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George Orwell: the Man and the Author

In order to truly comprehend a book and its underlying meanings, it is integral to research and learn about the author. The book Nineteen Eighty-Four was written by George Orwell and was first published in 1949. George Orwell was born in Bengal, India, in 1903, and died in London in 1949. Orwell led an interesting and intriguing life that was projected into Nineteen Eighty-Four, and his life is essential to the understanding of the book.

George Orwell was the pen name for Eric Blair. Seen with any kind of objectivity, Orwell's career was a model of hard work and success. Among Orwell's achievements: an Eton scholarship, first novel published before the age of thirty, and authoring of two novels (Nineteen Eighty-Four and Animal Farm) that literally changed the way people think. George Orwell grew up without a close physical connection to his father due to the fact that his father was employed in India while Orwell was schooled in England, and an added emotional distance was created in that his father did not approve of Orwell's choice to be an author. This relationship invariably affected Orwell as a human being and also as a writer. Orwell had been strongly discouraged by his family, and recalled that: "I had to struggle desperately at the beginning, and if I had listened to what people said to me I would never have been a writer." (Meyers 6) It only makes sense, then, that the society in Nineteen Eighty-Four did not allow one to write for personal fulfillment.

One of the dominant themes in Nineteen Eighty-Four is oppression. Throughout the novel, Winston Smith (the main character) felt oppressed by "Big Brother". Whether

it was newspeak, thought crime, or double-think, Winston was not obeying the laws as he should. Once Winston was captured and put into the Ministry of Love, the torture he went through was unbearable. One could wonder where Orwell got his ideas for a setting like the Ministry of Love, and some possible answers lie in a school named St. Cyprians, which Orwell attended from the ages of eight to thirteen.

In England it was very common for young men to attend prep schools. Orwell's parents made a decent income, but not enough to pay the full tuition at St. Cyprians. Orwell described his family's background as "lower upper-middle class." (Shelden 20) Fortunately for his family, the headmasters recognized Orwell's intelligence, and decided to lower tuition by half for Orwell's parents. Though this seemed like a wonderful act of generosity, Orwell felt otherwise. According to his writings, he was treated as a charity case and had an absolutely horrible time at St. Cyprians. (Shelden 20) Orwell depicted the headmaster and his wife as "sadistic, greedy snobs who held a cynical view of education as nothing more than a mechanical process of cramming facts into young minds." (Shelden 25) This description is not unlike the way Orwell describes the Ministry of Love, "the place with no darkness... yet there are no windows... they are always watching." Though certainly the Ministry of Love was much, much worse, it makes sense that Orwell would find his ideas from his childhood experiences. St. Cyprians was in many ways very similar to the Ministry of Love: both had the focus of profit, believed that they could read minds, and punished upon these whims. At St. Cyprians there was no privacy as doors did not fasten (much like the telescreens watching everyone), and the headmasters practiced religious brainwashing (similar to the brainwashing of Newspeak). The domination of school sports also created a feeling of helplessness in Orwell: "that

was the pattern of the school life - a continuous triumph of the strong over the weak.” (Shelden 38) Orwell described his feelings at St. Cyprians: “Whether one laughed or sniveled or went into frenzies of gratitude for small favors, one’s only true feeling was hatred.” (Shelden 25) Though written to describe St. Cyprians, this could easily describe the Ministry of Love. In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Winston has very few friends and feels that he was an outcast in the “Big Brother” infested society. Not surprisingly, Orwell was also an outcast throughout his childhood. Orwell described that he had “disagreeable mannerisms” which made him unpopular throughout his school days. (Why I Write 316) A fellow student at St. Cyprians described him as having “a permanent chip on his shoulder.” (Taylor 38) Though it is not understood why Orwell or Winston were outcasts, it is logical to associate the two.

After Orwell finished his schooling in 1922, he decided to follow in his father’s footsteps and work for the Indian Imperial Police in Burma. This experience was very traumatic for Orwell, and changed his outlook on life immensely. When Orwell served on the Burmese police force there was widespread animosity towards the foreign British rule. Additionally, crime was rampant, and Buddhist monks were organizing rebellions. This was Orwell’s first chance to see what imperialistic rule could do to a country. Orwell witnessed many coolie and slave beatings. He described one instance: “He was sub-human, a different kind of animal.” (Shelden 84) Unfortunately, Orwell would see more and more of these attacks, and eventually became guilty for lashing out at his own servants. Orwell would come to hate himself for these actions and despise the system that encouraged it. (Shelden 84) With England’s imperialistic nature, Orwell began to see that power is often pursued for its own sake (Patai 221) This simple concept is very prevalent

in Nineteen Eighty-Four with O'Brien, "Big Brother", and the idea of controlling everything including a person's thoughts! For example, O'Brien waited until Winston was at a suitable place before actually capturing him. He waited while Winston's health improved and until Winston had read some of Goldstein's book. O'Brien was aware of Winston's thought crime long before he actually captured him. Constantly questioned by O'Brien, Winston eventually realized: "The aim of their constant questioning and pain was simply to humiliate him and destroy his power of arguing and reasoning." (Nineteen Eighty-Four 249) Patai described O'Brien's actions in an almost sadistic fashion: "O'Brien waits until Winston is at a sufficient height from which to fall, and the harder the fall, the greater O'Brien's enjoyment of the game and the more intense his awareness of his own power." (Patai 227) O'Brien explained this quite clearly: "We make him one of ourselves before we kill him." (Nineteen Eighty-Four 263) Orwell's experience of being a practitioner of power in Burma must have ultimately given him an understanding of what drives one to power and how one achieves it.

Burma also had a very direct impact on Orwell's writings. Obviously his experiences there led to many of his creative ideas, but Burma's social and political structure had an even greater influence on Orwell. Orwell's job was actually quite an extensive surveillance operation, which is interesting to note considering the nature of Nineteen Eighty-Four. "The police of the sub-division are acquainted with the residence and movements of all bad characters, and that efficient and intelligent supervision is exercised over them as well as over conditionally released prisoners." (Shelden 97) Orwell explained: "The Burmese experience increased my natural hatred for authority." (Savage 4) Orwell could not have had a better opportunity to see what it was truly like to

be the oppressor, and it is safe to assume that Nineteen Eighty-Four would not have had nearly the same similarities or effects without Orwell's experience in Burma. Also, Orwell's job in Burma kept him absent from a time of great turmoil back in London. "His implicit absence at a critical time from the Europe of his adult activity also contributed to that attitude of 'estrangement' which is so identifiably a part of Orwell's creative matrix." (Rai 28) Orwell was aware of the events, but could use his developed imagination from his absence to more radically describe these events. This is most likely the way that Nineteen Eighty-Four began. Burma's lasting impact ran very deep, and allowed Orwell to focus on what appears to be one of the most important aspects of his literature: "Orwell's focus is on the individual, and how the last humane impulses – love, desire for freedom, the search for knowledge – can be controlled to the point of obliteration." (Savage 5) In 1927, after five years of duty in Burma, Orwell resigned and decided it was time to make his career as a writer. It was finally time for him to start writing about his experiences, and this is something Orwell did with amazing perfection. Orwell describes how deeply his experiences in Burma affected him in his essay: *Why I Write*:

First I spent five years in an unsuitable profession and then I underwent poverty and the sense of failure. This increased my natural hatred of authority and made me for the first time fully aware of the existence of the working classes, and the job in Burma had given me some understanding of the nature of imperialism: but these experiences were not enough to give me an accurate political orientation. Then came Hitler, the Spanish Civil War, etc. by the end of 1935 I had still failed to reach a firm decision. (313)

The preceding statement clearly proves that Orwell's first-hand experiences were imperative to his writings.

Essentially, Nineteen Eighty-Four is about the world of Winston Smith during war-time London. It is a world of propaganda and surveillance with Big Brother's poster

on every street corner, two minute hates, and telescreens constantly monitoring everyone. And Winston's job at the Ministry of Truth is very interesting: he falsifies information for the Times and sometimes 'vaporizes' people from existence. The goal of Newspeak (the new language for Oceania): "in the end we shall make thought crime literally impossible, because there will not be words in which to express it." (Nineteen Eighty-Four 74) In the book, Winston keeps a private journal (something that is illegal to do in Oceania), and yet every day he goes to work getting rid of even the slightest forms of personal thought. The hypocrisy in this is ridiculous, and yet, makes perfect sense as Orwell wrote against oppression, but once worked to help instill it in Burma. There was an obvious self-projection of Orwell into his main character.

Each of Orwell's novels, by extension, is the story of a rebellion that fails, of an individual – who, however feebly or obliquely, attempts to throw over the traces. Each ends in more or less the same way, with the protagonist humbled, defeated, sent back to square one. Winston, brainwashed and re-educated, knows that he loves Big Brother. There is no way out. (Taylor 319)

Simply put, Winston was rebellious, consumed with self-pity, and planned a future that depended not on selfishness but on overthrowing the oppressor. Orwell's ideals as a writer and a person were exactly the same as Winston's.

As a writer, Orwell was always influenced by negative impulses. "He needed to write *against* something." (Patai 7) Orwell's life was entirely surrounded by perpetual negativity, and the explanations for it only further help to explain the negativity of

Nineteen Eighty-Four.

When did Orwell begin to cultivate or have cultivated for him, the notion of his personal inadequacy? Undoubtedly he felt that he had disappointed his parents, his father especially, by his choice of career, and yet the whole thing seems much more integral to him, much more bound up in his idea of who he was, than to have been a consequence of parental hurt. To go back to 'Why I Write', it is the off-handedness of the line about every book being destined to fail that really

startles, the absence of gesture. It was Orwell, we can infer, who decided that he was a failure. (Taylor 320)

Orwell was a very driven and manic writer. He once confessed in a notebook that he always felt guilty about his work and fearful that his creative energy would dry up:

“There has literally been not one day in which I did not feel that I was idling ... and I have never been able to get away from this neurotic feeling that I was wasting time.”

(Meyers 5) Winston was not able to derive any fulfillment from his journal because he had to hide it in his wall. He never even got the chance to share it with his paramour, Julia. And wasn't Winston wasting time every day “vaporizing” people at work? Again the reader is driven to wonder how much difference there really is between Winston and Orwell. The perpetual negativity, the fact that Orwell believed he never succeeded, and the fact that Winston finally accepted, loved, and lost to “Big Brother” exemplified the desolate emptiness that Orwell seemed so obsessed with presenting to his readers. “I can never get any sense of achievement out of my work because it always goes slower than I intend. As soon as a book is finished, I begin from the very next day worrying because the next one is not begun, and I am haunted with the fear that there never will be a next one – that my impulse is exhausted for good and all.” (Meyers 5) The negativity that Orwell and Winston both present and endure is equivalent.

The scenes from Nineteen Eighty-Four that take place in the Ministry of Love are dramatically depressing and quite explicit in nature. There are many explanations for these depressing descriptions, and most relate to Orwell's physical and mental state during the time he finished writing the book. Orwell wrote much of the novel while he was living in a farmhouse on the island of Jura, where he moved despite increasingly bad health. Orwell was sick with tuberculosis in 1946, and how ill he was had everything to

do with Nineteen Eighty-Four. He wouldn't go to the hospital for treatment because a diagnosis of tuberculosis would have meant immediate admittance (which is what happened anyway once the novel was completed). "Two things dominated the near-end of Orwell's life, each linked to the other: his failing health and his intense desire to finish Nineteen Eighty-Four." (Taylor 381) Orwell's description of his treatment in the sanatorium was very close to his portrayal of Winston Smith after his torture in the novel and revealed Orwell's physical state upon completion of the book:

The truly frightening thing was the emaciation of the body. The barrel of the ribs was as narrow as that of a skeleton... The curvature of the spine was astonishing. The thin shoulders were hunched forward so as to make a cavity of the chest, the scraggy neck seemed to be bending double under the weight of the skull... he was aware of his ugliness. (Nineteen Eighty-Four 281)

When Orwell was in the sanatorium, the doctors had to take extreme measures to prevent him from writing. The medical staff insisted on complete physical and mental rest, so they confiscated his typewriter. Then, when he was found writing with a ballpoint pen, they put his right arm in plaster. (Meyers 5) Orwell, much like Winston, had an un-ending drive to finish things important to him. Disregarding the physical symptoms of tuberculosis, Orwell did everything he could to finish Nineteen Eighty-Four. In a similar fashion, Winston was not willing to simply be silent in his angst against "Big Brother": he had to read Goldstein's book, had an affair with Julia, and kept private thoughts in his journal. Orwell was aware of the huge effect that his tuberculosis had on his writing, and stated: "The vulgarity of the torture in 'Room 101' business ... I think it is a good idea but the execution of it would have been much different if I had not written it under the influence of tuberculosis." (Meyers 4) No matter what the circumstances were, these two had a drive that never dissipated.

Writing in general was always very important to George Orwell. In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Winston's job working for the Ministry of Truth is a very integral position. As Winston dealt with the relevance of his career and the fact that he was destroying history every day, he decided to start writing in a personal journal. Orwell stated in his essay, *Why I Write*, "I think from the very start my literary ambitions were mixed up with the feeling of being isolated and undervalued. I knew that I had a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts, and I felt that this created a sort of private world in which I could get my own back for my failure in everyday life." (314) The fact that Orwell gave Winston such a controversial job and had him use writing as a form of escape came from Orwell's own feelings about writing. Winston professionally destroyed the work of others while writing his own work. In his job he altered records of the past to fit party policy, and in private he wrote factually in his diary. "The first kind of writing is mechanical and exhausting; the second is psychologically liberating, but also sets off disturbing memories and dreams. The first is systematic lying in Newspeak, the second a passionate search for truth on a sheet of paper." (Meyers 9) These opposing writing styles forced Winston to practice doublethink (the ability to hold simultaneously two contradictory opinions which cancel each other out).

Winston was manipulated by the system, but his role was also part of the system that manipulated others. Orwell certainly related to this: "Orwell's focus is on the individual, and how the last humane impulses - love, desire for freedom, the search for knowledge- can be controlled to the point of obliteration." (Savage 5) Orwell's fear that provoked the writing of Nineteen Eighty-Four is the same fear that Winston experienced constantly. Orwell understood very much that the fear of government stopped the

proletariats from expressing themselves, which is deeply expressed in Nineteen Eighty-Four. Orwell even stated, “So long as the bourgeoisie are the dominant class, literature must be bourgeoisie.” (Rai 31) The power that government had on expression greatly effected Orwell, and therefore Winston’s career focused on this negativity and became a very prominent theme in the book. “Several of Orwell’s essays explore the conditions that allow or prevent the freedom of expression (and freedom from self-censorship) that’s essential for good writing to exist. The assumption that the act of writing is in itself a political act runs through all of Orwell’s work.” (Meyers 7) The simple fact that Winston wrote on his own made the government perceive him as a traitor, and Orwell emphasized that pessimism.

A critic once stated that “If Orwell had not existed, it might have been necessary to invent him.” (Rai 10) Such a strong statement cannot be disregarded. Orwell’s work has changed literature, and the themes that Orwell addressed have helped people understand many situations from more than one perspective. Orwell always had a goal in mind when he was writing, and unlike Winston, made a career of telling people his perception of the truth. In fact, Orwell derived his clear style from moral integrity (Meyers 10) In one letter Orwell stated: “My chief hope for the future is that the common people have never parted with their moral code.” (Taylor 271) Orwell felt passionately that the truth should be shared and people should not sway from their beliefs. Though Orwell’s beliefs regarding politics are not entirely clear (he never truly declared a political party, though he did state that he was against totalitarianism), he always wanted to make political writing into an art. “I write because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a

hearing.” (Why I Write 318) The importance of Winston’s job again came into play, because Orwell’s concern with the truth took him to its source: language. “Ultimately the nature of language has economic and political causes.” (Taylor 376) “Despite his vast influence, Orwell was never part of a movement, and remained a solitary, individualistic writer with a stubborn message: think for yourself and write the truth.” (Meyers 10)

Nineteen Eighty-Four is a book passionately written to help portray the negative aspects of dictatorships. Despite what he would want one to believe, George Orwell was one of the most influential prose writers of the twentieth century. George Orwell’s life brings much meaning and understanding to Nineteen Eighty-Four, and also shows that in some ways the book is almost autobiographical to different themes that appeared in Orwell’s life. Both George Orwell and Winston Smith believed that the pen is mightier than the sword, and that through truth came understanding. Orwell’s method of self-projection into Winston is immaculate, and Nineteen Eighty-Four became such a successful book because of his life experiences.

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