

## 8 Texts in Context

### Objectives

- To learn about various ways of placing texts in context
- To develop the ability to recognize and make use of relevant contextual information
- To prepare for studying and writing about the literature of a particular historical era or literary period

### What do we mean by context?

When we study a poem, a play, a novel or any other piece of writing we may initially give most of our attention to exploring and analysing the text we see in front of us. However, no literary text can exist in a vacuum, or entirely on its own. All kinds of factors influence the way authors write and affect the way we read their work. Becoming aware of this background information can enhance our understanding and enjoyment of texts by enabling us to see them as part of a wider picture. In other words, we place them in context.

There are several ways in which we can begin to place texts in context. We can consider:

- how a text interrelates with the events of the **author's life**
- the place of a particular text in the **author's oeuvre** or **writings as a whole**
- how the text reflects the **historical period** and/ or the **place** in which it was written
- the text as an example of its **genre** or of a particular **literary style** or **period**
- the ways in which the **language** of a particular time or place is reflected in the text
- how our reading of the text might be influenced by the way other readers or critics have reacted to it recently or in the past, that is its **reception**
- the place and significance in the work as a whole of an **extract**, such as a passage from a novel or one poem from a collection.

### Relevant contexts

At AS level, at least part of your study of literature will be integrated with the study of a particular context – a historical era or literary period. This involves becoming familiar not only with the events, but also the beliefs, ideas and concerns that have influenced or inspired the writers of that time. It works both ways, however. As you study the literary works, they themselves will reveal a lot about how society functioned at the time when they were written. You will be expected to recognize features that make a text typical – or atypical – of its context and to make your understanding clear by linking it with other texts you have read.

At A2 level, you will study literature relating to a particular theme across the whole sweep of English literature from Chaucer to the present day. In doing so, you should develop an awareness of the differences between the literary styles and conventions of different times and contexts and learn to draw comparisons between them.

Each of the other chapters in this section will introduce you to the literature of a particular period or context which is set for A level study. First, though, we will look more generally at some ways into exploring literature from a contextual point of view.

### The author's biography

It can certainly be interesting and increase our enjoyment of texts if we learn something about the lives of the people who wrote them. Indeed, it can be difficult to make any sense at all of some writing without any such knowledge. There can be two sides to this issue, however. Some critics believe that a text should stand alone and that as students of literature we should concern ourselves only with the words on the page, while others suggest that we should learn as much as possible about an author's life and times in order to understand the work fully. For AS and A level, we are aiming to achieve a balance between these two approaches.

Some awareness of a writer's biography may be invaluable for understanding what lies behind the work, but it cannot take the place of thorough knowledge of the text itself and it can create some pitfalls. For example, in essays or exam answers, it may be tempting to include more of the writer's life story than necessary, if you have spent time learning about it. Unless you have specifically been asked to write about the text in this way, too much biographical information can waste valuable time and words that would be better spent focusing on the text itself. It is more likely that you will want to demonstrate your understanding in more subtle ways, including facts or background details only when they are clearly relevant or they support points you want to make about the text.

### Finding biographical information

As a starting point, editions intended for study, particularly of classics or older texts, often include an introduction with some biographical material. The best way to gain a deeper understanding of an author's life and times, however, is to read a good biography, or if one exists, an autobiography.

Biographies can vary enormously. Some can be thoroughly researched and packed with information but very dry and dull to read, while others may be enjoyable – even scandalous – but less accurate. It is worth dipping into a few, if they are available. It can be particularly interesting to compare the different viewpoints found in biographies written by contemporaries of the author with those written more recently. For example, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* by Elizabeth Gaskell, published in 1857, gives not only a fascinating and personal account of her friend's life, but provides an inside view of society in the Victorian era. There are plenty of more recent biographies of the Brontës to read for a modern perspective.

You could also try the following:

- **Encyclopaedias**
- **Diaries** or **letters** from the author, published in book form. These can give fascinating insights into a writer's life, and how and why he or she writes, as well as reflecting the events and concerns of the time. In studying the literature of the First World War, for example, there are many such documents to explore.
- **Television documentaries** or **films** about the lives and times of famous writers.
- The **Internet**. Contemporary writers, and associations of people interested in particular authors, such as The Brontë Society, often have websites, although you may have to search carefully for genuinely useful information.