1984: Themes

The fundamental theme of the book is the conflict between the individual and the social system. It is a theme with which many people find it easy to identify. We all sometimes feel isolated in a world which seems determined to thwart our needs, deny our perceptions and foist false values upon us. In 1984 this feeling is cast into a fantastic form and pursued to a horrifying extreme.

While this ease of identification is a major source of the book’s appeal, it is the particular nature of the nightmare world Winston inhabits which accounts for the enormous impact that the book has had. Winston’s rebellion is not directed simply against a repressive job or unsympathetic parents, but an infinitely more alarming antagonist, totalitarianism. Many of the book’s original readers, having witnessed the relentless mass cruelty unleashed by Hitler and Stalin, naturally asked themselves whether such a system could ever develop in their own countries. It was undeniable that throughout the first half of the twentieth century there had been more and more government intervention in people’s lives in all developed nations, and that this trend had been accelerated by the Second World War. Orwell believed that greater government power was not only inevitable but was the only practicable way to bring about a more equal and democratic society, yet he feared that it could all too easily end in totalitarianism, a closed society where everything and everyone was controlled by a rigid dictatorship. The best way to avoid the danger was for people to be aware of the problem and vigilant in ensuring that it did not come about. 1984 was written to assist in this task.

Orwell takes some of the worst features of Nazi Germany and Communist Russia, imagines them refined to a vicious perfection by time and improved technology, and projects them onto the Britain of the near future, giving us an alarming reading experience which will encourage us to oppose this evil, plus a clear model of what it is we should oppose. The book makes it clear that the power of totalitarianism does not derive simply from the power of the state, immense though that may be, but also from the weakness of the citizens. While the proles are victims because they are uninterested in politics and accept government as they do the weather, intellectuals like Winston are contrastingly vulnerable to the impressive-sounding philosophical arguments which the rulers use to justify their power and to the pseudo-religious promise that, in joining them, individuals will be accepted into a protecting order, freed from the anxiety, guilt and weakness which are actually a normal part of the human condition.

While totalitarianism is Orwell’s chief target, 1984 also conveys a suspicion of modern life in general. Much of what Orwell foresaw has since come into being – television, security cameras, the twenty-four hour clock, metrication, the loss of Britain’s status as a great power – but so far without the sinister consequences which he linked to these developments. `Orwell’s scepticism towards modernity can still be defended, however, for a major theme of the book is the struggle of the individual to lead an authentic life, fully in touch with their feelings, in a “packaged” world of media manipulation and social expectation. To Orwell the good life is only loosely linked to affluence and technology; it has far more to do with experiencing a meaningful occupation and satisfying relationships, with self-knowledge and closeness to the basic facts of life. The book suggests that future developments may bring into being social forces so powerful that they can cut off the individual from these sources of health and leave him or her a victim of manipulation from above. This form the alienating society can take may be a brutal one in 1984, and arguably it is a concern which should not be lightly dismissed.

It is worth remarking, finally, on the themes which are absent from 1984. Although Orwell was a socialist, the book contains no direct advocacy of socialism. The book shows a world full of hate, but has relatively little to say about love. The struggle for freedom and creativity is defeated; no hope offered. Those who conclude from this that the book expresses despair, perhaps because Orwell was dying when he wrote it, may have missed the point, however. The confrontation between Winston and O’Brien demonstrates how hard it is to prove what is right and wrong through mere verbal argument. Orwell surely expects us to supply from our own experience both the knowledge of what is at stake in our particular time and place and the passion to fight for what truly matters to us.