

Insight Text Guide

Ross Walker

Nineteen Eighty-Four

George Orwell



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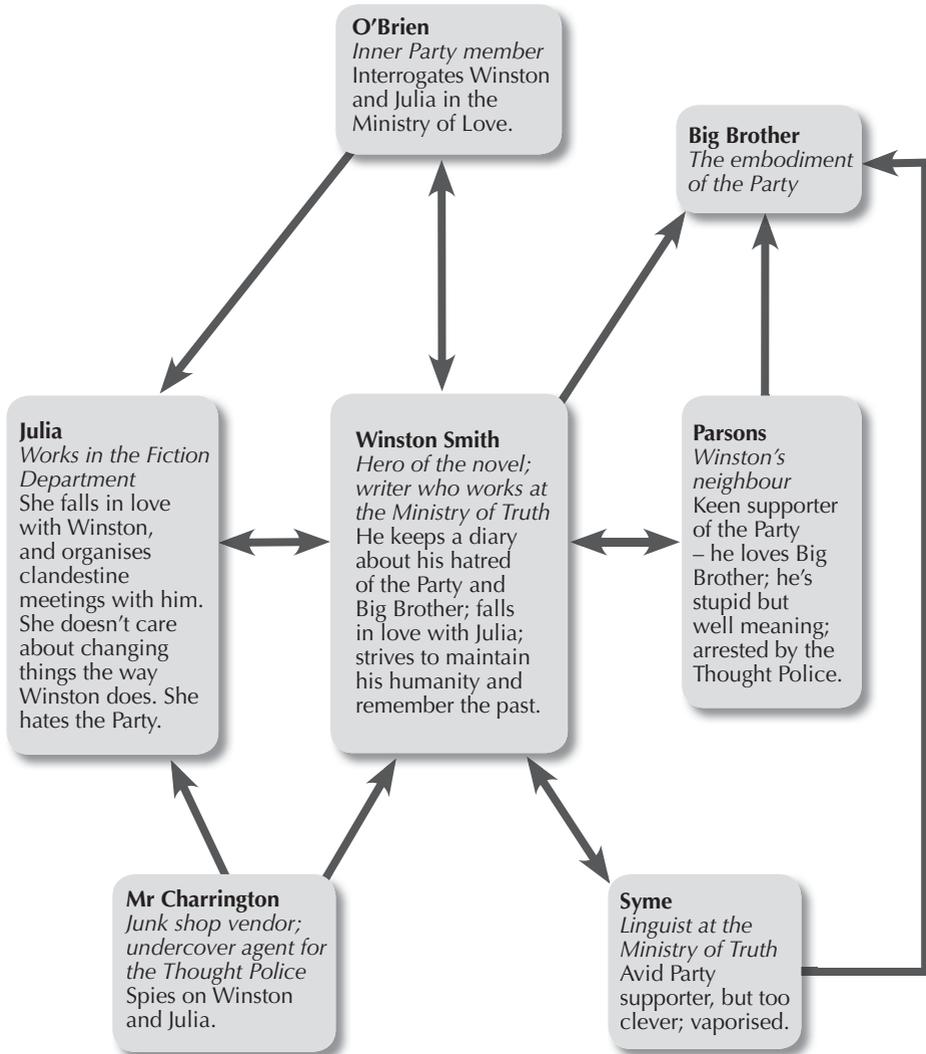
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CHARACTER MAP



INTRODUCTION

George Orwell: a passionate man

George Orwell will always be remembered for his last novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Nearing the end of his life, he retreated to the Scottish island of Jura. There, battling against the ill health which plagued so much of his life, he worked furiously to finish the novel. The sense of urgency with which he worked testified to his sense of the book's importance. He meant for this work to stand as a timeless warning to all humanity of the evil of totalitarian tyranny. Totalitarian government can be defined as a centralised system of government in which a single party without opposition rules over political, economic, social and cultural life.

Orwell was indeed a 'political animal'. All his works bear witness to his preoccupation with social conditions and the social structures within which people live. He always maintained a strong sense of social justice and outrage against the evils inflicted on people by their rulers. Although his politics were decisively left of centre and although he called himself a socialist, he constantly pointed out weaknesses in socialism. That was typical of his nature, for perhaps more than anything else, he abhorred blind conformity to any philosophy or creed. He cherished the independence of mind that is threatened by slavish adherence to belief systems. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reveals the truth that any political philosophy, whether of the Right or the Left, is capable of enslaving people when that philosophy is put into practice with the fanatical zeal that crushes fundamental human rights. Above all, the novel reveals Orwell to be a humanist, a man with a firm belief in both the dignity of humanity and the need to preserve it. Orwell was making no ideological distinction when he wrote in 1946 that 'politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia' (Orwell 2000, p.357).

Orwell's biographer, Michael Sheldon, notes that 'there is some reflection of [Orwell's] character in almost everything he wrote' (1991, p.355). Although *Nineteen Eighty-Four* describes a brutally bleak work, it reveals some of the most attractive aspects of its author's humanity: his unshakeable belief in the importance of the individual; his fierce intelligence; and his love of nature and of 'useless', but beautiful, objects to be found in junk shops.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

1948 becomes 1984

Orwell wrote this novel during the year 1948. Apparently, he obtained his futuristic date by transposing the final two digits of the year of writing. While the novel represents his vision of a nightmare totalitarian future, his setting of the city of London in the state of Oceania is largely based on post-war England. The descriptions of the physical conditions of the city mirror those of the country which had just recently emerged from the devastating war against Hitler's Germany. Orwell spent much of the war in London and he would have witnessed the daily German Blitz against that city. The London of 1984 exists under a rain of bombs and rockets, just like the actual London of the early 1940s. Although England won the war against Hitler, the peace was hard and austere. Recovery was slow: ruined buildings were everywhere, essential items were rationed and in Eastern Europe a new threat was emerging in the shape of Soviet Russia.

Stalinist Russia

During World War II, Britain, the United States and Australia joined with Russia to fight against Germany. At the end of the war, the United States had established its sphere of influence in Western Europe and Russia had control over Eastern Europe. The stage was set for a confrontation between these two ideologically opposed countries; the 'Cold War' had begun. The Western democracies, especially the United States, were deeply opposed to communism, the dominant ideology of the Russian regime. The goal of communist philosophy was to create a classless society in which capitalism was overthrown by a working-class revolution that would give ownership and control of wealth and property to a one-party state.

In 1946, during a visit to the United States the British wartime Prime Minister, Winston Churchill (1874–1965), declared that 'an Iron Curtain' had descended on Eastern Europe. He was referring to Soviet Russia's domination of Eastern Europe. The Russian dictator, Joseph Stalin (1879–

1953), who ruled Russia from 1922 until his death in 1953, sought to expand Soviet influence in the East and throughout the rest of the world. He conducted a reign of terror inside Russia itself. His portrait looked down upon his people all over Russia. Much like the portrait of Big Brother himself, it was a ubiquitous image of his power and menace. Stalin was responsible for the deaths of millions inside Russia; any hint of dissent could be deadly. He imposed a grim uniformity on Russia and the satellite countries of Eastern Europe, quite similar to that which Orwell depicts in Oceania. He made creative art and literature impossible; the only art or literature permissible was that which extolled the glories and achievements of the state. Everything had to be subjugated to the will of the state and its ruler. A sense of individuality – ‘ownlife’ in Newspeak – was considered a crime. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, O’Brien explains that no works of literature are written by individuals. In Stalinist Russia, creative artists such as the writers Boris Pasternak and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and composers such as Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich, were accused of producing ‘anti-Soviet’ works.

This is not to imply that Orwell necessarily intended Big Brother to represent Stalin. Big Brother, after all, is not an actual person. He represents the spirit of extremist government of any complexion. The repression, terror and murder of the Third Reich of Adolf Hitler (1889–1945), only recently defeated when Orwell wrote the novel, must have been in the author’s mind as he wrote. The mass hysteria of the public rallies organised by the Party bring to mind Hitler’s huge Nazi Party rallies. Nazism (German ‘National Socialism’) was the political ideology founded by Hitler. It was characterised by fanatical nationalism, ruthless suppression of all domestic opposition and especially fierce anti-Semitism which ultimately resulted in the extermination of six million European Jews. (Emmanuel Goldstein, the scapegoat for all ills in Oceania is Jewish. Anti-Semitism was also a prominent feature of Stalin’s regime.)

Yet Big Brother has the godlike stature which was accorded to Stalin. In addition many aspects of the Party’s rule in Oceania mirror Stalinist Russia, for example, the shortage and the inferior quality of vital goods available, the constant surveillance of the citizens, the torture chambers

where dissidents were sent for 're-education' and the falsification of history to create a world in which the Party is always right. The Soviet regime incarcerated dissidents (those who publicly criticised the regime) in psychiatric hospitals – just as dissidents such as Winston Smith in Orwell's novel were judged to be insane. But Big Brother has come to be a symbol of the kind of power which dictators like Stalin imposed upon their people. Orwell would have been surprised indeed to learn that these days his creation is often known only as the title of a popular reality TV program.

The prescience (capacity to predict future events) of Orwell's novel is remarkable. Orwell understood acutely the mentality behind totalitarian government – so much so that many examples in recent history mirror the abuses of the regime of Big Brother. During the 'Cultural Revolution' of Mao Zedong's China, which took place from 1965 to 1968, Mao (1893–1976) had semi-divine status and schools in China taught little beside the precepts of *The Little Red Book*, which he wrote. The Cultural Revolution was a political and cultural reform movement that aimed to revolutionise political opinion and behaviour. More recently, the same semi-divine status has been attained by Kim Jong-il, the leader of North Korea, the most rigidly communist state in the world today. Orwell depicted, too, the widespread economic failure of communism. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the population is constantly bombarded with bogus statistics designed to prove that the standard of living is constantly rising, while the majority of people live lives of poverty and deprivation.

We could describe the totalitarianism of the Party as a mindset, just as religious fundamentalism is a mindset. That is, what the fundamentalist actually believes eventually becomes a matter of only secondary importance. What is considered most important is that no one should think differently – to have a dissenting view is 'thoughtcrime'. Big Brother lives on in the leaders of the Taliban in Afghanistan, or the mullahs of Iran. He lives in the terrorists who seek to impose their power on those of a different ideology and who commit their atrocities in the name of God. The sadistic cruelty of their acts bears out the truth of O'Brien's admission that the Party seeks power for its own sake, rather than for any higher purpose.

At the same time, perhaps there are some grounds for greater optimism than Orwell might have felt when he ended his novel with the depressing announcement that Winston 'had won the victory over himself' since he finally 'loved Big Brother' (p.311). As we look around the world and see the decline of communism, there may be reason to believe in Winston's hope that 'the spirit of Man' can win against the forces that strive to crush it. The liberalisation of the Gorbachev era in Russia, culminating in the demolition of the Berlin Wall, which separated the Soviet bloc from the Western bloc, and the triumph of Lech Wałęsa's *Solidarność* (Solidarity) movement in Poland, bear witness to the strength of that spirit.

Orwell's *Animal Farm*

To better understand *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is important to read Orwell's short fable *Animal Farm*. It was published in 1944, towards the end of World War II. Orwell's criticism of Russian communism, especially of the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin (who was pilloried in the figure of the pig Napoleon) made it hard for Orwell to find a publisher for the novel. As Russia was then fighting against Hitler alongside the Western Allies, many people considered it bad policy to risk offending Stalin. Some of the central themes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are present in the earlier novel: the oppression of the majority of the people by an unscrupulous ruling elite, the seeking of power for its own sake, the alteration of history and the manipulation of language as tools of social control. Whereas the writing in *Animal Farm* is marked by a certain lightness of touch, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is thoroughly overlaid with a sense of darkness and doom. The alliance between Stalinist Russia and the Western powers, especially the United States, had turned into the Cold War by the time Orwell began his last work. This meant that he had no further difficulty in finding a publisher for it. Yet he undoubtedly would not have wished his work to be used as propaganda by those of any political persuasion. Rather, Orwell's writing strikes a blow for freedom and warns against political excesses of any complexion.