

# A Level English Literature

*Making the transition from GCSE to A Level and making sure you're fully prepared for the A Level course*

## **Welcome**

Well done, you've chosen to study English Literature at A Level. This is a fine decision. We're proud of you. We don't think you'll regret it.

This document offers some explanation of what your course in A Level English Literature will be like. In it, we'll hopefully outline what you can expect from the next two years and, perhaps more importantly, explain what you can be doing to prepare for the course and get yourself fully primed for September.

## **The Course**

We follow the AQA Specification A course in English Literature. This is a challenging and engaging course with a fantastic range of set texts. The AQA A specification approaches texts through the lens of historicism. This means that the course encourages students to study a range of texts with shared historical contexts. In the 'Love through the Ages' unit texts are studied diachronically (looking at texts produced across a very broad time period) while in the 'Modern Times' unit texts are studied synchronically (looking at texts produced in a clearly defined time period). This means that instead of studying a small list of set texts in closed isolation, pupils are encouraged to read more widely and teachers are empowered to branch out in their teaching drawing on a wide range of texts and ideas. Such wider reading will help to prepare pupils for the unseen elements which are a compulsory element in the new A Level specifications as well as broadening and enriching the course.

## **[The Autumn Term – An Introduction to Critical Theory / Brushing up your skills of analysis](#)**

Instead of diving straight into the set texts that must be studied for the examinations, we spend the first weeks of the course laying the foundations for the rest of the course. This involves thinking about and practising some of the skills needed for the study of English at A Level, such as the skills of research, wider reading and note-taking. We also introduce you to some of the critical theory that can be helpful in approaching texts, such as Marxist, Feminist and Post-Colonial approaches. In exploring these approaches we practise our skills of analysis by exploring a rich range of poems, short stories and extracts. It's a great way to sharpen up and expand the skills you developed at GCSE, ready for the challenge of those A Level texts.

## **[Paper 1 – Love Through the Ages](#)**

In this part of the course we study a range of texts from a very wide time period. We're interested in how writers have responded to the theme of love. This is a very wide and rich theme that encompasses ideas about marriage, gender, power, sex, courtship, loss and identity, to name but a few. As we explore texts we find remarkable similarities between texts written centuries apart, but we also find significant and revealing differences.

We study three set texts here, these are assessed by a three hour exam at the end of the course:

- *The Taming of the Shrew* - Shakespeare
- *Wuthering Heights* – Emily Bronte
- The AQA Anthology of Post-1900 Poetry (a collection of 15 poems)

In addition the final exam requires you to compare two unseen poems, so we will explore a wide range of unseen poetry to prepare you for this part of the course.

## Paper 2 – Modern Times

In this part of the course we study a range of texts from a much more concentrated period of time. For the purposes of the course 'Modern Times' is defined as 1945 (the end of World War II) to the present day. Here we study another three texts with the same balance between prose (a novel), poetry and drama that we also see in paper 1. The focus for this unit is on how the literature of this remarkable period of history responds to and reflects the dramatic changes that took place in the society and the world. This is a period of time when attitudes to gender, race, sexuality and class all undergo rapid and significant change. It is a time of conflict, change and revolution and all of this is reflected in the texts we read.

We study another three set texts here, these are assessed by a two and a half hour exam at the end of the course. This is an open book exam. The texts are likely to be:

- *The Handmaid's Tale* – Margaret Atwood (or *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates)
- *A Streetcar Named Desire* – Tennessee Williams
- *Skirrid Hill* – Owen Sheers

In addition the final exam requires you to respond to an unseen prose extract from a novel or short story. Again, we will aim to prepare you for this part of the exam by looking at various unseen prose extracts through the course to develop your skills of unseen analysis.

## Non-Examined Assessment (Coursework)

At A Level pupils will complete traditional coursework in the second year of the course. For this part of the course, which is worth 20% of the overall A Level marks, you must write a 2500 essay about any two texts (though one of these texts must have been written before 1900). You will study one of these texts as a class but you will be given some degree of choice over the second text. We believe that coursework remains a vital part of any A Level course: it helps you to develop the skills of research and independent study required at degree level, it provides you with a greater degree of choice and control over what you study and how you are assessed (you get to choose your essay title) and it allows you to enter the final examination knowing that you have a decent chunk of the marks already under your belt.

# What can you be doing to prepare for studying A Level English Literature?

## 1. Read

I know, it seems kind of obvious doesn't it. We hope that reading is something that you enjoy (you've chosen the wrong course if not...) and that this will be no hardship for you. Reading any kind of good literary texts will be good preparation, but here's some more specific advice about what you should be reading:

### 1. Read the set texts for the course.

Normally we'd send you home from the induction day armed with new copies of some of the set texts and ask you to read them over the summer. This year we can't do that, but hopefully you'll be able to get hold of some of the set texts so that you can get reading. In particular, if you can get the novels read (*Wuthering Heights* and *The Handmaid's Tale*) this would leave you well prepared.

### 2. Read around the course.

For example, read (or listen to) other texts that belong to our two key themes (Love Through the Ages and Modern Times). Visit the school library if you are able, or try accessing the books online. You can find hundreds of free audio books at: [https://www.openculture.com/audio\\_books\\_fiction](https://www.openculture.com/audio_books_fiction)

### 3. Read some articles from EMag

Emag is the magazine published by the English and Media Centre for students of English Literature. At RGS we subscribe to this fantastic publication, so next year you'll be able to search their entire archive of articles. However, we've gathered a number of interesting articles together here which should offer you a flavour of what's to come.

Also included here is a document produced by the EMC called '[Making the Leap](#)'. This was designed as a response to the coronavirus closure of schools and is aimed at people like you who are 'making the leap' from GCSE to A Level study. It contains lots more articles from EMag, including some that might invite you to look at your GCSE texts from interesting new angles. There are also some interesting activities and tasks to keep you busy.

## 2. Watch

Explore the tensions and conflicts of the battle for equality in America by watching the mini-series 'Mrs America'. This excellent show features an impressive cast, with Cate

Blanchett playing the lead role of Phyllis Schlafly. This would be superb context for your study of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. You watch it for free on iPlayer:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/p08ggcmd/mrs-america>

### **3. Explore, Think, Be Curious!**

Above all we want you to keep exploring. There is so much at your fingertips including podcasts, articles, audio-books, documentaries and much more.

There is so much out there, try to absorb as much of it as you can.

### **4. Get in touch**

If you have any questions about the course, the set texts or what you could be doing to prepare, please get in touch:

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