

Curated Postgraduate-Level Reading List (Personal Curriculum)

Below is a curated list of fiction works (in **italic**) chosen for their depth, insight, and enduring beauty. Each entry notes its significance and mentions academic contexts (e.g. university syllabi or reading lists) where the work is studied, reflecting inspiration from top institutions like Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, the Sorbonne, and leading Italian/Indian universities. The selections balance tragedy and redemption, span multiple cultures, and include well-regarded translations where applicable.

Pre-Modern Classics: Epic, Mythic, and Dramatic

1. ***The Odyssey*** by **Homer** (8th cent. BC) – An ancient Greek epic poem following Odysseus's arduous journey home from war, exploring themes of fate, resilience, and humanity's relationship with the divine. *The Odyssey* is foundational in the Western canon and is studied in world literature courses (e.g. Harvard's **Masterpieces of World Literature** syllabus ¹ ²). Its vivid portrayal of heroism and adversity continues to offer deep moral and symbolic insights.
2. ***The Mahabharata*** (attrib. to Vyasa, c. 4th cent. BC) – One of the two great Sanskrit epics of ancient India, encompassing a vast narrative of a dynastic war interwoven with mythology, philosophy (including the *Bhagavad Gita*), and ethical dilemmas. Renowned as a "rich and intricate literary masterpiece" ³ , selections from *The Mahabharata* appear in world literature curricula (e.g. University of Chicago's "Readings in World Literature" course ²). Its status as a cornerstone of Indian literature makes it *de rigueur* in Indian university programs, and well-regarded English translations (such as John D. Smith's) are used in academia ⁴ . Through its tragic war story and spiritual discourse, the epic probes the human condition and the pursuit of dharma (moral order).
3. ***The Divine Comedy*** by **Dante Alighieri** (1320) – An Italian epic poem in which Dante travels through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, guided by Virgil and Beatrice. This allegorical journey is a monumental synthesis of medieval Christian theology, classical literature, and personal vision. Dante's *Commedia* is revered as a pillar of European literature – it is required reading in Italian literature departments (for example, Dante's *Inferno* features on the University of Bologna's literature syllabus ⁵) and is frequently studied at institutions like the Sorbonne for its rich symbolism and influence. Dante's imaginative portrayal of sin and redemption has made the *Divine Comedy* an enduring source of moral and spiritual insight in the scholarly world ⁵ . (Readers are advised to use a respected translation, such as those by Allen Mandelbaum or Robert Durling, to fully appreciate the poem's nuances.)
4. ***King Lear*** by **William Shakespeare** (1606) – A pinnacle of tragic drama by England's foremost playwright, depicting an aging king's descent into madness after he unwisely divides his kingdom. *King Lear* offers profound commentary on power, loyalty, human suffering, and compassion. Shakespeare's works are central to English literature curricula worldwide; for instance, Shakespeare's tragedies (including *King Lear*) are a focus of study at Cambridge and Harvard ⁶ . The play's blend

of cosmic tragedy and moments of redemption (in Lear's reconciling with Cordelia) provides fertile ground for academic discussion on the human condition. Shakespeare's influence and the play's moral weight ensure *King Lear* a lasting place on advanced reading lists ⁷.

5. ***The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu** (c.1008) – Often called the world's first novel, this Japanese classic chronicles the life and loves of Prince Genji in the imperial court, blending romance, psychological insight, and poetic beauty. *Genji* is celebrated for its elegant exploration of aesthetics and impermanence in Heian-era Japan. It appears on syllabi for world and comparative literature (Harvard's global literature course includes *The Tale of Genji* ⁸), and it is studied in East Asian literature programs as a masterwork of narrative art. Arthur Waley's and Royall Tyler's translations are commonly recommended in academia. Reading *Genji* offers a contemplative, non-Western perspective on human passions and the passage of time, aligning well with a personal curriculum seeking depth and cultural breadth. ⁸

19th-Century Classics of the Novel (Social and Moral Insight)

1. ***Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens** (1861) – A classic Victorian bildungsroman following the orphan Pip's growth and moral development amidst themes of social class, ambition, and personal integrity. Dickens' novel is both sharply critical of societal inequalities and hopeful in its portrayal of personal redemption. It is a staple of English literature studies (featured on Oxford's English curriculum reading list ⁹) and valued for its memorable characters and blend of tragedy and comic relief. Universities like Oxford often include *Great Expectations* as representative of 19th-century English realism ¹⁰. Pip's ultimate humility and grace make the novel emotionally resonant and morally substantial for the advanced reader.
2. ***Jude the Obscure* by Thomas Hardy** (1895) – Hardy's final novel, offering a poignant critique of rigid social structures and the constraints of class and marriage in Victorian England. It follows Jude Fawley, an idealistic working-class man, through personal tragedies as his dreams of education collapse under societal pressures. Notorious for its stark portrayal of suffering, *Jude* is nevertheless suffused with Hardy's poetic vision of fate and hope. The novel appears on Oxford's recommended reading (e.g. listed in the Victorian core reading for English ¹¹) for its literary merit and social commentary. Hardy's exploration of despair and the yearning for meaning ensures this work's enduring presence in serious literary study ¹¹. (Hardy's prose is dense and tragic, but the emotional depth offers profound insight into the human condition and the possibility of sympathy amidst hardship.)
3. ***Middlemarch* by George Eliot** (1872) – Often acclaimed as one of the greatest English novels, Eliot's *Middlemarch* paints a panoramic portrait of life in a provincial town, delving into the inner lives of characters like the idealistic Dorothea Brooke and the ambitious Dr. Lydgate. It addresses themes of social reform, marriage, duty, and self-delusion with psychological realism and empathy. This novel's intellectual and emotional breadth have made it a fixture of academic syllabi; for example, it is part of Oxford's core reading list for 19th-century literature ¹². Scholars value *Middlemarch* for its narrative complexity and ethical reflections – qualities that reward the contemplative reader. Eliot's balanced treatment of tragedy and hope (Dorothea's moral growth amid personal disappointments) exemplifies the "depth, insight, and beauty" sought in a personal curriculum ¹².

4. ***Madame Bovary*** by **Gustave Flaubert** (1856) – A French realist masterpiece about a provincial doctor's wife, Emma Bovary, whose romantic illusions lead to debt and despair. Flaubert's groundbreaking narrative technique (free indirect discourse) and exacting prose style make this novel a cornerstone of modern literature. *Madame Bovary* appears frequently in university literature programs – it's listed among the essential French novels on comparative literature reading lists (e.g. Princeton's list of historically important fiction ¹³). At the Sorbonne and other top institutions, Flaubert's work is studied for its artistry and insight into the human penchant for self-deception. Emma's tragic fate offers a cautionary yet compassionate look at the gulf between fantasy and reality, aligning with the curriculum's focus on emotionally substantial works ¹³. (When reading in translation, the highly regarded version by Lydia Davis is often recommended by scholars for its precision.)

5. ***Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*** by **Mary Shelley** (1818) – A pioneering science fiction and Gothic novel in which a young scientist, Victor Frankenstein, creates a sentient creature in a quest to conquer death, only to meet horror and remorse. Shelley's work is rich in philosophical questions about creation, responsibility, and the consequences of ambition. It is widely taught in literature courses as an early exploration of science and ethics (featured on canonical reading lists like Princeton's Comparative Literature selection ¹⁴). The novel's enduring academic presence (e.g. in Romantic literature and ethics seminars) attests to its profound impact ¹⁴. *Frankenstein* balances tragedy (the creature's loneliness and vengeance) with a moral plea for empathy, making it a deeply reflective read that bridges classic literature and speculative fiction.

6. ***Crime and Punishment*** by **Fyodor Dostoevsky** (1866) – (Alternate Dostoevsky selection: *The Brothers Karamazov* can be substituted as another profound work by this author.) This Russian classic delves into the psychology of crime, guilt, and redemption through the story of Raskolnikov, an impoverished ex-student in St. Petersburg who commits murder under a nihilistic theory. Dostoevsky's novel is a staple of world literature studies—his works are frequently included in great books curricula (for instance, his *Brothers Karamazov* is cited among the epic novels studied at the University of Washington ¹⁵). In top programs at institutions like Harvard and Oxford, Dostoevsky is read for his exploration of moral philosophy and human conscience. *Crime and Punishment* in particular offers intense psychological insight and a redemptive arc through suffering and compassion, exemplifying the morally substantial literature sought in this list ¹⁶.

7. ***Wuthering Heights*** by **Emily Brontë** (1847) – (Optional addition) A classic of English literature known for its passionate intensity and Gothic atmosphere. The novel's tragic tale of Heathcliff and Catherine's all-consuming love and vengefulness against the moors of Yorkshire explores themes of nature versus culture and the destructive potential of obsessive passion. *Wuthering Heights* is commonly found on university reading lists (e.g. Cambridge's English syllabus and many "great novels" compilations) as a seminal work of 19th-century fiction. While emotionally tumultuous and darker in tone, Brontë's novel provides a counterpoint of raw romantic tragedy to the more socially grounded works above, and it is often studied for its innovative narrative structure and symbolism. (This entry is optional, recommended for readers drawn to poetic intensity; it appears, for instance, on Princeton's Comparative Literature list of fiction ¹⁷.)

(Entries 11–12 above represent 19th-century Russian and English classics, respectively. Depending on the reader's interest, one might choose Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) ¹⁵ – a sweeping exploration of faith,

doubt, and familial conflict – in place of or in addition to *Crime and Punishment*, and include Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* for its mythic emotional power.)

Historical and War Fiction (Tragedy and Resilience)

1. ***War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy** (1869) – An expansive Russian novel set during the Napoleonic Wars, interweaving the lives of aristocratic families with philosophical meditations on history and free will. Hailed as “the greatest book in world literature” by many scholars ¹⁸, *War and Peace* is a tour de force of historical fiction and human psychology. It is studied in both literature and history departments (e.g. dedicated Tolstoy courses at Penn and UCL, and comparative literature programs ¹⁵) for its realist detail and profound insight into war’s impact on society. Top universities (from Harvard to the prominent Russian literature programs at Cambridge) frequently include Tolstoy on their reading lists. The novel’s blend of wartime tragedy and personal redemption – exemplified by characters like Pierre Bezukhov, who finds spiritual illumination amidst chaos – offers the deeply contemplative experience fitting for a postgraduate personal curriculum ¹⁹. (Readers often use the acclaimed Maude or Pevear & Volokhonsky translations in academic settings.)
2. ***All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque** (1929) – A German novel presenting the grim reality of World War I through the eyes of a young soldier, Paul Bäumer. Renowned for its unflinching portrayal of the futility and human cost of war, this work is internationally taught as a classic anti-war novel. It appears on literature and history syllabi dealing with war (for example, Harvard’s war literature/film course and other curricula on 20th-century war experience include *All Quiet* ²⁰ ²¹). The novel’s straightforward, harrowing narrative gives voice to a “lost generation” and is emotionally powerful. Its presence on academic reading lists underscores its literary merit and its sobering exploration of camaraderie, trauma, and the loss of innocence – themes that resonate deeply in moral and human terms ²¹.
3. ***The Betrothed (I Promessi Sposi)* by Alessandro Manzoni** (1847, rev. ed.) – A seminal Italian historical novel set in 17th-century Lombardy during Spanish rule, featuring the story of two humble lovers, Renzo and Lucia, who are separated by war, famine, plague, and the machinations of a cruel baron. Manzoni’s narrative combines romance, social commentary, and spiritual themes (e.g. questions of divine justice and personal faith). This novel is often required reading in Italian literature programs (it’s integral to Italian high school and university syllabi – the University of Bologna’s reading list explicitly includes *I Promessi Sposi* ²²). Academics praise it as the first great Italian novel for its nation-building significance and realistic depiction of historical events. The triumph of goodness and the eventual reunion of the protagonists provide a measure of hope and moral clarity, balancing the tragedies they endure. Including *The Betrothed* adds a non-Anglophone European perspective to the curriculum, as well as an exemplar of enduring love and resilience in literature ²³. (A recommended English translation is by Bruce Penman or the newer one by Michael F. Moore, both respected for accuracy.)
4. ***Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* by Herman Melville** (1851) – An American epic of the sea that follows Captain Ahab’s obsessive quest to kill the great white whale. Part adventure narrative, part philosophical meditation, *Moby-Dick* is rich with symbolism and inquiries into fate, nature, and humanity’s place in the cosmos. Though once underappreciated, it is now firmly established in the literary canon and studied in top English literature departments (featured on many university Great Books lists; for instance, Princeton’s comp lit selection includes *Moby-Dick* ²⁴). The novel’s

encyclopedic scope and Ahab's tragic monomania offer a complex portrait of ambition and hubris. Melville's work also fulfills the "naval" aspect of the user's interest: it immerses the reader in the lore of whaling and the metaphysics of the ocean. Modern critics and courses often emphasize the novel's profound moral and spiritual symbolism (Ishmael's survival as a kind of redemption), making it a challenging but rewarding component of a contemplative reading program ²⁴ .

20th Century and Modern World Literature (Exploring the Human Condition Globally)

1. ***To the Lighthouse*** by **Virginia Woolf** (1927) – A landmark modernist novel that examines the inner lives of its characters as they visit the Ramsay family's summer home in the Hebrides, framed by the quest to reach a distant lighthouse. Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique delves into memory, perception, and the passage of time, capturing fleeting moments of consciousness with lyrical beauty. This novel appears on many university English syllabi (Oxford's reading list includes *To the Lighthouse* as a core text for the study of modern fiction ²⁵). Woolf's emphasis on the "**radiance of the everyday**" and the search for meaning amidst life's transience offers readers a meditative, deeply human experience. In academic contexts, Woolf is studied for her innovative narrative form and feminist perspective, and *To the Lighthouse* in particular is valued for its balance of elegiac sadness and creative vision of hope (the completion of Lily's painting as a quiet redemption) ²⁵ .
2. ***Till We Have Faces*** by **C. S. Lewis** (1956) – A modern reimagining of the Cupid and Psyche myth, told from the perspective of Psyche's sister Orual, a princess in a barbarian kingdom. Lewis – better known for *The Chronicles of Narnia* – considered this his finest novel. In *Till We Have Faces*, he wed classical myth with psychological realism and spiritual inquiry, exploring themes of love, jealousy, faith, and the soul's yearning for truth. This novel's literary quality and depth have garnered academic attention; for example, it has been taught in modern literature courses (see University of Southern California's reading list, which includes *Till We Have Faces* alongside modernist and fantasy works ²⁶). The book's allegorical richness and poetic prose stand the test of time, inviting the kind of reflective, personal reading the user seeks. Lewis's work here is emblematic of "modern authors likely to stand the test of time," bridging myth and modernity in a way that provokes deep reflection ²⁶ .
3. ***Ficciones*** by **Jorge Luis Borges** (1944) – An influential collection of short stories by the Argentine master, blending the real and the metaphysical. Borges' stories (such as "The Library of Babel" and "The Garden of Forking Paths") are intellectual labyrinths filled with mirrors, infinite libraries, and imagined books – metaphors for fiction and human understanding. Though a short-story collection, *Ficciones* has a monumental status in world literature and is often included in comparative literature courses (Harvard's *Masterpieces of World Lit.* course devotes a unit to Borges ²⁷). Reading Borges provides a cosmopolitan, mind-expanding experience: his works prompt philosophical contemplation about time, identity, and reality. Academically, Borges is celebrated for expanding the boundaries of fiction; his mixture of melancholy and wonder complements the reading list's aim to balance tragedy with intellectual beauty. (Note: *Borges' Spanish is highly elegant; the translations by Andrew Hurley or Anthony Kerrigan are commonly used in English-speaking courses.*) ²⁷
4. ***One Hundred Years of Solitude*** by **Gabriel García Márquez** (1967) – A towering work of magical realism that chronicles seven generations of the Buendía family in the fictional town of Macondo,

reflecting the tumultuous history of Latin America. Márquez's novel is praised for its imaginative power, emotional truth, and blending of the mythical with the historical. It has become a fixture on university reading lists around the world (included, for instance, in Princeton's Comparative Literature selection as *Cien años de soledad* ²⁸ and frequently taught in courses on world literature and postcolonial studies). The novel's cyclical narrative of love, war, tragedy, and hope exemplifies the "depth, insight, and beauty" that define enduring literature. Its final note of redemption and tragedy (Macondo's fate tied to a prophecy) offers profound commentary on human striving and memory. Márquez's masterwork will provide the reader with a richly layered, culturally expansive experience ²⁸. (For English readers, the translation by Gregory Rabassa is considered definitive and is itself celebrated in academic circles for capturing the novel's lyricism.)

5. ***Beloved* by Toni Morrison** (1987) – Nobel-laureate Toni Morrison's magnum opus, set after the American Civil War and inspired by the true story of an enslaved mother who chose to kill her child rather than see her enslaved. *Beloved* confronts the haunting legacy of slavery through lush, lyrical prose and elements of magical realism – the ghostly figure "Beloved" embodies trauma that refuses to be forgotten. Morrison's novel is studied in countless university courses (it appears on core reading lists, such as Princeton's Comp Lit selection ²⁹, and is central in American literature and African-American studies syllabi) for its narrative innovation and powerful moral themes. At Harvard and other top institutions, *Beloved* is read for its profound exploration of memory, community, and redemption – ultimately, it is a story of facing the past and finding a measure of healing. Including *Beloved* in this personal curriculum brings in a high-quality modern work that is both emotionally harrowing and ultimately affirming of the human capacity to transcend tragedy ²⁹.

6. ***Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe** (1958) – A cornerstone of African literature, this novel depicts the impact of British colonialism and Christian missionaries on a traditional Igbo community in Nigeria, through the tragic story of Okonkwo, a proud village leader. Achebe's straightforward yet poignant prose and his use of proverbs and folktales give the novel an epic quality, while offering a counternarrative to Eurocentric colonial literature. *Things Fall Apart* is widely taught across the globe – it's listed among the must-read fiction in comparative literature programs (e.g. Princeton recommends Achebe's novels on its reading list ³⁰) and is a staple in postcolonial literature courses at universities like Harvard and Delhi University alike. Academically, it is valued for initiating a rich conversation about cultural collision and identity. For the personal reader, Achebe's novel provides a profound, non-Western perspective on heroism and catastrophe, fulfilling the brief's emphasis on non-Western works and offering both tragic depth and a glimpse of hope in the resilience of culture ³⁰.

7. ***Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie** (1981) – An iconic postcolonial novel that marries the personal and the political, following Saleem Sinai – born at the exact moment of India's independence – who finds himself telepathically linked with a thousand other "midnight's children" born in that hour, each with magical abilities. Blending myth, history, and satire, Rushdie uses magic realism to comment on India's post-Independence trajectory. *Midnight's Children* is frequently included in top university curricula (it appears as a choice on Princeton's comp lit list ³¹ and is central in many English literature and South Asian studies courses worldwide) for its narrative ingenuity and cultural insight. The novel's exuberant style and its intertwining of individual fate with national history create a rich tapestry that has been recognized with the Booker Prize and academic acclaim. For a personal curriculum, this novel contributes a vibrant mix of tragedy (the costs of

partition and political turmoil) and hope (the idea of a pluralistic, resilient India), aligning with the theme of moral and emotional substance ³¹ .

8. **Norwegian Wood** by **Haruki Murakami** (1987) – A modern classic of Japanese literature, this coming-of-age novel is set in 1960s Tokyo and follows Toru Watanabe as he navigates love, loss, and mental health in the turbulence of youth. Written in a spare, melancholic style, *Norwegian Wood* deals with universal themes of nostalgia and the transition to adulthood, making it one of Murakami's most accessible yet profound works. Murakami is regarded as a significant contemporary author likely to stand the test of time – his works are increasingly studied in world literature courses (for example, Murakami's fiction, including *Norwegian Wood*, is noted on Princeton's Comparative Literature reading list ²⁹ as representative of modern Japanese narrative). Including Murakami adds an East Asian modern voice to the curriculum. The novel's blend of lyrical beauty and emotional pain (tragedy in the loss of loved ones, tempered by the protagonist's tentative steps toward healing) resonates with the curriculum's aim to find insight and humanity across cultures ²⁹ .

Each of these works is **grounded in respected academic contexts** – they appear on syllabi or reading lists of the world's top universities, ensuring their credibility and stature. This selection provides a broad tapestry of human experience: from ancient epics to modern magical realism, from the **depths of tragedy to glimmers of redemption**. Reading through this list in a personal, self-guided manner will cultivate a deep appreciation for enduring literary art and its capacity to illuminate the human condition.

Sources: The academic inclusion of these works is evidenced by university reading lists and syllabi, for example: Oxford's English literature recommended reading ⁹ ¹¹ , Harvard's world literature and Shakespeare courses ³² ⁷ , Princeton's Comparative Literature selection list ¹³ ³⁰ , the University of Bologna's Italian literature syllabus ³³ ⁵ , and other scholarly references as cited above. Each citation corresponds to the relevant curriculum or scholarly source that affirms the work's place in higher education study. Enjoy your journey through these masterpieces – a voyage through literary worlds that have shaped global intellectual heritage and will speak to the heart and mind in equal measure. ⁹ ²

¹ ⁸ ²⁷ ³² Masterpieces of World Literature | Harvard University

<https://pll.harvard.edu/course/masterpieces-of-world-literature>

² ⁴ Microsoft Word - Kulez - RWL Syllabus (Autumn 2020)[1].docx

<https://college.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/humanities-core-courses/RWL%20AUT20.pdf>

³ The Mahabharata Certificate - Hindu University of America

<https://www.hua.edu/programs/the-mahabharata-certificate>

⁵ ²² ²³ ³³ 2018/2019 LETTERATURA ITALIANA (A-D) — Università di Bologna

<https://www.unibo.it/it/studiare/insegnamenti-competenze-trasversali-moocs/insegnamenti/insegnamento/2018/393318>

⁶ ⁷ harvard.simplesyllabus.com

<https://harvard.simplesyllabus.com/api2/doc-pdf/nzfchohnq/Spring-Term-2025-Full-Term-ENGL-E-126-1-Shakespeare%27s-Tragedies.pdf?locale=en-US>

⁹ ¹⁰ ¹¹ ¹² ²⁵ Microsoft Word - 2020 Fresher Reading List

https://www.new.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/2022%20Fresher%20Reading%20List%20-%20English_0.pdf

13 14 17 24 28 29 30 31 **Reading Selection List | Comparative Literature**

<https://complit.princeton.edu/undergraduate-program/current-majors/reading-selection-list>

15 16 19 **RUSS 340 A Autumn 2021 | Slavic Languages & Literatures | University of Washington**

<https://slavic.washington.edu/courses/2021/autumn/russ/340/a>

18 **[PDF] 1 HIST1260/REES1380/COML1262, Spring 2024 Tolstoy's War and ...**

<https://coursesintouch.apps.upenn.edu/cpr/jsp/fast.do?webService=syll&t=202510&c=HIST1260401>

20 **World War I through Film and Literature - Simple Syllabus**

<https://harvard.simplesyllabus.com/en-US/syllabus/Fall%20Term%202023%20-%20Full%20Term/HIST/E-1889/1>

21 **amos.moravian.edu**

<https://amos.moravian.edu/syllabiproject/pdfs/201430/engl104b.pdf>

26 **web-app.usc.edu**

<https://web-app.usc.edu/soc/syllabus/20233/32741.pdf>