

“Such, Such Have Been the Joys”: Teaching Twentieth-Century European History with George Orwell

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HISTORIANS EMPLOY numerous techniques to successfully spark student interest depending on each faculty member’s individual abilities. Skilled orators turn a lecture into a riveting story, while researchers may employ powerful primary sources from lived experiences in the Holocaust, French Revolution, Cold War, and many other times and places. Newer approaches use entertaining techniques like Reacting to the Past games that cast students in roles and use gamification to produce active learning.¹ Meanwhile, growing numbers of faculty mine popular culture to fuse existing student interests with historical understanding through mediums like graphic novels,² science fiction,³ sports history,⁴ and many more.

This article discusses my experiences using another innovative and effective strategy for engaging students, using literature to teach history with one authorial voice. Some historians still hold back from assigning literature out of concern for historical accuracy, but as noted above, using fiction and popular culture is no longer unusual and, if anything, using novels may be seen as outdated in some circles. However, that does not mean fiction should be forgotten—we can still use it in new and creative ways. Literature offers students

emotionally powerful, human connections to a period or particular experience that resonate more strongly than almost any other format, and it can also serve as a time capsule for both content and writing style. One way to reinvigorate the use of the novel when teaching history is to center a class on only one author, which I believe is a unique approach. Doing so requires a writer who matches a period or theme extremely well and who covered a wide range of topics during their career. When this can be managed, having one voice allows students to develop an intimate connection and comfort level with that author, their life, and—through them—a historical period. This lets us delve into a writer's full catalog, see their highs and lows, and measure how they changed over time. This shows students an author as a person and explains why the author emerged as a representative of an age, providing depths of insight few other approaches can match.

To this end, over the past decade and a half, I have taught an upper-level college course on European history in the early twentieth century using the works of George Orwell as the exclusive narrative voice for the semester. The first iteration focused narrowly on Interwar Europe between 1919 and 1939 through an offering at a mid-sized, private college with a strong regional reputation. The second version expanded the focus to the entire first half of the century and was pitched more as a mid-level course at a regional campus in a large, public university system in the Midwest where we have a large percentage of first-generation college students. The course in its current version is officially a 300-level class, but has also been accepted as a general education requirement because the readings make it accessible to a wide range of students. Regardless of version, Orwell's life and works provide an excellent center for a course that offers both fiction and non-fiction sources and brackets the first half of the twentieth century almost exactly. *Animal Farm* and *1984* draw student interest, while Orwell's extensive catalog of other books and articles touch on most major issues that Britain and Europe experienced during that time. Further, the growth of social media and disinformation over the past decade have returned Orwell's works to relevance in modern society, making clear that a long-read writer has more to say to current generations. This article reflects on the experiences from teaching the course to draw lessons and offer other faculty ideas when considering similar approaches.

The first section delves into the idea of using literature to teach history generally, possible variations of this approach, and why I choose Orwell as the muse for the course. The next portion discusses the main themes and readings used in the class to explain the course more thoroughly and illustrate some advantages of using one author. The final section considers student responses over the years and reflects on the approach and its value. Overall, the course has been a great success and can be adjusted to fit different level classes depending on a faculty member's needs.

History with Literature, a Single Author, and Orwell

Teaching history with fiction, in general, is an approach that comes with some risks and requires thorough alignment and planning. Most obviously, as historians, our core mission is to teach the truth, while other mediums prioritize engagement and entertainment. However, these concerns can be mitigated by identifying each author's biases, and many professors have successfully used fiction to teach history over the decades. For example, in 2007, Diana Turk, Emily Klein, and Shari Dickstein discussed strategies for using literature in social studies classrooms, identifying several important approaches such as highlighting historical eras, large themes, essential problems, specific identities, and the value of the literature itself.⁵ They rightly mention *The Great Gatsby*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (the last of which I have long used to help students understand the experience of soldiers in World War I and modern war more generally) as examples of some of these different categories. Similarly, Allison Baer pairs fiction and non-fiction works on specific themes as a way to both engage students and help them understand the complexity of topics that the novels don't fully explain.⁶ She gives examples of such pairings on topics ranging from the Civil War, to the Holocaust, Afghanistan, and child soldiers, which demonstrates the depth of potential and wide breadth of this strategy.

Most faculty employ fictional works only for occasional topics in class and then return to more traditional teaching methods, though some have employed a variety of fictional works across an entire semester, usually by focusing on a specific theme or type of work. For example, in the 1970s, Daniel Weinberg discussed the

benefits and pitfalls of teaching U.S. immigration history through autobiographies and fictional works on the topic.⁷ He emphasized that understanding a fiction author's license to change details was only one step beyond identifying any other historical source's bias, and thus should not cancel out the vibrancy that such sources offer.⁸ More recently, John Putman similarly noted that historians tended to avoid the use of television, even as other fields have embraced shows like *The Wire* and *The Simpsons* for use in the classroom.⁹ Instead, he organized an entire class around the *Star Trek* franchise and used the show to address a variety of important historical themes, including race, gender, terrorism, and AIDS. Similarly, Emily Rosenberg used novels to teach American foreign relations, pairing fictional works with historical ages from the 1890s through the 1960s.¹⁰ She emphasized that each novel had to be contextualized for the class and used differently, but that literature like Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* also effectively engaged students and helped them understand policy changes by reflecting it within societal change.¹¹ Sharon Bannister used a similar approach in several classes, first using novels in a course on modern English history and then developing an interdisciplinary class on "History in Fiction" that embraced the approach fully.¹² She rightly recognized that "the novel's development as a full-fledged literary genre corresponds with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the number and types of novels abound," and saw the opportunity to teach history through fiction across that period in particular.¹³

This was an insightful observation because the modern period has been gifted with a wealth of possibilities, thanks not only to the development of the novel in general, but also to the movements of literary realism and naturalism in particular, which are especially useful to historians.¹⁴ Realism comes with dozens of sub-varieties as diverse as the Soviet Union's socialist realism¹⁵ and the Hispanic world's magical realism,¹⁶ while naturalism adds a focus on scientific understanding and positivism.¹⁷ As literary critic David Shumway offered, writers in such categories tell stories within their contemporary world and include visual and sensory details that create a sense of place instead of being directly related to the plot.¹⁸ They also "present psychologically and socially plausible characters," focus on common people who had previously been socially unacceptable topics for literature, and confront topics

similarly not seen as socially acceptable.¹⁹ Literary critics largely trace the realism genre to the French novelist Honoré de Balzac²⁰ along with other nineteenth-century pioneering works, including Charles Dickens' regular focus on poverty, Émile Zola's portrayals of prostitutes and disillusioned soldiers, Mark Twain's depictions of frontier life, and Stephen Crane's accounts of the brutalities of war. Critics debate whether to accept these works as true representations of a period or, in a more post-modern interpretation, to consider them as cultural artifacts from a period that shape our historical memory, but both interpretations and the distinction between them are themselves worth discussing in a history class.²¹

These nineteenth-century works established traditions that endured through the twentieth century, and now into the twenty-first. Many realist writers also had parallel careers in journalism that add value for historians because their training and tendencies lead them to observe and comment in depth on their communities, often with insightful results. Famous examples include Mark Twain in the nineteenth century, Ernest Hemmingway and George Orwell in the first half on the twentieth, Tom Wolfe through mid-century, and many modern detective or crime fiction authors like Laura Lippman today. Journalism careers also create troves of non-fiction newspaper articles and editorials from which to draw brief sources that can be used to broach topics in a classroom setting not covered by larger works, offering students shorter readings as breaks to manage the assignment flow.

Because of my expertise in modern Spanish and European history, I have always been drawn to Orwell in particular. While I'd long known his famous works, like many Spanish historians, I've loved *Homage to Catalonia* since I first read it, with its idealistic description of Barcelona during the first months of the Spanish Civil War in the fall of 1936 and the collective sense of working-class solidarity that briefly existed there. This led me to wonder what value I might find in his other lesser-known works, so I gradually read most of Orwell's catalog, including novels, newspaper articles, and biographical works about his life. I came to appreciate the depth and variety of his writing and increasingly considered the idea of using his works over a whole semester, precisely because there was so much more to them than the popular culture references that often reduced him to a trope.

I debated the merits of pairing his works with other writers, or using a variety of different literary figures, but quickly discounted the latter because having limited authorial voices represented one of the core features that I wanted to make the class unique. Further, and as Emily Rosenberg warned in her own article, every fiction writer requires their own historical contextualization and that would have taken significant class time away from the historical topics.²² However, I strongly considered pairing Orwell's works with several books by Ernest Hemingway, and still think that would make an interesting version of the class. In particular, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), and *A Moveable Feast* (1964) offer vivid material on the experiences of combatants in World War I and the Lost Generation writers, topics that Orwell's slightly younger age precluded him from covering. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) also offers a powerful literary account of the Spanish Civil War that would make a good addition to any class. However, I was already wedded to *Homage to Catalonia* and space didn't exist for two full-length books on the Spanish Civil War. Also, including Hemingway would have placed a greater emphasis on famous works, instead of diving deeper into one author's catalog. Lastly, if I brought another author in, it needed to be one who added gender or cultural diversity, which Hemingway would not have done.

A key part of this choice was the desire to have one narrative voice, which I increasingly believed offered several valuable advantages. First, one narrative voice allows students to get used to a writing style and know what to expect with each reading. This removes the regular challenge of students grappling with different writers and enables them to handle more difficult readings. Second, realist writers who spend much of their career writing for and editing newspapers usually develop writing styles that are accessible to the general public rather than laced with academic language. As a result, they tend to be engaging for students and easy to read. Third, with some authors, you can assign a blend of fiction and non-fiction pieces that establish their collective historical value. In Orwell's case, his works include non-fiction works like *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) and "Shooting an Elephant" (1936); fictionalizations of his personal experiences such as *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933); and others like *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949) that clearly draw on his understanding of contemporary groups and geopolitical issues,

but are true works of fiction. Fourth, one author allows students to see that writer grow over their career, both in terms of writing skill and shifting beliefs and interpretations. Instead of a single novel that captures a writer's perspective at one time, reading multiple works spanning several decades helps students understand change over time on the individual level, which can be linked to historical change. Fifth, and relatedly, the class can see how the same writer viewed a range of important issues. We tend to associate thinkers with only one set of topics or ideas, but by seeing their views on many different themes, students come to understand how themes relate to one another. Finally, having one author also allows the class to bring all those threads together over a semester of reading, ideally in a final climactic work. In this case, *1984* serves that purpose marvelously by mixing together every major theme from fifty years of European history in a literary masterpiece that projects those ideas forward towards our own time period. Few other classes that I know of have a similar payoff for the class, much less one that is simply so much fun to watch students embrace in the last two class periods.

As well as the benefits Orwell offers as a single authorial voice, he brings a number of valuable aspects to the class in particular. Most significantly, his greatest talent as a writer lay not in character construction or dramatic development, but in detailed observation. Whether fiction or non-fiction, his work consistently offers observations about how society functions (from geopolitics to small cultural details), regardless of the rhetoric (political, class, nationalist, or otherwise) that often obfuscates reality. These observations offer students invaluable windows into the European world of his time, helping them better understand the period and its similarities and differences with today, all while humanizing the man himself.

Further, Orwell's life experiences fit almost perfectly into the frame of a course on early twentieth-century European history. Known to the world by the pen name George Orwell, Eric Blair was born in 1903 in Motihari, India to a father who worked in the Opium Department of the Imperial Civil Service and knew little of Eric personally.²³ Within a few years, his mother brought him back to England, where he received a solid education at a series of British public schools, including St. Cyprian's, Wellington, and eventually Eton. Because of declining family fortunes, this came thanks to numerous scholarships, and the constant pressure soured him on

academia. Instead of attending Cambridge or Oxford, he followed family tradition and entered imperial service, serving much of his twenties in Burma's Imperial Police, a job he came to revile along with imperialism itself.²⁴ In 1927, he resigned, returned to England, and spent the next decade building his career as a writer until World War II found him creating cultural programming for BBC broadcasts to the Indian Raj²⁵ and then rising to the position of literary editor of London's *Tribune*.²⁶ During the latter stages of the war, he wrote *Animal Farm* and shot to fame once World War II shifted into the Cold War and the Soviet Union went from ally to enemy. However, fame suited Blair poorly and, after his wife's death in 1945, he retreated to the island of Jura off the western coast of Scotland with their adopted son Richard.²⁷ Largely cut-off from the rest of the world, it was there that he wrote *1984* about the encroaching power of government while suffering from the tuberculosis that finally killed him in January of 1950. These experiences frame the first half of the twentieth century almost exactly and represent an exceptional range of topics that touch on most core themes for the period, offering a near perfect opportunity to use one narrative voice in a history class.

Course Design and Themes

I structured the course by pairing topics chronologically from roughly 1900 through 1950—matching them with works of Orwell's—with introductory lectures to provide students with a broader understanding of each topic. Two units sit outside of this general structure, the first being a lecture on Orwell's life that sets the stage for the entire semester by fully introducing him, and the second a multi-day discussion of *1984* that offers a coda for the entire experience by bringing all the historical and literary threads together. Within this structure, I developed a collection of themes that appear in multiple topics and readings across the semester to show how they develop and change. These included socialism, communism, and working-class identity; Victorianism and middle-class identity; memory and history; British imperialism; and fascism, nationalism, and war. This combination of topics and themes make it possible to cover the period's core cultural, social, and political issues through discussions of readings so that students see how they were connected, developed, and changed.

Socialism, Communism, and Working-Class Identity

One of the most famous and important aspects of Orwell's works was his extraordinary sensitivity to social class. One form that this comes out in is his regular interest in the working classes and movements that sought to improve their lot. This led him to initially, if loosely, accept socialist arguments, and start his career writing books for editor Victor Gollancz and the Communist publishing house, the Left Book Club, during the 1930s. Gollancz took an interest in him because he had the education and writing training of the British elite, but wanted to develop an understanding of working-class life, offering the potential to produce works that bridged that gap. In the course, students are first introduced to this theme in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), essentially two loosely connected stories fictionalizing Orwell's experiences living first in Paris as part of the working poor and then tramping in and around London as a homeless man.²⁸ In the first half of the book, he discusses the hard work and extra money it took to maintain the appearance of respectability as a member of the working poor, such as having to buy occasional cups of tea at a cafe to be seen in public, knowing what time of day to pawn possessions for the best price, and how to repair visibly damaged sections of clothing. Similarly, he describes the long hours working as a dishwasher (or plongeur) in a hotel's restaurant and the class system of workers within that world, from the maitre'd, to waiters who interact with customers much like house servants, to the superiority of cooks as skilled workers, and, finally, his fellow plongeurs on the bottom as unskilled workers. The section concludes with an argument that such work is meant not simply for its output, but also to keep workers busy as a means of social control, sparking discussion among the class about that assertion. Students regularly share similar experiences from working in restaurants and living in cheap apartments, establishing a common connection between their lives and the topic of the working poor.

The second half of the book moves on to fictionalized versions of Orwell's stints living as a homeless man around London, staying at boarding houses and Salvation Army hostels, accepting food from various charities, and explaining the resentment homeless groups feel when moralized at.²⁹ He also discusses experiences in state-run homeless housing or "spikes," such as how authorities stripped

men naked for hygienic entrance exams and only allowed them to stay for one night. The former requirement humiliated them, while the latter forced them to tramp from location to location around the city—extremely hard work for the sick and malnourished that precluded serious attempts to find a job. He also offers character studies of two men he travels with, who landed in poverty not out of laziness, but from accidents that left them physically impaired. Through these stories, Orwell puts a face on the homeless, explains the circumstances that led people to those positions, and attacked the myth that they deserved to be there. In so doing, he offers the class a springboard to talk about their own views about poverty. At times, students have volunteered experiences with homelessness, such as living in their cars for a stretch.

Later in the 1930s, Gollancz suggested Orwell travel to the industrial town of Wigan, meet with coal miners there, and write a book about what he saw. This produced the non-fiction book, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), which includes trips into the homes of miners, a description of going down into a mining pit, and several chapters debating communist and socialist arguments about working-class rights.³⁰ The first few chapters about life in town offer students more vivid accounts of how hard a life it was, from the work itself, to the challenges of removing coal dust every day, to cramped living conditions with families in boarding house rooms meant for individuals. The second half of the book introduces them to polemical arguments made by socialists and communists about these situations, and students see how concern engages with ideology, even as Orwell is a bit uncomfortable with these ideological answers.

A few years later, Orwell traveled to Barcelona to fight on the Aragonese Front of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and 1937, writing about his experiences in the non-fiction book *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). He goes to fight fascism, but on arrival discovers a world where everyone wore the overalls of the working classes and he encounters the feeling of a city “where the working class was in the saddle,” even as his own middle-class background made this awkward.³¹ After this initial positive experience, in the spring of 1937, he returns from Aragon to Barcelona on leave to find the atmosphere radically changed. Capitalism had been reasserted and the May street fighting swept him up as the increasingly Soviet-supported Republican government sought to take power back from the revolutionary militias

and blamed the unrest on the Trotskyist unit Orwell fought with. He intersperses political chapters amidst the personal narrative, explaining the larger events, political groups, and rivalries that surrounded his experiences. Through both, he explains how the Soviet Union, in the name of communism, repressed Spain's working-class revolution in favor of their own authority and control. Students see how he becomes publicly concerned about organized communism, despite still greatly sympathizing with the working classes.

This sets the class up for *Animal Farm* (1945), where Orwell used allegorical writing to attack the Soviet Union openly by translating Stalinism's betrayal of the Russian workers into a story that regular citizens can read and understand, especially given that the majority of the Western population at the time had personal connections to the rural world. Students always enjoy matching each character and event with the real history of the Russian Revolution and Soviet Union. This ranges from straightforward observations that Snowball is Trotsky and Napoleon is Stalin, to smaller details like the parallel between Animalism's inclusion of all animals and communism's internationalism.³² Further, having read Orwell's fictional and non-fictional accounts of working-class life, the students are therefore equipped to recognize portrayals similar to other works, such as between the waiters in *Down and Out* and the vain carriage horse Mollie in *Animal Farm*. This highlights a key benefit to carrying a theme and one author throughout a semester—the students have built the depth of knowledge and confidence to draw their own connections and conclusions. They have also seen Orwell's evolution from concern about the working poor, to discussions of the issues alongside socialism's claimed solutions, to his ultimate rejection of communism as the answer. Through all of that, the students participate in readings and discussions in which they are asked to express their own opinions and decide where they land.

Victorianism and Middle-Class Identity

Just as socialism and working-class life offer one theme of the semester, Victorianism and middle-class identity offer another important theme, expressed through a variety of readings on how class difference is enforced and reproduced. This begins with Orwell's own, very precise self-identification as a member of a "lower-upper-

middle class” Anglo-Indian family who theoretically knew how to live and act like the upper classes, but thoroughly lacked the resources to do so.³³ Unpacking this self-description provides students with a first introduction to Orwell’s sharply attuned class sensitivity—and usually draws laughs as well. With an understanding of how finely tuned he is on the topic, we then discuss his observations on Victorian and middle-class society throughout the semester.

The first reading on this theme, “Such, Such Were the Joys,” is an essay written in the late 1940s about Orwell’s youthful experiences at St. Cyprian’s preparatory school almost forty years earlier that dives right into Victorian values like class expectations and sexual repression—which the adult Blair was less than impressed with.³⁴ The reading offers an irreverent and often funny introduction to him as a writer as he tells stories about boys whose teeth turned green from bad hygiene and about being taught to memorize famous lines from literature for exams instead of bothering to read the book. He highlights the hypocrisy of Victorian morality, its strict classism, and the anti-academic mindset of the school, all of which scarred him and undermined his respect for authority for decades. For example, the story starts with the young Blair being embarrassed in front of adults and caned for wetting his bed, leading to the moral that “Sin was not necessarily something that you did: it might be something that happened to you,” classic self-repression.³⁵ Later, he regales the reader with stories of better-off boys receiving birthday cakes, money for sweets, cricket bats, and lessons in riding, while he was denied such luxuries, even when his parents actually left money for them, supposedly to teach him not to expect things he wouldn’t be able to afford as an adult.³⁶ Similarly, the boys themselves propagated class prestige by testing each other about types of motorcars they claimed their parents owned or about vacation estates in Scotland.³⁷ These examples show students how the participants themselves perpetuate social class, allowing us to drift into examples of similar status symbols in their own lives.

Various shorter essays offer excellent windows into mass culture and middle-class norms. These include “The Art of Donald McGill” (1941) about low-brow postcards filled with images of crass humor sold in seaside resort towns in the 1930s and 1940s³⁸ and “A Nice Cup of Tea” (1946), containing his detailed directions for the eleven steps needed to make the perfect cup of tea.³⁹ Nonetheless, the main

work that delves into middle-class life is *Coming Up for Air* (1939), a novel written and set in 1938. It's the story of George "Fatty" Bowling, a middle-class man having a mid-life crisis while living what today we recognize as a classic suburban life. He complains about the enforced uniformity of his house's exterior by an early homeowner association, explains how you don't really own your house (but instead only have a mortgage that binds you to pay for it), and regularly grumbles about the wife he married essentially for her social status. He works as an insurance salesman and grabs food at a modern take-out restaurant covered in sleek chrome fittings, but whose food is terrible. Bowling is part of a first generation of British living this sort of suburban life that had been shaped for them by the breakdown of social classes after World War I, who isn't exactly happy with it, but is also terrified by the coming of World War II, which will change things again. Through this portrayal, students can see the beginning of our own world almost a century in the past and how it evolved from the Victorian age. Across these readings, Orwell defines the class rules and expectations that started the period and then illustrates how they evolved into modern middle-class life. This makes for some fun classes, shows the changes mass culture brought, and again demonstrates the value of following an author through multiple readings that consider different aspects within a theme.

Memory and History

In "Such, Such Were the Joys," Orwell concludes with a brief discussion of how writing the story from memory about events almost forty years prior colored his perspective on them.⁴⁰ This allows me to lead the class into an extended conversation about the nature of memory and history, the differences between the two, and the question of which is more important for a society. Starting a history class with such a question challenges their preconceptions that history consists simply of memorized and recited facts and establishes a foundation of complexity and critical interpretation.

The issue of memory comes up again in *Coming up for Air*. Orwell dedicates the middle of that book to an extended flashback of Fatty Bowling's youth in the small, rural town of Lower Binfield before World War I. Bowling remembers it as a time when it was always summer, kids ran around and played outdoors, everyone fished, and

all knew their place in society. We then see him leave this world to fight in World War I, become an officer because of all the deaths amongst the gentry, read books like those of Oscar Wilde and H. G. Wells that challenged the old order, and land a job selling insurance after the war, leading to his middle-class, suburban life. In the last portion of the book, Bowling returns to Lower Binfield to find it has become an industrial town so different that he gets lost and when he sees his first love, she doesn't even recognize him. This makes it painfully clear that his memories are rose-colored versions of reality and that the world had changed. Further, the story places his life as an individual in parallel with the larger changes British society went through during the early twentieth century. His youth came during the idealized glory of the fading Pax Britannica, then he lived through the upturned social world and questioning of that system during and after World War I, and his middle age is set amidst the correct fear that World War II would scramble society again and destroy Britain's preeminent place in the world. This takes the individual level of memory as introduced and discussed in "Such, Such Were the Joys" to the societal level.

Expanding upon the theme even further, in *1984* (1949), Orwell shifts from observation to an illustration of the dangers of allowing memory to be corrupted and controlled by the present. In *1984*'s London, Winston Smith's job is to find and "correct" news articles when Oceania's enemy changes, so that "history" matches propagandistic "reality." In so doing, Winston shapes the nation's history and undermines its citizens' memories to suit the whims of leadership—as personified by Big Brother—demonstrating the existential danger of allowing our views of the past to become completely defined by the present. Similarly, many of the formative acts of Winston's rebellion against Big Brother come through a simple desire to remember the true past. To this end, he goes to the antique shop and calls up childhood memories of World War II to remind himself that that world actually existed in the face of constant propaganda to the contrary.

Through these different readings, then, the students consider history and memory in "Such, Such Were the Joys," expand that to the societal level in *Coming Up for Air*, and then confront the danger of those memories becoming unhinged from historical reality in *1984*. These are particularly important lessons for students in the early twenty-first

century, where social media and disinformation have been actively employed to discredit elections, vaccines, and even science. Now more than ever it is absolutely vital not to forget that “who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.”⁴¹

British Imperialism

British imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offers another important theme for the first portion of the class. After a lecture explains the outlines of the “new imperialism” driven by the search for raw materials to feed industrialization, the class reads Orwell’s first novel, *Burmese Days* (1934), as well as his autobiographical short story, “Shooting an Elephant” (1936). *Burmese Days* tells the story of John Flory, a timber merchant in Kyauktada, Burma.⁴² His closest friend is Dr. Veriswami, an Indian doctor who has been trained in Western medicine and idealizes British culture, while Flory (a character who can be interpreted as a version of Orwell himself had he stayed in India) reviles the corrupting and wasting influence of imperialism, even as he participates in it. Other characters offer common imperial stereotypes, from the proper, local administrator, to the middle-class young woman who comes to Burma to find a husband, to the haughty but cheap member of the lesser nobility who leads a military police detachment, and the virulently racist, cockney club member desperate to assert his own precarious superiority that he would never have enjoyed at home. The plot leads through various crises, eventually leading to Flory’s suicide and the degradation of almost all the book’s well-meaning characters. Both the characters and plot illustrate the corruption of life in the colonial world through a story students enjoy.

“Shooting an Elephant” reinforces this theme through a non-fiction account of a specific personal experience. First, Orwell discusses the harassment he regularly received while serving as an imperial police officer in Burma even though, in his words, “Theoretically—and secretly, of course—I was all for the Burmese and against all their oppressors, the British.”⁴³ The core of the story covers the time he was called to control a male elephant experiencing heightened aggression during its mating season. He finds a coolie it had killed, calls for an elephant rifle as a precaution, and a crowd gathers in anticipation of him shooting the elephant. Once Orwell finds the elephant, he

immediately realizes it has calmed down and doesn't need to be shot. However, the crowd and his role as the authority figure pressures him to maintain the image of imperial power and avoid personal embarrassment.⁴⁴ As a result, he shoots the elephant, making him feel horrible as it slowly dies. The reading offers students a rich and unvarnished introspective depicting how imperialism and positions of authority shape the choices individuals make and taint everyone involved—a lesson that carries over from *Burmese Days*, where the members of the club had been degraded in almost every moral way.

In 2020, I added a second layer of interpretation to the discussion of “Shooting an Elephant” by framing it also as an insight into the clashes between police and protesters we had seen in the United States over that summer. Members of my university and community joined the online video conference class for a day, including criminal justice faculty and a graduate who went on to complete his law degree and work as a prosecutor. We talked in depth about how both police and protesters in such situations find themselves in similar roles that influence their actions, echo colonial situations, and offer serious warnings within a democratic nation. These discussions of imperialism also establish Orwell's increasing interest in the lower classes, and students see how that transfers from the locals in *Burmese Days* to the working-classes back in Europe in *Down and Out*, showing them the similarities between the issues of imperialism and social class across multiple readings.

Fascism, Nationalism, and War

In the second half of the class, the drive toward World War II and the postwar world takes center stage with group identities, nationalism, fascism, and the Cold War playing interrelated roles. The first reading on these topics is “What is Fascism?” (1944), a short article in which Orwell discusses how the word “fascism” was used and misused, particularly in print. He concludes that its usage had devolved so thoroughly that it mostly equated to calling someone a “bully,” as every group, almost regardless of political beliefs, used it to describe those they disliked.⁴⁵ Orwell's point smoothly shifts into lively discussions of how inaccurately politicians and other actors today use terms like “fascism” and “socialism” to almost identical ends.

Then we move on to “Notes on Nationalism” (1945) and its more in-depth arguments about group identities. Orwell starts by expanding the title term to mean almost any group identity and then differentiates nationalism from patriotism, with the former being an aggressive assertion and the latter emphasizing local pride without superiority or need for dominance.⁴⁶ Then, Orwell suggests categories of positive, transferred, and negative nationalisms and gives detailed examples of all three forms from the 1930s. This leads the class into a discussion about modern nationalism and their own self-conceptions of U.S. identity with the goal of helping students understand how identity groups function as an emotional call to allegiance and the effects this has. The topic is then reinforced further in *Homage to Catalonia*, which includes extended discussions about the difference between the reality Orwell experiences versus propaganda in Republican Spain about who was to blame for internal divisions, including an extended discussion of the “fifth column” arguments popular in that period.

Similar meditations on the functioning of group identities also appear in *Coming up for Air* because writing and placing the story in 1938 makes the specter of World War II a backdrop of tension for the story.⁴⁷ At various points, the characters see these group identities asserted, and Bowling imagines the effects of the war they will create. For example, the main characters attend an “anti-war” rally where socialist speakers spew hatred towards fascism that show in action how rival identities force people into one camp or the other before war. At another point, Bowling accurately imagines London during wartime, not leveled, but with occasional buildings destroyed by bombs and anti-aircraft guns poking out of windows. Similarly, near the end of the novel, a plane accidentally drops a bomb on Bowling’s hometown as he visits it, sending him to the ground as his soldier instincts kick in. It also rips the side off of a home, revealing one floor utterly destroyed and another virtually untouched—illustrating war’s random and differing effects as a warning of the cost of such ideological divisions and violence.

This leads to “You and the Atomic Bomb” (1945), another of Orwell’s insightful short articles.⁴⁸ Written immediately in the months after the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, it offers his speculations on the new weapon’s geopolitical effects. He suggests that if this devastating new technology is cheap, it will have a democratizing effect, but that it most likely would be so expensive that only the

largest and most powerful countries could afford it. He then postulates that smaller nations would be forced to align with great powers as part of two or three grand alliances, and that those alliances need to regularly threaten to use the bomb, despite their reluctance to do so, producing no resolution to differences and perpetual hostility or, as he describes it, a “cold war.” This almost exactly predicted geopolitics for the subsequent four decades and coined the phrase most commonly used to describe that period of international politics. Orwell also suggested that these dominant countries could also use this weapon to ensure their citizens fully support nationalist propaganda through fear—because they had no other option. It is an astoundingly prescient piece of writing that never fails to spark good discussions. Collectively, these different works help us explore nationalism, group identities, and propaganda through a variety of real-world topics surrounding the World War II era.

Connecting the Course Themes through 1984

All of these themes come together for the several days of discussion that end the class. In *1984*, the fifty years of historical development and themes covered in the course are all on display in the novel, making clear how thoroughly this dystopian view of the future is based on the past. Students can fully appreciate this because, by this point, they have read Orwell’s views across more than a dozen works and watched him develop as a writer from his first (somewhat shaky) novels, to his masterpiece—creating a level of understanding made possible by having had a single narrative voice for the entire semester.⁴⁹ I start the discussion of *1984* by asking the class what connections they see between this particular novel and the historical events, themes, and readings over the semester. This usually takes up the entire first day as students identify dozens of connections, usually feeding on each other’s ideas, and I prompt them on ones they miss. For example, students draw links between *1984*’s “Two Minutes Hate” and “Hate Week” and the nature of historic wartime nationalism and fascist/communist propaganda and rallies. *1984*’s Spies and Youth League organizations call to mind both Nazi and Communist real-world variants, while the Junior Anti-Sex League echoes Victorian prohibitions against sex and emotional desire discussed from the start of the semester. Images of product scarcity

and low-quality replacements directly correlate with war rationing, while some students realize that “Ingsoc” stands for English Socialism and connects to fears of a totalitarian, Communist state as explored through earlier discussion of *Animal Farm* and the Soviet Union. Other students notice how closely the members of the proles, Inner Party, and Outer Party resemble the working classes, middle classes, and elite discussed in numerous readings or, alternately, an imperialist division of colonized locals, on-site imperialists, and the metropole from the imperialism theme.

This wealth of historical connections helps the class understand how much they have learned through the semester and then enables them to consider *1984*'s images of the future more effectively as well. Students make the connection between the geopolitical situation in *1984* of three great powers and the idea of Cold War posited in “You and the Atomic Bomb.” *1984*'s idea of telescreens—where people look back through two-way televisions—was a cleverly simple leap in the 1940s that became startlingly relevant in the digital age, and then gained new levels of relevancy in 2020 as I taught the entire class live via our own telescreens of computers and Zoom. We also discuss *1984*'s language of Newspeak, the truncated form of English developed with most negative words and synonyms eliminated to control the thought patterns of citizens. With a few hints, students see how Twitter, text messaging, even emojis have similar effects on modern communication by reducing linguistic nuance and pushing interactions into simple for or against positions. This then leads to a discussion about how such truncated communication plays a role in our heavily bifurcated political and social divisions in the contemporary United States. As these examples demonstrate, the final classes bring the whole semester together and focus the course towards our own time. By understanding its history, students see how Orwell's masterwork continues to be relevant in the twenty-first century, and they can fully appreciate that only because they have taken a journey with him for an entire semester.

Student Responses and Conclusions

This last section considers students responses over the years, draws general conclusions about this approach, and considers possible adaptations. For reflection, I'll draw on student evaluations

and a survey of students from the Fall 2020 semester at Indiana University Kokomo. All such comments were collected completely anonymously and independent from students' grades, ensuring their validity as honest opinions. Naturally, the main questions I surveyed focused on what students thought about the use of literature to teach history, particularly through the use of one author for an entire semester. A few students have been enthusiastic about this approach coming in (particularly the English majors drawn into a history class), others have been somewhat leery of it, while the majority have come in neutral or just loosely curious. Almost uniformly, however, they thought it worked well by the end of the semester and none have ever expressed unhappiness with the format. As one student wrote in the Fall 2020 survey:

Being able to understand not only the events that took place in history and their effects on the future is important to a history course, but being able to understand relevant ideas, thoughts, and feelings of the time is important to understanding people and cultures in the past.⁵⁰

More explicitly, another added "connecting the classes subject with Orwell was a great idea, using contemporary literature makes the material both more relatable as well as creating cultural context."⁵¹ Both students went on to emphasize the value of using literature because it makes historical topics more "relatable" and can help students understand the "feeling" and context of a period. Another student initially "worried that teaching the class through the lens of a single author would have unintended consequences," but in the end emphasized that Orwell's objectivity and awareness that he was only observing "a corner of his world" made it effective.⁵² These comments validate the idea that the approach offers students a personal connection to the historical period by viewing it through one author's lens.

Regarding specific works, somewhat surprisingly, *Burmese Days* has consistently been a favorite reading over the years, perhaps because it maximizes that personal connection combined with a tragic ending that draws students in. One student lauded its ability to establish "the ideas behind imperialism and the situation the 20th century started with" through the eyes of characters they can connect with emotionally more than in many works.⁵³ Other readings have had more mixed responses, with some students appreciating them and others seeing them as a bit more detached because they are less

personal in nature. *1984* and “Notes on Nationalism” fall in this category because, as one student phrased it, it is “more difficult for me to understand the period through ideas than through personal experiences.”⁵⁴ Yet *1984* has also invoked strong emotional reactions from students as well. Most amusingly, one student showed up for the discussion and explained that she had to finish reading it outside because the more she read, the more she kept looking over her shoulder for listeners, even jokingly looking for a microphone hidden in the tree near her. This sort of reaction illustrates the benefit of using evocative literature in the classroom and opens up wonderful avenues for connecting those emotional responses to historical realities. On the other hand, more analytical students have regularly preferred the non-fiction readings like “You and the Atomic Bomb” that have led students to marvel at Orwell’s perceptiveness on class and geopolitics.⁵⁵ This reflects the value of using realist writers who allow the option to assign students both fiction and non-fiction works from the same narrative voice because it enables engaging both emotional and analytical learners.

When asked what could be done better in the class or what books were less useful, students have given various responses. In my first years teaching the course, many struggled with *The Road to Wigan Pier*, with its detailed dive into leftist arguments and Marxist polemics. I learned from this that straying too far from narrative readings (whether fiction or non-fiction) can alienate some students in a class structured around novels. This is a concern worth considering when adapting this approach to other topics. *Down and Out in Paris and London* also occasionally gets negative responses because it focuses narrowly on poverty and is disjointed as a story, but many students actually enjoy its flaws (one even came into class with Internet links to modern screevers, or sidewalk chalk artists, like one of the homeless men that Orwell profiles). This offers a good reminder that lesser works can actually be more relatable to students specifically because they are imperfect and less intimidating, which reinforces my desire to use a format that allows the class to read such works, instead of only the famous books.

Some students struggle with the sheer volume of reading required in the class, which is an issue with relying so heavily on literature. That said, while the volume concerns students, in student evaluations, they also struggle to decide which reading they would want to

remove. For example, sometimes students suggest that “Shooting an Elephant” is redundant on imperialism, but then immediately add that it was short enough as to not be a significant burden and that it added a worthwhile perspective.⁵⁶ They also generally appreciate that Orwell’s style meant they knew what to expect from each reading, which kept the sheer volume more manageable.

As a result of these experiences, I’m confident that other professors could adapt this approach using other writers. Literature, in general, allows students to connect emotionally to the experiences of people in a different time and place. Further, having one voice personalizes those events and allows students to bond with that writer over the semester, get used to their style, and see them grow and change as a writer as they hone their craft over a career of work. In so doing, this approach combines literary and journalistic lenses to makes history more relatable and individual—in the process demonstrating the value of not one, but two, humanities fields. Most obviously, other realist writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could be used to teach about either a period of history or a specific theme over a semester. For example, a course could look at either English or French working-class life using exclusively Dickens or Zola, respectively. Similarly, a course on the post-World War II United States might employ Tom Wolfe, who has works on topics ranging from 1960s counterculture, to the Space Race, to Wall Street in the 1980s, as well as dozens of newspaper and magazine articles. Similarly, a class on modern Colombian or Caribbean history through the eyes of Gabriel García Márquez’s magical realist fiction would be absolutely fascinating. Outside the modern period are possibilities as well, such as a colleague of mine currently considering a course on Renaissance Italy using the works of Niccolò Machiavelli as its narrative voice. The most important requirement is to find authors who spark imaginations, have a deep body of work, and can help students understand a period in history.

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