

MICHAELMAS TERM 2026

Welcome aboard! I'm looking forward to meeting you in October, and this is just a quick note on what to get going with between now and then.

For context, there are four first-year English papers at Oxford:

- Paper 1 is Introduction to English Language and Literature, and it is studied across the full year.
- Paper 2 is Literature from 650 to 1350; this is also studied across the full year.
- Paper 3 is Literature from 1830 to 1910; this is studied in Michaelmas Term (autumn).
- Paper 4 is Literature from 1910 to the present; this is studied in Hilary Term (spring).

If you are reading single-honours English ('ELL'), you take all four papers. If you are reading English with a Modern Language ('EML'), you take Paper 1 and can choose among the other English papers for your second paper (the only thing to keep in mind is that taking either Paper 2 or 3 as your second paper means that you're starting the year working closely with your ELL cohort, whereas Paper 4 isn't taught until the spring).

Because the reading for Paper 1 is relatively light compared to the others, it doesn't require preparation over the summer. The first term's reading for Paper 2 is also manageable in term-time, because the major task for Michaelmas is learning Old English well enough to be able to read these very early medieval works in the original. Paper 4 is taught in Hilary Term, so you receive the reading list for that paper just before the Christmas vacation. However, **Paper 3 has a very demanding reading list**—the full list is below—so you should **get going on that now**.

You're very welcome to get in touch with me if you have any questions. Otherwise, I'll write to you all next by the start of October about meeting at the beginning of Freshers' Week. Happy Victorian reading, meanwhile, and I wish you the very best for the final weeks of summer!

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Paper 3: Literature in English 1830-1910

Here are the main things to keep in mind:

(1) Victorian novels are often pretty substantial, so you need to read as many as possible of the primary texts (the 'required reading' below) **before you arrive in Oxford**. Prioritise *Middlemarch*, *Villette*, *Great Expectations*, and *North and South* because it's impossible to get the most out of a novel, let alone enjoy it, when you're reading against the clock. Bear in mind that **you have an essay on *Middlemarch* due in the first week of term**.

(2) You might not be able to read the long works more than once, and your first formal exams ('Prelims') are not until next summer. This is why you should **take detailed notes** as you read on anything that strikes you as potentially interesting. Don't rule out keeping an old-fashioned 'reading notebook'. A sturdy notebook where you write down your thoughts about Victorian lit in one place as you're reading is more useful and durable than miscellaneous laptop documents that (if you are like me) you forget ever having produced.

(3) When a week says 'tutorial' below, you will have an essay due by noon the day before. When 'class' is specified, you don't write an essay that week but must come ready to discuss the texts. The **prompts for tutorial essays and class discussions** are included below so that you can organise your thoughts as you read the primary texts.

(4) It doesn't matter which editions you use, and it's also fine to read the primary texts for free online, but Penguin Classics, Oxford World's Classics, and the critical editions from Norton and Broadview all have good explanatory notes and can usually be found second hand. You should bring the book (or the device where you have the text) and note-taking equipment (again, don't rule out a nice reading notebook!) to classes and tutorials.

(5) Once you are here and have got the hang of the library search engine ('SOLO'), you'll find more specialised criticism for your essay topics, but there are suggestions below to get you started. It is **not** expected that you work your way through all the secondary reading, but only that you treat your scholarly work as academics themselves do, as though you're entering a conversation that has already been going on for a while.

Week 1: The Scope of Victorian Literature (tutorial)

Required reading:

- **George Eliot**, *Middlemarch*

Recommended secondary reading:

Amanda Anderson and Harry E Shaw, *A Companion to George Eliot* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). (Not for reading all the way through, but Section IV is useful on Eliot's contexts.)

Karen Chase, *Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006). (The Gillian Beer essay is a good place to start.)

Kate Flint, ed., *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012). (Another book not for reading all the way through; you should consult the chapters that are most relevant to the specific theme of your essay and make a note of chapters that might be useful for later essays.)

Avrom Fleishman, *George Eliot's Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010).

Margaret Harris, ed., *George Eliot in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013).

Nancy Henry and George Levine, *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2019).

Noa Reich, 'Victorian Inheritance, Speculation, and *Middlemarch's* "Dead Hand"', *Law and Literature* 35, 1 (2023): 115-34. (Especially useful if you're writing on issues of money, property, or inheritance, but of surprisingly wide application.)

Essay prompt:

Please write an essay on the representation in *Middlemarch* of one of the following characteristically nineteenth-century concerns, **demonstrating along the way how Eliot's formal/narrative choices affect her treatment of that topic:**

- education and/or vocation
- community and/or place
- social class and/or class conflict
- duty and/or obligation
- public life and/or institutions
- money and/or property
- domestic life and/or marriage
- religious belief and/or doubt
- inheritance and/or the past
- secrecy and/or knowledge.

If you like, you could pick two bullet-pointed themes and focus your essay on how they intersect with each other, because that can be a useful way of finding a really focused argument.

Week 2: The Novel of Formation (class)

Required reading:

- **Charlotte Brontë**, *Villette*
- **Charles Dickens**, *Great Expectations*

Recommended secondary reading:

John R Maynard, 'The Bildungsroman', in Patrick Parrinder and William Thesing, *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 279-301. (A wide-ranging overview chapter that addresses the complications of genre classification.)

Richard Salmon, 'The Bildungsroman and Nineteenth-Century British Fiction', in Sarah Graham, ed., *A History of the Bildungsroman* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 57-83. (This is a really useful short overview that includes *Villette* and *Great Expectations*.)

Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987). (The classic account of the form.)

Discussion prompts—please be prepared to discuss one or more of the following topics:

- Is there anything distinctive or surprising about the Victorian representation of childhood and youth?
- What difference does it make that these novels (unlike, say *Middlemarch*) use first-person narration? And is *Middlemarch* also a Bildungsroman, or 'novel of formation'?
- A Bildungsroman focuses on the development of a single character, but how would you describe these novels' handling of *minor* characters?

Week 3: Poetry and Selfhood (tutorial)

Required reading:

- **Robert Browning**, 'Porphyria's Lover', 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation', 'My Last Duchess', 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church', 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister', 'Andrea del Sarto', and 'Fra Lippo Lippi'
- **Gerard Manley Hopkins**, 'God's Grandeur', 'The Windhover', 'Pied Beauty', 'Spring and Fall', 'To Seem the Stranger', 'I Wake and Feel', 'No Worst', 'Patience, Hard Thing', 'Carriage Comfort', and 'My Own Heart'
- **Christina Rossetti**, 'Cousin Kate', 'Goblin Market'
- **Alfred, Lord Tennyson**, 'Ulysses', 'The Lotos-Eaters'

Recommended secondary reading:

Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, 'Inner Space: Bodies and Minds', in Matthew Bevis, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 673-89. (This book also includes useful essays on the formal features of nineteenth-century poetry.)

Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999). (Chapter 4 is on Browning; chapter 5 is on Tennyson)

Ekbert Faas, *Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the Rise of Psychiatry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989). (Especially useful on the dramatic monologue.)

Cornelia D.J. Pearsall, 'The Dramatic Monologue', in Joseph Bristow, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 67-88.

Gregory Tate, *The Poet's Mind: The Psychology of Victorian Poetry, 1830-1870* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 1-58.

Essay prompts:

- How do these poets use specific forms (e.g. the dramatic monologue, the sonnet, etc) to represent psychological phenomena? Feel free to focus on a specific emotion that multiple poets write about—guilt, for instance, or longing, or exhilaration—and consider any important points of difference or similarity in how they treat that emotion. **OR:**
- ‘Give us no more of body than shows soul!’, Browning’s Prior orders Fra Lippo Lippi. Is there anything significant or interesting about how these poets think about the relationship between the body and the mind, or between inner and outer lives more generally?

Week 4: Culture and Industry (class)

Required reading:

- **Matthew Arnold**, *Culture and Anarchy* * If you don’t have time to read it all, you could skip the preface, read Chapters 1 to 4 inclusive, ‘Sweetness and Light’ to ‘Hebraism and Hellenism’, and then skip the last chapters.
(<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4212/pg4212-images.html>)
- **Elizabeth Gaskell**, *North and South*
- **John Ruskin**, ‘The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century’.
(<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20204/20204-h/20204-h.htm>)

Recommended secondary reading:

Urmi Bhowmik, ‘Empire and the Industrial Novel: Imperial Commodities and Colonial Labor in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*’, *Nineteenth-Century Studies* 26 (2012): 117-34.
Joseph W Childers, ‘Industrial Culture in the Victorian Novel’, in Deirdre David, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 77-96.
Jennifer MacLure, *The Feeling of Letting Die: Necroeconomics and Victorian Fiction* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2023, 53-89. (Chapter on capitalism and the utility of fiction in *North and South*; the book’s intro is also really interesting.)
Kate Nesbit, ‘Improving Ears: Elizabeth Gaskell’s Charitable Listener and the Social-Problem Novel’, *ELH* 87, 1 (Spring 2020), 149-78.
James Richard Simmons, ‘Industrial and “Condition of England” Novels’, in Patrick Brantlinger and William Thesing, ed, *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 336-52. (If you have time to read only one piece of secondary material, make it this or the Childers chapter above.)
Jill Matus, *Shock, Memory, and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 61-82. (Wide-ranging chapter on social/class trauma in *North and South*.)

Discussion prompts—please be prepared to discuss one or more of the following topics:

- One familiar idea in ‘secularisation’ narratives about Britain in the nineteenth century is that ‘culture’ begins to replace Christianity as a spiritualising force, both for individuals and society at large. Do Arnold and Gaskell bear this idea out?
- What does ‘culture’ mean to Arnold and Gaskell? Are there any important differences in how they understand the concept?
- Going by their literature, it feels as though many Victorians believed that they were living through a period of unprecedented crisis—in Ruskin’s essay, even the clouds augur catastrophe. What do their works suggest was generating that sense of crisis, and how do they imagine it might (if at all) be mitigated?

Week 5: The Making of Americans (tutorial)

Required reading:

- **Frederick Douglass**, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*
- **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, 'Self-Reliance' (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16643/16643-h/16643-h.htm#SELF-RELIANCE>)
- **Herman Melville**, 'Benito Cereno'

Recommended secondary reading:

Elizabeth Duquette, 'The Fog of Tyranny in "Benito Cereno"', *Textual Practice* 35, 11 (2021), 1853-67.

Christopher Freeburg, *Melville and the Idea of Blackness: Race and Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 93-131.

John Stauffer, 'Douglass's Self-Making and the Culture of Abolitionism', in Maurice S Lee, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 13-30.

Kenneth W Warren, 'A Reflection on the Slave Narrative and American Literature', in John Ernest, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), 183-95.

Ivy Wilson, *Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics in the Antebellum U.S.* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011). (Has chapters specifically on both Douglass and 'Benito Cereno'.)

Essay prompts:

- 'Liberty must either cut the throat of Slavery or have its own throat cut by Slavery' (Frederick Douglass). Or, as Douglass asked in a famous speech, 'What to the slave is the fourth of July?' How do these writers address the political and cultural contradictions of American 'liberty'? **OR:**
- 'At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed' (Frederick Douglass, discussing abolitionist discourse). To what uses do Douglass and Melville put 'scorching irony'? Do their different genres—one an autobiographical narrative; the other a work of fiction based on historical events—allow them to put different types of irony to work when they write about slavery?

Week 6: Adventures in Narrative (class)

Required reading:

- **Joseph Conrad**, *Heart of Darkness*
- **H.G. Wells**, *The Time Machine*

Recommended secondary reading:

Linda Dryden, *Joseph Conrad and H.G. Wells: The Fin-de-Siècle Literary Scene* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Allen MacDuffie, *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014). (Has chapters on both Conrad and Wells, but a good intro generally to Victorian scientific pessimism.)

Aaron Rosenberg, *Scale, Crisis, and the Modern Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2023). (Useful chapters on both Conrad and Wells, and, again, really helpful on scientific context.)

Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) (Old and unsurpassed—and the chapter on *Heart of Darkness* is famously longer than the novella.)

Discussion prompts—please be prepared to discuss one or more of the following topics:

- Conrad and Wells were friends at this stage in their careers, and *The Time Machine* is among the Wells novels that Conrad especially admired. Where can you see his influence on *Heart of Darkness*? Alternatively, did the differences strike you as more telling?
- These are examples of ‘framed’ narrative, a common device in the later nineteenth century. What relationships do they present between telling and experiencing?
- On the one hand, these are novellas—small-scale, you might say—and, on the other hand, they are about travelling through great stretches of time and space. How do they relate to the other works of fiction we have read (Melville, for instance?) in terms of their form and their theme?

Week 7: Turn-of-the-Century Performances (tutorial)

Required reading:

- **George Bernard Shaw**, *Arms and the Man*
- **John Millington Synge**, *The Playboy of the Western World*
- **Oscar Wilde**, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Recommended secondary reading:

Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 77-109. [Chapter on Synge.]
Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995). [Chapters 2, 3, and 10 are on Wilde, Shaw, and Synge respectively.]
Ben Levitas, *The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism, 1890-1916* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).
Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 103- 38.
Shaun Richards, *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006). (Chapters 6, 8, and 9 are on Synge, Shaw, and Wilde respectively.)
Alan Sinfield, “‘Effeminacy’ and ‘Femininity’: Sexual Politics in Wilde’s Comedies”, *Modern Drama* 37, 1 (Spring 1994), 34-52.

Essay prompts:

- Why might it be significant that these male-authored plays are all concerned with women’s fantasies about men and/or men’s fictions about themselves? **OR:**
- Identify a concept that the theatre enabled these texts to explore more successfully than non-dramatic narrative fiction (a novella, say) might have allowed. In other words, why did these works have to be *plays*?

Week 8: Literature and/vs Empire (class)

Required reading:

- **Rudyard Kipling**, *Kim*
- **Robert Baden-Powell**, *Scouting for Boys* (This is a revelation on the wider context, but it doesn’t need close concentration – just take a quick look through at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/65993/65993-h/65993-h.htm>)

Recommended secondary reading:

Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988).

-----, 'The Complexity of Kipling's Imperialist Politics', *English Literature in Transition* 48, 1 (2005): 88-91. (A useful review essay on Kipling's political difficulty.)

-----, 'Empire, Place, and the Victorians', in Juliet John, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 233-51.

Susan Jones, 'Into the Twentieth Century: Imperial Romance from Haggard to Buchan', in Corinne Saunders, ed., *A Companion to Romance* (Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 406-23.

John A McClure, *Kipling and Conrad: The Colonial Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981).

Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 132-62. (Section on *Kim* titled 'The Pleasures of Imperialism'.)

Alisha Walters, 'A "white boy . . . who is not a white boy": Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, Whiteness, and British Identity', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46, 2 (June 2018): 331-346.

Discussion prompts—please be prepared to discuss one or more of the following topics:

- 'Once a Sahib, always a Sahib', declares a character in *Kim*—but Kim is an Indian-born Irish orphan. How does *Kim* treat ideas of cultural 'purity' and hybridity?
- How far are the ideas of boyhood proposed by Baden-Powell, who incorporates *Kim* into his educational text for boys, compatible with those that Kipling implies?
- *Kim* is a spy novel, among many other things. How does Kipling treat surveillance at the level of theme and narrative style?

And then it is the vacation, and I bet you will be astonished that the term has gone by already! There will be a College exam (a 'Collection') on this paper in January, so that you can get a sense of how well you have mastered the material. 'Collections' are held after each vacation on the previous term's work in each period paper. They mimic the formal exams that are held in the summer (in this case, three essays in three hours, typed and invigilated) and are intended to help you to identify any weaknesses in your exam technique and to fill in any identified gaps in your knowledge while there is still plenty of time. These College exams are purely formative and diagnostic, and although they are important they don't count towards your degree.