

Course Overview and Policies

BHP 213 Text and Context: George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*
Spring 2006
Wednesday evening, 6:45-9:45

Contemporary discussions of politics, journalism, and social issues regularly reflect the influence of George Orwell's classic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Expressions like "Big Brother is Watching" and the term "Orwellian" routinely appear in modern speech and writings. Published in 1949, the book reflects the turbulent world that Orwell participated in from the waning of British colonialism to the rise of the Cold War. This course will explore the historical and cultural context that shaped Orwell as well as the ways in which Orwell's writings have been used and continue to be used by politicians, commentators and others.

Required Texts; *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell (Signet)
Animal Farm by George Orwell (Signet)
Burmese Days by George Orwell (Harcourt)

A Collection of Essays by George Orwell (Harcourt)
The Age of McCarthyism, 2nd ed., Ellen Schrecker, ed. (Bedford/ St. Martins)
Various handouts

Grading:

Group Portfolio of four entries 25 percent
[#1= 4 percent; #2, 3, 4=7 percent each]
Class discussion, quizzes 25 percent
Study questions 25 percent
Final exam 25 percent

Policies: All work must be submitted in hard copy form unless otherwise indicated. Work must be typed, double-spaced and multiple pages must be stapled. Always keep a hard copy of any assignment you submit.

You are encouraged to rewrite your assignments. However, in order to raise your grade, you must do more than simply correct mechanical errors. A rewrite must be a substantial improvement in the original assignment. Please see one of your professors for guidance on rewriting any assignment.

Discussion is a key component of this course. Therefore, students are expected to be present at all class meetings and activities. Absences will be grounds for reduction of your final grade.

Syllabus

Weekly schedule:

1/25 Introduction to course and the Historical Context for studying George Orwell
For tonight: Read "A Hanging"(1931) (online), and in Collection: "Shooting an Elephant" (1946), "Marrakech" (1939) and "Why I Write" (1946).

Homework: For 2/1, read "Such, Such Were the Joys" in Collection; and excerpts from *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *Wigan Pier* (1937), and New York Times series on Class in America, which will be distributed in class.

Begin reading *Burmese Days* (1934); must be completed by 2/8.

2/1 Early Influences: Orwell as both insider and outsider
Discuss "Such, Such"; *Down and Out* and *Wigan Pier*.

Homework: For 2/8, complete reading *Burmese Days* and read Eagleton essay distributed in class.
Answer 2 to 4 *Burmese Days* study questions (at least 750 words), to be handed in on 2/8.

2/8 White man's burden—the mask of the imperialist
Discuss *Burmese Days* and Eagleton.
Burmese Days study questions due.

Homework: For 2/15, read selections from *Homage to Catalonia* (pp. 1-4; chapter 5) distributed in class; and read in *Collection* "Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War."
Complete First Portfolio entry.

2/15 Fighting for a Just Cause
Discuss "Homage" selections "Looking Back" in class.
First Portfolio entry due.

Homework: For 2/22, read Gornick essay; in Schrecker pp. 1-57 and 110-133; and pp. 278-283; and in *Collection* pp. 234-242 (selection from "Inside the Whale").
Answer study questions on Communism, due 2/22.

2/22 Communism: Allure and Backlash in the United States
Guest speaker: Dr. Barry Seldes, Professor, Department of Political Science
Study questions on Communism due.

Homework: for 3/1 Read *Animal Farm* and essay by Tony Shaw, 'Some Writers are More Equal than Others': George Orwell, the State and Cold War Privilege" (distributed in class)
Answer Study Questions on *Animal Farm*, due 3/1.

3/1 Are Men Pigs?
Discuss *Animal Farm*.
Study Questions on *Animal Farm*, due.

Homework: For 3/8 read the 4th book of *Gulliver's Travels*: "A Voyage To The Country Of The Houyhnhnms." (See link on Blackboard) and in Schrecker pp. 58-97 and 134-170.

3/8 The (Ab)uses of a fable: legacies of *Animal Farm*
Continue discussion of *Animal Farm* and view film versions.
Discuss *Gulliver*.

Homework: For 3/22 read essays by Lippmann (distributed in class) and "Politics and the English Language" in *Collection*.

Begin reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, must be completed by 3/29.
Complete Second Portfolio entry, due 3/22.

3/15 Spring Break

3/22 "Good prose is like a windowpane"
Discuss Lippmann and "Politics and the English Language."
Second Portfolio entry due.

Homework: For 3/29 complete reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
Answer Study Questions on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, due 3/29.

3/29 Warning or Prediction?: A Dystopia for Orwell's Time—and Ours
Discuss *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
Study Questions on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* due.

Homework: For 4/5, read essays on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by Hermann, Gleason, Sunstein and Nussbaum, all distributed in class.

4/5 "You and the Atom Bomb"
Discuss *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and critical essays.
View film, "Dr. Strangelove."

Homework: For 4/12, read Carey essay (distributed in class) and in Schrecker, pp. 98-108 and pp. 171-216.

4/12 "Who we are ... and where we would like to go"
Discuss Carey essay.
In class portfolio work time.

4/19 "Duck and cover"
Homework: For 4/26, read in Schrecker pp. 217-277; and complete portfolios.

4/26 Orwell in the 21st Century
Portfolio presentations.

Homework: Prepare for final exam.

5/3 Final exam: 6:45 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.

BHP 213 Text and Context: George Orwell's *1984*
Profs. P. Brown and A. Wilner
Spring 2006

Portfolio Assignment (25% of final grade)
This is a group project. See syllabus for due-dates of portfolio entries.

As you read the literature by and about Orwell, his time, and his influence on cold-war politics, we would also like you to consider his relevance to current times. Therefore, a requirement of the course is a portfolio of at least four "connection-reflections," in which you link a central idea emerging from Orwell's work and/or its cold-war influence with a current event or phenomenon as documented in a high-level newspaper, news magazine, e-zine, or journal. Below is a list of some salient themes supported by brief quotations by or about Orwell, offered as examples of fruitful points of connection. We welcome your attempts, should you feel so inclined, to explore variations of these or to find other points of connection on your own.

For each connection-reflection, please do the following, typing all work:

1. Clip or print out the relevant article on a current event or idea.
2. Type the title of the article on a separate sheet of paper and specify the Orwellian idea of which it reminds you.
3. In an essay of about 300 words, analyze and reflect on the connection between the Orwellian idea you have selected and the current issue.

Note: • This relationship need not be restricted to simple affirmation, i.e., the article need not necessarily or solely be an illustration of why or how Orwell was right; perhaps the current article contradicts or qualifies Orwell's thinking and predictions or extends his ideas in way he failed to imagine.

• You are not required to argue an indisputable point. Many of the most interesting questions do not have absolute answers. Feel free to think of your reflection as an entry into an

ongoing conversation about complex and persistent social, psychological, political, and historical issues. Good question-posing is a valuable skill.

In any case, try to move beyond self-evident or very general claims (e.g., “many people still use language to obscure the truth,” or “power often corrupts people”) to a deeper analysis and more specific observations/reflections/questions.

Some themes to start us off:

I. Social values/hypocrisy: “The goodness of money [in the private school Orwell attended as a young boy] was as unmistakable as the goodness of health or beauty, and a glittering car, a title or a horde of servants was mixed up in people’s minds with the idea of actual moral virtue.”
“Such, such were the Joys. . .” in *Essays* 33.

To what extent does material wealth continue to be mixed up with the idea of moral virtue? To what extent do we try to pretend to keep these separate? Why is it difficult to do so?

II. Thought and Language: “As I have tried to show, modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their message 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. . . .If thought corrupts language, language also corrupts thought.”
“Politics and the English Language” *Essays* 164, 166

Can you find evidence in current media of the corruption of thought by language?

III. War and Propaganda “One of the most horrible features of war is that all the war-propaganda, all the screaming and lies and hatred, comes invariably from people who are not fighting. . . .It is the same in all wars; the soldiers do the fighting, the journalists do the shouting, and no true patriot ever gets near a front line trench, except on the briefest of propaganda-tours.”
Homage to Catalonia 65-66.

To what extent have the war in Iraq and the media’s coverage of it affirmed (or rebutted) this claim?

IV. Is true socialism possible? “The fact that has got to be faced is that to abolish class-distinctions means abolishing a part of yourself. . . .What is involved in not merely the amelioration of working-class conditions, nor an avoidance of the more stupid forms of snobbery, but a complete abandonment of the upper-class and middle-class attitude to life.”
The Road to Wigan Pier 161-162.

(What does Orwell mean by the upper-class and middle-class attitude to life?) Is the United States a classless society? If not, is such a society possible?

V. The political uses of enemies. “The point most often reiterated in his writing is that there should be no utilitarian trade-off between *freedom* and *security*. . . .Orwell did not conceive of the cold war as a one-dimensional fight against the totalitarian menace, but as a contest (rather too

well-matched) between super-powers, in which the danger of annihilation could be used to petrify and immobilize dissent.”

Christopher Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters* 85-87.

Find evidence to illustrate the relevance of Orwell’s fear to current events.

VI. Social Darwinism vs. Totalitarianism? “There is a divided realization in Orwell’s writing that the two things he most valued, which is to say liberty and equality, were not natural allies of each other. ‘A society of free and equal human beings’—probably his most oft-repeated statement of his preferred objective—seemed unlikely to emerge from a laissez-faire culture. . . . However, the measures of planning and taxation and regulation required to make the transition could easily and obviously eventuate in an over-mighty state with big ideas of its own.”

Christopher Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters* 80

How is the tension between freedom and equality being played out today?