

George Orwell, 1984, Humiliation in Life and Fiction

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Abstract presented at the 2009 Workshop on Humiliation and Violent Conflict, Columbia University, New York, December 10-11, 2009.

October 13, 2009

The ideas of totalitarian deceit and cruelty in George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four, which has sold over twenty million copies, have become incorporated into almost daily parlance. One item in the media or another is depicted as "Orwellian." Doublespeak, Big Brotherdom, Ministry of Truth, Newspeak, Doublethink, "War is Peace," "Freedom is Slavery," and other devices were designed by Smith's overlords to rule untrammelled through fear--and humiliation. These terms have become immediately recognizable in everyday discourse. Oddly, Orwell's classic dystopia, with its relentless pessimism about man's corrosive ways, never once employs the word humiliation or shame. Therefore, critics and biographers never have adopted either of them. Yet humiliation and shame dominate the ordeal of Winston Smith and his final, sad capitulation. Orwell was himself a disillusioned romantic, yearning vainly for both a return to the simplicities of the pre-Great War years and a revitalized humanized socialism. He came to see, though, that neither dream was reachable. More than many other writers, he translated personal experiences of humiliation, both real and imagined, into autobiography and fiction. This paper will sketch the areas of his life and his reinterpretation of his past experiences with respect to the abnegation of selfhood in his novel.