VCE Literature Text List 2023 (Updated May 2023)

The following texts proposed by the Literature Text Advisory Panel have been approved by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) as suitable for study in Units 3 and 4 in 2023. Texts were selected in accordance with the following criteria and guidelines.

Criteria for text selection

Each text selected for the VCE Literature text list will:

* have literary merit
* be an excellent example of form and genre
* sustain intensive study, raising interesting issues and providing challenging ideas
* reflect current community standards and expectations in the context of senior secondary study of texts.

The text list as a whole will:

* be suitable for a diverse student cohort from a range of backgrounds and contexts, including students for whom English is an additional language
* reflect the cultural diversity of the Victorian community
* include texts by Australians, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
* include a balance of new and established works,\* including a Shakespearean text
* include texts that display affirming perspectives
* reflect engagement with global perspectives.

\* Established works include texts that are recognised as having enduring artistic value.

Guidelines for text selection

The text list for VCE Literature must adhere to the following guidelines:

* The text list will contain 30 texts.
* The text list must represent a range of texts in the following approximate proportions:
* nine novels
* nine plays
* three collections of short stories
* three other works of literature
* six collections of poetry.
* One-third of texts on the text list must be by Australian authors.
* Approximately 75 per cent of texts on the text list would be expected to be familiar\* to most VCE Literature teachers.
* The text list must contain titles that are different from those on the VCE English and English as an Additional Language (EAL) Text List.
* The text list will be reviewed annually, with approximately 25 per cent of the texts being changed. No text will appear for more than four consecutive years or fewer than two years.
* Texts will be accompanied by full bibliographic details, where necessary.

\*Familiar texts can include canonical texts, texts that have been acknowledged in the public domain as significant through mechanisms like awards or accolades, texts of literary merit that have been adapted into film or other forms, and texts of literary merit that have been reviewed across national and international publications.

Information for schools

Teachers must consider the text list in conjunction with the relevant text selection information published in the *VCE Literature Study Design* *2023–2027* for Units 3 and 4.

The selection must include:

* one novel
* one collection of poetry
* one play
* two further texts selected from novels, plays, collections of poetry, collections of short stories or other literature.

At least one of the texts selected must be Australian.

Students must study a sixth text for Unit 3 Area of Study 1. The text used for Unit 3 Area of Study 1 must be an adaptation of one of the five required texts selected from the text list published by the VCAA. The text may take the form of, but is not limited to, a:

* live performance by a professional theatre company
* film or screenplay
* television miniseries
* play script.

A student adaptation cannot be used as the adaptation text for Unit 3 Area of Study 1.

The supplementary reading studied for Unit 3 Area of Study 2 is not prescribed.

No text or part of a text studied in Units 1 and 2 may be studied again in Units 3 and 4.

The selection of texts should ensure that students experience a range of literature from early to contemporary works, dealing with a diversity of cultural experiences and a range of viewpoints.

Students are encouraged to read widely in both Units 3 and 4 to support the achievement of all outcomes.

While the VCAA considers all the texts on the text list suitable for study, teachers should be aware that, with some texts, there may be sensitivities in relation to certain issues. In selecting texts for study, teachers should make themselves aware of these issues before introducing the text to students.

The VCAA does not prescribe editions; any complete edition may be used. However, it should be noted that the editions nominated in the text list are those from which the passages for the examination will be selected. For collections of poetry, poems are prescribed; students must study the poems listed in the text list.

The bibliographic information in this document is provided to assist teachers to obtain texts and is correct, as far as possible, at the time of publication. Publishing details may change from time to time and teachers should consult the *VCAA Bulletin* regularly for any amendments or alterations to the text list.

Text list

Key to codes

The text list is presented alphabetically by author according to text type. Abbreviations in brackets after the titles signify the following:

* ‘(A)’ – this text meets the Australian requirement
* ‘(#)’ – bracketed numbers indicate the number of years that a text has appeared on the VCE Literature text list; for example, ‘(1)’ indicates that 2023 is the first year that a text has appeared on the text list.

Novels

Atwood, Margaret, *Alias Grace* (1)

Austen, Jane, *Northanger Abbey* (4)

Faulkner, William, *As I Lay Dying* (2)

Ishiguro, Kazuo, *The Remains of the Day* (2)

Lindsay, Joan, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (A) (3)

Stoker, Bram, *Dracula* (2)

Winch, Tara June, *The Yield* (A) (1)

Wright, Alexis, *Carpentaria* (A) (4)

Zola, Émile, *The Ladies’ Paradise* (3)

Plays

Bovell, Andrew, *Speaking in Tongues* (A) (4)

Chekhov, Anton, *Uncle Vanya* (2)

Euripides, *Hippolytus* (4)

Kirkwood, Lucy, *Chimerica* (1)

Morrison, Toni, and Traoré, Rokia, *Desdemona* (4)

Murray-Smith, Joanna, *Berlin* (A)(1)

Parks, Suzan-Lori, *Father Comes Home from the Wars: Parts 1, 2 and 3* (2)

Shakespeare, William, *Othello* (4)

Shakespeare, William, *The Winter’s Tale* (2)

Short stories

Chiang, Ted, *Stories of Your Life and Others* (1)

**Stories for study:** ‘Tower of Babylon’, ‘Understand’, ‘Story of Your Life’, ‘Seventy-Two Letters’, ‘Liking What You See: A Documentary’

Munro, Alice, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (3)  
**Stories for study:** All

Tan, Elizabeth, *Smart Ovens for Lonely People* (A) (1)

**Stories for study:** ‘Night of the Fish’, ‘Our Sleeping Lungs Opened to the Cold’, ‘A Girl Is Sitting on a Unicorn in the Middle of a Shopping Centre’, ‘Eighteen Bells Karaoke Castle (Sing Your Heart Out)’, ‘.pptx’, ‘Ron Swanson’s Stencilled ’Stache’, ‘Washing Day’, ‘Yes! Yes! Yes You Are! Yes You Are!’, ‘Would You Rather’, ‘Excision in F-Sharp Minor’, ‘Disobeying’, ‘This Is Not a Treehouse’, ‘Shirt Dresses that Look a Little Too Much Like Shirts so that It Looks Like You Forgot to Put on Pants (Love Will Save the Day)’, ‘The Meal Channel’, ‘Lola Metronome and Calliope St Laurent Having a Picnic at the End of Civilisation as We Know It’

Other literature

Baldwin, James, *The Fire Next Time* (2)

Seacole, Mary, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (1)

Winton, Tim, *The Boy Behind the Curtain* (A) (3)  
**Selections for study:** ‘The Boy Behind the Curtain’, ‘A Space Odyssey at Eight’, ‘Havoc: A Life in Accidents’, ‘A Walk at Low Tide’, ‘Repatriation’, ‘Betsy’, ‘Twice on Sundays’, ‘The Wait and the Flow’, ‘In the Shadow of the Hospital’, ‘The Battle for Ningaloo Reef’, ‘The Demon Shark’, ‘Using the C-word’, ‘Stones for Bread’, ‘Sea Change’, ‘Barefoot in the Temple of Art’

Poetry

Each poem listed must be studied. In the case of longer poems, extracts from the poem may be used in the examination.

Dickinson, Emily, *The Complete Poems* (3)  
**Poems for study:** (45) ‘There’s something quieter than sleep’, (228) ‘Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple’, (254) ‘“Hope” is the thing with feathers’, (258) ‘There’s a certain Slant of light’, (280) ‘I felt a Funeral, in my Brain’, (389) ‘There’s been a Death, in the Opposite House’, (441) ‘This is my letter to the World’, (465) ‘I heard a Fly buzz – when I died’, (533) ‘Two Butterflies went out at Noon’, (622) ‘To know just how He suffered – would be dear’, (709) ‘Publication – is the Auction’, (712) ‘Because I could not stop for Death’, (754) ‘My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun’, (761) ‘From Blank to Blank’, (986) ‘A narrow Fellow in the Grass’, (1136) ‘The Frost of Death was on the Pane’, (1235) ‘Like Rain it sounded till it curved’, (1764) ‘The saddest noise, the sweetest noise’

Duffy, Carol Ann, *The World’s Wife* (1)

**Poems for study:** ‘Little Red-Cap’, ‘Queen Herod’, ‘Mrs Midas’, ‘Mrs Aesop’, ‘Mrs Darwin’, ‘Mrs Sisyphus’, ‘Mrs Faust’, ‘Anne Hathaway’, ‘Medusa’, ‘Circe’, ‘Mrs Lazarus’, ‘Mrs Icarus’, ‘Eurydice’, ‘The Kray Sisters’, ‘Elvis’s Twin Sister’, ‘Pope Joan’, ‘Penelope’, ‘Demeter’

Slessor, Kenneth, *Selected Poems* (A) (3)  
**Poems for study:** ‘Earth-Visitors’, ‘Pan at Lane Cove’, ‘Winter Dawn’, ‘Stars’, ‘The Night-Ride’, ‘Realities’, ‘Music’ (sections I–VI), ‘Captain Dobbin’, ‘Five Visions of Captain Cook’, ‘Country Towns’, ‘Out of Time’, ‘North Country’, ‘South Country’, ‘William Street’, ‘Five Bells’, ‘Beach Burial’

van Neerven, Ellen, *Throat* (A) (1)

**Poems for study:** ‘18Cs’, ‘Iogonliveon’, ‘Chermy’, ‘Bold & Beautiful’, ‘The Only Blak Queer in the World’, ‘A ship-shaped hole in the forest’, ‘Expert’, ‘Women are still not being heard’, ‘TREATY OF SHARED POWER’, ‘Queens’, ‘All that is loved (can be saved)’, ‘this deadly love’, ‘I used to have a name (for this)’, ‘Terra Nova’, ‘I grieve in sleep’, ‘Paper ships’

White, Petra, *A Hunger* (revised edition) (A) (4)  
**Poems for study:** ‘Ode on Love’, ‘Selva Oscura’, ‘By This Hand’, ‘Magnolia Tree’, ‘Feral Cow’, ‘The Relic’, ‘Truth and Beauty’, ‘Woman and Dog’, ‘Ricketts Point’, ‘Southbank’ (sections 1–11), ‘Highway: Eucla Beach’, ‘Highway: Bunda Cliffs’, ‘From Munich’, ‘Karri Forest’

Yeats, WB, *Poems Selected by Seamus Heaney* (2)  
**Poems for study:** ‘Adam’s Curse’, ‘To a Shade’, ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’, ‘Easter 1916’, ‘The Second Coming’, ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’, ‘Leda and the Swan’, ‘Among School Children’, ‘In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz’, ‘Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931’, ‘Byzantium’, ‘A Last Confession’, ‘The Curse of Cromwell’, ‘The Man and the Echo’

Annotations

These annotations are provided to assist teachers with text selection. The comments are not intended to represent the only possible interpretation or a favoured reading of a text. The list is arranged alphabetically by author according to text type.

Novels

Atwood, Margaret, *Alias Grace*, Virago Press, 2019 (1)

Margaret Atwood bases her novel on the basic events of a famous murder in 1843 in Canada in which two young servants ­– Grace Marks and James McDermott – are alleged to have killed their employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery. When we first meet Grace, she has been incarcerated for many years. Her many supporters believe her to be innocent and, in their attempts to have her released, organise for an assessment by a psychiatrist to determine her sanity.

From here, Grace’s story unfolds – from her early years in Ireland to her experiences in domestic servitude   
in Canada. Along the way, there is an unlocking of information about the murders and Grace’s role in the events.

The novel, while set around the murders, explores the experiences of young women in a society that subjugates them through class structures, ethnic prejudices and patriarchal assumptions. As Atwood’s heroine, Grace finds a voice to express the rage of having few choices and limited agency, and being subjected to unending exploitation. The light touch of the psychiatrist, who himself appears to exhibit signs   
of hysteria, offers deeper insights into control and manipulation.

There is a six-episode miniseries, based on the novel, written by Sarah Polley and directed by Mary Harron (2017).

Austen, Jane, *Northanger Abbey*, Penguin Classics, 1995 (4)

*Northanger Abbey* was the first of Jane Austen’s novels to be written and offered for publication, although one of the last to be published. Originally titled ‘Susan’, the novel was most probably written between 1798 and 1799, after Austen had made several extended visits to the English resort town of Bath, its principal setting. The novel, a playful reworking of the Gothic fiction so popular in the 1790s, follows 17-year-old avid reader Catherine Morland to fashionable Bath, at the invitation of her relatively rich family friends, the Allens. Here she meets both the Tilneys and the Thorpes. In a development that subverts the tropes of popular fiction, naive Catherine quickly becomes enamoured of Henry Tilney and befriends the scheming Isabella Thorpe. Plot complication follows via the introduction of siblings and an opportunity for Catherine to remove herself to the Tilney abode of Northanger Abbey.

As Marilyn Butler comments in the introduction to the Penguin Classics edition, *Northanger Abbey* is an extended meditation on the ‘theme of reading’: of novels, of people and of ‘the world’. While Austen’s original readers would have picked up on the nuances of her allusions to contemporary novels and events, modern audiences will appreciate the way in which Catherine learns to read outside her ‘genre expectations’. *Northanger Abbey* provides vivid insight into the obsessions of Georgian England: of the emergence of consumer culture and the need to delineate ‘real’ taste from vulgar ostentation. A number of television, stage and web-series adaptations are available.

Faulkner, William, *As I Lay Dying,* Vintage, 2004 (2)

Set in the 1920s, in William Faulkner’s ‘apocryphal county’ as he would often describe it, *As I Lay Dying* traces events following the death of the family matriarch Addie Bundren. Anse and his five children face the challenge of transporting the coffin of their mother to Jefferson in Mississippi, some distance from their fictional homeland of Yoknapatawpha County, to fulfil her dying wish. Along the way, we are witness to their mental and physical trials and tribulations, notably during a climactic attempt to cross a flooded river on a washed-out bridge, nearly losing the coffin in the process.

Faulkner uses 15 different first-person narratives and a modernist stream-of-consciousness style, building tension. He is interested in how the aftermath of death forges family members into stubborn, pathetic actions and flawed introspection. Nonetheless, these moments of bathos provide the characters with a touching humanity as they attempt to find a new sense of purpose, redefining their identities in the wake of shifting family dynamics.

As we witness the slow disintegration of the family’s values, the novel captures the individual personal experiences and the challenges of reconciling them behind a common purpose that goes beyond dealing with grief and exposes the characters’, and particularly Addie’s, existential angst and frustrations.

Faulkner’s rustic settings and lyrical prose create an authentic and evocative close connection between his characters, and the elements and the land, both of which are brutally harsh and unforgiving. A 2013 film adaptation, directed and co-written by James Franco, is available.

Ishiguro, Kazuo, *The Remains of the Day*, Faber and Faber, 2021 (2)

*The Remains of the Day* is Nobel Prize laureate Kazuo Ishiguro’s third novel and the first to be set in Britain. The narrator is an ageing English butler, Stevens, who is nearing the end of his lengthy service at Darlington Hall. He has remained loyal to his former master, the late Lord Darlington, despite the latter’s complicity in the appeasement of the Nazis, his ill-fated flirtation with fascism and his ultimate disgrace. Following Lord Darlington’s recent death, Darlington Hall has been acquired by a wealthy American, Mr Farraday. Stevens describes his pedestrian attempts to ‘banter’ with his more informal employer, who lends Stevens his car for a motoring trip, the goal of which is a meeting with Darlington Hall’s former housekeeper, Miss Kenton. As Stevens motors around post-war rural England, reflecting on his years of dedicated service, he is more comfortable musing on the nature of dignity and what constitutes a ‘great butler’ than acknowledging the lost opportunity for romantic love or the pain of witnessing the decline of his revered father. As the title implies, there is a sense of things drawing to a close and Stevens’ advancing years coincide with the decline in influence of the British Empire and aristocracy – as Salman Rushdie calls it, the passing of ‘a certain kind of Britain’.

*The Remains of the Day* won the 1989 Booker Prize for Fiction. Its acclaimed Merchant Ivory Productions film adaptation of the same name was nominated for eight Academy Awards.

Lindsay, Joan, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Text Publishing, 2019 (A) (3)

Joan Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is an Australian classic. It tells the story of a school excursion that turned into a disaster and the spiralling aftermath of disappearance and escalating tragedy. As the after-effects of the doomed picnic continue to reverberate through the school, and outwards into the wider community, we are left to wonder at the mysterious cause of the girls’ disappearance. The horror deepens as we are faced with the incapacity of any of the organs of power to halt, deflect or resist the devolving crisis. This makes the story compelling, and the unresolved nature of the conclusion serves to increase its menacing fascination. There is a series of deaths in the text that are quite shocking, yet their violence is not gratuitous; rather they serve to underline the horror of the tale. The presentation of the Australian landscape, seductive yet sinister, is a fascinating element of this story; the various characters’ fear of that vast unknown, which lurks beneath and beyond the facade of European settlement is interesting to consider. The presentation of the lost girls (whose burgeoning sexuality both compels and repels their society) as willing sacrifices to the hanging rock, gives the novel an uncanny power and considerable contemporary relevance. Lindsay’s prose brings her characters and their environment vividly to life, and her analysis of the girls school trope is insightful and sometimes funny.

In 1975 the novel was adapted as a critically acclaimed film directed by Peter Weir, and it returned to Australian screens in a 2018 television miniseries. As well as being an enthralling story, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* asks enduring questions of how we live in the Australian landscape, why we are transfixed by it and why we are afraid.

Stoker, Bram, *Dracula*, Penguin Classics, 2003 (2)

Bram Stoker’s classic Gothic tale *Dracula* is an exciting read. This late Victorian novel stands the test of time, delivering both excitement and terror, even to 21st-century readers, as young Jonathan Harker and his friends pit their wits against the forces of darkness, tracking the seductive yet sinister Count Dracula from Transylvania to London, at no small cost to themselves. The story of the first vampire will be familiar to students, and this text allows them the opportunity to learn exactly where the legend began. Although the novel is quite long, readers are swept through the text, engaged by changing narrative styles, transported to exotic locales and always intrigued by the ominous presence of the count, who both compels and repels characters and readers. Elements of the text are quite risqué, within a Victorian context, and the characterisation of both the count and those who battle against him is interesting to consider, discuss and explore.

Because of its place in contemporary cultural imagination, this text offers a wide variety of adaptations for Unit 3 and there is a wealth of critical material that can be used to support a range of different theoretical approaches. The varying voices of the text and the evocative elements of the Gothic genre also make the text interesting for close analysis. This text is one that rewards study, allowing students and teachers the opportunity to explore horror at its most terrible and thrilling.

Winch, Tara June, *The Yield*, Hamish Hamilton, 2019 (A) (1)

The second novel by Wiradjuri author Tara June Winch offers three distinct voices and stories. In one story, August Gondiwindi returns home for her grandfather’s funeral to discover their lands are under threat from a mining company. In another story, Albert Gondiwindi constructs a dictionary of the Wiradjuri language, beginning with the letter Y, and in doing so tells the story of his land and family. In the third story, missionary Ferdinand Greenleaf recounts his experiences in colonial Australia. These three stories interweave through the novel in a powerful exploration of language, place, identity and community, and a call to end dispossession and exploitation and to reclaim that which has been stolen and removed.

Set on the evocatively named Prosperous Mission and Massacre Plains, *The Yield* is redolent with grief and rage, but also with compassion and understanding. It won the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2020, where the judges noted it ‘celebrates and amplifies the contemporary resurgence and relevance of the Wiradjuri language … [and] is a novel where the past is the present is the future.’

Wright, Alexis, *Carpentaria*, Giramondo, 2006 (A) (4)

Set in the fictional north-western Queensland town Desperance, *Carpentaria* portrays a disparate community plagued by internal divisions. The non-linear narrative draws on traditions of Indigenous and biblical storytelling, and engages with the complexity of individual human experience as well as unresolvable social struggles. Unforgettable characters (Norm Phantom, Will Phantom, Elias, Angel Day, Mozzie Fishman and others), whose stories weave in and out of the narrative, were created by Alexis Wright ‘to demonstrate how the powerful essence of country is in our people’. The text addresses the legacies of colonialism, and Wright does not shy away from exploring issues plaguing contemporary Indigenous communities, such as substance abuse and deaths in custody. However, the breadth of vision of this ambitious text extends far beyond the themes of dispossession, racism and violence. The prose is sensuous and vital; the novel has an affirming and, at times, joyous quality.

Wright was awarded the Miles Franklin Literary Award for *Carpentaria* in 2007. Additionally, the novel won the Fiction Book Award in the Queensland Premier’s Literary Awards, the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal and the Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction.

Zola, Émile, *The Ladies’ Paradise*, Brian Nelson (trans.), Oxford World’s Classics, 2008 (3)

Set in Paris, *The Ladies’ Paradise* enables Émile Zola to denounce the abuses of capitalism in the form of the new department stores that were emerging in the 1860s. Led by the store owner and manager Octave Mouret, the readers are witness to all the tricks of the trade: psychological tactics to allure the ladies and encourage consumerism, ferocious trade with competitors and the merciless practices among the sales personnel. Zola captures this ruthless atmosphere to help criticise the emerging corruption and greed of French society during the Second Empire under Napoleon III. The female protagonist Denise Baudu, who arrives from Normandy with her two brothers, finds herself torn between her allegiance to her uncle, who owns a small business suffering from the expanding department store supremacy, and her admiration for Mouret’s entrepreneurial talent. In her journey, from social and religious aspirations to capitalist conquering logic, Denise brings her own humanist values as well as a psychological love tension, while exposing the dilemmas arising in a changing French society, particularly modern Paris, famously restructured by Haussmann.

As part of a series of novels that aims to tell ‘a Natural and Social History of a Family under the Second Empire’, this volume enchants us with many issues that are still relevant today: the emerging role of women in the workplace and as consumers, the dominance of big corporations and the resultant disappearance of small businesses and savoir-faire to the benefit of mass-produced goods, immoral capitalistic practices and class divisions. Zola’s prose, combined with Brian Nelson’s stirring translation, contains a verve that renders the text remarkably enjoyable and accessible. The recent BBC series adaptation *The Paradise* transposes the action to Victorian England, transforming Zola’s Gallic gritty realism into a gratifying British melodrama.

Plays

Bovell, Andrew, *Speaking in Tongues*, Currency Press, 2012 (A) (4)

In this contemporary play, first performed and published in 1998, Andrew Bovell explores the nature of communication and miscommunication in human relationships. In Part One, we meet two suburban couples whose marital relationships are awkward and failing. All parties desire more than they have but are locked into their own limitations and faults. As Bovell writes: ‘It maps an emotional landscape typified by a sense of disconnection and a shifting moral code. It’s about people yearning for meaning and grabbing onto small moments of hope and humour to combat an increasing sense of alienation.’

Part Two introduces a new set of characters, also experiencing dysfunction in their relationships, and Part Three draws together the threads from the preceding parts, widening the focus to encompass characters whose lives are peripheral to those in Part One but whose situations parallel them to an uncanny degree, suggesting the universality of the playwright’s concerns.

The staging is striking and inventive. The use of a split stage, or a split lighting focus, combined with mirrored actions and overlapping or intercutting dialogue, creates parallels between scenes occurring contemporaneously or in different time frames. Although at times the audience is aware of much more than the characters know, we still need to piece together the narrative at the end and question ourselves about the nature of commitment and trust.

Bovell adapted his own stage play to create the screenplay for the highly successful film *Lantana* (2001), directed by Ray Lawrence, which received numerous awards, including seven from the Australian Film Institute.

Chekhov, Anton, ‘Uncle Vanya’ in *Plays*, (Peter Carson, trans.), Penguin Classics, 2002 (2)

*Uncle Vanya* was first published in 1898 and premiered in Moscow at the Art Theatre in 1899. The play is set on a rural estate, exploring the dichotomy between a provincial existence and an intellectual urban lifestyle. The play weaves comedic moments with elements of tragedy, to explore the needs of the entitled thinking of the privileged urbanites with those of the hardworking rural communities. Anton Chekhov’s characters contemplate the futility of wasted lives and how real greatness should be measured, as they ruminate on the idea that real work is truly fulfilling. The stifling atmosphere of the storm brewing ignites the woes of the characters, as they reflect upon unrequited love and career choices. Emotions rise, shots are fired and a stolen vial of morphine creates anxiety for the mortality of the titular character Vanya.

Chekhov explores the situation of prominent rural families in the face of social upheaval and their movement from a more feudal society, in contrast to the expectations of an academic intellectual social set. The concerns about financial struggle were formative in Chekhov’s own adolescence and years of study, due to the change in his family’s means. This social change is further realised by the influence on his work of the Russian realist movement, which captured cultural shifts that were significant in the 1880s and fundamentally shaped the political climate that emerged in the 1900s.

Euripides, ‘Hippolytus’ in *Euripides I*,(David Grene, trans.), University of Chicago Press, 2013 (4)

Winner of the dramatic competition at the festival of Dionysus in 428 BCE and celebrated in the classical past as one of Euripides’ best plays, *Hippolytus* is a compelling drama of love and betrayal, speech and silence, divinity and mortality. Grene and Lattimore’s updated verse translation beautifully realises Euripides’ poetry, revelling in the stylised horror of inescapable tragedy. Framed by divine prologue and epilogue, the human drama of Phaedra (scorned and vengeful), of Hippolytus (accused and betrayed) and of Theseus (angry and remorseful) remains compelling, and offers much to students both new to classical tragedy and those more familiar with this form.

There is a substantial amount of literary criticism about *Hippolytus*, and the play lends itself to many different interpretations, as well as being rich in the imagery and stylistic features that reward close reading and analysis. While the violence, misogyny and accusation of rape are shocking, Euripides’ aching sympathy for his mortal characters in the context of the pitilessness of his gods does not allow his audience to make superficial judgments of the complex issues he raises. At the heart of this drama is Euripides’ anxiety about the impact of a new technology that threatened his society. Though his concern is with writing, his fear makes the play particularly relevant for us as we, too, find ourselves in the grip of a technologically expanding world.

Kirkwood, Lucy, *Chimerica*, Nick Hern Books, 2013 (1)

Through this fast-paced drama, Lucy Kirkwood examines the power of an image to reveal unexpected truths, and asks what becomes of those who are discarded and left behind in the race to tell the story. Shifting rapidly between locations, from 1989 to 2012, *Chimerica* explores the role of the journalist and the nature of exploitation in the struggle for the truth. The ethics of storytelling, and the complexity of the political relations between China and the United States, provide the backdrop for a provocative exploration of the tensions between censorship, freedom and consumerism.

Photojournalist Joe Schofield is driven to locate the anonymous figure at the centre of his most famous photograph: an image depicting one man standing defiantly before an army tank in Tiananmen Square during the pro-democracy protests of 1989.Upon the revelation of a clue in a newspaper advertisement, Joe believes ‘Tank Man’ is still alive and seeks the assistance of Zhang Lin, his contact in Beijing, to discover what happened to the unknown hero. Joe’s idealism is tested as his obsession to uncover the truth destroys his career and his personal relationships, while Zhang Lin, though haunted by the past, remains unafraid to challenge the status quo.

Since its inception in 2013, *Chimerica* was first staged in London and in 2017 the play was performed by the Sydney Theatre Company. A four-part television adaptation of the play (also written by Kirkwood) aired in 2019 on the United Kingdom’s Channel 4 and is available on DVD and through steaming services.

Morrison, Toni, and Traoré, Rokia, *Desdemona,* Methuen Drama, 2021 (4)

Toni Morrison’s artistic collaboration with Malian singer and songwriter Rokia Traoré has produced a powerful narrative that blurs generic boundaries. The text positions itself as a dialogue, not only with Shakespeare’s *Othello,* but also with its many interpretations and critical commentaries. Morrison and Traoré give voice to Shakespeare’s silenced characters and foreground the experiences of those often marginalised by history and literary traditions. The play is set in an imagined afterlife and is structured around a series of monologues and dialogues, mostly delivered by characters in *Othello,* interspersed with songs written by Traoré*.*

A review of the play in Sydney (2015) described it as a ‘piercing inquest into the crime at the heart of *Othello,* conducted by the victim herself’. What emerges from this interrogation of *Othello* is an invitation to reflect on the values, assumptions and prejudices embedded in the original text.

Murray-Smith, Joanna, *Berlin*, Currency Press, 2021 (A) (1)

Joanna Murray-Smith is one of Australia’s most internationally acclaimed playwrights. Her plays include Switzerland; Pennsylvania Avenue; Fury; True Minds; Day One, a Hotel, Evening; The Gift; Rockabye; Ninety; Bombshells; Honour; Redemption; and Love Child. *Berlin* is set in the titular European city among hipster bars, war memorials and tourist hedonists. Teachers are advised it contains the frequent use of the f-word and a sexual scene.

Murray-Smiths’ two characters, Tom, an Australian law school dropout and Charlotte, a poet who runs a trendy underground bar, play a game of seduction over one night. The playwright activates the conventions of a psychological thriller when we learn their meeting was not accidental. Furthermore, Murray-Smith’s lighting decisions involve the use of darkness, which facilitates hide-and-seek aspects of motivation. The play is rich in symbolism and characters engage in a range of literary discourse, including dialogue about the Ramones, philosophical argument and musing on the poetry of Rilke and Emily Dickinson.

The play raises significant philosophical questions about the conflict between individual freedom and respect for the legacy of war guilt. Murray-Smith raises the dramatic stakes as we learn of characters’ psychological burdens, Charlotte feeling the responsibility for the accidental death of her brother and Tom as a descendant of Holocaust victims. The central issue in the play – to what extent can individual choices be free of the burden of the past – is made palpable by the drama. It should resonate with Australian students with our history of colonialism and contested ownership.

Parks, Suzan-Lori, Father Comes Home from the Wars (Parts 1, 2 and 3), Nick Hern Books, 2016 (2)

In 2002, Suzan-Lori Parks became the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama. She was a finalist for the second time with *Father Comes Home from the Wars (Parts 1, 2 and 3)*, which the Pulitzer Committee described as ‘a distinctive and lyrical epic … that deftly takes on questions of identity, power and freedom with a blend of humor and dignity’.

The narrative follows the journey of Hero, a slave who has been promised his freedom by his master, on the condition that he fights alongside him with the Confederates – as Hero puts it, ‘helping out the wrong side’. It is an epic exploration of slavery in America during the Civil War in three interconnected parts: 1. A Measure of a Man, 2. The Battle in the Wilderness and 3. The Union of My Confederate Parts. The first and third parts are set in a West Texan slave cabin, and the second part on a Confederate/Unionist battlefield.

Parks authentically and powerfully elevates the modern African-American vernacular by intertextually reworking Greek epic (*The Odyssey*) and tragic (*Oresteia*) tropes, including a Chorus, to create a new, brutal and subversive vision of American slaves. Her lyrically colloquial dialogue bravely explores significant political and philosophical issues concerning race, thus challenging binary understandings of power. Parks also uses humour, reshaping absurdist elements, and songs, to portray the complex humanity of unique characters who experience both loss and love. Her use of diverse theatrical styles and forms creates a memorable play that reshapes how audiences view a significant part of American history.

Shakespeare, William, *Othello*, Cambridge School Shakespeare, Cambridge University Press, 2014 (4)

William Shakespeare’s *Othello* is set in the 16th century. The play begins in Venice but quickly moves to Cyprus, as the Venetians attempt to defend their island. Leading the Venetian army in the battle is Othello, not a native Venetian but a Moor, an outsider, unquestioningly given the role of general due to his incomparable skills in battle and warfare. However, accepting Othello as the general of the army appears to be the limit of acceptance for many, including Brabantio. When the much-desired Desdemona, daughter of Brabantio, marries Othello in secret, Othello is accused of using magic to steal her. Othello has already proven his worthiness to lead the Venetian army, yet he must further prove himself to be worthy of marrying one of their own, both to Venice and himself.

To make this even more difficult is Othello’s supposedly loyal ensign, Iago. Not being chosen by Othello to be his lieutenant, Iago attempts to destroy Othello, not through warfare, but through subtle and patient psychological manipulation. Preying on his fears, insecurities and jealousy, Iago attempts to destroy Othello while charming us into an incongruence of loathing and admiration. Villainous characters, such as Lucifer in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Walter White in *Breaking Bad* and Frank Underwood in *House of Cards*, have all been influenced by Iago.

Shakespeare, William, *The Winter’s Tale*, New Cambridge Shakespeare, Cambridge University Press, 2007 (2)

The first recorded performance of *The Winter’s Tale* was at the Globe Theatre, London, on 15 May 1611. It is difficult to classify as tragedy, comedy or romance, but may be seen as a combination of the three. In the first three acts, a dark shadow of suspicion, jealousy and revenge is personified in the all-powerful patriarch, Leontes, King of Sicilia, who accuses his pregnant wife, Hermione, of infidelity with his friend Polixenes, King of Bohemia. Leontes imprisons Hermione and commands that her newborn daughter be abandoned. Hermione and their young son Mamillius die of grief, and Leontes, learning from an oracle of Hermione’s innocence, is overcome with remorse.

The abandoned infant is found by a Bohemian shepherd and is named Perdita (‘the lost one’). Sixteen years later, Perdita and Polixines’ son, Florizel, fall in love but Polixenes considers Perdita a ‘shepherdess’, unworthy of his son. The young lovers flee to the court of Leontes, who hears Perdita’s story and realises that she is his daughter. Miraculously, Hermione returns from the dead, through the agency of her loyal friend and confidant Paulina, and the play ends on a note of joyful reconciliation.

William Shakespeare’s lyrical poetry and passages of tense or tender dialogue provide much scope for close study. The ideas of power, loyalty and love are as enduring in our time as they were in Shakespeare’s. The listed edition includes a useful introduction that canvasses a range of ideas and concerns in the play and contains detailed footnotes and references.

Available adaptations include a 1999 Royal Shakespeare Company production and *Branagh Theatre Live: The Winter’s Tale* (2015).

Short stories

Chiang, Ted, *Stories of Your Life and Others*, Picador, 2020 (1)

In this collection of short stories and novellas, Ted Chiang invests in the extraordinary to consider existential concerns and queries that have haunted humanity for millennia. In the first story set for study – ‘Tower of Babylon’ – Chiang unpacks the biblical tale of the tower of Babylon, offering his readers the logistics of the building of a tower that reaches to heaven, the chill of a profound disconnection to Earth and, finally, an inversion of what we might believe about time and space. In ‘Understand’, medical breakthroughs unleash unanticipated consequences for the protagonist, who must then battle a problem of identify and selfhood. The central story of the collection – ‘Story of Your Life’ – explores the power and limits of communication in both human and alien forms.

Chiang’s work plays with language, physics and our assumptions about the nexus between the ordinary and the extraordinary. His work is often predicated on loss or grief but engages with these experiences in surprising and unexpected ways.

Much awarded, Chiang is considered one of the most exciting contemporary science fiction writers.

In 2016, the film adaptation of ‘Story of Your Life’ was released as *Arrival*.

Munro, Alice, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Vintage, 2000 (3)

In her collection of short stories *Dance of the Happy Shades*, prize-winning Canadian author Alice Munro explores the lives of girls and women in rural Canada before and after World War II. Written during a 20-year period, these spare and unflinching tales take us into the interior lives of young women on the cusp of adulthood as they confront first romance, gender roles, social expectations and family ties, all of which lend the collection a contemporary resonance. Munro’s finely observed characters elicit pathos in the ordinariness of their quotidian lives, their small victories and bitter disappointments. Their sense of entrapment within prescribed social and gender roles is writ large by the constraints of small-town boundaries, both literal and figurative. Exploring the liminal space between adolescence and adulthood, Munro examines how the quiet nurturing of female ambition that seeks a life beyond small towns can lead to a rejection of narrow-minded parochialism, mirrored in the stories’ stifling, claustrophobic interior spaces and fenced farmlands. Through her lucid, unsentimental prose, Munro has crafted a penetrating examination of the intensity of the adolescent experience, inhibited by the inexorable pull of the past and the ties that bind.

Munro is the recipient of the 2009 Man Booker International Prize and the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Tan, Elizabeth, *Smart Ovens for Lonely People*, Brio Books, 2020 (A) (1)

Elizabeth Tan’s quirky collection of short stories received much praise upon release, as evidenced by its selection for the Stella Prize Longlist in 2021 and winning the 2020 Readings Prize for New Australian Fiction. There is much to savour in the often surreal universe Tan constructs, transforming ordinary mundane actions into mystifying and marvellous opportunities for self-reflection. From these unpredictable, enchanting situations emerge profound observations on contemporary human fallibilities and idiosyncrasies. The titles are evocative and tell a story in themselves: ‘A Girl Is Sitting on a Unicorn in the Middle of a Shopping Centre’, ‘Eighteen Bells Karaoke Castle (Sing Your Heart Out)’ or ‘Shirt Dresses that Look a Little Too Much Like Shirts so that It Looks Like You Forgot to Put on Pants (Love Will Save the Day)’. If these are not enough to capture students’ imaginations, the vibrant characters and settings will certainly allure them into a world in which the mind expands and imagination takes over.

Tan’s playfulness with language offers many opportunities to explore narratives from alternative viewpoints, engaging her readers, thanks to her panache. While refreshing, vibrant and full of humour, with an upbeat style and unique voice, *Smart Ovens for Lonely People* provides us with incisive commentaries that enable us to ponder the most profound, and at times esoteric, aspects of our daily existence.

Other literature

Baldwin, James, *The Fire Next Time,* Penguin Classics, 2017 (2)

Opening with an endearing and impassioned letter to his nephew, James Baldwin challenges America’s race relations while meditating on his position in society and reshaping his beliefs in the process. Written in 1962 at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, *The Fire Next Time* captures the mind of someone who is rejected by his own country and, as a result, struggles to feel accepted and loved in segregated America. The detrimental impact on one’s identity and sense of belonging is evocatively explored in the text, which highlights profound feelings of alienation and confusion, while aiming to restore some form of dignity. Baldwin retraces his childhood in Harlem, meditates on the role of religion and reflects on his transformative encounter with Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, in order to redefine American history and any chance of salvation for the future of civilisation.

Written with crystal clarity and eloquence, Baldwin’s essay is a tour de force that confronts the difficult truths not only within American society but within the history of humankind. His astute observations still resonate strongly in the light of the Black Lives Matter movement and ongoing forms of social injustice. Baldwin’s words act as a rallying call to work together to eliminate racial inequalities or else face a humanity that is divided and doomed. His compelling voice leaves no one indifferent to the plight of those ostracised and makes us ponder the role we each play in helping to construct a more harmonious society in which everyone feels included.

Seacole, Mary, Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands, Penguin Classics, 2005 (1)

A rollicking tale of action and movement, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* is a text of both adventure and activism. The voice we hear in this autobiography challenges much of what we might know and think about who tells stories and who has agency. That Mary Seacole was both a woman and a person of colour could have been enough in the 19th century (the original text was published in 1857) to condemn her to silence but the existence of the text is testimony to her sense of self and story. She claims her narrative as one of triumph and achievement, which might run counter to an assumption that this work will be an exploration of victimhood and exploitation. She is certainly clear she suffered discrimination; she was initially denied work as a nurse when war broke out in Crimea. But undeterred, she makes her own way into the war zone, opening the ‘British Hotel’, to nurse, feed and support sick and wounded officers.

A bestseller when first published, Mary Seacole’s autobiography fell out of favour in the 20th century. But recently, it has garnered renewed interest. Seacole has been reclaimed as a heroine of the Crimean War and a trailblazer. There are two films with links to her autobiography. The first is *Mary Seacole: The Real Angel of the Crimea* (2005) and the second is *Seacole* (due 2022).

Winton, Tim, *The Boy Behind the Curtain*, Penguin Books, 2016 (A) (3)

This non-fiction work by one of Australia’s most celebrated novelists is a collection of true stories from Tim Winton’s life and essays on salient issues of our time. Topics include the impact of his father’s motorbike accident, the embarrassment of the family car, growing up in a devout Christian family in a country town, surfing and the culture it has spawned, the campaign to save Ningaloo Reef from development, the mob mentality behind a shark cull and a childhood epiphany in an art gallery. Winton’s extraordinary ability to evoke a sense of place and his passion for the Australian landscape and coast resurface frequently in rich lyrical prose. A unifying idea through the text is that ‘the old war on nature [has been] for too long our prevailing mindset’ and this informs Winton’s rhetoric on colonisation, capitalism, politics, the media and national identity. Although it sheds light on some events and thematic concerns in his earlier works, this book is accessible to anyone who is unfamiliar with, or even resistant to, Winton’s fiction. This is an important and timely collection that addresses issues such as masculinity, gender, family, parenthood and the power of language and stories with insight, wit and generosity of spirit.

In the title piece – which Malcolm Knox termed ‘an exploration of fear-driven extremism’ – Winton discusses the disturbing allure of guns and the dangers they pose to individuals and society. Although Winton unambiguously condemns America’s gun culture and praises Australia’s firearms controls, teachers are advised to take these passages into consideration when selecting this text.

Poetry

Dickinson, Emily, *The Complete Poems*, Faber and Faber, 2016 (3)

Emily Dickinson wrote nearly 1800 poems during her lifetime, although she preferred to focus her attention on home, health and family. Those poems that did appear in print were published anonymously or without her consent. She recorded about 800 of her poems in handmade booklets that she showed to no one, and she shared selected poems only with a small circle of family and friends. It was only after her death that her work began to be known, and she is now recognised as a great poet.

Dickinson’s poems are frequently concise and invariably commanding in their structure and style. She is celebrated for her use of slant-rhyme, conceits, paradox and unconventional punctuation, which some scholars believe anticipated the modernist poetry of the 20th century. Most of her poems are written in the first person, asserting a sense of self through the frequent use of ‘I’, although the tone and attitude of her speakers is widely varied. Her poems are moving explorations of extremes of emotion, immortality, death, nature and art. They draw on a wide array of images drawn from her familiarity with law, music, religion, commerce and medicine, yet these everyday references are used to explore abstract ideas in profound and unexpected ways. Dickinson is frequently described as a recluse. However, her wit, sense of humour and wide-ranging intellectual interests reveal her engagement with the world. Students will appreciate Dickinson’s originality and the accessibility of her language, and they will find many avenues of analysis.

Duffy, Carol Ann, *The World’s Wife*, Picador, 2017 (1)

First published in 1999, this compelling collection reimagines myth and reconsiders history, offering readers sharp social commentary in the form of engaging, witty and thought-provoking poetry that students will enjoy. A former British poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy is a profoundly skilled writer, manipulating form and style to invest old stories with new life and to challenge old assumptions with new possibilities. The poems in the collection vary significantly; some are lyrical, others meditative and yet others conversational and intimate. All are interesting and all are paced so that readers are drawn through the narratives by vivid characters in sometimes familiar and sometimes unfamiliar circumstances. Some of the selected poems grapple with sexuality and desire and some explore vengeance and betrayal but Duffy’s treatment of such challenging material is sensitive and nuanced, inviting wide-ranging classroom discussion and complex student responses.

Although some research will be necessary to orient students to the source material of poems from the collection, *The World’s Wife* is accessible, returning readers often to the stories of childhood and allowing us to wonder about the narratives concealed by normative discourse. Duffy’s irreverence is appealing to read, her satire is crisp without being bitter and her insights cast new light on tired conventions and accepted traditions.

Duffy’s work is often taught in secondary school classrooms in the United Kingdom, so there are many online resources available to support a study of this collection, including readings and lectures by the author. *The World’s Wife* also inspired a 2017 opera of the same name by Tom Green, extracts of which are available on YouTube.

Slessor, Kenneth, *Selected Poems*, A & R Classics, HarperCollins Publishers*,* 2014(A) (3)

Kenneth Slessor is one of Australia’s best-known poets of the 20th century. Born in 1901 in Orange, New South Wales, he became a journalist with several Sydney newspapers and periodicals, and later an official war correspondent during World War II. His early poetry, written in the period immediately after World War I, was influenced by the views of Norman and Jack Lindsay and Hugh McCrae and the group that produced the literary journal *Vision*. It plunges us into an exotic and hedonistic world, inhabited by the Greek deities, nymphs and fauns or, more often, stone statues representing them. The poetry is pervaded by an air of nostalgia for a world that is no longer possible, if it ever was.

Other poems reflect an appreciation of the Australian landscape, natural and human, and a dry wit in describing such scenes. Throughout his oeuvre, we find a variety of styles, ranging from jaunty rhythms to longer elegiac rhythms, a concern for the striking image and a love for the musicality of language. The metaphor of tidal flux, with its associations for Slessor of time, memory, recurrence and change, is explored in many of his later poems and is at the heart of what is probably his best-known poem, ‘Five Bells’.

Students will find his poetry accessible but also challenging in the ways that the images and sounds resonate throughout. Readings and musical settings of some of the poems are available.

van Neerven, Ellen, *Throat*, University of Queensland Press, 2020 (A) (1)

With a perspective incorporating a Dutch and Mununjali Yugambeh (South East Queensland) heritage, Ellen van Neerven’s writing has won prestigious literary awards in Australia, and their short stories have been published in Australian and international literary journals. (Note: The poet prefers the use of gender-neutral personal pronouns in discussions of their writing.) They write about ‘Settler-Colonial continuity’, revealing the ongoing suffering of Indigenous Australians. ‘The Only Blak Queer in the World’ speaks of the alienation felt by those with a young, queer, Aboriginal identity. The speaker remembers the anxiety they felt ‘before [they] started to think of gender as a colonial construct’. Gender bias against any woman is denounced in poems such as ‘Women are still not being heard’.

Many poems explore issues of Indigenous identity: once it was a connection to the land, but those issues now revolve around the transformation and disintegration of this identity in a post-colonial society. In ‘Terra Nova’, the speaker mourns the loss of Country, which ‘turned into what themfellas imagined’. Yet van Neerven also finds cause for optimism. In ‘this deadly love’ the speaker is joyful about ‘fallin in big-one love with a deado Ballardong Noongar tidda …’ Poems like ‘Bold & Beautiful’ and ‘Queens’ celebrate the strength of women’s loving family and tribal relationships.

Van Neerven’s distinctive poetic voice is highly engaging; their vocabulary is invigorated by Indigenous words, and plain, often blunt, language, while technological terminology evokes the complex, global community we now inhabit. Their bold experiments with form, in ‘poems’ that look and sound like prose, or like a legal document, or almost like a sonnet, challenge poetic tradition with thought-provoking poems that will strongly resonate with many young readers.

Teachers should note that some poems make reference to sexual abuse and domestic violence.

White, Petra, *A Hunger*, John Leonard Press, 2018 (revised edition) (A) (4)

Petra White has emerged as a highly regarded Australian poet during the past decade. *A Hunger* incorporates White’s two previous collections and shows an expansion of her poetic concerns as she looks back to Renaissance poets and becomes more deeply philosophical. Beginning with ‘Thirteen Love Poems’, White alludes to Pablo Neruda’s ‘Twenty Love Poems’ but her exploration of love is less concerned with sensuality and passion than with questions about what constitutes love. She writes of joyful, all-consuming love, but also conveys a need to distance herself and reclaim her soul.

Other poems speak of memories, relationships and significant places, particularly in Australia. White explores aspects of city life and the natural world, seeing below the surface of things where ‘skill tugs at the muscles [and] drives the bones’. She moves easily between odes, elegies, lyric sequences and near-sonnets and shows considerable technical flair, particularly in the use of metaphor. A cleaning woman, for example, is a ‘moonwalker’, trailing her cargo through ‘an obsidian tangle’ of city offices. As a celebration of the fluidity and flexibility of language, the poems’ strong impact will be more fully appreciated when they are spoken aloud and listened to. They also provide a rich and rewarding source for close analysis and will accommodate differing literary perspectives.

The poems selected for study cover a range of forms, from the ode to the near-sonnet, and students will find intertextual references to poets such as John Donne, William Shakespeare, John Keats and Dante Alighieri. In her use and subversion of forms and voices, White endows her poetry with a rich texture of complexity and multiple levels of meaning.

Yeats, WB, *Poems Selected by Seamus Heaney*, Faber and Faber, 2004 (2)

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) is one of Ireland’s most revered poets and a significant voice in 20th-century literature. Although best known as a modernist poet, Yeats also co-founded and wrote plays for the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, an institution that aims to promote Irish literature. An advocate of Irish independence from Britain, Yeats served two terms as a senator with the Irish Free State after they won power in 1922. In 1923, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature ‘for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation’.

As Seamus Heaney comments in the introduction to this selection, Yeats ‘lived a life that coincided with an era of great social and political change’. Not only were Yeats and contemporaries such as TS Eliot, Ezra Pound and James Joyce witness to the decline of the British imperial enterprise, but they were witness to the unprecedented loss of human life in World War I and then the post-war rise of fascism in Italy and Germany. In Ireland there was the War of Independence from the British from 1919–21, followed by the Civil War between those in favour of a treaty with Britain and those who favoured a more radically independent model.

While Yeats was clearly committed to Irish nationalism, his poetry resists the temptations of propaganda. Yeats draws from Irish folklore and Celtic landscapes in many of his poems, but students will also perceive his interest in many other non-Christian sources of spiritualism. Alongside more overtly political poems, such as ‘Easter 1916’, Yeats offers others, like ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, which are more centrally concerned with psychological truth and the mysteries of existence.