

# Nineteen Eighty-four

by George Orwell

Rationale by Roy Ogren

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When *Nineteen Eighty-four* appeared thirty-four years ago, it was hailed by novelist James Hilton in the *New York Herald Tribune* as a "virtuoso literary performance with a sustained brilliance that has rarely been matched in other works of its genre." Eminent literary critic Lionel Trilling proclaimed, "*Nineteen Eighty-four* confirms its author in the special honorable place he holds in our intellectual life.

Time has validated both of these appraisals, for *Nineteen Eighty-four* remains as powerful, timely and important now as it was when first published in 1949--even more so as Orwell's totalitarian vision unfolds disquietingly around us: the six-and-a half foot wall screen manufactured by Kloss Video Corporation, Qube two-way cable networks, closed circuit security systems, ultrasensitive microphones, and voltage sensors which can detect heartbeat, respiration, muscle tension, and body movements from a distance contain all the components of Orwell's telescreen. To "cure" Winston of his dissidence, O'Brien employs actual psychiatric techniques like electroconvulsive therapy and flooding (intensive exposure to a phobic stimulus); political speeches, press releases and government reports are clogged with Newspeak, language designed to cloud reality, diminish thought, and weaken independent judgment. Without question, the stage is set for a degree of totalitarianism unlike anything the world has yet seen. And, as Sinclair Lewis warned in his novel of 1935, it can happen here. Physiologist and futurist David Goodman, who collaborated on the forementioned voltage sensor for humanitarian reasons, contends that it would merely take a "triggering incident" like a threat of nuclear terrorism to justify the "temporary" suspension of civil rights and imposition of martial law--also temporary, of course.

But why use this particular novel to explore the relationship between totalitarianism, technology, psychology, and language? Why not use social studies, science, and linguistic texts? Simply because, set forth in a work of fiction, the ideas are more accessible, more interrelated, and more engaging; and the sheer horror of totalitarianism is more real. We flinch when truncheon-wielding guards in the Ministry of Love crack Winston's fingers and shatter his elbow; we writhe in our armchairs as O'Brien virtually disembodies Winston with electric shock; we shudder as moist pads are applied to Winston's temples; and we, like Winston, are dazed by the "devastating explosion," "the blinding flash of light" which so numbs his mind that he consents to seeing--no, he actually sees--five fingers when only four are held up to him. Far from being gratuitous, this brutality serves a specific, justifiable purpose: Orwell jolts us--and our students--out of our complacency so that we never slacken our vigil against oppression. Research on

human rights violations from the dungeons of Chile and Argentina to the psychiatric wards of Moscow's Serbsky Institute will readily verify Orwell's fiction.

Orwell does more, however, than merely denounce tyranny; he also details specific strategies for acquiring and permanently maintaining power. Students therefore are sensitized to a host of social, political, scientific, technological, and even linguistic developments which foster totalitarianism.

They learn, first of all, that many technologies and psychological methods pose a direct threat to personal privacy and civil rights. The novel invites research and oral reports on all forms of surveillance, from contact microphones, which can hear through walls, to infrared telephoto lenses; on federal data banks, which contain detailed records on over 3.9 billion people; on psychological profiles used by corporations like Sears and Exxon to screen applicants and place employees; and on potential mind control stemming from brain research, psychopharmacology (the use of drugs to control mental states), and psychiatric innovations like the recently acclaimed PET scanner and the computerized analysis--electronic surveillance, really--of brain waves. Pretty soon, as in Oceania, "if you want to keep a secret, you must also hide it from yourself" (231).

In *Nineteen Eighty-four* Orwell also explores the power of language to manipulate and control. By analyzing the Party's use of specific propaganda techniques, like name-calling, bandwagon, and glittering generalities, then finding examples of each in the media, students learn to recognize and, we hope, to resist this type of deception.

In a more subtle and insidious perversion of language, the Party is systematically phasing out Oldspeak (standard English) in favor of Newspeak, language designed to suppress individualism and "diminish the range of thought" by eliminating all shades of meaning and by "cutting the choice of words down to a minimum" (247). By controlling language, the Party seeks to control thought and emotion, thereby securing the hearts and minds of its members.

This idea is especially disturbing because Newspeak is so prevalent in America today. In true Newspeak fashion, nouns are being used increasingly as verbs ("impact"); prefixes are being used to soften more highly charged negative words (nuclear reactor valves seldom stick shut, they just stay in the "non-open mode"); and our sense of reality is relentlessly undermined by gobbledygook and euphemisms, from the "protective reaction raids" of Vietnam to a recent Energy Department report which states that a local nuclear waste repository may be "a serious disamenity" to a community.

The objective today, as in *Nineteen Eighty-four*, is mind--and I suspect, in some subtle way--reality control. At times it seems that our politicians and bureaucrats actually believe their own euphemisms, as if their own sense of reality has been distorted by their attempts to shape ours. The lesson Orwell teaches is vital, for unless a democratic people can discern language which is deliberately vague and misleading, they stand little chance of interpreting official gibberish, and less chance of voting wisely. Worse yet, a populace bewildered by language which obscures reality may become apathetic and unsure of its

own judgment. At that point, they--or rather, *we*--become easy prey for Big Brother, the strong guiding hand who knows all too well that "if one is to rule and continue ruling, one must be able to dislocate the sense of reality" (177).

The study of Newspeak also yields a valuable lesson in style, for students learn to recognize vagueness, pretense, wordiness and meaninglessness in their own writing. Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" is very instructive here. In it he expresses his unswerving commitment to clear English and his firm belief in the relationship between language, thought and politics:

Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.

Toward the end of the essay, he lists six principles of good writing which students can apply immediately.

I can see two grounds--both very understandable--on which some might object to the teaching of *Nineteen Eighty-four*. One is the nightmarish brutality of the torture scenes. These incidents, however, are central to Orwell's purpose, as I have explained. Certainly by the time students leave high school, they must face the horrifying realities of totalitarianism.

The other grounds for objection might be the sex in the novel: the Junior Anti-Sex League is mentioned frequently, and the relationship between Winston and Julia is decidedly physical. These references, however, are intended neither to titillate the reader nor to condone illicit sex. Instead, Orwell's purposes are again so well defined that upperclassmen should be able to discuss this aspect of the novel maturely and objectively. The Party prohibits sex, except as an act of procreation, for two reasons: (1) to suppress emotion and personal freedom, which disjoin individuals from the Party by fostering personal identity, and (2) to generate frustration, "which was desirable because it could be transformed into war fever and leader worship" (110). Furthermore, Winston and Julia's affair is "a political act" (105), a rebellion of the individual against an oppressive society and a reaffirmation of self. Thus, while sex plays an important role in *Nineteen Eighty-four*, Orwell's interest in it is detached and analytical.

Every reason exists to teach *Nineteen Eighty-four*, and to teach it now: it is a modern classic which has been acclaimed by eminent critics throughout the free world; it challenges students with thought-provoking ideas which spark discussion, composition, research, and debate; it links English with social studies and science, thereby impelling students to see their education as a whole; and it raises timely issues of vital concern to a free society. Ultimately, teaching it is one of the most genuinely *American* things an English teacher can do.

## Reviews

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