Beyond the Frame

Use historical and cultural context to interpret a powerful photograph.

10.P.ST.1 "Context: Develop and apply knowledge of key components of context such as background information, geographic location, cultural influences, time period, and contemporary events when interpreting and constructing texts."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline each detail that gives time, place, cultural or economic conditions, or historical events. Circle each detail that shows what the photograph cannot tell a viewer.

Reading "Migrant Mother" in Context

1. In March 1936, photographer Dorothea Lange stopped at a pea-pickers' camp near Nipomo, California. She was working for the federal Resettlement Administration, a New Deal agency that documented rural poverty during the Great Depression. At the camp, Lange photographed Florence Owens Thompson with three of her children. The best-known image, later called Migrant Mother, shows Thompson looking away while the children turn their faces toward her. The photograph does not show the family's name, the camp's full conditions, or what happened after Lange left. Those absences affect how viewers interpret the image.

2. The image appeared as the United States faced widespread unemployment, farm foreclosures, and drought damage in parts of the Great Plains and West. Many families traveled toward California seeking seasonal farmwork. Newspaper reports about the Nipomo camp described hungry workers after a pea crop had been damaged by rain, although historians have noted differences between Lange's account and Thompson's later recollections. This background challenges a viewer to treat the photograph as evidence with a point of view, rather than as a complete record of one family's life. A viewer in 1936 might have connected the scene to urgent debates about federal relief.

3. Location also shapes the photograph's meaning. Nipomo lies on California's Central Coast, far from the Dust Bowl states that many migrants had left, yet it became part of a larger story about displacement and agricultural labor. Lange framed Thompson tightly, so viewers see worry and closeness but not the camp, the fields, or other workers. The family's clothing and pose can suggest hardship, but they cannot explain every choice or feeling. Today, the image circulates in textbooks, museums, and online posts, where it may symbolize the Great Depression more broadly than the single moment it recorded.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Which details establish the photograph's time, place, and historical setting? Give at least one detail for each category.

2. How does the information about seasonal farmwork and the rain-damaged pea crop change your interpretation of the people in the photograph?

3. What does Lange's tight framing allow viewers to see, and what does it leave out? Why does this matter when interpreting the image?

4. How can the photograph's modern use in textbooks, museums, and online posts change its meaning from its original 1936 setting?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Choose a photograph, song, speech, or post that you have encountered. Write a three-sentence context note for a new reader that includes its time period or a contemporary event, its geographic setting, and one cultural influence or audience, then explain how one detail shapes its meaning.

ANSWER KEY

Beyond the Frame

GRADE 10 · 10.P.ST.1

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline each detail that gives time, place, cultural or economic conditions, or historical events. Circle each detail that shows what the photograph cannot tell a viewer. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Which details establish the photograph's time, place, and historical setting? Give at least one detail for each category.	**Time: March 1936, during the Great Depression. Place: a pea-pickers' camp near Nipomo, California. Historical setting: unemployment, farm foreclosures, drought damage, migration for farmwork, and debates about federal relief.**
2	How does the information about seasonal farmwork and the rain-damaged pea crop change your interpretation of the people in the photograph?	**It places the family among workers facing hunger and lost work after crop damage, so their hardship is connected to larger economic and agricultural conditions.**
3	What does Lange's tight framing allow viewers to see, and what does it leave out? Why does this matter when interpreting the image?	**It shows Thompson's worry and the family's closeness, but leaves out the camp, fields, and other workers. This matters because the photograph presents only part of the situation.**
4	How can the photograph's modern use in textbooks, museums, and online posts change its meaning from its original 1936 setting?	**Modern viewers may treat it as a broad symbol of the Great Depression instead of as a record of one family at one specific moment.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Langston Hughes published “Harlem” in 1951 in Montage of a Dream Deferred, during a period when Black Americans faced racial discrimination and unequal opportunities. Harlem, New York, was a major center of Black cultural life, and Hughes drew on Black American speech and musical traditions. Knowing this setting helps readers see the poem's question about a delayed dream as a response to blocked hopes, not simply a private worry.

Accept equivalent evidence-based explanations that connect context to meaning and recognize the photograph's limits. For Part 3, accept any suitable text if the response includes all requested context details and a clear explanation of how one detail affects interpretation.