

NOVEL: GEORGE ORWELL - 1984

- "All power corrupts; and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Lord Acton
- "Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull." Winston
- "It is a fantasy of the political future, and, like any such fantasy, serves its author as a magnifying device for an examination of the present." Lionel Trilling
- "As in no other book or document, the convulsive fear of communism which has swept the west since the end of the Second World War, has been reflected and focused in 1984." Isaac Deutscher

A. ORWELL THE MAN

George Orwell (1903-1950) has been described as "the conscience of his generation". His generation came of age in the nineteen thirties. European life seemed dominated by depression, mass unemployment, wars, dictators, storm troopers and concentration camps. Such a background helps explain Orwell's emphasis on politics.

This emphasis was intensified by Orwell's own background. Samuel Hynes sees three "crucial, formative experiences" in Orwell's background: class, oppression and poverty. As a schoolboy at Eton only by scholarship, barely tolerated by the sons of the rich, he was acutely and miserably aware of class distinctions. The next stage of Orwell's development was in the Indian Imperial Police in Burma. There he learnt to hate imperialism and to pity the downtrodden and exploited. The final element was his first-hand encounter with poverty; for on his return to England, Orwell set out to know and understand the poor by living with them.

From these experiences, Hynes concludes, Orwell developed his belief in a fundamental decency. This decency included the humane treatment of people and the need to satisfy basic human needs. Orwell felt that people must have adequate food and shelter and a minimal amount of privacy before they can grasp for higher goals.

His political commitment is clearly stated in his essay, "Why I write" (1947).

"What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice."

And in the same article:

"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."

In fact, Orwell's political commitment was so strong that he volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Wounded in action, Orwell had to flee Spain to escape arrest. On returning to England,

Orwell wrote "Homage to Catalonia" to tell people the truth about the Communist suppression of the non-Stalinist groups among the Republicans. Reports of Stalin's purges and trials convinced Orwell that Russian Communism was a perversion of proper socialism: like Fascism, Orwell thought, it denied the basic human freedoms and rights he believed in.

Orwell's forebodings were deepened by the victory of Fascism in Spain, the growing power of dictatorships in Germany and Italy, and by the failure of the democracies to effectively oppose these regimes. As war looked imminent, Orwell prophesied in 1937, "Everyone with an imagination can foresee that Fascism... will be imposed on us as soon as the war starts."

In 1939 Orwell wrote, "It is quite possible that we are descending into an age in which two and two will make five when the leader says so."

Thus did Orwell fear the destruction of human reason under totalitarian rule.

World War Two came as no surprise to Orwell. Rather it confirmed the horror he had expected and it began an age in which basic freedom, he felt, would be lost:

"We are moving into an age of totalitarian dictatorships - an age in which freedom of thought will be at first a deadly sin and later on a meaningless abstraction."

The end of the war did not end Orwell's concern. The international scene was marked by the Cold War, the great division by the Iron Curtain, separating the Communist world from the West, a move that Orwell had both anticipated and feared. England was also a cause for concern. The wartime curtailment of civil liberties had been followed by the Socialist Labour government's imposition of austere restrictions in the great post-war economic difficulties. Yet although Nineteen Eighty Four, specifically mentions Eng. Soc. (English Socialism), Orwell had not intended his native country as the target of the book:

My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralised economy is liable and which have already been partly realised in Communism and Fascism.

B. THE BIRTH OF "NINETEEN EIGHTY FOUR"

1984 was Orwell's last novel. George Woodstock has described it as "a purging of all the apprehensions that had been haunting him unendurably for years". Written only a year before his death, it may perhaps be significantly coloured by his illness. Orwell is reported as saying of the novel,

"It wouldn't have been so gloomy... if I hadn't been so ill." Echoing this remark, Herbert Read speaks of the novel's possessing "a grimness of power which could perhaps come only from the mind of a sick man". Anthony West said of an earlier Orwell novel that "only the existence of a hidden wound can account for such a remorseless pessimism". In similar vein George Kateb has concluded that the real way of coming to terms with 1984 is to assume its worthlessness except as a contribution to understanding "the fundamental sickness of the man."

Orwell described the book to his publisher as "a novel about the future - that is, it is in a sense a fantasy, but in the form of a naturalistic novel". Orwell's point is that the novel is to be understood not as a prophecy, but as a satire and a warning. The Utopia, he inferred, was not to foretell the future, but to pass judgement on the present. The future is used as a microscope to pick out and highlight certain aspects of the present. As Woodstock puts it, the book must be regarded "as an eleventh hour call in the face of what its author regarded only as the possible".

The most important literary source of 1984 was the Russian Eugene Zamiatin's novel "We", first published in 1924, and highly praised by Orwell. In Zamiatin's vision of a twenty sixth century Utopia, the inhabitants all wear identical uniforms, are known only by numbers and live only in glass houses so that surveillance by the political police (the Guardians) can be constantly maintained. They live on synthetic food and their normal recreation is marching to the national anthem. At certain intervals they are allowed one hour of sex. The Single State is ruled by a person called the Benefactor, who is annually and unanimously re-elected by the people. The basic principle of rule is that happiness and freedom are incompatible. The State has achieved man's happiness by removing his freedom.

There are clear parallels to Orwell's book, leading Isaac Deutscher to remark that, Orwell's own description of Zamiatin's society reads "like a synopsis of 1984".

C. CRITICAL OPINION

1984 does not easily fit into the recognised genre (literary type) of the novel. R.J. Vorhees remarks that "1984 is not really a novel at all. It is a combination of tale of terror and political treatise". Similarly Wyndham Lewis comments, "The book as a whole is a first-rate political document". Irving Howe has said:

"It is not, I suppose, really a novel" and points to the absence of stress upon individual consciousness, psychological analysis and the study of intimate relations. Other critics, like R.A. Lee have replied that, in one sense, the entire book merely portrays successive changes in Winston Smith's consciousness. Furthermore, Lee argues, a central theme of the book, the impossibility of any significant human relationship in Oceania, justifies completely the relative absence of relationships and the treatment of the Julia-Winston relationship. Lee concludes that the book is in the tradition of the utopian novel, and more precisely, a late nineteenth and twentieth-century variation of that form, the "sour utopian novel".

A frequent criticism of the book is that the characters are too "thin" and not "credible" or "three-dimensional". But Winston and Julia appear rudimentary and sketchy because they are only slowly learning what being a full human being involves. They learn to cherish sexual passion and independent thinking, - both fatal qualities in the totalitarian state, as they themselves know.

It is relevant to remember F.R. Karl's comment that Orwell's characters are not individualized people but all mankind caught in a state that exploits and crushes them; and in 1984 he is more concerned in analyzing crushed human beings, than in placing the individual in conflict with other people.

Irving Howe argues plausibly that 1984 cannot be understood or judged in terms of the usual categories of literature; because it describes a world where these categories are insignificant. Politic's rules life; and the human relationships assumed in the normal novel are completely suppressed.

To some readers, Orwell's emphasis on documentation appears curious. Midway through the novel, the action halts, while Goldstein's work, "The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism" is studied by Winston. Furthermore, attached to the novel is a lengthy appendix on "The Principles of Newspeak", in which the new language of Oceania is treated as a reality. Yet these imaginative sections serve a valuable purpose; they purport to be documents, like statistical tables, that give authority and validity to Orwell's picture of Oceania. The reader may be more inclined to accept the picture because of the presentation of such "evidence".

D. THE TECHNIQUES OF TOTALITARIANISM

(i) Fascism is a word used to describe a state where there is one political party only and all political opposition is banned. The totalitarian state goes further. The word totalitarianism describes a political system in which the state has total control over the individual. Party members in Orwell's 1984 are to be spiritually, emotionally and intellectually infantile. They are to be utterly passive and obedient to Big Brother. Orwell himself expressed it in 1940,

"The totalitarian state tries, at any rate, to control the thoughts and emotions of its subjects at least as completely as it controls their actions."

"In 1984, Orwell is trying to present the kind of world in which individuality has become obsolete and personality a crime."

(ii) In Orwell's vision, the world is organized into three great political bodies. Despite their basic agreement on political philosophy, the three states are always at war, with alliances frequently changing to ensure a balance of power. The mass of the people have little clear idea at any moment of who are their allies or their enemies. Witness the astonishing ease with which the Hate Week demagogue changes enemies. War is not total and decisive, but partial and continual for it is essential to the health of all states. It helps justify and sanctions absolute rule within the states, and is the most efficient method of consuming the production of the factories on which the economy of the state is based. To distribute goods to the people would be a gross error, for it would stimulate the pursuit of pleasure and individuality, both dangerous to the state. Hence goods produced are destined for war consumption and destruction. The collective oligarchy must operate on a war footing.

(iii) The techniques of totalitarian rule are comprehensive and sinister. The four main ministries of Eng Soc (English Socialism) dominate the London skyline. The Ministry of Truth propagates lies; the Ministry of Plenty organises scarcity; the Ministry of Peace conducts war, and the Ministry of Love dispenses torture.

The Ministry of Truth undoubtedly owed much of its inspiration to Orwell's experience of war-time propaganda in the BBC. But perhaps more significant was the example provided by Nazi

propagandists who boasted that the biggest lie could deceive more people more effectively than the smallest one. Even more instructive was the example of Stalin, with his purges where sincere communists confessed treason and with his abrupt decisions which overnight turned enemies into allies.

Whereas Hitler had books burned, Stalin had them rewritten. Orwell clearly borrows the rewriting of history from Stalinism. In Oceania the destruction of social memory is a major governmental function. The offensive pieces of information are replaced with orthodox statements and then channelled through the memory hole into the incinerator.

It is the rewriting of history which most affects Winston. It is his daily routine, but the falsification of history is a constant challenge to his own reason. Changing the past every day to suit Big Brother, Winston craves a past that is unchanging. The coral in the glass and the other relics of a genuine past are objects he treasures. Sadly, his attempts to glean the real past from the proles are failures. His conversation with the old prole in the pub indicates that the totalitarian society destroys the past not only by destroying documents, but also by destroying the memory of the past through a disintegration of individual consciousness. The old prole is incapable of comparing the present with the past.

(iv) The television screens present everywhere serve a dual purpose. They are the medium from which censored propaganda constantly pours. They are also the means by which the Thought Police carry out a complete surveillance of Party members. These Police watch for any action or sign that deviates from the line laid down by the state. Big Brother is the leader, made into a God, omnipresent and invisible, but perhaps not even existing at all. So complete is the control by the state that not only is it an offence to harbour a thought against Big Brother but it is an offence to think of a private life secret from the state.

(v) The official mode of thought in Oceania is Doublethink, which gives one "the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them". Trilling describes Doublethink as the "intellectual safeguard of the State, which is reinforced by a language, Newspeak, the goal of which is to purge itself of all words in which a free thought might be formulated". Newspeak aims to narrow the range of thought, and to remove from the classics any possible subversive reference or thought which might possibly pollute the minds of Party members.

The Dictionary which Symes works upon reduces the number of words available - thus the choice of speech, and thus thought, are increasingly confined - and language is the means by which men both identify themselves and move out of their isolation.

The menace of Newspeak is clear. Goodsex is chastity and sexcrime covers all kinds of perversions as well as normal intercourse; rape is equivalent to regular intercourse in a society which frowns on sex of any sort. Consequently, the mind is controlled by the word. The word acts as a stimulus; the response is complete obedience to the state.

The importance Orwell placed upon Newspeak is indicated by the appendix to the novel and also by an earlier essay on "Politics and the English Language".

"Political language ... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable ..."

and also
"one ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end."

(vi) Orwell portrays well the function of the scapegoat and enemy in the totalitarian world. Goldstein is indispensable for the daily ritual of hate and the manipulation of group emotion by Big Brother. The Two Minutes Hate channels the frustrations of the people of Oceania into corporate hatred of the eternal foe. It is very significant, that when O'Brien confesses to writing sections of the book, he reveals of course, that Goldstein is a fiction, created by the Party for their own ends. Winston was shocked when Julia suggested that Oceania was not really at war at all; but that the Party just made it appear so.

(vii) When Aldous Huxley, author of "Brave New World" read 1984 he wrote to Orwell saying,

"The philosophy of the ruling minority in 1984 is a sadism which has been carried to its logical conclusion by going beyond sex and denying it."

The Party campaign against sex is sinister indeed. O'Brien tells Winston that the Party neurologists are working to end the orgasm. The object is "to remove all pleasure from the sexual act", and hence to prevent uncontrollable loyalties arising from the pleasure of love making.

There are also implications for freedom. Secure in the love of an individual of the opposite sex, the most downtrodden slave can escape to a free world.

Julia perceptively points out to Winston that the suppression of sexual pleasure means that the state can transform the sexual energy of the faithful into political hysteria.

Because of his hostility to the Party, Winston's sexual enjoyment with Julia is increased by the political overtures of the act. "The sexual act, successfully performed, was rebellion." (viii) Many of the literary critics have puzzled, like Winston, on the reasons for totalitarianism. Winston understands how the system works, but he does not understand WHY. When O'Brien mockingly asks him why, Winston thinks in party propaganda terms, that a strong elite was needed to rule the weak masses for the good of the majority. O'Brien, however, rejects these indoctrinated platitudes and replies,

"We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested only in power... Power in not a means, it is an end.... The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power."

Big Brother and his underlings know that absolute power is not a means, but an end in itself. They know also, as Trilling points out, that just as wealth exists only in relation to the poverty of others, so power exists only in relation to the weakness of others. Thus any power that the ruled possess, even the power to experience happiness, is a lessening of the power of the rulers.

Orwell has been severely criticised by Isaac Deutscher for succumbing to a "mysticism of cruelty" in explaining the behaviour of the totalitarian rulers. That is the reasons for

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their cruel oppression are not satisfactorily made clear. Howe comments that no one has satisfactorily explained "that systematic excess in destroying human values which is a central trait of totalitarianism".

(ix) An idea which recurs throughout the book is "if there is hope, it lies in the proles". In the novel, the proles exist outside the detailed control to which Party members are subjected. They are allowed to retain custom and language; sensual pleasures are not denied them; and instinctive behaviour has not disappeared. They live, in Woodstock's words, "like happy moles under the surface of the totalitarian nightmare which encloses and suffocates the members of the Party".

As they comprise eighty five percent of the population, Winston's optimism would seem to be justified. O'Brien, however, reading Winston's thoughts, declares that

"from the Proletarians nothing is to be feared!" They are "without the power of grasping that the world could be other than it is."

Perhaps Orwell would justify this by arguing that the state need no longer fear the workers after they have become demoralized as individuals and powerless as a class. But there does seem a major question here. The totalitarian state can allow no exceptions or tolerate any group outside its control. As Wyndham Lewis has said,

"It is unlikely, in a regime such as Orwell describes, that the millions of ordinary people will be left unmolested."

E. WINSTON SMITH

Orwell said that he had chosen "the form of a naturalistic novel" so that the action would be grounded in a setting of everyday reality. Similarly, for his central figure he devised an ordinary person, so that the book offers the plausibility of a common, typical existence. R.A. Lee attaches great importance to the name.

"In choosing the most commonplace of English surnames and combining it with a Christian name obviously drawn from Winston Churchill, Orwell immediately suggests several things".

Lee sees Smith as Everyman and Anyman, whose fate can be the fate of any person in this society. Yet at the same time, he argues, Smith is like Churchill, uncommon, a potential hero who tries to maintain his private virtue against public demands. O'Brien later tells Winston that his uniqueness is the reason the Party takes so much pain to educate him back to normality.

Winston's basic beliefs are as simple as two plus two equal four. "The past is fixed, love is private and the truth is beyond change". His crime is the use of a critical intelligence. He is unable to stop asking questions.

Winston's varicose ulcer establishes him as a wounded protagonist in the pattern of Orwell's earlier figures. Lee argues that the ulcer represents Winston's isolation from his society. It is temporarily healed during his love affair, but it recurs when he tries to maintain his individual existence in the Ministry of Love. After he is "cured" and returned to the society of Oceania, the wound is totally healed.

E. THE PLOT

The story is simple. In 1984, Winston Smith, public servant and Party member, develops grave political doubts and questions the system.

Winston's primary crime is the purchase of a diary and the attempt to record an unalterable version of history. Stimulated by the newspaper photograph of the three party functionaries, he comes to understand that the rewriting of history not only serves the political demands of the present but also helps the denial of human reason. Part one ends with Winston under the thumb of Big Brother, trying to write in his diary, but his mind dominated by party slogans. Harassed and fearful, he hates Julia and suspects her to be an agent of the Thought Police.

Part Two of 1984 deals with the relationship between Julia and Winston. They embark on their revolt through passion. Their undisciplined sexual activity is regarded as dangerously subversive by the state and therefore is even more enjoyable to them. They find liberation. The rural hideout to which Julia leads Winston is the golden country of his dreams. Their bedroom above the antique shop is a haven, another symbol of the full and happy life they had not before experienced. Fully committed to each other and to resistance to Big Brother, Winston and Julia go to O'Brien's home and are admitted into the Brotherhood. All is delusion, of course. The antique shop is run by the Thought Police, and O'Brien is a representative of the State, later to become the supreme inquisitor.

Winston and Julia have always been watched. They are doomed to capture. Thought Police burst into the bedroom, seize the two and shatter the coral paperweight. This had been not only direct proof of a different past but also a symbol of Winston and Julia's very existence. "The paperweight was the room he was in, and the coral was Julia's life and his own, fixed in a sort of eternity at the heart of the crystal."

Part three records their capture, their surrender and ultimately their mutual betrayal. Every natural impulse is destroyed as they are tortured into a conformity that is a kind of living death.

When O'Brien pulls a tooth out of Winston's mouth, Winston realizes that he is completely physically dominated. Only his thoughts are not yet wholly conquered - but even these are doomed. Room 101 contains Winston's ultimate fear, the torture which he is physically unable to endure. He betrays Julia. All personal values have been lost. O'Brien calls Smith "the last man". Winston has had his identity torn from him and the futile resistance is over.

The state has become his healer. Big Brother is now the recipient of all his love and Winston traces in the dust on the table 2 + 2 = 5.

NOVEL: HAL PORTER - SELECTED STORIES

- "Revenge" (1937)
- "Miss Rodda" (1937)
- "Act One, Scene One" (1948)
- "House Girl" (1954)
- "Friend and Friend" (1959)
- "Country Town" (1959)
- "Say to Me Ronald" (1961)
- "Francis Silver" (1962)
- "The Letter Writer" (1962)
- "Gretel" (1963)

This relation of Porter's stories can be followed for their autobiographical content (a feature in most of this writer's work) and for their development from rich exotic prose into a simpler, more mature style.

Apart from his three purely autobiographical novels, *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* (1963), *The Paper Chase* (1966) and *The Extra* (1975), many of Porter's short stories contain fragments of his life, or are partially autobiographical, outlining and detailing his experiences in fiction. A number of his early short stories are trials for his autobiographical novels but can be easily read as stories with an independent existence. Some of these stories come full circle from his childhood into his adulthood. It is a pity "*The Room*" (1936) is not a prescribed text as it best demonstrates Porter's development and maturity when compared with "*Country Town*" (1959). In the first story, Porter is a youth with the dream of becoming a writer and in the second he is a mature man who has returned to his past, thirty years later.

In writing about himself he is analysing his own experience and seeking to understand life. As a writer, he is a watcher of life, noting all the fine details of his own and others' lives. *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* is a full version of the experience of growing up which is seen in fragments in "Revenge", "Miss Rodda" and "Act One, Scene One". Compared with the novel, these stories are more contrived and work on what Porter calls "*Autoface texture*" rather than seeking to explain why he is what he is as a person. The novel is his first mature attempt to shape and explain the effect on him of his childhood and the death of his mother.

The above mentioned stories are experiments in style rather than a search for self-explanation. He hides what he seeks to know behind elaborate language, so ornate that it disguises its meaning rather than revealing it. They are not moving stories but rather macabre and weird in impression. They reveal what he said about himself in *The Watcher*: as an adolescent he presented himself "as a special sort of word crazy clown, always ready to entertain the mob" and "as an upstart and word-obsessed adolescent". He was "self-educating himself towards an aim not to this day accomplished of stating as incandescently as possible *verities not yet fully realized*." (1963) What these quotations mean is that he was trying to use words to reveal the truth about himself but in 1963 he had still not achieved this. The words, or style, were

still dominant over the ideas he was trying to express. Porter describes what he was achieving as "*Autoface texture*" (style) but what he wanted was what "*the x-ray showed*" (ideas).

In the early stories he is too obsessed with style to achieve "*verities not yet fully realized*" but as we read through the selection of stories, style becomes less overstrained and tricky and the drunken revelling in words for their own sake is reduced. Porter comes to a clearer understanding of himself and communicates more directly with the reader. In the last of the set stories to be studied, "Gretel", we can see how far he has developed. Here youthful illusions are shattered and reality is revealed in all its ugliness. He describes the loss of illusion in a far more moving fashion than the grotesque finale of "Act One, Scene One" and is less addicted to phrases strung together in cumulative sequence. The prose is much clearer and far less metaphorical. The circle has come full from "Act One, Scene One" to "Francis Silver", written just before "*Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*".

Briefly Porter's biography: born in 1911 in Melbourne, he was the eldest in a family of six. A lower middle class, respectable family, his father was an engine driver. Porter's view of his father, sometimes clear in his stories, was that he lacked intellect and humour. It was his mother who left the greatest impression on him. "Act One, Scene One" and "Francis Silver" are about her.

He went to state schools and had his first work published at the age of eleven. On leaving school he worked as a cub reporter for a year and then changed to school teaching: "Friend and Friend" and "Say to Me Ronald" both recount these days and experiences teaching. He liked teaching as it gave him the opportunity to write, for himself, not a newspaper.

In 1939 he married but after a car accident and a year in hospital he was divorced. His injury prevented him entering World War II and he spent this time teaching in Adelaide, where "Say to Me Ronald" is set. The 1940's were an unsettled time for him and perhaps to compensate for missing war service he spent several years after the war attached to Occupation Forces in Japan, teaching Australian and American children of servicemen. "House Girl" describes part of this experience.

By this stage he had published "Short Stories" (1942) and "The Hexagon" (Poems-1956). At the end of 1956 he received a grant to write a novel about his experiences in Japan and *A Handful of Pennies* was produced, followed by *The Liked Class* (1961). By this stage his short stories which had been published in the "Bulletin" were being noticed. *Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* (1963) was the book by which he was recognized as a profound Australian author.

During the 1930's and 1940's, Porter's style received no literary acclaim. No Australian authors in this period were practising stylistically. Content of social realism, such as Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Commonwealth*, was the more popular literature. Porter, on the other hand, did not write about society but was more concerned with his own life and the inner macabre darkness of life around him. He was not following the contemporary trend in Australian literature but was setting his own style and hence did not receive attention until the late 1950's and early 1960's when he won recognition and reputation with his auto-