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Economic and Social Literary Criticism

This essay offers suggestions for how material on the Great Writers Inspire site can be used as a starting point for exploration of or classroom discussion about economic and social criticism. Questions for reflection or discussion are highlighted in the text. Links in the text point to resources in the Great Writers Inspire site. The resources can also be found via the 'Economic and social criticism' start page [1]. Further material can be found via our Library [2] and via the various authors and theme pages.

We have chosen to combine the approaches sections on economic and social criticism because of many scholars' belief that the two are inextricable: it is the financial framework - who has and has not - that defines the structure of our society and the opportunities of the people it contains. Certainly many of the social critiques of literature are critiques of the ill or unjust treatment of those less affluent or well positioned.

The most common form of economic criticism of literature is **Marxist literary criticism**. Literary critic Terry Eagleton describes Marxist criticism as "not merely a 'sociology of literature', concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history." Marxist criticism tries to determine the class constructs of a piece of literature, decide whether or not it is socially progressive, and assess the politics of the work.

Karl Marx and Frederich Engels published The Communist Manifesto [3] in 1848, followed by Das Kaptial in 1867. In essence, Marxist literary theory suggests that all literature is a product of the class and financial conditions in which it was created. In the early 20th century, the Soviet Union declared the ideal art to be 'socialist realism', or art that positively depicts the struggle toward socialist progress.

Yale Professor Paul Fry on Marxist Literary Theory

- In Fry's lecture on Feminist Theory [4], from 9:20-15:10 Fry discusses a commonly postulated theory that all novels, in their essence, deal with Marxist issues at their core.
- In the first twenty minutes of Fry's podcast on the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory [5], Fry offers a convenient introduction to the ideology of Marx and Engels, and the ways in which Marxist criticism can present itself in literature.

  An understanding of the economic and societal pressures affecting authors can provide a point of reference for comparative papers, as well as offering students a wider awareness of the contexts in which the texts were written. Many of the writers highlighted on the Great Writers Inspire website were writing to live, so it is helpful to bear in mind that these authors wrote with consideration for their need for the popular and financial success of their works.

Early Modern Theatre

Watch University of Virginia's Professor Paul A. Cantor lecture on the Commerce and Culture of Shakespeare's Theatre [6]. It is easy to be caught up in the richness of Shakespeare's poetry and forget that he and his contemporaries? plays were written for performance, and most importantly, written to sell tickets.
How does it affect your view of Shakespeare's narrative poems, The Rape of Lucrece [7] and Venus and Adonis [8], knowing they were likely written during the period of plague when the theatres were closed, and Shakespeare was dependent on the financial support of patrons?

Take a look at the dedications to see how Shakespeare uses the poems to ask for the support of a patron. *What about the fact that they were by far his greatest financial and popular successes? How do his plays exploit the popularity of these poems?*

Read Dr. Emma Smith's essay on Renaissance Theatre [9], which discusses the popularity of the Renaissance Theatres as an institution for entertainment and the religious and political pressures working against the theatres.

Read the essay on Ben Jonson [10] and take a look at Jonson's works [11]

How did Jonson position himself as a popular author? How do his works court the favour of the court and wealthy patrons?

Listen to Dr. Emma Smith's podcast on Dekker's The Shoemaker's Holiday [12].

How does the comedy, by virtue of being an antidote to contemporary financial and social problems, reflects on those concerns and on class distinction within the play?

Read the works of Christopher Marlowe [13], an author who was born poor, attended school through scholarships, and rose and fell quickly from political grace. In his poem Hero and Leander [14], Marlowe goes on a lengthy tangent about the myth of why scholars are doomed to be forever poor. In The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus [15], among Faustus' list of what he will do with the demonic powers he intends to claim, he says, "I'll have them fill the public schools with silk,/ Wherewith the students shall be bravely clad." The only real opportunity for the financial advancement of a poor student at that time was a place in the church.

How did Christopher Marlowe [16] balk these expectations in his own life?

18th Century Fiction

Our High and Low Culture Section [17], including Dr. Abigail Williams' introductory essay [18], discusses the financial and social concerns motivating the 18th century obsession with the distinction between high and low culture, the rise of the literary marketplace, the Grub Street writers, the professional woman writer, and the deterioration of the elite culture of literary patronage.

Our Labouring-Class Writing Section [19] offers an introductory essay by Dr. Jennifer Batt [20] that describes the challenges faced by the financially impaired labouring-class writers of the 18th century.

Dr. Jennifer Batt's podcast [21] and essay [22] on Mary Leapor [23] discusses the 18th century household servant and poet. Leapor addressed and made use of her lower-class background in her poetry.

In Batt's podcast on Stephen Duck [24], she discusses how Duck offers a glimpse at the reality of the life of a rural labourer, and of the opportunities allowed Duck by the impression his poetry made on Queen Caroline. The podcast also discusses the transformation of his poetry with his rise through the social ranks.

In Dr. Abigail Williams' adapted lecture Aphra Behn and the Poetic Culture [25], Williams discusses Behn's attempts to break through the class and gender barriers she faced by establishing herself in the male poetic tradition, while trying to balance her desire for social standing with her need for her writing to bring her financial success, since she was the first English woman to live by her pen.

Victorian Fiction

Examine the works of Jane Austen [26] not just as romances, but also as critical social satires revealing class conflict, social rules, and the problems with England's legal laws of inheritance. The latter half of the essay The Anonymous Jane Austen [27] discusses the financial difficulty of the Austen women after the death of Mr. Austen and Jane's struggles with commercial publication.

Charlotte Brontë's [28] novel Jane Eyre [29] also deals intimately with the precarious financial position of a woman alone in the world, and of the vulnerabilities of a governess without the protection of wealth, social standing, or family. The essay Charlotte Brontë: A Wish for Wings [30] discusses Brontë's systematic exploration of social ills in her writing.

Charles Dickens [31] arguably provides the richest fodder of Victorian writers for exploration of economic and class issues. Dr. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst's podcast Why Dickens? [32] discusses how Dickens' own impoverished background and fear of financial hardship imbues his plots, characters, and writing style.

Gresham College lecture Dickens?s law makers and law breakers: Barnard's Inn and Beyond [33] discusses how Dickens' legal background and his proximity to London's slums and criminals influenced the settings and characters of his novels.

How does it affect your analysis of Charles Dickens' writing style to know that he was paid by the word? What about the fact that novels like Great Expectations [34] and A Tale of Two Cities [35] were serialised for publications, necessitating cliffhangers that would compel readers to purchase the next issue?

On a note that is more related to social than economic criticism, take a look at Oscar Wilde's Ballad of Reading Gaol [36], the poem he wrote after he was released from prison. The poem addresses the ill treatment of prisoners in the English penal system. The poem may surprise readers used to Wilde's more light-hearted comedies. Yet once you have read the poem, take another look at his comedies.

Where does Wilde critique, albeit humourously or subtly, his contemporary social structure and the treatment of the lower classes or those on the fringes of society? Consider, for example, the treatment of Mrs. Erlynne in Lady Windermere's Fan [37].

Modernist Fiction

In Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* [38], Woolf discusses not just the disadvantages faced by female writers, but the necessity of economic security to produce truly great writing, uninfluenced by market forces. Woolf postulates one must be able to afford a room of one's own before one can become a great writer.

Do you agree with Virginia Woolf? To what extent are great writers dependent on their works' financial success? Can a novel be examined properly without regard to the economic circumstances of its writer?

Links
[1] http://writersinspire.org/themes/economic-social-literary-criticism
[2] http://writersinspire.org/library
[3] http://writersinspire.org/content/manifesto-communist-party
[4] http://writersinspire.org/content/classical-feminist-tradition-lecture
[5] http://writersinspire.org/content/frankfurt-school-critical-theory-lecture
[6] http://writersinspire.org/content/commerce-culture-lecture-2-shakespeares-theater
[7] http://writersinspire.org/content/rape-lucrece
[8] http://writersinspire.org/content/venus-adonis
[9] http://writersinspire.org/content/renaissance-theatre
[10] http://writersinspire.org/content/ben-jonson-renaissance-playwright-renaissance-man
[11] http://writersinspire.org/writers/ben-jonson
[12] http://writersinspire.org/content/shoemakers-holiday-thomas-dekker
[13] http://writersinspire.org/writers/christopher-marlowe
[14] http://writersinspire.org/content/hero-leander
[15] http://writersinspire.org/content/christopher-marlowe-works
[16] http://writersinspire.org/content/who-killed-christopher-marlowe-why
[17] http://writersinspire.org/themes/high-low-culture
[18] http://writersinspire.org/content/high-low-culture
[19] http://writersinspire.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/themes/labouring-class-writing
[20] http://writersinspire.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/content/eighteenth-century-labouring-class-writing
[21] http://writersinspire.org/content/mary-leapor
[22] http://writersinspire.org/content/mary-leapor-1
[23] http://writersinspire.org/writers/mary-leapor
[24] http://writersinspire.org/content/18th-century-labouring-class-poetry-0
[25] http://writersinspire.org/content/aphra-behn-poetic-culture
[26] http://writersinspire.org/writers/jane-austen
[27] http://writersinspire.org/content/anonymous-jane-austen
[28] http://writersinspire.org/writers/charlotte-bronte
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[34] http://writersinspire.org/content/great-expectations
[35] http://writersinspire.org/content/tale-two-cities
[36] http://writersinspire.org/content/ballad-reading-gaol
[37] http://writersinspire.org/content/lady-windermeres-fan

[38] http://writersinspire.org/content/room-ones-own