

Love through the ages: Exemplar student response (AS Paper 2, Section A)

This resource is an exemplar student response to a Section B question in the specimen assessment materials for AS Paper 2.

Paper 2, Section A, Band 4

Sample question

The Age of Innocence by Edith Wharton (1862–1937) was published in 1920. The story is set in New York in the 1870s. The countess Madame Ellen Olenska has left Europe to escape her brutish husband, and is being given legal advice on her potential divorce by the novel's protagonist, Newland Archer. Archer is engaged to Olenska's cousin, May Welland.

In this extract, which takes place in Olenska's house, Archer has a rare opportunity to speak to her privately.

Examine the view that Wharton presents Newland Archer as a heartless seducer in this extract.

Make close reference to the writer's methods in your response.

Sample response

In the extract it could be argued that Newland Archer is presented as a heartless seducer firstly due to the disconnection between the reader and Newland Archer which is created by the use of a third person narrative. As the narrator is detached, it seems to portray Newland to be distant as there is more focus on him than on Madame Ellen.

The character of Archer is presented to be a heartless seducer by the way he seems to treat/have treated Ellen. As he was aware that she was being treated badly by her husband, he still suggests that she should rather “give up divorcing” as it was “selfish and wicked” and that “one must sacrifice oneself to preserve the dignity of marriage”. As Archer claims that if he was given the chance he would have married Ellen although he cared more for his own dignity and what people would say. As he convinced her that it would reflect badly on her cousin who is the proposed bride of Archer and her family although if Archer had feelings for Ellen surely his love for her would be his only concern rather than advising her that she should “sacrifice oneself to preserve the dignity of marriage” when he does not seem very content on preserving the dignity within

her marriage and his potential marriage to her cousin May Welland. This is shown by his repeated attempts to seduce Ellen.

At the start of the extract he “takes her hand” and “softly unclasped it”. The constant contact to her is as if Newland wishes to establish a connection with her. Even after Ellen “freeing herself from his moved away” which shows her desire to maintain the dignity within her current marriage as in the time that it was published in 1920 and the time it was set, the late 19th century in 1870s, it would have still been viewed by society as a woman’s role to be pure and innocent in her complete devotion to her husband and no one else, although it was viewed as men’s nature when they were unfaithful to their wives. This is highlighted by the fact that he kisses her “and after a moment he felt her stiffening in his arms and she put him aside”. It seems to be the role of the woman to be the moral compass and to separate wrong from right when it is essentially Newland who has created this situation.

It could also be argued that Newland is not presented to be a heartless seducer as he could be argued to have genuine feelings for Ellen although he is conflicted by his situation. As he says, “You are the woman I would have married” showing that he clearly would want to spend the rest of his life with her if it had been possible. When Ellen is crying in the corner and he hears “a faint stifled crying”, his first response is that he “started up and came to her side” supports the idea that he loves her and cannot bear to see her in the state which she finds herself in. The passion that Newland has for Ellen could be said to have been shown by his short sentences and the use of exclamation marks to show how much he cares for her and is worried by her current state of sadness. The sentence of “Ellen! What madness! Why are you crying?” could be said to link to his genuine concern for her well-being even though it could be argued that he believes that Ellen should stay with her husband due to the reaction it will cause. In addition Newland states that after being in the presence of Ellen and kissing her he says to Ellen, “Do you see me marrying May after this” to suggest that after a kiss with her, he feels he can not commit to a life without her.

Examiner commentary

The ‘best fit’ for this answer is lower Band 4 answer. It is coherent and thorough. Ideas are developed in a focused and purposeful way in relation to the task. The end of the third paragraph is particularly strong. There are some flaws that limit overall achievement, however, and suggest Band 3 rather than 4.

A01- A logical, coherent argument with some thoroughness is established. Most ideas are supported in depth. It is clear, accurate and makes use of some relevant literary concepts and terminology. However, occasionally expression is clumsy such as in the first paragraph.

A02- The candidate is thorough in dealing with authorial methods in relation to the task. However, there is some confusion between the writer and the character of Newland Archer in the final paragraph.

A03- On the whole a thorough and coherent approach to contexts of time, gender, culture and class is emerging here. In paragraph three, however, there is some rather obvious and unsubtle use of context.

A0s 4 and 5- The candidate considers implicit connections in the analysis of the concept of the heartless seducer and the references to contexts in a logical and consistent fashion. There is through engagement with the debate set up in the task. The deliberate balancing of the debate in the final paragraph does seem a little forced and the candidate might have been better to develop ideas from paragraph three a little further.