

# Understanding cultural context

In exploring the cultural context of the work of Arthur Miller, it is necessary to consider two important factors:

- ♦ What was the nature of the cultural influences on Miller and how are these made evident in *The Crucible* and some of his other major works?
- ♦ What was happening in the worlds of theatre and other artistic media in the United States in the early 1950s?

## *Ancient Greek tragedy*

Arthur Miller's plays are often described as tragedies. 'Tragedy' in the context of plays defines a specific type of dramatic event. In its modern everyday usage, tragedy is often used in association with sudden loss of life: for instance, we refer to the 'Hillsborough tragedy' (when 96 football fans were crushed to death at an FA-Cup semi-final match in 1989). However, while the events of a tragedy may, and indeed often do, involve loss of life, that is not the only distinguishing feature of dramatic tragedy.

The term 'tragedy' has its roots in the earliest forms of surviving theatre — Greek tragedy. The oldest trilogy of tragedy plays in existence, still frequently performed, is the *Oresteia* (Aeschylus c. 458 BC). Perhaps the most famous of all Greek tragedies, however, is *Oedipus Rex* (Sophocles c. 430 BC). *Oedipus Rex* provides us with a useful model for tragedy, and its influence can be seen in the later tragedies of Shakespeare and, significantly for us, in the works of Arthur Miller.

## *Oedipus Rex*

This play tells the story of a man who, it is predicted, will murder his father and marry his mother.

At the opening of the play, Oedipus, a king, has already (unknowingly) fulfilled his destiny. Because of his crimes, the gods have visited an appalling plague on his city, Thebes, and its suffering citizens appeal to their king to find the solution. In the early stages of the play, we see Oedipus proudly declare that he will take it upon himself to seek out the cause of the plague and prosecute whatever justice is deemed necessary by the gods. He is then confronted by a soothsayer, Tiresias, who tells him that Oedipus is the cause of the plague and that it is he who has offended the gods. Oedipus angrily refutes the soothsayer's claims, denouncing him as a fraud. Thereafter, the more strenuous Oedipus's efforts to determine the truth of events, the more inevitably he seals his own fate; the more he tries to assert himself over the events of the play, the more we realise how much he is at the mercy of forces far stronger than himself.

#### **Aeschylus (c. 525–456 BC)**

Aeschylus holds the distinction of being the earliest playwright whose plays — or at least some of them — still survive. He is often referred to as the 'father of tragedy'. Born in Eleusis in 525 BC, he was 26 when he wrote his first tragedy, although his early life was punctuated more by his military service than by his work as a dramatist.

Aeschylus was responsible for the development of drama by introducing the idea of the second actor, taking some of the emphasis off the chorus and enhancing the notion of character. The *Oresteia* trilogy is probably his most famous work, chronicling the story of the House of Atreus, the murder of the Greek king Agamemnon by his wife, Clytemnaestra, and the revenge of his children against their mother. Although his works are perhaps not as renowned as those of Euripides or Sophocles, there is no doubt that Aeschylus's influence on the shape and development of drama was pivotal.

#### **Sophocles (c. 496–406 BC)**

If Aeschylus's influence was assured by the addition of the second actor, Sophocles's place was assured by the addition of the third. Sophocles won first prize the first time he entered the Festival of Dionysus — beating the father of tragedy himself, Aeschylus.

*Oedipus Rex* is generally regarded as his finest play, although the third play in the Theban trilogy, *Antigone*, is also seen as a masterpiece. The addition of the third actor enhanced the notion of characterisation and made for complex three-way arguments, for example when Jocasta impatiently interjects during the argument between Oedipus and Creon.

While Aeschylus wrote trilogies, Sophocles wrote single tragedies that were complete in themselves and, therefore, dramatically more intense.

By the end of the play, Oedipus has grown in knowledge and wisdom but cannot avoid his terrible ultimate fate. He does not die at the end of the play but blinds himself at the moment when he realises the true nature of his own terrible actions.

### Blindness in Classical drama



Blindness is often used in a dramatically ironic way in Classical drama. In *Oedipus Rex*, Tiresias the soothsayer is blind yet has the gift of insight. Later dramatists used the same image. For example, the Earl of Gloucester in Shakespeare's *King Lear* suffers the torture of having his eyes pulled out seconds before realising that he has been duped by his treacherous son, Edmund. In John Milton's tragic poem in blank verse, *Samson Agonistes*, Samson only realises the truth of Delilah's treachery at the moment of his blinding.

### The tragic hero

At the centre of the action in a tragedy is the tragic hero. The Greek philosopher Aristotle identified the main qualities of the tragic hero in the *Poetics*:

...a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty.

(Section 13, trans. S. H. Butler)

### Aristotle (384–322 BC)

Aristotle's writings have influenced many aspects of modern life, from religion to science and natural history, from politics to philosophy. Although some of his work has been lost in the centuries since his death, much of it is still studied today. In theatrical terms, his greatest contribution was his *Poetics*, a piece of work exploring the nature of poetry and drama, specifically tragedy. The theories contained therein led to the development of the three unities of drama that were present in plays of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These stipulated that 'a play should represent a single action taking place in a single day in the same setting'. This tenet had a great effect on European drama of this period, and played a role in the development of naturalistic theatre in the nineteenth century.

Greek theatre sought to make sense of the world; its playwrights took events which could not be explained by reason or by cause and effect — such as the plague — and tried to create some kind of order around the chaos. As a civilisation, the Greeks sought to order the workings of the universe through astronomy

and the workings of the world through mathematics, but it was through poetry and drama that they sought explanations for the inexplicable.

Joe Keller in Miller's play *All My Sons* fulfils the definition of a tragic hero: he is amiable, generous and seen as a decent man in the community. He is not — in essence — a criminal. However, he has been guilty of a terrible error of judgement, which could be described as a 'frailty', by allowing the shipping of aeroplane parts he knew to be faulty. It is only when he realises and acknowledges the full magnitude of his actions that he commits suicide — significantly, off stage.

#### Miller on Greek tragedy

In *Timebends*, Miller describes himself as loving Greek tragedy the way a 'man at the bottom of a pit loves a ladder'. He felt that the writers of this genre 'sought to transform the vendetta and the blood feud into the institutions of law and justice'.

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Joe Keller in Miller's play *All My Sons* fulfils the definition of a tragic hero. (Laurie Metcalf as Kate Keller and James Hazeldine as Joe Keller, National Theatre, August 2001)

In *Death of a Salesman*, the hero, Willy Loman, is a tragic hero: a man who is not 'eminently good or just', whose downfall is caused not by 'vice or depravity' but by frailties in his character. His weakness is not only his belief in the 'American Dream' but also his own inevitable inability to achieve it: the audience realises from the start of the play that Willy's all-important

#### The fatal flaw

In Greek theatre, the tragic hero's 'fatal flaw' or 'error' has usually been committed or manifested before the action of the play begins. Thus, at the beginning of *Oedipus Rex*, the citizens of Thebes are suffering the ravages of the plague because of crimes committed years before by Oedipus.

relationship with his elder son Biff has already been damaged before the opening of the action, although the reasons are not made clear. It is only in the final minutes of the play, when Biff's awareness of his father's adultery comes to light, that the audience understands the origins of the son's utter disillusionment with his father, and in return the father's seething resentment of his son.

### *Reversal of situation*

There is an element of 'reversal of situation' in *The Crucible* — a dramatic device for tragedy which Aristotle refers to in the *Poetics*. An example of this in *Oedipus Rex* is the messenger's arrival — supposedly a source of comfort and reassurance to Oedipus about his mother, but in fact the moment that seals his doom.

In *The Crucible*, Proctor's survival is dependent on Elizabeth's willingness to testify to her husband's adultery. However, for the first time in her life she lies — in order to protect her husband — and thus she effectively ensures his condemnation.

### *The unities*

Aristotle defined not only the tragic hero and the 'reversal of situation', but also certain conventions which he identified as the hallmarks of theatre. One of these is the use of 'unities': the unities of time, action and place.

According to Aristotle, the plot of a tragedy should:

- ♦ take place over a 24-hour period (unity of time)
- ♦ be continuous (unity of action)
- ♦ be set in one area (unity of place)

In *All My Sons*, Miller follows the unities assiduously. The action of the play takes place over 24 hours in the yard of the Keller house, beginning in the sunshine of what seems to be a perfect August day. It ends with the revelation of a crime and the suicide of the main character, Joe Keller, before the day is out.

The structure of *Death of a Salesman* does not strictly follow the patterns established by the Greeks for tragedy, although, as we have noted, Willy Loman has the qualities of a tragic hero. Most of the play takes place within the Loman house. However, much of the second act — particularly the first half of it — takes place elsewhere in New York City, principally at Willy's office and a restaurant in town. The action does occur within 24 hours, but it is not strictly continuous: there are significant periods in the play during which the audience sees events from the past, as Willy relives the moments which have destroyed him. In this play, therefore, Miller is not using the Greek principles of staging as a rule book but rather as a useful and time-honoured guide. Shakespeare did no less in many

of his tragedies, so Miller's is a scholarly approach based on a sound understanding of theatre practice.

### *The high-ranking protagonist*

Tragedy, as presented by the Greek playwrights, and in its later incarnations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, dealt with the lives of high-ranking protagonists of noble birth.

In 1949, the same year as the first performance of *Death of a Salesman*, Miller published an essay in the *New York Times* entitled 'Tragedy and the Common Man', in which he explained how and why tragedy is not exclusively the province of the high-ranking protagonist. For the twentieth century, Miller felt that such an exclusive use of the genre was limiting. In his essay, Miller makes the case for tragedy being a vehicle to explore a character's evaluation of himself, whatever his rank:

Insistence upon the rank of the tragic hero, or the so-called nobility of his character, is really but a clinging to the outward forms of tragedy.

So for Miller, writing in the mid-twentieth century, tragedy should not preoccupy itself solely with the lives of nobility but should instead be made meaningful to the lives of more ordinary people. For him:

...the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing — his sense of personal dignity.

There is a less obvious application of Aristotelian principles of tragedy in *The Crucible* (the action covers many months), but there is something of the tragic hero in Proctor, an 'ordinary man'; he does perhaps evoke in us Miller's 'tragic feeling'. We discover early on in the play that in a moment of weakness he has had sexual relations with his servant girl, Abigail Williams. On discovering this, his wife, Elizabeth, throws the girl out, and thus the seeds of Abigail's desire for revenge are sown. As Proctor endeavours, unsuccessfully, to save the community and himself from the vengeful Abigail, his struggles mirror the efforts of Oedipus. His attempts to discover the truth inevitably lead to his own downfall.

### *Naturalism*

Greek tragedy was not the only cultural influence on which Miller drew in the creation of his plays. His work — in large measure — may be termed 'naturalistic':

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### August Strindberg (1849–1912)

Strindberg's works from the late nineteenth century are some of the earliest extant examples of naturalistic plays. As with many of his contemporaries, he began writing in other genres, preferring to compose stylised historical dramas and farces. However, alongside writers like Ibsen and Chekhov, he began to explore the effects of creating drama that presented a world much closer to that around us than previous style had allowed. His plays were littered with gender conflicts and displayed his personal disillusionment with intimate relationships. After a mental breakdown Strindberg ceased writing temporarily. When he returned, his works were more symbolic in style.

### Anton Chekhov (1860–1904)

The work of playwright Anton Chekhov is inextricably linked with the ideas of Konstantin Stanislavski and the development of the Moscow Art Theatre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Chekhov's reflections on the lives of the fading ruling classes in works such as *The Seagull*, *The Three Sisters* and, perhaps most famously, *The Cherry Orchard*, are variously seen as irreverent and humorous or touching and poignant. This debate was often the subject of argument between writer and director, and there appear to be strains of both tragedy and comedy running through Chekhov's works.

Although Chekhov's plays have an exaggerated, almost melodramatic quality, the complex characters often demonstrate a frustrating inability to communicate their feelings or to make sense of the world they inhabit. Often (as in *The Cherry Orchard*), the harsh reality of the world overtakes the romantic preoccupations of the characters, leaving the audience feeling a combination of infuriation tempered with sympathy.

that is, his works deal with human beings struggling both to make sense of their environment and to survive.

Naturalism emerged as an influence on playwrights and novelists in the late nineteenth century and was a movement which, despite being essentially artistic, took its lead from science. Following his journeys around the world onboard *The Beagle*, Charles Darwin (1809–82) propounded his theory of evolution and 'survival of the fittest' (the first serious challenge to creationism) in his book *On the Origin of the Species* (1859). Here, Darwin argued that human beings had evolved over centuries and proceeded to trace them back through their evolution, relating them to earlier species and living organisms. That human beings were simply a product of, and struggling participants in, their environment was an idea dramatically at odds with the traditional Christian view that every human being was special and made in God's own image.

Meanwhile, with the major developments in the design of microscopes in the middle of the nineteenth century, the scrutiny of man's environment had never been more detailed. Following the example of Darwin, many playwrights and novelists decided to turn the writer's microscope on humanity in its contemporary environment — to study individual human beings' problems, weaknesses and strengths rather than producing comedy or heroic melodrama (the predominant literary/dramatic forms through the nineteenth century). Playwrights such as Strindberg (for example *Miss Julie*, 1887; *The Father*, 1888), Chekhov and Ibsen strove to present man struggling

to survive in his natural, as well as societal, environment. They presented men and women facing crises of conscience, plunged into moral dilemmas from which they might or might not emerge wiser. In a sense, Darwin's theories were made visible on stage, and audiences were not always ready for the onslaught.

### *The naturalistic plays of Henrik Ibsen*

Henrik Ibsen was probably the most influential of all naturalistic playwrights, and, according to his biographer and translator Michael Meyer, the most influential playwright since Shakespeare.

It was not only the credible depictions of his characters that established his reputation, it was also the enormously controversial themes and issues he was prepared to tackle. For many years his work was unsuccessful, and the theatre for which he wrote went bankrupt during the 1860s. However, his major success, which made him internationally famous, was *A Doll's House* (1879). Interestingly, he was over 50 years of age before he achieved this success, after half a lifetime of writing.

Perhaps significantly, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was translated into Scandinavian shortly before Ibsen started work on *A Doll's House*.

#### *A Doll's House*

The principal character, Nora, is a pampered, pretty and somewhat air-headed housewife. However, early in her marriage she borrows money from an unscrupulous businessman, Krogstad, in order to take her husband, Torvald, abroad for a life-saving rest cure. Her husband believes Nora's father has given them the money for the trip. In fact, Nora forges her father's signature on the loan guarantee and is later blackmailed by Krogstad when he discovers the deception.

By the end of the play, when Nora's activities have been revealed and she has been confronted by her irate husband, she decides she can no longer live with him. As Ibsen put it in a letter about the play, reported in the introduction to William Archer's translation:

The wife in the play finds herself at last entirely at sea as to what is right and what wrong; natural feeling on the one side, and belief in authority on the other, leave her in utter bewilderment.

#### **Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906)**

As a playwright, Ibsen used theatre to challenge his audiences on personal, political and social levels. While he started his career with verse drama, and finished with more symbolic plays, it is his intervening naturalistic pieces which have had the greatest impact on theatre. Works such as *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* broke standards of both the stage and society, by addressing taboo subjects through realistic characters and by avoiding conventions such as 'happy endings'. In their time, these works were considered scandalous and led to Ibsen leaving his native Norway to work abroad for the majority of his career.

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In the same letter, Ibsen remarks:

A woman cannot be herself in the society of today, which is exclusively a masculine society, with laws written by men, and with accusers and judges who judge feminine conduct from the masculine standpoint.

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It is Torvald's inability to understand Nora's needs and motives that leads her to leave him. (Anne-Marie Duff as Nora, New Ambassadors Theatre, January 2000)

### *Miller and Ibsen*

Many of Ibsen's plays offer a clear message about how society has become corrupted and damaged by material interest, hypocrisy and bigotry. Miller confronts similar issues with an equal degree of passion and reformist zeal. In 1950, Miller even adapted one of Ibsen's most famous plays, *An Enemy of the People* (1882), the story of one man's struggle to uphold the truth and do the right thing as he sees it against extreme social opposition.

Miller's *The Crucible* also deals with the hypocrisy and crushing oppression that can be visited by one human being on another in the name of so-called 'values'. Just as Ibsen was prepared to incite disapproval from the establishment through the uncompromising nature of the content of his plays, so too was Miller through the uncompromising message of his work, none more so than *The Crucible*.

## Naturalism and Shakespeare

Significantly, the second half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a new interest in performances of Shakespeare's full texts (as they have come down to us). Shakespeare was approached with a greater seriousness than hitherto. The interest in a scrutinising, critical, less celebratory view of life and society that accompanied naturalism at this time encouraged exploration of some of the more uncomfortable themes and images in Shakespeare's plays.

The famous nineteenth-century actor Henry Irving (1838–1905) was particularly known for performing in productions of Shakespeare's texts which had fallen from favour over the previous century. Irving was most active during the 1870s and 1880s, presenting, for example, a celebrated version of *Hamlet* in 1874.

### Nahum Tate's sweetened Shakespeare



The playwright Nahum Tate (1652–1715) produced sweetened and sanitised versions of Shakespeare's plays during the 1680s to please the tastes of the audience of his day (adding, for instance, a happy ending to *King Lear*). These interpretations were preferred to the originals until the end of the eighteenth century. Even as serious and influential an actor as David Garrick (1717–79) favoured many of them over the master material.

## Religion

A final point to be made about the cultural influences on the creation of *The Crucible* must be that of Miller's own religious background and the connection he himself makes between this and the world of Salem in the 1690s.

In his childhood, Miller remembered seeing his great grandfather taking part in a strange dancing ritual in the synagogue; this ritual was probably part of the Simchat Torah, celebrating the Lord's gift of the Torah to the people. When researching the witch hunts for *The Crucible*, Miller discovered some sketches in the Historical Society's 'Witch Museum' of the trials and of the hysterical reactions of the judges to the adamant denials of the accused. He wrote in *Timebends* (p. 338):

Suddenly it became my memory of the dancing men in the synagogue... the same chaos of bodily motion — in this picture the adults fleeing the sight of a supernatural event; in my memory, a happier but no less eerie circumstance — both scenes frighteningly attached to the long reins of God. I knew instantly what the connection was: the moral intensity of the Jews and the clan's defensiveness against pollution from outside the ranks. Yes, I understood Salem in that flash, it was suddenly my own inheritance.

## Contemporary influences on Miller

When exploring the cultural context of a piece of work, it is always important to investigate the cultural output of other artists working in the same social and historical context.

### Tennessee Williams

Tennessee Williams was a contemporary of Miller. Both playwrights were of equal stature and dominated postwar American theatre. Williams's plays *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) were immensely successful — the last two becoming well-known films.

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Tennessee Williams (pictured) and Arthur Miller dominated post-war American theatre

#### Tennessee Williams (1911–83)

Tennessee Williams was the pseudonym of Thomas Lanier Williams III. He was born in Columbus, Mississippi and is considered by many as one of the most prominent playwrights of the twentieth century. His college friends called him Tennessee because of his southern 'drawl'. He received many theatrical awards during his career as a dramatist, including the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948) and for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955).

It is believed that his family provided him with the seeds of many of the characters in his plays. His father was a travelling salesman and an emotionally absent parent who was violent and abusive; his mother was the puritanical daughter of an Episcopal minister. His beloved elder sister, Rose, suffered from schizophrenia and spent most of her adult life in mental institutions. In 1937, in an effort to control her paranoia, her parents gave permission for a prefrontal lobotomy to be performed. The operation failed, and Rose remained incapacitated for the rest of her life. Williams never forgave his parents for allowing the operation, and Rose's situation perhaps influenced the 'mad heroine' theme that appears in many of his plays.

Williams's plays deal less with social issues and focus more on the darker recesses of human nature. Blanche DuBois — the faded southern belle who is the heroine of *A Streetcar Named Desire* — has sexual and romantic fantasies until confronted by the brutality of her brother-in-law, Stanley. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Brick has turned to drink and cannot make love to his wife, Maggie, when faced with the confession of homosexuality and subsequent suicide of his best friend. In these plays, Williams explored issues of sexuality and sexual behaviours years before such ideas were a part of the general currency of the theatre. Consequently, his 'provocative' plays were often banned or severely edited.

### *Clifford Odets*

The playwright who most immediately influenced Miller was the lesser known Clifford Odets, whose plays *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) and *Golden Boy* (1937) (later adapted into a film) contained strong socialist messages.

It was this strong flavour of socialism combined with a poet's craft that drew Miller to Odets. Here was a playwright responsible for 'disposing of middle-class gentility, screaming and yelling and cursing like somebody off the Manhattan streets' (*Timebends*, p. 229). The political affinity between Miller and Odets was clear, although in later years Miller would be more critical of Odets, seeing in him something of a contradictory character — one who would avow the cause of socialism (and who was more politically active than Miller) but who was also wooed by Hollywood and the champagne lifestyle.

#### **Clifford Odets (1906–63)**

Clifford Odets's earliest professional work was as an actor. After a series of small parts working in the theatre and on radio, he helped found the Group Theatre in New York in 1931 along with director and critic Harold Clurman (1901–80). Members held left-wing political views and wanted to produce plays that dealt with important social issues, for example Odets's first two plays *Awake and Sing!* and *Waiting for Lefty* (both 1935). Indeed, the earlier stages of his career as a playwright saw Odets become a major figure in American protest drama. His works were considered radical, using naturalistic theatre to object to the political situations in the USA. However, in later years he transferred to Hollywood as a writer and director.

### *Film noir*

The mood of tension and pessimism that prevailed in the 1940s and 1950s influenced not only theatre but also cinema, giving rise to a genre of film known as 'film noir'.

Film noir has a melancholic, disillusioned feel. Some of the more successful of such films are adaptations of novels by writers such as Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain and Dashiell Hammett. The plots of these films — for instance

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*The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950), *Key Largo* (John Huston, 1948) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946) — are dominated by violent crime, and both the hero and the villain characters are flawed, drink-dependent or corrupted. They live in worlds where moral structures have collapsed and been replaced by the bogus family values of the mob.

Although *The Crucible* is entirely different in genre and plot, it is possible to see the links between it and such films, especially when one considers the prevailing national condition of paranoia and suspicion in the aftermath of the Second World War.

### Summary

A study of the cultural context of a play explores the society in which the play was written. It examines writers and artists who influenced the style as well as the content of the playwright's work.

However, a successful play is never solely a reflection of its life and times. It would be wrong to assume, for example, that *The Crucible* can only be seen as a reflection of the time of the HUAC and McCarthyism. A production of *The Crucible* was mounted in Shanghai in 1980, where many people seeing it for the first time assumed it to be a reflection of the Cultural Revolution and the purges undertaken by the former Chinese leader, Mao Tse Tung. Apparently, the role of teenagers as accusers was remarkably similar in both societies.



### Discussion questions

- 1 What influences did the writers of Greek tragedy have on the work of Arthur Miller?
- 2 What are the links between the work of Henrik Ibsen and that of Arthur Miller?
- 3 What cultural connection is there between Miller's Jewishness and the themes of *The Crucible*?
- 4 What are the links between other cultural features inherent in 1950s America and *The Crucible*, e.g. film noir?

### Essay questions

- 1 Chapters 1 to 4 complete the study of the context of *The Crucible*, written by Arthur Miller in 1953. In your own words — and using sources other than this book — write context notes for the play.
- 2 Using Chapters 1 to 4 as a guide, write notes on the contexts of the play(s) you are studying.



### Hints

- ◆ Only include biographical details relevant to the plays.
- ◆ Try to maintain a balance of emphasis between the different sections of the context notes.
- ◆ Research the era in which the plays were written, as well as the periods in which the plays are set.
- ◆ Explore similarities between the style/genre employed by the playwright and those of other writers or artists he or she studied or was influenced by.