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1984

George Orwell



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BOOK ONE

Chapter I

Note: Written in 1949, this novel is Orwell's vision of the future. Before reading *1984*, it is important for students to understand the political atmosphere of the time. World War II had just ended. The true horrors of the holocaust and Hitler's Germany had just been revealed to the world. Although Orwell believed in socialized medicine and other community help programs, he was concerned that Communist and Fascist ideas may invade England. *1984* points out the evils of absolute government and totalitarianism.

As students read this novel, they may want to reflect on the extent to which Orwell accurately predicts life in the future.

1. The telescreen in Winston's apartment can be dimmed but never completely turned off. In addition, "the telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously." Everything Winston says or does can be viewed by the Thought Police. Winston is never sure that he is being watched, but he knows that it is always a possibility.

To what extent has Orwell's vision of the telescreen, which invades the privacy of Winston's home, become a reality in our modern homes?

2. The sentence, "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU," has become a part of our modern language. What does it mean to you? Explain a situation in which you used those words in a conversation with a friend.

5. Winston knows that “if detected it was reasonably certain that it [owning the diary] would be punished by death, or at least by twenty-five years in a forced-labor camp.” Knowing the danger, he purchases the diary because he “had been stricken immediately by an overwhelming desire to possess it.”

Write about a time that you may have done something impulsively that you knew to be dangerous.

6. Winston writes in the diary about the films he saw the night before. At the films, the audience applauds at the sight of a child’s dismembered arm going up into the air. Some critics believe the audience and Winston have been conditioned to accept this kind of violence from constant exposure to violent images. Do you think today’s movies have desensitized their audience, so they accept and expect to see brutal violence? Write about a movie you have seen or read about to support your answer.

7. While preparing for the Two Minutes Hate, Winston notices a young woman. He “disliked her from the very first moment of seeing her.” His opinion of the girl is based totally on her appearance and his perception of what her appearance says about her character.

By the way O’Brien adjusts his glasses and looks, Winston concludes that O’Brien is an intelligent man with whom he would enjoy talking. Have you even felt this way about someone you have never met, but seen in passing? Write a letter to Winston warning him of the dangers of judging someone’s character based on his or her appearance. Use experiences from your life to illustrate your points.

Chapter VII

26. Write a dialogue between Winston and a prole discussing the following statement.

“Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious.”

In the dialogue answer the following questions.

Why is this statement a paradox?

What must the proles become “conscious” of?

Winston: You must wake up to save our nation.

Prole: Wake up?...

27. Some critics believe that the ulcer on Winston’s leg represents both his suffering, because of the State, and his internal infections, as viewed by the State. Winston’s leg begins to itch again in this chapter when he thinks about the past.

“Winston reached down and cautiously scratched his varicose ulcer. It had begun itching again. The thing you invariable came back to was the impossibility of knowing what life before the Revolution had really been like.”

What do you think the varicose ulcer, which is frequently mentioned in the text, represents? Do you agree or disagree with the conclusions of the critics? Write a paragraph based on the incidents in this chapter discussing your opinion.

BOOK TWO

Chapter I

35. The dark-haired girl falls in the hallway. When Winston stops to help her up, she slips him a note. He knows he can not read the note immediately. Winston speculates as to the contents of the note, while he waits for an opportunity to read it.

Almost all students have passed notes in class. Write about the most clever or interesting way you or someone you know has passed a note.

36. Winston and the girl have never met, yet her note says, "I love you." How does Winston feel about the girl at this point in the story? Discuss your definition of love and whether or not you believe it is possible for two people who have never spent any time together to really be in love.

37. In this story, Orwell predicts what life will be like in the future. He writes that,

"Actually, few people ever wrote letters. For the message that it was occasionally necessary to send, there were printed postcards with long lists of phrases, and you struck out the ones that were inapplicable."

We don't have postcards like the ones Orwell describes, but many people today rarely write letters. Why do you suppose that is? What forms of modern communication have replaced the letter?

Chapter IX

56. Some critics believe that Orwell is prophetic in his vision of the future. We are now living in the future that he wrote about. Think about each of the ideas from Goldstein's book listed below. To what extent have each of these visions come true?
- The superpowers are continuously at war in order to use up the surplus of goods. The scarcity of goods maintains the existence of inequality among the social classes.
 - The State has become the new aristocracy because it is the holder of all wealth.
 - Big Brother is not a real person; he is made up by the Party to control the citizens.
 - Citizens are not permitted to have contact with foreigners.
 - The living conditions in all three superpowers are the same.
 - The technology to keep all citizens under constant surveillance gives the State the power to enforce complete uniformity of opinion and complete obedience from its citizens.
 - Membership to the Inner Party is not hereditary. It is determined by an examination at the age of sixteen. There is no racial discrimination or religious discrimination in the decision. The Party perpetuates itself by "the persistence of a certain world-view and a certain way of life, imposed by the dead upon the living." The Party is interested in continuing its doctrine not the bloodlines of the Party leaders.
57. Winston is comforted by Goldstein's book. "The best books, he perceived, are those that tell you what you know already." For what reasons do you agree or disagree with Winston's observation?