

# 6.1. Reading Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a Manifesto for Moderation and Decency

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## Abstract

Orwell's bleak depiction of life as dehumanized by a political authority relentless in its oppression forms the kernel of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The ways in which Winston Smith, as an embodiment of the "common man" is devastated intellectually, emotionally, and physically have been often explored with insights gained from Orwell's arguments on poverty, inequality, ignorance, assimilation, and a lack of freedom of thought, speech, will, and action. Yet, the concepts of moderation and "decency" remain relatively less discussed in connection with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in spite of their foremost relevance to Orwell's notion of an ameliorated personal and social life. In this respect, the argument of this essay is that, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as much as delineating a dystopic future in which man is dispossessed of his fundamental needs, Orwell puts a stress on the essentiality of moderation and decency on personal and political levels. The essay also suggests that absence of moderation and decency characterizes the fictional landscape that defines *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a dystopian novel.

**Key words:** Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, moderation, decency, dystopia

The concept of utopia and utopian literature at large reify an imagined social structure where a set of principles, values, and attitudes are unfolded as the indicators of the possibility of a human life advanced in all its parts; that is, morally, culturally, economically, politically, and intellectually. Utopias inherently involve suggestions for alternative and unorthodox ways of life and thought which are imbued with an underlying didactic and satirical tone. However, the communal life and collectively shared norms limned by visionary writers of utopian fictional

landscapes might be taken as faulty or deceptive from the critical vantage point of the modern, individualistic reader, which infuses a problematic undertone in utopian writing. The model of a highly personalized, epistocratic philosophizing in Plato's ideal state in *The Republic*, for example, might be identified as a despotic "totalitarian demi-god" who is "placed high above all ordinary men", as Karl Popper argues (2011: 125). Thomas More, in his formulation of the ideal society in *Utopia*, does not elaborate on the process in which a tyrannizing utopian ruler is deposed; besides, More's Utopian citizens can also be evaluated as subjects whose individualities and personal liberties are nullified by communal life, as discussed by Gregory Claeys (2017: 6). Yet, utopias are originally designed as visions of a possible realization of social enhancement, and the essential idea behind utopianism and maintained by utopian writers is advancement in all fields of current human life; this is also an end which is sought after by dystopian writers and which lets the two subgenres connect with each other.

While the complications regarding the authorial perception of the ideal and the ways in which this perception should characterize utopian settings may unhinge the precision of utopian welfare, the identification of what is not ideal for humankind and speculation on the adversities instigated by the non-ideal are effectively articulated by dystopian writing. A particular society or locality where humans are deprived of some basic necessities and rights; where people forcibly or, after a while, compulsively, become bereft of favourable human qualities such as reasoning and questioning; and where some catastrophic ecological conditions put life in jeopardy can not be regarded as ideal. Illustrating such apocalyptic circumstances, dystopias, in a way, concentrate on the outcomes of the ending, disappearance, or complete lack of what is considered as the most essential constituents of a standard human life. Writers of dystopia frequently implicate a signal for the necessity of making a change or taking an action in the way people live, behave, think, and feel. Drawing attention to numerous present or future possible threats to human welfare and liberties, dystopias tacitly reiterate the indispensability of creating (or reverting to) some recuperative conditions or values for the sake of individual and social betterment. Being an all-embracing conceptualization of these basic conditions and values for a humane community, 'common decency' is what George Orwell repeatedly lays stress on as a sine qua non of the eradication of the suffering, iniquities, and oppression that he observes in his lifetime. Orwell's accentuation of common decency and, in relation to it, his emphasis on the necessity of a sense of moderation (particularly on the part of the upper and ruling classes) pervade all of his writings and are the covert ultimate ends foregrounded in his magnum opus, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

In *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), Orwell says, "If you had asked me why I had joined the militia I should have answered: 'To fight against Fascism', and if you had asked me what I was fighting for, I should have answered: 'Common decency'" (2021a: 143). Here, Orwell clearly does not only refer to the Spanish Civil War (which he participated in on the side of the Workers' Party militia against Franco's fascist forces, before getting into a conflict with the Communist Party), he also divulges the motive behind his intellectual and physical resistance against inequality, poverty, privileged classes, and totalitarianism. What distinguishes Orwell as a person and writer is his unprecedentedly deep sensitivity to common human suffering and the problems of human civilization; it is a purely cordial sense of humility what prompts him to go deep down into coal mines, to lead the life of a tramp, to fight in lands unknown to him, and finally to sacrifice himself to revolutionary writings. Orwell's concern, as Selwyn Boyer contends, is "about a free world, the obliteration of class differences, and an essential and abiding opposition to all forms of authoritarianism including fascism" (1967: 97). Orwell's perception of common decency, in this respect, stands at a pivotal point since it hints at an aspect of the image of an ideal world in his mind, and forms a cluster of the favourable concepts against the adverse conditions that turn human life into a dystopia. A great majority of Orwell's works, literary or non-literary, reflect to varying degrees his anti-totalitarian stance. Orwell's attack on totalitarianism is basically generated by the fact that this absolutist political system, as he witnessed in Spain, controls and oppresses masses of people, as well as annihilating individual liberties; totalitarian authority and its agents not only lack decency in themselves but they deprive (and prohibit) human beings of decency as well. It is the irrational impositions exercised by a tyrannical authority as well as the impossibility of attaining a sense of decency and moderation that constitutes the dystopic vision and permeates the apocalyptic texture of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Even a slight tinge of decent or unorthodox behaviour, feeling, and thought within the storyline of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is politically uprooted, precluded, and socially forsaken. Big Brother's tyranny oppresses members of the Outer Party and proles by depriving them of any sort of freedom. But most importantly, people are forced into dissipating their sense of common decency; their sense of empathy with others' pain and misery is erased. The dismal and emotionless universe of the novel is shaped by a systematic, interiorized, and incessant control mechanism; and the most palpable outcome of the dehumanization practised by this mechanism is that it serves as an impediment to human decency and moderate life. The novel, as Stephen Ingle argues, "is all about the enemies of 'common decency', all about the destruction of humanity itself, with the elimination of Winston Smith its last representative in Europe" (2020: 122).

Big Brother and the Inner Party members, as the enemies of “common decency”, show no hesitation in putting extreme irrationalities and despotic and inhuman punishments into action. Utterly devoid of even particles of decency and moderation, the totalitarian authority controlling the lives of Oceanians is the incarnation of a ruthless dominator that shows no tolerance for questioning of the party’s policies and exercises. Big Brother’s oppression and supervision exerted mainly by the surveillance of telescreens and agents forestall any disobedience, defiance, or even a critical expression. However, what lets this despotism become an intolerably dehumanizing tyranny is that it seeks after destruction of humane relationships and communication between members of the Outer Party. Any sort of sensitivity, intimacy, empathy, and affection between the members is strictly precluded.

For Big Brother, such behaviours as helping, loving, caring, or simply befriending are as threatening as the thoughts of conspiracy, resistance, and revolution. The Outer Party members are not allowed to be selfless; to the contrary, they are compelled to internalize being self-centred and insensitive to each other, as seen at myriad points throughout the novel. As the narrator indicates, the members, rather than being friends, are “comrades”: “[Winston] turned round. It was his friend Syme, who worked in the Research Department. Perhaps ‘friend’ was not exactly the right word. You did not have friends nowadays, you had comrades” (51). The semantic difference between the words “comrade” and “friend” suggests the callousness in human relationships intended by the totalitarian rule of Oceania: “comrade”, an equalizing form of address in communist terminology, is derived from French *camerade*, meaning “chambermate”, while friend means “one joined to another in mutual benevolence and intimacy” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2009). Then, the narrator’s extraneous reference to the absence of friends or friendship indicates that the humane bond of friendship based on a heartfelt candour and goodwill is replaced by a place- or group-based organizational link, which emphasizes engagement in an external cause rather than interpersonal relationships.

The policies and impositions of Big Brother are so structured as to put the community into a mould made out of hatred, suspicion, fear, and egocentrism. Accordingly, a great majority of the Oceanian people are required to submit to the circumstances in which every single humane quality is already severed. Winston does not have any notion of the past and present, and in an effort to reach out to the future, he writes a diary, which is a tactful and considerate effort demonstrating his personification of common decency. It is significant that the first notes that he takes in his diary reflect his subconscious uneasiness. He records an anecdote about the Outer Party members watching a film, who cheer at the scenes in which a refugee is shot and killed in the sea, and a mother and her

child are torn into pieces by a bomb. Among the audience of the prole class, only a woman protests by shouting that such graphic content should not be shown to children; yet, she finds no support and is taken out of the room. Through Winston's first entry into his diary, Orwell underlines two issues regarding common decency. Firstly, members of the Outer Party are coerced into deserting (or not developing at all) their sense of common decency and thereby they are desensitized to others' suffering. Ultimately, Big Brother creates an "audience shouting with laughter" (10) to see others in agony. Secondly, proles representing the middle class and having no sense of common decency fail to share a humane awareness and to form a protesting unity. Winston's first notes in his diary show that Orwell's dystopic vision in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is generated by Big Brother and his party as much as by the passivity and inertia of common people (proles) who refuse to "fight for common decency". The Outer Party and proles, therefore, have no alternative other than to espouse the causes of totalitarianism and yield to the party slogans: "WAR IS PEACE [,] FREEDOM IS SLAVERY [,] IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH" (17). Since irrationality is normalized and the idea of common decency is treated as a dire threat in Orwell's dystopic world, the slogans of the party, which are among the most memorable literary phrases ever written, can be extended to the following: evil is good, cruelty is mercy, apathy is empathy.

Some other indicators of Big Brother's agenda against common decency are Newspeak, "the official language of Oceania [which] had been devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc" (317) and *The Two Minutes Hate*, that is, the routine of watching in groups the anti-propaganda videos showing the assumed traitor, Emmanuel Goldstein. Newspeak basically acts to manipulate Oceanians' common perception, to prevent them from obtaining true information, to keep them in misguided beliefs and thoughts, or in total ignorance; as Syme states, "to narrow the range of thought" (55). In a parallel with the film scene mentioned above, *The Two Minutes Hate* is an extremely effective way of evoking collective feelings of hatred and enmity in people against an external figure. Members of the Outer Party participating in the Hate are obliged to show their animosity conspicuously towards Goldstein. Yet, no obligation or pretence is needed, since a few boos and hisses rapidly kindle profound and primordial feelings of hatred in the members: "Within thirty seconds any pretence was always unnecessary. A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledge-hammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current" (16). Even Winston is provoked as he finds himself shouting and moving violently. Orwell thereby underlines the fact that not only submissive masses but even a reasonable person with a sense of individuality can be easily manipulated and swayed by the authority. In other words, in the Orwellian dystopic universe, collectiveness is formed by a sense of animosity rather than common decency.

A significant dimension of common decency as delineated in the novel is related to Winston's inner feeling that he should act so as to make a positive change on the lives of future people. He ventures to ask, "Why then did that horror, which altered nothing, have to lie embedded in future time?" (108). Unorthodoxly enough, Winston embodies a struggle for subjectivity, freedom, and rationality, and as a fictional character, he has been an iconic persona and a universal advocate of independent thought, revolutionary spirit, and figure of resistance against dehumanization. Yet, the fact that these notions are all generated by his sense of common decency should also be taken into account. Winston's struggle, by which he risks his life, is for the well-being of future generations rather than for personal concerns. In other words, if his resistance is triggered by his sense of revolt and defiance, his audacious insistence on resistance is enabled and invigorated by the idea that he can have a role in ameliorating the future and making it different from the present.

The final parts of the novel disclose the ways in which any notion associated with humanity, civility, and common decency is completely shattered. The horrendous punishment suffered by Winston for disobeying the laws of the Party suggests a nauseous and vicious obliteration of the sense of individual and common decency; love, the strongest of the links that connect one with another, is exterminated. Winston's abnegation of his love for Julia due to his fear of being eaten up by rats is presented as a moment of climax; but what is highly symbolic is that Winston is forced to be indifferent to Julia's probable pain. So, the victory of Big Brother is mainly that an altruistic Winston is transformed into an egocentric one; he is now able to turn his back on the one whom he once embraced with love. In the end, Big Brother destroys everything decent about him and divests him of his sensitivity to another's pain. In a way, a last but not least slogan is implied: love is hatred.

These and a great many other instances attest that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has a major significance in Orwell's war for common decency; it is an endeavour that eternalizes the concern about the welfare of others. Orwell calmly but strikingly appeals to all humanity by chronicling the eradication of a sense of common decency and its replacement by insensitivity, virulence, and bestiality. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a counterattack against totalitarian tyranny. Just as the bullet that gets through Orwell's neck in Barcelona can be taken as a metaphorical embodiment of the attack at human decency, Orwell's masterpiece is the most lethal weapon of a civilized mind against the boots who stomp on the face of human beings striving for common decency.

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