

7 George Orwell, an Acute Observer of his Time, in the Context of Significant Historic and Political Events

7.1.1 Situation in Post-War Britain – the Labour Government (1945 – 1951)

During World War II, Sir **Winston Churchill**, who served as **Prime Minister** of the United Kingdom from 1940 to 1945 and again from 1951 to 1955, proclaimed that Britain was not fighting to restore the past but to plan and create a noble future (McDowall 1991, 169). In 1940, the Labour Party formed a coalition with the Conservative Party in order to survey the scheme of Britain's social insurance and related services. The outcome of the survey, the report on *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, published in 1942 and named after its author Sir William Beveridge, identified the five Giant Evils in society: disease, idleness, ignorance, squalor and want (Qureshi 2006, 171), and proposed some crucial changes in the post-war social and economic spheres, e.g. a weekly national insurance contribution paid by working age people and subsequently compensated by supplementary sickness and unemployment benefits. The report further recommended coverage of medical treatment by a National Health Service (NHS). Healthcare, pensions and full employment became the focal points of the Beveridge Report, emphasizing social justice and an ideal post-war society. Mass media was in unison in reacting favourably to the report, and it became a bestseller with more than 600,000 copies sold (Head 2002, 14). One month after the Victory in Europe Day, the Labour Party – led by **Clement Attlee**, who served as **Prime Minister** of the United Kingdom from 1946 to 1951 and supported the decolonization of India, which became independent in 1947 – won the first general election since 1935, defeating the Conservatives with Winston Churchill in the lead. The Tory Party and its newspapers, disappointed by Churchill's defeat, severely attacked government ministers and blamed the Labour government for food and coal shortages (Morgan qtd in: Ribberink and Righart 2000, 6).

The Labour Government subsequently started implementing proposals stemming from the Beveridge Report. The National Health Service Act of 1946, introduced in 1948, laid, in fact, the foundations of the British **Welfare State**, providing financial help for the old, unemployed and those suffering from illness. Thus, in 1948, the National Health Service (see above) came into existence, ensuring anyone normally resident in the United Kingdom the right to the free health services. The Labour Government went even further and pursued its goal indicated in the Beveridge Report, nationalising e.g. British Coal and the Bank of England in 1946. Later on, British Gas (1949), British Steel (1967) and National Bus Company (1969) were counted among state-owned institutions as well; however, despite all the government's effort, nationalization did not bring the eagerly expected improvements but rather failure, resulting in the numerous protest movements. Nevertheless, after the war Britain advanced from affliction to the greater prosperity guaranteed by the British Welfare State. According to Morgan (Morgan qtd in: Ribberink and Righart 2000, 7), this was Britain's social democratic middle way, an honourable and credible alternative both to capitalism and communism, respected by third-world leaders from Jamaica to Johore.

During this period of a certain political consensus, most British writers focused especially on aesthetic and social problems. **Post-war British literature** was, therefore, influenced and shaped by non-literary ideas and factors, the most significant of them being particularly post-war development and the Cold War.

(Based on Mišterová 2008, pp. 25-26)

7.1.2

George Orwell

(1903 – 1950)

Eric Blair

* the Indian city of Motihari



<http://scrapetv.com/News/News%20Pages/Technology/images/george-orwell.jpg>

WAR IS PEACE

FEEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

Nineteen Eighty-four

→

- What was George Orwell's "real name"?
- Why did he take the pen-name?
- What did Orwell believe in?
- Was Orwell able to adapt his views to fit political doctrines?
- Did Orwell join any political party?

an essay *A Hanging* (1931)

Down and Out in Paris and London (1933)

Burmese Days (1934)

an essay *Shooting an Elephant* (1936)

Homage to Catalonia (1938)

Animal Farm (1945)

Nineteen Eighty-four (1949)

→ **dystopia** = a modern term invented as the opposite to utopia, and applied to alarmingly unpleasant imaginary world.

(Baldick 2008, 100)

Fill in the Gaps.

→ loves, torture, forbidden, fears, sustains, body, himself, evaporated, ally, retain, believes, wishes, aloof, tries, dashed

The central character, **Winston Smith**, _____¹ to keep himself _____² from the oppressive control of the state, determined to _____³ his individuality rather than

conform to the behaviour expected of a model citizen. He _____⁴ to have a place of his own in which he can be _____⁵, unobserved by Big Brother's watchdogs, and he _____⁶ his sense of individuality by keeping a diary. Winston _____⁷ himself to be successful for a while. He embarks upon a _____⁸ relationship with **Julia**, who has rebellious attitudes similar to his own, and believes that they can become part of the resistance movement, having contacted its leader, O'Brien. His hopes are _____⁹ when he is betrayed by his very O'Brien whom he thought to be his _____¹⁰. Then follows some of the most horrific _____¹¹ scenes ever described in prose fiction, ending in the ultimate betrayal. Winston's soul and _____¹² are broken and his wishes that the things he _____¹³ most should be done to Julia. He now _____¹⁴ **Big Brother**. When he meets Julia again, all human passion has _____¹⁵ and the only conversation that takes place is bland, devoid of feeling and meaningless.

Reading: Read an Extract from *1984*

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. At one end of it a coloured poster, too large for indoor display, had been tacked 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 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, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. **BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU**, the caption beneath it ran. ...

(Orwell 1949, p. 5)

In the year 1984, we are in London, Oceania, one of the three parts of the world.

→ The following are some common terms and slogans of that society. What do they tell us about how the society worked and what life was like?

- Freedom is slavery.
- Big Brother is watching you.
- Ignorance is strength.
- War is peace.
- Oldspeak x Newspeak.
- Thought police.
- Ministry of love. Ministry of peace. ...

→ Choose some recent **political event** that you find interesting and write a short newspaper article about it. The article should contain important information and your brief comments as a conclusion. Do not forget the headline.

Sample Study Questions:

1. Why do you think George Orwell set his novel in the year 1984?
2. In the opening passage of the novel, Orwell depicts the place where Winston Smith, the main protagonist, lives. What is the place like? How does Orwell depict the atmosphere of the place?
3. What is the name of the apartment building that Winston Smith lives in?
4. Why does Winston walk up the seven flights of stairs?
5. What physical evidence does the narrator give us that proves Winston walks a lot?
6. If Winston were to take the elevator, what would see on every floor when he exited the elevator?
7. Describe Big Brother. Does the description of the portrait of Big Brother remind you of anyone?
8. What role does Big Brother play within the novel?
9. Is it important whether Big Brother exists in reality? Explain.
10. How was the general control over people exercised?
11. What do we learn about Winston's clothes?
12. What is the name of Winston's work?
13. What city does Winston live in?
14. Colonies of what sprung up in places where bombs cleared space?
15. What are the three slogans of the party?
16. What elements motivate Winston into writing a diary? Is keeping a diary a crime?
17. What happens during the Two Minute Hate?
18. Is there any escape into a more colourful world?
19. How would you describe Orwell's dystopian vision?
20. What are the conflicts in *1984*? What types of conflict (physical, moral, intellectual, or emotional) are in this novel?
21. Do you find the characters likable? Would you want to meet the characters?
22. How does *1984* relate to current politics/society/etc.?

Explain:

“People simply disappeared, always during the night. Your name was removed from the registers, every record of everything you had ever done was wiped out, your one-time existence was denied and then forgotten. You were abolished, annihilated: vaporized was the usual word.”

(Orwell, *1984*, Chapter 1)

Explain:

“Nearly all children nowadays were horrible. What was worst of all was that by means of such organizations as the Spies they were systematically turned into ungovernable little savages, and yet this produced in them no tendency whatever to rebel against the discipline of the Party. On the contrary, they adored the Party and everything connected with it... All their ferocity was turned outwards, against the enemies of the State, against foreigners, traitors, saboteurs, thought-criminals. It was almost normal for people over thirty to be frightened of their own children.”

(Orwell, *1984*, Chapter 2)

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* represents a classical **dystopian novel** describing a “total” totalitarian regime, drawing a parallel with the Russian Communist system. The term dystopia is used to depict any unpleasant imaginary future world.