

Resource: “The Golf Links,” poem by Sarah Cleghorne

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Citation: The poem is readily available on the web:

The golf links lie so near the mill
That almost every day
The laboring children can look out
And see the men at play.

Context:

In this assignment, I use the famous poem “The Golf Links” by the peace, suffrage and labor activist Sarah Cleghorn (1876- 1959) to start students out on a conversation about the social and political applications of poetry.

I use this poem for courses in *Introduction to Literature*, *Introduction to Poetry* and *Literature and Politics*. (Of course its application can cross many different disciplines). I hand it out at the start of the semester to introduce the idea of literary contexts, in which I inform students that a good deal of poetry has been written to engage readers in social justice issues. I also begin by writing the famous last line from Percy Shelley’s “Defense of Poetry” on the board: “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

How I use it:

There are a number of ways to use “The Golf Links” in the classroom. For example, the poem was written in the 1910s to protest child labor, so it could be printed below one of Lewis Hines’s photographs of child mill workers. These photos are available on the web at: www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/childlabor/glimpse.jpg (I might also hand out information on child labor laws, or use the topic of child labor laws as a springboard for a research assignment).

“The Golf Links” offers an excellent critique of class and power relations in the United States in the early twentieth century. It is easy for students to understand so it offers a good springboard for studying literary forms as well. I ask students to read the poem out loud and then working on their own or with a partner have them take notes about the poem’s form and content. Then I ask students to look at the Hine image in which the photographer *has placed* his subject looking out a window with an electric loom directly at her back. Students are asked to draw connections between the poem and the image. When we discuss the students’ responses to the poem (and image) I try to make sure that they can identify the issue of child labor and draw it out into a broader discussion about class and the dynamics of power, i.e. who works and who plays.

One note of interest: because the poem was written at a time when many golf courses were known as “links,” which refers to a specific style of golf course design, students always ask what “links” are. From there we get into very interesting discussions about

how leisure activities are constructed, especially a sporting activity such as golf, which has been historically a game for wealthy, white men.