

Aspects of comedy: Exemplar student response (AS Paper 1B, Section B)

This resource is an exemplar student response to a Section B question in the specimen assessment materials for AS Paper 1B.

Paper 1B, Section B, Band 4/5 response

Sample question

Explore the significance of the title *The Importance of Being Earnest* to the comedy of the play.

Sample response

The play revolves mainly around the character of Jack who goes by the name of Jack in the county and uses his invented brother's name Earnest as his alternative identity in the town in order for him to be able to do as he pleases. The conflict between the two alter egos arises when his young ward Cecily begins to become too attached to his fictitious brother Earnest and when Gwendolyn makes it clear she will only marry him if his name is in fact Earnest. The name Earnest implied certain qualities that it seems will allow Gwendolyn to manipulate Jack, in the way Lady Bracknell seems to manipulate her husband, which the audience is able to presume may be the reason why she will only marry a man named Earnest not as she says because it inspires absolute confidence.

As the play is a comedy of manners the complications that arise from these hidden identities and false names are central to the plot, as without complications the play would be much less interesting and engaging to the audience as very little would unfold. With the name Earnest being the source of many of these complications, it only really seems appropriate that the title reflect this in the way that it does. The title itself in fact is a play on words, as prior to reading or watching the play we may assume that the title is simply referring to the personality trait of being Earnest but after having watched the play we are able to understand the double meaning behind this that is intended.

The play begins with the discovery by Algernon Montcreiff that his friend Ernest Worthing's name is in fact Jack Worthing, by reading the inscription on his cigarette case. This is much to Jack's dismay who declares that it is 'very rude to read one's private cigarette case' as he wishes to keep this identity a secret. Yet at the end of the play we discover that in fact Jack's real name has ironically

been Ernest the entire time. These parallels between the way the play commences and concludes are drawn from two opposite discoveries from Ernest really being called Jack, to his real name in fact being Ernest. These two discoveries at either end of the play really draw it together so it only seems appropriate, as previously mentioned, for the title of the play to reflect this.

The point at which the complications of the play reach a real height is the point at which the two female characters Gwendolyn and Cecily both believe themselves to be engaged to the same man, Ernest. If this play were not a comedy, this is where things have the potential to unravel for the two male characters Jack and Algernon. Parallels can really be seen between the two couples here with both of the women insisting that the man they marry must be called Ernest and both the men being willing to do anything to make that possible. Here Oscar Wilde really satirises the conventional seriousness of relationships as both relationships seem hinged on the Christian names of the male partners, which seems trivial and ridiculous. The title *The Importance of Being Earnest* seems ironic in this way, suggesting that it should not in fact be important to be Ernest but in this over exaggerated representation of society it is.

In the other sense of the word, 'Earnest' as a personality trait, this can also be read as very ironic as the word 'earnest' implies honesty which both men have proven throughout the play that they do not have. The character Algernon has created a fictitious invalid friend named Bunbury in order to escape any events that he does not wish to attend and rather than being ashamed of this he sees it as ordinary and tells Jack that, in marriage 'if you don't know Bunbury then your wife will'. He goes on to say that 'in marriage three is company and two is none' suggesting that he believes that in any relationship one partner will always be unfaithful. Algernon goes on to impersonate Jack's brother Ernest in order to meet his young ward Cecily. Jack is also deceitful in his creation of Ernest in the first place as well proving that in fact neither of the men are very earnest at all, yet they both manage to achieve their happy ending by marrying their intended partners suggesting that in fact there is not a great importance in being earnest after all making the title funny in its irony.

Therefore I believe that the title of the play is significant to the comedy of the play as it reflects the overall ironic tone of the play and also a key aspect of the complications of the play that serve to provide comedy to the audience.

Examiner commentary

This student produces a focused response to the task. She has good knowledge of the play and makes good selections of key passages to support her argument. Her introduction is particularly helpful in establishing her engagement with the task and she introduces some interesting ideas which are later developed. AO1 is strong; expression is precise and accurate and there is assured use of critical concepts.

The student pursues two clear lines of argument. The significance of the title is first discussed in terms of the name of Ernest as a character and then she discusses earnestness as a character trait, teasing out Wilde's use of irony. The discussion of the importance of Ernest as a character name is perhaps more securely done than the discussion of the quality – or otherwise – of being earnest.

In the first paragraph there is secure discussion of the task with a focus on the plot which the student says revolves around Jack's alter ego Ernest. The complications of the plot in relation to the name Ernest, the two pairs of lovers and two false identities are very well discussed. The student develops her ideas in the second paragraph and there is clear understanding of the play's genre as a comedy of manners. There is also a very clear understanding of the playwright behind the text and his play on words in the title – the introduction to the play.

In the third paragraph there is more sophisticated development of ideas and here there is some very good discussion of the play's structure. The student writes about the beginning of the play and how Jack's double identity is set up and then how Wilde resolves the complications at the end of the play. Here the dramatist's methods are very much in the foreground: 'These parallels between the way the play commences and concludes are drawn from two opposite discoveries from Ernest really being called Jack, to his real name in fact being Ernest. These two discoveries at either end of the play really draw it together so it only seems appropriate ...for the title of the play to reflect this'. Wilde's dramatic methods are very well integrated into the argument and in the fourth paragraph there is also some integrated commenting on the social context of romantic relationships as represented in Wilde's comedy of manners.

In the final section of the essay the student writes about the significance of the word earnest as a 'personality trait'. Quotations here are well selected and there is clear understanding of the cultural importance of marriage. The text is well used and there are relevant comments on the play's comedy and Wilde's use of irony. Throughout the essay the student shows her understanding of the comedy genre through her discussion of key comedic aspects including happy endings, misunderstandings, disguise and identity and double meanings.

Significance is very well handled and the student argues her ideas confidently working through ideas of what is signified by Wilde's title. Overall this is a coherent and thorough response and there is some perception in the discussion of Wilde's structuring of the play. This response seems to fulfil the Band 4 criteria and just edge into Band 5.