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**Moving beyond exposition: an action research project exploring the extent to which Year 10 students' appreciation of context might enhance their understanding of, and response to, poems studied for GCSE English Literature**

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**Abstract**

*In an educational climate where cultural capital, knowledge and literary heritage are prized, the requirement for GCSE English Literature candidates to show an understanding of the social, historical and literary context of texts studied is acknowledged to be a problematic area. This study, undertaken with a class of Year 10 students in a state-maintained, non-selective secondary school, examines students' opinions and different attitudes to both the value of contextual knowledge and how to teach it. The implications of the study are that students respond powerfully to certain texts with minimal contextual background. However, the study also suggests that adopting a contextual close reading approach, where text and context are considered alongside each other, can assist students in harnessing contextual understandings and cultural capital to illuminate language and make meaningful contextual references.*

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# **Moving beyond exposition: an action research project exploring the extent to which Year 10 students' appreciation of context might enhance their understanding of, and response to, poems studied for GCSE English Literature**

**Pieta DalGLISH**

## **Introduction**

My study focused on poems studied for The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). GCSE is an exam taken by English, Welsh and Northern Irish students in Year 11. My interest in this action research project arose out of my growing awareness of the challenges of teaching context for GCSE English Literature and the difficulties faced by students in meeting Assessment Objectives requiring an understanding of context and the writer's intentions. GCSE Examiners frequently complain that students fail to meet these objectives and include lengthy pieces of irrelevant biographical or historical information. Pupils who follow the AQA syllabus for English Literature at GCSE study poems from *GCSE English Literature. Past and Present: poetry anthology* (AQA, 2015). This anthology is divided into two clusters, broadly grouped by theme (Cluster One is called "Love and Relationships" and Cluster Two "Power and Conflict"). For the poetry element of GCSE English Literature, pupils will study only one of these clusters. During my Professional Placements, I taught both clusters of the AQA anthology. I therefore felt reasonably well placed in terms of professional experience to consider these issues in relation to poetry.

When I studied GCSE English Literature in the late 1980s, Assessment Objectives did not exist, and context was not routinely taught at this level. A wider interest in historical, social or biographical context was seen as the preserve of those who had an interest in literature that went beyond the examinations and who probably wanted to study English Literature at A Level and possibly at degree level.

Quoting from a 1967 English Literature A Level question, Barlow (2009) has pointed out that contextual elements have formed part of questions in English Literature A Level for many years (p.17). However, contextual understanding at KS4 is a more recent requirement, in part informed by an education policy which values cultural literacy, apparent in Gibb (2016): “Since coming into government in 2010, our reforms to the A levels, GCSEs, and the national curriculum have focused on bringing a new level of academic rigour to English state schooling. And central to this mission has been elevating knowledge to become a central component of a good school education.” I was interested in how approaches to teaching context can enhance students’ understanding of, and responses to, poetry, both in terms of meeting the Assessment Objectives and by developing a personal response to poetry, an area of literature which many teachers and students find challenging (on poetry being challenging, see Cliff Hodges & Rawlinson-Mills, 2019, p.182-183).

## **Teaching Context**

I conducted the research for this paper during my second Professional Placement at a state-maintained, non-selective secondary school, providing a single sex education for girls in Years 7 to 11, with a co-educational sixth form (the School). Due to its geographical situation, the School has a very low proportion of students from ethnic minorities and a very low proportion of SEN students. Most of the students at the school are from White, middle class backgrounds.

The Year 10 class of 29 pupils had been studying Cluster Two (“Power and Conflict”) from the AQA anthology since the beginning of the Spring term. The School sets broadly for English and this class was a second set, with predicted grades in the range 6-8, with the majority of students in the 7-8 range. Therefore, this was a class of high-attaining students.

Due to the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, I had only observed this class online before teaching them the lesson sequence in person. However, through the observations, I got to know the class reasonably well.

I complied with all the restrictions imposed by the global COVID-19 pandemic, so only pairs work was possible and no other group work. I could also walk around the class, with a mask.

## Literature review

### Conflicting approaches – formalism v historicism

Barry (2003) suggests that “balancing the claims of textuality and contextuality is one of the main problems encountered in literary study today” (p.63). Formalism, famously championed by the critic I.A. Richards, focuses on textuality and the formal, structural, linguistic and generic properties of a text, not its context. Historicism focuses on contextuality and seeks to understand the text in relation to its social, political and historical contexts.

Barry (2003) suggests that historicist approaches often involve reading ‘between the lines’, effectively “‘importing’ a new context into ... literary work[s]” (p.64). Whilst Barry accepts the validity of Edward Said’s postcolonial interpretation of *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen (in *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, 1995, as discussed in Barry, 2003), Barry notes that Said’s treatment of the issues is “actually quite broad-brush”, with limited textual analysis (p.65). In essence, Said’s reading of *Mansfield Park* involves interpreting what Austen leaves unsaid, leading Barry to suggest that “the problem of context in its most acute form is usually that of deciding how we interpret silence” (p.69). Contextual study focused on “silence” is apparent in recent postcolonial readings – see, for example, Fowler’s (2020) discussion of Heathcliff’s ethnicity in *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë (p.196-214). Whilst Fowler acknowledges that “we have to accept that Emily Brontë chose to be unspecific about his [Heathcliff’s] past or ethnicity” (p.199), this does not, apparently, place limits on historicist readings of the novel focused on the area’s links to the slave trade. Interpreting the unsaid can be problematic, or as Barry (2003) observes, “if we allow [context’s] unlimited expansion, without formulating criteria which put its claims into context, then we may find that little is left which can properly be called literary studies” (p.78). Barry’s reference to “literary studies” is instructive and reminds us that we are, after all, interpreting a text.

Greenblatt (1990) advocates a synthesis between contextual and textual approaches. Taking art as his starting point, Greenblatt suggests that proper appreciation of art (and by extension literature) should involve both “wonder” and “resonance”. For Greenblatt, “wonder” is aligned with formalism, behind which lies “the assumption that great works of art were triumphs of resolution ... – the mature expression of a single artistic intention” (p.17). “Resonance” aligns with historicism, which “tend[s] to discover limits or constraints upon individual intervention ... the apparent isolated power of the

individual genius turns out to be bound up with collective social energy” (p.15). Greenblatt’s final proposition is that it is the role of historicism “continually to renew the marvellous at the heart of the resonant” (p.34). Greenblatt’s suggestion that these perspectives do not need to exist in opposition to each other is attractive but lacks a practical angle. The question remains how, practically speaking, the conflicting demands of context and text may be reconciled and what criteria could be put in place to define and confine contextual approaches.

### **A potential synthesis – contextual close readings**

Gordon (2018) conducted case studies with students in England and Northern Ireland, in which students were presented with W.B. Yeats’ poem, *Easter, 1916*, a poem highly dependent on an understanding of the relevant politics and the central female figure of Countess Markievicz. Gordon noted that students in Northern Ireland, who were offered support by the teacher in accessing shared cultural understandings about the political background, invoking “situated cultural literacy” (p.33) were able to then apply these to understand the poem better, “informing and confirming close reading informed by cultural capital” (p.32). Students in England, by contrast, could not readily access the poem in this way, as they lacked the shared cultural understanding and therefore relied on a ‘practical criticism’, close reading approach. Gordon uses these case studies to argue against the inclusion of unseen poetry appreciation in the curriculum, suggesting that “Each case demonstrates that cultural literacy manifest in students’ responses to literature is not an easily quantifiable commodity: its extent and expression differs across classrooms, communities and countries” (p.32). However, whilst I consider that “the common currency of information in general possession and circulation” (Clark, 1990, p.52) is a shifting concept, I think Gordon has chosen a poem which is obviously more dependent on cultural understandings than some other poems. These two case studies do not, I believe, offer sufficient evidence to suggest the lack of validity of a practical criticism/unseen approach. Some poems depend more on context than others and *Easter, 1916* would obviously be a poor choice of poem for an unseen paper.

What the study in Northern Ireland does suggest is that an understanding of context can inform a close textual reading of the poem. Such an emphasis on text could be a valid criterion for determining the validity of contextual analysis and is one proposed by Barlow (2009) who proposes that “the real value of contextual study is to inform the close reading of texts” (p.42). Barlow goes on to formulate what could be posed as an answer to Barry’s (2003) central ‘problem’ of context and silence, putting

forward “a criteria which puts its claims into context” (Barry, p.78): “if context can expand our view of a text and its meaning, close reading can (or should) keep the act of contextualising itself in context. If it doesn’t, then the contexts may be false or falsely applied” (Barlow, p.42).

### **Poetry as “revelatory distillation” – the challenge of relating text to context.**

Although focusing on the text seems like a sensible way to anchor contextual approaches, it presents its own challenges. To consider why this might be, we can turn to poets themselves. Pat Kavanagh observes “I dislike talking about myself in a direct way. The self is only interesting as an illustration” (Kavanagh, 2000, p.122). Audre Lorde describes poetry as “a revelatory distillation of experience” (Lorde, 2000, p.138) and Adrienne Rich states, “Perhaps a simple way of putting it would be to say that instead of poems *about* experiences ... poems *are* experiences” (Rich, 2000, p.142). Wallace Stevens sums this up succinctly when he suggests that “a poem is not *about* an event, it *is* an event” (Stevens, 2000, p.65). We can see here the emphasis on the transformative process – poetry is borne out of experience, but such experience is transformed during the creative process into something ‘rich and strange’. As Bate (2010) suggests: “All literature is influenced by social and historical context – what human activity is not? – but a distinguishing characteristic of an enduring literary work is precisely its capacity to resist the context of its moment of production, maybe even to resist the knowledge and *intentions of its author*” (my emphasis) (p.39). Given that part of the process of art involves the transformation of life and if at the very least, we can say that great writing tends to both generalise and universalise individual experience, to make precise and meaningful contextual references closely based on (short pieces of) text and speculate on author intention is challenging. I suggest this is the real problem of context and that most relevant to school age students. It may also be a particular challenge with poetry, rather than, for example a novel, as the “revelatory distillation” (Lorde) is most pronounced in poetry.

### **The contextual elements in KS4 English and the development of a flexible approach**

Ofqual (2017) state that, to achieve Grade 8 in GCSE English Literature, candidates must “show perceptive understanding of how contexts shape texts and responses to texts” and to achieve Grade 2 “show awareness that texts are related to contexts.” DfE (2014) indicates that students at KS4 should be able to “understand and critically evaluate texts through ... drawing on knowledge of the purpose,

audience for and context of the writing, including its social, historical and cultural context and the literary tradition to which it belongs, to inform evaluation” (p.5).

The relevant Assessment Objective here is Assessment Objective Three (AO3), which requires students to show an understanding of the relationship between texts and the contexts in which they were written. In the whole AQA GCSE English Literature exam, this is worth 15% of the total exam mark, a small percentage compared to the weight given to Assessment Objective One (AO1) (reading, understanding and responding to texts) and Assessment Objective Two (AO2) (analysing language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings). However, the requirement is there and needs to be fulfilled in some measure. However, looking at the AO3 above, it is clear that context is already defined more broadly than in either the grade descriptors from Ofqual (2017) or the English programmes of study at KS4 (DfE, 2014).

AQA (2020) has stated that “AO3 is the understanding of the relationship between the ideas in the text and the contexts of the text. ... In teaching and assessing AO3, teachers and students can consider context in a flexible way, depending on the text itself and whichever contexts are the most relevant for that particular text” (p.5). The strand in the mark scheme related to AO3 further highlights the flexible approach, by referring to “ideas/perspectives/contextual factors”. For level 6, the AO3 strand is described as “exploration of ideas/perspectives/contextual factors shown by specific, detailed links between context/text/task”. It is clear then that context can be defined broadly and can include an exploration of *contextual ideas*. It is also clear that there is some overlap with the AO1 strand in the mark scheme strand at level 6 which refers to “critical exploratory comparison” (AQA, 2020, p.7). This flexibility towards AO3 is no doubt explained by the difficulties noted by Examiners, who continually urge against bolt on approaches to including contextual information which is not related to the question or the text. A recent Insight Report from AQA Examiners (2019) acknowledges: “The growing appreciation [from candidates] that context means exploring the ideas of the text in relation to the question being asked has improved the fluency and assurance of responses” whilst lamenting the fact that “some students are including unnecessary biographical information and historical detail, hindering their progress up the levels in the mark scheme” (p.8). In the end, it seems that, whilst the overarching curriculum documents define contextual understandings in a more traditional way, students are being actively discouraged from including context as it is commonly understood and fulfil the requirement by comparing ideas. Again, we can see this in AQA (2018), when Examiners observed: “There were some fantastic treatments of how characters, settings, events and plots

embody/demonstrate ideas and perspectives, and these were far more successful than those who presented extraneous pieces of historical information not rooted in the text” (p.14). I suggest that this flexible approach may reflect the fact that great writing, in Bate’s (2010) words “resist[s] the context of its moment of production” (p.39).

Helpful as it is, the flexible approach can cause some overlap with AO1. For example, AQA (2020) included this sentence from an exemplar response comparing *Ozymandias* with *My Last Duchess*:

“Ozymandias might have had ‘cold command’ of his ‘lands’, just as the Duke ‘gave commands.’ Both poets are concerned with the effects of power and how in the wrong hands it corrupts.” (Page number not given.)

The examiners comment here is: “AO1/AO3: direct references linked to interpretation, understanding of contextual ideas.” The same exemplar response goes on to state:

“However, although both poets show that this corruption is punished in the end, perhaps it is the Duke who is shown more clearly to be the true despot as Browning uses the dramatic monologue to show first-hand how completely self-absorbed he is.”

The examiners comment here is: “AO1/AO2/AO3: evaluative comparison of ideas linked to context with reference to form”.

In both examples, we can see the examiners adopting the flexible approach to what context is. The indication that multiple Assessment Objectives have been met illustrates how the Assessment Objectives can overlap, particularly AO1 and AO3.

### **Approaches to teaching poetry**

Recent considerations of how poetry is taught in schools tend to criticise taking over-analytical approaches too quickly. For example, Cliff Hodges and Rawlinson-Mills (2019) critique an approach to teaching KS4 poetry which “seems to involve a ‘rush’ straight *past* ‘meaning’ to the process of unpicking how the poem operates” (p.182) and advocate creative approaches to teaching which recognise poetry’s roots in music, dance and drama. Much has been written about how such approaches enhance students’ enjoyment of and personal response to poetry and can indeed inform later critical analysis. However, as Cliff Hodges and Rawlinson-Mills note, students must at some point “engage in the interpretative process” (p.195).

Bleiman (2014), talking about KS3, but equally applicable to KS4 suggests that: “an approach to contextual knowledge at KS3 that keeps the text at the centre of the discussion will be of immense benefit to teaching students an approach to contextual knowledge that avoids all the problems endlessly reported by examiners at GCSE and A Level.” AQA (2018) has stated “context informs, but should never dominate, a reading of the text. The text comes first” (p.10). As Bleiman (2019) notes: “Historical and other extraneous knowledge are often found within the texts themselves, or need to be offered in appropriate amounts along the way, not ladled out in advance in hefty portions.” The implicit criticism here chimes with my experience: I have observed that context is often taught at the beginning of the lesson on a particular poem, in a disassociated chunk of information.

Blending these threads together, it seemed to me worth investigating whether an integrated approach to teaching text and context could, in addition to helping with AO3, make the process of analysis more enjoyable and be potentially as valuable as (and in some senses analogous to) creative approaches. Barlow (2009) suggests that, “the greater emphasis on contextual close reading in the new [exam] specifications has, in my view, been valuable as a way of enabling students to show a more genuinely informed personal response to texts and language” (p.159).

From my reading, I also became interested to explore how a teaching approach which attempted to scaffold cultural understanding elicited from material provided and link these with close language analysis, “informing and confirming close reading informed by cultural capital” (Gordon, 2018, p.32) could assist students in making meaningful contextual references and go some way to overcoming the difficulty of contextualising Lorde’s “revelatory distillation[s].”

## Research questions

Through my reading and class teaching and observations, I formulated the following 3 research questions (RQ), shown alongside data collection methods in Table 1.

Research questions	Data collection
<b>RQ1:</b> Do students enjoy learning about context, do they feel it helps them understand texts and how confident do they feel writing about it?	Questionnaire, closed questions to class and semi-structured interview.
<b>RQ2:</b> How much do students pick up about contextual influences without explicitly being taught about context?	Assessment of written answers, class observation.
<b>RQ3:</b> Can an approach in which the teaching of context is intrinsically linked with ‘text’ and builds on cultural literacy improve students’ understanding and ability to make precise and meaningful contextual references?	Assessment of written answers, class observation.

**Table 1: Research questions and data collection methods**

## Ethical issues

Before undertaking this research project, I completed the Faculty of Education's Ethics checklist and gave due consideration to the issues therein and those raised in the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018). In particular, given that this was a public exam class, I gave consideration to the fact that the research should not hinder the academic progress of students. I did this by ensuring the research complimented and tied in with the students' upcoming assessment, in which they were asked to compare *Exposure* by Wilfred Owen (1920/2015) with a poem of their choice. Therefore, the lesson on *Exposure* worked as an assessment preparation lesson. Prior to undertaking the project, I discussed it fully with my mentor and acquired students' consent to all teaching sequences. The questionnaire used was completed on an anonymous basis and students were told that they could put their names on the other written pieces, but this was not compulsory. On several occasions, I emphasised that these written pieces were not tests or assessments.

## Methodology

Taber (2013) states that "... the nature of action research ... is such that it is ideally suited to addressing problems in a teacher's professional work, as it is focused on problem-solving rather than the generation of abstract knowledge – that is, it is context-directed ... rather than theory-directed" (p.143). It is this problem-solving and practitioner emphasis that made an action research project suitable in this instance, as it arose out of issues about the teaching of context and the problems encountered by students in making specific, text-based contextual references at GCSE.

As Denscombe (2007) states, "Action research is a *strategy* for social research, not a method" which "does not specify any constraints when it comes to the means for data collection that might be adopted by the action researcher" (p.124). I used a range of methods: a questionnaire, semi-structured interview, class discussion and written responses.

As part of the project, I wanted to know whether students enjoyed learning about context, whether they thought it was valuable and how confident they felt writing about it. I therefore begun the teaching sequence with a short questionnaire based on *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by R. L. Stevenson, which the class had studied the previous term. As Denscombe (2007) observes,

the purpose of a questionnaire is to “discover things”, not change attitudes. As time was limited, I kept the questionnaire brief to “minimize the response burden” (Denscombe, p.186). Whilst I gave consideration to using a variety of questions, in the end I decided to ask only closed questions. However, the use of a semantic differential to ascertain confidence levels in writing about context (question 3) provided a range of views. During lessons 2 and 3, I posed closed questions on a show of hands to get a class view on whether the contextual background had helped them understand the poem better. However, “group discussions can be illuminating” (Denscombe, p.205). Therefore, I conducted a brief, semi-structured interview with a group of 5 students, with a range of ability within the set (predicted grades 6-8), after the teaching sequence. Here, the use of more open questions allowed me to gain richer and more complex views on the matter.

Denscombe (2007) suggests that “Action research is wedded to the idea that change is good” (p.126). The key data collection method here was written work. Ideally, action research should be a cyclical process, creating a “feedback loop in which initial findings generate possibilities for change which are then implemented and evaluated as a prelude to further investigation” (Denscombe, p.127). My assessment of the written answers produced at the end of Lesson 2 allowed me to make some changes to the approaches to teaching in Lesson 3, creating a “mini” feedback loop, in which “initial findings generate[d] possibilities for change” (Denscombe, p.127).

In addition, during the lessons and afterwards I took notes and my mentor did as well. As my ability to take notes during the classes was somewhat limited, however, I did rely on memory.

The fact that this was a high attaining class and the nature of the school impacted on the extent to which any findings could claim to be representative, but as Denscombe (2007) suggests, “the setting and constituent features [of action research] are ‘givens’ rather than factors which can be controlled or varied” and, whilst “this reservation needs to be acknowledged” such research can still have “benefits for the organization to the extent that it is geared to improving practice and resolving problems” (pp.133-134).

## **Teaching sequence**

As I wanted to teach the class in person, which could not happen until schools reopened in the UK on 8 March 2021, timing was quite restricted and I taught three lessons in one week.

### **Lesson 1 – *Remains***

Students first spent 5 minutes filling in the questionnaire.

I then introduced the class to *Remains* by Simon Armitage (2008/2015), an extremely powerful evocation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the psychological damage caused by war. Armitage was inspired by interviews with Gulf War veterans, which are readily available online. The interview with Guardsman Tromans (Hogan, 2016) which inspired *Remains*, is usually played to students studying this poem. However, I wanted the students to produce a written response to the poem before being introduced to this context, to test Bleiman's (2019) idea that texts usually provide much of their own knowledge.

### **Lesson 2 – *Remains***

At the beginning of this lesson, I played the class the Tromans interview and shared with them how much they had in fact picked up about the poem which was reflected in the interview. This was followed by individual activities designed to link the context of the interview and PTSD with the text of the poem, set out in more detail below. The lesson ended with a written exercise, based on the PETAL (point-evidence-terminology-analysis-link) acrostic, with which the students are very familiar.

### **Lesson 3 – *Exposure***

The class had studied *Exposure* previously, so this lesson built on that knowledge. I started by asking students to identify certain language features of the poem. I then used three different prompts for context: photographs showing life in the trenches, a video about trench life and extracts from Owen's letters to his mother. Using these sources, students were asked to consider three key questions focused on drawing out contextual ideas. Finally, students were invited to link these contextual ideas to aspects of the poem's language, which they had identified at the beginning of the lesson.

Please note that all student responses have been reproduced verbatim.

## Findings and analysis of data

### **RQ1: Do students enjoy learning about context, do they feel it helps them understand texts and how confident do they feel writing about it?**

Data from questions 1 and 2 of the Questionnaire is set out below in Table 2.

<b>Question 1:</b>	Number of responses
Enjoyed learning about Victorian Society (VS)	22
Did not enjoy learning about VS	1
Not sure	6
<b>Question 2:</b>	Number of responses
Thought learning about VS helped them understand the book more (only)	12
Thought learning about VS helped them enjoy the book more (only)	0
Thought learning about VS helped them understand and enjoy the book more	17

**Table 2: Data showing students’ attitudes towards learning about context**

This data suggests that students believe that context is intrinsically linked to understanding, even more so than enjoyment of the text. This was borne out by two shows of hand sought during the teaching sequence. In Lesson 2, 24 out of 29 students indicated they felt viewing the Tromans interview helped them understand Remains better and in Lesson 3, 23 out of 29 students indicated that they felt the resources provided about Owen helped them understand Exposure better.

This reflects the views of students in Gordon’s (2018) study, who saw the value in learning about context and noted the “limiting absence” (p.29) in interpretation when they were not aware of the contextual background.

Data from the semantic differential (question 3) designed to ascertain confidence levels about context is shown in Table 3 below, presenting the number on a scale of how confident students feel about writing about context (from 1 - not at all confident to 10 - very confident)

As the data shows, the majority felt reasonably confident, with 16 students sitting in the 6-7 range, 7 students below this indicating average to low levels, and 6 students indicating higher levels of confidence. As might be expected, no students indicated levels on the extremes of the scale. This data could be interpreted as highlighting the potential issues when writing about context.

Confidence scale number (1 – not at all confident 10 – very confident)	Number of students
1	0
2	0
3	1
4	3
5	3
6	8
7	8
8	4
9	2
10	0

**Table 3: Data showing students’ confidence levels when writing about context**

Whilst all students felt that learning about context in some way helped them understand the text better and most enjoyed learning about it, this did not translate into universal levels of confidence in applying this knowledge and linking it to the author’s intentions. In the interview, students also observed that, whilst they enjoy context and they feel it helps them understand poems, in exams they were concerned about how to integrate context into their answers. One student said: “I tend to forget about it and then try to add something in at the end.” They said they found it “hard to relate the context and what the writer intends to the poems in front of [them]”.

**RQ2: How much do students pick up about contextual influences without explicitly being taught about context?**

*Remains – Lesson 1*

I began by showing students photographs of modern warfare, specifically desert warfare, and asked what these made them think of. Although they observed that these were images of modern warfare, it became apparent that the Gulf Wars of 1990-1991 were not a familiar context for them, as they were born in 2005-6. Whilst certain phrases in the poem referring to the desert setting are likely to remind older readers of news reports from the time of the Gulf Wars and place the poem in that context, giving it, in Greenblatt’s (1990) words, a certain “resonance”, this was not the case for this class.

After listening to Armitage reading *Remains*, students worked in pairs to find quotations which illustrated a series of statements about the poem, for example: “The soldiers do not know whether the

man running away is armed or not.” I asked students to comment on language effects in their chosen quotes. The class was adept at finding quotes relevant to the statements, but without prompting, found identifying language concepts more difficult. With help, they identified the use of repetition throughout the poem to suggest the speaker feels guilty. With prompting, students also identified the use of colloquialisms.

I then asked students to write short answers to two questions about *Remains*:

1. What do you find interesting about what Armitage is saying about the effects of conflict in *Remains*? You can include language effects if you like.
2. What do you think might have influenced Armitage in writing this poem?

There were strong personal responses to the poem, identifying the themes of guilt, trauma and the lasting effects of war, which persist after the conflict is over. One pupil commented on the relevance of the title *Remains*, picking up on its literal and symbolic meaning: “the name ‘Remains’ is referred to in the poem when he talks about the body being tossed into the cart which is a reference to the remains of war.” Only one student specifically mentioned post-traumatic stress disorder, but most students understood, to some degree, that the focus of the poem was mental trauma and psychological damage. Some students noted the effect of repetition and the “informal” language, which had been discussed in the lesson.

In terms of influences on Armitage, the students picked up on the fact that the poem has the authentic voice of someone who has actually experienced the events described. Extracts from their suggestions about what might have influenced Armitage are set out below:

*“a soldier feeling the guilt of taking someone’s life”;*

*“soldiers themselves”;*

*“seeing reality – [Armitage] as a probation officer, will have some knowledge of what it is actually like” (Tromans actually says he told the story first to a probation officer);*

*“Possibly a friend who has gone through war and Armitage would want to tell everyone about the horrific experience.”*

*“Personal experiences. Close relations of his ...”*

*“Soldiers’ reactions to conflict.”*

*“I think friends and family who have spoken to him personally about war, instead of getting information off the news and media.”*

*“He wanted to share someone’s story.”*

Other suggestions about influences on Armitage included notions of soldiers being forgotten, the difference between appearance and reality and the idea of an unsympathetic authority. These fascinating ideas about what influenced Armitage when writing *Remains* indicate that the poem was highly “resonant” to the students, with minimal contextual information. This may in part reflect the fact that, while this poem has a powerful source, the poem itself is not highly dependent on contextual information to be understood, reflecting Bleimen’s (2019) view that the text teaches you what you need to know. However, the poem also “resonated” in this way because many students shared a cultural literacy about the psychological damage of war. This was apparent in the interview, when a student explained that they had “learnt about shell shock in History lessons” and they sensed that society had ‘let veterans down’ in some way, due to their awareness of campaigns such as Help for Heroes and the Invictus Games. The specific parameters of the class’s cultural literacy (including the psychological damage of war/suffering of soldiers, excluding the Gulf Wars) illustrates Gordon’s (2018) point that “cultural literacy manifest in students’ responses to literature is not an easily quantifiable commodity” (p.32).

**RQ3: Can an approach in which the teaching of context is intrinsically linked with ‘text’ and builds on cultural literacy improve students’ understanding and ability to make precise and meaningful contextual references?**

*Remains – Lesson 2*

I began this lesson by playing the class the Tromans interview (Hogan, 2016), which combines the interview with Tromans reading parts of the poem. I then scaffolded linking the language of the poem to the interview. First, students worked individually to consider how the imagery, language features and what person the poem is written in link to the interview. The verbal answers in class picked up on the graphic violence in the poem, which is reflected in the Tromans interview and numerous colloquialisms in the poem, linking this to the speaking voice of the guardsman. In some of the initial reactions, students had thought that Armitage was speaking about his own experiences. Listening to the video helped them understand the concept of “voice” and the fact that, whilst this poem is written in the first person (moving from the first-person plural to the first-person singular), it adopts a persona which is not that of the poet. With prompting, the students were able to consider the poetic form and link the lack of a regular line length or rhyme scheme to the speaking voice.

I then asked students to “Write a PETAL paragraph on *Remains*, explaining how Armitage presents the effects of conflict, where ‘L’ means ‘link to context’.” I was interested to see whether our detailed discussions, in which text and context had been linked, would produce any observations linking text to the context of a soldier suffering from PTSD and the interview.

There were a few examples of the interview being referred to without linking it to textual elements (i.e. ‘bolted on’ contextual information), but many students linked the interview to the colloquial language and form of the poem. Extracts from three responses are shown in Table 4 below:

In Example 1, it is interesting to note how the student has linked the description of the dead body to the speaking voice of the guardsman and speculated that this may hark back to childhood, suggesting that the interview has helped her understand the language better and respond to it. This student and several others connected the colloquial nature of the poem with the speaking voice, one observing that Armitage “adopts the lexis of everyday speech.” It seemed that watching the interview had helped the students understand better the voice and language of the poem, suggesting that such approaches can help students in the interpretative process. It is worth noting also that this particular contextual source works like a dramatization of the poem.

I chose Example 2 partly because of the link between structure (enjambment) and context and partly because the phrase “even just for a second” suggests the strength of the student’s personal response to the poem. This implies an intense empathy with the soldier, which I suggest was intensified by watching the interview: it made the poem ‘come alive’ for the student. When asked why watching Tromans was helpful during the research interview, one student observed that poetry “is just words on a page”, whilst watching the interview had linked it to real life. One value of teaching context is that it may assist pupils in connecting with what is often acknowledged to be a challenging subject by relating it to real life and actual experience.

In a particularly effective piece of writing (Example 3), the student places the form of the poem in the context of PTSD. The interview had helped her understand the structure of the poem, but she seamlessly integrates the context with text, without producing any chunks of irrelevant information and without referring explicitly to the interview. This is I believe a good example of context facilitating “a more genuinely informed personal response” to a text (Barlow, 2009, p.159).



Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
<p>In the poem <i>Remains</i> the writer shows how traumatising the war was for soldiers and how the things they saw were very overwhelming. The poet writes about how once the soldier had been shot the body looked like it was [quote removed], this is a very immature way of describing the body and it links back to the interview ... which shows that the speaker is so traumatised by the event he is trying to link it to something happier or less scary like his childhood. Armitage interviewed a soldier from the Gulf War for this poem and throughout you can see the informal language being used by the poet from the interview, showing us how the soldier actually spoke.</p>	<p>Armitage presents the effects of conflict on the soldier as a negative and haunting experience. By using enjambment at the end of the [5<sup>th</sup>] stanza to the start of the next, then repeating the explanation of the looters from stanza 1, it really creates the sense that he has no rest from the horrors he has seen, when he closes his eyes – even just for a second – he is haunted by the scene. This reflects the interview that the poem was based on, almost impersonating how the former soldier tells his story, trying to capture the emotions that are plaguing him.</p>	<p>Armitage structures <i>Remains</i> to be reflective of post-war trauma suffered by soldiers, as well as the overwhelming guilt they suffer. In the poem, phrases ... are used and then repeated a few stanzas later. The cyclical structure this creates emulates the mind and thought process of someone suffering from PTSD; traumas echo and repeat as images formed in the soldier's mind – a relentless cycle of violence and death that results in a cycle of justification and guilt.</p>

**Table 4: Extracts from responses to *Remains* after watching the Tromans interview**

Watching the interview allowed many students to connect the language and structure of the poem and the context of PTSD. This suggests that an integrated teaching approach, which links text to context, can produce some effective responses, in which context is used to comment on the language of the poem. Notably, in the initial responses, only a handful of students had mentioned language. Watching the video also helped students relate their shared cultural awareness of the mental health issues affecting soldiers more closely to the text, “informing and confirming close reading informed by cultural capital” (Gordon, 2018, p.32).

Noting that the most successful pieces did not explicitly refer to the interview and that explicit references could be somewhat ‘clunky’, I took a slightly different approach in lesson 3, in which I used context to draw out contextual ideas and then link this back to text. This was particularly so in my approach to using the letter from Owen to his mother (see further below).

### *Exposure – Lesson 3*

The students had already been taught this poem, so I began the last lesson by telling them to re-read it and discuss in pairs the question: “What is Owen saying about the effects of conflict?” The responses I got here (verbal answers) focused on suggesting that “Owen is saying the real enemy is the weather.” I then asked the students to annotate the poem for the language features/effects outlined on a slide as follows:

1. What person is the poem written in?
2. Recurring lines (technical term: ‘burden’).
3. Alliteration – successive consonants.
4. Personification – human qualities given to something non-human.
5. Assonance – successive matching vowel sounds.
6. Pararhyme – partial rhyme between words with the same pattern of consonants but different vowels.

The students were familiar with Owen’s use of alliteration, repetition, and personification. They also readily identified the person (first person plural). However, they were not familiar with assonance or pararhyme and I provided examples of these. With assistance, they identified the rhyming scheme of abba and the pararhymes. In an example of upward differentiation, some higher attaining students appeared to understand, when I explained it, the ‘falling effect’ of the pararhyme, whereby, for

example, ‘knife us’ in line 1 has a higher pitch than ‘nervous’ in line 4. This also occurs with the pararhyme of “silent” and “salient”.

Gordon (2018) suggests the value of using photographs to initiate discussions about context and my first piece of scaffolding involved asking the students what three photographs suggested about life in the trenches.

I had chosen the photographs carefully in an attempt to prompt discussion not only about the misery of trench life (readily commented on by students) but also potential benefits and one pupil did indeed observe that the men “seem to enjoy hanging out together” and another said, “they are just getting on with it.” The class agreed that a sense of camaraderie and ‘being in it together’, was probably a feature of trench life.

I then played the class a short, but highly informative video about life in the trenches, which, again, emphasised the misery of trench warfare, but also pointed out that it was extremely boring at times and there were long periods of waiting, in which the men lived in a state of sustained tension. Having watched the video, the class discussed in pairs what sense of trench life they got from the video and, in the feedback session, they had readily picked up on the boredom and sustained tension of trench life. In the interview, the students said they found the video the most helpful resource and it became apparent that the reference to the striking co-existence of boredom *and* tension was not something they were aware of. From history lessons and films, they knew about the physical deprivations of trench life in World War I but watching the video and seeing the photographs helped them gain a more complex and nuanced understanding of this.

Finally, I read the class extracts from Owen’s letters to his mother [extracts from letters to Susan Owen, 16 January and 4 February 1917, in Cross (2009), p. 54 and p. 58, respectively], in which Owen talks about the misery and extreme cold of the early months of 1917. As well as revealing physical deprivation, however, the letters are interesting in that they illustrate how Owen regarded war as an assault on the natural world, which turned nature hostile. In particular, I drew the class’s attention to the metaphor in these lines: “It was of course dark, too dark, and the ground was not mud, not sloppy mud, but an octopus of sucking clay, 3, 4 and 5 feet deep, relieved only by craters full of water.” (Letter to Susan Owen, 16 January 1917). In the interview, students observed that the letter had helped because “you know what he [Owen] was thinking” and showed “how raw it was”, again suggesting that context can make poetry come alive.

I then asked the students to use the contextual to answer the following questions:

1. What effect does Owen think war has on nature?
2. What is daily life like in the trenches?
3. What emotions do you think soldiers will be feeling in this situation?

Question 1 adopted learnings from lesson 2 by using context to draw out a theme or perspective. Here, I did not want students to refer to the letter in their answers but use it to assist in understanding Owen’s perspective on war and nature. Specific references to the letter were more likely to amount to the ‘bolt on’ approaches to context and indeed, in comparing the letter to the poem, one can see how Owen both universalises and depersonalises his experience. AQA Examiners (2020) have suggested that studying context can “inform understanding of the meanings being conveyed”, adding “Acknowledgement of the universality of a literary text is an integral part of relating it to contextuality” (p.5).

After discussion, I asked students to consider which of the language features, previously discussed, could be linked to the following contextual themes and ideas, shown in Table 5 below:

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Owen thought war was unnatural and an attack on nature, which turned nature hostile.</li><li>2. Trench warfare was boring and repetitive – soldiers lived in a state of ‘stasis’ (i.e., a state of inactivity).</li><li>3. There was a sense of camaraderie in the trenches, this is a collective experience.</li><li>4. Soldiers lived in a state of sustained tension.</li><li>5. Soldiers experienced mental confusion.</li></ol> |
|---|

**Table 5: Contextual themes and ideas linked to language features in *Exposure***

Students readily suggested that the personification of nature could be used to illustrate the first point in Table 5. They also suggested that Owen’s use of burden and the repeated fifth line could reflect the boredom of trench warfare (point 2 of Table 5). With help, students also picked up on the use of the first-person plural to suggest the camaraderie of trench life (point 3 of Table 5). However, students needed help to see how the falling pararhyme could be linked to the sustained tension of trench life (point 4 of Table 5), with the lack of resolution here contributing to a sense of tension and the “falling effect” contributing to the sense of hopelessness and inertia which pervades the poem. I explained

how Owen uses sound effects and structure to build tension, for example, in line 4 with the use of sibilance and caesura:

“Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,” (Owen, 2015, p.33)

One could argue that Owen often uses assonance in the poem to suggest confusion (point 5 of Table 5), for example in line 3:

“Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient ...” (Owen, 2015, p.33)

This was again something that I had to explain to the students.

This lesson acted as a preparation for the class’s assessment, in which students compared how the effects of war are presented in *Exposure* and another poem of their choice. I used a selection of assessment answers to review whether the teaching approach outlined above assisted in making links between text and context and also, facilitated comparisons between ideas and perspectives which might meet the flexible interpretation of AO3.

There were some instances in which context and text were linked, for example in the extract below:

*“In Exposure, Owen uses the rhyme scheme of abba, this is regular throughout the poem. This continuous scheme could re-emphasise the idea that ‘nothing happens.’ The first line of each stanza is a blunt statement, followed by the next 3 lines; these lines dramatically heighten the tension, finally the fifth line is an anti-climax - after using such emotive vocabulary as ‘wearied’, ‘confused’, ‘curious, nervous’ builds the suspense - which is completely diminished in line five, mirroring the experiences of soldiers on constant edge.”*

Here, the student makes an interesting point about the bathetic effect of the final line, contrasted with the “emotive vocabulary” of the preceding lines and relates this to the constant tension of living in the trenches. The contextual reference is successful because it is light touch and focused on the text.

On the subject of Owen’s attitude to war and nature, the same student referred to how “Owen shows how war has made nature destructive”. Another student wrote “... the description of the wind gusts as ‘mad’ suggest the force and ferociousness of the wind attacking the soldiers. This pathetic fallacy shows how the negativity of war affects nature itself.” Again, another student suggested that the poem “shows how war changes what was once beautiful into something threatening.” I felt these references to Owen’s intentions, which would arguably meet the flexible AO3 approach to context, also reveal a more complex understanding of how nature is presented in the poem, because they suggest *why*

Owen presents nature in such a hostile way. I felt this was a more nuanced and complex approach than the initial responses I had got suggesting, simply, that Owen thought the real enemy was the weather. The analyses are informed by reading Owen's letter, but do not explicitly refer to it.

In the extract below, the student illustrates how understanding the context has enhanced her appreciation of language and structure:

*"The drastic effect of war is shown in the structure used by the poets [Owen and Hughes]. In Exposure, Owen uses a regular rhyme scheme of abba, the use of this symbolises the monotony of war which is a very negative effect of war. The fact this is a half-rhyme is most cases creates a cacophony which creates a jagged and tedious atmosphere that soldiers experienced in the trenches. Owen often uses enjambment, this creates an unfinished and worried effect, mimicking how the soldiers feel. Finally, Owen also writes the poem using the collective first person ("we/our"). This could be because he wanted to reflect his own experiences because he himself fought in these conditions or to highlight that war is indiscriminate and the effects are felt by everyone, emphasising the boredom and the tension, as soldiers wait, never truly knowing if they are going to die."*

Here, the student notes the effect of the pararhyme, using the interesting word "cacophony" (which we had not discussed) and also makes an interesting and valid connection between enjambment and tension. She also notes the nerve-jangling atmosphere of the poem using the striking juxtaposition of "jagged" and "tedious". In considering the use of the first-person plural, the student hints at how Owen has universalised his experiences in the trenches. This impressive piece of writing illustrates how context can be intricately linked with close textual analysis.

In another essay, a student compared Armitage's use of colloquialism and Owen's use of burden, suggesting that both poets use these different language effects to express "disassociation and trauma." This is a very interesting and original comparison, which would arguably meet the flexible approach to AO3, in that it is focussed on comparison of contextual ideas closely related to the text and the question. It was also interesting in moving away from the physical suffering /weather focus of many considerations of *Exposure* to find a common ground of psychological trauma in *Exposure* and *Remains*. A more nuanced understanding of trench life, linked to the poem's language, had assisted with this appreciation of *Exposure*. In both the above examples, context has been linked to language.

In a further example of a successful contextual link, a student observed of *Remains* and *Exposure*: "Through a first-person perspective, both poems depict the true horrors of war that are hidden by

propaganda.” This is similar to the analysis of *Ozymandias* and *My Last Duchess* referred to above (at p.6 above), which Examiners suggested met AO1 and AO3. Discussions of the person adopted by both poems, informed by context, were important aspects of my lessons.

I should point out that, in relation to both *Remains* and *Exposure*, some students did not make any contextual references or, in relation to *Remains*, referred to the Tromans’ interview without relating it to the poem or language. It is worth noting, however, that none of the *Exposure* essays referred explicitly to Owen’s letters.

## **Conclusions**

### **An integrated approach assists but context remains challenging**

My findings suggest that an integrated approach to teaching context and text, particularly one which builds on existing cultural understandings, can help some students make meaningful contextual references, which could meet AO3. However, context remains a problematic area for students, especially under exam conditions. This is due to the tendency of poetry “to resist the context of its moment of reproduction” (Bate, 2010, p.39), exacerbated by the fact that students have only one poem by each poet to work with. Contextual close reading is also complex and involves a high level of analysis and can itself be quite speculative and subjective. For example, none of the assessments I reviewed referred to the use of assonance or the “falling effect” of the pararhyme. Teaching context in any way runs the risk of students adding contextual information without linking it to the text or the question. The fact that this is a high-attaining class is of relevance here. It would, I believe, be more challenging to adopt a contextual close reading approach with lower attaining students.

### **The “flexible approach”, which draws out contextual themes, is a useful tactic when considering the ‘problem’ of poetry as “revelatory distillation”**

The approach to teaching *Exposure*, particularly the way in which I used Owen’s letters, suggests that drawing out themes from context, and essentially moving away from the contextual source, may assist students in avoiding the pitfalls of simply retelling the context. In all cases, it is important to link the context/text to themes, ideas (the flexible approach) and the writer’s intention, emphasising the need

to answer the question. One should bear in mind the comment that “Acknowledgement of the universality of a literary text is an integral part of relating it to contextuality” (AQA, 2020, p.5). Perhaps Greenblatt’s synthesis has application in the classroom and it could be said that it is the teacher’s role “continually to renew the marvellous at the heart of the resonant” (1990, p.34), using context (the resonant) as a window on the universal (the marvellous). This position acknowledges and, indeed, makes a virtue of the fact that the “revelatory distillations” of poetry transcend their context.

### **Shared cultural literacies can be harnessed in close textual readings**

The research also suggests that, whilst the question of what body of knowledge can be applied to a text is not a straightforward idea and cultural understandings vary from reader to reader, it is possible to build on broad, shared cultural literacies to enhance the appreciation of poetry and facilitate a “more genuinely informed personal response”. (Barlow, 2009, p.159). I felt this was particularly true of *Exposure*, where a more nuanced understanding of trench life in World War I, building on existing historical knowledge, helped some students begin to appreciate Owen’s “exceptionally sensitive ear” [Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried’s Journey*, 1916-20, p.62, as cited in Cross (2009), p.140]. I am particularly interested in “situated understanding” (Gordon, 2018, p.32), where the teacher carefully “situates” and enhances existing knowledge in conjunction with close textual readings. It should also be noted that it is worth allowing students to respond to a poem before teaching context and depending on the poem in question, limited contextual information may be needed or relevant.

However, it also seems to me that the current curriculum, focused on cultural literacy and knowledge, has led to a form of differentiation, giving certain children what might be called an unfair advantage. The students in this case were advantaged by their cultural literacy and awareness of historical factors. It was also easier for me to use this in my teaching, due to the homogeneous nature of the class, but the lack of diversity did not encourage different viewpoints.

### **Context makes poetry come alive for students**

Beyond the question of meeting Assessment Objectives, my research suggests that an appreciation of context can help students enjoy and respond to poems, making them more than “just words on a page.” Whilst poets themselves may emphasise the detachment of poetry from experience, for school students struggling to access a poem, an appreciation of context can help poetry come alive, precisely

by relating it to real life and experience (this is particularly true of modern contexts). In this sense, context could be seen as occupying the same space as creative approaches to teaching poetry designed to enhance response and engagement. Even if they may struggle to meet the Assessment Objective in question, students undoubtedly enjoy learning about context, and it makes poetry more relevant for them.

In terms of my own practice, I will continue to use an integrated approach to teaching context. I believe this assists understanding and personal response. However, I will continue to review these approaches in relation to the attainment level of students, bearing in mind that different approaches need to be adopted, depending on the class in question.

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