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# GCSE ENGLISH LITERATURE

Teaching context

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Further insight series

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# Further insights into how A03 context will be assessed in our new GCSE specification

GCSE English Literature (8702)

## Aim:

- To provide additional guidance (beyond that set out in the specification and Launch and Preparing to teach materials) on the way AO3 context will be assessed in our new specification.

## How is A04 (context) currently assessed in our legacy GCSE English Literature specification 9715?

### Context is currently assessed as A04

Relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts; explain how texts have been influential and significant to self, and other readers in different contexts and at different times.

AO4 context is currently assessed in Unit 1 (10%), Unit 3 (5%) and Unit 4 (5%). It is not assessed in either Units 2 or 5.

## How is this reflected in the mark scheme?

Unit 1H - Unit 1H is used here for exemplification only.

Mark Band 6 26-30 marks	(A04) (A04)	<b>In response to the task, candidates demonstrate:</b> 6.4 Insightful exploratory response to context(s) 6.5 Insightful exploration of a range of telling detail to support response to context(s)
Mark Band 5 21-25 marks	(A04) (A04)	<b>In response to the task, candidates demonstrate:</b> 5.4 Exploratory response to context(s) 5.5 Exploration of a range of telling detail to support response to context(s)
Mark Band 4 16-20 marks	(A04) (A04)	<b>In response to the task, candidates demonstrate:</b> 4.4 Considered/qualified response to context(s) 4.5 Thoughtful selection and consideration of details to support response to context(s)
Mark Band 3 11-15 marks	(A04) (A04)	<b>In response to the task, candidates demonstrate:</b> 3.4 Sustained response to context(s) 3.5 Selection of effective details to support response to context(s)
Mark Band 2 6-10 marks	(A04) (A04)	<b>In response to the task, candidates demonstrate:</b> 2.4 Explained response to context(s) 2.5 Selection of a range of details to support response to context(s)
Mark Band 1 1-5 marks	(A04) (A04)	<b>In response to the task, candidates demonstrate:</b> 1.4 Supported response to context(s) 1.5 Details used to support response to context(s)
0 marks		Nothing worthy of credit

Two bullets out of five reflect the heavy weighting of context on the task.

Each skill is assessed separately so the bullets are entirely discrete.

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## Why have we decided to change the way we approach context?

The current question structure encourages teaching and learning which focuses on social, cultural and historical context in a way that is not always integrated with the study of the text. This means that students often write about social, cultural and historical context separately from the meaning of the text.

When we talked to teachers and people from the English subject community there was agreement that the separation of context and meaning was not supportive of students' understanding of English Literature. There was also some agreement that it was not reflective of how the subject is taught and assessed at A-level and in Higher Education.

The new question structure will allow students to demonstrate understanding of context through the text itself rather than 'bolting-on' social and historical factors from the period in which the text was written.

## The difference between approaches to context in the legacy specification (9715) and the new specification (8702)

The essential difference between the ways in which context was addressed in legacy GCSE English Literature (9715), and in the way it will be addressed in the new specification (8702), is through **scope and range**. The legacy AO4 prescribed context as 'social /cultural / historical'. These specific descriptions have been removed from the wording of the new AO3. This means that students have a wider scope under which to consider context than under previous specifications: such as, for example, consideration of literary context.

The idea of context as a relationship between the text and the reader remains a relevant way of considering context.

In teaching and assessing AO3, teachers and students can consider context in a flexible way, dependent on the text itself and whichever contexts are the most relevant for that particular text. These contexts may relate to the relationship between the text and the context in which it was written. However, these contexts may also relate to the context within which the text is set: location, social structures and features, cultural contexts, and periods in time.

## How is A03 (context) assessed in our new GCSE English Literature specification 8702?

### Context is assessed in the new specification as A03

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

**A03** is worth **15%** of the marks for the overall qualification and is assessed in the following way:

#### Paper 1

Section A	Section B	
Q1 - 6	Q7 - 13	Paper 1 overall
<b>3.75%</b>	<b>3.75%</b>	<b>7.5%</b>

#### Paper 2

Section A	Section B	Section C	
Q1 - 24	Q25 and 26	27.1 and 27.2	Paper 2 overall
<b>3.75%</b>	<b>3.75%</b>	<b>A03 not assessed</b>	<b>7.5%</b>

## How is this reflected in the mark scheme?

**Paper 1** – Mark scheme levels 5 and 6 are used here for exemplification only.

One bullet out of five reflects the weighting of context – it is assessed on each taught text so has a low overall weighting within each question.

The description of AO3 performance is integrated with the description of the other skills. This reflects the approach of our exam questions and our mark scheme. We view discussion of a text's wider meaning and a writer's craft as integral to any exploration of context.

Mark	AO	Typical features	How to arrive at a mark
<b>Level 6</b>  <i>Convincing, critical analysis and exploration</i>  <b>26–30 marks</b>	AO1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Critical, exploratory, conceptualised response to task and whole text</li> <li>Judicious use of precise references to support interpretation(s)</li> </ul>	<p><b>At the top of the level</b>, a candidate's response is likely to be a critical, exploratory, well-structured argument. It takes a conceptualised approach to the full task supported by a range of judicious references. There will be a fine-grained and insightful analysis of language and form and structure supported by judicious use of subject terminology. Convincing exploration of one or more ideas/perspectives/contextual factors/interpretations.</p> <p><b>At the bottom of the level</b>, a candidate will have Level 5 and be starting to demonstrate elements of exploratory thought and/or analysis of writer's methods and /or contexts.</p>
	AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analysis of writer's methods with subject terminology used judiciously</li> <li>Exploration of effects of writer's methods on reader</li> </ul>	
	AO3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exploration of ideas/perspectives/contextual factors shown by specific, detailed links between context/text/task</li> </ul>	
<b>Level 5</b>  <i>Thoughtful, developed consideration</i>  <b>21–25 marks</b>	AO1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thoughtful, developed response to task and whole text</li> <li>Apt references integrated into interpretation(s)</li> </ul>	<p><b>At the top of the level</b>, a candidate's response is likely to be thoughtful, detailed and developed. It takes a considered approach to the full task with references integrated into interpretation; there will be a detailed examination of the effects of language and/or structure and/or form supported by apt use of subject terminology. Examination of ideas/perspectives/contextual factors, possibly including alternative interpretations/deeper meanings.</p> <p><b>At the bottom of the level</b>, a candidate will have Level 4 and be starting to demonstrate elements of thoughtful consideration and/or examination of writer's methods and/or contexts.</p>
	AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examination of writer's methods with subject terminology used effectively to support consideration of methods</li> <li>Examination of effects of writer's methods on reader</li> </ul>	
	AO3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thoughtful consideration of ideas/perspectives/contextual factors shown by examination of detailed links between context/text/task</li> </ul>	

## What might this look like as an exam question?

### *Macbeth*

Read the following extract from Act 1 Scene 5 of *Macbeth* and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play Lady Macbeth is speaking. She has just received the news that King Duncan will be spending the night at her castle.

The raven himself is hoarse  
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan  
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
5 And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull  
Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood,  
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between  
10 Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts  
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,  
Wherever in your sightless substances  
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
15 That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,  
To cry 'Hold, hold.'

0 1

Starting with this speech, explain how far you think Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a powerful woman.

Write about:

how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth in this speech  
how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]  
AO4 [4 marks]

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## Context in action – studying Macbeth

The text Macbeth is being used here to exemplify the assessment of AO3. Teachers should apply these same principles to other texts of their choice where AO3 is assessed.

### Where to begin?

Because of the range of ways in which students might approach AO3, the following questions might be a useful starting point:

- What is it helpful to know in order to understand about the text or the writer's view when reading this text?
- What might different readers / audiences take from this text, or from this moment in the text?
- What might it be helpful to know in order to get a fuller, richer understanding of the themes, or the language, or the characters?
- To what extent does the context broaden / deepen my understanding of this text?

### The idea of 'specificity'

The idea of 'specificity' is useful to bear in mind. The mark scheme highlights the need for students to **relate** their comments on context to the text:

- Clear understanding of ideas/perspectives/ contextual factors shown by **specific links between context/text/task**

Therefore context needs to be considered in the light of the text itself: context is informed by, and helps to inform, understanding of the text, rather than to dominate a particular reading.

Let's look at an example of this in action.

In the following extract from Act 3, Macbeth is talking about his feelings about Banquo:

Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,  
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,  
Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,  
No son of mine succeeding. If 't be so,  
For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind;  
For them, the gracious Duncan have I murdered;  
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace  
Only for them, and mine eternal jewel  
Given to the common enemy of man,  
To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings.  
Rather than so, come Fate into the list,  
And champion me to th'utterance.

Questions that may be useful to ask about this extract might include:

Why does Macbeth describe his crown and sceptre as 'fruitless' and 'barren'?

What does Macbeth mean by 'mine eternal jewel'?

What does Macbeth mean by the words 'list' and 'champion'?

In order to answer these questions, might students need to understand that:

- The idea of paternal lineage would be very important to Macbeth: it's not only his reign in the here and now, but his 'line' that is very important to him. A contemporary audience would appreciate the point being made by Macbeth here
- the idea of the afterlife would be very important to a contemporary audience; they would appreciate that Macbeth's 'selling his soul' had enormous implications for him
- notions of chivalry and courtly honour are being highlighted through some of Macbeth's language, reminding the audience of the extent that he has already removed himself from behaving like a hero.

So, although on one level students might understand that Macbeth feels that he has 'wasted his soul' by killing Duncan, they could possibly develop a deeper understanding by being introduced to some ideas that would be familiar to a contemporary audience.

Notice how, in this example, the contextual ideas are specific and relevant to that moment in the text. This approach helps to avoid students making generalised comments about 'all people in that time', 'everyone believed in', and so on.

## Responding to AO3 – beginning with AO1 and AO2

The questions are designed to elicit a response to AO3 in addition to a response to AO1 and AO2. In other words, there will be key words in the question that are designed to enable students to link their understanding of context to their understanding of the ideas in the text.

For example:

Bring me no more reports, let them fly all;  
Till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane,  
I cannot taint with fear. What's the boy Malcolm?  
Was he not born of woman? The spirits that know  
All mortal consequences have pronounced me thus:  
'Fear not, Macbeth, no man that's born of woman  
Shall e'er have power upon thee.' Then fly, false thanes,  
And mingle with the English epicures;  
The mind I sway by and the heart I bear  
Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear.

*Enter SERVANT*

The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon.  
Where got'st thou that goose-look?

Starting with this speech, explain how far you think Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a hero. Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Macbeth in this speech
- how Shakespeare presents Macbeth in the play as a whole.

In this sample task, it is the idea of 'heroism' that is pointing students towards AO3. Students could approach this task in a range of ways, including literary context, social, cultural or historical.

For example if students approached the task from a social or historical perspective, they might choose to consider what expectations of a 'hero' might be, and the extent to which Macbeth is demonstrating those characteristics at this moment. Such as:

Why does Macbeth refuse to hear 'more reports' and instead cling to the witches' prophecies?

Why does Macbeth refer to the thanes as 'false'?

Why does Macbeth claim that his 'mind' and 'heart' shall 'never sag with doubt'?

Why does Macbeth insult the servant, particularly with reference to 'the devil'?

In order to understand the implications of what Macbeth is saying here, might students need to understand that:

- Macbeth has committed his soul completely to the course that the witches have encouraged him to take, rather than following his own conscience. Rather than listening to advice and taking leadership of the situation, he has chosen to become blind to the reality of his position. He is not, therefore, behaving like a good king, or a noble leader.
- Loyalty towards the king would be expected of those around him. For the thanes to have become 'false', Macbeth would have to be behaving as a very bad leader.
- A good king would be expected to demonstrate qualities of strong leadership and bravery. Macbeth, by saying that he will 'never sag with doubt' could be said to be exhibiting these qualities in this speech, but perhaps there is an element of blind refusal to his words as well.
- A hero might be expected to treat others with respect. Retorting to insults, especially to a powerless servant, is not the behaviour of a heroic character.

If students approached the task via a literary context route, they might choose to consider the notion of tragic hero, and the extent to which this extract demonstrates how far Macbeth has fallen from his position of 'grace' at the start of the play. So, for example:

- The extreme presentation of hubris in this extract, and the positioning of this speech - just before Macbeth's death
- the extent to which Macbeth has embraced the words of the witches by now, and even the language he uses himself 'devil damn thee black', demonstrating how far he has allied himself with them in order to serve his own ambition
- the extent to which Macbeth might in fact have a sense of his own imminent final downfall, and what expectations a contemporary audience might have of his need to recognise this prior to his death.

Appreciation of context is linked to an understanding of any text as a conscious construct, similarly to appreciation of AO2. Therefore, teachers will make decisions about which approach to take depending on the needs, and abilities, of their own particular students.

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## How might this look in a student response?

### Example 1

Macbeth is behaving very strong in this speech because he is scared about the English soldiers coming to his castle and that there are ten thousand of them. He is on his own we know this because he says 'fly false thanes' which shows that all the other lords have left him and joined the English army because they know that Macbeth is a bad king. Macbeth is behaving like a hero in this speech because it is like he is not bothered that the thanes have left and he knows that he is not going to die because of what the witches said. But the audience knows that this isn't true and that Macbeth is being tricked by them so this shows that Macbeth is not a hero because he believes them because he has ambition so wants to believe what they have said. He says 'the spirits who pronounced me thus' showing that he is repeating what they have said to him to make him feel more strong and like he is hanging onto what they told him because he maybe knows deep down that they have tricked him and he is not going to win the war.

In this extract Macbeth is rude to the servant and this isn't like a hero because a hero would be kind to other people. He says to the servant that 'devil damn thee black thou cream-faced loon' which is insulting to the servant and would make the servant frightened of Macbeth. This is not like a hero because a hero would look after people who don't have as much power but Macbeth is rude and insults the servant. This says more about Macbeth than it does about the servant because he is behaving like a bully not like a hero who would protect people who are his servants. The audience would know that Macbeth is not behaving like a hero in this speech and not like a good king so he deserves what is going to come next (Macduff). He also says 'devil' which links him to the witches and shows that he has got like them because he has sold his soul to the devil for ambition.

This is not what Macbeth is like at the start of the play because at the start he is a hero and everyone talks about how he is brave and wins the war with Norway for the king which shows that he has nobility and does the right thing for his king and country. The soldier says that Macbeth is brave, 'brave Macbeth' and Duncan gives him Thane of Cawdor to say thank you for being a hero. At the start of the play Macbeth is brave and a good soldier and everyone likes him but at the end of the play he is still sounding brave but this time it is different because he is doing it for himself not for Duncan so he isn't behaving like a hero because a hero would do things for other people not for being selfish.

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### Commentary

This response is an example of Level 3 overall, with elements of Level 4 for AO3 balanced against low Level 3 for AO2. The student focuses on the extract but also demonstrates knowledge of where this extract fits into the play as a whole, and includes some references to support this. Although references to writer's methods are not explicit, there are some comments related to the effect of particular word choices such as 'devil'. In this example, the student explains some relevant contextual factors by showing some understanding of implicit notions of the way a hero would be expected to behave. Because the response focuses on the notion of 'hero' throughout, the understanding of contextual ideas develops and by the end the student has started to move into Level 4 for AO3.

## Example 2

In this extract, Macbeth is just about to be defeated by Macduff and there is some dramatic irony in this speech because the audience would know that he is holding onto the words of the witches even though Macduff is not 'of woman born'. He repeats back what the witches told him like a mantra that he is hanging onto to remind him that he is invincible. Perhaps on one level Shakespeare is suggesting that Macbeth is facing up to the truth and that this is why he is trying to focus his mind and remain strong. He seems like he is just being stubborn and not giving in because he believes what the witches told him, but perhaps he is also on another level frightened about the reality of the English army around his castle so is trying to comfort himself by repeating back the words of the witches. This also has the effect of reminding the audience how far Macbeth is now linked with the idea of evil and that he will deserve his punishment when it comes. When he says to the servant 'devil damn thee black' this also reminds the audience that he is in league with the witches and the devil. Shakespeare gives Macbeth some of the language that the witches use, just like when we see Macbeth for the first time and he says 'so foul and fair a day', just like the witches saying 'fair is foul and foul is fair', to show that he is linked with them right from the start.

This extract also shows that Macbeth is about to receive his downfall, and that his fatal flaw of being ambitious will end up causing his death. At the start of the play Macbeth has everything to lose, he is loved by Duncan and all the other thanes and people talk about him as a brave and noble hero in the battle with Norway. Shakespeare shows this by the soldier reporting to Duncan about how brave Macbeth was in the battle, which demonstrates that Macbeth's bravery and loyalty is almost legendary in Scotland.

The difference between the way Macbeth is presented as a hero at the start of the play and in this extract is that before, he was doing it for his king and his country and because it was his duty, whereas now he is behaving fearlessly but it is just for himself rather than for other people. In this way Shakespeare is showing that Macbeth is a tragic hero rather than a real 'hero' because he still has some of the same characteristics but his motives are for himself and therefore he will be punished by losing his life. He has caused his own downfall due to his ambition, so he had the choice of which way to use his talents and chooses to follow his own ambition. A real 'hero' would be brave and fearless and do the right and noble thing for everyone else and for their country, but Macbeth is a terrible king right from the start.

So Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a hero in some ways and not in others in this speech and in the rest of the play. He is a 'hero' at the start in terms of the society at that time because he is brave and noble and looks after his country, but by the end he is definitely not. However he is a 'tragic hero' because he allows his ambition (fatal flaw) to cause his own destruction.

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### **Commentary**

This response would achieve all Level 4 with some elements of Level 5 in terms of thoughtful consideration. The student has focused on the idea of 'hero' right from the start and demonstrates very clear understanding of ideas. There is plenty of clear evidence of understanding the play as a whole, with a range of references, both direct and indirect, used purposefully to illustrate and justify the explanations of ideas. The student has considered context in terms of expectations of a hero but also from a literary perspective, dealing with ideas about Macbeth as a tragic hero as well as of him as a brave soldier / subject / king. Where the response begins to exhibit Level 5 characteristics, they do this by starting to consider possible interpretations of Macbeth's words in the extract, and also beginning to consider different ways of viewing Macbeth as a hero.