

# PREPARATION FOR A LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE (OCR)

*Gothic Reading Challenge*





# COMPARATIVE AND CONTEXTUAL STUDY

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- ❖ One of your A Level English Literature papers focuses on Gothic literature. In the exam, you will write a critical appreciation of an unseen passage and write an essay comparing two Gothic set texts.
- ❖ The best preparation for this unit is to read widely in the Gothic genre . We would also like you to gain an understanding of the way the genre has evolved over time by reading chronologically.
- ❖ The good news is that these texts are fun to read!



# THE TASK: GOTHIC READING CHALLENGE

We are asking you to select and read one Gothic text from either the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> Century. If you feel enthusiastic, you may wish to move on to a second text – perhaps a more modern example. There are suggestions for each century, ranging from weighty novels to novellas and short stories on this presentation.

Before you start your reading challenge, research and make a note of the following terms:

- ❖ Ann Radcliffe's definitions of **Gothic horror and terror**
- ❖ **The uncanny** (you may want to look up what Freud had to say about this)



# THE TASK: GOTHIC READING CHALLENGE

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- ❖ Choose a text from the suggestions given. The 18<sup>th</sup> Century texts are probably going to be the most challenging in terms of length and difficulty of language but they do provide a really important foundation.
- ❖ If you get stuck, try reading a few extracts.
- ❖ As you progress to the choices for the C19<sup>th</sup> and beyond, you will find a wider choice with some much shorter texts!



# THE TASK: GOTHIC READING CHALLENGE

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- ❖ Read for pleasure! No detailed notes needed!
- ❖ As you read, think about the concepts of **horror, terror and the uncanny**, and how they apply to the texts you are reading.
- ❖ Look out for recurring characteristics: **typical characters; familiar settings; themes and imagery.**
- ❖ If you move on to a modern Gothic text, think about what remains consistent and how the genre changes.

# THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

❖ *The Castle of Otranto* Horace Walpole 1764

Generally considered to be the first Gothic novel, this is a great place to start. And it opens with the dramatic death of Conrad, flattened beneath a giant helmet!

❖ *The Mysteries of Udolpho* Ann Radcliffe 1794

This is a weighty novel but it was a hit in its day with vivid characters, dramatic settings and a plot full of suspense and drama.

# THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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❖ *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley 1818

This classic was written as part of a competition when Mary Shelley was just 20 years old! Read the novel to discover the true monster!

❖ *Northanger Abbey* Jane Austen 1818

A change of tone here: enjoy Jane Austen's clever satire of the Gothic genre as her heroine imagines herself at the heart of a Gothic romance! A great one for feature spotting!



# THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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❖ *The Fall of the House of Usher* Edgar Allen Poe 1839

Looking for a shorter read? Poe's short story delivers a macabre tale in a classic Gothic setting. There are plenty more of Poe's short stories to explore too.

❖ *The Woman in White* Wilkie Collins 1860

Dive into Victorian sensationalism with this page turner! It has dastardly villains, brave heroines, a classic mansion house setting and a bit of early detective work . Enjoy!



# THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

❖ *The Turn of the Screw* Henry James 1898

James' novella is a masterpiece in Gothic terror and lends itself to Freudian interpretation. Read first and then check out the numerous film adaptations.

❖ *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Oscar Wilde 1891

Wilde's novella scandalised his publishers and readers with its striking presentation of Victorian hypocrisy. This is one of the most original interpretations of the genre.

# THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

❖ *Rebecca* Daphne du Maurier 1938

This readable short novel has a disturbing power dynamic and famously haunting setting.

❖ *Wild Sargasso Sea* Jean Rhys 1966

A companion piece to Charlotte Brontë's classic *Jane Eyre*, Rhys takes the 'mad woman in the attic' and tells her story. If you want a challenge, read them both!

❖ *The Woman in Black* Susan Hill 1983

A horror story written in the style of a traditional Gothic novel.

# THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

❖ *The Little Stranger* Sarah Waters 2009

Part mystery, part social commentary; this is a gripping and unnerving read. Classic Gothic features combine here with psychological terror to reinvigorate the genre.

❖ *The Essex Serpent* Sarah Perry 2016

Written in the style of a Victorian Gothic novel, a village is terrorised by the threat of an ancient sea monster.

❖ *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* Sara Collins 2019

Sara Collins' award winning novel plots a slave's journey from Jamaican plantation to English prison. With a feisty narrator and fast paced plot, the award of the Costa prize for Best First Novel 2020 underlines the enduring appeal of the genre and its ability to adapt.



# BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

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- ❖ Hopefully you have now read **at least Gothic texts** from the 18<sup>th</sup> or the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This is in itself an achievement and great preparation for starting your course.
- ❖ If you can, record your impressions of the text. A big diagram would be best here, showing links between characters, themes, plot, style and even form and structure.
- ❖ Finally, you could use one of these texts to prepare your presentation.
- ❖ **Best of all: keep reading!**



# PRESENTATIONS

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As a follow up to your holiday reading, you will prepare and deliver a **brief (around 3 minutes) presentation on one of the texts** you have read. Key content:

- Author
- Context
- Plot (brief introduction – no spoilers!)
- Themes
- Style
- Structure
- Extract

# ALSO ...

❖ If you have any questions about this or any other aspect of English Lit at A level, please email Mr Ennew at [cje@bishopwordsworths.org.uk](mailto:cje@bishopwordsworths.org.uk)

❖ You should also download the A level English Lit handbook which can also be found here:

<https://www.bishopwordsworths.org.uk/sixth-form/course-guide/english-literature/> Details of texts you need (and which editions!) can also be found there.