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We and 1984: A Study in Conflicts

Joseph Irrer

Grand Valley State University

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WE AND 1984: A STUDY IN CONFLICTS

Since the days of the early Greeks, the fear of man's cruelty toward man has often been manifested in the form of the dystopian novel. The fact that such novels are labelled "dystopian" would indicate that they share a certain characteristics. A good illustration of the similarities of such works can be found in Zamyatin's We and Orwell's 1984. For example, both novels contain a repressive, totalitarian society, a victim of that repression, and an attempted overthrow of the society. Yet in the case of We and 1984, the similarities almost end here. A close analysis of these two books reveals that there are many differences between We and 1984, and that these differences lead to somewhat different interpretations. In particular, it is the distinctness of the conflicts which is important, for in We, the conflict exists within the character of D-503, whereas in 1984, the friction occurs between Winston Smith and Big Brother.

An important distinction between D-503 and Smith which demonstrates the differing conflicts is the way in which they view their respective governments. On the one hand, D-503 loves the One State throughout the entire novel. His affection for the One State is clearly shown in his reverent references to "the mathematically perfect life of the One State" (Zamyatin, p.2) and the Table of Hours (Zamyatin, p. 12). On the other hand, Smith has a clear disdain for Big Brother and its institutions. His contempt is brought out in the writings of his journal, such as the repeating of "DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER" (Orwell, p. 9). In fact, almost all his energies are in some way devoted to the destruction of the Party.

Two facts help to explain D-503 and Smith's differing attitude toward their governments. First, the One State is about a thousand years old, but Big Brother has been in power for less than fifty. As a result, the institutions of the One State are more firmly established, and it is thus able to control its numbers, like D-503, fairly well. But the Party is just beginning, relatively speaking, to control

its citizens; Newspeak, a language believed to limit thought, is just being put into use. Second, it should be noted that, through his job, Winston is able to see that the Party is based on lies and exploitation and therefore can see that Big Brother is evil. But D-503 has no such exposure and cannot possibly know the true nature of the One State.

Another way in which the characters' attitude toward their governments show the different conflicts is through D-503's and Smith's jobs. In the case of Winston, he has the duty of "rectifying" certain news items in the Times to make the predictions of Big Brother appear correct. Because he realizes that he is in effect changing "the truth, Smith becomes all the more aware of the moral weakness of the Party. So although Smith's job is relatively low-level, requiring little of him intellectually, it does force him to confront the hypocrisy of Big Brother. D-503's love of the One State and his inner conflict is also brought out by his job. He is the builder of the Integral, a title to which he frequently and proudly refers. He has also been assigned to write a treatise on the advantages of unfreedom. Such a job combination requires a great deal of mathematical skill as well as a high level of creativity. His mathematical inclination and poetic creativity are demonstrated throughout We: "The function of man's highest faculty, his reason, consists precisely of the continuous limitation of infinity, the breaking up of infinity into convenient, easily digestible portions-differentials. This is precisely what lends my field, mathematics, its divine beauty," (p.65). Within D-503, this mathematical and creative ability oppose each other to form the cause of his conflict--his desire to maintain his status as a 'happy number' vs. the urge to assert his individuality.

The distinct conflicts of We and 1984 are shown not only through the characters' attitudes toward their government but also through their feelings toward themselves. In the case of Winston Smith, he is proud of the fact that he is different from his peers, and individualist. He writes confidently in his diary, as might a bold revolutionary, when he states: "Freedom is the freedom to say that two

plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows," (Orwell, p. 37). But D-503 is fearful of the fact that he is different, that he has a soul. He describes his condition thus: "I am certainly sick. All of this is an illness," (Zamyatin, p. 76). D-503's self-doubt clearly shows that the conflict in We is within D-503, not between him and the One State.

Yet another display of the different conflicts, which relates to the characters' self-concepts is the relationship Smith and D-503 have with the main female character. The very nature of Winston Smith's love affair with Julia is entirely different from D-503's encounters with I-330. In the beginning of the affair, Smith saw his love making with Julia as a political move, a blow against Big Brother. As Orwell states on page fifty-six of 1984: "Their embrace had been a battle, the climax of a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act. This passage clearly underlines Smith's self-confidence and never-ending war against his government. But D-503's war against himself is as clearly indicated by his relationship with I-330, which could be accurately described as a love-hate relationship. On the one hand, he is strongly drawn to her because her spirit of non-conformity strongly attracts his "square root of minus one." But on the other hand, his mathematical self is equally strongly repelled by her animosity toward the One State. He therefore has a feeling of guilt by betraying the One State because of this affair, and yet another aspect of D-503's internal struggle is revealed.

A final proof of the differing conflicts relates to one important similarity between 1984 and We; Although the conflicts themselves were quite distinct, their resolutions for the respective characters were the same. Both Smith and D-503 were eventually forced to conform to their Societies' norms of behavior. In 1984, the changed element was Smith. As the last four words of the novel stated, "He loved Big Brother," (Orwell, p. 131). In the case of We, however, the changed element was the "square root of minus one" within D-503; it was simply eliminated by the Operation. His attitude toward the Benefactor after the Operation was unchanged, so there obviously was never any conflict between

the One State and him. But his attitude toward himself was now positive. As he states in the Fortieth Entry: ". . . I am well, I am entirely, aboslutely well. . ." (Zamyatin, p. 231). The struggle of his conscience had finally ceased. In addition, D-503 was more willing to accept his fate than was Winston Smith; his joy over the news of the Operation is clearly shown in the beginning of the Thirty-first Entry.

Through an analysis of the attitudes toward their governments, toward themselves, their job requirements, their relationships with women, and their ultimate fates, it is apparent that the respective conflicts of We and 1984 are quite distinct. And it is the different conflicts in these novels which make Orwell's basic message much more pessimistic than Zamyatin's. Orwell is saying in 1984 that, when a person decisively expresses his right to exist as a free-thinking individual, he has no chance of survival in a totalitarian society. But Zamyatin puts forth the idea that, even when the slightest hint of individuality exists within a "good number," a government that attempts to utterly control its citizens is doomed. The messages of We and 1984 are especially relevant today, as many "philosophers" debate whether or not our society is becoming an Oceana (One State). But only time will tell if Zamyatin and Orwell were merely science-fiction writers, or were in fact prophets.

Joseph Irrer

Second Prize Winner of the Annual English Writing Contest,
Category I.