

Understanding poverty and wealth through literary texts

Literature provides a way to get inside the facts and figures, to consider the relative evils of urban and rural poverty, differing manifestations of poverty across different cultures and historical periods, and to gain insight into the experience of poverty.

It allows us to 'get under the skin' of the issues, to engage with them at a human level, to see things through others' eyes and from a variety of perspectives.

The following is a small selection of relevant literature in the English language.

- Novels by Dickens, the Brontes and Mrs Gaskell describe 19th Century urban and rural poverty and class struggle, while also providing food for thought on wealth and philanthropy.
- 20th Century literature has Frank McCourt's *'Angela's Ashes'*, [Ireland], Steinbeck's *'The Grapes of Wrath'* [USA during the Great Depression] and Seamus Heaney's powerful poem *'At a Potato Digging'* [the Irish potato famine]. The destructive potential of wealth is a theme in *'The Great Gatsby'*.
- Coming right up to the present, J K Rowling's *'The Casual Vacancy'* explores conflict between wealthy and poor in middle England.
- Rural and urban poverty in early 19th century England may be compared by reading *'Lyrical Ballads'* [Wordsworth and Coleridge] alongside Blake's *'Songs of Innocence and Experience'*.
- *'Call the Midwife'* depicts poverty in London's East End whilst raising issues about wealth in terms of human relationships.
- African literature in English has the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *'Half of a Yellow Sun'* depicting refugees' struggle for existence during the Biafran War, while Kenyan novelist, Meja Mwangi's *'Going Down River Road'* and *'The Cockroach Dance'* contain hard hitting depictions of urban poverty.

Some Spanish suggestions include: *'Los Santos Inocentes'* by Miguel Delibes, the work of the 16th Century writer Lazarillo de Tormes and of Eduardo Galeano.



Opening up the world through literature: what texts would you choose from your bookshelf?



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