

Teacher notes

Using Context effectively in responses to poetry

In some ways Assessment Objective 3, which relates to context, is the most invisible of the four AOs for English Literature, as, particularly for poetry, it tends to depend on the reader's wider knowledge (or facts from outside the lines of the poem.)

Furthermore, in the questions on the Poetry Anthology, candidates are required to write about two poems, only one of which they will have in front of them, in an hour. The potential problems with this are that context tends to get overlooked, or forgotten altogether, or that candidates desperately try to include everything they know about the poet and the times and places in which they were writing, almost regardless of how this impacts on the meaning, and, as a consequence, neglect the text.

The challenge, then, is to learn to focus on the most relevant aspects of context (including, as well as time and place, influences such as location, social structures and features, cultural contexts, periods in time, and literary contexts.) Clearly, all would not be relevant to each poem, nor would it be feasible to deal with all these and also write about and respond to the details of the poem and how it is written (in other words AOs 1 and 2), as well as compare it with another. And yet, as the Assessment Objectives are equally weighted, giving AO3 a fair and balanced shot is important.

Therefore, the purpose of this set of resources is to get learners to think about what is most relevant, and how to integrate this knowledge into their responses, in order to show how contexts of different types can enrich the reader's appreciation of the poem.

There are no "right" or "wrong" answers here, as AO3 will be credited wherever it occurs in exam responses, and all the information here is accurate, but some answers are clearly more relevant to the text than others, so there is a lot of emphasis on discussion of points and prioritising which are the most important. The resources are designed to slot into and complement, not replace, the teaching of the poems in the anthology, focusing as they do on only one of the Assessment Objectives.

The resources work on a standalone basis, although it may be a good idea to start with the introduction to AO3 and the subsequent focus on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnet 43. The approaches used for one poem could also be transferred to others. The resources have been designed to be flexible, so that they could be used by individual students, or as the basis for group discussions.