

George Orwell's Life and Times: 1903–1950

Critic and biographer, Tom Hopkinson, writes in his introduction on Orwell that all of Orwell's works are similar in that they reflect the life experiences of the author.

"They are all tales of solitary characters, each in one way or another an expression of Orwell himself, seen against backgrounds that are taken from his own experience."¹

Although there is a danger in looking for similarities in an author's life and his or her fictional work, an examination of the important personal and world events that shaped Orwell's life and thought is helpful in gaining insight into the political and social ideas found within his novels.

Directions: Answer the questions below using the time line on pages 2–3 of this handout. Write your answers on a separate paper.

Questions

1. Which personal events seem to have affected Orwell the most? Explain your reasons.
2. What three wars had a powerful influence over Orwell? In which war did he actually fight?
3. Which fascist dictators rose to power during Orwell's lifetime?
4. Which novel by Orwell was a direct satire about Stalin and his political practices?
5. Which "totalitarian" event occurred in the United States during World War II?
6. Which book gives evidence that Orwell's experiences at boarding school developed in him a sympathy for the poor and a lasting dislike for social status and power based upon wealth?
7. Into what social class was Orwell born? Was Orwell ever truly poor?
8. Looking at the themes and topics of Orwell's novels, is Hopkinson's statement above valid? Why or why not?
9. Which world event do you think had the most profound influence on Orwell as he wrote *1984*? Why do you think this?
10. Was Orwell ever married? Did he have any children?
11. Why didn't Orwell fight against the Nazis in World War II?
12. What did Orwell decide to do after he graduated from a prestigious preparatory (high) school? Why do you think he disliked this job?
13. Was Orwell's first book based on his own experiences? Explain.
14. In what book did Orwell express a concern for the poor working class in England?

¹ Tom Hopkinson, "George Orwell," *British Writers Vol. VII* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984), 273.

Time Line

Personal data		Selected world events
Born Eric Blair in Motihari, India, to British civil servant (lower-upper middle class)	1903	
Attends St. Cyprian's boarding school in England, age 8; experiences terrible brutality and torment from wealthy peers, detests loss of privacy	1911	
	1914	World War I begins (1914-18)
Accepted at Eton Academy as a scholarship student; called a rebel and intellectual by peers	1917	Russian (Bolshevik) Revolution led by Lenin and Trotsky; Communist Party replaces czars
Graduates from Eton; decides not to attend Cambridge University	1921	
Joins the Imperial Police Force in Burma, India	1922	Mussolini, fascist dictator, takes control of Italy; Stalin appointed Secretary General of Communist Party by Lenin. (Lenin dies 1924.)
Quits the Imperial Police Force and attempts to become a writer; Lives in poverty for the next few years working as teacher, writer, bookstore clerk in London and Paris	1927	
	1929	Stalin expels Trotsky and opposition leaders; becomes dictator of U.S.S.R.
Publishes first book, <i>Down and Out in Paris and London</i> ; takes pen name George Orwell because he doesn't think work is good	1933	Hitler is elected Chancellor of Germany; a fascist dictator, Hitler enacts laws revoking the rights of Jews in Germany
Publishes <i>Burmese Days</i> in United States about his police experiences	1934	
Publishes <i>A Clergyman's Daughter</i>	1935	
Marries Eileen O'Shaughnessy, a teacher and socialist; publishes <i>Keep the Aspidochelone Flying</i> ; commissioned to write a book about the poor working conditions in northern England; leaves for Spain in December to enlist in P.O.U.M., a communist militia fighting Franco	1936	Spanish General Franco, a fascist, revolts against the "popular front" government of a coalition of workers and capitalist parties; aided by Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini Stalin conducts "purges" and forces political leaders of the Bolshevik revolution to confess treason and executes them; purges are carried out on a massive scale
Fights in Spain against Franco; wounded in throat; he and his wife escape Spain; publishes <i>The Road to Wigan Pier</i> about northern coal miners in England	1937	
Publishes <i>Homage to Catalonia</i> about Spanish civil war; becomes ill with tuberculosis	1938	"Kristallnacht"—Jewish homes and businesses are destroyed; Jews sent to concentration camps

Personal data

Publishes *Coming Up for Air* about the approach of war and totalitarianism

Publishes *Inside the Whale*; tries to enlist in British Army but is medically unfit; joins Home Guard

Does radio programs about war to India for the B.B.C.; publishes pamphlet *The Lion and the Unicorn* about liberty, his faith in common people, and English victory in WWII

Starts writing *Animal Farm*; works as a journalist, editor, and broadcaster

Adopts a son, Richard; wife dies during a simple operation; *Animal Farm* published; begins writing *1984*

Writes *Such, Such Were the Joys*, about his terrible experiences at St. Cyprian's boarding school; completes first draft of *1984*; suffers from tuberculosis attacks

Writes second draft of *1984*; illness continues

Marries Sonia Brownell who was a great help to him; publishes *1984*

Dies of tuberculosis January 21

Selected world events

1939 Germany invades Poland; World War II begins

1940

1941 Hitler Begins the "Final Solution," the mass extermination of the Jews in death camps

1942 110,000 Japanese-Americans on West Coast placed in Relocation Camps by U.S. army until 1944

1945 Hitler defeated; World War II ends; U.S. drops atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in August

1947

1948

1949

1950

Animal Farm Vocabulary Chapters 1-10

Chapter 1:

1. Benevolent
2. Ensnared
3. Cynical
4. Abolished
5. To tyrannize
6. Scullery
7. Preliminary
8. Resolution
9. Plaited
10. Paddock

Chapter 2:

1. Vivacious
2. Expounded
3. Pre-eminent
4. Apathy
5. Disheartened
6. Gamboled
7. Situated
8. Frothing
9. Nimble
10. Tormentors

Chapter 3:

1. Parasitical
2. Shirked
3. Cryptic
4. Resolved
5. Propulsion
6. Manipulation
7. Maxim
8. Grudging
9. Seclusion
10. Acute

Chapter 4:

1. Tractable
2. Irrepressible
3. Maneuver
4. Vengeance
5. Ignominious
6. Impromptu
7. Adjoined
8. To scorn
9. Monstrous
10. Posthumously

Chapter 5:

1. Pretext
2. Blithely
3. Ratified
4. Innovations
5. Aloof
6. Faction
7. Restive
8. Sordid
9. Articulate
10. Disinterred

Chapter 6:

1. Matted
2. Procured
3. Commissions
4. Compensated
5. Perpendicularity
6. Arable
7. Broker
8. Bankrupt
9. Simultaneously
10. Repose

Chapter 7:

1. Emboldened
2. Infanticide
3. Capitulated
4. Stupefied
5. To formulate
6. Graphically
7. Cowered
8. Secreted
9. Pervading
10. Retribution

Chapter 8:

1. Decree
2. Skulking
3. Impending
4. Pensioner
5. Hullabaloo
6. Wistful
7. Conciliatory
8. Unscathed
9. Unaccountably
10. Lamentation

Chapter 9:

1. Formulated
2. Devoted
3. Complicity
4. Stratagem
5. Professed
6. Knacker
7. Demeanor
8. Knoll
9. Tempered
10. Lamented

Chapter 10:

1. Upstanding
2. Frugally
3. Imperishable
4. Deputation
5. Misgiving
6. Dispelled
7. Witticism
8. Gratified
9. Intimated
10. Subversive

Responding to the Novel

Analyzing the Novel

Identifying Facts

1. The novel opens with a remarkable scene. A big old pig is waiting for Manor Farm's animals to assemble in the barn. According to old Major, why is Man the enemy of the animals? What does Major urge the animals to do?
2. In Chapter II, what objections do some of the animals raise to the principles of Animalism?
3. Describe the events leading up to the Rebellion at Manor Farm.

Interpreting Meanings

4. Orwell's animals are immediately humanized. How would you describe the **characters** of old Major, Clover, Boxer, Benjamin, and Mollie?
5. How are Snowball, Napoleon, and Squealer characterized? What traits set them apart from the other animals, such as Clover and Boxer? (After reading the description of these three leaders, which of old Major's warnings seems particularly important to keep in mind?)
6. Why is the promise of Sugarcandy Mountain a threat to the Rebellion and to the principles of Animalism? How is Mollie's behavior also a threat?
7. Who do you think is responsible for the disappearance of the milk at the end of Chapter

II? What problems in the future of Animal Farm do you think this incident might **foreshadow**?

8. What incidents in the story so far suggest that Commandments 2 and 7 (see page 816) might not be true? Which other commandments do you think might cause trouble in the future?
9. How could the animals represent a human society in miniature? Look especially at Orwell's description of the animals as they assemble in the barn (page 810).
10. Do you think any events in the animals' Rebellion are like events in real rebellions or revolutions you have read about? Explain.
11. Do you identify or sympathize with any characters so far? Do you dislike any of them?

Writing About the Novel

A Creative Response

Writing a Newspaper Story. Write the newspaper story that might have been published the morning after the rebellion at Manor Farm. Tell **what** happened, **where** it happened, **whom** it happened to, and **why** it happened. What will your headline be? What attitude will you take about the Rebellion: do you approve or disapprove? Before you write, decide whether your newspaper readers are people or animals.