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# Text, Reader, Critic

## Introducing Contexts and Interpretations



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### Website

Additional resources to complement the resources in the pack can be found in the Teaching Materials section of the English and Media Centre website ([www.englishandmedia.co.uk](http://www.englishandmedia.co.uk))

Unit 8:	Extracts from <i>Why Read the Classics?</i> by Italo Calvino (TRCunit8.doc)
Unit 11:	An extract from <i>The Self Conceived</i> by Helène Moglen (TRCunit11.doc)
Unit 13:	An interview with Matthew Bourne, director of Adventure in Motion Pictures on his all male adaptation of <i>Swan Lake</i> (TRCunit13.doc).

# Introduction

## **EMC Advanced Literature Series**

EMC Advanced Literature Series is a resource for A Level English Literature (and elements of Language and Literature). It is designed to meet the requirements of the new AS/A2 specifications for 2000 in challenging, innovative and practical ways. Each publication includes:

- texts for study, both literary texts and extracts from literary criticism
- student activities
- teachers' notes, with additional guidance, support and suggestions for extension activities and other useful sources of ideas and information.

## **Text, Reader, Critic**

This publication focuses particularly on the changed emphases implied by the requirement for assessment of the students' ability to:

- respond with knowledge and understanding to literary texts of different types and periods (AO2i)
- explore and comment on relationships and comparisons between literary texts (AO2ii)
- articulate independent opinions and judgements, informed by different interpretations of literary texts by other readers (AO4)
- show understanding of the contexts in which literary texts are written and understood (AO5i)
- evaluate the significance of cultural, historical and other contextual influences upon literary texts and study (AO5ii).

Despite these shifts towards a greater emphasis on contextual issues and different interpretations, the text remains central. A Level students are still expected to focus primarily on the texts set for study in each module, and to:

- read closely and carefully
- get to know the text really well
- get below the surface and between the lines
- interpret and make meanings
- see patterns – big ones and small ones
- make links with other things they have read
- be alert to ways writers choose to use language.

## **Personal responses, critical readings**

This priority is reflected in the approaches and materials used in the pack. It is not intended to be a course in 'Literary Theory'. The texts and related activities have been chosen to support the students' development of a genuine personal response to texts, by introducing 'different interpretations by other readers' which go beyond the sharing of responses within the peer group. The texts and activities provide students with plenty of opportunities to develop close reading skills.

Earlier activities are shorter, introducing students to some of the key ideas relevant to the study of literature at A level:

- the role of the reader
- what readers bring to texts – their knowledge, understanding and implicit or explicit assumptions which they make
- how readers are constructed, by gender, race, class, education and politics
- how readers are positioned, by the text and by its contexts, and by other readers
- the nature of the text.

The ideas explored in Section 2 are more challenging and are therefore more appropriate for A2 students. The activities offer practical, accessible and enjoyable ways of experimenting with different readings, drawing on a variety of theoretical positions. Many of these longer units require students to assimilate, compare and analyse a range of texts and are particularly appropriate for helping students develop the skills demanded by the synoptic papers – both those with unseen texts and those with pre-release and previously studied material.

Different texts will invite different critical approaches. For this reason it is not likely to be helpful to A Level students for teachers to interpret AO4 as an *instruction* to ‘teach critics’, if by that they understand ‘named writers about literature’. AO4 makes it clear that the student’s responsibility is to develop her or his own viewpoints about texts, making use of other readers’ views to do so. Increasing the students’ awareness of how texts can be read differently will be of more use to them than a limited amount of reading of single critics, no matter how distinguished.

The activities, therefore, aim to extend students’ abilities to consider and evaluate critically different readings and approaches. In line with all five Assessment Objectives, the pack focuses on an exploration of the text and the relations between writer, text, reader and context. All readers and critics base their readings on these variables, choosing to emphasise particular elements, depending on their view of ‘literature’ or the theoretical position they favour.

### Using the pack

The pack uses different critical approaches, from the ‘pure’ practical criticism of I.A. Richards to the eclectic methods of modern readers who adopt and adapt the ideas of the post-colonialists, the feminists, psychoanalysts and so on. It does not attempt to consider all the different sub-divisions of recent critical theory – nor even all the major positions of the twentieth century. Theories about narrative for example have not been included; these are considered in the introductory section to *The Modern Novel* (EMC Advanced Literature Series).

The Critical timeline in Appendix 3 (page 113) provides an overview of this critical history, while Appendix 4 (page 117) suggests how this relates to the growth of English as a university and school subject. The intention is not to suggest that the history of criticism is one of unproblematic progress and development. However, the proliferation of different readings and approaches is presented as something to be welcomed. Critical theories such as feminism and post-colonialism, for example, have challenged the assumptions implicit in the work of white, predominantly male readers like Leavis. At the end of the twentieth century one of the positive developments has been the dissolving of the boundaries between critical positions: critics construct a personal framework for reading texts from a whole range of critical theories.

Student activity sheets, which incorporate short pieces of criticism, introduce each unit. Primary texts follow the activities. Students will need access to *Othello* Act 1 scene 3 for Unit 18 and copies of Ted Hughes’s poem ‘The Rabbit Catcher’ and Sylvia Plath’s ‘The Rabbit Catcher’ for Unit 20. The Teachers’ Notes outline: the purpose and aim of the unit; practical information about the organisation of the activities; ideas for discussion and some suggestions for extension work. The notes also highlight units which could be used as preparation for the synoptic papers or as a starting point for coursework assignments. For those attempting the A Level extension papers or going on to study English at university, the activities offer an unthreatening introduction to critical theory. Students wanting to investigate theory further could start with some of the books suggested in the reading list in Appendix 2 (page 111).

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# Section 1

## Short Activities

# What readers bring to texts

This activity gives you opportunities

- to explore your own reading of a short story
- to think about how this reading is shaped
- to compare your reading with the readings of other people in the class.

## Exploring a response to a story

Your teacher will give you four pieces of information about a story you are going to read.

- 1) The title
  - 2) The first section
  - 3) The author
  - 4) More about the author.
- At each stage, as you learn something new about the story, jot down your response to the following questions:
    - am I going to like this?
    - why?
    - why not?
  - Now read the rest of the story, pausing after the places listed below to answer the questions:
    - do I like this story?
    - why?
    - why not?
    - i) 'you don't remember faces so much as hands and what they did.'
    - ii) They all stared intently at the beautiful scene with the flaw in it.
    - iii) 'Nobody knows what it might do when it comes.'
    - iv) The woman sighed finally and began to relax.
    - v) The end.

## Your experiences as a reader

- Look back at your own responses and consider critically the factors which influenced, informed and shaped your response.

Some possible factors are suggested here:

- i) your experience of reading other short stories (typical patterns of tension and so on)
- ii) your knowledge of the type of stories Ray Bradbury writes
- iii) the context of the story (for example, the time and place in which it is set)
- iv) the context of your reading
- v) your understanding of the ways writers direct the response of the reader
- vi) your experience of how to interpret the associations of words and the significance of metaphors and so on.

## Sharing your response

- Share your responses with another person in the class. Make a note of the similarities and differences in your responses. Look particularly at the way you began to piece together your response to the story as a whole, and the way this changed and developed.

- You all read the same words on the page, in the same situation. What do the differences and similarities in the responses suggest about the process of reading and interpretation? You should think about:
  - the reader
  - the writer
  - the text
  - the context (the situation in which you read the story).
- Choose a couple of points where agreement between you is particularly strong. What directed and shaped your responses in these instances? Were the same factors an influence? Could this aspect of the story be interpreted differently? If you think it could, why and by whom? If not, why not?
- Do the same for a couple of points where there is disagreement between you.

### **Whole class discussion**

- Prepare to report back your discoveries to the rest of the class.
- As a class, sum up what you have learned about the reading process. Come up with a list of all the different factors which affect an individual's response to a text. Some of the things you might include are suggested here:
  - knowledge of the genre
  - information about the author
  - an awareness of the historical period.



# 'Embroidery' by Ray Bradbury

The dark porch air in the late afternoon was full of needle flashes, like a movement of gathered silver insects in the light. The three women's mouths twitched over their work. Their bodies lay back and then imperceptibly forward, so that the rocking chairs tilted and murmured. Each woman looked to her own hands, as if quite suddenly she had found her heart beating there.

'What time is it?'

'Ten minutes to five.'

Got to get up in a minute and shell those peas for dinner.'

'But -' said one of them.

'Oh yes, I forgot. How foolish of me ...' The first woman paused, put down her embroidery and needle, and looked through the open porch door, through the warm interior of the quiet house, to the silent kitchen. There upon the table, seeming more like symbols of domesticity than anything she had ever seen in her life, lay the mound of fresh-washed peas in their neat, resilient jackets, waiting for her fingers to bring them into the world.

'Go hull them if it'll make you feel good,' said the second woman.

'No,' said the first. 'I won't. I just won't.'

The third woman sighed. She embroidered a rose, a leaf, a daisy on a green field. The embroidery needle rose and vanished.

The second woman was working on the finest, most delicate piece of embroidery of them all, deftly poking, finding, and returning the quick needle upon innumerable journeys. Her quick black glance was on each motion. A flower, a man, a road, a sun, a house; the scene grew under hand, a miniature beauty, perfect in every threaded detail.

'It seems at times like this that it's always your hands you turn to,' she said, and the others nodded enough to make the rockers rock again.

'I believe,' said the first lady, 'that our souls are in our hands. For we do *everything* to the world with our hands. Sometimes I think we don't use our hands half enough; it's certain we don't use our heads.'

They all peered more intently at what their hands were doing.

'Yes,' said the third lady, 'when you look back on a whole lifetime, it seems you don't remember faces so much as hands and what they did.'

They recounted to themselves the lids they had lifted, the doors they had opened and shut, the flowers they had picked, the dinners they had made, all with slow or quick fingers, as was their manner or custom. Looking back, you saw a flurry of hands, like a magician's dream, doors popping wide, taps turned, brooms wielded, children spanked. The flutter of pink hands was the only sound; the rest was a dream without voices.

'No supper to fix tonight or tomorrow night or the next night after that,' said the third lady.

'No windows to open or shut.'

'No coal to shovel in the basement furnace next winter.'

'No papers to clip cooking articles out of.'

And suddenly they were crying. The tears rolled softly down their faces and fell into the material upon which their fingers twitched.

'This won't help things,' said the first lady at last, putting the back of her thumb to each under-eyelid. She looked at her thumb and it was wet.

'Now look what I've done!' cried the second lady exasperated. The others stopped and peered over. The second lady held out her embroidery. There was the scene, perfect except that while the embroidered yellow sun shone down upon the embroidered green field, and the embroidered brown road curved toward an embroidered pink house, the man standing on the road had something wrong with his face.

'I'll just have to rip out the whole pattern, practically, to fix it right,' said the second lady.

'What a shame.' They all stared intently at the beautiful scene with the flaw in it.

The second lady began to pick away at the thread with her little deft scissors flashing. The pattern came out thread by thread. She pulled and yanked, almost viciously. The man's face was gone. She continued to seize at the threads.

'What are you *doing*?' asked the other woman.

They leaned and saw what she had done.

The man was gone from the road. She had taken him out entirely.

They said nothing but returned to their own tasks.

'What time is it?' asked someone.

'Five minutes to five.'

'Is it supposed to happen at five o'clock?'

'Yes.'

'And they're not sure what it'll do to anything, really, when it happens?'

'No, not sure.'

'Why didn't we stop them before it got this far and this big?'

'It's twice as big as ever before. No, ten times, maybe a thousand.'

'This isn't like the first one or the dozen later ones. This is different. Nobody knows what it might do when it comes.'

They waited on the porch in the smell of roses and cut grass.

'What time is it now?'

'One minute to five.'

The needles flashed silver fire. They swam like a tiny school of metal fish in the darkening summer air.

Far away a mosquito sound. Then something like a tremor of drums. The three women cocked their heads, listening.

'We won't hear anything, will we?'

'They say not.'

'Perhaps we're foolish. Perhaps we'll go right on, after five o'clock, shelling peas, opening doors, stirring soups, washing dishes, making lunches, peeling oranges ...'

'My, how we'll laugh to think we were frightened by an old experiment!' They smiled a moment at each other.

'It's five o'clock.'

At these words, hushed, they all busied themselves. Their fingers darted. Their faces were turned down to the motions they made. They made frantic patterns. They made lilacs and grass and trees and houses and rivers in the embroidered cloth. They said nothing,

but you could hear their breath in the silent porch air.

Thirty seconds passed.

The second woman sighed finally and began to relax.

'I think I just *will* go shell those peas for supper,' she said. 'I ...'

But she hadn't time even to lift her head. Somewhere, at the side of her vision, she saw the world brighten and catch fire. She kept her head down, for she knew what it was. She didn't look up, nor did the others, and in the last instant their fingers were flying; they didn't glance about to see what was happening to the country, the town, this house, or even this porch. They were only staring down at the design in their flickering hands.

The second woman watched an embroidered flower go. She tried to embroider it back in, but it went, and then the road vanished, and the blades of grass. She watched a fire, in slow motion almost, catch upon the embroidered house and unshingle it, and pull each threaded leaf from the small green tree in the hoop, and she saw the sun itself pulled apart in the design. Then the fire caught upon the moving point of the needle while still it flashed; she watched the fire come along her fingers and arms and body, untwisting the yarn of her being so painstakingly that she could see it in all its devilish beauty, yanking out the pattern from the material at hand. What it was doing to the other women or the furniture or the elm tree in the yard, she never knew. For now, yes, now! it was plucking at the white embroidery of her flesh, the pink thread of her cheeks, and at last it found her heart, a soft red rose sewn with fire, and it burned the fresh, embroidered petals away, one by delicate one ...