P2 HL (The Bell Jar and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest)

Straight off, you are about to read a great essay. The student responds to question 5 - Context – ‘historical, cultural, or social – can have an influence on the way literary works are written or received. Discuss with reference to at least two of the works you have studied – in the May 2013 HL exam. It’s a bit of a ‘garden path’ question, in that it explicitly directs students to address context. The student does just that, but in an otherwise outstanding essay, she does a poor job of discussing language and stylistic features.

Sample Essay

In the 1950s, in the aftermath of WWII, the emerging Cold War fostered paranoia for ‘Anti-American’ non-conformism. Society promoted a ‘traditional’ family structure, involving adherence to so-called traditional gender roles, and a suppression of individualism. In this regard, mental illness was a form of non-conformism, stigmatized by society, and treated by new medical and technological developments. Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar and Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest are both situated in this time and place. The former is a semi-autobiographical novel, narrated from the perspective of the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, who struggles with depression as she seeks to express her ‘authentic’ identity. The latter is a novel, narrated by Chief Bromden, about a ward in a mental institution in Oregon, controlled by the tyrannical Nurse Ratched whose control is challenged by the arrival of Randle P. McMurphy. Both literary texts are influenced by the socio-cultural context in which they are set – 1950s America – and may be regarded as the authors’ personal response to the circumstances of their context, revealing an understanding of gender roles and mental illness in particular.

Gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles are represented and challenged in both novels. In The Bell Jar, Esther’s defiance of societal expectations of gender roles is a major thematic concern. Esther is critical of the other girls living in Manhattan’s Amazon Hotel who are just ‘hanging around to get married’. Esther ‘never intend[s] to get married’, regarding married life as dreary and ‘wasted’, while ‘children make [her] sick’. This perspective is unconventional in a society that expects all women to aspire to become wives and mothers. Esther ‘hated the thought of serving a man’ and does not want to be ‘under a man’s thumb’. Esther’s rejection of this hegemonic outlook is expressed by her rebellion against the sexual double standard regarding ‘purity’ (i.e. virginity). ‘In Defence of Chastity’ is an article that her mother, who endorses societal expectations, sends Esther. It highlights the importance of women abstaining from sex until marriage because men ‘wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex’; however, Esther notes that the one thing the article does not consider is ‘what a woman wanted’. Whilst other women simply accept the patriarchal double-standard, Esther begins to hate Buddy Willard, her then boyfriend, after he admits that he had an affair with a waitress, whilst expecting Esther to remain a virgin until marriage. Esther resolves to lose her virginity to make her ‘equal’ to Buddy. Nevertheless, Esther is concerned by the prospect of becoming pregnant, where pregnancy is a mechanism to ‘keep women in line’. Her abhorrence of childbirth is evident when she describes a woman giving birth in horrific terms of ‘a windowless, doorless corridor of pain’. Esther manages this problem by having a diaphragm fitted, a procedure that she regards as ‘climbing to freedom’.

The sexual prejudice against women translates to societal oppression. Esther’s mother expects her to learn shorthand so that Esther can become a secretary, one of the few jobs androcentric society makes available to women. In fact, when Esther meets Dr. Nolan, she is surprised, as she had not ‘expected a woman psychiatrist’. In The Bell Jar, Esther eventually breaks free from the oppressive, traditional gender roles, but in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest women are portrayed through negative gender stereotypes. The characters include a number of strong women such as Nurse Ratched, Harding’s wife, and Billy Bibbit’s mother; however, they are all portrayed as cruel emasculators of men. Harding says that the patients of the male-only ward are ‘victims of a matriarchy’. Nurse Ratched is described as a ‘ball-cutter’ as she uses manipulation and insinuation to terrify and control the men, often turning man against man. Harding’s wife is a source of discomfort for him, whilst Billy Bibbit’s mother is so overpowering that when Nurse Ratched threatens to tell her that he has slept with Candy, he cuts his throat. McMurphy’s blatant sexuality (overt sexuality was often celebrated by ‘Beat Generation’ writers like
Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, Electroshock therapy at the (mordantly satirical) ‘Shock Shop’ and lobotomies are routinely administered as instruments of punishment and torture. It is in this way that Nurse Ratched is able to enforce social conformity, discouraging dissent or deviance. ‘Treatment’ often injures the patients, dehumanising them, and turning them into helpless ‘Chronics’. McMurphy is ultimately lobotomized, his punishment for attempting to kill Nurse Ratched. The operation destroys his spirit and he becomes a ‘vegetable’, leading Chief Bromden to kill McMurphy in an act of mercy as the novel concludes. The ‘therapeutic communities’ that Nurse Ratched and Doctor Spivey promote are also unhelpful. These ‘word meetings’ are apparently intended to help patients heal; however, McMurphy, leading Chief Bromden to kill McMurphy in an act of mercy as the novel concludes. The ‘therapeutic communities’ that Nurse Ratched and Doctor Spivey promote are also unhelpful. These ‘word meetings’ are apparently intended to help patients heal; however, McMurphy, leading Chief Bromden to kill McMurphy in an act of mercy as the novel concludes. The ‘therapeutic communities’ that Nurse Ratched and Doctor Spivey promote are also unhelpful. These ‘word meetings’ are apparently intended to help patients heal; however, McMurphy,
highlighting their animalistic nature, describes them as ‘pecking parties’. Instead it is rule breaking that empowers the men and eventually helps them regain independence. In this, again, readers are aware of the anti-establishment system of values of the Beat Generation, and it is this that Kesey seems to champion.

And, thus, in both novels – the counter-cultural One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, and the quasi-autobiographical The Bell Jar, readers sense something of America in the 1950s – its view of gender and women’s role in society, and, related to this, mental illness and the labelling of madness. If, however, the novels reveal aspects of time and place, they remain relevant today for contemporary readers in America and elsewhere.

**Teacher's Comments**

Before you read the examiner's comments, assess the sample according to the assessment criteria for Paper 2. Compare your marks and comments to that of what the teacher writes (below). How were they different? How were they similar?

**Criterion A - Knowledge and understanding - 5 marks**

The essay demonstrates an understanding of the works and knowledge of the contexts in which they were written. The student shows how context affects interpretations of the texts.

5 out of 5 – Outstanding! What else should one write?

**Criterion B - Response to the question - 5 marks**

A Paper 2 essay should focus on the question chosen. The implications of the exam question need to be explored in depth, and the student's response must be relevant to it.

5 out of 5 – A thorough and detailed response to the question. Excellent focus.

**Criterion C - Understanding of the use and effects of stylistic features - 5 marks**

In the Paper 2 exam, a connection needs to be made between the author's use of stylistic features and the effect of them on his or her audience. As Paper 2 questions invite students to explore how meaning is shaped by context, answers will have to explain why authors choose for a certain genre, narrative technique or structure.

3 out of 5 – This is the least successful aspect of the response. If this essay is used as an exemplar with students, although they may not be familiar with the texts, it may be useful to ask them how the essay could be modified to improve the score in this criterion.

**Criterion D - Organization and development - 5 marks**

The essay must develop an answer to the question coherently and effectively. Topic sentences should guide the ideas of paragraphs. Illustrations should be integrated well and explanations should shed light on the subject matter.

5 out of 5 – There are some fairly unwieldy paragraphs in this essay. Nevertheless, there is generally excellent coherence, focus, and movement of ideas.

**Criterion E - Language - 5 marks**

The language of the Paper 2 exam should be effective and accurate. The choice of vocabulary and use of grammar should be consistent and appropriate.