

Transition to Advanced Level English Literature

Welcome to A Level Literature - you have chosen an excellent A Level!

Why is there such a gap between GCSEs and A-levels? Well, A-levels are – as their name suggests – advanced qualifications, and so require much more of you as the student. They require you to gain a deeper understanding of the texts that you study. There is a lot more independent work required like reading about the author’s life and how this may have influenced the text; reading texts that are not on the examination syllabus in order to gain a deeper understanding of the context or writer’s that may have influenced the writing of the novel that you are studying.

Dr Ellerby, head of history at Dorset's Parkstone grammar, says: *"GCSE is often highly structured with very specific requirements for homework, whereas at A-level there is a greater expectation for taking the initiative in going beyond the set reading and utilising the library to read around and consolidate."* Roughly speaking, for GCSE exams you can just learn the content. At A-level you actually need to **understand** it.

The internet is a great source for reading other people's interpretations of text – use these to formulate your own response – remember the beauty of Literature is that there is never a right or wrong answer as long as you can justify your point of view!

Get into the habit of using your time effectively, and organise yourself so you know when you have deadlines and when you're going to do your work, then A-levels will seem much easier and less of a jump than expected. Particularly during the pressure points when you have non-examined assessment or exams, being organised and motivated from the start will ensure that you're really prepared, and not too stressed.

At any point during A-levels, if you're finding it hard, or are struggling with the workload, then it's always worth seeking advice and support. Your form tutor, subject teachers, and head of sixth form are a good place to start, and the earlier you talk to someone about any difficulties that you're having, the sooner they can be resolved.

Reading List

Lessons will not be used to read the text; you will be expected to come to lessons with a good knowledge of the plot, main themes and characters.

Over the summer, you are required to read the following texts that will be studied in the Autumn term. Buying your own copies is essential in order to make and keep annotations and highlights:

- Play: 'A Streetcar Named Desire' by Tennessee Williams (ISBN: 0141190272)
- Poetry: 'Poems of the Decade: An Anthology of the Forward Books of Poetry 2002–2011' (ISBN: 978-0571325405)

You will be given information in September about further texts required.

Starting in September

In your first lesson you will be given a course booklet with a wide range of information about the course and how you will be assessed. You will also undertake a series of activities to help you start understanding the aspects of literature covered throughout the year.

We hope your transition lessons have been enjoyable. We also hope that you enjoy your summer reading and look forward to hearing and seeing your responses in September.

Transition Tasks

To get you engaged with your reading and to give your new teachers an idea of your approach to the subject, you are expected to bring your response to the attached texts (the opening of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and a poem by Simon Armitage called *Chainsaw vs the Pampas Grass*) and tasks (before the texts) to your first lesson in September. **This is a compulsory task** from which we will make our first assessment as teachers.

Please complete the two tasks, answering the questions as fully as you can:

TASK ONE

Task on extract from *A Streetcar Named Desire*:

- 1) Select three details from the setting and explain what they might tell us about the themes of the play.
- 2) Comment on what Stella and Stanley's dialogue reveals about their characters and their relationship to each other.
- 3) Comment on what you think the significance of the final moment in this extract is – where Stanley throws the meat at Stella.

A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams

And so it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each desperate choice
"The Broken Tower" by Hart Crane

SCENE ONE

The exterior of a two-story corner building on a street in New Orleans which is named Elysian Fields and runs between the L & N tracks and the river. The section is poor but, unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm. The houses are mostly white frame, weathered gray, with rickety outside stairs and galleries and quaintly ornamented gables. This building contains two flats, upstairs and down. Faded white stairs ascend to the entrances of both.

It is first dark of an evening early in May. The sky that shows around the dim white building is a peculiarly tender blue, almost a turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay. You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouses with their faint redolences of bananas and coffee. A corresponding air is evoked by the music of Negro entertainers at a barroom around the corner.

In this part of New Orleans you are practically always just around the corner, or a few doors down the street, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers. This "Blue Piano" expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here.

Two women, one white and one colored, are taking the air on the steps of the building. The white woman is Eunice, who occupies the upstairs flat; the colored woman a neighbor, for New Orleans is a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races in the old part of town.

Above the music of the "Blue Piano" the voices of people on the street can be heard overlapping.

[Two men come around the corner, Stanley Kowalski and Mitch. They are about twenty-eight or thirty years old, roughly dressed in blue denim work clothes. Stanley carries his bowling jacket and a red-stained package from a butcher's. They stop at the foot of the steps.]

STANLEY [bellowing]: Hey, there! Stella, Baby!

[Stella comes out on the first floor landing, a gentle young woman, about twenty-five, and of a background obviously quite different from her husband's.]

STELLA [mildly]: Don't holler at me like that. Hi, Mitch.

STANLEY: Catch!

STELLA: What?

STANLEY: Meat!

[He heaves the package at her. She cries out in protest but manages to catch it; then she laughs breathlessly. Her husband and his companion have already started back around the corner.]

TASK TWO

Task on *Chainsaw vs the Pampas Grass*:

- 1) Summarise the 'story' of the poem in no more than 50 words.
- 2) Explain any possible symbolic meaning for:
 - a. The chainsaw
 - b. The pampas grass
 - c. Their interaction and outcomes.
- 3) Explain how Armitage has used language and structure to convey meaning in the poem.
- 4) Select the device you find contributes the most to the meaning of the poem and explain your choice.

Chainsaw versus the Pampas Grass

By Simon Armitage

It seemed an unlikely match. All winter unplugged,
grinding its teeth in a plastic sleeve, the chainsaw swung
nose-down from a hook in the darkroom
under the hatch in the floor. When offered the can
it knocked back a quarter-pint of engine oil
and juices ran from its joints and threads,
oozed across the guide-bar and the maker's name,
into the dry links.

From the summerhouse, still holding one last gulp
of last year's heat behind its double doors, and hung
with the weightless wreckage of wasps and flies,
mothballed in spider's wool . . .

from there, I trailed the day-glo orange power line
the length of the lawn and the garden path,
fed it out like powder from a keg, then walked

back to the socket and flicked the switch, then walked again
and coupled the saw to the flex – clipped them together.
Then dropped the safety catch and gunned the trigger.

No gearing up or getting to speed, just an instant rage,
the rush of metal lashing out at air, connected to the mains.

The chainsaw with its perfect disregard, its mood
to tangle with cloth, or jewellery, or hair.

The chainsaw with its bloody desire, its sweet tooth
for the flesh of the face and the bones underneath,
its grand plan to kick back against nail or knot
and rear up into the brain.

I let it flare, lifted it into the sun
and felt the hundred beats per second drumming in its heart,
and felt the drive-wheel gargle in its throat.

The pampas grass with its ludicrous feathers
and plumes. The pampas grass, taking the warmth and light
from cuttings and bulbs, sunning itself,
stealing the show with its footstools, cushions and tufts
and its twelve-foot spears.

This was the sledgehammer taken to crack the nut.

Probably all that was needed here was a good pull or shove or a pitchfork to lever it out at
its base.

Overkill. I touched the blur of the blade
against the nearest tip of a reed – it didn't exist.

I dabbed at a stalk that swooned, docked a couple of heads,
dismissed the top third of its canes with a sideways sweep
at shoulder height – this was a game.

I lifted the fringe of undergrowth, carved at the trunk –
plant-juice spat from the pipes and tubes
and dust flew out as I ripped into pockets of dark, secret warmth.

To clear a space to work
I raked whatever was severed or felled or torn
towards the dead zone under the outhouse wall, to be fired.
Then cut and raked, cut and raked, till what was left
was a flat stump the size of a barrel lid
that wouldn't be dug with a spade or prised from the earth.
Wanting to finish things off I took up the saw
and drove it vertically downwards into the upper roots,
but the blade became choked with soil or fouled with weeds,
or what was sliced or split somehow closed and mended behind,
like cutting at water or air with a knife.
I poured barbecue fluid into the patch
and threw in a match – it flamed for a minute, smoked
for a minute more, and went out. I left it at that.

In the weeks that came new shoots like asparagus tips
sprang up from its nest and by June
it was riding high in its saddle, wearing a new crown.
Corn in Egypt. I looked on
from the upstairs window like the midday moon.

Back below stairs on its hook the chainsaw seethed.
I left it a year, to work back through its man-made dreams, to try to forget.
The seamless urge to persist was as far as it got.

Finally

If you have any questions between now and September about AS English Literature at HWS, email Miss Ford (Head of English) at efo@hws.haringey.sch.uk or Ms Maree (KS5 Co-ordinator for English) at cma@hws.haringey.sch.uk.

Extension Tasks

Complete at least six bingo squares!

14. Dive into the world of short stories, listen to interview and discussion about it <input type="checkbox"/>	12. Investigate what an essay actually is, read some great examples and write one of your own about any subject you want <input type="checkbox"/>	24. Immerse yourself in a university lecture <input type="checkbox"/>	7. Try exploratory writing <input type="checkbox"/>
18. Write a graphic novel version of one of your GCSE texts. How well can you get across what is most important and distinctive? What gets lost? <input type="checkbox"/>	19. Put together a short anthology of poems and write the introduction to the collection <input type="checkbox"/>	20. Listen to literature (audio books) <input type="checkbox"/>	2. Read an <i>emagazine</i> article and select 3 interesting points to share <input type="checkbox"/>
11. Read a prize-winning novel – just for pleasure <input type="checkbox"/>	15. Visit a virtual library – the British Library's Discovering Literature website <input type="checkbox"/>	16. Take a risk by sharing an idea you're not sure about <input type="checkbox"/>	1. Let a poem brew over time <input type="checkbox"/>
22. Collate a taster anthology of your favourite books to tempt another reader into giving them a try <input type="checkbox"/>	4. Watch a play online and write the script for a podcast/online discussion reviewing it <input type="checkbox"/>	3. Watch a film or TV adaptation of a novel you know. Then write a pitch for a novel you think would make a great film adaptation. Explain why! <input type="checkbox"/>	13. Listen to a literature podcast and share what you found interesting with a classmate/your teacher <input type="checkbox"/>
10. Play with a text, messing about and transforming it in 2 or 3 different ways. What do you learn about the original? <input type="checkbox"/>	5. Experts in the spotlight – watch a selection of emagClips <input type="checkbox"/>	21. Take part in a 'Critics' Conference' role play <input type="checkbox"/>	17. Create a 'Five Books' list and publish your list <input type="checkbox"/>
8. Read the opening pages of 2 or 3 books about literature and explain which you'd most like to go on to read <input type="checkbox"/>	23. Explore the art of the review – read 3 or 4 online reviews for a novel you enjoyed, then either write your own or write a response to one of them <input type="checkbox"/>	9. Write a poem in response to a poem <input type="checkbox"/>	6. Take a risk with your reading and read a novel outside your comfort zone and write or record a review <input type="checkbox"/>