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The Political Imagination in British and American Literature before the Second World War

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Abstract:

*This research paper examines the concept of "political imagination" in British and American literature during the years leading up to the Second World War. The term political imagination refers to the human ability to transcend current political reality and visualize a more just and fairer world. The article attempts to show how creative writing serves as a catalyst for social reform by making readers feel empathy for the oppressed. Literature acts like a "gymnasium" where the mind learns to fight for the principles of justice and equality. The body of the paper focuses on the works of five influential authors: Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, George Orwell, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. In the British context, Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* provides a sharp critique of industrial society and demands social justice for the poor. John Ruskin, in *Unto This Last*, argues for "ethical socialism" by famously stating that human life is more valuable than money. George Orwell's pre-war writings, such as *The Road to Wigan Pier*, explore how "democratic socialism" can protect individual liberty from dictators. In American literature, Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* emphasizes that an individual's conscience is higher than any government law. Finally, Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* presents a radical vision of democracy that includes grassroots politics and equality for all people. The political imagination of these authors has helped the world understand the benefits of democracy, socialism, and liberty. Their literary visions successfully paved the way for these important principles to be adopted in modern real-world governance.*

Keywords: Political Imagination, Literature and Politics, Social Reform, Democracy, Socialism, Liberty, Equality, Social Justice, Secularism, Individual Conscience, Industrial Revolution, Utilitarianism.

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INTRODUCTION:

Political imagination is not just a fancy term used by scholars. It is the special power of the

human mind to look at the world and see how it can be made better. Usually, people think

that politics is only about the government, voting, or who has power over others. But the political imagination is about "transcending political reality" and dreaming of a fairer society (Duncombe and

Harrebye 1). When we use our imagination this way, we challenge the standard way of doing things. We start to visualize a future where every person has dignity and rights. This is very important because leaders often say that things cannot change. However, the political imagination creates a "dreampolitik" that shows us that a better world is always possible (Duncombe and Harrebye 1). There is a very deep relation between literature and politics. Many people think that stories and poems are only for entertainment or time-pass. But literature is actually a "democratic gymnasium" where the mind learns how to fight for justice (Henkel 107). Literature allows a reader to "go visiting" outside their own small life and understand the struggles of others (Duncombe and Harrebye 4). When a writer describes a character who is suffering because of an unfair law, they are criticizing the current political system. For example, a writer might show the "darker side" of society, such as poverty and the gap between the rich and the poor (Padra 346). By doing this, the writer acts as a catalyst for social reform. They make the readers feel empathy,

which eventually leads to real political change.

In the years before the Second World War, many British and American authors used their political imagination to change the world. This was a time of great trouble and change. In Britain, Charles Dickens used his novels to show the "plight of the poor and oppressed" during the Industrial Revolution (Padra 357). John Ruskin wrote about "ethical socialism" and argued that human life is more valuable than money (Boos). Later, George Orwell explored how "democratic socialism" could protect individual freedom from dictators (Husaynova et al. 136). In America, Henry David Thoreau taught the world that our own "conscience" is more important than unjust government laws (Wikipedia, "Civil Disobedience"). Walt Whitman saw democracy as a "great word" whose history is still being written by common people (Henkel 101).

These five authors used their works to help the world understand principles like democracy, socialism, liberty, and social justice. They did not just write stories; they created a vision of a world where everyone is equal. Through their imagination, they made people believe that these principles are beneficial for all humanity. Eventually, these

literary visions helped the world to adopt these concepts in real life. This paper analyzes how these writers used their political imagination to build the moral foundations of our modern society.

Charles Dickens: Social Justice and the Critique of Industry

Charles Dickens, the famous British novelist had a deep feeling for the poor people of England. During his time, the Industrial Revolution was changing everything. He grew up seeing the "stark divide" between the rich people and the poor masses in the crowded streets (Padra 352). His novel *Hard Times* is a great example of his political imagination. It is set in a fictional place called "Coketown." This town was full of "red brick," "smoke and ashes," and "ill-smelling dye" (Raj). Dickens describes Coketown as a "dystopia" where nature was completely "bricked out" to make room for factories (Raj). By showing this "darker side" of industrial growth, Dickens wanted his readers to see that the pursuit of profit alone was making the world an ugly citadel.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens critiques a system called "Utilitarianism." This was a way of thinking where everything was judged only by its use and profit. The character Thomas Gradgrind is a man who believes only in

"Facts" and nothing else. He tells his students to "plant nothing else, and root out everything else" except facts (Raj). He treats his children and students like "reasoning animals" and tries to kill their "imagination" (Raj). Dickens shows that this kind of education was meant to produce "obedient and compliant workers" for the greedy industrialists (Raj). In this system, human beings were not treated as people with feelings but as "mere automatons" (Padra 379). Dickens used his writing to protest against this "mental mechanization" because he believed that "fancy" and creativity are essential for human happiness (Raj).

Dickens also uses his novel to demand "social justice" and "equality" for the working class. He introduces us to Stephen Blackpool, who is a weaver of "perfect integrity" (Padra 361). But Stephen is "trapped in a system" that only wants to exploit and oppress him (Padra 343). He becomes a powerful symbol of the "plight of the working class" (Padra 343). On the other side, there is Mr. Bounderby, a rich factory owner who is very cold-hearted and treats his workers like commodities. Dickens highlights the huge gap between the haves and have-nots in Victorian society. He shows that though industrialization brought huge wealth, it also caused great social upheaval and poverty for the poor—in place of

prosperity. Through Stephen's struggle, Dickens argues that a society without "human decency and empathy" is a failing society (Padra 366).

The most significant aspect of Dickens' vision is his belief in the inherent dignity of every individual. Through characters such as Sissy Jupe, he represents the resilience of the human spirit. Unlike the other students in Gradgrind's rigid educational system, Sissy preserves her imagination, sympathy, and emotional sensitivity. Dickens suggests that these human qualities possess greater value than material success or an excessive dependence on facts and calculations. Through her character, he emphasises that kindness, compassion, and purity of heart are essential for preserving human dignity in a mechanised and materialistic society. His books were not just stories for entertainment. They acted as a "catalyst for social reform" and helped in passing new laws to protect children and workers (Padra 346-47, 398). By creating a strong sense of pathos and solidarity between readers and his characters, Dickens encourages society to recognise that social justice is essential for the creation of a compassionate and egalitarian social order.

John Ruskin: Ethical Socialism and the Value of Life

John Ruskin was one of the most influential Victorian thinkers who used his political imagination to challenge the materialistic and profit-driven values of his age. His most significant work on social and economic issues is *Unto This Last*, a collection of essays that sharply criticised the moral foundations of industrial capitalism. When these essays were first published in 1860, they generated intense controversy because of their direct attack on accepted economic beliefs. The reaction was so strong that the magazine publishing them was compelled to discontinue the series after only a few instalments. (Boos). Ruskin's own father was a very wealthy and conservative wine merchant who did not like his son's radical views on social inequality. However, Ruskin felt that literature should be a tool to define a just society. He used his writing to show the world that a nation's true strength is not found in its bank accounts, but in the character and happiness of its people.

Ruskin was very critical of the "political economists" of the 19th century. He felt that their theories were wrong because they assumed all human beings are naturally "dishonest" and only care about themselves. These economic thinkers believed that society should be organised around "economic competition" and the pursuit of

profit alone. Ruskin's political imagination strongly opposed this view and instead envisioned a "moral, cohesive society" founded on mutual care and social responsibility. He argued that the interests of the "master and man" were not naturally opposed when both acted with honesty and love. For Ruskin, a healthy economy depended upon co-operation rather than conflict. He therefore regarded unchecked competition as the "law of death" for a nation, since it weakened both social unity and human welfare. (Boos).

The central idea of Ruskin's vision is expressed in his most famous statement: "There is no wealth but life." This statement reshaped contemporary thinking about socialism and social justice. For Ruskin, true wealth cannot be reduced to gold, money, or property. He argues that the richest nation is the one which "nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings." He also introduces the term "illth" to describe forms of wealth that are created through harm, pollution, or destruction. Through this vivid language, he made the world understand that "human life" is the only real currency that matters and that the goal of all production should be to sustain that life (Boos). Ruskin did not limit himself to imagining a better society; he also proposed practical reforms

for achieving social justice. Through his political imagination, he argued that the government should ensure access to primary schools and trade schools for all children. He further maintained that the state has a responsibility to provide "work for the willing unemployed" and financial support for the "old and destitute." These measures were intended to secure "the welfare of all" rather than the benefit of a few. Ruskin also challenged conventional ideas of wages, arguing that a "just reward" for labour should be based on the "worker's necessities" rather than the lowest price determined by the market (Boos). These concepts eventually helped the world move toward the modern idea of the welfare state.

The impact of Ruskin's literary vision extended far beyond Britain and reached global audiences. In Britain, *Unto This Last* was widely read and came to be regarded as one of the most influential texts among the early leaders of the "Independent Labour Party." More significantly, the work travelled to India and deeply influenced Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was so impressed by *Unto This Last* that he translated it as *Sarvodaya*, meaning "The Welfare of All." This translation helped spread ideas of equality and social justice within the Indian freedom struggle. Through his powerful writing,

Ruskin successfully made the world adopt the idea that "human decency" and "mercantile self-sacrifice" are essential for any good government (Boos).

George Orwell: Pre-War Liberty and Democratic Socialism

George Orwell was a writer who always wanted to test his political imagination against the reality of life. Before the Second World War, he was very worried about the gap between the rich and the poor. He did not remain confined to his office or limited to writing stories. He chose instead to live among poor communities in order to understand their suffering more closely. This act was a conscious rejection of his "privileged background" and an expression of solidarity with the working class. (Husaynova et al. 134-35). In his book *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he describes the "harsh living and working conditions" of coal miners in northern England. Through this account, he constructs a "powerful indictment of industrial capitalism" and calls for social justice for those at the lowest levels of society (Husaynova et al. 137).

Orwell's political imagination helped him see that socialism should be based on "human dignity" and "common decency" (Husaynova et al. 136; "Homage to Catalonia"). He was

very critical of "parlor socialists"—middle-class intellectuals who talked about a "classless society" but in their hearts still looked down on the poor (Husaynova et al. 135). He felt that these people used too much "jargon" and complicated theories that ordinary people could not understand (Husaynova et al. 136). Orwell believed that socialism must be "understandable to ordinary people" to be effective (Husaynova et al. 136). He argued that political change is not just about economics, but about a moral revolution that removes prejudice and brings equality to all (Husaynova et al. 135, 138).

In 1936, Orwell took a very brave step and went to fight in the Spanish Civil War to oppose fascist forces. In his book *Homage to Catalonia*, he describes the "revolutionary atmosphere" of Barcelona, where for a short time, the "working class was in the saddle" (Husaynova et al. 135; Wikipedia, Wikipedia, "Homage to Catalonia"). He was deeply moved by his experience of a society in which "ordinary class-division" had disappeared and people treated one another as equals. He observed that honorific and servile terms such as "Señor" were no longer in use, since social relations had become more equal. This experience strengthened his commitment to "democratic socialism," as he had directly felt

what a more just and egalitarian society could be like (Wikipedia, "Homage to Catalonia").

However, Orwell also used his political imagination to warn the world about the dangers of totalitarianism. In Spain, he saw how "Stalinist forces" betrayed the revolution and used propaganda and lies to suppress other groups. He realized that some people were using the name of socialism to create a dictatorship. This led him to argue that socialism is only good if it also protects "individual liberty" and "freedom of speech" (Husaynova et al. 136). He believed that "individual conscience" is the most important thing and that people must have the right to think for themselves (Husaynova et al. 136). He also showed a secular mindset by criticizing the Catholic Church in Spain, calling it a "racket" that worked against the poor people (Wikipedia, "Homage to Catalonia").

Orwell's writing style itself forms an important part of his political vision. He believed that "clear, understandable language" is essential for the functioning of a healthy democracy. He also argued that political leaders often rely on "nonsensical words" to conceal uncomfortable truths and to manipulate public opinion. By adopting a simple and direct style of writing, Orwell

aimed to empower "ordinary people" so that they could recognise and resist political deception (Husaynova et al. 136). His pre-war works helped the world understand that liberty and social justice are not just dreams, but necessary goals for a fair society. Through his powerful words, Orwell pushed the world to adopt a form of socialism that values both equality and the freedom of the human spirit.

Henry David Thoreau: Individual Liberty and Moral Resistance

Henry David Thoreau was a very important American thinker who lived during a time of great change. He was part of a movement called "Transcendentalism," which valued nature and the individual spirit. Thoreau used his "political imagination" to challenge the power of the state and the greed of modern life. He believed that a person's own "conscience" is the highest authority. For him, being a true citizen did not mean just following every law. Instead, it meant doing what is morally right, even if the government says otherwise (Wikipedia, "Civil Disobedience").

In his famous essay *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau argues that individuals should not passively obey

“unjust laws.” He develops this argument in response to his strong opposition to slavery and the Mexican-American War. Thoreau believes that when a law forces a person to become an “agent of injustice” toward another human being, moral responsibility demands that one must “break the law.” (Wikipedia, "Civil Disobedience"). Thoreau famously refused to pay his taxes to protest these wrongs and even went to jail for a short time (Komut Bakınç 235). Through this act, he showed the world that liberty is not a gift from the government, but a duty that every person must protect using their own moral strength.

Thoreau also presents a distinctive understanding of democracy. He questions the belief that the majority should always determine what is right or just. According to him, a majority may possess political power, but it does not necessarily possess the “virtue” or “wisdom” required to make morally just decisions (Wikipedia, "Civil Disobedience"). He famously said, "That government is best which governs least" (Komut Bakınç 235). This was part of his "political imagination" to dream of a future where the state recognizes the individual as a higher and independent power. He wanted a world where people are just because they

choose to be, not because they are forced by the police.

In his book *Walden*, Thoreau describes his experiment of living simply in a small cabin in the woods. He wanted to show that a person can be rich without having much money or property. He was very critical of the "Industrial Revolution" because it made people "tools of their tools" (Komut Bakınç 223, 234). He believed that the pursuit of wealth was causing the "degradation of human values"

(Komut Bakınç 219). In *Walden*, he tells us to "enjoy the land but own it not" (Komut Bakınç 229).

This is a very socialist idea in a way, because he wanted people to value human life and nature more than private property.

Through his works, Thoreau helped the world understand that liberty and social justice are worth fighting for. His political imagination did not just stay in books; it travelled across the ocean and influenced great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi (Komut Bakınç 235). Gandhi used Thoreau's principles of "non-violent resistance" to fight for Indian independence. Later, Martin Luther King Jr. also used these ideas in the American civil rights movement (Komut Bakınç 235). By

teaching us that "unjust laws" must be resisted, Thoreau's literary vision eventually made the modern world adopt much stronger principles of individual rights and human dignity.

Walt Whitman: Radical Democracy and the Common Man

Walt Whitman was a very energetic American poet who is often called the "Bard of Democracy." He had a very large and active political imagination that allowed him to see the great future of his country. For Whitman, democracy was not just a system of government that was already finished or completed. Instead, he wrote that it is a "great word" whose real history has not yet been written because it still needs to be "enacted" by the people (Henkel 101). In his famous essay *Democratic Vistas*, he looked ahead to imagine a version of democracy that was much more "radical" and inclusive than anything the world had seen before (Henkel 101). He wanted his readers to understand that democracy is a living project that grows every day through the people's efforts.

One of the most important parts of Whitman's vision was his belief in "grassroots politics." He did not believe that democracy was only meant for "elections," "voting," or "party names" (Henkel 103, 118). Instead, his

political imagination wanted to see the principles of democracy enter all public and private life. He even suggested that institutions traditionally associated with strict discipline, such as the army and the navy, should become more democratic in structure and functioning. Through this idea, he emphasises that every individual should possess both a force and a voice in shaping the organisation of society and its institutions. (Henkel 118-121). He believed that true liberty is found when people take responsibility for their own lives and their own laws.

Whitman's imagination was very different from other thinkers of his time who wanted "elite leaders" to run everything. For example, he wrote *Democratic Vistas* to argue against Thomas Carlyle, who called common people a "swarm" that needed to be controlled by "heroes" (Henkel 101-02, 109-10). Whitman strongly disagreed with this elitist view. He had a deep "faith" in what he called the

"unnamed, unknown rank and file"—the ordinary working men and women of the world (Henkel 102, 104). He believed that every "common man" has the "genius" and the "natural capacity" to govern themselves (Henkel 104-05, 110). His writing helped the

world understand that a nation's strength comes from its ordinary citizens and not just from a few powerful leaders.

Whitman also used his writings to promote ideas of equality and social justice. He was among the earliest major writers to express “nascent support” for the “suffrage movement” and for women’s right to vote. Through his political imagination, he envisioned a future in which women would stand as “robust equals” and “practical deciders” alongside men in public and social life. Although he belonged to the nineteenth century, his vision sought to challenge the “fossil and unhealthy air” of social attitudes that prevented genuine equality (Henkel 117, 121). He saw democracy as a “great word” that could bring “solidarity” to all people, regardless of their background or class (Henkel 101, 107).

Through his poems in *Leaves of Grass* and his essays, Whitman helped the world adopt a very

“secular” and human-centered view of democracy (Henkel 101). He taught people that the “common man” is the real foundation of a nation's greatness. His literary vision made it possible for people to imagine a world where every individual is respected and valued. Eventually, these ideas became the

basis for modern democratic movements across the globe. Whitman’s work shows us that if we use our imagination, we can always find “new democratic vistas” to work toward for the benefit of all humanity (Henkel 122).

Conclusion

In conclusion, these five authors used their political imagination to change how we see the world today. Through their stories and essays, they made complex concepts like democracy, socialism, liberty, and social justice easy to understand and very desirable. By first making the world imagine a fairer and more equal society through literature, they successfully paved the way for these principles to be adopted in real life. Their literary visions remain a powerful reminder that words have the power to build the moral foundations of our modern society.

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