Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts,
Creative Works Strand, Vol. 11 No. 2, Fall/Winter 2024, pp. 1-5
Ubiquity: http://ed-ubiquity.gsu.edu/wordpress
ISSN: 2379-3007

Thunderstorms and Other Hot Flashes – The role of context in our Tottering Modernity

© J. Patrick McGrail, Ph.D.

Jacksonville State University

Correspondence concerning this article should be directed to J. Patrick McGrail, Ph.D., Jacksonville State University College of Business and Industry, 398 Merrill Hall, Jacksonville, AL 36265

Contact: jmcgrail@jsu.edu

Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts, Creative Works Strand, Vol. 11 No. 2, Fall/Winter 2024

Context matters more than we think in poetry and prose. Read a novel from, say, the 1970s, and we are struck by the passe “hip” lingo and the curious obsessions of the characters at that time. Or, when reading Alexander Pope, beyond finding the language antique and difficult to follow, we might well regard his poetry as irrelevant to the press and crush of our frantic, interconnected world. But this is nothing that Mr. Pope could possibly have helped; he was inextricably a writer of his time, and we are fully wedged in our own. So, time can make a context that is hard to extricate ourselves from when we seek to make sense of literary work. Perhaps only a few writers from centuries past produced written work we consider still relevant, by which I mean that the contexts in which the pieces were written have not overwhelmed the universality of whatever message they create for us.

But time is not the only vessel of context. Each of us brings some context to our work that is unique to ourselves; our ethnicity, our education, where we were born, whom we know, and where we live now all make indelible impressions on the creative work we produce. But even during the course of our lives, the context through which a piece of art we make can change.

I was struck by this as I read Janet Heller’s two works for the Ubiquity Creative Works issue this month, “Hot Flash at Work” and “October Thunderstorms in Michigan ”. Each is a hot flash of a different sort. I sincerely doubt Heller would have written either of these two works twenty years ago. And that is because both she and Michigan were ever so much younger then.

Therefore, the first context that I, as a reader, drape on Janet Heller’s Michigan this month is climate change, a concept never far from our news broadcasts and existential zeitgeist. I bring to her poem, “October Thunderstorms in Michigan”, the context that it is no longer that odd for there to be thunderstorms in Michigan in October. Nor for a December in the United

States to have eerily hot temperatures occasionally, and, as we saw recently, for the remote mountainous areas of North Carolina to be absolutely besieged by a massive storm and destructive floods. The world is warmer than it once was, and that has yielded very uncertain fruit for our environment. Yesterday in northeast Alabama, where I teach, it was 78 degrees Fahrenheit. And this was during the first week of February, when such a temperature would be warm for northern Florida, 20 years ago. And only two or three weeks ago, the cold had reached a bone-chilling 9 F. in Alabama at night, with snow staying on the ground for days.

The second context that I cannot avoid placing on Heller's work concerns her first poem, which is about something I cannot experience, namely hot flashes, at least when they are understood as part of a woman's life phase change. However, all of us experience flashes of concern, of recognition, and some of these we experience palpably as physical.

A context I bring to reading is my love of words. Janet Heller's vocabularic directness in confronting the experience of growing older made me want to learn as much as I could about the words she used. I knew that "vest" came from "vestment" and has always referred to an article of clothing. And like most of us, I know what a cardigan is. I did not, however, know where the word came from. Apparently, it originated with a British general, James Thomas Brudenell, the 7th Earl of Cardigan, who seems to have worn a garment *somewhat* like a cardigan into battle (Brudenell, 1860), but at least when I saw the picture, not something we could pick up at our local Target today. Curiously, Lord Brudenell has a connection to another article of clothing. Sporting his cardigan of sorts, at the Charge of the Light Brigade, he led troops to victory at the Battle of Balaclava (Thomas, 1974). But no, he did not wear a balaclava then, although eventually, Balaclava gave its name to the head garment that skiers and others wear today.

Another context for "cardigan" is the band called the Cardigans, who had some hits about 20 years ago, but were themselves all Swedish, hence none were named "Cardigan." Moreover, a Google search of their images yielded none I saw where any in the band actually *wore* a cardigan, whether of Lord Brudenell's variety or of the modern buttoned-down type.

This all may go to show that a writer can be aware of his/her/their context, but not control exactly how every single reader sees their work. Most of us regard Shakespeare's Scottish play[1] as unyieldingly tragic, but we forget that he inserted in Act II, sc. iii the hilarious porter scene. Shakespeare, who is clearly a writer for whose messages the context of time has failed to mar, seems to be saying to us that even in the direst of circumstances, contravening levity sometimes pokes through (Tromly, 1975).

In Janet Heller's two works, we are struck at first by the plainness of the language. She tells us that these are, respectively a poem and a prose poem, but we are not immediately met with "poetic" language. This is no Edna St. Vincent Millay. This is a writer foursquare in the third decade of the twenty-first century, unflinchingly confronting both an interior and an exterior earthquake. Context – that of poetic form and prosaic structure – bedevils us as it does MacBeth's grinning porter, as he pretends to portend passage to death, even while he is opening a mere wooden door.

[1] The *Tragedy of MacBeth*.

References

Brudenell, J. (1860). *Earl of Cardigan. Commander of the celebrated Charge at Balaclava, Octr. 25 1854* [Steel engraving]. National Army Museum, London, England. https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1960-12-321-19

Thomas, D. (1974). *Charge! Hurrah! Hurrah! A Life of Cardigan of Balaclava*. Routledge.

Tromly, F.B. (1975). Macbeth and his porter. *Shakespeare Quarterly, 26*(2), 151-156.