**Component 3 Section A: Unseen Prose**

**Exemplar response to SAMs: *Period 1918 – 1939***

**Extract from Evelyn Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust***

Throughout this depiction of societal gossip, scandal and status, Waugh creates a world in which the characters created both attempt to improve themselves and their status while also compromising their integrity. Waugh approaches society as an almost meaningless set of conventions, perhaps in an attempt to critique English society in the 1930’s.

In the description of Brenda’s decisions and the reaction to them, Waugh portrays society as both superficial and irrelevant in its frivolity. The use of asyndetin to describe the options Brenda has, ‘an electric bed warmer, a miniature weighing machine for the bathroom…’, Waugh shows the irrelevance of the superficial, while showing that the society described places great importance on it, as all the items are listed in full. This may be intended to be a criticism of post-war English society, which had become increasingly materialistic and reliant on wealth to denote class in the 1930’s. Waugh also hints at the foreign wealth which was increasingly present in England at this time with the mention of the ‘Canadian woman who was having her walls covered with chromium plating at immense expense.’ This comment also illustrates the attention Waugh saw high society as paying to the irrelevant. Later on in the passage, the use of the ‘omniscient authorial voice’ Davis describes shows the reader society’s preoccupation with Brenda’s affair as there ‘had been an autumn of very sparse and meagre romance’. This description is used by Waugh to both emulate the voice of the society depicted and to ridicule it. Here Waugh also embraces the fact that ‘all fictional characters are flat’ by simply mentioning an array of names and therefore reducing their meaning. For example, the use of the polysyndetin with the description of how ‘Beaver raised the whole escapade into a realm of poetry for Polly and Daisy and Angela and all the gang of gossips.’ This line also, with its hyperbolic description of how the news of the affair reached ‘a realm of poetry’ creates an almost incredulous tone from the narrator which despite its sarcasm does not damage the sense of ‘drama’ Waugh aims to create in the Paris Review. Therefore society is depicted as senseless and superficial throughout this extract through the descriptions of society’s concerns and the voice Waugh uses to describe it.

Throughout this passage a sense of boredom and want of excitement is created, emphasising the ‘flat’ nature of Waugh’s characters. In the discussion between Marjorie and Brenda, Waugh’s inclusion of the apparently meaningless discussion topics emphasises the relative frivolity of the lives of members of the upper class, many of whom (and all of the women) still did not work during the 1920’s and 1930’s. This discussion is then followed by a description of the excitement surrounding Brenda’s affair. This juxtaposition creates a more intense tone of scandal and excitement, with the description of how the gossip ‘was filling a want long felt by those whose…pleasure it was to discuss the subject’, illustrating to the reader, with a somewhat sarcastic tone, the topics which Waugh saw as occupying the upper classes. This depiction of gossip would have been more scandalous during the 1930’s due to the fact that most politicians still came from higher classes, and the irrelevance of the topics of conversation may have been seen as more inappropriate due to the situation elsewhere in the world at the time, of rising facism and economic depression. Waugh also illustrates this want for the sensational with the hyperbolic language used to describe the affair, such as ‘glamour’ or ‘enchantment’, which again creates a slightly disapproving tone in the ‘omniscient authorial voice’ in its illustration of society.

Waugh subtedly indicates signs of the ‘social and moral disintergration’ which is central to the novel. Even small phrases, such as Brenda ‘saying that she had to see about the flat’ suggestions deception, even if only in a minor sense, which, as the play progresses becomes more prominent and dangerous. The descriptions of the wealth of the society Waugh depicts may also be indented to subtedly suggest the moral decline of the society portrayed as before the second world war, new ideas and attitudes to wealth grew along with the rise of communism and socialist ideas, so descriptions of materialism like the ‘a wireless set fitted in a case of Regency lacquer’ may have been seen as a sign of corruption by some readers. The ‘social disintergration’ Davies describes is also illustrated through the depiction of society’s attitude to the affair between Brenda and Beaver. As discussed, the affair is celebrated because it provides the society with gossip, and Beaver’s mother’s opinion that ‘I think it will do the boy a world of good’ can be viewed as being a sign of ‘moral disintergration’ as both she, and society as a whole, support affairs, which in a previous decade would have been seen as scandalous and morally reprehensible. This therefore, as Davis suggests, precurses the later extreme disintergration of the society in the novel while ‘the characters are unaware of it’, which only further enhances Waugh’s depiction of society as silly and superficial. Overall, Waugh does subtedly give the reader signs of the character’s ‘social and moral distintergration’ through the depiction of their attitudes and interests.

In conclusion, this passage explores English society in the 1930’s and portrays it as superficial and declining through the exploration of different character’s attitudes towards Brenda’s affair and the language Waugh uses to illustration their emotions.

909 words

**Reminder of Supporting Extracts:**

“…the novel is…a deep(er) indictment of contemporary civilisation because it chronicles social and moral disintegration so pervasive that the characters are unaware of it and the omniscient authorial voice reveals it primarily through implication.” Robert Murray Davis*, Introduction to the Penguin edition of ‘A Handful of Dust’,* 1997

“All fictional characters are flat. A writer can only give an illusion of depth by giving an apparently stereoscopic view of a character – seeing him from two vantage points […] I regard writing not as investigation of character, but as an exercise in the use of language, and with this I am obsessed. I have no technical psychological interest. It is drama, speech and events that interest me.” Evelyn Waugh, *Paris Review,* 1963