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WEEK 5: CULTURAL, POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND PERSONAL CONTEXTS

BBE2082 Literature of the World

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

01

Contextual Influence in Literature

02

Contextual Influence in Molière's
Tartuffe



03

Contextual Influence in *Response of the Poet
to the Very Eminent Sor Filotea de la Cruz*

04

Literary Techniques:
Freytag's Pyramid

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Introduction to Contextual Influences on Literature



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How does context
influence individuals
at societal and
personal level?

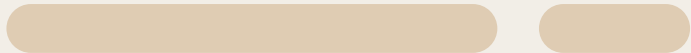


Introduction to Contextual Influence on Literature

Understanding Context in Literature

What Is Context?

In literary studies, context refers to the circumstances, background, and environment in which a literary work is created and received. This includes factors such as the time period, cultural norms, historical events, societal structures, and the personal experiences of the author. Context provides the lens through which readers interpret a work, influencing its meaning and relevance.





Introduction to Contextual Influence on Literature

Context can be categorized into several types:

- **Historical** : Events, movements, and conditions during the time the work was written.
Example: The French Revolution heavily influenced Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*.
- **Cultural** : Traditions, beliefs, and practices of the society in which the author lived.
Example: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* reflects the Igbo culture before and during British colonization.
- **Social**: The societal structures, class dynamics, and relationships that shape a story.
Example: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* explores social mobility and marriage in 19th-century England.
- **Political** : Political events, ideologies, or regimes that influence a work.
Example: George Orwell's *1984* critiques totalitarianism and surveillance, reflecting post-World War II anxieties.

Context is not limited to the era in which a work was written; it also encompasses the reader's contemporary context, as modern interpretations can add new layers of meaning to a text.





Introduction to Contextual Influence on Literature

How Does Context Shape Literature?

Literature is deeply intertwined with the context of its creation. Authors draw inspiration from the world around them, reflecting or critiquing the realities of their time. Context shapes the themes, characters, settings, and conflicts of a story, providing insight into the society and culture that produced it.

- Reflection of Societal Values: Literature often mirrors the dominant values, norms, and beliefs of its era, serving as a snapshot of its time. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* reflects the materialism and disillusionment of the Roaring Twenties in the United States.
- Critique of Injustices: Authors frequently use their work to critique societal or political injustices. For instance, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* addresses racial inequality and moral courage in the segregated American South.





Introduction to Contextual Influence on Literature

How Does Context Shape Literature?

- Exploration of Human Experience: Context allows literature to delve into universal human experiences, such as love, loss, ambition, and identity, while framing them within specific cultural or historical moments. Shakespeare's works, for example, address timeless themes but are firmly rooted in the Elizabethan worldview.
- Preservation of Cultural Identity: Literature serves as a record of cultural practices, traditions, and histories, preserving them for future generations. Works like Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* capture the values and myths of ancient Greece.





Introduction to Contextual Influence on Literature

The Power of Literature as a Response

Literature is not just a passive reflection of context; it is an active response to it. Authors use their work as a platform for critique, exploration, and dialogue, giving voice to marginalized perspectives or challenging the status quo.

1. Social Critique:

- Literature exposes societal flaws, questioning norms and systems of power. For example, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* critiques the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and familial expectations.
- Literature from marginalized communities often highlights the experiences of those excluded from dominant narratives, as seen in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.





Introduction to Contextual Influence on Literature

The Power of Literature as a Response

2. Challenging Norms:

- Authors frequently push back against prevailing ideologies or moral codes. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* challenges patriarchal restrictions on women's intellectual and creative freedom.

3. Voicing Resistance:

- Literature becomes a tool for resistance, expressing dissent against oppressive regimes or ideologies. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* exposes the horrors of Soviet labor camps, serving as a powerful indictment of totalitarianism.






Introduction to Contextual Influence on Literature

The Power of Literature as a Response

4. Fostering Empathy and Understanding:

- Literature allows readers to step into the lives of others, fostering empathy and challenging prejudices. For example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* humanizes the Nigerian Civil War, offering perspectives often omitted from history books.

5. Encouraging Intellectual Exploration:

- Literature provides a space for philosophical inquiry, moral debates, and imaginative speculation. Works like Albert Camus's *The Stranger* engage with existential questions, prompting readers to reflect on their own beliefs and values.
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Molière's Tartuffe

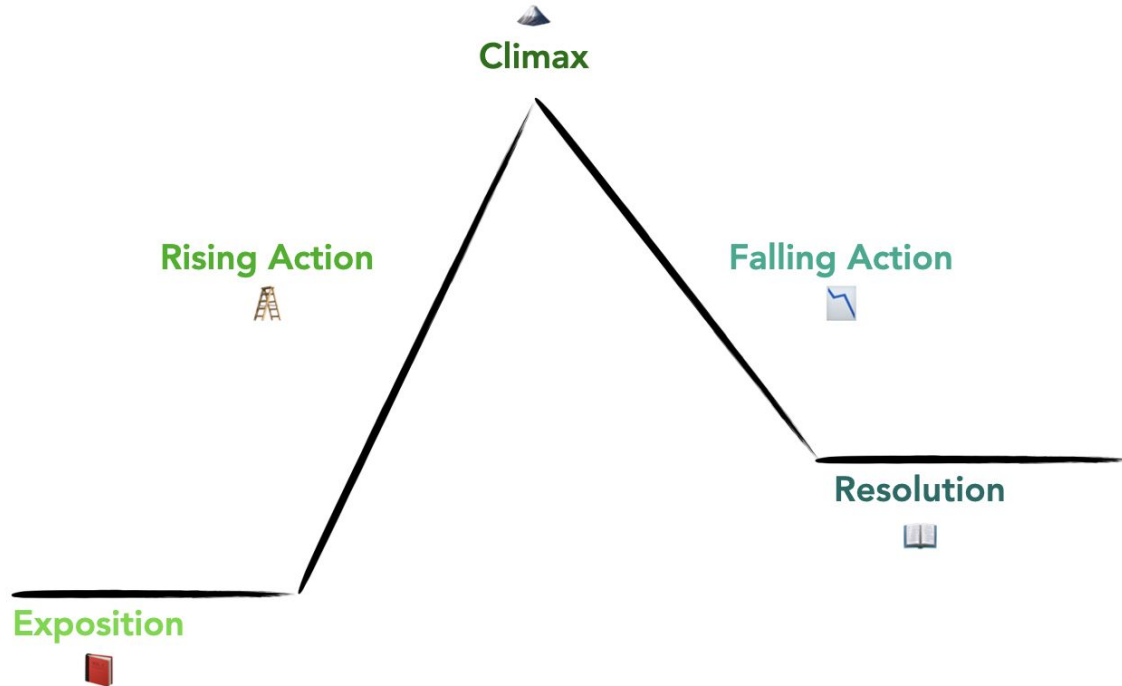
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Tartuffe (1664) is one of Molière's most famous comedies, written during the reign of Louis XIV. It critiques religious hypocrisy and the gullibility of those who blindly follow deceitful figures. The play was controversial upon release and was temporarily banned due to objections from religious authorities.

The play is set in the home of Orgon, a wealthy man who has fallen under the influence of Tartuffe, a pious-seeming but deceitful man posing as a devout religious figure.

Plot Structure in *Tartuffe*

FREYTAG'S PYRAMID





Plot Structure in *Tartuffe*

Freytag's Pyramid is a framework developed by 19th-century German playwright and novelist Gustav Freytag to analyze the structure of a dramatic narrative. It is often used to understand the organization and progression of events in a story or play.

Freytag's Pyramid helps readers and viewers:

- Understand Story Structure: By breaking down a narrative into clear stages, the pyramid clarifies how a story develops and resolves.
- Identify Key Moments: Recognizing the climax, for example, helps highlight the story's turning point and its emotional or thematic peak.
- Analyze Character and Conflict Development: The structure showcases how characters respond to challenges and how conflicts escalate and resolve.





Plot Structure in *Tartuffe*

1. Exposition (Introduction)

- The exposition introduces the setting, characters, and background information essential for understanding the story. It sets the stage for the conflict and establishes the tone of the narrative.
 - Example: In *Tartuffe*, the exposition reveals Orgon's household dynamics and the growing influence of Tartuffe over Orgon.

2. Rising Action

- The rising action includes a series of events that build tension and develop the central conflict. These events create momentum, leading to the climax.
 - Example: In *Tartuffe*, the rising action involves Orgon's plans to marry Mariane to Tartuffe and Tartuffe's inappropriate advances toward Elmire, which expose his duplicity.



Plot Structure in *Tartuffe*

3. Climax

- The climax is the turning point or moment of greatest intensity in the story. It is often where the main conflict reaches its peak, and crucial decisions or actions are made.
 - Example: In *Tartuffe*, the climax occurs when Elmire stages a conversation to reveal Tartuffe's true nature, and Orgon finally sees Tartuffe's hypocrisy.
 -

4. Falling Action

- The falling action includes the consequences of the climax and begins to resolve the conflict. Tension diminishes as the story moves toward its conclusion.
 - Example: In *Tartuffe*, the falling action includes Orgon's realization of his mistake and Tartuffe's attempt to use incriminating documents to ruin Orgon.



Plot Structure in *Tartuffe*

5. Resolution (Denouement)

- The resolution ties up loose ends and resolves the conflict, providing closure to the story.
 - Example: In *Tartuffe*, the resolution comes when the king intervenes, orders Tartuffe's arrest, and restores Orgon's property and peace to the household.

By using Freytag's Pyramid to analyze *Tartuffe*, we can see how Molière crafts tension and resolution, ensuring the play remains engaging while delivering its satirical critique of hypocrisy.

Watch this: [Tartuffe by Molière | In-Depth Summary & Analysis](#)





Themes in *Tartuffe*

1. Religious Hypocrisy: Tartuffe represents the dangers of those who use religion as a tool for manipulation.
2. Blind Faith: Orgon's unquestioning trust in Tartuffe shows how blind devotion can lead to personal and familial harm.
3. Power and Authority: The play critiques societal and religious authority figures who exploit their positions.







Excerpts from *Tartuffe*

Excerpt 1: Tartuffe Manipulates Orgon

Orgon: Poor man!

Dorine: Poor man!


Orgon: Yes, a poor man! The whole house takes such care of him. Everyone is so solicitous that he's offended by it. Each day he wishes nothing to eat, yet he eats so much food that his belly's tight as a drum. He rebukes himself for eating too much but eats enough for two. Ah, how happy I am to have taken him in!



Analysis:

This dialogue occurs early in the play and demonstrates Orgon's misplaced admiration for Tartuffe. It highlights the theme of blind faith. Orgon's inability to see through Tartuffe's obvious hypocrisy symbolizes the dangers of unquestioning devotion.

Molière's humor is evident in the exaggerated irony of Orgon's description, contrasting Tartuffe's actions (gluttony) with his supposed saintliness. The humor invites the audience to laugh at Orgon's gullibility while critiquing those who fail to discern true virtue.





Excerpts from *Tartuffe*


Excerpt 2: Tartuffe's Seduction of Elmire

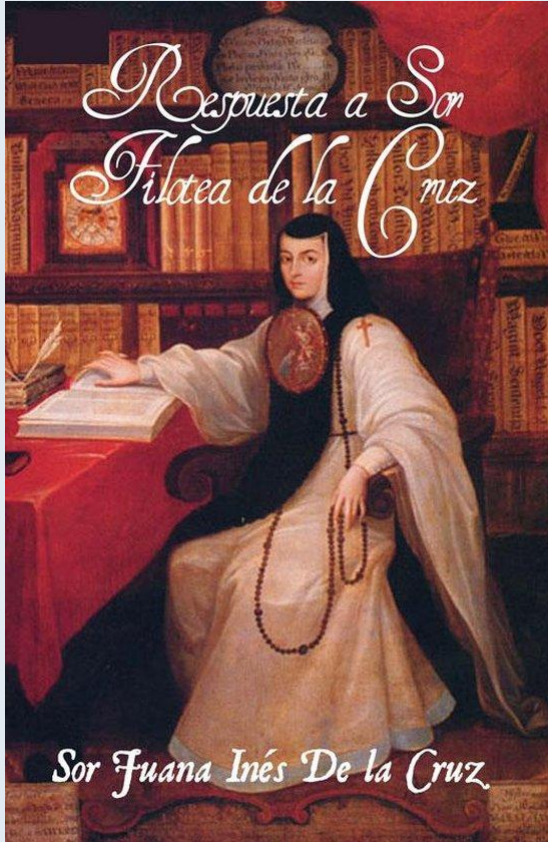
Tartuffe: Madam, all things have conspired to your perfection. Heaven made you the most beautiful of its works. Earth in admiration of you is silent; everything yields to you, for everything is less perfect. To gaze on you is to subdue my heart. And to touch your lips is to taste Paradise.

Analysis:

Tartuffe attempts to seduce Elmire, Orgon's wife, revealing his true character as a hypocrite and fraud.

This scene underscores the theme of religious hypocrisy, as Tartuffe, a supposed man of God, uses flattery and manipulation for personal gain. His smooth-talking seduction contrasts with the image of purity and piety he projects to Orgon. By unmasking Tartuffe's true intentions, Molière critiques the societal tendency to elevate individuals based on appearances rather than substance.





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Response of the Poet to the Very Eminent Sor Filotea de la Cruz

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The Response (1691) is an extended letter written by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a nun and scholar in colonial Mexico. It is a defense of her intellectual pursuits after being criticized by the Bishop of Puebla (writing under the pseudonym “Sor Filotea”) for dedicating herself to secular studies rather than theological writing. The Response is considered a foundational feminist text for its argument in favor of women’s right to education and intellectual freedom.



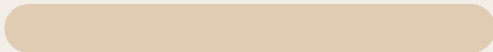
Content Summary

Opening Address:

- Sor Juana begins by humbly acknowledging the bishop's critique but carefully establishes her own perspective. She insists her studies are not intended to teach or challenge authority but to reduce her ignorance.

Personal Narrative:

- She recounts her early passion for learning, describing how, as a child, she secretly read her grandfather's books and taught herself Latin. Her love of knowledge persisted despite societal expectations for women to focus on domestic or religious roles.
- Sor Juana explains her decision to join a convent as a way to avoid marriage and dedicate herself to intellectual pursuits.





Content Summary

Defense of Secular Knowledge:

- Sor Juana argues that secular knowledge complements theological study. She cites examples of historical and biblical women, such as Deborah and the Queen of Sheba, who demonstrated wisdom and intellectual capability.

Critique of Gendered Constraints:

- She critiques the societal and religious norms that limit women's education, asserting that intellectual pursuits are not exclusive to men. She states that her studies have deepened her understanding of faith, not detracted from it.





Content Summary

Response to the Bishop's Criticism:

- Sor Juana refutes the idea that her secular studies are inappropriate for a nun. She argues that her work is a form of worship, as all knowledge ultimately leads to God.

Conclusion:

- Sor Juana closes with humility, framing her letter as an honest response rather than a challenge to authority. She reiterates her commitment to faith and learning, while subtly maintaining her intellectual independence.

Watch this: [History's "worst" nun - Theresa A. Yugar - YouTube](#)






Excerpts from the letter

Excerpt 1: Defense of Women's Education

"I don't study to teach, or to show off, as many people falsely imagine; rather, I study because I know no other way to fulfill my obligation to God. For even though I recognize myself as a woman, weak and insignificant, the supreme Giver of Light and Knowledge has not scorned to communicate the rays of His infinite bounty to such a woman, and for this I am compelled to study, to better understand Him."

Analysis:

Sor Juana defends her intellectual pursuits against accusations that her studies are inappropriate for a nun and for women in general. It addresses gender and intellectual freedom, asserting that women have the same capacity and divine right to knowledge as men. Sor Juana integrates theology into her argument, emphasizing that her studies are a way to worship and understand God, not an act of vanity or rebellion. Her tone is humble yet assertive, using logic and personal conviction to argue against societal constraints.






Excerpts from the letter

Excerpt 2: Critique of Religious Constraints

"If Aristotle had cooked, he would have written much less. Why should women not have as much right to knowledge as men, when they have a greater need for it, given the duties of raising children and caring for the household? How can one argue against this right, when women are the first teachers of their children and must therefore be educated themselves?"

Analysis:

Sor Juana critiques the societal norms that exclude women from education, arguing that their roles as mothers and caregivers make education even more essential. This passage explores the intersection of gender, knowledge, and societal roles, advocating for women's empowerment through education. Sor Juana's witty remark about Aristotle challenges the male-dominated intellectual tradition. By emphasizing women's practical and intellectual needs for education, she reframes the argument to show the societal benefits of educating women. While couched in humility, her critique is a bold challenge to patriarchal norms, making this a key moment in early feminist literature.





Themes

1. Intellectual Freedom: Sor Juana defends the right to study and pursue knowledge, regardless of gender.
2. Faith and Reason: She argues that secular and theological studies are not mutually exclusive but complementary paths to truth.
3. Critique of Patriarchy: The Response subtly critiques the limitations imposed on women by societal and religious institutions.





LITERARY TECHNIQUES

Freytag's Pyramid for analysing plot

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Freytag's Pyramid for analyzing plots

Freytag's Pyramid is not limited to analyzing plays or long-form narratives; it can also be applied to various literary and storytelling formats, including short stories, novels, films, and even non-fiction narratives. Here's how it can be utilized in different contexts:

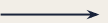
- **Analyzing Short Stories**

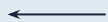
While short stories are often more concise than novels or plays, they still contain the essential elements of a plot: introduction, conflict, climax, and resolution. Freytag's Pyramid can help identify these key moments, even within a brief narrative.

Example: Rabindranath Tagore's *Kabuliwala*

Exposition

The story opens in Calcutta, introducing the narrator, his young daughter Mini, and their domestic life. Mini is a lively child who befriends the Kabuliwala, a traveling fruit-seller from Afghanistan. Their interactions are filled with humor and warmth, establishing the bond between the two characters.





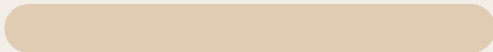
Freytag's Pyramid for analyzing plots

Rising Action

The relationship between Mini and the Kabuliwala deepens, with the Kabuliwala sharing stories of his homeland and bringing Mini small gifts. However, conflict arises when the Kabuliwala is arrested for assaulting a man over a debt. He is sent to prison, abruptly severing his connection with Mini.

Climax

Years later, on the day of Mini's wedding, the Kabuliwala is released from prison and visits the narrator's house. He hopes to see Mini, now a grown woman. When he finally meets her, the stark contrast between the little girl he remembered and the bride she has become is emotionally overwhelming for both.





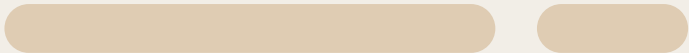
Freytag's Pyramid for analyzing plots

Falling Action

The narrator is moved by the Kabuliwala's emotions and gives him money to return to Afghanistan to reunite with his daughter. This act of kindness bridges the cultural and temporal gaps between the characters.

Resolution

The story ends on a poignant note, emphasizing the themes of separation, love, and the passage of time. Mini's wedding proceeds, while the Kabuliwala leaves, carrying with him the hope of reconnecting with his daughter.





Freytag's Pyramid for analyzing plots

2. Structuring and Writing Narratives

Freytag's Pyramid serves as a guide for writers to structure their stories effectively, ensuring they include all necessary plot elements for a cohesive narrative.

Application:

Introduction: Establish the setting and characters.

Conflict: Introduce a central challenge or problem.

Climax: Include a turning point that resolves or escalates the conflict.

Conclusion: Provide a satisfying resolution or open-ended finish.

Example: *Students writing creative retellings or mock film trailers can use Freytag's Pyramid to outline their narratives, ensuring a balance between tension and resolution.*





Freytag's Pyramid for analyzing plots

3. Film and Screenplay Analysis

Movies often follow a similar structure, with distinct acts that align with the stages of Freytag's Pyramid.

In films, the pyramid can identify:

Exposition: The setup of the characters and setting.

Rising Action: Events leading to the main conflict.

Climax: The most intense moment of the story.

Falling Action: The aftermath of the climax.

Resolution: The story's closure.

Example: In *The Lion King*:

Exposition: Simba's birth and introduction to Pride Rock.

Rising Action: Scar's betrayal and Simba's exile.

Climax: Simba confronts Scar and reclaims his place as king.

Resolution: Peace is restored to the Pride Lands.





Key Takeaways

- Molière's Tartuffe critiques societal hypocrisy and the dangers of blind faith through satire and dramatic conflict.
- Sor Juana's Response is a powerful defense of intellectual freedom and gender equality, addressing societal and religious constraints with eloquence and logic.
- Both works demonstrate how literature can challenge dominant norms and advocate for justice and autonomy.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Molière use the character of Tartuffe to critique religious hypocrisy?
2. What arguments does Sor Juana present to defend women's education, and how do they resonate today?
3. Compare how Tartuffe and Response address power and authority within societal institutions.



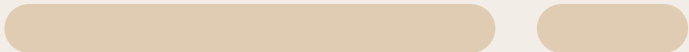
Key Points for Comparison Analysis

Historical Context:

- Tartuffe critiques religious hypocrisy in 17th-century France, a society deeply entwined with the Catholic Church.
- Response addresses gender and intellectual constraints in 17th-century colonial Mexico, a context shaped by Spanish colonialism and Catholic orthodoxy.

Tone and Approach:

- Tartuffe employs humor and satire to expose societal flaws.
- Response uses reasoned argumentation and autobiographical evidence to assert Sor Juana's case for intellectual freedom.





Next class:

1. Refer to the [COURSE INFORMATION](#) document.
2. Read the stories assigned for Week 6.

