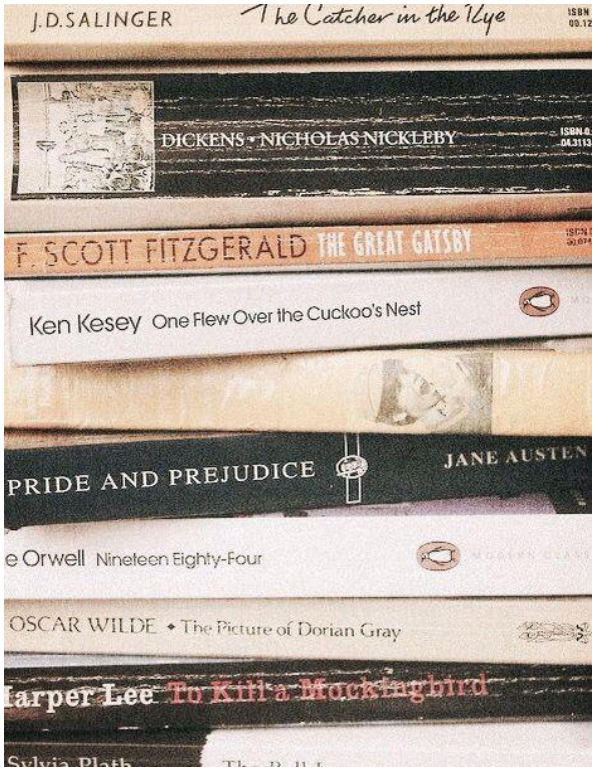
A Level English Literature
At
The Blue Coat School



Welcome to English Literature!

If you are reading this it is because you simply love reading; understanding different experiences, being transported to new worlds or seeing your own reflected on the page in front of you.

At A Level you will study a richly diverse range of texts, exposing you to a plethora of themes and ideas, as well as different social, historical, political and philosophical ideas.

This bridging course will consolidate and develop the skills you have honed at GCSE as well as introducing you to some of the texts you will be studying at A Level. At the back of the pack, you can find a glossary of poetic terms (some of these will be familiar to you from GCSE but some will be new) as well as some optional additional reading.

Why study literature?

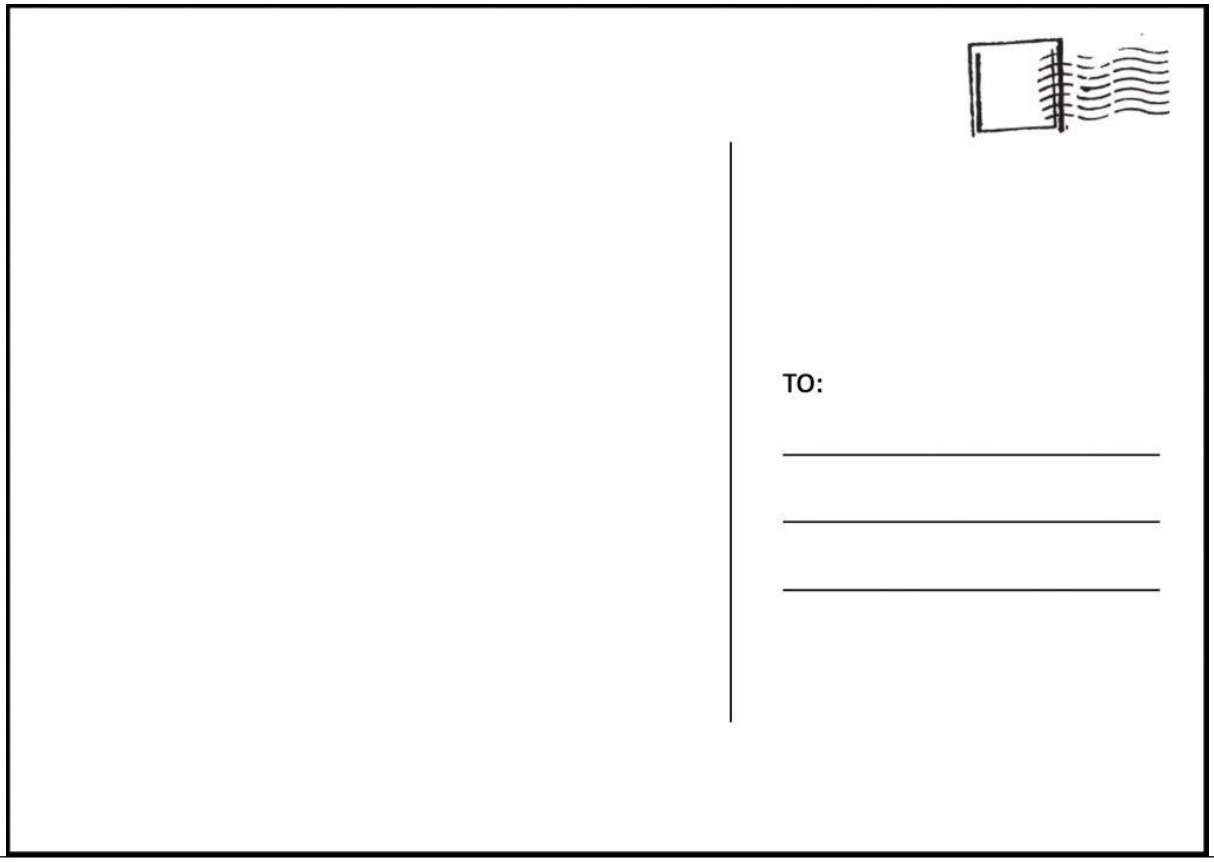
Find out here!

‘To My Nine Year Old Self’
By Helen Dunmore

Picture yourself at age nine. Do you have a particular image in mind of yourself at this sort of age? What are you doing in this image? What do you look like? What might you have been thinking about?

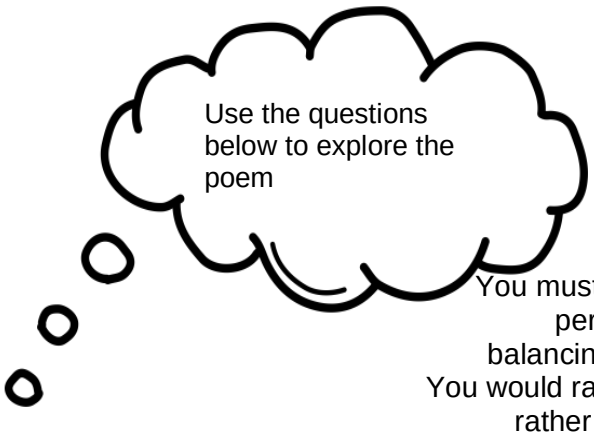
Imagine you could talk to your younger self in this picture. Write a postcard to this self in which you write:

- one sentence about what you look like in your picture of yourself
- one sentence about what you are doing
- one sentence about what you would say to this former self if you could meet him or her.



What issues are raised by this exercise?

- Are you the same person as you were at nine? What is the same/different about you?
- How easy was it to imagine yourself and what you were thinking at nine?
- How would you feel about yourself at age nine if you could go back in time?
- And how would your nine year old self feel about you now?
- Any other questions/issues?



To My Nine Year Old Self
by Helen Dunmore

You must forgive me. Don't look so surprised,
perplexed , and eager to be gone
balancing on your hands or on the tightrope
You would rather run than walk, rather climb than run
rather leap from a height than anything.

I have spoiled this body we once shared.
Look at the scars, and watch the way I move,
careful of a bad back or a bruised foot.
Do you remember how, three minutes after waking
we'd jump straight out of the ground floor window
into the summer morning

That dream we had, no doubt it's as fresh in your mind
as the white paper to write it on.
We made a start, but something else came up -
a baby vole, or a bag of sherbet lemons -
and besides that summer of ambition
created an ice-lolly factory, a wasp trap
and a den by a cesspit

I'd like to say we could be friends
but the truth is we have nothing in common
beyond a few shared years. I won't keep you then.
Time to pick rosehips for tuppence a pound,
time to hide down scared lanes
from men in cars after girl-children

or to lunge out over the water
on the rope that swings from that tree
long buried in housing -
But no, I shan't cloud your morning. God knows
I have fears enough for us both -

I leave you in an ecstasy of conversation
slowly peeling a ripe scab from your knee
to taste it on your tongue.

Look at Dunmore's use of second person pronoun. What is the effect?
Underline the strong use of active verbs at the start of the poem? Why are they there?
Where could you identify the speaker as being self-deprecating?
Explore the poet's use of 'we', 'you' and 'I'. What do you notice?
Look at Dunmore's use of caesura and enjambment. What do you notice?

Poetic Terms Quiz

Can you identify the correct poetic terms from their definitions? Check your answers against the glossary at the back of this pack.

A group of lines in a poem

- Paragraph
- Stanza
- Sonnet

A strong, regular repeated pattern of movement or sound

- Rhyme
- Rhythm
- Onomatopoeia

The repetition of vowel sounds usually in the middle of words

- Onomatopoeia
- Assonance
- Personification

Giving human traits to non-living things

- Hyperbole
- Alliteration
- Personification

A distinct break in a poetic line, usually marked by punctuation

- Caesura
- Enjambment
- Cadence

Consonant sounds such as ‘f’ and ‘th’

- Consonance
- Plosives
- Fricatives

An Easy Passage
By Julia Copus

Once she is halfway up there, crouched in her bikini
on the porch roof of her family's house, trembling,
she knows that the one thing she must not do is to think
of the narrow windowsill, the sharp
drop of the stairwell; she must keep her mind
on the friend with whom she is half in love
and who is waiting for her on the blond
gravel somewhere beneath her, keep her mind
on her and on the fact of the open window,
the flimsy, hole-punched, aluminium lever
towards which in a moment she will reach
with the length of her whole body, leaning in
to the warm flank of the house. But first she
steadies herself, still crouching, the grains of the asphalt
hot beneath her toes and fingertips,
a square of petrified beach. Her tiny breasts
rest lightly on her thighs. – What can she know
of the way the world admits us less and less
the more we grow? For now both girls seem
lit, as if from within, their hair and the gold stud
earrings in the first one's ears; for now the long, grey
eye of the street, and far away from the mother
who does not trust her daughter with a key,
the workers about their business in the drab
electroplating factory over the road,
far too, most far, from the flush-faced secretary
who, with her head full of the evening class
she plans to take, or the trip of a lifetime, looks up now
from the stirring omens of the astrology column
at a girl – thirteen if she's a day – standing
in next to nothing in the driveway opposite,
one hand flat against her stomach, one
shielding her eyes to gaze up at a pale calf,
a silver anklet and the five neat shimmering
oyster-painted toenails of an outstretched foot
which catch the sunlight briefly like the
flash of armaments before
dropping gracefully into the shade of the house.

In this poem, Copus explores the fleeting moment between girlhood and womanhood; between adolescence and adulthood. She uses the common and almost cliched image of a girl sneaking back in through her bedroom window after having been out without her parents' knowledge. How many films or TV shows can you think of where this happens? Even Simba sneaks out in *The Lion King.* However, Copus cleverly avoids cliché as the image acts as an extended metaphor for the girl's bridging of these two stages in life.

Use the questions below to help you decode the poem. Don't worry if you can't answer every question, just thinking about these things will help you explore the poem. If you struggle with the terms use the glossary at the back of the pack to help.

- The poem starts in media res, is unmetered and is written in filmic free verse. Why?
- There is an element of liminality in the poem. What is the significance of this? What does this symbolize?
- Why does the poet use an omniscient narrator?
- Why does the poet use the present tense?
- Focus on the caesura in line 13. What's the effect?
- The girls appear to be almost naked. Why?
- Identify any authorial intrusion. What is the effect?
- "Long, grey eye of the street". Complete a detailed analysis of this line.
- Look at the representation of other women. What's the significance of this?
- Explore the effect of the final simile.
- The poem is written as a single, unbroken whole. Why?

Make a list of links between 'To My Nine Year Old Self' and 'An Easy Passage'. Remember to think about the way the poems are written (poetic voice, structure, language etc) as well as what they are about.

How would I construct a response to these poems?

Read through the example below exploring two different poems ‘Please Hold’ and ‘Somewhat Unravelled” (feel free to read these two poems yourself!)

Within both poems, it becomes quite obvious that both poetic voices have to grapple with differing sorts of newfound powerlessness. In 'Please Hold', the poetic voice discovers that he is unable to influence his phone-call with an automated robot. Indeed, throughout the poem there is anaphoric repetition of "the robot", which serves to highlight the robot's prominence and dominance of the conversation, while the repeated use of a definite article gives the robot a heightened appearance of power, contrasting against the poetic voice's powerlessness. Shapcott uses a similar technique at the beginning of her poem, when the word "kettle" is repeated three times in the first two lines, highlighting the increased difficulty and frustration the aunt faces as she tries to interact with everyday objects despite her old age and limited mobility. Furthermore, O'Driscoll highlights the debilitating sense of powerlessness with the abrupt realisation that "I'm paying a robot for doing nothing." This construction contrasts with the previous polysyndeton that O'Driscoll uses during the conversation, with this statement marking the abrupt realisation that nothing can be done to shift the balance of power between him and the robot. This blunt moment of recognition does not take place in Shapcott's poetry, as the aunt's deterioration is a much more gradual process. Instead, we are shown a disjointed attempt at conversation between the personas as he says "Let me make you a cup of tea. She says ah ha!" The use of the imperative "let" highlights the dependence of the aunt upon the poetic voice, while her non-sequitur reply shows her failure to understand her niece and, more importantly, to connect with her.

As you can see from the answer above, you need to do three things:

AO!: provide a creative response to the question, using terminology and an academic style.
AO2: Analyse the ways writers shape meanings
AO4: Make connections between the two poems

Your turn!

Now have a go at writing your own comparison of ‘To My Nine Year Old Self’ and ‘An Easy Passage’. You can use the table at the bottom of the page to check you have included everything you need:

AO!: provide a creative response to the question, using terminology and an academic style.	
AO2: Analyse the ways writers shape meanings	
AO4: Make connections between the two poems	

Subject Terminology

ALLITERATION	The repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of neighbouring words in a line.
ALLUSION	A reference to a well known story, event, person or object.
ANAPAEST	A three beat pattern of syllables: unstressed, unstressed, stressed. E.g. 'on the moon.'
ANTITHESIS	The use of balanced opposites.
ASSONANCE	Vowel rhyme, e.g. sod and block.
BLANK VERSE	Unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter.
CADENCE	The rise and fall of sounds in a line of poetry.
CAESURA	A distinct break in a poetic line, usually marked by punctuation.
CONSONANCE	Rhyme based on consonants only, e.g. book and back.
COUPLET	A two line stanza, conventionally rhyming.
DACTYL	The reverse pattern to ANAPAEST: stressed, unstressed, unstressed. E.g. 'Strong as a'
DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE	A poem written in the voice of a distinct character.
ELEGY	A poem written in mourning of someone who is dead.
END RHYME	Rhyming words at the end of a line.
END-STOPPED	The opposite of enjambment; i.e. when a sentence and the poetic line stop at the same point.
ENJAMBMENT	Where sentences run over the end of lines or stanzas.
FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE	Language that is not literal, but employs figures of speech, such as metaphors or similes.
FEMININE RHYME	A rhyme that ends with an unstressed syllable or unstressed syllables.
FREE VERSE	A poem without metre or a regular, set form.
FRICATIVE	Consonant sounds such as 'f' and 'th'
HEROIC COUPLETS	Pairs of rhymed lines written in iambic pentameter.
HYPERBOLE	Extreme exaggeration.
IAMBIC	A metrical pattern of a weak followed by a strong stress, ti-TUM, like a heartbeat.
IMAGERY	The umbrella term for description in poetry.
JUXTAPOSITION	Two things placed together to create a strong contrast.
MASCULINE RHYME	An end rhyme on a strong syllable.
METAPHOR	An implicit comparison in which one thing is said to be another.
METONYM	A word, name or expression used as the substitute for something else with which it is closely associated. E.g. 'Washington' for US Government.
METRE	The regular pattern organising sound and rhyme in a poem.
MOLOSSUS	A metrical foot consisting of three long syllables.
MONORHYME	A poem in which all of the lines share the same end rhyme.
MOTIF	A repeated image or pattern of language, often carrying thematic significance.
OCET or OCTAVE	The opening eight lines of a sonnet.

ONOMATOPOEIA	Words that mirror the sound they describe.
PARADOX	A paradox is a statement that contradicts itself and still seems true somehow.
PENTAMETER	A poetic line consisting of five beats.
PERSONIFICATION	Giving human characteristics to inanimate things.
PLOSIVE	A type of alliteration using ‘p’ or ‘b’ sounds.
QUATRAIN	A four line stanza.
REFRRAIN	A line or lines repeated like a chorus.
SESTET	The last six lines of a sonnet.
SIMILE	An explicit comparison of two different things.
SONNET	A form of poetry with 14 lines and a variety of possible set rhyme patterns.
SPONDEE	Two strong stresses together in a line of poetry.
STANZA	The technical name for a verse.
SYMBOL	Something that stands for something else. Often a concrete representation on an idea.
SYNEDOCHE	A figure of speech in which a part is used to represent the whole.
SYNTAX	The word order in a sentence.
TERCET	Three line stanza.
TETRAMETER	A line of poetry consisting of four beats.
TROCHEE	The opposite of an aim; stressed, unstressed, strong, weak.
VILANELLE	A complex interlocking verse form in which lines are recycled.
VOLTA	The ‘turn’ in a poem.

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Openings in Contemporary Fiction – Questions, Challenges and Surprises

Stephen Dilley takes a look at the openings of four books on the 2016 Man Booker Prize shortlist to see how they work, and reflects on how these examples tie in with new trends in contemporary narrative writing.

The best openings of novels do more than just introduce plot, character and setting: they allow the writer to tell us something about the kind of novel we are about to read, and the role which they expect us to play as readers. Small details matter in these first sentences. By interrogating the openings of four of the novels from this year's Man Booker Prize shortlist, we can see how writers today set out to challenge and surprise their readers, and how the role of the reader is changing in fiction today.

Paul Beatty – The Sellout

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

Beatty's satire on American race relations is immediately provocative; as enlightened liberal readers, we may feel a sense of affront at the first-person narrator's initial assumptions about our prejudices ('This may be hard to believe') but the following list of perceived misdemeanours reveals a lighter touch, the use of minor sentences and repeated 'Never' giving it the flavour and force of a spoken voice. This paragraph is full of unexpected juxtapositions as the speaker moves seamlessly between trivial and serious offences. As with all satire, we may laugh at the exaggeration, whilst recognising the angry truth behind it in the context of continuing police shootings, inequality and discrimination.

This list reaches its climax as he describes 'board[ing] a crowded bus or subway car': given the racial context, we are likely to recall Rosa Parks' anti-segregation protest and may feel that we know what is coming next. His subsequent volte-face as he introduces his 'gigantic penis' is therefore doubly surprising: it should make us laugh at its outrageous irreverence (and the implication that even this

might be seen as normal behaviour for a black man), but also warns us that this novel will have no respect for any taboos surrounding racism and is therefore not for the easily shocked. The 'perverted, yet somehow crestfallen, look' seems to encapsulate the mixture of absurdity, pathos and anger that will run throughout the novel.

In the final sentence, the comparison between the 'thickly padded chair' and 'this country' is particularly telling: here, Beatty is giving us a sense of the novel's scope and ambition – this is a novel not just one man but about a whole nation – but also that he will not be afraid of exposing uncomfortable truths behind 'comfortable' façades.

Deborah Levy – Hot Milk

> *2015. Almería. Southern Spain. August.*
>
> *Today I dropped my laptop on the concrete floor of a bar built on the beach. It was tucked under my arm and slid out of its black rubber sheath (designed like an envelope), landing screen side down. The digital page is now shattered but at least it still works. My laptop has all my life in it and knows more about me than anyone else.*
>
> *So what I am saying is that if it's broken, so am I.*

The words '2015' and 'Today' immediately anchor this novel in the present: this is a novel of now, for now, about now and it's another first-person narrative. Some readers may feel that the speaker's reaction to her broken screen lacks perspective, but most of us will recognise her feeling that 'my laptop has all my life on it, and knows more about me than anyone else'.

But there is more going on here than just a comment on today's digital world. A sense of fracturing is central to Levy's opening: the full stops in the chapter title immediately create a jolting, fragmented effect which lacks the fluency we might expect of a diary entry. This is compounded by the violence of the first sentence, emphasised through the hard 'concrete floor'. We don't need to draw the parallel between the laptop's shattered screen and the speaker's feelings of brokenness because Levy does this for us. The observation we might make instead is that symbols of this kind will be important to how the novel communicates with us. Note, for instance, the sexual connotations of the 'rubber sheath' which is then compared to an 'envelope', associating the laptop with both sexuality and communication and suggesting that both might be slippery and difficult to grasp. As readers, we are being told to be alert to resonances like this throughout the novel, and to be ready to make these connections ourselves. We are also being told explicitly that what we're hearing is an account – 'So what I am saying is' – which draws attention to the telling in a way that many contemporary fictions like to do.

Ottessa Moshfegh – Eileen

> *I looked like a girl you'd expect to see on a city bus, reading some clothbound book from the library about plants or geography, perhaps wearing a net over my light brown hair. You might take me for a nursing student or a typist, note the nervous hands, a foot tapping, bitten lip. I looked like nothing special. It's easy for me to imagine this girl, a strange, young and mousy*

> *version of me, carrying an anonymous leather purse or eating from a small package of peanuts, rolling each one between her gloved fingers, sucking in her cheeks, staring anxiously out the window.*

Here again, we have a first-person narrator, and, like Beatty, Moshfegh immediately explores the assumptions we might form about her speaker ('a girl you'd expect to see on a city bus', 'you might take me for'). The message is clear: appearances will be significant in this novel but might be deceptive too. The reader is explicitly instructed to 'note the nervous hands, a foot tapping, bitten lip' – all familiar signifiers of anxiety – but because we can only see the speaker from the outside at this stage, we are left guessing at its causes.

But then, unlike Beatty and Levy, Moshfegh pivots quite unexpectedly to give a different view: 'it's easy for me to imagine this girl.' Here, Moshfegh establishes a gulf between the speaker then and now, and we realise that the first sentence's past tense ('I looked like') refers back much further than we had initially realised. As she continues to describe this 'strange, young and mousy version of me', we realise that the speaker has now changed into a completely different person. She subsequently tells us that 'I was not myself back then. I was someone else. I was Eileen.' The questions that will fuel our interest concern the idea of identity: how and why has she changed, and what did it mean for her to be 'not myself'?

Graeme Macrae Burnet – His Bloody Project

> ***Preface***
>
> *I am writing this at the behest of my advocate, Mr Andrew Sinclair, who since my incarceration here in Inverness has treated me with a degree of civility I in no way deserve. My life has been short and of little consequence, and I have no wish to absolve myself of responsibility for the deeds which I have lately committed. It is thus for no other reason than to repay my advocate's kindness towards me that I commit these words to paper.*
>
> *So begins the memoir of Roderick Macrae, a 17-year-old crofter, indicted on the charge of three brutal murders carried out in his native village of Culduie in Ross-shire on the morning of the 10th of August 1869.*

This prologue gives us two voices – the beginning of a first-person historical testimony and a commentary on this. Roderick Macrae's memoir immediately raises plenty of questions – the speaker's situation, the 'deeds' he has committed, the reasons for his current emotional state – and therefore, its interruption partly serves to pique our interest by withholding answers. But it also changes how we respond to what we have just read. The fact that these words have become the subject of scrutiny within the text invites us to read them critically too: we should not just accept Roderick's words at face value.

Macrae Burnet also uses this device to establish an illusion of historical veracity: the novel comprises a series of 'found' 19th-century documents, and the inclusion of a modern-day commentary adds authenticity, inviting us to suspend disbelief and imagine that the fictional events we are about to

encounter might actually be true. To add further weight, the author has playfully given his protagonist the same surname as himself, claiming this as a work of family history and thereby further blurring those boundaries between fact and fiction.

What's Revealed About Contemporary Fiction

So what, if anything, can these openings tell us about contemporary fiction? To a greater or lesser extent, they are all postmodern novels which reject the idea that they might contain any inherent objective truth or meaning. They are also concerned as much with how their stories are told as with the stories themselves, and all share a degree of self-consciousness in their openings, whether this is through explicit reference to the act of writing in His Bloody Project ('I am writing this at the behest of my advocate [...] that I commit these words to paper') or of speaking in Hot Milk ('So what I am saying is'), or through the willingness to address us as readers directly and subvert what we might 'expect' in Eileen and The Sellout. In all of these novels, the process of telling is fraught with great unreliability and fragility, and we should therefore anticipate as much drama to stem from the relation of events as we will find within the events themselves.

Linked to this is the role which we can expect to play as readers – we are not being treated simply as vessels expected to receive each novel's contents passively and uncritically, but are instead invited to become active participants, bringing our own experiences, beliefs and prejudices with us into each text and allowing these to be exposed and challenged by what we read. The direct involvement of the reader is a device as old as the novel itself; but what distinguishes these novels as particularly contemporary is that we are not simply being asked to decode meanings, but to create them. As this year's winner, Paul Beatty, said,

> *I definitely don't have a message.*

Any messages that we wish to take from these novels we will have to construct ourselves, and we are invited to begin that process of constructing meanings from the novels' very first pages.

Article Written By: Stephen Dilley is Acting Head of English at The Abbey School, Reading.

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Print

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Useful Information:

What exam board do we use?

The exam board used is EDEXCEL. You can find the specification here.

What texts will we study?

You can find your reading list below. The more of this that you can read before the course begins, the better.

A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams

Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte

Selected poems of Christina Rossetti

Othello by William Shakespeare

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini

Selected poems from Poems of the Decade: An Anthology of the Forward Books of Poetry

We ask that you buy your own copies of the plays and the novels so that you can annotate them in a way that is most effective to your study. The poems will be provided for you by school.

You can also watch adaptations of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Othello* to familiarise yourself with the texts.