

Winston's Pursuit of Existential Meaning in 1984

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Abstract. 1984 is a novel about self-existence. Sartre emphasizes self, freedom and responsibilities, and the absurd world in which human beings are entangled in. Therefore, based on the existential theory of Sartre, this paper analyzes the free choices of love, thoughts and actions of the protagonist Winston so as to explain the existence state without existing meaning, to clarify Winston's understanding and pursuit of the meaning of life.

Keywords: 1984, existentialism, freedom, choice, Winston

1. Introduction

As a British novelist and social critic, George Orwell's 1984 is a classic work against totalitarianism. 1984 focuses on a state with an absolute leader, who has the supreme power to control conducts of people by all means. Winston Smith, the protagonist of the story, supposes to be a thought criminal for his doubt for the supreme power and the society he has lived in. After the ideological transformation, Winston shifts to a pure-minded person.[1] 1984 has attracted the research of many scholars. Most critics comment on it from a political point of view, but the novel is also about existence. Winston pursues his life style by longing for a world he desires to witness or to be involved in. However, the absurd world he is wrapped twists him, resulting in his doomed failure in struggle.[3]

2. Existentialism and George Orwell's 1984

After World War II, individuality and freedom in Existentialism are received by the public with philosophical movement. Jean-Paul Charles Sartre, the key figure in the existential philosophy, captures the spirit. Though existentialism is known to be initiated by Kierkegaard, Sartre is regarded to be the fore-runner to make existentialism distinctive.

2.1 Existence over Essence

Sartre's primary point is existence over essence. Personality shapes not for any clear purpose or designed fate. To claim that existence precedes essence is to assert that there is no such predetermined essence to be found in humans, and that an individual's essence is defined by the individual through how that man creates and lives his life. Humans have no essence before their existence. To Sartre, by dint of consciousness, man creates his own values and decides a meaning for his life. Destiny is generated by the man himself. By posing the acts that constitute him, he makes his existence meaningful.

2.2 Freedom of Choice Making

Sartre claims that humans have freedom of choice making: We are left alone, without excuse.[2] Authenticity and individuality should be earned instead of being learned. Humans' act is not being determined by any forces to shoulder the consequences. It is "I" who freely transforms desire into action. Sartre states that "the world is a mirror of my freedom", intimating the world obliges "me" to react, to overtake myself. [2] Sartre adds-we are condemned to be free in this meaningless world. Human is responsible fully to his acts.

2.3 Absurdity of the World

The world is absurd in Sartre's view. Humans come by chance in the meaningless world. The society is permeated with tortures, misery, chaos together with confusion and the major characters and ridiculousness. The world is meaningless beyond what meaning we give it. The purpose of life is to give meaning to people's lives. People's life is to reject the life that discovers and pursues precise meaning for man's existence since there is nothing to be found. Due to the absurdity, anything can happen to anyone, also a tragic event could plummet someone into direct confrontation.

2.4 George Orwell's 1984

George Orwell's 1984 has a wide and far-reaching influence. Published in 1949, 1984 has been well received by readers and scholars. The world in 1984 is a totalitarian state Oceania. Big brother maintains the operation of society with the worship of leaders and hatred of enemies. Winston becomes a thought criminal because he begins to doubt the society and his leader, and he has feelings for another peripheral party member, Julia. After undergoing the ideological transformation of the Ministry of friendship and love, which is responsible for the internal cleansing, he finally shifts to a pure-minded person. Orwell analyzes the totalitarian society. He depicts a frightening hypothetical future society with the ultimate goal of pursuing power. Through a detailed description of the life of an ordinary person in this society, he projects the essence of totalitarianism in real life. Existence can be freely chosen, and the resistance of individuals in existence can prove the existence of individuals and realize individual values. But in Orwell's eyes, all resistance is futile. [4]

3. Winston's Pursuit of Existential Meaning

Winston lives in an imaginary ocean country. Screens, microphones, and helicopters monitor or observe actions that people are involved in. Winston's confined life shows his limited freedom in that people's indifference dissolves their thoughts. Winston struggles impotently.

3.1 Winston's Understanding of Existence

Desiring for freedom, Winston writes down his anger for big brother in his diary. He fights to prove his existence through several actions. He joins in a secret organization of the brotherhood to tear down the order. Winston is eager to find truth but his efforts are ineffective. He doubts the nature of Oceania and the rightness of the world. O'Brien, a member of the inner party and head of the ideological police gives him a conviction that his doubts, and later efforts, have been carried out under O'Brien's watchful eyes. O'Brien concocts all this until it is destroyed.

Winston doubts his existence but knows his ideals. He tempts to find love and freedom. He tries to curb his rebellion released from restraint. He fancies freedom by rebelling against big brother. He avoids be a shell at the mercy of big brother. As Sartre said, if a person cannot make free choices as his own consciousness, he will lose himself and his ego. [2] He chooses to love Julia to acquire comfort. Existentialism declares that existence is not the existence of human reality, but the existence of mind. Love is a form of mind's existence, so love proves self to exist. Even though both of them know it won't last long, they still choose to love each other.

3.2 Winston's Free Choices

Winston can not choose actions according to his own will, and his ideas confront to the ones popular at that time. "Most of the choices you make follow your heart", [2] as Sartre said. If a person is in front of things, not according to his personal consciousness to make free choices, that person would lose himself, thereafter the self vanishes.

3.2.1 Choice of Love

Winston marries without love since the marriage is arranged by the party. His wife obeys the orders of the party. For her, marriage is a command, a purpose, and a creation. What is ridiculous is that she ends up separating from Winston for she has not made a baby. The party suppresses sexual instinct, prohibiting love. However, Winston, on the impulse of human nature, resolutely opposes it.

Julia's appearance brings Winston hope of love. Winston's love with Julia is the excitement of the normal physiological and psychological needs of human nature. It is the combination of the souls between lovers under normal social conditions. They love each other and secretly have a tryst. Winston's varicose ulcer is getting better and better. They enjoy themselves. His love choice rewards him with real happiness. As existentialism holds, existence does not mean the existence of human reality, but the existence of mind. Love is a manifestation of the mind's existence. Unluckily, at Oceania, love is forbidden to blossom freely. When Winston and Julia happily enjoy their solitude and emotional well-being, they are arrested. This is the consequence of love. Even the choice of their own lovers is taboo, thus people's self hardly exists.

3.2.2 Choice of Thought

In Oceania, as long as people have heterodox ideas, they are condemned to death or an extremely painful process of brainwashing. Thought to people is luxury, whereas, the thought of the party is essential, the party deciding everything. People have no ideas, but bodies carrying the party's thoughts. When one's mind is limited, he cannot think freely, and that is the hell. [5] The defense for human freedom is broken, which is similar for him to be a walking dead.

As for Winston's work, in the truth department he tampers with written records. According to the head quarter's instructions, he modifies and destroys documents into the reach of the forgetting hole. Rewriting history is a covert action. In a nutshell, his mission is nothing more than the substitution of one nonsense for another, that is, the constant falsification of information consistent with the party's thinking, the constant input of information to the human brain through a television screen, to correct the information they have obtained, to ensure that people's thinking is consistent with the party's.

In order to eliminate the crime of thinking, the old language should be erased to create a new language. The party organization experts have edited the new words dictionary, gradually and systematically wiped out the vocabulary, so that the new words become the only language in the world with a decreasing vocabulary. After adopting the new words and forgetting the old words, the heretical thoughts cannot be reminded, and the unorthodox thoughts cannot be expressed at all. Only in this way can the party manage people. It is often the blind followers of thoughtless men, who are apt to serve as tools of totalitarian rule, gradually dehumanize. Without thought means without existence. This is in response to Sartre's reference to the existence of mind.

3.3 Winston's Absurd World

Winston struggles to resist totalitarianism and he fights to pursue his freedom. Although he puts up resistance, his endeavor fails. He pursues freedom in body and mind, and strives to seek true reality and love. Winston is a defiant rebel challenging the totalitarian authorities. He is forced to destroy himself, but he is rarely defeated. He collapses but maintains self-defense, hatred, so O'Brien plays Winston's fear of giant rats to threaten him. Winston gives in completely! From then on, the contradiction and opposition between the two disappear, replaced by the assimilation of fresh individuals. The more he resists, the closer he draws to death.

Despite Winston's struggle, the result turns to be absurd: rats persuade him to surrender, to be subservient and faithful to big brother. Thus, valuelessness exists in the individual, and even though Winston has fought to prove the meaning of his existence, his efforts fade.

4. Summary

1984 is a political prophet about human existence. In the totalitarian society, people are deprived of the right to exist. Through Winston's sufferings and inner activities, Orwell affirms the human pursuit of truth. Orwell seems to show the violation of human nature. Although the outside world is absurd, people should give weight to their own existence and deny their absurd existence in pessimism and despair, which is the core value of the novel 1984.

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