

Text and context



The relationship between the text and context is very critical in understanding the content of literal material. It is through the analysis of text-context relationship that the audiences are able to understand the intended message of the author. Text reception occurs at different space and time. It is, therefore, very important for the audience to first seek the understanding of a text-context relationship so as to fully grasp the author's message. Since the dialogue between the script and the audience is conveyed through this text and context relationship, the two go hand in hand with each other and it is not possible to have one without the other. The texts' context helps us to understand the experience in the current text as well; this is known as intertextuality (Andrew 45).

The story *The Devil and Daniel Webster* is about a man, a local farmer Jebez Stones, who goes through a series of bad lucks and out of frustration decides to sell out his soul to Mr. Scratch in exchange for seven years of prosperity. When the agreed duration expired, he bargained for an extension for three more years, which was granted. After that extension, the farmer was supposed to surrender his soul to Mr. Scratch as outlined in their contract. But in the twist of events the farmer opted to take the battle to the courts, Mr. Scratch accepted but on a condition that he would be the one to select the jury and judge. The trial was ruled in favor of the farmer; the farmer's attorney argued against slavery of the Americans and thus, the judge denied Mr. Scratch the rights to take over the farmer's soul.

The story is a classic example of how the text-context relationship can be used to convey a message in a script. It brings out its themes through the intermingling of various characters that represented particular issues in the

history of America. One requires an understanding of these relationships in order to grasp the message in the story. For instance, the name Mr. Scratch is the name given to the person buying the soul, but actually that was a name given to the devil in the pre-civil war periods. The scene is used to depict our material greed: that we can voluntarily sell out our soul for it. It has also captured the theme of slavery when the “ England war of 12” was mentioned, which was fought between the British and the Americans for freedom.

The theme of slavery is also depicted in the mention of the native Indians and, perhaps, an admission of wrong doing in invading their territory in hostile ways when the American first invaded this continent. The absence of jury Benedict Anord in the farmer’s case is conspicuously noted. He was a leader in the civil war but he defected to Britain and manifested as one who can support the idea of slavery. This is an indication that the court could not condone slavery at all. John Hathorne’s presence in the jury desk represents non-compromise of the evil power. He was an executer of those found to have used witchcraft in the history of America; he represents authority against Mr. Scratch (the devil) who supports and perpetrates slavery.

The story also captures the theme of patriotism. Webster argued that the devil could not take his soul simply because he was not an American. His argument was based on the issues that make a man a man and that distinguish humanity from other species, instead of focusing on the legal angle of the case view.