

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

1984

by

George Orwell

Book Information

George Orwell, 1984
Quiz Number: 5976
Signet, 1949
ISBN 0-451-52493-4; LCCN
267 Pages
Book Level: 8.9
Interest Level: UG

Eternal warfare is the price of bleak prosperity in this satire of totalitarian barbarism.

Topics: Community Life, Government; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Science Fiction, Future

Main Characters

Charrington a proprietor of a junk shop who is revealed as a member of the Thought Police
Julia a young woman who becomes Smith's lover
O'Brien an Inner Party member Smith mistakes for a rebel leader
Tom Parsons Smith's stupid, but zealously orthodox neighbor
Winston Smith the protagonist; an Outer Party member and worker at the Ministry of Truth

Vocabulary

catapult slingshot
doublethink to simultaneously know and not know something
oligarchy a government in which a small group exercises control
palimpsest writing material from which previous uses have been systematically erased to allow reuse
sinecures offices or positions that require no work for the remunerations they bring
totalitarian type of regime based on the systematic subordination of the individual to the state

In the negative utopia of 1984, the world is divided into three superstates that feign a condition of continuous warfare as a means of exerting absolute control of their respective populations. The action takes place in one of these, Oceania, and focuses on Winston Smith.

Smith is a member of the Outer Party and works at the Ministry of Truth, where all written records are constantly "rectified" to maintain the illusion of governmental infallibility. As a typical citizen, Smith is under constant surveillance by two-way televisions that appear everywhere in his London environment, with the exception of the quarters of the working class. The state, symbolized by the omnipresent image of Big Brother, seeks absolute control of its citizens, including control of their mental processes.

At the outset, Smith is a "rebel" only in the sense that his thoughts remain beyond Big Brother's total control. He begins a diary, which is a crime punishable by death, because he cannot believe that the truth consists solely of the lies told by the party. The crime of thinking for himself becomes more dangerous when he begins his affair with the young girl, Julia. Like independent thought, love is a crime in Oceania. Still, the pair meet and arrange a love nest in the proletariat quarters, a flat where their rebellious trysts are seemingly beyond the omnipresent eyes of the Thought Police.

The affair emboldens Smith and Julia to attempt to join the Brotherhood, a rebel group that might be no more than a rumor. Smith approaches O'Brien, a figure he has long suspected of being kindred in spirit and connected to the Brotherhood. O'Brien appears to enlist them to the cause. Then the couple is arrested in their sanctuary.

O'Brien becomes Smith's torturer, or "educator." He teaches Smith to instinctively believe all the lies the Party tells and to lose his capacity for love. As the novel ends, Smith is also a member of the Inner Party, a full follower of Big Brother, alive in body, but dead in spirit.

Synopsis

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Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why did O'Brien give Smith the book by Goldstein?

After the arrest, O'Brien claims to be part author, along with other Inner Party members, of the book that clearly gives the historical and political truth about the Party's origin, rise, and methods. In the course of Smith's cure, O'Brien reveals that the Party wants a form of submission so total from him that he ceases to be an individual. O'Brien had to first allow Smith to learn the objective truth, in order to then destroy his inner allegiance to it.

Literary Analysis

What stage of Winston's "cure" did the rats symbolize?

The rats arrive in Room 101 at the end stage of Winston's torture. They represent his most primal fear. It is important to observe that they are used only after he has been thoroughly "cleansed" intellectually. O'Brien resorts to this final force of deepest revulsion and fear only when the path is clear to Winston's last vestige of individuality--his heart.

Inferential Comprehension

At the end of the novel, what hopes are there that the Party will ever be overthrown?

In the death of Winston Smith's individuality, the hopes appear bleak indeed. Two possible sources do remain, however. The proletariat retains the raw power of their sheer mass and humanity, which Winston observed before his conversion. They would need, however, to somehow have the fuses of their consciousness ignited. The other grim hope resides in the global division of the world into three superstates. If one state were to sustain a technological breakthrough that allowed it to actually fight and win the continuous war, the victors would then be confronted by the challenge of "cultural integrity." It is possible that the effort to control foreign populations via the Party's doublethink principles would fail for deeply ingrained cultural reasons.

Constructing Meaning

From the viewpoint of the Inner Party, what was the true significance of the slogan "WAR IS PEACE"?

By perpetuating a state of continuous warfare, the Party could prevent Oceania from accumulating a surplus of goods and level of wealth that would lead its population to seek freedom. In that sense, the conduct of the phony war made a stable condition of oppression possible. The "peace" belonged to the Party, which remained beyond reach of all opposition.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors This novel's projection of the future was cast in the year 1949. As a discussion or writing topic, ask students to name and analyze subsequent inventions or historical developments that might have altered Orwell's vision if he had been able to consider them. The rise of computers and the "information age," for example, might have given the Party further means for control of its citizens. Or would it have given citizens more opportunities for resistance? Another major topic could be the

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collapse of the Soviet empire. How might that historical event have affected Orwell's historical perspective?

Understanding the Author's Craft As a creative writing exercise, ask students to "translate" some poem or piece of famous prose into Newspeak. Orwell's Appendix provides a rationale and description of the language, and there are many examples of words in the novel that represent it. However, the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary was not actually published, so students will be "free" to coin their own verbs, nouns, and modifiers. In a contest, the example using the fewest possible words with the least possible amount of ambiguity or nuance would win.

Identifying Persuasive Language Organize a classroom debate on the issue of which character most correctly or persuasively viewed the world, O'Brien or Winston. Students should focus their debate by citing the text and defending the characters' actual statements. There were many specific philosophical points of disagreement between them. One prominent example would be O'Brien's contention that "Reality exists in the mind, and nowhere else." In the debate, his faction would defend that principle, while Winston's rebuts it.

Responding to Literature As a cautionary tale, Orwell's novel retains its prestige and power. Explore with students their reactions to this negative utopia. Were they convinced that such a bleak world is possible? Which aspects of the Party's governing struck them as most or least plausible? Has history moved beyond the threats Orwell saw to personal liberty? How has the book made them think differently about their ideas of "freedom"?