

ENGLISH CONTEXT SUMMARY NOTES

“Whose reality?”

Includes:

- Foe
- Wag the Dog
- Death of a Salesman
- The Lot: In words

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Understanding the Context

When approaching this context students should ask themselves about the different *perspectives* that can exist when looking at a text: a set of values, a country, an idea, a person or even an animal. What ideas, values and assumptions do you bring to the way you see a particular thing? Are you male or female? Lower/middle/upper class? What is your cultural heritage? What religious affiliations do you have and how do they slant your view of this object/idea? Do you perceive an animal through an anthropocentric lens (that is, how it can serve you – are you going to eat it?). If you were born a hundred years ago how would your perspective change and why? As you can see, the list of questions raised by this context are numerous and this list is by no means exhaustive.

Writer's regularly raise questions about the way we perceive the world and seek to challenge our blinkered views. This may be approached through the genre (memoir, science fiction, literary fiction) the form (novel, film, play), the use of symbols, images and motifs, the use of characters and/or structure such as chronology to name but a few ways that the representation of reality can be constructed and manipulated for an audience.

When writing about this context students must be sure to use the texts to support their global interpretation of the context or idea, rather than simply discussing the text in isolation. It must be used to respond to a key part of the context, that is, looking at perspective, truth, historical/social/political etc. context, relativism and reality.

Background

The question ‘Whose reality?’ is one which has plagued philosophers, writers, scientists, theologians and almost all thinking people for centuries. However, the notion of singular truths has really only been effectively challenged within the last couple of centuries in Western thought, most notably in the 20th century. Post-modern literature problematises the notion of who possesses the ‘truth’ and relativises¹ all conceptions of what it means to ‘have’ truth and whether anyone can truly possess it.

Post-modern literature is based on the idea that there are multiple truths; that we each only have a single perspective and a limited point of view. It presents time as being fractured, which means that the simplicity of linear narratives is replaced by the fusion of past and present perspectives. Thus flashbacks, foreshadowing and overlapping of events becomes commonplace in post-modern literature. The idea is that you cannot do justice to reality through a single strand of narrative.

The inter-textuality of the TV show *The Simpsons* shows us that texts inform each other, that no texts exists in a vacuum. *The Simpsons* constant references to outside texts, such as Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Raven', the many political references and the pointed gags at Hollywood stars are examples of inter-textuality. *The Simpsons* uses irony as a strong satirical tool, which undercuts the sense that someone can have a valid holistic point of view or set of beliefs. The plethora of satirical cartoons, for which *The Simpsons* was the progenitor, reflects the growing belief in modern society that absolute conceptions of the world, a belief that there is only one truth or one way of looking at things, are obsolete.

Philosophers such as Plato believed that there was an essence of truth to each thing which can be discerned or discovered. Post-modern theory dismisses this notion. This context asks us to engage with the question of how to perceive the world: Is there an absolute truth or are there only perspectives?

It might be interesting to think about science in this context. Scientists pursue answers as though there were an external reality that is immutable and cannot be challenged. Imagine if scientists said, ‘Well you may think the earth is a sphere but from my perspective...’ The philosopher Thomas Kuhn presented a case for Perspectivism in science based on the idea of paradigm changes. He suggested that in each era certain assumptions about the world and truth and what constitutes a fact are prevalent. He argued that science is not a steady cumulative acquisition of knowledge but a series of peaceful interludes punctuated by intellectually violent revolutions. That is, there were periods of science when everyone agreed, followed by periods when anomalies would rise because the previous assumptions did not explain all of the problems being studied. When the anomalies grew too great then another theory was required and generated which caused rifts and a revolutionary change of paradigm.

Perhaps the most dramatic paradigm change in history was the Copernican revolution. Prior to Copernicus people believed that the Earth was the centre of the universe and the sun and all the heavenly bodies revolved around it. After Copernicus humankind was marginalised in the universe. This caused catastrophic religious, philosophical and scientific upheavals. Kuhn did not think that Science guaranteed truth but rather than it answered questions as they arose or as the paradigm (and the technology) allowed.

¹Relativises means to make relative to other things. That is, that one idea can only be seen in relation to another. e.g. The fact that I am a middle class Australian woman writing in the 21st century may change my perspective on Aboriginal rights in Australia that I might perceive differently if I were an English officer's wife in the newly established colony of New South Wales during the early 19th century.

Themes and Issues related to the Context

Truth

All of the study texts challenge the notion of truth in some way, whether it is a correct recollection of events, or an emotional truth, or a social and political truth. Truth is a difficult notion, one that has many facets, and it cannot merely be seen as a set of facts. It is open to the personal interpretation of all those involved. Obviously, then, there will be differences of opinion, and even conflict, over what exactly is 'the truth'.

Perspectives

Even the use of a range of texts in this Context is designed to offer a range of perspectives on the idea of reality. Perspective in the texts is deliberately constructed as fallible. Each character forms his/her own particular personal interpretation of 'The Truth' about the events that involve them. Thus, perspective is used to challenge the ordinary expectations of the audience and call into question the assumptions about self, others, truth and reality that each of us brings to our own lives and our individual perspectives of the wider world.

Honesty

The question of 'whose reality?' is not necessarily answered in such a straightforward manner as 'his truth' or 'my truth'. Often, people obscure truths from themselves and others through confusion, deceit, anxiety, stress, grief and despair, to name a few. Thus, the notion of honesty, to others and oneself, becomes paramount in the assessment of perspective, truth and reality, interweaving many of the key themes raised by this Context. Honesty to self and others informs the way we perceive ourselves, the way we perceive others, and the way others perceive us.

Doubt

Reality is something most people take for granted. We assume that our senses accurately reflect the world around us. We assume that things are indeed as they seem and that we do not need to question every little thing about our existence. Philosophers throughout the ages have, of course, questioned the nature of reality as evidenced by Rene Descartes', 'I think therefore I am'. Needing to prove that 'I am' (that I exist) seems redundant to most people and only causes anxiety and frustration. However, our senses are often called into question, for example when someone we trust lies to us, when we encounter an optical illusion, when our memory of an experience differs to someone else's recollection and so on, and when this happens we have cause to doubt.

Doubt is often shown through the texts to be a destructive element, though it is not always the case in 'real' life. Thus doubt affects reality twofold: one is in the way that it has damaged our sense of self and the trust we have in our own perceptions and experiences, the other is the consequential changes in our behaviours that result from the doubt which changes our perceptions and ordinary responses.

Shared perspectives

'We experience the world as I, but make sense of it as we.' Many of the texts explore the notion of how selves are socially constructed beings rather than purely self-defined. However, they also show that there is room to defy the social order and follow the rules written on one's own heart. Finding the boundary between defiance and acceptance is a line that many characters struggle with, running the danger, during the struggle, of falling into delusion or fantasy. The texts do not condone fantasy, escapism or delusions as a means of coping. Rather, they promote knowledge, finding one's own truth in seeking a reality that is honest to one's own experience and finding others to share it with.

TEXT 1: FOE

Background Information

Foe requires an intertextual understanding of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. First published on the 25th of April, 1719, the story centres around Robinson Crusoe, who finds himself shipwrecked on a deserted island. He is the only survivor from his ship and is lucky enough to be able to collect weapons and supplies from the ship before it sinks completely. He spends his time on the island building shelters, growing rice and barley, raising goats and reading the Bible. He becomes religious, thanking God for his survival, devoting much of his time to prayer and reflection. In the final section of the book, Crusoe learns that there are cannibals who sometimes visit the island to kill and eat prisoners. He rescues a prisoner and calls him 'Friday,' after the day of the week that he was found. They develop a close bond, while Crusoe teaches Friday English and converts him to Christianity. They are eventually rescued when sailors land on the island. Crusoe learns that the sailors have mutinied against their captain and helps to restore order to the ship. They pledge their allegiance to Crusoe and agree to take him and Friday home.

There are both similarities and differences between the original story of Robinson Crusoe's time on the island and J.M Coetzee's *Foe*. However, the differences far outweigh the similarities. Some of the more notable differences will be explored further in this study guide.

Similarities:

The similarities begin and end with the characters Crusoe and Friday. In *Foe*, Crusoe and Friday live on the island together.

Differences:

The character of Crusoe is different. In fact, in *Foe*, even the spelling of the name is different, with J.M Coetzee spelling his name 'Cruso.' In Defoe's story, Crusoe is interested in creating and maintaining surroundings that allow him to develop some sense of an ordinary life. Coetzee's Cruso is not interested in material surroundings and has cultivated nothing but empty terraces. While Defoe's Crusoe escapes the island and returns to Europe, Coetzee's Cruso dies on the ship shortly after being rescued.

The island itself is also different. Defoe's island is lush and Crusoe is able to grow food and raise goats. In contrast, Coetzee's island is battered by Mother Nature's harsh winds that cause the stunted trees to grow twisted. This makes them unfit to be used to build anything, and, all Cruso has on this island is a knife that he was able to escape his ship with.

The character of Friday is also different. The most notable difference is that he is unable to communicate, as his tongue has been cut out. While Defoe's character was able to learn English and communicate with Crusoe, Coetzee's Friday is mute.

Finally the largest difference is the inclusion of another character, Susan Barton and her writer, Foe. Susan Barton is a woman who is marooned on the island after being cast overboard when the men on her ship mutiny against their captain. *Foe* focuses on Susan's attempt to have Foe write about her time on the island after her rescue, so that she may sell the story.