

WHY DO WE READ - AND HOW?

In an age of digital media and wider access to information than ever, you may well ask yourselves: Why read? Why should we bother to pick up a book for the purposes of information or entertainment if we might as well watch a video, listen to a podcast, or ask ChatGPT? What can reading give us that other ways of engagement with media cannot?

Written texts are still one of the principal forms through which we as humans communicate and process ideas. They broaden our perspective and help us understand complex concepts and different points of view. Reading, in this regard, is not only a mental decoding activity: it is, even more crucially, a social, material, and emotional practice. It helps us connect with the world – both in- and outside ourselves. As children, we learn to read. But over the course of our lives, as we are confronted with different types of texts, we also discover that reading varies across situations. We develop different strategies for reading: over and over again, even as adults, we must learn *how* to read a particular text.

If you are new to reading classics, this is probably the situation you find yourselves in. You need to learn a new way of reading. Until recently, perhaps you have read fictional texts only casually to be entertained by relatable characters and a gripping plot. Yet now, as you are struggling through *Heart of Darkness* or *Mrs Dalloway*, you find this idea of reading does not apply anymore. The plot bores you; the complex sentences give you trouble; the characters seem unengaging to you and their views ‘problematic’. You have no idea how to ‘academically’ reflect on these texts and your reading experience or what even to write your final paper about.

First of all: Be patient. Build up a resilience to not being entertained in the way you have come to expect from the media you usually engage with. As academics, our mode of reading is a different, more active one than when we read solely for entertainment. If you approach an Old English epic such as *Beowulf* with the same mindset that you would apply to, say, a crime fiction or fantasy novel, of course you are likely to end up either disappointed, bored, or confused. Try, instead, to find other things in the text that intrigue you: structure, form, language, narrative perspective, voice ... Immerse yourselves in the mentality of earlier time periods, in the images and metaphors these people lived by, especially if they are entirely different from our own. Train your brain to be curious.

WHY DO WE STILL READ THE CLASSICS?

The texts we call “classics” are, in some way or other, considered to be formative in the history of literature. To paraphrase Italo Calvino, they are texts which give us the impression, even when we read them for the first time, that we are rereading something we have read before. A classic, in this sense, is like a giant palimpsest: a piece of parchment with all the old messages scraped off and a new one scrawled in their stead. “It’s only a single text,” you may initially think. But when you hold the parchment up to the light, thousands of earlier texts and meanings still shine through in the current text – imprints left by other writers, other times.

A classic, thus, is a text which has never exhausted all it has to say to its audience. Why else would we still study Shakespeare’s plays, for example, hundreds of years after they were first performed? Haven’t these texts long since said all they can? Haven’t scholars combed through them for every last nuance of meaning? You might be tempted to think so. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that both literature and academic discourse – like palimpsests – build up over time. As a work of art a classic, first of all, stands for itself. But at the same time it occupies a certain place in the genealogy of all classic works of literature: one classic is followed by other classics, which means that the more classics you have read, the better you are able to recognise where they ‘belong’ in the literary canon and how they are related to other texts. The same goes for the traces classics continually leave behind in the culture(s) and language(s) through which they pass. Layer by layer, these traces accumulate, along with the critical discourse that orbits a particular text.

The point is: the more and the more *broadly* we read, the more meaning we can glean from an individual text. If you already know Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, you will be able to pick up on intertextual references and subtext in works like Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* or Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince* that would otherwise remain hidden to you. Every classic comes to us trailing the remnants of earlier interpretations: a patina of memories, both collective and individual. These texts, thus, do not only make some kind of statement about the state of their contemporary world but also about the human condition. They help you define your own identity in

relation or opposition to them and – ideally – constitute a valuable experience for those who have read and enjoyed them.

I HAVE NO IDEA WHERE TO START - WHAT NOW?

Start somewhere. Anywhere is good. Perhaps you have already read some of the texts on this list or know them from hearsay; perhaps you have not. Just look up some of the titles online, read summaries, see what strikes your fancy. You can also ask your lecturers, your friends, or perhaps a person at a bookstore for recommendations. Find out what *you* like and gradually branch out from there. It's wonderful to have favourite texts you can return to, but staying in your comfort zone for too long will do you no good. Be brave and explore.

HOW DO I REFLECT ON MY READING?

Reading as an academic means thinking actively while you read, not just absorbing information. Try to watch yourself throughout the reading process. Ask yourself: What does this text do to me? How does it work, how does it communicate its ideas? Why does it communicate specifically *these ideas*? Does it support or challenge what I already know? Connect ideas as you go along. Compare what you are reading to other texts you have already read and try to link it to what you learned in your seminars or from other credible sources. Reading critically is an ongoing process of analysing, evaluating, and interpreting a text. It goes beyond comprehension: Try not to approach a text with the aim of identifying its definite 'meaning', even if you may have been taught to do this at school. Rather, try to interact with the text as a work of art. Question it, engage with it dynamically and see what it offers. What might be the text's function and how do aspects such as language or form contribute to its purpose? What could be the author's intent? And what about the audience: What elements of the text tell you about its intended audience? How does it correspond to or resist certain conventions of genre or narrative? In what ways does the text reflect the historical and/or cultural context in which it was created? How does the text interact with other texts? And, most importantly: *Why* might it be doing all of these things a certain way?

Long story short: Be aware of what you are reading and of your reaction to it. Investigate. Look for possibilities and affordances rather than certainties, and see if you don't surprise yourself.

LITERATURES OF THE BRITISH ISLES AND IRELAND

NB: *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (2 volumes, 8th edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al.) contains a number of authors and titles mentioned in the following list, in particular a selection of representative poems.

OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH - 8TH TO 15TH CENTURIES

VERSE

Anonymous	<i>Beowulf</i> (c. 8 th -11 th century)
Anonymous	"The Dream of the Rood" (8 th century?)
Anonymous	"The Wanderer" (10 th / 11 th century)
William Langland (c. 1330-1387/93)	<i>Piers Plowman</i> (c. 1370-86)
Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400)	<i>The Canterbury Tales</i> (c. 1387-1400)
Anonymous	<i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> (c. 1400)

PROSE

Sir Thomas Malory (c. 1416-1471)	<i>Le Morte Darthur</i> (1485)
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EARLY MODERN ENGLISH - 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES

VERSE

Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542)	"Whoso List to Hunt" (c. 1530s/40s) "They Flee From Me" (c. 1535)
Edmund Spenser (1552-1599)	<i>The Faerie Queene</i> (1590/96)
Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586)	<i>Astrophil and Stella</i> (1591)
William Shakespeare (1564-1616)	<i>The Sonnets</i> (1609) "Venus and Adonis" (1593) "The Rape of Lucrece" (1594)
Aemilia Lanyer (1569-1645)	"Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum" (1611)
John Donne (1572-1631)	"The Flea" (c. 1590s / 1633) "The Canonization" (c. 1590s / 1633)
Andrew Marvell (1621-1678)	"The Garden" (c. 1650s / 1681) "To His Coy Mistress" (c. 1650s / 1681)
John Milton (1608-1674)	<i>Paradise Lost</i> (1667)
Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672)	"The Author to Her Book" (1678)

Hester Pulter (1605-1678)	"The Eclipse" "The Garden, or The Contention of Flowers"
Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673)	"An Apology for Her Poetry" "Man's Short Life and Foolish Ambition"

DRAMA

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)	<i>Hamlet</i> (c.1600) <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (1595/96) <i>Macbeth</i> (1606) <i>Othello</i> (1604) <i>King Lear</i> (1605/6) <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> (1595/96) <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> (1598) <i>Richard II</i> (1595/96) <i>Pericles</i> (1608) ...
Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)	<i>Doctor Faustus</i> (1604) <i>The Jew of Malta</i> (1589/90)
Ben Jonson (1572-1637)	<i>The Alchemist</i> (1610) <i>Volpone</i> (1607)
John Webster (c.1578-c.1632)	<i>The Duchess of Malfi</i> (1623) <i>The White Devil</i> (1612)
John Ford (1586-c.1639)	<i>'Tis a Pity She's a Whore</i> (1633)
George Etherege (c.1634-1691)	<i>The Man of Mode</i> (1676)
William Wycherley (1641-1715)	<i>The Country Wife</i> (1675)
Aphra Behn (1640-1689)	<i>The Rover</i> (1677)

PROSE

Sir Thomas More (1478-1535)	<i>Utopia</i> (1516)
John Bunyan (1628-1688)	<i>The Pilgrim's Progress</i> (1678-84)
Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586)	<i>The Defence of Poesy</i> (1595)
Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626)	<i>Essays</i> (1597)
Thomas Nashe (1567-c.1601)	<i>The Unfortunate Traveller</i> (1594)

18TH CENTURY

VERSE

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)	<i>Essay on Criticism</i> (1711) <i>The Rape of the Lock</i> (1712/14/17)
William Blake (1757-1827)	"The Tyger" (1794) "A Poison Tree" (1794)
Robert Burns (1759-1796)	"To A Mouse" (1785) "Address to the Devil" (1785)
Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762)	"Constantinople" (1718) "Farewell to Bath" (1731)
Anne Finch (1661-1720)	"Nocturnal Reverie" (1713) "The Spleen" (1709)

DRAMA

William Congreve (1670-1729)	<i>The Way of the World</i> (1700)
John Gay (1685-1732)	<i>The Beggar's Opera</i> (1728)
Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774)	<i>She Stoops to Conquer</i> (1773)

PROSE

Daniel Defoe (1660-1731)	<i>Robinson Crusoe</i> (1719) <i>Moll Flanders</i> (1722)
Jonathan Swift (1667-1745)	<i>Gulliver's Travels</i> (1726)
Samuel Richardson (1689-1761)	<i>Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded</i> (1740)
Henry Fielding (1707-1754)	<i>Tom Jones</i> (1749)
Laurence Sterne (1713-1768)	<i>Tristram Shandy</i> (1759)
Frances Burney (1752-1840)	<i>Evelina</i> (1778)
Horace Walpole (1717-1797)	<i>The Castle of Otranto</i> (1764)
Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823)	<i>The Mysteries of Udolpho</i> (1794)
Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818)	<i>The Monk</i> (1796)
Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)	<i>A Vindication of the Rights of Woman</i> (1792)

19TH CENTURY

VERSE

ROMANTIC ERA	
William Wordsworth (1770-1850)	<i>Lyrical Ballads</i> (1800) "Daffodils"
Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)	"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) "Christabel" (1797-1800)
George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1824)	"She Walks in Beauty" (1814)
Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)	"Ozymandias" (1817) "Ode to the West Wind" (1819)
John Keats (1795-1821)	"Ode to a Nightingale" (1820) "Ode on a Graecian Urn" (1820)
Joanna Baillie (1762-1851)	"A Disappointment" (1840)
VICTORIAN ERA	
Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)	<i>Idylls of the King</i> (1859-1885) "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854)
Robert Browning (1812-1889)	"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (1852) "Porphyria's Lover" (1836)
Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861)	"A Musical Instrument" (1860) "Mother and Poet" (1861)
Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)	"The Future" (1852)
Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)	"The Caged Skylark" (1877) "Carrion Comfort" (1885)
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)	"The Cloud Confines" (1871) "Love's Nocturn" (1870)
Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)	"Goblin Market" (1862) "When I am dead, my dearest" (1862)

DRAMA

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)	<i>Lady Windermere's Fan</i> (1892) <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> (1895)
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PROSE

Jane Austen (1775-1817)	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i> (1813) <i>Mansfield Park</i> (1814) <i>Emma</i> (1815)
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Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832)	<i>Waverley</i> (1814) <i>Ivanhoe</i> (1819)
Mary Shelley (1797-1851)	<i>Frankenstein</i> (1818)
Emily Brontë (1818-1848)	<i>Wuthering Heights</i> (1847)
Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855)	<i>Jane Eyre</i> (1847)
Charles Dickens (1812-1870)	<i>Oliver Twist</i> (1838) <i>Bleak House</i> (1853) <i>Great Expectations</i> (1861)
William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863)	<i>Barry Lyndon</i> (1844) <i>Vanity Fair</i> (1848)
Wilkie Collins (1824-1889)	<i>The Woman in White</i> (1860)
Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865)	<i>North and South</i> (1855)
George Eliot (i.e. Mary Ann Evans; 1819-1880)	<i>Middlemarch</i> (1871) <i>The Mill on the Floss</i> (1860)
Henry James (1843-1916)	<i>Portrait of a Lady</i> (1881) <i>The Turn of the Screw</i> (1898)
Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)	<i>Treasure Island</i> (1883) <i>The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde</i> (1886)
Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)	<i>Tess of the D'Urbervilles</i> (1891) <i>Far From the Madding Crowd</i> (1874)
Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)	<i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> (1890)
Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)	<i>Kim</i> (1901) "Miss Youghal's Sais" (1887)
Bram Stoker (1847-1912)	<i>Dracula</i> (1897)

20TH AND 21ST CENTURY

VERSE

PRE-WORLD WAR II	
William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)	"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1889) "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927)
T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)	"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) "The Waste Land" (1922)

W. H. Auden (1907-1973)	"Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938) "September 1, 1939" (1939)
Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)	"Dulce Et Decorum Est" (1920)
Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)	"Counter-Attack" (1918)
Edith Sitwell (1887-1964)	"By Candlelight" (1920)
Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)	"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" (1939)
POST-WORLD WAR II	
Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)	"Digging" (1966) "Death of a Naturalist" (1966)
Ted Hughes (1930-1998)	"The Horses" (1957) "Lupercalia" (1959)
Philip Larkin (1922-1985)	"This Be The Verse" "The Mower"
Thom Gunn (1929-2004)	"On the Move" (1994) "In Trust" (2000)
Craig Raine (1944 -)	"A Martian Sends a Postcard Home" (1979)
Carol Ann Duffy (1955 -)	"Valentine" (1993) "Anne Hathaway" (1999)
Simon Armitage (1963 -)	"Out of the Blue" (2008) "Remains" (2008)
Don Paterson (1963 -)	"The Wreck" (2001) "Rain" (2009)
Alice Oswald (1966 -)	<i>Dart</i> (2002) "Severed Head Floating Downriver" (2016)

DRAMA

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)	<i>Pygmalion</i> (1912)
Noël Coward (1899-1973)	<i>Private Lives</i> (1930)
Shelagh Delaney (1938-2011)	<i>A Taste of Honey</i> (1958)
Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)	<i>Waiting for Godot</i> (1952)
Harold Pinter (1930-2008)	<i>The Birthday Party</i> (1957) <i>Betrayal</i> (1978)

Tom Stoppard (1937-2025)	<i>Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead</i> (1966) <i>Arcadia</i> (1993)
Sarah Daniels (1956 -)	<i>Byrthrite</i> (1986)
Sarah Kane (1971-1999)	<i>Blasted</i> (1995)
Mark Ravenhill (1966 -)	<i>Shopping and Fucking</i> (1996)
Martin Crimp (1956 -)	<i>Attempts on Her Life</i> (1997)
Forced Entertainment	

PROSE

PRE-WORLD WAR II	
H.G. Wells (1866-1946)	<i>The Time Machine</i> (1895) <i>The War of the Worlds</i> (1898)
Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)	<i>Heart of Darkness</i> (1899)
E.M. Forster (1879-1970)	<i>A Room with a View</i> (1908) <i>A Passage to India</i> (1924)
D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930)	<i>Lady Chatterley's Lover</i> (1928)
James Joyce (1882-1941)	<i>Dubliners</i> (1914) <i>Ulysses</i> (1922)
Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)	<i>Mrs Dalloway</i> (1925) <i>Orlando</i> (1928) <i>A Room of One's Own</i> (1929)
Aldous Huxley (1894-1963)	<i>Brave New World</i> (1932)
Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966)	<i>A Handful of Dust</i> (1934) <i>Brideshead Revisited</i> (1945)
POST-WORLD WAR II	
George Orwell (1903-1950)	<i>Animal Farm</i> (1945) <i>1984</i> (1948)
William Golding (1911-1993)	<i>Lord of the Flies</i> (1954)
Iris Murdoch (1919-1999)	<i>Under the Net</i> (1954) <i>The Black Prince</i> (1973)
Anthony Burgess (1917-1993)	<i>A Clockwork Orange</i> (1962)
John Fowles (1926-2005)	<i>The French Lieutenant's Woman</i> (1969)

Ian McEwan (1948 -)	<i>Atonement</i> (2001) <i>Machines Like Me</i> (2019)
Martin Amis (1949-2023)	<i>London Fields</i> (1989) <i>The Zone of Interest</i> (2014)
Julian Barnes (1946 -)	<i>England, England</i> (1998)
Graham Swift (1949 -)	<i>Waterland</i> (1983)
Kazuo Ishiguro (1954 -)	<i>The Remains of the Day</i> (1989) <i>Never Let Me Go</i> (2005) <i>The Buried Giant</i> (2015)
Hanif Kureishi (1954 -)	<i>The Buddha of Suburbia</i> (1990)
Andrea Levy (1956- 2019)	<i>Small Island</i> (2004)
Alan Hollinghurst (1954 -)	<i>The Line of Beauty</i> (2004)
Sarah Waters (1966 -)	<i>Fingersmith</i> (2002)
Jeanette Winterson (1959 -)	<i>Oranges are not the Only Fruit</i> (1985) <i>The Stone Gods</i> (2007)
Angela Carter (1940-1992)	"The Bloody Chamber" (1979) "The Company of Wolves" (1979)
John Banville (1945 -)	<i>The Sea</i> (2005)
Hilary Mantel (1952-2022)	<i>Wolf Hall</i> Trilogy (2008-2020)
John Lanchester (1962 -)	<i>The Wall</i> (2019)
Claire Keegan (1968 -)	<i>Small Things Like These</i> (2020) "So Late in the Day" (2022)
Sarah Perry (1979 -)	<i>The Essex Serpent</i> (2016)
Sally Rooney (1991 -)	<i>Normal People</i> (2018)
Sebastian Barry (1955 -)	<i>Days Without End</i> (2016)
Anna Burns (1962 -)	<i>Milkman</i> (2018)
Douglas Stuart (1976 -)	<i>Shuggie Bain</i> (2020)
Alan Garner (1934 -)	<i>Treacle Walker</i> (2021)
Paul Lynch (1977 -)	<i>Prophet Song</i> (2023)