

EXPLORING

# NINETEEN EIGHTY- FOUR

EMC APPROACHES



EMC

Publications

Written and edited by Andrew McCallum

Editorial assistance: Lucy Webster

Cover: Rebecca Scambler

Published on <https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/publications>

English and Media Centre, 18 Compton Terrace, London, N1 2UN

© English and Media Centre, 2019

Extracts from the text have been checked against the Penguin Modern Classics edition

### **Acknowledgements**

Extracts from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell (Copyright © George Orwell, 1949) reproduced by permission of Bill Hamilton as the Literary Executor of the Estate of the Late Sonia Brownell Orwell.

### **Download licence**

Permission is granted to reproduce this download publication for personal and educational use within the purchasing institution (including its Virtual Learning Environments and intranet). Redistribution beyond the institution by any means, including electronic, will constitute an infringement of copyright.

# Contents

## Part 1: Getting to grips with the novel

Front Covers	4
Quotations from <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i>	5
Close focus on Chapter One: feeling what Winston feels	11
Tracking place in <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i>	11
Key moments, key phrases, key characters	14
Exploring the ending	14
Key themes in <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i>	15

## Part 2: Context

The post-World War Two landscape	18
George Orwell: background to life and work	22
What Orwell said	24

## Part 3: Developing a deeper understanding

Aspects of narrative – first thoughts	28
Third-person narrative from Winston's limited point of view	28
Textual components	30
Narrative structure	31
Genre	
Genre fiction or literary fiction?	34
<i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> as dystopian fiction	35
<i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> as a satirical novel	36
Is <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> as a great literary work?	39
The importance of language	42
Characters	44
Physical life in <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i>	50
State control and indoctrination in <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i>	53
The politics of <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i>	54
Truth in <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i>	55
Freedom of thought in <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i>	56
The concept of doublethink	58
Studying <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> alongside another text	59
Learning from the expert	63
<i>emagazine</i> Articles	66

## Quotations from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Working with the following quotations will give you some ideas about what to look out for when reading the novel as a whole.

You can use them in the following ways:

### 1. Speed dating (use shorter quotations on pages 6-8 for this activity)

- Take one quotation each. Everyone moves around the room, stopping to share quotations with anyone you meet and exploring what they have in common.
- After doing this several times, choose the quotation you think makes the most interesting pairing with yours and explain why.
- As a class, gather together what you have learned about the novel from the quotations.

### 2. Grouping quotations

- Cut the quotations out and, in groups, sort them into clusters. Give each cluster a title. On your teacher's instruction, you should jumble the quotations up again and try to put them into different clusters.

### 3. Using the quotations for revision

- Return to the quotations when you have finished reading the novel. Learn what you consider to be a particularly significant quotation and then present it from memory to the rest of the class. At the same time you should give a short explanation of how and why your quotation is significant to the rest of the novel.

Tracking place in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Location	Winston's thoughts and feelings in this location	Significance of the location to the novel as a whole
Winston's apartment in Victory Mansions		
London streets		
Proles' district		
Proles' pub		
Charrington's shop		
Room above Charrington's shop		
Countryside with Julia		
Ministry of Truth		
O'Brien's apartment		
Ministry of Love		
Room 101		
Chestnut Tree Café		

## The post-World War Two landscape

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* was completed by Orwell in 1948 (the inversion of '48' to '84' in the title was deliberate) and published in 1949. The world at that time was shaped by the events of World War Two, which ended in 1945, and the subsequent influence of two global superpowers, the Americans and the Russians. The novel itself clearly alludes to the political and social conditions of the time when it was written.

The historical details and images listed below give a flavour of what Britain and the rest of the world was like at around the time of the novel's publication.

- In groups discuss each in turn, focusing on the following:
  - ▶ What additional information you know about this topic alluded to in the image or text.
  - ▶ What additional information you would like to know about the topic.
  - ▶ What the topics in general suggest about what the world was like at the time the novel was written.
  - ▶ The different ways this topic relates to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
- Imagine you are a writer living in post-World War Two Britain. Write the opening to your own piece of fiction that draws on the political and social context of the time. This can be set in the future, like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or in 1948 itself.

# Nineteen Eighty-Four as a satirical novel

## Satire:

The use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticise people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.

It's possible to think of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a satire in two broad ways:

1. A satire on human nature.
2. A satire on national and global politics.

The following activities will help you to think about both.

## 1. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a satire on human nature

The following are some of the aspects of human nature explored in the novel:

- ▶ Greed
- ▶ Duplicity
- ▶ Cruelty
- ▶ Violence
- ▶ Betrayal
- ▶ Desire for power
- ▶ Gullibility
- ▶ Hypocrisy
- ▶ Ignorance
- ▶ Base desires
- ▶ Unquestioning compliance

- Working in groups, share out these aspects so that each group has two or three.
- Find examples in the book where your group's aspects are explored. You might like to consider the following episodes: the cinema screening; passages involving Parsons and Parsons' children; passages involving Syme; the torture scene in part three; O'Brien's use of power, etc.
- Think carefully about how your aspects are presented by Orwell. Discuss the ways in which their presentation can be seen as satirical, bearing in mind the quotation at the top of the page.
- Feedback your ideas to the rest of the class.
- Finally, write down your thoughts about how the characters of Winston Smith and Julia are presented in relation to the novel as a satire about human nature. Are they at odds with everyone else in the novel? Do they offer hope for an alternative? Are they realistic characters, or convenient novelistic devices? Are they presented satirically in any way?

## 2. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a political satire

There are obvious parallels between the world presented in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the world in which Orwell lived. Some of these are listed on page 37.

- Work through each point in the grid and discuss how this aspect/element/parallel is presented in the novel. Can you identify aspects of humour, irony, exaggeration or ridicule that would place the presentation firmly in the category of satire (drawing on the definition at the top of the page)?
- When you have finished, read the extract from the novel in which O'Brien expands on the philosophy of the Party to Winston, printed on page 38. How does it add to or change your thinking?

## Is *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a great literary work?

The article reproduced below comes from *emagazine*. In it, Barbara Bleiman asks why so little of the writing about *Nineteen Eighty-Four* focuses on its literary qualities.

- Read the article and discuss its main points. You should consider whether your own reading of the novel sees it as a 'literary work' first and foremost, or if you are more interested in the issues it raises, and its cultural legacy.
- When you have finished, come up with a listicle: '5 Reasons why *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a great work of literature'.

For quite some time, *emagazine*'s editors have been trying to commission an article on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It's a major text of the 20th century, widely studied in Dystopia thematic units, not only in current specifications but over many years. It was a set text when I was doing my own A Levels, over 40 years ago! Its impact on the wider world – through the introduction of words and concepts like 'doublethink', 'Room 101', and 'Big Brother' is unquestionable and it has had a significant influence on other writers, not least of all Margaret Atwood whose own version of a dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is often studied alongside it.

However, try as we might (with the notable exception of the recent piece by Will Howell in *emagplus* February 2017), we've struggled to get anyone to write anything that offers a fresh angle, with a focus that supports the literary study of the text. Why might that be? What's the problem with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? In looking for the answer to this question, the angle for this article immediately suggested itself to me, which is to question the ways in which critics and reviewers have chosen to talk about this text and why.

I did a trawl through some readily accessible critical material about the text, looking at reviews, articles in journals and the work of well-known critics. What was striking was that most of the criticism took an approach to the text that was more political, historical or contextual than literary. Questions asked by the critics included such issues as:

- Could it really happen? (Criticism prior to the year 1984)
- Did it really happen, or could it still happen? (Criticism after the year 1984)
- What is it satirising? Is it anti-socialist, anti-communist, anti-totalitarian?

- Is it a cynical expression of disillusioned idealism?
- What kind of world is portrayed? What kinds of structures? What kind of lives do the characters lead? What are the paraphernalia of oppression and instruments of control?

### Two Examples of Criticism from the Year 1984

Here are two examples of critical comment on the novel, both written in 1984.

#### Reading 1

'In a free society,' wrote the French philosopher Montesquieu, 'it is not always important that individuals reason well, it is sufficient that they reason; from their individual thought, freedom is born.'

Exactly two centuries later, in his futuristic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the English political novelist George Orwell gave a tragic illustration of what the world would be without the freedom to think. Orwell had the intention to call his book 'The Last Man in Europe', as a tribute to the essential quality that distinguished man from the world around him, namely his ability to think for himself.

Winston, the main character of the novel, lives in a country where individual thought is banned, where only the leader, Big Brother, is allowed to reason and to decide. Prodded by his natural need for reflection and critical analysis, Winston finds it hard not to make use of his inborn talents. He starts questioning the wisdom of Big Brother and moves hopefully toward his own liberation. But in his struggle for emancipation he stands alone.

[...] Today, on the threshold of the real year 1984, we ask ourselves how much of Orwell's fictional world has become reality and what the prospects are for a more sensible world.

Edmond van den Bosche: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*  
(*New York Times*)

## The importance of language

Explorations of language are at the heart of so much in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. They are closely linked to themes and ideas about:

- ▶ Literature
- ▶ Freedom
- ▶ Thinking
- ▶ Resistance
- ▶ Aesthetics
- ▶ Memory
- ▶ History
- ▶ Control
- ▶ Indoctrination
- ▶ Propaganda.

Below are some significant quotations from the novel about language and its use.

- In a pair or group of three, read through each in turn. Identify where they come in the novel, and their significance.
- After working your way through all of the statements, in role as Orwell, write a few paragraphs outlining what you were trying to suggest about the importance of language through its exploration in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. You might like to link your ideas to the themes and ideas listed above.

To mark the paper was the decisive act.

The messages he had received referred to articles or news items which for one reason or another it was thought necessary to alter, or, as the official phrase had it, to rectify.

All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and re-inscribed exactly as often as was necessary.

People in the Records Department did not readily talk about their jobs ... He knew that in the cubicle next to him the little woman with sandy hair toiled day in, day out, simply at tracking down and deleting from the press the names of people who had been vaporised and were therefore considered never to have existed ... And a few cubicles away a mild, ineffectual, dreamy creature named Ampleforth, with very hairy ears and a surprising talent for juggling with rhymes and metres, was engaged in producing garbled versions – definitive texts they were called – of poems which had become ideologically offensive but which for one reason or another were to be retained in the anthologies.

## Learning from the expert



For this activity you will need access to the collection of video clips provided with this download publication (see folder 'EMC-DwanOrwell.zip').

In the clips, David Dwan, from Hertford College, Oxford University, expert on George Orwell, responds to questions about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. David Dwan's response to each of the questions that follow can be viewed separately.

- Before watching any of the clips, share the questions out among twos and threes in your class. Jot down points you might make in response to your questions. You might not be able to say much about some at this stage, but do as much as you can.
- In role as a literature expert (call yourself Professor if you like!), take it in turns to respond to one of your group's questions.

- ▶ Why is *Nineteen Eighty-Four* such a significant novel?
- ▶ How does *Nineteen Eighty-Four* fit in with the wider field of dystopian literature?
- ▶ How does *Nineteen Eighty-Four* fit in with the rest of Orwell's writing?
- ▶ What does *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have to say about the importance of history?
- ▶ How was *Nineteen Eighty-Four* shaped by the period in which it was written?
- ▶ An early title of the novel was *The Last Man in Europe*. How is this significant?
- ▶ How does *Nineteen Eighty-Four* explore ideas of freedom?
- ▶ How does *Nineteen Eighty-Four* explore ideas about truth?
- ▶ How does Orwell represent the proles?
- ▶ What is interesting about the narrative voice in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?
- ▶ What does *Nineteen Eighty-Four* suggest about the role of language?
- ▶ Are there any messages of hope in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?

- Next watch David Dwan responding to your questions. Note down anything significant that he says that you didn't think of or know yourself. Also identify any good points you yourself made that he did not.
- Feed back the key ideas identified by you and David Dwan to the rest of the class.