St Alban's English Department

A Level Literature A

Pre-reading booklet

This small booklet has been designed to help you explore some of the historical and cultural contexts that surround the texts you will study.
Before diving into the texts in lessons, it's important to understand the world in which the text was written.

By working through the accompanying articles, resources and accompanying tasks, you will:

- **Build valuable contextual knowledge for your coursework and exams**
- **Develop critical thinking about the texts you will study**
- **Make meaningful connections between history and the texts you will study**

Othello by William Shakespeare

Read the following article 'Black Tudors' and complete the tasks which accompany it.

Britain's first black community in Elizabethan London

20 July 2012

The reign of Elizabeth I saw the beginning of Britain's first black community. It's a fascinating story for modern Britons, writes historian Michael Wood.

Walk out of Aldgate Tube and stroll around Whitechapel Road in east London today, and you'll experience the heady sights, smells and sounds of the temples, mosques and curry houses of Brick Lane - so typical of modern multicultural Britain.

Most of us tend to think that black people came to Britain after the war - Caribbeans on the Empire Windrush in 1948, Bangladeshis after the 1971 war and Ugandan Asians after Idi Amin's expulsion in 1972. But, back in Shakespeare's day, you could have met people from west Africa and even Bengal in the same London streets. Of course, there were fewer, and they drew antipathy as well as fascination from the Tudor inhabitants, who had never seen black people before. But we know they lived, worked and intermarried, so it is fair to say that Britain's first black community starts here.

There had been black people in Britain in Roman times, and they are found as musicians in the early Tudor period in England and Scotland. But the real change came in Elizabeth I's reign, when, through the records, we can pick up ordinary, working, black people, especially in London. Shakespeare himself, a man fascinated by "the other", wrote several black parts - indeed, two of his greatest characters are black - and the fact that he put them into mainstream entertainment reflects the fact that they were a significant element in the population of London. Employed especially as domestic servants, but also as musicians, dancers and entertainers, their numbers ran to many hundreds, maybe even more.

And let's be clear - they were not slaves. In English law, it was not possible to be a slave in England (although that principle had to be re-stated in slave trade court cases in the late 18th Century, like the **"Somersett" case** of 1772). In Elizabeth's reign, the black people of London were mostly free. Some indeed, both men and women, married native English people.In 1599, for example, in St Olave Hart Street, John Cathman married Constantia "a black woman and servant". A bit later, James Curres, "a moore Christian", married Margaret Person, a maid. The **parish records** of this time from "St Botolph's outside Aldgate", are especially revealing. Here, among French and Dutch immigrants, are a Persian, several Indians and one "East Indian" (from today's Bengal). In this single small parish, we find 25 black people in the later 16th Century. They are mainly servants, but not all - one man lodging at the White Bell, next to the Bell Foundry off Whitechapel road, probably worked at the foundry.

Some were given costly, high status, Christian funerals, with bearers and fine black cloth, a mark of the esteem in which they were held by employers, neighbours and fellow workers. In 1597, for example, Mary Fillis, a black woman of 20 years, had, for a long while, been the servant of Widow Barker in Mark Lane. She had been in England 13 or 14 years, and was the daughter of a Moorish shovel maker and basket maker. Never christened, she became the servant of Millicent Porter, a seamstress living in East Smithfield, and now "taking some howld of faith in Jesus Chryst, was desyrous to becom a Christian, Wherefore shee made sute by hir said mistres to have some conference with the Curat".

Examined in her faith by the vicar of St Botolph's, and "answering him verie Christian lyke", she did her catechisms, said the Lord's Prayer, and was baptised on Friday 3 June 1597 in front of the congregation. Among her witnesses were a group of five women, mostly wives of leading parishioners. Now a "lyvely member" of the church in Aldgate, there is no question from this description that Mary belonged to a community with friends and supporters. Despite the story of Fillis, the lives of others were far from sweetness and light, of course. The lives of some black people were as free as anywhere in the white European world, but, for many, things were circumscribed and very hard.

Some black women worked alongside their white counterparts as prostitutes, especially in Southwark, and in the brothel area of Turnmill Street in Clerkenwell. Here the famous Lucy Negro, a former dancer in the Queen's service, ran an establishment patronised by noblemen and lawyers. Lucy was famous enough to be paid mock homage in the Inns of Court revels at Gray's Inn. Her area of London was notorious. "Pray enquire after and secure my negress: she is certainly at The Swan, a Dane's beershop in Turnmil Street," wrote one Denis Edwards in 1602. Shakespeare's acquaintance, the poet John Weaver, also sang the praises of a woman whose face was "pure black as Ebonie, jet blacke".

In around 1600, the presence of black people had become an issue for the English government. Their numbers recently increased by many slaves freed from captured Spanish ships, the presence of black people suddenly came to be seen as a nuisance. In 1601, among the Cecil papers still held at Hatfield House, we hear this: "The queen is discontented at the great numbers of 'negars and blackamoores' which are crept into the realm since the troubles between her Highness and the King of Spain, and are fostered here to the annoyance of her own people."

The "great numbers" were mainly galley slaves and servants from captured Spanish vessels, and a plan was mooted to transport them out of the country. Was this the first example of government repatriation? In July 1602, Cecil was putting pressure on the merchants, one of whom wrote: "I have persuaded the merchants trading to Barbary, not without some difficulty, to yield to [ie pay for] the charges of the Moors lately redeemed out of servitude by her Majesty's ships, so far as it may concern their lodging and victuals, till some shipping may be ready to carry them into Barbary…"

Whether this actually happened is unclear. No more then than now, should we take a government's pronouncements on such matters at face value? But it is at least worth noting that the authorities felt duty-bound to look after food and lodging while the freed slaves were in London. But it cannot be, as is sometimes claimed today, that this edict applied to the many black people who, like Mary Fillis, were living as citizens in London, as they were in Bristol.

Brief as they are, such hints suggest a surprisingly rich hidden narrative for black people in Elizabethan England.From Lucy Negro to Mary Fillis, their numbers grew in the 17th Century as they were joined by large numbers of people from India and, in particular, Bengal. Sadly, their own story, in their own words, is lacking, but by the time we reach the 18th Century, we have the remarkable works of prose, poetry and music written by black Britons, among whom the likes of Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoano and Ignatius Sancho deserve their place in any list of Great Britons. By the 18th Century, it is thought as many as 20,000 black servants lived in London. They even had their own taverns where they greeted defeat of the "Somersett case" and the victories of the abolitionists with raucous good humour.

Their numbers were still small compared with the population as a whole, but they already had a role in our national story. What would Mary Fillis make of things today I wonder? And what would we give for her story?

Tasks: Big Picture: Why Context Matters

"Literature is not created in a vacuum."

Task:
In your own words, explain why understanding the context of race and society in Elizabethan England might be useful when reading a play like *Othello*. Consider:

- Who was Shakespeare writing for?
- How might black characters have been perceived by Elizabethan audiences?
- Why might a modern reader's interpretation be different?

Write your response below (100–150 words):

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2. Guided Reading: Understanding the Article

Read the article carefully. Then answer the following comprehension and analysis questions:

a) Chronology Check

Make a timeline of key moments mentioned in the article (use approximate dates if necessary). Include at least 5 events.

Year/Period	Event

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b) People & Places

Match the name/place to its correct description:

Name/Place	Description
Mary Fillis	A) A poet who praised a black woman's beauty
Lucy Negro	B) A black woman baptised in 1597 after expressing her faith
John Weaver	C) Area in London associated with black prostitution
Turnmill Street	D) A black brothel owner and former dancer
St Botolph's Aldgate	E) Parish that recorded many black residents in Elizabethan times

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c) Key Vocabulary

Define these terms in your own words:

1. Antipathy
2. Galley slave
3. Catechism
4. Repatriation
5. Esteem

Now choose *two* of these words and use them in a sentence about the article.

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3. Close Reading Challenge

Read this extract again and annotate it (on a printed copy or here in note form) with:

- Any language used to describe black individuals or their lives
- References to freedom or servitude
- Details that challenge modern assumptions about race in Tudor times

"In Elizabeth's reign, the black people of London were mostly free. Some indeed, both men and women, married native English people… Among her witnesses were a group of five women, mostly wives of leading parishioners."

Task: What ideas does this extract challenge about the presence of black people in early modern England? Explain in 2–3 sentences:

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4. Research Extension Task: Into the Archive

Choose one of the following individuals to research further:

- Olaudah Equiano
- Ignatius Sancho
- Lucy Negro

Task: Write a short profile (150–200 words) including:

- Who they were
- Why they were significant
- How their story adds to our understanding of black history in Britain

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5. Reflection: Making Connections

Task: Think ahead to the literature texts you'll be studying. Based on this article, answer the following:

a) Why might the story of Mary Fillis be especially powerful or poignant?

b) How could this historical context inform our reading of Shakespeare's *Othello* or other texts involving racial identity?

Section 2: Women in Shakespeare: Love, Power, and Patriarchy

William Shakespeare's plays offer some of the most complex and enduring portrayals of women in English literature. From the spirited wit of Beatrice to the tragic fate of Desdemona, Shakespeare's female characters are central to the emotional and thematic cores of his works. For students preparing to study Love through the ages, examining how Shakespeare presents women not only deepens our understanding of gender dynamics in literature, but also invites exploration of love as a force shaped by power, silence, resistance, and expectation.

Context: Women in the Elizabethan and Jacobean World
In Shakespeare's time, women were expected to be obedient daughters, wives, and mothers. Their roles in society were narrowly defined by patriarchal norms, and the concept of romantic love was often tied to property, status, and duty. Women had no legal independence, were barred from formal education, and were represented on stage by male actors. Understanding this context helps us see how radical—or conformist—Shakespeare's portrayals could be.

Love and Obedience: Desdemona and Ophelia
Desdemona in *Othello* and Ophelia in *Hamlet* are often viewed as emblematic of the "obedient daughter" trope. Desdemona defies her father to marry for love, yet ends up the victim of her husband's jealousy and society's racial and gendered suspicions. She is at once bold and passive—a woman whose love costs her everything.

Similarly, Ophelia is caught between the demands of her father, Polonius, and her lover, Hamlet. Her identity is shaped by the men around her, and her eventual madness can be read as both a psychological collapse and a silent protest against a world that denies her voice.

Critical insight: Feminist critics have long debated whether these women are tragic victims or symbols of silent resistance. Elaine Showalter argues that Ophelia's madness marks the loss of a coherent female voice in a male-dominated narrative, while other scholars suggest Desdemona's loyalty is a form of agency within a restricted world.

Desdemona in Context: Between Idealism and Tragedy

When considered alongside Shakespeare's most iconic female characters, Desdemona emerges as a figure marked by both emotional integrity and tragic vulnerability. Unlike Beatrice or Rosalind—whose intelligence and assertiveness drive the action of Shakespeare's comedies—Desdemona exists within the moral and psychological confines of tragedy. She lacks the subversive freedom of comic heroines who disguise themselves, challenge authority, and orchestrate happy endings. Yet, in contrast to Lady Macbeth or Goneril and Regan, whose ambition disrupts the natural order and invites punishment, Desdemona is a figure of steadfast love and loyalty. Her death is not the result of personal ambition or deceit but of the destructive forces—jealousy, racism, patriarchy—surrounding her. Critics like Marilyn French argue that Desdemona is punished for her independence in marrying Othello and for trying to act with moral conviction in a world that does not hear women. Her voice, at once articulate and tragically unheard, places her among Shakespeare's most poignant portrayals of love's vulnerability in a patriarchal society.

Wit, Will, and Subversion: Beatrice, Viola, and Rosalind

Not all of Shakespeare's women are defined by silence or passivity. In his comedies, women like Beatrice (*Much Ado About Nothing*), Viola (*Twelfth Night*), and Rosalind (*As You Like It*) are witty, intelligent, and emotionally perceptive. They challenge male authority, manipulate social expectations, and often drive the narrative forward.

Beatrice famously demands that Benedick "kill Claudio" in defence of her cousin's honour, a line that reveals both the depth of her emotional convictions and the limits of her power in a male-dominated world. Rosalind and Viola disguise themselves as men, gaining freedom to navigate love and language with wit and insight.

Critical insight: These comic heroines demonstrate how Shakespeare uses cross-dressing and mistaken identity to explore the fluidity of gender roles. Some critics see this as a subversive move that empowers women; others argue that the eventual restoration of traditional roles (marriage, female identity) reinforces conservative values.

Power and Manipulation: Lady Macbeth and Goneril/Regan

In the tragedies, love can become entangled with ambition and destruction. Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth*) and the sisters Goneril and Regan (*King Lear*) demonstrate how women in Shakespeare's plays may use love or loyalty as a mask for power and manipulation. Lady Macbeth's appeal to her husband's ambition ("screw your courage to the sticking place") and her rejection of traditional femininity ("unsex me here") highlight the tension between gender and authority.

Critical insight: Psychoanalytic and feminist readings often interpret Lady Macbeth's descent into madness as the price of stepping outside accepted female roles. Her fate, like that of many powerful Shakespearean women, seems to serve as a warning against female agency in a patriarchal world.

Silence, Voice, and the Politics of Love
Across Shakespeare's plays, a recurring theme is the tension between women's silence and their desire to speak. From Cordelia's refusal to flatter her father in *King Lear* to Hermione's dignified silence in *The Winter's Tale*, love is often expressed through restraint, not rebellion.

Critical insight: Post-structuralist critics have examined how silence can function as both oppression and power. Where the male characters often rely on language to assert dominance, women's silence may reveal a deeper moral strength—or a tragic erasure.

Final Reflections: Love Through the Ages
As you begin your A Level study of *Love through the ages*, consider how Shakespeare's women are shaped by—and shape—the discourses of love. Their stories illuminate key questions:

- Is romantic love empowering or destructive for women?
- How does gender influence who gets to define love?
- Can silence and subversion be acts of love?

Though written over 400 years ago, Shakespeare's plays continue to speak to modern debates about gender, love, power, and identity. As you explore these texts, allow space for multiple interpretations, and consider how each portrayal reflects both the limitations of its time and the enduring complexities of human relationships.

Complete the following tasks:

Task 1: First Impressions – Women and Love in Shakespeare

Starter Discussion / Written Task
Look back at the article. Make a list of:

- Three ways in which women are *expected* to behave in Shakespeare's time.
- Three ways in which Shakespeare's female characters *challenge* or *conform to* those expectations.

Then answer:

Do you think Shakespeare's portrayal of women would have felt radical to his audience? Why or why not?

Task 2: Exploring Voices – What Do These Women Say About Love?

Read the following four short extracts from Shakespeare. Then complete the questions below each one.

A. Desdemona (*Othello*)

"I do perceive here a divided duty. / To you I am bound for life and education; / My life and education both do learn me / How to respect you: you are the lord of duty; / I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband."

B. Beatrice (*Much Ado About Nothing*)

"I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow / Than a man swear he loves me."

C. Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth*)

"Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty."

D. Ophelia (*Hamlet*)

"I do not know, my lord, what I should think."

For each extract:

- What does the character seem to be expressing about **love**?
- What does it reveal about **her personality or position** in society?
- Would you describe her as powerful, passive, rebellious, or something else?

Extension: Which character do you find most interesting or surprising? Why?

Task 3: Reflection Journal – Starting the Journey

Write a short personal response to one of the following prompts:

- What surprised or interested you most in the article?
- What do you expect love to look like in literature from different time periods?
- What questions do you have about how love will be explored in the texts you'll study?

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Year 11 into Year 12 Transition Tasks – AQA A Level English Literature

Set Text: *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Purpose of the Task

To prepare for A-Level English Literature, this task introduces you to the novel's key ideas, historical background, and literary techniques. It also encourages independent study and wider reading — essential skills at A-Level.

Tasks to Complete Over the Summer

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1. Read the Novel

- Read *The Great Gatsby* in full.
- Begin to annotate key passages with notes on:
    - **Narrative perspective**
    - **Character development**
    - **Themes** (e.g. illusion vs. reality, wealth, time, the American Dream)
    - **Symbolism** and **language choices**

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2. Contextual Research

Create a one-page research summary covering:

- **The Jazz Age / Roaring Twenties**
- **Prohibition** and organised crime
- **The American Dream** (its origins and critiques)

- F. Scott **Fitzgerald's biography**

Present your findings in a format of your choice: infographic, mind map, or summary notes. You can choose your own sources, but here is one to begin with:

https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Great-Gatsby

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3. Read this exemplar essay and then answer the questions that follow:

To what extent is *The Great Gatsby* a novel about illusion rather than reality?

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is a novel deeply embedded in illusion—illusions of love, identity, success, and the American Dream. While elements of reality punctuate the narrative—often in bleak or tragic forms—Fitzgerald's portrayal of characters, settings, and themes suggests that illusion dominates both the lives of individuals and the society in which they live. Through the character of Jay Gatsby, a rich tapestry of symbols, a potentially unreliable narrator, and the 1920s backdrop of excess and moral ambiguity, Fitzgerald critiques the illusory nature of the American Dream and the world it creates.

At the heart of the novel lies Gatsby himself, a man who builds an entire identity on illusion. Born James Gatz, Gatsby reinvents himself into a wealthy, refined socialite, wholly detaching from his humble origins. His obsessive pursuit of Daisy Buchanan becomes the central illusion that defines his life. Gatsby does not love Daisy as she is, but rather the idea of her—the idealised, unattainable figure he has elevated in his mind over five years. When reunited, the dissonance between his dream and Daisy's reality becomes increasingly evident, yet he clings to the belief that he can repeat the past. This delusion ultimately leads to his downfall, highlighting the dangers of mistaking illusion for truth.

Symbolism throughout the novel reinforces the dominance of illusion. The green light at the end of Daisy's dock represents Gatsby's dream—his hope for a future with Daisy and the broader promise of the American Dream. Its distant, flickering presence underscores its unattainability. Even when Gatsby reaches Daisy physically, the symbolic green light loses its meaning, becoming "just a green light," signifying the shattering of illusion when faced with reality. Similarly, Gatsby's mansion is a symbol of artificial grandeur. Its opulence is designed to impress and attract Daisy, but it is hollow at its core—hosting extravagant parties filled with strangers who barely know Gatsby, mirroring the emptiness of material excess without emotional substance.

Another powerful symbol, the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, looms over the desolate "valley of ashes." These faded eyes, painted on a billboard, are often interpreted as a symbol of the loss of spiritual values or the eyes of God watching a morally decaying society. They offer a stark contrast to Gatsby's glittering illusions, suggesting a reality that is bleak,

industrial, and devoid of moral clarity. They serve as a haunting reminder that beneath the surface glamour lies a grim truth—the spiritual emptiness of the American Dream.

Narrative perspective also plays a crucial role in blurring the lines between illusion and reality. Nick Carraway, the novel's first-person narrator, presents himself as a reliable, objective observer—"inclined to reserve all judgments." However, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that Nick is far from impartial. His admiration for Gatsby, even in the face of Gatsby's dishonesty and obsession, clouds his narrative. He is seduced by Gatsby's dream and romanticism, choosing to depict him as "worth the whole damn bunch put together." This emotional attachment distorts the narrative and encourages readers to question how much of Gatsby's character is real, and how much is a product of Nick's biased idealism. Thus, Fitzgerald uses Nick not as a transparent lens but as part of the novel's exploration of perception and self-deception.

The historical context of the 1920s further amplifies the novel's focus on illusion. The decade, often called the Jazz Age, was marked by economic boom, consumerism, and a culture of indulgence. The American Dream, once associated with hard work and self-made success, became increasingly linked to wealth, status, and instant gratification. Gatsby epitomizes this distorted version of the Dream—he acquires his wealth through dubious means, throws lavish parties, and surrounds himself with luxury, all in pursuit of love and acceptance. Yet, his dream remains unfulfilled, suggesting that the American Dream itself has become a dangerous illusion. Fitzgerald critiques this transformation, portraying a society obsessed with appearances but lacking substance or morality.

In conclusion, *The Great Gatsby* is, to a great extent, a novel about illusion rather than reality. Gatsby's invented persona, his obsessive love for Daisy, and the false promise of the American Dream all underscore the dominance of illusion. Fitzgerald's rich symbolism, ambiguous narration, and critical portrayal of 1920s society reveal a world where dreams are deceptive and reality, when it surfaces, is often harsh and unforgiving. The novel ultimately suggests that those who live by illusion, like Gatsby, are doomed to be destroyed by it.

Comprehension Questions

1. **How does the character of Gatsby illustrate the theme of illusion in the novel?** *(Consider his background, his relationship with Daisy, and the identity he constructs.)*
2. **What role do symbols such as the green light, Gatsby's mansion, and the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg play in reinforcing the contrast between illusion and reality?**

3. **Why might Nick Carraway be considered an unreliable narrator, and how does his perspective influence the reader's perception of Gatsby?**

Wider Reading and Viewing List

To enrich your understanding of *The Great Gatsby* and its literary and historical context, explore the following:

BBC World Service - World Book Club, World Book Club: The Great Gatsby

Podcast: Why The Great Gatsby Still Matters | The Art of Manliness

Please do explore Suffolk Communities Library – you can order books online using your library card and have them delivered to your nearest library.
https://suffolkcommunitylibraries.co.uk/

NB this is not a set reading list, but just a suggestion.

Other Works by Fitzgerald

- ***Tender Is the Night*** – Explores decadence, mental illness, and doomed relationships
- ***The Beautiful and Damned*** – A critical look at high society and moral decline

Novels/Themes Related to the American Dream or 1920s

- ***Of Mice and Men*** **by John Steinbeck** – The fragility of dreams in Depression-era America
- ***The Age of Innocence*** **by Edith Wharton** – Old money society and moral codes
- ***Revolutionary Road*** **by Richard Yates** – The disillusionment of 1950s suburban America
- ***Invisible Man*** **by Ralph Ellison** – Race, identity, and illusion in 20th-century America

Critical Non-Fiction

- ***Careless People*** **by Sarah Churchwell** – A blend of biography, history, and literary criticism around *The Great Gatsby*
- ***The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*** **by Jim Cullen**

Film & Media

- *The Great Gatsby* (Baz Luhrmann, 2013) – Bold and stylized; useful for discussion of modern interpretation
- *The Great Gatsby* (Jack Clayton, 1974) – A more traditional period adaptation
- *Midnight in Paris* (Woody Allen, 2011) – A whimsical view of 1920s Paris, featuring Fitzgerald and other literary icons

Poetry/Plays

- ***The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot** – Modernist poetry reflecting post-WWI disillusionment
- ***Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller** – A powerful American Dream tragedy

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Submission Instructions

Please bring your annotated novel, research summary, and completed essay to your first lesson in September. You will use these materials in discussion and early assessment tasks.