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# Sample Research Literary Analysis 1

Michael A Stanley, *Cleveland State University*



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Michael Stanley

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## **Big Brother's Boot**

*A contextual Analysis of Nineteen Eighty-Four, then and now*

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (hereafter, *1984*) is a classic work of dystopian fiction set in post-nuclear fallout London. The world of the novel is imagined a mere 35 years beyond the date it was published, a signal that Orwell believed the collapse of society was more likely than most would think after the fall of the axis powers in World War II. Yet what Orwell saw in Communist Russia led him away from the political party he once supported, and the horrors of war in fascist Italy and Spain led him to a career in writing, away from the battle field that he once fought in to oppose unethical politics and oppression. A difficult novel to classify, *1984* employs a cautionary tone that aligns both the anti-establishment and radical thought of the modernist era with the resistance to categorization and apathetic or fatalistic mindset of many post-modernistic works, yet the work is best understood as a scathing political satire and nightmarish vision of what could come to be. Orwell himself might have considered his novel a work of political protest and subversion rather than have been comfortable with being placed in any literacy camp or cannon outside dystopian fiction.

Among the myriad ways Orwell shows how a once prosperous society can devolve into a police state with voiceless, powerless citizens, critics have focused on the use of political manipulation of truth and the mind of the Party members. Thomas Dilworth gives an astute analysis of the use of brainwashing techniques used in the novel, and focuses his attention on the hypnosis of constant media consumption and surveillance. David Dwan shows how the manipulation of truth in the minds of Party members is the ultimate goal of the party and the cognitive control of the opinion of the populace is perhaps the most effective tool of the ruling party, and also the most poignant social commentary in Orwell's satire. Malcolm Pittock give special attention to Orwell's background as it influenced his writing and expertly addresses the warning that the novel seems to shout at the reader. Although the novel can seem dated given the absence of technology familiar to modern audiences, the warning Orwell lays out in his most famous novel is clear. *1984* is as relevant today as it was when first published in 1949 because the threats of unethical authority manifest themselves contemporarily with as much force as they did in the post-World War II, Cold-War era.

Eric Blair was born in India just after the turn of the twentieth century and lived there into his adolescence, but would not adopt the pen name George Orwell until injury and illness forced him to give up fighting totalitarianism physically, and he turned to writing as a means of political subversion. British Imperialism was still an imposing force in the nation of his birth, and Orwell felt alienated by his mixed ethnicity and lower social class that separated him from other English children living in the colonies of India. The sense of separation from his peers, his father's alcoholism and abusive treatment of the young Orwell, as well as the strict and highly authoritarian school systems that he found upon his return to England no doubt had an effect on the writer from his formative years and influenced his decision to fight against fascism in the

Spanish civil war. Pittock relates how Orwell's personal involvement in fighting tyranny may have influenced his writing when "In 1938 and 1939 Orwell was a member of the Independent Labour Party and, after a spell with POUM, in the Spanish Civil War he fought alongside other members of the ILP on the side of the Spanish Republic" (1). A gunshot wound to the throat and chronic lung infections led forced him away from the battlefield and led toward a career as a novelist and political essayist, but Orwell's novelistic satires such as *Animal Farm* and *1984* are widely appreciated as the most effective rallying cry against the forces of the fascism and dictatorial governmental styles prevalent during the period he was writing them. Orwell's fiction has also been shown to criticize the Imperialism that he witnessed firsthand as a boy, and even to predict the cold war hysteria and paranoia of McCarthyism in the U.S., with the constant threat of nuclear conflict. Orwell's critique of the post-war political climate is more effective because it does not attack specific ideologies or politicians, but rather the flawed ideals and methods themselves. Orwell's politically charged novel thus broke from traditional political essay and analyses "By not finally identifying the regime with any possible version of political totalitarianism, Orwell showed he had an inkling of the profundity of the evil released by the bloodiest war in human history and what it had done to him, and could only register that by going outside conventional political analysis" (Pittock 4). While *1984* does not explicitly predict the kind of political turmoil and violence that plagues the world today, his vision of ever consolidating nation states and constant war and surveillance remains as poignant and foreboding today as when it was first published.

In a world divided between three global superpowers that are in indissoluble conflict with each other, Orwell's implicit warning against never ending strife between nations is most apparent. While the old-style Imperialism that Orwell experienced is largely gone, exploitative

corporations, factions of government and political parties intent on annexing new territory, and violence between ethnic and religious groups is as much a part of our world as it is a part of the novel. The Party's theories on Production and economy are best understood as a hyperbole of the modern military industrial complex, in which "The essential act of war is destruction, not necessarily of human lives, but of the products of human labor. War is a way of shattering to pieces... materials which might otherwise be used to make the masses too comfortable, and hence, in the long run, too intelligent" (Orwell 157). In this way, the Party can continue create synthetic shortages of supply while increasing demand without the risk of political upheaval. The novel's main character, Winston Smith, works diligently to correct the redactions and inaccuracies of the propaganda and speeches of the Party who is always at war with at least one of the other nations. Winston is never sure which nation is the enemy, and the reports about the fighting and history of the conflict are actively changed and corrected to realign with party objectives and are altered by Winston himself in the Ministry of Truth. Within the novel, Orwell explains how the control of information about the past is tantamount to dictation of truth and therefore the minds of the party members:

The mutability of the past is the central tenet of Ingsoc. Past events, it is argued, have no objective existence, but survive only in written records and in human memories. The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon. And since the Party is in full control of all the records, and in equally full control of the minds of its members, it follows that the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it. (Orwell 176)

Blatant inaccuracies and fabrications are created by outer party members like Winston, and while the truth goes down the memory hole, he and all other outer party members are just as confused

about who they are fighting, why, and just as uncertain about the eventual outcome as we are today about conflicts in the Middle East, Russia, and sub-Saharan Africa.

Rather than a traditional war with identifiable enemies with certain boundaries, the territory occupied by each super nation in the novel constantly changes, alliances shift as well as the target, and the only knowledge the populace has of the events is through an impossibly biased and politically filtered media that is designed to manipulate the citizen. Dilworth points out that the war-mongering is disseminated through media in the most subtle ways, unconcerned with persuasion of Party members through reason, “Nor does the party seek dramatic interest; it seeks only power, which it would certainly wish to maximize to the fullest extent possible by subliminal suggestion” (313). The concern about journalistic integrity and bias are just as real today as they were in post-World-War II reactionism. The political theorists and left-leaning progressive movements that existed in great number previous to world war that advocated socialism and communism were silenced during wartime and following the end of global conflict, and the concern for individual freedom in political thought was threatened by claims of anti-patriotism just as it is today. The danger in being discovered by the thought-police for being guilty of thoughtcrime or as a member of The Brotherhood in *1984* is a reflection of the intolerance during the late 1940’s when Orwell penned the novel. Dwan suggest that Orwell’s depiction of the intolerance of the Party to independent thought is manifested in manipulation of the truth, where “What matters is not the way belief corresponds to an independent reality; rather, it is the way beliefs fit with each other in a coherent and comprehensive system. The Party repeatedly flouts the most basic pre-requisites of this kind of truth. It sponsors Doublethink” (386-387). Those refusing to conform to the rhetoric, and those opposed to popular opinion even in the relatively free United States risked censure. Being identified as a member of the

communist party was a considerable risk, and we see echoes of that vicious patriotism now, as those who question the war on terror risk being labeled unpatriotic, suspicious, or even an America-hater.

Comparing the media of today to Orwell's time is especially important to consider as perhaps the most salient example of how brainwashing and paranoia lead to the totalitarian nightmare state described in the novel. The telescreens and posters proclaiming "Big Brother is watching You!" are ubiquitous in the streets of Orwell's London. Dilworth uses the telescreens as a locus for his argument for social control by "Using domestic telescreens, the Thought Police broadcast specifically targeted subliminal messages, technically known as 'deferred suggestions,' to people asleep or in a sleep-related hypnotic trance" (307). The constant barrage of messages and constant connection via technology are perhaps felt even more soundly today than in the era just before television when the novel was published. However, today's media is often described as biased and heavily influenced by political slant and ideological agenda (e.g. Fox News, campaigns on social media, etc.). Politically charged speeches and biased punditry in the media can produce the kind of lock-step conformity seen in the novel's Two Minutes Hate displays. Dilworth describes the practice of "Rhythmic public chanting of 'B-B!' (for 'Big Brother') [a]s 'an act of self-hypnosis, a deliberate drowning of consciousness" (308). The radio and newspapers of Orwell's time blasted the public with rhetoric and condemnation of alleged political threats and cultural enemies. These malicious tactics to control the thoughts and behavior of people in the post-war era are transformed into the hyperbolic imagining of a society where the populace is brainwashed by forced media consumption like the Two-Minutes Hate and endless war mongering. The tactics used by mid-twentieth century media to influence opinion,

votes, and actions then are felt today in the twenty-four hour news cycle and the nearly umbilical connection to technology that our society has become accustomed to, and dependent on.

If we acknowledge the influence of media on the general public both in Orwell's time as well as ours, and in the fictional exaggeration in the novel, we can ask, to what effect does that influence aim? Within the novel, brainwashing the public through media and surveillance has the ultimate goal of eliminating any domestic dissent or opposition to the ruling party. The omnipresent media is both emitting propaganda, as well as monitoring the actions of the Party members and "It is probable that Thought Police using telescreens channel... limit the freedom of Winston and Julia and presumably everyone else in the Party. It is possible – I think probable – that the subliminal suggestion through telescreens eliminates all significant freedom as early in life as possible" (Dilworth 313-314). The party goes so far as to engineer the evolution of language to make it impossible to have independent thought. The "Newspeak" of *1984* aims to make it impossible to oppose authority by removing the language and knowledge of history necessary for conceiving opposition to the authoritarian powers. This is mostly achieved by what is termed "Doublethink" within the text, but could be better understood in the real world as cognitive dissonance; "Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. The Party intellectual knows in which direction his memories must be altered" (Orwell 176). The party views malleable individuals as its most important asset, for when the Outer Party populace willingly propagates the lies fabricated by the Inner Party, truth and reason is impossible and the future of the state is secure. Indeed, the novel shows that "Doublethink lies at the very heart of Ingsoc, since the essential act of the Party is to use conscious deception while retaining the firmness of purpose that goes with complete honesty" (Orwell 176-177). Accepting notions that are questionable or false, while



ignoring truth, logic and reason is not new to humanity, and Orwell certainly felt society needed to be reminded to this fallacy after Hitler's Nazism convinced people to go along with a mass genocide, and when nuclear warfare was considered as a possible protective strategy or inevitable outcome of an arms race. Even today, his message of the importance of independent thought and the necessity to avoid self-delusion is obvious when one considers islamophobia, vaccination debates, and nearly all news coverage today.

Independent thought versus the specter of groupthink and the danger of limiting free speech are easily grasped when one considers that the protagonist and his lover Julia, are in effect, terrorists in the eyes of the ruling Party. Because they oppose the ideals of the majority, engaging in illegal activity, and think for themselves they are in every way the enemy of the state and are treated as the worst kind of traitors. Neither the party, nor any of its loyal members validate the basic humanity of their desires, in that their only crime is want of love, sexual pleasure, freedom of opinion and thought, and a small degree of privacy, yet these are seen only as threats to the authority of the Party. As such, both characters are brutally tortured and brainwashed into confessing crimes they did not commit, betraying each other, and eventually succumbing to the influence of Doublethink entirely before being quietly liquidated. If this sounds like a nightmare only possible in fiction, one need only consider the gulags of Stalinist Russia, the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, or perhaps some of the current prisoners of Guantanamo Bay. Dwan points out that the use of doublethink to combat thoughtcrime and eliminate individual thought is the destruction of truth, and thus the destruction of humanity; "Truth, therefore, is a constituent of human thriving and is the basis for a basic form of freedom. To deprive human beings of their relationship to truth – as O'Brien does to Winston – is to destroy what they are: truth seeking creatures" (Dwan 392). In both our time and Orwell's, the

vision Winston had in a dream of a boot stomping the face of individuality and freedom for want of political and social dominance is made clear as a warning that was vastly important when the book was first published, and we need to be reminded of now. It is important to consider how much of a difference there is between two-way telescreens and hidden microphones in Oceania and the rampant suspicion and espionage of the cold war, or for that matter, governmental monitoring of email, phone calls, text messages, and surveillance by drones and satellites that become more powerful every year.

Orwell's classic cautionary novel was clearly meant as a warning about the subjugation of individuality and authoritarian rule that led to the atrocities of World War II and brought about the nuclear threat in the years leading up to his death just after the novel's publication. But the message of the novel remains just as important today with the same threats manifested in slightly different configurations. Pittock correctly assesses the impact and meaning of Orwell's novel both when it was first published as well as its importance to readers today:

The nightmare world that Orwell envisaged has, of course, not come to pass in the terms in which he envisioned it; but the fact that his key concepts have taken on a life of their own and are felt to illuminate the workings of our own society – ‘doublethink’ and ‘newspeak’, for example, nearly sixty years after Orwell coined them – shows that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was not merely fantasy... Orwell's prediction of a world that was characterized by perpetual war, if we include in that preparations for war, has proved alarmingly accurate. (5)

Orwell imagined a world in which the axis powers had won, or that another world war could bring about a similar result, and nuclear attacks would end society as he knew it. The Soviet Union has fallen and many more countries have become democratic, tolerant, and peaceful, but

the threats Orwell warns of are easily identifiable in the unending global war on terror, the lack of privacy on the internet and cell phones, and a political environment is at least as divisive now as it was in 1949.

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