

2 The Destruction of Words

How does the art of writing impact our society?

1 “Nineteen Eighty-Four”: the art of censorship

Part 1

A. Read the excerpt and pick out the characters' names and the topic of the conversation.

B. Say how each character acts and what it reveals about their set of mind, opinion and power. Justify by quoting the text.

C. Explain in your own words how Syme intends to simplify language.

D. Go further. Debate the following quotes with your classmates.

- “What justification is there for a word which is simply the opposite of some other word?” (l. 22)

- “You’d prefer to stick to Oldspeak, with all its vagueness and its useless shades of meaning.” (l. 45)

Part 2

A. Read the excerpt and find the true reason for destroying words.

B. What is the single word Winston dares to say and why?

C. Focus on the characters' attitudes. To what extent does the last paragraph shed light on Winston in parts 1 and 2?

D. Explain and discuss this quote with your classmates: “How could you have a slogan like “freedom is slavery” when the concept of freedom has been abolished?” (l. 37)

E. Go further. Why is the word “thoughtcrime” (l. 5) a paradox in this context?

Part 1

‘How is the Dictionary getting on?’ said Winston, raising his voice to overcome the noise.

‘Slowly,’ said Syme. ‘I’m on the adjectives. It’s fascinating.

[...] We’re getting the language into its final shape – the

5 shape it’s going to have when nobody speaks anything else. When we’ve finished with it, people like you will have to learn it all over again. You think, I dare say, that our chief job is inventing new words. But not a bit of it! We’re destroying words – scores of them, hundreds of

10 them, every day. We’re cutting the language down to the bone. The Eleventh Edition won’t contain a single word that will become obsolete before the year 2050.’

He bit hungrily into his bread and swallowed a couple of mouthfuls, then continued speaking, with a sort of

15 pedant’s passion. His thin dark face had become animated, his eyes had lost their mocking expression and grown almost dreamy.

‘It’s a beautiful thing, the destruction of words. Of course the great wastage is in the verbs and adjectives, but there

20 are hundreds of nouns that can be got rid of as well. It isn’t only the synonyms; there are also the antonyms. After all, what justification is there for a word which is simply the opposite of some other word? A word contains its opposite in itself. Take “good”, for instance. If you have a

25 word like “good”, what need is there for a word like “bad”? “Ungood” will do just as well – better, because it’s an exact

opposite, which the other is not. Or again, if you want a stronger version of “good”, what sense is there in having a whole string of vague useless words like “excellent” and

30 “splendid” and all the rest of them? “Plusgood” covers the meaning, or “doubleplusgood” if you want something stronger still. Of course we use those forms already. But in the final version of *Newspeak* there’ll be nothing else.

In the end the whole notion of goodness and badness will be covered by only six words – in reality, only one word. Don’t you see the beauty of that, Winston? It was B.B.’s

35 idea originally, of course,’ he added as an afterthought. A sort of vapid eagerness flitted across Winston’s face at the mention of Big Brother. Nevertheless Syme

40 immediately detected a certain lack of enthusiasm.

‘You haven’t a real appreciation of *Newspeak*, Winston,’

he said almost sadly. ‘Even when you write it you’re still thinking in Oldspeak. I’ve read some of those pieces

that you write in “The Times” occasionally. They’re good

45 enough, but they’re translations. In your heart you’d prefer to stick to Oldspeak, with all its vagueness and its useless shades of meaning. You don’t grasp the beauty of the destruction of words. Do you know that *Newspeak* is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller

50 every year?’ Winston did know that, of course. He smiled, sympathetically he hoped, not trusting himself to speak.