English 11-Merit Summer Reading

Welcome to English 11-Merit! As you know, merit- and honors-level English classes begin with a summer reading assignment, and this year is no different. Before the beginning of the semester when you have English 11, you will be expected to read a novel or play (from the list of options below) and demonstrate your understanding of it.

Because English 11 focuses on American literature--and what it reveals about the American experience over the course of history--you will be reading a novel or play that is written by an American author and that address the experiences of a particular group (based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or gender) during a particular era in America’s history. Your options are below. Before you choose which work to read, do some research online (reading summaries of the different choices) so that you can select the work you will find most interesting. Do not simply choose the shortest work; if the subject matter doesn’t interest you, a short book can be much less pleasant than a longer one that does capture your attention.

When you have made your selection, read your chosen work thoroughly and carefully, considering what it reveals about the experiences of the group being addressed. Also consider what universal thematic meaning it reveals (a truth or insight about some aspect of human nature or life in general). Make note of passages, details, and quotes that reveal overall meaning. You will be sharing your insights about the novel/play during small group discussion and specific questioning by Ms. Theriot. Your grade for the summer reading will be based on how well you demonstrate understanding of the work during this discussion. Do not try to skim the book just to find overall plot points or try to get by with watching a movie version. These approaches will not lead to a thorough understanding of the work’s meaning. Also, remember that your understanding of the book should be based on **your** reading and analysis. Do not use **any** outside sources--including “homework helper” websites--to supplement or replace your reading of the actual text.

There are a number of aspects of the work that you should think about when preparing for a literary discussion, including this one. Many of these are the elements of fiction that you have studied in previous English classes; the reason we address them every year is that they are all important in creating meaning in a text. The most important thing to remember is that the author is an actual person who has made decisions about every detail in the work. Always think about *why* he/she would have made those decisions and how they contribute to some overall idea (generally, a theme, which is a universal truth about life). Here are some key factors to consider about the work:

* Plot: Go beyond just comprehending what happens. Consider which events are most significant and why. Also think about why the author would have chosen to make those events occur.
* Conflict: What are the primary conflicts? Who or what is involved? How is each conflict resolved, and what do the characters learn (about life in general or some specific aspect of it) as a result? How are the characters changed by the conflict and its resolution?
* Setting: Remember that this includes both time and place. Consider the various aspects of setting and think about why they could be significant. (For example, if a work is set in spring, that could suggest new beginnings. If it is set at Christmastime, there may be a message about Christmas-related ideas like kindness toward others. If an adult character returns to his/her childhood home, the author may be revealing something about how people change as they grow or about the value of family or long-held traditions, etc.)
* Characters: Identify the major characters and their key personality traits. Then, consider which ones are presented sympathetically (in a way that makes readers like them). Often, authors give characters certain traits or behaviors and then make those characters likeable to encourage readers to adopt similar approaches to life. Antagonists (the “bad guys”) often display traits or behaviors that authors are encouraging readers to avoid. Also consider minor characters, why they are included, and what they could represent. Finally, pay close attention to any major changes that characters undergo. Again, think about why the author would have the character change in that way and what the impact is. (If a change makes a character happier and more content, while having a positive impact on others as well, the author is probably suggesting that such a change is a positive one for people in general to make.)
* Ending: Consider the overall situation at the end of the work and what has caused it to be this way. If the characters are generally happy, what has caused them to be this way (in a generalized sense that could apply to most people)? For example, have they learned to work together or become better educated or value their true selves? If there are major problems that remain at the end, what has caused them (again, in a generalized way that shows people what overall kinds of actions and choices to avoid)?

Limited copies of the works are available and will be loaned out on a first-come, first-served basis. If you have any questions or would like to check out one of the works, see Ms. Theriot.

Summer Reading Options:

* *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry
* *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck