Academic Literacy

Educational research has demonstrated that curriculums that emphasize depth tend to prepare students more effectively than those that emphasize breadth. Within such a curriculum, for example, students read fewer novels in school but spend more time on each, thus improving their reading skills without overwhelming them with content. However, such an approach does have a major drawback: students who lack a broad foundation of important literature are put at a disadvantage in higher education when compared to students who have read extensively on their own or through a rigorous college preparatory program. Additionally, college professors may assume students possess a knowledge of many of the more important “canonical” texts.

Some educational and literary philosophers (e.g., E.D. Hirsch, Jr. and Harold Bloom) have listed numerous texts which they feel are important for students who want to achieve “cultural literacy” (c.f. Hirsch) or read the major works of literary history (c.f. Bloom). In the interest of providing additional literary opportunities to students who feel their background in literature is lacking, I have listed some important works that helped shape contemporary literary development. The list is by no means exhaustive; it is merely supposed to represent a jumping-off point for students who want to expand their literary horizons but do not know where to begin.

The texts below have been selected to provide a broad literary base for students. Some are important because they influence modern literary or political thought, others deal with critical themes that help us gain a better understanding of American culture, while still others provide a foundation for further reading or are the source of myriad allusions and references in all literary genres. I have tried also to include works from a variety of important authors. As with any list of this nature, most who peruse it will likely find that I have excluded a work or author they consider of great significance. This is inevitable and unavoidable. One of my primary considerations was that this list should be manageable for an academically-motivated high school student. (But let me know if you would like to recommend an addition to the list; I will certainly entertain your suggestion for future revisions.) A last word: I have not included poetry, epic poems notwithstanding. That list is for another day.

Must Read (50)

Austen, Jane Pride and Prejudice and Emma
Beowulf
Bradbury, Ray Fahrenheit 451
Bronte, Charlotte Jane Eyre
Bronte, Emily Wuthering Heights
Carroll, Lewis Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland
Chaucer, Geoffrey Canterbury Tales (General Prologue, Miller’s Tale, Pardoner’s Tale)
Conrad, Joseph The Heart of Darkness
Crane, Stephen The Red Badge of Courage
Dickens, Charles A Christmas Carol, Great Expectations, A Tale of Two Cities
Ellison, Ralph Invisible Man
Fitzgerald, F. Scott The Great Gatsby
Golding, William Lord of the Flies
Hawthorne, Nathaniel The Scarlet Letter
Heller, Joseph Catch-22
Hemingway, Ernest The Old Man and the Sea
Homer The Iliad and The Odyssey
Huxley, Aldous Brave New World
Joyce, James A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man
Kerouac, Jack On the Road
Lee, Harper To Kill a Mockingbird
Machiavelli, Niccolo The Prince
Mallory, Sir Thomas Le Morte d’Arthur
Milton, John Paradise Lost
Morison, Toni Beloved
Orwell, George 1984 and Animal Farm
Rand, Ayn Anthem
Salinger, J. D. The Catcher in the Rye
Shakespeare, William Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, Hamlet
Shelley, Mary Frankenstein
Sinclair, Upton The Jungle
Steinbeck, John Of Mice and Men
Stevenson, Robert Louis Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Treasure Island
Stoker, Bram Dracula

Stowe, Harriet Beecher Uncle Tom’s Cabin
Swift, Jonathan Gulliver’s Travels (Part 1: A Voyage to Lilliput)
Tolkien, J. R. R. The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings
Twain, Mark The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and The Adventures of Tom Sawyer
Weisel, Elie Night
Wright, Richard Native Son

Extra Credit (25)

Alighieri, Dante Divine Comedy (Inferno)
Burgess, Anthony A Clockwork Orange
de Cervantes, Miguel Don Quixote
Dostoevsky, Fyodor The Brothers Karamazov and Crime and Punishment
Eliot, George Middlemarch
Faulkner, William The Sound and the Fury
Flaubert, Gustave Madame Bovary
Hemingway, Ernest A Farewell to Arms
Hugo, Victor Les Miserables
Hurston, Zora Neale Their Eyes Were Watching God
Joyce, James Ulysses
Kesey, Ken One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest
Marquez, Gabriel Garcia One Hundred Years of Solitude
Melville, Herman Moby Dick
Nabokov, Vladimir Lolita
Pirsig, Robert Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance
Pope, Alexander Essay on Criticism and Essay on Man
Proust, Marcel Swann’s Way (Remembrance of Things Past)
Rand, Ayn Atlas Shrugged and The Fountainhead
Steinbeck, John The Grapes of Wrath
Wharton, Edith The Age of Innocence
Woolf, Virginia To the Lighthouse

M. Fabrizi