

Power and Freedom in Dystopian Fiction

Disciplinary power and Biopower in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*



By: Simon Demir

Supervisor: Roberto del Valle Alcalá

Södertörn University | School of Culture and Education

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Abstract

This essay offers a comparative analysis of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* through Michel Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power and biopower. It argues that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* depicts disciplinary power as surveillance and punishment that produce self-regulating subjects. It also argues that *Brave New World* depicts biopower as population management through the regulation of bodies, reproduction, and desire. By comparing these modes of population control as they become visible through dystopian exaggeration, the essay shows how power operates through institutions, norms, and language, and how these forces narrow what can count as freedom. The analysis keeps pedagogical value as part of the main argument, since the novels' exaggerated systems of control offer accessible entry points for upper-secondary students to develop critical language awareness and to discuss how conformity and obedience are produced and sustained.

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Introduction

Dystopian fiction has often been used to explore how societies organize power, and how this power shapes everyday life. In the Cambridge Dictionary, a dystopia is described as a very bad or unfair society with a great deal of suffering, especially an imagined future society after something terrible has happened (Cambridge Dictionary). Gregory Claeys notes that modern dystopia is closely tied to the “failed utopia” of twentieth-century totalitarianism and to regimes marked by extreme coercion, inequality, imprisonment, and slavery (5). He further argues that political dystopia is structured by coercion that produces fear and can shape everyday life and even personality (8). From this perspective, dystopian narratives show not only that freedom is restricted, but also how restrictions become normal, how people learn to accept them, and what happens to those who do not.

This essay examines George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* as two influential dystopias that imagine different routes to social “stability.” Bernard Crick argues that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is misread if it is not situated in its immediate postwar context “around 1948,” shaped by spheres of influence and fear of the atomic bomb, and he stresses that Orwell’s London is a recognizable exaggeration of postwar London, which helps explain the novel’s atmosphere of scarcity, surveillance, and administrative domination (Crick 146). He adds that Orwell’s purpose was to discuss the implications of dividing the world into “zones of influence” and satirize totalitarian thinking, which frames the novel as a historically grounded warning rather than a detached prediction (Crick 147). Joanne Woiak similarly places *Brave New World* in the context of the Depression and the British eugenics movement, and she argues that eugenics could be presented as a reformist hope for designing a “better world,” (Woiak 105-106). She also links the novel to interwar planning culture, where technocratic thinkers promoted population management and social engineering as solutions to social instability (Woiak 110). Read together, these contexts clarify why Orwell stages control as coercion that must confront and crush freedom, while Huxley stages control as design that regulates bodies and desire so that freedom is less likely to emerge at all.

The analysis uses Michel Foucault’s concepts of disciplinary power and biopower to compare how control operates in these societies and how it shapes the characters’ understanding of freedom and individuality. Winston Smith and Bernard Marx serve as the

main points of comparison. John the Savage is used as an outsider figure who exposes what the World State treats as abnormal or unintelligible.

Using Foucault's framework, this essay reads *Nineteen Eighty-Four* through disciplinary power, where surveillance and punishment produce self-regulating subjects, and *Brave New World* through biopower, where the state governs the population by regulating bodies, reproduction, and desire. By comparing these two modes of population control as they are made visible through dystopian exaggeration, the essay argues that the novels are effective tools for teaching upper-secondary students to recognize and discuss how power operates through institutions, norms, and language.

Previous research on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Research on George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* often focuses on how the novel represents political control, surveillance and the limits of personal freedom. The general consensus is that the book is one of the most popular and influential literary portrayals of totalitarian power. Over the past decades, scholars have more frequently used Michel Foucault's theories to explain how the Party in the novel governs the population and shapes the behavior of individuals. The following overview presents important scholarly perspectives that are relevant to this study, with extra attention on Foucauldian analyses.

One central topic in existing research is the novel's portrayal of surveillance. Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson, argues that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be understood through the concept of "surveillant assemblage", meaning a network of observations that consistently monitors citizens. According to Haggerty & Ericson, the Party's power does not only come from physical surveillance but also from the creation of society where people internalize the feeling of always being watched this directly connects with Foucault's idea of the panopticon, where individuals discipline and self-regulate themselves because they believe they may be observed at any time. Haggerty's work shows that Orwell's novel is not only about direct state control but also about how surveillance becomes part of everyday life.

Another significant study is James Tyner's, who examines the novel through Foucault's ideas of space, discipline and resistance. Tyner argues that the Party shapes physical and psychological spaces in order to limit independent thought. He suggests that Winston's rebellion is not simply political but also spatial, because he seeks private areas

where he can think freely. Tyner's analysis demonstrates how Foucault's theories help explain why the Party's system is so effective: by controlling both public and private spaces, it becomes difficult for individuals to create a sense of self that exists outside the Party's ideology.

The connection between surveillance and torture has also been discussed in Foucauldian interpretations of the novel. Roger Paden shows that the Party combines constant observation with physical and psychological punishment to transform individuals. Paden connects the methods used in the Ministry of Love to Foucault's discussions of disciplinary institutions, where punishment aims to produce obedient subjects rather than simply cause suffering. According to Paden, O'Brien's interactions with Winston reveal how power works through both knowledge and force. This supports the idea that the Party's control does not end with surveillance but extends to the shaping of identity itself.

Previous Research on *Brave New World*

Research on *Brave New World* frequently focuses on social conditioning, technological control, and the regulation of desire. Many studies argue that Huxley's novel illustrates a society where conformity is maintained not through fear, but through pleasure, biological engineering, and psychological manipulation.

A recent contribution to this discussion is Jing Wang's interpretation of the novel through Foucault's discipline theory. Wang argues that the World State uses a system of early conditioning and behavioral normalization that creates individuals who willingly conform to state expectations. Instead of punishment, discipline in the novel works through pleasure, repetition, and internalized norms, reflecting Foucauldian ideas about modern forms of power. Wang's analysis therefore highlights how *Brave New World* depicts a form of control that functions by shaping desires, habits, and identities rather than through overt coercion.

Other scholars emphasize the biopolitical dimensions of control in *Brave New World*. Barış Ağır examines the novel through Foucault's concept of biopolitics, focusing on how power operates through the regulation of bodies, reproduction, and population. According to Ağır, biological engineering, medicalisation, and the manipulation of sexuality function as political tools aimed at maintaining social stability by managing life at a fundamental level. From this perspective, individuals are governed less as autonomous subjects and more as components of a regulated population.

Together, these studies suggest that *Brave New World* depicts a system of power that combines disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms. This provides a useful framework for comparison with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where control relies more visibly on surveillance, punishment, and fear.

Reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* together matters because they do not imagine control in the same way. They stage two routes to social stability, and that difference changes what becomes visible when we talk about power. Orwell shows obedience produced through surveillance, fear, and punishment, where control is experienced as threat and self-regulation. Huxley shows obedience produced through design, where bodies, habits, and desires are organized so that conformity feels natural and resistance is hard to sustain. A comparative Foucauldian approach therefore clarifies both what each novel criticizes and what conditions make dissent thinkable, speakable, or socially unintelligible.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Michel Foucault's theory of power to analyze how individuals experience and respond to control in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Foucault's work is central because it describes how modern societies regulate behavior not only through force but also through subtle processes of observation, normalization, and the management of life. Two concepts are especially relevant for this essay, disciplinary power and biopower. These concepts provide a foundation for examining how the societies in the two novels exercise control and how the characters' sense of freedom is shaped by the power structures surrounding them. In this essay, "freedom" refers mainly to the possibility of independent thought and meaningful personal choice within a social system.

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is developed in *Discipline and Punish*, where it is argued that modern power functions by creating individuals who monitor and regulate their own behavior. He illustrates this through the Panopticon, a structure in which individuals behave as though they are constantly observed even when they are not (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 195-202). This form of power relies on surveillance, routine, classification, and the organization of space. These mechanisms shape people's actions not through direct punishment alone, but by encouraging self-discipline. This idea is particularly useful for analyzing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the Party uses telescreens, strict behavioral norms, and continuous observation to shape citizens' thoughts and actions. Winston's fear of

surveillance and his careful control of facial expressions illustrate the internalization of disciplinary power.

The concept of biopower, first introduced in *The History of Sexuality*, describes a form of power that focuses on the regulation of life and populations (Foucault *History of Sexuality* 140-144). Unlike disciplinary power, which operates on individual bodies, biopower works through the management of health, reproduction, sexuality, and norms of behavior. Although disciplinary power and biopower can be separated for analytical purposes, Foucault also presents them as overlapping in practice, since modern societies may regulate both individual bodies and populations at the same time. Foucault explains that modern states do not rely solely on repression, but instead shape what people consider normal, desirable, or acceptable (Foucault *History of Sexuality* 140-144). Biopower is therefore productive: it creates subjects whose desires and expectations align with the goals of the system. This concept is relevant for *Brave New World*, where individuals are conditioned before birth, their development is controlled, and their desires are shaped to support social stability. The World State relies not on punishment, but on pleasure, satisfaction, and conformity to maintain order. This reflects Foucault's argument that power in modern societies functions by producing compliant subjects rather than by simply restricting their behavior.

Using these two forms of power together makes it possible to compare the different systems represented in the novels. Orwell's society operates through surveillance, fear, and punishment which can be mechanisms characteristic of disciplinary power. Huxley's society operates through regulation, conditioning, and the management of desire which can be mechanisms characteristic of biopower. Foucault argues that power produces behaviors, identities, and social relations rather than simply restricting them, making individuals part of the very processes that shape them (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 94-95). This idea is important for character analysis because Winston, John, and Bernard all encounter forms of identity shaped by the systems surrounding them. Their attempts to resist or understand these structures reveal how power influences the experience of freedom in each novel.

Analysis

Nineteen Eighty-Four: Disciplinary Power and Surveillance

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* takes place in a fictive country called Oceania, a one-party state where the ruling Party maintains control through a dense network of surveillance, routines and self-regulation. Winston Smith, an Outer Party member who works for the Ministry of Truth rewriting records, becomes a useful case for examining how power operates not only through restrictive laws and police, but through everyday routines that shape what can be said, felt and safely remembered. The Party's authority is signaled everywhere, from the figure of Big Brother to institutions such as the Thought Police, and it is reinforced through compulsory practice like the Two Minutes Hate and through the Ministry of Love, a secret prison and torture center.

Foucault's description of modern punishment and discipline helps clarify the logic behind this kind of control. He argues that modern power is less about open violence and more about using a political system that abuses people as a "political technology of the body" that makes individuals "both a productive body and a subjected body" (Foucault 26). Instead of simply punishing crimes, the ruling power invests in the body, adapts the environment and produces what he calls docile subjects that are useful, obedient and under constant supervision (Foucault 135-43). Read through this lens, Oceania is portrayed as an extreme disciplinary environment in which the possibility of freedom is narrowed through constant visibility and psychological pressure long before Winston reaches the Ministry of Love, the Party's prison where torture is conducted.

The novel establishes this logic through the design of everyday space. Winston enters Victoria Mansions and immediately sees a poster of Big Brother with the caption "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU" (Orwell 5). The slogan is not merely propaganda, because it teaches a spatial logic that every corridor, every room and every public square is designed as a place where one might be observed.

This logic becomes unavoidable through the telescreen, a device that both transmits and receives information inside Winston's flat. Because there is "no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment" (Orwell 6), Winston must behave as though observation is continuous. This is the Panoptic effect Foucault describes: it makes discipline and power function automatically because the subject behaves as if observation might happen at any moment, the effect of the surveillance becomes permanent even if the surveilled individual is free from guilt (Foucault 200-201). The Party's control therefore cannot be

reduced to one institution such as the thought police that discover and punish “thoughtcrime”, or to one device such as the telescreen. It is distributed across the environment and sustained through habitual self-regulation.

The novel also makes it clear that discipline is reinforced socially, not only technologically. One key example of this is the Two Minutes Hate, a compulsory public ritual where citizens must display the correct emotion in the correct intensity. This matters because discipline is not only about preventing illegal acts. It is also about forcing visible conformity. He never knows whether the Thought Police are actually observing him at a particular moment, but he must assume that they could be. This uncertainty pushes him into self-regulation. Winston’s fear in such moments is not just that he will speak dissent. It is that his face, his timing or the strength of his reaction will betray him. The ritual therefore trains the subject to experience ordinary participation as a test.

In Orwell’s Oceania, the body becomes the immediate site where discipline is tested. Winston tries to manage his facial expressions because even a small sign can be interpreted as disloyalty. The novel shows how discipline reaches below conscious intentions when Winston realizes that although he can control his expressions, he “could not control the beating of your [his] heart, and the telescreen was quite delicate enough to pick it up” (Orwell 74). The risk is not only what he does, but what his body reveals. Foucault’s phrase “Visibility is a trap” (Foucault 200) captures this perfectly. Under disciplinary power, visibility turns ordinary existence into evidence, and the subject experiences the self as something that might betray him at any moment.

Foucault also argues that modern punishment shifts away from spectacular violence toward what he calls the “soul”, meaning the inner life of thoughts, desires, and inclinations (15-17). He quotes Mably’s claim that punishment should “...strike the soul rather than the body” (16). The point is not that the body disappears from punishment, but that power increasingly aims to reshape the interior person rather than simply hurt the physical body. The strongest sign that discipline has succeeded is not punishment but self-regulation. Here the concept of thoughtcrime matters, not as a slogan, but as a mechanism that makes inner life governable. Winston’s diary scene makes this concrete. When he writes the forbidden phrase “DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER” (Orwell 19), the act is immediately followed by the realization that the act of writing is almost secondary, the danger lies in having thought it at all. The Party claims jurisdiction over interiority. That does not mean that the party can literally read thoughts at will, it means the subject begins to treat thoughts as punishable offences and starts policing them. This is reinforced by the notion of “facecrime” where an

improper expression can lead to arrest. The target is no longer only behaviour but signs of inner dissent. The body functions as a surface on which the inner self is constantly monitored and corrected. Winston's tragedy is that he experiences his own mind as a liability. If the Party punishes not only acts but potential thoughts, what room is left for autonomy? Winston's sense of a "Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull" (Orwell 27) as the last remaining private space turns out to be fragile. The more he polices his own thoughts, the more that inner space shrinks. What looks at first like the last refuge of freedom already carries inside it the logic of discipline.

Winston's search for refuge in the novel highlights how discipline operates through illusion as well as punishment. In the alcove of his flat, he turns his back to the telescreen to write, as if angle and posture could create privacy. Yet the narrator immediately undercuts this sense of safety by observing that "...even a back can be revealing." (Orwell 6). The rented room above Mr. Charrington's shop seems to offer a stronger refuge because it appears to contain no telescreen and promises ordinary intimacy and unmonitored speech. Mr. Charrington presents himself as a harmless shopkeeper, and Winston reads the room as a space outside the Party's immediate gaze. Yet the later reveal of a hidden telescreen and the arrival of the Thought Police show that this "outside" was produced inside the system. The room functions as a controlled space where Winston's resistance becomes visible, documentable, and therefore punishable. This supports a harsh conclusion about freedom in Oceania: it is not always destroyed instantly. It can be allowed to develop under observation, long enough for it to become evidence.

A key link between everyday surveillance and the Ministry of Love is the way punishment becomes hidden. Foucault argues that punishment tends to become "the most hidden part of the penal process", shifting effectiveness from visible intensity to inevitability and certainty (Foucault 9). In Oceania, "disappearing" is common knowledge, but nobody knows how they disappear. The Ministry of Love is not public, it is a secret space whose threat works at a distance. Roger Paden's article sharpens this point by framing *Nineteen Eighty-four's* torture as "terroristic torture" whose major function is "to control the population by means of fear." not to gain information or confession (Paden 265). This fits Orwell's depiction of O'Brien, a Party insider who directs Winston's "re-education," already "know[ing] everything" about Winston (Orwell 158). The interrogation is therefore not a search for truth. It is a process of reconstruction with the aim to break the will and remake belief. Paden also stresses that the torture is "secret," that victims "simply disappear," and the

state denies the practice (Paden 265-66). In this sense, the Party's violence does not operate as "punishment-as-spectacle" in Foucault's meaning, because it is not staged as a public ceremony (Foucault 9). Its force comes from secrecy combined with certainty. Citizens know what can happen, but they rarely see the act itself, which allows fear to circulate through everyday life and strengthens self-regulation. The society is disciplined by what is known but not seen.

Winston's character arc demonstrates how disciplinary power targets not only action but identity. Initially, Winston's dissent relies on memory, truth, and the feeling that something is wrong. Yet those resources are unstable under constant regulation. Over time, Winston becomes uncertain even about his own perceptions. This is where the Foucauldian lens is useful as a question: What kind of subject does such a system produce? Orwell's answer is a subject who loses confidence in the possibility of private truth.

The final stage is the Ministry of Love. Here discipline becomes overt coercion, but it remains consistent with the earlier logic: power must not only defeat Winston but produce him as a certain kind of person. Paden's claim that modern torture aims to "create conformity by terrorization" and the "destruction of the will through prolonged, incalculable pain" describes the direction of Winston's reform (Paden 265). In Room 101, the goal is not silence but transformation. When Winston betrays Julia and later ends in the Chestnut Tree Café, the final line "He loved Big Brother" (Orwell 271) signals not merely political defeat but manufactured interior alignment.

Brave New World, Biopower and the Engineering of Desire

Where *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents power as a constant threat of punishment, *Brave New World* imagines a society in which power rarely needs to threaten at all. Aldous Huxley's novel depicts a world organized around happiness, efficiency, and stability, where individuals are shaped from the beginning to desire exactly what the system provides. Rather than relying on fear or surveillance, control operates through pleasure, conditioning, and the careful management of life itself. Michel Foucault's concept of biopower offers a useful framework for understanding how such a society can remain stable without visible repression.

The novel is set in the World State, a global society in which human beings are no longer born naturally but produced through technological processes and conditioned from infancy. Bernard Marx, an Alpha-Plus psychologist, appears at first to be an insider in this

system, yet he experiences persistent discomfort with the world around him. Physically insecure, socially awkward, and emotionally out of step with prevailing norms, Bernard does not feel at ease with the life he has been prepared for. Unlike Winston Smith, he does not face arrest or interrogation, instead, his dissatisfaction is treated as a personal deficiency rather than political dissent. This makes Bernard a revealing focal point for examining how power in *Brave New World* operates through the regulation of desire and normality rather than overt discipline.

Foucault describes biopower as a modern form of power that focuses on "...the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life."(Foucault 140) particularly at the level of populations rather than individual punishment (Foucault 135-140). Rather than prohibiting behaviour outright, biopower works by organizing the conditions under which life unfolds, reproduction, health, sexuality, and emotional well-being. In *Brave New World*, this is most visible in engineered reproduction, early conditioning, and the management of desire as a public concern rather than a private matter. This framework allows us to ask a different kind of question than in the analysis of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: not how freedom is taken away through force, but how freedom becomes unnecessary when desires themselves are shaped in advance.

Bernard's position within the World State reveals the tension at the heart of this system. He has been conditioned like everyone else, yet he does not fully enjoy the life he has been prepared for. He longs for solitude, feels uncomfortable with casual sexual relationships, and hesitates to take soma as readily as others do. At one point, he articulates this dissatisfaction directly, admitting, "I want to know what passion is," and "I want to feel something strongly." (Huxley 110). These reactions are not illegal, but they are abnormal within a society built on constant pleasure and emotional regulation. Examples of this are statements like "When the individual feels, the community reels," (Huxley 110) Bernard senses that there is something wrong with him, even when he cannot fully articulate why. This internalized sense of inadequacy signals how deeply biopower operates. Deviation is experienced not as resistance, but as personal failure.

By focusing on Bernard, this section explores how *Brave New World* imagines a society in which freedom is eroded not by fear, but by design. The World State does not need to discipline Bernard into obedience; it has already shaped the standards by which he judges himself. In the sections that follow, this analysis will examine how biopower functions through biological control, emotional conditioning, normalization and why Bernard's attempts at individuality ultimately fail.

In *Brave New World*, the shaping of the subject begins long before Bernard experiences discomfort or self-doubt. It begins before birth itself. One of the most striking features of Huxley's society is that reproduction has been removed entirely from private life and placed under centralized control. Human beings are no longer born but "decanted" produced through technological processes in the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Center (Huxley 8). This shifts reproduction from private life to state planning, so biological life becomes an administrative problem rather than personal relationship.

Early in the novel, the Director explains that "all conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny." (Huxley 17). This statement reveals the deeper logic of the system. The goal is not simply to assign individuals to social roles, but to ensure that those roles are experienced as desirable. From the moment embryos are chemically manipulated and divided into the castes of Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas, and Epsilons, life is organized according to the needs of the population rather than the freedom of the individual.

Foucault's concept of biopower helps clarify what is at stake here. In *The History of Sexuality*, he argues that modern power increasingly takes life itself as its object, intervening in birth, reproduction, health, and biological development in order to regulate populations (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 135-140). Power no longer needs to appear primarily as prohibition or punishment, instead, it works through the administration and optimization of life. The Hatchery represents a fictional extreme of this logic, where human existence is planned and classified before it begins.

Bernard's body provides a revealing counterpoint to this system. As an Alpha, he is expected to embody physical confidence and authority, yet his short stature and insecurity mark him as imperfectly produced. "They say somebody made a mistake when he was still in the bottle-thought he was a Gamma and put alcohol into his blood-surrogate. That's why he's so stunted." (Huxley 54) and Bernard himself internalizes the idea that something went wrong in his development. What matters here is not whether the rumor is true, but how Bernard experiences it. His body becomes a site of comparison, constantly measured against the norms of his caste. This process illustrates how normalization functions within a biopolitical order. The caste system does not discipline Bernard through punishment or force but instead establishes standards of physical and social adequacy against which he judges himself. Bernard's dissatisfaction therefore appears not as resistance but as personal deficiency.

If life in the World State is biologically organised before birth, it is psychologically stabilized through conditioning after it. What makes this system particularly effective is that control rarely appears as restriction. Instead, it is experienced as comfort, pleasure, and normality. Citizens are not told what they must not want instead they are trained to want exactly what the system can provide.

One of the clearest expressions of this logic is hypnopaedia, a type of “sleep-teaching” (Huxley 27). From early childhood, individuals are exposed to repeated slogans that shape their values and desires. Statements such as “Community, Identity, Stability” and “Every one belongs to every one else” (Huxley 6 & 46) are drilled into children until they become automatic responses rather than conscious beliefs. Desire is not suppressed but programmed. As a result, social stability does not depend on moral conviction or political loyalty, but on deeply internalized habits of thought.

This mechanism reflects what Foucault describes as a modern form of power that functions most effectively when it conceals itself. In *The History of Sexuality*, he argues that power is tolerated precisely because it does not present itself openly as domination, but as regulation and normality. Power succeeds, he writes, by masking its mechanisms and appearing merely as a limit placed on desire rather than as force (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 86-89).

Soma reinforces this process by offering a chemical solution to discomfort. When characters experience anxiety, sadness or frustration, they are encouraged to take soma, a drug that produces calm and pleasure without hangovers or long-term consequences “A gramme is better than a damn” and “I wish I had my soma!” (Huxley 136). Lenina, for example, turns to soma almost instinctively when faced with emotional difficulty, and others encourage her to do the same. Emotional disturbance is treated not as something to be reflected upon but as something to be eliminated. In this way unhappiness itself becomes abnormal.

Here Foucault’s argument about normalization becomes especially useful. He notes that modern power does not operate primarily through law and punishment, but through techniques of control that establish norms against which individuals measure themselves (Foucault 89). The World State exemplifies this shift. There are few explicit laws governing private life yet deviation is immediately visible because happiness, sexual availability, and emotional smoothness function as social standards. To feel deeply, to grieve or to desire exclusivity is not illegal but it is strange.

Bernard's discomfort gains new significance in this context. Unlike most citizens, Bernard hesitates to take soma which marks him as a deviant not because it breaks rules, but because he resists normalization. In Foucauldian terms, power operates "not by law but by normalization..." (Foucault 89). Citizens are not forced to obey; they are shaped so that obedience feels natural.

As one of the World Controllers, Mustapha Mond articulates the official rationale behind the system and frames control as social improvement rather than domination. This rejection of freedom is stated explicitly by the character Mustapha Mond, who dismisses earlier objections to hypnopaedic conditioning by redefining liberty itself as a social problem:

Sleep teaching was actually prohibited in England. There was something called liberalism. Parliament, if you know what that was, passed a law against it. The records survive. Speeches about liberty of the subject. Liberty to be inefficient and miserable. Freedom to be round peg in a square hole. (Huxley 54)

By equating liberty with inefficiency and misery, the World State justifies hypnopaedic conditioning as a benevolent correction rather than a form of control. This logic aligns with Foucault's claim that modern power operates most effectively when it disguises itself as regulation and improvement rather than repression (Foucault *History of Sexuality* 86-89). Freedom in *Brave New World* is not violently removed; it is rendered irrational and undesirable. Under these conditions, Bernard's dissatisfaction cannot become resistance, because the very idea of freedom has been emptied of positive meaning.

In *Brave New World*, resistance does not fail because it is punished, but because the conditions for freedom have already been redefined. Bernard Marx's dissatisfaction initially appears as a desire for individuality: he wants to be alone, to feel deeply, and to be taken seriously as a unique person. Early in the novel, he complains that he wants to be free "to be happy in some other way" than the one prescribed by the World State (Huxley 107). This statement is revealing, not because it expresses rebellion, but because it already accepts the system's premise that happiness is mandatory and must take some approved form.

Bernard's discomfort never develops into a clear demand for freedom, because the society he lives in lacks a language for it. When he feels alienated or anxious, his reactions are framed as personal shortcomings rather than responses to structural control. His physical abnormality, his small stature and suspected alcohol contamination before birth reinforces this logic. Bernard himself repeatedly interprets his dissatisfaction as evidence that there is

something wrong with him, rather than something wrong with the system. As a result, his resistance turns inward, becoming self-doubt instead of opposition.

This inward turn is reinforced by the social treatment of unhappiness. Emotional disturbance is not prohibited, but it is immediately neutralized. Lenina's reflexive response to discomfort "a gramme is better than a damn" (Huxley 136) captures how quickly negative feeling is dissolved into pleasure. If dissatisfaction can always be erased, it can never mature into resistance.

Bernard's brief rise in status after introducing John to London further demonstrates how easily dissent is absorbed. Once he becomes socially admired, he enjoys privileges he previously lacked, sexual attention, recognition and a sense of belonging. His earlier criticism fades almost immediately. When he is confronted later by Mustapha Mond, Bernard panics and begs for mercy, crying out, "Oh, please don't send me to Iceland. I promise I'll do what I ought to do. Give me another chance. Please give me another chance." (Huxley 271). This moment exposes the limits of his resistance. Faced with exclusion from comfort, Bernard does not defend his beliefs, he pleads to remain inside the system. What he fears most is not oppression, but isolation.

Raised outside the World State on the Reservation, John encounters the system as an outsider rather than as someone conditioned to accept it. Because his values are shaped by a different moral framework, he can therefore see what the World State has trained its citizens to treat as unnecessary or pathological. Because of this distance, John can identify what others experience as stability and happiness, as a system that requires the removal of conflict, depth and moral choice.

John the Savage briefly makes visible what freedom might mean in contrast to this world. Unlike Bernard, John insists on the right to experience pain, longing, and moral struggle. When Mond offers him comfort and stability, John responds, "I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin" (Huxley 288). This declaration articulates precisely what the World State has eliminated, not choice alone but the conditions under which freedom could be meaningful. The possibility that pain and freedom might be connected. Through John, the reader sees that what appears as happiness within the World State depends on the removal of meaningful choice.

Together, Bernard and John reveal why resistance in *Brave New World* fails. Bernard cannot sustain a desire for freedom once comfort is restored, while John's demand for freedom is incompatible with a society built on normalization and pleasure. In this world,

dissent becomes unintelligible. What remains is a population that experiences stability as freedom and discomfort as personal failure.

Comparative Analysis: Discipline, Biopower, and the Fate of Freedom

When read together, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* do not simply depict different forms of dystopian societies. They describe two different forms of repression that are separate but overlap in real life situations. Using Orwell's novel as the standard case of disciplinary power allows Huxley's World State to be read not as a weaker form of domination, but as a variation of it. Where Oceania relies on fear, surveillance, and punishment to suppress dissent, the World State renders it unnecessary by reshaping desire itself.

This contrast is not primarily a question of which society is "worse." It is a question of what happens to autonomy when power no longer needs to confront resistance directly. In Oceania, the subject knows power as threat and experiences control as fear. In the World State, control is experienced as stability and comfort, so resistance is less likely to take form in the first place. The comparative problem is therefore how power relates to the subject: through coercion that disciplines the body and mind, or through regulation that makes conformity feel normal and desirable.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, power functions through visibility and uncertainty. Winston lives with the constant possibility of being watched, which forces him into self-regulation, careful posture, and emotional performance. Even private thought becomes risky because it can be betrayed by bodily signs or by an expression that appears out of place. Discipline works here by turning everyday life into a test. Dissent survives only as secrecy.

In *Brave New World*, control depends less on visibility than on normalization. There are few explicit prohibitions governing private life, yet deviation becomes immediately noticeable because happiness, sexual availability, and emotional smoothness function as social standards. Bernard is not punished for discomfort, but he experiences it as abnormality. Where Winston fears discovery, Bernard fears exclusion. The subject is not primarily controlled through threat, but through comparison and the internal pressure to match what the society defines as normal.

This difference shapes the form that resistance can take. In Orwell's world, rebellion is legible because discipline is overt. Winston can name his diary, his relationship with his lover Julia, and his attachment to truth as acts of disobedience, even when he knows

they are dangerous. His actions matter because they show that resistance remains imaginable, and that power must actively crush the desire for truth and individuality. In Huxley's world, resistance is weaker and more unstable because it is easily absorbed. Bernard's dissatisfaction fades as soon as social approval returns, and when he faces exile, he pleads to remain inside the system rather than defend his criticism. Dissent does not mature into opposition because comfort and belonging remain more valuable than critique.

John the Savage briefly makes visible what the World State cannot accommodate. Raised outside the system, he brings a moral vocabulary for suffering, commitment, and meaning that the World State treats as unnecessary or pathological. His refusal of comfort articulates what the society has eliminated, not only choice but the conditions under which choice could matter. Yet his inability to survive within the World State reinforces the logic of biopower: suffering appears as dysfunction rather than as critique, and the demand for freedom becomes unintelligible within a culture organized around stability.

The most important difference between the two novels lies in how autonomy is ultimately treated. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, autonomy is impossible, but it remains intelligible, which is why the Party must destroy Winston's inner alignment and remake his belief. In *Brave New World*, autonomy does not need to be destroyed because it is no longer desired. The World State reframes moral struggle, pain, and individuality as defects that threaten social equilibrium. From the perspective of Orwell's novel, this is a more complete form of domination: power no longer needs to discipline the subject because it has already shaped the conditions under which autonomy could be imagined as valuable have been weakened or displaced.

Taken together, the novels suggest that modern power does not move away from domination but toward more efficient forms of it. Fear and pleasure become different techniques serving the same end. Whether obedience is produced through surveillance and punishment or through conditioning and normalization, the result is a society in which dissent either cannot survive or fails to become meaningful.

This comparative perspective prepares the ground for the pedagogical discussion that follows. If control can operate not only through repression but through comfort and normalization, then teaching these novels is not only about warning against overt coercion. It is also about examining how power shapes language, desire, and social belonging, and how those forces influence what individuals come to experience as natural, acceptable, and true.

Pedagogical aspect

Nineteen Eighty-Four and *Brave New World* offer meaningful pedagogical possibilities in upper secondary English teaching, particularly in relation to the school's democratic mission. The curriculum for the gymnasium emphasizes that education should be grounded in democratic values and human rights, and that students should develop the ability to think critically, examine information, and consider different perspectives (Skolverket). Within this framework, literature teaching can provide a space where students reflect on power, freedom, and individual responsibility.

Both novels depict societies in which freedom and independent thought are limited, though through different forms of control. Rather than presenting simple moral messages, the texts invite readers to reflect on how power can operate through surveillance, fear, comfort, and normalization. This makes dystopian fiction especially suitable for classroom reflection on democracy and society, as students are encouraged to question how such systems function and why they may be accepted. The distance created by fictional settings also allows students to approach complex and sensitive issues indirectly, which can support open discussion. In both novels, the dystopian setting amplifies social tendencies into clearer patterns, which can make mechanisms of control and conformity easier for students to identify and discuss.

The aims of the English course plan further support this kind of work with literature. At the second level, the central content highlights work with fiction through a focus on themes, content, and form, as well as reflection on ethical and existential questions. At the third level, the subject plan places great emphasis on critical language awareness and explicitly points out how language can function as a form of power, including how stylistic and rhetorical devices are used for different purposes and how language can act as a means of control (Skolverket). These formulations make *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* particularly relevant texts, as both novels illustrate how language is used to shape thought, influence behaviour, and maintain social order.

Although this essay uses a Foucauldian lens in the analysis, the pedagogical value does not depend on students learning theoretical terminology. Instead, the underlying distinction can be introduced in accessible terms: one pattern of control relies on surveillance, fear, and self-monitoring, while another relies on conditioning, pleasure, and the shaping of desire and social norms. This gives students a comparative tool for discussing population control without turning the classroom into theory instruction. To understand how students can

engage meaningfully with such complex texts, it is useful to view reading as a developing process rather than as the search for a single correct interpretation. Judith Langer's concept of envisionment building offers a way of describing how literary understanding develops over time. Langer describes envisionment as the "world of understanding a person has at any point in time." (9) and emphasizes that this understanding changes as readers interact with texts, reconsider ideas, and engage in discussion (9). From this perspective, literary meaning is not fixed in advance but is gradually constructed through reading, reflection, and speech. This helps clarify how students' engagement can develop into interpretation. Because dystopian worlds exaggerate social tendencies, students can enter the fictional society, test interpretations against new textual details, and revise their assumptions about how control is produced and maintained. Engagement is therefore not only an emotional reaction, but a process of building and refining interpretations.

To further clarify how students' understanding of dystopian fiction can develop, Langer's description of reading as a progression between different stances is useful. She explains that readers do not approach a literary text in a single, fixed way, but move between different positions depending on what they are doing and thinking during reading. One important stance involves stepping back from the fictional world to reflect on what the text suggests about life beyond the story. At this point, readers can use the text to reconsider ideas and assumptions they already hold (17-18). When students read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Brave New World*, this reflective stance can support discussion about freedom, conformity, and responsibility, as students relate the fictional societies to broader questions about how power operates in real life.

Langer also describes a more analytical stance, where readers distance themselves from the reading experience in order to reflect back on it. In this stance, attention is directed toward literary elements such as language, structure and allusions. This stance also promotes discussions between different interpretations, the reader is a critic (18-19). Applied to dystopian fiction, this makes it possible to examine how slogans, repetition, limited vocabulary, and narrative perspective function as tools of control. This kind of analysis supports students' development of language awareness and critical reading, while remaining closely connected to the themes of power and ideology explored in the novels.

Langer also emphasizes that envisionment building is not only an individual process, but one that develops in a classroom community where students' understandings are shaped by "group membership and history" (38). From this perspective, discussion becomes a social space where interpretations can be tested, extended, and revised as students build on one

another's ideas. Langer argues that productive literary talk resembles "real conversation" rather than recitation, and that it requires a "shift in control from teacher to student" so that discussion moves beyond guesswork about what the teacher wants and toward substantive thinking (44). Discussion plays an important role in this process because it makes interpretations visible and open to negotiation. When students are expected to support claims with textual evidence and consider alternative readings, classroom talk can mirror democratic practices such as listening, disagreement without dismissal, and justification of one's position.

In this way, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* can function as more than objects of literary analysis. They become texts that open up reflection on power, language, and freedom, while also supporting the development of critical reading and communication in English. By focusing on the possibilities offered by dystopian fiction, literature teaching can contribute to the democratic aims of the curriculum while remaining closely connected to the subject-specific goals of English.

Conclusion

This essay has examined how power and freedom are represented in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* through the theoretical lens of Michel Foucault. By focusing on disciplinary power in Orwell's novel and biopower in Huxley's, the analysis has shown that the two texts present different but equally effective systems of control. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, power operates through surveillance, fear, and punishment, forcing individuals to regulate not only their actions but also their thoughts. In *Brave New World*, power functions through regulation, conditioning, and pleasure, shaping individuals so that resistance becomes unnecessary. Together, the novels illustrate how freedom can be undermined both through repression and through normalization.

A key finding of the analysis is that freedom does not disappear in the same way in the two novels. In Orwell's dystopia, freedom is impossible, but it remains meaningful. Winston understands what freedom would entail, even as the Party systematically destroys his ability to hold on to truth and individuality. In Huxley's world, freedom is not violently taken away but gradually redefined as undesirable. Because citizens are conditioned to equate happiness

with stability and comfort, the idea of freedom loses its value. This contrast suggests that modern forms of power do not necessarily rely on visible oppression but may instead function by shaping desires, norms, and expectations.

The comparative perspective highlights that these two forms of power should not be seen as opposites but as part of a broader continuum. Both societies aim to eliminate unpredictability and dissent, but they do so through different emotional registers: fear in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and pleasure in *Brave New World*. From this perspective, Huxley's novel can be read not as a less severe dystopia, but as one that represents a more subtle and potentially more stable form of domination. Power no longer needs to confront resistance directly because it has already shaped the conditions under which resistance could emerge.

These findings have clear pedagogical implications for upper-secondary English, particularly in relation to the school's democratic mission. Dystopian fiction offers a productive space for students to reflect on power, language, and individual responsibility, since exaggerated social systems make mechanisms of control easier to identify and discuss. Although the analysis is grounded in Foucault, the classroom value does not depend on teaching theoretical terminology. Instead, the two novels can provide an accessible comparative framework. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* makes coercion visible through surveillance, punishment, and restricted language, while *Brave New World* makes control visible through normalization, pleasure, and the regulation of desire. Through guided reading and discussion, students can examine how societies justify control and how language shapes thought and behaviour. Langer's concept of envisionment building supports this process by treating interpretation as developing over time, as students move between immersion in the text, reflection on its implications, and more critical analysis of its language and structure. In this way, a Foucauldian reading of dystopian fiction can support both literary understanding and critical language awareness, and it can strengthen students' ability to question how power operates in modern societies.

In conclusion, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* remain highly relevant texts, not only as literary works but as tools for examining how power operates in modern societies. By combining Foucauldian analysis with a pedagogical perspective grounded in democratic values and critical reading, this study demonstrates how dystopian literature can contribute to both literary understanding and civic reflection in upper secondary English education.

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