English Language and Literature Unit 4

Section B

AO3 Key contextual points from the 2017 mark scheme

**Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid’s Tale***

Key contextual points include:

* gender roles and patriarchy
* 20th century dystopian literature – Orwell, Huxley, Bradbury
* history of totalitarian regimes
* attitudes of the religious right, especially in the U.S.
* Puritan theocratic societies in 17th century America
* threats to fertility in the industrialised west
* late 20th century feminism and its reversal
* literary context of the Old Testament
* Atwood’s humanist beliefs
* idea of ‘speculative’ fiction
* any relevant critical readings.

**Jane Austen: *Emma***

Key contextual points include:

* gender roles and patriarchy
* 20th century dystopian literature – Orwell, Huxley, Bradbury
* history of totalitarian regimes
* attitudes of the religious right, especially in the U.S.
* Puritan theocratic societies in 17th century America
* threats to fertility in the industrialised west
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* literary context of the Old Testament
* Atwood’s humanist beliefs
* idea of ‘speculative’ fiction
* any relevant critical readings.

**Charles Dickens: *Great Expectations***

Key contextual points include:

* social status and hierarchy in early 1800s when the novel is set
* historical background e.g. transportation, capital punishment
* social issues such as poverty, crime, urbanisation
* serial publication for Victorian audience
* Dickens’ background and early life e.g. Kent childhood, factory work
* his experience of rich and poor, London life, the law
* his interest in social reform
* troubled relationships with women – separated in 1858
* gender roles and marriage
* bildungsroman/education novel
* how modern audiences might respond
* any relevant critical readings.

**Thomas Hardy: *Tess of the D’Urbervilles***

Key contextual points include:

* gender roles and male dominance; double standards
* rural Dorset setting and focus on agricultural labour
* traditional crafts and skills gradually being replaced
* improving educational opportunities after Education Acts
* social status and hierarchy
* post-Darwinian religious debates; religious doubt
* Tess as version of the ‘ideal woman’
* divided reactions to Tess and the sub-title ‘A Pure Woman’
* Tess as representative of the female agricultural worker
* Hardy in favour of more ‘candour’ in fiction over sex and childbirth
* late Victorian audience
* possible responses of modern readers
* any relevant critical readings.

**Alice Walker: *The Color Purple***

Key contextual points include:

* early 20th century contexts in America and Africa
* gender roles and patriarchal power e.g. land ownership
* racial prejudice and inequality
* position of black women in America and Africa
* role of Christian faith e.g. in missionary work
* absence of much human rights legislation
* Walker’s background and work, especially as a civil rights activist
* her ‘womanist’ and pantheist beliefs
* hostile critical reception from black men
* reference to audience responses in the 1980s or later
* any relevant critical readings.