

Politics and Social Protest in Literature:

Key Ideas:

- Power and powerlessness
- Equality and inequality
- Freedom and slavery
- Democracy and corruption
- War and peace
- Protest and rebellion
- Government and law
- Patriotism and nationalism
- Personal and political

Politics and you:

Politics is personal and everyday: it is the choice in what you wear, wear you shop, what you buy, how you dispose of your rubbish etc. It can be about your gender, ethnicity, class, religion or sexuality. It can be your compliance or disregard of laws and social conventions. It is even who or what causes you choose to support.

Power and leadership:

The concept of good or bad leadership has been at the heart of much political or protest writing. Does any institution have the right to make decisions on behalf of others? If so, how should they be chosen? How far should they be allowed to go in our interests? Where is the line between good leader and bad? Hero or tyrant? Are wars ever justified? Are nations and governments necessary and beneficial?

Power and the individual:

What rights or freedoms should the individual expect to have? To what extent should the individual be allowed to take part in making the decisions (think of Brexit!)? Should everyone have the right to vote and to protest? What happens to those who protest against those in power or choose not to conform? What forms of protest are acceptable? Is the legal system fair, equitable and fit for purpose?

Literature's role in politics and social protest:

Literature can have a profound effect. From the Bible, to Beowulf; The Canterbury Tales to Gulliver's Travels, writers have been criticising or satirising the institutions and conventions of the society that surrounds them.

Governments throughout history have been wary of the power of the written word, closing theatres or banning works of literature - why? Has it worked? Is it still as influential now?

Can literature really determine or shape people's social or political views?

Development of political and social protest writing:

- **Greek tragedy** – concerned with the plight of great, powerful men and the impact that their plight has on the powerless subjects
- **Medieval texts** – explored notions of kingship, loyalty, chivalry and were therefore predominantly for the upper classes. Religious authority was also a key idea.
- **Shakespeare's political theatre** - the Renaissance still dealt largely with royals and political or religious leaders and their travails. Conflicts within court and between nations and their

leaders and the impact upon the powerless is again a focus. There was a tendency to use more recent history and explore their leadership.

- **Restoration to 19th Century** - the closure of the theatres in 1642, following the execution of King Charles I, put a stop to the political dramas of the Renaissance. The monarchy was restored in 1660 but steered clear of politics for fear of punishment and closure. The 18th century saw a rise in political drama, most noticeably *The Beggar's Opera* by Jon Gay which focussed more tellingly on common people and satirised the behaviour of those in power.
- **Social realism 1843-1945** – The Theatres Act of 1843 reduced the ability of governments to interfere with or censor drama. Musical theatre had been the norm and was slowly replaced by more realistic plays that explored real contemporary social and political issues – this was known as social realism. The characters were believable, working or middle class people. The setting was often domestic and it contained realistic dialogue and action. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was an influential example of this and explored gender equality, class, social freedom and mobility etc.
- **Agitprop theatre** – derived from an amalgamation of the words “agitation” and “propaganda” this form of theatre became popular in the 1920s and 1930s and was written about and for the ordinary, working class people and their everyday struggles.
- **1940s -1960s – The Angry Young Men and the American Realists:** this saw the emergence of “kitchen sink realism” which was a form of social realist drama concentrating on the domestic lives of working class people often set in small rooms or flats in working class areas. John Osborne (“*Look Back in Anger*” – not an Oasis song) was typical of writers angry at class division and snobbery in Britain. In America, playwrights such as Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller tackled social divisions and identified with those alienated by society's power structures.
- **1970s-1990s: Radical political theatre** – more radical approaches explored explicitly political struggles focussing on political power, class, race, gender, sexuality etc.
- **Verbatim Theatre** – this uses the actual words from interviews and political events as dialogue (Robin Soans “*Talking to Terrorists*” 2005)

Influential Events:

- **French Revolution 1789:** the overthrowing of a powerful, oppressive and aristocratic regime by the “people” in order to establish a democratic and equal society was bound to prove inspirational. It was hoped to signal an end to mass poverty and exploitation and the introduction of fundamental rights such as a fair legal and political system. It offered hope to people that a more equal and just society could be obtained, if necessary by direct action and force. The Romantic poets of the 18th and 19th century in particular were inspired by this (Wordsworth, Coleridge etc.)
- **The Industrial Revolution:** the advent of the Industrial Revolution conflicted with the Romantics' concepts of beauty, nature and the idyllic nature of the countryside. The sudden growth of the cities led to terrible living conditions and greater exploitation of the poor than ever before and with no workers' rights.
- **World Wars, Russian Revolution, the spread of Communism and the Cold War:** the political and social upheaval of the first half of the 20th century led to the emergence of **modernism**. This usually reflected the chaotic political state of the world. It challenged traditional forms and conventions, in poetry for example breaking free of metrical restrictions.

Politics in the Novel:

Early political fiction: 1726: “*Gulliver's Travels*” - set out as a travelogue and used his journeys to fantastical places to satirise different systems of governance, organising society, intellectuals etc.

Others explored the concepts of justice, nature, the individual and society (e.g. Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein").

Victorian Novels: Charles Dickens, the Brontes, Thomas Hardy etc. reflected the ideas and movements of their time especially the social and financial gap between the classes, social injustice related to gender, class, race etc.

20th-century and contemporary political fiction:

- Dystopian fiction, science fiction

The most famous and recognisable of these is Orwell's "1984". By writing about a fictional future, you can expose and explore the worst aspects of the society that surrounds you. These novels often focus on the technological changes and the impact on individuals' freedoms (surveillance etc.), the organisation of society, manipulating data and information by those in power to control those who are powerless. The rise of totalitarian regimes in the real world led to an imaginative extension of this form of cruel governance in the fictionalised versions of the future.

- Historical Novels

Although focussing on figures in the past, the structures of society that existed and the way power was used or abused, it also offers a perspective on current political concerns as well as showing the way past political ideas are now viewed (e.g. "Wolf Hall" Hilary Mantel; "The Girl with the Pearl Earring" Tracey Chevalier).

Typical Social Issues in Modern Novels:

- Race ("To Kill a Mockingbird"; "The Color Purple"; "White Teeth" etc.)
- Class ("The Remains of the Day" Ishiguro; "Regeneration" Pat Barker)
- Gender and sexuality ("The Bloody Chamber" Angela Carter; "Oranges are Not the only Fruit" Jeanette Winterson)