

English Literature Induction Task

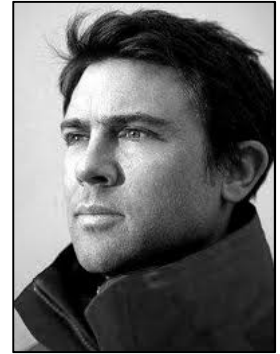
The first texts you will read on your A-level English Literature course are:

1. *Skirrid Hill* by Owen Sheers (poetry)
2. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by Tennessee Williams (drama)

In order to prepare yourself to study these texts and writers, please complete the tasks below for each text and bring your notes with you to your first lessons.

Skirrid Hill by Owen Sheers

1. Listen to this interview with Owen Sheers and make notes on what has inspired and influenced his poetry
(<https://poetryarchive.org/interviews/interview-owen-sheers/>)
2. Read the poems below which have been taken from his first collection of poetry 'The Blue Book'. What more do you learn about Sheers from reading these poems? How would you define his poetic style? What themes and ideas does his poetry explore? Do the poems remind you of any other poets you have read?



Unfinished Business

We often saw him pass the classroom window,
bunking off, jumper alive with ferrets,
two thin dogs snapping round the hem of his coat.

At fifteen he bolted from a tattoo parlour,
down on the docks in Swansea;

bursting into the light before the tattooist could start the S,
sprinting down the street, ATAN still bleeding on his head.

He tried to make sense of it in biro,
appearing at the gates, the crucial letter scratched in,
and despite our fear (we knew he'd dropped
a breeze block onto some bloke's unconscious face,
attacked a teacher with a Stanley knife, threatened
to fill in his kids and fuck his wife) we still laughed;
though it was always he who provided the punch lines –
usually ten or twenty times before someone could drag
him off.

Lambing

My father gloves himself in her,
up to his elbow, on his knees,
head angled, cheek resting
on the sprung wool of her rump.
Looking for coins down the back of a sofa.

His invisible fingers work inside,
finding a tangle of swollen joints
and crooked legs.
The hooves, soft as plums.

And then the slow, hydraulic extraction,
Chinese eyes and long ears pulled back
by the g-force of the womb.
The tight cling-film of the amniotic sac,
the pre-packaging of birth,
which, when it comes,
falls, flat and bloody as road kill –
a glued body, trailing a placenta,
a still life, until, at last, the first breath,
which arrives from nowhere –
an electric shock
run across the railings of its ribs.

Space Invaders

A confidence of swans,
coming at us with prehistoric necks, the question mark
of head and beak, that bulge beneath the eyes.

Their dodo waddle, so alien
to their usual smooth cut and groove of water,
their aquatic soft-shoe shuffle, their lakeside glide.

Pausing just short, they nonchalantly lift their angel wings,
and peer beneath, reaching for holsters,
before coming on again, somehow taller,

chest low-slung and puffed
above a John Wayne swagger,
a menace hinting in their dark eyes.

You tense in my hand and I try not to tense beside you —
but we are denied the satisfaction of their attack,
and they never touch, make no noise even.

Never threatened with those wings that can snap a
man's back.

Instead, they teach us a lesson in their own silent way,
stretch their necks and pick at the air around us,

confront us with beauty and the promise of pain.
Make no fuss, just pluck at our edges —
then leave us.

Skirrid

I. Facing West

She is she, but I do not know why.
This hare-lipped hill, this broken spine of soil

that stretches across my window
steep-sided, a sinking ship upturned.

Where I stood at Easter,
the Black Mountains shifting their weight in the west,
breathing their storm towards me,
turning a slow cloud down their shoulders

that came to me with hail-shot, straight in my face.
Ant eggs blown in my hair.

II. Facing East

A kestrel tilts on the breeze,
over swollen fields, deciding in the sun,

a dark scales paused in the sky,
hanging in the balance,

until finally it folds and dives, a falling grain,
and is no longer there.

Only the view is left, and in the distance,
the Severn, a long haze

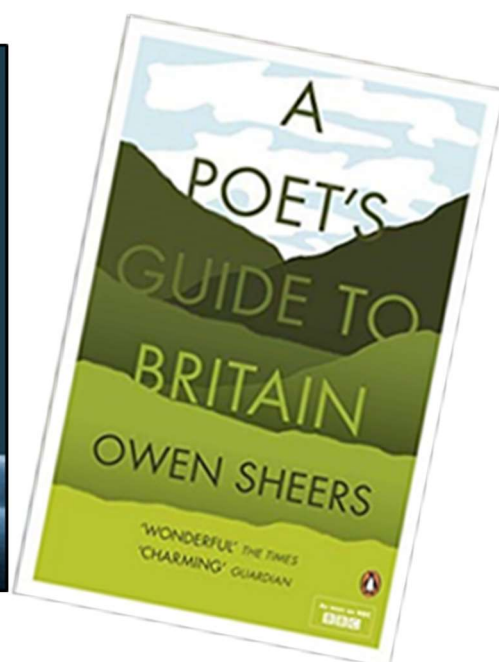
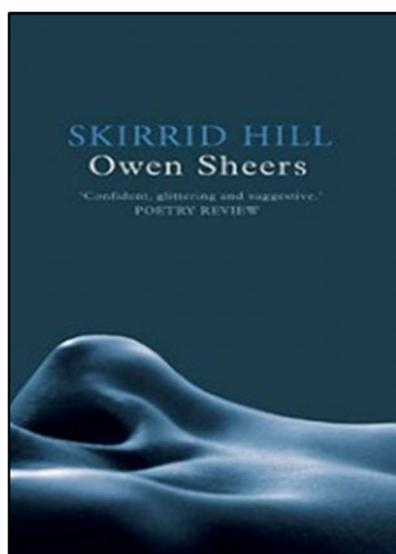
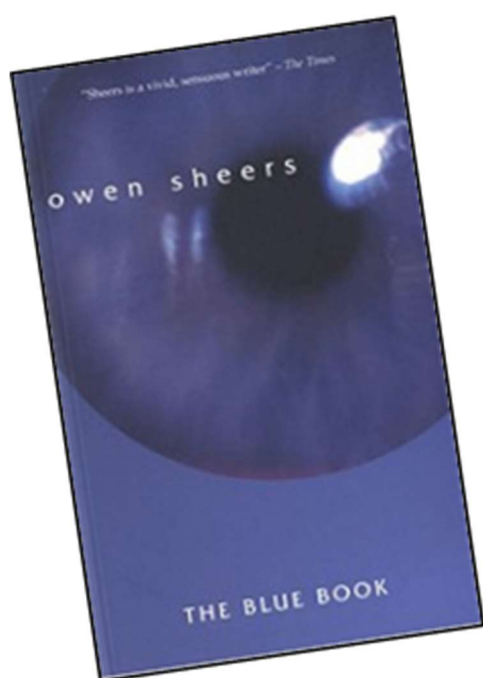
which flexes once a year,
rolling one huge wave down the estuary.

Now though, it is quiet, deciding,
its muscle still growing far out at sea.

Wider Reading

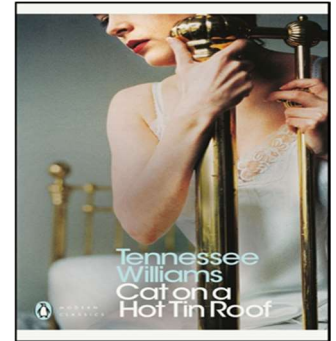
- If you would like to explore Owen Sheers further, the following texts will complement your study of *Skirrid Hill*.

Skirrid Hill – Owen Sheers	
The Blue Book	Owen Sheers <i>Poems on a range of themes, from recollections of time spent in Fiji, to sharper memories of an adolescence spent in the tough streets of a small, rural town; from dark ruminations on farm life to tender and unconventional love poems.</i>
Pink Mist	Owen Sheers <i>A work of great dramatic power, documentary integrity and emotional intensity, Pink Mist uses everyday yet heightened speech to excavate the human cost of modern warfare. Drawing upon interviews with soldiers and their families, as well as ancient texts such as the medieval Welsh poem Y Gododdin, it is the first extended lyric narrative to emerge from the devastating conflict in Afghanistan.</i>
The Four Quartets	T. S. Eliot <i>Four Quartets is the culminating achievement of T.S. Eliot's career as a poet. While containing some of the most musical and unforgettable passages in twentieth-century poetry, its four parts, 'Burnt Norton', 'East Coker', 'The Dry Salvages' and 'Little Gidding', present a rigorous meditation on the spiritual, philosophical and personal themes which preoccupied the author. It was the way in which a private voice was heard to speak for the concerns of an entire generation, in the midst of war and doubt, that confirmed it as an enduring masterpiece.</i>
A Poet's Guide to Britain	Owen Sheers <i>Under the headings of six varieties of British landscape - London and Cities, Villages and Towns, Mountains and Moorland, Islands, Woods and Forest, and Coast and Sea - Sheers has collected poems that evoke qualities of the land, city and sea and have become part of the way we see these landscapes.</i>



Cat on a Hot Tin Roof by Tennessee Williams

1. Read this article on Tennessee Williams (<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/oct/29/tennessee-williams-mad-pilgrimage-of-the-flesh-john-lahr-review>) and make notes on what you learn about Williams' upbringing, his influences and his dramatic style.
2. Read the following extracts from three of Williams' plays. Make notes on anything that strikes you about the extracts. Consider the subject matter, characters, stage directions and language. What sort of playwright does Williams seem to be? What themes and ideas do his plays explore?



A Streetcar Named Desire (1947)

STELLA: Belle Reve? Lost, is it? No!

BLANCHE: Yes, Stella.

[They stare at each other across the yellow-checked linoleum of the table. BLANCHE slowly nods her head and Stella looks slowly down at her hands folded on the table. The music of the 'blue piano' grows louder. BLANCHE touches her handkerchief to her forehead.]

STELLA: But how did it go? What happened?

BLANCHE *[springing up]*: You're a fine one to ask me how it went!

STELLA: Blanche!

BLANCHE: You're a fine one to sit there accusing me of it!

STELLA: Blanche!

BLANCHE: I, I, I took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn't be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like rubbish! You just came home in time for the funerals, Stella. And funerals are pretty compared to deaths. Funerals are quiet, but deaths – not always. Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you, 'Don't let me go!' Even the old, sometimes, say, 'Don't let me go.' As if you were able to stop them! But funerals are quiet, with pretty flowers. And, oh, what gorgeous boxes they pack them away in! Unless you were there at the bed when they cried out, 'Hold me!' you'd never suspect there was the struggle for breath and bleeding. You didn't dream, but I saw! Saw! Saw!

The Glass Menagerie (1945)

TOM: [...] This is the social background of the play.

[Music]

The play is memory.

Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic.

In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings

I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it. The other characters are my mother Amanda, my sister Laura, and a gentleman caller who appears in the final scenes.

He is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from.

But since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for.

There is a fifth character in the play who doesn't appear except in this larger-than-lifesize photograph over the mantel.

This is our father who left us a long time ago.

He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; he gave up his job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of town...

The last we heard of him was a picture postcard from Mazatlan, on the Pacific coast of Mexico, containing a message of two words –

'Hello – Good-bye!' and no address.

I think the rest of the play will explain itself ...

[AMANDA'S voice becomes audible through the portieres.

LEGEND ON SCREEN: 'OÙ SONT LES NEIGES'.

He divides the portieres and enters the upstage area.

AMANDA and LAURA are seated at a dropleaf table. Eating is indicated by gestures without food or utensils. AMANDA faces the audience TOM and LAURA are seated in profile.

The interior has lit up softly and through the scrim see AMANDA and LAURA seated at the table in the upstage area.]

Sweet Bird of Youth (1959)

PAGEBOY [offstage]: Paging Chance Wayne, Mr Chance Wayne, please.

PRINCESS [entering with PAGEBOY]: Louder, young man, louder ... Oh, never mind, here he is!

[But CHANCE has already rushed out on to the gallery. The PRINCESS looks as if she had thrown on her clothes to escape a building on fire. Her blue-sequinned gown is unzipped, or partially zipped, her hair is dishevelled, her eyes have a dazed, drugged brightness; she is holding up the eyeglasses with the broken lens, shakily, hanging on to her mink stole with the other hand; her movements are unsteady.]

MISS LUCY: I know who you are. Alexandra Del Lago.

[Loud whispering. A pause.]

PRINCESS *[on the step to the gallery]*: What? Chance!

MISS LUCY: Honey, let me fix that zipper for you. Hold still just a second. Honey, let me take you upstairs. You mustn't be seen down here in this condition ...

[CHANCE suddenly rushes in from the gallery: he conducts the PRINCESS outside: she is on the verge of panic. The PRINCESS rushes half-down the steps to the palm garden: leans panting on the stone balustrade under the ornamental light standard with its five great pearls of light. The interior is dimmed as CHANCE comes out behind her.]

PRINCESS: Chance! Chance! Chance! Chance

CHANCE *[softly]*: If you'd stayed upstairs that wouldn't have happened to you.

PRINCESS: I did, I stayed.

CHANCE: I told you to wait.

PRINCESS: I waited.

CHANCE: Didn't I tell you to wait till I got back?

PRINCESS: I did, I waited forever, I waited forever for you. Then finally I heard those long sad silver trumpets blowing through the palm garden and then – Chance, the most wonderful thing has happened to me. Will you listen to me? Will you let me tell you?

Wider Reading

- If you would like to explore Tennessee Williams further, the following texts will complement your study of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof – Tennessee Williams	
A Streetcar Named Desire	<p>Tennessee Williams</p> <p><i>Fading southern belle Blanche DuBois is adrift in the modern world. When she arrives to stay with her sister Stella in a crowded, boisterous corner of New Orleans, her delusions of grandeur bring her into conflict with Stella's crude, brutish husband Stanley Kowalski.</i></p>
The Glass Menagerie	<p>Tennessee Williams</p> <p><i>Abandoned by her husband, Amanda Wingfield comforts herself with recollections of her earlier, more gracious life in Blue Mountain when she was pursued by 'gentleman callers'. Her son Tom, a poet with a job in a warehouse, longs for adventure and escape from his mother's suffocating embrace, while Laura, her shy crippled daughter, has her glass menagerie and her memories.</i></p>
Death of Salesman	<p>Arthur Miller</p> <p><i>Willy Loman is on his last legs. Failing at his job, dismayed at his the failure of his sons, Biff and Happy, to live up to his expectations, and tortured by his jealousy at the success and happiness of his neighbour Charley and his son Bernard, Willy spirals into a well of regret and reminiscence. A scathing indictment of the ultimate failure of the American Dream.</i></p>
All My Sons	<p>Arthur Miller</p> <p><i>In Joe and Kate Keller's family garden, an apple tree - a memorial to their son Larry, lost in the Second World War - has been torn down by a storm. But his loss is not the only part of the family's past they can't put behind them</i></p>
The Long Day's Journey Into Night	<p>Eugene O'Neill</p> <p><i>Long Day's Journey into Night was written in 1940 but not staged until 1956, after O'Neill's death. Unashamedly autobiographical, it is, as he puts it himself in the dedicatory note, 'a play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood', a harrowing attempt to understand himself and his family.</i></p>
Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh	<p>John Lahr</p> <p><i>This astute, deeply researched biography sheds a light on Tennessee Williams's warring family, his guilt, his creative triumphs and failures, his sexuality and numerous affairs and his misreported death.</i></p>

