

Indian Horse

Sample Seminar:

How context influences one's understanding of the text



How does understanding the historical, authorial, OR cultural context during the time in which this text was written contribute to your understanding of this passage?

Historical Context:

- Treaties were agreements that were signed under the belief that they showed “honour” to all nations - they were covenants between sovereign nations (equals), but the Europeans and then Canadian gov’t had a different perspective as shown through residential schools, 60’s Scoop, Indian Act, Oka Crisis, etc. - ethnocentrism led to oppression and forced assimilation rather than a cooperation between nations. Result = mental health concerns, conflict, depression, economic instability, national identity crisis
- The residential schools tore apart families and were tools used to enact cultural genocide resulting in transgenerational trauma
- The 60’s Scoop was supported using ignorant assumptions built on ethnocentric beliefs leading to identity crisis.

Textual Evidence (Quote):

“A great change will come. It will come with the speed of lightning and **it will scorch all our lives.** This is what **Horse** said to me under that great bowl of sky. ‘The people will see many things they have never seen before, and I am but one of them. **When the Zhaunagush came they brought the Horse with them. The people saw the Horse as special.** They sought to learn its medicine. **It became a sign of honour to ride these spirit beings...But the Zhaunagush could only see this act as thievery, as the behaviour of lesser people, so they called us horse thieves.** The change that comes our way will come...In sights that are mysterious to our eyes, in sounds that are grating...in ways of thinking that will crash like thunder in our hearts and minds...But we must learn to ride each one of these horses of change. It is what the future asks of us and our survival depends on it. That is the spirit teaching of the Horse”(7)

Connecting the text to Historical Context:

- My understanding of the historical context helps me to recognize that “A great change” foreshadows the cultural genocide that will occur in the text as a result of the loss of sovereignty through colonization.
- My understanding of cultural assimilation helps me infer that The “Horse” is a symbol for the new way of life that arrived on the land - the European traditions. The Horse is respected and honoured by the Anishinabeg people. They attempt to assimilate this new “spirit” being into their lives and traditions - this is the start of cultural assimilation.
- The Europeans see them as “thieves” and “lesser beings” rather than spiritual allies and equals. My understanding of Ethnocentrism helps me to see that their labels are based on ignorant perspectives - I infer that this is a cause of the discrimination.

Connecting the text to Historical Context:

- **In sights that are mysterious to our eyes** - I can connect this to cities that replaced nature, mass hunting for trade, residential schools - started as cooperation then became forced assimilation due to ethnocentrism
- **in sounds that are grating** - connect to language and weaponry that are foreign + cries of those abused + language that oppresses (stereotyping) - grating because they were forced not shared
- **in ways of thinking that will crash like thunder in our hearts and minds.** ways of thinking” : land claims and religious beliefs were imposed rather than shared and adopted cooperatively

Significance of the contextualization:

The juxtaposition of the views regarding the horse (honour vs thievery) reveals the importance of understanding. This reflects the reality that when labels are created and judgements are made without understanding, then an “us vs them” mentality results. This “us” vs “them” mentality is/was used to justify the breaking of treaties, the oppression of people, and the creation of residential schools shown in the text and in history.

“The Horse” (perhaps Indian Horse the text) is a symbol to teach that ethnocentrism leads to misunderstanding, which breeds conflict, oppression, and trauma. This teaches that when people try to identify one culture as being better than another, then this leads to negative outcomes. It also hints at the beauty in sharing traditions through understanding (as shown in the first experience with the horse before the misunderstanding is imposed).

How does understanding the historical, authorial, OR cultural context during the time in which this text was written contribute to your understanding of this passage?

Authorial Context: Richard Wagamese

- abandoned by his parents and turned to alcoholism for a version of “healing”
- Only found healing when he returned to storytelling (through library books then oral tradition)
- He found a way to bridge the two cultures in which he was raised. As a result, he thrived.

Connecting to Authorial Context Reveals

“But we must learn to ride each one of these horses of change. It is what the future asks of us and our survival depends on it” -

- Richard Wagamese actually rode “each one of these horses of change”. He experienced the transgenerational trauma from residential schools, he suffered through discrimination + oppression, he gave into alcoholism and drug abuse
- Then he stopped running and judging and started understanding his experiences and his world through books. This understanding resulted in him embracing the beauty within both cultures in which he was raised: combined his traditional love of storytelling with writing using English.
- In sharing his journey through storytelling and writing he regained strength.

Significance of the contextualization:

The fact that Wagamese found solace in blending library books, writing novels, and storytelling to achieve understanding reveals the lesson that one must embrace “each one of these horses of change”, taking lessons from experience and understanding. Combining this with the significance found in the historical context leads to...

Inferred lesson: Avoid ignorant judgements, which result in conflict that leads to an identity crisis; instead, focus on understanding all aspects of one’s world and find ways to reconcile and honour all aspects of Canadian cultural identity to achieve peace.