

## **Why Nineteen Eighty-Four Still Matters, Preliminary Thoughts**

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In 2003 an editorial in *The New Statesman* lamented the fact that citing English author and journalist George Orwell now seemed to be “cliché, a lazy resort for writers with axes to grind.”<sup>1</sup> The piece, noting that intellectuals of any political disposition claim support for their views in Orwell’s writings, closed by asking if the time had come “to ban references to the great man, and particularly to his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.”<sup>2</sup>

It is true that Orwell’s politics and novels have been the subject of great debate. It is also true that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has seen its fair share of discussion.<sup>3</sup> An annotated bibliography of criticism published in 1977 by Jeffrey and Valerie Meyers found 500 books, articles, and reviews about Orwell. Out of these 500 a total 94 were focused solely on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a figure that does not include reviews of the novel or publications that mention it.<sup>4</sup> In fact a simple search through the shelves of our own Jerome Library uncovered 94 publications and essays written about *Nineteen Eighty-Four* since 1980, not including the various journal articles and other publications that inevitably exist.<sup>5</sup> More recent publications by Christopher Hitchens and Scott Lucas only accent the complaints of *The New Statesmen*, as Hitchens reveres Orwell as a saint and Lucas condemns him as a hypocrite. It is no wonder then that some have asked the

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<sup>1</sup> Editors, “That’s enough Orwell,” *The New Statesmen* June 2, 2003, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Some tried to paint *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an anti-socialist novel. This despite the fact that Orwell wrote a letter stating, “My recent novel is not intended as an attack on Socialism,” and also wrote in his essay *Why I Write* that “Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic Socialism.” Quotes found at George Orwell, *In Front of Your Nose*, vol. IV of *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1968), 202 and George Orwell, *Why I Write* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffery Meyers and Valerie Meyers, *George Orwell: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1977).

<sup>5</sup> The total of 94 can be found in the following texts, 7 in Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Interpretations: George Orwell’s 1984* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987); W.F. Bolton, *The Language of 1984: Orwell’s English and Ours* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984); 11 in Paul Chilton and Crispin Aubrey, eds., *Nineteen Eighty-Four in 1984: Autonomy, Control, and Communication* (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1983); 17 in Abbot Gleason, Jack Goldsmith, and Martha C. Nussbaum, eds., *On Nineteen Eighty-Four: Orwell and Our Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); 13 in Irving Howe, ed., *1984 Revisited: Totalitarian in Our Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983); 6 in Samuel Hynes, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 1984* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1971); Robert Plank, *George Orwell’s Guide Through Hell: A Psychological Study of 1984* (San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1986); Patrick Reilly, *Nineteen Eighty-Four: Past, Present, and Future* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989); 13 in Johnson Rose, ed., *The Revised Orwell* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1992); 22 in Peter Stansky, ed., *On Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1983); Tom Winniffrith and William V. Whitehead, *1984 and All’s Well?* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984); George Woodcock, *Orwell’s Message: 1984 and the Present* (Harbour Publishing, 1984).

question, should Orwell and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* be laid to rest?<sup>6</sup> The thoughts collected in this preliminary investigation say “No.”

While it is well-known that because of its Cold War timing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* became a disputed book used by both sides of the spectrum as ammunition against the other, the fact remains that the world of Winston Smith still has something to offer students and the general reading public. As we look towards the future, dystopic novels like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* do a valuable service as they remind us that if something so horrible can be conceived on paper, then it could one day be actualized in the real world. When combined with knowledge of history and/or current events, novels like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* prove their worth as devices that foster greater understanding and increased critical thinking.

That being said the question must be raised as to whether *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is being read in schools. A three-year study conducted by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature found that the most assigned readings in grades 9 through 12 were by authors such as William Shakespeare, Mark Twain, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, not George Orwell.<sup>7</sup> While a definitive answer could not be found as to why Orwell does not grace more high school classrooms, a starting point may be Cleo McNelly’s article entitled “On Not Teaching Orwell.” In this short essay she states that Orwell is not taught in schools because students find his prose too negative and/or unclear. Most of all she claims that students cannot understand Orwell because he is on a higher plain than they are when it comes to writing and reading comprehension.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) and Scott Lucas, *The Betrayal of Dissent: Beyond Orwell, Hitchens and the New American Century* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Complete list of authors: William Shakespeare, Mark Twain, Harper Lee, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Steinbeck, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Golding. Arthur N. Applebee and others, *Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature Final Report* (Albany, NY: University at Albany, 1991), pg. 56

<sup>8</sup> Cleo McNelly, “On Not Teaching Orwell,” *College English* 38 (Feb. 1977), 554-558.

As interesting as McNelly's argument may be, the idea that Orwell is less palatable to a teenager than Shakespeare or Hawthorne is erroneous at best and leads us no closer to the question of why Fitzgerald and not Orwell, why William and not George. Keeping this in mind however, McNelly's observation of negativity in Orwell's writing is not a new idea and along with his politics forms one of the pillars of the academic communities' excessive scrutinization of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (and Orwell for that matter), which in many ways diminishes its literary value.

As the aforementioned 186 publications show, one does not have to look far to find scrutiny. Isaac Deutscher's essay "1984—The Mysticism of Cruelty" explained that any message Orwell tries to convey in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* falls on deaf ears because the novel is too depressing.<sup>9</sup> David Lowenthal's article "Orwell's Political Pessimism in '1984'" continues Deutscher's depression theme, writing that in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the reader finds Orwell's belief that pessimism is the only way humans can brace themselves for the worst outcomes in life.<sup>10</sup>

The scrutinization continues in Jonathan Rose's collection of essays entitled *The Revised Orwell*. The collection focuses on, among other things, the literary artistry of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>11</sup> In "Utopia, Dystopia, and the Middle Class in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" Robert Paul Resch concludes that the novel demonstrates how "as long as capitalism dominates the world system, totalitarianism remains a real possibility, and the notion of a progressive alliance of the middle and working classes" nothing more than a dream.<sup>12</sup> Though these examples illustrate not even a small portion of criticism attached to the novel, there are also

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<sup>9</sup> Isaac Deutscher, "1984—The Mysticism of Cruelty," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 1984*, ed. Samuel Hynes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1971), 39.

<sup>10</sup> David Lowenthal, "Orwell's Political Pessimism in '1984'" *Polity* 2 (Winter, 1969), 175.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Rose, *The Revised Orwell* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Paul Resch, "Utopia, Dystopia, and the Middle Class in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" *boundary 2* 24 (Spring 1997): 140.

examples that are very eccentric, to say the least. Margaret Drabble's essay "Of Beasts and Men: Orwell and Beastliness" focuses on Orwell's usage of the word "beastly" and relates it to how Orwell's portrayal of humans as beastly in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* allowed him to write about morality and humanity.<sup>13</sup> Finally, take note of Robert Plank's book *George Orwell's Guide Through Hell: A Psychological Study of 1984*, in which Plank interprets *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as Orwell's depiction of what Hell might look like.<sup>14</sup>

These aforementioned, and the numerous unmentioned, examples tie into a broader trend of academics striving to latch on to any angle in order to be published, no matter how great of a stretch or weak their argument may be. Andrew Delbanco accented this problem in *The New York Review of Books* when he wrote in 1999 how the pressure to publish causes many English PhDs to write eccentric essays that are in turn perceived by those outside of the discipline to be a joke.<sup>15</sup> Though all academic fields face similar challenges, the ongoing focus on minute detail and the deconstruction of literary texts hinders the every day benefits to be found in fictional literature, benefits that when combined with other fields can have extremely positive outcomes for students.

I draw your attention to Martha C. Nussbaum's book *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Inside she observes that the novels of today are sadly seen as something separate from other academic fields, useful purely for entertainment or as we've

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<sup>13</sup> Margaret Drabble, "Of Beasts and Men: Orwell on Beastliness" in *On Nineteen Eighty-Four: Orwell and Our Future*, eds. Abbot Gleason, Jack Goldsmith, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 43.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Plank, *George Orwell's Guide Through Hell: A Psychological Study of 1984* (San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> An example Delbanco gives is "a recent English lecture, the speaker discussed a pornographic "performance artist" who, for a small surcharge to the price of admission to her stage show, distributes flashlights to anyone in the audience wishing to give her a speculum exam. By looking down at the mirror at just the right angle, she is able, she says, to see her own cervix reflected in the pupil of the beholder, and thereby (according to the lecturer) to fulfill the old Romantic dream of eradicating the distinction between perceiver and perceived. The lecturer had a winning phrase—"the invaginated eyeball"—for this accomplishment. During the discussion that followed, a consensus emerged that, in light of the optical trick, standard accounts (Erwin Panofsky's was mentioned) of perspective as a constitutive element in Western visual consciousness need to be revised." Delbanco, Andrew. "The Decline and Fall of Literature" *The New York Review of Books* November 4, 1999 <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/318>

already noted the subject of intense over-scrutiny.<sup>16</sup> Nussbaum however contends that the novel is a useful device which expresses a “normative sense of life,” telling readers what to or not to notice in life and society and thus playing an integral part in public rationality.<sup>17</sup> History, that is the knowledge we possess about the past, may be able to show readers what happened in an oppressive society such as the Soviet Union, but it does not allow one to fully immerse themselves in the idea of what it was like to live within an oppressive society; a novel does.

Nussbaum writes that the story found within a novel allows reader involvement with the characters, the perplexities of their lives, and the world that they live in via narration and literary imagination. Glimpsing into another world, the readers relate the story in unique ways to aspects of their own world and in doing so are transformed into social agents “responsible for making a world that is either like or unlike the world within its pages.”<sup>18</sup> In other words the literary imagination allows us to move beyond the facts of every day life and explore other avenues of thought and understanding.<sup>19</sup> Thus as Nussbaum says, “literature focuses on the possible, inviting its readers to wonder about themselves” and the world within which they live.<sup>20</sup>

To enhance Nussbaum’s argument one can apply these ideas to current events or historical topics inside the classroom in order to foster students’ critical thinking skills. The following examples apply her premise to show how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be a useful tool that helps students develop critical thinking skills when examining certain aspects of society during the last eight years under President George W. Bush.

The National Security Archive at George Washington University reported that since 2001 the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has secretly reclassified over 55,000 pages in 9,500

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<sup>16</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Elaine Scarry, “A Defense of Poesy (The Treatise of Julia)” in *On Nineteen Eighty-Four: Orwell and Our Future*, eds. Abbot Gleason, Jack Goldsmith, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 13-28.

<sup>20</sup> Nussbaum, 5.

documents from the open National Archives and Records Administration, with special attention to the Kennedy and Johnson Presidential Libraries.<sup>21</sup> One such reclassified document was sequestered because it showed the director of the CIA complaining about the bad publicity they were getting for being unable to predict an anti-American riot in Bogota, Colombia in 1948.<sup>22</sup> These procedures are similar to those carried out by Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as one of his job duties in the Ministry of Truth is to alter old newspapers to make it seem like Big Brother is always right, never does anything wrong, and can predict the future.<sup>23</sup> Thus effectively hiding unwanted information about the government and confirming the INSOC slogan of “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the future controls the past.”<sup>24</sup>

For another example we turn to former Vice-President and environmental activist Al Gore. Mr. Gore notes in his book *The Assault on Reason* that TV news stations hardly have a reputation of solid reporting on news that actually affects the country. He cites examples over the last few years in which the media, rather than covering the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or debates in Congress, preferred to saturate the news with stories about JonBenet Ramsey, Michael Jackson, the trial of Robert Blake, and Anna Nicole Smith, none of which have any bearing on the wellbeing of our government.<sup>25</sup> In addition sociologist Barry Glassner writes that the media is part of a group of institutions, be it political, media or advocacy groups that benefit from fear mongering through repetition and “the depiction of isolated incidents as trends.”<sup>26</sup> To prove his point he cites the example that the murder rate in the United States decreased by twenty percent between the years 1990 and 1998, however during that same time network reporting on murder

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<sup>21</sup> Matthew M. Aid, “Declassification in Reverse” The National Security Archive, Feb 21, 2006, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB179/> (accessed January 25, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> George Orwell, “1984,” in *Animal Farm and 1984* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Inc, 2003), 123-124.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>25</sup> Al Gore, *The Assault on Reason* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 3-5.

<sup>26</sup> Barry Glassner, “Narrative Techniques of Fear Mongering” *Social Research* 71 (2004): 819-826, cites 823

increased by six hundred percent!<sup>27</sup> Once again this is similar to the world of Winston Smith. In Orwell's dystopian novel telescreens (televisions) are never turned off. Always on, they broadcast multiple programs but of particular interest is the Two Minutes of Hate in which citizens are forced to watch images of their "enemy" Emmanuel Goldstein that whip them up into such a frenzy that they begin to scream and throw things at the screen.<sup>28</sup>

This mind-numbing broadcast is combined with threats of attacks from Goldstein's The Brotherhood, so that citizens are constantly distracted from what may really be going on. The telescreens and dreaded "Thought Police" also keep the citizens of Oceania under constant surveillance, arresting those deemed dangerous without trial or any report of their arrest.<sup>29</sup> One can see parallels in the Military Commissions Act signed by President Bush in 2006.<sup>30</sup> The act creates a separate justice system controlled by the president that is used for trying "unlawful enemy combatants." This court, revoking the right to Due Process, allows individuals to be sentenced to life imprisonment or death without bringing forth evidence.<sup>31</sup> Because it applies to anyone the president deems to be "engaged in hostilities against the United States," the accused can be taken into custody at anytime and be held indefinitely without justification to any authorities or individuals outside of the commission.<sup>32</sup>

Returning to telescreens and "Thought Police," a form of Orwellian style surveillance today is the ongoing illegal wiretapping conducted by the National Security Agency (NSA). As James Bamford reported in his 2008 book *The Shadow Factory: The Ultra-Secret NSA from 9/11*

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 820. In addition it is important to note that the influence of TV should be taken seriously. A 2006 report by the Associated Press showed that 81% of homes in the US have more than one TV and on average within these households the TV is turned on for eight hours a day or more, with the average person watching almost 5 hours of TV a day. Associated Press, "Average home has more TVs than people" USA TODAY, September 21, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Orwell, 100-101.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 90 and 105.

<sup>30</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, "President Bush Signs Military Commissions Act of 2006," October 17, 2006, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/10/20061017-1.html> (accessed January 25, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The End of America* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2007), 15-16 and American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) "Fact Sheet: Military Commissions Act," <http://www.aclu.org/safefree/detention/29145res20070322.html> (accessed January 25, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Jeffery R. Smith, "On Prosecuting Detainees Draft Bill Waives Due Process for Enemy Combatants," *Washington Post*, July 28, 2008.



to the *Eavesdropping on America*, the NSA has been illegally wiretapping Americans phone calls since October 2001.<sup>33</sup> With the cooperation of major telecommunication companies like AT&T the NSA installed computers at fiber-optic cable switches that now collect hundreds of thousands of conversations, emails, internet searches, and credit card purchases so that by 2002 the NSA was secretly intercepting about 650 million pieces of voice and data information from Americans per day.<sup>34</sup> Seven years later not only has the NSA continued to wiretap US citizens despite former Justice Department employee Thomas M. Tamm bringing their actions out into the open, but the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISA) has deemed their actions legal.<sup>35</sup> Combined with the Military Commission Act the information collected by the NSA could be used to arrest anyone in the country without explanation and in the process deny their rights as a US citizen.

These examples only serve to strengthen the argument that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* still matters. Of course a caveat would be that students should never be spoon-fed answers when discussing the content of a book and attempting to identify any parallels with the topic of study. If examining the policies of the Bush Administration they may not even reach the same conclusions as those mentioned above, but this is permissible as the main point of the exercise is not to answer questions correctly so much as to get students thinking critically. As Elaine Scarry wrote in her essay *A Defense of Poesy*, factual statements are nourished by fictional literature.<sup>36</sup> “Illegal wiretapping” might be a fact, but literature allows us to think about what exactly “illegal wiretapping” entails and could imply if additional measures were taken. Literary imagination is a

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<sup>33</sup> James Bamford, *The Shadow Factory: The Ultra-Secret NSA from 9/11 to the Eavesdropping on America* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 118.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 181 and 211.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Klaidman, “Now We Know What The Battle Was About,” December 22 2008; Michael, Isikoff, “The Fed Who Blew the Whistle,” *Newsweek*, December 22, 2008; Eric Lichtblau, “Intelligence Court Rules Wiretapping Program Legal,” January 15, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Scarry, 27.

vital component in our understanding of the world and the actions we decide to take in molding it.

Henceforth though the topic needs more extensive consideration than what can be offered here, the argument that dystopian literature is still important should not be ignored. Novels like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and others such as *A Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451* stimulate our literary imagination.<sup>37</sup> By doing so they allow us to see society in ways that are not possible by relying solely on facts. Integrating fictional literature with studies of history or current events not only leads to a greater understanding of the past and present, but also serves the student in everyday life. It allows the student to look beyond known facts into the realm of possibilities, in turn creating a more thoughtful and critically minded citizen. *The New Statesman* may think *Nineteen Eighty-Four* needs to be buried, but the aforementioned examples show that if properly applied its usefulness has just begun.

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<sup>37</sup> Aldous Huxley, *A Brave New World* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946) and Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

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