

Allegories of System in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*



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Table of contents

Introduction	2
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Chapter 1: The System & the Allegory

Chapter 1.1: Allegory of System	5
Chapter 1.2: The Orwellian System	11

Chapter 2: Orwell in America

Chapter 2.1: Impact of Orwell in America	18
Chapter 2.2: Kesey and Orwell	24

Chapter 3: Concluding

Chapter 3.1: Kesey and Orwell: System and the Individual	31
Works Cited	33

Introduction

Could Orwell have predicted the impact *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would have on western society? In current times people describe excessive state control as being Orwellian: “when the adjective ‘Orwellian’ is used, the most common meaning is that of an all-seeing state that has totally effaced personal privacy” (Gleason & Nussbaum, 5). Terms like *Newspeak* and *Big Brother* have also entered the common language. Some describe his novel as “a story that remains eternally fresh” (McCrum) and say it has had an effect “on our cultural and linguistic landscape...not... limited to ...film adaptation” (McCrum). Others argue that Orwell’s book is mostly seen as “a warning against the dangers that technocratic modernism poses to privacy and freedom” (Posner, 1).

Many roads can be taken to discover the influences of Orwell on Western society: some form of direction is thus necessary. Robin West leads the way towards discovering some of the resonances of Orwell’s novel: “what if it is the very real bloodshed of Columbine or the rapes of Woodstock ’99, rather than the fictional mind control of the malignant authority in Oceania or of the head nurse in *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, that leave us most shaken?” (West, 250). Leaving aside the realities of Columbine and Woodstock ’99, two things stand out: the linkage of George Orwell and Ken Kesey and the terms mind control and malignant authority. By doing so, West makes a thematic connection that cannot be overlooked between both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. West however, creates a link which is afterwards never fully developed but which deserves to be looked at further. This idea of a link between the themes used by Orwell and Kesey has been put forward before: “Big Nurse has her antecedent in Orwell's Big Brother...” (Porter, 20). In what follows this idea will be developed further.

Mind control is one of the ways in which IngsoC establish its authority in Oceania. The agents of the Thought Police are the ones that verify if the people of Oceania are complying

with the state doctrine. If individuals are suspected of rebellious thoughts, or *Thoughtcrime* in *Newspeak*, it is the Thought Police that comes to take dissenters away to have them brainwashed in the Ministry of Love. Their main weapon in their war on dissenters is surveillance; this is conducted mainly via the Telescreen, a two-way television with a microphone. This Telescreen “is a powerful metaphor for the loss of privacy in a totalitarian state” (Posner, 15).

The real strength of this System is not surveillance per se; it is the paranoia it creates which is so effective in keeping people in line. Winston Smith, the protagonist of the story, explains this point:

How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live--did live, from habit that became instinct--in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized (Orwell, 5).

Important to notice here is not the danger of surveillance on its own. There is also the possibility that a watchful eye will make people docile and easy to control. The ruling force no longer has to apply heavy pressure to make people walk in line. They do so on their own accord because they live in a constant state of paranoia.

Chief Bromden, the Native American who suffers from schizophrenia, embodies the state of paranoia in *One Flew over The Cuckoo's Nest*. From the onset of the story the paranoia is made clear. The book opens with the line: “They are out there” (Kesey, 7). This immediately creates a sense of two sides, one being the patients and the other being the staff of the ward, which controls the patients. The Chief’s paranoia is a result of his fear of

surveillance, he even suspects his characteristic mop to be a part of Nurse Ratched's System: "the mop handle in my hands is made of metal instead of wood (metal's a better conductor) and it's hollow; there's plenty of room inside it to hide a miniature microphone" (Kesey, 149). Having lived under the discipline of the ward for years, The Chief has grown accustomed to it: "I creep along the wall quiet as dust in my canvas shoes, but they got special sensitive equipment detects my fear and they all look up, all three at once, eyes glittering out of the black faces like the hard glitter of radio tubes out of the back of an old radio" (Kesey, 7). The mechanical imagery Kesey uses here is striking. The black wardens are described as having equipment that detects fears and their eyes glitter like radio tubes. A connection can be made with later descriptions of the black wardens: "all three black boys tune in closer and closer with the Big Nurse's frequency" (Kesey, 33). Big Nurse is described here as sending out a frequency which the wardens can pick up, this fits in with the earlier descriptions of the men having eyes like radio tubes. The wardens could be seen as robots that act on instructions of their master.

Nineteen Eighty-Four as well as *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* describe Systems of surveillance. They also have a power figure at the heart of their society, namely Big Brother and Big Nurse. They are powerless on their own but via technology, the breaking down of human loyalty and the infliction of pain they are able to dominate. It is interesting to compare both these webs of control and to see what similarities they have. In the first chapter the imagery and symbols used by Orwell will be explored. In the second chapter the view shifts to the System in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. After that the focus will be on the influence of Orwell in America. Afterwards an attempt will be made to link the imagery of Orwell and Kesey and to show how the Systems in both their novels can be compared. It will then also be shown how both works are allegories of System.

Chapter 1: The System & the Allegory

1.1: Allegory of System

Abrams and Harpman explain that an allegory is a story in which the agents, actions and sometimes even the setting are designed to make sense on the literal level on the one hand. On the other they “communicate a second, correlated order of signification” (Abrams & Harpman, 7). According to Abrams and Harpman there are two major types of allegory, the first one being the historical or political allegory in which the characters allegorize historical figures or events. The second one is the allegory of ideas in which “literal characters represent concepts and the plot allegorizes an abstract doctrine or thesis” (Abrams & Harpman, 7). In this kind of allegory the different people in the story personify abstract entities such as ideas, virtues, vices modes of life and types of character.

Gay Clifford argues that allegories are rich with symbols. In modern times the events and objects of everyday life have been foregrounded as symbols of the allegory. Gay Clifford also says that symbols have the tendency to be self-centred, the meaning of the symbol points towards itself. This thwarts the vital process of the allegory: “in allegory the concern is always with process, with the way in which various elements of an imaginative or intellectual system interact, and with the effects of this system or structure on and within individuals” (Clifford, 11).

The allegory is also a story which both educates the reader and the protagonist about the values and obstacles of life. This element of allegories is certainly present in the dystopian world created by Orwell:

Both utopian and dystopian fiction... belong to the genre of political satire. In this genre the reader plays an active role. Through the satirical devices of indirection – irony, allusion, the reversal of cause and effect relationships, apposition, overstatement – the satirist prepares us

to recognize the flaws of our own society (Gottlieb, 241).

The problems of Oceanic society are based on problems Orwell perceived in his own time. The image of impending doom serves to make people aware of dangerous contemporary trends: “the final breakdown, the future dystopia...is always an extrapolation of contemporary fears and concerns, of current perceptions of rot and decay” (Kroes,7). Rob Kroes calls Orwell’s apocalypse self-contradictory, it lacks the abruptness and suddenness one would expect from doomsday. “It is a frozen apocalypse, a routinized cataclysm” (Kroes, 7). This is according to Kroes the defining element of Orwell’s System, this endless self-contradiction, also reflected in the three Party slogans: War is Peace, Ignorance is Strength and Freedom is Slavery.

Some of the fears and concerns present in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have been touched upon before but it is interesting to take a closer look at the symbols Orwell uses to make these issues more concrete to the reader in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

One of the most pervading symbols in Orwell’s book is Big Brother, the face of The Party and its totalitarian rule. He symbolises the ever-watchful eye of the Thought Police. Posters of him are plastered all around Oceania, they do not only serve as propaganda but they are also a warning to all the citizens of Oceania: do not step out of line because the Party will be watching and waiting for you. Even in Oceania itself he is a symbolic figure, his existence is shrouded in mystery because he never makes public appearances or gives speeches. O’Brien shines a light on the existence of Big Brother, Winston asks: “Does Big Brother exist?’ ‘Of course he exists. The Party exists. Big Brother is the embodiment of the Party.’ ‘Does he exist in the same way as I exist?’ ‘You do not exist,’ said O’Brien” (Orwell, 296). Not much later Winston asks: “‘Will Big Brother ever die?’ ‘Of course not. How could he die?’” (Orwell, 297) These lines could be read as strong evidence for the symbolic value Big Brother

plays in Oceania as well as in the book overall.

An equally elusive figure is Emmanuel Goldstein, the leader of the underground movement called The Brotherhood and the writer of the rebellious work known as The Book. The Party uses him as a scapegoat for their failures and he is the target for the Two Minute Hate. These two minutes are the only time people are allowed to let their emotions run free in the otherwise restricted society of Oceania. For Winston, Goldstein is the voice of reason. His book serves as proof of the suspicions he had about The Party and its real purpose. Orwell has however a tendency to introduce an element of bleakness into every aspect of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, so even this glimmer of hope in the form of The Brotherhood has a bitter undertone. Alan Kennedy notices the problems of absolute power: “the image he gives of the future: ‘a boot stamping on a human face – for ever’...it is very difficult for O’Brien to avoid the master/slave paradox...for the boot to feel power, it is dependent on the existence of the face” (92-93). Seen in this light the name of the underground group, the Brotherhood, suddenly seems to echo Big Brother. Add to this the remark by O'Brien that “this drama that I have played out with you during seven years will be played out over and over again, generation after generation” (Orwell, 307) and there emerges the image of a System which has a desire to maintain power indefinitely but also produces its own enemies under controlled circumstances.

A number of symbols refer to the past; some examples are Mr. Charrington’s shop, the book with the creamy paper, the glass paperweight and the nursery rhyme ‘Oranges and Lemons’. From Mr Charrington’s shop Winston has acquired the book with the creamy paper, which he uses as a diary. This goes against Party policy as it is a form of history writing outside of the Party's control. Mr Charrington also introduces Winston to the nursery rhyme ‘Oranges and Lemons’ that is another part of the long forgotten history of Winston's youth. Lastly, Charrington's shop and the room above are remnants of the times before the

revolutionary war. All these things represent a time of sanity and community for Winston.

The proles embody the idea of brotherhood and affection, also remnants of a forgotten past. It is the prole woman who is disgusted by the cinema show during which refugees are killed by a helicopter. As the story progresses Winston starts to see the real value of the proles:

They were not loyal to a party or a country or an idea, they were loyal to one another. For the first time in his life he did not despise the proles... The proles had stayed human... They had held on to the primitive emotions which he himself had to re-learn by conscious effort (Orwell, 191).

Human affection is the closest Winston gets to a form of consolation. The other historical artefacts in the end are destroyed or used against him. The goods in Charrington's shops are from the scrap-heap and do not tell a coherent story, and the nursery rhyme is used by the Thought Police when they come to take Julia and Winston away: "here comes the chopper to chop of your head" (Orwell, 254). It is also during the raid of Winston's and Julia's room that the paperweight is smashed to pieces. Winston notices the piece of coral that rolls out and "how small... how small it always was!" (Orwell, 254) This shows how fragile the little world was where he and Julia had been living in together was and how easily it can be swept away.

To return to the symbols of love, the proles teach Winston about humanity but it is Julia and his mother who teach him what love is. Through recollections of his mother he starts to see how she truly loved him because she was willing to sacrifice everything for him, even herself and his little sister: "his mother's memory tore at his heart because she had died loving him, when he was too young and selfish to love her in return, and because... she had sacrificed

herself to a conception of loyalty that was private and unalterable” (Orwell, 35). Orwell also infuses this storyline with bleakness by destroying the perfect image of Winston’s mother. Winston meets a drunken and disorderly woman in his cell in the Ministry of Love who is also called Smith and is of the right age to be his mother. When he is released from the Ministry of Love another memory of his childhood comes flooding back to him. He remembers a rainy afternoon during which his family sat inside and played snakes and ladders, being perfectly content, but it offers no consolation because Winston soon dismisses this memory as false.

Winston experiences little to no love, his marriage was far from a success for example. He also visited prostitutes but the picture Orwell paints of one of the visits is rather horrific. When Winston meets Julia for the first time his desire for her is mixed up with these traumatic experiences. He fantasises smashing her head in with a cobblestone. Slowly he learns to turn his aggressive fantasies into genuine love for her and eventually other humans. Just before he is captured by the Thought Police he looks out the window at the prole woman, singing and hanging up the laundry. He suddenly realises that she is beautiful, not as a result of her physique but because of her abiding spirit which after years of taking care of the household is still able to sing. This is a far cry from the Winston who mindlessly kicked a severed hand away after the rocket bomb attack. This transformation takes place as a result of Julia’s presence in his life: “Julia leads Winston from darkness into light” (Good, 52).

A good way to explore a System in an allegory is to see the workings of the System through the eyes of an individual. He or she is in most cases an outsider and provides a fresh outlook. The experience of this person “provides for explaining its particularities” (Clifford, 23). The questions the traveller asks about the System he or she discovers are the same as the reader's:

Nineteen Eighty-Four was designed to show how one man, Winston Smith, representing everyman, was controlled by the all-powerful forces of the state. The book posed the question: Can the individual survive in the face of the collective power of the modern state? (Rossi & Rodden, 9).

Winston Smith is not able to do so, his rise and fall is shown through transformations of his body. This is an important part of allegories. All allegories share a belief in transformation, not just of its protagonist but also of the reader: “if the author believes that the reader can be changed and made wiser...the most effective way for him to demonstrate this is to show his heroes transformed” (Clifford, 29). The most profound way to depict changes in the characters of the allegory is through metamorphoses of the body.

The internal transformation of Winston is also shown through a transformation of his body. When the reader first encounters him he is a frail alcoholic who is plagued by an ulcer on his right ankle but under the influence of Julia he begins to grow healthier. He becomes fatter, he abandons his drinking habits and his ulcer does not bother him any longer. The downfall of Winston is also shown through a decline of his body. O’Brien breaks the spirit of Winston by showing him what has become of him after his time in the Ministry of Love; he has turned into “a bowed, grey-coloured, skeleton-like thing” (Orwell, 310). When he sees Julia for the last time he notices how hard and cold her body is, mirroring their love which has died out after they betrayed each other in room 101. Winston picks up his habit of drinking gin again, now more than ever. It has become so extreme that he cries gin-scented tears of love when he looks at the face of Big Brother at the end of the story.

1.2: The Orwellian System

What defines this System in Orwell's book, what are its elements and how does it operate? The term System as it is used here refers to a regime, and discovering this Orwellian regime will be the main aim of this chapter. In his essay "The Benefits of 'Regimen'" Steve Ingle writes about the regime of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

He first describes the basic premises of the scientific socialist utopia. Namely, that the elite ruling class will rule with good intentions and that when the time is ripe they will give up their position of power. In the scientific socialist state there also has to be a sense of development: the state is a ship, which is constantly moving forward. The elitist group is the captain of this ship, they are the ones who are giving it direction. Eventually a state of pure intellect will be reached in which every life has merit. Writers like Wells believed in the good nature of this elitist group and their willingness to break down their own power System when the time was ripe for it.

Orwell is sceptic about this way of thinking in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In Oceania an elitist group has been established which claims to be socialistic (Ingsoc is derived from English Socialism). Ingle says that this is just appearance, under the surface there is actually an elitist power System that has seized control not for the betterment of the proletariat but to maintain power for its own sake. The revolution of Ingsoc operated under the banner of socialism but when they eventually rose to power they showed little inclination to lend a helping hand to the ordinary citizens:

the so-called 'abolition of private property' which took place in the middle years of the century meant, in effect, the concentration of property in far fewer hands than before: but with this difference, that the new owners were a group instead of a mass of individuals (Orwell, 236).

The socialist dream has become a nightmare. Not only the actions of The Party are the antithesis of the socialist utopia, even their final purpose is horrifying: “The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the goods of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness: only power, pure power” (Orwell, 301-302). The Party’s power lies in inflicting pain, breaking down people and building them up again under their control. The final destination, which O’Brien envisions for the society of Oceania, is that of the boot stamping on the face of humans forever. Oceania has become a state in which there is no active resistance, no underground organisation or successful rebellion: a world fixed forever in the same state. Orwell's story shows “that certain social trends could result in a revolution that will be the last one, to warn against the digging in of the transitional stage” (Wilding, 244).

Ingle lays bare the multiple ways through which the regime of Ingsoc is enforced. The basis is provided by technologies such as microphones and Telescreens. On top of this refined psychological methods are used to break the individual spirit. Orwell describes Ingsoc ideals:

the ideal set up by the Party was something huge, terrible, and glittering--a world of steel and concrete, of monstrous machines and terrifying weapons--a nation of warriors and fanatics, marching forward in perfect unity, all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans, perpetually working, fighting, triumphing, persecuting--three hundred million people all with the same face (Orwell, 85).

Ingle says that Orwell does not blame socialism alone for this destruction of individuality and perversion of power. It is almost inevitable in this age of technology that a power structure will turn the benefits of advanced technology against its citizens, no matter what political ideal they follow. Ingsoc has clearly seen the potential of technology: “in

Oceania...technology provided The Party with the means to keep all citizens under constant surveillance, thus effectively bringing private life to an end” (Ingle, 174). Not only obedience to the System can be enforced now, in the modern age uniformity of opinion and ideological indoctrination became a possibility. In other words “ideology controls technology in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*” (Beauchamp, 55).

The other elements of this regime are as follows: “thought control through propaganda, education, psychology (including behavioral modification), informers (including children), censorship... and, above all, the manipulation of historical records and of language...”

(Posner, 15).

The idea of the destruction of an external truth is clarified by O’Brien in room 101: “reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else. Not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes, and in any case soon perishes: only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal” (Orwell, 285). Winston’s remark that The Party will eventually say that two plus two makes five lies at the core of this element. Even things people hold for evidently true, like mathematics, will in the near future no longer be so straightforward. Another important way The Party makes truth an alterable entity is by reshaping history. In the Ministry of Truth history is being turned into a palimpsest that can be scraped clean and rewritten as often as the leaders deem necessary. In the process the tools to compare and to reconsider are being destroyed. What The Party claims history looks like becomes truth, exemplified by the way newspapers and history books are rewritten when Oceania starts a new war. It is made to look like the new enemy has always been the enemy since the first days of Ingsoc.

The second element is the breakdown of family ties. Children are taught to betray their parents when they are guilty of crimes against the Party. In jail Winston meets his former

colleague Parson who says his own child turned him in: “it was my little daughter, 'She listened at the keyhole...and nipped off to the patrols. I don't bear her any grudge for it” (Orwell, 268). Blood bonds no longer provide comfort and shelter; in fact the home has become a place of paranoia and not only because of the omnipresent Telescreen. Parson himself was turned in because he mumbled anti-Party sympathies in his sleep. The family has effectively become an extension of the Thought Police.

The lack of a cultural tradition is the third important element. Someone must “feel himself part of (a) tradition and be able to pass it on to his children” (Ingle, 177). According to Ingle, Orwell saw language as the most important component of that cultural tradition. The Party tries to control behaviour by controlling the language. Therefore a new form of language is being developed in Oceania, known as Newspeak. According to Syme, who is working on this new form of language, it will “narrow the range of thought. In the end we shall make thought crime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it” (Orwell, 60).

The confinement of a full emotional life is another important element of the regime in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. O'Brien explains this particular side of suppression during the integration of Winston: “we shall abolish the orgasm... There will be no loyalty, except loyalty towards the Party. There will be no love, except the love of Big Brother. There will be no laughter, except the laugh of triumph over a defeated enemy” (Orwell, 306). Robin West recognises the value of sexuality in the exercise of power. According to West there are two standards ways of thinking about laws regulating sexuality: on one side there is the conservative way which lays emphasis on the moral and religious beliefs of a community. Sexual behaviour can be placed either under the header of morally good or bad, the laws in their turn should applaud good and deter bad sexual behaviour. On the other side of the spectrum there are the liberals who see humans as autonomous beings. People are thus

encouraged to develop their own moral beliefs and laws should not curb human beings of their right to find their own way in life, this also goes for sexual behaviour.

West brings to the table two different ways of looking at laws and sexuality. The first one is in the realm of politics. This way of thinking sees another side to the curbing of sexual behaviour by laws and lays “bare their relation to various forms of pernicious *power*, rather than their relation to contested moral virtues or values” (West, 242). Laws, sex and regulation should in this line of thought be assessed “by reference to whether and how particular laws or legal regimes, or particular sexual practices or sexual regimes further politically desirable social organizations” (West, 242-243). The second form of non-standard thinking is humanistic. This school of thought does not focus on the distribution of power under influence of sex, laws and regulation. It has instead an eye for “the harms caused, interests served, lives enhanced or lives diminished, and communities strengthened or weakened by our sexual practices, our legal institutions, and our sexual regulatory regime” (West, 243). Turning to Orwell and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, West says the following:

in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the political novel for which he is best known, Orwell introduced—by negative, dystopian inference—an important political argument for sexual privacy that, although similar in outcome to liberal arguments for deregulation, is nevertheless different from them, and perhaps even idiosyncratic (West, 243).

Orwell's argument for sexual privacy places the notion of power at its core, sexual practice itself gets little attention. Power consists of two basic ideas in Orwell's view: the first one is that power kills: power is the ability to inflict pain, suffering and misery on others. The second idea is that the most dangerous form of power is uncontrolled, unchecked and unbridled state power. It should not come as a surprise then that in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it is

the state which inflicts misery.

According to West, the originality of Orwell's argument for sexual privacy stems from the combination of two opposite reactions to the possibilities of unchecked state power. The first reaction is that the Rule of law serves as an antidote to totalitarian rule. *In Nineteen Eighty-Four* the antithesis of the idea of the Rule of law is presented: "...the citizens...lack a Rule of Law to protect them from power's malignancy" (West, 248).

Orwell combines this idea of law guarding against state domination with the notion that unregulated and free sex for its own sake can be an act of rebellion against state power and control. It is a political act because it is naturalistic and animalistic instinctive behavior making it the antidote to power: "sex is what power isn't" (West, 248) because it is spontaneous, uncontrolled and it creates comfort instead of discomfort and suffering. Power might destroy family ties and love but it cannot get a grip on passionate sex.

Law is also the opposite of power but for different reasons than erotic sex. Law is rational, general and aimed towards progress: "Orwell... found in *both* our capacity for...hedonistic sexuality *and* our capacity for...universal legalism vehicles ...of our human freedom" (West, 248).

Winston has suffered under the loveless marriage with his wife before meeting Julia. Physical contact only served to produce children. He recognises in the description of Julia his own wife: "the stiffening of Katharine's body as soon as he touched her, the way in which she still seemed to be pushing him from her with all her strength, even when her arms were clasped tightly round him" (Orwell, 152). According to Ingle, Julia represents this physical passion that is absent in Party doctrine. Despite his claim that the more men Julia had the more Winston loves her, he is "probably not in favour of promiscuity in fact, but rather against the total lack of any undifferentiated passion: he presents an argument in favour of some sort of balance" (Ingle, 179). That more than just the physical is necessary to overthrow

The Party is made clear by Winston's reprimand of Julia that she is a rebel from the waist down. On top of this she also falls asleep during Winston's reading of Goldstein's book.

Fifthly, material insufficiency plays a role in the regime. From the onset of the story it is made clear that Orwell's London is not one of abundance. It is a downtrodden city with bomb craters in the streets, boarded up windows and dark streets. The food is also appalling, cigarettes lose their tobacco and the gin Winston drinks makes his intestines burn. The shortages in the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are based upon the realities of post-war England: "the dismal conditions of everyday life in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were a replication of what the author saw around him in 1948" (Symons, 20). Goldstein explains that shortages are achieved via the perpetual war. The masses cannot be allowed to grow comfortable as a result of growing wealth but also have to be kept busy with work, which distracts them from thinking. By creating a perpetual war the need for production is justified, but at the same time the fruits of the diligence of the masses are destroyed on the battlefields, keeping the wealth out of their pockets: "the chronic shortages...the pervasive atmosphere of grimness and grime are all part of a deliberate design to keep the citizens in a state of depressed deprivation" (Beauchamp, 55). This scarcity leads to competition for minor privileges, especially in the Outer Party. The struggle for survival in a bleak world "break(s) down the human spirit and a render(s) a truly individual life impossible" (Ingle, 179-180).

Finally, and this point has been hinted at before, the lack of privacy breaks down individuality. Everyone is under the constant surveillance of cameras and microphones. Even facial expressions have to be regulated in order to prevent facecrime. This lack of privacy renders an individual life virtually impossible. Nothing can be kept from the Thought Police, it is even suggested by Orwell that The Party can read minds during the interrogation scene of Winston in room 101.

Chapter 2: Orwell in America

2.1: Impact of Orwell in America

Has Ken Kesey read Orwell before writing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? That is the central question of this chapter. There cannot be a definitive yes or no answer as Kesey never explicitly made a statement about this, but could Orwell have had an influence on American culture during the Cold War years?

Irving Howe writes in his essay "Orwell and America" that he cannot find anything in the American response to Orwell which was significantly different from the British. Some things can be said however about the American intellectual and Orwell although one cannot "dredge up profundities about the American character" (Howe, 19).

Howe explains that Orwell never visited America, this is partly a result of his untimely death and partly because of English provincialism, which supposed that America could not be very important. Most of all however, the reason that Orwell never travelled across the Pacific was because he simply could not afford it. Howe says Orwell's knowledge about America came from books. His references to this country display a romantic vision of the frontier past but at the same time, America is a place of vulgarity, violence and power lust for Orwell.

Orwell greatly admired the American writer Henry Miller. For Orwell he represented "a mythic representative of the loose-limbed, free-spirited, fast talking American, not very refined but free of the caste barriers and social inhibitions" (Howe, 20), a thing Orwell disliked so greatly in British society as a result of his time as a policeman in Burma. Ian Williams writes in his essay "Orwell and the British Left" that his service made him aware of the social Systems in Burma as well as back home in England. When he returned home from Burma he took on a bitterly anti-imperialistic tone and started to display a hatred of the British Empire and all that it represented.

Howe goes on by saying that from 1941 Orwell regularly started writing the "London

Letter” to the influential American magazine the *Partisan Review* about political and cultural issues. It provides an insight into the relationship between left-wing anti-Stalinist intellectuals on both sides of the Pacific. Orwell writes in his first letter about his optimism for change, as a result of the war and continued losses on the English side. Orwell thought that the window for revolution in England was opened as a result. He believed that his country had entered a new phase and that people were ready to embrace socialism. Orwell soon swung around, he left behind his “quasi Trotskyist, quasi-pacifist line” (Howe, 22). He no longer believed that the war could be stopped if labourers on both sides of the war refused to fight on. A year later he concluded that the war had to be won through force. He accused pacifist of helping the enemy by weakening the English war effort. Howe tells that the readers of *Partisan Review* were fascinated by the dispute between English writers about the questions of pacifism during the war, mainly because it mirrored disputes going on at the same time in New York among intellectuals.

For Howe, who has first-hand experience with the war years and the debates going on, it is important to remember that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* predated the discussions of totalitarianism by intellectuals during the 1950’s. According to Howe, the similarities between Orwell’s vision of totalitarianism, for which he could only rely on his instincts, and the theory of totalitarianism developed in the 1950’s are so striking that one easily forgets that Orwell wrote his book in 1948. The theory that was being developed recognised the new elements in the rule of totalitarianism:

Terror as an integral part of this new society; ideology as both mental equivalent of terror and a means of dominating the public and private lives of subjects; the breakdown of boundaries between state and society...; the atomisation of social life, with classes pulverised into a passive, anonymous mass...a relentless warfare of state

against people; and the consolidation of a ruling elite, sanctified in the person of the Leader, claiming not just a monopoly of power or a variety of goods but the ownership...of state and society (Howe, 24).

Orwell was very keen on this new form of control, which was different from earlier imperialism. He developed his vision in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and showed the break with the old tradition it entailed and how it embodied a “radical new ethos of blood, terror and nihilism” (Howe, 25). This new way of thinking had a large influence in the 1950’s, especially among American intellectuals it struck a chord. The admiration of Orwell also brought along minor distortions of his work in American circles, Howe comments. During the 1950’s a trend of conservatism among American intellectuals became noticeable as a result of the expansion of the Soviet Union into Eastern Europa from 1948 onwards. There was a general dislike of ideology, and Orwell was hailed as the one of the heroes of the American intelligentsia because in their view he had expressed his disgust with orthodoxies from either the Left or Right. Howe comments that the image of Orwell in America was shaped by V.S. Pritchett, a British literature critic who also wrote for the *Partisan Review*, and Lionel Trilling who describe him as a secular saint and as a man of great virtue. Howe cannot agree with that was painted of Orwell in America: “the Orwell I see in his books, his journalism, his public career is a much more combative, polemical, and above all, desperate figure” (27).

The book arrived in the heydays of the McCarthy era during which Communism “was dammed officially as a monolithic, worldwide menace, and there was no point in even distinguishing between Stalin and Trotsky” (Pynchon, 6). This general fear of anything that hinted at socialism in America is captured in Maxwell Geismar’s vision of the 1950’s: “in our own period even the most generous visions of social idealism have turned into the horrid nightmare of tyranny and deep oppression” (Geismar, 19). The social reality of the period is

like “Orwell's *1984*, a world of continual warfare, of shifting politico-military alliances, and daily revision of the faiths, allegiances, and beliefs” (Geismar, 19).

The audience of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* expected a straightforward allegory as *Animal Farm* had been, but what they got was a complex book which explored multiple themes. It was nevertheless still marketed as an anti-communist tract in America. During the Korean conflict, allegations of brainwashing for the purpose of ideological reinforcement were made towards the communist. Their practices were said to be based on the work of Ivan Pavlov, the scientist who trained dogs to salivate when a bell rung. The Soviet technocrats were allegedly drawing from this research to condition their “human subjects into political reflexes that would be useful to the State” (Pynchon, 6-7). Not only the Russians, but also the Chinese and North-Koreans were under suspicion. The fact that brainwashing also happens in Orwell's book reinforced the idea that it was intended as an attack on the horrors of Stalinism.

This pavlovian response and fear of condition seems the thing that American writers latched onto. Tony Tanner recognises this interest too in the American scene. The American hero is fascinated by controlling forces and conditioning, not just by the government but also by social norms: “we are trapped in roles that have been forced upon us...fixed in a falsifying structure...caught up in a vast movie which some unnamed power insist is reality” (Tanner, 380). Edward Hall's book *The Silent Language* was of great influence in this way of thinking. Tony Tanner says that his book made people aware of a “large number of interactions patterns and systems -most of them non-linguistic- which determine people's behaviour in America” (Tanner, 421).

There was a strong desire to break free from all this into a new space. From the 1950's until the 1970's there is a clear reoccurring theme in the American novel, namely the idea of an unconditioned life in which autonomous decisions are possible. As a result, the great dread of the American writer was the idea of someone else patterning lives and robbing people of

their individuality and sovereignty to think and act. There was also the strong feeling that America was the last place where this kind of unconditioned life could be enjoyed.

The great motivator for American writers in the 1950's up until the 1970's was the idea of society as an arbitrary System from which the individual could escape. Freedom could be found outside of all the Systems and fictions of ordinary life. On the other hand there is always the fear in the back of their minds that by stepping outside of all this, one is stepping into a dark void. This fine line between this dark void and the limiting structures of society is the place where the American writer moved, constantly trying to look for the edge without falling into the abyss.

This dread of the American author of conditioning forces is close to the point of paranoia; this is detectable in the narrative devices, which are "full of...plots, secret organisations, evil systems (Tanner, 16). But the paranoia extends even further than this. Just like Orwell, American writers recognised the possibilities of shaping reality through language. Here lies a paradox for the writer: if he wants to convey a message which can be understood by the general public he has to use a language which might be limiting, directing and perhaps controlling him. The obvious solution for the writer is to distort the language he uses to show his uniqueness and to express his unwillingness to conform to the structures of language. An even more radical solution would be to abandon language altogether or to create a personal language System. But even to the creation of personal Systems is a down side, because what defines you at the same time confines you. It is very possible to become entrapped in a System of your own making.

Kesey addresses the issue of conditioning in his book *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. It deals with the "contemporary consciousness (the walking around, average sort) as a form of engineered social addiction" (Hicks, 9). He was inspired to write this book while working in a psychiatric ward. He saw forces at work there which kept the patients from

perceiving their own form of reality by keeping them locked up inside. Tom Wolfe wrote about his experiences:

The whole system – if they set out to invent the perfect Anti-cure for what ailed the men on this ward, they couldn't have done it better. Keep them cowed and docile. Play on the weakness that drove them nuts in the first place. Stupefy the bastards with tranquillizers and if they still get out of line haul them up to the "shock shop" and punish them

(Wolfe, 48).

This went against his ideal of freedom, the desire to “escape the imprisoning, limiting structures of society which screen out so much of reality” (Tanner, 383). This desire to escape and to experience reality without intervening structures or Systems is what lies at the heart of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* according to Tanner: “Kesey imagined McMurphy leading the inmates out to their adventurous voyage on the ocean, and wrote a book about it” (Tanner, 390).

2.2: Kesey and Orwell

It is now time to ask the following question: what are the Orwellian influences in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? While answering this question the symbolism of Kesey will also be under investigation.

Ingle's argument about Orwell's System can be transferred to the discussion of Kesey's work. The destruction of individuality is the major theme of Orwell's work. In Kesey's work this idea has turned into what he calls the Combine. Chief Bromden says that it "is a huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside as well as...the Inside" (Kesey, 36). The Combine is the force that breaks the individual spirit and turns people to conformity. The Chief sees the workings of the Combine when he goes along on the fishing trip, he describes how the exact same houses are planted by machines across hillsides and how trains spawn hundreds of identical men in the same suits. The families living inside the generic houses are so interchangeable that nobody notices anything when the children get mistakenly mixed up. This shows the "extent of conformity and dehumanization that has taken place outside" (Porter, 34).

In Kesey's work the destruction of external truth is symbolised by the juxtaposition of the Inside and the Outside. The Inside is the hospital which is riddled with machinery: Chief Bromden describes how Nurse Ratched installs electronics into the patients, how she transforms into a truck when she is upset and how hidden fog machines produce the fog in which he loses himself. The whole Inside is an "accurate, precision-made machine" (Kesey, 36). Even the name of Nurse Ratched has symbolic value. The first connection here name conjures up is that of a ratchet. A ratchet is a mechanical device that allows rotary motion in one while preventing motion in the opposite direction. One of the ways this device was used is in torture devices in which people are slowly stretched out more and more. The patients on the Inside are also slowly being pulled apart by the regime of Nurse Ratched, some of them

have become empty husks as a result of the relentless psychological warfare of the head nurse. By describing the nurse as a perfect doll at the head of an accurate machine she herself can also be seen as a robot. Even Nurse Ratched is just a smaller ratchet in the much bigger System of the Combine, which aims to turn the whole of society into an anonymous mass.

At the same time McMurphy pronounces her name as rat-shed, rat shit in other words. Rodents are associated with qualities as quietness, effectiveness but also relentlessness. Rats also have the ability to find entrances into every room of a house no matter how small the openings are. Nurse Ratched also seems ruthlessly effective in her invasion of the heads of her patients. Once inside she starts gnawing at the brains of the men, forming them to her own liking.

The Outside is a place of ridicule and conformity but it also represents the promise of a free life and escape from the Inside. It is during the fishing trip on the Outside that takes the men far from society and the workings of the Combine that they are able to open up and laugh for the first time. All of them begin to swell up since they are out of the reach of Big Nurse. The most dramatic change takes place in the Chief who is so free that he leaves behind his psychical form and drifts away: "I was off the boat, blown up off the water and skating the wind with those black birds, high above myself" (Kesey, 300). Big Nurse exerts her power by using the idea of the Outside to scare the patients into submission, she says: "a good many of you are in here because you could not adjust to the rules of society in the Outside World, because you refused to face up to them" (Kesey, 237). She does not allow the men to grow in any way or form, when McMurphy is able to set up the fishing trip she hangs up newspaper clippings of reports of heavy storms on sea in order to keep the patients Inside. For Chief Bromden the Outside was virtually non-existent, his whole life was the Inside and the ruling of Big Nurse. Striking for this fact is that under the influence of McMurphy the Chief is for the first time able to see that there is actually a field outside of the hospital. Here he sees a dog

sniffing out squirrel holes and making his way across the field, foreshadowing the path the Chief takes when he finally escapes the ward.

The breakdown of family ties, or in this case loyalty among the patients, is also achieved by Big Nurse. Just like the family becomes the extension of the Thought Police the patients become the eyes and ears of Nurse Ratched by writing down things in the logbook that other patients say and do which do not seem in order. They can then be discussed during the therapeutic talks. The theory behind it says that it turns the hospital into “a democratic ward, run completely by the patients and their votes” (Kesey, 62). It is in practice a shaming device of Nurse Ratched to control the men within her System. They are forced by the nurse and her logbook into “telling things that wouldn’t ever let them look one another in the eye again” (Kesey, 64). On the Inside there is no place for loyalty or unity, Harding acknowledges this and says that the men only fulfilled their assigned parts in the therapeutic talk when they started accusing him of all sort of things which made him feel inadequate. He himself is not better: “if you had been on the carpet, or you Billy, or you Fredrickson, I would have attacked you just as cruelly as you attacked me. We mustn’t be ashamed of our behaviour; it’s the way we little animals were meant to behave” (Kesey, 83).

There is also a distinct lack of a full emotional life inside the ward. When McMurphy enters the ward, he notices how beat down all the men Inside are and how “nobody will laugh...there’s something strange about a place where the men won’t let themselves loose and laugh” (Kesey, 61). Big Nurse also does everything in her power to remove any form of sexuality from the ward. In a cruel trick played on her by nature however she has been endowed with large breasts which she unsuccessfully tries to hide in her white uniforms. McMurphy also describes her as a ball-cutter. He says that in a bar brawl the weaker party will almost always try to hit you in the groin because it saps you of any will to fight. Harding retorts that all the men inside are well-aware of the position they are in and the submissive

power of Nurse Ratched. Harding also says that the power of Big Nurse is much more cunning than just desexualisation and castration, her System is so refined that she only has to hint at things to make acquisitions. The Nurse does not however force the men into anything, she merely teaches them to accept their role as rabbits in a world of wolves. For McMurphy this becomes one of the most shocking discoveries. He finds out that he is one of the few men who is actually committed to the hospital, most of the patients are hospitalised voluntarily and can at any given moment choose to be free. Instead of making a choice however they are rather dominated by Nurse Ratched, no matter the costs, because she gives their lives structure and she protects them from the realities of the Outside.

Billy Bibbit is one example of this. He has been treated as a little boy his whole life and only experienced the intoxicating love of his mother. He never had any form of girlfriend or physical love in his life. McMurphy notices how he looks like a thirty-year-old boy. During the party Billy discovers for the first time a new side of love with the girl. In the morning both are caught by Nurse Ratched who starts shaming him, she cannot understand how someone as innocent as he could have had sex with a prostitute. She also questions what Miss Bibbit would think of all this. Billy begs her not to tell his mother but Big Nurse feels obligated to do so because they go back a long way. Overcome with shame Billy cuts his own throat, Nurse Ratched immediately tries to shame McMurphy by blaming him for the death of Billy: “I hope you’re finally satisfied. Playing with human lives—gambling with human lives—as if you thought yourself to be a God!” (Kesey, 383).

Big Nurse wants to keep up the appearance that everything she does is for the betterment of the patients. The men believe this story: “our Miss Ratched is a veritable angel of mercy and why just everyone knows it. She’s unselfish as the wind, toiling thanklessly for the good of all, day after day, five long days a week” (Kesey, 77). But under the surface there seems to be an equal hunger for power in her as The Party has: “as an ex-army nurse

accustomed to regimentation and inflexible routine, Big Nurse has come to value and order for its own sake” (Porter, 48).

Just as Big Brother, Nurse Ratched watches over her subjects. She sits behind her glass panel inside the Nurses' Station where she “spend(s) the day sitting at her desk and looking out her window and making notes on what goes on out in front of her in the day room” (Kesey, 9). Her regime is run by the clock: “everything the guys think and say and do is all worked out months in advance, based on the little notes the nurse makes during the day” (Kesey, 39). The Chief goes on to explain the iron routine of the ward, in his mind the Nurse has such a control over the ward that she is able to speed up or slow down time.

Anyone who fails to adjust to her regime is sent up to the Shock Shop or is in the worst case lobotomised. Ellis is one of the patients who after his shock therapy is “nailed against the wall in the same condition they lifted him off the table for the last time... He’s nailed like that on the wall, like a stuffed trophy” (Kesey, 21) or the once aggressive and rebellious Ruckly whose “eyes are all smoked up and gray and deserted inside like blown fuses” (Kesey, 22) as a result of his lobotomy.

It is Randal McMurphy who does not want to submit to this regime of Nurse Ratched. He lures the men out of their comfort zone and tries to make them human again. It is especially Chief Bromden who gets his attention. The key transformation in Kesey’s book is undergone by the Chief as a result of McMurphy’s actions. Chief Bromden thinks the Combine has made him weak and small, he feels he cannot stand up against the tyranny of Big Nurse. McMurphy, as an outsider, sees the Chief the way he is and he describes him as being “big as a damn mountain” (Kesey, 261) but he feels that McMurphy is twice the size he is. According to Gilbert Porter this is evidence for the “vulnerability of the human spirit” (62). McMurphy restores the Chief’s self-worth but in the process he destroys himself. Slowly his rebellious behaviour becomes more an act than anything else.

McMurphy is send up to the Disturbed ward where he is subjected to a series of therapeutic electroshock sessions; he tries to uphold his image of the swaggering tough guy but underneath this facade he begins to crack. It is the Chief who notices this first when he sees a glimpse of the strain McMurphy is under in the rear view mirror of the car. He also sees that McMurphy is starting to fear the session in Building One: “every time that loudspeaker called for him to... walk to Building One, the muscles in his jaw went taut and his whole face drained of colour, looking thin and scared” (Kesey, 348-349). By the end of the book when McMurphy attacks Big Nurse, The Chief realises that McMurphy has been persisting because he felt an obligation towards the patients. They have been his driving force all along:

it was our need that was making him push himself slowly up from sitting... rising and standing like one of those moving-picture zombies. It was us that had been making him go on for weeks, keeping him standing long after his feet and legs had given out, weeks of making him wink and grin and laugh and go on with his act long after his humor had been parched dry between two electrodes (Kesey, 384).

Despite the earlier doubts the patients had about the true reasons behind McMurphy's actions, The Chief now sees that it was ultimately love. McMurphy could not live in Nurse Ratched's world of regime and control and could not allow that her System would survive much longer and trample the patients.

The decline of Big Nurse is also reflected in her outward appearance. The Chief conveys how during one of the therapeutic talks he feels that “she’s too big to be beaten” (Kesey, 140), but as his own dignity is restored he can see how the nurse also begins to display small cracks at the seams. After the attack of McMurphy, where he has exposed her breasts, Big Nurse can no longer deny that she is human too. Her control over the ward has

dwindled; when she returns with a swollen face and her neck in a bandage and a new uniform in which she cannot conceal her womanhood the men mock her. Not much later a handful of them sign themselves out of the hospital. Her downfall was brought forth by McMurphy who has turned into a martyr for the free spirit. The lobotomy has made an empty husk of the once loud-mouthed Irishman but his actions live on in the minds of the patients. The Chief cannot allow that his best friend is left in the ward as another trophy of the Combine for people to look at so he smothers him with his own pillow. The body of McMurphy clings strongly to life and tries to fight the Chief. He is, nonetheless, able to subdue McMurphy showing that he has always been stronger than he imagined himself to be. The last challenge he has to face on his way to freedom is the panel in the tub room. Where McMurphy failed he is able to lift it off the ground and smash it through the window. He runs away over the field following the path of the dog he saw at night, feeling that he is finally back into the world after a long time.

Chapter 3: Concluding

Chapter 3.1: Kesey and Orwell: System and the Individual

An attempt has been made to show the influence of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The similarities between the allegories of System and corresponding symbolism and the regimes in the two books are interesting to see. Despite the Orwellian elements in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey's own ideas are also present. This could explain the differences between the Systems and the people living inside them in the two books under discussion.

One of these differences is that at the heart of the System of the ward a person stands, whereas in Orwell's world it is a political System. This makes the System of Ingsoc ultimately more effective than Big Nurse's in keeping control and prolonging leadership. Evidence for this is that the human spirit is able to flourish in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and not in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Both works also describe how the individual interacts with the System and how they try to escape from the pressure it puts them under. The Chief is able to break free from his chains under the wings of McMurphy who becomes a martyr for the free spirit. Chief Bromden's successful escape from the ward shows that there is hope for the individual to assert itself in an oppressive System. This hope of freedom is what sets Kesey apart from Orwell; *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents a bleak world where human suffering has become the main aim of the ruling class. The focalising point in this world is Winston Smith who yearns for honesty and genuine love. Where the Chief is able to achieve his goals, Winston is utterly destroyed. At the end of the story he has not only learned to accept his submissive role in the larger System but also to love his suppressors. Kesey believes in a successful growth of the individual and a breakdown of social conformity, Orwell is much more pessimistic.

Underlying all this is the dichotomy of humanity versus the System. In Kesey's novel

there is the sense of the free spirit before the creation of an oppressive System. It is mankind itself which chooses to be dominated and is thus able to escape whereas in Orwell's books it is the System before the individual, it establishes itself as an unshakable entity from which escape is impossible. Afterwards it starts grinding the individuality out of people.

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