

Orwell, G. (2021). *Such, such were the joys: A graphic novel, adapted by Samuel Michael Wilson. Illustrated by Jaime Huxtable. Pluto Press.*

nelson ang^A

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Independent researcher

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Figure 1: Extract from p. 47.

Whoever writes about his childhood must beware of exaggeration and self-pity. (*I do not claim that I was a martyr or that St Cyprian's was a sort of Dotheboys Hall.*) But I should be falsifying my own memories if I did not record that they are largely memories of disgust. (Orwell, 1952)

There is a fair bit of criticism of George Orwell's somewhat autobiographical account of schooling in St Cyprian's. Some decided that he did not take heed of his own advice on exaggeration rendering it no more than a disclaimer. Sam Leith (2014) went as far as to declare the posthumously published work to be "sodden with self-pity", thus "Orwell's account of his prep school years is fascinating but not to be trusted.

Cyril Connolly, who attended St Cyprian's, then Eton together with Orwell and with whom he shared a friendship, recounted his own regret borne from erroneous memories of St Cyprian's and the Wilkeses - headmaster Sambo and his wife Flip. He wrote in an article for the New York Times in 1972:

When I read this account of Orwell's school days, drawn so largely from his and mine, I was at first enchanted as by anything which recalls one's youth; but when I went to rectify some references from old reports and letters, I was nearly sick...

In the case of St. Cyprian's and the Wilkeses whom I had so blithely mocked there is an emotional disturbance. I received a letter of bitter reproach from Mrs. Wilkes after "Enemies of Promise," which I have never dared to reread and when, after the death of my own parents their papers descended to me, I found evidence of the immense trouble she had taken to help me win my scholarship to Eton despite the misgivings of my father which had to be overcome.

The Wilkeses were true friends, and I had caricatured their mannerisms, developed for dealing with generations of boys, and I had read mercenary motives into much that was just enthusiasm. What they would have made of Orwell's more severe strictures, published in England only after his death in 1950, I have no idea, I hope they never saw them (Connolly, 1972).

This is an interesting book to review because there is the book, graphical no less, and then there is the original essay. Do I then cast my two pennies upon Orwell's words or Jaime Huxtable's glorious illustrations or the adroitness of Sean Michael Wilson's adaptation? In order to preserve the integrity and wholeness of the endeavour, I believe I need to do all of the above, over two convenient sections: (i) the essay and (ii) the book.

I draw from an online version of the essay (Orwell, 1952) to compare against the book; words found in the essay but omitted from the book are in parenthesis and italicised. Illustrations from the book are then reproduced for ease of study.

The essay: An Orwellian narration of Bourdieusian habitus and capital

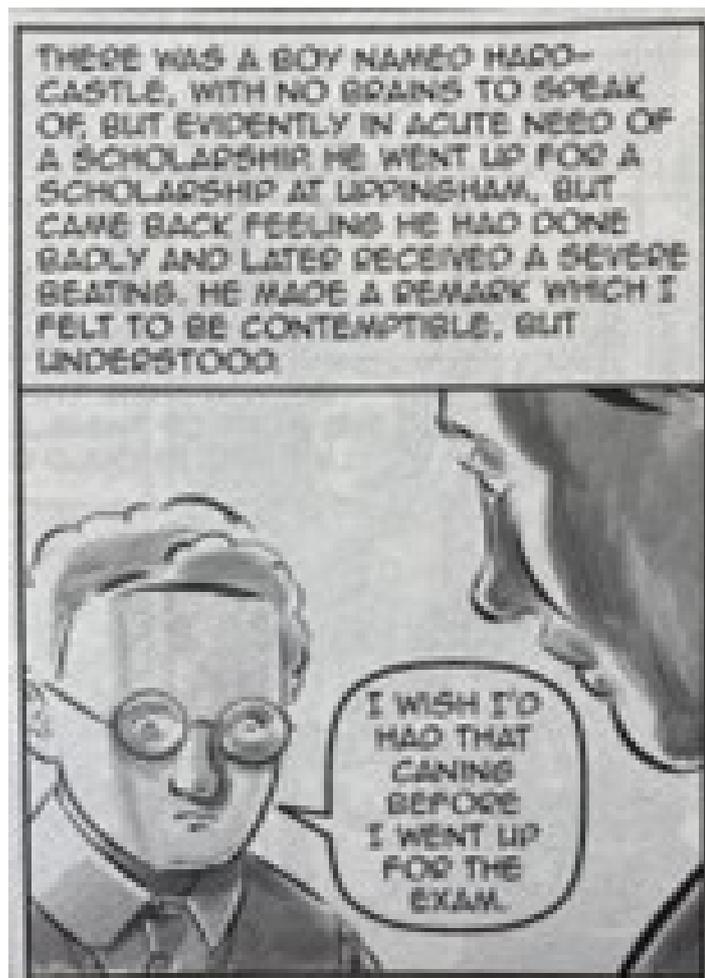


Figure 2: Extract from p. 27.

There was a boy named Hardcastle (*Beacham*), with no brains to speak of, but evidently in acute need of a scholarship. (*Sambo was flogging him towards the goal as one might do with a foundered horse.*) He went up for a scholarship at Uppingham, came back with a consciousness of having done badly, and (a day or two) later received a severe beating (*for idleness*). 'I wish I'd had that caning before I went up for the exam', he made (*said sadly* —) a remark which I felt to be contemptible, but (*which I perfectly well*) understood (Orwell, 1952).

(The boys of the scholarship class were not all treated alike. If a boy were the son of rich parents to whom the saving of fees was not all-important, Sambo would goad him along in a comparatively fatherly way, with jokes and digs in the ribs and perhaps an occasional tap with the pencil, but no hair-pulling and no caning. It was the poor but 'clever' boys who suffered. Our brains were a gold-mine in which he had sunk money, and the dividends must be squeezed out of us. Long before I had grasped the nature of my financial relationship with Sambo, I had been made to understand that I was not on the same footing as most of the other boys.) In effect there were three castes in the school. There

was the minority with an aristocratic or millionaire background, there were the children of the ordinary suburban rich, who made up the bulk of the school, and there were a few underlings like myself, the sons of clergyman, Indian civil servants, struggling widows and the like (Orwell, 1952).

Very quickly into the essay, Bourdieu's construct of habitus was screaming in my mind. The doxa of wallowing as being well-deserved and accepting that such treatment is rightfully reserved for those "not on the same footing" predispose the dominated to know their place. This misrecognition limits the underlings' agency so that the hierarchy that places them at the bottom to begin with, can reproduce itself.

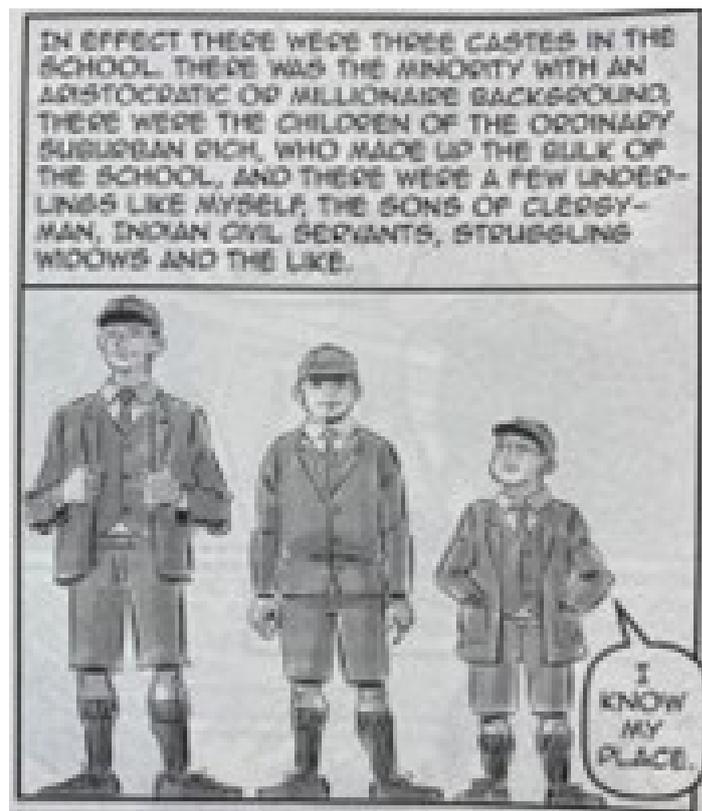


Figure 3: Extracted from p. 28.

The habitus is the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g. of language, economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions, in the organisms (which one can, if one wishes, call individuals) lastingly subjected to the same conditionings, and hence placed in the same material conditions of existence (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 85).

... all human action is situated within determining structures that are not readily available to everyday consciousness (Swartz, 1997, p. 57).

The habitus affords irregularities in and unpredictability of agents' actions whilst concurrently limiting these possibilities such that they tend to reproduce existing social milieux (Reay, 2004). Agents exclude practices that are alien to their habitus and fail to recognise the resultant loss of freedom. Forms of agency are not equally possible and impossible because capital is constantly accumulated and converted from one form to another within an "accumulated history" (Bourdieu, 1997, p.46). Bourdieu argues that there can only be limitless possibilities and equal opportunity if moments in history are unique and independent of one another; a society that is devoid of accumulation or inheritance of capital so that no agent is favoured in the competition. However, today's availability of resources that are needed for desired actions is the result of yesterday's endowment, there can be no true competition where all outcomes are equally possible. Hence actions cannot be disinterested.

Bourdieu conceptualises capital as resources that are "objects of struggle" (Swartz, 1997, p. 74). He sees the forms of capital as material (economic), cultural, symbolic, and social. Bourdieu proffered that there exists a "political economy of culture" (Swartz, 1997, p. 67) within which apparent altruistic actions beget more cultural capital. This noneconomic form of capital can be expended in return for power and domination, enabled by resources such as language, aesthetics, "cultural awareness", and "educational credentials" (Swartz, 1997, p. 75). However, such violence is often misrecognised as virtues, thus legitimised and justified. Cultural capital then functions as social capital.

Social capital, put simply, is "membership in a group" (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 51). The volume of social capital that one possesses is dependent on one's ability to mobilise the other members in the network, dependent on "the power to impose (his/her) will on others". This power is in turn dependent on the volume of their other forms of capital - both economic and cultural - which the aristocrats and rich suburban castes own in large amounts. Consequently, the underlings should not confuse their enrolment in St Cyprian's as membership. Rather, they need to know their place and be grateful no less.

Bourdieu's constructs are not an allusion that true agency is not possible. It is a treatise that fully rational decisions and subsequent actions that are free of interest are not immediately available as "agents are differently positioned to be reflexive about their practice" (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008, p. 731). Emancipation lies in the possibility of an awakening; a Freirean conscientisation to empower the overcoming of "an irrational fear of freedom. A fear that those who possess it are reluctant to admit to, or otherwise unconscious of, and misrecognising the status quo as self-existent, to be preserved and protected" (Ang, 2021, p. 74). The imperative of severe caning in securing scholarships is not self-existent. Dialogue underpins this awakening, which is rendered impossible by St Cyprian's deeply rooted banking pedagogy that denied students their voices. Orwell's own conscientisation is evident in this essay and his voice regained resonates till this day.

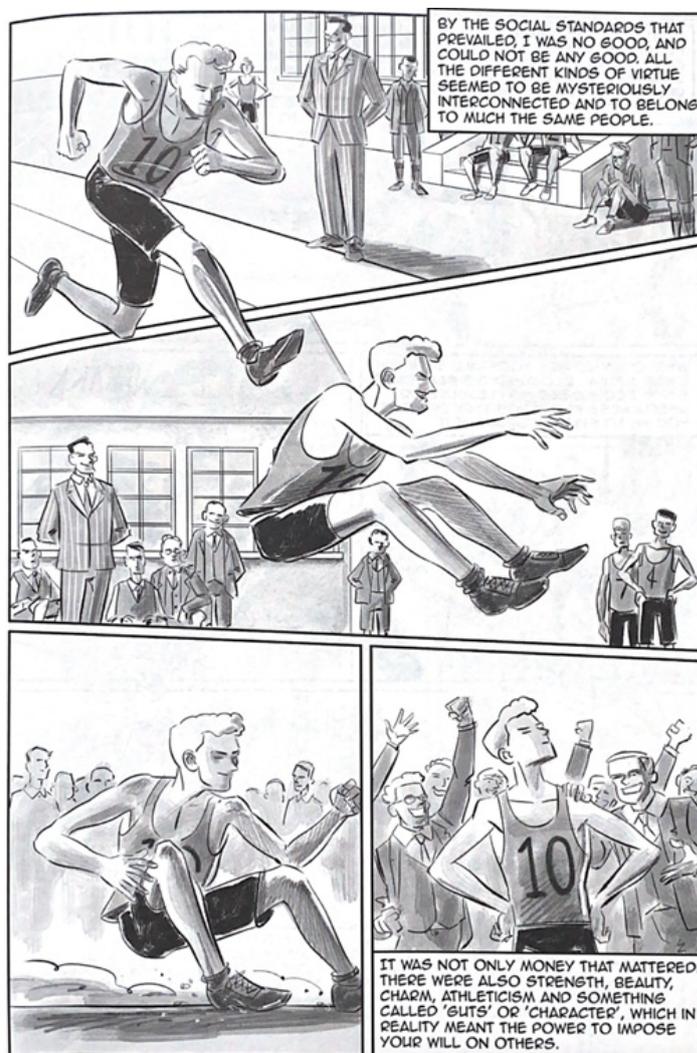


Figure 4: pp. 87-88.

By the social standards that prevailed (*about me*), I was no good, and could not be any good. But all the different kinds of virtue seemed to be mysteriously interconnected and to belong to much the same people. It was not only money that mattered: there were also strength, beauty, charm, athleticism and something called 'guts' or 'character', which in reality meant the power to impose your will on others. I did not possess any of these qualities (Orwell, 1952).

The book: Dead Poets Society meets Harry Potter?

Very quickly into the book, Mr Keating (Robin Williams) was screaming a barbaric yelp in my mind. I remember my school had arranged for all Secondary Three students to watch *Dead Poets Society*, going as far as hiring the entire screening hall in the cinema. That also happened to be the year I came to know George Orwell, the name, because we read *Animal Farm* for English Literature. As I write this, I still cannot figure out what the English department was thinking. Did they think that we would be inspired by the movie to score distinctions in the literature examination? Whilst their intention escapes me, the irony could not, even if it wanted to. I saw so much of my school in Welton Academy and concluded that I was stuck in a reincarnation of the *Animal*

Farm. It is no coincidence that Beasts of England can be sung to the melody of our school song. You could say my crusade for emancipation began at 15.

I do not believe that my generation fantasised about attending boarding school because "Hellton" hardly came across as appealing. Hogwarts though is a totally different story for the later generations. How many grew up wishing they could run into the wall at platform nine and three-quarters? Perhaps this graphic novel by Wilson and Huxtable might help redress the imbalance, especially if it gets made into a movie! The storyboard has already been completed and characters fleshed out by Huxtable's beautiful illustrations; without which, I do not believe I would have connected with Orwell's original words as vividly. It does make me wonder if Leith would have had more sympathy for young Eric Arthur Blair had he read this book instead of the essay. The screenplay is nearly complete too though Wilson may have a tad more to do. He set out to stay true to Orwell's essay hence his very judicious adaptation. For the silver screen, he might unleash a little bit more of his own creativity. One last thing... Warner Bros, Disney, Universal, are you reading this?

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