

Private Lives AS-Level Study Guide



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*'Work hard, do the best you can, don't ever lose faith in yourself
and take no notice of what other people say about you'*

- Noël Coward

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1. Introduction

The following guide has been produced to support teachers and students in the study of Noël Coward's *Private Lives*. It will aim to creatively engage students and develop their knowledge of the play through the examination of core themes, genre and context. Further to this, it will also explore the way in which the play has been interpreted by different audiences over time, allowing students to respond critically and creatively to the text.

The document will provide guidance into the Assessment Objectives required for component 2 of HO72, Drama post-1900 (AO1, AO3, AO2 & AO5)

2. A brief introduction to Noël Coward

***'I'm an enormously talented man, and there's no use pretending that I'm not.'* – Noël Coward, on himself**



Coward, Aged 7
© NC Aventales AG, 1906

Born in 1899, Noël Coward was raised as a working class boy in the London suburb of Teddington. His father was an unsuccessful piano salesman with little personal ambition, resulting in often poor family finances. After his eldest brother died, Coward's mother devoted her ambitions towards Noël and did her best to gloss over the family's poverty. While Coward's formal education was limited, he possessed a natural intelligence. From a young age, Coward was an avid reader and instinctive performer with an insatiable ambition to learn and succeed.

Encouraged by his mother to attend a dance academy in London, Coward entered into the professional world of theatre at the age of 12. From this point on, his writing and acting career swiftly flourished and he gradually became acquainted with a different class of people. Due to the class-conscious world that

Coward was brought up in, social acceptance of a young working-class actor from a poor background into the established world of the upper-class gentry would not have been easy or immediate for him. Nevertheless, Coward's extraordinary determination and charm, as well as his teenage friendships with artist Philip Streatfield and Mrs. Astley Cooper, won him entrance into the upper-class circles. These friendships, coupled with his rising successes as an actor and playwright, enabled Coward to move easily amongst the very highest levels of society at the time. This even included association with the Royal Family, making acquaintances that lasted a lifetime; the Queen Mother, for example, attended Coward's memorial service, stating that 'I came because he was my friend'.

Coward – The Celebrity

Alongside Coward's social ascendancy came his first great critical and financial success with *The Vortex*. Following this, demand grew for new Coward plays from the mid-1920s and as a result, Coward's presence in the public eye turned him into a celebrity in his own right across both the UK



Noël Coward and the Queen Mother under a picnic blanket. © NC Aventales AG, June 1966

and USA. This was quite a rare feat at the time, especially from a working-class boy from the suburbs.



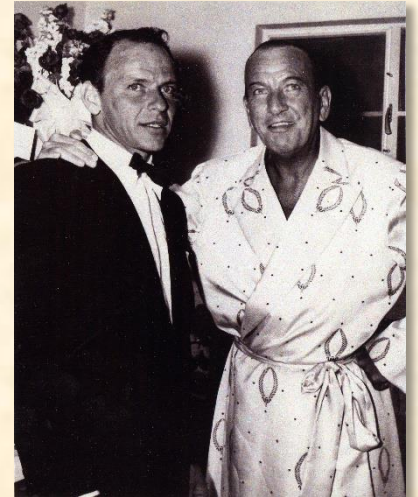
Noël Coward 'The Celebrity' before crowds in South Africa
© NC Aventales AG, 1944

The media avidly followed and reported on Coward's plays and public appearances, elevating his celebrity status significantly as his career continued to develop. In an era that was not rife with modern publicists and the flurry of social media, Coward's celebrity persona was very much constructed and controlled by Coward himself: 'I acted up like crazy. I did everything that was expected of me. Part of the job.'

He had a strict outlook on his public versus his personal life, believing that his private business

was not for public consumption. For this reason, Coward realised that he needed to be cautious about overdoing his flamboyant lifestyle: 'It is important not to let the public have a loophole to lampoon you'.

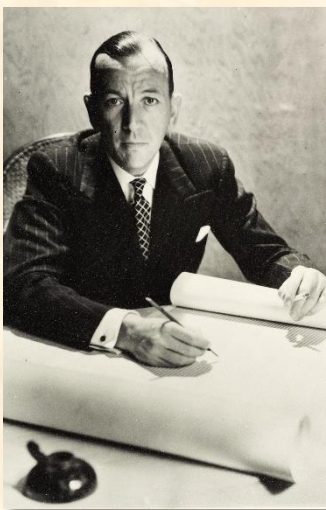
There are similar celebrity icons who have established themselves in today's society that can be compared to Coward's status at the time: Benedict Cumberbatch, Bradley Cooper, David Tennant, Eddy Redmayne, Keira Knightley, and Emily Blunt. It may be useful for students to have these as a comparison in order to grasp an understanding of Coward's position in society at the time, as well as where he would fit today.



Frank Sinatra and Noël Coward, 1955.
Courtesy of Noël Coward archive, Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham

Coward – The Master

Despite his high-profile persona and arguably lavish lifestyle, Coward was fundamentally a man who loved all artistic forms and possessed a work ethic like no other. He immersed himself in work from the age of 10, which can be seen from the canon of work he produced throughout his lifetime; his final verse was written only days before he died.



Coward at his writing desk.
© NC Aventales AG, C. 1930

'The only way to enjoy life is to work. Work is more fun than fun' - Noël Coward

Consequently, Coward became known as 'The Master' by many of his contemporaries and fans. A quote from Lord Louis Mountbatten on Coward's 70th birthday perhaps best sums this up: 'There are probably greater painters than Noël, greater novelists than Noël, greater librettists, greater composers of music, greater singers, greater dancers, greater comedians, greater tragedians, greater stage producers, greater film directors, greater cabaret stars, greater TV stars. If there are, they are 14 different people. Only one man combined all 14 labels - The Master.'

In more recent times, he is still recognised as one of the greatest British Playwrights of all time, with his plays continuing to be produced in both amateur and professional capacities worldwide today.

'Mr Coward is his own invention and contribution to this century. The 20th Century would be incomplete without Noël Coward: he was simply a genius, and anyone who cannot see that should kindly leave the stage' - John Osborne



Memorial to Sir Noël Coward, unveiled by the Queen Mother in 1984 at Westminster Abbey

Suggested activities:

- It is important for students to realise the vast extent of Coward's works. Get students to find an example of each of the different artistic platforms that Coward created (play, musical, novel, song, film, sketch/revue, painting, short story) alongside dates for them for students to then present and discuss in class.
- The education page on the Noël Coward website contains further images of Coward with celebrities of the time, as well as selection of quotes about him from others over the course of time. It would be good for students to explore this section of the site in order to understand the influence of Coward's work on others, and the society he was associated with during his lifetime.

3. Thinking Conceptually

This part of the guide contains information and activities which will familiarise students with the genre and overarching themes of *Private Lives*, beginning with a thorough analysis on the 'Comedy of Manners' style that many of Coward's plays adopt. This will aim to not only give students a history of the genre, but also make it more accessible to them by providing examples of how this genre still features regularly in contemporary society.

This section will proceed to open up discussion on the core themes within *Private Lives*, in order to encourage students to think conceptually about the play and how it is constructed. Using technical vocabulary and analytical tools will enable students to formulate, test and articulate their own personal and creative responses to the text. The section will specifically aid students in AO1 and AO2 of the examination. It will help them to articulate informed, personal and creative responses to the play, using associated terminology, and guide them towards analysing the ways in which meanings are shaped within the play.

3a. Genre - Comedy of Manners

Comedy of manners is a genre of theatre that depicts and satirises the manners of contemporary society using witty, cerebral dialogue and clever dramatic functions. The word 'manner', by definition, implies a polite and well-bred behaviour, as well as a method in which everyday duties are performed, or a way of speaking. It therefore follows that such a play is concerned with satirising a society's manners. It does so through sophisticated use of speech and dialogue to create sharp comedy of the highest wit.

Characteristics/Mechanics of a 'Comedy of Manners'

Core Theme	Specific Mechanics/Techniques
Social Context	Comedy is built around satirising society of a specific time and place
	Requires audiences/viewers/readers to have an understanding of a specific time and place
	Most plays of the genre were carefully constructed to satirise the very people watching them
Linguistic Techniques	Dialogue is the most prominent feature of a comedy of manners
	Prominence placed on verbal comedy over physical comedy
	Wit and dialogue take precedence over plot to a large extent
	Many dialogue techniques used to keep the witty rapport and pungent commentary effective: imitation, dichotomy, irony, duologues, aphorism, symmetry
	Dialogue is short and precise. The language depicts the values of the people in the play more than their actions
	Sexual innuendos are used and rakish behaviour is shown
Characterisation	Characters consist of stock characters who conform to/challenge conventional stereotypes.
	Characters often fight with each other in situations of conflicting love triangles and intrigues
	Often shown to be immoral and their weaknesses illuminated
	Characters are defined by one single trait and are driven by a single emotion
	Characters often do not develop or change throughout
Plots	The plots traditionally concern themselves with an illicit love affair, or similarly scandalous matter
	The plotting is often very convenient and contrived

Comedy of Manners – Timeline

340-8 BC - Ancient Greek Traditions: New Comedy

The comedy of manners was first developed in the new comedy of the Ancient Greek playwright Menander. His style, elaborate plots, and stock characters were imitated by the Roman playwrights and satirists such as Plautus, Horace and Terence.

17th Century - Molière & Shakespeare

Arguably the best-known comedies of manners were those of French playwright Molière, who satirised the hypocrisy and pretension of society at the time in plays such as *The Misanthrope*, *Tartuffe*, *The Miser*, *The Imaginary Invalid*. Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* could also be considered the first comedy of manners in England, but the genre really flourished in England during the Restoration period.

18th Century - Restoration Comedy

In 1660, King Charles restores the English throne. He granted several key theatrical figures licence to produce plays and breathe life back into the theatre. Restoration comedy, which was influenced by Ben Jonson's comedy of humours, made fun of affected wit and follies of the time. Other examples include John Dryden, *Marriage a la Mode* and William Wycherley, *The Country Wife*.

19th Century - Oscar Wilde

The genre is developed and continued through playwrights such as Oscar Wilde, who created plays of elaborate, artificial plotting and epigrammatic dialogue. Examples: *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

20th Century - Coward, Wodehouse, Carry On

In the 20th century, the comedy of manners reappeared in the plays of the British dramatists Noël Coward and W. Somerset Maugham and the novels of P.G. Wodehouse, as well as various British sitcoms. The *Carry On* films are a direct descendant of the comedy of manners style.

21st Century - Stage, TV & Film

Comedy of manners still prevalent across many artistic platforms.
Stage: P.G Wodehouse *Jeeves and Wooster*, Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*
TV: *Seinfeld*, *Sex and the City*, *Modern Family*, *Friends*
Films: Richard Curtis Films- *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Love Actually*

Comedy of Manners and *Private Lives*

Private Lives, alongside many of Coward's other plays, has been placed into the 'comedy of manners' genre. When reading and watching the play, it is easy to spot many of the key characteristics (see worksheet 1).

Other examples of Coward's use of this genre in his works could be the fact that, through satirising the social class within the play, he was actually mocking the audience watching. For example, the below dialogue from *Present Laughter*:

GARRY: And what's the matter with the provinces, may I ask? They've often proved to be a great deal more intelligent than London.

HENRY: Be careful! Someone might hear.

- *Present Laughter*, 1939

In addition to the typical techniques of the genre, there were also other dramatic functions that Coward used. 'Comic geometry' was a phrase coined by Peter Holland, which explains how Coward's use of repetition and mirroring lead us to be one step ahead of the action. For example, with the mirrored setting and dialogues in Act I, audiences know that Elyot and Amanda will end up together even before they do:

SIBYL: Yes, but you love me differently [to Amanda]; I know that
ELYOT: More wisely perhaps

VICTOR: I think you love me quite differently from the way you loved Elyot
AMANDA: I love you much more calmly, if that's what you mean

Coward was also an early practitioner of 'layering'. Playwright Harold Pinter recalled that it was when he saw *Private Lives* that he realised you could put a character on stage and have him saying one thing, while the audience knew that he was really saying something else. For instance, in the balcony scene (pictured right), Elyot and Amanda appear to be discussing his world travels since they split up, but they are in reality trying to find out if the other is still in love with them.

Coward himself insinuated that this was present in his method of writing in *Shadow Play*: 'Small talk, lots of small talk with other thoughts going on behind'. In a letter to Esme Wynne, he also says: 'Don't under rate your Audience so dreadfully – instead of letting your people say how and what they're feeling – let them express it more subtly – the audience will get it alright'.

With these additional elements, it can be seen that while Coward adopts the core comedy of manners techniques, he also evolves or deviates from the genre's rules in some aspects. While Coward is thought of as a 'comedy of manners' playwright,



Coward and Lawrence in 'the balcony scene', 1930
© Photo by Sasha, Courtesy of The Mander & Mitchenson Collection – University of Bristol

there is often an underlying depth to his plays that point towards something darker and more profound than the light-heartedness on the surface. For example, in *Private Lives* it could be argued that there is an underlying sadness in the realisation that Amanda and Elyot can't live with or without each other. It is also true that the very physical nature of the comedy in Act II goes against the convention that the main comedy of the play should come through the dialogue alone.

Common misconceptions and difficulties that this genre may provoke

Due to comedies of manners being so heavily rooted in satirising a specific period in time, the play has its challenges to maintain credibility in more modern times. For example, the seemingly artificial manner in which the characters speak could make the play seem out-dated at first consideration. This could be helped by looking at the contemporary British TV programme *Downton Abbey*, or the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, which similarly involve clipped language and contrived plots.

It could also be helpful for students to be encouraged to realise the fluidity of a *play* over a *printed text*. The former enables the work to transform and evolve over time in a way that the latter perhaps cannot (see section 4c on the theatrical context). Further to this, the fact that *Private Lives* has become such a timeless piece of British Theatre may mean that there are underlying elements beyond time/place and British conventions of the 1930s that give the play relevance to all ages.

As one of the main elements of comedy of manners, the plots are often minimal and contrived, which could again cause further issues for students in today's society where plots are so key. For example, the symmetry of the setting and farcical elements of the comedy in *Private Lives* may be challenging for students to believe. However, one of the reasons that lack of plot is overcome in this genre is due to the fact that it is a theatrical piece. It's important, therefore, to instil a sense of the dramatic form and why the play works so well on the stage when its plot seems so contrived. To make this more accessible to students, it could be considered in the context of more recent US sitcoms, as this is a function that they also use. For example, while some elements of *Seinfeld* or *Friends* are quite contrived or deliberately set up, the direction and overall setting allows for the comedy and witty dialogue to override the reality and plot.

Suggested activities:

- Ask students to look into ways in which *Private Lives* exemplifies/deviates from the comedy of manners genre using worksheet 1.
- Using worksheet 1 Look into how other texts/plays/TV programmes use the techniques of this genre in a similar way and compare to *Private Lives*. Examples of other texts could be: Horace's Satire 1.9, Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, or more contemporary examples such as *Seinfeld*, *Modern Family* or *Friends* (this can be easily accessed through YouTube if needed for reference in class).
- Is *Private Lives* an intentional subversion of form? How does it depart from the conventions of the 'comedy of manners'? Does it become something deeper?
- One of Coward's most revered skills is his quick-fire, subtextual and mercurial dialogue. Students can be asked to dissect the set-ups/pay-offs of the jokes and also the reiteration of certain 'in-jokes' such as the famous 'Sollocks' and show how their verbal sparring fuels their relationship.
- What is the dramatic function of comedy of manners? Find examples from *Private Lives* and consider their function and effect?
- Compare the comedy of manners that is present in *Private Lives*, with a 'naturalistic' piece (such as *A Doll's House*) – What different effects do these styles have on audiences?

3b. Marriage and Gender

Gender, marriage and the relationships between the two sexes play a large role in Coward's works, with many of his most famous plays being based around dynamic and gripping relationships (Laura and Alec in *Brief Encounter*, Elyot and Amanda in *Private Lives*). Accordingly, it is important to analyse and discuss with students the way in which Coward explores male and female roles, and the way in which marriage is portrayed in *Private Lives*. This will require analysis of the text, as well as a contextual understanding of how gender and marriage were viewed in the 1930s, when *Private Lives* was written.

Marriage, Love & Divorce

From the first page of *Private Lives*, the theme of 'marriage' is established: Elyot and Amanda are on their separate honeymoons with their new spouses. As is Coward's satirical way, audiences quickly realise that the conventional notions of marriage are perhaps not what they seem in this play. Coward readily sets up romantic clichés before subtly turning the tables on them:

Sibyl: It's heavenly. Look at the lights of that yacht reflected in the water. Oh dear, I'm so happy.

Elyot: (smiling) Are you?

Victor: I can hardly believe it's true. You and I, here alone together, married!

Amanda: (rubbing her face on his shoulder) That stuff's very rough.

At the time of writing, Coward's world had strict views and regulations in regard to marriage. Many of these conventions are either portrayed, satirised or subverted in *Private Lives*, making it an interesting theme and function within the play. For example, while the marriages between the couples in the play are conventional, there is a distinct lack of love between the partners. The opposite can be said between the no longer married Elyot and Amanda, however. The discrepancies between love and marriage were explored extensively by Coward over the course of his life:

*Tell me, what is love?
It is some consuming flame;
Part of the moon, part of the sun,
Part of a dream barely begin?
- 'What is Love?' from Bitter Sweet, 1929*

'Marriage nowadays is nothing but a temporary refuge for those who are uncomfortable at home.'
- Olive in *The Rat Trap*, 1918

'Love is no use unless it's wise, and kind, and undramatic. Something steady and sweet, to smooth out your nerves when you're tired. Something tremendously cosy; unflurried by scenes and jealousies.' – Elyot in *Private Lives*, 1930

In *Private Lives* marriage and love do not go hand in hand; 'true' love is characterised by destruction. Amanda and Elyot's love is passionate and all encompassing, but with that comes crippling jealousy, suspicion and even violence: 'Selfishness, cruelty, hatred, possessiveness, petty jealousy. All those qualities came out in us just because we loved each other'. The two main characters are perhaps not 'bad' people on their own, but their love is explosive and calamitous to themselves and others around them. This is highlighted by their relationships with Victor and Sibyl – Amanda characterises her love with Victor as 'calm' and 'lasting', and Elyot says he loves Sibyl 'more wisely'. Despite this, Coward shows that although one might know what is best for them, with Victor and Sibyl being the

more sensible choices, the kind of love Amanda and Elyot share is addictive and intoxicating, very difficult to resist, and the two characters are doomed to forever keep going back to one another.

Linking directly to marriage, and also touched upon in *Private Lives*, is the theme of divorce. In Coward's day, divorce was a much more difficult process than it is today; it was the exception as opposed to the norm. From the late 19th to early 20th Century, the English legal system meant that divorce proceedings were costly and largely not in favour of women. For example, a man could divorce a woman for adultery alone, whereas women had the task of not only proving adultery but also an additional offence, such as cruelty or abuse. This is something that Coward is perhaps satirising in *Private Lives* when Elyot tells Amanda that 'certain women should be struck regularly, like gongs'. Domestic violence is present within the play but Coward takes a very different approach than most other dramas, using it to fuel the comedy as opposed to evoking tragedy.

Interestingly, Gertrude Lawrence was herself a divorced woman and single mother at the time of *Private Lives*, but in wider society it was much harder for women to achieve until the 1970s. Until 1925, for example, custody of children over the age of 7 was automatically vested to the father. The rights of the mother were not, in fact, equalised until 1973. When divorce became easier in the 1970s, coinciding with women's liberation, the rates increased dramatically which perhaps implies that the conventional ways of marriage were not working. Was Coward's satirising of marriage and love in *Private Lives* alluding to this even in the 1930s?

Suggested Activities

- Get students to consider how Elyot and Amanda go against the traditional notions of love and marriage at the time and explore how this might be viewed in today's society, now that conventions have progressed so significantly.
- There are many other examples of Coward's thoughts on love and marriage throughout his lifetime (see website for additional quotes/references). Get students to explore and discuss these using examples other than *Private Lives*. Does Coward suggest that marriage in his day was part of the problem as opposed to the solution? Is Coward suggesting that marriage only works if you are merely fond of your partner, rather than being deeply in love?
- Get students to think about the institution of marriage and how it enshrines received notions of our gender roles. What is Coward saying about marriage in society and its uses?

Male & Female roles

Get students to consider section 4b of this study guide, which looks at the constraints upon men and women in the early part of the 20th Century. By gaining an awareness of the roles of men and women within Coward's world at the time, students can use evidence from the play to support how Coward not only satirises the 'traditional' roles of the sexes, but also subverts them.

Coward satirises the roles of men and women and how they were traditionally perceived at the time, but he also creates characters (especially female) that step away from the conventions and challenge the tradition, making for interesting analysis of the main characters in *Private Lives*: Amanda and Elyot's relationship versus Sibyl and Victor's, Amanda versus Sibyl, Elyot versus Victor.

Many of Coward's plays were considered risqué in their subject matter in so far as they broke away from 'traditional' concepts of love, gender, marriage and pushed the boundaries. This often caused controversy amongst audiences and critics and mixed reactions to his works.

While there is a consistent dichotomy between the main characters in *Private Lives*, Coward's plays almost always present characters who are equally matched, or have an equal counterpart. When women are shown as traditional they are matched with a traditional male equivalent. For example:

SIBYL: I mustn't get sunburnt.

ELYOT: Why not?

SIBYL: I hate it on women.

ELYOT: Very well, you shan't then. I hope you don't hate it on men.

SIBYL: Of course I don't. It's suitable to men.

AMANDA: Yes. I want to get a nice sunburn.

VICTOR: I hate sunburn on women.

AMANDA: Why?

VICTOR: It's somehow, well, unsuitable.

By using this as a technique, Coward allows the battle of the sexes to be waged on equal terms.



Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor as Elyot and Amanda in Private Lives, 1983

Warring and tempestuous couples, like Elyot and Amanda, are established throughout history, and undeniably make for great viewing and gripping performances. For example, one of the most notorious real-life couples, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, also played Elyot and Amanda. This can be seen in the recent BBC Film *Burton and Taylor*, in which Helena Bonham Carter and Dominic West give an insight into the 'Private Lives' of Taylor and Burton as they prepared to take on the roles of Elyot and Amanda in Coward's *Private Lives*.

A good starting point in a discussion about male and female roles could be to use the lyrics to 'Why is it the woman who pays?' from Coward's musical *After the Ball* (available on the website). By using the traditional notions of men and women and the contrast between them as a starting point, this can begin a discussion about the differences between male and female roles in 1930 and whether we have moved away completely from such traditional notions in today's age?

The 'New' Woman vs Traditional Woman

While an exploration of the dichotomy between male and female characters is important to understand Coward's works, it is also necessary to get students to specifically consider the theme of women in *Private Lives*.

A significant feature of the play is the difference between the two women, Amanda and Sibyl. Sibyl is very young, waifish, innocent and quiet; in other words, she is in keeping with the traditionally 'feminine' woman. She relies on Elyot and has a traditional 'husband-wife' relationship with him:

ELYOT: Apart from loving me and all that, you must have plans.

SIBYL: I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about.

Amanda, on the other hand, is loud, independent, opinionated and sometimes perhaps vulgar. She stands up for what she believes in, even when it may be disagreeable for a woman to do so. She can

play her role as the 'traditional' woman very well, but is also wise to the injustices of gender politics at that time:

ELYOT: It doesn't suit a woman to be promiscuous.

AMANDA: It doesn't suit men for women to be promiscuous.

Furthermore, she uses this knowledge of her gender to manipulate her partners, and is aware of doing so. In Act One, for example, she says she irritated Elyot because he knew she could see through him. This boldness would have been rather shocking at the time.

Suggested Activities:

- Neither Elyot nor Amanda fit into the category of the 'traditional' male or female of the time. In the same way as Coward matches 'traditional' Sibyl and Victor, explore moments in the text where Coward uses dialogue to match Elyot and Amanda.
- Get students to research other plays or works where Coward notably pushed the boundaries and causes controversy. Students could read any of the following plays: *The Better Half*, *The Vortex*, *Design for Living*.
- Coward satirises the well-behaved Sibyl and Victor but ultimately shows them up to be as tempestuous and petty as Amanda and Victor; get students to explore the ideal of partnership and the dichotomy between the two distinctive pairings and their journeys throughout the play
- Get students to consider other scenarios and excerpts in *Private Lives* where Coward shows the contrasts between the 'traditional' and 'new' woman.
- Get students to think about other famous 'warring' couples that have transfixed viewers and become iconic, and give examples of why. This can then be related back to *Private Lives* and the relationship between Elyot and Amanda. Examples could be anything from Antony and Cleopatra, to Ross and Rachel from *Friends*.
- Encourage students to watch the BBC Film 'Burton and Taylor' which documents the legendary acting duo Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton as they prepare for their roles in the 1983 production of *Private Lives*.

3c. Juxtaposition between Private and Public in *Private Lives*

Relating to the theme of gender and marriage is the juxtaposition that plays out between public and private in the play. All characters appear to have a 'private' and 'public' identity, and each shifts constantly and quickly between the two. For example, Amanda can be coy, sweet and charming – she is most likely like this in public – but also has a malicious and venomous side to her, reserved mostly, it seems, for Elyot. Likewise, Elyot can appear to be protective and caring, but also aggressive and condescending. When these 'private identities' collide, the results are often explosive no matter how much they try to curb them.

The pressure to appear successful and happy in Coward's time was enormous, and to appear otherwise was to run the risk of being disgraced. As we can see, keeping a handle on their facades is not one of Elyot or Amanda's strengths, and perhaps it was the pressure to keep their 'public faces on' which ruined them:

'I believe it was just the fact of our being married, and clamped together publicly, that ruined us before.' – *Amanda Prynne*

What makes the characters so engaging is that we are allowed to see the full spectrum when it comes to Elyot and Amanda, and we can understand what each is capable of both publicly and privately. This is the source of a lot of the humour in the play, as the audience/reader is let in on the full extent of their interactions, allowing them to appreciate the comic value of their gibes and sarcastic comments. Seeing the full breadth of their characters' is what makes them so real.

Although we don't see the full extent of their personalities until the very end, the same can be said of Victor and Sibyl. By delaying this glimpse into their full characters until the final act, Coward is perhaps implying that however sweet and inoffensive people may seem to begin with (as Victor and Sibyl do), everyone has a dark or private side to them.

In today's society, relationships, love and battles between the sexes are just as enthralling. To add to this, we are also consistently immersed within a digital world that allows us to always be privy to the private affairs between people in a very public arena. If Elyot and Amanda were born in today's age, they would be tweeting their arguments and announcing their relationship status on Facebook.



Chris Brown & Rihanna's 'Twitter Wars'



A modern day Elyot and Amanda?

Suggested Activities:

- There are a few references to the juxtaposition between private and public throughout the play, get students to look for examples of this in the text and discuss as a group.
- Get students to look into how the inner conflict between 'private' and 'public' selves of Elyot and Amanda explore the wider notion of moral responsibility to others. Amanda, for example, flits between feeling pangs of guilt to being downright flippant about their predicament.
- Get students to create a 'modern' scenario of Elyot and Amanda's relationship, and consider how this might be ruined or obstructed when taken into a public sphere.
- Using the 'tweeting' or 'text' reference above, task students with writing 'in character' tweets for a pivotal scene in the play and share with the class.

4. Thinking Contextually

Noël Coward wrote and first performed *Private Lives* in 1930, a decade which was quickly becoming one of the most significant periods in British history. As a result, the inter-war period in which Coward was immersed prior to writing *Private Lives*, as well as the period from 1930 onwards, are reflected in both the content and overall structure of the play.

This section of the guide focuses on getting students to think contextually about *Private Lives* in regard to the political and cultural world it was written in, as well as considering the play within the changing, and more contemporary environments that it has been performed in over time. As a dramatic piece, it is also important for students to understand and be shown *Private Lives* within its theatrical context, as this informs a large extent of the critical interpretations of the play (discussed in section 6). It will also help them to understand how and why the play has evolved in tandem with theatrical movements over time.

4a. Political Context

The inter-war period was characterised by both a bitter nihilism after the horrors of the World War I and a fantastic hedonism of ‘bright young things’, who pursued pleasure at the expense of everything else only to be brought down again by the Great Depression in the 1930s.

In 1929, the Wall Street Crash plunged the USA into economic turmoil. America reacted to this event by calling in their loans to other countries and putting up barriers to stop imports of foreign goods. As a result, this affected economies across the world, causing what became known as ‘The Great Depression.’

In Britain, the Depression was also known as ‘The Great Slump’, and resulted in unemployment rising to 3.5 million by 1933, which constituted 25% of the workforce. The worst hit were areas of ‘heavy industry’, such as coal, iron, steel and shipbuilding companies. These were industries which were already struggling because they had not modernised after the war, so had no hope of surviving as soon as the Depression hit.

However, as with most things, there was a flip side to the Depression. With the fall of many of the ‘heavy industries’ came the rise of the ‘technical revolution’, which brought new washing machines, automobiles, and electricity. As a result, some people actually became more affluent during the Depression for a number of reasons: prices fell and family sizes reduced allowing more money for luxuries, electricity was introduced in homes, millions of new houses were built, and there was a significant increase in leisure activities such as cinemas, dance halls, swimming baths and football matches.

The effects of the Depression, therefore, went in two opposing directions: poverty – due to the high unemployment and poor housing situations - and posterity – due to the introduction of new technological advances such as washing machines, automobiles and cinemas.

During a time of mass unemployment and economic stagnation, *Private Lives* perhaps doesn’t represent a fair picture of 1930s Britain. However, it is still important to look at the Great Depression within the context of *Private Lives*, as this was what people of Britain at the time were experiencing. It could be the case that the main characters from the play, and indeed the audiences who could afford to attend theatre at this time, were part of the community who were prospering during this time. Coward was perhaps satirising the frivolity and moral irresponsibility of these characters, and therefore his audience, within a historically troubled time.

Alternatively, it could be seen that Coward was creating light-hearted comedy as an escape for those going through a difficult period in reality. 'Escapism' was a heavily used form of art during this period, with playwrights and authors often adopting comedic structures (such as comedies of manners) to allow people to distance themselves from the difficulties going on around them in actuality. Many of the successful films of the time, for example, were escapist: *Broadway Melody*, *Ziegfeld Follies*.

Coward was hugely aware of the world around him and *Private Lives* is just one of the plays in which Coward openly scrutinises and satirises the political and social issues of the time. For example, the two plays that immediately followed *Private Lives* were reflections specifically on the troubled world around him: Coward's anti-war play *Post Mortem* was also written the following year in 1930, and the year after that in 1932 Coward wrote *Cavalcade*, which became regarded as the first family saga about a family and their servants.

Suggested activities:

- As a product of an era of great economic upheaval, consider whether *Private Lives* is a play that addresses the political issues of the time, or whether it looks back at a previous era of hedonism and frivolity?
- We never know what Elyot or Victor's professions are in *Private Lives*. Imagine a scenario where they are part of the community who became more affluent during the Depression, how does this reflect in their attitudes in the play?
- Using the notion of 'dramatic comedy' as a form of escapism that has been prevalent throughout history, give another example of a play which does this? (E.g. a Shakespearean Comedy or a Greek Tragedy.)
- Get students to look into the ways in which the Depression era affected or shaped hit plays, films and other forms of art. Students can then be tasked to consider the political effects from another point in history and how this may have had a similar effect on popular culture at the time. For example, the effect of art in relation to the recession today, or the disaster movies of the 70s arising from another need for escapism in the midst of politic and economic disillusion at the time.

4b. Cultural Context

The British Class System

In addition to the political and economic context at the time, England in the 1930s was steeped in rigid class systems and conventions, which are also featured heavily in Coward's works. *Private Lives*, being a prime example, examines the lives and loves of a particular class of people. In order to understand how the comedy operates in *Private Lives* and why it was considered risqué by the Lord Chamberlain before it went into production, students should research the hierarchy of class in Britain and how stratified society was in the 30s.

Until the outbreak of war in 1939, British society retained a rigid class structure, with educated middle and upper classes tending to believe their own moral and cultural superiority over the working classes. Proper models of behaviour were seen to emanate from this section of society, including correct pronunciation, table manners, appropriate dress and even the courting of wedding partners. With few exceptions, the holders of power and authority came from an upper class background and had a public school education. They saw themselves as the upholders of proper culture, and those lower down the social order rarely questioned their position. It was a social and cultural hierarchy that was largely self-policed, with members of different classes rarely willing or

able to move to alternative social groupings. It was expected that people would conform to the values of their peer group, and any attempt to transcend this hierarchy was restricted by social convention.

As discussed in section 2 of this guide, Coward himself came from a middle-class family before his acquaintances and career propelled him into upper class circles:



Noël with HRH Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent and HRH Prince George, Duke of Kent, amid the crowd at a Theatrical Garden Party held in Queen Mary's Gardens, Regent's Park. © NC Aventales, 1937

***'Coward was from the lower class, but never of the lower class'
– Barry Day on Noël Coward***

However, while Coward may have mixed heavily in upper class circles, he had an interesting relationship with them. This can be seen through his constant satirising of these circles throughout his works. Coward scholar, Barry Day, notes: 'Class and the observation of its different manifestations was the bedrock on which much of Noël's work was based. Sometimes the notes he struck were true ones. At other times, although the affection was clearly felt, the touch was less sure and the result could appear patronising'. Coward was incredibly aspirational, but essentially he was always an outsider looking in. As a result, Coward had difficulty in belonging to both the working-class life that he was born into and the higher societies.

While interpretations of the way Coward portrays the class system differ, it is a predominant theme within *Private Lives*. The four characters within the play are from the upper class social set and the play satirises them in a number of ways. Not only does Coward emphasise their high-flying lifestyles, with Amanda's retreat in Paris and Elyot's recent return from travels around the world (a feat which

was not as easy as it would be today), but their irresponsible behaviour throughout insinuates that these characters are financially independent and carefree.

We do, however, get glimpses of the lower class throughout the text through the character of the maid, Louise, who makes her first entrance in Act III laden with bags of food to maintain Elyot and Amanda's lavish lifestyles. There are also references to Louise's life outside of the play through Amanda and Elyot's dialogue in Act II. Students need to understand the function of Louise within the play, specifically in relation to the theme of class. It is interesting to note, also, that the character of the maid/butler is used a lot in Coward's plays: Edith in *Blithe Spirit*, or Moxie and Crestwell in *Relative Values*.

When considering the characters in *Private Lives* within the context of the rigid class system and the economic crisis of the 1930s, there are a number of ways to interpret, question and analyse Coward's depiction of class in the play:

Was he satirising the British Class system and the upper-classes that he was part of, but not born into? Was he accusing the leisured upper class (which many of the audience members would have belonged to) of having very little concern for their actions during a period of economic crisis? Was he implying that they were perhaps culpable for the state of the country at this time? Or, was he simply using this class of people because their care-free way of life was more easy to satirise, and therefore more likely to create a popular piece of entertainment?

Suggested Activities:

- Get students to fill in a grid based on the variety of 'classes' that are identifiable in 1930s and to give examples of where the characters from *Private Lives*, or indeed people from society today would be placed in this system. It would be useful to also get the students to reflect on how different classes are supposed to behave in different ways, and relate this to *Private Lives* and/or other plays by Coward. (Worksheet 2)
- Almost a century later, the rigid notions of class within Coward's works could be somewhat alien to students today. While it is generally considered that we live in a 'classless' society, there could be a discussion on whether there are still underlying divisions in class in contemporary society – for example, is there a difference in the way we and the media view Kate Middleton and Katie Price? If so, why? For comparison, it could be useful to look at Coward's parody of *Private Lives*, called *Some Other Private Lives*, in which the two main characters 'Fred' and 'Flossie' are the class opposites of Anna and Elyot. Another good comparison could be Coward's sketch *Class*, which preceded *Private Lives*, or alternatively his revue *Word and Music*.
- Explore and discuss the role of the maid/butler in Coward's plays, with specific reference to Louise and her function within the play.
- Read Coward's sketch *Class* and write a short parody of two scenes, which play out the same scene, but mix the class. A useful contemporary example to use as a starting point could be the difference between the manners/dialogue of the Royal Family and that of the popular TV series, *The Royle Family*.

Women

The notion of the 'traditional' woman has progressed significantly since the early 20th Century, so it is important for students to consider this progression over history in relation to *Private Lives*. By doing so, it will allow students to gain further understanding of why Amanda was considered outlandish at the time, as well as allowing them to see why and how the portrayal of women in the play has developed through time.

The progression of women was already happening when Coward wrote *Private Lives*, which is perhaps why Amanda's divergence from values and behaviours of 'traditional' women escaped the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain. Below is a brief timeline of some of the key progressive movements towards female equality:

1929	The first general election in which women are allowed to vote occurs. Women become 'persons' in their own right, by order of the Privy Council.
1941	National Service Act passed, introducing conscription for women.
1948	Introduction of NHS gives everyone free access to health care. (Previously, only men were insured)
1956	Legal reforms say that women teachers and civil servants should receive equal pay.
1964	The Married Women's Property Act entitles woman to keep half of any savings she has made from the allowance she is given by her husband.
1967	The Abortion Act decriminalises abortion in Britain. The contraceptive pill becomes available.
1970	The equal pay act makes it illegal to pay women lower rates than men for the same work.
1977	International Women's Day is formalised as an annual event.
1979	Margaret Thatcher becomes the first female Prime Minister in Britain.
1986	The Sex Discrimination Act enables women to retire at the same age as men.
1997	The general election sees 101 Labour women MPs elected.
2002	Parliament passes measures allowing lesbians and unmarried couples to adopt children.

When looking at this development over history, it can be understood why students may find the concept of the 'traditional' woman of the 1930s a difficult concept to grasp. With this in mind, an interesting topic for conversation could be looking at the different females who have played Amanda throughout history:



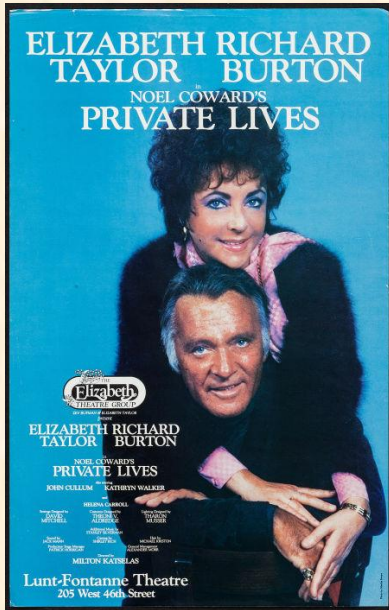
Courtesy of Noël Coward archive
Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham

Gertrude Lawrence

The character of Amanda was written specifically for Gertrude and she was the first to play the role. She was a female 'celebrity' in 1930 and Coward's friend, mixing in the same high social circles.



Noël Coward and Gertrude Lawrence in *Private Lives*.
© Photo by Sasha. Courtesy of The Mander & Mitchenson Collection, University of Bristol 1930



Elizabeth Taylor (left)
Amanda in 1983. Legendary actress, who was also famous for her tempestuous relationship with Richard Burton.

Kim Cattrall (right)
Amanda in 2010. Her other famous role was as the sexually promiscuous 'Samantha' in *Sex and the City*, which was similarly a controversial programme that explored the lives and attitudes of women in a modern era.



Suggested Activities

- It may be useful to get students to look up other important events in women's history over the decades to add to the timeline and their understanding of *Private Lives*.
- Look into versions of *Private Lives* that have been played in each decade and how the notions of 'women' may be considered differently in such a context.
- Look into other females (as per the above examples) who have played Amanda over time, and discuss the significance of this in the context of the time/place in which it was performed.
- Can we view Amanda a feminist heroine?
- On the Noël Coward website, there are further images of the women who have played Amanda, as well as a few quotes from some of the actresses. For students wishing to explore this theme further, the material on the website would be a useful tool.

The 'Jazz Age' & the emergence of the 'Bright Young Things'

Jazz music originated in the United States from African American musicians. As it began to expand to middle-class white Americans in the 1920s, the movement also began to infiltrate Europe, with many American jazz bands traveling the distance to perform for European fans.

The introduction of jazz into Britain at this time was significant in a number of ways. Britain was not only in political and economic upheaval after the First World War, but it was also going through a period of enormous movement socially. With the rise of new technologies and forms of entertainment, the world was beginning to modernise making more seem possible than ever before. As a result, a proportion of the nation's young people in Britain at this time were given access to money and the licence to let rip – it was, in part, a reaction against the slaughter of World War I.

In this way, the younger generation of the time began breaking away from previous traditions and moving towards more socially frivolous behaviour. They disregarded their parents' warnings to take 'proper' paths in life and instead opted for enjoying life in the moment by relishing in their new found freedom. According to Catherine Parsonage, jazz 'seemed to promise cultural as well as musical freedom' for young people in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

In regard to the acceptance of jazz music into the class system in Britain, this was made easier due to the advent of the BBC and the increased quality of gramophone records at the time, which were regarded as a respectable form of media. It was also helped by Prince Edward's enthusiasm for the music. Bands such as the *Original Dixieland Jazz Band* were even summoned to perform for him at Buckingham Palace. The Prince's enthusiasm for the music was a key influence on high society, making it acceptable for the established gentry to also enjoy.

While jazz music became a more accepted feature within upper class circles, the 'Bright Young Things' of the generation used the influence of jazz music to rebel against the traditional culture of previous generations. This, in turn, went hand in hand with many other phases that evolved throughout this time: the 'flapper' girl, women smoking cigarettes, free talk about sex, and more tolerance towards homosexuality. In this way, the jazz age (also known as the 'Roaring Twenties') can also be linked to the rise of the 'new woman', the movement of fashion, and a society that was steeped in a new wave of media attention.

With more social gatherings, new glamorous outfits, and generally more publicly frivolous behaviour the press found new ways to reach this group of socialites. What ensued was a period of more colourful and enticing advertising, with many of the popular newspapers specifically featuring 'society columns'. Taking advantage of this, the 'Bright Young Things' used the evolution of the media landscape to propel themselves further into the public eye; people started to become famous just by being famous. It was a media frenzy, which in many ways can still be seen in today's media coverage: our print and online media is still rife with society-based commentary, undefined celebrities (Jodie Marsh, Katie Price, Paris Hilton), and advertising that entices people to succumb to various unnecessary luxuries. People were, and still are, fascinated by glamour and how other people live. This fascination at the time can be linked to the massive changes that resulted from World War I, and is a captivation that still emanates in today's society: we still want to know what goes on behind closed doors which can be seen from shows such as *Come Dine with Me* and *Big Brother*, as well as our attraction to following celebrity Twitter accounts.

Throughout this period, Coward's plays and his career were also evolving and taking note of the way in which society was behaving. In his twenties at the time, Coward was in the midst of the social trends and fads that were emerging, and was himself very much in the public eye. It is no surprise then that Coward satirises, scrutinises and analyses this period of history heavily throughout his works. Barry Day tells us that 'even in his own early twenties, Coward has catalogued that he saw as a dangerous *ennui* of the post-war generation'. So, while plays like *Private Lives* allude to many of the elements of society at the time (pictured right), there is again a satirical undertone to the ways in which his characters go about their daily lives. Coward scrutinises Amanda and Elyot's tendencies to act on a whim and so easily forget the world around them. For example, the play may be set up within the constructs of a comedy, but there are elements of the play that point towards their lack of conscience on a larger scale, especially when considering the state of the economy at the time:



Lawrence and Noel in Private Lives.

*Image of Gertrude smoking in fashionable attire shows the depiction of Amanda as a 'Bright Young Thing' of her day.
© photo by Vandamm. Courtesy of New York Public Library, 1930*

AMANDA: *It's nice, isn't it?*

ELYOT: *Strangely peaceful. It's an awfully bad reflection on our characters. We ought to be absolutely tortured with conscience.*

AMANDA: *We are, every now and then.*

ELYOT: *Not nearly enough.*

As with most themes in Coward's works, he made many more explicit references to these subjects throughout his career. In his own words, he said that 'when I had matured enough to be able to view the First World War historically and set it in perspective, its horrors and muddles and tragedies became very profoundly significant'.

The subtle hints of this in *Private Lives* could easily link to some of his songs at the time which both satirise and contemplate these moments of history:

*In lives of leisure,
The craze for pleasure
Steadily grows;
Cocktails and laughter,
But what comes after?
Nobody knows!
You're weaving love into a mad jazz pattern,
Ruled by Pantaloon,
Poor little rich girl,
Don't drop a stitch too soon!*
- Poor Little Rich Girl from *On with the Dance*

*Why is it that civilized humanity
Can make the world so wrong?
In this hurly-burly of insanity
Our dreams cannot last long.*
- 20th Century Blues from *Cavalcade*

[Full lyrics, article and further songs on the website]



Suggested Activities

- On the Noël Coward website is a selection of his songs and lyrics, which relate to the jazz age and the era of the 'Bright Young Things'. Get students to look at these and discuss their significance to the time, as well as a way to explore Coward's attitudes towards them.
- Students can think about Coward as a jazz age dramatist and how he might have been influenced by this post-WWI phenomenon, which was very much a movement of young people. Students can also research the jazz age phenomenon to identify writers who contributed to this movement e.g. Evelyn Waugh, Nancy Mitford, and F Scott Fitzgerald. Does Coward operate within this sphere or is he satirising what he finds by being on the outside looking in?
- There has been exploration on this time period through Jack Ross in *Downton Abbey*, and the Louis Lester Band in *Dancing on the Edge*. Both give us a peek at the infiltration of jazz

into British society of the 1920s and 1930s. It may be useful for students to watch these in order to gain a better understanding of this movement in relation to *Private Lives*.

- In relation to the fascination with glamour in the 1930s and today's age, it may be a good task for students to look at the advertising in the programme from *Private Lives* in 1930 [on the Noël Coward website] and compare this to advertising in today's society. What are the differences/similarities?

Fashion & Edward Molyneux

In a similar way to the progression of the musical landscape and the evolution of the 'new' woman, fashion was also undergoing a significant period of change in the 20s and 30s, especially for females. Just as jazz music broke away from previous traditions, so too did young women's fashion. Breaking away from the rigid Victorian way of life, these young, rebellious women did away with the corset and instead donned looser fitting, knee-length dresses that exposed their legs and arms. Their hairstyles became chin-length bobs and they embraced the growing popularity of cosmetics. These girls were labelled by older generations at the time as 'flapper' girls, and were a new breed of women in the 1920s. They were seen as brash for wearing excessive makeup, drinking, treating sex in a casual manner, smoking, driving automobiles, and otherwise flouting social and sexual norms.

While this fashion movement was emerging, Coward's plays deviated from this towards a more sophisticated and acceptable mode of fashion within the upper class circles. One of Coward's good friends at the time was designer Edward Molyneux, who designed many of the costumes for Coward's plays. Similarly to the 'flapper' girls at the time, Molyneux deviated from the traditions of Victorian fashion, but also created a line of fashion that differed from the flapper girl image. Caroline Milbank summed up his work as 'the designer to whom a fashionable woman would turn if she



Noël Coward and Edward Molyneux in France, © NC Aventales AG C. 1930

wanted to be absolutely right without being utterly predictable in the 1920s and 1930s.' He was himself a model of cool elegance, and this was consistently reflected in his works. As a result, he embraced the movement of fashion in the 20s and 30s and designed dresses for royalty and a fleet of the best female actresses of the time: Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Gertrude Lawrence.

Interestingly, Molyneux was similar to Coward in terms of his self-earned celebrity status. Coming from a

working class background also, Molyneux ascended society through his work and became one of the first celebrity designers in the media.

With this in mind, he designed costumes for many of Coward's plays, including *Private Lives*. Alongside his initial thoughts for *Private Lives*, Coward not only envisaged the part of Amanda being played by Gertrude Lawrence, but he also pictured her in a dress created by Molyneux. This manifested into the dress in the image of Gertrude below (right), which can also be seen from the original watercolour sketch of the dress designed by Molyneux (pictured left).



Original Molyneux Watercolour sketch
© NC Aventales AG



Gertrude and Noël in the Balcony Scenes in *Private Lives*.
© Photo by Sasha. Courtesy of The Mander & Mitchenson
Collection – University of Bristol, 1930

4c. Theatrical Context

***'The theatre should be treated with respect. It is a house of strange enchantment, a temple of dreams.'* – Noël Coward, on theatre**

In order to fully appreciate the timeless nature of *Private Lives*, it is vital for students to understand the play as a piece of *theatre* and what this means. Teachers also need to highlight and discuss the progression of British theatre prior to Coward up until present day. By doing so, students can understand and consider the play through the eyes of multiple theatrical contexts.

In regard to the genre of comedy in British theatre pre-Coward, this mainly consisted of Edwardian musicals, music hall and sentimental comedies with stock characters and minimal plot lines, much along the same theme as *Private Lives*. On the other hand, domestic tragedies, in which the tragic protagonists were ordinary middle-class or lower-class individuals, were also very much in fashion.

As with all times, however, theatrical conventions were in a period of transition and the advances of naturalism and psychological realism by Shaw, Ibsen, Chekhov were beginning to overturn and change the theatrical landscape as people knew it. Much like most playwrights, Coward was influenced by others and drew inspiration from them in his works. For example, Coward admired the works of Oscar Wilde, so it could be argued that some of the light-hearted comedy in his works were taken from playwrights such as him.

In regard to the lightness of the comedy, Coward was fully aware that, as a piece of live entertainment, the play would always stand and fall by the way it was *performed*. Coward was not only a playwright but an actor and a director too, so he always wrote with the performance in mind, which is why it is so crucial for students to analyse and consider the play from page to stage, just as Coward would have done.

For example, on the page Victor and Sibyl are perhaps quite superfluous characters, but in order to play the characters with conviction, Coward knew that they needed to be superbly performed in order for them to be credible to audiences (pictured right).



Adrienne Allen and Laurence Olivier first played Sibyl and Victor in *Private Lives*, 1930 © Photo by Sasha. Courtesy of The Mander & Mitchenson Collection – University of Bristol

Another important thing to note was that until 1968 the Lord Chamberlain and his team enforced a theatre censorship. This meant that the Lord Chamberlain had absolute power over anything that appeared on the stage, and would vet play scripts before they were produced, advising on deletions of scenes and changes of wording.

Interestingly, the Lord Chamberlain initially banned *Private Lives* for being too risqué. He declared that the characters who were supposed to be married to other people seemed to be admitting sexual relations with each other. Noël Coward, however, performed it to the Lord Chamberlain and persuaded him that it could be performed without any cuts.

Students need to think about the effect that such a censorship had on playwrights. This does not need to be just in the case of Coward, but could also go back as far as Marlowe and Shakespeare, who knew that the content of their plays had to be in keeping with the court and Queen in order to not risk the death penalty.

As a result of such censorships, it effected both the writing of a play as well as the way in which it might be directed and performed on stage, which can be seen from the example above with Coward adapting the performance of *Private Lives* to be in line with the Chamberlain’s censorship. It also shows the juxtaposition between words on a page and how they could be adapted/interpreted on stage. For example, as can be seen from the below photographs, the ‘sexual’ nuances of Amanda and Elyot’s relationship in the *text* of *Private Lives* can be portrayed in very different ways on *stage*:



Gertrude Lawrence and Noël Coward as Amanda & Elyot, 1930 © NC Aventales AG



Anna Chancellor and Toby Stephens as Amanda & Elyot, 2013 © Photo by Johan Persson. Courtesy of Old Vic Productions

It is important for students to always think and write about *Private Lives* in the context of who is watching, as well as the time/place in which the production is being performed. By doing so, students will get a clearer understanding of the playwright's mind-set and the reason for the many different interpretations, adaptations and theories that surround the play.

'Consider the public. Treat it with tact and courtesy. It will accept much from you if you are clever enough to win it to your side' – Noël Coward in the Sunday Times, 1961

Suggested Activities:

- Get students to think of *Private Lives* in the context of the censorship and how different direction/performances may allow the play to escape the censors, whereas playing it in an alternative way may not. Using the images above could be a good starting point. Is there significance in making the performance more in keeping with a modern society's ideals, or should the play be performed as it was originally intended?
- Get students to research famous plays pre and post-1930 and compare and contrast them to Coward's comedies and style of writing.
- Students need to see the play acted, as well as reading it. An important task to set as homework or in class is to watch a production of *Private Lives*. [website contains links, footage and other useful resources for teachers and students to access a live production of the play]



- Another task could be to look at the ways in which the posters/imagery/sets have changed for the production over the years and evaluating the movement/differences. For example, would the poster (right) from 2001 image have been accepted in 1930? If not, why?
- Get students to think about what might effect a writer when creating a play in a specific society or set of circumstances. For example, Coward originally intended *Private Lives* to be an 'operetta', but changed this as Gertrude Laurence (for whom he wrote the part of Amanda) didn't have the best singing voice.

- *The Vortex* was the *Angry Young Man* play of the day and blasted Edwardian Theatre out of the water. Then *Look Back in Anger* was written, which had the same effect on Coward's plays and the theatre landscape as a whole. Get students to consider the changes in theatre history throughout time and how this movement could be reflected or contextualised alongside fashions and trends at the time.

5. Production History

In order to allow students to understand the importance of the theatrical context, as well as the reason for the many critical interpretations over time, there is a bespoke area on the education page of the Noël Coward website, which features a range of materials from productions throughout history. As one of Coward's most famous plays with countless productions over the years, one of the most appealing parts of studying this play is the vast amount of imagery and materials that students can use to support their revision and research.

This area of the website will help students in AO3 and AO5 specifically, allowing them to shape their understanding of different critical interpretations and be able to place the play within different contexts over time.

6. Critical Interpretations over time (AO5)

As one of Coward's most performed plays, and greatest financial successes (earning him £3,200 for him every week and making him the highest paid author in the Western, and West End world at the time), it has received enormous amount of critical interpretations and analysis. There are innumerable books, essays, and theories surrounding *Private Lives*, as well as a myriad of reviews from productions across the globe. While this may be daunting for students, it does give them a great amount of material to refer to and use when considering essay and exam questions. It will also significantly help them to achieve strong results in AO5 of the examination.

As a brief snippet, the original production of *Private Lives* was met with mixed reviews. Allardyce Nicoll, for example, said that the play was 'amusing, no doubt, yet hardly moving farther below the surface than a paper boat in a bathtub'. Cole Lesley, on the other hand, reviewed the first production and was overcome with emotion from watching Noël and Gertrude's portrayal of the relationship between Elyot and Amanda.

Ultimately though, the celebrity status of Gertrude, Coward and Olivier at the time went a long way to making the production a success. Sheridan Morley states that 'what the critics first thought was a matter of irrelevance...they could have read the telephone directory and still have had audiences queueing to see it'. This can still be said of the modern age, with 'celebrity' status being one of the main draws to theatre even now.

Since then, there have also been an array of literary theories on the play, ranging from a view of 'queer theory' to psychological theories to analysing the play as part of the theatre of the absurd.

Suggested Activities:

- Get students to formulate a feminist and/or Marxist theory (or other theory) of their own, having read some contemporary reviews on *Private Lives*, analysing and giving evidence in the text/production to support this theory.
- Get students to look at reviews from a more recent production of *Private Lives* and consider the reason for the various critical responses and interpretations based on the context that the play was produced in.
- On the education page of the Coward website are a range of suggested essays and critical interpretations of the play which students should be encouraged to read and explore alongside study of the play in order to support their development of AO5.

7. Further Reading/References

The education page on the Noël Coward website contains a range of essays, video footage, images, articles and other materials for teachers and students to use to further their study of *Private Lives*. (www.noelcoward.com/education)

Noël Coward Further Reading

Plays

The Better Half, 1922

The Vortex, 1925

Post Mortem, 1930

Cavalcade, 1931

Relative Values, 1952

Hay Fever, 1925

Design for Living, 1933

Verse, Lyrics & Sketches

The Lyrics of Noël Coward Heinemann, Methuen, 1985 (Paperback)

Noël Coward, the Complete Lyrics Ed. Barry Day, Methuen, 1998

Collected Sketches and Lyrics Hutchinson, 1931.

The Noël Coward Song Book Ed. Lee Snider, Methuen, 1984 (Paperback)

A full bibliography with additional works by Coward can be found on the Noël Coward website:

www.noelcoward.com.html/archive.html

Books of Quotations

Noël Coward in His Own Words, Compiled and Introduced by Barry Day, Methuen 2008

The Sayings of Noël Coward, Ed. Philip Hoare, Duckworth, 1997

The Quotable Noël Coward, Ed. Sheridan Morley, Running Press, 1999

Noël Coward, a Life in Quotes, Ed. Barry Day, Metro, 1999

Wicked Wit of Noël Coward, Ed. Dominique Engright

Further literary criticism can be found on the Noël Coward Education Page

Other Comparative Texts

The Taming of the Shrew by William Shakespeare

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen

Dance of Death by August Strindberg

The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde

Man and Superman by George Bernard Shaw

The Constant Wife by W. Somerset Maugham

A Little Night Music by Stephen Sondheim & Hugo Wheeler

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf by Edward Albee

The Norman Conquests by Alan Ayckbourn

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen

That Face by Polly Stenham

Passion Play by Peter Nichols

Closer by Patrick Marber

All of the above texts are available at the Noël Coward Room, which is an archive in London of Noël Coward's works. The room features a colourful wall display of production artwork, rare film footage available to view and a database containing hundreds of photographs of Noël Coward's professional and personal life.

This room is available to individual students embarking upon independent study, as well as small groups of students as part of an organised outing. To make an appointment, email: abr@alanbrodie.com

