



A Level English Literature

Year 12 2020 Induction Booklet

Name.....

This booklet accompanies the live online lessons you will attend as part of your induction onto this course. Please make sure you have it and a pen / pencil with you when you log into the live lessons.

Openings in Contemporary Fiction

Paul Beatty – The Sellout

This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man, but I've never stolen anything. Never cheated on my taxes or at cards. Never snuck into the movies or failed to give back the extra change to a drugstore cashier indifferent to the ways of mercantilism and minimum wage expectations. I've never burgled a house. Held up a liquor store. Never boarded a crowded bus or subway car, sat in a seat reserved for the elderly, pulled out my gigantic penis and masturbated to satisfaction with a perverted, yet somehow crestfallen, look on my face. But here I am, in the cavernous chambers of the Supreme Court of the United States of America, my car illegally and somewhat ironically parked on Constitution Avenue, my hands cuffed and crossed behind my back, my right to remain silent long since waived and said goodbye to as I sit in a thickly padded chair that, much like this country, isn't quite as comfortable as it looks.

Deborah Levy – Hot Milk

2015. Almería. Southern Spain. August.

Today I dropped my laptop on the concrete floor of a bar built on the beach. It was tucked under my arm and slid out of its black rubber sheath (designed like an envelope), landing screen side down. The digital page is now shattered but at least it still works. My laptop has all my life in it and knows more about me than anyone else.

So what I am saying is that if it's broken, so am I.

Openings in Contemporary Fiction

Otessa Moshfegh – Eileen

I looked like a girl you'd expect to see on a city bus, reading some clothbound book from the library about plants or geography, perhaps wearing a net over my light brown hair. You might take me for a nursing student or a typist, note the nervous hands, a foot tapping, bitten lip. I looked like nothing special. It's easy for me to imagine this girl, a strange, young and mousy version of me, carrying an anonymous leather purse or eating from a small package of peanuts, rolling each one between her gloved fingers, sucking in her cheeks, staring anxiously out the window.

Graeme Macrae Burnet – His Bloody Project

Preface

I am writing this at the behest of my advocate, Mr Andrew Sinclair, who since my incarceration here in Inverness has treated me with a degree of civility I in no way deserve. My life has been short and of little consequence, and I have no wish to absolve myself of responsibility for the deeds which I have lately committed. It is thus for no other reason than to repay my advocate's kindness towards me that I commit these words to paper.

So begins the memoir of Roderick Macrae, a 17-year-old crofter, indicted on the charge of three brutal murders carried out in his native village of Culduie in Ross-shire on the morning of the 10th of August 1869.

Openings in Fiction

A Christmas Carol

Stave 1: Marley's Ghost

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the Country's done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Scrooge knew he was dead? Of course he did. How could it be otherwise? Scrooge and he were partners for I don't know how many years. Scrooge was his sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole assign, his sole residuary legatee, his sole friend and sole mourner. And even Scrooge was not so dreadfully cut up by the sad event, but that he was an excellent man of business on the very day of the funeral, and solemnised it with an undoubted bargain.

The mention of Marley's funeral brings me back to the point I started from. There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate. If we were not perfectly convinced that Hamlet's Father died before the play began, there would be nothing more remarkable in his taking a stroll at night, in an easterly wind, upon his own ramparts, than there would be in any other middle-aged gentleman rashly turning out after dark in a breezy spot -- say Saint Paul's Churchyard for instance -- literally to astonish his son's weak mind.

Openings in Fiction

The Great Gatsby

Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her;
If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,
Till she cry 'Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover,
I must have you!'

—THOMAS PARKE D'INVILLIERS

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

'Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,' he told me, 'just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.'

He didn't say any more but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon—for the intimate revelations of young men or at least the terms in which they express them are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions.

Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth.

And, after boasting this way of my tolerance, I come to the admission that it has a limit. Conduct may be founded on the hard rock or the wet marshes but after a certain point I don't care what it's founded on. When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction—Gatsby who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of the 'creative temperament'—it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.

Openings in Fiction

Regeneration by Pat Barker

Finished with the War
A Soldier's Declaration

I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust.

I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

On behalf of these who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.

S. Sassoon
July 1917

Openings in Fiction

Regeneration by Pat Barker

Bryce waited for Rivers to finish reading before he spoke again. 'The "S" stands for "Siegfried". Apparently he thought that was better left out.

'And I am sure he was right.' Rivers folded the paper and ran his fingertips along the edge. 'So they're sending him here?'

Bryce smiled. 'Oh, I think it's rather more specific than that. They're sending him to *you*.'

Rivers got up and walked across to the window. It was a fine day, and many of the patients were in the hospital grounds, watching a game of tennis. He heard the *pok-pok* of rackets, and a cry of frustration as a ball smashed into the net. 'I suppose he is "shell-shocked"?'

'According to the Board, yes.'

'It just occurs to me that a diagnosis of neurasthenia might not be inconvenient confronted with this.' He held up the Declaration.

'Colonel Langdon chaired the Board. *He* certainly seems to think he is.'

'Langdon doesn't believe in shell-shock.'

Bryce shrugged. 'Perhaps Sassoon was gibbering all over the floor.'

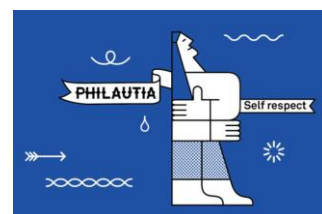
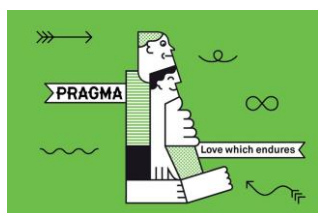
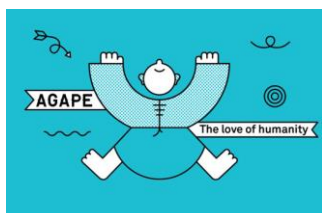
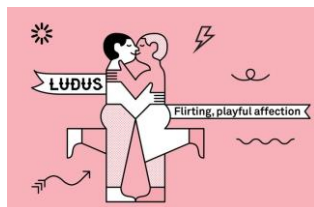
'"Funk, old boy." I know Langdon.' Rivers came back to his chair and sat down. 'He doesn't *sound* as if he's gibbering, does he?'

Bryce said carefully, 'Does it matter what his mental state is? Surely its better for him to be here than in prison?'

'Better for *him* perhaps. What about the hospital? Can you imagine what our dear Director of Medical Services is going to say, when he finds out we're sheltering "conchies" as well as cowards, shirkers, scrimshankers and degenerates? We'll just have to hope there's no publicity.'

Introduction to Literature of Love

Task: Match the picture with the correct type of love and write in above the definition.



MANIA

This is an unconditional love that sees beyond the outer surface and accepts the recipient for whom he/she is, regardless of their flaws, shortcomings or faults. It's the type of love that everyone strives to have for their fellow human beings.

A passionate and intense love that arouses romantic feelings; it is the kind that often triggers "high" feelings in a new relationship and makes you say, "I love him/her". It is simply an emotional and sexual love.

The feelings we have when we test out what it might be like to be in love with someone. The fluttering heart and feelings of euphoria; the slightly dangerous sensation.

The love we give to ourselves. This is not vanity, like narcissism, but our joy in being true to our own values. The strength to care for ourselves so that we can in turn care for others.

The love we feel for people we strive with to achieve a shared goal – our co-workers, the players in a football or netball team, the soldiers in an army.

The love between a married couple which develops over a long period of time. The love which endures in sickness and in health. The love which makes a friend care for their former school friend who has become vulnerable in later life.

This is the love that parents naturally feel for their children; the love that member of the family have for each other; or the love that friends feel for each other. This love is unconditional, accepts flaws or faults and ultimately drives you to forgive. It's committed, sacrificial and makes you feel secure, comfortable and safe.

This love refers to an affectionate, warm and tender platonic love. It makes you desire friendship with someone. It is a committed and chosen love.

A type of love that leads a partner into a type of madness and obsessiveness. People who love in this way wants to love and be loved to find a sense of self-value.

Introduction to Literature of Love

Extract from *Far From the Madding Crowd*

Far From the Madding Crowd by Thomas Hardy was published in 1874. In this extract, Bathsheba, a wealthy farmer, has just been watching a display of swordsmanship by Sergeant Troy, a soldier who has been stationed nearby. Having just cut off a lock of her hair, Troy asks Bathsheba to remain still once more.

Extract

"No—no! I am afraid of you—indeed I am!" she cried.

"I won't touch you at all—not even your hair. I am only going to kill that caterpillar settling on you. Now: still!"

It appeared that a caterpillar brushed from the ferns in passing had chosen the front of her bodice as his resting place. She saw the point glisten towards her bosom and seemingly enter it. Bathsheba closed her eyes in the full persuasion that she was killed at last. However, feeling just as usual, she opened them again.

"There it is, look," said the sergeant, holding his sword before her eyes. The caterpillar was spitted upon its point.

"Why it is magic!" said Bathsheba, amazed.

"O no – dexterity. I merely gave point to your bosom where the caterpillar was, and instead of running you through checked the extension a thousandth of an inch short of your surface."

"But how could you chop off a curl of my hair with a sword that has no edge?"

"No edge! This sword will shave like a razor. Look here." He touched the palm of his hand with the blade, and then, lifting it, showed her a thin shaving of scarf-skin dangling therefrom.

"But you said before beginning that it was blunt and couldn't cut me!"

"That was to get you to stand still, and so make sure of your safety. The risk of injuring you through your moving was too great not to force me to tell you a fib to escape it."

She shuddered. "I have been within an inch of my life, and didn't know it!"

"More precisely speaking you have been within half an inch of being pared alive two hundred and ninety-five times."

"Cruel, cruel, 'tis of you!"

"You have been perfectly safe nevertheless. My sword never errs." And Troy returned the weapon to the scabbard. Bathsheba overcome by a hundred tumultuous feelings resulting from the scene, abstractedly sat down on a tuft of heather.

"I must leave you now," said Troy, softly. "And I'll venture to take and keep this in remembrance of you."

She saw him stoop to the grass, pick up the winding lock which he had severed from her manifold tresses, twist it round his fingers, unfasten a button in the breast of his coat, and carefully put it inside. She felt powerless to withstand or deny him. He was altogether too much for her, and Bathsheba seemed as one who, facing a reviving wind, finds it blow so strongly that it stops the breath.

He drew near and said, "I must be leaving you." He drew nearer still. A minute later and she saw his scarlet form disappear amid the ferny thicket, almost in a flash, like a brand swiftly waved.

That minute's interval had brought the blood beating into her face, set her stinging as if aflame to the very hollows of her feet, and enlarged emotion to a compass which quite swamped thought. It had brought upon her a stroke resulting, as did that of Moses in Horeb, in a liquid stream—here a stream of tears. She felt like one who has sinned a great sin.

The circumstance had been the gentle dip of Troy's mouth downwards upon her own. He had kissed her.

Introduction to Literature of Love

Extract from *The Rotters' Club*

The Rotters' Club by Jonathan Coe was published in 2001. It tells the story of a group of teenage friends and their coming of age in the 1970s, which includes coping with their parents' failing marriages. In this extract, Doug's father Bill and his lover Miriam are planning to spend an illicit night together.

Extract

That evening, he met Miriam at The Black Horse in Northfield, and they drove out to Stourbridge in his brown Marina. They checked into The Talbot Hotel as Mr and Mrs Stokes (a little tribute Bill had decided to pay to the current chairman of British Leyland). Irene was under the impression that he was in Northampton, staying overnight for a TGWU dinner. And indeed, that's where he should have been. But he had phoned the regional office that afternoon, and called off sick. It had all been arranged more than a month ago. It was to be their first whole night together.

They sat in the hotel's cavernous lounge bar, Bill drinking pints of Brew, Miriam drinking Dubonnet and bitter lemon. He rested his hand on her knee beneath the table. It was proving surprisingly hard to sustain a conversation.

'Wouldn't it be lovely,' Miriam said, 'if we could spend every evening together like this?'

Bill wasn't sure that it would be lovely at all. It was beginning to dawn on him that he and Miriam didn't know each other very well. Yes, they knew each other's bodies – knew every inch of each other's bodies, knew them inside out – but they had never done much talking; had never had the time. The affair had been going on for eleven months but tonight, quite unexpectedly, Bill felt that he was sitting with a stranger. He thought about Irene and found himself aching for her company: not for anything in particular she might say or do; just for her wordless, kindly presence. He thought about his son, about how he would feel if he could see his father in this ridiculous situation. And then he watched Miriam as she went to the bar for more drinks, and his body was galvanized, yet again, with the knowledge that he had somehow won the affection of this beautiful woman – this beautiful young woman, more to the point – and that tonight she

was going to give herself to him, willingly. To him: not to any of the young designers she worked for, or the fitters who were always trying to chat her up in the social club, but to him, Bill Anderton, pushing forty, losing his hair. Other girls had fallen for him in the past, often enough, so clearly there was something about him, something they must have liked: but the thrill never quite went away, the thrill of knowing that he could still inspire those feelings, even with Miriam, even after eleven whole months...

If only she would stop looking at him that way.

'Cheers,' he said, raising his glass.

'To us,' she said, raising hers.

They smiled at each other, and drank, and then just a few seconds later she put her glass down and let out a convulsive sob and said: 'I can't go on like this, Bill, I just can't.'

Soon afterwards she composed herself and they went in to dinner.

The dining room was vast, and empty. A waitress led them through the gloom to a far corner, lighting their way with a candle which she carried before her as if it were a torch, and which was then set down to flicker bravely on their table, partly no doubt as a romantic gesture but also, perhaps, in a futile attempt to ward off the swathes of funereal darkness that surrounded them. Buried somewhere in the walls was a speaker system through which John Denver's 'Annie's Song' dribbled out like primeval musical ooze. The base of the candlestick was encrusted with lumps of molten wax which Bill initially mistook for ice, so Arctic was the room temperature. They took it in turns to warm their hands at the flame of the candle, thereby finding a third use for it. Neither spoke much as they perused their menus, which were printed on enormous sheets of card, some two feet by eighteen inches, but seemed to offer only three choices, one of which was off.

Bill went for the mixed grill. Miriam chose the chicken-in-a-basket.

'Do you want chips with that?' the waitress asked.

'What's the alternative?' asked Miriam.

'Just chips,' said the waitress.

'Chips is fine,' said Miriam, fighting back tears.

'I'm sorry about that,' said the waitress, concerned. 'Do you not like chips?'

'It's all right,' said Miriam, reaching for a tissue, 'Really.'

'She loves chips,' said Bill. 'Adores them, in fact. We both do. This is a purely personal matter. Please go away.' Just as she was about to disappear into the encroaching shadows, he added: 'And bring us a bottle of Blue Nun while you're at it.'

He took his own handkerchief and dabbed tenderly beneath Miriam's eyes. She pushed him away.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I'm sorry. I'm being stupid.'

'Don't worry. It's this place. I know how you feel. It's so depressing.'

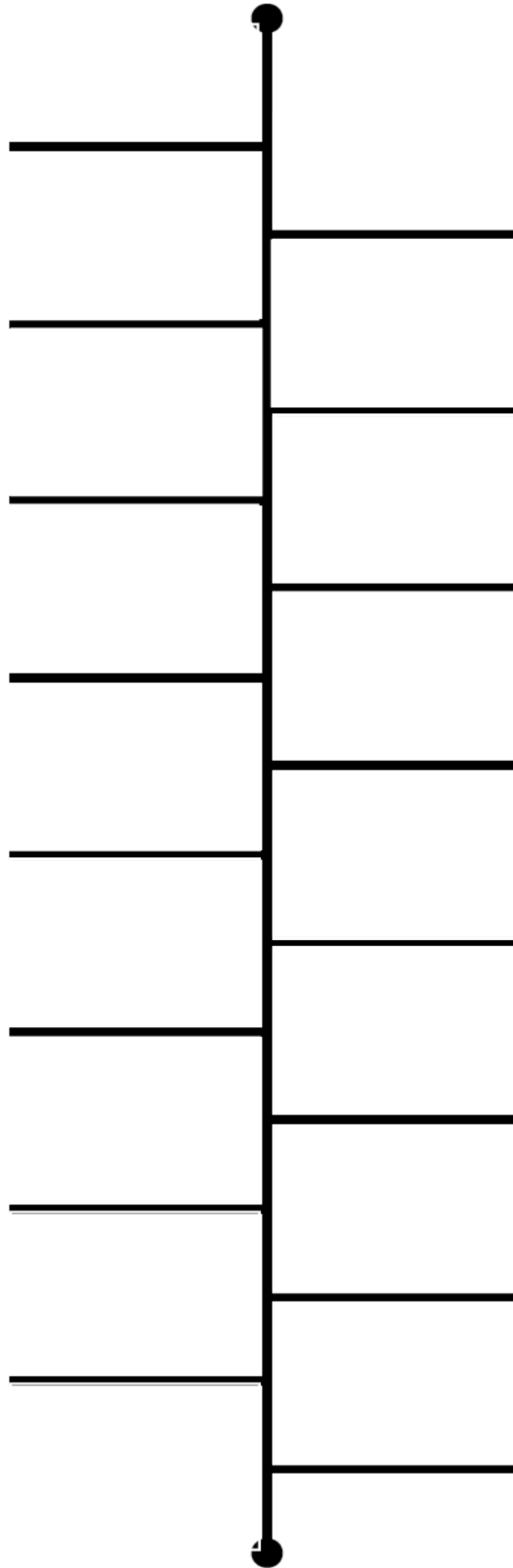
'It's not that,' said Miriam, sniffing. 'It's Irene. I want you to leave her. I want you to leave her and move in with me.'

'Oh, Jesus Christ,' said Bill. 'I don't believe this is happening.'

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Literary Eras and Canon



Introduction to Love Poetry



Wendy
Cope

(b. 1945)

After the Lunch

On Waterloo Bridge, where we said our goodbyes,
The weather conditions bring tears to my eyes.
I wipe them away with a black woolly glove
And try not to notice I've fallen in love.

- 5 On Waterloo Bridge I am trying to think:
This is nothing. You're high on the charm and the drink.
But the juke-box inside me is playing a song
That says something different. And when was it wrong?

- On Waterloo Bridge with the wind in my hair
10 I am tempted to skip. *You're a fool.* I don't care.
The head does its best but the heart is the boss –
I admit it before I am halfway across.

Introduction to Love Poetry



Philip
Larkin
(1922 – 1985)

Wild Oats

About twenty years ago
Two girls came in where I worked –
A bosomy English rose
And her friend in specs I could talk to.
5 Faces in those days sparked
The whole shooting-match off, and I doubt
If ever one had like hers:
But it was the friend I took out,

And in seven years after that
10 Wrote over four hundred letters,
Gave a ten-guinea ring
I got back in the end, and met
At numerous cathedral cities
Unknown to the clergy. I believe
15 I met beautiful twice. She was trying
Both times (so I thought) not to laugh.

Parting, after about five
Rehearsals, was an agreement
That I was too selfish, withdrawn,
20 And easily bored to love.
Well, useful to get that learnt.
In my wallet are still two snaps
Of bosomy rose with fur gloves on.
Unlucky charms, perhaps.

Introduction to Love Poetry



Edna
St. Vincent Millay
(1892 – 1950)

I, being born a woman and distressed

I, being born a woman and distressed
 By all the needs and notions of my kind,
 Am urged by your propinquity to find
 Your person fair, and feel a certain zest
 5 To bear your body's weight upon my breast:
 So subtly is the fume of life designed,
 To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,
 And leave me once again undone, possessed.
 Think not for this, however, the poor treason
 10 Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,
 I shall remember you with love, or season
 My scorn with pity, — let me make it plain:
 I find this frenzy insufficient reason
 For conversation when we meet again.

Introduction to Love Poetry



Anne
Sexton
(1928 – 1974)

For My Lover, Returning to His Wife

- She is all there.
She was melted carefully down for you
and cast up from your childhood,
cast up from your one hundred favorite aggies.
- 5 She has always been there, my darling.
She is, in fact, exquisite.
Fireworks in the dull middle of February
and as real as a cast-iron pot.
- Let's face it, I have been momentary.
10 A luxury. A bright red sloop in the harbor.
My hair rising like smoke from the car window.
Littleneck clams out of season.
- She is more than that. She is your have to have,
has grown you your practical your tropical growth.
- 15 This is not an experiment. She is all harmony.
She sees to oars and oarlocks for the dinghy,
has placed wild flowers at the window at breakfast,
sat by the potter's wheel at midday,
set forth three children under the moon,
20 three cherubs drawn by Michelangelo,
done this with her legs spread out
in the terrible months in the chapel.
If you glance up, the children are there
like delicate balloons resting on the ceiling.
- 25 She has also carried each one down the hall
after supper, their heads privately bent,
two legs protesting, person to person,
her face flushed with a song and their little sleep.
- I give you back your heart.
30 I give you permission —
for the fuse inside her, throbbing
angrily in the dirt, for the bitch in her
and the burying of her wound —
for the burying of her small red wound alive —
- 35 for the pale flickering flare under her ribs,
for the drunken sailor who waits in her left pulse,
for the mother's knee, for the stockings,
for the garter belt, for the call —
the curious call
40 when you will burrow in arms and breasts
and tug at the orange ribbon in her hair
and answer the call, the curious call.
- She is so naked and singular.
She is the sum of yourself and your dream.
- 45 Climb her like a monument, step after step.
She is solid.
- As for me, I am a watercolor.
I wash off.

Dickens: A Realist?

Dickens and Realism John Mullan

His descriptions of London streets are almost tangible, yet his plots rely on ludicrous and fortuitous coincidences. He confronts his readers with the harsh realities of 19th-century life, yet his characters are more cartoon caricature than psychologically complex. So, asks John Mullan, is Dickens a realist?

Is Dickens a realist writer? In our common references to his fiction, we hardly seem to know. 'Dickensian' is sometimes a word for the seamy side of Victorian life. Here we think of Dickens as a writer who revealed the miserable 'reality' concealed in the slums and workhouses of a great imperial nation. But 'Dickensian' also refers to the novelist's gift for the grotesque, even the monstrous. Writing his stories for publication in weekly or monthly parts, Dickens was driven to make his characters instantly recognisable and utterly memorable. The likes of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* or Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield* are certainly unforgettable, but they are surely distorted shapes of humanity.

Social realism

The 'realist' Dickens is often thought to be the writer who refuses to flinch from the real effects of poverty. In *Oliver Twist*, for instance, Dickens takes his genteel reader to a locality that he claims to know. On the Thames near Rotherhithe

there exists, at the present day, the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London, wholly unknown, even by name, to the great mass of its inhabitants.

This is Jacob's Island.

Crazy wooden galleries common to the backs of half a dozen houses, with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath; windows, broken and patched: with poles thrust out, on which to dry the linen that is never there; rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter; wooden chambers thrusting themselves out above the mud, and threatening to fall into it - as some have done; dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations; every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot and garbage

It was a real place, really visited by the author. But Dickens's prose makes it also a place from a nightmare, where even the force of his hyperbole can hardly do justice to his indignation.

Think of the opening of *Bleak House*, where we get a November afternoon in London.

As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet or so long, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes - gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.

'One might imagine': it is a scene that confesses to be fanciful, yet this vision of a city returned by its own gloom and filth to some primal epoch, a city that has managed to extinguish solar warmth and light, is irresistible. To do justice to reality, description has to be fantastic.

Fascinating villains

So too with some of Dickens's grotesque characterisations. He is sometimes criticised for his villains, 'baddies' pure and simple, their very features twisted. Yet these monsters are as 'real' as our childish nightmares. Readers of *The Old Curiosity Shop* fret at the sentimental depiction of the virtuous Little Nell, but few deny the vividness of the novel's dwarfish, repulsively fascinating villain, Quilp. He looks like a living Mr. Punch and has the energy of pure ill-will. He drinks extraordinary concoctions of boiling alcohol and ferociously chain-smokes cigars. His accessory Sampson Brass supposes that he spends his leisure hours 'making himself more fiery and furious [...] heating his malice and mischievousness till they boil'. Quilp's malignity burns with incandescent vigour. He keeps turning up with some new trick, even if it is only to hang upside down from the top of a coach and make horrible faces at the travellers inside. 'Such an amazing power of taking people by surprise!' He is not, we might say, a 'real' person but he is an aspect of humanity.

Expressive names

Dickens's distortion of human features in order to get at essential human characteristics is represented by the improbable but wonderfully expressive names that he invents. For Dickens, to get the name was to get the character. In his notes for *David Copperfield*, you can see him trying out different possibilities. David's intimidating step-father goes from Mr. Harden to Murdle to Murden before he becomes, unforgettably, Mr. Murdstone: hard and murderous. Just right, perfectly evoking a child's fears. Dickens's names are sometimes close to telling you what a character is (the frozen Sir Leicester Dedlock in *Bleak House*, the utilitarian Gradgrind in *Hard Times*) and sometimes more poetically expressive (the lovably foolish Traddles in *David Copperfield*, the vampire lawyer Vholes in *Bleak House*). No wonder that some of Dickens's names have become words for types of character. An article in the *Guardian* complains that New Labour enthusiasts 'have a Gradgrindian commitment to facts and data'. A columnist in the *Daily Mail* describes the Chief Executive of the Football Association as an 'Artful Dodger'. And ever since his first appearance in *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, Scrooge has been a synonym for a life-denying miser.

Unrealistic genres

A Christmas Carol is, of course, a ghost story, composed for that time of year when the family might amuse itself with an amiably chilling story, written to be read aloud. It is characteristic of Dickens that he should breathe new life into this unliterary genre - the supernatural tale. The journals that Dickens edited, *Household Words* and *All The Year Round*, made ghost stories their speciality, especially at Christmas. Dickens wrote other examples, like 'The Haunted Man' and 'The Chimes'. Here he looks like an anti-realist. He not only adopts an unrealistic form, but in *A Christmas Carol* does so in order to make a moral fable. This most famous of his tales for Christmas is apparently doubly anti-realist. It employs the supernatural, and it shows a man being transformed overnight from vice to virtue. If we use the word 'realistic' to mean 'likely', then this is entirely unrealistic.

Yet the brilliance of the story is to contain within its fable-like form fragments of vivid social realism. Scrooge is forced to see the world as it really is and has been, from the scenes from his own childhood to the domestic interiors of his employees and relations. The tipsy party games played by Scrooge's nephew and niece and their friends are like Victorian family video clips, even if they are shown us by a spirit. Dickens redeemed other popular, supposedly 'unrealistic' genres. By the 1830s, middle-class readers were lapping up the so-called 'Newgate Novels' of Harrison Ainsworth and Bulwer Lytton. These narrated the exploits of notorious criminals. Moralists complained that they romanticised crime. *Oliver Twist* can be seen as Dickens's response to this literary fashion, a response that insisted on the unwholesome quality of what it showed. Dickens added a preface to the novel insisting that 'the very dregs of life' may 'serve the purpose of a moral'. Dickens's moral design always requires a certain quite conscious avoidance of what a sociologist of today might think likely. Oliver, the parish boy, is strangely untainted by his life amongst desperate paupers and calculating criminals. His very habits of speech make him sound like the good middle-class boy that he is destined to become.

Improbable plots

Dickens's sense of design leads him to use, indeed to highlight, some improbable plot turns. The path untainted through corruption of *Oliver Twist* is revealed to be an elaborate scheme by his half-brother, Monks, to rob him of his birthright. There is a lost will, in which the man who was father to both Oliver and Monks left the bulk of his property to Oliver. The truth is proved by a ring and a locket that Oliver's mother possessed when she died in the workhouse. It is like the providential discoveries at the end of a romance. The parish boy gets his inheritance and the villain gets his just desserts. (Monks emigrates and eventually dies in prison.) Dickens's fiction provides us with poetic justice. Near the end of *David Copperfield*, David and his friend Traddles are being given a conducted tour of a prison by Mr Creakle, the rascally schoolmaster who has become a magistrate. Creakle, 'in a state of the greatest admiration', presents the institution's two model prisoners, Twenty Seven and Twenty Eight, who inhabit adjacent cells. They are Uriah Heep and Steerforth's malignly creepy butler, Littimer. These two villains have ended up next to each other. David feels 'resigned wonder'. 'Of course!' is the reader's response. Both characters specialised in the sinister pretence of servility, so being famous 'penitents' together was a natural (even if not probable) fate.

Underlying reality

This is fiction that reveals the hidden shape of things. It uses every flamboyant staging device, every possibility of caricature, to do so. Dickens's contemporary George Eliot thought that realism should be like a Dutch painting of a domestic interior: sober, modest, attentive to the ordinary things in life. By her standards, Dickens is no realist. But we would not be so captured by his grotesquerie and exaggeration and gift for the fantastic if these did not so often and so truthfully show a reality underneath the ordinary surface of life.

Comedy in Tragedy

Excellent Foppery - Comedy in Shakespeare's tragedies

Daniel Stanley investigates the subtle and powerful role humour plays both structurally and dramatically in Shakespeare's tragedies. He looks in particular at Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, King Lear and Othello.

Gravediggers' humour

A musician had given orders that when he died, his flute was to be buried with him. The undertaker asked the widow, 'What do you think, madam?' 'Well,' she replied, 'I thought it a blessing he didn't play the piano.'

This kind of humour, illustrative of the close relationship between comedy and tragedy, would have been appreciated by Shakespeare. The notion of a poignant moment tinged with relief but then diminished by practical, earthly considerations seems inappropriate but inescapably amusing. Indeed, Hamlet's graveyard clowns seem to understand that despair and laughter are twin responses to tragedy. Charged with the job of burying the poor drowned Ophelia, their scene quickly turns into black comedy as one clown asks another a riddle:

Who builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright or a carpenter?

The solution, like something from a Christmas cracker, soon follows:

a gravemaker - the houses he makes last till Doomsday.

All their discussions and mock-philosophical banter about drowning seem to provide a little light relief, albeit still concerned with the subject of death.

And yet, like other humorous moments in Shakespeare's tragedies, their placement within the play is loaded with structural and dramatic significance. Here, in the final act, Hamlet's beleaguered sweetheart has just drowned herself and it will only be a few lines before Hamlet himself lifts up the skull of the King's former jester and delivers his famous 'Alas, poor Yorick' speech.

'The readiness is all'

Structurally, a scene of dark comedy can also be seen to prepare the tragic hero, and audience, for the acceptance of truth. Hamlet passes through the graveyard scene and reaches greater insight about the idea of mortality when he later says:

The readiness is all. Since no man knows of aught he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?

In this sense, the graveyard scene anticipates events that will lead to Hamlet's end. Hamlet states that man is no more likely than a sparrow to comprehend what comes after death. And the audience, too, senses that the duel with Laertes that follows will bring bleak finality.

Verbal duelling

In *Romeo and Juliet* it is a duel, too, that brings about a change in mood and a realisation on the part of the hero of his own weaknesses. Romeo's fatal brawl with Tybalt is foreshadowed by comedic verbal duelling with his friend Mercutio in Act 2, Scene 4. Complaining that Romeo abandoned his friends at the Capulet ball, Mercutio says:

You gave us the counterfeit last night

and when Romeo fails to comprehend he is told:

The slip, sir, the slip. Can you not conceive?

This begins an exchange filled by Shakespeare with riddles, puns and wordplay. The idea of a counterfeit coin suggests the double meanings of language that will be explored in order to demonstrate their relationship to truth. Mercutio is complaining about Romeo's lack of honesty towards his friends, but also towards himself. Here, a swift exchange of short lines and word duelling begins:

MERCUTIO: ...such a case as yours constrains a man to bow in the hams.

ROMEO

Meaning, to curtsy.

MERCUTIO

Thou hast most kindly hit it.

ROMEO

A most courteous exposition.

MERCUTIO:

Nay, I am the very pink of courtesy.

ROMEO

Pink for flower.

MERCUTIO

Right.

ROMEO

Why, then is my pump well flowered.

MERCUTIO

Sure wit, follow me this jest now till thou hast worn out thy pump, that, when the single sole of it is worn, the jest may remain, after the wearing, sole singular.

ROMEO

O single-soled jest, solely singular for the singleness.

MERCUTIO

Come between us, good Benvolio! My wits faint.

Romeo and Juliet, Act 2, Scene 4, 51-69

Romeo is accused of being 'singularly' one-track minded but Mercutio's jest is that behind the slip of words, 'courtesy' to 'curtsy', 'pink of flower' to 'flowery pumps' (shoes), 'sole' to 'soul', is a singular truth. Once worn out, Romeo will be left with nothing to stand on and the joke will be on him. For his part, Romeo evades this, simply seeing the jest as 'single-soled', like the thin sole of a shoe. 'The slip', then, refers to the slippery nature of the meanings behind language that reflect Romeo's own evasiveness. The verbal duel continues, with Romeo seeming to have the upper hand. But with the friendship reaffirmed by witty banter, Mercutio has the last word, saying:

Now art thou Romeo. Now art thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature.

Here, however, the double side of 'art' as in 'are' and as in 'artifice', the opposite of natural, continues to make the question of what Romeo really 'is' a slippery one to pin down. Romeo himself comes closest to answering it in Act 3, Scene 1 when, having been involved with Mercutio's death and losing himself to an impulsive revenge upon Tybalt, he moans, 'I am fortune's fool!'

Clowns, fools and jesters

So far we have seen how comedy prepares the way for truths to be revealed to both audience and hero. Clowns and jesters, then, play an important dramatic and structural role within Shakespeare's tragedies. Indeed, the audience feels the sudden change in mood brought by Mercutio's final lines. He jokes as he lies dying, 'ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man'. And yet, what stands out is not his wit, but the fear invoked by his repeated curse: 'A plague a'both your houses'. His last words, 'Your houses' toll the death knell of comedy and romance and mark the onset of tragedy. Taken off stage, his words remain, haunting the lovers and their families to the very end.

Licensed fools

Another joker whose disappearance marks a shift towards tragedy is King Lear's Fool. Shakespeare's comedies, such as *Twelfth Night*, contain instances of clowns and fools who play an important role in the confusion and errors of identity that make up the core humour of the drama. Sometimes simple minded, the conventional fool is the object of much mirth but he often also states truths and has the licence to say things that others can't. Fools in Shakespeare often use wit and clever wordplay for satirical ends, drawing attention to the flaws in their rulers or society, or the darker side of their world. This kind of satirical wit can act as a comic mirroring of the events of the plays. In Lear's tragedy,

however, we meet a fool whose ability to speak wisdom and truths is demonstrated in a play where questions about nature and reality versus illusion or artifice reign. In a dramatic sphere where truth is contested, rendered murky by disguise, intrigue and insincerity, it is the hero's metaphorical blindness that arguably leads to his downfall. The Fool's privileged position and the lowliness of his social origins give him license to speak with honesty and truth. In *King Lear*, however, part of the tragedy lies in the fact that Lear consults his Fool too late; by Act 1, Scene 4 the seeds of tragedy have already been sown. The timing of the arrival of the Fool seems inopportune and his advice to Lear flippant in the light of the king already having given his kingdom away to his two scheming daughters, Goneril and Regan. Furthermore, he has disowned his most loving and faithful daughter Cordelia and banished the loyal Earl of Kent. And yet, Lear's relationship with his Fool is warm and full of trust. Unlike in the case of Kent, Lear listens to the Fool's criticisms, which Shakespeare fills with more riddles and wordplay. But behind the Fool's words lies the truth, and part of his function is to open Lear's eyes to it:

FOOL: ... Nuncle, give me an egg and I'll give thee two crowns. KING LEAR : What two crowns shall they be?

FOOL: Why, after I have cut the egg i' the middle, and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou lovest thy crown i' the middle, and gav'st away both parts, thou bor'st thy ass on thy back o'er the dirt thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away... [Sings.]

*Fools had ne'er less grace in a year,
For wise men are grown foppish,
They know not how their wits to wear,
Their manners are so apish.*

To begin with, the Fool puns on crowns as in money as well as the halves of Lear's kingdom he has given up. He takes this further with the metaphor of the egg, out of which he creates two crowns and an image of a golden yoke representing his daughter, whose true value and love Lear had failed to recognise. In a third meaning of 'crown', Lear's head is held up for examination, dramatically significant given the madness that will shortly take hold of him. Lear is further ridiculed by the image of him carrying his own donkey, an inversion of natural order that the Fool compounds with the statement that wise men have become fools, so that the jester's own job seems seriously redundant.

Lear's folly

The essence of the Fool's joke is that Lear must have emptied his head of wits and good sense, strongly suggesting that the real fool here is Lear himself. His 'apish' decisions suddenly seem absurd to the audience, who are put in the position of deciding whether, as a tragic hero, he deserves our sympathy at all. This may be why Shakespeare has Lear continue to be blind to the truth and our pity for him is suspended until he undergoes great suffering and madness. Nonetheless, the Fool scenes are worthy of further study not only in the way their humour defuses the tension of the play, but in the part the character plays in helping Lear realise his mistakes. By that time, however, it is too late; the Fool is gone and Lear can only lament while holding the body of Cordelia in his arms: 'and my poor fool is hanged.'

Iago: a malevolent wit

The Fool's perceptive jests are enjoyable but his removal from action, like that of Mercutio's, signifies a dramatic step towards tragedy. The skull representing a king's dead jester, Yorick, also represents the death of laughter. As Hamlet himself asks:

Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar?

In Othello, laughter also quickly dies. Iago is another trusted companion of the leader, who in a comedy might use his cleverness to quip and joke satirically about his world but in Iago that humour has gone sour and his clever wordplay performs an entirely different function. Iago has the Fool's position of trusted servant and confidant; however, his sharp wit is used for deceit and discord rather than the service of truth. 'I am not what I am', we are warned by 'Honest' Iago in the first scene of Othello. His openness is disarming, as are his light-hearted riddles and drinking songs, so that when Othello requires guidance, Iago's words are valued. In fact, Othello requires Iago to be true to himself when seeking to validate his insecurities about his wife, Desdemona: 'Give thy worst of thoughts the worst of words' he requests. Skilfully holding back, Iago eventually counsels Othello, 'it is in my nature's plague to spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy shapes faults that are not'. Iago's genius cunning is in using his honesty veiled by modesty to manipulate his master so that he may be trained to see for himself the proofs of infidelity between Desdemona and Cassio he looks for:

*if you please to hold him off a while
You shall by that perceive him [...] Note if your lady strain his entertainment
... much will be seen in that.*

Having set him up, all Iago needs to do is to plant the proof, Desdemona's handkerchief, in Cassio's chamber and the trap is set. 'Thus credulous fools are caught' boasts Iago, with Othello having suffered a total breakdown:

and many worthy and chaste dames even thus/all guiltless, meet reproach.

A complex conclusion

There is little mirth to be found in Othello. In the other tragedies what comedy there is serves briefly, but only briefly, to make us laugh. It is a dark kind of comedy which uses language to point up harsh realities about characters, the world or the truth of human experience. In the end it reinforces the impact of the tragedy, and the pity we feel, as the protagonists tumble into insanity, indignity or death.

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This article first published in emagazine 48 (April 2010)

Comedy in Tragedy

Act 2, Scene 3

Enter a PORTER. Knocking within

PORTER

Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the key.

Knock within

Knock, knock, knock! Who's there, i' th' name of Beelzebub? Here's a farmer that hanged himself on the expectation of plenty. Come in time, have napkins enough about you, here you'll sweat for 't.

Knock within

Knock, knock! Who's there, in th' other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. O, come in, equivocator.

Knock within

- 5 Knock, knock, knock! Who's there? Faith, here's an English tailor come hither for stealing out of a French hose. Come in, tailor. Here you may roast your goose.

Knock within

A sound of knocking from offstage. A PORTER, who is obviously drunk, enters.

PORTER

This is a lot of knocking! Come to think of it, if a man were in charge of opening the gates of hell to let people in, he would have to turn the key a lot.

A sound of knocking from offstage.

Knock, knock, knock! (*pretending he's the gatekeeper in hell*) Who's there, in the devil's name? Maybe it's a farmer who killed himself because grain was cheap. (*talking to the imaginary farmer*) You're here just in time! I hope you brought some handkerchiefs; you're going to sweat a lot here.

A sound of knocking from offstage.

Knock, knock! Who's there, in the other devil's name? Maybe it's some slick, two-faced con man who lied under oath. But he found out that you can't lie to God, and now he's going to hell for perjury. Come on in, con man.

A sound of knocking from offstage.

Knock, knock, knock! Who's there? Maybe it's an English tailor who liked to skimp on the fabric for people's clothes. But now that tight pants are in fashion he can't get away with it. Come on in, tailor. You can heat your iron up in here.

A sound of knocking from offstage.

Comedy in Tragedy

Knock, knock! Never at quiet. What are you? But this place is too cold for hell. I'll devil-porter it no further. I had thought to have let in some of all professions that go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire.

Knock within

Anon, anon! I pray you, remember the porter.

Opens the gate

Enter MACDUFF and LENNOX

MACDUFF

Was it so late, friend, ere you went to bed,
That you do lie so late?

PORTER

10 'Faith sir, we were carousing till the second cock. And drink, sir, is a great provoker of three things.

MACDUFF

What three things does drink especially provoke?

PORTER

Marry, sir, nose-painting, sleep, and urine. Lechery, sir, it provokes and unprovokes. It provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance. Therefore, much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery. It makes him, and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuades him, and disheartens him; makes him stand to and not stand to; in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and, giving him the lie, leaves him.

MACDUFF

I believe drink gave thee the lie last night.

PORTER

That it did, sir, i' th' very throat on me; but I requited him for his lie, and, I think, being too strong for him, though he took up my legs sometime, yet I made a shift to cast him.

MACDUFF

15 Is thy master stirring?

Knock, knock! Never a moment of peace! Who are you? Ah, this place is too cold to be hell. I won't pretend to be the devil's porter anymore. I was going to let someone from every profession into hell.

A sound of knocking from offstage.

I'm coming, I'm coming! Please, don't forget to leave me a tip.

The PORTER opens the gate.

MACDUFF and LENNOX enter.

MACDUFF

Did you go to bed so late, my friend, that you're having a hard time getting up now?

PORTER

That's right sir, we were drinking until 3 A.M., and drink, sir, makes a man do three things.

MACDUFF

What three things does drink make a man do?

PORTER

Drinking turns your nose red, it puts you to sleep, and it makes you urinate. Lust it turns on but also turns off. What I mean is, drinking stimulates desire but hinders performance. Therefore, too much drink is like a con artist when it comes to your sex drive. It sets you up for a fall. It gets you up but it keeps you from getting off. It persuades you and discourages you. It gives you an erection but doesn't let you keep it, if you see what I'm saying. It makes you dream about erotic experiences, but then it leaves you asleep and needing to pee.

MACDUFF

I believe drink did all of this to you last night.

PORTER

It did, sir. It got me right in the throat. But I got even with drink. I was too strong for it. Although it weakened my legs and made me unsteady, I managed to vomit it out and laid it flat on the ground.

MACDUFF

Is your master awake?

Tragic Heroes and Othello

Tragic hero as defined by Aristotle

A tragic hero is a literary character who makes a judgment error that inevitably leads to his/her own destruction. In reading Antigone, Medea and Hamlet, look at the role of justice and/or revenge and its influence on each character's choices when analyzing any "judgment error."

Characteristics

Aristotle once said that "A man doesn't become a hero until he can see the root of his own downfall." An Aristotelian tragic hero must possess specific characteristics, five of which are below:

- 1) Flaw or error of judgment (hamartia) Note the role of justice and/or revenge in the judgments.
- 2) A reversal of fortune (peripeteia) brought about because of the hero's error in judgment.
- 3) The discovery or recognition that the reversal was brought about by the hero's own actions (anagnorisis)
- 4) Excessive Pride (hubris)
- 5) The character's fate must be greater than deserved.

Initially, the tragic hero should be neither better or worse morally than normal people, in order to allow the audience to identify with them. This also introduces pity, which is crucial in tragedy, as if the hero was perfect we would be outraged with their fate or not care especially because of their ideological superiority. If the hero was imperfect or evil, then the audience would feel that he had gotten what he deserved. It is important to strike a balance in the hero's character.

Eventually the Aristotelian tragic hero dies a tragic death, having fallen from great heights and having made an irreversible mistake. The hero must courageously accept their death with honour.

Other common traits

Some other common traits characteristic of a tragic hero:

- Hero must suffer more than he deserves.
- Hero must be doomed from the start, but bears no responsibility for possessing his flaw.
- Hero must be noble in nature, but imperfect so that the audience can see themselves in him.
- Hero must have discovered his fate by his own actions, not by things happening to him.
- Hero must understand his doom, as well as the fact that his fate was discovered by his own actions.
- Hero's story should arouse fear and empathy.
- Hero must be physically or spiritually wounded by his experiences, often resulting in his death.
- The hero must be intelligent so he may learn from his mistakes.
- The hero must have a weakness, usually it is pride.
- He has to be faced with a very serious decision that he has to make.

Problematic Othello?

Playing Othello

Article written by: Hugh Quarshie

Published: 15 Mar 2016

Hugh Quarshie describes his reservations about Othello, and how he used these to shape the production in which he played the title role.



Life would have been so much simpler if I had stuck to a faith. I might have been spared the stress of trying to figure out things for myself; and when bad things happened, I might have found consolation in traditional practices, however spurious. Secretly, I envy people with faith, even if I lack confidence in their ability to expound truth, explain meaning and make moral judgements. Ever present at the back of my mind is the caption to a cartoon depicting the all-knowing, all-loving Almighty: 'He could have banned slavery or shellfish. Shellfish. He chose shellfish.'

Universal genius?

Some secular people have embraced the quasi-religion of Bardolatry, declaring Shakespeare as the god of their idolatry. According to the followers of this religion, Shakespeare was 'a man not for an age but for all time' (Jonson); and 'he reads us better than we read him' (Bloom). It is claimed that he is a 'universal genius' whose appeal extends to all men at all times in all places, and that he possessed an unrivalled if not complete understanding of human nature. Such a man, Bardolators say, can be trusted and deserves to be worshipped.

Not being a Bardolator, despite having appeared in several productions of his plays, I am not convinced that Shakespeare is an unequivocally reliable guide in the exploration of human nature; and I fear that we may see the world and ourselves through the distorting prism of his plays. And so I took some persuading before agreeing to take on the role of Othello. This was in large part because of my reservations about the character and about the play. I had seen many fine actors take on the role but never quite been convinced of his transformation from a man of reason, sound judgement and nobility of mind into an emotionally incontinent, insecure, homicidal obsessive in the space of a single scene, Act 3 Scene 3. And doubts about the character's coherence led to the suspicion that Shakespeare was really just elaborating on the Elizabethan stage convention which held that 'Moors' posed a menace to 'mores', social, sexual, moral and aesthetic. Did Shakespeare effectively save himself the trouble of a plausible psychological profile for Othello by reverting to the convention as voiced by Iago: 'These Moors are changeable in their wills' (1.3.346–47)?

A Bardolator will believe that Shakespeare's unrivalled understanding of human nature obliges us in all humility to accept that Othello is not simply a stage convention but a serious study of sexual jealousy. 'Shakespeare's greatest insight into male sexual jealousy is that it is a mask for the fear of being castrated by death', according to Bloom.^[1] (I have to admit that I am not sure what this means and suspect it might be 'psycho-babble': death by castration I can understand, but to be castrated *by* death sounds as comically absurd as it would to be scarred, amputated or unhinged by death.) Nevertheless, working backwards from his murderous actions, the faithful Bardolator will 'retro-fit' a psychological condition to him, suggesting that however proficient and professional he might be on the battlefield, in the arts of love he is a rank amateur; and that for all the pride he takes in his 'royal siege', he was always insecure and is actually the kind of self-hating black man who would say:

Her name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black
As mine own face. (3.3.386–88)

But, as I say, I am no Bardolator and felt entirely justified in asking whether the character is coherent and whether the play is racist, whether indeed that Shakespeare suggests that Othello behaves as he does *because* he is black. Does the 'willing suspension of disbelief' really mean that I should accept that a play written over 400 years ago by a white Englishman for another white Englishman in blackface make-up is an authoritative and credible profile of a genuine black man?

There may well have been someone who was very much like the Moorish Captain in Cinthio's original story or very much like Shakespeare's Othello; just as there may well have been Native Americans who behaved very much like the 'Red Injuns' of old Westerns, riding around the circled wagons, ululating, scalping white men, raping white women and kidnapping white children. But we now know that there were a good many Native Americans who did nothing of the sort, and indeed that those movies were a distorting prism. In Elizabethan England, there were many black people who were nothing like Othello, or Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*, or Eleazar in *Lust's Dominion*, or Muly Hamet in *The Battle of Alcazar*. But Shakespeare's types and tropes have not been questioned because of the inherited assumption of his 'universal genius'.

It is clear that Shakespeare could have got to know some genuine black people in Elizabethan London, had he wished to do so. If he decided *not* to take the trouble of doing this basic research, was he being lazy? If he *did* have black acquaintances and still went on to write the Othello of the second half of the play, was he being a bigot?

Of course, another reason for my hesitancy was that I knew all too well how easy it is for Iago to steal the play: it may be Othello's tragedy, but it is Iago's play. An actor of skill, given ample material to charm an audience, will charm that audience. The actor who plays Othello is arguably gifting the actor who plays Iago, as James Earl Jones found to his cost in the last of his seven portrayals of the role opposite Christopher Plummer. Why put yourself through all the nightly stress and emotional turmoil just for someone else to take all the plaudits?

Playing the role of Othello

In a lecture I gave 20 years ago, later published as *Second Thoughts About Othello*, I argued that black actors who took on the role ran the risk of reinforcing racist attitudes towards black people. It seemed to me that Shakespeare was much more interested in the character of Iago, who has double the number of soliloquies that Othello has, and is allowed to engage much more directly with an audience. A soliloquy is an opportunity for a character to establish a relationship with the audience, to reveal something of himself or herself. Emilia, Desdemona and Roderigo are allowed the briefest of opportunities, Othello more, but he appears at times to be talking not to an audience but to himself.

The odds were clearly stacked against me. But Greg Doran, the Artistic Director of the RSC, can be quite persuasive. Over lunch toward the end of 2013, he suggested that I had reached the right age to play Othello and that if I did not do so soon, I probably never would! He went on to say that should I decide not to play it, then perhaps I should think about directing it. On leaving lunch, I thought of little else. But after a couple of days' mulling, it seemed clear to me that the best way of defeating this monstrous hybrid would be if I performed the title role myself. This, I think, is called hubris; but I felt I had to have a go, even if it meant tilting at the windmills of traditional interpretation.

The relationship between Othello and Desdemona has to be credible, poignant and palpably sensuous for there to be any sense of tragic loss; and I felt strongly that a woman director would best help an actress create a convincing, three-dimensional character, in as far as that is possible with a role originally written for a young man. We were fortunate to find just such a woman in Natalie Abrahami but, unfortunately, a scheduling clash forced her to withdraw. In the event, the eventual director Iqbal Khan and I shared a similar agenda and got on well enough to persuade me to get into the ring with Othello.

‘Judged by the brain, it (*Othello* the play) is ridiculous. Judged by the ear, it is sublime’. I agree with George Bernard Shaw that the plot is open to ridicule – uxoriously jealous rage triggered by a dream and a handkerchief; and I agree that some of the verse is sublime. But I have wondered whether it is the so-called ‘*Othello* music’ which has led audiences and indeed critics to overlook the more unsatisfactory story elements or even make a virtue of them – the ‘double time’ structure, the excessive reliance on coincidence, the tendentiousness of the dialogue which makes it easy for Iago to dupe Othello. Indeed, I have wondered whether it is precisely the intensity of the emotional experience that audiences look for in a ‘black’ character. The voice of a soul singer can cover up the most incoherent and meaningless lyrics. In striving to make our production less ‘ridiculous’, we may well have lost some of the poetic sublimity. But this was perhaps inevitable.

There was no possibility of suggesting that a clever and cunning white man could easily dupe a credulous black man because in our production, both Othello and Iago were black. And our mission was to allow an audience to see what Othello and Desdemona saw in each other despite an obvious age gap; a mission which, though difficult, was not, I think impossible. Other than that, there were three objectives: the first was to make credible Othello’s transformation from magnanimous to murderous. The ‘Temptation scene’, Act 3, Scene 3, is a long scene but there are barely 300 lines between him saying ‘Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee’ (3.3.90–91) and ‘Now do I see ’tis true. Look here Iago, / All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven’. (3.3.90–91) This meant restructuring the scene, transposing and reassigning certain lines. Cuts were made but no lines were rewritten, other than a small but key change to a line previously mentioned: ‘Her name that was as fresh as Dian’s visage is now begrim’d and black as **thine** own face...’

The second objective was to make it much more difficult for Iago to manipulate Othello and the other characters; and having aroused Othello’s jealous rage, to put him in danger of it, thereby raising the stakes and increasing the jeopardy for Iago.

And the third objective was to link Othello’s sense of personal betrayal to a conviction that he has been cleverly and cynically exploited by the ruthless Venetian state, that he has bought into a false set of values. In our production, the personal was political.

It is fair to say that the production was acclaimed, with some people talking of it as landmark, even a ‘game-changer’. We – Iqbal Khan, Lucien Msamati and I – made sense of it by bringing the play closer to our experience. But in so doing, did we take it away from Shakespeare? And does it matter?

<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/playing-othello>

Re-creative Writing

What is Re-creative Writing?

Andrew McCallum explains the possibilities opened up by the re-creative process and encourages you to get your creative juices flowing.

Experimental French writer Raymond Queneau one morning observed a man on a bus accusing another of jostling him. He described the incident in just over 100 words, under the heading 'Notation'. He then re-wrote the same event from different narrative perspectives in 98 different ways, using titles such as 'Blurb', 'Onomatopoeia', 'Rainbow', 'Exclamations' and 'Botanical', gathered together in a book called *Exercises in Style*. Each is an example of re-creative writing. An original work is made afresh; the new version brings additional meaning to its source, which, in turn, throws light on narrative choices made in the re-creation.

Re-creative writing in schools generally asks that you turn a published piece of work into something else (hence it is often called 'transformative' writing). For example, you might re-write a passage from a novel in a different genre, turn it from prose into poetry, set it in a different historical period, or re-imagine it from the perspective of a minor character. Such strategies can be a lot of fun, but they have also gained sufficient credibility to be an assessed part of some A Level Literature specifications. The examiners are effectively stating that you can demonstrate critical reading through re-creative writing.

Wide Sargasso Sea

First published in 1966, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's much older *Jane Eyre*, telling the story of how the first Mrs Rochester came to be locked up in the attic of her husband's mansion. The 'madwoman in the attic' is transformed in Rhys's novel into a lively woman with real hopes, fears and desires. Her descent into madness is then linked to rejection by her husband, which comes in turn from his rejection of her Creole heritage. Rhys forces you to question how Brontë's original can fail to explore the character of the woman in the attic. Does her background make her of little value to the culture of her time? And how does this affect the way we read *Jane Eyre* today?

On Beauty

Zadie Smith's 2005 novel, *On Beauty*, is based loosely on E.M. Forster's 1910 novel *Howards End*. However, Smith's work does not so much critique the original as draw on it for inspiration. It offers a modern take on Forster's exploration of what happens when two families with different values become interlinked. Smith sets her book in the United States rather than England; her characters, like Forster's, are middle-class, but black while his are white. There is nothing unusual about a black family in the States being middle class. However, it is relatively unusual for one to be portrayed in an award-winning novel. The book challenges readers to view the characters in a similar way to Forster's; in other words, according to their behaviour rather than ethnicity. Her critique, then, is of the way we read rather than of *Howards End*.

Re-creative Writing

The Passionate Shepherd to His Love BY CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove,
That Valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

And we will sit upon the Rocks,
Seeing the Shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow Rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing Madrigals.

And I will make thee beds of Roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of Myrtle;

A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty Lambs we pull;
Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold;

A belt of straw and Ivy buds,
With Coral clasps and Amber studs:
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.

The Shepherds' Swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May-morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me, and be my love.

The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd BY SIR WALTER RALEGH

If all the world and love were young,
And truth in every Shepherd's tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move,
To live with thee, and be thy love.

Time drives the flocks from field to fold,
When Rivers rage and Rocks grow cold,
And Philomel becometh dumb,
The rest complains of cares to come.

The flowers do fade, and wanton fields,
To wayward winter reckoning yields,
A honey tongue, a heart of gall,
Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall.

Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of Roses,
Thy cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies
Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten:
In folly ripe, in reason rotten.

Thy belt of straw and Ivy buds,
The Coral clasps and amber studs,
All these in me no means can move
To come to thee and be thy love.

But could youth last, and love still breed,
Had joys no date, nor age no need,
Then these delights my mind might move
To live with thee, and be thy love.

Achieving a Re-creative Frame of Mind

Books expose readers to new worlds. Re-creativity offers the opportunity to transform those worlds. You explore an original text, identify a gap or a point of interest, and create it afresh. In doing so you enter into the original world on terms of your own making. What you re-create acts in a way as a critical comment. But it can also do much more. It has the potential to bring you closer to what you read, turning it into something similar to actual lived experience. Think about the examples from Rhys and Smith. Both take something they have read and transform it to fit in with their own understanding of life. Re-creative writing thus offers a connection to original texts unavailable in essay writing. One way to experience this explicitly is to embed your own persona within a re-creative text. For example, you might write a dialogue in which you talk to a novel's central character about his or her behaviour and ideas. You will find yourself making critical comments that would never occur in a formal essay, no matter how much your teacher encourages a 'personal response'.

Re-creative Writing



Mourning Picture (above), Edwin Romanzo Elmer, 1890

The little-known American artist Edwin Ramanzo Elmer painted this strange and arresting work after the death from appendicitis of his 9-year-old daughter Effie. Here she is portrayed with her pet lamb and kitten, against the clapboard house her father built in Western Massachusetts. The remote and rigid figures of the artist and his wife appear in mourning clothes, though the painting was only given its title decades later, and not by the artist. The narrative voice in Adrienne Rich's poem belongs to the dead Effie, the couple's only child. Hauntingly, she compares the veins of the lilac leaf to her father's "grief-tranced hand".

Mourning Picture, Adrienne Rich (1965)

They have carried the mahogany chair and the cane rocker
out under the lilac bush,
and my father and mother darkly sit there, in black clothes.
Our clapboard house stands fast on its hill,
my doll lies in her wicker pram
gazing at western Massachusetts.
This was our world.
I could remake each shaft of grass
feeling its rasp on my fingers,
draw out the map of every lilac leaf
or the net of veins on my father's
grief-tranced hand.

Out of my head, half-bursting,
still filling, the dream condenses--
shadows, crystals, ceilings, meadows, globes of dew.
Under the dull green of the lilacs, out in the light
carving each spoke of the pram, the turned porch-pillars,
under high early-summer clouds,
I am Effie, visible and invisible,
remembering and remembered.

Re-creative Writing

Winner Creative Category – 16-19

Natalie Perman, Withington Girls' School in response to 'Do You Speak Persian?'

do you remember

my great grandmother spent years
peeling cabbages
boiling broth that steamed the house
white with grief.

when she arrived in america
the streets breathed smoke and
people cut words like steak
which dripped raw blood into
cavernous mouths:
swallowing words like food.

she couldn't speak their language
but she began to copy sounds
of foreign laughter like the clink of wine glasses
and that and what and how in cracks
of pavement in new york.

she forgot how to pronounce the
sounds of her childhood
so she spoke only yiddish:
she had idioms about onions
bought *tchothke* for
the neighbour's children
and then her own.

my grandmother says
she was a little *meshugganeh*
(although she was *mishpucha*, family, of course)

she never recovered from travelling
alone to the united states at age 13
knowing her family were dead.

when she shaved horseradish for pesach
and the walls would sweat with
the sharp smell
but her eyes were always dry

she said to my mother
that it was her tongue-
her tongue which crawled out of her mouth
and made strange sounds
verbs and vowels that tasted
sour

since she lost her tongue
she couldn't remember
who she was
anymore

words like
peeled *kroyt*
down the drain.

Do You Speak Persian?

Some days we can see Venus in mid-afternoon. Then at night, stars separated by billions of miles, light travelling years

to die in the back of an eye.

Is there a vocabulary for this--one to make dailiness amplify and not diminish wonder?

I have been so careless with the words I already have.

I don't remember how to say *home*
in my first language, or *lonely*, or *light*.

I remember only
delam barat tang shodeh, I miss you,

and *shab bekheir*, goodnight.

How is school going, Kaveh-joon?
Delam barat tang shodeh.

Are you still drinking?
Shab bekheir.

For so long every step I've taken
has been from one tongue to another.

To order the world:
I need, you need, he/she/it needs.

The rest, left to a hungry jackal
in the back of my brain.

Right now our moon looks like a pale cabbage rose.
Delam barat tang shodeh.

We are forever folding into the night.
Shab bekheir.

Natalie's Reflective Commentary

Kaveh Akbar's poem 'Do You Speak Persian' begins and ends with night; I decided to begin and end with cabbages, one of the few words I know in Yiddish (*kroyt*). Akbar's poem intertwines language with his heritage as Persian, I intertwined mine as an Ashkenazi Jew with equally faltering knowledge of the language of my family, which oscillated between Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Hebrew and English.

In Akbar's poem we are invited to lose ourselves in the Persian language, without knowledge of the phrases he uses. As such, I decided to tell the story of my great-grandmother, who lost part of her identity when she forgot how to speak her native tongue, Russian, and took on another, English. Akbar's image of swallowing words moved me to focus on my great-grandmother's life through the imagery of food, cabbages and the kitchen.

I left my Yiddish unexplained as Akbar left his Persian, although the words are quite well-known, as are Akbar's Persian phrases: 'Delam barat tang shodeh', I miss you, and 'Shab bekheir', good night.

In Akbar's poem I sensed the urgency of the need to hold onto words before we lose them, to treasure words, to take care of them. Akbar's exploration of the struggle of language, being an immigrant or 'other' in a new place and learning a new language yet forgetting your own, represented in the beautiful futility of a star travelling light years only to 'die in the back of an eye', seemed to me to express grief, longing, loss, hopelessness, but also the need to reconnect and find new meanings. This poem serves as an ode to my great-grandmother and her search for language but also an ode to grief, and the people whose words get lost in their lives.