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Contemporary Black British Literature: Teaching Activities

Pearson

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Introduction for teachers

These teaching activities and resources are provided as a springboard for teachers to explore some possibilities of using Contemporary Black British writing in students' wider reading and coursework for Edexcel's English Literature A level. With the recent narrowing of Key Stage 3 and 4 texts in most centres, departments may recognise the increasing importance of bringing the full cultural breadth of British literature to today's students, both to widen their understanding of what our subject offers and to recognise the true diversity of the canon of English literature in twenty-first-century Britain.

Anchor texts

Drawing on *Contemporary Black British Literature: A Guide*, written by Dr Deirdre Osborne of Goldsmiths College, the activities below use two of her recommended texts as 'anchor' texts, with the expectation that they have already been read by the students:

Drama: *Something Dark* by Lemn Sissay
Prose: *NW* by Zadie Smith

A third text is also introduced as a possible pairing with *Something Dark*, but any pre-knowledge of the full text is not necessary for the suggested activity.

Poetry: *The Adoption Papers* by Jackie Kay

While the Edexcel English Literature specification does not include cross-genre comparison in the examined papers, coursework can be an area where centres choose to explore this possibility.

Teaching activity structure

These resources facilitate a common coursework approach in many centres, whereby an 'anchor' text is taught and linked satellite texts are suggested to students for independent work, to ensure the expectation of originality and individuality in candidates' final comparative submissions.

The resources provide:

1. **Opener:** introductory teaching suggestions for this anchor text, (addressing AO3). Suggested satellite texts, including established popular coursework texts and possible coursework focuses.
2. **Close reading:** a close-reading activity on the anchor text, linked to possible coursework focuses (addressing AO2).
3. **Further work:** additional resources which may include critical reading (AO5) or a comparative exercise (AO4) with a suitable coursework text.

Assessment objectives

In the coursework, all assessment objectives will be assessed and have equal weighting:

AO1 Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression

AO2 Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts

AO3 Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received

AO4 Explore connections across literary texts

AO5 Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations

Teaching Activities

Something Dark by Lemn Sissay

Possible satellite texts and ideas for coursework links:

Red Dust Road by Jackie Kay: search for a parent; hope, disappointment and acceptance; the presentation of journey

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath: perception and the relationship between the reader, writer, art and truth in autobiographical texts

The Adoption Papers by Jackie Kay: family roots and identity, portrayal of the British care system/adoption/fostering

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: the quest for knowledge and identity, the presentation of journey

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison: dark, light and the identity of colour

Beloved by Toni Morrison: past experience and present identity; mother-child relationships

1. Opener

The life story of Lemn Sissay is so arresting that it cannot fail to grip today's young people. Activities in Resource 1.1 engage students with the central concerns of *Something Dark* and involve them in independent research into the biographical context of the writer, which is the basis of this monodrama.

Student outcomes:

- brainstorm and discussion on personal identity
- independent or paired research notes about the life of Lemn Sissay.

Resources:

- Resource 1.1 – one per student
- internet access with audio facility.

Assessment focus: AO3

2. Close reading

Resource 1.2 will engage students in the literary methods Sissay uses to convey his concerns. Students will employ their AO2 skills, which are an integral part of their coursework assessment and must be demonstrated in their written submissions. Analysis of writer's method is wider than merely the close study of language; students may consider the writer's craft in terms of, for example, dramatic form and structure.

Student outcomes:

- annotations of the passages in Resource 1.2
- extended writing commentaries on each passage.

Resources:

- Resource 1.2 – one per student.

Assessment focus: AO2

3. Comparison

The focus and text extracts in Resource 1.3 offer an initial activity to begin comparison of writers' methods as a bridging activity for coursework.

Students will consider how Jackie Kay and Lemn Sissay have made choices about voice to convey their personal stories about identity, race and adoption. In *The Adoption Papers*, Kay employs three voices: her own, her white adoptive mother's and her white birth mother's. Sissay's monodrama is limited to his own voice on stage, with a variety of other methods used to supplement this.

Student outcomes:

- annotated poem and drama extracts
- short comparative essay on specific text sections of *The Adoption Papers* and *Something Dark*.

Resources:

- Resource 1.3 (Chapter 8: 'Generations' of *The Adoption Papers* is included. Students will need their own copies of *Something Dark*)

Assessment focus: AO2 and AO4

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NW by Zadie Smith

Possible satellite texts and ideas for coursework links:
Trumpet by Jackie Kay: use of narrative structure and voice to convey meaning
Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: the quest for knowledge and identity, the presentation of journey
Mrs Dalloway by Virginia Woolf: stream of consciousness, one-day narrative structure
Saturday by Ian McEwan: one-day narrative structure, engagement with modern world, outsiders
A Child in Time by Ian McEwan: exploration of time
The Wasteland by T.S. Eliot: fragmentation of modern existence
The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald: identity, self-invention, escape, journeys, truth and artifice

1. Opener

In Resource 2.1, students will consider the 'novel' form and how Zadie Smith, as an avant-garde contemporary novelist, uses a range of experimental methods in *NW* to convey the lives of her characters in twenty-first-century London. This learning sequence will support students in placing the novel and its techniques in their literary context, drawing on generic critical writing about the genre, as well as specific critical writing about *NW*.

Student outcomes:

- brainstorm about the features of the traditional Victorian and modern novel, drawing on students' wider reading.

Resources:

- Resource 2.1 – one per student

Assessment focus: AO3

2. Close reading

Resource 2.2 focuses students on a range of extracts from *NW* and will engage students in the literary methods used by Zadie Smith to convey meaning. Students will employ their AO2 skills, which are an integral part of their coursework assessment and must be demonstrated in their written submissions.

Student outcomes:

- annotations of the extracts suggested in Resource 2.2
- extended writing commentaries on each passage.

Resources:

- Resource 2.2 – one per student

Assessment focus: AO2

3. Explore different interpretations: the experimental novel and the construction of reality

Resource 2.3 encourages students to conduct their own research of critical material about the 'experimental novel' form, and to consider technical innovation in *NW*. Students will consider Smith's own writing about the form before responding to a review of *NW*, supporting their own views with textual evidence.

Student outcomes:

- summary of notes on the experimental novel
- response to critical reading – points of agreement and dissent
- speech responding to the Guardian review of NW

Resources:

- Resource 2.3 – one per student

Assessment focus: AO2 and AO5

Resource 1.1

Researching the biographical context of *Something Dark*

The activities below will help you to consider the biographical context of the writer which is central to the drama *Something Dark*.

Assessment focus

AO3 Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received

Activity A

1. Brainstorm what gives you your current sense of **personal identity**.
2. Consider the connotations of the words **family**, **home** and **dark.**
3. Read the extract below from *Something Dark*.

> I have to tell this story cause there was no one to put two and two together. I was aware that nobody I knew, knew me for longer than a year. Period. I slowly became aware while in care that the only proof of my existence was me. See, that's what family does – it gives you reference points. This is not defining a good family from a bad family. This is saying that you know what your birthday is by virtue of the fact that someone tells you what your birthday is. A brother a sister an aunt a father a mother a grandparent – it matters to someone and therefore matters to you. Understand? I was the only proof of my own existence, my own echo, tattooing myself into myself.

4. Agree with a partner the key points Sissay argues.
5. Compare your own experience with the extract above in terms of personal identity.

Activity B

On your own or with a partner, use the resources listed below to research the life story of Lemn Sissay. Then feed back as a class on the questions below:

From what you have read and watched:

- What do you most admire about Sissay?
- What do you regard as his greatest achievement and why?

- What do you find most shocking about his life story?
- What aspects of identity have been central to Sissay's life story?

Resources

- The writer's own website
- Radio 4: *Desert Island Discs*
- TED talk: 'A child of the state'
- BBC three-part Documentary *Internal Flight*, which can be found on YouTube

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Resource 1.2

Considering dramatic method in *Something Dark*: 1st Act

One notable aspect of *Something Dark* is the fact that only Sissay himself performs this autobiographical monodrama. The audience learn his story, and experience aspects of it, through his words and the wider theatrical experience. The activities below will focus you on the dramatic methods used by Sissay.

Assessment focus

AO1 Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression

AO2 Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts

Activity A

Referring to Extracts 1-4 below, establish the surface meaning and focus of each passage. What is happening on a literal level?

Activity B

Analyse how the writer uses a variety of methods to shape meaning and to address Sissay's wider concerns such as identity, race and family, in these extracts.

Working with a partner or group, think carefully about the effect of the following aspects:

- the form of monodrama with the writer as actor
- use of the first-person pronoun
- use of non-standard grammar and punctuation
- use of metadramatic techniques (for example direct address to the audience, references to stagecraft that 'break the fourth wall')
- figurative language, imagery and symbolism
- anecdotes, irony, wordplay, humour, repetition, contrast
- stage directions, lighting
- any other significant methods you identify.

Activity C

Write up an evaluation of each passage, considering how dramatic method furthers Sissay's overall concerns in each.

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Extract 1

Dark. In Darkness always comes the question, Where is the light?
The light pours upon him
Light. Light. It begs the question. Why was it dark?
The lights shut down
Dark. Where is the light?
The light pours upon him
Light. Why was it dark?
The light shuts upon him.
Light. Why was it dark?
The light shuts upon him
Damn. Darkness. Light, light. Light.

Extract 2

The story. The child. The child inside a woman, the woman inside a bed, the bed inside a ward, the ward inside a hospital inside a city a foreign country inside the sea. Me. An island in an island in an island in an island. Me. Light

Extract 3

'I have to tell this story cause there was no one to put two and two together. I was aware that nobody I knew, knew me for longer than a year. Period. I slowly became aware while in care that the only proof of my existence was me. See, that's what family does – it gives you reference points. This is not defining a good family from a bad family. This is saying that you know what your birthday is by virtue of the fact that someone tells you what your birthday is. A brother a sister an aunt a father a mother a grandparent – it matters to someone and therefore matters to you. Understand? I was the only proof of my own existence, my own echo, tattooing myself into myself.'

Extract 4

So there I am on another day with a very good friend who you could describe as 'white'. Six taxis go past as I try to catch one. Darkness. Let's look at the odds. I am in my home town – whatever that means. It's two am, I am hailing a cab and...not one but six drive by, they slow down, they look at me and they carry on. I put the bread knife away.
'I'll prove it', I tell my friend, so I sit behind a wall. My friend hails a cab. The cab stops. We get in. 'I don't believe it', my friend says, 'six cabs go past and don't stop cause my friend he's...'
'I stop for anyone, anyone', barks the driver.
Darkness. I look at my friend talking and I'm still behind the wall...folding up my darkness and gently placing it into my inner child's mouth telling him Shut the fuck up!

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Resource 1.3

Comparative study of Sissay and Kay's use of multiple voices

The activities below support comparative study of how Sissay and Jackie Kay use single or multiple voices to convey their central concerns regarding identity, family and race. Sissay's play is written as a monodrama; Kay employs three voices in *The Adoption Papers* – her own, her white adoptive mother's and her white birth mother's. You will need to refer to *Something Dark* –1st Act, as well as Chapter 8 'Generations' of *The Adoption Papers* (included in this resource).

Assessment focus

AO2 Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts
AO4 Explore connections across literary texts

Activity A

1. In groups of three, work through Kay's poem to mark up the different speakers, identifying the words attributed to the following voices:

- daughter
- adoptive-mother
- birth-mother.

2. Consider how the poet marks these voices typographically for the reader and identify any points where the voices become more difficult to distinguish. Discuss possible reasons for the poet's choices.

3. As a group, produce your own reading of this poem, using multiple voices.

Activity B

1. Re-read the first Act of *Something Dark* and consider any particular sections where voices or perspectives other than Sissay's are introduced. What methods does Sissay use to do this in this monodrama, since only one person, the writer himself, is on stage?

Think carefully about use of letters, anecdotes, reported speech, direct speech, episodes, past and present time, and any other methods you can identify.

2. Annotate these sections and consider what they suggest about identity, race or family in the play.

Activity C

Write an essay in response to the following title:

Compare how Kay and Sissay use voice in Chapter 8 ‘Generations’ and the first Act of *Something Dark* to convey their personal stories about identity, race and adoption. Consider any relevant contextual factors.

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Chapter 8: Generations

The sun went out just like that
almost as if it had never been,
hard to imagine now the way it fell
on treetops, thatched roofs, people's faces.
Suddenly the trees lost their nerves
and the grass passed the wind on
blade to blade, fast as gossip

Years later, the voices still come close
especially in dreams, not distant echoes
loud – a pneumatic drill – deeper and deeper still.
I lived the scandal, wore it casual
as a summer's dress, Jesus sandals.
All but the softest whisper:
***she's lost an awful lot of weight*.**

Now my secret is the hush of heavy curtains drawn.
I dread strange handwriting
sometimes jump when the phone rings,
she is all of nineteen and legally able.
At night I lie practising my lines
but 'sorry' never seems large enough
nor 'I can't see you, yes, I'll send a photograph.'

I was pulled out with forceps
left a gash down my left cheek
four months inside a glass cot
but
she came faithful from Glasgow to Edinburgh
and peered through the glass
she would not pick another baby.

I don't know what diseases
come down my line;
when dentist and doctors ask
the old blood questions about family runnings
I tell them: I have no nose or mouth or eyes
to match, no spitting image or dead cert,

my face watches itself in the glass.

I have my parents who are not of the same tree
and you keep trying to make it matter,
the blood, the tie, the passing down
generations.
We all have our contradictions,
the ones with the mother's nose and father's eyes
have them;
the blood does not bind confusion,
yet I confess to my contradiction
I want to know my blood.

I know my blood.
It is dark ruby red and comes
regular and I use Lillets.
I know my blood when I cut my finger.
I know what my blood looks like.

It is the well, the womb, the fucking seed.
Here, I am far enough away to wonder –
what were their faces like
who were my grandmothers
what were the days like
passed in Scotland
the land I come from
the soil in my blood.

Put it this way:
I know she thinks of me often
when the light shows its face
or the dark skulks behind hills,
she conjures me up or I just appear
when I take the notion, my slippers
are silent and I walk through doors.

She's lying in bed; I wake her up
a pinch on her cheek is enough,
then I make her think of me for hours.
The best thing I can steal is sleep.
I get right under the duvet and murmur

you'll never really know your mother.
I know who she thinks I am – she's made a blunder.

She is faceless
She has no nose
She is five foot eight inches tall
She likes hockey best
She is twenty-six today
She was a waitress
My hair is grey
She wears no particular dress
The skin around my neck is wrinkling
Does she imagine me this way?
Lately I make pictures of her
But I can see the smallness
She is tall and slim
of her hands, Yes
Her hair is loose curls
an opal stone on her middle finger
I reach out to catch her
Does she talk broad Glasgow?
But no matter how fast
Maybe they moved years ago
I run after
She is faceless, she never
weeps. She has neither eyes nor
fine boned cheeks

Once would be enough,
just to listen to her voice
watch the way she moves her hands
when she talks.

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Resource 2.1

Features of the novel

The activities below will support you in thinking about the features of a traditional novel before considering how Zadie Smith breaks with convention in *NW*.

Assessment focus

AO3 Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received

Activity A

1. Independently, write a list of what you consider to be the features of a traditional novel. (for example, central character/character).

2. Read the article below by Professor John Mullan from UCL about plot, and consider any additions you would like to make to your list as a result of your reading: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/14/whatever-next-pleasures-plot-dickens-line-of-duty

Activity B

In a group, agree the features that you consider typical of a traditional novel. Think of any nineteenth-century novels you have read to start your discussion, and consider common features of such texts and their relationship to real life.

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Resource 2.2

Narrative method

Zadie Smith uses a range of innovative methods in *NW* to represent reality to the reader. She breaks from established conventions of traditional realism that we find in many novels, in both narrative style and organisation. The activities below will support you in considering the narrative methods employed by Zadie Smith.

Assessment focus

AO1 Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression

AO2 Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts

Activity A

Consider the section headings of the novel and the relationships between form and content. With a partner, discuss and make notes on how the general form of each section links to the general content.

- visitation – focusing on Leah, April–August 2010 – stream of consciousness
- guest – focusing on one day (27 August 2010) and the death of Felix – relatively conventional third-person narration
- host – Keisha/Natalie's life from her childhood in the late 1970s and 1980s to 27 August 2010 – 185 short numbered and titled sections
- crossing – Nathan and Natalie – same day after the murder – relatively conventional narrative
- visitation – occurs two days after the murder and ends with Natalie and Leah phoning the police – relatively conventional narrative

Activity B

1. Consider the extracts below (from the Penguin: 2013 edition of *NW*).

- Extract 1: Image on page 31
- Extract 2: Page 39
- Extract 3: Page 45, from '–I'll give a pound,…' to '–Surviving.'
- Extract 4: Page 240
- Extract 5: Page 316

2. Remind yourself of where each passage comes in the novel. What is happening on a literal level?
3. Decide how Smith's methods depart from the traditional novel you discussed earlier in Resource 2.1.
4. Analyse the value of Smith's chosen methods to convey the reality of the life of her characters in modern London. You may find the terminology list provided by Edexcel useful to support your analysis, as well as the specific terms below. Write up your analysis of each passage.

Glossary

You may find some of the terms below useful to support your discussion:

- Metafictional techniques – techniques that draw the reader's attention to the artifice of the literary form
- Stream of consciousness – narrative method that attempts to portray the multiple simultaneous thoughts and feelings that pass through the mind
- Free indirect style – a third-person point of view that manages to subtly and indirectly attribute a thought or emotion to a character
- Calligram – a shape poem
- Dialogue – a conversation between two or more people
- Direct speech – the reporting of speech by repeating the actual words of a speaker

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Resource 2.3

The experimental novel and the construction of reality

The activities below will help you to consider technical innovation in *NW*, by exploring literary criticism and the writer's own views on the experimental novel.

Assessment focus

AO2 Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts
AO5 Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations

Activity A

1. Research the term 'experimental novel'. You could use the following sources or any other reliable critical material you identify: David Lodge's chapter on 'The Experimental Novel' in *The Art of Fiction* (Vintage: 2011); John Mullan's chapter on 'Structure' in *How Novel's Work* (OUP: 2006). Both can be found online.
2. Write a summary of your findings. Include brief relevant quotations that may be useful in discussing this form in relation to *NW*.

Activity B

1. Read the extracts below from an essay by Zadie Smith commenting on a traditional literary modern novel called *Netherland*.

In this essay Smith criticises the lack of innovation in the modern novel and how an accepted literary style has become overly dominant as a way of conveying reality. She argues that *Netherland* is constructed in the style of many accepted modern novels, a style she refers to as 'lyrical realism':

> In practice *Netherland* colonizes all space by way of voracious image. This results in many beauties ("a static turnstile like a monster's unearthed skeleton") and some oddities (a cricket ball arrives "like a gigantic meteoritic cranberry"), though in both cases, there is an anxiety of excess. Everything must be made literary. Nothing escapes. On TV "dark Baghdad glitter[s] with American bombs." Even the mini traumas of a middle-class life are given the high lyrical treatment, in what feels, at its best, like a grim satire on the profound fatuity of twenty-first-century bourgeois existence.

> An interesting thought is trying to reach us here, but the ghost of the literary burns it away, leaving only its remainder: a nicely constructed sentence, rich in sound and syntax, signifying (almost) nothing. *Netherland* doesn't really want to know about misapprehension. It wants to offer us the authentic story of a self. But is this really what having a self feels like? Do selves always seek their good, in the end? Are they never perverse? Do they always want meaning? Do they not sometimes want its opposite? And is this how memory works? Do our childhoods often return to us in the form of coherent, lyrical reveries? Is this how time feels? Do the things of the world really come to us like this, embroidered in the verbal fancy of times past? Is this really Realism?
>
> Zadie Smith: 'Two Paths for the Novel', November 20, 2008
> *The New York Review of Books*

2. In your group:
   - decide what you think Zadie Smith means by 'lyrical realism'
   - agree what you understand Zadie Smith feels is problematic about this style of writing.

Activity C

1. Read the *Guardian* review of *NW*.
2. Write a speech in response to the *Guardian* article, identifying points you agree and disagree with, and supporting your argument with textual reference from *NW*. Deliver your response to your class.

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