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Is George Orwell's *1984* Really Behind Us? (Bridging the Gap Between Composition and Literature)

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Now that it is 1985, the spate of articles and conferences on George Orwell's *1984* is behind us and we are left to decide whether we can continue to teach a novel whose title is out of date. It seems to me that we can do so profitably.

I remember the reactions first reading *1984* produced in me as a teenager: shock, surprise, disbelief, anger and a continual wondering if such a world as Orwell described could ever come to be. Thinking as a professor, I also considered Orwell's interest in the proper uses—and the misuse—of language, certainly an appropriate concern in a freshman English course. While I knew it would be a risk to focus for an extended period of time (nearly seven weeks) on only one work, I suspected that the novel's combination of speculation with many changes of plot direction and mood would hold the class's attention, repay the students' extended, careful study, and lead to challenging writing assignments.

I decided on a format for the class, a format which led at least a couple of students to nickname me as "Big Teacher." I asked my students to read Orwell's novel a bit at a time, writing brief "comment papers" in which they recorded their own reactions, whether intellectual or emotional. A vital part of my plan was that I forbade the students to read ahead. Thus the students would be forced to examine each chapter of the book carefully and to speculate intelligently upon what was to come. They would be forced to become critical readers. Fortunately for my plan, with better nature than I expected, they for the most part agreed to follow this seemingly labored approach. Perhaps it was the novelty of being required to slow down and read it at leisure that the students liked. In any case, only a few had already read the novel.

Out of the slow, deliberate reading, com-

menting upon and discussing the book in class I asked the students to develop more finished ideas about *1984* and to express those ideas in finished papers. Some of these papers would be due long before the students had finished the novel. So, somewhat as Winston Smith was forced to try to puzzle out the why and how of his society, the students were forced to imagine the whole pattern of the book they were examining. They were forced to speculate intelligently, to read and write critically. The Big Brother of the novel never would have approved.

What the students had to say:

Shock and anger were the first reactions. Shock and anger that any person should have to live under the conditions of physical and—more important—emotional deprivation that Winston Smith endures at the novel's beginning. What I found most notable was that my students uniformly saw the world described in the first of the novel's three main sections as somehow different in kind from their world. There might be empty shops and half demolished buildings in downtown Flint, and many students might be making their way through the university on a shoestring. However, the students saw their lives as far more hopeful than that of Winston Smith.

The students got high marks from me for their caring and concern. They knew that Winston was a fictional invention from the year 1948, yet still they wrote of their desire somehow to help him. Some wanted to be able to step into the novel and explain to him just what was going on. Others wanted to reach into the book, grab him by the collar, and lift him bodily into our world. They wanted to save Winston. In a different vein, a significant minority wanted to reach back to 1948, grab George Orwell by the scruff of the neck, give him a good shake and make him treat Winston Smith more humanely. While it is obvious that there is a good deal of Orwell in Winston Smith, the students already were beginning to suspect that Orwell's personality might also have something of Big Brother in it. Thus came the students' first critical judgements.

Perhaps surprisingly, jokes also were in

order. However, the students and I saw the world of **1984** as different from our world; we still wondered if there might not be overlaps. We called Winston Smith “the world’s oldest thirty-nine year old man” almost as soon as we winced to see him limping from the effects of his varicose veins. Jokes were in order to diffuse the tension of wondering: *could* it happen? Could our 1984 become like **1984**? Could we be as obviously mortal as was Winston or his creator, George Orwell?

At this point in our reading Orwell began to give the students some hope. He gave them another way of life and another character. The way of life was that of the proles, the bottom eighty-five percent of the population of the nation Oceania. The proles are obviously modeled on the English proletariat, the British lower classes. In **1984** they live apart from the party members like Winston Smith and the party does not care about them.

They are little people leading little lives, but as a result the proles are free. They have only a little, but they share what they have. They expend their ingenuity in gambling at the state lottery and in detecting the incoming rocket bombs that drop seemingly at random. A prole saves Winston’s life by warning him of a bomb—for no reason Winston can discern. Here the students began to see parallels with their world. The lottery seemed to set them off. (Few of them hadn’t bought a lottery ticket at least once.) They began to ponder the joys of being ordinary persons with ordinary jobs and ordinary families—of participating in ordinary human relationships. They also began to consider the possible costs—beyond tuition and fees—of the course of striving to excel which going to college implies. They began to wonder if that striving might lead them into a supposedly successful but emotionally sterile position like that of Winston.

Probably for this reason, as well as for others, the students were particularly taken with the new character Orwell then gave them: Julia, the renegade member of the Junior Anti-Sex League. They judged Julia to be everything that Winston was not: quick, resourceful, poised and determined to shape her life to her own

liking. A measure of their desire for such a person—and for the sort of relationship she gives to Winston—lies in the fact that they welcomed her, although most acknowledged that she was manipulative, promiscuous and without much in common with Winston. Still, they wanted to see a close relationship, of whatever sort. It is to their credit that the students were well aware of the illogic into which this desire led them.

Two thirds of the way through their close reading of Orwell’s novel, the students came to the writing assignment that proved to be their favorite. The possible existence of a resistance, the Brotherhood, has been introduced. The students understood—even if they continued vehemently to dislike—the way in which the society of **1984** worked. At this point I asked them to project in expository or narrative form their own ideas of how the novel would (or *should*) end. In my judgement this was by far the most difficult of the assignments I gave them—even more difficult than writing the full-fledged research paper. To project an ending to so tightly structured a book as **1984** required considerable imagination.

Still, the students took to the assignment like ducks to water. And most decided to try to make the ending they wanted, making that ending as credible as possible rather than to imagine what (probably dreary) ending Orwell had in store for them.

Some of the endings were in the Ian Fleming mold, although Winston made a somewhat unlikely James Bond. Still, students figured ways to smuggle Winston, bomb in hand, into the bowels of the Ministry of Love, center of torture. The ensuing explosions were satisfying in the extreme. One student made Winston an unwitting pawn, carrying an antique atom bomb which members of the Brotherhood had found unexploded in a London Bomb crater. Winston died, happy in his final, momentary realization that he had destroyed the hated government of Big Brother.

Some students realized there was no hope for the two lovers, but no suicide pacts were projected. At the worst, the two came to endings

like the actual ending of the novel—or separated forever, realizing their love could not survive the attention which would inevitably become their lot if they were to stay together.

But positive values of one sort or another consistently were stressed. Many of the students saw the lovers' best course as one of joint involvement in the struggle against Big Brother. The writers of these endings realized that Winston and Julia likely would die in that struggle, yet clearly thought such a struggle worth the cost. And the most elegant and touching endings built on three elements: the value of the relationship between the two, the positive human values embodied in the lives of the proles, and Winston's job as a rewriter of history. In these endings, Winston literally wrote the "deaths" of the two into the *London Times*, leaving them free to disappear into and live out their lives together in the remaining humane society of London: the society of the proles.

After this assignment, the last third of the novel was in a sense anticlimax for the students. They felt the tragedy of Winston's renunciation of Julia. They understood the warning about totalitarianism which Orwell was sending. Yet the students felt they had made their choices, and those were choices that Orwell would have approved, even if he might not have expected them. The students' eventually came to see the parallels between Orwell's novel and our contemporary world; they were committed to ensuring that *1984* would not come to Flint, Michigan, in 1984.

Conclusion:

To be academic, what is the lesson of all this for us as teachers of English and the Language Arts? For those of us who strive to bridge the gap between composition and literature? Certainly, the passing of one year cannot outdate the consideration of the misuse and proper uses of language inherent in Orwell's work. *1984* will continue to have lessons to teach our students, and it is deserving of very careful consideration.

Certainly, in the context of freshman English, high quality writing and high quality reading are opposite sides of the same coin. Whatever wonderful insights and techniques recent research into the process of composition has brought us, such works of literature as *1984* still have vital roles to play in the education of student readers and writers.