

## I am yours for ever - love through the ages

If you have just started the second year of your A Level English Literature course with AQA Specification A, you are probably wondering how you are supposed to get a grip on a theme as all encompassing as 'love through the ages', especially when your wider reading about this subject has to include prose, poetry and drama texts. Jane Ogborn offers some advice.

*When it comes, will it come without warning  
Just as I'm picking my nose?  
Will it knock on my door in the morning,  
Or tread in the bus on my toes?  
Will it come like a change in the weather?  
Will its greeting be courteous or rough?  
Will it alter my life altogether?  
O tell me the truth about love.*

*W. H. Auden : Twelve Songs. No 12*

### Aspects of love

The reason for basing your final examination on such a huge topic is to give you the opportunity to get to know some major male and female writers in all three genres, from Chaucer in the 14th century to the present day. Broadening your reading from your AS option into other periods will give you the chance to compare different writers' thoughts and feelings about 'love' across time, and develop your awareness of the importance of the different contexts in which their work has been written and read. In order to tackle the A2 examination with confidence, you will need to be able to refer to a variety of wider reading in poetry, prose and drama, covering a range of emotions associated with 'love'.

### Getting organised

Nothing depresses an examiner more than a whole group who all refer to identical examples of their wider reading. To go alongside the texts you will be studying with your teachers you will need a way of keeping a personal wider reading record. This should include:

- text and page references for your personal choices of key poems and scenes from fiction and drama

- your collection of relevant illustrations, newspaper and magazine cuttings book, play and film reviews
- references to internet sites
- details of your own research into writers and texts.

You will also need to work out your own ways of classifying and linking texts so that your records are useful and accessible when you come to revise for the examination.

## Making a start

First love, love at first sight, young love, married love, parental love, love after death, lust, jealousy, passion...

How might you extend this list to encompass the complexities of human relationships, including the darker sides of them as well as the purely romantic ones?

Look back over the texts you studied at AS. Are there aspects of love there that you can revisit? Think of Carol Ann Duffy's 'Havisham' and 'Anne Hathaway', or the framing 20th-century narrative in *Birdsong*, or the pairings off of couples in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, or the breakdown of a relationship in the final Act of *The Doll's House*. Do these offer any additions to your list of kinds of love?

Keep your list to add to later, and start to think of texts you already know something about, which would fit under some of these headings.

Where would you put *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, Cathy and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Sonnets from the Portuguese', or Tennyson's 'In Memoriam', *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Color Purple*, or *Birdsong*, and which parts of those texts would you choose to home in on, as examples of aspects of love?

## Covering the genres: poetry

Why not start with an anthology? The New Penguin Book of Love Poetry edited by Jon Stallworthy, spans the ages from the Latin poets Ovid and Catullus to the present day. The writers chosen are mainly, but not exclusively, British, and the collection is organised thematically, in sections headed Intimations, Declarations, Persuasions, Celebrations, Aberrations, Separations, Desolations and Reverberations. If you read the editor's choices more or less as you would a novel, starting at the beginning, rather than simply picking poems that take your fancy, as most people do with anthologies, it will give you plenty of experience of seeing familiar and unfamiliar poems by different poets, writing at different times, juxtaposed in interesting ways, and this will be good training for comparing the texts you find on the exam paper. If you also want to concentrate on some contemporary poets, try *From Me to You* by U. A. Fanthorpe and Rosemary Bailey, Douglas Dunn's *Elegies* or Carol Ann Duffy's most recent collection, *Rapture*. These texts about love all seem to insist on being read as wholes - try them and you will understand why.

## Prose

You could start your wider reading of prose with some real-life love letters. *Love Letters*, edited by Peter Washington (Everyman's Pocket Library) is a collection from famous and not so famous men and women, historical figures, writers, artists and musicians from Europe and the United Kingdom. The letters were written from the 15th to the 20th century and are organised in sections headed: Invitation,

Warning, Parting, and finally Envoi (Conclusion), in which Richard Steele, writing to his wife in February 1716, simply says 'Dear Prue, Sober or not, I am ever yours.'

These classifications make it easy to browse through the book, picking out names you recognise, or variations on a theme which attracts your attention, and getting a sense of different personalities and voices. The editor gives no contextual detail about these letters, apart from names and dates, so you would need to do some research about most of the writers and their relationship with the recipient of the letters. You won't need to do any research to provide a wider context for the letter from Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn, since everyone knows what the outcome of that was!

## Short stories and novellas

If you need an antidote to too much romantic love, try the 26 stories, mainly by 20th-century writers from all over the world, published by Penguin: *Let's Call the Whole Thing Off*: love quarrels from Anton Chekhov to ZZPacker. You will also find stories which deal with the bleaker aspects of love - misunderstandings, destructive secrets, disappointments and failures - in the work of the Americans, Edith Wharton (*The Letters*), Kate Chopin ('*The Kiss*', '*Desiree's Baby*') Raymond Carver (*What We Talk About When We Talk about Love*) and Annie Proulx (*Brokeback Mountain*).

If you prefer a whole novel to short stories, consider these short ones, all under 200 pages long, which deal with some less obvious aspects of love. Three written at the turn of the 19th century are Henry James' *Washington Square* (in which a plain, rich girl is cruelly deceived by a plausible, handsome young man) and Edith Wharton's tragic pair: *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*. Three mid-20th century novels are Bernard MacLaverty's first novel, *Lamb* (an account of the misunderstood relationship between a priest and a young boy); *Cal* (a bitter love story set against the background of Ulster politics) and Susan Hill's *In the Springtime of The Year* (an account of a young widow's grief after the death of her husband, and her recovery).

## Coping with long novels

Long novels have room to develop complex characters, situations and themes, and this makes it difficult to pick out self-contained extracts, even from novels where love is a main focus. You could start by pooling your knowledge of great love scenes in films, and then compare these with the original episodes in the texts: Mr Darcy's proposals, Jane Eyre's night of agony before she leaves Rochester, and their eventual reunion, Angel Clare's rejection of Tess, or Gatsby's tea party for Daisy.

If I had to choose just one novel about love, I would go to 19th-century fiction, where 'love' tends to drive the plot. I would be torn between *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, published in France in 1857, and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, published in England in 1872. These major realist novels have much in common. Both are set in the provinces, around Rouen in Northern France and in the Midlands respectively, and examine aspects of love and marriage. Both writers consider the importance of money and class in their societies. The key differences are in their chosen focuses, and in tone. George Eliot carefully examines a whole range of relationships between men and women of varying ages, happy and unhappy marriages, and mutual and destructive kinds of love. Flaubert focuses on one woman: bored, romantic Emma, who despises her dull, clumsy husband and, in the course of the novel, has two passionate affairs, the first with Rodolphe, an experienced seducer, and the second with Leon, a younger man she had known in the early days of her marriage. Both men find Emma irresistible initially, but tire of her romantic fantasies and hunger for love and passion. Flaubert tells her story with a mixture of irony and understanding. As a heroine, you may find her irritating, but it is hard not to sympathise with her as well, even before her horrible death.

If you want a taste of this novel, read the section from a page and a half before the end of Part 2, Chapter 12, where Rodolphe and Emma are parting the night before they plan to run away together. Then read Chapter 13, in which Rodolphe composes a farewell letter to her to be delivered the next day. Its effect causes her to break down. Months later Emma unexpectedly meets Leon again and in Part 3 Chapters 1, 3 and 5 show how their affair develops.

## Drama

Long novels take time and a committed reader. Ideally plays are seen and heard in live performances, but you need to be able to read a drama text as well. Reading a play may take less time than a novel, but it requires different skills and the imagination to lift the dialogue off the page and visualise the text in action.

If you feel you need some laughs, the 18th century offers some great comedies - in *The Rivals* Sheridan makes fun of excessively romantic characters like Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* and anticipates women like *Madame Bovary*, but without the sex, and in *She Stoops to Conquer*, Goldsmith mocks a young hero with communication problems.

In the 20th century and today 'love' is more likely to be central in comedies rather than tragedies, and you need to look to musicals, television soaps and films for romantic love stories. In modern drama, you will find plenty of sex, but not a lot of love, and dramatists often explore its difficulties and problems, rather than its pleasures. Just one example is the Irish playwright Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leehane*, in which an old woman robs her daughter of happiness by the age-old plot device of destroying a crucial letter.

## Conclusion

Don't be overwhelmed by the vast number of poems, fictions and dramas about 'love through the ages'. You can't read even a fraction of them, but do remember the importance of range and variety in your wider reading, and enjoy finding some texts of your own choice to refer to when making links with the extracts you find on the examination paper.

**Article Written By:** Jane Ogborn is an examiner and moderator who has written many books for A Level.

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