

Sample comparative response: *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and *The Age of Innocence*

Topic

Compare the impact of strict social rules and conventions on the characters in Martin Scorsese’s *The Age of Innocence* and Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.

Notes

Although this topic gives you a clear idea to discuss in relation to both texts, you will need to create a sharper focus. Ask yourself questions such as:

- What *sorts* of strict social rules and conventions are present in the two texts?
- *How* do these rules and conventions impact on the characters – positively or negatively?
- Are some characters affected more than others?
- *How* is the impact shown, e.g. through relationships, crisis points, resolutions?

A simple table such as the following can help you to select and organise your material.

Characters in <i>Girl with a Pearl Earring</i>	Impact of strict social rules	Characters in <i>The Age of Innocence</i>	Impact of strict social rules
Griet	Has to remain modest and reserved; has few choices in life; conceals her feelings.	Ellen Olenska	Breaks the social rules; desires more independence but is largely excluded by New York society.
Vermeer	Has to provide for a large family; attracted to Griet; transgresses but in a minor way.	Newland Archer	Conforms to social conventions; desires emotional fulfilment but does not want to sacrifice his comfortable place in society.
Catharina	Frequently pregnant; in an unfulfilling marriage, subservient to her husband, Vermeer.	May Welland	Happily conforms to social expectations; lacks imagination.
van Ruijven	Rich and used to exercising power; can transgress without negative consequences.	Larry Lefferts, Sillerton Jackson	Their mastery of social conventions gives them status; Lefferts has frequent affairs without suffering consequences.

This table could be expanded to include more of the minor characters; it could also include more of the positive effects of a rigid social structure, such as strong traditions and customs.

To give your essay coherence you must select the main characters and the issues you will concentrate on. The sample response focuses on the characters Griet and Ellen, and on the negative impact of strict social conventions on women who transgress or threaten to break the rules.

TOPIC

Compare the impact of strict social rules and conventions on the characters in Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* and Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.

SAMPLE RESPONSE

The complicated rules and conventions governing particular social groups are often unspoken, but are usually understood and adhered to. These rules enable the social elite to suppress challenges from lower ranks in the social hierarchy. Women, traditionally seen as the 'inferior' sex, are continually subjected to rules and expectations that limit their freedom, especially in matters relating to their sexual conduct.^① Martin Scorsese in *The Age of Innocence* and Tracy Chevalier in *Girl with a Pearl Earring* construct strong female characters who challenge strict social codes, but who suffer condemnation and rejection as a consequence.^②

In *The Age of Innocence*, the restrictive social customs governing fashionable New York in the 1870s are apparent in attitudes towards the disgraced Baroness, Ellen Olenska, who has transgressed society's rules by marrying a disreputable Polish count and, more scandalously, by leaving him.^③ At the opera, Ellen is the subject of scrutiny and gossip. Sillerton Jackson and Larry Lefferts (who decide on matters of 'form' and 'fashion') condemn the Wellands' public support of Ellen and, at the Beauforts' ball and the Archers' dinner table, Ellen's life is ruthlessly dissected. Ellen is also a threat to Newland and May's relationship, which, according to Mrs Manson Mingott, is a union between two of 'New York's best families'. As society matriarch, the formidable Mrs Manson Mingott is the undisputed authority on its rules and conventions. Her rejection of her niece, Regina Beaufort, whose husband's 'regrettable' past and 'vulgar' behaviour ensure his eventual eviction from society, is a stark lesson to others about the need to obey the rules.^④

The rejection of Ellen by members of New York society, evident in their refusal to attend the dinner in her honour, is not merely a snub; it is an 'eradication'. In her naivety, Ellen fails to understand this but it is a clear indication that she is an unacceptable outsider. Nevertheless, she is coerced into conformity where possible. Her bid for freedom is firmly discouraged, as divorce is not favoured by social customs and, more importantly, would lead to embarrassing public revelations of the sordid details of her marriage breakdown. More strategically, Ellen's entrapment in a failed marriage makes her unavailable to Newland, whose increasing attraction to her is obvious to all. At Ellen's farewell dinner, Newland suddenly realises that all of New York society (including his wife) believes that he and Ellen are lovers, and that 'the whole tribe had rallied around his wife'. It is New York's 'silent organisation which held this whole small world together' that ensures the triumph of tradition over individual freedom: the price that New York pays to restore the established order.^⑤

In 17th-century Europe, similarly rigid conventions ensure conformity and maintain social stability. In the household of Johannes Vermeer, Griet is an outsider, as Ellen Olenska was in New York, and she is also seen as a potential threat to the stability of the world she enters.^⑥ Her presence threatens the established hierarchy of power in the house, and destabilises the relationship between Vermeer and his wife. On arriving at the Vermeer household, Griet is quickly made aware of her inferiority. Tanneke looks at her 'with crossed arms as if waiting for a challenge', and Maria Thins, an unusually powerful woman in a patriarchal society, fixes Griet with a 'watchful'

- ① The introduction 'unpacks' the topic, briefly explaining the kinds of rules and conventions to be discussed, and establishing the focus on female characters.
- ② The two texts for discussion are identified and the main contention stated: that there is a harsh impact on those who break certain rules.
- ③ Body paragraph 1 begins with a topic sentence connecting to restrictive social customs, and provides examples from *The Age of Innocence*.
- ④ The example of the Beauforts broadens the discussion by emphasising the need for adherence to the rules, even by 'insiders'.
- ⑤ Body paragraph 2 takes the discussion further, considering society's reasons for punishing transgressions, and the high price to be paid for enforcing restrictive rules. This is a more in-depth analysis, which does more than merely list examples.
- ⑥ Body paragraph 3 introduces text 2; the topic sentence briefly reconnects with text 1 (using the word 'similarly') and also links to the topic through 'rigid conventions'.

SAMPLE COMPARATIVE RESPONSES

- ⑦ Examples from the text support the discussion of Griet as an outsider who poses a threat, and of the effects (both negative and positive) on her.
- ⑧ Body paragraph 4 extends the discussion with further examples of transgression and its impact, which also involve those around Griet.
- ⑨ Body paragraph 5 draws the two texts together, looking at contrasts as well as similarities.
- ⑩ The class difference between Griet and Ellen means the texts deal with the idea of strict social rules from different perspectives. Language for comparison is used, e.g. 'both', 'unlike', 'while'.
- ⑪ Body paragraph 6 continues to compare the two texts, commenting on the less severe consequences for male characters who transgress.
- ⑫ The brief conclusion sums up the discussion, linking back to the topic through the phrase 'oppressive customs' and making a strong statement about the points of view offered by both texts.

gaze, warning her that she will need to conform. The women's hostility is intensified by the interest shown in Griet by Vermeer and van Ruijven, despite her endeavours to conform to expectations of modesty and subservience. The impact of this difficult situation on Griet is to increase her loneliness, but also her resilience, as she begins to 'find [her] place at the house'.^⑦

As a maid, Griet is ultimately ruled by her master, Vermeer, whose authority even Maria Thins defers to. Griet is drawn to him, as 'no gentleman had ever taken such an interest in me before'. Her suppressed desire is aroused as well, and Vermeer exploits her attraction to him by forcing her to pose for a painting which portrays her as a sexually aware woman: she knows that 'virtuous women did not open their mouths in paintings'. Griet's knowledge that the painting will be owned by the lecherous van Ruijven increases her distress. Both Vermeer and van Ruijven shamelessly exploit the unspoken conventions of patriarchy which render servant girls the property of powerful men and then abandon them, as van Ruijven has done to the maid in the red dress. The impact on Griet of Vermeer's exploitation is the eradication of her sense of worth. She becomes the subject of gossip in the market, then eventually is compelled to leave the house, with no real option but to become the wife of Pieter the butcher's son, whose bloodstained apron has always repelled her.^⑧

Both Ellen Olenska and Griet suffer as a consequence of a patriarchal society's expectations of women, through the loss of their freedom and reputation, and their eventual banishment.^⑨ The impact on Griet is more devastating because, unlike Ellen, she endeavours to obey the rules but is manipulated by those who wish to exploit or dominate her. Moreover, as a poor, uneducated woman, Griet has no option other than to marry, while Ellen, well educated and financially independent, can choose 'freedom'.^⑩ May, too, has choices, despite being bound by social conventions, and she willingly accepts these in order to get what she wants.

Newland's resigned acquiescence to these rules shows that men are also constrained by social custom. Likewise, in 17th-century Holland, Vermeer must obey the women of the house by producing enough paintings to pay the bills and, ultimately, by sacrificing Griet for her part in disturbing the domestic balance. Nevertheless, the male characters who transgress are neither ostracised nor banished. Even Julius Beaufort's 'regrettable' past eventually ceases to matter, while Ellen is permanently banished from New York. This heightens our sense of the injustice suffered by women in conservative, patriarchal societies.^⑪

Both Martin Scorsese and Tracy Chevalier implicitly condemn the oppressive customs of conservative societies through the sympathetic construction of vulnerable characters who are condemned and excluded, simply because they desire freedom.^⑫