

# Object-Oriented Narratives in *1984*: A Study of Materiality, Power, and Personal Freedom

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**Abstract:** George Orwell's *1984*, as a classic dystopian novel, portrays the totalitarian society and the erosion of individual freedom through political oppression. In *1984*, objects are not merely tools of daily life; they serve as central elements through which the totalitarian regime controls and shapes social order. This paper utilizes Bill Brown's Thing-Narrative Theory to analyze the symbolic and functional roles of objects in *1984*. By examining objects such as the television screen, tools of the Thought Police, and Big Brother's portrait, this paper explores how objects act as symbols of power and tools for social control, and how their proliferation and collectivization influence individual freedom and social relations. Additionally, the paper examines how objects function as symbols of resistance in the characters' struggles, particularly in the cases of Winston and Julia, and how objects act as emotional bonds and mediums for rebellion. Through the lens of Object-Oriented Ontology, this paper reconsiders the interaction between objects and the totalitarian society in *1984*, revealing how objects play a crucial role in suppressing freedom and shaping social order.

**Keywords:** *1984*, Thing-Narrative Theory, Totalitarian Society, Objects, Power Symbols.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

Since its publication, George Orwell's *1984* has been regarded as a canonical work of dystopian literature. The novel presents a totalitarian society in which the protagonist, Winston Smith, struggles to assert his personal freedom under the omnipresent and omnipotent power of the Party. Through its vivid portrayal of an oppressive political regime, *1984* explores the complex dynamics between power, social control, and individual resistance. In such a tightly regulated society, objects are no longer mere tools for daily life; rather, they are deeply embedded in the mechanisms of power, the construction of social order, and the suppression of individual freedom. Objects in *1984* function not only as components of everyday existence but also as potent symbols and instruments of authoritarian control over human thought and behavior.

In scholarly discussions, the objects in *1984* are often interpreted as manifestations of power relations and mechanisms of oppression.[1] Items such as the telescreen, the instruments used by the Thought Police, and the ubiquitous portrait of Big Brother symbolize the Party's total control over the populace. These objects serve not only as products of technological and cultural development but also as reflections of the socio-political structure, acting as ever-present "watchers" that threaten personal autonomy. Yet, their role extends beyond mere control; they also act as mediums for resistance. For example, Winston's use of a diary or the paperweight with a hidden message becomes a means of articulating his yearning for freedom-transforming these items into emblems of rebellion.

With the rise of Object-Oriented Narratology, scholars have begun to reconsider the role of objects in literary texts, emphasizing their agency and interaction with human characters.[2] Bill Brown's theory of Thing Theory posits that objects are not merely passive instruments of human will, but

autonomous entities with their own modes of existence and internal efficacy. Within a totalitarian context, objects are no longer fully subjugated to human control; instead, they possess the potential to shape social structures and influence individual behavior. Objects not only occupy a central role in human life but also, through their interaction with people, participate in the construction of ideology and subjectivity.

Through the lens of Bill Brown's Thing Theory, the objects in *1984* can be reinterpreted as active agents. They function not only as tools of ideological repression but also as independent entities engaged in intricate interactions with human characters. These objects are simultaneously instruments of control and symbols of freedom, resistance, and identity. In this light, objects influence not only the mundane details of daily life but also the very operation of the social system itself. [3]Therefore, an object-oriented narrative analysis of *1984* provides a multidimensional perspective that uncovers the novel's deeper critique of totalitarianism and its exploration of the conditions of human freedom.

### 1.2. Research Significance and Objectives

This study aims to re-examine the role of objects in *1984* through the theoretical framework of Bill Brown's Thing Theory, with a particular focus on how objects function as autonomous agents within the narrative, especially in relation to social control, power structures, and individual resistance. The research will address the following key questions:

(1) How do objects reflect mechanisms of oppression in a totalitarian society?

In *1984*, how do objects such as the telescreen, the tools of the Thought Police, and the portrait of Big Brother serve as symbols of the Party's pervasive surveillance and control? How do these objects become integral to the stabilization of the totalitarian power structure?

(2) What is the relationship between objects and individual freedom?

Through the use of personal items such as Winston's diary and the origami bird, how do characters express resistance to

the Party's control? In what ways do these objects connect with the characters' inner worlds and their desire for freedom?

(3) How does the autonomy of objects affect society and power structures?

From the perspective of Thing Theory, how do objects, as independent entities, display agency through their interactions with human characters? Can these objects reinforce oppressive systems, or do they possess the potential to disrupt social structures and facilitate resistance?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to reveal how objects in *1984* transcend their symbolic function to become active instruments in the dynamics of both oppression and resistance. It highlights the autonomy of objects and their subversive potential within the context of totalitarianism. This approach offers a novel interpretive framework for understanding object symbolism in dystopian literature and the operation of power in fictional totalitarian societies.

Moreover, applying Thing Theory to *1984* not only enriches our understanding of the novel's portrayal of objects and their influence on the individual-society relationship but also broadens the applicability of object-oriented approaches in literary studies. By re-evaluating the role of objects in literature, this research aims to provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the complex interactions between materiality, power, and subjectivity, thereby contributing to both the theoretical discourse on material culture and the literary analysis of dystopian fiction.

## **2. The Symbolism of Objects and Power: Instruments of Totalitarian Politics**

In George Orwell's *1984*, objects are far more than mere instruments of daily life; they are imbued with symbolic and functional significance by the totalitarian regime. These objects not only play pivotal roles in mechanisms of political control and social surveillance, but their material presence and operational logic also reflect the suppression of individual freedom and the consolidation of authoritarian power. This chapter explores several key objects in the novel—the telescreen, the tools of the Thought Police, and the ubiquitous portrait of Big Brother—to examine how they function as symbols of totalitarian authority, how they are transformed into instruments of domination, and how their proliferation and symbolic resonance construct a culture of submission and fear toward the Party.

### **2.1. The Telescreen and Tools of the Thought Police**

In the world of *1984*, the telescreen is not a conventional medium for entertainment or information dissemination. Instead, it serves as a technological extension of the Party's ideological and behavioral control. The ubiquity of the telescreen is not merely a means of surveillance over every citizen's actions—it is an integral part of the Party's apparatus for monitoring and disciplining thought. [4]As described in the novel, the telescreen is capable of observing individuals at any time, whether in the privacy of their homes, at work, or in public spaces. This omnipresent surveillance cultivates a normalized state of self-censorship, wherein individuals constantly regulate their own behavior under the assumption that they are always being watched.

From the perspective of object-oriented narratology, the telescreen is a highly symbolic object. It does not simply

deliver content; it operates as a tool of domination, symbolizing the total suppression of free will. The telescreen is not merely a conduit of state propaganda but is, in itself, a manifestation of state power. According to Bill Brown's Thing Theory, such objects are not passive instruments controlled solely by humans; they possess agency and exert influence. The telescreen serves as a continual reminder of surveillance, making the notion of escaping the regime's gaze unimaginable. It thus transforms into a force that shapes both external behavior and internal consciousness.

Similarly, the tools employed by the Thought Police play an essential role in the enforcement of ideological conformity. These objects are not only physical instruments of violence and fear; they also function as psychological mechanisms of repression. The Thought Police embody the Party's dominion over thought itself, and the very presence of their tools signifies the inevitability of punishment for ideological deviance. The apparatus of the Thought Police is composed of a range of oppressive technologies that, alongside the telescreen, enable comprehensive control over society and the individual.

These instruments represent the regime's deep penetration into the private domain of the individual. Viewed through the lens of Thing Theory, they are not mere human artifacts but entities that exert a psychological presence. By their continual presence and implied threat, they instill a lasting fear that undermines any sense of individual autonomy. These tools do not merely enact physical violence; their repeated appearance and operation plant the seeds of internalized fear in every citizen, thus becoming intrinsic components of the totalitarian system.

### **2.2. The Portrait of Big Brother and the Materialization of Power**

Big Brother is the ultimate symbol of totalitarian rule in *1984*, and his control over society is enacted not only through the telescreen and the mechanisms of the Thought Police but also through the omnipresence of his image. The portrait of Big Brother, as a material object within the narrative, holds profound symbolic weight—it is both an emblem of Party authority and a manifestation of the suppression of individuality and autonomous thought.

In Orwell's dystopia, Big Brother's image is inescapable. It appears in offices, homes, streets, and virtually every public and private space. This ubiquity is no coincidence; it is a deliberate strategy by the regime to enforce and normalize the presence of authority. The portrait does more than signal the Party's reach—it creates the illusion that the Party is omnipresent and omniscient.

According to object-oriented theory, material objects are not inert but possess agency. The portrait of Big Brother, through its constant visibility, becomes a vessel of power. Every citizen who encounters the image is subjected to a form of psychological pressure. Whether through its overwhelming scale or the piercing gaze of Big Brother, the portrait conveys an inescapable sense of surveillance and domination. [5]These images are not merely visual signs; through their repetitive presence, they reinforce submission and manufacture a culture of fear.

The presence of Big Brother's portrait is more than physical; it embodies a deeply embedded psychological and ideological function. Through its persistent and menacing presence, it contributes to the construction of a fear-based culture in which personal freedom is negated. Individuals feel

insignificant and powerless beneath the symbolic weight of the image. It regulates not only outward behavior but also penetrates the psychological interiority of the subject, generating a sense of continuous pressure and anxiety.

Thing Theory emphasizes that objects possess autonomy and exert influence—Big Brother’s portrait is a powerful illustration of this principle. By continually entering the visual field of the populace, it enforces the constant awareness of the Party’s presence, dissolving individuality and suppressing will.[6] The portrait is not merely a political symbol; it is the material embodiment of power itself. Its psychological function compels obedience and cultivates a culture of submission. The image’s significance lies not only in its visual dominance but in its capacity to internalize the logic of surveillance, ensuring that every citizen exists in a state of chronic unease and vigilance.

### **3. Objects and Individual Freedom: Symbols and Vehicles of Resistance**

In Orwell’s *1984*, objects are not merely instruments of social oppression; they also emerge as powerful symbols and vehicles of individual resistance and the yearning for freedom. Particularly for the protagonists Winston and Julia, material items play a crucial role in their acts of defiance. By analyzing these intimate objects, we can explore how individuals express their desire for autonomy through material culture, and how such objects function as vessels of rebellion and emotional connection within a totalitarian society.

#### **3.1. Winston and His Relationship with Objects**

##### **3.1.1. The Diary: A Metaphor for Rebellion**

Winston’s diary is one of the most symbolically charged objects in the novel. On the surface, writing a diary may seem like an ordinary activity, but within the context of a totalitarian regime, it becomes a profoundly subversive act. In a society policed by the omnipresent Thought Police, to record thoughts that dissent from Party ideology is an act of extreme risk. Through his diary, Winston not only expresses his disgust with the present social order but also articulates a deep-seated yearning for freedom and independent thought.

The diary transcends its physical function as a mere writing tool; it becomes a symbol of Winston’s personal autonomy. Though composed of paper and ink, within the oppressive framework of *1984*, it is one of the few objects capable of representing private consciousness and intellectual liberty. It serves as Winston’s declaration of individuality against the Party’s ideological dominance. The act of writing helps him maintain his inner world and self-awareness, becoming a critical element in his psychological resistance to totalitarian control.

##### **3.1.2. The Paper Crane: A Symbol of Warmth and Freedom**

Another object of significant symbolic value is the paper crane Winston gives to Julia after they meet. Light and delicate, the paper crane stands in stark contrast to the heavy, repressive atmosphere of the totalitarian world. It represents Winston’s longing for beauty, tenderness, and freedom.[7] In a harsh and surveilled society, the crane embodies his ideal of personal happiness and his emotional rebellion against systemic oppression.

### **3.2. Julia’s Resistance Through Objects**

The objects shared between Julia and Winston—especially the paper crane and the love letters—are emblematic of their rebellion against the Party. These items are more than emotional tokens; they carry deeper symbolic weight as manifestations of individual resistance. The paper crane reflects their mutual desire for freedom, while the love letters serve as tangible expressions of emotional intimacy in a society where such personal bonds are outlawed.

In the totalitarian context of *1984*, all forms of individual affection and private relationships are subject to control and eradication by the Party and the Thought Police. Thus, the paper crane and love letters stand as quiet but powerful emblems of privacy, intimacy, and opposition. They illustrate how the power of material objects can challenge the rigid boundaries imposed by the regime, allowing individuals to reclaim fragments of agency.

From an object-narrative perspective, these artifacts do not merely symbolize emotion or ideology—they actively reshape the behavior and thoughts of Winston and Julia. The objects forge a temporary connection between the self and the world, offering moments of solace and resistance. Through these items, the characters experience fleeting but meaningful glimpses of freedom and comfort, enabling them to psychologically withstand the overwhelming force of totalitarian repression.

### **4. Objects and the Control of Totalitarian Society: The Shaping of the Material World**

#### **4.1. Objects as Instruments of Social Control**

In a totalitarian society, objects are no longer simple tools of everyday life; they become potent instruments of power and control. Through the proliferation, surveillance, and manipulation of material objects, the regime subtly influences the behaviors, thoughts, and emotions of its citizens. For instance, the telescreen is not merely a medium for disseminating information—it operates continuously, both as a vehicle for propaganda and as a surveillance device, shaping unconditional obedience to the Party and reinforcing the suppression of independent thought.

By altering the function, form, and usage of objects, the regime intervenes in the material world to restructure behavioral patterns and mental frameworks, ensuring social stability and the Party’s dominance.[8] The physical presence of objects, combined with their social functions, enables a gradual yet deep control over the individual.

This control is further manifested in the meticulous regulation of everyday life. From Winston’s residential environment to the distribution of consumer goods and the scheduling of daily activities, the regime uses a system of carefully designed objects and infrastructure to exercise fine-grained management over the population. Every item and detail is institutionalized, creating a rigid social order that not only dictates modes of living but also transforms the relationship between individuals and objects, aligning personal behavior with the goals of the regime.

For example, the rationing of food, the limited choices in clothing, and the standardized design of housing all exemplify the controlling function of material goods in a totalitarian context. Citizens’ basic needs are met through the regime’s tightly controlled provision and restriction of goods. These

seemingly mundane objects constrain personal freedom while simultaneously shaping a culture of collectivism and social control on a micro level. Their omnipresence renders escape from collective conformity nearly impossible, fostering a mechanized social structure that erases individuality and extinguishes the seeds of rebellion.

## 4.2. Collectivism and the Function of Objects

The “collectivization” of objects serves as a critical mechanism of control in totalitarian societies. By standardizing the design, production, and distribution of material goods, the regime ensures a uniform living experience among citizens and reinforces identification with collective ideology. For instance, the fact that all residents use the same model of telescreen, bed, and other essentials erases personal distinctions and autonomy, intensifying collective consciousness. Through the collective attributes of objects, the regime strengthens its suppression of individual freedom and enforces a high degree of ideological and behavioral conformity. [9]Objects thus function not only to meet individual needs but also to symbolize social uniformity and shape individual thought.

This collectivization is not only evident in the physical uniformity of objects and their usage but also in their ideological implications. The standardized production and distribution of material goods eliminate material distinctions among social strata, ensuring a kind of material equality. However, this form of equality does not signify genuine freedom; rather, it is a manifestation of control and limitation over personal liberty. Through the uniformity of objects, the regime constructs a society devoid of personal uniqueness, suppressing independent thought and autonomous action. Every individual lives within the same material framework—their consumption habits, daily routines, and sense of identity are all dictated by the regime’s manipulation of objects.

The collective function of objects operates not only at a physical level but also deeply affects individuals psychologically, permeating every facet of daily life. Whether in public spaces or private environments, the presence of objects constantly reinforces a sense of surveillance and control. The ubiquitous portrait of Big Brother and the standardized nature of everyday items work in tandem to strengthen the mechanisms of social control.[10] Together, they construct a totalitarian world devoid of private spheres—where objects are not neutral tools but active agents in the regime’s continuous domination of its citizens.

## 5. Conclusion

In 1984, everyday objects are transformed from ordinary tools into symbols of power and instruments of control. Through the lens of material analysis, we observe how a totalitarian regime utilizes objects to enforce ideological surveillance, suppress individual freedom, and reinforce

collective identity. Objects not only shape individuals' lifestyles but also become crucial mechanisms in constructing systems of social control and power. Through these objects, individual resistance and the pursuit of freedom are systematically suppressed, pushing the entire society into a state of pervasive surveillance and oppression.

This study, adopting the perspective of material narratology, reveals the role of objects as autonomous agents in literature, offering a novel methodological approach to textual analysis. Objects are not merely background elements in fictional worlds; rather, they can profoundly expose the power dynamics and the relationships between the individual and the state. Future research could further explore the intricate relationships between material objects, societal power structures, and individual autonomy, and investigate how objects can serve as lenses through which to better understand the dynamics of totalitarianism, collectivism, and personal resistance.

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