



British Literature II – Syllabus

Course Description: Though great works of art, especially paintings in large cathedrals, are often the primary icons of the Renaissance, this movement also renewed many other aspects of European culture, including reading and literature. As the Renaissance Age began to fade, a thirst for knowledge and a search for new ideas was only just beginning. In this course, we will explore some of what came about during and in subsequent eras as we read works by several great British poets, essayists, and short story writers between the 1500s-1900s.

Prerequisites: *Intro to British Literature* or equivalent experience. This course will dwell less on British history than *Intro to British Literature*, instead focusing more on individual texts and literary elements, but will provide contextual reminders of important facts.

Course Outline:

Week One: British Foundations – Jonathan Swift, excerpts from *Gulliver's Travels* & *A Modest Proposal*

Week Two: British Poetry, 1500s-1800s – Sonnets by William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, John Milton, & Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Week Three: British Poetry & Essays, 1800s – Lord Byron, Percy B. Shelley

Week Four: British Essays, *continued* – John Stuart Mill, excerpts from *On Liberty*

Week Five: British Short Fiction – H.G. Wells, “The Man Who could Work Miracles”

Week Six: British Short Fiction, *continued* – Joseph Conrad, “The Secret Sharer” & G.K. Chesterton, “The Blue Cross”

Week Seven: A British Novella – George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

Week Eight: A British Novella – Orwell, *continued*

Grading Information: All assignments will be graded using *The Advanced Writer Rubric* and averaged to receive a final course grade.

Required Texts:

Please note that, on heavier reading weeks, we will have shorter or lighter written assignments. Our goal is that students are understanding and enjoying the texts!

The student should have access to the following works, via internet links provided in each lesson, attached PDF documents provided with some lessons, or hard copies borrowed or purchased. Selections cover as wide a geographical and cultural background as possible, while still including essential works of the British literary canon.

Note on content: *While we always strive to pick clean and uplifting works, some highly valuable texts result from cultural backgrounds that involve some negative or challenging content. Therefore, we recommend that a parent or trusted adult at least briefly review works and reach out if they would like to substitute a work that matches student and/or family values.*

If you have any trouble finding a particular text, please let us know promptly so that we can help!

Week One: British Foundations

Reading: Excerpts from *Gulliver's Travels* (PDF provided) & *A Modest Proposal* (available online)

Value: Jonathan Swift's work highlights a significant time period in British history, using satire to expose political unrest, division, and hypocrisy. In addition, Swift's work provides a glimpse into the ideologies of the Enlightenment, and how those ideologies have impacted shifts in government and society as a whole.

Week Two: British Sonnets, 1500s-1800s

Reading: Sonnets by William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, John Milton, & Elizabeth Barrett Browning (PDF provided)

Value: The sonnet is a unique but popular type of British poetry with variations in form across eras and writers. A study of sonnets across centuries shows many similarities in style while also highlighting shifts in writing structures and even in societal ideals.

Week Three: British Poetry & Essays, 1800s

Reading: Lord Byron, "When We Two Parted" **AND** "She Walks in Beauty" **AND** "So We'll Go No More a Roving" **AND** "Stanzas for Beauty" (Available online)

Value: Lord Byron is considered a leading figure of the Romantic movement and one of the greatest English poets of all time. In the hundreds of poems that he wrote, Byron experimented with everything from satire to drama, narrative to tragedy, Spenserian stanzas to blank verse. Although not Byron's most well-known poems, the four poems covered in this lesson demonstrate the wide array of emotions expressed in Romantic-era poetry.

Reading: Percy B. Shelley, “Ozymandias” AND “Music when Soft Voices Die” AND “Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples” AND “Mutability [‘The flower that smiles to-day’]” (Available online)

Value: These four poems are some of Shelley's most-known and widely quoted pieces, all highlighting the grandeur, romance, beauty, and heartache of the Romantic movement.

Reading: Percy B. Shelley, excerpted portions from “In Defence of Poetry” (PDF provided)

Value: Shelly wrote both poems and essays. His well-known “In Defence of Poetry,” published posthumously in 1840, provides an excellent exploration into the controversial nature of Shelly's style while simultaneously giving readers the chance to consider the value of poetry in the literary world.

Week Four: British Essays, continued

Reading: John Stuart Mill, excerpted portions from *On Liberty* (PDF provided)

Value: Considered the “most influential English language philosopher of the nineteenth century,” John Stuart Mill published *On Liberty*, a 50,000+ word essay in 1858, outlining his opinions regarding individual liberty, government interference, and the relationship between individuals and society.

Week Five: British Short Fiction

Reading: H.G. Wells, “The Man Who Could Work Miracles” (available online or in Wells' short story anthology, *Tales of Space and Time*)

Value: Wells was a boundary-pushing author, ultimately earning the title (along with writer Jules Verne) of “the father of science fiction” through the publication of such novels as *The Time Machine* and *The Invisible Man*. In “The Man Who Could Work Miracles,” *H.G. Wells* pushes another boundary by writing a modern fantasy story in an era when fantasy fiction as a genre did not yet exist.

Week Six: British Short Fiction

Reading: Joseph Conrad, “The Secret Sharer” & G.K. Chesterton, “The Blue Cross” (available online)

Value: Conrad's work holds a unique place in British literature, as Conrad himself was neither a native Englishman nor a native English speaker. “The Secret Sharer” demonstrates Conrad's notable writing style, highly influenced by his life on the sea, in addition to his immense talent in characterization.

Chesterton's “The Blue Cross” was the first in a very successful run of fifty-three Father Brown short stories, published over the span of twenty-six years. Throughout this story, we see how Chesterton combines elegant description and prose with humor, suspense, and a strong sense of detail, revealing why the Father Brown series was so enduring.

Week Seven: British Novella

Reading: George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

Value: As a sharp critic of both capitalism found in Britain and communism found in the Soviet Union, George Orwell highlights the results of government oppression in his 1945 *Animal Farm*, written as an allegorical fable depicting the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Week Eight: British Novella

Reading: George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, continued

For this class, we provide PDF documents for some of the works and internet links for works easily accessible online. However, students are more than welcome to find their own print copies! If purchasing or borrowing hard copies, there is no required edition; the student must simply cite the edition used. Simply, **please make sure that your copy of any given text is not abridged.**

We recommend that students interact with the text (highlighting and marginal notes), but students are *not* required to own copies of the works—texts from the library are perfectly all right! If you would like to own, inexpensive copies can be found online and at used bookstores.

As students tend to experience stronger reading comprehension when not reading on a screen, we would highly recommend that students have access to a hard copy of the works (a printed out PDF works well, too!).



British Literature II

Lesson One: British Foundations

SAMPLE LESSON

As Shakespeare (yes, him again!) famously wrote, “Brevity is the soul of wit” (1)—ironically, it was for one of his chattiest characters, but that’s a story for another time.

In this class, we will be expanding our knowledge of British literature by taking a deep dive into some of the culture’s great shorter works. This week, we will get our bearings with some satirical early British writing. Next week, we’ll begin a brief analysis of poetry; then we will detour into both nonfiction, for some additional brilliant essays, and fiction, for some thought-provoking British short stories.

British author George Orwell (whom we will meet in several weeks) reminds us that “tea is one of the mainstays of civilization in this country [Britain],” (2) so we hope that you will accompany your reading with a good strong cuppa (informal British term for a *cup of tea*) while we explore some classic British literature!

MORE LITERATURE STUDY TIPS –

In *Intro to British Literature*, we discussed a handful of suggestions for how to better read and understand literature. Before we get started on this week's reading, we would like to touch on some of those again and offer a few additional suggestions.

Of course, you are always being told about the importance of independent reading. The individual encounter between reader and text lies at the heart of all literary studies. Apart from other benefits, reading increases your vocabulary: the more words you learn, and the more new meanings you discover for words you know, the easier it is to enjoy whatever the authors have set before you. To grow in your understanding and appreciation of what you read, we suggest employing these tips:

- Our first point from *Intro to British Literature* bears repeating: **understand, and keep trying to understand, the context and the intention.** What kind of culture existed when this was

written? What did the author hope to gain from this piece? You may be able to learn some of these answers before you start reading, but keep your eyes open for more clues as you go. It's easy to "judge a book by its cover," but we don't always gain the full value of a text when we do so.

- **Plan to allow plenty of time for reading**, especially if you embark on a long or challenging work. Learn to pace yourself. This will help you to work out how much time you will need to read your texts in time to complete your assignments. (i.e. we don't recommend waiting until the day before the assignment is due to start your reading!)
- **If you meet difficult passages, make the effort to go back over them.** Poets, for example, sometimes abandoned conventional word order for the sake of making more powerful emotional impact, or to fit into their chosen rhyme or rhyme pattern. This can make some of the works we will cover difficult to read.
- **Reading summaries is not cheating!** (No, reading a summary cannot take the place of reading the actual text, but it still serves a purpose.) With tough texts, we would recommend reading the summary beforehand, using it to understand unclear segments, or reviewing it afterward to make sure that you grasped the text properly.
- **Use your dictionary and take notes!** Look up words that you don't know and write down the definitions. In addition, write comments, questions, and summaries as you read, either in the margins or in a separate book. Keeping notes not only helps us remember, but it reinforces what we read in our memory and ensures that we are really comprehending what we read.
- **Reach out for help early.** Your instructor is here to support your learning and is always available for questions.

So, with these things in mind, it is time to turn back the clocks and imagine ourselves some four hundred years ago.

THE BRITISH EMPIRE –

Throughout the 1600s, the British Empire enjoyed the many new luxuries brought over from countries to the East. The British East India Company was founded in 1600 and lasted over 200 years. It was during this time that British royalty amassed incredible wealth and riches. While certain novelties like silk, spices, and tea elevated the standard of living, some of the negative impacts of international trade were also beginning to rear their ugly heads.

The number of slaves brought over from Africa during this time period was devastating. Slaves were used primarily for manual labor, although during the eighteenth century it was viewed as "fashionable" for a

wealthy British family to adopt African children as servants. As is so often the case in history, as one people group prospered and became wealthier, another suffered and struggled to survive.

JONATHAN SWIFT (1667-1745) –

Seven months before Jonathan Swift was born, his father—a lawyer—passed away, leaving the young boy largely in the care of his uncle, Godwin Swift. Although both of Swift's parents were from England, Swift spent the majority of his childhood and young adult years living in Ireland. His behavior and academic efforts were meager, and Swift graduated from Trinity College Dublin in 1682 only by a special administrative favor. Humiliated, Swift resolved to study more and spent the next several years studying eight hours each day. In 1688, with political turmoil arising in Ireland, Jonathan Swift left for England and reunited with his mother. In the years to come, Jonathan Swift would reside regularly in both countries as he began his career as a writer.

In the first few decades of the 1700s, political unrest and frustration now began to increase throughout England. Significant controversies separating the authority of church and government were rampant, and division between the Whigs and Tories—two political parties—was strong. Swift ultimately found himself aligning more with the Tories and taking a more conservative view of all that was happening in Britain. In 1726, Swift wrote his famous book *Gulliver's Travels*. In many ways, the book *Gulliver's Travels* is about the divisions that Swift saw. In 1729, Swift anonymously published his famous essay *A Modest Proposal* which relies on a shock factor to bring attention to society's insensitive and hard-hearted attitudes toward Ireland's poor people. Both of these works contain satire—a way to mock, criticize, or poke fun at important issues without using specific names or events. In fact, Jonathan Swift is most often remembered nowadays for his straightforward, almost in-your-face use of satire and irony.

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT –

Jonathan Swift is known as one of the greatest writers of the Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason. Simply put, this time period is known for the idea that **human reason would ultimately lead to freedom and both personal and societal progress.**

Isaac Newton (1643-1727), an incredibly influential scientist, mathematician, and physicist of the time, played a role in its beginnings. In 1686, Newton used mathematics to demonstrate the law of gravity, then translated such findings in support of Kepler's laws of planetary motion and in explanation of various other astronomical concepts. Three years later, writer John Locke published his “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” arguing that some knowledge, such as that of God or certain moral truths, is not innate;

rather knowledge is something gained through sensory experience and personal reflection. “The *Essay*’s influence was enormous, perhaps as great as that of any other philosophical work apart from those of Plato and Aristotle. Its importance in the English-speaking world of the 18th century can scarcely be overstated. Along with the works of Descartes, it constitutes the foundation of modern Western philosophy.” (3)

Interestingly, there is not considered to have been any unified Enlightenment; in fact, even prominent Enlightenment thinkers held varying viewpoints and often disagreed. Nonetheless, for more than the next one hundred years, the Enlightenment influenced thought and conversation, with themes of “rational questioning and belief in progress through dialogue” (4) emerging as central themes. Some key features of the Enlightenment include the following:

- an emphasis on reason over superstition
- an emphasis on science over blind faith
- an emphasis on three central goals of rational humanity: knowledge, freedom, and happiness

Both the French and American Revolutions were direct results of Enlightenment thinking. In addition, the Enlightenment led to many important societal concepts, including liberty, separation of church and state, and constitutional government. Other such concepts derived from the Enlightenment include progress, tolerance, and individualism.

TO SATIRE OR NOT TO SATIRE –

In many ways, Jonathan Swift's writing demonstrates the man's optimistic, Enlightenment-based worldview. His work is known for its dry humor and irony, in addition to its satire.

A **satire** is a genre in which human vice or folly is exposed, through such means as hyperbole, irony, ridicule, rebuke, or sarcasm. One of the most challenging aspects of this genre is that it can be interpreted in many different ways. Satires often have broad underlying messaging and can vary with interpretation.

Swift believed perhaps that by criticizing society through the use of hyperbole and distortion, he could thus improve society. He, along with many Enlightenment thinkers and writers, believed improvement, even perfection, came with the use of common sense. In this way, Swift's writing “serves as a magnifying mirror to show us our faults so that we can see how far we have strayed from reasonable behavior and how much we are controlled by our passions and our pride.” (5)

This week, we will be studying portions of Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels* along with his essay *A Modest Proposal* to see satire in action. *Gulliver's Travels* is considered one of the most notable satires in English literature, and *A Modest Proposal* will give you a glimpse at how satire can be used in nonfiction writing.

Note: You may have realized that *Gulliver's Travels* is a novel—and this class is to focus on shorter works, right? Indeed, *Gulliver's Travels* is some 90,000+ words long, and we simply cannot cover the story in its entirety here. However, the novel is split into four sections, each one almost like a short story itself. We will be reading Part I, Chapters 1-4 to get a good idea of Swift's writing style and the plot of the novel's first section. If you would like, you can read the remaining four chapters of Part I at a later point to see how this 'short story' concludes.

Assignment 1: This assignment has four parts.

Step One: Review MLA guidelines, attached with this week's lesson. (They are the same as the ones we used in *Intro to British Literature*.)

Step Two: Read the following –

- *Gulliver's Travels*, Part One: A Voyage to Lilliput: Chapters 1-4 (PDF attached)
- *A Modest Proposal* (available online; we recommend the following link:
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1080/1080-h/1080-h.htm>)

Value: Jonathan Swift's work highlights a significant time period in British history, using satire to expose political unrest, division, and hypocrisy. In addition, Swift's work provides a glimpse into the ideologies of the Enlightenment, and how those ideologies have impacted shifts in government and society as a whole.

Step Three: Write a 1-2 paragraph summary of each chapter read from *Gulliver's Travels* as well as a 1-2 paragraph summary of *A Modest Proposal*.

Step Four: Write a brief response in MLA format (200+ words) explaining what you believe Swift is exposing, mocking, and/or ridiculing in both *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*. If you need some help, you may wish to consider some of the following questions:

- The narrator's name is Lemuel Gulliver. How could this name be considered ironic?
- How is the Emperor of Lilliput described in Chapter 2? How does his appearance contrast with his character as seen throughout Chapters 2-4? What message could Swift be attempting to convey via this character?

- What might Swift be attempting to point out in the description of the emperor's 'diversions'?
- In the second half of Chapter 3, what could Swift be satirizing in the “article upon which I recovered my liberty”?
- In Chapter 4, what might be the significance of the conflict regarding egg-breaking?
- What could Swift be ridiculing when he writes, in Chapter 4 that the “histories of six thousand moons make no mention of any other regions than the two great empires of Lilliput and Blefuscu”?
- Remember to read *A Modest Proposal* in a figurative way. Swift writes one thing but means another. What is the actual argument?
- Consider the essay's title. Why didn't Swift just call it *A Proposal*. What effect does the word *Modest* have?
- What groups of people is Swift singling out in this essay? What changes is Swift hoping to bring about via this essay?
- At the end of *A Modest Proposal*, Swift excludes himself and his wife from the provided suggestions. How does this add to the satire and overall message of the piece?

SUBMIT: Your summaries (there should be 5!) and your (200+ word) response about satire in both pieces.

Sources –

1. Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, 2.2.90.
2. Orwell, George. “A Nice Cup of Tea.” *Evening Standard*, posted by The Orwell Foundation, 12 January 1946, <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/a-nice-cup-of-tea/>.
3. “John Locke's Important Works.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/summary/John-Lockes-Important-Works>.
4. “Enlightenment.” *History.com*, 16 December 2009, updated 21 February 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/british-history/enlightenment>.
5. Marshall, Lisa. “Teacher's Guide to The Core Classics Edition of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.” *Core Knowledge Foundation*, 2003, [Core-Classics-Gullivers-Travels-Teacher-Guide.pdf](#).