



Discussion Guide for
1984
George Orwell



The Great Books Foundation

ABOUT THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

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This discussion guide includes references to *1984* (Signet Classics, 1961).

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THE GREAT BOOKS FOUNDATION

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Discussion Guide for 1984

ABOUT 1984

George Orwell's *1984* explores the possibility of a dystopia formed by a concentration of the world's political powers into large "superstates." Orwell tells the tale of Oceania, revealing the nature of its infrastructure and mechanisms of control through the eyes of Winston, a minor member of the Party who harbors a considerable amount of skepticism for their methods.

The public and critical interest in *1984* was so great that it nearly overshadowed Orwell's previous dystopian novel, *Animal Farm* (1945). Whereas *Animal Farm* is widely regarded as a critique of Stalinism, *1984* goes a step further and functions as a broader criticism of totalitarianism. As Erich Fromm says in his afterword to the book, "It would be most unfortunate if the reader smugly interpreted *1984* as another description of Stalinist barbarism, and if he does not see that it means us, too."

In a 1944 letter to a fan, three years before he wrote the book, he admitted his belief that totalitarianism and leader worship were increasing, even in countries such as Britain and the United States. Explicitly presaging the structure of Oceania, he wrote that, "If the sort of world that I am afraid of arrives, a world of two or three great superstates which are unable to conquer one another, two and two could become five if the fuhrer wished it. That, so far as I can see, is the direction in which we are actually moving, though, of course, the process is reversible."

Decades of interest in Orwell's work reveal that many readers also take its vision of the future seriously. Many of the words and

phrases coined by Orwell for political processes in Oceania, such as “doublethink,” “newspeak,” and “Big Brother is watching,” have moved into our lexicon as ways to characterize political wrongs. This permeability of language is an ironic testament to Orwell’s concerns regarding media propaganda and the influence of vocabulary on the capabilities of thought.

Whether these visions of the future are to be believed or not, generations of readers have been unable to shake the fear of a society that claims the ability to eliminate “ordinary human feeling” (256). It is one thing to dread a totalitarian rule, it is altogether another to be made to imagine a power so complete that we are incapable of even dread.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Why doesn’t the majority of the population of Oceania belong to the Party?

1. Why does *the book* claim that early socialism was “deeply infected by the Utopianism of past ages”? (203)
2. What does “free” mean in the Party slogan “Proles and animals are free”? (72)
3. Why does Winston believe that the proles “had stayed human” but that he and Julia “are not human”? (165)
4. Why is the Party so confident that the proles will never revolt?

Does Winston and Julia’s affair succeed as a rebellion against the Party?

1. Why does Julia’s note make Winston want to survive?
2. Why does Winston tell Julia that she is “only a rebel from the waist downwards”? (156)
3. Why do Julia and Winston say they must meet again, even after openly admitting their mutual betrayal?

4. Does the Party succeed in making Winston incapable of “ordinary human feeling”? (256)

Is O’Brien telling the truth when he claims, at the beginning of the interrogation, to have been watching over Winston for seven years?

1. Why was Winston convinced that O’Brien was part of the resistance?
2. If Mr. Charrington is a member of the Thought Police, why doesn’t the Party capture Winston and Julia sooner?
3. Is Winston wrong to think that he and O’Brien are intimate “in some sense that went deeper than friendship”? (252)
4. Why does Winston continue to believe that “O’Brien knew everything”? (262)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. For a person to be considered sane, must others share their perceptions?
2. Does language control the scope of human thought?
3. Are the means or the ends of a political agenda more important when evaluating morality?
4. Is the process of doublethink present in our own society?

ABOUT GEORGE ORWELL

George Orwell (1903–1950) was born Eric Arthur Blair in Bengal, India, the son of a British civil servant. As was typical, the family returned to England for Orwell to attend school. Immediately recognized as bright, he was awarded a scholarship to attend the prestigious Eton boarding school. Although he was the pupil of Aldous Huxley at Eton and even succeeded in publishing his first

works of writing in small college journals, he did not dedicate himself to writing until many years later.

Instead he followed the example of his father and relocated to Burma to serve in the Imperial Police. Orwell was troubled by the sequestering of British officers from the local people and even more bothered by the slow revelation that the Burmese were unhappy with the rule. Unwilling to continue supporting such a system and ready at last to pursue his childhood dream of becoming a writer, he left Burma after only five years of service. It was during these years that Orwell was to form his earliest criticisms about imperial and totalitarian rule, which later inspired his first novel, *Burmese Days* (1934). Moreover, the experiences were of great personal significance to Orwell and mark the turning point in his life during which he first identified himself as an anarchist and socialist.

Orwell published a book every year from 1933 through 1939, including *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), a commissioned account of the lives of coal workers in the north of England and what is often considered his first socialist work. This was followed by *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), a portrayal of his two years fighting for the Republicans in Spain who were resisting the oppression of Franco's Nationalists. After being chased from Spain by the Soviet-backed communists he had tried to support, Orwell would live out the rest of his life at home in England.

In his last decade, the pace at which he put out full length books slowed considerably, as he turned more and more to journalism. During the Second World War he worked for the BBC and later became the literary editor of a socialist magazine. During these years he was considerably concerned with the questions of journalistic ethics and the portrayal of truth in media, issues that were to play critical roles in his last novel, *1984* (1949).

In 1945 he published *Animal Farm* (1945), a satirical fable of Soviet communism told through a tale of farmyard animals. This was his first outright success with the public during his lifetime and provided the financial freedom for him to finish *1984*, while struggling with tuberculosis. He died in January 1950, less than a year after its publication.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE'S AUTHOR

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