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Orwell's **1984**

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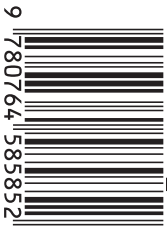
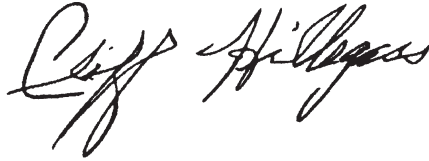
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1984

By **Nikki Moustaki, M.A., M.F.A**

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- Study a graphical Character Map
- Explore themes and literary devices in the Critical Commentaries
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LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR

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Personal Background

George Orwell is the pen name of Arthur Blair, born in 1903 in Motihari, Bengal, India, during the time of the British colonial rule. Young Orwell was brought to England by his mother and educated in Henley and Sussex at schools.

Early Years

The Orwell family was not wealthy, and, in reading Orwell's personal essays about his childhood, readers can easily see that his formative years were less than satisfying. However, the young Orwell had a gift for writing, which he recognized at the age of just five or six. Orwell's first published work, the poem "Awake Young Men of England," was printed in the *Henley and South Oxfordshire Standard* when he was eleven years old.

Orwell attended Eton College. Because literature was not an accepted subject for boys at the time, Orwell studied the master writers and began to develop his own writing style. At Eton, he came into contact with liberalist and socialist ideals, and it was here that his initial political views were formed.

Adult Years

Orwell moved to Burma in 1922, where he served as an Assistant Superintendent of Police for five years before he resigned because of his growing dislike for British Imperialism. In 1928, Orwell moved to Paris and began a series of low paying jobs. In 1929, he moved to London, again living in what he termed "fairly severe poverty." These experiences provided the material for his first novel, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, which he placed with a publisher in 1933.

About this time, while Orwell was teaching in a small private school in Middlesex, he came down with his first bout of pneumonia due to tuberculosis, a condition would plague him throughout his life and require hospitalization again in 1938, 1947, and 1950.

In 1933, Orwell gave up teaching and spent almost a year in Southwold writing his next book, *Burmese Days*. During this time, he worked part time in a bookshop, where he met his future wife, Eileen O'Shaughnessy. He and Eileen were married in 1936, shortly before he moved to Spain to write newspaper articles about the Spanish Civil War.

In Spain, Orwell found what he had been searching for—a true socialist state. He joined the struggle against the Fascist party but had to flee when the group with which he was associated was falsely accused of secretly helping the Fascists.

By 1939, Orwell had returned to England. In 1941, he took a position with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as the person in charge of broadcasting to India and Southeast Asia. Orwell disliked this job immensely, being, as he was, in charge of disseminating propaganda to these British colonies—an act that went against both his nature and his political philosophy. In 1943, Orwell took a job more to his liking, as the literary editor of *The Tribune*.

Shortly after Orwell and Eileen adopted a son in 1944, Orwell became a war correspondent for the *Observer* in Paris and Cologne, Germany. Tragically, Eileen died in the beginning of that year, just before the publication of one of his most important novels, *Animal Farm*. Despite the loss of his wife and his own battle with poor health, Orwell continued his writing and completed the revision of *1984* in 1948. It was published early the next year with great success.

Orwell remarried in 1949 to Sonia Brownell, only a year before his own death of tuberculosis. He is buried in the churchyard of All Saints, Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire.

Literary Writing

Orwell's writing career spanned nearly seventeen years. Ironically, although Orwell didn't consider himself a novelist, he wrote two of the most important literary masterpieces of the 20th century: *Animal Farm* and *1984*. While these are the most famous novels of his career, his memoirs, other novels, and essential work as an essayist all contribute to the body of work that makes up important twentieth century literature.

In Orwell's writing, he sought truth. Even his fiction has elements of the world around him, of the wars and struggles that he witnessed, of the terrible nature of politics, and the terrible toll that totalitarianism takes on the human spirit. From the time he began to write at the age of twenty-four, Orwell longed to capture the struggles of "real" people, to live among the less fortunate, and to tell their stories. Of his own writing, Orwell has said that he writes because there is some kind of lie that he has to expose, some fact to which he wants to draw attention. Orwell certainly does this in *1984*, a novel fraught with political purpose, meaning, and warning.



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Introduction

Orwell's *1984*, like many works of literature, unmistakably carries with it literary traditions reaching back to the earliest of storytellers. Among the literary traditions that Orwell uses is the concept of *utopia*, which he distorts effectively for his own purposes. Utopia, or Nowhere Land, is an ideal place or society in which human beings realize a perfect existence, a place without suffering or human malady. Orwell did not originate this genre. In fact, the word *utopia* is taken from Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, written in 1516. The word is now used to describe any place considered to be perfect.

In *1984*, Orwell creates a technologically advanced world in which fear is used as a tool for manipulating and controlling individuals who do not conform to the prevailing political orthodoxy. In his attempt to educate the reader about the consequences of certain political philosophies and the defects of human nature, Orwell manipulates and usurps the utopian tradition and creates a *dystopia*, a fictional setting in which life is extremely bad from deprivation, oppression, or terror. Orwell's dystopia is a place where humans have no control over their own lives, where nearly every positive feeling is squelched, and where people live in misery, fear, and repression.

The dystopian tradition in literature is a relatively modern one and is usually a criticism of the time in which the author lives. These novels are often political statements, as was Orwell's other dystopian novel, *Animal Farm*, published in 1945. By using a dystopian setting for *1984*, Orwell *suggests* the possibility of a utopia, and then makes very clear, with each horror that takes place, the price humankind pays for "perfect" societies.

Historical Background

Orwell wrote *1984* just after World War II ended, wanting it to serve as a warning to his readers. He wanted to be certain that the kind of future presented in the novel should never come to pass, even though the practices that contribute to the development of such a state were abundantly present in Orwell's time.

Orwell lived during a time in which tyranny was a reality in Spain, Germany, the Soviet Union, and other countries, where government kept an iron fist (or curtain) around its citizens, where there was little, if any freedom, and where hunger, forced labor, and mass execution were common.

Orwell espoused democratic socialism. In his essay, “Why I Write,” published in 1947, two years before the publication of *1984*, Orwell stated that he writes, among other reasons, from the “[d]esire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples’ idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.” Orwell used his writing to express his powerful political feelings, and that fact is readily apparent in the society he creates in *1984*.

The society in *1984*, although fictional, mirrors the political weather of the societies that existed all around him. Orwell’s Oceania is a terrifying society reminiscent of Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union—complete repression of the human spirit, absolute governmental control of daily life, constant hunger, and the systematic “vaporization” of individuals who do not, or will not, comply with the government’s values.

Orwell despised the politics of the leaders he saw rise to power in the countries around him, and he despised what the politicians did to the people of those countries. Big Brother is certainly a fusing of both Stalin and Hitler, both real and terrifying leaders, though both on opposite sides of the philosophical spectrum. By combining traits from both the Soviet Union’s and Germany’s totalitarian states, Orwell makes clear that he is staunchly against any form of governmental totalitarianism, either from the left or the right of the political spectrum.

By making Big Brother so easily recognizable (he is physically similar to both Hitler and Stalin, all three having heavy black mustaches and charismatic speaking styles), Orwell makes sure that the reader of *1984* does not mistake his intention—to show clearly how totalitarianism negatively affects the human spirit and how it is impossible to remain freethinking under such circumstances.

The Role of the Media

Orwell spent time in Spain during the time of Franco’s Fascist military rebellion. Although he was initially pleased with what he considered to be the realization of socialism in Barcelona, he quickly saw that dream change; such a political climate could not maintain that kind of “ideal” political life. The group with which Orwell was associated was accused of being a pro-Fascist organization, a falsehood that was readily believed by many, including the left-wing press in England. As a reflection on this experience, in *1984*, Orwell creates a media service that is nothing more than a propaganda machine, mirroring what Orwell, as a writer, experienced during his time in Spain.

Orwell worked with the BBC during World War II when certain kinds of restrictions limiting what news could be disseminated were common, and he became disturbed by what he perceived to be the falseness of his work. It is noteworthy that Winston Smith, the main character in *1984*, works in the media and is responsible for creating what is, essentially, deceptive propaganda. In fact, it is Winston's position in the media that gives the reader the most insight into the duplicity of the society in which he lives and therefore, the society that Orwell most condemns.

The Setting

The setting of *1984* is Oceania, a giant country comprised of the Americas; the Atlantic Islands, including the British Isles; Australia; and the southern portion of Africa. Oceania's mainland is called Air Strip One, formerly England. The story itself takes place in London in the year 1984, a terrifying place and time where the human spirit and freedom are all but crushed. In the novel, war is constant. The main character, Winston Smith, born before the World War II, grew up knowing only hunger and political instability, and many of the things that he experiences are hyperboles of real activities in wartime Germany and the Soviet Union.

It is important to remember that Orwell based *1984* on the facts as he knew them; hunger, shortages, and repression actually happened as a result of the extreme governmental policies of these countries. The war hysteria, the destruction of the family unit, the persecution of "free thinkers" or those who were "different" or not easily assimilated into the party doctrine, the changing of history to suit the party's agenda, were all too real. Orwell's speculation of the future is actually a creative extension of how the masses were treated under Franco, Hitler, and Stalin.

By setting *1984* in London, Orwell is able to invoke the atmosphere of a real war-torn community, where people live in "wooden dwellings like chicken houses" in bombed-out clearings. His intent clearly was to capitalize on a memory that every reader, especially a British reader, was likely to have. London in *1984*, then, becomes not just a make-believe place where bad things happen to unknown people, but a very real geographical spot that still holds some connection for the modern reader.

In *1984*, the world is sliced into three political realms—the super states of Oceania, Eastasia, and Eurasia. Orwell drew these lines fairly consistent with the political distribution of the Cold War era beginning after World War II. Each of these three states is run by a totalitarian government that is constantly warring on multiple fronts. By creating an entire world at war, Orwell not only creates a terrifying place, but he also eliminates the possibility of escape for Winston, who is forced to live within his present circumstances, horrible and unremitting as they are.

Oceania's political structure is divided into three segments: the Inner Party, the ultimate ruling class, consisting of less than 2 percent of the population; the Outer Party, the educated workers, numbering around 18 to 19 percent of the population; and the Proles, or the proletariat, the working class. Although the Party (Inner and Outer) does not see these divisions as true "classes," it is clear that Orwell wants the reader to see the class distinctions. For a socialist such as Orwell, class distinctions mean the existence of conflict and class struggle. In Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, for example, the few people who comprised the ruling class had a much higher standard of living than the masses, but in these nations, as in *1984*, revolt was all but impossible.

A Brief Synopsis

Winston Smith is a member of the Outer Party. He works in the Records Department in the Ministry of Truth, rewriting and distorting history. To escape Big Brother's tyranny, at least inside his own mind, Winston begins a diary—an act punishable by death. Winston is determined to remain human under inhuman circumstances. Yet telescreens are placed everywhere—in his home, in his cubicle at work, in the cafeteria where he eats, even in the bathroom stalls. His every move is watched. No place is safe.

One day, while at the mandatory Two Minutes Hate, Winston catches the eye of an Inner Party Member, O'Brien, whom he believes to be an ally. He also catches the eye of a dark-haired girl from the Fiction Department, whom he believes is his enemy and wants him destroyed. A few days later, Julia, the dark-haired girl whom Winston believes to be against him, secretly hands him a note that reads, "I love you." Winston takes pains to meet her, and when they finally do, Julia draws up a complicated plan whereby they can be alone.

Alone in the countryside, Winston and Julia make love and begin their allegiance against the Party and Big Brother. Winston is able to secure a room above a shop where he and Julia can go for their romantic trysts. Winston and Julia fall in love, and, while they know that they will someday be caught, they believe that the love and loyalty they feel for each other can never be taken from them, even under the worst circumstances.

Eventually, Winston and Julia confess to O'Brien, whom they believe to be a member of the Brotherhood (an underground organization aimed at bringing down the Party), their hatred of the Party. O'Brien welcomes them into the Brotherhood with an array of questions and arranges for Winston to be given a copy of "the book," the underground's treasonous volume written by their leader, Emmanuel Goldstein, former ally of Big Brother turned enemy.

Winston gets the book at a war rally and takes it to the secure room where he reads it with Julia napping by his side. The two are disturbed by a noise behind a painting in the room and discover a telescreen. They are dragged away and separated. Winston finds himself deep inside the Ministry of Love, a kind of prison with no windows, where he sits for days alone. Finally, O'Brien comes. Initially Winston believes that O'Brien has also been caught, but he soon realizes that O'Brien is there to torture him and break his spirit. The Party had been aware of Winston's "crimes" all along; in fact, O'Brien has been watching Winston for the past seven years.

O'Brien spends the next few months torturing Winston in order to change his way of thinking—to employ the concept of *doublethink*, or the ability to simultaneously hold two opposing ideas in one's mind and believe in them both. Winston believes that the human mind must be free, and to remain free, one must be allowed to believe in an objective truth, such as $2 + 2 = 4$. O'Brien wants Winston to believe that $2 + 2 = 5$, but Winston is resistant.

Finally, O'Brien takes Winston to Room 101, the most dreaded room of all in the Ministry of Love, the place where prisoners meet their greatest fear. Winston's greatest fear is rats. O'Brien places over Winston's head a mask made of wire mesh and threatens to open the door to release rats on Winston's face. When Winston screams, "Do it to Julia!" he relinquishes his last vestige of humanity.

Winston is a changed man. He sits in the Chestnut Tree Café, watching the telescreens and agonizing over the results of daily battles

on the front lines. He has seen Julia again. She, too, is changed, seeming older and less attractive. She admits that she also betrayed him. In the end, there is no doubt, Winston loves Big Brother.

List of Characters

Winston Smith Winston, the novel's protagonist, is staunchly against the Party. He finds unobtrusive methods to rebel, or at least he believes them to go unnoticed. His main desire is to remain human under inhuman circumstances.

Julia Winston's love-interest and ally. Julia also works in the Ministry of Truth. She is against the Party's doctrines, but she merely wants to break the rules, not change the society.

O'Brien Member of the Inner Party. A mysterious figure, O'Brien is at once Winston's enemy and his ally and is the reason for Winston's ultimate indoctrination to the Party. O'Brien is a personification of the Party, and much of the Party's doctrine is revealed through him.

Big Brother Leader of the Party. Big Brother is a god-like figure, all-present, all-powerful, and eternal—yet quite intangible.

Emmanuel Goldstein Leader of the Brotherhood. Orwell leaves ambiguous whether the Brotherhood actually exists or is merely propaganda perpetuated by the Party. Nevertheless, Goldstein, whether he exists or not, figures prominently as a foil to Big Brother.

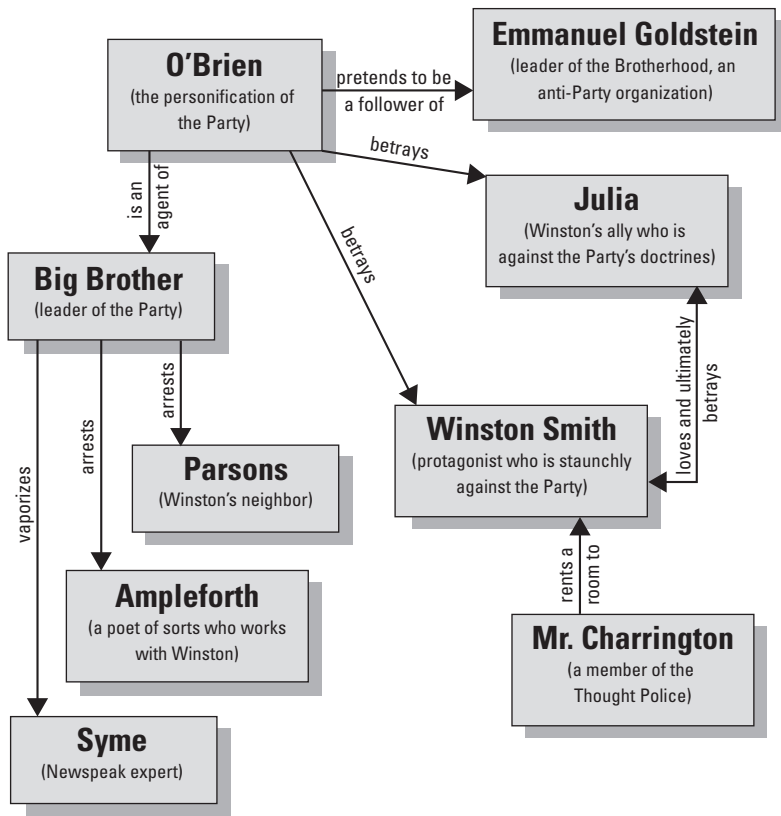
Mr. Charrington Owner of the shop where Winston rents the room and a member of the Thought Police.

Parsons Winston's neighbor who ends up in the Ministry of Love with Winston, turned in by his own children.

Syme A Newspeak expert who works with Winston in the Ministry of Truth and is vaporized.

Ampleforth A poet-of-sorts who works with Winston in the Ministry of Truth and also winds up in the Ministry of Love.

Character Map



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Part One

Chapter I

Summary

On a bitter April day in London, Oceania, Winston Smith arrives at his small apartment on his lunch break. The face of Big Brother is everywhere. It is immediately obvious, through Winston's musings, that the political weather of Winston's London is grim and totalitarian. Winston pours himself a large drink and sets about to commit an act punishable by death—starting a diary. He believes he is fortunate because a small corner of his apartment is hidden from the telescreen—a device that allows him to be viewed and heard twenty-four hours a day by the authorities—or Big Brother. Here is where he begins the diary.

Winston is stuck by a pang of writer's block when he suddenly realizes that he doesn't know for whom he is writing the diary. In his panic, he begins to write a stream-of-consciousness account of a recent trip to the movies. While writing this, he has a memory of a significant happening earlier in the week, in which he was simultaneously attracted to and repelled by a young woman working in his building. He felt as though she was following him. He also remembers sharing a brief moment with O'Brien, a member of the Inner Party, an encounter in which Winston believes that O'Brien attempted to show solidarity with him against the tyranny of Big Brother. He continues writing, this time with more substantive material about his feelings on the current environment in which he lives. He is interrupted by a knock at the door.

Commentary

The opening image of the work sets the foreboding tone that prevails throughout as the reader is introduced to Winston Smith, the fatalistic protagonist of the novel, on a "cold day in April," when "the clocks were striking thirteen." Immediately, the author depicts a society in decay by describing a setting of "gritty dust," "hallways [smelling] of boiled cabbage and old rag mats," elevators (the lift) not working, and electrical current that is turned off during daylight hours.

The other main characters are introduced through Winston's perception of them. Julia, the dark-haired girl from the fiction department (who, in this part, is described but, as yet, unnamed), causes him "to feel a peculiar uneasiness which had fear mixed up in it as well as hostility, whenever she was anywhere near him." Winston suspects her to be a member of the Thought Police. Initially, he sees her as a symbol of social orthodoxy, that is, she possesses "a general clean-mindedness," an enthusiastic adherent to the Party line. Conversely, Winston feels a certain comradeship with O'Brien, predicated on his secretly held belief that "O'Brien's political orthodoxy was not perfect." Winston developed this impression when he and O'Brien had once exchanged glances. Big Brother (both a person and a concept) is introduced very early on in posters that appear in Winston's building bearing the caption "Big Brother Is Watching You." Finally, Emmanuel Goldstein, also, a person and a concept, is introduced during a hate session.



The political environment is detailed through Winston's musings, as well as narrative descriptions of specific political entities. At the heart of the political orthodoxy that exists is the process of controlling human thought through the manipulation of language and information. Crucial to manipulating the language and the information individuals receive are *doublethink* and *Newspeak*. Doublethink is the act of holding, simultaneously, two opposite, individually exclusive ideas or opinions and believing in both simultaneously and absolutely. Doublethink requires using logic against logic or suspending disbelief in the contradiction. The three slogans of the party—"War Is Peace; Freedom Is Slavery; Ignorance Is Strength"—are obvious examples of doublethink. The act of doublethink also occurs in more subtle details.



As Winston begins writing in the diary, he commits his first overt act of rebellion against the Party; he creates a piece of evidence that exists outside himself. He is still safe because no one else knows of his thoughts or his act, but the reader shares the ominous mood created when Winston observes, "Sooner or later they always got you." Winston, obviously, knows the significance of his act; nothing will ever be the same for him.

This first chapter introduces the reader to a host of significant issues and images that become motifs that set the mood for and recur throughout the novel. The reader is not so subtly drawn into a world of constant duplicity, manipulation, and surveillance. The name of

Winston's apartment, "Victory Mansions," for example, creates a particular mental image for the reader that is immediately contradicted by Orwell's observation that the ". . . hallway smelt of boiled cabbage and old rags," the lift (elevator) seldom works, and the electricity is cut off during daylight hours—hardly a description one imagines of a structure with such an exalted name.

Big Brother, whose countenance purposely mirrors Stalin, and his pseudo omnipresence are introduced to the reader in the posters and on the telescreen. Although he never appears in person, Big Brother is the dictator of record in Oceania, and the posters carry the caption "Big Brother Is Watching You," enhancing the menacing feeling of an evil environment.



Orwell alerts the reader's senses of anticipation and dread in his depiction of the bureaucracy and political structure of Oceania: "The Ministry of Truth," which rewrites history to suit the occasion; "The Ministry of Peace," which functions to wage war; "The Ministry of Love," which maintains law and order and is "the really frightening one"; and the "Ministry of Plenty" coupled with the Thought Police, two minute hate sessions, and antithetical national slogans (War Is Peace, Freedom Is Slavery, and Ignorance Is Strength).

Glossary

(Here and in the following chapters, difficult words and phrases, as well as allusions and historical references, are explained.)

varicose ulcer an ulcer resulting from an abnormally and irregularly swollen or dilated vein ("varicose vein").

pig iron crude iron, as it comes from the blast furnace.

blue-bottle a bright, metallic-blue blowfly.

sanguine of the color of blood; ruddy: said especially of complexions.

Chapter II

Summary

The knock at the door is Winston's neighbor, Mrs. Parsons, who asks him to unclog her sink because her husband, Tom Parsons, who works with Winston in the Ministry of Truth, is not home. Winston obliges her and is accosted by her children, who call him a traitor, a thought criminal, and finally, Goldstein.

Winston returns home to continue the diary and again thinks of O'Brien. Winston recalls a dream seven years earlier in which a voice said to him, "We shall meet in the place where there is no darkness." He now believes this voice to be that of O'Brien's and is certain that, in some way or another, the prophecy of the dream will come to pass.

Back at the diary, Winston finally realizes who the audience is for his diary. He also realizes the inevitability of his death at the hands of the Thought Police.

Commentary



Winston's dream foreshadows what will take place later on in the book. The use of the phrase, "a place where there is no darkness," another recurring image in the novel, takes an ironic twist when this premonition of Winston's does not turn out as he expects. Winston attributes this phrase to O'Brien, a member of the Inner Party, who, later in the novel, meets Winston "in a place where there is no darkness"—the Ministry of Love, a prison.



The mutability of the past and the existence of fact through memory are prominent themes throughout *1984*. In this chapter, Winston begins to ask himself questions that will haunt him throughout the rest of the book; among them, how can an idea survive if the past is not allowed to exist? Both Hitler and Stalin distorted the past and rewrote history to maintain the illusion of supreme power. However, Orwell's intent is not merely to warn against the Hitlers (Fascists) and Stalins (Communists) of the world. Instead, his aim is to warn against

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