2.3 To what extent do texts offer insight into another culture?

OBJECTIVES OF CHAPTER

- To consider the difficulties of representing the complexity of cultures through texts.
- To consider the importance of different perspectives within cultures.
- To explore the differing insights offered by outsiders and insiders to a culture.
- To examine how global brands adapt to suit different cultures.

In the previous chapter, we looked at different ways to approach texts from times and cultures other than our own. In this chapter, we are going to consider more fully how texts **offer insight into other cultures**, and explore the extent to which that insight is offered.

Every one of us reading this coursebook is immersed in a particular time and culture. Some of us may be in a bustling Asian city like Hong Kong, with its mixture of Cantonese and Western culture. Some of us may be in Paris, with its French culture and its *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité*. Some of us may be third culture children – people who are influenced by a mix of cultures growing up – and could be a person of mixed Indian and English descent living in Peru; the possibilities are near endless. It is this complexity that affects the texts we create and the way we interpret texts written by others.

As cultural boundaries blur and intercultural relationships become more common, an openness and understanding of other cultures is increasingly important. As explored in the previous chapter, one of the most powerful ways of understanding another culture is through a work or text that has been produced within it.

Our guiding conceptual question asks us to consider the extent to which we are given insight through such texts. It is true that texts have their limits. Let's first consider some of the **limitations** of texts providing insights into culture.

- **The complex nature of culture:** It is a good time to remember that cultures are fuzzy, complex and often contradictory constructions. An overall culture often broadly encompasses other cultures within it, sometimes grouped by religious beliefs, race, or geography. American culture is a good example: African-American culture has certain distinctions from Southern US American culture which has certain distinctions from Native American culture, yet they all contain a lot of overlap and often feed off each other. This 'melting pot' of cultures contains a variety of experiences and contradictions, but these will not always be evident in isolated texts, which leads on to our next point …
- **Narrow perspective:** The insights into culture you gain from a particular text are narrow. A single text is one voice among many, and often reflects specific parts of a much wider and diverse culture. This is because a text is almost always created by one writer, and they are communicating their one perspective and experience. Representation can also be an issue – it is often the oppressed who have their voices silenced or minimized, and this can extend to texts. To gain a better understanding, a range of texts needs to be engaged with, providing a range of perspectives. In doing so, a much broader picture of a place is painted, with the complexities and subtleties that can offer true insight.

- **Texts are reproductions:** Without being physically immersed in a culture – tasting the food, taking in the smell of a city, seeing the sights, and hearing the musicality of the language – it is hard to truly understand what life is like there. This essence of a culture cannot be produced in a text, it can only be *re*produced. Any act of communication, particularly through a text, is an act of reproduction – an imperfect attempt to capture an essence of a place, a culture, a feeling, an experience. When a text describes the markets of Istanbul, we cannot smell the aroma of the spices ourselves, we can only have it described to us through the craft of the writer and experienced through our imagination. It is better than nothing, but it is always a second-hand experience.
- **Language barrier:** This course focuses on texts in English. We look at texts in translation, but translating the native words of a culture into English is an imprecise science and never truly retains the entire original meaning of a text. Reading a Russian classic like Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, for example, is often said to lose a little of its magic and power when divorced from the original Russian – even the word 'crime' itself is an imprecise translation of *prestupleniye*, which literally means 'stepping over' in English.

Despite all of these deficiencies, texts can still provide valuable insight into a culture; it may be at best a facsimile, but a text opens up cross cultural understanding that is important in an increasingly globally connected world. The Language and Literature course is designed with this in mind – it is no accident that you are confronted with texts from a variety of times and places and in a variety of forms.

From the outside looking in

Cultures are not always explored in texts by writers that grew up immersed in them. Sometimes, outsiders to a culture can provide a fresh perspective and insight that other outsiders may find easier to relate to. At other times, they may offer a reductive or stereotyped insight of that culture that may be considered offensive. Our following two texts provide two different perspectives on the same issue. One is from an outsider looking in, and the other is from an insider looking around them. Both are focused on the Indian slums, and both show different insights into Indian culture.

Shantaram by Gregory Roberts (2003)

Gregory David Roberts

Australian Gregory David Roberts, born 1952, has had an eventful life. After divorce and losing custody of his daughter, he became addicted to heroin. To fund his drug habit, he became known as the 'Gentleman Bandit' and robbed banks that he ensured had adequate insurance, sometimes wearing a three-piece suit and always being sure to say 'please' and 'thank you'. After being caught and jailed, he escaped from Pentridge Prison in 1980 and went on the run, spending many years living in India. He was caught in Frankfurt in 1990 smuggling heroin, extradited to Australia and jailed for six years. It is during this imprisonment that he began writing his famous novel *Shantaram*. He has since moved around the world continuing with his writing career and supporting charity work.

Shantaram is a novel loosely based on the eventful life of the author, Gregory Roberts. Lindsay, the main character, has escaped prison in Australia and fled to India. While travelling through the country to Bombay, he is robbed and ends up having to live in the slums. Despite being wanted for crimes elsewhere, he is sheltered by the people he encounters. He learns the language and becomes part of the community, falls in love, and embroils himself in an underworld crime syndicate.

In considering this text, we must ask ourselves how and to what extent does an outsider's perspective offer insight into a foreign culture? Though it has its challenges, writers often write of cultures they themselves are not a part of, in the same way they may write of historical times they did not experience. To do so is fraught with danger, as it is easy to misrepresent a culture, or to show a lack of cultural sensitivity and understanding (*Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden, for example, was accused by some of exoticizing and stereotyping elements of Japanese culture). But it does offer some advantages:

- **Wider perspective:** It allows a wider perspective as the writer is able to compare it to their own culture and other cultures they may have experienced.
- **Fresh insight:** It allows a fresh point of view as the writer may have an unusual perspective on a culture or see beauty in things that would otherwise be ignored by people native to that culture.

Shantaram is, of course, a novel. This allows what is often referred to as 'poetic licence' – an ability to deviate from true reality and to add imagined detail for artistic effect. In addition to this, Roberts is only a partial outsider; he may not have grown up in the slums, but he did spend time living there. With these things in mind, the description of the slums may be exaggerated, romanticized or heightened for descriptive impact. It is not always the writer's intent to create a truly accurate reflection of a place or culture, but one that suits their story or their intended readership. However, these texts are sometimes the only exposure a reader has to a culture, and texts can sometimes help generate stereotypes and reductive impressions in the minds of their readers. This means a critical eye must always be used when reading texts that relate to culture: Has the writer exaggerated aspects of this culture? Is the writer exoticizing the descriptions to make them more appealing? Am I only being presented this culture from a Western perspective? What aspects of this culture is the writer *not*

describing? Any assumptions about culture garnered from texts should always be tested with further research and reading, particularly when that writer was born an outsider. With this in mind, consider the following extract and the extent to which Roberts is able to provide insight into another culture.

Like brown and black dunes, the acres of slums rolled away from the roadside, and met the horizon with dirty heat-haze mirages. The miserable shelters were patched together from rags, scraps of plastic and paper, reed mats, and bamboo sticks. They slumped together, attached one to another, and with narrow lanes winding between them. Nothing in the enormous sprawl of it rose much above the height of a man.

It seemed impossible that a modern airport, full of prosperous and purposeful travellers, was only kilometers away from those crushed and cindered dreams. My first impression was that some catastrophe had taken place, and that the slums were refugee camps for the shambling survivors. I learned, months later, that they *were* survivors, of course, those slum-dwellers: the catastrophes that had driven them to the slums from their villages were poverty, famine, and bloodshed. And five thousand new survivors arrived in the city every week, week after week, year after year.

As the kilometres wound past, as the hundreds of people in those slums became thousands, and tens of thousands, my spirit writhed. I felt defiled by my own health and the money in my pockets. If you feel it at all, it's a lacerating guilt, that first confrontation with the wretched of the earth. I'd robbed banks, and dealt drugs, and I'd been beaten by prison warders until my bones broke. I'd been stabbed, and I'd stabbed men in return. I'd escaped from a hard prison full of hard men, the hard way - over the front wall. Still, that first encounter with the ragged misery of the slum, heartbreak all the way to the horizon, cut into my eyes. For a time, I ran onto the knives.

Then the smoulders of shame and guilt flamed into anger, became fist-tightening rage at the unfairness of it: *What kind of a government,* I thought, *what kind of a system allows suffering like this?*

But the slums went on, kilometre after kilometre, relieved only by the awful contrast of the thriving businesses and crumbling, moss-covered apartment buildings of the comparatively affluent. The slums went on, and their sheer ubiquity wore down my foreigner's pieties. A kind of wonder possessed me. I began to look beyond the immensity of the slum societies, and to see the people who lived within them. A woman stooped to brush forward the black satin psalm of her hair. Another bathed her children with water from a copper dish. A man led three goats with red ribbons tied to the collars at their throats. Another man shaved himself at a cracked mirror. Children played everywhere. Men carried water in buckets. Men made repairs to one of the huts. And everywhere that I looked, people smiled and laughed …

I looked at the people, then, and I saw how *busy* they were - how much industry and energy described their lives. Occasional sudden glimpses inside the huts revealed the astonishing cleanliness of that poverty: the spotless floors, and glistening metal pots in neat, tapering towers. And then, last, what should've been first, I saw how beautiful they were: the women wrapped in crimson, blue, and gold; the women walking barefoot through the tangled shabbiness of the slum with patient, ethereal grace; the white-toothed, almond-eyed handsomeness of the men; and the affectionate camaraderie of the fine-limbed children, older ones playing with younger ones, many of them supporting baby brothers and sisters on their slender hips. And half an hour after the bus ride began, I smiled for the first time.

(Gregory Roberts 4)

Wider perspective

The protagonist, our narrator of the story, initially has a strong reaction that someone used to such a slum may not have. He shows this with the emotive metaphor describing the 'smoulders of shame and guilt' that 'flamed into anger' (line 19). The abstract nouns 'shame', 'guilt' and 'anger' demonstrate a sequence of emotion that an outsider may feel: shame that they were not aware of the problem; guilt that they have lived in relative comfort while people elsewhere in the would live in such poverty; anger that it is a problem that exists. His anger is directed towards the Indian government, asking, 'What kind of a system allows suffering like this?' (line 20). This simplistic reaction is the luxury of an outsider, someone without deep knowledge of the complex ways a country works. It is also looking at India through a **Western** lens. This outrage in an Indian writer may not be quite as stark, as the reality of the slums would be something they may have grown up with. They may have a clearer understanding of the historical, political, economic and cultural reasons the slums exist. This demonstrates how outsiders can often make broad comments about other cultures despite a shallow knowledge and understanding of the place they are describing. However, this often means they are reflecting questions and perspectives the reader may share as the reader is often an outsider themselves.

Our character is also able to provide commentary on inequality. He speaks of feeling defiled by his 'health' and 'money' (line 13) – symbols of his Western lifestyle. The metaphorical 'lacerating guilt' (line 14) conveys the almost physical response he has to seeing such poverty that was hitherto unimaginable. In writing as an outsider, he is able to express sentiments that other outsiders may feel, but insiders to the culture being described may not. This outsider's perspective, though instinctive and fresh, still has value when looking for insight into another culture. It is easy for those within a culture to become used to the status quo, and an outsider can sometimes ask questions that people of that culture have stopped asking.

Fresh insight

Outsiders also have an ability to see beauty in the mundane. Sometimes we take our own culture for granted until an outsider visits and is full of praise for the things we see as everyday. When writing in such a way, there is always a danger of this falling into what we call **exoticizing** other cultures – describing them in romantic terms, falling back on stereotypes, focusing on the unusual and simplifying them to fit an outsider's narrative. This is not always intentional, and not always negative, but it can sometimes cause offence to people of that culture. A text that exoticizes can reduce 'foreign' characters to stereotypes, or describe things that to a cultural insider would be 'normal' in exaggerated, heightened language that emphasizes the foreignness of the place. Historically, this most often happened when Western writers have been writing about non-Western cultures – meaning the reader is provided with a Western perspective on the wider world and fails to empathize and understand what these cultures are truly like. In the past, many writers of cultures around the world have been marginalized, or if they have been published, their works have not been translated into English. This is why reading texts in translation is particularly important; it allows non-Western voices to be heard through texts written by non-Western writers about their non-Western cultures.

There is, perhaps, evidence of **exoticization** in our extract. The people of the slums are described as 'beautiful' and the women wear 'crimson, blue, and gold', carrying themselves with 'ethereal grace' (lines 33–34). There is also a 'white-toothed, almond eyed handsomeness' (line 35) of the men. These heightened physical descriptions reinforce stereotypical views of India as a place of exotic colour and beauty; there is a focus on the superficial 'otherness' of life there. Rather than focusing

on the reality of day-to-day life in the slums, the writer focuses on a noble beauty he perceives in the people. In describing the slum and its inhabitants in such an exotic, enchanting and intoxicating way, it is easy to sideline how problematic their plight is. Nevertheless, the writer successfully creates vivid and evocative imagery in the reader's mind, which is of paramount importance when writing a novel, and is perhaps an example of the poetic licence we mentioned before. And, of course, we are being a little unfair to Roberts: the rest of the novel gives a far more nuanced perspective on the slums, and our extract deliberately shows an outsider's initial reaction to them.

GLOBAL ISSUES *Field of inquiry:* **Politics, Power and Justice**

WEALTH INEQUALITY

As we have seen, this work explicitly deals with income inequality through the lens of an Australian man viewing the slums of Bombay, now known as Mumbai. For him, such poverty had previously seemed distant and foreign, but physically experiencing the slums triggers a wave of shame and anger he describes as a 'lacerating guilt' (line 14). Though the life, energy and beauty of the slums is explored later in the novel, this initial reaction conveys a guilt that many privileged people share when faced with the poverty that much of the world's wealth is built on.

Many bodies of work can be found that explore the same issue. An increasing awareness of global supply chains has made the public ever more conscious of the conditions in factories that produce much of the world's goods. Various anti-sweatshop advertising campaigns can be found that raise awareness of the issue, and a series of infographics have been produced to emphasize the scale of the problem. Searching for terms such as 'sweatshop political cartoon' also brings up a series of cartoons that deal with the suffering behind the manufacturing of products bought in wealthier countries. Beyond this, many films, photographs, articles and appeals also relate to the global issue of wealth inequality.

Shantaram is an interesting example of a text by an outsider. It contains autobiographical elements but is, at its heart, a novel. Fiction is not primarily concerned with accuracy in the same way a painter is not concerned with creating a precisely accurate image of a place. By its nature, the text-type allows imaginative detail, exaggeration and a focus on feeling. We cannot read all texts as if they are neutral passages in an encyclopaedia, there to provide factual insight into a culture, and this is something we need to be aware of as readers. This is similar to writers setting stories in the past or in space – they can often just be convenient backdrops for the deeper messages of the text, which often transcend such cultural concerns. For many in India, however, it can be frustrating that poverty is so often the focus of film and literature set in their country, and that other aspects of India are often sidelined by outsiders. *Shantaram*, it appears, has elements of truth, but it needs to be considered a voice among many rather than giving definitive insight into India and the Mumbai slums.

TOK Links

These are issues writers and critics often wrestle with: if a writer deals with a culture other than their own, is it their responsibility to portray it accurately? Should we expect documentary-level accuracy in works of fiction? Do writers outside cultures even have the right to write about them, or is this a form of cultural appropriation?

Times of India (2013)

By contrast, our next text is written by a writer within Indian culture. This article is an op-ed from the *Times of India* giving a positive spin on the slums that exist in most major cities in the country. The *Times of India* is a broadsheet newspaper and is the third-largest in the country in terms of circulation. Consider how the text provides insight into the culture, and how similar or different it is to Gregory Roberts' novel extract.

KEY FEATURES OP-ED

- **Expresses opinion:** An article in a newspaper in which newspaper staff or guest writers convey their opinions on an issue. The name originally came from the page **op**posite the **ed**itorial page, but is now often understood as meaning 'opinion editorial'.
- **Solid foundation:** Op-eds are usually backed up by research or well-thought-through points in order to make the opinion more compelling.
- **Clear structure:** Op-eds have a clearly organized structure and may make use of features such as bullet points and imagery. They are reasonably short and provide a clear argument.
- **Rhetoric:** They sometimes feature persuasive techniques to make the opinion more impactful.
- **Strong ending:** Op-eds, much like speeches, often end with some sort of a call for action or an imperative demanding change.

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/Swaminomics/slums-are-hubs-of-hope-progress-and-dignity/

Slums are hubs of hope, progress and dignity

The Census Commissioner has released a new report showing that 64 million people, representing one in six urban residents, live in slums with unsanitary conditions 'unfit for human habilitation'. This has caused much moaning and groaning. But conditions are far worse in most villages. Romantic pastoralists may fantasize about happy green villages as opposed to filthy urban slums. But migration of millions proves that villagers see slums, warts and all, as the way forward.

Yes, slums are dirty, but they are also entrepreneurial hubs where India's poor are climbing up the ladder of opportunity and income. The census report shows that 16.7% of slum households are factories, shops and offices. These are humming commercial centres, not dead-ends.

Dharavi in Mumbai, India's largest slum, has an estimated business turnover of $650 million. It has created slumdog millionaires aplenty. They should be objects of envy, not objects of pity.

Dalit writers like Chandhra Bhan Prasad and Milind Kamble have highlighted how cities are hubs of opportunity and dignity. Ambedkar rightly denounced villages as cesspools of cruelty and prejudice. Dominant castes continue acting like feudal rulers in many rural areas. Social barriers make it difficult for dalits and shudras to raise their heads in many villages. But once they migrate to towns, they escape the caste discrimination and landowner-dependency of rural India. They earn far more in towns than in villages, and the money they send home frees their relatives from historical dependence on village feudatories.

Slums are the entry point of the poor into cities. Insane tax and urban land policies have encouraged a never-ending avalanche of black money into real estate. Urban land prices have skyrocketed, and bear no relationship to the income they generate. Land is unaffordable by most of the middle class, let alone the poor. This is one reason why urbanization has been so slow in India.

The poor can enter cities only through existing or new shanty-towns. This is illegal, yet fully accepted by politicians as a legitimate form of entry. So, shanty-towns are frequently regularized before election time.

No politician dares raze them. Rather, they are improved through supplies of water and electricity. Many slums simply steal electricity, with the tacit backing of politicians plus bribes to linesmen.

The census description of slums as 'unfit for human habitation' is highly misleading. In fact census data prove that slums are much better off than villages, which are presumably fit for habitation! No less than 70% of slum households have TVs, against only 47% of total Indian households. The ratio is just 14.5% in Bihar and 33.2% in UP. Even Narendra Modi's shining Gujarat (51.2%) and Pawar's Maharashtra (58.8%) have a far lower rate of TV ownership than our slums!

True, 34% of slums don't have toilets. Yet the ratio is as high as 69.3% in rural India. Ratios are worst in rural Jharkhand (90%) and Bihar (82%). But even Modi's Gujarat (67%) and Pawar's Maharashtra (62%) are far worse off than urban slums.

Similar stories hold for access to tap water, education, healthcare, electricity or jobs. As many as 90% of slum dwellers have electricity, against barely half of rural households. Ownership of cellphones (63.5%) is as high among slum dwellers as richer urban households, and way above rural rates. One-tenth of slums have computers, and 51% have cooking gas (not far short of 65% of total urban households). Amazingly, more slum households (74%) have tap water than total urban households (70.6%).

So, let nobody misinterpret the Census report on slums as a terrible indictment. The report does indeed highlight unsanitary, cramped conditions, and the need to improve these. Yet it also provides a wealth of data showing how slums are better off than villages, and how on some counts slum-dwellers are as well off as richer urban dwellers. The report fails to highlight the extent to which slums have generated thousands of thriving businesses. It also fails to highlight the role of slums in helping conquer rural caste and feudal oppression.

Forget tear-jerkers about our filthy slums. Instead, see them as entry-points of the poor into the land of urban opportunity. See them as havens of dignity for dalits and shudras. See them as hubs of rising income and asset ownership, which have already generated several rupee millionaires.

This means we need more slums, more hubs of opportunity. The urban gentry want to demolish slums, but they are plain wrong. Instead we should improve slum sanitation, water supply and garbage disposal. We need more improved slums, upgraded slums, but slums nevertheless.

DISCLAIMER : Views expressed above are the author's own.

(Swaminathan Aiyar)

Context	India – 2013
Genre	Newspaper article – op-ed
Audience	Adults in India, particularly those with an interest in social issues
Purpose	To inform and persuade

In this text we get a far more practical perspective of the slums. While the *Shantaram* extract gives an outsider's first reaction to them, the writer of this op-ed gives a far more considered explanation of how, in many ways, slums provide better conditions than the countryside. This demonstrates a more in-depth understanding of India and its demography of a kind that an outsider would struggle to possess.

ACTIVITY 3

Can you find examples of the key features of an op-ed and explain how they are used to provide a positive perspective on the slums? Here are some hints to get you started. Answers can be found in the back of the book.

- **Expresses an opinion:** *Sum up the opinion of the writer and explain how it may be considered surprising.*
- **Solid foundation:** *Look for examples of statistical and factual evidence used to back up the writer's opinions.*
- **Clear structure:** *Explain how the points the writer makes are ordered to keep the ideas clear and effective for the reader.*
- **Rhetoric:** *Look for persuasive techniques in the article.*
- **Strong ending:** *Explain how the article ends with a call to arms and a clear sense of how things need to change.*

This type of text has a very different function to a novel and is far more grounded in the practicalities and realities of slum life. We get a more subtle and less descriptive sense of the slums, and the writer provides surprising insight into a place that may be dismissed by outsiders as an appalling place to live. Such nuance is often beyond the grasp of outsiders to a culture, whereas a writer from within the culture can provide perspectives that are sometimes surprising and almost always better informed.

In looking at the culture of India, we have explored how insights from people within and without the culture can vary. Writers writing about a culture that is not their own can provide fresh insight, and their perspective can often resonate with other outsiders. Writers from within a culture can often write with more detail and capture its essence and subtleties. Both have value, and we can get a rounder picture of a culture by reading a variety of texts from a variety of perspectives.

Cultural complexity

Cultures are complex and often contradictory constructions. Writers frequently try to explore these contradictions in their work, and Federico Garcia Lorca was no exception. His native Spain had a stark divide between traditionalist conservatives and progressive liberals. Despite his liberal background, he was fascinated by the conservative side of Spain, particularly the music and folklore of the rural areas of his homeland. He produced a series of plays that sought to provide insight into this part of Spanish culture.

Blood Wedding by Federico García Lorca (1932)

Federico García Lorca

Federico García Lorca, born in 1898, was one of the most important Spanish poets, playwrights and theatre directors of the twentieth century. He was a Republican with strongly liberal views in a divided Spain, where liberal Republican views clashed with conservative Nationalist views. After spending some time in New York, he travelled the countryside of Spain with his theatre company 'La Barraca', giving free performances of Spanish classics. With this group, he also produced the three 'rural tragedies' which cemented his theatrical reputation: *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*. In 1936, he was tragically shot by a Nationalist and anti-Communist death squad during the Spanish Civil War for being a liberal, a Republican and a homosexual, all of which were considered to be unforgivable. He was buried in an unmarked grave.

The Spanish countryside was highly religious, conservative, and had clear social rules, particularly regarding women and honour. García Lorca's play explores what happens when those rules are broken, and how society reacts. Based on a true story from the Almeria province of Spain, the bride of the play gets married to the groom – the son of the mother in our extract. However, she does not love him, and eventually runs away with a married man called Leonardo. The two lovers flee to the forest, a symbolic escape from the stifling rules of the village into the wild and raw expanse of nature. The groom and a vigilante group of villagers head to the forest, where Leonardo and the groom kill each other in battle. Our extract shows the reaction of the mother of the now-dead groom when confronted with the source of the conflict: the bride who abandoned her son.

The BRIDE enters. She comes without the orange-blossom and wearing a black shawl.

NEIGHBOUR *(angrily, seeing the BRIDE)*: Where are you going?

BRIDE: I'm coming here.

MOTHER *(to the NEIGHBOUR)*: Who is it?

NEIGHBOUR: Don't you know her?

MOTHER: That's why I'm asking who she is. Because I mustn't know her, so I shan't sink my teeth into her neck. Serpent!

She moves towards the BRIDE threateningly; she stops.

(To the NEIGHBOUR): You see her? There, weeping, and me calm, without tearing her eyes out. I don't understand myself. Is it because I didn't love my son? But what about his name? Where is his name?

She strikes the BRIDE who falls to the ground.

NEIGHBOUR: In the name of God! *(She tries to separate them)*

BRIDE *(to the NEIGHBOUR):* Leave her. I came so that she could kill me, so that they could bear me away with them. *(To the MOTHER).* But not with their hands; with iron hooks, with a sickle, and with a force that will break it on my bones. Leave her! I want her to know that I'm clean, that even though I'm mad they can bury me and not a single man will have looked at himself in the whiteness of my breasts.

MOTHER: Be quiet, be quiet! What does that matter to me?

BRIDE: Because I went off with the other one! I went! *(In anguish.)* You would have gone too. I was a woman burning, full of pain inside and out, and your son was a tiny drop of water that I hoped would give me children, land, health; but the other one was a dark river, full of branches, that brought to me the sound of its reeds and its soft song. And I was going with your son, who was like a child of cold water, and the other one sent hundreds of birds that blocked my path and left frost on the wounds of this poor, withered woman, this girl caressed by fire. I didn't want to, listen to me! I didn't want to! Your son was my ambition and I haven't deceived him, but the other one's arm dragged me like a wave from the sea, like the butt of a mule, and would always have dragged me, always, always, even if I'd been an old woman and all the sons of your son had tried to hold me down by my hair!

A NEIGHBOUR enters.

MOTHER: She's not to blame! Nor me! *(Sarcastically.)* So who's to blame? A weak, delicate, restless woman who throws away a crown of orange-blossom to look for a piece of bed warmed by another woman!

BRIDE: Be quiet, be quiet! Take your revenge on me! Here I am! See how soft my throat is; less effort for you than cutting a dahlia in your garden. But no, not that! I'm pure, as pure as a new-born child. And strong enough to prove it to you. Light the fire. We'll put our hands in it: you for your son; me for my body. You'll be the first to take them out.

Another NEIGHBOUR enters.

MOTHER: What does your honour matter to me? What does your death matter to me? What does anything matter to me? Blessed be the wheat, for my sons lie beneath it. Blessed by the rain, for it washes the faces of the dead. Blessed be God, for He lays us side by side so we can rest.

Another NEIGHBOUR enters.

BRIDE: Let me weep with you.

MOTHER: Weep. But by the door.

The LITTLE GIRL enters. The BRIDE remains by the door. The MOTHER, centre-stage.

(García Lorca, Blood Wedding Act 3 Scene 2)

In this play, García Lorca explores how the repressive, conservative social norms can come into conflict with the raw emotions and passions of two lovers.

ACTIVITY 4

Using the literary reading strategy to help you, answer the following questions, and then compare them with the provided commentary below.

1 How does this moment in the play explore cultural notions of honour?

2 How does the daughter demonstrate how passion and emotion can conflict with the conservative values of rural Spain?

A society built on strong notions of honour is evident in the extract. The mother's son went out to kill Leonardo to restore his honour after his wife's unfaithfulness, and Leonardo fought back for the honour of his love: both have ended up dying. These honour-bound deaths show how destructive rigid conformity to honour can be. It leads to hatred, suffering, and the bereavement of those left behind. The bereaved mother relates imagery of her lost son, saying 'blessed is the wheat, for my sons lie beneath it' (line 40), an image of peace that contrasts with his past suffering and shame at the hands of the dishonourable bride. His death is shown to be a bittersweet one: he has had an honourable death, but it is a death all the same, and the mother is left without any sons. The bride then offers her own life, in part to be with Leonardo in the afterlife, and in part as a sacrifice to help restore the honour of the mother character. García Lorca thus presents the audience with an image of female suffering due to the repercussions of honour: both women are grieving and forced to face uncertain futures without men. In doing so, García Lorca presents the dangers of traditional honour codes and the difficulties faced by many rural women.

The strong, passionate emotions of the bride are a source of conflict with the society she is a part of. The hyperbole used in her description of being 'a woman burning, full of pain inside and out' (line 21) emphasizes the depth of feeling she was suffering when she was in her fruitless marriage with the groom. The groom is metaphorically described as a 'drop of water' (line 21) in contrast to the 'dark river' (line 22) of her lover, suggesting her strength of feeling for him but also the mysterious power with which he was able to carry her, much as a river can carry you away to places unknown. In a society that focused on control, repression and transactional marriages, this broke many unspoken rules and caused irreparable conflict with the rest of the village. We see the outcome of the desires of the individual coming into conflict with the desires of the community.