1984: Narrative techniques and structure

The story is a simple one, and is straightforwardly divided into three parts: a beginning, a middle and an end. It starts with Winston’s decision to think for himself despite the likelihood that this will lead to his death. We are also in the first chapter introduced to Julia and O’Brien, and from the way that they are singled out we infer they will be significant characters. The remainder of Part One shows us the world in which Winston is trapped and his reactions to it. Part Two contains the rebellion. Winston has an illegal affair with Julia and through O’Brien the couple join the Brotherhood. The pair are then take prisoner. Part Three recounts Winston’s defeat.

The tale is narrated in the third person, but focused entirely on one character, Winston, whose point of view we occupy through free indirect discourse and also through his speech and diary entries. Only two other characters feature heavily in the book, O’Brien and Julia, and they are important purely because of what they mean to Winston. The book is therefore the exploration of a single consciousness. We are immersed in Winston’s thoughts and feelings. We follow his experiences, held by the drama of his situation and fascinated by the world in which he is trapped, so like our own in some ways, but so unlike it in others.

One reason the book is disturbing is because, despite Winston’s efforts, his consciousness is ultimately beyond his control, attacked not only from outside by propaganda and regulation, but from inside by nightmares and memories, over both of which O’Brien finally proves himself master. While the sensory world of the story seems to be a solid one, made out of such ingredients as dilapidated buildings, bad smells and poor-tasting food, Winston’s consciousness frequently undergoes cinematic dissolves from the present to the past and from waking to dreaming. It would be no surprise, though it would be a big disappointment, if the book finally revealed itself to be the creation of a mental patient with O’Brien as his therapist. For all its surface naturalism, 1984 is a work of intense paranoid fantasy.

Winston is a victim of a conspiracy so thorough that the Thought Police themselves seem to have initiated his rebellion in order to be able to defeat it (putting him in a flat where he cannot always be seen by the telescreen, selling him the diary, and so on), leaving him virtually no autonomy even as a rebel. What he dreams earlier in the book comes true at a later juncture. He dreams of seeing Julia taking off her clothes in the country; later it happens. He dreams of a voice like O’Brien’s saying “we shall meet in the place where there is no darkness” (1.2) and of a “wall of darkness” behind which is something he dares not face (2.4). When he uses the former phrase to O’Brien, the latter seems to recognise it and later introduces the rat torture by explaining to Winston that this is what his nightmare was really about. Similarly, Winston coins the phrase “we are the dead” to describe the members of the Party, only to find it taken up, first by O’Brien when he describes the members of the Brotherhood, then by the Thought Police when he is taken prisoner.

The recurrence of these key phrases may detract from the book’s realism, but by occurring at important moments and stressing points for our attention thye help to give it shape. The same is true of other recurring features, such as the ominous children’s rhyme “Oranges and Lemons”, Winston’s two visits to the Chestnut Tree Café and the use of symbols such as the dust which covers this uncared-for world, the clocks which regulate all activities, the pastoral Golden Country which Winston is able to enter only briefly, and the fragile paperweight which stands for everything that he wishes to attain. The appearance and reappearance of these motifs creates a strong sense that there are inevitable forces running beneath the events of the story. The motifs also give a slightly poetic quality to the book, helping to counterbalance the documentary texture cause by the enormous amount of plainly stated information which it contains.

The latter is sometimes called a problem. 1984 contains so much information that some readers find they cannot comfortably digest it all. In particular, the extracts from Goldstein’s writing and the appendix on Newspeak have been accused of interrupting and distracting us from the story. The need to add these sections certainly shows that Orwell was not able to incorporate all of his ideas into the main narrative. Whether the result is clumsy or not is a matter of taste. Orwell himself certainly considered the passages of ideas essential and risked forty thousand pounds in royalties (far more in present-day money) by refusing to allow them to be cut in a US Book-of-the-month Club edition.