

# Lipograms, Linguistic Censorship and Dystopian Literature

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## **Lipograms, Linguistic Censorship and Dystopian Literature**

Završni rad

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Split, 2024

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## 1. Introduction

A human's inner world can be seen by their use of language. By trying to take control of it, outside forces in dystopian literature commit a serious breach into a person's inner workings. Such an act can feel pervasive and violent, breaking into the innermost part of the human consciousness. After all, how we express ourselves is who we are as a person, it's our very essence. Therefore, having control over it has been a powerful tool for manipulating the population, in literary works as well as in real life. All throughout history, this concept has shown itself as true numerous times, in numerous ways.

In this thesis I am going to analyse the effect that language use has in dystopian novels, both as a tool of oppression and as an instrument of defense. I will begin the thesis by providing a general overview of the theoretical background needed to recognize and distinguish some key concepts, and assign them to their literary counterparts. Some of those concepts will be lipogram, dystopia, political dystopia, censorship, and the work of the Oulipo school.

I will try to explain the cognitive importance of expressing ourselves through language and how it is challenged by oppression, showcasing the importance that language has on our perception of reality itself, and not only on ourselves. I will observe the language used primarily in *Ella Minnow Pea* by Mark Dunn and portray the gradual decline of its linguistic variety using specific examples from the novel.

Furthermore, I will closely analyse the ruling bodies present in the source materials, comprised of chosen literary works. The analysis will consist of an attempt at a simplification of the governing systems, denominating key traits which render the systems dystopian.

The analysis will be based on the book *Ella Minnow Pea* (Mark Dunn, 2001), as well as some secondary sources, most notably *1984* (George Orwell, 1949) with which distinct parallels shall be drawn.

To provide a detailed analysis, I will lean into the philosophical theories established by the Frankfurt School of thought, most notably those of Theodor W. Adorno. In doing so, I will strive to prove that Adorno's critical works can be used as a tool that aids a critical reading of *Ella Minnow Pea*, all the while using *1984* to contribute to the clarity of the main points. The thesis will focus on the stylistic analysis of *Ella Minnow Pea*, and how it relates to its thematical layer, while *1984* will be used as a more overt example of some similar ideas.

Right at the start, it is important to note that *Ella Minnow Pea* is not a realistic depiction of a totalitarian regime, and should not be analysed as such. Instead, the stylistic choices made by the author render it somewhat more eccentric, which contributes to its connection with Adorno's work. This idea will be further analysed, and the comprehensive analysis will serve to back my leading thought, that certain parallels can be drawn between *Ella Minnow Pea* and the critical theory ideas presented by the Frankfurt School of philosophy, specifically Theodor W. Adorno. It can be said that Dunn's work showcases Adorno's theories in an original way, particularly through the linguistic restriction that can be claimed to parallel Adorno's ideas of social restriction, achieved through a process of standardization of thoughts. The consideration of the parallels, which are presented herein in a comprehensive manner, will ultimately enable me to place these texts into a productive critical relation.

## 2. Theoretical and philosophical background

Firstly, it is important to define what constitutes a dystopia. The word itself derives from two Greek words; *dus* (meaning “diseased, bad, faulty, unfavourable”) and *topos* (meaning “place”). According to Claeys, the word first appeared in the mid-eighteenth century, but was not widely used until the twentieth. Thus, what we generally associate with dystopia is mostly a modern phenomenon. In its everyday usage, the term is most commonly viewed as the opposite of utopia. However, such a simplification cannot be regarded as the complete definition, since it misses the nuances of the concept. Furthermore, the term is mostly used in its literary sense, as in *dystopian literature*, but that collocation is, while common, not necessary to make, as dystopia can exist outside of the realm of fiction. (Claeys 4-5)

The definition most agreed upon, and seconded by Claeys, is that of dystopia as a “failed utopia”. It is mostly identified with the failure of 20th century totalitarian regimes, and incorporates a sense of collectivism gone awry. (Claeys 5) According to Rosefielde, dystopia, specifically “the communist dystopia”, as he equates dystopia with totalitarianism in general, is “the antithesis to utopia. A hellish state brought about by attempts to construct unrealizable ideal systems.” (Rosefielde 246)

Claeys also differentiates between three main groups of the concept. There is the most common, political dystopia, which is also the main focus of this thesis. It is the type that is mostly connected with the failure of totalitarian attempts at a utopia, and therefore the one which has proven itself to be the most popular in literary circles, as is demonstrated both with *Ella Minnow Pea* by Mark Dunn and *1984* by George Orwell. The next type is the environmental dystopia, brought upon either by a great natural disaster, or slowly, by general neglect of humans, oblivious to the degradation of the Earth they inhabit. The final of the general types of dystopia is the technical dystopia, where science and technology are what poses a threat to humanity. (Claeys 5)

Another key concept to define is that of censorship. The definition stated in the Cambridge Dictionary is of censorship as a “system in which an authority limits the ideas that people are allowed to express and prevents books, films, works of art, documents, or other kinds of communication from being seen or made available to the public, because they include or support certain ideas.”<sup>1</sup> The prevalent type of censorship discussed in this thesis is linguistic censorship, conducted either gradually (by restricting free speech one letter at a time) or

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<sup>1</sup> [https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/censorship#google\\_vignette](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/censorship#google_vignette)

abruptly (for example, by barring the citizens of Orwell's Oceania from mentioning the former version of the past after it has been altered).

When observing *Ella Minnow Pea*, another term that calls for an explanation is that of a lipogram. Collins English Dictionary offers a succinct definition, stating a lipogram to be “a piece of writing from which all words containing a particular letter have been deliberately omitted.”<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that language restriction, which is in *Ella Minnow Pea* used against the citizens as a means of control and censorship, is not always viewed as a bad thing. A notable example of language restriction being used to enhance prolificity is the Oulipo school. Oulipo can be described as a rather loose gathering of writers and mathematicians (mainly French-speaking) who seek to constrain themselves linguistically in order to trigger inspiration. The group's official name was *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, translated to English as “workshop of potential literature”. (Buljubašić 14-15) It was first founded on November 24, 1960, and the official name which remains in use to this day was only coined at their second meeting. (Buljubašić, 19) In the decade which followed, Oulipo was only rarely operating as a group, with most members being active only individually. With the publication of *La Littérature Potentielle* (1973), a collection of representative pieces, the group appeared in the public eye as a whole. (Levin Becker 44)

It is interesting to briefly analyse the terminology used in order to describe the restricted style of writing used by those associated with the Oulipo group. While it is inevitable to come across the word “constraint” (fr. *contrainte*) while researching the group, some theoreticians consider the term to be too unstable and too ambiguous. Levin Becker claims that the term is too dependent on its interpreter, and that it is more appropriate to refer to the so-called constraint-based writing, or constrained writing. (Levin Becker 75-76)

There are several famous examples of the “constraints-based” methods used by the Oulipo writers, including the aforementioned lipogram. Exhibited in *Ella Minnow Pea*, the use of the lipogram was very popular among members of Oulipo, the most famous literary example being *La Disparition* (1969) by Georges Perec, in which the author entirely omits the letter “e”, the most common letter in the French language. (Levin Becker 31) Another popular form is a palindrome, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “a word or group of words that is the same

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/lipogram>



when you read it forwards from the beginning or backwards from the end.”<sup>3</sup> There is also the N+7 method, in which the author replaces each noun with the seventh noun following it in the dictionary. The results are mostly nonsensical and surreal, which enables the author to experiment with meaning and language. (Buljubašić 87) Another method involves the use of an already structured form, such as the *sestina*, and burdening it with even more restrictions. A famous example is Jacques Jouet’s *Anagrammatic Sestina*, a conventional *sestina* in alexandrine verse, already a highly structured form in and of itself, but with an additional rule which states that the word ending each line must be an anagram of its counterpart in the previous stanza.<sup>4</sup> Finally, another method used is the creation of poetic forms known as snowballs, in which each successive verse has one more (or one less) letter than the previous one, creating therefore the effect of a snowball gradually building up or melting. A good example of that is Harry Mathews’ *Liminal Poem*. (Buljubašić, 70)

Even though Mark Dunn is not officially a part of the Oulipo group (Buljubašić 38-46), his novel *Ella Minnow Pea* shows a clear influence by Oulipian principles, because the constriction of expression actually allows Mark Dunn to express more – the interesting use of the lipogram, one of the most famous techniques of Oulipo, which includes the omission of certain letters as was previously described, enables the author to convey the reality of the characters more vividly to the reader. By ingeniously using the epistolary form, the author completely immerses the reader into the plot, rendering him almost one with the characters. He is indeed constrained in his expression, but that fact paradoxically enables him to get his point across better.

To gain some perspective, it is interesting to mention some philosophical works dealing with totalitarianism, such as that of the Frankfurt School of critical theory. Associated with the Institute of Social Research, which was founded in Frankfurt in 1923, it is a social and political philosophical movement which attracted intellectuals dissatisfied with the socio-economic systems which were in place in the 1930s, such as capitalism, fascism, and communism. The school emerged within the Institute after 1933, when the establishment was forcibly closed by members of the Nazi party and its proponents sought refuge at Columbia University in New York.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/palindrome#google\\_vignette](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/palindrome#google_vignette)

<sup>4</sup> <https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2013-12/anagrammatic-sestina/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://iep.utm.edu/critical-theory-frankfurt-school/>

While the Frankfurt School cannot be strictly divided into generations, a loose division can be made based on the specifics of every new wave of philosophers, although they are all strung together by some shared thoughts, that being the critique of capitalism, analysis of rationality, cultural analysis, and analysis of social change and possible emancipation.

The first generation consisted mostly of the school's founders and early members, brought together by their shared experience of operating under the Institute for Social Research and its subsequent forced relocation to New York. The most notable names are that of Max Horkheimer, the director of the Institute and one of the key figures in developing the concept of critical theory; Theodor W. Adorno, a prominent member and the one most relevant to this analysis; Herbert Marcuse, a philosopher dealing extensively with the contradictions of capitalist society. (Edkins and Vaughan-Williams 8)

Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno is interesting for his views on the matter of this thesis, as he mostly relayed criticism regarding the political regimes of his time. He dealt with the ways in which systems of power and ideology constrain human thought, which he integrated into his broader critique of modern society. Along with other proponents of the group, he concerned himself with how rationality, although seen as a liberating force during the Enlightenment, had become instrumentalized in modernity.<sup>6</sup> Adorno saw this instrumental rationality as a form of reason that focuses on efficiency, control, and the calculation of the best means to achieve a given end, without questioning the moral or ethical implications of those ends. He therefore noticed the dark side of rationality, how it can be weaponized into being merely a means to an end. This type of rationality, he argued, had become dominant in modern society, particularly in the spheres of capitalism and bureaucracy. (Edkins and Vaughan-Williams 13)

In addition, he claimed that the same rationality that was supposed to liberate humanity could also lead to totalitarianism. The emphasis on control and domination was evident, according to him, in the rise of fascist regimes, where the application of rationality was used to organize and justify systematic oppression and violence. (Bernstein 8-9) His ideas regarding rationality act as a base for most of his other work, as he heavily focused on what to do to mitigate the negative effects of this phenomenon. The first important work dealing with the problems of embracing rationality as a guiding light is *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) which relays the general idea of rationality being used as a means to an end. To write this work of

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/teoria-critica-della-societa\\_\(Enciclopedia-delle-scienze-sociali\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/teoria-critica-della-societa_(Enciclopedia-delle-scienze-sociali)/)

philosophy, Adorno joined forces with Max Horkheimer, another famous representative of the Frankfurt School. While the text was distributed by the authors among friends and colleagues in 1944 under the title *Philosophical Fragments*, it was formally published in 1947 under its final name. (Edkins and Vaughan-Williams 11) It is one of the main texts of critical theory, and its depiction of the failure of Enlightenment and emergence of totalitarian regimes paved the way for later philosophers dealing with the subject.

As this overarching concept branches out, it can be connected to *Ella Minnow Pea*. Instrumental rationality can manifest itself in many ways, one of them being reduction of the thinkable. According to Adorno, modern capitalist societies promote a uniformity of thought, (Cook 105-106) as they seek to create a society whose members are unlikely to challenge the status quo. (Gerhard 16) The members are discouraged from critical thinking, as that might lead to an uprising, and those in charge want to stifle any possibility for genuine change. Ultimately, the reduction of the thinkable serves to reinforce systems of domination.

In *Ella Minnow Pea*, the reduction of the alphabet symbolizes the reduction of what can be expressed and, by extension, what can be thought. As letters are systematically banned, the characters are forced to think within increasingly narrow linguistic constraints. This mirrors Adorno's idea that instrumental rationality reduces the thinkable by limiting the range of ideas and expressions that are permissible within a given society. He also reflects on language in particular becoming a tool for this reduction. Due to the manipulation of language in totalitarian society, certain ways of thinking are promoted while others are excluded entirely. According to him, linguistic reduction, which is at first sight the most prominent element of *Ella Minnow Pea*, actually mimics the broader social reduction of the thinkable. (Cook 105-106)

The system of domination in this literary work is the Council, which demonstrates an authoritarian use of rationality. Their decisions are technically rational, if we observe them in the vacuum of the rigid, literal reality of following Nollop's literary legacy, but they lead to absurdity when enforced. It is important, here, to capture the general attitude that Nolllopians, led in this belief by the Council, hold towards Nollop as a historical and even somewhat religious figure. Namely, due to the fact that Nollop is credited as the composer of the famous pangram, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.", they view him as a literary genius who laid the foundations for the literary artistry exhibited by the Nolllopians throughout the generations. In his honour, there is a cenotaph on the island, consisting of tiles, each of which holds one letter of the revered sentence. Stemming from that belief is the conviction of the Council that the falling of the tiles is a physical manifestation of Nollop's wishes, and as such,

it should be treated as a matter of utmost importance. Consequently, the Council decided that with each tile that fell, the corresponding letter should be removed from daily usage, along with its sound, that should be prohibited from uttering. The action, therefore, can be technically seen as rational, as the thought process behind it is clear, but it is just as clearly absurd when implemented. That being so, it can be seen as an exploration of Adorno's ideas on instrumental rationality being used as a weapon.

The main byproduct of the usage of instrumental rationality here is the pronounced feeling of alienation. As the linguistic restrictions become more severe, the characters' struggle to make meaningful conversations increases, which portrays Adorno's idea of a society in which people find it hard, or even impossible to think and express ideas outside of the prescribed norms. A notable example is Mittie Purcy, who decided to stop talking entirely for fear of retaliation. This can be observed as another literary parallel with Adorno's thoughts, since it is exactly the effect that he predicted. As the individuals are rendered unable to interact with each other freely, they cannot engage with the world in an authentic and complete way, which leaves them feeling alone and contributes to their dehumanization, as they are prevented from living the full human experience. (Benzer 19)

This idea of alienation is one of the key insights of *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951), Adorno's critique of alienation, conformity, and loss of individuality in modern society. The author started writing the book while in exile in America, and completed it in the span of five years. The book reflects how everyday life can start to feel alienating for the individual, as the familiar routines and rituals are crafted by forces outside of one's control, and yet they feel natural and inevitable. The same can be applied to thought, which becomes almost forcibly standardized to become easily consumable and controllable, leaving the individual estranged from the possibility of thinking critically, and contributing to one's dehumanization. Essentially, interpersonal relations are transformed into relations between things, and the resulting overemphasis on the exchange principle leads to significant erosion of social bonds between individuals. (Cook 45)

Another side effect predicted by Adorno and portrayed in the novel is the rise of totalitarian regimes. As aforementioned, he argued that the application of rationality to emphasize control and domination tends to be used to organize and justify systematic oppression and violence. (Bernstein 8-9) Such an effect is somewhat masked in *Ella Minnow Pea*, however, by the thin veneer of whimsy that enshrouds the events of the book. According to Adorno, the creation of a totalitarian regime is almost inevitable in the conditions presented,

but *Ella Minnow Pea* steers clear of the realistic portrayals of totalitarianism, opting instead for a different stylistic approach. As the book is set in an undefined historical period and on an imaginary island, a dissonance is created between Dunn's Nollop and any real place affected by totalitarian rule of the 20th century.

Such a decision on the authors part has significant effect on the readers, as the emergence of a totalitarian regime is not presented to them in the way they easily recognize, but rather slightly obstructed from their immediate view, forcing them to apply their critical thinking skills in order to notice it happening.

This can be seen as support of Adorno's emphasis on critical analysis, underlined by him as a way of combating instrumental rationality. While he offered no clear solution for the problem, he advocated for maintaining a critical attitude in order to resist the reduction of thought. It is again important to note *Minima Moralia*, Adorno's critical theory work which doesn't offer a direct form of resistance, per se, but rather emphasizes the importance of maintaining a critical perspective, no matter how difficult it may be. (Cook 82) The book consists of 153 aphorisms and short essays, with themes ranging from everyday experiences to disturbing insights on general tendencies of late industrial society. The book's very form, which can be described as reflective, personal, and somewhat scattered, can be seen as a refusal to conform to conventional methods of philosophical writing in order to resist the totalitarian reduction of thought. (Gordon et al. xvii)

It is also important to note another one of Adorno's works, *Aesthetic Theory*, which was published posthumously in 1970. It is regarded as a book that challenges conventional views on art and culture, and asks the readers to assume a more critical stance, reiterating a constant theme present throughout Adorno's work. (Zuidervaart 121) Among the key concepts presented in the book is the relationship of art and the author's idea of utopia. According to Adorno, utopia is not something easily defined or achievable, but rather the negative, in that it represents what the present lacks in its current form. It is not something necessarily concrete, but instead the very gap that should not be filled with positive content. The concept is succinctly explained by Benzaquén, who claims that critical theory as a whole is "founded on the vision of a better world" (Benzaquén 150), and that in working towards it, the proponents of critical theory rely on negative thinking. She goes on to explain that "negative thinking criticises the existent as that which can and should change, and in so doing it marks the space of an absence." (Benzaquén 151) It can be understood that the main goal of critical theory, therefore, is to point

toward the possibility of something better, without actually defining this vision in positive terms.

Presented in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is the importance of art for inspiring genuine change. Adorno sees a certain utopian potential hidden within the creation of art, and while art doesn't create utopia, it delineates it, by refusing to conform to reality as it is. It suggests that life doesn't necessarily have to be organised the way it is, and in doing so it critiques the status quo. Possibilities beyond the present arise through art's depiction of contradictions, as is especially visible in modern art, such as abstract painting or fragmented literary forms. (Hughes 477-478) *Ella Minnow Pea* can be observed as a good example of what Adorno was aiming at, since it can be stated that while the novel does deal with an expression of totalitarianism, albeit skewed, it can still be regarded as utopian in that the absurdity into which a seemingly functional society descends after unreasonable bans reflects Adorno's idea that society is full of contradictions and irrationalities. It also shows that the notion of a utopia that can be almost enforced through a series of dogmatic rules is absurd, which mirrors Adorno's critique of any attempt to define utopia using positive terms which denote a perfect system.

The concept is interestingly connected with Oulipo, or the "Workshop of Potential Literature". While they may seem unrelated at first, since Adorno's concept of art as a critical gesture which should break away from traditional forms can seem at odds with Oulipo's focus on formal constraints, it is important to circle back to the reasoning behind Oulipo's self-restraining tendencies. Namely, within the self-imposed limitations, they seek to explore new creative possibilities. The main concern of Oulipo is potential, as they believe that their constraints open up an infinite range of creative possibilities. This fortifies the paradoxical idea that a liberation from normativity and conventional expectations can be achieved by reinforcing formal constraints. (Buljubašić 63-64) Their focus on endless potential, on what could be, can be connected to Adorno's idea of art as a utopian construct which hints at what is missing.

Dunn's work doesn't aim for an idealized literary form in order to be a utopia, but instead focuses on the ongoing process of creation, embodied by the characters' persistence in finding a way to communicate. The epistolary form of the novel itself enables us to observe the increasingly creative use of language exhibited by the characters, which in its originality suggests that art can always be restructured in new ways, and so can society. This proves that Dunn's work can be considered a utopia, in the sense that it demonstrates the possibility of breaking the norms, of expanding and reconsidering fixed forms.

A running theme of the novel is also the characters' resistance, which is central to Adorno's idea of art as a negative utopia. Referring back to Benzaquén, who states that "negative thinking stays *on this side* of the change it seeks" (Benzaquén 151), it is possible to claim that art does not provide a sketch of a better world, but rather resists the current one, exposing its contradictions and flaws in order to allude to the existence of something more.

An important concept connected to his ideas of resistance is negative dialectics. While *Minima Moralia* references negative dialectics in several passages, it is not a systematic explanation of the term, but it does offer a way of resisting in the form of maintaining critical consciousness. However, the concept of negative dialectics is presented in more detail in his later work, titled *Negative Dialectics* (1966). To understand it, it is firstly important to explain dialectic in general. The term was firstly coined as a denomination of the art of dialogue, of discussion between two individuals eager to persuade their interlocutor by presenting arguments which back the speaker's point of view.<sup>7</sup> It is essentially a debate which excludes any and all subjective elements, such as emotional appeal and rhetoric. However, in philosophy, the term expressed different meanings. While the meaning evolved through different philosophical schools, the change most relevant for Adorno was the one brought about by Hegel. According to him, dialectic can be defined as the movement of thought through a three-step process: thesis (an abstract idea), antithesis (its opposite; the negation of the thesis), and synthesis, through which the contradiction of the former two is ultimately resolved (negation of the negation). (Edkins and Vaughan-Williams 16)

Adorno challenges this way of thinking with his concept of negative dialectics. Instead of resolving contradictions into a higher unity (synthesis), Adorno argues that contradictions should be sustained and that we should focus on the negative, unresolved aspects of thought and reality. His intended process differs from that of Hegel by not aiming for any particular closure, focusing instead on a continuous process of critical reflection, unlike the Hegelian drive to reach a positive outcome (synthesis). This method refuses to accept easy answers, instead delving deeper into the complexities and contradictions of reality. (Edkins and Vaughan-Williams 16)

Significant parallels can be drawn between this theory and *Ella Minnow Pea*. When observing the key aspects of the theory noted by Adorno, the first and most obvious connection that arises is the critique of totality. Adorno is wary of totalizing systems of thought, as he finds

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/dialettica/>

that they often obscure the particularities and contradictions of the world while claiming to portray a complete account of reality. (Cook 3) We can therefore draw the conclusion that the Council in *Ella Minnow Pea* would be subject to severe scrutiny, as its enforcement of the letter bans represents a totalizing system, disconnected from the nuances of life and instead simplifying what they do not understand in order to maintain a false sense of clarity for themselves.

Another key concept of negative dialectics is non-identity. According to him, a non-identity exists between the concept and object, as concepts cannot fully capture the vividness of objects. The gap that results from the concepts falling short must be analysed, claims Adorno, and not simply ignored. (Edkins and Vaughan-Williams 16) We can notice a parallel with *Ella Minnow Pea*, in that it is impossible for the Council's laws to fully capture the diversity of human language and expression, and the attempt to do so ultimately illuminates the destructiveness of such an approach. The gap between the subject, in this case the rich human expression, and the object, or the Council's laws, is therefore made glaringly obvious by the very existence of the object.

Furthermore, even the Council's attempt to resolve the problem of the letters falling evokes a core aspect of Adorno's theory. He stresses the importance of the emphasis of the Negative – according to him, unresolved aspects of thought and reality need to be focused on, and not simply ignored, lest one fails to maintain an ongoing critical stance. (Cook 172) Instead, the Council fails to acknowledge the absurdity of their actions, barreling forward and holding true to their convictions despite common sense, which brings about nothing but suffering for the island's residents. Portrayed within that debacle is the danger of ignoring the contradictions that arise.

Adorno's idea of negative dialectics can be connected to his idea of utopia presented in *Aesthetic Theory* in order to explain how art created by assuming the continuous attitude of critical reflection is actually utopian. By focusing on the void that is left in the wake of concepts trying and failing to capture the vivacity of objects, the artist focuses on what might be, and in doing so somewhat delineates a vision of a utopia. The Negative, therefore, hints at the endless potential to make our world better, and it strives to inspire the observer to work towards genuine change. (Hughes 478-479)

To apply that concept on *Ella Minnow Pea*, it can be said that its representation of totalitarianism can be viewed as utopian writing, as it demonstrates what has to be scrutinized



and removed from our society. The literary techniques used in the novel, such as the lipogram, paired with the fact that the style of the novel is not realistic, but instead quite whimsical, serve to aid the aforementioned process. Essentially, the reader has to take a critical stance and go beyond the surface meaning in order to notice the emergence of a totalitarian regime. That act paves the path for the continuous criticism that the reader is invited to construct, in order to notice the Negative that is present, but also to notice the possibility of the new positive, which is not directly conveyed.

### 3. Cognitive elements

To understand how restriction of language can become a tool of oppression, it is essential to note the importance it has in shaping our personality. If we observe modern ways of “measuring” personality, we can notice that language use plays a strong role in defining it more closely, and it has even been proposed by some psychologists as a prime dimension of personality that is subjectible to research. Unlike the prevalent self-report questionnaires, whose objectivity is somewhat shrouded by the self-made lens that prevents researchers from making accurate measurements as self-reports don’t necessarily reflect who people really are. (Boyd and Pennebaker 64)

This property of language use, that it is presented as a complementary model to the established technique of self-report questionnaires, helps us understand the importance it really has for shaping one’s personality – if it can be used as an accurate assessment tool, than a question poses itself – how does censorship impact the innermost parts of the human psyche, and what consequences can such a repression of a person’s very essence have?

*Ella Minnow Pea* is a good example of a forced gradual decline of linguistic variety. As the plot progresses, the alphabetical scarcity and the desperation of the characters both become progressively more apparent. At the beginning, the restriction of only several letters is shown as worrisome, but not extremely challenging to an already verbose nation. With the exception of several slips such as that of Mittie Purcy, the protagonist’s aunt who, during her working hours as a teacher, said one of the forbidden letters causing the parents of one of her students to report her to the Council (“I am writing to ask why you felt it necessary to report my mother’s slip of the tongue to the island authorities. Mistakes will be made by all of us during these trying times, and it is my belief that latitude should be extended to those like my mother who are employed in professions in which one is called upon to speak for long, wearying periods and through a wide swath of subject areas.” (Dunn 41)) most of the islanders manage to get by with using various synonyms which do not contain the forbidden letters. Such a gradual decline can be analysed. At the beginning, it is noticeable that the islanders already make use of quite complex lexical structures, as can be seen in the first letter written by Ella for her cousin Tassie:

*Henceforth, use of the arguably superfluous twenty-sixth letter will be outlawed from all island speech and graphy. It appears that this is how Mr. Nollop chooses to reward the islanders who drew him and his brilliance to their collective bosom: by issuing this directive, by sitting fully*

*upright upon his bier, as it were, and ordering us to communicate using only the twenty-five letters that remain. (Dunn 13)*

Later, as several of the letters are banned, the “speech and graphy”, at first, become only more complicated – with some obvious interferences of words that act as substitute to their more common counterparts. An example of such an exchange can be found later on in the book, in a letter sent by Ella to her aunt Mittie. In the moment of the exchange, the banned letters were q, k, f, j, q, z, and d.

*Remember, as well, that L.E.B. thugs are still wont to exchange in spot home searches, hoping to turn up anything containing the illicitabeticals. One cannot be to wary; last Thurby, a woman who lives near us was brought into L.E.B. Precinct 2. The charge: an unthought-through grocery list seen by a thug, there on her icebox. (Dunn 112)*

Several interesting elements can be noted in this paragraph. Firstly, there is the word “illicitabeticals”. It is an example of a portmanteau word; a word made by combining the spellings and meanings of two or more other words or word parts.<sup>8</sup> It is a combination of the first part of the word “illicit”, meaning here illegal, with the second part of the word “alphabeticals”, meaning here letters. It can, of course, be argued that such a word already existed in the nollopian lexicon, as they are noted for being linguistically gifted, but such a claim can be disputed by the counterargument that the Nollopians had no need for that word previous to the events of the book, and that it was created as a substitute that does not require the usage of words such as forbidden, banned or any similar words ending in -ed.

Another interesting word used in this paragraph is “*Thurby*”. It is one of the seven substitutes created by the Council to denominate days of the week, those being Monty, Toes, Wetty, Thurby, Fribs, Satto-gatto, and Sunshine, respectively.

As the plot progresses further, we can see a change in tone – with more and more letters disappearing, the letters cease to amplify in complexity and become, instead, more simple. In the following example, the forbidden letters are q, c, k, b, f, j, v, z, and d.

*This letter I post on this here portal in hopes that Mittie might see it. That Mittie is staying here at her sister’s home now. I hope hope hope it is so. I an in a home not too remote. Three homes away. (...) The yellow-sphere shone harshly on me. (Dunn 145)*

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/portmanteau>

If we observe, for example, a letter written by Georgeanne Towgate to Mittie we can notice that the syntax is reduced as much as possible, the sentences are shorter, and even general terms are exchanged for descriptions (“*the yellow-sphere*”, here meaning the Sun). Synonyms are also fewer in number, with emphasis being expressed by repetition (“*I hope hope hope it is so.*”).

Later on, near the end of the book, the Council allows for homophonic translation – the forbidden sounds may be expressed in writing by using letters that are still allowed, in order to approximate the sound that must still be omitted in speech. Homophonic translation is an extremely interesting concept often used by the Oulipo school. It can be defined, according to Dembeck, as “a translation that is true to the phonetic structure of the original and does not necessarily attend to its semantic ‘content.’” (Dembeck 7-8)

This type of ‘translation’ can be used as a bridge between two different languages, or within a single language, as is exhibited by the example below. The name of the phenomenon was only coined in 1957, with the Austrian poet Ernst Jandl naming his poem ‘Oberflächenübersetzung’ (or ‘surface translation’), and transforming William Wordsworth’s poem “My Heart Leaps Up”, also known as “The Rainbow”, into German. (Dembeck 7) Although being hitherto unnamed, the phenomenon itself dates centuries back, present even in Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, on the example of Latin and English. (Dembeck 9)

HOLOFERNES. Sir Nathaniel, haud credo.

DULL. ‘Twas not a haud credo, ‘twas a pricket.

HOLOFERNES. Most barbarous intimation! Yet a kind of insinuation, as it were, in via, in way, of explication; facere, as it were, replication, or rather, ostentare, to show, as it were, his inclination, after his undressed, unpolished, uneducated, unpruned, untrained, or rather unlettered, or ratherest, unconfirmed fashion, to insert again my haud credo for a deer.

DULL. I said the deer was not a haud credo, ‘twas a pricket. (Shakespeare 4.2.11-21)

The letters banned up to that point are the same that were banned in the previous example – namely q, c, k, b, f, j, v, z, and d.

*Greetings Nollopians,*

*This is to inphorm ewe oph Statoot 28-63 past this morning with implorment phrom high elter R. Lyttle. Hensephorth, sitisens may – in graphy only – espress themselfhs when warrant, threw yoose oph proxy letters, yet only as hear-twins. Any attempt to employ hear-twin graphemes in orality will warrant the most sepheerest penalties yonter the law. (Dunn 150)*

As more letters drop from the cenotaph, the penultimate pages of the book are filled only with indecipherable vocalizations, consisting only of the few remaining letters, those being l, m, n, o, and p. When read aloud, those few letters form the title of the work, as well as the homophonic rendition of the main character’s name. With that in mind, the culmination of the plot is rendered more poetic with one of the final letters of the work, written by Ella to herself and signed only with “LMNOP”.

*No mo Nollop pomp!*

*No mo Nollop poo poo!*

*No mo 4 pop/1 moll Nollop looloo poop!*

*No no no mo plop, plop, plop, plomp!*

*No mo Nollop!*

*No, mon, no! O Nooooooooo!*

*OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO*

*OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!*

- “LMNOP” (Dunn 174)

The title is, in that moment, given an extra layer, as it was up to that point only connected in the mind of the reader to the main character. It symbolizes then all of the letters that the Nollopians have left. It symbolizes all that our main character has left, which is but her very name. It is a final desperate letter before the grand resolution, as the next sentence is:

*Pack my box with five dozen liquor jugs? (Dunn 174)*

After that point, the entirety of the following exchange is written using all letters of the alphabet, and the state of the island is forever changed.

## 4. Governments

There are many different aspects that can constitute as dystopian in a literary work. One of the most common ones is the fictive government, which is oftentimes portrayed as an exaggeratedly malicious version of a government from the real world. For example, we could take the idea of a government, divide it so that it becomes a series of its most primitive traits, and then amplify the ones that are undesirable to the people, such as corruption, thirst for power, a constant need for surveillance, etc., and we would get a dystopian government. While there are other methods of making a literary work dystopian, such as abuse of technology, ecological threats, and so on, a corrupt government is one of the most prominent ones and also the one that is used in *Ella Minnow Pea*. (Claeys 5-6)

A lot of dystopian governments share some core traits. For example, they are presented as a mystery to the people, a force whose motives are mostly vague, but the people are led to believe that their ultimate goal is to benefit the nation. That end is supposed to justify any and all questionable actions performed by the government and inspire the people to think that they themselves lack the wisdom to understand what is best for them, and as a consequence discourage them from inspecting the government more closely. That creates a distance between the regular citizens and the ruling powers that is not accidental.

Part of it stems from the inspiration drawn from real life – a regular person would scarcely know what goes on behind closed doors of the Oval Office, for example. However, in dystopian literature, the fact that the government is presented as an establishment shrouded by uncertainty and almost incomprehensible to the outside world, feeds into the feeling that a regular citizen could not possibly understand something that is so far above him or her, both intellectually and power-wise. That sense of confusion is necessary for avoiding revolutions. If the citizens of dystopias would scrutinize their leaders more closely, they would, in most cases, easily find everything they would need to judge and find lacking, yet they don't do that. Fear of repercussions stops them, of course, but what is even more potent is the conviction that the government could not err, as they must know what they are doing, even if regular people do not.

It is possible to analyse this phenomenon by leaning, yet again, into the ideas of the Frankfurt School. Seeing how its proponents dealt with the flaws of the socio-economic systems in place, they concerned themselves with the ways systems of domination try to maintain the

status quo and their control over the general population. In doing so, the systems placed great emphasis on the prevention of critical thinking and subsequently, revolutions.

To be more specific, it is possible to connect Theodor W. Adorno's concept of the "culture industry" with the portrayal of dystopian governments in the source novels. Adorno developed the concept in order to explain how mass culture forces individuals into conformity by producing standardized cultural goods with the purpose of discouraging critical attitudes within the population and enforcing standardized thoughts. (Huysen 4) The cultural goods succeed in doing so by creating a false sense of fulfillment amongst viewers, therefore guiding them to accept their conditions without closer scrutiny. In the context of *Ella Minnow Pea* and *1984* specifically, this concept translates into a depiction of the government as a vague and opaque entity, put in place in such a way that it elicits a sense of confusion and intellectual inferiority among the citizens.

The Council, just like the upper Party together with the Big Brother, is shrouded in mystery, leaving the impression of an omnipotent force that is beyond all questioning, whose motives are surely justified, although incomprehensible to the common man. The citizens are in both cases led to believe that the complex workings of the ruling strata are well beyond their realm of understanding and they could not possibly hope to decipher the intricacy of it all, or the reasons behind their decisions. This process results in masses of people who are less likely to question the increasingly absurd laws presented to them, but rather passively accept them as inevitable. The irrational, therefore, is presented by the culture industry as completely normal. The people are thus prevented from recognizing the underlying power structures which are at play, believing themselves to be powerless to spark any genuine change, which in turn allows the system of dominance to maintain control.

Another core trait would be the harsh punishments that follow seemingly insignificant acts. Dystopian governments tend to respond disproportionately worse than the offence would call for, and that is necessary for the preservation of control on multiple levels. Firstly, the strictness serves as not only a punishment for the perpetrator, but also as a warning to everybody else. The mere possibility of an open objection to the government is recognized to be disastrous for its very existence, as it would undermine their rule and bring their infallibility into question. As an open objection of one person could instill ideas of rebellion into others, it is important to remove any possibility of such an action even taking place. Therefore, the smallest of events, ones that even vaguely insinuate a disagreement with the government, are met with extreme retaliation, most commonly in the form of torture and death. (Gerhard, 56-58)

In *Ella Minnow Pea*, for example, a simple use of a wrong letter was punishable by banishment from the island. That way, citizens were discouraged from voicing any objections, for fear of being even more severely punished.

Besides that, the harsh punishments had another purpose, and that is contributing to the aforementioned feeling of confusion that surrounds any thoughts of government. By being exposed to the concept of such strict repercussions, citizens were led to believe that the acts that inspired them really deserve such treatment, and even if general human decency would say otherwise, their fear mixed with blind faith would mostly prevail and they would ultimately end up feeling like the government must be doing the right thing, even if they don't understand it.

That effect can be observed, for example, on Parsons from 1984. He can be classified as a textbook example of Adorno's "authoritative personality". The concept originates from the 1950 sociology book of the same name, co-authored by Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford. The book lists nine traits whose presence and intensity in an individual makes it possible to place them on the "F scale", in which "F" stands for "fascist". (Adorno et al. 224) The traits discussed are conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, anti-intraception, superstition and stereotypy, power and "toughness", destructiveness and cynicism, projectivity, and exaggerated concerns over sex. (Adorno et al. 228) The authors argued that certain personality traits cluster together as a result of childhood experiences, particularly punitive parenting, which fosters a sense of repression, insecurity, and hostility, which is later projected onto minorities. (Adorno et al. 326)

This concept is, on the example of Parsons, heavily intertwined with that of the "culture industry", as the latter contributes greatly to why Parsons acts the way he does. The phenomenon of citizens not criticising their leaders because they were influenced to believe in their inherent wisdom captures both the critique of the "culture industry" and the idea of the "authoritarian personality". While Parsons is undoubtedly influenced by the environment he is in, he also exhibits certain traits out of the nine listed by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford. (Adorno et al. 228)

Firstly, it is justified to claim that Parsons showed clear signs of conventionalism, described in *The Authoritarian Personality* as a "rigid adherence to conventional, middle class values". (Adorno et al. 228) Namely, Parsons exhibits unwavering loyalty to the Party, adhering strictly to the imposed rules without scrutinizing them. ("He was a fattish but active man of paralyzing stupidity, a mass of imbecile enthusiasms—one of those completely unquestioning,



devoted drudges on whom, more even than on the Thought Police, the stability of the Party depended.” (Orwell 12)) It is evident that this trait is one of the most important ones in an authoritarian personality, since it directly contributes to the continuation of the Party’s rule. Winston’s remark, which is seemingly ironic at first, proves to be true after a short and somber contemplation by the reader. Even though the Thought Police does appear to be a more active way of law enforcement, the system would be virtually powerless without people like Parsons who do their part by simply accepting the Party’s power.

The second personality trait evident on the example of Parsons is authoritarian submission, or a “submissive, uncritical attitude towards authority figures in one’s in-group”. (Adorno et al. 228) Described first and foremost as a simple person, sometimes even offensively so, he placed his faith blindly in Big Brother’s rule. The Big Brother was far from his realm of understanding, he viewed him almost like a deity, going so far as to encourage his own children to follow him, even at the expense of his family, who became subject to constant surveillance under their watchful eyes. He kept his strong sense of faith about him even later in the book, when it led to his demise – while he was being kept in the Ministry of Love because of a claim that his own children made against him, his ideals never once wavered. His confusion about why he was being kept was constantly overpowered by his immense faith in the government, even in the face of possible death. (“‘Who denounced you?’ said Winston. ‘It was my little daughter,’ said Parsons with a sort of doleful pride. ‘She listened at the keyhole. Heard what I was saying, and nipped off to the patrols the very next day. Pretty smart for a nipper of seven, eh? I don’t bear her any grudge for it. In fact I’m proud of her. It shows I brought her up in the right spirit, anyway.’” (Orwell 135))

The third personality trait which marks Parsons as an authoritarian personality is his authoritarian aggression. Defined by Adorno as a “tendency to be on the lookout for, and to condemn, reject, and punish people who violate conventional values” (Adorno et al. 228), it is not necessarily attributed to Parsons himself, as he does not demonstrate overt aggression personally, but rather accepts implied aggression from the Party. This ties back to the second trait, drawing from his uncritical attitude towards ruling figures, and becomes evident on the aforementioned example of his own arrest. It goes to show that he has no objections regarding the Party’s use of aggression, even on himself, believing it to be rightful and justified.

Another trait that is important to mention is Parsons’ anti-intraception, or the “opposition to the subjective, the imaginative, and the tender-minded”. (Adorno et al. 228) With his description, Orwell establishes quite early on that Parsons is a man devoid of any emotional

or intellectual depth. What runs his life is not his own intrinsic drive, but rather routine and adherence to the Party. He is portrayed as a person unable to form any thoughts beside those imposed upon him, those being mostly superficial.

Another three personality traits can be observed on the example of Parsons, albeit to a lesser extent. Those are superstition and stereotypy (Adorno et al. 228) (noticeable somewhat on his black-and-white worldview, lacking all nuance necessary to decipher that the Party is not what he blindly believes it to be), power and toughness (Adorno et al. 228) (manifested through Parsons' ready acceptance of the Party's power over him, seeing his submission as a sign of strength rather than weakness), and destructiveness and cynicism (Adorno et al. 228) (shown mostly through his participation in the Hate Week, where his darker side slips out through his glee regarding brutal punishments of perceived enemies).

The remaining two can be somewhat attributed to Parsons, as well, but they are never explicitly shown in the novel, so their intensity and presence remain debatable. The first of the two is projectivity, defined as the "projection outward of unconscious emotional impulses". (Adorno et al. 228) It can be stated that Parsons easily internalizes the ideas of conspiracies invented by the Party, and in doing so projects the Party's paranoia onto the outside world. The final personality trait is the "exaggerated concern with sexual "goings-on"" (Adorno et al. 228), and while it can be assumed that Parsons would likely accept the Party's endorsement of sexual repression, the topic is never explored in the novel itself.

In conclusion, yet another parallel can be drawn with the work of Theodor W. Adorno, here, both with his theory of "cultural industry" and that of the "authoritarian personality". This comparison is merely an exploration of another facet of Adorno's broader work, and it even indirectly aids a critical reading of *Ella Minnow Pea*. Namely, after the enforcement of the Council's new statutes, some citizens of Nollop conform out of fear of retaliation even though the rules seem absurd. This act reflects the way authoritarian personalities, according to Adorno, often conform even to those social norms which are evidently harmful. In *Ella Minnow Pea*, however, the descriptions of the psychological state of the characters who simply comply with the new laws is less prominent, so observing Parsons through Winston's eyes can help us clarify how such a person thinks, and how their blind obedience to those in power came to be.

#### **4.1. *Ella Minnow Pea***

The manifestation of the dystopian aspect in the form of the government can be observed in *Ella Minnow Pea*. Being an oligarchy, or a rule of the few, only several people rule the island,

imposing their interpretation of recent events to the majority throughout the book. As they try to come to terms with the shifting of their entire worldview, religion also comes into play as it is unclear whether they believe what they're saying, and consider it a message from their founder, or they're just exercising their power, showing a staggering amount of influence over the majority, and going so far as to restrict their right of free speech, all because of a tile that dropped from the wall. The minuscule reason that inspired them to do so (that being the tile), serves to show the extent of their power – they aren't what they're supposed to be, a guide to their people, but rather a group powerful enough to act upon their every whim, which in turn makes them dangerous.

The insignificance of their motive, as it is viewed by the reader, is there to showcase their power to the reader, as well as to the Nollopians – it is, ultimately, what shakes some of them into action, as they feel the repercussions of such a brutal decree on their own skin. However, the fact that even the reader doesn't know if they're aware of what they're doing, or are they really only individuals blinded by their faith, is ultimately what leads to their downfall. Their own possible unawareness is what gave the citizens enough leeway to find some loopholes in their prohibitions, which enabled them to undermine their rule. Their own naivete became their flaw.

That aspect of *Ella Minnow Pea* can be used as a point of comparison with other similar novels, as it is also an aspect that foreshadows the ending of the novel itself. Restriction of the freedom of speech was never all-encompassing in this novel – it was a relatively new concept gradually imposed upon the citizens, leaving them able to remember life before it, and therefore fight to bring it back. However, a question poses itself – what would happen if such a restriction was more systematic, more well-thought of, more deliberate? The answer to that lies in another book, *1984* by George Orwell.

#### **4.2. 1984**

The government in George Orwell's book, *1984*, the Big Brother and the upper Party, was evidently more sinister than that of *Ella Minnow Pea* from the very beginning, as it is visible that it is a well-oiled machine, or a system that has been established for a long period of time, and therefore runs somewhat smoothly. As the plot of the novel thickens, it is revealed that the citizens that remembered a life before the existence of the Party were systematically killed a long time ago, as it was clear that they were the social group that was most likely to start a rebellion, as their memory of the world before, being unarguably better, is less fallible than that of the younger

people. The younger generations are more malleable – their thoughts of the old world, if they even exist, are easily blurred or changed entirely. Time, as we can see, worked in favour of the government – a similar fate might've awaited citizens of Nollop, if their government had, purposely or subconsciously, done things differently. *Ella Minnow Pea* proved the suspicions of the Big Brother to be correct – the generation upon which the system was imposed was the one that found in themselves the power to cause an uproar – their memory of before showed itself as greater than their fear of repercussions, at least for some of them.

*1984* is very interesting to analyse from a political aspect. It is a totalitarian regime, fueled by fear of trying to form any sort of opposition and the almost total surveillance that the government has over the actions of its citizens, but it also relies heavily on the Party, a greater political backbone put in place, consisting not only of Big Brother, but also of his devotees who are deathly scared of being caught even slightly tinged with the spirit of rebellion.

It is also interesting to note the role of indoctrinating children into the system from birth, so that they grow up to be vessels of the government, in the role of spies lest their parents or neighbors make even a minor slight. It is possible to observe this type of education in real historical examples, as well, most notably in the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. They operated on the idea that the state is uniquely bound to be the end-all-be-all of early education, simultaneously holding the future of the entire nation in its hands via total control of the education system. The basis for such a schooling was established even earlier, in the nineteenth century. An example of that is a quote of Treitschke, which claims that "...the state protects and embraces the life of the people, regulating it externally, in all directions." (Treitschke 12) Advocating for such an absolute power of the state did not entirely take sway at the time when it was proposed, but it did pave the way for later regimes, who managed to liken their actual practices to this theoretical background. (Woody 40-41)

A good example of an educational system affiliated completely with the state is that of Fascism. At the time, the role of teachers and professors was hardly just educational, as a strong political tendency towards Fascism was not an option, but rather a prerequisite for obtaining a job, as Mussolini wanted to leave no room for doubts in the malleable minds of school children. (Woody 46-47) The same can be seen in *1984*. The students were seen as the future of the nation, and were regarded with the importance of such – they were an important ally to the Party, inspiring trepidation in their family members and foreshadowing a new, even crueler Party, unmarred by the current Party's inherent humanity, which was yet to come.

### 4.3. Resistance

It is important to analyse the different types of resistance displayed by the oppressed in both of the source novels. In both *Ella Minnow Pea* and *1984*, we can notice that persistence is the key factor, it is what enables the citizens of Nollop to persevere. It can be observed on the example of Ella, whose determination and bravery ultimately saves her island. When observing Winston, however, we can notice that his persistence leads to his demise, as he is rendered just a shell of his former self by the end of the book. However, that is not to say that he was less persistent than Ella, but rather that his circumstances were somewhat bleaker and more threatening. Ella's success is undoubtedly aided by the general air of uncertainty that surrounds her storyline. As was mentioned before, due to how recently the tiles have fallen, bringing forth a drastic change, the Council hasn't managed to find their footing just yet, which leaves them and their ideology appearing weaker and more open to attacks. As was also mentioned, the uncertainty is palpable even regarding the Council's motives, as it remains undisclosed whether or not they are operating for their own personal gain, or in actual blind faith in the divine intervention of the island's founder.

The concept of persistence introduces another powerful motive in these books – memory. In *1984*, it was shown as something more or less easily manipulated – with every change of the recognized version of history, all traces of true, objective events were erased from existence – if there even was an objective version, in most cases. However, while being shown as easily changeable, at least in the realm of public opinion of Oceania, memory, for Winston, was the most stubborn part of his being. It was the one thing that kept him moving forward in uncertain times.

As he worked in the Ministry of Truth, his job consisted of altering news that he knew to be false, but his main motivation for doing everything that he did, for writing a diary, was the memory that he had of a single instance where the skewing of truth was a concrete evidence that he held in his hand. The evidence consisted of a single photograph which reached Winston's office desk as part of a *The Times* cut-out. It was a photograph of Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford, known traitors of the state, unmistakably inscribed with their names underneath it, and it depicted them participating in a Party function in New York. However, the date when the photograph was taken coincided with the time during which, according to their confession in trial, the three were in Eurasia. The event was monumental for Winston, as it was a tangible proof of their confessions actually being lies. While that in itself did not surprise Winston, the reality of the evidence in his hands did. It was something concrete, solid, and the sheer potential

it had is what caught his attention. Namely, if it became publicly known, it could destroy the Party (“It was enough to blow the Party to atoms, if in some way it could have been published to the world and its significance made known.” (Orwell 45)). Unfortunately, the threat of the telescreen, a device meant for constant surveillance, in the corner of Winston’s cubicle was enough to convince him, after some deliberation, to get rid of the sheet.

The event is interesting from the point of literary, but also philosophical analysis. It can be better understood by drawing a parallel with the work of Jean Baudrillard, a French sociologist and philosopher best known for his analyses of media, contemporary culture, and technological communication. Some of his most famous work focuses on the concepts of simulacra and hyperreality, through the lens of which the aforementioned event can be observed. (Scott 14-15) In his work *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) he explores the relationship of reality, symbols, and society, discussing in particular how reality is replaced by simulacra, or copies that depict things that either had no original, or that no longer have an original. Baudrillard claims that the boundary between reality and its representation is blurred, and that society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs due to the latter’s detachment from any grounding in objective reality. The created hyperreality is defined as the state where the real and the imaginary are seamlessly merged, and simulacra are perceived as more real than reality itself. (Wolny, 76 -77)

This theory can be applied to understand how “fake news”, increasingly present in today’s society, serve to create a distorted version of reality. The same principle applies to Orwell’s “doublethink”, which allows contradictory beliefs to exist simultaneously. In using it, the Party cultivates a hyperreal environment by constantly rewriting its own history, and fabricating new “truths” that serve its agenda. The final product of such a process, meaning the altered newspaper articles and historical records, can all be considered simulacra – they are merely representations unrelated to any actual event which took place in reality, but are still accepted as real by the population.

Winston’s moment of clarity, brought upon him by the shocking evidence that directly contradicts the Party’s official history, for a moment pierces the hyperreality constructed by the Party. The event allows him to get a glimpse of the underlying reality, the world which existed before it was forcibly concealed by the Party’s simulacra. It also greatly unsettles him, showing that the discovery of something real in a world filled with simulacra can have profound psychological consequences.

As was mentioned, Baudrillard's theory can be applied to today's "post truth" "fake news" world, where there is an ever-increasing amount of information that blurs the line between truth and falsehood, creating therefore a hyperreal environment. However, the monumentality of an event such as Winston's moment of clarity is debatable in today's world. Due to the alarming proliferation of "fake news", resulting from the astounding growth in popularity of the Internet, it is arguable that no revelation today could have such severe implications on an individual's psychological state, as the falsehood is so widespread. Tentatively, since the following does not, of course, apply to every individual currently exposed to the vastness of the Internet's unreliable resources, it can be stated that the general population today demonstrates a more critical attitude towards what is published online. All news are approached with a dose of wariness, instilled in the individuals in order to protect them from the very real possibility of being deceived. The average person mostly recognizes that there is a chance they're being lied to, which means that the confirmation of their doubts would probably not elicit the same response that it did from Winston.

Furthermore, it was shown that the Party could not control his thoughts openly, unless he was in the basement of the Ministry of Love, for all they tried – including the TVs, the Thought Police and the patrols, so his innermost corner of thoughts was all that he had left, his only private possession in the world that was decidedly against those. The memory was what sparked his ideas of rebellion, fueling them even in the face of his inevitable defeat, and forcing him to try and make things right again in the only ways that he knew how to – by writing a diary which served as a tool for future generations, but also as a tool to keep his own sanity.

The concept of a diary as a type of emotional release is what highlights the importance of language in all dystopian novels – we are returned to our primary idea of the language as a way of expressing ourselves, irreplaceable by anything else in the world. This is what makes control of speech so potent as a means of oppression – by being forced into silence, either by constant surveillance or by a gradual prohibition of letters, humans are left unable to communicate amongst themselves, which makes planning a revolution significantly harder. When the very act of speaking outside of the government-approved norms is considered as grounds for a lawsuit, or even worse, torment and death, abject terror is enough to force whole masses of people into silence, for fear of retaliation.

The censorship, and the repercussions of breaking it, therefore, act on multiple levels. It is not only a means of preventing an open revolution, placing the people in opposition to the government, but it is also a way to plant seeds of discord among citizens themselves. It is a way

of shifting public focus – by being afraid of communicating even amongst each other, for fear of neighbors which are eager to blow the whistle, the revolution is nipped at the bud – even the citizens become branches of the government, in a way, with their newfound ability of making life horrible for others. The neighbors in *Ella Minnow Pea* can be compared to children in *1984*. Although their motives tend to vary, as the children are motivated by conditioning from an early age and the neighbors are motivated by spite and petty vendettas, the effects of their actions are the same. That, in itself, is a means of creating a certain hierarchy in society – which is the one of the goals of dystopian governments.



## 5. WAR = PEACE

It is important to briefly analyse a very famous section from *1984*, WAR=PEACE, which tries to explain the *modus operandi* of totalitarian governments, with their combining of loyalty to the government and disloyalty to the fellow men, all for the purpose of placing a select few on the top. This segment explains that blind loyalty to the ruling power is of the utmost importance for the continuation of their rule, as the numbers, otherwise, are not in their favour – the people are significantly more numerous and that, in itself, holds a form of latent power. That blind devotion is achieved by the introduction of a common enemy – in *1984*, that enemy changes every couple of years, but its purpose stays the same – to give the citizens a channel for directing their frustration caused by living conditions into a thirst for war and a strong sense of nationalism.

When created, however, the loyalty garnered with the citizens is not reciprocated. While the citizens are expected to follow the ruler blindly, the ruler pays them no heed as he brutally punishes even the slightest transgressions. Therefore, loyalty in such a system can be described as a one-way street – while meant to be provided endlessly to the ruling powers, the general population is betrayed by them at every turn.

The slogan “WAR=PEACE” itself, however, is also very interesting. It is a paradoxical statement which demonstrates the use of contradictory slogans by the totalitarian regimes in order to control the population by reinforcing the concept of doublethink. In accepting said slogan, the individual allows two contradictory beliefs to be true simultaneously, without causing any cognitive dissonance. The phenomenon can be connected to the Frankfurt School of thought, considering particularly the concept of reification, which stems from Marxist theory. The term refers to “consider[ing] or represent[ing] (something abstract) as a material or concrete thing: giving definite content and form to (a concept or idea)”.<sup>9</sup> The term therefore encompasses treating social relations and human actions as things or objects, which leads to the dehumanization of individuals and normalization of oppressive systems.

The process is visible in *1984* with the reification of the concept of war, making it a tool meant to promote peace and stability as they are viewed by the dominant system. This ties back into Adorno’s theory of instrumental reason, where rationality is used merely as a means to an

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reify#cite>

end, through which its dark side is portrayed. The slogans used by the Party are seemingly rationalized, with the purpose of maintaining control and quelling any dissent.

## 6. Conclusion

Throughout this thesis we have clarified some key concepts regarding control of free speech, such as censorship, and also ventured into voluntary restriction of free speech, as observed on the very interesting example of the Oulipo school. We have connected those elements in order to analyse a unique novel by Mark Dunn, *Ella Minnow Pea*. Focusing on the linguistical aspects of it, a detailed analysis was provided which made it possible to observe the novel from a political angle, as well, since the two are so interconnected and dependent on each other.

We have therefore managed to relay a political analysis of the novel, marking it as dystopian, alongside the linguistic one, observing the gradual restriction of letter usage. In doing do, the discourse was led in the direction of dystopian literature, mentioning *1984* as a point of comparison, and dystopia in general, since it was established that the term does not necessarily have to be used in the literary sense.

Furthermore, it was mentioned how *Ella Minnow Pea* is not a realistic depiction of a totalitarian regime, and should not be analysed as such. Instead, the discussion was guided to the philosophical and linguistic, and how the two are interwoven. The theories that were introduced were those of the Frankfurt School of philosophy, particularly Adorno, as well as those of Baudrillard, if only briefly. The comprehensive analysis allowed for a conclusion to be drawn, namely that *Ella Minnow Pea* is essentially a reflection of the critical theory ideas presented by the Frankfurt School of philosophy, specifically Theodor W. Adorno. Their critical theory is relayed in a unique and somewhat eccentric way, aided by the fact that it is not realistically depicted. Dunn's work exemplifies linguistic restriction, which parallels Adorno's reduction of the thinkable, and subsequently social restriction.

## 7. Abstract

This paper aims to combine literary theory with the philosophical works of the Frankfurt School of philosophy in order to analyse *Ella Minnow Pea*, a 2001 novel by Mark Dunn. The novel depicts an emergence of a totalitarian regime in a seemingly well-functioning society, whose inclination towards eloquent expression is put to the test as their vocabulary is forcibly reduced by the gradually imposed restriction of allowed letters. The novel is devoid of any real historical distinctions, and that contributes to the abandonment of a realistic style, which in turn continuously calls for the reader's critical attitude. The consideration of that similarity with the critical theory ideas presented by Theodor W. Adorno, a member of the Frankfurt School, alongside many other parallels, enable these texts to be placed in a productive critical relation.

Key words: lipogram, censorship, dystopia, Oulipo, instrumental rationality, negative dialectics, critical theory

## 8. Sažetak

Cilj ovog rada je kombinirati književnu teoriju s filozofskim djelima Frankfurtske filozofske škole kako bi se omogućila analiza romana *Ella Minnow Pea* Marka Dunna napisanog 2001. godine. Roman prikazuje pojavu totalitarističkog režima u naizgled funkcionalnom društvu čija je naklonost k rječitom izražavanju stavljena na kušnju kada postupno ograničavanje dozvoljenih slova prisilno reducira njihov vokabular. Roman je lišen bilo kakvih pravih povijesnih obilježja te to doprinosi odmaku od realističnog stila, što potom neprekidno iziskuje kritičan stav čitatelja. Razmatrajući spomenute karakteristike romana i ideje kritičke teorije koje je iznio Theodor W. Adorno, član Frankfurtske škole, te uzevši u obzir postojanje brojnih drugih paralela, moguće je postaviti ove tekstove u produktivan kritički odnos.

Ključne riječi: lipogram, cenzura, distopija, Oulipo, instrumentalna racionalnost, negativna dijalektika, kritička teorija

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