

English 11

Free Read Writing Options

For your second book report, I would like 11th graders to read one of the many authors that help inform and contribute to the literary canon of early 20th century American literature, which is where we will begin our reading and study next fall. I have made several suggestions below, though this is really only scratching the surface.

Please read one of the following novels and then create a written response based on the suggestions that follow. Each of these works has important thematic connections to material you will be covering in both US History II and English 11.

Students are welcome to choose other books from these authors or other essential American authors of the early 20th century, though any alternatives should please be approved by me first. Please feel free to email over the summer (alehmann@gosms.org)

PLEASE SEE WRITING ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FREE READ CHOICES AT THE END OF THIS DOCUMENT.

(Choose one)

The Awakening – Kate Chopin (1899)

From Amazon: “When first published in 1899, *The Awakening* shocked readers with its honest treatment of female marital infidelity. Audiences accustomed to the pieties of late Victorian romantic fiction were taken aback by Chopin's daring portrayal of a woman trapped in a stifling marriage, who seeks and finds passionate physical love outside the straitened confines of her domestic situation. Aside from its unusually frank treatment of a then-controversial subject, the novel is widely admired today for its literary qualities. Edmund Wilson characterized it as a work “quite uninhibited and beautifully written, which anticipates D. H. Lawrence in its treatment of infidelity.” Although the theme of marital infidelity no longer shocks, few novels have plumbed the psychology of a woman involved in an illicit relationship with the perception, artistry, and honesty that Kate Chopin brought to *The Awakening*.”

The House of Mirth – Edith Wharton (1905)

From Amazon: “Pulitzer Prize-winning American author Edith Wharton used her inside knowledge of upper class New York life in the early part of the 20th century as the basis for her 1905 novel, “*The House of Mirth*”. The novel is the classic and tragic portrayal of Lily Bart, an intelligent New York socialite during the Victorian era, who seeks to secure a husband and a place in the society life of New York’s upper class. Lily, who was raised to strive for a socially and economically prosperous marital union, finds herself at the edge of thirty, her youthful beauty fading and her matrimonial prospects dwindling. The novel follows Lily’s descent down the social ladder over a period of two years as she circles the margins of New York’s upper class drawing closer to what seems an inevitable

loneliness. Central to the theme of the novel is how the Victorian era offered women relatively few other alternatives to achieve upward social and economic mobility than through marriage. A classic depiction of a bygone era, “The House of Mirth” is at once a detailed portrait of New York society life and a social satire which harshly criticizes the moral failings of the rich.”

The Jungle – Upton Sinclair (1906)

From Amazon: “An ardent activist, champion of political reform, novelist, and progressive journalist, Upton Sinclair is perhaps best known today for *The Jungle* — his devastating exposé of the meat-packing industry. A protest novel he privately published in 1906, the book was a shocking revelation of intolerable labor practices and unsanitary working conditions in the Chicago stockyards. It quickly became a bestseller, arousing public sentiment and resulting in such federal legislation as the Pure Food and Drug Act. The brutally grim story of a Slavic family who emigrates to America, *The Jungle* tells of their rapid and inexorable descent into numbing poverty, moral degradation, and social and economic despair. Vulnerable and isolated, the family of Jurgis Rudkus struggles — unsuccessfully — to survive in an urban jungle. A powerful view of turn-of-the-century poverty, graft, and corruption, this fiercely realistic American classic is still required reading in many history and literature classes. It will continue to haunt readers long after they've finished the last page.”

My Antonia – Willa Cather (1918)

From Amazon: “*My Antonia* evokes the Nebraska prairie life of Willa Cather's childhood, and commemorates the spirit and courage of immigrant pioneers in America. One of Cather's earliest novels, written in 1918, it is the story of Antonia Shimerda, who arrives on the Nebraska frontier as part of a family of Bohemian emigrants. Her story is told through the eyes of Jim Burden, a neighbor who will befriend Antonia, teach her English, and follow the remarkable story of her life. Working in the fields of waving grass and tall corn that dot the Great Plains, Antonia forges the durable spirit that will carry her through the challenges she faces when she moves to the city. But only when she returns to the prairie does she recover her strength and regain a sense of purpose in life. In the quiet, probing depth of Willa Cather's art, Antonia's story becomes a mobbing elegy to those whose persistence and strength helped build the American frontier.”

Winesburg, Ohio – Sherwood Anderson (1919)

From Amazon: “In this moving collection of interrelated stories, Ohio-born Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) illuminates the loneliness and frustration — spiritual, emotional and artistic — of life in a small American town. Winesburg, Ohio subtly portrays as well a young writer's coming of age, searching for love, yearning for a less stifling world. Through the eyes of young George Willard, the inner lives of many of Winesburg's inhabitants open to us. Before George leaves the community, we have learned much about his mother Elizabeth, his friend Helen White, his teacher Kate Swift and other Winesburg residents — the lonely, sensitive Dr. Reefy, the tormented Rev. Charles Hartman and the enigmatic Wing Biddlebaum among them. Through Anderson's art, their stories are woven into a powerful portrayal of community life, and, ironically, of the

isolation its close atmosphere can engender. A great success on its first publication in 1919, Winesburg, Ohio profoundly influenced a generation of fiction writers with its deeply moving poetic realism. It endures as a classic portrait of American life.”

The Wasteland – TS Elliot (1922)

From Amazon: “Famous for juxtaposing Eastern cultures with Western literary references, *The Waste Land* has been celebrated for its eloquence, depth of meaning and numerous subtleties. Rich with allusions to religious texts of Hinduism and Buddhism, ancient literature, and Eliot's own life, the poem is admired to this day and is a common text in school and university English literature courses.

Painstakingly composed, the original drafts of *The Waste Land* were far longer than the final edition which is composed of five distinct parts. Truncation occurred on the advice of Eliot's contemporary and friend Ezra Pound. A famous line - "*And we shall play a game of chess/The ivory men make company between us / Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door*" - was removed at the request of Eliot's wife Vivienne, it is thought for being too revealing about their married life.

Quickly ascending to the status of literary classic, *The Waste Land* is widely considered by literary scholars to be Eliot's finest poem, representing a maturity in his style and a confidence in both expression and in research.”

The Sun Also Rises - Ernest Hemingway (1926)

From Amazon: “The quintessential novel of the Lost Generation, *The Sun Also Rises* is one of Ernest Hemingway's masterpieces and a classic example of his spare but powerful writing style. A poignant look at the disillusionment and angst of the post-World War I generation, the novel introduces two of Hemingway's most unforgettable characters: Jake Barnes and Lady Brett Ashley. The story follows the flamboyant Brett and the hapless Jake as they journey from the wild nightlife of 1920s Paris to the brutal bullfighting rings of Spain with a motley group of expatriates. It is an age of moral bankruptcy, spiritual dissolution, unrealized love, and vanishing illusions. First published in 1926, *The Sun Also Rises* helped to establish Hemingway as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century.”

The Grapes of Wrath - John Steinbeck (1939)

From Amazon: First published in 1939, Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning epic of the Great Depression chronicles the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s and tells the story of one Oklahoma farm family, the Joads—driven from their homestead and forced to travel west to the promised land of California. Out of their trials and their repeated collisions against the hard realities of an America divided into Haves and Have-Nots evolves a drama that is intensely human yet majestic in its scale and moral vision, elemental yet plainspoken, tragic but ultimately stirring in its human dignity. A portrait of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, of one man's fierce reaction to injustice, and of one woman's stoical strength, the novel captures the horrors of the Great Depression and probes into the very nature of equality and justice in America. At once a naturalistic epic,

captivity narrative, road novel, and transcendental gospel, Steinbeck's powerful landmark novel is perhaps the most American of American Classics.

For Whom the Bell Tolls – Ernest Hemingway (1940)

From Amazon: "In 1937 Ernest Hemingway traveled to Spain to cover the civil war there for the North American Newspaper Alliance. Three years later he completed the greatest novel to emerge from "the good fight," *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

The story of Robert Jordan, a young American in the International Brigades attached to an antifascist guerilla unit in the mountains of Spain, it tells of loyalty and courage, love and defeat, and the tragic death of an ideal. In his portrayal of Jordan's love for the beautiful Maria and his superb account of El Sordo's last stand, in his brilliant travesty of La Pasionaria and his unwillingness to believe in blind faith, Hemingway surpasses his achievement in *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* to create a work at once rare and beautiful, strong and brutal, compassionate, moving, and wise. "If the function of a writer is to reveal reality," Maxwell Perkins wrote Hemingway after reading the manuscript, "no one ever so completely performed it." Greater in power, broader in scope, and more intensely emotional than any of the author's previous works, it stands as one of the best war novels of all time."

Assignment Options:

1. Briefly describe the plot line of the book (what happens!). For non-fiction works, you may find it appropriate to substitute a discussion of the central subject matter rather than a discussion of plot. Please include mention of setting, key characters, conflicts, and resolutions.
2. Would you recommend this book to another reader? Why or why not?
3. Write an essay based on ONE of the following questions or prompts, though you may certainly include elements from more than one option to inform your writing. Responses should be at least three paragraphs in length and can explore any number of issues that involve a direct discussion of the work.
 - a) Provide a character study of one of the characters in the book. Some elements you *might* consider include: 1) physical characteristics; 2) actions in which the character engages that lend insight and understanding to his or her attributes; 3) the nature of his or her interaction with other characters and what we learn from these interactions. When providing specific information about a character, please try to support your observations with short, carefully chosen quotes.
 - b) Is the author trying to convey a message in his or her book? If so, what might the message be, and how does he or she choose to communicate it?

c) Most drama involves conflict. Some examples include conflict between characters within the novel, conflict between characters and their environments, and characters in conflict with themselves. What is the central conflict of this story and how is it resolved?

d) Write a letter to a character in the novel or to the author. What would you like to know or what would you say to this person? Why? Be sure to reflect your understanding of details from the work in constructing your correspondence.

e) Write a book review of the work. What aspects of the book did you like or dislike? What types of readers might enjoy the work? Support your observations with personal insight and reference to specific details from the book.