



George Orwell, Salvador Dalí & Censorship

Intended for advanced English or humanities classes

Note to teachers: Please read Orwell's essay before assigning it to students. Some individuals may find the terms of his argument unsuitable for classroom use.

Goals:

- Students will enter into a historical discussion about the relationships between art, morality and culture.
- Students will engage with issues of censorship and will formulate and articulate their views on the subject.
- Students will examine the structure of an argument.

Description:

Orwell's essay about Dalí's obscenities was itself suppressed on charges of obscenity. Students will read and respond to the essay "Benefit of Clergy: Some Notes on Salvador Dalí" and will examine controversial figures in pop culture from the past 20 years in light of Orwell's ideas.

What to do:

1. Photocopy and distribute "Benefit of Clergy: Some Notes on Salvador Dalí." (The essay is included in *Dickens, Dalí & Others* (1946), which is still in print, and in Orwell's collected essays. It's also available online at www.k1.com/Orwell/index.cgi/work/essays/dali.html and at http://orwell.ru/library/reviews/dali/english/e_dali .) Have students read it as homework.
2. After fielding initial response from the class, either a) plot out the structure of Orwell's argument, or b) begin a progressive discussion of content. The latter could begin and move forward with questions such as: What is Orwell's response to Dalí's work? Why does this trouble him? What is the "Benefit of Clergy" that Orwell names in the title of the essay? Orwell doesn't recommend suppressing Dalí's works; what does he recommend doing instead? What questions does he leave his reader with?
3. Inform your students that Orwell's essay was suppressed when it first went to press. Orwell writes, "'Benefit of Clergy' made a sort of phantom appearance in the *Saturday Book* for 1944. The book was in print when its publishers, Messrs. Hutchinsons, decided that this essay must be suppressed on grounds of obscenity. It was accordingly cut out of

each copy, though for technical reasons it was impossible to remove its title from the table of contents.” As a further part of class discussion, or as a piece of take-home writing, ask your students to respond to this piece of news. Why is it ironic? What might have been the editors’ rationale for doing so? Do your students agree or disagree with the editors’ decision and on what grounds? Judging from what we know of the essay, how would Orwell have responded were he in their place? Were the editors actually hurting their own cause by censoring Orwell’s essay—which argues against the obscenity he sees in Dalí’s work? If both Dalí’s and Orwell’s works are “obscene,” what do they share in common and where do they differ from one another? Have any of your students read Orwell’s novel *1984*? How does this shape their response to these issues?

Further Work:

1. Have your students research Dalí’s life and work to assess the legitimacy of Orwell’s reaction—or over-reaction. Where else was Dalí censored, and on what grounds? Have there been recent artists whose work has been similarly challenged or suppressed? Research these cases. How does their work compare to Dalí’s, and how do the various challenges compare to those leveled against Dalí?
2. Present your students with a list of banned and challenged books and ask for their reactions. Then, have students sign up to do book reports on individual texts. Ask them to address, somewhere in the body of their talk, possible reasons why the text might have been banned or challenged. (Helpful web sites for your reference are the American Library Association at www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/banned/index.cfm , UPenn Library at <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/banned-books.html>, and the ACLU at www.aclu.org/issues/freespeech/bbwind.html .)
3. After making a case for why Dalí’s art is objectionable, Orwell says that it won’t do to suppress it. “The question,” he writes, “is not so much *what* he is as *why* he is like that. . . . The important thing is not to denounce him as a cad who ought to be horsewhipped, or to defend him as a genius who ought to be horsewhipped, or to defend him as a genius who ought not to be questioned, but to find out *why* he exhibits that particular set of aberrations.” After discussing this excerpt from Orwell’s essay, have your students locate, research, and write about some of the more controversial and “denounced” public artists of the past 20 years: Salman Rushdie, Marilyn Manson, Eminem, Madonna, 2 Live Crew, Ice T, etc. Just as Orwell seeks an explanation to why Dalí produces the type of art he does, ask your students to tailor a similar argument about the subject of their choice and the reasons why they exhibit the “aberrations” they do.