

English Literature

PHASE ONE: What makes Literature worth studying?

Hello and welcome to your English Literature course! We're so excited to talk about some amazing pieces of literature with you, and hopefully this induction work helps you to feel informed, confident and ready to hit the ground running in September. If anything, the intellectual workout in the following pages might help you stay sharp during the summer months and avoid drowning in a sea of Netflix/TikTok.

We're starting with a rather large and surprisingly deceptive philosophical question: *what makes Literature worth studying?*

How to get the most from your induction work:

- Don't be afraid to put a digital hand up. Treat these activities as if you were in a classroom. If there's a word or idea that you don't understand, please e-mail Mrs Cummins (fxc@hardenhuish.wilts.sch.uk) to start a conversation.
- Take notes! There's lots of valuable material here and we expect our A Level students to have well-organised notes on various topics.
- This induction work has four tasks to work through and a final task to submit to Mrs Cummins via e-mail for some feedback. Don't skip the tasks! The reading and thinking are needed for a decent response to that final activity.

What work is being set?

- There are four tasks and a final outcome to complete here. You'll be thinking about why we study literature, your own literary journey and thinking about why some texts come to be regarded as classics while some seem destined to end up in charity shops and landfills.

How long should I spend on this work?

- It is expected that you spend five hours on this first phase of work.

Who should I send this work to and / or who should I contact with any questions?

- Mrs Cummins – fxc@hardenhuish.wilts.sch.uk

How and when to submit

- Your work should be e-mailed to Mrs Cummins at the address above by Monday June 21st.

TASK ONE: What makes Literature worth studying?

Well, let's start with an easy one. Start by noting down all the reasons you can think of for studying English Literature. As you've tentatively signed up for the course, there should be at least one of these!



TASK TWO: What Literature have you studied, and why do you think it's been chosen?

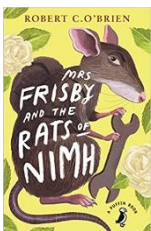
You may have studied the English curriculum at Hardenhuish, or you may be joining us from another school where hopefully you've studied some books as well. (Also, welcome! We're delighted you could make it). It's important to consider our literary journeys so far at secondary school, and to start reflecting on why some books are chosen to read in class whereas others are left to gather dust in the English Book Cupboard (a seriously dusty space and final resting place for many spiders).

Make notes – what texts do you remember studying in each year of your education? Make sure you record the authors as well!

Here's mine, adjusted for the fact that I am a lot older than you and my memories of secondary school are slightly fuzzier. There were almost definitely more, but it's funny what stays with you in life. I'm pretty sure I remember 'Tractor' by Ted Hughes only because it contains a swear word, and it was probably my first experience of studying something with one of those in.

Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
Mrs Frisby and the Rats of NIMH – Robert O'Brien.	Just a blur I'm afraid.	Romeo and Juliet – William Shakespeare.	Twelfth Night – William Shakespeare A poetry anthology – I remember 'Search for My Tongue' by Sujata Bhatt and 'Tractor' by Ted Hughes.	To Kill A Mockingbird – Harper Lee

Make notes – why do you think these texts were chosen for you to study?



I think this one was chosen by my Year 7 teacher as it's a fast-paced book for children. The plot is a bit of a page-turner and I think it was chosen for its vivid imagination – the main character is a mouse and it's about a society of rats who have gained the ability to read, write and build machines from their time as test subjects in a laboratory. What 11 year old wouldn't love that fantastic leap of imagination and unique idea! I think my teacher was perhaps trying to show us the imaginative possibilities of stories and how fiction isn't necessarily bound by the world around us...



Sujata Bhatt's poem, 'Search for My Tongue', was one that I remember in my anthology, about an Indian woman who moves to the UK and feels like she doesn't belong. Some of the poem is written in Gujarati, and it was probably the first time I'd read any literature in a language that wasn't my own. It was probably also one of the first texts I read written by someone who'd had a very different life to my own – I went to school in a pretty white part of the Midlands. This poem was perhaps chosen to show me how Literature can afford us a window into the experiences of others, broadening our understanding of their lives and stories and making us more empathetic. It was also absolutely crucial to helping teenage me realise that it's not only the British or the Americans who write Literature, and that each culture has a rich tradition of the written word.

TASK THREE: What makes a specific text worth studying?

Presumably, you have enjoyed at least *some* of the Literature that's been placed in front of you during your time at school...but why were those books chosen? You're presumably aware that you've studied a curriculum, and that means these books have been selected for you to study – it's the government who stipulate that you need to study a 19th Century Novel for example.

And what makes a text worth studying isn't necessarily its popularity either. Have a look at the best selling books of the 2000s below.

1. E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) – 15.2 million copies
2. E. L. James, *Fifty Shades Darker* (2011) – 10.4 million copies
3. E. L. James, *Fifty Shades Freed* (2012) – 9.3 million copies
4. Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (2008) – 8.7 million copies
5. Kathryn Stockett, *The Help* (2009) – 8.7 million copies
6. Paula Hawkins, *The Girl on The Train* (2015) – 8.2 million copies
7. Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (2012) – 8.1 million copies
8. John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) – 8 million copies
9. Stieg Larsson, *The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo* (2008) – 7.9 million copies
10. Veronica Roth, *Divergent* (2011) – 6.6 million copies

These books aren't really studied in schools (and certainly for the top three that's a good thing) ...but you may struggle to call some of the titles on this list 'literature'. Do you really think we'll be studying *Divergent* or *The Girl on The Train* alongside *Macbeth* or *Lord of the Flies*? Probably not. English Literature has what's known as a **canon** – a group of texts that are regarded as 'classic' or 'important' and that lead to online articles like this one appearing:



Here's how our exam board describe this concept:

The literary canon is often understood to mean the group of authors or works that a consensus of academics, historians and teachers recognise as worthy of study: these are the texts that are regularly in print, are studied for school examinations and in universities and which have 'status'. The apparently 'accepted texts' that appear on your English Literature exam papers, for example, are regarded as belonging to the literary canon.

And here are a couple of snippets from writers thinking about the 'canon' and what might qualify a text to enter it. What qualifies *Jekyll and Hyde* as a work of Literature? Why might people turn their noses up at *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*? If some texts are more valuable than others, what determines that? **Read the excerpts below and answer the questions posed please!**

Complexity and unity

Literary texts which are assumed to be of special value are generally characterised by complexity of plot, structure, language, and ideas. Indeed, complexity is often used in this context as a synonym of value. But complexity can be of a number of different kinds. In novels, complexity typically involves not only a skilfully constructed main plot, but often the co-existence of this plot with sub-plots which mirror and highlight the events and themes in the main plot. The structure of a specially valued poem is held to be complex in ways which repay close attention; for example, the poem may be structured as a complex sequence of parallelisms. The more the reader studies the poem, the more he or she is aware of the poet's skill in composing it in this way. The language of valued literary texts is also typically assumed to be complex: writers do not simply choose 'ordinary' words, like the words we use for conversation, but words which have resonance, historical associations, beauty, or 'rightness' for the particular context. The reader is encouraged to assume that writers of valued texts laboured painstakingly to choose exactly the right word, since each word forms part of a larger complex structure. Nor can the ideas of a poem or novel be taken as haphazardly chosen: they too form complex patterns or structures, either being echoed by other ideas in the text or reaffirmed in the form of general themes. The complex interweaving of elements of language, structure, plot, ideas and so on, can be seen to constitute the **aesthetic unity** of the text. Through carefully studying the text, the reader will consequently find that all of its elements contribute to the same overall structure, and is thereby likely to consider the poem to have achieved value, or even greatness. Alternatively, if by applying the same criteria the reader is not able to discover a complex but unified pattern in the text, that text will not be regarded as the highest kind of literature, and will be judged to be flawed.

In what ways can texts be considered complex?

What do you understand by the phrase 'aesthetic unity'?

Language

We assume that writers of canonical texts are craftspersons – that they are in command of their writing, and that they are skilled in ways that other writers are not. Of special interest, as regards the question of value, is the attention paid to the language of valued texts. Language in valued texts is described as being elegant, witty, patterned, controlled; in short, the author is considered to have taken care in her or his choice, and the reader takes pleasure in the skill which the author displays.

What qualities does the language of texts from the canon possess?

Subject-matter

The subject-matter of valued texts is generally considered to be serious, dealing with moral and philosophical topics of acknowledged importance. Valued texts are supposed to give the reader an insight into fundamental questions which are of universal concern, such as the nature of evil, the corrupting effect of money, the value of love, and so on, and to rehearse the dilemmas of moral and ethical choice. For this reason, comic texts are rarely accorded status unless they appear to discuss such supposedly universal themes. Because valued texts are held to deal with such universal themes, which are of concern to all people, they are also thought to have qualities of durability.

Shakespeare's works, for example, are deemed valuable because they are believed to have significance not only for his time but for all time. When texts discuss evidently universal questions, they are unlikely to be at the same time texts which discuss specific political questions in any detail. Political polemic (open and heated critical discussion) is generally taken to be at odds with literary worth, and is often seen to detract from the universalising aim of great literature (satires are often valued for their observations about humankind in general, rather than for their more specific criticisms of particular societies).

What are valued texts supposed to give the reader an insight into?

Why are comic texts often dismissed?

What gives a text 'durability' in the canon?

The 100 greatest novels of all time: The list

From Don Quixote to American Pastoral, take a look at the 100 greatest novels of all time

So, according to these snippets, what makes a text 'worth studying' is that it has complexity, unity, skilful choices of language and meaningful subject matter and is ideally something that touches on universal themes.

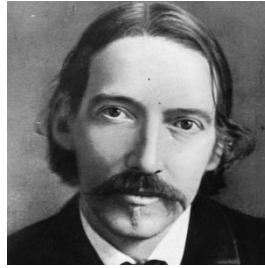
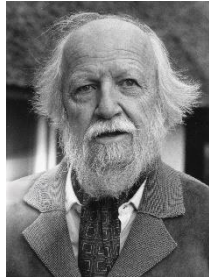


FINAL REFLECTIONS

- Do you agree with these qualities being what makes Literature 'great'?
- What qualities, if any, do you think are missing? Is there anything else that makes a text worthy of study?
- What books does this definition miss out? Are there books you love that don't necessarily fit the definition of worthy Literature?

TASK FOUR: Is the canon the most representative? Who gets to choose what is studied?

Things get even more complicated when you consider who actually makes it into the canon, and who gets to decide that a text has all of these qualities in the first place? What do the authors you've perhaps studied have in common?



Hmmm...well, they're all male. They're all from England. They're all white. They're all middle class. They're all dead.

Go back to Task Two – your own Literary Journey. How representative do you think that journey is? How many of those authors were white, middle class men? How many of them were contemporary authors? How many of them aren't English?

Why this might be a problem:



"Good prose should be transparent, like a window pane."

Here's an interesting quotation from George Orwell about writing. I love George Orwell (*Animal Farm* and *1984* are well worth the read!) but I'm not sure I agree with this point of view. Is it really possible to write 'transparently' as Orwell suggests? Surely what we write is influenced by our identity! Our class, our education, our upbringing, our gender and our race all have an influence on our experience of the world, and, as a result, what we have to say about it when we write Literature ourselves. So if the canon is only made up of quite similar looking and thinking authors, we only get to experience those views through Literature. It's perhaps not a coincidence that the pictures of the authors above largely reflect those who are in power at any given time: a government of white, middle class men.

Answer in your notes: Do you think the canon is representative of modern Britain? Should it be? Why?

Surely we should just add in some writers from different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities and this would solve the problem? Well, it might not be that simple...

The inclusion of a wider range of texts to study is one response to the problem of an exclusive canon. But another question emerges from this debate: what is the effect of continuing to produce 'representative' canons that include the odd black writer or two, on the grounds that they are 'as good as' any of the white writers on the list? If one argues that one text is 'as good as' another, there must be a shared set of criteria on which that judgement is made. In other words, this makes alternative literatures conform to the same standards of a tradition that has excluded them.

What points are being made above in this excerpt from a university textbook?

Making your judgements

Thinking over everything you've read on the canon and what makes a text worth studying from Tasks Three and Four, can you plot the following statements on a 'disagree' to 'agree' scale?

DISAGREE

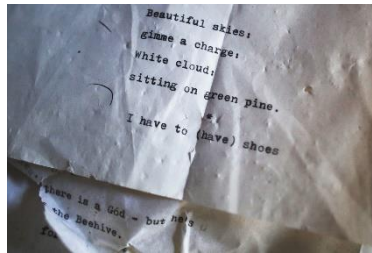
AGREE

- Texts have intrinsic value; a canon is a necessary result of that belief
- The canon should be more representative
- The canon is a way of perpetuating nationalism and pride in being British
- The canon perpetuates white male bourgeoisie values
- Positive discrimination, i.e. Including more black/female writers should be encouraged
- Text choice is tightly controlled by a ruling elite
- The literary canon puts people off Literature
- Enjoyment is the only criteria that matters when it comes to Literature
- Any value of a text says more about the reader than it does the text

OUTCOME: The New Canon

Hopefully, you've thought about the study of English Literature, your own journey through studying Literature so far and some thoughts about why certain texts get chosen and yet my 1,000 page novel about a stressed English teacher who comfort eats during break and lunch and binge-watched the latest series of Masterchef is still awaiting a publisher. It's time to apply that now!

We would like you to **propose a text suitable for study in an English Literature A-Level, and justify your reasons for its inclusion.**



Bits of advice:

- A 'text' is a broad term. You can choose a novel, a drama or a poem, as you will be studying all three of those forms over the next two years!
- Your justifications can draw on your readings in this project: you might want to argue that your text has a particular complexity or use of language or universal theme that justifies its place on our constructed curriculum. Or, that simply it is an enjoyable text and that's enough!
- You may also want to make an argument from representation: are you recommending a book written from a different cultural perspective? Or a book that might depart from having a male, heterosexual protagonist? You may want to write about why studying these particular topics is important.
- Your work should be one side of A4. You can include a reasonably sized image of a book cover if you like, but please don't take the mick with ridiculous font sizes and margin mangling.

Your work should be submitted to Mrs Cummins by Monday 21st June. Once again, her e-mail address is fxc@hardenhuish.wilts.sch.uk and you'll receive prompt feedback on your choices. The choices will be compiled and sent round as a list as well for some summer reading but also to help you get to know each other – the class that discusses books together stays together, and we should be trying to build our relationships as a class during this time as well.

Where do we go next?

We'll be off into the study of an actual text from the genre that will drive our Year 12: tragedy! Get the togas ready, as we'll be heading back to Ancient Greece and taking a virtual theatre trip. More details to follow soon.