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978-0-521-71247-7 - World and Time: Teaching Literature in Context

Adrian Barlow

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Contexts in Literature

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To
Anne and Peter Stileman
for their friendship and encouragement
ever since I started teaching

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Preface

This book is a companion to the *Cambridge Contexts in Literature* series. It has been written particularly for those who may be beginning their careers as teachers of English and, specifically, of English Literature. I hope it will also be helpful to those who have been teaching for some time and have recently felt the ground shifting under their feet. In some respects the subject as taught and examined today is very different from the English of twenty years ago; in others, however, it seems to some people not to have moved fast enough. I have set out to explore these differences and continuities, to see how they can be reconciled.

As the book's sub-title – *Teaching Literature in Context* – suggests, *World and Time* is both about attitudes to teaching literature today and about questions that can provoke real anxiety. How should one teach context in literature – and why? And what contexts should one teach anyway? I have written the book from a post-Curriculum 2000 perspective: it was in the 'Subject Criteria for English Literature', published by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in 1999, that the new emphasis on context was first articulated. But whether one is teaching A levels in England, Auckland or Singapore, Highers in Scotland, the OIB in France, Advanced Placement in San Francisco, or the IB anywhere else, I hope the book's arguments and its approaches to teaching literature in context will be thought-provoking and of use.

During much of my career, I have been both a teacher and an examiner, closely involved in developing new A level syllabuses and specifications, in creating the Advanced Extension Award in English and launching the English Literature Admissions Test (ELAT). In *World and Time* I have tried to focus on both the teaching and the assessment of literature, so I should state at the outset my belief that the curriculum (what needs to be taught) should always determine the shape and scope of assessment, not the other way around. All teachers teach to the test, but anyone who *only* teaches to the test should not be teaching. Indeed, the whole point of contextual study is to make English a more open-ended subject than ever, one in which going beyond the set texts is essential. Giving students time and guidance to explore the literary landscape for themselves; encouraging them to take risks with what they read and showing them how to find connections between texts – these are what make for good A level teaching and hence for good students.

Much of this book is concerned with issues of transition from studying English Literature in the sixth form (that outdated but still useful shorthand for anyone taking an advanced pre-university course to the age of eighteen) to English Studies at university. Everyone preparing students for possible admission to an English

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degree should compare the Benchmark Statement for English, published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) with the QCA Subject Criteria. Sometimes this emphasis on transition is explicit. For example, in Part 1 of this book I discuss the anxiety felt in Higher Education at the apparent loss of close reading skills from the sixth-form curriculum, and the way that university English departments sell themselves to prospective applicants.

Elsewhere it is implicit, particularly in Part 2 where I illustrate and discuss different types of context and explore ways of integrating close reading and contextual study. Here my aim is to show how at A level it is possible – necessary, in fact – to take students well beyond the point of thinking that plot, theme and character lie at the heart of textual analysis or that unseen practical criticism is a technique for unlocking the ‘hidden meaning’ of a poem or passage. Contextual study enlarges the frame of reference in which texts can be studied. I hope to show that it adds to the rewards of teaching literature. Above all, I want to argue that all good teaching should lead to greater enjoyment of literature and literary study – for both the teacher and the student.

Some of the material in this book has previously appeared, in earlier versions, in magazines and journals. I am grateful to the editors of *e-magazine*, *The Use of English* and *The International Journal of Youth and Adolescence* for allowing articles to be reproduced here. I am also grateful to many of my own adult students for their views and criticisms of some of the chapters. In particular Joy Dauncey, Lucy Barratt, Paul Crossley and Anil Malhotra have probably taught me more than I have taught them. To colleagues and friends in the English Association, the English and Media Centre and in Cambridge Assessment – Helen Lucas and Julia Hughes, Barbara Bleiman, Paul Norgate, Mike Smith, Sue Fiander and Mark Shannon – I also owe much. All have helped, one way and another, with the writing of this book. At Cambridge University Press I have been fortunate to have had such a supportive and patient editor as Matthew Winson. Gary Snapper’s reading of the whole text in typescript has been invaluable. Gill Stacey, too, has played a large part in the making of this book and indeed of the whole *Cambridge Contexts in Literature* series. However, it is no exaggeration to say that, but for my wife Christine, *World and Time* would probably never have been started. And without her as my best critic it would certainly never have been finished.

Madingley Hall
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29th February 2008