

A dystopian future: the world of 1984

Business



The twentieth century was one of the most uncertain and frightening time periods in human history. The 1910s saw a world ravaged by war and divided by ethnicity and animosity. In 1929, societies still recovering from war were struck by another crisis, a debilitating, crushing economic crisis that became known as the Great Depression. The crisis left millions jobless, dejected, and even homeless. This condition of despair, hopelessness, and desperation led rise to terrible dictators in Germany, Italy, and Japan. In 1939, the world was thrust back into a state of war.

This conflict led to an unprecedented death count after five years of warfare and genocide. The war culminated in the unveiling of the atom bomb, the most terrifying weapon the world had ever faced. For the first time, humans possessed weapons of mass destruction and thus the ability to annihilate an entire population, easily and swiftly. Humanity spent the next forty-five years, holding their breath, waiting to see if a nuclear war was what the future would bring them. Fortunately, humanity survived and recovered.

But what if it hadn't? What if the concept of mutually assured destruction had not prevented humans from firing weapons of mass destruction? The destruction would have been catastrophic and the death toll could easily have been in the billions. And that brings to mind another question: in such an event, where more than half of the world's population were killed, how would the survivors move forward? Would they come together and learn from the mistakes of the past? Or would this give rise to an absolute dictatorship, far worse than any before? Amidst the uncertainty of the 1900s, George Orwell explored these questions that were plaguing humanity in his novel 1984. This dystopian, fictional novel, today considered a classic,

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depicts a society that has risen from the aftermath of a global war. In 1984, George Orwell creates a future where individual freedom is nonexistent and the government is omnipotent and impregnable. The novel explores the concept of human dignity, freedom, and the strength of knowledge, while subtly warning us of what will happen if we abandon these universal truths. In the world of 1984, humanity has emerged from World War II divided by animosity and ready to engage in another world conflict.

In the 1950s, Russia conquers almost all of Europe, while the United States gains control of the entire Western Hemisphere and the British Isles. This leads to the creation of two super-states: Oceania, which includes the Americas, the British Isles, Southern Africa, Australia, and parts of Indonesia, and Eurasia, which includes most of Europe and Northern Asia. A third super-state, Eastasia, which encompasses China and Japan, emerges after heavy fighting in the Pacific. The citizens of the three super-states have no contact with each other, but they are taught through propaganda that all foreigners are brutal, inhumane, and evil. The novel is told from the viewpoint of Winston Smith, a citizen of Oceania.

In Oceania, the Party controls its citizens through the terrifying Thought Police while keeping its subjects in complete ignorance. Telescreens, which are used by the Party to constantly monitor its citizens, are present in virtually every room and in every public place, so that one is always being watched. The Thought Police constantly monitors citizens, and even the slightest crime, including any thought of opposition to the Party, is severely punished by torture, forced labor, and often execution. The leader of the Party, Big Brother, is revered as the political and intellectual mastermind

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behind all of the people's prosperity, while Emmanuel Goldstein, the supposed leader of an underground rebellion called the Brotherhood, is hated and blamed for all of the people's suffering – social, foreign, and domestic. By using Goldstein and the other super-states, one of which is always at war with Oceania, as scapegoats for the desolate state of affairs, the Party channels the people's hatred and fears onto foreign sources, away from the Party. Winston, the novel's protagonist, has recognized the evils of the society he lives in, but he is afraid to openly partake in acts of rebellion.

In the beginning of the novel, he begins to write a diary, an act that is forbidden by the Party. At first, he is tentative to openly write down his feelings of hatred against the Party, but he gradually opens up and vents his frustration in his writing. He immediately feels fear that the Thought Police will find him, torture him, and execute him, but he accepts it as inevitability and resigns to fate. Gradually, he begins to record his thoughts and experiences, which offer insights not only into daily life in Oceania, but also into Winston's character. Winston describes his work at the Ministry of Truth, which governs the news, entertainment, education, and the fine arts.

Winston works in the Record Department, where he alters documents so that nothing appears in contradiction with the word of the Party.

On a daily basis, the Party alters records to make it appear that it always provides the best lifestyle for its citizens and that no other government is capable of doing so. In the ninth chapter, Winston begins to have an affair with Julia, a colleague from work. Julia is rebellious, unorthodox, and free-spirited, but she does not share Winston's beliefs in social change and the possibility of a better future. As their affair continues, Winston becomes

increasingly careless and attached to Julia. Winston is legally married, though he and his wife separated over ten years ago.

However, the degree of love Winston feels toward Julia was not present in his marriage; rather, his marriage had been more of a formality, a measure made necessary by the need for procreation. One day, at work, a member of the upper class, O'Brien, who Winston has long expected to be in rebellion against the Party, surreptitiously invites Winston to his home. Winston and Julia arrive at his mansion, and Winston boldly declares himself to be an enemy of the Party. O'Brien announces that he is a member of the Brotherhood and that he is prepared to admit Winston and Julia into the secret underground organization. Winston, overcome with excitement, accepts. O'Brien instructs him to read "the book", the Brotherhood's manifesto, which will be delivered to Winston in a few days.

However, a few days later, as Winston and Julia begin to read the book, Thought Police surround their hideout and arrest Winston and Julia. Winston then discovers that O'Brien is actually a member of the Thought Police and that he had deliberately lured him into admitting his unorthodoxy. O'Brien interrogates and tortures Winston, until every independent thought is driven out of him. O'Brien asserts that he is not merely trying to torture and punish Winston; he is trying to change him and make him see the wrong in his ways. O'Brien also admits that all the Party is after is pure power, not the welfare of its people. Winston is unable to resist the psychological and physical torture the Party inflicts upon him, and eventually, in the climax of the novel, he is even able to forget his love for Julia.

Once O'Brien is satisfied that he has driven every ounce of humanity out of Winston, he sets Winston free to live out the rest of his life. In the last scene of the novel, Winston's heart is filled with love for Big Brother. One of the most integral themes of the novel is the possibility of the alteration of truth. If truth can be altered, if the past can be undone, how can we be certain of anything? In 1984, the Party continuously alters history, in order to make it appear that the Party is always right, while its enemies are depicted as brutal and inhumane. History books in Oceania describe the destitution and despair of the working class and the inhumanity of vicious capitalists before the Revolution. In reality, however, the standard of living in Oceania is lower than ever, with frequent shortages of food and household goods, and inequality between the social classes is widespread and ubiquitous.

In another example of its falsities, the Party claims that Oceania is at war with Eurasia and at peace with Eastasia, and always has been. However, Winston clearly remembers that only a few years ago, Oceania was in fact at peace with Eurasia and at war with Eastasia. Halfway through the novel, the war with Eurasia ends and a war with Eastasia begins. Almost simultaneously, the entire population suddenly believes that Eastasia was always the enemy, and that Eurasia was always the ally. Winston marvels at how such obvious lies could be swallowed by the population so thoroughly that they are hardly doubted. Though he knows with utmost certainty that he is correct, and that the Party has been lying to its citizens since its inception, he has no proof of the Party's deception other than his memory, since the Party has altered all of the records.

“ How could you tell how much of it was lies?” Winston thinks, “ It might be true that the average human being was better off now than he had been before the Revolution. The only evidence to the contrary was the mute protest in your own bones, the instinctive feeling that the conditions you lived in were intolerable and that at some other time they must have been different... It was as though some huge force were pressing down upon you – something that penetrated inside your skull, battering against your brain, frightening you out of your beliefs, persuading you, almost to deny the evidence of your senses. In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it... And what was terrifying was not that they would kill you for thinking otherwise, but that they might be right. For, after all, how do we know that two and two make four? Or that the force of gravity works? Or that the past is unchangeable?” As Winston sits contemplating the gravity of his thoughts, he suddenly realizes that “ Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exists; its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth’s center.

” In his diary, Winston writes: “ Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four.” In the Ministry of Love, O’Brien tortures Winston while asking him how many fingers he is holding up. Winston states truthfully that there are four, but O’Brien continues the torture until Winston says that there are five. But O’Brien doesn’t only want Winston to say there are five; he wants him to believe there are five. In the end, Winston accepts that two and two make five, and that the Party has always been at war with Eastasia, and that he will always be in the grip of the Party, and there is nothing he

can do about it. Another important aspect of 1984 is the motivation behind the totalitarian regime's oppression.

George Orwell is slightly unclear on the motivation behind the Party's mission of eliminating individual rights, which is reflected in Winston's statement of " I understand how, but I do not understand why." O'Brien admits freely to Winston that the Party is not trying to benefit its subjects, and that the actions of the highest-ranking members of the Party only benefit themselves. He claims that the Party is motivated by pure power and power only. However, this leads us to wonder: is it truly possible for a small group of people to gain power over so many others, even when they are blatantly being oppressed? In 1949, when 1984 was published, the world had just emerged from a World War brought on by totalitarian regimes in Germany, Japan, and Italy. Around the world, in China, Cuba, Vietnam, Korea, and Eastern Europe, brutal communist regimes were emerging.

Worker revolutions promising equal rights for the oppressed were turning into brutal dictatorships. Throughout history, totalitarian regimes have developed from situations of despair and inequality. When citizens have reached a point of absolute destitution and desolation, they are willing to blindly follow a leader who promises them equal rights and affluence. Far too often, however, this dictator only provides momentary relief, and becomes a far worse oppressor than those who came before. 1984 depicts the ultimate worker revolution, where the oppressors manage to convince the population to give up everything for stability. Once the government is in place, however, it becomes impregnable.

The novel serves as a warning against blindly following the word of those who call themselves “ liberators”. 1984 takes place in the twentieth century, only thirty-five years into the future at the time it was published. By setting his novel in the immediate future, George Orwell was sending us a message about the immediacy of totalitarianism, a warning of how quickly freedom could be eradicated. Though it was written from the perspective of the twentieth century, 1984 is pertinent to all eras of human history: past, present and future. Its message of the importance of freedom, equality, and democracy will persevere, carried on to the next generation by the work of those that came before it. 1984 provides a very real and personal perspective on the worst path humanity could take.

A dystopian future similar to the one depicted in this work of fiction not only is possible, but also seems quite probable in a time when humanity is faced with the possibility of nuclear warfare and mass destruction. By reminding us of the full consequences our actions will have on the future, 1984 will help to ensure that our descendants will live in a utopia, not a dystopia, and that our principles of individual freedom and equality will be carried into the future and last throughout human history.