

JUNIATA COLLEGE
PS 122
POLITICS IN LITERATURE

Spring, 2002
Good 102
10:00 AM, MWF

Jack Barlow
Office: Good 319
641-3651

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.
-- Percy Bysshe Shelley

... we [legislators] ourselves are poets, who have ... created a tragedy that is the most beautiful and the best; at any rate, our whole political regime is constructed as the imitation of the most beautiful and best way of life, which we ... assert to be really the truest tragedy.
-- Plato, Laws

And Nietzsche, from all accounts, a lot worse than that!
-- Bertie Wooster

Course Description

An introduction to some of the themes of political philosophy through a careful reading of works of literature. The course will address such political topics as the relation of the individual to society and the legitimation of political authority.

Course Objectives

The course will proceed simultaneously along two lines of inquiry. The first concerns the works of literature directly: what, if anything, do these authors have to tell us about politics, including that most comprehensive of political themes, the good life? The second line will require us to reflect on our own activity: what does it mean to "read" a "text" in a political manner? Are meanings put into texts by authors, by readers, or both? Is our objective to "find" meanings put into works by their authors, or does our reading reflect our own concerns and questions back to us?

Definitions

Because they are being used in very inclusive (or merely loose) ways in this course, it is well to provide definitions of the key terms "politics" and "literature."

"Politics," as we will use it here, ultimately includes everything that touches human life. But it most especially or emphatically includes ethics: The most comprehensive political question is "what is the good [or best] life?" Every human society provides (or presumes) an authoritative answer to that question; that is, every society has certain canons of value. Sometimes those canons are presented explicitly as myths, and sometimes they are presented as facts, with more or less support from "science."

The question of the best life inevitably raises the more narrowly political question, "how can we best live together?" That question in turn raises a host of others: for example, who is one's father, and how to get along with one's father, are in this sense political questions.

A community's politics rests in part on its understanding of the world and of humanity's place in that world. It perhaps goes without saying that there are a variety of such views. It is the thesis of this course that those understandings can be found not just in laws, customs, or the treatises of political theorists, but also in works of literature. Literature has the capacity to create worlds of its own, worlds in which human beings are shown to act in accord with their beliefs about the meaning of human life. It offers a kind of laboratory in which the consequences of different views or beliefs can be explored. Within "literature" we will study plays and novels in this course. But that category could easily be expanded to include any medium that conveys, questions, discusses, or otherwise treats of a society's convictions about how life is to be lived. Thus it might include opera, film, or, today, television.

Required Texts

T. Coraghessan Boyle, Tortilla Curtain
William Golding, Lord of the Flies
Joseph Heller, Catch-22
Aldous Huxley, Brave New World
V. S. Naipaul, A House for Mr. Biswas
Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Alice Walker, The Color Purple
P.G. Wodehouse, The Code of the Woosters
Richard Wright, Native Son

There are, in addition, readings on reserve in the library, as noted in the schedule below.

Course procedures and policies

1. Class meetings. Students are expected to come to class having read the assigned material and prepared to discuss it. Discussions will center on the assigned books, and in the Monday "lecture" before the discussions, certain questions will be raised or anticipated. Monday sessions will deal with the reserve readings; please note that ALL readings are required, except as noted, and will be needed to complete the writing assignments. Wednesday and Friday discussions will concern the primary works. For the Wednesday/Friday discussions, students are required to bring in one question in writing, to be turned in at the beginning of class, which will be used as starting points for our discussions.

Class participation is an important component of the grade in the course. Students are required to attend their assigned discussion group; each unexcused absence will automatically lower your participation grade by one-half a letter grade.

2. Written assignments. There will be three major written assignments, due on the dates indicated in the syllabus. Unless an extension has been granted before the due date, papers up to 48 hours late will be penalized 10% of the grade; papers more than 48 hours (2 days) late will not be accepted. (NOTE: The following assignments are subject to change, if conditions warrant.)

Assignment 1: (no more than five pages, typed and double-spaced)

In his "Jerusalem Address," Milan Kundera draws on the Jewish proverb, "man thinks, God laughs," as a way of helping to explain the novel as an art form. Taking Kundera's understanding of the novel as he advances it in this address, analyze The Code of the Woosters. To what extent, if at all, does Wodehouse oppose the "non-thought of received ideas," or is he simply a purveyor of "kitsch"? What would either of these stances tell us about his politics? Does he defend the society he portrays?

Assignment 2: (no more than seven pages, typed and double-spaced)

A House for Mr. Biswas, The Color Purple, and Native Son are novels that concern people who by reason of their color and/or their gender are outsiders or "others" in this society. How do Mohun's, Celie's, and Bigger's experiences compare, and how do they contrast? What are the roots of "otherness"? Can "otherness" be overcome without losing one's identity as part of a distinct society or culture?

Assignment 3/Final Paper: (no more than seven pages, typed and double-spaced)

Both Huckleberry Finn, in Huckleberry Finn, and Yossarian in Catch-22 seem to be trying to survive in a world where the rules are (a) made by someone else and (b) apparently always changing. Likewise both may be said to be on a kind of journey or quest in which they must negotiate with the powerful from a position of powerlessness. Is either Huck or Yossarian aiming at something more than self-preservation? What are they preserving themselves for? That is, what vision of the good life or the good society seems to be present in these novels, and what is the effect of these visions on the readers? Are these corrupting books?

The first two assignments may be rewritten, provided that the initial assignment was turned in on time and reflects a serious effort. Rewrites must be completed within seven days after the original is returned; rewrites must be submitted together with the original paper. The grade for the rewrite will replace the original grade.

In addition, as noted above, each student should prepare a question on each of the primary reading assignments. These will not be graded, as such, but they will be collected and their presence or absence will form part of the data for the class participation grade.

3. Academic Honesty. The college's policy on academic honesty, as set forth in the "Pathfinder" and elsewhere, is the policy of this course.

4. Course withdrawal. Students may withdraw from this course at any time before the deadline set by the Registrar's office.

5. Grades. Grades will be weighted as follows: First paper, 25%; second paper 30%; final paper 25%; class participation 20%.

6. Office hours. I will ordinarily be available during posted office hours. You may also contact me by e-mail, or by phone at 641-3651.

Schedule

Week 1: Preliminary considerations
(1/14) Reading: Ovid, Metamorphoses, III: Cadmus and the Dragon (handout)

How can you be sure that the country you inhabit is really yours? How do you know that your ancestors didn't steal it unjustly from the original inhabitants?

Week 2: P.G. Wodehouse, The Code of the Woosters
(1/21) Reserve reading: Milan Kundera, "Jerusalem Address: The Novel and Europe," and (recommended, especially section 9) "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes."

Is Bertie Wooster an idiot by nature or has society made him one? What is "the code of the Woosters"? What kinds of things, or what kinds of behavior, are valued by this society? How do, or would, they answer Socrates' question, "how am I to live"? What question of Bertie's challenges his entire way of life? How does Jeeves handle it? What are the sources of authority in this society? How is politics presented? Is this a book to be taken seriously, or simply enjoyed? What is it in this book that makes us laugh? Is there a kind of wisdom here?

Week 3: Aldous Huxley, Brave New World
(1/28) Reserve: Stanley Fish, "Literature in the Reader," from Is There a Text in this Class?

Is there a technological solution for the political problems created by human nature? Is there a human "nature" at all, or only conditioning? If we could change humanity (by changing conditioning?) would that be a good thing? Does the fact that we have the power to do something make it desirable to do so? Why does The Savage ultimately kill himself? Is this the only possible response by a genuine human being to the perfectly conditioned society?

Week 4: William Golding, Lord of the Flies
(2/4) Reserve: Wayne Booth, excerpt from The Company We Keep (Introduction)

What makes "civilization" preferable to "nature"? Are there problems with "civilization" itself? Are human beings basically good, or bad? Do social rules and practices compensate for human nature? How do such rules and practices become accepted or established? How does Jack acquire political authority? Why does Ralph lose it? On what does Jack's authority rest?

PAPER 1 DUE FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 8

Week 5: V. S. Naipaul, A House for Mr. Biswas, Part I (to p. 292)
(2/11) Reserve: James Boyd White, "Rhetoric and Law: The Arts of Cultural and Communal Life," from Heracles' Bow

Who is Mr. Biswas? What are his aspirations or goals in life? How are those goals or aspirations formed by his ethnic background? How are they formed by the fact that Trinidad is a British colony? Who are the Tulsis? How does the Tulsis' approach to things differ from that of Mr.

Biswas and his family? Is assimilation preferable to maintaining a separate existence? Why is Hanuman House such an important presence in the book? How does it compare with the various houses that Mr. Biswas inhabits?

Week 6: V.S. Naipaul, A House for Mr. Biswas, Part II (pp. 295-end)
(2/18) Reserve: Percy Bysshe Shelley, "In Defence of Poetry" (optional).

How does Mr. Biswas's life change once he moves to Port of Spain? Does he become a "success"? If so, by what standards? What about his children? Whatever becomes of the girls? Why do we hear very little about them? Does Mr. Biswas ever reconcile the contradictions in his life? Is he even capable of doing so?

Week 7: Alice Walker, The Color Purple
(2/25) Reserve: John Gardner, excerpt from On Moral Fiction

This novel has been attacked as lending authority to the white-created image of the black male, and as merely pandering to middle class values. Does it? Is Celie merely a victim? What about Shug Avery? Does the means of escape that Shug shows to Celie really constitute an escape, or is it, as critics suggest, merely a different kind of victimization? What is the role of Africa in the novel, and what role does Celie's sister Nettie play? How does her story compare or contrast with Celie's?

Spring Break

Week 8: Richard Wright, Native Son, Part I (parts 1 and 2)
(3/11) Reserve: Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Literary Imagination," from Poetic Justice.

Who is Bigger Thomas? Does he have the makings of a murderer from the very beginning? How does his contact with the Dalton family alter his perspective on life? Are the Daltons really trying to do something good and noble, or is it a kind of irresponsible playing with people's lives? What about Jan and Mary? Are they simply out for thrills/kicks?

Week 9: Richard Wright, Native Son, Part II (part 3)
(3/18) Reserve: Terry Eagleton, excerpt from Marxism and Literary Criticism

Is Bigger what society expects black men to be – rapists or potential rapists (cf. our discussion about The Color Purple)? Is he then merely fulfilling the role that society created for him? In that case, is he really responsible for his actions?

Week 10: Mark Twain, Huckleberry Finn, part I (chs. 1-18 [pp. 13-134])
(3/25) Reserve: Stanley Fish, "Introduction: 'That's Not Fair,'" from There's No Such Thing as Free Speech...and it's a good thing, too

Why does Huck rebel against the constraints imposed by the Widow Douglas? Would Huck turn out just like his old man if he had the chance? What possibilities does this show us for "uncivilized" life? Why can't the law protect Huck against his father? Is Huck's solution to this problem really a very practical one? Why does he decide to help Jim? How does Huck's natural

compassion guide him in situations where the demands of morality are unclear? Why does Huck consider himself a bad person?

PAPER 2 DUE FRIDAY, MARCH 29

Week 11: Mark Twain, Huckleberry Finn, part II (chs. 19-43 [pp. 135-296])
(4/1)

How do the Duke and the King show the limitations of adults' conceptions of authority? Why does Huck seem to think that this is normal? Is Tom Sawyer like the Duke and King in some sense? Why does Tom insist on the elaborate plot to free Jim? Do Huck and Jim benefit from the law and from "civilized" society in ways that they do not understand? Is Huck's refusal to accept the constraints of civilized life natural?

Week 12: T. Coraghessan Boyle, Tortilla Curtain
(4/8) Reserve: Wayne Booth, excerpt from The Company We Keep (Epilogue)

What happens when worlds collide? How is it possible for someone like Delaney Mossbacher to understand someone like Candido? Or vice versa? Can there be a "common good" when there are people of such different backgrounds/outlooks/life experiences in the same country? Or should we just keep out people like Candido and America, who expect us to share what we have with them? What makes people want to endure the kinds of things they endured? Are any of these people living lives that could be considered "good"? Does the good life of the people in Arroyo Blanco Estates require the existence of people like Candido and America? Do you have to be a member of the class Boyle is lampooning in order to get his jokes?

Week 13: Joseph Heller, Catch-22, part I (chs. 1-21 [to p. 234])
(4/15)

What is going on here? How does Heller disorient the reader, and why? Are we meant to experience this as part of Yossarian's disorientation? Is this supposed to be what war is "really like"? What is Catch-22? Is Catch-22 symbolic of all authority – social, economic, and political – in the sense that "they" have us where they want us?

Week 14: Joseph Heller, Catch-22, part II (chs. 22-end)
(4/22)

How does Orr escape? Why doesn't anyone else? Why does Nately's whore want to kill Yossarian? Is the war really being run by Milo Minderbinder? What happens to Doc Daneeka after he is killed on McWatt's plane? What about Aarfy? All the rest? Is there anything that is worth dying for? Are abstractions like "country" really the important things in human life?

4/29: Last day of class
Final paper due date TBA