

Human Rights and Literature: A Critical Analysis of Dystopian Fiction *1984*

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Abstract

Think about all the screens in a modern home. The laptop, cellphones, television, tablet, and gaming devices are just some of the many portals people spend hours gazing into. But what if someone was staring back at you, monitoring every action and word? In George Orwell's (1903-1950) *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), that's the dystopia the main character Winston Smith is trying to escape. The research paper will delve into the intricacies involved in the intersection of literature and human rights violation.

Keywords: communism, dystopia, human rights, totalitarianism

Nineteen Eighty-Four is widely considered the most influential novel of the 20th century. It has impacted everything from political discourse to everyday language, with generations of writers, thinkers, artists, activists, and politicians going back to this text for inspiration during times of instability. Seventy years from its publication, many people wonder why this novel remains so fresh and frightening. Orwell's ability to combine elements of the past with the present to warn about the nightmarish possibilities of the future makes *Nineteen Eighty-Four* such a timeless classic.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the world is separated into three superpowers: Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia, which exist in a constant state of war with each other. The novel is based in Oceania. Great Britain is now referred to as Airstrip One. The Party dominates every aspect of life in the workplace and family home. The population is controlled through mass surveillance and propaganda. People who dissent are "disappeared", or erased from history. Every citizen lives under the watchful eye of Big Brother, the personification of the Party's control systems.

Totalitarianism is a type of government system using tyranny and dictatorship. 1984 is a political novel written with the purpose of warning readers in the West of the dangers of totalitarian government. Having witnessed firsthand the horrific lengths to which totalitarian governments in Spain and Russia would go in order to sustain and increase their power, Orwell designed 1984 to sound the alarm in Western nations still unsure about how to approach the rise of communism. In 1949, the Cold War had not yet escalated, many American intellectuals supported communism, and the state of diplomacy between democratic and communist nations was highly ambiguous. In the American press, the Soviet Union was often portrayed as a great moral experiment. Orwell, however, was deeply disturbed by the widespread cruelties and oppressions he observed in communist countries, and seems to have been particularly concerned by the role of technology in enabling oppressive governments to monitor and control their citizens.

In 1984, Orwell portrays the perfect totalitarian society, the most extreme realization imaginable of a modern-day government with absolute power. The title of the novel was meant to indicate to its readers in 1949 that the story represented a real possibility for the near future: if totalitarianism were not opposed, the title suggested, some variation of the world described in the novel could become a reality in only thirty-five years. Orwell portrays a state in which government monitors and controls every aspect of human life to the extent that even having a disloyal thought is against the law. As the novel progresses, the timidly rebellious Winston Smith sets out to challenge the limits of the Party's power, only to discover that its ability to control and enslave its subjects dwarfs even his most paranoid conceptions of its reach. As the reader comes to understand through Winston's eyes, The Party uses a number of techniques to control its citizens, each of which is an important theme of its own in the novel.

By means of telescreens and hidden microphones across the city, the Party is able to monitor its members almost all of the time. Additionally, the Party employs complicated mechanisms (1984 was written in the era before computers) to exert large-scale control on economic production and sources of information, and fearsome machineries to torture those who seem enemies. 1984 reveals that technology, which is generally perceived as working toward moral good, can also promote the most evil.

The Party controls every source of information, managing and rewriting the content of all newspapers and histories for its own ends. The Party does not allow individuals to keep records of their past, such as photographs or documents. As a result, memories become fuzzy and unreliable, and citizens become perfectly willing to believe whatever the Party tells them. By controlling the present, the Party is able to manipulate the past. And in controlling the past, the Party can justify all of its actions in the present.

While the Party's primary tool for manipulating the populace is the control of history, they also control independence and identity. For example, the basic traits of establishing one's identity are unavailable to Winston and the other citizens of Oceania. Winston does not know how old he is. He does not know whether he is married or not. He does not know whether his mother is alive or dead. None of his childhood memories are reliable, because he has no photos or documents to help him sort real memories from imagined ones. Instead of being unique individuals with specific, identifying details, every member of the Outer Party is identical. All Party members wear the same clothing, smoke the same brand of cigarettes, drink the same brand of gin, and so forth. As such, forming a sense of individual identity is not only psychologically challenging, but logistically difficult. The Party also forces individuals to suppress their sexual desires, treating sex as merely a procreative duty whose end is the creation of new Party members.

The Party is fueled by loyalty, and thus demands that its citizens support any and all actions it takes in pursuing a greater Oceania. For the Party, loyalty means accepting without question or hesitation. Ironically, when Winston pledges his loyalty to the Brotherhood, he also agrees to accept the goals and requirements of the Brotherhood without question or hesitation. Winston agrees to do anything the Brotherhood requires, even if that means murdering innocents. However, Winston is also loyal to Julia, and refuses to be separated from her forever. This split loyalty is what separates Winston from the other Party members. Party members are loyal to the Party, Big Brother, and Oceania alone. Personal relationships are of no importance.

Newspeak plays an extremely important role in Oceanian society and in the Party's control over its population. As Syme says, Newspeak reduces and limits the number of words in the English language, and removes words used to describe rebellion or independence (with the ultimate goal being to remove citizens' ability to think anti-Party thoughts). Interestingly,

the Party works to form a language around itself rather than naturally accepting and assuming the language of the people that make up the country. In this way, language is used as yet another mechanism of mind control. Removing a nation's original language serves to reduce the importance of a nation's past. Languages develop over centuries, and are deeply intertwined with culture and history. Redefining and forcing a language on a population, as was often done in the postcolonial era, denies that society has its individuality. The Party meets this goal with great efficiency.

The ideology and dangers behind totalitarianism, propaganda, and censorship are conveyed through Orwell's use of symbolism and motifs. Orwell uses the irony of doublethink to show how manipulation and control can restrict one's individuality and freedom. The concept behind Big Brother represents more than just the leader of Oceania, but rather the dictatorial presence over the nation. Doublethink is a mind-manipulation strategy in which individuals hold two contradictory ideas simultaneously and believe both are true. Orwell's language use throughout 1984 illustrates what it is to doublethink. The Party uses this strategy to invoke loyalty in its citizens. The names of the Ministries in 1984 exemplify the idea of doublethink, "The Ministry of Truth, which concerned itself with news, entertainment, education and the fine arts. The Ministry of Peace, which concerned itself with war. The Ministry of Love, which maintained law and order. And the Ministry of Plenty, which was responsible for economic affairs. Their names, in Newspeak: Minitrue, Minipax, Miniluv, and Miniplenty" (Orwell 4).

In reality, the Ministry of Peace is in charge of waging war, the Ministry of Truth manipulates and distorts information, the Ministry of Love oversees punishment, and the Ministry of Plenty focuses on economic shortcomings. Orwell's use of irony in these examples highlights how Oceania manipulates its citizens' minds in order to gain complete control and remove the ability for citizens to have independent thought, creating the idealistic totalitarian government.

Orwell's totalitarian government focuses heavily on Big Brother. The face of the Party has never been seen, however, and fear reigns across a nation as his presence is shown. As described in the text, "...the face of Big Brother seemed to persist for several seconds on the screen, as though the impact that it had made on everyone's eyeballs was too vivid to wear off immediately," Big Brother's intimidation lies deep within its citizens (Orwell 21). Big Brother symbolizes power and the state and the complete oppression of society.

Telescreens are used as constant surveillance for the people of Oceania and as a tactic to spread the Party's propaganda. Orwell uses telescreens to symbolize how the totalitarian government abuses its power through different means; in this case, the telescreens are directly an abuse of technology. The telescreens watch citizens' every move, tracking their facial features and reporting any suspicion to the Thought Police. As described in 1984:

"The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it, moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized." (Orwell 2)

The dehumanizing political philosophies of the Party are established through the various themes and motifs of the story. Orwell's warnings about government control are manifested throughout this novel by the use of propaganda, mind- manipulation, and fear. By looking deeper into the use of language and symbolism, it is abundantly apparent: Big Brother is watching you.

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