

**In 1984, London/Airstrip 1 illustrates how the concept of ‘place’ operates as a site of conflict and control under totalitarian power.**

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**Abstract:**

The Link between Conflict and Control in the concept of place, like a capital city, a symbol of power, like in 1984 which takes place in London, a city where our political power is embedded.

**Keywords:**

Manipulation, Coercion, War, misinformation

*1984* is a clear example of how conflict and control is used in places to illustrate power over the people, as when referring to places it offers a sense of belonging to characters in literature. But London in *1984* is washed out, and under the thumb of ‘The Party’ and the embodiment of the party ‘Big Brother’ who is always watching.

Milford A Jeremiah defines 'the use of place in literature' as "place serves a function in that it puts the reader where the writer intends him or her to be mentally."<sup>1</sup> London is an iconic capital city in the world and with the context that when *1984* was published (1948) was during the slow decline of the British Empire after the second world war. London also is a symbol of political power, a parliament which a house of commons (represent communities like boroughs) and the house of lords (highborn individuals or appointed) and its laws have influenced other countries, like America whose constitution is inspired by the British, when they formed the United States against British rule.

Orwell picking London isn't on accident, even though Orwell was born in India, London is a symbol of the British empire, that ruled India for nearly 200 years. Orwell also spent some time on the streets of London, he knows the struggles of the working class and understands it which explains why Winston's silent and subtle rebellion (writing his own true thoughts in a book) is relatable. Also reflecting on that London was the main city that was bombed during the battle of Britain.

In *1984* Winston the main character is a worker for Airstrip 1 in London, in this fictional dystopian interpretation of London, a large-scale workforce for the party. Winston is a 'prole' who in the hierarchical structure of *1984* is uneducated and part of Oceania' working class whose lives are on constant surveillance. The World of 1984 Winston is supposed to be considered regular in this fictional world; however, he does have undertones of a deviant like

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah, A Milford, 'Concept of Place,' Language Arts Journal of Michigan  
<<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1352&context=lajm>>.

keeping a diary to express his thoughts, which he keeps hidden. Deviant behaviour is often reflected in those who reject societal norms.

It could also be interpreted that the main character being called Winston is a reflection of real-life Winston Churchill who rejected the majority of conservatives to surrender to the fascists in World War 2 (which can make Churchill a deviant in his own party), or it could also be connoted with Winston's last name being 'Smith' a common trope especially in British media and literature as to represent the 'ordinary man', it makes Winston seem somewhat relatable as he is an ordinary person in an environment that some of us are alien to or for some a future of Britain that many fear may come true, a paranoid look into the mind of Orwell.

By the end of the book Winston is brainwashed into becoming a compliant worker and servant of big brother (figurehead of the totalitarian state) by the governing body called the 'Ministry of Love' (can be inferred as a government building in London), here it can be interpreted that Winston is forced to fit into Oceania as he does subtle anti-establishment behaviours, like having a secret journal committing 'thoughtcrimes' and joining the brotherhood to fight 'The Party' (the state). Thoughtcrimes are quite relevant in the UK right now regarding new laws imposed by the government with the 'controlled thought zones,'<sup>2</sup> these signs have been put up ironically in London during the summer of 2025 by the Labour government, a look into the future that Orwell tried to warn us about, and with the new laws

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Controlled Thought zones in London after the Online Safety Act'  
<[https://x.com/ES\\_News\\_/status/1954816111179870525](https://x.com/ES_News_/status/1954816111179870525)>.

of mandatory digital identification introduced, this can't be ignored and the public are aware with the government petitions to retract these laws.

London in this dystopian interpretation is grey and washed out but large in scale, could be compared to the architecture of the Soviet Union, which could connect to Orwell's criticism of Stalinism even though Orwell classed himself as a socialist, as in Book 1 Chapter 8, the book states "The vanished world of Capitalism"<sup>3</sup> leaning more to the idea that 1984 is more anti-communist than fascist as that is a far right ideology which coincides with capitalism. But there are critics of Nazi Germany through the party's manipulation of Oceania's population. Socialism in simplistic terms are about the unity of workers which is reflected in the 'Brotherhood' united against Big Brother.

O'Brien is the main source of conflict and control in the story as he manipulates Winston into betraying 'the party' but turns out he was working for Big Brother the whole time, to have Winston betray Julia (Winston's lover who is also a rebel) and subjected to torture to accept the party's ideology, turning him into another slave for Big Brother. The idea of O'Brien causing Winston to join the Brotherhood can link to the party creating the idea of an enemy to keep the proles under further surveillance, to keep a tighter grip on their lives, the falsehood of a threat has been used throughout history like the Manchuria invasion (falsehood made by the Japanese government in 1931) and the obvious example of Jews being persecuted in Nazi Germany.

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<sup>3</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, (Penguin Classics, 2021), b1ch8.

Another source of control in *1984*, is the figurehead of the party being Big Brother, used as a propaganda tool in posters, projectors to the public, spouting the ideology of the party and to love the party, “You must love big brother.” Or that he is always watching you as it's been interpreted by many illustrators like Johnathan Burton.<sup>4</sup> Those posters are across all over London, a constant reminder of the authoritarian control of the party. Big Brother's appearance is striking to dictators like Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, clear examples of authoritarianism taken too far; manipulation, starting wars, genocide, killing millions, depriving your own people of basic needs.

His appearance could also echo the politician Oswald Mosley<sup>5</sup> who was seen as the British Hitler as fascism was the new rising political ideology in the 1920s and 1930s, him even having a seat in the House of Commons. The appearance of big brother is supposed to make us uneasy and not trustworthy despite what he says.

Another form of manipulation has there is a ‘Ministry of love’ which is used as a way to brainwash and torture those who commit ‘thoughtcrimes’. The place of the Ministry of love is a branch of the party's government and could be interpreted as either 10 Downing Street or in the houses of Parliament (not the supreme court as it was a part of the house of lords until 2009), this might exemplify the influence that the party have over the flow of information and perception.

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<sup>4</sup> Maria Popova, ‘Haunting Illustrations for Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,’ Introduced by the Courageous Journalist Who Broke the Edward Snowden Story,’ themarginalian <<https://www.themarginalian.org/2014/12/19/folio-society-george-orwell-1984/>>.

<sup>5</sup> Oswald Mosley, ‘Into the Shadows,’ YouTube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LErplTl3UzI>>.

Another form of conflict is with Winstons deviant behaviour, as the audience can sympathise with characters who feel trapped in a situation they cannot escape. As Winston has as mentioned a diary, an illegal relationship with Julia and attempting to join the Brotherhood, he was not even considered a rebel but the thought of joining the 'Brotherhood' (which is a thought crime).

The outside fears conflicts of Eurasia and Eastasia as they are the other superstates in the novel, but as revealed in Goldstein's book given to Winston in Book 2 Chapter 9, "The war is not meant to be won, its meant to be continuous" all to keep further control over the people. It could also be a reflection of the Manipulated tactics of Nazi Germany in World War 2 as Hitler united a nation against what they thought was a common enemy being the Jewish population, to keep the people in a constant state of hatred. "Continuous frenzy of hatred of foreign enemies and internal traitors"<sup>6</sup>, The United Kingdom were fresh off World War 2, still in a state of rebuilding what was lost, all while the lies that Germany was fed were being exposed during the Nuremberg trials.

One place in London that operates as a site of conflict and tension is Trafalgar square. Renamed as 'Victory Square' in the novel, where ironically no victory took place there, and is just a symbol of 'The Party's' influence and manipulation of the public, "War is Peace...Freedom is Slavery" being the most famous quote from the novel's opening,

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<sup>6</sup> Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, b2ch9.

immersing the audience in the contrived world of *1984*, it's all to keep Oceania in charge over the people, as the words 'victory' can give a sense of pride, like how the British public showed pride and resilience all the while London and other major cities were being bombed.

As the threat of 'enemy' is constantly shifting in the book, a constructed 'enemy' to further suppress the people as mentioned in Goldstein's book. 'Victory Square' is also a place for public humiliation, propaganda parades and rarely executions, inducing fear into the public, like in Nazi Germany, where 'traitors/deserters' were hung during the battle of Berlin, even when defeat was inevitable, also could link to the blind loyalty that the Party expects from its workers.

This throws into question about the Brotherhood, whether if they are real or not is left completely ambiguous in the book, is it a constructed enemy for the party to keep hold of their power or is it an actual rebellion who want what every human wants 'freedom'. Winston clings to this notion as we know his thoughts and wanting to be freed from the clutches of 'The Party'. A historical example of this can be the burning of the Reichstag in 1933, an event that Hitler used to blame Jews, socialists and communists for it, even though no one knows who did it, Hitler using it as a way to cling to power and create an enemy for the German people to fear.

*1984*'s representations of conflict and control, was inspired by Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin most popular work being 'We'<sup>7</sup> released in 1917 and the first piece of literature banned in the Soviet Union until its collapse in 1991. Unlike Winston who still keeps his name, the main character in 'We' is D-503, an engineer who like Winston tries to be part of the rebellion against 'the one state.' 'We' ends on mostly on an optimistic note as the rebellion does leave a lasting impact on the 'green wall' the separation between nature and humanity.

Winston is Orwell's version of D-503 and Julia is I-330, Winston loves the idea of Julia because she defies the party, I-330 is a part of a rebellion and allures D-503 to join and break the rules by sleeping with her and not his designated partner (O-90). Both of the book's endings are similar in bleakness as both main characters have their humanity stripped from, them. The similarities between both books can't be ignored like how *1984* influenced *Handmaid's Tale*.

Oceania is one of the three superstates in *1984*, which covers the Americas and the British isles, while the other two states are Eurasia (covers parts of Europe and Asia), and Eastasia (covers most of Asia like China and Japan). This helps broaden the scope of the concept of place in *1984*, as London and Britain are like Winston, under the rule of something bigger, as Oceania and its figurehead 'Big Brother' are on top while the party runs its own set hierarchy like the 'inner' party, 'outer' party and the proles (like Winston).

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<sup>7</sup> Yevgeny Zamyatin, 'We,' Internet Archive <<https://archive.org/details/we-by-yevgeny-zamyatin>>.

London/Airstrip one operates as a way for the Party to control the proles to do what they told, under a constant threat of fear through either fabricated conflict, or to seek out conflict to keep its control over those who are uneducated and part of the working class, a cynical view of politics, as politicians and party's want to appeal and create a false attachment or relatability to its voters. Or a way for a politician's/party's rise to power under the guise of fear, of a seen or unseen enemy. In the words of Mark Twain: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes", 1984 is an homage to the events leading and during World War 2, a critique of authoritarianism taking place in capital cities as that is where the power lies.

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