

*“Great authors do not merely reflect their contexts, they challenge them, and in doing so, throw a light on the universal human condition.”*

Context is the social, historical, biographical, and cultural aspects that influence texts. The changes in context lead to changed values being reflected in texts. Katherine Mansfield and Philip Larkin challenge part of their contexts, and in doing so, throw a light on the universal human condition. Mansfield’s short story ‘The Garden Party’ and Larkin’s poem ‘Mr. Bleaney’, explore a similar theme of class division, whilst Mansfield’s short story ‘At The Bay’ and Larkin’s poem ‘Dockery and Son’, explore a similar perspective on social expectations, however, the context surrounding each text may be challenged and hence, facilitates the examination of the human condition. Thus, as texts are a reflection of their contexts and its values, it is evident that the aspects of human nature remain constant irrespective of context.

Mansfield’s ‘The Garden Party’ highlights the universal human condition of class divisions through accepting the social context of post WWI. The representation of Mansfield’s own context in which she was brought up in an upper middle class family based in Wellington, New Zealand is reflected in the text when class distinctions cause Laura to question her own identity and whether or not she is actually so different to those less fortunate than her. The contrast between the upper and lower class is emphasised in the light and dark imagery “the very smoke was poverty-stricken...so unlike the great silvery plumes that uncurled from the Sheridan’s chimneys.” The use of diction to describe the lower class emphasises the simplistic and poorer nature of their environment, in contrast to the richness and liveliness of the upper class surrounding (“silver”). Furthermore, concepts of alienation were developed by Karl Marx before this time, who focused, in particular, on the alienation of the working class, which is further evident in the symbolism of the Sheridan’s estate. It is located on a hill separated by a wide road, suggesting that they have a high social standing and are isolated from the neighbouring lower class families. Mr and Mrs Sheridan provide an exclusive upbringing for their children by isolating them from the realities faced by working class families and being surrounded by upper class acquaintances. Hence, Mansfield’s acceptance of differing social classes emphasises the poor environment of the lower class in the period of post WWI.

Similarly, Larkin’s bleak and depressing poem, ‘Mr. Bleaney’, reflects the sociological and economic state of mid 1950s Britain, where the differences of class and culture emerge from the advancement of the industrial revolution. The class and cultural differences between the new tenant (the persona) and his predecessor (Mr. Bleaney) is depicted in “Bodies” by the symbolism for a factory which manufactured car bodies, indicating that Mr. Bleaney was a worker in such a factory. Differences of class and of culture are evident in the very manner in which the speaker proceeds to describe the life-style of Mr. Bleaney through the use of accumulative listing, “Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook”, which highlights the dull and fairly poor quality of life of the lower class. The atmosphere created is one of monotony, sadness, hopelessness and almost absence of life, showing his material poverty. Furthermore, the lack of strong syllables in the title, ‘Mr Bleaney’, makes it sound monotonous giving the impression of boredom, of a life lacking excitement, reflecting the lives of the working class. Being associated with ‘The Movement’, Larkin was anti-modernist, anti-experimental and sought to return to more traditional approaches to writing poetry, thus using the form of seven

highlights the material poverty of the working class and looks down upon them, accepting class distinction during post WWII.

In 'At the Bay', Mansfield challenges her context of the roles of women in society, where she opposes the traditional idea of marriage and the confining nature of social expectations of the early twentieth century. Mansfield wrote at a time when women, and some men, were questioning traditional gender roles, influencing her to focus on those estranged or isolated by society. As a modernist writer, she incorporated the stream of consciousness form and interior monologue in many of her short stories, including 'At The Bay', to present the character's internal life. Linda is characterised as an individual who is confined by a life of domesticity, experiencing a crisis of identity and sexuality. She struggles to integrate her internal and external self within the structures of a male dominated society. Furthermore, Linda wants to escape "up a river in China", with the water acting as a symbol for freedom, but ironically, she is the only character who doesn't go to the water at the bay, highlighting her distaste for motherhood and her eagerness and desires to break free from society's expectations of stereotypical gender roles in the home. In addition, the Manuka tree symbolises Linda's questions about the meaning of life in conforming to society's expectations, and she describes the blossoms that fall, scatter, and brushed aside as "horrid little things". She also relates herself to a leaf blowing about with a sense of entrapment and no escape in marriage. Therefore, Mansfield's view on the role of women in society as a mother in colonial New Zealand at the turn of the twentieth century is rejected.

Likewise, Larkin's 'Dockery and Son' highlights the concept of social expectations, revealing his rejection of perceptions of marriage and the nuclear family. In the cultural context of post WWII, society's value for materialism was merely based on the common goals set by society such as having an education, marrying, and having children. This is shown when the persona conflicts with the central tenet of the poem, and attempts to understand "Where do these innate assumptions come from?" The use of rhetorical question conveys that the persona questions the nature of man's choices, what makes him choose a certain lifestyle. Freedom and choice cannot exist, and Larkin portrays that society pushes us to marriage and having children when, sometimes, that isn't what we want to do. However, Larkin was influenced by the idea of existentialism, finding the meaning of life and death after the Great Depression and WWII. Pathos is used in the last stanza to make the reader feel sympathy for the persona and realise the sad, transient nature of humanity. Moreover, the poem ends with "And age, and then the only end of age." The repetition of "age" reinforces the melancholy thought that death is inevitable, and there is nothing we can do to prevent it. The incapability of choosing one's destiny entraps man in a life that may not satisfy him, leading him to wish for and dream about a more promising one, when in fact, we all die. Hence, the human nature of the decision between order and freedom in society is challenged by Larkin in relation to his context of the role of individuals in society.

In summary, it is true that both Katherine Mansfield and Philip Larkin accept perceptions on class divisions and reject views on social expectations. Mansfield was swayed by Marxism on the alienation of the working class, and societal expectations of women in the family, while Larkin was influenced by the sociological and economic state of post WWII on workers of manufacturing industries, and societal expectations of marriage in living the idealistic life. From our understanding of the social, historical, biographical, and cultural context surrounding each text, they provide an insight on the universal