

# 2014 Q2 Comparative – Cultural Context |

## Sample Essay

**“The cultural context within a text often dictates the crisis or difficulties faced by characters and their response to these difficulties.”**

**(A) Discuss to what extent this statement applies to at least one central character in one of the texts you have studied for your comparative course.**

I believe that the above statement applies to the character of Ree in ‘A Winter’s Bone’, directed by Debra Granik. In my opinion, the cultural context is quite central and significant in this film and accurately dictates the crisis and difficulties faced by the characters.

In ‘A Winter’s Bone’, we are introduced to Ree Dolly, a seventeen year old girl who is desperately trying to keep her family together. Located in the Ozarks, the community thrives on the production and distribution of illegal drugs, mainly methamphetamine. However, poverty dictates the lives of the more genuine people, such as Ree and her younger siblings. We learn that Ree’s father, Jessop, has been reported missing, coincidentally a week before he is due to appear in court. Her mother is mentally incapacitated after years of abuse and perhaps drug addiction, therefore all familial responsibilities fall to Ree as the oldest child. Despite Jessop’s usual flaky nature, Ree instinctively knows that there is something wrong about the whole situation. As a courtesy, the local sheriff pays a visit to Ree and informs her that the family home and land is being used as collateral for her father’s bond. If Jessop fails to show in front of the court, Ree and her family will be made homeless, as the court repossess the land and house. Jessop is a known meth manufacture and works for the most feared man in the region, Thump Milton. Thump holds more power in his little finger, than the local law officers combined and runs the village as he sees fit. Desperate to find her father before time runs out, Ree pays Little Arthur, a known

friend and associate of her father, a visit. It quickly becomes apparent that Little Arthur isn't aware of Jessop's whereabouts and the situation turns volatile when Ree refuses his offer to "*blow some smoke.*" However Thump Milton's granddaughter refers Ree to Thump, with a warning to take care. Ree continues on her hunt for Jessop, despite her uncle Teardrop's warning to steer clear. Ree challenges Thump directly and attempts to force her way in, resulting in a show force by the Miltons', leaving her with extensive injuries. Perhaps in another world, Ree would've had the law on her side, protection even, and the search for Jessop would have gone much differently. Power and reputation appear to be the religion in this film and powerless characters suffer at the hands of those such as Thump Milton. A man that not even the sheriff can touch. Eventually the Miltons' take pity on Ree and "*fix*" her problem by cutting the hands from Jessop's corpse (conveniently, they knew where it was located.) By showing his amputated hands to the court, Ree could prove Jessop's death, therefore eliminating his debt and collateral. Although 'A Winter's Bone' explores family values and injustice, I believe that the cultural context is more focused on poverty and social exclusion. This is where the reader can begin to draw comparisons between other texts on the comparative course. Ree's poverty and lack of resources available to her, hinder her search for her father and allow the bigger powers at play to do with her what they will. Social exclusion prompted her neighbours to condescendingly and cruelly suggest that they take her siblings from her, hinting that she is a nobody in the community and not to be trusted with small children.

In conclusion, the cultural context does indeed influence and dictate Ree's response to the difficulties she faces. Perhaps if she wasn't responsible for the wellbeing of her younger siblings and her mother, she may not have gone to such lengths to find Jessop but it is her weight to bear and her weight only. Poverty and desperation forced her to do all that she could to find Jessop, which included suffering at the hands of Thump Milton and others like him. I believe that if the law had more influence and power over its citizens, Ree may not even have been in the situation to begin with.

**(B) Compare the extent to which the above statement is applicable to at least one central character in each of the two other texts you have studied on your comparison course.**

I believe that the above statement also applies to the character of Lear in Shakespeare's 'King Lear' and the character of Ma in Emma Donoghue's 'Room'. The cultural contexts in 'King Lear' are similar to those in 'A Winter's Bone', yet slightly more intricate and complex. 'Room' explores a life of isolation, along with its consequences and damaging effects on such a young mind.

Firstly, I believe 'King Lear' to be based around the cultural context of power and social exclusion. Shakespeare presents two families; one consisting of a father and three daughters and one consisting of a father and two sons. However, Lear is the central character who lives a very different life to Ree's character in 'A Winter's Bone' and Jack in 'Room'. Lear was born into a privileged life as a member of the royal family, before becoming king. In this play, it is Lear who holds all of power but he possessed it legally and rightfully rather than through fear, unlike Thump Milton. In Act I, scene (i), Lear attempts to divide the kingdom between his three daughters Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. Lear in his foolish arrogance and vanity, insists that his daughters partake in a 'love test'. They must confess to how deeply and honestly they love him, in order to boost his already sizeable ego. He expects Cordelia to inherit the most, as she is the youngest and his favourite. However, she decides to "*love and be silent*" much to the delight of her older sisters. Lear loses his temper and Cordelia is subsequently banished from the kingdom and Goneril and Regan divide the lands between themselves. Lear underestimates the impact of his fall from power, as he naively believes that his remaining daughters will care for him in his old age. His daughters regard him as a foolish old man, as Lear begins to fear that he is "*not in my perfect mind*". His insanity, paired with the cruel nature of his daughters, causes him to make the irrational decision to spend a night outside in a storm after both Goneril and Reagan refuse to meet his extensive demands. Gloucester is blinded by Regan and Cornwall for helping Lear which, in turn, affects Edgar's decision to help Gloucester. However, unlike in 'A Winter's Bone',

Lear is not influenced by poverty or even survival. He made the decision to give up his power completely unaided and with 80 years of wisdom. He raised his daughters to be selfish, just like him and he couldn't see that it was only Cordelia that truly loved him until it was too late for both of them. The cultural context that influenced Lear was social class and status, wealth and most importantly, power.

Congruent to 'A Winter's Bone', the power held in 'Room' is obtained by force rather than legitimately. This power is held by Old Nick, after kidnapping Ma and keeping her prisoner for seven years. Ma's son, Jack, is the character that ultimately suffers the most. Born and raised in captivity, the five year old has no desire to leave the small box room that he calls home. To him, life is exactly as it should be. The social isolation and exclusion has a tragic effect on his ability to communicate and adapt, which we see later on in the novel. Although Ma's can still remember what the world outside Room is like, years of psychological and physical abuse take their toll, as I believe she suffers from PTSD and depression, which Jack refers to as her "Gone" days. For her son's sake, Ma has not attempted to escape in almost five years but hatches a plan to get Jack out, after Old Nick turned off the heating and electricity for several days. Her lack of power forces her to use Jack as the bait, in an effort to save them both. Ma's actions are dictated by the simple fact that she has no choice, but similar to Ree, she seizes power and takes matters into her own hands. However, the risk is much higher as Ma is gambling with two lives instead of one. Her gamble pays off, when Jack manages to successful lead the police to Room. Due to obvious reasons, Ma finds it hard to readjust to normal life and Jack is completely overwhelmed "*I've seen the world and I'm tired now.*" Power has been rightfully restored but both Ma and Jack will be forever haunted by the trauma of Room, "*Goodbye Room.*"

In conclusion, cultural context within both 'King Lear' and 'Room' dictates the crisis and difficulties faced by characters and as a result, their responses to these difficulties. As with 'A Winter's Bone', lack of power or the removal of power, is the definitive characteristic running through each of the three texts. Although not affected by extreme poverty, Lear suffered in his own way after he hands over his kingdom to his ungrateful and greedy daughters, a lesson that he learned the hard way. Ma experienced a similar social isolation that Lear faced, but she decided to seize power and rectify the situation herself. However 'A Winter's Bone' and 'Room' conclude on a positive note as the problems face were rectified in the end, while 'King Lear' ended in tragedy and heartbreak but allowed a new beginning for the genuine characters.

