

Teaching Module:

Meet Me on the Barricades

Canada and the Spanish Civil War

March 2019

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Background and Context

Introduction to the Novel

Meet Me on the Barricades recounts a few days in the life of P. Herbert Simpson, a middle-aged, weak-hearted oboist with the New York Symphony Orchestra and leftist fellow traveller. Simpson is also subject to wild hallucinations that are sometimes daydreams, sometimes drunken delirium, and sometimes intricate dreams while asleep. In his hallucinations, he escapes his unrewarding marriage into a passionate fantasy of a Russian girlfriend, and escapes his day job in the symphony to fight on the front lines of the Spanish Civil War. Harrison's novel is a unique book, significant for its self-consciousness as both a modernist novel and a political document. *Meet Me on the Barricades* is a densely allusive text that layers global politics, revolutionary theory, classical music, literary theory, world history, and anti-Stalinism.

The Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War, which lasted from 17 July 1936 to 1 April 1939, was a conflict between the Spanish Republic and a coalition of right-wing rebels, the Nationalists. The war was a cause celebre for leftists around the world, and in *Meet Me on the Barricades* is an important subject of Simpson's phantasies and daydreams. The Republic, which had democratically elected a new government after the abdication of King Alfonso XIII in 1931, was faced with a number of ultra-conservative political groups who perceived the dissolution of the monarchy as a destruction of Spanish national identity. Francisco Franco led a military coup d'état in July 1936. Those loyal to the Republic attempted to hold Spain against the Nationalists. Despite the determination of the Republicans and the thousands of international volunteers that joined their cause against fascism, the war ended in a Nationalist victory, and Franco went on to rule Spain as a dictatorship until his death in 1975.

Charles Yale Harrison

Charles Yale Harrison (1898-1954) was an author, journalist, and a leading figure of the literary left in New York in the 1930s. He was born in Philadelphia, but was raised in Montreal. He began working as a journalist at 16, but soon after he enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force and was shipped off to Europe. His experience in the First World War inspired his best-known novel, [*Generals Die in Bed*](#) (1930).

He eventually moved to New York, where he worked as a journalist and public relations consultant. Though he seemingly never joined the Communist Party, Harrison was active in some of its cultural organizations, and worked as a contributing editor for the renowned New

York-based magazine *New Masses*. He was involved in the founding of the United States's John Reed Clubs in 1929—an organization named for the radical US journalist who covered the Russian Revolution. The clubs were put together by the Communist Party to provide space for politically inclined writers to meet and collaborate. He was later expelled from the clubs, apparently for openly criticizing the USSR's treatment of Leon Trotsky's daughter (Ward 361).

Harrison is best known for his 1930 anti-war novel *Generals Die in Bed*, which follows a Canadian soldier fighting in World War I. *Generals Die in Bed* was controversial for its frank depictions of violence and its unsavoury view of the Canadian and British military: it features Canadian soldiers looting the French town of Arras and committing war crimes against German soldiers. There is little heroism to be found in this work, as soldiers of both sides prove themselves to be both brutal and cowardly, and commanding officers are represented as manipulative and remorseless. *Generals Die in Bed* was a deeply serious, stripped down and modernist work, which contrasts sharply with the satire of *Meet Me on the Barricades*. But even within *Meet Me on the Barricades*, there are moments when satire gives way to something unfunny, and Harrison's anti-war commitments come to the foreground.

Harrison struggled with a heart condition throughout his life, and died quite young.

Sources: [Library and Archives Canada: Service Record](#)

Popular front

Closely related to questions concerning war and left wing politics were debates about the the strategy of the Popular Front, whereby any anti-fascist organizations and political parties would suspend rivalries in order to focus on defeating fascism.

The increasing threat of fascism in the 1930s opened debates on whether socialists and Communists would collaborate with centrists and liberals. The debates were heated and left some feeling as though the left had betrayed their principles by postponing their revolutionary ambitions and that they were putting the world on course for another imperialist world war. The prospect of a new world war gave pause, as the First World War caused unprecedented death and destruction on and around the battlefield and political repression at home. These concerns are highlighted in *Meet Me on the Barricades* when Harrison points out the irony of the introduction of domestic fascism under the pretenses of fighting fascism abroad (Harrison 82).

1930s Print Culture

In many ways, this is a text about reading, and specifically about the importance of reading and publishing to leftist politics. Both Simpson's status as an armchair revolutionary and the form of the book rely on the existence of a substantial and transnational leftist print culture. Presses either in or associated with the Soviet Union produced texts in a variety of languages for readerships around the world, covering topics including Marxist theory, political

analysis, and literary theory. Relatively cheap publications introduced the basics of socialist thought or considered a particular political situation. As the *Canada and the Spanish Civil War* website repository makes clear, Spain was a frequent topic of consideration for these radical and/or labour publishers. There were newspapers and publications specifically for diasporic communities such as Jewish, Ukrainian or Finnish immigrants, and these publications were often associated with political organizations. These texts were circulated among the working class and intellectuals, introducing people to new, radical ideas, but also building a leftist literary and print culture beyond English-language texts, resulting in a more accessible leftist literary scene.

Harrison himself was intimately familiar with leftist print culture: he worked extensively in left wing publishing organizations, including for the vanguard magazine *New Masses*, and he wrote pamphlets for the general public to inform about the need for public housing.

Simpson's reading choices—from news briefs to the section of the history of the October Revolution that he revisits so often as a kind of psychic balm—mark him distinctly as an “armchair revolutionar[y],” who is happy to read and simply *imagine* himself deeply involved (Harrison 21). The idea that those comfortably middle class socialists like Simpson were daydreamers, and of no help to the revolution, was a common criticism. Avrom Yanovsky

echoes this critique in a cartoon titled “Intellectualiegentsia,” published in a 1935 edition of the Communist-run arts and culture magazine *Masses* [Figure 1]. The panel depicts a man reading the democratic socialist magazine *Canadian Forum* while smoking in a chair flanked by a bottle of gin and a shelf full of Kant, Wilde, and Huxley. This scene is framed by a cloud, under which a crowd of the masses marches carrying banners reading “class struggle.”



Seated in the clouds, toying with posy-decorated literature, our highbrow hero regales himself with non-essentials. He is away above the class struggle—or so he believes.”

Harrison similarly uses the existing leftist print scene to build satirical critiques of the left, discussed below.

Meet Me on the Barricades

Critical Summary

Meet Me on the Barricades charts the dreams, fantasies, and mundane real life of P. Herbert Simpson, a timid oboe-player who imagines a rich, radical life for himself. His fantasies are challenged by other leftists and his own physical and mental limitations.

Key Figures

The following figures are prominent either in the politics of the 1930s or in the text.

Vladimir Lenin: (1870-1924) the leader of the Bolshevik Party during the Russian Revolution, later the first president of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). He has been recognized as the most important intellectual inheritor of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and for putting the ideas of communist theory into practice. After his death in 1924, he came to be effectively canonized by others in the USSR—to the point that his body was embalmed and remains on display in the Red Square in Moscow to this day. He remains iconic in depictions of the early Soviet period, and his writing is still widely read by leftists of all sorts.

Joseph Stalin: (1878-1953) Georgian revolutionary and Bolshevik. Though he had a relatively small role during the Revolution, he rose to a place of prominence within the USSR by the time of Lenin's death. He defeated Leon Trotsky and other leading Bolsheviks in the power struggles of the mid-1920s. His plans for industrializing the USSR and limiting private property by collectivizing agriculture produced considerable economic gains, but at a large cost in human life. He developed a loyal following in the USSR and abroad by projecting a charismatic and paternal image, leading to his nickname "Uncle Joe." During a series of purge trials, he ordered the execution of a large number of political opponents, who posed threats to his rule both real and invented. After his death, his successor launched into a process of "de-Stalinization" and rehabilitation of those who had been purged.

Earl Browder: (1891-1973) the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) from 1934 to 1945. Browder shifted his political position—and that of the party—depending on the changing political circumstances of the 1930s. During the early 1930s,

Browder produced texts such as *The Meaning of Social Fascism: Its Historical and Theoretical Background* (1932), in which he argued that in the face of an impending working class revolution, those socialist parties which proposed reforms were propping up capitalism and fulfilling the same function as fascist parties. Later, Browder led the CPUSA in pursuing more conciliatory positions towards the US government and a more respectable image. He was expelled from the CPUSA in 1946 for his changing attitude toward communism in government. Harrison satirizes the incompatibility between the positions Browder took in 1932 and those he took in 1937 to great effect.

Michael (Mike) Gold: (1893-1967) Jewish-American novelist, editor, playwright and poet. Born Itzok Granich to a working-class Jewish immigrant family in Manhattan's Lower East Side, he took the name Michael Gold as protection during a period of anti-communist and anti-semitic sentiment. He held radical political beliefs, and was influenced by Marxist theory as well as Anarchist thought. He struggled to complete high school, and though he studied at NYU and Harvard, he left both without completing his studies. His most successful book was his fictionalized biography *Jews Without Money* (1930). He was the editor for leftist magazine *New Masses*, and a co-founder of New Playwrights Theatre in New York.

Leon Trotsky: (1879-1940) prominent Bolshevik theorist and leader of the Russian Revolution. He is noted for arguing that a meaningful communist revolution would have to be an international project, not only a national one. In the struggle for power that followed Lenin's death, Stalin assumed leadership and eventually had Trotsky exiled and assassinated. Throughout the 1930s he was the leader of a loose group of communists who were critical of the Soviet Union, arguing that the worker's state that had been built following the Revolution and Civil War had deformed into an anti-democratic bureaucracy. The USSR and its affiliated communist parties around the world refused to collaborate with Trotskyists, and frequently argued that they were in collaboration with fascists.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: (1882-1945) President of the United States during the Great Depression and through the Second World War. Roosevelt held office as a Senator and Governor before being elected President in 1932. Roosevelt's "New Deal" addressed the Depression by creating many social programs, which employed people from agricultural workers to artists, and stimulated the economy.

Walter Duranty: (1884-1957) Anglo-American journalist. He was the bureau chief of the *New York Times* in Moscow. He was known for his largely uncritical representations of the Soviet Union. Duranty reported on the show trials, or "purge trials," of the late 1930s that took out Stalin's enemies.

Key Terms

Anarchism: a far left ideology that promotes self-governance and the abolition of all forms of hierarchy. Like communism, anarchism in the 19th and 20th centuries was an ideology closely associated with tendencies that emerged from the International Workingmen's Association, a left wing internationalist organization that eventually split over differences between communists and anarchists.

Bourgeois socialists: Those who identify as socialists or with socialist thought, but still uphold the interests of capitalism and/or are complicit in the exploitation of the working class. It was frequently used as an epithet by Communists against moderate or non-revolutionary socialists.

Communism: a far left ideology that promotes the abolition of private property and the rule of the working class. The history of communist thought is long and diverse, but most uses refer to the ideology associated with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* and their most successful follower, Vladimir Lenin and the history of the Bolshevik Party and the USSR.

Degenerated workers' state/state capitalism: Much ink has been spilled in pages of doctrinal debates between various left-wing tendencies about the class character of the USSR. For some radicals—for example Trotsky—the USSR was a state where the economy was collectively owned, but a group of bureaucrats had ended democratic worker control. Other radicals went further, saying the USSR had instead devolved into state capitalism, where the state acts as a sort of corporation, controlling industry and extracting surplus value from workers.

Fascism: A definition of fascism can be difficult to provide, as it lacks the coherence of other ideologies and has taken many forms in practice. Fascism is a much debated series of far right-wing ideologies and systems of government that emphasize a perceived national humiliation or decline, typically attributed to the actions of the left and/or a racialized minority. This decline must be reversed through the unrestrained application of violence and "social cleansing" by the fascist movement in concert with economic and traditional elites in the church, military, state, and so on. (Paxton 218). Fascism was particularly prevalent in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, most notably in Italy and Germany. **Anti-fascism** denotes resistance to fascism and its intersecting oppressions, including capitalism and racism.

Fellow Traveler: A person who supports the Communist movement without being an official member of the party; a person who sympathizes with communist and other radical leftist politics.

Moscow trials: a series of show trials in the USSR from 1936-1938 in which the remaining Old Bolsheviks—members of the party since before the revolution in 1917—are convicted on a variety of spurious charges and usually executed. The most prominent defendants were Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, who along with Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin had made up the first political bureau of the Bolshevik party.

The People's/Popular Front: Broad coalition of leftist—and sometimes centrist—political groups. With the rising threat of fascism apparent in the mid 1930s, the Comintern adopted a more conciliatory attitude towards other socialists and even liberals, encouraging cooperation and the establishment of broad anti-fascist organizations. For some on the left, this was seen as a betrayal of revolutionary principles, as it was seen as putting off the goal of revolution in order to address a symptom of capitalism.

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, also known as the Soviet Union, was a Communist state from 1922 to 1991. At its best, the USSR was a beacon to left-wing organizations around the world, organizing the Comintern and providing funding and leadership to a number of workers' parties, and anti-colonial and anti-fascist organizations. At its worst, it dominated its neighbouring countries and affiliated parties, and purged the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, executing falsely accused traitors.

Timeline

- **1914:** World War One begins. Harrison fights in the Canadian Army. The anti-war left finds itself with few allies, as many socialist parties elect to fall in line with their national governments for the duration of the war. The split between anti-war and pro-war socialist parties becomes permanent and leads to the mass departure of parties from the Second International—the international political organization that brought together socialists from around the world.
- **1917:** In February, the Tsar is overthrown by massive protests across the Russian Empire. Initially, the Bolsheviks represent the far left, and are just one faction within a complicated and crowded group of political parties. Their relevance increases as the insurrectionary peasants and workers look for increasingly radical answers to their demands, and the Bolsheviks overthrow the moderate provisional government in October. Civil war follows, as a coalition of landowners, monarchists, and right wing forces launch an offensive against the new government. The White Armies—as the

reactionary army is called — is supported by a number of international powers, including France, the UK, the USA, and Canada. The Red Army — as the Bolshevik aligned forces are called — is effectively on its own.

- **1919:** The left wing of the USA's Socialist Party of America founds the Communist Party of the USA. The party goes on to play major role in organizing unions and anti-racist struggles in the early 20th century.
- **1923:** Benito Mussolini, the leader of the National Fascist Party, comes to power in Italy.
- **1924:** Russian Communist leader Vladimir Lenin dies.
- **1928:** The Third Period begins when the Comintern's 6th Conference in Moscow concludes that the global political and economic system of capitalism is in crisis. The Third Period can be understood as the international communist movement going on the offensive, refusing to collaborate with reformist socialists and preparing for the imminent collapse of capitalism.
- **1929:** Leon Trotsky is exiled from the USSR, eventually settling in Mexico where he is assassinated by a Soviet agent in 1940.
- **1931:** In Spain, the monarchy is replaced with a democratically-elected Republican government: the Second Spanish Republic is proclaimed.
- **1933:** The Nazi party comes to power in Germany.
- **1935:** Italy invades Ethiopia for a second time after they lost the First Italo-Ethiopian War in 1895-6. Although both Italy and Ethiopia are members of the League of Nations, the league does nothing to prevent or intervene in the conflict. The war ends when Italy makes Ethiopia into an Italian colony.
- **1936:** The Spanish Civil War breaks out.
- **1937:** The Second Sino-Japanese War begins after years of Japanese aggression towards China.

Methodology and Approaches

1. **High-Modernism:** This is Harrison's most experimental novel, and it draws on many modernist techniques. It is heavily influenced by James Joyce's "Nighttown" episode of *Ulysses*. It is also a sharp departure from the socialist realist novels common in the literary left at this time (see Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* and Ted Allen's *This Time a Better Earth*).

Secondary Sources: Vautour, "Countering and Co-opting."

- a. **Allusion & Intertextuality:** Harrison frequently borrows words from pamphlets and speeches, and characters from other novels or from real-life. In this way, he puts himself in conversation with many other influential modernist writers. His

use of quotes—for example, quoting an earlier Earl Browder against a later Browder—allow him to critique the unstable politics of his contemporaries.

- b. **Stream of consciousness and interior monologue:** Much of the novel is spent in Simpson's head, where readers follow his hallucinatory or (day)dream adventures. The narrative is a continuous flow of Simpson's thoughts, imaginings, and reactions. At certain points, Simpson's emotional turmoil accelerates the jumbling of ideas and sentences, and his thoughts recall images and quotes from earlier in the novel.
2. **Satire:** Though most novels—and literature more generally—of the Spanish Civil War are deeply earnest, Harrison employs satire and irony in *Meet Me on the Barricades*, exposing and critiquing many aspects of the Left and the anti-fascist movement. If the satirical content of Harrison's work seems distant and inscrutable today, it is because it is primarily directed against the perceived hypocrisy of 1930s left-wing organizations and figures. Simpson himself is a satirical figure, as he is passionate about politics but unwilling to take action. The satire also targets political figures (Browder, Hitler, Lenin), other writers (Gold), the Popular Front, and leftist debates over literature and publishing.

Secondary Sources: Sharpe & Vautour, "Imagining Spain."

3. **Anti-hero:** Simpson is an unconventional hero; it can be argued that he is unlikeable and that he does not perform heroic actions (or any actions of note). Within the canon of Spanish Civil War novels, and war novels more generally, Simpson is a notably passive and uninspiring protagonist. Simpson's characterization is an important aspect of the novel's satire, as Simpson functions as a critique of the passionate and passive everyman.

Secondary Sources: Vautour, "Countering and Co-opting."

4. **Leftist Politics:** Like Harrison himself, *Meet Me on the Barricades* is deeply engaged in the Leftist politics—of the United States specifically—of the early 20th century. There are many paths for reading into this political and social context.

Secondary Sources: Denning; Kutulas; Sharpe & Vautour, "Introduction."

- a. **Disillusionment & Pessimism:** Ascaso in particular is deeply disillusioned and cynical about Leftist politics, and the potential for radical change. Disillusionment is also a major theme in Harrison's war novel, *Generals Die in Bed*, and in many other First World War novels. There is rich potential for a reading of disillusionment across these two very different texts and very different contexts.

Secondary Sources: Sharpe, "Traitors in Love."

- b. **Popular Front:** In the mid-1930s, with the rising threat of fascism, Comintern (the international organization of Communist parties) encouraged a political alliance between communist and non-communist groups, including socialists, anarchists, and liberals. These groups assembled around the common goal of

anti-fascism. But these alliances were unstable, and many leftists were opposed to these alliances. As a novel of the late 1930s, *Meet Me on the Barricades* is engaged with the fallout of Popular Front politics.

- c. **Leftist Infighting:** Despite the push for a Popular Front, there was much disagreement within the broad coalition of the Left. This manifested as in-fighting, from the Stalinist purges in the Soviet Union, to the fighting in the streets of Barcelona and the execution and imprisonment of the POUM, a radical Spanish political party. Simpson struggles to understand these events, and reconcile them with his own vague leftist politics.
5. **White supremacy:** Through Simpson, Harrison critiques the North American Left's internalized racism: Simpson reveals it is easier for him to feel solidarity with White people (Spaniards) than non-White people (Chinese). Harrison also focuses on some of the ways that popular front agitation against fascism occasionally played on racist anxieties (Harrison 80). Simpson also negotiates contradictory stereotypes of Russians as cultured Europeans and savages. These off-hand comments offer an opening for analyzing the racial politics of the Leftist movement, and who was excluded from revolutionary thinking and on what grounds.

Secondary Sources: Sharpe, "Traitors in Love"; Sharpe & Vautour, "Imagining Spain."

6. **Patriarchy & misogyny:** Simpson's attitude towards his wife Mathilda is dismissive, and he often associates her with the apathetic bourgeois he despises. His fantasy mistress, Natasha, is a manifestation of male desire, and she is explicitly encourages him to pursue his sexual desires outside their relationship. And yet, Mathilda is more of a intelligent and compassionate matriarch, and Natasha 'betrays' Simpson by acting on her own sexual desires. Simpson struggles with how women—as sexual actors and intellectual subjects—fit into the revolutionary masculinity that Simpson clings to.

Secondary Sources: Sharpe, "Traitors in Love"; Sharpe and Vautour, "Imagining Spain."

Discussion Questions

1. What do we make of Simpson's physical description and personality (5)? How does Harrison negotiate—or critique—relatability and likeability as they apply to protagonists?
2. Simpson's unremarkable and quiet death after the excitement of a night of drinking and arguing contrasts sharply with the more heroic endings of war novels. What are other examples of Harrison bucking literary conventions?
3. How might we understand Simpson in today's terms: is he an ally? An activist? A Slacktivist? Is he advancing the causes he purports to support, or hindering them?

4. What is the effect of the formal shift in Chapter X? What does it tell us about Simpson?
5. What are some of the methods Harrison uses to introduce his politics throughout the novel? Are we to understand the dialogue of a character such as Ascaco or the content of the “stage directions” as the more direct presence of the author’s voice?

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Credits

Kevin Levangie, Bart Vautour, Emily Robins Sharpe, and Kaarina Mikalson.