

VIEWS, VALUES AND CONTEXTS IN *HONOUR*

See *Literature for Senior Students*, Chapter 5, Views, Values and Contexts, p.159

Notes by Katy Marriner

This document provides detailed notes on how you might respond to an essay topic on views, values and contexts. It also shows how to use textual evidence to support your interpretation and response – a vital element of your writing on any text.

For a comprehensive discussion of the ways in which a text can present views, values and contexts, see Chapter 5 of *Literature for Senior Students* (Insight, 2006).

Background notes and questions

Before focusing on a particular topic or set of views and values, it is useful to think more generally about the text's broader context and the issues it raises. This will help prevent your response from being too narrowly centred on the few key terms of the topic, and encourage you to explore interesting links and implications.

Context

In *Honour* (second revised edition, Currency Press, 2006)*, Joanna Murray-Smith offers a contemporary examination of the dangers rather than the comforts of middle-class privilege and prosperity.

In a conference presentation to Victorian Literature teachers in December 2005, Murray-Smith claimed: 'we are living in an age of grand self-permissiveness' and that *Honour* is about 'people who know the right thing to do but choose the wrong'.

***Note that this revised version includes a number of variations from the 1997 edition, including changes to dialogue and page numbers, and a name change from 'Gus' to 'George'.**

Preparation questions

Discuss in class the broad issues that the text raises. How do these issues relate to your own life experiences?

- Which is more honourable: remaining loyal to duty and giving yourself over to the inevitable compromises of love, or making yourself your first priority? How would the characters in *Honour* answer this question? What do you think Murray-Smith's perspective is?
- Is it wrong to act on a longing?
- Is it better to be self-centred or selfless?
- Do the characters in *Honour* elicit your understanding or condemnation? Where do your sympathies lie? Which character/s does Murray-Smith seem to have most respect for?

Assessment task and analysis of key terms

'In *Honour*, Joanna Murray-Smith exposes the modern conflict between self-indulgence and responsible behaviour.' Discuss.

Responding to the topic

Given the self-evident validity of this statement, your task is to interpret the ways in which such views and values are represented and commented upon in this text.

Do you agree or disagree with the topic's contention? Look for complexities and complications – they make for a more interesting and nuanced response.

- What evidence from *Honour* supports this claim?
- How does Murray-Smith's construction of the text influence the reader's position?
- Is there a difference between the position that the play invites you to adopt and your real position?

Self-indulgence

Look closely at the key terms of any topic you write on.

- Define self-indulgence. When do you behave in a self-indulgent way? Is such behaviour acceptable?
- Why do we think of self-indulgence as wrong?
- In *Honour*, who behaves in a self-indulgent way? Why? Does Murray-Smith endorse or challenge such behaviour? Find evidence to support your interpretation.

- Do you endorse or challenge the self-indulgence of the characters in *Honour*?

Responsible behaviour

- Define what it means to be responsible. When do you behave in a responsible way? Why?
- In *Honour*, who behaves in a responsible way? Why? Does Murray-Smith endorse or challenge such behaviour? Find evidence to support your interpretation.
- Do you endorse or challenge the responsible behaviour of characters in *Honour*?

Modern conflict

- Why is the conflict between ‘self-indulgence’ and ‘responsible behaviour’ regarded as ‘modern’?
- In *Honour*, whose behaviour is shaped by modern views and values? Whose behaviour is shaped by more traditional and conservative views and values?
- What does *Honour* tell us about the way impulse and restraint are valued by different age groups?

Exposes

- Murray-Smith exposes the conflict between self-indulgence and responsible behaviour by dramatising the collapse of George and Honor’s marriage.
- Does Murray-Smith choose a side?

Using evidence from the text

Compile a ‘database’ of textual evidence – link each piece of evidence to the topic *and* to your interpretation.

You will need detailed evidence from the text in order to develop and support an interpretation of the text. This evidence also needs to be clearly relevant to the topic in order for you to write a convincing and coherent response. The table below contains evidence from *Honour* which foregrounds the conflict between self-indulgence and responsibility. The right-hand column suggests how this evidence could be used to support an interpretation that also responds to the topic.

Evidence from the text	How it supports an interpretation
Relationship: George and Honor	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honor speaks for responsibility: she is 'attached to reality' and likes 'sameness' (p.32). • George asserts he is unhappy and therefore it is better for him to leave: 'Isn't it about how we feel, how love makes us feel? ... Our love lost its vibration' (p.33). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • George and Honor take up opposing positions: she endorses responsibility, whereas he wants passion. • Both partially modify their positions throughout the play, suggesting the conflict is complex rather than straightforward.
Character: Honor reassesses her values	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honor has a strong sense of duty, but she wonders: 'I never quite became what I might have, did I?' (p.15). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honor questions whether she has lost opportunities for fulfilment – being responsible might come at a personal cost, but Honor sees this as a price worth paying.
Character: George sees both sides	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • George feels his life has been compromised: 'Sometimes one craves something for years' (p.16). • Yet, George says behaving in a self-indulgent way 'might not be the best or noblest thing' (p.16). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • George can see both sides of the argument – another aspect of the playwright's 'exposing' of this conflict or tension. • George's age and experience are contrasted with Claudia's immaturity and youth: the generation gap between them foregrounds the conflict between self-indulgence and responsibility.
Character: Claudia changes her position	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initially Claudia speaks for self-indulgence: she would never put her 'life on hold' (p.11). • Later she questions the consequences of such self-indulgence: 'what if the truth is that we do not know love because we do not know how to deny ourselves anything?' (p.56). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Claudia's shift in perspective suggests it is wrong to favour self-indulgence over responsibility. • Alternative interpretation: perhaps by the end of the play she no longer desires a relationship with George, so this apparent 'shift' is merely another instance of her following her impulses.
Character: Sophie	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sophie confronts her father: 'You used to be very big on duty' (p.29). • Sophie accuses Honor of playing 'the martyr' and being 'so passive' (p.26). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sophie criticises both her parents, suggesting George is too self-indulgent and Honor is too respectful of what George wants. • Thus, Sophie speaks for a middle ground between their positions (though is more sympathetic to her mother's values).
Narrative structure: resolution	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honor loses her marriage but retains her sense of dignity and returns to her writing. • George is left alone at the end. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The play's resolution suggests the text's overall view of how this conflict is best negotiated. • Honor's values and viewpoint seem to offer more potential for lasting happiness than George's. • What other ways are there of reading the play's 'resolution'?
Key concern: love	

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• For Honor, love is connected with responsibility, which brings certainty and familiarity – and these in turn bring happiness.• For George, love is about ‘how we feel’ (p.33) – more focused on the short-term than the long-term.• Claudia is young, but she realises her love for George is more about power – ‘I can undo you’ (p.59) – than real feeling: ‘There is nothing here, George— [Indicating her heart] Here’ (p.58).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Love means different things to each character, but all of them see it as entailing some kind of balance between responsibility and self-indulgence.• Claudia’s idea of love seems cruel, but she also admits it is inadequate and she therefore ends the relationship.• This could be read as an acknowledgment of the need for more responsibility and less self-indulgence.• The play as a whole can be seen to endorse this view of love. It is largely Honor’s view, too, and she is the central character – reflected in the correspondence between her name and the play’s title.
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About the author

Katy Marriner BA, Dip. Ed. teaches at St Columba's College. She has taught VCE Literature and English and has presented revision lectures for Literature students as well as workshops for Literature teachers.