



1984

By George Orwell

First published in 1949

Genre & subject

Dystopian Fiction

Synopsis

Winston Smith works for the Ministry of Truth in London, chief city of Airstrip One. Big Brother stares out from every poster and the Thought Police uncover every act of betrayal. When Winston finds love with Julia, he discovers that life does not have to be dull and deadening, and awakens to new possibilities. Despite the police helicopters that hover and circle overhead, Winston and Julia begin to question the Party; they are drawn towards conspiracy. Yet Big Brother will not tolerate dissent - even in the mind. For those with original thoughts they invented Room 101.

Author biography

Eric Arthur Blair (25 June 1903 – 21 January 1950), known by his pen name George Orwell, was an English novelist, essayist, journalist and critic. His work is marked by lucid prose, awareness of social injustice, opposition to totalitarianism, and commitment to democratic socialism.

Commonly ranked as one of the most influential English writers of the 20th century, and as one of the most important chroniclers of English culture of his generation, Orwell wrote literary criticism, poetry, fiction, and polemical journalism..

Orwell's work continues to influence popular and political culture, and the term Orwellian — descriptive of totalitarian or authoritarian social practices — has entered the language together with several of his neologisms, including cold war, Big Brother, thought police, Room 101, doublethink, and thoughtcrime.

Discussion starters

- The world within which Winston lives is replete with contradictions. For example a major tenet of the Party's philosophy is that War is Peace. Similarly, the Ministry of Love serves as what we would consider a department of war. What role do these contradictions serve on a grand scale? Discuss other contradictions inherent in the Party's philosophy. What role does contradiction serve within the framework of Doublethink? How does Doublethink satisfy the needs of The Party?
- In the afterword, the commentator describes 1984 as "a warning." Indeed, throughout the text, Orwell plants both subtle and overt warnings to the reader. What do you think are some of the larger issues at hand here?

- Describe the role that O'Brien plays in Winston's life. Why do you think that initially, Winston is drawn to O'Brien? Why does he implicitly trust him, despite the enormous dangers involved?
- Discuss the significance and nature of Winston's dreams. Deconstruct the dream wherein O'Brien claims that they "shall meet in a place where there is no darkness" (page 22), and the dream in which Winston's mother and sister disappear (page 26). What are the underpinnings of these dreams? What deeper meanings do they hold? Why do you think the author devotes as much time as he does to Winston's dreams?
- Discuss Winston as a heroic figure. What qualities does he possess that could define him as one?
- Compare and contrast some of the other characters in Winston's world: Parsons, Syme, O'Brien. How does Winston view each one? How do they differ from Winston? What opinion do you think each one has of Winston?
- Early on in the novel, we learn of Winston's belief in the proles as a liberating force. What accounts for Winston's almost blind faith in the proles? What are some of the characteristics of the proles that, in Winston's eyes, make them the ultimate means for overthrowing Big Brother?
- From her first appearance as "the dark-haired girl," through to the end of the novel, Julia is a key figure in 1984. Trace the path of Julia in relation to Winston's life; in what ways does she influence him? Did you trust her, initially? Overall, do you feel she had a positive or negative impact upon him?
- How would you describe the author's tone in 1984? Does it add to or detract from the character's discourse?
- In the final analysis, how accurate was Orwell in his vision of the future? In what ways does our contemporary society compare to his idea of society in 1984? Are there examples in which he was correct? What is most opposite? Do you see a potential for aspects of Orwell's "vision" to come true?

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