



Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching George Orwell's

1984

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

Pete Boysen



PRESTWICK HOUSE, INC.

"Everything for the English Classroom!"

General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *1984*

1984 IS ONE OF THE LANDMARK dystopian novels in all of world literature. It is joined by such fellows as *Brave New World*, *Animal Farm*, and *Fahrenheit 451*, all of which turn the utopian novel form on its head, describing instead a world where everything has gone wrong.

This novel is also similar to Swift's satirical classic *Gulliver's Travels* in that it examines every aspect of a society, identifying weaknesses and atrocities committed against the common person. The former city of London, now called Airstrip One, no longer serves as a major city in the United Kingdom, but instead as one city in the massive territory known as Oceania.

In this story, we follow the progress of one Winston Smith. Married but isolated, toiling his days away at a desk where he is charged with purging "errors" from the historical record, he finds his drives for love, aesthetic enjoyment, human fellowship, and sex to be bottled up by the control of the Party. All energy is to be focused into patriotism for the war effort, which, depending on the particular day, is either against Eurasia or Eastasia. Smith at last finds sexual release in the person of Julia, who, ironically, enters his life as a supporter of the Junior Anti-Sex League. His hatred for all forms of Party control find release in his pursuit of the elusive Brotherhood, the traces of which lead him at first to O'Brien, but then, tragically, to the depths of the Ministry of Love. After a lengthy period of reeducation, Winston emerges once more, a hollow shell of himself, to be sure, but also a devoted follower of Big Brother.

Formalist Theory as Applied to 1984



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is often dismissed as rigid and inaccessible, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Examining the Text for Significant Use of Tone

1. Divide the class into three groups, or a number of groups divisible by three.
2. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) one of the following:
 - The two passages from Goldstein's book (Pg. 184-199 and 201-217)
 - Winston's diary entries (Pg. 8-9, 18, 19, 28, 63-69, 72, 73)
 - O'Brien's explanations of the way that the Party actually works (Part Three, Sections II, III and V)
3. Have the groups reread their assigned passages and discuss the following questions:
 - How can the novel's tone, in many places throughout the novel, be said itself to be ironic?
 - What specific literary devices in the passages contribute to the empty, yet intense mood?
 - What is the rhetorical purpose of Winston's diary? Of Emanuel Goldstein's book?
 - What similarities do you see between Winston's rants and lyrics to a song, or to poetry in general?
4. Reconvene the class and have each group report.

Marxist Theory as Applied to 1984



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated the means of production, not in the hands of those few who owned it. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Examining the Nature and Source(s) of Power in 1984

1. In full class, discuss the types of power one individual might have over another, or a group might have over an individual. Include a discussion of how the individual or group with the power might choose to exercise control.
 - Review the types of control Marx believed the bourgeoisie exercised over the proletariat.
 - Point out that Orwell's common people are called "Proles."

2. Divide the class into small groups and have the groups examine the book for the methods the Party uses to control
 - other Party members
 - individuals like Winston, Julia, and Tom Parsons
 - the Proles

Then have students read O'Brien's discussion of power on pages 262 – 265. (Perhaps read it aloud while students read along.)

3. Reconvene the class and discuss the power the Party actually has compared to the power it claims to have.
 - Is it true, as O'Brien asserts, that the Party can never be overthrown?

Mythological/Archetypal Analysis of 1984



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is, "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One

Analyzing Archetypal Values of the Character Julia

1. Distribute Archetypal Activity One: Passage One
 - Put students in groups of three or four and have them *individually* read the account of the Fall of Man.
 - In their groups, have them note and discuss key elements of the story (i.e., the relationship between Adam and Eve, the nature of the sin, the role of nakedness and their awareness of their nakedness, any other sexual references, and the punishments inflicted to each for her or his sin).
2. Next, have students examine the following passages, noting Orwell's diction as well as the tone of the passages and the narrator's apparent attitude toward the characters, especially Julia:
 - Pg. 9-10: The episode in which Winston first encounters Julia.
 - Pg. 105 – 111: Julia's first communication with Winston.
 - Pg. 117-127: Winston and Julia's first tryst.
 - Pg. 130 – 143: The first meeting in Charrington's room.
 - Pg. 221 – 224: Winston and Julia's arrest.
 - Pg. 290 – 293: Winston and Julia's final meeting.
3. Then have them discuss the following questions:
 - In what ways is Winston and Julia's relationship idyllic?
 - In what ways is their relationship depraved?
 - How do country / garden / park settings parallel (either literally or ironically) the Garden of Eden?
 - Of what "forbidden fruit" do Winston and Julia partake?
 - What "knowledge of good and evil" do they gain as a result of this?
 - In the Genesis account of the Fall, how does Eve bring death into the world? How does Julia both bring life and death into Winston's reality?
4. Reconvene the class and discuss Julia as a representation (or reverse representation) of Eve.