

## Nineteen Eighty-Four

by George Orwell

### THE EXCELLENT ESSAY



An excellent text response essay about Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reflects most of the following top-range grade descriptor qualities as specified in the *VCE English / English as a Second Language Assessment Handbook: 2008–2011* for Unit 4, Outcome 1:

**41–50 marks:** A highly-developed and well-sustained interpretation of a selected text supported by the considered selection and use of highly appropriate textual evidence. Thorough and insightful understanding of the ideas, characters and themes constructed and presented in the selected text. Complex discussion and critical analysis of the ways in which the author constructs meaning and expresses or implies a point of view and values. Highly appropriate use of relevant metalanguage to support analysis. Highly expressive, fluent and coherent writing.

### SAMPLE TOPIC

**'Even though Winston is ultimately defeated, he remains a hero in the reader's eyes.'**  
Discuss.

#### Content features

- 1 Describes the social context of the text.
- 2 Names the author and text title and identifies one of the writer's purposes in writing the text.
- 3 Topic directly referred to with the mention of 'the reader' and the effect the text is intended to have.
- 4 Description and succinct discussion of the main character (who is also a main feature of the topic).
- 5 The stages of Winston's rebellion listed to indicate paragraph topics.

#### Excellent essay

Essentially becoming nothing more than 'three hundred people all with the same face', (1) the inhabitants of Oceania (1) are reduced to mindless drones under the 'all powerful and infallible' (1) rule of the Party and their leader, Big Brother. Thus, (2) George Orwell's (2) nightmarish glimpse of a totalitarian future (3) in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (2) positions the reader to fear the dreadful potential of a corrupt and selfish government (3) and the elimination of identity that ensues. (2) Orwell created Winston Smith as a beacon of hope – 'a minority of one' who wilfully struggles against oppression – and through his choice of limited third-person narrative perspective, (4) the reader sympathises with Winston, an everyman who resists the Party's indoctrination. (3) Through individual thought and action, Winston manages (5) to collude with Julia in his search for a resistance movement to bring Big Brother down. (4) And despite (2) the sophistication and pervasive nature of the leaders' methods of control and domination, when Winston is (5) defeated in the denouement (4) of the novel, (5) the reader celebrates just how much he has achieved against impossible odds. He remains a hero in the reader's eyes for his tenacity and defiance. (6) (3)

'Gazing down from every commanding corner', (7) (6) the Party has installed ubiquitous (7) telescreens that watch the inhabitants of Oceania

#### Expression and mechanics features

- 1 Short, pertinent quotes from the text, built into the syntax of the essay.
- 2 Linking words used.
- 3 Sophisticated and thematically accurate vocabulary used to describe the text, the society presented, the main character and his actions, as related to the demands of the topic.
- 4 Many metalinguistic terms: 'narrative perspective' and 'denouement'.
- 5 Present tense used.
- 6 Short quotes used when discussing specific examples. Quotes do not interrupt the flow of the student's writing style.

**'Even though Winston is ultimately defeated, he remains a hero in the reader's eyes.' Discuss.**

**Content features**

- 6 Direct and concise answer to the topic given.
- 7 Quoting to display knowledge of the text.
- 8 Precise examples of 'control' (as flagged in the introduction) given.
- 9 Specific examples (razor blade, chocolate ration, Parsons) used to prove the points made.
- 10 Specific examples to show how Winston is different from his peers and his society, and how he negotiates this difference in the face of social conditions.
- 11 This paragraph is essentially about the Party and how it uses terror, propaganda and scarcity to control its people; the writer's messages are discussed in relation to these ideas presented in the text.
- 12 Every sentence uses some textual detail even if it is generalised ('public punishments and denunciations').
- 13 Direct references to the topic: 'the reader' and the effect the text is intended to have.
- 14 Precise examples – diary, prostitute, Charrington's shop – synthesis of different textual episodes that have a similar effect or make a similar point.
- 15 Ideological analysis of the text – 'values we treasure above all else' – to show a comprehension of the text's and writer's purposes.
- 16 Short, potent quotes add to the examiner's opinion that the student knows the text extremely well. Events from the text are woven in amongst the quotes and the discussion of the text in relation to the topic.
- 17 Discussion of the ways that Winston and

**Excellent essay**

scuttle about among the grime. 8 Deprivation and scarcity, 8) deftly and meticulously 7) arranged and propagated 8) by the Ministry of Plenty, render the citizens desperate and undignified; even supposedly privileged Outer Party members must beg each other for a safe, clean razor blade. 9 They wholeheartedly swallow the 'hatred and lies' that are issued from spontaneous 7) news bulletins broadcast throughout the superstate. When the Ministry of Plenty reports that the chocolate ration 9) has risen to twenty grams a week, the people rejoice in the generosity of their leaders; only Winston remembers that last week the ration was actually thirty grams. Given that it is sedition, or 'thoughtcrime', to question or criticise the government, Winston must keep this revelation to himself; others such as 'that bloody fool' 6) Parsons, 9) relish the news with glee. 10 The Party uses devious tactics, 11) such as promoting 'doublethink' (the ability to believe two seemingly contradictory thoughts at the same time), in order to confuse its people and force them to rely on the Party as the sole source of information and control. The Party slogans 'War is Peace', 'Freedom is slavery' and 'Ignorance is strength', 12) which are emblazoned on posters and telescreens, are sincerely accepted despite their absurdity. Through the Thoughtpolice who continuously swarm like a 'bluebottle', and public punishments and denunciations of thought criminals, 12) the Party aims to retain its power absolutely and 'for ever'. 12)

But 10) Winston is not so easily fooled. He yearns for more than the society of Oceania in 1984 will provide, wondering whether 'it was always like this'. Consequently, when the reader 13) 11) becomes privy to his rebellious behaviour, such as buying a diary 14) and repeatedly writing 'DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER' in it, we 11) are assailed by ambivalence; he is sealing his own death warrant (for 'thoughtcrime doesn't entail death; it IS death'), but we also admire his quest for truth and individuality – values we treasure above all else. 13) 15) Winston becomes a victim of his 'own nervous system' 12) and yields to his sexual desires by first engaging in sexcrime with a prostitute 14) in the filthy prole quarters; he actively pursues a sexual relationship with Julia, the 'rebel from the waist down'; 12) rents a room above Charrington's shop 14) for this purpose and meets with O'Brien, agreeing to collude with the fictitious Brotherhood to bring the Party down. Readers may revile 13) his weakness for stupidly making himself and Julia vulnerable to arrest, or for agreeing too eagerly to 'throw sulphuric acid in a child's face' or 'cheat, to forge, to blackmail' 12) in order to help the resistance, but we also admire him as a hero for having the courage to fight against an unfair and destructive system.

Because Winston is fatalistic, 13) knowing that 'sooner or later they were bound to get you', that he, like other thoughtcriminals, 14) will be shot 'in the back of the neck', 16) the reader too, from the inception of the novel, comprehends the awful inevitability of his arrest, detainment and eventual death. His perpetual tone of 14) foreboding doom, and the repetition 14) of his reminder to Julia that 'we are the dead', lead the reader to recognise how he has led himself to certain annihilation. 13) However, 15) there are indicators throughout the novel that Winston is a better person, someone to admire as a hero, despite his crimes and complicity in his own downfall, his 'conscious, gratuitous, suicidal folly'. 16) He becomes noticeably healthier 15) during his sexual relationship with Julia: 17) he gains weight; his varicose ulcer subsides, 'leaving only a brown stain on the skin above his ankle'; he no longer drinks gin to obliterate his misery; and his morning coughing fits also cease. 18) These are surely signs of a happier man, and Orwell allows us to become privy to Winston's fears and triumphs. When Julia clears the room of 'the very worst

**Expression and mechanics features**

- 7 Adjectives and adverbs used to describe people, places and events in the text.
- 8 Use of language from the text: 'scarcity' and 'propagated'; the language, in common with Orwell's, is taken from political and economic jargon.
- 9 Returns to the topic and uses its terms of reference.
- 10 Intentional and swift negative linking word 'but' opens the paragraph; this makes it clear that the paragraph will be rebutting the ideas in the last paragraph, and the content will be about Winston mainly, as the topic sentence indicates.
- 11 Consistent use of 'we' and 'the reader' remind the examiner that the student is working within the frame of reference offered by the topic.
- 12 Short quotes built into the grammar of the student's writing. They do not inhibit the flow of the writing.
- 13 Specific words chosen to show clarity and precision of expression – 'revile', 'fatalistic', 'annihilation' – the student has thought about and analysed characters and situations and has come to their own conclusions about them.
- 14 Metalinguage here ('repetition', 'tone') and the text's vocabulary ('thoughtcriminals', 'Thoughtpolice').
- 15 Tone of the second half of this paragraph is optimistic and lighter, which matches the more positive examples used.
- 16 Bold statements about the society and its ethics ('ridiculous' and 'unfair'), as opposed to Winston, who is 'fragile' – the student's

Julia defy the system, and how the experience of love allows Winston to feel special – again one of Orwell’s messages is illuminated here.

**18** Synthesis of specific textual examples to show a broad yet intimate knowledge of the text.

**19** Direct links to the topic: ‘the reader’, ‘a hero’.

**20** Introduction of O’Brien alludes to the ‘endgame’ that Orwell has created – this shows the examiner that the student has divided paragraphs well, and that there is a specific focus for each body paragraph.

**21** A choice of events that occur in the Ministry of Love and which lead to the inevitable destruction of the hero, Winston. This was indicated in the introduction and the examiner would be expecting the penultimate paragraph to deal with this.

**22** The potential problem here is that Part Three of the text is quite long, and the student must work quickly and use a range of events from this third part to prove their assertions about ‘megalomania’ and ‘torture’; this student has chosen the evidence carefully so it is broad and relevant.

**23** Conclusion begins with a very late moment in the text – how the character eventually ends up. Another small example (meeting Julia) is used to show the change in the character named in the topic. These effectively summarise the character’s journey.

**24** Most of the conclusion is general in relation to the topic, especially in generalising how ‘the reader’ is affected by the text.

thing’ to Winston – rats – and when they stand, naked, glancing down at the fat washer-woman in the courtyard outside, the reader **19** sympathises with their hopeless situation, but revels in their ‘blow struck against the Party’ **16** – that their love has superseded Big Brother’s ridiculous and unfair **16** dogma of total subservience. In these ways, Winston is already a hero; **19** so, when he is arrested, naked and placed back to back with Julia and has to witness her being struck by a member of the Thought Police **14** in the solar plexus and writhing on the floor, we are supporting him totally in his helplessness as a fragile **16** human being stuck in a cruel regime.

As representative of the insanity and megalomaniac **17** nature of the Party, O’Brien **20** becomes, paradoxically, both Winston’s ‘saviour’ and torturer. **17** Confined in the much-feared Ministry of Love, kept in a ‘place where there is no darkness’, Winston loses sense of time and perspective. He is starved, ridiculed, beaten into submission and tortured with many unthinkable **18** devices, such as when O’Brien tries to convince him that ‘2+2’ can equal 4, or 3 or 5, depending on what O’Brien commands. Winston’s logic is deemed ‘lunatic’, and through pulling his sole tooth out, **21** **18** and making Winston face a three sided-mirror that precisely shows his feebleness **18** and fragility, O’Brien convinces Winston that he is a ‘bag of filth’. **21** Eventually, when he submits to O’Brien’s trump card, **18** betraying Julia when faced with his greatest fear (of rats gnawing through his face), Winston is reduced to a shell. **18** Regardless, the Party has spent seven years tracking this ‘flaw in the pattern’ and the reader is enamoured by Winston’s persistent protests to O’Brien (even in the face of torture) that ‘two and two are four’. **22** Ultimately, despite his acquiescence, Winston remains in our eyes, a hero.

As Winston sits sipping gin at the Chestnut Tree Café, **23** a solitary figure publicly denounced by himself and the Party, the reader is struck with a rush of sympathy and admiration for this broken man. **19** We have followed him from his initial rebellion and have seen him flourish into a healthier man who can enjoy the fruits of love in a society that disallows this very special, yet basic human need. **19** Now, we shake our heads in collective pity at a hero who had more chance than any other to bring down the Party and thwart its dirty tricks. ‘He loved Big Brother’ and even only ‘made a half-hearted attempt to catch up with’ Julia **23** when he sees her after their respective expulsions from the Ministry of Love. **20** But Orwell’s didactic political parable **20** has more resonance than this pathetic figure would normally excite; Winston did defy the Party, and only when he is assaulted by nasty and inhumane treatment does he surrender. For this, and the possibility of others refusing to accept the unfairness of a cruel government that effaces individuality, love and truth, the reader **24** ultimately views Winston as a hero we should all aspire to be like. **21** (1441 words)

opinions about these textual features is clear.

**17** Carefully chosen adjectives and nouns, such as ‘megalomaniac’ and ‘torturer’, introduce the Ministry of Love and O’Brien.

**18** Synthesis of events is done fluently, quickly and systematically, but is still precise and not general. Examples here and language chosen betray the obvious opinion of the student about Winston, the Party, O’Brien and the methods of control and torture. Words such as ‘shell’, ‘feebleness’ and ‘sole tooth’ offer sympathy to Winston; in contrast, descriptions such as ‘trump card’ and ‘unthinkable’ show that the student is critical of the Party and O’Brien – which, of course, is Orwell’s intention in the text.

**19** Bold, uncompromising language to show that deductions and conclusions are being reached.

**20** Much more general in detail but more specific in terms of references to the genre, purpose and audience targeted by the writer: ‘didactic political parable’.

**21** The final sentence is bold and makes a strong statement, related to the terms in the topic.

# THE SATISFACTORY ESSAY



A satisfactory text response essay about Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reflects most of the following medium-range grade descriptor qualities as specified in the *VCE English / English as a Second Language Assessment Handbook: 2008–2011* for Unit 4, Outcome 1:

**21–30 marks:** A generally well-sustained interpretation of a selected text supported by textual evidence. Knowledge of the ideas, characters and themes constructed and presented in the selected text. Discussion and some analysis of the ways in which the author constructs meaning and expresses or implies a point of view and values. Use of mainly relevant metalanguage to support analysis. Generally expressive, fluent and coherent writing.

A satisfactory text response essay presents a mostly relevant response to the topic and also contains adequate content and adequate expression. An essay of this standard reads as though it is unfinished, or 'half-baked'.

Read the following sample satisfactory text response essay on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and complete the tasks in order to improve the standard of the essay.

## SAMPLE TOPIC

'Orwell's use of settings displays his abhorrence for totalitarianism.' Discuss.

### Satisfactory essay

George Orwell's difficult (1) text *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written to show his opinion about both the Nazis and the Soviets. (2) The writer abhors the totalitarian systems in place in the first half of the twentieth century and he creates a world in the book (3) that criticises how they gain control over normal people. Orwell creates settings such as Winston's living and working conditions and then contrasts these against the wealth and privilege (4) of the Inner Party. The book is also about Winston Smith and his lover Julia. (5)

Winston lives in Victory Mansions – but he hasn't won anything at all, really, has he? (6) There is grime on the walls and the elevator doesn't work. This makes him have to climb the stairs and makes his sore on his leg become worse. (7) Only when he meets Julia does he feel better. (8) Mrs Parsons has 'dust in the creases of her face' and her tap is broken. (9) In contrast, the four Ministries appear white and new above the landscape of London. This shows how unfair the living conditions are. (10)

Winston works in the Ministry of Truth (11) where he changes (12) documents so that the Party can always prove it is right and never loses, (12) and this shows (12) that he is part of the 'hatred and lies' that the Party hangs onto (12) in it's (13) goal of controlling all of its people. The Proles, (11) who make up (12) most of the people in Oceania, also live in filth. (11) Winston eats terrible food for lunch (11) and he can't even get the right things he needs to survive. (11) (12)

The Inner Party has many things (12) that the Outer Party and Proles don't have, such as servants, wine and carpet. This is shown when Winston visits O'Brien and his servant offers Winston wine. Winston agrees to lie and cheat and kill children to help the Brotherhood and he is stupid for doing this because O'Brien has proof to use in his trial later. (14) Also, in the Ministry of Love there is 'no darkness' (15) and this makes

### Improvement tasks

- 1 The student should avoid appraising the text: 'difficult'. Change this to describe the genre of the text better.
- 2 Is this relevant? Is this the writer's contention? Is it your answer to this question? If so, state it more definitely. If not, change it to reflect your own ideas.
- 3 Avoid the word 'book'. What kind of 'book' is it exactly?
- 4 'Privilege' is misspelt. Find the correct spelling.
- 5 End of introduction is irrelevant to the topic. How would you conclude the paragraph so it is relevant to the topic?
- 6 It is usually not appropriate to use rhetorical questions in text essays, and the tone here is too 'chatty'. Make this point using more sophisticated language.
- 7 Find the precise quote to match this textual moment.
- 8 Prove this point and link it to the topic in some way.
- 9 Link this point to the contention and/or topic.
- 10 More effectively conclude this paragraph by referring back to the topic.
- 11 Not enough detail (including a lack of quotes and description) is given about the ideas (Ministries, Proles, terrible food). Give quotes or more textual description about these key aspects of the text.
- 12 The language used is simplistic and, at times, inaccurate. Find better, more specific vocabulary to describe the aspects discussed in this paragraph.
- 13 Is this 'it's' correct?
- 14 Lacks cohesion, and tends to be repetitive and laboured. The first two sentences here are too long and rambling. Rewrite these sentences so they link better, are not repetitive or vague, and use sophisticated vocabulary.

## Satisfactory essay

Winston *scared* (16) and it makes him betray Julia, and so do the rats that O'Brien threatens him with. 'The very worst thing in the world'. (15)

At the end of the book (3) Winston is sitting at the Tree Café (17) drinking gin and this setting makes us feel sorry for him because he is lonely and no-one talks to him. (18) He sees Julia once more and the 'cold, vile' weather shows that they don't love each other any more. (19) We are also *sad* (20) here because they had a really strong relationship in the room above Charrington's shop with the double bed and the coffee. She wore a dress and put make-up on. (21) Orwell uses settings to show how terrible living in a totalitarian society is. (22) (23) (24) (496 words)

## Improvement tasks

- 15 Quotes are sparsely used and not always discussed for significance. Contextualise these quotes and explain how they are important to Winston.
- 16 Show the effects of this fear.
- 17 A word from the text is missing here. What is it?
- 18 Rewrite this sentence so that it is more sophisticated in expression.
- 19 Explain how this happened briefly, and why the Party engineers this outcome between people.
- 20 'Sad' is repeated. Find a synonym.
- 21 Is this specific detail necessary for the conclusion? Would you keep it?
- 22 Link the whole conclusion together better through connectives and linking words, and by omitting any irrelevant or repeated detail.
- 23 Did you come to the same conclusion about the topic? Explain, and change this conclusion if not.
- 24 In general, where in this essay is it appropriate to discuss metalanguage?

## BUILDING THE TEXT RESPONSE ESSAY PLAN

Complete the following tasks in order to plan your response to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

### ESSAY TOPIC

**'The past was erased ... the lie became truth.' Why is the refusal to record the past accurately so important in the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?'**

#### 1 Key words

Write out the key words/phrases in the topic.

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#### 2 Synonyms

Give synonyms for the key words/phrases.

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#### 3 Paraphrase of topic – #1

Write a paraphrase of the topic by directly substituting the key words/phrases with appropriate synonyms.

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#### 4 Paraphrase of topic – #2

Write a paraphrase of the topic by reversing the order of ideas in the original topic statement – i.e. begin with the second half of the topic statement sentence.

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#### 5 What do I have to think and write about?

Complete the following sentence in order to understand the demands of the topic.

*In order to answer this topic, I must think and write about* \_\_\_\_\_

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#### 6 Questioning the topic

List your own questions about the topic and consider possible answers.

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#### 7 My point of view – Agree? Disagree? Maybe?

Revise your responses to the preceding tasks. Based on these responses, determine your point of view on the topic. Using a combination of words/phrases from your responses, write a sentence stating your point of view.

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#### 8 My first reason (body paragraph one)

Complete the following proforma by stating your reason for asserting this point of view. You may add more evidence as appropriate.

➤ *Reason* \_\_\_\_\_

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➤ *Evidence* \_\_\_\_\_

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➤ *Evidence* \_\_\_\_\_

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#### 9 My second reason (body paragraph two)

Complete the following proforma by stating your reason for asserting this point of view. You may add more evidence as appropriate.

➤ *Reason* \_\_\_\_\_

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➤ *Evidence* \_\_\_\_\_

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➤ *Evidence* \_\_\_\_\_

### 10 My third reason (body paragraph three)

Complete the following proforma by stating your reason for asserting this point of view. You may add more evidence as appropriate.

➤ Reason \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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➤ Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

➤ Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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### 11 My fourth reason (body paragraph four)

Complete the following proforma by stating your reason for asserting this point of view. You may add more evidence as appropriate.

➤ Reason \_\_\_\_\_

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➤ Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

➤ Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### 12 Conclusion

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## THE TEXT RESPONSE TRAINING ESSAY



Complete the following essay by writing appropriate paragraphs for each topic sentence by drawing on your knowledge of the text. Ensure that you develop your ideas in line with the contention and topic sentences. Incorporate both direct and indirect references to the text. Also write a conclusion for the essay.

When you have completed this essay, brainstorm other approaches to the topic.

### SAMPLE TOPIC

**'Fear destroys Winston's spirit.' Discuss.**

George Orwell's powerful political warning, illuminated in his parable *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, shows how vulnerable a human being is in the face of brutal totalitarianism. Through the third-person narrative perspective, Winston Smith, the novel's hero, is portrayed as an intelligent yet ordinary member of society who must betray his integrity, or risk persecution and 'vaporisation'. He is vulnerable and very, very frightened of the omnipresent telescreens that could betray his dissent, and of the Thought Police who spy on Oceania's citizens without warning. As one of the people 'held apart by a wall of hatred and lies', Winston must negotiate his space in this despotic regime, while maintaining his staunch beliefs in freedom, truth and love. Unfortunately, fear indeed does bring him undone, and he is reduced to an unthinking automaton at the end of the text. Although fear does destroy his revolutionary spirit, ultimately the reader admires him for struggling so long and defiantly against an unfair system.

Immediately, Orwell alludes the reader to a cruel and unfair government who allows its own people to be wracked with fear.

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\_\_\_\_\_

Despite the fear instilled in Oceania's citizens, Winston Smith has the spirit to criticise and revile the society, risking certain death if discovered.

The reader celebrates Winston's achievements in the face of such very real threats – he pursues truth and love regardless of the risks involved and, in intrinsic ways, he achieves personal success and overcomes his fears.

Ultimately, though, Winston's spirit is crushed due to the unfair and devious methods of detection and annihilation that the Party uses to control every one of its 'three hundred million people all with the same face'.

Conclusion

SAMPLE PAGES