History, Culture, and the Author

Have you ever heard the lyrics to a song and wondered what motivated the musician to write them? What about a work of literature—do you ever wonder what inspired its creation? In this workshop, you’ll learn about different factors that can affect writers. By examining the layers of a writer’s experience, you can “read into” literature with far more insight.

Part 1: A Writer’s Background

You are the unique product of many factors, including your heritage, family life, national identity, and economic status. Just as all these factors shape your ideas and beliefs, they influence writers as well. Writers may not consciously realize it, but their heritage, traditions, attitudes, and beliefs are reflected in what they choose to write about and also in how they express their ideas.

For instance, consider “Eating Together,” a poem that paints a touching picture of a close-knit family. First, read the poem itself. Then go back and read the background on Li-Young Lee to identify aspects of his heritage and customs that are reflected in the poem. Notice how your knowledge of Lee’s personal history deepens your understanding of the poem.

Eating Together

Poem by Li-Young Lee

BACKGROUND Li-Young Lee was born to Chinese parents in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 1957. The family moved many times during Lee’s childhood—often to avoid anti-Chinese sentiments—before settling in the United States. Lee’s poetry frequently focuses on his close-knit, traditional Chinese family, and many poems express the poet’s grief over his father’s death.

In the steamer is the trout seasoned with slivers of ginger, two sprigs of green onion, and sesame oil. We shall eat it with rice for lunch, brothers, sister, my mother who will taste the sweetest meat of the head, holding it between her fingers deftly, the way my father did weeks ago. Then he lay down to sleep like a snow-covered road winding through pines older than him, without any travelers, and lonely for no one.

What evidence of the author’s heritage and customs do I see? The Asian family described in the poem seems close-knit and traditional, much like Lee’s own family.

What might have been the author’s motivation for writing this poem? Lee may have wanted to express his feelings about his father’s death and to reflect on how his father’s absence has affected his family.
MODEL 1: ANALYZING A POEM

Read this poem a first time, without knowing anything about the author behind the words and ideas. How would you describe the speaker?

Each morning I wrote my name on the dusty cabinet, then crossed the dining table in script, scrawled in capitals on the backs of chairs, practicing signatures like scales while Mother followed, squirting linseed1 from a burping can into a crumpled-up flannel.

She erased my fingerprints from the bookshelf and rocker, polished mirrors on the desk scribbled with my alphabets. My name was swallowed in the towel with which she jeweled the table tops. The grain surfaced in the oak and the pine grew luminous. But I refused with every mark to be like her, anonymous.

Close Read

1. What images does Alvarez use to help you visualize the actions of the speaker and her mother? Find three examples.

2. Think about what the speaker means by what she says in the boxed lines. How is she different from her mother?

1. linseed: yellowish oil made from flax seeds, often used to help preserve the shine of natural wood furniture.

MODEL 2: THE WRITER’S BACKGROUND

Read this background information about Julia Alvarez. Then go back and read the poem a second time.

Julia Alvarez was born in New York in 1950. When she was three months old, her parents returned with her to their native country, the Dominican Republic. However, the family came back to the United States for political reasons when Alvarez was ten years old. Alvarez grew up speaking Spanish, with English as a second language. Her mother worked as a housekeeper and, as a young girl, Alvarez would often go with her mother to work. Alvarez has said, “As I followed my mother cleaning house, washing and ironing clothes, rolling dough, I was using the material of my housebound girl life to claim my woman’s legacy.” Alvarez later became a writer and continues to share her childhood experiences in her works.

Close Read

1. In what way does the background information help you to better understand the poem?

2. What connection can you draw between the last two lines of the poem and Alvarez’s career?
Part 2: Historical and Cultural Contexts

Knowing about a writer's personal background can help you to appreciate his or her work more fully. Similarly, knowing the historical and cultural contexts in which the work was written can help you interpret and analyze that work more accurately. Historical and cultural contexts refer to the events, social problems, traditions, and values that may have influenced the author and the writing. For example, what events and issues of the time was the author concerned about? How are those concerns reflected in the literature's topic and theme?

Take a look at this excerpt from a story by James Baldwin. Notice how reading the background and answering some questions can give you new insights into Baldwin's writing.

from Sonny's Blues

Short story by James Baldwin

BACKGROUND In the early 1900s, African Americans were encouraged to move to Manhattan’s Harlem neighborhood, partly to shelter them from emerging racial conflicts in other neighborhoods. By 1920, Harlem was populated almost exclusively by African Americans. Though the 1920s became known as the Harlem Renaissance because of the blossoming of jazz music, writing, and art in the African-American community, it was also a time of economic hardship. Since many landlords in other areas refused to rent apartments to African Americans, landlords in Harlem often took advantage of their tenants by charging high rents.

“Sonny’s Blues” was published in 1957, reflecting James Baldwin’s firsthand knowledge of the neighborhood in which he grew up. Throughout most of the twentieth century, Harlem was known for being troubled by crime and poverty as well as being a prominent African-American cultural community.

The narrator and his brother are returning to the neighborhood of their youth:

Houses exactly like the houses of our past yet dominated the landscape, boys exactly like the boys we once had been found themselves smothering in these houses, came down into the streets for light and air and found themselves encircled by disaster. Some escaped the trap, most didn’t. Those who got out always left something of themselves behind, as some animals amputate a leg and leave it in the trap. It might be said, perhaps, that I had escaped, after all, I was a schoolteacher; or that Sonny had, he hadn’t lived in Harlem for years. Yet, as the cab moved uptown through streets which seemed, with a rush, to darken with dark people, and as I covertly studied Sonny’s face, it came to me that what we both were seeking through our separate cab windows was that part of ourselves which had been left behind.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

What aspects of Baldwin's background are reflected in the writing?
Baldwin uses words and phrases like “smothering,” “encircled by disaster,” and “the trap” to describe the poverty-stricken Harlem neighborhood of his youth.

What theme might the author have wanted to explore in this story?
Baldwin may have wanted to explore why former residents of Harlem who “escaped the trap” still feel so connected to the neighborhood in which they grew up.
MODEL 1: ANALYZING FICTION

In this story, a British pilot wakes up in a French hospital during World War II. Find out what he’s thinking about as a nurse tends to him. First, read this excerpt and answer the Close Read questions. Then read the background that follows.

from Beware of the Dog

Short story by Roald Dahl

“I believe there’s someone coming down to see you from the Air Ministry after breakfast,” she went on. “They want a report or something. I expect you know all about it. How you got shot down and all that. I won’t let him stay long, so don’t worry.”

He did not answer. She finished washing him and gave him a toothbrush and some toothpowder. He brushed his teeth, rinsed his mouth, and spat the water out into the basin.

Later she brought him his breakfast on a tray, but he did not want to eat. He was still feeling weak and sick and he wished only to lie still and think about what had happened. And there was a sentence running through his head. It was a sentence which Johnny, the Intelligence Officer of his squadron, always repeated to the pilots every day before they went out. He could see Johnny now, leaning against the wall of the dispersal hut with his pipe in his hand, saying, “And if they get you, don’t forget, just your name, rank, and number. Nothing else. For God’s sake, say nothing else.”

MODEL 2: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The following background helps to explain why a British pilot would be nervous about waking up in a French hospital.

World War II began with Germany’s 1939 invasion of Poland, which caused Britain and France to declare war on Germany. By 1941, German forces had occupied France and much of Western Europe, but Great Britain was still fighting back. Other countries joined the war on both sides of the conflict, dividing into the Axis forces and the Allies. France was not liberated from German occupation until 1944.

Roald Dahl joined the British Royal Air Force in 1939. He became a fighter pilot and flew missions over North Africa, Greece, and the Middle East during the war. After his plane crashed in Egypt, he spent six months in a hospital, recovering from a head injury. When he was asked later to share his experiences, Dahl’s career as a writer began. “Beware of the Dog” was published in 1944.

Close Read

1. What do you learn about the pilot in this passage?
2. The hospital staff is being kind to the pilot, but he believes they are only trying to get information from him. Which words and phrases convey his anxiety?

Close Read

1. What exactly is the pilot worried about? Explain how the background helps you to understand his situation.
2. In your opinion, is Dahl’s tone in the story sympathetic to the pilot? Explain.
Part 3: Analyze the Text

Before reading “Origami,” read the following background information about the author, Susan K. Ito, and the topics mentioned in her story.

BACKGROUND
Crafting Words and Mending Old Wounds

Seeking to Belong
As a child, Susan K. Ito often struggled with her sense of identity. She says, “I felt like I was the only one of my kind: mixed-race, adopted, only child.” She often found herself envying women who were full-blooded Japanese, since she was only part Japanese. When she began taking literature and creative writing classes in graduate school, Ito felt like she had found where she belonged: “I was finally immersing myself in the world that I’d longed to be in forever: the world of words.” Life as a Japanese American and the struggle for a sense of belonging have been the focus of much of her writing.

Peace Cranes
“Origami” is named after a paper-folding craft that has been practiced for centuries in Japan. Its popularity has now spread to many other countries. One of the most popular paper designs is the crane—a type of bird. In many Asian countries, the crane is a symbol of peace. Many people from around the world send paper cranes to a memorial in Hiroshima, Japan, every year. It is done in memory of those who died there during World War II and as an expression of the senders’ wish for world peace.

Japanese Internment
During World War II, nations were divided between the Axis and Allied forces. In 1941 Japan—a member of the Axis powers—bombed the U.S. military base at Pearl Harbor in Honolulu, Hawaii, prompting the United States to declare war on Japan. Four years later, the United States dropped atomic bombs on two Japanese cities: Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Americans were fearful of another attack within their borders. As a precaution, Japanese immigrants and Americans of Japanese ancestry were sent to and held in facilities called internment camps in order to isolate them from the rest of the American public. The largest camp was the Tule Lake Segregation Center in California. At the time, limiting the rights of one ethnic group was viewed as being done in service of the greater good of the American public. The last internment camp closed in 1948. However, it was not until 1988 that the U.S. government issued its first official apology for its treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II.
The narrator of this short story views herself as an outsider struggling to prove that she belongs. As you read this excerpt, consider how the background information enhances your understanding of the story.

I take my place, hesitantly, among the group of Japanese women, smile back at the ones who look up from their task to nod at me. Their words float around me like alphabet soup, familiar, comforting, but nothing that I clearly understand. The long cafeteria table blooms with folded paper birds of all colors: royal purple, light gray, a small shimmering silver one. They’re weaving an origami wreath for Sunday’s memorial service, a thousand cranes for the souls of those who died at Tule Lake’s internment camp.

I spread the square of sky-blue paper flat under my hands, then fold it in half. So far, this is easy. I’m going to follow all the directions. It’s going to be a perfect crane, *tsuru*, flying from my palm. Fold again, then flip that side of the triangle under to make a box. Oh no. What? I didn’t get that. I’m lost. The women around me keep creasing, folding, spreading, their fingers moving with easy grace. My thumbs are huge, thick, in the way of these paper wings that are trying to unfold but can’t.

My heart rises and flutters, beating against its cage in panic, in confusion. I try to retrace my steps, turn the paper upside down, in reverse. It’s not working. I want to crumple the paper into a blue ball, an origami rock.

But instead I unfold the paper with damp, shaking fingers. I persevere. *Gambaro*. Don’t give up. I’m going to make this crane if it kills me. I’m going to prove that I can do this thing, this Japanese skill. I’m going to pull the coordination out of my blood, make it flow into my fingers. I have to.

But what if I can’t? Then it only proves the thing that I fear the most, don’t want to believe. That I’m not really Japanese. That I’m just an imposter, a fake, a watered-down, inauthentic K-mart version of the real thing.