

ANIMAL FARM

by George Orwell

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Didactic Material
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Adapted by **Paul Stebbings**
Directed by **Gaspard Legendre**
Produced by **Grantly Marshall**



GEORGE ORWELL

George Orwell (1903-1950) is a writer and activist who is also considered as a prophet.

A biography of George Orwell, born Eric Blair, appears elsewhere in these notes. This is an attempt to review the themes, experiences and ideas that illuminated his extraordinary life and career. As time passes Orwell's reputation and influence only increases, and he cements his place as one of the most effective and accurate commentators on our modern world. This is a reputation that he earned not just by his writing but by his experience. This essay on the man attempts to link his work to his life.

1: Early life. The rejection of privilege. The rejection of Empire.

Although Eric Blair was not born into the aristocracy, his proud parents ensured he attended Britain's most elite school: Eton. The school has provided more prime ministers than another and one which the royal family often send their sons. This all male school was locked in the values of Victorian Britain. In the 1920's it was dedicated to privilege and Empire. Eric Blair received a solid education while being able to observe the strange ways of an upper class who may have dominated much of the globe, but who had no idea of the working poor of England. As a scholarship boy (not paying fees) , young Blair was looked down upon and did not do well academically.

Unsure of what to do after Eton, Eric followed his family into the Imperial Civil Service and became a policeman in the British Colony of Burma, a minor province of the sprawling and fragile British Empire.

Key works: BURMESE DAYS. SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT.

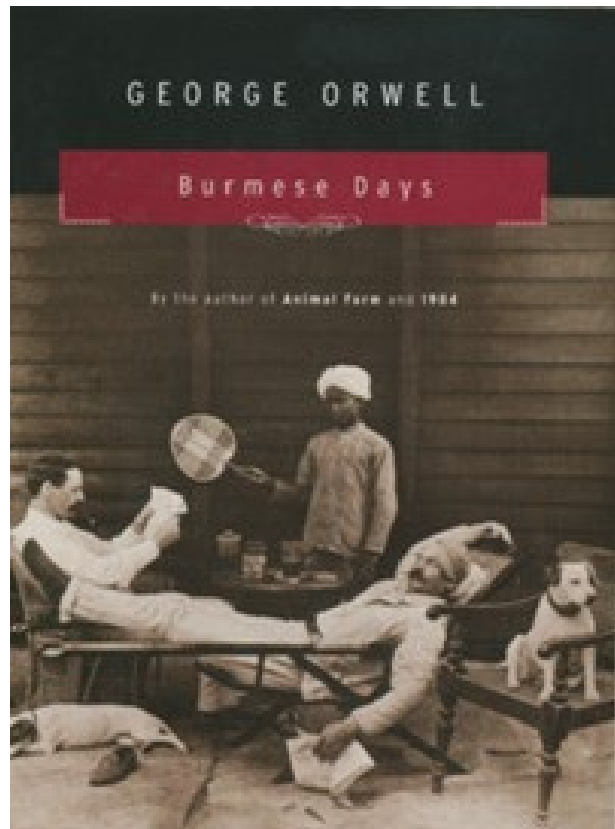
“Shooting an elephant “ is the one of the finest short stories written in English in the 20th century. In a small Burmese town an elephant has run riot. But now the giant beast sits calmly in the town square. The locals expect the white Policeman to shoot the elephant. This is the role of Empire. The policeman (Blair) endures the cold hatred of the local population and goes to do his duty. It is as pointless to kill the peaceful elephant as to rule another country because one is white. He shoots the helpless elephant. His job is done and he returns to his house full of self-hatred and loathing for the Empire.

Eric Blair resigned from the Imperial Police, returned to Britain and became a school teacher.

“He wears a mask, and his
face grows to fit it.”

“When the white man turns
tyrant, it is his own freedom
that he destroys.”

Quotations from “Shooting an
Elephant”. G Orwell.



THE DESCENT INTO POVERTY

Key work: *Down and Out in Paris and London*

Blair was fascinated by the poverty that most wealthy people avoided in Britain. He started exploring the East End, the poor quarter of London which housed poverty and neglect as terrible as any in Burma. After spending a night in a “kip” (homeless shelter), he decided to adopt this life himself. He spent the next two years on and off “tramping” the roads of England sleeping rough or in “the spikes” (shelters). He moved to Paris after a while and lived in terrible poverty there too, finally working as a dish washer in a grand hotel. Curiously he would often escape from his life to visit wealthy relatives in Britain and France then return to the road, its hardship and stink.

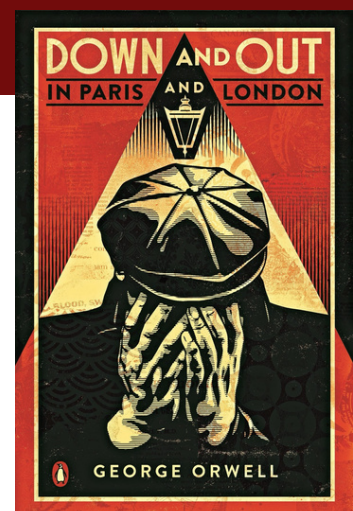
He wrote an account of these experiences in: *DOWN AND OUT IN PARIS AND LONDON*. This became his first true success and was published in London and New York.

“In practice nobody cares if work is useful or useless, productive or parasitic; the sole thing demanded is that it shall be profitable. In all the modern talk about energy, efficiency, social service and the rest of it, what meaning is there except “Get money, get it legally, and get a lot of it”? Money has become the grand test of virtue. By this test beggars fail, and for this they are despised.”

— George Orwell, quote from *Down and Out in Paris and London*

“If you set yourself to it, you can live the same life, rich or poor. You can keep on with your books and your ideas. You just got to say to yourself, “I’m a free man in here” - he tapped his forehead - “and you’re all right.”

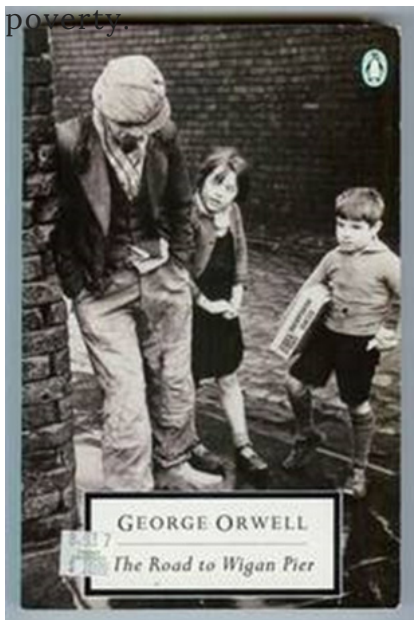
— George Orwell, quote from *Down and Out in Paris and London*



Eric Blair had now created his own “nom de Plume” George Orwell. He had also gained a reputation as a social observer. He became naturally drawn to Socialist principles and moved in Left wing literary and social circles in London. But he wanted to do more. So at the invitation of the Labour party he set out to explore and describe the poorest areas of “Imperial” Britain, the small working class towns of the North which had always been poor but who suffered even more during the Great Depression of the 1930’s.

Key work: THE ROAD TO WIGAN PIER.

A description of this small drab town and its downtrodden population, the unemployed, the coal miners and the men and women who lived in hopeless poverty.



“It is only when you meet someone of a different culture from yourself that you begin to realize what your own beliefs really are.”

“Every empty belly is an argument for socialism”.
- Orwell *The Road To Wigan Pier*.

But *The Road To Wigan Pier* is not just a political book by someone who believes they are “right” it also asks questions and is critical of the author as well as many of his fellow Left wingers. This is a crucial part of his life and work. He never belongs to a group without standing back and examining its weaknesses and hypocrisies.

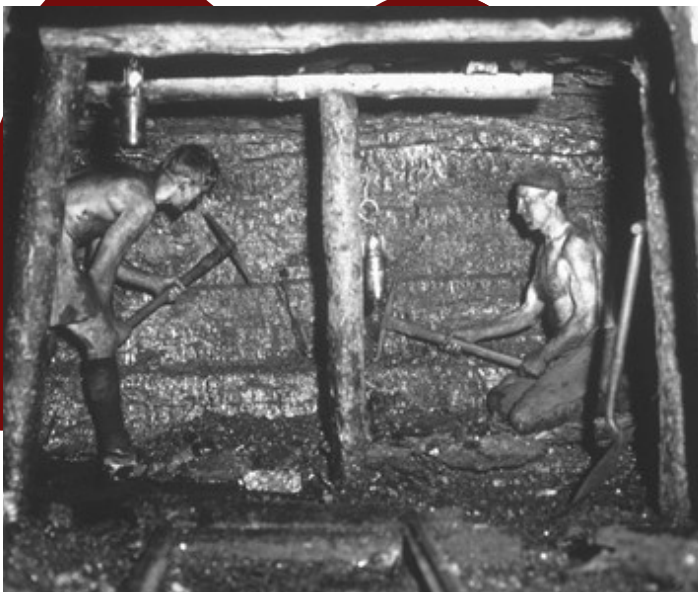
“One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words ‘Socialism’ and ‘Communism’ draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, ‘Nature Cure’ quack, pacifist in England.”

— George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*

But he understood poverty as he had lived it, and his sympathy always remained with the poor and exploited members of society. Even in his last novel “1984” the Proles (workers) are the only source of hope.

“In a way it is even humiliating to watch coal-miners working. It raises in you a momentary doubt about your own status as an ‘intellectual’ and a superior person generally. For it is clear that it is only because miners sweat their guts out that superior persons can remain superior. You and I and the Archbishop of Canterbury and Comrade X, author of *Marxism for Infants* – all of us really owe our comfortable lives to poor miners underground, blackened to the eyes, with their throats full of coal dust, driving their shovels forward with arms and belly muscles of steel.”

— George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*



Action not words – Orwell in the Spanish Civil War.

The Spanish Civil War was the great issue for the Left in the 1930's. They correctly saw it as a dress rehearsal for the attempt at domination by the fascist powers of Europe – Germany and Italy. The democracies of France and Britain foolishly tried to stay neutral and this infuriated most of the organised Left.

The Democratic governments were too afraid of Communist Russia, who supported the Republic against the rebel fascist forces of Franco. Hitler and Mussolini supported Franco with resources and even military forces. Gradually Stalin's Russia did the same for the Republic. But before the Russians became important, volunteers from all over Europe joined the 'International Brigades' to fight against fascism and defend the young socialist republic of Spain. George Orwell joined the International Brigade and fought in the front line near Barcelona. He was nearly killed in battle, a bullet passing through his neck. His major book about his Spanish experience entitled *HOMAGE TO CATALONIA* remains a classic of both war and political literature.

This period of Orwell's life is crucial, because he experienced not only the fight against fascism but also the civil war within a civil war, where Stalin's Communists fought in the streets of Barcelona against the Anarchists and socialists who had first rallied to defend the Republic. He was shocked and understood the parallel between Stalin and Hitler before many others understood this bitter fact. Any reading of *ANIMAL FARM* or *1984* has to take into account Orwell's shame as he realised that the side he had been fighting for was little different from the Fascists he fought against. It is in Spain that Orwell understood that Totalitarianism (Dictatorship) and that each Dictator only used political aims or ideology as a cover for a naked grab of power at the expense of the individual and their liberty.

Franco won the war with Hitler's help. The wounded Orwell returned to London, having witnessed the bloody suppression of the Anarchists and Socialists by the Stalin backed Communist Party, which contributed to the Republican defeat.



Key work: HOMAGE TO CATALONIA

“There are occasions when it pays better to fight and be beaten than not to fight at all.”

— George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*

“If you had asked me why I had joined the militia I should have answered: 'To fight against Fascism,' and if you had asked me what I was fighting for, I should have answered: 'Common decency.'”

— George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*

“The whole experience of being hit by a bullet is very interesting and I think worth describing in detail... They laid me down again while somebody fetched a stretcher. As soon as I knew that the bullet had gone clean through my neck I took it for granted that I was done for. I had never heard of a man or an animal getting a bullet through the middle of the neck and surviving it. The blood was dribbling out of the corner of my mouth. ‘The artery's gone,’ I thought. I wondered how long you last when your carotid artery is cut; not many minutes, presumably. Everything was very blurry. There must have been about two minutes during which I assumed that I was killed.

— George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*

Beware of my partisanship, my mistakes of fact and the distortion inevitably caused by my having seen only one corner of events.”

— George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*

Orwell at the front line
of the Spanish civil War.



JOURNALISM, ESSAYS AND PROPAGANDA ORWELL IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Key work, the long essay:

The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius (1941)

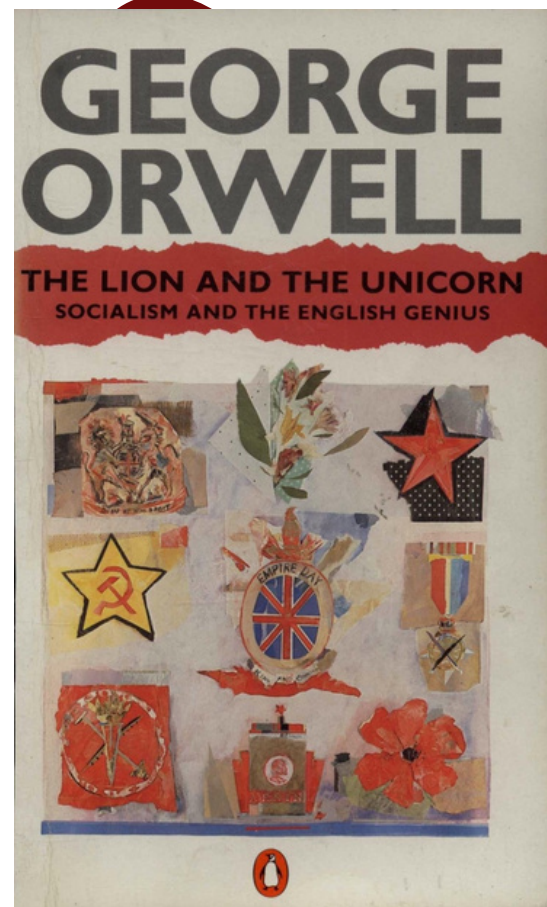
Orwell developed Tuberculosis after returning to Britain and very nearly died. The disease was to kill him ten years later. Unable to fight he joined the BBC to work on propaganda broadcasting. At first he was optimistic that the War would encourage Socialism but became unhappy with the half-truths he was forced to write at the BBC and the lack of political progress. When Hitler invaded the USSR he was appalled that the Western Allies forgave all Stalin's murderous faults (and previous alliance with the Nazis) and came to worship Stalinism, which he had seen at first (bloody) hand in Spain. Orwell stayed in London for most of the War and endured the Nazi bombing.

“The BBC is something between a girls' school and a lunatic asylum, and all we are doing at present is useless, or slightly worse than useless.” - Orwell (1942)

Orwell was to use his experience of working inside the BBC in his novel '1984', and indeed Big Brother is also 'BB' - Brenden Bracken, Churchill's brilliant and domineering Minister of Information and controller of the BBC during the war. Orwell left the BBC to edit the main left wing journal *Tribune* and was far happier.

‘One cannot see the modern world as it is unless one recognizes the overwhelming strength of patriotism, national loyalty. In certain circumstances it can break down, but as a force there is nothing to set beside it. Christianity and international Socialism are as weak as straw in comparison with it. Hitler and Mussolini rose to power in their own countries very largely because they could grasp this fact and their opponents could not’.

— Orwell: The Lion and Unicorn



‘By revolution we become more ourselves, not less. There is no question of stopping short, striking a compromise, salvaging “democracy”, standing still. Nothing ever stands still. We must add to our heritage or lose it, we must grow greater or grow less, we must go forward or backward. I believe in England, and I believe that we shall go forward’.

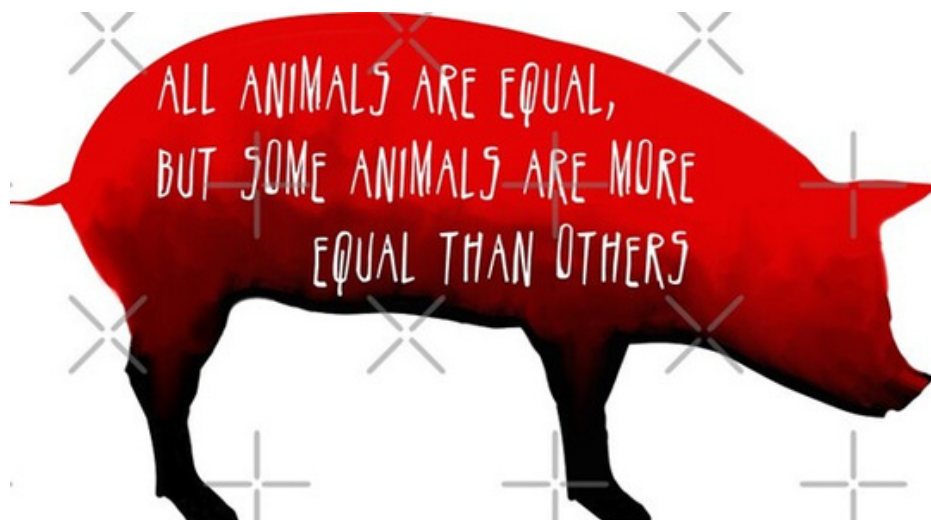
— Orwell: The Lion and Unicorn

Orwell tries to find a balance between patriotism and Socialism, between human liberty and systems of government/authority. And as he states in HOMAGE TO CATALONIA he believes deeply in “common decency”, respect for others and an essential human ‘goodness’ especially among the weak and poor. Perhaps that ‘decency’ is an English tradition, a moderation and sense of fairness that is the best of English culture just as the Empire and the rulers of that empire embody the worst of Britain.

THE LITERARY SUMMIT (1) : ANIMAL FARM

George Orwell conceived of the perfect metaphor for his political and social beliefs in the creation of ANIMAL FARM (1944/45). The book's balance between farmyard fable and crystal clear political analysis is unique. It remains constantly up to date; sadly the Totalitarianism and cynical manipulation of ideology is as present in today's world as in 1944. Right and Left have combined to exploit and pervert the book: Stalin's agents at the BBC managed to delay its publication, the CIA funded the distorted 1950's cartoon version and Orwell himself struggled to delay the US publication until he could ensure that it was not used as a weapon against Socialism. It is often forgotten that the ultimate target of the book is Capitalism as much as Stalinism. Napoleon the Dictator Pig enters into agreements with the Farmers to restore capitalism to Manor Farm. The purpose of his grab for piggy power is to make money. The hens fail to keep their eggs which are sold, even the workhorse Boxer is sold for glue. Dictatorial power is a means to ensure wealth and comfort of the Pigs and their enforcers (dogs). The other Animals foolishly believe they are working for equality and a better future for all. As usual, Orwell seeks a complexity and balance and does not preach.

“THE SEVEN COMMANDMENTS:
WHATEVER GOES UPON TWO LEGS IS AN ENEMY.
WHATEVER GOES UPON FOUR LEGS, OR HAS WINGS, IS A FRIEND.
NO ANIMAL SHALL WEAR CLOTHES.
NO ANIMAL SHALL SLEEP IN A BED.
NO ANIMAL SHALL DRINK ALCOHOL.
NO ANIMAL SHALL KILL ANY OTHER ANIMAL.
ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL.”



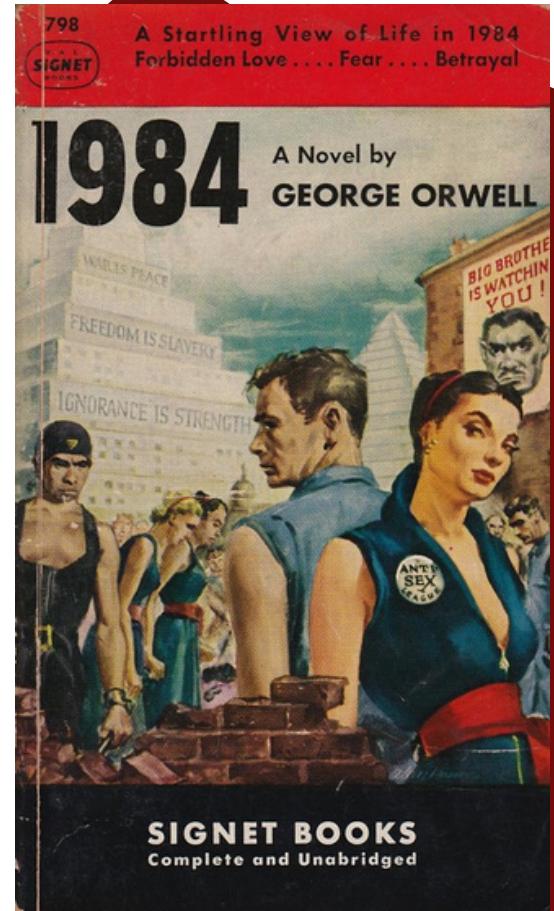
~~The literary summit(2): 1984~~

THE LITERARY SUMMIT (1) :

ANIMAL FARM

Orwell became increasingly ill with tuberculosis after the war ended. He and his wife escaped the smog of ~~London to live in the healthy air of a Scottish~~ Island (Mull) in a remote cottage, where he wrote his last masterpiece: 1984.

The book is a dystopia (a vision of the future as Hell on earth rather than a paradise as in its opposite: Utopia). Orwell explores the ultimate degradation, a world where the Party are no longer committed to ideology but pursue power nakedly and with total cruelty. He uses his experience in propaganda at the BBC to suggest how this might be achieved. The chief means are the destruction and simplification of language: so that words lose their meanings and no one can even think thoughts against the State or the Party. 1984 is a brilliant combination of a thriller and love story set within a dictatorship of the human mind as well as society. The book has entered the realm of myth and the adjective "Orwellian" is used frequently to describe a nightmare state.



Today the phrase “Big brother is watching you” becomes more insidious as we lose control of our digital identity. Further away, we see the total social and political control that Orwell predicted taking place in East Asia. Even language follows Orwell’s pattern as the digital world dumbs down rich and complex language in favour of ‘tweets’, while fake news replaces fact. Antivaxxers and dictators do not bother with any pretence of truthfulness, polluting companies “greenwash” their image and we live in shifting world where our identity is for sale and unorthodox opinion a danger to ourselves. All of this is brilliantly exposed in 1984. It may well be the most significant novel of the last one hundred years, the story with which the future will remember our time, (unless it is banned, as it is in several countries). But this darkest of books also celebrates love even if it fails, as ever Orwell offers a complex and satisfying view of humanity through his writing.

Shortly after finishing 1984 George Orwell died from a lung haemorrhage.

He was 46 years old.

The further a society drifts
from truth the more it will **hate**
those **who speak it.**

– George Orwell



QUIZ GAME

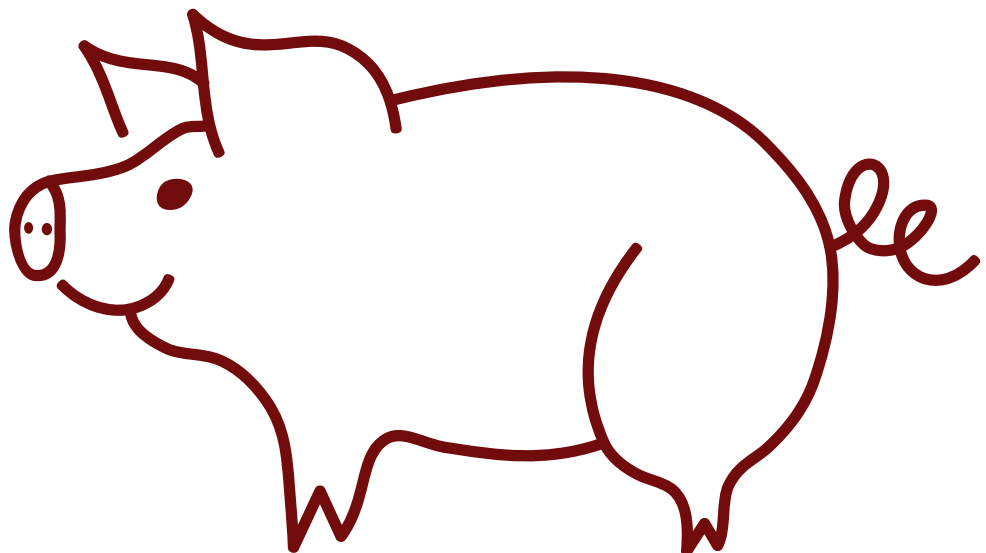
- 1) What was George Orwell's real name:
 - a) George Elliot
 - b) D. H. Lawrence
 - c) Joe Bloggs
 - d) Eric Blair

- 2) In which colony was Orwell a policeman?
 - a) India
 - b) Australia
 - c) Burma
 - d) Kenya

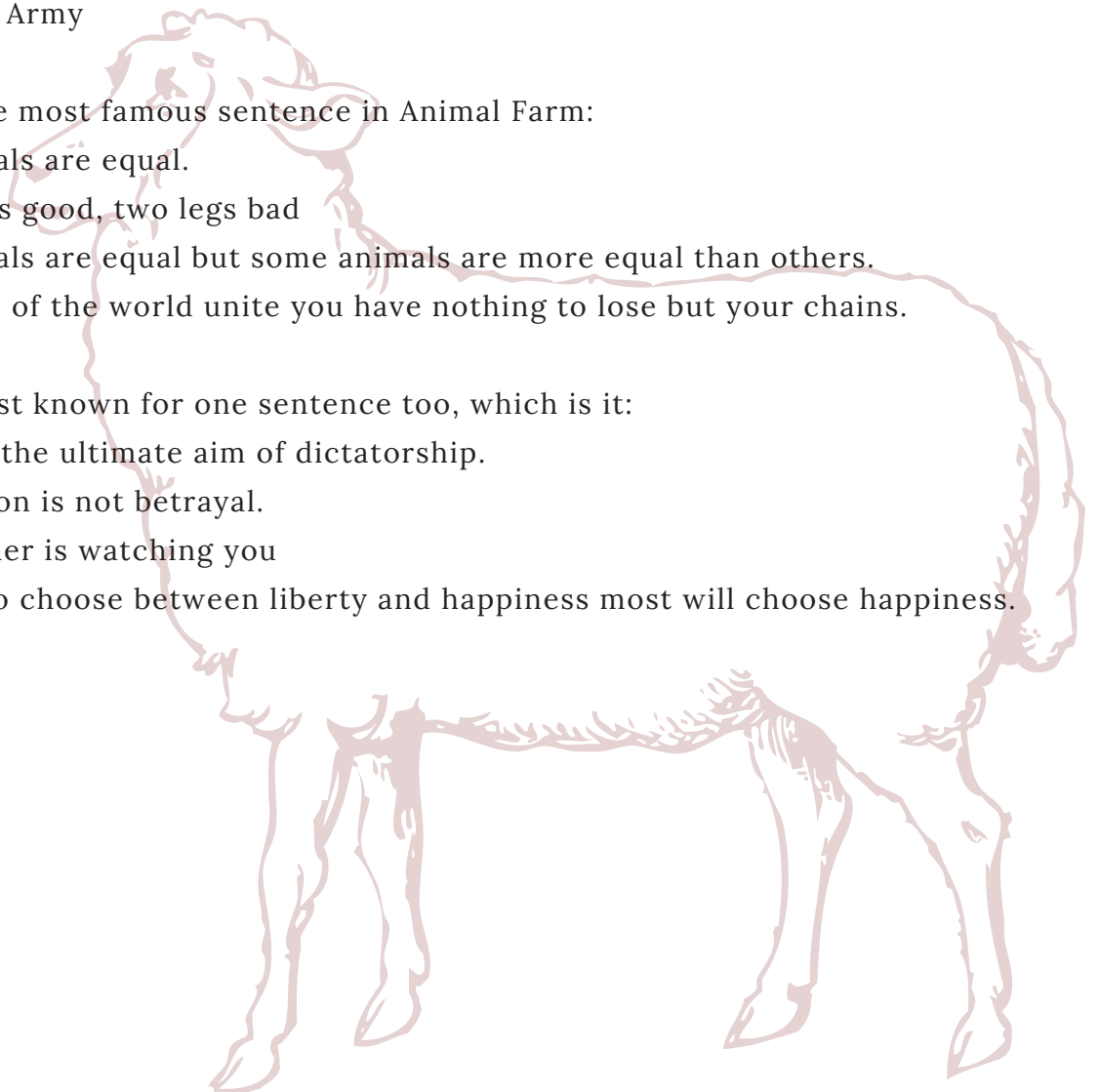
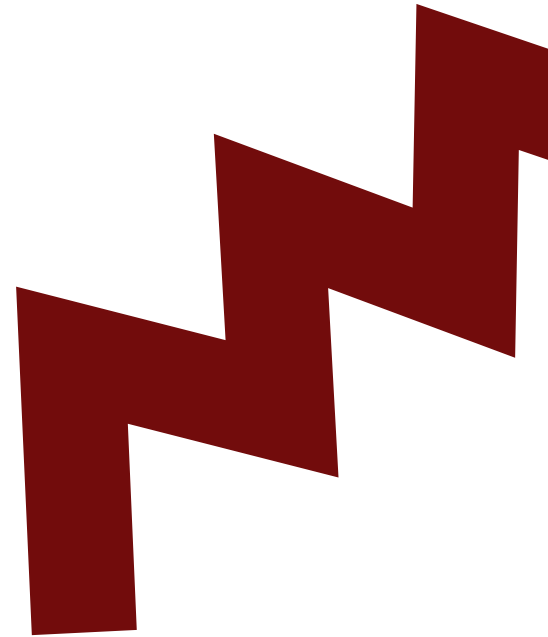
- 3) What job did Orwell take in Paris?
 - a) Journalist
 - b) Street sweeper
 - c) Diplomat
 - d) Dish washer

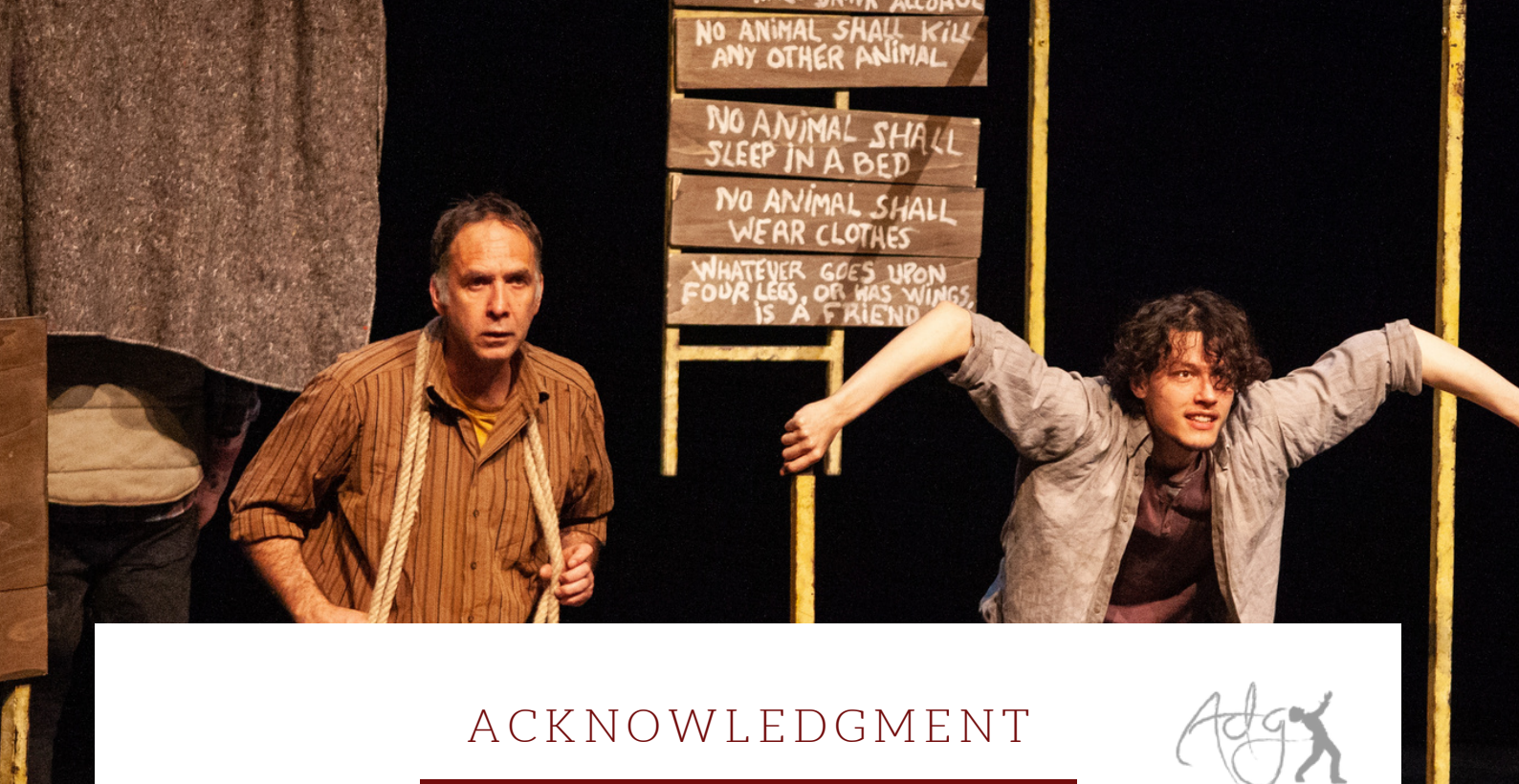
- 4) Orwell wrote a book on poverty called: "The road to Wigan Pier". What is a pier?
 - a) A coal mine
 - b) A dock for boats
 - c) An unemployment office
 - d) A crane for goods

- 5) Orwell served as a soldier and was wounded in what conflict?
 - a) The Spanish Civil War
 - b) The Second World War
 - c) The First world war
 - d) The Russian Revolution



- 6) In the second world war Orwell served as:
- a) A front line soldier
 - b) A spy
 - c) A BBC journalist
 - d) An intelligence officer
- 7) In Animal Farm the Pig Snowball represents:
- a) Stalin
 - b) Hitler
 - c) Franco
 - d) Trotsky
- 8) In Animal Farm the Crow represents:
- a) The secret Police
 - b) The Church
 - c) The Communist Party
 - d) The Red Army
- 9) What is the most famous sentence in Animal Farm:
- a) All animals are equal.
 - b) Four legs good, two legs bad
 - c) All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.
 - d) Workers of the world unite you have nothing to lose but your chains.
- 10) 1984 is best known for one sentence too, which is it:
- a) Power is the ultimate aim of dictatorship.
 - b) Confession is not betrayal.
 - c) Big brother is watching you
 - d) Forced to choose between liberty and happiness most will choose happiness.





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Published by American Drama Group Europe:

Author - Paul Stebbings

Content editor - Federica Parise

Graphic Designer - Domante Tirilyte

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