English Literature in Context

Comprehensive and accessible, this textbook supports the study of English literature from the Middle Ages to the present, and is designed as a main resource for all English Literature students. The book is carefully structured for undergraduate use, with a rich range of illustrations and textboxes that enhance and summarise vital background material. The seven chronological chapters are written by a team of expert contributors who are also highly experienced teachers with a clear sense of the requirements of the undergraduate English curriculum. Each analyses a major historical period, surveying and documenting the cultural contexts that have shaped English literature, and focusing on key texts. In addition to the narrative survey, each chapter includes a detailed chronology, providing a quick-reference guide to the period; contextual readings of select literary texts; and annotated suggestions for further reading. This is an invaluable reference for students and teachers alike.

Paul Poplawski is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Leicester. He has taught widely in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, and also has teaching interests in post-colonial literature and creative writing. He has published several books and articles on D.H. Lawrence, including the revised third edition of A Bibliography of D.H. Lawrence (Cambridge, 2001), and is also Series Adviser for the current Penguin Classics series of D.H. Lawrence’s texts. His other publications include A Jane Austen Encyclopedia (1998) and, as editor, Encyclopedia of Literary Modernism (2003).
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All the above images courtesy of Getty Images
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**Lee Morrissey**, Professor of English at Clemson University, is the author of *From the Temple to the Castle: An Architectural History of English Literature, 1660–1760*. 
Preface

Don’t want your drum and trumpet history – no fear … Don’t want to know who was who’s mistress, and why so-and-so devastated such a province; that’s bound to be all lies and upsy-down anyhow. Not my affair. Nobody’s affair now. Chaps who did it didn’t clearly know … What I want to know is, in the middle ages Did they Do Anything for Housemaid’s Knee? What did they put in their hot baths after jousting, and was the Black Prince – you know the Black Prince – was he enamelled or painted, or what? I think myself, black-leaded – very likely – like pipe-clay – but did they use blacking so early?


As Edward Ponderevo’s rambling comments from Wells’s novel humorously illustrate, literature regularly asks questions about history and about the processes by which historical knowledge and understanding are shaped. What is somewhat less common is to see historical questions asked of literature - questions, for example, such as how and why particular types of literature should emerge from particular sets of historical circumstances. The academic study of literature usually takes for granted the idea that literature should function as a critical reflection on people and society in history, and on the ways in which people make historical sense of their lives, but it often glosses over the fact that literature (in both its material and symbolic aspects) is itself always actively part of the historical process and inextricably bound up with its surrounding historical contexts.

There has certainly been a growing trend among critics and scholars in recent years to place increased emphasis on the precise historical contextualisation of literature, and this trend has to some extent been reflected within degree programmes in English. However, it remains the case that undergraduate literature students often have only a fairly limited sense of relevant historical contexts, and this is partly because of the relative dearth of appropriate and accessible study materials within this field. By its very nature, relevant historical information for the whole sweep of English literature tends to be widely scattered in a number of different sources, and, in any case, historical information of itself does not necessarily illuminate literary study without further interpretation and contextualisation of its own – and students often need guidance with this. There are many helpful general histories of English literature, of course, and these can go some way towards providing such guidance, but they usually deal mainly with the ‘internal’ development of literature through the ages and only briefly, if at all, with the broader historical contexts.
which have helped to shape that development. At the other end of the spec-
trum, there are also many useful books of specialised historical literary criti-
cism which deal in close detail with specific periods, and these are certainly
valuable resources for a focused historical understanding of literature. However, broad-based books dedicated to introducing students to the systema-
tic study of literature in context, with historical and literary material relevant
to all periods of literature, are very few and far between, and it is this particular
gap in provision for students that the present book seeks to address.

English Literature in Context has been written and designed specifically for
undergraduates to provide a detailed and accessible source of contextual
reference material to support the study of English literature from the Middle
Ages to the present. The book offers a wide-ranging introduction to the key
historical and cultural contexts in which literature has been produced through
the ages and it explores the complex interactions between literature and its
contexts through focused discussions of particular literary trends, move-
ments, texts and issues within each period. Each chapter of the book provides
a comprehensive overview of one broad period of English literature, outlining
important historical and literary events and examining the ways in which the
diverse social, economic, political and cultural aspects of the period have
informed its literary activity. To consolidate and enhance the reader’s under-
standing of the period and its literature, a range of illustrations and ‘break-out’
textboxes also feature in each chapter.

As indicated above, the book has been written as an introductory text for
undergraduates and, in particular, the authors have tried to maintain a clear,
lively and accessible style of writing without any assumption of prior specialist
knowledge on the part of the reader. At the same time, however, we hope that
the book’s detailed treatment of particular trends, texts and contexts within
each period will make it suitable as a source of reference and stimulus for more
advanced study too. It should perhaps be noted that the authors are all experi-
enced teachers of literature with a clear grasp of the learning needs of students
as they progress through degree programmes in English, and the book has
been designed to cater flexibly for those needs.

Using this book

Each chapter of the book has a common structure of five main sections which
move the focus gradually from the general to the particular as they each
develop the dialogue between history and literature, contexts and texts.
These five sections are as follows:

i. Historical overview
ii. Literary overview
iii. Texts and issues
iv. Readings
v. Reference
In each chapter, the ‘Historical overview’ is preceded by a brief introductory paragraph and a chronology which covers the period in question, listing all major historical and cultural events alongside key literary developments. Among other things, the chronologies are intended to provide a quick reference guide to the literature and history of each period and to enable readers to make some critical observations of their own about the period, both before and after reading the main part of the related chapter. The first two sections then lay narrative foundations for each chapter by broadly surveying the historical and literary trends of the relevant period and by drawing attention to key points of conjunction between the two. The third section, ‘Texts and issues’, looks more closely at such points of conjunction and expands on the inter-relations between texts and contexts by considering some of the dominant issues or themes which can be seen to permeate the period, both in its literature and in its broader social and cultural contexts. The ‘Readings’ section then narrows the focus further by providing short contextualised readings of a small group of representative texts from the period. In their attention to textual and contextual detail, these critical readings are intended to draw together specific elements of the preceding historical, literary and thematic overviews while also serving as practical examples of how to discuss individual texts in close relation to their historical contexts. The final ‘Reference’ section in each chapter provides readers with structured and annotated suggestions for further reading and research, as well as full references for all works cited in the main text.

Within the common broad structure outlined above, there are different types of emphasis from chapter to chapter and many individual variations in how material is organised within each of the five main sections. These variations reflect the different characteristics of each particular period (including their differences in length) as well as the different interests of individual authors – for, while we have aimed at a certain degree of standardisation of style and structure across chapters, we have wanted to avoid a narrow uniformity and have done our best to retain a clear sense of our own individual voices, along with a lively feel for the distinctiveness of our periods.

It should be made clear that the focus of the book is on British literature primarily and that American literature and other literatures in English are not dealt with in any detail here. Having said that, variable historical circumstances over the centuries inevitably mean that authors have had to make their own critical judgements for their specific periods as to how narrowly or broadly to interpret the concept of ‘British literature’ and how far to trace literary developments and influences beyond Britain at any particular point. Similarly, although several chapters touch on critical questions about how we define and delimit literary periods in the first place, and also about how we decide on what constitutes a relevant historical context, we have not felt it appropriate in a practically oriented book like this to dwell too much on such matters. We certainly want readers to reflect on these things for
themselves, and we have tried in our discussions to retain a degree of flex-
ibility and open-endedness to encourage this, but, equally, in organising our
material we have each had to make some clear-cut decisions and selections –
and in the main these have been guided by a pragmatic sense of the broad
requirements of undergraduate studies in English and of the sorts of literary
traditions, periods and texts that are widely taught and studied in universities
and colleges around the world. We are aware, of course, that there is no neat
consensus on such matters and that English degrees are as many and various as
the institutions which offer them, but we hope our coverage is sufficiently
broad and balanced to meet the requirements of at least some parts of most
degree programmes. It should be stressed, moreover, that much of the discus-
sion in the book (especially in the ‘Texts and issues’ and ‘Readings’ sections) is
only intended to be illustrative of a general approach to the study of literature in
its historical contexts. We are by no means trying to prescribe particular
programmes of study of our own, or indeed to narrow the possibilities of
analysis and interpretation to the ones presented here. Our hope is simply
that we can provide a firm foundation for historically contextualised literary
study, along with sufficiently stimulating examples of such study to encourage
readers to make their own critical explorations in this field according to their
own circumstances and interests.

Sources for all quotations and references are cited in abbreviated form in the
main text and full details of such citations can be found in the relevant
‘Reference’ section at the end of each chapter. For ease of orientation within
that section, citations are always keyed to its various sub-sections (A, Bi, Cii,
etc.) – for example:

Stephen Constantine, *Unemployment in Britain between the Wars*, pp. 1–2 [Bi]
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