Introduction

This chapter is based on the area of exploration “Time and space”. The objectives of this chapter are to:

- **introduce** students to ways of perceiving texts as products of and contributors to cultures
- **exemplify** the skills of reading literature through the lens of reception history by considering how writers and readers from different times and places may encounter a text differently
- **investigate** specific examples of textual and contextual relationships
- **guide** students toward making their own discoveries about the intersection of texts and their contexts (the writer’s, reader’s and readers’)
- **provide** constructive advice for imaginatively correlating aesthetic and historical lines of inquiry.

Study and work selection in this area should allow students to explore texts and issues from a variety of places, cultures and/or times. Time and space aims to broaden students’ understanding of the open, plural or cosmopolitan nature of literary texts by considering the following guiding conceptual questions.
In this part of the course, we consider the study of texts through cultural, temporal, literary and personal lenses, or a combination of these. To be able to examine a text from these perspectives, it is important to remember that a work of literature is viewed as an event that happens in a particular cultural context. The writing of the work may involve a very private and intimate process for the writer, but a literary work is not produced in a vacuum. The literary work is seen as an event that has been made possible through the convergence of ideas, decisions, conditions, circumstances, incidents, influences, attitudes, ideologies and so on at a given point in time at a specific place. A work is shaped, to a greater or lesser extent, by the environment (the culture in which it is conceived, produced and received), as well as the historical circumstances surrounding it, with or without the author’s deliberate choices. The historical and geographical coordinates of a work, however, do not offer us an explanation of the text as such, but they give us insight into aspects of the work and indications for interpretation and explication. While the study of these circumstances may help us understand better how a text was conceived and produced, the task and challenge for a reader is to explore the text in depth to discover the ways and the means with which the text interacts with historical, political and social circumstances. In other words, from this perspective, the role of the reader is to discover the culture and the context of the work through its language and the ways the author uses language to create meaning.

In addition to this perspective, our own experience plays a role in the way we understand and interpret a text. A careful consideration of our own context and culture is necessary in order to heighten our awareness of how literary texts may endure the test of time; and how their meaning can be adjusted or appropriated, or reimagined or reconstructed in a different time period.

As we begin to look at issues of culture and context, literary analysis and personal response, you will use your learner portfolio to document reflections, thoughts and responses to the suggested activities and questions that will relate to various skills required in the course. These activities are designed to engage students in discussions about literary texts, to practise literary analysis skills and to prepare for the assessment tasks for the English A literature course. The activities will include close reading and textual analysis (paper 1), comparison and contrast (paper 2) and identification and discussion of global matters in the texts studied (internal assessment: individual oral) as well as inquiry-based tasks for particular works (the higher level essay).

Talking about culture

"Culture... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tyler, a British anthropologist, 1870: 1; cited by Avruch 1998: 6).

"Culture consists of the derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including those images or encodings and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves" (Schwartz 1992; cited by Avruch 1998: 17).

"Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour" (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 3).
Exploring classical Greek drama

This section will explore the genre of Greek tragedy against the backdrop of classical Greek culture and consider:

- the impact of the work
- the ways in which the work offers us insight into the culture of the time.

The challenge in defining culture is that it is a construct based on all aspects of human life. In other words, culture is defined on the basis of experience and the study of human activity. When studying culture, classical Greek culture is a very interesting example as it has given us dramatic works that we study to this day and these have profoundly influenced our literary traditions in many ways. In this section we will consider this influence and impact, and the meaning of the original, drawing on a close analysis of the text.

Classical Greek culture

Before we begin looking at the text more closely, choose one of the definitions above, research classical Greek culture and make notes on aspects of culture that seem significant to you, for example because they seem unusual or very similar to your culture. Consider the depth our knowledge of such a culture can attain and which cultural expressions, rituals, beliefs and so on cannot be documented.

Observations on culture

Reflect on and respond to the questions below, using your own experience and also any experience of other cultures that is available to you. You can also use drawing, colours or any means you prefer to represent concepts and ideas in your portfolio.

- Do you notice any patterns in the observations about culture?
- Does reflecting on observations about culture reveal something about you that is new to you?
- How could these observations relate to your reading and your habits of mind as a reader?

Consider these questions about definitions of culture.

1. Identify similarities and differences in the three quoted definitions.
2. What could be the reasons for the differences among them?
3. How is your list or definition similar to or different from the definitions above?
4. If you were to list the key elements of your list or definition of culture, how would you rank them and why?
5. Compare your notes with those of a peer. What differences do you notice and what do these differences say about you as individuals or about your culture or cultures?

Theatre space and audience experience

Theatre space and artistic experience influence each other and work together to create an experience for the audience. Theatre spaces reflect the culture that contains them and are very revealing of attitudes towards the theatre as an art form. In the same way, theatre space at the time a play is written is a very important aspect of a play as the space that hosts a performance is part of its context of production as well as reception. The Globe Theatre in London in the picture below (shown below, left) has a yard open to the sky. The stage is covered with a roof and it sticks out into the yard. The audience stand in the yard or sit in the three covered galleries that surround it. The recently renovated Alice Tilly Hall at the Lincoln Center in New York (below, right) has a multi-purpose performance stage with sound fittings in wood veneer and a special acoustic design that allows sound to bounce, among other features. Looking at the picture of the ancient theatre of Epidaurus (above) and the two pictures below, what conclusions can you draw about the tradition of the theatre in ancient Greece, during Shakespeare’s time and in contemporary America? Make a note of the pertinent features of these spaces and how they could impact the audience’s understanding of the play.
The cultural context of Antigone by Sophocles

The following is a summary of the story of Antigone.

Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta. Oedipus’ tragic fate was that unknowingly he married his mother and this curse follows all the members of his family. After Oedipus’ death, Antigone and her sister Ismene return to their native Thebes where a civil war is raging between their two brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices, who had agreed to take turns ruling the city. While Eteocles defends his rule beyond the agreed term, Polyneices attacks Thebes and his brother. The result of the conflict is the demise of both brothers, and their uncle Creon becoming king of the city. Creon’s first edict is to forbid the burial of Polyneices whom he considers a traitor, responsible for the civil war. Antigone defies Creon and buries her brother under threat of execution by Creon. She hangs herself in the cave where she was held prisoner and her beloved, Haemon, Creon’s son, also kills himself.

There are several cultural and contextual aspects to examine when studying Antigone. The first is the specific historical event where Pericles, the leader of Athens, was part of a campaign to put an end to the revolt of the island of Samos. In this respect, the play is written almost as a response or a reflection on events at the time. The second aspect is the political nature of the play as acknowledged by Sophocles, Aristotle and also Knox, the author of the introductory text above. The third aspect, implicitly mentioned, is the fact that the individual challenging Creon’s decree that Polyneices not be buried is a woman. These issues are explored and elaborated on in the play through various literary aspects, such as the structure of the work, the role and commentary of the chorus, the characters’ development and the dialogue.

Critical theory

We have chosen to explore texts as events that come about within a specific context and culture, yet critical theorists occasionally take a different stance.

As students of literature, the mere consideration of different perspectives offers us further insight into a work and how we respond to it. In this vein, consider two very different critical perspectives.

- One perspective is known as new criticism. It calls for an interpretation of a literary text without any consideration of the text’s context. Using this approach, the language of the text is the sole vehicle of meaning that the reader can access for interpretation.
- The other perspective is known as historicism. It claims that no interpretation of a literary text can be valid without a detailed examination of the culture and context of the text. Historicism “insists on the prime importance of historical context to the interpretation of texts of all kinds” (Hamilton 2003).

New criticism and historicism are just two examples of analytic theories of literature that are also themselves outcomes of cultural and contextual factors. You may want to research these theories further. However, for the purposes of this course these theories are considered perspectives to reflect on rather than topics of study.

Approaching a text in the distant past

Make a list of the advantages of the two approaches of new criticism and historicism when considering a text from a period of the distant past such as Antigone. How would these perspectives lead us to approach the text and reach an interpretation? How would these two interpretations differ? What does one approach capture that the other may find a challenge to analyse or evaluate?
Exploring classical Greek drama

Second Episode: Antigone is brought before Creon, and confesses that she buried her brother. She and Creon argue, and Creon decrees she will die. Ismene is led in, and claims she helped her sister. Antigone rejects her help.

Second Stasimon: The chorus reflects on the destiny of Antigone’s house, fate, and the nature of a divine curse.

Third Episode: Haemon argues with his father Creon, and leaves. Creon decrees that Antigone be entombed alive in a cave.

Third Stasimon: The chorus reflects on the destiny of Antigone’s house, fate, and the nature of a divine curse.

Fourth Episode: Antigone, lamenting her fate to the chorus, is led to the cave.

Fourth Stasimon: The chorus compares Antigone’s fate and imprisonment to that of three others: Danae, Lycurgus, and Cleopatra.

Fifth Episode: Teiresias enters, and tells Creon he has made a grave mistake. Creon realizes his mistake, and rushes to bury Polynices and release Antigone.

Fifth Choral Ode: The chorus invokes Dionysus, the god who protects Thebes.

Exodus: A messenger reports the deaths of Antigone and Haemon. Eurycle, Creon’s wife, commits suicide. Creon laments his losses.

Glossary

- **Prologue**: opening expository dialogue.
- **Parados**: song by chorus following the prologue.
- **Episode**: character interaction and dialogue takes place.
- **Stasimon**: a choral ode in which the chorus reacts to the last episode.
- **Exodus**: the conclusion of the play and the final choral ode.

Structure of Greek classical tragedy

Here are some preliminary questions about the structure of the play as outlined above. Make a note of your thoughts about these questions and try to identify your expectations as a reader before you read the play.

1. Classical Greek tragedy is not structured in acts and scenes. Could the episodic structure of tragedy reveal something about the role and function of tragedy in the culture of the time?
2. Given that the chorus is a group of citizens, usually women or old men who do not participate in the action as such, but are helplessly watching the drama unfold, how does the structure of the play highlight their role?

Tragedy in classical times was understood as education—rather than entertainment, as might be the case today. During the festivals, citizens went to the theatre as part of a pilgrimage for Dionysus. In this sense, the act of going to the theatre had a religious significance as well as a

<table>
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<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Deconstruction: A method of analysis by which deconstruction is a critical outlook concerning the relationship between text and meaning.</td>
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<td>Marxist literary theory: Marxist literary criticism seeks to analyse the way literature portrays the narrative of male domination.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feminist literary theory: Feminist literary criticism seeks to analyse the way literature portrays the narrative of male domination.</td>
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<td>Psychoanalytic theory: This theory was created by Sigmund Freud. It interprets and analyses dreams, anxieties and internal conflicts.</td>
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<td>New historicism: New historicism seeks to find meaning in a text by considering the work of the ideas and assumptions of its historical era.</td>
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<td>Archetypal theory: As used in literature, an archetype is a recurrent, universal pattern that awakens images and different emotions in the collective unconscious.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structuralism/ New criticism: The text is the text, and only the text. The theory of structuralism focuses only on the text and brings nothing else to it. It looks at the universal qualities of a piece of literature.</td>
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The structure of Antigone

**Prologue:** Antigone asks for her sister Ismene’s help in burying their brother Polynices. Ismene refuses, and Antigone rejects her sister.

**Parodos:** The chorus enters, rejoicing and thanking the gods that the attack of Polynices has been defeated and Thebes is safe.

**First Episode:** Creon enters, and reveals his plan to bury Eteocles but leave Polyneices unburied. A sentry enters, and reports that someone has tried to bury Polyneices. Creon is angered, and threatens the sentry.

**First Stasimon:** The chorus dances and sings its Ode to Man (“Many are the wonders, none is more wonderful than what is man.”)
political one. The stories of the plays performed were myths that the citizens were familiar with. Therefore, the purpose of the theatre was not to create a novel experience but rather to serve as food for thought and a prompt for reflection on issues relating to human affairs.

Action is never portrayed on the stage and the episodic nature of tragedy focuses on the interaction and the dialogue between characters, the ideas that the playwright wants to bring to the audience’s attention and the impact of these ideas on people.

Just from looking at the outlined structure (see the previous pages), we notice the presence of the chorus framing each episode. The chorus may not be involved in the action, but they represent the citizens, the members of the polis, and express their feelings and opinions about what happens. It is obvious then that their point of view (that is, the perspective of the citizens about the conflict between Antigone and Creon) is very important and so it can have an influence on the understanding and the perspective of the audience.

The characters in Antigone

The curse of the house of Laios begins with the king of Thebes, Laios, who ordered the shepherd to kill his son, Oedipus. As we know, however, the shepherd disobeyed him and instead gave the baby to another shepherd who, in turn, gave him to the King and Queen of Corinth who were childless and very happily adopted him. The myth of the house of Laios and Oedipus is very interesting in the complex issues it raises. While Oedipus is guilty of killing his father, so is Laios guilty of ordering the murder of his son in an attempt to defy the oracle.

The characters in the play reference the values and issues presented through their speech and their actions. The following exchange between Antigone and Ismene is from the prologue, which serves to give information about the predicament of Antigone and Ismene as well as the divergent inclinations and opinions about the burial of Polyneices. The characters of Antigone and Ismene are introduced as is the action that Antigone is planning to take. The prologue in Greek theatre always has the purpose of exposition; that is, of setting the scene for the audience regarding the conflict and what could follow. The dialogue has already established the opposition between “friend” and “foe” and the idea of opposition and conflict is also mirrored by the two sisters as they discuss Antigone’s resolution and the justification of her defiance of Creon and the state law.

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The genesalogical tree of Antigone