



SARACENS  
HIGH SCHOOL

**A LEVEL  
ENGLISH  
LITERATURE  
BRIDGING  
WORK**

COURSE: A Level English Literature

EXAM BOARD: OCR

SPECIFICATION CODE: H472

Literature Set Texts:

Gothic Novels:

- Frankenstein – Mary Shelley
- The Bloody Chamber – Angela Carter

Drama:

- A Doll's House – Henrik Ibsen
- The Tempest – William Shakespeare

Poetry:

- Christina Rossetti – Maude Clare, Goblin Market, Remember, Song, A Birthday, From the Antique, Uphill, Echo, Shut Out, Twice, Good Friday, Winter: My Secret, Soeur Louise de la Misericorde, In the Round Tower at Jhansi, No thank you, John

Further reading texts:

- Vathek – William Beckford
- The Italian – Ann Radcliffe
- The Picture of Dorian Gray – Oscar Wilde
- Light in August – William Faulkner
- Rebecca – Daphne du Maurier
- Outer Dark – Cormac McCarthy
- The Wasp Factory – Iain Banks
- Beloved – Toni Morrison

### **Why should you study English Literature?**

1. To benefit from the insight of others. The body of world literature contains most available knowledge about humanity – some of life’s most important lessons are subtly expressed in our art.
2. To examine how societal issues are reflected and critiqued in literary texts.
3. To recognise language devices and appreciate their emotional power. Like good music, poetry uses wordplay, rhythm, and sounds to deliver its message.
4. To learn to support our points of view and trust our own interpretations. We provide evidence for our interpretation of a story or poem when we explain it. When we build a solid case in support of our opinion, we build self-confidence in our own interpretations of language itself.
5. To develop empathy and understanding for ideas and experiences that are different to our own.

### **And finally...**

The most important thing you can do to prepare for September is read, read, read. Use the reading lists at the end of this pack and start where your interest takes you. You will be asked to talk about what you have read when you return in September.

***We hope that you enjoy these tasks – they will get you thinking in a way you will need for A Level.***

1. Listen to a clip about the difference between horror and terror in the Gothic.

The *emagazine* website includes a collection of video interviews with leading writers, academics and critics. A selection of these are available without a subscription at this web address:

[English & Media Centre | Making the Leap: moving from GCSE to A Level Literature study \(emagClips\) | Videos | Video Clips \(englishandmedia.co.uk\)](#)

- Listen to the clip entitled: Professor David Punter discusses the Gothic.
- Make notes on the key information.

2. The Art of the Essay

We know that essays are what we write in English. But, beyond knowing that they are the way you show your knowledge in an English exam, what is an essay? And can its meaning outside the classroom help us write better essays inside the classroom (and get more enjoyment from it)?

- Spend a couple of minutes jotting down what you think an essay is. (Does it have anything in common with a review? Does it have to answer a question? Can you write an essay about anything?)
- Now read these short definitions of the essay:

Essay is derived from the French word *essayer*, which means 'to attempt' or 'to try'.

A short form of literary composition based on a single subject matter, and often gives the personal opinion of the author.

A famous essayist, *Aldous Huxley* defines essays as, 'A literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything.' (Aldous Huxley, novelist and essay writer)

A short piece of writing on a particular subject. (Oxford English Dictionary)

A scholarly work in writing that provides the author's personal argument.

A short piece of writing on a particular subject, especially one done by students as part of the work for a course.

Essays are how we speak to one another in print – caroming thoughts not merely in order to convey a certain packet of information, but with a special edge or bounce of personal character in a kind of public letter. (Edward Hoagland, Introduction, *The Best American Essays*: 1999)

- Read the attached article in which the novelist and essayist Blake Morrison explores the art of the essay in ‘A Loose Sally of the Mind’, published in *emagazine*. You will find it challenging at first. Read it slowly, read it out loud, write out short quotations which grab your attention or which interest you.
  - Now read a short extract from Professor Judy Simon’s chapter on the essay attached.
  - Make notes on what the two texts have said.
3. In September you are going to have to make a 5 minute presentation on Shakespeare.

You should choose a unique topic that can capture your audience’s attention and will allow them to learn something new. Shakespeare wrote about important themes such as love, life, death, magic, revenge, murder, jealousy, grief, mystery, and more so you can devote your presentation to one of these immortal themes or analyse a specific play – its characters, themes, scenes, speech, literary devices, etc. You can also write about Shakespeare’s plays in relation to the cultural and social context, or analyse his influence on theatre. You will not be able to talk about any text you have already studied. Here are some interesting topic ideas. Feel free to use them for making your presentations:

- Supernatural Elements in Shakespeare’s Plays;
  - Gender Issues in Shakespeare’s Works;
  - Dramatisation of Religious Ideas and Issues in Plays of Shakespeare;
  - Explore Conflicts Between Children and Their Parents in Works of Shakespeare;
  - Shakespeare’s Views on Love and Marriage;
  - Idea of Revenge in Plays of Shakespeare;
  - Role of Fool in Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Comedies;
  - Explore Shakespeare’s Contribution to English Literature;
  - Explain Why Shakespeare is Still Popular Today;
4. Read one of the novels from the recommended reading list that follows. Try to read one from outside your comfort zone in order to stretch yourself. When you have finished the novel, write a review of it. You should include a discussion of the key things, the main characters and a personal response to the text.

## Recommended reading list for English Literature A Level

The list that follows is by no means exhaustive, but it should give you somewhere to start when faced with a whole library full of possibilities! Happy reading!

Chinua Achebe	Things Fall Apart
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	Purple Hibiscus
	Americanah
	Half of a Yellow Sun
Monica Ali	Brick Lane
Margaret Atwood	The Handmaid's Tale
	Oryx and Crake
	The Blind Assassin
Jane Austen	Pride and Prejudice
	Emma
	Sense and Sensibility
Iain Banks	The Wasp Factory
Pat Barker	The Silence of the Girls
William Beckford	Vathek
Charlotte Brontë	Jane Eyre
Emily Brontë	Wuthering Heights
Octavia Butler	Parable of the Sower
AS Byatt	Possession
Angela Carter	Nights at the Circus,
Joseph Conrad	The Secret Agent
Charles Dickens	Great Expectations
	Hard Times
	Bleak House
Daphne Du Maurier	Rebecca
George Eliot	The Mill on The Floss
	Middlemarch
Bernadine Evaristo	Girl, Woman, Other
William Faulkner	Light in August
Sebastian Faulks	Birdsong
	Charlotte Gray
F. Scott Fitzgerald	The Great Gatsby
	Tender is the Night
E.M. Forster	A Room with a View
Elizabeth Gaskell	North and South
	Wives and Daughters
Gabriel Garcia Marquez	Love in the Time of Cholera
Graham Greene	Brighton Rock
Mohsin Hamid	The Reluctant Fundamentalist
Thomas Hardy	Far from the Madding Crowd
	Tess of the D'Urbervilles
L.P. Hartley	The Go-Between
Ernest Hemingway	For Whom the Bell Tolls
	A Farewell to Arms
Khaled Hosseini	A Thousand Splendid Suns

Aldous Huxley  
Kazuo Ishiguro

James Joyce

Jhumpa Lahiri  
Nella Larsen  
D.H Lawrence

Harper Lee  
Andrea Levy  
Hilary Mantel

Cormac McCarthy  
Ian McEwan

Toni Morrison  
Iris Murdoch

George Orwell  
Arundhati Roy  
Sylvia Plath  
Annie Proulx

Ann Radcliffe  
Henry Roth  
Jean Rhys  
Sam Selvon  
Zadie Smith

John Steinbeck

Bram Stoker  
Alice Walker  
Sarah Waters  
Oscar Wilde  
Jeanette Winterson  
Virginia Woolf

The Kite Runner  
Brave New World  
The Remains of the Day  
Never Let Me Go  
Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man  
Dubliners  
The Namesake  
Passing  
Sons and Lovers  
Women in Love  
To Kill a Mockingbird  
Small Island  
Wolf Hall  
Bring out the Bodies  
Outer Dark  
Atonement  
Enduring Love  
Beloved  
The Bell  
The sea, the sea  
Nineteen Eighty-Four  
The God of Small Things  
The Bell Jar  
Postcards  
The Shipping News  
The Italian  
Call it Sleep  
Wide Sargasso Sea  
The Lonely Londoner  
White Teeth  
NW  
On Beauty  
The Grapes of Wrath  
East of Eden  
Dracula  
The Colour Purple  
The Little Stranger  
The Picture of Dorian Gray  
Oranges are not the only Fruit  
Mrs. Dalloway  
To the Lighthouse

## A Loose Sally of the Mind – Putting Forward Bright Ideas in English Literature Essays

Writer, academic and critic Blake Morrison discusses the nature of the English literature essay, going back to the original meaning of the word to discover just how exploratory, tentative and personal it's meant to be.

For most students, an essay is something imposed on them rather than something they choose to do. You might hear someone say 'I've been writing a poem' or 'I've been writing a story', as if these were pleasurable and freely chosen activities, but if someone tells you they've been writing an essay it'll usually be with a groan – the essay will have been set as homework, to be done as duty, rather than as a means of self-expression. But essays – even literary essays – can be as personal to write, as pleasurable to read and as creative as poems or novels. And they're no less a matter of expressing yourself and offering your personal take on the world.

### Trying Something Out

'To essay' something – the verb, that is – means to try something out, to have a go. And the noun 'essay' suggests an attempt or endeavour. In his famous Dictionary, Samuel Johnson defines the essay as

*a loose sally of the mind, an irregular indigested piece, not a regular and orderly composition.*

Of course, when teachers come to mark essays, they do look for order of some kind, the sense of an argument being put forward in a clear and logical fashion. Still, I think Dr Johnson is right – the best essays put forward a bright idea or series of bright ideas, not fully formed perhaps, but stimulating and provocative. An essay isn't the last word. It's tentative, personal and subjective: 'Here's what I think – how about you?'

The most famous exponent of the essay is perhaps the French 16th-century writer Michel de Montaigne, who described his essays as attempts to show 'some traits of my character'. They also expressed his thoughts on politics, religion, morality, love, sex, parenthood, death and much besides. But they were unashamedly personal and this was what made them radical. We tend to think of essays as impersonal. When I was doing A Levels, and then again at university, the use of the first person pronoun was discouraged. You were meant to be objective, which meant adopting a style that was neutral, beige or passive. But essays can't help but be subjective. And the original model for them, Montaigne's, was candid, open, not afraid to say 'I'.

After all, it's your engagement with the text that matters. You do need to be aware of what others think of that text – critics, reviewers, your teacher, your fellow students, the way in which that text was received when it came out and has been received since. But it's what you bring to that text that



matters – your own ideas and responses. Talking about its structure, or its themes, or use of metaphor, or characterisation, all this is also a way of saying how it affects you. And if it hasn't affected you, if it's left you cold, that too is something to explore.

## Orwell and Early 20th-century Essays

The literary essay had its heyday in the early 20th century, with writers like D. H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster. Topping all of them was George Orwell. In the current era of post-truth, newspeak and double-think Orwell is essential reading – a man who can help us see through the lies and sham, a man to guide us through the labyrinth of war, post-colonialism, Brexit and Donald Trump. My favourite essay of his is called 'A Hanging'. It recounts an experience he had as a young man while serving in the police force in Burma, at a time when he was already beginning to question the ethics of colonialism. The essay brilliantly describes the scene of the hanging: the guards, the condemned man (whose offence we are never told), a dog that bounds into the yard where the hanging is due to take place and disrupts the proceedings. For most of the essay, Orwell doesn't comment on the morality of capital punishment. But when he notices the prisoner step aside to avoid getting his feet wet in a puddle, even though he has only minutes left to live, Orwell suddenly realises how immoral it is to take another person's life for any reason, even by way of punishment. Of course, the thought may have occurred to him before. The essay is as carefully shaped, and as artful, as any short story. But there's a sense of discovery in it – as though it's through the act of recalling the event, and writing about it, that Orwell is working out what he really thinks. In creative writing showing always works better than telling. And it's by showing what happened, rather than preaching and pontificating, that Orwell gets his point across.

Of course, Orwell's essay tells a story and it's based in life. Critical essays can't do that. They engage with texts. But when Orwell writes about Gulliver's Travels, or boys' comics, or the poetry of the 1930s, or the idiocy of Tolstoy's criticism of Shakespeare's King Lear, you still hear that same voice – of somebody not afraid to have his own thoughts, even if they're out of step with current opinion. Above all, there's a sense that he's connecting the books he writes about with his own life, his own experiences, his own ideas about the world. And you don't have to be in your twenties, thirties and forties to do that. If a sentence in a novel resonates with you, or the line of a poem rings true for some reason, or you come across a simile or metaphor that sends shivers down your spine, then that's worth writing about: it's what the poet or novelist hoped when he or she set down those words – not that their text would be studied for exams, but that someone would be emotionally moved or intellectually provoked by it.

## The Extinction of the Essay?

In a recent article for the Guardian, the American novelist Jonathan Franzen suggests that what defines the essay – the expression of opinions or the narrating of personal experiences (or some combination of the two) – is now a staple of social media: of blogs, of posts, of tweets. He asks:

*Should we be mourning the essay's extinction? Or should we be celebrating its conquest of the larger culture?*

It's a good question, but I don't think that essays and tweets are comparable. That's not just because the most famous tweeter in the world – the man who's given Twitter a bad name – is Donald Trump or because 140 or even 280 characters are too minimal to be called essayistic. It's because tweets

allow little room for nuance. They're assertions not explorations – and exploring is what the essay does best. Blogs are a better comparison: as first-hand testimonies of thoughts, opinions and experiences set down by one person for other people to read, they're the equivalent of essays. And however opinionated, blogs are often vulnerable, tentative and deeply personal – again just like essays.

## Criticism, Judgement and Celebration

At one point in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, the two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, exchange insults – 'vermin', 'moron', 'sewer rat' and 'cretin'. The ultimate, unanswerable insult they come up with is 'critic'. The word 'criticism' (like the word 'essay') has negative associations. But literary criticism doesn't preclude positivity: passion, enthusiasm and celebration. It's about championing books by showing what makes them tick far more than it's about attacking them or doing them down. Honest judgment is what we look for in criticism – reasoned, nuanced but personal judgement. Critical essays may be parasitic – they exist in relation to the literature they're feeding off – but they can also be an art-form in themselves. What we value in them is wit, passion, intelligence, provocation, enjoyment – the same qualities we look for in a novel or poem.

Of course, hatchet jobs can be fun too, when someone takes on an established name and calls his or her bluff. But it's a different kind of fun I'm thinking of – the fun of finding new things in a classic text or of finding new ways to talk about that text, through the insights of feminism, or environmentalism, or politics, or simply from personal experience. Books might exist physically as objects without even being opened, but they don't truly exist till someone reads them. The author Alberto Manguel has said that

*All writing depends on the generosity of the reader*

– the text gives to us and we bring something to it in return. Your task when writing a literary essay is to interpret, explain, elucidate, make sense – but also to connect the book you're reading to your own life. *Mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur* the Roman poet Horace wrote:

*Change the name and the story is about you.*

Classic texts tell stories that seem to be our stories, as though written just for us. And that's why we, in turn, write about them.

In short, there's nothing weird or elitist or negative about the act of criticism. It's as natural as breathing. It's what we all do when we've seen a film, or heard a new album: 'What did you think of it? I thought this.' And we back up our thoughts by reference to a particular scene or song, and argue our corner against those who disagree with us. That's the basis of the critical essay. And it can be inventive, it can be creative, it can be passionate. Most importantly, whether you use the I-word or not, it has to bear your stamp – it has to have your personality at its heart.

**Article Written By:** Blake Morrison is a writer of fiction, poetry, non-fiction, journalism and literary criticism. He is Professor of Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London.

## The Art of the Essay (emagplus)

In this extract from EMC's The Literature Reader, Judy Simons explores the essay in the digital age – and provides some practical tips.

The critical essay does not conform to a single format which has to be rigidly adhered to. Like other literary genres, it is a flexible medium, a creative space in which academics, students, authors and general readers can share opinions. Literary experience is not constant but changes over time, and modern essays are generous in acknowledging the diversity of readers and their backgrounds. [...]

'The great enemy of clear language is insincerity,' wrote George Orwell. 'When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting ink'. Orwell's *Inside the Whale* (1940) is both a classic example and a clear-sighted assessment of the art of writing critical essays. Wide-ranging in scope, beautifully structured, eschewing jargon or complicated terminology, it addresses its central subject head on. Its insistence on clarity and honesty is sound advice. Believe in what you are saying and do not try to dress up your ideas in highbrow language or rely on clichés.

There are many student guides on the market which provide a template for essay-writing. Websites such as [essaydragon.com](http://essaydragon.com) advise on the different stages of planning, structure and style while a number of university English departments publish online handbooks, which contain excellent practical pointers. There are also helpful YouTube videos, which take you through the composition process step by step. Yet because an essay should always be personal, there can be no absolute prototype. It is helpful to remember that the verb 'to essay' also means 'to try'. Your essay is a means of testing out ideas and polishing the techniques used to structure them.

My own top five tips are:

1. Know your subject. This relies on reading the text for yourself. At A Level you may feel that you have done this exhaustively. Yet, understanding is also about engaging with that text, the story it tells, and whether or not it has the power to speak directly to you as a reader, not just via your teacher. Literature that is set for A Level has usually been selected for its complexity and its potential to enlighten or affect your thinking. So, read and read again!
2. Conduct research. This does not necessarily involve seeking out obscure primary sources, although reading Keats's letters or Mary Shelley's 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein* will offer considerable insights into their works. Rather it means reading around the text, understanding the contexts, including its literary history, and knowing what other commentators have said. Writing an essay is not an isolated activity. When you embark on it, you are entering an ongoing debate about literature, including with other students and with academic critics, whose ideas will help inspire your own. Remember that there is no 'correct' interpretation of a text and that it is perfectly acceptable to disagree with others' opinions. This is an important step in articulating your own position.



3. Answer the question. Most essay topics offer a deceptively simple proposition that demands a more subtle answer; for example, 'How far do you agree with the view that in King Lear, Goneril and Regan are victims rather than villains?'. Your essay should of course sustain a focus on these two characters and the scenes in which they appear. But the phrasing also invites a review of the primary value system embedded in the action, such as the human and social values of family, respect for order, filial obedience, love, charity and kingship. How do Shakespeare's dramatic methods, the juxtaposition with Gloucester's family or the positioning of Lear's speeches excoriating his daughters fit into the play's exploration of power? Is there really scope for ambiguity here? Don't forget that the best essays show evidence of an enquiring mind so you should not be shy about using question marks.
4. Structure your argument. Where an author can be equivocal or abstruse, the critic should be aiming to be clear and to untangle. Planning what you are going to say is essential. You may find that as you make notes on your reading, your proposition evolves in unexpected ways. The key is to organise your points into a logical format that supports your main case. This avoids your ideas spilling out onto the page in a random sequence that results in a disjointed or rambling piece of work. In a comparison piece, for example, you should aim to keep your paragraphs balanced alternately between the texts. Remember too to keep to the prescribed word count. Do not make the mistake of thinking that the more you write the more compelling your thesis will be.
5. Provide the evidence. Every claim you make must be underpinned by reference to the text or to relevant contexts. This is what makes your line of reasoning convincing. You need to be selective about the material you use, but if you have followed points 1-4 above, this should come naturally. Quotations from the text underpin and strengthen your interpretation. They can be used alongside any background information you have, for example about the cultural climate in which a writer's work was produced and the literary conventions of the day. Do not make the mistake of expecting characters in a Victorian novel to behave according to twenty-first century codes. It is the judicious use of reference to characters, scenes, authorial voice and imagery that will ensure your essay comes alive.

## The Essay in the Age of Digital Technology

Digital technology has opened up a massive literary resource. It provides access for researchers to a range of materials which were once available only in a specialist library, such as copies of original manuscripts, out of print books and articles and biographical or historical information. It allows for new scholarship and literary discoveries that contribute to the essay's intervention in an evolving live debate.

Wikipedia, Google and other search engines can, however, tempt a reader towards simplistic analysis. A work of literature amounts to more than its surface narrative or plot synopsis. The internet is seductive because it appears to be comprehensive but its information is only as reliable as the person who posted it, and not all online views are equally valid. A critical perspective located via Google can range from incisive analysis by a learned scholar to a barely literate high school essay on Jane Eyre, such as some of those on the Bartleby website. Surfing the internet requires scrupulous discrimination on the part of the consumer, and it should never, ever be used as a sales outlet from which to purchase ready-made, supposedly bespoke coursework essays.

On the plus side, digital media have created a new approach to essay writing, with online magazines such as Electric Lit offering alternative publishing outlets. A whole blogosphere has emerged, populated by enthusiastic litbloggers, who exchange views, reviews and mini-essays. Blogging, where

typical posts are between 800 and 1500 words, affords a spirited, democratic space for literary discussion. As one commentator has noted, 'it does more than an essay because of its playfulness'. Yet its explosive growth has sparked controversy, with some, such as one chair of the Man Booker judges, claiming that blogging will only result in the 'detriment of literature'. Check out the regularly updated Literature Blogs UK Top 10 and make up your own mind.

Rarely do blogs follow the accepted conventions of critical essay writing. They are more casual, allowing for impromptu, open-ended observations that reaffirm a collective passion for literature. They can be quirky, playful or angry. They challenge the specialised rhetoric of the literati and what some see as an ivory tower complacency. Yet many academics, authors and teachers are themselves active bloggers, who find in the blog release from academic conventions and who know they can reach new audiences with a speed and directness that gives their views both currency and significance.

Readers live in the contemporary moment, and the power of present-day media shapes both textual meaning and production. Technology has opened up a world in which literary experience is not confined to the traditional print format. This is why the essay remains such a dynamic form, constantly renewing itself with each external stimulus. Do not give up on its rewards.

This extract is taken from EMC's *The Literature Reader*, a collection of articles by leading academics and writers on a wide range of topics from modernism and experimental literature to Shakespeare and the contemporary novel.

**Article Written By:** Judy Simons is a Research Fellow at the University of London and Emeritus Professor of English at de Montfort.

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