

# George Orwell: Nineteen Eighty-four

## Author:

The book *Nineteen Eighty-four* by George Orwell was written in 1948 and published in 1949. It is one of Orwell's most famous books.

Eric Arthur Blair (George Orwell) was born in 1903 in India, where his father worked for the Civil Service. The family moved to England in 1907 and in 1917 Orwell entered Eton, where he contributed regularly to the various college magazines. From 1922 to 1927 he served with the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, an experience that inspired his first novel, *Burmese Days* (1934). Several years of poverty followed. He lived in Paris for two years before returning to England, where he worked successively as a private tutor, schoolteacher and bookshop assistant, and contributed reviews and articles to a number of periodicals. *Down and Out in Paris and London* was published in 1933. In 1936 he was commissioned by Victor Gollancz to visit areas of mass unemployment in Lancashire and Yorkshire, and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) is a powerful description of the poverty he saw there. At the end of 1936 Orwell went to Spain to fight for the Republicans and he was wounded. *Homage to Catalonia* is his account of the civil war. He was admitted to a sanatorium in 1938 and from then on he was never fully fit. He spent six months in Morocco and there he wrote *Coming Up for Air*. During the Second World War he served in the Home Guard and worked for the BBC Eastern Service from 1941 to 1943. As literary editor of *Tribune* he contributed a regular page of political and literary commentary and he also wrote for the *Observer* and later for *the Manchester Evening News*. His unique political allegory, *Animal Farm*, was published in 1945, and it was this novel, together with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which brought him worldwide fame. George Orwell died in London in January 1950.

## Title:

1984 means the year, when everything has changed. The world is divided into three countries: Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia. Oceania comprises the Americas, the Atlantic islands including the British Isles, Australasia and the southern portion of Africa. Eurasia comprises the whole of the northern part of the European and Asiatic land-mass. Eastasia, smaller than the others comprises China and the countries to the south of it, the Japanese islands and large parts of Manchuria, Mongolia and Tibet. Two of the three countries are allied and lead war against the third country. Who is allied and who is the enemy changes from time to time. The novel is set in the year 1984 in London ("Airstrip One") in Oceania, a superpower controlled by the restrictive "Party" and led by its symbolic head Big Brother. Everywhere you can see large posters of him saying: "Big Brother Is Watching You". These are the slogans of the party:

WAR IS PEACE!  
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY!  
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH!

The entire apparatus of government in Oceania is divided in four Ministries: The *Ministry of Truth*, which concerns itself with news, entertainment, education and the fine arts. The *Ministry of Peace*, which concerns itself with war. The *Ministry of Love*, which maintains law and order and the *Ministry of Plenty*, which is responsible for economic affairs. The regime has invented a new language, called Newspeak, the official language in Oceania. The names of the Ministries in Newspeak are Minitrue, Minipax, Miniluv and Miniplenty. The Ministry of Love is the really frightening one. It is a place impossible to enter except on official business, and then only by penetrating through a maze of barbed wire entanglements, steel doors and hidden machine-gun nests.

The Party controls the industry and the production of all goods. But the worst thing is, that it alters the past by rewriting or destroying all old documents. What was true yesterday can be wrong today. It is forbidden to think against the party, to say nothing of public demonstrations.

Now, the Party is about to invent a new language, called Newspeak. Newspeak should prevent everybody from thinking wrong, which is called crimethink in Newspeak. The vocabulary is reduced, so that there is no way of thinking wrong, because you can't express it.

To oversee all people the party has organized a secret organisation, the Thought Police, which uses modern telescreens to control each single person. The telescreen receives and transmits

simultaneously. In almost every room is fixed a telescreen and everything that happens is transmitted to the Thought Police, but how often or on what system the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork.

The book is written from Winston's point of view, but there is a third-person narrator.

### **Main characters:**

*Winston Smith* is a member of the Outer Party, thirty-nine years old and suffers from varicose ulcer. He works in the Ministry of Truth, where he has to rewrite old newspaper articles. He's intelligent, sensible and recognizes the lies of the Party. He wonders how other people see over the obvious lies and the daily cutbacks of consumer goods. His hope that the regime will be overthrown one day lies on the proles.

*O'Brian*: He also works in the Ministry of Truth and he's a member of the Inner Party and of the thought-police, but Winston doesn't know that fact. Generally, nobody knows who is a member of the thought-police. At the beginning of the book, Winston supposed that O'Brian is a member of the Brotherhood and so O'Brian deceived Winston. He's also intelligent, understands everything and is able to explain everything, even things that aren't true. He tortures Winston to destroy his resistance against the Party and drums the Party's ideology in Winston's head, so that Winston finally loves the Big Brother. He has a counterargument for every argument of Winston when he interrogates him.

Quotation: *Winston: Does "Big Brother exist?" "Of course he exists. The party exists. Big Brother exists. Big Brother is the embodiment of the Party." "Does he exist in the same way as I exist?" "You don't exist," said O'Brien.*

*Julia* becomes Winston's girlfriend and she's also a member of the Outer Party. Winston really loves her, and so they meet secretly in a room which Winston met from an antique dealer in a prole-part of London. She seems to be a perfect Party-member, because she spends much time to organize campaigns for the Party and screams loudest when Goldstein's picture is shown on the telescreen during the hate-weeks.

*Emmanuel Goldstein* is the leader of an underground organisation called "The Brotherhood". Nobody knows if he and the organisation really exist. Goldstein is said to be the author of "The book" which is criticising the party's politics and the structure of society. Party members have to hate him and his picture is shown on the telescreen during the hate-weeks and the people have to shout at it.

Winston Smith, Julia and O'Brian are round characters but all the others are stereotypes, all supporters of the Party who are fascinated by Big Brother.

### **Plot:**

The action is presented chronologically, but it is interrupted by explanations of Ingsoc and the social structure, by extracts of Goldstein's "The book" and so on.

April 1984. A short time ago Winston bought a diary in a little junk-shop in a slummy quarter of London. This was not illegal, since there were no laws anymore, but if detected, he would be punished by death or sent into a forced labour camp. Unseen by the telescreen he starts to write into the diary. He hates the party, its rituals, slogans and its secret service. He remembers the last two-minute hate, a ritual, where Goldstein is shown on a large telescreen and the people scream and shout angrily at the picture. There he saw Julia, a black haired girl. He hates her, because she seems to be the perfect party member. In this hate he also saw O'Brian and for a short time he looked straight into his eyes. He came to the idea, that O'Brian could have the same opinion about the Party, which he himself has. But this opinion must be kept secret. He writes into his diary: Down with big brother!

His work in the Ministry of Truth is to rewrite newspaper articles for the Party, which is changing the past for its advantage. So the Party controls the history because the past gets erased, the erasure gets forgotten and a lie becomes truth.

He often thinks about the proles. They live in the poorer quarters of the town and none of them is a member of the Party. Winston thinks, that if there is hope, it lies in the proles. Sometimes he wanders around in the poorer quarters talking to them and speaking about the past. In the shop where he bought the diary he buys a little coral and the shopkeeper shows him a room without a telescreen, the perfect hiding place. Writing into his secret diary he is absolutely sure that he will get detected some day. Thoughtcrime is the word for acting or only thinking against the Party. Some day he will get

caught and become an unperson, like his former comrade. Once O'Brien said to him "We shall meet in the place where there is no darkness." Winston thinks, that O'Brien meant the future - a better future.

One day he leaves his cubicle in the Ministry of Truth to go to the lavatory. On the corridor he sees the black haired girl. She stumbles and falls down. He helps her up and she gives him a little sheet of paper (luckily unseen by the telescreen). Back in his cubicle he reads it: "I love you." They meet in the hiding place. Julia has the same opinions about the Party like Winston. They often meet in the hiding place, speaking about the Party or making love.

One day Winston gets invited by O'Brien. They both get there and it comes out, that O'Brien really is a member of the underground organisation called the Brotherhood. They can talk openly, because O'Brien turns off the telescreen, a privilege only Inner Party members have got. They become members of the Brotherhood and short time after that meeting, Winston gets "The Book", written by Emmanuel Goldstein. In their hiding place he reads the book. It tells about the past, the Party's social and political structure, doublethink (Newspeak word for reality control), the Thought Police and criticises the Party and the Big Brother.

Suddenly they hear a voice from a telescreen, which was hidden behind a picture on the wall. It said: "You are dead." The house is surrounded by the thought police. It comes out, that the shopkeeper is a member of the secret service. They get parted and arrested.

He finds himself in a prison cell in the Ministry of Love. There are telescreens on each wall of the cell. It is very high, broad lighted and white tiled. O'Brien's words about the place where there is no darkness come to his mind. Through the screen he gets ordered to sit still. He is starving, but he has nothing to eat. After some time he gets brought into a room, where several people are sitting in. They are prisoners too - some of them badly hurt, one of them nearly starving to death.

He meets O'Brien, who is also a member of the Thought Police. The investigation starts. He gets beaten and questioned. He has to confess everything. His thoughts against the Party, the diary, the relationship with Julia. For many months he has to bear torture, starving, inquiry, confessioning - he even confesses things he has not done, only not to get beaten - but he does not get shot, as he always thought.

One day he gets brought into a room, where he has to lie on a stretching bank. His whole body gets fixed to it. Now O'Brien is questioning him. The inquiry starts again and he has to learn, that everything the Party says is true. So if the Party says that two plus two makes five, two plus two makes five and not four. This inquiry - his "healing" - lasts for several days or weeks and with time, Winston gives up his own thoughts and opinions and learns to see things with the Party's eyes. He also gets a better cell and enough to eat.

He talks to O'Brien about the Party and sees, that it is too powerful to fight against. He made many confessions while being under inquiry, and "learned" to give up his thoughts, but there was one thing he never did. He never betrayed Julia, because he still loved her. So he gets ordered to room 101. He heard about it before - everyone feared that room - but nobody exactly knew, what happens to you in there. He has to sit down on a chair, and O'Brien fixes some sort of mask to his head. On the other side of the mask there is a cage with two hungry rats. Only a door parts the mask (and with it also Winston) and the rats. Winston gets into panic, but he cannot move. His whole body, even his head, is fixed to the chair. The only thing that can provide him from the rats' attack is a person between him and the rats. He knows that the only person to whom he can transfer this punishment is Julia. Frantically he is shouting: "Do it to Julia! Not me!" -so he finally even betrays the person he loves. He gets set free.

He is a broken, old man. One day he even meets Julia, accidentally. They talk to each other, but there is no love anymore. They part again. Finally he has "learned" to love Big Brother.

### **Interpretation:**

It is a frightening vision, that the whole world is ruled by three totalitarian countries. It is obviously that all of the three countries are governed totalitarially. Two of them are allied and they are in war with the third country alternately. A peace that is permanent would be the same as a permanent war (War is peace). But the war (it is only one continual war) isn't as cruel as the wars in former times. There are only some areas where the war takes place, but none of the countries is able to occupy another one, because their military power is at the same level. But the war is necessary to employ workers and use up the things they produce. The essential act of war is destruction, not necessarily of human lives, but of the products of human labour. War is a way of destroying materials which might otherwise be used to make the masses too comfortable, and, in the long run, too intelligent. Even when weapons are not actually destroyed, their manufacture is still a convenient way of expending labour power without producing anything that can be consumed.

Which country is enemy and which one is ally has changed several times in the last century. I could imagine that Orwell thought of the Nazi-Soviet pact in August 1939, followed by the German invasion of Russia in 1941, which brought Stalin into the war on the side of the Allies, and then by the cooling of Allied-Soviet relations, which turned Russia back into a potential enemy of the West. In short, the impermanence of the alliances is one feature of Nineteen Eighty-Four.

In addition, the regime wants the people to think, that Oceania was always allied with Eastasia and was always in war with Eurasia. Every shred of evidence that conflicts with the last official line is systematically destroyed and a false trail is laid in its place. The whole history had been erased and replaced by a version which matches with the Party's ideology. It is unbelievable that it's impossible for the young generation to find out what happened in the past. "Ignorance is strength" is one of the slogans of the Party.

It is Winston's job to rewrite newspaper articles, but so he has the possibility to read old articles and can get some bits of information about the past.

The Party has also created a new, sanitised language, called "*Newspeak*" to take the place of traditional English with its uncomfortable associations. It is based on short, clipped words which arouse the minimum of echoes in the speaker's mind and which make it impossible to think of measures against the Party. There will be no possibility to commit thoughtcrime as soon as everybody speaks Newspeak, because there will be no words to express it. The purpose of Newspeak is not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc (the Party's ideology), but to make all other modes of thought impossible. When everybody will speak Newspeak, a heretical thought, diverging from the principles of Ingsoc will be unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought. Orwell gives real-world examples of Newspeak: "Nazi, Gestapo, Comintern" and there are many others.

*Ingsoc*, Oceania's political idea is based on the Socialism. But in each variant of Socialism that appeared from about 1900 onwards the aim of establishing liberty and equality was more and more abandoned. The new movements which appeared in the middle years of the century, Ingsoc in Oceania, New-Bolshevism in Eurasia, Death-Worship in Eastasia, had the conscious aim of perpetuating unfreedom and inequality. The purpose of all of them is to arrest progress and freeze history at a chosen moment. Every new political theory leads back to *hierarchy*.

After the revolutionary period of the 'fifties and 'sixties society re-grouped itself, as always, into High, Middle and Low. At the apex of the society-pyramid comes Big Brother. He's infallible and all-powerful. Nobody has ever seen Big Brother and it is said that he'll never die. Below Big Brother comes the Inner Party, its number limited to six millions. Below the Inner Party comes the Outer Party which, if the Inner Party is described as the brain of State, may be justly likened to the hands. Below that come the dumb masses, which are called "the proles", numbering eighty-five per cent of the population. The mutability of the past is the central tenet of Ingsoc.

*Doublethink* means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously and accepting both of them. Doublethink lies at the heart of Ingsoc, since the essential act of the Party is

to use conscious deception. People tell deliberate lies while they genuinely believe in them and they forget every inconvenient fact.

People who don't conform to the political idea of the Party or commit thoughtcrime (crimethink in Newspeak) are arrested, tortured, tormented and seriously hurt. Everybody has his own, personal hell. In Nineteen Eighty-four it is room number 101 in the Ministry of Love. In this room, Winston is tormented by O'Brien and other members of the Thought-police. All prisoners in the Ministry of Love are brainwashed and some never leave the Ministry. These people are called "unpersons" and their existence in the history is erased. They have never existed.

Freedom is limited to the minimum in Oceania. All Party-members are kept under surveillance 24 hours per day. To speak while sleeping can be a lethal mistake, because many of such people disappeared on the next day. Love doesn't exist anymore. Girls only have to "do their duty to the Party". It is a life for the Party, emotionless except the hatred for Goldstein and the hostile country. Nobody knows whether Goldstein really exists or not. The author of "The Book" could also be the thought-police itself to unmask traitors. Even children betray their parents if they observe a suspicious conversation or behaviour. Parents can never trust their children.

### **Personal comments:**

Because of the relatively simple plot of Nineteen Eighty-four, Orwell concentrated on the description of the Party's ideology Ingsoc and Oceania's society. Almost half of all pages contain Winston's thoughts about society, the Party, the proles and his relationship to Big Brother, Julia, O'Brien and other people.

For me, the plot was easy to understand, but the explanations of society, Ingsoc and so on were hard to understand. The language is contemporary and rather matter-of-fact.

It was interesting to see how people can be influenced by others, in this case by the Party and Big Brother. Although the year 1984 is over, we still live in a democracy. But the book is still as topical as in 1948, because most of the problems shown in the book are all pervasive even nowadays, for example bad housing conditions, especially for the lower-class people and the increasing poverty. Some of Orwell's predictions really happened just as Orwell had predicted. Today the world isn't as perfect as optimists wish, but not as bad as pessimists see it.

I don't think that Orwell wanted to predict the future, but I think that he also wanted to show the situation in 1948 when he wrote the book. 84 are the changed digits of 48, the year of origin. In my opinion, the book should be understood as a warning, so that things like the rule of Hitler or Stalin will never happen again.

The power of the regime in Nineteen Eighty-four is based on the entire obedience to the Party and the ignorance of the population. They all believe what the telescreen says, even if it was said the opposite a day before. It is unbelievable that most of the people accept the lies of the Party. The most frightening thing is how opponents of the regime are tortured to break their will and how they are brainwashed.

Only education can prevent people from following a leader. Uneducated people are not able to recognize the deception and lies of the Party. Oceania represents the worst case of totally uneducated people.

I was surprised that Orwell shows us a world without much technology. The one and only new invention of the Party is the telescreen, which is only a combination of a video-camera and a flat television-set, which can't be turned off (except by Inner-Party-members). The reason is, that new inventions require a lot of "thinking" and well-informed people. Computers would allow them to communicate with other cultures, they would learn and recognize the lies of the Party and prevent that the Party can control all people and change the history. Modern technology is a contrast with a totalitarian regime. Winston can resist the electroshock and technical instruments of torture, but the rats, an old method to torture people, caused Winston to betray Julia.