

Individual Learning Packet

Advance Placement Teaching Unit

The Importance of Being Earnest

by Oscar Wilde

written by Eva Richardson

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The Importance of Being Earnest

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. outline the social and moral conventions and expectations associated with upper-class society in Victorian England.
2. describe and analyze the practice of creating alternative identities for Jack and Algernon.
3. explore the principles of Aestheticism and its relation to traditional Victorian upper-class society.
4. discuss the play as a critical commentary on the superficiality and insincerity of the upper class in Victorian England.
5. analyze the play as a commentary on social identities and social masks.
6. study the relationship between writing and reality with regard to the diaries of Gwendolen and Cecily.
7. discuss the play as a critical commentary on marriage.
8. trace the connection between names and identities in the play.
9. examine the language of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and analyze the impact Wilde's irony and sarcasm have on the reader.
10. analyze how the play complicates nineteenth-century notions of gender and sexuality.
11. analyze the complex and contradictory meanings of "being earnest/Ernest."
12. explain the relationship between earnestness and triviality.
13. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
14. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
15. offer a close reading of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Background Information

England during the Victorian Era:

The Victorian Era was a time in British history marked by drastic social and economic changes, conflicts, and contradictions. Named in honor of the long reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), the Victorian Age defined most of the nineteenth century. During Victoria's reign, England became the wealthiest country in the world, and British expansion under Colonialism turned England into a mighty and influential world power. The widespread notion of the "White Man's Burden" determined that it was Britain's *duty* to spread western culture and order throughout the world. Victorians witnessed the rapid progress of the Industrial Revolution, which changed England from a rural society into a fully industrialized, modern, urban state. The city of London became a multicultural metropolis.

Modernization and Industrialization:

The Victorian Era was marked by a number of significant inventions and innovations that changed the face of England's social and geographical landscape forever. The expansion of the railroad system enabled Britain to develop an infrastructure that could promote the swift and efficient distribution of goods, ideas, and services. The world's first subway system was built in London, turning the city into the first truly modern urban center. The Colonial system brought a wealth of commodities and exotic wares into the kingdom, and the Victorian middle and upper classes quickly developed an obsession with luxury articles that could be imported from the British colonies.

Advancements in industry and modernization came at a high price, however: urbanization led to overcrowding in cities, and the living conditions of the working poor were often deplorable. Child labor was a common practice, and common workers had no voice in the political process. It was not until 1838 that the Chartist Movement began to unite factory workers and tradesmen and encourage them to call for reforms and political participation. A number of public health and factory reforms followed and continued through the end of the century.

Victorian Society and Gender Roles:

Victorian society was marked by strict class distinctions. The nineteenth century witnessed the "rise of the middle class," and the middle class quickly became the most influential segment in British society. Middle- and upper-class society was characterized by a strict and conservative moral code that dictated rigid formal manners and an unwavering adherence to duty, family, and propriety. Gender roles were firmly defined. Men dominated the public sphere in politics and industry, while women were relegated to the private sphere where they were to oversee the household and supervise the educations of their children. The ideal Victorian woman was a domestic "angel"—always quiet and demure. She had no business participating in public life or politics.

Literary and Narrative Techniques

Elements of Irony:

Oscar Wilde uses irony throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest* in order to expose the ridiculousness and pretension of Victorian society. The title of his play itself is an ironic pun on the word “earnest”: While it is important to Cecily and Gwendolen that they each marry a man named Ernest, such an aspiration is not important at all.

Irony is a literary device that involves a breach between what a writer, speaker, or narrator says in a text and what is understood by the reader or by other characters. There are three major types of irony used in fiction, poetry, and drama: **situational irony, verbal irony, and dramatic or tragic irony.**

Situational Irony—Situational irony occurs when an event that takes place (in a novel, poem, or on stage in a play) produces a completely unexpected outcome.

Verbal Irony—Verbal irony occurs when a writer, speaker, or narrator uses words to say one thing when he really means the opposite of what he says. One popular form of verbal irony is **sarcasm.**

Dramatic or Tragic Irony—Dramatic irony occurs when the words or actions of a character reveal his ignorance toward a particular situation, while the reader correctly understands the situation.

Wilde incorporates a combination of different ironic elements throughout his entire play. For example, Lady Bracknell’s reaction to the death of Lady Harbury’s husband is built on an ironic twist of expectations:

LADY BRACKNELL: I’m sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn’t been there since her poor husband’s death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger.

Readers would expect that Lady Harbury has suffered after her husband’s death and looks ill, but Lady Bracknell ironically informs readers that the “poor” woman never looked better.

Later, Wilde ridicules expectations of courtship when Jack proposes to Gwendolen. Gwendolen criticizes Jack’s hesitation when he makes his offer of marriage and states, “I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.” Since Jack is not married, he, obviously, has not “practiced” proposing.

DISCUSSION TOPICS/QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the notion of “being earnest” for the play?
2. What attitudes toward marriage do Algernon and Lady Bracknell represent?
3. What is the correlation between “bunburying” and wearing social masks?
4. What effect do instances of irony and sarcasm have on the reader? How do Wilde’s tone and style help reinforce his critical perspective on social class in Victorian England?
5. How does the play challenge conventional notions of sex and gender, and the public and private spheres?
6. What is the importance of being trivial within the play?
7. What significance do names and acts of naming or christening hold within the play?
8. What is Wilde’s attitude toward the Victorian preoccupation with philanthropy?
9. To what extent is Gwendolen a typical Victorian lady? To what extent does she *not* fulfill typical Victorian standards and requirements for being a lady?
10. How does Cecily create reality? What is the connection between reality and writing?
11. What function does the character of Miss Prism fulfill within the play?
12. What role does food play within the play?
13. To what extent does the play champion the principles of the Aesthetic Movement?

The Importance of Being Earnest

First Act

1. How does Algernon’s statement that he does not play the piano “accurately” but “with wonderful expression” exemplify the principles of the Aesthetic Movement?

2. What does Wilde suggest is going to be one of the primary sources of humor when Algernon asks Lane about the champagne?

3. Where is the humor in Algernon’s comments on the lack of “moral responsibility” among the lower classes?

4. What does Algernon’s comment on marriage as a “business” reveal about his attitude toward married life?

5. Why does Jack praise the bread and butter Algernon offers him? What does his praise reveal about Jack?

6. According to Algernon, why is it unlikely that Jack will ever be married to Gwendolen?

Second Act

1. What is Cecily implying in her reason for disliking her German lesson?

2. What is ironic about Miss Prism’s expressing concern for Jack and admiration for his devotion to his brother? What kind of irony is this?

3. How does Cecily’s concept of “memory” differ from Miss Prism’s idea of “memory”? What stereotype is Wilde comically reinforcing?

4. Why does Dr. Chasuble explain that he was speaking metaphorically when he expresses a desire to “hang upon” Miss Prism’s lips?

5. What can readers infer about Miss Prism when she corrects Dr. Chasuble upon being called “Egeria” and reminds him that her name is Laetitia?

6. What are Cecily’s expectations upon hearing that Mr. Ernest Worthing has arrived? What do her expectations reveal about her character?

Third Act

1. What contradictions can be found in the conversation between Cecily and Gwendolen as they observe Jack and Algernon eating muffins in the garden? What is the primary purpose of these contradictions?

2. How does Wilde continue a bit of humor he began in the previous act concerning Gwendolen and Cecily’s friendship? What might Wilde be poking fun at?

3. What artistic viewpoint does Gwendolen’s statement that “in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing” reflect?

4. What is Lady Bracknell worried about when she learns that Algernon is engaged to Cecily?

5. How does hyperbole contribute to the humor in the discussion of Algernon’s engagement to Cecily?
