



## 1984 – Chapter One - Cultural Context

### **Setting:**

- ‘bright cold day in April’
- ‘clocks were striking thirteen’
- ‘vile wind’
- ‘gritty dust’
- ‘The hallway smelt of boiled cabbage and old rag mats’
- ‘the electric current was turned off during daylight hours’
- ‘the world looked cold’

All of these details in the opening give a sense of bleakness, depression and a lack of hope. It is ironic that Winston’s flat is in a building called ‘Victory Mansions’ as there is no hint of victory in the description of the place.

### **Political environment:**

- ‘BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU’
- ‘the police patrol, snooping into people’s windows’
- ‘every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinised’
- The four ministries represent the ‘entire apparatus of government’
- The Ministry of Truth is concerned with news, entertainment, education and the fine arts ; the Ministry of Peace concerns itself with war; the Ministry of Love maintains law and order, and the Ministry of Plenty is responsible for economic affairs.

- The Ministry of Truth stands against the 'grimy landscape'. All around are 'rotting nineteenth century houses' and 'bombed sites' in which 'sordid colonies of wooden dwellings' have sprung up. The impression we are given is that there is a huge disconnect between those in power and the majority of people living in London.
- 'The Ministry of Love was the really frightening one'. It is a windowless building surrounded by barbed wire and 'machine-gun nests'.
- The difference between reality and what the government wants the people to believe is even seen in the alcohol and cigarettes in Winston's flat. The 'VICTORY GIN' is revolting and the 'VICTORY CIGARETTES' are so poorly made that the tobacco falls out if they are held vertically.
- The regime is so oppressive that Winston has to hide from view of the telescreen in an alcove in his living room in order to write a diary.
- Nothing is illegal but if Winston is found writing a diary, he will almost certainly be put to death or sentenced to life in a forced-labour camp. There is no impartial justice, only the will of the Party.
- The figure of Big Brother is similar to Hitler or Stalin
- 'Doublethink' – the holding of and belief in contradictory ideas - is evident in the Party's slogans:

WAR IS PEACE

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

### **Attitudes and Values:**

A particularly disturbing incident is described in which Winston writes of going to the cinema and watching films of refugees at sea being brutally murdered by helicopter guns and bombs. The audience is 'shouting with

laughter' and there is 'applause from the party seats' when a woman in a boat attempts to shield a terrified child before they are all blown to bits and there is 'a wonderful shot of a child's arm going up up up right up into the air'. One woman in 'the prole part' of the cinema objects to this violence being screened when there are children in the audience but there is little sympathy for her views and she is thrown out of the cinema by the police.

Propaganda is used to stir the people into a frenzy. Winston describes the 'Two Minutes Hate' in which an enemy of the people is shown onscreen and the audience is encouraged to shout abuse and rage at his subversive ideas.

### **Class distinctions:**

Those like O'Brien are in the Inner Party, while Winston and his colleagues are members of the Outer Party (educated workers). The rest of the population – the majority – are Proles, which is short for proletariat. In the cinema, people are seated by class. When a Prole woman objects to the graphic violence on screen, she is thrown out of the cinema by the police but Winston doubts anything happened to her as 'nobody cares what the proles say'.

### **Women:**

Winston is both threatened by and attracted to the young woman in his office. He dislikes 'nearly all women, and especially the young and pretty ones. He is torn between his loathing for this attractive woman with the red sash around her waist proclaiming her membership of the Junior Anti-Sex league. He fantasises about torturing and killing her, but there is a strong sexual component to these fantasies.