

## The Tragedy of Winston Smith - A Naturalistic Perspective of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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### Abstract

*George Orwell's works are strongly influenced by Emily Zola, a French novelist known as the leader of naturalism. Generally speaking, the naturalistic theme recurs in almost every story of his novel, such as Burmese Days (1934), The Clergyman's Daughter (1935), Keep the Aspidistra Flying (1936), Coming Up for Air (1939), and Nineteen Eighty Four (1948), to name just a few. In a cold, hostile, and suffocating world, a lonely and feeble figure fights defiantly, and yet, single-handedly, against his powerful, hideous enemy, often the system of his living existence, only to lead up to devastation eventually. Flory commits suicide in Burmese Days; Dorothy Hare ends up as a trapped victim in every situation in The Clergyman's Daughter; Gordon Comstock becomes absurd, petty and deeply neurotic in the end in Keep the Aspidistra Flying; George Bowling becomes disappointed to find his idyllic hometown destroyed by the speculative builders, commercialists and capitalists and his nostalgic memory impossible to retrieve in Coming Up for Air; and Winston Smith, having been persecuted and tortured to such an extent as to betray his lover in the end. As a newly-born man, he happily accepts Big Brother whom he used to hate in Nineteen Eighty-Four. Almost every individual is overwhelmed and readily accepts his own devastation. The present thesis endeavors to make an analysis of Nineteen Eighty-Four particularly, under the perspective of naturalism, how the environmental effect, to be more specifically, upon the individual existence and mentality finally brings about his destruction and failure.*

**Keywords:** Nineteen Eighty- Four, George Orwell, Naturalism.

### Introduction

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a dystopian novel set in 1984; thirty six years ahead of the year of nineteen forty eight, the year of composition. In 2005, *Nineteen Eighty Four* was selected by *Time Magazine* as one of the 100 best English novels from 1923 to 2005. It was awarded a place on both lists of Modern Library 100 Best Novels, reaching number 13 on the editor's list, and 6 on the readers' list. In 2003, the novel was listed at number 8 on the BBC's survey *The Big Read*. Such phrases as "Big Brother", "Double Think", "Thought Crime", "2+2=5" and "Memory Hole" have find their way into everyday use. The present thesis aims at delving into one of its naturalistic features which exhibits how the protagonist, Winston Smith, a diligent and skillful worker in the Ministry of Truth secretly harbors hatred for the Big Brother, the Party dictator, and dreams of toppling down the totalitarianism system the Party has established, but is defeated eventually by his overmatched opponent.

### *The Pyramid Social ladder in Oceania*

In *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the world is controlled by three totalitarian overstates: Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia. And each of their core territory is Great Britain and its colonies, Continental Europe, Russia and Siberia; and Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, and Indochina respectively. The three superstates wage perpetual war against one another for the remaining unconquered lands of the world, forming and breaking alliances as is convenient. Oceania is socially structured like a pyramid with the omniscient and omnipotent demi-God, Big Brother at the top. Even though no one has ever seen him anywhere, and yet he comes into the reader's sight as soon as Winston Smith makes his first presence. "At one end of it a coloured poster, too large for indoor display, had been tacked to the wall. It depicted simply an enormous face, more than a metre wide: the face of a man of about forty-five, with a heavy black moustache and ruggedly handsome features." "On each landing, opposite the lift-shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall.

It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran” (George Orwell, 1987:941) Big Brother is selected by the Party to represent its image. He is also the icon awed and worshiped by the people. In order to accumulate the utmost power to the dictator and to establish him as the cult of personality, also as the religious cult of a disbelieving world, the Party attributes all of its success, happiness and knowledge to his inspiration and encouragement. He is practically a demigod. No sooner has the daily Two Minutes Hate come to an end and the face Emmanuel Goldstein, the Enemy of the Party, is replaced by the face of Big Brother than the hateful minds are filled with religious faith, confidence and love. “The hostile figure melted into the face of Big Brother, black-haired, black-mustached, full of power and mysterious calm, and so vast that it almost filled up the screen. Some even fling forward upon the back of the chairs and pray: “my savour” (George Orwell, 1987:953)!

The Party, right under Big Brother, is divided into two parts: the Inner Party and the Outer-Party who are just like the head and hands of a human body. The Inner Party is the elite ruling minority, the number being strictly limited to no more than six million, that is, less than two percent of the total population of Oceania and the Inner Party members are also much better educated and enjoy privileges denied to the Outer Party members, such as turning off the telescreen that monitors every party member. They manipulate the Outer Party members. The Outer Party members, on the other hand, making up the thirteen percent of the whole population, need to take up courage to simply step into the living community of the Inner Party members. As O'Brien's luxurious dwelling is described as “a large, well-appointed flat, the better texture of his clothes, the better quality of his food and drink and tobacco, his two or three servants, his private motorcar or helicopter- set him in a different world from a member of the Outer Party” (George Orwell, 1987:1091). Quite opposite to the luxurious living condition of the Inner Party members, the Outer Party members can only live in the dark, dingy and dilapidated departments. “The plaster flaked constantly from ceilings and walls, the pipes burst in every hard frost, the roof leaked whenever there was snow, the heating system was usually running at half steam”(George Orwell, 1987:957). Their soup and blades are of ill quality, and their food is disgusting.

As subordinates to the Inner Party members, the Outer Party members are assigned to the four ministries, where they have to work day and night at what is quite the opposite to what the titles of their ministries suggest. “The Ministry of Peace concerns itself with war, the Ministry of Truth with lies, the Ministry of love with torture, and the Ministry of Plenty with starvation”(George Orwell, 1987: 1109). That is, the Ministry of Peace supports Oceania's perpetual war against either of the two other superstates; the Ministry of Truth substantiates the Ministry of Plenty's claims by revising historical records to report numbers supporting the current, "increased rations"; the Ministry of Truth (Records Department), "rectifying" historical records to concord with Big Brother's current pronouncements, thus everything the Party says is true, and the Ministry of Love identifies, monitors, arrests, and converts real and imagined dissidents.

Additionally, the Outer Party members have no real privacy. They live in apartments equipped with two-way telescreens, so that they may be watched or listened to any time. Similar devices are fixed at work stations and in public places, along with hidden microphones. Written correspondence is routinely opened and read by the government before it is delivered. The Thought Police employ undercover agents, who pose as normal citizens and report any person with subversive tendencies. Children are encouraged to report suspicious persons to the government, and some even denounce their parents. Surveillance controls the citizenry and the smallest sign of rebellion, even something as small as a facial expression, can result in immediate arrest and imprisonment. Thus, citizens (and particularly party members) are compelled to obedience.

Nevertheless, outside the Party, some people can enjoy freedom. They are a great number of the proles, 85 percent of the population of Oceania. They are at the bottom of the pyramid. The Party inculcates to them that the proles are naturally inferiors, who should be kept in subjugation, like animals. “Left to them, like cattle turned loose upon the plains of Argentina” is a true picture of their existence in Oceania (George Orwell, 1987:996). To keep them in control is far from being difficult. All that is required of them is only their primitive patriotism which urges them to overwork for shortage of ration whenever necessary. As they are generally ill-educated, they only focus on petty specific grievances rather than on greater evils. Even if they do feel discontent sometimes, their discontents are only trivialities. Therefore, there is no need to watch them, just as the Party slogan says, “The proles and animals are free” (George Orwell, 1987:997).

### **Winston's Rebellion**

Winston Smith, as one of the Outer Party members, is the only man who thinks phlegmatically while the others normally live in a state of slavery. He is born in 1940s, when the Party rules the Great Britain. Working in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth or Minitrue which is responsible for propaganda and historical revisionism, his job is to rewrite past newspaper articles so that the historical record always supports the party line. This means the people in the future are unable to know what has happened before them. Thus, Winston Smith is determined to carry out his rebellions against the whole system established by Big Brother, and the first step is to record what he sees in a diary.

The first entry of his diary he writes about is what he experienced in the cinema where the audience watched happily the refugees' ship being bombed by aircrafts: "You saw a lifeboat full of children with a helicopter hovering over it. There was a middle-aged woman might have been a Jewess sitting up in the bow with a little boy about three years old in her arms. Little boy screaming with fright and hiding his head in her breasts as if he was trying to burrow right into her and the woman putting her arms around him and comforting him although she was blue with fright herself, all the time covering him up as much as possible as if she thought her arms could keep the bullets off him. Then, the helicopter planted a 20 kilo bomb in among them terrific flash and the boat went all to matchwood, then there was a wonderful shot of child's arm going up up right into the air a helicopter with a camera in its nose must have followed it up and there was a lot of applause from the party seats but a woman down in the prole part of the house suddenly started kicking up a fuss and shouting they didn't oughter of showed it not in front of kids they didn't it aint right not in front of kids it aint until the police turned her out.... nobody cares what the proles say typical prole reaction they never"(George Orwell,1987: 947)

The description above indicates how successful the Party whitewashes the Party members. They are totally lacking humanism, compassion and brotherhood. No wonder, they showed no love and sympathy for the mother and little boy whereas the woman of the proletarian class seems compassionate and sympathetic. Apparently, Winston is impressed by the scene that the mother protects the child off the bullets. It reminds him of his mother and sister. Winston's parents disappeared in one of the first great purges of the fifties. First, his father disappeared, and then his mother and sister passed away after a short interval of unbearable hunger. His memory of his mother and sister was so dim that his longing for mother's love only depends upon his dream in which he saw his mother and his tiny feeble sister held in his mother's arms looking at him down in some subterranean place-bottom of a well, a deep grave, or a sinking ship. There was no a reproach either in their faces or in their hearts but the knowledge that they must die in order that he might remain alive. His love for his mother deepens his understanding of the world; he becomes aware that "his mother's death was tragic and sorrowful in a way that was no longer possible. And yet, tragedy belonged to the ancient time, to a time when there was still privacy, love and friendship, and the members of family stood by one another without needing to know the reason. His mother's memory broke his heart as she had died loving him, when he was too young and selfish to love her in return" (George Orwell, 1987:964).

Winston's another rebellion is manifested by his extramarital affair with Julia, and a sexual adventure with a prostitute as the Party's sex education is rather puritanical. In Oceania, Marriage is legal only in its practical function of reproduction so that it can produce the next generation for the service of the Party. Divorce is not allowed, and extramarital affair between Party members is prohibited. Children are inculcated with the opposition of sexual love. Such organization as the Junior Anti-Sex League advocates complete celibacy for both sexes. All children are given birth by artificial insemination and brought up by public institutions. Katherine, Winston's ex-wife best exemplifies the successful brainwashing of the Party's propaganda. Before long they get married, Winston finds the most stupid, vulgar and empty-minded woman in his wife. She has not a thought that is no slogan; in fact, she believes in whatever the Party has taught her. What's more, whenever he gets close to her, she would wince and stiffen so that embracing her, he feels like embracing a jointed wooden image, let alone making love with her. Strangely enough, Katherine rejects remaining celibate as she declares they should have a child in order to fulfill their "duty to the Party." Intimacy between lovers turns into unpleasantness. They live separately for about ten years. Winston lives in vague hope that Katharine may die or could be "got rid of" so that he may marry Julia. He regrets not having killed her by pushing her over the edge of a quarry when he had the chance many years previously. The Party removes love between family members to isolate them so that the lonely individual turns to nobody but the leader of the Party for comfort and support; hence, the individual believes in whatever the Big Brother propagandas. In this way, the Party demands the absolute loyalty of his subjects.

As a result, the Party manages to remove a man of his humanity and turn him into a docile slave, and a mechanically political tool.

### **Winston's Failure**

Like most Party members, Winston spends every hour in terror and panic, for fear that he might encounter misfortune anytime; However, the minute he gets the note with "I love you" from Julia, the sexual desire is awakened in his body: "the desire to stay alive welled up in him," and his life becomes meaningful, and hopeful; he doesn't care at all that Julia has had sexual relationship with other men. Most importantly, she has a strong desire for sexual love with him, and she awakes in Winston the tender feeling he has long suppressed. After their second meeting, she becomes the indispensable part of his life. "He wished that they were a married couple of ten years' standing. He wished that he were walking through the streets with her just as they were doing now but openly and without fear, talking of trivialities and buying odds and ends for the household" (George Orwell, 1987:1050). He wishes above all that they have some place where they can be alone together without feeling the obligation to make love every time they meet.

Thus the idea of renting Mr. Charrington's room above an antique shop has occurred to him and Julia agrees with readiness. They believe that the shop, being located in a proletarian neighborhood of London, is safe, as the room has no telescreen. Both of them know that it is craziness, yet they are intentionally stepping nearer to their graves. At the antiques shop, Winston approaches an Inner Party member by the name of O'Brien, whom Winston believes is an agent of a secret underground society known as the Brotherhood that intends to destroy the Party. They arrange a meeting at O'Brien's flat where both Winston and Julia swear allegiance to the Brotherhood; A week later, O'Brien secretly sends Winston a copy of "The Book," *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* by Emmanuel Goldstein, the publicly reviled leader of the Brotherhood. The Book explains the concept of perpetual war, the true meanings of the slogans WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, and IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH, and how the Party can be overthrown through means of the political awareness of the proles. Quite out of their expectation, Mr. Charrington, the shopkeeper, reveals himself as a Thought Police. O'Brien is also an agent of the Thought Police. He is part of a special sting operation used by the police to find and arrest suspected thought criminals. Both Winston and Julia are arrested delivered to Ministry of Love (Miniluv) for interrogation, and then tortured in the notorious Room 101. They can hardly stand the torture and have to surrender to the Party; they not only admit the crime but also betray each other in their craziness.

### **Conclusion**

According to Roger Fowler's "Version of Realism" (2007), the main influence on George Orwell seemed to have been Emily Zola, the French Naturalist writer, whom he much admired. In 1940 he included Zola in a list of eleven "writers I care most about and never get tired of" (*CEFL*, II, 39). In 1932, he tried to persuade Chatto & Windus to allow him to translate Zola (*CEFL*, I, 102). A book review in 1936 uses Zola as standard of comparison, and produces a characteristic Orwellian metaphor in which the organism of Zola is opposed to mechanical composition: "The scene of violence Zola describes in *Germinal* and *La Debacle* are supposed to symbolize capitalist corruption, best they are also scenes. At his best, Zola is not synthetic. He works under compulsion, and not like an amateur cook following the instruction on a packet of Crestona cake-flour (*CEFL*, I, 279) (Roger Fowler "Version of Realism" [Bloom's Modern Critical Views: George Orwell, InfoBase Publishing 2007:P74])

In *Nineteen Eighty Four*, what George Orwell concerns is not so much about Winston's love with Julia as his thoughts about the past and future of humankind matter most. At the very beginning, Winston returns home after his work without having lunch to write a diary, as it is a token of the historical responsibility of passing down the tradition he has to take. He is surely aware that once his diary is founded out, he is to be sentenced to death or at least twenty-five-year hard work as a prisoner. "For the future, for the unborn" (George Orwell, 1987:946) he had to write down what he could not express in his life. He knows well what sort of world he is in. "In an age of uniformity, an age of solitude, an age of Big Brother and doublethink", "he was a lonely ghost uttering a truth that nobody would ever hear" (George Orwell, 1987: 962); however, he is firmly convinced that so long as he utters, in some obscure way the continuity is not broken. It was not by making yourself heard but by staying sane that you carried on the human heritage.

He gets to understand the absurdity of his age and his writing purpose, that is, “to the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free, when men are different from one another and do not live alone, to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone” (George Orwell, 1987: 962). Like Sisyphus, Winston Smith rebels strenuously against the strong dictatorship single-handedly; nevertheless, his opponent is so powerful that he fails eventually. However trivial Winston’s effort is his endeavor in fighting against the totalitarianism and dictatorship deserves the readers’ admiration.

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