1984 by George Orwell, Part 1: Crash Course Literature 401

Crash Course: Literature
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Hi I'm John Green and welcome to season 4 of Crash Course Literature.

Today we're transporting you to one of my favorite/ least favorite dystopias, George Orwell's 1984. I feel like that eye is looking at me.

The book starts like this, "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 vole wind slipped quickly though the glass doors of victory mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him". Of course its not just a swirl of gritty dust traveling with Winston.

Like everyone in 1984, he;s never really alone. In Orwell's dystopian future 1984, which was published in 1949, the world is vile and gritty and the clock strikes 13 and citizens are under near constant government surveillance. But you know what?

Orwell did not correctly predict the future; our clocks still stop at 12. Also, in the novel 1984, people routinely disappear and evidence of their existence is erased from public records, and that doesn't happen much.... Yet.

1984 is an indictment of specific governments, but it's also a warning about the importance of free thought and speech, and in today's episode, we're gonna discuss the historical context in which 1984 was written and also its use of oppressive language.

I want to think about whether Orwell suggests within the logic of this novel, that the written word can significantly alter the society in which it is produced.

And I mean that on at least two levels: Can the novel 1984 change the actual world in which we live and are characters in the novel ultimately controlled by the language they, and their government use? Spoiler

Alert: We're all doomed. I'm just kidding. I mean, I hope I'm kidding. The truth is, as usual, it;s complicated. [logo music] George Orwell's protagonist, the wind-blown Winston Smith, shares a first name with Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1940-1945 and again from 1951-1955.

And by replacing a lofty, aristocratic surname (that evokes Churches and Hills) with a common one (a Smith is a metal worker), Orwell puts the fate of England in the hands of a working man, although this one bends worlds, not metal, since he is a writer. As for whether Orwell's Winston will prevail as Winston Churchill did in World War II... of course not!

Now, some dystopias end with the overthrow of the horrible government, but Orwell's tend to end with the bad guys and/or pigs winning. And 1984 is very much a dystopia - a dehumanizing society in which "There seemed to be no color in anything" and posters of a "black-mustachio'd face gazing down from every commanding corner" bearing the now-famous caption "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU".

In this world, the government endorses something called "doublethink", which links contradictory beliefs. So you see slogans like: "War is Peace", "Freedom is Slavery", and "Ignorance is Strength". The problem isn't that citizens are told the opposite of what is true.

The problem is that their experiences have become so limited that they lack the perspective and the language to differentiate between major concepts.

But let's back up for a second and talk about George Orwell.

Here's some doublespeak for you: George Orwell is not George Orwell. He was born Eric Arthur Blair to English parents in Bengal, near the border with Nepal. His father worked in quality control for opium (which is used to make morphine, and codeine, and heroin). And the British held a monopoly on opium for many years, and exported it to China, both for financial gain, and to subdue Chinese citizens.

Although the Chinese government tried to get Britain to dismantle the India-China opium trade for over 150 years (and there were wars fought about it), China wasn't successful until 1910. Basically, this was like the largest international drug cartel in history and it was legal. Ah colonialism, the original dystopia!

I guess the original dystopia was actually hunting and gathering, I mean at least for those of us who hate the paleo diet. God, I love processed carbohydrates... what were we talking about? Oh, right. Eric Arther Blair (soon to be George Orwell).

So, as a kid Blair moved to England, and was eventually sent to Eaton, a prestigious boarding school. And in 1922, he joined the Imperial Police in Burma.

In "Why I Write" he explains that he rejected imperialism after spending 5 years in the "Unsuitable profession of working in the imperial police force", and experienced poverty himself when he returned to England.

Sensitised to the evils of colonialism, and now "fully aware of the existence of the working classes", Blair was on his way to forming what he called a "political orientation".

He changed his name to George Orwell when he published "Down and Out in Paris and London" in 1933, but he still hadn't identified where he stood politically. Then in 1936, he declared that he was "Against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as i understand it."

Democratic Socialism basically uses democratic means to create a political and economic structure that supports socialist goals (you know, things like a social safety net, and universal healthcare).

You might think of it as a rejection of unfettered capitalism, Orwell found the "real nature of capitalist society" abhorrent, because, as he wrote, "I have seen British imperialism at work in Burma, and I have seen something of the effects of poverty and unemployment in Britain...
One has got to be actively a socialist, not merely sympathetic to socialism, or one plays to the hands of our always active enemies."

At the same time, Orwell was strongly opposed to Stalin, ad the totalitarian strains of communism. For instance, in 1936, when he went to fight the fascist leader Fransisco Franco, he joined the Marxist group POUM. He didn't join the main communist party.

In homage to Catalonia, he explained "the communists stood not upon the extreme left but on the extreme right. In reality, this should come as no surprise, because of the tactics of the communist parties elsewhere."

These tactics, as seen in the USSR, included the conscious use of propaganda, the repression of individual freedoms, and also state-sponsored murder.

But the point I want to make is that it's not quite accurate for either the contemporary left or right to claim Orwell. He most famous novels are anti-communist, but they're also anti-capitalist. Mostly,

they seek to show the ways that many government structures are prone to totalitarianism, and they chary the slow almost unnoticeable descent into that totalitarianism.

But in 1984 specifically, Orwell explores the difficulty of retaining individual freedom within the confines of an oppressive society. In the book, the Earth has been divided in three zones - Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia- which are constantly at war with one another.

And Winston lives in London, the main city of Airstrip One, which is a province of Oceania. He's legally married to the stiff, brainwashed and desireless Katherine. They are unable to produce children, and live separately, but they are forbidden from remarrying.

Winston's primary pleasures include scratching a varicose ulcer above his right ankle, drinking shots of a "sickly, oily" Victory Gin (which provides "the sensation of being hit on the back of the head with a rubber club") and writing in a "thick, quarto-sized blank book with a red back and a marbled cover".

So you know, his pleasures are scant. Any life where one of the chief pleasures is scratching an actual, physical itch is not, like, a great life. I mean, it's a good life for a dog, but it's not a great life for a person.

But then, Winston's pleasures, and also his anxieties, experience a significant uptick when he begins an affair with the young, vital and beautiful Julia. Despite being "ten, fifteen years younger", Julia boldly declares her love for Winston. And Winston is a little incredulous, he says "I'm thirty-nine years old. I've got a wife that I can't get rid of. I've got varicose veins. I've got five false teeth."

And the reader may have some doubts as well. I mean, when Julia replies "I couldn't care less", Orwell seems to be acknowledging (but not apologizing for) this particular breed of middle-aged male fantasy. But you know, it's also a romance that serves a plot.

So, Winston and Julia meets secretly for months. They rent rooms from an antiques dealer named Mr Carrington in the plebeian quarter of London. They confess their affair and anti-party beliefs to O'Brien, a member of the Inner Party who seems to be sympathetic to their cause, and they begin reading a book, which is allegedly written by the underground resistance leader Emmanuel Goldstein.

They know that they'll be discovered, and tortured and (very probably) executed. Their victories -and they do have some- come from tiny moments of consciousness, and human connection, and personal freedom. And these moments are tiny.

For Winston, some of them include procuring a pen with a real nib "simply because of a feeling that the beautiful, creamy paper deserves to be written on." I mean, we're not talking about proper Freedom of Speech, we're talking about succumbing to the "balminess of the April air", "to stroll through the labyrinth of London".

Winston also purchases a glass paperweight containing coral, and all of this leads to a cool point: despite the authoritarian nature of Ingsoc (the perversion of socialism that dominates Oceania), moments of personal freedom like these are commonplace.

There's even a word for them in Newspeak, the new language that the government is developing: "ownlife, it was called, meaning individualism and eccentricity".

But of course, the line between experiencing an "ownlife" and engaging in political subversion is really thin. I mean, when Winston gives in to his "animal instinct, the simple undifferentiated desire" to have sex with Julia: "Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the party. It was a political act."

There's no ambiguity there. Making your life yours, making your choices yours, is political. And also, having your own thoughts is political. I mean, the Party doesn't just suppress subversion through surveillance, and arrest, and torture, and execution, those oldies but goodies from Totalitarianism isn't for Dummies.

In 1984, the government also suppresses individualism by limiting language. Just 4 pages into the book, an asterisk appears after the first mention of "Newspeak": this asterisk interrupts the narrative flow, breaking any bond that the reader may be (or, let's be honest, may not be" forming with Winston.

And it entices the reader towards an appendix, narrated by a scholar living long after Winston. And the appendix explains that Newspeak had been "devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc", and that its vocabulary has been designed "to make speech, and especially speech on any subject not ideologically neutral, as nearly as possible independent of consciousness."

In other words, Newspeak seeks to make it nearly impossible to express, and maybe in turn even to THINK, revolutionary thoughts.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

===== Thought Bubble (10:56) =====

So Newspeak has three main categories of vocabulary:

- the A Vocabulary contains blunt words for daily functions, like eating, working and sleeping. And these words don't have multiple meanings, the examples listed include "hit, run, dog, tree, sugar, house, field".

- the B Vocabulary contains compound words that blend a noun and a verb to express a limited number of political or ideological concepts, like "Goodthink" means orthodoxy to party policy and "Crimethink" is its opposite.

- and the C Vocabulary is scientific and technical jargon. It contains words accessible only to workers in a particular field, the idea being that no individual will be able to synthesize knowledge from multiple fields.

So people will be able to do their work, but not be able to understand the context in which that work is happening. And that's one example of how, by trying to limit what people can say, the government is hoping to constrain what they can think.

And an interesting feature of the Appendix is that it explains that Winston's version of Newspeak was "a provisional one, and contained many superfluous words and archaic formulations which were due to be suppressed later."

This foreshadows that language will become increasingly oppressive. Which, of course, is bad news for Winston and his peers. But there is some good news for the rest of humanity.

Because you will notice that the appendix is written in standard English. And as many readers, including Thomas Pynchon and Margaret Attwood have pointed out, this suggests that free thought and its expression will ultimately prevail. And that language will someday again be rich and complex and free.

Thanks Thought Bubble.

===== End Thought Bubble (12:32) =====

So how do we get back to free language? Well, I'm a writer, and as such I'm almost professionally obligated to believe in the power of language. Next week we'll go into more detail on the complicated relationship between thoughts and language.

But I think it's worth mentioning now that, while we don't think entirely in words, language does help give form and expression to complex ideas within us.

I mean, that's part of what books attempt to do, but it's also something we're all doing all day because we think in language. It's one of the primary ways we communicate our feelings and experiences to other people, but it's also one of the primary ways we communicate that stuff within us.

And I think in 1984, Orwell argues that the restriction of language is ultimately a form of restricting thought itself.

It's encouraging that Newspeak may ultimately fail, but it does make me wonder: what thoughts can't I think because of the language I've inherited?

Next time we'll also address a question that should be on your mind, since you're watching this video on something very like a telescreen, possibly while in a government-funded school where the government is deciding, at least in part, what you learn about.

What could 1984 teach us about our current political context and our relationship to what many have called "Surveillance Society"? And in a world where so many of us volunteer so much of ourselves to the public sphere, is there value in a private life?

Spoiiler alert: I think there is! But we'll talk more about that next week.

Thanks for watching, I'll see you then.

===== Credits (13:55) =====

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===== (14:00) to (14:28) =====

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