

What is the context of a text?

The aims of this unit are

- to extend your understanding of the different contexts which may throw light on a text, taking this beyond 'historical background'
- to look at the context in which 'texts are written and understood', for example: matters of genre; language; textual production
- to consider the way in which the text is received
- to look at a text in relation to the writer's entire works.

Yesterday's news

- Working in pairs or small groups, jot down some of the songs, television programmes and trends which you associate particularly with the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. A few examples are given here to get you started:
 - Ali G
 - *The Simpsons*
 - Dreamcast
 - *The Royle Family*.
- Choose one of these and annotate it with some of the references, jokes and so on which you think will need explaining in 10, 20 or 50 years time.

A first reading

- On your own, read and jot down your response to the poem 'Killing Time.'

A poem for a particular time

This is an extract from a longer poem by Simon Armitage, written when he was poet in residence with the New Millennium Experience Company.

- Re-read the poem and make a note of how you respond to the poem now that you know when, and for what purpose, it was written. Some things you might consider are suggested here:
 - it is about events set in a particular time
 - it was commissioned (a poem written to order)
 - it is a public poem
 - it is an extract from a longer poem.
- In pairs or small groups, talk about the way your response to the poem and your understanding of it altered.

Understanding the references

The poem is set at a particular time and place in the late twentieth century. It uses an event more normally recounted in newspaper stories to explore life, beliefs and attitudes in twentieth century Britain. This means that readers in the future may need to do some research before they can fully understand what it is about.

- Imagine you are editing the poem for a reader in the year 2050. Work in pairs and highlight the parts of the poem which you think will need explaining. What knowledge does it assume the reader will have?

- Are there any references in the poem which puzzle you or which you don't understand? If there are, stop and consider why this might be.
- Still working in pairs, write the footnotes which you think a reader in 2050 will need.

The contexts of the poem

- Working in small groups, compare the footnotes you have written and spend a few minutes talking about what different people think will need contextualising in the future.
- Use the details collected to try to classify the contexts of this text. Illustrate each one with an example from the poem.

Context	Example	Notes
Historical/political		
Generic (literary conventions)		
Linguistic		
Cultural		
Social/shared values		

- As a class talk about the ways in which the experience of reading a text alters in the following situations:
 - reading a text without knowing the context (political, social and cultural) in which a text is written
 - reading a text when the references are familiar – 'natural'
 - reading a text in conjunction with footnotes.

Writing for the moment

- Write your own section of a poem in the style of Simon Armitage's 'Killing Time'. Focus it on one of the following:
 - an area of life you feel you are an expert on, for example, club culture
 - a current cultural trend, for example, fashion or music
 - what's happening in a soap you watch
 - the week's big news stories and how they are reported.
- Use your poem to explore or comment more generally on life at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

From *Killing Time* – Simon Armitage

Meanwhile, hot air rises.
And the two men held for twenty-one days in living conditions
decidedly worse
than those in most high security prisons
are not the victims
of some hard-line, oppressive regime, or political refugees,
or eco-warriors
digging in on the side of rare toads and ancient trees,
or dumbstruck hostages,
or Western tourists kidnapped by gun-toting terrorists,
or moon-eyed murderers
on death row, or self-captivated Turner Prize exhibitionists,
but balloonists, actually,
jet-streaming the globe, riding the one, continuous corner
of the world's orb.
In a picnic basket swinging from a bunsen burner
suspended beneath
a tuppenny rain-hood filled with nothing but ether,
Messrs Piccard and Jones
hitched a ride on a current of air and lapped the equator
in less time than it takes the moon
to go through its snowball-cycle of freezing and thawing.
Think of all the mental energy
and tax dollars pumped into that Stealth bomber thing
with its invisible paint
and silent engines and non-reflective angles;
all that fuss
when all along we could have sided with the angels.
All we have to do,
apparently, is catch the breeze and hold our breath,
strike a match
and watch the planet going round and round beneath.

How the context of the reading affects interpretations

This activity suggests that

- the meaning of a text is not fixed
- the meaning a reader makes of a text is affected by many contextual factors, including the way in which it is encountered.

Reading two poems

You will be working in pairs on either page 17 or pages 18 and 19.

- Working in pairs, quickly read poem A. Spend no more than five minutes talking about your response to the poem and what you understand it to be about.
- Next, turn to poem B. This is the poem you will be focusing on and you should spend some time reading, annotating and talking about the form, language, structure and themes. You could begin by looking closely at the title and jotting down the expectations it raises.
- On your own, or in pairs, draft a paragraph summing up what you think poem B is about and your reasons for thinking this.
- Compare your ideas about poem B with one or two more pairs who have been working on the same sheet.

Comparing responses

- Join up with another pair who have been working on the other sheet.
- Take it in turns to read and talk through your interpretation of poem B on your sheet. As you listen, make a note of anything which surprises you.
- Compare your responses to poem B. Highlight the differences in your interpretations and use these to explore in more detail what influenced and shaped your reading of the poem. Some ideas to get you started are suggested below:
 - the title of the poem
 - the effect of reading poem B *after* reading poem A.
- Prepare to feed back what you have learned to the rest of the class.

Whole class discussion

- Listen to each group's feedback. Draw together some conclusions about the ways in which an individual's reading of a text is shaped, particularly the relationship between the contexts in which you read, and your interpretations of the text.

Poem A

What the Donkey Saw

No room in the inn, of course,
And not that much in the stable,
What with the shepherds, Magi, Mary,
Joseph, the heavenly host -
Not to mention the baby
Using our manger as a cot.
You couldn't have squeezed another cherub in
For love or money.

Still, in spite of the overcrowding,
I did my best to make them feel wanted.
I could see the baby and I
Would be going places together.

U.A. Fanthorpe

Poem B

Nativity

After two thousand years
The star burned out
The kings froze in history
The angels froze in the bible
The mysteries in tinsel.
When the shepherds heard voices
They knew it was only the wind.

Out of that arctic legend
Only one escaped
On the high horse of power:
Riding the centuries down
His drumming hooves have harried
All others off the roads.
Now he assumes his hour -

And everything that is
Must crawl beneath
The Herod-coloured sky.
He is the lord of all.

His guards lean on the gates
The road is barred
The bullrushes cut down;
Around the derelict fable
His soldiers tighten their net
And now they beat
Hard on the stable door.

Where through the only gate
No magistrate may guard
His enemy leaps in.
He lies in a hollow of straw
Deserted by kings and gods
With only the cows and the sheep
Too silly to get out.

In despite of Herod's curfew
Light stirs in the city.
Because it is pitiful
Pity runs to the child:
Help breaks down the door
Because it has cried for help:
The poor press back the guards.

Bringing whatever is needed
Because it is in need
Because the seed must grow
And the child is the seed.

The social and cultural contexts of language

The aim of this unit is

- to help you focus on the knowledge you bring to texts, particularly your understanding of the social and cultural contexts of the language of literary texts.

The little Renault already looked sculpted out of snow, and the key would not turn in the door lock. She freed it with a patent squirt imported from Finland, and hastily discontinued, called Superpiss. Charles had given it to her for a joke, suggesting she used it as a visual aid to introduce Saussurean linguistics to first year undergraduates, holding the tube aloft to demonstrate that what is onomatopoeia in one language community may be obscenity in another.

Nice Work by David Lodge

When we talk, listen and write in our first language it is easy to forget just how complicated this language is. We take for granted many of the rules and conventions. This unit highlights some of the ways in which particular words are given additional significance by both individual readers and societies. As a result the word, and its visual representation, comes to mean more than what it stands for – or signifies – on a literal level.

The activities give you the chance to consider a well known poem from the point of view of a reader who is unfamiliar with the social and cultural contexts of the English language. For this reader to fully appreciate the poem you may need to find an explanation for things which, as a student of English Literature, you have become used to taking for granted. For example, in love poetry 'rose' does not refer (only) to the flower, but is often used as a metaphor for the experience of being in love.

The Alien Robot

Imagine a robot from an alien planet lands on earth. The robot has been programmed to understand the following:

- the way the English language works grammatically in ordinary speech and writing
- the dictionary definition of words, including the words humans use to describe emotions, for example 'love'
- the fact that language is used to communicate instructions, explanations and descriptions
- that language exists in written and spoken form.

However, the robot has no experience or understanding of the following:

- gender differences (in the robot's world there is no such thing as he or she)
- language used in a non-literal way (for example, metaphor and symbolism)
- words which have more than one meaning
- the use of language for anything other than communicating basic instructions, explanations and descriptions
- poetry or literature.

During his visit the alien robot comes across 'Sonnet 18' by William Shakespeare, printed on page 21.

A robotic response

- Read the poem a couple of times, underlining anything you think would be a problem for the robot. Annotate a few of these with your ideas to show why the robot would find it difficult.
- As a class, spend a few minutes sharing your first ideas.

Questioning the poem

- Working in pairs or small groups, take responsibility for looking more closely at one of the aspects of language about which the robot has no understanding (gender, non-literal language and so on). Write five questions the robot would need answering before it could understand the poem.
- Using what you know about the conventions of the language and its social and cultural contexts, try and provide your answers to the robot's questions.
- Prepare a short account of your discoveries to present to the rest of the class.

Whole class discussion

- Listen to the poem being read out loud, followed by the groups' presentations.
- As a class, sum up what you have learned about the significance of the social and cultural contexts of language.

Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.