

Initial Proofreading Test

Selection from:

Hamlet Contexts

OCR A2 Teacher's Guide (2nd Ed.) by Mike Craddock

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General Introduction

In a famous moment from the play, Hamlet pauses over the praying Claudius, the murderer of his father, and delays his revenge. The Prince remarks:

*'Now might I do it pat, now a is a –praying.
And now I'll do it. (Draws his sword)
And so he goes to heaven;
And so am I reveng'd.'* (III, iii, 73 –75).

When I first read this, I was consumed with a psychological view of the character and the play. I saw in it another moment of Hamlet's famous delay; he avoids action as the way out of taking decisions that involve doing wrong. Not a man of heroic action, Hamlet's delay was an example of another kind of heroism – of thought. This romantic view of the hero saw him as being in essence too good for the rotten world in which he lived. In the light of what happens elsewhere in the play, such a moment seems characteristic of a Prince whose deeds fail to match his words, partly because all choices now seem flawed or wrong. His delay and confusion reject and reflect a world from which the thinking man feels alienated. Such an interpretation itself tells us something about Hamlet the character and *Hamlet* and its contexts of scepticism and doubt. Both in his own age and in ours there is something appealing – perhaps dangerously so – in the person who's imaginative response rejects hard practical choice and realities for something we might call more human.

If we look at more modern criticism, however, we can see other contexts at work that perhaps give us a fuller and more balanced picture of what is going on in the scene. In the excellent *Cambridge Contexts in Literature* series, there is a brief reflection on *Hamlet* that singles out this scene and draws our attention to the realities of hell and damnation for the original audience. Indeed, if we take a closer look at what Hamlet actually says, and reflect on what he does only a few moments later – killing the hiding Polonius whom he believes is Claudius – another, less romantic view of the hero can be suggested. Hamlet refrains because he wants to send his uncle to a damnation that is fitting punishment for what his uncle did to his father. Such a reading reminds us of Hamlet's father's sufferings evoked spectacularly by the ghost earlier in the play. It reminds us that one of the preoccupations of the play is what comes after death, and also suggests the contemporary disputes over the nature of heaven, hell, sin and salvation which were a much more urgent concern for the original audience than today's where individual point of view on almost anything counts so much more than traditional authority.

Moreover, such a reading presents a far more problematic view of the central character than the attractive trait of indecision in a harsh world. It alerts us to the idea that Hamlet may be cruel, ruthless as well as sympathetically (at least for us today) morally indecisive. It suggests one of the real paradoxes of revenge – justice mingled with murder – and recalls the revenge tragedy tradition that was as popular in Shakespeare's time as medical dramas are today because it brought alive in fascinatingly immediate ways acute moral dilemmas. Furthermore, if we remember that this is drama, a play, the episode lives as a fantastic moment of theater playing to cruder but equally important narrative patterns of suspense, tension, interrupted resolution and ultimate closure.

Reminding ourselves of aspects of context therefore – the importance and vividness of religious controversy, and the revenge tragedy tradition for example – make us read the passage in a richer way. *More than that, perhaps the most important way of reading context is to see individual moments in the context of the play as whole.* Here we recall the appearance of the ghost, and think ahead to what happens next – *Hamlet kills Polonius*. We also recall the bitter irony that Claudius's heart is not in his deed of prayer. Such a sense of contexts, especially that of the play as a whole, add to our sense of what is going on in the scene and stop us from simply looking at the moment as a piece of psychology, or romantic characterisation, enabling us to read it in a more interesting, complex and challenging way.

In essence, that is what context is about, particularly remembering to see everything that happens in a text in the most important context of all – *the whole text*. Such reading should not diminish our personal response to the text. One of the great appeals of studying English is the way reading allows us imaginative responses and personal ones to works of literature, giving us ownership, personal authority, in a way that may well have resonance with Shakespeare's own age where some claim the modern individual was born. At the same time, being more aware of contexts makes the texts come alive in other ways too.

This resource is designed to suggest some of the kinds of contexts that students can begin to explore or be aware of in their reading of *Hamlet*. *The key to doing well at AS and A2 level remains, however, understanding and close knowledge of the text.* This in itself is a daunting prospect for many A level pupils with such a long work as *Hamlet*. Going beyond that may seem an even more difficult task, but perhaps is not as hard as it sounds and, indeed, contextual knowledge is really an inevitable as well as necessary part of good reading.

This resource also makes suggestions about what contexts are and how they may be used. The best advice to an A level student – or indeed any reader – is to concentrate hard on the text – to listen to what it says and consider what it means to us, and not be taken over by ready-made historical summaries or theories that guide us to find what the theory proposes we find! Many of the best ideas begin with close reading, and careful thought, and a key piece of advice is ***always to work from the text out, and remember again that the key context is the text itself.*** It is surprising how we bring so many prejudices to our reading, and, even more how easy it is to get carried away with a critical idea or opinion, or some piece of background information, and stop listening to what an imaginative piece of work may be telling us, or can suggest.

At the same time, the contexts, both of the original production of the work, *and of the context of our own reading*, are important. We don't get far in *Hamlet* before we meet a ghost and immediately we have to ask ourselves what the figure means, what did the Elizabethans think of ghosts, and how do we make sense of something that for us is theatrical allusion or imaginary thing rather than a dramatisation of a glimpse of a figure from purgatory? Fortunately, *Hamlet* is one of the most written about and discussed plays in history and there are some fabulous editions that can guide students over the well-trodden ground of its many critical issues. In many ways, it is hard to say or write anything new about *Hamlet*, for whole books exist on explaining the ghost or exploring how the Elizabethan stage may explain developments in the plot or characterisation. Nonetheless, it is important begin to see at A level how some contexts help us understand what is going on in the play, and this resource seeks to begin to make students aware of some of the key contexts and their possible implications for reading the play as well as explaining why boards now like to see more explicit evidence of what used to be called background.

Ways of Reading: Context and Theory

A. Why Context Matters

Over the past few decades it has become increasingly fashionable in literary criticism to see texts, at least in part, as determined by, or products of the time and culture which produced them. Books, like all great art, tell us about ourselves and our worlds. They are often attempts to, in Hamlet's famous phrase, 'hold a mirror ... up to nature'. We can identify in a character like Hamlet many common human characteristics and we celebrate a writer such as Shakespeare because he has the genius to be able to create representations of human characters or reality that are so fascinatingly life-like in their complexity and subtlety that they actually enable us to see ourselves and our world as it is, or was, with deeper insight, understanding and feeling.

Such approaches to reading are fundamental and probably in the end timeless. To be human is to reflect on what we are, who we are, and the world around us and to turn ourselves and our lives into stories, stories that we hope make sense of life, give it meaning, and perhaps reveal deeper truths that make sense of life for us.

Many accounts of *Hamlet* talk about Hamlet as if he were a real character and there are extremely revealing traditional interpretations such as those by A.C. Bradley in his famous *Shakespearean Tragedy* and Dover Wilson in his *What Happens in Hamlet?* that tend to treat the Prince as if he were something like a psychologically consistent character in a novel. Even in these traditional approaches, though, there are ways in which the writers look at context – knowledge of Elizabethan ideas of medical or psychological theory known as the humors, or contemporary stage craft to explain what goes on, on stage.

Today, in appreciating a character in a play and to write good examination answers, we like to see characters as part of the themes and preoccupations of their plays, and remember they are made-up, constructs. So, for example, Hamlet's madness is not just brought about by personal circumstance or character, but may also be seen as part of the play's sense of corruption and dislocation that reflect social or political pressures and confusions. Whilst we recognise, and continue to discover the brilliance of Shakespeare's psychological insights, we also like to see how character embodies ideas of individuality, gender, and relationship to society that reflect the wider context of the play, the time it was written, and the kind of genre (type of literature) that Shakespeare was writing.

Hamlet is unique, but *Hamlet* also reflects the scepticism of its age, the moral dilemmas of the popular revenge tragedy, and embodies the political tensions of a culture that tried to maintain authority in feudal and religious systems that were undergoing radical questioning and reinventing themselves in response. *Hamlet* also seems to have been written for the great actor Richard Burbage whose versatility itself must have beckoned forth some of the range of its characterisation. Moreover, critics tell us that *Hamlet* derives from a series of sources and a revenge tradition and perhaps even an earlier, now lost, version of the play by Shakespeare. These 'backgrounds' explain some of its features, even, for example, the madness of its hero which is a generic (feature of the type of play) as well as psychological characteristic. Looking further, the *Hamlet* we read today is in fact a collation of three versions of the play, and, the context most often forgotten when studying at A level, is *it is a play*. *Hamlet* is work of drama, and that means something that has conflict at the core of its form. It is also a work of literature most of all, an *imaginative* transformation of its elements that speaks to our *imagination* as well as other needs and wants.

As well as these 'contexts' we have the biographical context of the creator himself, Shakespeare, whose own circumstances, the recent loss of a son called Hamnet, for example, or the death of his father, and the triumphs and tragedies of success and maturity must have cast their own shadows. Shakespeare reputedly played the part of the ghost in productions of the play, and if *Hamlet* were written after his father's death, and the ghost comes from the Catholic idea of Purgatory, so all sorts of speculations about guilt, religious conflict, the burden of parental authority and so on may come to add at least something to our sense of what might be going on in the play.

Did Shakespeare intend to reflect or embrace these or other ideas when writing the play? We cannot know, but we do know how brilliantly, for example, patterns of imagery are sustained in his plays, and can see the manifest play of extraordinary intelligence and experience at work. Great art always suggests more than it intends to and exists not just as objective finished statement, but in the ways in which we interpret or read things into it. The famous Irish poet W.B. Yeats once said that we 'make poetry out of the quarrel with ourselves', an idea that might be applied to all literature. It is useful to see texts as kinds of quarrel – discussion – debate – both intentional and unintentional, meant and unmeant, explicit and implicit. Similarly, consciously or unconsciously,

art reflects the contexts – political, cultural, generic, biographical and social – that both determine and enable us to interpret the world that created it.

Whilst such enquiries are intriguing, and such contexts always worth considering, we have to be careful, however. In many cases, we cannot even be sure about dates of composition let alone more speculative ideas, and Shakespeare's life story is notoriously short on real facts. There is always the danger of wrenching things to fit a fashionable theory, or, more than that, of simplifying a work of art or imagining that art reflects biography or other contexts in some naïve way. Nonetheless, *thinking about* and *being aware of contexts* can lead us to understand the work we are considering. Why something is must always owe something at least to cultural and contextual pressures even if these are not always consciously realised by the writer or reader, dramatist or audience.

Context can seem limitless and daunting to an A level student pushed to understand the text of the play. There is no easy method either to show how to put together generalised historic awareness with specific textual detail and without care interpretation can be as wild as reading something like *The Da Vinci Code* where the historical and theological basis of an argument are suspect and rarely survive the application of reason and fact, but the imaginative pleasures are intriguing and compelling and tend to push mere common sense aside!

Nonetheless, over the last few decades, literary studies have changed a lot and Curriculum 2000 rightly tried to reflect some of the concerns, as well as trying to get students better prepared for university and less naïve about ways of reading and context.

B. Theory and Context

Something called theory – really understanding more about the ways we read and a lot of the prejudices we bring to reading – has come to shape the way we write about and read books. Essentially, critics have become much more interested in the way books or texts *construct* meaning, and how societies too construct their sense of themselves. When we talk about the world we use language to create our sense of things, not simply reflect them. Moreover, when we talk or write about things like human nature, the individual, reality, truth, character, and so on, we need to recognise that these ideas are not simply reflections of given things, but *creations* themselves, *products* or *concepts* of particular times and places and values. To put it simply, what we think of as true or real often turns out to be interpretation. 'Human nature', for example, may mean a Western idea of human nature today. Moreover, that idea must be determined by the views of individuals who themselves reflect the forces, ideas and pressures at work in the world around them.

In other words, criticism, over the last few decades, has been engaged in a process of 'de-naturalising' our understanding – making us look at the way we see things, not just think we see the world 'naturally', or correctly as some consistent and eternally given object. Applied to reading, we see how what we think of as character, or good or bad, or even meaning depends in part on what we see, which depends in turn on *what we look for*. What we look for and what we find depend, in turn, on the kind of world we live in which effects our view of things. *We are therefore our contexts* – our values, our history, our families, our cultures, our points of view make us, just as they made up the histories and cultures and texts of the past.

Such an approach is, of course, common sense in lots of ways, and not new as some modern critics like to claim. It is important to recognise too that our own contemporary Western culture with its currently democratic tradition tends to value highly individual and personal judgement, and distrust authority. What we find in literature is itself – at least in part – a product of our own prejudices and values. Literary study, as we now practise it, has only been around for a hundred years or so. Whilst English is just about the most popular course at university, it has only become so in the last hundred years – so even sitting studying *Hamlet* at all in the way we are doing *depends on a contemporary context*.

Such observations make us recognise that we view literature differently in some ways to how it was viewed in the past – indeed we have created our sense of literature. Similarly, our culture exists in a secular (non-religious), pluralistic and postmodern age (a democratic one where we tend to respect multiple points of view rather than insisting on privileging one or another.) In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, one of our dominant critical criteria has become society, social. Whether this is right or wrong or not, we tend to believe truth exists in the relationship between things rather than in things themselves. So we look more at Hamlet in his society and world, and as reflecting and being a symbol of that world, and tragedy itself not just as something that expresses absolute truths about the human condition, but about a particular culture and society.

At the same time, our culture champions individuality, seeks equality, dislikes absolutes and in its democratic traditions often asserts the value of the popular over deference to ideas of tradition and authority. Correspondingly, we tend to prize irony, ambiguity, in literature and texts which are ambivalent – or which we want to make ambivalent. Uncertain of much, we tend to equate truth with complexity and we resist the idea of ‘closure’, the notion that you can finally arrive at a set of stable meanings or propositions that a text stands for, or a definitive interpretation. In much modern critical writing there is even a tendency to loose meaning and an extreme form of philosophical idealism known as deconstruction has gone so far as to generate a whole school of criticism that often brilliantly suggests the ways in which texts, because of the nature of language, cannot be closed down into a set of stable meanings at all.

All this may seem complicated and confusing, but we need to try to remember that we read texts in part because of our culture’s values. The ways we read them reflects some of those values too and the things that are written now similarly reflect and embody the age we live in. Likewise, if *Hamlet* reflects its society and world, so we need to understand that social views are influenced by texts read and plays seen. *Hamlet* partly creates our sense of society then, just as it was created by it. Similarly, our sense of society today is partly created by plays seen and texts read, so texts and contexts always have a dialectical relationship, or are always in a state of interplay. We can become more aware of such relationships by thinking about theory, ways of reading. An excellent introduction to the different types of theory is Peter Barry’s *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* which helps us to understand these relationships by defining how different ways of reading society and people – social texts if you like – such as economics, ideas of gender and sexuality, class structures and values, and so on, interplay with literary texts and the imagination.

Such conclusions are not always as modern or as revolutionary as they are sometimes presented in modern criticism, but they should make us more aware of our own ways of reading, and more sensitive to the *changing* contexts that, in part, produce literary texts. It is a critical truism that critics tend to find their own values reflected in the study of *Hamlet* – they find themselves! Such an awareness should not make us feel that we are incapable of intelligent criticism however. We need to try to recognise the limitations of our knowledge of the Elizabethan age and be aware of the baggage we bring to reading, but we are not trapped by history into being unable to understand another age or recognise the values of our own at work in our interpretations.

We are dealing with imaginative works of art – and in a play like *Hamlet*, one of the supreme works of art of all time. The imagination reflects its time of production, but it also changes and transforms things. Making something new that also brings news of the time it was written and news of ourselves is what literature is all about. The imagination also transcends – rises above – its culture to recreate and renew the age that fashioned it. So, criticism needs to try to be aware of some of the ways *Hamlet* might have meant to its original audience, why it means something to us, but also to recognise that the creative imagination is something else too that can give us insights, visions, and teaches us truths and values that are not just defined by context.

All this may seem rather abstract, but practically it means that we need to recognise that *Hamlet* is both a product of its time and a work of art, fiction. Looking at contexts can immeasurably enrich our sense of its meanings to its original audience and to us; it is an indispensable part of our study. But the most significant context remains *Hamlet* itself – the imaginative life of which will always transcend and transform the ways we read it.

Context and Practice

Remember: the golden rule; a little context in literary essays at A level goes a long way!!!

Since Curriculum 2000 and the new AS and A2 levels were introduced, a new emphasis on awareness of contexts has been specifically flagged up in the Assessment Objectives of the new courses. This explicit attention to contexts really reflects changes in the way texts are read and discussed as explored in Section 3 although all good readings of the play have always paid attention to background.

Most students, as they become aware of the importance of contexts, do so through good teaching that raises awareness of different ways of reading. Most difficulties tend to become practical ones under the pressure of a two year course and perhaps only a few months spent on one text. They tend to boil down to a few key issues:

1. How much background is needed, for example, and how should and can it be applied in an essay? What kind of contexts can help us understand *Hamlet*?
2. How do we access and integrate such knowledge without generalising? Students and teachers worry that either they need a depth of knowledge only available to research students, or that they are dealing with generalities.
3. How do contexts inform reading? What is really needed at this level is an *awareness* of contexts and a *recognition that texts are partly at least the product of the society that produced them and not exclusive works of art that can only be understood on their own terms.*

What follows is some sensible advice and worked examples about what to do and what not to do.

First of all, what are the contextual Assessment Objectives at AS and A2 level and what do they mean?

(These are currently under review, and new ones are already under discussion, but whilst the specific numerical objective may change and be integrated into something simpler, the key ideas of what the subject now entails are not going to be much modified, so some discussion of what is expected should help students and teachers see what they are expected to do more clearly).

Many of these objectives, set by QCA in an attempt to begin to define what the subject is all about and to promote academic rigour, explicitly or implicitly evoke contexts. The AOs that apply to context are as follows.

AO2 (i): respond with knowledge and understanding to literary texts of different types and periods...and

AO2 (ii): respond with knowledge and understanding to literary texts of different types and periods, exploring and commenting on the relationships between literary texts

What do these mean for the study of *Hamlet*? They mean literary *contexts* and generic *contexts* (form/type of literature). It obviously makes sense to look at *Hamlet* in the context of Shakespeare's other great tragedies, the ideas of tragedy and the revenge tragedy itself (see Section 7).

AO4: articulate independent opinions and judgements, informed by different interpretations of literary texts by other readers

What does this suggest? This suggests we need to look at critical *contexts*. To understand the play, it helps to know how it has been read and is read today. Much of this arises out of intelligent discussion in the classroom where other's opinions and ideas are shared, but looking at the way views on the play have changed can tell us much about the contexts of the criticism as well as, increasingly, the contexts of the original play.

Finally, there is the explicit instruction in *A05* to

- i. Show understanding of the contexts in which literary texts are written and understood.
- ii. Evaluate the significance of cultural, historical and other contextual influences on literary texts and study.

This is indeed ambitious, but Section 3 should have begun to suggest some of the things that can be looked at. For example, it is worth being aware of some feminist criticism of characters such as Gertrude and Ophelia to see how parts of their story may be determined by the male-dominated society in which Shakespeare wrote, or, indeed, the more gender conscious critical world in which we now analyze texts. This can sound crude and clumsy – after all, Shakespeare created ideas and images of women that are infinitely more interesting than critical stereotypes, but thinking about women then and now can alert us to aspects of the text that we might otherwise miss. In other words, such thinking ought to send us back to look at, say, the relationship between the rather patriarchal Polonius and his daughter.

At the other end of the scale there are works of criticism such as Harold Bloom's interesting but controversial study *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* in which the writer suggests that in figures like Hamlet Shakespeare actually creates our sense of what it means to be individual and human – not just reflecting a new individualism in Stuart Society, but creating and transforming our ideas of being human, then and now.

The word that can cause problems is 'evaluate;' but that is really asking us not to pronounce on some direct link between historical fact and works of the imagination, but to be aware that there must be interaction between the two, and make some informed imaginative connections and judgements on that. In other words, we move from background – women were treated differently in Shakespeare's time – to some sense of how that might have influenced the representation of them in the play. Similarly, historical background teaches us about the religious controversy that was part of Shakespeare's world, and we can identify in *Hamlet* different and sometimes conflicting voices about ideas such as sin, the afterlife, death, and conscience that may well express the crises through which the writer lived. Even writing a tragedy may well be a comment on Tudor society as much as an expression of universal concerns about human vulnerabilities and mortality (see Section 7).

How do we deal with this in practice?

The kind of thing examiners *do not* want is paragraphs of generalised history such as the following.

Bad Example 1:

'The Tudor Age was a time of turmoil and change. Henry VIII broke with Rome and founded the Church of England. Protestants put more emphasis on individual conscience than church ritual priestly mediation between God and man. This gave the individual more freedom but also less security in his attitude to religion.'

Comment:

This is just generalisation and not particularly good generalisation either! Hamlet is not mentioned and the text is not addressed at all.

Similarly, forced generalisations derived from the text are not helpful. The following is a good example of what not to do!

Bad Example 2:

'The 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy is a clear expression of the religious crisis through which Shakespeare lived. Hamlet's doubts derive from Protestant uncertainties about what followed death and his thoughts of suicide are caused by spiritual unease.'

Comment:

There may be *some* truth in some of the ideas here, but they are being stuck on to the text rather than subtly derived. In fact, if we look at the context of the play as whole, it may well be that Hamlet is not so much thinking of his own suicide again (although he does earlier) but displaying that questioning frame of mind which looks critically and sadly at the ways of the world, and his society. Tensions about faith and doubt certainly dominated Shakespeare's world and resonate in the play, but the second example deals far too crudely with the text and context.

A better way to work in practice.

A better way of working is to work through the text, derive ideas, suggest links, and make imaginative connections subtly and where appropriate, not delivering little nuggets of background information or history to satisfy an assessment objective. The AOs want us to show intelligent awareness not display lots of facts. For example, rather than talking about critical contexts in terms of lists of names and opinions, examiners want to see that ideas have been thought about, and personally engaged in relation to specific textual detail. The following example may be helpful.

Example 3

'Hamlet's scene with Ophelia, the so-called Nunnery Scene, is typical of the play's complexities. Some critics maintain that he feels rejected by Ophelia and so punishes her, others that he is driving her away from himself to protect her from his own 'sins'. Does he know that he is being watched? Is this another example of his 'antic disposition' or is it the real madness, loss of control, he talks of later when he mentions 'excitements of my reason and blood?' Whichever, the effects on Ophelia are devastating as she laments the fall of 'th' observed of all observers'. Linked with his cruelty towards her in the play scene, Ophelia has become Hamlet's victim just as Hamlet is Claudius's. Her subsequent madness owes something to the destruction of the two dominant and dominating male figures in her life, and suggests something of the way power and authority keep collapsing into corruption and destruction.'

Comment

This is not perfect – perhaps there are too many questions, and more precise analysis of the text might yield more answers. However, it: displays awareness of critical contexts without parading critics' names or lists; it moves from the text out; it shows a good knowledge of the whole text as context; it begins to recognise a different culture in the sense of women as victims and the idea of 'dominating' male roles; and, it also sees the text as being bound up with questions of power and authority. Without forcing a simplistic conclusion, the example leads us on to think about court, political and social contexts of power and see how there may be something critical at work that begins to raise questions about all kinds of contemporary authority.

The rest of this resource looks in a bit more detail at some of the contexts that may throw light on aspects of *Hamlet*. Remember once again, however, the supreme importance of reading the text, and the text itself as context, and beware of generalisations, or indeed simplifying the complexities of the past. *Hamlet* above all should remind us especially not to do that!

To sum up, in practice, the most important things to remember about context are:

1. A little context goes a long way.
2. Context should be integrated into answers, deriving from textual appreciation, not tacked on as evidence of background reading!
3. Context informs textual reading, and should never replace it.
4. Contextual generalisations should always be treated with great wariness. Much history is interpretation not fact.
5. The most important context in a work of literature is the context of the whole work itself.