## *1984* Background Information

**STYLE, SETTING AND THEMES**

***1984* is set in the city of London,** some **forty years after the end of the Second World War**. The city is not identified as London, but as Airstrip One, the capital of Oceania, an empire that appears to consist of North and South America, the British Isles, and part of Africa. **The protagonist is Winston Smith**, a social malcontent employed in the Ministry of Truth at the unending task of making sure that the archives of the media never show that Big Brother has made a mistake of any kind.

**Four particular places in Airstrip One are important to the consideration of setting:** Winston’s apartment, Winston’s workplace, the apartment that Winston rents for his trysts with Julia, and the depths of the Ministry of Love, where Winston is rehabilitated. The descriptions of each of these places, in addition to the descriptions of the dishevelment of the city as a whole, are **a crucial part of the establishment of mood in the novel**. A dystopian novel such as this seeks to create a future in which everything is NOT perfect—instead, everything is awful, and the power structure seems bent on keeping everything as awful as possible. Note the crumbling ruins everywhere in the city; the dreary disrepair of Winston’s apartment building; the filth in the secret apartment, whose scant comforts would disgust many of us, but which are priceless to Winston’s aesthetic; the mind-numbing conditions in which Winston works. The imagery used to create each of these different settings within the novel is one source of this novel’s immense power.

The **dystopian style** is found throughout modern literature. Other examples of this include Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, and Vonnegut’s short story “Harrison Bergeron.” A key to this style is the use of language that shows that, at least officially, conditions in society are not only good; they are wonderful, and they are as great as they have ever been in human history. However, this grandiloquent style is undermined by the actual conditions in which the society exists.

In *1984* this appears in large and small scale. Take, for example, the **ubiquitous branding of Victory on products that are designed to drug the user, such as Victory Gin, and Victory Tobacco.** If life in Oceania is so wonderful, why do its citizens need to drink and smoke so much? Why wouldn’t Victory Gin be a wonderful drink? Why wouldn’t cigarettes made with Victory Tobacco be the best cigarettes? Instead, Victory Gin is almost impossible to drink, and the cigarettes fall apart just as fast as Winston can light them. Note, also, the grand music and announcements of victory that erupt from the telescreen, cloaking the real news, which usually entails the reduction of some sort of ration for public consumption. Note the odd oaths that Winston and Julia must take to join the Brotherhood in O’Brien’s apartment, including a promise to throw sulfuric acid in the face of a child if that is what is required—such noble ideals, supported by such horrible deeds. It is this idea that the grandest human sentiments are just window dressing for the dark instincts of the human heart that drives the dystopian writer, and these ideas abound in *1984*.

**The dominant theme in *1984* is control**. The Ingsoc government controls every aspect of its subjects’ lives: physical, mental, and emotional. There are tight restrictions on travel; every Party member is under virtually constant surveillance via telescreens, hidden microphones, and spies wandering the streets for the Thought Police. This telescreen is not only used for surveillance, however; it is the primary tool for the inculcation of whatever idea the Party desires into the minds of the Party members. **Using auditory and visual images, the Party drives a neverending stream of input into its members’ minds**. The telescreens are aided by posters of Big Brother, and of the hated enemy soldiers of Eurasia (or Eastasia, as the case may be), and the constant slogan: BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU.

**Even one’s own family is used as a source of psychological control.** Marriage is permitted only for the purpose of procreation, and then, from an early age, children are encouraged to turn in their parents for thoughtcrime. Sex is discouraged when it is an act of joy or intimacy, and is encouraged only for couples desiring to add to the human race.

**Physical control appears in a number of ways.** There are mandatory exercises; Party members work long, tiring days; the government rations food and provides alcohol and cigarettes designed to leave the user in a tranquilized daze. The result is a Party too tired to mount a real resistance against the authority of the Inner Party, left only with the opportunities to vent against Emanuel Goldstein as a channel to release emotional frustration.

**Control extends even to the dissemination of information.** This is the job of the Ministry of Truth, where Winston works. Novels, films,—even the daily news—are written and re-written, with an eye towards making Big Brother appear infallible and Ingsoc as the ideal way of life. The Ministry of Truth is at work, constantly re-writing history, and constantly finding ways to make the English language less ambiguous by removing synonyms, reducing language to a grunting of syllables that, in the final analysis, appear to be far less intelligible than the language had been before. The ostensible aim of the Party, though, is not to increase understanding, but to reduce ambiguity. In truth, the reduction of language facilitates a reduction in thought; the human mind cannot long entertain a thought it cannot frame into words.

**Taken together, all these themes combine to show the perils of living in a totalitarian state.** Orwell had been familiar with the harsh way in which the Spanish monarchy and the Soviet government under Stalin would crush dissidence in an attempt to maintain power. His own British government was not exempt from his criticism, however. In his early life, he had seen how brutally the British Empire could treat its subjects in India, in order to hold sway over the natives. Whether totalitarianism is dressed up in the cruel methods of Hitler and Stalin, or the benevolent promises of socialism, it is still absolute control over the individual, and it is this absolute control that takes the Winstons and Julias of any society and drains them of their humanity, in Orwell’s thinking.