

# Anti-heroism in Nineteen Eighty-Four

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**Abstract:** George Orwell's dystopian masterpiece, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is one of the most pervasively influential books of the twentieth century. Many previous researchers have explored its profound themes and cultural implications. Starting from a different perspective, this thesis approaches the story in the light of anti-heroism. By analyzing the image of Big Brother and the protagonist, the anti-heroic spirit shown in the transformations of the protagonist presents the glory of humanity under the pressure of totalitarianism. The suffering of the protagonist especially when he is under arrest shows readers how humanity will be tortured by totalitarianism in a world which is dominated by traditional heroism. Orwell expresses his comprehending of the freedom and concern for the future of mankind and gives his answer about hero and freedom after a close reading. A true hero is not the one who maintains the leadership of the party, but a man with independent thought, identifying the beauty and ugliness. And the right of freedom is the freedom of ideology on the basis of history.

**Keywords:** Anti-heroism; Totalitarianism; Dystopia; *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

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## 1. Introduction

George Orwell is a significant English writer in the twentieth century. His magnum opus *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is widely considered as a treasure of the western Canon, and it is thus often included on lists of most influential or greatest books, for its cautionary connotation and rebellious spirit against totalitarianism. Worldwide scholars give miscellaneous comprehension about this work, notably in themes and cultural connotation. This thesis makes a deep exploration on how the anti-hero Winston changes, intending to analyze the anti-heroic spirit in this story.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a dystopian novel written by English novelist George Orwell published in 1949 as a warning against totalitarianism. Well known by the pseudonym George Orwell, Eric Arthur Blair earned his living as a writer in the most of his life. He expressed his sympathy to the oppressed working side, and hated colonialism and imperialism. To breaking out of his sense of guilty for having himself take part in the imperialist oppression of the colonial people, he abandoned his position in the middle-class and associated himself with the outcast and down-trodden people. The anti-heroic spirit is embodied in the story by deep impression of chilling dystopia, and Orwell's ideas exert a propound effect on mainstream culture. The story is set in an imagined future, the year 1984, when much of the civilization under the suffering of perpetual war and omnipresent government surveillance. Great Britain, known as Airstrip One in the story, has become a province of a superstate named Oceania that is ruled by the Party who employs the Thought Police to persecute individuality and independent thinking and maintains control through the Thought Police and continual surveillance. The protagonist, Winston Smith, is an-industrious and cautious worker in the government ministry who is conscious of improbability of Utopian society. He is a minor party functionary living in London where is still shattered by a nuclear war that took place not long after World War II. He belongs to the Outer Party, and his job is to rewrite history in the Ministry of Truth, conforming words to change announcements of the Party. Nevertheless, Winston's longing for truth and decency leads him to secretly rebel against the government. He embarks on

a forbidden affair with Julia, a like-minded woman, and they rent a room in a neighborhood and communicate their mood of discontent about the Party. Their movement seems to be the act of rebellion as the Party insists that sex may solely be used for reproduction. Winston also becomes increasingly interested in the Brotherhood, a group of dissenters. Unbeknownst to Winston and Julia, however, they are being watched closely. When Winston is approached by O'Brien—an official of the Inner Party who emerges to be a secret member of the Brotherhood—the tapirs set. O'Brien is actually a spy for the Party, on the lookout for "thought-criminals," and Winston and Julia are eventually caught and sent to the Ministry of Love for a violent reeducation. The ensuing imprisonment, torture, and reeducation of Winston are intended not merely to break him physically or make him submit but to devastate his independence and destroy his dignity and humanity. In Room 101, where prisoners are forced into submission by exposure to their worst nightmares, Winston panics as a cage of rats is attached to his head. Suffering from physical and mental torture which is the consequence of giving his party away, Winston finally chooses to give up and announces that he loves Big Brother, the leader of the Party, enjoys an intense cult of personality despite the fact that he may not exist. When Winston is bitten by mice, he immediately abandons his principle for the sake of compromise. He censures Julia for her disloyalty to the Big Brother and impurity in ideology to survive in violence. He becomes the most innocent one who carelessly deceived and impacted by an evil-behaved woman in his words. Julia is not the lover that he knows, but an object of special hatred and virulent attack. Winston is cognizant of that the true price of freedom is betrayal. Humanity is destined to be certain failure in this Utopian society. After being released, Winston meets Julia in a park. She says that she is also tortured, betraying Winston in aims of fawning on the Party. At the end of the story, Winston who gets blind drunk every day sits alone in a cafe as Oceania celebrates a supposed victory over Eurasian armies in Africa, and repeats that he loves the Big Brother.

The study undertaken in this dissertation is significant in the following aspects: first, some supplements about anti-heroism are given in panoramic view of parent blooming studies. In twentieth century, protagonists of novels gradually

become ordinary being, deconstructing the image and function of traditional heroes. Appreciating Nineteen Eighty-Four from perspective of anti-heroism, Orwell's overhaul of the social mode and criticism of the dark reality will be better revealed. Connecting with personal experience of Orwell, he sympathized with the oppressed people in colonial Incendiary he was a child. He knew the development of western powers was established on the basis of exploitation and plunder of colonies, without which there would be no western developed capitalist countries. His judgement about hero in this story will be a perpetual warning of opposition to war and utopia society. Second, through the detailed analysis of the story, studying from the perspective of anti-heroism, the two sides of human being could be better presented. Greedy, cruel and crafty individual is, but the glory of humanity still shines in each tiny person. In Orwell's vision, the grim Utopian world deprives the faint-hearted among people of hope. He never wants people to abandon all hope, but shapes the image of anti-hero to warn people that the development of humanity could not be ignored. Orwell's experience as a police in Myanmar makes him think about the harm of British colonial rule and further realize the infallibility of totalitarianism. The British offices alleged that they were heroes for they conquered the barbarism. Nevertheless, the foreign settlers brought with new diseases which killed many people and seized the land on which the natives had lived for thousands of years. In this way, a new perspective in reading Nineteen Eighty-Four should be encouraged.

There are many studied at home and abroad of all ages researching on Nineteen Eighty-Four, and the number of research paper on this book is large. According to the innovation of former researches, the availability of this paper is verified. This book has been extensively studied from various perspectives. Many critics subjectively think Orwell must support capitalism according to the criticism socialism in Nineteen Eighty-Four. Thereby too many of researches about Orwell's political stance have appeared in the early years. There are many critics have pointed out that the true meaning of Nineteen Eighty-Four is the warning role, the limitation to their ideas and themes fully change until the ending of the cold war.[2] A common sense was widely accepted that all totalitarian regimes were hollow at the core and would crumble with a small push. With the changes of the situation in the world, the analysis of Nineteen Eighty-Four in the world is gradually depended and widened. No longer merely talking about its political ideas and warning to the Utopian society, yet more researches from the perspective of postmodernism and individualism, the negative effects about science and technology are appeared. There are some critics said, Nineteen Eighty-Four is a book that written in year of 1948, and it can be ironically considered as an allegory. Totalitarian world described in the book is not necessarily appeared in 1984; it may be in the future in 2050, 2084 or 2050 into reality.[3] In John Dale's opinion, George Orwell responded to a period of historical change by imaging his dystopian future of 1984, and his standard about hero would change if the story were written today. [4] Khalid and Amman reveal the government side, which can be said as the hero side in this story, uses strategies employed to control public mind. The language itself manipulatively used by the elites is unfair. [5] As the review said the number 1984 is not important, the important thing is the foreboding of totalitarianism. So the year 1984 has passed so many years of today, the novel Nineteen Eighty-Four still affects many people.

George Orwell's work firstly faces criticism when introducing into China, yet gradually many scholars analyze Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four from different angles of view. Sun Zhongxu, a well-known translator, thinks that Orwell is "the last European intellectuals", and praises for Orwell's forward thinking. [6] Zhu Chunli writes in her paper that totalitarian government makes use of modern science and technology to control its subjects in spiritual dimension. Totalitarianism has cleared in the way of spiritual domination blocks such as sexual instinct and the instinct of parenthood. [7] Some scholars, such as Zhao Yunmei, Xiao Peng and Yang Jie, analyze the freedom in Nineteen Eighty-Four from angle of criticism. By describing the public behavior in the hilarious way, the misfortune of those unfree people can be seen, that is their ignorance about in which way they have been oppressed. They hold the view that people in Oceania have no freedom, yet the protagonist is still holding on to his humanity even under the pressure of totalitarianism. [8] The inequality of totalitarianism may destroy human community and human individuality. Wang Lan thinks that Orwell seeks to awaken people's love of life by describing Winston's pursuit of love, thinking of the history and future and the exploration of the basic truth and the meaning of life. [9] Yang Sen and Yang Yaye think the existence of hero in the story is weakened and collapsed by the subjugation of human nature. Literary creation in the post-modern period opposes idolatry to a certain person, the nature of existence and the way of noble. Spirits show in the humble and vulgar are what we should attach importance to. The goodness of individual is not advocated, but a kind of villain under the shadow of darkness. [10] As far as Chan Chaoru concerned, the strength of family and love can bring hope and motivation to totalitarianism society. It is with the passion, love and self-awareness that individuals take the steps into the world, accepting themselves as individuals and in context. [11]

## 2. Analysis of Anti-heroism in Nineteen Eighty-Four

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of some characters in the story from the perspective of anti-heroism, showing the symbolic meaning under their actions.

### 2.1. Image of Big Brother in Nineteen Eighty-Four

As an unseen hero in the story, Big Brother plays an important role in keeping the momentum going. He is a man of about forty-five, with a heavy black mustache and ruggedly handsome feature. His face will reassuring people in Oceania in each day's Two Minutes Hate, an activity which people crazily express their negative feeling to the Enemy of the people in a raw and crude way.

The Big Brother firstly symbolizes the traditional heroism. He enjoys an intense cult of personality despite the fact that he may not exist. What he has done is what a traditional hero has usually done. He is the symbol of absolute authority in this utopian world. From every corner his eyes pursue the people, on coins, on stamps, on the covers of books, on banners, on posters, and on the wrapping of a cigarette packet. He pacifies people who are really suffering by the smile of his picture and discriminates against those who hold different views. He sacrifices a lot to protect his people by his way. Here, writer comes up with the weakness of traditional heroism. Heroic, righteous though he appears to be,

underneath that facade hides a lightweight hypocritical inherence. The traditional heroism is just like that pyramid architecture mentioned in the story as the symbol of government with an enormous base and 300 meters height, same features are applied to the underground and above-ground parts. Above the ground, the society is a bright and elegant administration, yet the darkness of underground is the true picture: distortion of truth, destruction of peace and persecution of the people. Connecting with Orwell's experience, the Big Brother symbolizes the whole utopian governmental party, that is to say, the totalitarianism. The totalitarian side brainwashes people from chaos into ignorance and makes up grand reasons for their unjustifiable acts. The existence of Big Brother is necessary in a totalitarian society because it is easier to love a hero than an organization, and that the name "Big Brother" is selected in aims to strengthen the connection between hero and the public. People are more willing to follow the pattern of a hero than legal doctrine. Big brother, on behalf of the deformity of the society, witnesses the descent of humanity.

As a member of the Inner Party, O'Brien holds more confidential information about the totalitarian government, especially how the Party shapes the image of a traditional hero for consensus leading. He is aware of the nature of traditional heroism is a hypocrisy in utopian society, and he mistakenly believes that persisting in traditional heroism will change the truth. Even though his appearance belies him that he hates to mingle with other party members, his personality is totally eroded by traditional heroism. O'Brien's urbane manner and his prizefighter's physique make Winston believe that his political orthodoxy is not perfect, that he may be his partner against the Big Brother. Nevertheless, the traditional heroism keeps the society backward for it does such violence to the spirit thwarting the human ability to distinguishing between right and wrong and discriminating beauty and ugliness. O'Brien is a supporter and a vindicator of Big Brother, whereas, a victim of heroism. On the one hand, O'Brien acts what a hero should be in totalitarian society. He deceives Winston he is the head of the anti-party clique, and tortures, insults and maltreats Winston when he is under arrest. He wants to change Winston's mind, and wants Winston believe the correctness of double think and the integrity of the existence of Big Brother. He is proud of being a thought police for preserving the rationality of Big Brother, social stability and peoples' living. All the atrocity he has done to Winston including putting mice to bite Winston and getting spiritual torment on Winston becomes heroic under the name of heroism.

On the other hand, he fears or despises Winston's rebellious spirit to traditional heroism. O'Brien isn't puzzled by someone's idea and trying to control people's minds, and he merely notices the irrationality of traditional heroism and chooses to ignore it. Everything against Big Brother is knocked down by him, for just being afraid to admit the existence of anti-heroes. O'Brien is the one who is obsessed with his fantasy and refuses to wake up, waiting a hero take him away from cruelty of fleshy lives.

## 2.2. Image of Winston in Nineteen Eighty-Four

Winston is stated as being 39 years old at the beginning of the book. He is just a tiny clerk in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth, and he needs to endlessly rewrite historical documents so they could be consistent to the changing current party line. Most of his work is to revise

newspaper articles and eliminate pictures—especially people who have run afoul of the party. Because of his proximity to the mechanics of rewriting history, Winston Smith nurses doubts about the Party and its monopoly on truth.

Not merely scratching the surface of this character, the image of this anti-hero can be further comprehended from the method of familiarization. Take doublethink as an example, doublethink means maintaining and accepting in one's mind to receive two conflicting cognitive abilities at the same time in Nineteen Eighty-Four. The way the Oceania people thinking about a question becomes unfamiliar to readers. Winston needs to hide in a corner where he could escape from monitor in order to record his real thought, since it will never be done by a hero. When the party members are lying, they clearly know that they are tampering with reality, yet they really believe their lies. They know the truth but hide some telltale lies and they hold two contradictory views at the same time, and believe them even though conflict with each other. Therefore, the moment Winston realizes the conflict of doublethink is the moment he begins to struggle for his true self. If he accepts doublethink, the society would maintain ostensible stability, and keep the peace and unity as the government wants. Winston wants to express his mind freely, even though he will be the destabilizing factor in the Utopian society. To be a doublethink people is intolerable for Winston and people with humanity, so he starts to seek for truth and write down his minds in diary. So unfamiliar and discomfort for readers is that a government official who works in the ministry of Truth is acquired to ceaselessly query the accepted truths, only in this way he will not be changed by the traditional heroism in that totalitarian society. Provided that a hero could not face the things deep inside his heart and blindly chase to be a noble one approved by others, social unrest could be seen everywhere. Accepting living with doublethink one may forget what must be forgotten, and recover the memory when it is needed, thereafter immediately forget about truth. A traditional hero is consciously doomed to lose his sense of self and then not be aware of the hypnosis he just completed.

In the first stage, Winston behaves in the same way like other citizens in the Utopian society where people live in impoverished living conditions and spiritual and cultural life. In previous years, Winston, like the others, drifted with the current to worshipping Big Brother. Although he insistently dedicated, he is still happy with his work and works efficiently. His memory about the past that is the reason why he takes his paper notebooks as treasures, because paper is his connection with the thing he really experienced. He is also exceedingly particular about taking notes even though he could not write very well. The majority of his life is after the first great purges, which is a movement removing deviation, but the memories left by his grandparents makes him miss his childhood as he grew older. He never finds out why such deception of traditional heroism should be carried out at any cost. Keeping a diary becomes an important mission that freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four.

In the second stage, with the deepening of his diary, he has more courage to face up to his discontent for the Big Brother and desires of being a person he really wants to be, even though he may not be a hero. His diary is a key helps him recognize his strengths and weaknesses and his position. Winston can smoothly record his feelings and skillfully rewrite the past, struggling in his way against the principle of traditional heroism in totalitarian society: a hero controls the

past controls the future and a hero controls the present controls the past. He realizes that rewrite history is just another way of lying. He wants to face the history squarely, whereas he lacks the confidence to deny the wrong value of Big Brother, a traditional hero. Then he meets Julia, a girl integrated herself into the daily life of Oceania early and secretly despises the Party and wants to join the Brotherhood, purportedly an outlawed organization founded by the Enemy of the state. They decide to live life to the fullest while dodging the Party whenever possible. During the next a couple of months, they secretly meet at their secret sides outside of London. They spend a lot of time having a trial run of the route, though they clearly know what they done is forbidden by the Party. The lovers know what they have done is so shameful for traditional heroic society, but they are warrior in their affair against traditional heroism. Their embrace is considered as a battle against the traditional heroism, and their climax is a victory of oppression. The love contrary to morality between two anti-heroes is a blow struck against the Party, and a glorious anti-heroic act.

In the third stage, after Winston and Julia are both arrest, Winston has to be a nasty little man. Nothing in the world is as bad as physical pain and in the fact of pain. No one can be termed as hero in front of injustice, tyranny, oppression and inequality. His appearance becomes hideous. A forlorn, jailbird's face with nubby forehead running back into a bald scalp, a crooked nose and battered-looking cheekbones above which the eyes were fierce and watchful. He stops thinking and accepts everything about the Party, including two plus two is five. His humanity is completely defeated by the totalitarian government.

At first, it is Winston's memories of his youth that stimulates him to value the precious feelings in a period of severe material shortages and shackles on people's mind. Suffering from the alienation of traditional heroism, the nursery rhymes which Winston's grandfather taught to him connect him with his family even though the rest of family members have already gone. Every time when Winston gets stuck, he always thinks about the image of his mother and it always comforts him. Family affection accelerates his transformation to be an anti-hero. In order to think about the big picture, a traditional hero needs to accept family disruption and holds the spirit of self-sacrifice from traditional view. Yet, Winston does not. Then the affair with Julia accelerates Winston's transformation. By means of lover's supporting, he seems to be prepared to give his live in pursuit of freedom. He wants to be authentic self, accepting his not-so-good qualities as facets of a worthwhile man. It is truth that giving people the chance and they always fight for freedom; always prefer tolerance to prejudice, will never willing accept suppression of human rights and governance by totalitarianism. However, in the utopian totalitarian society, these anti-heroes are doomed to sacrificing to maintain the social stability. They are inconspicuous and incompetent, and not as great as the social hero Big Brother who contributes a lot to the Utopian society.

Freedom and democracy are out of the question while people have been squeezed. After Winston and Julia falling in love, their resistance consciousness gradually expands. It is a trap of joining a rebel group, and both of them are captured and imprisoned as prisoners who need to undergo torture for ideological transformation. Winston's transformations reveal the brutal and terrifying side of traditional heroism and focus on the idea that torture can reshape personality. Facing the

torture, Winston abandons his principles and his love for his lover, betrays her to survive. Their love is not a traditional love story that suffering lovers pay for love and open them to a new level of feeling and joy. There are not heroes for each other. It's hard to consider Winston's love for Julia while his mind is under a state of chaos especially their past memories are very different, and no wonder they have different attitudes towards traditional heroism. In Winston's point of view, people should not be guilty for their history. What was happened in the past should take a place in human society; even a hero is not eligible to rewrite it. But Julia has no memories about the past and regards the danger of revolting the Party as a stimulus, looking for love and sex in the stimulus. An anti-hero is not one merely holds the rebellious spirit, but has a clear cognition about him. The existence of humanity is infinitely weakened and suppressed. And in such despair, they have gone hopelessly to the lowly status it is difficult to transcend their own narrowness, for they are stuck in the self-evil extricate themselves. People become the decentralized subjects, unable to perceive their connection with the society, even excludes from it, and become man-self without a center and any identity. A man, like Winston, in that moment is no longer anyone's son or lover.

### **2.3. Anti-heroic Spirit in Nineteen Eighty-Four**

Winston is the symbol of the values of civilized life, and his defeat is a poignant reminder of the vulnerability of such values in the midst of all-powerful states. The Oceania rulers use newspapers and television to destroy family ties, and make everyone betray each other in name of hero, thus the traditional heroism destroys the moral personality and dehumanizes people. The government of Utopian society constantly wages to defend in aims to transferring sharp internal contradiction. Wars become an effective way to express individuals' traditional heroic spirit. Unilateral judging will lead to even unjust, confuse the right and wrong, lead to the destroying of production developing and lead to society fall back and poor.

At the beginning, Winston lives just for the sake of remaining alive, even his resistance to the totalitarian forces does not have a great purpose—just to pursue personal freedom. He is neither as noble as the traditional heroic characters, with extraordinary intelligence and physical strength, nor responsible to others and the society. Nothing could be done under a series of inevitable and fearful things. And a real society is composed of such absurd and funny people. The weakness of human nature makes up the reality of him. In the end, he does not persevere or sacrifice bravely, he betrays his lover and his own self, succumbs to the control of the totalitarian society from body to spirit, and becomes one of the millions of brainwashed people. He is not a hero for readers to follow, but he would not be condemned by anyone. A civilization could not be established under the emotion of fear, even in the name of heroism. Freedom means one could freely develop his humanity. He could choose to be a hero, or a normal person. The powerful force of heroism should not envelope the individual begets the idea that all parts the community can be used by the members of that community any way they see fit, including ideas.

Winston's fate is worse than the death he desperately prayed for. He once soberly sees the limitation of traditional heroism clearly but becomes a traumatized shell. Stripped of all human feeling, saving for a forced bond to the ideals of the Party, Winston's every hope for himself and his beloved has

been slaughtered. Traditional heroism successfully muzzles the mind and alters human feelings even succeeds in killing humanity. Traditional heroism couldn't always appear in history after all like the Stalinist model control the horrible fascist dictatorship of Soviet Union. We can understand that peoples' struggle for precious freedom of thought never stop since the Renaissance, which began in the 16th century. Nineteen Eighty-Four is not only an expression of Orwell's fears, but an anxiety about how the role of hero would be better organized in the future. The course of history would be changed in name of traditional heroism by any reason, and people will gradually not realize that their humanity is decaying. We should always think independently which think about the ego, the true self, and this process is a search for freedom. Provided that the best of human qualities is not permitted to believe in discuss, the existence of hero will be distorted. Traditional heroism grossly overstates the good aspects of human qualities, but ignores the weak side of human. This will generate a vague impression of the hero and villain. Therefore the complete liberation of humanity is in essence the problem of the humanistic society construction. The human world should be one consisting only of humanity and only in such a society can humanity be completely liberated. Orwell constantly attaches importance to the degrading and twisted human nature in special situations, which is beyond culture and history.

### 3. Conclusion

In this dissertation, this thesis presents a thorough understanding of Nineteen Eighty-Four, from the perspective of anti-heroism. Heretofore, the dissertation will further interpret the research question mentioned at the beginning of this thesis. Firstly, the anti-heroic spirit in Nineteen Eighty-Four shows in description about the leader of the Party, Big Brother and Inner Party member O'Brien. The writer satirizes that a noble hero who is blindly worshiped by the public may not exist. The pursuit of traditional heroism will cause the descent of humanity. The anti-heroism in another way helps people realize the reality and themselves. Secondly, the anti-heroic spirit reflects in the three transformations of Winston. He gradually realizes his darkness of personality in his transformations, and faces up the problem of the Utopian

society. Although he is not brave and perfect as a traditional hero, readers will view the magnificent glory of humanity from his actions. Winston's rebellion to the Party not only shows Orwell's rebellious spirit to the traditional heroism, but also a warning to Utopia. Winston's failure to totalitarian is inevitable, since the torment of humanity is much more horrible than that.

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