English Literature

Transition Pack

Year 12: 2026-2027

Welcome to the AQA A Level English Literature B specification. This is a two year linear course with final exams and a non-examined assessment (NEA) unit in Year 13.

Entry Requirements: Good GCSE grades in both English Language and Literature. An ability to read with insight and to express understanding and opinion with clarity and accuracy is also important. You must enjoy reading and do so extensively.

About the Subject: This is an exciting course that offers opportunities for personal and academic development. Over the two years you will enrich your knowledge of literature, develop your independent research skills and your powers of oral and written communication, whilst studying a range of texts including novels, poetry and drama. The course is intensive. You are expected to read texts independently, before you study them in greater detail in class. Although the course is rigorous it is thoroughly enjoyable as it opens up both the canon of English Literature and more modern texts, whilst encouraging students to develop their own originality and flair. Students will undertake a genre study which incorporates a compulsory Shakespeare text alongside modern and popular fiction. This new A Level also provides students with the opportunity to study texts relevant to modern life and its complex social and cultural issues, and does so through a close focus on both pre-1900 and post-2000 prose and poetry. The non-exam assessment allows students freedom of choice to follow their literary passions as well as the opportunity for re-creative writing.

Where does the subject lead? A Level English Literature complements a range of other A Level choices across Arts and Sciences as it teaches you to think analytically, read complex texts with understanding and express your ideas clearly and accurately. You will be taught detailed oral and written communication skills by experienced professionals. These skills are highly valued in all walks of life and play a crucial role in any future endeavour. A Level English Literature is widely regarded by top universities as a cornerstone integral to all degree options. Career options are varied and include jobs in drama, the theatre, writing, publishing, journalism, marketing, teaching, law and business, vocations which many of our successful candidates have gone on to pursue at top universities.

In Year 12 you will start with the study of the genre of tragedy and the following texts:

Othello by William Shakespeare
ISBN 1-903436-45-1
Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller
ISBN 978-0-141-18274-2

You **must** read these texts prior to starting the course.
You **must** have your own copies of the texts you are studying at A Level.

What is Tragedy?

KEY TERMS

Classical: usually refers to plays written in ancient Greece or Rome.

Epic: refers to a play that has a grand or ambitious theme.

Modern: usually refers to plays written in the late 19th or 20th century.

Domestic: refers to drama set in a household. It does not have a grand or ambitious theme.

Contemporary: refers to plays written in the late 20th or 21st century.

Disorder: inversion of the normal order in society.

Redemption: making up for one's faults, or being saved from the consequences of one's earlier actions. Usually, however, this does not happen in tragedies – the character fails to be redeemed.

Tragedy is a genre or type of drama that ends with the death of the main character. In principle, there are two main kinds of tragedy. The first kind is in the form written initially by classical Greek dramatists and later refined by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, in which the audience witness terrible chaos and breakdown in society. This is usually labeled **classical** or **epic** tragedy.

The second type is known as **modern** or **domestic** tragedy. It may seem less ambitious than classical or epic but it confronts many of the same issues. It usually involves the breakdown of a family, showing the corruption and chaos that lurks beneath the surface of apparent domestic order. This type of tragedy was established in the 19th century by writers such as Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg, and was refined by playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller.

Tragedies focus on failure, conflict and disaster. In most dramas of this type, three aspects are emphasised: **suffering**, **chaos** and **death.**

Suffering is what the characters must endure in a tragedy. The audience watches how the suffering is created and how the central characters deal with their suffering.

Chaos (which we might also term disorder) can be both personal and social. In some tragedies the central character breaks down psychologically; in others the whole of society disintegrates, while in others both character and society disintegrate. Chaos usually leads to death.

At the end of the drama the cast and audience are left staring at **death** and its consequences.

Tragedies are very ambitious plays because they carry huge subject matter and themes. They deal in matters of life and death, and for this reason alone may be considered an important literary form.

Tragedy in Literature

KEY TERMS

Genres are defined by certain **conventions**: the accepted rules, structures and customs we expect to see in a specific genre of writing.

Tragedy is a specific genre of literature, which operates within a set of **conventions.** Tragedy is one of the oldest literary traditions and over time the conventions have helped define what needs to happen on stage and why writers construct tragedies in certain ways. One of the things the audience should feel when watching a tragedy is that the world is somehow a worse place without the tragic hero.

1. Read the following article and complete the tasks.
2. According to this article explain, in your own words, two of the positive effects that tragedy on the audience.

Drama and Tragedy

Before the ancient Greeks ever staged their first play, they were already long in the habit of holding annual festivals to Dionysus, the god of fertility, and the god of wine. Even without too much concrete information about these festivals, we can imagine what a spectacle they would have been, with the entire town gathered for singing and dancing and storytelling, and other rites. The stories were in the form of dramatic poetry; they were about Dionysus and the other gods, and a few legendary heroes made famous by Homer and Hesiod. Pots of wine were filled and refilled; if you were a good citizen you showed up to pay homage to the god of fertility. At a certain point in the festival the ancient stories, or "dithyrambs," were performed at centre stage in the amphitheater to musical accompaniment. Somewhere around the sixth century B.C., an innovative poet named Thespis had the revolutionary idea that acting the story told in the dithyramb might be more interesting than simply reciting it. He put his idea to the test and became the western world's first "thespian" (i.e., "actor"). Not much later, an even more innovative poet called Aeschylus (who wrote The Orestia) added a second actor, and not long after that—in head to head competition with Aeschylus—Sophocles added a third.

Greek theatre was born.

From this golden age of Aeschylus, Euripides, Aristophanes, Sophocles, and others, classical Greek theatre has drizzled down through the foggy ruins of time incredibly resonant works of literature that are still alive with meaning and relevance, even today. Almost twenty-five hundred years separate us from these comedies and tragedies that are so firmly situated in ancient Greece—they are some of the western world's oldest literature—yet, amazingly, they still speak to us. The issues these writers grappled with, their insights into the human heart, still resonate with us today. Discovering our modern selves peeking out from these ancient texts can be an exhilarating, heady experience—which goes to the heart of what literature is all about.

Ancient Greek theatre was a community event, a cultural happening. The festival plays were performed for the entire citizenry in huge amphitheaters carved into hillsides. These outdoor arenas seated thousands—as many as 15,000 people. The seats faced an "orchestra" or "dancing place" behind which actors played their scenes in front of a "skene"—the building behind the stage where actors exited and changed costumes. Gradually it became customary to paint the wall facing the audience to suggest a "set"—a particular setting or place where the scenes were taking place. Our modern stage is not a whole lot different from its ancient beginning.

However, there are a few conventions in ancient Greek theatre that are no longer familiar. If you were to study a Greek play, they would bear explaining. Even if you are not studying ancient drama, it helps to understand these features, because they haven't completely vanished from the modern theatre, although they may have metamorphosised.

First, each play had its "chorus," or group of men, a dozen or so, who would observe the action from the orchestra, and between episodes would sing and dance their commentary on the action. Sometimes the chorus leader would even participate in the scenes by engaging the characters in dialogue. The chorus' role was to model a response to the action unfolding on the stage. They represented public opinion, the public's response to the events of the play. They might provide background information (exposition), or tell us what they think of the relative virtue of the characters—good or ill. They might try to offer advice, or admonish bad behaviour. Whatever their precise function, their poetic commentary following each episode must have been a crucial part of the entertainment, as they would sing and dance and chant rhythmic lines of poetry between scenes—their musical lines and poetic diction would heighten the language and the emotional intensity.

Another Greek convention was the "god in the machine" (deus ex machina in Latin). This was a device some playwrights used to resolve conflicts when they were too difficult for the characters to resolve. Literally a "god" was lowered onto the stage by a mechanical platform (imagine a window-washer's unit), descending from the roof of the skene, rescuing the characters from themselves. It's interesting to note that Sophocles—innovator that he indeed was—never made use of this device. He must have thought it too simplistic, too contrived. That's the way we think of it today as well—an artificial device that provides an easy-out.

Structurally, Greek plays are somewhat different from modern drama with its one-act, three-act, or five-act structure, but we don't have much trouble adjusting back to the prologue, episode, and exodus structure of ancient drama. Things haven't changed as much as they might have in 2500 years.

One thing that hasn't changed much at all is our ability to create and respond to **tragedy**, in life and in art.

Tragedy is all about suffering, especially human suffering. Unfortunately it's all around us, every day, when we open our eyes to see it. "Count no man happy till he dies" (Sophocles' famous last word in Oedipus). No one is safe; we're all vulnerable. And we can't always shield ourselves from that basic but terrifying truth, as much as we may want to. The reality of tragedy lies before us, seen or unseen. An elderly couple dies alone and unnoticed inside the stiflingly hot attic of a flooded house in a poor section of New Orleans. A firefighter rushes into chaos trying to rescue someone and is killed in the process. These events are bad enough, heart-wrenching enough. But what about the individual who rushes to someone's rescue, insisting on doing it alone, unwilling to risk anyone else's life—or feeling overconfident, maybe—and dies because he tried to make the rescue alone? Or the individual who waded through contaminated flood waters to save a stranded child, and five years later is diagnosed with cancer? A child dies of a disease, which feels tragic enough—but what if you learn she died of a curable disease, but her family didn't have the resources to get her the treatment?

There are ghosts we sometimes create ourselves, suffering we bring upon ourselves. This is the suffering that tragedy reveals to us by facing it head on. No avoidance. Why? Maybe Nietzsche said it best: "what doesn't kill us makes us stronger." The Greek tragedians understood that if a "hero" were to emerge, he (we would add, or she) would have to emerge amidst tragedy. Tragedy is a powerful catalyst for heroism, and equally a catalyst for revealing its opposite. The Greeks explored, in their tragedies, all the ways the human spirit could respond in the face of overwhelming suffering. How does the hero act and react? Does the hero face it head on, make an attempt to overcome it, or become crushed by it? In The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature, Michael Meyer says that "a literary tragedy presents courageous individuals who confront powerful forces within or outside themselves with a dignity that reveals the breadth and depth of the human spirit in the face of failure, defeat, and even death." What's at stake is usually more than an individual life—it's the life of the state, the fate of the community that's in danger.

Even in their day, some of the great tragedians of the classical era took heat for being "too depressing" (especially Euripides). But there must be some deep-seated value to this so-called depressing stuff if we keep producing it. As long as there are humans alive to observe it, tragedy won't go away, and neither, it seems, will our desire to represent it artistically, meaningfully, truthfully. Some of the most psychologically incisive literature in existence is in the form of tragedy. Whether it's **ancient Greek tragedy**, **Shakespearean tragedy**, or **modern day tragedy**, the message is essentially the same: humans suffer terribly, pitifully, but there's so much wisdom to be gained from that suffering that to ignore it or cover it under a rug (or put a falsely happy face on it) would be to blind ourselves to the great human strengths it engenders. To remove the tragedy would be to remove what is most noble about us, what is most resilient and inspiring. Tragedy doesn't depress or paralyze us—it does the opposite. It moves us, sometimes to tears. We cry, not merely from sadness or depression, but from an intensity of understanding. In that cry, in those tears, we become sharply, acutely aware of our feelings. Through this story we've been following, which seemed to be about someone

else, we've strangely come to know ourselves. What value there is in that self-knowledge no one can say. I can only think it's priceless. And when we cry together, we become more acutely aware of one another's feelings as well.

There's some kind of superglue running in those tears. They unite us, attach us to one another, make us realize we care about the same things, share the same values, belong to the same community.

Some 2500 hundred years later, the best source for understanding the nature of tragedy is still Aristotle.

Aristotle taught that art should be an "imitation" of life. It should hold a mirror up to life. It should be "truthful," or "true to life." Tragedy is a fact of life, so any work of art, to be of any use, must confront it. Aristotle explains his concept of tragedy, making two general points straight away:

- The finest tragedy is complex rather than simple
- Tragedy is a "representation of terrible and piteous events"

If a play is complex rather than simple, it will mentally and emotionally challenge its viewers in some way. Perhaps Aristotle felt that simplistic or obvious plays were a waste of time, or an insult to his intelligence. When he says that tragedy should represent terrible and piteous events, he is referring to ideas he develops elsewhere in the Poetics. A play that shows "terrible and piteous events," arousing an audience's pity and fear, is not a waste of time because these emotions lead to "**catharsis**," a healthy calling forth and then purging of emotion, that "good cry" that doesn't kill you but glues you together and makes you stronger somehow.

Next, Aristotle indicates the kind of hero who should serve as the main character, but first he tells us the kind of character who does not qualify for service as a "tragic hero." For tragedy, the hero can't be:

- A good man falling from happiness to misfortune (this will only inspire revulsion, not pity or fear)
- An evil man rising from ill fortune to prosperity (that won't inspire sympathy, so it can't arouse pity or fear)
- A wicked man falling from prosperity into misfortune (that might inspire sympathy, but not pity or fear, because (1) pity can't be felt for a person whose misfortune is deserved, and (2) if we don't identify with the character's wickedness, we won't be afraid of his fate falling on us).

The appropriate tragic hero, then, is the character who sits between these extremes. He's not "pre-eminent in virtue and justice," but on the other hand, he isn't guilty of "vice or depravity," just some "**mistake**", **or hamartia.** He is a good but not perfect person who is of some social importance (holding a "highly renowned and prosperous place"). He could be a king, like Oedipus (Sophocles' Oedipus was Aristotle's idea of the quintessential tragedy).

The best tragic plot, he concludes, moves this hero (a person of some importance who is good but flawed) from prosperity to misfortune, occasioned not by any innate depravity or badness of character, but by some great mistake he makes (the "tragic flaw").

In an editorial aside, Aristotle puts in a good word for the poet/dramatist Euripides, who has apparently drawn much criticism for writing too many unhappy endings. But Aristotle insists that this is how it should be. He praises Euripides (whose most famous play is Medea), calling him the "most tragic of the poets," and insists that tragedy is superior to comedy.

Aristotle spends some time elaborating what he considers the essential qualities of the tragic hero. He explains that "with regard to the characters there are four things to aim at":

- **Goodness**. They should reveal through speech and action what their moral choices are, and a "good character will be one whose choices are good." Any "class of person" may be portrayed as "good"—even women and slaves, though on the whole women are "inferior" and slaves are "utterly base."
- **Appropriateness**. Men can be domineering or "manly" (what does he really mean here, I wonder?), but for a woman to appear formidable would be inappropriate.
- **Lifelikeness**. This is just a shade different from "appropriate." To be "lifelike," the hero ought to be "realistic"— "believably human"—not superhuman or "larger than life." The tragic hero should not be godlike, or akin to the mythical heroes of legend, but just like real human beings.
- **Consistency**. Once a character is established as having certain traits, these shouldn't suddenly change.

Aristotle also advised that, in constructing the plot, characters should say and do only what seems probable and reasonable given the events of the play. The outcome of the action should arise naturally from the plot itself and not be contrived by any exterior devices like the popular "deus ex machina" (referred to above). If the god magically appears to deliver justice and put things right, the human tragedy is lost.

(Stacy Tartar © 2004)

Task 1:

Create a spider diagram of the qualities of the tragic hero identified by Aristotle.

Task 2:

Explain what is meant by 'catharsis'.

Heroes, Villains and Victims

Heroes, villains and victims are conventions of tragedy. You have already identified some of the qualities of the archetypal tragic hero, including the '**tragic flaw**' in character that leads to the mistake (what Aristotle calls **hamartia**), which precipitates their downfall.

The downfall of **the tragic hero** or, **protagonist,** is aided by the manipulations of the **tragic villain or antagonist.** The **victim** suffers as a result of the actions of others.

Task 3:

Draw on your knowledge of Shakespeare's tragedies or / and read short synopses of 3 plays (eg. King Lear, Othello, Macbeth, Hamlet ...) and try to identify the **hero, villain and victim** in each.

Play			
Hero			
Villain			
Victim			

What common characteristics of plot do these plays share in the way that chaos and disorder is represented?

When reading the texts you will study for coursework you should be alert to the ways dramatists like Shakespeare and even modern playwrights, represent the archetypal qualities of heroes and villains. You may be able detect obvious differences in the way a character's speech is represented, for example, in **prose** or in **verse.** The language used by a character (**word choices** and their **connotations**) will give initial clues as to whether a character has the nobility of a hero, the baseness of a villain or the innocence of a victim. Of course, literature is never so straightforward as to present us with such one-dimensional characters, but close focus on language, looking for patterns and contrasts is a good place to start.

TASK 4:

Write a review of a book you've read over the summer.

Ensure that it is prose fiction. It can be from any era. (Approximately 500 words)

6 Elements of a Good Book Review

A good review is balanced. It takes into account that we all have likes and dislikes, and while this book may not be our cup of tea, it could be someone else's absolute favorite. (Hey, it could happen!) Yes, share your honest opinion. But realize that's what it is. Your opinion. A subjective evaluation of what you've read. No more, no less.

A good review is about the book, not the author. Focus on the writing, on the treatment of the topic, on the characters, on the storyline, on the research, on the facts, and so on. Don't make judgment calls about the author's faith, intelligence, relationships, parenting skills, parentage, or whatever. A reviewer's job is to share your opinion of the *book.* You don't have the right to go beyond that.

A good review is about the author's craft, not the book's packaging. Don't base your review on the cover or endorsements or things over which, I guarantee you, most traditionally published writers have absolutely no control. (Now, if the authors are indie, then yes, they control those things…) But remember, what you're reviewing is the *writing,* not the packaging.

A good book review doesn't give an extensive summary of the book and then one or two lines about your thoughts. Readers can get the summary from lots of places. What they want to know is what you thought of the writing, the message, the story.

Even more important, **a good review doesn't give away the ending/secret/mystery/twist!** Please, friends, for the love of heaven, don't ruin the read for others. If you knew who the killer was on page 2, fine, say, "I knew who the killer was by page two." But do NOT say, "I knew by page two that the butler was the killer." If a book has a great twist, say that. But don't give the twist away. Have mercy on not just the readers, but on the author.

A good book review is specific. Don't just say you loved the book or hated it, tell us why. And tell us what specific aspect of it you loved or hated. For example:

What did you like or dislike about the writing?

What drew you to–or left you cold about–the topic or characters?

What moved or challenged or inspired or infuriated or disappointed you?

TASK 5:

Read the extract from 'Othello' and answer the following questions in full sentences/paragraphs on A4 paper, ready to hand into your teacher in September for marking:

1. What does Shakespeare show us about Othello's interactions with other characters here?
2. What impression of Othello do you gain from the speeches of the characters around him?
3. What impression do you gain of Othello from the lines 'Let him do his spite …' to ' … what lights come yond!' (lines 17-28)?
4. What kind of character does Iago seem at this point?

(Read the left hand column before moving over to the text in the right)

Enter OTHELLO, IAGO, and Attendants with torches IAGO Though in the trade of war I have slain men, Yet do I hold it very stuff o' the conscience To do no contrived murder: I lack iniquity Sometimes to do me service: nine or ten times I had thought to have yerk'd him here under the ribs. OTHELLO 'Tis better as it is. IAGO Nay, but he prated, And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms Against your honour That, with the little godliness I have, I did full hard forbear him. But, I pray you, sir, Are you fast married? Be assured of this, That the magnifico is much beloved, And hath in his effect a voice potential As double as the duke's: he will divorce you; Or put upon you what restraint and grievance The law, with all his might to enforce it on, Will give him cable. OTHELLO Let him do his spite: (l17) My services which I have done the signiory Shall out-tongue his complaints. 'Tis yet to know, Which, when I know that boasting is an honour, I shall promulgate--I fetch my life and being From men of royal siege, and my demerits May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune	As this that I have reach'd: for know, Iago, But that I love the gentle Desdemona, I would not my unhoused free condition Put into circumscription and confine For the sea's worth. But, look! what lights come yond? (l28) IAGO Those are the raised father and his friends: You were best go in. OTHELLO Not I I must be found: My parts, my title and my perfect soul Shall manifest me rightly. Is it they? IAGO By Janus, I think no. Enter CASSIO, and certain Officers with torches OTHELLO The servants of the duke, and my lieutenant. The goodness of the night upon you, friends! What is the news? CASSIO The duke does greet you, general, And he requires your haste-post-haste appearance, Even on the instant. OTHELLO What is the matter, think you? CASSIO Something from Cyprus as I may divine: It is a business of some heat: the galleys

Have sent a dozen sequent messengers
This very night at one another's heels,
And many of the consuls, raised and
met,
Are at the duke's already: you have
been hotly call'd for;

When, being not at your lodging to be found,
The senate hath sent about three several guests
To search you out.

OTHELLO
'Tis well I am found by you.

I will but spend a word here in the house,
And go with you.

Exit

CASSIO
Ancient, what makes he here?

IAGO
'Faith, he to-night hath boarded a land carack:
If it prove lawful prize, he's made for ever.

CASSIO
I do not understand.

IAGO
He's married.

CASSIO
To who?

Re-enter OTHELLO

IAGO
Marry, to--Come, captain, will you go?

OTHELLO
Have with you.

CASSIO
Here comes another troop to seek for you.

IAGO
It is Brabantio. General, be
advised; He comes to bad intent.

Enter BRABANTIO, RODERIGO, and Officers
with torches and weapons

OTHELLO
Holla! stand there!

RODERIGO
Signior, it is the Moor.

BRABANTIO
Down with him, thief!

They draw on both sides

IAGO
You, Roderigo! come, sir, I am for you.

OTHELLO
Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will
rust them.

Good signior, you shall more command with
years
Than with your weapons.

BRABANTIO
O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd my
daughter?

Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her;
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,

If she in chains of magic were not bound,
Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy, So
opposite to marriage that she shunned The
wealthy curled darlings of our nation, Would
ever have, to incur a general mock, Run from
her guardage to the sooty bosom Of such a
thing as thou, to fear, not to delight. Judge
me the world, if 'tis not gross in sense That
thou hast practised on her with foul charms,

Abused her delicate youth with drugs or
minerals

That weaken motion: I'll have't disputed on;
'Tis probable and palpable to thinking.

I therefore apprehend and do attach thee
For an abuser of the world, a practiser
Of arts inhibited and out of warrant.

Lay hold upon him: if he do resist,
Subdue him at his peril.

OTHELLO
Hold your hands,
Both you of my inclining, and the rest:

Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it
Without a prompter. Where will you that I go
To answer this your charge?

BRABANTIO
To prison, till fit time …