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The dystopian elements of government in Orwell's Novel 1984

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the dystopian elements of government as depicted in Orwell's novel 1984. Generally, dystopia appears in the abuse of power, manipulation, exploitation, and injustice in man's attempt to achieve a perfect society. This paper deals with how dystopian literature depicts the flaws of those seemingly utopian societies in Orwell's 1984. It shows how people fall victim to the dystopian government policy and its games, exposing peoples' lives to danger and even death. In brief, it shows the slow decay of life and self as reflected in dystopian literature which portrays a frightening vision of a revolutionary world, generally controlled by knowledge and a dictatorial ruling government that uses any possible means to utilize iron-handed power over its people; this is done through the discussion of how Orwell depicted the elements of dystopian government like family and sex, repression, religion, control of information, society, psychological manipulation, and technology in his novel.

Keywords: dystopia, George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four, science fiction, Totalitarianism, utopia

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Public Interest Statement

This paper explores the dystopian elements of government in Orwell's 1984, focusing on the abuse of power, manipulation, exploitation, and injustice in a utopian society. It highlights the flaws of these utopian societies, as people fall victim to the government's policies, exposing their lives to danger and even death. The paper discusses how Orwell depicts elements of dystopian government, such as family, sex, repression, religion, control of information, society, psychological manipulation, and technology, in his novel.

Introduction

Discussing the significance of contemporary cultural, material, and political conditions of George Orwell, this paper is supposed to provide background on the representation of the dystopian government in 1984, and how Nineteen Eight-Four depiction of the elements of the dystopian government are presented and shaped in this literary work.

Background on George Orwell

Born in Motihari, Bengal, India in 1903, Eric Arthur Blair, better known by his pen name George Orwell, is one of the most significant and influential novelists, essayists, journalists, critics, and political writers of the 20th century. His writings stand out for their opposition to authoritarianism, scathing social criticism, straightforward language, support for democratic socialism and political democracy, as well as their emphasis on economic democracy. He wrote six novels in the final sixteen years of his life (1934–1949), among them the dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four and the novella Animal Farm (1945). (1949). He was an essayist, and in his 1946 article “Why I Write,” he described his motivations for writing as follows:

What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce a work of art’. I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.

From the beginning of the publication of his works, including *Burmese Days* (1934), to *Coming Up for Air* (1939), to *1984* (1949), the world-renowned Orwell exerts influence to transform “political writing into a mere art” (Orwell, 1956, p. 394). Upon close examination of the works of George Orwell, one finds that most of his documentary-fictional works are unique and significant, and inspired by the experiences he gained as a policeman in Burma, a dishwasher in Paris, a tramp in London, an eyewitness to World War II, a fighter against fascism in Spain, and finally as a journalist for some newspapers such as the BBC. Orwell’s fiction adopts a distinct documentary style of writing based on aesthetic experience. In his book *George Orwell: A Life*, Crick (1981) claims that Orwell has been neither “a political philosopher” nor simply “a political polemicist,” and refers to his fiction as “descriptive works” that are “not always directly political in the subject matter” but always exhibit a “political consciousness”.

Research Problem

A dystopian world can be described as an “imagined universe in which oppressive societal control and the illusion of a perfect society are maintained through corporate, bureaucratic, technological, moral, or totalitarian control” (“Dystopias: Definitions and Characteristics”). Dystopian literature can be used as a way of criticizing the present social systems that place constraints on freedom. In this study, the researcher wanted to explore how the perceived issues about governmental control are represented across dystopian novels in the past century. In particular, the researcher wanted to answer two questions:

1. How the elements of dystopian government are represented in the novel.
2. How people in a society are depicted through their relationship with the government.

Through these different questions, the researcher wanted to investigate how this novel reflects ordinary issues and social fears about the power of the government that has stayed prevalent through to our present day.

Literature Review:

This part will give an overview and background for the research topic: dystopia and its relation to literature and society. Humanity seeks to find, order, justice, and peace in an ideal world that is called a utopia. Yet, this desire expressed in several works of literature has been affected by the sad side of real life. Consequently, utopia is transformed into dystopia. Utopia is generally used to refer to the fictional representation of an ideal society, which is much better than the one in which we live. Such a kind of society has perfect social, political, and environmental systems. On the other hand, dystopia refers to the fictional representation of a society that is worse than the one in which we live. Thus, it can be described as an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible (Moylan 95). Though, it should be noted that dystopia is not exactly the opposite of utopia, for both share the same intense measures of social control. The real difference lies in the approach. In both utopia and dystopia, the intense measures of social control emphasize extremely upon their positive and negative effects respectively. Though not all societies that are recognized as perfect represent utopia, they are the subtle beginning of dystopia. This is merely because all efforts to make those societies look perfect are made of power, manipulation, exploitation, and injustice. This desire can generate greed and selfishness (Altaher 147). Anti-utopianisms argue that using force is important to achieve an ideal society for example Sargent (1994) argues that “utopianism is said to lead to totalitarianism and the use of force and violence against people”. This means that there could not be a dystopia without the desire for a utopia (Dunn 47). So, dystopia exists when society seems utopic, but when you look closely enough, you can observe that it is not (Boyd et al. 383- 85). Accordingly, it can be confirmed that the turn to dystopian literature is generally associated with the inadequate existing social, economic, and political systems. Booker states that although the society of the United States seems to have been more successful and “durable”, it has proved that it is greatly influenced by “serious abuse” of bourgeois capitalism (The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature 20). Both utopian and dystopian societies aspire for a better future, but no society can be ever ideal for everyone. That is to say, one’s utopia can be another one’s dystopia and vice versa. This is naturally because of the clashing and contradiction among humans’ interests and desires. The world cannot be fair for everyone. Booker proceeds to say, “even these ‘democratic’ societies can have their nightmarish sides” (The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature 20). The idea of utopian/dystopian literature is derived from that of science fiction which is based on creating an imagined future to expose the human reaction to the contemporary changes in science and technology and their effects. Thus, dystopian fiction is set in the future to focus on the extremely destructive or negative effects of such changes. Science fiction themes strongly influenced many dystopian works (Moylan xi-xv). Although science and technology are meant to enrich human life, this utopian impulse of science has been replaced by dystopian projections of disastrous current trends (Scholes and Rabkin 174). In dystopia, they are employed “to maintain the state’s surveillance and control of its slave citizens” (Hillegas, 1967: 3). Beyond the obvious scientific changes, science fiction deals with the economic, political, and social changes that affect a man and his life. Science fiction gives a space for a new form of political opposition within the bleakest conditions. Such generic fiction is considered an allegorical description of social injustice and a critique of societies (Moylan 30-32). Therefore, fiction witnessed the beginning of a new genre known as dystopia which presents a miserable and bitter image of the future, offering a picture of the present that is cast in the future (Cziganyik 305). However, dystopia presents a new way of understanding the world, which broadens the readers’ experience of the unseen possible reality. It might also prevent the status quo from being worse as it presents an imaginary picture of the worst possible outcomes of the current conditions. It could make people conscious of what

might happen and therefore work to change it (Moynan 126). Moreover, Booker clarifies that dystopian literature is used to provide future fresh and unfamiliar perspectives on problematic practices that might be inevitable. In this way, dystopian writings are read by many as political warnings. Booker proceeds by saying, “This exploration of alternative perspectives recalls the technique of defamiliarization”; which can be regarded as a literary technique of dystopian literature. Therefore, dystopian literature is made up of stories where the societies which seem utopian are revealed to be defined by the oppression and suffering caused by a totalitarian or fascist government. Such a government appears utopian only on the outside as its rulers think this is the best for their nations. Nevertheless, how they manage their state is unjust and wrong (Altaher 154). Simply, dystopia is not about a tyrannical society with limited freedom, but about what makes that society tyrannical. It is not simply about an evil police-state government, but it explores the way by which the government influences and controls people (Yoran 186). A dystopian society is one where the government or some entity has robbed the population of their freedom. Dystopian societies are regularly characterized by dehumanization, environmental disaster, totalitarian governments, human misery, squalor, oppression, disease, overcrowding, or other characteristics associated with a catastrophic societal decline (wordreference.com). Those societies are class-based, where lower classes are somehow forced to live in horrible poverty. Dystopian authors extrapolate the existing issues and amplify them to their extremes. Therefore, Sargent defines dystopia as a non-existent society, set in a specific time and place, that a contemporary reader views as worse than the society in which he/she lived. Being a genre of imagination, dystopian fiction presents an alternate reality in the future which is considered a cautionary tale or warning about the consequences of continuing certain policies or behaviors. So, dystopian literature portrays a negative point of view “the way the world is supposedly going to provide urgent propaganda for a change in direction” (Clute and Nicholls 360-62). In dystopian novels, the hopeful promise of the possibility of improvement is replaced by the notion that the world is a dangerously cruel and terrible place (Findley 56-57). Thus, the protagonists face famines, violence, and other forms of human oppression (Boyd 386). Among the most highlighted ideas in dystopian fiction are not necessarily horror or the apocalypse, but how one attempts to endure and survive “atrocities and frights” (McAleer 168). What distinguishes dystopian writers is that they believe in man’s ability to survive the worst conditions in which he lives. Although they acknowledge his defeat, they look beyond it to the possibility of winning (Woodcock 18-19). As dystopian writers explore the dark side of their society, they adopt the approach of portraying an oppressive future society because it is often the best way to set a prophetic warning based on current abuses or disturbing trends in society (Borcherding 12). In other words, dystopian writings warn against, and didactically predict a coming evil while there is still time to correct the situation in reality (Sisk 80).

Dystopian Elements of Government in the Novel

The dystopian society of 1984 lived in a revolutionary world. It formed innovative technologies for governing the individuals, by using psychological manipulation they separated their people according to the government’s measurement, confirmed full control of history and information, eliminated any mark of religion, and forced the government’s opinion of sex and family on the societies.

Orwell establishes an imaginary world 40 years in the future but is yet able to raise doubts in his readers’ minds about the story’s time setting. He does not identify the time of the novel occurrences and accordingly focuses on the tyranny of society in 1984. The story begins with the helplessness of the major character, Winston, to determine the accurate time: To start with, he was not sure that the time was 1984. It must be around that time because he was sure that he was 39 years old and assumed that he had been born in 1944 or 1945.

- Technology:

George Orwell employs aspects of technological development in his novel as a means for manipulating society. The major role of technology is to manage all aspects of society. The author employs the idea of

a telescreen that is continuously observing and hearing the members of the Oceania Party: The telescreen received and transmitted concurrently. Every sound made by Winston, higher than whispering, would be heard, furthermore, since he stayed in the area of vision he could be seen as well as heard. It is not possible to know whether you were being watched at any moment. (Orwell, 1949: 5) The major purpose of telescreens is to keep society in fear and to allow people to run their lives without feeling that they are making something dangerous or wrong. The author used technology as the primary means of pressure and it is employed in all parts of life. The Party uses inventive tools to damage undesirable people's identities and parts of the past.

- **Psychological Manipulation:**

Psychological manipulation is an essential aspect of the dystopian novel. Orwell uses that aspect in various ways, for example, the Party employs the propaganda's power to persuade the people of Oceania of their well-being and consequently guarantees the brainwashing of the society. 1984 world is full of pictures that remind the society who is ruling them: On each place, facing the elevator shaft, the picture of a huge face watching them. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the slogan below it ran. (Orwell, 1949: 3) Besides the posters that remind the people that they are being watched, the Party continuously repeats its slogans: Then the face of Big Brother disappears, and instead, the three mottos of the Party appear in capitals: "WAR IS PEACE FREEDOM IS SLAVERY IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH" (Orwell, 1949: 21). The Party's mottos are conflicting, but the people of Oceania never question these slogans because they are right for them.

Language is employed as a way of psychological control and manipulation method for society. The Party realizes that language has great value for understanding the world. It obliges new language to be used by the people of Oceania. This language is meant to substitute their language and is prepared to limit the scope of their thinking:

"Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end, we shall make thoughtcrime impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed, will be expressed by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten." (Orwell, 1949: 67)

The government of 1984 knows that they can control the thought by controlling the language. They realize that society can be controlled by removing words that do not match them. The author mentioned this idea by stating, "Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller" (Orwell, 1949: 67).

- **Society:**

The presence of a layered society is an essential element of the dystopian novel. In 1984, George Orwell made a divided society. It was divided into two classes, the proles and the Party members. "The Party taught that the proles were natural inferiors who must be kept in subjection, like animals" (Orwell, 1949: 91). The Party believes that the proles are a working force and "no attempt was made to indoctrinate them with the ideology of the Party" (Orwell, 1949: 91). In the novel, the proles are under the control of the Party members.

"The Party states It was not desirable that the proles should have strong political feelings. All that was required of them was a primitive patriotism that could be appealed to whenever it was necessary to make them accept longer working hours or shorter rations." (Orwell, 1949: 92)

The government of 1984 keep its society segregated. It manifests its control by maintaining a rigorous rule of those who can prosper and those who cannot.

- **Control of Information:**

One of the elements of dystopia that appears in 1984 is the government's control of history and information. This controlling of information besides repressing that part of history which does not help the ideology of the government helps the government to create a dystopian world where the society will not be able to compare its present with the past. In the novel 1984, the Party succeeds to persuade the people that they are living better than their descendants because of the Party policy; therefore, they modify the past to their convenience: it claimed that nowadays education improved by 40% more than before. The Party argued that the infant death ratio was now only 160 per thousand compared to 15% before the revolution, (Orwell, 1949: 95) The altering of the information process is generally employed to the past as the Party slogan says, "Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell, 1949: 312). The Party succeeds to have control over both the present and the future by controlling the past. This process of controlling the history and information gives the Party complete control over its members. It also makes the people of Oceania unable to be sure about both time and events that occurred. To practice this complete control the Party uses some persons to falsify and change production figures, newspaper reports, and history books. "Winston states that all one knew was that every quarter astronomical numbers of boots were produced on paper, while perhaps half the population of Oceania went barefoot. And so, it was with every class of recorded fact, great or small. Everything faded away into a shadow world in which, finally, even the date of the year had become uncertain." (Orwell, 1949: 55) The totalitarian government keeps its society in a state of complete ignorance by altering the information whenever it feels that it is necessary. In addition to that, the Party changes the names of cities and countries. This leads to the inability of the members to have any clear evidence of their destruction of the past except their memories: Further, than the late fifties, everything disappeared. "When there were no external records that you could refer to, even the outline of your own life lost its sharpness. Everything had been different then. Even the names of countries, and their shapes on the map, had been different. Airstrip One, for instance, had not been so called in those days: it had been called England or Britain." (Orwell, 1949: 41)

- **Repression of Religion:**

One of the important dystopian elements in 1984 is the oppression of religion. By applying its policy, the government changed the concept of religion in society therefore they worship the state instead of the divine. Religion is symbolized by an imaginary character (Big Brother) that serves as a continuous Party's power reminder. The people of Oceania honor Big Brother who represents the power of the almighty. Besides, the members of high rank are called "the priests of power" (Orwell, 1949: 333) and in this way, they give the Party equal power with God.

- **Family and Sex:**

Society and the protagonist Orwell created had a different perspective on sex and family in his world. In the novel, the family is one of the units that work for the government of Oceania. Children are encouraged by the Party to spy on their families.

As Winston Smith explains, all their ferocity was turned outwards, against the enemies of the State, against foreigners, traitors, saboteurs, and thought criminals. It was almost normal for people over thirty to be frightened of their children. And with good reason, for hardly a week passed in which the Times did not carry a paragraph describing how some eavesdropping little sneak – "child hero" was the phrase generally used – had

overheard some compromising remark and denounced his parents to the Thought Police.
(Orwell, 1949: 31)

The members of the family have no real relationship and their loyalty is only to the Party. The children are believed to be involved in spying on their parents early on this behavior leaves traces on the dynamics of the family.

There is no chance for parents' feelings in addition to their fear that their children will bring them one day to the Thought police. In this way, children and parents are affected by the Party's plan to crush families. Parents feel honored because their children serve the state irrespective of the cost, besides they denounce their children in the name of the Party. Mr. Parsons recognizes that when talking to Winston Smith:

“Did I ever tell you, old boy,” he said, chuckling round the smoke of his pipe, “about the time when those two nippers of mine set fire to the old market woman's skirt because they saw her wrapping up sausages in a poster of B.B.? Sneaked up behind her and set fire to it with a box of matches. Burned her quite badly, I believe. Little beggars, eh? But keen as mustard! That's a first-rate training they give them in the Spies nowadays better than in my day, even.” (Orwell, 1949: 79-80)

In Orwell's novel, the Oceania government influences its people's sexual life to have complete power over society, therefore the members are not permitted to have strong relations with each since then they will not be able to commit to the life of serving the Party. As Winston Smith declares:

“The aim of the Party was not merely to prevent men and women from forming loyalties that it might not be able to control. Its real, undeclared purpose was to remove all pleasure from the sexual act. Not love so much as eroticism was the enemy, inside marriage as well as outside it. All marriages between Party members had to be approved by a committee appointed for the purpose, and – though the principle was never clearly stated – permission was always refused if the couple concerned gave the impression of being physically attracted to one another. The only recognized purpose of marriage was to beget children for the service of the Party. Sexual intercourse was to be looked on as a slightly disgusting minor operation, like having an enema. This again was never put into plain words, but indirectly it was rubbed into every Party member from childhood onwards.” (Orwell 1949: 83-84)

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear from the above discussion that Orwell created a world in which the government designed advanced technologies for controlling its people, in addition to this it used psychological manipulation to separate its people according to the government's measurement, besides confirming full control of history and information. The government also eliminated any mark of religion and forced the government's opinion of sex and family on the societies; so, the discussion shows that the elements of the dystopian government are presented and shaped clearly in this literary work and this fulfills the assumption of the study.

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