Published on *Great Writers Inspire* (http://writersinspire.org)

Approaching Political Literature

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 the political aspects of literature. 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 'Political Literature' start page [1]. Further material can be found via the Library [2] and via the various authors and theme pages.

Introduction

There is something viscerally frightening about the burning of a book, and not just because of the act's associations with fascist regimes. To burn a book is not just to burn paper: it is to burn ideas. In John Milton's 1644 tract against censorship, *Areopagitica [3]*, he argues that:

"Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are [...] Unlesse warinesse be us'd, as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image; but hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye."

To kill a book is to physically destroy the possibility of another way of thought, and the possibility of another way of life. The power of a book that extends beyond paper and binding is rarely more potent than in the case of literature that comments on or condemns those holding political power. Whether direct treatise or veiled allegory, literature has long been a mechanism via which writers could comment on contemporary politics. If a book is reason, than it can persuade; and persuading enough individuals, or the right individuals, can alter governments.

In the context of the A-level syllabus

Analysis of political literature can be brought to bear on work for the A-level syllabus. The GCE guidelines stress the importance of "understanding the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received", to which the political climate at the time of writing certainly is relevant. Subtler political critique in some of the older texts suggested below can be compared with later overtly dystopian or political A-level texts such as George Orwell's *1984*, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. And the poetry of World War I for the Unit 3 Interpretations of Prose and Poetry might be set against the images of England at war in the plays of William Shakespeare and Thomas Dekker.

The Politics of Kingship

King John

In Dr. Emma Smith's podcast on the often overlooked Shakespearean history play *King John* [4], Smith discusses how the play calls into question notions of just or rightful sovereignty. In the play all claims to power seem tentative at best, and often the confusion of the battlefield obscures who has the best right to the throne. Additionally, Shakespeare diverges from all source texts by creating the character of Philip Falconbridge, the Bastard, whose charisma draws attention to the Falconbridge's microcosmic drama of inheritance, family, and birthrights.

Richard II

In Dr. Emma Smith's podcast on William Shakespeare's *Richard II* [5], Smith asks, 'Was it right for Bolingbroke to take the throne from Richard?' Smith talks about issues of regicide and regime change within the context of contemporary politics and dramaturgical insight into the play. Queen Elizabeth I allegedly said to her archivist, "I am Richard II. Know ye not that?" Elizabeth was beset with rebellion in England and Ireland, and like Richard, had no obvious successor. The play *Richard II* became embroiled in the Essex Rebellion against Queen Elizabeth I when Essex sponsored a performance of the play on the eve of his rebellion, intending to draw parallels between Queen Elizabeth and a king who was deposed after listening to manipulative advisors.

Though the queen pre-empted the rebellion, how does this charged political climate affect your view of the play and the justice of Richard II's fate in the play?

Take a look at our Renaissance Timeline [6] and discuss what other political events might have affected the works of Renaissance playwrights.

Julius Caesar

While Richard II ends with the assassination of a monarch, Shakespeare's Julius Caesar [7] shows the plotting, execution, and consequences of a rebellion against the head of state. It is worth discussing that although the play centres around Brutus, the play is named for Caesar. Perhaps to do otherwise would be to show a dangerous amount of sympathy for a traitor to the crown.

Does Henry IV pt 1 [8] demonstrate these same sorts of consequences for a ruler who claimed the throne through rebellion? How does Shakespeare weigh the points of view of the ruling elite and the commoners/mob in Coriolanus [9]?

Richard III

In Dr. Emma Smith's podcast on William Shakespeare's *Richard III* [10], Smith asks whether or not we really want Richmond, killer of the tyrannical Richard and founder of the Tudor dynasty, to win at the end of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. The play represents an attempt to glamourise what was in fact Henry VII's rather violent rise to power. And while the play was tremendously popular, that was in no small part because it satisfied the public's contemporary appetite for plays about regime change.

Smith says that the sudden popularity of history plays in the 16th century suggests that people were turning to the nostalgia of the past due to anxiety and uncertainty about their present and future. To what extent might this vogue relate to fears about the aging and heirless Queen Elizabeth I? How does it inform your view of the play when you consider that Richmond, later Henry VII, was the current queen's grandfather?

Henry V

In this podcast on William Shakespeare's *Henry V* [11], from 5:15 Dr. Emma Smith discusses the two contradictory versions of King Henry readers or audience members can extrapolate from the play.

Is Henry V a mirror of all Christian kings, who mingles with his people and dedicates his victory to God? Or is he a monstrously efficient war machine, a power-hungry despot? Where should our emotional, rational, dramatic, and political sympathies as readers lie? When English writer Gerald Gould returned from World War I, he wrote an article proposing the play should be read satirically, rather than as endorsement of imperialism and patriotism. Was this view of Henry the result of his experiences with a brutal world war? How might the play's critical reception have changed in response to different political events since it was

written?

The Shoemaker's Holiday by Thomas Dekker [12]
In Dr. Emma Smith's podcast on Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* [13], Smith discusses how contemporary political issues such as war, famine, and immigration intrude on what otherwise is a feel-good holiday comedy.

Christopher Marlowe [14]
Christopher Marlowe was directly involved in early modern politics due to his work spying against Catholics for Queen Elizabeth's government - for more information on Marlowe's espionage, read the essay "Who Killed Christopher Marlowe, and Why?" [15] While Shakespeare treated historical events long past, Marlowe was not so careful. His 1592 play *Massacre at Paris* depicted the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris that took place only twenty years previously.

Ben Jonson [16]
Ben Jonson too, dabbled closely with recent and even current political events, and his mockery of King James, his selling of knighthoods, and his courtiers in *Eastward Ho!* resulted in Jonson's arrest and imprisonment for several months.

Aphra Behn [17] and Political Culture
In the essay 'Aphra Behn and Political Culture' [18] adapted from a lecture by Dr. Abigail Williams, Williams discusses how Behn's devotion to King James II and the Tory party influenced her plays, poetry, and prose, and how each party cultivated its image through literature.

The Politics of Religion

John Milton [19]
One of the most religiously controversial literary classics is John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* [20]. In Yale's Professor John Roger's online course on Milton [21], Lecture 9 discusses Milton's involvement with the Puritan government of England, his imprisonment after the restoration, and how his views on England's political turmoil (at the time nearly inextricable from the battle for Puritan or Catholic political supremacy) affected his poem.

Why would a man in Milton's position choose to retell the story of rebel angels? As a devoutly religious man, where in his poem do Milton's sympathies lie?

Be sure to listen to Rogers' discussion of radical theology from 23:14 in Lecture 9. Also worth noting is Lecture 13, which examines Book Three's conversation between God and the Son and reinvents the concept of Calvinist predestination.

In her lecture Literature and Politics in Seventeenth Century London [22], Dr. Anna Beer talks about Milton's background, his politics, and the difficulties of getting his radical works into print (from 28:41). Because of the success of *Paradise Lost*, it is often overlooked that after his time as a political activist and civil servant under Cromwell's government, Milton spent most of his life writing radical political pamphlets and tracts on topics such as divorce, education, freedom of speech, and models of government. Many of these can be read in *The Prose Works of John Milton [23]*.

A personal favourite of Milton's political tracts, Areopagitica [3], appeals to Parliament to repeal the Licensing Order for books published in Britain; Milton writes eloquently of the basic human need for free speech and print. Check out Professor John Rogers' lecture on Areopagitica [21] (Lecture 8).

Jonathan Swift [24] and *A Tale of a Tub*
Like Milton, Jonathan Swift ran into his fair share of trouble over his religious allegory *A Tale of a Tub [25]*.

In her adapted lecture Jonathan Swift and *A Tale of a Tub* [26], Dr. Abigail Williams discusses Swift's use of allegory to attack branches of the church and reveal the foolishness of the Catholics, dissenters, and Thomas Hobbes. The complex work was frequently misinterpreted as supporting atheism, and political and literary backlash against the text was considerable.

Robert Louis Stevenson [27] and Darwin

Take a look at the section 'The Influence of Science and the Theory of Atavism' in the 'Introduction to the Victorian Gothic' essay [28] to learn how Darwin's On the Origin of Species [29] rocked Victorian England and generated fears of 'atavism', or man's regression to animalistic and primitive forms. Darwin's theory went head to head against Christian religious assumptions of the origins of man, and that conflict between science and religion was prevalent in Victorian literature - think of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein [30]. In the case of Robert Louis Stevenson's The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde [31], consider how the description of Hyde plays on Victorian anxieties about Darwinian evolution. Though in film or television adaptations Hyde is often a huge, hulking monster, in the original novella he is small but powerful, hunched, wiry, with hairy knuckles - not unlike the apes suddenly labelled man's ancestors. For more information on Stevenson's manipulation of fears about scientific advancement, read the essay Gothic Elements in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* [32].

The essay Science and Religion [33] describes the politicisation of scientific discoveries in the Victorian era.

The Politics of Sexuality

Oscar Wilde [34]

Read the sections 'Trial and Death' and 'Legacy' in the essay 'The Importance of Being Wilde [35]' for a discussion of Wilde's trial for gross indecency as a result of his homosexuality, and of his posthumous appropriation as an icon for political movements supporting gay rights.

How does his novel The Picture of Dorian Gray [36] reflect on the advantages and dangers of obeying moral laws imposed by society? How do his plays like Lady Windermere's Fan [37] and An Ideal Husband comment on characters marginalised from English society because of sexual acts?

Also take a look at Wilde's political tracts, such as The Soul of Man Under Socialism [38], or his poem condemning the poor conditions of the English prisoner, The Ballad of Reading Gaol [39], which he wrote after his release from prison. Keep in mind that Wilde's mother was a devout Irish nationalist.

To better understand the repressive Victorian reviews of sexuality that resulted in the horrified public response to works like Dorian Gray, watch the Gresham college lecture The Victorians: Gender and Sexuality [40].

D. H. Lawrence [41]
D. H. Lawrence wrote on the tensions between industrial and pastoral England and class conflict in novels like *Sons and Lovers* [42]. However, Lawrence is most famous for the difficulties resulting from the sexual nature of his novels, particularly in light of the restrictions of the Obscene Publications Act of 1857. Dr. Catherine Brown's podcast on Lawrence's Reception History [43] discusses the difficulties in publication and public responses to his challenging and subversive works. Even well into the 20th century, D. H. Lawrence's works faced public censure, most famously through the Lady Chatterley trial. The first version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* [44] that was published in 1928 was abridged heavily; this is not surprising, given that Lawrence could not even persuade his first typist to finish transcribing the work, and sought the help of Aldous Huxley's wife to finish preparing the manuscript. When Penguin Books published the posthumous uncensored edition in 1960, the recent Obscene Publications Act of 1959 was tested in a trial prosecuting Penguin Books. After many academics, critics, and experts battled to prove the novel's literary worth, Penguin Books was declared not guilty.

The Politics of Empire

Jonathan Swift [24] and Gulliver's Travels
In the essay 'Jonathan Swift and Gulliver's Travels' [45], adapted from a lecture by Dr. Abigail Williams, Williams discusses the ways in which *Gulliver's Travels* [46], often presented as a children's tale, is in fact a censorious satire of the culture of 18th century England, including the nation's imperialist undertakings. *How do Gulliver's interactions with the natives of the island they visit in the satire compare with the treatment of the Surinam natives in Aphra Behn's slightly more realistic Oroonoko [47]?*

Jane Austen [48]
Because of the romantic nature of Austen's novels and their focus on the social sphere, it can often be ignored that they take place during a time when England was embroiled in the Napoleonic Wars, and just before the height of England's empire.

Why is it that war is only considered when it brings soldiers to be stationed near the novels' women? Were the private and public spheres really so separate? At what point did war begin to intrude on the private consciousness of England as a nation? Why do modern adaptations of Austen's works try to play up the rather tentatively political aspects of her novels, such as when the 1999 film adaptation of Mansfield Park [49] wrestles with issues of slavery in the American colonies?

Charles Dickens [50]
Consider how Dickens' depictions of poverty, unjust legal systems, and the failure to provide for England's children can serve as criticism of the political practices of Victorian England. Listen to Dr. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst's podcast 'Why Dickens?' [51] for a discussion of how Dickens' personal socioeconomic and legal background influenced his works.

Also take a look at our Economic and Social Literary Criticism section [52], since socioeconomic criticism often is inextricably linked to criticism of the political structures of a society.

Rudyard Kipling [53]
In the essay by Dominic Davies [54], Davies discusses how we can reconcile the author of 'The White Man's Burden [55]', a poem held up to justify decades of racism, with the author of 'Kim [56]', a comparatively sensitive exploration of British colonialism in India.

Joseph Conrad [57]
Take a look at the essay about Joseph Conrad [58]. Joseph Conrad was born into political turmoil. He was child of exiled Polish nationalists, and after their death he joined the maritime industry and assumed British nationality. His travels exposed him to cultures across the globe, which led to his complex critiques of the

ramifications of European imperialism in his writings, especially his famous novella *Heart of Darkness* [59].

Derek Walcott

Dominic Davies's essay on Derek Walcott [60] discusses the challenged faced by the Caribbean writer looking to find both a place in a literary tradition that is predominantly English and American, and a space to critique the horrors of British colonialism on his native island of Saint Lucia. Also check out Dr. Catherine Brown's podcast Walcott and Naipaul: History and Myth [61].

A better understanding of colonial literature could feed into a reading of Orwell's *Burmese Days*. How might Orwell's experience as a colonial soldier impacted his vision of Great Britain in *1984*?

The Politics of World War

The First World War changed the way the world and literature perceived war, and poets responded to the carnage in droves. For a good introduction, read Charlotte Barrett's essays on World War I [62], explaining the historical and social background of the war, and The Art of Mourning in First World War Poetry [63], discussing the different treatments of poetic elegy by Wilfred Owen [64], Edward Thomas, and Isaac Rosenberg. Then check out the section of Great War soldier and poet Wilfred Owen [64]. To find out more about how written word of the war affected those at home, take a look at the essay Reading and World War I [65] from The Open University.

The First World War Poetry Digital Archive is assessed in the article Poetry on Context: The First World War Poetry Digital Archive [66] by its project manager, Kate Lindsay, and Oxford English Faculty member Dr. Stuart D. Lee.

Yale Professor Langdon Hammer's lecture World War I Poetry in England [67] surveys English World War I poetry and evaluate its responses and challenges to the war's rhetoric and propaganda, its depiction of the relationship between home front and battlefront, and its descriptions of the experiences of the soldiers on the front line.

Why did World War I generate such a unique poetic response compared to earlier (or later) conflicts?

Think about F. Scott Fitzgerald as a formal World War I soldier and a member of the Lost Generation. In what ways might The Great Gatsby [68] depict America's reaction to World War I?

Dr Rebecca Beasley's podcast on Ezra Pound [69] addresses the writer's devout fascism and the affect of his political beliefs on his poetry.

Links

[1] http://writersinspire.org/themes/political-literature
[2] http://writersinspire.org/library
[3] http://writersinspire.org/content/areopagitica
[4] http://writersinspire.org/content/king-john
[5] http://writersinspire.org/content/richard-ii
[6] http://writersinspire.org/content/english-renaissance-timeline-some-historical-cultural-dates
[7] http://writersinspire.org/content/tragedie-ivlivs-caesar
[8] http://writersinspire.org/content/first-part-henry-fourth-life-death-henry-sirnamed-hot-spvrre
[9] http://writersinspire.org/content/tragedy-coriolanus
[10] http://writersinspire.org/content/richard-iii

[11] http://writersinspire.org/content/henry-v
[12] http://writersinspire.org/writers/thomas-dekker
[13] http://writersinspire.org/content/shoemakers-holiday-thomas-dekker
[14] http://writersinspire.org/writers/christopher-marlowe
[15] http://writersinspire.org/content/who-killed-christopher-marlowe-why
[16] http://writersinspire.org/writers/ben-jonson
[17] http://writersinspire.org/writers/aphra-behn
[18] http://writersinspire.org/content/aphra-behn-political-culture
[19] http://writersinspire.org/writers/john-milton
[20] http://writersinspire.org/content/paradise-lost-poem-twelve-books-1674
[21] http://writersinspire.org/content/course-milton-open-yale
[22] http://writersinspire.org/content/literature-politics-seventeenth-century-london-lecture
[23] http://writersinspire.org/%26lt%3Ba%20href%3D
[24] http://writersinspire.org/writers/jonathan-swift
[25] http://writersinspire.org/content/tale-tub
[26] http://writersinspire.org/content/jonathan-swift-tale-tub
[27] http://writersinspire.org/writers/robert-louis-stevenson
[28] http://writersinspire.org/themes/victorian-gothic
[29] http://writersinspire.org/content/origin-species
[30] http://writersinspire.org/content/frankenstein-or-modern-prometheus
[31] http://writersinspire.org/content/strange-case-dr-jekyll-mr-hyde
[32] http://writersinspire.org/content/gothic-elements-strange-case-dr-jekyll-mr-hyde
[33] http://writersinspire.org/content/science-religion
[34] http://writersinspire.org/writers/oscar-wilde
[35] http://writersinspire.org/content/importance-being-wilde
[36] http://writersinspire.org/content/picture-dorian-gray
[37] http://writersinspire.org/content/lady-windermeres-fan
[38] http://writersinspire.org/content/soul-man-under-socialism
[39] http://writersinspire.org/content/ballad-reading-gaol
[40] http://writersinspire.org/content/victorians-gender-sexuality-lecture
[41] http://writersinspire.org/writers/dh-lawrence
[42] http://writersinspire.org/content/sons-lovers
[43] http://writersinspire.org/content/dh-lawrence-7-reception-history
[44] http://writersinspire.org/content/lady-chatterleys-lover
[45] http://writersinspire.org/content/jonathan-swift-gullivers-travels
[46] http://writersinspire.org/content/gullivers-travels-several-remote-nations-world
[47] http://writersinspire.org/content/oroonoko-or-royal-slave
[48] http://writersinspire.org/writers/jane-austen
[49] http://writersinspire.org/content/mansfield-park-0
[50] http://writersinspire.org/writers/charles-dickens
[51] http://writersinspire.org/content/why-dickens
[52] http://writersinspire.org/themes/economic-social-literary-criticism
[53] http://writersinspire.org/writers/rudyard-kipling
[54] http://writersinspire.org/content/rudyard-kipling
[55] http://writersinspire.org/content/white-man%E2%80%99s-burden
[56] http://writersinspire.org/content/kim
[57] http://writersinspire.org/writers/joseph-conrad
[58] http://writersinspire.org/content/joseph-conrad
[59] http://writersinspire.org/content/heart-darkness
[60] http://writersinspire.org/content/derek-walcott
[61] http://writersinspire.org/content/walcott-naipaul-history-myth
[62] http://writersinspire.org/content/first-world-war

[63] http://writersinspire.org/content/art-mourning-first-world-war-poetry
[64] http://writersinspire.org/writers/wilfred-owen
[65] http://writersinspire.org/content/reading-world-war-i
[66] http://writersinspire.org/content/poetry-context-first-world-war-poetry-digital-archive-article
[67] http://writersinspire.org/content/world-war-i-poetry-england-lecture
[68] http://writersinspire.org/content/great-gatsby
[69] http://writersinspire.org/content/ezra-pound-0