

‘*Studying English Literature in Context* will undoubtedly advance the theory and practice of cultural materialist pedagogy in higher education. I recommend this lively and enjoyable volume as a valuable resource for teachers and students of English literature, and as an excellent anthology of scholarly essays in its own right.’

Caroline Franklin, Swansea University

‘*Studying English Literature in Context* helps to ease students’ transition from second- to third-level study by offering scholarly essays that are written specifically for students. This makes academic writing and argument more accessible to students coming to such material for the first time, with the further resources offering the additional benefit of helping students to think more critically about what they are reading. *Studying English Literature in Context* offers new university students much-needed support as they work towards the broader/deeper critical inquiry in which they will engage at later stages of their programme. It is likely to be widely assigned in undergraduate survey courses, and much used.’

Naomi McAreavey, University College Dublin

‘Driven by the conviction that texts are fruitfully understood within the context of their time, this enormously adaptable book manages, without strain, to appeal both to scholars and to students, to bookworms and to neophytes. It covers the entire history of English literature and drama with an ease and dexterity matched only by ambition and range. Critical reflections accompanying each essay inform students, without dryness, of the scholarly tradition to which they contribute. This collection deserves a place on reading lists wherever English literature is nurtured and cherished.’

Ronan McDonald, The University of Melbourne

‘*Studying English Literature in Context* is a superb collection of essays by leading scholars that will foster stimulating response, reignite debate, and demand intellectual engagement by readers of representative texts from the long history of English. The authors recognise that, from *The Dream of the Rood*’s multivalence to Aphra Behn’s colonial novel *Oroonoko* and Grace Nichols’ feminist poetry, literature both contributes to, and reflects, sociocultural critique, linking past modes of creative expression with current conversations

about form, textual ambiguity, literary resistance, and periodisation. In addition to this impressive set of critical interpretations, generous resources are provided to situate the student in the long chronology and complex range of generic, stylistic, material, and performative possibilities offered by literature. The whole volume works to ensure enhanced understanding of the significance of poetry, prose, and drama, both to authors and creators and to audiences globally; as Poplawski anticipates, this book offers *contextured* readings, encouraging connections between eras, affect, and modalities to amplify the power of the written and spoken word.'

Elaine Treharne, Stanford University

'An impeccable selection of wide-ranging but sharply focused texts in their historical and cultural contexts by seasoned scholars with a keen sense of the past as well as a sharp eye for essential contemporary issues such as feminism, environmentalism, immigration, and politics. The crisp and succinct essays are packed with engaging questions that suggest lively classroom discussion as well as thoughtful critical examination.'

Stephen Kern, Ohio State University

Studying English Literature in Context

Ranging from early medieval times to the present, this diverse collection explores the myriad ways in which literary texts are informed by their historical contexts. The thirty-one essays draw on varied themes and perspectives to present stimulating new readings of both canonical and non-canonical texts and authors. Written in a lively and engaging style by an international team of experts, these specially commissioned essays collectively represent an incisive contribution to literary studies; they will appeal to scholars, teachers and graduate and undergraduate students. The book is intended to complement Paul Poplawski's previous volume, *English Literature in Context*, and incorporates additional study elements designed specifically with undergraduates in mind. With an extensive chronology, a glossary of critical terms and a study guide suggesting how students might learn from the essays in their own writing practices, this volume provides a rich and flexible resource for teaching and learning.

Paul Poplawski taught at the University of Wales and the University of Leicester, where he was Director of Studies at Vaughan College and Senior Lecturer in English. He was the general editor of the two editions of *English Literature in Context* (2008, 2017), to which he also contributed the chapters 'The Twentieth Century, 1901–39' and 'Postcolonial Literature in English'. He is a member of the editorial board of the Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence and co-author of the third edition of *A Bibliography of D. H. Lawrence* (2001). In addition to several other books and essays on Lawrence, he has published a book on Jane Austen (1998) and was the editor of *Encyclopedia of Literary Modernism* (2003). Most recently, he was guest editor for the *MHRA Yearbook of English Studies* for 2020, entitled *Back to the Twenties: Modernism Then and Now*.

Studying English Literature in Context

Critical Readings

Edited by
Paul Poplawski



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Materialities: Reorienting the Body in Modernist Literature (2019; edited by Kara Watts, Molly Volanth Hall and Robin Hackett).

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Texts and Contexts, Characters and Themes (co-edited with Raluca L. Radulescu; 2005) and *The Arthurian Way of Death: The English Tradition* (co-edited with Karen Cherewatuk; 2009).

ROBERT WILCHER retired as Reader in Early Modern Studies in the English Department at the University of Birmingham, UK, in 2007. In addition to *The Writing of Royalism 1628–1660* (2001), he has published many articles on early modern literature and twentieth-century drama, and books on Andrew Marvell, Arnold Wesker and Sir John Suckling. He is a joint editor of *The Works of Henry Vaughan* (Oxford University Press, 2018) and the author of *Keeping the Ancient Way: Aspects of the Life and Work of Henry Vaughan* (2021). He is an honorary fellow of the Shakespeare Institute.

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Preface, Volume Outline and Rationale

What do you get if you take the text out of context? A con? Well, perhaps not a confidence trick exactly, but surely some kind of sleight of hand which creates the illusion of something entirely self-contained, whose meanings and significance are magically self-generated without any apparent connection to history and the complex swirling networks of language, culture and society that shape and inform all our lives.

It may be true that, as long as we can understand the language it is written in, a text can appear to be perfectly comprehensible without our knowing too much about the particular historical circumstances out of which it grew and without thinking too much about how our own contexts as active readers might influence the meanings we derive from it. But this apparent autonomy of signification obscures the fact that individual texts in themselves would have no meaning at all without the historically evolved frameworks of language, culture and society that have brought them into being as signifying entities in the first place. It also obscures the individual's crucial 'activation' of meaning in the very process of reading, a process that inevitably has its own contexts and associated frameworks of interpretation.

Whether or not we are consciously aware of it, we are constantly drawing on 'contextual' information to make sense of the many material and symbolic 'texts' around us. In decoding and processing symbolic written texts in particular, we draw from our internalised store of information, knowledge, beliefs, assumptions and understanding about the world. And even if that store of 'ready-made' contextual resources is lacking in some way, we will still, as meaning-making creatures, automatically smooth over any gaps or anomalies to try to make sense of things as best we can – or as best suits us – even if this is based on a sort of creative guesswork. In this way most of us can make reasonably good sense of most of the texts we read, even if they were written at some distance from us, chronologically, geographically or culturally, in times, places or cultures where our grasp of relevant contexts must be largely uncertain. It is here that the sleight of hand I mentioned comes into play most obviously – that is, when we take the text out of context and simply assimilate what we read to our own inner and often unexamined 'map' of the world. And it is here, therefore, where critically contextualised readings of texts such as are presented in this collection can help not only to provide us with richer, fuller contextual understanding of particular texts, but also to sensitise us to all the things *we don't know* we don't know about many of

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the texts we read and believe we understand. Imagine, for instance, what a reader in thirty years' time might make of these final words from a recent poem by Grace Nichols: '*I can't breathe*' ('Breath', 2020). Most of us today, in 2022, will immediately understand the connotations of these words because of the contexts of the continuing coronavirus pandemic and the brutal police murder of George Floyd in 2020. Detached from these contexts, however, readers in 2052 will probably miss the full significance of the line on first reading (even if, unfortunately, they are still likely to recognise its echoing of the climate emergency). Nichols's poem was written to commemorate the 1977 Battle of Lewisham and would therefore have another specific historical context to be retrieved and explored as well (see www.explore.gold/breath).

There are, in fact, myriad complex ways in which texts depend for their meanings on 'contextual' factors, and this volume's richly diverse collection of essays, spanning the whole of English literary history, seeks to explore and elucidate some of these ways by setting a wide range of texts and contexts in illuminating dialogue with one another. 'Context' may seem to be a simple concept, but this is far from the case, as will be seen, and one aim of this volume is to refine our understanding of how texts and contexts feed off each other by considering some of the many material, institutional and symbolic contexts that have dialogically informed English literature from its beginnings in Anglo-Saxon times through to the globalised present.

Taking in all the main literary genres and considering a balanced mixture of both well-known and lesser-known texts and authors, the essays range variously across social, political, economic, religious, scientific and literary-critical contexts. They engage with many topics and issues of contemporary relevance – such as social crisis and precarity, migration, racial and gender inequalities, and the threat to our environment – and draw on a number of critical fields and perspectives, including anthropology, cultural materialism, ecocriticism, everyday life studies, feminism, genre studies, life writing, New Historicism, postcolonialism and print culture studies.

The volume's emphasis on texts and contexts should be seen as an equal emphasis on both elements; in turn, its overall approach presupposes a view of literature as a form of active social critique where literary texts are seen as shaping contexts as much as they are shaped by them. The dialogue between the two is not always neatly balanced and generally not directly synchronous in time, but one of the most highly valued qualities of literature has always been its ability to hold up a critical mirror to society, and the analysis of this function of texts naturally plays a major role here. Moreover, as already suggested, in looking into the mirror of texts in their own historical periods, many of the essays also refract critical light on facets of our own contemporary society – and this in turn reflects an overarching aspiration of this volume to convey a compelling sense of the always *immediate* relevance of studying English literature in context.

Volume Outline and Rationale

As will become clear, there is an important distinction to be noted between the essays and the book's supplementary study support elements. The essays, that is, have been conceived as contributions to critical scholarship within literary studies and have been written, accordingly, at the levels of sophistication that one would normally expect to find in scholarly journals and other essay anthologies (such as the well-known series of Cambridge Companion volumes, for example). The study support elements, on the other hand, have been conceived and written especially with students (and their teachers) in mind, with the intention of helping students to make the most of the essays and to draw lessons from them in terms of developing their own critical practice. There is no reason why serious students should not find most of the essays in this volume readily accessible – especially if they are read in conjunction with the book's study support elements and, where relevant, with advice and guidance from teachers – but the key point here is that, unlike those study support elements, the essays are not written solely for students, but are intended as mainstream scholarly essays for a broad academic audience. The sense in which the essays *are* particularly intended for students, when seen together as an integral part of the whole book, is in the sense of offering students a varied range of models of how criticism is generally conducted within English studies which they can then draw upon in their own evolving essay writing practice.

Following a general introduction, the volume presents thirty-one essays organised, as follows, into seven broad chronological parts and an eighth part on post-colonial literature (whose period span has conventionally been seen as similar to that of the immediately preceding section, though it has roots going back much further in time, as several of the essays in earlier sections here testify):

- I Medieval English, 500–1500
- II The Renaissance, 1485–1660
- III The Restoration and Eighteenth Century, 1660–1780
- IV The Romantic Period, 1780–1832
- V The Victorian Age, 1832–1901
- VI The Twentieth Century, 1901–1939
- VII The Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries, 1939–2020
- VIII Postcolonial Literature in English

The grouping of the essays into these traditional literary periods, along with a final part on postcolonial literature, is partly a matter of convenience as it mirrors the structure of my earlier Cambridge volume, *English Literature in Context* (2nd edn, 2017), and will facilitate cross-referencing between the two books for those who wish to use the two together (for example, to set the focused readings here against the general historical contexts there). However, as suggested above, many of the

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essays address issues which cut across chronological lines, and it is part of the purpose of the book positively to suggest thematic continuities between the essays and links across the periods they represent. This is not to suggest that there are continuous lines of argument from essay to essay, or any narrowly prescribed set of themes for the book. The essays are unified first and foremost by their common critical concern to explore texts in relation to their contexts – but, as far as subject matter goes, each individual essay can be approached entirely on its own terms, if the reader so wishes. In that respect, the volume should be seen more as a ‘miscellany’ of critical readings rather than as a strongly themed anthology. Nevertheless, for readers who *do* want to pursue thematic links, there is plenty of scope to do so. To aid in this, each of the eight parts is preceded by an introductory note section which, in addition to introducing the individual essays within that part of the book, specifically draws attention to such links and continuities throughout the volume and suggests some ways in which readers might set essays from different periods in fruitful dialogue with one another.

Beginning students in particular will find it helpful to refer to *English Literature in Context* if they would like to consolidate their knowledge and understanding of the broad historical and cultural backgrounds to English literature which the essays here generally take for granted. I do, however, also signal clearly in my introductory notes where there are especially useful links in the former volume to specific parts or individual essays in the present book.

Each essay is immediately preceded by a short abstract summarising the main focus and argument of the essay. Among other things, it is hoped that this will be a helpful browsing feature for readers who wish to read selectively within what is clearly a large collection. Notes and references are found at the end of each individual essay. After these endnotes, each essay then has its own short supplementary section entitled ‘Critical Reflections and Further Study’ in which contributors reflect on the development of their essays and offer some questions and suggestions for further thought, research and reading. These sections have been designed with undergraduate students (and their teachers) particularly in mind, and one anticipated use of them is as a stimulus for classroom or seminar discussion following a careful independent reading of the related essay. An additional aim here has been to add a personal dimension to the essays in which contributors can share something of their own development as critical practitioners and thus perhaps ‘demystify’ the process of academic writing for students a little. It is for this reason that these sections vary somewhat according to the contributor’s preferred style of engagement with the reader, although there are some standard features common to them all. For example, no endnotes have been used in these sections and all references are given fully either within the running text or in a further reading list at the end of the piece (although occasionally cross-references to a relevant endnote in the essay itself are given).