# A Level English Literature

# Using Contextual Information at A Level

### Task 1 - Looking at the Drama Texts

For this task you will need to use Resource 1.

In this task a statement about the context of each of the proposed set texts is made under a number of headings. Can they match the text with its appropriate contexts?

Look carefully at the descriptors: can they find the remaining three characteristics of the text they are studying? With help, they might try to work out the characteristics of a number of the other texts, too.

### Task 2 – Looking at the Poetry Texts

For this task you will need to use Resource 2.

The second copy of the chart is largely blank to allow students to research for themselves: it is only expected that they would cover their set text. The completed boxes are to help act as a guide for their own comments.

The contrasts between the comments on dramatic texts and on poetry should spark reflection about different audiences and expectations over the two genres.

### Resource 1

| Political Context | Social context | Theatrical Context | Biographical/ Authorial Context |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Marlowe’s EDWARD II**Written in a society interested in the spectacles of human weakness, and in politics and power, but in which these things are safer discussed as a ‘historical’ record - to discuss the behaviour of Monarchs publicly may well be dangerous | A picture of a society where respectability and legal responsibility create a sense of claustrophobia: middle-class concerns underly the sense of status being gained by painful hard work and moral correctness. Under this male-dominated surface lie real feelings and dilemmas which are never fully articulated: where individuals are never allowed to develop as individuals A | Performed in commercial theatres with realistic scenery representing specific places, which are described in some detail in the text. There is a sense of direct appeal to the audience’s judgement, and that the success or failure of plays - whether they are a ‘hit’, really matters  a | The author is a socialite and ‘wit’: fascinated by social behaviour and ingenious in using conversation to both reveal and hide motivation. Under the ‘social’ surface, though, lies a darker and deeper concern with hypocrisy and double standards: the author was arrested and imprisoned during the play’s run, and the cast gave evidence against him1 |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Webster’s DUCHESS OF MALFI** Written for and in a society fascinated by plotting and political intrigue, where Catholicism is regarded as dangerous (though some of the audience may be secret Catholics) and power is seen as corrupting: some aspects of the play may be felt to reflect aspects of contemporary court life, but are ‘neutralised’ by a Mediterranean setting | This audience values style and wit above almost everything: well-turned remarks, witty or cynical, are central to most characters’ appeal. Under the surface, though, there are hints of dark secrecy and corruption, and a concern with the social role of women  B | Highly realistic, elegant settings, reflecting the lives and tastes of the wealthy: a sense of display and self-conscious elegance reflected in interiors, manners, dress and language. High emotional tension, centering on revelations and dark secrets, gives a powerful shape to events  b | The author is interested in power and corruption, and is inclined to shock. He enjoys the macabre. He looks hard at the human and personal implications of inherited power and wealth, and at the darker sides of family relationships. He seems to have been a lawyer by training. He represents Mediterranean countries as deeply corrupted 2 |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Goldsmith’s SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER**Written for a society in which the aristocracy and middle classes attend the theatre for fun: they are interested in polite (and impolite) social behaviour, and they enjoy the spectacle of human fallibility, and enjoy fun being made of idiosyncratic behaviour | Written to be enjoyed in a commercial theatre which is concerned with fashion and ‘manners’: highly alert to the distinctions of country and town, and with the social manners of each. This society is highly concerned with social status and income, and sees marriage as bound up in this C | Probably performed most often in smaller, private candlelit theatres before a middle-class and aristocratic audience, though perhaps also performed outdoors in the bigger playhouses: does not demand highly specific locations, though enclosed chambers, darkness and eavesdropping figure largely: a sense of the ‘sinister’ prevails c | The author writes tragedies and historical plays, based on recently published history books: he is a brilliant user of poetic rhythm, and is exploring new ways of looking at power and human motivation. He is interested in some aspects of sexual ambiguity: he is also suspected to have been a spy  3 |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Wilde’s AN IDEAL HUSBAND**Written in a society which has a highly developed sense of social style and manners: it is fascinated by social status and moral responsibility: power and wealth may be inherited or gained by other means. Concerned with appearances and reality: with the gap between peoples’ professed views and their actual behaviour | Written to be seen by literate middle class and aristocratic audiences who may ‘decode’ references to contemporary political corruption: an audience which is well-read and interested by ideas of corruption and loyalty, and which finds ‘dark passion’ among ‘the great’ intriguing D | Highly realistic, spare staging, representing the precise social respectability and status of the protagonists: the smallest details of set design (letterboxes, furnishings) have a direct relationship to the plot d | The author was born into a respectable merchant family, but his father’s financial ruin showed him, through his mother, womens’ capacity for selfless suffering. His plays are often attacks on the moral values of the society in which he lived 4 |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Ibsen’s A DOLL’S HOUSE**Written in a society concerned, above all, with social status and respectability, and in which men hold all the power in the household and in society. A play which is likely to disturb audiences whose social world is reflected on the stage: a play designed to upset | Written to be received in a public theatre which admits people of all ranks: all members of audiences may not necessarily be able to read. The audience has a growing sense of its history, and of what it means to be ‘English’ E | Performed sometimes before a closed, select audience in private, but more often, quite spectacularly, on big, public open stages which are being built as the play is first performed. Contains some dramatic spectacle, some court scenes, and some intimate sequences. Deliberate cruelty figures in some scenes e | The author is concerned to write a comic play which will be a ‘hit’ - he is making fun of conceit, and looking at the ways in which ‘town’ and ‘country’ manners conflict. He is also benignly amused by the vagaries of human behaviour, especially the effects of embarrassment 5 |

Students’ final decision:

|  | A-E | a-e | 1-5 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marlowe  |  |  |  |
| Webster |  |  |  |
| Goldsmith |  |  |  |
| Wilde |  |  |  |
| Ibsen |  |  |  |

### Resource 2

| Political Context | Social context | Theatrical Context | Biographical/Authorial Context |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Chaucer's 'Merchant's Prologue and Tale'**Written to be read aloud in a courtly situation, this poem satirises and celebrates a complete cross section of the society of its time. Related by marriage to the Royal family and aristocracy, Chaucer is critical of some clergy, and reflects current 'new learning' being discovered in classical and renaissance literature. |  | Clearly valued from its first production, and initially circulated in manuscripts copied by individual illuminators known to Chaucer, some lavishly illuminated (the Hengest copy is in the National Library of Wales) this was one of the first texts to be printed, by William Caxton, and had a wide (if wealthy, and literate) audience.  |  |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Milton's 'Paradise Lost Books 9 and 10'** | Written during a period of complete social and political upheaval by a man of great political influence (a pamphleteer and ambassador for the Commonwealth) who before the Commonwealth was known for plays as well as poems. The work seeks to provide a poetic justification for religious faith, to dramatise and humanise scripture, and to look at the damaging power of moral choice in human hands.  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Coleridge's 'Selected Poems'**Classed as 'Romantic', Coleridge's verse is often philosophical, but is sometimes rooted in everyday life - the 'conversation poems' and touches on the philosophy of education and on the nature and effects of experience. Some of his work is politically and socially radical. |  | Coleridge wrote prolifically, as an instigator of (sometimes very ambitious) publishing schemes, initially in a publishing (though not writing) collaboration with Wordsworth. His verse is often either reflective, or visionary. |  |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Tennyson's 'Maud'** |  |  | The son of an upper middle-class Lincolnshire clerical family, Tennyson's poetic talent was recognised early. He went to Cambridge; where his friendship with A H Hallam was crucial to his alter work. He was overwhelmingly popular, and a major figure in Victorian society: created Poet Laureate and a peer, despite his sometimes strikingly unconventional views. |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Rossetti 'Selected Poems'** |  |  | Born into an artistic and quite unconventionally creative academic and artistic family, the increasing uncertainty and isolation of life after her father's death drew her to religion, which caused her to renounce close relationships, but to pursue religious and feminist themes. |