Texts and Contexts

introducing literature and language study
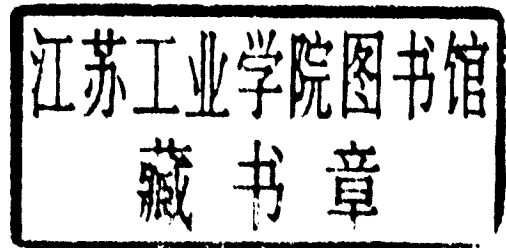
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ROUTLEDGE

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Texts and contexts

A framework

All academic subjects have methods of enquiry which need to be employed, methods which are based upon certain theoretical frameworks. English is no exception. This book is based on the central idea that when you study English at an advanced level, your reading of texts will be more thorough and sophisticated if you approach it through a clear framework. In doing this, your critical responses will come from a methodical approach, just as happens in other subjects you study.

This should not mean that reading becomes a chore, yet another activity burdened by complex jargon and terminology. What it should mean is that you are more receptive to different ways of looking at texts, and that you get more from them by realising that their meanings are not fixed. Note here that the word 'meanings' has deliberately been used in the plural, to emphasise that you are not searching for one meaning that is correct, but for the many meanings that are possible.

Having a theoretical framework for your study of literature, far from cramping your style, in fact gives you the freedom to look at texts in more varied and creative ways.

For most of the twentieth century, advanced reading at sixth form involved the reading of 'great works' from Literature; there were no English language courses at sixth form and no courses which allowed the study of language alongside that of literature. Generally speaking, students read works by 'great' authors, chosen by their teachers who then guided them towards an understanding of what

these books were supposedly 'about'. This meant that the content of the texts was always seen as far more important than the processes of reading them. It also meant that studying literature was a rather passive process.

This way of looking at texts is now challenged by critics, teachers and students, who argue that the processes of writing and reading require a more rigorous, coherent analysis. This in turn frees the student to be a more active participant in the process, sharing the reading rather than receiving it from someone else.

When old ideas are being challenged by new methods, there is inevitably conflict and resentment, making it necessary, often, for writers and teachers to declare where they stand. This will be done in this opening chapter.

Task

The four numbered sections below give you a flavour of how approaches to reading have developed and changed. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, each section has a paragraph marked 'Then' and another marked 'Now'. The first paragraph looks at how texts have often been read in the past; the second offers a more modern view, which this book encourages you to take as you work your way through it. As you read through these four sections, ask yourself the following questions:

1   With which of the approaches to reading are you familiar?
2   What methods did you use/were you encouraged to use at earlier stages of your education?
3   This book is clearly advocating the methods marked 'Now'. What do you think?

Literature and reality

Then Authors, it was sometimes assumed, wrote about and reflected an absolute thing called 'reality'. They put meaning and reality into their texts, and if the readers were intelligent enough, and helped by a teacher who could show them how to see it, they would be able to see this reality presented to them. This led to the idea that characters in books were also 'real'. An example of this, which is sometimes still given to students, is in *Wuthering Heights*: 'Is Heathcliff a

hero or a villain?' Stated like this, it removes the author and the reader from the equation. It even removes the idea that this is a character in a novel, while also suggesting that Heathcliff must be either a hero or villain, but not a mixture of both.

In some cases, this concept of real characters led to the idea that they even have lives outside the books in which they appear. One of the best-known products of this bizarre idea is the work of the critic A.C. Bradley in which he speculates on issues such as 'Did Emilia suspect Iago?' or 'Did Lady Macbeth really faint?'

Now There is no such thing as absolute, objective reality. All use of language involves the language user and the language receiver in a relationship – and relationships are complex things, viewed differently by all involved. There can therefore be no such thing as objective 'reality' reflected by a great author and understood by a reader. Instead, all things are relative, and the best way to study a text is to explore it with an open mind, using various approaches.

Literature and genius

Then Writers, especially dead ones, were often made out to be geniuses; they somehow rose above common mortality and the social and cultural issues of their time, to produce works which are timeless in their meaning and significance. Shakespeare is still, of course, often held up as the classic example of true genius at work. In British exam syllabuses, decreed by Government, Shakespeare stands in a category all by himself, outside the requirements of time or genre. He is seen neither as a dramatist, nor as an Elizabethan – he is simply Shakespeare, simply the best, better than all the rest. This means that the variable qualities of his plays have often gone unquestioned.

Now Texts are produced by authors who live in the political and social world of their time, and we gain a better understanding of their works by taking these contexts into account. It is sometimes wrongly suggested that texts are somehow self-contained, existing in a world of their own and so free from outside influences. This in turn leads to the idea that some authors are geniuses who manage to operate outside the world the rest of us inhabit. Writers, including Shakespeare, are often very skilled in their craft, but they are not superhuman.

Literature and the reader

Then The role of the reader, one part of the relationship described in 'Literature and reality' above, was often ignored. This meant that texts were seen to be independent of their readers. They sat on a shelf with their meaning already encoded, waiting to be picked up by a reader who would try to break the code and extract the meaning. Reading would be a very limited, and limiting, activity if this were the case.

If texts were seen to have a fixed and permanent meaning which did not change, either with time or with different readers, then this in turn led to the idea that society would be a better place if everyone at school was forced to read the works of 'great' authors. These texts would contain clear and unchanging moral lessons, which students would then put into effect in their own lives. This view is still held in some political quarters.

Now *The Merchant of Venice*, with its anti-semitism, or *The Taming of the Shrew* , with its sexism, surely need to be challenged as examples of good morality at work. A text cannot have an existence independent of its readers, who recreate the text through bringing their own culturally-conditioned views and attitudes to bear on it. Each reader recreates the text as it is read – and re-read – because no reading is ever the same. This makes readers active, vital participants in the reading process, rather than mere passive recipients of accepted ideas. If readers are actively creating new meanings, then logically this means that the text cannot contain any single fixed permanent meaning. An extension of this is that books may encourage readers to consider moral issues, but books are not in themselves going to change social behaviour, or make people behave more morally.

Literature and interpretation

Then Students were often told that there is no right answer, that as long as you have an opinion, then it is valid. Literature, it was claimed, is all about individual personal response, which the reader's mind intuitively produces when it is in contact with great texts. This at first sight might seem to contradict what has been said about encoded meanings in 'Literature and the reader' above; the idea of individual response only paid lip-service to freedom of thought. What it really implied is that texts have a timeless meaning and signifi-cance, which is only reached by paying careful attention to a teacher

and other critics who have already worked out what it all means. Your opinion was only valid if you read by the rules.

Now Although it is agreed that there is no single right 'answer' in literary analysis, it cannot be accepted that any *opinion* is valid. Just as other academic subjects require the careful application and evaluation of different theories, so does reading. The result of careful study is not so much opinion, but *informed judgement*. Applying to texts different aspects of a reading framework will produce many different ideas, interpretations, meanings. Weighing these up, and deciding which ones you respond to in particular, is what needs to be encouraged – but this involves rather more method than merely having an opinion.

Summary

The governing principle of this book is to suggest that it is possible to approach texts, including literary texts, in a variety of ways which can be explained and then applied. How you responded to the first two questions about your earlier reading will to some extent determine your response to the third. You may feel that you are already acquainted with many of the ideas that are marked as modern. On the other hand you may feel annoyed that methods and assumptions that you have worked with before are now being challenged; that things are suddenly being made difficult. Far from making reading more difficult, looking at contexts can provide a framework which allows you, the reader, to work out your own ideas and responses without feeling that there is somehow a right answer out there which only the privileged few can access. This should make your study of English more varied, more challenging, and ultimately more fun.

The next part of this opening chapter introduces a framework based upon the idea of contexts.

The word 'contexts': the assessment objectives for rewritten Advanced Level courses, which will begin the new millennium, talk of students 'studying the contexts in which texts were written'. The word 'context' has had different uses in the study of English, and it is worth looking at these first.

For many years the word 'context' was used to describe a particular sort of exercise in English studies. Students were given a small part of a larger text they had already studied, and were then asked a series of questions on it. It was a sort of quiz or puzzle, because essentially they had to recognise whereabouts in the text it came, what it

showed about the plot or action at that point and possibly what it showed about the text as a whole. The questions that were asked usually focused on behaviour of characters, the themes that were being explored and something called the 'style' of the passage.

In the A Level assessment objectives, and in this book too, the word 'context' is used in a different way from that mentioned in the previous paragraph. Like all words involving the root 'text', 'context' originates from the idea of weaving together, as in 'textile'. *The New Oxford Dictionary*, published in 1998, defines context as 'the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood and assessed'. In other words, instead of looking at small bits of a text in predictable ways, this book will suggest that exploring context involves much bigger issues – the 'circumstances' that contribute both to its production by the author and to its reception by the reader. Context refers to what goes *with* a text, rather than what is *in* it.

You should note at this point that in the A Level assessment objectives, the word 'contexts' is in the plural. So too is the word 'circumstances' in the New Oxford definition quoted above. This deliberate use of plurals is important for you to recognise. The plurals suggest that when reading texts we are looking for more than a single perspective, rooted in a single cause.

This book uses the idea of contexts while it explores ideas around the writing and reading of texts. Listed below are five broad strands of context that will be explored through a range of texts and ideas and with questions which give you some idea of what is involved in each strand. As you work through the book, you, as reader, will be asked how the answers to these questions affect the way you view the texts under discussion.

Although these strands may seem unusual or complex at this stage, do not worry; each chapter will return to these central ideas about context and your understanding of them will develop as you work through the book.

A context framework

The writer's context

1   What do we know about the writer's life, values, assumptions, gender, race, class, sexual orientation etc.?

2   What do we know about the values and assumptions prevalent in the culture in which the writer lived? How was the writer influenced by these values and to what extent did the writer challenge them?
3   What political/economic issues were important at the time?

The text's context

1   What is its publishing history? For example: are there different versions; is it read in translation; was it originally serialised; is it part of a larger text such as a newspaper or anthology?
2   What sources contributed to it?
3   What is the text's relationship to other texts; does it, for instance, echo the language of another text, the ideas of another text?
4   What is its history of performance and what audience and/or readers has it had over time?
5   What previous critical reviews has it received and how do they affect the way we view the text now?

The reader's context

1   What is your previous reading experience?
2   How do your values, assumptions, gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation etc. affect the way you read the text?
3   How are your views shaped by the political and economic issues of your time?
4   How are your views shaped by the values and assumptions of the culture in which you live?

The readings context

1   How do different critical schools respond to this text?
2   How can different critical theories and methods be applied to the text?
3   How is the text ambiguous in its meanings?
4   What is left unsaid in the text?

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The language context

1   What generic conventions does the text follow, and how does the reader recognise them?
2   How is the text's narrative organised?
3   How do various linguistic features affect the way we read the text?
4   In what ways can we approach the question 'How does this text work?'

All of the above questions form ways to approach the single question 'What does this text mean?'

It is important at this stage to stress that these are not listed in any sort of hierarchy. All texts are subject to enquiry from the standpoints of all the contexts listed above. As was noted earlier, when discussing contexts, we are looking at plurality. This means that there is no single right response when studying texts and it is possible, indeed preferable, to see that there are many different ways that a text can be read and discussed. This means that you are not looking for one solution when you read and study texts, but for lots of different ways of approaching and responding to them.

Conclusion

This opening chapter has introduced some ideas which may be new to you, and has suggested some theoretical ways of looking at texts. It has also challenged some traditional views about how to study literature. Above all it has said that you, the reader, are as important as the author of the text you are reading. The next chapter begins the task of putting the theory into practice.

Texts and contexts

Whose dog are you?

In the last chapter you were introduced to the idea of context. In this chapter the idea is expanded further with a short practical activity to work on. To help you develop your understanding of the idea of context, you are given a task, followed by a commentary. You can either complete the task first, and then look at the commentary, or you can use the commentary to help you with your answers.

Task

Read the following poem carefully a number of times; then work at the questions which follow.

Text *Epigram*

**Epigram Engraved on the Collar of a Dog
which I Gave to His Royal Highness**

I am his Highness' dog at Kew:
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?

Alexander Pope

Either individually or in a group, write:

1   briefly what you understand this poem to be about;

2   a list of questions that arise from your reading of the poem, the answers to which you would find helpful when analysing this poem. They may include words you do not understand, factual detail you would find helpful etc.

Commentary

When given these tasks, one group of students came up with the following questions:

1   What is an epigram?
2   Who is 'I' and 'you' in the poem? Is 'I' in the title different from 'I' in the poem?
3   What exactly was given to his Highness?
4   Who does 'sir' refer to?
5   What is Kew? Who was His Royal Highness?
6   When was this poem written and do we know anything about why Pope may have written it?

An epigram is defined as 'a short poem, especially a satirical one, which has a clever and witty ending'. In the title to his poem, Pope spells out that it belongs to a certain **genre**. Looking at the genre of a text is one way of thinking about its content and purpose. By giving the poem the label of an epigram, Pope is stating that the poem is satirical in purpose and he hopes to amuse the reader. Such a long title to such a short poem is also to comic effect.

This epigram is not only brief, it is also written in a rhyming couplet. A rhyming couplet is a term used to describe two lines of poetry which rhyme, and whose sense is usually complete. Because of the rhythm, and the growing anticipation of the rhyme which completes the couplet, it can be argued that the greatest weight or emphasis in a couplet comes with the last word, especially if it is monosyllabic. Here the last word is 'you'. This leads us to look at pronouns in the poem, but later the commentary will return to the importance of this final word.

Pronouns are words which are normally substituted for nouns, such as 'I', 'You', etc. Pronouns require what is technically called **pronoun reference**; they make sense because they refer to something that has already been named. The problem here is that the pronouns cannot easily be placed in their reference. Who is the 'I' of the title, and is it the same 'I' who appears in the first line of the

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poem? Who is the 'you' in the last line of the poem? It seems to refer to the word 'sir', but who this 'sir' is remains vague. There are many possible ways of looking at these pronouns and that is deliberate – Pope actually wants the reader to be uncertain. He has deliberately created **ambiguity**.

In looking at genre, effects of verse sounds and structure, and pronouns, you are focusing on the linguistic features of the poem – part of **the language context**. When coming to a text 'cold', without the benefit of extra information, it is likely that your first responses, your first ways into the text will be linguistic, drawing also on your previous experience as a reader of texts.

Another way of thinking about the pronouns, and another part of **the language context**, is to explore what **narrative structure** is being used here. It seems unlikely that the same narrative 'I' is being used in the title as in the poem itself: in the title it could be the author himself, or a fictional persona invented by the author; in the poem it could be the 'voice' of the dog wearing the collar. We must then ask who is reading the text, who is being addressed by it when the word 'you' is used? In the final reckoning, of course, it is you the actual reader, but there is also a created reader here, an imagined fictional reader who meets the dog and reads its collar. Who could this be? Someone who comes across the dog at Kew? Or even the King himself who does, after all, own the dog?

Because of the various possibilities, this seems rather complex – as narrative in texts can be. It often helps to show the process in a tabular form:

- ◉ real author (Pope)
- ◉ invents persona ('I' of title)
- ◉ who invents a fictional voice ('I' of poem; the dog)
- ◉ which speaks to an imagined reader ('you' who reads the collar; king? courtiers?)
- ◉ which is read by the real reader ('you' who works out the real point).

Ultimately, the real author is communicating with the real reader, but the way this is done is vital to the way the message is received. Just as it can be wrong to assume that the 'I' who narrates a story is actually the author, when it can be a fictional character, so it can be wrong to assume that the story is addressed directly to the real reader, when it can be addressed to a fictional reader or readers.

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