

Literature
comparison: one flew
over the cuckoo's
nest and 1984 essay



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Approximately at the end of the Second World War, after the world had seen the terrifying aspects of technology and science mirrored in the nuclear bombs, weapons of mass destruction and Mengele's experiments, the human kind began to doubt that scientific progress alone can improve human society. After that, it became clear that unless steered in the right direction, science and technology can bring about unimaginable destruction and suffering. More importantly, the ignorance about science among the general population became the tool for exploitation masked by justice and good intentions.

There was a whole array of novels at that time that dealt with this topic, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Nineteen-eighty Four* are just two examples. These two books deal with the hidden and not so easily observable side of the Enlightenment in that they explore the ways in which scientific knowledge provides tools for exploitation. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey tackles the problem of mental institutions and how the categorization into the sane and the insane can be used to secure conformity and docility.

Orwell, on the other hand, deals specifically with the problem of using new technologies for surveillance and control justified by common social goals and preventing crimes. It can be said that while both of these books address the issue of hidden methods of coercion, *Nineteen-eighty Four* provides a bleak vision of the future in which the whole of society is controlled in the same way as the mental health ward in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

In addition to the overarching theme of subjugation and enslavement through hidden methods, these two books have a number of common motifs. The first similarity, one can locate, can be termed as “ subjugation for one’s own good”. The premise and excuse for limiting people’s freedom in both books is the idea that some people are not able to take care of themselves, and therefore, their will should be subjected to the will of others, who are more “ reasonable”. One cannot reject this idea completely, after all, children do need to have parental guidance in order to avoid dangerous situations, and more capable people should lead those who are not so capable. However, the one who tries to absorb some other individual’s powers has the obligation to prove that such an act is legitimate.

Unfortunately, it is obvious that various manipulations can be utilized in order to take advantage of someone while pretending to be helping them. For that reason, George Orwell’s novel addresses the issue of propaganda, which is the most advanced stage of manipulation in which truth is distorted systematically in order to deceive an entire state. In 1984, the whole of population is lead to believe that all of the repression exerted on them is for the common goal of “ English Socialism”. Propaganda as a method of persuasion is very well described in the book.

For that reason, in Orwell’s vision of the future society the Government’s headquarters have the following inscription: “ WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH” (Orwell 1977, pp. 131-132). This quotation shows how the linguistic potential of shifts in meaning is used to change value systems of people. The government tries to blur the lines between these antonyms by equating them in order to make people

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incapable of conceiving true slavery, ignorance and war which are constantly in front of their eyes.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, similar idea is carried out only in this case through false diagnoses of insanity. Insanity of another person makes for a good reason to take control over them, and impose one's own will on them. However, the fact that in this society, the other's insanity can be falsified precisely because it gives power is an issue Kesey uses as a motif in his book.

Unfortunately, since humans are social creatures, a view that a society has of an individual slowly becomes that individual's view of the self as well. This is why we see sane characters only occasionally doubting the society's view of them as insane. This is evident, for example in Brodman's words, " You're making sense, old man, a sense of your own. You're not crazy the way they think."(Kesey, 1962, p. 106).

Another similarity of the two books is the theme of rebellion which gives hope. The two authors both believe that rebellion is one of the inextinguishable human impulses, and see it as a force which is in contradiction with power and the establishment. Here, in my opinion, the two authors stand out from the general pessimism about human kind prevalent in that period in that they show elements of humanism. After all, if there were no constant possibility of people rebelling against the establishment, authorities would have no need to fight it through the mechanisms of control. In *Nineteen-eighty Four*, Orwell skillfully selects his rebel protagonist, and makes him a member of the ruling party to show how humanity is an

omnipresent force which is being suppressed constantly by the external forces, and also very often by antagonistic forces within the individual himself.

The protagonist, Winston, is a member of the ruling party but he recognizes that the system is evil and violent so he decides to fight it with all his powers. In addition, we might say that Orwell sees all of the humanistic characteristics of people, such as creativity and empathy, as signs that all is not lost. This is evident when Winston hears Red-Armed Prole Women singing. Here is what Winston thinks of their singing: “ It struck him as a curious fact that he had never heard a member of the Party singing alone and spontaneously. It would even have seemed slightly unorthodox, a dangerous eccentricity, like talking to oneself” (Orwell, 1977, p. 180).

In Kesey’s novel, rebellion is also the protagonist’s main trait, and the author also makes a tight connection between humanity and rebellion. Just like singing in 1984, in Kesey’s novel, laughter is one of the basic human impulses, and serves as a symbol of hope in a bleak picture of the human society. This is why Brodmen remembers humor and joking about politicians as a very powerful force in his childhood, and says “ I forget sometimes what laughter can do.” (Kesey, 1962, p. 74)

As far as differences between the two pictures of the world are concerned, it is evident that while Kesey focuses on the problem of institutionalization of people, which is already present in our society, Orwell goes a step further, and imagines how the future society as a whole will look like if the present trends remain. Kesey sees the great problem and threat that mental

institutions create, but does not discuss the whole of society at length. It is, however, natural to ask what kind of society would create the conditions for such institutions, but such a message is only implied. In Orwell's book, the subjugation runs across the entire society. Here is how Orwell describes the social structure of the future world:

“ Below Big Brother comes the Inner Party. Its numbers limited to six millions, or something less than 2 per cent of the population of Oceania. Below the Inner Party comes the Outer Party, which, if the Inner Party is described as the brain of the State, may be justly likened to the hands. Below that come the dumb masses whom we habitually refer to as ‘ the proles’, numbering perhaps 85 per cent of the population.” (Orwell, 1977, p. 265)

In such a society, the mechanisms of control have clearly been taken to extreme because they have been imposed on the entire population.

In summary, these two authors belong to the current in the post-WWII literature in which the common motif is the worry about the downside of scientific and technological revolution. These two writers share the disappointment in the Enlightenment as the driving force of modernity, and examine the ways in which science can be used for manipulation. In both pictures of the world, the traditional ways of coercion and subjugation are abandoned, and people's will is manipulated through subtle and implicit mechanisms of control, which turn to physical force only in extreme cases.

By avoiding force, which has its immediate reaction in rebellion and

resentment, these mechanisms threaten to destroy the human conception of
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liberty. However, both of the authors share the hope for humanity, which is grounded in the tendency to rebel and all other essentially human characteristics such as creativity, humor, etc. Finally, Orwell's portrayal is much more pessimistic since he sees these mechanisms of power conquering the entire society, while Kesey only discusses this problem as apparent in mental institutions, such as the ones we have today.

In the end, one should think about the fact that both of these authors leave some room for hope, and do not resort to utter pessimism and nihilism. In line with many humanistic thinkers they recognize that in addition to greed, envy and will to power, there are other positive human capacities that lead us to believe that humanity has a chance of survival. Orwell and Kesey see humor, art, empathy and creativity as traits that cannot be taken away from humans. Those traits are actually the ones that finally lead to rebellion against the oppressors.

What I, personally, value when it comes to these two writers, and what makes them stand out among other post-WWII writers is precisely the fact that they prevent us from falling into nihilism. The nihilism in literature, and social criticism of the post-WWII era was, in my view, very dangerous and counterproductive because it was serving the purpose of exploitation in that it was killing the enthusiasm and good will necessary for bringing about any positive change in the society. After all, the Cultural revolution and Civil rights movement at that time proved that all is not lost, and that there still is room for good ideas and intentions to flourish.

Kesey, K. (1962). *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*, a novel. New York: Viking Press.

Orwell, G. (1977). San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.