

6.21

# George Orwell

POUM = Partido obrero de unificación Marxista

realistic

from Myanmar



rst on left) at Eton

Aragon front, 1937

son Richard

## Early life

Born Eric Blair in India in 1903, George Orwell was the son of a minor colonial official. As a small child, he was taken to England by his mother, and was educated first at a preparatory school, St Cyprian's, in Eastbourne, then at Eton. He could not stand the lack of privacy, the humiliating punishments, the pressure to conform to the values of the English public school tradition – such as the development of 'character', a spirit of competition and a rigid adherence to discipline – and to the prevailing moral code. At Eton he began to develop an independent-minded personality, indifference to accepted values, and he professed atheism and socialism.

On leaving school, he passed the India Office examinations for the Indian Imperial Police, opting to serve in Burma (now Myanmar), where he remained from 1922 to 1927. In 1927 he went on leave and decided not to return; it was not simply that he wished to break away from British imperialism in India: he wished to 'escape from [...] every form of man's dominion over man', as he said in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), and the social structure from which he came.

## First-hand experiences

Back in London, he started a social experiment: wearing second-hand clothes, he spent short periods living in common lodging-houses in the East End, seeking the company of 'down-and-outs'. In this way he directly experienced poverty and learned how institutions for the poor, such as hostels, prisons, lodging-houses and hospitals, worked.

After a period in Paris, where he worked as a dishwasher in a hotel, he decided to begin publishing his works with the pseudonym of George Orwell. He chose 'George' because it had an Englishness about it, suggesting plain speaking and common sense, and 'Orwell' because it was the name of a river in the county of Suffolk he was fond of. *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) was his first non-

fiction narrative, in which he described his experiences among the poor; it was followed by *Burmese Days* (1934), a book based on his experience in the colonial service.

In 1936 he married Eileen O'Shaughnessy, an Oxford graduate who shared his interests in literature and socialism. In the same year Orwell was commissioned by a left-wing publisher to investigate conditions among the miners, factory workers and unemployed in the industrial North, where he stayed for two months. His report, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, was published in 1937.

In December 1936 Orwell went to Catalonia with his wife to report on the Spanish Civil War. In Barcelona he joined the militia of the POUM (Workers' Party of Marxist Unification) and fought in the trenches of the Aragon front. In *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) he recalled this experience as the time of his true conversion to socialism and the ideals of brotherhood and equality. Back in England, the Orwells adopted an infant child and called him Richard. George suffered from bronchitis and pneumonia, and Eileen was to die during an operation in 1945.

## An influential voice of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

When the Second World War broke out, Orwell moved to London and in 1941 he joined the BBC, broadcasting cultural and political programmes to India. In 1943 he resigned and became the literary editor of *The Tribune*, an influential socialist weekly. He also began writing *Animal Farm* (→ Text Bank 106-107), which was published in 1945 and made Orwell internationally known and financially secure. Orwell's last book, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, was his most original novel; it was published in 1949 and soon became a bestseller. Orwell died of tuberculosis the following year.

## The artist's development

Orwell had a deep understanding of the English character, of its tolerance, its dislike of abstract theories and insistence on common



All animals are equal, but some animals are equaler than others.

Pigs: a criminal farm who control the government, hypocrisy of governments, preclude the absolute equality of articles but of and things of etc.

sense and fair play. On the other hand, his various experiences abroad contributed to his unusual ability to see his country from the outside and to judge its strengths and weaknesses. Closely linked to this quality was the fact that he chose to reject his background and to establish a separate identity of his own. As a consequence, he was receptive to new ideas and impressions. Orwell's life and work were marked by the unresolved conflict between his middle-class background and education and his emotional identification with the working class.

In his essay *Inside the Whale* (1940) Orwell tried to define the role of the writer by considering the literature of the 1920s and 1930s. Whereas the writers of the Twenties had concerned themselves with language and form to express a tragic, post-war pessimism, those of the Thirties had valued social commitment and content over form and had left-wing sympathies. His desire to inform, to reveal facts and draw conclusions from them led him to believe that writing interpreted reality and therefore served a useful social function. This explains why his most successful novels express political themes. However, Orwell believed that the writer should be independent, that no good writing could come from following a party line.

### Social themes

Orwell was a prolific book-reviewer, critic, political journalist and pamphleteer in the tradition of Daniel Defoe (→ 3.10) and Jonathan Swift (→ 3.11). Indebted to Charles Dickens (→ 5.14) in his choice of social themes and the use of realistic and factual language, he conveyed a vision of human fraternity and



4. George Orwell when a speaker at the BBC Studios in 1943.

5. George Orwell's National Union of Journalists card

### NATIONAL UNION OF JOURNALISTS

7 John Street, Bedford Row, London, W.C.1  
Phone: HOLborn 2258 Telegrams: Natujay Holb, London

This is to certify that  
Mr. **GEORGE ORWELL**  
of **The Tribune**



is a member of the **T. & P.**  
Branch of the National Union of Journalists.  
{ **Leslie R. Alston** Branch Sec.  
(Address) **66, Priory Lane, N.6.**  
Member's Sig.

of the misery caused by poverty and deprivation. He insisted on tolerance, justice and decency in human relationships, and warned against the increasing artificiality of urban civilisation. Above all he strongly criticised totalitarianism, warning against the violation of liberty and helping his readers to recognise tyranny in all its forms.



CURIOSITY

Orwell largely wrote *Eighty-Four* on the island of Jura in the Hebrides, where he fled from London in 1948 because of tuberculosis and depression. He had been married for a year before. Orwell lived in an abandoned farm, Barnhill, by the sea, with his younger sister Avril and son Richard.

'Orwellian' has become a universal term for any repressive or totalitarian system.

The writer probably found inspiration to create *1984* in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (→ T108) from a room at the BBC's Broadcasting House where he had to sit through boring meetings during WWII. Ironically, the show now broadcasts a show named *Room 101* in honour of Orwell.

### COMPETENCE:

USING THE VISUAL TOOLS OF COMMUNICATION

- 1 READ the texts and use the pictures on these pages as prompts to summarise George Orwell's life.

### COMPETENCE:

READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

- 2 ANSWER the following questions.
  - 1 How did Orwell view his country?
  - 2 What conflict did he experience?



# Nineteen Eighty-Four

## PLOT

The novel describes a future world divided into three blocks: Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia. The regimented, oppressive world of Oceania is ruled by 'the Party', which is led by a figure called 'Big Brother', and is continuously at war with the other two States. In order to control people's lives, the Party is implementing 'Newspeak', an invented language with a limited number of words, and threatening them through the 'Thought Police'. Free thought, sex and any expression of individuality are forbidden, but the protagonist, Winston Smith, illegally buys a diary in which he begins to write his thoughts and memories, addressing them to the future generations. At the 'Ministry of Truth', where he rewrites historical records to suit the needs of the Party, Winston notices an attractive dark-haired girl staring at him, and is afraid she might be an informant who will prove him guilty of 'thoughtcrime'. The girl's name is Julia; she proves to also have a rebellious attitude, and they begin a secret affair. One day O'Brien, a member of the powerful 'Inner Party', summons them to his luxury flat and tells them that he too hates the Party and works against it as a member of the 'Brotherhood' led by Emmanuel Goldstein. This mysterious group is trying to overthrow the Party. O'Brien gives Winston a copy of Goldstein's book, the manifesto of the

Brotherhood. Winston is reading it to Julia in their room when some soldiers suddenly break in and arrest them. He is taken to the 'Ministry of Love', where he finds out that O'Brien is a Party spy. O'Brien tortures and brainwashes Winston for months, but he struggles to resist. At last O'Brien sends him to Room 101, the final destination for those who oppose the Party. Here Winston is forced to confront his worst fear: rats on his head, ready to eat his face. Winston's will is broken and he is released to the outside world. He meets Julia, but no longer loves her. He has completely given up his identity and has learned to love Big Brother.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The novel is set in a state of perpetual war reminiscent of World War II. The idea for the three countries described in the book came to Orwell in 1943, the same year of the Tehran Conference where US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin met to coordinate their military strategy against Germany and Japan and to make important decisions about the post-war period.

The society, although fictional, reflects the political atmosphere of the tyrannies in Spain, Germany and the Soviet Union. That is why the novel is pervaded by descriptions of hunger, forced labour, mass torture and imprisonment, and perpetual monitoring by the authorities. The 'character' of Big Brother is both Stalin and Hitler, both real and terrifying leaders, though on opposite sides. So Orwell made clear that he was against any form of totalitarianism, either from the left or the right of the political spectrum.

## SETTING

The setting of the novel is Oceania, a large country including the Americas, the Atlantic Islands, Australia and the southern portion of Africa as well as Airstrip One, previously England. The story takes place in a terrifying London in the year 1984. The shortages, the bomb sites, the regular failure of things to work properly, the prevailing squalor, were drawn from real life. Orwell's aim was to work on a memory that every reader was likely to have. Oceania's political structure is divided into three segments: the Inner Party, the





ruling class, consisting of less than 2 percent of the population; the **Outer Party**, that is, the educated workers, around 18-19 percent of the population; and the **Proles**, or the proletariat, the working class. Although the Party (Inner and Outer) does not see these divisions as true 'classes', Orwell wants the reader to see the class distinctions. For a socialist such as Orwell, class distinctions meant the existence of conflict and class struggle.

## CHARACTERS

The overwhelming impression of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a **sense of loss**, a feeling that beauty and truth, and all finer emotions and values, belong to the past. This is symbolised by the protagonist, **Winston Smith**, the last man to believe in humane values in a totalitarian age. 'Smith', the commonest English surname, suggests his symbolic value; 'Winston' evokes Churchill's patriotic appeals for 'blood, toil, tears and sweat' during the Second World War. Winston is 39 and **physically weak**; he experiences alienation from society and feels a **desire for spiritual and moral integrity**. His main concern is the manipulation of history by the Party, and he greatly fears the moment when no one will have any memories of actual history. He is in love with Julia and he remains loyal to her until his last torture experience. Julia is more **naïve** and is **pessimistic** about the Party, since she believes that it will never be overthrown. She is not much concerned with historical truth. She **falls in love with Winston**, which is considered a big crime by the Party. O'Brien is a **member of the Inner Party** who tricks Winston and Julia into believing that he belongs to the secret Brotherhood, which is

dedicated to overthrowing the Party. He is a **mysterious** character, with little background information revealed to the reader. O'Brien is the main agent of Winston's torture, asking him to believe in the Party in order to be cleaned and saved.

## THEMES

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a satire on hierarchical societies which destroy fraternity. The dictator is called 'Big Brother' but he actually does not watch over his people as a brother should do; so 'watching' here does not mean 'taking care of' but 'controlling'.

Memory and mutual trust become positive themes in the struggle put up by Winston to maintain his individuality. Orwell believed that if man has someone to trust, his individuality cannot be destroyed because his identity arises from interaction, not autonomy or isolation. Decency is mutual trust, tolerance, behaving responsibly towards other people, acting with empathy. It is extremely important for political action and civic culture. According to Orwell, the major theme of memory is linked to a view of morality. An egalitarian post-revolutionary society would not change values or expect them to be different but would put an end to exploitation and draw on the best of the past. Thus Winston attempts to write a diary in which private memory is defended against the official attempts to rewrite history.



Route 11: Dystopia, the shadow of utopia

## Key idea

### A dystopian novel

Set in a grotesque, squalid and menacing London, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a dystopian novel. While a utopia is an ideal or perfect community some writers have described to embody their ideals, a dystopia (→ Route 11) shows a possible future society that is anything but ideal and that satirises existing conditions of society. Orwell establishes a model of what the world should not become by presenting a frightening picture of the future as being under the constant control of 'Big Brother'. There is no privacy because there are monitors called 'telescreens' watching every step people take (→ T107); love is forbidden but there is the 'Two Minutes Hate' and the country is in a perpetual state of war. The Party has absolute control of the press, communication and propaganda; language, history and thought are controlled in the interests of the State through the gradual introduction of Newspeak, the official language of Oceania, whose lexis is so limited that people find it impossible to express their own ideas. Any form of rebellion against the rules is punished with prison, torture (→ T108) and liquidation. The novel does not offer consolation but reveals the author's acute sense of history and his sympathy with the millions of people persecuted and murdered in the name of the totalitarian ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 **READ** the texts and answer the following questions.

- 1 What historical facts influenced the composition of the novel?
- 2 What is the protagonist like and what does he symbolise?
- 3 How does Julia differ from Winston?
- 4 Why is O'Brien ambiguous?
- 5 What are the main themes of the novel?
- 6 In what sense is *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a dystopian novel?
- 7 What sort of society does it describe?



## 107 Big Brother is watching you

*This is the beginning of the novel. The following extract gives an insight into the life in London, the capital of Airstrip One in Oceania, a totalitarian State where men have lost control of their inner being. The only person who tries to resist indoctrination is the protagonist of the book, Winston Smith.*

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.

The hallway smelt of boiled cabbage and old rag mats<sup>4</sup>. At one end of it a coloured poster, too large for indoor display, had been tacked<sup>5</sup> to the wall. It depicted simply an enormous face, more than a metre wide: the face of a man of about forty-five, with a heavy black moustache and ruggedly<sup>6</sup> handsome features. Winston made for the stairs. It was no use trying the lift. Even at the best of times it was seldom working, and at present the electric current was cut off during daylight hours. It was part of the economy drive in preparation for Hate Week. The flat was seven flights up, and Winston, who was thirty-nine and had a varicose ulcer above his right ankle, went slowly, resting several times on the way. On each landing, opposite the lift-shaft<sup>7</sup>, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived<sup>8</sup> that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran.

Inside the flat a fruity<sup>9</sup> voice was reading out a list of figures which had something to do with the production of pig-iron<sup>10</sup>. The voice came from an oblong metal plaque like a dulled<sup>11</sup> mirror which formed part of the surface of the right-hand wall. Winston turned a switch and the voice sank somewhat, though the words were still distinguishable. The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed<sup>12</sup>, but there was no way of shutting it off completely. He moved over to the window: a smallish, frail figure, the meagreness<sup>13</sup> of his body merely emphasized by the blue overalls<sup>14</sup> which were the uniform of the Party. His hair was very fair, his face naturally sanguine, his skin roughened by coarse<sup>15</sup> soap and blunt razor blades<sup>16</sup> and the cold of the winter that had just ended.

Outside, even through the shut window-pane, the world looked cold. Down in the street little eddies<sup>17</sup> of wind were whirling dust and torn paper into spirals, and though the sun was shining and the sky a harsh blue, there seemed to be no colour in anything, except the posters that were plastered everywhere. The blackmoustachioed<sup>18</sup> face gazed down from every commanding corner. There was one on the house-front immediately opposite. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption said, while the dark eyes looked deep into Winston's own. Down at street level another poster, torn at one corner, flapped fitfully<sup>19</sup> in the wind, alternately covering and uncovering the single word INGSOC. In the far distance a helicopter skimmed down<sup>20</sup> between the roofs, hovered for an instant like a bluebottle<sup>21</sup>, and darted away again with a curving flight. It was the police patrol, snooping<sup>22</sup> into people's windows. The patrols did not matter, however. Only the Thought Police mattered.

Behind Winston's back the voice from the telescreen was still babbling away about pig-iron and the overfulfilment of the Ninth Three-Year Plan. The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen

his chin nuzzled. Il mento affondato.  
slipped. Scivolò.

7 lift-shaft. Vano dell'ascensore.

8 contrived. C...

12 ...



as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in<sup>23</sup> on any individual wire was guesswork<sup>24</sup>. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized.

Winston kept his back turned to the telescreen. It was safer; though, as he well knew, even a back can be revealing. A kilometre away the Ministry of Truth, his place of work, towered vast and white above the grimy landscape. This, he thought with a sort of vague distaste – this was London, chief city of Airstrip One, itself the third most populous of the provinces of Oceania. He tried to squeeze out some childhood memory that should tell him whether London had always been quite like this. Were there always these vistas of rotting<sup>25</sup> nineteenth-century houses, their sides shored up with baulks of timber<sup>26</sup>, their windows patched with cardboard and their roofs with corrugated iron, their crazy garden walls sagging<sup>27</sup> in all directions? And the bombed sites where the plaster dust swirled in the air and the willow-herb straggled over the heaps of rubble<sup>28</sup>; and the places where the bombs had cleared a larger patch and there had sprung up sordid colonies of wooden dwellings<sup>29</sup> like chicken-houses? But it was no use, he could not remember: nothing remained of his childhood except a series of bright-lit tableaux<sup>30</sup>, occurring against no background and mostly unintelligible.

The Ministry of Truth – Minitrue, in Newspeak<sup>31</sup> – was startlingly different from any other object in sight. It was an enormous pyramidal structure of glittering white concrete<sup>32</sup>, soaring up<sup>33</sup>, terrace after terrace, 300 metres into the air. From where Winston stood it was just possible to read, picked out on its white face in elegant lettering, the three slogans of the Party:

WAR IS PEACE  
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY  
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

## VISUAL ANALYSIS

1 READ the text and write a caption to describe the content of each of the seven paragraphs of the extract.

2 LOOK at the visual analysis of the text and write down what each highlight and colour represents in the spaces provided.

3 Consider the symbolic meaning of the elements in Winston Smith's description.

- 1 His name Winston: who may have inspired the choice of such a name?
- 2 His surname Smith: how would you expect the name of such a common British surname?
- 3 His age and appearance: do they correspond to the traditional features of the 'hero'?
- 4 His memories: can he remember his past?