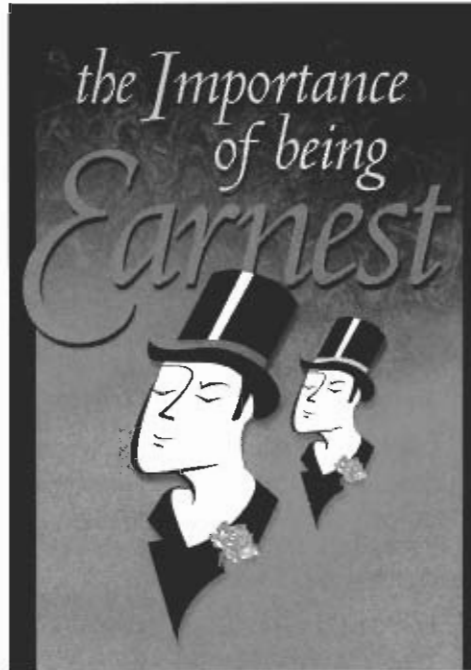


STUDY GUIDE

THE REPERTORY THEATRE OF ST. LOUIS



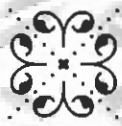
BY OSCAR WILDE
DIRECTED BY JOHN GOING

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Words to the Wise



cucumber sandwich—This is one of many popular English sandwiches intended to be served with tea.

Recipes vary, but this will get you close: 8 oz. cream cheese, 1/2 cup mayo, 1 pkg. dry Italian salad dressing, 3-4 medium size cucumbers, 1 loaf of bread, any type. Mash mayo and cheese together. Mix in salad dressing. Peel and dice cucumber and add to mixture. Leaving the bread crust is optional. Spread mixture on bread and cut in fourths diagonally.



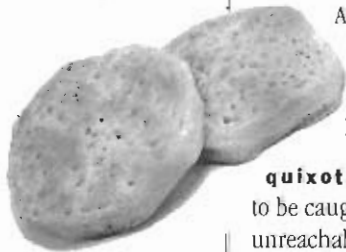
Shropshire—Shropshire is a county west of London known for its sheep.

Tunbridge Wells—This is a city in Kent in southeast England.

Bunburyist—Although not a real word, Bunburyist became often-used throughout English-speaking countries because of the popularity of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It refers to Algernon's made-up friend Bunbury, whom he uses as an excuse to get out of social responsibilities.

Wagnerian manner—This phrase implies a loud, demonstrative nature, like the music of German composer Richard Wagner.

crumpet—Also called an English muffin, a crumpet is a flat, round, piece of bread, baked on a griddle and usually served toasted.



expurgation—This term refers to the act of removing erroneous or vulgar material from something (such as a book) before it is exposed to the public.

purple of commerce—This is another phrase coined by Wilde. It implies money that comes through work or trade rather than from a privileged birth.

trivet—A trivet is a small, three-legged table. Jack uses the term to imply that Gwendolen is stable and agreeable.

Gorgon—In Greek mythology, the three sisters Stheno, Euryale and Medusa were known as the Gorgons. Each had snakes for hair, and anyone looking into their eyes was turned to stone.

profligate—Profligate describes something or someone that is shamefully immoral.

vacillate—To vacillate is to swing from one side to the other. When describing a person, it means he or she cannot decide on a course of action and jumps from one activity to another without completing anything.

Egeria—Egeria is a female advisor or counselor. The word derives from the name of a goddess who served as advisor to a mythic Roman king.

Evensong—Evensong is another word for a daily evening service in the Anglican Church.

rupee—The rupee is the basic monetary unit of India, Pakistan and Nepal.

quixotic—To be quixotic means to be caught up in the pursuit of unreachable, idealistic goals. It comes from the novel *Don Quixote* by Thomas Shelton.

buttonhole—Men in Victorian England often placed a flower through the buttonhole of their coat.

Marechal Niel—A Marechal Niel is a variety of rose, fragrant and soft yellow in color.

misanthrope—Someone who hates and mistrusts mankind is called a misanthrope.

womanthrope—Although not a real word, Miss Prism's meaning is clear: a womanthrope is one who does not trust women.

neologistic—This refers to a new word or a new meaning for a word.

interment—Interment is the act or ritual of interring or burying.

portmanteau—This is a large trunk that opens into two hinged compartments.

dog cart—A dog cart is a light, two-wheeled, horse-drawn vehicle.

equanimity—Equanimity is the quality of being calm and even tempered.

philanthropic work—This refers to the practice of donating money, property or time to needy persons.

terminus—A terminus is the end point of a transportation line.

Oxonian—An Oxonian is a graduate of Oxford University.

Anabaptists—The Anabaptists were a religious group that sprang from the 16th-century Reformation. They did not ascribe to baptism.

perambulator—Perambulator is a British word for a baby carriage.



Who's Who?

Lane is Algernon's manservant at his flat in London.

Algernon Moncrieff is a young bachelor who lives in London. He is a good friend of Jack, although at the start of the play he believes Jack's name to actually be Ernest. 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.

John Worthing, J.P. 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 in a cloakroom at Victoria Station. Therefore he does not know his own history or his true family. He is the legal guardian of Cecily Cardew.

Lady 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.

Hon. 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.

Merriman is Jack's butler at the Manor House.

Cecily Cardew is Jack's daydreaming niece and ward. Cecily falls in love with Algernon, believing him to be Jack's never-dowell 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, D.D. is the Rector of the church in the country, and he has something of a crush on Miss Prism. Jack and Algy each ask him to rechristen them Ernest.

Read More About It

Oscar Wilde by Richard Ellmann. Vintage, 1988. This is the definitive biography of Oscar Wilde. While extremely factual, it does not delve into the cultural contexts that surrounded and influenced Wilde's life.

Oscar Wilde: A Certain Genius by Barbara Belford. Random House, 2000. This biography of Wilde discusses the playwright's life and explores the influence that Victorian England had on him—and the influence he had on it.

The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde by Oscar Wilde. Perennial, 1989. This 1200 page book contains all the stories, essays, plays and poems of Wilde.

The Wilde Album by Merlin Holland. Holland, Wilde's grandson, wrote this short book that also contains many excellent pictures of Wilde.

The Importance of Being Earnest (VHS, DVD). Buena Vista Home Video, 2002. This is the classic play of wit brought to film. Although there were a few earlier versions of this film, this version retains more of Wilde's original language. It stars Rupert Everett, Colin Firth, Frances O'Connor and Reese Witherspoon.

The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry by Walter Pater. Oxford University Press, 1998. Wilde called this collection of essays the "holy writ of beauty." Both the book and its author, Pater, were a strong influence on Wilde and the aesthetic movement.

www.cmwww.com/historic/wilde/ is the official home of Oscar Wilde on the World Wide Web. The site includes an introductory paragraph by Wilde's grandson, Merlin Holland.

We encourage you to examine these topics in-depth by exploring the following books, websites and videos.

To view the complete script of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, or to locate Oscar Wilde photos and in-depth biographical information, go to the Wilde webpage of the Fireblade Coffeehouse at www.hoboes.com/html/FireBlade/Wilde.

www.victorianweb.org and www.erasofelegance.com/victorian.html are extensive sites on Victorian England. The sites are subdivided into many categories such as history, authors, culture, religion, science and morality.

www.broadviewpress.com/drama/nineteenthcentury.htm contains an interview with Wilde as well as an original critical review of *Earnest*. A familiarity with the aesthetic movement is helpful in appreciating the tone and humor of the interview.



What's the Story?



As Oscar Wilde stated,
The Importance of Being Earnest
 is "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People." The brilliance and wit
 of the play lie in the dialog, however, and not the plot.
 This should be taken into account when reading any summary of the play.

The Importance of Being Earnest takes place in London and the countryside in 1895, the last few years of the period that would be termed Victorian England. The English aristocracy flourished during this time. It is this group on which Wilde's satire focuses, along with their view that marriage has nothing to do with love, but is rather a means for achieving social status.

Act I

Algernon Moncrieff, an upper-class English bachelor, and his Manservant, Lane, are preparing for the arrival of Algernon's aunt, the Lady Bracknell. He is visited by his friend Jack Worthing—though Algernon knows Jack as "Ernest."

Jack reveals that he has come to town to propose to Gwendolen Fairfax, the daughter of Lady Bracknell. Algernon jokingly tells him that, as Gwendolen's first cousin, he refuses to give his consent for the marriage until Jack can explain why the name Cecily is inscribed in his cigarette case. After making up a story about Cecily being an old (but tiny) aunt, Jack finally admits that Cecily is his young, beautiful ward



who lives in the country. This is precisely the information Algernon is seeking. Jack also admits that his name is not Ernest, but rather Jack: he goes by Jack in the country and Ernest in the city. Algernon confirms a suspicion he has long had by accusing Jack of "Bunburying," or making up a situation in order to be able to escape unwanted social responsibilities. Algernon explains that he himself has an imaginary friend called Bunbury who frequently gets sick, giving Algernon an excuse to get out of social obligations such as family dinner parties.

The Honorable Gwendolen Fairfax and the Lady Bracknell arrive at Algernon's flat for tea. Algernon tells Lady Bracknell that, due to the illness of his

friend Bunbury, he must leave London, and as a result will not be able to attend her dinner that night. Algy distracts her in another room so that Jack can make his marriage proposal to Gwendolen.

Jack tells Gwendolen that he loves her, and she replies that she loves him too, particularly because he is named Ernest, a name that "seems to inspire absolute confidence." Jack, knowing that his name is actually Jack, gets worried, and

privately resolves to get baptized and change his name. Gwendolen, meanwhile, accepts his proposal just as Lady Bracknell returns; Lady Bracknell announces that Gwendolen may not marry Jack until she gives her approval. Algernon and Gwendolen exit while Lady Bracknell interrogates Jack to determine how suitable a husband he is. She is pleased with his answers until she asks him about his parents. When Jack admits that he was abandoned by his parents and found in a handbag by a Mr. Thomas Cardew in Victoria Station, Lady Bracknell is horrified. She refuses to let her daughter marry a man with no knowledge of his own parentage, and suggests to Jack that he "produce at least one parent before the season is over."

Gwendolen returns, having heard of Lady Bracknell's disapproval, and she asks Jack for his address in the country. Algernon overhears it and copies it down.

Act II

At Jack's country estate, his ward, Cecily, is learning German and geography at the hands of Miss Prism, a tutor who once wrote a long novel that mysteriously disappeared. The house Rector, Dr. Chasuble, arrives and begins to flirt with Miss Prism. While she is taking a walk with him, Algernon, pretending to be Jack's brother Ernest, arrives to meet Cecily. The two show an immediate romantic interest in one another. As they leave, Prism and Chasuble return and meet Jack as he arrives back home from the city. He is dressed in mourning clothes in order to

keep up the ruse that his brother, who does not actually exist, has died. While Jack is speaking with Chasuble and Prism, Cecily comes out of the house and informs him that his brother has arrived. Jack is shocked and angered when his "brother" Algernon comes out of the house. As the others exit to allow the two reunited brothers time to resolve their differences, Jack tells Algernon that he must leave the house at once. Algernon replies insincerely that he will, but only if Jack changes out of his morbid mourning clothes. As Jack exits to do so, Cecily returns. Algernon proposes to her and she agrees, although she tells him that she particularly loves him because his



name is Ernest, and that she "pities any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest." Cecily, in fact, has already been pretending in her journal to be engaged to "Ernest" ever since she first discovered that her guardian had an unsavory, dangerous brother by that name. Algernon begins to worry that he is not named Ernest, and he also resolves to get rechristened.

After Algernon exits, Gwendolen arrives to see Jack, but in the meantime she chats with Cecily, whom she has never before met. Gwendolen is surprised to hear that "Ernest" has a ward but has never told her about it. Cecily is confused when Gwendolen says that she is engaged to Ernest, and their relationship becomes very cold as they realize that they may be engaged to the same man. Both try to refute the engagement claims of the other until Algernon and Jack return. When the two young ladies begin to question the men in order to resolve their own engagement, the men confess they have lied and that neither of them is

named Ernest. The two women are shocked and retreat together into the house. Meanwhile, Jack begins to panic while Algernon sits back and eats all the muffins.

Act III

Inside the Manor House, Algernon and Jack join Cecily and Gwendolen. Algernon tells Cecily that he lied to her only so that he could have a chance to

see her, and Jack confesses to Gwendolen that he lied to her about having a brother so that he could spend more time in the city with her. The women are satisfied, although they still cannot accept the men because they are not named Ernest.

When the men reply that they are scheduled to be christened that afternoon, all seems well until Lady Bracknell arrives. She again refuses to give her

consent regarding Gwendolen's engagement. Algernon tells her that he is engaged to Cecily, and when Lady Bracknell learns that Cecily is extremely

wealthy thanks to her father's estate, she gives her consent. However, as Cecily's legal guardian, Jack will not give his consent to the marriage unless Lady Bracknell approves of his engagement to Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell refuses yet again and prepares to leave with Gwendolen. Dr. Chasuble enters and learns that the christenings will no



longer be necessary, so he states that he will return to Miss Prism. Lady Bracknell, hearing the name Prism, asks to see this woman because she suspects she may be the same that once took care of her sister's baby. When Miss Prism arrives, Lady Bracknell demands to know what happened to the baby that had disappeared twenty-eight years previously when Miss Prism was supposed to be taking it for a stroll in the perambulator. Miss Prism confesses that she accidentally put her three-volume novel in the perambulator and the baby in her handbag, which she mistakenly left in the cloakroom at Victoria Station. Jack, suddenly realizing that he was that baby, fetches the briefcase in which he was found, which Miss Prism confirms as being hers. Lady Bracknell tells Jack that he is the son of her sister and the elder brother of Algernon. A search through the military periodicals of the time reveals that their father's first name was Ernest, and because first sons are always named after the father, they realize that

Jack's name has, indeed, all along been Ernest.

Overjoyed, Jack realizes he has been telling the truth his whole life even though he thought he was lying. In the end, he is permitted to

marry Gwendolen, Algernon is permitted to marry Cecily, and although Lady Bracknell accuses Jack of triviality, he retorts that he has only just discovered "the vital Importance of Being Earnest."

Pictures from the 2002 film adaptation of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.



Shop Talk



Every play presents its own unique challenges for the director and the design team. As *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one the most produced plays in the English language, an initial challenge they had to overcome was to make this production notable, yet not depart from the elements that make the play such a timeless favorite. Director Jack Going chose to focus on style, because the content of *Earnest* is established: it is a brilliantly worded satire on marriage and the shallowness of the Victorian upper class. Therein lies its charm. Therefore, the style of the show must be realistic for the period, complementary to the plays content, and also have its own unique flair.

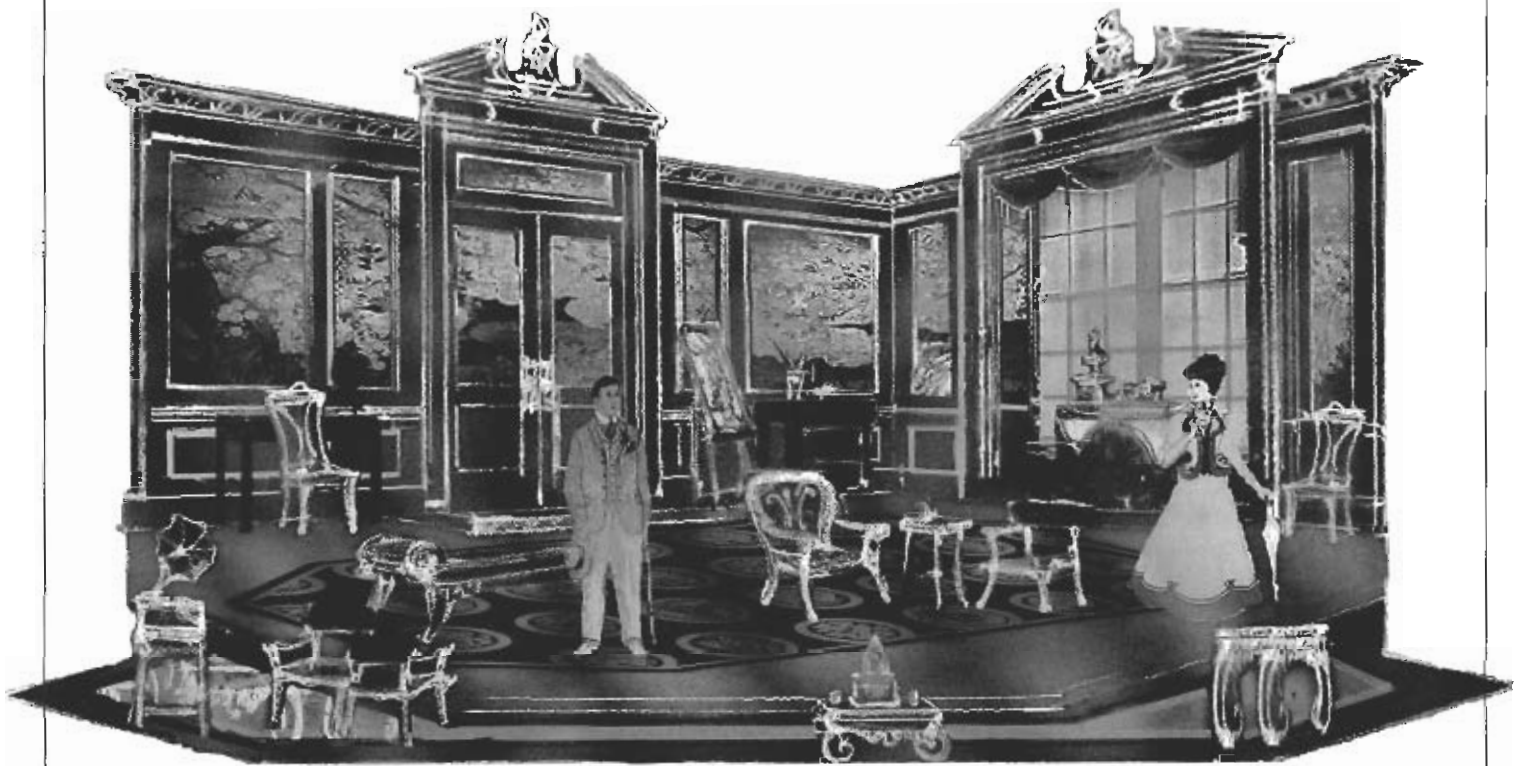
Scenic designer James Wolk fulfilled all these criteria in the set. In Act I, Algernon's apartment décor is a realistic representation of 1895 London, but it also distinguishes itself from other productions of the play. In 1885, a large, Japanese exhibition was held in England, and the Japanese style became the craze. This is reflected in numerous props and elements in the set: from the black-lacquered furniture to the gold, cherry-leaf murals, to the oriental rugs. The apartment also has various elements that reflect Algernon's dabbling in the arts. The costumes complement the set in color as well as style. The set contains a lot of green, and the attire is purple—colors that are split complements and also realistic for the late-Victorian period.

In Act II the action moves from London to an English country house, and the set becomes more spacious and open. The header above the set and the sliders on either side (black in Act I) are partially opened to reveal the backdrop, which is painted to represent the sky and the greenery of the countryside. A trap door is also opened to reveal a small pond. The costumes switch to pale colors and browns, or, as costume designer Elizabeth Covey terms them, "ice cream colors."

In Act III the backdrop is completely revealed to create an even more spacious feel, and the set is essentially turned around: the elements upstage go downstage and vice versa. For instance, the table that was prominent in Act II is moved upstage, so that the audience may view the popular "muffin-eating" scene between Algernon and Jack while the female characters are conversing.

The Japanese flavor adds a unique elegance to the production while still maintaining an accurate reflection of late-Victorian England. In this way, the set complements the content of the play without distracting the audience from its brilliant language and wit.

Costume rendering by designer Elizabeth Covey.



A preliminary set drawing by scenic designer James Wolk.



At left Mary Cassatt's 'The Letter,' is similar in style, layout and color to Japanese artist Kunisada's woodblock 'Getting Up Early.'



These two portraits of the postman Joseph Roulin by Vincent Van Gogh display a Japanese-influenced floral background.

Asian Invasion

In the late 19th century, the Japanese influence swept across Europe and into England. Japanese woodblock prints inspired prominent artists such as Degas, Cassatt, Monet and Van Gogh. While Japanese artists used Western ideas that included perspective in their art, the influence was relatively minor. French Impressionists accepted the Japanese ideas of composition and design and incorporated them into their own work. In particular, they began to

use larger planes of color, and brighter colors. Figures and textures became more sharply outlined and geometrical.

Once the Japanese movement had reached the artistic centers, it was only a matter of time before it spread to the rest of the population. Within a very short time, it became the height of style for the décor in an upper class home to have a Japanese influence.

Victorian Parlor Games



Although the Victorians were often characterized as being stuffy or prudish, they actually played a great many games. Many of those games are still common today, such as Charades, Twenty Questions and Musical Chairs, but they also played many others. Usually, they gathered together to play games in the parlor, also called the drawing room. Many Victorian parlor games involved witty word play, and they adapt well to interactive learning games for the classroom. Try a few of the following parlor games with the class.

Alphabetical Geography

GIVE everyone in the room a number. When you call for a number, announce a letter of the alphabet. The student called must, before you count to six, apply the letter to the name of a place and to two things he might see there.

For example: "A" — I am going to Africa to see antelope and apes.

Celebrated Authors

One student should step outside the room and those who remain should determine what celebrated author he is to represent. On his return, he must in all respects be treated as that author would be if he were the class's guest. He must be entertained by conversation and questions that would be of interest. Neither the conversation nor the questions may be misleading, and they should be helpful to him in discovering his identity.

Suppose Shakespeare is the distinguished guest. Everyone would rise to receive him and everyone's manner would indicate that they were in the presence of greatness. The conversation might be of England and how much it has changed. He might be asked how he liked Queen

Elizabeth, and if it was true that she was as fond of him as she had expressed.

If it becomes obvious that the student cannot guess his identity, ask more obvious questions such as: Did the boys ever call you Bill? When the identity is guessed (or cannot be guessed) another student will leave the room and another author selected. Then the game continues as before.

Laughable Rhymes

One student repeats from memory, reads from a book, or makes up a line of poetry. The student to whom he addresses it must add a line of the same rhyme and sense. When the first student has delivered his line, he must walk to the chalkboard and write it. The second line of poetry must be added by the next student before the first finishes writing. If a line cannot be given in time, that student must forfeit his turn. Poetry of merit is not expected.

Example:

Student 1: "Once upon a midnight dreary"

Student 2: "Edgar Allen makes me leery"

Ghost

This is a spelling game. One student gives a letter, and the student next to him must think of a word beginning with the letter and add a second that could lead to a correctly spelled word. A third student must think of a word using the two letters given and add a third and so on, until a word is spelled. A student is not a ghost until he is caught two times. You become a *ghost* (get eliminated) in the following ways: someone challenges you correctly, you challenge incorrectly, or you complete a word. A challenge consists of doubting a letter a player has given. A player may say "I challenge you," when a person has added a letter if he believes no word can be spelled. If correct, the speaker has one

penalty against him as a ghost. If, on the other hand, the person challenged states a word that confirms his letter selection, the challenger gets the penalty. The student that completes a word also incurs a penalty. For example, take the word revelry. The letters R-E-V-E have been given, and unless the fifth player can think of "N" and change it to revenue (or some other word), he must say "L" and thus the word ends. Whoever is a ghost has to keep absolute silence throughout the game.

Judge And Jury

Put seven slips of paper in a bag. One slip should be labeled "judge" and six should be labeled "jury." Pick seven students at random and allow them to draw from the bag. The student that draws the "judge" slip becomes the judge, the other six become the jury, and the rest of the students must each assume the identity of a famous person such as Beethoven or Oscar Wilde.

The judge calls one of the other students up to the bar and proceeds to question him or her. The prisoner is bound to answer any question the judge may see fit to ask, and the business of the jury is to decide the name of the prisoner. Ten questions are all that may be asked. At the end of the questioning, the prisoner sits and awaits the jury's verdict. If the first decision of the jury is incorrect, the prisoner is released. If correct, the prisoner takes the place of one of the jury, who must draw paper slips to determine which one is relieved. The ex-jury member then takes his place among the waiting prisoners and assumes a character. After three trials the judge must be a jury member and one of them must take his place. This is also determined by drawing slips. The game ends when the players become tired.



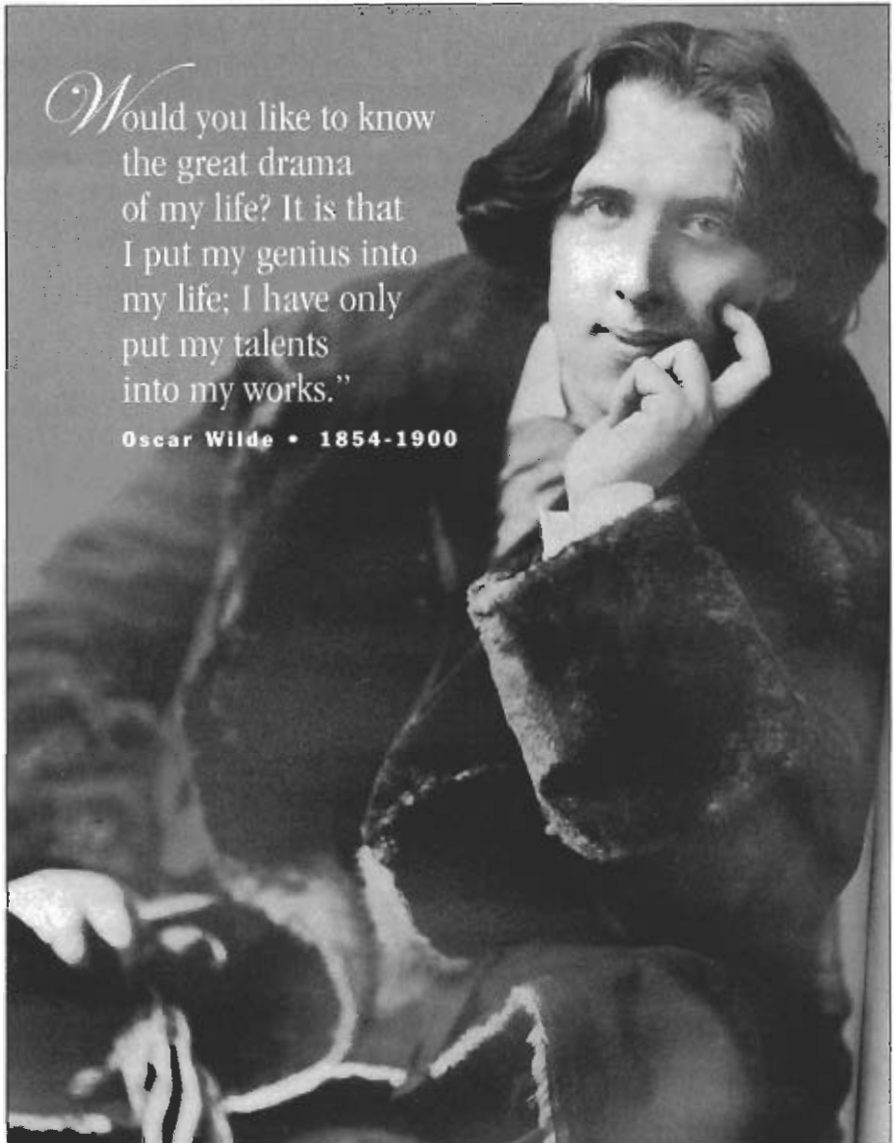
Bio and Beyond



Born in Ireland, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde is most famous for his brilliant and witty plays, which were the first since the comedies of Sheridan and Goldsmith to have both dramatic and literary merit. He studied at Trinity College, Dublin, and at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he distinguished himself not only for his scholarship, but for his wit and his flamboyant dress and manners. Influenced by the aesthetic teachings of Walter Pater and John Ruskin, Wilde became the center of a group glorifying beauty for itself alone, and he was satirized for this association throughout his career. His first published work, *Poems* (1881), was well received. The next year he lectured to great acclaim in the United States, where his drama *Vera* (1883) was produced. In 1884 he married Constance Lloyd, and they had two sons, Cyril and Vyvyan.

Later he began writing for and editing periodicals, but his active literary career began with the publication of *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* (1891) and two collections of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince* (1888) and *The House of Pomegranates* (1892). In 1891 his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared. A tale of horror, it depicts the corruption of a beautiful young man pursuing an ideal of sensual indulgence and moral indifference; although he himself remains young and handsome, his portrait becomes ugly, reflecting his degeneration.

Wilde's stories and essays were well received, but his creative genius found its highest expression in his plays—*Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and his masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), which was the last play he ever wrote. All of these works were filled with witty epigrams and paradoxes. He also



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

wrote two historical tragedies, *The Duchess of Padua* (1892) and *Salomé* (1893).

In 1891, Wilde met young Lord Alfred Douglas, nicknamed "Bosie." Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, soon learned of their relationship and wrote Wilde a note accusing him of homosexual practices. Wilde brought action for libel against the Marquess and was himself charged with gross

indecent, found guilty, and sentenced to prison for two years. His experiences in jail inspired his most famous poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), and the apology published by his literary executor as *De Profundis* (1905).

Released from prison in 1897, Wilde found himself a complete social outcast in England and, plagued by ill health and bankruptcy, lived in France under an assumed name until his death.



These questions and activities are designed to help students anticipate the performance and then to build on their impressions and interpretations after attending the theatre. The activities and questions are divided into “**Before the Performance**” and “**After the Performance**” categories. While most of the exercises provide specific instructions, please feel free to adapt these activities to accommodate your own teaching strategies and curricular needs. To assist you in incorporating these materials into your existing curriculum, we have provided the numbers of some of the corresponding Missouri Knowledge Standards and Illinois Learning Standards. In addition, the majority of the content integrates or allows demonstration of the following Missouri Performance Goals: 1.5, 1.9, 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 and 4.1.



Communication Arts



Before the Performance

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

(MO: CA1, CA2, CA5, CA6 IL 1, 4, 5)

2 Building on the first activity, have the students research definitions for the different types of comedic device and find an example of each one from a book, play, film or television show. Make sure that pun, epigram, charactonym, irony and satire are included on their list. Encourage the students to watch for and identify these devices when viewing *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

(MO: CA1, CA2, CA4, CA5, CA6, FA2, FA3, FA4 IL 1, 3, 4, 5)

After the Performance

1 What is the significance of the name “Earnest” in the title of the play? What is the literal definition of the word? Do the main characters embody earnestness? What type of literary comedic device does the use of the name in the title represent? In what way is Jack’s earnestness (and dishonesty) ironic? (MO: CA1, CA2, CA5, CA6, FA1, FA2, FA3 IL 1, 4, 5, 25)

2 Wilde was a master of the epigram, and *Earnest* is full of them. Nearly the entire play is set up line, joke. 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. Look at the following epigrams from the play:

“I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance.”

“It is awfully hard work doing nothing. However, I don’t mind hard work where there is no definite object of any kind.”

“It is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth.”

Write your own epigrams on the following topics: marriage, love, money, work, the environment, and a genre of music. Read your compositions to the class. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA4, CA5, CA6, FA1, FA2, FA3 IL 1, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26)

3 Have the students create a short scene exploring Wilde’s use of language and humor. Have them work together to create the dialogue for their characters, and try to use as many comedic devices as possible (puns, epigrams, irony, etc.). Potential subjects that parallel *The Importance of Being Earnest* could include:

- A discussion of marriage and the opposite sex between two friends
- Two women, one fiancé
- A marriage proposal

(MO: CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA5, CA6, FA1, FA2, FA3, SS2, SS6 IL 1, 3, 4, 5, 16, 18, 25, 27)

4 Oscar Wilde truly had a wild life; his personality and style were nothing if not unique. In addition, he went from the peak of his popularity to infamy within a few short weeks. Create a timeline that shows the major events in Wilde’s life. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA5, CA6, FA1, FA2, FA3, SS2, SS6 IL 1, 3, 4, 5, 16, 18, 25, 27)



5 In addition to Wilde, the Victorian period hosted another great playwright, George Bernard Shaw. Although Shaw's plays were very different from Wilde's, there were also many similarities. Read a play by Shaw and write a short report that compares the Shaw play to *Earnest*. Be sure your report

addresses the following questions: How do the plays differ in the aspects of Victorian England they explore? How do the comedic devices differ between the two? Which artistic movement do the plays characterize and how? (MO: CA1, CA2, CA4, CA5, CA6, CA7, FA1, FA2, FA3, SS2, SS6 IL 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 16, 18, 25, 26, 27)



Fine Arts



Before the Performance

1 Oscar Wilde personally identified with the aesthetic movement in art, but there were several other artistic movements during the Victorian period, such as realism. Pick one other artistic movement that was explored during the Victorian period and research its characteristics. Divide a page in half, and using your research, list the characteristics of the aesthetic movement and the movement you chose. Also list at least three artists or writers that were influenced by the movement. (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA5, CA6, CA7 IL 1, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)

2 In an interview just before *Earnest* opened in London, Wilde was asked, "I dare not ask, I suppose, if it [*Earnest*] will please the public?"

Wilde responded, "When a play that is a work of art is produced on the stage what is being tested is not the play, but the stage; when a play that is not a work of art is produced on the stage what is being tested is not the play, but the public." What do you believe Wilde meant by this remark? Do you agree?

(MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA6, CA7 IL 1, 4, 5, 25, 27)

After the Performance

1 In Act I, what elements of the set did you notice that revealed the character of Algernon? What did they show about his interests? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, CA1, CA2, CA6 IL 1, 4, 5, 25)

2 How does the initial scene between Algernon and Lane set up the major themes of the play? When Jack arrives, how are these themes further developed? How does the concept of Bunburying relate to the themes of the play?

(MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, CA1, CA2, CA6 IL 1, 4, 5, 25)

3 Why do you believe Wilde moves the action from the city to the country in Act II? Was it for comedy or does it forward the plot? How does the different environment affect the characters and their dialogue?

(MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, CA1, CA2, CA6 IL 1, 4, 5, 25)

4 Do you believe the resolution of the final act rewards Jack and Algernon for their dishonest behavior? Do they deserve it? Do you believe the pair are more or less honest than the other characters in the play?

(MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, CA1, CA2, CA6 IL 1, 4, 5, 25)

5 Read "Shop Talk" earlier in this study guide. If you were the scenic designer for a new production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, what would you do to distinguish your set? Ask yourself the following questions in creating your design: What design options would be realistic for Victorian England? What props and scenic elements would support the action of the play?

What elements would develop and reveal the personalities of the characters? Try to think of specific details that could be added to the set in order to accomplish these goals.

(MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA5, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA6 IL 1, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)

6 Have a class discussion in which you compare a television comedy, such as *Seinfeld*, to *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Your discussion should cover how the casts are similar or different, the types of comedic devices that are used in each, and how the themes differ between the two. (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, CA1, CA2, CA5, CA6 IL 1, 4, 5, 25)



7 Walter Pater, one of the leaders of the aesthetic movement and a major influence on Wilde, once wrote: "...the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake."

Wilde and others went on to turn this view into the Aesthetic movement. What in *The Importance of Being Earnest* embodies Pater's statement? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA6, CA7 IL 1, 4, 5, 25, 27)



Social Sciences



Before the Performance

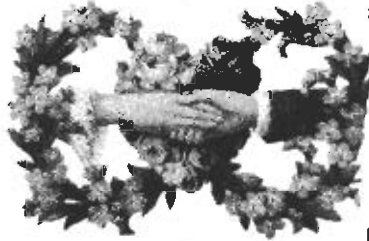
1 The following is an excerpt from an essay titled "Wilde, Society, and Society Drama" by Cary M. Mazer. It is about the original London opening of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

"With regard to clothing, Society Drama at the fashionable theatres was a mirror literally as well as figuratively. Actors employed by George Alexander at the St. James's were contractually required to dress appropriately 'off-stage as well as on,' and could be fired if spotted walking in Picadilly during the day in anything less than a well-tailored morning coat. New Society Dramas would often premier at the beginning of the London 'season,' and women would wait until they saw the fashions worn by the female characters in the play before they ordered their new gowns and hats."

This passage shows how the theatre influenced style during the Victorian Period. Write an essay on what you believe influences style today. Be sure to include specific examples that support your argument.

(MO: SS2, SS6, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA6, FA5 IL 1, 3, 4, 5, 16, 18, 27)

2 The Victorian period marked great scientific and industrial advancement in both America and England. Assign each student to do research on a great scientist or industrialist of the period, such as Louis Pasteur, Thomas Edison or Sigmund Freud. Each student should create a presentation based on his or her research. Be sure to encourage them to incorporate both text and graphic elements in their display. The presentations can be given individually before the class or put together with the other students' presentations and arranged as a collage along a wall of the classroom. (MO: SS2, SS6, CA1, CA3, CA4, CA5, CA6, FA2 IL 1, 3, 4, 5, 16, 18, 26)



3 Victorian England was famous for its etiquette and rules of courtship. The rules were considered prudish by many but charming to others. Split into groups and research Victorian England and its rules of etiquette and courtship. Write a vignette (a short scene as in a movie or play) based on your research and perform it for the class.

Have the students participate in a further discussion that explores the following question: Given the repressive nature of Victorian England, how could it be the basis for such an imaginative and far-ranging scientific and industrial era? (MO: SS2, SS6, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA5, CA6, FA1, FA2, FA3, FA5 IL 1, 3, 4, 5, 16, 18, 25, 26, 27)

After the Performance

1 When Cecily and Gwendolen first meet, how would you characterize their behavior? Do you believe this is an accurate representation of the way real women acted in Victorian England? (MO: SS2, SS6, CA1, CA2, CA5, CA6, CA7, FA2, FA3, FA5 IL 4, 16, 18, 25, 27)

2 The primary characters in *Earnest* are in upper-class society. If you were directing a modernized version of *Earnest*, what social group would you substitute for them? What other groups comprise our modern upper class today? How do these people influence our style? Our behavior? (MO: SS2, SS6, CA1, CA2, CA5, CA6, CA7, FA2, FA3, FA5 IL 4, 16, 18, 25, 27)

3 In *Earnest*, Wilde satirized only the Victorian upper class and left the commentary on the difference between the classes to others, such as Bernard Shaw and Charles Dickens. Read a book or play written during the Victorian period that explores the class stratification of the society (the two writers above are both good choices). Do you believe the same class separation exists today? Does your social class affect your behavior and opportunities as it did for those in Victorian England? Create a visual presentation (using poster board or presentation software such as PowerPoint) that compares the classes of Victorian England to those of today. (MO: SS2, SS6, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA5, CA6, CA7, FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5 IL 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 16, 18, 25, 26, 27)

4 Marriage is a primary theme in *Earnest*, and it is also the focus of many of the play's witticisms. On a sheet of paper, compare and contrast the marriage views of each of the primary characters: Jack, Algernon, Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen and Cecily. (MO: SS2, SS6, CA1, CA2, CA4, CA6, FA1, FA2, FA3, FA5 IL 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 16, 18, 25, 27)

5 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 our 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 are they totally false? (MO: SS2, SS6, CA1, CA2, CA4, CA6, FA1, FA2, FA3, FA5 IL 1, 2, 4, 5, 16, 18, 25, 27)

