

<p>‘Dystopian fiction is often characterised by its engagement with social and political issues’</p>

The dystopian genre was arguably a movement of literature that was in response to humanity’s growing self-awareness leading into the twentieth century. The immense and rapid growth in society and technology seemed limitless and with this came forth ambivalence and scepticism as to the trust of such powers in the hands of authority. Much dystopian fiction deals with the abuse of these powers and the events that lead after it. A prominent novel in the dystopian genre is George Orwell’s *1984*. Set in a futuristic, deeply politically sanitised society, *1984* deals with a world where technology, media and military forces are used against the public to adhere to a strict oligarchical ideology, constructed by a mysterious totalitarian dictator known as Big Brother. The novel, written in a time of great social and political uncertainty after both world wars, is argued to be a cautionary tale, illustrating Orwell’s deep contention of the possibility of totalitarianism taking over the Western World.

The fear of totalitarianism arguably arose after the successes of politicians in the early twentieth century such as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, both with desires to have a one ‘world state’. Both of these leaders rose to power under a guise of a collectivist ideology to bring their respective countries (Germany and the USSR) ‘together’ to share prosperity. However, this guise was quickly subverted once power had been won, to further an elitist oligarchical structure. In *1984*, Orwell satirises this process of leaders rising with a façade of collectivism in the process of ‘doublethink’. ‘Doublethink’ is a term coined by Orwell in Newspeak (the language of Oceania) meaning the acceptance of two contrary opinions simultaneously. This process being seemingly inhuman and robotic is one used to turn the Oceanian public against their own opinions and to treat Party guidelines as gospel. Emmanuel Goldstein’s book; ‘The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism’ is a perfect example of the practice of doublethink. In the book, Goldstein highlights the Party’s (ruling classes’) utilisation of *false consciousness* in order to control the highest percentage of the population of Oceania, the proles. Distractions such as the lottery and the noted lack of education for the proles prevents any form of intellectual uprising within the lower classes and stabilises the totalitarian social structure. With this representation, arguably Orwell is satirising the political psychology of his time in which many of his democratic socialist peers supported Stalin’s collectivist practices despite having the knowledge of the state’s vastly undemocratic foundation.

Like many dystopian texts, Orwell also exposes the abuse of language to create ambiguity and deception. One way in which this is shown is through Newspeak, the official language of Oceania. The primary aim of Newspeak is to reduce the meaning of language as well as the number of words possible. To this end, Newspeak removes all synonyms and antonyms. Bad becomes ‘ungood’ and warm becomes ‘uncold’, and so on. Newspeak is designed and controlled by the state in order to suppress free thought, individualism, and happiness. It is illustrated perfectly in Syme’s description; “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". The use of language as a propaganda device as we see here is a concept that we in a twenty-first century, westernised society that promotes free speech see as horrific and an example of mass brainwashing. Language is something used by humans to translate thought and without the words to describe a thought, slowly, the thought will inevitably go away; something that a political power can harness to prevent any kind of rebellion within the populous. Keith M. Booker argues that dystopian texts such as *1984* "provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices" and although there hasn't been a notable example of where language has been harnessed by a political power to further a certain ideology in our history, we can see that Orwell was writing in terms of a prediction of a dark future, where any extremist totalitarian ideology may dominate and thus highlights the sheer amount of power and domination an authority can have, to be able to shape their subjects internal psychology.

In the novel Orwell engages with a social and political issue that transcends the twentieth century: class conflict. Goldstein's book within the novel holds many similarities to that of the Communist Manifesto, the original source of the communist ideology, written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848. The manifesto's opening line of the first subchapter (*Bourgeois and Proletarians*) reads: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles", a sentence that bears striking resemblance to Goldstein's first chapter (*Ignorance is Strength* [another oxymoronic tagline]). In this section, the cyclical nature of the social class system is revealed to Winston - "The aim of the High is to remain where they are. The aim of the middle is to change places with the high. The aim of the Low... is to abolish all distinctions and create a society in which all men shall be equal." The cyclical nature of the Middle classes utilising the power of the low classes to rise to the top and topple the High is a characteristic that the Party is primarily concerned with. The difference of the Party from other totalitarian states such as the USSR is that the Party has recognised the faults of past states of totalitarianism and has actively fought against them in order to hold power forever. For example, the Middle (Outer party) is under constant physical and psychological surveillance to prevent any rebels who have a desire to rise up. The proletariat classes are kept in a perpetual state of false consciousness and the High are therefore firmly seated in power. Totalitarianism's power to create an impenetrable state is arguably what Orwell feared most leading into a world of new beginnings and an unclear future. The end of World War Two marked a turning point for the entire world and *1984* a cautionary warning to outline the dangers of any form of extremism.

Often the social and political issues that dystopian texts attempt to tackle are unclear at the time of the issues taking place. In this respect, dystopian texts such as *1984* can be seen as moral stabilisers for societies facing major social and political change.