

A literary text needs  
to be understood in  
relation to its  
historical context  
essa...



**ASSIGN  
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In my essay I am going to look at both the importance of historical context and universalism in relation to literary texts, particularly looking at Thomas More's 'Utopia'. Despite having the opinion that both historical context and universality are of great importance when considering a text, I am going to argue in favour of universalism and that a literary text does transcend its time and typically achieves universality. These various views over text and context are possibly the largest area of debate in the field of English studies.

However, in the first part of my essay I am going to consider the importance and usefulness of taking historical context into account when examining a text. This way of exploring a text is found in the theory of historicism. This literary movement believes that historical context is key when interpreting a text:

“ For new historicism and cultural materialism the object of study is not the text and its context, not literature and its history, but rather literature in history”. 1

It is a reaction to universalism, in that it thinks human nature is too various in its nature to be universally applicable. It believes context is the most significant aspect and as readers we should pay it great attention. It is divided into two main focuses. Firstly, it wants to situate any statement in its historical context. This is useful to consider but limits the possibilities of interpretation. You have to consider if they are able to distinguish between the meaning a text had for its first audience and its real meaning, uninfluenced by the original audience and any other following period's beliefs. Secondly, it looks back on itself to investigate how literature was

launched in history, reflects the interests and prejudice of the period in which it was written.

It places a large focus on the political ideas of a text and offers an interpretation of texts, based on political considerations. A historicist critic believes that the best way to interpret these issues is to place the text in its historical context, to look at what relevant issues, anxieties and struggles were present at the time and how they present themselves in the text.

As I have outlined briefly historicism is important in interpreting a texts meaning. It offers a way in and gives insights, even if these are limited. It can make literary interpretation quite limited and remote. People often see it as locked in the past and no longer relevant. It is also useful to remember that our versions of the past are interpretations; they are not a set of facts. This approach, also, does not consider the artistic quality of a text. It does not appreciate its creativity and beauty - all the things that make a text unique and individual. It can be seen to just reduce literature to ' a footnote of history'2. Although, I think it is an interesting root to investigate the historical context of a text, I do not think these critics can reveal an objective meaning. It simply participates in an historical discourse that does not always reveal a great deal about the actual text.

I will now examine and argue in favour of the second statement that literary texts can go beyond their time and attain universality. Universalism differs from historicism in that it believes the journey of time makes no difference to human nature and the meaning of literature. Universalism believes that

human nature is stable and enduring, despite any outside factors. It assumes that texts are part of the world:

“ Texts cannot but be part of the world.... to talk about texts as ‘ representing’ reality simply overlooks ways in which texts are already part of that reality, and ways in which literary texts produce our reality, make our worlds”. 3

Universalism is very flexible and adaptable. It is able, with adequate resources to interpret any text, in a way that it is adaptable and able to address people of all times and places.

F. R Leavis is a key figure in twentieth century literary criticism and wrote about universalism in some of his various works. He believed in the importance of focusing on the ‘ words on the page’, rather than the context of the work. I think this is an important concept. He also thought literature had many aesthetic qualities, such as individuality, spontaneity and authenticity. Leavis considered literature is privileged because the best qualities are already there; ‘ infused into a rich and subtle use of the living language and thereby made available to subsequent generations’. 4

Universalist critics consider literature as art. They do not think it is necessary to look at a text from its political position, and examine the social processes within it. I think this is a useful approach as it keeps your mind on the actual text, not distracted by any outside issues.

As I have mentioned, if you look at a text from a universalistic perspective, you have to really concentrate on the words on the page. It focuses on the

insights they offer, especially through the description of emotions. These are studied through the close analysis of the most believable, true to life and compelling characters.

I think the second statement that literature transcends time and achieves universality is a more convincing view, than that of placing literature within its historical context. I feel it is interesting to examine a text's historical context and how relevant the issues within it are to that time. However, I think it is more beneficial to be able to apply these issues and look at them within other and our contemporary society. I think this is particularly true with Thomas More's 'Utopia'. There are many ideas, such as the mechanised way he suggests for a bride and groom to view each other naked before they are married, which seemed a radical process for the readers of More's time but for our society, if thought about is not such a radical idea:

" But they .... wondered at the folly of the men of all other nations, who, if they are but to buy a horse of a small value, are so cautious that they will see every part of him, .... and that in the choice of a wife, on which depends the happiness or unhappiness of the rest of his life, .... and only see about a hand's-breadth of the face, all the rest of the body being covered...". p. 47

More recognises the sexual desires within marriage and that a marriage won't work without this. This view would have been quite radical at his time but it is quite normal for a bride and groom to see each other naked beforehand in our society. There are many ideas in 'Utopia' that would have been radical to its original audience but transcend time and would fit or do fit into our society without difficulty or surprise.

Despite this, a universalist critic does not believe in the power of the reader. Rather, it wishes to take the critics identity completely away. It encourages this so that issues such as, ethnicity, politics, class and gender do not influence the reading.

I think a universalist critic, in most cases, is right, in that a text can transcend time and have meaning for all audiences. If we look deep enough into most texts we can find relevant issues to the majority of periods the human race has experienced over time. However, as we would expect, there have been objections to this approach. Some believe it simply pushes us to appreciate rather than examine a text critically. It is also clear that it is very easy to apply and find issues. It can be seen to be quite bland and does not take you very far into the text. It does not specify enough about the issues in the text. I think the most valid and major criticism is how it does not take history into consideration. A universalist believes human nature to be stable and human identity to be socially constructed. It really isn't valid to assume human nature to simply be socially constructed, as history as clearly made a difference and will continue to do so in the future.

Nevertheless, universalist critics are still a powerful influence, due to their clear value and appreciation of the ' words on the page'. To refer to Leavis again, he believed that English Literature was not simply handed down but could be given meaning by each generation:

" He maintains that only in terms of the present can the literature of the past exist, that the reality of English literature for each age changes...there is no mere handing down or taking over." 5

This is true in More's 'Utopia'. We can give new meaning to the ideas and learn from the various proposals for a better, 'perfect' society.

I will now look at 'Utopia' with this universalistic approach. 'Utopia' was written by St Thomas More (1478 - 1535). (I will not analyse his biographical details immensely as a universalist critic would not consider this important in examining a text.) One of the biggest issues within his lifetime was the major spiritual crisis he experienced. More was a catholic and devoted to his religion. In 1499, he retired to the London Charterhouse where he lived for some years. He lived in seclusion, 'seeking through prayer and penance to learn his true vocation'.<sup>6</sup> He returned to politics and in 1523 became speaker of the House of Commons.

More became popular with the King and he would often call for More's company. However, More had to resign from this position due to his commitment to his religion, as the King had decided he could decree his own marriage without the permission of the church. He then claimed he was the head of the Church of England. It was totally separate from the Catholic Church, and many disagreed. However, nobody would oppose it as to contrary the King's opinion was made high treason. Thomas More would not betray his religion and did deny this and was therefore put in confinement. More was sentenced to be beheaded as he continually refused to sign the oath for this new religion. Despite this undignified ending, More was regarded very highly by his contemporaries:

" Lord Campbell has said of the character of Sir Thomas More that it comes as near to perfection as our nature will permit" <sup>7</sup>

It was in 1516 he completed 'Utopia', which is thought to be inspired by Plato's republic. 'Utopia' is split into two books. The first gives us a picture of English social life at the beginning of the sixteenth century. It is critical and displays how oppression and corruption are everywhere. The major issue is the misuse of private property. The second book gives a perfect society, in an imaginary island.

In 'Utopia', More addresses many of the evils of his society, such as religious, social and political issues. To consider this universally, many of these can still be seen in our society. This shows 'Utopia' is not confined to literary genres / ages.

In Book 2 of 'Utopia', More present a perfect society, with perfect values and ideals. Many of the utopian values are universal and relate to many socialist ideas throughout history. Much of the socialist ideas drawn on are thought to be inspired from Plato's Republic, not only showing the text to be universal but the genre also. There have been texts after 'Utopia' which have been stirred by this literary genre, such as Francis Bacon's, 'New Atlantis'. 'Utopia' invents a universal genre.

One of the universal ideas within 'Utopia' is the idea of equality. In Book 2 the island has no classes; everyone shares in the same work and has the same rights. There are some in our society that would fight for this type of state and there are clear benefits. There would be no exploitation or poverty. Everyone would be happy and well-off, rather than a small minority. I think the idea of everyone working equally and being rewarded with the same is a really fair idea and would eventually result in maximum happiness for



everyone. There so many ideas in the text which we could place within our society to improve it. The importance of the family and aged is another universal idea. There is a traditional family structure, (with some radical ideas):

“ No family may have less than ten and more than sixteen persons in it.... This rule is easily observed, by removing some of the children of a more fruitful couple to any other family that does not abound so much in them.” P. 30

Another universal idea is the worth of education and being well learned. There is a universalist belief that ‘ education breeds morality and virtue’. 8

More’s ‘ Utopia’ offers so many universalist ideas, some beneficial and some not. Some we can see within our society, whilst some many would not consider. The basic values are definetly universal. There basic love for humanity is an idea many try to live by and would benefit many societies to adapt. More also gets us to consider the negatives of societies in history and our society now. Many of the criticisms are universal and still apply to us now. I think one of the most important issues More brings to out attention is the luxuries and indulgence of the ruling class at the expense of the lower classes.

More’s work is often used as ‘ inspiration for revolutionaries’ 9, showing its universal nature.

Overall I think ‘ Utopia’ is clearly a universal text. There are so many issues to draw upon that are relevant to our time and many periods beforehand. It

is unlikely this utopian society will ever be achieved but this representation of his time reflects the great challenges that have faced us in history and will most likely continue to do so.