

Plot Summaries of Classic Novels for ENG 3U CCA

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***The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood**

Set in a future where nuclear accidents and pollution have rendered many of the female population sterile, this novel takes place in a male dominated world. Women who are fertile are forced to become 'handmaids' to men in political power for the purpose of procreation. The story focuses on a young married woman who was captured by the authorities and is now a handmaid renamed Offred. Desperate to learn word of her husband's fate and to find her daughter who was given to a high-ranking Gilead family, Offred is determined to conceive because she sees this as the only way to save her life. Thus, she agrees to clandestine meetings that her master proposes. When the mistress of the house, who is also desperate for a child but suspects her husband is sterile, suggests that Offred secretly meet with an employee of the house named Nick in order to conceive that way, Offred agrees. A relationship develops between the two, and when Offred's friend Ofglen is arrested because of her participation in underground activities, Nick, who is also a member of the resistance, arranges a mock arrest to ensure Offred's safety. Atwood's novel is a cautionary tale, reminding society that we must be on guard to ensure that oppressive practices from the past don't reassert themselves.

***Emma* by Jane Austen**

Even in the 1800s many young women preoccupied themselves with match-making and such is the case for Emma, the title heroine. Emma sets out to 'make-over' her friend Harriet. What Emma doesn't take into account is the difference in social standing between herself and her friend. Emma's attempts to match Harriet with the resident vicar backfire, but the heroine has the *grace* and self-knowledge to learn from her mistakes. Probably Austen's lightest novel.

***Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen**

Set in England in the early 1800s the novel is the story of matriarch Mrs. Bennett and her attempts to marry off her five daughters. The action of the novel takes place within the rigid social setting of the times where one's wealth and rank were paramount when it came to marriage. Our heroine Elizabeth Bennett, sets herself apart from her silly sisters by her intelligence and her belief that a person's value is determined by his/her merit, not money or status. After overcoming a series of hurdles, Darcy and Elizabeth are united, and pride is humbled while prejudice is dissolved.

***Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury**

Written in 1953, and set in a future where nuclear war seems imminent, the novel's protagonist is fireman Guy Montag. In this dystopic version of the future, the task of firemen is to burn books. Society has decided that rather than potentially offend someone, that books should be banned and those in possession of books are arrested. When Montag's neighbour Clarisse questions the reasoning behind book burnings, Montag begins to examine his role in such censorship. He befriends a man named Faber who explains the rich texture that books provide and a whole new world is opened for Montag. Montag's wife, who is fulfilled by hours of television, informs on her husband, and he flees just as the atomic war begins. On Faber's instructions, Montag escapes to the country side to join a band of teachers and writers living as tramps. Each member memorizes books in the hopes that the power of word will not be lost to future civilizations.

***Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte**

Our orphaned heroine suffers abuse at the hands of her aunts, then by the rule of a cruel headmaster. Jane eventually finishes her schooling in a more pleasant environment and then accepts a position as a governess. She befriends her employer, Mr. Rochester, and eventually falls in love with him. However, Jane soon discovers that Rochester has his own secrets to keep, the least of which is the identity of the mad woman imprisoned in the tower. Will true love overcome? Read this gothic romance and find out.

***Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte**

Considered THE classic gothic romance, Bronte's story of two love triangles makes current pulp fiction such as the *Twilight* series seem like children's books. The story of Heathcliff and Catherine's ill-fated love plays out on the atmospheric moors and extends into a second generation of characters who seemed to be ruled by destiny and tragedy. With a cast of would be victims and ruthless avengers, this novel is replete with melodrama. Watch for the bird imagery that Bronte weaves throughout.

***The Plague* by Albert Camus**

The Plague is set in 1940s Oran, Algeria, and as the title suggests it portrays a town in the grips of the bubonic plague. Told from the point of view of doctor Bernard Rieux, the book is considered to be Camus' best illustration of his concept of the "absurd" in terms of the human condition. Camus believed that when an individual comes to the understanding that his/her life is meaningless in a cosmic sense, that the individual then creates his/her own meaning. Humanity is heroic in spite of the realization that failure is inevitable. Camus believed that mankind shared a common bond and uses the plague as a metaphor for the human condition since it emphasizes both humanity's mortality and the common bond we all share.

***Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad**

Steamboat captain Narrator Marlow tells of his adventures down the Belgian Congo during the end of the nineteenth century. On the first leg of his journey, Marlow hears story of Kurtz, a man who has gone into uncharted territory with the intention of civilizing the natives. However, when Marlow eventually meets Kurtz he discovers that the man has given in to Man's most primal instincts and that the natives are now his slaves. Kurtz dies with the words "the horror, the horror!" on his lips and it is up to the reader to decide to what horror the man refers.

***The Rebel Angels* by Robertson Davies**

Davies' witty portrait of gypsies, love, murder and scholarship at a Canadian university is the second of his trilogies. Narrated by Maria Theotoky, a beautiful graduate student; and Simon Darcourt, an Anglican priest and professor at the university; the story is set in motion by the death of eccentric art patron and collector Francis Cornish. Hollier, McVarish and Darcourt are the executors of Cornish's complicated will, which includes material that Hollier wants for his studies. The deceased's nephew Arthur Cornish, stands to inherit the fortune. Into the fray wades John Parlabane, a renegade monk who teaches skeptic philosophy. He interferes in the lives of all the characters and is ultimately discovered to be a murderer. He is an instigator, but Maria credits him, as well as Hollier and Darcourt as her rebel angels, a reference to the angels who taught wisdom to Man after being thrown from Heaven.

***David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens**

Seen as somewhat autobiographical, *David Copperfield* is the story of a young man's journey of self discovery. After his mother's death, David escapes the tyrannical grasp of his step-father and ventures out into the world where he searches for his only relative who generously agrees to fund his education. Throughout his education and apprenticeship, David makes many friendships, good and bad, and comes to love and marry the frivolous Dora. As David matures, he gains experience and comes to a better understanding of human nature and more mature decisions, which in turn ultimately bring David happiness..

***The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostovesky**

Set in the mid nineteenth century, this is a tale of three brothers, who after the death of their mother are abandoned by their father. Each brother takes a different pathway but reunite once they reach adulthood. The novel portrays the conflicts between the brothers and their father and partly centres around a love triangle that emerges. The conclusion of the novel involves the trial of Dimitri for the murder of his father, but suspicion also falls on the illegitimate son and family servant, as well as Ivan. Dostovesky uses plot as a vehicle to explore themes such as the Oedipal Complex, as well as the themes of greed and vengeance.

***The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas**

Set in 19th century France during a time of political and social turbulence, Dumas tells the story of Edmond Dantes, who is betrayed by his friends on his wedding day and imprisoned for 14 years. After a daring escape, Dantes returns home as the mysterious Count of Monte Cristo. His main objective: revenge on those who tried to destroy him.

***As I Lay Dying* By William Faulkner**

The novel is narrated by 15 different characters over 59 chapters and begins with the death of Addie Bundren. Her dying wish is to be buried in her hometown and so the family begins a journey that because of the dangers and struggles they face along the way, takes nine days to complete.

***The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner**

Set in the early part of the 1920s the novel tells the story of the Compson family, former plantation owners who have fallen on financial troubles. Three members of the family narrate the story, each with their own chapter, while an omniscient narrator completes the story with a fourth chapter. Each son provides a different perspective on the Compson family history. Benjy, the mentally challenged son, is reflected in the title which refers the reader to lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

***The Wars* by Timothy Findley**

This novel is the story of Robert Ross, a sensitive nineteen-year old Canadian officer who served his country during World War I. Robert faces the horrors of trench warfare: mud, smoke, gas and chlorine and witnesses the deaths of his comrades. The psychological impact of these experiences causes Robert to perform a last desperate act that affirms his commitment to life. Although the central plot focus is World War I, as the title suggests the novel deals with more than one kind of war. The struggles of our Aboriginal Peoples to keep their lands, the wars between the sexes and between families, and the wars waged within the Self, are all portrayed.

***The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald**

Told from the perspective of narrator Nick Carraway, this novel is set in Long Island during the Jazz Age. Carraway is the poor neighbour of self-made man Jay Gatsby. Gatsby, whose source of money is debated by many, lives in a huge mansion and throws legendary parties. When Carraway and Gatsby become better acquainted, Gatsby discovers that his new friend can bring about a meeting between himself and his lost love, the beautiful Daisy Buchanan. Nick and the reader discover that a few years ago, Daisy had turned down Gatsby's marriage proposal because he wasn't of the same social standing. Gatsby's new-found wealth and Daisy's unhappiness changes things and the story soon centres around a love triangle between beautiful Daisy, her husband Tom Buchanan, and Gatsby. A tragic accident tests the loyalty of the main characters and brings about Nick's disillusionment.

***Tender is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald**

Set in the glitz and glamour of the United States between the wars, this psychological novel tells the story of tragic hero Dick Diver. The character flaw that is Diver's undoing is his introspective nature. After a brief affair and struggling with the needs of a mentally unstable wife, Dick feels that he is losing control. Fitzgerald's manipulation of time allows the reader to know the life outcomes of the main characters, but Dick must struggle to find his role in a world where he wants to be needed.

***This Side of Paradise* by F. Scott Fitzgerald**

The book that launched Fitzgerald's career tells the coming of age and sexual awakening of Amory Blaine. Partly autobiographical, the novel describes and celebrates the "Jazz Age" and has been credited with the invention of the American flapper.

***Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert**

The title character is a young peasant at the beginning of the novel. Educated in a convent during her early years, Emma has been instilled with a desire for experiences outside of the farm. She believes she has escaped when she marries Charles, a student of medicine. However, Emma soon realizes that she is not in love with Charles. Although she soon bears Charles a daughter, Emma soon engages in a series of affairs. Her lust for a life of luxury proves to be Emma's downfall, as she amasses debts and drags both her husband and her lover down with her.

***Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy**

Deemed scandalous when it was published in 1891, the novel is the story of Tess, who was violated by, and then rejected by, a titled man. When Tess finds herself with child, she returns home and eventually gives birth to an infant who dies. Tess later falls in love with a young man named Angel and they marry; however, when he learns of Tess's past, he rejects her and leaves the country. Despite the departure of Angel, the lives of Tess, her violator, and her husband continue to intertwine, with tragic consequences.

***The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne**

Hester Prynne, the heroine of this tale set during the time of the Puritans, is found guilty of adultery; the proof of this being an infant conceived and born to her while her husband was absent. The punishment of the times was imprisonment and the lifelong wearing of a scarlet A upon her breast. Hester refuses to reveal the identity of the father and when her husband returns from abroad he vows to discover the man's identity and seek retribution. The rest of the story chronicles Prynne's search, the growth of Hester's daughter Pearl, and the increasing guilt and self castigation of the upstanding member of the community who is Pearl's father.

***Catch 22* by Joseph Heller**

Set during WWII, the novel's plot centres around American bombardier John Yossarian. The brutality of war scares our protagonist since it causes him to come face to face with his mortality and Yossarian vows to try and escape the war. After his radio-gunner is shot in two and dies with his entrails sprayed all over Yossarian's uniform, the airman refuses to wear any clothes. The title refers to the ever increasing number of missions required to complete one's tour of combat. Because Heller believed that the reality of war was insane, he choice to ridicule it; the term 'metafiction' eventually came to be used for this type of story. The novel's black humour deals with death and injury. Most critics agree that *Catch 22* is one of the four or five most memorable novels to come out of WWII.

***A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway**

Set in Northern Italy and Switzerland during World War I, the story begins with Lieutenant Frederic Henry meeting nurse Catherine Barkley. He begins what he sees as a harmless flirtation with her, and then returns to the front. However, when Frederic is badly wounded by an Austrian projectile, he finds himself in the hospital under the care of Catherine. The two fall in love and their relationship intensifies during his convalescence from surgery. By the time Frederic must return to his ambulance job, Catherine is pregnant. Frederic experiences first hand the horror of war and the dangers of a mob mentality and this causes him to commit a "farewell to arms." He deserts the army, meets Catherine, who is on leave, and the two escape to Switzerland where they await the arrival of their baby. Unfortunately, like the backdrop of war, happiness gives way to tragedy and Frederic must cope with loss.

***For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway**

In 1937 Hemingway covered the Spanish civil war as a war correspondent . He was passionate in his belief that Fascism should be eradicated and this comes across in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The novel is the story of Robert Jordan, a young American who is attached to an antifascist guerilla unit in the mountains of Spain. His mission is to blow up a bridge, which will play a key role in an upcoming offensive. This is Robert's only focus until he meets the beautiful Maria who was starved, tortured and raped before escaping from the Fascists. Robert falls in love with her, but the violence of war interferes with their plans.

***The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway**

The story of Santiago, an old Cuban fisherman, and his friend, the young boy Manolin, *The Old Man and the Sea* tells the story of the old man's struggle to land a fish. Day after day, Santiago returns empty handed. It is only because of the kindness of Manolin, who feeds Santiago, that the old man survives. One night when a gigantic marlin takes Santiago's bait, the old fisherman begins his battle to bring home the fish. Themes developed are the testing of human endurance, as well as the search for dignity and meaning.

***The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway**

On the surface, the novel is a love story between Jake Barnes—a man whose war wound has made him impotent and the promiscuous divorcée Lady Brett Ashley. Barnes is an expatriate American journalist living in Paris, while Brett is a twice-divorced Englishwoman, who represents the new sexual freedom of the 1920s. The novel is divided up into several books, each one dealing with various friendships and events related to the running of the bulls, an event the friends have gathered to witness. Ultimately, the two former lovers are left to contemplate how their lives could have turned out differently.

***Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley**

Written in 1932, the book is set in a future where time is measured as AF (after Ford). Technology has brought about the laboratory creation of life. Eggs grow in specialized solutions that result in humans who are bred for specific parts of society or jobs. In fact, the Bokanovsky budding process allows for the creation of multiple humans that are exactly the same, thus making it possible for them to carry out identical tasks. In this brave new world, individuality is a thing of the past. People go on soma vacations, drug induced breaks from their day to day world. It is only in the Savage Reservation where primitive, savage life exists and this is only permitted because of its usefulness to scientific study. *Brave New World* is as relevant today as it was over eighty years ago because its vision of the future is just as frightening in its possibility as when Huxley wrote it.

***The Cider House Rules* by John Irving**

The novel begins with the story of Dr. Wilbur Larch, who provides women with safe abortions. For those women who are too far along and are unable to care for their babies, Larch runs an orphanage. An orphan named Homer Wells, becomes both the doctor's apprentice and his spiritual son. Wells struggles to find his place in the world. When teenagers Wally and Candy come to the orphanage seeking an abortion, Homer leaves with them to live with Wally's family, who owns an orchard. Homer falls in love with Candy, but it isn't until Wally is away during the war, that the pair act on their feelings. Candy becomes pregnant; the two hide her pregnancy and Homer takes Candy back to St. Cloud for the delivery. The two return home with an 'adopted baby', Angel, only to find that a paralyzed Wally has returned home. Out of loyalty, Candy marries Wally, and Homer and Angel form a family. It is not until Angel is in his teens, that Homer performs an abortion on a cider house employee who has been impregnated by her father, and decides to return to St. Clouds to replace the recently deceased Dr. Larch.

***A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving**

In the summer of 1953, during a Little League baseball game, Owen Meany hits a foul ball that kills the mother of his best friend, John. Owen believes that his God's instrument and this incident shapes the rest of his life and that of his friend. Key themes found in this novel include fate, spirituality and social justice.

***The World According to Garp* by John Irving**

This novel contains two plot elements typical of Irving: a dysfunctional family and a character who wrestles. Imperfection is a theme throughout the novel, whether it is a physical disability or an emotional challenge. The flaws of the main characters bring about tragedy, but Garp does learn from his experiences. He discovers that life, like wrestling, often leaves scars, both physical and internal. Unfortunately, Garp's insights still do not prevent his ultimate destruction.

***Finnegan's Wake* by Henry James**

In James' final novel, his two main character, Chimpden Earwicker and Anna Plurabelle, represent the two parts of the psyche. Earwicker must address the guilt he feels over a sexual indiscretion and he does so through the vehicle of a dream.

***Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James**

Set in the late 1870s *Portrait of a Lady* tells the story of Isabel Archer, a young woman, who, after the death of her father, sets out on an escorted tour of Europe. While in London, Isabel meets her cousin Ralph. He in turn falls in love with her, and quickly becomes one of several eligible suitors that Isabel rejects. While in Florence, Isabel is wooed by Gilbert Osmond and eventually accepts his proposal in spite of her friends' reservations.

***Ulysses* by James Joyce**

The novel's setting is Dublin, 1904. Although epic in scale, the action takes place over the course of one day and is a continuation of the story of Stephen Dedalus from *Portrait of the Artist*. The book is famous for its Homeric parallels. The incidents/scenes and characters correspond to the tale of the Odyssey. Leopold Bloom is Ulysses, while Molly Bloom is Penelope. The book's most significant style characteristic is stream of consciousness.

***One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey**

Set in a 1960s mental hospital, the novel is the story of new patient Patrick McMurphy who rallies his fellow inmates to challenge the authority of Nurse Ratchett. What starts out as a sporting competition becomes an all-out war. McMurphy's influence on the others brings about the rehabilitation of patient Chief Bromden. The Chief sees society as a giant combine that eats people up and spits them out. The hospital is the cuckoo's nest, or repair shop, which essentially further oppresses its inmates. While Bromden ultimately is able to escape, McMurphy ultimately pays for his defiance.

***The Diviners* by Margaret Laurence**

Set in the mythical prairie town of Manawaka in the 1970s, *The Diviners* introduces the reader to heroine Morag Gunn. Divided into five sections, the novel follows Morag's search for independence. *The Diviners* attracted a lot of controversy in the 1970s when several school boards removed the book from the curriculum because it was considered pornographic. Many defenders of the novel believe that conservative readers could not accept a female heroine who frequently used four letter words, celebrated her sexuality and stood up to her husband. Never mind that she chose to give birth to an illegitimate child!

***Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence**

Published in Italy in 1928, but not available in Lawrence's own country until 1960, this novel evoked much controversy because of its portrayal of sexuality. The book begins after World War I and follows Lady Connie Chatterley's life as she attempts to help the man she married come to terms with the paralysis he suffered while in the war. Connie attempts to help Sir Clifford pursue a career in writing, but she finds the estate and her role of baroness to be confining. Her husband's injury prevents them from sexual intimacy and this, combined with the restrictions her new title brings, cause Connie to pursue a short affair with a playwright, before meeting the groundskeeper Mellors. Connie is drawn to Mellors' rough self confidence and he awakens her sexuality. The two become closer and when Connie finds herself pregnant, she is challenged to choose between what society deems acceptable and what she wants. Sir Clifford's refusal to grant a divorce creates another obstacle and while the novel ends with the two characters apart, Mellors' letter to Connie promises that their love will ensure that they have a future together.

***Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence**

Lawrence's semi-autobiographical novel tells the story of artist Paul Morel, who is greatly influenced by the strong character of his mother. She influences the relationships he forges with women. He has a love affair with Miriam Leivers, but rejects her for the married Clara Dawes. Ultimately, however, Paul returns to his mother and when she dies he is left alone.

***Women in Love* by D. H. Lawrence**

Set in 1910, *Women in Love* is a sequel to Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. It tells the stories of sisters Gudrun and Ursula as they search for love and happiness against a backdrop of personal calamity and political turmoil. Artist Gudrun falls into a destructive relationship with colliery owner Gerald Crich, while teacher Ursula chooses school inspector Rupert Birkin.

***Barometer Rising* by Hugh MacLennan**

Set in Halifax during WWI, the novel depicts the series of events that climaxed in the Halifax explosion. The reader witnesses the story of Neil Macrae, who has returned from France to clear his name. Neil's uncle, Colonel Geoffrey Wain, ordered an ill-planned advance on the Germans and when it proved hugely unsuccessful, Wain tried to blame Neil, ordering his arrest and court-martial for cowardice. A bombing of the dugout where Neil was held prison caused authorities to believe him to be dead, but he was in fact rescued and assumed to be a private in the British North Country regiment. When Neil recovers his memory he returns to Canada, searching for Alex Mackenzie, the corporal whom he had sent back to headquarters with a message that would have cleared him of the charge of cowardice. An unknown complication to Neil's plans occurs when Penny, Wain's daughter and Neil's former lover, catches a glimpse of the man she thought was dead. Neil does not know that while he was in France, she gave birth to their daughter. When Penny tells Wain that she has seen his nephew, the Colonel sets out to destroy the man who threatens to expose him. At this stage the Halifax explosion intervenes.

***No Great Mischief* by Alistair MacLeod**

Emblem Editions back cover overview: "The main character Alexander MacDonald guides us through his family's mythic past as he recollects the heroic stories of his people: loggers, miners, drinkers, adventurers; men forever in exile, forever linked to their clan. There is the legendary patriarch who left the Scottish Highlands in 1779 and resettled in "the land of trees," where his descendants became a separate Nova Scotia clan. There is the team of brothers and cousins, expert miners in demand around the world for their dangerous skills. And there is Alexander his twin sister, who have left Cape Breton and prospered, yet are haunted by the past....*No Great Mischief* is a spell-binding story of family, loyalty, and the blood ties that bind us to the land from which our ancestors came."

***One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez**

Considered to be one of the most important Latin American novels of the twentieth century, *Solitude* tells the story of the rise and fall, birth and death of the mythical town of Macondo through the history of the Buendia family. Although not fantasy, the novel is not exactly grounded in reality. Ghosts are present, flowers fall from the sky, and a five-year rainstorm occurs. While there may be elements of the fantastic, the novel still deals with serious themes important to Latin America: political unrest, and exploitation from without. Marquez also presents universal themes such as the solitude of power, language, envy, death, blindness, etc.

***Atonement* by Ian McEwan**

When thirteen year old Briony's naivete causes her to misinterpret something she sees, this sets in motion a series of events that change the lives of several of the novel's main characters. Consequently, Briony spends much of the novel trying to atone for her sins. A large portion of the novel takes place during World War II and then jumps ahead fifty years so that the reader may hear the elderly voice of writer Briony.

***Moby Dick* by Herman Melville**

Ishmael, the narrator of the story, embarks on a sea adventure in order to escape his past. He decides to board the Pequod, a ship that is captained by Ahab. Lots of foreshadowing of bad things to come occurs in the days leading up to the ship's departure. Ishmael discovers that while he may have embarked on a journey of self discovery, Captain Ahab is obsessed with the hunting down of Moby Dick. Eventually Ahab's obsession tests the loyalty of his crew as they must fight for their very survival.

***A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry**

Set in 1970s Bombay (now Mumbai), *A Fine Balance* uses flashbacks to establish the early years of the characters. The novel tells the stories of four protagonists: Dina Shroff, the daughter of a Parsi physician; leather worker (and member of the lowly caste chamaar) Ishvar Darji and his nephew Omprakash Darji; and Maneck Kohlah, a young student and son of one of Dina's school friends. When the government declares a "State of International Emergency" these characters' lives come together and their fates become inextricably linked. The title refers to the delicate balance between laws and tolerated unlawfulness that is destroyed by the sweeping changes in the laws of the state that the "Emergency" brings in.

***Who Has Seen the Wind* by W.O. Mitchell**

Like Mark Twain's works, W. O. Mitchell's famous novel is a children's story for adults. Set in Saskatchewan during the Depression, *Who Has Seen the Wind* follows the childhood of young Brian O'Connell, from age four through eleven. With the prairie drought as a backdrop to the plot, young Brian must deal with both the deaths of special pets and close family members. The characters he comes in contact with each teach him something about the town he lives in and the larger world that exists beyond it. Along the way, both Brian and the reader discover that like the wind, there is an ever present force that determines the cycle of life and death.

***Jazz* by Toni Morrison**

Set in the mid 1920s in New York City, *Jazz* tells the story of both the migration of African Americans from the South to the North, and specifically portrays life in Harlem during the Jazz age. The novel is divided into ten sections and a narrator tells the story of Joe and Violet Trace and their families. In addition to music, one of the central themes is that of loss, whether it is lost love or loss of family due to the far-reaching impact of racism. As Plume Publishing remarks, “*Jazz* is a story of passion, jealousy, murder and redemption, of sex and spirituality, slavery and liberation, country and city.”

***Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison**

The first African American to earn the Nobel Prize, this is the story of Milkman Dead’s search for his identity. Superficially, the novel is concerned about Milkman’s search for lost gold, but the real point of the novel is his discovery of his past. Those around him have been influenced to adopt the white culture that surrounds them, but Milkman learns of the impact slavery had on his family ancestry. Eventually he learns what the children’s song “Solomon” means to his family.

***In the Skin of a Lion* by Michael Ondaatje**

The novel is narrated by the main character, Patrick Lewis, to a young girl as they drive from Toronto to a rural town in Ontario. Patrick grew up on a farm, but as a young man, went to Toronto to seek his fortune. Although a large part of the story involves Patrick and the jobs that eventually connect him to Clara and Alice, the key women in his life, the book also depicts the building of Toronto, from Patrick’s role to the immigrants who built its bridges and worked in its tanneries, to the politically powerful who brought their visions into being.

***Animal Farm* by George Orwell**

A satire on dictatorship, many of the animal characters in *Animal Farm* are believed to be figures from Russia’s history. Short and deceptively simple, the novel prompts the reader to consider the problem of combining power with ideals. How do the oppressed who manage to rise above their oppressors resist the temptation of becoming like their oppressors? In the novel, Napoleon and his henchman ultimately treat their fellow creatures worse than Farmer Jones did. The seven rules (or ideals) that the animals aspired to are ultimately replaced by, “All animals are equal but some are more equal than others.”

***Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell**

Written in 1949, *1984* served as a warning of where the post war world might be headed. The novel's anti-Utopian setting is still relevant today and is the source of such terms as "Big Brother," "Doublethink" and "Newspeak." The main character Winston, works for the Ministry of Truth, where history is re-written so that it matches the predictions of the current government. The world of *1984* is a world devoid of individuality and privacy, but full of propaganda and threat. When Winston is caught thinking and acting out against the Party he is seized by the Thought Police and tortured until he ready to affirm his love for Big Brother.

***The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand**

The novel's title refers to its main theme, that man's ego is the fountainhead of human progress. The story of architect Howard Roark, a man who is characterized by his integrity, the novel follows his battle against conventional standards, both in architecture and life itself. Along the way Roark falls in love with the beautiful Dominique, who although she shares an equal passion for him, chooses to marry his worst enemy. Rand initially used fiction to present her philosophical theories, namely objectivism. She would later publish three non-fiction works on her theories.

***The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* by Mordecai Richler**

Published in 1959, this novel was controversial due to its explicit language, controversial themes, and bawdy satirical voice. Growing up on St. Urbain St. in Montreal's Jewish Ghetto, Duddy Kravitz takes to heart his grandfather's adage that "a man without land is nobody." As a boy and then as an adolescent, Duddy develops the unscrupulous and inventive qualities that he then uses in his pursuit of property. Deemed to be one of the powerfully portrayed anti-heroes in Canadian fiction, if Duddy was a real man he would likely leave Donald Trump in the dust!

***Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger**

Salinger's most famous novel tells the story of Holden Caulfield, who we discover as the story unfolds, is in California in a psychiatric hospital. Holden recounts to the reader about the circumstances surrounding being expelled from school. Rather than face his parents, Holden heads to New York city where a series of encounters reveal his cynical view on life. He can't abide people who are phonies, but is willing to get into a fight if he sees someone's reputation or innocence questioned. During a secret visit home Holden's younger sister Phoebe becomes his confidant and it is to her that Holden shares his wish to become a catcher in the rye

***Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley**

Debating the ethics of medical advancements and experimentation isn't confined to the present day. In 1816 Shelley considered the moral issues surrounding the creation of life. When Dr. Frankenstein makes a living creature out of human parts taken mainly from the bodies of convicts he discovers that instead of creating a miracle he has made a monster. The consequences are far reaching and horrifying.

***The Stone Diaries* by Carol Shields**

Although part of this novel reads like a standard autobiography- the birth to death story of Daisy Goodwill, parts of the novel are presented in a third person narrative, revealing other characters' thoughts and perspectives on their lives and the life of Daisy. Shields was fascinated with personal narratives and revealed, "Daisy continues to revise herself...and that's an issue that autobiography raises: how much can we alter, revise, subtract? She's made up all these people's impression, so her real identity is a big question mark in her head."

***The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck**

The Grapes of Wrath is the story of the Joad family's journey from Oklahoma to California. Driven from their home by drought and poverty, they hope to find agricultural work in California, which is seen to be the land of plenty. Unfortunately, there are more migrants than there is work and the Joads find that the business owners see them and others as lower class threats. When the novel was published it was seen to be a portrayal of social injustice. Steinbeck had spent time working with the migrant workers and those hired to test whether the author's portrayal was accurate discovered that the situation was even worse than Steinbeck had depicted. The experiences of the Joads enable them to see that not only family bonds them together, but their connection to their fellow man.

***Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson**

To all who know him, Dr. Jekyll is a genteel, upstanding citizen. He keeps secret the strange rites and practices he commits behind closed doors. The doctor has long believed that there exists two personalities in everyone-both good and evil-and eventually he concocts a formula that facilitates his physical transformation from the good (Jekyll) to the evil (Hyde). The novel depicts the struggle that ensues when good is separated from evil and the consequences of Jekyll's experiment.

***Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift**

Ship's surgeon Lemuel Gulliver, is shipwrecked on Lilliput, an island inhabited by creatures only six inches high. This is only the beginning of his adventures. He also visits a land inhabited by giants, an island in the sky, and a place where horses have the ability to talk. On the surface, the book reads like a children's story, but the underlying story is a satirical attack on humanity and its foibles.

***Vanity Fair* by William Makepeace Thackeray**

This is the tale of two women from different stations in life who meet and attend school together. Becky is the selfish orphan who is befriended by the sweet, naive, well-off Amelia. After graduation, the two set out to marry. While Amelia is concerned about true love, Becky wants to improve her station and is rather ruthless in this pursuit. The story winds itself through war, death, and tragedy. Becky is ultimately punished for her infidelity while the widowed Amelia finds love again.

***Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy**

The marriage of Alexey and title character Anna is a loveless marriage. When Anna meets dashing officer Alexey Vronsky, she with little hesitation abandons her husband and son for the sake of passion. Her decision leads to chaos and ruin. Her husband suggests they divorce but she refuses to accept what she perceives to be an act of generosity. Her lover's offer to take her away is also rejected as Anna continues her descent into self destruction. Her final act of self-destruction-death under the wheels of an oncoming train, in her mind is vengeance against her lover.

***Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain**

Considered to be the father of the American novel, Twain tells the story of Huck, who after finding robber's gold with his friend Tom, settles down to live with the Widow Douglas. Life is good for a time, despite the constraints of no smoking or swearing, but Huck's abusive father soon returns hoping to claim the money that now belongs to his son. Huck is abducted by his father, but escapes. After meeting up with escaped slave Jim, Huck disguises himself as a girl and visits town where he learns that the villagers believe that he was murdered by Jim. Knowing that there is a price on Jim's head, Huck returns to his new friend and the two set off on an adventure on the Mississippi where they meet friends, foes, and where family members eventually resurface.

***The Underpainter* by Jane Urquhart**

The Underpainter is the story of Austin Fraser, an American painter now in his later years, who looks back on his life with regret as he realizes what his detachment has done to his art, his friends and himself. He recalls the lives of those who deeply touched his own, including a young Canadian soldier and china painter and the beautiful model who becomes Austin's mistress. The story covers decades and the setting moves from France in World I, to New York City in the '20s and '30s through to the '70s. As one reads it becomes apparent that in order to understand the characters, one must remove the layers of underpainting to reveal their true realities.

***Bluebeard* by Kurt Vonnegut**

The narrator of the novel is Rabo Karabekian, an elderly American artist is frustrated by the criticism that his representational painting lacks "soul". He must also contend with the criticism that his abstract works are meaningless. On top of that, Karbekian learns that a new paint he has been using disintegrates after a few months, thus threatening the preservation of all his expressionist painting. With this plot twist Vonnegut satirizes the modern world's blind faith in technology. After surviving several tragic events in his life, including the suicide of a fellow artists and the death of his wife, Karabekian decides to draw on a powerful memory from his past, the view of the valley where he and other WWI POWs were released. Representing various nationalities and cultures, and various states of mental and physical health, the painting is cathartic for both the artist and those who view the painting. Its success reunifies Karabekian's life and art and conveys the message "no more war."

***Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut**

Cat's Cradle is a satirical commentary on modern man and his madness. An apocalyptic tale, the protagonist is a midget and the novel features a original theology created by a calypso singer and a vision of the future described using black humour.

***The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker**

The story of Celia, *The Colour Purple* tells of her rape by the man she assumes to be her father. When Celia's mother dies, her stepmother arranges her marriage to a local farmer who proceeds to abuse her and force her into a life that is essentially one of slavery. Celia submissively accepts this role in life, but finds comfort in the belief that her sister Nettie, whom she has helped escape from sexual abuse, is living the life that she (Celia) would like to live. When Celia is forced to care for her husband's mistress, an unlikely friendship develops and Celia learns self-respect and gains the strength to speak up for herself.

***The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells**

Set in late nineteenth century London, and told by an anonymous narrator well educated in the sciences, the plot revolves around a Martian attack on Earth. The Martians arrive in cylinders and once opened a grotesque, revolting creature emerges. Earth sends a contingent to speak with the Martians as indications suggest they are intelligent, but the Earth representatives are wiped out by a heat ray. The Martians continue to arrive in more cylinders and systematically attack the country-side, killing everyone in their path. A small but mighty enemy ultimately brings about the Martians' destruction, but the narrator, who has narrowly survived, must live with the fear that mankind has only been granted a temporary reprieve. Wells' subsequent novels would also question man's place in the universe and the powers that science was unleashing.

***Clara Callan* by Richard B. Wright**

Set in Canada during the Depression, this novel tells the tale of two sisters: Nora, the adventurous sister who leaves to pursue a dream of show business in New York, and school teacher Clara, whose strong independent nature is frustrated by the traditional views of her hometown. Although Clara envies her sister, she soon learns that life in Radio City isn't everything that Nora thought it would be. Meanwhile the news Clara shares in her letters does not reflect the dark things that are happening to her: loss of religion, being raped by a vagrant, her subsequent abortion, and later her affair with a married man. Both sisters discover the joys of life, as well as its darker side, along with the bond of sisterhood.

***The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde**

What if a person were able to live a life of greed, evil and lust, but physically remain unchanged? Such is the wish of Dorian Grey and it is mysteriously granted. When the young narcissistic Dorian is presented with a portrait of himself he wishes that he could remain as young and handsome as he is in the painting. It is not until Dorian commits an act of cruelty that he realizes that although he remains young in appearance, the painting reflects his dissolution. As the years pass, Dorian continues to look about twenty; however, the portrait paints every evil deed of its sitter until eventually the marks of murder mar the canvas.

***Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf**

Mrs. Dalloway follows the title character on a typical day, as she plans a party, shops, meets old friends, and makes her grand entrance at the party, all the while rethinking her life, her choices, her problems with identity, her sense of self, and the conflicting demands of love. The book is a stream of consciousness narrative and focuses on Woolf's belief that human emotions connect all people.

***To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf**

Said to be Woolf's most autobiographical book, this novel uses a stream of consciousness narrative to examine the ideas of perception and creativity. The male characters attempt to create order by quantifying and analyzing. In contrast, the women attempt to nurture and unify those around them. Because the narration is stream of consciousness, following the story is a challenge at times as narration moves from character to character, as well as through the past to the present. In the end, it is the artists Mr. Carmichael and Lily Briscoe, who bring the male and female perspectives together.