LITERATURE IN ENGLISH 1830-1910

Five quick things to note:

(1) Some Victorian novels are very long, so your summer reading should prioritise the works (asterisked below) likely to be hardest to manage during term-time (Middlemarch and Our Mutual Friend should definitely be read over the summer);

(2) You may be reading all but the shortest works only once, so take detailed notes as you go on everything that strikes you as interesting;

(3) The prompts for tutorial essays and class discussions are included here, to help you organise your thoughts as you read;

(4) So long as a work was written in this period and originally in English (regardless of national origin), you are welcome to discuss it in Oxford assignments, including tutorial essays and formal exams; this summer would be a good time to recall the other works you know from the 1830-1910 period—add these to your notes now;

(5) On editions: only once is a particular edition named—because editions of Mayhew’s London Labour differ so much that it’s almost like reading a different book every time. Otherwise, it doesn’t matter which you use. Penguin Classics, Oxford World’s Classics, and (pricier, but easy to source second-hand) Norton Critical Editions all have good explanatory notes. Those notes and scholarly apparatus are what you’re paying for when you buy the book rather than reading it free online. Short essays, though, do just look up online, even if you might need to consult a library version afterwards to cite them properly.

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Week 1: The Scope of Victorian Literature (tutorial)

Required reading:

George Eliot, Middlemarch.*

Recommended secondary reading:

Kate Flint, ed., The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012). [N.B.: you absolutely needn’t read this all the way through, but consult the chapters most relevant to your topic, and then make a note of those that might be useful for later essays.]

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 advance and/or complicate her treatment of that topic: (1) vocation and/or education; (2) community and/or place; (3) social class and/or class conflict; (4) duty and responsibility; (5) public life and/or institutions; (6) money and/or property; (7) domestic life and/or marriage; (8) religious belief and/or doubt; (9) inheritance and/or the past; (10)
conformity and/or dissent. If you like, you could pick two of these topics and build your argument around how the two issues intersect (just be careful not to take on too much!).

**Week 2: Poetry and Selfhood (class)**

Required reading:

**Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Maud.**

Recommended secondary reading:

Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850-1880* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000). (N.B. This one is intellectual/cultural history rather than literary criticism.)

Prompts:

Describe any significant or surprising uses of poetic form to represent mental processes or the development of a particular emotion.

What do you make of the fact that these poems about extreme or pathological mental states are so preoccupied by images of and ideas about the physical body?

**Week 3: The Subjection of Women (tutorial)**

Required reading:

**Anne Brontë**, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.*
**Wilkie Collins**, *The Woman in White.*
**John Stuart Mill**, chapter 2 (on marriage) of *The Subjection of Women* (you can read the chapter online at: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/27083/27083-h/27083-h.htm)

Recommended secondary reading:

Week 4: Culture and Industry (class)

Required reading:

**Matthew Arnold**, *Culture and Anarchy.*

**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:


Kate Nesbit, ‘Improving Ears: Elizabeth Gaskell’s Charitable Listener and the Social-Problem Novel’, *ELH* 87, 1 (Spring 2020), 149-78.


Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: OUP, 2013). (Chapter 2 is on Arnold and the idea of ‘utility’.)

Prompts:

One familiar idea in secularisation stories about the nineteenth century is that ‘culture’ starts to replace Christianity as a spiritualising force, both for individuals and society at large. What does ‘culture’ mean to Arnold and Gaskell?

Going by their literature, it feels as though many Victorians believed that they were living through a period of unprecedented crisis (even the clouds look ominously different, Ruskin
thought). What do their works suggest was generating that sense of crisis, and how, if at all, do they imagine it might 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’ (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16643/16643-h/16643-h.htm#SELF-RELIANCE)
*Herman Melville*, ‘Benito Cereno’.

Recommended secondary reading:


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 Douglass’s and Melville’s works address the political contradictions of American ‘liberty’?

‘At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed’ (Frederick Douglass, on abolitionist speech and writing). To what uses do Douglass and Melville put ‘scorching irony’? Are there any important differences in the kinds of irony they adopt?

**Week 6: Urban Poverty and Wealth (class)**

Required reading:

*Charles Dickens*, *Our Mutual Friend.*

Recommended secondary reading:


Prompts:

How far are Dickens’s and Mayhew’s perspectives on class difference and/or poverty shared by the other nineteenth-century British writers you have read?

Mayhew was a journalist and—of course—Dickens was a novelist, but what can be described as literary about Mayhew’s work and, conversely, what is journalistic or documentary about that of Dickens?

Week 7: Drama and Other Social Performances (tutorial)

Required reading:

George Bernard Shaw, Arms and the Man (any edition)
John Millington Synge, The Playboy of the Western World (any edition)
Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest (any edition)

Recommended secondary reading:

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.)
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.)

Prompts:

Why might it be significant that these male-authored plays are all concerned with women’s fantasies about men and men’s fictions about themselves?

These plays are all by Irish authors, although only Synge’s is set in Ireland. Would it be clarifying or reductive—or something in between—to see their otherwise comic concerns with identity and artifice in relation to their late-colonial context?

Week 8: Late-Impperial Selves (class)

Required reading:

Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim.*
Rudyard Kipling, Kim.*
Cornelia Sorabji, ‘Love and Death’ and ‘The Pestilence at Noonday’ (These are in a collection titled Love and Life behind the Purdah, or you can find them here: https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/sorabji/purdah/purdah.html#death)

Recommended secondary reading:

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Prompts:

‘Once a Sahib, always a Sahib’, a character announces in *Kim*. How does turn-of-the-century literature on empire treat cultural ‘purity’ and/or hybridity?

‘Inobtrusively supplying the place of the police in places where the police cannot be, the mechanisms of discipline seem to entail a relative relaxation of policing power. No doubt this manner of passing off the regulation of everyday life is the best manner of passing it on’ (D. A. Miller, writing in *The Novel and the Police* about the omniscient narrator of the Victorian novel). How do these texts treat surveillance, whether official or unofficial?
Prelims Paper 2: Early Medieval English Literature (650-1350)

This paper will be taught across all three terms. The aim of the paper is to introduce you to the earliest English literature, from the alliterative poetry of the Anglo-Saxons to the emergence of new genres such as romance, beast fable and lyric after the Norman Conquest. We call the language of the Anglo-Saxons ‘Old English’; after 1066 this comes into contact with ‘Anglo-Norman’, producing the phase in the language that we call ‘Early Middle English’. As we move through the first ‘half’ of English literary history, we will encounter epics and romances, dream visions and hymns, riddles and charms, chronicles and battle poems, laments and lyrics.

In Michaelmas and Hilary terms, we will focus mainly on the Old English period (650-c. 1100). Then, in Trinity Term we will look at some Early Middle English texts. The set texts we will translate are *The Wanderer*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Battle of Maldon* and an extract from *Beowulf* (the fight with Grendel). All of these texts are included in this edition, which you must get hold of before Michaelmas:


Before you come to Oxford for Michaelmas Term you should read a selection of Old English texts in translation. In particular, you MUST read a translation of *Beowulf* before you get to Oxford, as this is the best introduction to the themes and styles of Old English verse. For a good verse translation, try this:


You could also read the excellent, but very different, verse translations by Seamus Heaney, Michael Alexander and Richard Hamer.

Please also buy a copy of this book, which provides Old and Early Middle English texts with facing-page, prose translation:


Further recommendations include:

- *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, transl. Robert Hamer (Faber, 2006) (facing page verse translations of major short poems; very cheap on Amazon)

In order to get a sense of who the Anglo-Saxons were and what Old English literature is like, have a look at some of these books:


More detailed information about the course, including a sample exam paper, reading lists and other useful resources, can be found by clicking this link on the English Faculty’s webpage:

https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/site/humdiv:engfac:prelims-2

If you have any questions about the course, please do not hesitate to get in touch. I look forward to meeting you all in October!

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