

AQA English Literature GCSE

Romeo and Juliet: Context

This work by [PMT Education](https://www.pmt.education) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



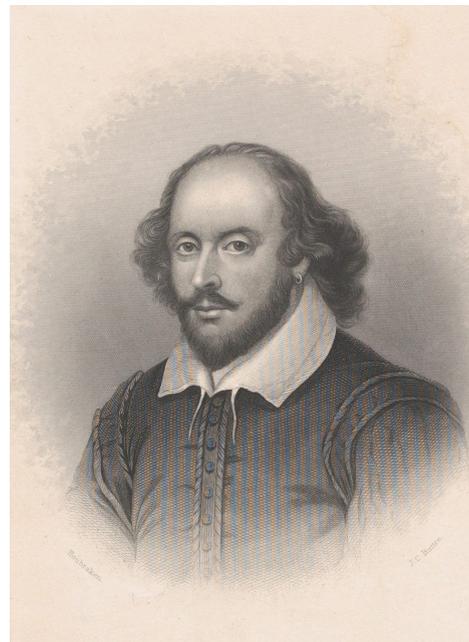
Background Information

Shakespeare

Shakespeare is known as England's most famous playwright; he lived from **1564 – 1616**. His plays can be divided into **Histories** (e.g. Henry VI), **Comedies** (e.g. Midsummer's Nights Dream), and **Tragedies** (e.g. Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet).

Shakespeare was writing for his acting group, the **Lord Chamberlain's Men** (later, the King's Men). Thus, his characters and writing style correspond to some of his most talented actors (Richard Burbage, for instance; most well known for his role as the first Romeo and the eponymous character Hamlet).

Shakespeare was writing during **the Renaissance** which was a period between the 14th to 17th centuries where there was an expansion of artistic expression. This expression freed itself from the **restrictions** of previous centuries. Romeo and Juliet is suspected to have been written at the beginning of Shakespeare's career from around **1597-1579**.



<https://cdn2.picryl.com/photo/1856/01/01/william-shakespeare-0a54b6-1600.jpg>

Plays were an incredibly **popular and central medium of entertainment** during the Elizabethan and Jacobean era. Shakespeare's plays were the mass media of London for the day. The importance of **entertainment** of the plays must be understood when studying them; intense critical analysis is important, but should not detract from the big-picture view that these were first-and-foremost written to entertain.

History of Romeo and Juliet

Who was the audience?

Shakespeare was writing for what **John Lennard** calls a **“cross-class” audience**, this is because members would have been from both the lower and middle classes. His plays often contain ‘lower-class’ humour i.e. bawdy and crude jokes to **entertain** alongside refined language.

The difference between classes is reflected in some of the characters. For example, the nurse is meant to **represent the lower class** which is clear from the **sexual jokes** that she makes when talking to Juliet.

However, Shakespeare also used more refined language which the literate audience members would have appreciated. For example, the **sonnet structure** may have been appreciated by the richer and more educated audience members.

Where was it performed?



The Globe was Shakespeare's theatre; however, *Romeo and Juliet* was first performed at the (aptly named) *Theatre* and then after that *The Curtain*.

- These theatres were **open-air**
- The most common (poorer) members of the audience would have stood in front of the raised stage, whereas the richer sat higher up. The richest citizens could even sit on the stage itself, and show off their rich clothes to the audience.
- Women were not allowed to act so female characters (incl. Juliet) were generally played by pre-pubescent boys

Where did the inspiration come from?

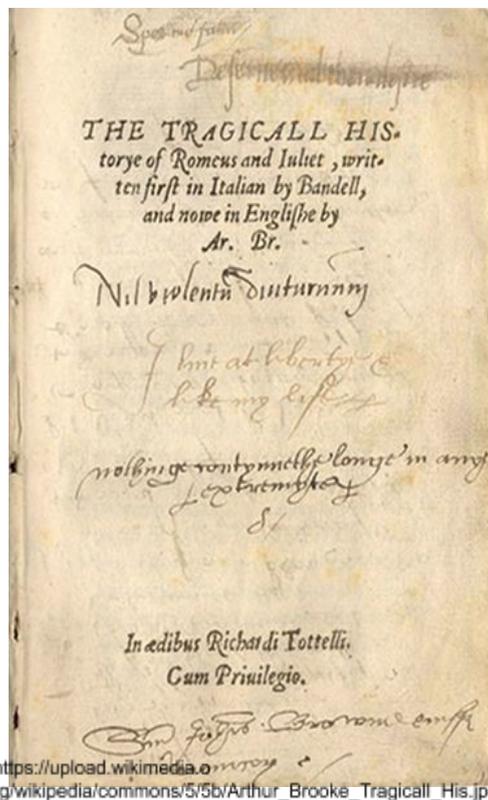
While Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* may be the most famous story about 'two star-cross'd lovers' taking their lives, Shakespeare is not the first person to use this concept. Indeed, the story of *Romeo and Juliet* **spans across cultures and stands the test of time**. There were many before Shakespeare the earliest written piece being in 1562.

Preliminary texts for *Romeo and Juliet* which Shakespeare was probably inspired by include:

- **Arthur Brooke's *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562)**. This was the first English rendering of the story and was very popular at the time. Unlike Shakespeare, Brooke is fixated on the notion that *Romeo and Juliet* die of their own fault and that it is deserved; see 'sin' below.
- **William Painter *Palace of Pleasure* (pre-1580)**

Italy

In addition to the texts above, Shakespeare would probably have known about Italian books which tell a similar love story. These Italian versions centre on the characters of *Romeo* and *Giuletta*, and their opposed families, **Montecchi** and **Capelletti**. Shakespeare may have set his play in Italy because of the rich Italian heritage that the story already had. **A French version** of the play had been written in **1559**; Brooke's version is a translation of this into English.



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5b/Arthur_Brooke_Tragicall_His.jpg

Different written versions of *Romeo and Juliet*

The first edition of the play was published in **1597**. This edition is called the **First Quarto**, and is far shorter than the texts you're currently studying. A **second quarto** was published in **1599** and this may be taken as the full version of the play with many of the First Quarto's mistakes removed. Two further quartos appeared in the years leading up to 1623. *Romeo and Juliet* was included in **Shakespeare's First Folio (1623)**. This was published after Shakespeare's death and represents the first official compilation of his plays.



Production History

Richard Garrick's 18th Century production was immensely popular and set the tone for subsequent productions over the next hundred years. He heightened the intensity of the play and reduced its comic elements.

The Mid-19th Century saw, unusually, female actors being allowed to play the role of Romeo. Having female actors highlighted the effeminacy of Romeo.

In 1957 the play was then adapted by **Bernstein** into **West Side Story** (produced 1957; filmed 1961), a modernised adaptation of the play into a musical set in 50s New York (and it is a race which separates the lovers in this play).

There have been many film productions, the most influential of which is perhaps **Baz Luhrmann's 1996 Romeo + Juliet** (Claire Danes starring as Juliet and Leonardo DiCaprio as Romeo). In this modernised adaptation of the play (which bears many similarities with West Side Story), the Montagues and Capulets become opposing Mafia clans.

Genre

While Romeo and Juliet is known as one of the greatest love stories of all time, it is also very important to note that it is a **tragedy**. Tragedies have been used as a form of entertainment throughout history and tend to have certain common characteristics.

Aristotle outlined the key elements to a tragedy (it is important to note that Shakespeare had likely not read Aristotle's works, though some people believe he had at least a general sense of the key ideas):

- **Catharsis** – a tricky term which can generally be understood as **a purging of pity and fear among the audience through the action of the play**.
 - Negative emotions are purged by watching the tragic events of the play. For example, the end of the play when the lovers commit suicide Juliet says **“O happy dagger, / This is thy sheath,”** and dies, this is a great **source of catharsis** for the audience.
- **Hamartia** – tragic error made by the character (something more than the simplistic **“fatal flaw”**); a foolish decision made by a character which leads to disaster.
 - For example, Romeo's **hamartia** is that he is **“too rash”** which leads him to fall in love too quickly first with Rosaline and then with Juliet, which of course leads to the tragic end.

Senecan tragedy (a set of Ancient Roman tragedies) were **bloody and sensationalist** – elements of this violence can be seen in Romeo and Juliet, such as the fight in Act 1 and the bloody ending.



Setting

Verona

The play is set in **Verona**, which is modern-day Italy. Shakespeare placed the setting of the play in both a **temporally and a geographically distant place**. This distance would give the audience a sense of safety from which they could experience **catharsis** (see below).



As the audience doesn't have to worry that the issues of the play could infect their world, they can escape from their mundane rainy lives in England to hot and passionate Verona.

Why did Shakespeare set his plays in foreign lands?

Shakespeare was sometimes highly critical of the English monarchy, setting his plays in faraway places like Verona permitted him to critique society and the monarchy without being **accused of treason**. It also allowed him to **explore subversive themes** such as suicide, war and hostility in a safe space.

In addition, these settings added a sense of **'foreignness'** to the play, meaning new ideas could be explored with greater ease. In Romeo and Juliet, the **hot temperature** of Verona is associated with increased passion so is an apt setting for this **passionate tale**.

Religion

Catholicism

Italy was known to the English for its **Catholicism**. As England's national religion at the time was Protestantism, due to Elizabeth I being the reigning monarch, the audience may have viewed this setting with mistrust. Catholicism was viewed negatively as it was known for its **apparent corruption** and its **excess of passion**.

Anti-Catholicism was at its height in the Elizabethan era in England due to the war with Catholic Spain (Spanish Armada etc.). This means the **Friar** in the play would have been viewed with suspicion or at least been regarded as an **untrustworthy character**. In England, at the time, you could even get sent to prison for being a Catholic.



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3f/Grace_Cathedral_-_Votive_Rack.jpg



Christianity

Religion was central to Elizabethan life and would have had a great bearing on the considerations of the morality of Romeo and Juliet's affair. It is easy to compare Elizabethan religious life with modern religious life, but this would be inaccurate.

- In the modern-day religion is often an "addition" to one's life - religion is something **one does**.
- In the Medieval to Early Modern Era, religion was the entirety of one's life - religion was something **one was**.
- Most could not conceive of a life without religion, unlike today.

It's important to consider the **audience's religious stance** when reflecting what effect the play would have on them.

- Concerning the issue of **suicide**, for example (a central one in the play), the Elizabethan era saw a "**gradual waning of vehement Christian views against**" it (R. Wymer).
- **Plato** an ancient Greek philosopher saw suicide as a moral evil, whereas **Cicero** (Roman philosopher) saw it as rational to kill oneself when one was no longer enjoying life.
- **Montaigne** (1533-1592) argued that "**the voluntaryist death is the fairest**" ... though the appropriateness of this sentiment to *Romeo and Juliet* is limited, considering that there is little "**fair**" about their deaths.

The concept of **sin** also has its place in the play, with the idea of sin pervading Juliet's refusal to obey her father (a contravention of the 10 Commandments). Moreover, the young couple epitomising the **sin of hubris** (one of the Seven Deadly Sins). The young couple can also be seen to embody pride, lust and perhaps greed.

The tragic ending can be seen as a **manifestation and re-assertion of traditional Christian Divine Justice**. This is a pertinent and perhaps fatalistic message considering the widespread evolution of Christian belief away from such traditions among the Elizabethans.

Is Shakespeare showing the audience that Christian dogma will always prevail?

Central social concepts

As well as dogmatic religious concepts the Elizabethan era was defined by its fixation on order, as highlighted by several important concepts.

Ordered Great Chain of Being: a belief system which underpinned Elizabethan society and taught that there was a **hierarchical ordering of all creation** (including all Heavenly bodies, human society, animals etc.). It essentially meant that one must adhere to one's place in the **Great Chain**, breakage in the hierarchy would inevitably precipitate chaos.

- This links with the idea of the **Harmony of the Spheres** (*Musica Universalis*) which taught that the movement of the planets (the Heavenly Spheres) was predictable and that the spheres were in perfect balance. The following quotation is an example of adherence to the Great Chain theory:



“There is nothing which the bond of order does not create. And since God had thus regulated all creatures, it is impious to think that he left unregulated the human race, which he made the highest of all earthly creatures” – Sir John Fortescue (15th Century jurist).

Astronomy

Astronomy taught the Elizabethans that the Earth was the centre of the universe and was surrounded by various spheres, this concept was also supported by religious teaching at the time.

- This creates another interpretation of Juliet’s **allusions to the heavens and stars**. When she talks about the universe it is possible she believes they are extensions of the central, Earthly power of which they are the centre.

Gender

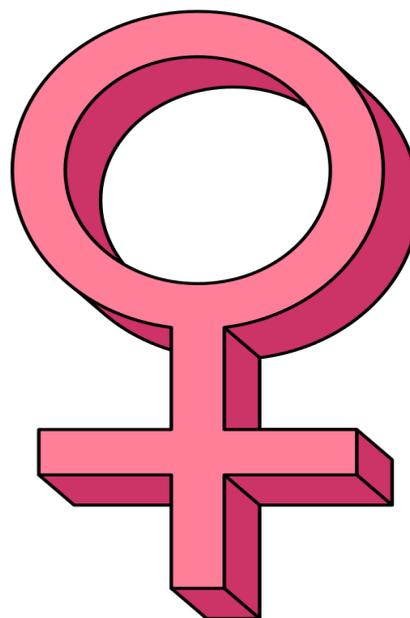
The position of women

Women were seen as lesser than men, due to their increased propensity towards sin (in the Bible Eve is seen as the mother of sin) and the Aristotelean idea that **women were deformed men** and were thus lower on the **Great Chain of Being** (see above).

Objectification

In the Elizabethan era women were **seen as property** and were therefore **objectified**. Women were not allowed to own any **property**, in fact they were seen as property themselves.

- Females always **belonged** to the closest male relative, when they were born they belonged to their father and then when they were married they became the property of their husbands.
- This meant that the men could do whatever they wanted to their wives free of judgement or condemnation.
- Women weren’t just seen as property but also **sexual objects** there to satisfy the needs of their husbands who were their **lords’** and **masters**.



<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/2/24/Venus-female-symbol-pseudo-3D-pink.svg/540px-Venus-female-symbol-pseudo-3D-pink.svg.png>

The importance of marriage

Women were also seen as objects within marriage. Among richer families (e.g. the Montagues and the Capulets) the girls in the family were seen principally as a means of making links with other rich families. It is worth noting that the Montagues and the Capulets are NOT noble families, rather they are mercantile families. Nevertheless, they follow similar noble practices such as the use of the dowry.

The **dowry** was a central part of such marriages – this was the physical objects (property, money etc.) which were added to the woman to make her more attractive to possible suitors. This made



the woman “part of the package”, as it were, being simply another object among many and thus contributing to the widespread **objectification** of women in Elizabethan society. Women of noble families were sold off as part of the dowry from a very early age, so Juliet’s young age would not have been so shocking to the contemporary audience.

Marriage was looked at as an end goal and purpose for all women. If a woman didn’t marry then she was thought of as a **deviant** (someone who does not follow social norms and values). An unmarried woman would not just be ignoring her natural calling but also have been diverting from the will of God.

→ Lady Capulet tells Juliet that **“I was your mother much upon these years”** meaning that she was already married with a baby at Juliet’s age.

However, the position of women had changed with the assumption of **Queen Elizabeth I** which defined (and, to an extent, introduced) the **archetype of the strong female leader**.

→ QE1’s famous statement that **“I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king”** (1588) highlights how **patriarchal norms still predominated**, and how she was fighting against them.

It is possible that Shakespeare was inspired by Elizabeth I as a powerful woman to create a strong female character. Shakespeare hardly wrote female leads and rarely independent ones. However, **Juliet is a strong character** - she disobeys her father following her heart, is sexually liberated and takes autonomy of her own life.

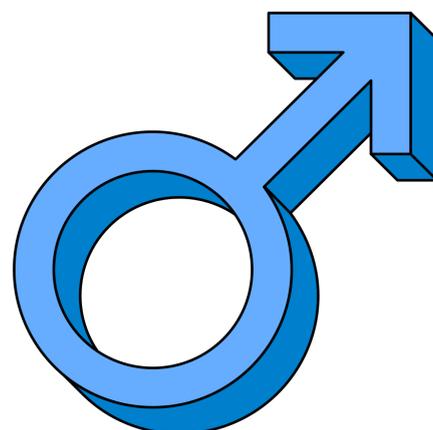
Gender Norms

In marriage, women were expected to be **passive** and take on a domestic role. This contrasts to the men who were **active** creatures and meant to make money.

Shakespeare’s exploration of Romeo and Juliet’s love affair challenges these **gender norms** as both characters are **portrayed as active**. In addition to this, Romeo’s **feminine tendencies** subverts the typically masculine traits men were supposed to have. Interestingly, this **male-female active-passive dichotomy** is based on **Augustinian teachings**.

It is clear to see that men had to be **aggressive** and were associated with **violence** as it was their role to protect their women, family and friends as well as their honour. It is possible that the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets is no longer about real fight or disagreement but one just based on **male honour and pride**. Within the play the grudge is so **“ancient”** no one remembers what it is really about.

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/4f/Mars-male-symbol-pseudo-3D-blue.svg/900px-Mars-male-symbol-pseudo-3D-blue.svg.png>



Love

Petrarchan lovers

Shakespeare draws heavily on the archetype of the **Petrarchan Lover**: a man who falls in love with a woman but is either resisted or rejected. Simply put, **Petrarchan love is unrequited**. This rejection inevitably led the man to **internal turmoil** and **self-imposed solitude**.

It was also the role of the woman to reject the man's advances, if she did not she was breaking social norms.

Romeo is evidently a Petrarchan lover both in his pursuit of Rosaline and Juliet (at first; though when Juliet accepts him, the love becomes reciprocated and therefore no longer Petrarchan). Loving marriage was increasingly seen as the best way to achieve a **moral life**. This form of love represents a movement away from the traditional fixation on chastity as the ideal of morality

Courtly Love

Courtly love incorporates ideas such as **love at first sight** and **dying for one's true love**. It was a Medieval ideal or, at least, an ideal which was imposed on the Middle Ages during the Renaissance.

- In Romeo and Juliet, courtly love is glorified and romanticised.
- However, the presence of sex in Romeo and Juliet's relationship somewhat **undermines this idealisation of selfless and romantic love**.

Courtly love also had many rules which a man was supposed to follow to show that he was really in love:

- **The man cannot eat or sleep when he is in love and isolates himself** - while it can be argued that Romeo was not in love with Rosaline but instead infatuated with her, he still displays characteristics which were **typical of a courtly lover**.
 - In **Act 1 Scene 1** Benvolio says that "**So early walking did I see your son**" and Montague adds that "**Away from light steals home my heavy son**", they are observing that Romeo is staying up late and not sleeping. These are the signs of a man whose love has rejected him.
- **The man forgets his old love when a new love comes along** - the audience knows that Romeo must forget Rosaline as Juliet is his '**star-crossed**' lover.
 - When they meet for the first time Romeo asks the servant "**what lady is that (?)**" he continues to say "**Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight! For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night**". Romeo asks this **rhetorical question** about loving a new woman when only maybe a few hours prior he was "**Adding to clouds more clouds with his deep sighs**".
 - The **metaphorical** use of **natural imagery**, not only reveals a lot about Romeo's **capricious** (subject to sudden change). It also tells the audience a lot about the character of a courtly lover and the influence and power that a new woman can have the man.



- **The man sends love letters or speaks in poetry when he is in love** - In **Act 1 Scene 5** when Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time their language becomes **elevated** both through **imagery** but also through the **syntax** used.
 - When the lovers meet for the first time they use the **sonnet structure** which is usually associated with romantic love. To the educated audience who would identify this it characterises their love as something special.
 - Also the language that Romeo uses also includes images which are out of this world. On the balcony scene Romeo calls Juliet a **“bright angel!”** this **heavenly metaphor** suggests that he sees her as a **pure and peaceful woman**. Her purity would also have been significant as a woman's **virginity** was very important. In addition to this, the use of **“bright”** indicates that she is **illuminating him** and perhaps to juxtapose the dark night. The **exclamation mark** indicates the **excitement** which Romeo feels seeing Juliet for the second time.

Types of love

It's worth noting the different kinds of love and to what extent Romeo and Juliet's affair embodies them. Their affair seems to incorporate both **erotic love** (**eros**; epitomised in their sexual encounters) and **selfless, coupling love** (**agape**; selfless love).

- Shakespeare's time saw a move towards marriages formed from love rather than out of duty to one's family. The play may be seen as the **epitome** of this ideal.
- These changing motivations for marriage meant a change in the way men went about obtaining a woman. This led to the notion of **“wooing”** a woman. Wooing is the process of impressing a woman so she wants to be with you.

Fate

What we would call **superstition** was central to the lives of Elizabethans (witches, magic, fairies etc.). **Fate**, itself a form of superstition, was **a central concept in Elizabethan society**. Most believed that some greater force (be it God, the stars etc.) would or has already controlled their destiny.

Many sources of fate are recognised as being in Romeo and Juliet by John F. Andrews who writes that it is a play about “Fortune, Fate, and the Stars”. He also notes how **Free Will** (i.e. the antithesis of Fate) is central to their tragic ending.



<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/62/Starsinthesky.jpg/1200px-Starsinthesky.jpg>

Calvinists (who were increasingly persecuted in the Elizabethan era by Archbishop of Canterbury John Whitgift) believed in **predestination**. This is the idea that God has a great plan in which we all have our courses and salvation (election) determined. This perhaps represents the apotheosis of ideas of fate, demonstrating the widespread fixation on it as a concept.



Astrology (the study of the positions and aspects of various celestial bodies) was prominent in Elizabethan thought and this led to the supposition that the movement of the Spheres determined one's fate ("**star-cross'd lovers**"). Prominent astrologers at the time included Dr. John Dee and Edward Kelly.

Violence

Explicit violence was a far more public affair in Elizabethan times than it is today so fights of the sort between the Montagues and Capulets would not have been unthinkable. This was in part because the state employed violence so readily in dispatching criminals; **hanging** and **burnings** all formed a **central part of entertainment** in Elizabethan society.

However, the Elizabethan era was not an out-and-out barbarous era, violence was still treated with a **paradoxical revulsion** and attraction (as today).

- **Suicide** was both condemned as **sinful** (though see above for possible developments in this view), and yet – because of this condemnation, the society was incredibly fascinated in it which may have been a reason why Shakespeare included it in his plays.
- Just as people enjoy watching gruesome Horror films with explicit deaths today, despite a revulsion of violence, people in Elizabethan England were attracted by instances of violence in plays and in the public sphere. It is possible that the explicit forms of violence that occurred during Shakespeare's era created a need within the society to see more.

What the literary critics think

In general, **R.A. Foakes** points out how Shakespeare's plays evince a developing relationship with violence:

"His plays may be seen as following a trajectory that [a] begins with a delight in representing violence for entertainment, [b] continues in a series of plays that explore various aspects of the problem of violence, and [c] ends with a searching study of human aggression in relation to self-control" (Shakespeare and Violence, 2003, Cambridge University Press, pp1-2).

This quotation highlights how Shakespeare moves from a **glorification of violence** to a philosophical discussion about it. Shakespeare's attitude towards violence is not static within the play:

- Romeo **struggles** with the concept of violence throughout the play unlike other characters who seem to go out looking for it.
- The concept of revenge through violence is debated by many characters, both male and female, who have different views on it.
- Foakes also highlights how the Montague-Capulet feud appeals to an archetype of two warring families / countries / clans etc. This is a pertinent image for both an Elizabethan and a modern day audience. It is therefore worth considering how universal the ideas and messages of the play are.



What does context mean for your exam?

AO3

AO3 is the understanding of **the relationship between the ideas in the text and the contexts of the text.**

Context is assessed **throughout the paper**. The strand in the mark scheme related to AO3 references 'ideas/perspectives/contextual factors'. However, if a question requires a student to think about the text in its context, this is also reflected inherently through the response to task.

The context may relate to **various factors**:

- The relationship between the text and **the context in which it was written** and/or the **context within which the text is set**.
- You may also consider **literary contexts** such as which **genre** the text is from - for example, The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde is a gothic text.
- You can also consider the contexts in which texts are engaged with by different audiences - for example An Inspector Calls was set in 1912 but was watched by audiences in 1945 who would have a different opinion about what takes place compared with an audience watching it now.

Exam Tip

The range of contexts and relationships that are most relevant for your AO3 will depend on the text, the author and the task. Within your exam you need to be able to **select** which context is **relevant to the question you are answering** and the **point you are trying to make**.

When thinking about context you can consider factors such as location, social structures and features, cultural contexts, and periods in time.

Acknowledgement of the universality of a literary text is an integral part of relating to it contextually.

Essay writing tip

It is important that the contextual information provided is **directly relevant**, rather than being 'bolted-on' to the end of a paragraph or essay. When writing your response you should include **relevant context** to **illustrate and develop your interpretation** of what is required by the task.

Don't just write everything you know about Shakespeare and Elizabethan England!

