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The Art of Being Alternative, with Style, in Context

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Archaeology or dissection. Broadly, these have been the two antagonistic approaches, producing alternative meanings in the study of literature through the twentieth century. Either a literary text is examined as an artefact from a period of the past, or it is described and analysed in its own terms, for art's sake. The former is really a very specific branch of historical study; the latter is often decontextualised nit-picking. The subject cores for A Level English reflect these approaches, with 'context' and 'cultural and historical influences' set alongside requirements for close analysis. In the English Language syllabuses, especially, close reading means stylistic analysis, informed by linguistic knowledge. Put like this, it would be difficult to sell either approach to students as an engaging and stimulating experience.

Of course, these days literary stylistics (though I prefer 'literary linguistics') is not purely formalist (and I will return to this at the end). It is also important to realise that 'context' does not necessarily just mean *historical* context. 'Context' literally means anything that comes 'with the text', that circumscribes its meaning. It is well understood in linguistics that the same sentence can have a radically different meaning in different environments. The sub-branch of linguistics called 'pragmatics' details how meaning is a product of the text in a particular context, and this involves the introduction of other determining concepts such as intention, social force in a situation, purpose of the text, and so on (see Thomas 1994, Jackson and Stockwell 1996, Jeffries 1998)

Here are some forms of context:

- historical
- cultural
- ideological
- purposive
- receptive
- pedagogic.

This is not a comprehensive list, but it will do for the moment. The question that differentiates these is a functional and practical matter: what is the text used for? Potentially there are limitless answers - a text can be 'gutted' for quotations for an essay, to learn lines for a production of a play, to prop open a window, torn up to line a drawer, or to wrap up chips. While all of these are uses of texts, I will restrict the discussion to what is usually done in the classroom. However, I am not being totally flippant in listing these uses, since it is important to realise the ideological authorisations that legitimise some uses of literature from others.

The different dimensions of context often overlap each other, as I will describe. Firstly, however, placing a text in the moment of its historical production is what is usually treated as 'context'. The vast majority of literary criticism falls into this category. Certain texts gather different meanings in the context of knowledge about political events at the time, social movements relevant to the writing, the biography of the author, and so on. Such information can be very illuminating, adding understanding both to the interpretation of the literature and to the historical period in question.

The cultural context is another dimension that can (but does not always necessarily) overlap with the historical context. Being aware of the cultural context of texts and interpretations can produce quite different meanings. This is obvious when dealing with texts in which the cultural environment is clearly specified, as in Indian, South African or American literature in English, and which British students might or might not share. There are more subtle effects of cultural context as well. One of my older colleagues has commented on how the decline in regular churchgoing has produced students for whom biblical allusions in literature are meaningless, a factor which makes teaching Renaissance texts a different experience altogether. Understanding different cultural contexts even within Britain can illuminate differences in meaning: what am I to make of the highly personal insults in Pope's poetry? What do I know about the officer-class of the First World War that could affect my reading of their poems? How does a quiet sheltered child from the south of England read *Trainspotting*? These cultural contexts were brought home to me by the experience of watching the films *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* in Surrey, when it quickly became apparent that everyone else in the cinema thought they were watching straightforward comedies.

There is clearly an ideological context determining readings here as well. Some literary criticism is orientated around this dimension, though perhaps the effect of ideology on interpretation is not foregrounded enough at A Level. *Wuthering Heights* can certainly be read as a love story (as in the various film and dramatic readings), or in a more scholarly way as an updated medieval romance. It can be read as a proto-Gothic novel, especially when set beside the other Brontë texts. Or it can be read as a pre-Marxian dramatisation of a treatise on property rights (look up Heathcliff's very first uttered words), published at the time of the 1848 European revolutions.

Purposive contexts are usually subsumed into biographical history, but the motivation for creating literature is a separate context in its own right. In my own recent work on pre-war American pulp magazine science fiction, for example, much of the hilarious ineptitude of the expression can be ascribed to the fact that the writers were paid a quarter to half a cent per word. This economic factor, of course, produced sentences in which a verb is always accompanied by an adverb or adverbial phrase, a noun is always presented with various modifiers and qualifiers, and there is much repetition. The usual ellipses of normal fluent prose would cost money, so are not used. This all seems clumsy and inept at first glance, but a different understanding emerges when the original readership and the purpose of pulpstyle in terms of its market is considered. Pulpstyle SF readers were adolescent boys and newly arrived immigrants to the eastern USA, for whom English was often a poor second language.

For them, the style of the pulps was easily readable and entirely appropriate (see Stockwell 1999).

This leads into the receptive dimension of context. Every generation re-reads the literature of the past in its new terms. Michael Foot, in the introduction to the Penguin *Gulliver's Travels* (Swift 1726) sees an image of nuclear deterrence in the Laputan scientists' invention of the floating island, which threatens to drop onto its enemies destroying everything. Feminist re-readings of past literature from Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare to George Eliot and Virginia Woolf are receptive reinterpretations of meanings that would not have been accessible to original audiences. The current environmentalist re-reading of Wordsworthian pastoral or Shakespeare as 'ecocriticism' is a similar new receptive use. BBC2 recently ran a series of short comments on famous artworks by non-academic critics, such as a bricklayer's evaluation of a painting of the Great Wall of China, for example.

All of these dimensions of context are co-present in any single literary reading, perhaps though with a different aspect foregrounded as being the most relevant in a particular situation. They can all be explored to render alternative interpretations of the same text. They can also be combined. For example, ideologically different historical and cultural accounts can differentiate the readings of *Wuthering Heights*; the ideology of a feminist reading of *The Taming of the Shrew* can be contrasted with a reconstruction of the play's likely reception in 1592. These practices are all part of classroom study, a pedagogic use of literature, different again from the other contexts of use.

It is important to remember that the pedagogic context introduces a mediating artifice between the other contexts and the classroom reading. The pedagogic context is the one in which the other contexts are made explicit and are examined directly. In the classroom context, we do not just read Shakespeare, we also read various contextual readings (uses) of Shakespeare, and they become part of the study as much as the actual play-texts themselves. The pedagogic context, then, is a 'meta-context' that reflects on contextualisation. Whereas other contexts bring along their 'bare' reading concerns with them, the pedagogic context needs an analytical tool that crosses the boundaries. The best tool for the job of exploring texts, contexts and alternative readings is literary linguistics (or 'stylistics' if you prefer your terminology with flares).

Literary linguistics is not a mechanical answer machine. That is, it cannot be laid over a text to produce *the* meaning, since a meaning depends also on the contextual use which accompanies the text. Literary linguistics is a far more useful tool. It provides a common, non-impressionistic language with which students can compare readings of literature. As a methodological system, it can be used to discover evidence to support different contextualised readings, but it allows those readings to be articulated precisely and it exposes the grounds on which different readings are in themselves coherent and valid. It can also, of course, discriminate those readings which are unsupported at all by the text, and are thus completely off-the-wall and invalid.

In practice, different frameworks within literary linguistics can be applied depending on the interpretative context that is under investigation. Different readings can be explained by, for example, an analysis of verb-forms (who does what to whom in a murder scene?), phonology (how does the poem sound aloud and how are certain words emphasised by sound-patterns?), lexical choice (whose point of view and attitude is presented?). All of these can form part of whole-text analyses such as: explaining absurdist dialogue by contrasting it with a model of natural conversation; understanding the marginalisation of female characters by the different presentations of their speech and thought; comparing descriptive lyric and action narrative, and explaining their different effects; analysing political rhetoric, or dialectal variation, or tracking the conceptual mapping in metaphoric expressions; or understanding ironic readings through the manipulation of pragmatic conventions, and on and on.

Literary linguistics, in other words, can provide the grounds for understanding how a text read in a context can produce alternative meanings. Unfortunately there is not the space here to demonstrate this in detail, since such analyses require careful argument and illustration (the point that such close systematic discussion takes a lot of space is another question for the A Level Boards to consider). The following works exemplify the approach: Carter and Simpson (1989), Verdonk and Weber (1995), Short (1996), Simpson (1997), Culpeper, Short and Verdonk (1998); and the history of the approach is followed in Weber (1996).

Finally, the focus of this discussion has been on the alternative meanings that permutations of texts and contexts can produce. Most literary critical debate concentrates itself into this area. However, a recent empirical study has shown that readers tend to agree overwhelmingly in most interpretations, and the differences are disproportionately important simply *because* they are differences. The researchers suggest, 'If people in fact agree quite well in their interpretations of literary texts, the point of enterprises such as deconstructionism is, to put it mildly, rather unclear' (Martindale and Dailey 1995: 308). By contrast, the constructive and adaptable tool of literary linguistics can be a fine-tuning differentiator of literary meanings. I have always found that contextualised literary linguistics engages and enthuses students more than any other approach to literature. It is neither archaeology nor dissection. If you really want a metaphor for the work and enjoyment, the system and the elegance, here is one borrowed from Jeffries (1993): literary linguistics is yoga.

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