
The theme of survival and selfishness in the Handmaid's Tale in 1984

Are Winston, Julia and Offred eventually made into 'reluctantly-selfish' victims of totalitarian regimes or are they innately 'pragmatically-selfish' beings? Discuss in relation to The Handmaid's Tale and 1984.

Offred and Winston, the main protagonists of the two strikingly similar dystopian fictions, The Handmaid's Tale and 1984, have disparate fates in the endings of the novels. Julia's fate, however, is undetermined, as (like the two protagonists of both novels), she succumbs to the party out of the "selfish" desire to survive. Orwell gives us a fatalistic vision to his prophecy, where Winston dies. While Atwood gives us a positive ending, where the "heroine" finds hope in her romanticism with her secret lover Nick and presumably, survives by escaping from the regime to tell her story. Winston's doom, however, partly lies in the core of the regime's invincibility and partly lies in his impracticality and idealistic views on an indomitable regime. Offred, on the other hand, survives because of her 'selfishness' or 'pragmatism'. Winston clearly shows himself to be selfish toward the end, but Offred, vacillates between being selfish and being a pragmatic post-feminist. It is perhaps her balance of selfishness and pragmatism that helps her to survive the regime, which she eventually succumbs to but escapes. All three characters display selfish traits that "benefit" them.

Offred, the primary narrator of The Handmaid's Tale is by no means a conventional heroine. Her unconventionality lays in the fact that she resists the regime but does not take any tangible action against it. Offred's gradual but certain conformity serves to attest to the fact that she is not truly "heroic" and that the regime is 'all-powerful'. Many commentators on the novel have characterized the narrator as a heroine, a developing consciousness, or an emerging woman. Offred also appears in many ways as a sympathetic narrator, an every-woman, who in the pre-Gilead world of the contemporary United States, was "an ordinary sensual woman, with a college degree, a husband, a daughter, a job in a library". Her lack of active resistance, however, does not make her a patsy for the oligarchic regime either. Offred is a 'pragmatist' because she is savvy about how to live under the constraints of Gilead. She recognises but ignores the social and power relations and conflicts that impinge upon her life. She is ignorant yet aware simultaneously. Her consciousness is partly apparent because of her faculty of double vision – she is a survivor of the past and her remembering of the past allows her to survive the present. Offred is thus seen to be "savvy" when she first meets her shopping partner, Ofglen, and is apprehensive, refusing to be drawn into a conversation about the on-going war:

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“Ofglen may be a real believer, a Handmaid in more than name. I can’t take the risk”

When she finds out that Ofglen is actually a member of the underground organisation, Mayday, whose mission is to subvert the regime, she refuses to implicate herself in the organisations covert operations, refuses to supply information and refuses to join it. This adduces to her part selfishness and her part pragmatism. Offred knows that to trust another person, is to risk her own life. Her rejection of the anti-Gilead illegalities proposed by Ofglen manifests her selfish yet pragmatic nature. In Offred’s inertia, it becomes evident that the reason Offred ignores Ofglen’s requests for information on the Commander and urgings at Particicution is that she has fallen back on her romanticism with Nick:

“The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him.”

Offred’s accommodation of herself and her life to the misogyny of the totalitarian contemporary United States, her acceptance of such conditions as ordinary and usual, is mirrored by her gradual succumbing to the conditions of the theocratic regime. She acknowledges and admits it:

“I have made a life for myself, here, of a sort. That must have been what the settler’s wives thought... if they had a man. Humanity is so adaptable... Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations.”

Clearly, Offred has found value in her life and has made one for herself through Nick; showing that the basic human desire to love and to be loved becomes omnipotent in *The Handmaid’s Tale* helping Offred to sustain her psyche. Her selfishness or pragmatism thus results in her conformity. Offred is evidently not a heroine and not a feminist as one would see it. Her clandestine sexual love affair with Nick, inherently does not undermine the regime, but bolsters it because of her dependence on men like Nick and the Commander. This clearly shows that the regime is indomitable and succeeds in converting deviants of every form, eventually. No one is exempt. As she slowly disentangles herself from her identity, a result of the absolute reduction to her reproductive capacity, she becomes more selfish, rather than pragmatic:

“Ofglen is giving up on me... I do not feel regret about this. I feel relief.”

The idea that ‘ignorance is bliss’ is Offred’s mentality, shows her transience and gradualism as a discrete individual to an inert, more selfish and monolithic being. Her romanticization of Nick paralyzes her and delivers control of her destiny into the hands of others. But Offred becomes slightly reckless, her trysts observable by others – hardly conducive to survival in Gilead. Later, after Ofglen is uncovered as a member of the resistance, Offred’s acquiescence to and internalization of the conditions and standards of Gilead becomes complete. Her fear and

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paranoia possess her, and she starts to visualise her fate tragically. Offred even admits her selfishness to be a fact:

“Moira was right about me. I’ll say anything they like, I’ll incriminate anyone. It’s true, the first scream, whimper even, and I’ll turn to jelly. I’ll confess to any crime”

When Offred then finds out that Ofglen has committed suicide, she is ‘relieved’ to know that she herself is “safe” and in celebration of her temporarily-ensured safety, she indifferently comments that she “will mourn [for Ofglen] later”. Again, her immediate concern with her own survival renders her a selfish being, more than a pragmatic one. The change from being a pragmatist, to a selfish person is gradual but transparent in Offred. Her selfishness and subservience becomes complete when she unabashedly says:

“I’ll do anything you like. Now that you’ve let me off, I’ll obliterate myself, if that’s what you really want; I’ll empty myself... I’ll give up Nick, I’ll forget about the others, I’ll stop complaining. I’ll accept my lot. I’ll sacrifice. I’ll repent. I’ll abdicate. I’ll renounce.”

Here, like Winston’s submission in Room 101, her conversion to the regime becomes complete and cemented. Her willing outpouring and confession is something she assumes will exempt her from purgatory. Offred has given up her rights, and her will power to resist, as well as her identity, for ultimate survival. She is lucky, however, and survives with the help of the Mayday organisation, which intercedes with her fate and helps her to escape; as is generally assumed. But the fatality does not lie in Offred’s predicament but in her submission and ultimate surrender to herself. She betrays herself because of her selfishness. Yet it is her selfishness or pragmatism that helps her to survive. Offred’s weaknesses and lack of “swashbuckling heroism” fails her, as she succumbs passively to the “over into the hands of strangers”. Her loss of faith renders her inert, making her a useful tool for the regime had she not had the timely opportunity to escape:

“I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject.”

Unwilling to work with her mother and Moira (her lesbian best friend) before Gilead, with Moira at the Red Centre and later with Ofglen, Offred shows herself to be self-absorbed, focused on her own happiness or survival, and unconcerned with women as a group, with society at large, and even with the quality of her own life . Offred has internalised the expectations of the Gilead regime, as she had those of the contemporary United States, soothing her ills with romantic dreams and hopes. She eventually hands her body, her self, and her destiny over to Nick. Offred’s lack of understanding of the larger political and social structures and forces surrounding her separates her from Moira and her own feminist activist mother, she then

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submits herself willingly and utterly. Her co-possession of the interlinked qualities of ignorance and selfishness are the reasons for her ultimate betrayal; the loss of her identity. To her, any problem as well as its solution was a totally personal matter. Offred failed to think in terms of acting with others; and she privately mocked such awareness in both her mother and her best friend Moira.

However, Offred's submission can be seen as a form of adaptability, her conformity is a reason for her survival and thus, she is a "heroine". She transcends boundaries and debasements, allowing herself to survive and, concurrently surpass the regime, although she does not defeat it. It is through Offred's acceptance of her conditions that she can be seen to be humble and malleable, but not fragile because she survives, albeit with the help of others. Offred is not subjected to the terrors and punishments of the regime and she overcomes these fears through submission; a true pragmatist.

The character of Winston in 1984 is neither selfish, nor is he a pragmatist. He is a hero and not a hero. But what remains almost certain of him is that he is a fool, or, at best, a rebel at heart. He is definitely a stubborn rebel who reluctantly falls victim to the Party. Winston, unlike Offred, does not try to stay alive. Instead, he prides himself on his folly and he tries to subvert the regime which he despises, at first. His unrealistic and idealistic ambition makes him foolish, often inspired by intellectual concepts like the integrity of history and the notion of freedom rather than being concerned with his own survival. But more than anything, Winston refuses to let himself be a brainless follower or a patsy of Big Brother's regime; his fatal flaw.

Winston's mistress, the rebellious Julia, is in many ways, similar to the character of Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Julia flouts the minor and then major rules of the totalitarian society of Oceania. Like Offred, Julia is uninterested in understanding the political dynamics of the society surrounding and oppressing her and is a hedonistic pragmatist who seeks to undermine the regime but not subvert it:

"Except where it touched upon her own life she had no interest in Party doctrine."

Julia invariably falls asleep when Winston talks to her of the Party and its doctrines, clearly uninterested and unmotivated in revolting, unlike Winston. Like Offred, Julia is a post-feminist and she willingly subjects herself to the sexual uses of men with her many liaisons. As Winston explicitly observes, Julia is "a rebel from the waist downwards." She objects to the regime purely because it stops her from having a good time. Julia is solely motivated by the love of sexual pleasure, similar to Offred. This is where her selfishness or pragmatism stems. Julia's rebellion against the Party does not have an ideological or theoretical basis, rather, it is grounded in her desire for pleasure and the pursuit of a personal life.

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When Winston first comes into acquaintance with Julia, he learns that she, unlike her appearance and behaviour, is a very sexual being and had her first love affair when she was sixteen. The Party member with whom she had had the affair committed suicide to avoid arrest and torture to which Julia selfishly remarks that it was “a good job too”, fearing they would have had her “name out of him when he confessed”. Here, like Offred, Julia is spurred on by sexual desire, liaisons and love affairs that motivate her to continue staying alive. But Julia is, in many instances, more pragmatic than Offred. She is careful and successfully manipulates the Party into thinking she is orthodox. It is Julia who initiates contact with Winston and meticulously plans their encounters. Her pragmatic mentality is seen in her declaration that “the clever thing was to break the rules and stay alive all the same”. Julia pessimistic and unconvinced about the revolution against the Party that Winston idealises so often, she is realistic:

“She Julia had never heard of the Brotherhood, and refused to believe in its existence. Any kind of organized revolt against the Party struck her as stupid.”

Clearly, it can be deduced Julia is more pragmatic than selfish. She knows the limits and the rules of the game, therefore Julia is seen to be realistically-pragmatic. “Unlike Winston, she [Julia] had grasped the inner meaning of the Party’s sexual Puritanism.” Unlike Winston, who is willing to ‘join the Brotherhood’ and risk all, she pragmatically or, perhaps, sarcastically states that:

“I’m quite ready to take risks, but only for something worth while, not for bits of old newspaper.”

Julia does ‘join the Brotherhood’ nonetheless; but only because she is spurred on by her love for Winston, who believes his life mission is to subvert the regime. In her and Winston’s clandestine meeting with O’Brien, Julia hardly speaks and when she does, she only does so to object to the suggestion that she and Winston were to separate in the name of the Brotherhood. Julia’s orientation is also purely practical: she is capable, mechanically oriented (she works on the machines in Pornosec) – and hedonistic, unanalytical, opportunistic . Julia’s pragmatism makes her an unlikely deviant in the eyes of the Party, fooled because her behaviour and appearance obscure her inner-self. But her ‘ugly’ yet centrally pragmatic/selfish nature is seen when after capture, she capitulates to O’Brien’s methods at once, like “a textbook case”. Julia’s quick succumbing is evidence of her more pragmatic and selfish nature compared to that of Winston’s. Her conversion to the regime, again, unlike Winston’s is far more willing and selfish.

Winston is defined by most critics to be ‘heroic’ and in that sense, selfless in the beginning. But, like everyone, he eventually succumbs to the regime’s imposed ideals. Winston’s submission is far more forced and impinged, unlike that of Offred’s or even Julia’s. In idealising

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about a revolution against the regime, Winston becomes too absorbed and risks everything, becoming 'selfless', which is what he naively thinks will assist in subverting the regime. Winston 'heroically' or foolishly attempts to understand his society and the Party's doctrines. When Winston is invited to 'join' the Brotherhood, whose existence he chooses to believe in, he disregards everything and all his morals for the sake of overthrowing the regime. The atrocities he claims he is willing to commit are morbid and fearful, ranging from murder to sabotage; all in the name of subverting the regime or what he believes is "for the greater good". Thus, Winston becomes blinded by his 'selflessness'.

The only instances where we see Winston being selfish is in a distant and vague childhood memory of his; in his selfish and uncontrollable hunger, he denies his mother and his sickly sister their fair share of food. But under the regime, Winston is far too isolated and solitary to be selfish as he hardly interacts with anyone else other than Julia. The lack of any real human relationships makes him ambivalent toward the outcome of others. This can be accredited to the success of the Party's 'dehumanising' policy and Winston is made an unwilling victim. In the end, like Offred, Winston does commit an act of selfishness. Faced with the possibility of being subjected to his worst fear, rats, in Room 101, he re-enacts his first act of betrayal by offering up the body of the only person he loves as a surrogate for his own:

"Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don't care what you do to her. Tear her face off, strip her to the bones."

Here, Winston offers up Julia as a human sacrifice to the hungry rats selfishly. The act is one of betrayal on two counts: betrayal of Julia and the second is betrayal of himself. Winston inconceivably destroys his hard-won liberation, the maturity of his selfhood, and pushes himself into another, far more terrifying infancy. Winston's conversion to the regime becomes complete as he mutates into a typical 'Big Brother-loving' citizen of Oceania. The subsequent self-betrayal and act of pure selfishness, Winston's emotional and psychological breakdown at the prospect of being devoured by rats – is crucial to the exercise of power and to the disintegration of individual will. Politically, Winston's capitulation was pre-ordained by the dynamics of totalitarianism. Winston eventually transforms from a 'selfless' person to a selfish being.

Unlike Winston who is seen to be 'naïve', Offred sees the regime for what it is. She understands "for the first time, their true power" making both her and Julia far more compatible and both more pragmatic than Winston, who constantly fights the regime yet fails to understand that his resistance and existence is futile. Hope exists only in being selfish. In the fates of the characters, particularly Winston, we see the complete and absolute control of the totalitarian regimes and how the characters are selfish, inherently because of the power of absolute control. 1984 shows us ways in which corruption extends to the individual's sense of autonomous selfhood. The dehumanising and cruel ways in which the Party seeks to destroy

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selfhood serves as a dramatic warning to readers of the probability of such a future. The deracination of the self means that the recalcitrant individual can no longer maintain a discrete and autonomous selfhood; thus we see the purest form of totalitarian control, which is self-control, or the lack of it. The willing submission of the self to the macrocosm of the state renders victims like Winston, Julia and Offred selfish. The fact that all three main characters of the two novels eventually succumb to their respective regimes, one way or the other, adduces to the fact that they subsequently and eventually become selfish victims rather than being innately – selfish and inhumane beings.

Like Oceania's Airstrip One, Gilead's political 'power grows out of the barrel of a gun', utilizes repressive laws and politics, and is solidified by the isolation of each woman, the fragmentation of her social world, and the reconstruction of each woman's world into Gilead's mould. Power, like God, becomes beyond reason in the two totalitarian states where even the most stubborn 'heroes' are forced to become victims. The people under the control of these states become selfish as a result of the loss of self; presenting us with a paradox: to lose one's self is to retain one's self by the act of submission.

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