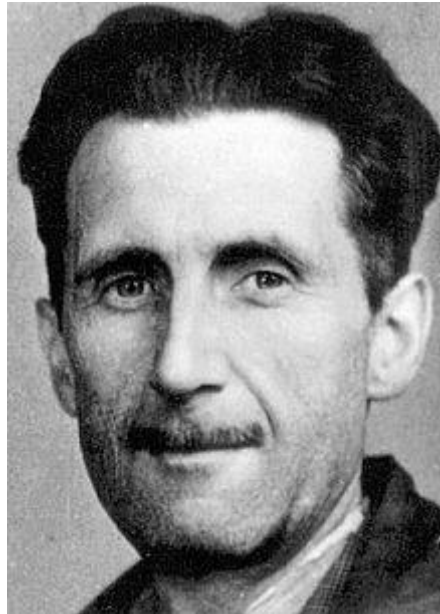


George Orwell in Our Time

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George Orwell

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Orwell

Abstract

George Orwell (1903-1950) occupies a significant place in the English literary imagination. A political and cultural commentator, as well as an accomplished novelist, Orwell is one of the most widely-read essayists of the 20th century. He is best remembered for his two novels written towards the end of his life: *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). In this paper I intend to focus on some of his representative essays and non-fiction writings to suggest that Orwell is very much alive to the vital issues of our time through his extensive range of interests ranging from politics, war, and sports, to issues such as language and literature. We can say that history has treated him well, proving him right about the key issues of the twentieth century. In the bipolar political climate of the 1930s and 1940s, when intellectuals on the left and right were getting ready to confront the evils of totalitarianism and fascism, Orwell saw that the choice between Stalinism and fascism was in fact no choice at all, that the real struggle was between freedom and tyranny.

Keywords: Animal Farm, George Orwell, totalitarianism, fascism, tyranny, freedom

George Orwell

A conservative by upbringing, and a socialist and a dissident by nature, he did not believe in politics as a matter of allegiance to a party or camp. What he did believe in was his own sensibility or that which he described as his "power of facing unpleasant facts." As Christopher Hitchens observes in his biographical essay, *Why Orwell Matters*, this "power of facing" proved important to Orwell, whose life was filled with more than its share of unpleasantness and danger. While working as a policeman in Burma he had experienced the complex workings of Empire and its insidious, baneful effects on the colonizer and the colonized alike; and while fighting in the Spanish Civil War alongside the anarchists of Catalonia, many of whom were arrested as "Trotskyites" by Soviet forces, he had witnessed the wickedness of Stalinism. In Paris, London, and the various mining towns of Northern England, where he immersed himself in life at the lowest rungs of society, he had seen the limitations of both the Church and the State to elevate the poor. Throughout these experiences, he had expressed his nonconformist views and faced considerable social and professional adversity with poise and equanimity.

Contemporaries

To put Orwell in the context of his time we can think of critics who were close to him in time and spirit like Cyril Connolly who in his *Enemies of Promise* (1938), describes Orwell as a true "rebel" and "intellectual" at school and portrays an interesting contrast to Orwell's own unpleasant memories of school days recorded in his essay "Such were the Joys". Q. D. Leavis, George Woodcock and V.S. Pritchett were the first Orwellian scholars who threw new light on his creative mind and brought him to light by contributing their critical essays on Orwell in 1940, before the publication of *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Q. D. Leavis refers to him as a writer having "a special kind of honesty", and describes his writings as "responsible, adult, and decent (193). George Woodcock found in his varied writings the presence of a "crystal spirit", and later on wrote a book on him with the same title. T.S. Eliot and Bertrand Russell referred to Orwell's spirit of bitterness, grim pessimism, and negativism; Pritchett called him "a kind of saint" (96), and Arthur Koestler saw in him "the only writer of genius among the litterateurs of social revolt between the two wars". (103)

Politics of Truth

Lionel Trilling's essay "George Orwell and Politics of Truth" (1952) written as an introduction to Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* and later published in *The Opposing Self* (1955) described Orwell as a virtuous member of human family. He believed that Orwell teaches us to understand our present state of politics as he "restores the old sense of the democracy of mind "and makes us believe that we may become full members of the society of thinking men (158) in his book *Essays of Literature and Ideals*. (1963) Tom Hopkinson in his British Council Pamphlet that appeared in 1953 threw light on the moral aspect of Orwell, both as a man and a writer and saluted "the courage and lonely man who is not afraid of being lonely. (5) John Atkins and Laurence Brander published two full-fledged books on him in 1954. Both knew Orwell personally and tried their best to publish Orwell's real attitude in their respective books. Atkins points out that the common element in Orwell's writings is a sense of decency and uniqueness in having the mind of an intellectual and feeling of an ordinary man. He criticizes Orwell for suggesting a dangerous doctrine that "A writer should bifurcate himself, devoting one part (the citizen) to an ideology and other part (the writer) to external values". (365)

No Compromises

Brander regarded him as an individualist who refused to accept the compromises demanded by the so-called normality of life. He said that Orwell spoke with authority and in his books he dealt with "contemporary, social and political problems with the detachment of a fine intelligence". (12) In 1961, Sir Richard Rees, Orwell's close friend, published his book *George Orwell: Fugitive from the Camp of Victory* where he described Orwell as a fighter for justice who instinctively and spontaneously responded to the call of the suffering. According to him, Orwell was a friend of the poor. His moral antennae could suddenly pick up the televised cry of the downtrodden. Rees portrayed an integral relationship between Orwell's life and work in this book in an artistic way. According to him it is "difficult to think about his works without thinking of his life and vice versa". (9) Richard J. Voorhees published his book *The Paradox of George Orwell* in the same year examining Orwell's paradoxical attitudes towards rebellion and responsibility. He describes *Orwell as "a rebel with a remarkably strong sense of responsibility"*. (11) Frederick R. Karl in his book *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary English Novel* (1963) includes a chapter on Orwell entitled "George Orwell: The White Man's Burden". He has surveyed Orwell's works and called him

a “literary Marxist”. (161) According to him, Orwell is to be thoroughly understood for an understanding of our contemporary society and of the society of the future. Robert Lee in his book *Orwell's Fiction* saw “a sense of sanity welcome in an age that often seems insane”.
(xi)

Democratic Socialism

In his major political work, Orwell persuasively puts forward a view of democratic socialism as the “natural” alternative to the bloody ideologies of the time. Many of his views were indisputably radical: he felt that free market capitalism was a failed system, pernicious in its effects on English society. He was remarkably consistent in his opinions and opposed atrocities and imperialist actions all over the world, even when they were committed in the name of freedom. But before getting into the details of his writings, I would like to present a brief biographical account of his life to put his writings in proper perspectives.

India Background of Orwell

George Orwell was born Eric Blair on June 25, 1903 to an Anglo-Indian family in Motihari, Bihar, in India, during the period when India was part of the British Empire under the British Raj. The date and place are important, because they meant that Orwell came of age during the Great War and experienced the British Empire at the height of its power. George Orwell is a British Christian name, and Orwell is the name of a small river in East Anglia in England. Although he understood the flaws of the Edwardian Age, Orwell would always look back on that era with nostalgia, as an Eden destroyed by war, technology, and mass unemployment. Orwell's writing draws upon this vision of a happier time, maintaining that no matter how bad things become, some hope remains for humanity. Blair's father, Richard Walmesley Blair, worked for the opium department of the Civil Service. His mother, Ida Mabel Blair, brought him to Britain at the age of one. He did not see his father again until 1907, when Richard visited England for three months before leaving again. Eric had an older sister named Marjorie, and a younger sister named Avril. He would later describe his family's background as "lower-upper-middle class."

Family

Blair attended St. Cyprian's on a scholarship that allowed his parents to pay only half of the usual fees. Many years later, he would recall his time at St Cyprian's with biting

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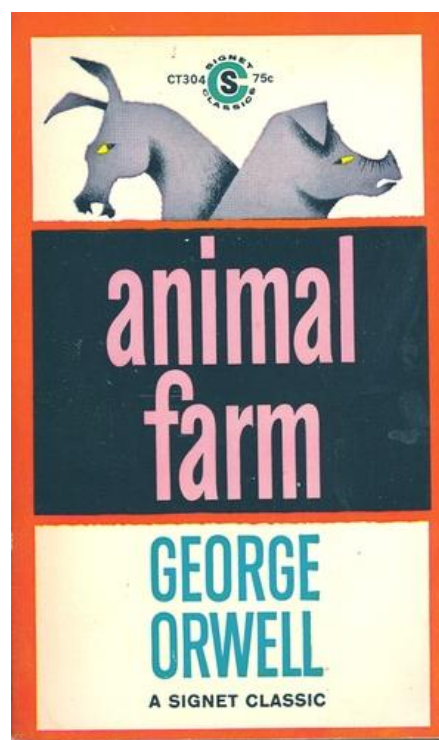
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resentment in the essay "Such, Such Were the Joys". However, in his time at St. Cyprians, the young Blair successfully earned scholarships to both Wellington College and Eton College. After some time at Wellington, Blair moved to Eton, where he was a King's Scholar from 1917 to 1921. Later in life he wrote that he had been "relatively happy" at Eton, which allowed its students considerable independence, but also that he ceased doing serious work after arriving there. Reports of his academic performance at Eton vary; some assert that he was a poor student, while others claim the contrary. He was clearly disliked by some of his teachers, who resented what they perceived as disrespect for their authority. During his time at the school, Blair made lifetime friendships with a number of future British intellectuals such as Cyril Connolly, the future editor of the *Horizon* magazine, in which many of Orwell's most famous essays were originally published.

Journalist, Essayist

During most of his career, Orwell was best known for his journalism, his essays, reviews, columns in newspapers and magazines and for his books of reportage: *Down and Out in Paris and London* (describing a period of poverty in these cities), *The Road to Wigan Pier* (describing the living conditions of poor miners in northern England) and *Homage to Catalonia* (describing his experiences during the Spanish Civil War).

Novels by Orwell



On the face of it, the novels that George Orwell wrote in the 1930s look surprisingly remote from one another. *Burmese Days* (1934) is about a colonial administrator who kills himself over a failed love affair. The heroine of *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935) is an amnesiac spinster who embarks on a low-life picaresque with a gang of down-and-outs. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) stars moth-eaten Gordon Comstock, a disaffected poet trying to preserve his integrity in the presence of capitalism's rattling swill bucket. *Coming Up for Air* (1939) finds a middle-aged insurance salesman grimly revisiting the locales of his Oxfordshire boyhood. All four, however, share the same emotional perspective; each, in the end, declares itself as a step on the path that leads to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell's most ingrained habit as a novelist is a trick of grounding his fiction in the circumstances of his own life. A few extra-curricular flourishes aside, his novels consist almost exclusively of projections of himself, deviously imagined structures erected on the foundation of his own psychology. Each of Orwell's novels turns out to be a study in regression, a matter of life not sustaining its early promise, dreams cast down into dust. Flory in *Burmese Days* is a lonely fantasist whose best years have been squandered in drink and whoring. Dorothy Hare in *A Clergyman's Daughter* is an old maid at 28. Even George Bowling in *Coming Up for Air*, perhaps the most resourceful and worldly of this desperate crew, is irrevocably caught up in the ooze and stagnation of a life lived out with his mirthless wife, Hilda, in the shadow of approaching war, the bombs and the machine guns that are going to smash civilization into bits. And behind them – behind Comstock, with his rants against the editors who won't print his poems, or Dorothy bicycling to Holy Communion through the inhospitable back lanes of Knype Hill, Suffolk – lurks the figure of Orwell himself, a man who, despite much evidence to the contrary, considered himself a failure and believed that, wherever he was set down on the planet, whether in early 1920s Burma or on late 1940s Jura, he was being watched.

The Structure

Each of his four novels from the 1930s has what is in effect the same structure: the setting up of a solitary, persecuted anti-hero in opposition to a hostile world. That world is at bottom Orwell's own – the Burmese village where he had served as an Imperial policeman, the Suffolk town where he had lived with his parents – in each case twisted out of kilter, decorated with all the subliminal horrors that oppressed the author as much as the people he created. What makes these landscapes so suffocating is the presence of "them", the malign exterior forces that Orwell assumed to be at work interfering in his characters' lives. If the

people in his novels share a single characteristic, it is their creator's tendency to victimize them, to place them at the centre of a hostile world in which their every movement is subject to constant surveillance. The provincial backwater of Knype Hill is represented as a cauldron of spite and backbiting. Gordon's life is a series of furtive concealments: he brews illicit cups of tea in his room while listening for the sound of the landlady's feet on the stair. Bowling has a terror of being found out. His journey in search of the Thames Valley haunts of his boyhood is undermined by the thought that his wife's spies are on his tail. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the spies are real and unavoidable, symbolized by the telescreen that hangs on every wall. Written more than a decade before Oceania, Airstrip One and two-minute hates, the 1930s novels are full of sharp, prefigurative intent. The alarm clock that jerks Dorothy out of bed in the opening paragraph of *A Clergyman's Daughter* is "like a horrid little bomb of bell metal". (5) The aeroplanes are coming, Gordon reflects in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*; the whole world will shortly be going up in a roar of high explosives. Even the campaign that Gordon works on after his shamefaced return to advertising canvassed by the slogan "PP ['pedic perspiration'] which is reckoned to have a "sinister simplicity" seems only a yard or two distant from the looming horizons of Big Brother and the Thought Police. Yet these connections ought not to surprise us. Each of Orwell's novels is, ultimately, the story of a rebellion that fails, of an individual – in *Animal Farm*, a mini-society – who, however feebly or obliquely, attempts to throw over the traces. Contemporary readers are more often introduced to Orwell as a novelist, particularly through his enormously successful titles *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The former is an allegory of the corruption of the socialist ideals of the Russian Revolution by Stalinism, and the latter is Orwell's prophetic vision of the results of totalitarianism. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has given the English language the phrase 'Big Brother', or 'Big Brother is watching you'. This is used to refer to any oppressive regime, but particularly in the context of invasion of privacy. The TV series 'Big Brother' is named after this phrase. The adjective Orwellian is mainly derived from the system depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It can refer to any form of government oppression, but it is particularly used to refer to euphemistic and misleading language originating from government bodies with a political purpose, for example 'friendly fire', 'collateral damage' and 'pacification'.

Satire

Variations of the slogan "all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others", from *Animal Farm*, are sometimes used to satirize situations where equality exists in theory and rhetoric but not in practice. For example, an allegation that rich people are treated more leniently by the courts despite legal equality before the law might be summarized as "all criminals are equal, but some are more equal than others". The term "cold war" goes back to centuries. Orwell used it in an essay titled "You and the Atomic Bomb" on October 19, 1945 in *Tribune*, he wrote:

"We may be heading not for general breakdown but for an epoch as horribly stable as the slave empires of antiquity. James Burnham's theory has been much discussed, but few people have yet considered its ideological implications, this is, the kind of world-view, the kind of beliefs, and the social structure that would probably prevail in a State which was once unconquerable and in a permanent state of 'cold war' with its neighbours."

Very Much Relevant to Our Time

In the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Centre, the war in Iraq, the desecration of the Bamian Buddhist rock sculptures in Afghanistan, in fact in the face of the Talibanization of history and art, scholars and critics come to George Orwell again to see how very much relevant he is to our time. In these past few years he has been exalted as a prophet, and critics and intellectuals invest him with the political authority to address the psychodynamics and the social process from which literary works emerge. And some still seriously and honestly argue about the possible line of thought and action he would have undertaken in to-day's complex and conflicting world where ignorant armies clash by night, as Arnold would like to say, and in the process examine afresh the guiding and governing themes and contexts of his work to gain a deeper insight into the writer. Although biographers and scholars have chronicled, with near-definitive thoroughness, the life of George Orwell, the story of the unique afterlife of "Orwell", of the man, the writer, the persona, literary personality, and also the universal metaphor for issues in the *Zeitgeist* ranging from language abuse to privacy invasion to totalitarian evil and far more, is still waiting for explanation and elaboration.

Orwell has been dead for more than six decades, and it is impossible to extrapolate from an author's writings what he would say about events after his death. But such studies

can be enlightening for sociological purposes, and critics do continue to pose questions about Orwell into the twenty-first century. That they do so testifies to the durable appeal of the Orwell persona and the ongoing relevance of Orwell's work. The recurrence of the question has helped keep Orwell's reputation "alive" and controversial—and illustrates, more generally, the rhetorical advantages of claiming a sizable figure's mantle and the crucial influence of news events on a reputation's shape and size. Both as an early post-war activist and a present-day culture warrior, Orwell has proven to be, as he once remarked of Dickens, "a writer well worth stealing."

Concern for Language and Civilization

Orwell's sincere attempt, from the early period of his writing, had been to describe thinking in the shortest and simplest way possible. Although he differed from G.B. Shaw on matters of socialistic revolution in England, he fully shared his deep concern for the English language and was one with him on the question of making it the best. John Atkins rightly observed, "Orwell's campaign was therefore for a language that should be pure and subtle, flexible and simple." One is surprised at the clarity and lucidity of Orwell's style. He is certainly very keen about clear thinking and plain language. There are people who are still "delighted by the quality of his literary style, its firmness, its colloquial vigor, its unpretentious vividness, and above all, its limpid clarity" though many more are attracted by his brilliant political ideas. There are also critics, relatively unimpressed by Orwell the man or the writer, who retort that the simplification of Orwell's style springs from the kind of subject matter he chooses. But the writings of Orwell stand in sharp contrast to those of the post-structuralists, as was evident from the writings of Ronald Barthes, Jacques Derrida and others.

Conservative or Liberal?

Critics are still struggling to position Orwell in the perspective of his time. Some believe that it seems justifiable to call Orwell a conservative rather than a liberal, as by the time he became a political writer, the liberal tradition in England, like the Liberal Party itself, was in such a state of decline that it is hard to imagine so practically-minded a man as Orwell linking his fortunes with it. The second reason is that the word "liberal" has still not acquired in English the connotations which it has in French, where "libéral"

immediately evokes the idea that political freedom cannot be separated from a free market economy.

Orwell made a conscious effort to write his social reportage and polemics with marked clarity. His ambition had always been to write good prose and to bring the English Language close to the modest political thinking. He found that political language consisted largely of euphemism. He was aware of the fact that correct political thinking needed an accurate and powerful use of words. A careful manipulation of words could be very useful in politics. In 1984 Winston noticed how language had become a major weapon of exploitation. Orwell felt that the modern language lacked coherence of feeling and imaginative vitality. The new political situation had corrupted the language and Orwell was very much serious about what he writes.

Orwell shared the view, commonly held in the 1930's and 1940's, which persisted for at least a decade after his death, that socialism both could and would produce a society which was not only freer and fairer than the one created by capitalism, but which was also considerably richer. Even to link him with the right seems, in the light of what he personally thought about himself and of his work, to be carrying the Barthesian notion of the Death of the Author to a point where it becomes totally absurd. It may well be as Wimsatt and Beardsley were already arguing in 1946, that a writer's intentions have nothing to do with the meaning of his work, and Orwell would not be the first author to have understood the meaning of what he wrote in a way that differed completely from that of a number of his readers. If it is true, as G.K. Chesterton once remarked, that the aim of literary criticism is to tell an author something which would make him jump out of his boots, then there would certainly be a case for looking at Orwell in a way which he would have found very unattractive.

When the general atmosphere is bad and there is lack of clarity in one's thought and action, language must suffer, and bad language would corrupt thought, and again the slovenliness of our language would bring foolish thought. He expresses his keen desire to eliminate 'bad habits' in the English language. By the phrase 'bad habits' he means such things as purple passages, and the use of figures of speech for the sake of using them and so on.

Guidelines for Writing

We may again repeat the guidelines he had given for writing well. He lays down certain guidelines and rules to correct the English language:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Concerns of Present Times: Terrorism and Totalitarianism

Ideologically, there is some sort of a consensus between the previously opposed forces of conservatism and liberalism under the threat of terrorism and totalitarian mindset which was such an inescapable feature of the political landscape in Orwell's life-time. Values such as freedom of speech and of intellectual inquiry, clarity of diction, patriotism, and a realistic appraisal of the need sometimes to fight in order to protect these values, are still recognised by both conservatives and liberals as part of a world view which they shared. And in our time, Orwell appeals to the saner impulses of mankind because of his passion and commitment for a world free from the spectre of totalitarianism and alive to the enlightened ideals of freedom.

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