



## **Historians Are Real People: When Stories Are True**

Curriculum Unit 87.04.03  
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Like many others, when I think of the historian I am somehow intimidated. The title of this unit underscores a basic concern that most laymen feel when they confront the discipline of history. It is clear to me that many students (and adults) perceive history as the highly regimented pursuit of documented facts; these may give way to an ultimate understanding of a time and place when the historian engages in exhaustive research and manages to keep his own biases in check. The vocation of the historian thus appears to entail: 1.) long dusty hours within the confines of venerable libraries; 2.) specialization which rivals that of the medical profession; and 3.) the conscious development of a personal and cultural objectivity. In other words, the historian must be essentially lonely, stringently focused, and unwaveringly honest. Needless to say, the average Joe and Jane are often put off by the field of history; early on they decide that they are not equal to the task, and resolve to spend their time with others learning a little about a lot of things while allowing themselves egocentric opinions when their personalities warrant this. My point is that the field of history is erroneously viewed as unapproachable because it is not understood by many; that is, it is not seen as a pursuit which brings pleasure to the historian.

The primary objective of this unit is to re-define history for (and with) my students. We will debunk the popular view of the precise and proper discipline in order to enjoy discovery about others and ourselves. We will play at being historians by looking at primary source material (literature) with the intention of “learning history.” We will resolve to see ourselves as active detectives who must ferret out clues and decide whether they are red herrings or the truth. The answer to one question will lead to another question. Presumably we will learn that while history is complicated, it is not impenetrable. We will also learn that there is more than one way to approach literature. By deciding to view a novel as “his story”—that is the author’s—while resolving to accept the notion that the author’s story must reflect his time and place, we shall have joined, in fact, the fraternity of the historian. We will need practice to feel comfortable in this role, yet we will have put away our fear of and prejudice toward history.

Perhaps the truly educated are the truly open-minded. Perhaps fear and the resultant prejudice do more to impede the progress of education than any other factor. We in the teaching profession meet fear and prejudice on a weekly basis, at the very least. We often hear such statements as: “English is dumb” or “This book you just handed me (which I’ve never seen before) is boring.” Watching a student callously dismiss a favorite book seemed a personal affront. I eventually learned to focus less on my own annoyance and more on what must certainly be regarded as fear on the part of students. Certainly a beatific smile and encouraging words do more in the way of dispelling fear than does the more “human” and emotional reaction of horror

and/or annoyance. Yet, the smile and a request to “Trust me” is manipulation at worst, and a stop-gap way of handling prejudice, at best. Certainly I want my students to feel more comfortable when they confront new and/or threatening experiences in education. However, perhaps it would be better for my students and me to deal with the problem of prejudice more directly.

In short, I think my students and I could usefully spend some time confronting our own fears and prejudices. This, of course, means that I must admit to my own: for example: Why do I quickly dismiss my fifteen year old student’s romance novel as trivial? Does her preference for such reading seem to undermine my skills as a teacher? The point is that, while I do not advocate teacher admissions of prejudice in pseudo-psychological discussions with students, I do think a discussion about literary taste and/or high-brow and low-brow classification should take place. After all, who decides what is “good”? Are they infallible? What are the criteria of a “good book”?

Thus the secondary objective of this unit has to do with encouraging and enabling students to become assessors of good literature. Students will compare and contrast works which have been traditionally seen as high-brow and lowbrow literature; that is, they will consider a classic work and a detective story which are paired according to time and place. Students may note similarities of the authors’ themes and concerns. They certainly will develop an awareness of style and the effect the choice of style has upon the reader. Ultimately, students will be called upon to judge the merits of the paired books—this with regard to each work’s depiction of society. Will one book impart more raw information about societal conditions? Will the other capture more of the “feeling” of the society at hand? Which of the books will elicit a greater response from the readers? Why? Perhaps we will be able to delineate the criteria for the critics’ advocacy for the mantle of “the classic.” Perhaps we will decide that our criteria are based on different needs, different questions. I believe that we will come to champion the idea of pairing such books for the more comprehensive understanding of time and place that such pairing affords.

The choice of the pair of books to be used in this unit ( *Down and Out in Paris and London* —Orwell; *The ABC Murders* —Christie) reflects my own interest in British culture. Perhaps opting to discover the history of a foreign culture provides us with some distance or objectivity. Yet, it seemed to me that this experiment of detection or the discovery of past societal conditions and concerns also needed to be grounded somehow in something familiar. Hence the decision to consider urban literature. Students will learn about city life in Britain in the 1930s. The students’ own experience of urban existence will provide a necessary “anchor” from which they can drift and/or explore the similarities of urban life in Britain and the USA. Perhaps the resultant recognition of urban experience (and what we may learn about it through our study) will enable students to accept the legitimacy of studying other places as well as other times. Maybe we’ll learn to regard our own urban existence more thoughtfully because we have distanced ourselves and looked at the others through the proverbial magnifying-glass. I hope, primarily, that my students decide to let go of the notion that history is all about dead people and dead ideas. This unit may be deemed successful if students come to regard history as a continuum of living experience.

A preliminary comparative reading of *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The ABC Murders* convinced me that these two books, which are probably widely viewed as disparate, are rather remarkably similar indeed. Distinctions of class are important in both. The theme of the essential isolation of the individual within the constructs of society concerns each author. Interestingly enough, the protagonists in both works are outsiders who view the workings of society from a self-imposed distance. I felt that these similarities could not be coincidental; they must reflect the authors’ very real reactions to the society of which they found themselves a part. Certainly the initial awareness of the similarities between the two books prompted questions.

Comparing *Down and Out* and *The ABC Murders* turned out to be the first leg of my journey of discovery of 1930s Britain. At this writing the journey is not complete, and I can therefore imagine and/or relate to what it must feel like to be a historian: the experience of detection feels very much like a trip into uncharted waters primarily because my destination is not known. It is a journey which is personal (but not lonely), a bit nerve-racking (and therefore exciting), and, above all, in some significant way, satisfying. It is an adventure I would like my students to experience.

Yet, I cannot exactly replicate my journey of discovery for students because they will not have made the initial decisions about what we will study and how. Such decisions are usually (though not always) made by the teacher for obvious reasons. Especially initially, but in truth throughout much of this unit, I will serve as a guide for my students. Though I have a destination in mind for them, their own discoveries of this destination are of great importance to me. I will not tell students what I have learned; however, the questions I pose will often “lead them down the garden path.” In other words, at least the beginnings of student discoveries will often be “rigged.” For now I conclude that rigged discoveries lead to genuine discoveries, and/or that they are often prerequisite to the more independent discoveries for which one does not need a teacher. Yet, in fact, the methodology of the directed question raises (in my mind) all sorts of questions about the nature of teaching. Are directed questions manipulative? Is manipulation a necessary component of teaching? Or should/can manipulation be avoided?

Such questions reflect a subtle process which was at work in our seminar. Ostensibly we set out to come to an understanding of history. To put it simply (perhaps too simply) we asked: What is history? What can it do? Yet these questions very quickly became personalized; we soon were wondering: Who are we (as teachers)? What can we do? Of course, any answers to such questions are not definitive, for circumstances and people are constantly changing. However, “known temporary” answers provide a necessary confidence and/or enable us to better enjoy our profession. I concluded that much of what we do necessarily includes some portion of manipulation. Indeed, writing a unit is manipulation, for we seek to explain—and to persuade through our explanations. While I accept manipulation as a necessary part of teaching, I also think that students should be aware of the process of manipulation and/or should consider the topic: Communication and Manipulation—as a point of discussion. And certainly student manipulation—that is manipulation of students—should be overt.

Thus I will be “up-front” with my students from the start. We will begin with a hypothesis such as: Literature is a key to the mind-set of those living in a particular place and time. Of course, the hypothesis is not nearly as important as the question which will follow: Can we prove this? If the hypothesis is true, then we should be able to find underlying themes (through the process of comparison) in various works of the same period and place. I believe that the process of discovery will be exciting for students and will ultimately become self-motivating. One skill that students will need in order to be able to discover is that of comparison.

The exercise of comparison is often intimidating for students. Comparing requires abstract thought—and perhaps more important—a feeling of intellectual competence. Like any other thinking or writing skill, comparison becomes easier with practice. It seems to me that students might profit from a preliminary comparison exercise. This exercise will stand on its own and apart from the literature we will be studying because experience has taught me to separate skill work and new content, at least initially. Often important content is lost in the first attempt of understanding a skill, and such content cannot be easily retrieved. Therefore students will be asked to respond to the words, *New Haven*, in a free-writing exercise. That is, they will write about the topic in any form for five to ten minutes. Subsequently these writings will be shared. Will we find underlying concerns or themes expressed albeit in different ways? I believe so. Perhaps the resultant class discussion about similarity of theme in students’ writings will help students feel more comfortable about

the process of comparison. Presumably such an experiment will testify as to the positive results of the exercise of comparison, and thereby encourage students to work through comparison in relation to *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The ABC Murders*. Needless to say, some provocative, if guided, questions must be provided for students as they approach the two works. (Students will have read both books beforehand with little teacher intervention. It is my guess that the underlying themes will not have been apparent to them.) These questions follow the comparison of *Down and Out* and *The ABC Murders*.

### **Comparing *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The ABC Murders* : A Similarity of Theme**

Agatha Christie and George Orwell were chroniclers of their time. If literature can be regarded as primary source material for social history, and I believe it can, then novelists of a particular time period must be reflectors of the same milieu. Of course, this presupposes that said novelists are interested in the society which envelops them and are by nature keen observers. I believe that Christie and Orwell shared the paradoxical stance of good writers; that is, they were passionately involved with their society while they simultaneously maintained intellectual objectivity. Of course the aforementioned stance sounds suspiciously like that of the historian. Are fine novelists social historians? I think so. The following paragraphs serve to point out the many similarities of theme in *Down and Out* and *The ABC Murders*. It seems that Christie and Orwell couldn't help but write the same story—in the thematic sense.

It is interesting to note at the outset that the main characters in each book are themselves observers of society. That is, both George Orwell, for this book is largely autobiographical, and Hercule Poirot see themselves as noters of detail. Orwell's ability to recreate full scenes of the tramp's life through his own experience results, in fact, in a social history of 1930s Britain. Poirot's never-failing sense of the truth enables him to solve a mystery; that answer ultimately enables Christie to share her picture of British life. Both characters consciously maintain an objectivity which precludes missing salient details. The acceptance of such detail somehow reassures us that these characters have no preconceived notions. They report things as they are rather than as they might wish them to be. One might wonder how such objectivity is achieved. It is a curious coincidence that while Hercule Poirot is a foreigner in England, Orwell experiences the life of a tramp (in England) directly after a long stint in Paris. In fact, the first section of *Down and Out* deals exclusively with Orwell's foreign experience. As the *Atlantic Monthly* stated: "The striking thing about Orwell as a 'witness' is that, he remained miraculously uncontaminated . . . He retained a rebellious clarity of vision which penetrated to the nastiness that is hidden, hushed up, camouflaged by convention." Suddenly Christie's choice of a foreigner seems more deliberate than accidental; perhaps she, too, consciously recognized the problem of societal objectivity and created Poirot to provide herself with a needed distance.

Both *Down and Out* and *The ABC Murders* are concerned with the victimization of individuals. The real culprit in both works seems to be society at large. Both authors recognize the result of a rigid class system and/or the lop-sided distribution of money and power. Orwell and Christie (consciously or not) paint a picture of the divisiveness of such a society and the resultant cruelty which emerges through class-mandated isolation.

Alexander Bonaparte Cust ( *The ABC Murders* ) and "the tramp" ( *Down and Out* ) are one and the same in that they are essentially victims of an unjust environment. Though they inhabit different strata of society, their victimization is all but identical. A.B. Cust, but for the intervention of Poirot, would be executed for a crime he did not commit. "The tramp" is executed by degrees for the "crime" of unemployment. In both cases these characters are sacrificed so that others might reap monetary reward. To be sure, in *The ABC Murders* the point of sacrifice is made clearer. Franklin Clarke murdered his brother for an inheritance and "set up" Cust to "take the fall." In *Down and Out* the sacrifice is more shadowy; yet, as Orwell points out, lodging houses for tramps were deliberately kept at a sub-standard condition for the sake of the profit margin. The London County

Council saw fit to create laws against gambling in such places, but neglected to require that owners provide a clean and/or healthy environment for their patrons.

A.B. Cust and the tramp find themselves in virtual isolation from other sectors of society and even from members of their own classes. Christie manages to capture the bleakness of the inhabitants of single-room apartments. Cust lives in his own four walls without family or friends and in constant fear of unemployment. It stands to reason that he is an easy target, for he has no one upon whom he can rely on for comfort or advice. More important, because no one really knows him, no one can vouch for his character. The tramp, too, knows little in the way of human companionship. Marriage is out of the question, for lodging houses are sex-segregated. All social companionship is often censored by lodging house officials, who fail to provide an environment conducive to social interaction such as a common room with chairs. Indeed, on occasion such officials blatantly disallow interaction through a mandated regimen of silence. Such enforced isolation seems sinister if not malicious. How does one break the spirit of a man in prison? Through solitary confinement? How does society insure that the status quo remains intact? By forbidding any discussion on the matter?

The enforced isolation of Cust and the tramps seems even more insidious when one takes into account the nomadic quality of their lives. Cust is relegated to employment as a salesman. His job does not entail the free and easy wanderings of a traveler; rather, he takes orders from a “higher-up” and/or is provided with an itinerary. Of course, such regimentation allows the actual murderer in *The ABC Murders* free rein to manipulate Cust physically and, eventually, mentally. When Cust finally comes to realize that he has been at the scenes of a series of murders, he envisions not manipulation by another but his own madness. The tramps’ enforced wanderings serve to further isolate them from one another. The rule that a tramp may spend only one night in a lodging house seems pointless until one realizes that such a rule results in a perpetually exhausted and disjointed group of men. In fact, the tramps can never coalesce into a group which might consider its plight. Like Cust, the tramp fails to envision a manipulation by others. He sees his own failure instead. Thus with enforced isolation comes a deadening resignation which keeps the disenfranchised perpetually cowed, and the status quo firmly intact. There is an ugly irony about this picture of people on the move. That phrase or the metaphor of a mobile people has often been linked with the idea of a shifting society—of upwardly mobile people who would break class lines through the force of their own personalities. The nomadic existence of the tramp and the salesman is, in contrast, a metaphor of a meaningless, circuitous journey.

Finally, one might ask what all of this has to do with the idea of urban life. Though *Down and Out* and *The ABC Murders* adopt shifting locales, it is the mind-set of the city which influences the lives of the disenfranchised and comfortable alike. The city seems to breed fear, mistrust, and the ultimate in selfishness. People on the street are anonymous. When their stories are not known, they cease to be human or real. How easy it is for city inhabitants to judge those of the city, for image rather than identity counts. Never mind that the judgments may be unfair or stupid or dangerous. The face of the other quickly disappears—probably never to be seen again.

Comparison Questions for Students:

The following questions for students may be used in whatever order the teacher deems best. Often students need to have questions re-phrased in order to make sense of them; I include examples of re-phrased questions in order to underscore this need.

1. Where had Orwell been just prior to his experience with the tramps in England? What is Poirot's nationality? How might their foreign experiences help these characters to see British society/life more clearly? Can you think of instances in life where an outsider might be used to solve a problem? What qualities does an outsider have which help him in the role of arbitrator?
2. What does Poirot discover about Cust's connection to the murders? How does Orwell feel about the plight of the tramps? Does he give us any reason(s) for why they are treated as they are?
3. What crimes are the tramps and Cust accused of? Do you consider them to be guilty of anything? What hardships must they endure because they have been charged with crime? Does anyone profit from their hardships? Explain.
4. How are the tramps and Cust isolated from other members of society? Discuss their living conditions.  
Do the tramps and Cust have close relationships?  
Why/why not? Of what value are close relationships (for the individual)? What sort of support do friends give one another? How might it feel to be totally isolated?
5. Both the tramps and Cust move from place to place. How does this affect their relationships (or lack of) with other people? Are their wanderings self-motivated? Explain.
6. Who manipulated Cust? Why? How? Are the tramps manipulated? If so, by whom? Why? How?
7. In what sense are the tramps and Cust city people? How might their lives have been different had they lived in a small town or rural setting?  
What are the drawbacks to living in the city? Are there benefits? Explain. How might cities become better living environments for people?
8. How were the tramps viewed by other segments of British society in the 1930s? How are the "homeless" viewed today in our society?
9. Discuss, in general, the similarity of theme of *Down and Out* and *The ABC Murders* . What points did each author make about British society in the 1930s? (List similar concerns.) How do you account for the similarity of theme?

The question of "What was happening in Britain during the '30s?" might naturally follow students' discoveries of similar themes in *Down and Out* and *The ABC Murders* . At least I hope that students will be amenable to looking at a summary of the political and economic decisions (and their aftermaths) of the time. Such a detour into the hindsight understanding of the time period, or "history" as students generally know it, may serve to underscore what we have deduced. Perhaps we will also come to understand better the "whys" and the



“wherefores” of the concerns raised by our authors. What follows is admittedly a rather sketchy and incomplete version of what happened in ten years time; space and time constraints preclude in-depth study. Yet, I hope that this summary, placed as it is between primary source analyses, will serve to further delineate our discoveries and/or help us to make better sense of them.

### ***A Brief History of Britain in the 1930s***

In lectures published in 1929 R.H. Tawney, a socialist economic historian, referred to an establishment of a new “religion of inequality” in Britain. Two-thirds of the wealth was owned by less than one percent of the population, and there were immense disparities in the quality of life among British citizens. <sup>1</sup> Yet, little in the way of protest occurred until the late 1930s. In fact, negative public opinion on the matter of “social division” was not heard until international affairs, most notably the “appeasement controversy” (Chamberlain/Hitler), became the subject of bitter public debate.

By 1932 unemployment was at its peak. The American stock market crash resulted in a sharp decrease in British trade and eventually a massive run on the pound. Then Labour Prime Minister MacDonald was forced to resign only to be resurrected as the Prime Minister of a (new) “National Government.”

“The politics of the National Government were based, unequivocally and unapologetically, on class and regional divisions.” <sup>2</sup> The depressed communities where industry was contracting were virtually ignored perhaps because such communities were self-contained. In other parts of Britain citizens found life to be “acceptable and in many ways agreeable.” <sup>3</sup> The government had decided to support growing suburban communities of new shopping centers and cinemas, and thereby won the support of a large majority of the people. “If one explanation for the lack of social change in Britain amidst the unemployment and depression of the thirties lies in the lack of political and economic power vested in the older industrial areas, another lies in the growing commitment to a pleasing and acceptable form of suburban life by larger and larger sections of the population left relatively unscathed by the bleak years.” <sup>4</sup>

While the rest of Europe faced totalitarianism, Britain remained stable with its social and cultural hierarchy intact. “The prestige of Parliament . . . of a highly stratified educational system headed by Oxford and Cambridge . . . remained as high as ever. The monarchy retained its esteem by responding subtly to marginal changes in the outlook of the mass democracy: George V’s attendance at the annual working-class festival of the Wembley Cup Final was one such instance.” <sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the general complacency of the early thirties was part and parcel of a post-war mentality. There was intense reluctance to take part in overseas military adventures after World War I, for many felt that the 1919 peace settlement was “vindictive” and in no way connected to a desire for world peace. Britain, disillusioned and unsure, remained domestically and internationally passive; non-intervention in international affairs was accepted even when this meant the erasure of democracy in Spain. (To be sure, this over-throw of democracy was not foreseen by the public. In fact, the public was duped by a government-run press which misrepresented the events taking place in Spain.) Eventually the British government engaged in “accommodation with Fascist dictators” under the leadership of Chamberlain. It was at this point that public opinion began to change.

When Jewish refugees from Germany told of Hitler’s regime, the public conscience began to awaken. Trade union leaders turned against pacifist politicians who had failed to aid labor groups in Germany and Austria. The public finally turned to Churchill for leadership when they understood that Chamberlain’s Munich talks had resulted in the fall of Czechoslovak democracy. Eventually, in response to Hitler’s invasion of Poland, Britain

declared war on Germany.

In the late stages of Chamberlain's tenure public response became acrimonious. "Domestic and international conflicts merged into one passionate, turbulent whole. Chamberlain, the architect of much of the prosperity of the thirties, the titan of the suburban middle class, the dominant leader of the decade, suddenly became the hated symbol of a fraudulent, decadent political order." <sup>6</sup>

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Students will read this summary of 1930s Britain. We will discuss the themes raised in *Down and Out* and *The ABC Murders* —as they relate to the history of the period. It seems to me that we might approach such a discussion by way of topics such as: 1.) *Isolation* (social and political/ domestic and international) What are the causes? What are the results? 2.) *Manipulation* (personal and political) Reasons for? Results? 3.) *Division of Society* (classes) How maintained? Why? 4.) *Urban/ Industrial Blight* (Reactions to).

The above, of course, serves only as a broad outline for discussion. I have not included more directed questions here because I want the discussion to be "self-perpetuating." That is, I really do not want to "run" or manipulate this discussion to a pre-destined outcome. At this point I will become less "guide" and more "listener." It is sometimes risky to take such a stance; one must often be prepared to provide additional direction. Yet, I have found that, on certain occasions, the "thinking on one's feet" kind of direction is, by virtue of its spontaneity, more exciting and/or "natural" for all concerned.

Following a discussion, where I hope students will have become excited about the themes raised in *Down and Out* and *The ABC Murders* and their relevance to political events of the 1930s, it is time to turn to the secondary objective of this unit. Now we must consider the differences between *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The ABC Murders* with an eye on assessing the quality of these two works. It is at this point that the unit becomes more "English-oriented" as students are encouraged to think about such topics as audience and (author's) voice. Yet, interestingly enough, the questions which are raised in the following analysis, are essentially historical—though perhaps unanswerable.

### **Contrasting *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The ABC Murders* : A Difference of Style**

No one could argue that Christie's style is even remotely like Orwell's or vice versa. Perhaps the difference in style has to do with how these authors regarded themselves and/or their missions of writing. Perhaps what is most important to note is the fact that they envisioned different audiences. For whom they chose to write may tell us something important about these individuals and/or their views of society. Yet, there are other factors as well. I have concluded that each author's choice of style is reflected in four main differences between *Down and Out* and *The ABC Murders* . They are: 1.) how the theme is revealed; 2.) the presence or absence of the author's voice; 3.) the audience envisioned by the author; and 4.) the expectations of the same audience.

George Orwell made a conscious decision to chronicle the life of the tramp. *Down and Out* is especially powerful because Orwell lived this existence himself. The reader learns real details about the everyday experiences of the tramp, and perhaps what is more important, is allowed no relief from these experiences. Though the tramps come in contact with other members of society, they are essentially unseen and therefore cannot communicate with these people. The reader, too, is separated from other segments of society. Orwell's unrelenting focus on the tramp's life forces the reader to confront this issue of society's failure. Agatha Christie reveals society's failure in a different way. *The ABC Murders* allows us a glimpse into the lives of characters from a range of social classes. Indeed, it is the variety of societal experience that brings home



Christie's theme. Because *The ABC Murders*' many possible suspects represent the entire social spectrum, Christie is able to make the point that the lop-sided distribution of wealth affects not just the lowest of the classes but virtually all members of the class structure. The potential violence is the outcome of a frustrated people who either strive to grab onto what they haven't got or resolve to hold onto what they have but others want. While Orwell tells us what might be called the "true" story of actual individuals, and thus makes an impassioned plea for justice, Christie conjures up a fable which is less impassioned, because of the distancing effect of its fiction, yet equally effective in its delineation of theme.

The effect of the author's voice is especially apparent in *Down and Out*. Orwell is able to give vent to his opinions and/or reactions to the plight of the tramps because he is writing his own story. Orwell's conclusions seem deceptively simple; his exhortations are succinct and penetrating. "The English are a conscience-ridden race, with a strong sense of the sinfulness of poverty . . . One cannot imagine the average Englishman deliberately turning parasite . . . Indeed, if one remembers that a tramp is only an Englishman out of work . . . then the tramp-monster disappears." <sup>7</sup> "There must be at the least several tens of thousands of tramps in England. Each day they expend innumerable foot-pounds of energy—enough to plough thousands of acres . . . in mere useless walking . . . They cost the country at least a pound a week a man . . . The law keeps this process going, and we have got so accustomed to it that we are not surprised. But it is very silly." <sup>8</sup> Of course, there is no similar author-voice in *The ABC Murders*. Christie is able to record her message only within the confines of plot and character. Thus the reader may not sit up and take notice in all cases. Christie's message is more subtle or subliminal than Orwell's—but less effective? Surely that depends on the audience.

When one considers audience, one certainly needs to examine an author's purpose in writing. In the case of Orwell and Christie the issue of purpose becomes tricky indeed. Of course, it is easy to point out that Orwell's purpose is self-evident. He wanted to describe the lives of the poverty-stricken, and he wanted to plainly state that society's workings were essentially flawed. But what of Christie? Did she write merely to entertain? If *The ABC Murders* is an apt picture of 1930s Britain, did Christie mean it to be? It is difficult to ascertain Christie's purpose in writing in any definitive way. Perhaps one is satisfied with stating that, consciously or not, Christie painted a picture of British society that parallels Orwell's very self-conscious work. Perhaps we learn (once again) that writers cannot write "out of their times," or that experience of a time and place is indelible in the consciousness and must be reflected in art. But, the question of audience needs further explanation.

One has only to enter a bookstore and ask for copies of *The ABC Murders* and *Down and Out in Paris and London* to learn that one is readily available—while the other is not. Certainly Christie's book appeals to a wider audience. This is understandable given its entertainment value. After all, one can read Christie just for fun. One need not think of the social implications of murder unless one has a mind to. Orwell's book, in contrast, was written for those who are interested in social issues and/or his life. One does not read *Down and Out* for its entertainment value; one reads it to learn something. The point is that Christie's message was potentially available to many more people than was Orwell's, but "potentially" is a key word here. It must be assumed that many who have read *The ABC Murders* were merely entertained. If Christie were trying to make a statement or effect change, as was Orwell, did she choose the right style and/or the right audience?

Of course, all of this leads back to the problem of low-brow and high-brow literature classifications. Is it possible that such classifications do some real damage? What of the audience's expectations? If I expect to get a fun puzzle from Christie, isn't that just what I'll get? I know I won't get that from Orwell. Maybe a different expectation enables me to be more serious about his work.

Finally, what are the effects of various books on the social consciousness of a people? Is Christie's subliminal

message essentially effective in some way? Do books effect changes in a society? Or do books reflect the impending changes in a society?

### **Contrast Questions for Students:**

It seems to me that students might profit once again from some guided questions which in this case relate to our authors' divergent choices of style. I would like my students to consider such topics as author's voice and audience, and thus the following questions are organized according to the four main differences of style discussed in the previous analysis. I include here, too, subjective questions which will encourage students to voice their own opinions and their preferences in reading. Such questions legitimize the highly personal component of the activity of reading and thereby encourage (and value) students' own thoughts and reactions.

#### *How Theme is Revealed*

1. Orwell's book focuses on one class (tramps) while Christie's includes a range of social classes. How do the authors, decisions of focus affect their delineations of the class society? Why did they make the choices they did? Was either book (because of its focus) more effective in revealing the problems inherent in a class society? Explain.
2. Orwell's story might be called a "true" or actual story while Christie's might be called a "fable". Is one more effective than the other because of its type? How does the type of story limit each author in his/her telling of the story?

#### *Author's Voice*

1. Find instances in *Down and Out in Paris and London* where Orwell expresses his opinions and/or reactions to the plight of the tramp. What is your reaction to his thoughts? Is Orwell manipulative? Explain.
2. Christie's voice is not heard, and therefore her message is not overt. Is her message less effective because it is not overt? Does Christie's fiction allow the reader more freedom to come to his/her own conclusions than does Orwell's? Explain.
3. What are the pros and cons of an author's existent or non-existent voice?

#### *Audience Envisioned by the Author*

1. For whom did Christie and Orwell write? Discuss the differences in the audiences envisioned.
2. What was each author's purpose in writing? Did Christie have more than one purpose? Explain.
3. Why are Christie's books more widely read than are those of Orwell? How serious can an entertaining book be?

4. Which author is probably taken more seriously as a writer of social criticism? Why? Is there a prejudice at work here?

### *Audience Expectations*

1. Which of the two books did you expect to be more challenging? From which book did you expect to learn more? Did you in fact learn more from this book? Explain.
2. Which is the better book? Explain.
3. Had you read each book separately and without discussion, would you have “rated” these books quite differently? Would *The ABC Murders* be seen on its own as a serious book? Why/why not? Explain. Would *Down and Out* be seen as serious? Explain.
4. Which of the books do you think did more in the way of effecting social change? Explain.
5. Do books effect social change? Or do they reflect impending changes of a society? How are we affected by what we read?

The previously unstated and underlying objective of this unit, which is to enable students to regard written works critically, forms the essence or the heart of all of my teaching endeavors. I am much more interested in students’ awareness of their part in the process of learning than I am in the product of this awareness, the knowledge gained or the facts learned. In order to be truly involved in the process of education, students need to develop a consciousness of learning and must be affected personally through their own thought processes and ideas. My students are not empty vessels into which I might pour wisdom; rather they are developing minds of varied interests and experiences who must be encouraged to think their own thoughts and work through their own “logic.” It is not surprising that many students have become passive participants in education, for they are constantly bombarded by the information and ideas afforded by a variety of media. The sheer volume of information (and of the critical assessment which accompanies this information) can be overwhelming. Do students see room for their own thoughts amidst the deluge of modern communication? I wonder. It seems to me that students, above all, must be encouraged to question (from their own experiences) all material to which they are exposed. No form of communication—not books, nor TV, nor movies—should be passively consumed. If students are not asked the equivalent of “What does this mean to you?” time and again, the very value of education is lost.

The great debate about the effect of TV and other visual media on intellectual development rages on. We teachers can, and often do, gnash our teeth because our students prefer movies to books; yet, the stance of simply wishing for a renaissance of bibliophilia is in reality the active avoidance of an immensely powerful medium. Perhaps our energies should be spent in learning how to use this medium to our best advantage.

More to the point, perhaps we should be incorporating this medium in the classroom by teaching students how to be active rather than passive consumers of visual material. In short, we should be encouraging students to view (as well as read) critically.

### ***Closing the Unit : A Look at Film***

The final portion of this unit represents, at the very least, an acceptance of the role of visual material in the classroom. Students will view two films produced in Britain in the 1930s. Though I imagine that students will be mesmerized by the sheer suspense and entertainment of these works, as I was, I also believe that they will be able to connect the story-lines to the setting and/or will recognize the very themes with which we have been engrossed up to this point.

The two films to be considered are *The 39 Steps* and *Sabotage* —both directed by Hitchcock and both intriguing. The captured visual images of Britain in the 1930s are mesmerizing in and of themselves. The physical attributes of Britain and its people, which are accessible to us through the active representation of film, broaden our minds and delight our senses. We can't help but feel that "we are there," and it is fun. Perhaps the visual component of the unit enables us to experience yet another "feeling" for the setting. We may no longer feel as distanced from the issues and concerns of the time. Perhaps we will be able to see more of ourselves in the lives of those portrayed. Will this serve to help us better understand Britain in the 1930s? Or will the issues become cloudy or mundane? (Admittedly such questions have as much to do with the quality of the films as they have to do with the medium itself.)

It is interesting to note that both films depict an uneasiness in British society of the '30s. There is danger lurking. Interestingly enough, the danger comes from outside (foreign spies and saboteurs) rather than from within the social fabric of Britain itself. We are reminded of Britain's close proximity to other countries—of a war not so recently ended and of a war soon to begin. The menace depicted is "faceless" and irrational; reasons behind the planned disruptions of British life are not made clear.

### ***The 39 Steps***

The themes discussed in relation to *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The ABC Murders* : isolation, manipulation, and the problems of a class society are also evident in *The 39 Steps* —though the issue of class society is a subtle theme indeed.

*The 39 Steps* is the story of a man who is unwittingly thrust into a situation of international intrigue. When Richard Hannay finds himself alone in his apartment with the corpse of a woman who had previously asked him for protection from a gang of spies, he is at once cut off from normalcy. The situation is too fantastic to be believed, so Hannay thinks, and he opts to "go it alone." Hannay then becomes the hunter (of the spy ring) and the hunted (by the spies and the British police).

Hannay's isolation is all but complete as he is thrust into a situation seemingly outside of his control. He must dodge both the "bad guys" (for obvious reasons) and the "good guys" (because they do not know the truth and assume that he is simply a murderer). In a sense Hannay becomes a reactive being who must see "tigers" at every turn. The film reinforces this sense of danger and isolation with such visual images as a looming and sinister Forth Bridge and stark moors. Like Cust ( *The ABC Murders* ) and the tramps ( *Down and Out* ), Hannay must be constantly on the move. Unlike Cust and the tramps, Hannay is conscious of the danger from without and cognizant of his ability to ultimately escape from it. Hannay builds his own reality in a sense and/or learns whom to trust, and more important, whom to manipulate.

It is Hannay's sense of himself as a member of the upper-middle class which enables him to turn the tables or manipulate others. Early on his supreme confidence in "getting around" a member of a lower class helps him to escape from his apartment. (He manages the loan of a milkman's coat which enables him to avoid the police—at least for a time.) When Hannay is mistaken for a speaker at a political rally, much later in the film, he once again taps the power inherent in his class; he manages to charm the audience, and thereby gains time, and more important, a necessary renewal of self-confidence. It is Hannay's intuition—bolstered by a sense of his own superiority—which enables him to triumph. Hannay is a hero, but a dubious hero in a sense, for he exercises a class-generated power.

### **Questions for Students:**

1. Discuss the isolation of Richard Hannay. What causes this isolation? How is this isolation underscored in various scenes and landscapes? Are other people isolated as well? Explain.
2. Is Hannay manipulated? If so, by whom or what? How does he overcome this manipulation? (Compare with Cust [ *The ABC Murders* ] and the tramps [ *Down and Out* ].) Whom does Hannay manipulate? Why? How? Are issues simplified with an ending where the "hero" triumphs? What qualities does Hannay have which enable him to triumph?
4. Does this film make a statement about class society? Explain.
5. What was the purpose of the film? What did you learn from the film? Was this film more concerned with international or domestic affairs? Explain. Should we accept it as a serious commentary on 1930s Britain? Why/why not?
6. Are any of the issues raised relevant to us today?

### **Sabotage**

The themes of isolation, manipulation, and the problems inherent in a class society are all touched upon in *Sabotage*. Like *The 39 Steps*, the danger is seen as coming from without, for a foreign syndicate seeks to disrupt British society through a reign of terror.

The sense of "things are not what they seem" is underscored in this film where false personae are adopted by friend and foe alike. A young wife, isolated in a marriage of convenience for the sake of her younger brother, has not the slightest suspicion that her husband is a saboteur. A Scotland Yard detective deliberately poses as a grocer in order to befriend this woman; such a plan (the detective assumes) will enable him to gain information and thereby unmask the saboteur/husband. In this endeavor the detective is ultimately successful, but not before lives are lost, and in particular, the life of the young brother.

In a sense this is a film about the risks of manipulation. The saboteur himself is manipulated by "higher-ups" who force him to set aside principles concerning the value of human life. The saboteur allows this manipulation, but his act of sabotage is only partially successful; a bus rather than the whole of Piccadilly Circus is destroyed, and the ring of saboteurs is found out and squelched. The detective seeks to manipulate the wife into relinquishing her husband to the authorities, but is unsuccessful because the wife knows nothing

of her husband's activities. Perhaps both positive and negative manipulations are portrayed as risky in this film because there is no credence given to intuitive thinking and/or to an ordered or patterned world. There are no heroes (or anti-heroes) in *Sabotage*. Instead, characters lead reactive lives which result, more often than not, in negative consequences. Though the wife will not be charged with the revenge killing of her husband, one wonders how she will cope with this and the loss of her brother. Though the ring of saboteurs is disbanded by the film's end, one wonders if or when they will operate again. *Sabotage* is in many ways a dark film which depicts fear and irrationality.

### **Questions for Students:**

1. Discuss the wife's isolation within her marriage.
2. Who might become saboteurs? What is sabotage supposed to accomplish?
3. There are many manipulations of characters in this film. Who is manipulated? How? Why? Is manipulation ever used in a positive way? Are any of these manipulations ultimately successful? Explain.
4. Why did the "reign of terror" exist? Is this ever explained? Why/why not?
5. Comment on the ending of this film. Is it realistic? Compare this denouement with that of *The 39 Steps*.
6. Which was the better film? Why? Which of the films did you enjoy more? Why?

Though this unit is finished, I am still thinking about *Sabotage* and its relation to *The 39 Steps*. I suspect that Hitchcock is making yet another statement about class society in *Sabotage*. But, I need to think further. Participation in our seminar enabled me to see that answers inevitably lead to more questions. Is the profession of the teacher like the profession of the historian? It seems to me that both professions deal with the continuum of human experience, and both recognize that we are all changing— even as the times change.

## **Notes**

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1. Kenneth O. Morgan, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain*, p. 544.
2. *Ibid*, p. 547.
3. *Ibid*, p. 548.
4. *Ibid*, p. 549.
5. *Ibid*, p. 550.
6. *Ibid*, p. 555.
7. George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, p. 202.



8. *Ibid*, p. 205.

## Student Reading List

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Christie, Agatha. *The ABC Murders* . New York: Pocket Books, 1941.

Orwell, George. *Down and Out in Paris and London* . New York: Harvest/HBJ Books, 1933.

## Films

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*The 39 Steps* (dir. Hitchcock). Gaumont-British Pictures, 1935.

*Sabotage* (dir. Hitchcock). Gaumont-British Pictures, 1936.

## Teacher Resource

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Morgan, Kenneth O., ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain* . Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

(Remarkable volume of the history of Britain. Invaluable for teachers of English literature.)

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