

BEGINNING

1

Overview

In this unit, you will:

- learn how to get the most out of this textbook
- think about ways of developing as a reader
- consider how best to bridge the gap between your previous studies and A Level
- learn about the historicist approach to studying literature.

1.1 How to get the most from this textbook

1.1.1 The purpose of this textbook

Welcome to this textbook, which is designed to support you through your A Level Literature course. You will find it useful to read this unit at the start of the course, as it provides an overview of the contents of the book and the Literature course that it supports.

This textbook will help A Level students through the two-year course, until the examinations in the summer of the second year of study. This book also provides support for students whose goal it is to complete an AS Level course after one year of study. The aim of this textbook, however, is more ambitious than simply to assist students through examinations. The explanations of concepts and skills that you encounter in this textbook will provide a firm foundation for study after A Level, and indeed, for lifelong learning. The practical activities in this textbook will enable you to develop and extend your skills of close reading and analysis. The activities in

the Part 2 'Developing' and Part 3 'Enriching' units of this book have been written to provide opportunities for you to reflect more closely on the detail of your set texts and their contexts, thus challenging you to dig deeper into your learning.

1.1.2 How this book is organised

There are three parts to this book, as mentioned briefly in section 1.1.1.

Part 1: Beginning

The units in Part 1 'Beginning' provide a firm grounding in the essential knowledge, concepts and skills that you will need to move forward over the next two years, and ultimately, to complete the course. The Part 1 units will also prepare you for Part 2, 'Developing', where you will develop your reading and critical skills in more detail. During the course, you may find it helpful to return to the Part 1 units as a refresher. Part 1 'Beginning' offers an introduction to these areas:

- responding critically and creatively to literature
- exploring how texts relate to their contexts
- developing reading and research skills
- looking at question types for set examination texts, unseen examination texts and non-examined texts
- writing effectively about the texts you study.



See 1.4.1 for information on non-examination assessment (the coursework component)

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Part 1 also introduces the key concepts and skills for reading texts from the three main literary genres:

- poetry
- prose
- drama.

Part 2: Developing

Part 2 'Developing' is the largest section of this textbook and builds on the knowledge, concepts and skills introduced in Part 1. The activities encourage you to develop your skills further as you consider a wide range of poems and extracts from prose and drama texts.

The content follows the A Level specification, covering three topic areas:

- Love through the ages
- World War I and its aftermath
- Modern times: Literature from 1945 to the present day.

The content and related activities include references to many set examination texts in the syllabus and will help you to relate these texts to their historical, social, cultural and/or literary contexts.

In each topic area, the content and activities are grouped around the three main forms: poetry, prose and drama. The activities will help to build your confidence and extend your skills, both as an independent reader and as a writer of sustained critical analysis.

Part 3: Enriching

Part 3 'Enriching' will enable you to consolidate and further extend your skills. This section contains:

- additional reading such as articles by subject experts
- extensive wider reading links to books, academic articles, websites and other sources.

1.2 Becoming an independent reader

The ability to articulate informed personal responses to texts is at the heart of literary study. It's not about what your teacher thinks, what a study guide says or about an interpretation offered by a particular film version. Literary study is not a subject where you will find ready-made or 'model answers' that you simply have to churn out in an examination.

It is perfectly possible for individual readers to have different responses to, and alternative

interpretations of, certain aspects of texts. You are permitted to have your own views about a text: for example, about the characters, themes, setting and the writer's methods in a particular play. What is important is that your views are **informed** views; that is, they can be judged as valid views that you can **substantiate** by referring to specific details in the text.

It is not enough simply to make assertions; there must also be textual support so that others can assess how well informed your judgements are. Personal interpretation does not mean that an 'anything goes' approach will do. Producing informed personal responses requires a disciplined approach, which the activities in this book will help you to develop.



Key terms

informed: knowledgeable and supported

substantiate: show something to be true, or support a claim with evidence

1.2.1 Insisting on your own view

The best way to start is to read any text with an open mind. Develop the habit of asking yourself: 'What are my first impressions of this text?' as you read it for the first time.

Contribute fully to class discussions so that you get the most out of your lessons. In such discussions, you will encounter a range of views from fellow students and your teacher. As you engage in these discussions, you will find that your views are confirmed or challenged. The most effective arguments will be carefully supported, and these will help you to refine your views. It's highly likely that you will modify your views about particular aspects of your texts as you revisit them during the course.

ACTIVITY 1

Personal responses

Think of the play you studied for your last literature examination. List the things that influenced your personal response to the text. Consider these questions:

- 1 What were your first impressions of the play? Did you like it, or not? Why?
- 2 How far did class discussions help you to develop your response to the play?

- 3 How often did you read the play? Did you change your mind about any aspects?
- 4 Were you responsible for most of your notes on the play, for example, synopsis, timeline, mind maps?
- 5 Did any film version or book about the play influence your interpretation?
- 6 Were your views challenged by a performance you may have seen or taken part in?

1.2.2 Things that might influence your personal response

Let's consider Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, a popular examination text for 15- and 16-year-olds. The following points might influence you when preparing for an examination:

- reading the play in class, perhaps with some drama workshop-style activities
- making notes during lessons
- reading study guides, for example, 'York Notes' or 'SparkNotes'
- writing essays on examination-type questions and receiving feedback in the form of the teacher's comments
- watching video clips from one or more film versions
- watching the play performed on stage
- reading a review of a film adaptation.

All of these activities will play a part in helping you to inform a response to the play.

ACTIVITY 2

Extracts from newspaper reviews

Read Texts 1A and 1B, both of which are extracts from newspaper reviews. Text 1A reviews the 2013 film version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Text 1B reviews a 2013 Broadway stage performance of *Romeo and Juliet* in New York.

- 1 What do you learn about the reviewers' interpretations of the play from their reviews?
- 2 How do you think reading such reviews can add to your appreciation of a play?

Text 1A

Rumours of a cod shortage are laid to rest in the confounding new version of *Romeo and Juliet*. You could fry it up and feed most of East Anglia.

Revisionism's fine – after all, vast swathes of the text were discarded by Baz Luhrmann, whose 1996 hit managed to bring the play electrifyingly to life for an MTV audience. But this new effort, penned – not just pruned – by Julian Fellowes, has no idea what planet it's on.

It has all the trappings of a traditionalist retelling – set in Verona, in period, with none of Luhrmann's guns and gas stations. It's dressed and designed to summon a look you might call Arabian Nights Kitsch. Listen to it for even a minute, though, and critical things are amiss. The verse. The sense. The whole point.

Not all of the play's lines are jettisoned. Fellowes keeps the 'unworthiest hand' kissing scene, and much of the balcony scene, as if shuffling through a Spotify playlist of Bill's greatest hits. Everywhere, he supplies weird additions, in a register of Shakespeare mimicry which the cast can only wobble their way through, pretending it's the real thing.

'And what is my reward?! A puking fool!', Damian Lewis's needlessly hammy Lord Capulet spits at his daughter, a characteristic twist on Shakespeare's 'And then to have a wretched puling fool'. Let's think about this variant. The archaic verb to pule means to whimper or whine. To puke is to throw up. Juliet (Hailee Steinfeld) is lovestruck and doesn't want to marry Paris in Act V, sure, but she hasn't quite reached the vomiting stage yet.

The Fellowes defence is that he's writing for a new generation, who need the play livened up a bit. In the shonky hands of Italian director Carlo Carlei, his dutiful pastiche has quite the opposite effect. The supporting cast bustle about in entirely discordant movies. Some, like Lewis, with his bizarre monastic haircut, and Stellan Skarsgård's dour Prince, function like rent-paying guest stars on *Game of Thrones*. Others – the younger ones – treat the Montague/Capulet feud as if it's the sequel to a yet more ancient grudge: the one between werewolves and vampires in the Twilight series.

Steinfeld's rushed approach to all her monologues makes them maddeningly hard to follow. And even the poetry we're given is trampled on by Abel Korzeniowski's incessant score – a close cousin to Nino Rota's from