

George Orwell, 1984

Born in 1903 in India, Orwell was highly educated and became friends with several intellectuals. Due to his interest in class divisions, working class conditions and upper-class privileges, he was appointed to write about workers in northern England. He subsequently travelled to India and became acquainted with the consequences of imperialism.

He also came in contact with war as a journalist in the Spanish Civil War (1936-37). His social and political views emerge in his work, sometimes showing signs of development with increasing experience. Orwell's productions can be divided into fictional and non-fictional.

As to the first category, the following works deserve a special note: *Coming Up For Air* (1939), where the pessimistic atmosphere of the industrial and capitalist society is counterbalanced by an idyllic past; *Animal Farm* (1944), where the anti-Stalinist allegory expresses disillusionment towards any form of revolution; and *1984* (1949), that depicts a totalitarian regime ruled by a dictator referred to as 'Big Brother'. The last two novels belong to the dystopian genre, as they portray a catastrophic and dramatic future.

Orwell's non-fictional works deal with Orwell's social investigation and report about the English working classes (*Down and Out in Paris and London*, 1933), the author's experience in Spain (*Homage to Catalonia*, 1938; *England, Your England and Other Essays*, 1941) and in India (*Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*, 1936).

1984 reflects Orwell's disappointment by the turn of Russian Revolution of 1917, that, according to the author, betrayed the revolution principles. Big Brother's physical appearance is redolent of Stalin's, the enemy of the totalitarian state echoes Trotsky and the trials during the Great Purge serve as basis for the events narrated in the novel.

Big Brother controls all aspects of its inhabitants by spying at citizens through the Thought Police.

The story is about Winston Smith, an employee at the Ministry of Truth, which controls mass-media and publishes documents that conform to the state's view. Winston falls in love with Julia but both are arrested and tortured for their relationship.

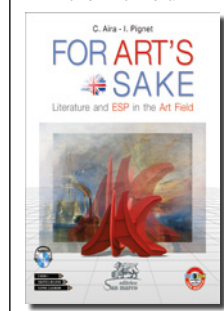
This passage is a description of Big Brother's controlling methods in London, the principal city of Airstrip One (the equivalent of Great Britain).



Behind Winston's back the voice from the telescreen was still babbling away¹ about pig-iron and the over fulfilment of the Ninth Three-Year Plan. The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper,² would be picked up by it, moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commended, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in³ on any individual wire was guesswork.⁴ It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct in the assumption⁵ that every sound you made was over-heard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized.

Winston kept his back turned to the telescreen. It was safer, though, as he well knew, even a back can be revealing. A kilometre away the Ministry of Truth, his place of work, towered vast and white above the grimy⁶ landscape. This, he thought with a sort of vague distaste – this was London, chief city of Airstrip One, itself the third most populous of the provinces of Oceania. He tried to squeeze out⁷ some childhood memory that should tell him whether London

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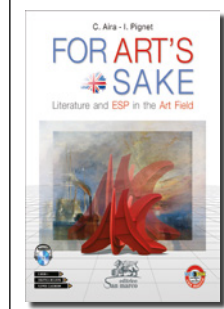
GLOSSARY

- 1 reminds of
- 2 looking in secretly

GLOSSARY

- 1 confusedly talking – 2 murmur – 3 connected – 4 supposition – 5 idea – 6 very dirty – 7 force out





had always been quite like this. Were there always these vistas of rotting⁸ nineteenth-century houses, their sides shored up⁹ with baulks of timber,¹⁰ their windows patched with cardboard and their roofs with corrugated iron, their crazy¹¹ garden walls sagging¹² in all directions? And the bombed sites where the plaster dust swirled¹³ in the air and the willow-herb¹⁴ straggled¹⁵ over the heaps of rubble;¹⁶ and the places where the bombs had cleared a larger patch and there had sprung up sordid colonies of wooden dwellings¹⁷ like chicken-houses? But it was no use, he could not remember: nothing remained of his childhood except a series of brightlit¹⁸ tableaux occurring against no background and mostly unintelligible. The Ministry of Truth – Minitrue, in Newspeak – was startlingly different from any other object in sight. It was an enormous pyramidal structure of glittering white concrete, soaring¹⁹ up, terrace after terrace, 300 metres into the air. From where Winston stood it was just possible to read, picked out on its white face in elegant lettering, the three slogans of the Party:

WAR IS PEACE
 FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
 IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

GLOSSARY

8 collapsing – 9 reinforced – 10 wooden supports – 11 cracked – 12 inclining – 13 twisted, turned – 14 herb of the primrose family – 15 grew untidily – 16 mass of broken stones – 17 houses – 18 full of light – 19 rising into the sky

ACTIVITIES

- 1 Answer the following questions.
 - 1 How did the telescreen operate?
 - 2 What did it pick up?
 - 3 When did the Thought Police plug the telescreen in?
 - 4 How had people learned to live?
 - 5 Why did Winston keep his back to the telescreen?
 - 6 Was it absolutely safe?
- 2 Say whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F) and correct the false ones.

1 London is the most populous city of Airstrip One.	T F
2 Winston doesn't have any clear memories of what London looked like in his childhood.	T F
3 The houses are collapsing, their walls reinforced with wooden supports, their windows patched with cardboard.	T F
4 The bombed sites have been cleared up and are full of flowers.	T F
5 The Ministry of Truth is a low and dilapidated building.	T F
6 It bears the face of Big Brother.	T F
- 3 Discuss the three slogans of the Party using the following cues.
 - Positive and negative words used.
 - How the words are combined and how this affects the meaning of each slogan.