

Cossette Massa

Dr. Lana Krys

ENGL 381: Post-Colonial Literature

6 April 2016

Distortion of Reality in Orwell's *1984* and O'Brien's "The Things They Carried"

A dystopian society gains control over a population through the use of illusions to cover up the unsatisfying reality of everyday life. These illusions can be in the form of distractions that prevent individuals from realizing the extent of corruption and demoralization within the foundations of a dystopian nation. Propaganda, too, intentionally blinds people from the truth to prevent any rebellion that may result in the destruction of the leading government body. This excessive psychological and mental domination causes a restlessness and uneasy response from those who want to express their individuality. Individuals who reject their "inner escapism" by conforming to the universal identity will forever remain compliant to the appearance of reality (Caponi 24). On the other hand, those who decide to challenge social regulations are expressing their individuality, which runs in opposition to a government's totalitarian ideologies. George Orwell illustrates this idea through a rigid, military-like dystopian society that lacks individual expression, to emphasize a sense of physical and mental entrapment. Similarly, Tim O'Brien addresses the techniques that soldiers and the American government use to hide the disturbing realities (civilian and soldier deaths) of the Vietnam War. However, O'Brien's narrative events are based on reality (just with a possible change of character names to hide the identity of the actual people), compared to Orwell who writes under a fictional dystopian narrative. O'Brien's short story "The Things They Carried" and

Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* suggest that the ruling imperial government attempts to cover up the truth behind society's dismal reality by exploiting an individual through dominance and control. This is analyzed through escapism, propaganda, the manipulation of fear and perspective, and, finally, a distorted portrayal of freedom.

The desperation to escape from reality appears when the pressure to conform to a universal identity comes into conflict with individual desires. Orwell and O'Brien use a physical object to provide a temporary sense of release from the constraining expectations of society. Winston Smith discovers a delicately beautiful paperweight that seemed to "possess [a sense] of belonging" in the chaotic world of Big Brother, by acting as a connection to a time before the current dystopian age (Orwell 99). The object's odd misplacement in the novel is a reference to Winston's inherent focus on past events and ideologies, which do not belong in the world of Big Brother. The paperweight is "aesthetically beautiful, [but] not useful" in the opposition against totalitarianism, because it has no value or power over Big Brother, and therefore represents only an illusion (Ranald 70). Inside the paperweight is a fantasy realm that Winston exploits in an attempt to resist the "habit of accepting the official stereotypes...of propaganda" (Sabin 44). Unfortunately, the persistence and power of the real world destroys his illusion as the paperweight "smashed...[in]to pieces," bringing the realization that there is no escape from the truth (Orwell 232). Jimmy Cross uses a timeless object in the form of a pebble that represents the perceived connection he has outside of the war. There is an "absorbed preoccupation with the self" when Cross is stuck in an unattainable ideal of returning home with no consequences (Clarke 142). Truthfully, "Cross's exilic daydreams" cannot shield him from the mental trauma he accumulates throughout the war and from Ted

Lavender's death (Chen 85). The pebble directly depicts a "separate-but-together quality," because of its symbolic state of limbo between the shore and the land (O'Brien 7). Cross implies his desire to return to an unchanged home, but this selfish request is "depicted as static and lacking in generative potential," since it is impossible to return to how things used to be before he experienced the war (Chen 85). Cross experiences a parallel purgatory state similar to Winston, because he mentally resides in an illusion, but is physically in a life-or-death situation. Winston and Cross escape into a false world of their own creation as a way to regain a sense of relief that may never come.

The government utilizes propaganda and distractions to pull a blanket over the population's understanding that their actions are purposeless and meaningless. Orwell's Big Brother aims for a "deliberate drowning of consciousness" through the use of intentional disruptions that deter people from realizing the corruption in society (19). Some of these distractions include the two minutes of hate and public executions, which are emphasized to draw people's attention away from the hardships or doubts that they may have towards the party and their personal quality of life. By preventing wandering thoughts that may cause rebellion, Big Brother gains the ability to control the mind of every living human being within its sphere of influence. This control can also be organized through an alcoholic distraction in the form of gin, because the drink represents the "exploitation and measured poisoning" given by the party to the population (Caponi 25). Although the drink's taste may not be appealing, it provides a sense of temporary relief to life's hardships and drowns out the questioning motives of Big Brother. Not only does this beverage physically distort appearances due to the effects of alcohol, but it also supports the totalitarian government's intention to cover up the real world under false

accusations (such as the existence of the Brotherhood). Purposeful distractions attempt to hide the dismal way of life of everyone within governmental control and, therefore prevent any form of uprising. Compared to Orwell, O'Brien introduces the American war chest as a physical interruption of the war that is filled with meaningless contents meant to provide a brief escape by simulating the American home. Tedious objects, such as the "sparklers for the Fourth of July," is also a form of government propaganda that tries to make light of a soldiers' experience in war (O'Brien 15). However, it is also one more thing to carry in the already overwhelming supply of military survival items. This chest symbolizes the mental and physical wandering away from the reality of war and death. Despite facing threatening situations from enemy interactions and the environmental conditions (mines and hidden bombs), the soldiers realize that the "endless march...[is] without purpose" (O'Brien 14). Although Cross discovers that there is no purpose to the motives of the American government and, therefore no purpose in having the Vietnam war, he decides to remain in a "wish-fulfilling fantasy" centered around ignorance (Clarke 136). As a result, both Big Brother and the American government attempt to prevent any motivation to escape by assisting in the formation of an unrealistic Utopian dream.

Fear and, paradoxically, a false sense of security act through symbolic truth to present the distressing reality of society's dark nature. Big Brother acquires the knowledge behind each individual's fear through constant and inescapable surveillance that results in the discovery of various weaknesses. Winston is forced to undergo a form of therapy that will allow him to realize the goodness within Big Brother while being tortured in Room 101. The totalitarian government recognizes that "knowing when a

human being is helpless” is key to controlling their thoughts, because they can pry on that person’s weakness (Orwell 298). Big Brother does not hesitate to attack anyone, but they strike against Winston when he lets his guard down under the assumption that he has fooled the Thought Police. Winston’s fear towards rats is used against him in a final confrontation of his disloyal belief system. The rat is stated to “sometimes...attack the eyes first...[then] devour the tongue,” symbolizing Big Brothers ability to silencing the rebellious individual by changing their perspective or through amputation and death (Orwell 299). When Winston is confronted with his fear, he is pressured to either sacrifice himself and remain true to his beliefs or surrender Julia. Unfortunately, fear is able to control Winston after he decides to give up Julia and all the things she stands for, which means, “the one thing he has loved he has, at least symbolically, killed” (Ranald 86). This decision to throw away everything that Winston has built to fight against the government leaves him as a “shell of a man,” without purpose (Ranald 86). Similar to Winston, Cross also has a fear of facing the reality that the war he is fighting has no purpose or benefit. Not wanting to believe in the truth, Cross attempts to live in a fantasy world revolving around Martha and her letters. Unfortunately, there is a disconnect between what he is living through and what Martha chooses to address, because “she belongs to another world, which is not quite real” (O’Brien 16). Martha is not a part of Cross’s world, which is emphasized by the fact that “she never mentioned the war” in any of her letters, which shows how meaningless the war is to her or how minor the impact the war is having in her life (O’Brien 2). However, this statement does not mean that she is ignorant towards the war, but rather the war does not affect the outside world in the same way that it affects the soldiers. Martha is not part of the Vietnam war, but Cross

forms his fantasy on the idea that everyone in America is watching, waiting and cheering for the soldiers. Unfortunately, there is an “impossibility of any permanent return” back to America, because the outside world is not stuck in time like Cross (Chen 81). Cross only becomes aware of how “exiled from America” he is, after witnessing the death of Ted Lavender (Chen 80). It took the death of his comrade for Cross to realize that he “couldn’t burn the blame” for the war and the consequences by selfishly retreating into a fantasy (O’Brien 22). The amount of losses in terms of losing comrades and having America ignore the efforts put into the Vietnam War makes Cross question why he is fighting in a war that has no benefit, just to lose everything he cares about. Although both Winston and Cross have to experience the fear of losing their constructed fantasy, they are able to return to society, whether it is for the better or worse.

The ruling government presents freedom through the norms of society and organizes how the meaning of life can be accomplished, but will never be attained. Despite Orwell’s dismal and hopeless totalitarian government, there is an implication that freedom is given to those that are truly loyal to the party. However, to weed out any disloyal individuals, overwhelming posters of Big Brother envelope the entire city as a surveillance and control technique. This dictator’s “eyes follow you” everywhere and are meant to be an intimidating measure that proclaims the power of Big Brother (Orwell 3). Having a “God-like figure who sees and knows everything” also puts civilians at a disadvantage, because they are always being watched and, therefore, are unable to freely express themselves (Reed 14). The posters noticeably control how the city’s dismal and hopeless appearance is conveyed due to there being “no colour in anything, except the posters” themselves (Orwell 4). The party’s need to express their power everywhere is

meant to show how the true goals and ideologies of Big Brother will never be attainable by any ordinary citizen (mortals cannot surpass Gods). A regular citizen cannot be allowed to reach that level of understanding or else they will have the power to replace Big Brother, which is something that can never be permitted to happen. Freedom is harder to grasp while dealing with traumatic events everyday and fighting what seems to be a purposeless war. Cross and his team briefly “dreamed of freedom birds” that flew out of the battle with the intention of returning home to America (O’Brien 21). That feeling of being free from the government control whose orders have them serving missions in the midst of the Vietnam War, is what each soldier hopes to be released from. As the birds escape from the battlefield, “the weights fell off” of each soldier’s mind and body in the form of discarding the things they carried (O’Brien 21). However, this dream assumes that there is a possibility for each soldier to “achieve...an unproblematic return home” safe (Chen 79). Unfortunately, this hope for freedom exists only in the form of dreams or death, revealing the internal struggle of each soldier knowing that they may not have the luxury of returning home alive. The idea of freedom is promising to many, but those that are in control of providing freedom put constraints on it, making the likelihood of independence impossible.

Orwell and O’Brien reveal how imperialist intentions manipulate the truth behind society’s dismal reality by dominating and controlling individuals. The mental removal away from reality is a result of the intentional construction of an imaginative fantasy world, which provides a sense of brief escape for Winston and Cross. However, this escape is only momentary, and society still requires everyone to accept the standard beliefs or community values that govern over a nation. People are expected to accept the

universal government ideologies that include events, knowledge and ideologies society considers to be meaningful. As people move deeper into the falsifications set by the dystopian government, they are exposed to the truth behind unknown imperialist objectives. This illusion is broken when individuals realize that their “class identity [is]...difficult to discard” because individuality is a result of the same ideologies they are fighting against (Sabin 51). Winston and Cross are forced to give up their attempts to escape from the hopeless reality and purposelessness of the world, in exchange for the ability to survive.

#### Works Cited

- Chen, Tina. “‘Unraveling the Deeper Meaning:’ Exile and the Embodied Poetics of Displacement in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 39, no 1, Spring 1998, pp. 77-98. *MLA International Bibliography*, <https://library.macewan.ca/library-search/detailed-view/mzh/0000314831?query=tim+o%27brien+the+things+they+carried>.
- Clarke, Michael Taval. “‘I Feel Close to Myself’: Solipsism and US Imperialism in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*.” *College Literature*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2013, pp. 130-54. *Project MUSE*, <https://library.macewan.ca/library-search/detailed-view/edspmu/edspmu.S1542428613200057?query=Imperialism+AND+%22The+Things+They+Carried%22>.
- Kaplan, Steven. “Chapter Six: *The Things They Carried*.” *Understanding Tim O’Brien*, University of South Carolina Press, 1995, pp. 169-90.



- O'Brien, Tim. "The Things They Carried." *The Things They Carried*, Mariner Books, 2009, pp. 1-25.
- Orwell, George. *1984*. Penguin Books, 2008.
- Paolo, Caponi. "Victory Gin Lane. Starvation and Beverages in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*." *Altre Modernità*, vol. 0, no. 13, 2015, pp. 24-34. *Directory of Open Access Journals*, doi: 10.13130/2035-7680/4831.
- Ranald, Ralph A. *George Orwell's 1984*. Monarch Press/Simon & Schuster, 1965.
- Reed, Kit. *Barron's Book Notes: George Orwell's 1984*. Edited by Michael Spring, Barron's Educational Series, 1984.
- Sabin, Margery. "The Truths of Experience: Orwell's Nonfiction of the 1930s." *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*, Cambridge UP, 2007, pp. 43-58. *MLA International Bibliography*, <https://library.macewan.ca/library-search/detailed-view/mzh/2007584023?query=%09The+truths+of+experience%3A+Orwell's+nonfiction+of+the+1930s>.