

# Literature In Context





# The Manhunt

By Simon Armitage

## Context



### Link quotes to context:

- **'Frozen river'** suggests he is trying to hide his emotions as many soldiers tried to hide their experiences when they returned from war. Eddie (the soldier this is based on) suffered from depression after his time in the war in Bosnia.
- **'Blown hinge of his lower jaw'** could link to the missions Eddie would undertake as a peacekeeper. The horrors he has seen have affected him physically and emotionally.
- **'Then I widened the search'** shows how Armitage wanted to explore the effects war had on relationships. Eddie and Laura (his wife) struggled to reconnect on his return as he was like a different person. She felt she had to find him again.
- The metaphor **'buried deep in his mind'** suggests the war has changed his mental state. It links to PTSD and the idea that scars are mental as well as physical. People who suffer with PTSD can often explode or panic when something like a loud noise triggers their **'buried'** memories and experiences like an **'unexploded mine'**.
- **'Then, and only then did I come close'** shows the amount of work that Laura (and others like her) had to do to try and repair their relationships. The poem was written for a documentary called **'Forgotten Heroes'** and this line shows that their relationships made them unforgettable.



## Sonnet 43

By Elizabeth Barrett Browning

## Context



### Link quotes to context:

- A sonnet is a traditional form for a love poem. Sonnet 43 comes from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's collection *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. The title was an attempt to hide the true intimacy behind the poems by pretending they were translations. Browning wrote the poems to her future husband Robert Browning.
- The opening question 'How do I love thee?' suggests a conversation between Browning and her lover. Her relationship with Robert Browning was very intense and was initially conducted through love letters – one of these love letters eventually became Sonnet 43.
- 'I love thee freely' may reference the fact her and Robert Browning had to conduct their relationship in secret as Elizabeth's father was extremely over-protective. The couple eventually eloped to Italy.
- The 'childhood griefs' may refer to Browning's painful illness, which caused her to be an invalid. It began when she was around 10 years old and lasted until her death. 'The love I seemed to lose' could be the deaths of her mother and younger sister. She also lost two of her brothers to TB when she was in her early twenties.
- The final line 'I shall but love thee better after death' could link to her religious beliefs of an afterlife but also her knowledge that as an invalid she would die before her husband, who was not only healthy but was much younger than her. She eventually died in his arms.



# London

By William Blake

## Context

### Link quotes to context:

- The repetition of 'charter'd' throughout the first stanza emphasises the idea of the city being owned by the rich. Added to the repetition of 'mark' it creates a heavy feeling of oppression.
- The repetition of 'every' in the second stanza suggests the universal suffering that was occurring due to the mass poverty in the city. The poem was written just after the French Revolution and Blake could be alluding to the possibility the poor could revolt against the rich in London as well as in Paris.
- Although Blake was religious, he rejected established religion such as the Church of England because of their lack of intervention with poor children in London. The 'Chimney-sweeper's cry' could suggest the failure of the church to help children forced to work.
- The world was very troubled at the time of Blake's writing. As well as the French Revolution, there had also been the American Revolution not long before. The 'blood' running down Palace walls could be Blake suggesting the monarchy is responsible for many deaths and shows his support for revolution.
- The final stanza shows the bleak and depressing life cycle. An infant born to a 'harlot' and even something joyful like marriage is contrasted with 'Hearse'. The 'plagues' could also reference the excessive amount of sexually transmitted diseases that were passed around by the 'harlots'.



## The Soldier

By Rupert Brooke

### Context

#### Link quotes to context:

- The opening line 'If I should die' shows Brooke's acceptance of dying for his country. It is something he states with great pride.
- The 'corner of some foreign field that is forever England' not only shows Brooke's pride in his country but also ended up being prophetic. Brooke died in 1915 after being bitten by a mosquito and is buried in Cyprus.
- 'England' is repeated several times throughout the first stanza which shows Brooke's unending patriotism. The poem is a sonnet, which is a traditional form for a love poem, and could be seen as a love letter to England.
- The death Brooke speaks of in the second stanza is calm and almost dreamlike with 'dreams as happy as her day'. When Brooke wrote the poem in 1914, just as the war started, he had no idea how horrific the lives and deaths of the soldiers would become.
- The final image of an 'English heaven' shows Brooke's religious beliefs and suggests that dying for England would be his salvation.



## She Walks in Beauty

By Lord Byron

**Context**

### Link quotes to context:

- The opening line and title 'She walks in beauty' signals that this isn't a love poem – it is solely about her appearance. Byron was known for his frequent affairs which were based on lust rather than love.
- Byron uses contrasts throughout the poem of 'dark and bright' and compares her beauty to the night. This is different to more traditional love poems such as Shakespeare's Sonnets where he often compared women to 'summer' and light. This perhaps suggests how striking and unusual her beauty is.
- He describes her hair as 'raven' which suggests she is a brunette. This was unusual for the time as women who were considered to be beautiful were normally fair and pale.
- Byron's love of women can be seen in the line 'smiles that win' which suggests he is easily 'won over'. Byron eventually left England to escape rumours of his infidelity to his wife (who he separated from) and even gossip about an incestuous relationship with his half-sister.
- Byron seems to delight in the 'innocent' love of the unnamed girl in the poem. The fact she is unnamed could suggest she is one in a long line of his conquests. Byron was famously described as being 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'.



## Living Space

By Imtiaz Dharker

## Context

### Link quotes to context:

- The title 'Living Space' is directly opposed to the cramped in living situations in Mumbai. The slums are concocted in any available space. One of the biggest slums in Mumbai is the most densely populated places on Earth.
- The verb 'clutch' shows the weak grip the people living in the slums have on their lives. Wide-spread illness and sanitation issues mean there a big mortality rates. Most people don't live beyond 60.
- Religion is very prominent in the slums with Hinduism as the main religion. So the idea of 'miraculous' things occurring and 'faith' would be very strong in the minds of the inhabitants.
- 'Fragile curves' suggests there is a thin line between life and death. Most people in the slums survive on less than £1 a day and work long hours in blistering heat.
- 'Thin walls of faith' not only links to the ever-present religion in the slums but also the fact that the communities in the slums are divided into religions (mainly Hindu and Islam) so there are 'thin walls of faith' between each community.



# As Imperceptibly as Grief

By Emily Dickinson

## Context

### Link quotes to context:

- The title and opening line 'as imperceptibly as grief' invites the reader to feel comforted by the fact that grief lapses and fades. Dickinson could be reflecting on her own feelings towards grief.
- The use of times of day such as 'twilight' and 'afternoons' could suggest grief should be an accepted part of life. Dickinson lived opposite a cemetery and would have been accustomed to witnessing funerals.
- Religious words such as 'Grace' are side by side with words associated with nature such as 'Wing' and 'Nature'. This could reflect Dickinson's personal belief that religion and nature were very closely tied together and God was reflected in the natural world.
- Dickinson chose to spend her time away from other people and rejected the strict religious beliefs that she had been taught as a child. Her school was Calvinist, who believe that humans are destined for hell unless they consciously strive against it. This could be reflected in the line 'harrowing Grace', as the oxymoronic nature of the words suggests religion is something to be feared.
- The last line 'into the Beautiful' reinforces Dickinson's rejection of hell and suggests an escape in to the afterlife (for Summer, or humans) would be 'beautiful'.





## Cozy Apologia

By Rita Dove

## Context



### Link quotes to context:

- The title can be translated to mean 'A Defence of Coziness' which suggests Dove is defending her stable but unexciting relationship with her husband. He is the 'Fred' that the poem is dedicated to.
- The poem is autobiographical and includes details from Dove's life including the pen 'drying matte' referencing her work as a poet.
- They are trapped in their home because of the hurricane 'Big Bad Floyd'. She refers to her husband as her knight in shining armour, with 'chain mail glinting' which suggests she feels as if he is keeping her safe from the hurricane outside.
- An 'Aerie' is a dwelling that is often high up and inaccessible. The fact that they have separate spaces ('twin desks') suggests they are happy to spend time apart but still be secure in their relationship. They are 'content'.
- The final line 'I fill this stolen time with you' reflects the business of everyday life (alluded to earlier in the poem as 'this post-post-modern age is all business'). Dove could be suggesting that her marriage is successful because even in their busy lives they still make time for each other.



# Valentine

By Carol Ann Duffy



## Context

### Link quotes to context:

- The title 'Valentine' is universal, as is the 'you' in the poem. It could be any pair of lovers speaking. Duffy wrote the poem for a Valentine's radio broadcast so the non-specific nature of the speaker could apply to anyone listening.
- The 'moon wrapped in brown paper' shows the traditional idea of unwrapping gifts but the gift is untraditional. This may link to Duffy's own unconventional relationships with both men and women as part of the LGBTQ community.
- 'A wobbling photo of grief' suggests the speaker looking in a mirror, or even over old photographs. In a modern context, this shows memories of broken relationships can last longer because of the photographic evidence that remains behind.
- A 'kissogram' is a traditional romantic gesture of sending your partner a humorous message accompanied with a kiss. It has since been replaced gestures such as public declarations of affection on Instagram.
- The final line 'cling to your knife' reflects the self-harm people inflict in relationships. Duffy wanted to show that even the most loving and secure relationships can have a dark side (this idea is also explored with the juxtaposition of 'possessive and faithful').



## A Wife in London

By Thomas Hardy

### Context

#### Link quotes to context:

- The fact she is 'A Wife' shows how many women were affected by the deaths of their husbands. The war is the Boer War which Hardy was opposed to as he thought it caused unnecessary damage to human life.
- The 'tawny vapour' symbolises the thick fog that surrounded London due to the amount of pollution from factories. Although the fog was real, Hardy uses it as pathetic fallacy to set the sombre tone of the poem.
- 'He- has fallen – in the far South Land...' is a euphemistic way of describing his death, so the blow is softened. The specifics of the war are never mentioned reflecting Hardy's desire to show the unimportance the Boer war had on the British people but how deeply it could affect individuals.
- The 'fog hangs thicker' suggests her grief and new status as a widow weighs heavily upon her. Hardy's intention could have been to show the sorrow of the loved ones left behind. Hardy was a realist and often showed suffering in his poetry to reflect the harshness of real life.
- The final line 'a new love they would learn' is a reflection of the tragedy of a young couple being ripped apart and denied their chance to grow old and have a family together. Hardy's poetry often reflected the lives of ordinary people and how they were affected by wars beyond their control.



# Death of a Naturalist

By Seamus Heaney

## Context

### Link quotes to context:

- The title 'Death of a Naturalist' is also the title of his first collection of poems which were heavily influenced by the death of his younger brother (hit by a car when he was four) and his growing awareness of the difficulties in the world around him.
- In the first stanza Heaney writes with the persona of his childhood self. Gleeeful about the disgusting discoveries he makes in nature such as the 'slobber' of the frogspawn.
- His role as a 'naturalist' can be seen when he proudly recites what he has learnt in Biology. Again, Heaney embodies his keenness as a child to learn about nature, and particularly 'frogspawn'.
- Language such as 'angry' and 'grenades' shows Heaney's growing awareness of the troubles in the world around him. Heaney grew up a Catholic in Protestant Northern Ireland and witnessed the conflict surrounding the IRA at the time.
- The final verb 'clutch' shows the grip adulthood has on him as he moves further away from his childhood fascination with nature. What was once exciting, now disgusts him.



## Hawk Roosting

By Ted Hughes

### Context

#### Link quotes to context:

- The title 'Hawk Roosting' and first line 'I sit at the top of the wood' emphasises the idea that the hawk is at the top of the world, looking down on creation and controlling everything like a fascist dictator.
- Ted Hughes described the poem as 'Nature thinking' and said he wanted to portray the natural thoughts of a hawk with verbs like 'kill' and 'eat'
- The hawk speaks as if he is God as he takes credit for 'Creation' as is God at the start of the Bible.
- Hughes believed that the natural world was about survival, not violence. This can be seen through his descriptions of the hawk's attacks such as 'tearing off heads' and the 'direct' path of flight the hawk takes to catch his prey.
- The clash between Hughes' view that the natural world is held to a different set of laws and the parallels between the hawk and a dictator can be seen in the final line 'I am going to keep things like this.' On the one hand, the hawk is just surviving and taking his natural place in the food chain, on the other, he is representative of a fascist regime.



## To Autumn

By John Keats

### Context

#### Link quotes to context:

- Autumn is the third season and at the beginning is a time of harvest but as it moves towards Winter, plants begin to die and animals begin to hibernate. In terms of the life cycle, Autumn would represent aging and coming towards the end of life.
- Keats was a Romantic poet and often wrote about the beauty of nature. This can be seen in his celebration of the 'season of mists and mellow fruitfulness'.
- Keats recognises man's relationship with the seasons. He wrote the poem after being inspired by an Autumn walk and in the second stanza it suggests a conversation with Autumn. 'Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours' suggests an appreciation for the slow ripening of fruit or the unhurried turning of the leaves.
- Keats wrote the poem shortly after noticing the first signs of tuberculosis, which would eventually lead to his death, at just 25 years old. The start of the last stanza 'Where are the songs of Spring?' could show his awareness that his life is ending and Spring is out of his reach.
- The 'gathering swallows' and 'full grown lambs' symbolise Winter is coming, as swallows fly south in Winter and full grown lambs would be ready to begin the next cycle of life. As a Romantic poet Keats was concerned with trying to understand the deeper meaning of life and this can be seen here as he understands that as his life ends, others must continue and new life must begin with the arrival of Spring.



# Afternoons

By Philip Larkin



## Link quotes to context:

- The title 'Afternoons' reflects much of Larkin's poetry based around the idea of youth passing and middle-age setting in. Larkin, however, tended to focus on other people's middle age and not his own.
- Larkin's poetry is very observational and focussing on ordinary lives- in this poem he imagines the lives of 'young mothers' although Larkin had no children himself.
- A feature of Larkin's poetry is that he remains detached and doesn't get emotionally involved. There is no judgement of the 'young mothers' and the 'estateful of washing', he is just making an observation.
- 'Courting' is an old-fashioned word for dating so the mothers are remembering the places they used to meet their boyfriends. As they are still used (by younger teenagers) it is a reminder that their youth and enjoyment has passed.
- Larkin's poetry is considered to be universal and can be applied to anyone. The last lines 'Something is pushing them/to the side of their own lives' suggests that parenthood and aging causes their own priorities to fade, something a lot of people feel happens as they get older.



## Dulce et Decorum Est

By Wilfred Owen



Context

### Link quotes to context:

- The simile comparing the soldiers to 'old beggars' is shocking because the soldiers were all young and healthy men. They were destroyed by the war. There were many young soldiers but up to 250,000 were actually under 18. Owen was only 24 when he wrote *Dulce*.
- Owen's poetry shows how many lives were affected by the war. Although not all injuries resulted in death, there were over 1.5 million soldiers who sustained injuries and became part of the walking wounded.
- By 1917 (when the poem was written) the most common gas used in warfare against the British was Mustard Gas. This gas didn't necessarily kill straight away but it made skin blister and caused internal organs to bleed. It would take victims up to five weeks to die; 'drowning' in their own internal blood.
- Owen's use of cutting language in the last stanza shows his own hatred of war and his harsh words vividly show his experiences of being on the front line.
- The final line 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' is Latin for 'it is sweet and honourable to die for your country'. Owen's juxtaposition of this mantra with the words 'old Lie' show his belief that the war was unjust and people were suffering and dying for no reason.





## Ozymandias

By Percy Bysshe Shelley

### Context

#### Link quotes to context:

- **Ozymandias was an Egyptian Pharaoh (Ramses II) who was known for being a tyrant. He focussed his reign on building a huge empire of cities and monuments. The 'antique land' the traveller has returned from is the remains of this empire.**
- **The statue is described as 'vast' which shows how powerful he was and how arrogant he was to build a statue representing that power. A statue was found recently that is believed to be this statue and would have been 8 metres tall when intact.**
- **Shelly's poetry was often concerned with the power of nature to overcome humanity. Words such as 'lifeless' and 'half sunk' show how nature has destroyed most of Ramses' legacy.**
- **Ramses II went down in history as being a 'great' ruler – meaning he built Egypt up to be a thriving civilisation, even though he was also arrogant. The writing on the statue 'king of kings' shows his arrogance but also pays tribute to his legacy.**
- **Shelley's final lines emphasise his lack of sympathy for the ruler and support his belief that nature would always win against humanity. In the end the 'boundless and bare' land has destroyed the statue and Ramses' empire.**



## Mametz Wood

By Owen Sheers



### Link quotes to context:

- The title 'Mametz Wood' refers to a site where 4,000 Welsh soldiers from the 38<sup>th</sup> Welsh Division were killed during the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Today, there is a monument with a Welsh Dragon on the top to honour their sacrifices for WWI.
- 'A chit of bone' and 'the china plate of a shoulder blade' suggests the remnants of the soldiers are like relics of the past found on excavation sites of Roman ruins. Sheers said when he went to visit Mametz Wood he could see these remnants as he was walking and it struck him that it was as if the earth was trying to purge itself of its violent past.
- The 'nesting machine guns' show the juxtaposition of war with the natural world but also suggest the machine guns seemed friendly, like nests. This could be because the men were often walking into the machine gun fire of their own soldiers.
- Whilst Sheers was visiting Mametz Wood, a grave was discovered nearby of 'twenty men buried in one long grave'. He said the image stayed with him as some still had boots on and showed how little their lives had been worth to the generals that the 'boots that outlasted them' had remained, while they had perished.
- The final stanza refers to 'their absent tongues' suggesting the soldiers had no voice. The 38<sup>th</sup> Welsh Division was criticised for their lack of training and poor leadership upon their arrival in France. The soldiers were sent to their death without having a say in their badly led fate.



## Excerpt from The Prelude

By William Wordsworth

## Context



### Link quotes to context:

- The Excerpt is from the much longer poem 'The Prelude'. In this section Wordsworth is reflecting in his childhood in 'the frosty season.' The lake District, where he grew up, would have had many opportunities for outdoor skating in Winter.
- Wordsworth refers to his childhood as a 'happy time'. He believed that children were closer to nature and therefore more joyous. This can be seen when he refers to his feelings as 'a time of rapture'.
- 'Shod with steel' refers to the ice skates on his feet, which would have had steel blades, but also reinforced the image of the child 'like and untir'd horse' as the skates are like the shoes on the horses hooves. This links to his belief that children had a closer relationship with nature.
- The noise the children make becomes an 'alien sound' which reflects Wordsworth's belief that as children grow up they lose the magic of nature that was within them. The sounds of nature, happiness and childhood become 'alien' as you grow older.
- Wordsworth believed that childhood memory could become a solace as you became closer to death. This is symbolised by the 'orange sky of evening' as the sun is setting on his life, but the memory is still beautiful.



# A Christmas Carol

By Charles Dickens

## Context

- Dickens' use of spirits to guide Scrooge to a happier, more generous life, is fitting as in the Victorian period telling ghost stories at Christmas was a tradition. However, in The Preface he is at pains to explain that his "Ghost of an idea" is not meant to be too frightening, instead he wanted to "haunt" people's minds, so they wouldn't dismiss his ideas once they finished the book.
- Until his encounters with the ghosts, Scrooge believes that profit is all that matters, and rather than helping the "poor and destitute", he demands to know whether the prisons, workhouses and the Poor Law are still in operation. The Portly Gentlemen explain that, "Many can't go there; and many would rather die", so allowing Dickens' to directly criticise the way some believed the poor were directly responsible for their own suffering. Dickens' father was imprisoned for debt and as a child Dickens had to work in a factory, which he hated.
- Dickens makes Scrooge the mouthpiece for Malthusian principles, that the poor should die and "decrease the surplus population". Thomas Malthus, an economist, believed that there was not enough food supplies for all the population and that it was inevitable that some people would be forced to go hungry. Dickens rejected this idea, instead he uses the ghosts to present a far more compassionate view towards poverty, and makes Scrooge seem so awful, that a reader automatically dismisses Scrooge's opinions in favour of Dickens' far kinder views.
- The Ghost of Christmas Past holds a branch of holly. Dickens' readers would have understood that holly refers to forgetting the past, as well as being a symbol of winter.
- The Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge to the countryside, which prompts his first really emotional reaction. The idyllic purity of the countryside is being used by Dickens to contrast with the dirt and pollution of London, where grief and greed is found everywhere.
- When the Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge Christmas in the city, Dickens uses the contrast between the pure white snow and the

soot, to reflect the living conditions between the rich and the poor, who often lived only a short distance apart. The presentation of the Cratchit family, and their joy as they celebrate a humble Christmas and dance “about the table” is used to emphasise Scrooge’s unreasonable view of the poor. Their warm home also contrasts with Scrooge’s cold and lonely house.

- Dickens readers would have understood that although Bob describes Tiny Tim as “growing strong and hearty” his death was highly likely. In 1839 it is estimated that almost half of all funerals in London were for children younger than 10. Dickens’ uses Tom to prompt sympathy and support for his social message. With his “little crutch” he is the embodiment of the “surplus population”. Bob’s low paid employment means, as it was for many Victorians, he could just about support his family but never improve their living conditions.
- Dickens uses the withered children Ignorance and Want, the creation of “Man”, to highlight again the cruelty of mankind. We are told to especially beware of Ignorance, which illustrates how Dickens believed that only through education could the cycle of poverty be broken. Education for Dickens was the route out of poverty, crime and despair.
- The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows Scrooge the poorer parts of London, where the description creates a sense of despair and horror. The smells are dreadful and the whole area “reeked with crime, with filth, with misery”. Like many social reformers, Dickens believed crime was often the result of poverty.

#### **Bonus comment!**

- Dickens forgot to tell his readers Tiny Tim’s fate in the first draft of the book. He added it to the manuscript as it was going to the printers. Imagine how different the story would have been, if we never knew that Tiny Tim lived!

