

## 10th Grade Advanced English Letter Home

May 2009

Dear Parents and Students,

The focus of the sophomore advanced English program is the study of the humanities (classical literature that is the foundation for our own Western culture) and classic American literature. The goal of the summer reading program is to allow an opportunity for our students to read significant literary works at a leisurely pace. The selections for this year are Homer's *Odyssey*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and a non-fiction choice of Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, E.B. White's *Essays*, or Henry Miller's *Stand Still like the Hummingbird*.

Because of the allusions to ancient Greek and Roman classics which pervade our literature today, we believe that coming to class next fall with a knowledge of Odysseus and his ten year voyage from Troy to his home and family in Greece will prepare our students for the year's course of study. Odysseus' adventures are filled with excitement, heroism, pathos, and some rather strange creatures. As you read, note the plot structure Homer uses as well as the characterization (personality traits) of the main characters, especially our hero. The translation we have selected by Robert Fitzgerald is highly regarded by critics. This epic parallels those of other cultures we will be reading during the first semester; it also ties into another extensive unit, Greek mythology.

Second semester we bring the epic journey to America. *The Great Gatsby* is a fine chronicle of the early twentieth century. It is the study of Jay Gatsby, a self-made man seeking the American dream, who is on a quest to reunite with his lost love. As you read, look for the recurring issues of money, friendship, carelessness, and dishonesty as they tie into the theme of moral corruption. Pay attention, too, to his symbols (the automobile, the billboard, and others) as well as Fitzgerald's use of color imagery. Note the role of the storyteller, Nick. How does this narrative method affect how the events of the story are revealed? Also, as you read, pay attention to the personalities of the main characters: Nick, Jay, Daisy, Tom, Myrtle, and George.

Next you can choose one of three collections of non-fiction essays. First published in 1968, Joan Didion's *Slouching towards Bethlehem*, was immediately acclaimed as an extraordinarily accurate picture of life in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury which serves to successfully capture the mood of the whole country in the 1960's. According to *The New York Times Book Review*, in "her portraits of people, Didion is not out to expose but to understand.... [She] shows us actors and millionaires, doomed brides and naive acid-trippers, left wing ideologues and snobs of the Hawaiian aristocracy in a way that makes them neither villainous nor glamorous, but alive and botched and often mournfully." Another option is *Essays of E.B. White*, a commentary on America by the author of *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*. Mr. White writes with "skill and sanity. He happens to know a great deal about a lot of things--about birds and boats and literature, and, best of all, about how silly it would be to worry about the strictures against anthropomorphism and the pathetic fallacy that children's-book librarians and French new-wave novelists tried to impress upon us in the 60's" (*NY Times*). The final option is Henry Miller's *Stand Still like the Hummingbird* which may serve as an appropriate introduction to the author of one of our more innovative twentieth century novels, *Tropic of Cancer*. He, too, chronicles the second half of the century, focusing on personal ("First Love"), public ("Money and How It Gets That Way"), and literary ("Walt Whitman" and "Henry David Thoreau") issues. Check out excerpts and reviews of these three online, choose the style that fits you best, and enjoy the ride through our American culture.

Come to class the **first day of school** ready to share your response to **all three** books: two [reductions](#) and one [double-entry journal](#). First, "reduce" the two required readings to their basic

fictional elements. Consider major parts of the plot (conflicts, climax, resolution, denouement), characterization (not just a list of names but also adjectives to describe their personalities), setting, symbols, other stylistic devices, themes, and important quotes found in the work. Use a blank piece of 8½ X 11 paper and fill it! The emphasis with a reduction is on visual representation; keep verbal expression to a minimum, using complete sentences only for pertinent quotes which can reflect the theme or character's personality, for example. Then your understanding of the third book, a collection of essays, will be reflected with a double-entry journal. As you read, choose important quotes (a minimum of ten) and write them on the left side of the page. On the right side write your interpretation of the significance of this passage; explain, basically, why you chose it. Be sure to choose quotes from the entire book and indicate page numbers. (Your current teacher will show you examples of both of these types of reflection; there are also samples on the LHS webpage.)

Buying your own books means being able to highlight important passages as you read during the summer and as you prepare for discussions and presentations later in the year. Also, we recommend students purchase Hamilton's *Mythology* as a reference book to add to their personal libraries, although school copies will be available for fall use. Students are expected also to buy *Writers Inc.*, a grammar and style book, to be used during the rest of high school and, most likely, into college. In September you will be able to order these and other books we will use during the year.

Be sure to keep and refer to this letter as a study guide. Read and highlight, note, or question as you go; perhaps you can even keep a response journal to jot a few reactions in after a day's reading. A book for each month of summer sounds like a reasonable goal.

For further information, go to <http://lakewoodcityschools.org/>. Go to the Lakewood High School main page and look for the link for summer reading.

Sincerely,

**Sophomore English teachers**