



1984 (Illustrated & Annotated)

George Orwell

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Born Eric Blair in India in 1903, George Orwell was educated as a scholarship student at prestigious boarding schools in England. Because of his background—he famously described his family as “lower-upper-middle class”—he never quite fit in, and felt oppressed and outraged by the dictatorial control that the schools he attended exercised over their students’ lives. After graduating from Eton, Orwell decided to forego college in order to work as a British Imperial Policeman in Burma. He hated his duties in Burma, where he was required to enforce the strict laws of a political regime he despised. His failing health, which troubled him throughout his life, caused him to return to England on convalescent leave. Once back in England, he quit the Imperial Police and dedicated himself to becoming a writer. Inspired by Jack London’s 1903 book *The People of the Abyss*, which detailed London’s experience in the slums of London, Orwell bought ragged clothes from a second-hand store and went to live among the very poor in London. After reemerging, he published a book about this experience, entitled *Down and Out in Paris and London*. He later lived among destitute coal miners in northern England, an experience that caused him to give up on capitalism in favor of democratic socialism. In 1936, he traveled to Spain to report on the Spanish Civil War, where he witnessed firsthand the nightmarish atrocities committed by fascist political regimes. The rise to power of dictators such as Adolf Hitler in Germany and Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union inspired Orwell’s mounting hatred of totalitarianism and political authority. Orwell devoted his energy to writing novels that were politically charged, first with *Animal Farm* in 1945, then with *1984* in 1949.

1984 is one of Orwell’s best-crafted novels, and it remains one of the most powerful warnings ever issued against the dangers of a totalitarian society. In Spain, Germany, and the Soviet Union, Orwell had witnessed the danger of absolute political authority in an age of advanced technology. He illustrated that peril harshly in *1984*. Like Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), *1984* is one of the most famous novels of the negative utopian, or dystopian, genre. Unlike a utopian novel, in which the writer aims to portray the perfect human society, a novel of negative utopia does the exact opposite: it shows the worst human society imaginable, in an effort to convince readers to avoid any path that might lead toward such societal degradation. In 1949, at the dawn of the nuclear age and before the television had become a fixture in the family home, Orwell’s vision of a post-atomic dictatorship in which every individual would be monitored ceaselessly by means of the telescreen seemed terrifyingly possible. That Orwell postulated such a society a mere thirty-five years into the future compounded this fear.

Of course, the world that Orwell envisioned in *1984* did not materialize. Rather than being overwhelmed by totalitarianism, democracy ultimately won out in the Cold War, as seen in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Yet *1984* remains an important novel, in part for the alarm it sounds against the abusive nature of authoritarian governments, but even more so for its penetrating analysis of the psychology of power and the ways that manipulations of language and history can be used as mechanisms of control.

Plot Overview

Character List

Analysis of Major Characters

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