



# Preparing to study A Level English Literature

Hello!

This booklet contains the work we'd like you to do over the summer to prepare for studying A Level English Literature with us at Wyke. As you've probably already heard, A Level English Literature is a huge step up from GCSE English Literature in terms of level and difficulty, so we want to challenge you in your reading and research in order to get you as prepared as possible.

In this booklet, there are things to read and tasks to do. Any task that you need to complete is in **bold**. You should complete these tasks in a separate document – either on a computer or by hand – and bring it with you to your first A Level English Literature lesson in September.

OK – let's go!

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## The Literary Canon

“The widely debated term ‘literary canon’ is used to classify a group of literary works that are considered the most important from a certain time or place. Derived from the Greek word *kanôn* meaning measuring rod or standard, the canon has been compiled by literary critics, scholars and teachers over time in order to assert which works of literature are ‘essential’.”

Emily Kinder on *theboar.org* in 2018

You may well have heard this term before, and at school you will definitely have studied at least one writer who is considered to be part of the 'canon'! You may also know that there has been much debate over time about which texts should be considered part of the 'canon'.

In 1994, the critic Harold Bloom wrote a book called *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, in which he identified the following 26 writers as being essential to the 'canon':

- William Shakespeare
- Dante Alighieri
- Geoffrey Chaucer
- Miguel de Cervantes
- Michel de Montaigne
- Molière
- John Milton
- Samuel Johnson
- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
- William Wordsworth
- Jane Austen
- Walt Whitman
- Emily Dickinson
- Charles Dickens
- George Eliot
- Leo Tolstoy
- Henrik Ibsen
- Sigmund Freud
- Marcel Proust
- James Joyce
- Virginia Woolf
- Franz Kafka
- Jorge Luis Borges
- Pablo Neruda
- Fernando Pessoa
- Samuel Beckett

1. **Write down any writers on this list who you have read something by. For each writer, say what you've read by them, and whether it was for school, or for pleasure, or both!**
2. **Do you agree with the idea of some writers being more important than others? Why? (Write a short paragraph in response to these questions.)**
3. **Who should choose who is in the 'canon'? Why? (Write a short paragraph in response to these questions.)**

Other writers, scholars and critics have argued that the traditional literary 'canon' is too male and too white! The writer Toni Morrison said in 1988: "What is possible is to try to recognize, identify, and applaud the fight for and triumph of quality when it is revealed to us and to let go the notion that only the dominant culture or gender can make those judgments, identify that quality, or produce it."

4. **What do you think Toni Morrison meant by this? Do you agree? (Write a short paragraph in response to these questions.)**

The Mary Sue website ([www.themarysue.com](http://www.themarysue.com)) calls itself "the premier destination for entertainment geeks, female or otherwise". In an article called 'What's In Your Literary Canon?', published on this site in 2018, Princess Weekes said: "Expanding literary canon is a means of saying that we are having conversations with other stories and other authors now, and that's okay". She argued that the following writers should be added to the Western literary 'canon':

- Eliza Haywood
- Delarivier Manley
- Aphra Behn
- Samuel Richardson (specifically his novel *Clarissa*)
- Williams Wells Brown (specifically his anti-slavery narrative *Clotel*)
- Toni Morrison (specifically her novel *Beloved*)
- 'Women of letters' such as Dorothy Wordsworth (yes – the sister of William!), Zelda Fitzgerald (yes – the wife of F. Scott!) and Anne Lister

5. **Do you agree that the 'canon' needs to be expanded? Make a list of 5-10 writers who you would add to the 'canon'. For each, write a sentence explaining why you feel they are deserving of inclusion.**
6. **Do you think that people who write the following types of literature are worthy of inclusion in the canon? For each, write a sentence explaining your thoughts.**
  - a. **children's literature**

- b. YA (young adult) fiction
- c. comic books/graphic novels
- d. non-fiction

### **The big tasks**

Choose one of the writers from Harold Bloom's list of 26, or from the Wikipedia page on the Western literary canon: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western\\_canon#Literary\\_canon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_canon#Literary_canon)

This page includes a wider range of literature, including 20<sup>th</sup> century writers, feminist writers and black writers.

Read something written by your chosen writer. This could be a large text such as a novel, or a small text such as a poem, depending on who you choose! The only stipulation is that it must not be something you have studied at school or read before. Write a response to this text in any form you choose. It could be:

- a book review
- an article discussing the issues raised in the text
- a piece of creative writing inspired by the text
- something else!

Research your chosen writer.

- What is/was their life like?
- How is/was their work received by critics?
- What are considered to be their greatest works?

Summarise your research in any form you choose, as long as it's in your own words, and on no less than one side of A4. Feel free to be creative in how you present your findings!

Your responses to the two big tasks should be included in the same document (either typed up on a computer or written by hand) as the earlier questions, and brought to your first A Level English Literature lesson in September.

We hope that this work will not only challenge you but also remind you of your love of literature! We look forward to meeting you in September.