

Political Purpose and Aesthetic Purpose in the Fiction of George Orwell during the 1940s

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Preface

The British novelist George Orwell (1903-1950) achieved prominence in the late 1940s as the author of two brilliant satires, Animal Farm (1945) and Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949). He wrote documentaries, essays, and criticism. During the 1930s and later, he established himself as one of the most important and influential voices of the century. Eric Arthur Blair, later George Orwell, was born in 1903 in the Indian village of Motihari which lies near the border of Nepal. At that time, India was a part of the British Empire.

In 1922, Eric joined the Indian Imperial Police. In doing so he was already breaking away from the path most of his school-fellows would take, for Eton often led to either Oxford or Cambridge. Instead, he was drawn to a life of travel and action. He was trained in Burma, where he served in the police force for five years. Even at this early stage of his life, his ideas about writing and his political ideas were closely linked. It was not simply that he wished to break away from British Imperialism in India; he wished to "escape from every form of man's dominion over man" (15), as he said in The Road to Wigan Pier (1937). Moreover, the social structure of his country depended on "the dominion over others", not just over the Burmese, but over the English working class.

The original version of Down and Out in Paris and London was completed in October 1930 and came to only 35,000 words for Orwell used only a part of his material. Down and Out in Paris and London is not a novel; it is a kind of documentary account of life unknown to most of its readers. And this was the point of it. He wished to bring the English middle class, of which he was a member, to an understanding that the life they led

and enjoyed was founded upon the life under their very noses. Here one can see two typical aspects of Orwell as a writer, his idea of himself as a writer who unveils painful truth, which people for various reasons do not wish to see; and his idea of himself as a representative of the English moral conscience.

After two rejections from publishers Orwell wrote Burmese Days (published in 1934), a book based on his experiences in the colonial service in Burma, India. His next book was A Clergyman's Daughter (1935) and then Keep the Aspidistra Flying (1936). In 1936, he received a commission from the Left Book Club to examine the conditions of the poor and unemployed. This resulted in The Road to Wigan Pier (1937). He went on living among the poor about whom he was to write his book. Once again it was a journey away from the comparatively comfortable middle-class life. His account of drawing out communities in the north of England in this book is full of detail and conveys to the reader what it was like to go down a mine. When the Left Book Club read what he had written about the English class system and English socialism in The Road to Wigan Pier they were not pleased, and when the book was published it contained a preface by Victor Gollancz taking issue with many of Orwell's main points. And another fact criticized by Orwell was that most of the socialists tended to be members of the middle class. The kind of socialist Orwell makes fun of is the sort who spouts phrases like "proletarian solidarity", and who puts off respectable people, the people for whom Orwell wants to write.

Having completed The Road to Wigan Pier he went to Spain at the end of 1936, with the idea of writing newspaper articles on the Civil War,

which had broken out there. The conflict in Spain was between the communist-socialist Republic, and General Franco's Fascist military rebellion. When Orwell arrived in Barcelona he was astonished by the atmosphere he found there; what had seemed impossible in England seemed a fact of daily life in Spain. Class distinctions seemed to have vanished. There was a shortage of everything, but there was equality. Orwell joined in the struggle by enlisting in the militia of the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificaci^ón de Marxista), which was associated with the British Labor Party.

For the first time in his life socialism seemed a reality, something for which it was worth fighting for. Orwell received a basic military training and was sent to the front in Aragon, near Zaragoza. He spent a couple of dull months there, and he was wounded in the throat. Three and a half months later, when he returned to Barcelona, he found it a completely changed city. No longer a place where the socialist word "comrade" was really felt to mean something, it was a city returning to "normal". Even worse, he was to find that the group he was with, the POUM was now accused of being a Fascist militia, secretly helping Franco. Orwell had to sleep in the open to avoid showing his papers, and eventually managed to escape to France with his wife. His account of his time in Spain was published in Homage to Catalonia (1938). His experiences in Spain left two impressions on Orwell's mind; firstly, they showed him that socialism in action was a human possibility, even though it is a temporary one. He never forgot the high spirits of those first days in Barcelona, when a new society seemed possible, where "comradeship", instead of being just a socialist abuse of language,

was a reality. But secondly he saw the experience of the city returning to normal as a gloomy confirmation of the fact that there will always be different classes, and that there is something in the human nature that seeks violence, conflict, and power over others.

In 1938, Orwell became ill with tuberculosis and spent the winter in Morocco. While being there, he wrote his next book, a novel entitled Coming up for Air, published in (1939), the year the long-threatened war (Second World War) between England and Germany broke out. Orwell wanted to fight, as he had done in Spain, against the fascist enemy, but he was declared physically unfit.

In 1941, he joined the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as a talk's producer in the Indian section of the eastern service. He served in the Home Guard, a wartime civilian body for local defense. In 1943 he left the BBC to become literary editor of the Tribune and began writing Animal Farm. In 1944 the Orwells adopted a son, but in 1945 his wife died during an operation. Towards the end of the war, Orwell went to Europe as a reporter. Late in 1945 he went to the island of Jura off the Scottish coast, and settled there in 1946. He wrote Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) there. The island's climate was unsuitable for someone suffering from tuberculosis and Nineteen Eighty-Four reflects the bleakness of human suffering and the humiliation of pain. Indeed, he said that the book would not have been so gloomy if he had not been so ill. Later that year he married Sonia Brownell. He died in January 1950.

George Orwell's writings cover a politically very chaotic period. His first book, Down and Out in Paris and London (1933), was written only sixteen years after the Russian Revolution (1917). Till 1949, when Nineteen Eighty-Four was published, the world would see the Spanish Civil War, Nazism in Germany, Fascism in Italy, Stalinism, the Moscow Show Trials in Russia, and the Second World War. In this respect, this thesis will shed light on the nineteen forties period, with reference to Orwell's fictional contributions at that chaotic period. The outcomes of this period, undoubtedly, political, social and economical are still affecting our world up till now.

Edward M. Thomas wrote in his book Orwell (1965) that Orwell was prepared to sacrifice literary accomplishment to politics, but he was not prepared to sacrifice the individual integrity which was for him the essence of the writer. Orwell considers his own political writings as an attempt to reach a fair solution for the conflict between the claims of political urgency and literary truth. Orwell stated in the preface to the Ukrainian translation of Animal Farm that it was the first book in which he deliberately attempts to do so, “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” (V).

George Orwell, as a critic, has created a critical method called “Double Standard of Judgment” that regards the political novel as an attempt to find a solution to the conflicting claims of political purpose and aesthetic purpose. Through this critical method, Orwell makes a socio-political judgment on an author then he makes a literary one, and his essays consist of a dialogue between these two points of view. It followed from Orwell's

double standard of judgment that he has seen his own political writing as an attempt to find a solution to the conflicting claims of political purpose and aesthetic purpose, but he never described in detail how he set about achieving this. The most explicit writing concerning this critical method comes in his essay on Jonathan Swift "Politics vs. Literature: an Examination of Gulliver's Travels".

Orwell said of Animal Farm, 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, so, it is worth looking closely at how this was achieved in his two political allegorical novels which were written in the 1940s.

This thesis is composed of Chapter one, an introductory chapter, which deals with the historical background of Orwell's age, and the political issues which prevailed at that time. Also, this chapter will contain a review of literature which was written about George Orwell concerning his critical method (Double Standard of Judgment) and how it is applied on his two novels.

Chapter two entitled "Totalitarianism and the abuse of power" discusses Orwell's view, as a socialist, of Totalitarianism with reference to the Russian Revolution and the reign of Stalin in Russia. This view is tackled in both Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four. Totalitarianism is a political approach where the state obtains its power by diminishing the individual's life on all aspects. Consequently, this regime will lead to the abuse of power. This abuse of power eventually leads to a dystopian society. The abuse of power is a theme that dominates both of Orwell's novels

Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four. Each novel has its own way in showing how power is a seductive tool in the hands of the leaders of any group of people; once it is obtained it leads to tyranny and tempts those leaders to manipulate with it to satisfy their own interests and purposes. The theme of the abuse of power is expressed in different ways in Orwell's two novels, but both novels end up with the same consequences of deterioration and declination of those subjected to this blind power.

Chapter three entitled "Politics versus Literature" aims at showing how Orwell applied his method of "Double Standard of Judgment" to most of his novels. This will be executed through a careful reading of Orwell's essay "Politics vs. Literature: an Examination of Gulliver's Travels," from which this chapter takes its title, in which he criticizes Jonathan Swift's literary writings in terms of a double standard of judgment. The first standard of judgment is a socio-political one; while the second standard is a literary judgment of Swift's literary contributions.

This chapter attempts to explore the features of George Orwell's narrative technique, a study that will help us understand how Orwell has achieved the fusion between the political purpose and the aesthetic purpose of his novels. Finally, the conclusion comes as an assessment of the point of view of this thesis.

Chapter One

Introduction