

**THE LIVING LENS: HOW UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORICAL  
CONTEXT OF THE ANCIENT WORLD ENRICHES OUR  
APPRECIATION OF ANCIENT LITERATURE**

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**Abstract**

Homer's Odyssey. The Bhagavad Gita. The Epic of Gilgamesh. Whether the text has religious scriptures, philosophical treatises, legal documents, or literary works, each piece is a testament to the social, political and cultural aspects of the era and the geographical location it is based upon.

It's this historical and social aspect of it that sometimes makes it feel like a fragment of fiction, a piece of a broken world that could never be ours. But can we truly appreciate a whole new perspective? Can we learn to embrace an unrelatable, superficial and unreliable evidence of what once was without sufficient context?

This 'context' is the actual deciding factor, the pawn that could actually change the game, but is it that significant to affect the way we truly understand, perceive and value ancient literature?

**The Context**

Literature is driven on the wheels of the environment and milieu it is based upon [2] and a deeper understanding of this could help readers infer from literary texts and understand what fueled the writer, understanding their thought and the society that formed the skeleton for it [3].

It's usually the stigma that goes unchallenged and accepted [4], the stereotypes that writers grow up with, and the relationships they share with others in their community [5] that provides context for a story.

'The Odyssey' by Homer, for example, has stereotypic gender roles with males being the heroic and active protagonists while females get less prominent roles like the faithful wife, Penelope, and the temptress, Circe. This is also seen in Greek history, with women prohibited from performing in Greek theatre; giving women a prominent platform like a stage was considered 'dangerous' back then and female characters were hence portrayed by male actors [7]. As seen, with the misogynist backdrop of Ancient Greece, these gender roles would not come as a surprise, but if it was unbeknownst, it would be considered strange, given that these bounds of gender roles are blurring away in today's world.

Another great example is 'Pride and Prejudice' which strongly revolves around the themes of class and marriage that were evident during the Regency period. With the strict inheritance laws of entrusting property to male relatives [9], Pride and Prejudice establishes this disturbing idea which is nonexistent in today's world, and without prior comprehension of the

times and thinking of the social classes during that era, the very foundations of the book may have been ‘fictitious’ to a few readers especially with the ‘cult of domesticity’ and the societal expectations placed upon the female characters being almost unbelievable to today’s modern generations [10].

The context of a book however, is not restricted to societies, but expands to the historical landscape as well. Gabriel García Márquez’s ‘One Hundred Years of Solitude’ which depended heavily on Colombian history, politics and culture among which neo-colonialism and colonization were a few discussed ideas, would have been better understood if readers were aware of the struggle and the need of the hour back then.

Then comes the philosophy of that time. ‘The Brothers Karamazov’ by Fyodor Dostoevsky is a great example that explores ideas of faith and doubt, free will and existentialism [13]. Inspiration from the existentialist movement gave birth to the human dilemmas faced by the brothers, and the idea of defining their own meaning through their actions and experiences [14]. The scope for redemption and the rational skepticism between the problem of evil and the existence of God is highlighted and these, with a firm context on the philosophy of those times and the philosophy Dostoevsky followed would reap a greater impact on the reader.

### **The Conventions**

Every piece of text has its nuances. The linguistic and literary conventions of ancient times like the rhetorical devices of Greek literature [15] and the strict meter of Latin Poetry [16] could enhance the way we look at a piece of work. To an unaware reader, it would simply be a string of words, but it is those knowing of the conventions of literature back then who would actually take greater interest and better value the effort by the writer and the seamless way it fits into the molds of that time. The genre conventions of the world back then, like the structure of Greek tragedies or Roman satire, could help dive deeper into the writer’s intentions and artistic goals.

### **The Interpretation**

Firstly, so many times, while reading a novel, you find a really simple solution to a character’s problem. Take Romeo and Juliet for example. A few solutions that first came to my mind were: eloping, better communication and medical check. When I read more about that era, I realized that none of these would have been great options considering that back then in that era elopement led to defaming, social ostracism and loss of all that they could have inherited from their family, leaving them to survive on their own. Better communication was just not possible because there were no pagers or mobile phones back then, and messengers and letters took some time to reach. Furthermore, medicine had not advanced as much as it is today to actually know if Juliet was dead or not – besides, if it was that progressive, the Capulets would have definitely done it and the entire plan would have gone for a toss.

This proves that it’s very important to know the times and the situations of the era a literary piece is set in to prevent anachronisms like this. Reading an ancient text with a modern lens can lead to such misunderstandings – whether it is based on contemporary norms, technologies, societies, beliefs or ideologies. This can lead to misinterpretations and a distorted and reluctant appreciation of the work. It’s hard to look at the ethics and morals of the ancient world – like the stereotypes that once existed when it comes to women’s roles in a household – when the attitude to these issues now has completely changed or is currently evolving.

Some pieces of literature, found in fragments, have been translated and retold, but these usually lack the contextual depth of the original piece. The Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, found in fragments required scholars to reconstruct the missing parts [17], but there are several versions and some contain potential gaps in the narrations and interpretations that would be better understood if people knew more about ancient Mesopotamia.

When readers finally know the context and the conventions of the ancient world the text was written in, they can better grasp the complexities and infer deeper meanings below the surface, the undertones that are usually overlooked but could actually change their entire perspective on the piece.

On re-reading Virgil's Aeneid after knowing more about the Augustan period did I realize that Aeneas portrayed the virtue of pietas which was something Emperor Augustus revived. The rituals, sacrifices, involvement of gods and goddesses and the very crux of culture symbolizes the cultural renewal and revival Augustus promoted. The Aeneid also hints at a golden future which serves as a nod to Pax Romana, which was established by Augustus. With its many prophecies, it also serves as a covert political endorsement to Augustus's rule and shows the respect Virgil holds for his emperor.

Moreover, the deeper inference also helps us understand and interpret the interconnections of the modern world to the ancient one. We realize the enduring legacy, the dying practices and the extinct ideologies of today, the origin of the theories we believe in and the foundations of our modern world.

Lastly, it helps bridge philosophy, sociology, psychology, religion, history and archaeology to literature helping us get a comprehensive overview of the richness of writing, and the significance of it. It shows literature as more than just a piece of fiction, but something that is or was real, wholly or partially, at some point of time.

### **Timelessness**

Some may argue that there are a few classics that would be equally appreciated without background information and I wouldn't disagree.

'The Great Gatsby', for instance, talks about how chasing the 'American Dream' of true happiness is now just a chase for wealth and riches. It shows that there are so many people who chase materialistic success, but those goals come with corruption and don't always have a happy end. It is especially relevant in today's materialistic world where no one is ever satisfied with what they have, and everyone keeps wanting more. So many times, we neglect the joy and the journey and keep running marathons just to get the money, and then when we have it, the best days of our life are over. Money can buy luxuries, but it can't buy happiness and I believe that this message, strongly portrayed by this great novel, is absolutely timeless.

'Frankenstein' is another great example. In our world, we are driven with scientific discoveries and progress, with the technology that surrounds us. 'Frankenstein', however, shows us the dark side of this progress. It shows the dangers of being too ambitious, the impact of being lonely and loathed and the thirst for revenge that comes with it. It also shows how people are quick to judge on the basis of appearances like they did for Frankenstein's monster and how the hatred and isolation he felt drove him to insanity. With the ongoing advances in genetics and robotics, science would definitely have more inventions like Sophia the robot (who in an

interview claimed that she would destroy all humans [21]). This makes Frankenstein even more relevant and relatable today despite the difference in timelines.

### **The Perspective**

The lack of understanding and knowledge of the world in which a particular piece of literary text was first written in can affect the viewpoint of modern readers.

As a first, it would offer a fresh interpretation. In the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna's moral dilemma on the battleground can be related to how we are often stuck at crossroads and are indecisive. It is faced by everyone and Lord Krishna's wise words about fear and responsibility are still relevant even today. It could be that piece of advice we all need. The personal growth of Arjuna can be seen as our own personal growth – whether it is psychological or emotional. So many times, our morals and our ethics clash with the circumstances in front of us, making us question our decisions. The Bhagavad Gita helps clear our heads, and modern readers can still appreciate its deep meaning and honest truths without context of the Mahabharata War that was being waged. In a way, the Mahabharata War is also a metaphor for the internal wars we have within us every single day, and this sort of perspective is what can be drawn even without knowing much about the setting and era.

Next, literature always has universal themes like love, betrayal, mortality, courage, fate, etc. These are still apt today, and it's this bigger picture that is often appreciated by a reader because it connects to them on a personal and emotional level. This does not require a historical or cultural context. It's simply there and it is equally treasured.

Context sometimes might also hamper the overall content. You don't always have to look at literature with logic. Sometimes, everything doesn't have to make sense. Suppose you're reading 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland' by Lewis Carroll. This classic doesn't really need context about the time and era it was written in. The whimsical events and nonsensical characters have still secured a spot in readers' hearts and this would not be possible if you look at it with practicality. The very fiction of the story ends up limited and restrained if you do so. Sometimes, context can make a work of fiction seem less unreal, and this can actually alter the way a reader looks at a book. Literature serves as the getaway car for readers worldwide and sometimes too much reality can make it boring and exhausting. Finding context in nooks and crannies can also make readers overlook the real parts of the book – the emotions, the characters and the plot. If we know bits and pieces about the author's life, we can look at his/her writing as a journal rather than a story. Knowing more about a particular culture or era may also cause certain distaste and loathing, and this might cause readers to dislike the book because of these mental bars.

However, it's time to also look at the flipside of the situation. As mentioned before, there's a huge scope for anachronisms, misunderstandings and misinterpretations. It might alter what the reader thinks the writer's original intentions were and that changes the impact of the literary piece altogether. It is harder to infer when there is little to no context and readers usually cling on to the superficial understanding, missing out on the greater meaning and the little things that could actually mean a lot more.

Writing is an art form. Imagine being the audience to a performance where you don't know what to expect. There's music and dance, but maybe there's a story portrayed. Maybe it reflects a particular era. Reading literature without knowing the style conventions is just like that

– you don’t know what to expect, so you just observe the words, you simply read. You usually overlook the meter or the writing style of that piece of writing, so you would not be able to completely grasp and appreciate the craft of the writer. ‘Gadsby’ by Ernest Vincent Wright, for example, has no e’s in it [24]. Old English poetry, like Beowulf, relies heavily on alliteration, lines and meters [25]. Elizabethan drama (which includes Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets) followed strict iambic pentameter [26]. Without knowing these conventions, these restraints or patterns the writers followed, the appreciation for the literary pieces will never be the same, with so many tending to undervalue it.

### **A Change in Lens**

Readers love to imagine, and to ensure that the realms of their imagination is just as immersive for ancient literature as it is to contemporary works, it is quintessential to have a brief backdrop about the context and the conventions of the era. It not only helps depict how interconnected our world today is, but also expands our perspective over lives and lifestyles different from our own. I like to call this the ‘Living Lens’ because it makes you live and breathe through the words. It allows you to step into the shoes of the writer and the people in that world. I believe that this change in lens is paramount to actually understand a piece, gauge the writer’s perspective and appreciate the words in front of us. It makes reading a journey through some space-time continuum, across coordinates on the map, and makes it more three dimensional. This three dimensionality can make readers thoroughly enjoy literature – it can make it seem like a movie, except that we’re in it too. It makes it more believable and less imaginary, more real and less fictitious and more relatable and less distant.

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