

# A Level English Literature:

## Transition Work

Here's a few things to get your teeth into over the next couple of months, so that you're prepared for the course in September.

If you choose English Literature you will be studying the genre of TRAGEDY, and how it applies to three/four different texts. First, here is a quick overview of the genre:

### Aspects of tragedy

At the core of all the set texts is a tragic hero or heroine who is flawed in some way, who suffers and causes suffering to others and in all texts there is an interplay between what might be seen as villains and victims. Some tragic features will be more in evidence in some texts than in others and you will need to understand how particular aspects of the tragic genre are used and how they work in the chosen texts. The absence of an 'aspect' can be as significant as its presence. There can be no exhaustive list of the 'aspects' of tragedy but areas that can usefully be explored include:

- the type of the tragic text itself, whether it is classical and about public figures, like King Lear, or domestic and about representations of ordinary people, like Tess or Willy in Death of a Salesman
- the settings for the tragedy, both places and times
- the journey towards death of the protagonists, their flaws, pride and folly, their blindness and insight, their discovery and learning, their being a mix of good and evil
- the role of the tragic villain or opponent, who directly affects the fortune of the hero, who engages in a contest of power and is partly responsible for the hero's demise
- the presence of fate, how the hero's end is inevitable
- how the behaviour of the hero affects the world around him, creating chaos and affecting the lives of others
- the significance of violence and revenge, humour and moments of happiness
- the structural pattern of the text as it moves through complication to catastrophe, from order to disorder, through climax to resolution, from the prosperity and happiness of the hero to the tragic end
- the use of plots and sub-plots
- the way that language is used to heighten the tragedy
- ultimately how the tragedy affects the audience/reader, acting as a commentary on the real world, moving the audience through pity and fear to an understanding of the human condition.

**Starting points:**

Watch the following video on the features of a Shakespearean Tragedy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgwETHbjhGE>



To find out about Greek Tragedy watch the following video by the National Theatre

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSr6mP-zxUc>



### **Even greater depth:**

This podcast by the University of Oxford takes this into even further detail

<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/defining-tragedy>

### **TASK ONE:**

With the above in mind, think back to your study of Macbeth and An Inspector Calls for GCSE, and make some notes on the following points:

1. Could these plays be considered to contain 'aspects' of tragedy? Which ones? How and why?
2. Focus on the characters of Eva Smith and Lady Macbeth; could they be seen as a tragic characters? Look again at the bullet points and your notes from the videos and note down which of them the characters conform to.
3. Are there any points on the list that are debatable for each character?

### **Even greater depth:**

The following blog goes into even greater depth on whether Lady Macbeth can be considered a tragic character

<https://quinnae.com/2012/12/28/shaking-her-fell-purpose-lady-macbeth-as-tragic-heroine/>

You will be studying a Shakespearean play as part of the course which for Holy Family is **Othello**.

### **TASK TWO:**

Watch the following trailer for the RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company) production of Othello. What do you believe the play will explore given the areas the trailer for the play highlights?

Focus on the set and the costumes, the events shown in the video and what you can infer.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoDtvmljkRw>



### **Othello the play**

Othello is the greatest general of his age. A fearsome warrior, loving husband and revered defender of Venice against its enemies. But he is also an outsider whose victories have created enemies of his own, men driven by prejudice and jealousy to destroy him. As they plot in the shadows, Othello realises too late that the greatest danger lies not in the hatred of others, but his own fragile and destructive pride.

Watch the following video in which the Director talks about the play and who the main characters are.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvef-Rxk6DU>



### TASK THREE:

Write a summary including the following information:

1. Who is Othello and what is his role in the play?
2. Explain who his sergeant is?
3. What betrayal occurs at the beginning?
4. Who has eloped with Othello?
5. What is Iago's purpose in the play?
6. How does the play change as it progresses?

Othello:

To give you a further taste for the main character in the play this is an actor talking about how he played the part

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cNOd1tUaaw>



If you want to see a different version of Othello there is a film from 1995 available (see below)



## Vocabulary

This is some of the vocabulary you will be using when studying the play – some of which will be familiar to you from GCSE English Literature.

Vocabulary	Definition	Use it correctly in a sentence
Pathos		
Denouement		
Harmatia		
Malcontent		
Credulous		
Misogyny		
Hubris		
Catalyst		

## TASK FOUR

Machiavelli and his ideas lie behind the tragedy of Othello. Read the following and watch the video to get a summary of the key ideas you will need to understand during the course.

**Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli (3 May 1469 – 21 June 1527) was an Italian Renaissance diplomat, philosopher and writer, best known for *The Prince (Il Principe)*, written in 1513.[4] He has often been called the father of modern political philosophy or political science.**

For many years he served as a senior official in the Florentine Republic with responsibilities in diplomatic and military affairs. He wrote comedies, carnival songs, and poetry. His personal correspondence is of high importance to historians and scholars. He worked as secretary to the Second Chancery of the Republic of Florence from 1498 to 1512, when the Medici were out of power.

Machiavelli's name came to evoke unscrupulous politicians of the sort Machiavelli advised most famously in *The Prince*. Machiavelli considered political battles, not through a lens of morality, but as though they are a board game with established rules. His experience showed him that politics has always been played with deception, treachery and crime. He also notably said that a ruler who is establishing a kingdom or a republic, and is criticized for his deeds, including violence, should be excused when the intention and the result is beneficial. Machiavelli's *Prince* was much read as a manuscript long before it was published in 1532 and the reaction was mixed. Some considered it a straightforward description of "the evil means used by bad rulers; others read in it evil recommendations to tyrants to help them maintain their power."

The term Machiavellian often connotes political deceit, deviousness, and realpolitik. Even though Machiavelli has become most famous for his work on principalities, scholars also give attention to the exhortations in his other works of political philosophy. While much less well known than *The Prince*, the *Discourses on Livy* (composed c. 1517) is often said to have paved the way of modern republicanism

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOXI0LI\\_t9s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOXI0LI_t9s)



**Even greater depth:**

The BBC documentary video below explores Machiavellianism in more depth. Please watch and make notes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsMs-DuGy1o>



**TASK FIVE**

Finally, now that you're more acquainted with the genre, read the following poem, which is contained in an anthology of tragic poetry put together by the exam board (the reading of it is attached):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RL9RUdBTvsA>





## Death in Leamington John Betjeman (1932)

She died in the upstairs bedroom  
By the light of the ev'ning star  
That shone through the plate glass window  
From over Leamington Spa

Beside her the lonely crochet  
Lay patiently and unstirred,  
But the fingers that would have work'd it  
Were dead as the spoken word.

And Nurse came in with the tea-things  
Breast high 'mid the stands and chairs-  
But Nurse was alone with her own little soul,  
And the things were alone with theirs.

She bolted the big round window,  
She let the blinds unroll,  
She set a match to the mantle,  
She covered the fire with coal.

And "Tea!" she said in a tiny voice  
"Wake up! It's nearly five"  
Oh! Chintzy, chintzy cheeriness,  
Half dead and half alive.

Do you know that the stucco is peeling?  
Do you know that the heart will stop?

From those yellow Italianate arches  
Do you hear the plaster drop?

Nurse looked at the silent bedstead,  
At the gray, decaying face,  
As the calm of a Leamington ev'ning  
Drifted into the place.

She moved the table of bottles  
Away from the bed to the wall;  
And tiptoeing gently over the stairs  
Turned down the gas in the hall.

Once you've read through a few times and annotated it either:

- Complete a mindmap for your ideas on this poem in terms of its tragic aspects or
- Write up an essay which analyses this poem in terms of its tragic aspects. Write about a side or so of A4, but make sure you cover a range of points; a succinct analytical writing style is vital when writing about literature.

You can email your notes or essay to [cscrivens@holyfamilyschool.uk](mailto:cscrivens@holyfamilyschool.uk)

**Further reading:**

It would strengthen your preparedness for the course if you've read some of these texts prior to the course starting in September but it isn't compulsory.

Course reading list

Othello	William Shakespeare
Death of a Salesman	Arthur Miller
The Kite Runner	Khaled Hosseini
The Handmaid's Tale	Margaret Atwood
Songs of Innocence and Experience	William Blake