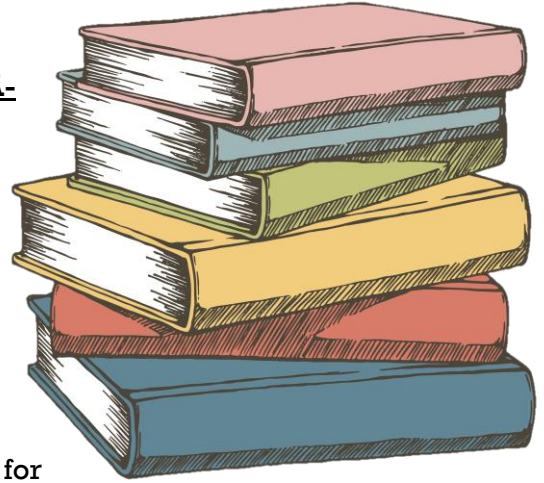


PREPARING FOR ENGLISH LITERATURE AT A-LEVEL

At SCGSG, we study a wide range of material from the early 17th century to present day. Some of the texts we look at are prescribed by the examination board (AQA) and fall into two genres – **tragedy** and **crime** – but the A-Level also involves a **coursework** element that gives you the freedom to explore and write about texts of your own choosing, analysing them in the light of significant theoretical perspectives such as feminism and Marxism. So, to prepare yourself for A-Level study in English Literature, the best thing you can be doing now is reading widely and asking yourself some “BIG” questions about the value and significance of literature across different time periods and contexts.



To do this well, and so you can draw upon your ideas when the A-Level course commences, we would advise you to keep a **reading log**, noting down: what you have read (author, title and date); a summary of key information and ideas, especially anything that jumps out to you as striking or thought-provoking; key quotations that you might want to use or refer to in the future; and, perhaps most importantly, your own reflections along with any questions that arise from your reading.

But *what* should you be reading? The rest of this document will set out some ideas that you may want to follow as you try to **broaden your understanding** of English literature – of its history, its key themes, movements and genres, and the impact that different writers have made on the world. You will see that there are lots of possible tasks listed below, all of which are optional but should work well together in helping you to become more confident in looking more deeply into the subject.

1. Tragedy



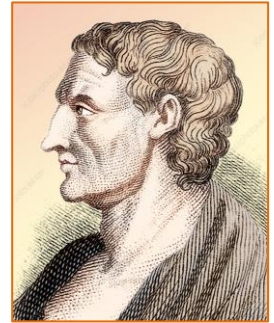
For the tragedy paper, we study the following set texts at SCGSG:

- William Shakespeare, *Othello* (c. 1603)
- John Keats, poetry selection: ‘*Isabella, or The Pot of Basil*’; ‘*La Belle Dame sans Merci*’; ‘*Lamia*’; and ‘*The Eve of St. Agnes*’ (1818-19)
- Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (1949)

As you can see, these texts cover a large span of history, ranging from the early modern period to the late 1940s, so to understand how tragedy works as a **genre**, it is important to look closely at how the genre began, how it developed over time, and how older texts impact readers and audiences today.

TASK: what are the core ingredients of a tragedy? Make a mind map of all the **conventions** that you would expect a tragic story to follow. Use some of the tragedies that you are familiar with already – e.g. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1595) and *Macbeth* (1606) – as a starting point.

Our earliest tragedies, and the earliest writing *about* tragedy, date from **Ancient Greece**. Having been taught by **Plato**, the Greek philosopher **Aristotle** acted as tutor to Alexander the Great before returning to Athens where he founded an influential school of philosophy at the **Lyceum**. In his *Poetics* (c. 335 BC), Aristotle attempts to define how the genre of tragedy works. He argues that a tragic play should present a reversal of fortune involving persons ‘who are held in great esteem’ and should be written in ‘language made pleasurable’. Aristotle appeared to view tragedy as the superior genre: tragedy, he thought, was where real truths about human life were revealed.



TASK: research the meaning of the following key terms that Aristotle uses in his *Poetics* and write your own definition for each: **hamartia**; **peripeteia**; **anagnorisis**; and **catharsis**. You may find for one of these terms, that the words ‘error’ and ‘flaw’ are used interchangeably by translators and critics – consider for yourself what differences there may be between a character who makes an ‘error’ and a character who possesses a ‘flaw’, then read the following extract from *Poetics* and decide which of the two words you think most accurately captures Aristotle’s meaning:

“A perfect tragedy should [...] imitate actions which **excite pity and fear**, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly, in the first place, that the **change of fortune** presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for **pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves**. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. There remains, then, the character between these two extremes – that of **a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty**. He must be one who is **highly renowned and prosperous** – a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families.” (Aristotle, *Poetics*, Part XIII)



TASK: is this description of the “perfect tragedy” too **prescriptive**? Think back to a tragedy that you know well, e.g. *Macbeth*, and draw up a table with two columns, listing all of the ways that the story conforms to Aristotle’s definition in one column, and all of the ways that it differs in the other. Once finished, decide for yourself whether those differences are actually **deficiencies** or in fact **crucial** to the success of the story – would the story function as well if Aristotle’s rules were followed exactly?

TASK: writing as he was in the 4th century BC, Aristotle was responding to the tragic drama that was performed during that period. To develop your own sense of how Aristotle's dramatic theory relates to **Greek tragedy**, either read some of the plays that you can find in English translation, or simply research their plots through online summaries. Note down any examples in these plays that can help to explain where Aristotle's rules came from, as well as any **similarities** or **differences** that you notice with modern-day storytelling.

These are a few of the Greek plays that you could choose to investigate:

- Aeschylus, ***Agamemnon*** (458 BC)
- Sophocles, ***Antigone*** (442 BC)
- Sophocles, ***Oedipus Rex*** (c. 430 BC)
- Euripides, ***Hippolytus*** (428 BC)



The earliest tragedy that you will study as part of the A-Level course is Shakespeare's *Othello*, which was first performed in 1603 – the year that **Elizabeth I** died, thus ending the Elizabethan period and marking the start of the Jacobean. During Elizabeth's reign, drama was revolutionised by the opening of several **permanent professional theatres** immediately outside the city boundaries of **London**. Before the first of these (imaginatively named The Theatre) opened in 1576, tragic drama was mostly confined to student performances given at the **Inns of Court** (where lawyers were trained) and in the colleges of the **University of Oxford** and the **University of Cambridge**. With much wider audiences now being reached by the new public theatres, tragedies no longer had to satisfy just the classically educated but had to be filled with events that would shock and provoke pity from all theatregoers. In 1581, a new book

containing old plays provided just the inspiration that young playwrights such as Thomas Kyd, William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe needed: it contained translations into English of the ten plays that were thought then to have been written by the Roman playwright **Seneca** (c. 4 BC – AD 65). As you will see from the following task, many of the dramatic methods used in these plays were soon adopted to startling effect in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.

TASK: read the introduction to ***Seneca: His Tenne Tragedies*** on the British Library website and note down all of the features (e.g. soliloquies) in Seneca's drama that you recognise from your study of Shakespeare. *You may notice that many of the stories that Seneca told were identical to those found in Ancient Greek drama, so to appreciate the **innovations** of Roman tragedy fully, you may also find it useful to read two versions of the same story, comparing the Greek with the Roman.*

www.bl.uk/collection-items/seneca-his-ten-tragedies-1581

Of course, Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy was far from static. Just as you would expect a film that is made in 2020 to be different to a film that was made in 1980, the content and style of drama



altered significantly throughout the period from the 1580s to the 1620s. To explore the impact of Seneca on Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy further, most notably in the sub-genre of **revenge tragedy**, these are some of the plays from across those decades that you could choose to investigate:

- Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1587-90)
- Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (1588)
- William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1599)
- William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (1605)
- John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* (c. 1613-14)
- Thomas Middleton, *Women Beware Women* (c. 1621)

TASK: create a **timeline** of the most significant texts in the history of tragedy, starting with **Aeschylus**.



TASK: to prepare for your study of *Othello*, read this article by **Kiernan Ryan** to familiarise yourself with some of the key **aspects of tragedy** as they feature in the works of Shakespeare. You will see on the right-hand side of the webpage that there are many other articles to read in the “**Discovering Literature**” section of the **British Library** website; making sure to keep a record in your reading log as you go, move onto some of these once you have finished reading Ryan’s article and build up your understanding of Shakespeare’s craft as a writer and of the theatrical world in which he worked.

www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/an-introduction-to-shakespearean-tragedy

TASK: to further explore Shakespeare’s language, speeches and playtexts, watch these videos from **Ben Crystal**, an expert on original pronunciation, and make a note of any important information.

“What’s Iambic Pentameter?”

www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1WsNE0ec6U

“How to Map a Speech”

www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBcj0u4KihE

“The First Folio & Co.”

www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfW89XUFdpA



As Ben Crystal demonstrates in his use of original pronunciation, a lot has changed since *Othello* and Shakespeare's other tragedies were first performed in the early modern theatre. Studying English Literature at A-Level involves not only seeing how the plays might have worked and been responded to by audiences *then* – that is, when the writers themselves were alive – taking the subject to the next level also involves asking “BIG” questions about how plays might somehow **transform** as they are performed in new ways and to new audiences. So far, by working through the tasks on Greek, Roman and early modern English drama, you have traced the development of the genre in a way that will have highlighted new **dramatic methods**; now, in the following task, the challenge is to consider how those same dramatic methods function differently when they are used in new **settings** and **contexts**.

TASK: watch a wide variety of performances, either from the list below or that you find elsewhere on television or online. As you go, keep a detailed **performance diary**, recording your thoughts and observations just as you have done in your reading log so far. These performances do not necessarily have to be just of plays by Shakespeare, but Shakespeare's works are naturally a good place to start given your familiarity with, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* as well as the presence of *Othello* in the A-Level curriculum at SCGS.

These are just some of the modern theatrical performances currently available:

- **Shakespeare's Globe** in London is streaming performances for free on a two-week rotation: www.shakespearesglobe.com/watch/
- The **Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC)** has made two performances available for free: the first of these is a modern reimagining of *Julius Caesar* (1599) from 2012; the second is a more conventional performance of *King Lear* (1605) from 2013: *I, Cinna* – <https://youtu.be/6xQAr5le0UU> // *King Lear* – https://youtu.be/zP_g-ODJ2SM
- In the **Shakespeare Solos** series published by *The Guardian*, leading actors perform some of Shakespeare's greatest speeches – including new recordings from “The Quarantine Players”: www.theguardian.com/stage/series/shakespeare-solos
- Several landmark performances from the **Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC)**, **Shakespeare's Globe** and the **Royal Opera House** can be watched in full via the BBC iPlayer: www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/p089zds8/culture-in-quarantine-shakespeare
- The **National Theatre** is streaming a series of world-class performances on a weekly basis: www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/nt-at-home



Tragedy as a genre does not end in the 1620s, as shown by the presence of Keats and Miller on the A-Level syllabus for SCGSG. What you will find, however, is that “tragedy” as a genre becomes ever more complex and has to be seen as only one aspect of a more complicated way of viewing the world – in the case of Keats, for instance, it is intertwined with the ideas and values of **Romanticism**, whilst in the case of Miller, the tragedy of his drama requires a deep understanding of the social and political ethos often referred to as “**The American Dream**”. For now, you may choose to concentrate on the early stages in the genre, but if you would like to start exploring the contextual background to Miller’s play, the following texts would make a good starting point:

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)
- Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)
- Arthur Miller, *All My Sons* (1947)

2. Crime

For the crime paper, we teach the following set texts at SCGSG:

- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1834 version)
- Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926)
- Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (2001)

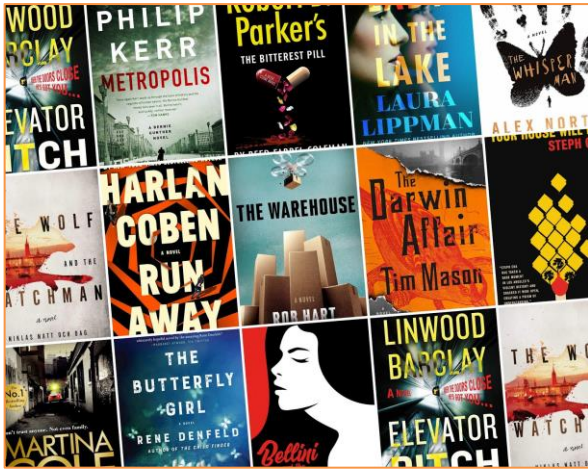
You will not study these texts until Year 13, but whilst it would be best for you to prioritise your reading around the genre of tragedy, this is also a good time for you to be exploring the **crime genre** and thinking about its key conventions and how these are employed and/or subverted across a range of crime fiction texts. Doing so will also sharpen your sense of what makes **tragic** texts distinctive – crime fiction and tragedies both tend to involve death, for instance, but they handle it differently.



TASK: what are the core ingredients of crime fiction? As you did for tragedy, make a mind map of all the **conventions** that you would expect a story to follow within this genre. Again, use some of the crime stories that you are familiar with already – from Arthur Conan Doyle’s **Sherlock Holmes** stories to the detective dramas that appear on television today – as a starting point.



Just by looking at two modern crime dramas from television, ITV’s *Midsummer Murders* (1997-) and BBC’s *Line of Duty* (2012-), it is clear that crime fiction is far from uniform in how writers and producers choose to employ and interpret the generic conventions, and in literature there are even greater **creative possibilities** when we consider the use of narrators (who is speaking? can they be trusted?), the use of multiple perspectives, and the opportunity for writers to leave deliberate “gaps” in the storytelling. In a way, readers become detectives themselves, whilst the writer can be seen as a villain who misleads us, withholds crucial evidence, and holds back the truth until there is no way out.



TASK: either by reading crime stories that you can find, or simply by researching their plots through online summaries, consider some of the different ways that crime writers attempt to **manipulate** their readers. Note down your findings in your reading log and then choose a couple of particularly interesting examples (e.g. one from the 19th century and one from the 21st century) and write a short piece of analysis, **comparing** the methods used by the writers and their effect on readers.

These are a few of the countless crime novels that you could choose to investigate:

- Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1837-9)
- Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892)
- Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934)
- Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (1938)
- Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (1939)
- Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (1992)
- Kate Atkinson, *When Will There Be Good News?* (2008)
- Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (2012)

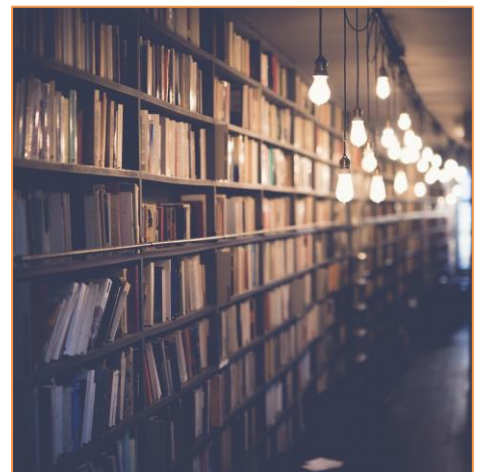
You might also be taken by a few of the suggestions given in this article from 2020:
www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/14/book-clinic-thrillers-crime-fiction-for-17-year-old



TASK: a “BIG” question that may arise from your focus on crime fiction appears simple at first but leads to a much more profound consideration for any serious student of literature. The question is “**why do readers do this to themselves?**” At different points in a crime story, a reader will experience trepidation, shock, sympathy, confusion, frustration, and a host of many other strong emotions, many of them decidedly unpleasant. Think carefully about this question and then note down some ideas about why literature, and crime fiction in particular, proves so popular – what is it, exactly, that readers are *looking for* when they choose a text to read?

3. Wider Reading

As mentioned at the outset, there is also an element of the course that provides the opportunity for you to write about texts of your own choice, selecting from novels, collections of short stories and volumes of poetry, which means that any wider reading whatsoever will stand you in good stead! You may, in the meantime, decide on a literature-themed question for your **Personal Research Project**, allowing you to learn and become more comfortable with the process of deciding on a topic, researching and planning, and then presenting an argument, and this would also be a fantastic



opportunity for you to investigate some of the “BIG” questions that arise from your wider reading.

Along with the reading suggestions provided above, you may find some inspiration from browsing the **Poetry by Heart** and **Poetry Foundation** websites:

www.poetrybyheart.org.uk

www.poetryfoundation.org

As for prose fiction, try browsing this [subjective] list of the **100 best novels written in English**:

www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/17/the-100-best-novels-written-in-english-the-full-list

And finally, for a more whimsical take on the **value of literature**, watch this **TED Talk**:

www.ted.com/talks/mac_barnett_why_a_good_book_is_a_secret_door