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1984

GEORGE ORWELL





A NEW ADAPTATION CREATED BY ROBERT ICKE  
AND DUNCAN MACMILLAN.

## GEORGE ORWELL-BIOGRAPHY



Orwell, born Eric Blair in India 1903, describes his family as “*lower-upper-middleclass*” - he never felt that he fitted in.

Having frequented several prestigious boarding schools in England he became to feel oppressed and outraged by the schools’ dictatorial control over their students’ lives.

Following his time at Eton, Orwell joined the British Imperial Police in Burma but grew to hate this job too, unwilling to enforce the strict rules of this political regime. He returned to England because of ill-health and left the Imperial Police, intent on becoming a writer.

Orwell filled his life with experiences that transformed his beliefs and ideas. After reading ‘*The People of the Abyss*’ by Jack London, Orwell went to live amongst the very poor in London to gain insight and understanding and published ‘*Down and Out in Paris and London*’ following this experience. He gave a few months of his life to live amongst the destitute coal miners of North England re-emerging as a devout socialist! But, after first-hand experiences of reporting on the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War, Orwell enhanced his hatred of totalitarianism and political authority, writing ‘*Animal Farm*’ in 1945 and ‘*1984*’ in 1949.

‘*1984*’ is one of the world’s most powerful warnings ever issued against the dangers of totalitarianism. Similar to ‘*Brave New World*’, it deals with a dystopian world, where the writer aims to portray the most ‘unperfect’ society; the worst human society imaginable.

An important factor to remember is that Orwell was writing at the dawn of the nuclear age, over sixty years ago when television or the internet weren’t fixtures in all British homes. Then, Orwell’s fears of dictatorial country seemed a possibility. Fortunately, ‘*1984*’ remains a work of fiction - democracy rules!



Yet, '1984' remains an important novel as a warning against an abusive and oppressive authoritarian government but also as a fore-warning to the psychological power and the ways that manipulations of language and history can be used to control people.

## PLOT

*1984* is a play based on the George Orwell Novel of the same name, written in 1949. Icke and Macmillan have adapted the well-known novel that tells the story of Winston Smith, a low-ranking member of the ruling Party in the nation of Oceania. Winston's job is in the Party's Ministry of Truth, where he has to delete the past and re-shape it to suit the Party's needs and agendas. Everywhere Winston goes, like all the citizens in Oceania, he is being watched by the Party through telescreens and being ruled by the Party's leader the Big Brother. The Party are ruling by pushing a language called Newspeak that attempts to prevent rebellious behaviour by eliminating any language linked to it. Rebellious thoughts are also illegal, and 'thought crimes' are the worst of all crimes in the nation.

Winston is forever having rebellious thoughts. He even buys a diary to note these thoughts but then worries that his co-workers are spies that will turn him in to the Big Brother. One such person is Julia. Winston notices her watching him and one day she slips him a note saying 'I love you' - which is also illegal under the Party's ruling. They begin a love affair meeting out of town at an old tree and then, as the story progresses, they find a room above an old antique shop - the one where Winston purchased the diary, where there are no telescreens (so they can't be watched by the Party.) As their affair progresses, Winston's hatred for the Party increases and he is always on the lookout for more Allies, or members of the counterparty 'The Brotherhood', to befriend.

He is convinced that O'Brien, in his office, is a member of the Brotherhood and awaits his call. Finally, he receives it and is summoned to his house along with Julia. He reveals that he is, indeed, a member of the Brotherhood and gives Winston a copy of Emmanuel Goldstein's



book – *'The Manifesto of the Brotherhood'*. Winston reads the book aloud to Julia in their room above the antique shop. Unfortunately, on one occasion, the Party soldiers storm in and take Julia and Winston to the Ministry of Love, separately.

There, Winston is greeted by O'Brien, who turns out to be a Party spy. Winston and Julia are tortured at the Ministry of Love, as the Party try to break them and force them to live the Party way. Winston will not break and is taken to the dreaded Room 101, where the torturing becomes more intense. He has expressed views of his hatred and fear of rats throughout, so O'Brien places a mask on his head filled with rats that will of course, eat his face. Finally, Winston can no longer contain his fear and breaks, telling O'Brien to do it to Julia instead of him. This is exactly what O'Brien wanted.

The novel ends with Winston being released into the outside world, where he sees Julia, but no longer loves, or feels anything towards her. He has accepted the Party entirely and now loves Big Brother.

In the forward to the play, Icke and Macmillan explain the importance of the appendix to the Orwell novel although many publishers have discarded it as they don't see its relevance. Icke and Macmillan explain how important it is to emphasise that the novel is *'fiction pretending to be fact'*. It refers to Shakespeare, Milton, Swift and Dickens and quotes the Declaration of Independence suggesting that they all used a form of Newspeak and that the last recorded use of Newspeak is 2050, way into the future. The playwrights felt that this should be the main focus of their play – to use voices to differentiate from the characters, as if giving the audience footnotes before, during and after the main events in the play.

So the play begins in 2050 with voices; a mother, father, child, host and waitress who tell us of Winston's diary that was supposedly written in 1984. The things the voices say are then reflected in what the characters say later in the play. The voices also become the characters in the play. It then follows a similar plotline to the novel. We see Winston and Julia's love affair unfold and see the Party break Winston in Room 101. The play comes to a close back in the year 2050 where Winston is sat at a table in a coffee shop being served by a waitress, Julia. He admits that he has betrayed her. A father and son are talking of the fall of the Party and a fictional character called Winston Smith who wrote a diary, possibly in 1984, but no one is sure; although the things he writes about are fact. The child questions whether the diary and the fall



of the Party are real or whether it's a plot the Party wants us to believe before singing the full version of the song Oranges and Lemons that has been partially sung many times during the play. Winston, having listened to this conversation, thanks O'Brien who is to be seen watching from the side

## THE CHARACTERS

### WINSTON

The main character in the play. It is through his eyes and life that we see the happenings in Oceania. His hatred towards the party and his questioning nature makes him willing to rebel, but his paranoia leaves him forever asking, '*Is it- switched off?*' referring to the telecoms to reassure himself. We see his courage when O'Brien is listing the things that he would be willing to do to bring the party down as we see him agree to throwing sulphuric acid in a child's face, commit suicide, betray his country and lose his identity! But we also see his love towards Julia as he refuses to agree to never seeing her again. His motives are obviously to bring the Party down and to be free but his paranoia and fear of rats change this during his torture, as he allows for Julia to take his punishment and to never see her again - he becomes an obedient citizen in Oceania and a loyal servant to the Party.

His movements and voice should reflect his paranoia of being caught as well as his intrigue of rebelling by maybe looking over his shoulder or by keeping his things close to him. Whilst being tortured by the rats, Winston's voice and movements should show how intense his fear is and by the end of the play he should show that he is totally relaxed and content with life, especially as he says '*Thank you*' to show that the Party has full control over him.



## JULIA

She is confident and optimistic and fearless in her rebellion and is in love with Winston. She despises the Party and takes part in several rebellious acts. The difference between her and Winston is that her rebellion is for her personal pleasure, drinking real coffee, eating chocolate, having sex and a loving relationship - whereas Winston's rebellion is more ideological. Her love for Winston is obvious when she agrees to go to meet with O'Brien, even though she fears that he is involved with the Party as she says *'This is madness... but I'm coming with you. Not for Goldstein or for O'Brien or for the Brotherhood. For you.'* Her motives are to live the best life possible and to have pleasure, however hard that might be to find. Her movements and voice should be confident in her rebellion and contented; she is not worried at all.

## O'BRIEN

He is a very complex character. We never know if we should trust him. Through the play he gives us clues that he is a member of the Brotherhood in the things he says and does to Winston - *'We shall meet, Winston in the place where there is no darkness'*. His motives seem clear, which is to enrol Winston into the Brotherhood, but that all changes when we see him interrogate him in Room 101 and realise that his main motive is to get Winston to give up the only thing he said he couldn't, Julia. His movements and voice should be mysterious, especially in the closing scene of the play when he is lingering around the coffee shop just watching the scene unfold.

## CHARRINGTON

He is an old, friendly character who runs an antique shop where Winston spends a lot of his time. Mr Charrington seems to share Winston's interest in the past by sharing old stories of his marriage and of London city, and encourages Winston's rebellion by selling him the 'keepsake album' and renting out an old room that doesn't have a telescreen for him to carry out his love affair with Julia. But as we discover on page 67, he is one of the Thought Police and he is the one who hands Julia and Winston over to the Party, so his motives, movement and voice could be portrayed as cunning. He also reveals that he is actually 20 years younger in reality which



further challenges the actor in his portrayal.

## **SYME**

He works in the Ministry of truth with Winston where he is responsible for editing the Newspeak dictionary. We see him in the canteen telling his workmates of the beauty of the new language. His character is part of the play to show the mundanity and repetitiveness of life under the Party as his lines are repeated time and again and this could also be shown with the voice and the movements by the actor if they're repeated. During the last time the same dialogue is repeated between Syme, Parsons, Martin and Winston - Syme isn't present and they talk to Syme's empty chair with Winston the only one to question his whereabouts. Parson hints that the Thought Police may have taken him.

## **MARTIN**

He is the one associated with the book, the manifesto of the Brotherhood that Winston wants to read. He is the one who is reading it at the start of the play and says that nothing is the same after reading it. Martin says this at O'Brien's house as he gives the briefcase containing the book to Winston and also at the end of the play as he is still reading the book. He is liked to O'Brien and is a Party member.

Martin appears in the past, present and future - this makes us question whether the diary was really written in 1984, whether what we are watching is really 2050 or whether it's happening now, in the present day.

## **PARSONS**

An obnoxious character that is forever bragging about his children who spy on other citizens and turn them in for Thought Crimes. It's obvious that Syme doesn't like him, but this doesn't faze Parsons, he continues to brag about his children's work for the Party. Even at the end of



the play, when he is about to be killed for being a Thought Criminal he is bragging about his children and telling the tale of how they turned him in. His voice and movements should reflect the pride he has in his children and the Party.

### **MRS PARSONS**

She is a nervous character who we only meet at the start of the play. She seems to fear her children who appear to be chasing her. She reminds Winston of who he is, and 'smiles nervously' as her child calls him a Thought Criminal. Her movements and voice should reflect her nerves and the fear she holds towards her children and her situation.

### **VOICE, HOST (CHARRINGTON), MOTHER (MRS PEARSON), FATHER (MR PEARSON), WAITRESS (JULIA), MAN (SYME)**

These are the voices we hear at the beginning, during and at the end of the play. Their lines reflect the ones other characters deliver during the play. They also refer to the year 2050. They could be seen as voices from the future that challenge us to think whether things have really changed or not.

We could also argue that these are the characters that we have just been watching, as they're played by the same actors, only that they've been '*prepared to lose their identity- forgot who they are*'- that they have all been tortured, lost their identity for being Thought Criminals. This makes us question again if this is all happening in the present.





## STAGING THE PLAY

The location of the play is fluid as well as the timescale which suggests that the set should be minimal. The use of technology is also compulsory as the telescreens are a focal part of the play. The only locations mentioned and are clarified in the stage directions are the antique shop, the canteen at work, the countryside (where Julia and Winston's love affair begins), Room 101 and the Café (at the end of the play). This suggests that the play could not be staged naturalistically.



This gives the teacher the opportunity to experiment and introduce learners to different theatrical styles, genres, techniques and practitioners. There are Artaud elements in the play especially with the torture scenes and there is scope for the use and teaching of physical theatre. But the most obvious practitioner to study is Brecht using his 'Verfremdungseffekt' techniques such as the telescreens, multiple roles and interaction with the audience key to the success of '1984'.

The staging of it could work well on a thrust stage – the audience would entrap the actors from all three sides - with the screen in the background a collection of telescreens. This would increase the intensity of Big Brother watching. There could also be telescreens behind and above the audience to engulf them and to make them feel even more claustrophobic by Big Brother and the Party.

The idea of being watched and trapped could also lend its self to performing the play in the round. It is crucial that the audience feel a part of the action and that the actors engage with them directly from time to time, especially with stage directions stating on page 78 that the houselights are lifted and '*Winston is aware of us watching him*'. This also reflects that this is '*the place where there is no darkness*' where O'Brien and Winston are to meet again.

This shows the importance of lighting in the play. Light and darkness are used to symbolise knowledge of the truth and hiding from it. The stage directions refer to an office lamp that



illuminates the diary throughout the play that Winston switches on and off, it's as if he is experimenting and trying to decide whether what he is reading is truth. Charrington and the Host also play with light - they're also linked with the past, showing and hiding the truth. Lights are also used to change the scene - learners must pay close attention to the stage directions.

The use of sound is also important in the play as various sounds such as klaxons, train whistles and the hum of the telescreens are all used to change location or to remind the characters, and the audience, that they're being watched. Silence is only used once in the stage directions; *'O'Brien turns off the telescreens. The first real silence of the play'*. It is important that there is a dull sound throughout the play, apart from this moment.

One production in the past used a proscenium stage with the screens on the back wall above the characters, giving the feeling of being watched constantly. They also used a minimal set of school desks and wooden chairs with floor lights at the front of the stage to create shadows on the characters' faces therefore emphasising change in features and reflecting the loss of their identities.



With its varied and challenging opportunities for directors and the challenge of multiple roles, different theatrical styles and techniques for the actor, there is no surprise that Orwell's novel has successfully transposed to a play.



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