1984: Characterisation

The characters in 1984 are straightforward ones, with the partial exception of the central character, Winston Smith. While this may disappoint readers who value rich, developed characters in fiction, it cannot be considered a flaw in this particular kind of book, for by its nature a science fiction dystopia sets out to dramatise ideas rather than personalities. Indeed one of Orwell’s key points is that a world which was as centrally controlled and hostile to individualism as 1984 would have to eliminate anyone who possessed originality in order to maintain its existence.

WINSTON SMITH

Winston is a smallish, frail figure, who wears the compulsory blue Party uniform. He is 39 with fair hair and a red face, and has a varicose ulcer above his right ankle. Employed at the Ministry of Truth to rewrite the records of the past, he comes to realise that the unrevised past which he is burying was a better world than the present. He starts writing a diary in order to try to think for himself and later develops a relationship with Julia which he finds nourishes both spirit and body. Having managed to unlearn some of the assumptions of a Party intellectual, he comes to value the way of life of the lower-class proles. However, he remains isolated in his rebellion, since he receives little intellectual support from Julia, is unable to achieve any meaningful contact with the proles and is betrayed when he attempts to join the Brotherhood. Once he has been arrested and reduced to a single, fearful rebel against the system, his conviction that he is right and the Party is wrong is not strong enough to withstand torture and brainwashing.

Winston’s surname establishes him as an everyman figure, but his first name is more open in its implications. Some of today’s readers, knowing Winston to be a name favoured by West Indians, might assume that he is black (which would give an additional twist to the chess metaphor in the final chapter), but the intended reference is clearly to Winston Churchill, Britain’s prime minister during the Second World War. The most straightforward interpretation of this link is that, like his namesake, Winston Smith represents resistance to evil. However, his first name could also be interpreted as an ironic comment on his lack of fitness to resist evil, contrasting him with Churchill, or even as a satirical reflection on how, under Churchill’s leadership during the Second World War, government controls had increased.

The story of 1984 is almost entirely Winston’s story. Everything that happens in it happens in relation to him. It begins with the first of his diary entries, then traces each stage of his rebellion until his final capitulation. The narrative is focussed on him throughout, allowing us to share not only his reflections but also his dreams and longings. We observe his personality begin to grow as memories of the past force themselves back and he starts to come to terms with his feelings about his lost mother. Ultimately, however, such development is brought to a brutal end and his growing self is replaced by a superficial conformist personality imposed from outside.

Paradoxically, although our main impression of Winston is that he is a powerless victim of an evil world, it also seems to be a world which manifests his inner feelings, almost as if he is dreaming it into being. There are several occasions when his dreams come true, from his liaison with Julia in the Golden Country to his exposure to the rats in Room 101. We are told from the beginning that he foresees the fatal outcome of his rebellion. It sometimes seems that part of him wants to be “cured”, perhaps as an escape from, or punishment for, the guilt which he feels over his childhood selfishness.

As we share Winston’s ideas and perceptions so fully, it is easy to assume that we are always intended to sympathise and agree with him. However, as the book progresses, the reader is likely to notice that Winston’s views are not always reliable. Winston’s perceptions of his wife Katharine and the proles, for example, are so stereotypical that they invite scepticism. His prediction that Parsons will never be arrested proves false and, remarkable, he fails to notice any of the sinister clues about Charrington or O’Brien.

Far from being an admirable character, Winston considers murdering his wife, vows to kill children when being sworn into the Brotherhood and eventually betrays Julia. Although he desires to behave with decency, his environment repeatedly inhibits him from doing so. As for love, his only real experience of it is the love his mother gave him in childhood. His relationship with Julia is quite limited in comparison. We never see him idealise her or put her interests before his own, so why should we be surprised when he is terrorised into betraying her?

Orwell certainly expects us to retain some distance from Winston’s point of view. In the first chapter when Winston scribbles his initial diary entry, expressing normal Party attitudes towards the violent film and the prole woman, we can see that this is only his training speaking, just as in the final paragraph of the book we discount his love for Big Brother as the result of brainwashing. In between these two points, however, the reader has to exercise personal judgement about which of Winston’s sentiments to accept and which to reject.

JULIA

Julia, whose last name we never know, is introduced in the first chapter. At this stage Winston suspects her of being a spy, and this possibility remains throughout the book. Evidence for her membership of the Thought Police is clear throughout the chapters, and, if we break off from the experience of reading and think about it with detachment, it is quite powerful evidence. We should remember, however, that the book has several unrealistic features which create a sense of entrapment and their effect has to be judged from the reading experience, not from a detached analysis. Most readers have accepted the relationship between Julia and Winston as authentic, and found their subdued meeting in the final chapter a moving conclusion.

Julia is a bold-looking 26-year-old, with thick, dark hair, a freckled face and athletic movements. She wears a scarlet sash which appears to demonstrate her support for the Party’s Anti-Sex League but which she actually wears in order to make herself more sexually attractive. Under pretence of conformity, she is a promiscuous disbeliever in the Party’s moral code. She works, appropriately, in the Fiction Department. As her oily hands suggest, she is a highly practical person, skilfully organising love affairs and obtaining luxury goods from her admirers. Although she does not regard revolution against the system as a realistic option, her affection for Winston leads her to support him in his attempt to join the Brotherhood. Sometimes her cynicism enables her to see reality more clearly than he does, as when she suggests that the Party may be bombing its own people in order to foment hatred of the enemy.

It is arguable that in some respects Julia is a male fantasy figure. While a girl who likes to enjoy herself is plausible enough, a girl who flings herself determinedly at a downtrodden older man, arranges their meetings and takes charge of their sex life is rather less so. Orwell introduces her largely to help Winston create an alternative life for himself and to act as a sounding board for his ideas. The stages of his rebellion are matched by his reactions to her. She is glimpsed only briefly in Part 1, in Part 2 she becomes his lover, then is absent from Part 3 until the end, where the converted Winston shows that he no longer has any feelings for her. Throughout, she receives limited character development in her own right.

O’BRIEN

O’Brien is a member of the Inner Party. He too is introduced in the first chapter. He has the build of a prize fighter, burly and thick-necked, with a coarse, humorous, brutal face, but habitually readjusts his glasses on his nose in a way which suggests a contrasting urbanity and intellect. From the start Winston longs to talk to him, feeling instinctively that such a man would not be bound by orthodox thinking and would therefore understand him. He even links O’Brien to the voice in one of his dreams. Eventually O’Brien offers to induct him into the Brotherhood, but does so only to entrap him.

The danger should have been evident to Winston when O’Brien was able to recognise two of his pet phrases just as though he had been spying on him. When they meet again for the interrogation, O’Brien actually seems to be able to read Winston’s mind. Like the evidence which suggests that Julia is a member of the Thought Police, O’Brien’s telepathic powers are not perhaps to be taken in their own right, but understood as a method by which Orwell creates a sense of Winston’s vulnerability. We learn finally that O’Brien is no mere torturer but a kind of religious inquisitor, a fanatic whose aim is to convert his victims to orthodoxy before he executes them.

OTHER PARTY MEMBERS

All of the other members of the Party are simple stereotypes, introduced to contrast with Winston, to convey information and to help advance the plot. Parsons is an enthusiastic obsessive who supports the Party without reservations. Syme is a haughty intellectual. Ampleforth is a vapid poet. Bumstead and the cadaverous man he tries to help are victims of torture who have contrasting attitudes or who are perhaps merely at different stages of their destruction. Mrs Parsons is a downtrodden housewife, the Parsons children are aggressive brats and Mr Charrington is a refined elderly prole who turns out to be a member of the Thought Police in disguise.

THE PROLES

The proles are introduced in Part 1, Chapter 1 through the woman in the cinema, a positive figure in her values yet a stereotypical figure of fun in her behaviour: a loud, disruptive character who can only express herself in repetitive and common language. A similarly limited impression is made by other proles later in the book: the slum-dwellers and pub-goers of Part 1, the woman at the clothes line in Part 2, and the prostitute in Part 2. They are not developed characters, but figures from a comic postcard or a music hall sketch. Although Winston eventually comes to respect the proles for their virility and their humane perspective which contrasts with the Party’s world view, they are presented as mental inferiors who have not consciously rejected the Party’s vision, but are simply incapable of understanding it. For this reason they are also incapable of challenging the Party and creating a world which would do their values justice.

Many critics have found the proles unconvincing and have condemned them as stereotypes. They argue that Orwell, the product of upper-class schools and a formative period sent as an imperial policeman in Burma, could not empathise adequately with those below him in the class structure. This is a plausible argument, but we should also consider the possibility that it rests on a misunderstanding of Orwell’s intention. Like the sudden switch of enemy from Eurasia to Eastasia, or the conversion of the English language into Newspeak, the way of life of the proles may be a feature of the book which is not meant to be realistic, but a satirical exaggeration which dramatises a point, in the case the damage done by class divisions.

We should also remember that Winston is not an entirely reliable narrator. He is a Party member who never entirely succeeds in freeing himself from the Party’s world-view. The question of how widespread the resistance may be, particularly whether the Brotherhood really exists, is left open. When O’Brien assures Winston that the proles can’t rebel, he says “I do not have to tell you the reason: you know it already (pg 300), but we do not have to accept the Party line which both of them share.