

Fighting imperialism:
Orwell's essays as a
lens for
understanding his
novels



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George Orwell continues to be one of the most frequently quoted and best-loved British authors of the 20th century. Even years after his death, he is still celebrated by people all over the world. The political consciousness that pervades his writing ensures that he remains to be a touchstone for most readers. In particular, most readers refer to him as a primary literary protagonist during the Cold War era. This is confirmed by The Socialist Party of Great Britain by arguing that “Orwell was a fine, though somewhat confused, journalist who became famous for the plain style of writing evident in his essays; his successful attempt to make political writing an art; his famous satires on totalitarianism; his search for objectivity and honesty in journalism depicted most graphically in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938)” (1). Orwell's writing became a source of great controversies during his lifetime. *1984*, his last novel, was the definition of a ‘canonical text’ that focused on conservative anti-communism. His miscellaneous work, *The Collected Essays*, enabled the readers to understand the context of Orwell's books.

As World War II came to an end, Orwell was finishing up his novel, *1984*. The book became famous, so much so that its key phrases and title are still used to show the dangers of excessive government control. The developed ideas in his book expressed the dangers he witnessed through the fascism of Italy, Spain, and Germany, and the Soviet Union's communism (The Socialist Party of Great Britain 1). “Nineteen Eighty-four” - are ideas Orwell developed to express the dangers he saw mid-century in the fascism of Germany, Italy and Spain and communism in the Soviet Union (Christie 1).” It is argued that future generations will continue using Orwellian terms to fight authoritarian governments. Furthermore, the generations to come may also use the terms

to decry democracies that utilize Big Brother techniques under the pretext of self-preservation. Orwell was critical of individuals who accepted, as well as parroted, the party line regardless of the party values and style of leadership. Nobody ever imagined that Orwell's essay, which praised the Common Toad, would become famous sixty years after it was written. In the beginning, the article was written to fill a newspaper column. The article had all the characteristics that had been associated with Orwell's style of writing. Particularly, " it focused on an unglamorous subject matter, the unnoticed details, the baleful glare, and the belief in humanity" (Paxman 1). The piece is not about the Toad, but about spring, which is the most promising time of the year. The essay is one among the many articles written by Orwell that criticized governments and their leaders. After reading this piece, the question that one asks is why would he write an article focusing on controversial political issues?

George Orwell was initially known as Eric Blair, and was the son of a government official who oversaw the opium trade. He was born in India, but was transferred to Burma as an imperial police officer (Biography 1). " The son of a British civil servant, George Orwell spent his first days in India, where his father was stationed. His mother brought him and his older sister, Marjorie, to England about a year after his birth and settled in Henley-on-Thames. His father stayed behind in India and rarely visited (Biography 1)." Initially, he did not show any signs of liberal ideas, but as time went by, he started to change his thoughts. It was as if something had interfered with his conscience, making him adopt a liberal view. Blair began to hate the dirty job of breaking strikes and maintaining order among the locals. After going

through these situations, it is likely that Blair started developing a hatred for what the government was doing. It became clear to him that he could not go on being a member of a regime that was oppressing other people. In those days, prisons overflowed, and the villages were destroyed and burnt to the ground. When someone sees other individuals undergoing too much suffering at the hands of his or her people, he or she may become affected.

In this case, Blair saw that enough was enough, and he could not continue being a part of the imperial government. It might have been wise for Blair to refrain from writing about controversial political issues at the time. However, the experience he had in Burma made him adopt a liberal view and start criticizing governments. Five years in Burma was enough to change Eric Blair into George Orwell, a man who hated imperialism at all costs. As Chen writes, " Five years in Burma had transformed Eric Blair into " George Orwell", a man who hated the imperialism I was serving with bitterness which I probably cannot make clear" (1). Christie adds that " Orwell's political lines started to fuel with the increasing loathing that he developed towards imperialism. He decided that he was going to satirize the absurd claims by the British colonialists regarding their racial superiority" (1). Going to Burma and later changing his mind about the actions of the British Imperial government proves that Orwell did some self-analysis. He observed the atrocities being directed to the locals and made a decision that it was not fair at all.

To get a deeper insight of the works of Orwell, one has to dig further into his experiences as a police officer. For example, while in Spain, Orwell

recollected about the conditions that were present on the battlefield. At first, <https://assignbuster.com/fighting-imperialism-orwells-essays-as-a-lens-for-understanding-his-novels/>

he was fascinated by the fact that workers had taken over the city of Barcelona. It becomes evident that Orwell argued that the rich were cruel because they exploited the poor. In Barcelona, he came across a working class that was fast turning into a class for itself. It appears that Orwell wanted the poor members of the society to rise to the occasion and start taking advantage of the available opportunities (Chen 1). Venturing into controversial political topics and issues was a chance to enlighten the members of the public about what was taking place. However, the thrill he had experienced dwindled after he was put on the front line. "Orwell's writing was the source of as much controversy during his life as it was when left and right fought over his literary corpse after his death (Chen 1)." Orwell did not like the conditions that the soldiers faced while on the battlefield. They had to put up with muddy trenches, the terrifying presence of rats, drenched dugouts, human excrements, and infestations of lice. What kind of a government lets its citizens face such conditions in the name of fighting its enemies? Additionally, the Imperial soldiers had antiquated weaponry, as well as inadequate training. If the government wanted them to defeat its enemies, would it not have trained them well and given them superior weapons? His experience in Spain can help us answer the question regarding Orwell's focus on controversial political topics. It is clear that he saw the top government officials and leaders as being individuals who only cared about themselves. In particular, they wanted the British Empire to fight its enemies to push forward their personal agendas. These experiences made him criticize dictators regarding their selfish nature and treatment of their subjects.

Orwell's essays also help in providing answers to the question of why he preferred to cover controversial political issues. One such essay, "Shooting an Elephant", tells us of an experience he had in Burma. He sees an elephant that has run amok and is using its knees to beat a bunch of grass. He aims at the elephant decides to pull the trigger, but the beast seems to remain standing. However, a mysterious and terrible change comes over the elephant's body and every line on its body changes. All of a sudden the elephant appears struck, shrunk, and immensely old. At this point, questions are likely to start crossing the minds of the readers. What did Orwell want to represent after using the elephant as an example? What message did he want to pass across to the audience? Assessing the essay closely, one can conclude that Orwell was representing a political issue. (Paxman 1). Paxman states, "The atom bombs are piling up in the factories, the police are prowling through the cities, the lies are streaming from the loudspeakers, but the earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it" (1). In particular, he wanted to demonstrate that the imperial project taking place in Burma was futile. Earlier, Orwell stated that the life of a white man in the East proved to be a struggle and could not be laughed at. In his bibliography, it is written "Orwell took all sorts of jobs to make ends meet, including being a dishwasher" (1). He goes on to say that he killed the elephant so as not to look like a fool. It becomes clear that Orwell hated imperialism because he acknowledged that imperialism was not going to be a success. Having experienced the difficulties that white men faced in the East, he addresses the issue for people to know his discontent with it. The stance that Orwell adopts on the issue of imperialism paints a man who

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seems to know all its negative effects. He believes that countries in the East need to be given the chance to rule themselves and make their own decisions. He took it upon himself to try and create awareness about the disadvantages of imperialism.

Looking at Orwell's style of writing, he had his reasons as to why he wrote the essay praising the Common Toad and other texts. For instance, when he wrote the essay he was referring to the spring political season but not about the toads. This is confirmed by The Orwell Prize " I mention the spawning of the toads because it is one of the phenomena of Spring which most deeply appeal to me, and because the toad, unlike the skylark and the primrose, has never had much of a boost from poets" (1). The article also adds that " As for Spring, not even the narrow and gloomy streets round the Bank of England are quite able to exclude it. It comes seeping in everywhere, like one of those new poison gases which pass through all filters" (The Orwell Prize 1). Additionally, When he was a young boy, he wrote for the sake of writing by making up stories or describing scenes. " However, as he grew up, his writing started to evolve, and he began to focus mostly on political issues" (Wengraf 1). Additionally, Wengraf writes that " Orwell did not become a militant in and of the working class movement, nor did he adopt the world outlook of the workers' movement, that is, Marxism. Rather he adopted the role of the self-conscious outsider who, while investigating the conditions of the workers and the poor (and sympathizing with them), would retain his individual independence and detachment" (1). He provided four reasons that drive people to write. A close assessment of these issues can help us understand why he decided to follow a political dimension in his

writing. The first reason why people write, according to Orwell, is because of sheer egoism. Pure egoism occurs when writers become extremely self-centered and vain, making them desire writing about themselves. In this case, they hope to show the world what they can do or make their opinions and views noted. Could Orwell have focused on controversial political issues to make his opinions and views prominent? The second reason for writing is aesthetic enthusiasm among the writers. In this case, Orwell postulated that people write because they take pleasure in the words and beauty of the world. Such writers hope to express and share their valuable experiences with their audience. At this point, we get to understand why he focused on the issue of imperialism. Going to Burma opened his eyes on the suffering the locals were facing at the hands of the British police officers. Therefore, he focused on topics that would allow him to share his experiences with his audience while serving as a law-enforcement officer. The third reason for people to write is because of historical impulse. Such types of writers have an interest in facts concerning the contemporary world, and they want to record them to inform future generations. Orwell must have wanted the next generation to understand and appreciate the political landscape during his time. In this case, he decided to write his texts and essays following a political landscape to educate future generations on the predicaments at the time. The fourth reason for people to write is because of political considerations. Writers with this motive aim to change their societies through raising awareness, altering peoples' perceptions, and so on. It is evident that to Orwell, this is the most important reason for writing. During his time, momentous political revolutions were occurring in Europe, World Wars were ensuing, and grim totalitarian regimes such as Nazism and <https://assignbuster.com/fighting-imperialism-orwells-essays-as-a-lens-for-understanding-his-novels/>

Stalinism were reigning. He made it his responsibility to raise awareness on issues that were of political importance.

Orwell was said to be a self-described socialist, as a result of the lessons he learned in his early life. His experiences in Burma turned him into an anti-imperialist who wanted to expose the oppression of the poor and working class. As portrayed in the NPR article, "Orwell had lived in Burma in the 1920s as an officer in the Imperial Police Force" (1). This experience shaped his writings. Moreover, he wanted to increase the rights of the poor and the working class in the society. He became a contradictory and controversial writer who took diverse and courageous positions regarding his works. The essay "Some Thoughts on the Common Toad" paints a clear picture of a person who hated what the dictators of the time were doing. He acknowledged that the only platform he was going to use to reach these dictators was his writing. He became obsessed with criticizing Stalinism, especially towards the end of his life. In the essay "Some Thoughts on the Common Toad", Orwell argues that "So long as you are not actually ill, hungry, frightened or immured in a prison or a holiday camp, Spring is still Spring. The atom bombs are piling up in the factories, the police are prowling through the cities, the lies are streaming from the loudspeakers, but the earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it" (Paxman 1). He wanted people to understand that regardless of what the dictators were doing, they could not stop them from enjoying what they wanted. Therefore, Orwell focused on controversial political issues because he wanted to promote awareness among the people.