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# CIE IGCSE ENGLISH LITERATURE 0486

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NOTES ON “THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST”

# PLAY'S STRUCTURE

- **Farces:**

- A farce is a comedy written for the stage, which aims to entertain audience by means of ridiculous situations and events

- **Features:**

- Disguise and mistaken identity
- Verbal humor (puns and inversions)
- Incomprehensible plot due to fast-pace, plot twists and random events
- Broad physical humor
- Deliberate absurdity or nonsense

- **Puns:**

- The title: 'The Importance of being Earnest'; no one is earnest in personality or name
- Lady Bracknell: 'Persons whose origin was a Terminus'; "Terminus", a double entendre which means both "end" and "terminal station" as in the one where he was found.

# PLAY'S STRUCTURE

- Jack: 'I mean it naturally is Ernest'; pun because he finds out his name is Earnest but he also wants to say that he is being truthful (earnest)
- **Inversions**
  - Algernon: 'Divorces are made in Heaven'; he inverts cliché about marriages being "made in heaven"
  - Jack calls it 'a terrible thing' for a man to discover that he's been telling the truth all his life; he inverts conventional morality
  - Inversion of accepted Victorian practices with regard to gender roles
    - Lady Bracknell interviews Jack, a father's task
    - Gwendolen and Cecily take charge of their own romantic lives, while the men take a passive role
    - Gwendolen travels all the way to Jack's house unaccompanied
  - Whole play is inverted, serious matters treated trivially and trivial matters treated seriously

# PLAY'S STRUCTURE

- **Critiques**

- "Wilde's basic formula for satire is [his characters'] assumption of a code of behavior that represents the reality that Victorian convention pretends to ignore" - Otto Reinert
- A humorous "treatment of decay and death," and of "human suffering," in which Wilde finally abandons the effort to balance "conventional moral norms with the realities of human behavior" - Robert Boyle
- Wilde's explanation of the play's philosophy: "we should treat all the trivial things seriously, and the serious things in life with sincere and studied triviality."
- The play is "rib-tickling" but lacking in "humanity" - George Bernard Shaw

# THREE PLOT SUMMARY

- **Act I:** Jack's second identity is revealed to fellow Bunburyist, Algernon. Jack's name isn't really Ernest. But Jack's lack of parents makes it impossible for him to marry his beloved, Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell is stubborn like that. But Jack won't let his ladylove get away.
- **Act II:** Algernon impersonates Ernest to woo Cecily. It works. Especially since he's named Ernest. Algernon's arrival embarrasses Jack, who's trying to explain his deception. When Gwendolen arrives, the truth is revealed. There is no Ernest and the men were just pretending. The women are angry and give them the silent treatment.
- **Act III:** Since Jack and Algernon only lied out of love, Gwendolen and Cecily forgive them. But Lady Bracknell is a party-pooper. The only sign of hope comes with the discovery of Miss Prism's dark secret. She was the one who orphaned Jack. Jack is really Algernon's brother! And the Army Lists show that Jack's real name is Ernest.

# WILDE QUOTES

- **Distrustful of others:** 'Whenever people agree with me, I always feel like it must be wrong'
- **Perfectionist:** 'I have the simplest tastes. I'm always satisfied with the best'
- **Ambitious:** 'An idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea'
- **Cynical:** 'Everything popular is wrong'
- **Individualistic:** 'Be yourself everyone else is taken'
- **Peaceful:** 'Always forgive your enemies - nothing annoys them so much'
- **Self-centered:** 'To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance'
- **Curious:** 'This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last'
- **Arrogant:** 'I have nothing to declare except my genius'
- **Religious:** 'Those whom the Gods love grow young'
- **Against marriage:** 'One should always be in love. That is the reason one should never marry.'
- **Superficial:** 'It is better to be beautiful than to be good. But... it is better to be good than to be ugly.'
- **Frivolous:** 'Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about.'

# JACK WORTHING

- **Function:**

- To represent an upper-class character easily recognized by his audience.
- To explore attitudes about Victorian rituals such as courtship and marriage.
- Represents conventional Victorian values: he wants others to think he adheres to such notions as duty, honor, and respectability, but he hypocritically flouts those very notions by leading a deceptive life in town for pleasure

- **Personality**

- **Deceitful:** leads a double life and tells Algernon wrong county; 'Shropshire? Yes, of course.'
- **Respectable and responsible** as he is a 'guardian' to Cecily and 'has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects'
- **Punning and witty:** 'It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn't a dentist. It produces a false impression.'
- **Hedonistic:** 'Oh pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?'

# **JACK WORTHING**

- **Progression through play:**

- Act 1: Jack feels strongly of Victorian morals and though he's deceiving them with his double life, he still believes that they are right to an extent.
- Act 2: when he is rejected by Lady Bracknell to marry Gwendolyn until he finds his parents, Jack starts to feel that the strict morals could cause the downfall of his love life. With this in my mind, he tries to dispose of his second identity
- Act 3: he finally finds out who his parents were dramatically and gets the consent to marry Gwendolyn by blackmailing Lady Bracknell.

- **Similarity to Algernon**

- Both lead double lives, 'bunbury'
- Both are witty and clever
- Both are trying to marry someone which they are being prevented to
- Both contain features of a dandy and hedonist

# ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

- **Function:**

- Along with Jack, introduce Oscar Wilde's idea of individualism.
- Be funny by mocking the current beliefs, norms and traditions in Victorian society.
- Use the idea of Bunburying to satisfy pleasures
- To be deceptively clever - audience will like him due to his smart, funny, daredevil image.
- Algernon Moncrieff is part of the upper class, since he is the niece of Lady Bracknell.

- **Personality:**

- **Self-centered:** Tells Jack not to take a cucumber sandwich, reserved for Lady Bracknell, then takes one himself.
- **Superficial Love:** He only learns Cecily's name and has gone to chase with no revealed prior history
- **Rebellious:** Is against Victorian morals and traditions. Humorously mocks the traditions and class system of the society suggesting he is not afraid.
- **Daredevil:** He is in debt yet has the balls to go out in public as himself, when he wants Jack to come over for dinner at a party in the midst of the first Act.

# ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Page 10

- **Progression through play:**

- Act 1: Daredevil and doesn't want women chaining him down; does not believe in romance
- Act 2: He meets Cecily, the love of his life. He becomes more affectionate
- Act 3: His affection towards Cecily increases This whole emotional movement from unloving to compassion suggests that everyone has to settle down at some point

- **Similarity to Jack:**

- They are both long lost brothers.
- This suggests that they would have many similar characteristics.
- Both lead double lives suggesting they are both deceitful.

- **Similarity to Gwendolen:**

- Superficial love; Algernon loves Cecily for her looks and Gwen loves Jack for his name (Ernest).

# GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX

Page 11

- **Function:**

- To emphasize qualities of usual Victorian manhood. She has ideas and ideals, attends lectures, and is bent on self-improvement. She is also artificial and conceited.
- Represents Victorian morality, which (Wilde suggests) is fixated on superficial appearances over truth and integrity; in love with Earnest because of name.

- **Personality:**

- **Ambitious:** 'Oh I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions.'
- **Superficial:** 'In matters of great importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing'
- **Patriarchal:** 'Men are infinitely beyond us'
- **Naïve:** 'Ernest has a strong upright nature. He is the very soul of truth and honor'

# GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX

Page 12

- **Progression through play:**

- Act 1: Child-like, innocent character who desperately want to love and marry someone called Ernest.
- Act 2: Meets, Cecily for the first time, says they're going to be great friends, until both argue about whose going to marry Ernest, in which they insult each other. (bad temper) (lack of wit)
- Act 3: Jack confesses what he's been doing. She asks him why he invented Ernest - was it so that he could see her town? she doubts him when he says yes (decides to crush doubts) - only cares about name - refuses to marry him. Finally Jack revealed to be Ernest - Gwendolen agrees to marry him

- **Similarity to Cecily:**

- Marrying a man named Ernest seems to be a very important part of their lives.
- Say simultaneously "Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!"
- Gwendolen and Cecily both keep a diary, which they believe would pretty much stand up in a court of law as proof of whatever they say.
- Both are willing to fight to get what they want, though not in front of the servants.

# LADY BRACKNELL

- **Function:**

- Represents strict Victorian morals and ideas – is a stereotypical aristocratic lady
- Is the primary antagonist and source of satire in the play
- Is also the commandeering and most powerful body in the play – her word is law

- **Personality**

- **Bossy:** 'Come here. Sit down. Sit down immediately'
- **Condescending:** Lady Bracknell enters the room, Jack and Gwen separate from hugging
- **Materialistic Love:** 'A moment Mr. Worthing. A hundred and thirty thousand pounds!'
- **Respected:** Her title is 'Lady' which suggests she is well-respected within the Victorian society
- **Ridiculous:**
  - 'I think it is high-time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or die'
  - 'Ignorance is like a delicate, exotic fruit'

# LADY BRACKNELL

Page 14

- **Progression through play:**

- Act 1: Sets her bossy and traditional image. Is very commanding of Gwendolen, who follows like a puppy, building LB's condescending presence
- Act 2: She does not appear in this act, however Gwendolen leaves to go to Jack, suggesting LB is losing control over her.
- Act 3: She starts off the same but nearing the end, Jack outsmarts her and she thus loses a significant amount of say or power in the consent of marriage.

- **Similarity to Jack:**

- Initially, Jack also believes that to an extent, the Victorian morals were correct

- **Similarity to Gwendolen:**

- Both believe in tradition and its importance in society
- They have different perceptions of love

# CECILY CARDEW

Page 15

- **Function:**

- Compliment Algernon and make him more attractive/likeable
- While also making Jack seem like a boring/serious character
- Thus encouraging Victorian contemporaries to be more like Algernon's opinions
- Portray the damsel in distress, along with Gwen

- **Personality**

- **Simple:** 'When I see a spade I call it a spade'
- **Intellectual:** Learns German (a smart language to study, similar to Chinese nowadays). Not as intellectual as Gwendolen.
- **Innocent:** Loves to write in her diary and her favourite writer is herself.
- **Witty:** 'I suppose that is why you live in town'
- **Purest love:** She doesn't care that Algernon's name isn't Ernest. She just wants to marry him
- **Matchmaker:** Brings Jack and Algernon together. Brings Dr. Chausible and Miss. Prism together

# **CECILY CARDEW**

- **Progression through play:**

- Act 1: Only referenced by Jack's cigarette case, suggesting she is lovable
- Act 2: Meets Algernon (called Ernest at the time) suggesting her superficial love of the name. She also meets Gwen, where she proves her wit using clever counter-remarks to Gwen's insults.
- Act 3: She then learns of Algernon's true identity, yet still wishes to marry him suggesting that her purest love has taken over her superficial counterpart.

- **Similarity to Gwendolen:**

- Both want to marry a man called Ernest.
- Both women are persistent and in pursuit of goals in which they take the initiative.
- Gwendolen follows Jack to the country — an atmosphere rather alien to her experiences, and Cecily pursues Algernon from the moment she lays eyes on him.

# BUTLERS

- **Function:**

- Support story line as stock characters during the Victorian Era
- Announcing entrances and exits (most of the time)
- Both are often present to show when the story will start to escalate in excitement
- Lane: is like a sidekick to Algernon – goes with the flow when the sandwiches disappear
- Merriman: a mirror image of Lane, doing exactly as he does, except he is Jack's butler

- **Personality:**

- **Lane:**
  - **Cheeky:** After Algy asks whether he was listening to him playing the piano, Lane replies 'I didn't think it polite to listen, sir'
  - **Rebel:** After Algy express that marriage is a demoralizing state, Lane replies: 'I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir'
  - **Reveals personal life:** 'Been married once... was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person'

# BUTLERS

- 'In married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand'
- **Merriman:**
  - **Obedient:** 'Yes, sir/miss' Says this a lot, follows orders
- **Progression through play:**
  - Both remain consistent, normal, stock character, butlers throughout the play
- **Similar characters:**
  - They are both similar to each other
  - Merriman is more obedient while Lane is more cheeky and rebellious

- **Function:**
  - Allow Wilde to comment on religion and morality.
  - Typical country vicar who refers often to canon law and gives fatherly advice
  - Symbolizes Wilde's view of Victorian religion and respectability.
- **Personality:**
  - **Romantic:** 'Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips.'
  - **Believes no one is perfect, including self:** 'I myself am peculiarly susceptible to draughts.'
  - **Affectionate:** 'She is the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability.'
  - **An individual:** 'I am a celibate, madam.'
- **Progression through play:**
  - Appears pious and knowledgeable in the beginning however embraces Miss Prism in the end.
- **Similar characters:**
  - Similar to Miss Prism, both are knowledgeable and both have no partners.

# THE 'RIDICULOUS'

- **Aristotle:**

- Greek Philosopher
- Known for his ideas on the world, universe and other things related to general knowledge
- A very logical person
- 'the ridiculous should be imitated in comedy'

- **Ridiculous in TIOBE**

- The characters' foolishness is the core of the comedy
- Uncertain whether character says something absurd in a serious way or if the character is just joking
- Wilde creates ridicule in a number of ways:
  - Using destiny as his toy and creating very strange coincidences
  - Inverting popular saying to mean the exact opposite of what they were made to mean
  - Also takes normal ideas and uses them to justify actions of characters that would defy a trail of common sense (basically he was being a smart ass)
  - Juxtaposing random things so that they create an absurd situation.

# THE 'RIDICULOUS'

- **Lady Bracknell:**

- 'I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die'

**Only fate can decide.**

- 'To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness' **It is not in his control.**

- 'make a definite effort to produce one parent' **Clearly an impossible and absurd task.**

- **Algernon:**

- 'Divorces are made in Heaven' **Inversion is ridiculous**

- 'Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner' **Says this after Cecily finds out about his double life and Jack asks how he is just calmly eating.**

- 'When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me' **Not only is this absurd but adds to the question: Does he love Cecily that much? If so, why did he not say that she would console him too.**

# THE 'RIDICULOUS'

- **Lady Bracknell:**
  - 'It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn't a dentist' **Who the hell is he to judge?**
  - 'It produces a false impression' **Hypocritical because he is leading a double life**
  - 'I say it's perfectly heartless your eating muffins at all, under the circumstances' **Just because he is eating muffins, he is heartless?**
- **Gwendolen:**
  - 'In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing' **Sense of superficiality creates an essence of absurdity**
  - 'Sugar is not fashionable anymore' **Again, there is an absurd importance of superficiality**
- **Cecily:**
  - 'But I haven't got a cough' **Blatantly ridiculous since she is pointing out the obvious**
  - 'They have moments of physical courage of which we women know absolutely nothing' **Say this when the Algy and Jack are willing to be christened again. Random and Ridiculous**

# DANDYISM

- **Main features of a dandy:**
  - Appearances – overdressed, cares very much about it
  - Wit or intelligence - speaks in epigrams and paradoxes
  - Hedonistic mindset – life is just for pleasure
  - Vain – believes himself to be most important
  - Ridicules hypocrisy of society's moral arbiters
- **Jack:**
  - **Appearance-centric:** Algernon has never seen 'anybody take so long to dress'
  - **Hedonistic:** 'Oh pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?'
  - **Twists Victorian Morals:** 'It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case'
- **Algernon:**
  - **Appearance-centric:** Never has 'any appetite unless' he has a 'buttonhole first'
  - **Vain:** 'always immensely over-educated'
  - **Hedonistic:** 'Algy you always adopt a strictly immoral attitude towards life'

# DANDYISM

- **Algernon:**
  - **Appearance-centric:** Never has 'any appetite unless' he has a 'buttonhole first'
  - **Vain:** 'being always immensely over-educated'
  - **Hedonistic:** Gwendolen says that he 'always adopt[s] a strictly immoral attitude towards life'
- **Gwendolen:**
  - **Appearance-centric and Vain:** 'I am always smart!'
  - **Vain:** 'In fact, I am never wrong'
  - **Witty:** 'Whenever people talk about the weather, I always feel quite certain that they mean something else'
- **Lady Bracknell:** asserts the importance of appearance and is superficial in matters of marriage

# MARRIAGE

- **Conventional factors affecting marriage:** social position, income, and character
- Marriage is the primary force motivating the plot and the whole play is a debate about nature of marriage
- **Algernon:**
  - **Believes marriage is unpleasant at first:** 'is marriage so demoralizing as that?'
  - **Is romantic but does not accept conventional morals of marriage:** 'The very essence of romance is uncertainty'
  - **Superficial love:** never seen Cecily however after short time of meeting her, wants to marry her 'I am engaged to be married to Cecily'
- **Jack:**
  - **Accepts Victorian Conventions (proposing):** 'I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.'
  - **Blackmails LB to get consent:** 'The moment you consent to my marriage with Gwendolen, I will most gladly allow your nephew to form an alliance with my ward.'

# MARRIAGE

- **Lady Bracknell:**
  - **Marriage is business:** 'A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her'
  - **Hypocrite:** 'But I do not approve of mercenary marriages.'
  - **Materialistic:** 'When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind.'
- **Cecily:**
  - **Love in uncertainty:** 'I am so afraid he will look just like every one else'
- **Gwendolen:**
  - **Superficial:** 'my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest'

# INDIVIDUALISM

- **Main features of an individual:**
  - Against social norms
  - His aims are to satisfy himself, not interested in others
  - Doesn't like to agree with others, prefers to be alone in ideas
- **Jack:**
  - **Fake identity to please himself:** 'I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist'
  - **Wants difference:** 'I wish to goodness we had a few fools left'
  - **Contradicting social norms:** 'Terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth.'
- **Algernon:**
  - **Deceptive:** 'I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury'...'I may be able to go down into the country'
  - **Against Victorian Morals:** [in amazement]: 'Oh! Of course I have been rather reckless'
  - **Actions to satisfy needs:** 'I must see him at once on a most important christening'

# INDIVIDUALISM

- **Lady Bracknell:**
  - **Male role/leader role:** 'Not down on my list of eligible young me'
  - **Non-moral views on marriage:** 'A hundred and thirty thousand pounds'...'Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady'
  - **Perceptive 'think out of box':** 'Never speak disrespectfully of society... Only people who can't get into it do that'
- **Gwendolen:**
  - **Ambitious:** 'I intend to develop in many direction'
  - **Prepared to take a male role:** 'If the poor fellow has been entrapped...consider it my duty to rescue him at once, with a firm hand'
  - **Only cares about own needs:** 'Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier'