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Research Article

# The Social Life of *Animal Farm* through Robert Escarpit's Sociology of Literature

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## Abstract

This study examines how institutions shaped the production, distribution, and consumption of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Using Robert Escarpit's sociology of literature, it conducts a qualitative documentary analysis of reproduced correspondence, authorial essays, contemporary criticism, bibliographical records, educational documents, and relevant scholarship. The analysis concentrates on publication and early circulation in 1944–1954, with selected later examples of translation and educational use. Publisher rejection reveals the interaction of literary judgment and political acceptability; Cold War adaptation shows how sponsorship could reshape the work circulating to audiences. Reception evidence demonstrates disagreement among interpreters, while examination documents establish institutional use rather than uniform reader responses. The findings suggest that literary persistence depends on repeated institutional selection and reinterpretation across the three processes. The study contributes an integrated account of these relationships while acknowledging the absence of representative readership data and comprehensive sales records.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Animal Farm* presents a problem of literary mediation: how does a politically contentious manuscript become a work selected, translated, adapted, and taught by different institutions? The novella's social history cannot be explained solely by identifying its political allegory. Its passage to audiences also depended on decisions about what could be published, which versions should circulate, and how readers were invited to interpret them. Robert Escarpit's sociology of literature provides the framework for examining these relationships.

Escarpit (1971) organizes the social study of literature around production, distribution, and consumption. Production concerns the creation and material realization of a work; distribution concerns the institutions and channels that bring it to audiences; consumption concerns readers and their uses of literature. These categories are connected: publishers anticipate audiences when selecting manuscripts, intermediaries shape access and presentation, and subsequent interpretations can provide grounds for new editions or adaptations. This article uses these relationships as analytical questions rather than treating the three categories as a self-sufficient explanation of literary success.

The historical starting point is the difficulty of publishing *Animal Farm* during Britain's wartime alliance with the Soviet Union. Eliot's rejection letter of 13 July 1944 and Orwell's proposed preface document different ways in which political judgment entered publication decisions (Eliot, 1944; Orwell, 1972). The novella appeared through Secker & Warburg in 1945 (Orwell, 1945). Its later appropriation for a CIA-supported animated film presents a contrasting case in which political interest supported cultural production (Leab, 2007). The contrast raises a question about changing institutional evaluations, not simply the eventual triumph of a controversial book.

Existing studies offer several points of entry. Atmadja (2024) reads the novella through class domination, identifying coercion and incentives as mechanisms of hegemonic power. Sari et al. (2025) examine political allegory and the manipulation of language and truth. These studies illuminate power within the narrative. Other scholarship already addresses its social history: Rodden (1989) examines the making of Orwell's literary reputation, while Leab (2005, 2006, 2007) investigates the filmmakers, governmental involvement, and production of the animated adaptation. Mowafy and Mohamed (2023)

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show how selected Arabic translations use paratexts to frame the novella politically. It would therefore be inaccurate to claim that publication, circulation, or reception has been neglected altogether.

The contribution proposed here is a focused synthesis of these strands through Escarpit's framework. Darnton's (1982) communications-circuit approach reinforces the need to connect the different participants in book history, while Griswold et al. (2005) distinguish reading as a social practice from simple access to texts. Together, these perspectives help specify the article's narrower research problem: how institutional mediation links the conditions of publication to the versions and interpretations available to readers. Escarpit remains the organizing framework; book-history and reading scholarship clarify its application rather than supply interchangeable theories.

Three research questions guide the analysis. How did author–publisher relations, political judgments, and material constraints affect production? How did commercial intermediaries, translation, and political sponsorship organize distribution? What do documented reviews and educational practices reveal about consumption, and where does the available evidence stop short of demonstrating readers' responses? The argument is that *Animal Farm*'s persistence involves repeated institutional selection and reinterpretation, with unequal power to determine access and preferred meanings.

## METHOD

This study uses qualitative documentary analysis rather than an empirical survey of readers or a comprehensive archival history. Its core historical focus is 1944–1954, from the documented rejection of the manuscript to the animated adaptation. Selected later evidence comprises a study of Arabic translations published in 2023, an AQA examination paper from 2020, and AQA's online specification consulted on 21 October 2026. These examples are purposive comparisons, not a continuous record of worldwide circulation from 1945 to the present.

The primary documentary materials are Eliot's 1944 letter in a publicly reproduced transcription, Orwell's essays and prefaces reproduced by the Orwell Foundation, Soule's 1946 review reproduced by its original periodical, and AQA's own specification and examination paper. They provide evidence of particular editorial judgments, authorial explanations, critical interpretations, and prescribed educational practices. Orwell's 1947 preface survives in an English back-translation from Ukrainian, a transmission limitation identified by the Foundation. The 1945 novella is the literary object, not evidence of its readership. Publication history and readership are research topics, not primary sources.

Secondary evidence includes Leab's (1997) collection-based exhibition catalogue, scholarship on the film adaptation, studies of Orwell's reputation and translated paratexts, and research on literary institutions and reading. The catalogue is used as a documented account of surviving editions, not as a claim that the present study inspected those physical copies. Similarly, CIA involvement is discussed through published scholarship; no independent consultation of classified records, publisher archives, or the Orwell Archive is claimed.

Sources were selected for their direct relevance to a research question, identifiable authorship or institutional provenance, and traceable publication details. Targeted searches combined *Animal Farm* with publication, Eliot, CIA, adaptation, reception, curriculum, and translation. Primary texts and institutional records were prioritized for specific actions or interpretations; scholarly studies supplied historical context. Unattributed or weakly supported contemporary ban claims were excluded. Where evidence supported only a narrower statement, the statement was narrowed: a print run is not treated as sales, a curricular listing is not a measure of readership, and a political sponsor's intention is not evidence of audience persuasion. This is a purposive documentary study, not a systematic review with an exhaustive search protocol.

The analysis identifies the actor, date or period, institutional setting, action, and evidential limits of each example. Production indicators are editorial acceptance or rejection, authorial purpose, and material publishing constraints. Distribution indicators are publishing channels, translation, sponsorship, and changes of medium. Consumption indicators are identifiable interpretations in reviews and institutionally prescribed uses in education. Adaptation belongs to both production and distribution

because it creates a new cultural product and another route to audiences. Reviews and curricula are analyzed separately because the former record expressed judgments whereas the latter prescribe reading activities. The final synthesis compares these mechanisms across the three categories without inferring unobserved sales growth or uniform reader responses.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Production of *Animal Farm*

*Animal Farm*'s first publication in 1945 was the outcome of both editorial selection and material constraint. Leab's (1997, item 19a) exhibition catalogue records Secker & Warburg's acceptance in October 1944 and a delay associated with the small publisher's allocation of rationed paper. It identifies 4,500 copies as the initial print run, not sales within six weeks. The distinction matters: copies manufactured establish the scale of an initial publishing commitment, whereas sales would require evidence of purchases. The present analysis therefore treats the figure as a production indicator and makes no inference about how quickly those copies were read.

Eliot's letter is particularly revealing because literary approval did not lead to acceptance. Writing for Faber & Faber on 13 July 1944, he acknowledged the skill of the fable while rejecting its political standpoint. He described that standpoint as Trotskyist and found it unpersuasive. He also indicated that another director agreed with him (Eliot, 1944). The document records a contemporaneous editorial decision, not a later admission by Eliot. Nor does it establish that Faber had previously published Orwell. Those distinctions prevent the publication history from becoming a retrospective story unsupported by the correspondence.

The letter suggests that publisher power operated through a distinction between literary competence and a message the firm considered worth endorsing. Eliot explicitly denied that prudence alone should prevent publication if a publisher believed in the work's position (Eliot, 1944). Wartime sensitivity is consequently an important context, but it does not exhaust the documented reasoning. In Escarpit's terms, a completed manuscript did not become a publicly available book through authorial intention alone: an institution had to judge it publishable and commit resources to it. The rejection illustrates the authority to withhold that commitment even while recognizing artistic merit.

Orwell's proposed preface supplies a related but distinct perspective. It recounts a publisher's withdrawal after consultation with the Ministry of Information and emphasizes the pressure of prevailing opinion on publishers and editors (Orwell, 1972). This is the author's account of the obstacles he encountered; it should not be equated with an official order banning the book. The evidence supports a distinction between informal discouragement, editorial refusal, and statutory prohibition. Each can restrict access, but they involve different actors and require different kinds of documentation.

Authorial purpose must likewise be distinguished from subsequent institutional appropriation. In *Why I Write*, Orwell (1946) presents *Animal Farm* as an attempt to combine artistic and political purposes. His Ukrainian preface locates the work in his opposition to the Soviet political myth while explaining his own political development (Orwell, 1947). These statements establish how Orwell represented his intentions; they do not settle every legitimate interpretation of the novella. The production analysis thus identifies a negotiation among authorial purpose, editorial conviction, and material capacity. Political constraints shaped that negotiation, but the available evidence does not justify assigning an identical motive to every publisher who declined the manuscript.

### Distribution of *Animal Farm*

Distribution involved organizations that could assemble an audience as well as manufacture books. Leab's (1997, item 19b) catalogue documents Harcourt, Brace's American edition in 1946 and the Book-of-the-Month Club's selection. These were identifiable institutional channels, not evidence that all American readers interpreted the book similarly. The distinction is central to the analysis: editorial promotion increases opportunities for encounter, while the character of reception must be established

separately. A distributor can recommend a work and frame its significance without controlling the judgments subsequently formed about it.

The 1954 animated adaptation illustrates a more interventionist relationship between circulation and political purpose. Leab's research places the film within American governmental cultural activity and examines the work of John Halas, Joy Batchelor, and producer Louis de Rochemont (Leab, 2005, 2006). His later monograph documents CIA influence using archival material, including production records and agency documents (Leab, 2007). This scholarship provides a firmer basis than informal web commentary for identifying politically supported adaptation. It does not, by itself, justify attributing every translation or international edition of *Animal Farm* to the CIA.

Adaptation is therefore treated here as both renewed production and a distribution channel. The film required another set of producers and decisions about how the narrative would be represented; it also made a version of the story available through cinema. Leab (2007) traces political intervention in that process, including the shaping of the film's message. Analytically, the object being circulated was no longer simply an unchanged book. Political sponsorship could influence which version reached an audience and how it was positioned. Whether viewers accepted the preferred interpretation remains a separate reception question.

Translation provides a further example of mediation. The Ukrainian edition of 1947 occasioned a preface in which Orwell introduced himself to an audience he did not presume to know (Orwell, 1947). This paratext demonstrates an attempt to establish a relationship with a new readership; it does not record that readership's actual responses. In a different historical and linguistic setting, Mowafy and Mohamed (2023) analyze selected Arabic translations and identify political framing in their accompanying paratexts. Their findings concern translators' and publishers' interpretive interventions. They should not be generalized into a single response shared by Arabic-speaking readers.

These examples show why distribution is more than geographical movement. Selection by a book club, sponsorship of a film, and framing through a translated edition each organize access while proposing a way of understanding the work. The relevant comparison is between their institutional mechanisms, not an assumption that they form one centrally directed campaign. The evidence also counsels against a general inventory of countries where the novella is supposedly still banned. No verified current country-by-country censorship dataset is available in this study. Its analysis of restriction is confined to documented wartime publication obstacles, while later distribution is examined through specific publishing, adaptation, and translation cases.

## Consumption of *Animal Farm*

Consumption requires evidence of use or interpretation beyond the existence of editions. Griswold et al. (2005) conceptualize reading as a social practice, which makes it necessary to distinguish access, prescribed activity, and expressed response. The present evidence permits a limited comparison among a contemporary critic's interpretation, an institutional recommendation, educational assessment, and scholarly accounts of translated framing. It cannot establish the demographic composition, size, or shared beliefs of a global readership.

Soule's review in The New Republic on 2 September 1946 supplies direct evidence of a particular critical response. He questioned the fit between the allegory and Soviet history and found the political implications insufficiently clear. He also distinguished the book's anticipated commercial success from his unfavorable assessment of its literary execution (Soule, 1946). This is evidence of disagreement about how the work should be understood, not a neutral description of its message. Soule's speculation about what book-club readers might think was not based on a reported survey and is not treated here as readership data.

A contrasting response appears in the Book-of-the-Month Club's endorsement, documented in Leab's (1997, item 19b) catalogue through Christopher Morley's promotional assessment. Read alongside Soule, this demonstrates that recommendation and critical resistance coexisted. The point is not to quantify positive and negative opinion from two instances. It is to show that institutional

circulation and interpretive agreement are different outcomes. A work may receive prominent promotion while remaining disputed by a contemporary reader with a public platform.

Educational consumption is supported by a bounded institutional example. AQA's GCSE English Literature specification lists *Animal Farm* among the modern prose options and requires study of the whole selected text (AQA, n.d.). Its November 2020 paper asks candidates to examine Napoleon's interest in power or relationships between humans and animals (AQA, 2020, questions 17–18). These documents establish an authorized place in assessment and specify interpretive tasks. They do not show how many schools selected the novella, what students believed about it, or whether teaching produced agreement with Orwell's politics. This case supports a specific claim about examination-based use, rather than general adoption across British and American schools and universities.

The examination example shows how an institution can turn literary interpretation into a recurrent educational practice. By choosing themes and requiring textual argument, assessment directs attention to particular features of the narrative. This is institutional use rather than direct observation of classroom experience. It nevertheless gives a more precise consumption indicator than mere availability in bookstores. To establish actual student reception, a subsequent study would need classroom observation, interviews, or appropriately sampled examination responses.

The Arabic translation study offers a different form of evidence. Mowafy and Mohamed (2023) identify efforts to privilege political readings through editorial and translatorial framing. This demonstrates interpretive work performed by intermediaries who are themselves readers and who then address further audiences. It does not establish the effectiveness of that framing among ordinary readers. The comparison with AQA is therefore limited but useful: both translation paratexts and assessment questions organize conditions of interpretation, although their audiences, historical settings, and purposes differ.

Taken together, these cases support a modest conclusion about consumption: *Animal Farm* has been interpreted, recommended, and assigned in identifiable institutional contexts, and those activities do not yield a single uncontested meaning. The evidence does not support claims that every controversy renewed demand or that adaptation necessarily increased book readership. Keeping these distinctions visible allows consumption to remain an analytical category rather than a synonym for longevity or fame.

### Connecting Production Distribution and Consumption

The three processes meet at moments when a reader also exercises institutional authority. Eliot's interpretation helped determine a publication decision; the book club's evaluation supported distribution; translators' readings shaped new paratexts; and educational selection prescribed later encounters with the novel. These examples make the relationship recursive rather than simply chronological. Interpretation can precede publication, accompany distribution, or generate conditions for future reading. Darnton's (1982) circuit and Escarpit's (1971) framework help make these connections visible without treating every participant as equally powerful.

The contrast between wartime rejection and Cold War adaptation is especially instructive. Political judgments could obstruct one route to publication and support another cultural product in a different setting. It would be too strong to infer that censorship itself extended the work's life, or that educational selection demonstrably caused republication, without further records. The supported contribution is more precise: institutional judgments repeatedly reorganized the relationship between the work, its available forms, and its intended audiences. Sales ledgers, publishing correspondence, and reception studies would be needed to measure the commercial and interpretive feedback from those decisions.

## CONCLUSION

*Animal Farm*'s social history shows that production, distribution, and consumption are linked by institutions that evaluate both literary form and political meaning. Editorial rejection and material

constraints affected the book's initial realization; commercial selection, adaptation, and translation organized later routes of access; and reviews and educational documents reveal particular interpretations and uses. The study's contribution is to connect these mechanisms within Escarpit's framework while distinguishing intended audiences from demonstrated responses.

The analysis remains limited by its purposive, predominantly English-accessible documentary corpus. It uses published reproductions and secondary scholarship rather than new research in publisher archives, and it lacks comprehensive sales records, library lending series, and representative reader-response data. The reception examples are selective, and the Arabic case is mediated through an existing study rather than a new analysis of the translated editions. Future research could compare political novels across publishing systems, reconstruct specific translation histories, or investigate classroom reception directly.

The case therefore supports a qualified account of literary persistence. Readers help sustain a work through interpretation and reuse, but the capacity to make an interpretation widely available is unevenly distributed. Publishers, political sponsors, translators, critics, and educational authorities can give some readings greater institutional reach than others. Escarpit's categories are most productive here when used to examine those relationships and their evidential limits, rather than to infer worldwide influence from continued availability alone.

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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