

1984, A Warning

In George Orwell's 1949 novel *1984* a middle aged man by the name of Winston Smith fights against the tyranny of the massive single party state Oceania. Winston's attempts to rebel are crushed and Orwell paints a bleak picture for the future of the world. George Orwell wrote this book for one reason, and that reason was to warn the world of the rising threat of communism and totalitarianism. Totalitarianism is a political system in which the government controls every aspect of society and has total authority over the inhabitants. The world of *1984* is a totalitarian dystopia where all freedoms are suppressed and regulated; even thoughts are monitored by the notorious Thought Police. Orwell utilizes a variety of devices to describe how a world under the thumb of totalitarianism would look. Orwell utilizes anything from media censorship to the traitorous "Junior Spy" children to disturb the reader. Orwell was familiar first-hand with the capabilities of totalitarian regimes and served as the Paul Revere to the western world, the Soviets were coming and if someone did not stop them, the world would never be the same.

The novel *1984* is still relevant today but to understand its true meaning the context within which the novel was written must be known. Orwell had experience with totalitarian regimes in the Spanish Civil War and developed a hatred for the mechanical like way the regimes treated the people they ruled. The majority of the novel was written in 1948, in the few years lull between World War II and the Korean War, just before the western world realized the colossal threat of the Soviet Union and its totalitarian ways. Orwell did not wish to

see what happened in Spain happen everywhere, so he wrote 1984 to scare anyone who did not realize the threat the Soviets posed into action.

The state of Oceania is under the control of the Party and its notorious leader Big Brother. One of the ways the Inner Party maintains control over the people of the nation state of Oceania is through the elimination of family units. With children pitted against their parents there is no trust in families. Orwell's depiction of families in his novel is meant to disturb people. People in general rely on their family for support and guidance, the trust within a family is one of the aspects that make it so dangerous to the Party. The idea of a world where family is just the people one lives with is frightening to most people. In addition to children being conditioned by Big Brother to spy on their parents the Party suppresses sex and sexual desires. "The sexual act, successfully performed, was rebellion. Desire was thought crime" (Orwell 59). The Inner Party only allows sexual relations to occur under specific circumstances and only for the purpose of procreation. Transforming sex from an expression of love into a cold calculated act of duty to continue the human race dehumanizes people. In one of Winston's earlier attempts to rebel he starts a sexual relationship with Julia, another worker in the Ministry of Truth. She hates the party as much as Winston does and enjoys rebelling against the Party in any way possible. Her obsession with sex as a freeing action transfer over to Winston in ways that make him more rebellious. The Inner party's object in sexual suppression and child conditioning are to eliminate the close bonds of family units; if an individual cannot trust their own family they can't really trust anybody. Winston and Julia grow to trust each other as they grow closer however and this poses a threat to the Party. The only thing consistent and trustworthy in a person's life is the Inner Party.

Another focus of Orwell's novel is the increasing number of ways a totalitarian society can oppress its people through technology. Throughout the novel Orwell describes televisions in every room with Big Brother's face always watching. Through technology the party can invade every aspect of every person's life. In the world created by Orwell's novel, personal freedoms do not exist and people are not allowed to even think of resisting Big Brother.

Winston's coworker Tom Parson's was a loyal member of the Party but he is arrested and tortured for muttering "down with Big Brother" in his sleep. The purpose of technology and science in general is different in the world of *1984*; Winston states that "technological progress only happens when its products can in some way be used for the diminution of human liberty" (Orwell 30). The entire focus of the Party is not wealth it is only power. Towards the end of the novel Orwell makes a bold statement in regards to power, "Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture" (Orwell 263). This interpretation of totalitarianism portrays the political system as not a benign force for the greater good but a greedy power grab by individuals wishing to dominate others.

In addition to technology the Inner Party uses language and media to control the population of Oceania. The Inner Party creates a new language known as newspeak to replace the language of the past called oldspeak (most likely English). This new language omits several words that promote revolution and free thinking, this change in language structure eliminates the very thoughts of rebellion. If the idea of resisting does not even exist then any hope for change is eliminated. Orwell's mindset is that once established a massive totalitarian state

would be near impossible to overthrow. The absolute power of the government in such a society would not be opposable. In addition to the control of language the media is also regulated and information is changed. Winston works at the Ministry of Truth where newspapers are processed and released for distribution to the populace. Not only does Orwell portray the substitution of real news for propaganda but Winston also witnesses past information being changed. "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past." (Orwell 35). This allows the Inner Party to edit information to give the appearance that things have improved when in reality the condition of society has gradually worsened over time. At one point in the novel a Party spokesperson switches the name of the country he is denouncing mid speech. The nation of Oceania had been at war with Eurasia and in alliance with East Asia at the beginning of the speech but at the end of the speech the two nations switched places and the crowd just goes along with it, not even questioning the signs they brought denouncing Eurasia. It is stated that the Party could make the people believe that "two and two made five" (Orwell 80).

Much of the plot revolves around Winston's attempts to resist Big Brother and attempting to connect with the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood is an organization portrayed in the media as a terrorist organization that damages the party at every available opportunity. This Brotherhood is most likely just the creation of the party as no member of the Brotherhood is ever located by Winston. It is logical that the party would create such an organization to both create a common enemy that the people could rally against and to weed out potential free thinkers that would attempt to sabotage the Party's interests. Winston is victim to Mr. O'Brien, an inner party member who pretends to be a member of the brotherhood to lead Winston into

a trap. The fact that Orwell never actually reveals whether the Brotherhood is real or not is meant to reinforce that in a world where everything is controlled by the government it is never possible to actually know if anything is true. Orwell also leaves the existence of Big Brother himself in a veil of ambiguity. Big Brother is never actually seen in person, he serves as a tool of the Inner Party. Big Brother conveys two primary feelings; he injects fear into the hearts of anyone thinking of rebellion but also serves as a warm benevolent leader to anyone who is loyal to the party. This ambiguity is further amplified by Mr. O'Brien who tortures Winston and never gives a straight answer to anything Winston ever asks. When O'Brien does reveal information, the reader is unsure as to whether O'Brien is merely arrogant and revealing the inner workings of the party or simply deceiving Winston to further confuse him. The deceitful nature of the Inner Party in regards to conveying information and the mental confusion that results from it serve to both thicken the plot and to convey a negative aspect of totalitarian governments. Orwell inflicts the same confusion upon the reader that the party does to Winston.

At the end of the novel O'Brien tortures Winston until he breaks down and submits to O'Brien's will. O'Brien as an influential member of the Inner Party and the embodiment of contradiction is an excellent allegory for the Party as whole. He uses a variety of tactics to gain the submission of Winston ranging from starvation to Winston's biggest fears. Winston tells O'Brien he hates Big Brother and O'Brien responds "You must love Big Brother. It is not enough to obey him; you must love him." (Orwell 282). This conveys Orwell's belief that a Totalitarian government must not only control its people physically but psychologically. When confronted with his greatest fear (rats) he breaks down and begs O'Brien to "Do it to Julia" (Orwell 286)

instead of himself. This event forces him to renounce his love for Julia; he cannot love Julia after honestly wishing her to be tortured in his place. With this O'Brien believes Winston broken and releases him back into the world. At the end of the novel broken and defeated Winston admits that he loves Big Brother (Orwell 297). The defeat of the story's protagonist expresses the impossibility that Orwell feels in regards to fighting established Totalitarian governments from the inside. The physical and psychological victory of the Party is a dark ending that shows the reader how serious the repercussions of a totalitarian government can be.

With his novel *1984*, Orwell creates the sovereign example of a totalitarian society. At the time the novel was written the Soviet Union was on the rise and the nations of the western world had yet to perceive the true threat that the Soviets represented. Orwell wrote *1984* as a warning to the western world of what was coming. Orwell wanted the world to know what communism was capable of producing and that if left unchecked the Stalinist and totalitarian ideas of the Soviet Union would spread with the speed and tenacity of a wild fire. The western world at the time would not listen to a simple declaration however; they needed to be shown the results of the totalitarian way of life. The startlingly dark methods of physical and psychological control portray a world where personal liberties are repressed and people are treated like machines. The idea that people can be broken and repaired to be functional units in society is a horrifying idea that adhered to the hearts of many westerners at the time. The Cold War which escalated with the Korean conflict of 1950-1953 seemed to support Orwell's warnings. The second red scare that followed the circulation of this novel raised the western

world's awareness to the threats of the Soviet Union and totalitarianism, preventing the horrendous scenario in *1984* and justifying Orwell's warnings in the novel.

Bibliography and Word Count

Orwell, George. *1984: A Novel*. New York, NY: Published by Signet Classic, 1977. Print.

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