

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

*The Importance
of Being Earnest*

by Oscar Wilde

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The Importance of Being Earnest

Background Notes

In the plays Oscar Wilde wrote between 1892 and 1895, he largely ignored the trend of the period toward increasing realism in the theater. In an essay, “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde put forth his reason: “As a method, Realism is a complete failure and the two things that every artist should avoid are modernity of form and modernity of subject matter.” He pointed out that modernity is quickly outdated and ultimately precludes the reader’s ability to associate with or find meaning in the story.

This is pertinent because Wilde’s plays are not in the tradition most familiar to students. Wilde’s plays are often compared to the comedies of the Restoration period, which do not have realistic, creditable plots or fully rounded, believable characters. Some readers view his plot and characters solely as a means to convey many witticisms.

It is for this reason that the critic Eric Bentley (*The Playwright as Thinker*) says that many people dismiss Wilde as a dramatist of little importance.

It is easy to handle this play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, without noticing what it contains. It is so consistently farcical in tone, characterization and plot that very few care to root out any more serious content. The general conclusion has been that Wilde merely decorates a silly play with a flippant wit...He is dismissed as “not really a dramatist at all”...Yet we shall only display our own insensitivity if we dismiss him.

Bentley develops his thesis that one or two witty remarks may be considered flippant, but as Wilde piles flippancies on flippancies, they cease to be flippant. They become a satiric criticism of life. Bentley points out that Wilde’s plays have both a substance and a style worth studying. More relevant, however, is the fact that Wilde survived the fate he had predicted for writers of realism; his plays are still produced today, and people pay him the highest compliment—they pay money to see his plays. We study this play in the hopes that more people may see and enjoy the wit, humanity, and insight of Oscar Wilde.

All references come from the Dover Thrift edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, published 1990.

The Importance of Being Earnest

Objectives

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

1. discuss Wilde's style of writing and contrast the style of *The Importance of Being Earnest* with the style of another comedy with which the student is familiar.
2. identify four targets of Wilde's satire and analyze the treatment of these targets.
3. write a short paper explaining the enduring popularity of Wilde's plays.
4. identify and discuss the following terms:
 - satire
 - farce
 - comedy of manners
 - art for art's sake
5. identify the irony between the elegant, suave demeanor of the characters and their absurd conversations and behavior.
6. identify the pun central to the play and analyze its meaning.
7. discuss the play in the context of a Victorian England audience.

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Questions for Essay or Discussion

1. How did you respond to the characters and plot in this play? Did it bother you that the plot was improbable and the characters unbelievable? Why?
2. Identify at least three scenes that were comic, and explain what created the humor.
3. Identify three people or institutions that Wilde mocks. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being mild amusement and 5 being bitter denunciation, how strong is Wilde's criticism of his targets? Use at least two specific, supporting details to explain your analysis of each.
4. Why is this play popular with audiences? Why do you suppose the play is as popular today as it was when it was written nearly one hundred years ago?
5. Steve Martin, a well-known actor, director, and comedian, has adapted a number of classic books, including *Cyrano de Bergerac (Roxanne)* and *Silas Marner (A Simple Twist of Fate)*, and made them into popular movies with contemporary settings. What changes do you think he would make so he could adapt this book into a contemporary movie?
6. Compare and contrast this play with popular comedies of today. What generalizations can you make about comedies and the time periods in which they are produced?
7. What is the significance of the play's title, *The Importance of Being Earnest*? Is this an appropriate title for the play? Why or why not?
8. The subtitle of this work is "a trivial play for serious people." What do you think Wilde meant by that? Who did Wilde expect his audience to be, and how do you think he felt toward them? Remember that Wilde was writing during the final years of Queen Victoria's reign.

The Importance of Being Earnest

Study Guide

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Act One

Vocabulary

apoplexy–stroke
conduce–contribute
cynical–distrustful of human nature and its motives
domesticity–shortened, familiar form
expurgations–removals of objectionable elements
forte–strong point
glibly–nonchalantly, with easy lack of concern
indecorous–unseemly, not proper
invariably–in an unchanging manner
lax–not strict, loose
metaphysical–abstract, theoretical
profligate–dissolute, immoral
propounding–putting forward for consideration
purple–high ranks
salver–serving tray
semi-recumbent–half lying down
sententiously–in a pompously moralizing manner
surmised–guessed
tedious–boring, tiresomely dull

1. Much of the humor in this play arises from the incongruity within conversations, and even within sentences. At the beginning of the act, what statement of Algernon's appears incongruous? Why?
2. Another cause of much of the humor is inverted expectation. That is, the reader is set up to hear a conventional piece of wisdom, but the character delivers a line that is quite the opposite of what is expected. Why are the first two lines in the play examples of that?

Act Two

Vocabulary

apprehensions—fears
arduous—difficult
chafe—become irritated
chronicle—record
débonnaire—suave
demeanour—outward manner
effeminate—unmanly
emigrating—leaving one's country to live elsewhere
equanimity—the quality of being even-tempered under stress
interment—burial
lorgnette—eyeglasses with a handle
machinations—scheming, crafty actions
misanthrope—a person who hates or distrusts humanity
neologistic—relating to a newly coined word
philanthropic—humanitarian, promoting human welfare
portmanteaus—large suitcases
presumptuous—excessively confident
Quixotic—impractically idealistic
reconciliation—restoration of friendship
superciliously—in a haughtily scornful manner, disdainfully
utilitarian—emphasizing usefulness over beauty
vacillating—wavering

1. Who is Miss Prism?
2. How did Jack become Cecily's guardian? Is he related to her by blood?
3. Who is Ernest, according to what Jack has told Cecily and Miss Prism? Why?
4. Why has Jack planned to have Ernest die?

Act Three

Vocabulary

apprised–informed

credulity–willingness to believe too readily

effrontery–disrespectful boldness

insuperable–incapable of being overcome

irrevocable–unalterable

ostentatiously–showily

Oxonian–graduate of Oxford University

quails–cowers

solicitors–lawyers

tutelage–state of being under a guardian

1. What comment of Gwendolen's at the beginning of Act Three once again brings up the importance of style? What does this illustrate about her character?
2. Although both girls forgive Jack and Algernon for having deceived them, what do they say remains as an "insuperable barrier" to marriage? (Act III)
3. Why does Lady Bracknell say that Mr. Bunbury "seems to have had great confidence in the opinion of his physicians"? (Act III)
4. Although Lady Bracknell is initially against Algernon's engagement to Cecily, what wins her over?
5. For what reason does Jack refuse to give his consent to Algernon and Cecily's engagement?