**A Level Literature Summer Project: Experiencing a University Lecture**

In 2015 Professor Emma Smith from Hertford College, Oxford University, recorded her undergraduate lecture series on Shakespeare plays. These are all available via Apple Podcasts: [https://itunes.apple.com/gb/itunes-u/id399194760](https://itunes.apple.com/gb/itunes-u/id399194760%20) and via Oxford University ([https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/people/emma-smith)](https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/people/emma-smith)%20)

This is how she describes the approach she takes in the lectures:

*Each lecture in this series focuses on a single play by Shakespeare, and employs a range of different approaches to try to understand a central critical question about it. Rather than providing overarching readings or interpretations, the series aims to show the variety of different ways we might understand Shakespeare, the kinds of evidence that might be used to strengthen our critical analysis, and, above all, the enjoyable and unavoidable fact that Shakespeare's plays tend to generate our questions rather than answer them.*

Different approaches, a variety of different ways, thinking around a central critical question, enjoyable, more questions than answers – these lectures are the perfect way to experience what it means to be a student of literature (as well, of course, as discovering more about some Shakespeare plays).

The lectures were written and delivered for undergraduates at Oxford University, so you should **expect to find them a bit of a challenge**. But it’s the sort of challenge which someone interested in Literature should find very satisfying, even exciting. And Emma Smith explores her ideas with real clarity and delivers the lecture with humour. So give them a go – don’t worry about understanding everything, especially the first time you listen.

Use the instructions below to help you:

1. Choose the play you studied for GCSE or a play you are already very familiar with. Look at the mini-description of the lecture and make a note of your own ideas and questions about this idea:

* Macbeth: This lecture explores ideas of agency – who or what makes happen the things that happen in Macbeth?
* Twelfth Night: This lecture takes a minor character in Twelfth Night - Antonio - and uses his presence to open up questions of sexuality, desire and the nature of romantic comedy.
* Romeo and Juliet: This lecture tackles the issue of the spoiler-chorus, in an already-too-familiar play.
* The Tempest: This lecture asks if it’s useful to think about the character of Prospero as a self-portrait of Shakespeare.
* The Merchant of Venice: This lecture discusses the ways the play's personal relationships are shaped by models of financial transaction, using the casket scenes as a central example.
* Henry V: This this lecture asks whether the presentation of King Henry V in the play is entirely positive
* Julius Caesar: This lecture focuses on the scene with Cinna the Poet to discuss structure, tone, and politics.
* Much Ado About Nothing: This lecture asks why the characters are so quick to believe the self-proclaimed villain Don John, thinking about male bonding and the genre of comedy

1. Listen to the lecture in the background, as you are doing something else, just to get used to the approach and style.
2. Listen to the lecture without worrying about taking notes. Afterwards see if you can jot down two or three ideas that interested you.
3. Listen again and see if you can add to your notes
4. During the course of your study, you will explore Shakespeare’s ‘Othello’. Try and watch a version of the play, if you can. **You might find it helpful to read a synopsis of each act so you’re confident with the plot as you watch.**
5. Listen to Emma Smith’s lecture on Othello – you will study this play in Year 12.
6. Draft an email to Emma Smith in which you explore your response to one of her ideas. This can be typed or handwritten and should be brought with you to the first lesson.

Extension Activity

1. Draft and/or record your own short lecture (aim for 10 minutes) on your Shakespeare play. Follow Emma Smith’s model and focus your lecture on a specific idea or question. This can be typed or recorded and can be emailed to your new teacher after your first lesson.