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George Orwell's
1984

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Teaching Unit

1984

by George Orwell

written by Peter Boysen



Prestwick House

Item No. 302228

1984

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. identify the elements of dystopian literature.
2. explain how Orwell's background emerges in the themes of *1984*.
3. explain the purpose of the Two Minutes' Hate.
4. explain the various forms of control that the Ingsoc government exercises over its citizens.
5. describe the ways in which the Ingsoc government uses technology to monitor and influence its citizens.
6. explain the historical context behind the three forms of totalitarianism that appear in *1984*.
7. explain the major ideas found in Goldstein's book about oligarchical hierarchism, and compare and contrast those ideas with the ideas espoused by our own government.
8. contrast the rulers of Oceania (the Inner Party) with rulers in historical totalitarian states.
9. analyze the ways in which tone and diction undermine one another in the story.
10. analyze the ways in which syntax lends itself to tone construction.
11. explain the various forms of paradox that appear throughout the story, including Newspeak, doublethink, and crimestop.
12. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
13. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
14. offer a close reading of *1984* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Background Lecture

STYLE, SETTING AND THEMES

1984 is set in the city of London, some forty years after the end of the Second World War. The city is not identified as London, but as Airstrip One, the capital of Oceania, an empire that appears to consist of North and South America, the British Isles, and part of Africa. The protagonist is Winston Smith, a social malcontent employed in the Ministry of Truth at the unending task of making sure that the archives of the media never show that Big Brother has made a mistake of any kind.

Four particular places in Airstrip One are important to the consideration of setting: Winston's apartment, Winston's workplace, the apartment that Winston rents for his trysts with Julia, and the depths of the Ministry of Love, where Winston is rehabilitated. The descriptions of each of these places, in addition to the descriptions of the dishevelment of the city as a whole, are a crucial part of the establishment of mood in the novel. A dystopian novel such as this seeks to create a future in which everything is NOT perfect—instead, everything is awful, and the power structure seems bent on keeping everything as awful as possible. Note the crumbling ruins everywhere in the city; the dreary disrepair of Winston's apartment building; the filth in the secret apartment, whose scant comforts would disgust many of us, but which are priceless to Winston's aesthetic; the mind-numbing conditions in which Winston works. The imagery used to create each of these different settings within the novel is one source of this novel's immense power.

The dystopian style is found throughout modern literature. Other examples of this include Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and Vonnegut's short story "Harrison Bergeron." A key to this style is the use of language that shows that, at least officially, conditions in society are not only good; they are wonderful, and they are as great as they have ever been in human history. However, this grandiloquent style is undermined by the actual conditions in which the society exists.

In *1984* this appears in large and small scale. Take, for example, the ubiquitous branding of Victory on products that are designed to drug the user, such as Victory Gin, and Victory Tobacco. If life in Oceania is so wonderful, why do its citizens need to drink and smoke so much? Why wouldn't Victory Gin be a wonderful drink? Why wouldn't cigarettes made with Victory Tobacco be the best cigarettes? Instead, Victory Gin is almost impossible to drink, and the cigarettes fall apart just as fast as Winston can light them. Note, also, the grand music and announcements of victory that erupt from the telescreen, cloaking the real news, which usually entails the reduction of some sort of ration for public consumption. Note the odd oaths that Winston and Julia must take to join the Brotherhood in O'Brien's apartment, including a promise to throw sulfuric acid in the face of a child if that is what is required—such noble ideals, supported by such horrible deeds. It is this idea that the grandest human sentiments are just window dressing for the dark instincts of the human heart that drives the dystopian writer, and these ideas abound in *1984*.

The dominant theme in *1984* is control. The Ingsoc government controls every aspect of its subjects' lives: physical, mental, and emotional. There are tight restrictions on travel; every Party member is under virtually constant surveillance via telescreens, hidden microphones, spies

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Big Brother is one of the most well-known allusions to *1984*. What role does he actually play in the novel? How does he affect Winston? How is this effect similar to or different from the effect that O'Brien has on him?
2. In what ways is technology used to control the citizens in the novel?
3. What is the most frightening element of Room 101 before Winston actually enters it?
4. What event ultimately breaks Winston's spirit and makes him ready to accept all of O'Brien's truths?
5. In what ways is Winston's fatalism self-fulfilling?
6. How is Julia's attitude toward the party different from Winston's?
7. What factors in Julia's personality make her attitude different?
8. How is the role of sex in Oceania similar to, and different from, its role in our own time?
9. How are the objects that Winston finds in the antique store symbols?
10. What is the rhetorical effect of Winston's reminiscences of his mother and sister?
11. How is the novel's first sentence jarring?
12. In what ways that the government in Oceania distracts its citizens from their own problems similar to the ways that our own government distracts us?
13. Why are Julia and Winston so distant from one another when they meet after their rehabilitation?
14. There are no laws in Oceania. Why, then, is it such a terrifying place to live?
15. How long do you think the Thought Police knew about Winston and Julia's affair before they were actually caught?

1984

ONE

I

1. What is the effect of the juxtaposition at the beginning of this section?

2. What is the effect of the anaphora in this sentence? “You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized”.

3. How is paradox involved with the descriptions of the government ministries?

4. How is paradox found in the description of Victory Gin?

5. What is ironic about the statement that “nothing was illegal, since there were no longer any laws”?

V

1. In our own time, what might Syme have used to start his conversation with Winston?

2. What is perhaps the most grotesque sign of the desensitization that has taken place in Oceania with regard to violence, in Syme and Winston's conversation?

3. Is "ungood" clearer in meaning than "bad"? Why or why not?

4. What is Newspeak a metaphor of?

5. How is Winston's prophecy of Syme's imminent disappearance ironic?

6. What is the effect of comparing the man from the Fiction Department to a duck?

VIII

1. What is the effect of the whiff of genuine coffee at the beginning of this section?

2. How is the Party interaction at the Community Center compared to a machine?

3. What, to the proles, is a “serious piece of news”?

4. What is the effect of the old man’s complaints about the change from pints to half-liters of beer?

5. Why does Winston purchase the piece of coral?

6. Why is it ironic that Winston chooses not to buy the picture on the wall?

III

1. Explain the below sentence

“She hated the Party, and said so in the crudest words, but she made no general criticism of it.”

2. According to Julia, why does the Party frown on sex for pleasure?

IV

1. What is it that makes Winston at last feel tenderness toward Julia?

2. How does Winston misunderstand the song of the prole woman below the window?

3. How have Winston and Julia reversed traditional gender roles in this room?

4. What elements of foreshadowing appear in this section?

THREE**I**

1. Why doesn't Winston explore further the possibility that the woman in his cell might be his mother?

2. Does Winston truly love Julia?

3. What does O'Brien mean when he says, "They got me a long time ago"?

II

1. What is the significance of this sentence?

"He was the tormentor, he was the protector, he was the inquisitor, he was the friend."

2. According to O'Brien, what is the true purpose of the Ministry of Love?

3. How is punishment in the Ministry of Love equivalent to execution?

III

1. Why does O'Brien tell Winston the truth about the Party's motives?

2. What is significant about Winston's recognition of his own physical degradation? Why does O'Brien refer to him as "the last man"?

3. What fact does Winston believe saves his humanity?

IV

1. What is one sign that Winston has been permanently weakened mentally by his time in the Ministry of Love?

2. What betrays Winston's last level of resistance to Big Brother?
