

Crumpets or Apple Pie—which is Superior?: an Investigative Approach to Literary Hegemony in the post-World War II Era

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A journal article in which the implications of America's rise and Britain's decline as world powers are connected to the influence of their post-World War II era authors. First, we examine the economic, social, and political landscapes of the two nations immediately after the war. Then follows an examination of authors studied at prestigious universities in both Great Britain and America as a sort of "measuring stick". The essay concludes by examining the implications of literature's far-reaching effects today, and posits that the authors of immediately post-World War II America had the most lasting influence socio-politically.

The thoughts, feelings, and writings of authors have always influenced the social and political landscapes of their nations, and, to a larger extent in the modern world, the entire globe. From the apostolic writings of the Bible to the linguistic innovations of Shakespeare, literature has shaped the way people think, the way economies have functioned, and even how people vote. Take, for example, the case of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. This "literary failure" published his controversial novel about the gruesome realities of the American meatpacking industry in February of 1906 (Wikipedia.org); by June a disgusted and appalled President Theodore Roosevelt had pushed for and convinced Congress to create the Food and Drug Administration (Blackwell). The public outcry created by the publication of this "muckraker's" writings has led to significant and important change in the way American companies have done business over the last century. American authors are not the only ones who enact significant change in their countries—British authors have utilized various avenues to influence social reform and outlook. Britain's history of socially-involved writers is long; Chaucer's tongue-in-cheek presentation of nobility during the middle ages, Jonathan Swift's open mockery of bureaucrats and the high society, Charles Dickens' darkly comic and often pitiful scope of Victorian England, and

Orwell's stark pseudo-prophecies of where the world might possibly find itself in the near future: all of these writers caused their nations, and the world itself, to stop and reevaluate the choices that were being made in public and private governances. The evidence that writers, especially artists of the English language, have changed the course of history is irrefutable; the question, then, is this: who, overall, had the *most* effect on their society, British or American authors? Perhaps the most pivotal point in the history of these two nations, World War II, is the best place to look for the answer. Because Britain's days as a dominant world power waned due to economic turmoil and postwar reconstruction, and the up-and-coming prodigy, America, began to gain ground on the global stage, it is almost certain that the authors the United States played a more critical role in the development of the nation's rising socio-political landscape than did the authors of Britain. It is therefore crucial to gain an understanding of the historical significance of the post-World War II era itself.

The effects of World War II had many facets, both for Great Britain as well as the United States. Economically, the War was a boon for the United States—it propelled the nation out of the grasp of the Great Depression and into the prosperity (and consumerism) of the 1950s. The proposals of President Truman's Fair Deal and the economic sections of National Security Council Resolution 68 kept defense spending at its wartime levels, while increasing the standard of living in America through G.I. bills, increasing flexibility in taxation policies, and through the wide-spread consumerist markets that sprang up nationwide (French). As soldiers returned from combat, they now had money to spend and families to spend it on. The subsequent flow of cash into the various markets of the U.S. economy allowed the government to cut taxes and uphold its seemingly conflicting tenets of defense and domestic well-being. Such programs as Medicare and Medicaid, the governmental funding of private industry's efforts in research and

development (e.g. the funding of ARPANET, the predecessor to the Internet), and federal support of universities became the focus of surplus government funds, which set the stage for incredible advances in thought, technology, and socio-political philosophy in the latter part of the century, even into the twenty-first century (French). This balancing act, emphasizing security and prosperity both at home and abroad, asserted America's new role as a world power—the nation was finally able to sustain peace in affairs foreign and domestic.

For Great Britain, however, the economic situation in the postwar years was anything but prosperous. As her colonies gained independence one by one, starting with the liberation of India in 1947, Britain lost significant portions of her income, and, subsequently, had to refocus the economic emphases of Parliament, often away from education and social development. Ironically, the United States did not do much to help its former ally—the United States halted its Lend-Lease, which Britain had relied upon through the war to fund its arms and military spending in return for bases in British territory. In addition, the Washington Loan Agreement of 1945, which the British government had hoped would provide a significant stimulation to the tanking economy, effectively made the situation direr—the agreement contained a convertibility clause that allowed companies to demand payment in American dollars, which were in viewed as the new more powerful, more stable currency. These dollars were then spent in American markets, further depressing industrial demand; the money, therefore, did not go to paying off the loan, nor did it improve the sinking economy of postwar Britain (Rohrer). The consensus politics of Britain demanded a Welfare state and a place in the world, neither of which could be funded on the swiftly-depressing economy of postwar Britain. These devastating blows to the former economic giant spelled doom for Britain's status as a world power. Focused solely on saving their economy, the British government effectively retreated from the world stage to fix

the leaking economic pipes back home. The states of the economies of America and Britain, and effectively the social atmospheres of both countries are reflected in the writing styles of the nations' authors—American authors like Saul Bellow took on a more hopeful tone in their writing, while British authors like Martin Amis focused almost exclusively on the sorry state of economic affairs in Britain.

Although economic difficulty struck Great Britain, the resilient nation banded together to stem the effects of the hardships. Utilizing campaign slogans that had helped propel British unity during the war, British citizens found social stability in the nation's unity. The British Labour Party took power after the war, reflecting the returning soldiers' view of what their rights should be after serving their country. This shift in power, however, was another cause of Britain's decline as a world power—the focus on individual rights supplanted their previously global outlook, sacrificing international identity for the national. American political and economic policy, conversely, shifted from the individual's welfare, as with the New Deal, to a more consumerist and national focus. The reforms associated with President Truman's Fair Deal legislation increased government influence in the housing market, integrated the military, and reformed social security. This national focus, coupled with the aforementioned maritime-level defense spending, allowed for prosperous and more liberal times in American history. Again, these reforms in political policy, as well as the newfound economic prosperity following the Depression and War, influenced a change in tone and subject in the writings of American authors; the writing became freer, lighter, and emphasized the positive connection between the stories' protagonists, who generally represented the common man, and the environs with which he was surrounded. In essence, the authors wrote about prosperous times because prosperity was the order of the day.

It would be erroneous to assume that Great Britain and the United States had little effect upon one another—indeed, as has been mentioned, the United States, advertently or not, dealt a serious blow to the economic situation of the United Kingdom with the Washington Loan Agreement of 1945. Perhaps one explanation for America's leg-up on Britain following World War II was the fact that no significant damage had been done on the home front during the war in the U.S., save the bombing of Pearl Harbor; Britain, on the other hand, sustained massive aerial bombardment over the course of the war. Having no need to make infrastructural repairs, the United States was free to spend its funds on improving the quality of life for citizens, while the British government had to not only rebuild a broken nation, but to swim against the flow of debt. Ironically enough, the emergence of the American dollar as the preferred medium of international trade, in conjunction with the convertibility clause of the Loan Agreement allowed British companies to do business in American markets, which simultaneously helped the American economy further and hindered the British economy drastically. This prosperity of the American public is a probable cause for the broader range of subjects taught in American universities as compared with British universities; the American government had more funding for schools, and could thus provide means for more curricula, while the British, the majority of whom were working in blue-collar jobs just simply to subsist in the broken economy, had little money to spend on universities, and not enough demand for higher education to make it worth their while. The effects of this dichotomy of available funds for universities are still seen today in the top universities in both nations. A key piece of evidence for the arguments of who is more influential, American or British authors, as well as the effects of the post-war economic downturns on education, is what kinds of classes are being taught in the top universities in both Great Britain and the United States. To back these claims, a deeper investigation of the

educational pedagogy of the two nations' top universities is required. As will be examined, British universities offer only specialized, narrow-view studies of authors in their English degrees, while American universities develop a more globally marketable and broader-ranged English major, touching upon various subjects. To determine who actually had a greater and longer-lasting influence on their nation's socio-political landscape following World War II, an examination of author-oriented university courses in both nations will be presented.

Throughout the ages both the British and Americans have been fascinated with the written word. Universities in both countries study literary work, some more heavily than others. The most prestigious universities in England include: Oxford, Cambridge, University College London, University of St. Andrews, University of Warwick, Durham University, The University of York, Bristol University, and University of Edinburgh. American Universities that are considered the highest sources of learning are: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania, Columbia, Stanford, Dartmouth, and Duke. These schools hold the principles of higher-level thinking and impactful ideas in high regard and incorporate them into their curriculum. When speaking of Yale University, the president of the school, Richard C. Levin, stated, "In the diversity of its students, its global outlook, and its outstanding research, it is also a university of compelling change" (Levin). Within this statement Levin gives us a look at the university's perspective on education and the importance of having an assortment of ideas presented. By looking into the courses offered at these cutting-edge and highly influential universities we can gain a better understanding of which authors had a more lasting effect on society.

High-ranking American universities and high-ranking British universities stand, for the most part, at the same level on the world stage. Both countries' top universities have excellent

programs, produce individuals who have obtained an exceptional education, and who are highly informed in their subject of study. Both British and American universities have a wide range of majors and minors available, and focus on holding their students to a high level of excellence. This is not to say, however, that the two countries' universities function in identical ways. The means of obtaining an education varies between the universities, though all British universities follow a certain pattern which differs slightly from the predominant pattern of study found in American universities. This point is especially proven by the differences between American and British universities in both requirements for an English degree and the course of study itself. Though both American and British authors are being studied in the top British universities in which an undergraduate degree in English is available, it is quite difficult to ascertain which authors are being studied more predominantly in British universities than in American universities; British Universities have taken on a distinct specialization pattern in their study of English.

From early on in the course of the English degree at any of England's top universities it is requisite to choose an area of specialization that will be the focus of the degree. This is radically different from the broad spectrum of English study available at top American universities. At Oxford University, England's top university, a person can choose to study American or British literature, but there is no required study of both sections (Oxford). Likewise, at England's second highest ranked institution, Cambridge, a student chooses a specific area of study in the English language that interests them, and that becomes the focus of their degree. Some of these focuses include, "Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic: Insular Latin Language and Literature"; "Old Norse Language and Literature"; "Medieval Welsh Language and Literature" (Cambridge). Cambridge, although it still follows the specialization pattern of British universities' English

programs, seems to have the broadest availability of courses of study out of all the top universities in England. Cambridge offers students the ability to study English generally for their first two years of study, an opportunity that does not exist at any of the other universities when working toward a degree (Cambridge).

Though the specialization of study becomes primarily important to American courses of study in the graduate program, England seems to take this need to specialize to an early point in education. British universities essentially create literary specialists rather than the general English majors of American Universities. With this in mind, it becomes difficult to judge the impact of authors in any era by reviewing classes in which authors are being taught. Due to the lack of a general and sweeping view of the English language, particularly in the arena of literature, it becomes difficult to pin down which authors of the post-World War II era, British or American, have had more impact on the study of English and on society over all.

With the problems of researching due to the specialization pattern of study in England taken into account, it is still possible to monitor the influence of both British and American authors by looking into the types of specialization available for study at top universities. In the top British universities in which a major in English is available, specific studies of American authors and of the post-World War II era are available. By looking specifically at the post-World War II era specialization classes and observing the authors taught in these classes, it is possible to note a rise in American authors in this era. This would indicate a heavy influence made by American authors in the era. Some authors from the post-World War II era being studied include William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams all of whom are American authors (Oxford). These American authors are also studied when a student specializes in American authors, though American authors not of the

post-World War II era are also studied in these types of emphases at most top universities. There are, however, also British authors being studied in the post-World-War-II-era specialty of study, including H.G. Wells and George Orwell. The British authors being studied in the post-World War II specialty are heavily outnumbered by American authors, especially in the realm of socio-political writings. This heavy domination of American authors in the study of this era is particularly telling—the hegemony of American authors would indicate a heavier influence being made by American authors than British authors following World War II.

In contrast to the universities of Britain, American universities offer a vast variety of majors. Within these majors a student has the option to pick an emphasis or study the subject on a broad level. In regards to English emphases, students at prestigious universities throughout the country tend to pick an emphasis that will allow them to succeed in their future field. However, within these emphases the universities ensure that the curriculum presented shows students a variety of literary work, from English authors around the world. An overview of the courses offered within the top American universities, as listed above, showed a continuous trend; the authors that were included within each curriculum were: Philip Roth, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, Martin Amis, and George Orwell. These authors' works were published many years ago; however, the most prestigious schools in America make sure their students study and have a strong understanding of their words.

Patrick Brantlinger, a Professor of English at the University of Indiana stated, “Philip Roth has provoked controversy by mining his life for fiction.... His treatments of sexual themes and ironic analysis of Jewish life have drawn popular and critical attention, as well as criticism” (Brantlinger). As an American author Roth wrote fiction political satires, expressing his view of society and the events that were occurring within that element. His most accomplished works

include: *Goodbye, Columbus*; *Portnoy's Complaint*; *Sabbath's Theater*; *Our Gang*; and *Kafkaesque the Beast*. These works lead readers to thought and to question the world that they lived in and if needed make a change.

Ralph Freedman, a professional in the field of literary interpretation and analysis said in regards to William Faulkner's *Light in August*, "The world becomes a pretext for more pertinent inner vision, a state of which, as a French critic has put it, is 'always dissolving.' Reduced to a mask functioning in no dependable world, man ultimately retreats from his mirrored double" (Freedman). Such is the outlook of Faulkner on the world before World War II; the idea that man will fight for his ideals, thoughts, and dreams until eventually that hope fails and the world, or society concurs. As an American author during this time period Faulkner wrote numerous novels, novellas, short stories, poems, and on occasion used his talents for screen writing; his work is considered by many to be some of the most influential pieces of the twentieth century (William Faulkner's Influence).

Saul Bellow, an American author of the World War II era, wrote fictional stories showing the relationship that the environment, or society, had with the individual. Freedman stated, "In his earlier novels... Bellow's heroes were centers of consciousness as well as victims of a relentless environment" (Freedman). These literary works depict a life for the hero, or individual, in which the world is against them. However, with the appearance of *The Adventures of Augie March* in 1949 we see a change within his writings. The overall theme of the story is the same, having an image familiar to the reader of urban middle class. The difference, Freedman stated, was that "hero and world became related to one another in a new light-hearted dialect... both prove to be equally evanescent as well as equally stable, equally prone to interchanging their active and passive states" (Freedman). This change in writing style came just as the quality of

life for American's changed for the better. His writings post World War II illustrated environment, or society, as part of the individual's life; working with it to better the life of all involved.

After studying the literary work of these authors, which are studied by a majority of top universities within the United States, a conclusion can be drawn that the socio-political landscape was changed by the literary work of these writers. Not only that, but the tone and the theme of these works were altered by the changes in society that were occurring. This conclusion reaffirms the assertion that was made earlier, that literary author's have had an effect on the socio-political landscape of the post World War II era.

Education is held to an extremely high standard in both America and England. Both countries produce students of an exceptional quality, and both produce students who maintain the high standard of excellence expected of a top university graduate. The differences between the two, however, are extremely obvious. As was noted before, British universities and American Universities do not have the same methods in the achieving of English degrees. While American universities produce students with a well-rounded view and understanding of the English language in the areas of literature and writing, British universities create students who become highly specialized in their area of learning and expertise. It is not until an American student enters their graduate program of study that they begin to specialize in any one area of expertise, and even then most degrees below doctorate remain broad enough to cover more than one era of writing, more than one type of author, or more than one subject of study within the English language. America's broad addressing of the English language at their top universities creates highly employable, highly marketable students. American English majors are qualified in many aspects of the language, and are able to apply their knowledge generally. The broad American

system allows for a more globalized English degree, and creates a student who can apply themselves to many positions.

The British English majors, on the other hand, are more specialized. Though not as marketable at first glance, the students are more aware and qualified in their area of expertise than are the American English majors at an undergraduate level. British English majors become experts in their field of study, and are more able to better apply their skills in jobs they qualify for by their specific designated area of study. British English majors may not be as globally marketable as American English majors; they have a more extensive knowledge than do the American English majors at the achievement of their undergraduate degree, but in a narrower scope of knowledge. This fact allows British English majors to apply their skills in a specialized area to a more extensive level. This level of specialization, though extensive, is not accessible on a wide scale. This lack of accessibility, being defined as “the degree to which a product (e.g., device, service, environment) is accessible by as many people as possible” (Wikipedia), the product in this case being well educated English majors, limits the British English major’s impact on the global scale.

This specialization of British universities’ English programs does have its draw backs in its impact on society. While American English majors are more able to apply themselves to a wide spectrum of career paths, British English majors are limited in their opportunities. Because of this, American English majors can reach a more globalized audience and have more of an impact in number than do the British “specialists” who are contained in their area of expertise and have a limited impact to those outside of their area. Globalization is defined by a study of the subject at Stanford University to be “linked to the growth of social *interconnectedness* across existing geographical and political boundaries” (Stanford, emphasis added). This desire for

“social interconnectedness” between nations has become appealing to the world on a global scale. This desire for a more globalized world has created students of a higher and more marketable quality. With the British English students specialization in certain topic the student’s marketability is limited, and as a result the impact of the student globally is lessened. Well-roundedness is highly favorable in this globalized society (well-rounded being defined as “showing interest or ability in many fields”) (yourdictionary). This well-rounded education is not wholly available to British English students as it is to American English majors. This lack of a multiplicity of abilities, and the inability to apply their knowledge to more than one area, even within the English language, proves to be a detriment to British university English majors, who are extremely qualified in their area, but less globally accessible. This global accessibility of American English majors creates a heavy influence of the American society on a more global scale, stretching back to the authors about whom they studied, and reaching forward into the foreseeable future. The type of education obtained by both English and American English majors is not the only variable that determines the impact that the individual student has on society—there is also the impact that the literature to which they have been exposed (especially in regards to the immediately post World War II era works of literature) that determines the knowledge that the student possesses. This exposure to immediately post World War II literature has created a gigantic impact not only on the individual, but on society as a whole. The well rounded and marketable student is aware of the literature that has shaped society, and the implications of that work.

This desire for a well rounded and globalized student to enter the world is heavily determined by the awareness of the individual to significant works. Reading literature from the era immediately following World War II allows students to gain a more well-rounded

perspective on how the events of the time affected ordinary people. In today's technologically-driven, fast-paced society, it is often difficult to determine the impact that literature has on modern day students. Dibyendu Ghosal, journalist for the *Portland Independent Media Center* writes,

Perhaps teens who text message unceasingly as a form of communication could never fathom waiting patiently for a letter, but the bottom line is, most students who dedicate themselves to analyzing these works of literature are likely to extract morals, values, themes, and motifs that are very much still "current" today... It seems that modern society and systems are still adhering to the systems of the past which taught classic literature, to a certain degree. Of course, it seems that there are some societies, which clearly employ a younger generation of literary minded people, who have begun to add some more contemporary works to their curriculum in order to help students assert a better grasp on current events (Ghosal).

This exposure to more current literature (i.e. post World War II era literature) allows students to become well-rounded, have a better grasp of the overall academic perspective, and to become more aware of societal issues at large. These “morals, values, themes, and motifs” addressed in, especially, immediately post World War II era literature, are still making an impact on the modern world, and have not fallen into obscurity.

By reading literature of the immediately post World War II era, a student or individual becomes more aware of the socio-political implications of their own actions and the actions of others who surround them in society. It is thus reasonable to say that the country who had more impact on the socio-political landscape in regards to literature would still maintain a heavy

influence on the socio-political awareness and motives of the students of today, and even those of future students. Literature has always been not only a mirror of the troubles and issues of the society from which it was produced, but a guide to future generations. This ability still exists today, and may in fact be stronger now than ever before. The growing accumulations of knowledge available in all works of literature create the tone for future society.

Before World War II, it is safe to say that literature being studied was predominantly European and heavily British. However, with the collapse of the British economy following World War II, and the rise of America to the status of world power, literature from American authors began to take on a new level of respect on the global scale. The works of American authors became highly notable and began to create socio-political changes worldwide. That power of American literature still remains. American literature heavily affects the thoughts of individuals and societies globally. The Westernization and even primarily Americanization of most countries, and societies throughout the world is aided especially by American literature. These works are available to the world audience, and have been incorporated into many societies on a massive scale. This Americanization has the power to shape the world in unknown ways, and will be aided every step of the way by American authors--the same authors that began rising into a status of power in the era immediately following World War II.

As has been proved, the American authors of immediately post-World War II have had the longest-lasting effect upon the world, due to their socio-political dominance. Because of postwar economic hardships and their subsequent narrow-focused university studies, as well as America's rise to the status of world power, the authors of Britain, once acclaimed for their superior literary abilities, have fallen into the shadow of the American literary giants. As the

influence of America's socio-political power grows in a globalized world, it would seem that this hegemony will continue to increase in the decades to come.

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