Article by Robert Hillman

Introduction to the Context

**WHOSE REALITY?**

In this article
This article is designed to introduce some of the ideas and arguments suggested by the Context Whose Reality? and offers a variety of strategies for unpacking it. It also introduces the four texts set for study in this Context by VCAA in 2008–9.

Table of contents

INTRODUCTION............................................................................................................................3
On-going Activity: A Context File .................................................................3

BUILDING THE CONTEXT ......................................................................................................4
- Words and meanings........................................................................4
- Quotations........................................................................5
- Is it real?........................................................................5
- Reality TV .........................................................................6
- Childhood beliefs ....................................................................6
- Who or what shapes our sense of reality? ..................................6

IDENTIFYING THE BIG IDEAS .............................................................................................7
1 Multiple Realities .................................................................................................7
- Trigger questions........................................................................7
- Ideas to get you started ................................................................7
- Writing activity ...........................................................................8
- Discussion questions ....................................................................8

(please note: this approach is used for all the ideas below)
2 Emotional Realities .................................................................................8
3 Constructed Realities ........................................................................10
4 Cultural Realities ...........................................................................11

EXPLORING THE TEXTS .......................................................................................................13
A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams ........................................13
- Overview ............................................................................13
- Sample passage ...................................................................14
- Discussion questions ...........................................................15
- Focus on the features of the text ...........................................15
- Activity ..................................................................................16

Enduring Love by Ian McEwan ........................................................................16
- Overview ............................................................................16
- Sample passage ...................................................................17
- Discussion questions ...........................................................18
- Focus on the features of the text ...........................................18
- Activity ..................................................................................19

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind directed by Michel Gondry ................................19
- Overview ............................................................................19
- Sample scene .......................................................................20
- Discussion questions ...........................................................21
- Focus on the features of the text ...........................................22
- Activity ..................................................................................22
The Shark Net by Robert Drewe ................................................................. 22
  • Overview ................................................................................................. 22
  • Sample passage ....................................................................................... 23
  • Discussion questions ............................................................................... 24
  • Focus on the features of the text ............................................................ 25
  • Writing activity ......................................................................................... 25

CLARIFYING THE IDEAS ................................................................................. 26
  • Develop summaries ................................................................................ 26
  • Stage a debate ......................................................................................... 27
  • Character-based activity ......................................................................... 28

TOPICS FOR WRITING ON THE CONTEXT .................................................... 28

REFERENCES & OTHER RESOURCES .............................................................. 29

ABOUT THE AUTHOR ..................................................................................... 31
Introduction to the Context

WHOSE REALITY?

INTRODUCTION

Look carefully at the name of this Context – *Whose Reality?* It focuses on ‘reality’ yet is presented as a question. Is this intended to suggest that what is real and what is not is open to debate? Think about the word ‘whose’ too. This Context is not only interested in what is real, but also in the idea of a perspective or point of view on reality. Does this suggest that reality can be different for different people, or perhaps for different groups of people? Is it possible that one person’s reality may be mere fantasy to another person?

The Context is inviting you to consider the concept of ‘reality’ with questions such as these in mind.

Ongoing Activity: A Context File

Put together a file or folder to house all your notes and materials related to *Whose Reality?* By adding to this file regularly, you will build up an excellent resource to draw on when preparing for the SACs and the end of year exam. You will also be able to see how your ideas and point of view on the Context develop and expand. You might include:

- notes from class discussions and brainstorming
- articles or images (including cartoons) from newspapers, magazines or websites that have something interesting to show about the way ‘realities’ are presented in our society, e.g. advertising images that distort reality in some way
- useful vocabulary or a word bank for discussing and writing about the Context
- summaries of key ideas and arguments about the Context that you draw from the two texts you are studying
Introduction to the Context: Whose Reality?
Area of Study 2: Creating & Presenting

- notes on the language and structural features of your set texts (i.e. the choices an author makes) which might influence the choices you make for your own writing.

BUILDING THE CONTEXT

Building the Context requires developing a range of initial ideas about what the Context means. What issues does it relate to? What questions does it encourage you to think about? You are building the Context broadly at this stage. It is not yet necessary to draw ideas from the texts you are studying. The parameters of the Context may be endless but you will build an initial framework that you can add to, refine or change as your thinking develops.

Below are several suggested activities for getting started building the Context. You may do these activities individually. In the classroom, different groups may choose different activities and then report their findings to the class as a whole. It may also be useful to revisit these activities at various stages throughout the year to see how your initial thoughts about the Context have changed.

**Words and meanings**

- Create your own word bank which you can add to throughout the year, on your own or in class.
- Begin by brainstorming definitions of the key words of the Context: ‘whose’ and ‘reality’.
- Use a dictionary and thesaurus to expand on these definitions and write down several entries that seem helpful or interesting to you.
- Consider the associated words, terms, phrases and meanings that are elicited by these initial key words. Work in groups of three or four and compare and discuss your findings. How do these relate to or contrast with ‘whose’ and reality’? It will be useful to repeat this task at various times throughout your study of the Context, to see how these words and meanings change. Below are some associated words and phrases. Start with these. How many others words and phrases can you think of?
Introduction to the Context: *Whose Reality?*

### Area of Study 2: Creating & Presenting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Fact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>Imagination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>Illusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delusion</td>
<td>Persuasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misrepresentation</td>
<td>Credibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plausible</td>
<td>Self-deception</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Quotations**

- Other people’s viewpoints can stimulate and expand your thinking. Use the internet to find relevant quotations on reality. These will help to expand your word bank and also the ideas that you associate with the Context. The quotes can also be used as starting points for discussion or writing topics.

*Is it real?*

How do we know that something is real? What makes something real? If something is real what features must it have?

- In small groups, create a list of the features of some real things. You might start by choosing a real item in the room, then answer questions such as: What makes this item real? How do we know that it is real? How can we be sure that it is not imagined?

- Can something that is invisible or unseen be real? Consider the following questions: Are feelings and emotions real? If so, how is this reality different from the reality of the things that we can see and touch?
Reality TV

In the past decade there has been a rise in the number of ‘reality’ shows on our television screens. How many can you name?

- In small groups, choose a particular show currently on television and discuss its features. In your discussion, consider the following: How much reality is actually shown? Is reality manipulated? Does editing or censorship distort the reality being shown? If you or members of your discussion group were part of this reality television show, ask yourselves how much reality you would be comfortable sharing with the public.

Childhood beliefs

- Have you ever been encouraged to accept the reality of a fantasy character, such as the tooth fairy or Father Christmas? Think about why you were encouraged to believe that such characters were real. Ask yourself why you ceased believing in such characters. Does a child experience the same reality as an adult?

Who or what shapes our sense of reality?

Our sense of reality is shaped from a multitude of sources. The media is one entity that plays a significant role in shaping reality.

- Consider the role played by advertising in shaping realities. How are products such as cars, beverages, foods and clothing represented in advertising on television and in magazines? You may wish to collect advertisements for your Context file that show ‘enhanced’ versions of reality (i.e. the happy expressions of people enjoying a fizzy drink) or those that promote an idealised image of a product’s user (i.e. the man or woman with the perfect body who drinks low-fat milk), as well as those that promote exaggerated benefits for a product’s users (i.e. the face cream that will make a sixty-year-old woman look like she is twenty again). Think about the ways in which reality has been ‘distorted’ in these images and the reasons why.
IDENTIFYING THE BIG IDEAS

What are the Big Ideas and arguments that emerge from this Context? Before you begin to explore your texts, consider further ways of grouping concepts about Whose Reality? using the following Big Ideas:

1. Multiple realities
2. Emotional realities
3. Constructed realities
4. Cultural realities

You may find an overlap between many of these ideas. For example, the role that emotions play in shaping reality will be relevant to each. Of course, there may be many more Big Ideas in this Context than those identified here. How many more can you identify?

1 Multiple realities

Trigger questions

- Do different people experience different versions of reality?
- Can multiple versions of reality exist at the same time?
- Can we experience more than one reality in a lifetime?

Ideas to get you started

Although reality might be defined as that which concretely exists and is not rendered by the imagination, you should consider that we are all strongly motivated in our behaviour by things that can’t be scientifically shown to exist. In the one society, multiple realities exist. People from different backgrounds experience the world in different ways. The same can be said for people from the same background who hold different beliefs, values and ideals. Some people believe that UFOs regularly visit the earth and devote time searching for them, although there is no scientific or recorded proof that UFOs exist. If your behaviour is motivated by a certain belief, that belief can become a part of your
realities. If we put all the things that motivate us together, we might find the following: superstitions, wild hopes and fantasies, mixed in with widely shared beliefs. Taking these factors into account, one person can experience a number of realities at any one time.

**Writing activity**

Write a brief piece about yourself as a child exploring the changes you have undergone to become the person that you are today.

- Do you have a different relationship to the world now than you did then?
- Were you encouraged to accept ideas that you now question?
- Are things that were once mysterious to you no longer so?
- What about things that once thrilled you, worried you or frightened you – have these changed?

**Discussion questions**

- In small groups, consider the following proposition: That all realities are not equal. In your discussion, consider the following questions: Does one person have the right to criticise another person’s experience of reality? Is one person’s experience of reality more valid or important than another’s?
- Can you recall an experience you shared with another person (e.g. a concert or a movie) which you both remember quite differently? What are the differences in your recollections? Why do you think you have remembered the experience differently?

**2 Emotional Realities**

**Trigger questions**

- Can your emotions change the way you experience the world around you? If you are happy, do you see the same world you see when you are unhappy?
- What role do lies and manipulation play in the creation of reality?

**Ideas to get you started**

People’s emotions are not always visible to others. Instead, our emotions become public through a variety of physical expressions or how we behave. If you say that you love someone, it will be the loving way you behave that
actually reveals the inner feeling. The same is true for fear and hatred, as it is for the entire spectrum of emotions. Some might suggest that a person’s feelings are real only if their behaviour and actions support those feelings.

Our feelings, or emotional state, also impact on how we experience the world on a day-to-day basis, how we interact with other people and how they respond to us. If we feel sad or angry this may be visible to those around us through facial expressions or actions. Alternatively, these ‘clues’ to our emotional reality may only be visible to those who know us best and have a better understanding of our moods. If we are happy or have received good news, a different set of clues to our emotional reality may be visible, and so on.

**Reflective writing activity**

Keep a record for a full day of the emotions you experience from waking to settling down to sleep at night.

- Briefly indicate the experience or event that gave rise to a certain emotion: e.g. ‘frustrated: I couldn’t find my Insight English for Year 12 textbook’.
- The following day, consider whether any of these emotions would have been evident to the people around you.
- Make notes on ‘What other people saw’ and then add notes about what you felt.
- You may conclude this activity by reflecting on how much of your emotional reality is or is not visible to others.

**Discussion question**

- Can you recall a time in which you were told by someone that your response to a situation was incorrect because it was too emotional and not rational? Did you feel that an emotional response was perfectly reasonable, despite it being more difficult to explain why and how? In small groups discuss which version of reality is the more truthful one – one that can be made real in words or one that is felt? If you can, provide personal experiences to support your viewpoint.
3 Constructed Realities

Trigger questions

- Do individuals construct their own reality or have it shaped by an external force?
- Does what you do and don’t know determine your reality?
- Who has the power to construct reality?

Ideas to get you started

Powerful people in a community such as the wealthy, media masters and politicians, have more opportunity to shape the world than those with little wealth and power. As a result, powerful people are often the community’s decision makers, shaping and influencing what we accept as reality. In any society, there are varying degrees of coercion involved in this process. The media can be seen as a subtle manipulator of reality, often presenting a world that taps into people’s fantasies and desires. Politicians also determine reality in the way they talk about the ‘issues’. Reality may be shaped by wide public debate that permits the existence of multiple viewpoints or it may be shaped by a narrow interpretation of the issues that excludes multiple viewpoints. Those individuals or groups whose voices are loudest and most persistent can be said to determine the version of reality that is understood as the ‘truth’.
Introduction to the Context: Whose Reality?

Area of Study 2: Creating & Presenting

Activities

- The media – including television, film, magazines and the internet – can be said to shape reality and how we come to understand the world. Although these create, to a certain extent, fictional worlds, they do influence how we come to understand reality. Explore some images from a celebrity gossip magazine and think about how these might be said to manipulate or distort reality. How far removed is the world they present from the world that you live in? Are there any similarities?

- Who determines what is newsworthy? Over two nights compare the coverage of a news item on a commercial news program with the coverage it receives on ABC or SBS. Which report do you think constructs a more complete understanding of the event? Do you think you are seeing the whole story or only half of it in either report? Consider the information that may be left out or hurried over and how this impacts on your understanding of the news item. You may also want to explore what the lead (first) news item is on each of these programs. If they are different, what do you think this tells you about how something becomes newsworthy?

Discussion question

- In small groups, consider the ways in which more powerful members of a family or peer group might shape what others accept as reality. Can you think of any examples from your own life that might help to illustrate this idea?

4 Cultural Realities

Trigger questions

- Does what is real remain that way independent of cultural beliefs?
- Are many cultural beliefs better understood as moral beliefs?
- Can one culture ever fully understand the reality of another?
Introduction to the Context: Whose Reality?

Area of Study 2: Creating & Presenting

Ideas to get you started

The culture in which we are born and raised plays a significant role in what we accept as reality and how we perceive the world. Our cultural reality is made up of things such as how we dress, what we eat, the types of relationships we form and the level of education we receive. Plurality of races and religions in a society ideally allows for a plurality of opinions and perspectives to flourish. This is not always the case. What the citizens of one culture accept as natural and right might be viewed as wicked and wrong by citizens of another culture. Cultural realities compete for validity, creating a situation in which one cultural reality is viewed as more important than others. We can learn many things about ourselves from other people’s cultures and vice versa. Often, however, different cultures struggle to coexist, finding their versions of reality in direct conflict with one another.

Writing activity

• You are a cultural ambassador from another planet who has been sent to Earth to explain to people on Earth how people behave on your planet. Write an interview, assuming the roles of interviewer and interviewee. Imagine three to five questions people on Earth might ask you and then respond to them in writing. Questions might cover such topics as diet, dress, festivals, beliefs, relationships or sports. Your responses should help the reader gain an insight into the particular cultural reality of your planet.

Discussion question

• In small groups, explore the ways in which different cultural beliefs multiply the realities of a society. Consider the ways in which people born in countries other than Australia might not experience the same reality as those born here. If there are members of your class who were born in countries other than Australia, or whose parents were, be sure to draw on and compare their experiences in your discussion.
EXPLORING THE TEXTS

Studying texts in this area of study has a particular purpose: you are drawing ideas from them to inform and expand your own thinking about the Context. The ideas you have developed when building the Context will help to focus your reading and discussion of the text. As you explore texts, consider how they are connected to the Big Ideas discussed above.

- How do the texts expand and support the way you think about these ideas and arguments?
- Do the texts introduce any new perspectives on the Context?
- Are there any features of the text that might influence your own writing?

_A Streetcar Named Desire_ by Tennessee Williams

**Overview**

For many people, reality can be a crushing burden to bear. In _A Streetcar Named Desire_, Blanche DuBois presents herself as a delicate Southern belle and a stranger to crudity in all its forms. Visiting her younger sister in New Orleans, Blanche is immediately critical of Stella’s earthy working-class husband, Stanley Kowalski. Blanche’s reality clashes with the Kowalskis’. Her airs and graces anger Stanley and he makes it his business to uncover the truth about her past and the real reason she had to leave Laurel. His emotional and physical attacks on Blanche break down all of her defences against reality and she slides further into fantasy, illusion and eventually delusion. The reader accepts that Blanche is relying on lies, deception and evasion to build a new life for herself in New Orleans and that she is fully aware of what she is doing. Later scenes in the play, however, suggest that Blanche’s drinking and seductions of younger men are an attempt to deal with the burden of her guilt over the suicide of her young husband many years earlier.
Sample passage

Scene Five, p.169

Blanche: 'I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft – soft people have got to court the favour of hard ones, Stella … But I’m scared now – awf’ly scared. I don’t know how much longer I can turn the trick. It isn’t enough to be soft. You’ve got to be soft and attractive. And I – I’m fading now!'

Summary

In this scene, Blanche and Stella are talking as Stella dresses. Stanley returns from bowling and asks Blanche if she knows a man called Shaw who claims to have met her at the seedy Hotel Flamingo in Laurel. As Stanley continues his questioning, Blanche becomes increasingly nervous and panicked. When Stanley leaves, Blanche asks Stella what gossip she has heard about her and begins to confess that she ‘wasn’t so good the last two years or so, after Belle Reve had started to slip through my fingers’ (p.169) and that she did certain ‘things’ in order to survive.

Questions for exploring ideas

1. What is the version of reality that Blanche creates in this passage? How does Stella respond to it?

2. From the information that Blanche provides here, why do you think she cannot face reality? Do you think Blanche’s situation would be the same if she was a man?

3. Do you see any dangers attached to Blanche’s strategy for dealing with the reality of her situation?

4. What other events in the play does this passage point toward? What other characters does Blanche attempt to win over with this version of reality?
Discussion questions

1 Blanche’s constructed reality fails to impress Stanley. Why do you think she is unsuccessful in persuading Stanley? Does this failure suggest a limitation to what we can persuade others to believe about ourselves? In small groups, locate examples in the text of passages that suggest these limitations.

2 Is reality only a matter of what we can make others believe? In small groups, read the passages in Scene Seven (pp.185–9) in which Stanley tells Stella everything he has learned of Blanche’s life in Laurel. Can you locate any confirmation in this scene that persuasion (i.e. the way he tells her rather than what he tells her) is more effective than ‘facts’ when assessing what is real and what is not?

3 Do we each play a part in reinforcing other people’s conception of reality? Do we sometimes allow other people to promote their versions of reality, even if we believe they are fantasies, or untrue? Can this be detrimental? In Scene Six, Blanche and Mitch are alone in the house. Through a close reading of this scene, explore whether Mitch is complicit in Blanche’s illusions and therefore partly responsible for what happens to her by the play’s conclusion.

Focus on the features of the text

As well as drawing on ideas from A Streetcar Named Desire in your writing about Whose Reality?, remember that the language and style of your writing may also be inspired by the structures and features of the text. For example, the following aspects of Williams’ play may influence how you choose to use language in the texts you create:

- detailed stage directions give a rich and vivid sense of the social and cultural context of the play
- directions regarding costumes and physical appearance play an important part in shaping the reality of the characters; for example, Blanche comes alive on the page through the description of her clothes and mannerisms
Introduction to the Context: *Whose Reality?*

- information about Blanche’s past is revealed gradually, building dramatic tension
- contrasting language and vocabulary reveal the differences between characters
- the ways in which characters interact with each other discloses important information about them.

**Activity**

- Stage directions and character interactions can provide a more complete understanding of the reality of a character’s life than simply focusing on what they say. Make a list of what you learn from these directions and interactions about each of the following characters in the play: Blanche, Stanley, Stella and Mitch. For example, begin with the passage in Scene One in which Blanche and Stanley first meet (pp.128–130) and she draws ‘involuntarily back from his stare’ (p.129). What does this first interaction between them tell you about their characters? Do you think this first interaction defines the nature of their relationship from this point on? Ask similar questions of the first meetings between other characters in the play.

**Enduring Love by Ian McEwan**

**Overview**

A dangerous clash of realities is at the heart of Ian McEwan’s novel, *Enduring Love*. The novel’s narrator and principal character, Joe Rose, has to defend his version of reality against the assault of another character’s version. Both Joe and his adversary, Jed Parry, are strangers to each other at the start of the novel, but circumstances throw them together when they attempt to prevent a disaster involving a runaway hot-air balloon. They share the trauma of watching a man fall to his death from the balloon and the experience convinces Jed that he and Joe have forged a bond that will unite them for life. The bond, as Jed sees it, is a mixture of mysticism and religion, but the author makes it plain that Jed has in fact fallen in love with Joe, so the bond is also erotic. Joe denies this – he loves his wife, Clarissa, and Jed’s attraction is unwelcome. Joe, a
journalist specialising in science, is a rational man who defends his conception of truth and reality with the tools of reason: logic and scepticism.

*Enduring Love* challenges the reader to reflect on the vulnerability of reality when that reality is repeatedly challenged and questioned. McEwan subjects the reader to the same pressures that Joe has to face. As we listen to Jed’s version of events, we begin to wonder if Joe really did contribute to the creation of this mystical bond that Jed speaks of so convincingly. Joe’s wife Clarissa acts out the reader’s doubts, becoming more and more persuaded that her husband is not being truthful about his feelings for Jed.

**Sample passage**

Chapter Seven, p.66

“‘The fact that you love me,” he continued, “and that I love you, is not important. It’s just the means … I said, “You keep using the word love. Are we talking about sex? Is that what you want?’”

**Summary**

Jed has been waiting outside Joe’s building for him and when he sees Joe exit, approaches. Although Joe is in a hurry he listens to what Jed has to say. Jed tells Joe that he loves him and that he knows Joe loves him too. Joe reminds Jed that they have only met once before and that he doesn’t know him, let alone love him. Jed becomes increasingly agitated as he tries to convince Joe that they share something special, or what he calls ‘pure energy, pure light’ (p.65). Jed believes that through his love for Joe he can bring Joe closer to a relationship with God. Remaining rational, Joe wants to know what it is that Jed actually wants from him, and deduces that what Jed really wants is sex. Jed insists, however, that it is love and that both men want the same things despite the fact that they clearly see things very differently.
Questions for exploring ideas

1. Why does Jed object to Joe employing ‘education, reason and logic’ when he tells Joe that he loves him?

2. What evidence is provided in this passage of Jed’s obsessive behaviour?

3. The term ‘fact’ is used twice in this passage. Is what the term describes actually factual, in either case?

4. Going only on the information provided in this passage, which version of reality appears to you to be the more reliable one – Jed’s or Joe’s? Why?

5. When Jed says, ‘You can pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about’, is he suggesting that Joe is denying his true feelings? In what ways might our sense of reality be jeopardised by persistent accusations of this sort?

Discussion questions

1. Can the pressure of persuasion change reality? In small groups, find two passages after Chapter Seven in the novel that suggest Joe’s sense of reality has been affected by Jed’s persistence.

2. Clarissa’s view of what is real and what is not in the claims made by Jed alters as the story unfolds. Discuss the factors that influence Clarissa to change her point of view.

3. In small groups, discuss the possibility that ‘sanity’ is merely a reflection of the view of the majority in any given situation. Use evidence from the text to support your point of view.

Focus on the features of the text

As well as drawing on ideas from *Enduring Love* in your writing about *Whose Reality?*, remember that the language and style of your writing may also be inspired by the structures and features of the novel. For example, the following aspects of McEwan’s novel may influence how you choose to use language in the texts you create:

- the narrative viewpoint shifts throughout the novel, complicating the question of whose
version of events is the correct one

- a hybrid form combining a variety of styles of writing, including letters and medical research papers
- characterisation is shaped by the writing style; for example, Joe’s first-person narration is controlled and assured suggesting his (scientific) authority on the events
- important events are repeated, allowing the reader to also formulate their own view of reality.

**Activity**

- Using a mind map or a series of mind maps, choose an event or events from the text and show the different ways in which Joe, Jed and Clarissa experience and recount it. Do different perceptions of reality emerge? Are there any similarities?

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* directed by Michel Gondry

**Overview**

Our sense of reality is largely stored in our memory. We have some instinctive responses that don’t rely on memory, but our memories of the past often generate what we think of as real in the present. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* asks the question: ‘If we could erase selected memories from our minds, would we be better off?’ Reality is changed by the loss of memories and, as the film suggests, it is our emotional connection to a past event, which cannot be erased, that is the strongest marker of what is real. In this way, the feelings associated with a memory become more significant than the actual events that took place.
The film recounts Joel and Clementine’s story through a series of memories and flashbacks. We see that they begin a relationship very much in love and eventually find it difficult to remain together. In order to erase the pain they feel about this relationship’s end, each undergoes a ‘procedure’ that will permanently erase their memories of each other. While he is in the middle of his erasure, Joel changes his mind. As he relives the key events of his relationship with Clementine, Joel realises that he is still in love with her and that the happy memories of their time together far outweigh their problems.

Sample scene

Joel and Clementine meet again (DVD Chapters 18 and 19)

Summary

The scene begins in the same place as the film’s opening – Joel is in bed and wakes up. We now realise that this is the morning after the erasure procedure is completed. Joel is at the train station heading to New York City. Suddenly he changes his mind and goes to Montauk, where he first met Clementine (during the erasure, the disappearing Clementine asks him to meet her in Montauk). Montauk is a place he associates with happy emotions (the place he first met Clementine). We don’t see the next sequence of events (but imagine that they mirror those at the commencement of the film). The film cuts to Joel dropping Clementine at her apartment to collect her toothbrush where she discovers the tapes of her erasure that Mary has sent. Joel also discovers his tapes and they break up again. Later, they decide to try again despite the possibility that it will not last.

Questions for exploring ideas

1. After you have watched these chapters, re-watch Chapters One to Four in which we see further details of Joel and Clementine’s second ‘first’ meeting. What are the similarities in the presentation of these two views? What don’t you learn in either version?
Introduction to the Context: *Whose Reality?*

**Area of Study 2: Creating & Presenting**

2. What are the visual clues and film language (setting, props, camera style etc.) linking these scenes to those earlier in the film?

3. Although Joel and Clementine have had their memories of each other erased, an emotional connection remains. Do you think the reality of their feelings for each other is more important than the existence, in tangible memories, of their past together? What does this tell you about the role emotions play in shaping reality?

4. Do we have the power to shape and control our own reality? Does Clementine’s comment at the end of the film that “I’ll get bored with you and I’ll feel trapped because that’s what happens with me” suggest that the past has a tendency to repeat itself?

**Discussion questions**

1. Is it ever a good idea to tamper with our sense of reality? In small groups, discuss what *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* concludes about the wisdom of cancelling painful memories. Are painful memories as much a part of who we are as the pleasant ones?

2. Is love the most powerful marker of what is real in the universe of the text? What do you think? Which kind of reality triumphs in this film – literal or emotional?

3. Joel relives the moment he first met Clementine at a beach party at Montauk (a place they are both repeatedly drawn to). Clementine tells him that the memory will be gone soon and Joel knows that all they can do is ‘enjoy it’ while it lasts. To what extent do you believe that an event only really exists in the moment when it is happening? Does the film support or challenge this view?
**Focus on the features of the text**

As well as drawing on ideas from *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* in your writing about *Whose Reality?*, remember that the language and style of your writing may also be inspired by the features of this film. For example, the following aspects of the film may influence how you choose to structure your own texts:

- the narrative shifts back and forth through time and space
- visual elements have symbolic meaning, such as the changing colour of Clementine’s hair
- sequences are not edited for continuity and events and perspectives are often repeated, creating multiple views of reality.

**Activity**

- In small groups, brainstorm a list of experiences, events or situations in life for which you think the emotional reality attached to the experience might outlast your memory of the factual details. An example of this is a funeral or a wedding. How many can you come up with?

**The Shark Net by Robert Drewe**

**Overview**

Communities construct versions of reality from a variety of sources. The community reality acts as a border fence, securing it against threatening forces outside, or against alternative versions of reality that might disrupt social harmony. In this way, a community creates both insiders and outsiders. Those inside the community fence follow the same set of rules, seeing the world in much the same way. Some of those outside the fence wish to be outsiders, defying convention, seeing things in their particular way. But other outsiders crave acceptance by the majority and can become resentful when acceptance is denied.
In his unconventional memoir, Robert Drewe recalls his move in childhood from one community to another. The two communities are represented as dramatically different. When he first leaves Melbourne for the new community in Perth he feels like he doesn’t belong. His memoir details a process of uneasy adjustment where he eventually takes his place inside the community fence while coping with the further demands of adolescence and early adulthood. While telling his own story, Drewe constructs another reality: the story of serial killer Eric Cooke. He is presented as an outsider who is rejected by the community and whose resentment expresses itself in serial violence against those on the inside.

*The Shark Net* reveals the dynamics of a constructed reality. Those on the inside are haunted by a fear of the outside and of outsiders. This is ultimately presented as a fear of the unknown. The symbol of a ‘shark net’ is a potent one throughout the memoir. A shark net in the ocean is designed to keep at bay the predators of the deep – here, the community’s fence of values, manners and perceptions is designed to keep at bay the predators that may be lurking amongst the outsiders.

**Sample passage**

‘Saturday Night Boy (I)’ (pp.47–8)

‘And then the familiar hateful routine: the whispers, stifled giggles and averted glances, the turned backs … “Birdmouth!”’

**Summary**

As part of the hybrid style of his memoir, Drewe creates three episodes entitled ‘Saturday Night Boy’, narrated from a third-person viewpoint, in which he imagines Eric Cooke out on a Saturday night as he attempts to connect with the community. In this first instalment, we see Eric approaching young women (despite having a wife and children at home) and being rejected because of his appearance. Drewe creates the confusion and isolation Eric feels as he fails to be accepted as ‘Joe Cool’ and the events that follow in his Saturday night routine. These vignettes can also be seen as part of the wider story of Drewe’s
own adolescent anxiety about belonging and acceptance in a new place. In this way, two realities mingle to provide a more complete image of each other.

**Questions for exploring ideas**

1. What does this passage suggest about the way in which Eric wishes to be seen by people? What does it tell us about how he is actually perceived?

2. Is Eric’s version of reality a delusion – do you think he sincerely sees himself as ‘Joe Cool’? If not, why do you think he creates this persona?

3. What is it that makes Eric an outsider in the community? Is it just his harelip and speech impediment? In what ways does the scene regarding Robert’s father’s fear of the ocean (p.39) connect to the passage above?

4. What is Eric’s response to the rejection of his view of ‘the real me’ in this passage? How does Eric deal with rejection further along in the story? (see pp.227–9)

5. Compare the response of the girls at the dance to Robert’s first encounter with Eric, detailed pp.116–7. Does Robert respond in the same way as the girls do?

**Discussion questions**

1. We adjust our view of reality as we grow older. If we don’t, we risk losing acceptance. In small groups locate examples of the ways in which Robert adjusts his view of reality as he grows older. Is this forced on him or does he change willingly?

2. ‘One evening my mother tip-toed with us into the bank. Her ease with general office equipment was impressive enough, but her confidence in the typist’s chair was the real eye-opener’ (p.25). What does this passage suggest about the way in which children see their parents? Do you think children have more trouble coping with a reality other than their own than adults do?
Focus on the features of the text

As well as drawing on ideas from *The Shark Net* in your writing about *Whose Reality?*, remember that the language and style of your writing may also be inspired by the structures and features of the memoir. For example, the following aspects of Drewe’s text may influence how you choose to use language in the texts you create:

- memoir writing presents multiple layers of reality – the past, the present and the act of remembering these
- detailed descriptions of time and place create a vivid idea of the reality of the text
- reader expectation is challenged by subverting generic convention; for example, the opening chapter is not directly about the author
- different writing forms are combined to create the whole text.

Writing activity

- Recall an event from your childhood and write 500 words about it in the third person, as if you are observing yourself and the experience. You may choose to create an alter ego for yourself in this piece (as Drewe does in *The Shark Net*) as a way of explaining something about the reality of your world that can’t be done in your own voice.
CLARIFYING THE IDEAS

Your knowledge and views about the Context will have been informed by your reading of the set texts as well as wide-ranging discussion. As your study of the Context develops, it is important to clarify and refine your ideas, for example, by summarising key arguments and/or sub-themes, and by discussing and debating these ideas. What you think or your point of view on the ideas is an important part of this aspect of your study.

Develop summaries

You can summarise key ideas and arguments about your Context in a number of ways.

- Make a list of statements that highlight important aspects of the Context.
- Create a mind map to summarise key ideas.
- Summarise ideas in a table (as in the example below). Make a note of your own thoughts on each idea. Be sure to include a column for each of the texts that you are studying to show how these expand and develop your understanding of the Context. In Unit 4, make connections between your texts. What similarities do they share in relation to the Context? What different ideas do they help you to clarify?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Whose Reality?</strong></th>
<th><strong>Individual reflections on key ideas/arguments</strong></th>
<th><strong>Text 1 – A Streetcar Named Desire</strong></th>
<th><strong>Text 2 – Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy can become reality</td>
<td><strong>Fantasy has the power to reshape reality.</strong></td>
<td>• Blanche tries to maintain the illusion that she is still a Southern belle, helping her to deal with a fear of death and being left alone.</td>
<td>• The ‘real’ world scenes are shot in a dull, lifeless manner to contrast with the brightness of the memories being relived as they are erased.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memories define our past and present realities</td>
<td><strong>If a present reality falls short of our expectations, we may look to the past as a refuge from an unpleasant situation.</strong></td>
<td>• Blanche is haunted by the suicide of her young husband. Williams indicates this with the repeated polka music of the ‘Varsouviana’.</td>
<td>• Both Joel and Clementine are literally empty without their memories of the past. • Joel realises that even the painful memories of his past with Clementine are worth preserving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The triumph of emotional reality</td>
<td><strong>Our feelings about an event may play a stronger role in how we remember it than the actual facts.</strong></td>
<td>• Although Blanche knowingly manipulates the truth, her emotional state tells us a lot about how much she has suffered.</td>
<td>• Joel and Clementine’s memories of each other are erased; however the emotional reality they shared isn’t forgotten.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Stage a debate**

A debate is a useful strategy for clarifying and presenting a point of view on the Context. The following topics will be a good place to begin, or you may wish to develop your own propositions based on the key ideas and arguments you have identified.

- That our memories of the past tell us who we are today.
- That reality is in the eye of the beholder.
- That we each choose the reality we are living.
- That no two people can ever share the same reality.
Character-based activity

- Revisit the characters in the texts you have studied. Reflect on the ideas you have explored by linking characters to the Context ideas that best illuminate them. You may wish to complete this via a table or a mind map, like the brief example below.

![Character-based activity diagram]

**TOPICS FOR WRITING**

Studying a Context will help to highlight the connection between reading and writing. You will be able to draw on ideas and arguments from your Context to create your own written texts for a specified audience and purpose. The topics below will be useful for writing as you prepare for the SACs and the final exam. They are topics based around the Context and are therefore relevant no matter which texts in this Context you are studying.

1. ‘Our sanity depends on a clear understanding of what is and isn’t real.’
2. ‘We believe what those who are stronger than us tell us to believe.’
3. ‘What we feel tells us what is real.’
4. ‘The answer of each of us to the question of whose reality is more important is always ‘mine’.’
5. ‘Every reality is open to interpretation.’
THE TEXTS


OTHER RESOURCES

Art

M.C. Escher ‘The Official Website’

http://www.mcescher.com

Articles

Miller, Laura 1999, ‘Ian McEwan fools British shrinks’, *Salon Books*, 21 September,

http://www.salon.com/books/log/1999/09/21/mcewan/

Films


**Introduction to the Context: Whose Reality?**

**Area of Study 2: Creating & Presenting**


**Novels & stories**


**Poetry**


**Websites**

Ian McEwan’s Website,


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Hillman is a novelist and biographer. His memoir, *The Boy in the Green Suit*, won the 2005 National Biography Award. He writes full-time and divides his working week between Warburton and Carlton.