1984: Satire

The book directs contempt and ridicule at several targets. Most obviously, it is a satire on totalitarianism, largely modelled on Soviet Communism since at the time of writing this was the form which seemed to be the most threatening. Orwell takes the typical features of totalitarian states and imagines them developed to new extremes. Big Brother is not just a dictator like Hitler or Stalin; he is an immortal ruler, a man-made god. Ingsoc does not just put forward one set of ideals while implementing another; it glories in its contradictions and boasts of them in slogans like “Freedom is slavery” and concepts like “doublethink”. The Party does not merely spy on its citizens to enforce conformity to its laws; it helps its members to betray it, so that it can then brainwash them and ensure they fully believe its lies. One effect of these extreme developments is to increase our understanding; we are able to see totalitarianism features of society in a more dramatic form and so comprehend them more clearly. Another effect is to frighten us; we wonder whether such a society could really be brought about. Still another is to make us see the absurdity of totalitarian pretensions; we perceive their senselessness and, counterbalancing our fear, we find ourselves regarding them with amused contempt.

There are several religious references in the book’s description of totalitarianism. This is hardly surprising, since one definition of totalitarianism is that it is the secularisation of religious aspirations, the attempt to create a heaven on earth. In the world of 1984, God is replaced by Big Brother. In the first chapter, during the Two Minutes Hate, a woman calls Big Brother her saviour and prays to him. The telescreen, correspondingly, is the all-seeing eye of God. The Party members are saved, with O’Brien a religious inquisitor hunting down backsliding and heresy among them. The arch-heretic Goldstein has the first name Emmanuel, a biblical word for “Messiah”. “Thoughtcrime” is another word for ‘sin’, of which the wages is death. “2+2=5” is a miracle, which has to be accepted by an act of faith before one can be a true believer.

While a religious person would be entitled to interpret all this as satire against the secularisation of religious ideas, Orwell himself probably intended the satire to include certain features of organised religion, specifically Roman Catholicism, with its appeal to papal authority. In discussing the concept of “blackwhite”, Goldstein seems to echo the words of Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order of priests, who said that his followers should believe white was black, and black white, if the Church required it. Orwell suggests in his essay “Inside the Whale” (1940) that Catholicism and Communism have a similar appeal to disaffected intellectuals who want something to believe in, because both have a worldwide organisation, rigid discipline and power and prestige. However, Orwell’s target is bigger than just Catholicism. He has in mind any use of religion as an excuse for one set of people to impose their wills on others, as can be seen from his sideswipe at Eastern religions under the name of “Death-Worship”(2.0).

Since 1984 is set in a Britain of the near future, Orwell naturally includes much satire on contemporary Britain, a world of shortages, rationing, nationalisation, bureaucracy, sexual repression and obsessive, hopeless gambling. All of these targets are cast into a slightly unfamiliar form which tends to both clarify their nature and render them amusing.

Understandably, the story’s setting in a world resembling post-war Britain led some readers to think the book’s targets must also include the 1945-51 Labour government, which was nationalising important industries. Orwell firmly denied this, though he did admit that he was pointing out the danger of what the government might one day become. The point he consciously intended to make was that totalitarianism was so powerful a trend, even a genuinely constructive movement might be taken over by it. However, some readers felt that, if 1984 is an attack on all types of totalitarianism, then it is up to them which targets they choose to apply it to. Accordingly, the book has been used as a political weapon in many countries, with members of different parties accusing each other of putting forward “Orwellian” policies like those of Big Brother. Arguably, this is the most valuable dimension of Orwell’s satire. By supplying us with a way of naming the totalitarian threat, he has kept people aware of the danger and so reduced the likelihood of it coming about.