

# LITERATURE AND PROPAGANDA IN GEORGE ORWELL'S ESSAYS

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## *Abstract*

The paper explores the idea of manipulating language for the purpose of sending emotional messages and creating impressions in order to frame the reality to one's intentions. Among many other writers, George Orwell pointed out the social and political determination of literary writing and the author's responsibility in shaping the public opinion. In his essays, Orwell challenges the position of literature and art in general, concerning the society and political situation of his age. He questions the role of the writer in the age of totalitarianism, when the attitude to art is politically coloured and the integrity of the artist is threatened. The aim of the paper is to analyse several of Orwell's essays written between 1940 and 1949 in order to determine to what extent the relationship between art and politics is possible, provided that the artists still preserve their own sincerity and, as Orwell calls it "honest language".

**Key-words:** *loaded language, literature, art, propaganda, totalitarianism.*

## **Introduction**

The world we live in is highly determined by the politics which influences our way of living, not only in a materialistic sense, but also determining in a great proportion our thinking, decision making and consequently, acting. Although loaded language is present in almost every aspect of human communication, politically loaded language can be dangerous since politics affects viewpoints of an enormous number of people, sometimes whole nations. Freely and Steinberg claim that loaded language provides many possibilities for obstacles to clear thinking. They define it as the use of emotionally charged words with the goal to establish a conclusion without the proof (2000: 85). In that way, language itself can be easily manipulated. Walton regards emotionally loaded language as a highly persuasive means, which is extremely present in ethical argumentation. He further explains that ethical arguments arise from conflicts of values where both sides have pro-attitude viewpoints. Each side uses emotionally loaded language to support their own

standpoints and strengthen the arguments and at the same time to express opposition to the other side (2003: 17-18).

In his essay *From 1984 to One-Dimensional Man: Critical Reflections on Orwell and Marcuse*, Douglas Kellner finds different viewpoints on contemporary political and social issues in two books by Orwell and Marcuse. They both deal with issues of their contemporary social and political situation, with an emphasis on industrial society. Orwell and Marcuse give their standpoints about communism, fascism, totalitarianism and capitalist system in general. Orwell proved himself as a political thinker and prophet, whereas Marcuse offered an insight into contemporary issues, making his own social and political theory. Kellner writes that “*One-Dimensional Man* provides an analysis of such a totalitarian society which uses technology, consumerism, media, language, the state, and culture and ideology as new instruments of social control and domination.” Orwell, who was famous for his bohemianism and individualism and his support of human rights and democratic society, continually pointed out the danger of force and state terror. On the other hand, Marcuse put an emphasis on manipulation and new forms of social control. Kellner distinguishes an idea that the two writers had in common, and that concerns the manipulation and degradation of language and thought. They both established a strong relationship between language and politics and pointed to the fact that through the control of language, one’s thinking and behaviour can also be controlled. Marcuse even uses the phrase “Orwellian language”, referring to the new totalitarian language from Orwell’s novel *1984* “Newspeak” and its part “Doublethink”, a process of indoctrination pushing a person to accept false statements or mutually contradictory statements, so that one should have no personal opinion or possibility of critical thinking and could be manipulated in every possible way. Kellner writes that Marcuse uses the term “Orwellian language” to point out that in contemporary life, officials use “one-dimensional language” to smooth over social contradictions and problems in order to manipulate the public, restrict thoughts and public discourse. He points out that both Orwell and Marcuse called attention to the manipulation and degeneration of language and truth in political discourse, phenomena also present in the contemporary era. Kellner praises them for opening an important area of political linguistics as well. Marcuse explicitly mentions loaded language in his essay *Aggressiveness in Advanced Industrial Society*:

The loaded language proceeds according to the Orwellian recipe of the identity of opposites: in the mouth of the enemy, peace means war, and defence is attack, while on the righteous side, escalation is restraint, and saturation bombing prepares for peace. Organized in this discriminatory fashion, language designates a priori the enemy as evil in his entirety and in all his actions and intention (490).

Loaded language is a powerful tool, which can be used for the welfare of society, as well as for completely different goals. It can influence the public for

selfish purposes, for economic, social or political benefits and can consequently cause, as shown through history, disasters with unprecedented consequences.

### **1.Orwell: Why He Wrote**

George Orwell was in favour of the idea that, in order to understand a writer's work, one should know more about his background, because the life and work of a person are inseparable. In his rather personal essay *Why I write*, which was written in 1946, near the end of his life, Orwell explains his motives for writing, the social and political influences on writing and his viewpoint regarding literature and aestheticism. He claims that the age in which the author lives directly determines him and his social environment, at that time colonialism and fascism. Growing poverty and war circumstances force the author to become politically engaged. Orwell evokes emotional attitude in writing to a certain extent to retain sincerity, which he finds of outmost importance. In his essay *Politics and English language* from 1946, he also points at the “great enemy of clear language”, that is insincerity. To the question of why people write, what actually motivates them, Orwell offers four possible answers, respectively: sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse and political purpose. Orwell admits that the first three motives are stronger in his case than the fourth, the political purpose of writing. Had he lived in a peaceful time, and had he not experienced the evils of imperialism, totalitarianism and fascism he would have probably remained unaware of his political loyalties. He stated that since 1936 he had been writing against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism. The time he lived in demanded political engagement and the authors had to be aware of that fact in order to be able to preserve their aesthetic and intellectual integrity. How to connect art and politics? How to fuse political purpose and aesthetic purpose? Orwell explains his efforts:

What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce a work of art’. I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing. But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience. Anyone who cares to examine my work will see that even when it is downright propaganda it contains much that a full-time politician would consider irrelevant (1941).

Looking back through his writing, Orwell admits that where he lacked political purpose, his books were lifeless and without meaning. He compares good writing with a windscreen, it protects you from outside effects, but at the same time it exposes you to others. The writer has to reveal his personality and

follow his artistic impulse, but at the same time political purpose is the drive that gives life and meaning to words.

### **1. Literature and Totalitarianism**

Orwell is often regarded as an example of a socially and politically engaged author and his turbulent life and war experience largely contributed to his writing. Having learned about society and politics first hand, he distanced himself from both left and right influences and eventually developed as an independent socialist, a critic of his time, sceptical of any organized groups, especially of those leaning towards a totalitarian social order. Because of his individualistic attitude, insistence on humanity and progressiveness, and refusal to join any particular social group, Orwell was often considered as an anarchic individual during his lifetime. He claimed totalitarianism was the greatest evil of his time, and he constantly repeated that opinion in his novels and essays.

Although he was attacked from various sides, Orwell never abandoned the demands for individual integrity, consistency, sincerity and truth. In the essay *Literature and the Leviathan*, he discusses the position of the writer in times of totalitarianism, where the state controls everything and where the whole attitude towards literature is coloured by political bias and loyalties. He claims that among English literary intellectuals there are strong tendencies towards totalitarianism. Politics inevitably interferes in all spheres of society, including art. Orwell believes that writers must have defined political standpoints, although that can be dangerous for literature, because political views influence creative writing, so the writer's inventive abilities fade away:

Group loyalties are necessary, and yet they are poisonous to literature, so long as literature is the product of individuals. As soon as they are allowed to have any influence, even a negative one, on creative writing, the result is not only falsification, but often the actual drying-up of the inventive faculties (1946).

He argues that a writer, as a modern literary intellectual, lives and creates in constant fear, not of the public opinion in the broadest sense, but of public opinion within his own group. It does not mean that the writer should keep out of politics, on the contrary: he should be engaged in politics as a citizen, as a human being, not as a writer. As a citizen, he can help his party in many actions, from distributing leaflets to fighting in civil wars. As a writer, though, he should preserve his integrity and never write for his party. Orwell claims that the writer must be an objective critic of society, regardless of the price he will have to pay for it:

But does all this mean that a writer should not only refuse to be dictated to by political bosses, but also that he should refrain from writing *about* politics? Once again, certainly not! There is no reason why he should not write in the most crudely political way, if he wishes to. Only he should do so as an individual, an outsider, at the

most an unwelcome guerrilla on the flank of a regular army. This attitude is quite compatible with ordinary political usefulness (1948).

Orwell admits that the author's dilemma whether to try to isolate himself into an "ivory tower" or to yield to a party machinery is a painful one, because the writer is aware of the necessity of political engagement, and at the same time he also sees what a degrading and dirty business it is. The writer's political responsibility is great, but the writer has to preserve his creative, critical, and ethical integrity and find the way to reconcile these two opposites.

In his essays *The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda* and *Literature and Totalitarianism*, both from 1941, Orwell analyses the place of literature in the society of that time from a sociological point of view. Because they live in a political society, writers are more preoccupied with the subject than with the way in which they write, which results in the fact that literature has almost ceased to be aesthetic and has been swamped by propaganda. In *The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda* Orwell claims (today, from a historical distance, this may appear unfounded) that the artists who wrote in the late 19th century and up to the 1930s lived in a comfortable and safe period, so they could put the main emphasis on the technical aspect of literature. He believes that the representatives of aestheticism and modernism, such as T. S. Elliot, Ezra Pound or Virginia Woolf did not need to be "writers with a purpose", so they were preoccupied with their own reflections and aesthetic techniques. After 1930, Hitler and the world crisis destroyed people's sense of security, man was not safe either as an individual or within a value system, he had to choose between fascism or socialism. Since writing is determined by external circumstances, i.e. the social atmosphere of a given period, literature necessarily had to become political and the illusion of pure aestheticism disappeared. Orwell argues that a work of art has its political, social, and religious purpose, and in turbulent times, writers discover that they cannot be separated from social events, and that intellectual integrity cannot be sacrificed for political beliefs. The aesthetic standpoint is not enough, nor is political honesty. Since, as he claimed, he did not live in a time of indifference but of struggle, where the writer necessarily had to be politically committed, Orwell wondered if literature could survive in such an atmosphere. For literature, the basic rule is to rely on the concept of intellectual honesty. Modern literature is a matter of the individual, a reflection of his thoughts and feelings. Since totalitarianism had abolished freedom of thought, if it became universal and permanent, Orwell feared that literature would become extinct. His last hope is to establish a form of socialism that will not be totalitarian, in which freedom of thought will survive the disappearance of economic individualism. For him, opposing totalitarianism is a matter of life and death, and literature has immeasurable value in human history and throughout human existence in general. At the end of *Literature and Totalitarianism* he concludes: "Whoever feels the value of literature, whoever sees the central part it plays in the development of human history, must also see the life and death necessity of

resisting totalitarianism, whether it is imposed on us from without or from within“ (1941).

In his essay *The Prevention of Literature* Orwell expresses a strong attitude against any form of totalitarianism, because it demands disbelief in objective truth and exerts great pressure on intellectuals. He claims that “a bought mind is a spoiled mind“ (1946). Orwell urges for freedom of thought, although he also points out that a genuinely non-political literature is not possible in his contemporary social and political circumstances. Political writing is an enemy of intellectual liberty:

Political writing in our time consists almost entirely of prefabricated phrases bolted together like the pieces of a child’s Meccano set. It is the unavoidable result of self-censorship. To write in plain, vigorous language one has to think fearlessly, and if one thinks fearlessly one cannot be politically orthodox (1946).

Orwell stresses that the idea of intellectual liberty is attacked from two sides: by theoretical and practical enemies. Theoretical enemies are the apologists of totalitarianism whereas practical enemies are represented by monopoly and bureaucracy. The direct attack on intellectuals comes from intellectuals themselves. Hence Orwell appeals to solidarity among intellectuals, scientists, writers and journalists in order to preserve intellectual honesty.

## **2. Language and Politics**

George Orwell was deeply concerned with both language and political freedom. In his work, he continually refers to the idea that, besides inevitably being political, literature must have a certain spontaneity. In his essay, *The Prevention of Literature* from 1946 he constantly advocates freedom of thought and expression, otherwise “language itself becomes ossified“. *Pamphlet Literature* is an essay in which Orwell valorises the pamphlet as a critical literary and political form, at the same time lamenting upon the poor quality and lack of literary value. Based on his list of eight representative contemporary pamphlets, Orwell analysed features and reasons for the revival of that form of writing. He states that the quality of contemporary pamphlets is “rubbish“, which is surprising, taking into consideration the fact that it should have been the age of such a literary form:

We live in a time when political passions run high, channels of free expression are dwindling, and organized lying exists on a scale never before known. For plugging the holes in history the pamphlet is the ideal form. Yet lively pamphlets are very few, and the only explanation I can offer - a rather lame one - is that the publishing trade and the literary papers have never gone to the trouble of making the reading public pamphlet-conscious (1943).

The essence of the pamphlet is that the writer has something to say for the audience now, and feels passionately about it. Contemporary pamphlets

lacked passion, emotion and liveliness, so these were the reasons why they were so poor. If the pamphlets are published through a political party, they are worthless because of the censorship, so they have no literary value. Orwell expresses his regret for the poor quality of this genre in terms of flexibility and hopes that something will change in the future and bring the pamphlet back to the attention of its proper public.

The essay *Politics and the English Language* reflects on the written English language of his time and its tendency to self-debasement in relationship to political orthodoxies. Orwell had preference for the concrete as opposed to the abstract and urged clear language and expressions instead of pretentious prose. He shares the idea that unclear political thinking results in unclear political writing:

Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts (1941: 3).

Orwell made a selection of five passages from different fields (from literary essays to a political pamphlet), which, in his opinion, little below the average value, to show the ugliness of the contemporary language. They had in common two qualities: staleness of imagery and lack of precision. The authors either had no clear opinion or they could not express their perspectives. Orwell clearly identifies vagueness and sheer incompetence as the most obvious characteristics of contemporary English prose, especially of political writing. Words are replaced by meaningless phrases to cover up the real meaning. He presents a list of corrupting habits and faults that consequently cause poor thinking and writing: unoriginal, or, as he calls them, "dying" metaphors, pretentious diction, meaningless words and phrases. The danger lies in the fact that, if thought can corrupt language, that means that language can also corrupt thought. Orwell explains that political language consists of euphemisms, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. This abstract language serves political purposes and the invasion of one's mind by "ready-made phrases" (1946: 7). He also presents a list of rules of how to write clearly, avoid and resist dishonest language. Language is a powerful means for deception and it can easily be manipulated. Orwell points out:

As I have tried to show, modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to

make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug (1946: 9).

In conclusion, Orwell makes a clear connection between the political situation of his time and the decay of language. In an age of bad politics, corrupted language appears as inevitable. Considering language as a tool, he proposes the simplifying of the English language in order to break free from the follies of orthodoxy. As he explains, political language is designed “to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind” (1946: 8). This can be fought by the use of honest language, which also implies political acting of a kind, by opposing the manipulated rhetorical structures and the worn-out and useless phrases. The writer should turn to changing his own habits instead of using mindless and deceptive phrases and language, he should produce honest and sincere interpretations and writing.

Orwell’s essays are known for their transparency, plain-spokenness, clarity, frankness and directness. These qualities are exactly what he proposes in his writing, because, as he points out in numerous essays, oppressive ideology results in bad prose, meaningless phrases and vague language intend to hide the truth rather than express it. There is a thin line between literature, politics and propaganda and the manipulation of language poses a great danger to sincerity in writing. Orwell’s rhetorical approach to writing and his clear style appeal to the reader, asking for participation and engagement.

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