ZELEK Sebastian 14/11/2013

English library assignment

“In my book, choose 1 theme and 1 technique. Analyse and demonstrate how the writer links them to create effects.”

“1984” is a novel written by George Orwell. It is set in the year 1984, in a alternative version of London: a totalitarian regime that calls itself the “Party” is in power and rules over the United Kingdom alongside all of the territories connected to the Atlantic like North and South America or South Africa. The main character of the book is Winston Smith, a thirty-nine year old Party member that works in the “Ministry of Truth”: an organ of the government that occupies itself with the falsification of the past to suit the Party's current needs. Already from the beginning of the novel Winston starts his private rebellion against the Party: he begins a diary where he reflects upon the state of the society, which is one of the many things that can get him reported to the so-called “Thought Police”, ending up in a forced labour camp and/or getting killed. Then he meets a girl called Julia who also works at the Ministry of Truth and quickly develops a vivid interest in her: at first a deep hatred towards her grows in him, he thinks that she's one of the Thought Police. But he finds out that he mainly hates her for being out of his reach, her being young and pretty and him being nearly forty year old wreck. But that is turned around with an incident where Julia slips a word in Winston's hand saying “I love you”. That flips his whole emotional life around: he suddenly starts enjoying life to a certain extent, finally having a purpose. That encourages his rebellion to rise up from paper to hand: taking a leap of faith, he and Julia confess to O'Brien, a member of the Inner Party whom they take to be an enemy of the Party, that they want to rise up against the government. But their leap misses and they fall into a trap; they are captured by the Thought Police and imprisoned in the Ministry of Love, where they are heavily tortured and brainwashed by the Party. After a certain amount of time both are released from the Ministry of Love and confess that they betrayed each other in the dreaded “Room 101”, where each receives his personal final blow: a torture that aims exactly the victim's fears and dreads. In Winston's case, it was the threat of rats going to dig through his face, to which he succumbs and betrays the last thing he clanged to: his love to Julia. Broken by the regime, now he just sits in a café and smiles, listening to propaganda and saying that “2+2=5”, and believing it. In fact, Winston's story is used as a warning against the new totalitarian regimes rising in Europe around 1940's: Fascism and Stalinism. Where the first might have already fallen, the rise of communism is regarded as an interesting experiment. But Orwell saw that beneath the beautiful surface of perfect freedom and ideal equality a whole world of cruelty and oppression in communist countries was hidden. For that he decided to write “1984”: to warn the Western culture about the risks of a totalitarian regime with the power of controlling everything, from history to mind.

Throughout the novel George Orwell criticises totalitarian regimes portraying them with language: his portraits of London owned by the Party show no doubt that this world has degenerated, the streets are described as gritty, smelly, full of uneducated proletarians. At one stage of the novel, Winston looks for someone who would be able to tell him how was life before the Revolution, before the Party rose to power, but all he can get out of an old man he found in the street is a very vulgar language that only hovers on unimportant details: we see that the Ministry of “Truth” has done it's job, all mentions of a better life before the Revolution have been erased and replaced with another version of history. As one of the Party's slogans says “Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.“, the memory is gone, the only true history is dictated by the Party, there is no more “freedom to say that two plus two make four”, which is the definition of freedom by Winston. Instead, we have to say that two plus two make five, but not only say it. We need to believe it, because it's the Party who says so, and what the Party says is the truth.

That is opposed with Winston's rebellious language, which is not expressed but seen in his portraits of people and places. His descriptions of everything that links to the Party are seen as negative, almost passively hateful. But the might of the Party catches up to his language and not only counters it with O'Brien's plays with words, they completely remove Winston's language in order to make a point: only the Party's language will survive, the language in which there will be no option to think that “2+2=5” and betray the Party's principles. That language will force out English, which gives a place to doubt, and be replaced with Newspeak where everything will be clear. George Orwell even introduces a new word: “doublethink”, which means to believe that two simultaneously contradictory statements are both correct. As said by O'Brien, it is “To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just as long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies – all this is indispensably necessary. “. Language is distorted to a point that one word will have multiple significations and the correct one will be adapted to the current context. It is probably most clearly seen with the four Ministries: the Ministry of Peace concerns itself with war, Ministry of Truth with lies, Ministry of Plenty with poverty and finally the Ministry of Love with torture. That is in fact the shroud deployed by totalitarian regimes: under a happy and welcoming mask they hide a ruthless tyrant. It is in fact the principle of “doublethink” that lets Orwell thrive on his criticism: saying one thing, while meaning the other. The citizen needs to forget that “2+2=4” and believe that it is in fact “2+2=5”. But he needs to be able to switch back to the previous statement, completely abolishing the new one. Stalinism lives under contradictions that feeds his population with the most comfortable lie at a given time, able to switch it around instantly. That further abolishes the freedom of thought, giving one language capable of saying many ideas with only one word.

The reader of 1984 is confronted by a heavy critique of totalitarian regimes by George Orwell that not only seems to accurately describe how these regimes control the people, near the end of the novel he can almost feel the power of the Party's slogans dripping through the pages and the principle of “doublethink” rooting itself in his consciousness. Orwell's plays with language makes think if in fact the Party got the author while he was writing 1984 and “healed” him from his heresy of words.