



Lincoln College

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Prelims Paper 3: Literature in English, 1830-1910

Dr Iris Pearson

Dear First Years,

Welcome to Oxford, and to Lincoln. In your first term, you will study English literature between 1830 and 1910 (known as ‘Prelims Paper 3’) with Dr Iris Pearson. The Victorian period comes with a mixed reputation which honours the range and variety of its outputs: the zenith of realism meets long, long novels; poets experiment with the sonnet and the elegy, as well as with more difficult and unformed verse forms; texts feature English domestic politics and slavery narratives. The nineteenth century saw an exponential increase in literary production and consumption, as advances in print technology made it easier to publish, while educational and social reforms expanded the size of the reading (and writing) public.

As you’ll quickly learn about Prelims papers, there is no simple or single way to cover this diverse, exciting and international literary period in eight weeks. Our work this term will focus instead on drawing out some central themes within the century, tracing strands between authors, genres and contexts, and thinking about the most apt and productive approaches to writing about Victorian fiction and poetry.

The teaching for this paper will be structured as a combination of classes and tutorials, each organising primary and secondary material according to a particular theme or preoccupation of the period. Classes will have core texts, which are compulsory reading, while tutorials will offer a list of options, which you can choose between, as well as a list of further reading suggestions to explore. For each tutorial, I’ll ask you to write an essay; for classes, I will set one or two tasks, often related to a presentation or a shorter, more informal piece of writing, which will help us think more creatively about the set literature.

I’ll circulate a more detailed syllabus once you arrive in Oxford, but for now, here is a list of essential pre-reading across a range of genres and forms. Please read it all carefully. I recognise that you suddenly have a lot to do before arriving in Oxford, and the reading list is not intended to be overwhelming – although it should highlight the importance of getting ahead with reading some of the longer novels over the summer. The more you do before you arrive, the more productive and less overwhelming the term will be, giving you space to focus on secondary material and lesser-known primary texts to complement the canonical ones. There’s no avoiding the heft of some of these novels, but I promise that you’ll find thrill, emotion, humour and surprise in these texts. Get stuck into the reading, and arrive in Oxford open to conversation, and we’ll have a great term.

I’m very happy to field any questions you have about this document ([iris.pearson@ell.ox.ac.uk](mailto:iris.pearson@ell.ox.ac.uk)); otherwise I look forward to meeting you in October. Congratulations once again on all your hard work to achieve this place at Oxford.



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### Reading

I've flagged here some of the longer texts that we'll look at during the term. You should look to buy a physical (paperback) copy of each of the novels (this applies to all texts we read this term), as it will be much easier to work with, both as you read and as we discuss in class: second-hand copies of these texts are almost always available on <https://www.abebooks.co.uk/>, or on websites like [World of Books](#); look out for copies published by Penguin, Oxford University Press, or W.W. Norton, which will have been expertly edited and will often include a helpful introduction. As you read, take plenty of notes, whether annotating particular pages or marking intriguing / vexing passages to return to during the term. In classes, I'll want you to bring up specific passages of interest, as well as threading themes and preoccupations through the text, so have your eyes open for these. And keep your receipts, as you may be able to apply to the college to defray the costs.

- **Charles Dickens**. Definitely read *Great Expectations* (1860-61) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859); and pick one other out of *Hard Times* (1854) or *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870).
- **Harriet Beecher Stowe**, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). We'll look at this with Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) or Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), so you could also get a headstart with one of those.
- **Henry James**, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898)
- **George Eliot**, *Middlemarch* (1871)

We'll also look at some drama: over the vacation, I want you to read one play by each of these writers:

- **Oscar Wilde**, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) or *A Woman of No Importance* (1893)
- **George Bernard Shaw**, *Arms and the Man* (1894) or *You Can Never Tell* (1897)
- **John Millington Synge**, *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) or *Riders to the Sea* (1904)

We'll also study poetry by **George Meredith**, **Elizabeth Barrett Browning**, **Gerard Manley Hopkins**, **Emily Dickinson**, **Alfred Lord Tennyson**, **Christina Rossetti** and **Dante Gabriel Rossetti**. Over the vacation, I'd like you to dip into poems by these writers – *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Volume E: The Victorian Age* might be a good place to start, as it has excellent period and author introductions to frame your reading.

We'll talk more about secondary reading when you get to Oxford, but if you want to start, you could have a look at some chapters from *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David (2006), or Isobel Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (1993).

Best,

Dr Iris Pearson