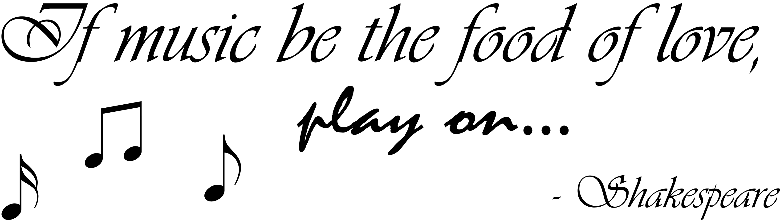


**English Department**

Sixth Form

Handbook



**English Literature in the Sixth Form**

Studying literature is intellectually challenging, intensely personal and immensely rewarding. If you enjoy reading and talking about books and the ideas they contain, then this course is for you. You will acquire the valuable and transferable skills of analysis, argument, critical thinking and teamwork; you will be expected to form and voice your own opinions, and to evaluate the opinions of others. English Literature is widely recognised as a highly desirable qualification, both at university and beyond.

**The OCR English A Level consists of three units: two examination papers and a coursework module:**

**Paper 1: Shakespeare & Drama and Poetry pre-1900 (60 marks) 2hrs 30mins**

You will study *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare and the examination will consist of both an extract based close textual reading and a question focusing on the play as a whole. The second section places a play and a poetry text against each other for comparison: Webster’s revenge tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi* and Christina Rossetti’s poetry. You will need to weigh interpretations of the texts against each other and develop a good contextual understanding.

**Paper 2: Comparative and Contextual Study (60 marks) 2hrs 30mins**

This paper allows you to delve into an area of literature in more depth. You will be studying *Dracula* by Bram Stoker and *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter in addition to a range of extracts from across the genre. Some classes may also look at an additional novel: choices have included Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* You will be encouraged to read other texts from the topic independently. You will go on a trip to see the founder of the gothic genre, Horace Walpole’s house, Strawberry Hill.

**Coursework: Literature post-1900 (40 marks)**

The coursework unit allows the class to study three texts, one of which must be written post-2000. You will be asked to write a 1,000 word recreative essay with commentary on a novel, this year’s choices were *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy and *NW* by Zadie Smith; and a second essay of 2,000 words focusing on a comparison of modern drama and poetry texts. Possible combinations for this comparative essay might include poetry by Sylvia Plath, Maya Angelou or Allen Ginsberg and drama choices have included Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* or David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross.*

Hopefully you will enjoy the benefits and delights of studying literature to an advanced level. Whether you have chosen similar subject such as history, modern languages or classics, or focused on the physical or social sciences, English Literature will complement and support your interests and give you essential skills. Perhaps chiefly, you will become a more rounded and open individual, ready to take an active part in our remarkably rich cultural environment.

**HOW TO STUDY LITERATURE**

Your teachers will tell you precisely what is required on a day-to-day basis and are always available for consultation. However, the following guidelines aim to point you in the right direction.

**Read the texts**  The books you are given should be read as soon as you can. Do not leave them until the last moment. As you are reading, make notes on a separate sheet of paper to help you remember the plot, characters and key ideas. Often your first thoughts will be very useful later on. You should re-read the texts at least once before the exam.

**Prepare thoroughly** You will often be required to prepare a passage, chapter of poem before a lesson. You will be given responsibility for tracking a particular character and/or theme through the text, and for reporting back to the class. Do the necessary work thoroughly in advance; take care over the production of handouts and notes. Ask yourself if you can be proud of what you are about the offer the class as you work together as a team.

**Read around the texts** Your teachers will suggest other books to help you appreciate your set texts. From an early stage you should start to read the ideas of other critics, not so that you can pass them off as your own (which is plagiarism and could result in your exclusion from all A Level examinations!) but so that you can compare and refine your own ideas by considering alternative approaches (thus meeting AO5) and be more informed about the critical context surrounding your texts. Explore the internet, but be aware of unreliable postings. There is a collection of critical books in the library and you can also use JSTOR and Firefly for other sources. Explore the art, music and historical background of the periods of your texts.

**Make notes** Much of your time in English lessons will not be spent in copying down notes dictated by your teacher. The onus is on you to make an adequate record of the ideas being put forward and discussed, so that you will remember them and be able to elaborate on them when it comes to essay writing. You will be able to make annotations in your copies of texts. Ensure notes are clear enough for you to come back to them during revision and be able to understand what you have written.

**Write essays** All you’re A Level marks come from writing essays. Spend as much time as is necessary on them. A more detailed guide can be found under How to Write an Essay in the Handbook.

**Think and talk** You develop ideas by discussing them with others in and out of class. To do well you must be prepared to contribute to class discussion and debate – and don’t switch off as soon as you leave the classroom.

**Ask questions** If you don’t understand something, ask. If it isn’t cleared up in the lesson, your teachers will always be willing to arrange a time when you discuss any difficulties.

**Read, watch and listen for fun** Read a wide variety of writing other than your set texts – develop enthusiasms and explore new areas. Aim to broaden your cultural horizons by reading newspaper and magazine reviews and articles; watching good quality films and TV (for instance, BBC adaptations of classic texts and good new literary dramas); listening to good quality talk radio – which can also be accessed via the web (eg*. Today*, *In Our Time* and *Front Row* on Radio 4, *The Verb* and *Night Waves* on Radio 3); and going to the theatre, both on school trips and on your own initiative.

**ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES**

**AO1 Engagement**

Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.

**AO2 Analysis**

Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.

**AO3 Context**

Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.

**AO4 Comparison**

Explore connections across literary texts.

**AO5 Critical interpretation**

Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | AO1 | AO2 | AO3 | AO4 | AO5 | Total |
| **Paper 1: Drama and poetry pre-1900** | 10% | 7.5% | 10% | 5% | 7.5% | 40% |
| **Paper 2: Comparative and contextual study** | 5% | 15% | 12.5% | 5% | 2.5% | 40% |
| **Coursework: Literature post-1900** | 5% | 7.5% | 2.5% | 2.5% | 2.5% | 20% |
| **Total** | 20% | 30% | 25% | 12.5% | 12.5% | 100% |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **AO1 engagement** | **AO2**  **analysis** | **AO3**  **context** | **AO4 comparison** | **AO5**  **critical interpretation** |
| ***Gothic extract (exam)*** | 12.5% | 75% | 12.5% |  |  |
| ***Gothic BC and Dracula (exam)*** | 12.5% |  | 50% | 25% | 12.5% |
| ***Twelfth Night close analysis (exam)*** | 25% | 75% |  |  |  |
| ***Twelfth Night essay question (exam)*** | 50% |  |  |  | 50% |
| ***Rossetti and Malfi (exam)*** | 12.5% |  | 50% | 25% | 12.5% |
| ***Recreative / analysis (coursework)*** | 50% | 50% |  |  |  |
| ***Comparative essay (coursework)*** | 20% | 20% | 20% | 20% | 20% |

**HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY**

1. **Always** go through the following procedure:

* **Think** about the question you have been given: what are its key terms, and what do you have to know to answer it?
* **Plan** how you are going to answer it: the Three point Plan (or dialectic) is a good scheme (divide your ideas into three main paragraphs, which could follow the form thesis, antithesis, synthesis)
* **Assemble** the information you need: key points, quotations, ideas from secondary sources, etc.
* **Draft** your answer, checking periodically that you are on track. Remember to include clear points supported by evidence from the text and in depth analysis
* **Write** your final draft, making amendments and corrections
* **Check** your final draft (see below)
* **Hand in** your essay on time

1. **Check** the following before you hand the essay in:
   * Does it fully **answer the question** set?
   * Have you supported each point with a **quotation** or close reference to the text?
   * Does it make **sense**?
   * Have you **avoided** padding and retelling the story?
   * Have you **acknowledged** all secondary sources to avoid plagiarism?
   * Is it all **spelt and punctuated** correctly? (check unfamiliar words and names\_
   * Is it **named and dated**?
2. **Avoid:**
   * Slang, colloquialisms and clichés
   * Contractions (didn’t, hadn’t , etc.)
   * Generalised opinion – always link to specific evidence
   * Waffle – especially common in first paragraphs!
   * Signposting (‘As I was saying earlier’ etc.)
   * Trying to be too clever – complex ideas are usually best conveyed in a simple style using easily understood words
3. **Aim for:**
   * Clear, formal language
   * Absolute relevance at all times
   * Development of one key idea per paragraph
   * Clear structure
   * Concise expression
   * Short, apt quotations (never more than two lines and preferably shorter) woven into your own sentences wherever possible
   * Forceful opening and conclusive conclusion
4. **Presentation:**
   * Underline titles or put them inside quotation marks (or italicise if word processed) throughout the essay eg. ‘Evil always seems present in *Macbeth*’
   * Put longer quotations on a new line for clarity unless they are incorporated in the sense of your sentence
   * Set out verse quoations as verse
   * Give references for quotations (Act/Scene/Line or Chapter/Page) – this will help you with your revision

**SAMPLE ESSAY – CRITICAL APPRECIATION**

**How does Du Maurier use gothic features for effect in chapter one of *Rebecca*? (30)**

Du Maurier’s famous opening to Rebecca immediately establishes the tone and mood of the novel. The unnamed narrator’s nostalgia is tinged with imagery of violence and a sinister tone is prevalent throughout this extract. The perversion and death of nature shows a Romantic sensibility, characteristic of gothic settings and the passage’s sematic field of death and decay reflects the gothic preoccupation with the macabre. Whilst *Rebecca* was written during the early twentieth century, the Romantic nostalgia of the heroine in this opening chapter is reflective of the gothic fascination with the past and a sense of loss.

The writing itself, like the heroine, is tinged with nostalgia: the natural lexical field lends a sense of Romanticism to the novel, more typical of the Victorian gothic and reminiscent of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* or Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*. Like the beaten moors in *Wuthering Heights*, the nature here is aggressively anthropomorphised; reflecting the underlying violence of the novel itself. The tricolon ‘crowded, dark and uncontrolled’ creates a menacing atmosphere as the trees seem to have abandoned all sense of order and have encroached upon the driveway, the setting is ‘dark’, and thus typically gothic, referring to both the night time setting and the potential for evil lurking in the grounds of Manderley. The passage is saturated with natural imagery and the adjective ‘monster’ is repeatedly used to describe both the size and character of the plants and trees, reminiscent of the gothic preoccupation with the monstrous. Here this is juxtaposed with the setting of Manderley, the country estate symbolising civilisation and order, contrasting with the wild, ‘native, ‘jungle law’ of the grounds. Indeed, the ivy is described as ‘malevolent’ and ‘always an enemy to grace’. The superlative ‘always’ adds force to the description, in addition to the strong adjective ‘malevolent’. This creates a sense that the ivy has destroyed the ‘grace’ of the house, implying that nature, indeed the potential for evil in nature, will always triumph over enforced civilisation; perhaps referencing the psychological element of the gothic prevalent in texts such as *Jekyll and Hyde*, and the Freudian theory that the base instinct of man’s Id will always ultimately emerge.

There is a sense of the gothic convention of the uncanny and liminality: the house is familiar, ‘twisting and turning as it had always done’ and yet there is a feeling ‘that a change had come upon it’. This adds to the perception created by the ‘dream’ experience, emphasised through repetition, that the narrator is in a liminal space where imagination and reality have merged, a common gothic trope. This produces a sense of uncertainty, furthered by the author’s use of ‘moonlight’. The light imagery juxtaposes with the darkness of the nature, creating a sense of illumination and hope; yet this is undermined by the narrator’s statement that ‘moonlight can play odd tricks upon the fancy’. This anthropomorphisation of the moonlight implies that the light is not to be trusted and thus adds to the general sense of unease established throughout the extract. Du Maurier makes further makes use of the gothic convention of the supernatural as the narrator describes herself as ‘possessed all of a sudden with supernatural powers’. Du Maurier uses the simile ‘like a spirit’ to describe the narrator, increasing the sense of liminality as the dreamer seems to exist in an ethereal space, ‘enchanted’ and immune from nettle stings; this is juxtaposed with the library scene set through the domestic lexical field of ‘curtains’, ‘handkerchief’, ‘cushions’ and ‘books’. There is a sense that Manderley is simultaneously ghostly and transient, whilst retaining its tangible material state; similarly, the Marquis’ castle in *The Bloody Chamber* is described as ‘amphibious’, with gothic spaces commonly inhabiting a ghostly or liminal space.

Gothic heroines are traditionally virtuous, corrupted by the monsters that they encounter. This theme of violation is reflected in du Maurier’s extract through the use of natural and colour imagery: ‘the beeches with white, naked limbs leant close … their branches intermingled in a strange embrace’. The anthropomorphised ‘white, naked limbs’ of the trees are evocative of the female body and the colour white has connotations of innocence and purity, yet here this innocence is tinged with the sexual connotations of a ‘strange embrace’. The adjective ‘strange’ implies that there is an unnaturalness to the joining of the trees. There is further violation of nature as the ‘rhododendrons’ are ‘twisted and entwined with bracken’ and have ‘entered into alien marriage with a host of nameless shrubs’. The beauty of the flowers has been corrupted through the unnatural, ‘alien’ marriage with weeds; and thus their beauty sullied. Sexually suggestive diction is mingled with ‘twisted’ and unnatural adjectives, a gothic trope reminiscent of the Victorian origins of many major works of the genre, such as Dracula, where sexuality is seen as deviant and strange; particularly in women, or here mother nature herself. The ‘famous’ hydrangeas’ have become ‘black and ugly as the parasites that grew beside them’. The adjectives black and ugly are incongruous with conventional descriptions of flowers and the simile comparing them to parasites is indicative of the decay that has set in. Flowers, a traditional symbol of fertility and life are reduced to rot. This is, perhaps, suggestive of the themes of the novel and could foreshadow the fate of the narrator, du Maurier’s gothic heroine.

Like the decaying flowers, the passage is permeated with imagery of death. For instance, the roots of the tree as described with the simile ‘like skeleton claws’: roots are the tree’s source of life and here they are linked with death; nature itself has died at Manderley. Furthermore, there is a sense of foreboding typical of the gothic as the trees form a ‘vault’ above the narrator’s head. This metaphor could represent a tomb, foreshadowing death (either literal or metaphoric) for the character. Indeed, the house is described as ‘a desolate shell, soulless at last, unhaunted’; whilst the idea of the house being ‘unhaunted’ may appear to be contradictory to a gothic setting, the walls are left ‘staring’ and alive and the scene of decay and wild nature around it juxtaposes with the lifeless, dead house adding to a sense of loss and adding to the malevolence of the nature that has buried it. Indeed, it as though the house itself has died as the short sentence that ends the passage states ‘Manderley was no more’. Horace Walpole, the founder of the gothic genre believed that ‘gothic effects may be produced by the disposition of a house’ and thus presents the setting of gothic novels as a character themselves: the death of Manderley is what has led the dreamer to her morbid reimagining of it in both life and death simultaneously, thus the novel begins with a kind of death, indicative of the gothic genre as a whole and the melancholy tone of the novel.

**SAMPLE ESSAY – COMPARING TEXTS**

**‘Women are characterised in Gothic fiction as merely passive victims.’**

**Compare how far this view informs your reading of *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* with at least one other text prescribed for this topic.**

There is much to support this view when applied to early Gothic fiction, where the figure of the innocent and virtuous, but essentially helpless female preyed upon by a villain or monster is commonplace in novels such as *The Castle of Otranto* or *The Monk*. As the genre evolved in the 19th century however a more assertive style of heroine began to emerge in the novels of writers like the Bronte sisters with characters like Jane Eyre or *Wuthering Heights’* Cathy, and by the time of *Dracula* towards the close of the century even those women portrayed as victims are arguably far from “passive”. Looking ahead to Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, published in 1979, this paradigm can be seen to be both challenged and demolished. In large part this is due to social and cultural developments over time that have afforded women greater power and freedom, most obviously the rise of the feminist movement in the late 20th century, which strongly informs Carter’s fiction. Helen Simpson notes of Carter’s female characters that “passivity is not an intrinsically virtuous state” and the stories affirm this in repeated examples of empowered female characters proving more than a match for their male counterparts.

In *The Snow Child*, for instance, the “passive victim” figure of the Snow Child initially seems to fit the stereotype exactly. This waif-like and innocent girl is victim of first the Countess’ murderous scheming and then the Count’s lust, reduced to nothing but a “bloodstain” on the snow. Yet the tale’s final twist is the rose that “bites” the Countess. This could of course suggest that the Countess is or will be just as much victim of the Count’s sexual dominance as the child, but another reading suggests the girl asserting symbolic revenge on this corrupt husband and wife.

Far more obviously assertive is the protagonist of *The Tiger’s Bride*, a tough and uncompromising young woman who takes her destiny into her own hands when her father fails her, and proves the match of her fearsome and bestial new husband. Unlike in the linked story that precedes this one, *The Courtship of Mr Lyon*, which offers a more traditional retelling of *Beauty and the Beast*, the Tiger and his bride seem to discover common ground in their shared animal natures, vividly symbolised in the final scene where the girl is erotically transformed through a kind of fellatio into a tiger with “beautiful fur”. Carter appears to suggest here that through mutual sexual liberation male and female can unite on equal terms. This is a far more radical conclusion than that of *Mr Lyon*, in which the more traditional and “passive” female virtues of gentleness and compassion enable the union, but in which it is still possible to argue that Beauty conforms to the stereotypical “passive” and subordinate role in her blandly “happily ever after” marriage to the tamed and weakened Beast.

The most obvious example of a “passive victim” in *Dracula* is Lucy Westenra, the Count’s first prey on arrival at Whitby. Lucy is portrayed by Stoker very much in the mould of the traditional Victorian middle class woman, socially demure and obedient to male authority, though there is a flirtatious aspect to her character suggested by her playful comment to Mina: “Why can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her?” and her evident enjoyment of male attention. Many critics argue that it is this element of sexual openness which condemns Lucy to the role of primary victim in the novel, not just of Dracula but of the horrific phallic violation of the staking of her corpse to destroy the diabolical “thing” that she becomes. Stephen King argues that the attack on Lucy in the Whitby graveyard is “the moral equivalent of being struck by lightning while playing golf”, which may be so, but it is hard to ignore the strongly sexualised nature of these episodes, exaggerated still further in the BBC’s adaptation of the story or Coppola’s 1992 film where Lucy’s arousal is quite explicit. There appears to be a real fear of the dangers of open female sexuality, typical of the late Victorian period, in sharp contrast to Carter’s depiction of female sexuality as key to empowerment and even a weapon in the struggle for equal status with men. Victorian paranoia about female sexuality is all the more apparent during the “Bloofer lady” episodes of *Dracula*, where the vampiress Lucy preys on small children in a disturbingly paedophilic fashion – a sexual taboo on a par with the Count’s necrophilia in *The Snow Child*. It also forms an interesting contrast with the three female vampires that attempt Harker’s seduction in Dracula’s castle. They too can be seen as victims of Dracula, but come across as forceful sexual predators in the novel, preying on grown men rather than infants, and only restrained by the Count’s imperious command of “This man belongs to me!” Again, it has been persuasively argued that this ambiguous cry of Dracula’s is suggestive of sexual rivalry between the Count and his barely-controlled female followers.

Mina forms a distinct contrast to Lucy and fulfils a very different role. Whilst she is initially presented as the archetypally dutiful Victorian wife, an independent streak is implied by her determination to master shorthand and typing in order to follow a potential career as a journalist, and equipping her with the secretarial skills necessary to record and gather vital information with which to defeat Dracula. She gently mocks the “new women” that she mentions at various points in her letters, yet seems to the reader very much part of this breed of more independent female emerging at the end of the 19th century, paving the way for the suffrage movement. Like Lucy, Mina falls prey to Dracula’s attack, but her strength of mind allows her to fight back and ultimately triumph. The male characters continually praise her and in many ways claim her as one of their own, ascribing “masculine” qualities of intelligence and moral courage. “She has a man’s brain … and a woman’s heart”, affirms Van Helsing – an ideal union. Mina reciprocates with comments in her journal like “How can women help loving men when they are so earnest, and so true, and so brave!” In this way a kind of equality between the sexes is established, akin to that explored by Carter in some of her stories, based on mutual respect, force of intellect and shared strength. However the reader is left in no doubt at the close of *Dracula* that the “brave and gallant” Mina is an exception to the female norm in a patriarchal Victorian world where men firmly keep a grip on all the real power. Yet the very fact Mina has such a prominent voice in the narrative is indication that change is underway.

In conclusion, the assertion that women are characterised in Gothic fiction as merely passive victims is only true in some cases. As the genre developed the role of women in the stories changed, sometimes even reversing the usual stereotypes, as we see with Harker’s passive surrender to the female vampires in *Dracula*, or the sinister female predator bewitching the knight at arms in Keats’ *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Contemporary Gothic narratives, in film and fiction, are just as likely to show the female characters as more dominant figures than the male, as the hugely popular *Game of Thrones* frequently demonstrates. In part this reflects social and cultural changes, but it could equally be seen as evidence of the remarkably adaptable nature of the Gothic reinventing itself for each new age.

**As part of your study of English A Level, you will be expected to read critical approaches to texts and genres. These will vary in approach and register; please see the example below from eMagazine.**

**Game of Goths**

HBO’s phenomenally successful *Game of Thrones* has run for six seasons and numbers David Cameron and Barack Obama among its legions of fans worldwide. Based on George R.R. Martin’s series of fantasy novels, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the world it creates pays homage to the godfather of the epic fantasy genre, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, which in turn draws on much older Celtic and Nordic sagas such as *Beowulf*. Like all such stories, *Game of Thrones* creates a world for its audience and characters to inhabit which is recognisably like our own in many respects but with the addition of fantastic and magical elements. Such stories appeal powerfully in their imaginative scope and the uniquely immersive, “wrap-around” escapism they provide.

*Game of Thrones*’ elaborate plotlines take inspiration from the brutal dynastic struggles of The Wars of the Roses, vividly dramatized by Shakespeare. In atmosphere however Martin’s world is more akin to *King Lear* or *Macbeth* than *Richard III*. Morally and spiritually, *Game of Thrones* shares the bleak nihilism of these plays. The forbidding northern landscapes of Westeros evoke the gothic Scotland of *Macbeth*, a darkly primitive place studded by isolated castles held precariously at bay from the more civilized south by a wall. Thematically, all these dramas pivot on the violence and wickedness of raw power politics. They show us failed states where madness threatens not just the individual but society as a whole, when the powers of darkness are unleashed through personal depravity or supernatural agency.

The gothic dimension of *Game of Thrones* is most evident in its settings – castles, dungeons, foggy, wolf-haunted forests – but also in other structural and thematic features which place it firmly within the gothic tradition and help explain the depth of its appeal to modern audiences.

**The threat of “the other”**

Season 1, Episode 1 opens with a scouting expedition by three members of the Night’s Watch who venture north into the frozen forest beyond the wall. They come across the site of a massacre before falling victim themselves to malevolent supernatural violence. The episode frames the story arc of all the series that follow, in which Westeros is continually at risk of invasion by barbarians (Wildlings), demons (the White Walkers) and winter itself, which threatens to exert its icy grip for decades. “Winter is coming,” the Stark household motto, is a metaphor of warning and perpetual vigilance.

*Dracula* (1897) similarly posits the threat of alien invasion, not simply by the Count’s appearance and predations in London, but what he represents: the barbarous East and its blood-soaked culture. Gothic fiction routinely presents monstrous threats to the “normative spaces” we all inhabit, most intimately our middle class homes, which Dracula also penetrates in his attacks on Lucy and Mina. Such fears are often connected to wider cultural insecurities, such as the late Victorian sense of the decline of empire, or the aftershock of Darwin and new science challenging the religious bedrock of society.

Just eleven years before Stoker’s tale, Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886)had suggested the even more disturbing idea that “the other” could come from within – we carry our own monster around inside ourselves. *Game of Thrones* also embraces this concept, with by far the most dreadful acts being perpetrated by cheerfully malignant human beings such as the monstrous child-tyrant Joffrey, rather than supernatural forces. As George R.R. Martin observes, “the true horrors of human history derive not from orcs and Dark Lords, but from ourselves.”

**The transgressive and taboo**

Season One, Episode One ends on a shocking note. Overseen committing incest by the ten year-old Bran Stark, Jamie Lannister casually shoves the boy out of a high window to his presumed death, laconically commenting, “The things I do for love”. This unholy combination of voyeurism, incest and infanticide sets the tone for the sex and sadism that peppers every episode and has attracted criticism even from admirers of the show. *Game of Thrones* never spares us the explicit realism of its world in a way that contrasts sharply with the sexless and largely bloodless *The* *Lord of the Rings*. Complicit by the act of viewing, the audience become gradually mired in what Andrew Marr describes as the “moral grime” of the story – an all pervading sense of the blurring of moral lines, where brute force, not justice, determines outcomes.

Partly this emphasis on explicit sex and violence is a reflection of a contemporary culture that is less shocked by such material than previously. Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) is similarly unabashed in its inclusion of transgressive content, such as the necrophilic rape of a young girl in “The Snow Child”. Sexual violence against women (or the threat of it) has in fact been a staple of gothic literature since its inception, and the incorporation of taboo sexuality is seen by many post-Freudians as a kind of pressure valve allowing readers to confront and perhaps exorcise their own Mr Hydes.

**Female oppression and empowerment**

Another aspect of *Game of Thrones* perhaps gives more cause for optimism. Whilst the medieval world it depicts is patriarchal to its core, with women more often than not its victims, there is a strand of female empowerment that defines many characters and reflects the way gothic literature has evolved its presentation of women over the years.

Cersei Lannister is the wicked witch figure in the story, a femme fatale of monstrous proportions. Beauty and evil combine to render her truly terrifying, in the mode of Keats’ *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, only more deliberate and relentless in her cruelty. But the female victims of Cersei fight back and grow stronger as a result, most notably the younger of the Stark sisters, Arya, whose survival skills and swordcraft develop apace as she evades the Lannisters’ reach. Brienne of Tarth is another female fighter who magnificently holds her own against all comers, while perhaps the show’s ultimate “weaponised woman”, Daenerys Targaryen, matures rapidly from girl bride to warrior queen, wielding ultimate force in the shape of three dragons – Westeros’ equivalent of a nuclear power. In this respect *Game of Thrones* continues a long-running gothic tradition of women fighting back against the patriarchy, be it Jane Eyre in the 1840’s, the protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper* at the close of the 19th century, or Angela Carter’s feminist heroines in the dawn of Thatcherism. This is more than simply a reflection of cultural change; it illustrates the genre’s concern with gender politics and the rebel impulse to empower the weak and marginalised.

**Narrative instability**

From *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) onwards an important structural aspect of the gothic tradition has been narrative instability. Horace Walpole originally presented his tale as a translation of a much earlier manuscript, destroying readers’ faith in the authenticity of the story when his deception was made public. The modern horror classic *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) followed Walpole’s example by initially purporting to be “found footage”. This aspect of the gothic persists in structural devices including multiple, unreliable or mentally unstable narrators; framed, non-linear and inter-textual narratives; and the inclusion of dreams and hallucinatory elements, all of which undermine the dependability of the text. Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* opens with an anonymous foreword that reassures the reader of the scrupulous documentary accuracy of the narratives that follow whilst acknowledging their “variance with the possibilities of latter-day belief”. In doing so the reader is simultaneously invited to trust and doubt the story as it unfolds.

The novels that make up *A Song of Ice and Fire* are told from multiple perspectives, creating a layered narrative that weaves in the books’ many characters and locations. However the destabilising element of *Game of Thrones* lies in the way it subverts our deeply-held expectations of narrative through the dispensability of its characters. With an average of 14 deaths per episode the viewer quickly gets accustomed to a high body count. The shock however lies in the show’s willingness to dispense with major characters without warning or apparent justification, particularly when these are characters with whom the audience has become emotionally invested. One such is Ned Stark in Season One, the closest thing to a voice of conscience in the treacherous world of Westeros, whose execution robs us of assurance that any character will survive beyond the fragile present they inhabit on screen.

This element also feeds the unsettling moral climate of the story. *The* *Lord of the Rings* was, above all else, an epic clash between good and evil, where good resoundingly triumphed, reflecting the 20th century’s titanic wars against fascism in which Tolkien played his part. In the “moral grime” of an increasingly godless 21st century we are given no such reassurance of the ultimate victory of good over evil. Dislocation and uncertainty, rather, are the key notes. To quote Andrew Marr: “Martin’s books capture our contemporary sense of cultural, political and social decline.” Sue Chaplin goes further, explaining the unique resonance of the gothic in our time: “Gothic has become the definitive mode of cultural engagement with the traumas of modernity and post modernity.” *Game of Thrones’* primary appeal may well be the good old-fashioned escapism of epic fantasy, with its clashing swords and dragons, spiced by titillating doses of sex and violence. But it is in *Game of Thrones’* gothic roots that its deeper hold on the modern psyche resides. In taking us back to an imaginary past *Game of Thrones* connects us with a troublesome present where turbulent politics, economic shocks, global terrorism and climate change all threaten our sense of stability, and even perhaps our faith in the viability of Western capitalism. Winter may indeed be coming.

**Nick Johnston-Jones**

**November 2016**

**TOOLS OF THE TRADE**

**A Short Guide to Critical and Literary Terms**

**ABSURD** Used specifically to indicate a mid-C20th style of theatre, in which moral or philosophical points are made through plots which are ‘absurd’ (eg. A choir of weighing machines)

**ALLEGORY** A story which exists on two levels at one: a straightforward/literal level and as a parallel to other events. Thus a commentary can be made on the events which are present by implication only. Orwell’s Animal Farm is an allegory of the events of the Russian revolution, and reaches unfavourable conclusions about the seizure of power by the people

**ALLITERATION**  Repetition of the same sound at the start of a number of words. Can underline meaning or create emphasis (eg. When Lear exclaims ‘I disclaim all my paternal care,/ Propinquity and property of blood’, the plosive alliteration suggests venom and anger)

**ALLUSION** Reference in a text to someone/thing which brings in a series of associations, thereby extending the meaning of an enriching the immediate text

**AMBIGUITY** Ability of words and sentences to express more than one meaning (eg. puns and double entendres). In linguistics, ambiguity is amore serious, demonstrating the fallibility of language (eg. ‘Flying aeroplanes can be dangerous’)

**AMBIVALENCE** Expression which by deliberate intent has more than one meaning. Often used in literary criticism in preference to ‘ambiguity’

**ANAGNORISIS** The tragic hero’s eventual self-knowledge gained through his suffering

**ANAPHORA** Repetition of word or group of words in successive clauses (eg. we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds’)

**ANTHROPOMORPHSIM** Ascribing a human quality to something inanimate

**ANTONYMS** Words that express opposites, eg. in/out, kind/cruel

**ARCHAISM** Deliberate use of old-fashioned word/phrase, usually to add to atmosphere of text, eg. Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ‘A Gentil Knight was pricking on the plaine’ (mock medieval, cf. Chaucer)

**ASIDE**  A speech or remark delivered by one character to another or to the audience; other characters on the stage are deemed not to hear it

**ASSONANCE** Repetition of the same vowel sound in a series of words (eg. The brown frown of a drowned town’)

**BATHOS** Collapse from serious tone to ridiculous

**BLANK VERSE** Written in lines of iambic pentameter which do not rhyme (see Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*, the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries)

**CAESURA** Pause near the middle of a metrical line, often indicating a pause in sense

**CATHARSIS** Originally a Greek term for purification of feelings and desires of audience by violent action which closes tragic drama. Also used by Elizabethans re own taste for gory plays

**CHIASMUS** The mirrored repetition of similar phrases or ideas, eg. Othello, ‘I kissed thee ere I killed thee’

**CLICHÉ**  Expression so frequently used that the idea behind it has become commonplace

**CONCEIT** Device in C16th / early C17th poetry depending on unlikely parallel between different things, often extended to great length, eg. Donne in ‘A Valediction Forbidding Mourning’ compares himself and is love to twin legs of a pair of compasses

**CONNOTATION**  What a text implies covertly through association and suggestion

**CONTEXT** Narrowly, the place in a text from which a part of that text has been extracted. More widely, the social, economic, political and cultural surroundings in which a particular text has been written, and which therefore influence it overtly or covertly. This latter usage is much favoured in literary criticism

**COUPLET**  A two-line, rhyming unit of poetry

**COURTLY LOVE (AMOUR COURTOIS)** C12th French philosophy of love which influenced medieval literature. Dealt with aristocratic, extra-marital love in secret: male lover was totally subservient to mistress, whom he worshipped as a goddess. Chaucer makes significant use of the convention.

**DENOTATION** What a text shows overtly and superficially (opposite of connotation)

**DICTION** The kind of language that a text uses: may be formal, intimate, everyday, specialist (referring to a particular trade/way of life, regional dialect, dependent on character), friendly, cold etc, etc. Often gives extra clues to character, setting, themes, etc.

**ELLIPSIS**  Omission of words/phrases from sentences

**EMPIRICISM** Philosophy relying only on observation, sense-data or experiment, rejecting theory

**EPIC** Poem of great length and elevated style narrating deeds of notable hero

**EPIC SIMILE** Extended simile showing series of parallels and comparisons

**EPIGRAM** Brief statement of moral significance in witty, compressed mode, eg. A H Clough, ‘The Latest Decalogue’: ‘Do not adultery commit/ Advantage rarely comes of it’

**EPIPHANY** ‘Manifestation’, originally the appearance of Christ to the Gentiles via the Magi. More recently used to signify a rapturous moment of illumination

**EPISTLE**  Poetry written as a letter

**EPONYMOUS** That which gives its name to anything (eg. David Copperfield is the eponymous hero of his novel)

**EUPHONY** Pleasantly smooth and melodious language

**FABLIAU** Short, satirical tale with strong bawdy element

**FREE VERSE** Verse with no regularity of line length, metre or rhyme. Used generally from C19th onwards. Do not confuse with blank verse!

**GENRE** Widely used to define different kinds of literature: novels, plays, poems. Within these categories, various sub-divisions are recognized, eg. social novels and science fiction novels; comic and tragic drama; lyric and narrative poetry. Non-fictional genres include travel writing, autobiography, diaries, history, literary criticism

**HAMARTIA**  From Greek for ‘error’, dramatic meaning is the fatal flaw in his nature which causes a tragic hero’s downfall. Hubris is a type of hamartia

**HUBRIS**  Originally Greek, meaning pride that allows tragic hero to ignore gods’ warnings and so bring about his own nemesis (downfall)

**HYPERBOLE** Figure of speech using exaggeration, often to a ridiculous extent

**IMAGE** Often used to describe a complex metaphor, where one thing is described in terms of another

**IRONY**  Use of language to express exact opposite of what is being said. Frequently subtle and not always easy to spot! Dramatic irony is a specific form where the audience knows more than the characters

**MALAPROPISM**  Use of word which sounds like the one intended, usually with comic results

**METAPHOR** A comparison stated by implication, often used direct without ‘like’ or ‘as’, linking things unexpectedly

**METONYMY** A figure of speech in which the name of an attribute of a thing is substituted for the thing itself, eg. ‘The Stage’ for the theatrical profession, ‘The Crown’ for the monarchy

**METRE** Pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables which make up the rhythm of the verse. Metrical poetry in English is written in various combinations of standard ‘feet’. Common feet are:

Iamb: 1 unstressed and then 1 stressed syllable

Anapaest: 2 unstressed and 1 stressed

Trochee: 1 stressed and 1 unstressed (last foot is often only 1 stressed syllable)

Dactyl: 1 stressed and 2 unstressed (often a 2-stressed spondee is added at the end)

The most frequent line lengths of metrical verse in English are:

Iambic pentameter (5-foot line of iambs)

Iambic tetrameter (4-foot line of iambs)

Alexandrine (iambic hexameter, a 6-foot line)

**MODERNISM**  Literary and artistic movement of the early C20th. ‘Modernism reflected the crack-up of a whole civilization. There was a dramatic speed-up in technology, along with widespread political instability. It was becoming hard to believe there was any innate order in the word.’ (Terry Eagleton)

**NEMESIS** Originally Greek, meaning the fate or downfall which pursues a tragic hero

**ONOMATOPOEIA** Use of words which recreate the sound of what they name, eg. crash, thud, splat, hiss

**OXYMORON** Rhetorical figure in which two opposite meanings are combined eg. ‘holy sinner’ or ‘honest thief’

**PARADOX** Apparently self-contradictory statement which, on closer inspection, has an element of truth

**PARODY** Writing in imitation of high or serious style with comic or ridiculous subject

**PATHETIC FALLACY** Term invented by Victorian art critic John Ruskin to scorn the ascribing of human feeling to inanimate objects. Often used of weather which is manipulates to reflect characters’ moods

**PERSONIFICATION** The impersonation of embodiment of some quality of abstraction

**POSTMODERNISM** A contemporary movement of thought embracing all forms of cultural expression. Postmodernism is sceptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture.

**QUATRAIN** A 4-line unit of verse within a longer stanza

**REFRAIN** A phrase or line repeated at intervals

**RHETORIC** Ancient branch of linguistic study, now a branch of literary criticism, concerned with forms/structures of literary texts and the way in which effects are achieved. Also refers to the art of effective speaking and writing.

**SIBILANCE**  Repetition of the sound ‘s’

**SIMILE**  Simplest kind of comparison, usually including ‘like’ or ‘as’

**SOLILOQUY**  Speech by a character revealing their thoughts to themselves or to the audience, usually when alone on stage.

**SONNET** Poem of 14 lines, commonly in iambic pentameter. Imported from Italy in C16th, originally in two sections of an octave and sestet rhyming ABBA ABBA CDE CDE (‘Petrarchan’ model). Shakespeare altered the form to 3 quatrains and a couplet ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

**STANZA**  Group of lines in a poem which are moderately self-contained in subject or structure (also mistakenly called a verse)

**SYNONYMS** Words which have the same or nearly the same meaning

**SYNTAX** Construction of sentences, paying attention to word order, grammatical relationships and inflections, and deployment of clauses

**TONE** In general, tone in poetry and drama means the effect conveyed by the voice speaking the lines. Often depends on setting, mood character, relationships between characters, etc. Tone in prose is harder to pin down: it is generally the voice in which the writer is speaking to the reader, and may be intimate, ironic, formal, playful, offensive, provocative, or a combination etc. In any genre, tone may change frequently within a passage, depending on who is speaking and what effect is sought

**TRANSFERRED EPITHET** A figure of speech in which the epithet is transferred from the appropriate noun to modify another to which is does not really belong, eg. ‘a sleepless night’. Also known as hypallage

**WIT**  Term has gone through several meanings. Modern usage denotes intelligence/wisdom or application of these to experience, originality or the capacity to think quickly.

**ZEITGEIST** The spirit or genius which marks the thought or feeling of a period

Further terms and information can be found in good quality guides such as *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*

**LITERARY THEORY MADE SIMPLE**

Literary theory is about ways of reading. It influences the approach to texts, which should be viewed not as having one fixed meaning dictated by the author’s original intentions, but a multiplicity of meanings based on the type of person who is reading the text and the experiences they bring to the reading process.

**Marxism – a class-based approach**

Marx and Engels did not put forward any comprehensive theory of literature but subsequent critics have constructed an approach around their class-based philosophies. Marxist literary criticism maintains that a writer’s social class, and its prevailing ‘ideology’ (outlook, values, tacit assumptions and allegiances) have a major bearing on what is written by a member of that class. The content (as opposed to the form) of the work is all important. Marxist critics try to reconstruct the past on the basis of historical evidence in order to find out to what extent a text (say, a novel) is a truthful and accurate representation of social reality at that time. Their view of history is one in which the class struggle is fundamental. Famous Marxists include the playwright Brecht, and critics such as Walter Benjamin, Louis Althusser and Terry Eagleton.

**Feminism – reading from a female perspective: a gender based theory**

Coming out of the struggle for women’s rights and emerging in the late 1960s, feminist theory is an attempt to describe and interpret (or reinterpret) women’s experience as depicted in various kinds of literature – especially the novel. It questions the long-stranding, dominant, male, phallocentric ideologies (which add up to a kind of male conspiracy) patriarchal attitudes and male interpretations in literature. It privileges women writers and is highly critical of certain male authors such as D H Lawrence, Norman Mailer and Henry Miller, and their representations of men and women in their novels. It challenges traditional and accepted male ideas about the nature of women and about how women feel, act and think, or are supposed to feel, act and think. Thus, it questions numerous prejudices and assumptions made about women by male writers, not least any tendency to cast women in stock character roles, eg. whores, virgins, mad women. Famous feminists include Simone de Vauvoir, Germaine Greer, Kate Millet and Elaine Showalter.

**Colonialism / Post-colonialism – in which nationality is all-important**

Colonial literature was written during the period of European colonialism and the British Empire and included literature whose main subject matter is white representations of colonial countries. The type of literature is often criticised for its limitation and bias. Colonial writers often adopt and ethnocentric or Eurocentric perspective (based on privileging the views of Europeans), seeing the colonized country as an exotic ‘other’ which is contrasted with their own pursuits and concerns – viewed as the norm, the standard by which to judge others.

Post-colonialism is about national awareness when ‘the empire writes back’. Initially this often takes the form of non-Europeans trying to imitate Western European literary traditions and writers, thereby at least establishing a presence and voice. Increasingly there is an awareness that to write in the colonisers’ language (ie English) is a form of subjection. Agreeing to a type of intellectual colonial control. Some post-colonial writers have therefore reverted to writing in their native language, declaring their cultural independence in the process. A less radical post-colonial gesture is to modify European literary forms and centre subject matter on native concerns. Due to historical events and missionary education post-colonial identity is often problematically doubled, or hybrid, becoming characteristically unstable. Post-colonial readings by critical like Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabba and Edward Said focus on issues of national identity and control, being highly critical of perceived examples of cultural or linguistic imperialism.

**Structuralism – concerned with ‘language’ and how meaning is achieved through codes of communication**

Structuralism maintains that everything is the product of a system of signification or codes of communication (eg. smoke, fire, traffic lights, Morse, flags, body language, the written word). The relationship between the elements of the code gives it signification (meaning). So, for instance, a red light in a bedroom window might signify a brothel, but if seen in relation to an amber and a green light it means ‘stop’. Codes are arbitrary (all signs are arbitrary) and without them we cannot apprehend reality. As far as literature and literary criticism are concerned, structuralism challenges the long-standing belief that a work of literature reflects a given reality; a literary text is, rather, constituted of other conventions and texts. Structuralism began in the science of linguistics with such concepts as the distinction between the signifier (eg. the word T-A-B-L-E) and the signified (the object – a piece of flat wood possessing four legs). A single sentence may have many different surface forms and features and yet have the same meaning: for example, ‘the cat sat on the mat’ or ‘the feline seated itself upon the rug.’ The underlying or deep structure regulates the meaning. Models and patterns are important in structuralism. Language is a sign system or structure whose individual components can be understood only in relation to each other and to the system as a whole. Thus the codes and conventions of literary structuralism include such things as the meaning generated through binary oppositions: light/dark > white/black > good/evil > heaven/hell. Famous structuralists include Carl Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Noam Chomsky.

**Post-structuralism / deconstruction – the instability of meaning**

Post-structuralism was a late 1960s development of structuralism and a reworking / criticism of the shortcomings of the earlier theory. It reveals that the meaning of any text is, by its very nature, unstable. One way to understand this new concept is to look at the work of Roland Barthes who chose to advance his own ideas in a post-structural way with a famous essay called ‘The Death of the Author’ (1968). In this essay he playfully announces the death of the author, which is a rhetorical way of asserting the independence of the literary text and its immunity to the possibility of being unified or limited by any notion of what the author might have intended or ‘crafted’ into the work. Instead, the essay makes a declaration of radical textual independence: the work is not determined by the intention or context. It naturally follows that the death of the author signals the birth of the reader, who is now free and unrestrained in interpreting the text as s/he sees fit. Thus this theory initially signalled the possibility of an endless free play of meaning. Later this complete textual freedom was limited somewhat by a more disciplined approach. Julia Kristeva is the most famous post-structuralist who adopted a psychoanalytical approach to the question of language and its lack of stable meaning.

Practically we may experience this instability in texts when we write a CV or personal statement, a text to a friend or potential romantic interest or a letter of condolence. There is often an anxiety that the letter will express things we hadn’t intended, or convey the wrong impression, or betray our ignorance, callousness or confusion. Even when we use a phrase like ‘If you see what I mean’ there is an underlying sense that we are not really in control of the linguistic system.

Deconstruction is the positive development of this anxiety surrounding language and its meaning, where the reader/critic is empowered to ‘undo\ the words and sentences by teasing out the different and possibly conflicting meaning within the text. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to certain domination of one mode of signifying (method of constructing meaning) over another. Jacques Derrida is the most famous deconstruction theorist who demonstrated that a text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying, and that it may carry plural meanings in its reading. Thus meaning is not lost but elaborated by the process of dismantling or taking apart a text.

**New Historicism / Cultural Materialism – the importance of historical context or co-texts**

New historicism is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts usually of the same historical period. That is to say, new historicism refuses to ‘privilege’ the literary text: instead of a literary ‘foreground’ and an historical ‘background’ it envisages and practises a mode of study in which literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform each other: they are co-texts. Most new historical work has been done on the Renaissance and the Romantic period since the early 1970s by American critics such as Stephen Greenblatt and Marjorie Levinson. Typically, a new historical essay will place the literary text within the ‘frame’ of a non-literary text such as a contemporary historical document.

Cultural materialism is the British counterpart to new historicism, with critics such as Graham Holderness describing this theory as ‘a politicized form of historiography [the study of history-writing]’. This study has four characteristics: it combines an attention to historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis. The reference to cultural materialism there is an emphasis on the functioning of the institutions through which Shakespeare is now brought to us – the Royal Shakespeare Company, the film industry, the publishers who produce textbooks, and the National Curriculum. Cultural materialism involves using the past to ‘read’ the present, revealing the politics of our own society by what we choose or suppress of the past. For critical examples of cultural materialism at work, see Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield’s collection of essays *Political Shakespeare*; Grahan Holderness: The Shakespeare Myth; ed. John Drakakis: *Alternative Shakespeare*; and Terence Hawkes: *That Shakespeherian Rag*.

**Psychoanalysis – concerned with repression and the unconscious**

Psychoanalytic criticism adopts the methods of ‘reading’ employed by Freud and later theorists to interpret texts. It argues that literary texts, like dreams, express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author, that a literary work is a manifestation of the author's own neuroses. One may psychoanalyze a particular character within a literary work, but it is usually assumed that all such characters are projections of the author's psyche.

Like psychoanalysis itself, this critical endeavour seeks evidence of unresolved emotions, psychological conflicts, guilt, ambivalences, and so forth within what may well be a disunified literary work. The author's own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, fixations, and such will be traceable within the behaviour of the characters in the literary work. But psychological material will be expressed indirectly, disguised, or encoded (as in dreams) through principles such as "symbolism" (the repressed object represented in disguise), "condensation" (several thoughts or persons represented in a single image), and "displacement" (anxiety located onto another image by means of association).

Despite the importance of the author here, psychoanalytic criticism is similar to New Criticism in not concerning itself with "what the author intended." But what the author *never* intended (that is, repressed) is sought. The unconscious material has been distorted by the censoring conscious mind.

Psychoanalytic critics will ask such questions as, "What is Hamlet's problem?" or "Why can't Brontë seem to portray any positive mother figures?"

**ANALYSING POETRY**

The close reading and analysis of texts is a fundamental activity of literary criticism; poetry offers a rich field because of its textual density. You will need to acquire and practise the skill of close analysis with confidence, not least because it equips you to meet AO2. Every reader (and every teacher) will have a personal checklist of features to look for, and you will no doubt develop your own. To start off, we suggest this sequence.

1. **Subject**

What a story, poem or play is about; to be distinguished from plot and theme. Jane Austen’s Persuasion is about the social, marital and economic concerns of a narrow caste in early C19th England. Its plot concerns the organization of the actions of the novel’s characters. Its themes are deep-lying, often timeless ideas Austen conveys through her specific story.

**Setting**

The time and place of a literary text that establish its context. The early poems of T S Eliot are set in European cities shortly after the First World War. The early poetry of Seamus Heaney reflects the experience of the Troubles in Ireland during the 1970s.

**Point of view**

The angle of vision from which a story is narrated. A text’s point of view can be: first person, in which the narrator is a character or observer; objective, in which the narrator knows or appears to know no more than the reader; omniscient, in which the narrator knows everything about the characters; and limited omniscient, which allows the narrator to know some things about the characters but not everything.

1. **Themes**

The underlying, perhaps universal ideas of a literary text, abstracted from its details of language, character and action. These are rarely obvious; indeed, different readers may find different themes in any given text, depending on their own experiences and prejudices.

Themes commonly found in Western literature are love, growing up and aging, race and gender. Having decided the subject of the text (what it is ‘about), try to frame your answer to this section by saying what the text is ‘really about’.

**Tone**

The attitude of the narrator and/or the writer to the subject, characters and themes of a text. Often conveyed, albeit indirectly, through the voice adopted by the writer: confiding, assertive, angry, nostalgic, regretful, etc.

1. **Technique**
2. **Form**
   * **Allegory** a symbolic narrative in which the surface details imply a parallel secondary meaning. Often takes the form of a story in which characters represent moral qualities, eg. John Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, in which the central character’s name, Pilgrim, epitomizes the book’s allegorical nature
   * **Ballad** a narrative poem written in four-line stanzas, characterized by swift action and narrated in a direct style
   * **Elegy** a lyric poem that laments the dead. Shelley’s *Adonais* is a lament for Keats; W H Auden’s *In Memory of William Butler Yeats* and *Funeral Blues* are clearly elegiac
   * **Epic**  a long narrative poem that records the adventures of a hero. Typically chronicles the origins of a civilization and embodies its central values. Famous examples in Wester literature include Homer: *Iliad* and *Odyssey;* Virgil: *Aeneid*; Milton: *Paradise Lost*
   * **Epigram** a brief, witty poem, often satirical
   * **Lyric** characterized by brevity, compression and expression of feeling
   * **Narrative** a poem that tells a story (see Ballad)
   * **Ode**  a long, stately poem in stanzas of varied length, metre and form. Usually a serious text on an exalted subject, such as Horace: *Eheu fugaces* or Keats: *Ode to a Nightingale*, but sometimes more light-hearted
   * **Satire** criticises human misconduct and ridicules vices, stupidities and follies. Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* is a satirical mock-epic
   * **Parody** a humorous, mocking imitation of a literary text, sometimes sarcastic, but often playful and even respectful in its careful mimicry
3. **Structure**
   * **Closed form** characterised by regularity and consistency in such elements as rhyme, line length, and metrical patterns. For example, Robert Frost: Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening:

‘Whose woods these are I think I know.

His house is in the village though.

He will not see me stopping here

To watch his woods fill up with snow.’

* + **Open form** characterised by freedom from regularity and consistency in such elements as rhyme, line length, metrical pattern and overall structure. See also free verse.
  + **Sestina**  a poem of 39 lines written in iambic pentameter. Its six-line stanzas repeat in an intricate and prescribed order the final word in each of the first six lines. After the sixth stanza, there is a three line envoi which uses the six repeating words, two per line
  + **Sonnet** a 14-line poem in iambic pentameter. The Shakespearean or English sonnet is arranged as three quatrains (4-line units) and a final couplet, usually rhyming *abab cdcd efef gg*. The earlier Petrarchan or Italian form divides into an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet (the point of division being the volta), rhyming *abba abba cde cde*
  + **Stanza**  a division or unit of a poem that is repeated in the same form, either with similar or identical patterns of rhyme or metre, or with variations from one stanza to another
  + **Tercet**  a three-line stanza, as in Shelley: *Ode to the West Wind*. Two tercets make up the sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet

1. **Language**
   * **Word choices** look for instances of particular choices of word and phrase for effect. Possible devices include but are not limited to:

Alliteration metaphor

Ambiguity metonymy

Allusion onomatopoeia

Anaphora oxymoron

Assonance parody

Bathos pathetic fallacy

Emotive language personification

Euphony refrain

Hyperbole sibilance

Imagery simile

Irony syntax

* **Metre** decide which metrical pattern the verse appears to be written in: examples include iambic, trochaic, anapaestic, dactylic metres and others. A regular rhythm might suggest harmony and completeness: a break in the rhythm is often worth investigating, for **the sense of the text will also change or break at that point**
* **Rhyme** the matching of the final vowel or consonant sounds (or a combination) in two or more lines. Look for specific instances of rhymed words which add significance to the text: the words might reinforce or contradict each other. Useful terms include:

**Blank verse** unrhymed lines in iambic pentameter. Shakespeare’s plays are written largely in blank verse, as is Milton’s Paradise Lost

**Couplet** a pair of rhymed lines

**End rhyme** the rhyme occurs at the end of the lines

**Feminine rhyme** where the final syllable is unstressed and soft

**Half rhyme** a close but not exact match in sounds

**Internal rhyme** a pair of rhyming words within a line of verse

**Masculine rhyme** where the final syllable is stressed and hard

**Free verse** without a regular rhyme or metre, often used by C20th and C21st poets

* **Punctuation** can support or alter the sense of the line or sentence, eg:

**Caesura**  a strong pause in the middle of a line, often marked with a comma or hyphen

**Elision** the omission of an unstressed vowel or syllable to preserve the metre of the line, usually shown by an apostrophe

**End-stopping line** the opposite of enjambement: a line of verse is given a distinct ending signalled by a comma, full stop, semi colon, etc. giving a s ense of completeness or finality

**Enjambement**  a run-on line in which logical and grammatical sense carries over from one line to the next with no punctuation stopping the first line, giving a sense of freedom, continuity or overflow

1. **Evaluation**

What do you like about this text? What has it taught you? Are there difficulties in it which have foxed you, or have you enjoyed teasing out possible meanings? Form an opinion and be ready to express it

**The Iambic Pentameter**

A genius for variation explains its pre-eminent place in English verse, says James Fenton

Saturday July 6, 2002

*The Guardian*

A line of five feet, each of which is an iamb, that is to say, each of which is a ti-tum. As opposed toa tum-ti.

Ti-tum ti-tum ti-tum ti-tum ti-tum

In fact, if you analyse a passage of blank verse, that is to say poetry written in unrhymed iambic pentameters, you will find very few lines that conform precisely to this pattern:

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall

Nobody could read this line of Tennyson (from *Tithonus*) without reading it metrically, this is to say, placing emphasis on the second, fourth, sixth, eighth and tenth syllables. But while this is an example of a regular iambic pentameter, it is not common, in good poetry, to find such perfect lines, or to find several of them in succession.

The iambic pentameter owes its pre-eminence in English poetry to its genius for variation. Good blank verse does not sound like a series of identically measured lines. It sounds like a series of subtle variations on the same theme.

The key to the historic success of this line is its being neither too long nor too short. If it were any longer, the reader would have to emphasise the meter a little more, in order to assert control of the line. You can hear this need asserting itself in English poetry written in the longer classical line, the hexameter. You have to assert the meter, otherwise you will get lost. But if the iambic pentameter is properly written, you shouldn’t have any difficulty understanding how it goes. The poet should have written it so that it comes trippingly off the tongue.

Again, if the poetic line is shorter than the 10 syllables of the iambic pentameter, what happens is that the meter asserts itself willy-nilly, because there is less room for variation. This is not the fault of shorter lines, it is merely a characteristic of them. You may choose a shorter line precisely in order to enjoy this extra degree of assertiveness. But in choosing the more assertive line you have to bear in mind the length of the poem. You have to decide whether you can keep your more assertive line going for more than a page of two. The iambic pentameter is ideal for a long poem because of this capacity for each variation.

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,

The vapours weep their buthen to the ground

Once again, in the second line of the poem, it would be hard to read the words wrongly. And yet, if you read the words as they feel they should sound, you will automatically skip the emphasis on the eighth syllable. The metrical template – ti-um ti-tum ti-tum ti-tum ti-tum – would lead you to expect an emphasis on the word “to”-

The vapours weep their burthen to the ground

But that would sound idiotic. So one of the five metrical accents has been dropped. In the next line, by way of further variation, we find that there are six stresses:

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,

The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,

Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,

You cannot read line three without placing emphasis on both the first two words – and this is an effect perfectly consonant with the meaning of the poem. Man has arrived on the scene, and has disrupted things by his arrival. “Man comes” – if you emphasise both words equally, which is what you are being asked to do, you are turning the first foot of the line into what is called a spondee.

An iamb goes: ti-tum

A trochee goes: tum-ti

A spondee goes: tum! tum!

But spondees are much rarer than iambs and trochees in English verse, because it normally happens that if you put two words together, or two syllables together, one of them will attract more weight, more emphasis than the other. In other words, most so-called spondees can be read as either iambs of trochees.

These technical terms – iamb, trochee, spondee – which come to use from classical metrics, are used as a matter of convenience, but they can give a false impression of rigour when we use them in an English context. In English poetry there is no such thing as a regular use of the spondee – it is more like a specific local effect. You couldn’t write a whole poem in spondees – you couldn’t even write a single line. But you can write immense poems in iambics.

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,

The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,

Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,

And after many a summer dies the swan.

In the fourth line Tennyson could easily have avoided the extra syllable – the line has 11 syllables – by making the summers into a more convenient plural:

And after many summers dies the swan.

But he does not do this. Clearly he prefers the idiomatic flavour of “many a”. But there is another point here: the irregularity he has introduced is not a mistake. It is another variant, and in this case a very gentle variant, on the basic pattern. You could argue, indeed, that it hardly counts as a variant, since most people would run the las syllable of “many” together with “a”, making one syllable. They would elide the syllables. They would create an elision.

This is an edited extract from James Fenton’s book *An Introduction to English Poetry*

**WHAT IS PROSE FICTION?**

by Professor John Lye, Brock University, Canada

The analysis of fiction has many similarities to the analysis of poetry. As a rule a work of fiction is a narrative, with characters, with a setting, told by a narrator, with some claim to represent 'the world' in some fashion.

The topics in this section are [plot](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#fplot), [character](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#fcharacter), [setting](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#fsetting), [the narrator](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#fnarrator), [figurative language](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#ffigure), [the way reality is represented](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#frepresentation), [the world-view](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#fideology).

**1. Plot.**

As a narrative a work of fiction has a certain arrangement of events which are taken to have a relation to one another. This arrangement of events to some end -- for instance to create significance, raise the level of generality, extend or complicate the meaning -- is known as 'plot'. Narrative is integral to human experience; we use it constantly to make sense out of our experience, to remember and relate events and significance, and to establish the basic patterns of behaviour of our lives. If there is no apparent relation of events in a story our options are either to declare it to be poorly written or to assume that the lack of relation is thematic, mean to represent the chaotic nature of human experience, a failure in a character's experience or personality, or the lack of meaningful order in the universe.

In order to establish significance in narrative there will often be coincidence, parallel or contrasting episodes, repetitions of various sorts, including the repetition of challenges, crises, conciliations, episodes, symbols, motifs. The relationship of events in order to create significance is known as the plot.

**2. Character.**

Characters in a work of fiction are generally designed to open up or explore certain aspects of human experience. Characters often depict particular traits of human nature; they may represent only one or two traits -- a greedy old man who has forgotten how to care about others, for instance, or they may represent very complex conflicts, values and emotions. Usually there will be contrasting or parallel characters, and usually there will be a significance to the selection of kinds of characters and to their relation to each other. As in the use of setting, in fact in almost any representation in art, the significance of a character can vary from the particular, the dramatization of a unique individual, to the most general and symbolic, for instance the representation of a 'Christ figure'.

**3. Setting.**

Narrative requires a setting; this as in poetry may vary from the concrete to the general. Often setting will have particular culturally coded significance -- a sea-shore has a significance for us different from that of a dirty street corner, for instance, and different situations and significances can be constructed through its use. Settings, like characters, can be used in contrasting and comparative ways to add significance, can be repeated, repeated with variations, and so forth.

**4. The Narrator.**

A narration requires a narrator, someone (or more than one) who tells the story. This person or persons will see things from a certain perspective, or *point of view*, in terms of their relation to the events and in terms of their attitude(s) towards the events and characters. A narrator may be external, outside the story, telling it with an ostensibly objective and omniscient voice; or a narrator may be a character (or characters) within the story, telling the story in the first person (either central characters or observer characters, bit players looking in on the scene). First-person characters may be *reliable*, telling the truth, seeing things right, or they may be *unreliable*, lacking in perspective or self-knowledge. If a narration by an omniscient external narrator carries us into the thoughts of a character in the story, that character is known as a *reflector character*: such a character does not know he or she is a character, is unaware of the narration or the narrator. An omniscient, external narrator may achieve the narrative by telling or by showing, and she may keep the reader in a relation of *suspense* to the story (we know no more than the characters) or in a relation of *irony* (we know things the characters are unaware of).  
In any case, who it is who tells the story, from what perspective, with what sense of distance or closeness, with what possibilities of knowledge, and with what interest, are key issues in the making of meaning in narrative.

**5. Figurative language.**

As in poetry, there will be figurative language; as in drama, this language tends to be used to characterize the sensibility and understanding of characters as well as to establish thematic and tonal continuities and significance.

**6. Representation of reality.**

Fiction generally claims to represent 'reality' (this is known as representation or *mimesis*) in some way; however, because any narrative is presented through the symbols and codes of human meaning and communication systems, fiction cannot represent reality directly, and different narratives and forms of narrative represent different aspects of reality, and represent reality in different ways. A narrative might be very concrete and adhere closely to time and place, representing every-day events; on the other hand it may for instance represent psychological or moral or spiritual aspects through symbols, characters used representatively or symbolically, improbable events, and other devices. In addition you should remember that all narrative requires selection, and therefore it requires exclusion as well, and it requires devices to put the selected elements of experience in meaningful relation to each other (and here we are back to key elements such as coincidence, parallels and opposites, repetitions).

**6. World-view.**

As narrative represents experience in some way and as it uses cultural codes and language to do so, it inevitably must be read, as poetry, for its structure of values, for its understanding of the world, or world-view, and for its ideological assumptions, what is assumed to be natural and proper. Every narrative communication makes claims, often implicitly, about the nature of the world as the narrator and his or her cultural traditions understand it to be. The kind of writing we call "literature" tends to use cultural codes and to use the structuring devices of narrative with a high degree of intentionality in order to offer a complex understanding of the world. The astute reader of fiction will be aware of the shape of the world that the fiction projects, the structure of values that underlie the fiction (what the fiction explicitly claims and what it implicitly claims through its codes and its ideological understandings); will be aware of the distances and similarities between the world of the fiction and the world that the reader inhabits; and will be aware of the significances of the selections and exclusions of the narrative in representing human experience.

For further thoughts on the purposes and practice of analysis, visit Prof Lye’s website at: <http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.html>

**HOW TO ANALYSE PROSE FICTION**

by Professor John Lye, Brock University, Canada

Someone is always speaking in a novel -- whether it is a narrator who is not a character within the fiction, or a character within the narrative. Consequently both the particular ideas, attitudes, feelings, perspectives of that speaker, and the concerns and attitudes of the novel as a whole, will be presented through the prose The analytical reader needs to understand what information is conveyed and how it is conveyed. The following is a guide to some things to look for, and contains:

1. [prose](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#pprose): [the language](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#prlanguage); [sentence structure](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#psentence); [imagery and setting](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#primagery); [discourse features](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#pdiscourse).   
2. [characterization](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#pcharacterization)  
3. [genre and tradition](https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#prgenre)

**1. The Passage as Prose.**

1. **The language:**
   1. What kind of language is used? Here are some possibilities:

Is the language:

* + - abstract or concrete language
    - language of emotions or of reason
    - language of control or language of openness
  1. What are the connotations of the language? How much language is connotative? What areas of experience, feeling, and meaning are evoked? When Conrad writes that a gate was "a neglected gap," we have to take notice, as a gate is not ordinarily a gap, nor is the issue of neglect or care usually applied to gaps. Conrad intends to imply, to connote, certain qualities through his language use.
  2. How forceful is the language (see also imagery and sentence structure)?
  3. what aspects of feeling are supported or created by the sound of the language?
     + by the vowel and consonant sounds -- soft or hard long or short
     + by how the words go together -- e.g. smoothly, eliding, so that one slides into the other, or separated by your need to move your mouth position.

1. **Sentence structure:**Meaning is created by how the sentences sound, by how they are balanced, by the force created by punctuation as well as by language:
   * by the stresses on words, and the rhythm of the sentence
   * by the length of the sentence
   * by whether the sentence has repetitions, parallels, balances and so forth
   * by the punctuation, and how it makes the sentence sound and flow.
2. **Imagery and setting:** Images and use of setting can tell you a great deal about a character, a narrator, a fictional work:
   * Imagery as figurative language: what sort of metaphors, similes and analogies does the speaker use, and what does that tell you about their outlook and sensibility?
   * Images as motifs: are their recurring images? What ideas or feelings are aroused by them, what people or events are brought to mind by them?
   * Imagery as setting: How is the setting used? To create a sense of realism? To create mood? To represent or create a sense of states of mind or feelings? To stand for other things (i.e. symbolic or allegorical -- as for instance Wuthering Heights and Thrushcroft Grange in *Wuthering Heights*might be said to stand for two ways of viewing the world or two different sociological perspectives, and jungle in *Heart of Darkness* might be said to stand for the primeval past or for the heart of humankind)?
3. **Discourse features**
   * how long does the person speak?
   * are the sentences logically joined or disjointed, rational or otherwise ordered, or disorderly?
   * what tone or attitude does the talk seem to have?
   * does the speaker avoid saying things, deliberately or unconsciously withhold information, communicate by indirection?
   * to what extent and to what end does the speaker use rhetorical devices such as irony?

**2. Characterisation** The idea here is that the various features of the prose, above, will support features of characterisation which we can discuss in somewhat different terms.

* What ideas are expressed in the passage, and what do they tell you about the speaker?
* What feelings does the speaker express? What does that tell you about them? Are their feelings consistent?
* Does the character belong to a particular character type or represent a certain idea, value, quality or attitude?
* What is the social status of the character, and how can you tell from how they speak and what they speak about?
* What is the sensibility of the speaker? Is the person ironic, witty, alert to the good or attuned to evil in others, optimistic or pessimistic, romantic or not romantic (cynical, or realistic?).
* What is the orientation of the person -- how aware are they of their own and others' needs, and of their environments?
* How much control over and awareness of her emotions, her thoughts, her language does the speaker have?
* How does the narrator characterize the character through comment or through description?

**3. Genre & Tradition**

Different traditions and genres tend to use language and characters and setting and plot differently, and this may show in individual passages. Is it a satire, a comedy, a tragedy, a romance? Is it a novel of social comment, an exploration of an idea? (There are more kinds.) Is it in a certain sub-genre like a detective novel, science fiction, etc.? Is it an allegory or a satire, is it realistic or more symbolic? How does this genre, sub-genre or tradition tend to use setting, characters, language, mood or tone? Does this one fit in?

**Writing an Analytical Essay**

by Professor John Lye, Brock University, Canada

Your purpose in writing an analytical essay is to convey your sense of what the text is saying, and how the text creates its meaning -- the use of the various aspects and devices mentioned in the previous sections. The simplest way to open your essay is with a statement of what you have decided the meaning of the text, the most sufficient interpretation, is. The body of your essay is then a presentation or 'defence' of your interpretation: you demonstrate the ways in which the text makes the meaning you believe it to have. In the conclusion you sum up your findings or recapitulate your argument briefly, and extend the significance of your reading if you wish -- this is where you comment on the more general, cultural or moral or technical significances of the theme and techniques of the text. You may begin you essay in other ways -- by stating what the main barriers are to an interpretation of the poem or what the main difficulties with arriving at an interpretation are, for instance, and how consequently you intend to deal with the text, or by stating what sorts of options you have in terms of emphases and why you have chosen the one(s) you have chosen. It is important to give the reader a sense of *how*you are proceeding in the essay and *why*.

There is no sure-fire formula for essay writing. The form your essay takes will likely vary with the nature of your evidence (quotations from the text, principally, or from other sources), with your sense of how the text is structured and shaped, with your interpretation, and with your sense of what issues are most relevant. Obviously, you will have to make some organizational decisions. In writing on a poem, for example, do you go through a poem stanza by stanza showing how the meaning is developed? If this is your method, be sure you avoid the pitfalls: mere paraphrase, providing an unselective running commentary, and disorganization of kinds of evidence. An alternative approach might focus on the poem aspect by aspect (the point of view, the voice, the setting, and so forth). The pitfalls here are not being able show how the various aspects tie together to create meaning, and assuming that each aspect deserves equal and exhaustive treatment. Fiction is usually analysed by considering one or more aspects of the work in the categories of theme (ideas, meanings), and/or of fictional techniques (plot, point of view, etc.).

Remember that there are different kinds of literature in each genre, and that different kinds may rely on different devices. A poem may be narrative; it may be a dramatic monologue; it may be a collection of images with no human in sight; it may develop a logical argument; it may work allusively, analogically, symbolically and so forth; it may have a careful stanza-by stanza development, or it may depend on repetitions, images, and so forth. A work of fiction might be allegorical, it might use magical realism, it might concentrate on the effects of the environment, or it might attempt metaphorically to represent the interior lives of characters. Figure out what the main devices and strategies are, and concentrate on them, adding the lesser ones later and not necessarily in full. Try, if you are not sure of your interpretation, starting with the simplest, most obvious situation -- two lovers are meeting, say -- and add other possible points of meaning as they seem to extend or illuminate the dramatic situation -- for instance a storm is threatening, the meeting is seen from only one lover's point of view, each stanza gives a different meaning to what the significance of physical love might be, and so forth. Always deal with the 'form' as well as the 'content', however, with how the way something is said shapes what it means. Write what you have to say as clearly and precisely as you can. Have someone proof-read your paper for you for spelling and grammatical errors and for intelligibility.

**DELVING INTO DRAMA**

Begin simply with a checklist of features:

* + 1. **Characters** How many are there on stage? Who are they?
    2. **Scene** Where is the scene taking place? Are there any stage directions which help you? Do the characters’ words suggest a setting?
    3. **Action**  What happens? Is there any action suggested in what is said? What stage effects are used?
    4. **Ideas**  What do the characters talk about? Is there a discussion or an argument or other form of conflict? Can you find an underlying theme? Does the characters’ language reveal significant attitudes?
    5. **Response** What effect might the playwright be aiming at? How might the audience (you) respond? You might want to laugh, or you could find your values and preconceptions under attack. Perhaps you detect a strong atmosphere or find in yourself an emotional reaction (such as dear, tension or pity). This is the tone of the scene, created largely by the writer’s choice of words or diction (see below for more details), which you can judge by the effect it has on you and how you respond. You have perception and imagination to help you: use them.

Aspects of dramatic language or diction:

* Silences and pauses, which are interruptions to speech, sometimes significant ones. Notice also fade-out endings to speeches, interruptions, hesitations, evasions, omissions, equivocations, lies.
* Is the speech in complete sentences, or in single words or short phrases?
* If sentences, are they questions, statements, orders, exclamations?
* If questions are asked, are the answered? If not, why not? If there are answers, are they truthful?
* Notice the number of words and syllables used in any particular sentence. A few monosyllabic words might give a sharp, definite, even aggressive effect, whereas several polysyllabic words could be softer, more ‘polite’. Contrast: ‘Give me that!’ with ‘Would you kindly consider the possibility of transferring that object to me?’
* Do the words chosen and the expressions used reveal a particular social position? Is the vocabulary used vulgar, sophisticated, educated, provincial dialect?
* Is slang used? If so, what does it reveal?
* Is the language used wrongly, revealing ignorance in the speaker?
* Are the speeches lengthy, or are they a few sentences, a few words, most of the time?
* Are significant forms or figures of speech used? Puns, metaphors, euphemisms, non-sequiturs? Is there deliberate repetition, invective or rhetoric? What purpose might be aimed at?
* Is verse used? To what effect? See below for more details
* Tone: is it mocking, sincere, pathetic, sentimental?
* Emphasis and strength. This is the result of several possible language devices: words chosen, length of sentences, volume of sound, degree of character conflict
* Pace. Again, this is variously achieved: writer’s stage directions, director’s inclinations, actors’ skills, quick-fire dialogue, pregnant pauses

Verses in drama:

Different forms of verse have been used throughout the history of English drama. In its greatest period, when Shakespeare and his contemporaries were writing, blank verse was the usual form of dramatic expression. Subsequently verse, in any of its forms, has returned to the English stage only occasionally. The student of drama should be sensitive to its use and aware of its purposes.

Verse widens the gap between the stage and reality. It draws attention to the language being finer, or more polished, or elaborate. Verse is a patterned form of expression and the characters who use it, or the ideas which are expressed in it, receive greater significance thereby. Seldom does verse closely relate to common speech. One of the uses to which Shakespeare puts verse, for example, is to differentiate between noble and common characters.

Generally, speech lacks the power to express intensity, beauty, the extremes of emotion. Verse can sometimes fulfil this need, and offers the authority and appeal of a more elevated form of language. Although a splendid, complex verse speech delivered in the theatre will leave many of the audience only half-aware of the total content, the rhythmic and musical effect will nevertheless influence them, and they will respond emotionally to its power/

Verse is not necessarily poetry, but it is sometimes, like poetry, memorable, and that in itself is useful in an ephemeral art. When verse does reach the heights of poetry, it may touch the soul. More mundanely, it demands that the student bring skills of poetry analysis to the appreciation of drama.

‘How dramatically effective do you find this passage?’

First, what are the ‘dramatic effects’? This type of question means, what methods are used to make the scene visually and aurally alive, active, exciting or tense? To answer this you need imagination to think beyond the page to what happens in the theatre.

1. Where would the actors be on stage? How much would they be dressed? Is their costume significant?
2. How much movement is indicated, how much pace?
3. Are there dramatic silences or quiet moments of tension? Are there outbursts of noise?
4. Are there any stage props? What sound effects are used on or off stage? Is there scope for lighting changes?
5. To what extent are the audience being asked to suspend their disbelief?

**TRAGEDY**

**Origins**  It is thought that tragedy developed from primitive religious rituals in Greece. The word ‘tragedy’ in Greek means ‘goat song’. The goat was sacred to Dionysus, god of fruitfulness, vegetation and wine, and tragedy developed form the fertility feasts that celebrated in the harvest and vintage, when the old year was dying and the coming new one was offered a sacrifice to ensure future bounty.

**Greek Tragedy**  This form of drama developed to a point of sophistication in Greece in C6th and C5th BC. The issues raised in these plays relate to questions about the dying of the year, the promise of the new one, the failure or success of the crops, human control of nature through sacrifice, along with a subjection to the ‘punishments’ of nature which defy that control (insects, lack of rain, disease, etc.). These questions include: why do we suffer? Why do we create and destroy? Are the causes of our suffering in ourselves, other people or the gods? Why is there such a gap between our plans and what happens to them in the future?

**Elizabethan Tragedy** The theatre in England during the reign of Elizabeth I saw a revival of the form. Between this time and the Greek tragedies of the classical period, tragedy largely disappeared. Why is difficult to explain, but the following reasons contributed: we know very little about performances of this time; the Romans on the whole, did not succeed in reviving tragedy (although the violent, anxious tragedies of Seneca, greatly influenced the Elizabethans); Roman culture collapses after barbarian invasions; classical learning recovered slowly across Europe during the Middle Ages. It was the end of the Middle Ages that classic literature was seriously revived: it was thought to be a new beginning, a ‘Renaissance’, the French word for ‘rebirth’. This new rush of creative ideas began in C14th Italy, but it was not until C16th that Cristopher Marlowe and others developed the drama we recognise as Elizabethan or Shakespearean tragedy.

**Major Features of Shakespearean Tragedy**

1. The hero is a person of the upper class, usually a man and a ruler, who is respected because of his position, but largely forfeits that respect because of a weakness of some kind: there is a ‘fatal flaw’ (or **hamartia**) in his nature which will lead to his death. The hero’s death affects the whole of society because of the influential position he holds and the example he is supposed to give others
2. There is a sense of the **reversal of fortune** as various forces (human, natural and supernatural) conspire against the hero to bring about his downfall (also known as nemesis)
3. The hero has a **developing sense of his own part in the catastrophe** he has begun, and is finally aware that he is the partial cause of his own downfall (this growth of self-knowledge is also called **anagnoresis**)
4. Two types of **conflict:** between opposing groups, and in the mind of the hero. In the later tragedies the latter becomes more important
5. There is a **moral order**, governed by natural and supernatural forces, which ‘balances’ any excessive criminal behaviour and lends a sense of justice to those who defeat the hero
6. Although there is a sense of chance elements in the drama, the main impression is of a series of actions that grow inevitably out of each other toward catastrophe
7. The **structure** of the tragedies follows a pattern: the exposition of the conflict, setting out some of the reasons for it in Act I; the gradual development of the conflict to a point of crisis (often echoing the beginning of the play) and reversal of the hero’s fortunes during Acts II to IV; a brief moment of deceptive hope for the hero before the final catastrophe in Act V

To sum up, a tragedy shows how we both control and are controlled by fate. It provokes feelings of pity at the destruction of noble people and fear of the human, divine and natural forces which oppose pride, ambition or even human desire generally. The involvement of the audience in emotions of fear and pity, the witnessing of the sacrifice of the hero, and relief that we are not the victim, is called **catharsis**.

**COMEDY**

**Classical Definitions** In Greek drama, comedy was often used to juxtapose tragic events through farce, dramatic humour (including comic relief) and satire. Aristophanes’ comedy and its tradition is intellectual, analytic and argumentative. In C20th the drama of Pinter and Beckett follows this mode in its ‘cool, intellectual appraisal of insignificant dereliction’ (Merchant). The protagonists are not great enough to bear tragic roles, and ‘their hopeless articulation of man’s failure to communicate with man is itself a characteristic insight in this tradition of intellectual comedy.’ Modern tragicomedy can cause ‘wild laughter in the throat of death.’

**More recent definitions**

* Byron gives a structural definition: ‘All tragedies are finished by a death / All comedies are ended by a marriage’ (*Don Juan*)
* Horace Walpole gives an experiential view: ‘The world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel’
* Ben Jonson defines the subject matter of comedy as dealing with ‘human follies, not with crimes’ (*Every* *Man in His Humour*)

But all of these place comedy lower in value than tragedy. It may be argued that this is not automatically so.

**Psychological Theories**

The following writers consider laughter as a way of dealing with life’s difficulties and therefore raise the status of comedy.

* Niebuhr (a theologian) sees laughter as: ‘a kind of no-man’s land between faith and despair. We preserve our sanity by laughing at life’s surface absurdities.’
* Freud sees jokes as either innovent or having a purpose, and further divides those with a purpose into those which intend to destroy and those which expose. Destructive jokes are under such headings as sarcasm and satire, exposing jokes under the labels of obscenity and bawdry
* Martin Grotjahn sees comedy as: ‘a king of reversed Oedipus situation in which the don does not rebel against the father but the son’s typical attitudes of childhood longing are projected upon the father’ (*Beyond Laughter*)

**Tragic Relief**

If comic relief heightens tragedy, then the term ‘tragic relief’ may be used to describe the potentially tragic events within a comedy. The church scene in *Much Ado About Nothing* (Act IV Scene i) is a good example of this. Frye says that tragedy is rather implicit or uncompleted comedy and that comedy contains a potential tragedy within itself.

**SELECT READING LIST**

During your A Level study of English it is important not to confine yourself to reading only the set texts introduced by your teachers. Part of the pleasure of taking this subject is the opportunity to discover a wide range of writing and to develop literary interests and tastes of your own. Maturity of understanding and a wide variety of reference will help your critical appreciation of unseen texts, and will prepare you better for university. It is also useful to read some secondary texts by recognised critics.

This list is not exhaustive. Like all such lists, it is the partial and prejudiced selection of those who put it together. You do not need to read every book on the list, but we hope that you become familiar with a good number of them and that they will, in time, form the backbone of a partial, prejudiced but informed selection of your own.

**Classics**

Jane Austen Emma

Pride and Prejudice

Persuasion

Charlotte Brontё Jane Eyre

Emily Brontё Wuthering Heights

Wilkie Collins The Moonstone

Daniel Defoe Moll Flanders

Robinson Crusoe

Charles Dickens Great Expectations

Bleak House

David Copperfield

George Eliot Middlemarch

Silas Marner

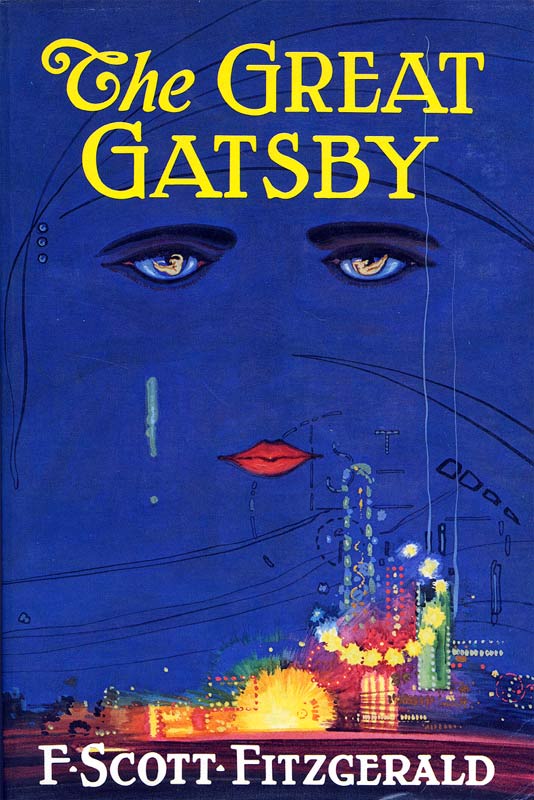
Henry Fielding Tom Jones

Elizabeth Gaskell North and South

Thomas Hardy Tess of the d’Urbervilles

The Mayor of Casterbridge

Jude the Obscure

Nathaniel Hawthorne The Scarlet Letter

Henry James The Portrait of a Lady

The Wings of the Dove

Herman Melville Moby Dick

Mary Shelley Frankenstein

Bram Stoker Dracula

Oscar Wilde The Picture of Dorian Gray

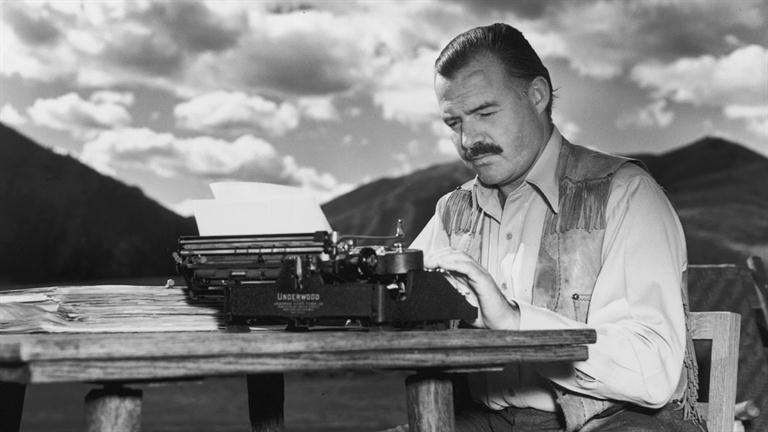
**Modern Classics**

Joseph Conrad Heart of Darkness

The Secret Agent

F Scott Fitzgerald The Great Gatsby

Tender is the Night

E M Forster A Passage to India

A Room with a View

William Golding Lord of the Flies

Graham Greene The End of the Affair

The Power and the Glory

The Third Man

Joseph Heller Catch 22

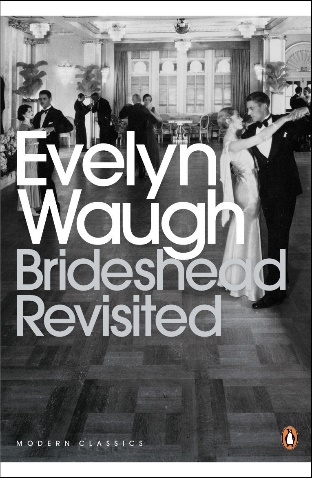
Ernest Hemingway A Farewell to Arms

Short Stories

Aldous Huxley Brave New World

James Joyce Ulysses

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

 Dubliners

D H Lawrence Sons and Lovers

Women in Love

The Rainbow

George Orwell 1984

The Road to Wigan Pier

Evelyn Waugh Brideshead Revisited

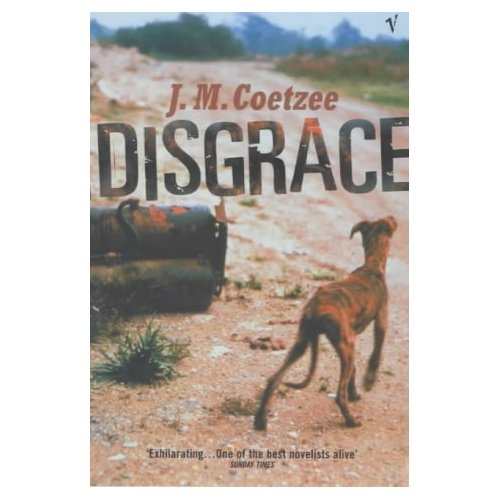
Vile Bodies

Virginia Woolf To the Lighthouse

Mrs Dalloway

Orlando

**Recent Writing**



Peter Ackroyd Hawksmoor

Martin Amis Money

Time’s Arrow

Kate Atkinson Life After Life

Margaret Atwood The Handmaid’s Tale

J G Ballard Cocaine Nights

Iain Banks The Crow Road

Whit

The Business

Julian Barnes Metroland

A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters

Angela Carter Black Venus

Wise Children

J M Coetzee Waiting for the Barbarians

Disgrace

Roddy Doyle Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha

Esther Freud Hideous Kinky

Nick Hornby High Fidelity

Kazuo Ishiguro The Remains of the Day

Never Let Me Go

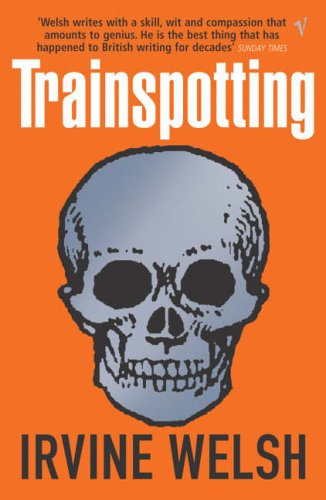
Andrea Levy Small Island

David Lodge Changing Places/Small World

Nice Work

Ian McEwan Atonement

Saturday

Michael Ondaatje The English Patient

Ben Okri Songs of Enchantment

The Famished Road

Salman Rushdie Midnight’s Children

East West

Zadie Smith White Teeth

Graham Swift Waterland

Last Orders

John Updike Couples

Rabbit Run

Irvine Welsh Trainspotting

Jeanette Winterson Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit

Written on the Body

**Literature in Translation**



Jorge Luis Borges Labyrinths

Albert Camus The Outsider

The Plague

Anton Chekhov Uncle Vanya

Short stories

Dante Inferno

Fyodr Dostoevsky Crime and Punishment

Victor Hugo Les Misérables

Franz Kafka The Trial

The Castle

Milan Kundera The Unbearable Lightness of Being

Primo Levi If This is a Man

The Periodic Table

Gabriel Garcia Love in the Time of Cholera

 Marquez One Hundred Years of Solitude

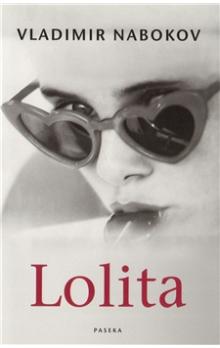
Klauss Mann Mephisto

Thomas Mann Death in Venice

Vladimir Nabokov Lolita

Patrick Susskind Perfume

Leo Tolstoy Anna Karenina



**Secondary Texts**

Peter Ackroyd Shakespeare: The Biography

Peter Barry Beginning Theory

Robert Eaglestone Doing English

Terry Eagleton Literary Theory: an Introduction

David Lodge The Art of Fiction

Ed Margaret Drabble Oxford Companion to English Literature

Melvin Bragg The Adventure of English

Robert Burchfield The English Language

**USEFUL WEBSITES**

Poetry

Bartleby (online text resource) [www.bartleby.com](http://www.bartleby.com)

James Fenton’s Poetry Masterclass [www.guardian.co.uk/books/series/jamesfentonspoetrymasterclass](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/series/jamesfentonspoetrymasterclass)

Authors and Genres

Cambridge Companions Online cco.cambridge.org

(log in details can be found on the Library section of Firefly)

Luminarium

(pages on C14th – C18th authors) [www.luminarium.org](http://www.luminarium.org)

‘How to’ guides to criticism

‘Critical Reading’ by Prof John Lye [www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.html](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.html)

(Brock University, Canada)

Shakespeare

Shakespeare’s Life and Times ise.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/into/introsubj.html

(University of Victoria, Canada)

Shakespeare Birthplace Trust www.shakespeare.org.uk

(UK: background info, articles)

Complete Works of William Shakespeare Shakespeare.mit.edu

(MIT, USA: e-text of every play)

Shakespeare’s Globe (performance) [www.shakespeares-globe.org](http://www.shakespeares-globe.org)

General reference and specific text study guides

Bibliomania (reviews and study guides) [www.bibliomania.com](http://www.bibliomania.com)

SparkNotes (study guides) [www.sparknotes.com/lit](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit)

**GENERAL ADVICE**

1. **Read** the books you’re given in advance of class, and read them again before exams
2. **Think** about what you’ve read: form questions and try to answer them. Have an opinion: there is no single correct answer in literary study
3. Take a full part in **discussion**: offer your ideas, listen to others’ ideas and be ready to argue your corner
4. Ask **questions** if you don’t understand – no-one will think less of you, and the best discussions often arise from genuine enquiries
5. Take a sensible amount of **time** researching and writing your essays (neither too much not too little). Don’t be tempted to plagiarise!
6. Learn the **Assessment Objectives** and apply them systematically to your work
7. **Hand in your work on time**.
8. Remember that English is a **slow-burn subject**: the longer you do it, the better you get at it. Early attempts at essays and assessments might go wrong, but you have two years to perfect your craft!
9. **Enjoy** your reading, and talking and writing about books. This is an unique subject with an unique approach – relish our differences!
10. You may end up studying an English related subject at university, or you may not. Whatever path you follow, hopefully A Level will help to inspire you to always be a **reader** who can enjoy a good book!