**Unit 1**

**Section A**

**The importance of context**

This exam offers the opportunity for teachers to address not only the biographical contextual detail related to each poet, but also to use the anthology as a vehicle through which to develop a broader understanding of cultural, historical, political and social developments.

It is vital that students show awareness of the impact of contextual factors on the texts they have studied. By establishing a strong contextual focus in the AS year, candidates will be thoroughly prepared for the requirements, of the second year units.

* Candidates should use contextual material throughout their essay; they should avoid writing a stand-alone paragraph on context at the start of the essay and should instead embed it into their analysis
* Contextual material will mostly relate to the anthology poem that they have been taught and have prepared; it can also relate to the unseen material they select. Spoken texts in particular will have a strong sense of audience and purpose and candidates can use this as a spring board to discussing relevant contextual factors
* Rather than teaching the poems individually, it is possible to group them into literary movements / periods. This would help candidates think about historical, social and political changes over time in, for example, attitudes to love or religion. It might also allow for the teaching of several poems in one session, allowing students to then work independently on annotating them in more detail
* Presentations on context work well and often students will come up with contextual material that is unexpected and different, but valid. Dividing up the poems between a class and asking them to research and then present their findings to the rest of the class is a good way of highlighting how important context is.

Using contextual material correctly is a bit like assembling a jigsaw. Each ‘piece’ of context that you use should fit seamlessly to a ‘piece’ of analysis. Like the pieces of a jigsaw, contextual material should appear throughout an essay and should always be relevant to the overall picture.

In your essays, remember that each time you use contextual material, you should ‘fit it’ into another piece of analysis on the text.

**TASK**

**Poem: Thomas Hardy’s ‘The Darkling Thrush’**

On the next page, look at the eight different jigsaw pieces which represent four comments on context and four pieces of analysis.

Match the context pieces to their analysis partner.

Hardy sets his poem at dusk, using the metaphor of a ‘weakening eye’ to describe the poor quality of light at the end of the day. This symbolises a feeling of things coming to an end, and adds to the poem’s initial tone of uncertainty and tension.

It is said by critics that Thomas Hardy wrote this poem on New Year’s Eve, 1899.

The ‘aged thrush’ is immediately vibrant, in contrast to the gloomy wood. The dynamic verb ‘fling’  
 and the plosive  
 noun phrase ‘blast-  
 beruffled plume’  
 present the bird as a source   
 of hope and energy.

Hardy was heavily influenced by Romantic poets such as Keats, Coleridge and Shelley. In the Romantic tradition, birds expressed emotions in their song that had human significance; they would often be used as symbols of optimism and hope.

By considering the lexical set of nouns related to nature in the poem, the reader  
 can vividly imagine the rural  
 scene described. Noun   
 Phrases such as   
 “tangled bine-stems”,

“bleak twigs” and the noun

“wind” reveal the Winter landscape to us.

Born in Dorset, Thomas Hardy retained a deep affinity for the countryside for his whole life. When he died his ashes were buried in Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey, but his heart was buried in his local parish churchyard, back in Dorset.

Hardy’s use of the extended metaphor of death to describe the body of the past century ‘outleant’, with the nouns ‘crypt’ and ‘corpse’, adds to the melancholy and pessimistic tone of the first two stanzas.

 At the change of the century, there was a feeling of doubt and pessimism – especially among intellectuals and the people of the upper class. Social problems   
 were on the increase:  
 a huge number of   
 people belonged to the  
 working class and had to   
suffer from poor conditions. Also, developments in science and rationalism meant that people were becoming more alienated from religion.