

Key Women Writers and Texts: An Introduction

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Below is a very select list of writers and texts that you may want to suggest to your students – or add to your own reading lists. As with all lists, it is not comprehensive, but all are texts which could be studied and enjoyed by students whilst completing the NEA/coursework component for the A level English Literature qualification.

Most of these writers and texts have a great deal of critical material written about them which should be easily accessible to most students. A useful starting point would be the [British Library website](#) which has recently been updated. The British Council website also have a [searchable database](#) of British and Commonwealth writers which outlines their works and includes some references and critical perspectives.

There are also three useful NEA/coursework guides covering *Contemporary Black British Writing*, *LGBTQ+ Literature* and *British Asian Literature* on the [Pearson website](#) which contain works by women writers.

There are a number of interesting anthologies and lists of women writers which may give you some ideas about some new women writers to introduce to your students and to help them to select authors they may wish to study more closely such as:

- Becca Anderson, *Book of Awesome Women Writers* (2020)
- Ann Sandham (ed), *The Women Writers' Handbook* (2020)
- Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (eds), *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (2 vols), (2008).
- Elaine Showalter (ed), *The Vintage book of American Women Writers* (2011)
- Maren Tova Linnett (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women Writers* (2010)
- Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K Taylor (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature* (2009)

Please also refer to our [coursework guidance](#) document.

Julian of Norwich (c1343–c1416) was a female [anchoress](#) whose works, known as *Revelations of Divine Love*, are thought to be some of the first writings by a woman in the English Language. As she was a deeply devout woman, her works focus on the love and nature of God. A digitalised version of her manuscripts can be found on the [British Library](#) with a modern edition published by Oxford World Classics. There is also an interesting page on [Wikipedia](#) which outlines the history and publication of her works.



Margery Kempe (c.1373–c.1438) was a Christian mystic who wrote about her life and beliefs in what is thought to be one of the first examples of [autobiographical writing](#) in English. Her book, *The Book of Margery Kempe* survives as a manuscript in the [British Library](#) and modern academic editions of the text have been produced and are readily available with introductions and glossaries.

Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (1561–1621) was an early patron of writers and artists in Early Modern England and the sister of the poet, Sir Philip Sidney. She wrote a number of poetic works and her closet drama, *Antonie* (1595), which was read aloud rather than performed, was translated from a French drama and discusses the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra. Her niece, [Lady Mary Wroth](#) (1587–1561) also wrote poetry and drama and her pastoral drama, *Love's Victory* (1620) as well as her prose romance, *Urania* (1621) are thought to be the first of their kind.

Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623–1673) is thought to be one of the first women to publish her work under her own name. She wrote a great variety of works from her poetry to philosophical and scientific writings. Her prose romance, *The Blazing World* (1666), has been seen by some critics as an early example of science fiction writing. The [British Library](#) website has some interesting information about her life and career.

Aphra Behn (1640–1689) is thought to be one of the first professional female writers. Her slave narrative, [Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave](#) (1688) has a female narrator which allowed her to highlight the issues surrounding women at the time as well as her own views about the slave trade and politics. Her play, *The Rover* (1677), is known as a [restoration comedy](#) and is still performed today.



[Charlotte Smith \(1749–1806\)](#) was a [Romantic](#) novelist and poet. She is best known for her poetry, which used the [sonnet form](#) to discuss Romantic themes such as nature and personal feelings about life and love.

[Frances \(Fanny\) Burney \(1752–1840\)](#) is perhaps best known for her novels, but she also wrote plays as well as some more autobiographical works. Her best – known novel is *Evelina* (1788), which is an [epistolary](#) novel following the life of Evelina, an aristocrat’s daughter, who grew up in the countryside and comes to London at the age of 17. The [British Library](#) website has some useful information about Burney’s life and legacy.

[Phillis Wheatley \(1753–1784\)](#) was sold into slavery when she was very young and became the first African American poet to be published. Her work, [Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral](#) (1773) focus on the politics of the time as well as her religious and spiritual beliefs. This blog from the [ZSR library](#) in North Carolina outlines the history of the work.

[Mary Wollstonecraft \(1759–1797\)](#) was a writer and philosopher whose work, [A Vindication of the Rights of Woman](#) (1792) is viewed as an influential work in feminist thought and theory. She also wrote novels – *Mary* (1788) and *Maria* (1798) – in which she expressed her views on marriage and relationships.



[Anne Radcliffe \(1764–1823\)](#) is widely viewed as one of the first writers of [Gothic fiction](#). [The Mysteries of Udolpho](#) was published in 1794 and featured the now well-known tropes of the [Gothic genre](#). It was later satirized in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818). There is an interesting introductory essay to Anne Radcliffe on the [British Library website](#).

[Maria Edgeworth \(1768–1849\)](#) was a prolific author of fiction for both adults and children. She travelled extensively and also met many popular authors of the time. She is perhaps best known for her novel, *Castle Rackrent* (1800). Set in Ireland, this short novel tells the story of the Rackrent family and is an early example of [historical fiction](#).

[Jane Austen \(1775–1817\)](#) is one of the best –known authors in the world and her novels are still enormously popular. Her six novels – *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815), *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and *Persuasion* (1818) – all focus on family life, marriage, love and relationships as well as taking a satirical view of Regency society. Many modern critics read the novels as a [critique](#) and comment on the patriarchal society of Austen’s times and praise the largely female perspective represented in the novels.



[Elizabeth Barrett Browning \(1806–1861\)](#) was an English poet who was married to the English poet, Robert Browning. She is perhaps best known for her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) and *Aurora Leigh* (1856). Browning’s life and work is discussed on the [Poetry Foundation](#) website and the social and political contexts of her works are discussed in [two articles](#) on the [British Library website](#).

[Mary Shelley \(1797–1851\)](#) was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, and she wrote perhaps one of the most famous novels of modern times. *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) uses multiple narrators to tell the story of Victor Frankenstein, who creates his own creature in a scientific experiment. Shelley’s work is discussed in this article on the [British Library](#) website.

[Charlotte Bronte \(1816–1855\)](#) was the eldest of the [three Bronte sisters](#) and wrote many novels and works of poetry during her lifetime. Her most famous work, *Jane Eyre* (1847), tells the story of Jane Eyre and her relationship with Mr Rochester, the owner of Thornfield Hall where she is a governess. Bronte uses her titular heroine to investigate such themes as class, gender roles, relationships and religion. The novelist [Jean Rhys](#) famously wrote *Wild Sargasso Sea* (1966) which is a prequel to *Jane Eyre* and tells the story of Mr Rochester’s first wife, Antoinette Cosway/[Bertha Mason](#).

[George Eliot \(1819–1890\)](#) was the pen name of Mary Ann Evans. She was a prolific writer from the Victorian era. Her most novels, such as *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Middlemarch* (1871), tend to be set in rural communities and focus on nature, [social and political concerns](#) and the internal lives of her characters.



[Emily Dickinson \(1830–1886\)](#) was an American poet whose reputation has grown since her death. Her poetry focusses on the beauty of nature, identity and death and she uses a myriad of different poetic styles and linguistic ideas. Her home in Massachusetts is now a museum and the [website](#) provides lots of biographical material as well as information about her work.

[Mary Elizabeth Braddon \(1835-1915\)](#) was a Victorian novelist. Her most famous novel – *Lady Audley's Secret* was published in 1862 and is described as a [sensation novel](#).

[Radclyffe Hall \(1880–1943\)](#) was an author whose most famous work, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) was seen as [controversial](#) at the time it was published. Hall's ground-breaking novel follows the story of Stephen Gordon who was christened with a boy's name as her parents were expecting her to be a boy. The novel follows Stephen's life but also questions the assumptions and prejudices of the time around homosexuality and sexual identity. This interesting [blog](#) from the Warwickshire libraries website, discussing the text as part of their LGBTQ+ History month.



[Virginia Woolf \(1882–1941\)](#) is perhaps best known for her [modernist](#) novels – such as *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928) – which are highly regarded for their innovative literary style. Woolf's non-fiction text, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is also cited by many feminist critics as an important work as Woolf outlines how women have been oppressed and kept silent over the course of history.

[Zora Neale Hurston \(1891–1960\)](#) was the author of *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) which follows the life of her young protagonist, Janie Crawford. Although this novel was not highly regarded at the time it was published, critics now see it as an [important](#) work looking at gender and race through the eyes of a female narrator. The [Zora Neale Hurston website](#) discusses this novel – and many of Hurston's other works – as well as provided [resources for teachers](#).



Maya Angelou (1928–2014) is best known for her collection of autobiographical novels. Her first, [I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings](#) (1969) outlines her early life



growing up with her grandmother in Arkansas. Angelou bravely covers topics from her life such as racism, prejudice and rape which has caused the novel to be banned in [some schools](#). Angelou works have been praised by many authors and other writers for discussing important issues, politics and feminism. Her [poetry](#) is equally as powerful and has a [musical/lyrical quality](#). The Maya Angelou [website](#) is a useful resource for information about the author as well as her works.

Toni Morrison (1931–2019) is a word-famous writer whose work and influence have long been lauded by critics. Following her death in 2019, many writers and critics wrote about [her influence](#) on both their own writing and the literary world. Her novels such as *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987) focus on identity, relationships, racism and a struggle to be accepted and seen in the world. As well as fiction, Morrison also wrote [non-fiction](#) and well as giving many [interviews](#) and [lectures](#). She won the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* in 1988 and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) is best known for her seminal work, *The Bell Jar* (1963), the semi-autobiographical novel which was published posthumously. In this novel, Plath discusses mental health, identity and feminism, using her own experiences to relate these issues directly and starkly to the reader. As well as this novel, Plath also wrote the [poetry](#) collections *The Colossus and other poems* (1960) and *Ariel* (1965).

Caryl Churchill (1938) is a playwright who has been writing and producing [plays](#) for many years. Her plays – such as *Top Girls* (1982), *Serious Money* (1987), *Far Away* (2000) and *A Number* (2002) – deal with [many topics](#) such as gender, nature, politics, the future, sexuality and feminism. Her plays are known for their use of [different dramatic techniques](#) and themes.



A.S. Byatt (1938) is a Booker prize winning novelist and poet whose works combine a number of [literary techniques](#) and devices. *Possession*, which won the Booker Prize in 1990 is a work of [historical fiction](#) which uses multiple writing styles to tell the story of the two academics as they are researching the relationship between two fictional Victorian poets, Randolph Ash and Christabel Lamotte. A.S. Byatt's [website](#) contains useful information about her life and works and the Penguin Random House website has an interesting reader's guide to [Possession](#).

Margaret Atwood (1939) is a world-renowned poet, novelist and activist. Her earlier novels – such as *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972) and *Cat's Eye*



(1988) - cover themes such as female friendship and relationships, feminism and identity. Atwood is perhaps best known for her [dystopian](#) novels – *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Onyx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), *MaddAdam* (2013) and *The Testaments* (2020) – which have

garnered many awards and plaudits. *The Handmaid's Tale* has been on A level set text lists for many years and has led to an enormously successful TV series. Margaret Atwood's [website](#) and her [twitter account](#) have a number of interesting articles about the author's work and environmental concerns.

Angela Carter (1940–1992) was a novelist and poet who was known for her works of [magical realism](#) such as *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), [Wise Children](#) (1991) and [The Bloody Chamber](#) (1979). The Angela Carter [website](#) includes a number of reviews of her work as well as some examples of her non-fiction works and useful biographical information about the author. There is also an interesting article about Carter's life and work on the [British Library](#) website.

Alice Walker (1944) wrote [The Color Purple](#) in 1982 which won her the Pulitzer Prize in the same year it was published. This popular and critically acclaimed story of Celie was also made into an [Oscar nominated film](#) starring Whoopi Goldberg. As well as writing *The Color Purple*, Walker has also written many other novels, collections of poetry and non-fiction. She is a staunch campaigner for equal rights and her [website](#) has a number of interesting articles about her activism and her many published works.

Amy Tan (1952) is a novelist who is perhaps best known for her best-selling novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). This novel follows the lives and stories of Chinese American mothers and daughters as they meet to play mah-jong. Tan's novels tend to focus on family life, relationships and identity, as well as the role of

women in society. Amy Tan's [website](#) contains more information about the author and her writings as well as reviews of her works.

Bernardine Evaristo (1959) is an author and the current President of the [Royal Society of Literature](#). Her 2019 novel, *Girl, Woman, Other* won the [Booker Prize](#)



alongside Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*. This novel, which follows the lives of 12 women discusses key themes such as race, gender and identity. The book has garnered wide-spread praise and her [website](#) has a number of reviews and articles about this book and her other works. A summary of Evaristo's earlier work *Mr Loverman* (2013) can be found in the Pearson [LGBTQ+ Literature](#) guide.

Arundati Roy (1961) is an author and activist whose first novel, *The God of Small Things* won the Booker prize in 1997. Set in Kerala, India, this novel tells the story of twins Rahel and Esthappen before and after they are separated after a series of devastating events. Roy uses a [non-linear plot](#) and narrative to describe the events and lives of the families and discusses Indian politics, social history, gender and family loyalty. As well as being a novelist, Roy is also an activist. Her [website](#) contains information about her novels as well as her non-fiction writing and reviews of her work.



Zadie Smith (1975) is a novelist, playwright and essayist who came to fame in 2000 with the publication of her debut novel, *White Teeth*. In this novel, she focusses on the lives of two friends – Samad Iqbal and Archie Jones – and their families. One of Smith's [other novels](#) – *NW* (2012) – is included in the Pearson [Black British Writers](#) coursework guide. Smith also recently wrote a play – *The Wife of Willesden* (2021) – which is a modern rewriting of Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath*. This was performed at [The Kiln Theatre](#) in Kilburn and garnered [excellent reviews](#). Smith's [website](#) also includes information about her works as well as links to her non-fiction writings and interviews.

[Yaa Gyasi \(1989\)](#) has won many awards for her debut novel, *Home Going* (2016)



including the PEN/Hemingway award for a first book of fiction. This work of historical fiction follows the lives of the descendants of two sisters, Essia and Esi, from the 18th century through to the present day. Each descendent has a separate chapter and Gyasi uses these separate, yet connected chapters, to show the themes of family, heritage, slavery, segregation and prejudice. In this interesting talk on [YouTube](#), Gyasi talks at length about her novel, her influences and motivations for writing the novel. Penguin Random House have created a useful [Readers](#) and [Teachers](#) guide to the novel.

Source information

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