

Stasiland and Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984)

1. Introductions

Stasiland is a memoir-style recollection of the author Anna Funder's encounters with people affected by the years of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), or when Germany was divided into east and west. It marries the author's personal growth and development during her period of research with the personal histories of those who acted as both perpetrator and victim of the regime's atrocities. The result is an emotional and deeply human perspective of this heavily-documented period of history which delves into the lasting yet often invisible marks the GDR left on those it touched.

1984 is on the surface the dystopian narrative of the struggles and ultimate downfall of a man named Winston who lives in the depressingly grungy and hopeless world of Big Brother and The Party. In a more profound sense, however, it is author George Orwell's warning concerning the possibilities inherent in the development of totalitarianism and how these might come to damage the human race.

2. Themes

Stasiland	1984
Power	
The Stasi/GDR controlling the people	The absolute rule of Big Brother and The Party
Enjoyment gained by Stasi members through wielding state power	Power not as a means to an end, but as the end; power for the sake of power
Desperation/suffering	
Need to escape the Stasi and live a normal life	Inability to hide from the all-encompassing Party
Political morality	
Should governments/ruling bodies ever have powers of universal surveillance? What happens when/if this power is misused?	

Stasiland	1984
Individual agency	Collective agency
When they choose and in the correct context, an individual alone can achieve significant things	The only means of affecting truly great change is to be a 'cell' part of a greater 'body' of people
Political fallibility	Political infallibility
Ultimately, politicians are people too who are susceptible to human faults	When acting as 'cells' statesmen achieve a type of immortality which frees them from human flaws
Records as truth	Records as control
The Stasi records of people's lives and acts committed against them (the truth) are invaluable to those whose lives it touched	Reports of the state of things in Oceania are altered to shape the foundation on which future generations will build their history

Futility			
Frustration of being unable to do what you want to do (Frau Paul, Julia)	Realisation that resisting is pointless; The Party will get what it wants regardless		

3. Character analysis and comparison

When comparing the characters presented in these two texts, it is important to remember that Orwell's are fictional and Funder's are her retellings of real people's stories. Take care to avoid discussing Funder's characters as constructions, and focus instead on *how* she has chosen to portray them.

Stasiland

Character	Description	Comparisons
Anna Funder	The Australian author, narrator and central character who is pensive and deeply invested in the lives of those she interviews	*Similar narration to Winston, but he is an insider and she an outside
Miriam Weber	An interviewee who defies the state at a young age and whose personality is shaped by her consequent incarceration	*Winston and Julia's psychological damage is similar, but Miriam's has the advantage of existing in a more forgiving world with hope
Charlie Weber	Miriam's husband who also defied the state and paid the price with his life	
Julia Behrend	Anna's landlady whose life was essentially derailed by the Stasi and who suffered a sexual assault	*She shares a name and a formerly rebellious attitude with Winston's lover, but does not share her sense of mischief or her joy in the present
Klaus Renft	Anna's friend whose band was censored by the Stasi and who drinks heavily	
Frau Paul	The wall took away her ill son Torsten and the Stasi imprisoned her for helping people escape East Germany	
Torsten Paul	Frau Paul's son who is crippled, but is not haunted by the regime to the same degree as his mother	*Unlike the children portrayed in 1984 which act as spies against their parents, Torsten has not been warped so badly by the GDR
Werner Koch	Attempted to escape with Frau Paul	

Michael Hinze	A West Berlin inhabitant who was party to Frau Paul's plans	
Herr Winz	Former Stasi employee who is a member of the Insiderkomitee	
Herr Christian	Former Stasi employee who worked in border control	
Hagen Koch	Former Stasi employee, an enthusiast of the GDR period of history	
Herr Boch	Former Stasi employee, specialist in recruiting informers	*Shares O'Brien's sense of mystery but is considerably less sophisticated
Herr Bohnsack	Former Stasi (HVA) employee, gave himself up to the media	
Karl Eduard von Schnitzler	Former TV host of an anti-Western channel called 'Der Schwarze Kanal' or 'The Black Channel'	
Erich Mielke	Minister for State Security (head of the Stasi)	
Erich Honecker	President of the GDR	*Could be called less distant, more flawed cousin of Big Brother

Nineteen Eighty-Four

Character	Description	Comparisons
Winston Smith	An older, frail intellectual Party member with cynical and somewhat fatalistic tendencies. He is also pensive and seeks to understand the structure of the regime which rules him from an ideological perspective.	*Like Anna Funder he is an observer of the world around him, but he is much more fatalistic than she *Like Julia Behrend, has his prospects and life destroyed by the regime
Julia	Another younger Party member who works in the same Ministry as Winston and becomes his lover. Unlike Winston, she is not ideological in the slightest and rebels for pragmatic and selfish reasons.	*Shares young Miriam's will to rebel, but not her seriousness *Unique in her flippant attitude towards rebelling
O'Brien	A Party member and skilled torturer who Winston thinks is somewhere in its upper reaches who pretends to be part of an anti-Party movement	*Can be compared with all of the former Stasi members Anna interviews; he differs greatly from Herr Bohnsack in attitude and is arguably most similar to Herr Bock

Mr Charrington	A member of the Thought Police who finds Winston and Julia out through his front as a kindly old man who runs a secondhand store and helps the couple.	*Mr Charrington can also be compared to former Stasi members
Syme	An intelligent, fervent Party member who is involved in the 'destruction of language' or the creation of the Newspeak dictionary. He is eventually vaporised.	*Could be compared with Stasi members or victims, as there are parallels in both areas (e.g. Hagen Koch, Miriam)
Parsons	A dim Party member who lives near Winston and along with his wife is simultaneously proud and afraid of his Children, members of the Junior Spies	*See 'Syme'
Big Brother	The ubiquitous and yet intangible ruler of Oceania	*Compare with the authority figures of the Stasi depicted in the media
Emmanuel Goldstein	Like Big Brother, never appears in the story and may not actually be real, but is described by the Party as a dangerous man to be hated	*The Two-Minutes Hate addressed towards Goldstein can be compared with Karl Eduard von Schnitzler's 'Der Schwarze Kanal' and his vitriol towards the West

4. Sample paragraphs

Prompt: Discuss the different ways in which the authors of Stasiland and Nineteen Eighty-Four explore the intricacies of state power and knowledge.

Sample introduction

When significant knowledge in any form is gained, it follows that it can be used in any way an individual or group sees fit. Stasiland and Nineteen Eighty-Four both show that the same piece of information can be used in drastically different ways to suit the purpose of that information's owner. In both texts, we can observe this in many areas: mass surveillance for security or espionage purposes, recordkeeping to retain the truth or warp it, and medical or physiological advancements used to solve humanity's problems or deliberately harm and deform people. Such examples force us to consider two well-known maxims, and to decide between the bliss of ignorance and the power of knowledge.

Sample body paragraph

In theory, mass surveillance has many benefits; it could be used to prevent criminal activity such as large-scale terrorist attacks and ensure the happiness and wellbeing of citizens. However, it is almost never associated with anything positive. In George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, we are introduced to his hypothesis concerning what it would be like if it were to become developed to its full extent. The concept can be divided into three levels; firstly there is the obvious, external activities that we

observe in both texts, which include mail screening, a military or gendarme presence in the streets and a network of informers. Secondly there is the introduction of the state into the home, which is achieved by The Party mainly through the telescreen, the most prominent and sinister instrument of mass surveillance in Oceania which gives total access to individual behaviour in the privacy of the home. While Winston seems to have found a loophole in this area by being 'able to remain outside the range of the telescreen', The Party carries its mass surveillance to the truest sense of the expression by extending it to a seemingly impossible third level, which introduces the state into 'the few cubic centimetres inside [the] skull'. Interestingly, while the Thought Police cannot truly 'see' what is inside someone's head, they can still control it; as long as people *think* that someone can see their thoughts, they will censor them themselves. This shows that the beauty of mass surveillance is that it does not actually have to be universal or all-encompassing to be successful. This is why the Stasi did not need to go to the lengths of The Party to achieve a similar result; the people merely need to *believe* that it is so on the basis of some evidence, and through this they can be controlled. Ultimately, mass surveillance can never be anything but destructive for this reason; it could put a complete halt to all terrorist plots and it would still act against the people by insidiously forcing them to censor their own thoughts out of fear.

Sample conclusion

Both Stasiland and Nineteen Eighty-Four show absolutely that knowledge is a fundamental and intrinsic part of power, as it cannot exist without knowledge. While it is true that knowledge can be held without exercising it in some external display of power, it always shapes the person who holds it in ways both subtle and direct. Knowledge can therefore be seen as similar to Pandora's Box; once it exists in a mind, it alters it, and the actions it prompts depend only on the desires and will of that mind.

5. Tips

In order to properly understand either of these texts, you'll need to put on your history hat. Both of them are very firmly rooted in historical events, and to get a good grasp on what they really mean, you need to understand these events. You should research communism and socialism fairly extensively as well as the GDR, but you don't need to sit for hours and write a book on the subject. All you need to do is trawl through Wikipedia for half an hour, or as long as it takes to get a sense of the subject. The key is to not ignore things that you don't understand; if you see terms like 'Eastern Bloc' or 'Marxism' or 'The Iron Curtain' and you've got no idea what they are, *research them!* Even terms that you might believe you're familiar with, like 'Communism' could also use a refresher.

The other main point is that 1984 particularly deals very heavily in ideological and philosophical argument. Orwell constructed the events of the plot as one giant hypothetical situation, so try and think to yourself – could that really happen? Is that really possible, or is this whole thing just plain silly? Remember that this text is much, much more than a simple narrative, and address it as such.

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