Whenever you write about an A level English Literature text, you should support your arguments with evidence, which you then analyse in terms of language choices, literary techniques and meanings. For example, a discussion of *A Woman of No Importance* for AQA A English Literature LTA3 requires that the context of the play is taken into account when interpreting and responding to it.

### Examples

**Act 1** – Mrs Allonby says to Lord Illingworth, the villain of this melodrama, of her challenge for him to kiss Hester:

'It is an arrow shot into the air.’ (Line 459)

This image can have two connotations:

- Cupid’s arrow, suggesting romance, but this would be ironic as he sees Hester as just another potential conquest, simply because she is ‘decidedly pretty’. (Line 432)
- A warning or challenge, which would support the view that Mrs Allonby is jealous because Hester is ‘only eighteen ... most annoying’ (Line 426). Wilde uses war imagery again in Act 2, to convey Mrs Allonby’s attitude to relationships with men: ‘One should never surrender.’ (Line 205)

**Act 2** – Hester begins her argument against Victorian double standards, unaware that Mrs Arbuthnot has entered at the back of the stage:

‘If a man and woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love or loath each other there.’ (Lines 291-3)

- The circumstances of the speech create dramatic irony as the audience knows that Mrs Arbuthnot hears it and is visibly affected by it as she ‘starts’.
- Hester’s moral stance is conveyed by the biblical tone of her dialogue e.g. the archaic sounding verb ‘go forth’ and the image of banishment to ‘the desert’ as a punishment.
- The contrasting pair of verbs ‘love and loath’ is drawn together by alliteration.

**Act 3** – Mrs Arbuthnot struggles to tell Gerald the truth of his paternity, building on suspense created earlier when she failed to do this:

*(Gerald sits down beside his mother. She runs her fingers through his hair, and strokes his hands)* ‘Gerald, there was a girl once, she was very young...’ (Lines 431-3)

- The stage direction emphasises the characters’ close mother/son relationship with stereotypical examples of touch to show affection.
- Wilde opens what is expected to be Mrs Arbuthnot’s confession of Gerald’s illegitimacy in a tentative, detached way by:
  - addressing him by his name ‘Gerald’
  - parodying a fairy story opening ‘there was once a girl’
  - presenting the story in the third person ‘the girl’, ‘she’
  - defending ‘the girl’ and her actions with ‘she was very young’ in order to protect herself when Gerald learns the truth.
Act 4 – Wilde creates dramatic irony and humour for the audience when Lady Hunstanton unwittingly, but correctly, criticises Mrs Allonby and praises Mrs Arbuthnot in her conversation with these two characters:

‘Most women in London, nowadays, seem to furnish their rooms with nothing but orchids, foreigners, and French novels. But here we have the room of a sweet saint.’ (Lines 26-29)

- ‘orchids’ are an exotic flower used in Mrs Allonby’s dialogue in Act 1, line 303/4 as an excuse to leave with Lord Illingworth to see ‘an orchid [there] as beautiful as the seven deadly sins’, a simile which conveys the amoral attitude to life of both characters who defy the conventional Victorian expectations of the aristocracy and of married women.

- ‘French novels’ suggests Wilde is referring to contemporary novels whose content was considered scandalous, for example Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert, translated into English in 1881.

- The final two phrases of the list of three criticisms seem to emphasise Lady Hunstanton’s contempt through the alliteration of ‘foreign ... French’.

- ‘sweet saint’ creates a contrast between the criticism against the kind of character Mrs Allonby really is and the qualities imputed to Mrs Arbuthnot’s character by the adjective ‘sweet’ and the sibilance of the ‘s’ sound which emphasises the tone of reverence created by the metaphor ‘saint’.

Activity

Now analyse the following quotations from the play, examining carefully Wilde’s use of dialogue and stage directions in the presentation of characters, relationships and the action of the play. Start by annotating ideas around the quotations so that you can then write a sentence on language choices, literary techniques and meanings in relation to the aspect suggested.
Social class and treatment of servants:
Lady Hunstanton (To Footman) ‘The cushion there, Francis. And my shawl. The Shetland. Get the Shetland.’ Exit Footman for shawl (Act 1 Line 61/2)

Hypocrisy:
Kelvil ‘Woman is the intellectual helpmeet of man in public as in private life.’
‘My wife is at the seaside with the children, Lady Caroline.’ (Act 1 Line 335/6 & Line 347)

Flirting and hiding the truth:
Lord Illingworth ‘You fence divinely. But the button has come off your foil.’
Mrs Allonby ‘I have still the mask.’ (Act 1 Line 503/4)

Wordplay and wit:
Lady Hunstanton ‘I am told that, nowadays, all the married men live like bachelors, and all the bachelors like married men.’ (Act 2 Lines 37-9)

Duplicity (double-dealing, deceitfulness):
The Archdeacon ‘Lord Illingworth has been most entertaining.’ (Act 2 Line 420)
Lord Illingworth ‘I was bored to death. Never opened my lips the whole time.’ (Line 435)

Dramatic irony:
Lord Illingworth ‘I am old enough to be your father, Gerald.’
Gerald ‘I don’t remember my father; he died years ago.’ (Act 3 Lines 22/3)

Attitudes to marriage:
Lord Illingworth ‘Men marry because they are tired; women because they are curious. Both are disappointed.’
‘But the happiness of a married man, my dear Gerald, depends on the people he has not married.’ (Act 3 Lines 111/2 & 114/5)

Moral decisions:
‘Lord Illingworth frowns and bites his lip. After a time Gerald raises up his mother, puts his arm round her, and leads her from the room’ (Act 3 final stage directions)

Double standards:
Mrs Arbuthnot ‘There is no atonement possible. I am disgraced: he is not... It is the usual history of a man and a woman... The woman suffers. The man goes free.’
(Act 4 Lines 47-51)

Melodramatic triumph of good over evil:
Lord Illingworth ‘...and treated quite seriously too, one’s mistress, and one’s–’
Mrs Arbuthnot snatches up glove and strikes Lord Illingworth across the face with it... He is dazed by the insult of his punishment...goes to window and looks out at his son. Sighs, and leaves the room. (Act 4 Lines 484/5 and following stage direction)