2F Reading

The Woman in White, by Wilkie Collins

I can understand and react to an extract from a 19th-century novel.

Revision: Student's Book page 26

1 Rewrite the sentences, replacing the underlined literary words with more modern equivalents.

1 Those doors lead to the King's private chambers.
2 Pray tell us all what you're thinking.
3 Why did you steal out of the house late last night?
4 Her eyes had a bluish-grey hue.
5 We would be happy to receive you at our house.
6 It's hard to explain my sensations at that moment.
7 I couldn't hear his words, but I could tell from his earnestness that it was a serious matter.

2 Read the text. Are the sentences true or false? Find evidence in the text for your answers.

1 The narrator feels that he understands the woman and her motives. ☐
2 She asks him a question which surprises him. ☐
3 The woman and the narrator have a common acquaintance. ☐
4 The narrator is unhappy with his own social status. ☐
5 The woman loses her trust of him during the extract. ☐

3 Read the extract again and answer the questions.

1 What are the narrator's feelings at the beginning?
2 Why does he hesitate before answering the woman?
3 How does the narrator meet people 'of rank and title'?
4 What does the narrator speculate about the baronet?
5 Why does the woman want him to walk ahead?

Reading Strategy

Being able to summarise a text will enhance your awareness of how texts are organised and improve your ability to pinpoint the main ideas or events.

1 Start by dividing the text into sections. Mark the points where there is a clear change of ideas or events.
2 Underline the key points or events within each section.
3 Rewrite the key points or events in your own words. Be brief, keeping within the word limit if there is one.

4 Read the Reading Strategy. Then write a short summary of the extract. Write no more than 50 words.



We set our faces towards London, and walked on together in the first still hour of the new day – I, and this woman, whose name, whose character, whose story, whose objects in life, whose very presence by my side, at that moment, were fathomless mysteries to me. It was like a dream. I was too bewildered – too conscious also of a vague sense of something like self-reproach – to speak to my strange companion for some minutes. It was her voice again that first broke the silence between us.

'I want to ask you something,' she said suddenly. 'Do you know many people in London?'

'Yes, a great many.'

'Many men of rank and title?' There was an unmistakable tone of suspicion in the strange question. I hesitated about answering it.

'Some,' I said, after a moment's silence.

'Many' – she came to a full stop, and looked me searchingly in the face – 'many men of the rank of Baronet?' Too much astonished to reply, I questioned her in my turn.

'Why do you ask?'

'Because I hope, for my own sake, there is one Baronet that you don't know.'

'Will you tell me his name?'

'I can't – I daren't – I forget myself when I mention it.' She spoke loudly and almost fiercely, raised her clenched hand in the air, and shook it passionately; then, on a sudden, controlled herself again, and added, in tones lowered to a whisper 'Tell me which of them YOU know.'

I could hardly refuse to humour her in such a trifle, and I mentioned three names. Two, the names of fathers of families whose daughters I taught; one, the name of a bachelor who had once taken me on a cruise in his yacht, to make sketches for him.

'Ah! you DON'T know him,' she said, with a sigh of relief. 'Are you a man of rank and title yourself?'

'Far from it. I am only a drawing-master.'

As the reply passed my lips – a little bitterly, perhaps – she took my arm with the abruptness which characterised all her actions.

'Not a man of rank and title,' she repeated to herself. 'Thank God! I may trust HIM.'

I had hitherto contrived to master my curiosity out of consideration for my companion; but it got the better of me now.

'I am afraid you have serious reason to complain of some man of rank and title?' I said. 'I am afraid the baronet, whose name you are unwilling to mention to me, has done you some grievous wrong? Is he the cause of your being out here at this strange time of night?'

'Don't ask me: don't make me talk of it,' she answered. 'I'm not fit now. I have been cruelly used and cruelly wronged. You will be kinder than ever, if you will walk on fast, and not speak to me. I sadly want to quiet myself, if I can.'

GLOSSARY

fathomless = deep and impossible to understand
baronet = the title of one type of member of the English upper class
humour (*v*) = oblige, grant someone their wish
trifle (*n*) = something unimportant

LIVEWORKSHEETS