

# *George Orwell: The Political Ideologies and Social Criticism in His Literary Works*

Research Question: To what extent do George Orwell's novels and essays reflect his personal views?

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout his entire life Eric Arthur Blair was inevitably confronted with different forms of political suppression which contributed to his realisation of social inequality and built the foundation of his personal conceptions. His opinions are not only intriguing, but also extraordinarily thought-provoking since many issues he depicts are nowadays still unresolved. The struggle of finding an ideal form of government is one of the most pressing matters in today's world. In his novels, the author manages to give a broad overview of a multitude of different political and likewise social systems, by elaborating on them and by proposing concepts which, when applied, could largely benefit the population. Therefore, an investigation into his work is beneficial for any politically motivated individual. Above that the reader gets a glimpse of the personal experiences and development of a renowned author, who narrates his intriguing ideas in an honest and humorous way.

Born and raised in British India, Blair found himself living in a country, in which the population was suppressed by his own nation, the imperialistic British Empire. Later on when in Paris and London, he lived among the poorest and was a down-and-out. He even fought in the Spanish Civil War as part of a movement that saw socialism as a possibility and deemed "political consciousness and disbelief in capitalism [...] more normal than their opposites" (Orwell, 2000:87). Those events doubtlessly left their marks and notably shaped Blair's opinions. However, the question whether these are present in his written works, published under his pen-name, George Orwell, seems to be worth analysing and discussing. Orwell's decision to use a pseudonym was fuelled by the fact that his circumstances and provocative writing would have surely led to an undesirable rift between himself and his family.

The best approach to answer the essay's research question, which is the following: **"To what extent do George Orwell's novels and essays reflect his personal views?"**, seems to be

through a close examination of a variety of his provocative essays and some of his novels in which he illustrates his personal experiences at different stages of his life. These two types of sources give a deep insight into the life and views of the mysterious George Orwell. When reading and analysing parts of his literary legacy, readers understand the often harsh reality this man found himself confronted with and sense the criticism Orwell often was not able to express openly.

Furthermore, the author's reflective piece 'Why I Write' proves a valuable source in supporting this essay's research question and in shedding light on the actual purpose behind his novels.

## 2. Colonialism in 'Shooting an Elephant'

Orwell starts his essay, written from a first-person perspective, by stating that the leading character which we can conclude to be Orwell himself is hated by the majority of the Burmese population. In the story, the narrator is a colonial police officer, which reflects his true position in Burma from 1922 to 1927.

### 2.1. Orwell's Opinion on Imperialism

Born in India due to his father's work there, Orwell found himself as a part of the imperialistic British Empire, which suppressed the Burmese. Through the use of metaphors the essay gives readers a clear impression of Orwell's ideologies, which stands in great contrast to his motherland's beliefs and the way he was expected to act. Orwell (1994:19) also admits:

“For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing.”

Those early years of his life, working for the British Empire and against the oppressed Burmese, definitely fuelled Orwell’s hatred against colonialist ideas and ideologies, which in the long run shaped his political ideas to a great extent. During his work as an officer he was confronted with all the “dirty work” of the Empire as he labelled it, which is why he states: “I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British” (Orwell, 1994:19). Moreover, Orwell (1994:19) refers to British imperialism as an “unbreakable tyranny” and uncovers “the real motives”, while remarking on: “the hollowness and futility of the white man’s dominion in the East” (Orwell, 1994:22). According to Jeremy Paxman (2015) the nature of Orwell is to use his essays in order to demonstrate issues like the uselessness of ‘the imperial project’.

## 2.2. His Thesis on the Effects of Imperialism

Orwell’s opinions on the effect of imperialism on the oppressed are quite evident, as he describes their misery in great detail and portrays the mistreated population of Burma as suffering under the British regime. Orwell even emphasizes this picture by letting the elephant, symbolizing the imperialistic British Empire, kill an Indian coolie, an unskilled worker. This cruel action, enforced to establish dominance over the Burmese, leads the officer to order a rifle with which he would be able to kill the elephant. This is the moment in which he finds himself caught up in a dilemma. The decision of whether or not to shoot represents going against his own nation, family and upbringing or showing allegiance to Britain and all it stands for.

However, Orwell (1994:21) gives two reasons as to why this “attack of ‘must’” is not of benefit for the oppressor either. Firstly, he elucidates his “intolerable sense of guilt”, which he as part of the regime feels towards the oppressed. His life in Burma as a colonial officer has led to the formation and solidification of his strong personal opinions against imperialism. In his action of shooting the elephant and betraying the British Empire, it becomes obvious that Orwell was morally opposed to the form of governing. Secondly, Orwell (1994:22) declares that if “the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys”. While working for the regime, Orwell noticed paradoxes in the system, with oppressors simultaneously hurting themselves. This is caused by the oppressors actively trying to impress and threaten the natives, hence, they are no longer in control of their own actions. Orwell (1994:22) considers the position of the British population within a colony to be much like “[wearing] a mask and [their] face has grown to fit it”. He makes clear that imperialism hurts both the oppressors and the oppressed, which in the long-run fuels his negative impressions on imperialism.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the essay ‘Shooting an Elephant’ was written by Orwell with the sole purpose of allowing its readers an easy pathway into his mind and thoughts, while depicting the circumstances within the perimeters of Burma. It becomes evident that his opinions were gradually established through his experiences there. Hence, this essay is indeed reflecting his personal views and in fact is nothing but a disclosure disguised as a simple story, as it may first seem, which later develops into nothing other than Orwell expressing his hatred and disagreement with the imperialistic British Empire. However, he uses metaphors for this throughout the whole essay for the sake of his own safety. It was obviously not admissible to state such strong opinions against the true motives of imperialism.

Furthermore, the essay 'Why I Write' supports this idea, since Orwell (1994:4) states the following about his time in Burma: "I spent five years in an unsuitable profession (the Indian Police Imperial) [...] this increased my natural hatred of authority and [...] had given me an understanding of the nature of imperialism."

### 3. Social Problems in 'Down and Out in Paris and London'

In the introduction to Orwell's novel 'Down and Out in Paris and London' written by Dervla Murphy (2001), she states that in 1928 Orwell was forced to live in a cheap hotel in the Parisian slums and later even to live as a down-and-out in London, since the possibility of continuing to live with his parents in Burma and joining the Indian Imperial Police, was no longer an option for Orwell (Murphy, 2001). Orwell (2001: 37) writes about his experiences of famine and states: "Hunger reduces one to an utterly spineless, brainless condition." Those experiences have with great certainty left their marks and influenced his thinking in many aspects. Being part of the lowest class of society, he chooses to share also the story of others who accompany him in those slums. By keeping a diary, which a few times he mentions owning, he later had the possibility of integrating these stories into his book. They play a significant role, as they shape his opinions regarding the following points.

#### 3.1. Social Classes in Orwell's Times

Orwell himself worked in different lower class hotels in Paris. There he witnessed the existence of social classes and how they functioned. In reminiscence of Burma, Orwell again encounters an "elaborate caste system existing in a hotel" (Orwell, 2001: 72). Showing him that class separation was omnipresent. Moreover, he writes about the fact that people of

different rankings could decide the faith of those below them. After giving an extensive inauguration into the aforementioned system, he reveals his position to be at the very bottom of this hierarchy: he was a “plongeur”, which is the French word for a dishwasher.

Possibly the most impressive chapter of this book offers an explanation of the “fear of the mob”, which he starts by criticising the futility of a system resembling slavery: “A plongeur is one of the slaves of the modern world.” (Orwell, 2001: 123) Moreover, being held a slave gives you no chance of escaping caused by being: “Trapped by a routine which makes thought impossible” (Orwell, 2001: 123). This is why “plongeurs” have not yet organised a strike to fight for more rights. Orwell concludes that the upper classes will never change the conditions of the lower classes, due to what he calls ‘fear of the mob’, in this context Orwell (2001: 127) states: “The fear of the mob is a superstitious fear. It is based on the idea that there is some mysterious, fundamental difference between rich and poor.”

Orwell’s criticism of social classes within a society strongly reminds the reader of the first motions towards a socialist or communist society, both which are topics he tackled later in life. Therefore, this essay offers an extraordinary insight on how Orwell’s political opinions were shaped and how he gradually established them as a result of those iniquitous confrontations during his life.

### 3.2. Working Conditions at Orwell’s time

One of the grievances, which develop out of the aforementioned ‘caste system existing in a hotel’, are the working conditions. Orwell (2001: 113) found that employees faced terribly long hours of labour: “Seventeen and a half hours, almost without a break.” However, this was nothing out of the ordinary in those hotels. The lower one’s rank was, the fewer the



chances of good treatment, as Orwell (2001: 61) adds: “The big hotels are quite merciless towards their employees.” The employers did not see any obligation to treat their employees any better, since they could easily be replaced considering the surplus of workers.

Conclusively, this novel by Orwell is the perfect reflection of his personal opinions as the whole book is structured like a diary which later transformed into a novel. In it Orwell offers very clear ideas on how social classes function and prevail and he never seems to run out of suggestions for improvements. For instance, he mentions possible concepts that would benefit lower classes. Orwell wrote this essay to inform about the life of down-and-outs, but also to spread his socialist ideas formed during his time among them.

In his essay, ‘Why I Write’, Orwell (1994:4) gives his time in Paris and London significance for the fact that he learned a lot while he “underwent poverty and the sense of failure”. In addition, Orwell states that this was the first time he acknowledged the differences between the social classes.

#### 4. The Author’s Transition from Ardent Communist to a Critic of Dictatorial Forms of Government Shown by the Examples of ‘Homage to Catalonia’ and ‘Animal Farm’

In December 1936, during the Spanish Civil War, Orwell (2000:2) goes to Barcelona, fascinated by the fact that workers were in power and the revolution was thriving. At the time of his arrival, anarchists were almost implicitly in control and Orwell describes the situation as a “temporary working model of the classless society”. He was so overwhelmed that he decided to join the militia: “I recognized it [the revolution] immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for” (Orwell, 2000:4).

In Spain, Orwell was fighting for the POUM, a communist political party, which was partly a fusion of the Trotskyist Communist Left of Spain (Wikipedia, 2017), with the intention to create some significant change for the formerly suppressed civilians. He found himself fighting at the front in trenches, as well as caught up in speculations and deceptions of political parties accusing the POUM of causing problems. This time period changed his political views to a large extent, since the party he fought for was an anti-Stalinist communist party and therefore, gave him more of a critical outlook on communism and Stalinism.

#### 4.1. The PSUC in Contrast to the POUM

In January 1936, an election was held and many supposedly left-winged parties, including the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM, independent communist) and two others, formed an alliance called the Popular Front. In Catalonia a subgroup of the PCE, which was called the PSUC operated, being the only party which was a full member of the Third International (Wikipedia, 2017). Hence, the PSUC was to a large extent supervised and also supported by the Soviet Union, which first becomes obvious when Orwell (2000:131) depicts that only they had new rifles that they refer to as the 'Russian rifles'.

In his novel, Orwell (2000:212) mostly deals with the PSUC, which in his perspective stands "for centralized government and militarized system", and his own party, the POUM which is described as a party standing purely "for worker's control".

Orwell (2000:102), who fought at the front for this party, mentions "[his] personal loyalty to [...] comrades in the POUM". Therefore, it might seem unavoidable that Orwell had to

become an advocate of this specific group. However, one must distinguish between his devotion to his comrades and his personal views which only developed further when observing and analysing the debates between the two parties. It is important to be aware of the fact that Orwell (2000:10) was not particularly biased by this sense of loyalty, since he even admits the existence of flaws within his party: "I do not want to idealize the POUM militia. The whole militia-system had serious faults."

Furthermore, though strongly supporting the ideology that workers should gain power, Orwell sadly admits: "The revolutionary purism of the POUM, though I saw its logic, seemed to me rather futile." Surprisingly, he concedes that: "At this time, I preferred the Communist [the PSUC] viewpoint of that of the POUM. The Communists had a definite practical policy."

In the course of his novel, 'Homage to Catalonia', Orwell explains, regardless of the previously mentioned remarks, how he evolved such a strong reluctance and animosity towards the PSUC. Firstly, Orwell (2000:204) clearly elaborates on the position of this party by stating: "The USSR began to supply arms to the Government [the Popular Front, which includes the PSUC] and power began to pass from the Anarchists to the Communists. [...] Consequently the Russians were in a position to dictate terms." Secondly, Orwell (2000:206), well aware of the flaws of the coalition "Popular Front", acknowledges that an "alliance of enemies", would always lead to one suppressing the other partners, in this case he saw the PSUC as the oppressors. The party made the POUM responsible for all drawbacks and destroyed their reputation in the press. Both, the support by Soviet Russia and the press propaganda, possibly also generated by Third International, are reasons that probably caused Orwell's objection towards the PSUC. In the long run, this most likely fostered the creation of Orwell's strong antipathy towards Stalinist Communism. This can be supported

through the statement by Bernard Crick (2004): “This attempt by the communists to purge the POUM and the Catalan anarchists made him [Orwell] bitterly anti-communist.”

Finally, Orwell (2000:220) never supported the ideology of the PSUC and also at no time seemed a major advocate of the POUM: “I spent most of my time in the militia in bitterly criticizing the POUM ‘line’.” However, it is apparent that regardless of his harsh criticism towards their non-existent policies, Orwell remains a devoted socialist in favour of the principles of the POUM, hoping for a classless society and with the workers in power.

#### 4.2. Comparing the Two Novels

Orwell being part of the Spanish Civil War and therefore, being in direct contact with many different ideologies and contrary applications of those, implements his experiences in many of his successive novels. Apparently, Orwell documented and reflected on this ideological journey in the novel ‘Homage to Catalonia’. After analysing the consecutive novel ‘Animal Farm’, the reader can draw parallels to the scenery and characters of this previous novel. The comparison of the two novels is vital in answering the essay’s question, since it gives an exclusive insight into the author’s method of mixing fiction and storyline with his own personal views.

The novel ‘Animal Farm’ is well known for addressing the crucial events of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and Stalin’s era of the Soviet Union. Two of the most important characters are Napoleon, who is based on Stalin, and Snowball, representing Trotsky. The conflict between the two becomes central since “According to Snowball, they must send out more and more pigeons and stir up the rebellion among the animals on other farms.” (Orwell, 2008:34), whereas Napoleon wants to keep the power already gained. This mirrors

the situation during the Spanish Civil War depicted by “The antagonism between those who wished the revolution to go forward and those who wished to check or prevent it - ultimately between Anarchists and Communists” (Orwell, 2000:103). The Anarchists and the POUM constitute the first group of ardent revolutionists like Snowball, while power-hungry Napoleon might be based on the PSUC, set on maintaining power.

Finally, another similarity is the need of a scapegoat, villainized in propaganda speeches and the press. In ‘Homage to Catalonia’ Orwell (2000) describes how when he analysed the PSUC and Communist press more closely that he came to the realization that they were blaming and targeting the POUM. This also applies to ‘Animal Farm’, in which all the mishaps were credited to Snowball’s actions (Orwell, 2008:52). In both cases, the accusations go as far as linking them to the enemy which are either the Fascists: “The POUM was declared to be a disguised Fascist organization” (Orwell, 2000:133) or Mr. Jones: “Snowball was in league with Jones” (Orwell, 2008:53).

Conclusively, it has to be said that the connection between Stalin and the PSUC is based on historical facts, but the connection between the character of Napoleon and the actions of the PSUC are merely guesswork, just like any comparison of Snowball and the POUM.

However, the resemblances are both stark and reoccurring. It seems reasonable that Orwell would have included personal experiences, creating a strong argument for Orwell’s novels indeed reflecting his personal views.

#### 4.3. The Mechanism of Dictatorial Forms of Government and the Manipulation of the People

Throughout his novel ‘Animal Farm’, Orwell draws the reader’s attention to the mechanisms which make governments drift towards dictatorial forms. They often make use of

propaganda and manipulate facts and the population. The leaders of such governments brainwash the population so that any act of scrutinising the obtained information is impermissible: “Comrade Napoleon is always right” (Orwell, 2008:84). It is also common to declare that anything negative is undoubtedly related to the enemy. As aforementioned, Snowball is held responsible for all mishaps and is declared a public enemy. Referring to a later published novel by Orwell, Victor Sawdon Pritchett (2009) commented: “It is with this moral corruption of absolute power that Mr Orwell’s novel is concerned.”

In addition, ‘Homage to Catalonia’ gives perfect examples of how propaganda works. “The press censorship was mainly under Communist control” (Orwell, 2000:213) making political oppression therefore an almost inevitable result.

Furthermore, the population’s gullibility plays a major role regarding the emergence of dictatorship. Ignorance can lead to political suppression, since the one in power will always take advantage of the gullible masses. In ‘Animal Farm’ Orwell (2008:61) demonstrates the animals’ gullibility by making themselves believe that they were mistaken in not seeing two words in one of the seven commandments: “Somehow or other the last two words had slipped out of the animals’ memory.”

Orwell’s antagonism to the population’s ignorance also becomes obvious in ‘Homage to Catalonia’, where he is confronted with people’s reluctance to continue the revolution for ‘working-class control’. He explains that: “To the mass of the people the food shortage was the most important thing” (Orwell, 2000:96). It becomes apparent that Orwell blames them for putting their basic needs above idealistic political goals.

The two books complement each other so well, since Orwell first documents his experiences and how his political ideals get betrayed in ‘Homage to Catalonia’. Years later, he reflects on

his re-established ideologies while putting them into a fable-like context in the novel 'Animal Farm'.

Proof for the fact that his writings are reflecting his views can be found in his essay 'Why I Write', in which Orwell (1994:5) states that "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."

### 5. Conclusion

In answering the research question: **"To what extent do George Orwell's novels and essays reflect his personal views?"** this essay draws the conclusion that Orwell's works indeed do reflect his political and social opinions and their development. He clearly states in 'Why I Write' that his opinions and specifically the political oriented ones were his motivation to write. Hence, Orwell makes the question concerning the reflection of his personal views fairly simple to answer. However, an analysis from a psychological point of view sheds some light on his experiences, which influenced or even formed his personal views considerably.

It was imperialism which dictated his early hatred towards authority, then it was poverty which led him to oppose social classes and finally, it was different forms of communism and totalitarianism which triggered his will to writing in opposition to the aforementioned.

The time period in which Orwell lived was filled with political events, as stated by Jeremy Paxman (2015): "But he also had the paradoxical good fortune to live in evil times." Those events were at times so hard to process that only through reflecting on the events he was able to see the bigger picture and thus formulate his personal views on the occurrences.

Hence, the approach of revealing his involvement in the political events and simultaneously

disclosing his views was chosen. From a psychological point of view the conclusion can be drawn that his essays do reflect his true personal views, since they helped him come to terms with the reality of his time.

As outlined in chapter 4.3., where the aim was to set up a link between Orwell's famous novel 'Animal Farm' and his writings on real life experiences during the Spanish Civil War, it becomes clear that the events of his lifetime, his opinions and his novels are inseparable.

The conclusion that Orwell's literary works reflect his personal views can be supported by the idea that he wanted to publish his opinions gained from individual experiences and give the whole world access to those, since: "Orwell believed passionately and politically that no meaningful idea was too difficult to be explained in simple terms to ordinary people" (Crick, 2004).



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