

THE WRITER AND COMMITMENT:
A STUDY OF THE POLITICAL NOVELS OF GEORGE ORWELL

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ABSTRACT

Among political writers, Orwell is one who observes closely and critically the political movements of his days. He feels very strongly about these and considers it his duty as a writer to make the reading public aware of the political trends he hates. His approach to the issues is sincere and strong, and his beliefs in politics are simple, based on decency, justice and liberty. His political work shows him to be a writer of responsibility and an impassioned preacher.

Because of the strength of his responsibility and his particular style used to convince the public of his message and prophecy, he can be considered as a committed writer. For a man with such an outlook, the possible and convenient media to convey his concepts to the readers are newspapers, political weeklies and periodicals and Orwell certainly takes advantage of these. Besides, he also needs a more substantial medium of expression; he takes to writing novels and documentaries as well as semi-autobiographical work. This thesis will be concerned with the political novels which will be discussed, not merely to show how brilliantly and successfully he expresses his political ideas, but also to see how his unusually strong commitment affects the standard of his work. The final judgment of the thesis is that the novels succeed as powerfully written documents of personal commitment but suffer as works of arts because Orwell's talent is not suited to imaginative writing; he is too concerned with the real world to make a success of characterization, plot-making and other novel writing techniques.

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INTRODUCTION

Commitment is the writer's act of pledging himself to a particular cause, principle or view in life. All writers are bound in varying degrees by an emotional attitude based on a moral view of human activities and society. This moral viewpoint is so strong that it is deeply rooted in their mind and becomes a driving force or an impulse in their writing. This force is always with them; without it, they would probably never write.

A writer who constantly writes under such force is committed. The degree of commitment varies from one person to another, according to the environment which influences him. Whatever kind of work the writer may write, it will always reflect his personal view, his moral standpoint, his strong desire to change or to see the world as it should be, or his impulse to find facts and expose them to the public; the core of his expression is moral.

In English literature, the term 'commitment' has been used in connection with a group of modern English writers grouped together under the title, 'the New Left'.¹ In the period following the Second World War, writers were not pleased with the situation of the day. Hardships and scarcities resulting from the war dissatisfied them; it pained them to see the deplorable state of human beings in the midst of the ruins

of war; this committed them strongly to write for the common good, for a better life for the individual.

Orwell's commitment was very strong and more obvious even than that of his contemporaries. His commitment stemmed from his unbreakable faith in the dignity and rights of the individual in society. He fervently believed that every man should be treated with decency. For Orwell, decency was a cardinal virtue. His commitment did not originate from any purely academic source but from his own experience and close observation. In the early days of his childhood, he knew what isolation meant; he lived a lonely kind of existence and had to develop an unwanted independence. Because of his early independence, he had to create his own world, his own view of life. In his school days, he underwent discriminating treatment and learned the meaning of injustice and class prejudice. He learned what it was like to be treated without decency. Five years in Burma taught him oppressive rule under British imperialism. In Paris and London, he suffered from poverty. In Spain, he grasped the real motives behind the Civil War and it pained him to see the frauds and lies of the political parties of the day.

Orwell quickly developed an instinct to defend at all costs the rights of the individual; he pledged himself ceaselessly to the cause of human freedom, justice and the rights of mankind. Wherever he felt any oppression, threat or injustice

by the state or society against the masses, he immediately felt committed to express his point of view on their behalf. His identification with the poor, the oppressed and the unhappy was real. He not only felt it necessary to write for them; he even felt it necessary to become one of them.

The question to be answered in the thesis is, what effect does such intense commitment have on Orwell's work, in particular, on his political novels? Is he a good novelist or merely a novelist? Is he a great writer or merely a writer? A detailed analysis of his books confirms that the quality of his writing is considerably affected by the nature of his commitment. In some cases, his work is enhanced by it, in others, marred. At times, his commitment is responsible for brilliant, meticulous and persuasive prose, at others for long tracts of naive prejudice. We can see this double effect at work, best of all, in his novels. Being a writer of scrupulous honesty, Orwell in his essays and autobiographical pieces, cannot be accused of deliberate distortion or crude propaganda. In his novels, where he uses a fictional form to express his feelings about political injustice or to warn us against the evils of totalitarianism, he lays himself open to distortion of truth, to naive propaganda. He often puts his message before his plot or his characters and the result is not satisfactory, for the impact of the message suffers as well as the novel.

In order to understand the nature and extent of Orwell's

commitment it is necessary to examine his own and other writer's versions of his experience and to sketch the political and social background of his period. The political novels to be studied in the thesis include Homage to Catalonia but exclude Keep the Aspidistra Flying and Coming up for Air. Although Homage to Catalonia is not strictly a novel, its form is very similar to that of the novel, and the subject matter of the book is strictly political. Coming up for Air and Keep the Aspidistra Flying are excluded because they are strictly social novels; their condemnation of the political situation is only implied; they do not, like the others, directly concern existing political systems.
