

Compare the ways in which the writers of your two chosen texts criticise human behaviour.
Written Timed Essay: A* (MCM)

Margaret Atwood and H.G. Wells both responded to radical changes in human attitudes and behaviour of their societies when they wrote their texts. Atwood feared the conservative revival, headed by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, fearing the feminist accomplishments of the 70s would be undone. She also feared a puritan theocratic regime in America, such as the one established in Massachusetts. H.G. Wells witnessed horrific treatment of the poor by the upper class in London, those who benefitted from the Industrial Revolution and engaged in the period of imperialist self-congratulation at the fin de siècle (the time of Victoria's Diamond Jubilee). He was also a part of the counter-religious movement in favour of science over religion. Criticisms of human use of religion as a tool for oppression or criticisms of the hypocrisy institutionalised religion are presented in both novels, from the curate's emotional failings to Gilead's re-indoctrination of the Bible. The narratives themselves demonstrate many failings in human nature from Wells' satirical sensationalism to Offred's reconstructions of her stories. Perhaps the most harrowing critique of human nature is the exploration of how characters take advantage of adversity.

One major episode concerning a critique of human behaviour in regard to religion is presented in Chapter 8 of *War of the Worlds*. The curate laments about the destruction the Martians have caused "The church! We rebuilt it only three years ago. Gone! – Swept out of existence! Why?" His discourse is notable for the broken syntax and mix of fragmented sentences, highlighting a state of futile panic. The curate's focus on "The church!" with the exclamatory sentence followed by a complaint of its recent reconstruction highlights a degree of materialism that the church-representative focuses on. His religious fanaticism through his bible paraphrasing ('as if it were Sodom and Gomorrah!') combined with his materialism, is Wells' critique of human behaviour within the church, as corrupt, mismanaged and, as the narrator aptly puts, useless "if it collapses at calamity"; a rhetorical question addressing both the curate and the reader. Instead of focusing on the lives lost to the Martians, only material symbols of the church are considered. Wells may have been influenced by Karl Marx' 'Das Kapital' published in the late 19th century that criticises society's "fetishism of commodities" as a critique of materialism. Though the criticism of religious human behaviour is centred against the curate alone, a metaphor for the church as a whole, Atwood criticises the use of religion rather than its existence. In the Red Centre, the women were made to repeat: "Oh God...thank you for not creating me a man. Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh." This syndetic list of prayers is harrowing for its subversion of bible quotes as well as the perverse gratitude that enhances the Handmaids' oppression. "Thank you for not creating me a man" – the verb to thank connotes the Handmaid's are indebted to the Lord for their existence, whilst also displaying how the women's supposed gratitude aligns with the patriarchal regime's need for docile, willing Handmaid's as a stark representation of the misuse of religion. The feverish use of imperatives 'obliterate' and 'mortify' hide a sense of desperation of the women to be 'fulfilled' in the regime's image. Thus, the critique of human behaviour is centred not only around the hypocrisy and hubris of the morals of the church, but also the overwhelming power it has over those it influences and the desperation it can cause.

An analysis of human behaviour is also presented through the use of narratives; particularly the power the narrators wield over their story. Offred declares early on in the novel “if it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending.” The noun ‘control’ implies a degree of unreliability as she admits she exercises power over the events of the novel and our subsequent opinion of her. Due to the lack of heteroglossia in the first-person narrative, one can only rely on Offred’s retelling. Thus, many of her inner monologues, unchallenged, can be analysed as slightly unreliable. This is most pertinent in Chapter 46: “I could bundle up some of my clothes...and strike my one hidden match.” The conditional verb ‘could’ implies a passivity that juxtaposes the dynamism of her imagined narrative through the dynamic verb ‘strike’ she admits shortly after how “[she] consider[s] these things idly.” Her false narratives are indication of typical human behaviour: a demonstration of guilt. She is ashamed of the passivity she has portrayed throughout the novel and thus would like to convince an audience she had a rational thought-process that concluded with inaction, rather than it as her first instinct. It is the nature of dystopian novels to present a regime that is insurmountable; even Winston, the protagonist of 1984 (a novel which greatly influenced Atwood) admits “the party is invincible” and admits the only possible form of rebellion is ‘isolated acts of violence’. Wells’ narrator purveys a similar unreliability and guilt in Chapter 4, where he describes how he “had a momentary impulse to go back and help him that my fears overruled.” Like Offred, he does not share his narrative, and thus chooses to display socially acceptable acts of humanitarianism in order to improve his narrative. Yet, Wells’ unreliable narrator also acts as a critique of journalistic sensationalism. At the fin de siècle, the public become enamoured by false ‘news from mars’, which caused a rise in newspaper prices, attempting to profit off of public gullibility. The Edinburgh review described this phenomenon as a combination of ‘public imbecility and journalistic enterprise’. Thus, human behaviour is criticised through the guilt caused by retrospective narratives which is hastily concealed by the narrators with false stories of their supposed bravery. Perhaps both authors were trying to undermine the ‘new’ narrative, thus attributing the rise of a dystopia as the fault of society, not the individual.

The most disappointing displays of human behaviour rise from various characters taking advantage of the situation. In chapter 1 of Atwood’s novel, the Aunts are described as patrolling with “electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts.” Through the nouns ‘electric cattle prods’ connotes a brutality and dehumanisation of the Handmaids, the subsequent nouns ‘thongs’ and ‘leather belts’ connotes a sadistic gratification the Aunts may enjoy. Atwood has said that “some of the Aunts are true believers...some are sadists of sexual fulfilment on the part of the Aunts displays a disgusting manipulation of the oppression of the Handmaid’s. Meanwhile, in War of the Worlds, the narrator displays a complete lack of humanitarianism that is almost akin to Darwinism: In Chapter 9, the narrator searches for a means to escape Woking, he “knew the landlord had a horse and dog-cart...[he] found him in his bar, quite unaware of what was going on.” The narrator takes away the landlord’s only chance of escape because he was ‘unaware’ of what was going on. The verb ‘unaware’ implies a passivity that was not the landlord’s fault, akin to a genetic characteristic in Darwin’s theory. The narrator’s taking advantage of this fulfils the ‘survival of the fittest’ sentiment. Perhaps Wells chose to reference Darwinism due to the rise of science in place of religion at the turn of the century, a criticism of the superficial devotion of man above animal that the church pervades. Nevertheless, both the Aunts and

Wells' narrator show a disappointing display of human behaviour through an unsympathetic manipulation of the establishment of a dystopian regime to be in their favour.

The nature of dystopian novels, or as Atwood prefers, 'speculation' novels, are to criticise the worst forms of human behaviour in the author's current society, and to hyperbolise the consequences of continuing this behaviour. Perhaps the characters' flaws have been over-exaggerated? Nevertheless, the immorality of the church, the unreliable narrators and the frequent images of people profiting from the suffering of others amalgamate to provide a deplorable homage to human nature and behaviour.