



Intro to British Literature – Syllabus

Course Description: British literature holds the history of the English language, traced from the rhythms of Anglo-Saxon storytelling to the vivid poets of World War I. In this course, we'll see language and history unfold as we delve into one era of British literature per week. While the majority of literature assigned will be English, introducing students to the largely-English touchstone literature for this grade level, we'll also explore Scottish, Welsh, and Irish texts. Students will be encouraged to read thoughtfully, respond critically—interacting with the texts through analysis, close-readings, and creative responses—and, of course, have fun!

Course Outline:

Week One: Anglo-Saxon & Medieval – Excerpts from *Beowulf*, “*The Ruin*,” & *The Canterbury Tales*’ “General Prologue”

Week Two: Renaissance – Shakespeare play of choice

Week Three: Regency – Jane Austen novel of choice

Week Four: Regency – Austen, *continued*

Week Five: Romantic – Selected poems from Robert Burns, John Keats, & William Wordsworth

Week Six: Victorian – Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Week Seven: Victorian – Short excerpt from Browning’s “Cry of the Children” & Doyle, “The Red-Headed League”

Week Eight: Modernist – Siegfried Sassoon, “Repression of War Experience”; Dylan Thomas, “Out of a War of Wits”; AND James Joyce, “Araby”

Grading Information: All assignments will be graded using *The Advanced Writer Rubric* and averaged to receive a final course grade.

Required Texts:

Please note that, on heavier reading weeks, we will have shorter or lighter written assignments. Our goal is that students are understanding and enjoying the texts!

The student should have access to the following works. Selections cover as wide a geographical and cultural background as possible, while still including the essential works of the British literary canon.

Note on content: *While we always strive to pick clean and uplifting works, some highly valuable texts result from cultural backgrounds that involve some negative or challenging content. Therefore, we recommend that a parent or trusted adult at least briefly review works and reach out if they would like to substitute a work that matches student and/or family values.*

Note: If you have any trouble finding a work, please let me know promptly so that I can help!

Week One: Anglo-Saxon & Medieval

Reading: Excerpts from *Beowulf*, “*The Ruin*,” & *The Canterbury Tales*’ “General Prologue”
(PDF provided)

Value: *Beowulf*, “*The Ruin*,” and *The Canterbury Tales* provide an excellent overview of early British literature and offer an opportunity for reflection on the student’s experience with British literature and history.

Week Two: Renaissance

Reading: Select one Shakespeare play from the following list that the student hasn’t previously read: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night* (Selected for value and brevity)

Value: William Shakespeare is one of the most well-known British playwrights of the Renaissance. Shakespeare is quintessentially British, and no overview of British literature class would be complete without covering at least one of Shakespeare's world-renowned plays.

Week Three: Regency

Reading: Select a Jane Austen novel that the student hasn’t previously read: *Emma*, *Persuasion*, *Pride & Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Sanditon* (delightful but unfinished & unedited draft), *Sense & Sensibility*

Value: As one of the leading female authors of the early 1800s, Jane Austen is known for her insightful novels discussing everything from socioeconomics to marriage, social standing to reputation.

Week Four: Regency

Reading: Finish the selected Jane Austen novel

Week Five: Romantic

Reading: Selected poems from Robert Burns, John Keats, & William Wordsworth (PDF provided)

Value: As iconic Romantic era poets, Burns, Keats, and Wordsworth highlight throughout their work the shift in style and worldview occurring in Britain after the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Regency periods.

Week Six: Victorian

Reading: Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Value: Charles Dickens was an excellent speaker, wildly talented at anything he picked up, and an adorer of his adoring public. *A Christmas Carol* was written over the course of several weeks in 1843, and cemented Dickens—and his love for Christmas—in the public consciousness.

Week Seven: Victorian

Reading: Short excerpt from Browning's "Cry of the Children" (PDF provided) & Doyle, "The Red-Headed League" (available online or as part of a collection)

Value: Part of Barrett Browning's popularity derives from her courageous stands against social injustices, such as child labor and slavery in America. "The Cry of the Children," which we will read this week, is one of her best-known poems due to its empathetic passion.

Value: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a brilliant Victorian writer, known for his infamous Sherlock Holmes. "The Red-Headed League" is one of the fifty-six Sherlock short stories Doyle wrote.

Week Eight: Modernist

Reading: Siegfried Sassoon, "Repression of War Experience" (poem — PDF provided); Dylan Thomas, "Out of a War of Wits" (poem — PDF provided); & James Joyce, "Araby" (short story from *Dubliners* – available online or as part of a collection)

Value: The work of Sassoon, Thomas, and Joyce help us understand the British Modernist movement, capping off our overview of British history from early centuries to current times.

There is no required edition; the student must simply cite the edition used. **Please make sure that your copy of the text is not abridged.** Other works will be provided in PDF format to the students, although they are more than welcome to find their own print copies!

We recommend that students interact with the text (highlighting and marginal notes), but students are *not* required to own copies of the works—texts from the library are perfectly all right! If you would like to own, inexpensive copies can be found online and at used bookstores.

As students tend to experience stronger reading comprehension when not reading on a screen, we would highly recommend that students have access to a hard copy of the works (a printed out PDF works well, too!).



Intro to British Literature

Lesson Six: Victorian

SAMPLE LESSON

Welcome to the age of Victoria and Albert, Ebenezer Scrooge, and Sherlock Holmes: The Victorian era.

THE VICTORIAN ERA (c. 1820-1914) –

Unsurprisingly, the Victorian era is named for Queen Victoria (r. 1837-1901), who ascended the throne at eighteen after a lifetime of preparing to lead the British monarchy. (1)

Much like the Elizabethan period, the Victorian era is often seen as a golden age—although that masks the tragic injustices of the Industrial Revolution, which we’ll talk about soon. Britain bore impressive imperial power, held enormous wealth, and was a center for culture that has impacted our lives to this very day. (2,3) (Did you know that Queen Victoria kicked off the widespread popularity of white wedding dresses?) (4)

Meanwhile, society was firmly structured by social class and the “separate spheres” for men and women, which implied that men were strong and made for the public sphere, while women were weak and meant for the private sphere. (Women were also thought to be instinctively of a higher moral class than men, and believed to naturally have greater religious feeling.) This idea was reflected in the royal couple—Queen Victoria was seen as submissive to Prince Albert, relying on his expertise in political matters, and Prince Albert was seen as a dominant co-monarch. Of course, working-class families often couldn’t afford for the women to operate only in the domestic sphere, but the “separate spheres” ideology touched all socioeconomic classes.

The era was filled with important advances, both societal and technological. From a civil rights standpoint, one of the most vital advances came in 1834, when the British empire formally abolished slavery—thirty-one years before than its former colony in America. However, the empire did not provide support to those who were formerly enslaved.

Around twenty years into the Victorian age, and three years into Queen Victoria's reign, tragedy struck. Throughout the 1840s, known as "the Hungry Forties," poor harvests led to famines, including the terrible Irish Potato Famine in 1845-9.

THE IRISH POTATO FAMINE / THE GREAT HUNGER: (5) While the Irish Potato Famine began with a potato blight, a disease that damaged the crop, it wasn't helped by the British government's *laissez-faire* approach to intervention. Many of Ireland's rural poor were essentially subsistence farmers, relying on potatoes—which grew well in Ireland's soil—for the majority of their meals. When the blight impacted their crops, farmers not only lost their livelihood and ability to pay rent, but they lost the food on their table. The Famine resulted in approximately one million deaths and one million emigrations from Ireland.

Simultaneously, industry was speeding its way through the nation with new developments of rail networks, steamship routes, and even the electric telegraph. (6) (These innovations were partially thanks to James Watt, a Scottish engineer who improved on Thomas Newcomen's modern steam engine back in the 1760s and later co-created a second engine design that enabled the new technology to be used in multiple industries.) Steam power enabled the creation of mass production products, and thanks to Britain's already-strong textile industry, the Industrial Revolution dug deep roots in the nation.

However, the era's innovations also brought on unfortunate living and working conditions for the lower classes. Cities became overcrowded, severely polluted, and even *more* dirty. Often, poor- and working-class laborers—some of them children—toiled long hours in dangerous working conditions for meager wages. These conditions are largely the reason for our current-day child labor laws and public health regulations.

CHARLES DICKENS (1812-1870) –

Charles Dickens was born one year before Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) on February 7, 1812 in Portsmouth, England. (7) In his youth, the family was decently well-off, although one of his grandfathers was an embezzler and his father was less-than-excellent when it came to money. After a stilted school career, Dickens worked as a clerk and a shorthand reporter, and *almost* became an actor in the early 1830s. Instead, he pursued writing, publishing stories and essays starting in 1833. Three years later, Dickens' fame appeared almost overnight with the serial publication of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7). Think of Dickens as a pop culture star, writing stories that could engage and entertain people from all classes and backgrounds. He was an excellent speaker, wildly talented at anything he picked up, and an adorer of his adoring public.

A Christmas Carol was written over the course of several weeks in 1843, and cemented Dickens—and his love for Christmas—in the public consciousness. He frequently read the book aloud, bringing it to life with his knack for performance.

Sadly, his later years were full of fatigue, family disappointments, and health challenges. Although he attempted a final reading tour, he collapsed in April 1869, and settled for a short round of readings in London. Charles Dickens died the following year and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Assignment 6: Enjoying Literature Experiment + Reflection

This assignment has three parts:

1. This week, instead of a formal assignment, we are going to have a moment to breathe before we start our last two weeks of class. If studying literature has been difficult for you, I'd like this to be an opportunity to find the joy in—or, at least, your best-case scenario for—reading. We are going to try an experiment!

This segment may seem long. Please read it all carefully, as the assignment itself will be simple if directions are followed, and it's designed to help you build “survival strategies” for life projects you love less.

Before you start this week's reading, think about what would make an ideal environment for you to read and enjoy today's text. You may want to consider these factors:

- **Current Issues:** What are my hang-ups with reading, if any? What might make it less fun or more stressful? If I already love reading, how could I make the ultimate reading environment?
- **Purpose:** This is another abstract one. If you have trouble finding the purpose in a class or an assignment, it can help to think of how it helps your overall purpose or goal. Here are a few outcomes for our class:
 - **I want to be more empathetic.** Reading different experiences can help you understand other people better.
 - **I want to be a good communicator.** Writing and reading skills help every facet of your communications life, from your career to your social media posts!
 - **I want to be well-rounded.** All of the things we read become touchstones that you can call back to in the future. You'll have informed opinions on each of these texts!

- **I want to go to college/find a good job.** Every college application I've ever seen, and every job I know of, relies on strong communication skills! We're practicing the writing skills that will help your application essays, the critical thinking skills that will help you analyze situations in your career, etc.
- **Environment:** Where is most comfortable for you to sit and read? Would a cozy blanket or your favorite slippers set the tone? Does it help you focus if you jog on a treadmill while you flip pages? Do you enjoy sitting under your favorite tree in a picturesque orchard?
- How is the lighting? Does it strain your eyes to read when it's too dark or too bright?
- **Timing:** When are you at your reading best? Do you feel like you absorb information better in the morning or at night? Also, make sure that you start reading soon enough that you don't feel stressed or rushed close to the due date.
- **Additions:** Is there anything that you enjoy that could be brought into the reading environment? A cup of tea, a favorite soda, a delicious snack?

Set up that ideal environment, or as close to it as you can manage, for your reading this week. Keep your purpose front and center in mind, if that helps you! After your reading, you'll write a short reflection on your experience.

2. **Read *A Christmas Carol*** in your ideal environment (or as close to it as possible).
3. **Complete and submit a short reflection** about your enjoying-reading experiment. It must meet these requirements:
 - MLA format
 - 200 word minimum
 - Answers these questions:
 - What were your initial issues with reading in general or reading literature, specifically? If you didn't have any issues, what did you think could make the ultimate reading experience? *Remember, I'm looking for your honesty! I will not be offended or mark you down if you don't like to read. :) I'll grade based on our usual rubric and editing checklist (below).*
 - How did you seek to resolve those issues or to make your best reading experience?
 - What were the results of your experiment?
 - What was your favorite moment in *A Christmas Carol*? (Give a specific page citation so I can find it, too!)

Sources –

1. For more on Queen Victoria, see: “Queen Victoria.” *English Heritage*,
<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/women-in-history/queen-victoria/>.
2. For more on the Victorian era, see: Steinbach, Susie. “Victorian era.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*,
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Victorian-era>.
3. An Introduction to Victorian England (1837-1901).” *English Heritage*,
<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/victorian/>.
4. Brennan, Summer. “A Natural History of the Wedding Dress.” *JSTOR Daily*,
<https://daily.jstor.org/a-natural-history-of-the-wedding-dress/>.
5. For more on the Irish Potato Famine, see: Mokyr, Joel. “Great Famine.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*,
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Famine-Irish-history>.
6. For more on the Industrial Revolution, see: “Industrial Revolution.” *HISTORY*, A&E Television Networks,
<https://www.history.com/topics/industrial-revolution/industrial-revolution>.
7. For more on Charles Dickens, see: Collins, Philip. “Charles Dickens.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*,
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Dickens-British-novelist>.