

Interpreting A03 for poems in the English Literature poetry anthology

- The range of contexts that is most relevant as part of A03 will depend on the text, the author, and the task.
- A03 (context) can be interpreted in a flexible way. In some cases, it may be most relevant to focus on the place and time in which the author was writing and how this may have affected different aspects of the author's work.
- However, it may also be appropriate to explore context through consideration of the context within which the text is set. This includes, but is not limited to:

location

social structures and features

cultural contexts

periods in time

literary contexts, such as genres.

So, what does this mean in practice?

Basically, it's any knowledge from outside the lines of the actual poem that may increase a reader's understanding and appreciation of the poem they are reading.

STEP 1 - DECIDE WHICH CONTEXTUAL DETAILS ARE IMPORTANT...

Sonnet 43

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height

My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight

For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

I love thee to the level of every day's

Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.

I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;

I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

I love thee with the passion put to use

In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose

With my lost saints – I love thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life! – and, if God choose,

I shall but love thee better after death.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

For example, with Sonnet 43, here are some contextual points covering the above suggestions:

Location

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was born in County Durham in 1806, the oldest of 12 children but lived in various places around England after that, spending much of her adult life in Wimple Street in London. When she was 39 she made her father angry by secretly marrying, and moving to live in Italy with, another poet, Robert Browning. Here she wrote most of her poems.

She died there in 1861.

Social Structures and Features

When Barrett Browning went against her father's wishes, by marrying Robert in secret, the rift was never mended. Elizabeth's parents both had roots and business in the slave trade in Jamaica, but Elizabeth herself was an opponent of slavery.

Cultural Contexts

Elizabeth suffered from health problems for most of her life, and medical science wasn't sufficiently developed to treat these effectively. Elizabeth was deeply religious, and was also a keen supporter of rights for women, having read Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.

Periods in Time

In Victorian times, women were subservient to men, and were not always respected as writers, but Elizabeth was a famous poet in her own right. In fact, her husband first met her because he was a fan of her work. Elizabeth was also widely read and highly intelligent.

Literary Contexts

Elizabeth wrote and published a series of 44 sonnets, called *Sonnets* from the *Portuguese* (which was Robert's nickname for her). Sonnet 43 is, obviously, the next to last, so this suggests that it's important.

Sonnets are 14 line poems, written in iambic pentameter, with a clear structure. Elizabeth used the Petrarchan or Italian structure (where the lines are organised as 8 + 6, with a sort of twist at the end). They are often associated with love or strong feelings.

Now, in a small group, or on your own, think about how the above facts, interesting as they may be in their own right, actually impact on your understanding of the poem.

Think about these points:

No names, or genders, are mentioned in the poem - what is the impact of this?

Is there any evidence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's interests in religion and women's rights in the sonnet?

What effect may Elizabeth Barrett Browning's background have had on the writing of her sonnet?

Why do you think Elizabeth Barrett Browning chose the sonnet form for her series of poems?

Now, you will probably have noticed that only a few of the facts given here about Elizabeth Barrett Browning are really relevant to readers of *Sonnet 43*, and this tends to be the case with other poems in the anthology.