

At a Glance

- The totalitarian Party rules Oceania with an iron fist, monitoring its citizens day and night.
- Coworker Julia passes Winston a love note, sparking a clandestine affair. The lovers seek the Brotherhood, an underground rebel faction.
- Inner Party member O'Brien tells Winston he is a secret member of the Brotherhood and gives Winston a heretical book.
- Winston and Julia are caught, arrested, and interrogated; O'Brien and the man from whom they rented their room are members of the Thought Police.
- Winston and Julia are tortured until they betray each other. Winston, unsure of his memories, comforts himself with his love for Big Brother and anticipates his execution.

- [allie-draper](#).

Summary of the Novel

The concepts of free enterprise and individual freedom no longer exist in 1984. Only three superpowers remain to dominate a world of hatred, isolation, and fear. Eurasia and Eastasia are two of these superpowers. Oceania, the other, is always at war with one of them.

Winston Smith is a 39-year-old employee at the Ministry of Truth, London, located in Oceania. His world is shaped by the Party and its dictator/leader Big Brother, whose face is everywhere on posters captioned "Big Brother Is Watching You." Big Brother controls life in Oceania through the four ministries of Peace, Love, Plenty, and Truth. Winston's job at the Ministry of Truth involves revisions of historical documents and rewrites of news stories to reflect the Party's infallibility.

The Party, which carries out government policies in Oceania, rations food, issues clothing, and selects social activities. Both chocolate and tobacco are in short supply during this latest war. Winston's clothing, including his tattered pajamas, is government issued, and his evenings are spent in government-sponsored meetings.

War and hatred dominate Oceania, where the Party monitors every move and expression with telescreens, hidden microphones, and spies. The Thought Police, Big Brother's secret militia, help the Party quell any sign of revolt by eliminating all who think or behave in a disloyal fashion. Hate Week intensifies feeling against Emmanuel Goldstein, Enemy of the People, while increasing devotion to Big Brother. The Party also preaches that the proles, the majority, are natural inferiors to be kept in check.

The Party, however, does not completely control Winston. He secretly buys an illegal diary in which he writes the heresy "Down With Big Brother." In doing so, he commits the worst offense, "thoughtcrime," a Newspeak term for the "essential crime that contained all others in itself." Many of Winston's thoughts revolve around his attempts to remember various events and people from his childhood, especially his

mother who had disappeared years before. Winston tries to investigate the specifics of life in London before the Revolution, but it seems the Party has been successful in eradicating all remnants of daily life in the past.

Winston enters into an affair with the free-spirited Julia, a fellow employee at the Ministry of Truth. At the beginning they view their desire for one another as a political act against the Party dominated by hate and suspicion. Since promiscuity among Party members has been forbidden, they view their affair as an act of rebellion. As the affair continues, Winston's feelings for Julia change. Although the couple knows the affair is doomed, they continue to meet secretly in an attic room above a junk shop owned by Mr. Charrington, the man who sold the diary, and later, a coral paperweight, to Winston. The lovers discuss the repressiveness of their lives and the possibility of joining the Brotherhood, the secret underground of Emmanuel Goldstein whose express purpose is to overthrow Big Brother.

At work at the Ministry of Truth, Winston is approached by O'Brien, an acquaintance who seems to share his views. After Winston and Julia visit O'Brien at his apartment, he recruits them as members of the Brotherhood and promises to send them a copy of Goldstein's book, which details strategies to destroy Big Brother. Winston pledges to do whatever it takes, including murder and suicide, to erode the power of the Party.

The inevitable occurs when Julia and Winston are arrested in their secret room, betrayed by Mr. Charrington, a member of the Thought Police. Winston is taken to the Ministry of Love where he is starved, beaten, and tortured during the next months in an effort to "cure" him. Ironically, his torturer is O'Brien, who confirms his identity as a dedicated Inner Party member. Winston submits after a long struggle when he is taken to the mysterious room 101 and threatened with a cage of hungry rats prepared to devour him. At this point he finally betrays Julia.

Soon Winston is released, but he awaits the bullet he knows will extinguish him. He unexpectedly runs into Julia, who admits that she too had betrayed their love. Surprisingly, Winston feels no desire for her, preferring instead to take his usual seat at the Chestnut Street Cafe where he spends another night in his habitual alcoholic stupor. Winston knows that it is only a matter of time before the Party executes him; nevertheless, when the telescreen barks the news of the army's latest victory, he weeps with joy. The Party finally controls Winston, whose defeat is summed up in the final sentence, "He loved Big Brother."

Estimated Reading Time:

1984 is divided into three major sections of approximately equal length, each with separate chapters. Orwell also included an appendix on Newspeak. Thus, in order to maximize understanding, the reader should plan no fewer than four reading sessions.

By reading approximately 30 pages per hour, the reader should be able to complete the entire novel in 8 to 12 hours. He or she should also plan to spend more time on Part I, where Orwell establishes the frameworks of plot, characterization, and theme.

Notes

1. J. R. Hammond, *A George Orwell Companion—A Guide to the Novels, Documents, and Essays* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), pg. 172.

2. *Ibid*, pg. 173.

1. [Insights](#)

Dates and Context

George Orwell's futuristic dystopian novel, *1984*, was first published in 1949. It responds to what Orwell saw as the increasing threat of totalitarianism. Although one major target of Orwell's satiric vision was Stalinist Russia, it was far from the only totalitarian society to which Orwell was reacting. As Orwell was writing the novel, the Allies had just defeated, after great sacrifice and struggle, the totalitarian Axis powers of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. Franco was in control of Spain. In 1949, Mao came to power in China. Thus the novel reacts to what Orwell saw as an increasing threat to the liberal democracies which had developed in the nineteenth centuries by the growth of fascism and totalitarianism.

- [thanatassa](#).

Nineteen Eighty-Four, a grim satire directed against totalitarian government, is the story of Winston Smith's futile battle to survive in a system that he has helped to create. The novel is set in 1984 (well into the future when the novel was written) in London, the chief city of Airstrip One, the third most populous of the provinces of Oceania, one of three world powers that are philosophically indistinguishable from, and perpetually at war with, one another.

Smith, thirty-nine, is in marginal health, drinks too much, and lives alone in his comfortless apartment at Victory Mansions, where he is constantly under the eye of a television surveillance system referred to as Big Brother. Smith's wife, Katharine, who lived with him briefly in a loveless marriage—the only kind of marriage permitted by the government—has long since faded from Smith's life, and his day-to-day existence has become meaningless, except insofar as he has memories of a time in his childhood before his mother disappeared. In the midst of this meaningless existence, Smith is approached clandestinely by Julia, a woman who works with him in the Ministry of Truth. She passes him a note that says, "I love you."

The next several months are passed with "secret" meetings between Winston and Julia. From Mr. Charrington, a shopkeeper from whom Winston has bought a diary and an ornamental paperweight, they secure what they believe is a room with privacy from Big Brother's surveillance. During these months together, Winston and Julia begin to hope for a better life. Part of this hope leads them to seek out members of the Brotherhood, an underground resistance movement purportedly led by Emmanuel Goldstein, the official "Enemy of the People." In their search for the Brotherhood, Winston and Julia approach O'Brien, a member of the Inner Party, a man who they believe is part of Goldstein's Brotherhood. Smith trusts only Julia, O'Brien, and Mr. Charrington. He feels that he can trust no one else in a society in which friend betrays friend and child betrays parent. Both he and Julia know and articulate their knowledge that, in resisting the government and Big Brother, they have doomed themselves. Still, they seem to hope, much as the oppressed animals in Orwell's *Animal Farm* embrace hope in a hopeless situation.

Winston and Julia's small hopes are destroyed when they are arrested by the Thought Police, who surround them in their "private" apartment. They are further disillusioned when they learn that Mr. Charrington is a member of the Thought Police and that their every movement during the past months has been monitored. Winston realizes further, when he is later being tortured at the Ministry of Love, that O'Brien is supervising the torture.

Evident in both the Ministry of Truth, where history is falsified and language is reduced and muddled, and in the Ministry of Love, where political dissidents and others are tortured, is Orwell's preoccupation with the effects of paradoxical political language. Even the slogans of the Party are paradoxical: "War Is Peace," "Freedom Is Slavery," and "Ignorance Is Strength." The Ministry of Truth, particularly, is concerned with

reducing language, moving toward an ideal language called Newspeak. To clarify the purpose of the language purges, Orwell includes an appendix, "The Principles of Newspeak," in which he explains that Newspeak, the official language of Oceania, has been devised "to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc, or English Socialism." Once Newspeak is fully adopted, "a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc—should be literally unthinkable." It is because Winston Smith still knows Oldspeak that he has been able to commit Thought Crime.

In the Ministry of Love, Smith comes to understand how totalitarian control works, but he continually wonders about the reasons for it. Why, for example, should Big Brother care about him? It is O'Brien who provides Smith with the answer: power. Power, as O'Brien explains, is an end in itself. Power will destroy everything in its path. O'Brien concludes that, when all else is gone, power will remain: But always—do not forget this, Winston—always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever.

The purpose, then, of totalitarian government becomes only that of sustaining its feeling of power.

Still, even late in the novel, when O'Brien forces Smith to look into a mirror at his naked, tortured body and his "ruined" face, Smith clings to the idea of his humanity. He says to O'Brien, "I have not betrayed Julia." Yet Smith is stripped of this last tie to his humanity before Orwell's bleak vision is complete.

After a brief time of physical recovery, Smith wakes from a dream, talking in his sleep of his love for Julia. He has retained some part of his will and concludes of Big Brother and the Party: "To die hating them, that was freedom." Whatever he says in his sleep is, of course, being monitored by Big Brother. As a result, Smith faces his ultimate horror, the horror that makes him betray Julia. Physically and mentally ruined, Smith is released from the Ministry of Love to await the death that O'Brien has promised him. Smith retains only enough self-awareness to tell Julia, during their final brief meeting, that he has betrayed her. She, too has betrayed him.

Winston's final defeat is encapsulated in the last words of the novel, seconds after the "long-hoped-for bullet" is "entering his brain." He has become convinced of the insanity of his earlier views; his struggle is finished: "He loved Big Brother."

Externally, Winston Smith appears well adjusted to his world. He drinks the bitter victory gin and smokes the vile victory cigarettes. In the morning, he does his exercises in front of the telescreen, and when the instructor speaks to him over the two-way television, he bends with renewed vigor to touch the floor. His apartment is dingy and rickety, but at thirty-nine years old, he is scarcely old enough to remember a time when housing had been better. He has a decent job at the Ministry of Truth because he has a good mind and the ability to write newspeak, the official language. He is a member of the outer ring of the Party.

One afternoon, after giving up his lunch at the ministry, Winston has a little free time to himself. He goes to an alcove out of reach of the telescreen and furtively takes out his journal. It is a noble book with paper of fine quality, unobtainable at present. It is an antique, bought on an illicit trip to a secondhand store run by old Mr. Charrington. Although it is not illegal to keep a diary—there are no laws in Oceania—it makes him suspect. He writes ploddingly about a film he had seen about the valiant Oceania forces strafing shipwrecked refugees in the Mediterranean.

Musing over his writing, Winston finds to his horror that he had written a slogan against Big Brother several times. He knows this act is a crime, even if the writing is due to his drinking gin. Even to think of such a slogan is a crime. Everywhere he looks, on stair landings and on storefronts, are posters showing Big

Brother's all-seeing face. Citizens are reminded a hundred times a day that Big Brother is watching their every move.

At the Ministry of Truth, Winston plunges into his routine. He has the job of rewriting records. If the Party makes an inaccurate prediction about the progress of the war, or if some aspect of production does not accord with the published goals of the ninth three-year plan, Winston corrects the record. All published material is constantly changed so that all history accords with the wishes and aims of the Party.

There is a break in the day's routine for a two-minute hate period. The face of Goldstein, the enemy of the Party, appears on the big telescreen, and a government speaker works up the feelings of the viewers; Goldstein is accused of heading a great conspiracy against Oceania. Winston loudly and dutifully drums his heels as he takes part in the group orgasm of hate.

A bold, dark-haired girl, wearing a red chastity belt, often seems to be near Winston in the workrooms and in the commissary. Winston is afraid she might be a member of the thought police. Seeing her outside the ministry, he decides she is following him. For a time, he plays with the idea of killing her. One day, she slips a little note to him, confessing that she loves him.

Winston is troubled. He is married, but his wife belongs to the Anti-Sex League. For her, procreation is a Party duty. Because the couple produced no children, they split up; Winston's wife left him. Now this girl at work—her name is Julia—speaks of love. Winston has a few private words with her in the lunchroom, being careful to make their conversation look like a chance meeting. Julia quickly names a place in the country for a rendezvous. Winston meets her in the woods and, far from a telescreen, they make love. Julia boasts that she had been the mistress of several Party members and that she has no patience with the Anti-Sex League, although she works diligently for the group. She also buys sweets on the black market.

Winston again visits Mr. Charrington's antique shop, and the proprietor shows Winston an upstairs bedroom preserved as it had been before the Revolution. Although it is madness to do so, Winston rents the room and, thereafter, he and Julia have a comfortable bed for their brief meetings. Winston feels happy in the old room, which has no telescreen to spy on them.

At work, Winston sometimes sees O'Brien, a kindly looking member of the Inner Party. Winston deduces from a chance remark that O'Brien is not in sympathy with all the aims of the Party. When they can, Winston and Julia go to O'Brien's apartment. He assures them that Goldstein is really the head of a conspiracy that eventually will overthrow the Party. Julia tells of her sins against Party discipline, and Winston recounts his evidence that the Party distorts facts in public trials and purges. O'Brien then enrolls them in the conspiracy and gives them Goldstein's book to read.

After an exhausting hate week directed against another enemy, Eurasia, Winston reads aloud to the dozing Julia, both comfortably lying in bed, from Goldstein's treatise. Suddenly, a voice rings out and orders them to stand in the middle of the room. Winston grows sick when he realizes that a hidden telescreen has recorded the actions at O'Brien's apartment. Soon the room is filled with truncheon-wielding police officers. Mr. Charrington comes in, no longer a kindly member of the simple proletariat, but a keen, determined man and a member of the thought police. One of the guards hits Julia in the stomach, and the others hurry Winston off to jail.

Winston is tortured for days—beaten, kicked, and clubbed until he confesses his crimes. He willingly admits to years of conspiracy with the rulers of Eurasia and tells everything he knows of Julia. In the later phases of his torture, O'Brien is at his side constantly. O'Brien keeps him on a rack with a doctor in attendance to keep him alive. He tells Winston that Goldstein's book is a Party production, written in part by O'Brien himself.

Through it all, the tortured Winston has one small triumph: He still loves Julia. O'Brien knows about Winston's fear of rats and brings in a large cage filled with rodents; he fastens it around Winston's head. In his unreasoning terror, Winston begs him to let the rats eat Julia instead. Winston still hates Big Brother, then says so. O'Brien patiently explains that the Party wants no martyrs—they strengthen opposition—nor do the leaders want only groveling subjection. Winston must think right. The proletariat, happy in its ignorance, must never have a rousing leader. All Party members must think and feel as Big Brother directs.

Winston is finally released, now bald and without teeth. Because he had been purged and because his crime had not been serious, he is given a small job on a subcommittee. Most of the time, he sits solitary in taverns and drinks victory gin. He even sees Julia once. Her figure has coarsened and her face is scarred. The two have little to say to one another.

One day, a big celebration takes place in the tavern. Oceania has achieved an important victory in Africa. Suddenly, the doddering Winston feels himself purged—he now believes. Now he can be shot with a pure soul, for at last he loves Big Brother.