

Ordinary Level Leaving Certificate English 2012

DANCING
AT
LUGHNASA

CHARACTER SKETCHES



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Kate Mundy

Forty years of age, schoolteacher

Mother figure / Authority figure

Kate is a schoolteacher, and the eldest of the Mundy sisters. She is the only wage-earner, so it is understandable that she feels like a parent to her younger sisters. She can be overly-controlling in her behaviour towards her sisters, and they sometimes express resentment of her bossiness. Early on in the play, we learn that the sisters avoid incurring Kate's displeasure. When Chris announces that she is considering wearing lipstick, Agnes warns her only to do so: 'As long as Kate's not around.'

Kate believes that she has a right to dictate how the house is run. When Gerry Evans arrives on an unexpected visit, Kate initially says that he cannot stay, but then relents. However, she still insists that he does not stay in the house but in the shed. Part of her determination to control her sisters' behaviour stems from Kate's fear of having shame brought on the family. Chris has already damaged the family's good name by having a child outside of marriage, and Kate does not want to risk any further disgrace.

The discussion about the harvest dance is another example of Kate's authoritarian role in the Mundy household and her fear of inappropriate behaviour. She asks her sisters, 'Do you want the whole countryside to be laughing at us?'

The effect of Kate's controlling and stabilising influence on the Mundy household is twofold. It keeps the family together and ensures that the sisters' lives are well-organised and well-structured. (Look what happens at the end of the play when Kate's influence fails and Agnes and Rose leave.) On the other hand, Kate creates a repressive atmosphere in the house, which adds a sense of tension to the plot. We can see - as can Kate - that things are beginning to unravel as the play unfolds.

Religiously conservative and morally upright

Kate does not approve of anything that may be seen to go against the Church's teachings. She is very unhappy with Jack's repeated references to the pagan rituals in Ryanga, and she does her best to steer any such conversations back to safer ground. When Jack talks about the benefits of one man having several wives, Kate is most disapproving. Primly, she tells Jack that 'It may be efficient and you may be in favour of it, Jack, but I don't think it's what Pope Pius XI considers to be the holy sacrament of matrimony. And it might be better for

you if you paid just a bit more attention to our Holy Father and a bit less to the Great Goddess ...Iggie.’

Kate uses the word ‘pagan’ as a term of disparagement and is disgusted to hear that there are still local people who participate in Celtic rituals at Lughnasa. Those who do so are ‘savages’ in her eyes and she is harsh in her condemnation of their behaviour.

Kate even disapproves of the radio, accusing it of playing ‘those ‘aul pagan songs’.

It is particularly sad that Kate should be let down by the Catholic church she has so staunchly defended. She loses her job in the school because of Father Jack’s abandonment of his faith. This is a terrible blow for Kate as she had eagerly looked forward to the ‘great public welcome’ that she felt sure would accompany Jack’s return home to Ballybeg.

In Kate’s eyes, a public ceremony welcoming Jack home would have gone some way to balancing the shame Chris brought on the family by having a child outside of marriage. Although she loves Michael dearly, she is not happy that he is illegitimate.

Loving and generous

Kate genuinely loves her family, and positively adores Michael. She praises his decoration of the kites and tells the other sisters that he is very talented and ‘very mature for his years’.

Kate is also understanding of Chris’ feelings for Gerry Evans, even though she is most unhappy about the relationship. She comforts Chris when she is nervous about meeting Gerry again after over a year, telling her that she is ‘perfectly calm’ and ‘looking beautiful’.

Even when she is being kind and thoughtful, Kate cannot resist lecturing her sisters, which causes them to feel a mixture of gratitude and resentment towards her. For example, when she comes back from a shopping trip to Ballybeg, she gives each of them something they want or need, but each gift is accompanied by an instruction or a moral lesson of sorts. She has noticed that Chris is pale, so she buys her cod-liver oil, at the same time saying that Chris looks unhealthy because she takes ‘no exercise’. She gives Agnes a romantic novel, but is scornful about its content, sarcastically calling it ‘riveting’ and reading the title aloud in a disapproving tone: *“The Marriage of Nurse Harding – oh, dear!”*

Hides behind a mask

As well as controlling her sisters, Kate is an expert at controlling herself. She is not as self-confident as she might appear, but this is not a side of herself she shows very often. It is only with Maggie that she can admit her fears about Father Jack’s losing his faith and becoming a different person, saying that ‘it’s what he’s changed into that frightens me.’ She also confides

in Maggie that she feels the family is falling apart: 'You perform your duties as best you can – because you believe in responsibilities and obligations and good order. And then, suddenly, suddenly you realise that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away'.

Kate's vulnerability is also evident when Rose teases her about Austin Morgan. The other sisters try to distract Rose but it is too late. Kate is clearly discomfited – blushing and moved to uncharacteristic anger with Rose: 'For God's sake, Rose, shut up, would you!'

Kate is more passionate than she may appear. In the scene where all the sisters dance, Kate dances alone, lost in concentration. She makes no sound but her dancing is 'ominous of some deep and true emotion', something which she rarely expresses.

Feels the weight of responsibility / Loses control of the family

As well as putting pressure on her sisters, Kate puts pressure on herself. She feels that she has to take care of her family in every way. She is the sole provider, she is the moral guardian, and she is determined to restore Father Jack to full health and to see him celebrate Mass once more.

All of this responsibility takes its toll on Kate. She is not as in control of things as she would wish. She cannot cure Jack, nor can she provide for her family once she loses her job. Her control over her sisters begins to weaken, and even the normally quiet Agnes turns on her, calling her a 'damned righteous bitch!' for saying that Gerry Evans has neglected his duty of care towards Michael.

Kate sees that she is losing her power to hold the family together. She confides in Maggie that 'It's all about to collapse'. Although Maggie reassures her, Kate is correct. Agnes' revolt was simply one symptom of Kate's dwindling authority in the household. Later on, Rose refuses to tell Kate what exactly she was doing with Danny Bradley up in the back hills.

Eventually, Kate loses any power she had. She loses her job and is reduced to tutoring Austin Morgan's children, Rose and Agnes leave for London, Father Jack dies, Chris has to get a job in the new knitting factory, and Michael is 'happy to escape' as soon as he reaches adulthood. Everything Kate worked for, and everything she sacrificed her own happiness for has come to nothing.

Maggie Mundy

Thirty eight years of age, housekeeper

The joker of the family and the peacemaker of the family

Maggie uses humour to defuse tense situations in the Mundy household. She is quick to see when her sisters are angry or upset with one another, and jumps in with a joke to distract them. When Kate returns from her shopping trip in Ballybeg and says worriedly that the local priest won't meet her eye since Father Jack returned, Maggie lightens the mood by saying, 'That's because you keep winking at him, Kate.'

A short time later, when Kate is becoming agitated about the story of the Sweeney boy being burnt during a pagan ceremony around a Lughnasa bonfire, Maggie brings the conversation back to Okawa, Father Jack's house boy. She jokes that it would be 'very handy in the winter time to have a wee house boy to feed the hens', and goes on to imitate someone calling chickens to feed.

Provides balance in the household

Maggie's role as peacemaker means that she is the one Kate feels she can confide in when things in the household begin to fall apart. In many ways, Maggie is a transitional figure. She is not controlling, like Kate, but neither does she resent Kate the way the other sisters do. Maggie seems to understand and tolerate everyone's point of view. She is easy-going and kind underneath her jokey exterior.

Maggie is the only sister who can stand up to Kate without fighting or losing her temper. When Rose goes missing and Kate begins to question Agnes too aggressively, accusing her of lying, Maggie takes charge of the situation, saying 'That'll do, Kate! Stop that at once!' Calmly, she instructs each of the sisters to search a different area, while she plans to go to town to tell the police. Kate is horrified, fearing the scandal that might ensue if it were to get out that Rose was 'mixed up with that Bradley creature', but Maggie is firm. She says that she will go to the police and that Kate will do as she is told.

Hides her femininity but, like Kate, has hidden passion

Maggie dresses in an unattractive, unfeminine way. She wears 'a drab, wrap-around overall' and 'large boots with long, untied laces.' However, this does not mean that she does not have hidden desires. When Kate tells her about meeting Bernie O'Donnell, Maggie becomes uncharacteristically quiet. There is none of her usual, jokey manner evident in her rather

bleak and short reactions to Kate's observations about Bernie's beauty, her glamorous lifestyle, her beautiful twin girls and her rather exotic husband.

It is Maggie who leads the wild dance which is one of the most important moments in the play. Her dancing shows her passion as she becomes 'a white-faced frantic dervish'.

Loving aunt to Michael

Maggie is very close to Michael, and teases him fondly. She sets him riddles and jokes, and gives him sweets. Her manner when dealing with Michael is much the same as the way she deals with the rest of the family. She is light-hearted and entertaining, and Michael feels comfortable enough with her to call her 'pathetic' when she sets him another of her riddles. They play practical jokes on one another, and clearly enjoy the time they spend together.

In denial?

It could be said that Maggie is in denial about the realities of life. She makes jokes whenever a tense situation develops, and she answers Kate's concerns about the family by saying 'Nothing's about to collapse, Kate', and she refuses to engage with Kate's very real worries about her job and about Chris's emotional state when Gerry Evans turns up out of the blue.

At the end of the book, Michael says in his monologue that when Agnes and Rose left, Maggie simply took on their jobs in the household and 'pretended to believe that nothing had changed.' This could mean that Maggie is not as strong as she might appear and copes with unpleasant situations by ignoring them.



Agnes Mundy

Thirty five years of age, knitter

Endlessly patient and kind to Rose

Agnes and Rose are paired throughout the play. Agnes sees her role as that of Rose's protector. She is patient and kind to Rose, taking time to explain things to her when Rose fails to understand what is going on. Her calmness works well with Rose, who can be stubborn and defensive if challenged. For example, when Rose tells the sisters about Danny Bradley, Agnes does not warn Rose against the married father, like the other sisters do. Instead, she is gentle and kind, admiring the necklace Danny gave to Rose and simply saying 'I know' when Rose announces that she loves Danny.

Agnes does not approve of Rose's relationship – if it can be called that – with Danny Bradley any more than the other sisters do, but she realises that Rose will not react well to being challenged directly about this matter. When Rose returns after going missing while out picking bilberries, Agnes still retains her calm, even though she is deeply concerned about Rose. She asks gentle questions, but does not succeed in getting the truth about Rose's date because Kate keeps interrupting.

Agnes protects Rose as best she can but, like Kate, her power is slipping away. Rose is determined to see Danny Bradley again, and is unmoved by her sisters' disapproval. Rose is the most vulnerable member of the Mundy household and when the knitting factory opens up, Agnes does not even apply for a job there. It is likely she knows that Rose would not be employed, and she is too loyal to her sister to leave her now. Kate believes that Agnes has high ideas of herself and that she is too proud to work in a factory, but this does not seem like a reasonable explanation.

Agnes decides to go to London with Rose rather than stay at home, unemployed. This decision is disastrous for both sisters, and they die in poverty.

Hidden passion

Another reason Agnes may have decided to leave Ballybeg is her secret longing for Gerry Evans. There is a certain chemistry between the two, and Agnes defends Gerry hotly against Kate's scathing criticism. Gerry flirts with Agnes, and even asks specially for her when he meets Chris again after a thirteen month absence. Her feelings for Gerry Evans might be another part of Agnes's reasons for leaving Ballybeg. She may not want to compromise her relationship with her sister by coming between her and Gerry Evans in any way.

Resents being bossed around by Kate and longs to control her own life

Agnes does not take kindly to being treated like a child by Kate. Agnes would like to go to the harvest dance, and even offers to pay for all of them to go: 'I want to dance, Kate. It's the Festival of Lughnasa. I'm only thirty five.' Kate vetoes the suggestion, and Agnes accepts her decision quietly.

Later on, Agnes suggests that they throw out the radio as it is nothing but junk. Kate asks sharply if Agnes intends to buy a new one out of her glove money. She reminds her sister that the family home 'isn't your classroom'. Kate continues to criticise Agnes, saying that if she has money to spare, she should offer to pay it towards the upkeep of the house. At this, Agnes explodes in anger, telling Kate, 'I wash every stitch of clothes you wear. I make your bed. We both do – Rose and I.' Her bitterness is clear when she says, 'What you have here, Kate, are two unpaid servants.' Perhaps this sense of frustration at being unappreciated and being unable to control her life may be one of the reasons Agnes leaves for London, taking Rose with her.



Rose Mundy

Thirty two years of age, knitter

Childlike

In the introduction to the play, Rose is described as 'simple'. This means that she is mentally challenged and is like a child in many ways. She can say things that the other sisters would prefer were left unsaid, such as that Kate is called 'the Gander' by her pupils; or that Kate likes Austin Morgan and is distressed to hear that he is going out with a younger woman.

Relies on Agnes

The bond between Rose and Agnes is a strong one. Agnes is Rose's protector and Rose knows that Agnes is less judgemental than the rest of her sisters. Rose resents her other sisters' attempts to keep her away from Danny Bradley, saying 'That's what's wrong with the whole of you – you're jealous of me!' It is to Agnes that Rose turns now, seeking approval and reassurance. While Agnes does not approve, neither does she confront Rose directly, the way the other sisters do. Instead, she simply says 'I know' when Rose admits to loving Danny Bradley.

The closeness between Rose and Agnes is such that when Agnes leaves for London, she takes Rose with her.

Stubborn and independent

Rose can be quite rebellious on occasion. She meets Danny Bradley and goes to Lough Anna with him despite her sisters' disapproval, and when she returns, she refuses to tell them what she has been up to: 'And that's all I'm going to tell you.' She even stands up to Kate when Kate is against buying a new radio: 'And do you know what your nickname in school is? The Gander!'

Rose wants to be like the others and to have a chance at love and an independent life. She longs for things to work out with the one man who has shown an interest in her, and is too simple and naïve to see that he is more than likely taking advantage of her. She points out that Chris has no right to lecture her on going out with unsuitable men. There is a certain amount of logic to this argument. After all, Chris had Michael outside of wedlock, but is now telling Rose that she must not get involved with a married man.

In sensitive

Rose is not always aware that she may be hurting others by what she says. Like a child, she does not pick up on subtle nuances in conversations, and is unaware that she should drop certain subjects. When Kate returns from shopping in Morgan's Arcade and Rose accuses her of having 'a notion of that aul Austin Morgan!' she is oblivious to Kate's embarrassment and irritation. The other sisters try in vain to change the subject, but Rose persists, pointing out that Kate is blushing. Eventually, Kate snaps: 'For God's sake, Rose, shut up, would you!' but even then, Rose continues. It falls to Agnes to distract Rose by asking her to do a small job for her.



Chris Mundy

Twenty six years of age, Michael's mother

Unmarried mother

It would have been most unusual in rural Ireland in the 1930s for a woman to have had a child outside wedlock and still be supported and loved by her family. In a country ruled by the Catholic church, unmarried mothers were considered sinful and Chris could have expected to have been turned out of home and forced to give up her son for adoption. Instead, the Mundy sisters love Chris and Michael dearly, and do everything they can for them. This is a sign of the independence, decency and loving natures of the Mundy sisters. Even the conservative, deeply Catholic Kate shows Chris and Micheal nothing but love and support. Still, it is difficult for Kate, knowing that the whole town is aware of the family's disgrace. As she explains it to Father Jack, 'Much as we cherish love-children here, they are not exactly the norm.'

Chris is not as openly affectionate to Michael as his aunts are. This is not to say that she does not love him deeply, of course. Perhaps it is Brian Friel's way of showing the audience that all of the sisters love Michael dearly and that his bond with his mother is no stronger than his bond with his aunts. When Father Jack praises Michael, Agnes tells him that 'We're all lucky to have him'. Michael is effectively being raised by five women, not one.

Vulnerable

Chris is a strong, independent woman in many ways, but her one weak spot is her continued love for Gerry Evans. When he turns up out of the blue, it is clear that Chris is very excited: 'Oh sweet God – look at the state of me – what'll I say to him?'

Chris tries to be cool and collected when Gerry arrives at the door, and she succeeds for a while, simply giving short, factual answers to his questions. However, when he begins to dance with her, Chris falls for him all over again. Gerry is very charming, and Chris is unable to resist him.

Chris knows on one level that Gerry can't be trusted or relied on, and she says as much to him when he proposes to her. She claims that he would 'walk out on me again' because that is his nature.

When Gerry returns to the house the second time, Chris tries to keep him at a distance. She

Spurns his advances and refuses to go down to the old well with him. However, she is moved to anger by his flirtation with Agnes, and does not like it when the pair dance together and Gerry kisses her on the forehead. Still, she will not dance with Gerry herself, instead turning on him angrily and asking him if he is thick when he repeats the question. When Maggie offers to dance with Gerry instead, Chris turns the radio off, saying that she is 'skick of that damned thing.' Although she may be avoiding any closeness with Gerry, Chris still has feelings for him.

Independent

Chris has a defiant streak that helps her to cope with the fact that she is an unmarried mother. She does not seem to care very much what the people of Ballybeg think of the Mundy family. In this, she is unlike her sister Kate. Neither is Chris too worried about the opinion of the Catholic church. An example of this is her holding up the surplice (priest's robe) she is ironing and saying 'Make a nice dress that, wouldn't it?' Although she says 'God forgive me' afterwards, her comment shows that she puts her own feelings above the opinion of the Church.

When the sisters discuss going to the harvest dance, Chris is very keen, saying 'you know how I loved dancing', and putting on the priest's robe as if it was a ball gown. This is quite a disrespectful thing to do, but Chris does not care.

Unhappy

Chris has a sad life. Although she never finds out that Gerry Evans was married to a woman in Wales, the fact that the audience is told this adds to our sympathy for Chris. We know now that she could never have found happiness with Gerry, no matter what his nature.

Chris ends her days working in the knitting factory, and hates 'every day of it.'



Father Jack Mundy

Fifty three years of age, missionary priest

Frail and confused

Jack is 'nothing like...the resplendent figure' Michael had in his head. Instead, he is a shrunken, weak old man, ill with malaria and who is unclear exactly where he is and who he is with, much of the time. He has lived in Africa for so long that he no longer feels at home in Ballybeg and even struggles with the English language. This is understandable, considering he has been speaking Swahili for twenty five years. Jack's health does improve quite rapidly, but he does not live for long, dying within a year of his homecoming, and the sisters are heartbroken.

Converted to a 'pagan' religion

As the play progresses, Jack's English comes back to him more and more, but this is not always a source of joy for his sisters, particularly Kate. Now Jack tells them stories of his time in Ryanga and the various ceremonies in which he took part. It becomes clear that he was sent home because of his refusal to obey the dictates of his superiors in the Church. His role was to convert the Africans to Catholicism, not to be converted to their religion.

Jack's attitude towards life in Ballybeg is not at all what would be expected from a priest. He has no problem with people celebrating the feast of Lughnasa, and thinks that having a 'love-child' is an excellent thing.

Represents change

Jack has been held up as 'a hero' to young Michael, but he says that Jack was 'a hero and a saint to my mothers and my aunts'. They saved whatever little bits of money they could to send to him. Stories about him appeared in the local paper, and this gave the Mundys 'a little bit of status in the eyes of the parish'. Having such a priest in the family also something to alleviate the shame that Chris brought on the Mundys by having a child outside of wedlock.

However, the reality of Jack is completely different to the expectations the family had of him. Far from bringing stability and honour, Jack brings strange stories of the outside world and has no interest whatsoever in saying Mass or in taking up any Church duties. As he is a disgraced priest, his return is the reason for Kate losing her job in the local primary school.

Gerry Evans

Thirty three years of age, Michael's father

Charming

Gerry Evans is not a reliable or an honest man, but he does have charm. He uses this charm as a defence mechanism to avoid unpleasant realities. When he arrives at the Mundy's house after an absence of more than a year, he is ill at ease but hides it well. He smiles all the time and ignores Chris's rather frosty attitude towards him. Eventually his flattery and charm breaks through Chris's coolness.

It is not just Chris who is susceptible to Gerry's charm. All of the sisters except Kate fall for it in one way or another. Agnes is the most deeply affected and Gerry flirts with her quite openly.

Selfish and self-absorbed

The majority of Gerry's time is spent talking about himself. He does ask after other people from time to time, but this is simply a way of appearing polite and charming.

His stories are not very credible, and he contradicts himself a number of times. For example, he tells Chris that the gramophone business is going tremendously well, but then says something later on about not having made any sales.

Irresponsible father

Gerry shows little or no interest in Michael. He says that he 'wouldn't mind talking to him' but makes no effort to do so. Very quickly, the conversation turns back to himself and Michael is forgotten again.

Michael says that Gerry returned several times after that first visit: 'And each time he proposed to Mother and promised me a new bike'. Gerry's promises to his son are just a way of making himself popular, but he has no intention of fulfilling them.

Gerry's lack of interest in Michael and his mother is seen in the fact that he admits he only came to Ballybeg by accident, because he happened to bump into a man who said he was going that way. He thinks this was 'a bit of good luck' and does not seem to realise how callous his attitude must seem to the mother of his child.

Childish and insincere

Gerry's language shows how much he exaggerates and lies. Everything is wonderful, brilliant and terrific. He sounds like a small child when telling Chris about his success as a dance teacher 'I had thousands of pupils – millions!' He claims that he is now a highly successful gramophone salesman: 'Agent for the whole country, if you don't mind'. The reality is far from that, but Gerry refuses to acknowledge it.

All Gerry can really do is dance. This superficial, attractive side of Gerry may fool the rest of the sisters, but Kate is unimpressed: 'That's the only thing that Evans creature could ever do well – was dance.' Gerry may be stylish, but he lacks substance.

Refuses to be tied down

Gerry Evans does whatever he wants in life, greeting each new enterprise with enthusiasm and excitement. This is in sharp contrast to the Mundy sisters, who are tied to their home by family bonds and by responsibilities. Gerry does not see why he should be limited in this way, and the irony is that he is probably one of the happiest and most successful people in the play. Not one of the Mundy family succeeds in living a fulfilled life, but Gerry Evans manages to die at home, surrounded by his loving family.



Michael

Young man, narrator

Narrator

Michael's role in the play is to narrate his memories of the summer of 1936.

We never see Michael as a boy, but the other characters address the invisible boy as if he were on stage. The adult Michael answers, but the characters do not look at him or speak to him directly. This creates a distance between Michael and the rest of the characters, which is important as the story is not so much his as it is the tale of the Mundy sisters.

Michael fulfils a similar function to a Greek chorus. He stands apart from the rest of the character, and on five occasions delivers monologues which give the audience additional information and insights.

Adored by his mother and aunts

Michael, like everybody else in the Mundy household, is a little bit apart from the local community. He plays alone, but seems quite happy and content. He gets on very well with his aunt Maggie and they have an easy relationship. In many ways, they are more like brother and sister than nephew and aunt.

Imaginative

Michael spends much of his time in the play making and decorating kites. He paints faces on them, and even Gerry Evans expresses his admiration: 'I think they're just wonderful!' Kate constantly tells Chris that she has 'a very talented son'.

Michael's imagination means that he believes Maggie when she pretends to have an imaginary bird in her hands. He actually believes he can see it fly away, and is disappointed when Maggie tells him 'It was all in your mind.'

Longs to escape

None of the men in the play want to stay in Ballybeg. Jack longs for Africa, Gerry Evans cannot stay there for any length of time, and Micheal says that he 'was happy to escape' when his time came.