**De Aston**

**English Department**

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**Year 12: Literary Theory**

**Academic Excellence Booklet**

**Activity 1**

Do readers expect men and women to write differently, to focus on different topics and use different styles? In the 19th century, women writers were subject to various judgements as to what they should and should not write about, and the way they should express themselves. One very famous example is the way readers reacted to the novel ‘Jane Eyre’ by Charlotte Brontë. When it was first published in 1847, it was under the pseudonym ‘Currer Bell’. Like her sisters, Brontë chose a pseudonym to conceal her identity and deliberately leave her gender ambiguous. When Jane Eyre was published, it was an instant success, and there was much debate as to whether it had been written by a man or a woman. The following extracts show a few responses and reviews that give a flavour of the debate:

William Makepeace Thackeray, a favourite author of Charlotte's, wrote:

*"I wish you had not sent me Jane Eyre. It interested me so much that I have lost (or won if you like) a whole day in reading it at the busiest period, with the printers I know waiting for copy. Who the author can be I can't guess - if a woman she knows her language better than most ladies do, or has had a 'classical' education. It is a fine book though - the man & woman capital - the style very generous and upright so to speak... Some of the love passages made me cry - to the astonishment of John who came in with the coals. St. John the Missionary is a failure I think but a good failure there are parts excellent I dont know why I tell you this but that I have been exceedingly moved & pleased by Jane Eyre. It is a womans writing, but whose? Give my respects and thanks to the author - whose novel is the first English one (& the French are only romances now) that I've been able to read for many a day."*

Anne Mozley, in a review in the *Christian Rememberancer*, wrote:

*“However, we, for our part, cannot doubt that the book is written by a female, and, as certain provincialisms indicate, by one from the North of England… Yet we cannot wonder that the hypothesis of a male author should have been started, or that ladies especially should still be rather determined to uphold it. For a book more unfeminine, both in its excellences and defects, it would be hard to find in the annals of female authorship. Throughout there is masculine power, breadth and shrewdness, combined with masculine hardness, coarseness, and freedom in expression.”*

Edwin Percy Whipple, in a review in the *North American Review*, wrote:

*From the masculine tone of Jane Eyre, it might pass altogether as the composition of a man, were it not for some unconscious feminine peculiarities, which the strongest minded woman that ever aspired after manhood cannot suppress. These peculiarities refer not only to elaborate descriptions of dress, and the minutiae of the sick-chamber, but to various superficial refinements of feeling in regard to the external relations of the sex. It is true that the noblest and best representations of female character have been produced by men, but there are niceties of thought and emotion in a woman's mind which no man can delineate, and which only escape unawares from a female writer. There are numerous examples of these in Jane Eyre. The leading characteristic of the novel, however, and the secret of its charm, is the clear, distinct, decisive style of its representation of character, manners, and scenery; and this continually suggests a male mind. In the earlier chapters there is little, perhaps, to break the impression that we are reading the autobiography of a bold, powerful and peculiar female intellect; but when the admirable Mr. Rochester appears, and the profanity, brutality, and slang of the misanthropic profligate give their torpedo shocks to the nervous system, – and especially when we are favored with more than one scene given to the exhibition of mere animal appetite, and to courtship after the manner of kangaroos… we are gallant enough to detect the hand of a gentleman in the composition.*

1. What evidence do the different readers use to support their judgements as to whether ‘Currer Bell’ was male or female?
2. What impression do you get from these responses as to the different judgements that were made of male and female writers?
3. Do you think people still expect male and female writers to write in different ways and about different subjects? Give examples to support your argument.

**Activity 2**

The Bechdel test asks whether a work of fiction features at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man. The test is used as an indicator for the active presence of women in films and other fiction, and to call attention to gender inequality in fiction due to sexism. Also known as the Bechdel–Wallace test, the test is named after the American cartoonist Alison Bechdel, in whose comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* it first appeared in 1985.

A character in Dykes to Watch Out For explains the rules that later came to be known as the Bechdel test (1985):



In her 1929 essay A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf observed about the literature of her time what the Bechdel test would later highlight in more recent fiction:

*All these relationships between women, I thought, rapidly recalling the splendid gallery of fictitious women, are too simple. [...] And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends. [...] They are now and then mothers and daughters. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that [...]*

Originally meant as "a little lesbian joke in an alternative feminist newspaper", according to Bechdel, the test moved into mainstream criticism in the 2010s and has been described as "the standard by which feminist critics judge television, movies, books, and other media". In 2013, an Internet newspaper described it as "almost a household phrase, common shorthand to capture whether a film is woman-friendly".

1. Consider each of the texts you studied for AS: The Great Gatsby; Othello; Death of a Salesman; Keats’ poetry. Before looking for evidence in task 2, record your gut feeling on whether each one would pass or fail the Bechdel test.
2. Now revisit each of those texts – does each text pass or fail? Where you correct in your gut feeling for each text? Were there any surprises?
3. This gives you a snapshot of how women are represented in literature – what are your opinions on this?
4. Try applying the test to other texts. Record your findings.

**Activity 3**

Philip Larkin’s poetry collection ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ (1964) is a good example of a text that conveys particular attitudes towards women. Larkin’s own relationships with women were highly complex: he was highly resentful of his mother and older sister, and while he never married, he had long-term relationships with many women – often several at a time. Poems in ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ depict women as partners, mothers, widows, objects of desire and objects of contempt. Women never speak for themselves in the poems, although their voices are sometimes parodied. The voice that narrates the poems is not necessarily Larkin’s own, but is nevertheless interesting to explore the poems in the context of what we know about his life, and the society in which he lived.

Read these two poems, taken from ‘The Whitsun Weddings’:

**Wild Oats**

About twenty years ago

 Two girls came in where I worked -

 A bosomy English rose

 And her friend in specs I could talk to.

 Faces in those days sparked

 The whole shooting-match off, and I doubt

 If ever one had like hers:

 But it was the friend I took out,

And in seven years after that

 Wrote over four hundred letters,

 Gave a ten-guinea ring

 I got back in the end, and met

 At numerous cathedral cities

 Unknown to the clergy. I believe

 I met beautiful twice. She was trying

 Both times (so I thought) not to laugh.

Parting, after about five

 Rehearsals, was an agreement

 That I was too selfish, withdrawn

 And easily bored to love.

 Well, useful to get that learnt,

 In my wallet are still two snaps,

 Of bosomy rose with fur gloves on.

 Unlucky charms, perhaps.

**Afternoons**

Summer is fading:
The leaves fall in ones and twos
From trees bordering
The new recreation ground.
In the hollows of afternoons
Young mothers assemble
At swing and sandpit
Setting free their children.

Behind them, at intervals,
Stand husbands in skilled trades,
An estateful of washing,
And the albums, lettered
Our Wedding, lying
Near the television:
Before them, the wind
Is ruining their courting-places

That are still courting-places
(But the lovers are all in school),
And their children, so intent on
Finding more unripe acrons,
Expect to be taken home.
Their beauty has thickened.
Something is pushing them
To the side of their own lives.

1. Explore the way women are presented in these two poems.
2. Identify the attitudes towards relationships, marriage and domesticity, from the point of view of both men and women.
3. Write a response to Larkin from one of the women he describes, exploring the woman’s own perspective on the way she has been depicted.
4. Look for other examples of poems from the collection and apply the same questions to those.

**Activity 4**

Shelley’s poem ‘The Masque of Anarchy’ was written in 1819 in response to the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester, which represented to many an extreme example of the abuse of political power. It involved the violent suppression of a demonstration in favour of parliamentary reform. A peaceful gathering of men, women and children was charged by the armed local yeomanry: 15 people were killed, and around 700 injured. Shelley’s poem was suppressed during his lifetime, and was not published until 1832. However, it quickly became popular with left-wing thinkers, and verse from it were recited by protesters in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in Beijing in 1989 and in Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2011.

1. Read the poem, which is included at the end of this pack. Pay particular attention to Shelley’s use of abstract figures such as Murder, Fraud and Hypocrisy. What effects are created by this use of abstractions? What observations can you make about Shelley’s use of rhyme, rhythm and verse-form?
2. The British Library website has a fantastic range of resources on the poem. Read the essay by John Mullan, ‘An introduction to *The Masque of Anarchy*’ (also at the end of this pack) and use the links on the British Library website to explore the poem’s historical background.
3. In his essay, Mullan describes ‘The Masque of Anarchy’ as ‘a poem devised to be accessible to a wide readership’. In the light of what you know about it, and about Marxist approaches to literature, why do you think it was important that Shelley’s poem was accessible to a range of readers?

**Activity 5**

Marxist ‘takes’ on literature have tended to see how literature **reflects** the social world. Feminism, by contrast, has tended to take a stronger line. Feminism says that literature helps to **construct** views of women that are unfair.

To extend this further, it could be argued that all fiction, including nursery rhymes, fairy tales, the literary canon, cartoon strips, animated films, live-action films, etc. all contribute to our socialisation and our constructed views of society. If this is the case then examining books, TV shows and films aimed at children can be particularly revealing in exploring where we acquire our understanding of women’s roles and the functioning of society in general. Here is an example of a Marxist interpretation of the nursery rhyme ‘Incy Wincy Spider’ (here referred to as Itsy Bitsy Spider, its American counterpart):



Read also this Marxist interpretation of Spongebob Squarepants:

SpongeBob Marxistpants

SpongeBob Squarepants is a classic childhood show that first aired in 1999 and portrays anthropomorphic sea creatures living in the fictional underwater city Bikini Bottom. The show usually centres on the everyday silly misadventures of SpongeBob and his friends. But, a frequent recurring plot is of evil Plankton’s (a zooplankton) numerous (and failed) attempts at stealing the “secret formula” to make the irresistible Krabby Patty of Mr. Krabs’ Krusty Krab restaurant .The target audience, children and young teens, interpret a good versus evil scheme, perpetuating the hegemony that evil Plankton will never prevail and that SpongeBob and Mr. Krabs are the “good guys” for foiling his plan.

However, on a deeper level, it is the materialistic goods that drive the plot: the moral economy of Mr. Krabs, the possession of the physical (and only copy) of the secret formula, and the physical body dominance. Therefore, a Marxist analysis is appropriate and important in understanding the hidden messages of how material possessions lead to wealth and ultimately empowers the owner to have control of those who do not have ownership, leading to the latter’s disempowerment.

SpongeBob, a carefree character, exudes a naïve personality that gets him easily taken advantage of. By contrast, Mr. Krabs, owner of fast food restaurant and SpongeBob’s employer, possesses a sly and calculating character. As a result, Mr. Krabs always takes advantage of the sponge chef, leading to an example of hegemony, where dominating groups (the bosses) have more power over other groups (the employees for instance) in a working society, where the workers seem to have no personal voice. The restaurant owner crustacean holds all the power. He is the one that employs SpongeBob as the cook that gives him a low wage job. But, it is Mr. Krabs who is really benefitting and earning almost the entire profit margin. SpongeBob has accepted this as normal as a result of Mr. Krabs feeding him praises and nonsensical excuses to encourage him to work his best while exploiting his worker’s rights.

Even merely possessing the one –of- a -kind on paper secret formula has given Mr. Krabs great power in the fast food industry. This secret ingredient that Plankton has been trying to steal from him has started a huge rivalry. Plankton believes that just possessing the formula is the key to turning his lacking -of -quality -food restaurant into a booming business. This motive alone sends an ideological message to children that as long as you possess some physical secret weapon, even if you steal it, you will be successful.

Aside from SpongeBob’s naivety, Plankton’s diminutive size emphasizes his disempowerment. Being only 4 inches tall is a serious disadvantage when trying to physically overcome a crab 20 times his size. To me, their difference in statures is a powerful symbolism that once again reinforces to the child audience that evil will never win. Once again, just by having a size trait, there is an obvious and unquestionable immediate sense of empowerment and

SpongeBob Squarepants has been quite a popular show for children. At first, the show gives off a strong childhood innocence vibe. However, deeper analysis can reveal the subtle messages of power based on possession of certain economies, whether they are intangible ones or physical ones that you can own. Since children are not likely to overthink the more intense messages broadcasted, it is very unlikely for the young target audience to realize that they are exposing themselves to a hegemony. In the long run, negative effects may show after these children grow up into teenagers and subconsciously have accepted that naturally, there will be rightful empowerment and rightful disempowerment in their lives without stopping to question any of it.

1. What do you think of these Marxist interpretations? Are they intended to be humorous or do they offer genuine insights into the views of society that the media constructs for our children?
2. Create your own Marxist interpretation of a well-known nursery rhyme, fairy tale or TV show and prepare to present it to the rest of the class.

**Activity 6**

The following extracts both present a Marxist interpretation of “Death of a Salesman” but their findings contrast significantly:

***‘Simplified/vulgar’ Marxist interpretation:***

In “Death of a Salesman,” two major ideologies come into direct conflict: the play moves from the homespun myth of the fierce individualist who has pulled himself up by the bootstraps and into fame and fortune (i.e. Willy's father and Ben, his brother) to the harsh realities of industrial capitalist society. Both ideologies equate happiness with economic success. Willy thinks he can achieve this goal with a smile and handshake. He places image before substance. This idea coupled with a belief that the simplest and most humble can rise to the greatest heights form the core of Willy's motivation. It is also the source of his greatest struggle. Willy becomes Miller's ideological champion of the common man. Though he fails, Willy challenges the fixed notion of a class system.

Willy’s boss, Howard is Willy's ideological opponent. He embodies the growing amoral view of business: survival of the fittest, profit at any price. This efficiency ideology transforms society into an entity that produces soulless machine-like people. The animosity this ideology expresses toward Willy exemplifies the class struggle. In this manner Willy becomes a kind of Marxist Everyman. He embodies the plight of the proletariat and confirms the Marxist view of history as a struggle to become free from oppression.

It is possible to read Linda as a Marxist figure within the play because she understands the importance, the value, of Willy (the proletariat), even though she has an influential role in his suicide.

Biff’s self-discovery late in the play demonstrates a different way to struggle against this bleak world view. A spark of self-awareness can be seen in Biff, the wanderer returned home. By the conclusion of the play this spark has blossomed into self-realization. Biff begins to assign higher meaning to his life, meaning beyond financial standards. There is hope that through this process of self-realization, Biff can avoid meeting Willy's fate.

From a Marxist perspective, the play is a broad based attack of industrial society as a whole. The modern world should accept at least partial responsibility for those like Willy who lead pathetic lives and suffer senseless deaths. ‘Death of a Salesman’ is **a powerful indictment of industrial capitalism as a whole** with Willy Loman representing the tragic fate that awaits us all.

***A ‘subtle, more scathing’ Marxist critique:***

Howard, Willy's godson and employer, is not a monster. He has an infatuation with gadgetry and a proud love of his children not unlike Willy. If this were truly a vulgar Marxist commentary, Howard would be more an oppressive tyrant than a self-consumed father. Willy must also accept some of the responsibility for his downfall. His blindness is partially self-induced. His character is not totally dominated by the oppressive capitalist environment. Not all people suffer the fate of Willy Loman. Charley and Bernard work hard, and they not only survive, they thrive in Willy's world. **Capitalism is thus praised and punished within the play.**

The most debilitating blow dealt to a vulgar Marxist interpretation is the discovery of a paradox fundamental to the supposed message of the play. Money is the only viable solution presented to problems in the play. More money makes an act more acceptable. Charley gives Willy money. Ben tries to entice Willy to Alaska with the promise of money. Biff tries to redeem himself by earning more money. Linda equates money with freedom. Willy ends his life because he is worth more dead than alive. Self-worth is not something one can receive from a neighbor or give to a son. The only logical alternative that occurs to the characters is an economic one. Only Biff searches for higher values, values beyond the dollar sign.

1. Try to explain in your own words the contrasts between these two analyses.
2. Do you agree with either view? Explain your answer.
3. Does applying a Marxist ideology add to your understanding of the play? Or are these issues that you consider to be inherent to the play and the point that Miller was trying to make?

**Wider reading**

* Below is a list of accessible introductions to literary theory, aimed at A level students and undergraduates:
* Barry, P (2009) Beginning Theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory.
* Culler, J (2011) Literary Theory: A very short introduction.
* Eaglestone, R (2009) Doing English: A guide for Literature students.
* Eagleton, T (2008) Literary Theory: An introduction.
* Jacobs, R (2001) A beginner’s guide to critical reading: An anthology of literary texts: readings for students.
* Tyson, L (2006) Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide.

**Further useful resources**

* The following resources will help you to broaden your understanding of literary theory, introducing you to a range of different arguments and perspectives:
* BBC Radio 4: In our time – Melvyn Bragg’s discussion series features a number of topics relevant to literary theory, including episodes on cultural imperialism, epistolary literature, modernism, the pastoral, Marxism and feminism. All past episodes are available online via the programme’s home page.
* Oxford Podcasts: Challenging the canon – A provocative series of lectures, aimed at potential undergraduates, exploring some of the debates surround the literary canon.
* Purdue University’s online writing lab – A useful online guide to key questions raised by different critical and theoretical approaches

***The Mask of Anarchy***

As I lay asleep in Italy

There came a voice from over the Sea,

And with great power it forth led me

To walk in the visions of Poesy.

I met Murder on the way—

He had a mask like Castlereagh—

Very smooth he looked, yet grim ;

Seven blood-hounds followed him :

All were fat ; and well they might

Be in admirable plight,

For one by one, and two by two,

He tossed them human hearts to chew

Which from his wide cloak he drew.

Next came Fraud, and he had on,

Like Lord Eldon, an ermined gown ;

His big tears, for he wept well,

Turned to mill-stones as they fell.

And the little children, who

Round his feet played to and fro,

Thinking every tear a gem,

Had their brains knocked out by them.

Clothed with the Bible, as with light,

And the shadows of the night,

Like Sidmouth, next, Hypocrisy

On a crocodile rode by.

And many more Destructions played

In this ghastly masquerade,

All disguised, even to the eyes,

Like Bishops, lawyers, peers, and spies.

Last came Anarchy : he rode

On a white horse, splashed with blood ;

He was pale even to the lips,

Like Death in the Apocalypse.

And he wore a kingly crown ;

And in his grasp a sceptre shone ;

On his brow this mark I saw—

‘I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!’

With a pace stately and fast,

Over English land he passed,

Trampling to a mire of blood

The adoring multitude.

And with a mighty troop around

With their trampling shook the ground,

Waving each a bloody sword,

For the service of their Lord.

And with glorious triumph they

Rode through England proud and gay,

Drunk as with intoxication

Of the wine of desolation.

O’er fields and towns, from sea to sea,

Passed the Pageant swift and free,

Tearing up, and trampling down ;

Till they came to London town.

And each dweller, panic-stricken,

Felt his heart with terror sicken

Hearing the tempestuous cry

Of the triumph of Anarchy.

For from pomp to meet him came,

Clothed in arms like blood and flame,

The hired murderers, who did sing

‘Thou art God, and Law, and King.

‘We have waited weak and lone

For thy coming, Mighty One!

Our purses are empty, our swords are cold,

Give us glory, and blood, and gold.’

Lawyers and priests a motley crowd,

To the earth their pale brows bowed ;

Like a bad prayer not over loud,

Whispering—‘Thou art Law and God.’—

Then all cried with one accord,

‘Thou art King, and God, and Lord ;

Anarchy, to thee we bow,

Be thy name made holy now!’

And Anarchy, the Skeleton,

Bowed and grinned to every one,

As well as if his education

Had cost ten millions to the nation.

For he knew the Palaces

Of our Kings were rightly his ;

His the sceptre, crown, and globe,

And the gold-inwoven robe.

So he sent his slaves before

To seize upon the Bank and Tower,

And was proceeding with intent

To meet his pensioned Parliament

When one fled past, a maniac maid,

And her name was Hope, she said :

But she looked more like Despair,

And she cried out in the air :

‘My father Time is weak and gray

With waiting for a better day ;

See how idiot-like he stands,

Fumbling with his palsied hands!

‘He has had child after child,

And the dust of death is piled

Over every one but me—

Misery, oh, Misery!’

Then she lay down in the street,

Right before the horses feet,

Expecting, with a patient eye,

Murder, Fraud, and Anarchy.

When between her and her foes

A mist, a light, an image rose.

Small at first, and weak, and frail

Like the vapour of a vale :

Till as clouds grow on the blast,

Like tower-crowned giants striding fast,

And glare with lightnings as they fly,

And speak in thunder to the sky.

It grew—a Shape arrayed in mail

Brighter than the viper’s scale,

And upborne on wings whose grain

Was as the light of sunny rain.

On its helm, seen far away,

A planet, like the Morning’s, lay ;

And those plumes its light rained through

Like a shower of crimson dew.

With step as soft as wind it passed

O’er the heads of men—so fast

That they knew the presence there,

And looked,—but all was empty air.

As flowers beneath May’s footstep waken,

As stars from Night’s loose hair are shaken,

As waves arise when loud winds call,

Thoughts sprung where’er that step did fall.

And the prostrate multitude

Looked—and ankle-deep in blood,

Hope, that maiden most serene,

Was walking with a quiet mien :

And Anarchy, the ghastly birth,

Lay dead earth upon the earth ;

The Horse of Death tameless as wind

Fled, and with his hoofs did grind

To dust the murderers thronged behind.

A rushing light of clouds and splendour,

A sense awakening and yet tender

Was heard and felt—and at its close

These words of joy and fear arose

As if their own indignant Earth

Which gave the sons of England birth

Had felt their blood upon her brow,

And shuddering with a mother’s throe

Had turned every drop of blood

By which her face had been bedewed

To an accent unwithstood,—

As if her heart cried out aloud :

‘Men of England, heirs of Glory,

Heroes of unwritten story,

Nurslings of one mighty Mother,

Hopes of her, and one another ;

‘Rise like Lions after slumber

In unvanquishable number.

Shake your chains to earth like dew

Which in sleep had fallen on you—

Ye are many—they are few.

‘What is Freedom?—ye can tell

That which slavery is, too well—

For its very name has grown

To an echo of your own.

‘’Tis to work and have such pay

As just keeps life from day to day

In your limbs, as in a cell

For the tyrants’ use to dwell,

‘So that ye for them are made

Loom, and plough, and sword, and spade,

With or without your own will bent

To their defence and nourishment.

‘’Tis to see your children weak

With their mothers pine and peak,

When the winter winds are bleak,—

They are dying whilst I speak.

‘’Tis to hunger for such diet

As the rich man in his riot

Casts to the fat dogs that lie

Surfeiting beneath his eye ;

‘’Tis to let the Ghost of Gold

Take from Toil a thousandfold

More than e’er its substance could

In the tyrannies of old.

‘Paper coin—that forgery

Of the title-deeds, which ye

Hold to something from the worth

Of the inheritance of Earth.

‘’Tis to be a slave in soul

And to hold no strong control

Over your own wills, but be

All that others make of ye.

‘And at length when ye complain

With a murmur weak and vain

’Tis to see the Tyrant’s crew

Ride over your wives and you—

Blood is on the grass like dew.

‘Then it is to feel revenge

Fiercely thirsting to exchange

Blood for blood—and wrong for wrong—

Do not thus when ye are strong.

‘Birds find rest, in narrow nest

When weary of their wingèd quest ;

Beasts find fare, in woody lair

When storm and snow are in the air.

‘Horses, oxen, have a home,

When from daily toil they come ;

Household dogs, when the wind roars,

Find a home within warm doors.’

‘Asses, swine, have litter spread

And with fitting food are fed ;

All things have a home but one—

Thou, Oh, Englishman, hast none !

‘This is Slavery—savage men,

Or wild beasts within a den

Would endure not as ye do—

But such ills they never knew.

‘What art thou, Freedom ? O ! could slaves

Answer from their living graves

This demand—tyrants would flee

Like a dream’s imagery :

‘Thou are not, as impostors say,

A shadow soon to pass away,

A superstition, and a name

Echoing from the cave of Fame.

‘For the labourer thou art bread,

And a comely table spread

From his daily labour come

In a neat and happy home.

‘Thou art clothes, and fire, and food

For the trampled multitude—

No—in countries that are free

Such starvation cannot be

As in England now we see.

‘To the rich thou art a check,

When his foot is on the neck

Of his victim, thou dost make

That he treads upon a snake.

‘Thou art Justice—ne’er for gold

May thy righteous laws be sold

As laws are in England—thou

Shield’st alike both high and low.

‘Thou art Wisdom—Freemen never

Dream that God will damn for ever

All who think those things untrue

Of which Priests make such ado.

‘Thou art Peace—never by thee

Would blood and treasure wasted be

As tyrants wasted them, when all

Leagued to quench thy flame in Gaul.

‘What if English toil and blood

Was poured forth, even as a flood ?

It availed, Oh, Liberty.

To dim, but not extinguish thee.

‘Thou art Love—the rich have kissed

Thy feet, and like him following Christ,

Give their substance to the free

And through the rough world follow thee,

‘Or turn their wealth to arms, and make

War for thy belovèd sake

On wealth, and war, and fraud—whence they

Drew the power which is their prey.

‘Science, Poetry, and Thought

Are thy lamps ; they make the lot

Of the dwellers in a cot

So serene, they curse it not.

‘Spirit, Patience, Gentleness,

All that can adorn and bless

Art thou—let deeds, not words, express

Thine exceeding loveliness.

‘Let a great Assembly be

Of the fearless and the free

On some spot of English ground

Where the plains stretch wide around.

‘Let the blue sky overhead,

The green earth on which ye tread,

All that must eternal be

Witness the solemnity.

‘From the corners uttermost

Of the bounds of English coast ;

From every hut, village, and town

Where those who live and suffer moan

For others’ misery or their own,

‘From the workhouse and the prison

Where pale as corpses newly risen,

Women, children, young and old

Groan for pain, and weep for cold—

‘From the haunts of daily life

Where is waged the daily strife

With common wants and common cares

Which sows the human heart with tares—

‘Lastly from the palaces

Where the murmur of distress

Echoes, like the distant sound

Of a wind alive around

‘Those prison halls of wealth and fashion.

Where some few feel such compassion

For those who groan, and toil, and wail

As must make their brethren pale—

‘Ye who suffer woes untold,

Or to feel, or to behold

Your lost country bought and sold

With a price of blood and gold—

‘Let a vast assembly be,

And with great solemnity

Declare with measured words that ye

Are, as God has made ye, free—

‘Be your strong and simple words

Keen to wound as sharpened swords,

And wide as targes let them be,

With their shade to cover ye.

‘Let the tyrants pour around

With a quick and startling sound,

Like the loosening of a sea,

Troops of armed emblazonry.

‘Let the charged artillery drive

Till the dead air seems alive

With the clash of clanging wheels,

And the tramp of horses’ heels.

‘Let the fixèd bayonet

Gleam with sharp desire to wet

Its bright point in English blood

Looking keen as one for food.

‘Let the horsemen’s scimitars

Wheel and flash, like sphereless stars

Thirsting to eclipse their burning

In a sea of death and mourning.

‘Stand ye calm and resolute,

Like a forest close and mute,

With folded arms and looks which are

Weapons of unvanquished war,

‘And let Panic, who outspeeds

The career of armèd steeds

Pass, a disregarded shade

Through your phalanx undismayed.

‘Let the laws of your own land,

Good or ill, between ye stand

Hand to hand, and foot to foot,

Arbiters of the dispute,

‘The old laws of England—they

Whose reverend heads with age are gray,

Children of a wiser day ;

And whose solemn voice must be

Thine own echo—Liberty !

‘On those who first should violate

Such sacred heralds in their state

Rest the blood that must ensue,

And it will not rest on you.

‘And if then the tyrants dare

Let them ride among you there,

Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew, —

What they like, that let them do.

‘With folded arms and steady eyes,

And little fear, and less surprise,

Look upon them as they slay

Till their rage has died away.’

‘Then they will return with shame

To the place from which they came,

And the blood thus shed will speak

In hot blushes on their cheek.

‘Every woman in the land

Will point at them as they stand—

They will hardly dare to greet

Their acquaintance in the street.

‘And the bold, true warriors

Who have hugged Danger in wars

Will turn to those who would be free,

Ashamed of such base company.

‘And that slaughter to the Nation

Shall steam up like inspiration,

Eloquent, oracular ;

A volcano heard afar.

‘And these words shall then become

Like Oppression’s thundered doom

Ringing through each heart and brain.

Heard again—again—again—

‘Rise like Lions after slumber

In unvanquishable number—

Shake your chains to earth like dew

Which in sleep had fallen on you—

Ye are many—they are few.’

**An introduction to 'The Masque of Anarchy'**

*Professor John Mullan analyses how Shelley transformed his political passion, and a personal grudge, into poetry.*

Percy Bysshe Shelley was living in Italy when news reached him of the Peterloo Massacre. On 16 August 1819 a crowd of well over 50,000 had gathered at St. Peter’s Fields outside Manchester to support parliamentary reform. The radical orator Henry Hunt was to speak in favour of widening the franchise and reforming Britain’s notoriously corrupt system of political representation, with its ‘pocket’ and ‘rotten’ boroughs. Magistrates ordered the Manchester Yeomanry (recruited from amongst the local middle classes) to disperse the demonstration. The cavalry charged the crowd, sabres drawn. At least 15 demonstrators, including a woman and a child, were killed, and many more wounded.

**Documenting and supressing**

The events of the day were widely documented and described. The businessman John Taylor, who had witnessed the aftermath, went on to set up the Guardian newspaper in response. And it was via newspapers, almost a month later, that Shelley found out what had happened. ‘The torrent of my indignation’, as he put it, flowed into The Masque of Anarchy. It was a poem devised to be accessible to a wide readership but doomed not to reach it. Though Shelley sent it back to England, his friend Leigh Hunt felt that it could not be safely published. So-called ‘Gagging Acts’ had been introduced to restrict published political protest. The perpetrators of the Massacre had been exonerated, but the organisers of the demonstration had been imprisoned. Shelley’s poem remained unpublished until the 1830s.

**Apocalyptic vision**

The poem is a prophetic dream, in which the political crisis of Regency England is turned into an apocalyptic vision. In the first part of the poem the nation’s leading politicians parade like monsters, leading the figure of Anarchy, on a white horse, to trample the multitude who adore him. In this vision, the true anarchists are Britain’s rulers, who delight in fear and disorder. Anarchy’s followers, who include ‘Lawyers and priests’, take possession of Palace, Bank and Parliament. They are challenged only by a ‘maniac maid’ called Hope, though ‘she looked more like Despair’.

Like the protestors outside Manchester, she is about to be trampled between the horse’s hooves when a shape arises like a mist to kill Anarchy, ‘the ghastly birth’. Now we hear ‘an accent unwithstood’ of a voice advocating Freedom and encouraging the people to seize it. We see ‘a great Assembly ... Of the fearless and the free’ assailed, like the Peterloo crowds, by the troops of their rulers. Yet their bayonets and scimitars are somehow defeated by the resolution of the people.

**Grotesques**

The title of Shelley’s poem refers both to a dramatic pageant (like the masques that monarchs staged to celebrate their power) and an organised deception (the ‘masquerade’ of those who conspire together to rule the country). As if to confirm this ambiguity, the poem was called ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ in manuscript, but ‘The Masque of Anarchy’ when eventually printed. The images of these gloatingly sinister men of power also recall contemporary caricatures, such as those of James Gillray, in which the nation’s rulers assume the grotesque shapes of their true desires.

The individual politicians are reduced to personifications of eternal vices.

I met Murder on the way -

 He had a mask like Castlereagh -

 Very smooth he looked, yet grim;

 Seven blood-hounds followed him

Tory leader and Foreign Secretary Viscount Castlereagh was a spokesman for the harsh measures of political repression that followed the Massacre.

Next came Fraud, and he had on,

 Like Eldon, an ermined gown;

 His big tears, for he wept well,

 Turned to mill-stones as they fell.

This was personal as well as political. Lord Eldon was Lord Chancellor. He had sat in judgement on the fate of Shelley’s children by his first wife, Harriet, after her suicide. He had refused Shelley custody because of his ‘immoral and vicious’ principles.

**Experimentation**

Shelley’s political passions were notorious and are still famous, but it was not these that made him a great poet. He was always trying out different verse forms; each new poem was a new experiment with rhyme and metre. The vision is recounted in the same stanzas as were used in popular ballads, and dizzyingly mixes poetic wit with furious hyperbole.

**Other radical writings**

Other writers also used popular verse forms to express their indignation – anonymously, to avoid prosecution. One such published protest, which was hugely popular, was William Hone’s verse satire The Political House that Jack Built (1819), with George Cruikshank illustrations.

The caution of Shelley’s friends meant that his incendiary ballad was denied such immediate impact. Shelley died in 1822 and his widow, Mary Shelley, sent the manuscript to Sir John Bowring, political reformer and editor of the Westminster Review, in 1826. It is now held by the British Library. The poem was not published until 1832.

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