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The Tutorial of Torture: Finding Out the Awful Truth in *That Hideous Strength* and *1984*

Abstract

Contents *That Hideous Strength* and *1984* have the same theme, "that an objective view of morality is necessary for worthy human life." Notes "similarities between the didactic devices which the authors employ," such as Belbury/Oceania and Studdock/Winston, especially in their torture/ indoctrination. The biggest difference is in the resolution of both novels.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Mark Studdock; Lewis, C.S. *That Hideous Strength*; Orwell, George—Characters—Winston; Orwell, George. 1984

The TORTURE TUTORIAL

FINDING OUT THE AWFUL TRUTH IN *That Hideous Strength* AND 1984

JOHN R. REILLY

C.S. Lewis tells us on the title page of his novel, *That Hideous Strength*, that the book is a "fairy-tale for grown-ups." George Orwell (who was born "Eric Blair" but is universally known by his pen-name) intended both his world-famous novels *Animal Farm* and *1984*, to be satires on Stalinism. Thus, although *THS* and *1984* might be broadly classified as fantastic literature, both were written by people living in the British Isles and both were published in the post-World War II period (*THS* was finished in 1943 and published in 1945, *1984* was begun in 1946 and appeared in 1949), these are not works that you would immediately suspect of having much in common. There is no need to belabor the differences between the books and their authors. Lewis was a theist writing a tale of edifying supernatural horror, while Orwell was a humanist and an agnostic given to the sort of fixed attention to melodramatic unpleasantness which often passes for realism (Orwell's religious position was perhaps more ambiguous than this characterization would suggest: he always had a sentimental attachment to the Church of England and arranged to be buried according to its rites).

The authors themselves do not seem to have been aware of any parallels between these two books. Lewis wrote an appreciation of *1984* after an apparently sensational television production of it in 1954 (the essay appears in *On Stories*, edited by Walter Hooper). Lewis found the book interesting but flawed. According to Lewis, Orwell's *Animal Farm* gets the same points across and does so almost perfectly. If Orwell was aware of Lewis, he does not seem to have had much occasion to mention him. Certainly I have found no evidence that Orwell read *That Hideous Strength* before beginning to work on *1984*.

Both men were missing something. The books have essentially the same theme, which is that an objective view of morality is necessary for worthy human life. Orwell and Lewis have surprisingly similar views on practical politics. There are parallels between the way the stories develop. Perhaps even more interesting are the similarities between the didactic devices which the authors employ.

One of the most striking (and entertaining) things about the organization of wicked scientists in *THS* is that their methods and language are, well, Orwellian. The official name for their group, the National Institute for Coordinated Experiments, is referred to throughout the book as simply the N.I.C.E., which I am sure every reader

silently pronounces as "nice." This shows at least as much inventiveness as Orwell's Ministry of Truth for the propaganda department and Ministry of Love for the secret police. John Wither, the Deputy Director of the N.I.C.E. and its chief human administrator, uses sinister bureaucratic locutions to disguise the real nature of his actions. Thus, when an inconvenient colleague is to be murdered, Wither will "make provision" for him. The sentences of convicted prisoners needed for experimentation can be extended indefinitely simply by characterizing the period of incarceration as one of "treatment" rather than "punishment." Indeed, the atmosphere of the N.I.C.E.'s headquarters at Belbury is very like that of Orwell's totalitarian state of Oceania. It is a lawless place, one without fixed rules, which is nevertheless wholly at the mercy of its police. Its denizens can preserve their positions, and even their lives, only through continuous attention to subtle political signals from the Inner Ring. Both Belbury and Oceania are societies in which innocence is no excuse.

Curiously, they are both tyrannies of the petty intelligentsia, persons of no particular culture whose educations leave them with no moral center and a defective sense of reality. Orwell is at pains in *1984* to show that the British working class is still the British working class. Though victimized by the Party, they are the part of society least affected by the revolution which (apparently) overtook Britain and the Americas soon after the Second World War. The level of insanity increases as you approach the center of the Party. Finally, you reach the leadership, people who really believe that the interminable three-sided world war can be won, who live entirely in a world of symbols and slogans of their own devising. Orwell was notoriously of the opinion that intellectuals are the most gullible sort of people there are. (Regarding the rumor on the Left in wartime Britain that American troops were being sent to the country to put down a workers' uprising, he is alleged to have remarked that this is the sort of thing you need to have gone to college to believe.) Lewis took a similarly jaundiced view of the wisdom of intellectuals. As the N.I.C.E.'s security chief, Fairy Hardcastle, explains to the protagonist, Mark, his job as a newspaper propagandist is to deceive the educated. These people can be made to believe anything, and will not notice when you change their minds for them. The lower classes, in contrast, are protected by common sense and an invincible disinterest in abstractions.

Both novels involve stories in which a young protagonist of the professional classes discovers the true nature of his society and gains some notion of what the Truth itself may be like (*THS* also contains a parallel plot which we consider below). For Winston in *1984*, the matter has a somewhat epistemological ring: "Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four," he enters in his secret diary; "If that is granted, then all else follows." In other words, if knowledge is objective, then history is not simply what the Party says it is, physical facts are not matters of social convention, and Big Brother is not literally immortal. Winston also works his way toward an objective view of morality, spurred on by the inchoate intuition that the stress and fear under which all the people in his world live are not natural to the race, that something is radically wrong. This is why Winston joins the underground in Oceania, only to learn that it is a government front designed to catch thought-criminals like himself. Mark, on the other hand, only begins to do some serious general thinking about the N.I.C.E. when he is already its prisoner and has the choice of undergoing behavioral conditioning or being executed on trumped-up murder charges. Mark's meditations are much more directed toward the possibility of a natural morality, a sense of the "Straight and the Normal," as a reaction to the skepticism and intellectual perversion which he finally sees to be the foundation of the N.I.C.E. It is interesting to note that Winston, the government clerk, is far more concerned with basic philosophical questions than Mark, a university sociologist. As Orwell would doubtless have observed, Mark had been to college.

In both cases, much of such enlightenment as the protagonists achieve is reached in the course of attempts by the forces of evil to brainwash them. These oddly didactic episodes may, with some exaggeration, be called "torture tutorials." They are attempts not simply to change the victim's behavior or to punish him, but to convert him to the inquisitor's point of view. In *1984*, of course, Inner Party Member O'Brien and his colleagues do literally torture Winston, both through simple beatings and with a ghastly machine with which O'Brien inflicts pain when he finds his victim's responses unsatisfactory. Winston's clarity of mind does not improve in the course of this process. Although he attempts dissimulation, his metaphysical convictions by the penultimate stage of the brainwashing have hardened into a little knot of refusal which he mistakenly believes O'Brien does not perceive. In contrast, Professor Frost in *THS* simply lectures Mark in a bare cell about the mixture of Logical Positivism and Behaviorism with which the N.I.C.E. justifies to itself the prospective decimation of the human race and the enslavement of its degraded remnants to honest-to-God demons. The physical elements of Frost's conditioning process, which are apparently supposed to have some magical as well as psychological effect, are disgusting rather than painful. Mark has no difficulty at all in hiding his newly-acquired convictions from the rather mechanical Professor Frost.

In both books, the terrible truths which are revealed to Mark and Winston are oddly similar. The teachers in these tutorials strip away the sentimental public-service facades of the N.I.C.E. and the Party. At the very core of each are creatures (in the case of the N.I.C.E., not all of them human) whose sole interest is the acquisition and the maintenance of power. Not even the enjoyment of its fruits is of much interest to the Inner Ring; its members are necessarily ascetic, not as a matter of discipline, but simply because the enjoyment of any good thing in this world would distract them from the conceptual universe of their own devising. The philosophy of the rulers of Oceania in *1984* might almost be taken as an illustration of the idea of the "dominant generation" discussed in Lewis' *The Abolition of Man*. That essay set out the thesis that the so-called conquest of nature meant the increasing power of some men over others, using nature as their tool.

The generation which achieved complete domination over nature, in the sense of being able to remold human nature, would dominate all past and future generations. The past it would dominate because the will of the rulers of the dominant generation would prevail over every custom, belief and hope of the past, while the shape of the future would be wholly within their control. Big Brother in *1984* put it rather more succinctly: he who controls the present controls the past; he who controls the past controls the future.

Although the development of the processes of indoctrination in *THS* and *1984* may appear to be divergent, they are in fact both moving toward a point of ultimate crisis. Both reach a stage where the victim needs be made to do just one more thing to be wholly in his torturer's power. In *THS*, Mark is told to tread upon a garish depiction of the Crucifixion. For Mark to have done this would have meant the renunciation of that subtle spiritual help which had made it possible for him to defend himself against being consciously persuaded by Professor Frost into cooperation with the N.I.C.E. program. Additionally, though this is less clear, it seems that Professor Frost's initiation techniques may have been supposed to have some effect no matter what the subject thought. Frost was, in a sense, putting Mark under a spell, and maybe had Mark done as Frost asked, his dissimulation would have turned into real assent. Be this as it may, Mark's refusal left Frost flabbergasted. Events in *1984* were much less problematical. O'Brien sees the remaining rebellion in Winston, and has him taken to Room 101, where the worst thing you can think of is waiting for you. The worst thing Winston could think of was rats eating his face. When he is confronted with this awful prospect, he suggests in his panic that they do it instead to his girl friend, Julia. His love for her had been his chief defense against final submission to Big Brother, just as Mark's reawakened love for his wife, Jane, had become the chief example for him of the Straight and the Normal. When Winston makes this proposal, his torturers are satisfied, and he is released.

Those who are familiar with the tutorial system in British universities will know better than I which of these distressing fictional episodes most closely mirrors actual pedagogical practice. In Mark's confrontation with Frost, however, one cannot escape the atmosphere of the study or the seminar room. On the other hand, although Orwell (an Etonian) and Lewis were at one in their loathing for the British public school system, Orwell did not attend university. It is therefore probably not entirely accidental that Professor Frost is far more professorial than Comrade O'Brien. With regard to *1984*, the dramatic device of the torture tutorial does not lack for possible non-academic sources of inspiration, however. Winston was supposed to be a typical victim of a Party purge, like the old Bolsheviks who confessed to so many improbable crimes during the Moscow show trials of the 1930s. The defendants there confessed without very much public prompting, and Arthur Koestler spread the idea in the West, through his novel *Darkness at Noon*, that the victims of the trials had come to believe in their guilt as a matter of ideology, no matter what facts they may have known about their own histories. Doubtless *1984* was supposed to illustrate how this could have happened. C.S. Lewis, for his part, may have been trying to show how with luck and grace a man might survive brainwashing techniques with his will still his own.

There was, additionally, the Stalin Interview Fantasy. This was a recurrent daydream among Leftists in the 1930s and 40s, in which they would get the opportunity to meet Stalin himself. They would invariably find him to be wise and kindly but a little ill-informed, and explain how he should amend his policies toward the West. The daydream is mentioned as a recurring theme in progressive literature in a fictionalized account of an editorial board meeting at a Communist publishing house in Doris Lessing's novel, *The Golden Notebook*. A particularly fine example of it may be found in the last of Upton Sinclair's "Lanny Budd" novels, *A World to Win*. It is conceivable that O'Brien's philosophy is Orwell's notion of what a junior intellectual might have actually heard, had he been able to talk to Stalin face-to-face.

The biggest difference between the novels is in their resolutions. Mark escapes from the N.I.C.E. as it self-destructs and goes to meet his wife, attended by signs and wonders. Poor broken Winston, on the other hand, after a desultory encounter with his equally demolished girl friend, comes to realize that he does, finally, love Big Brother. *THS* is almost two novels; as much time is devoted to the adventures of Jane and her own discovery of the spiritual world as to Mark's unpleasant tuition at Belbury. Jane, in fact, goes to the opposite of Belbury, to St. Anne's-on-the-Hill, where a select mystical company, under the leadership of King Arthur's successor, tries to foil Belbury's schemes. Winston's female companion plays a much smaller role in the action of *1984* and the story is never told from her viewpoint. She is a sufficiently impor-

tant figure that Winston's betrayal of her marks his final treason against life, but his love for her is not strong enough to save him. Neither, strictly speaking, was Mark's love for Jane strong enough to save Mark. For him, however, she constituted the doorway into the transcendent, which in Lewis' case is a large and lively Christian transcendent. The only sure content of Winston's transcendent, on the other hand, was "2+2=4."

The final point of contrast between *1984* and *THS* is that *1984* is by far the more frightening book, even if you suspend disbelief long enough to take the events in both literally. It has a hopeless, nightmarish affect which is a sort of a negative image of Marxist eschatology. It was widely believed in Orwell's day, even among anti-Communists, that "the armies of socialism marched only one way." Barring foreign conquest and occupation, a revolutionary society was supposed to be indestructible. Winston, who opposed the Party on little more than intuition, had no real answer to this confident triumphalism. The people at Belbury, for their part, hoped to establish a world in which

...Bad men, while still in the body...would have the diuturnity and power of evil spirits. Nature, all over the globe of Tellus, would become their slave; and of that dominion no end, before the end of time itself, could be certainly foreseen."

As *THS* develops, however, this outcome is providentially avoided. Orwell's world, unfortunately, has no providence. It is therefore the more thoroughly diabolic of the two. ❧

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