

Moral Culpability Among the Oppressed and a New Look at the Tragedy of Orwell's 1984

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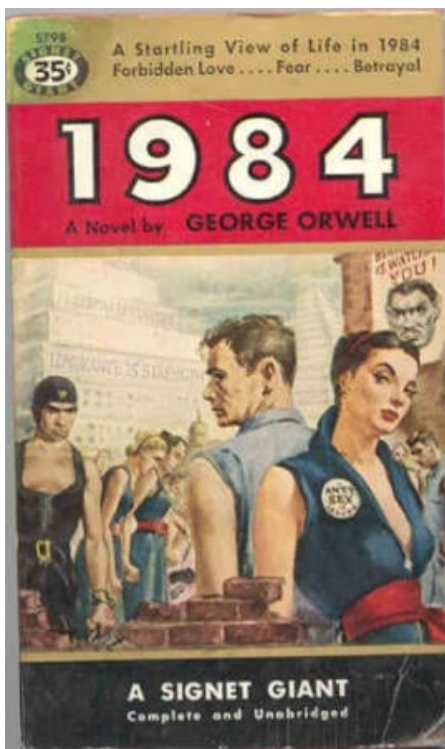
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I have no idea whether or not it is fashionable in literary circles to criticize the two protagonists of George Orwell's 1984, Winston and Julia. After all, they inhabit a world governed by a perverse and despicable elite who have achieved virtually complete control over the thoughts and actions of their subjects — a world not far removed from the one that is being thrust upon us as I write.



When I recently reread the novel I was surprised by the tender sensitivity with which Orwell rendered the lovers' relationship. The Orwell of social and political commentary, the prescient Orwell, the didactic Orwell — this was the author I remembered most, and I regarded his portrayal of the poignantly tragic couple, the couple

whose love for each other was annihilated by the State in the end, to be the highlight of the book.

We sympathize with these rebellious creatures playing a dangerous game against the Enemy we all abhor, we cherish their secret meetings and their attempts to breathe within the suffocating mantle of surveillance, and we hope against hope that their love will triumph, knowing of course that only a dismal termination would be possible.

The tortures perpetrated upon them and their ultimate betrayals of self and other lend an even greater weight to the overall gloom of Orwell's dystopian political world. They had been beaten, bludgeoned, threatened and, finally, broken, into forsaking each other for the sake of their own skins — understandably enough, I suppose — and with this the embers of their love were extinguished, transmogrified into some facsimile of affection for Big Brother.

I asked myself, however, if Winston and Julia did not in some irrevocable way, perhaps reminiscent of Greek tragedy, deserve their fates.

In a clandestine meeting with O'Brien, the man they believe to be leading the Resistance, they are asked a series of questions to determine their dedication to the good cause against the ruling Party:

'You are prepared to commit murder?'

'Yes.'

'To commit acts of sabotage which may cause the death of hundreds of innocent people?'

'Yes.'

'To betray your country to foreign powers?'

'Yes.'

'You are prepared to cheat, to forge, to blackmail, to corrupt the minds of children, to distribute habit-forming drugs, to encourage prostitution, to disseminate venereal diseases—to do anything which is likely to cause demoralization and weaken the power of the Party?'

'Yes.'

'If, for example, it would somehow serve our interests to throw sulphuric acid in a child's face—are you prepared to do that?'

'Yes.'

Heinous and evil as undoubtedly the Party is, with its reign of ceaseless war and terror, its abolition of privacy, its revision of history and language, its debasement of its citizens and its promotion of suffering, the two who have met in love and pledged to fight for some semblance of human freedom commit themselves to unconscionable acts in the service of their quest for a greater good. They are apparently willing to do anything except promise never to see one another, a promise they will, pathetically and ironically enough, not be

able to keep.

What if they had answered O'Brien, the treacherous Party representative masquerading as the opposition, with a 'no' to these queries? Would their fates have been different?

I wonder.

Yes, they would have been imprisoned and tortured and flattened and perhaps even executed, but they would have died with their souls and their love somehow intact. It is this failing, this weakness, this fallibility, consumed as they were by the desperate fight for the cause of humanity, that signaled their destruction more certainly than the machinations of Big Brother could ever accomplish.

When people ask me nowadays if we can ever hope to win out against the immense forces arrayed against our own humanity, our wishes for love and intimacy and cooperation and support and freedom to think and feel as we wish, I tell them that, unlike Orwell, I'm not a terribly good prognosticator.

But I also add that staying true to what is good makes us winners no matter what.

It is tempting in any war to resort to lawlessness, it is tempting to justify destructive means by the ends they purport to reach, it is tempting to put our consciences in abeyance in the thick of the fight. But by doing so we therefore become the instruments of our own destruction.

Those doctors who conveniently forgot about informed consent and individualized treatment and 'first do no harm' when it came to the Jab, and those lawyers and judges who conveniently overlooked the trampling by the government of our unalienable rights to freedom of expression and protest, did themselves in, whether they acknowledge it or not.

To become, by renouncing our fundamental principles, like the destructive and despicable enemy that persecutes us, is sure defeat. They may invade our bank accounts and attempt to invade our bodies and appropriate our earthly possessions, but only we can ensure that our souls are intact. Death, in the end, looms for us all. Preserving dignity is a choice we can make every step along the inevitable path.

In a way this is nothing new. I'm sure that life under Genghis Khan for an ordinary peasant was no picnic, nor was life as a Helot in Sparta. The now massively global reach of the Oppressing Elite, however, lends a uniqueness to our collective plight.

We have been given, however, just as uniquely, a glimpse into the rotten hearts and the depths of the Overlords' hypocrisies and their many perverse means of wielding Power. It is breathtaking, this revelation of institutionalized genocide, chicanery, deception and clever manipulation, and we may indeed be in for a new Dark Age of feudal submission.

Or not.

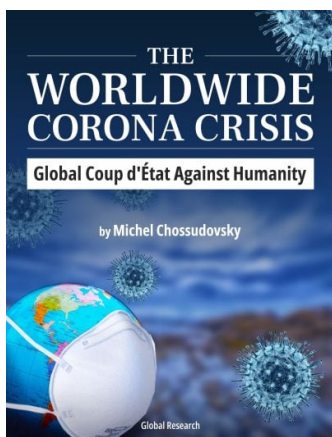
I believe that even in a vicious conflict there are ways to fight tough, smart and effectively, sparing the innocents, through peaceful means. Whatever the material outcome. so long as we oppose oppression without betraying ourselves, we will be victorious.

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