

George Orwell Biography

Directions: “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” As we study George Orwell’s classic allegory of power and corruption, we will explore the impacts/effects of propaganda, examine Orwell’s parallels to Russian revolutionary figures/events and ponder the realities of our own personal freedoms. Remember always, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

I. Background Research:

A. George Orwell Biography: Read and Answer Questions

George Orwell is the pseudonym of Englishman Eric Arthur Blair. Orwell was born in 1903 in Motihari, a town in India approximately 25 miles south of the Nepalese border. Orwell's relatives on both sides of his family were of European origin but residents of Southeast Asia. His mother's parents were traders and lived in what was then called Burma. Both his father and grandfather were officials in the British forces that occupied India as part of the British Empire.

Orwell moved back to England with his mother when he was very young. In his early schooling he was a good student, and he attended several schools on scholarship--including one of England’s finest schools, Eton. The imperial history of his family and his experiences as a scholarship student was two important influences on Orwell’s intellectual development. They helped him define himself mostly in terms of what he did not wish for himself.

Cruel administrators ran the schools Orwell attended, and they were interested in tormenting and singling out the students who did not pay their own way. He eventually lost interest in traditional scholastic achievement while at Eton, and his poor performance there reflects his interest in rejecting the traditional educational path that lead to either Oxford or Cambridge. He instead decided to return to India and served for a number of years as a policeman in the Indian Imperial Police. His experiences as an officer charged with keeping the Burmese people obedient to British rule opened his eyes to the fundamental difficulties of power. In his essay, “Shooting an Elephant,” he describes an incident in which he felt compelled to shoot an elephant in front of a large crowd of Burmese simply to avoid looking like a fool. The real lesson, he wrote, was that when a man becomes a tyrant “it is his own freedom that he destroys.”

When he returned to England in 1927 he resolved to fulfill his childhood ambition to be a writer. Over the next five years he lived in an adventurous fashion, always on the edge of poverty. In Paris, he wrote and washed dishes in a hotel when the money ran out. Back in England, he lived in a series of cheap hotels in the East End of London and also traveled through the countryside “tramping” and doing some agricultural labor. The documentary account of these experiences--and of the desperate poverty he observed--became his first full-length published work, Down and Out in Paris and London (1933). Since he was unsure what sort of reaction the book would receive, he decided to publish it under a pen-name. The man who had been a student at an exclusive school like Eton and who had served as an instrument of the British Empire remade himself as George Orwell--a writer who ignored the barriers of class and wrote about poverty with insight and empathy.

In the years that followed the publication of his first book, Orwell taught school, worked in a bookshop, and continued to write. He also continued his travels and adventures. In 1936 he lived in the industrial north of England in order to investigate the conditions of working-

class life and the effects of unemployment. In 1937 he went to Spain to serve in a militia fighting against the forces intent on establishing a fascist government in that country.

In the 1940s Orwell settled down somewhat. He worked from 1941 to 1943 for the BBC, producing radio shows for broadcast to India and Southeast Asia. From 1943 to 1946 he was the editor of a politically left newspaper, the Tribune. He also served as a wartime correspondent from Paris in the spring of 1945. He wrote and published Animal Farm during this period.

In the late 1940s his health began to decline seriously. He always had respiratory problems, and developed tuberculosis seriously enough to require hospitalization in 1947, 1948, and again in 1949. He revised his draft of 1984 after his release from the hospital in 1948. He was able to see the initial favorable response to both his novels, but died from a hemorrhaged lung in early 1950, well before the impact of his writing would be fully evident.

