

## About This Volume

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Robert C. Evans

This volume, like all the others in the Critical Insights series, is organized into four distinct sections. The first section opens with an essay by a major scholar who explores some of the general dimensions of the volume's theme. The second section—"Critical Contexts"—consists of four essays designed to examine that theme by using (1) a historical approach; (2) an approach emphasizing previous scholarship; (3) a specific "critical lens"; and (4) an approach involving comparison and contrast. The third section—"Critical Readings"—offers ten different approaches to varied authors and works, while the closing "Critical Resources" section includes a listing of additional resources relevant to the theme, a secondary bibliography, and a comprehensive index.

The present volume opens with an essay by the widely published English scholar Nicolas Tredell, who explores issues of "Power and Corruption in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*." Tredell argues that Warren's novel

vividly evokes and dramatizes . . . general questions such as: does power inevitably corrupt? Is it necessary to embrace at least a measure of corruption in the first place to gain power? Might a leader whose route to power has involved some corruption or who has become corrupt after gaining power nonetheless achieve goals that are widely acknowledged as public benefits? Is corruption not only a product of and means to power but also an ineluctable aspect of human life and human nature in general?

"The novel," Tredell continues, "does not answer these questions—novels that try to answer the general questions they pose risk turning into tracts—but it does succeed in conveying a sense of their moral, psychological, philosophical, and historical complexity in a narrative that is itself complex."

# The Earliest Newspaper Reviews of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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Robert C. Evans

George Orwell's 1949 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has long been regarded as a masterpiece of modern fiction, partly because the horrific future it depicts seems so convincingly real, so distant from "fiction" in the usual sense. Orwell's book is also generally seen as one of the most powerful treatments ever presented of the themes of power and corruption and the ways those two nouns are tightly connected. Fervent praise for Orwell's book was almost instantaneous, but little attention seems to have been paid to the earliest newspaper reviews it elicited.<sup>1</sup> My purpose here is to describe, in chronological order, many of those reviews (from Britain, the United States, and Canada) and thus give some sense of how the book was understood by its earliest readers. Most readers—but not all—found Orwell's description of the depressing lives of Winston Smith (the novel's protagonist) and his lover Julia thoroughly gripping and, indeed, unforgettable.

## Reviews from New Jersey, Ottawa, Manchester, and London

Many early notices reported that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had been chosen as a selection by the popular American "Book-of-the-Month Club," which paired the novel with John Gunther's nonfiction account of life *Behind the Curtain*—that is, the Communist "Iron Curtain" of Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe (see "Book-of-the-Month"). Indeed, many early reviews often noted the relevance of Orwell's novel to the threat of Communism, an important topic in postwar political and cultural debates. Yet many reviewers also reminded their readers that another important oppressive force—Nazism—had only recently been defeated. Thus, on June 4, 1949, in Canada's *Ottawa Journal*, a writer identified only as "V. M. K." described

## Documentary Films as Contexts for Recent Novels about the Chinese Cultural Revolution\_\_\_\_\_

Robert C. Evans

Surely one of the most important examples of a nexus between power and corruption can be found in China's "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution," an especially chaotic and bloody period in the history of Communist China that ran from 1966 to 1976. Although the Cultural Revolution (CR), instigated by the dictator "Chairman" Mao Zedong, officially ended almost fifty years ago, it remains relevant to the entire world for at least two reasons. First, mainland China, along with the United States, is now one of the two most powerful nations on Earth. China is both economically and militarily strong and has ambitions to surpass the United States as the world's leading "superpower." The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which unleashed the Cultural Revolution, remains the dominant power *within* China, and any erstwhile hopes that the Party might someday relinquish or at least share its power—that China might someday become a "liberal" democracy, as was once widely assumed—now seem foolishly naïve. If anything, China since the 1990s, and especially in the last ten years, has become less and less "democratic" than ever, particularly following the famous massacre of thousands of student protestors in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

But the Cultural Revolution remains important for another reason as well. Many of the features of the Revolution (including a strong commitment to an extreme ideology, a willingness to use violence to suppress dissenting beliefs, a wholesale rejection of traditional culture, and an alarming tendency to shut down competing ideas even in schools, colleges, and universities) can still be found today, not only in the United States but in other places throughout the Western world. China itself has not yet come to terms with the legacy of the Cultural Revolution: free discussion, *in* China, of this chapter in Chinese history is routinely suppressed. And discussion in the West of the Revolution's legacy is far less

# “Doing evil” and “Doing right in the sight of the Lord”: Power and Corruption in the Bible\_\_\_\_\_

Edwin Wong

- 26 ¶ Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse;  
27 A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day:  
28 And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which ye have not known. (*King James Version*, Deut. 11:26–28)

Power follows from obeying YHWH’s law. Liberty, self-determination, military conquest, health, children, long life, population increase, harvest, dominion over nature, prosperity, and a life of milk and honey in the Holy Land result from keeping the statutes, commandments, judgements, and testimonies of YHWH. The opposite of power is corruption. Military catastrophes, animal maulings, enslavement, pestilence, leprosy, barrenness, great fires, earthquakes, famine, drought, poverty, despair, dethronement, plague, loss of the Holy Land, and the day of the Lord result from altering, neglecting, or breaking the law. The terms of power and corruption are dictated by the covenant, a contract between YHWH and the children of Israel:

- 4 [YHWH to Moses] Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and *how* I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself.  
5 Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth *is* mine:  
6 And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These *are* the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.

7 ¶ And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before their faces all these words which the LORD commanded him.

8 And all the people answered together, and said, All that the LORD hath spoken we will do. (Ex. 19:4–8)

The pact is stated as a conditional clause introduced by the conjunction *if*: “**if** ye will obey my voice indeed,” says YHWH, “**then** ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people” (emphasis added). Because the condition is a dyad, the people have two options: either grow powerful by accepting the law or grow corrupt by breaking the law. When they choose power, they are said to “Do right in the sight of the LORD.” But when they choose corruption, they are said to “Do evil in the sight of the LORD.” Biblical history, from the Old to the New Testament, is measured in the pendulum swing between power and corruption.

In a monotheism, doing right should be easier than in a polytheism. Instead of a pantheon of competing claims, there is one God, one law. The hitch, however, is that many of YHWH’s laws contradict human nature: humans gravitate towards a multitude of gods and saints (as the various polytheistic religions and iconoclasm attest), are moderately aggressive, envious, and covetous, as well as being somewhat polygynous and open to different sexual orientations (Wilson *Nature* 99–120, 125, 142–47). When corruption is linked to the all-too-human, biology becomes a stumbling block: “the spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak,” says the apostle Matthew (26:41). The monotheism of the Bible is difficult because it calls for humans to act contrary to their biological programming: “What but a Soul would have the wit / To build me up for Sin so fit?” says the restless body in Andrew Marvell’s poem. In the push-pull between faith and nature, the Holy Scripture becomes a study of how far, in the name of power, humans can defy human nature.

## Shakespeare's Cleopatra and the Biblical "Strange Woman" of Proverbs

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Christopher Baker

Among the women of Shakespeare's plays who are memorable for their use or abuse of power—Lady Macbeth, Tamora, Volumnia, Regan and Goneril, to name a few—none seems to enjoy wielding her authority more than Cleopatra. In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* her exercise of power is intimately allied with her love for Antony, whose leadership is corrupted by his fascination with her and her emotional dominance over him. In her death scene she summons the power to transcend her own tragic end as she proclaims her transmutation into "fire and air" (5.2.289) yet still calls out, "O Antony!" (5.2.313). Her skill at shifting from indulging in love for its own sake to loving as a means to an end enables her to manipulate Antony through both her irresistible temptation and his passionate affection that undermines his allegiance to Rome, leading him to regretfully declare, "O, my fortunes have / Corrupted honest men" (4.5.16–17). That the men around her find it hard to know whether her ardor is genuine or merely a stratagem is evidence of what Enobarbus famously calls her chameleonic "infinite variety" (2.2.246).

Sources that may have contributed to Shakespeare's conception of such a woman who is both alluring and commanding include mythological and biblical characters such as the goddess Isis and even, according to Michael O'Connell, Christ himself (195–96). However, one Old Testament figure whose relevance for Cleopatra has not been closely examined but whose corrupting power remarkably anticipates hers is the character of the so-called "Strange Woman" in the Book of Proverbs. Shakespeare's biblically literate audience, who heard the book of Proverbs read during July of the church year as directed by the Book of Common Prayer, may have noted that Cleopatra's debasement of Antony reimagines the threat posed by the immoral Strange Woman to the prototypical young

## Power, Corruption, and Narrative Control in *Wuthering Heights*

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Melissa Anderson

Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* can be read as an examination of a generational struggle for power between two families—a struggle complicated by issues of gender, race, and social class. The introduction of an orphan boy of uncertain heritage to the family of the Earnshaws, landed gentry in rural West Yorkshire for hundreds of years, catalyzes a series of events and violent conflicts that forever change not only the Earnshaw family but also the neighboring Linton family and the ownership of the estates on the moor. Brontë explores the way that power corrupts those who wield it as once-oppressed characters such as Heathcliff become the oppressors and once-powerful figures, like Hindley Earnshaw, find themselves robbed of control over their own lives. Digging deeper into the text, we also see that Brontë's experiments with narrative structure, embedding multiple different first-person narratives within the framing narrative of Lockwood's stay in West Yorkshire, highlight how control over narrative and story can be used to empower those such as Nelly Dean, Isabella Linton, Joseph, and Zillah who are otherwise disempowered by their gender and/or social class. We can also recognize how competing narratives complicate notions of truth and knowledge, all within the context of an England experiencing rapid social change due to industrialization and urbanization. By contextualizing Brontë's novel and its ingenious narrative structure within nineteenth-century social history and identifying how nineteenth-century conceptions of class, race, and gender shape the power struggles within the novel, we can better understand the significance of this innovative work in literary history.