

Literature in Its Time and Place

Analyzing a literary work as a product of cultural and intellectual history is the task of (1) determining what can be clearly deducible as coming directly out of the major issues existing at the time it was written and (2) deciding what is new and permanent—that is, of determining what has been created by the author of the work from ideas prevalent at the time of composition. The concern is to see both the similarity and dissimilarity of a work and its period.

Such a study of literature is valuable because it promotes the realization that ideas and ways of seeing the universe change with time and place. Too often it is easy to read texts as though they were all written last week and to attribute to writers ideas that they never had. Shakespeare, for example, had a number of political ideas, but he had no experience with representative government as we know it today. Therefore, in considering works of his that touch the subject of politics, such as the *Henry IV* plays, *Richard II*, and *Henry V*, you should understand why he dramatizes the importance of a just and strong monarch or the necessity of a moral aristocracy. We can enthusiastically accept his idea that wise rulers and moral people are necessary in the creation of successful government, even though we today apply the principle not to monarchy—the form that Shakespeare knew—but to democracy.

Writing about a Work in Its Historical and Cultural Context

The first part of your task is to decide what is topical about the work on which you are going to write. Usually, there is enough in a work's descriptions, actions, locations, customs, and cultural assumptions to find something there that is unique. Irving Layton's "Rhine Boat Trip," for example, is derived from reflections about the unspeakable German atrocities and concentration camps during World War II.

Some works, however, may seem to offer a special challenge because of their apparent lack of references; that is, they seem to be so closely connected with our own contemporary ideas and assumptions that you may not readily see them in historical and cultural perspective. At first, Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" might give this impression. But "Dover Beach" provides abundant symbolism about the loss of religious certainty in the nineteenth century, and this idea, which many people today also feel, would provide you with sufficient material on which to begin the thoughts for an essay.

Another problem might arise when the work assigned is remote either in history or in place. In such works, however, the subject matter brings out ideals and attitudes of the writer, and these can then be related to the time in which the work was written, just as it may also be related to our own times. Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess" is such a work. It was published in 1842, but its subject is a Renaissance Italian nobleman who is callous and self-centered and who wields despotic power. Thus, it is apparent that Browning is providing a timely idea that absolute power produces destructive results both on the individual wielding it and on those around him. This is an idea that is certainly up to date—in fact, it is up to the minute. Browning's presentation of the duke can

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therefore be analyzed as a good deal more than a dramatic study of a powerful eccentric of past times.

Raise Questions to Discover Ideas

It is important to realize that the major source of your information is the work itself. In your reading, you will discover a great deal about the period of the author—even our own period—and, more important, about the place of the work in that period. You need to ask and answer a number of questions.

- Are historical circumstances specifically mentioned? What are they? What does the author say about them?
- Does the writer describe conditions with photographic detail, or is he less concerned with pictorial details and more with human and political issues?
- To what national, ethnic, social, and economic class do the principal characters belong? What is their background? What values do they hold or represent?
- Are the characters religious or not? To what degree do religious or philosophical thoughts govern the actions of the characters?
- Is the principal character (or any character) an important part of the prevailing social and economic system as outlined in the work, or is she an outsider? If she is outside the system, what conditions have put and now keep her there? Are you made to feel pleased or angry with these conditions?
- Does the character eventually win a place in the system, is she left out of the system, or is she broken by it?
- What assumptions do you think the author had about the literary interests of his audience? That is, does it seem that the author wrote for a sophisticated audience, a simple-minded one, or a sensation-seeking one?
- What conclusions can you draw, on the basis of your answers to these and like questions, about the author's attitudes toward his times? Does he attempt to give a complete view or a partial view? Does he seem to be recommending values that are similar, or contrary, to those held during his era?

From questions such as these, you will soon discover a suitable topic, for there is need here, as always, for narrowing the focus of your discussion. For example, a question about the fortunes of particular characters can lead to an avenue of inquiry like the following: How can the unrealized talents of the characters in Anita Scott Coleman's story "Unfinished Masterpieces" be shown to reflect Coleman's views about American racial politics in the early twentieth century? Events or situations themselves can be focused in the same way. The details about Jackie's home life in Frank O'Connor's "First Confession" might suggest a topic like "The Negative Effect of Home Life on the Individual." Your creation of topics like these should enable you to develop an interesting and relevant essay.

This use of the work of literature itself as an authority for your remarks in the essay may seem open to the objection that literary works are often not reliable as actual source material for history. Sometimes works contain exaggerations made for comic or satiric effect, and sometimes they develop out of improbable circumstances. As history, therefore, the close study of a literary work is a weak substitute for more accurate documentation.

The answer to this objection—and also an important realization—is that the focus of this assignment is the work itself. Your essay is about the historical period only as it is reflected in the work. Your concern is not to use the work for evidence in writing history but rather as evidence of a literary reaction to historical and cultural circumstances. Even if there are exaggerations and caricatures or if conditions reported are brighter or darker than life, these very aspects of the work become an important part of the material you bring to your essay. Your aim should not be to use the work as a filter through which you attempt to acquire historical data, but to determine to what use such observable data have been put within the work.

Some types of literature are more readily approached from the historical, intellectual, and cultural point of view than others. Usually novels, short stories, narrative poems, dramas, and essays are fairly obviously rooted in customs and ideas of their time. Many of these works can be discussed without extensive reading in secondary historical sources. By contrast, many short lyric poems are not obviously connected with their respective periods, and to write about these works may require more inferential efforts.

Organize Your Essay about a Work and Its Context

In the following plan, the introduction might be proportionately longer than usual because of the need for presenting detailed information about the work and what you know about its historical period.

Introduction In addition to defining your central idea and thesis sentence, your aim here should be to place the work in its context. You should identify the work, state the time of its publication and, if known, its composition. You should also include any biographical data relevant to an understanding of the work and its background. You should also state whether there are any special problems in discussing the work, such as that it is a historical novel, or a work remote in time, or that there is some controversy about it.

You should also state the pertinent historical facts concerning the events and ideas that you have selected for discussion. There is no need for extensive explication but only for those details that are relevant. If your work was written during or shortly after a recent war, for example, you may assume that your readers know as much generally about this war as you do and need only those details that will remind them of their knowledge. Thus, if you are discussing Hardy's "The Man He Killed," you might state that the poem is probably based on a soldier's view stemming out of the trench warfare on the Western front during World War I. You might then go on to state that this war was immensely complex, for it had implications for all European nations and the United States; that it was fought on not only land but also the sea; that it was sometimes called the "Great War" and also "the war to end all wars"; that it was also seen as an ideological war in which nations felt their prestige to be at stake; that the war highlighted for many the idea that life and love were impermanent and fleeting; that the war was immensely

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wasteful and destructive; and that it was difficult to pinpoint the causes of the war and to explain the reasons for which opposing nations took sides. There is nothing unusual about these conclusions: The point about them is that they are general statements about the period rather than detailed descriptions.

Body After dealing with introductory details, you should aim to show how they apply to the work you are studying. You may wish to include both of the following or just one or the other.

1. **A discussion of how the work embodies the facts or of how the facts shape the work.** Thus, Hardy's "The Man He Killed" not only demonstrates the commonsense quality of the speaker but also exposes the sham of theoretical warfare when contrasted with the ordinary needs and wants of an average human being. The poem can be seen as an assertion that international political concerns, in human terms, are valueless. Similarly, in discussing Browning's "My Last Duchess," you might show that the duke's conversational manners (his pre-empting the discussion of marriage details by reflecting on the portrait of his former duchess and his stating that his "just pretense" for a dowry will be acceptable) can be related to the assertion that the poem is an effective counterargument against nineteenth-century claims that "great men" are needed to perform the great tasks that are required in public and political life. Browning's "great man" is so preoccupied with his own power that he listens to no one and abandons all human decency.
2. **A discussion of literary matters—that is, style, structure, tone, point of view, and imagery—that can be related to the period.** Thus, ideas about the need for personal freedom may be related to poems written in free verse. An awareness of the horror of discrimination may be related to the ballad structure of Dudley Randall's "Ballad of Birmingham," in which the simple poetic structure emphasizes the extreme to which such cruelty can go. The modern stress on psychology may account for the limited point of view story, Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill," in which we as readers directly follow the thoughts and responses of the major character. The compact, brief stanzas of Langston Hughes's "Negro" enables the poet to express a brief world history of the exploitation of blacks. What is important here is to apply the context of the work to its literary characteristics.

Conclusion To conclude, you should try to determine which elements you have discussed seem out of date and which ones are still relevant and important. For purposes of your conclusion, you may assume that your own point of view is modern and up to date, although on this issue you should perhaps assert yourself humbly and emphasize your broadmindedness. Thus, in this section you might attempt to determine whether Browning's exposé of the ruthless duke in "My Last Duchess" is still applicable, granted that many people in various nations have invented the title "President for Life," and continue to fill that role. Does Young Goodman Brown's (in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown") preoccupation with the evil of others seem to be relevant today, or should we regard his ideas as having passed their time? What should be our responses to those young men described by Gwendolyn Brooks who claim that they are "real cool"? It is questions such as these that you might ask and attempt to answer in your conclusion.

Illustrative Essay

The central idea, thesis sentence, and topic sentences are shaded here to stress the goal of strong organization. As your instructor wishes, you might use this or a similar system in your own essays.

Larkin 1

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 English 101
 23 September 2010

Langston Hughes's References to Black Servitude
 and Black Pride in "Negro"

Negro (1958)

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black.

Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave:

Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean. . .

5

I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker:

Under my hand the pyramids arose.

I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.

I've been a singer:

10

All the way from Africa to Georgia

I carried my sorrow songs.

I made ragtime.

I've been a victim:

The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.

15

They lynch me still in Mississippi.

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,

Black like the depths of my Africa.

[1]

Langston Hughes was a strong voice of the Harlem Renaissance, a twentieth-century movement that declared that the time had come to recognize the significance of African Americans in all phases of life.

In "Negro," Hughes propels this argument by showing that oppression

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essays.

Larkin 2

against blacks is as old as human history.^o He might have chosen to develop his idea in a lengthy book study, with many supportive details and many references. Instead, his interest is to be brief and memorable—almost as though he is providing details for a political agenda—and he chooses to create a poem of six brief stanzas. The poem demonstrates how eloquent a spokesman and leader Hughes was for his people. The poem is built on the contrast between what the heritage of blacks should be—the entitlement to equality and freedom—and what in fact it is and has been—the indignity of slavery and oppression.*

The form of “Negro” is both simple and direct. There are six stanzas in the poem, each beginning with the pronoun “I” followed by a grammatical form of the verb *to be*. The total number of lines is nineteen. Stanzas 1 and 6 identify the speaker as a representative Negro whose identity is the same as his race—black—“Black like the depths of my Africa” (lines 3 and 19). These opening and concluding stanzas are current in scope, for they are in the present tense and they define the speaker’s racial identity and pride in the color of his African heritage.

Stanzas 2, 3, and 5 are historical, however, briefly referring to the servitude and suffering that blacks have experienced. The emphasis in these stanzas is on the past, and Hughes’s use of the present-perfect tense bears out his continuing historical emphasis. These comprehensive stanzas jump time and place, from the slavery and oppression of ancient Rome and ancient Egypt, on the one hand, to Revolutionary War times and modern industrial times of the United States, on the other. Symbolically, the speaker says that in the palace of Caesar, he was a slave who kept the doorsteps clean, just as he cleaned the boots as a personal servant of America’s first president, George Washington. The idea is that the heights that these men (and others like them) reached were achieved by their dependence on the slavery of blacks. Similarly, the Belgian colonial regime in Africa was sustained by oppressive cruelty against blacks, which is symbolized by the cutting off of the hands of slaves in the Congo (line 15). Hughes goes on to state that such

[2]

[3]

^oCentral idea.

*Thesis sentence.

Larkin 3

colonial oppression is by no means over, for his speaker refers to the neocolonial oppression of life in Mississippi (in 1958, the date of the poem), where lynching still occurred.

[4] The most positive section of the poem is stanza 4, where Hughes tells us that the narrator has sung his “sorrow songs” during the entire history of displacement from “Africa to Georgia” (lines 11 and 12). This stanza is comparable to stanzas 1 and 6, for in all three stanzas Hughes declares the positive identity and value of African Americans. In stanza 4, the idea is that there is a vast human talent among blacks that has already been realized, with the implication that there is much more to come.

Here, Hughes is emphasizing black pride because the power of making music and providing musical beauty is a capacity that can never be suppressed, even through the long centuries of black oppression that date from the origin of history. The possibility of continued high achievement, Hughes implies, is endless.

[5] As we have seen, “Negro” concludes and ends on the importance of realizing the promises of history for the present time. The tenses of the verbs bring this out, for everything implies a current condition. The past has had its day, with its oppression, and is now over or should be over. The present is now the greatest concern. The time has come for African Americans to appreciate their own blackness, “like the depths of my Africa” (lines 3 and 19). Things are in some respects the same, yet they are changed because the time has come for liberation, for freedom. The idea is that it is time for the end of oppression—a time when African Americans can listen to themselves and their “sorrow songs” and can be themselves as they were meant to be when they were in their original homes in Africa.

[6] “Negro” is therefore a thoroughly modern poem. It recognizes the past but emphasizes the significance of the present. In three of the poem’s stanzas, Hughes refers to the past. The final stanza indicates that the present is the same as the past but that African Americans have moved up from slavery and oppression and can build their new identity out of their past history. Even though this last stanza is identical to the first, word for word, it suggests that it is time to move, to claim a new movement of history, a new direction. Hughes’s argument is that this direction is forward.

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Work Cited

Hughes, Langston. "Negro." *Writing About Literature*. By Edgar V. Roberts. 12th ed. New York: Pearson, 2010. 248. Print.

Commentary on the Essay

As an essay about a literary work as it pertains to its historical period, this essay deals with the issues of African American identity and liberation that have become a major idea in American life during the preceding generations of Americans. All the descriptions and interpretations of "Negro" are based on this connection. Because the issues of African American life have such strongly political overtones, the essay treats the poem as a work of exhortation as well as description. The essay makes transitions with the key words *however* (paragraph 3), *most positive* (4), *as we have seen* (5), and *therefore* (6).

In the body of this essay, paragraph 2 deals with the poem's shape and its essential simplicity. Of special interest is the poet's use of the present tense to sustain the argument that the poem is directed at current readers, who can translate their attitudes and interpretations of life into direct political action.

Paragraphs 3 and 4 are the most extensive in the essay, for they concern Hughes's interpretation of history and his emphasis on the indignities and horrors of black oppression from ancient times to the present. The unique analysis here is that the grammar of stanzas 2–5 is a major means by which Hughes sustains his argument. The idea in the essay here is to show that the past lives on in the present. Paragraph 4 follows Hughes's argument that the musical nature of African Americans is a positive symbol of their inherent human worthiness.

Paragraphs 5 and 6 emphasize once again the present implications of "Negro." Paragraph 5 especially emphasizes the present, while the concluding paragraph, 6, asserts that the poem is particularly modern. In this way, the essay demonstrates how Hughes's poem has a place in the historical times when it was written. The essay's analysis and its central idea both emphasize this connection.

Writing Topics about Works in Their Historical, Intellectual, and Cultural Context

1. Consider a story or poem in which the topics are connected with philosophy or politics—for example, Arnold's "Dover Beach" (religion, philosophy), Robert Frost's "Desert Places" (the cosmos), Hardy's "The Man He Killed" (politics and war), and Amy Lowell's "Patterns" (war and human relationships). Write an essay about just one of these works, showing how the topic reflects ideas and concerns of the time it was written and also of today's times.

2. Consider William Blake's use of the image of the "Tyger" in "The Tyger." To what degree is the Tyger a symbol of what Blake considered to be evil? How does he seem to define evil? How current is his use of what today is considered an endangered animal? How does his poem speak to today's concerns?
3. In the context of current relationship of human beings to the natural world, how significant is William Wordsworth's "Lines Written in Early Spring"? Does the poem meet the same need for today's readers that it probably met for Wordsworth's readers?
4. The circumstances of farm life in the early twentieth century are reflected in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*. Consider the circumstances of loneliness, isolation, lack of communication, and marital abuse that are treated in this play. To what degree are these issues still significant in today's world?
5. Describe the timeliness of the issues that Layton brings out in "Rhine Boat Trip."
6. Coleman's "Unfinished Masterpieces" deals with the issue of the inadequacy of opportunity. Specifically, her topic is that ability is meaningless when there is no chance to develop it. Write an essay attempting to demonstrate that her idea is as vital now as it was in the 1920s when she wrote her story.
7. The speaker of Luis Omar Salinas's "In a Farmhouse" is an eight-year-old boy who has been put to work picking cotton. What current issues are suggested by the speaker's plight?
8. Browning's "My Last Duchess" and Randall's "Ballad of Birmingham" touch upon the issue of political power. How do the works reflect what you take to have been the political concerns of their times, and what contrasts between the works are you able to make?

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