

On Context

Introduction

This article discusses context, first as the generic concept, and second, as it employed in Literature. This is not a complete discourse on context, rather, it is a good introduction to the concept, and it is limited to the study of Literature¹.

We are all aware of context and what it means, but usually at a subconscious level only. This article merely articulates that awareness, and puts it into conscious and explicit form, so that we can use it as a tool.

The relevance of context cannot be over-emphasised: virtually all problems derive from being unaware of context; or a lack of maintaining it, or from losing it without realisation; or operating in a limited context.

Concept

A concept is an abstraction, that is, it is a way of mentally imagining something, in a way that is removed from the thing, such that it can be analysed. It is a way of perceiving the thing that we are perceiving.

abstract²

adjective: existing in thought or as an idea but not having a physical or concrete existence: *abstract concepts such as love or beauty*

- dealing with ideas rather than events: *the novel was too abstract or esoteric to sustain much attention*

In Literature, the content too, is an abstraction, it is generated entirely in the reader's mind.

Definition

Context is a concept, an abstraction, it needs to be understood as such, it is not merely a definition of a word.

Context is best described in terms of content, the two concepts go together, one does not exist without the other. Context is the container, that contains the content. The content simply would not hold together (it would fall apart or disperse) except for the context, which holds it together. Context without content serves no purpose.

context²

noun: the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood or assessed: *the decision was taken within the context of planned cuts in spending*

- the parts of something written or spoken that immediately precede and follow a word or passage and clarify its meaning: *word processing is affected by the context in which words appear*

Context provides *meaning* to the content, otherwise the content is meaningless. The meaning we ascribe to the content relates to what we are going to do with it, so the meaning itself cannot be defined, other than by example.

Example 1. A bucket of water

If not for the reliability of the bucket, the water would be a puddle on the ground. It is the bucket that forms the water, that keeps it in a shape that we can use. Here the meaning regards the usefulness of water: water flowing in a stream is beautiful, etc, but it is not immediately useful.

Example 2. An egg

The shell is the context, the egg is the content. The egg ceases to exist (as an egg) when the shell is broken. When the egg is placed in a frying pan, the context is no longer an egg, it is breakfast.

Example 3. The policeman shot a man [who was stabbing his wife]

The first clause gives us the event, the content, the second clause gives us the context, the container. Here we are at ease, and the protection of society is maintained. If the second clause was absent, it would cause us to be upset at the unnecessary use of force.

Thus it is the context, the container, within which the content is delivered, that gives the content its meaning.

Last, note that context does not have to be stated in full and complete form, a few words are usually enough to establish it. However, that does result in the fact that, from those few words, different people will construct different *meanings* in their minds, thus they will have different contexts.

Example 4. Childhood

One's childhood is a very happy experience for some, and a very unhappy one for others. Any literature that invokes a childhood context will generate quite different feelings in different people.

1 Note also, this is based on my experience and understanding of Literature, which I have always loved, thus far. However, it must be stated that I do not yet have any tertiary qualifications in it.

2 New American Dictionary, as implemented by Apple Computer Corporation 2007.

Context is Layered

While it is a single abstraction, there are multiple layers within context. Consider the following.

Example 5. Layers of Context

<i>The policeman shot a man</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Since no context is given, we assume the highest or outer-most layer of the context each of us has. The act is: against the Commandments; against the law; murder; apparent unnecessary use of force; etc.
<i>who was stabbing his wife</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Another layer is identified.• It drastically changes the <i>meaning</i> of the event, that particular use of force is now justified.• This does not cancel the first layer of context, it is a second layer, that exists in addition to the first.

Notice that here we have two layers in our context, rather than two separate contexts.

- The event should not be evaluated in one or the other *layer* of context, in a separated or isolated manner, any such evaluation would be grossly incorrect.
- The event needs to be evaluated in the two layers *taken together*, in the single context. Further, the country in which the event took place is a third layer, because that will dictate whether that particular use of force is upheld or denied.
- Mental health is the integration of these layers of context, and how well it is integrated with the external (objective) reality. Otherwise the mind becomes disintegrated.
- Conversely, mental illness can be described simply, by doing so in terms of context: the denial of certain layers of context; or the incorrect ordering of the layers; or the obsession with some single layer at the expense of the other layers. Such abnormalities impede the normal function of those afflicted.

Let us consider another layer of context.

Example 5. Second Increment

<i>with whom the policeman was having an affair</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A fourth layer of context is identified.• Now the event has progressed to a point where the context has become complicated, a full investigation is warranted.
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That arrests our attention, and we experience the urge to find out all the details, we cannot think of anything else until all that is resolved.

Context is Fundamental

The reason for this must be stated: even though context is an abstraction, it is a fundamental part of what each of us experiences as *reality*. It is our internal view of the world, of society. When our reality is resolved we are at peace, and we can function, when it is unresolved it threatens our world-view, and we are driven to resolve it, we cannot function.

Reality is the basis upon which we interact with society, and context is a fundament of it. We cannot rest until such a disturbance is resolved, until the truth is exposed, because our survival in society (as the person each of us is, in the society that each of us lives in) is threatened.

The second increment in Example 5 disturbs our context, and thus our reality, we need to be assured that we live in a society that such events are prevented, and when they do occur, that they are investigated and resolved according to our laws. Alternately, if the law has changed, or policemen were no longer required to maintain good conduct, we need to know about it right away, so that we can adjust our world-view.

Now for yet another layer of context.

Example 5. Third Increment

<i>However, the policeman had not previously met the cuckolded husband, it was simply a coincidence that he was assigned to attend the emergency call.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This news cancels the unresolved issue that was introduced in the fourth layer of context.
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Our drive to find out details has abated, the issue is resolved. Our world-view is safe, it is no longer threatened. Our knowledge of the law and good conduct has been confirmed. Now all that is necessary is to take disciplinary action against the policeman for his misconduct regarding the affair.

Context is Personal

Each of us has a different context, our very own. It is a deeply personal thing, because it is internal, and it is based on our morals; ethics; and feelings. Thus the context that each of us imagines (ie. constructs internally) when reading a piece of literature, is different for each of us.

The result of the personal nature of context and its layers is that while we may agree on some levels (such as the Law, or the preservation of society), we may not agree on other levels (such as the nature of love or the justification of violence).

Further, some of us may be more affected by a particular verse or a change in context than others.

Context in Literature

There are three aspects³ to context, above and beyond its ordinary use, that are employed in Literature:

1. Context is Fundamental

- While any ordinary statement without context lacks meaning, in Literature, a story or poem without a *carefully constructed* context simply does not hold up as a story worth telling. It is the difference between informal speech, and the written word, thoughtfully written.
- Context is consciously constructed by the author. It is usually given in increments, in order to build the story as a progression. (This article presents *context* in increments, such that the understanding of it can be built incrementally, and to maintain clarity.)
- The few words that are required to establish context are used purposefully, to establish either an ambiguous context, or an explicit one.

2. Internal Change

- (Recall that the appealing quality of Literature is that it touches our emotions, it invokes feelings. That is the method used to affect a personal impact on the reader.)
- Context is invoked in the same way, it affects a personal impact.
- However, because context is an important part of our reality, any change to the context of the piece affects us much more than connotations affect our feelings.

3. Context is Manipulated

- Because context governs meaning, a change in context results in a change in *meaning* of the story.
- In addition to the conscious construction of context, the author obtains great effect by changing it, at purposeful points in the piece, in order to invoke internal change in the reader. It is a *volta* in the progression of the story.
- The engagement of the reader in Example 5, all those changes in thoughts and feelings, were accomplished by specific changes to each layer of the context, because context is fundamental to us.

Conclusion

Context is an abstraction that exists in our minds, and it is a very important one because it is a part of our reality, it determines the way we interact with society. Further, it is made up of layers, and due to our differences in beliefs and morals, etc, these layers are different for each of us.

In Literature, context is consciously constructed, and the construction is delivered in increments. Further, it is manipulated, by setting and changing these layers, at specific points in the story. This has great effect, more than connotations affect our feelings, precisely because it engages our internal world.

³ As determined by yours truly, at this particular stage in my life, without any tertiary education in Literature. There may well be more aspects, more to be defined and discussed.