

# Willis English 11—AP Lit. Course Rationales

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This course is designed to comply with the curricular requirements described in the AP English Course Description. The readings are selected by their cultural, historical and/or social context, their genre, student engagement, teacher expertise, and their frequency on previous AP exams (College Board). Using the above stated criteria, the English Department has carefully evaluated the AP book list as a whole and deemed it worthy for the AP Literature and Composition curriculum.

Please note that a portion of these rationales apply to materials and texts taught outside of class in optional literature clinics. Students have the option to attend any or all of these as their schedule and interest allows.

Students may opt out of one in-class text per the department guidelines. Alternative texts will be selected from the AP list in discussion with the student and guardian.

## *Antigone* by Sophocles (441 BC)

### Plot Summary

This ancient drama by Sophocles features at its heart tensions between family members, and particularly generational conflict connected to tradition and expectation. The play begins at the end of a war between factions of the same family. We meet the survivors as they try to put their world back to rights. Antigone and her sister Ismene have returned to Thebes to discover both of their brothers have died in battle. Their uncle has been enthroned and has decreed one nephew be buried with honors and the other be left to rot for his treason. The central conflict of the narrative is Antigone's desire to honor both her fallen brothers.

### Rationale and Learning Objectives

The play has appeared on the AP Literature exam ten times in the past and provides students with a unique opportunity to study alternative texts and translations. At the same time this ancient drama is filled with themes students will revisit throughout the course: fate and free will, vision and blindness, plus ambition and pride. This lays a foundation for the work that lies ahead and provides students with the skillset necessary to tackle complex texts. Study will focus on plot, chorus, hamartia, hubris and other dramatic traditions.

### Addressing Sensitive Subjects

**Possible sensitive topics contained in *Antigone*: violence, murder, and suicide.**

To silence his niece, Creon locks Antigone in prison and she takes her own life. What follows is a series of suicides, a concerning feature of the narrative to be sure. But the opportunity to discuss this cascade of tragedy in light of our discussion of free will and autonomy make this

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text necessary. Students can, and should, be forewarned about the potentially upsetting nature of Antigone's death. To consider the extreme decision to end a life, especially one's own life, students need a discussion venue that is properly moderated and conducive to frank dialogue.

### *Beowulf* translation by Seamus Heaney (700 AD) \*

#### Plot Summary

*Beowulf*, an Anglo-Saxon epic poem, focuses on the eponymous hero as he attempts to destroy the monster terrorizing the Danish town of Heorot. Beowulf is able to defeat the terrible monster, Grendel, but as a consequence he provokes another monster into seeking revenge. The tale recounts the crucial battle to defeat this second monster, and the reward Beowulf earns for ending the terror haunting the kingdom. But Beowulf's journey to help Hrothgar's beleaguered kingdom only prefigures his only life and death as the leader of his own lands, providing a look not only at a journey across the sea, but also through life.

#### Rationale and Learning Objectives

The student will be challenged to evaluate the form and meaning of the poem; delving into the psychological impacts of war as they accompany Beowulf through his epic battles. The characteristics of heroism and sacrifice will occupy the student in our study of this demanding narrative. As even in translation, the features of Old English challenge even advanced readers with their symbolic and metaphoric complexities. Students will have an opportunity to study poetic form, foreshadowing, digression, epic formula, point of view, and juxtaposition.

#### Addressing Sensitive Subjects

**Possible sensitive topics contained in *Beowulf*: graphic, violent depictions of battle.**

While some features of *Beowulf* are unique to this ancient work, sadly the violence contained within the work is not outside the experience of the modern audience. Seamus Heaney, the translator, says of the work, "Its narrative elements may belong to a previous age but as a work of art it lives in its own continuous present." Students may be disturbed by the violence, but as an essential commentary on its time, as well as our own, this is a valuable experience.

### *Othello* by William Shakespeare (1603)

#### *With Film Adaptation (1995) & Theater Production (2008)*

The film adaptation is rated R, for some sexuality, but explicit sex scenes are not shown in the classroom. The theater production is Not Rated. It is a live-recording from the Globe Theater production and does not include explicit sex or intense violence. Portions of both will be shown in class to provide students with the context necessary for understanding and to provoke conversations about artistic license and directorial choice.

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### Plot Summary

William Shakespeare's tragedy, *Othello*, is a play about love, hate, jealousy, envy, and lust. In the opening scene, Iago announces his intention to avenge the wrong done him by Othello and Cassio. He devises elaborate schemes to turn Othello against Cassio by implicating Cassio in tryst with Desdemona, Othello's bride. The play concludes with the revelations of Iago's deceptions, but not in time to stop the murder of Desdemona and the subsequent suicide of Othello.

### Rationale and Learning Objectives

This classic Shakespearean play will serve as a focal point for the study of drama and, in particular, tragedy. The play will be read aloud in class, with frequent pauses to analyze both plot and the literary devices employed by Shakespeare to communicate his complex message. Students will carefully examine Iago's scheming and intentions, with a particular eye toward persuasive speech and techniques. Students will have an opportunity to study sonnet form, irony, setting, characterization, and motivation.

### Addressing Sensitive Subjects

**Possible sensitive topics contained in *Othello*: sexuality, adultery, murder, and suicide.**

While Shakespearean tragedy demands a literary category all its own, the universality of Shakespeare's villains and tragic heroes extends across time, community, and country. And as the characters are grappling with jealousy, ambition, dishonesty, race, these same concerns occupy the daily lives of students. Of particular value in the AP environment, *Othello* is a demanding work that pushes students to empathize, to sympathize, to villainize, to criticize.

And though no work is required for the AP exam, as Michael Hiltzik notes, "Reading books and watching plays may not always be adequate substitutes for living one's life, but how well can one understand the human soul without knowing Shakespeare?"

### *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen (1813) \*

*With Film Adaptation (2005)*

The film adaptation is rated PG for some mild thematic elements.

### Plot Summary

As a novel of social critique, *Pride and Prejudice* is centered on the Bennet family, whose matriarch is deadest on finding suitable spouses for each of her five daughters. As marriage is one of the few respectable options available to women at the time, and the family is in precarious financial and social straits, this task is made especially difficult. But perhaps an even greater challenge lies in the reluctance of her daughters to marry for anything less than true love and passion.

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### Rationale and Learning Objectives

The student will compare and contrast Austen's novel with Mary Wollstonecraft's, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, evaluating the role of women in the 19th century. In addition, the student will analyze Austen's critique of social class. Finally, the student will identify character, setting, plot, point of view, and theme, demonstrating deeper understanding through both personal and focused written responses. As one of the earliest novels in English literature, this work serves as a point of reference in the study of many other works in the course.

### Addressing Sensitive Subjects

Possible sensitive topics contained in *Pride and Prejudice*: reference to a couple living out of wedlock. In the classroom, sensitive topics will be dealt with in a mature fashion, toward an understanding of why this material is included in the novel. The English department feels that the literary merit of this novel more than compensates for the inclusion of this sensitive subject matter. The student is encouraged to feel comfortable expressing his/her beliefs and views openly within the classroom environment. If the student is uncomfortable at any time, the student should meet with the teacher to discuss his/her concerns.

### *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (1818)

#### Plot Summary

*Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, is the classic Gothic novel about man's struggle to play God and create the perfect human being. Ambition overcomes the goodness of his original medical implications, and Dr. Victor Frankenstein's fiendish creature torments his creator. The reason for revenge is simple- no one loves the abomination. Society takes one look at the creature, judges his nature wrongly, and turns him into the monster represented in movies and TV today.

### Rationale and Learning Objectives

Victor and his monster present a unique opportunity for students to consider the nature of parent and child. The ethical implications of the choices made by Dr. Frankenstein and his creation to indulge their passions and meet their needs will occupy the conversation about Shelley's classic novel, as students examine how Frankenstein's actions have tragic influence on the lives of family, friends, and acquaintances. The student will consider allusion, frame narrative, setting, epistolary development, and theme as they compose AP practice essays.

### Addressing Sensitive Subjects

Possible sensitive topics contained in *Frankenstein*: violence, murder. In the classroom, sensitive topics will be dealt with in a mature fashion, toward an understanding of why this material is included in the novel. The English department feels that the literary merit of this

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novel more than compensates for the inclusion of this sensitive subject matter. The student is encouraged to feel comfortable expressing his/her beliefs and views openly within the classroom environment. If the student is uncomfortable at any time, the student should meet with the teacher to discuss his/her concerns.

### *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte (1847) \*

*With Film Adaptation (2011)*

The English Department has carefully evaluated *Jane Eyre* as a whole and deemed it worthy for the 11th grade English curriculum. The film adaptation is rated PG-13 for some thematic elements including a nude image in a painting and brief violent content.

#### Plot Summary

Bronte's novel follows the difficult, but ultimately triumphant, life of Jane Eyre. An orphaned governess, Eyre struggles against the social mores of Victorian England, the limitations of her family connections, and the complicated nature of her affection for her employer Rochester. The novel follows Jane throughout her life: from her childhood deprivations at the hands of her family to her own life as a mother. While Eyre's life is filled with tragedy and impediments, she ultimately prevails and manages a rather unconventional "happily ever after."

#### Rationale and Learning Objectives

Covering the spectrum of a nineteenth century life for women, Brönte's novel is a unique combination of the semi-autobiographical, Victorian, Gothic, and Bildungsroman. As such, the novel presents an opportunity for students to experience a wide range of literary forms within its bounds. The themes of the novel are timeless, and its form is archetypal.

Questions of loyalty, forgiveness, and faith dominate this realistic novel as Jane struggles to navigate the sometimes rigid moral standards of Victorian England. Jane rejects many of the requirements and expectations of women during this period, consequently the novel is considered by many to be a proto-feminist text. Students naturally respond to Jane's independence and personal fortitude in the face of oppression. Jane fits the mold of transgressive female narrators students have already encountered, having read *Pride and Prejudice* and is predictive of the types of narrators students will encounter in the remainder of the course curriculum.

#### Addressing Sensitive Subjects

Possible sensitive topics contained in *Jane Eyre*: child abuse, violence, sexuality, and references to adulterous affairs. The student is encouraged to feel comfortable expressing his/her beliefs and views openly within the classroom environment. If the student is uncomfortable at any time, the student should meet with the teacher to discuss his/her concerns.

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Sexuality in the Victorian world is carefully governed, and discussion of this topic may be of concern to some readers and parents. This aspect of the novel is essential to understanding Jane, who grapples with morality and loyalty before deciding sexuality should be contained by matrimony. By raising the fundamental importance of personal relationships to morality, the book helps students to explore their own emerging sense of virtue as it relates to this topic.

Students can, and should, be forewarned about the potentially upsetting discussion of sexuality contained in the novel. Considering the sexual extremes depicted daily on television, students need a vehicle to discuss the importance of individual morality in this area of their lives. As Jane says, ““I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will.” Brönte’s novel provides students an opportunity to seek for themselves the freedom promised by independent will.

### *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)

*With Film Adaptation (2013)*

The film is rated PG-13 for some violent images, sexual content, smoking, partying and brief language.

#### Plot Summary

Fitzgerald’s classic novel brings to life the exuberance and vitality of the Jazz Age, with its elaborate parties, sparkling personalities, and careless people. Nick Caraway narrates as the mystery of *Gatsby* unfolds, and the novel captures the nostalgia, narcissism, corruption, social climbing, hedonism and hope tied up in the era. *Gatsby*’s American dream is the engine that drives it all, but the crushing impact of WWI and the hollow heart of The Lost Generation prove inescapable.

#### Rationale and Learning Objectives

The novel is occupied with quintessentially American themes related to meritocracy and regret. Students will have an opportunity to explore the impact of past action and future intentions on the lives and motivations of Fitzgerald’s characters. A short story and poetry exploration will provide students with a look the way different texts address a similar theme. The student will consider symbol, foreshadowing, irony, paradox, and theme as they compose AP practice essays.

#### Addressing Sensitive Subjects

Possible sensitive topics contained in *The Great Gatsby*: violence, sexuality, alcohol, murder, suicide. In the classroom, sensitive topics will be dealt with in a mature fashion, toward an understanding of why this material is included in the novel. The English department feels that the literary merit of this novel and film adaptation more than compensates for the inclusion of this sensitive subject matter. The student is encouraged to feel comfortable expressing his/her

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beliefs and views openly within the classroom environment. If the student is uncomfortable at any time, the student should meet with the teacher to discuss his/her concerns.

### *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck (1937) \*

#### *With Film Adaptation (1992)*

The film adaptation is rated PG-13 for some scenes of violence. To further understanding of setting as a literary device the student will compare the novel with the performance.

#### Plot Summary

Steinbeck's classic depression-era novel traces the journey of two outsiders in search of the American dream: a small plot of land to call their own and an independent life. The novella hinges on the friendship between these two, which requires George provide leadership, guidance, and caretaking for his friend. As a counter to their bleak migrant existence, George tells Lennie a story about their future, embroidered with stability, safety, and calm that their do not and will not have in their lives.

#### Rationale and Learning Objectives

*Of Mice and Men* serves to illuminate the historical condition of a critical moment in American history and provides one of the most powerful narratives in American literature. The central question of the work is connected to our conceptions of justice, an issue that students have traced from the earliest moments of the course. In order to protect Lennie from the world, George must make a heartbreaking decision to kill him. This moment challenges students to consider the grey in a world of black and white.

#### Addressing Sensitive Subjects

Possible sensitive subjects in *Of Mice and Men*: reference to adultery and sexuality, vulgar language, manslaughter, mercy killing. The student is encouraged to feel comfortable expressing his/her views openly in the classroom. If the student is uncomfortable at any time, the student should meet with the teacher to discuss his/her concerns.

The conclusion of this novel is difficult. In the end, in order to protect Lennie, something he has done many times over the course of the work, George must kill him. While this moment has been foreshadowed, this takes many students by surprise. In order to process this tragedy, students have built a rapport and a venue. Steinbeck said, "It is true that we [humanity] are weak and sick and ugly and quarrelsome but if that is all we ever were, we would millenniums ago have disappeared from the face of the earth." The conversation about Lennie helps students consider this dichotomy and all its complexities.

## *The Stranger* by Albert Camus (1942) \*

### Plot Summary

Albert Camus' *The Stranger* is a novel about an unintended murder and the trial that follows. Meursault is a young man who appears to be indifferent to the world around him and is forced to face his own identity and ultimately, his own mortality.

### Rationale and Learning Objectives

Camus' complex text, an example of existentialism and absurdism, challenges the reader to evaluate the concepts of alienation, spirituality, morality, and choice, encouraging comparison and evaluation of one's individual beliefs. Students will identify character, setting, plot, point of view, and theme, demonstrating deeper understanding through both personal and focused written responses.

### Addressing Sensitive Subjects

Possible sensitive topics contained in *The Stranger*: murder (violence) and sexual topics. In the classroom, sensitive topics will be dealt with in a mature fashion, toward an understanding of why this material is included in the novel. The English department feels that the literary merit of this novel more than compensates for the inclusion of this sensitive subject matter. The student is encouraged to feel comfortable expressing his/her beliefs and views openly within the classroom environment. If the student is uncomfortable at any time, the student should meet with the teacher to discuss his/her concerns.

## *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960)

### *With Film Adaptation (1962)*

The film adaptation is unrated, but parents are advised that the recommended rating is PG-13 for thematic material, some language, and references to rape.

### Plot Summary

Lee's novel is narrated by Scout Finch and follows her family as they struggle against the entrenched racism of 1930s Alabama. Scout's father Atticus is a local public defender, called to confront bigotry and discrimination directly as the attorney for a black man named Tom Robinson. Tom has been falsely accused of rape and because the narration is provided from the perspective of a child, the crime in question is bewildering on many levels.

### Rationale and Learning Objectives

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is vital to any study of literature. The novel, its characters, and Lee herself are frequently alluded to in popular culture and academia. But the value of the novel is not

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limited to its existence as a touchstone, the framework provided by Lee's work is ideal for the study of literary elements and story archetypes. Theme, motif, and allusion are particularly evident and easily accessible for students.

The motif of childhood that infuses the first portion of the narrative makes the novel particularly appealing to high school students. Readers naturally sympathize with Scout's escapades and the accessibility of Lee's prose makes the complexities of the novel manageable for students.

### Addressing Sensitive Subjects

Possible sensitive topics contained in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: profanity or vulgar language, reference to rape, and violence. The student is encouraged to feel comfortable expressing his/her beliefs and views openly within the classroom environment. If the student is uncomfortable at any time, the student should meet with the teacher to discuss his/her concerns.

Bigotry can be a sensitive issue in the classroom, and the undercurrent of violence that pervades the novel adds additional complexity. While the racism and injustice that feature in the narrative may seemingly have receded out of the public consciousness, certainly these issues remain relevant for students. Harper Lee has remained steadfastly silent on the book and its influence, but she once noted, "The book to read is not the one which thinks for you, but the one which makes you think." To the extent the students will have an opportunity to think about crucial issues and conduct difficult literary analysis this is the book to read.

### *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1987)

#### Plot Summary

The novel opens as Paul D reunites with Sethe following the American Civil War. They hope to build a future together, but the couple is haunted. The past is present at 124 Bluestone Road in the spectral form of Beloved, Sethe's deceased daughter. And to come together, they first need to grapple with their lives as slaves back at Sweet Home.

In her escape from slavery, Sethe murders her tiny daughter to save her from slavery. With this death she earns her life, and a life for her other children, but it isn't a whole life. Cut off from their community, and haunted by her baby, Sethe survives. And when the ghost manifests as a grown woman, Sethe finds a way back to her people as the living save the living from the dead.

#### Rationale and Learning Objectives

The action of this non-linear narrative and its many allusions make this novel an essential component of the AP literature course. Synecdoche, anaphora, and incantation feature in the linguistic analysis of the prose, which verges on free verse poetry.

Thematically the novel is an extension of all the previous study in the course. From the righteous valor of Antigone there is a straight line to Sethe. The tortured manipulations of

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Beloved echoes across time. The complex relationship between parent and child explored in *Frankenstein* is here too, in the fraught link between Sethe and her children. Like Gatsby she is haunted by the past even as she imagines her future. And the consequences of the Civil War touched on in Lee's work are palpable on every page of *Beloved*. In every way the study of Morrison's novel augments the preceding texts and pushes students to revisit each in preparation for the AP exam.

### Addressing Sensitive Subjects

**Possible sensitive topics contained in *Beloved*: bestiality, infanticide, rape, sexuality, and violence.**

Morrison's novel has appeared on the AP exam over a dozen times but is one of the most challenged books in American schools. Make no mistake, the provocations of *Beloved* are deeply rooted in the difficult history of American slavery, with its immeasurable cruelty and violence. As Paul D and Sethe reckon with their past, so too do high school students, as they consider what forgiveness and reconciliation look like on the macro and micro scale.

The violence of this novel is horrifying and it's a testament to Morrison that the prose is so beautiful. There are memoirs of slavery, and nonfiction about slavery, and poetry about slavery. And somehow, this book covers all of that ground and pushes into new territory. It's hard to read. It's hard to hear. It's lovely to read. It's lovely to hear.

In a recent poll of editors and reviewers, *Beloved* was named "the single best work of American fiction published in the last twenty-five years." Students are encouraged to make informed choices about their literary education and there are many texts students can select from the AP list. However, none are as intricately connected to this course and American literature.