

DALLAS
THEATER
CENTER

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The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

STUDY GUIDE

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CHASE



A Trivial Comedy for Serious People

The Importance of Being Earnest revolves around the mistaken identities of Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff. Jack, who resides in the country, loves to visit London for some big city entertainment. In order to escape, he invents a younger brother, Ernest, whom he claims to visit in the city. In Algernon's case, when he wants to travel to the countryside, he fabricates the excuse that he is visiting a sick friend, Bunbury. Both men fall in love under their false identities. Jack proposes to Gwendolen Fairfax, but her mother, Lady Bracknell, does not approve of his

social standing, and forbids their engagement. When he pretends to be Jack's brother Ernest in the countryside, Algernon falls in love with Jack's ward, Cecily Cardew. All four young people eventually cross paths in the country, where both women end up thinking they are engaged to the same man named Ernest. In a hilarious, neatly tied-up ending, Jack and Algernon admit (partially) to their lies, Jack discovers his family history and that his name really is Ernest, and all the lovers are united.



Michael Newcomer (Algernon) & Paul Whitthorne (Jack)

A Colorful Cast of Characters



Jack Worthing wishes to marry Lady Gwendolen, but he cannot secure the approval of her mother, Lady Bracknell. When he is in the city, he goes by the name of Ernest; when he is in the country, he goes by the name of Jack, which he believes is his real name. As a baby, Jack was discovered in a handbag at Victoria Station. Therefore, he does not know his own history or his true family.

Algernon Moncrieff is a young bachelor who lives in London. He is a good friend of Jack. Algy is a member of the Victorian upper class, but his primary pursuit in life—bunburying—has left him with considerable debts. He falls in love with Jack's ward, Cecily, shortly after meeting her.

Lady Augusta Bracknell is the mother of Gwendolen and the aunt of Algernon. A member of the aristocracy, she has an overpowering, confident demeanor. She forbids Gwendolen to marry Jack.

Gwendolen Fairfax is the young, beautiful daughter of Lady Bracknell. She is in love with Jack, but a large part of her attraction comes from her belief that his name is Ernest.

Cecily Cardew is Jack's daydreaming niece and ward. Cecily falls in love with Algernon, believing him to be Jack's ne'r-do-well brother, Ernest. She will be given access to a large sum of money when she comes of age.

Miss Prism is Cecily's tutor and a strong proponent of Victorian morality. She once wrote a three-volume novel and she enjoys flirting with Dr. Chasuble.

Rev. Canon Chasuble is the Rector of the church in the country, who has a crush on Miss Prism. Jack and Algy each ask him to rechristen them Ernest.

Lane Algernon's manservant at his flat in London.

Merriman Jack's butler at the Manor House.

*"The truth is
rarely pure and
never simple."*

Oscar Wilde: A Witty Wordsmith



Oscar Wilde is well known for his contributions to Victorian literature and drama. Born on the 16th of October, 1854, to a Dublin family, he attended grammar school and then went on to Trinity College and Magdalen College at Oxford University, where he was extremely interested in Greek classics and excelled at his studies. At university, he was a leader of the Aesthetic Movement. He dressed in a very distinct manner, wearing black velvet suits and long hair. Followers of his philosophy also began dressing in the same way.

Successful at the young age of 23, he published his first poem, "Ravenna," at the same time that he graduated from Oxford. Only 4 years later, Wilde became an international celebrity when he was

sent on a lecture tour of the United States and Canada.

When he was 29, Wilde married Constance Lloyd, whom he described as a "beautiful, grave, slight, violet-eyed little Artemis." Married life for Wilde resulted in the publication of a book of fairy tales. But in 1890-91, he published what is considered to be his literary masterpiece, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He also published *Intentions*, a collection of critical essays that explained his theories about art.

He followed his literary success with a series of dramatic treasures. From 1892 to 1895, the British stage was graced with Wilde's plays: *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and finally,

The Importance of Being Earnest. They were all extremely well received and highly regarded for their witty style and social commentary. Wilde had borrowed the French concept of the well-made play, but he used wit with such flair to satirize the form that it made an enduring impact on British theatre.

Oscar Wilde didn't enjoy this popularity for long, however. Accused of homosexuality, which was considered a crime in Victorian England, Wilde was brought to trial in a widely publicized case. His relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie, as he was called) was made public, and after a long and arduous trial, Wilde was sentenced to two years in prison. There, he still managed to write, producing *De Profundis*. After Wilde was released from prison, he returned to London to discover that all his possessions had been auctioned off and his family had fled the country. Disillusioned, Wilde moved to France where he passed away at the age of 46 in November, 1900.

Oscar Wilde is best remembered for his skill as a dramatist and his witty sayings. Hailed as one of the most influential British playwrights, he used the theatrical conventions of the time, but added a fresh perspective with his ironic commentary and witty dialogue.

"WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW THE GREAT DRAMA OF MY LIFE? IT IS THAT I PUT MY GENIUS INTO MY LIFE; I HAVE ONLY PUT MY TALENTS INTO MY WORKS."

OSCAR WILDE
1854-1900

The Aesthetic Movement



Wilde was a leader of the Aesthetic Movement, which professed a belief in "art for art's sake." This meant that art shouldn't be influenced by politics, science, or morality, but should be an expression of whatever it wished to be. Art shouldn't merely look to life or nature for inspiration, for art that too closely imitates life is a failure, according to Wilde. Plays with characters who spoke and acted just like they would in real life were utterly boring to followers of Wilde's philosophy. "Realism,"

Oscar Wilde said, "is a complete failure." Wilde also believed that "art was superior to life and that the one obligation was to transform life into art – to be as 'artificial' as possible." In the fine arts, the Aesthetic Movement was the philosophy behind the Pre-Raphaelites. They strove to create beauty and emotion in their art, typically focusing on the female body.

Wilde's Epigrammatic Theater

epi·gram

1: a concise poem dealing pointedly and often satirically with a single thought or event and often ending with an ingenious turn of thought

2: a terse, sage, or witty and often paradoxical saying

Part of that success of *The Importance of Being Earnest* comes from Wilde's seemingly infinite supply of piquant epigrams. Though some of the concise, often paradoxical statements refer to contemporary events, most are universal, hilarious reflections on beauty, art, men, women, and class. They are endlessly quotable and continue to delight audiences with their blend of sophistication and absurdity.

One feature of the epigram that ensures the play's durability is that it can be separated from the play's narrative. In other words, epigrams have little effect on the story. This is because epigrams encapsulate many of Wilde's beliefs on what art should do; above all, art should be beautiful and serve little social function. It should be "useless," as he has written. The epigram is the epitome of this ideal; beautiful in its elegant construction, it is also dramatically useless to the play.



Oscar Wilde's writing and pithy epigrams just beg to be quoted. There is one here for practically every occasion.

- ★ We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.
- ★ I love acting. It is so much more real than life.
- ★ It's only the intellectually lost who ever argue.
- ★ Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.
- ★ It is a very sad thing that now-a-days there is so little useless information.
- ★ In the old days books were written by men of letters and read by the public. Now-a-days books are written by the public and read by nobody.
- ★ Friendship is far more tragic than love. It lasts longer.
- ★ The only thing that can console one for being poor is extravagance. The only thing that can console one for being rich is economy.
- ★ Those whom the gods love grow young.
- ★ I suppose society is wonderfully delightful. To be in it is merely a bore. But to be out of it simply a tragedy.
- ★ I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train.
- ★ All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his.
- ★ Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much.
- ★ The way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it.
- ★ The only thing to do with good advice is pass it on; it is never of any use to oneself.
- ★ Oscar Wilde's last words: "Ah, well, then I suppose I shall have to die beyond my means."

Timeline



- 1854 **Oscar Wilde is born.**
- 1859 Charles Darwin writes *On the Origin of Species*.
- 1861 Charles Dickens writes *Great Expectations*.
- 1861-65 American Civil War - US is split over the issue of slavery.
- 1865 Lewis Carroll writes *Alice in Wonderland*.
- 1867 Alfred Nobel invents dynamite, the first high explosive which can be safely handled.
- 1869 Mendeléev produces the Periodic Table of chemical elements.
- 1876 Alexander Graham Bell invents the telephone.
- 1879 Edison invents the incandescent lightbulb.
- 1891 **Oscar Wilde publishes *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.**
- 1892-93 **Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance* are produced.**
- 1895 **Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is produced.**
- Oscar Wilde is tried on charges of "gross indecency."**
- 1896 Anton Chekhov writes *The Seagull*.
- 1899-1902 The Boer War erupts between Boers and the British in South Africa.
- 1900 **Oscar Wilde dies.**

An Earnest Glossary

apprised: to give notice to

apoplexy: to cripple by a stroke

Bunbury: this is a word that Wilde invented for the play; **Bunburying (verb):** traveling around under false pretenses in order to make mischief

christen: to name at baptism

credulity: readiness or willingness to believe especially on slight or uncertain evidence

crumpets: a small round unsweetened bread cooked on a griddle and usually split and toasted before serving

cynical: having or showing the attitude or temper that is contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives

demonstrative: inclined to display feelings openly

Egeria: *Latin*, a nymph who advised the legendary Roman king Numa Pompilius; a woman adviser or companion

effrontery: shameless boldness

emigrate: to leave one's place of residence or country to live elsewhere

equanimity: evenness of mind especially under stress

expurgation: to cleanse of something morally harmful, offensive, or erroneous

Gorgon: any of three snake-haired sisters in Greek mythology whose appearance turns the beholder to stone; an ugly or repulsive woman

grotesque: absurdly incongruous

horticulture: the science and art of growing fruits, vegetables, flowers, or ornamental plants

impetuous: marked by impulsive vehemence

indecorous: conflicting with accepted standards of good conduct or good taste

invalid: one that is sickly or disabled

insuperable: incapable of being surmounted

machinations: a scheming or crafty action or artful design intended to accomplish some usually evil end

metaphysical: of or relating to the transcendent or to a reality beyond what is perceptible to the senses; highly abstract

misanthrope: a person who hates or distrusts mankind

neologistic: a meaningless word coined by a psychotic

nigh: near in place, time, or relationship

notorious: widely and unfavorably known

obliged: to constrain by physical, moral, or legal force or by the exigencies of circumstance

ostentatious: marked by or fond of conspicuous and sometimes pretentious display

Oxonian: a student or graduate of Oxford University

poachers: one who kills or takes wild animals (as game or fish) illegally

perambulator: a baby carriage

philanthropic: dispensing or receiving aid from funds set aside for humanitarian purposes

portmanteau: a large suitcase

profligate: completely given up to licentiousness

propound: to offer for discussion or consideration

provincial: the area of a country outside of the city center

Quixotic: foolishly impractical especially in the pursuit of ideals; marked by rash lofty romantic ideas or extravagantly chivalrous action

recumbent: representing a person lying down

repellent: arousing aversion or disgust

shilly-shallying: to show hesitation or lack of decisiveness or resolution

vacillating: to waver in mind, will, or feeling; hesitate in choice of opinions or courses on

vicinity: the quality or state of being near

Wagnerian: of, relating to, characteristic, or suggestive of Wagner (1813-1883), a German composer; originator of the music drama; loud brash female voice

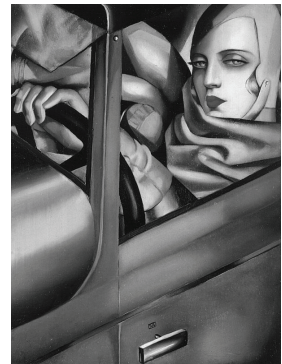
ward: a young person placed under the care of a guardian

Art Deco

Dallas Theater Center's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is set during the 1920's, when Art Deco was at the height of its popularity.

Art Deco: A term that designates a style of design popular during the 1920s and 30s. Coined in the 1960s, the name derives from the 1925 Paris Exposition of Decorative Arts, where the style reached its apex. Art deco is characterized by long, thin forms, curving surfaces, and geometric patterning. The practitioners of the style attempted to describe the sleekness they

thought expressive of the machine age. The style influenced all aspects of art and architecture, as well as the decorative, graphic, and industrial arts. Works executed in the art deco style range from skyscrapers and ocean liners to toasters and jewelry.



Pictured above is a painting featured in the scenic design for *Earnest* entitled *Self-Portrait in the Green Bugatti* by Tamara de Lempicka (Polish, 1898-1980)

Some Rules of Etiquette

In Victorian culture, rules of social interaction were remarkably defined, but if anyone was capable of commenting on the absurdity of Victorian high society, it was Oscar Wilde. An outsider due to his Irish birth, he nevertheless worked his way into the London upper-class social circle with his intelligence and charming wit. As an outsider with an insider's perspective, Wilde chose to satirize the society with which he was so familiar. Victorian rules were strictly adhered to because to do so was an indication of class and upbringing. Keeping up appearances was extremely important in Victorian high society. There were so many rules of etiquette that books were published as a sort of "cheat-sheet" for how to behave.

Rules for Dinner

When Algernon tells her that he won't be coming to dinner, Lady Bracknell remarks that her "table would be completely out," meaning that the number of men would not be equal to the number of women invited. Dinner parties were formal affairs with many rules.

Here are some others:

1. Guests should be spaced two feet apart from one another at the dinner table.
2. Loud talkers should be seated near the center of the table so everyone can hear them.
3. Soups should be sipped from the side of the spoon.

Rules for Courting

Algernon and Jack behave quite differently around each other than they do when in the company of Gwendolen and Cecily.

When courting, gentlemen had specific guidelines:

1. Only talk about subjects that the lady will find interesting. Avoid topics like politics.
2. Bow and lift your hat off your head when greeting ladies.
3. If you meet a lady on the street, instead of stopping her, turn around and walk beside her in the direction she was going until you are done conversing.

4. Do not smoke in the presence of ladies.
5. If a young woman and man are engaged, they should not be left alone together.
6. Gentlemen should propose not in writing but in person; most gentlewomen will already be prepared for the proposal.
7. If you want to walk your sweetheart home, you must give her your card. If the lady wants you to walk her home again, she'll give your card back to you.

Student Activities

COLLAGES

Research Wilde's famous epigrams. Using text, images, headlines, and colors from various magazines, create a collage based on an epigram found in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Let the character traits of the person who says the epigram influence your design choices.



MASKS

Create a simple mask of one of the characters in the play. Half of the mask can be the "reality" of the character, while the other half of the mask can be the "illusion" of the character - the world the character is making up to impress others.

ETIQUETTE

Students can bring in cups & saucers to class and serve tea while reading the play. Discuss Victorian Etiquette and its significance to the play. How have these etiquette rules changed for teens today?



COMEDY

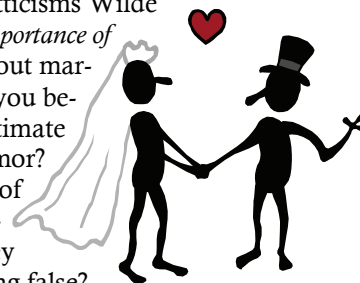
Comedy comes in many shapes and forms, and everyone has his or her own favorite type. Ask the students what makes something funny and record their answers. Prompt them to go beyond physical humor and to look at specific devices such as satire, puns, epigrams, mistaken identities, irony and paradox. Encourage students to cite specific examples that illustrate what they find humorous.



MARRIAGE

Our society views marriage very differently today than they did in Victorian England. In what ways do you view marriage differently than the characters in the play? Which character's views of marriage more closely match those of modern society? In the many witticisms Wilde makes in *The Importance of Being Earnest* about marriage, what do you believe is the ultimate source of the humor?

Is there a hint of truth to his statements or do they ring false?



EPIGRAMS

Very effective epigrams can be constructed by simply imagining what an audience would expect you to say about a subject, such as marriage, and then changing a word or two in the sentence to make it say the exact opposite. Ask students to write their own epigrams on the following topics: marriage, love, money, work, the environment, politics, success, and a genre of music. Have the students present their compositions to the rest of the class.

This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.

CONTRAST

Discuss the pairing of Dr Chasuble and Miss Prism. How do their moral codes and the Rector's profession compare with their feelings and actions? How do these two compare with the rest of the characters in the play?



What about Lady Bracknell? Why does she have no obvious counterpart? Is the spirit of the play her adversary?

FEEDBACK

The Importance of Being Earnest opened in 1895. What expectations did you have of a comedy that was written over one hundred years ago? What are your thoughts on Dallas Theater Center's production? Was there a part you really enjoyed? A design that inspired you? **We want to hear from your students! Send cards, letters, emails, reviews & drawings to: Project Discovery c/o DTC 3636 Turtle Creek Blvd Dallas TX 75219 education@dtcinfo.org**

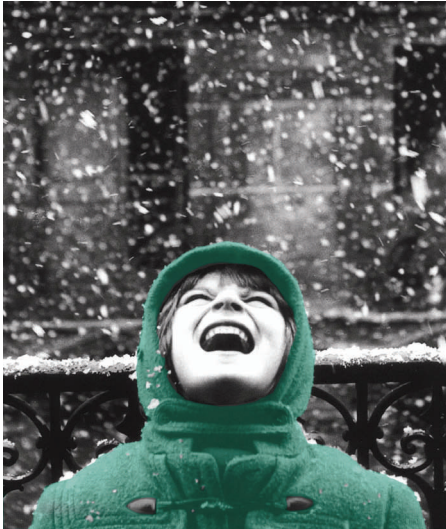


\$12

Student Matinee Series 2004-2005

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

The 20th anniversary production of Charles Dickens' masterful tale of transformation.

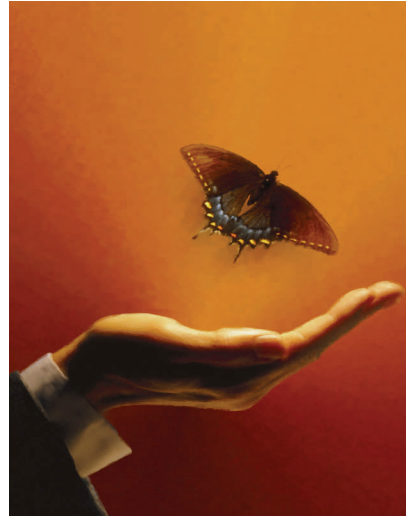


Dec 2 Dec 9
Dec 3 Dec 10
Dec 7 Dec 14
Dec 8 Dec 15

10:30am—ADT

MY FAIR LADY

One of the most beloved musicals of all time—a glorious adaptation of Shaw's *Pygmalion*.



April 14
May 4
May 5

11:00am—ADT

Some performance dates still available! Call 214-252-3917 or email us at education@dtcinfo.org.

Reminders For the Students

- ★ In live theater, unlike movies and television, the actors can hear and see you. If you talk or whisper during the play, you disturb not only the other audience members, but also the performers onstage, thus diminishing the performance and, ultimately, your enjoyment of it. This doesn't mean you have to remain silent. Actors want you to respond with laughter and applause, but such responses should always be genuine and appropriate to the moment. Such inconsiderate behavior as shouting, catcalling, or sustained whispering can ruin the concentration of actors and other audience members. Additionally, throwing paper or objects of any kind towards the stage is not only rude, it is extremely dangerous to the performers. In the event of any student misbehavior, the school will be contacted and the lead teacher and principal will be informed.
- ★ Intermissions are meant to be enjoyed by everyone. Use your time wisely and do not congregate at and around the concession stand. Have respect for your fellow playgoers by not talking too loud or showing off. Food and drink are strictly forbidden in the theater.
- ★ We want you to enjoy your visit to Dallas Theater Center and we rely on you to exercise your common sense and mature judgment. Thank you for being a valuable member of our audience!

DTC EDUCATION'S *Importance of Being Earnest* STUDY GUIDE
was researched, compiled and designed by Patti Kirkpatrick,
with additional research by Dana Tanner.

RESOURCES used in this study guide include:

- www.nyu.edu/library
- Www.arterotismo.com
- www.news.bbc.co.uk
- www.oscariana.net
- Www.cmgww.com/historic/wilde
- Bibliomania.com
- Actors Theatre of Louisville
- The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis

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