

## G. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* beyond Dystopia

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### **Abstract:**

The article proposes a theoretical foray into Orwell's *1984*, one that offers insight about how complex the fabric of, perhaps, the most well known classic dystopia of the 20th century, really is. Discussing auctorial intention and the inherent structural aspects of a utopia/dystopia, a close analysis of *1984* reflects the lesser known aspects behind creating some of the most familiar contemporary images related to the disappearance of personal freedom and the birth of the surveillance state.

**Keywords:** dystopia, bibliography, constructivism, literature, language

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is one of those rare books which prevailed in preserving its literary status in addition to developing some of the most enduring images of popular culture: the subtle transition from *doublethink* to *doublespeak*, Big Brother, room 101 *etc.* More to the point, the (political, literary, sociological) analysis dedicated to the novel produced tomes of intricate arguments, proving that Orwell's book's legacy is as relevant as the novel itself was at the time of its publishing. While I have elsewhere<sup>1</sup> discussed some of the broader concepts of Orwell's writing, this article aims to highlight some of the complexities to be found throughout the novel.

### *Power, logic, morality and history in 1984*

If one can find a rational justification for the pursuit of power in *Brave New World*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* breaks away with this pattern by describing a world system that lacks moral justification mainly because it fails to present an argument for the possession of power, or better said because the answer itself lacks moral justification.

The three slogans of the party (or better said two of them in the first part) are explained through two different and divergent

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<sup>1</sup> *Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four. Deconstructing Dystopia* in "Journal of Humanistic and Social Studies", ISSN 2067-6557, UAV Univ. Press, vol.3, No.2 (6)/2012, p. 51-59, and *From Plato to Swift and Orwell, from Utopia to Dystopia* in "Journal of Humanistic and Social Studies", ISSN 2067-6557, UAV Univ. Press, vol.V, No.7 (1)/2016, p. 9-16.

perspectives. In Emmanuel Goldstein's reading *Ignorance is Strength* refers to the structure of society composed of three different classes, the low, the middle and the high, which are engaged in a permanent struggle for power, the lower class being the only one that never changes its position in the structure.

The last surviving political ideology that preached equality, the ideal of the low class, was Socialism but the transformations it went through changed it in a doctrine that "had the conscious aim of perpetuating *unfreedom* and *inequality*" (Orwell, 2001: 211), whereas the outcome of socialism – described accurately in its phases: economic conflict, political and in the last instance an armed conflict - should be one that helps "materialize the idyllic vision of a classless society" (Irwine, 1955: 180).

The crucial moment of instauration for Ingsoc is located in the moment where (due to technical development) a complete equality between individuals is achievable, a moment when all political systems turn towards totalitarianism, actively trying to avoid the realization of equality.

The main weapon for defending the newly created dominant class is orientated in two directions. First, the traditional meaning for a class system disappears because the permanence of the hierarchical system becomes the only important thing for its members. As long as there is no reference point in the past for comparison, the reality of the present must always be satisfying.

Secondly, the most important element for maintaining the ideology is the introduction of *doublethink* which "means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them" (Orwell, 2001: 223).

Goldstein's revelation ends at the crucial point; the main question, the very essence of the reasons that lays behind the whole system, the why, is left unanswered; that is, the answer is given by O'Brien at the moment of Winston's incarceration and it is a totally disruptive one: "the Party seeks power for its own sake" (*Ibidem*: 275), furthermore "power is not a means, it is an end" (*Ibidem*: 276).

On the other hand *War is Peace* is a direct reference to Orwell's position towards the Teheran conference. The world is divided in three zones each controlled by a military superpower virtually without the possibility of reciprocal annihilation. This war serves two purposes: it helps to use up the resources that due to technological development threaten to change the status of the class structure, and more importantly, it preserves class hierarchy. What results is a situation where the forces of the rivals are equally distributed, the permanence of war that does not dispute territorial integrity but only the disputable frontiers; the classical meaning of war is transformed into a concept that

bases its principles only on achieving the domination of the inferior classes, a war fought exclusively within the boundaries of its own geography. So we are not faced with a permanent war but paradoxically with a permanent state of peace, hence “a peace that was truly permanent would be the same as a permanent war” (*Ibidem*: 208).

And since the principles *Ignorance is Strength* and *War is Peace* are explained as dynamic processes by Goldstein, the last principle of *Ingsoc*, *Freedom is Slavery* becomes a matching solution in a manner that fully incorporates the principles of doublethink, of the reverse, hence *Slavery is Freedom*. The principle on which this assertion relies is simple and effective: an individual can escape weakness only by becoming part of something larger, but he also has to abandon his identity for a total and unconditioned integration.

So the two different perspectives are clearly meant to represent not only dissimilar points of view, but to complete each other. The detailed history of political status is necessary to introduce the answer to the *why*. The answers O’Brien produces have a meaning primarily because they represent the opposite in meaning to those provided by Goldstein.

There is no opposition, whatsoever. The brotherhood is an invention of the party, Goldstein and Big Brother themselves are used as symbols and there is no proper evidence to support their actual existence. Resistance in any form is unimaginable, and those who oppose the system are converted only when resistance ceases: “we do not destroy the heretic because he resists us: so long as he resists us we never destroy him” (*Ibidem*: 267). All this gains a meaning when the reader is explained that “we are not content with negative obedience, not even with the most abject submission... We make him one of ourselves before we kill him” (*Ibidem*).

#### *Games of power*

Could it be however that Orwell was only playing games with the inner logic of power in *1984*? Daphne Patai (*The Orwell Mystique*) makes an interesting parallel between power relationships in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and games. Her main argument is that games are not means but ends in themselves, in this respect “the game is an activity that is intrinsically valuable and that is pursued for its own sake” (Patai, 1984: 222).

Further she advances into stating that one of the main motives of the book is the pursuit of power for its own sake and in this case it becomes a game, but not a simple kind of game but one in which a worthy and competitive adversary is needed, for power quest and games always presume a relational type of activity.

From this perspective there are three categories identified that maintain the game parallel of the book. First of all the Party is not

functional on his own when exercising power because, as Patai observed, it requires a constant quantity of opponents to be able to exercise power and the quality of the opponents must be elevated in order to appreciate success.

Secondly the permanent wars between Oceania, Eurasia and Eurasia are intended, in Patai's opinion, solely to prolong the game since this enduring war has no palpable outcome.

In the third case, *newspeak*, the very principle that animates Ingsoc and that constitutes the very essence of the Party's ideology, represents, when fulfilled, a ceasing of power since *thoughtcrime* will be impossible to commit.

But the ultimate reason for Patai lies in the elaborated process that transformed Winston in an enemy of the party. The seven year course of the process, the shelter provided, presumably by the party, leads to the logical conclusion that the party is creating opponents exactly because the relations of power in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* function like that of a game. If that is true, then the assumption that "without an ideology of power as an end in its self, there is no reason to cultivate opponents" (Patai, 1984: 227) justifies itself.

The principles of newspeak are applied to the game itself, though the goal of the game remains the same, i.e. wining; when the narrator declares that Winston "he had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother" (*Ibidem*: 311) the opposing forces in the game change: Winston becomes in the same time the looser and the winner at an individual level, though all victories are attributed to Big Brother.

#### *Recreating history between biography and political stance*

For some critics constructing the past or recreating history is Orwell's novel's main preoccupation. In *Deconstructing History*, Alan Munslow advances the idea that when history is perceived from a narrative's point of view several issues emerge. His main thesis is that a narrative claims to represent objective realities in all their nuances but the form in which it realizes this (that of a narrative) implies the active participation of the narrator (historian) thus a certain perversion of the objective, historic truth can be expected.

The problem is that the presumed illegitimacy of such an approach lies in the failure to establish a firm correspondence between the factual truth, the narrator's intention to exemplify and the nature of the material on which the story is super-imposed.

If we perceive history as a narrative form then history inevitably becomes literature; the danger embedded is that in this process, literature's own critical apparatus is imported allowing not only for formal but also structural modification (Muslow, 1997: 71).

This is particularly valid for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. History is not only modified from the perspective of the form it is presented in, but exists exclusively as a means to exercise the will of the narrators. The narrators in this case are inner party members<sup>2</sup>.

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On the other hand, several studies observed that the novel was constructed in accord with a well documented background; for example, Gordon Bowker's biography on Orwell sheds light on a series of such occurrences. References to Burnham are evident in the construction of the three super powers and the relation between them; from Zamyatin's *We* it seems that he borrowed the idea of total surveillance and that of the repressive state. In a letter to his publisher Warburg from 1949, Orwell notes that *We* is "an interesting link in the chain of Utopia books ... it seems to me a good book in the same way as *The Iron Heel*, but better written" (Orwell, 1968: 547).

More importantly, Orwell's reshaping of the vocabulary in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is similar to what Huxley describes in *Words and Behavior*: "Words form the thread on which we string our experiences. Without them we should live spasmodically and intermittently" (Huxley, 1960: 245). Huxley's point is that emotions, as well as all feelings, get their internal power and meaning from the fact that they are conjured by a word that carries within all nuances that define the complex meanings of the reality it defines. In the threats that menace the state of a language he incorporates abstract words. In Huxley's opinion when a word that gained a specific meaning due to various contexts, historical or political or of other nature, is incorporated in a context that preserves its primary meaning but adds other nuances that were not a part of the word in previous contexts, we are faced with the loss of the word's character and the change of its nature. Therefore, the process through which we arrive at an abstract word is a progression that implies "variations in quantity, if sufficiently great, produce variations in quality

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<sup>2</sup> As for Orwell's role in the outcome of the book, George Kateb considers that neither Orwell's growing dissent with the politics of his time, nor his personal problems (loss of his wife and illness) could amount to the perspective upon the future offered in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, therefore the reason must be relocated in other realms. The argumentation Kateb proposes is simple but convincing; Orwell was not a utopian thinker, he did not genuinely believe that mankind can attain a perfect social organization, but he strongly believed that there can be a certain decency governing life (Kateb, 1966: 576). Valerie Sims finds that the answer should be found in Orwell's essays and nowhere else for we have a clear image of the author's perspectives outlined in these works. However she is reluctant to draw a clear line between political views and the illness that marked Orwell's last years. She writes: "It is possible that, but not at all likely, that 1984, because of his illness, departed from these deeply held beliefs. If it did so, the fact is unrecorded in any other writing by Orwell in the period surrounding the writing and publication of the novel. It must remain an unlikely and unproven hypothesis" (Sims, 1974: 302).

[...] if we use abstract words which apply equally well (and equally badly) to other, quite dissimilar situations, it is certain that we shall think incorrectly” (*Ibidem*: 249).

Orwell talks of similar things when he elaborates the linguistic system of *Ingsoc*; the weakness of a language is a consequence, or better said a direct reference to the way reality is defined. However Orwell does not explain what is the direct relation between the decay of language and the decay of the perceived reality; he just makes the connection between the two, leaving the reader to look for the answer. Huxley on the other hand goes a step further; he attributes this phenomenon to an express desire to ignore reality: “We protect our minds by an elaborate system of abstractions, ambiguities, metaphors and similes from the reality we do not wish to know too clearly” (Huxley, 1960: 251).

The principle of Newspeak “arouse out of an awareness of how language was distorted by propagandists and advertisers and how artificial languages, such as Esperanto and Basic English, [...] gave power to those who would manipulate minds through the limitation of thought” (Bowker, 2003: 385). The basic concept of *Room 101* and the methods of torture employed in the novel are taken, as Bowker indicates, from the methods used by Torquemada; “the torture scenes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ...have historical roots” and the scene of the caged rats is derived from “a method used by Torquemada” (*ibid.*). The scenes involving the mysterious Room 101 are usually attributed to Orwell’s boarding school days spent at St. Cyprian’s of which the author had less than pleasant memories, and to which he refers as a place which “I loathed ... so deeply [...] have not even enough animosity left to make me hope that...the story of the school being burnt down was true” (Orwell, 1968: 547). For Bowker it is certain that “Orwell’s novel was informed by his past reading as much as his political experiences”<sup>3</sup> (Bowker, 2003: 385).

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<sup>3</sup> The direct reference that would support such a presumption can be found in Orwell’s article, “Literature vs. Politics”, in which the author makes some appreciation towards the way Swift obtained the unitary vision of Gulliver, noting that “Swift’s disgust, rancour and pessimism would make sense against a background of a ‘next world’ to which this one is a prelude” (Orwell, 1968: 254).

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