

George
Orwell example
narrative essay



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Animal Farm was written between November 1943 and February 1944, but was not published until August 1945, principally as a result of political objections that arose over the book's attack on Stalin and the Soviet Union. It was turned down by a number of publishers in England (including T. S. Eliot at Faber and Faber) and America. One American publisher rejected it because, he said, Americans were not in the mood for animal stories. Orwell, fearing implicit censorship and convinced of the urgency of his message, considered publishing it himself as a two-shilling pamphlet. Finally, Secker and Warburg agreed to publish it, but it was still held for publication until the end of the war, ostensibly because of lack of paper, but more likely because it was still deemed imprudent to publish something attacking the Soviet Union when it was a valuable ally of the West. When the novel was finally published the magnitude of its success surprised Orwell as much as anyone. The first edition sold out the first month, and by the spring of 1946 it was being translated into nine languages. After the Book-of-the-Month Club in America chose it as a selection, it sold more than a half-million copies, relieving him from financial worries for the first time in his life.

The specific political purpose that had aroused Orwell's sense of urgency was his desire to explode the myth of the Soviet Union as the paradigm of the socialist state. He also wanted to expose the dangers of totalitarianism, which he saw reflected in the politics of expedience, the devaluation of objective truth, and the systematic manipulation of the common people through propaganda. This fable about the animals who overthrow their human oppressors only to be oppressed once again by those animals who were once their comrades has been used to support various ideological

points of view. However, while Orwell clearly indicts the betrayal of the revolution that occurs on Marsh Farm, there is no indication that the revolution itself is being satirized. When Old Major, the political visionary who represents Marx, describes the plight of the animals—their lack of freedom, their misery, their powerlessness—in his declaration of the principles of Animalism, it is clear that he is describing allegorically the relationship between the working class and the rich, landowning upper class of any society. The revolution that occurs spontaneously (it is significant that it is not activated by the conspiracy of a privileged few) establishes an idyllic, primitive community that is reminiscent of Orwell's depiction of Barcelona in December 1936. While the revolution itself is entirely affirmed, the major question is why it fails, why it proves to be only temporary.

Orwell's identification of what exactly goes wrong on the Animal Farm is more complex than many readers give him credit for; he suggests several causes: the perverse drive for power among those who already possess it, the lack of intelligence and memory among the lower animals (which makes them powerless against the autocracy of the pigs), and, perhaps most important, the idea that to alter merely the shape of a society is insufficient as a revolutionary goal. The pigs clearly represent a savage critique of an intellectual, elite class. Because they organize and supervise the operations of the farm, they establish themselves as an isolated, privileged class; as a result, Orwell suggests, they are displaced from the renewing work of the farm, from the communal life of the other animals, and from the tempering moral sources of their origin. Thus isolated from the sources of their cultural

and moral strength, they become as deracinated and self-serving as Orwell believed many British left-wing intellectuals had become.

But Orwell also dramatically emphasizes that the animals' lack of a cultural heritage (seen in their lack of memory and in their illiteracy, which deprives them of a conscious past) renders them powerless against the totalitarian oppression of the pigs. Their lack of a verifiable history and of a historical consciousness (what Orwell was trying to awaken in common-culture Englishmen in *Coming Up for Air* and in *The Lion and the Unicorn*) makes them easily subject to the manipulative uses of language and power. As they repeatedly witness the falsification of history and the rewriting of the seven commandments of Animalism, their disquiet is appeased only when they are convinced that "their memories had been at fault." Thus, the decay of the revolution stems not simply from the consolidation of power by the pigs but also from the animals' lack of a conscious moral-cultural tradition, for they have no heritage of justice and equality to fall back on. Without the agency of memory, which could preserve the ideals of the revolution and enable them to shape the future of their own society, the prerevolutionary shape of the farm is gradually restored, although under a different leadership.

In 1947 Orwell said that *Animal Farm* was "the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole." His fable is a remarkably effective integration of a political message within a unified fictional narrative, and it is significantly a radical departure in form from his documentaries and fiction of the 1930s. The use of the fable, the simplicity of style, and the notable absence of a narrative or authorial voice provide *Animal Farm* with the

potential for a mythic quality that engages a deeper level of consciousness than either realistic fiction or the essay. While this is very likely Orwell's most perfect literary production, the form of the fable does limit the emotional and psychological complexity of the story, which is the limitation that Orwell sought to transcend in the more complex *Nineteen Eighty-Four*....

In *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* Orwell envisions a time in the near future when the world has been divided into three super states, each of which is ruled by a system of oligarchical collectivism that has brutally eliminated privacy, intellectual freedom, friendship, and the autonomy of the individual, and each of which has systematically deprived its inhabitants of a verifiable history and of the resources of a cultural consciousness. It is a mistake to read this work as a fatalistic prophecy of the death of civilization, for Orwell's primary purpose is to magnify and distort disturbing conditions, tendencies, and habits of thought that he saw existing in the world, so that they could be recognized and arrested. What makes *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a more powerful, disturbing dystopia than such works as Huxley's *Brave New World* and Zamyatin's *We* (both of which he had read) is, first, the temporal proximity of its setting (only thirty-five years from its publication, whereas Huxley's and Zamyatin's imagined futures are set hundreds of years away), and second, the disturbing familiarity and plausibility of the world that Orwell constructs. Because the social world of *1984* is not that far removed from the reader's own experience, he becomes involved in a more profound, intimate way than he does in Huxley's remote chrome-and-glass society. Orwell wanted his readers to understand not only the intellectual-theoretical

foundations of this future society, but to experience the dull, shabby horror of living in such a world.

The first two-thirds of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* portrays the future as a schizoid, psychotic world, but Orwell counterpoints this disturbing portrait by showing that an awareness of the past (which the Party is determined to extirpate from human consciousness) provides a means of understanding the present and becomes the single resource by which the novel's protagonist, Winston Smith, can preserve his sanity and establish his individuality. While the world of 1984 has virtually erased the private, subjective life, Winston surreptitiously begins his diary (itself a political crime) in order to give form to his "ancestral memory," a vague term which is used to express the recesses of his cultural consciousness, his shadowy sense of the past, and his last vestiges of a communal human spirit. The motivation for Winston's revolt is not so much political as it is cultural and historical; he seeks to validate his "ancestral memory" by seeking out ordinary, bourgeois experience (a quest not entirely dissimilar to Flory's, Comstock's, or Bowling's). Toward this end he gathers a number of relics of the past: a diary, a paperweight, and Charrington's upstairs room, where he and Julia make love. There is a timeliness and peace about this bourgeois room, and it becomes a place where he and Julia can establish (albeit temporarily) a normative and private life. This "pocket of the past" is both an escape from the nightmarish world of Oceania and a place where they can recover the sources of ordinary human experience, which the party recognizes as an embryonic threat to their control and therefore seeks to extinguish. It is important to remember that this work, like previous works of Orwell's, does

not simply assert a nostalgia for the past but asserts the value and significance of the past to human consciousness, and therefore to the preservation of human liberty and the human heritage.

The only hope outside of himself that Winston feels lies in his quasi-faith in the proles, who comprise eighty-five percent of the population (a large figure which suggests that it comprises the majority of common, ordinary Englishmen, what Orwell elsewhere referred to as the “big public”). Winston believes that they have unconsciously preserved the ordinary values and habit of life through an “ancestral transmission of the human spirit,” and yet he finds in them no potential for acting upon their instincts or even of becoming conscious of their instinctual heritage. The proles are strikingly evocative of a pre-1914 working-class world, a class that Orwell periodically idealized, but whose “semi-anaesthesia” he feared would abet their own oppression. The image of the working-class woman who sings as she hangs up her clothes defines for Winston the abiding human spirit that the Party has not extinguished, but, finally, the proles are no more conscious of their past or of their heritage than are the animals in *Animal Farm* and are vulnerable to the same kind of oppression.

The last third of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—dominated by the interpolated chapters from Emmanuel Goldstein’s “The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism,” and Winston’s systematic “re-education” in the Ministry of Love as O’Brien expounds on the theoretical foundations of Ingsoc—does not effectively develop or resolve the thematic or plot elements established in the first two-thirds. It is in this section that Orwell’s focus appears to shift away from the dramatic framework and toward the direct,

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unfiltered expression of his political purpose. By the close of the novel, Winston's final obliteration and the mute survival of the proles suggest Orwell's pessimistic outlook in 1948 for the survival of England's liberal heritage, a pessimism which he was repeatedly expressing elsewhere (as in statements such as, "When you are on a sinking ship, your thoughts will be about sinking ships"). There is no doubt that this grim, powerful, affecting work has continued to express the latent insecurities and anxieties of our age.

For Orwell the problem of making people conscious of what was happening around them, as well as awakening a critical habit of mind that would resist the political rationalizations of power politics, had been his most significant literary challenge since 1936. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* he found a form capable of meeting that challenge by fusing realism and fantasy: realism enabled him to establish a recognizable world and to express some of his most deeply felt social and cultural attitudes; fantasy enabled him to construct a mythic framework that would dramatize the nightmarish quality of the political society of 1984 and to affect the deepest resources of the reader's imagination. Although the work was immediately successful, it coincided with the emergence of the Cold War consciousness, and because it was often used to support political points of view that Orwell never intended, he was provoked to directly respond to such "misreadings": It has been suggested by some of the reviewers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that it is the author's view that this, or something like this, is what will happen inside the next forty years in the Western world. This is not correct. I think that, allowing for the book being after all a parody, something like *Nineteen*

Eighty-Four could happen. This is the direction in which the world is going at the present time, and the trend lies deep in the political, social and economic foundations of the contemporary world situation. Specifically the danger lies in the structure imposed on Socialist and on Liberal capitalist communities by the necessity to prepare for total war with the U. S. S. R. and the new weapons, of which of course the atomic bomb is the most powerful and most publicized. But danger lies also in the acceptance of a totalitarian outlook by intellectuals of all colours. The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one: Don't let it happen. It depends on you....

Bibliography: David Morgan Zehr, " George Orwell," in British Novelists: 1930-1959, Part 2, edited by Bernard Oldsey, Gale Research Company, 1983, pp. 407-22. Reprinted in DISCovering Authors 3. 0 , Gale Group, 1999.