



 Prestwick House

# Activity Pack

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

BY OSCAR WILDE



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Written by Rebecca Challman

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Pre-Reading****Critical Reading****Objective:** Applying literary ideas to life**Activity**

Queen Victoria ruled England for most of the nineteenth century, which became known as the Victorian Era. Oscar Wilde opened *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the St. James' Theatre in London on February 14, 1895. Thus, the play both mocks and celebrates Victorian traditions and attitudes. One such tradition is the afternoon tea. Algernon explains, "I believe it is customary in good society to take some light refreshment at five o'clock." (Pg. 2)

As a class, hold a Victorian tea party. In groups, research the Victorian tea. Each group should research one aspect of the tea party and provide it for the tea. For example, one may locate a recipe for teacakes, and make enough for the class. Another group may research a type of brewed tea (such as Earl Grey), and bring in the required accoutrements.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Act I****Style II****Objective:** Recognizing elements of an author's style**Activity**

Algernon invents a euphemism for leading a double life, Bunburying. He says to his friend, who is Earnest in town and Jack in the country, "What you really are is a Bunburyist." (Pg. 6) Algernon explains that he invented a story about a sick friend, Mr. Bunbury, so he could retreat to a life of hedonistic pleasure at a moment's notice. Thus, he coined the term Bunburying.

Create a euphemism for something in your life that you would rather refer to in a more discreet manner. Be sure to give an explanation of your euphemism and why you would use it.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Act I****Characterization II**

**Objective:** Understanding how an author uses characterization to lend meaning to a literary work

**Activity**

In pairs, complete the character chart below. Discuss the character traits that make the players so convincing and necessary. Then, invent an appropriate character to join the cast. We have done the first one for you.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Act II****Theme I**

**Objective:** Extracting ideas from a literary text

**Active**

In large groups, choose a theme from *The Importance of Being Earnest* to debate.

- marriage for love vs. marriage as a social tool (financial arrangement, etc.)
- pseudo-morality vs. virtue
- aestheticism vs. social responsibility
- ideal romance vs. real love
- self-deception vs. imagination

Each group should split in half on either side of the debate into two parts: the theme as is evident in the novel and the theme as it applies to real life. Each side of each group should select a debate team captain, who shall lead the debate. The groups should meet to discuss the theme, take notes from the text, and brainstorm real-life experience and application of the theme. Each group will have twenty minutes to debate (ten minutes for each side of the theme).

Fellow students should decide the winner of each debate based on the following criteria:

- professional appearance
- earnest (sincere and serious) presentation of ideas
- convincing argument
- thorough research

**Act II****Theme II**

**Objective:** Extracting underlying themes from a literary text

**Activity**

Select the appropriate numbers below to describe the characters. Some of them will repeat. Explain any answers that are not obvious.

1,6     A. Algernon Moncrieff

3       B. Jack Worthing

9,6     C. Cecily Cardew

12, 2   D. Dr. Chasuble

11, 8   E. Lady Bracknell

5       F. Miss Prism

7       G. Gwendolen Fairfax

1. unemployed, in debt, lives hedonistic lifestyle rather openly
2. represents religious thought
3. Justice of the Peace, lives hedonistic lifestyle on the sly
4. represents the hypocrisy of Victorian ideas about morality
5. governess
6. represents a refusal to conform to societal norms
7. Lady Bracknell's daughter
8. represents the insincerity of the public personae
9. Jack Worthing's ward
10. represents the belief that emotional maturity comes with age
11. Algernon's aunt
12. Reverend
13. represents duality of ego
14. represents the Victorian idea of marriage for money, rather than romance

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Act II****Characterization III**

**Objective:** Understanding how characterization lends meaning to a literary text

**Activity**

In Act II of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Jack kills his imaginary brother Earnest. Then Jack, Dr. Chasuble, and Miss Prism discuss Earnest's life and death. If Jack really had a dead wayward brother named Earnest, perhaps the epitaph on his tombstone would read, "While he seldom did what he should, he always did the best he could."

Write a nameless epitaph for each of four characters in the play. As a class, read the epitaphs aloud and attempt to identify each other's deceased characters.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Act III****Theme**

**Objective:** Extracting underlying ideas from a literary text

**Activity**

Create a poster collage or a PowerPoint presentation illustrating ideas from the play. On the back of your collage or in your presentation, write a paragraph explaining your choice of theme.

**Sample Ideas:**

- marriage as a financial arrangement
- morality vs. the appearance of morality
- seriousness vs. triviality
- ideal romance
- alter egos
- social respectability
- class bias
- gender bias



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Act III****Critical Reading I****Objective:** Applying literature to life**Activity**

Imagine you are a critic attending *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Use these guidelines to write a one-page review of the play:

- be objective in point of view (do not use I) and in attitude; the reader is more likely to trust an objective opinion rather than a subjective one
- express an opinion immediately in your thesis statement or topic sentence
- use material from the play (quotes, facts about structure and content, etc.) to support your opinion
- be clear
- discuss style in reference to tone, word choice, pace, etc.
- discuss theme—what ideas does Wilde promote? What ideas does he satirize?
- be persuasive—it is your job to convince the reader to see the play, or stay away!