

Aspects of tragedy: Exemplar student response (AS Paper 1A, Section B)

This resource is an exemplar student response to a Section B question in the specimen assessment materials for AS Paper 1A.

Paper 1A, Section B, Band 4

Sample question

Explore the view that Willy's tragic isolation is caused largely by Linda's failure to understand him.

Remember to include in your answer relevant comment on Miller's dramatic methods.

Sample response

Willy's tragic isolation, that is, his distance from the world around him, is not caused largely by Linda's failure to understand him, that is, Linda's lack of understanding of Willy as a person is not the main factor which causes him to be tragically isolated. In fact his tragic isolation is largely caused by his active escapism away from the reality of his failure to achieve his ideals.

Linda views Willy with great sympathy, so much so that it could be argued that she has little understanding of the extent of his flaws. She does however show moments of clarity towards Willy, and Miller aligns her understanding of Willy with that of the reader in places. When Miller has Linda use metaphors such as "he just a little boat searching for a harbour" this may be read as her over sympathising with Willy and therefore failing to understand him through Miller creating a patronising tone. But there is truth behind what she says. Miller allows the reader to gain a deep understanding of Willy's hopes and dreams through his memories and literal dreams. Through this, he presents Willy as a man searching for his identity. He says to Ben "I just feel kind of temporary about myself" when referring to his lack of a father figure. He is also seen to be constantly asking Ben for affirmation and confirmation that he is making the right decisions "that's right isn't it?" "What's the secret?" So Miller aligns Linda's perception of Willy to ours.

Through Linda's monologues and time away from Willy, Miller allows us to see a more perceptive side to Linda. "He's not the easiest man to live with, I know that better than anyone" she shows an awareness of his flaws, but discounts them for his rights as a human being: "He's a human being and a terrible thing is

happening to him, so attention must be paid". Through these moments away from Willy, we see that Linda puts up a cheery façade in front of Willy, but she "has developed an iron repression" to his "little cruelties". Through this Miller presents Linda as having great understanding of Willy.

Miller also provides other more significant causes for Willy's isolation. Through his aphorisms and the symbolic character and embodiment of Willy's ideals, Ben, we see that Willy's ideals are flawed. As Charley aptly points out "All that matters in this world is how much you sell" "when are you going to understand that those things (naming Howard) don't matter".

Miller also shows us that because of his flawed ideals, and perceptions of what is needed to succeed, that is, being "well liked" Willy has failed in this society, in which success is having enough money to own a tape recorder and employ a maid. He shows us this failure through the recognition from Biff, "Can't you see what you have become?" "He has the wrong dreams".

We also see how this failure causes Willy to be isolated from this society. In the restaurant scene, Willy "falls on his knees", and we see others perception of him "is that your father?" "No that's just some guy."

Willy even conceives himself at times "I've not got another story to tell Biff. So don't give me a lecture about facts. I am not interested. Now what have you got to say to me". That he uses stories and lies to escape from the world, he is not interested in the truth.

In the end, Willy withdraws so much that he runs out of dreams to escape to, and has to bill himself as the only escape.

Examiner commentary

This student creates a relevant and largely coherent argument and there is some particularly thorough discussion of Linda. Where the argument falters is when the student seems to force learned quotations (for this closed book exam) into the answer and they do not always work in terms of the task. Perhaps this student would have benefitted from using close references rather than quotations as it might have given her the freedom to range around the play more widely and appropriately. However, the essay has a good shape and the content shows that the student is thinking. Comments about psychological and economic contextual factors are blended into the argument.

In the introduction, the student shows understanding of the task (and therefore A04) though the explanations of what 'isolation' and 'failure to understand' mean are rather wooden. The second half of the introduction establishes the line the argument is to take and this is promising in terms of A05.

In the second paragraph there is plenty of detail about Linda and her failure to understand Willy and there is good understanding of Miller's shaping of meanings through his dramatic methods. The student's knowledge of the text is good and quotations here support the argument. The third paragraph is also

good with more focus on Miller's structuring of the play – his developing Linda's character through her monologues and her times away from Willy.

In the fourth paragraph the student moves the argument forward by considering other causes of Willy's isolation and there is some valid discussion of Ben, although the quotations here do not work as well as they did in the Linda section. AO1 is not as secure here and the argument gets slightly lost at times.

The answer is relevant to the task and there is apt detail which is appropriately used. All the AOs are addressed and the student has a good understanding of the tragic genre. All the Band 3 descriptors are met and there is evidence of Band 4 work here which would suggest that a low Band 4 mark would be appropriate for this response.