



Summer work for future

Y12 Literature students



Welcome!

On the following pages, you'll find some tasks and reading material to get you ready to start A Level English Literature in September. You can find details about our syllabus (AQA English Literature Spec B) [here](#).

The tasks:

1. Get hold of your own copy of Othello for September.

(The Arden edition has excellent notes, the Heinemann version has good notes and a bit more room for notes of your own, and the Cambridge Schools edition will be familiar and has plenty of space for your own notes).

2. Read the 'Introduction to Tragedy' (the next 12 pages of this doc) and make notes.

3. Starting with the information beginning on page 14 of this document, find out more about two of the authors you will be studying in the tragedy unit: Arthur Miller and John Keats.

4. Have a look at the attached reading list (final page). These are texts that we recommend as wider reading (especially for the prose coursework in Y13). It would be a good idea to read one of these texts over the summer.

1984 by George Orwell is a great choice, both as background reading for Paper 2 (Political/Social Protest Writing) and the prose coursework.

5. Have a listen to [Mr Richardson's Introductory Podcast!](#)

Enjoy!

Tragedy

A Student Handbook



Sean McEvoy
with **Tony Coult** and **Chris Sandford**

I N T R O D U C I N G
T R A G E D Y

WHAT IS TRAGEDY?

The word **tragedy** is in common usage in everyday life. In any one day you may hear it used in casual conversation, or in the media, to describe everything from a missed penalty in a football match to the death of a child, from the pain caused by man-made or natural disasters to a pop star's ill-advised haircut. While the light-hearted and exaggerated use of the term (missed penalties, break up of celebrity relationships) may have little to do with literary concepts of tragedy, descriptions of real life suffering as a tragedy reflect our need to make sense of, and dignify the unimaginable, unspeakable, inexplicable and unfair. These aspects of life are at the heart of tragic drama.

The critic Raymond Williams wrote that to restrict the term tragedy only to literature, as some literary critics have sought to do, is to deny to real events the understanding which tragic drama can confer on them. Throughout history one of the roles of tragedy has been to provide a means of understanding our real lives through fictional representation. Tragedy is not just an artistic exercise, but a way of dignifying and making sense of suffering. For this reason some people suggest tragedy is a genre unsuited to Christian societies in which human suffering is seen in the context of God and the afterlife.

I have known tragedy in the life of a man driven back into silence, in an unregarded working life. In his ordinary and private death, I saw a terrifying loss of connection between men, and even between father and son: a loss of connection which was, however, a particular historical and social fact.

Raymond Williams 1979: 13

How can art help us to cope with suffering? How can it make sense of pain and death, and of the sense of injustice that often accompanies these central human experiences? Why does seeing suffering represented on stage in a tragic drama produce a sense of enjoyment rather than merely add to our sense of pain or awareness of the suffering in the world?

The word tragedy itself was coined by the ancient Greeks who first chose to put these crucial questions about human suffering on the public stage almost 2500 years ago in democratic Athens, a non-Christian society. Translated literally the word means 'goat song' which may refer to the prize awarded to the playwright whose play took first prize in the annual competition.

Pleasure and pain

One of the paradoxical characteristics of tragic drama – and a defining difference between the literary and everyday concept of tragedy – is that at the same time

as feeling sorrow and pity for those whose suffering we see on stage, we also take pleasure in the representation of suffering. This pleasure comes partly from the delight we take in beautifully crafted works of art in general. It also comes from our response more specifically to the tragic nature of the play and what we feel we have gained from the experience: emotional solace, perhaps a greater political understanding of our world, or perhaps a sense of striving to understand something almost beyond words. Art itself survives death and goes on speaking to generations whose sufferings could not even be imagined by the people for whom a tragedy was originally written. In this sense the existence of tragedy as a literary concept seems to defeat suffering and even death:

Tragedy is the art form created to confront the most difficult experiences we face: death, loss, injustice, thwarted passion, despair.

Jennifer Wallace 2007: 1

The scope of this book

Although tragedy as an art form has also developed in genres such as the novel and films, it has been predominantly a theatrical form, and that is the main focus of this book.

Art and literature dealing with the common experience of human suffering and recognised as tragic is found in cultures throughout the world. This book focuses on the Western tradition, tracing its origins from classical Greek tragedies through the Renaissance to the late 19th and early 20th-century European tragedies. It also considers modern Irish, American and British concepts of tragedy, and what the term has come to mean at the beginning of the 21st century.

CONCEPTS OF TRAGEDY

Tragedy has been important in Western art for two and a half thousand years. Theories about its nature have inevitably changed and developed over that time. There are, however, certain concepts which have remained more or less central to what we understand the term to mean. These concepts have their origin in *The Poetics* of the Greek philosopher **Aristotle** who wrote in about 330 BC. They can be summarised as follows:

1. The drama is usually centred upon one or more main character (**the protagonist**) who acts in a way which proves disastrous.
2. The scope of the play's action is limited in terms of plot (which should not be too complex). The time the action takes to elapse should also be limited, as should the location of the action (**the unities**).
3. There is a calamitous outcome (**the catastrophe**) which causes an emotional response in its audience.

TRAGEDY IN ANCIENT GREECE

In Greek the word **protagonist** meant the first of the three professional actors who played all the speaking roles in the drama. It has come to mean the individual whose suffering constitutes a central part of the tragedy. Sometimes he or she is known as the **tragic hero** (or heroine), but since these terms tend to carry with them the suggestion of virtue, and since not all **tragic protagonists** can uncontroversially be called virtuous, it makes sense to use the older Greek word.

The classical protagonist

When Aristotle wrote *The Poetics* he was thinking of the kind of central character to be found in the plays of **Sophocles** (p.43). The protagonist was a man who had a certain nobility about him, a man of high birth who was courageous and generous in character. The Greek word Aristotle used is **megalopsychia**, 'greatness of soul'. The protagonist could not be a man who was totally good, or else the audience would feel only disgust at the injustice of his destruction in the play's catastrophe. Neither could he be someone wicked, for then the audience would rejoice at his fall.

There remains an error between these two extremes. This is the sort of man who is not conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall from misery is not due to vice and depravity, but rather to some error, a man who enjoys prosperity and a high reputation, like Oedipus or Thyestes and other famous members of families like theirs.

Aristotle c.330 BC: 48

Hamartia – the fatal error of judgement

The protagonist is a character with whom the audience can identify, someone who makes a wrong decision for good reasons or with the best of intentions.

Aristotle called the protagonist's error of judgement **hamartia**. It is often the result of a condition called by the Greeks **hubris**, the excessive pride which brings down divine punishment upon the head of the protagonist. Conventional Greek religion in the classical period saw the gods as selfish and vengeful. They guarded their status jealously, and would punish any mortal whose sense of personal pride and self-importance seemed to them to exceed what was proper to humans. In a text that Greeks regarded as a guide to their culture's values, Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*, the goddess Hera explains to Zeus why she always takes action against any mortal who offends her – because that is what makes her a god:

Even men will achieve their purposes for other men, though they are mortal and without the knowledge that we have. How then, when my claim is to be the greatest of the goddesses ... how could I not weave trouble for the Trojans, when they have angered me?

Homer c.700 BC: 304

The story of Oedipus exemplifies the concept of hamartia. According to Greek myth, Oedipus is the man who, having been abandoned to die at birth, grows up to kill his father Laius, King of Thebes. He then take over both his crown and his widow, Jocasta – Oedipus's own mother.

At the beginning of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* Oedipus is at the height of his powers: he has slain the Sphinx, the monster which terrorised the people of Thebes, and is attempting to find out the cause of the plague afflicting his city:

Now we pray to you. You cannot equal the gods,
Your children know that, bending at your altar.
But we do rate you first of men,
Both in the common crises of our lives
And face-to-face encounters with the gods...

Chorus to Oedipus, Sophocles: Oedipus Rex 429? BC: 161

Oedipus discovers that Apollo has sent the plague because Thebes still harbours the man who killed the previous king, Laius. In trying to save the city from the plague, he uncovers the truth: that he is the man who killed the king, his own father, and therefore is also married to his mother. Jocasta commits suicide and Oedipus blinds himself. His unwitting error of judgement and the terrible punishment he suffers demonstrate both the power of the gods and man's lack of power over his life and destiny.

Hubris and anagnorisis

The protagonist in classical tragedy commits **hubris** by choosing to defy the claims of the gods. In Sophocles' play *Antigone*, Creon, King of Thebes commits hubris when he refuses to bury the body of Antigone's brother Polynices, who was killed fighting against his city. Following the suicides of his wife and son, Creon comes to realise that he has made a mistake in defying the gods of the underworld. He recognises he has committed hubris, and so reaches a state of **anagnorisis** – recognition of his tragic error of judgement:

The mighty words of the proud are paid in full
with mighty blows of fate, and at long last
those blows will teach us wisdom

The final words of the Chorus, Sophocles: Antigone 441? BC: 128

TRAGEDY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Tragedie is to sey a certayn storie,
As olde bookes maken us memorie,
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
And is yfallen out of heigh degree
Into mysterie, and endeth wrechedly.

(Tragedy is a type of story found in ancient books in which is preserved the glory of one who had high status but fell into a terrible state and ended his days wretchedly.)

Chaucer: The Monk's Tale late 14th century

Tragedy in a Christian age?

In the Middle Ages ideas about tragedy became rather simplified. Some people argue that tragedy is not possible in Christian societies: if it is believed God's providence will ensure that ultimately the wicked are punished and the good rewarded, there is no urgent need for art to make sense of human suffering and those men who seek earthly power are deluded. At the end of *The Monk's Tale* (c.1400), Geoffrey Chaucer suggests tragedy is nothing more than the inevitable turning of the Wheel of Fortune:

But that Fortune alwey wole assaille
With unwar strook the regnes that hath been proude;
For whan man trusteth hire, than wole she faille,
And covere her brighte face with a cloude.

(Fortune will always assault with an unexpected blow the kings who have been proud; whenever a man trusts her, then will she let him down, covering her bright face with a cloud.)

Chaucer: The Monk's Tale late 14th century

Tragedy during this period shrunk in scope to a moral message about how the turning of the Wheel of Fortune will bring about the fall of kings and princes who put their faith in earthly power rather than God.

TRAGEDY IN THE RENAISSANCE

A royal protagonist

By the Renaissance this was still the basis of the view of a theorist such as Sir Philip Sidney, but there was also a new, more sceptical and more political slant. Sidney, writing in around 1581 was sure that tragedy

teacheth the uncertainty of the world, and upon how weak foundations
guilden roofs are builded.

Sir Philip Sidney c.1581: 45

That is, tragedy also showed tyrants that their crimes would be revealed and punished by God.

It was the dramatists, however, who decided that kings and princes were not the only candidates for the role of protagonist. Although Shakespeare's tragedies typically concern noble figures such as *Hamlet* (p.87) and *Othello* (p.94), Shylock the Jewish moneylender in *The Merchant of Venice* can certainly also be seen as a tragic figure. Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* was a scholar (p.67), and Tamburlaine originally a shepherd. John Webster's tragic protagonists in *The Duchess of Malfi* (p.132) and *The White Devil* are women, albeit aristocrats. Early modern English tragedy looked beyond the protagonist – the noble individual – showing not only a wider interest in society, but also questioning whether the universe is ruled by divine justice, a radical, even dangerous perspective at the time. In *King Lear* (p.103), the play's ending notoriously defies any notion that God has rewarded the just. The innocent Cordelia cannot be rescued in time and is hanged; the most senior surviving nobleman, Albany, proposes a division of the kingdom, the very policy which began the descent of the kingdom into chaos; the king's most loyal retainer, Kent, declines the offer of the crown for an obscure but ominous reason, hinting at his intention to commit suicide; and there is no clear resolution about what will happen next as the survivors stand on a stage littered with noble corpses.

ALBANY Friends of my soul, you twain [*To Kent and Edgar*]
Rule in this realm, and the gored state sustain.

KENT I have a journey, sir, shortly to go:
My master calls me, and I must not say no.

EDGAR The weight of this sad time we must obey:
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most: we that are young
Shall never see so much nor live so long.

Exeunt with a dead march

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THE ROMANTICS

Tragedy delights by affording a shadow of the pleasure which exists in pain.

Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Defence of Poetry 1821

Reinterpreting the Shakespearean protagonist

After the great days of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre tragedy in England, fell under the influence of neo-classical ideas (p.62). By the end of the 18th century it was German thinkers such as Goethe who were most significant. A key idea in the Romantic movement, of which Goethe was an important part, was that the world of the imagination offered a liberating vision against the constraints of society, with its hierarchies of power and organised religion.

The tragic protagonist in the Romantic period was a sensitive individual striving for self-expression in a world which did not recognise the validity of personal feeling and vision. Sensibility, not royal blood, was what made an individual a potentially tragic protagonist. In England, Romanticism expressed its tragic vision in critical and theatrical interpretations of Shakespeare. Hamlet, according to the poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was a man who gave too much weight to the life of the imagination and could not engage successfully with the real world. The tragedy of the Romantic protagonist lay in the failure of the world to fulfil the emotional and creative vision of the sensitive individual. Some fulfilment could happen in the private act of reading, inside the world of the imagination. Indeed, Charles Lamb suggested that Shakespeare ought only to be read since the plays lived best in the imagination, not on stage where they were constrained by the practicalities of performance. For the Romantics:

man could free himself only by rejecting or escaping from society, and by seeing his own deepest activities, in love, in art, in nature as essentially asocial and even anti-social.

Raymond Williams 1979: 73

In continental Europe Romantic works such as Goethe's *Faust* (completed 1832) and Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867) are almost unstageable in their entirety, but feature heroes striving mightily for emotional and spiritual fulfilment. The protagonists of Chekhov and Ibsen are often sensitive 'Romantic' individuals: in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890; p.149) Hedda is a woman raging against the world which traps her. However, by the end of the 19th century, the Romantic instinct had become something obscure and, in her case, merely self-destructive as she kills herself:

Hedda longs for beauty, for some different kind of perspective upon her world. 'It's a release to know that in spite of everything the unpremeditated act of courage is still possible. Something with at least a spark of instinctive beauty' (Act 3) ... But her motivation ultimately remains opaque, both to those around her and to her audience.

Jennifer Wallace 2007: 68-9

20TH-CENTURY INTERPRETATIONS

The tragic flaw

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the Romantic focus upon the uniqueness of the character of the individual protagonist, combined with the beginnings of the study of psychology, encouraged close scrutiny of the character of the protagonist as a means of understanding the nature of tragedy. A further factor was the contemporary belief in the ability of 'great men' to transform history on their own, an idea found in writers such as Thomas Carlyle.

A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) proposed the idea of the **tragic flaw** in the psychological make-up of the protagonist. (This is not to be confused with Aristotle's notion of **hamartia**, which is a matter of action, not character.)

What we do feel strongly, as tragedy advances to its close, is that calamities and catastrophe follow inevitably from the deeds of men, and that the main source of these deeds is character.

A.C. Bradley 1904: 29

Bradley drew on the ideas of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) who argued that political and social progress is made by the synthesis of opposing and conflicting forces. The character of the protagonist embodies just such a conflict: greatness in conflict with evil. According to this view, the protagonist is noble (not necessarily 'good'), but possesses a flaw which means that their downfall is inevitable. External factors are significant, but nothing like as significant as a conflicted individual moral psychology which brings about the opposite of what the character intends. According to Bradley, Hamlet's moral nature (p.87) is fragile, and the shock of his mother's re-marriage causes him to subside into melancholy. Othello's flaw is jealousy (p.94). When his lieutenant Iago falsely informs him that his wife Desdemona is having an affair:

such jealousy as Othello's converts human nature into chaos, and liberates the beast in man.

A.C. Bradley 1904: 169

Othello murders his wife and commits suicide. Bradley's view of Othello's character is also inflected by the 'scientific' racism propounded by many in the era in which he wrote.

TRAGEDY FOR THE 20TH CENTURY AND BEYOND

The tragedy of the common man

In the 20th century the protagonist came to be any man or woman. Partly this was a political assertion of the rights of the individual, particularly for American dramatists.

It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time – the heart and spirit of the average man.

Arthur Miller: 'Tragedy and the Common Man', New York Times 1949

But the tragic protagonist in contemporary drama does not quite seem to be anybody. A residue of Romanticism insists that the tragic protagonist must be someone who is prepared to devote themselves to some idea or notion, which may range from a political or economic belief to the simple need for utter personal integrity in a world which demands compromises. In the case of the former, the political and economic belief may be wrong, and this is the source of the tragedy. In the case of Arthur Miller's Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (p.215), it is Loman's dedication to American capitalism that leads to his destruction: he fails to see that men themselves become products with market value, and that once he can no longer behave convincingly as a salesman he too will be discarded as unsaleable stock.

Alternatively the dramatist can present the protagonist as fundamentally good, but doomed in attempting to be virtuous in a world where selfishness is what society values. One such example is Isobel, the protagonist of David Hare's *The Secret Rapture* (p.225).

In both cases, however, there is a refusal of the protagonist to surrender: rather than compromise their sense of who they are, they choose death or destruction. While we, the audience, may recognise the futility of this uncompromising and fatal view of life, the plays encourage us also to admire the man (or woman) who takes to its logical extreme the right to assert an individual belief in the face of an uncomprehending or unsympathetic society.

The commonest of men may take on ... stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest, the battle to secure his rightful place in the world.

Arthur Miller: 'Tragedy and the Common Man', New York Times 1949

It could be argued of classical and early modern tragedy that the nobility of the protagonist increases the tragic impact, since their fall, as a ruler or aristocrat,

greatly affects the society around them. But in modern tragedy the protagonist's very ordinariness may also make him or her able to stand for a wider class of people, and their political views: women, the working class, and other racial groups who have struggled for emancipation during the 20th century. Marlene and her sister Joyce in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982; p.227) come to stand for the different political and personal choices faced by women in Britain in the 1980s. Donal Davoren, the protagonist of Sean O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923; p.169), dramatises the self-mythologising of Irish nationalism. Davoren, an impecunious poet, is happy to be seen as an IRA gunman in order to impress a young woman in his tenement house, but his deception leads to the shooting of the impressionable Minnie Powell by the British army. This gives Davoren's romantic self-promotion a bitterly ironic edge:

To the people the end of life is the life created for them; to the poet the end of life is the life that he creates for himself; life has a stifling grip upon the people's throat – it is the poet's musician.

Sean O'Casey 1923: 107

The 20th-century protagonist is devoted to the fulfilment of his or her own personal ideal or the following of his or her own beliefs. The cost of that fulfilment upon themselves and society is often at the heart of the tragedy.

Arthur Miller and the background to *Death of a Salesman*

Arthur Miller was born in New York City on October 17, 1915. His career as a playwright began while he was a student at the University of Michigan. Several of his early works won prizes, and during his senior year, the Federal Theatre Project in Detroit performed one of his works. He produced his first great success, *All My Sons*, in 1947. Two years later, Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and transformed Miller into a national sensation. Many critics described *Death of a Salesman* as the first great American tragedy, and Miller gained eminence as a man who understood the deep essence of the United States. He published *The Crucible* in 1953, a searing indictment of the anti-Communist hysteria that pervaded 1950s America. He has won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award twice, and his *Broken Glass* (1993) won the Olivier Award for Best Play of the London Season.

Death of a Salesman, Miller's most famous work, addresses the painful conflicts within one family, but it also tackles larger issues regarding American national values. The play examines the cost of blind faith in the American Dream. In this respect, it offers a postwar American reading of personal tragedy in the tradition of Sophocles' *Oedipus Cycle*. Miller charges America with selling a false myth constructed around a capitalist materialism nurtured by the postwar economy, a materialism that obscured the personal truth and moral vision of the original American Dream described by the country's founders.

A half century after it was written, *Death of a Salesman* remains a powerful drama. Its indictment of fundamental American values and the American Dream of material success may seem somewhat tame in today's age of constant national and individual self-analysis and criticism, but its challenge was quite radical for its time. After World War II, the United States faced profound and irreconcilable domestic tensions and contradictions. Although the war had ostensibly engendered an unprecedented sense of American confidence, prosperity, and security, the United States became increasingly embroiled in a tense cold war with the Soviet Union. The propagation of myths of a peaceful, homogenous, and nauseatingly gleeful American golden age was tempered by constant anxiety about Communism, bitter racial conflict, and largely ignored economic and social stratification. Many Americans could not subscribe to the degree of social conformity and the ideological and cultural orthodoxy that a prosperous, booming, conservative suburban middle-class championed.

Uneasy with this American milieu of denial and discord, a new generation of artists and writers influenced by existentialist philosophy and the hypocritical postwar condition took up arms in a battle for self-realization and expression of personal meaning. Such discontented individuals railed against capitalist success as the basis of social approval, disturbed that so many American families centred their lives around material possessions (cars, appliances, and especially the just-introduced television)—often in an attempt to keep up with their equally materialistic neighbours. The climate of the American art world had likewise long been stuck in its own rut of conformity, confusion, and disorder following the prewar climax of European Modernism and the wake of assorted -isms associated with modern art and literature. The notions of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung regarding the role of the human subconscious in defining and accepting human existence, coupled with the existentialist concern with the individual's responsibility for understanding one's existence on one's own terms, captivated the imaginations of postwar artists and writers. Perhaps the most famous and widely read dramatic work associated with existentialist philosophy is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Miller fashioned a particularly American version of the European existentialist stance, incorporating and playing off idealistic notions of success and individuality specific to the United States.

The basis for the dramatic conflict in *Death of a Salesman* lies in Arthur Miller's conflicted relationship with his uncle, Manny Newman, also a salesman. Newman imagined a continuous competition between his son and Miller. Newman refused to accept failure and demanded the appearance of utmost confidence in his household. In his youth, Miller had written a short story about an unsuccessful salesman. His relationship with Manny revived his interest in the abandoned manuscript. He transformed the story into one of the most successful dramas in the history of the American stage. In expressing the emotions that Manny Newman inspired through the fictional character of Willy Loman, Miller managed to touch deep chords within the national psyche.

Contexts of *Death of a Salesman*

THE CONTEXT OF THE PLAYWRIGHT

- Arthur Miller was born in New York in October 1915 into a Jewish Polish family.
- In 1929, during the Depression, his father's business was ruined and the family moved to a house in Brooklyn, which is thought to be the model for the Loman's house in *Death of a Salesman*.
- After a youth spent playing football and working in a car warehouse to raise the funds, Miller attended the University of Michigan, graduating in English in 1938. During his time at University, he was awarded a prize for playwriting, along with Tennessee Williams.
- He returned to New York and began a career writing for radio.
- He married his college sweetheart in 1940 and they had two children.
- He was exempt from being drafted into the US Army because of an injury.
- He married Marilyn Monroe in 1956, but they were divorced in 1961.
- In 1957, he was brought before the House Committee on Un-American activities and called upon to explain his Communist tendencies. He was convicted of contempt for refusing to name names.
- In 1962, he remarried.
- Arthur Miller died in February 2005.

THE MAJOR PLAYS

<i>All My Sons</i>	1947	About a family coping with having a son listed as missing in action during WWII.	New York Drama Critics Circle Award
<i>Death of a Salesman</i>	1949	An examination of American life and consumerism	Drama Critics Circle Award; Pulitzer Prize
<i>The Crucible</i>	1953	About witch-hunts in colonial Salem, it implied a parallel with the McCarthy trials	Tony Award
<i>A View From the Bridge</i>	1955	The self discovery and fall of a Brooklyn dock worker questioning US immigration laws	
<i>After the Fall</i>	1964	About an unhappy marriage	

Find out about:

- The Depression
- The Wall Street Crash
- The American Dream

Contexts of *Death of a Salesman*

CONTEXT - THE AMERICAN DREAM

- The idea of the American Dream is that, through a combination of hard work, courage and determination, prosperity can be achieved. These values came to America with the early settlers and were passed on to later generations.
- In the later half of the 19th Century, there was a distinct possibility of coming across a fortune through relatively little effort, as long as you were able to invest in land. Many early prospectors bought cheap land west of the Rockies in the hope of finding deposits of gold. The American Dream was a driving force in the Gold Rush of the mid to late 1800s, as well as encouraging the immigration that followed.
- The Irish Potato Famine and other problems in Europe encouraged mass immigration to America. People fled the problems at home in order to prosper from the freedom and financial security that they had heard existed in America.
- As the 20th Century drew closer, the Dream became that of industry and capitalism, with men such as John D Rockefeller beginning life in humble conditions, but going on to control vast corporations and the fortunes that resulted.
- Successes such as these suggested that talent, intelligence and a willingness to work hard were all that was needed to achieve the dream.
- America has always been perceived as a place where the streets are paved with gold; consequently, there are more legal immigrants to the US per annum than any other country in the world. They were (and are) drawn to work in the major cities such as New York, Chicago and Detroit.
- During the 1920s and 1930s, the Depression was a cause of major hardship and seemed to be a reverse of the Dream which people had held dear for so long.
- The end of WWII drew young American families to live in comfort and stability in the suburbs, living the life of a 'perfect family'. However, the rise of the hippy values of the 1960s rejected this ideal - but did not kill it off entirely.
- Some say that that the American Dream is misleading. It is impossible for everyone to gain prosperity simply through hard work and determination. The consequence of this is that those who do not achieve success believe that it is entirely their fault.
- In addition, the poor are penalised as their poverty is seen as proof of their laziness.
- The American Dream does not take account of the fact that the family and wealth that one is born into, as well as traits such as natural intelligence, have a bearing on potential success in life.
- The word 'Dream' is important - what does it suggest?
- In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller shows that the American Dream is superficial and meaningless.

As you read the play, remember to look for quotations that are relevant to the theme of the American Dream, and add them to your chart.

Contexts of *Death of a Salesman*

THEATRICAL CONTEXT

In 1947, Miller saw Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* on stage and was impressed at how Williams had used a mixture of **realism** and **expressionism** to create a unique feeling for his play. It is this influence that we see in *Death of a Salesman*.

REALISM

- An artistic movement which began in France in the 19th Century.
- It sought to accurately portray everyday characters, situations and problems.
- The language used was as close as possible to natural conversation.
- Costumes were contemporary and sets were three-dimensional and lifelike.
- The plays were usually about social problems.

IBSEN; CHEKHOV; BERNARD SHAW

Miller was fascinated by Expressionism but didn't want to give up the conventions of Realism. In *Death of a Salesman*, he incorporates the two so that we see the reality of the events as well as the turmoil that Willy is undergoing.

Sometimes, this takes the form of Willy's past experiences being acted out; at other times, it is in the appearance of characters from the past in Willy's present.

Some people call these events 'flashbacks'. Miller did not. He said that it is 'literally that terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present'. ... 'There are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present ... because in his desperation to justify his life Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between now and then.'

EXPRESSIONISM

- Was a reaction to realism and began in the 1900s.
- It sought to portray the inner psychological life of a character, concentrating on a subjective view of the world rather than an objective one.
- Plot, structure and characterisation were less important than poetic dialogue.
- Lighting was used to create atmosphere.

MAINLY SEEN IN SCANDINAVIA, BUT ALSO IN THE WORK OF EUGENE O'NEILL AND THORNTON WILDER

Contexts of *Death of a Salesman*

THEATRICAL CONTEXT - TRAGEDY

- A tragedy, in the theatrical sense, is a serious play which represents the disastrous downfall of a central character (the protagonist). In some Ancient Greek tragedies, a happy ending was possible, but the more usual ending is that the protagonist dies.
- Aristotle (4th Century) defined a tragedy as an action which is serious and complete, with the protagonist achieving **catharsis** (purification) through incidents which arouse pity and terror. The protagonist is led to this point through **hamartia** (an error) which often takes the form of **hubris** (excessive pride).
- Traditionally, the protagonist would be of high status.
- The protagonist in a tragedy has a character defect or **tragic flaw** which brings about their downfall.
- *Death of a Salesman*, with its concerns for a socially inferior protagonist, may be considered a domestic tragedy.

John Keats

(1795–1821)



English Romantic poet John Keats was born on October 31, 1795, in London. The oldest of four children, he lost both his parents at a young age. His father, a livery-stable keeper, died when Keats was eight; his mother died of tuberculosis six years later. After his mother's death, Keats's maternal grandmother appointed two London merchants, Richard Abbey and John Rowland Sandell, as guardians. Abbey, a prosperous tea broker, assumed the bulk of this responsibility, while Sandell played only a minor role. When Keats was fifteen, Abbey withdrew him from the Clarke School, Enfield, to apprentice with an apothecary-surgeon and study medicine in a London hospital. In 1816 Keats became a licensed apothecary, but he never practiced his profession, deciding instead to write poetry.

Around this time, Keats met Leigh Hunt, an influential editor of the *Examiner*, who published his sonnets "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and "O Solitude." Hunt also introduced Keats to a circle of literary men, including the poets Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Wordsworth. The group's influence enabled Keats to see his first volume, *Poems by John Keats*, published in 1817. Shelley, who was fond of Keats, had advised him to develop a more substantial body of work before publishing it. Keats, who was not as fond of Shelley, did not follow his advice. *Endymion*, a four-thousand-line romance based on the Greek myth of the same name, appeared the following year. Two of the most influential critical magazines of the time, the *Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine*, attacked the collection. Calling the romantic verse of Hunt's literary circle "the Cockney school of poetry," *Blackwood's* declared *Endymion* to be nonsense and recommended that Keats give up poetry. Shelley, who privately disliked *Endymion* but recognised Keats's genius, wrote a more favourable review, but it was never published. Shelley also exaggerated the effect that the criticism had on Keats, attributing his declining health over the following years to a spirit broken by the negative reviews.

Keats spent the summer of 1818 on a walking tour in Northern England and Scotland, returning home to care for his brother, Tom, who suffered from tuberculosis. While nursing his brother, Keats met and fell in love with a woman named Fanny Brawne. Writing some of his finest poetry between 1818 and 1819, Keats mainly worked on "Hyperion," a Miltonic blank-verse epic of the Greek creation myth. He stopped writing "Hyperion" upon the death of his brother, after completing only a small portion, but in late 1819 he returned to the piece and rewrote it as "The Fall of Hyperion" (unpublished until 1856). That same autumn Keats contracted tuberculosis, and by the following February he felt that death was already upon him, referring to the present as his "posthumous existence."

In July 1820, he published his third and best volume of poetry, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*. The three title poems, dealing with mythical and legendary themes of ancient, medieval, and Renaissance times, are rich in imagery and phrasing. The volume also contains the unfinished “Hyperion,” and three poems considered among the finest in the English language, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “Ode on Melancholy,” and “Ode to a Nightingale.” The book received enthusiastic praise from Hunt, Shelley, Charles Lamb, and others, and in August, Frances Jeffrey, influential editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, wrote a review praising both the new book and *Endymion*.

The fragment “Hyperion” was considered by Keats’s contemporaries to be his greatest achievement, but by that time he had reached an advanced stage of his disease and was too ill to be encouraged. He continued a correspondence with Fanny Brawne and—when he could no longer bear to write to her directly—her mother, but his failing health and his literary ambitions prevented their getting married. Under his doctor’s orders to seek a warm climate for the winter, Keats went to Rome with his friend, the painter Joseph Severn. He died there on February 23, 1821, at the age of twenty-five.

When Keats died, he was hardly known outside his own literary circle. It was assumed that his work was doomed to total neglect and obscurity. However, later in the 19th century, the influential poet and critic Matthew Arnold said of Keats: ‘He is with Shakespeare’. The famous WWI poet Wilfred Owen also made the connection, saying that he wanted to fight ‘to protect the language of Keats and Shakespeare.’ Now, two hundred years after his death, Keats is probably the best-loved of the romantic poets.

Key Keatsian ideas:

- **‘O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!’** – Keats’s poems often contrast the ‘life of sensations’ (pleasure experienced through the senses in the present moment) with the ‘life of thoughts’ (reflection, philosophy, science etc.) These two mindsets can be seen in terms of two Greek gods: Dionysus, the god of wine, revelry and chaos, and Apollo, the god of light, reason, music, knowledge and order.
- **Negative capability** – ‘when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’ Keats praised Shakespeare for having this quality, and criticised Coleridge for lacking it. He believed that beauty was often to be found in mystery and uncertainty and that a desire to solve every mystery through philosophy or science stripped life of its beauty.
- **The ‘chameleon poet’** – A true poet, Keats said, ‘has no identity’. Again, he cited Shakespeare as the ultimate example of this. We cannot find his character, his opinions, his politics in his poetry: Shakespeare seems to take as much pleasure in portraying the villain as the hero, and he defies our attempts to understand what his opinions are. In contrast, Keats cites Wordsworth as an example of a poet who has ‘a design’ on the reader and tries to get us to think certain things:
‘We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us — and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul, and does not startle or amaze with itself, but with its subject.’
- **Beauty and truth** – ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’

A Level Literature
Coursework / Wider Reading
Prose reading list

George Orwell – *Nineteen Eighty-Four**
George Orwell – *Animal Farm**
J.D Salinger – *The Catcher in the Rye*
Ken Kesey – *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*
Kurt Vonnegut – *Slaughterhouse 5*
Joseph Conrad – *Heart of Darkness*
Henry James – *The Turn of the Screw*
Ray Bradbury – *The Martian Chronicles* (short stories)
Ray Bradbury – *The Illustrated Man* (short stories)
Ray Bradbury – *Fahrenheit 451**
Franz Kafka – *The Metamorphosis*
James Joyce – *Dubliners* (short stories)
Thomas Pynchon – *The Crying of Lot 49*
Charlotte Perkins Gilman – *The Yellow Wallpaper***
Kate Chopin – *The Awakening*
Albert Camus – *The Outsider*
Shirley Jackson – *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*
Chinua Achebe – *Things Fall Apart*
Nathaniel West – *Miss Lonely Heart*
John Steinbeck – *The Pearl*
Ernest Hemingway – *The Old Man and the Sea*
Ernest Hemingway – *In Our Time* (short stories)
Raymond Carver - *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (short stories)
Edith Warton – *Ethan Frome*
Anthony Burgess – *A Clockwork Orange*
Toni Morrison – *The Bluest Eye*
Katherine Mansfield – *The Garden Party & other short stories*
Alice Munro – *Runaway*
Edgar Allan Poe – *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*
Thomas Hardy – *The Withered Arm*
Daphne Du Maurier – *The Birds*
E.M Forster – *The Machine Stops*

Titles in bold are highly recommended coursework texts, either because they link well with the critical anthology or because I know them inside out and can offer plenty of support. Please give these texts serious consideration before looking beyond them.

* Recommended reading for Political/Social Protest Writing (Paper 2)

** A decent fallback choice. Read it; it's short, but it has been done to death for prose coursework.