

Literature post-1900: Expanding your NEA library (June 2021)

Here at OCR, our A Level English Literature NEA is designed to give students and teachers scope to explore contemporary literature written in English. In discussions with our teachers, we're offering these twice yearly bulletins highlighting a range of texts for your consideration.

In this edition, we're taking a slightly different approach. There are three texts that we see most frequently: Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* (1999); Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001). While these are all still fantastic texts, we thought we'd offer ten possible alternatives for each text that students could consider. We really hope you find something that sparks your interest in our suggestions.

List of texts:

Poetry (*The World's Wife*):

- *Vertigo and Ghost* by Fiona Benson
- *Bestiary* by Donika Kelly
- *Archaic Figures* by Amy Clampitt
- *Exiles of Eden* by Ladan Osman
- *Meadowlands* by Louise Glück
- *Postcolonial Love Poem* by Natalie Diaz
- *Some Are Always Hungry* by Jihyun Yun
- *Helen in Egypt* by H.D
- *Virgin* by Analicia Sotelo
- *Autobiography of Red* by Anne Carson

Drama (*A Streetcar Named Desire*):

- *Egusi Soup* by Janice Okoh
- *Tender Napalm* by Philip Ridley
- *The Thrill of Love* by Amanda Whittington
- *Saturday Night/Sunday Morning* by Katori Hall
- *Five Kinds of Silence* by Shelagh Stephenson
- *People, Places and Things* by Duncan MacMillan
- *Meet Me at Dawn* by Zinnie Harris
- *Fugue* by Rona Munro
- *The Almighty Sometimes* by Kendall Feaver
- *4.48 Psychosis* by Sarah Kane

Prose (*Atonement*):

- *Mr Fox* by Helen Oyeyemi
- *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing
- *Possession* by A.S Byatt
- *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf
- *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut
- *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado
- *The Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz
- *An Unnecessary Woman* by Rabih Alameddine
- *Asymmetry* by Lisa Halliday
- *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles

If you've always chosen Duffy's *The World's Wife*

You're interested in poetry that retells old stories from new perspectives, centres women's voices where possible and explores issues of violence, sexuality and power.

1. *Vertigo and Ghost* by Fiona Benson (2019, Cape Poetry)

Benson's second collection was shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize and a Forward Prize in 2019. Its first half examines Greek mythology and its litany of divine abuse against women. Benson's voice is one of protest and clarity, and in the latter half of the collection, distinctly more personal.

Themes: sexual violence, motherhood, abuse, power, hope, perspective

2. *Bestiary* by Donika Kelly (2016, Graywolf Press)

Taking its name from Middle Ages volumes of real and imaginary animals, Kelly's collection does not so much retell old myths as use these real and mythical creatures to explore transformation and the self. Kelly is interested in love, in queerness, in the body and reclaiming it after abuse.

Themes: transformation, love, identity, LGBT+, trauma, hybridity

3. *Archaic Figure* by Amy Clampitt (1987, Faber)

This is best found in her Collected Works but is well worth the investment. Clampitt's collection can be seen as an ancestor of Duffy's with its engagement with Greek myth (especially the Medusa) and place, but also her use of literary allusion – to George Eliot, Milton, Dickinson, Keats.

Themes: myth, landscape, pain, resilience, disguise, modernity

4. *Exiles of Eden* by Ladan Osman (2019, Coffee House Press)

The collection is Osman's second and plays with both Biblical narratives as per the title, but also in the final long poem, the myth of Eurydice. It's quite an experimental, multimodal collection featuring the poet's photographic work and would offer an expansion on what it means to engage with myths and legends.

Themes: displacement, stories, sensuality, violence, climate change, vulnerability

5. *Meadowlands* by Louise Glück (1998, Carcanet)

Glück tells the tale of a marriage under test, utilising Penelope and Odysseus' story during and after the Trojan War. Tackling distance, disappointment and love, as well as other Odyssean figures like Circe and Telemachus, Glück refashions these myths into something loving and modern.

Themes: marriage, commitment, passion, fear, The Odyssey, dilemma

6. *Postcolonial Love Poem* by Natalie Diaz (2019, Faber)

Diaz' collection focuses less on explicit retelling of old stories and myths, instead repurposing and translating them as way to express emotional truths. The collection shows Diaz' deftness with Greek myth, Mojave beliefs Biblical imagery as well the American myth of Manifest Destiny.

Themes: love, colonialism, intimacy, belief, destruction, community

7. *Some Are Always Hungry* by Jihyun Yun (2020, University of Nebraska Press)

Yun's debut collection offers three female voices across generations while exploring and retelling family stories, Korean history and Korean fairytale. Yun's poetry doesn't shy away from the violence of survival, or the ways in which food is intertwined with community and oppression.

Themes: food, violence, occupation, family, memory, stories

8. *Helen in Egypt* by H.D. (1961, New Directions Books)

H.D, one of the early Modernist poets, offers a revision of the myth of Helen of Troy and of Achilles in this epic book-length sequence of poems. Based on Stesichoros' tale that Helen never went to Troy, H.D plays with time, memory and myth as well as the masculinist history of The Epic.

Themes: culpability, dislocation, femininity, violence, war, reinvention

9. *Virgin* by Analicia Sotelo (2018, Milkweed Editions)

Sotelo's collection engages with a range of traditions, including Catholic rituals, surrealist art and Greek mythology. The later sections of the collection make reference to the Minotaur myth with a particular focus on reimagining Ariadne. Sotelo explores womanhood, being Mexican-American, and being caught between desire, objectification and shame.

Themes: desire, femininity, shame, family, faith, objectification

10. *Autobiography of Red* by Anne Carson (1998, Cape Poetry)

Carson is a Classicist by profession and this is one of her most acclaimed works. This is a verse novel focusing on Herakles' tenth labour retold from the perspective of Geryon and transposed to a modern setting. Carson's work follows Geryon from boyhood, to his teenage relationship with Herakles and their tangled reunion years later.

Themes: storytelling, power, abuse, coercion, sex, violence

If you've always chosen Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*

You're interested in drama that explores violence, gender, mental illness, fantasy and relationships, perhaps moving beyond a purely realist mode. Given the themes of Williams' play, we have tried to indicate warnings for potentially traumatic or triggering content in the options below.

1. *Egusi Soup* by Janice Okoh (2011, Methuen Drama)

Okoh's debut play also centres around two sisters, Anne and Grace, as they and their mother prepare to head back to Nigeria to celebrate the one year memorial of their father's death. As in Williams' play, Okoh explores resentments about carrying responsibility in the wake of grief, concerns about partners, and differences in aspiration.

Themes: grief, loss, pretense, aspiration, love, home

2. *Tender Napalm* by Philip Ridley (2011, Methuen Drama)

In this two-hander, Ridley explores the relationship between a couple and the intersections of fantasy, love and violence. While in quite a different style to Williams, Ridley engages with similar themes regarding gender and conflict, as well as a willingness to explore the brutality and tenderness that can exist between people.

Themes: memory, destruction, sex, violence, power, intimacy, loss

3. *The Thrill of Love* by Amanda Whittington (2013, Nick Hern Books)

Inspired by the story of the last woman to be hanged in England in 1955, Whittington brings Ruth Ellis to life in all her disappointment and the reality of her often violent relationships with men. The play explores similar territory to Williams in studying women misunderstood by those around them and the ways in which they can be punished.

Themes: love, femininity, violence, cruelty, abuse, punishment

4. *Saturday Night/Sunday Morning* by Katori Hall (2011, Bloomsbury)

Utilising a similar Southern setting as Williams, Hall's play takes place at the tail end of WW2 in a Memphis Black beauty parlour and boarding house. Taking place over the last few months of the war, Hall brings to life a group of women, a Cyrano plot, and the winding down of war as these women navigate beauty, belonging, love and desire.

Themes: desire, love, loss, family, war, the South

5. *Five Kinds of Silence* by Shelagh Stephenson (2000, Methuen Drama)

Where Williams is only able to depict abuse as it happens, Stephenson's drama offers another road after violence and abuse. Mary walks in as her daughters Janet and Susan have shot their abusive father Billy. Stephenson explores their voices, their silence and their restriction as the case is investigated and Billy's presence is felt everywhere.

Themes: domestic abuse, sexual violence, cyclical violence, justice, silence, freedom

6. *People, Places and Things* by Duncan Macmillan (2015, Methuen Drama)

The play focuses on Emma, a young actor whose life and career comes to a halt when her struggles with addiction land her in rehab. Just as Blanche uses fantasy and illusion to cushion her from the world, Emma's addictions keep the world and consequences at bay – until they can't any more.

Themes: instability, addiction, power, fear, isolation, shame

7. *Meet Me at Dawn* by Zinnie Harris (2017, Faber)

A couple arrive wet and shaken on a shore after an accident, confused as to how they ended up wherever it is they are. As Helen and Robyn try to piece together what has happened, Harris explores memory, trauma, grief and the possibility of getting one more day.

Themes: grief, fantasy, love, loss, memory, trauma

8. *Fugue* by Rona Munro (1983, Nick Hern Books)

Munro's play explores Kay, a young woman struggling with depression who may or may not have seen something unexplainable. Featuring physical manifestations of her memory and the ghost of her depression, Munro is able to explore the different facets of Kay's mental illness and the reliability of memory.

Themes: instability, memory, mental illness, fantasy, reality, work

9. *The Almighty Sometimes* by Kendall Feaver (2018, Faber)

Feaver's play also centres around a complex relationship between two women, this time mother Renee and her daughter Anna, who has been dealing with mental illness since childhood. Anna, is starting to think she might spread her wings and move beyond the diagnoses and prescriptions that she feels have defined her.

Themes: co-dependency, mental illness, cruelty, love, storytelling, fantasy

10. *4:48 Psychosis* by Sarah Kane (2000, Methuen Drama)

Written flexibly so as to allow directorial interpretation (and in quite a different style to traditional playscripts), Kane's play deals explicitly with suicidal ideation and depression and the disconnection wrought by both. Kane's work left an indelible mark on British theatre in much the same way as Williams' play did on the American stage.

Themes: mental illness, suicide, depression, violence, constriction, isolation

If you've always chosen McEwan's *Atonement*

You're interested in prose that explores the dynamic between storytelling and the truth, the ways perspective alters a story, the complication and nuance of relationships and isn't afraid to play with narrative.

1. *Mr Fox* by Helen Oyeyemi (2011, Picador)

Oyeyemi's body of work is vast with influences but her 2011 novel primarily reinterprets the Bluebeard and Reynardine fairytales. In 1936, St John Fox, an American writer's neat life with his wife Daphne is disrupted by his imaginary muse, Mary Foxe. Oyeyemi explores power and agency, storytelling and storyteller, fairytale and reality.

Themes: storytelling, archetypes, misogyny, intertextuality, metafiction, power

2. *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing (1962, Fourth Estate)

Lessing's novel is a masterpiece of multiple narratives and fractured perspectives. Anna Wulf has been keeping four notebooks where she explores different parts of her life in a bid to stave off breakdown. As we move through her notebooks, we see Anna begin to try and reconcile these parts of her psyche in one notebook and find her real voice.

Themes: narrative, perspective, womanhood, sex, freedom, change

3. *Possession* by A.S. Byatt (1991, Vintage)

Focusing on research assistant Roland Mitchell's research into the lives, letters and loves of Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, all while Roland falls for fellow scholar Maud Bailey. Byatt's novel is a melding of satire of academia, a faithful rendition of Victorian epistolary and poetic style, as well as romance and intrigue.

Themes: romance, discovery, storytelling, privacy, autonomy, ownership

4. *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf (1928, OOC)

Inspired in part by her lover Vita Sackville-West, Woolf puts forward a close study of an Elizabethan poet whose adventures across time and gender entwine with 300 years of English literary history. *Orlando* is a fictional biography, wrestling with an incomplete record, fragmentation and the ways in which a story cannot wholly capture a life.

Themes: history, literature, love, gender, time, storytelling

5. *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut (1969, Vintage)

Taking a different approach to the ways in which time and narrative can be played with, Vonnegut's novel follows our protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, as he is unstuck in time. Tackling questions about the nature of time and the immorality of war, Vonnegut explores what it means to be human and to have a story that needs to be told.

Themes: time, history, storytelling, truth, war, humanity

6. *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado (2019, *Serpent's Tail*)

In this formally inventive memoir, Machado takes on the task of exploring her experiences of intimate partner violence as a queer woman. Machado does so through a series of vignettes, taking on the perspective and formal approach of a range of genres, narrative traditions and tropes: romance novel, fairytale, murder mystery to name a few.

Themes: abuse, fantasy vs reality, storytelling, perspective, relationships, violence

7. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz (2008, Faber)

This reverse family saga about Oscar, a Dominican American science-fiction nerd living in New Jersey, and the legacy of Trujillo's dictatorship, family curses, and growing up. Playing with reported history, footnotes and anecdotes, Diaz gives voice to narrators and perspectives like Yunior, his sister's boyfriend, Lola his sister, and Oscar's parents.

Themes: history, legacy, violence, unrequited love, family, dislocation

8. *An Unnecessary Woman* by Rabih Alameddine (2014, Corsair)

Offering a slightly different engagement with storytelling, Alameddine's novel centres around Aaliya Saleh, a 72 year-old woman who has been secretly translating Western classics into Arabic during the Lebanese civil war. A very interior novel, Alameddine mines Aaliya's relationship with literature and her inner life to great effect.

Themes: literature, translation, solitude, secrecy, communication, war

9. *Asymmetry* by Lisa Halliday (2018, Granta)

Exploring what it means to tell a story, Halliday's novel asks questions about power, memory and creativity. Following Alice, a young woman working in publishing who begins an affair with famous Ezra Blazer and Amar Jaafari, an Iraqi-American being detained at Heathrow, Halliday plays with structure, narrator and who has the right to tell a story.

Themes: creativity, storytelling, power, authenticity, memory, narrative

10. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles (1969, Vintage)

Perhaps one of the more famous metafictional, postmodern novels, Fowles' text is a clear ancestor of McEwan's novel. Fowles writes of Sarah Woodruff and her contentious relationship with Charles Smithson in 1867. Playing with time, epigraphic framings, and the role of the narrator, Fowles tests what the novel and its author can do.

Themes: intertextuality, love, metafiction, duty, narrative, expectations, judgement