OIb Practise essay (09/29/2020)

“ The past is not a package one can lay away” (Emily Dickson). The past is known as an important tool used by most authors to help their readers understand where their characters come from. In most books, the past can also play the role of a safe place, that characters hide in during difficult times to feel safer. Indeed very often authors use this theme to set the story in place, explain why the antagonists or protagonists are the way they are and illustrate how they managed or failed to get what they desired. In the Handmaid’s Tale by Margaret Atwood, the protagonist often uses the past as an escape from the prison that is the society in which she lives in. Indeed memories of her daughter, mother, husband and friends seem to be the only way Offred has managed to mentally survive her daily struggles. The author thus shows the importance of the past through flashbacks the protagonist often has and an important yet strange part of the book named ‘Historical Notes’ that features characters analyzing and discussing the importance of what’s known as their “past”.

On the other hand, in the play “Sweet bird of Youth ”, Tenessee Williams uses the past to explain and illustrate the addiction the characters of the story have towards youth and beauty. Indeed the spectator gets to understand the protagonists, by being aware of the attitude of the characters through their past and consequently get to see why they treat their pasts like their drug. Thus both writers specifically explain through their characters and their stories why “ the past is [really] not a package one can lay”.

First of all, in Sweet bird of Youth by Tennessee Williams, the playwright uses the past as a tool that helps the reader understand in what aspects youth is an important element according to the protagonists of his play. Indeed, Chance Wayne, for example, one of the main characters of the play, has an incredible obsession directed towards staying young and reliving his youthful days, which were by then, long gone. This attitude is however perfectly explained by the playwright who uses the past to help the reader depict why the character acts the way he does. Indeed, Chance having grown up in a town where he was praised for being known as handsome and up and coming actor, has a hard time letting go of such years during which he was served whatever he desired on a silver plate. The importance of the past is especially seen when the character explains that he was scared of leaving for the Navy as he feared that he would come back to a town in which he was treated differently because he would’ve lost the beauty of his youth : “I was twenty-three, that was the peak of my youth and i knew my youth wouldn’t last long. By the time I got out, Christ Knows, I might be nearly thirty”. The repetition of Youth, shows how desperate the character is in maintaining his youth and illustrates the importance of the past and the beauty that comes along with it, as his youthful times remain his simplest and most fascinating years.

Moreover, the author shows the importance of the past through his second protagonist Princesse, who just like Chance, has a hard time letting go of her old days Williams thus uses the past to explain and paint the reasons that led to not wanting to let go of her golden days. Indeed,just like Chance, Princess had lived an amazing life as a Hollywood star. However as time passes by, the protagonist slowly loses her entire famen along with her youth. This leads to her addiction of the past and all the fame that came along with it. The importance of the past is especially seen towards the beginning of the play, when the protagonist explains why she lost all her fame and success to Chance Wayne : “ I just wasn’t young, not young, young, i just wasn’t young anymore”. The repetition of the adjective young translates how desperate and addicted the protagonist is towards her degraded youth and the fame and fortune that came with it.

On the other hand, Margaret Atwood, in her book The Handmaid’s tale, uses the past as a tool that helps her protagonist mentally live through GIlead. Indeed the past plays the role of the only key Offred has out of the prison cell the current society has her trapped into. Indeed the author relies on Flashbacks that the protagonist often has to help her remember the values of her old society and the things she treasured such as her daughter, her mother, her husband and her friends. One of the many important moments in which the protagonist has a notable flashback is when she passes in front of the Commander’s wife garden and suddenly remembers her own garden : “I once had a garden. I can remember the smell of the turned earth”. The authors switch between the present tense and past tense helps the reader notice the clear change between the protagonist’s narration on the events going on at the moment and her flashbacks. In addition the use of olfactory imagery shows that the protagonist gets flashbacks from the smallest and simplest things like dirt indicating that she has a hard time getting used to the new society and its strict rules (as she always seems to hide in any flashback that comes to her mind).Another important moment during which the author uses flashbacks to help the reader understand where the protagonist comes from and get to know occurs, when the Offred has a Flashback on her mother that reflected the complicated yet in a way the loving relationship that went on between them: “She expected too much from me. I felt. She expected me to vindicate her life, and the choices she’d made. I didn’t want to live my life on her terms. I didn’t want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas”. The repetition of the terms “i didn’t want” reflects the negative relationships Offred had with her mother as they hardly ever agreed on anything as the protagonist wanted to follow her own ambitions while her mother preferred she followed in her footsteps. This statement is very ironic as the protagonist who wanted to accomplish what she had in mind for herself and not what others told her, is now forced to follow the rules of a restrictive government who takes away her liberties and doesn’t give her the right to choose. Secondly Atwood uses flashbacks to help the reader understand how society has gone from what it was before, to being restricted and governed harshly and unjustly. A notable moment proving this is shown in one of the protagonist’s flashback’s in which she talks with her old friend Moira : “Women can’t hold property anymore... it’s a new law”. Indeed the regime of Gilead slowly installed itself through little rules that slowly took away all liberty from women before turning into something much larger.

Atwood also uses property to explain how women were completely stripped from their identity and freedom. Indeed women were now restricted into wearing distinct clothes, completely taking away their identity and restricting them. In addition, women were now forced to follow strict rules controlling every single one of their moves and completely brainwashing them into forgetting the old society : “It’s strange to remember how we use to think...as if everything were available to us, as if there were no contingencies, no boundaries; as if we were free to shape and reshape forever”. The adjective “strange” employed by the protagonist shows that the Gilead regime has completely fooled the protagonist into thinking that the old society was abnormal instead of the new one. Thus, the author uses the past through flashbacks to explain that the protagonist uses this tool to stay mentally stable despite the hard life she’s living, to compare the old society to the new one, and to portray how the gilead society has deleted all rights and identity from women.

Thus both authors use the past similarly to help their reader get to know the characters better. Indeed in the Handmaid’s tale Atwood uses flashbacks to tell the story of Offred and give an insight on who she was, while Williams does the same in his play Sweet bird of Youth to explain the character’s obsession to youth. However Atwood also uses the pass through flashbacks to denounce the Gilead regime and tell the story of how it comes to be, letting the reader in a way see things through the protagonist’s perspectives. The reader thus gets to realise how easily the regime has come to be and how strict it is. On the other hand, just like Atwood, Williams uses the past as a tool to denounce the effects of not wanting to let go of the past. Indeed most of his characters (particularly Chance and Princess ) live their lives in the past instead of facing the future and what it has to offer. Consequently most of them finish off by paying the prices of their actions through, in worst cases, death.

In conclusion, the authors show in their stories how the past can be a hiding place for their characters. Indeed in both stories, the protagonist uses the past as a safe place in which they can forget all their worries for a while. In addition the authors also use the past as a tool to criticise a concept. Indeed whether it be to denounce an unjust regime or show the negative effect on not wanting to turn back time, the past let’s the authors perfectly attain their objectives and touch in many ways the reader's mind. Thus both authors perfectly show how the past really isn’t “a package one can lay away”.

Maryam Sade

ASSESSMENT RUBRIC FOR OIB AMERICAN OPTION WRITTEN EXAMINATION: ESSAY

N.B. A short response may require assessment to be lowered.

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| Category | Below Level -0.5 or more at the discretion of the examiner | Level 0 | Level 1 + 0.5 | Level 2 + 1.0 | Level 3 +1.5 | Level 4 +2.0 |
| Knowledge & Understanding | No true understanding or first-hand knowledge shown. Factual inaccuracies void argument. | Some understanding but superficial. Learned response replaces  first-hand knowledge. Factual inaccuracies affect argument. | Satisfactory understanding and knowledge. Development may be limited with some inadvertent or minor factual inaccuracies. | Good overall understanding.  Knowledge is full and developed. | Very good and thorough understanding, including some subtlety. Levels of meaning are apparent. | Excellent understanding, including some subtlety. Levels of meaning are apparent. Detailed and pertinent knowledge. |
| Response to  the Question | Off-subject or no clear response discernible. Observation, commentary or opinion may be present but no attempt to form an argument. | Response is partial or muddled. Argument is directed at the question but may be confused or superficial. | A satisfactory response to the main implications of the question. Some aspects of the question may be ignored. | A good response. Argument addresses the question but may need more development. | A very good response. Argument is complete and well-targeted,  and the question is well-understood. | An excellent response. Argument demonstrates original thought and addresses the question with clarity and depth. |
| Analysis  & Depth  (Includes discussion of style at Level 2 and above) | Plot summary or generalizations dominate. No successful attempt at analysis. | Plot summary or generalizations frequent. Little or unsuccessful analysis. | Inconsistent analysis that does not always address important elements.  Analysis may be uneven or lacking in depth. | Good analysis that appropriately addresses important elements. Generally appropriate analysis of style illustrated by relevant examples. | Very good analysis. Thoughtful, pertinent analysis of style. | Excellent analysis  and argumentation. Insightful,  sophisticated and  coherent analysis of style. |
| Organization  of the Essay  & Integration  of Evidence | No logical sequence of ideas. Chronological confusion. Development is so inadequate that clarity is in danger of dissolving completely. | Weak or mechanical structure. Development is barely adequate and examples are either impertinent or lack clear connection to the argument. | Satisfactory structure and development. Sequence of ideas generally logical. Examples not always pertinent and integration may be awkward. | Good structure with some transitions. Sequence of ideas logical. Examples are generally pertinent and most often integrated appropriately. | Very good essay structure with solid transitions. Clear development throughout and good integration of supporting evidence. | Excellent essay structure with clear transitions. Carefully planned, persuasive development throughout. Sophisticated integration of supporting evidence. |
| Expression | Meaning often cannot be surmised. The essay is very difficult to read. | Prose can be read and  its meaning surmised even if hampered by weak control (or French interference). | Prose conveys the writer’s ideas adequately. Vocabulary is sufficient and notions of good English usage are evident if sometimes inconsistently applied. | Prose shows evidence of good writing skills. Lapses are minor and do not impede understanding. Some care is shown in word choice and register. | Prose is clear and coherent. A rare lapse does not mar ideas or flow. Effective use of vocabulary and register. | Prose is articulate,  fluid, and displays an excellent command of written language. Sophisticated use of vocabulary and register. |
| Totals |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Adopted Nov 2015 OIB

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