

The 1st Runner Up of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Tam Cheuk Ming
Name of School : St. Joseph's College
Book Title : 1984
Author : George Orwell
Publisher : Harcourt

Published in 1949, Nineteen Eighty-Four's unflinching portrayal of the modern society has proved to be strikingly sound and prescient. Unlike other dystopian novels, the dictatorial landscape that Nineteen Eighty-Four creates, from Big Brother to the Ministry of Love to the omnipresent telescreens, has become timeless in people's minds, slowly morphing from a four-digit number to a shorthand for dictatorship.

Set in London in the superstate of Oceania, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* centers on the rebellion of Winston Smith, the protagonist of the story, and his lover, Julia. Winston is a member of the Outer Party who works at the Ministry of Truth, where he is responsible for historical revisionism — constantly editing and re-editing historical events in newspaper such that it would always go along with the Party's stance on history. Everywhere Winston goes, whatever he says, the Party keeps a watchful eye through the omnipresent telescreens. The Party has great dominance over the state, from the language that people speak to even the way they think. Any rebellious thoughts against the Party are strictly prohibited. Such actions, dubbed as thoughtcrime, are in fact considered the worst of all crimes. Under the dictatorial rule of the Party, people are ripped of their freedom to think, speak, love, even any sexual

behaviors are called ‘our duty to the Party’ for new party members, and children are to report any rebellious signs on their parents to the Party. As the story unfolds, Winston is tired of the incessant surveillance and disgusted at the Party, but thinks that nothing can be done, that is, until he meets Julia, with whom he has several rendezvous and falls in love. At the same time, Winston secretly buys a journal in which he writes down his rebellious thoughts, though knowing for sure that this will lead to their capture. As Winston's relationship with Julia goes on, he harvests much hatred towards the Party, and swears that his love for Julia will never change no matter what happens. Things take a sharp change towards the end of the novel, where the duo is captured by the Ministry of Love for interrogation. From the promise he made to Julia, Winston manages to bear through a series of torture — until he is led to room 101,

where he is to face his greatest fear of having a cage of rats on his face. This proves to be the last straw, Winston snaps, begging that it be done to Julia instead, betraying her. The story ends with Winston bumping into Julia, though he no longer has any feelings for Julia, whom confesses that she, too, betrayed him at the Ministry of Love. Disgusted, Winston breaks up with Julia, realizing that 'He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.' With that, the story comes to a close.

Narrated with intricate precision, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* portrays a futuristic world where people live under the 24/7 surveillance of the Party through telescreens, accompanied by microphones that allow the Thought Police to notice any individuals or parties that plan for rebels against the Party. Children are, on the other hand, encouraged to report any misbehaviour or irregularity of

their parent to the Party. 1984 has come and gone with humanity stepping into the 21st century. Reading Nineteen Eighty-Four as a teenager, as I do, it got us thinking — do we still live our lives under the countless cameras, as though everyone is either a hot celebrity or a wanted criminal? Do we still have every word we say recorded perfectly by hidden microphones recorders? Does the government get its hand on my contacts, the friends I chat with every night, restaurants that I go on routine, songs that I listen to non-stop, what undershirts I wear? Are we safe, even after the year of the prophecy has long faded into the past? I wish I could tell myself the answer to that question is yes, without having reprimands from my conscience. With the fast evolution of technology, countless breakthroughs and new discoveries each day, it seems like Orwell's description of the future is not that accurate.

Indisputably, people still live under surveillance, just that we won't get to see a telescreen in our home, so exposed and rightfully placed in the wall. No, what we have is micro camera today, if not nano-sized, stalking stealthily in the shadow at the corners, secretly keeping a watchful eye on us, probably scattered everywhere, in our closet, jackets, scarves, surreptitiously tracking us, just that we have our heads in the clouds, feeling safer than ever. You might say that this is way beyond absurd, but don't forget that early in 2007, the United States Government has launched the PRISM program, a clandestine surveillance program under which the National Security Agency collects internet communication from various major internet companies. It was only after six years, when NSA contractor Edward Snowden disclosed the program to the media did the program come to light, after collecting data from the public

for the whole time. It was argued against the press that the program has been for the prevention of terrorist attacks and to keep the public safe, but is that really its true identity, or just a mask covering the ugliness beneath it?

Living in Hong Kong, CCTVs still proudly remain on streets, and Octopus cards still keep track of our locations. It doesn't seem to be a far cry from the situation in the US. And this brings us to the next question — is this the best way to keep people safe? Or is it really for keeping the public safe? In Nineteen Eighty-Four, the people of the state are kept under constant surveillance. People with rebellious thoughts, like Winston and Julia, are automatically captured to 'cure' their thoughts, as if that is anything but brainwashing. People are like caged birds, being ripped of the freedom to speak, to voice out their opinions, to fight for justice, and stand up against immoral

issues. Looking back on the biological web, humans have long stood above other creatures because of the intellectuality that we possess. It is what sets us apart from cats and dogs, being able to distinguish between black and white, right and wrong, and act accordingly to our morals. Unlike other organisms, we possess a highly developed intellect to separate the right and wrong, thus we can voice out our opinions to the government through the press, media, demonstrations, and fight for a greater cause. The public's voice, indeed, is what burns the fuel for a state's development as it instills equality and snuffs out immorality. Centuries ago, the French voiced out their thoughts through demonstrations, and like a horn mustering up for battle, more provinces joined in, and the French Revolution was born. Eventually this battle horn pulls the powerful monarchies and churches down to their demise, and at the

same time opens a pathway for democracy that greatly shaped France as it is now. Yet in the novel people are brainwashed to acknowledging $2+2=5$, or whatever the Party wants it to be. The horn that revolutionists once blew triumphantly is muted by psychological manipulation. People are made to believe 'war is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength'. It seems that people in Nineteen Eighty-Four are nothing more than androids, being just able to follow orders from the Party without thinking beforehand. Then, can we still claim that we are standing on top of other live forms? How would being an as-good-as-gold android sets us a from a puppy? Thankfully, our society has yet succumbed to that state of losing our freedom to think. People still get to express their opinions through demonstrations and our freedom and human rights are still protected by laws. We seem to live in

a kaleidoscope of happiness where technology provides all our necessities at our fingertips — online shopping, chatting with friends far away, entertainments — and we are just too contented for the convenience of it. The question is is this state of contention everlasting, or is it just the calm before the storm? That, is yet to be seen.

The way people are controlled by the Party is made more profound through the vivid depiction of the Two Minutes Hate— a daily routine where Party members have to express their hatred towards the Party's enemies for exactly two minutes. Nineteen Eighty-Four has again brushed across a question raised by most dystopian novels — standing in the mobs of people during a Two Minutes Hate, where the Big Brother is watching us, constantly, would you have the courage to stand up and tell the official right in the face that this is not right? T. S. Eliot has said:

Do I dare disturb the universe? In the novel, Winston stands up alone against the Party hoping to challenge it, yet in the very end there is no martyrdom, but a tragedy. Does that mean that we have to throw away the remaining in the opened Pandora's Box, fold our arms and wait for doom's arrival? Or can we even muster up our courage to stand up against the whole world? After all, the sane person in an insane asylum is the lunatic. Reality is cruel, where heroes could end up being clowns instead, though bear in mind there are dark shadows on the earth, yet its lights are stronger in contrast. One hand won't clap, but if a single voice can somehow inspire others, as the remains of a torch lights another, sometime in the distant future, like a plant grows with certainty, the fruits of success could be eventually tasted. Malala Yousafzai, an activist for female education in Pakistan, was once shot in her country on her

way to school. Yet miraculously she survived the blow and raised international attention on human rights in developing countries. What appeared to be a drop of water could cause ripples that spread out incrementally. Sometimes, it does not have to be a direct victory, like Malala, who has raised much public attention on global issues and advocating human rights through various media. We have to keep faith in our hearts, knowing that what we do is for a greater cause, and never let go of the last little creature in Pandora's Box even if the stakes are high.

Nineteen Eighty-Four has long surpassed to be merely a dark dystopian fiction, but more as a prophecy directed to not just us, but our next generation, and the generations after — that we should risk it all to prevent the revival of 1984.