The Age of Innocence
CA2 (Chapter 6) Review

**HOW - Citing evidence, identifying methods and effects**

I continue to read a lot of ‘Newland is a...’ when we should be focusing on, ‘Newland is portrayed as...’. The first example makes your points more descriptive while the second tends towards analysis. Remember that we are looking at the writer’s portrayal of characters first, not the characters themselves as if they were real people who were really ‘traditional’ or ‘chauvinist’.

Since it is the writer who takes precedence, we have to draw our attention to the narrator and the tone she adopts. I keep saying this but it seems to fall on deaf ears. At the very least, we must examine the choice and effects of certain words. For instance, we can discuss how the use of ‘oppressed’ paints Newland as a helpless victim and Old New York - his oppressor - as a rigid and inexorable force. We could also pick out motifs (e.g. ice, fire, prison) and how Newland symbolically ‘covers his fire’ and chooses the wintry (‘image of snow’), ‘manufactured’ May over the ‘twists’ of passion and romance. I have **bolded** relevant methods and **underline** specific words worth close analysing in the sample answer.

**WHY - Concerns relevant to the passage**

The answer that follows this review does not adequately elaborate on the themes of (i) individuality and conformity, (ii) Old New York’s social codes and customs, (iii) the ‘outside’ / the European and (iv) the role of men (in relation to women). Nonetheless, these common concerns should be discussed in your own voice at the end of each paragraph and in your conclusion or thesis, if possible.

**WHY - Linking ‘here’ to ‘elsewhere in the novel’**

Cross-referencing remains a ‘bonus’ rather than an expectation at this stage. In this light, the attempt to cite relevant or similar episodes in the novel to the depiction of May and Newland is heartening. However, you are advised not to emphasise ‘elsewhere’; some wrote entire paragraphs about other chapters when the task demands you ‘write a critical commentary on the following passage’.

The idea is to **make** connections between Archer’s dilemma and the rest of the novel. It is passable to say that you ‘also see’ the same idea elsewhere but it is better if you explain how the passage might:

(i) **introduce, establish, reflect, develop**... Newland’s uncertainty
(ii) **reinforce, build on, crystallise**... Newland’s ‘progressive ideals’ regarding women’s freedom
(iii) **show contrast with, a shift from**... his previous alliance with Old New York’s customs
(iv) **lead to, foreshadow**... Newland’s boyish infatuation with Ellen Olenska
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Introduction
This passage builds on the narrator’s declaration that ‘the case of the Countess Olenska stirred up old settled convictions’ by portraying Newland Archer contemplating his future with May with mixed feelings. His dilemma between the ‘terrifying’ dullness of a life in the New York set and the ‘thrill’ he will later find in the Countess’s presence is decidedly introduced to the reader here; the more advanced reader may sense that the passage actually signals Newland’s eventual choice in the novel -- he will extinguish the ‘fire’ in his life for a frozen, ‘cloudless’ one with May.

Newland and the hieroglyphic world
The first line, ‘The young man was sincerely but placidly in love’ perfectly captures Newland’s dilemma, the word ‘but’ exemplifying the conflict between his feelings for May and the ‘dull[ness]’ of their ‘permanent association’.
- As much as he is attracted to her ‘radiant good looks’, the narrator informs the reader that he feels ‘oppressed’ by the prospect of marrying May and thereby marrying a part of the system.
- May is portrayed as an ‘artificial product’ of Old New York, a motif repeated in ‘creation of factitious purity’ and ‘manufactured’. The writer’s allusions to industry and mechanisation here remind the reader of Archer’s view of New York as a ‘hieroglyphic world’ earlier in the chapter, wherein ‘all this frankness and innocence’ are a facade.
- The choice of the words ‘conspiracy’ and ‘cunningly’ is particularly disparaging towards a society that lacks the ‘guile’ and passion that Newland Archer desires.
- In this light, the use of ‘oppressed’ presents Old New York as a trap in which Archer will only find falseness and lifelessness if he were to marry May. Newland Archer, the disenchanted ‘individual’, rethinks his place in society and what ‘was supposed to be what he wanted’.

Newland, the New Yorker
While Newland expresses uncertainty about also becoming a ‘product’ of society, the narrator seems to suggest that Newland is very much a part of this system.
- The description of May in glowing terms (‘radiant’, ‘a glow of feeling’) and through the use of enumeration (‘her... her... her’) illustrates how Newland is enamoured by her.
- Yet, Newland’s interest in her extrinsic qualities of ‘health’, ‘horsemanship’, ‘grace’ and ‘innocence’ would place him as one of the ‘button-hole-flowered gentlemen’ who rule patriarchal New York.
- This minor hypocrisy is exposed by Wharton’s ironic narrator. The use of narrative interjections in the first paragraph clearly ridicule Newland for his vanity: it is ironic that May’s humour is ‘chiefly proved’ through his jokes and her literary ‘advance[ment]’ is attributed to ‘his guidance’.
- The reader is thus urged to see Newland Archer himself as consumed by societal expectation and at heart a ‘New Yorker’ who will ‘ally himself with one of his own kind’ (Ch 4, 26).
Newland’s vanity
While the reader is asked to see Newland as a typical chauvinist, Newland perceives himself at once as the progressive who calls for women to be ‘allowed the same freedom of experience as himself’. The narrator once again coldly exposes his ideals as a result of his ‘masculine vanity’.
- His intense distaste for the ‘manufactured’ is presented ironically as a ‘lordly pleasure’. Through the use of hyperbole in ‘lordly’, the narrator mocks Newland’s self-importance. Newland’s ‘progressive’ reflections are then undermined by the narrator as bearing ‘a certain triteness’ and ‘habitual’ to many other young men in New York.
- The formal diction above shows a more evaluative (or even condescending) understanding of Newland. The reader may notice that the narrator’s tone is distant throughout, referring to Newland as ‘The young man’ and later by his full name, ‘Newland Archer’. The frequent use of absolute terms (‘could not’, ‘nor could’, ‘all’, ‘any’) further establishes the narrator’s critical voice.
- It is patent that the comparison between Newland and other young men is used to portray Newland critically rather than sympathetically, for his vanity bears ‘no trace’ of guilt or embarrassment that ‘generally accompanied’ other young men.

Newland and a new flame
Nevertheless, Archer’s questions and ‘anxious cogitations’ do reveal a persona seeking to escape the oppressive, ‘hieroglyphic world’ of New York.
- Wharton’s novel is not without pathos. It is the forcefulness of New York customs and conventions that ‘pitchfork’ Newland into the ‘coil’ of Ellen’s scandal, painting him as a helpless victim. It can be contended that Newland does not choose to completely reject his social obligation; it is just that he is helpless and ‘could not really see why’ ‘form’ and custom should dictate his fate.
- The narrator elucidates Newland’s disdain through his inner thoughts (‘Hang Ellen Olenska!’ he grumbled). This unwillingness to champion Ellen’s cause, ironically, will draw him closer to her.
- It is suggested to the reader that Newland will be attracted to a life of ‘twists and defences’ outside New York’s ‘long dead’ primitivism and ‘artificial products’. This ‘instinct’ and ‘guile’ he yearns for, one suspects, is found in a ‘mysterious’ and ‘fiery’ woman like Ellen Olenska.
- The passage thus establishes Newland’s discontent with the ‘dead and buried’ rules of New York but also primes the reader for his ‘thrill’ and infatuation with Ellen Olenska in the coming chapters.

Conclusion
Is Newland’s ‘fate’ sealed by an inability to escape the prison of New York or a refusal to ‘see’ beyond its false but radiant hieroglyphs? The reader is asked to make his or her own judgement, but it is clear that one should empathise with the protagonist’s predicament.
- Yet, Wharton brings out how Archer will ‘let lie’ the case. early in the novel can only mean that he will choose the safe, dull road trodden by most of the New York set. The entrapment and oppression of Old New York that will ‘pitchfork’ and ‘force’ him into submission will extinguish all questions that he has about a prospective life with Ellen Olenska.
- I believe that the novel does not portray an Age of Innocence; its title is intentionally ironic. The passage ultimately presents Newland as oppressed and in a quandary about ‘what he was supposed to
want’. Yet, like countless others, he is expected to and will finally conform to his perfectly ‘placid’ way of life. Innocence, if it does exist, is manufactured or in the case of Newland Archer, lost.