

1984

George Orwell



About the author

George Orwell (Eric Arthur Blair) was born in India into a middle-class English family in 1903. He went to private school in England where he learnt to distrust the British class system, and in 1922 he started work as a policeman in Burma. In 1927, Orwell returned to Europe, choosing to live among the poorest people in order to challenge his own middle-class viewpoint. He wrote *Down and Out in Paris and London* about his experiences. From this point Orwell became a passionate supporter of socialist ideals and his politics are strongly represented in everything that he wrote. In 1936, Orwell went to Spain to report on the Spanish Civil War. He joined forces against General Franco's Fascist rebellion. He wrote about his experiences and his hope for the future of Spanish socialism in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938).

Orwell worked as a reporter during the Second World War (1939–45). In 1943 he started writing *Animal Farm*, his celebrated political satire about the communist regime in Russia. He wrote his other world-famous masterpiece, *1984* in 1948–49, and died only a year later.

Summary

Winston Smith lives in an imaginary future where the government ('Big Brother') watches and controls the actions and thoughts of all citizens. He lives in London – a dirty city destroyed by an on-going war. There is no good housing or food for ordinary citizens and things that break down are rarely repaired. Winston works for the Ministry of Truth where he rewrites facts about history and politics. The Ministry uses this propaganda to brainwash its citizens and prevent any criticism. But Winston is different from the people around him: he is still able to think for himself. He instinctively hates the system under which he

is forced to live and he is desperate to express his own opinions and feelings.

Chapters 1–2: One afternoon in London in 1984 Winston Smith begins a diary. He wants to write about his feelings about the society he lives in. In the state of Oceania, Big Brother and the Thought Police watch everyone, with the help of *telescreens* everywhere. As he begins his diary, Winston remembers a pretty, dark woman at the Ministry during the Two Minutes Hate for Emmanuel Goldstein, the enemy of the People. He is afraid of her. He also thinks of O'Brien, an important member of the Inner Party who may share Winston's feelings about Oceania. Winston is interrupted by his neighbour Mrs Parsons. She is the wife of Tom Parsons, a faithful and stupid Party member. She asks Winston for help with her sink. While Winston helps her he is attacked by her two children. The children scream that Winston is a *thoughtcriminal*, someone who thinks thoughts that are not allowed. The mother is afraid of her children.

Chapters 3–4: Winston works at the Ministry of Truth, Minitrue, in the language of Newspeak. Winston changes the words of the news so that they are the same as what the Party says. Words are important because without language people cannot think. Newspeak is a way of controlling people by destroying language. People can also be destroyed or *vaporized*, and, in Newspeak, they become *unpersons*. Winston goes to a café for lunch and sees the pretty, dark girl again. Later, Winston writes in his diary again and tries to remember his parents, who were *vaporized* when he was quite young. He writes about a woman whom he paid to have sex. He thinks of his wife Katherine and their short marriage. She was not interested in sex, but thought it was a necessary duty to have children. Later, Winston goes for a walk in the neighbourhood of the *proles*, the poor people who do the hardest work in Oceania. He comes to the shop where he bought the diary and the shop keeper, Mr Charrington, invites him to look at a room above the shop. He thinks that he would like to live there; it has no *telescreen*.

Chapters 5–6: The pretty, dark girl sends a message to Winston saying that she loves him. They agree to meet in the country. Winston meets the girl, Julia, and they have sex. Winston rents the room above the shop and he and Julia often meet there to talk and make love. In a world where sexual love is not allowed, their relationship is as much an act against the party as it is an expression of emotion. Winston knows that he and Julia are in great danger.

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Chapters 7–8: Winston and Julia visit O'Brien at his home. They tell him they are against the Party and want to join the Brotherhood, an anti-government organisation led by Emmanuel Goldstein, which is fighting against Big Brother. O'Brien tells them that he is part of the Brotherhood and later he gives them a book by Goldstein. Winston and Julia return to their secret room and Winston reads Goldstein's book. Winston and Julia are arrested in the room by the Thought Police.

Chapters 9–10: Winston is in a prison cell in the Ministry of Love, Miniluv. O'Brien has tricked him. He tells Winston that Julia has betrayed him. O'Brien tortures Winston systematically. He wants Winston to *doublethink* – to believe something that he knows is untrue – in order to prove his loyalty to the Party. Tom Parsons appears in the cell. His daughter has told the police that her father is guilty of *thoughtcrime*.

Chapters 11–12: O'Brien admits that he wrote a large part of Goldstein's book and that the Party only wants power. O'Brien sends Winston to Room 101 where rats, the thing that Winston most fears, are waiting to eat him. Finally, he begs O'Brien to kill Julia rather than himself and so betrays her. Later, Winston is freed and he meets Julia. They both realise they have been changed and no longer love each other. Winston's ability to think independently or to feel genuine emotion is completely eroded – he loves Big Brother.

Background and themes

Socialist ideals: *1984* was written shortly after the end of the Second World War, when many European countries were establishing new political systems. Orwell was a socialist, believing strongly that individuals should be treated fairly and equally by their governments. However, his in-depth knowledge of European history and contemporary politics meant he was aware that socialist ideals were not easily put into practice.

Power: In *1984*, Orwell shows how and why a government can become all-powerful and all individual freedom completely eroded. Goldstein's book explains (Chapter 8) that absolute equality in society is impossible. There will always be different social classes, and it is human nature for humans to exert power over weaker people.

Manipulating language: One way in which the government maintains and strengthens their power is manipulating

language. Just as clever advertising slogans and political messages might persuade us today, Big Brother uses language to plant new ideas in peoples' minds and erase old ones. As Syme explains in Chapter 3, if a word like 'freedom' does not exist, then the whole idea of freedom also ceases to exist. Orwell stresses this point by inventing a whole new language, 'Newspeak', for *1984*.

Re-writing history: Similarly, Orwell exemplifies the importance of historical documentation. If an event is not documented it ceases to exist in the present. But it is only by understanding the past that we can judge and make informed decisions about our future. At the ironically named Ministry of Truth, Winston and his colleagues work on re-writing and erasing history so that citizens remain ignorant and the Party is always in the right. Winston records history by writing in his diary – itself an act of rebellion.

Repression: When all else fails, the Party maintains power by using brute force. Those who do not conform are killed ('vaporized') or tortured until fear prevents them from opposing the government in any way. Orwell's experiences in Spain exposed him to human brutality of the worst kind. *1984* warns us that ignoring the violent side of human nature can cost us our individual freedom. In *1984*, difficult political ideas are expressed in a very simple and elegant style. Almost all the language associated with the Party is extremely ironic (Big Brother is a cruel tyrant, not a loving, protecting friend; the Ministry of Truth manufactures lies; and the Ministry of Love tortures, kills and destroys). Similarly, the contradictory Party slogans (War is Peace; Freedom is Slavery; Ignorance is Strength) reflect the inherent absurdity of the Party policy itself.

Liberty: Essentially, *1984* is about the balance between personal liberty and social order. It is a warning of what *could* happen under a government that takes more and more responsibility for social order upon itself.

Discussion activities

Introduction

After reading

1 Discuss: Tell students that George Orwell wrote *1984* in 1948. For a whole generation of readers *1984* was a possible vision of the future. Have students discuss in groups what the historical or political reality behind Orwell's vision was and if today's political reality makes *1984* a possible vision of the future. Afterwards, groups compare answers.

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Chapters 1–2

Before reading

- 2 **Predict:** Have students read the titles to Part 1, *Thoughtcrime*, and Chapter 1, *Big Brother Is Watching You*. Ask: *What do you think thoughtcrime is? Who do you think Big Brother is? What kind of person is he?*

After reading

- 3 **Check:** Students check and discuss their predictions.
- 4 **Discuss:** Put students into groups and ask them to discuss: *It is dangerous for Winston Smith to write a diary in 1984. In what situations do you think that writing a diary can be dangerous today?* Afterwards groups compare answers.
- 5 **Write:** Tell students: *During the Two Minutes Hate, the dark pretty girl and others scream at the picture of Emmanuel Goldstein. Ask them to write a paragraph about who they think would be hated as much today and why. Afterwards students compare answers.*
- 6 **Role play:** Put the students into groups of four, one pair as the two Parsons children, and the other pair as Winston and Mrs Parsons. *Pair A:* The children say that Winston and Mrs Parsons are *thoughtcriminals*. The children seem to know what Winston has been thinking and writing in his diary. They also invent things about Mrs Parsons and her husband Tom. *Pair B:* Mrs Parsons and Winston try to make the best possible defence.

Chapters 3–4

Before reading

- 7 **Guess:** In groups. Students read title of Chapter 2 and guess what kind of work Winston and others do there. Compare answers.

After reading

- 8 **Write:** In pairs students write a list of adjectives, following the good/ungood example that Syme mentions. With one adjective and the prefix 'un', Newspeak is available to all. Compare lists and the differences between standard adjectives and those of Newspeak.

Chapters 5–6

Before reading

- 9 **Predict:** Tell the students: *The pretty, dark girl gives Winston a message. Look at the picture of the girl in Chapter 5. What do you think the message says?*

After reading

- 10 **Check and discuss:** Check students' predictions. Ask students: *Why is 'I love you' a dangerous message in 1984? Is it also dangerous in our society today?*
- 11 **Role play:** In pairs, students role play Winston and Mr Charrington. Mr Charrington tells Winston about different objects from the past (such as the diary) that Winston has never seen before. Winston asks him what the objects are for and how they work.

Chapters 7–8

Before reading

- 12 **Predict:** Tell students: *Winston and Julia go to O'Brien's flat and tell him that they are enemies of Big Brother. What do you think O'Brien will do?*

After reading

- 13 **Artwork:** Tell students: *Draw a picture of Emmanuel Goldstein, the enemy of Big Brother. Include a slogan. The class votes for best picture.*
- 14 **Discuss:** In pairs students discuss: *Doublethink is the ability to hold two contradictory thoughts at the same time. Do you think that people today also do this? Give examples. Is this a good thing?*

Chapters 9–10

Before reading

- 15 **Guess:** Tell students: *In these chapters three people appear in Winston's cell: Ampleforth, Parsons, and O'Brien. Two of them are prisoners and one works for the Thought Police. Which one works for the Thought Police? Students discuss the questions in pairs.*

After reading

- 16 **Discuss:** Talk about students predictions in activities 12 and 15.
- 17 **Write:** Tell students that Ampleforth was put in prison because he didn't change the word 'God' in a poem. Ask them to write a short poem that they think the Thought Police would not like. Ask some students to read their poem to the class and explain why they think the Thought Police wouldn't like it.
- 18 **Artwork:** Tell students: *You work in the Ministry of Truth, Minitrue. Draw a poster called Little Brother is Watching You. The poster is for the Spies, so that young children will spy on their parents like Tom Parsons' children did. Don't forget the colour of the Spies uniform (page 9). Students vote for best poster.*

Chapters 11–12

Before reading

- 19 **Discuss:** Tell students: *Chapter 11 is called 'The Last Man' because O'Brien tells Winston that he is the last man. What do you think O'Brien means? Is there a last woman, too?*

After reading

- 20 **Role play:** In pairs students take the roles of either Winston and O'Brien or Winston and Julia. They tell each other how they feel about what has happened.
- 21 **Write:** In pairs, students imagine a different ending to the book and write a summary. The class votes for best alternative ending.