

Welcome to A-Level English Literature

Why do we study English Literature?

Welcome to Gillingham School's two-year English Literature A-Level course. You might well ask yourself, 'Why do we study English Literature?' The award-winning author and teacher Richard Jacobs was asked this question, and he made a list:

1. Literature can help us make better sense of our world, our lives and ourselves.
2. Literature has the power to give us an enriched understanding of other worlds, lives and times, of the way things have been and how they might be.
3. Reading, thinking, writing and talking about literature is both a personal and collegiate experience - a model of how society operates or should operate.
4. Literature embodies the values of imagination, identification and empathy. These matter in an increasingly divisive world.
5. Characters in literature are very often transformed by the plot and this process models the way literature intervenes in our own lives and can transform them.
6. The shared experience of studying literature in class gives us the ability and the need to read the world and its texts on our own.
7. Studying literature recognises that the making of meaning is a dynamic and volatile process and that meanings are socially and culturally produced, as various and multiple as readers.
8. Studying literature explores the text in its many contexts, how the text finds and makes a place in the world, how it is enabled to speak and to make a difference.
9. Studying literature and critical reading are an opening out that returns us to the text in an adventure that never finishes.
10. The study and criticism of literature is the asking of questions that generate more and better questions.
11. The study and criticism of literature is not just a social act but an inherently political act. Authoritarian governments are for that reason suspicious and antagonistic towards advanced literary study.
12. Studying literary texts with my own teachers, and later with my own students, has very often changed my life. Take every opportunity to have your lives changed by the reading and studying of literature. Because it matters.

How is studying Literature at A-Level different to how I have studied before?

At GCSE you will have studied a range of texts. You will have written about them in some detail, and you will have some opinions about them. At A-Level, you will be studying two novels, modern and Romantic Poetry, and two dramatic texts. While you will be doing all the same things you were doing at GCSE, you will also be learning how to study a text in a deeper and more sophisticated way.

Think of a book, or a story that you like. Ask yourself:

- Who is telling the story? Whose voice or voices does the writer choose to narrate? Why has the writer done this?

- Is the author invisible in their text, letting the action speak for itself, or does the writer intrude into the story, sharing their thoughts and opinions?
- What are the contextual landscapes around the texts, and how has when they were written affect how, or even why, they were written.
- How has a writer, poet or dramatist created and shaped their meanings in their texts? How do writers make specific structural choices to create different effects?
- How do you, as a young modern reader, respond to texts written in the past, sometimes far in the past? How has the critical opinion about a text changed over time?

If you enjoy reading and discussing great English Literature, English Literature A-Level might be for you.

What Might I Do Before I Start?

- Widen your literary horizons by regularly reading for pleasure. Here are a few famous reflections on the value of reading

'What an astonishing thing a book is. It's a flat object made from a tree with flexible parts on which are imprinted lots of funny dark squiggles. But one glance at it and you're inside the mind of another person, maybe somebody dead for thousands of years. Across the millennia, an author is speaking clearly and silently inside your head, directly to you. Writing is perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people who never knew each other, citizens of distant epochs. Books break the shackles of time. A book is proof that humans are capable of working magic.'

Carl Sagan

'Some books seem like a key to unfamiliar rooms in one's own castle. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us. That is my belief.'

Franz Kafka

'With what admiration the reading of excellent poets fills anyone who attentively studies the invention and interpretation of concepts! And what shall I say of architecture? What of the art of navigation? But surpassing all stupendous inventions, what sublimity of mind was his who dreamed of finding means to communicate his deepest thoughts to any other person, though distant by mighty intervals of place and time! Of talking with those who are in India; of speaking to those who are not yet born and will not be born for a thousand or ten thousand years; and with what facility, by the different arrangements of twenty characters upon a page! Let this be the seal of all the admirable inventions of mankind.'

Galileo Galilei

- Find some blogs online that might help give you some ideas or inspiration:
 - <https://www.themarginalian.org/>: a carefully curated selection of perspectives on a wide range of literary issues

- Check out podcasts about different aspects of English Literature:
 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/598SVYJ2smP8qJlpH29y7Vi/podcasts>: archived episodes of 'In Our Time', featuring discussions about art, culture, literature and philosophy
 - <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2021/01/the-best-literary-podcasts-for-book-lovers>: a link to 39 of the best podcasts for book lovers
- Keep a written record of what you read, and write down your ideas as you go

What Must I Do Before I Start?

- Buy copies of the two novels to read before the course starts in September. This is vital to enable you to start thinking about the texts and generating ideas for discussion
- Read the two novels we will be studying, 'The Handmaid's Tale' by Margaret Atwood and 'Frankenstein', by Mary Shelley. A first reading should always be for pleasure, enjoying the story and seeing how it affects your thoughts and feelings
- Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus (Penguin Classics), by Mary Shelley. ISBN Number **978-0141439471**.
- The Handmaid's Tale (Vintage), by Margaret Atwood. ISBN: **978-1784873189**

Finally, if you'd like to have a go at some practical tasks, feel free to access the **two student books** produced by the exam board, with a range of practical activities designed to develop your knowledge of poetry and prose. These can be accessed in PDF form with this information.

We are looking forward to welcoming you at Gillingham next year.