

Totalitarianism Through Newspeak and Doublethink: An Evaluation Through George Orwell's 1984.

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This paper aims to examine the Orwellian Society in George Orwell's novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four" along with other underlying themes. It seeks to reconcile the current political setup to that in the book. It explores the avenue of Doublethink, especially Doublethink and Newspeak affect the scope of thinking and how limiting the scope of language can lead to a dictatorship. The scope is general with emphasis on totalitarianism and control of the mind by linguistic and ideological control through Newspeak and Doublethink. The paper has examined the contemporary relevance of the book and the ideas put forth. Sources include the book itself and secondary sources.

INTRODUCTION

“Thoughtcrime¹ does not entail death: thoughtcrime IS death”²

What would life be in an era of absolute control? A time where even thoughts and love are controlled by an external force? Would such powers cause de-humanisation?

All this and more is explored in George Orwell’s dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four.

George Orwell, born Eric Blair, served as a British Imperial Policeman in Burma where he despised his duties that included enforcing strict laws of a political regime he despised. The novel was composed on similar lines, with the central theme being the dangers of an Authoritarian Society in which Big Brother was the despot.

Through Ministries and language control, Big Brother controlled the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of the people. Other themes include behaviour control, socialism, de-humanisation and language control.

The book is not a literary triumph. Despite that, the novel is considered Orwell’s greatest work due to its visionary nature. Its dystopian style tries to portray the worst scenario possible as a deterrent to absolute political authority and conveys a powerful warning of the dangers of totalitarian regime. This book is very politically charged and has a lot of historical and contemporary relevance.

¹ “Thoughtcrime” is a phrase in the fictional language of Newspeak which means a disapproving or illegal thought.

² Orwell, George *1984* pg 27

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK

In his youth, Orwell was fascinated by H.G. Well's *Modern Utopia* and Yevgeny Zamayatin's *We*. After reading *We*, he began to write a manuscript of a book on the same lines³, leading to this piece of literature. All his loathing for the political setup in Burma manifested in this novel as Big Brother and the entire totalitarian social and political setup.

The Thought Police always captured dissidents in the dead of the night. This is probably based on Stalin's secret conviction 15 Soviet Jews on the Midnight of August 12th (13th morning) of 1952 for capital offences because they were members of an anti-fascist committee.^{4, 5}

Just as Stalin slaughtered these people for being against fascism, thought-criminals in Oceania were apprehended at night for opposing Ingsoc ideologies.

Orwell also worked for the BBC and had to often doctor and censor news items. This was similar to what Winston's job was in the Minitrue.

Winston is modelled on Orwell. Both hated authority and were atheists. Both Winston and Orwell suffered varicose veins. Winston's coughing fits and poor health can be attributed to the fact that Orwell was bedridden and suffering pneumonia, very close to death at the time of authoring this work.

The three superpowers Eastasia, Eurasia and Oceania were probably modelled on the superpowers of World War 1.

³Orwell, George, *1984*, Edition 2008; Note on the text by Peter Davidson mentions a letter to Gleb Struve to that effect.

⁴ The Night of the Murdered Poets was one of Great Purges in Russia. The NKVD were the secret police who executed the Purges

⁵ Shrearer, David A., *Social Disorder, Mass Repression, and the NKVD during the 1930s* Cahiers du Monde russe, Vol. 42, No. 2/4

ISSUES RAISED

Nineteen Eighty-Four raises a lot of issues, most of which are of contemporary relevance such as:

1. Dangers of absolute power;
2. Restrictions placed on freedom in a Totalitarian regime;
3. Lack of privacy;
4. Control of the minds of human beings through language and alteration of historical records;
5. Deterioration of language.

Newspeak

Winston stayed in Victory Mansions, the Party Members' quarters. The Party controlled actions, thoughts, memories and beliefs of the people thorough various means such as surveillance through Telescreens, the Thought Police, reports from Party Members to the Thought Police, altering language and historical records. Thus, calling a residence in which the inhabitants were constantly monitored and restricted "Victory Mansions" is highly ironic as the residents are not victorious and free but enslaved by a system of absolute control.

"BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU" was the slogan posted all round. No one had ever seen Big Brother (BB) or knew his real name and was probably fictitious. Winston felt that Big Brother was a voice and face under whose pretext the Party carried out its activities and exhibited itself to the world. Big Brother was a character who acted as a "focusing point for love, fear, and reverence, emotions which are more easily felt towards an individual than towards an organization". The Ingsoc, English Socialism movement, required stability and if Big Brother was a fictional ruler then this would prevent any power-hungry Inner Party

Members from staging a coup d'état. **No member would seek to overthrow a phantom ruler.**

Ingsoc did not permit trading on the free market. It undertook manufacture of all commodities under the brand name of Victory. All these goods could be redeemed against coupons only and every member drew a certain number of coupons annually, depending on rank. This rank distinction was not socialist. The Party slogan was paradoxical and ran like this:

“WAR IS PEACE
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH”

It was said that peace is maintained by engaging in war, giving up liberty would yield freedom⁶ and the power of knowledge was to be abandoned to seek strength.

The administrative and executive machinery consisted of four Ministries: Minitrue or the Ministry of Truth which concerned itself with news, entertainment and publications; Minipax or Ministry of Peace which concerned itself with war; Miniplenty, Ministry of Plenty, which handled economic affairs; and Miniluv or Ministry of Love which was responsible for maintaining law and order.

Miniluv was set up to ensure law and order but nothing was considered illegal as there were no laws. Despite this, the Party often sent people to Forced Labour Camps “Joy camp” or ordered their death due to non-conformity of such law which they disguised as ideas of Ingsoc.

⁶ The ideology of giving up liberty for freedom was what a lady propounded when she was interviewed for Alex Jones’ documentary *Terrorstorm: A History of Government Sponsored Terrorism* as though liberty and freedom were at conflict and one could be traded for another.

The Thought Police were in charge of regulating thoughts that were against Ingsoc, the Party or Big Brother. They were aided by tip-offs from Party members themselves and often, their children. A Thoughtcriminal could not evade the Thought Police forever. Sooner or later, the Thought Police would apprehend the offender. Usually, the arrest would be done at night and all evidence of the Thoughtcriminal's existence would be erased by Minitrue which was in charge of lies and controlled all publications.

Minitrue would publish all kinds of books, articles and magazines. Most novels were electronically authored by a novel writing machine. More importantly, Minitrue would alter all records to control people's thoughts. For instance, if Oceania was once at war with Eastasia but later struck a truce, all record would be altered to show that Eastasia and Oceania were always at truce. Similarly, if they were now at war with Eurasia, records would suggest that Eurasia was always an enemy and the two countries were always at war.

If such a thing was said to be authenticated by the Ministry, the people would believe it and once they believed it, they would think it was status-quo. This was called *doublethink* which is a system of reality control. It is the power to accept two contradictory beliefs. *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*⁷.

For instance, in the book, when Winston is told that $2+2=5$, he begins to believe that the sum of two and two is actually five due to which he visualises it to be so. If he was told that everyone has six fingers on each hand, he would actually visualise a sixth finger and believe it to be there. When Winston was called upon to alter records, he was to forget having done so.

⁷ Orwell Today [Online http://www.orwelltoday.com/doublethink.shtml](http://www.orwelltoday.com/doublethink.shtml)

The best illustration of Doublethink would be the Ministries' names:

The Ministry of Peace was concerned with War;

The Ministry of Truth with Lies;

The Ministry of Love with Torture; and

The Ministry of Plenty with Scarcity and starvation

This device of doublethink was the main method through which the individuality and thinking ability of people were curtailed.

Newspeak followed a similar pattern. It deleted many words and restricted the usage of several. Apart from providing a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, Newspeak sought to make all other modes of thought impossible. Its basic principle was that what could not be said could not be thought and thus not communicated. Thus, limiting language limited thought and thus communication of certain ideologies.

The society was roughly demarcated into two sections- the first being proletariats and the second all cadres of Ministry Officials. The Party placed severe restrictions on its members and thus their lives were devoid of any love, purpose and humanity. They lived a de-humanised existence. The proletariats' lives were the closest in resemblance to humanity; they were considered socially and morally inferior but they had their freedom. In contrast, the Ministry officials' lives were so restricted that they were given very limited resources and the Party tried to control their ideologies and thoughts. They were not even allowed to wear

perfume or make up. Everyone was addressed as “Comrade” eliminating the personal touch and human aspect attached to addressing a person by their name.

The Ministry Officials were allowed to purchase their things only through the Ministry by way of coupons. They were prohibited to indulge in “free- market operations” as it was against the socialist sentiments if “Ingsoc”. This was similar to communist USSR where people had to purchase items only through ration shops. Both Oceania and communist USSR suffered shortage of items. Winston admitted shortage of razors and USSR’s shortage was characterised by long lines at the ration shops.

Emmanuel Goldstein was the Enemy of the People as he had once long ago engaged in counter revolutionary activities when he was a member of the Party almost as influential as Big Brother himself.

It was Goldstein who was the prime figure in the daily “Two Minute Hate” during which all Party members’ anger was focussed on him.

This man had assembled an army “The Brotherhood” and written a book which all Party members avoided mention of. At the end of the Hate, the Party’s slogans would appear:

WAR IS PEACE

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

The people would then chant “BB” in praise of Big Brother and Party philosophies.

Winston’s apartment was constantly monitored by the telescreen which could not be switched off but only dimmed. Due to his telescreen’s positioning, Winston was able to be beyond the line of sight of the telescreen in a specific spot in his house. It was there that he took out an old diary and began to write down his thoughts. Subsequently, he began thinking treacherous thoughts. Even before he put his words “DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER” onto paper, he had

committed the offence of thoughtcrime for which he would be apprehended by the Thought Police sooner or later.

Oceania was always at war with another country. When it came across a new belligerent, all records were altered so that the people believed that Oceania was always at war with the country in question. The Party altered other documents to control people by trying to confuse their memories. It also controlled personal relationships such as marriage by making Party consent necessary. Consent was generally granted for the sole purpose of begetting children and couples were granted or denied consent on the basis of genetic characteristics. Desires and feelings were systematically being removed from people's minds from an early age. The people were taught to look at feelings and desires with contempt. The only feelings they could nurture were the love for Big Brother and the Party, camaraderie and hatred for Goldstein.

The Power Structure in Oceania is explained by Habermas's model of System- Life world which explains power structure on the basis of the control of personal life by the institution. Oceania's power structure is characterised by the colonisation of the life-world constant monitoring and bureaucratization of social activities and everyday life, enabled by systematic mechanisms.

VISIONARY ASPECTS OF THE BOOK

Orwell predicted well in advance what the world would eventually come to. He was right on many counts and perhaps the book alone was a powerful deterrent that prevented some of the atrocities Orwell envisioned.

Our speaking style and writing style is becoming quite like Newspeak. It is projected that Newspeak will be widely used in the world by 2050.⁸ The transition is evident. From emails to texting (that too is Newspeak- a contraction of text messaging), we are shortening words and restricting vocabulary. Soon, only such abbreviations will be used and the true essence of words will be lost. The meaning will be the same but the context will be largely narrowed leading to the ideology of the word being lost. As in the book, the word free existed. Newspeak allowed the word to be used only in the context of being without; “the dog is free from lice” was accepted syntax but thinking of being free as political freedom was incompatible with Newspeak. Such a construction was only possible by someone with knowledge of Oldspeak (classical English). Soon, such a scenario will arise. Linguists estimate this trend to emerge by 2050.

However, W.F. Bolton, a Professor of linguistics, differs from this view. He believes that Orwell had little knowledge of linguistics and his writings portrayed his tastes and social prejudices. He explains that though the core of the book has timely issues, the ideas are often disjointed. Bolton portrays Orwell as a thoroughly inconsequential analyst of linguistic matters, a mere spritzer of strong but uninformed opinions. Bolton stated that Orwell "knew

⁸ Orwell, George, *1984*,

no more about language, then, than the average Briton of his time and class might have known, and perhaps a little less"⁹

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF IDEOLOGIES IN THE BOOK

Perhaps Orwell's dystopian book was a warning which was heeded to and thus prevented the society it portrays. Luckily, what Orwell envisioned did not come true completely, some of the themes have manifested in today's time and society.

Winston purchased a coral paperweight from a proletariat shop. This shattered. The paperweight appears as the glimmer of hope; the coral remains protected. Suddenly, this glimmer of hope in a "tiny world with its atmosphere complete" vanishes.

The fragments of the paperweight lie exposed. The shattering of the paperweight signals the breaking of human will.¹⁰ It signifies individuality being relegated to authority. This is exceptionally important in an era where people try to exert individuality.

Doublethink:

Many oxymoronic terms exist today that cause us to accept two contradictory facts and accept both of them to be true.

The war on terrorism means subjugating violence with violence. This creates more violence as aggressive means are used to eliminate terrorists. Many politicians, especially George

⁹ Daniels, Harvey A., *George Orwell's Linguistic Naïveté* American Speech, Vol. 62, No. 2 (Summer, 1987), pp. 159-162

¹⁰ Vinz, Ruth *The English Journal*, Vol. 72, No. 6 (Oct., 1983), pp. 39-41

Bush, have spoken about ensuring the safety of the people and peace by declaring a war on terror.

Peacekeeping forces refer to armed forces which intend go to war, creating more disharmony instead of ensuring peace. Firing cannons and bullets, entering enemy territory, killing the enemy and leading to the death of soldiers and civilians through such actions creates unrest and not peace.

The Health Department is a department that deals with treating sick people. Calling it the “Health Department” makes it sound as though it is a department that manages the affairs of healthy people which it does not.

The idea of giving up rights in the name of freedom is doublethink. It states that by relinquishing rights, freedom is achieved. Actually, without rights, there is no freedom.

Defence Forces are believed to defend the country’s interest. They use armed force to defend the country. By engaging in war, both as aggressors and to defend from attack, the defence forces cause deaths of lives of citizens. Maintenance of the armed forces and engaging in war diverts resources that could be used constructively for infrastructure, town planning, human resource and social security to the forces which may cause death of human beings. Thus, the Defence Forces do not entirely defend the people.

Politicians are equivocators. They hold or pretend to hold contradictory beliefs in their mind simultaneously and reconcile them. Their campaigns and activities stand testament to this fact. Diplomats have a similar job. They present a scenario which sounds favourable to another country while they hold their country’s interest in mind which may be contrary to the other country’s interest. The US invasion of Iraq is a classic example.

MINITRUE altered and censored media. In the past few years, a lot of countries have taken this route. It has always been a common practice for a country to glorify itself and try to suppress opinions against the state. Orwell was party to such distortions of the truth when he worked for the BBC.¹¹

¹¹ Supra, 3

Recently, China censored a lot of media. Very few newspapers were allowed to publish in the country and lot of the World Wide Web was censored. The censorship was at such a height that a search for the word “carrot” yielded no results as this word contained a characters that were included in Hu Jinato’s name. This led to the withdrawal of Google from China. Israel and Iran have also been in the news for media censorship.

Those who were not entirely for the Party were vaporized. Similarly, rational Mullahs in Pakistan (ones who were not fanatics or overly attached to religion) were killed soon after taking up their post.

SIMILAR REFERENCES

Doublethink was a form of reconciling contradictory ideologies. Such an act is similar to equivocation which is the misleading use of a term with more than one meaning or sense (by glossing over which meaning is intended at a particular time). It is a logical fallacy by holding two contradictory beliefs at the same point of time.

In many ways, doublethink in the book is similar to Macbeth’s equivocation.

Macbeth the tyrant is quite similar to the regime of Big Brother. In Macbeth’s regime, good people “Expire before the flowers in their caps, Dying ere they sicken”. Similarly, those conversant with Oldspeak and thus old philosophies such as freedom were very few and they would be vaporised for thoughtcrime or they were tortured till they were brainwashed. Both Scotland and Oceania were countries “Almost afraid to know itself” due to the horrid fate of the people and the lack of freedom of subjects. These countries were controlled by tyrants who incited hatred and not patriotism. Thus, Scotland and Oceania “cannot be called our

mother but our grave” where the death and disappearance of those against the rulers were so frequent that they were “made, not marked” and “violent sorrows” of war and suppression of human rights were a “modern ecstasy”.

The Inner Party wanted stability and they feared loss of control. This echoes an Eastern proverb “Evil rulers are always haunted by fear of their subjects”. It was such fear that led those practicing Oldthink to be vaporised by the Party and those not in support of Macbeth to be brutally murdered.

Big Brother was a fearsome ruler, modelled on Hitler and Stalin. Similarly, it was said that “Not in the legions of horrid hell can come a devil more damned in evils to top Macbeth.”

Thus, the rule of Macbeth and Big Brother’s regime were similar, the only difference being the time period and the state of technology.

The movie *V for Vendetta*¹² has a similar theme. The movie is about a man ‘V’, a freedom fighter, who lives in an advanced totalitarian society where everything is unreal and like in 1984, even products are of substandard quality. ‘V’ and Evey rebel against the regime and the Secret Police. Both Winston and Evey’s parents and siblings were taken from them by the purges of the respective regimes. Just like the Minitrue censored the media, Gordon Deitreich, who takes in Evey, must have scripts for television censored and approved before they can be telecast. Moreover, both stories are set in London, though London is the capital of Airstrip One (Newspeak name for Britain) in Orwell’s work.

Everyone hopes for Utopia, which is unattainable. Sometimes, to have a perfect society, people have to give up individualism and freedom. In all probability, the quest for Utopia would result in a dystopia where, though there is equality; life would be mechanical and restricted. Striving for Utopia is irrational. Instead of focussing to perfect the world, it should

¹² The movie it is based on a series of graphic novels written by Alan Moore and illustrated by David Lloyd

be made a better place. Perfection is impossible. Even if it is possible, it takes out the joy of life.

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Note:

Each version of the book has certain events which are not mentioned in the other. The 2008, 2000 and 1961 versions were referred for this work.

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