

**Author** Se-Hoon Ko

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# *George Orwell, an Intellectual*

## Colophon

**Editor** Seong Eun Kim, Sang Ae Park

**Translation** Min-kyung Kim, Seong Eun Kim,  
Jeong Hyen Kim

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# George Orwell, an Intellectual'

Se-Hoon Ko

## **Chapter 1. Lifetime: Expiation and Compensation**

### **2. Initial Experience of Shame and Guilt: The School Life and the Burmese Days**

#### **St. Cyprian's and Eton – The Beginning of Shame and Guilt**

**pp.114-115, 117**

The majority of St. Cyprian's students were children of the nouveaux riches, who became suddenly rich without having their own lands and residences in the rural area, unlike aristocrats. The rich students competitively bragged about their vacations, vehicles, butlers and country houses. They faced a disparity in classes explicitly, and this led them to feel alienated from each other. For example, the rich students, who are just barely in their teens, usually bombarded the peers, if it is hard to tell their classes, by asking prying questions, such as; where do you live in London, Knightsbridge or Kensington? How much is your father's annual income? Does your family have a butler or a cook? How much is your

<sup>1</sup>  
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Se-Hoon Ko | Professor, School of Public Administration, Korea University

Se-Hoon Ko studied economics in Yonsei University and politics in the graduate school of Seoul National University, and obtained a Ph.D. in political science from the Ohio State University, with a thesis on the politics of the British Labor Party. Ko has been a professor in Korea University since 1989. His research interests are British politics, welfare states, and social democracy, particularly in the Victorian Age and interwar period of the UK. Ko published *George Orwell, an Intellectual* (Hangilsa, pp.632) in 2012.

allowance? The poor students became dreadfully dispirited, especially when the rich kids talked about Scotland, because Scotland was the ideal place for a summer vacation to them, which the poor cannot even imagine visiting there. Rich students were the first to realize this class gap. They got generous as if they were not interested in class differences, only after their classes were clearly established. At the temporary and limited place of a preparatory school, children of newly rich families were anxious to show off their father's wealth and they were class-conscious more than anyone. It is not an exaggeration to say that this 'sneaky' character was later depicted as fear against children who report against their parents to the Thought Police in the totalitarian world in 1984. [...] What was really mysterious was that all kinds of virtues were linked together and only belonged to people in the same category. For example, well-off children always had physical strength, attractive appearance, passion for sports, masculine courage as well as money. [...] George Orwell later lamented through Comstock, an anti-hero living in poverty, in his novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* that "probably the greatest cruelty one can inflict on a child is to send it to school among children richer than itself. A child conscious of poverty will suffer such snobbish agonies a grown-up person can scarcely ever imagine." A boy was not liberated from money even after he became penniless, because impoverishment killed thoughts first. "Most of the middle-class boys' minds were completely dominated by money even before they reached 13 [...] Orwell became a child who felt the formidable effect of money on a person's life much more sensitively than ordinary people."

### **The Burmese Days – Ethics of Infliction**

#### **'Intimacy without Equality' – Introduction of Imperialism**

#### **'Descending' – Decisive Action for Expiation and Compensation**

**pp.148, 152**

"For five years I had been part of an oppressive system, and it had left me guilty conscience. Innumerable remembered faces haunted me intolerably. [...] I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate. I suppose that sounds exaggerated; but if you do for five years a

job that you thoroughly disapprove of, you will probably feel the same. [...] I felt that I had got to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's dominion over man. I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants. [...] At that time failure seemed to me to be the only virtue. Every possible success in the world [...] seemed to me spiritually ugly, a species of bullying. [...] Isolated from everything, I lost myself deep in thought. [...] Suspicious of any forms of success, I refused even to make a few hundred pounds a year. [...] I now realized that there was no need to go as far as Burma to find tyranny and exploitation. [...] I did not know the essential fact that 'respectable' poverty is always the worst. The frightful doom of a decent working man suddenly thrown on the streets after a lifetime of steady work, his agonized struggles against economic laws which he does not understand, the disintegration of families, the corroding sense of shame — all this was outside the range of my experience. When I thought of poverty I thought of it in terms of brute starvation. [...] Therefore my mind turned immediately towards the extreme cases, the social outcasts: tramps, beggars, criminals, prostitutes. I even planned parts of it in detail; how to sell everything, give everything away, [...] and start out with no money and nothing but the clothes one stood up in."

## **Chapter 1. Lifetime: Expiation and Compensation**

### **1. Life Description**

#### **Participation in the Spanish Civil War and Its Influence**

#### **pp.72, 73-74**

Mr. Orwell's experience in Spain sparked his distrust and hatred against the Soviet system and leftwing intellectuals who supported the system. Communists constantly covered up facts and spread false reports to attain their objects, and leftwing intellectuals remained silent or connived with them. That is when Orwell learned a painful lesson about the totalitarian governance. [...] Only partisan history existed, while objective history disappeared. It was the common ground of historical agreement that the totalitarianism aimed to destroy. In terms of distortion and discontinuation

of records and history, the world was pushed into a more deteriorated state than the slavery society in the past. [...] Totalitarian prospect for the mankind's future drove Orwell into "fear worse than bombs." "I cannot have the slightest doubt about who is right. [...] Almost certainly the Western civilization is moving into an age of totalitarian dictatorships. The autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence." This outlook dominated his thoughts till his last days, and he strived to incorporate it into his writings as a main topic.

### **Jura · 1984 · Death**

#### **pp.96-98**

George Orwell finally finished *1984*, an awfully grim and depressed novel that forewarned a totalitarian dystopia, in November 1948 as the result of his superhuman efforts to write. At the end of that month, he wrote to his friend "I have finished a novel I began in 1947. I am typing now [...] It is a terrible thing to do because I have to sit upright for a long time, away from my couch." The finished manuscript was immediately sent to Secker and Warburg, a publisher which already promised to publish it and had published *Animal Farm*. Orwell's friend and the owner of the company, Fredric Warburg, said after reading the manuscript "this is amongst the most terrifying books I have ever read. The savagery of Swift has passed to a successor who looks upon life and finds it becoming ever more intolerable. [...] It is a great book, but I pray I may be spared from reading another like it for years to come." The second leader of the publisher, David Farrer, also sent Orwell the best compliment. "In emotive power and craftsmanship this novel towers above the average. Orwell has done what Wells never did, created a fantasy world which yet is horribly real so that you mind what happens to the characters which inhabit it." [...] As Orwell himself said, *1984* is a book about the relations between men and the contemporary totalitarian nation. What O'Brien, an Inner Party member in *1984*, boasted was not just that the system was successful. He claimed that the system went beyond the mere destruction of human nature or the end of men, and succeeded in recreation. The world where politics substituted

men, public values destroyed possibilities of private lives, autonomous individuals ceased to exist, and having personality and sensibility was treated as a crime was terrifying enough to cause fear and despise. [...] The totalitarianism threatened the very survival of the Western civilization and its values, and the most 'advanced' form was Stalin's Russia. "Hitler burnt books, but Stalin wrote books again." In this regard, *1984* is an extension of *Animal Farm*.

## **Chapter 2. Ideology and Writing: Power · Intellectuals · Ordinary People**

### **8. Writings of a Political Writer**

#### **Politics · Religion · Literature**

#### **Topic · Style · Ordinary People**

#### **pp.491-492, pp.526-527**

When Orwell established him as a political writer, his political and literary sensibilities were not separated. The plain colloquial writing style was his honest way of revealing his strict and harsh thoughts on politics. This is probably why his novels are in the form of autobiography or reportage [...] also, it presumably influenced him to write a huge number of essays. "My starting point is always the recognition of partisan sentiments and injustice." He couldn't help but continue political writing, and writing was a political job. There shouldn't be poems or novels that claimed "a solid world of one's own." This is why Orwell criticized Oscar Wilde who advocated the dedication to 'art for the sake of art' as if it is the most important proposition. [...] George Orwell accused *Black Spring* of Henry Miller (the writer of *Tropic of Cancer*) of moving away from the ordinary world into a sort of Mickey Mouse universe where things and people don't have to obey the rules of space and time. He said the reality became wind and was sucked into "the balloon of fantasy." Orwell believed that people don't have to dive deep into metaphysical discussions on what reality means, and that writings lose power when they go far away from the ordinary world where  $2+2=4$ . He never let go of the world of ordinary people who act ordinarily. "I always feel uneasy when I get away from the

ordinary world where grass is green, stones hard, etc.” This attitude has to do with why Orwell was critical against writers of the time. People who have the luxury to write novels almost always belong to the middle class and are separated from ordinary people. When writers cannot easily contact with ordinary people, they suffer the lack of subject matters and are simply tempted into play on aesthetic words and expressions. If a novel doesn’t have good narration, a story that can be finished in a couple of lines gets longer without much meaning or content. For example, “carefully treated hollow topics” practically put novels of prominent novelists, such as Aldous Huxley and Virginia Woolf into “the infertile world.” In these literary works, everything seems to be approved, but nothing is important. Also, they might be funny but hardly touching. Orwell lamented that many talented writers were so isolated from the contemporary life that they couldn’t write anything about ordinary people. “If a writer is separated from the world of ordinary people, what on earth would they write about?”

## **7. Power · The Last Man · Prole**

### **Totalitarianism — the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Phenomenon**

#### **The Problem of Power**

#### **Intellectuals · Freedom · 1984**

#### **pp.440, 451-452, 461**

Orwell held a very critical attitude about H. G. Wells, who saw hopes for men in science, machinery and technology development. Wells was the most influential writer of the time and had an optimistic view that the mind which embraces machines automatically yearns for free and equal world for mankind. According to him, the history has been a series of victories won by ‘the scientific man’ over ‘the romantic man.’ As Orwell saw it, Wells was confused with mechanical progress vis-a-vis justice, liberty, and common decency. [...] Orwell claimed that it never occurred to Wells that his categories might have got mixed, [...] that it might be the reactionary who would make the fullest use of the machine and that the scientist might use his brains chiefly on race-theory and poison gas. It might be impossible to monitor the entire population on earth through telescreens, but people

acted under the assumption that their every move was reported to the Thought Police. The monitoring system based on advanced science was not a tool that simply controlled the external behaviors. Its main function was to induce people to conform to the ideology by forcing them to behave with extreme vigilance. [...] The belief that their inner thoughts could be unrestricted even under the totalitarianism was the most dangerous thought. It is almost impossible to think without speaking. If Daniel Defoe lived in a desert, he could never write *Robinson Crusoe* and even wouldn't be willing to write.

Totalitarianism is more dangerous than capitalism, mainly because the former is based on power not money. Its premise is new, as it values power over money. Orwell said 'the man of power' appeared by the end of capitalism, as 'the man of money' appeared by the end of feudalism. The man of power may be corrupt individually, but collectively their purpose is not to accumulate money and they are not hedonists. What they want is not comfort and luxury but the ecstasy of repressing others. From the perspective of victims or the weak, the domination of power has been worse than that of money. That is because power tends to be concentrated and it is much more difficult to be distributed than money. The pillar of both leftwing and rightwing totalitarianisms is to obtain power. The problem has been the power, not a certain type of social system. ∞