
A Feminist Critique of Gender Dynamics in Dystopian Literature

“O, brave new world!” John joyfully proclaims after being told he will have the chance to live in the World State with Bernard and Lenina (Huxley 93). Upon first reading dystopian literature, one might feel much like John, assuming a more progressive society full of equality and promoted individuality. However, by examining these texts further with the feminist theory in mind, one will see the many inequalities the World State has to offer. As the reader can clearly concur, the theme of female suppression appears in the characters of the dystopian novels *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and *1984* by George Orwell. Both Huxley and Orwell exhibit themes of oppression through low work roles for women, demeaning language used to describe women, and the portrayal women as sexual objects.

Women in early dystopian novels are oppressed by their society, especially in the work force. In Cheryl Lange’s analysis of female characters portrayed by male and female writers, it is noted that females, in the novels of their male writers, tend to portray a less important and more “subservient life in which she is defined only in relation to males” (Lange). Women not only are seen as side characters, but are also given lower level of authority in the such novels. The best example of the trivial roles given to women can best be seen in both dystopian novels *Brave New World* and *1984*. In the novel, *Brave New World*, females are never given superior jobs. In fact, in the first chapter the reader encounters a group of Alpha students touring the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre (Huxley 5). However, all of these students are males. The highest class in *Brave New World* is reserved only for men, making a clear point that women are not as valuable or as intelligent as men. The children are conditioned from a young age to know that Alphas “work much harder than [they] do, because they’re so frightfully clever” (Huxley 21). Obviously, the Alphas are shown favoritism in society, instilling the notion that, once again, men are superior and more capable than women. Furthermore, in both *1984* and *Brave New World*, a male holds the position of utmost authority. In *Brave New World*, this supreme figure is the World Control and The Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning. Likewise in *1984*, Big Brother is the all-knowing male force that controls society. Not only do men control society, but they also control the choices women make in society. In the World State in *Brave New World*, women do not have the right to chose whether or not to be sterilized. The men of society solely dictate this choice for the women. Overall, women are suppressed to minuscule work roles in both dystopian societies.

In addition to women’s low ranking place in society in both *1984* and *Brave New World*, the demeaning language the authors use to describe women obviously represents the underlying

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sexism in the dystopian novels. Nina Baym, professor of English at the University of Illinois, states that, “[...] male-authored texts cannot help but represent women invidiously, that ‘women’ in men's texts are therefore always textual victims” (Baym). Professor Baym’s point capitalizes on the issue of the suppression of women in literature. Women often play satellite characters and are poorly portrayed by their misogynistic authors. For example, in 1984, Julia is described as a “rebel from the waist down” for using sex to get back at the government (Orwell 196). A feminist critic would say it is evident that the author is implying that only men are capable of rebelling because they are clever enough to do so. By painting Julia as a character with little intellect, Orwell successfully asserts his patriarchal mindset upon the reader. In Orwell’s eyes, the only thing women can contribute to society is sex. Orwell makes a deliberate statement that he finds women in society to be brainless, stating through his protagonist character, Winston, “It was always the women, and above all the young ones, who were the most bigoted adherents of the Party, the swallowers of slogans, the amateur spies and nosers-out of unorthodoxy” (Orwell 13). Orwell ingrains in the reader’s mind that the women are the reason society has become so mindless. It is the women’s unintelligence to blame for the dictatorship of Big Brother. Similarly, in Brave New World the only capable people of successfully rebelling are once again the men of the society. One can additionally see the prejudice against women in Brave New World when the topic of “mother” is mentioned (Huxley 18). For example, Lenina compares Bernard’s odd behavior to that of her using the word “mother” as an insult, saying he looked as if she had “made a dirty joke-asked him who his mother was, or something like that” (Huxley 39). Mother in the World State society is considered a vulgar word that should never be repeated. On the other hand, when a character mentions father, it is seen as a smutty, more acceptable word. Women are also described as “pneumatic” meaning full of air (Huxley 32). Men in the book are never mentioned in such a way and are seen as the capable beings of the society. After all, the men hold all of the power in the book. The lack of authority women are able to hold in both societies eludes that women have no positive contribution to society.

Women are not only degraded by the words used to describe them in both 1984 and Brave New World, but are also stereotyped based on their appearance. Although sex is frowned upon among the citizens of Oceania, sex is highly promoted in the World State. However, women are judged by their youthful appearance and good looks. Looks are of the highest importance that when the citizens of the World State see Linda, an outsider who has lived on the reservation for years, she is categorized as “disgusting” because she had wrinkles and did not look youthful. In fact, the sight of Linda causes “a murmur of...horror; a young girl screamed; standing on a chair to get a better view” of her, as if she were an animal for not having the typical beauty the society was used to (Huxley 101). Despite sex being frowned upon in 1984, Winston continues to objectify women based on their appearance. When describing women of a particular area, Winston states, “The woman down there had no mind, she had only strong arms, a warm heart and a fertile belly” (Orwell 174). Therefore, Winston is promoting the patriarchal ideology that

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women are only objects and have no intelligence. Women's only use is for children and "motherly tasks." Furthermore, in 1984, Julia is seen as a tool for Winston happiness. When he first sees Julia, Winston is caught describing her appearance after putting on makeup, saying, "...With just a few dabs of colour in the right places she had become not only very much prettier, but, above all, far more feminine. Her short hair and boyish overalls merely added to the effect. [...]" (Orwell 179). The obsessions with women's physical appearance creates a stereotype in the reader's mind and encourages them to judge women solely based on appearance.

As one can see from analyzing the similar oppressive dystopian society in both Brave New World written by Aldous Huxley and 1984 by George Orwell, the authors display numerous examples of sexist writing through their oppression of women in dystopian society through low work roles, the language used to describe women and the portrayal of women as sexual objects. Men are seen as superior beings, while the women in the societies are oppressed through lower ranking jobs. Furthermore, women are also described in a more sexual manner than men and are merely sexual objects made for the pleasure of men in society. Through feminist theory, any reader of dystopian literature can pinpoint the inequalities females face at the hands of their male authors. As it turns out, the "brave new world" John mentions in Huxley's novel is nothing more than an oppressive, sexist society where women are not allowed to flourish.

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