

TEACHERS' NOTES

This guide has been written for use within the English Curriculum and Media Studies at Key Stages 3 and 4. It may be used to support the teaching of George Orwell's novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four" or can be used simply in conjunction with a viewing of the film.

Some references may link the title of the novel /film to the time of writing.

NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR: ORWELL

"Orwellian" is a widely used, and even more widely abused adjective, inseparable from which is the nightmare visionary world of "Nineteen Eighty Four". Yet meanings vary. Governments of both the Far Left and Far Right regularly accuse one another of being "Big Brother" dictatorships. Orwell's novel has thus been ruthlessly simplified and used in crude political propaganda wars; paradoxically, the very kind of abuse against which he was writing.

It is, therefore, very difficult to arrive at a well balanced view of the book or film, without first clearing up a great number of misconceptions, misunderstandings and deliberate distortions.



Orwell himself wrote, *"I don't believe that the kind of society I describe will arrive, but I believe something resembling it could arrive..."*

He certainly wrote it more as a warning than a prediction.

TASK 1

Given that Orwell denied that his novel was attacking either Stalinist Left or Nazi Right policies and ideas, what do you think was his greatest fear about the future as shown in the novel? What is the warning?

Orwell was not a profound political theorist, but a powerful presenter of a nightmare portrait of society. "Nineteen Eighty-Four" is a flawed novel, but it's also a masterpiece of political speculation.



Writing about "Nineteen Eighty-Four" in 1984 one could feel either complacency or abject panic. We are not living in Orwell's "world" but many people have argued that there is still truth in Orwell's assertion that, "This is the direction in which the world is going..."

TASK 2

Do you feel that the world is going in the directions shown in "1984"?

Looking around you, given the existence of super powers, closed circuit surveillance, newspaper Bingo, subliminal advertising etc., and given that our political leaders

often appear to seek to hide the truth (Russian history books? The recent General Belgrano incident? Watergate?) how near the truth do you think parts of Orwell's vision are?

In many ways, "Nineteen Eighty-Four" is quite a remarkable success story. Its continued relevance in a rapidly changing world and its phenomenal sales, despite a serious political content, have actually increased its influence. Yet it is an unusual novel. It is a work of sociological rather than psychological imagination, a novel of ideas rather than character. This presents the film director with a major problem to overcome. Although the book skilfully alternates action with ideas, description and reflection, in order to keep it moving, how can a director attempt to do this? Obviously the descriptions and actions are "immediate" enough for the screen, but how can the fundamental principles of the novel be illustrated? How can the inner thoughts and workings of Winston's mind be conveyed effectively?

TASK 3

Write about how the director deals with the complexities of concepts such as Newspeak; describe how he brings the dreams and events of Winston's past life into the film. Given the problems faced, how would you, as director, have dealt with them?



Having stated the importance of ideas to "Nineteen Eighty-Four", it is nevertheless a novel dominated by a single character, that of Winston Smith. As almost all of the incidents in the novel are seen through Winston it is sometimes difficult to believe that the novel was not narrated by him. We base all our assessments of possibilities, our hopes, on evidence provided by him alone.

TASK 4

Given his importance, what does Orwell want us to think of Winston? What is his role? Can we trust him? What kind of man is Winston Smith? A hero? What qualities do we normally associate with such a role? Does Winston "measure up" to these? In what ways? Why does he fail? Could he have led a successful revolution?



TASK 5

Once you have worked out what Winston's character is, and what you feel about him, answer the following questions for each of the three main characters: Winston, "The Hero"; Julia, "The Heroine"; O'Brien, "The Priest/Inquisitor".

What kind of person are they? (6 descriptive phrases at least)

What events show their character most clearly? (2 or 3 minimum)

What are we meant to feel for them?

What is their fate? (you can speculate on their long term end).



It may be interesting to speculate on their "long term" fate - what would the Party do with the three of them? Indeed you could try to justify why so much time and effort (not to mention the resources involved) is spent producing a gin-sodden nobody who is of no use to the Party.

Many people, in fact, object to the unrelieved pessimism of the novel, to the final lack of hope. Orwell was certainly a very sick man when he wrote "Nineteen Eighty-Four" and perhaps the society portrayed in the novel reflects this. It seems that Orwell was determined not to propose any means of escaping such a system.

TASK 6

Do you feel that the ending gives the novel/film more effect, or does it leave you resentful? Do you want to know what happens to the characters? Taking perhaps, a wider view than Orwell's, do you believe that such a society, based solely on power, and without loyalty, could really exist? Is there hope in the Proles? Or in O'Brien? Or even in Julia? Try to rewrite the ending so that you feel it offers some hope to us living in 1984.

NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR: THE MEDIA

The world presented in Orwell's "1984" is bleak and lacking in comfort. Yet the majority of the people in it seem to accept the conditions under which they live. In order to understand this, it is necessary to look at the ways in which they understand the events that are going on around them. Firstly, they are informed of current events and given information on the "rise" in standards of living via the large T.V. screen and newspapers. Yet both of these are controlled by the Ministry of Information.



The obvious propaganda that the Ministry puts across and its equally obvious changing of facts to suit necessity would, to some people, seem to be similar to the state that exists in Russia. Yet how far could the same be said for Britain in 1984? How far are we being "conditioned" to think in certain ways and behave in certain ways?

TASK 1

One way of considering this is to see how various people, places and ideas are treated in the Media. Draw a chart with two columns, one headed USA and the other USSR. Put down any ideas or images that you have about the two countries.

Which is the longest list? Which of the two countries appears to be the most pleasant to live in? Why do you think this is so? Who makes the newspapers, film and T.V. programmes that might have given you these impressions? How could this affect the way that each country is portrayed?

Films and television programmes affect the way that we perceive things. Advertising affects the way that we see ourselves. The contents of a woman's magazine defines the people who read that magazine. They are seen to have certain interests. Look at some magazines that are aimed at people of your own age. What are the articles about? What is advertised in the magazines? What is not in the magazines that you would like to know about? Try to offer some suggestions as to why what is not in the magazines has not/cannot appear in them.

The news is presented to us in a seemingly unbiased way. Indeed, the BBC and ITV news programmes should not be biased; according to their charters. Yet, how is it possible for them to "shade" the news, so that we think in one way or another?

TASK 2

Consider the words listed below:

FIRM STUBBORN

ENTHUSIASTIC FANATICAL

CROWD MOB

DISPUTE CONFRONTATION

STRIKE BREAKER SCAB

Try to write sentences into which either word could be inserted and try to judge how the meaning of the sentence is changed e.g.

"A crowd gathered outside Parliament".

"A mob gathered outside Parliament".

Watch a news programme. Try to pick out any words or phrases which might "shade!" the meaning of the news item.



We are very proud of our "freedom" in this country and in many ways we are perhaps allowed more freedom than in other countries. Yet is our view of the world and ourselves formed from an unbiased view or are we subtly put into certain positions and attitudes by the Media? and if so, consider whether our "1984" is all that different from Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four".

NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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