Section B – Writing in Context – (Creating and Presenting)

Context 2 – Whose Reality?

Text: A Streetcar Named Desire

“We do not see things as they are. We see them as we are.”

There is nothing quite like the smell of a theatre dressing room. That heavy, musky scent of years of makeup, hairspray and perfume that lingers in the air, telling a vague story of performances past. I breathed the air in deeply, savouring the scent. I was a part of that history – little old me, Lillian of country farms and sheep and cows, turned Lyla of the stage. I was ready. Sinking into an elegant bun at the nape of my neck. I was almost ready. Just a touch of rouge, a single spray of perfume and a little puff of the glittered powder on my chest. It added a little something, I thought. A gentle twinkle like a fairy – just like a storybook of fairy. I gave a little twirl and admired the sparkles glinting in the light. Like a jewel, I thought.

Ten minutes to go. I had my little preparation routine so well rehearsed that I was completely ready, so I floated over to the record player and set some familiar music playing to steady my nerves. A faint polka tune, like the ones they play at those dances in the movies. And – One – Two – Three – and – One – Two – Three. I hummed along with the music, doing a little step of my own. I was quite a dancer, I must admit. Quite the dancer... My pale skirts swirled around me as I danced and again, I stopped to admire my reflection in the mirror. All made up, I barely resembled the girl I once was – small, freckly with an unruly mess of hair and scraps on my elbows on knees. All that was gone: hidden under a chiffon veil and reams of cream lace. I was someone else now, someone new. People don’t realize but one can easily change oneself if only one watches a few films here and there, picking up the characters along the way. I took a dash of elegance from one heroine, a delicate nature from another, picking and choosing the qualities like flowers. And here I was, a beautiful bouquet, framed by soft lighting from paper lanterns and with lilting polka music playing behind me.
“It’s time, Miss. Lyla,” I heard a voice call from behind my closed door. “I’m on my way!” I replied happily, a tinkling laugh escaping my lips once more. With one final look I swept out of the dressing room, down the hall and to side stage. I could feel the buzzing atmosphere of the crowd behind the curtain; my adoring fans all waiting to catch a glimpse of the famous and beautiful Little Lyla Two-Step. The curtains swept open and I waited just a moment before stepping into the light. An audience appreciates a little suspense, although they don’t realize it. But I am there to give them what they want – a show like they’ve never seen before.

I’ve done the act a million times over, and I know it as well as the back of my hand. *Twist, jump, smile, tap, pause, laugh, sing, smile...* It plays in my head as I perform, like a script, urging me on to the next move, to the next applause, to the next rose thrown at my feet. By the time the first act is over I’m glowing, and the applause is almost deafening. They love me, quite simply, they utterly adore me and I adore them right back.

“I’ll be back!” I promise before flitting backstage as the curtains swing shut. I can almost hear the groan of disappointment from the audience as they mutter to each other, *but I want to see more now! I can’t wait until next act!* I smile and slip into my dressing room, settling before my mirror and gazing at my face. I’m radiant; my cheeks flushed a pale pink and my eyes sparkling like the glitter on my skin. My eyes move to my red lips and, with a sudden shock, I notice that I am not smiling. I quickly fix that, but the smile I bring only seems forced.

“What’s this?” I murmur to myself. I study my face carefully. The lights are quite bright and for the first time, I see what lies underneath the layers of stage makeup. Small lines ran from the corners of my mouth and my eyes where the skin was once smooth and young. Surely not wrinkles, I was hardly old enough, but there they were. The frown snapped back again and this time I did nothing to fix it. I was aging, and it was showing. I quickly dimmed the lights and sat in the shadows, breathing fast, but it was no use. I had seen my less than perfect face and the image was burnt into my mind. I powdered my face urgently, not settling until a soft cloud of powder wafted around my head. Shaken, I stumbled to the liquor cabinet and poured a glass of whiskey, drowning it in one undignified gulp and giving a sharp cough as the liquid burned my throat. My hands shook as I clutched the glass, but the mouthfuls of the amber liquid did nothing to quell these sudden feelings that had surged toward me so unexpectedly. The room spun unnervingly
and I sunk to the floor, unwilling to stand on my weak legs any longer. I was ashamed, simply ashamed. All this time I thought I had hidden everything, that my age, my past could not be seen under the layers of beauty that I had piled on top of me. But I had been wrong. It had been nothing but a flimsy façade and everyone knew. Such shame . . .

When the knock on my door came I could hardly bring myself to stumble back to side stage, but I could not deny my public of their last ever glimpse of me. I could not perform any longer, of course, not here anyway. I would disappear and reappear in some other town, under some other name and no one would be anymore the wiser, and I would keep my dressing room so dark that I could only see the face that the stage makeup gave me. Only paper lanterns would light my veiled reflection.

I quickly checked my makeup once more, but turned away from my reflection after only a glimpse. My makeup was still perfect; it was my face that was flawed. b I stumbled backstage, waiting for my cue. The curtain swished open once more and the applause started, but to my ears it now sounded weak and hollow. I slowly inched onto the stage, desperately trying to grip onto myself, to get some traction somewhere – anywhere – so that I could perform again. I stood stock still in the center of the stage, waiting for the music and staring blankly into the crowd and what I saw terrified me. My crowd – my adoring crowd – was gone. It had been replaced with cruel, unforgivable people who now glared at me with barely concealable disdain. I began to sing but stuttered over the lines and the silence that greeted me was even more deafening than the applause I had heard just moments ago. They hated me. I was worthless to them, all because my veil had slipped and here I was, entirely exposed to their piercing stares. It was as if they were shouting at me, all of them at once, splitting my head with their loud voices. The room spun once more and I cut off my song suddenly. Tears sprung to my eyes and I let them come, blinding my vision and blocking the awful faces of those before me. I stumbled and gave a little shriek as the audience loomed before me. They were attacking me! They were going to hurt me all because I couldn’t keep myself hidden from them . . . I couldn’t do it forever and now I was going to pay . . . The world around me dimmed and I stumbled forward, the floor rising up with the angry audience to meet me.
CONTEXT: WHOSE REALITY?

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

ESSAY 1. “Our own perspective is the only meaningful source of truth we have.”

From the time we are very young, our perspective colours our understanding of reality. This changes as we mature. For example, perception of age itself varies and we gradually accept the fact of our mortality. Because of this shift as we age, we often lose the dreams which have given us the impetus to achieve in our youth. Such a progression to an adjusted reality is usually accepted as being a healthy stage of growth. The extraordinary results of not being able to make this change are explored in literature and evidenced in rare examples from life, for both better and worse.

Often when middle-aged parents have not achieved their youthful goals they relive them by casting them onto their children, in a vain belief that they can still share in their children’s success. Arthur Miller investigates this in Death of a Salesman. Willy, an aging travelling salesman, and father to 34-year old Biff and 32-year old Happy, fails to adjust to a changing way of doing business. He tells his boss of his early days with the firm, “In those days there was personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it’s all cut and dried, and there’s no chance of bringing friendship to bear”. As a result, his sales income is not enough to pay his bills. He lives instead for Biff’s success, believing, “...you got a greatness in you, Biff, remember that. You got all kinds of greatness” based on Biff’s one-time success as a baseballer. He says to his wife, Linda, “A star like that, magnificent, can never really fade away!” as Biff determines to seek a business job from an old boss for Willy’s sake, as Willy is suicidal. Biff, however, unemployed and with time spent in jail for theft, has a different reality. “Mom, I don’t fit in business” he says. When his attempt at an interview fails, he tries to confront Willy with his version of the truth: “Let’s hold onto the facts tonight, Pop.” But Willy is looking for some good news to tell Linda, to offset his own bad news of being fired. He is unable to accept the evidence of Biff’s failure or stop his dream for his success. Miller eventually makes this lead to Willy’s suicide, as Willy imagines how great Biff will be with “twenty-thousand” insurance money behind him.

“When the mail comes he’ll be ahead of Bernard again” thinks Willy aloud, still in competitive mode. That his vision of success is clinched to Biff is stated amongst his last lines: “Oh, Ben, I always knew one way or another we were gonna make it, Biff and I!” The poignant irony of his vision is that he is about to choose to die, and so not “make it” at all in any sense. Thus his perspective of the truth is as deadly as it is personal.

Against the insanity of suicide as reality and this grim portrait from literature, it is uplifting to find an example in which having an individual perspective enabled someone to deliver outstanding and original achievement. Such a man was Ludwig II of Bavaria. His views on life and ruling were thought to be extreme, and he became known as The Mad King. But his vision has given the world the fabulous architectural structure of Neuschwanstein, the fairytale castle in the Black Forest, and the music of Wagner. This palace was built as a refuge for the king from the world, and no strangers were allowed to enter. In this environment he could exercise his personal, courtly and highly pious understanding of what it was to be a king, and held many private sessions of drama and music, amongst them the works of Wagner. The king himself declared, “I want to remain an eternal mystery to myself
and others", and was intensely private. He worked at night and slept by day. Finally he was declared insane by the government as foreign banks moved to seize his property. Yet since his death more than 50 million people have visited Neuschwanstein to wonder at his creation, and the music of Wagner has become famous due to his patronage. Ludwig had the courage to implement his own perspective and was compelled to live by its consequences.

From the common man like Willy Loman to a king like Ludwig II, the truth by which each operated was driven by their particular understandings of the world. The same principle governs mob behaviour when it is acting as one. In the French Revolution, the peasants were starving. Their reality was very different from the King’s with his wealthy court and palaces. This difference in perspective is well caught in the phrase attributed to Marie Antoinette when the peasants demanded bread at the gates of the Bastille, “Bread? Why, let them eat cake!” Like Willy, the aristocrats’ version of the truth would cost them their lives as the mob guillotined them.

In these examples the validity of the argument that one’s perspective affords one’s operating truth is seen, for better as well as worse. In a negative view from literature, Willy Loman of Miller’s Death of a Salesman refuses to accept his failure in life, and embarks on a deadly mission of suicide to succeed through his son. In a more positive case, Ludwig II of Bavaria thought so far outside normal bounds that he was deemed mad, but unwittingly left a legacy of beautiful architecture and music to the world. Individual truth also governs class action, for example in the French Revolution, the aristocrats were culled because the mob’s antithetical reality drove them to rebel. This perspective usually changes as we mature but where it does not or cannot, the extraordinary occurs.

982 words
CONTEXT: WHOSE REALITY?

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

ESSAY 2. “We are not what we seem to be.”

Creative response: short script

Setting: A modern lounge room

Mimi: “Stop it! Who cares who’s right and who’s wrong? Don’t you see, he’s dead!”
(Threw herself on the couch, crying.)
George: “This would never have happened if you’d made something of yourself!”
Alex: “Look who’s talkin’!”
George: “Wha’dya mean, ‘Look who’s talking’? I did all right.”
Alex: “You and your fine suits! You call losin’ 800 grand doing OK?”
Mimi: “What 800 grand?”
Alex: “You call fiddlin’ around with numbers work? Some of us have to slog it out from our
guts. Day in, day out, all weathers. And against the clock. Hard, honest work. Ha! Fancy you
in a Mac! Wouldn’t last one trip.”
George: “Yeah, and who paid your deposit for the Mac? And who paid for your heavy
licence? And who let you board free? Dad, that’s who! And you never paid him back. And
now you’ll collect again! Trucking magnate, my arse! Lindsay Fox must be trembling in his
boots!
Alex: “You just got lucky with your career!”
(Mimi bursts noisily into tears again)
George: “Can’t you stop snivelling? I can’t think, and there’s important matters to decide.”
Alex: “It’s a wonder you can think at all with that swollen head of yours!”
Mimi: “Stop it! Dad would do anything for both of you, and he’s not even buried and you’re
still fighting as usual. He can’t do anymore. He can’t give anymore. Give him the peace and
dignity now that you never gave him in his life. Can’t these matters wait a while?”
George: “No, Mimi, they absolutely cannot wait. The share market’s not like that. You gotta
be on the ball every minute of every day to capitalise, see? We react, we steer society. David
Jones has taken another hit today and Fairfax is likely to follow thanks to this Gina lass.
When department stores and newspapers are no longer fashionable, we have to guess what’s
next and invest there.”
Alex: “Wouldn’t wanna blow another 800 grand, now, would we?”
Mimi: “George, what’s he talking about?”
Alex: “Yeah, tell her, George. All about your big heart. Tell her how you lost nearly a mill of
battlers’ dough all for leadin’ society.”
George: “You’re being totally unfair and you know it. For starters, it wasn’t even really my
folio. Mimi, I merely gave advice for a funeral fund which turned sour when all the facts
were known. Simple as that. It wasn’t my fault, the court ruled that, Alex, I was just doing
my job.”
Alex: “Great job. Bet you grabbed your commission and ran, leaving the grannies broke
behind you.”
Mimi: “When did this all happen? How come I didn’t know? Don’t tell me Dad knew?”
George: “It happened years ago when I was just starting out interstate. I should’ve known
better but I didn’t. Dad so wanted us to make good. I thought I’d make a little extra, impress
him, you know. But instead it backfired. Dad knew the big picture but never pressed me for
details. I don’t think he could have stood the truth. He put it down to business experience and
we moved on.”
Mimi: *(quietly but firmly)* “Of course he could have stood the truth. He’d been to your dark
places so often himself, but you never saw it. Dad was a strong man. He didn’t ask you about
the truth because he loved you and if you didn’t offer it, that was enough for him. He took the
failures of the two of you fair and square and never stopped fighting for you. So don’t try to
trump him with your intelligence: he was a lot smarter than you’ll ever realise.”
George: “Look, sis, I think I know him better than you. And he wasn’t so smart. He was a
dreamer, that’s all, and it’s a common thing to dream big when you’re small.”
Mimi: *(stung)* “Don’t take of Dad like that! How dare you after all he’s done for you! You’ve
turned out callous as well as greedy, George. That’s something that would hurt Dad. Maybe
it’s just as well you haven’t seen him for five years as he sure wouldn’t be proud of you right
now!”
George: “C’mon, tell me what he did for me! I’m a self-made man! It’s pretty boy here who
got all the help!”
Alex: “He only put you through school and uni, there’s a few tonne! And the door was
always open, every time you got the wobbles and came running home!”
George: “We’re wasting time. Let’s get to business. Dad’s will states the house is to be
maintained in the family, but that’s impractical with all of us being in different states. I say
we should sell it. With the money, I could set up investment portfolios for all of us, for a
small percentage of course.”
Alex: “I’d rather pay off the Mac.”
George: “Can’t do without Dad’s help, even in death, eh? Things must be grimmer than I
thought.”
Mimi: “George, stop it! Don’t bait him. This is a serious matter, have you no sense of
propriety? And anyway, what about you plan? Wouldn’t you profit on Dad, too? For myself,
I’d prefer to travel if we sell, get away, clear the air for a while. After all, I’ve been here as
carer for a solid year and I’m tired. But what of Dad’s wishes? Shouldn’t we obey them? He
always viewed the house as a refuge from the world for all of us.”
George: “Rubbish. He just wants to control us from the grave. The house is falling down.
Look at it! There will have to be money spent on it in a big way. It’s just time for us all to
move on, you especially Mimi. Alex and I left ages ago.”
Mimi: “How do you feel, Alex?”
Alex: “I certainly could do with the help.”
George: “Well, good, are we agreed then? Mimi, you’re outvoted anyway. I’ll see the
solicitors this afternoon. The whole business should be wrapped up in a few months. Mimi,
don’t look so sad! Start packing!
End.

1036 words
Context: Whose Reality?

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Essay 3: “Reality can be beaten with enough imagination.” — Mark Twain

“Give me the strength to dream” is an oft-repeated aphorism. However, perhaps the sentiment should focus on the strength needed to face one’s reality, for it is only in acknowledging the limitations of a situation that dreaming beyond it becomes possible. For some people such acknowledgement is rational and conscious, leading to new and positive realities, but more commonly the reaction of kicking against limitations is embedded in unarticulated feeling and results in frustration. Literature is a safe vehicle in which the negative outcome can be explored. In life, luminaries such as successful entrepreneurs and leaders of state provide inspirational role models to the rank and file.

The Great American Dream of the twentieth century beckoned the ordinary American to accumulate a self-made fortune. Wealth was understood to be the single measure of success, and hence capitalism was understood to be the only mantra of a successful life. Arthur Miller investigates the effect of this dream on a travelling salesman in his play, Death of a Salesman, published in 1949. “What—what’s the secret?” asks the main character, Willy Loman, of his nephew, Bernard, who has found wealth and success as a lawyer. Willy on the other hand struggles to pay his bills and travels a territory of “seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent”. His awareness of his situation prompts him to suicide for the “twenty-thousand dollars” insurance money it will pay to his family. Thus he does have the strength to face his own real situation. However, he lacks the ability to imagine any strategy to get out of it in any positive way, to articulate any alternative success. In his view, his brother Ben is highly successful because he was an entrepreneur in the African mines: “the man knew what he wanted and went out and got it! Walked into the jungle, and comes out, at the age of twenty-one, and he’s rich!” He tries to foist his ideas on Biff, his son, who laments, “Mom, I don’t fit in business” and “I just can’t take hold, Mom, I can’t take hold of some kind of a life.” If Willy’s tragedy is that he is too blinded by the American Dream, Biff’s is that he is not motivated by a dream of anything, perhaps because as he himself confesses, he lacks the ability to articulate the limitations of his reality. As he tells Willy, “Today I realised something about myself and I tried to explain it to you and I—I think I’m just not smart enough to make any sense out of it for you.” As Biff discovers, self-awareness is essential to self-mastery. And without the strength from such knowledge, the strength to dream beyond one’s reality is not possible if the outcome is to be positive.

In the entrepreneurial world, a knowledge of one’s strengths is often the feeding ground for original developments. An icon of self-determination is Sir Richard Branson, the highly inventive and mega-successful billionaire founder of the Virgin Group of some 400 companies. He writes, “My biggest motivation? Just to keep challenging myself. I see life almost like one long university education that I never had — every day I’m learning something new.” Sir Richard seized the reality of being dyslexic and leaving school at Year 10 level. His limitations fuelled his imagination instead of stunting it. Instead of being beaten by the student world and his peers, he quietly ventured into launching his first magazine in the only area he knew well, youth culture. Student was a publication produced by students for students. Its first edition sold $20,000 of advertising allowing 55,000 copies to be freely distributed. Sir Richard had struck success. Using his natural entrepreneurial flair and people skills, his ensuing projects in the music industry culminated in Virgin Records with its
recording studio. His determination to stay successful after it hit financial difficulties saw him diversify and create Virgin Radio, and V2, a second recording company. With a passion for making the dream possible, he then changed industries and brought the world affordable air transport with Virgin Airlines. Finally in recent years he has his sights set on space travel, something which stays on most people’s fantasy list, with Virgin Galactic. Sir Richard is obviously someone who had and still has “the strength to dream” prompted by his perceptions of the smallness of the reality around him.

Such a provocation also prompts many leaders into taking office. Legendary leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi in India and Nelson Mandela in South Africa were personal victims of the injustice in their societies. In place of resigning their fates to the status quo, both had the courage to face the desperate realities of racism and apartheid respectively and the imaginative strength to dream up a way out for their peoples. Without their accurate understanding of the reality of their countries’ situations, the proper solutions would not have been found and they would not have been made heads of state. As a humble citizen, Gandhi visually demonstrated his position and unity with his fellow Indians by deciding to ditch British suits and wear Indian clothing with pride everywhere, even in Britain, and by using common salt as a political tool against taxes. By these immediately recognisable token measures he was able to use the essential reality of what set Indians apart from the British to build a dream of their independence. Mandela went to prison for over twenty years for his beliefs against apartheid and inspired three generations to believe that it should and could be changed. Both men saw new realities grow from their strength to meet their worlds head on and then to dream.

This discussion about reality and imagination illustrates that the two must work together for real achievement to be possible. As Miller warns in Death of a Salesman, if the two are not synchronized, tragedy can result. But in cases where the strength to dream is based on an equivalent strength to face reality first, truly amazing things can happen, as seen in the changes brought about by entrepreneurs such as Sir Richard Branson and extraordinary leaders such as Gandhi and Mandela.

1047 words
Sample 1: Expository essay

**TASK:** Write a sustained piece exploring the idea that science provides no better description of reality than art or religion can. Draw on ideas or arguments presented in *Enduring Love* in your response.

**TITLE:** The Artist’s Guide to Reality

**Written explanation**

'The artist’s guide to reality' suggests ways in which an artistic viewpoint can provide insights into the reality of our world that science and religion are not always able to provide. This is an expository essay that aims to inform and explain, comparing and contrasting the three points of view rather than mounting an argument, and assumes little prior knowledge on the part of the audience. The intended audience is, however, assumed to be an educated adult audience that would read a serious magazine or newspaper supplement, and the language used in the essay aims for a level of sophistication that such readers would expect.

The essay draws on Ian McEwan’s novel *Enduring Love*, which provides examples of the different worldviews and suggests that very different perceptions of reality can arise from them.

**Essay: The Artist’s Guide to Reality**

As I sit here writing I am frequently being distracted by the view through my window. I can see trees gently blowing in the wind, their leaves a mixture of green and orangey-brown. The sun is low in the sky and the dappled light filters through the leaves and branches creating unusual shifting patterns on my desk. What is the reality that I am perceiving here? And what is the best guide to this reality? Should I be thinking of the genius of the tree, the time of year, the angle of the sun in the sky? All of these things might contribute to a scientific understanding of reality. On the other hand, if I were a religious person I might be filled with awe at the wonder of God’s creation. The closest approximation of the way I actually feel, though, is an artistic point of view. Just as Dante had the Roman poet Virgil guide him through the depths of the Inferno, so I would choose to have an artist rather than a scientist or a mystic as my guide as I explore the nature of reality.

In Ian McEwan’s novel *Enduring Love*, the action revolves around three characters who seem to represent different ways of perceiving the world. The narrator, Joe, a writer of popular science articles, clearly represents the scientific point of view. Joe's
tormentor, Jed Parry, is consumed by his rather unusual beliefs and supplies the religious point of view. Joe's wife Clarissa is a university academic specialising in Romantic Literature. She provides the artistic point of view. Joe and Clarissa are brought together with Jed at the scene of a tragic balloon accident, and their respective reactions to this event are telling. Joe attempts to give an objective description of the tragedy and pictures the would-be rescuers approaching the balloon in mathematical terms. Jed's first response to the tragedy is to pray, and he sees some sort of cosmic significance in the way that he and Joe were brought together. Clarissa, however, thinks of a quote from Milton's epic poem Paradise Lost: 'Hurl'd headlong flaming from th’Ethereal Sky.' Although the novel privileges Joe's scientific world view by having him narrate the story, I would choose Clarissa as the best guide to the reality that I perceive.

Now I'll return to the view through my window, the reality of the outside world. The sky is now strewn with clouds and the setting sun has turned a shade of pink as it sinks slowly towards the horizon. What I'm thinking of is not whether the clouds are cirrus or cumulonimbus, or whether there might be a high-pressure system coming. The scientific view might often be a valid way to perceive the world, but for the reality that I am currently experiencing it provides no real insights. Nor do I see any religious significance in the view, despite its majestic nature. Some people might find comfort and purpose in the religious point of view, but these are not what I'm looking for. Instead, I respond most strongly to the artistic viewpoint of the poet John Keats, one of Clarissa's particular areas of expertise in Enduring Love. Winter may be here already, but the leaves on the tree still have their autumn colours, and a line from Keats's poem 'To Autumn' comes to mind: 'While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day.' Now this, finally, is my reality. This is not a clinical description or dry classification. This is not superstition or religious mysticism. Rather, this poetic parallel to the scene before me deepens and enriches the way I perceive reality.

I don't mean to suggest that an artistic sense of reality is always superior to a scientific or religious sense, merely that its perspective is often in tune with my own. We can have very different experiences of reality depending on what viewpoint we approach it with. Each of us frequently mixes the different viewpoints in our everyday lives. At the same time, however, we can be more in sympathy with one point of view than the others, and when I am lost in the world I'll be immediately reaching for the artist's guide to reality.