

PREPARING FOR ENGLISH LITERATURE AT A LEVEL

If you are considering English literature in Year 12, use this time wisely: this is a golden opportunity to get ahead of your peers. Read the set texts and any biographies of the writers; read history books about the periods you are studying- it will all will be very useful.

A level English literature is divided into two genres: **Tragedy** and **Crime**

Our set texts are (in the order we read them):

CRIME:

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd – by Agatha Christie

Atonement – by Ian McEwan

a narrative poem by George Crabbe

My last Duchess, The Laboratory and *Porphyria's Lover*, poems by Robert Browning

The Ballad of Reading Gaol, a poem by Oscar Wilde

(all poetry is available for free, via a google search)

As there is also an unseen crime extract, you should read lots of crime texts!

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/28/top-writers-choose-their-perfect>

(This is a good list as you get recommendations from our top living crime writers, whose books you can also explore)

TRAGEDY:

King Lear, a play by William Shakespeare

La Belle Dame Sans Merci ; Isabella and the Pot of Basil; The Eve of St Agnes and Lamia, (mostly) narrative poems by John Keats

Death of a Salesman a play by Arthur Miller

(all available online - I have a pdf of Death of a Salesman somewhere, just ask)

Mrs Barrington recommends: . I

At A level, you also have to write coursework on both a prose text and a poet of **your choice through a a particular critical lens.**

Watch this to learn a little about critical theory: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXLm3zZYhc0>

If you *never read* quality texts for pleasure, you will find this very difficult!

You could write about other works by the our set text writers. From McEwan, perhaps *The Cement Garden* by McEwan or *The Child in Time*

Books that inspired McEwan to write *Atonement*: *The Go-between* by LP Hartley; *Northanger Abbey* - Jane Austen.

For Agatha Christie - more Poirot or Miss Marple;

Dorothy L Sayers, as another 'Golden Age' detective writer.

Raymond Chandler for some American 'hard-boiled' work;

Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* for an early form of crime writing (he was Dickens' mate).

Read some other sections from *The Village* by Crabbe (*Peter Grimes* is one part of a huge text called '*The Village*') which is all online.

Read *De Profundis* by Wilde, also written in jail to the lover who spurned him once he was imprisoned for his sexuality.

Shakespeare – watch versions via youtube; read his other tragedies - *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus* etc. Read or listen to podcasts and see what people think of Lear – listen to Emma Smith's podcasts on Shakespeare . <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/people/emma-smith>)

If you want more Arthur Miller, read *The Crucible* or *All my Sons*. You can watch the play on Youtube – there are a couple of versions.

Listen to some of these – they are clever people, talking about important things – useful for history and RS and science too. I cannot recommend them highly enough

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/598SVYJ2smP8qJlpH29y7Vj/podcasts>

Other books:

If you liked the Prologue we based our 'It is difficult to believe..' Section B, Paper 1 writing on, read *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt – which is also a crime text

Read some Patricia Highsmith (*The Talented Mr Ripley*) You also have to write coursework about a quality piece of prose and a poet (works that are already on the A level spec are forbidden)

Read some Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath poetry, then read *The Birthday Letters* and *The Bell Jar*

If you want to get lost in a long epic, read *100 Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez - or my favourite by him, *Love in the Time of Cholera*

For a shorter piece of magical realism: *The Magic Toyshop* by Angela Carter.

Read to find something you would love to write coursework on. I love all these books (but I'm old and female). Dark short stories by a German? *Tales from the Underworld* by Hans Fallada; a linger dark German novel *The Tin Drum* by Gunter Gras

The funniest book I have ever read is [A Confederacy of Dunces](#) by John Kennedy Toole.

You will find great writing from: Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, David Mitchell, Margaret Atwood, Chinua Achebe, Audre Lorde, William Faulkner, Graham Greene, Emily Bronte, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy... need inspiration? Check this list: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/books-best-greatest-read-before-you-die-classic-novels-literature-austen-orwell-dickens-mantel-a9255191.html>

A great English poetry: John Milton, Philip Larkin, WH Auden, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Browning, Seamus Heaney, Carol Ann Duffy, Simon Armitage – need ideas (and read good critical writing) look here: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/poemoftheweek>

WHATEVER YOU READ - GET INTO THE HABIT OF READING!

Good luck and happy reading! Books can be pricey but 'Used and New' on Amazon means you can usually pick up a copy of the texts for the cost of postage. Many of the older texts are online. Feel free to bother me if you want advice or more help. Mrs Barrington sbarrington@uobschool.org.uk

Critical reading:

A big difference between A level and GCSE is the concept of viewing a text through a particular critical lens. At A-level, we explore the following **literary critical theories**:

- Narrative theory
- Marxism
- Feminism
- Post-colonialism
- Eco-criticism
- The Literary canon

For example, were we to view *A Christmas Carol* through a **feminist** lens, we might reflect upon the gender stereotypes that Dickens presents and notice that most female characters fit into the servile, modest profile of a typical, 19th century woman. Any woman who does not fit this profile (his former housekeeper, for example) is both physically repulsive and morally corrupt.

By contrast, I might say, from a **Marxist** perspective, that the novel exposes how working class people have no control over their own lives because they are beholden to the whims of their employers (Cratchitt and his family). Even when Scrooge is redeemed, it is still he who holds the purse strings – who said they even wanted a big turkey? How were they supposed to cook it in their tiny home?

Then again, from an **eco-critical** view, we might see Dickens as anthropocentric (an adjective meaning to regard humankind as the central or most important element of existence) because the weather and the world adapts to match Scrooge's own mood.

It is interesting to look at familiar texts in new ways – if you want to get ahead and read more, look at the PDF of AQA's critical anthology.