

'Power and Conflict' poetry context booklet

Use this booklet to revise the context of each poem in your anthology. In your exam you will be asked to discuss power and conflict in two or more of these poems. X% of the marks available are for AO3 (see below).

AO1

Read, understand and respond to texts. Students should be able to:

- maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response
- use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.

AO2

Analyse the language, form and structure used by the writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.

AO3

Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.

**** Understanding context means understanding the ideas that have influenced the poet when they were writing their poem. These influences could be historical, cultural, social or literary. E.g. By understanding that Shelley was an atheist, we can understand why he's questioning the idea of a God in his poem.**

Exam top tip:

Don't just drop in the facts, explain how they have influenced the poet's writing.

Useful internet resources for independent research:

BBC Bitesize

Mr Bruff YouTube clips on individual poems

The Poetry Archive

SparkNotes

The British Library (website)

'Ozymandias' by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792 – 1822)

Historical context

I MUST KNOW: The poem was written by Shelley in a collection in 1819. 'Ozymandias' was inspired by the recent unearthing of part of a large statue of the Egyptian Pharaoh, Ramesses II.

I SHOULD KNOW: The Egyptian Pharaohs, like Ramesses II, believed themselves to be gods in mortal form and believed their legacy would last forever.

I COULD KNOW: The base of the unearthed statue read, "King of Kings am I, Ozymandias. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works."

Shelley's context

I MUST KNOW: Shelley was a man who believed strongly in freedom and equality for all people. He was also an atheist (someone who does not believe in the existence of God).

I SHOULD KNOW: His ideals about freedom and equality came from the French Revolution, so he was politically radical for his time. He devoted a lot of time to convincing others of the rightness of his beliefs. Shelley was expelled from Oxford University for his part in writing a pamphlet called *The Necessity of Atheism*—atheism being an outrageous idea in religiously conservative nineteenth-century England.

I COULD KNOW: You could say he is presenting Ozymandias as a scornful and spiteful leader, who does not care for his subjects, in order to persuade readers that successful leaders should try to rule for everyone and not just for themselves. Perhaps he uses the name 'king of kings' ironically in the poem. This is a Biblical term used to describe the Christian God. By showing Ozymandias describing himself as 'King of Kings', when he is actually as fragile and temporary as the rest of us, Shelley calls into question the very concept of God.

Independent Research (website suggestions on the front cover)

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'London' by William Blake (1757 – 1827)

Historical context

I MUST KNOW: The poem is set during a time in England where there was a huge amount of poverty, child labour and a horrific war with France.

I SHOULD KNOW: At this time, death rates from disease and malnutrition were high and the industrial revolution meant London became overcrowded and polluted by large, oppressive factories. Almost half of children died before the age of two.

I COULD KNOW: At this time, France had just thrown off and executed their king. This 'People's Revolution' was meant to show that all men are equal and have power. In Britain, a country with an old monarchy and aristocracy, this was scary. Blake is perhaps supporting revolution, asking people to throw off the 'manacles' of their belief that they should be told what to do. Many of his poems railed against the establishment. This poem also laments how London, arguably the greatest city in the world at that time, was so dirty and corrupt.

Blake's context

I MUST KNOW: Blake rejected religion, particularly because the church failed to help children in London who were forced to work. Blake lived and worked in the capital, so he understood about the hardships people faced.

I SHOULD KNOW: Blake was a radical man, who was frustrated with the world around him. He was vocal and public about his political views. In fact, he was part of the mob that burned down Newgate Prison in the London riots of 1780. He wanted people to challenge the world around them, which was arguably his motive for writing 'London'.

I COULD KNOW: Throughout his life, he claims to have seen various visions. He reportedly saw a tree of angels in Peckham Rise. Therefore, lots of his poems have a spiritual or supernatural element.

Independent Research

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'Extract from, The Prelude' by William Wordsworth (1770 – 1850)

Literary context

I MUST KNOW: Wordsworth was a Romantic poet. The Romantics believed nature was more powerful than mankind and should be respected.

I SHOULD KNOW: The Romantics also believed that nature was more enduring or lasting than civilisation (things built by mankind). They often wrote about the ordinary person and situation, as opposed to the extraordinary, hoping to appeal to 'the everyday man'.

I COULD KNOW: The Romantics highlighted the healing power of the imagination, because they truly believed that it could enable people to transcend their troubles and their circumstances. In addition, they often chose child speakers or perspectives in their poems because they believed they were innocent and uncorrupted, enjoying a precious affinity with nature.

Wordsworth's context

I MUST KNOW: Wordsworth was inspired to write about the beautiful Lake District because that's where he lived when he was growing up. He spent lots of time outside.

I SHOULD KNOW: He liked to write about his memories, explaining how they affected him. 'The Prelude' is based on a real memory from his childhood in which he stole a boat and rode out onto a lake. The terror of seeing the true height of a mountain made him find a new respect for the supremacy of nature. His poem teaches us to respect nature before our own pride.

I COULD KNOW: You could say that by writing about a traumatic incident in his childhood in such an imaginative, supernatural way, he harnesses the Romantic belief in the intense power of the imagination, encouraging the reader to acknowledge and respect it.

Independent Research (<http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-romantics>)
(<http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/wordsworth/context.html>)

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'My Last Duchess' by Robert Browning (1812 – 1889)

Historical context

I MUST KNOW: The poem is based on Duke Alfonso II (a very powerful and wealthy man) and is written from his perspective, talking to a messenger about arranging his next marriage.

I SHOULD KNOW: The real Duke Alfonso II's last duchess was Lucrezia de' Medici, who died in suspicious circumstances after two years of marriage.

I COULD KNOW: This historical controversy from the 16th century influenced Browning's writing in the 19th century, because there are subtle hints within his poem that the speaker's last duchess was murdered: 'the faint half flush that dies along her throat' and 'then all smiles stopped together'.

Browning's context

I MUST KNOW: Browning spent most of his life living in Italy, which is perhaps why he chose to write about figures of fascination from Italian history.

I SHOULD KNOW: He married fellow poet Elizabeth Barrett, but they had to marry in secret and flee to Italy because of her over-protective father. Perhaps his experience of this overbearing father led him to write about the duke, who was also incredibly controlling and domineering over his last duchess.

Independent Research

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'The Charge of the Light Brigade' by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809 – 1892)

Historical context

I MUST KNOW: The light brigade were a real army who fought in the Crimean War against Russia (1853 and 1856).

I SHOULD KNOW: At this time, there were basic guns and cannons, but soldiers would still also fight on horses, to rush in and attack before their enemy could reload or stop them. However, the light brigade were very lightly equipped, more for scouting or attacking from the back or sides than charging straight in. The poem clearly documents the horror and the violence, making it clear that the men did not stand a chance.

I COULD KNOW: The Crimean War was the first war to be documented in mass media. Indeed, Tennyson alludes to this, when he says 'while all the world wondered'. The Crimean War brought about a sea of change in Britain's attitudes towards its fighting men. Previously the military hero was a gentleman, but the heroes who returned from Crimea, were the common troops. Their deeds were recognised for the first time in 1857, when Queen Victoria instituted the Victoria Cross, awarded to gallant servicemen, regardless of class or rank. Perhaps this is why no soldiers are named in Tennyson's poem; they are anonymous and equally courageous 'everyday' men.

Browning's context

I MUST KNOW: He was one of the most important poets of the Victorian period. He wrote 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' after reading a newspaper account of the battle and its death toll.

I SHOULD KNOW: He was asked to present the catastrophic charge as a glorious sacrifice of men serving their kingdom. This is certainly implied by the celebratory semantic field of the poem ('glory' 'noble' 'honour').

Independent Research

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'Exposure' by Wilfred Owen (1893 – 1918)

Historical context

I MUST KNOW: Thousands of men signed up to fight as a result of recruitment propaganda which made people believe it would be honourable to die for their country

I SHOULD KNOW: 1917 was the coldest winter on record. Perhaps this is why Owen personifies the perishing cold in his poem; he wanted to reveal the 'merciless' reality of fighting in the trenches at this time.

I COULD KNOW: Jessie Pope wrote jingoistic poems for the Daily Mail, urging men to take glory in fighting for their country. Owen wrote one of his most famous poems 'Dulce et decorum est' to directly challenge her poem 'Who's for the Game?' (*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori = it is sweet and honourable to die for your country*). Perhaps Owen's political agenda made him write such emotionally charged poetry. 'The burying-party [...] Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice/ But nothing happens'.

Owen's context

I MUST KNOW: Owen fought in the First World War and died fighting aged 25.

I SHOULD KNOW: His war poems rail against the idea of fighting for your country and reveal the truth of war's horrors. As a young man he experienced the suffering of poorer people in his community and felt pity for them. In the same way, he pities the soldiers fighting alongside him. Perhaps this is why he portrays man with such vulnerability in his poem: 'we cringe in holes' 'Is it that we are dying?' 'we lie out here'.

I COULD KNOW: Wilfred Owen lost his faith during his lifetime. This sense of hopelessness & loss of God is present in his poem. 'For love of God seems dying'.

Independent Research

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'Storm on the Island' by Seamus Heaney (1939 – 2013)

Cultural and Literary context

I MUST KNOW: Many remote parts of Ireland are inhospitable, bleak and totally at the mercy of the weather.

I SHOULD KNOW: The poem is written in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) – a form used by literary greats in their Epic Poems. Perhaps Heaney wanted to reflect the epic power of nature through his choice of form.

Heaney's context

I MUST KNOW: He was born on a farm in Ireland. Many of his poems are about the countryside and farm life that he knew as a boy.

I SHOULD KNOW: He enjoyed writing about very normal and homely subjects, perhaps to give his poems universality. The lack of article (the or a) before the title 'Storm on the Island' implies that his message is not about a specific storm, but about the terrifying power of nature itself, which we can never quite comprehend ('Space is a salvo' and 'We are bombarded by the empty air').

Independent Research

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