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## TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

### QUESTION FIVE

**The reading of a text is influenced or affected by knowledge of its historical and cultural context. Discuss with reference to one or more texts.**

#### *Thinking about the question*

Probably the most important requirement of this question is that you have some detailed knowledge of the historical and cultural context of the text you choose to focus on. After all, it's easy enough to condemn the past in general terms, but much harder to understand it on its own terms. One of the real dangers here is that you might be content to consider the context of a text only through general references to class, gender, race or cultural identity. The result can be that you focus too much on your own historical context and not enough on the context of the text. If you do wish to condemn the values and attitudes privileged by a text try to keep your focus on the context of these, rather than on the values and attitudes themselves, since that is the intended emphasis of the question.

Even when your knowledge of context is detailed and specific you should be careful about spending too much time simply describing the context and not enough time on showing how your knowledge of the context has influenced or affected your reading of the text. Indeed, identifying some of the different ways in which context influences or affects your reading should be at the centre of your planning strategies.

Knowledge of context might:

- open up the possibilities of an allegorical reading
- impact on your level of identification and empathy with certain characters
- help you to understand the text as a political document
- help you to understand the dominant values and attitudes of the societies being represented

or

- help you reflect on the closeness of other times and places to our own, or on their remoteness.

There are so many ways in which your reading might be influenced by an appreciation of the historical and cultural context of a text. Your own list will vary according to the text you choose, and also according to what you value. You are an important part of this question because it is you who have been influenced and affected. Therefore, it's also worth thinking about the subjectivity of your own cultural and historical context as a way of avoiding 'finger-pointing.' You know that your own responses to things are often different from those of your neighbour, so it probably follows that you have been influenced in quite specific ways. Don't be afraid to use 'I' in an essay, especially in an essay like this.

#### *Further reading*

- Blainey, G., *The Great Seesaw*, MacMillan, 1988.
- Burgmann, V. and Lee, J. (eds.), *Constructing Culture*, Penguin, 1988.

Sample answer for question 5

Text: *The Handmaid's Tale*

Suggested Approach

Read through the answer, ignoring the annotations, to get a sense of the argument - then re-read the answer, giving attention to the annotations.

Any text is always constructed through the intersection of historical and cultural contexts of the author, the reader and within the text itself. A knowledge of the contexts of a text is particular[ly] vital to the reading of dystopias, which extrapolate on specific events in the historical context of their composition. *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood is {a} near future dystopia based on the extrapolations of from American society in the 1980s, particularly the rise of New Right movements, the anti-feminist backlash, and religious fundamentalism. A knowledge of recent contexts as well as the cultural context of American society greatly influences a reading of the text.

The general point is fine, but the expression could have been tighter. Have a go at re-writing the first sentence.

The previous sentence has already located US society in the 1980's as being the contextual focus of the novel.

*The Handmaid's Tale* relies heavily on the anti-feminist and New Right movements which rose in the 1980s. The tale constructs a society where these organisations have created absolute control. The novel contrasts the feminist movements of the 1960s with these movements. A knowledge of these two opposing contexts helps to generate reader understanding of irony in the text. Feminist phrases such as

No need for indentation here.

... Every Baby A Wanted Baby... and "... woman's culture ..." are addressed, as this is the case in Gilead. It becomes ironic that these versions of feminism have succeeded, because each baby is wanted according to the Gileadean precept:

... Give me children or else I die and Gileadean society may be described as a "woman's culture" as the entire society revolves around the sexuality of women. Though men are also seen as sexual objects in the text, because of the assumption that

... There is no such thing as a sterile man, not any more, the responsibility for the Gileadean society is placed on women, the variable. A knowledge of the earlier feminist movements reveals this central irony to the novel. Therefore a knowledge of historical and cultural context influences the reading of a text.

The expression is convoluted and the flow of the argument is interrupted as a result.

Margaret Atwood herself has rejected the cultural notions of a collective woman, which sprung from the 1960s feminist movements.

Here's another example where clumsiness with grammar impacts on the good impression created by an interesting idea.

... Woman is just the sum total of women. To illustrate this, the story narrative of the novel emphasises individual women as being able to resist Gileadean society rather than groups. As a group in the Red Centre the female

body is disempowered, and reduced to a mere "... womb-with legs..." However, as a singular voice, Offred is able to repossess her body, through her narrative and the ecriture feminine she employs:

I'm a cloud congealed around a central object, more real than I am and glows red in its translucent wrapping... This emphasis on individual women rather than groups as being able to reclaim the female identity is only made clear with a knowledge of the novel's historical and cultural context.

Probably true, though the specific context is still in need of more detailed elaboration.

The 1980s were also a time of the rise of religious fundamentalism, not only in Islam, but America. Springing from this protestant Christian culture is much of the imagery of the text. The state's name Gilead is taken from the Old Testament, the place where Jacob decided to raise his family, the place of fertile ground and nurturing. This is an ironic image to juxtapose with the violent social hierarchy of Gilead, which endures food shortages and holds particutions. This irony is made clear through the knowledge of historical and cultural context.

An indepth understanding of Christian cultures is also necessary for a detailed critique of the Gilead constructed Gileadean fundamentalist religion. Some of the precepts it quotes are not actually in the Bible, such as:

They also serve who only stand and wait,  
a quote from John Milton, and  
From each... according to her ability, to each according to his need,  
which is a slight variation on the words of Karl Marx.

Both of these paragraphs are effective in showing the close relationship that knowledge of contexts has to the construction of irony in the text, although the ideas in the second paragraph needed to be developed further.

The antagonism between the America and the Soviet system in Russia in the 1980s is also necessary historical information to realise the symbolic repercussions of a fundamentalist religious sect preaching Communistic phrases from (which abhorred religion as the "opiate of the masses"). Other principles of Gileadean society also spring from Biblical misinterpretations. A "Martha" in Gilead is praised as a household worker, whereas in the Biblical story Jesus chides Martha for working on trivial concerns instead of listening to the word of God. The three central Christian precepts of faith, hope and charity are also missing from the Gileadean religion, as well as literally the missing cushions in the house. The reading of this text, due hope and charity to its deep basis on Christian Scriptures, is undeniably affected by a knowledge of the historical and cultural contexts they represent.

An interesting discussion of the religious aspects of the Cold War, but still in need of some more details on the sense of political crisis and ideological fundamentalism that a 'war environment' breeds.

A study of The Handmaid's Tale may leave readers thinking that the novel contains issues of gender, class and cultural

This topic sentence doesn't develop the argument.

identity, but without reference to race. However, an understanding of the cultural context of America in the 1980s, particularly its diverse racial makeup, leads to a reading of the text which is aware of the conspicuous absence of race issues. The absence of characters of different races or of different ethnic groups may be seen then as part of the cultural rewriting performed by the Gileadean fanatics, a type of racial purge of America. The overly conspicuous ethnic names in the historical notes breeds more questions. References to a "...sing-song..." may lead readers to an acknowledgement of the presence of native American peoples, yet there ~~is~~ are more explicit references made. A knowledge of the historical context of the novel informs readers that the "University of Denay, Nunavit" is a corruption of the name of the first native American government, created just prior to the novel's composition. This leads to the understanding that just as Gileadean society was constructed as a fundamentalist backlash, it is possible for other marginalised groups, such as racial and ethnic groups, to come into political and cultural power. These added dimensions to the message of the dystopia are only generated through the knowledge of the historical and cultural background of its composition.

*The Handmaid's Tale*, a near future dystopia by Margaret Atwood, relies heavily on the reader's knowledge of its historical and cultural context, in order to make a reading which fully utilises its many layers of symbolism. An understanding of feminist movements of the 1960s, the notion of a collective woman, Christian cultural and historical contexts as presented in the Bible, and the contexts of American society just prior to the novel's composition, all play a crucial role in developing the irony and significance of the novel's message. By knowing these contexts a great understanding of the

The conclusion is clear and concise. The two main answers given to the question were that knowledge of contexts helps us to understand the ironies in the text and explore the significance of the issues that are being addressed. Can you think of any others?

## Observations

### Essay structure

The broad outline of the argument is convincing. The candidate clearly identifies some of the main ways that a detailed knowledge of context can illuminate many of the important issues represented in the text and is able to demonstrate a close working knowledge of both the text and some of the specific contexts associated with its construction.

### Development of ideas

Textual knowledge is highly satisfactory. The essay is always concerned to demonstrate the relationships between text and context, and avoids the problem of demonstrating an awareness of context, but an inability to identify its significance in terms of the action of the novel.