



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

School
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English.



Contemporary Literature Challenge

Contemporary Literature Challenge: Transformations

Literature is responsive to the world around us. Fiction, poetry and plays don't merely 'reflect' reality but are instrumental in framing our understanding of events, peoples and places. In times of transformation – rapid change or crisis, the arrival of new social movements, revolutionary technologies – literature articulates and interprets their impact. Writing across genres and media engages with what is happening and generates new forms of understanding; literature itself is transformative.

The challenge

This challenge is in two parts; Part 1 asks you to engage with a text that deals with a 'transformative' event, movement or phenomenon while Part 2 gives you the option of writing your own critical or creative piece on the theme of 'transformation'.

Part 1

The examples below are poems or short stories that relate to specific social or political 'transformations'. Choose one and respond to it critically in a format of your choice. You could use a word cloud, spider diagram or mind map, or you could write a one paragraph response.

Questions you could consider:

- How does the text engage the reader in thinking about the topic? Is it polemical? satirical? metaphorical? magical?
- What choices does the writer make in relation to language, style and structure? How do these features contribute to the effect the text achieves?
- How does the text create a narrative voice or perspective?
- Who is the intended audience? Is there anyone you would recommend this text to?
- Are there other books, plays, films, songs or TV shows that you've come across that cover similar themes?

1. 'Cat Person' by Kristen Roupenian

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person>

Written a few months before the #MeToo movement took off, this story went viral in 2017. It focuses on the power imbalance between older men and younger women and the dynamics of coercion in dating.

2. 'The Thing Around Your Neck' by Chimamanda Adichie
<https://icpla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Adichie-CN-The-Thing-Around-Your-Neck.pdf>

This story narrates the experiences of a young Nigerian woman's migration to the US. Published in 2009, it deals with migration and racism at a time when there was a lot of political wrangling about immigration as well as optimism about 'post-racial' societies as Barack Obama came into office.

3. 'Black' by Dave (track from his 2019 album Psychodrama)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDUPSNdmFew>

This might seem to stretch the definition of 'literature' but rap has a lot in common with poetry and you can analyse the song's lyrics as you would a piece of writing. It deals with race in contemporary Britain via a global perspective that connects to the Black Lives Matter movement. If you choose this one also think about the video.

4. 'Black Box' by Jennifer Egan

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/06/04/black-box-2>

This story is an example of 'twitterature', first published in 2012 as series of tweets. It offers us a chance to think about how narratives work in/through social media as well as raising questions of posthuman identities and gender relations.

5. 'The Tamarisk Hunter' by Paolo Bacigalupi

<https://www.hcn.org/issues/325/tamarisk-hunter-Bacigalupi>

This story is an example of 'cli-fi', fiction that addresses climate change. It imagines a future US short of water.

6. 'People's Faces' by Kate Tempest

<https://thepreludepress.com/news/2019/10/10/kate-tempest-shares-video-for-peoples-faces-streatham-version>

This song/spoken word/animated piece from Tempest's album *The Book of Traps and Lessons* (2019) deals with divisive politics in contemporary Britain (Brexit anyone?). If you choose this one think about the animations in relation to the lyrics.

Part 2

Either (1) write up ideas from Part 1 as a more formal essay (max. 500 words),

Or write a piece of flash fiction (max. 500 words) or a poem (max. 20 lines) on the theme of 'transformation'. You don't need to relate your piece to a specific event unless you'd like to. Try to use some of the techniques that you noted in your analysis in Part 1 and aim to create a powerful narrative voice.

Advice on writing flash fiction (there's plenty more out there):

<https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2012/may/15/flash-fiction-tips-david-gaffney>

<http://flashfictiononline.com/main/2015/04/thirteen-tips-for-writing-flash-fiction/>

If you'd like to submit your piece for Part 2 to our 'Challenges' competition, see 'The School of English Y11 /Y12 Prize': 'how to enter'.