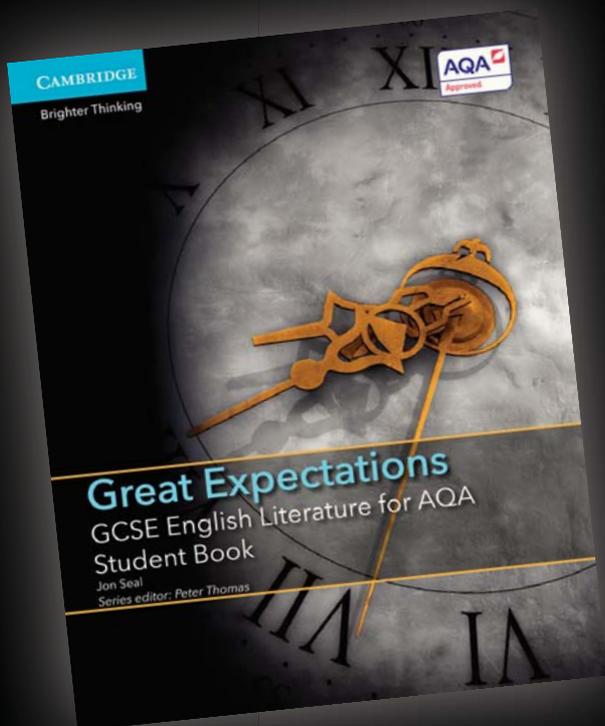


# INSPIRATION, IDEAS AND TIPS FOR TEACHING GCSE ENGLISH LITERATURE



Written by **Jon Seal**  
on behalf of Cambridge  
University Press

## About the author:

Jon Seal has been a teacher for over 27 years, with experience as a Head of English and Head of Drama & Media Studies. He has written teacher guides and scripted DVD material, and is the author of three Cambridge University Press Student Books for the new AQA GCSE in English Literature (*Frankenstein*, *Great Expectations* and *An Inspector Calls*). Jon has written and directed a large number of plays and is a filmmaker, winning a Jerwood Film Shorts Prize for *Back To Earth*. He also wrote and directed many of the videos that feature in the digital editions of Cambridge's new Student Books for AQA GCSE English Literature.



# What the Dickens!

By Jon Seal

It's tempting to feel that the stars are not wanted now; that we should pack up the moon and dismantle the sun; pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood. We need to prepare for the exam, and must thrash through the weighty tomes of the literature worthies.

This year, English teachers are navigating around another series of changes as GCSE English Literature shifts into yet another form. Coursework has disappeared completely, and now all students – of all abilities – will be seated in hot summer sports halls for the unfortunately named 'terminal exam' with nothing but what's in their heads for comfort.

When I heard about the plans for GCSE English Literature I was haunted by an image. Rows of ink splattered desks; me, a confused schoolboy, stabbing holes in a dog-eared copy of *Great Expectations*; Lloyd Bailey waving a rubber monster's hand every time the teacher turned to the blackboard. It was hard not to look back in frustration.

## **And yet...**

Sometimes when grappling with such literary heavyweights as Dickens, Priestley and Shakespeare, it's easy to see them as grand old men of literature, who have a wealth of intellect and tradition behind them which must be respected. It's easy to forget that in their day, they were innovative, often smashing down the walls of respected literary traditions. Dickens published serials in his own magazine, shining a light into the unrespectable corners of Victorian society. Shakespeare was a jobbing playwright who carved out plays which asked dangerous questions about politics and power. And Mary Shelley was a teenager who rebelled against just about everyone and everything. They might be part of the great traditional canon now, but in their day they were irritants, sniping at the establishment and all around them. They probed and asked the awkward questions, operating at the uncomfortably sharp end of new ideas and technology.

## **Maybe we should take our lead from them.**

Maybe now is an opportunity to take a fresh and innovative approach to the literary worthies. After all, the exam boards are keen to encourage the active and creative; they highlight the importance of approaching these texts through discussion, collaboration and exploration – the kind of approaches that have been so successfully developed in English classrooms over the last 30 years. Perhaps now is a good time to be bloody, bold and resolute; to approach literary tradition with a fresh and twinkling eye.



## BE HONEST - IT'S DIFFICULT!

I sometimes feel a little bit flummoxed when reading Dickens. Who doesn't? How many times have I read, and taught, and seen *Macbeth*? But do I understand it all? How many times have I been floored by a tricky question about Elizabethan language from a sharp Year 10? If we find it difficult, it's OK for a fifteen-year-old to get annoyed and confused. They shouldn't be beating themselves up because they 'don't get it'.

## A STORY CATCH-UP

Rather than thinking of that novel as a 300-page journey in the fog from beginning to end, it can be helpful to think of the work as a sculpture - stand back and have a look at the whole, before moving in to explore the detail. For example, start with a simple summary of the story or assign a chapter/scene to a mixed-ability group of four or so students and ask them to reduce it to a few lines to be presented to the rest of the class. Use examples first if it will help, like the one below from *Great Expectations*. A class presentation will provide a 'map' for sections of the text before reading in greater independent detail.



## USE TECHNOLOGY

Sometimes it's easy to forget that Shakespeare wrote for the stage and not the page. Don't be afraid (or feel guilty!) to access the wealth of adaptations and clips that are out there. Rather than watching the whole DVD, break the play down into a selection of highlights, or use trailers that give you summaries and key quotes like [this teaser for the 2015 Macbeth film](#). Viewing different clips from different adaptations gives a patchwork of interpretations and ideas to be discussed. Theatre companies are becoming more gripping with their promotional clips, too, as with [this RSC trailer for Macbeth](#). Who knows; it might inspire a classroom presentation. Who hasn't enjoyed a bunch of Year 11 lads performing the Witches in Act 1 Scene 3?



## DISCUSSION AND DEBATE ARE WHAT WE DO!

Literature enables us to explore the big questions. Questions are the base material of our subject. To these we each bring our own interpretations and ideas. Together we argue and inch towards some kind of understanding, as the social and cultural landscape wobbles beneath us. If literature is working, it should make us think about real people in the here and now. Dickens, Shakespeare and Shelley deal with modern themes which are relevant, controversial and edgy.



**Why did Romeo and Juliet die?**

**Who is most responsible for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet?**

**Is Pip right to leave his home in search of fortune and a better life?**

**Is *Frankenstein* a chilling warning of where science is taking us?**

**Does Abel Magwitch simply use Pip to re-live his wasted life?**



## DON'T SHY AWAY FROM CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

All writers read literature to find out how to do it. Why should our students be any different? Creative writing around the themes, characters and settings of a novel can really help us to emotionally engage and own the work. You could ask your students to work in pairs to describe the loneliest place they have been, to write their descriptions down and then compare their versions with the opening of *Great Expectations*.

## BRING THE WORKS OFF THE PAGE

We can explore the actions and motivations of characters through hot seat and character interview. We can adapt those three key pages of the novel into a piece of drama. We can stop the action, interview the characters and explore their inner feelings. We can prepare our cases, put characters on trial and pit our ideas against others.

Of course, we always need to be mindful and realistic. Our ideas need to be probed with academic rigour and justified with strong evidence, but in our pragmatism to prepare for the exam we should not pack up the moon and dismantle the sun. Discussion and debate, issues and politics, creativity and enthusiasm; these are the life-blood of English Literature and must remain centre stage.

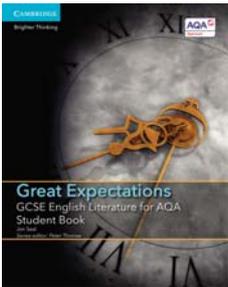
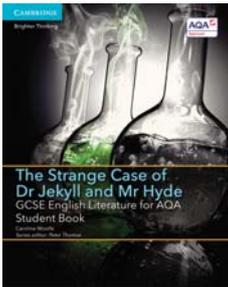
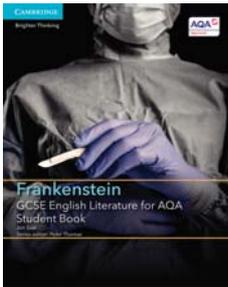
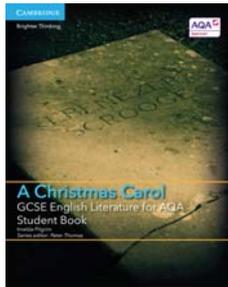
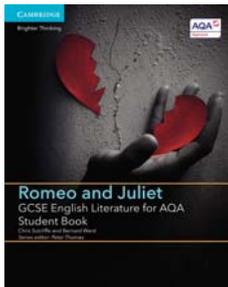
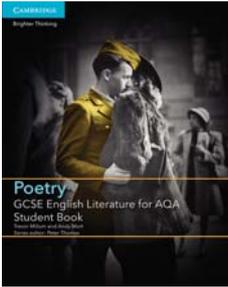
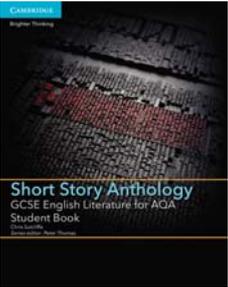
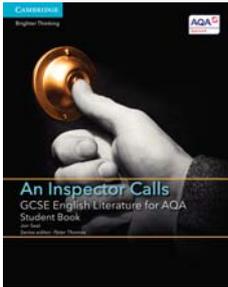
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