17BAE01 GCE English Literature

# Folder 4

***'The greatest tragedy of dystopian literature is the dehumanisation of the protagonist.'***

In light of your dystopian texts, to what extent do you agree with this statement.

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**'The greatest tragedy of dystopian literature is the dehumanisation of the protagonist.'**

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There are immense questions about the very fundamental nature of the human existence. As humans, we have ability of compassion, love and emotion which separates being human, and having humanity. A dystopia can be conceived as an imaginary place in which everything is at its worst[1]. These dystopian societies in *The Road* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* are often so demoralising that they dehumanise the protagonist, depriving them of human attributes[2].

To deprive a human of humanity itself may indeed be the greatest tragedy of all. Similarly, the downfall or death of the protagonist and therefore the death of the protagonist representing the death of society itself. One might say it is worse to lead a dehumanised life than to lead a life at all. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Winston represents all men and Julia represents all women. While The Man represents all of humanity and The Boy represents the possibility of reigniting morality. David W Sisk in *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias* stated: "Dystopian writers must horrify their readers without eliminating the hope that such grim futures may be averted through present-day action"[3]. The protagonist faces the existential dilemma that they are the only "good guys"[4] left in a godless worlds. However, it may be more accurate to say that humanity in dystopian societies becomes distorted due to the totalitarian government telling them that lies are the truth.

Characters are forced to become subhuman in order to survive both mentally and physically. Throughout *The Road*, the world is filled with death and destruction that it is normalised: "Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By the dead impaled on spikes along the road"[5]. McCarhty uses secondary characters to show the destruction and pain others go through. The man struck by lightning highlights helplessness when he sits down having the protagonists overtake him. The Boy asks, 'Cant we help him Papa?' and The Man replies, 'No. We cant help him. There's nothing to be done for him'[6]. Similarly, *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* totalitarian regime[7] denies individuality and independent thought through the use of propaganda and terror. Winston carries the same level of disregard when he: "saw that it was human hand severed at the wrist…He kicked the thing into the gutter"[8] which shows Winston's lack of empathy. He is so numb that he treats seeing severed hands in the street is a regular occurrence "as though it had been a cabbage-stalk"[9]. The language used to describe the dead can also be described as demoralising as well with the use of the word "dead"[10] and "severed"[11]. Both words are blunt and straight to the point not using any description of the life that once was. Protagonists lack empathy due to their dystopian society dehumanising them. This could even suggest that *The Road* is the final sequel to *Nineteen Eighty-Four.*

When personifying death, it is a universal tendency to personify something to understand. *The Road* seems to humanise death and treat it as a significant character. It is always present. The Road itself is set where

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[1]Oxford English Dictionary, Dystopia, 1
[2]Oxford English Dictionary, Dehumanise, 1
[3] Sisk, David W, *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias, (1963)*
[4] Picador Fiction, *The Road,* Cormac McCarthy, p77
[5] ibid, p32
[6] ibid, p50
[7] Oxford English Dictionary, Totalitarian, 1
[8] Penguin Modern Classics, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell, p165
[9] ibid, p165
[10]ibid, p165
[11] Picador Fiction, *The Road,* Cormac McCarthy, p32

all forms of life are dying or dead. Death is humanised when the subject of suicide is brought up by The Woman who sees the world for what it is. She is unable to adjust to the new world and makes the decision to commit suicide saying to The Man, "Ive taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot" in which The Man replies: "Death is not a lover" and The Woman responds: "Oh yes he is". This conversation reads like a lot like The Woman is betraying The Man, even comparing death to a 'new lover'[12] as if Death is someone who can give her something he cannot. By humanising death, you can see how dehumanised The Woman is by her society. In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* it doesn't seem to be death which Winston is scared of but fear itself. In this case, death is a quick easy escape. Winston comes to the conclusion that nothing is more powerful than fear itself—no emotional loyalty can overcome it. Even when it comes between Julia and Winston saying: "I betrayed you," she said baldly. "Is betrayed you," he said. She gave him another quick look of dislike'[13]. Their relationship is treated as if it never happened, overpowered by their greatest fear. Together Winston and Julia are stronger and more human than ever. They express feelings and emotions first when Julia hands Winston a piece of paper which reads: 'I LOVE YOU'[14]. However, both Winston and The Man end up committing the greatest betrayal of all. They stop loving their significant other. Death is perhaps the ultimate dehumanisation.

The universes in which *The Road* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are written in are the polar opposites of each other. In 1516, Sir Thomas More wrote *Utopia,* which was based on the perfect social and political system which has the best intentions[15]. However, a utopia is an illusion and most utopia's are dystopia's for others.[16] The main example being Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm.* Although there is a still a functioning society, some are still unfairly treated despite what they are told: "All animals were equal"[17]. *The Road's* society has crumbled into nothingness in which there are no winners. Humanity will always rise and humanity never irradiates. It is only easily suppressed. Although these different societies seem to have a similar effect on the protagonists. Orwell describes a propaganda-filled area with, 'no colour in anything, except the posters that were plastered everywhere'[18] just as McCarthy's describes The Road as "long gray dusks"[19] and "long gray dawns"[20].

Where life struggles against societal degeneration, Orwell depicts the idea of all the attention being put on to the posters and there is nothing really of substance to look at except the government churned media. The slogan: "WAR IS PEACE. FREEDOM IS SLAVERY. IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH"[21] continues the manipulation of the society. In addition, Orwell's *Animal Farm* the sheep memorise the slogan: "Four legs good, two legs bad"[22] as a form of propaganda. There is no strict way to look in the universe of *The Road.* It's a fight for survival where you have to live "like an animal"[23] in order to survive. Becoming more animal like deprives his characters of identity and allows him to become almost soulless.

Anyone who defies the Party is "re-educated"[24] through brutal torture. Just like Napoleon in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, who is considered to be "always right"[25]. By conditioning the minds of their victims with

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[12] Picador Fiction, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy, p57
[13] Penguin Modern Classics, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell, p369
[14] ibid, p136
[15] More, Thomas. *Utopia,* Edition Simon & Brown, 2011.
[16] Oxford English Dictionary, Utopia, 1
[17] Penguin Modern Classics, *Animal Farm*, George Orwell, p116
[18] Penguin Modern Classics, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell, p4
[19] Picador Fiction, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy, p7
[20] ibid
[21] Penguin Modern Classics, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell, p130
[22] Penguin Modern Classics, *Animal Farm*, George Orwell, p29
[23] Picador Fiction, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy, p172
[24] Penguin Modern Classics, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell, p146
[25] Penguin Modern Classics, *Animal Farm*, George Orwell, p56

physical torture, the Party is able to control reality, convincing its subjects that '2+2=5'[26] while: "No animal shall kill any other animal without cause"[27]. Winston "won victory over himself. He loved Big Brother"[28]. However, this love for Big Brother is produced by brainwashing and not genuine emotion. Although it is difficult to believe that such a world like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* exists—North Korea comes fairly close to this dystopian horror story. It is thought that prisoners are kept in concentration camps in North Korea, including camps which are dedicated to certain political crimes which their punishments consist of forced labour, physical abuse and execution[29]. All of this is eerily reminiscent of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* and even *Animal Farm*. Humanity is defeated all the way throughout *Animal Farm.*

McCarthy uses animals to describe the world in which they live in by saying: 'the ribs of fishes in their millions stretching along the shore as far as the eye could see like an isocline of death'[30]. In fact, it's probably useful to think of The Road as both physical setting and a mental state. The Road becomes a habit for the man. In effect, by breaking a habit, you live longer[31] and to continue this will eventually lead to death. Seeing death every day changes the man psychologically so much that he lacks more humanity as the novel progresses. At one point in the novel he describes the boy as: 'all that stood between him and death'[32]. In comparison, The Man shows The Boy is the only reason he is alive. The Boy is, in fact, the fire for the man as he reminds him what humanity used to stands for.

Fire is a recurring symbol which represents humanity having one final chance. McCarthy uses fire to show that even though it seems goodness has been conquered by evil, it lives on. In Greek mythology, Prometheus stole fire from Mount Olympus and gave it to mankind. The Gods punished Prometheus for carrying the fire and he was chained to a rock, where an eagle ate at his liver everyday suffering through his immortality[33]. But does the loss of the fire constitute the loss of the person's humanity? To carry the fire is to suffer. Erik J Weilenberg's *God, Morality and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's The Road,* states 'Perhaps to carry the fire is to carry the seeds of civilisation'[34]. Although the fire is more metaphorical than real, The Man uses fire to convince The Boy to keep following The Road after his death by saying: "It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it."[35] When a loved one dies, they are often described as being "inside you"[36] because you carry them with you. The Man struggled getting The Boy as far as he did but, 'it is the existence of this relationship that makes it worth continuing the struggle[37]'. The fire is passed on to The Boy just like how Prometheus passed it on to humanity—like a family heirloom. Even the book itself is a reference towards the fire as McCarthy dedicated this book all about humanity to his son. Carrying the fire and trying to find humanity even in the darkest of times. So when The Boy meets The Veteran and asks "So are you?"[38], The Veteran responds "What, carrying the fire?... Yeah, we are."[39] Sisk states: "humanity is far too weak to rise to the challenge of choosing salvation over bread"[40]. The

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[26] Penguin Modern Classics, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell, p367
[27] ibid, p80
[28] ibid, p376
[29] http://www.sfreporter.com/santafe/blog-3500-lee-on-literature-1984.html
[30] Picador Fiction, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy, p222
[31] http://jamesclear.com/three-steps-habit-change
[32] Picador Fiction, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy, p29
[33] http://www.prometheas.org/mythology.html
[34] Wielenberg, Erik J, *God, Morality and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's The Road, (2010)*
[35] Picador Fiction, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy, p279
[36] ibid
[37] Wielenberg, Erik J, *God, Morality and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's The Road, (2010)*
[38] Picador Fiction, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy, p283
[39] ibid, p283
[40] Sisk, David W, *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias, (1963)*

Man becomes fully dehumanised when he dehumanises others on The Road. For example, The Thief which The Man forces the thief to strip off all of his clothes: "standing there raw and naked, filthy, starving"[41] - killing him anyway. Because the protagonist represents the whole of society, this represents mankind stripping each other of humanity.

The Fire is a false hope which could never protect him. The exact same thing with the room above Mr. Charrington's shop in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which quickly becomes a safe haven for Winston and Julia to meet in private. Even Julia says: "In this room I'm going to be a woman, not a Party comrade"[42] suggesting that here, they will live without a care about being watched. The room ultimately strengthens their relationship, allowing them privacy; "a very valuable thing"[43] not allowed in Oceania. It is because of habit Winston and Julia are caught by The Party who inevitably splits them up. The Man still follows The Road out of habit because it feels safe. Winston and Julia still go to room above Mr. Charrington's shop out of habit because it feels safe. The coral paperweight could also be compared to the fire in *The Road.* "The paperweight was the room he was in, and the coral was Julia's life and his own, fixed in a sort of eternity at the heart of the crystal."[44] Although it's a small object, anything beautiful in *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* it is considered dangerous and a "little chunk of history"[45]. However, the paperweight is later broken by a government official after Winston and Julia are caught in their refuge. The paperweight could even be a symbol of hope and is a reminder of a time before Big Brother ruled. Yet Again, it is yet another symbol of false hope.

On the other hand, it could be argued that even a dehumanised protagonist is needed to survive in a dystopian society. Members of a certain group view others as inferior and not deserving moral consideration. In the holocaust, the Nazi's goal was to deprive human qualities from the Jews (individuality, compassion and identity) through the process of dehumanisation[46]. Jews were dehumanised by the Nazis and were no longer seen as."Arbeit macht frei" is a German phrase known for appearing on the entrance of Auschwitz meaning "work sets you free"[47] a form of Doublethink. The Party's slogan: "IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH"[48], although is from *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* but it is about *The Road* as well. To be ignorant is to be uninformed of knowledge, either in general or with respect to a particular subject[49]. Therefore, becoming dehumanised and not thinking about others allows you to focus on your strength. Instead of searching for meaning and morality a dehumanised protagonist is able to fend for themselves, not be phased by the world or the people around them.

In *The Road,* identity is stripped away from them. Having an actual name gives you social status and proves the existence of someone. The same thing happens with the retelling of old folk tale. The characters are often nameless which allows it to be retold in the simplest way possible[50]. Dehumanisation strikes The Man after they meet The Little Boy on The Road and The Boy asks: "What if that little boy doesnt have anybody to take care of him? he said. What if he doesnt have a papa?"[51] and The Man responds with,

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[41] ibid, p257
[42] Penguin Modern Classics, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell, p143
[43] ibid, p137
[44] ibid, p147
[45] ibid, p145
[46] http://www.ukessays.co.uk/essays/history/dehumanization-a-psychological-process.php
[47] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arbeit_macht_frei
[48] Penguin Modern Classics, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell, p4
[49] Oxford English Dictionary, Ignorant, 1
[50] Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale.* University of Texas Press; 2nd Revised edition, 1968

[51] Picador Fiction, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy, p85

"There are people out there. They were just hiding"[52]. Here, dehumanisation appears through a lack of empathy and compassion. The Man understands that he lives in a world where its everyone for themselves. Trying to help The Little Boy would put them at risk. Therefore, by dehumanising himself he is able to survive. Similarly, Winston is relentlessly tortured to the point where dehumanisation is the only option — becoming a symbol of human manipulation. His only emotion other than love for Big Brother, is hatred for anyone who opposes him. By dehumanising himself, Winston's "struggle was finished"[53]. Now that Winston loves the party, he also now follows their slogan: "IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH"[54], because the power of the peoples ignorance, strengthens the power that the Party and Big Brother have.

Moreover, The Man in *The Road* is more afraid of being alone than death itself. The Boys asks The Man: "What would you do if I died?"[55] and The Man responds, "If you died I would want to die too".[56] The Man's purpose is to keep The Boy alive. The Woman had already given up on not only The Road but The Man and The Boy as well. She sees suicide as the better option rather than them being: "rape [them] and kill [them] and eat [them]"[57]. But, Erik J Weilenberg said: "It is the existence of this relationship that makes it worth continuing the struggle". As each day passes, The Man and The Boy have a closer relationship. Myles Munroe once said: "*The greatest tragedy in life is not death, but a life without purpose*"[58]. The purpose means doing something that has a positive effect such as: working to change a social structure that might not completely happen in your lifetime[59]. Without The Boy, The Man's life becomes meaningless and The Road becomes nothing more than "the walking dead in a horror film"[60]. You could even use this phrase to describe *Nineteen Eighty-Four.* Sisk also stated that: "through repeated exposure to subliminal propaganda, the younger generation has absorbed"[61]. Despite having a functioning totalitarian society, they all seem to worship The Party and Big Brother to the extent that it becomes their life. Even the children of Party members are so in love with the Party that turn in their own parents for Thoughtcrime: "Heard what I was saying, and nipped off to the patrols the very next day… It shows I brought her up in the right spirit, anyway"[62]. The same thing happened in Nazi Germany where children would report their parents to the Gestapo giving them the power they thought they had[63]. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* their only purpose is to love and accept everything The Party tells them to leaving them not to have any other sense of identity left.

On balance, it is clear to see that through my argument, the greatest tragedy of all is in fact the dehumanisation of the protagonist. We have seen through this essay the different types of dehumanisation with instances of a dehumanised survival or death (being the preferable option). Although becoming dehumanised allows one's survival, living in ignorance allows short term pleasure and long term loss. Living in truth, however, allows short term suffering and long term benefits. Both novels leave the question open. Like all good literature, both Orwell and McCarthy leave us with food for thought.

***(Word Count: 3174)***

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[52] Picador Fiction, *The Road,* Cormac McCarthy, p85
[53] Penguin Modern Classics, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell, p297
[54] ibid, p4
[55] Picador Fiction, *The Road,* Cormac McCarthy, p11
[56] ibid, p11
[57] ibid, p56
[58] Munroe, Myles. *In Pursuit of Purpose*. Edition, Destiny Image Publishers, 1992

[59] Oxford English Dictionary, Purpose, 7
[60] Picador Fiction, *The Road,* Cormac McCarthy, p55
[61] Sisk, David W, *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias, (1963)*
[62] Penguin Modern Classics, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell, p233
[63] http://www.johndclare.net/Nazi_Germany2_BBCnotes.htm

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