

3.2

How do conventions evolve over time?

OBJECTIVES OF CHAPTER

- ▶ To understand how writers can modify the expected conventions of a text or work in response to changes in societal values and concerns.
- ▶ To recognize how readers and writers can question and change the use of traditional literary and non-literary conventions in order to discuss significant issues within society.
- ▶ To provide an overview of how, as the use of the English language changes over time, the conventions of the language can also change.
- ▶ To demonstrate ways to apply course concepts to specific works of literature and non-literary texts.
- ▶ To demonstrate ways to understand specific works of literature and non-literary texts in the context of global issues.

In Chapter 3.1 we explored how we can define the conventions that belong to a particular genre or text type and why it is that writers may adhere and deviate from these conventions. In this chapter, we will be exploring how and why these conventions can change over time. To do this, we will be exploring, in detail, each of the objectives listed at the beginning of this chapter.

In addition, throughout Chapter 2.1, you will have explored how we can define culture and the impact that a person's culture can have upon how they receive a text or work. In this next part, we will discuss the impact that culture can also have on the production of texts and works.

How and why writers modify the expected conventions of a text

In this section we will explore how and why writers modify the expected conventions of a text or work in response to changes in societal values and concerns.

All varieties of writing, whether they are fiction or non-fiction, prose or poetry, advertisements or news reports, can be seen as a product of the environment in which they were produced. Writing can be affected by, just to mention a few examples, the political climate during the time period in which it is being written, by major events that are happening locally, nationally or globally at the time of writing, and/or by trends within society such as the popularity of a certain kind of music or aesthetic during the writing process. As all of these factors shift and change throughout time, so does the writing that reflects them.

CONCEPT CONNECTION

CULTURE

If you were to research events of global significance that occurred in the years 2001 or 2002 you may note down the September 11 attacks (which took place in the USA in 2001) as being a key political/historical event from that time. Then, if you were to research significant cultural events from the same time period you may note down that the highest grossing film at the US Box Office during 2002 was the film *Spider-Man* directed by Sam Raimi. The film tells the 'origin' story of the eponymous *Marvel Comics* character and is set in New York City. Part of its success could be attributed

to the resonance it had with Americans at this highly emotional time through its characterization of *Spider-Man* as a hero of New York who strives to save the city from crime and a variety of 'evil' influences, (many of the battle scenes were set among the key landmarks of the New York city skyline); along with its depiction of *Spider-Man* struggling and then succeeding in bearing the weight of the responsibility that he felt came with his superhuman powers and the sacrifices that he had to make for the greater good of the city and its people. This more nuanced, serious, and character-driven approach to a 'superhero' film was a change in convention from previous incarnations of the genre that had focused primarily on more sensational action-driven narratives. Can you think of any other cultural products that have been created as a direct result of, or have clearly been influenced by, an event of global significance?

To further the relationship between culture and texts/works, we will analyse two magazine front covers. They are both magazine front covers from the print publication *Cosmopolitan*. *Cosmopolitan* is an international lifestyle magazine intended for a female readership which is published in 35 different languages and in 110 countries around the world. The magazine originated in the USA in 1886 as a family magazine, before becoming a literary magazine, and then a fashion and lifestyle magazine in 1965. The magazine has traditionally focused on content such as fashion, celebrities, horoscopes, beauty, relationships and health. Despite the challenges to the print media industry as explored in the previous chapter, *Cosmopolitan* still has over three million subscribers to its print edition, even though it does have an online version of the magazine and is also increasingly viewed through various social media platforms.

KEY FEATURES MAGAZINE FRONT COVERS

- It is important to remember that aside from sales of the actual magazine itself, advertising is a huge source of revenue for the magazine industry. The front cover of a magazine is ultimately its advertisement to the public and so is crucial to its commercial success and therefore its potential to attract companies to advertise in its publication. This is important to consider when analysing the features of a magazine front cover.
- **Masthead:** the name of the magazine (usually at the top of the page).
- **Tagline:** memorable phrase that readers may apply to magazine.
- **Headline:** text that reveals the main article (usually in large font or a different font to stand out).
- **Main image:** a large visual image, often a photograph, that promotes the main article in the magazine. Often this will be the central feature of the cover.
- **Subtitle:** text that advertises the other big stories (usually denoted through larger font than the cover lines).
- **Cover lines:** text that reveals the other stories.
- **Pull quote:** a quotation from the main article – words are surrounded with quotations marks.
- **Buzz words:** words that promise there is even more in the magazine ('plus ...', 'and ...', 'exclusive ...').
- **Strapline:** a narrow strip of text at the bottom of the cover.
- **Puff:** an incentive to buy the magazine, usually put in a different shaped 'box' or 'balloon' to stand out.

The QR codes in this part of the chapter will introduce you to a series of *Cosmopolitan* magazine front covers, together these can constitute a body of work.



Scan the QR code on the previous page to view the *Huffington Post* article 'Six Decades of Cosmo'. In particular, look at the cover from April 1990 featuring supermodel Christy Turlington. Then, scan the second QR code to view the article from *Cosmopolitan* featuring their October 2018 cover, with plus-size model Tess Holliday on the front. After reading the two *Cosmopolitan* magazine front covers, read the table below that highlights the key differences in the conventions used in each magazine front cover.



■ Table 3.2.1

Feature	<i>Cosmopolitan</i> 1990	<i>Cosmopolitan</i> 2018
Masthead	The masthead is capitalized in a print font, which is coloured white, and isn't large enough to fill the entire of the top of the magazine from left to right.	The masthead is capitalized in a print font, which is coloured a soft pink, and fills the entire of the top of the magazine front left to right. The masthead seems bolder and more assertive, definitely less stereotypically 'soft' and 'feminine' in its aesthetic.
Colours	The main colour used for the background and the dress of the cover model, is a soft purple/lilac. The text is all the same colour – white.	The main colour used for the background is a steely, cold blue varying in shade. The cover model is wearing a swimming costume that is a dark, emerald green. The text varies between bold black and white, and a softer pink. Like with the masthead, these colours are less stereotypically 'feminine' when compared to the colours used in the 1990 front cover.
Layout	The layout of the magazine is fairly minimal, with only the masthead at the top of the page, the main visual image of the model featured in the middle with eight cover line stories featured around her, all in the same font and text colour. When looking at the front cover, there seems to be a lot of blank space only occupied by the background colour.	The layout of the magazine front cover is very 'busy' with the masthead at the top, the main visual image of the model in the middle, and the cover lines featured around the model taking up almost every available space on the page. This mirrors the change in pace of many women's lives in the modern era which are as full and frenetic as their male counterparts.
Main visual image	The main visual image on the front cover is of supermodel Christy Turlington. The model is slim and tanned, and is wearing a strapless purple satin dress which while being short, isn't too revealing. Her hair and make-up, while being clearly styled in a way that was fashionable at the time, are 'natural' in their style and colour palette.	The main visual image on the front cover is of plus-size model Tess Holliday. The model has paler skin covered in a variety of tattoos and is larger in size than a typical fashion model. She is wearing an emerald green vintage style swimsuit that is quite revealing. Her hair and make-up are similar to the 1990 front cover, naturally styled but more in a vintage 1950s aesthetic fashion. It is clear that the stereotypical notion of a 'desirable' and 'beautiful' cover girl is being subverted here through the inclusion of an atypical model.
Cover lines	The cover lines on the 1990 front cover frequently refer to marriage, with words belonging to its semantic field appearing many times; 'married', 'wives', 'husband'. This perhaps connotes that the intended reader would also be a married woman, or a woman actively looking to be married. The topics covered are stereotypically feminine and focused on issues within relationships – 'What Makes a Man Want to Marry', or mainstream entertainment and culture, for example, an interview with an A-list Hollywood actress and the release of a new romance novel.	Even though this magazine cover has fewer cover lines than the one from 1990, their typography is much larger and there are subheadings provided that give more details about the topics being covered. The topics are still female-centred but in, perhaps, a less stereotypical way. For example, one cover line details a husband's viewpoint of his wife's affair and one cover line is about a survivor of sexual assault. There is also the inclusion of profanity in the cover line, 'Tess Holliday Wants the Haters to Kiss her Ass'. This implies that perhaps the readership of <i>Cosmopolitan</i> is more interested in reading detailed, serious features than before and also does not shy away from strong opinions like those of Tess Holliday.
Language features	The front cover utilizes the type of language features that we would expect to find on a magazine front cover such as elliptical sentences 'Battered wives. Why they stay', alliteration in 'What Makes a Man Want to Marry' and tricolons in 'Tall, Blonde and Terrific'. The language never directly addresses the reader, referring ambiguously to 'a man' and 'women' throughout. As mentioned previously, most of the language belongs to the semantic field of marriage or heterosexual relationships between men and women.	The front cover also utilizes the type of language features that we would expect to find on a magazine front cover such as rhetorical questions in, 'Is Success an Illness?' and intensifiers in 'Total Chic' and 'The UK's Most Eligible Man'. The front cover, like its 1990 counterpart, also doesn't ever directly address the reader. This front cover only once refers to marriage, and it is ambiguous whether this is a same-sex or heterosexual marriage.

CONCEPT CONNECTION

REPRESENTATION

How far that the texts we read represent the truth of our human experience has long been a contentious topic, and none more so than in the beauty industry and the mass media connected to it. Once you have read the two magazine front covers and read the above features table, it is clear that there has been a deviation from the conventions that used to be used by *Cosmopolitan* to represent women on their magazine front covers, and a shift in the topics that they feel women would like to read about. But, why is this?

The lives of women, and the things that they desire and expect from life, have drastically changed in many parts of the world across time. For example, in 1990, in both the UK and USA, marital rape still hadn't been criminalized, and laws pertaining to statutory maternity leave for all working women were still not fully in place. In 1990, the USA still hadn't had a female speaker in the House of Representatives, and in both the UK and USA women were still

barred from serving in any combat role within the military. However, by 2018 all of this had changed, with marital rape criminalized in both countries and statutory maternity leave being required by law for all working women in both countries. By 2018, all combat roles in the UK and USA military were open to women, and in 2007 Nancy Pelosi became the first woman to take up the position of Speaker of the US House of Representatives. This great change in the rights of women across time is perhaps best summed up in Nancy Pelosi's speech to the opening of the 110th US Congress:

For our daughters and granddaughters, today, we have broken the marble ceiling. For our daughters and our granddaughters, the sky is the limit, anything is possible for them.'

(Nancy Pelosi)

ACTIVITY 1

As the way that society views and treats women changes, then it is hardly surprising that the way in which they are represented in mass media will also change. When looking at the two front covers of *Cosmopolitan* magazine from the QR codes, how do you think the visual and language conventions used in the 2018 cover show a deviation from those used in the 1990 front cover to show this shift in culture and representation? Read the example response below.

The main visual image used in the 2018 *Cosmopolitan* print magazine front cover depicts a large photograph of the model Tess Holliday. Tess Holliday is a 'plus-size' model meaning that she is larger in dress size than that of usual fashion models. She is wearing an emerald green swimsuit that is vintage in style, and her make-up and hair is also styled in this fashion. She has on display her many tattoos. There has been a backlash against stereotypical representations of women in the mass media, especially in fashion and advertising, in contemporary society and the use of Tess Holliday as an atypical fashion model could be seen as an attempt by *Cosmopolitan* to meet the needs of its young, socially aware, female readership who may be aware of, and involved in, this discussion about the representation of women in the mass media. The vintage style of Tess Holliday is an allusion to fashion models from the 1950s, who although larger in size than models commonly used today, were still considered beautiful. This allusion connotes to the key idea contained in the use of the main image that even if a woman does not conform to stereotypical notions of beauty she can still be considered beautiful. This is a message that the readership of the magazine may wish to see on the front cover of the magazine and thus help to sell it.

Revisit the 'Six Decades of Cosmo' article via the QR code and look at the covers from March 1987 and September 2013. Use the model above to write a commentary of how you think the visual and language features used in them show a shift in culture and the representation of women in the mass media.



ACTIVITY 2

The above response focuses on how *Cosmopolitan* uses magazine cover conventions in order to meet the needs of a female readership that is now far more likely to question the way in which they are represented in the media due to the greater opportunities and rights being afforded to women in many contemporary societies. However, it is clear from the first cover example that women didn't always feel that they had the voice to question this representation, or simply didn't feel the need to. Also, despite some positive changes in the representation of women in the media there is still, in some people's opinion, a lot of progress to be made in order to create a diverse, equal and accurate representation of women in the mass media. For example, there is still discussion ongoing about how few women of colour are used for the main image of fashion magazines compared to their white counterparts and there is still concern about the main focus of many fashion magazines still being on how to make women as sexually attractive to men as possible.

Go online and see if you can find the front covers for this month's leading fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Harper's Bazaar*. How truly representative do you think the models depicted on this array of front covers are? In your opinion, how could these be changed to be more representative? Write down a summary of your ideas.

From your analysis of the *Cosmopolitan* covers you should be able to see how and why *Cosmopolitan* changed the conventions used in its print magazine front covers in order to respond to a societal shift in the way women are depicted, and expect to be depicted, in the magazines that they read. In the next part, we will look at how and why literary works can also respond to shifts in the concerns of society.