1984

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Context

Born Eric Blair in India in 1903, George Orwell was educated as a scholarship student at prestigious boarding schools in England. Because of his background—he famously described his family as "lower-upper-middle class"—he never quite fit in, and felt oppressed and outraged by the dictatorial control that the schools he attended exercised over their students' lives. After graduating from Eton, Orwell decided to forego college in order to work as a British Imperial Policeman in Burma. He hated his duties in Burma, where he was required to enforce the strict laws of a political regime he despised. His failing health, which troubled him throughout his life, caused him to return to England on convalescent leave. Once back in England, he quit the Imperial Police and dedicated himself to becoming a writer.

Inspired by Jack London's 1903 *The People of the Abyss,* which detailed London's experience in the slums of London, Orwell bought ragged clothes from a second-hand store and went to live among the very poor in London. After reemerging, he published a book about this experience, entitled *Down and Out in Paris and London.* He later lived among destitute coal miners in northern England, an experience that caused him to give up on capitalism in favor of democratic socialism. In 1936, he traveled to Spain to report on the Spanish Civil War, where he witnessed firsthand the nightmarish atrocities committed by fascist political regimes. The rise to power of dictators such as Adolf Hitler in Germany and Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union inspired Orwell's mounting hatred of totalitarianism and political authority. Orwell devoted his energy to writing novels that were politically charged, first with *Animal Farm* in 1945, then with *1984* in 1949.

1984 is one of Orwell's best-crafted novels, and it remains one of the most powerful warnings ever issued against the dangers of a totalitarian society. In Spain, Germany, and the Soviet Union, Orwell had witnessed the danger of absolute political authority in an age of advanced technology. He illustrated that peril harshly in *1984.* Like

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), *1984* is one of the most famous novels of the negative utopian, or dystopian, genre. Unlike a utopian novel, in which the writer aims to portray the perfect human society, a novel of negative utopia does the exact opposite: it shows the worst human society imaginable, in an effort to convince readers to avoid any path that might lead toward such societal degradation. In 1949, at the dawn of the nuclear age and before the television had become a fixture in the family home, Orwell's vision of a post-atomic dictatorship in which every individual would be monitored ceaselessly by means of the telescreen seemed terrifyingly possible. That Orwell postulated such a society a mere thirty-five years into the future compounded this fear.

Of course, the world that Orwell envisioned in *1984* did not materialize. Rather than being overwhelmed by totalitarianism, democracy ultimately won out in the Cold War, as seen in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Yet *1984* remains an important novel, in part for the alarm it sounds against the abusive nature of authoritarian governments, but even more so for its penetrating analysis of the psychology of power and the ways that manipulations of language and history can be used as mechanisms of control.

Themes

Themes are the fundamental concepts addressed and explored in a literary work.

The Dangers of Totalitarianism - *1984* is a political novel written with the purpose of warning readers in the West of the dangers of totalitarian government. Having witnessed firsthand the horrific lengths to which totalitarian governments in Spain and Russia would go in order to sustain and increase their power, Orwell designed *1984* to sound the alarm in Western nations still unsure about how to approach the rise of communism. In 1949, the Cold War had not yet escalated, many American intellectuals supported communism, and the state of diplomacy between democratic and communist nations was highly

ambiguous. In the American press, the Soviet Union was often portrayed as a great moral experiment. Orwell, however, was deeply disturbed by the widespread cruelties and oppressions he observed in communist countries, and seems to have been particularly concerned by the role of technology in enabling oppressive governments to monitor and control their citizens.

In *1984,* Orwell portrays the perfect totalitarian society, the most extreme realization imaginable of a modern-day government with absolute power. The title of the novel was meant to indicate to its readers in 1949 that the story represented a real possibility for the near future: if totalitarianism were not opposed, the title suggested, some variation of the world described in the novel could become a reality in only thirty-five years. Orwell portrays a state in which government monitors and controls every aspect of human life to the extent that even having a disloyal thought is against the law. As the novel progresses, the timidly rebellious Winston Smith sets out to challenge the limits of the Party's power, only to discover that its ability to control and enslave its subjects dwarfs even his most paranoid conceptions of its reach. As the reader comes to understand through Winston's eyes, The Party uses a number of techniques to control its citizens, each of which is an important theme of its own in the novel. These include:

Psychological Manipulation - The Party barrages its subjects with psychological stimuli designed to overwhelm the mind's capacity for independent thought. The giant telescreen in every citizen's room blasts a constant stream of propaganda designed to make the failures and shortcomings of the Party appear to be triumphant successes. The telescreens also monitor behavior—everywhere they go, citizens are continuously reminded, especially by means of the omnipresent signs reading "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU," that the authorities are scrutinizing them. The Party undermines family structure by inducting children into an organization called the Junior Spies, which brainwashes and encourages them to spy on their parents and report any instance of disloyalty to the Party. The Party also forces individuals to suppress their sexual desires, treating sex as merely a procreative duty whose end is the creation of new Party members. The Party then

channels people's pent-up frustration and emotion into intense, ferocious displays of hatred against the Party's political enemies. Many of these enemies have been invented by the Party expressly for this purpose.

Physical Control - In addition to manipulating their minds, the Party also controls the bodies of its subjects. The Party constantly watches for any sign of disloyalty, to the point that, as Winston observes, even a tiny facial twitch could lead to an arrest. A person's own nervous system becomes his greatest enemy. The Party forces its members to undergo mass morning-exercises called the Physical Jerks, and then to work long, grueling days at government agencies, keeping people in a general state of exhaustion. Anyone who does manage to defy the Party is punished and "reeducated" through systematic and brutal torture. After being subjected to weeks of this intense treatment, Winston himself comes to the conclusion that nothing is more powerful than physical pain—no emotional loyalty or moral conviction can overcome it. By conditioning the minds of their victims with physical torture, the Party is able to control reality, convincing its subjects that 2 + 2 = 5.

Control of Information and History - The Party controls every source of information, managing and rewriting the content of all newspapers and histories for its own ends. The Party does not allow individuals to keep records of their past, such as photographs or documents. As a result, memories become fuzzy and unreliable, and citizens become perfectly willing to believe whatever the Party tells them. By controlling the present, the Party is able to manipulate the past. And in controlling the past, the Party can justify all of its actions in the present.

Technology - By means of telescreens and hidden microphones across the city, the Party is able to monitor its members almost all of the time. Additionally, the Party employs complicated mechanisms (*1984* was written in the era before computers) to exert large-scale control on economic production and sources of information, and fearsome

machinery to inflict torture upon those it deems enemies. *1984* reveals that technology, which is generally perceived as working toward moral good, can also facilitate the most diabolical evil.

Language as Mind Control - One of Orwell's most important messages in *1984* is that language is of central importance to human thought because it structures and limits the ideas that individuals are capable of formulating and expressing. If control of language were centralized in a political agency, Orwell proposes, such an agency could possibly alter the very structure of language to make it impossible to even conceive of disobedient or rebellious thoughts, because there would be no words with which to think them. This idea manifests itself in the language of Newspeak, which the Party has introduced to replace English. The Party is constantly refining and perfecting Newspeak, with the ultimate goal that no one will be capable of conceptualizing anything that might question the Party's absolute power.

Interestingly, many of Orwell's ideas about language as a controlling force have been modified by writers and critics seeking to deal with the legacy of colonialism. During colonial times, foreign powers took political and military control of distant regions and, as a part of their occupation, instituted their own language as the language of government and business. Postcolonial writers often analyze or redress the damage done to local populations by the loss of language and the attendant loss of culture and historical connection.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Doublethink - The idea of "doublethink" emerges as an important consequence of the Party's massive campaign of large-scale psychological manipulation. Simply put, doublethink is the ability to hold two contradictory ideas in one's mind at the same time. As the Party's mind-control techniques break down an individual's capacity for independent thought, it becomes possible for that individual to believe

anything that the Party tells them, even while possessing information that runs counter to what they are being told. At the Hate Week rally, for instance, the Party shifts its diplomatic allegiance, so the nation it has been at war with suddenly becomes its ally, and its former ally becomes its new enemy. When the Party speaker suddenly changes the nation he refers to as an enemy in the middle of his speech, the crowd accepts his words immediately, and is ashamed to find that it has made the wrong signs for the event. In the same way, people are able to accept the Party ministries' names, though they contradict their functions: the Ministry of Plenty oversees economic shortages, the Ministry of Peace wages war, the Ministry of Truth conducts propaganda and historical revisionism, and the Ministry of Love is the center of the Party's operations of torture and punishment.

Urban Decay - Urban decay proves a pervasive motif in *1984.* The London that Winston Smith calls home is a dilapidated, rundown city in which buildings are crumbling, conveniences such as elevators never work, and necessities such as electricity and plumbing are extremely unreliable. Though Orwell never discusses the theme openly, it is clear that the shoddy disintegration of London, just like the widespread hunger and poverty of its inhabitants, is due to the Party's mismanagement and incompetence. One of the themes of *1984,* inspired by the history of twentieth-century communism, is that totalitarian regimes are viciously effective at enhancing their own power and miserably incompetent at providing for their citizens. The grimy urban decay in London is an important visual reminder of this idea, and offers insight into the Party's priorities through its contrast to the immense technology the Party develops to spy on its citizens.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Big Brother - Throughout London, Winston sees posters showing a man gazing down over the words "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU" everywhere he goes. Big Brother is the face of the Party. The

citizens are told that he is the leader of the nation and the head of the Party, but Winston can never determine whether or not he actually exists. In any case, the face of Big Brother symbolizes the Party in its public manifestation; he is a reassurance to most people (the warmth of his name suggests his ability to protect), but he is also an open threat (one cannot escape his gaze). Big Brother also symbolizes the vagueness with which the higher ranks of the Party present themselves—it is impossible to know who really rules Oceania, what life is like for the rulers, or why they act as they do. Winston thinks he remembers that Big Brother emerged around 1960, but the Party's official records date Big Brother's existence back to 1930, before Winston was even born.

The Glass Paperweight and St. Clement's Church - By deliberately weakening people's memories and flooding their minds with propaganda, the Party is able to replace individuals' memories with its own version of the truth. It becomes nearly impossible for people to question the Party's power in the present when they accept what the Party tells them about the past—that the Party arose to protect them from bloated, oppressive capitalists, and that the world was far uglier and harsher before the Party came to power. Winston vaguely understands this principle. He struggles to recover his own memories and formulate a larger picture of what has happened to the world. Winston buys a paperweight in an antique store in the prole district that comes to symbolize his attempt to reconnect with the past. Symbolically, when the Thought Police arrest Winston at last, the paperweight shatters on the floor.

The old picture of St. Clement's Church in the room that Winston rents above Mr. Charrington's shop is another representation of the lost past. Winston associates a song with the picture that ends with the words "Here comes the chopper to chop off your head!" This is an important foreshadow, as it is the telescreen hidden behind the picture that ultimately leads the Thought Police to Winston, symbolizing the Party's corrupt control of the past.

The Place Where There Is No Darkness - Throughout the novel

Winston imagines meeting O'Brien in "the place where there is no darkness." The words first come to him in a dream, and he ponders them for the rest of the novel. Eventually, Winston does meet O'Brien in the place where there is no darkness; instead of being the paradise Winston imagined, it is merely a prison cell in which the light is never turned off. The idea of "the place where there is no darkness" symbolizes Winston's approach to the future: possibly because of his intense fatalism (he believes that he is doomed no matter what he does), he unwisely allows himself to trust O'Brien, even though inwardly he senses that O'Brien might be a Party operative.

The Telescreens - The omnipresent telescreens are the book's most visible symbol of the Party's constant monitoring of its subjects. In their dual capability to blare constant propaganda and observe citizens, the telescreens also symbolize how totalitarian government abuses technology for its own ends instead of exploiting its knowledge to improve civilization.

The Red-Armed Prole Woman - The red-armed prole woman that Winston hears singing through the window represents Winston's one legitimate hope for the long-term future: the possibility that the proles will eventually come to recognize their plight and rebel against the Party. Winston sees the prole woman as a prime example of reproductive virility; he often imagines her giving birth to the future generations that will finally challenge the Party's authority.