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Freud's Model of Civilization and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Never again will you be capable of ordinary human feeling. Everything will be dead inside you. Never again will you be capable of love, or friendship, or joy of living, or laughter, or curiosity, or courage, or integrity. You will be hollow.

—O'Brien, in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Civilizations are essentially highly developed societies; a superior level of organization enhances the productivity and objectivity of individuals to better the group as a whole. With the strength of the accumulative whole, civilization offers protection and security people would lack independently. In return, individuals are expected to obey the conventions of the governing power to avoid impeding its advancement. Minding the rules requires the restraint of instincts that one would otherwise need to survive on their own. Freud suggests in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that "civilization is built up upon renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction...of powerful instincts [such as sex and aggression]" (84). In other words, civilization dictates the subjugation of happiness, or pleasure of satisfying instincts, by conditioning individuals to concede what is "right," and what is "wrong." Freud's conception of civilization is demonstrated in the central themes of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Freud's model of the psyche—consisting of the id, ego and super-ego—suggests that civilization influences human development as individuals become increasingly dependent on it (151). With these theories in mind, I will examine the measures taken by the government in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to repress individuals externally and internally, as well as the means used to redirect their suppressed instincts. Freud discusses the effects that civilizations have on instincts like sex and aggression, and I will investigate how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* illustrates this. *Nineteen Eighty-*

Four illuminates the extremes of Freud's theories; civilization strips individuals of their capacity for happiness. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* depicts Freud's beliefs about the potentialities of human nature in a civilization; illustrating his argument that civilization has the capability to completely repress happiness and exterminate instinctual human nature as we know it.

During the Stalin era of the Soviet Union, Orwell was inspired to elucidate totalitarianism and its potential threat to man. The Second World War had just ended and Orwell had the intention to illustrate a society resembling Germany and the Soviet Union to show the rest of the world that such regimes should be avoided. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a story about the life and psychological trials of a man living in a totalitarian society. The main character, Winston Smith, is an outer-party member of the reigning party in London, within the nation of Oceania. Oceania would be considered by Freud to be the epitome of an oppressive civilization. In Oceania there are established ways of behaving that are required by its members to survive. The Party dictates every aspect of its members' lives. The party prohibits sex, aggression, free thought, and any expression of individuality. Freud's take on the effects instincts can have in motivating an individual, as well as the conflict experienced when instincts are repressed by society, becomes apparent when viewing his theories of id, ego, and super-ego.

Freud's id theory is known as the initial stage of human development. The id is *the* culprit of instinctual drives. All that the id is concerned with is satisfying instinctual desires; it is where aggression and sexuality originate. For the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it seems that the id is all that is "wrong" with individuals, and the Party's goal is to completely overpower it with the super-ego. The super-ego leads us to strive to behave and live in a socially appropriate manner, whereas the id just wants instant self-gratification regardless of what society imposes. The super-ego commands our sense of right and wrong. The ego is one's perception of reality

and consciousness. The ego's task is to satisfy the id enough for it to subside, while remaining within the super-ego's boundaries. Freud explains that the "super-ego torments the sinful ego with the same feeling of anxiety and is on the watch for opportunities of getting it punished by the external world" (83). Illustrated in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the super-ego is the Party's pawn in repressing the id. Freud portrays the potential effects of the super-ego: "Even when a person has not actually done the bad thing but has only recognized in himself an intention to do it, he may regard himself as guilty" (122). The super-ego is conditioned by civilization to punish the individual with guilt in order to restrain instincts.

The Party (working as a mass super-ego) not only manipulates the individual super-ego with its rules of what is right and wrong, it also goes a step further in its attempt to catch members committing "thought crimes" (having thoughts that are instinctual or rebellious against the Party). The device known in Oceania as a "telescreen" haunts Winston and all other citizens of Oceania, surveying every sound and movement they make. Telescreens resemble televisions, but receive and transmit simultaneously, as they pick up everything that can be seen and heard within its field of vision as a surveillance device. On every telescreen "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU" is posted along with a picture of their seemingly omniscient leader, illustrated as "the black-mustachio'd face [that] gazed down from every commanding corner" (Orwell 90). The function of the telescreen is much like the super-ego. The telescreen is a way that the Party and "thought police" (enforcers of thought crime) survey individuals to catch them showing any signs of behaving or thinking in an illegal manner. The Party takes guilt to the next level by literally punishing any member by death (physical death or of the mind, brainwashing) if their ego slips up on masking the id. In his writing, "Orwell, Freud, and *1984*," Paul Roazen highlights this passage from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "The smallest thing could give you away. A

nervous tic, an unconscious look of anxiety, a habit of muttering to yourself—anything that carried with it the suggestion of abnormality, of having something to hide”(681). Anything the super-ego cannot hide is eventually discovered by the telescreen. Roazen adds: “the ubiquitous telescreen threatens to invade the mind’s inner self” (681). Behind the telescreen, the goal of the Party and thought police is precisely that. The Party is attempting to “invade the mind’s inner self” and eradicate any member that they uncover as guilty of incorrect thinking, much like how the human super-ego attempts to rid the mind of any “wrong” thoughts.

The combination of the telescreen and the super-ego leave Party members completely helpless. The telescreen's existence inherently intensifies the super-ego. Members are not only threatened by inner guilt, but they are also at risk of being caught for any recognizably wrong thoughts or subconscious indications that do not fit into the mold of the Party’s standards. With that in mind, their super-egos are thrust into overdrive to ensure that they do not even begin to *think* about instinctive or rebellious behavior. Now the question is: What happens to the internalized instincts if they are not even allowed to be experienced internally?

The Party uses its control over the feelings of desire/love to its advantage and simultaneously satisfies the individual’s urge for aggression during what is called the “two minutes hate”. “Two minutes hate” is when all members of the Party stop what they are doing to congregate in front of the telescreen to express hate towards the images on the screen. Whilst threatening music is playing, the images on the screen range from enemies at war, to Emmanuel Goldstein (who the Party claims to be the most dangerous man alive), to just about anything or anyone else the Party desires its members to oppose.

A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledge hammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current, turning one even against one's will into a grimacing, screaming lunatic.(101)

During this frenzy of aggression, the aggressive instincts within every individual become redirected towards the enemies of the party. Freud proposed that "civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man's aggressive instincts and to hold the manifestations of them in check" (105). The "two minutes hate" is the Party's way of dictating aggressive instincts. The "two minutes hate" not only gives the Party the power to manipulate how its members feel about its enemies, but it also enables the Party to redirect the instinct of aggression in a way that can be used to its advantage.

At the end of the "two minutes hate," a calming image of Big Brother is projected along with upbeat music. After their fever of madness, being presented with a happy music and a figure they have been taught to connote with comfort, the members have no choice but to love Big Brother. The members become conditioned to project their internalized sex/love drive towards Big Brother because he is not only protecting them from their enemies, but he is there to comfort them after what they had just experienced. Beauchamp points out how the sexual/love energy is redirected: "the remarkably precise way in which Orwell has embodied the conditioned hysteria of love for Big Brother, Freud's theory of eroticism is displaced" (10). What Beauchamp is saying here is that what Freud illustrates as our need for sex/love, is replaced with Big Brother. Thus, the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* fulfills Freud's theory that sexuality/love as an instinct can be controlled by civilization and manipulated to work for the benefit of society.

Sigmund Freud once said that "civilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security" (109). In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud

characterizes happiness as “an absence of pain and unpleasure... [while] experiencing strong feelings of pleasure” (52). According to Freud, the satisfaction of sexual and violent instincts constitutes our happiness. But when an individual chooses to be “civilized,” they must sacrifice their freedom to act instinctively in order to satisfy the standards of society. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Oceana is led to believe that before the revolution when the Party took over, primitive life as they knew it was dreadful and hellish. In fact, the party continually announces through the telescreens how much better the Party and its members are doing, even if it is not true. They do this as a means of assuring the members that they are doing much better than before the Party took over, thus solidifying the members' loyalty and dependence upon the Party for “happiness”.

Freud insists that the “primitive man was better off knowing no restrictions of instinct” (73). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is apparent that there is no way for an individual to get away with satisfying their instincts without being guilty, or caught and punished. Because avoiding unhappiness is an additional component to being happy, any instinctual behavior from a member of the Party in Oceana is going to be punished by guilt by their super-ego, by the police when they are caught, or both—leaving citizens in unavoidable anguish. Though the “two minutes hate” allows individuals to express aggression and love/sexuality by means the Party approves, for people like Winston Smith (who are enemies of the party and actually conscious of the Party’s injustices), the “two minutes hate” is viewed to be another sick tactic of control they are forced to endure.

Nineteen Eighty-Four illustrates such an extreme form of what Freud describes as the costs of civilization, that the civil individual in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been robbed of his ability to experience happiness. With the manipulation of the super-ego, the Party capitalizes on Freud's observation that “the sense of guilt is the most important problem in the development of

civilization and to show that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt”(97). As the super-ego’s activity is maximized, guilt is also.

To return to the beginning of this paper, I used a quote from a scene in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Winston had been caught for not only thought crime, but also the overt crime of having sex under pretexts not allowed by the Party. The character mentioned earlier, O’Brien, is the agent of the Party who is attempting to “fix” Winston by ridding him of all the feelings and desires that are forbidden. I have illustrated through Freudian analysis how the Party uses the individuals’ own minds against themselves to coerce them to conform to civility according to its standards. The Party aims to make its members behave and think the same. The statement by O’Brien that concludes above exemplifies the intentions of the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and radicalizes Freud’s model of civilization:

“We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves.”

While there is no direct evidence that Orwell was influenced by Freud’s theories, he does present strikingly similar ideas. Assuming Freud’s definition of a civilization is accurately depicted by Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, certain questions arise: What insights could a Freudian viewpoint provide when analyzing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? And, Did Orwell have Freud’s theories in mind when writing it?

Through a Freudian lens, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* seems to portray Freud’s model of civilization to the fullest degree. Orwell’s depiction of a totalitarian society in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and its prohibition of all instinctual acts, internal desires, independence from society, or any other means of happiness that lies in our nature intensifies Freud’s illustration of civilization: “the essence of it lies in the fact that the members of the community restrict themselves in their

possibilities of satisfaction, whereas the individual knew no such restrictions” (81). This common outlook on society from Freud and Orwell could lead one to believe that Orwell may have been conscious of Freud’s ideas when writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Freud expounded in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that “It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive manifestations of their aggressiveness” (107). Perhaps, the protagonist of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston Smith, would know what Freud meant saying that. The Party enslaved the minds of masses of people and conditioned them to hate who and what they wanted them to hate, and to love only Big Brother. Winston was one of the poor souls left over that could not bring himself to love Big Brother, or hate the enemy, and so he endured an intense, internalized aggression. Freud’s “idea of civilization” at its best ironically shows civilization at its worst: in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell conveys how civilization can affect the individual.

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