

# OxfordAQA

## International GCSE

### English Literature (9275/1)

## New text guide

## Where do students encounter set texts in the course of study and assessment?

In Paper 1 of the OxfordAQA International GCSE students need to write about one prose text and one drama text. The prose text can be a novel, chosen from the list of set texts for this specification, or the short stories in the *OxfordAQA Short Stories Anthology*.

For first teaching from 2026, the set texts for section A are as follows:

### Section A (Prose)

- *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
- *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
- *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro
- *The Woman in Black* by Susan Hill
- *Oxford AQA Short Stories Anthology*

### Section B (Drama)

- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare
- *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare
- *An Inspector Calls* by JB Priestley
- *DNA* by Dennis Kelly
- *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry

## What are the assessment objectives?

The assessment objectives are:

AO1	Understanding of, and engagement with, themes, ideas and contexts.
AO2	Analysis of how writers create meanings and effects.
AO3	Express informed, personal responses to literary texts, using appropriate terminology and coherent, accurate writing.

These are always at the forefront of examiners' minds when they are setting and marking the examinations, and it is useful for teachers to keep them in their thoughts when planning lessons too.

AO1 addresses students' understanding of and engagement with the ideas in their set texts. Students will be covering this assessment objective if they make sure they address the question when crafting their response. For example, if a question asks students to consider how the effects of fear are presented in *DNA*, a response which identifies parts of the play where characters feel fear and considers how their fear affects their words and actions in the play will be addressing AO1.

Examiners are always looking for genuine engagement with the ideas in texts. This can be shown by students knowing the text in enough detail to select relevant parts to write about to address the question and can also be shown by students crafting strong and compelling arguments if a question asks for a response to a particular viewpoint. For example, in a question such as ‘How far does Ishiguro present the Mother as a cold and unsympathetic character in *Klara and the Sun*?’ examiners have no preconceptions about what students will write. While many students will write a balanced argument, weighing up the positive and negative aspects of the Mother’s character, those who strongly agree or disagree with the statement can create compelling arguments too: examiners mark the responses on the quality of the argument, not on whether they agree with it or not.

Although context is mentioned in AO1, it is never assessed separately and is only useful in that sometimes it can help students understand a text more fully. For example, students who write a page about the history of slavery in the USA, the Jim Crow Laws and the Scottsboro Trials in response to a question on *To Kill a Mockingbird* will not be answering the question – because a question will always focus on the text and not its social or historical background. On the other hand, students who have an understanding of the ways attitudes to race have changed between when the novel is set, when the novel was written and now might be able to write more sensitively about the actions and words of the characters (if that is relevant to the question).

AO2 is about how writers create meanings and effects. Analysis should arise naturally from students considering meanings. Students sometimes have a mental list of techniques which they feel they have to include to get into the top band of the mark scheme. This is not the case and while literary terms may be an efficient way of identifying what a writer is doing, marks are not awarded for simply naming these techniques – it is much more important that students can explain why the writer’s words create a particular response in them as readers. For example, Jennet Humfrye in *The Woman in Black* may be seen by readers as a frightening character – not because Susan Hill uses metaphor or simile to describe her but because of the precise associations those descriptions have for a reader, and this is what students need to try to explain.

Although students can, of course, achieve high marks by writing about individual words and phrases, there are many other ways of addressing AO2, some of which are specific to prose texts or to drama texts. For example:

- There may be **structural issues** which are relevant, such as the way Macbeth becomes more tyrannical as the play progresses or the way *The Woman in Black* has a first chapter which is set in the narrative present, followed by the rest of the story which is told as a flashback.
- There may be **comparisons or contrasts** in the characters or the events in the text, such as a comparison between Papa’s house and Auntie Ifeoma’s house in *Purple Hibiscus* or a comparison between the views of the Inspector and those of Mr Birling in *An Inspector Calls*.
- **Settings** may be important, such as the repeated settings of the street, the field and the wood in *DNA* which can be seen as universal in their simplicity and perhaps represent the way the teenagers are trapped by their actions.
- In a play, the **stage directions** may be important, as might the nature of the dialogue – who speaks? who is silent? who interrupts? and so on.

- In a prose text there may be relevant comments to be made about **the narrator**, for example, Klara's limited view (literally at the start of the novel) and the way we, as readers, can read more into her narrative than she actually says.
- The **tone** of the narrative also affects our responses as readers, for example, the sardonic and humorous tone in *The Lumber Room*.
- **Symbols and imagery** can often be important, such as the sun in *Klara and the Sun*, Atticus shooting the mad dog in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and so on.

These are just a few examples: there are many more ways students can show an understanding of how writers create meanings.

AO3 tends to be assessed at the end of a student's response and is an overall assessment of the answer. Examiners consider whether the response is coherent – ie does it make sense? can it be understood? and whether appropriate terminology has been used. This does not mean that students need to use complicated technical terms: the ordinary words that students use to express their ideas are fine. Spelling, punctuation and grammar are not assessed on this specification – it is the quality of the ideas that matters, not technical accuracy.

## New texts for teaching from 2026

### ***Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro**

This is a novel which covers scientific ideas which are increasingly relevant to the way we live our lives, such as AI and genetic modification. These should provide much material for class discussion about how AI is used in real life; for example, how quickly it is developing and the challenges and opportunities it provides. From there, more focused questions about Klara, the 'Artificial Friend' in the novel and the Mother's plan to make an AI to replace Josie if she dies could lead to consideration of the moral and ethical issues surrounding the scientific developments in the novel.

The story is narrated by Klara who only has a limited understanding of what is going on. It might be interesting to ask students to retell part of the novel from a different character's perspective.

### ***The Woman in Black* by Susan Hill**

*The Woman in Black* is a pastiche of a late 19th century/early 20th century ghost story which pays homage to writers such as MR James by its mood and subject matter and sometimes more explicitly, such as the chapter title 'Whistle and I'll come to you'. It is interesting to get students to identify the typically Gothic features of the novel – the description of the woman in black herself, the graveyard setting, the mist and the isolated Eel Marsh House and so on – and then see how Hill uses and subverts these tropes to give her story greater depth. For example, many traditional ghost stories of this kind have a 'framing narrative' – usually set in a warm, cosy environment where one of the characters recounts their encounter with the supernatural. This framing narrative surrounds the main story, so the reader is drawn in by the cosy storytelling, then frightened by the ghost story itself, then returned to the comforting environment and reminded it is just a story at the end. Hill seems to be doing this – there is the framing narrative of Esme and her children and Arthur telling ghost stories at the beginning of the book, but the novel does not return to this domestic setting at the end – instead we are left with the bleak death of Arthur's wife and son, making the novel far less

comforting and cosy than most tales of this kind. Similarly, we associate the woman in black with isolated and bleak settings, so when she strikes Arthur's family on a sunny Saturday afternoon in a crowded and happy London park, the breaking of Gothic conventions is shocking.

### ***A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare**

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* offers much scope for discussion about magic and illusion and the contrast between the world of Athens where logic and authority reign (sometimes cruelly – Hermia is threatened with death if she does not marry the man her father and the Duke want her to) and the world of magic and freedom in the wood. Discussion could focus on exploring themes such as love, reality and illusion, dreams and so on. There is also a great deal of visual and verbal humour, especially in the scenes with the mechanicals and those between Hermia and Helena, and students might enjoy staging some of these scenes and identifying how comedy can be created in a theatrical production.

### ***DNA* by Dennis Kelly**

*DNA* is a modern play about a group of teenagers who commit a crime and the effects this has on each of them. It offers plenty of opportunities to discuss responsibility, power, peer pressure, leadership and guilt, among other ideas. These 'big ideas' are made interesting and relevant to teenagers and there are opportunities for real engagement in lessons. The style of the play is contemporary which lends itself to interesting discussions about settings, dialogue, naturalistic and non-naturalistic features and characterisation.

### ***OxfordAQA Short Stories Anthology***

The Short Stories Anthology has been updated slightly and the three new stories, for teaching from September 2026 are: *The Darkness Out There* by Penelope Lively; *My Polish Teacher's Tie* by Helen Dunmore and *The Lumber Room* by Saki. All these stories have been selected because they either feature children or young people in main roles or have settings which students will be familiar with.

It is worth reiterating that students do not need to compare the stories in the exam and that those who try to do so often limit the depth of their analysis.