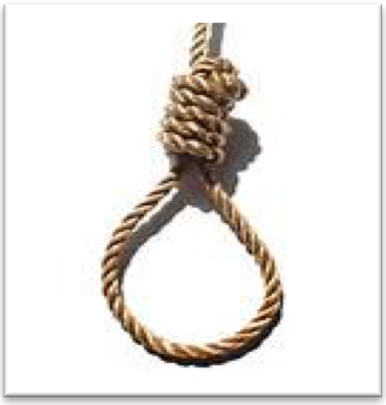
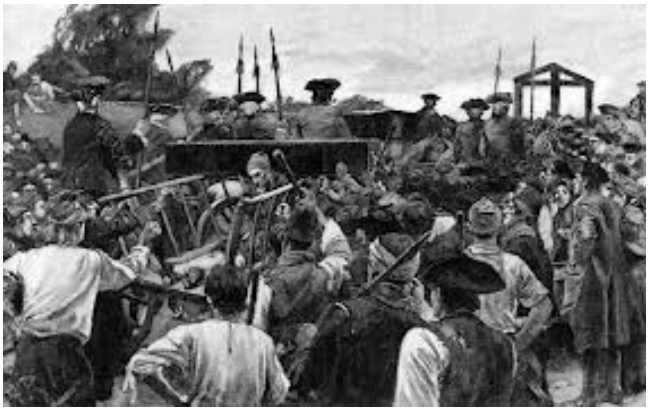
"Just Pulling Your Leg" - the noose in poetry and prose



*When I was a Boy Scout there was one knot we were **never** taught and which was absolutely forbidden; so, of course, it was the **one** knot we all wanted to learn. It's quite an easy knot to tie and it has a history, which continues to fascinate and frighten: this knot is the noose! The gallows, the gibbet, the "drop": all these related words continue to reverberate uneasily in our consciousness, despite the abolition of the death penalty in Britain on the 16th December 1969.*

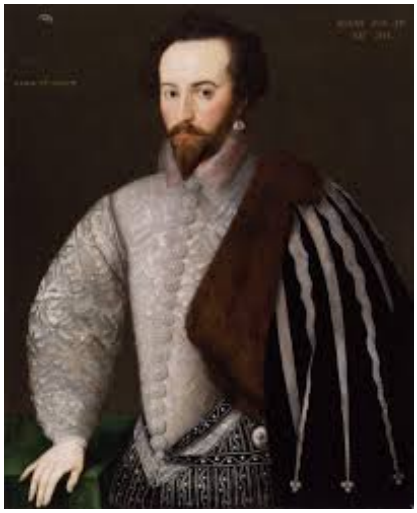
Do you know the origin of the common expression, "to pull somebody's leg", meaning to tease or trick someone (in a humorous fashion)? It is derived from the much grimmer practice of having your friends come to "pull your legs" literally, as you swung from the noose, kicking and choking to death at Tyburn, the fearsome place of execution outside London. This would, they hoped, shorten your suffering, for it took a good 8-9 minutes to die, when you were simply hauled up on the gibbet, or else pushed off "to swing" from the cart, which had brought you from Newgate, London's most notorious prison. (If you wish to find the site of Tyburn, you will find a large plaque in the traffic island just north of Hyde Park Corner. The prisoners were brought all the way up Oxford Street, which was then surrounded by fields and was outside the city of London.)



Prisoners being taken to Tyburn

There has always been what has been called "gallows humour" associated with executions, which may seem strange to us now. Here, now, is a famous sonnet by Sir Walter Raleigh, humorously (?) addressed to his son. It's a "friendly" warning! To make sense of it, you need to understand the three key words: the "wood" is the gibbet, the wooden structure from which people were hanged (you play the game "Hangman" on the blackboard?); the "weed" refers to the rope, which was made of hemp (the same plant from which we get marijuana!); and the "wag" is a joker, somebody who doesn't take things seriously – here, his son!

How should we read this? Seriously?



Sir Walter Raleigh

SONNET - THREE THINGS THERE BE…

Three things there be that prosper up apace *quickly*
And flourish, whilst they grow asunder far, *apart*
But on a day, they meet all in one place,
And when they meet, they one another mar; spoil
And they be these: the wood, the weed, the wag.
The wood is that which makes the gallow tree,
The weed is that which strings the hangman's bag,
The wag, my pretty knave, betokeneth thee. *signifies*
Mark well, dear boy, whilst these assemble not,
Green springs the tree, hemp grows, the wag is wilde,
But when they meet, it makes the timber rot,
It frets the halter, and it chokes the child. *halter = animal's collar = noose*
Then bless thee, and beware, and let us pray,
We part not with thee at this meeting day.

("Sir Walter Raleigh to His Son")

Balladeers would circulate amongst the huge crowds who would gather on these occasions. There was a holiday atmosphere, with snacks and entertainments, including the songs and ballads written to commemorate the event. The climax was often the speech of the condemned prisoners. Not all prisoners went to the gallows in terror; some bold spirits would harangue the crowds, either to protest innocence or to beg them not to tread their paths, or else to ask God for forgiveness: it was a gruesome but compelling spectacle and it was not until 1868 that public executions were stopped in Britain.

Here is a famous and anonymous ballad set in Ireland and written in the street slang of the period. What is remarkable is the dark humour that hides the compassion and sorrow. The use of slang reinforces a sense of "them" and "us". "They", the "system" use a different language from "us": society is divided into victims and victimisers (the church included!). What do ***you*** *notice reading this poem?*

The Night Before Larry was Stretched
c. 1816 Anonymous
I
The night before Larry was stretch'd,
The boys they all paid him a visit;
A bit in their sacks, too, they fetch'd—
They sweated their duds till they riz it; *pawned their clothes/ raised the sum*
For Larry was always the lad,
When a friend was condemn'd to the squeezer, *gallows or rope*
But he'd pawn, all the togs that he had, *clothes*

Just to help the poor boy to a sneezer, *drink*
And moisten his gob 'fore he died. *mouth*

II
''Pon my conscience, dear Larry', says I,
'I'm sorry to see you in trouble,
And your life's cheerful noggin run dry, *bottle, drink*
And yourself going off like its bubble!'
'Hould your tongue in that matter,' says he;
'For the neckcloth I don't care a button, *halter or noose*
And by this time to-morrow you'll see
Your Larry will be dead as mutton:
All for what? 'Cause his courage was good!'

III
The boys they came crowding in fast;
They drew their stools close round about him,
Six glims round his coffin they placed— *candles (coffins were left in the condemned cells!)*
He couldn't be well waked without 'em, *a wake = a party at a funeral*
I ask'd if he was fit to die,
Without having duly repented?
Says Larry, 'That's all in my eye,
And all by the clergy invented,
To make a fat bit for themselves.

IV
Then the cards being called for, they play'd,
Till Larry found one of them cheated;
Quick he made a hard rap at his head—
The lad being easily heated,
'So ye chates me bekase I'm in grief!
O! is that, by the Holy, the rason?
Soon I'll give you to know you d—d thief!
That you're cracking your jokes out of sason,
And scuttle your nob with my fist'. *break your head*

V
Then in came the priest with his book
He spoke him so smooth and so civil;
Larry tipp'd him a Kilmainham look, *Gaol in Dublin*
And pitch'd his big wig to the devil.
Then raising a little his head,
To get a sweet drop of the bottle,
And pitiful sighing he said,
'O! the hemp will be soon round my throttle,
And choke my poor windpipe to death!'

VI
So mournful these last words he spoke,

We all vented our tears in a shower;
For my part, I thought my heart broke
To see him cut down like a flower!
On his travels we watch'd him next day,
O, the hangman I thought I could kill him!
Not one word did our poor Larry say,
Nor chang'd till he came to King William; *statue of the king in Dublin*
Och, my dear! then his colour turned white.

VII
When he came to the nubbing-cheat, *the gallows*
He was tack'd up so neat and so pretty;
The rambler jugg'd off from his feet, *cart*
And he died with his face to the city.
He kick'd too, but that was all pride,
For soon you might see 'twas all over;
And as soon as the noose was untied,
Then at darky we waked him in clover, *night*
And sent him to take a ground-sweat. *buried him*

Rudyard Kipling

You might like to compare this ballad with another famous one, by Rudyard Kipling. Do you notice the ironies in the conversation between a private soldier and his sergeant? Everybody is dreading the execution but because they are soldiers they pretend that it is the cold, or the sun, which is affecting them.

Danny Deever

BY RUDYARD KIPLING

'What are the bugles blowin' for?' said Files-on-Parade.
'To turn you out, to turn you out,' the Colour-Sergeant said.
'What makes you look so white, so white?' said Files-on-Parade.
'I'm dreadin' what I've got to watch,' the Colour-Sergeant said.
For they're hangin' Danny Deever, you can hear the Dead March play,
The Regiment's in 'ollow square—they're hangin' him to-day;
They've taken of his buttons off an' cut his stripes away,
An' they're hangin' Danny Deever in the mornin'.

'What makes the rear-rank breathe so 'ard?' said Files-on-Parade.
'It's bitter cold, it's bitter cold,' the Colour-Sergeant said.
'What makes that front-rank man fall down?' said Files-on-Parade.
'A touch o' sun, a touch o' sun,' the Colour-Sergeant said.
They are hangin' Danny Deever, they are marchin' of 'im round,
They 'ave 'alted Danny Deever by 'is coffin on the ground;
An' 'e'll swing in 'arf a minute for a sneakin' shootin' hound—

O they’re hangin’ Danny Deever in the mornin!’

‘’Is cot was right-’and cot to mine,’ said Files-on-Parade.
‘’E’s sleepin’ out an’ far to-night,’ the Colour-Sergeant said.
‘I’ve drunk ’is beer a score o’ times,’ said Files-on-Parade.
‘’E’s drinkin’ bitter beer alone,’ the Colour-Sergeant said.
They are hangin’ Danny Deever, you must mark ’im to ’is place,
For ’e shot a comrade sleepin’—you must look ’im in the face;
Nine ’undred of ’is county an’ the Regiment’s disgrace,
While they’re hangin’ Danny Deever in the mornin’.

‘What’s that so black agin the sun?’ said Files-on-Parade.
‘It’s Danny fightin’ ’ard for life,’ the Colour-Sergeant said.
‘What’s that that whimpers over’ead?’ said Files-on-Parade.
‘It’s Danny’s soul that’s passin’ now,’ the Colour-Sergeant said.
For they’re done with Danny Deever, you can ’ear the quickstep play,
The Regiment’s in column, an’ they’re marchin’ us away;
Ho! the young recruits are shakin’, an’ they’ll want their beer to-day,
After hangin’ Danny Deever in the mornin’!

More humane, perhaps, was "the drop" – this was the trap door on the scaffold which dropped you so that your neck was broken. Harry Allen was the man who performed Britain's last hangings in 1964. A courteous man who prided himself on his professionalism, he liked to view the prisoners, unseen, in the condemned cell. It was very important to get the length of the rope just right – too short a length and the prisoner's

neck would not break, leading to a protracted death and suffering; too long and the head might be wrenched off, spoiling the proceedings. Often sandbags of the same weight would be tried out beforehand, to get the best possible result.

Here are two very different prose accounts of hangings. One is fictional, by Dickens. It comes at the end of "Oliver Twist", when Fagin is about to be hanged, publicly, at Newgate Prison. Dickens campaigned strongly against public hangings and we sense here, rather sentimentally perhaps, his disgust for this punishment, even for Fagin, the scheming and selfish gangmaster (he would now be called).

'Outside, outside,' replied Fagin, pushing the boy before him towards the door, and looking vacantly over his head. 'Say I've gone to sleep—they'll believe you. You can get me out, if you take me so. Now then, now then!'

'Oh! God forgive this wretched man!' cried the boy with a burst of tears.

'That's right, that's right,' said Fagin. 'That'll help us on. This door first. If I shake and tremble, as we pass the gallows, don't you mind, but hurry on. Now, now, now!'

'Have you nothing else to ask him, sir?' inquired the turnkey.

'No other question,' replied Mr. Brownlow. 'If I hoped we could recall him to a sense of his position—'

'Nothing will do that, sir,' replied the man, shaking his head. 'You had better leave him.'

The door of the cell opened, and the attendants returned.

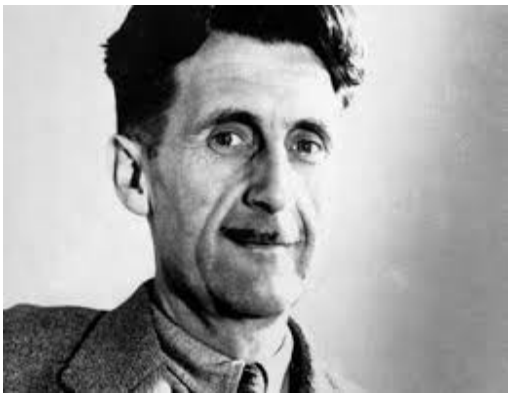
'Press on, press on,' cried Fagin. 'Softly, but not so slow. Faster, faster!'

The men laid hands upon him, and disengaging Oliver from his grasp, held him back. He struggled with the power of desperation, for an instant; and then sent up cry upon cry that penetrated even those massive walls, and rang in their ears until they reached the open yard.

It was some time before they left the prison. Oliver nearly swooned after this frightful scene, and was so weak that for an hour or more, he had not the strength to walk.

Day was dawning when they again emerged. A great multitude had already assembled; the windows were filled with people, smoking and playing cards to beguile the time; the crowd were pushing, quarrelling, joking. Everything told of life and animation, but one dark cluster of objects in the centre of all—the black stage, the cross-beam, the rope, and all the hideous apparatus of death.

The other is by George Orwell and is an autobiographical essay called "A Hanging", (1931) about his time in the British Imperial Police between the wars. One feels his own personal involvement and his sense of outrage at what he takes part in here.



From ***A Hanging*** by George Orwell

We set out for the gallows. Two warders marched on either side of the prisoner, with their rifles at the slope; two others marched close against him, gripping him by arm and shoulder, as though at once pushing and supporting him. The rest of us, magistrates and the like, followed behind. Suddenly, when we had gone ten yards, the procession stopped short without any order or warning. A dreadful thing had happened - a dog, come goodness knows whence, had appeared in the yard. It came bounding among us with a loud volley of barks, and leapt round us wagging its whole body, wild with glee at finding so many human beings together. It was a large woolly dog, half Airedale, half pariah. For a moment it pranced round us, and then, before anyone could stop it, it had made a dash for the prisoner, and jumping up tried to lick his face. Everyone stood aghast, too taken aback even to grab at the dog.

Executions after the 1851 mutiny in India

"Who let that bloody brute in here?" said the superintendent angrily. "Catch it, someone!"

A warder, detached from the escort, charged clumsily after the dog, but it danced and gambolled just out of his reach, taking everything as part of the game. A young Eurasian jailer picked up a handful of gravel and tried to stone the dog away, but it dodged the stones and came after us again. Its yaps echoed from the jail wails. The prisoner, in the grasp of the two warders, looked on incuriously, as though this was another formality of the hanging. It was several minutes before someone managed to catch the dog. Then we put my handkerchief through its collar and moved off once more, with the dog still straining and whimpering.

It was about forty yards to the gallows. I watched the bare brown back of the prisoner marching in front of me. He walked clumsily with his bound arms, but quite steadily, with that bobbing gait of the Indian who never straightens his knees. At each step his muscles slid neatly into place, the lock of hair on his scalp danced up and down, his feet printed themselves on the wet gravel. And once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he stepped slightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path.

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working - bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming- all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing

when he stood on the drop, when he was falling through the air with a tenth of a second to live. His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned- reasoned even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone-- one mind less, one world less.

Let us return to the nineteenth century for two more classic reactions to hangings. The first again is fictional, from the end of "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" (stop reading here if you haven't read the book yet!). Tess, the "pure woman" must pay the price for her murder of the man who raped her and thus put her beyond the bounds of her society, which could not tolerate a woman who had had sex, even if raped, outside marriage.

The prospect from this summit was almost unlimited. In the valley beneath lay the city they had just left, its more prominent buildings showing as in an isometric drawing - among them the broad cathedral tower, with its Norman windows and immense length of aisle and nave, the spires of St Thomas's, the pinnacled tower of the College, and, more to the right, the tower and gables of the ancient hospice, where to this day the pilgrim may receive his dole of bread and ale. Behind the city swept the rotund upland of St Catherine's Hill; further off, landscape beyond landscape, till the horizon was lost in the radiance of the sun hanging above it.

Against these far stretches of country rose, in front of the other city edifices, a large red-brick building, with level gray roofs, and rows of short barred windows bespeaking captivity, the whole contrasting greatly by its formalism with the quaint irregularities of the Gothic erections. It was somewhat disguised from the road in passing it by yews and evergreen oaks, but it was visible enough up here. The wicket from which the pair had lately emerged was in the wall of this structure. From the middle of the building an ugly flat-topped octagonal tower ascended against the east horizon, and viewed from this spot, on its shady side and against the light, it seemed the one blot on the city's beauty. Yet it was with this blot, and not with the beauty, that the two gazers were concerned.

Upon the cornice of the tower a tall staff was fixed. Their eyes were riveted on it. A few minutes after the hour had struck something moved slowly up the staff, and extended itself upon the breeze. It was a black flag.

"Justice" was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess. And the d'Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing. The two speechless gazers bent themselves down to the earth, as if in prayer, and remained thus a long time, absolutely motionless: the flag continued to wave silently. As soon as they had strength, they arose, joined hands again, and went on.

The second, which is yet again a ballad (the recognised form, almost, for poems about hangings), is by Oscar Wilde, who recounts the reality of life in Reading Gaol, where he was sent for being a homosexual. Here, he tells of the reaction of the prisoners as they wait for one of their number to be executed at the traditional time of eight o' clock in the morning.

From **The Ballad of Reading Gaol** *by Oscar Wilde*

The morning wind began to moan,
  But still the night went on:
Through its giant loom the web of gloom
  Crept till each thread was spun:
And, as we prayed, we grew afraid
  Of the Justice of the Sun.

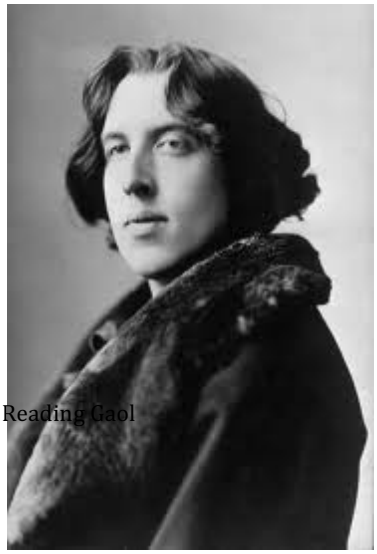
The moaning wind went wandering round
  The weeping prison wall:
Till like a wheel of turning steel
  We felt the minutes crawl:
O moaning wind! what had we done
  To have such a seneschal?

At last I saw the shadowed bars,
  Like a lattice wrought in lead,
Move right across the whitewashed wall
  That faced my three-plank bed,
And I knew that somewhere in the world
  God's dreadful dawn was red.

At six o'clock we cleaned our cells,
  At seven all was still,
But the sough and swing of a mighty wing
  The prison seemed to fill,
For the Lord of Death with icy breath
  Had entered in to kill.

He did not pass in purple pomp,
  Nor ride a moon-white steed.
Three yards of cord and a sliding board
  Are all the gallows' need:
So with rope of shame the Herald came
  To do the secret deed.

We were as men who through a fen
  Of filthy darkness grope:
We did not dare to breathe a prayer,
  Or to give our anguish scope:
Something was dead in each of us,
  And what was dead was Hope.



Reading Gaol

For Man's grim Justice goes its way
  And will not swerve aside:
It slays the weak, it slays the strong,
  It has a deadly stride:
With iron heel it slays the strong
  The monstrous parricide!

We waited for the stroke of eight:
  Each tongue was thick with thirst:
For the stroke of eight is the stroke of Fate
  That makes a man accursed,
And Fate will use a running noose
  For the best man and the worst.

We had no other thing to do,
  Save to wait for the sign to come:
So, like things of stone in a valley lone,
  Quiet we sat and dumb:
But each man's heart beat thick and quick,
  Like a madman on a drum!

With sudden shock the prison-clock
  Smote on the shivering air,
And from all the gaol rose up a wail
  Of impotent despair,
Like the sound the frightened marshes hear
  From some leper in his lair.

And as one sees most fearful things
  In the crystal of a dream,
We saw the greasy hempen rope
  Hooked to the blackened beam,
And heard the prayer the hangman's snare
  Strangled into a scream.

And all the woe that moved him so
  That he gave that bitter cry,
And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats,
  None knew so well as I:
For he who lives more lives than one
  More deaths than one must die.

Morbid, gruesome? Yes, perhaps. There is a grisly fascination somewhere, that is chilling, in our reactions to that most troublesome action throughout history: the deliberate taking of life both as retribution and deterrent. Albert Pierrepoint, Britain's last official hangman wrote this about hanging's likely deterrence in his 1974 autobiography:

From *Executioner: Pierrepoint*

> "It is said to be a deterrent. I cannot agree. There have been murders since the beginning of time, and we shall go on looking for deterrents until the end of time. If death were a deterrent, I might be expected to know. It is I who have faced them last, young men and girls, working men, grandmothers. I have been amazed to see the courage with which they take that walk into the unknown. It did not deter them then, and it had not deterred them when they committed what they were convicted for. All the men and women whom I have faced at that final moment convince me that in what I have done I have not prevented a single murder."

Perhaps what is most disturbing about what this article shows is the close relationship between "the rope" and the world of entertainment. "Tyburn Tree" in some ways resembled a theatre; the condemned prisoners, particularly the rich and famous (or infamous) achieved the status of theatrical stardom for a brief, ironic moment where they "played out" the end of their lives. Gallows humour persists to this day (cf "The Life of Brian" 'Aways look on the bright side of... death…') and yet, as Orwell's essay tries to show, what was being done was terrible and should not be belittled.

I hope this will not give you too many nightmares. Luckily, civilised societies (outside China, Iran, North Korea, Texas, etc.) have since relegated such sordid executions to the past. And I'm sorry, but I shall not show you here how to tie a noose!

*NB. Grammar – curtains are **hung** - prisoners are **hanged***
Many English speakers get this wrong

AREAS FOR STUDY

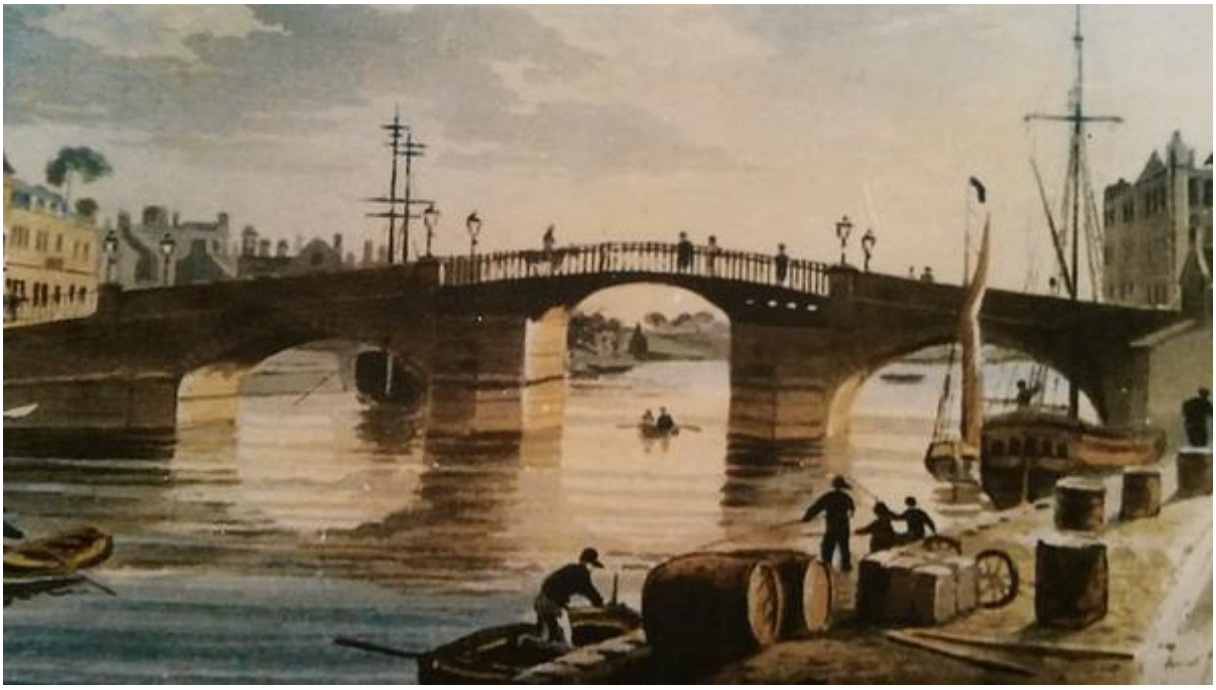
First of all, talk about your reaction to this article with a partner. Which of the texts and extracts did you most respond to? Why? How? Did you notice any common threads running through the poems and passages?

Choose one of the passages to write a critical appreciation. What do you notice particularly about the ways the writer has shaped his material? (None of the writers is female – is this just a coincidence??) Look at the rhetorical effects of the writing (repetitions, metaphors, alliterations etc.) and the place of the narrator.

Use the internet to do some further research on attitudes to punishment (prison, execution, murder….) through the ages. See if you can find further ballads or historical accounts. Present your findings to the class and get more discussions going.

One of the most successful shows (a musical opera based on ballads) of the eighteenth century was "The Beggar's Opera" by John Gay (1728) which was set in Newgate Prison. Find out more about why this show broke box-office records in its day.

YouTube has links for this and also musical versions of *"The Night That Larry Was Stretched"*. Check them out.



Weymouth Harbour Bridge, built in 1824 with stone to replace the much earlier wooden structure of the 17th century with 17 arches.

Here is Hardy's poem "The Harbour Bridge". Notice how visual the details are, first of all. Then look at how the "camera" of the poet draws in more closely (there is much of the 'voyeur' in Hardy, at times) so that we can "eavesdrop" on the pathetic little drama being played out on (SO symbolically and ironically) on a bridge! Notice too the absence, almost, of empathy. We observe, listen, from afar, and like the stars above, ultimately watch human dramas tragically play themselves out. For Hardy, there was no God, especially NOT a caring God. Humans are condemned to act out their lives alone and unhelped. The nearest we come to a God in Hardy, is the novelist/poet as puppet-master.

What else will the pupils discover in this poem? Notice the word "judge". The poem doesn't appear to judge, but perhaps the word is more functional than it might seem. After all, the wronged woman is trying to "bridge" a gap, surely? It is the man, who "gloomily" rejects the olive branch and the possibility of a reconciliation. Notice the truncated last line of each stanza, cutting off any idea of hope or negotiated settlement of the sad story. Its abruptness seems to cut off any comfort.

Notice, too, the foreshadowing of the end of the relationship with words like "hanging dark" and "skeleton" .

THE HARBOUR BRIDGE

FROM here, the quay, one looks above to mark
The bridge across the harbour, hanging dark
Against the day's-end sky, fair-green in glow
Over and under the middle archway's bow:
It draws its skeleton where the sun has set,
Yea, clear from cutwater to parapet;
On which mild glow, too, lines of rope and spar
Trace themselves black as char.

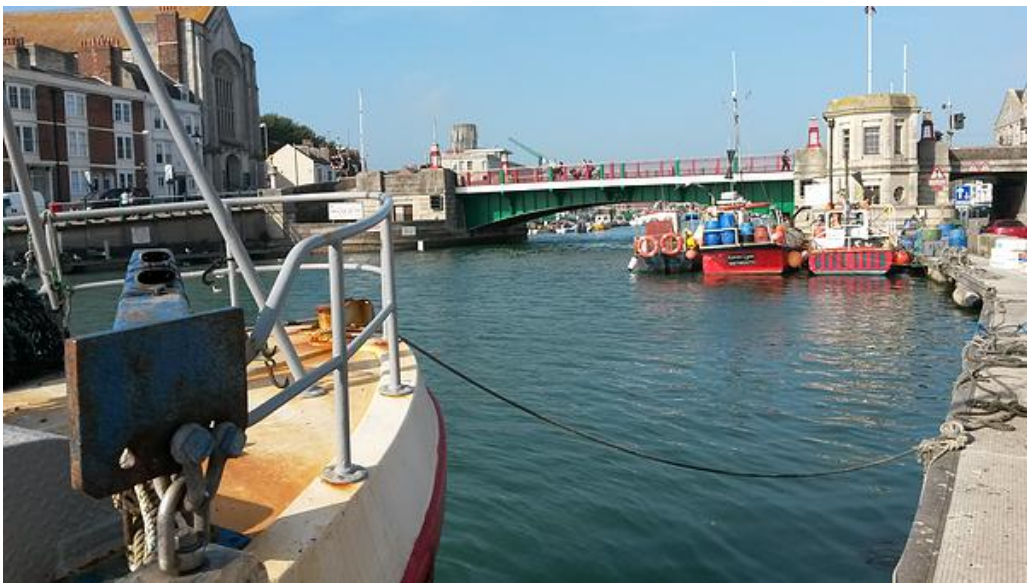
Down here in shade we hear the painters shift
Against the bollards with a drowsy lift,
As moved by the incoming stealthy tide.
High up across the bridge the burghers glide
As cut black-paper portraits hastening on
In conversation none knows what upon:
Their sharp-edged lips move quickly word by word
To speech that is not heard.

There trails the dreamful girl, who leans and stops,
There presses the practical woman to the shops,

There is a sailor, meeting his wife with a start,
And we, drawn nearer, judge they are keeping apart.
Both pause. She says: "I've looked for you. I thought
We'd make it up." Then no words can be caught.
At last: "Won't you come home?" She moves still nigher:
"'Tis comfortable, with a fire."

"No," he says gloomily. "And, anyhow,
I can't give up the other woman now:
You should have talked like that in former days,
When I was last home." They go different ways.
And the west dims, and yellow lamplights shine:
And soon above, like lamps more opaline,
White stars ghost forth, that care not for men's wives,
Or any other lives.
WEYMOUTH.

Weymouth Harbour Bridge remodelled in 1880



Weymouth Harbour Bridge as it is today