

Exploring Aspects of Humanism in GCSE English Literature Texts

This resource has been designed to support teachers to employ a humanist lens to better develop students' understanding of GCSE English Literature texts. The aim is to enable students to recognise humanist themes, ideas, motivations, and values, and their relevance across time periods, cultures, and genres. Recognising these key humanist ideas and perspectives can illuminate our study of a range of texts through a deeper understanding of the characters, events, and meanings contained within.

Why humanism?

One might develop a better understanding of a text by exploring the religious beliefs of the characters, or religious themes and ideas in the language or narrative. Equal value and understanding can be gained by exploring the attitudes, motivations, and themes contained in a text through a non-religious, humanist lens. One does not need to be a humanist for this approach to be beneficial. It simply offers a way of considering a text which can offer new insights. Nor should it dictate one's response to the text, rather it simply provides an alternative or additional perspective to deepen understanding.

What is humanism?

Throughout recorded history there have been non-religious people who have believed that this life is the only life we have, that the universe is a natural phenomenon with no supernatural side, and that we can live ethical, meaningful, and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. They have trusted to the scientific method when trying to understand how the universe works, made their ethical decisions based on a concern for the welfare of human beings and other sentient animals, and sought to make a positive contribution towards building a better society.

Today, people who share these beliefs and values are called humanists, and this combination of attitudes is called humanism.

Content

Each selected GCSE exam text has a selection of thematic links to humanism, supported by evidence, along with notes regarding characterisation and structure, authorial context (if relevant) and key classroom discussion questions to support pupils' active analysis of the text. We expect that teachers will use these resources alongside exploration of other perspectives and interpretations, with classroom discussion being led by the thematic focus of the tables.

Also provided is a detailed list of humanist beliefs, a list of suggested, broader questions connected to humanism that can be applied to the study of any text, and a contents page of the texts and their links to humanist themes.

Humanist beliefs that might be expressed by the author or characters, or lie behind themes and narratives in texts

Understanding the world

- 1) The world is a natural place with no supernatural side
- 2) The absence of any persuasive reason or evidence to believe in a god (humanists are atheist or agnostic)
- 3) Science and the search for evidence provide the best way to understand the world around us
- 4) Science should be applied ethically with consideration for the wellbeing of human beings and other sentient life

Human beings and human nature

- 1) Human beings are a product of nature, not anything beyond it
- 2) Our instincts and behaviours evolved naturally and human nature has both positive and negative features – the humanist aim being to promote our positive capacities
- 3) If we put our positive capacities to good use, we have the potential to lead good, happy, and meaningful lives, and can support others to do the same

How we ought to live: freedom and happiness

- 1) This is the one life we have - there is no afterlife - and so we should make the most of life in the here and now
- 2) While there is no afterlife, something of us can survive our deaths - e.g. our atoms, our genes, our ideas, our works, our contributions - our impact can live on
- 3) Happiness needs to be found in the here and now, not in another life after this one
- 4) We should all have the freedom to live as we choose so long as we are not causing harm to others - there is no one single right way to live
- 5) While the universe has no ultimate meaning, we can find ways to make our own lives meaningful on a human scale
- 6) The value of connections in providing happiness and meaning in our lives (connections with other people, with the ongoing human story, and with the natural world)
- 7) The pleasure, joy, awe, and wonder that comes through human creativity and imagination and the experience of the natural world
- 8) A non-religious life is no less wonderful

Humanist ethics

- 1) The origins of morality lie inside us, through our evolution as a social animal - it's about living well together - we are not always good (we also evolved other instincts), but we can be, and many of us are
- 2) Morality is not about fulfilling the wishes of some superhuman agent, but is about supporting the wellbeing and flourishing of sentient life (it's about our responsibilities to each other rather than to a god)
- 3) Morality is not just about following rules but is about considering the consequences of our actions
- 4) Our understanding of our shared human needs and our capacity for empathy and reason provide us with the means of addressing moral questions

Action and society

- 1) The responsibility for building a better world falls on human beings alone - help isn't going to come from elsewhere
- 2) Wrongs won't be righted in another life, we need to work for wellbeing and justice in the here and now
- 3) We ought to recognise our shared humanity rather than focusing on how we differ
- 4) Humanism is about more than belief - it is about action
- 5) We should work for a world in which everyone has the rights, freedoms, and opportunities to live a full and flourishing life in the here and now
- 6) Everyone deserves equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities, regardless of gender, race, religion or belief, age, sexuality, or disability
- 7) Secularism provides the best way of organising a pluralistic society - including support for freedom of religion or belief
- 8) As part of nature we have a responsibility to take care of it
- 9) We can be optimistic - while a perfect world might be impossible, human beings have made progress and have the capacity to build a better world
- 10) We can celebrate the work that human beings have done to build a better world, but we need to acknowledge the work that is still to be done

More information about humanism can be found on understandinghumanism.org.uk.

Generic questions that could be applied to any text to explore humanist themes and ideas

General

- 1) Could any of the characters be described as displaying humanist values? How might their humanism motivate their actions?
- 2) Does a character's humanism help or hinder them? Do their beliefs lead to joy or suffering? Are they caged or liberated by their beliefs? How much is this a consequence of the conditions, community, or society in which they find themselves?
- 3) How might a humanist interpret the resolution of the novel?
- 4) How did the writer live their own life? Did their beliefs, values, and actions align with humanist beliefs? Is their humanism expressed in their work?

Understanding the world

- 1) How is nature and the natural world presented? Are supernatural forces at play?
- 2) Is science presented as a key theme in the text? Does the representation of science link to humanist ideas about morality?
- 3) Do characters in the text take an evidence-based approach to life?
- 4) Are natural explanations sought for events in the text?
- 5) Do the resources of the human and natural world (rather than anything beyond) provide everything the characters need to lead a happy and meaningful life? If not, could human beings offer solutions to their problems?

Human beings and human nature

- 1) Does the author present a range of positive and negative aspects of humanity through their characterisation? Could that link to the way humanists describe ideas relating to our social evolution?
- 2) Do any characters demonstrate an overcoming of their more negative natural instincts and embrace their more positive natural capacities?
- 3) Is an optimistic or pessimistic account of human nature presented?

How we ought to live: freedom and happiness

- 1) How is death presented by the writer? Does this align with humanist views regarding death as final? If so, does this impact characters' behaviour?
- 2) How does the writer present ideas surrounding enjoying our life in the here and now? Could this link to humanist views that we have one life, and the motivation to make the most of it?
- 3) How does the writer explore living with the consequences of our actions? Do characters face consequences in this world rather than in an afterlife?
- 4) How are ideas about legacy presented in the text? Does the writer's presentation of these ideas link to the ways in which humanists view creating our own legacy through the impact of our actions in life?
- 5) Does the writer present their characters as having individual agency? How important is this?
- 6) How far does the author present the characters as having freedom to decide what they believe, how they live, who they love, etc.?
- 7) Are the characters presented as seeking meaning on a cosmic or human scale?
- 8) How is connection (to each other or to the natural world) presented as a key theme in the text?
- 9) In the text, to what extent are pleasure, joy, awe, and wonder shown to be found in human creativity and imagination, and the experience of the natural world?

Humanist ethics

- 1) How are characters shown to approach and tackle their moral choices? Do they employ empathy, reason, and an understanding of our shared human needs?
- 2) How far is a humanist perspective on our shared humanity presented in the text?
- 3) Does morality in the text connect to human or divine needs?
- 4) How are the characters shown to respond to rules or traditions? Are these shown to benefit or stifle them?
- 5) To what extent are characters shown to consider the consequences of their actions?

Action and society

- 1) To what extent are characters shown as taking responsibility for solving problems through their own agency?
- 2) How important does the writer suggest it might be that injustices are resolved in the here and now?
- 3) How does the writer explore ideas regarding our shared responsibilities within society? (This could be to each other, to animals and other sentient life, or to our environment/the world).
- 4) How do inequalities lead to the suffering of characters?
- 5) How does the writer present characters taking action to improve society? How does this link to humanist ideas that we should take action to build a better, fairer world?
- 6) Are religion and/or non-religion expressed as positive or negative influences in the world of the text? How?

Resource list and links to humanism

Page	Title	Author	Humanist themes
Shakespeare Plays			
8	Macbeth	William Shakespeare*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive and negative aspects of humanity • Living with the consequences of our actions • Individual agency • Death
10	Romeo and Juliet	William Shakespeare*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legacy • Death • Individual agency • Connection
19th Century Novels			
12	A Christmas Carol	Charles Dickens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rationality and evidence • Importance of empathy • Shared responsibility
14	The Sign of the Four	Arthur Conan Doyle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection • Living with the consequences of our actions • Rationality and evidence
16	Frankenstein	Mary Shelley*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive and negative aspects of humanity • Connection • Nature and the natural world • Science
18	The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde	Robert Louis Stevenson*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Science • Social evolution • Connection
Modern Texts			
20	Lord of the Flies	William Golding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rationality and evidence • Connection • Positive and negative aspects of humanity • Importance of empathy
22	DNA	Dennis Kelly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living with the consequences of our actions • Connection • Social evolution
24	Animal Farm	George Orwell*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking action • Social evolution • Legacy
26	An Inspector Calls	J. B. Priestley*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living with the consequences of our actions • Taking action • Importance of empathy • Shared responsibility

Page	Title	Author	Humanist themes
Poetry			
28	Checking Out Me History	John Agard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection • Legacy • Individual agency
30	Sonnet 29	Elizabeth Barrett Browning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection • Nature and the natural world • Living well
31	A Century Later	Imtiaz Dharker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of empathy • Living well • Taking action
33	War Photographer	Carol Ann Duffy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking action • Importance of empathy • Shared responsibility • Connection
35	Singh Song	Daljit Nagra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual agency • Living well • Connection
37	Like An Heiress	Grace Nichols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared responsibility • Positive and negative aspects of humanity • Nature and the natural world
39	Love's Philosophy	Percy Bysshe Shelley*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection • Nature and the natural world • Living well
41	Ozymandias	Percy Bysshe Shelley*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living well • Human creativity and imagination • Legacy • Connection
43	Climbing My Grandfather	Andrew Waterhouse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection • Nature and the natural world • Legacy
45	Poppies	Jane Weir	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection • Legacy • Individual agency

*Starred authors demonstrate particular links to humanism in their own lives, beliefs and/or actions.

Humanism in *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any idea of an afterlife is noticeably absent in Macbeth's consideration of life shortly before his death: 'Life is but a walking shadow; a poor player Who struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more.' (Act 5, Scene 5). This offers a humanist view of life because it implies that life on earth is not simply a preparation for an afterlife or a divine reward or punishment. Death is portrayed as final in the later acts of <i>Macbeth</i>.
Individual agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shakespeare presents Macbeth considering his own actions and making his own choices, particularly in soliloquy. In Act 1, Scene 7, when Macbeth considers whether to kill Duncan, he describes Duncan's position as here 'in double trust' and decides against going through with the murder. In the subsequent dialogue with Lady Macbeth, Macbeth states, 'We will proceed no further in this business'. However, by the end of the scene, Lady Macbeth has persuaded him to murder Duncan, preying on his fears around his masculinity and encouraging his ambition. From a humanist perspective, this exploration of individual agency allows us to consider our natural, internal, moral instincts, and the ways in which others and our environment can influence our decisions.
Positive and negative aspects of humanity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists recognise that there are good and bad sides to all of us. Macbeth's downfall from respected soldier and nobleman, described by King Duncan as 'valiant' and 'worthy' in Act 1, Scene 2, to Macduff's 'tyrant' in Act 5, represents the idea that if this negative side is given more fuel it can take over. Humanists believe that if we put our positive capacities to good use, we have the potential to lead good, happy and meaningful lives, and here, we see Shakespeare exploring the converse of this.
Living with the consequences of our actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Macbeth and Lady Macbeth both face consequences due to the guilt they feel over the murder of Duncan. These consequences are not in an afterlife in any religious sense, but in their world. After Macbeth has murdered Duncan, he focuses on his hands and questions, 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?' (Act 2, Scene 2), demonstrating his immediate regret. Lady Macbeth's guilt is delayed until Act 5, when she also becomes obsessed by the idea of blood on her hands. In the 'Out, damned spot' scene, her guilt manifests in her sleepwalking and reliving her actions. Here Shakespeare demonstrates the humanist recognition that our

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| | <p>actions have consequences, and we must live with them in this world.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shakespeare portrays Lady Macbeth's suicide as an escape from guilt, not a religious sin. |
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Humanist characterisation

- Shakespeare's characterisation of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth reflects the humanist idea that happiness can be found in our connections with one another.
- Before the murder of Duncan, we see these two characters offering a united front and in a loving relationship: in Act 1, Scene 5, Macbeth describes Lady Macbeth as his '**partner in greatness**'.
- As they take steps into evil and depravity, they lose their connection to one another, and both die alone and in misery.

Dramatic structure & humanist themes

- The frequency and positioning of soliloquies in *Macbeth* allow the audience to engage with the interior 'life' of characters, particularly Macbeth.
- In Act 1, Scene 7, we are presented with Macbeth's decision making process, illustrating the important humanist belief in individual agency.
- Later in the play, the characters' soliloquies demonstrate them living with the consequences of their actions.
- In Act 5, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth remain focused on their feelings of guilt in the here and now, not the impact of their sins on them in an afterlife.

Humanist authorial context

- In an era preoccupied with religion, Shakespeare's plays and poetry are remarkably secular in subject matter and outlook. Shakespeare seems to have been influenced by classical and Renaissance ideas about the importance of reason, humanity, and individual freedoms.
- Shakespeare himself cannot be considered as wholly humanist in the modern sense. However, he explores many humanist themes in his writing. The characters' actions carry consequences in their world that they have to navigate, and he focuses on individual agency and moral decisions.
- heritage.humanists.uk/william-shakespeare
- andrewcopson.com/2025/04/shakespeares-mirror
- humanists.uk/humanism/the-humanist-tradition/renaissance/shakespeare

Classroom discussion questions

- How does Shakespeare address living with the consequences of one's actions in *Macbeth*, and how does this link to humanist ideas about consequences?
- How does Shakespeare present death in the play? How does the play explore the idea of this being the one life we live, and the impact this has on the characters' feelings and actions?
- How far do you agree that Shakespeare presents Macbeth as in control of his decisions and actions? Does this link to a humanist view of individual agency?

Humanism in *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Legacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists believe that, while there is no afterlife, legacy can be created by our actions, ideas and contributions in this life. Romeo and Juliet's legacy is a return to 'a glooming peace' in the final lines of the play. Their sacrifice leads to a reconciliation between their families after their death.
Individual agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet choosing each other over their families, in a clear display of their individual agency. In Act 2, Scene 2, Juliet claims her love is 'as boundless as the sea [...] as deep; the more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite', presenting her choice to 'give' her love to Romeo, defying her family's wishes. Later, Romeo refuses to be controlled by fate when he declares, 'Then I defy you, stars' (Act 5, Scene 1). Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet both having the desire and agency to control their own lives.
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Romeo and Juliet's loving connection to one another links to the humanist recognition that happiness can be found in our earthly connections. In Act 2, Scene 2, Romeo describes 'love's light wings' allowing him to 'o'erperch these walls', suggesting a freedom and joy found in love and their relationship.
Death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The typically Christian view of suicide is not depicted in the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. Shakespeare creates sympathy for the characters who felt their only choice was to take their own lives for love. Romeo and Juliet are not condemned for their actions. Instead, their legacy has a positive impact. In Act 5, Scene 3, Montague says he will 'ray [Juliet's] statue in pure gold' and Capulet claims 'as rich shall Romeo's by his lady lie', suggesting that the characters do not view Romeo and Juliet as sinful, instead, they try to atone for their own sins with this show of wealth in memoriam.

Humanist characterisation

- Shakespeare's characterisation of both Romeo and Juliet presents humanist ideas through their youthful rebellion against traditional orthodoxy.
- Both characters are depicted as impulsive, particularly Romeo, and when that impulsivity is channelled positively, Shakespeare presents a childlike joy in both characters. This links to the humanist belief that we should all have the freedom to live our lives as we choose, so long as we are not causing harm to others.

- Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet's connection to each other through natural imagery, **'It is the East, and Juliet is the sun' / 'a rose by any other name'** (Act 2, Scene 2). This demonstrates the humanist view that our links to each other and the natural world are inherent to our understanding of ourselves.

Dramatic structure & humanist themes

- The structure of *Romeo and Juliet* supports the idea that the characters are active agents in their own lives and that they live with the consequences of their actions.
- Throughout the play, there is an apparent battle between fate and free will. Shakespeare could be exploring individualism in a society where decisions are so often taken out of young people's hands – particularly women in the aristocratic, ruling classes, who were often used as items to trade in the marriage market.
- Juliet's extremely young age, **'she hath not seen the change of fourteen years'** (Act 1, Scene 2), could support the idea of young people's futures being controlled, and the play explores Romeo and Juliet attempting to take their lives into their own hands.
- The structure of the play overall follows a consequential pattern: Romeo chooses to attend the Capulet's ball, thereby falling in love with Juliet and starting the feud with Tybalt. Juliet's choice to marry Romeo in secret leads to the plot with Friar Lawrence, because she truly cannot marry Paris. This reflects humanist ideas of individual agency and living with the consequences of our actions.

Humanist authorial context

- In an era preoccupied with religion, Shakespeare's plays and poetry are remarkably secular in subject matter and outlook. Shakespeare seems to have been influenced by classical and Renaissance ideas about the importance of reason, humanity, and individual freedom.
- Shakespeare himself cannot be considered as wholly humanist in the modern sense. However, he explores many humanist themes in his writing. The characters' actions carry consequences in their world that they have to navigate, and he focuses on individual agency and moral decisions.
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Classroom discussion questions

- How does Shakespeare explore the conflicting themes of fate and individual agency in *Romeo and Juliet*? How does this link to humanist ideas regarding human agency?
- How far do you agree that Shakespeare's presentation of Romeo and Juliet's love for each other creates joy and meaning, and that this is otherwise absent from the characters' lives? How might this link to humanist ideas regarding the importance of having freedom to live in the way we choose?
- How does Shakespeare present the death of Romeo and Juliet? How could this link to key humanist ideas regarding death and legacy?

Humanism in *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Rationality and evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists believe that the world is a natural place, with no supernatural side. Scrooge's initial response to the spirits demonstrates this rationality, when he blames his indigestion: 'You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese [...] There's more of gravy than of grave about you'. The humour used by Dickens here allows the reader to find the idea of a character like Scrooge seeing, and ultimately believing in, the supernatural amusing.
Importance of empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The overall moral development of Scrooge's character occurs because of his growing understanding of empathy. Humanists believe that we should recognise our shared humanity and universal human needs. Scrooge demonstrates regret over his previous choices: "'I wish," Scrooge muttered [...] "but it's too late now... There was a boy singing a Christmas Carol at my door last night. I should like to have given him something, that's all." This demonstrates Scrooge's growing awareness of his miserly nature, the impact he has had on others, and the potential for change. Humanists understand that we are able to grow and develop our empathy through connections with, and stories about, others.
Shared responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By the end of the novel, Scrooge takes responsibility for his behaviour and recognises his responsibility to others. He claims: 'Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business'. He no longer wishes to live a life of isolation and demonstrates a more humanist approach to life, recognising our human responsibilities, and taking action to help those who need it.

Humanist characterisation

- Dickens' characterisation of Scrooge reflects the humanist idea of human beings having both positive and negative characteristics.
- At the start of the novel, Scrooge is described as **'hard and sharp as flint'**, demonstrating his unyielding nature.
- By the end of the novel, he **'became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew'**.

- This links to the humanist belief that if we put our positive capacities to good use, we have the potential to lead good, happy, and meaningful lives, and can support others to do the same.

Narrative structure & humanist themes

- The novel is structured in 5 staves, with the four visiting ghosts appearing in Staves 1-4, and Scrooge's redemption in Stave 5.
- While the supernatural is clearly present in this novel, the ghosts are devices to allow us to focus on Scrooge's character arc and development. These supernatural elements do not influence the wider world of the novel; they can be considered part of Scrooge's internal moral deliberation.
- Dickens chose to write a **'Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea'** (preface), allowing us to recognise his moral message of caring for one another, translated through the text.

Humanist authorial context

- Dickens was a Christian; however, his novels also contain humanist themes. While there are mentions of religion in *A Christmas Carol*, the novel's main message revolves around our responsibilities to improve the lives of others in the here and now.
- Dickens' political stance and publications focus on ideas relating to social responsibility, and the creation of shared empathy. He believed everyone in society should share a public moral duty to care for the needy, regardless of religion.
- newhumanist.org.uk/articles/5906/the-quiet-subversiveness-of-a-christmas-carol

Classroom discussion questions

- How do you interpret the supernatural characters in *A Christmas Carol*? How could they link to humanist ideas of rationality, the natural world, and our internal thought processes?
- How does the idea of redemption in the novel link to humanist ideas and values?
- How does Dickens convey moral ideas and a sense of human responsibility in *A Christmas Carol*? Do these morals link to humanist beliefs?

Humanism in *The Sign of the Four* by Arthur Conan Doyle

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Rationality and evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists believe that we should take an evidence-based approach to deciding what to believe, linking to the character of Sherlock Holmes, whose focus on evidence and observation of minutiae is legendary. In <i>The Sign of the Four</i>, Holmes claims, 'Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science', celebrating a logical and rational approach.
Living with the consequences of our actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The novel as a whole focuses on the consequences of Jonathan Small's actions. His ultimate capture by Holmes is presented as a just punishment on earth. His lengthy confession in the final chapter explains his past crimes, including murder: 'the thought of the treasure turned me hard and bitter. I cast my firelock between his legs as he raced past'. Small recognises that he is not going to profit from his crimes when he describes how he 'cannot bear to feel that I have paid the price only that another may enjoy'. This clearly presents the humanist idea of earthly justice rather than a divine punishment.
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In <i>The Sign of the Four</i>, Watson meets Mary Morstan (in later novels to become Mary Watson). The romantic way that Doyle approaches the couple's budding relationship links to the humanist belief that we can find joy and meaning in our connection to others. Watson keeps thinking about 'her smiles, the deep, rich tones of her voice...' demonstrating this romantic approach and the necessity to find human connection.

Humanist characterisation

- Doyle's characterisation of Sherlock Holmes reflects the humanist belief in the importance of finding evidence to prove or disprove ideas.
- Watson is a necessary foil to Holmes to demonstrate the more emotional, romantic side of humanity.
- Humanists believe that we are products of evolution and have also evolved socially. The two characters' differing behaviours represent this variety in humanity.

Narrative structure & humanist themes

- Watson's narrative provides a frame for Small's detailed confession in the final chapter.

- This can be linked to the humanist idea that we have different instincts (both positive and negative) and allows Doyle to present the evil side of humanity through Small, but also the flaws, mistakes, and turning points that led him down the path of evil.
- Small is keen to explain that he did not want to kill Sholto, however, we see his evil side when we learn that he killed the merchant Achmet in cold blood and stole his treasure.

Classroom discussion questions

- How far does Sherlock Holmes demonstrate a humanist approach to deciding what to believe, based on reason and evidence?
- Are the romantic elements of *The Sign of the Four* important? How do they allow us to see the breadth and diversity of human behaviour and motivations?
- Explore the way justice is presented in the novel. How could this link to humanist ideas regarding facing the consequences of our actions in this world?

Humanism in *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists believe that science is the best way to understand the world, and that science should be applied ethically, with consideration for the wellbeing of human beings and other sentient life. The early novel describes the wonder of science and curiosity 'to learn the hidden laws of nature, gladness akin to rapture,' and the power of scientists: 'They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows.' In <i>Frankenstein</i>, Shelley's presentation of the creation of the Monster through unchecked scientific progress comments on the dangers of science when not combined with a human approach to morality. Frankenstein's immediate response to his creation coming to life, 'the beauty of the dream vanished and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart'(Chapter 5) illustrates this danger.
Positive and negative aspects of humanity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists believe that our instincts and behaviours evolved naturally, and that human beings have both positive and negative capacities. This position is reflected in the novel: 'Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous and magnificent, yet so vicious and base?' Characters in <i>Frankenstein</i> are flawed - the Monster clearly tries to be good when he collects wood for the De Lacey family, who even describe him as their 'good spirit' (Chapter 12) before they meet him. Frankenstein himself chooses to create life, but then abandons his creation, 'unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room' (Chapter 5), demonstrating the negative side of his character. Humanists believe that we should aim to put our positive capacities to good use, and support others to do the same. The consequences of not doing this are explored in <i>Frankenstein</i>.
Nature and the natural world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the Monster is first created, Shelley presents his awe and wonder at life. He notices the moon for the first time: 'Soon a gentle light stole over the heavens and gave me a sensation of pleasure. I started up and beheld a radiant form rise from among the trees. I gazed with a kind of wonder.' (Chapter 11). This sensory delight the Monster feels in discovering nature creates a childlike innocence, happiness and joy in his character.
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Monster's ongoing isolation is ultimately what causes him to turn towards evil. He attempts to connect with others, although his experiences of rejection make him fearful of this: 'I longed to join

	<p>them, but dared not'. (Chapter 12)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When he finally speaks to De Lacey in Chapter 15, he appears to be successful due to De Lacey's blindness and therefore lack of prejudice based on his appearance. De Lacey claims that 'the hearts of men, when unprejudiced by any obvious self-interest, are full of brotherly love and charity'. The Monster rejoices in this connection 'You raise me from the dust by this kindness'. However, the way Felix, Agatha and Safie respond to him is the turning point in the novel: 'Who can describe their horror and consternation on beholding me?' (Chapter 15)
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Humanist characterisation

- Shelley's characterisation of the Monster and Frankenstein reflects the idea that positive and negative capacities are a natural part of humanity.
- Both characters try to be good, but ultimately their flaws lead to the novel's tragedies.

Narrative structure & humanist themes

- The key turning point in the novel is at the start of Chapter 16: **'Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live?'** The Monster's character changes irrevocably after he is unable to forge connections to the De Lacey family. He recognises at this moment that he is destined to be a social outcast and so turns towards evil and revenge. This moment demonstrates the power of human, social connection.
- The dialogue between Frankenstein and the Monster offers a key exploration of empathy and understanding of others. The Monster tells Frankenstein, **'I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend'** in their dialogue in Chapter 10.

Humanist authorial context

- The daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft (who died after Shelley's birth) and William Godwin, Mary Shelley's upbringing was grounded in radical free thinking for the time. Her mother's devotion to values of freedom, reason, and equality remains central to humanism today. (heritage.humanists.uk/mary-wollstonecraft)
- William Godwin was an atheist and encouraged Shelley to question and explore the scientific basis of life.
- Mary Shelley's marriage to Percy Bysshe Shelley was another avenue of philosophical development and exploration. Percy Bysshe Shelley was also an atheist and much of his writing focused on freedom of thought and belief.

Classroom discussion questions

- Considering the representation of the characters in *Frankenstein*, what do you think makes us human?
- How does Shelley explore ideas relating to social connection and ostracism in *Frankenstein*? How does this link to humanist ideas regarding human relationships?

- How does Shelley present the key theme of science in *Frankenstein*? Can you find any links to humanist ideas regarding science and morality?

Humanism in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by R.L. Stevenson

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Jekyll pushes the boundaries of science in his creation of the potion that unleashes his animalistic side. • Humanists believe that science is morally neutral and that it is up to humans to apply an ethical code to scientific decisions and progress. • Jekyll describes how 'Late one accursed night, I compounded the elements, watched them boil [...] with a strong glow of courage, drank off the potion'. The use of 'accursed' here demonstrates Jekyll's understanding of the error of his choices. • He also recognises that 'Had I approached my discovery with more noble spirit [...] I had come forth an angel instead of a fiend', demonstrating this idea of human responsibility to assign moral boundaries to scientific progress.
Social evolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanists believe that we have evolved naturally, with both positive and negative instincts and behaviours. • When Jekyll describes how 'man is not truly one but truly two', we see Stevenson exploring the idea of the base, animalistic side of humanity and the good, moral side, which abides by social conventions. • Humanists recognise that we have the capacity for both good and evil and believe that we should aim to create a world where people's positive traits can flourish.
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As Jekyll becomes more isolated, he descends further into becoming Hyde. • This could support the humanist idea that it is through our connections with others that we experience happiness and contentment. • Without these links to society, negative traits can flourish. When Lanyon describes how 'it is more than ten years since Henry Jekyll became too fanciful for me', we see the start of his separation from mainstream society. • However, it is later that Utterson seems to separate from Jekyll too: 'he did not like his friend's feverish manner'. This potentially sets the ground for Hyde to take over.

Humanist characterisation

- Stevenson's characterisation of Dr Jekyll reflects the humanist idea of the duality of human nature. The two sides of his character, represented through Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, present the natural evolution of instincts and behaviours, with Stevenson exploring the idea of the dangers of allowing the animalistic, negative side to take over.

Narrative structure & humanist themes

- The novel is written in third person limited perspective from the viewpoint of Mr Utterson.
- However, the inclusion of letters in the first person, such as the final confession of Jekyll himself, allows the reader to better understand the moral issues of the story and the idea of repression within Victorian society, leading to the creation of Hyde.
- Jekyll confesses that he **'concealed [his] pleasures'** and believed that, in separating his human nature, **'life would be relieved of all that was unbearable'**. This insight into Jekyll's state of mind in the final chapter allows the reader to consider how society could have supported Jekyll more.

Humanist authorial context

- Stevenson was raised Christian but rejected religion later in life, becoming agnostic and, later, an atheist. Stevenson was part of several societies including the Speculative Society and Liberty, Justice and Reverence, where he discussed life and what it means to be human.
- thehumanist.com/magazine/september-october-2015/features/robert-louis-stevenson-says-no-to-religion

Classroom discussion questions

- How far do you agree that Stevenson explores the humanist idea that we should take responsibility for our actions?
- Does Hyde's character truly represent the darker side of humanity, present in all of us?
- Is society at fault for rejecting Jekyll and forcing him to 'conceal' his 'pleasures'? How could this link to the humanist idea of allowing people to live in the way they choose as long as they cause no harm to others?

Humanism in *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Rationality and evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The idea of 'the beast' that the 'littluns' fear is rejected immediately by the older children as irrational. Ralph says, 'We've got to talk about this fear and decide there's nothing in it. I'm frightened myself, sometimes; only that's nonsense! Like bogies' and Piggy describes life as 'scientific' in an attempt to quell these fears. This rejection of the idea of a supernatural being on the island links to humanist ideas of the world being a natural place without a supernatural side.
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Without any authority figures, the group forms a pseudo-society with Ralph as leader (initially). The conch becomes a symbol of order: 'Hear him! He's got the conch!' (Ralph). This presents the way in which the boys initially band together for survival and demonstrates the importance of human connection.
Positive and negative aspects of humanity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists believe that human beings are a product of nature and that our instincts and behaviours have evolved naturally. The group of boys represent different aspects of humanity and our capacity for both good and evil. The descent into more animalistic, base instincts displayed by some of the group (notably Jack and Roger), demonstrates this animalistic side to humanity. Before he releases the rock which kills Piggy, Roger feels 'a sense of delirious abandonment' in his gleeful dismissal of the normal moral boundaries of human behaviour.
Importance of empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over the course of the novel, many characters lose their sense of empathy as the society they have formed dissolves. The treatment of Piggy by many of the other characters ('Piggy once more was the centre of social derision so that everyone felt cheerful and normal') demonstrates a lack of empathy from some of the characters. Even Ralph's refrain, 'sucks to your ass-mar' reflects a lack of patience and understanding, although later in the novel, this has become half-hearted as he chooses Piggy over Jack, and in the final lines of the novel describes him as a 'true, wise friend'. When Simon is killed, the boys are initially shocked by what they have done, but soon make excuses for their behaviour: 'In the silence that followed, each savage flinched away from his individual memory'.

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The characters dehumanise Simon and Piggy to excuse their behaviour. |
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Humanist characterisation

- Golding's characterisation of each member of the group reflects the idea of humans having positive and negative sides to their nature.
- The humanist aim is to promote positive capacities, seen through the characters of Ralph, Simon and Piggy. However, the dangers of giving into base, animalistic instincts are demonstrated through the characters of Jack and Roger.

Narrative structure & humanist themes

- The final chapter of the novel is full of fast-paced urgency as we seem to be hurtling towards the seemingly inevitable murder of Ralph.
- However, the arrival of the naval officers is an abrupt ending and halts the frenzied atmosphere. This could link to the humanist idea of the potentially positive influence of human society and the moral human norms that it is able to establish.

Classroom discussion questions

- To what extent does Golding present a humanist view of human nature in the novel?
- How far do you agree that in *Lord of the Flies*, Golding is advising people to live in a way that could be considered humanist - i.e. promoting our positive capacities, and seeking to overcome our negative instincts and behaviours?
- How does Golding explore the humanist idea of connection and society in *Lord of the Flies*?
- Do you agree that Golding focuses on rationality and an evidence-based approach to the supernatural when considering the way 'the Beast' is presented in *Lord of the Flies*?

See also 'The Real Lord of the Flies' for an account of what really happened when a group of school boys found themselves abandoned on an island:

www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/09/the-real-lord-of-the-flies-what-happened-when-six-boys-were-shipwrecked-for-15-months

Humanism in *DNA* by Dennis Kelly

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Social evolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists believe that our instincts and behaviour evolved naturally, and that human nature has both positive and negative features. The characters in <i>DNA</i> represent different aspects of humanity, from those that follow their violent instincts like Phil, 'you'll land on Adam's corpse and you'll rot together', to those who are more empathetic like Leah: 'Well it's not all roses, you know. Brian's on medication'. Kelly explores the ways in which some characters take advantage of the vulnerability of others, and ultimately implies that we need to look after each other to create a happy and functioning society.
Living with the consequences of our actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kelly presents his teenage characters facing several moral decisions with increasingly high stakes. Initially, the characters choose to cover up the accidental "death" (they think) of Adam. Later, they actually do murder him in order to prevent the gang's lies from being exposed. Kelly demonstrates the characters reacting to their choices in a range of different ways. Danny 'can't be involved in this' as he wants to 'be a dentist', showing selfish motivations. Cathy delights in the violence and continues to behave violently, 'she cut a first year's finger off'. Leah is the only character who tries to stop the murder, shouting 'It's Adam, Phil, Adam!', attempting to remind Phil of Adam's humanity. From a humanist perspective, Kelly explores the many sides of humanity through his gang of teenage characters, and the ways they respond mentally to the aftermath of their actions. By the end of the play, Brian is mentally unwell, 'they caught him staring at a wall and drooling', and Phil has completely disconnected from society. The only character who may gain some kind of redemption is Leah, who has left the corrupt group - reported by Jan and Mark at the start of the final act: 'She's gone'.
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The gang appear to be a tight knit group. However, on closer inspection, there is an isolation to the gang, setting them apart from the rest of society; no character outside of the gang appears on stage in the entire play. This presents the humanist idea of the importance of our connections with other people and the natural world. Without these connections, the gang become adrift and create their own (im)moral code. Leah's exploration of the wider world in her field monologues

	<p>demonstrates her attempt to find these important connections.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She explores evolution in the chimps and bonobos monologue, 'chimps are evil', 'the tiniest change in their DNA', exploring the two conflicting sides of human nature through these animals.
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Humanist characterisation

- Kelly's characterisation of each member of the gang in *DNA* reflects the idea of humans having positive and negative sides to their nature.
- The humanist aim is to promote positive capacities, seen through the character of Leah and potentially the changes to some of the other characters by the end of the play, such as Richard.

Dramatic structure & humanist themes

- The isolation of the gang is depicted by Kelly through the absence of any adults or any other characters throughout the play.
- The settings are claustrophobic and repetitive - the action moves from the street to the field to the woods in a cycle throughout the play.
- This isolation offers a way for Kelly to explore what could happen in a society without empathy and meaningful connection to others.

Classroom discussion questions

- How does Kelly explore the importance of social connection in *DNA*? How might this link to humanist ideas regarding human relationships?
- Explore the theme of evolution in *DNA*. Can this be linked to a humanist view regarding the ways we have evolved socially?
- How does Kelly present the many sides of human nature in *DNA*? How does this link to a humanist understanding of human behaviour?

Humanism in *Animal Farm* by George Orwell

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Social evolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Orwell presents the different animals as reflective of different aspects of humanity. Humanists believe that we are products of evolution and have evolved positive and negative behaviours and instincts. Boxer is kind and sacrifices himself to the cause to support their society: 'I will work harder' is his constant refrain. Whereas Napoleon and Squealer are manipulative and selfish. Napoleon confuses the animals through the rewriting of the commandments: 'All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others' being a key example of his manipulation.
Taking action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Old Major's original plan was a call to arms for the animals to try to improve conditions and society. The original revolution and their 'commandments' were intended to create a better society, for example: 'No animal shall kill any other animal'. Humanists believe that it is our shared responsibility to create a better society and, while there is much to work on, such a society is possible. Orwell's representation of Animal Farm is a more pessimistic consideration of the aftermath of revolution when non-humanist forces, such as the rejection of freedoms and equality, prevail – inspired by Stalin's Russia.
Legacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Old Major's legacy inspires the animals to take control of the farm. Humanists believe there is no afterlife, but our actions can live on in the memories of others and in the changes we have made to the world. Old Major shares the song 'Beasts of England' which describes this idealistic society that the animals should aim towards. The lyric 'For that day we all must labour / Though we die before it break', demonstrates the idea that Old Major was aware he would not see the outcome of the revolution, but still inspires the animals towards this goal. Napoleon tries to erase this legacy by banning the animals from singing the song, but it is still 'perhaps hummed secretly here and there' as 'the animals never gave up hope'. This wish for a better world can be linked to Old Major and his legacy.

Humanist characterisation

- Orwell's characterisation of the animals reflects the humanist idea of there being varying positive and negative aspects of humanity, as the different creatures represent different human behaviours.
- The sheep simply follow the pigs' rules blindly: **'four legs good, two legs bad' / 'four legs good, two legs better'**. Their changing chant demonstrates the dangers of an unquestioning, accepting mentality and the absence of thinking for oneself.
- The pigs' behaviour highlights the power struggles that have occurred across history, with the disagreements between Napoleon and Snowball leading to the society's descent into a dictatorship.

Narrative structure & humanist themes

- By the end of the novel, Animal Farm has come full circle to become 'Manor Farm' again, and the pigs have become human-like.
- The final lines of the novel are: **'The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which'**. This allegorical link to human behaviour reminds the reader that the novel is a study of the corruption of power and the human condition.

Humanist authorial context

- George Orwell is one of the most celebrated English authors and essayists of all time, and was a practical humanist who rejected ideas of immortality in favour of the here and now.
- Orwell expressed atheist beliefs in his writings and endorsed a humanist philosophy throughout his life, while also noting a concern that diminishing religious conviction might leave a moral vacuum in its wake. His solution, though, was a humanist one. What was needed, he wrote in 1940, was to 'reinstate the belief in human brotherhood without the need for a "next world" to give it meaning.'
- heritage.humanists.uk/george-orwell

Classroom discussion questions

- How far do you agree that Orwell represents a convincing array of different human values and behaviours through the characters in *Animal Farm*?
- How is the afterlife considered in *Animal Farm* and how could this link to humanist views on the lack of an afterlife? Consider Moses the raven's description of **'Sugarcandy Mountain'**.
- How does Orwell's message link to humanist ideas regarding the need to take action to build a better society? What can the failure of the *Animal Farm* "dream" teach us?

Humanism in *An Inspector Calls* by J. B. Priestley

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Shared responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists explore the ways in which people are interconnected and consider the responsibility we have to others. In <i>An Inspector Calls</i>, each character had a responsibility to Eva Smith, and each character squandered their opportunity to save her. The Inspector's famous speech in Act 3 demonstrates the important humanist idea of shared humanity and being kind to one another: 'One Eva Smith has gone - but there are millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still with us [...] all intertwined with our lives. We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other'.
Taking action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists believe that we need to work for justice in the world we are in as our wrongs won't be righted in an afterlife. Priestley's Inspector forces the characters to face their mistakes and therefore change their ways. The younger characters are immediately affected by this - Sheila quickly says 'I'll never, never do it again to anybody' after she is exposed by the Inspector.
Importance of empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Inspector forces the characters to recognise their shared humanity with Eva Smith and encourages them not to distinguish themselves from her based on class. Humanists focus on the aspects of humanity that link us to one another, no matter the distance, and avoid the distinctions of class that the Birlings initially seem to hide behind. Mrs Birling demonstrates class snobbery in her description of Eva Smith: 'She was giving herself ridiculous airs [...] that were simply absurd in a girl in her position'. Humanists focus on empathy as a means of addressing moral questions, and Mrs Birling appears unable to display empathy here.
Living with the consequences of our actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over the course of the play, the characters gradually come to terms with their role in Eva Smith's death. The Inspector ensures that they are aware of their role in her suicide: 'each of you helped to kill her. Remember that. Never forget it. [...] But then I don't think you ever will'. Humanists believe that we have one life, and it is our duty to live it well, supporting the wellbeing of others and considering the consequences of our actions.

Humanist characterisation

- Priestley's characterisation of the young Birling generation (Sheila and Eric) reflects the humanist idea of recognising our shared humanity and responsibility to one another. Their remorse is palpable and immediate.
- The older generation (Mr and Mrs Birling) are characterised as holding on to traditional values and class divisions, presenting a contrast with their children.

Dramatic structure & humanist themes

- The whole play takes place in the dining room of the Birlings' home, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere.
- The Inspector's invasion of this space allows him to become an almost omniscient presence, and the moral centre for the play.
- Humanists believe that morality is not just about following rules, but also about considering the consequences of our actions, and the structure of the play overall, with the Inspector managing much of the central portion of the play, allows for this developing focus on the tragic consequences of the Birlings' actions.

Humanist authorial context

- J. B. Priestley was born into a working class family in Yorkshire in 1894. His plays and writing focus on various humanist ideas, including our shared social responsibility, and he outlined the need for a better world post World War II. His aim was to end the unfairness of social inequalities.

Classroom discussion questions

- How far do you agree that Priestley presents social responsibility as crucial to human society in *An Inspector Calls*?
- Who is to blame for Eva Smith's death? How are different characters in the play shown to be aligned, or not, with humanist values?
- How does Priestley present the humanist idea of living with the consequences of our actions in *An Inspector Calls*?

Humanism in 'Checking Out Me History' by John Agard

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Legacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agard references key figures from black history, including Toussaint L'Ouverture and Mary Seacole, 'Toussaint / a slave / with vision / lick back / Napoleon / battalion / and first Black / Republic / born'. This links to the humanist idea that while there isn't an afterlife, our actions can live on after our death through their impact on others and society. Agard explores the importance of covering a range of figures from different cultures in history, rather than focusing solely on '1066 and all dat'.
Individual agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The narrator expresses the need to explore history himself rather than relying on the school curriculum, which is mocked through the references to nursery rhyme figures being more important than the crucial figures from history he describes. The final lines of the poem, 'now I checking out me own history / I carving out me identity', expresses the humanist idea that we are free to make our own choices, and this is an important part of knowing ourselves and the world.
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agard cites the importance of his own connection to the ongoing human story and the need to represent black history in the curriculum, to allow everyone to feel connected and represented. He immortalises Nanny of the Maroons among others, 'Nanny / see-far woman / of mountain dream'. Humanists describe connection through our relationships to others in the world now, and those who have come before us. The narrator recognises the power of the historical figures he describes and how their stories help him to understand his place in the world.

Humanist characterisation

- Agard's characterisation of the narrator reflects the humanist idea of taking action, as he chooses to learn about the ignored figures of black history referenced in this poem.

Poetic/narrative structure & humanist themes

- The structure of the poem with indented and italicised 'histories' draws attention to the stories of prominent black figures in history, providing them with greater import than the standard figures of a traditional, mainly white, history curriculum.

Classroom discussion questions

- How does Agard explore humanist ideas relating to legacy in 'Checking Out Me History'?
- Does Agard's poem represent the humanist idea of taking action to improve society? How/why?
- Is feeling a personal connection to the overall human story and history important? Why/why not? How might this link to humanist ideas of finding meaningful connections in the world, and our own responsibility towards the ongoing human story?

Humanism in 'Sonnet 29' by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists believe that we can find joy and meaning in our relationships with one another. In 'Sonnet 29', Barrett Browning focuses on the importance of human connection: 'I think of thee! - my thoughts do twine and bud / About thee', illustrating the all-consuming nature of a loving relationship.
Nature and the natural world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Throughout the poem, imagery relating to nature is used by Barrett Browning: 'wild vines', 'broad leaves', 'straggling green'. There is a wildness to these descriptions, suggesting the speaker views love as untamed and passionate. Humanists view nature as wonderful and believe that we can find joy through our exploration of the natural world in the here and now. The way Barrett Browning links love to nature demonstrates both nature and love being sources of joy.
Living well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The speaker asks their partner to 'renew thy presence', implying that they wish to see their partner, rather than just think of them. Humanists believe that we should focus on living life fully, as this is the one life we have. The speaker's focus on enjoying life with her partner, and the urgency of her summons for him, supports the idea of enjoying life together now.

Poetic structure & humanist themes

- The poem follows a typical Petrarchan sonnet structure. At the volta, the speaker's passion increases, and the intensity of the requests become more extreme: **'let these bands of greenery which insphere thee / Drop heavily down - burst, shattered, everywhere!'** This passionate request demonstrates the humanist idea of living well in this life, and can also be viewed as a release of emotion against societal restraint.

Classroom discussion questions

- How does Barrett Browning present nature in 'Sonnet 29'? How does this link to a humanist interpretation of the wonder of nature?
- How does Barrett Browning present the idea of seizing the moment and enjoying life? How does this link to the humanist idea that this is the one life we have?
- Explore the theme of connection in the poem. Do Barrett Browning's ideas surrounding connection relate to humanist ideas about connection?

Humanism in 'A Century Later' by Imtiaz Dharker

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Taking action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In 'A Century Later', Dharker describes young girls sent 'into the firing line' when they try to gain an education. At the end of the poem, there is 'A murmur, a swarm', as the 'schoolgirls are standing up', demonstrating the humanist idea that we should take action and recognise our responsibility to work for a world in which everyone has the right to live a full and flourishing life.
Importance of empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dharker recognises that the girls are worthy of an education and should have 'the right to be ordinary'. She links the girls fighting for their right to have an education to girls in countries where they do not face this battle, saying they should all be able to 'paint their fingernails, go to school'. This ordinariness reminds us of our shared humanity, something humanists promote when considering our links to one another and encouraging us to feel empathy for others, no matter the physical distance between us.
Living well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists believe that we should all have the freedom to live life in the way we choose, provided we are not doing harm to anyone. The girls' protest and desire for an education is juxtaposed with the violence of their society: 'Surrendered, surrounded, she / takes the bullet in the head'. The innocence of the girls and this shocking violence helps to convey the idea that we should create a world where people should be free from persecution and allowed an education, regardless of gender.

Humanist characterisation

- Dharker's characterisation of the girl who is shot reflects the humanist idea of standing up for human rights and equality.
- The clear link to Malala Yousafzai reminds the reader that this is a real threat faced by girls around the world, and not just a story. Many humanists today campaign for equal access to education in parts of the world where women's and girls' rights are limited.

Poetic structure & humanist themes

- The juxtaposition of imagery of battlefields with natural beauty creates a startling reminder that this girl is as human as the rest of us - and finds joy in the natural world: **'The missile cuts a pathway in her mind, to an orchard / in full bloom'**.
- Humanists describe nature as being a source of joy and connection, represented through the girl's thoughts here.

Classroom discussion questions

- How far do you agree that Dharker focuses on the humanist idea of shared humanity in 'A Century Later'?
- Is the poem an effective call to action for the reader? How does Dharker explore the humanist idea of working for a better society?
- How does Dharker present the humanist idea of finding joy in the natural world?

Humanism in 'War Photographer' by Carol Ann Duffy

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Duffy's poem, the war photographer brings the reality of conflict to those outside the war zones: 'he sought approval / without words to do what someone must' - reminding us of the humanist idea that we are all connected to each other in the world. The war photographer is presented as taking his social responsibility seriously.
Importance of empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The idea of empathy in the poem is complex. The war photographer himself is visibly disturbed by what he has witnessed: 'solutions slop in trays / beneath his hands, which did not tremble then / though seem to now'. He recognises the horrors he is sharing with others. However, the reader is described as finding it harder to experience empathy, as their 'eyeballs prick with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers', showing Duffy's scathing view of humans' ability to distance themselves from the suffering of others.
Shared responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists believe that the responsibility for building a better world falls on humans alone. In 'War Photographer', Duffy offers a pessimistic view of humans' capacity to make meaningful change, as, at the end of the poem, the final lines read, 'From the aeroplane he stares impassively at where / he earns his living and they do not care.' This implies that even the war photographer himself has started to feel jaded.
Taking action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The war photographer 'has a job to do'. There is a sense of the photographs being a call to action, linking to the humanist view that humanism is about more than belief, it is about action and working for justice.

Humanist characterisation

- Duffy's characterisation of the war photographer reflects the humanist idea that we should take action to build a better world. He does **'what someone must'** implying that there is a mission and vocation to his work.

Poetic structure & humanist themes

- The war photographer is nameless throughout the poem, therefore he could represent a universal war photographer from any conflict, supported by the listing of conflict zones at the end of the first stanza: **'Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh.'**

Humanist authorial context

- Duffy was raised Catholic but became an atheist in her teenage years.
- Her religious upbringing is apparent in the description of the war photographer as being like **'a priest preparing to intone a Mass'**, but rather than an overtly religious context, this simply highlights the reverence the photographer feels towards his work.

Classroom discussion questions

- In what ways could Duffy's 'War Photographer' be seen as a call to action, reflecting the humanist idea of social responsibility?
- How does Duffy comment on the humanist idea of our connection to others, no matter the distance, in 'War Photographer'?
- How does Duffy explore humanist ideas relating to empathy in 'War Photographer'?

Humanism in 'Singh Song' by Daljit Nagra

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The narrator and his wife are deeply in love and take any opportunity to spend time together, even if that means closing their shop: 'ven nobody in, I do di lock / cos up de stairs is my newly bride'. The joy the couple find in their relationship reflects the humanist idea that happiness can be found through our relationships and our connections to others.
Individual agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The couple in the poem are presented by Nagra as refusing to abide by the narrator's father's demands: 'he vunt me not to hav a break'. However, they rebel against authority by finding opportunities to close the shop and spend more time together, sharing 'chapatti' and 'chutney' and 'making love'. This reflects the humanist idea that we should be free to live in the way we choose, provided it does no harm to others.
Living well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nagra presents a desire by the couple to find joy in the life they are living. There is no suggestion of religion other than the wife being on 'her Sikh lover site', which creates irony around any idea of religious orthodoxy. The couple find joy in the natural world through looking at the moon together: 'how much do yoo charge for dat moon baby? [...] is half di cost ov yoo baby [...] is priceless baby'.

Humanist characterisation

- Nagra's characterisation of the couple reflects the humanist idea that this is the one life we have and therefore we should make the most of life in the here and now.
- The couple's decision to close the shop at the slightest opportunity to focus on their relationship creates a sense of joy and love, found by rejecting orthodoxy.

Poetic structure & humanist themes

- The idea of joy being found in our life on earth is reflected through the use of dialogue in the poem. Initially, Nagra creates an exasperated refrain from the customers of the shop: **'di worst Indian shop / on di whole Indian road'**. However, by the end of the poem, Nagra gives the dialogue to the narrator and his wife: **'is priceless baby'**, showing their love and happiness is more important than the comments of those outside of their relationship.

Classroom discussion questions

- How does Nagra present the humanist idea of finding joy in the here and now in the poem 'Singh Song'?
- Do you agree that the narrator and his wife should be allowed to live in the way that they choose in the poem? How does this link to humanist ideas about making the most of our life, as it is the only life we have?
- How does Nagra present connection and empathy in the poem 'Singh Song'? Does this reflect humanist ideas?

Humanism in 'Like an Heiress' by Grace Nichols

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Shared responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists believe that we have a shared responsibility for building a better world. In 'Like an Heiress', the impact of human behaviour - the 'wave of rubbish against the seawall - / used car tyres, plastic bottles, styrofoam cups' - is clearly portrayed by Nichols as damaging to the environment. We share responsibility for this damage, but also for trying to fix this problem.
Nature and the natural world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nichols' narrator feels drawn to the Atlantic; she is presented as 'gazing out' at the 'far-out gleam' of the ocean. This links to the humanist idea that joy can be found in our connection to nature, and that we are beings of the natural world.
Positive and negative aspects of humanity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nichols presents the contradictions in the human condition at the end of the poem. The narrator has a deep connection to nature and the ocean, and thinks about 'the quickening years and fate of our planet', showing a desire to make a positive change. However, she also returns to the 'sanctuary' of her 'hotel room / to dwell in the air-conditioned coolness', creating an irony that her comfort is also contributing to the planet's demise.

Humanist characterisation

- Nichols' characterisation of the Atlantic Ocean reflects the humanist idea that humans are connected to the natural world.
- The sea is personified and behaves as an active agent: **'Atlantic draws me / to the mirror of my oceanic small-days'**.
- The narrator's memories of her childhood are entwined with the idea and image of the ocean and there is a joy and wonder in this connection.

Poetic structure & humanist themes

- The poem is written loosely in the form of a sonnet. At the volta (line 8), Nichols moves from focusing widely on the beach and the planet, to focusing on the individual's response (the narrator).
- Unfortunately, her response is found lacking, and here Nichols could be offering a call to action by reminding the reader that we are all ultimately responsible for the planet.

Classroom discussion questions

- Humanists believe that there is work to be done to improve our world, but that we can be optimistic about our human potential. Do you think that Nichols strikes an optimistic or pessimistic tone in 'Like an Heiress'?
- Nichols explores humankind's shared responsibility for protecting the world. How does the poem link to humanist views of our responsibilities towards nature?
- How does Nichols explore the complexity of the human condition in 'Like an Heiress'? Could this link to humanist views on our social evolution and the positive and negative aspects of humanity?

Humanism in 'Love's Philosophy' by Percy Bysshe Shelley

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists believe that joy and happiness can be found through our connections to one another. In 'Love's Philosophy', Shelley presents love as natural and explores how love can allow us to feel interconnectedness with each other. 'Nothing in the world is single' implies that, just like in nature, humans have evolved to create deep and meaningful connections with one another.
Living well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The message of the poem is to enjoy life now, together, rather than waiting for love and pleasure. The final lines of the poem, 'What is all this sweet work worth / If thou kiss not me?' ends the poem on a question, with the assumption that the answer has already been suggested - there is no point in all this wonder in nature if the couple don't enjoy life in the here and now. Humanists believe that there is no afterlife in a religious sense, and therefore living well and living happily is important. As long as no one is harmed, humanists believe that we should be free to live life in the way that we choose, and Shelley's persuasion here implies that to live in this way is natural and right.
Nature and the natural world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shelley's use of imagery creates a sense of awe in the natural world - 'the sunlight clasps the earth / And the moonbeams kiss the sea' - demonstrating the humanist idea that we can find joy and wonder through the natural world without needing the supernatural or religion.

Poetic structure & humanist themes

- The consistent rhyme scheme (ABAB), coupled with the use of enjambment creates a sense of fluidity that reflects the idea that love is natural and suggests that the couple should enjoy their time together now.
- The final question of the poem is the end of the speaker's persuasion and assumes the speaker's partner will kiss him and respond to the description of love as natural.

Humanist authorial context

- Percy Bysshe Shelley was a major poet of the Romantic period, and remains one of England's best loved and most influential writers.
- Despite being born into a wealthy family, Shelley chose to pursue his passion for writing, leading to financial uncertainty and familial estrangement.
- Shelley's was a humanist creed of love for humankind, respect for nature, and equality for all, expressed in work which was considered radical and dangerous: promoting atheism, rebelling against authority, and expressing the desire for greater freedoms for everyone.
- Though his life was short, he made a tremendous impact on the thinking of his time.

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Classroom discussion questions

- How does Shelley present love as natural in 'Love's Philosophy'? How does this link to the humanist idea that the world is a natural place and can be the source of value and meaning in our lives?
- Explore the way that the speaker in 'Love's Philosophy' encourages their partner to embrace the pleasures of love and connection, linking to the humanist idea that life is about seeking joy in the here and now.
- How does Shelley present nature in 'Love's Philosophy'? How does this link to the humanist idea that we can find awe and wonder in the natural world?

Humanism in 'Ozymandias' by Percy Bysshe Shelley

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Ozymandias</i> presents a reminder that while we might feel we are important, our lives have little meaning on a cosmic scale (we are merely grains of sand). For humanists, however, meaning and purpose are to be found on a more human scale in the here and now – we can make our own lives meaningful. Time has erased Ozymandias' 'Works'; 'Nothing beside remains'. The irony here demonstrates the fact that seeking lasting meaning through institutional power or impact may be in vain.
Legacy and living well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanists do not believe in an afterlife, but believe the impact our lives have on others can survive us – this, they believe, is a motivation to live well and act in ways that have a positive influence. Shelley presents Ozymandias' attempt to be remembered for his power and status – his striving to memorialise himself, his seeking immortality – as futile. His statue is broken, forgotten, 'a colossal wreck'. The final line of the poem, 'The lone and level sands stretch far away', presents Ozymandias as forgotten; his statue remains alone and unworshipped in the desert. From a humanist perspective, Shelley presents the idea that lasting greatness is not found in political power or glory.
Human creativity and imagination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The sculptor is celebrated more highly than the King in the poem: 'its sculptor well those passions read', implying the humble sculptor had a greater understanding of what it means to be human than the fearsome 'King of Kings'.

Humanist characterisation

- Shelley's characterisation of Ozymandias connects to humanist ideas of empathy and morality. Ozymandias' **'sneer of cold command'** depicts a dictatorial and uncaring ruler, which could serve as a wider, metaphorical representation of institutional power, rather than a comment on a particular historical figure, raising questions on how we should be governed. The statue's ultimate erasure by time could be a symbolic step towards the potential creation of a society that prioritises wellbeing and justice.
- Shelley's characterisation of the sculptor also links to humanist ideas about the impermanence of human life, and the nature of legacy. The artist's skill in representing Ozymandias remains evident, **'stamped on these lifeless things'**, and is therefore celebrated more highly than the king's **'works'**, of which **'nothing beside remains'**. The description of the statue as **'Half sunk'** with a **'shattered visage'**, though, reminds the

reader of the impermanence of human existence, and the way in which we forgo any control over our legacy once we have died.

Poetic structure & humanist themes

- The poem has a framing narrative whereby the narrator of the poem introduces the traveller, who then introduces the inscription of the “words” of Ozymandias: **‘My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!’**
- This framing narrative diminishes the power of Ozymandias, as we are distanced from the statue, and view it through the eyes of the **‘traveller from an antique land’**. This could serve as a reminder to us that there is no inherent or lasting meaning in power, status and authority.

Humanist authorial context

- Percy Bysshe Shelley was a major poet of the Romantic period, and remains one of England’s best loved and most influential writers.
- Despite being born into a wealthy family, Shelley chose to pursue his passion for writing, leading to financial uncertainty and familial estrangement.
- Shelley’s was a humanist creed of love for humankind, respect for nature, and equality for all, expressed in work which was considered radical and dangerous: promoting atheism, rebelling against authority, and expressing the desire for greater freedoms for everyone.
- Though his life was short, he made a tremendous impact on the thinking of his time.
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Classroom discussion questions

- What questions does the poem raise about human meaning, purpose, and impact on a cosmic scale?
- What does legacy mean in the context of the poem? How does this relate to humanist ideas around how we might be remembered?
- Does the narrator of ‘Ozymandias’ have an implicit stance on how humans should live their lives? Does this link to humanist ideas about living well?

See Carl Sagan’s [Pale Blue Dot](#) for a humanist perspective on our situation and responsibilities and compare and contrast it with the words of Ozymandias.

Humanism in 'Climbing my Grandfather' by Andrew Waterhouse

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Climbing my Grandfather' focuses on the connection between a grandson and his grandfather. • The grandson sees the grandfather as a heroic figure, and both clearly find joy in their relationship; the speaker describes the grandfather's 'smiling mouth' and 'good heart'. • The simplicity of the language here creates an uncomplicated loving relationship, and links to the humanist idea that we can find joy in this world through our connection to others.
Legacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanists believe that, while there is no afterlife, our legacy can live on through our genes and our actions in this world. • The familial love and connection seen in this poem becomes the grandfather's legacy: 'stare into his brown eyes, watch a pupil / slowly open and close'. The grandson learns from the grandfather and seems to wish to absorb his wisdom while he can. • Waterhouse presents the grandfather's body as marked by events in his life - 'the glassy ridge of a scar' - demonstrating the idea that we are shaped by our experiences.
Nature and the natural world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The way Waterhouse describes the grandfather creates a deep connection between him and nature; he is a mountain to be climbed, past 'the screed cheek' to reach 'the summit'. • Once the grandson reaches the top, he 'can only lie / watching clouds and birds circle', thus situating his grandfather within the natural world. • The grandfather becomes a figure of permanence, almost a part of nature, even though there is an awareness throughout the poem that he won't be around forever; the description of his 'slow pulse', and skin like 'warm ice' imply the continuing passage of time.

Humanist characterisation

- Waterhouse's characterisation of the grandfather reflects the humanist idea of creating our own legacy, as his connection to his grandson and his grandson's memories of him will outlive him.

Poetic structure & humanist themes

- There is a freedom of expression in the poem's structure as it is one single stanza with irregular line lengths. The journey to 'climb' the grandfather gives structure to the poem and offers a loving description of him.
- The poem as a whole could be said to memorialise the grandfather in anticipation of his inevitable death.

Classroom discussion questions

- How does Waterhouse explore the idea of legacy in the poem? How could this link to the way humanists view legacy and death?
- Explore the relationship between the grandson and the grandfather. How could this link to humanist views on connection and family?
- How could the natural imagery in the poem link to the humanist idea of our deep and meaningful connection to the natural world?

Humanism in 'Poppies' by Jane Weir

Which themes in the text link to humanist values or ideas?	How do they link to humanist values or ideas?
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weir presents the closeness of the mother and son relationship throughout the poem 'Poppies'. • The mother performs caring actions for the son despite the fact he is now an adult; she 'smoothed down [his] shirt's upturned collar' and 'rounded up as many white cat hairs as [she] could'. • This links to the humanist idea that we can find meaning in this world through our connections to one another and our loving relationships.
Legacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The imagery of the poppy, 'spasms of paper red', demonstrates the importance of the legacy of soldiers who have followed the same path before the son. • Humanists believe that while there is no afterlife, we can leave a legacy through our family and our actions, and both of these ideas are expressed in the poem. • The poem also focuses on the memories that the mother holds of the son: 'I wanted to [...] play at being Eskimos like we did when / you were little', 'hoping to hear / your playground voice', presenting the idea that the son leaves these traces of his past self, almost as a legacy, with the mother who loves him.
Individual agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is an inevitability to the son's leaving and becoming his own person in adulthood that reflects the typical mother/child relationship. • Weir describes 'the world overflowing like a treasure chest', demonstrating the son becoming his own person with individual agency and having the desire to explore the world away from his mother. • The mother recognises the importance of this moment - it is she who 'threw [the door] open', demonstrating this rite of passage. • Humanists believe that we should be offered the freedom to live life in the way we choose, providing that we do no harm to others. These sentiments are often present at a humanist naming ceremony. • This change in the nurturing relationship and letting go of the child is an important part of that growth.

Humanist characterisation

- Weir's characterisation of the mother reflects the humanist idea of a universality of human emotion and shared human experiences.
- The image of the mother wishing her son well as he leaves, as she '**steelled the softening of [her] face**', and with her '**stomach busy making tucks, darts, pleats**', can link to an experience felt by caregivers across the world as the child grows up and leaves home.

Poetic structure & humanist themes

- The poem's use of a first person narration, and the direct address to the son, including personal details like '**I wanted to graze my nose / across the tip of your nose**', creates an image of the deep connection between mother and son and the memories that the mother holds dear.

Classroom discussion questions

- How does the poem express a humanistic perspective on our personal autonomy and freedom to find our own path in life?
- How does Weir present the humanist idea of shared human experiences in 'Poppies'?
- How important is the theme of legacy in 'Poppies'? How could this link to the way some humanists might view ideas surrounding legacy?
- How does Weir present the deep and meaningful connection between the mother and her son? How could this link to humanist ideas surrounding the importance of human relationships?