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GEORGE ORWELL

Born: Motihari, Bengal, India; June 25, 1903

Died: London, England; January 21, 1950

Widely recognized for both his novels and his essays, Orwell, especially during the last decade of his life, worked “to make political writing into an art.”

BIOGRAPHY

George Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair in Motihari, Bengal, India, on June 25, 1903, the son of Richard Walmesley Blair, a minor official in the British government, and Ida Limouzin Blair. In 1904, Orwell's mother took him to England, where the family lived at Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire. Orwell had two sisters, one five years older and the other five years younger. According to his own account in his essay “Why I Write,” Orwell, until he was eight years old, barely saw his father. Consequently, Orwell developed a habit of solitude that resulted from his developing “disagreeable mannerisms” that made him “unpopular” throughout his schooldays.

Orwell's schooldays were spent at Sunnylands, an Anglican convent school in Henley. He also spent time as a boarder at St. Cyprian's preparatory school in Eastbourne, Sussex, and as a King's Scholar at Eton. He attended one term at Wellington College in 1917.

Upon completing his formal education, Orwell prepared for the India Office examinations, after which he became assistant superintendent of police in the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, a position that he held from 1922 to 1927. Because of his disdain for British imperialism, reflected in such later essays as “A Hanging” and “Shooting an

Elephant,” Orwell resigned his post, moved to Paris, and gradually began his career as a writer.

His first works, written while he was working as a dishwasher in Paris and later as a hop picker near London, were published under his birth name, Eric Blair. These works include “A Scullion's Diary” (1931), which is an early version of *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), and “A Hanging.” Perhaps the best overview of Orwell's early writing comes from Orwell himself. In “Why I Write,” he recounts his first experiences as a writer. He says that he wrote his first poem, dictated to his mother, at the age of four or five. As Orwell reflects on this poem, he thinks it was probably “a plagiarism of William Blake's ‘Tiger, Tiger.’” His first published poem, “Awake Young Men of England,” is a patriotic poem written during World War I. It was printed in the local newspaper, the *Henley and South Oxfordshire Standard*, when Orwell was eleven years old. In his early years, Orwell also attempted a few short stories, but he considered the attempts “ghastly failures” and abandoned the genre.

Mostly, Orwell regarded his earliest writing as insignificant except insofar as he was aware that he wanted to be a writer. He begins “Why I Write” with an acknowledgment of that awareness:

From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer. Between the ages of about seventeen and twenty-four I tried to abandon this idea, but I did so with the consciousness that I was outraging my true nature and that sooner or later I should have to settle down and write books.

From 1932 to 1933, Orwell taught at a small private school in Hayes, Middlesex. It was then that he began to write books. In 1933, he published his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, under his pseudonym George Orwell, a name that he used for the rest of his books. In the next seven years, eight of Orwell's books were published: *Burmese Days* (1934), *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* (1936), *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), *Coming up for Air* (1939), *Inside the Whale, and Other Essays* (1940), and *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941). His two most highly acclaimed novels, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), were yet to be written. During these years, prior to 1945, Orwell was gaining the personal and political experience that went into his final works.

In 1936, Orwell married Eileen O'Shaughnessy; in 1944, they adopted a one-month-old baby. In March, 1945, Eileen died during an operation. Also in 1936, Orwell began a series of economic, social, and political experiences that gave him a deeper understanding of his earlier experiences in Burma and in Paris. For three months in 1936, he investigated working-class life and unemployment, a process that undoubtedly gave him insight into the despair that he felt at entering a hospital in Paris in 1929 during a time of personal poverty. He recalled the experience in his essay "How the Poor Die." During the summer of 1936, Orwell attended the Independent Labour Party Summer School. In early 1937, he was part of a detachment on the Aragon front in Spain. Orwell was wounded in the throat and honorably discharged.

Orwell says his experiences in 1936 and 1937 were a turning point:

The Spanish war and other events in 1936-37 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism, as I understand it.

Politics and writing, for Orwell, had become interwoven. He continued both his writing and his political involvement despite his ill health. In 1938, Orwell entered a tuberculosis sanatorium and later went to Morocco for his health. In 1940, back in

London, he joined the Local Defence Volunteers (Home Guard). From 1941 to 1943, Orwell was in charge of British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) broadcasts to India and Southeast Asia. In 1945, he was a war correspondent for *The Observer* in Paris and Cologne. In June and July, he covered the first postwar election campaign. In August, 1945, *Animal Farm* was published.

Animal Farm is a culmination of Orwell's wide-ranging socioeconomic and political observations. In this novel, Orwell succeeds in making "political writing into an art." *Animal Farm* was followed by *Critical Essays* (1946; published in the United States as *Dickens, Dali, and Others*) and, finally, by *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. More than four hundred thousand copies of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* sold within the first year of its publication.

During the final years of Orwell's life, he was in and out of tuberculosis sanatoriums and other hospitals. In September, 1949, he was transferred from Cotswold Sanatorium, Cranham, Gloucestershire, to University Hospital in London. There, on October 13, only a few months before his death, he married Sonia Brownell, an editorial assistant with *Horizon*. Orwell died suddenly, on January 21, 1950, of a hemorrhaged lung. He was buried in the churchyard of All Saints, Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire.

ANALYSIS

Orwell's writing of both novels and essays divides fairly distinctly into two parts, the periods prior to, and after, 1936. Orwell himself, in "Why I Write," makes the division, citing as the turning point his participation in the Spanish Civil War and alluding to other events occurring in the same year.

Orwell's writing up to 1936 includes essays recounting his experiences in Burma, India, Paris, and London. These works sharply criticize British imperialism, economic inequity, and class barriers. The works are highly analytical narratives, characterized by flashes of insight into humanity. In "A Hanging," for example, Orwell narrates his participation in the hanging of a man in Burma. As Orwell and the other executioners escort the condemned man to the gallows, the man sidesteps a puddle. At this moment, Orwell says, he realizes the "unspeakable wrongness" of cutting a man's life short when it is in "full tide." Again, in "How the Poor Die," Orwell recounts his experience of

admitting himself, while impoverished, to a hospital in Paris. He concludes that the fear of hospitals that one finds among the poor is warranted. Yet again, in "Shooting an Elephant," Orwell narrates an experience in Lower Burma during which he unnecessarily destroys an elephant because he fears losing face with the natives. He suddenly realizes that he has no choice in his actions, and that one of the effects of imperialism is that it changes him, as well as others like him, into a sort of "hollow, posing dummy." He acknowledges, during this flash of insight, "the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East." Similarly, in his books during these early years, Orwell recounts his experiences in Burma, India, Paris, and London. *Down and Out in Paris and London* explores his experiences as a dishwasher in Paris and as a hop picker in England; his novel *Burmese Days* examines his experience as an officer in the Indian Imperial Police from 1922 to 1927.

Orwell's writing after 1936 is consciously focused political commentary, sometimes in works such as *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and other times in essays such as "Politics and the English Language." In "Why I Write," Orwell states that his purpose is "to make political writing into an art."

Evident also in Orwell's later writings are other philosophical changes stemming from his sharply focused worldview. These later works often reflect a lack of faith in the human capacity to survive, and they point to the inevitability of oppression. To Orwell, oppression seems inevitable insofar as people are deceived by, and deceive others with, political language—that is, with discourse aimed at deception rather than expression. In *Animal Farm*, for example, the animals reject the totalitarian rule of the cruel humans and try to erect a democratic socialism, only to become victims of new tyrants, the pigs and dogs. The oppressed animals are repeatedly deceived by clever political language and, thereby, allow themselves to be victimized. In the end, it matters little to the oppressed animals whether their oppressors are humans, hogs, or dogs.

Nineteen Eighty-Four explores these themes even more fully. Critics have called *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a satire, a dystopian novel, and a negative utopian novel. These labels all fit. They all capture the grim, cheerless worldview evident in this, Orwell's

last novel. The protagonist, Winston Smith, tries to free his mind and body from the rigidly totalitarian controls of Big Brother, the figurative leader of Oceania. Smith struggles for freedom of thought, freedom to have an accurate picture of history, and freedom to love, only to discover that Big Brother has monitored his every move. Not only is Smith physically destroyed; he is, more horribly, also mentally remade into a creature without a will. His final submission is to acknowledge his love of Big Brother, who, mercifully, shoots Smith in the back of the head. The novel, often compared to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and the Russian Yevgeny Zamyatin's *My* (wr. 1920-1921; pb. 1927, 1952; *We*, 1924), ends with the total defeat of humanity. Orwell depicts not only a society in which power is a means to an end but also one in which power itself is the end. The final image of total oppression, as in *Animal Farm*, is tied to the pernicious effects of political language. Smith himself has, ironically, spent his career rewriting history and erasing from the language those words that permit people to talk about or even think about freedom and humanity. He is left with only enough autonomy to admit to his beloved Julia that he has betrayed her. Orwell carefully interweaves the horror of oppression, the decay of language, and the loss of humanity.

These are themes that he explores in his non-fiction, as well. For example, in "Politics and the English Language," Orwell characterizes modern English prose as a "mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence." His thesis is that "political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible," that such language is used by people who want "to name things without calling up mental pictures of them." Orwell's conclusion in "Politics and the English Language," however, is not so grim as his conclusions in the final two novels are. The essay is, rather, a call to action to stop the decline of language, to reclaim its clarity.

In both his novels and his essays, Orwell succeeds in interweaving politics and language. More than that, however, Orwell the stylist holds a place in Western literature. He has, in fact, made political writing into an art. Often anthologized are such essays as "A Hanging," "Shooting an Elephant," "Why I Write," and "Politics and the English Language." Orwell is recognized as a careful stylist, conscious of his writing down to the word

level, carefully using anthropomorphism in “Shooting an Elephant,” painting scenes in Burma vividly with sensory images and fresh similes, and artfully sustaining dramatic moments. Readers are drawn to his strong narratives, his flashes of insight, and his clear analysis. Finally, his greatest appeal may be his honesty, his absolute candor with himself and others, what he calls his “power of facing unpleasant facts.”

ANIMAL FARM

First published: 1945

Type of work: Novel

In what Orwell calls a “fairy story,” animals overthrow the cruel humans only to fall into their own oppressive social structure.

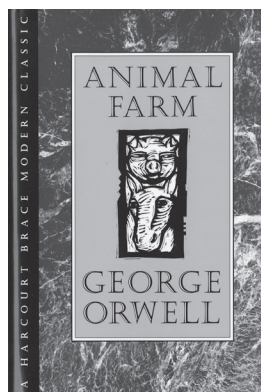
George Orwell says of *Animal Farm*, a novel subtitled *A Fairy Story*, that it was the first book in which he tried, with “full consciousness” of what he was doing, “to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole.” Set at Manor Farm, run by Mr. and Mrs. Jones, *Animal Farm* begins with a sketch of farm life from the perspective of the animals. Jones, who drinks excessively, and his nondescript wife do little to care for the animals while living off the animals’ labor. It is old Major, the prize Middle White boar, who speaks in his old age of better times when the animals will set their own laws and enjoy the products of their labor. He tells the farm animals, “All the habits of Man are evil,” and he warns them to avoid human vices, such as living in houses, sleeping in beds, wearing clothes, drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco, touching money, and engaging in trade. It is old Major who leads the farm animals in their first song of solidarity, which they sing so loudly that they wake the Joneses. Jones, hearing the ruckus and assuming

that a fox is responsible for it, fires shots into the darkness and disperses the animals. Three nights later, old Major dies peacefully in his sleep. With him dies the selfless belief system needed to enact his vision.

As old Major has predicted, the overthrow of the Joneses and Manor Farm occurs. Jones, increasingly incapacitated by alcohol, neglects the animals and the fields and finally leaves the animals to starve. In their desperation, the starving animals attack Jones and drive him off Manor Farm. Mrs. Jones flees by another way. Though the humans have been overthrown, it is not harmony but a lengthy power struggle that follows.

In this power struggle, essentially between the two young boars Snowball and Napoleon, one sees at first a sort of idealism, especially in Snowball, who speaks of a system that sounds much like Orwell’s particular vision of “democratic Socialism.” The animals begin by renaming Manor Farm as Animal Farm and by putting into print their seven commandments, designed primarily to identify their tenets and to discourage human vices among themselves. At first, the new order almost appears to work: “Nobody stole, nobody grumbled. . . . Nobody shirked—or almost nobody.” In fact, Orwell’s animals have human weaknesses that lead to their destruction. Mollie, one of the horses, is vain and does not want to forfeit ribbons and lumps of sugar. The sheep, hens, and ducks are too dull to learn the seven commandments. Boxer, a horse, believes blindly in the work ethic and the wisdom of Napoleon. Benjamin, a donkey, is cynical, refusing to act or become involved because he believes his actions are irrelevant. He believes “hunger, hardship, and disappointment” are “the unalterable law of life.” In fact, the one action that Benjamin takes, a desperate attempt to prevent Napoleon from sending his friend Boxer to the glue factory, is futile. When he acts, his actions make no difference. Nothing changes.

Gradually, the pigs begin claiming the privileges of an elite ruling class. They eat better than the other animals, they work less, and they claim more political privileges in making major decisions. The outcome of the power struggle between Snowball and Napoleon is that Napoleon and his trained dogs drive Snowball into hiding. Snowball becomes in exile a sort of political scapegoat, a precursor to Emmanuel Goldstein in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.



Napoleon, now the totalitarian ruler of Animal Farm, rewrites history, convincing the other animals that Snowball was really the cause of all their problems and that he, Napoleon, is the solution to them.

Under Napoleon's rule, Animal Farm declines steadily. As the pigs break the commandments, they rewrite them to conform to the new order. The sheep bleat foolish slogans on Napoleon's behalf. Napoleon's emissary, Squealer, a persuasive political speaker, convinces the increasingly oppressed animals that nothing has changed, that the commandments are as they always were, that history remains as it always was, that they are not doing more work and reaping fewer benefits. Squealer, in his distortion of history and his abuse of language for political purposes, is a precursor of Winston Smith and the other employees in the Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* who spend their days rewriting history and stripping the English language of its meaning. Ironically, all the animals pour their energy into creating a system that leads to their oppression.

The final decay of Animal Farm results from the pigs' engaging in all the human evils about which old Major had forewarned them. The pigs become psychologically and even physically indistinguishable from the humans. The pigs wear clothing, sleep in beds, drink alcohol, walk on two legs, wage wars, engage in trade, and destroy their own kind. Ultimately, despite old Major's vision, nothing has changed. The pigs and their dogs have become bureaucrats and tyrants: "neither pigs nor dogs produced any food by their own labour."

Though *Animal Farm* is antitotalitarian, it cannot really be called prodemocratic Socialism, except in the sense of a warning, because the animals have no choice; the course of their fate appears inevitable. Even if they had been given a choice, little in the novel indicates that it would have mattered. The final image in the novel is of the oppressed "creatures" outside the house looking through the window at the pigs and men fighting over a card game. They "looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which."

NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR

First published: 1949

Type of work: Novel

In the year 1984 in the oppressive society of Oceania, the protagonist Winston Smith futilely tries to preserve his humanity.

Nineteen Eighty-Four, a grim satire directed against totalitarian government, is the story of Winston Smith's futile battle to survive in a system that he has helped to create. The novel is set in 1984 (well into the future when the novel was written) in London, the chief city of Airstrip One, the third most populous of the provinces of Oceania, one of three world powers that are philosophically indistinguishable from, and perpetually at war with, one another.

Smith, thirty-nine, is in marginal health, drinks too much, and lives alone in his comfortless apartment at Victory Mansions, where he is constantly under the eye of a television surveillance system referred to as Big Brother. Smith's wife, Katharine, who lived with him briefly in a loveless marriage—the only kind of marriage permitted by the government—has long since faded from Smith's life, and his day-to-day existence has become meaningless, except insofar as he has memories of a time in his childhood before his mother disappeared. In the midst of this meaningless existence, Smith is approached clandestinely by Julia, a woman who works with him in the Ministry of Truth. She passes him a note that says, "I love you."

The next several months are passed with "secret" meetings between Winston and Julia. From Mr. Charrington, a shopkeeper from whom Winston has bought a diary and an ornamental paperweight, they secure what they believe is a room with privacy from Big Brother's surveillance. During these months together, Winston and Julia begin to hope for a better life. Part of this hope leads them to seek out members of the Brotherhood, an underground resistance movement purportedly led by Emmanuel Goldstein, the official "Enemy of the People." In their search for the Brotherhood, Winston and Julia approach O'Brien, a member of the Inner Party, a man who they believe is part of Goldstein's Brotherhood. Smith

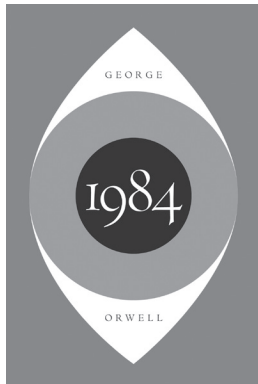
trusts only Julia, O'Brien, and Mr. Charrington. He feels that he can trust no one else in a society in which friend betrays friend and child betrays parent. Both he and Julia know and articulate their knowledge that, in resisting the government and Big Brother, they have doomed themselves. Still, they seem to hope, much as the oppressed animals in Orwell's *Animal Farm* embrace hope in a hopeless situation.

Winston and Julia's small hopes are destroyed when they are arrested by the Thought Police, who surround them in their "private" apartment. They are further disillusioned when they learn that Mr. Charrington is a member of the Thought Police and that their every movement during the past months has been monitored. Winston realizes

further, when he is later being tortured at the Ministry of Love, that O'Brien is supervising the torture.

Evident in both the Ministry of Truth, where history is falsified and language is reduced and muddled, and in the Ministry of Love, where political dissidents and others are tortured, is Orwell's preoccupation with the effects of para-

doxical political language. Even the slogans of the Party are paradoxical: "War Is Peace," "Freedom Is Slavery," and "Ignorance Is Strength." The Ministry of Truth, particularly, is concerned with reducing language, moving toward an ideal language called Newspeak. To clarify the purpose of the language purges, Orwell includes an appendix, "The Principles of Newspeak," in which he explains that Newspeak, the official language of Oceania, has been devised "to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc, or English Socialism." Once Newspeak is fully adopted, "a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc—should be literally unthinkable." It is because Winston Smith still knows Oldspeak that he has been able to commit Thought Crime.



In the Ministry of Love, Smith comes to understand how totalitarian control works, but he continually wonders about the reasons for it. Why, for example, should Big Brother care about him? It is O'Brien who provides Smith with the answer: power. Power, as O'Brien explains, is an end in itself. Power will destroy everything in its path. O'Brien concludes that, when all else is gone, power will remain:

But always—do not forget this, Winston—always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever.

The purpose, then, of totalitarian government becomes only that of sustaining its feeling of power.

Still, even late in the novel, when O'Brien forces Smith to look into a mirror at his naked, tortured body and his "ruined" face, Smith clings to the idea of his humanity. He says to O'Brien, "I have not betrayed Julia." Yet Smith is stripped of this last tie to his humanity before Orwell's bleak vision is complete.

After a brief time of physical recovery, Smith wakes from a dream, talking in his sleep of his love for Julia. He has retained some part of his will and concludes of Big Brother and the Party: "To die hating them, that was freedom." Whatever he says in his sleep is, of course, being monitored by Big Brother. As a result, Smith faces his ultimate horror, the horror that makes him betray Julia. Physically and mentally ruined, Smith is released from the Ministry of Love to await the death that O'Brien has promised him. Smith retains only enough self-awareness to tell Julia, during their final brief meeting, that he has betrayed her. She, too has betrayed him.

Winston's final defeat is encapsulated in the last words of the novel, seconds after the "long-hoped-for bullet" is "entering his brain." He has become convinced of the insanity of his earlier views; his struggle is finished: "He loved Big Brother."

“SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT”

First published: 1936 (collected in *Shooting an Elephant, and Other Essays*, 1950)

Type of work: Essay

In a narrative account of shooting an elephant unnecessarily, Orwell argues that the experience showed him the “real nature of imperialism.”

Based on Orwell’s experience with the Indian Imperial Police (1922-1927), “Shooting an Elephant” is set in Moulmein, in Lower Burma. Orwell, the narrator, has already begun to question the presence of the British in the Far East. He says that, theoretically and secretly, he was “all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British.” Orwell describes himself as “young and ill-educated,” bitterly hating his job.

Orwell’s job, in this instance, is to respond to a report of the death of a local man who was killed by an elephant in musth. Orwell finds the man “lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to the side.” The corpse grins with “an expression of unendurable agony.” At this point, Orwell feels the collective will of the crowd urging him to shoot the elephant, but Orwell, knowing that the elephant is probably no longer dangerous, has no intention of shooting the elephant. He begins to anthropomorphize the elephant, changing the pronouns from “it” to “he,” referring to the elephant’s “preoccupied grandmotherly air,” and concluding that “it would be murder to shoot the elephant.”

Despite Orwell’s aversion to shooting the elephant, he becomes suddenly aware that he will lose face and be humiliated if he does not shoot it. He therefore shoots the elephant. The death itself is sustained in excruciating detail. After three shots, the elephant still does not die. Orwell fires his two remaining shots into the elephant’s heart. He sends someone to get his small rifle, then pours “shot after shot into his heart and down his throat.” Still, the elephant does not die. Orwell, unable to stand the elephant’s suffering and unable to watch and listen to it, goes away. The elephant, like the Burmese people, has become the unwitting victim of the British imperialist’s need to save face. No one is stronger for the experience.

Orwell candidly depicts his unsympathetic actions both in shooting the elephant and in the aftermath, when he is among his fellow British police officers. He is relieved, he admits, that the coolie died, because it gave him a pretext for shooting the elephant. As far as his fellow officers are concerned, he did the right thing. As far as the natives are concerned, he saved face. Yet Orwell concludes, “I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.”

Throughout the essay, Orwell weaves his thesis about the effects of imperialism not only on the oppressed but on the oppressors, as well. He says that “every white man’s life in the East was one long struggle not to be laughed at,” that “when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys,” and that the imperialist “becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib.” Orwell’s essay, however, is more than one person’s riveting narrative about the beginning of an awareness. “Shooting an Elephant” captures a universal experience of going against one’s own humanity at the cost of a part of that humanity.

“POLITICS AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE”

First published: 1946 (collected in *Shooting an Elephant, and Other Essays*, 1950)

Type of work: Essay

Orwell analyzes the corrupting influence of political language on clear thinking and concludes that “political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible.”

“Politics and the English Language,” though written in 1946, remains timely for modern students of language. In this essay, Orwell argues that the English language becomes “ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.” To illustrate his point, Orwell cites writing from two professors, a Communist pamphlet, an essay on psychology in *Politics*, and a letter in the *Tribune*. All these examples,

Orwell argues, have two common faults: staleness of imagery and lack of precision. In his follow-up analysis, he discusses general characteristics of bad writing, including pretentious diction and meaningless words. His purpose in the analysis is to show “the special connection between politics and the debasement of language.”

Orwell maintains that, in his time, political speech and writing are “largely the defence of the indefensible.” That is, the actions of ruthless politicians can be defended, but only by brutal arguments that “do not square with the professed aims of political parties.” He gives examples of the British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, and the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan. In order to talk about such atrocities, Orwell contends, one has to use political language that consists “largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.” Orwell translates for his readers the real meanings of such terms as “pacification,” “transfer of population,” “rectification of frontiers,” and “elimination of unreliable elements.” He concludes: “Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

This premise is one that Orwell explores more fully in his novels *Animal Farm*, particularly in the pigs Napoleon and Squealer, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in Big Brother, Newspeak, and the Ministry of Truth. Orwell’s conclusion in “Politics and the English Language” is less bleak than are his conclusions in the two novels. In the novels, the damage

to language is irreversible. In the essay, Orwell calls his readers to action. He asserts that bad habits spread by imitation “can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble.” He concludes that “one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless phrase . . . into the dustbin where it belongs.”

Orwell’s 1946 essay is still calling readers to action. In 1974, for example, the National Council of Teachers of English began handing out its annual Doublespeak Awards for misuses of language with potential to cause harm or obscure truth. The awards, named in honor of Orwell, are meant to identify deceptive uses of language and to jeer them out of existence. Not surprisingly, perhaps, there is no shortage of nominees.

SUMMARY

George Orwell’s novels and essays have contributed to current literary and political writing an awareness of the connections among language and thinking and political actions. Particularly in his later works, Orwell focused his purpose on writing, merging art with politics, attacking the effects of the power motives of totalitarian governments in one’s humanity, warning his readers of the dangers inherent in “groupthink” and “doublespeak,” and grimly satirizing the human traits that have let oppressed peoples become the victims of those intoxicated by power. Though Orwell’s writing career, by twentieth century standards, was fairly short, several of his essays and novels hold for him a place in Western literature and in political thought.

Carol Franks

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DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does George Orwell, in such works as "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Elephant," make vivid the evils of imperialism?
- What does *Animal Farm* owe to the medieval bestiary?
- What is a dystopian novel? Is a dystopia an intended utopia that has somehow gone wrong?
- Looking back at two of the most famous twentieth century works of the type, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which seems like a more prophetic book?
- Is Orwell correct about the extent of political influence on the English language, or is the "indefensible" use of the English language primarily a result of other influences, such as advertising?

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