

CliffsNotes.com® At a Glance for 1984

In George Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith wrestles with oppression in Oceania and introduces the watchwords for life without freedom: BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU.

Set in London in the future, Party member Winston Smith works for the Ministry of Truth, where his job is literally to rewrite history. The government, personified by a figure called Big Brother, watches everyone through telescreens, but Winston begins a private diary, which is a crime punishable by death. Winston suspects that a coworker named O'Brien may secretly share his hostility to the totalitarian way of life. Winston fears another coworker, named Julia, until she passes him a note on which "I love you" is written.

Winston and Julia meet to talk and eventually make love, first in the country, and then in a room Winston has sought just for this purpose. They swear never to betray one another even though they assume they'll be caught someday. Winston and Julia contact O'Brien, whom they believe to be a member of an underground, anti-government organization called The Brotherhood; O'Brien shares the writings of Brotherhood leader Emmanuel Goldstein with Winston and Julia.

Eventually we learn that Winston and Julia were being observed all along by Big Brother and that O'Brien has been watching Winston for seven years. Winston and Julia are apprehended, and after months of torture by O'Brien, Winston is faced with his greatest fear, a cage full of rats, in Room 101 of the Ministry of Love. Winston betrays Julia, and it turns out that she has betrayed him as well.

Written by: George Orwell

Type of Work: novel

Genres: utopian literature; social criticism

First Published: 1949

Setting: Oceania

Main Characters: Winston Smith; Julia; O'Brien; Big Brother/Emmanuel Goldstein

Major Thematic Topics: mutability of the past; the existence of fact through memory; memory; history; language; oppression of writers

Motifs: repressed sexuality; dreams

Major Symbols: Newspeak; prole woman; birds; telescreens; glass paperweight

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The three most important aspects of *1984*:

- The setting of *1984* is a dystopia: an imagined world that is far worse than our own, as opposed to a utopia, which is an ideal place or state. Other dystopian novels include Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and Orwell's own *Animal Farm*.
- When George Orwell wrote *1984*, the year that gives the book its title was still almost forty years in the future. Some of the things Orwell imagined that would come to pass were the *telescreen*, a TV that observes those who are watching it; and a world consisting of three megastates rather than hundreds of countries. In the novel, the country of *Eastasia* apparently consists of China and its satellite nations; *Eurasia* is the Soviet Union; and *Oceania* comprises the United States, the United Kingdom, and their allies.
- Another of Orwell's creations for *1984* is Newspeak, a form of English that the book's totalitarian government utilizes to discourage free thinking. Orwell believed that, without a word or words to express an idea, the idea itself was impossible to conceive and retain. Thus Newspeak has eliminated the word "bad," replacing it with the less-harsh "ungood." The author's point was that government can control us through the words that it, and we, use.