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Humanities Core

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1984: Seeking Humanity in a Heartless Society

George Orwell's *1984* is his last masterpiece and by far one of his most popular novels. Set in a dystopian society, *1984* encapsulates the horrors of a totalitarian regime called IngSoc (short for English Socialism) where individualism is not only discouraged but also severely punished. Citizens of Oceania (formerly known as Great Britain) are physically and mentally enslaved, robbed completely of their individuality. Writing on the brink of death, Orwell's thoughts of death were amplified which are clearly reflected in the intense atmosphere that surrounds the book along with the constant mention of death in the novel. This novel has retained its extraordinary popularity because he had created the society "so recognizably like that with which people in 1948 were familiar" (Woodcock, 24). The book was published in 1948, the year from which the title gained inspiration. This reversal of the date is an indication of what the parallel, or the chaotic version, of contemporary society could be like. By making the protagonist's, Winston Smith's, society so similar to that of the real world, the dystopia becomes a reality and an absolute possibility. This novel is intended as a warning of the dangers in embracing a totalitarian government such as Hitler's Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. In order to emphasize these hazardous consequences, Orwell sticks closely to the format of Gothic fantasy. Like most Gothic novelists, Orwell exaggerates physical horror "in portraying the

imposition of power, notably psychological power over individuals, through irrational means” (Woodcock, 21). In this heartless world, the government, also called the Party, turns children against their own parents; there is no familial affection or connection. This act of not being able to trust one’s own closest kin creates paranoia and effectively eliminates humanity. Without a sense of trust or connection to others, people become apathetic and mindlessly obey whatever the person in charge demands of them. This “person” in power is known as Big Brother, who holds a ubiquitous presence in the novel but never physically makes an appearance. This is evident throughout *1984* as much of the conflict that arises among the government, Winston, and the rest of the people, occurs within the mind. In addition, the government seeks to limit language as a vehicle to curb the thinking that would lead to individuality. Through the implementation of surveillance, thought policing, and psychological abuse, the totalitarian government is able to prevent objection and obtain absolute power forever. The suppression of individuality through the eradication of language and human connection can ultimately destroy the humanity within individuals.

In order for a despotic regime to function and last, it must take extreme measures to ensure that its citizens remain subservient and the most effective way is through ceremonial indoctrination. Keers in *Words as Weapons* claims that ceremonial indoctrination is the glue that cements the totalitarian cage as it is practiced in order to brainwash citizens and to garner mass support. In this process, elements such as individual integrity, compassion and even the sense of self-preservation are ripped out of the individual’s conscience. They are conditioned so that the ideal citizen “eventually believes that his individual value and the value of other individuals does not exist outside of the current public opinion” (Keers, 70). This public opinion refers to the

Party's ideals and the supposed belief that the Party should be first priority above all else. Once this process of indoctrination is completed, individuality is virtually nonexistent and tyranny becomes absolute.

Winston mentally battles the oppressive rule of the Party in a desperate attempt to gain control of his own conscience and his own humanity. With a diary he illegally purchased, Winston slowly comes to the realization that he lives in an oppressive society through the act of writing. Unconsciously, he writes "voluptuously over the smooth paper, printing in large neat capitals 'Down with Big Brother' over and over again" (Orwell, 18). This unconscious act is Winston's first act of thoughtcrime, or the crime of having unorthodox leanings. Surprisingly, he writes this phrase naturally, with ease, unlike the forced "cramped awkward handwriting" (Orwell, 18) he had when he was transcribing the Party's slogans. The fluidity with which he writes such blasphemy suggests to him that there is a part of him who does not believe in the lies the government has forced on him and that he is entitled to his own thoughts and opinions. Psychologist David Myers advocates the direct link between thought and language meaning that "to expand language is to expand the ability to think" (Myers, 353). As words were intended for the purpose of communicating thought, it has the ability to influence the way people think. This use of language elicits the sense of individuality because everyone's brains are wired differently, so one would eventually realize that he or she deserves a place in society. Winston recognizes that he is a dead man from the moment he started writing in his diary. He muses, "So long as human beings stay human, death and life are the same thing" (Orwell, 136). Winston accepts that he will be executed sooner or later for preserving his own humanity and internally rebelling

against Big Brother. Though he will inevitably be executed, it is of his own choosing to walk on the fatal path.

Even though Winston recognizes the importance of retaining his humanity in an authoritarian government, he is not as resistant to the Party's powerful clutches as he likes to believe and unknowingly acts in ways that slowly chip away at his humanity. Winston works in the Ministry of Truth, one of the four ministries— the rest are Ministry of Peace, Love, and Plenty— that, ironically, function opposite of what their names euphemistically suggest. His job is to rewrite document records in favor of the Party doctrine. This includes adjusting production rates to correspond with the actual rate, changing the name of the warring nation, and completely erasing individuals from existence or even creating new ones. Winston enjoys and even excels at his job; he believes that what he is doing is not forgery but simply a “substitution of one piece of nonsense for another” (Orwell, 40). Readers know that Winston's falsification of documents is illegal, but Winston himself does not comprehend it because he is so engaged in the act of doublethink, the process by which individuals modify the past without the memory of having done such a thing. Doublethink is how the Party keeps citizens in line; even Winston, with his self consciousness, is susceptible to such a tactic. He easily dismisses such an action without a second thought and does not realize that he is losing a small piece of his own humanity by lying to himself when he is aware that he is doing something wrong. What is frightening about recreating the past is that no one would be able to remember the truth of what actually happened. “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” (Orwell, 248). The Party has the power to manipulate the human mind since there is no point of reference for anyone to judge the authenticity of what they are told. This manipulation of the mind

effectively shortens memory and twists the concept of objective truth. The Inner Party “[deprives] people of their own words and in so doing, deprives them of memory” (Lewis and Moss, 51). This tactic proves to be effective as obliterating history ensures that centers of opposition cannot grow. No one has the power to counter the Party’s claims that the past had been different because they do not even know what they can not remember. The deprivation of memory also destroys feelings and emotions. Under the Party’s command, Winston recreated a completely new person out of thin air. In an attempt to erase a person who had gone against the Party’s doctrine, Winston came up with Comrade Ogilvy, who “unimagined an hour ago, was now a fact” (Orwell, 47). Winston did not feel ashamed or hesitation about erasing a once respected hero of the nation from ever having existed and replacing him with an imaginary person who had never even existed. Even in death, people are unable to escape the Party’s abuse of power. This shows how expendable people are to the Party; as soon as one shows the smallest sign of unorthodoxy, he or she would not only be executed but also cruelly removed from history. Winston’s complete disrespect of a dead person shows his lack of compassion, which is an essential trait to being human.

The totalitarian government, such as the one depicted in *1984*, craves absolute power and demands absolute loyalty from its citizens; in order to do that, it destroys the only thing that could undermine its empire: language. Language is the vehicle used to express thoughts and sentiments, which make each person unique and human. Thus, the Party controls the population of Oceania through the imposition of Newspeak, “the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year...and the range of consciousness always a little smaller” (Orwell, 52). Without a wide expanse of vocabulary to choose from, the citizens have no way of

deriving their own thoughts. French studies Professor at Warwick University, Paul Chilton, identifies the specific features of Newspeak: “reduced complexity, few abstractions, and no self-reference...which makes all other modes of thought impossible” (Chilton, 37). By limiting the amount of work required of the brain, the mind atrophies and becomes ever more incapable of pursuing higher intellectual knowledge. As Rousseau claims in his essay *Discourse on Inequality*, the pursuit of knowledge through language is what separates man from beast. Apart from satisfying their basic biological needs, humans tend to work towards self-actualization, or the goal of reaching their own full potential. However, the reverse is true in the novel: citizens slowly begin losing their own identity and their own individuality in favor of advancing the Party’s goals. Other than the walking and breathing shell of a man, there is no depth to him. For example, Winston overhears a man droning on and on about something in the cafeteria. What caught Winston’s attention was not the content of the conversation but rather the manner in which the man spoke. It was clear that every word of it was pure orthodoxy, but “Winston had a curious feeling that...it was not the man’s brain that was speaking; it was his larynx...noise uttered in the unconsciousness” (Orwell, 54). This scene illustrates the ideal citizen that the government desires: a puppet with no thoughts other than pure orthodoxy, an empty mind that only spills praises for Big Brother. This man did not know what he was talking about; his use of language was meaningless because there was no weight behind his words. Everything he said was basic repetition of the Party’s slogans, which emphasizes the fact that “Newspeak is the language of the they-self” (Carter, 199). Instead of looking after oneself, citizens put the Party’s needs above all else. The man’s incapability of shaping language into his own creation dehumanized him because he could no longer show compassion or impart wisdom, both of

which are crucial traits required to be human. Destroying language has effectively isolated people into their own mindless void, incapable of overthrowing the government.

Newspeak “narrows the range of thought...so that every concept that can ever be needed will be expressed by exactly *one* word” (Orwell, 52). Without a doubt, one word is not enough to express every emotion and every idea. Everybody will eventually come to the same conclusion and see only one perspective. In *A Brave New Language: Orwell's Invention of "Newspeak"* in 1984 by Jean-Jacques Courtine, the author claims that “people who are identical to one another become alien to one another”. Even though similarity usually brings communities together, the totalitarian government has twisted this unity into a repulsive force. It has torn people apart by bringing down the language that is supposed to connect one another. Language threatens the whole totalitarian enterprise (Courtine, 70). Courtine also claims that language provides a barrier between the individual and the totalitarian gaze and offers man a space of inner resistance. Through language, people are able to formulate their own thoughts, express their own opinions and commit their loyalty to different groups through communication. Being in a group could potentially bring down an empire as it is “intensively intolerant of of deviance or nonconformity” (Claeys, 37). The contradictions of different goals set by different groups split power amongst each of the groups; thus, a totalitarian society can not tolerate anyone pledging his loyalty elsewhere. Limiting language isolates each person and forces them to attach to the only group that remains, which is the Party.

The Party attempts to dehumanize its citizens on all levels by forcing them to regress back into the primitive stages of nature before the formation of civilization by destroying the most intimate bonds of a family and of a sexual relationship between couples. The Party was

able to destroy the family by turning the children from “the gamboling of tiger cubs which will soon grown into man-eaters” (Orwell, 23). The children may initially be innocent and harmless but the indoctrination of the Party will turn them into cold, heartless killing machines. They are encouraged to denounce their own parents to the Thought Police if they suspect any signs of unorthodoxy. It is not uncommon for parents to fear their own kids and distance themselves from the responsibilities of parenthood. Deprived of the affection that a loving parent can offer, the children will never learn of compassion; instead they will mindlessly obey the Party’s every command, carrying out its goals of a utopian society. When Winston assists Mrs. Parsons, his neighbor with two kids, he notices that her eyes “flitted nervously from Winston to the children, and back again...[and] that there actually *was* dust in the creases of her face” (Orwell, 23). Mrs. Parsons is depicted similar to that of a wounded, caged animal, unsure of when her life will suddenly come to an end. This paranoia forces her to follow all the rules and remain loyal to the Party at all times and places. The Party has made society into the survival of the most obedient.

In addition to destroying the bonds between parent and child, the Party has banned recreational sexual intercourse, one of the most fundamental acts of human existence. Sex is only allowed for the purpose of reproducing a child, as it would ultimately serve the Party’s needs. This is reminiscent of Rousseau’s view of the savage man who participates in sex without any attachment or responsibility of nurturing a family; he is completely detached. If men found something that made them satisfied and content, there would be no incentive for them to focus solely on Big Brother. Winston and Julia, a young woman who shares the same hatred for Big Brother, have an affair as a form of rebellion against the Party. The act of sex is in itself a form of language in which the two bodies come to an understanding of each other and establish an

attraction. Oftentimes, people say that “love conquers all” and this is a great fear of the Party because its rule solely depends on fueling fear and hatred. Thus, this intimacy is viewed as a threat to the Party’s power because Winston and Julia’s “relationship works...more on the unconscious, or at least the unintellectual level...in the strange irrational fatality that encompasses them” (Woodcock, 28). Winston and Julia’s love is a concept that the Party has no way to control because it is not tangible. The irrational fatality is viewed by tyrants as uncontrollable imagination, which poses a threat to their idea of a perfect and static world. Imagination is one of the most stimulating consequences of humanity; this creativity allows one to think outside of the box and distinguish oneself from the rest of the population.

Even though Winston and Julia have retained some of their humanity, the oppressive government inhibits them from inciting a rebellion. The presence of telescreens forces them to sneak around and whisper only in each other’s ears. The telescreens are crucial in the Party’s structure of order as it acts as a surveillance camera and a public announcement system. Every single detail is recorded through the telescreen, so the Thought Police knows what one is thinking and knows every move one is about to make. As the philosopher Jeremy Bentham states, “To be constantly under the eyes of an inspector is to lose the power to do evil and almost the thought to wish it.” This complete invasion of privacy heightens citizens’ sense of fear and paranoia. Over time, individuals become acclimated to the tension and will find it easier to adhere to the Party’s rules instead of fighting against it. As soon as they accept that their whole life is documented for all to see, it becomes easy for the Party to manipulate their minds. Winston has learned to fake his expressions and emotions when facing the camera. He is always

acting and can never truly express himself. The telescreen curbs the emergence of individuality and keeps everyone suppressed.

However, despite Winston's silent rebellion, opposing oppression does not fully humanize him. Ironically, in his pursuit for humanity, he turns towards corruption and inhumanity which is the exact opposite of his goal. When he joins an underground organization called The Brotherhood, aimed at defeating the Party, he agrees "to lie, to steal, to forge, to murder, to encourage drug-taking and prostitution, to disseminate venereal diseases, to throw vitriol in a child's face" (Orwell, 172). All these crimes seek to destroy his own humanity. This sets up a parallel between Winston and the Party because they are both willing to do anything, whether it is inhumane or not, in order to achieve their end goal. Because he felt like that was his only choice in bringing down Big Brother, he failed to see that there may be a more civilized way to reach his goal.

No matter how hard Winston tries to cling onto his humanity, the Party will never let him die with his own conscience. Winston is eventually caught by the Thought Police and dragged to the Ministry of Love, which is ironically a torture chamber. There, he is abominably tortured to confess all of his crimes and implicate Julia as his partner. However, even through all that, he continues to love Julia. O'Brien, his torturer, gives Winston a mirror to show him what the Party has been able to reduce him to. Winston sees that the "barrel of the ribs was as narrow as that of a skeleton; the legs had shrunk so that the knees were thicker than the thighs...[he] was rotting away...falling to pieces" (Orwell, 272). By showing Winston his own starved and mistreated body, O'Brien is saying that the Party has gained control over his body. It is not enough for the Party to dehumanize him physically but also to dehumanize him spiritually. He is taken to Room

101, the room that holds the most fearful weapon that the Party possesses. In Room 101, it is revealed that there is nothing one can hide within the totalitarian society; even one's deepest fear is known and used against him. This way, the Party managed to break Winston completely when they set a cage of starving rats next to him. Winston shouts, "Do it to Julia!" (Orwell, 273). By betraying Julia, Winston has completely lost his humanity. He is eventually freed, but he is not even considered to be a threat anymore because he truly loves Big Brother now. Winston is brainwashed in the Ministry of Love to believe that he loves Big Brother wholeheartedly, and that $2+2=5$ because the Party had claimed that was true. In the end, Winston realizes that one can never escape the government because they can get into one's head. After his release, he finds that he "[can] no longer fix his mind on any one subject for more than a few moments at a time" (Orwell, 301). Winston is no different than that of a beast, devoid of any humanity or any thought. He spends his days, drinking and waiting for that bullet to find the back of his head.

Winston's journey to find humanity is ultimately dashed by the workings of the totalitarian government. No matter how hard Winston tried to hide his own humanity and preserve his own individuality, the Party still found out and destroyed him both physically and mentally. A totalitarian society seeks to destroy all forms of humanity and individuality, not leaving a single person to spare. Orwell's depressing ending serves to emphasize that contemporary society must do everything it can to steer away from a tyrannical regime.

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