

# George Orwell

By Larisa VYSOKOVSKA (2014)  
(25 June 1903 – 21 January 1950)



## Biography

**Eric Arthur Blair**, known by his pen name George Orwell, was an English novelist, essayist, journalist and critic. His work is marked by lucid prose, awareness of social injustice, opposition to totalitarianism, and commitment to democratic socialism.

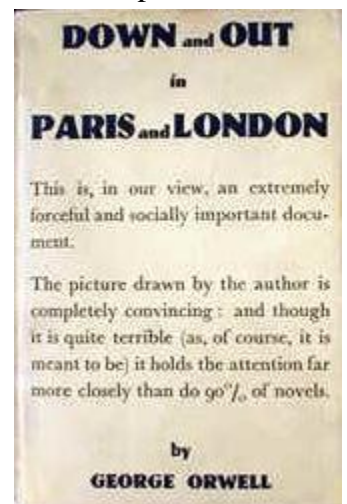
Eric Blair was born in 1903 in Motihari, Bengal, in the then British colony of India, where his father, Richard, worked for the Opium Department of the Civil Service. With his characteristic humor, he would later describe his family's background as «*lower-upper-middle class*».

At the age of five, Blair was sent to a small Anglican parish school in Henley, which his sister had attended before him. He never wrote of his recollections of it, but he must have impressed the teachers very favorably for two years later he was recommended to the headmaster of one of the most successful preparatory schools in England at the time: St Cyprian's School, in Eastbourne, Sussex. Young Eric attended St Cyprian's on a scholarship that allowed his parents to pay only half of the usual fees. Many years later, he would recall his time at St Cyprian's with biting resentment in the essay «*Such, Such Were the Joys*».

After a term at Wellington, Eric moved to Eton, where he was a King's Scholar from 1917 to 1921. Later in life he wrote that he had been "relatively happy" at Eton, which allowed its students considerable independence, but also that he ceased doing serious work after arriving there. In any event, during his time at the school Eric made lifetime friendships with a number of future British intellectuals.

After finishing his studies at Eton, having no prospect of gaining a university scholarship and his family's means being insufficient to pay his tuition, Eric joined the Indian Imperial Police in Burma. After five years in Burma, Orwell resigned his post and returned to England. He was intent on making it as a writer. He adopted his pen name in 1933, while writing for the «*New Adelphi*». He chose a pen name that stressed his deep, lifelong affection for the English tradition and countryside: George is the patron saint of England (and George V was monarch at the time), while the River Orwell in Suffolk was one of his most beloved English sites.

His first major work «*Down and Out in Paris and London*» (1933) explored his time eking out a living in these two cities. Orwell took all sorts of jobs to make ends meet, including being a dishwasher. The book provided a brutal look at the lives of the working poor and of those living a transient existence.



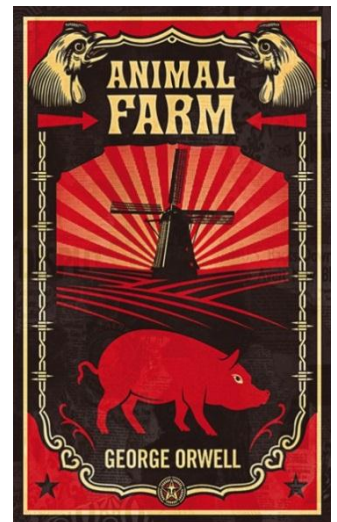
Soon after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Orwell volunteered to fight for the Republicans against Franco's Nationalist uprising. As a sympathizer of the Independent Labor Party (of which he became a member in 1938), he joined the militia of its sister party in Spain, the non-Stalinist far-left POUM (Workers' Party of Marxist Unification), in which he fought as an infantryman.



He also depicted what he saw as the betrayal of that workers' revolution in Spain by the Spanish Communist Party. Orwell was shot in the neck on May 20, 1937, an experience he described in his short essay *«Wounded by a Fascist Sniper»*, as well as in *Homage to Catalonia*. Orwell and his wife, Eileen, were indicted on treason charges in Spain. Fortunately, the charges were brought after the couple had left the country.

Orwell began supporting himself by writing book reviews for the *«New English Weekly»* until 1940. During World War II he was a member of the Home Guard and in 1941 began work for the BBC Eastern Service, mostly working on programs to gain Indian and East Asian support for Britain's war efforts. He was well aware that he was shaping propaganda, and wrote that he felt like *«an orange that's been trodden on by a very dirty boot»*.

In 1944 Orwell finished his anti-Stalinist allegory *«Animal Farm»*, which was published the following year with great critical and popular success. The royalties from *«Animal Farm»* provided Orwell with a comfortable income for the first time in his adult life. From 1945 Orwell was the Observer's war correspondent and later contributed regularly to the *«Manchester Evening News»*. In 1949 his best-known work, the dystopian *«Nineteen Eighty-Four»*, was published.



Between 1936 and 1945 Orwell was married to Eileen O'Shaughnessy, with whom he adopted a son. She died in 1945 during an operation. In the autumn of 1949, shortly before his death, he married Sonia Brownell.

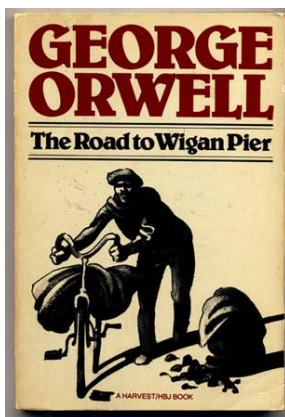
In 1949 Orwell was approached by a friend, Celia Kirwan, who had just started working for a Foreign Office unit, the Information Research Department, which had been set up by the Labour government to publish pro-democratic and anti-communist propaganda. He gave her a list of 37 writers and artists he considered to be unsuitable as IRD authors because of their pro-communist leanings. Orwell's motives for handing over the list are unclear, but the most likely explanation is the simplest: that he was helping out a friend in a cause - anti-Stalinism - that both supported. There is no indication that Orwell ever abandoned the democratic socialism that he consistently promoted in his later writings - or that he believed the writers he named should be suppressed. Orwell's list was also accurate: the people on it had all at one time or another made pro-Soviet or pro-communist public pronouncements.

Orwell died at the age of 46 from tuberculosis which he had probably contracted during the period described in *«Down and Out in Paris and London»*. He was in and out of hospitals for the last three years of his life. Having requested burial in accordance with the Anglican rite, he was interred in All Saints' Churchyard, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire with the simple epitaph: *«Here lies Eric Arthur Blair, born June 25th 1903, died January 21st 1950»*.



### ***Literary style and literary career***

During most of his career, Orwell was best known for his journalism, in essays, reviews, columns in newspapers and magazines and in his books of reportage: *«Down and Out in Paris and London»*, *«The Road to Wigan Pier»* and *«Homage to Catalonia»*. According to Irving Howe, Orwell was *"the best English essayist since Hazlitt, perhaps since Dr Johnson."*



Modern readers are more often introduced to Orwell as a novelist, particularly through his enormously successful titles *«Animal Farm»* and *«Nineteen Eighty-Four»*. The former is often thought to reflect degeneration in the Soviet Union after the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalinism; the latter, life under totalitarian rule. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is often compared to *«Brave New World»* by Aldous Huxley; both are powerful dystopian novels warning of a future world where the state machine exerts complete control over social life.

In an autobiographical piece that Orwell sent to the editors of Twentieth Century Authors in 1940, he wrote: "The writers I care about most and never grow tired of are: Shakespeare, Swift, Fielding, Dickens, Charles Reade, Flaubert and, among modern writers, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence." Elsewhere, Orwell strongly praised the works of Jack London, especially his book *«The Road»*. Orwell's investigation of poverty in *«The Road»* to *«Wigan Pier»* strongly resembles that of Jack London's *«The People of the Abyss»*, in which the American journalist disguises himself as an out-of-work sailor in order to investigate the lives of the poor in London.

Throughout his life Orwell continually supported himself as a book reviewer, writing works so long and sophisticated they have had an influence on literary criticism. He wrote in the conclusion to his 1940 essay on Charles Dickens.

Arthur Koestler mentioned Orwell's *«uncompromising intellectual honesty [which] made him appear almost inhuman at times»*. Ben Wattenberg stated: *«Orwell's writing pierced intellectual hypocrisy wherever he found it»*.

Orwell's work has taken a prominent place in the school literature curriculum in England, with *«Animal Farm»* a regular examination topic at the end of secondary education, and *«Nineteen Eighty-Four»* a topic for subsequent examinations below university level.



In his essay «*Politics and the English Language*» (1946), Orwell wrote about the importance of precise and clear language, arguing that vague writing can be used as a powerful tool of political manipulation because it shapes the way we think. In that essay, Orwell provides six rules for writers:

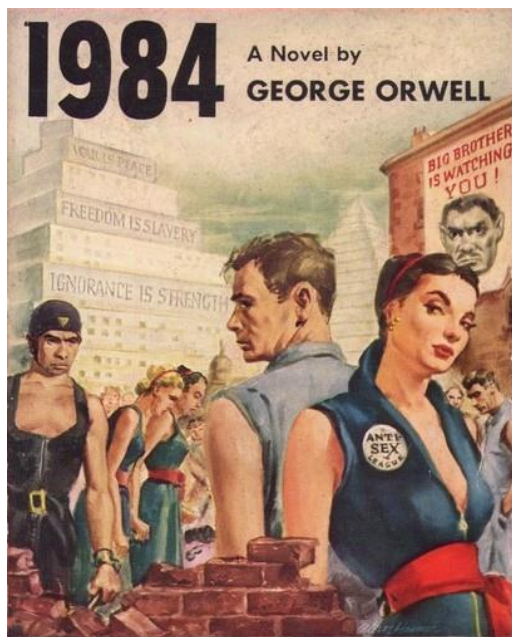
- Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

The adjective Orwellian connotes an attitude and a policy of control by propaganda, surveillance, misinformation, denial of truth, and manipulation of the past.

Orwell may have been the first to use the term cold war, in his essay, "*You and the Atom Bomb*".

The NCTE George Orwell Award for Distinguished Contribution to Honesty and Clarity in Public Language established in 1975 and given by the National Council of Teachers of English Public Language Awards Committee, recognizes writers who have made outstanding contributions to the critical analysis of public discourse.

### «*Nineteen Eighty-Four*»



The most famous works in the genre of dystopia, which is a parody of the genre of utopia or a utopian idea, were beginning to emerge in the literature of the early XX century. And among them is important to distinguish fantasy novel by George Orwell with elements of satire, published in 1949, titled "*1984*".

As literary political fiction and dystopian science-fiction, «*Nineteen Eighty-Four*» is a classic novel in content, plot, and style.

Many of its terms and concepts, such as Big Brother, doublethink, thought crime, Newspeak, Room 101, Telescreen,  $2 + 2 = 5$ , and memory hole, have entered everyday use since its publication in 1949. Moreover, «*Nineteen Eighty-Four*» popularised the adjective Orwellian, which describes official deception,

secret surveillance, and manipulation of the past by a totalitarian or authoritarian state.

George Orwell «encapsulated the thesis at the heart of his unforgiving novel». On 4 December 1948, he sent the final manuscript to the publisher Secker and Warburg and «*Nineteen Eighty-Four*» was published on 8 June 1949. By 1989, it had been translated into sixty-five languages, more than any other novel in English at the time.

«*The Last Man in Europe*» was one of the original titles for the novel, but in a letter dated 22 October 1948 to his publisher Fredric Warburg, eight months before publication, Orwell wrote about hesitating between «*The Last Man in Europe*» and «*Nineteen Eighty-Four*». Warburg suggested changing the main title to a more commercial one.



«*Nineteen Eighty-Four*» is set in Oceania, one of three inter-continental superstates that divided the world among themselves after a global war. Most of the action takes place in London, the "chief city of Airstrip One", the Oceanic province that "had once been called England or Britain". Posters of the Party leader, Big Brother, bearing the caption "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU", dominate the city, while the ubiquitous telescreen (transceiving television set) monitors the

private and public lives of the populace.

Describing dominant in "1984" way of thinking, Orwell found the word that has gone in modern vocabulary - "doublethink» (doublethink) as the ability to truly believe in two mutually exclusive things, or change their minds at the opposite ideological necessity. Explain the idea of doublethink in the following expressions from the novel:

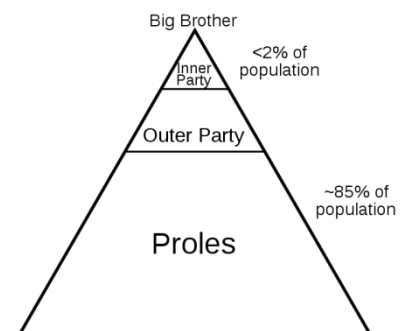
*War is peace.*

*Freedom is slavery.*

*Ignorance is strength*

The social class system of Oceania is threefold:

- **(I) The upper-class Inner Party**, the elite ruling minority, who make up 2% of the population.
- **(II) The middle-class Outer Party**, who make up 13% of the population.
- **(III) The lower-class Proles** (from proletariat), who make up 85% of the population and represent the uneducated working class.



As the government, the Party controls the population with four ministries:

- ***The Ministry of Peace (Minipax)***, supports Oceania's perpetual war.
- ***The Ministry of Plenty (Miniplenty)***, rations and controls food, goods, and domestic production; every fiscal quarter, the Miniplenty publishes false claims of having raised the standard of living, when it has, in fact, reduced rations, availability, and production. The Minitrue substantiates the Miniplenty claims by revising historical records to report numbers supporting the current, "increased rations".

- **The Ministry of Love (Miniluv)**, monitors, arrests, and converts real and imagined dissidents. In Winston's experience, the dissident is beaten and tortured, then, when near-broken, is sent to Room 101 to face "the worst thing in the world" — until love for Big Brother and the Party replaces dissension.
- **The Ministry of Truth (Minitrue)**, controls information: news, entertainment, education, and the arts.



### Short plot

The novel «1984» is a story about Winston Smith, a member of the Party that is ruling over the state of Oceania. The Party rules under the dictatorship of Big Brother.

The protagonist Winston Smith, a member of the Outer Party, works in the Ministry of Truth as an editor, revising historical records to make the past conform to the ever-changing party line and deleting references to unpersons, people who have been "vaporised", i.e. not only killed



by the state, but denied existence even in history or memory.

Winston is shown to be leading a lonely life in what used to be known as London before the Party came to power following a revolution. Moreover, the society created by the Party is based upon hatred, suspicion, and fear; it lacks all the finer emotions like love, trust, and friendship.

There are strict rules laid down for Party members, and members of the opposite sex cannot meet freely. All movements and activities of the members are under constant surveillance through telescreens. Neighbors and children are taught to keep an eye on others and report on what they observe.

Winston, who is an intelligent and sensitive person, begins to hate everything the Party stands for; but he knows he cannot openly express his feelings, for questioning the Party means death. As a result, Winston leads a double life, privately abhorring everything the Party says or does, while publicly putting on a facade of loyalty and enthusiasm towards the ideas of the Party.

Winston meets Julia, who is also a Party member. She is working in the Fiction department at the Ministry of Truth, where Winston is working in the Records department. They fall in love and meet away from the prying eyes of the microphones, telescreens, and patrols.

Young Julia gives the lonely Winston a purpose for living and an ally. Since she also hates the restrictions and controls of the Party, they discuss ways of overthrowing Big Brother. Both of them are



aware of the secret organization known as the Brotherhood, whose head is Goldstein; he is the chief enemy of the ruling Party.

Winston and Julia think of joining the Brotherhood, but do not know how to go about it. They meet with O'Brien at his flat, where he tells them about the Brotherhood.

The Thought Police soon catch Julia and Winston together. Arrested and sent separately to the Ministry of Love, they are made to confess their sins and mistakes. Here, Winston meets O'Brien, who reveals his true identity. O'Brien tortures and punishes Winston until he agrees to accept the ideas of the Party unquestioningly.

After nearly one year of solitary confinement, Winston is released. Before he is allowed to leave, O'Brien warns Winston that the Party will kill him whenever it thinks it is appropriate. Once released, Winston is no longer allowed to work in the Ministry of Truth's Records department. Instead, he is given a job as part of the subcommittee of a subcommittee appointed to study and prepare an interview report on some minor problems faced in the preparation of the eleventh edition of the 'Newspeak' (the new language) dictionary. Winston spends any spare time at the Chestnut Tree Cafe, the chief haunt of all rebels.

The end comes unexpectedly when Winston is listening to the news of Oceania's victory over Africa. Amidst the cheers and screams of the crowd, Winston is shot with a thought bullet as he is sitting at the Chestnut Tree Cafe. As he dies, he has a feeling of reverence for Big Brother.

### *Short analysis*

Orwell's prose is very descriptive and informative. He portrays terrifying images and conveyshorrifying truths in a calm voice that contrasts effectively with the true horrors of his message. Foreshadowing and suspense is used to heighten this exciting novel.

1984 is an anti-Utopian novel in which Orwell depicts a society four decades into the future. It is a society that has been perverted, rather than perfected, by a government that strips humans of their basic rights. Even though the year of 1984 has now passed without the creation of a Big Brother state, the novel still has relevance today. Although the cold war is over and the fascist governments no longer exist, man still feels alienated.

The heavily automated society of today has stripped people of human contact. Prejudice and hatred still exist in many forms. Political maneuvers are still made throughout the world, often without the interest of people in mind. The threat of war still hangs heavy. As a result, 1984 is as relevant now as it was in the post-war period. It is still a warning to humankind that it can never let down its guard; it must protect precious human rights, both today and in the future.

### *Vocabulary notes*

**Lucid** – светлый, ясный, прозрачный

**Tuition** – обучение

**Homage** – дань, уважение, почтение

**Vague** – расплывчатый, мутный, неопределенный

**Distinguish** – различать

**Ubiquitous** –ездесущий

***Dissension***- разногласие

***Abhor***- ненавидеть

***Ally***-союзник, соединять

***Solitary***- уединенный,отшельник

***Confinement***- лишение свободы, заключение

***Rebel***- бунтовать, повстанец

### ***Comprehension questions***

- What does it mean- «*lower-upper-middle class*»?
- What did write Orwell about pro-democratic and anti-communist propaganda in 1949?
- In which book did Orwell describe his first years in Paris?
- What is the main idea of «*1984*»?