

In his dystopian masterpiece *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell deftly weaves political satire, cultural studies, linguistics, and prescient caveats into a haunting narrative replete with unforgettable characters and enduring motifs. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is that rare book that transcends a niche genre—in this case, speculative fiction—to achieve seminal status within both popular culture and the canon of British and Commonwealth literature. *Critical Insights: Nineteen Eighty-Four* contextualizes Orwell's final and finest novel within the author's multidisciplinary oeuvre, the complex cultural climate of its composition, and the diverse range of critical responses to the text. The first three essays, which comprise the "Critical Contexts" section of the book, address *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* literary and historical importance as well as its ongoing relevance to contemporary readers, providing a foundation for further study and scholarly work.

In his essay addressing *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* cultural and historical background, Bradley W. Hart traces Orwell's antiauthoritarian political development through the nineteen thirties and forties, focusing on Orwell's increasing resistance to both left- and right-wing extremism. Through a close examination of Orwell's reaction to British domestic policy during the Second World War, Hart shows how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was partially shaped by Orwell's belief that unquestioning commitment to political ideology alienates people from the core sociopolitical values they espouse.

In the "Critical Lens" chapter, Tony Burns provides an overview of scholarship that questions the traditional notion that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is an anti-utopia. Pointing to utopian possibilities embedded in Orwell's overtly pessimistic dystopia, Burns demonstrates how Orwell's final novel can be understood as a forerunner of the critical dystopias of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, narratives that conclude with sufficient

ambiguity to allow for the possibility, however remote, of social renewal.

In her “Comparative Analysis” chapter, Regina Martin considers the influence of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on Dave Eggers’s *The Circle*. Martin addresses how Eggers takes Orwellian thought into the digital age, applying Orwell’s critique of governmental power to the unregulated multinational corporations that are increasingly supplanting the nation state. Martin argues that although *The Circle* presents a glittering vision of realized desire, it actually forecloses the latent utopian hope in Orwell’s world of deprivation.

The remaining essays provide “Critical Readings” that present a range of engaging critical interpretations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by prominent scholars. In the first of these, Gregory Claeys addresses how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* illustrates the broad, multifaceted conception of nationalism presented in Orwell’s 1945 essay “Notes on Nationalism.” Claeys discusses Orwell’s expansion of the term “nationalism” to explore a range of widespread modern beliefs determined by ideology and group psychology rather than evidence. Claeys argues that understanding *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in terms of Orwell’s unconventional definition of nationalism broadens the focus of the novel from a critique of totalitarianism, particularly Stalinism, to an assessment of the individual’s ability in modern times to identify with a particular movement without being corrupted or deceived by bias and consequently losing the capacity to grasp objective truths.

Jill Belli analyzes Orwell’s nuanced assessment of the sociopolitical effects of nostalgia through his portrayal of Winston Smith’s veneration of the past. Belli argues that Winston loses his political efficacy by channeling his potentially fruitful utopian leanings into an unattainable re-creation of past domesticity. In contrast to Julia’s pragmatism and subversive sexuality, Winston, by isolating her and himself in the room above Mr. Charrington’s shop, foregoes the future by retreating into an idealized past. While recognizing that nostalgia arising from discontent with the present can provoke critical thinking and thus an impetus for progress, Orwell illustrates the perils of failing to recognize the possibilities

for a better future suggested by favorable circumstances of earlier times.

While acknowledging that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is primarily a work of dystopian fiction, Erik Jaccard analyzes the text as an English catastrophe novel, a late nineteenth- and twentieth-century genre that portrays the realities of and responses to rapid societal collapse. In Orwell's evocation of this late imperial tradition, Jaccard identifies unexpected conservative and patriotic undertones that suggest a connection in Orwell's thinking between Englishness and sociopolitical freedom.

Conceding that the world of global superstates envisioned by Orwell is unlikely to come about, Rafeeq O. McGiveron examines *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* historical value as a document of the early Cold War but also as an exposé of authoritarian subcurrents in England's putatively benign socialist movement. McGiveron points out that Orwell's dystopia has succeeded in keeping generations of people in democratic countries watchful for totalitarian tendencies and aware of their appeal.

Clifford T. Manlove examines how governmental power in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* functions according to Freud's conception of the primal horde. Manlove argues that *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—unlike Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*—envisions a possible future in which the Enlightenment principle of rational governance is replaced by a premodern familial ruling philosophy. Manlove is particularly interested in the way the concept of equality under the law is used in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to facilitate regression to the veneration of a god-like, sovereign father.

Comparing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, Sean A. Witters shows how in both novels the protagonists' paranoia paradoxically drives them to resist the madness of the bureaucratic state and to challenge it with a motivating "fantasy of coherence." Witters points out that readers, too, resist totalitarianism by engaging in a paranoid reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, one that invites repeated attempts to demystify Big Brother so as to uncover the rationale behind the Party's repressive rule. Witters also considers the ways in which paranoia reinforces authoritarianism. For example,

while the reader, like Winston, hates Big Brother, underlying that hatred is a latent attraction to patterns of symmetry, hierarchy, and coherence that paranoia looks for and that Big Brother symbolically embodies. Witters concludes by addressing how Orwell satirizes Winston's (and the reader's) paranoid reaction to oppression.

Drawing on the work of various cultural and literary theorists, Dario Altobelli explores the tension in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* between the archive drive—the natural impulse to document and preserve information—and an innate corollary of the Freudian death instinct that generates an opposing tendency to suppress and obliterate information. Noting that every destructive system in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has also, paradoxically, an archival function, Altobelli argues that Orwell, through his portrayal of both Winston Smith and the Party, suggests that this instinctive, irreconcilable tension between the need to preserve and the compulsion to destroy can destabilize democratic as well as autocratic communities.

Charles Tedder reads *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an illustration of how the concept of sociopolitical freedom depends upon the fundamentally communal acts of writing and reading. Building on the notion that writing is always for others and the consequent connection between writer and reader, Tedder argues that for Orwell, writing and reading foster the community essential to the development of a free society. Ingsoc's power, therefore, is rooted in the forgeries, rewritings, and re-inscriptions in which even Winston Smith participates in his job at the Records Department. The Party's reduction and distortion of language create a totalitarian world with speech and text but no genuine writing or reading, what Tedder calls an "unwritten authoritarianism" governed by silent rules rather than written laws. Tedder's analysis of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* suggests that literacy remains the best defense against and the greatest threat to tyranny.

Jackson Ayres examines how Anthony Burgess in *1985* (1978), Zoë Fairbairns in *Benefits* (1979), and Martin Amis in *Money* (1984) plumb Orwell's critique of totalitarianism to address social concerns of the late seventies and early eighties, indicating not only the versatility of Orwell's thinking but its ongoing relevance.

Exploring the ways in which we acquiesce to the diminishment of privacy, Andrew Byers shows how Orwell's concerns about the dark potential of surveillance have been both accurate and inaccurate. Byers highlights the extent to which contemporary surveillance is more pervasive yet less obviously oppressive than what Orwell forecast. Focusing not just on the methods but the symbols of surveillance, Byers reassesses the usefulness of the Big Brother metaphor within the increasingly diffuse surveillance apparatus of the twenty-first century, concluding that ours is a world not of one Big Brother but rather a multitude of "little brothers."

Donald Morris addresses the balance between privacy and state control common to both utopias and dystopias, noting, for example, that in both Thomas More's *Utopia* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the government exercises control over citizens through restrictions of privacy. Citing recent psychological research indicating that perceptions of fairness depend more on procedural consistency than individual outcomes, Morris raises the possibility that because all Outer Party members live under the watchful eye of the telescreen, they are less inclined to perceive the injustice of a lack of privacy.

The various interpretations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presented in these essays highlight the richness, complexity, and pertinence of this classic dystopian novel.

From “The Splitting-Up of the World into Three Great Superstates” to “A Bare, Hungry, Dilapidated Place”: 1949 in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Rafeeq O. McGiveron

George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), masterful as it is, seems the classic twentieth-century dystopia whose nightmare world is, at least in its broad strokes, now least likely to materialize. For the most part, after all, gone from our world are the great totalitarian dictatorships¹ from behind whichever opaque and impenetrable “Curtain” they lay—Iron or Bamboo—with even the repressions of China seeming mild in comparison with its savage heyday of the 1950s and 1960s. Although the widespread burning of books now appears as far-off as the creation of genetically engineered and hypnopedically brainwashed social castes, novels such as Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) otherwise hit closer to home in our modern era of instant gratification and the saturation of mass-media communication.

Nineteen Eighty-Four thus may be dated in certain aspects, but those aspects are priceless in their historicity. For generations who might not have experienced a time before a World Wide Web facilitating instantaneous and unfettered communication among all parts of the globe, let alone a time when Cold War superpowers faced off so precariously for so many years, Orwell’s novel artfully captures the contours—the social, political, and even technical milieu—of the cramped, constrained, and oppressive realities of the now-vanished era of the great twentieth-century dictatorships. Moreover, lest we imagine that the novel’s implicit warnings against the loss of freedom and humanity apply only to other places and to times long past, when long-dead murderers such as Hitler and Stalin ruled huge swaths of the world without conscience or restraint behind a wall of police-state secrecy, Orwell carefully yet subtly

reminds us that no society is immune to the danger, and the lure, of totalitarianism.

Technical

The world of 1949—including both the decade or two that preceded it and the notions of a future that, at the time, seemed very possible to follow it—is reflected in every aspect of the bleak dystopia published in that year. Excepting only the “speakwrite” and the regulation-issue “oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror” (Orwell 6) of the two-way telescreen that not only receives government propaganda broadcasts but also sends real-time video² of citizens back to the Thought Police of Oceania, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not really “science-fictional” in its technology. On the one hand, in addition to improving existing weapons by making more powerful guns, better armor, and stronger conventional explosives, military researchers indeed also are always imagining new super-weapons. Some “strive to produce a vehicle that shall bore its way under the soil like a submarine under the water,³ or an airplane as independent of its base as a sailing ship; others explore even remoter possibilities such as focusing the sun’s rays through lenses suspended thousands of kilometers away in space,⁴ or producing artificial earthquakes and tidal waves by tapping the heat at the earth’s center” (160).

On the other hand, however, even the existing super-weapon of the atom bomb, though planned for compulsively, no longer is used, since even with the best planning, still no warring side would be able to launch a well-coordinated nuclear strike “with effects so devastating as to make retaliation impossible” (Orwell 161). Far more common, then, are references to weapons familiar to, even iconic of, the Second World War. The “rocket bomb,” for example, an obvious echo of the sleek German V-2 ballistic missile that rained down on Britain from launching sites across the English Channel, appears numerous times. In the real world, Britons may have been used to the mass bombing raids of propeller-driven aircraft and to the stuttering pulsejet of the V-1 “buzz bomb” cruise missile, but a supersonic weapon that struck invisibly, and in advance of the

shriek of its descent, at first seemed inexplicable. Gradually, though, the terrifying V-2 became grimly commonplace.

In Orwell's world, too, the warheads drop "daily on London" (127), with the resultant "few scores of deaths" (153) here and there apparently being fairly unremarkable. Only when the rockets "ha[ve] been killing larger numbers of people than usual" does the populace take particular notice—when one "bur[ies] several hundred victims among the ruins" of a movie theater, for example, or when one hits a playground and "blow[s] to pieces" "several dozen children" (124). Yet while civilians have no protection, the three-hundred-meter pyramidal concrete fortresses of the government's four ruling ministries are so massive that "A thousand rocket bombs would not batter [them] down" (26). Perhaps, however, the point is moot. Although the supposition of the "casually" cynical Julia is never conclusively proven or disproven, it is indeed possible that "the war [is] not happening" and that the rocket bombs in fact are "fired by the Government of Oceania itself, 'just to keep people frightened'" (127).

As is explained by *the book*, the forbidden and whispered-about "book without a title" (Orwell 15) whose ironically accurate critique of Oceania's police state was written not by the fabled rebel Brotherhood but by agent provocateurs of the government itself, "the art of war has remained almost stationary for thirty or forty years," with "[t]he tank, the submarine, the torpedo, the machine gun, even the rifle and hand grenade . . . still in use" (160-61). Indeed, the submachine gun, a weapon emblematic of the worldwide conflict that had ended so shortly before the publication of Orwell's novel, is mentioned several times, in the employ of both Oceania and its enemies. Prisoners of war being trucked through London on display, for example, are watched by "wooden-faced guards armed with submachine guns" (96), while the story of the fictitious Party exemplar Comrade Ogilvy, whom protagonist Winston Smith invents during a particularly inspired falsification of the past, features the submachine gun prominently, from childhood to heroic death (42). Government propaganda to demonize the enemy of the moment does not neglect the ubiquitous weapon either. A film for

viewing during the daily Two Minutes Hate features “the figure of a Eurasian soldier who seemed to be advancing, huge and terrible, his submachine gun roaring” (17), while a gigantic outdoor poster is equally stylized and threatening:

It had no caption, and represented simply the monstrous figure of a Eurasian soldier, three or four meters high, striding forward with expressionless Mongolian face and enormous boots, a submachine gun pointed from the hip. From whatever angle you looked at the poster, the muzzle of the gun, magnified by the foreshortening, seemed to be pointed straight at you. (Orwell 123)

Such images of machine-gun-armed shock troops were even more current in Orwell’s day than they are in ours, for just as the Second World War became a war of super-weapons—from jet fighters that could attack more swiftly than a bomber’s gun turrets could turn to unstoppable ballistic missiles, and from Flying Fortresses⁵ with top-secret Norden bombsights to Superfortresses carrying fission bombs able to destroy entire cities—so, too, was it the war of the machine gun. Belt-fed guns were mounted on land, air, and sea vehicles of all variety, and crew-served weapons were lugged from foxhole to foxhole by two or three soldiers, but the lighter, shorter-barreled submachine gun firing smaller pistol rather than rifle cartridges put enormous albeit short-range firepower in the hands of individual infantrymen. The United States and Britain had their own weapons, although arguably the German MP-40 has grown even more famous due to later appearances in numerous war films. Perhaps just as familiar to contemporary readers, though, was the Russian PPSH-41 with its drum magazine and its short barrel made even blunter-looking by a perforated shroud. The PPSH-41 was used in fierce battles across the Eastern Front, including the final momentous Soviet overrun of Berlin, as was depicted in countless photos and newsreels; moreover, just as apropos to the themes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Aleksandr I. Solzhenitstyn reminds us that such submachine guns were used extensively in the gulags, the infamous forced-labor prison camps of the Soviet Union.⁶

Chronology of George Orwell's Life_____

- 1903** Born Eric Arthur Blair on June 25 in Motihari, Bengal (now part of India), to Richard Walmesley Blair and Ida Mabel Blair (née Limouzin). His older sister Marjorie Frances Blair was born on April 21, 1898.
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- 1904** Richard Blair settles his young family in England following an outbreak of plague.
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- 1908** Avril Norah Blair, Orwell's younger sister, born on April 6.
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- 1911-6** Attends St. Cyprian's, a private boarding school in Eastbourne, Sussex, on partial scholarship. Orwell befriends Cyril Connolly, a fellow student.
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- 1917** Attends spring term at Wellington College on scholarship.
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- 1917-21** Attends Eton College, where Aldous Huxley is his French teacher, on scholarship as a King's Scholar.
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- 1922-7** Works as a police officer in Burma.
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- 1927-8** Returns to England, stays initially with family, then settles in London, living intermittently among tramps.
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- 1928-9** Moves to a working-class neighborhood in Paris and works as a journalist. Does various menial jobs to supplement his small income. Returns to England in December of 1929.
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- 1930** Works in England over the next five years as a private tutor, a bookseller, and a teacher. Occasionally tramps under the assumed name P. S. Burton.
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Major Works by George Orwell

Novels

Burmese Days (1934)

A Clergyman's Daughter (1935)

Keep the Aspidochelone Flying (1936)

Coming Up for Air (1939)

Animal Farm (1945)

Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949)

Nonfiction

Down and Out in Paris and London (1933)

The Road to Wigan Pier (1937)

Homage to Catalonia (1938)

Inside the Whale and Other Essays (1940)

“The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius” (1941)

Critical Essays / US edition: *Dickens, Dali, and Others: Studies in Popular Culture* (1946)

Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays (1950)

“Such, Such Were the Joys” (1952)

The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell (1968, four volumes)

Orwell: The War Broadcasts / US edition: *Orwell: The Lost Writings* (1985)

Orwell: The War Commentaries (1986)

Other

The Complete Works of George Orwell, 1986–1998 (twenty volumes)

The Lost Orwell (2006)

Orwell: Diaries (2009)

Orwell: A Life in Letters (2010)

About the Editor ---

Thomas Horan is Associate Professor of English at The Citadel. He holds an AB from Harvard University, a JD from Cornell University, and a PhD from The University of North Carolina. His teaching and research interests include dystopian literature, twentieth-century British and Commonwealth literature, and modern and contemporary drama. His work appears in *Modern Drama*, *Extrapolation*, and *The Arthur Miller Journal*. He has also contributed chapters to *Critical Insights: Dystopia* and *Critical Insights: Brave New World*.