

Deconstructing Family: an analysis of the erosion of family in dystopian texts

When reading dystopian literature, one often questions how the society's citizens remained complacent and oblivious during the insidious descent into their dire situation. This past year, the menace of COVID-19 and subsequent government management initiatives has revealed our capacity, as humans, to follow authority and the liberties we are willing to surrender. Prior to the pandemic, we could not fathom that our government would have the power to enforce the strict lockdown of the entire population for multiple weeks, yet, this has occurred, and we have obeyed. Reflecting on the unprecedented situation in which we find ourselves, one can consider it to be a junction for humankind. In order to preserve the integrity of our society we look to dystopian literature through which we can witness grim futures while still holding the power to alter ours. Characterised by constant surveillance, conformity and control, dystopian texts flourished in the 20th century as advances in technology and concerns regarding over-population prompted writers to share their unease at the state of affairs. George Orwell's *1984*, published in 1949, in the midst of the global rise of Fascist states, serves as a warning of the dangers of dictatorial control. The novel explores the human condition in futuristic London wherein the citizens of Airstrip One are subservient to the oppressive oligarchy of the Inner Party and their figure-head, Big Brother. Years later, the similarly themed director's cut of Ridley Scott's film, *Blade Runner* was released in 1992. Set in a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles, society is dominated by the Tyrell Corporation whose slave-like, synthetic humans – replicants - invite a consideration of what defines humanity. Family, a key theme in both texts, is an integral part of the human identity as it functions as a person's earliest source of intimacy, and thus plays an important role in shaping their values. In *1984* and *Blade Runner*, the ruling bodies appropriate the family unit – exploiting and redefining it – in order to strengthen and sustain their power over the individual.

The two dystopian texts reveal the innate human necessity for connection and thereby how through eroding or manipulating familial bonds, the authority can reduce humans to wretched and vulnerable creatures. In *1984*, the Inner-Party aims to eliminate the traditional functioning of family as they understand that raising citizens without its influence, as a key determiner of an individual's core values and beliefs, they are more susceptible to ideological control. Orwell highlights the Party's erasure of familial attachment through Winston's dream of his mother and sister 'in the saloon of a...ship...sinking down...into the green waters' (p.37), symbolising how his attachment to them is slipping away due to the Party's efforts to eradicate anything that interferes with one's complete and singular devotion to INGSOC. Resulting from the absence of family, people are shown to seek security and connection from other sources, such as the authority, in order to fulfil their requirement. Although O'Brien is Winston's torturer, Orwell represents him as a father-figure; during one of the interrogation sessions between the pair in Room 101, Winston is described to have 'clung to O'Brien like a baby' (p.316). This simile evokes the concept of a familial connection between the two. Furthermore, Winston reflects that he feels 'comforted' and 'protect[ed]' (p. 316) by O'Brien's presence. Orwell, thereby positions readers to conclude that, when otherwise withheld, the human desperation for intimacy will force individuals to accept whatever relationship they can, even if abusive in nature. The misuse of the concept of family within dystopian worlds is reinforced through the Party's 'direct appeal to the sentiment of family loyalty' (p. 272) in the choice of title for their figurehead. Orwell invites his audience to appreciate the irony of the misnomer, Big Brother, as

the evoked associations of protection and care is in striking juxtaposition to the tyrannical figure that looms over the citizens of Oceania. In comparison to *1984*, where the Party attempts to abolish family in order to wield more power over the individual, in *Blade Runner*, Tyrell recognises that through the fabrication of a childhood he can ensure his creations remain compliant. Tyrell discovered that by implanting memories in replicants he can ‘create a cushion or pillow for their emotions and consequently...control them better’, demonstrating his blatant exploitation familial bonds – and the security and stability it offers - for personal gain. Hence, the audience sees that through his ability to grant the replicants a family, albeit an illusion of one, Tyrell commands power over them. Furthermore, in the scene where Rachael learns of her manufactured childhood and replicant nature, her inherently “human” yearning for belonging and love is foregrounded. Scott implements upward lighting, highlighting Rachael’s face while keeping the rest of the frame obscured by shadow. This serves to emphasize the anguish in her expression as she realizes she is an artificial creature without any genuine family. Although capitalized on through opposite strategies, the authority in both *1984* and *Blade Runner* demonstrate how the longing for intimacy, fundamental to the human condition, is an opportunity for control which can be capitalized on by either denying or bestowing such connection.



Rachael learns of her replicant nature (Scott, 1992)

The ruling body, in the two texts, reinvents the family unit so that the loyalty traditionally present within families is warped and members turn against each other. In both *Blade Runner* and *1984*, an illusion of a family has been created so that the associated connection and bond can be appropriated for the benefit of maintaining power; however, in the former the opportunity for manipulation is emotional, whereas, in the latter the exploitation is physical (using family members as spies against each other). Additionally, the concept of the “created” killing its “creator” is



Roy and Tyrell's meeting (Scott, 1992)

repeated throughout both texts to emphasise the perversion of family dynamics within futuristic worlds. In *Blade Runner*, when replicant, Roy meets his designer, Tyrell, a close-up shot of the pair accentuates the intimacy of the moment between them but once he realises Tyrell has no genuine care for him further than pride at his invention, Roy kills his maker. During the ensuing struggle, the characters do not share a frame, rather, the camera switches between shots of either individual, symbolising Roy’s severing of the connection between them, breaking away from his “father” and the power this bond holds over him. Moreover, through Rachael’s artificial “memory” of spiderlings eating their mother, Scott reinforces the theme of parricide which highlights how the Tyrell Corporation has perverted the natural loyalties of family. Similarly, in *1984*, the Party appropriates the family unit and ‘systematically turn[s] [children] against their parents’ (p. 168) through a youth program that trains them to be informants of the Thought Police who ‘report...deviations’ (p. 168) from the will of the

State. This concept is emphasised during an interrogation session where O’Brien boasts to Winston of the Party’s plans to further corrupt the institution of family by taking children ‘from their mothers

at birth, as one takes eggs from a hen' (p. 337). Through this imagery, Orwell positions readers to condemn the Party's crude disregard for the natural bond between parent and child. Furthermore, it is revealed that the oligarchy 'undermine[s] the solidarity of the family' (p. 272) by indoctrinating children when they are young and impressionable. The success of this mechanism for control is evidenced in the Ministry of Love, when Winston learns that his neighbour and colleague, Parsons, was 'denounced' (p. 295) by his own daughter, who thereby subjects him to 'torture and death' (p. 44) at the whim of the Party. The authority in the two texts exploit and redefine the family unit, resulting in a distortion of loyalty between members, evidenced by children's betrayal of their parents.

As world events prompt us to reflect on the current magnitude of governmental power and exponential evolution of technology in our present world, we hark back to the cautions of dystopian writers - in their ever relevant texts - for guidance. The legacies of both Scott and Orwell's work is to prompt their audience's consideration of the danger that these developments pose to the security of personal autonomy. As evidenced in *1984* and *Blade Runner*, the institution of family can be used by ruling bodies as a mechanism of control, through both the exploitation of the household, as opportunity for surveillance, and the emotional manipulation made possible in the absence or presence of familial connections. Dystopian texts warn of the potentially sinister workings of authority and we should heed their wisdom if we do not want to realize Orwell's vision of the future as 'a boot stamping on a human face – for ever' (p. 337).

Word count: 1451

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