


### Why Orwell's 1984 could be about now

adapted from an article by Jean Seaton

- 1 Reading 1984, George Orwell's claustrophobic fable of totalitarianism, is still a shock. First comes the start of recognition: we recognise what he describes. Doublethink (holding two contradictory thoughts at the same time), Newspeak, the Thought Police, the Ministry of Love that deals in pain, despair and annihilates any dissident, the Ministry of Peace that wages war: Orwell opened our eyes to how regimes worked.
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- The image shows the front cover of the book '1984' by George Orwell. The title '1984' is printed in large, bold, black letters. Below it, in smaller text, it says 'A NOVEL BY George Orwell'. The cover has a textured, slightly mottled appearance, possibly due to the paper's age or the scanning process. The book is shown at an angle, with the spine visible on the left.
- 2 But now we can read 1984 differently: with anxious apprehension, applying it to measure where we, our nations and the world have got to on the road map to a hell Orwell described. Prophetic? Possibly. But stirring, moving, creative, undeniable and helpful? Yes. A book published on 8 June 1949, written out of the battered landscape of total war, in a nation hungry, tired and grey, feels more relevant than ever before, because Orwell's 1984 also arms us.
  - 3 The book defines the peculiar characteristics of modern tyranny. Winston Smith, the protagonist, works as a censor in the Ministry of Truth in a constant updating of history to suit present circumstances and shifting alliances. He and his fellow workers are controlled as a mass collective by the all-seeing and all-knowing presence of Big Brother. In 1984 television screens watch you, and everyone spies on everyone else. Today it is social media that collects every gesture, purchase, comment we make online, and feeds an omniscient presence in our lives that can predict our every preference. Modelled on consumer decisions, where the user is the commodity that is being marketed, the harvesting of those preferences for political campaigns is now distorting democracy.
  - 4 Orwell understood that oppressive regimes always need enemies. In 1984 he showed how these can be created arbitrarily by whipping up popular feeling through propaganda. Now political, religious and commercial organisations all trade in whipping up feelings. Orwell uncannily identified 36 that such movements can elicit: and of course Winston observes it in himself. So, by implication, might we in ourselves.

- 5 Then there is his iconic dictator Big Brother: absurd and horrifying in equal measure. Orwell's writing 37 the giant '-isms' that disfigured the 20th Century. Orwell fought against Fascism as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War but realised the hollow promise of Communism, when the anti-Stalinist group he was fighting for was hunted down by the pro-Stalin faction. He witnessed first-hand the self-deception of true believers. Today there is another set of '-isms', such as nationalism and populism that operate through the mobilisation of that most dangerous of feelings, resentment. And everywhere you look in the contemporary world, 'strong' men are in positions of power. They share the need to crush opposition, a fanatical terror of dissent and self-promotion. Big Brothers are no longer a joke but strut the world.
- 6 But the greatest horror in Orwell's dystopia is the systematic stripping of meaning out of language. The regime aims to eradicate words and the ideas and feelings they embody. Its real enemy is reality. Tyrannies attempt to make understanding the real world impossible: seeking to replace it with phantoms and lies. The terror in 1984 is the annihilation of the self and the destruction of the capacity to recognise the real world.
- 7 You cannot separate Orwell's work from the man. He is increasingly viewed as a kind of a saint, but how he would laugh at the statues of him that are sprouting up. His views towards feminists (though not women), vegetarians and other groups would hardly pass the test now. But he was a man who lived by his beliefs. He made himself genuinely poor; he fought for what he thought was right; he was unfailingly generous and kind to other writers, and yet he taught himself to try and see the world as it was, not how he would like it to be. He was never compliant, and he forensically unearthed for our gaze the worst of himself.
- 8 It is not only that we live in a world transformed by Orwell's insights in that it shapes how we see oppression. But 1984 is also a handbook for difficult times. Knowledge is a kind of strength and we are all being tested.

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## Tekst 9 Why Orwell's 1984 could be about now

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- 1p 32 What can be concluded about Orwell from paragraph 1?
- A He foresaw how paradoxical tendencies would change world politics.
  - B He realised that dictators thrive best when there is some resistance.
  - C He thought that his dystopian narrative would one day become reality.
  - D He understood full well the machinations of oppressive governments.
- 1p 33 How is 1984 presented in paragraph 2?  
as a work of fiction that
- A can be used to recognise whether a society is moving towards an authoritarian state of affairs
  - B gives practical advice on how to retaliate against authoritarian transgressions in troubled times
  - C is an astute personal reflection on the authoritarian tendencies that are unhinging civilisation today
  - D should be appreciated for its artistic merits rather than its presentation of authoritarian politics
- 'The book defines the peculiar characteristics of modern tyranny.'  
(alinea 3)
- 1p 34 Welke alinea is de **laatste** alinea waarin een van deze eigenschappen wordt genoemd?  
Noteer het nummer van deze alinea.
- 1p 35 What is the main point made about our present society in paragraph 3?
- A The networks that shape it are aimed at destabilising social cohesion.
  - B The propagation of fake news is turning it into an unsafe environment.
  - C The use of algorithms is violating the constitutional rights of its citizens.
  - D The way it is governed is threatened by the use of digital technology.
- 1p 36 Which of the following fits the gap in paragraph 4?
- A the intrinsic frailty of loyalty
  - B the longed-for upheaval in society
  - C the strong wish for exoneration
  - D the willing collusion in hate

- 1p 37 Which of the following fits the gap in paragraph 5?
- A aims to explain the ideals of
  - B has exposed the inconsistencies between
  - C is rooted in the struggles between
  - D tries to right the wrongs of
- 1p 38 Which of the following headings fits paragraph 6?
- A How to turn debate into a tool of demolition
  - B Lexicon as a means of control and coercion
  - C The grand-scale obliteration of dissidents
  - D When dictators resort to emotional blackmail
- 1p 39 Which of Orwell's character traits are especially stressed in paragraph 7?
- A his aloofness and superiority
  - B his altruism and diligence
  - C his integrity and authenticity
  - D his righteousness and tenacity

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**Bronvermelding**

*Een opsomming van de in dit examen gebruikte bronnen, zoals teksten en afbeeldingen, is te vinden in het bij dit examen behorende correctievoorschrift.*