

Standard English Advanced English

Common Module:
Texts and Human Experiences

1984, George Orwell

Author Biography

- George Orwell was born 'Eric Blair' in India in 1903 and later attended a prestigious boarding school in England as a scholarship student → due to his family being 'lower-upper-middle class', he claimed he never felt as though he fitted in
- Following his schooling, he decided to forego college and instead became a British Imperial Policeman in Burma. He did not enjoy this experience and disagreed with the strict laws and political regime he had to enforce.
- Eventually he returned to England after experiencing poor health and decided to become a writer
- Whilst he was back in England, he was inspired by Jack London's *The People of the Abyss*, (which depicted the slums of London) and was so inspired he went out and bought ragged clothes and even lived among the very poor in London
- Following his stint in the slums, he later lived among the destitute coal miners in northern England, where he came to the conclusion that he wished to support democratic socialism
- In 1936, he traveled to Spain as a reporter during the Spanish Civil War, where he witnessed the appalling crimes committed as a result of fascist political regimes
- Similarly, the rise of powerful dictators including Hitler and Stalin, further inspired his mounting hatred of totalitarianism and political authority
- His novels including, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, are both politically charged and influenced by his political opinions

Context of Composition

- Orwell was influenced by his time in Spain, Germany and the Soviet Union and was particularly interested in their political totalitarian regime and ‘iron curtains’
- After his time within the three countries, Orwell pondered a post-atomic dictatorship in which every individual would be monitored intensely. His text was written 35 years into the future
- The novel is also set in a constant state of war, which is presumably reflects World War II and is a key reason as to why *1984* is set in a dystopia
- Yet whilst Orwell’s vision of a world like *1984* did not materialise, the year 1984 itself still holds great meaning
 - It was the year that the Cold War Ended as reflected in the end of the Berlin Wall and the gradual collapse of the Soviet Union within the early 90s

Plot

- The book is set in Oceania, one of three warring states (the other two being Eurasia and Eastasia)
- Oceania is governed by a totalitarian, all-controlling Party that has brainwashed the population into worshipping and abiding by Big Brother; an all-seeing, all-powerful, all-knowing entity
- The Party manages to maintain its control through the Thought Police and the continual surveillance of its citizens
- The book's protagonist and hero, Winston Smith, is a London citizen who still reels from the nuclear war that occurred following WWII. He belongs to the Outer Party and his job is to 'rewrite history' but only in a way that aligns with the government
- Yet Winston's desire for truth ultimately leads him to secretly rebel against the government, engaged in a forbidden relationship with Julia, a like-minded woman and eventually becomes increasingly interested in a group of dissenters (rebels)
- However, as their rebellious behaviour continues, they pair is being watched by Big Brother
- Winston is approached by O'Brien, a believed member of dissenters, but this is a trap. O'Brien is actually a spy for the Party and he eventually 'captures and sends' Julia and Winston to the 'Ministry of Love' for a re-education (torture, imprisonment and further brain-washing)
- In order to end his torture, he yells that the torture should be enforced upon Julia not him, "do it to Julia"
- The end of the novel sees Winston betray Julia and be released back to society
- He and Julia later encounter each other but do not take interest in the other. It is revealed Winston instead loves Big Brother

Characters

Winston Smith:

- A 39 year old thin, frail, pensive and intellectual man who is minor member of the ruling Party in near-future London
- He hates totalitarian control and the repression of the Party and in turn considers revolutionary dreams in order to obtain a sense of hope

Julia:

- The romantic interest of Winston; she is a dark-haired woman who works in the Fiction Department at the Ministry of Truth
- She is rebellious, quite care-free and claims she has had affairs with multiple party members, her rebellion against the party is also personal, rather than ideological or political (unlike Winston's)

O'Brien:

- A mysterious, powerful and sophisticated Member of the Inner Party, although Winston naively perceives him to be a member of the Brotherhood (the rebellion group)

Characters Continued

Big Brother:

- This ‘character’ never appears in the novel and his existence is even questioned - is he merely a perceived figure to enact order, or is he a living being?
- His ‘presence’ is seen in the posters reading “BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU”, as well as his image stamped on coins and broadcasted on telescreens

Mr. Charrington:

- An elderly man who runs a secondhand store in the prole district. He is kind and encouraging and often reminisces on the past with Winston
- It is presumed he supports the rebellion, however it is later revealed he too, is a member of the Thought Police

Emmanuel Goldstein:

- Another character who is highly influential yet never ‘appears’ within the novel
- According to the Party, he is the leader of the Brotherhood after his falling out with the Party
- He is considered the most dangerous and treacherous man in Oceania

Setting

- All events take place in a fictionalised version of London, in an unspecified future
- ‘Oceania’ is believed to be composed of the Americas, the British Isles, Australasia and the southern part of Africa
- It is assumed that the novel is set in the year 1984, but this is never confirmed and Winston only merely suspects it is the year 1984
- The fictional city of London includes three social groups
 - Inner Party: who live in upper class dwellings and have access to slaves and luxury goods
 - Outer Party: (where Winston lives) the conditions are stark, dilapidated and individuals have little control over their personal space/property
 - Proles: the lowest social group who live in poorly maintained slums where there is little control from the party, yet little support or opportunity

Genre

Dystopian Fiction:

- *1984*, is a totalitarian society in decline which sees inequality, innate human weakness, conflict and miserableness
- The novel is devoid of hope for humankind and instead implies that the human race will only decline as a result of man's lust for power and cruelty
- The characters are constantly fearful of wars, government surveillance and are restricted from free speech
- London is dirty and crumbling, with food shortages, exploding bombs, miserable citizens

Science Fiction:

- *1984*, is an important example of science fiction, although it deviates from this genre too
- Orwell's science fiction elements are reflected in the advanced technologies; dictation machines, flat-screens mounted to walls, spying helicopters

Themes

The Dangers of Totalitarianism:

- Orwell designed *1984* as a means to sound the alarms to Western nations in order to consider the rise of communism and the threat it posed
- Orwell was particularly concerned about the totalitarianistic trait of monitoring and controlling citizens closely
- The novel portrays the ‘ideal totalitarian society’ and the title is assumed to highlight the near threat of such a reality

Psychological Manipulation:

- The Party constantly provides psychological stimuli in order to overwhelm and brainwash individuals, minimising independent thought
- The giant telescreen in every room is a reminder of the Party and its success, virtually eliminating other thoughts
- The Party even undermines the archetypal family structure, by employing “junior spies” who are encouraged to spy on their parents and report disloyalty

Themes Continued

Physical Control:

- The Party watches over individual's actions and even a tiny 'facial twitch' could lead to imprisonment
- Further, Party Members are forced to undergo strenuous morning exercise, followed by long days at work in order to keep people in an exhausted state
- Any person who defies the Party is punished and has to be "reeducated" through brutal, systemised torture

Control of Information and History:

- The Party is constantly managing and rewriting the course of history in order to manipulate their citizens into believing their truth
- In doing so, the Party is also able to control the present and can justify it's past and current actions

Technology:

- Through advanced technology, the Party is able to monitor it's members virtually 24/7
- Technology is also employed to exert large-scale control economically, control information and inflict torture upon threats
- Ironically, it is described by the Party as for the greater good, yet it inflicts some of the most diabolical evil

Motifs

Doublethink:

- Doublethink is a consequence of the large-scale psychological manipulation. It is defined as the ability to hold two contradictory ideas at once
- It is a technique used by the Party in order to eliminate individual thought and rebellion, through ‘brain-washing’ individuals into believing what they dictate, even if it is contradictory to what they know or believe to be ‘correct’
- An example of it is seen in the slogans, “War is Peace”, “Freedom is Slavery”, “Ignorance is Strength”

Urban Decay:

- London is a dilapidated, rundown city which is in need of desperate repair as a result of the Party’s mismanagement and incompetence
- The grim, cityscape however, is an important visual reminder of the Party’s priorities; these being advanced technology and control, instead of the wellbeing of its citizens or state of the city

Symbols

Big Brother:

- He is the Leader of the nation and of the Party, yet it is never confirmed whether or not he actually exists
- Regardless, he symbolises the Party and its public manifestation
- Symbolises a contradiction; presumably warm and protective (due to his name) yet an open threat (as no one can escape his presence and he is always watching)

The Place where there is no darkness

- These words first come to Winston in a dream, but it continues to haunt him throughout the novel
- It is symbolic of the future, referencing Winston's intense fatalism.

The Telescreens

- The omnipresent screens are symbolics of the Party's constant monitoring of its subjects
- Telescreens similarly reflect how totalitarian governments can abuse technology for its own ends instead of exploiting technology as a means to improve the experience of society

Study Questions

1. Describe Winston's character as it relates to his attitude toward the Party. In what ways might his fatalistic streak contribute to his ultimate downfall?
2. How does technology affect the Party's ability to control its citizens? In what ways does the Party employ technology throughout the book?
3. Discuss the idea of Room 101, the place where everyone meets his or her worst fear. What role does the uncertainty play in making Room 101 frightening? Does the cage of rats break Winston's spirit, or does it merely play a symbolic role?
4. What role does Big Brother play within the novel? What effect does he have on Winston? Is Winston's obsession with Big Brother fundamentally similar to or different from his obsession with O'Brien?
5. 1984 is full of images and ideas that do not directly affect the plot, but nevertheless attain thematic importance. What are some of these symbols and motifs, and how does Orwell use them?
6. Discuss the idea of doublethink. How important is doublethink to the Party's control of Oceania? How important is it to Winston's brainwashing?
7. Describe Julia's character as it relates to Winston. How is she different from him? How is she similar to him? How does Julia's age make her attitude toward the Party very different from Winston's?
8. Compare and contrast Julia and Winston. How does each rebel against the Party, and are these rebellions at all effective?
9. Trace Winston's path towards destruction. Where do we first witness this fatalistic outlook? Is his defeat inevitable?

Study Questions Continued

1. Discuss the role of technology in Oceania. In what areas is technology advanced and in what areas has it stalled? Why is this?
2. Discuss the role of Big Brother in Oceania and in Winston's life. What is Big Brother's role in each?
3. Discuss analyse the role O'Brien plays in Winston's life. Why is he such a revered and respected character, even during Winston's time in the Ministry of Love?
4. Discuss the symbolic importance of the prole woman singing in the yard behind Mr. Charrington's apartment. What does she represent for Winston, and for Julia?
5. 1984 is an interpretation of Orwell's definition dystopia and was meant as a warning to those of the modern era. What specifically is Orwell warning us against and how does he achieve this?
6. Analyse the interactions between Winston and the old man in the pub, Syme and Mr Charrington. How do Winston's interactions with these individuals guide him towards his ultimate arrest?
7. Analyse the Party's level of power over its citizens, specifically through the lens of psychological manipulation. Name the tools the Party uses maintain this control and discuss their effectiveness.
8. Outline the social hierarchy of Oceania. How does this hierachy support the Party and its goals?

Quizzes

Test your knowledge with the quizzes below:

<https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/1984/quiz/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/quiz/2015/jun/08/george-orwell-nineteen-eighty-four-quiz>

<https://www.gradesaver.com/1984/study-guide/quiz1>

<https://www.proprofs.com/quiz-school/story.php?title=1984-comprehension-test>