



The Importance of Being Earnest

"A trivial comedy for serious people"

by Oscar Wilde

Directed by Rich Keitel

March 7 – March 16, 2014



Funded in part by:

The Heinz Endowment



THE GRABLE FOUNDATION



LAUREL FOUNDATION



Massey Charitable Trust





For Teachers & Students

POST-SHOW CHAT SESSIONS

Stay after the school matinees to ask questions of both the actors and the production crew! During the 15-minute post-show chat sessions, delve into the story and then ask questions of the actors about the rehearsal process, theatre performance, and their experiences working on that particular production. No registration required.

THE LITERACY IN ACTION PROGRAM

Prime Stage Theatre's flagship education program strives to increase adolescent literacy through theatre in underserved and underperforming school districts in the Western Pennsylvania area. In this FREE program, schools receive tickets and books for each Prime Stage production, 10 in-school workshops, and professional development opportunities for teachers. If you would like your school to become involved, please download an application at our website, http://www.primestage.com/files/pdf/literacy_in_action_application.pdf

TEEN DATING AWARENESS PROGRAM

Prime Stage Theatre is proud to offer a touring production of *You Belong to Me*, a 45 minute play designed to identify the warning signs of teen dating violence that can help save the life of a friend, loved one or even you. Written and performed by Pittsburgh area teens, this show will make an impact at your school or community center. If you would like our *Teen Dating Awareness Program* to come to your school or community center, please visit our website, http://www.primestage.com/education/teen_dating_awareness.html

OTHER OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEENS, FAMILIES AND ADULTS

Prime Stage Theatre offers opportunities for people of all ages to get involved with the theater. Check out our website to learn about the Teen Board, Mentorships, Volunteering, Book Readings and many other exciting events. There is something for everyone at Prime Stage! <http://primestage.com/>

The Importance of Being Earnest

Resource Guide



Volume 5, Issue 2
2.18.2014

Welcome to Prime Stage Theatre: Bringing Literature to Life!



Fahrenheit 451, PST 2012-2013



The Great Gatsby, PST 2012-2013



Walk Two Moons, PST 2012-2013

Welcome to Prime Stage Theatre's 2013-2014 season! We had a very successful season last year with acclaimed productions of *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Great Gatsby* and *Walk Two Moons*.

This year, we are pleased to bring you the thriller ghost story of *Turn of the Screw*, one of the best comedies ever written, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and the world premiere adaptation of Jane Yolen's Newbery Award winning novel about the Holocaust, *The Devil's Arithmetic*.

This Resource Guide is designed to provide historical background and context, classroom activities and curricular content to help you enliven your students' experience with the literature. We hope it will inspire you to use theatrical games and creative thinking in your classroom in order to spark personal connections with the theme and characters in the stories.

If you have any questions about the information or activities in this guide, please contact me. I'm happy to help and welcome your suggestions!

Monica Stephenson

Education Director

mstephenson@primestage.com

Did you know...

*Prime Stage is celebrating its 16th birthday.

*Prime Stage has brought over 60 stories to life!

*In 2006, Prime Stage welcomed Mary Badham, the actress who played Scout in the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Check out what's inside!

<i>The Importance of Being Earnest in 3 minutes...or less</i>	5
<i>Oscar Wilde, Bio</i>	6 - 7
<i>The Characters</i>	8
<i>Putting it in Context</i>	9 - 15
<i>The First Stage Production</i>	16
<i>Themes</i>	17
<i>Motifs & Symbols</i>	18
<i>What is What?</i>	19
<i>Class Activities</i>	20 - 23
<i>Putting it in Stage</i>	24 - 26
<i>Attending the Performance</i>	27
<i>Additional Resources</i>	28
<i>PST & PA Core Standards!</i>	29

Curriculum Connections Corner

Prime Stage is committed to directly correlating our programs to the PDE Academic Standards. *The Importance of Being Earnest* and this Resource Guide may be used to address the following curriculum content standards:

Arts and Humanities: 9.1-9.4
Reading, Writing, Speaking, & Listening: 1.1-1.9
History: 8.1, 8.3



The Importance of Being Earnest, A Trivial Comedy for Serious People

In 3 minutes or less...

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.

In a July 1894 letter, Oscar Wilde expresses his opinion about the plot in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. "The real charm of the play, if it is to have charm, must be in the dialogue. The plot is slight, but, I think, adequate... Well, I think an amusing thing with lots of fun and wit might be made."

Act 1, Algernon Moncrieff's flat in Half Moon Street,

The play opens with Algernon Moncrieff, an idle young gentleman, receiving his best friend, John Worthing, whom he knows as Ernest. Ernest has come from the country to propose to Algernon's cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax. Algernon, however, refuses his consent until Ernest explains why his cigarette case bears the inscription, "From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack." 'Ernest' is forced to admit to living a double life. In the country, he assumes a serious attitude for the benefit of his young ward, the heiress Cecily Cardew, and goes by the name of John (or, as a nickname, Jack), while pretending that he must worry about a wastrel younger brother named Ernest in London. In the city, meanwhile, he assumes the identity of the libertine Ernest. Algernon confesses a similar deception: he pretends to have an invalid friend named Bunbury in the country, whom he can "visit" whenever he wishes to avoid an unwelcome social obligation. Jack refuses to tell Algernon the location of his country estate.

Gwendolen and her formidable mother Lady Bracknell now call on Algernon. As he distracts Lady Bracknell in another room, Jack proposes to Gwendolen. She accepts, but seems to love him very

largely for his professed name of Ernest. Jack accordingly resolves to himself to be rechristened "Ernest". Discovering them in this intimate exchange, Lady Bracknell interviews Jack as a prospective suitor. Horrified to learn that he was adopted after being discovered as a baby in a handbag at Victoria Station, she refuses him and forbids further contact with her daughter. Gwendolen, though, manages covertly to promise to him her undying love. As Jack gives her his address in the country, Algernon surreptitiously notes it on the cuff of his sleeve: Jack's revelation of his pretty and wealthy young ward has motivated his friend to meet her.

Act 2, The Garden of the Manor House,

Woolton Cecily is studying with her governess, Miss Prism. Algernon arrives, pretending to be Ernest Worthing, and soon charms Cecily. Long fascinated by Uncle Jack's hitherto absent black sheep brother, she is predisposed to fall for Algernon in his role of Ernest (a name she, like Gwendolen, is apparently particularly fond of). Therefore Algernon, too, plans for the rector, Dr. Chasuble, to rechristen him "Ernest."

Jack, meanwhile, has decided to abandon his double life. He arrives in full mourning and announces his brother's death in Paris of a severe chill, a story undermined by Algernon's presence in the guise of Ernest.

Gwendolen now enters, having run away from home. During the temporary absence of the two men, she meets Cecily, each woman indignantly declaring that she is the one engaged to "Ernest." When Jack and Algernon reappear, their deceptions are exposed.

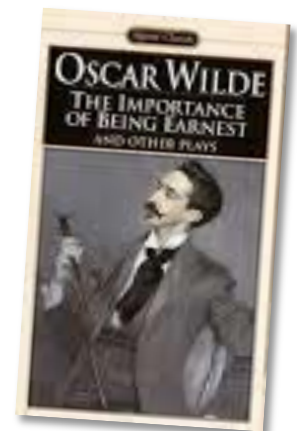
Act 3, Morning-Room at the Manor House, Woolton

Arriving in pursuit of her daughter, Lady Bracknell is astonished to be told that Algernon and Cecily are engaged. The revelation of Cecily's trust fund soon dispels Lady Bracknell's initial doubts over the young lady's suitability, but any engagement is forbidden by her guardian Jack: he will

consent only if Lady Bracknell agrees to his own union with Gwendolen—something she declines to do.

The impasse is broken by the return of Miss Prism, whom Lady Bracknell recognizes as the person who, twenty-eight years earlier, as a family nursemaid, had taken a baby boy for a walk in a perambulator (baby carriage) and never returned. Challenged, Miss Prism explains that she had abstractedly put the manuscript of a novel she was writing in the perambulator, and the baby in a handbag, which she had left at Victoria Station. Jack produces the very same handbag, showing that he is the lost baby, the elder son of Lady Bracknell's late sister, and thus indeed Algernon's elder brother. Having acquired such respectable relations, he is acceptable as a suitor for Gwendolen after all.

Gwendolen, though, still insists that she can only love a man named Ernest. Lady Bracknell informs Jack that, as the first-born, he would have been named after his father, General Moncrieff. Jack examines the army lists and discovers that his father's name—and hence his own real name—was, in fact, Ernest. Pretence was reality all along. As the happy couples embrace—Jack and Gwendolen, Algernon and Cecily, and even Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism—Lady Bracknell complains to her newfound relative: "My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality." "On the contrary, Aunt Augusta", he replies, "I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of being Earnest."



Oscar Wilde, Playwright

"All that I desire to point out is the general principle that life imitates art far more than art imitates life." - *Oscar Wilde*

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (16 October 1854 – 30 November 1900) was an Irish writer and poet. After writing in different forms throughout the 1880s, he became one of London's most popular playwrights in the early 1890s. Today he is remembered for his epigrams, his only novel (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*), his plays, and his imprisonment and early death.

Wilde's parents were successful Anglo-Irish Dublin intellectuals. Until he was nine, he was educated at home, learning fluently both French and German. He then attended Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh. Wilde left Portora with a royal scholarship to read classics at Trinity College, Dublin, from 1871 to 1874.

At Trinity, Wilde established himself as an outstanding student: coming in first in his class in his first year, won a scholarship by

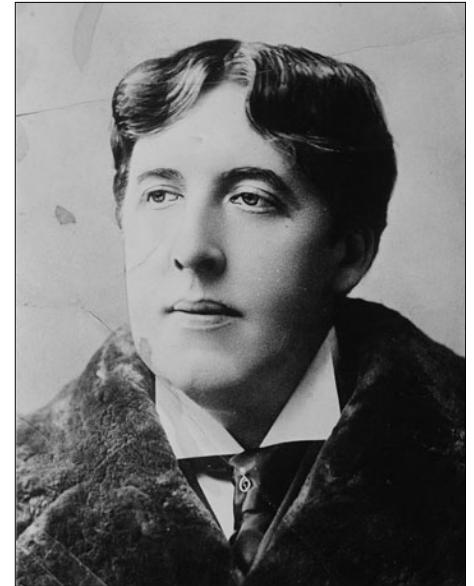


competitive examination in his second, and then, in his finals, won the Berkeley Gold Medal, the University's highest academic award in Greek. He later won a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford to continue his studies.

While at Magdalen College, He became known for his involvement in the rising philosophy of aestheticism, led by two of his tutors, Walter Pater and John Ruskin. Wilde wore his hair long, openly scorned "manly" sports, and decorated his rooms with peacock feathers, lilies, sunflowers, blue china and other *objets d'art*.

After university, Wilde moved to London into fashionable cultural and social circles. As a spokesman for aestheticism, he tried his hand at various literary activities: he published a book of poems, lectured in the United States and Canada on the new "English Renaissance in Art," and then returned to London where he worked prolifically as a journalist. Wilde became known for his biting wit, flamboyant dress and glittering conversation.

In 1881 Wilde was introduced to Constance Lloyd, daughter of Horace Lloyd, a wealthy Queen's Counsel. She happened to be visiting Dublin in 1884, when Wilde was lecturing at the Gaiety Theatre. He proposed to her, and they married on 29 May 1884. The couple had 2 sons, Cyril (1885) and Vyvyan (1886). At the turn of the 1890s, he refined his ideas about the supremacy of art in a series of dialogues and essays, and incorporated themes



of decadence, duplicity, and beauty into his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The opportunity to construct aesthetic details precisely, and combine them with larger social themes, drew Wilde to write drama. He wrote *Salome* (1891) in French in Paris but it was refused a license for England due to the absolute prohibition of Biblical subjects on the English stage. Unperturbed, Wilde produced four society comedies in the early 1890s, which made him one of the most successful playwrights of late Victorian London.



Constance and Cyril in 1889

Oscar Wilde, Playwright

“Life is too much important a thing ever to talk seriously about it.” – *Oscar Wilde*

In 1891 Lionel Johnson introduced Wilde to Alfred Douglas, an undergraduate at Oxford at the time. Douglas was a handsome and spoilt young man. An intimate friendship sprang up between Wilde and Douglas and by 1893 Wilde was infatuated with Douglas and they consorted together regularly in a tempestuous affair.



Wilde and Alfred Douglas

At the height of his fame and success, while his masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), was still on stage in London, Wilde had the Marquess of Queensberry prosecuted for libel. The Marquess was the father of Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas.

Check out [biography.com](http://www.biography.com) to watch videos and learn more about Oscar Wilde!

<http://www.biography.com/people/oscar-wilde-9531078>



The charge carried a penalty of up to two years in prison.

The trial unearthed evidence that caused Wilde to drop his charges and led to his own arrest and trial for gross indecency with other men. After two more trials he was convicted and imprisoned for two years' hard labor.

In 1897, in prison, he wrote *DeProfundis*, which was published in 1905, a long letter which discusses his spiritual journey through his trials, forming a dark counterpoint to his earlier philosophy of pleasure. Upon his release he left immediately for France, never to return to Ireland or Britain. There he wrote his last work, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), a long poem commemorating the harsh rhythms of prison life. He died destitute in Paris at the age of forty-six.

Retrieved January 14, 2014, from

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_Wilde

* FAST FACTS *

BIRTH NAME: Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde

BIRTH DATE: October 16, 1854

BIRTH PLACE: Dublin, Ireland

NATIONALITY: Irish

EDUCATED:

Trinity College (Dublin)
Magdalen College (Oxford)

FATHER: Sir William Wilde (eye doctor)

MOTHER: Jane Francesca Elgee (poet & journalist)

SIBLINGS: brother William, sister Isola

SPOUSE: Constance Lloyd

CHILDREN: two sons—Cyril & Vyvyan

OCCUPATION: Playwright, novelist, poet, editor, critic

PERIOD: Victorian Era (1837-1901)

LITERARY MOVEMENT:
Aestheticism

FAMOUS WORKS:

The Picture of Dorian Gray
The Importance of Being Earnest
The Ballad of Reading Gaol

DIED: November 30, 1900 (aged 46) in Paris, France.

RESTING PLACE: Le Pere Lachaise Cemetery, Paris France

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY



Curriculum
Connections

For students to get a better sense of Wilde's life and philosophy, ask them to reflect on some of his famous quotes. Ask students to describe what is ironic or surprising about each quote.

“One should always be in love. That is the reason one should never marry.”

“The more one analyzes people, the more all reasons for analysis disappear. Sooner or later one comes to that dreadful universal thing called human nature.”

“To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance.”

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!”

The Characters



George Alexander as Jack Worthing ('The Importance of Being Earnest'), from 'The Sketch' magazine, London, 1895.



Irene Vanbrugh as Gwendolen Fairfax ('The Importance of Being Earnest'), by Alfred Ellis, publicity photograph from the first production, London, 1895.

John "Jack" Worthing

Jack is the play's protagonist and the play's most sympathetic character. He was found in a handbag on a railway line, and feels less at home in aristocratic society than does Algernon. He lives in the country but has invented a wicked brother named "Ernest" whose scrapes require Jack's attendance in the city.

Algernon Moncrieff

Algernon, the foil to Jack, is a hedonist who has created a friend named Bunbury whose status as a permanent invalid allows Algernon to leave the city whenever he pleases. He believes this activity, "Bunburying," is necessary, especially if one is going to get married—something he vows never to do.

Lady Bracknell

Lady Bracknell is the antagonist of the play, blocking both potential marriages. She embodies typical Victorian classism; she does not allow Gwendolen to marry Jack when she finds out he is an orphan, and she dislikes Cecily as a mate for her nephew Algernon until she learns that Cecily is wealthy.

Gwendolen Fairfax

Gwendolen is Lady Bracknell's daughter, and is the object of Jack's romantic attention. Though she returns his love, Gwendolen appears self-centered and flighty. Like Cecily, she desires nothing but to marry someone named Ernest.

Cecily Cardew

Cecily is Jack's ward and lives with him in the country. Young and pretty, she is favored by Algernon, who pretends to be Jack's brother Ernest. Cecily has heard about this brother, and has written correspondences between the two of them for months by the time she meets Algernon/Ernest. Like Gwendolen, she is only interested in marrying a man named Ernest.

Miss Prism

Miss Prism is Cecily's governess. She obviously loves Chasuble, though the fact that he is a priest prohibits her from telling him so directly.

Lane

Algernon's butler delivers a number of droll lines which show that he is far from a passive servant.

Chasuble

A rector, Chasuble frequently visits Jack's country house to see Miss Prism. Though he is celibate, he seems well matched for the educated Miss Prism.

Merriman

Jack's butler, Merriman has a less significant role than Lane has, but in one scene he and another servant force the bickering Gwendolen and Cecily to maintain supposedly polite conversation.

Classroom Activity



Curriculum Connections

The Importance of Being Earnest has nine characters.

Look at the descriptions on the page and think about how you might choose a cast to portray these characters.

**What physical characteristic would you look for in the actor playing each character? Why?*

**What vocal quality would you expect each character to have? Would they speak slowly, quickly, gravelly, squeaky?*

**How would you make each character unique?*



Caricatures of the cast, by Stanley Parker, 1939

PUTTING IT IN CONTEXT

The Importance of Being Earnest is a satire of the Victorian era, when an intricate code of behavior governed everything from communication to marriage. During the Victorian era, marriage was about protecting your resources, and keeping socially unacceptable impulses under control. We can see this at work in the *The Importance of Being Earnest*, usually when the social referee, Lady Bracknell, blows her whistle. Her two main concerns are class and money. Jack is a no-go because he doesn't know who his parents are (i.e., his class is unknown). Lady Bracknell is concerned that he might be a butler in disguise who will squander her daughter Gwendolen's wealth. One character in particular, Cecily, becomes a lot more interesting when her fortune is mentioned. The ridiculous end of the play – three engagements in five minutes – is a "happy" one because everyone gets together. But think about it – they only get together because their social and economic fitness for each other is demonstrated.

Retrieved from <http://www.shmoop.com/importance-of-being-earnest/>



Queen Victoria, pictured in 1887 in the 50th year of her reign.

Life in Victorian England



A picture of Leadenhall Street, London, c. 1837

Victorian England began with the coronation of 18-year-old Victoria. Victoria led England into a period of tremendous growth in almost all areas of life and society including population, industry, science, philosophy, business, and art. It was generally an optimistic time. By the end of the period, electricity lit up homes and streets, horse-drawn carriages moved over for shiny new automobiles; and sophisticated sewer systems allowed for toilets to be brought inside. The Industrial Revolution was at its height. With progress, however, came severe growing pains, as the population swelled beyond society's capacity to handle the growth. Disease was prevalent in Victorian England and death could come at any moment, especially in crowded cities. Medical care was improving but tuberculosis, polio, smallpox, scarlet fever, cholera, and typhoid were regular threats.

English society was clearly defined by social classes and a person's quality of life depended mostly upon his social status. Legally, Victorian England had just two classes: aristocrats (men who inherited titles and land and did not work for money) and commoners (the underclass, working class, and middle class). However, Victorians understood their society as multi-tiered, with the middle class growing in size throughout the period. Education was not an equal opportunity for the classes or sexes, which meant the at the social class you were born into is the one you knew you would most likely remain in. Some change in class was possible, with middle class life the ideal goal for the general population.

Underclass citizens made up a huge portion of the Victorian England population. They were impoverished and had little opportunity to make money. Men could earn pennies as porters; boys could hold horses while the driver took a break, or sell newspapers or food in the streets. Sweeping a path across the filthy roads for a well-dressed pedestrian could earn a few pennies. Begging could bring more money, especially if the beggar could use a small child, but it was illegal. Sometimes the beggar children were blinded or maimed, to tug on the heartstrings of passers by. Many women made money as prostitutes. Workhouses were established to try to help the poorest people. Entire families lived together in these buildings. Life there meant hard labor—breaking up large granite rocks or unraveling tarred rope for use in caulking the seams of battleships. Workhouse pay consisted of coarse bread: 4 pounds a week for a married man and 2 pounds for a child.



Working class life in Victorian Wetherby, West Yorkshire

The working class included both men and women and made up the majority of the population. Working class citizens were paid daily or weekly. Their work was physical and often dirty, usually consisting of working as domestic servants or as farm or factory hands. They also worked as miners and fishermen. Many women worked in the clothing industry. Most people earned just enough to live by working 12-14 hours per day. If they were lucky they would have Sunday off. This amount of work did not leave much, if any, time for self-improvement or education. Life for most people was work, work, work, and hoping to avoid contracting a horrible disease. Working class children were seen as potential moneymakers and were sent to work as early as six years old.

Classroom Activity



Create a class chart with three columns with the labels: What I Know, What I Want to Learn, What I Learned. Engage students in a discussion about what they already know about 19th century England. In addition to the topics that interest the students, consider incorporating the following: Courtship and Marriage, Codes of Conduct for Men and Women, Clothing and Fashion, Education, Food and Dining, Professions and Occupations. Divide students into research groups. Assign each group specific research questions. Each group may present their new findings to the class.

PUTTING IT IN CONTEXT

Life in Victorian England

Middle class people did cleaner, more mental work than the working class and they earned a monthly or yearly salary. The middle-class had a wide range of positions and were the “professionals” of English society. They held jobs that required some skill and education that they often gained through apprenticeships. Some positions included: clergymen, teachers, farmers who hired working class men, police officers, bankers, shop keepers, and tutors. Both men and women in the middle class worked, but after marriage the women were expected to stay at

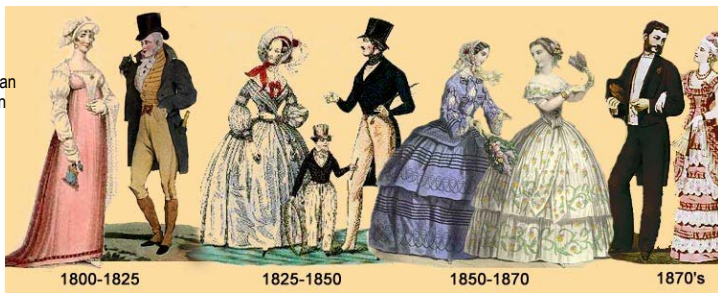


An artist rendition of a Victorian governess

home to care for the children. Middle class families were churchgoers. They believed in sexual morality and hard work, and despised what they saw as the idleness of the upper class.

Upper class citizens did not work for money but were expected to serve society through national or local political office, or through charitable causes. As land owners, upper class families made money through the lease of their lands to middle class farmers. Upper class families could own thousands of acres and lived in a manor, which was a comfortable country house with a staff and servants. Schooling

Upper class Victorian fashion



of upper class children was very important for them to keep their places in society. Boys were taught at home by governesses or tutors until they were old enough to go to public schools. The goal for most boys was to attend university at Cambridge or Oxford and then go on to Parliament. For girls, a governess provided the education at home. Important skills for upper-class girls included French, drawing, dancing, and music. She may also have learned practical skills of sewing, embroidery, and accounting.

Fun Wilde Fact!

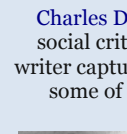
In October 2007, a first edition manuscript of *Earnest* was donated anonymously to a charity shop in England – placed appropriately in a hand bag.

Famous Victorians!

Oscar Wilde, one of the Victorian Era's most acclaimed authors, playwrights and celebrities, shared the spotlight with many other famous Victorians.



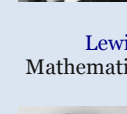
Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) - Pioneering nurse. Born in Italy, Nightingale served as a nurse in the Crimean war and helped to raise standards of hospitals and the nursing profession.



Charles Dickens (1812-1870) - Writer and social critic. Dickens more than any other writer captured the Victorian age, especially some of the poverty that was endemic in Victorian inner cities.



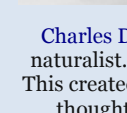
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) - A Scottish physician who was best known as the author of the Sherlock Holmes detective stories



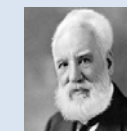
Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) - English Mathematician, writer and author of Alice in Wonderland.



Millicent Fawcett (1847 – 1929) - British Suffragist who campaigned (through non-violence) for women to have the vote and to improve women's access to higher education.

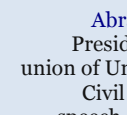


Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882) - English naturalist. Developed theory of evolution. This created one of the greatest changes of thought during Victorian period. A few years after Darwin published his theory, evolution became commonly accepted.



Alexander Bell (1847-1922) - Scottish scientist credited with inventing the first working telephone.

Famous Americans



Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) - As President, Lincoln fought to keep the union of United States together during the Civil War. In his famous Gettysburg speech, he inspired the nation with his noble words and helped to bring about the abolishment of slavery.



Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) - Political activist for women and human rights.



Emily Dickinson (1830 – 1886) - American Poet



PUTTING IT IN CONTEXT

Victorian Etiquette

"The world was my oyster but I used the wrong fork."

- Oscar Wilde

Victorians took propriety seriously! There was a strict code of conduct that one had to follow in order to be considered a lady or gentleman of good breeding. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde satirizes Victorian etiquette. Check out some of the do's and don't taken from the many published manuals during the Victorian Era.

Basic Rules

Learn to govern yourself and to be gentle and patient.

Remember that, valuable as is the gift of speech, silence is often more valuable.

Learn to speak in a gentle tone of voice.

Learn to say kind and pleasant things when opportunity offers.

Beware of meddlers and tale-bearers.



On the Street

Courtesy requires the return of all civil greetings--those of servants included. Only the most serious causes can justify "a cut."

In bowing, the head should be best; a mere lowering of the eyelids, affected by some people, is rude; but etiquette does not permit a familiar nod, except between business men, or very intimate friends. In passing and repassing on a public promenade or drive, bows are exchanged only at the first meeting.

In the evening or whenever safety may require, a gentleman should give a lady his arm.

A gentleman may take two ladies upon his arms, but under no circumstances should the lady take the arms of two gentlemen.

A gentleman will assist a lady over from an omnibus or carriage, without waiting for the formality of an introduction.

No gentleman will smoke when walking with or standing in the presence of a lady standing in the street.

Calling (visiting)

Do not be in haste to seat yourself; one appears fully as well and talks better standing for a few moments.

A man should always remain standing for as long as there are any women standing in the room.

Do not take children when making formal calls.

Do not call across the length of the room if you wish to address any one. Cross the room and speak to him quietly

Do not scratch you head or use a toothpick, ear spoon or comb.

Teas

The day and hour of an afternoon tea may be written on a visiting card. For an afternoon reception, an "At Home" card is used.

Only simple refreshment should be served at an afternoon tea. Thin slices of bread and butter, sandwiches, fancy biscuits or cake, tea, coffee, or chocolate, ice-cream and bouillon. Punch and lemonade may also be served, but no wine or alcoholic drinks.

If the number of guests is small, the hostess should walk about the room, talking with her visitors. If large guest list, she should remain near the door and have the aid of other ladies who should help entertain the guests, ask them to take refreshments and make introductions when necessary.

For more on Victorian Etiquette check out
<http://hubpages.com/hub/The-Weird-World-of-Etiquette-Bad-Manners>

PUTTING IT IN CONTEXT

The Ultimate Wilde World History Timeline!

- 1837 - William IV died and his niece Victoria became Queen at the age of 18.
- 1839 - First Opium War between Britain and China, began lasting till 1842.
- 1840 - The first stamp in the world, the Penny Black stamp, was issued in response to the huge amount of letter writing taking place at the time. Imagine your only way to communicate over long distances is writing. No cell phones! ;)
- 1843 - Charles Dickens published *A Christmas Carol* and it sold out in 6 days.
- 1845 - Ireland suffered the Great Potato Famine when entire crops of potatoes were ruined. About 800,000 people died as a result of the famine. A large number of people migrated to Britain, the United States, Canada and Australia.
- 1845 - Edgar Allen Poe published *The Raven and Other Poems*.
- 1848 - Harriet Tubman escaped from slavery and joined the Underground Railroad.
- 1849 - The California gold rush began.
- 1850 - Workhouses opened in London to try to help the poorest people who had no money. In return for their labor, the workers were given a bed and basic food. Entire families lived together in these communities.
- 1851 - The first free public library opened in Winchester.
- 1852 - The first public flushing toilet opened in London.
- 1854 - Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin to Sir William and Francesca Elgee Wilde.**
- 1861 - U.S. Civil War began.
- 1863 - The first underground railway opened in London.
- 1865 - Wilde began his studies at the Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, Ireland.**
- 1868 - Spanish Revolution.
- 1871 - Wilde enrolled at Trinity College in Dublin to study classics.**
- 1874 - Wilde was awarded a Berkeley Gold Medal, Trinity's top honor for classics students. He earned a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford, and enrolled there for further studies. He became known for his flamboyant dress and mannerisms.**
- 1876 - Scotsman Alexander Bell invented the telephone.
- 1878 - Wilde graduated from Oxford. He moved to London.**
- 1878 - London began to implement public electric lighting to replace hand lit gas lamps.
- 1881 - Wilde published his first book, a collection of verse entitled *Poems*. He had established a reputation as a leader in the London aesthetic movement, and was parodied as a dandy in the Gilbert & Sullivan opera *Patience*.**
- 1882 - Wilde spent the year lecturing in the United States. During his time in America, he met poet Walt Whitman, whom he greatly admired.**
- 1884 - Wilde married Constance Lloyd, the wealthy daughter of an English barrister, in London.**
- 1884 - The world's first skyscraper was built in Chicago. The Home Insurance Building.
- 1885 - Wilde's first child, son Cyril, was born.**
- 1886 - The Wildes' second son, Vyvyan, was born.**
- 1887 - Wilde was hired to revitalize the failing magazine *Women's World*.**
- 1887 - Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*, was published.
- 1888 - Wilde published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, a collection of fairy tales.**
- 1888 - Jack the Ripper killed at least 5 women. Historians speculate he murdered more.
- 1890 - Vincent Van Gogh committed suicide. During his lifetime he only sold one painting.
- 1890 - The National American Women's Suffrage Association was formed.
- 1891 - Wilde published a book of short stories as well as a collection of essays outlining his thoughts on aestheticism. He also publishes his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Critics attack Wilde's moral character on the basis of the book's homoerotic overtones. He also befriends an Oxford student named Lord Alfred Douglas.**
- 1892 - Ellis Island was opened.
- 1892 - Battle between steel strikers and Pinkerton guards in Homestead, PA - strikers were defeated after militia intervened.
- 1892 - Wilde wrote the play *Lady Windermere's Fan*.**
- 1893 - New Zealand became the first country in the world to grant women the vote.
- 1893 - Wilde's comedic play *A Woman of No Importance* premiered to great success.**
- 1893 - The World's Fair opened in Chicago and introduced the Ferris wheel.
- 1895 - Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* premiered at St. James's Theatre in London. He and Lord Alfred Douglas were then lovers, a fact that enrages Douglas's father the Marquess of Queensberry.**
- Feb. 1895 - Queensberry left a calling card at Wilde's home inscribed to "Oscar Wilde, posing sodomite" (he meant sodomite, a pejorative term for homosexuals). Wilde decided to sue Queensberry for libel, a decision that ends up ruining his life.**
- Apr 3, 1895 - The libel trial began. The trial becomes more about Wilde's conduct as a gay man than about Queensberry's libel. Lawyers grilled Wilde on his work and relationships, and submitted his letters to Alfred Douglas as evidence. Queensberry was acquitted and Wilde was immediately arrested on charges of gross indecency.**
- Apr 26, 1895 - Wilde's trial for indecency opened. At his family's urging, Douglas left the country and went to France. Constance Wilde took their sons to Europe and changed their last name. Wilde never saw his children again.**
- May 1895 - Oscar Wilde is convicted of gross indecency and is sentenced to two years' hard labor.**
- 1896 - The first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens, Greece.
- 1897 - Wilde is released from jail in poor health. He goes to France, where he spends the rest of his life in exile.**
- Nov 30, 1900 - Oscar Wilde dies of meningitis in Paris at the age of 46.**
- 1901 - Queen Victoria died, ending the Victorian Era.
-

PUTTING IT IN CONTEXT

London & Hertfordshire, England

“I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train.”
 – Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Map of The United Kingdom



Jack Worthing's Manor House in Hertfordshire County is the setting in Act II and Act III. Hertfordshire is located just north of London.

Algernon Moncrieff's Flat in at Half Moon Street, London is the setting in Act I

Student Activity



Curriculum
Connections

One of the main characters in the play (Algernon) lives in the city and visits the country. Another main character (Algernon's friend, Jack) lives in the country and visits the city. Jack says that he visits the city for pleasure, to avoid the responsibilities of home. He states: "When one is in town, one amuses oneself. When one is in the country, one amuses other people."

What do you think would be the major city and country pastimes of the wealthy in 1895, the year the play was first produced?

In today's society, what activities do we associate with the city? What activities do we associate with the country?

How do you think today's city schools are both similar and different from today's country schools? What are the advantages and disadvantages of attending a city school/country school?

PUTTING IT IN CONTEXT

Comedy of Manners

“If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they’ll kill you.”
-Oscar Wilde

A Comedy of Manners is a play

concerned with satirizing society’s manners. A manner is the method in which everyday duties are performed, conditions of society, or a way of speaking. It implies a polite and well-bred behaviour.

Comedy of Manners is known as high comedy because it involves a sophisticated wit and talent in the writing of the script. In this sense it is both intellectual and very much the opposite of slapstick, which requires little skill with the script and is largely a physical form of comedy. In a Comedy of Manners however, there is often minimal physical action and the play may involve heavy use of dialogue.

A Comedy of Manners usually employs an equal amount of both satire and farce resulting in a hilarious send-up of a particular social group. Most plays of the genre were carefully constructed to satirize the very people watching them. This was usually the middle to upper classes in society, who were normally the only people wealthy enough to afford going to the theatre to see a comedy of manners in the first place. The playwrights knew this in advance and fully intended to create characters that were sending up the daily customs of those in the audience watching the play. The satire tended to focus on their materialistic nature, never-ending desire to gossip and hypocritical existence.

sat·ire: the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.

farce: a comic dramatic work using buffoonery and horseplay and typically including crude characterization and ludicrously improbable situations.

The Importance of Being Earnest is an example of Comedy of Manners by making fun of Victorian society; it specifically exposes the hypocrisy, superficiality, and greedy nature of that society. Wilde’s main purpose to write the play was to expose the values of the Victorian aristocrat society; the play centers on the ideas of identity, love, marriage, and money. Wilde uses language that is satirical, funny, and witty to emphasize values of the Victorian upper class and how they judged everything by appearance.

Check out this example from *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Jack and Algernon are arguing and are greatly upset at having revealed their true identities; yet Algernon eats the muffin set out from a tea service as is custom.

Jack: How can you sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble, I can’t make out. You seem to me to be perfectly heartless.

Algernon: Well, I can’t eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them.

Jack: I say it’s perfectly heartless you’re eating muffins at all, under the circumstance.

Algernon: When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Indeed, when I am in really great trouble, as anyone who knows me intimately will tell you, I refuse everything except food and drink. At the present moment I am eating muffins because I am unhappy. Besides, I am particularly fond of muffins.

Comedy of Manners started in Ancient Greece, was copied by the Romans and was hugely popular during the Restoration Period. Oscar Wilde is attributed for having perfected this style of writing!

Check out these contemporary examples of Comedy of Manners!

- *Seinfeld
- *The Beverly Hillbillies
- *Sex and the City
- *Friends
- *Clueless
- *Mean Girls
- *Do the Right Thing
- *My Cousin Vinny
- *Annie Hall
- *Bridget Jones Diary



PUTTING IT IN CONTEXT

Aestheticism

aes-thet-i-cism or es-thet-i-cism n.

1. Devotion to and pursuit of the beautiful; sensitivity to artistic beauty and refined taste.
2. The doctrine that beauty is the basic principle from which all other principles, especially moral ones, are derived.

The philosophical foundations of Aestheticism were formulated in the eighteenth century by Immanuel Kant, who spoke for the autonomy of art. "Art was to exist for its own sake, for its own essence or beauty." The artist was not to be concerned about morality or utility or even the pleasure that a work might bring to its audience.

Oscar Wilde did not invent Aestheticism, but he was a dramatic leader in promoting the movement. Wilde was especially influenced as a college student by



'Charger' by William De Morgan

the works of the English poet and critic Algernon Charles Swinburne and the American writer Edgar Allan Poe. The English essayist Walter Pater, an advocate of "art for art's sake," helped to form Wilde's humanistic aesthetics in which he was more concerned with the individual, the self, than with popular movements like

Industrialism or Capitalism and Religion. Art was not meant to instruct and should not concern itself with social, moral, or political guidance.

Wilde advocated freedom from moral restraint and the limitations of society. His point of view contradicted Victorian convention in which the arts were supposed to be spiritually uplifting and instructive. Wilde went a step further and stated that the artist's life was even more important than any work that he produced; his life was to be his most important body of work.

Oscar Wilde Writing Style: Wilde is known as one of the greatest playwrights of the Victorian Era. Wilde adhered to and expanded upon the philosophy of aestheticism (the study of and devotion to beauty) in both his writing and lifestyle. His distinctive writing style employs the frequent use of paradox and epigrams. Wilde sums up his writing and philosophy quite well himself in his essay, *The Decay of Lying, An Observation*. In the essay, which is presented as a Socratic Dialogue, his two characters, Vivian and Cyril (Interesting to note that his sons names were Vyvyan and Cyril) discuss Art and in particular that Art never expresses anything but itself. All bad Art comes from returning to Life and Nature. Life imitates Art (more than Art imitates Life). And, most importantly, *Lying* (the telling of beautiful untrue things) is the proper aim of Art. Wilde, through his character Vivian, goes so far as to say: "It is fortunate for us, however, that Nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have no art at all. Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place. As for the infinite variety of Nature, that is a pure myth. It is not to be found in Nature herself. It resides in the imagination, or fancy, or cultivated blindness of the man who looks at her."



The Decay of Lying by Oscar Wilde

"Art creates an incomparable and unique effect, and, having done so, passes on to other things. Nature, upon the other hand, forgetting that that imitation can be made the sincerest form of insult, keeps on repeating this effect until we all become absolutely wearied of it."

— Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*

THE FIRST STAGE PRODUCTION



Irene Vanbrugh as Gwendolen Fairfax and George Alexander as Jack Worthing in the 1895 production of 'The Importance of Being Earnest', from The Sketch magazine, London, March 1895. NAL 131655

'The Importance of Being Earnest' premiered on St Valentine's Day, 1895, at the St James's Theatre, London. It was Oscar Wilde's fourth West End hit in only three years. His earlier play, 'An Ideal Husband,' had only opened a month before and was still playing to packed houses at the Haymarket Theatre a few streets away.

The first night was a glittering occasion, with audiences in evening wear. Wilde himself was in attendance, wearing what one biographer called 'the depth of fashion' - his coat had a black velvet collar, he wore a green scarab ring on his finger and carried white gloves. The production was a huge success. Allan Aynesworth, who played Algernon Moncrieff said 'I never remembered a greater triumph, the audience rose to their seats and cheered and cheered again.'

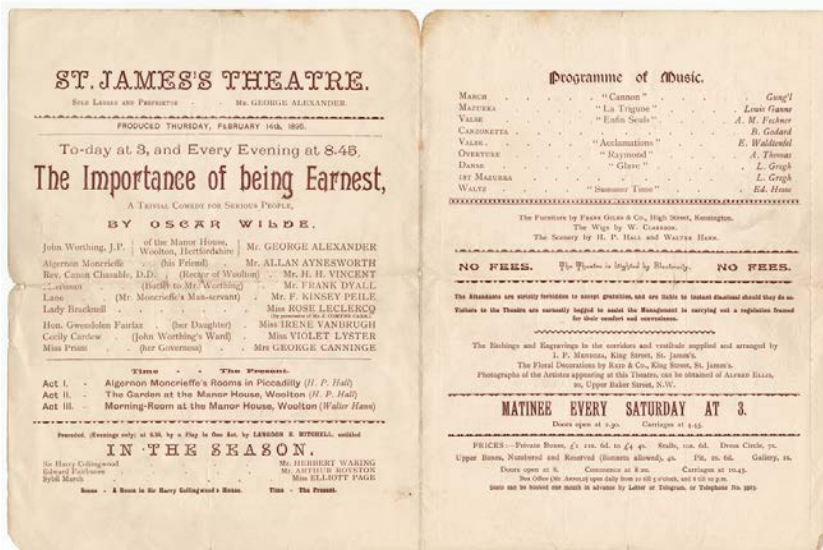
At the final curtain, Wilde was called for but he refused to take a bow. He was

avoiding the Marquess of Queensberry, the father of Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde had issued a libel charge to the Marquess because he had implied that Wilde was conducting an illicit relationship with his son. At the time, homosexuality was regarded as a serious criminal offense.

However, on 5 April 1895, Wilde was arrested on a charge of gross indecency. On 6 April his name was removed from the programme and all advertising for the play. The box office collapsed immediately and the play closed on 8 May, having run for 83 performances.



St James's Theatre, 1896



Program for the first production of 'The Importance of Being Earnest', St James's Theatre, London, 1895.

Front cover of the program



THEMES

“All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does, and that is his.”

– Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work. *The Importance of Being Earnest* contains many rich themes for exploration and discussion. Below are listed some prominent themes from the play with supporting statements.

Duty and Responsibility

The Victorians valued duty and respectability above all else. *Earnestness* (a determined desire to do the correct thing) was at the top of the code of conduct. Appearance was everything, and style was much more important than substance. So, while a person could lead a secret life, carry on affairs within marriage or have children out of wedlock, society would look the other way as long as proper appearances were maintained. Wilde questions whether the more important or serious issues of the Victorian Era are overlooked in favor of more trivial concerns about appearance.

Courtship and Marriage

Wilde felt these Victorian Values were perpetuated through courtship and marriage, both of which had their own rules and rituals. Marriage was a careful selection process. When Lady Bracknell pummels Jack with questions about parents, politics, fortune, addresses and the like, his answers must be appropriate for a legal union between two families to be approved. Marriage is presented as a legal contract between consenting families of similar fortunes; love and happiness have little to do with it.

Perpetuating the Upper Class

The strict Victorian class system, in which members of the same class marry each other, perpetuates the divide between the upper, middle and lower classes. Snobbish, aristocratic attitudes further preserve the distance between the classes. The French Revolution is held up as an example of what would happen if the lower class is taught to question its betters. Education is not for learning to think, but for mindless following convention. Lady Bracknell approves of this ignorance, “Thinking causes discontent, and discontent leads to social revolution.” That simply will not do.

The Absence of Compassion

Two areas in which the Victorians showed little sympathy or compassion were illness and death. When Lady Bracknell hears that Bunbury died after his doctors told him he cannot live, she is glad that he acted appropriately by following the medical advice. “Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty in life.” Wilde seems to be taking to task the social class that thinks only of itself, showing little compassion or sympathy for the less fortunate.

Secret Lives

Because Victorian norms were so repressive and suffocating, Wilde created episodes in which his characters live secret lives or create false impressions to express who they really are. Jack and Algernon both create personas to be free. These other lives allow them to neglect their duties - in Algernon’s case – or leave their duties to pursue pleasure – in Jack’s case.

Classroom Activity



Curriculum
Connections

There are even more themes in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Have the class break into small groups and discuss the themes that they consider important in the novel. Select two themes that the group can all agree upon and express each one, using the following phrases: *The Importance of being Earnest* tells us that . . . We know this because . . .” Complete the phrases by giving specific reasons. Each group will present the statements of theme to the class to determine whether the class arrived at the same conclusions.

MOTIFS & SYMBOLS

“I am so clever that sometimes I don’t understand a single word of what I’m saying.”
– Oscar Wilde

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help develop and inform the text’s major themes. *The Importance of Being Earnest* contains many motifs for exploration and discussion. Below are listed some prominent motifs from the play with supporting statements.

Puns

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the pun, widely considered to be the lowest form of verbal wit, is rarely just a play on words. The pun is also the title. The earnest/Ernest joke strikes at the very heart of Victorian notions of respectability and duty. Gwendolen wants to marry a man called Ernest, and she doesn’t care whether the man actually possesses the qualities that comprise earnestness. In embodying a man who is initially neither “earnest” nor “Ernest,” and who, through forces beyond his control, subsequently *becomes* both “earnest” and “Ernest,” Jack is a walking, breathing paradox and a complex symbol of Victorian hypocrisy.

There are even more puns in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Can you find them?

Inversion

One of the most common motifs is the notion of inversion, and inversion takes many forms. The play contains inversions of thought, situation, and character, as well as inversions of common notions of morality or philosophical thought. When Algernon remarks, “Divorces are made in Heaven,” he inverts the cliché about marriages being “made in heaven.” Similarly, at the end of the play, when Jack calls it “a terrible thing” for a man to discover that he’s been telling the truth all his life, he inverts conventional morality. Most of the women in the play represent an inversion of accepted Victorian practices with regard to gender roles. Lady Bracknell usurps the role of the father in interviewing Jack, and Gwendolen and Cecily take charge of their own romantic lives, while the men stand by watching in a relatively passive role. The trick that Wilde plays on Miss Prism at the end of the play is also a kind of inversion.

Symbols are objects, characters, figures or colors used to represent ideas or concepts. Below are listed some prominent symbols from the play with supporting statements.

Food - Food and scenes of eating appear frequently in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and they are almost always sources of conflict. Act I contains the extended cucumber sandwich joke, in which Algernon, without realizing it, steadily devours all the sandwiches. In Act II, the climax of Gwendolen and Cecily’s spat over who is really engaged to Ernest Worthing comes when Gwendolen tells Cecily, who has just offered her sugar and cake, that sugar is “not fashionable any more” and “Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.” On one level, the joke about food provides a low comedy. On another level, food and gluttony suggest a substitute for other appetites and indulgences.



Diaries, Ms. Prism’s Novel and Fiction - Writing and fiction figure in the play in a variety of important ways. In Act II, Cecily speaks dismissively of “three-volume novels” and Miss Prism tells her she once wrote one herself. This is an allusion to a mysterious past life. Cecily is proud to share that in her diary is an invented romance whose details and developments she has entirely imagined. When Cecily and Gwendolen seek to establish their claims on Ernest, each appeals to the diary in which she recorded the date of her engagement, as though the mere fact of having written something down makes it fact. Wilde seems to regard as the most fundamentally moral those who not only freely admit to creating fictions for themselves but who actually take pride in doing so.

WHAT IS WHAT?

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde uses his words wisely and for humorous means! Listed below are some of the challenging vocabulary words in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Have students record and look up unfamiliar words as they encounter them while reading the book! Vocabulary activities can include a word wall, word ball or making a new sentence.

PDE Academic Standards 1.7-1.8

ACT ONE

absurd: adj. ridiculous, unreasonable

candid: adj. truthful and straightforward; frank; candidly: adv. frankly

demoralise/demoralize: v. to corrupt in morals or spirit; to weaken

earnest: adj. serious; showing sincerity of feeling; grave; important. n. an intensely serious state of mind.

flat: n. British speak for one's apartment

forte: n. one's strong point or strength

indiscretion: n. behavior or speech that is indiscreet or displays a lack of good judgment

invalid: n. a sickly person

invariable: adj. constant. invariably: adv. constantly

profligate: adj. recklessly extravagant or wasteful in the use of resources; licentious

salver: n. a small serving tray

sententious: adj. self-righteous; using pompous language. sententiously: adv.

ACT TWO

arduous: n. difficult and tiring

debonnaire/debonair: adj. courteous, gracious, and having a sophisticated charm

equanimity: n. mental calmness or stability esp. in a difficult situation

impetuous: adj. acting or done quickly without thought or care; rash; impulsive

misanthrope: n. a person who dislikes humankind and avoids human society

neologism: n. a new word, meaning, usage, or phrase; the introduction or use of new words or new senses of existing words. neologistic-adj

quixotic: adj. exceedingly idealistic; impractical and unrealistic

snare: n. a trap for catching birds or animals; a thing likely to lure or tempt someone into harm

utilitarian: adj. designed to be useful or practical rather than attractive

vacillate: v. to be indecisive; to waver between different opinions or actions

call a spade a spade: speak candidly without avoiding unpleasant or embarrassing issues

ACT THREE

capacious: adj. spacious; roomy.

credulity: n. willingness to believe or trust too readily, esp. without proper or adequate evidence; gullibility.

effrontery: n. shameless or imprudent behavior

grave: adj. serious or solemn

indignant: adj. feeling or showing anger or annoyance at what is perceived as unfair treatment

insuperable: adj. (of a difficulty or obstacle) impossible to overcome

mercenary: adj. working or acting merely for money or other reward at the expense of ethics

ostentatious: adj. characterized by vulgar or pretentious display; designed to impress or attract notice. adv. ostentatiously

Oxonian: n. a member or graduate of Oxford University; a native or inhabitant of Oxford, England

tutelage: n. protection of or authority over someone or something; guardianship



Fun Wilde Fact!

In *Spiderman 2*, Mary Jane Watson plays Cecily in *Earnest* as her first play and almost forgets a line when she sees Peter Parker in the audience.

CLASS ACTIVITIES

Prime Stage's mission, *bridging literature, life and learning*, encourages students to approach literature with curiosity and personal relevance. The activities below are intended to spark enthusiasm, interest and inquiry into the story before they have read the text or attended the performance.

What Makes You Laugh

Humor can be subjective. To encourage students to think about what makes something funny, have them analyze different types of comedic devices by asking them to bring in examples of something that makes them laugh. This might be a clip of video, an excerpt from a book, picture or comic strip.

As a class, review different devices used in comedy, such as satire, incongruity, slapstick, exaggeration, irony, parody, puns.

Have them share their examples with a partner and then identify the comedic device.

From: us.pengiuangroup.com

Doing the Right Thing

In Victorian England, doing the right thing in terms of how to behave was very important. Have student explore the notion of manners and "doing the right thing" in today's era. Discuss the phrase and collect responses on a large sheet of paper. Ask students to get together in groups, each taking one of the responses and making it the title for a short piece of polished improvisation.



Hey, What Are You Doing? Improv Game

Help students understand incongruity by playing the improv game "Hey, what are you doing?"

One person begins by doing an everyday activity, such as combing her hair. The person to the right asks, "Hey, what are you doing?" She then continues to comb her hair but answers saying that she is doing something completely different, such as giving her cat a bath. The person who asks must now begin to pantomime giving a cat a bath. The next person asks, "Hey, what are you doing?" The game continues until everyone has taken a turn or two.

Ask students to identify the most humorous moments and discuss why those moments were funny.

Introductions

Assign students to read Chapter II on "Introductions" pp. 6-18 from the Victorian Era manual *Manners and Rules of Good Society, or, Solecisms to be Avoided* which can be found by searching for that title at Google Books: <http://books.google.com/bkshp?hl=en&tab=wp>

*Working in small groups, students should develop a two-minute scene where three or more characters must use the rules of proper etiquette to introduce themselves to each other. Encourage students to use their imaginations in inventing fictitious characters and settings appropriate to the time period.

*Students should share their scenes with the class.

*Discuss what they think were the purposes of etiquette during that time. Also discuss: Does etiquette sometimes mask rude or unfeeling behavior? How is etiquette used to maintain social status?



From: us.pengiuangroup.com

CLASS ACTIVITIES

Prime Stage's mission, *bridging literature, life and learning*, encourages students to approach literature with curiosity and personal relevance. The activities below are intended to spark enthusiasm, interest and inquiry into the story before they have read the text or attended the performance.

Art for Art's Sake

Oscar Wilde was a leading proponent of the art form Aestheticism or "Art for Art's Sake" Ask students to explore aestheticism through pictures.

*Divide the class into groups of 3 or 4. Have the groups take pictures or draw anything within the classroom that interests them. Encourage imagination and creativity in the visual composition.

*Have them choose 3 top images, share them with the class and explain what make them aesthetically appealing.

*Discuss with students: What is the importance of making art? What make something art? Should art always have a purpose or can it simply be?

From: us.pengsiungroup.com



Create a Comedy Sketch!

The Importance of Being Earnest includes various cultural customs, such as courtship, marriage proposals, planning for dinner parties, and taking tea. In each case, the characters either discuss or are already aware of distinct rules of behavior that must be obeyed.

Several comedians, including the cast of Monty Python, have satirized our culture by enacting well-known customs with a new set of rules.

*As a class, decide on various customs that are appropriate topics for satire. The ones listed from the play are good examples, but the class might identify others as well.

*In groups, select one custom for the group to satirize.

*The group will make up a new rule of behavior for the custom they have selected. (For example, a new rule of courtship might involve giving a certain gift, wearing a certain item of clothing, approaching each other in a certain way, etc.)

*In the performance of the custom, one person in the group will pretend not to know the rules. Other members of the group will teach the rules. The person who has just learned the rules will then try them out with other characters in the group taking different roles, perhaps with coaching from another character in the group.

*In order to be truly satirical, the scenes must be played with great seriousness.

*After viewing each of the scenes, the class might discuss the possible origins and importance of cultural rules and rituals.

Two Truths and a Lie

Deception is an integral part *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Jack's lie about his bother Ernest is even the title! Explore deception through this popular improv game.

Give students a slip of paper. Ask them to write down two truths and one lie about themselves. A tip is to make their lie believable and try to throw others off with unusual truths. Have students read aloud what they wrote while the rest of the class votes on which one is the lie. Discuss the follow questions: What did it feel like to lie? Is it always easy to know the difference between a lie and the truth? Is there a time when it might be necessary to be deceptive in order to protect yourself or do what you need to do? What kind of lies do we see in the play?

CLASS ACTIVITIES

Prime Stage's mission, *bridging literature, life and learning*, encourages students to make personal connections to literature through meaningful, interactive exploration of the text and themes. The activities below are intended to enliven, clarify and enrich text as they read the novel.

A Letter of No Importance

The Importance of Being Earnest uses the device of irony to mock the lifestyles of the wealthy gentry. One way that irony is used is by having the wealthy characters take seriously very unimportant details of life and treat impulsively very important ones. For example, choices of food, clothing, and seating arrangements at dinner are given careful thought, while choices of spouse are made quickly and based on superficial qualities.

In character as a young adult of leisure, have students write a letter to a close friend that they haven't seen in a while. Use the same device of irony found in the play by treating unimportant details very seriously and important issues very flippantly.

Your letter should let the friend know where you are and what you have been doing lately.



However, But Contradiction Game

This is a fun way to understand Oscar Wilde's use of contradictions in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Have students work in pairs for this improvisation, ask each pair to label themselves A and B. They are to have a conversation about something simple, for example the weather or lunch. A is to begin each sentence with the word "However" and B with the word "But". See how long students can keep the conversation going.

Ask An Expert

The characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are caricatures of the upper class in the Victorian Era. Have your class explore the mindset and ideals of Algernon, Jack, Cecily, Gwendolyn, Lady Bracknell, though this fun improvisation game.

Ask student volunteers to act as the characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The remaining students will formulate questions based on themes or moments in the play and can take turns interviewing the characters. The students playing the character roles will become the experts on the topics covered and will improvise their answers based on the role they are playing.

Cool Writing Activities!

Enrich your student's connection to the play by having them work on the following writing prompts.

- *What do the aristocracy in *Earnest* value? How does Wilde show that Jack and Cecily have the same kinds of values?
- *What is the girls' fascination with the name 'Ernest'? What does it have to do with their romantic idealizations? How are names used to indicate character (or not) in the play?
- *Discuss the character of Miss Prism. What kind of person is she and what seems to be her function in the play?
- * Which union—Jack's with Gwendolen or Algernon's with Cecily—seems more likely to succeed?



CLASS ACTIVITIES

Prime Stage's mission, *bridging literature, life and learning*, encourages students to reflect on their learning. The activities below are intended to provide opportunity to synthesize the learning and make personal meaning after they have read the text or attended the performance.

Agree or Disagree! Here's a fun approach to sparking a classroom discussion.

Move the chairs to either side of the classroom. Use masking tape to mark off a line on the floor, across the center of the room. Make a statement based on an issue covered in the novel or production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Students who AGREE with the statement will stand on the right of the line. Students who DISAGREE will stand on the left. Students who are ON THE LINE will stand directly on the tape. Ask individual students to share why they feel that way.

Try the following statements or make up your own!

*Lying is OK if you are doing it for a good reason.

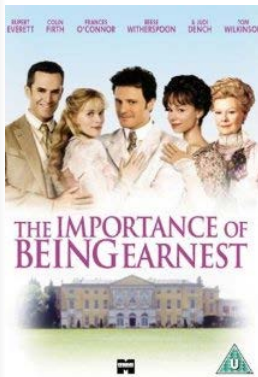
*In the play, Algernon meets and 'falls in love' with Cecily the first time they meet. This would be impossible in real life.

*The Victorian ideal of propriety is alive and well today.

*Style is more important than sincerity.

The Importance of Being Earnest,

The Movie



Imagine that a new movie version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is being produced and that you have been chosen to design the advertising poster. What image would you select to catch the eye of a passerby? What brief description of the play would accompany your

photo or visual art? Create a poster that you feel captures the spirit of the play.

Set Symbolism

Discuss the imagery used in the set design. Why do you think the production team used these images? What impact did it have on your interpretation of the story? What impact did it have on the audience?

What would you have done differently? Have student draw their interpretation of a set design for this or another story.



Surprising Choices

What surprised you about this production by Prime Stage Theatre? Consider the costumes, set design, music, lighting, special effects, acting and directing. What do you think motivated the production team or actors to make the choices that surprised you? Were they trying to solve a unique problem, create a strong response from the audience, make a creative statement or address some other need? Write a statement describing the surprising choice. Explain why you think it was a part of the production and whether or not you thought it was a good choice.

Earnest, The Sequel

Imagine you have been asked to write the sequel to *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Consider the follow questions: What characters would be included? Where would it take place? What is happening given the changes in time and place? Is there something you would like to see happen to any of the characters in Wilde's play? Next, make an outline of the sequel. How would this plot unfold? Write the opening paragraphs or a short scene in the sequel.

PUTTING IT ON STAGE

Meet the Cast



Tom Driscoll (John Worthing) Tom is a recent graduate of The Conservatory of Performing Arts at Point Park University and his past credits include *The School for Scandal* (Charles Surface), *The Producers* (Max Bialystock), *M33* (Al Marconi), *The Outsiders* (Two-Bit), *Camino Real* (Gutman), and *Evita*.

Andrew Swackhamer (Algernon)

Andrew appeared as Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* last year. He has also been seen at The Pittsburgh Public in *Our Town* (Mr. Carter) and *Off The Wall* with No Name Players in *Viva, Los Bastarditos* (Dancin' Eddie Danson) The Post-Gazette mentioned him as one of 2013 Pittsburgh's Best Performances for Dancin' Eddie Danson.



Susan McGregor-Laine (Lady Bracknell) Susan has appeared locally for Off The Wall Theatre; Pittsburgh Irish & Classical Theatre, The Pittsburgh Playhouse; Quantum Theatre; Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company, Pittsburgh Public Theatre, barebones productions, Apple Hill



Playhouse, Open Stage, The Summer Company, and Little Lake Theatre.

Hayley Nielsen (Gwendolen)

Hayley is happy to return to Prime Stage after last season's, *Fahrenheit 451*. Other credits include: *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* (City Theatre), *Little Gem* (City Theatre), *Killer Joe* (barebones productions), *Viva Los Bastarditos!* (No Name Players) and is currently the female swing for PCLO's *The Invention of Edison*.



Magan Dee Yanko (Cecily) Magan is currently a Senior B.F.A. Musical Theater Major at Point Park University. She has worked with CLO, The Cleveland Public Theater, Carnivale Theatrics, The Theater Factory, and Playhouse Jr. Favorite roles include Natalie in *Next to*

Normal, Clarisse in *Fahrenheit 451*, and Ollie in *Yo! Vikings*



What does it take to bring *The Importance of being Earnest* to the stage? PST Education Director, Monica Stephenson recently sat down with director Richard Keitel to discuss the play and his creative process.



Monica: We are thrilled that you are directing *The Importance of Being Earnest!* What are you most excited about for this particular production?

Rich: I'm most excited about the comedy; that it's a fun show. After directing last year's *Great Gatsby*, it's so delightful to work on a show

that we can laugh at during rehearsal and I know the audience is going to laugh. It's a real pleasure to work on comedy. Oscar Wilde is such a brilliant writer. There are just so many quotes in this play [*Earnest*] that are just worldwide classics. It's such a delight to see it live. And, the cast, I have such a wonderful cast. So I'm really excited about that.

Monica: Could you tell us a little about the world in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Rich: It's like *Downton Abby*, it [*Earnest*] takes place a few years before the first episode began, but it's similar, you have these upper class characters. Back then, the upper class they didn't really work. They just lived off their incomes from inheritances and their land. It was frivolity that they did and Oscar Wilde was going through that time. There was a world of what do we wear, how do we dress ostentatiously, how do we present ourselves to the world, so they're not dealing with, "How do I get my next meal?" or "How do I work?" or struggling through life. It's "How can I be witty?" and go through life just enjoying myself. Oscar Wilde's subtitle for the play is "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People." One of my favorite lines in the play is: "Is that clever?" Algernon says: "All women become like their mother's and no men do; that's their tragedy." and Jack says: "Is that clever?" and it was very clever. I can see Oscar Wilde writing that line and saying "Is that clever?"

PUTTING IT ON STAGE

Meet the Cast cont.



Scott Patrick Calhoon (Lane) Scott Patrick Calhoon has performed with numerous regional and local theatres with hundreds of credits to his name. He is proud to be 'serving you' as a new member of the Prime Stage family.

Mary Schafer Masterman (Miss Prism) Selected credits from her time in Pittsburgh, Chicago and Los Angeles include Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. in *Wit*, Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* (Garland Winner – *BackStage West*), Lorraine in *A Lie of The Mind*, and Bernice in *The Musical Comedy Murders of 1940*.



Everett Lowe (Dr. Chasuble) Everett is pleased to be working with Prime Stage again, having played Meyer Wolfsheim last year in *The Great Gatsby*. A great fan of Oscar Wilde, Everett is having a blast working on *Earnest* with such a wonderful cast.

John Feightner (Merriman) John is an actor and improviser usually seen about town at the Arcade Comedy Theater. He is a member of the comedy troupe *Hustlebot* and is the current host of *Friday Nite Improvs*.



Interview with Rich Keitel Cont.

Monica: As you are approaching this work are you looking at the style? Are you having your actors do this in a stylized way?

Rich: We are looking at the style, but I don't want the audience to feel like they are looking at a museum piece. I want to be real. We're really having fun with the style. One of the keys to comedy is the fast pace; so we're working on keeping it moving and keeping it interesting for the audience. We're having dialect coach Vince Ventura come in for the sounds, because we are doing British dialects which is how it was done, and we'll pay attention to that, but I don't try to overlay style on it ... I think someone once asked John Gielgud: how can you define style? And he said "style is knowing what play you're in." So you just be honest to the world of the play and the style comes from that.

Sound Design

On stage, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is brought to life through the work of many people.

PST's Resident sound designer, Angela

Baughman has provided all of the sound effects and musical elements for the play. Learn more about her design below!

What is your artistic vision for *The Importance of Being Earnest*?

Earnest is set in the Impressionist period, which heavily inspired most of the visual design of the show. Impressionist music was also born in France at this time, although "impressionist" composers themselves renounced the term. In fact, Debussy said "I am trying to do 'something different'... what the imbeciles call 'impressionism' art critics."



is a term which is as poorly used as possible, particularly by

With this in mind and keeping with Wilde's sense of humor, my design is not strictly period music, but more like an impression of impressionism. The music is based in the classical style of the time period, but with modern instruments sprinkled throughout.

What has been the most fun and/or challenging aspect of your design process for *The Importance of Being Earnest*?

There's a part of the show where Algernon plays piano in the other room. I'm excited to be collaborating with Andrew Swackhamer, who will be playing an offstage piano live.

Is designing for a comedic play different from designing for a tragedy or dramatic work? If so, how?

There isn't much difference between designing comedy vs tragedy. The process varies much more based on genre - sci-fi and fantasy are usually sound effect driven, while period pieces and dramas are often more music heavy. But it really all depends on the director's vision for the show.

PUTTING IT ON STAGE

Designing the Set, A Behind the Scenes Special

by PST's resident Set Designer, Johnmichael Bohan

All the scenery, furniture and props the audience sees at a production of a play make up the set design. The set designer's job is to design these physical surroundings in which the action will take place. The overall look of the set also gives the audience information about the director's concept of the production.

I'm excited to present the ideas that Rich Keitel (Director) and I have been tossing around over our discussions of the Earnest set design. We did not want to complicate the story with any high concepts or commentary that would stray away from the original text. Instead we are aiming to give a true to the script presentation, something simplistic and elegant.

Through researching the period of the play and most importantly the artwork of the late 1800s/early 1900s I started to become quite smitten with Impressionistic paintings - you know, those blurry images of water plants and such. They provided a detailed view of daily life with using just a few brush strokes. I have found a set of three paintings that I feel encompass the mood and surroundings of each of the Acts of Earnest.

I am planning to use these paintings as backdrops in each of the Acts, presented in an oversize ornate picture frame that will hang upstage against the Full Stage Traveler. These images, along with a title card image for the play, will be printing on a 40' wide vinyl banner that will scroll from one painting to the other. Each image will essential be an 8'x10' image.

Underneath the painting, is a podium safeguarded behind a set of velvet ropes. On this podium will be a large crank that Lane will use to "scroll" the paintings forward during each of the scene changes. In actuality this crank will do nothing the Stage Traveler will be run by a motor.

The flooring will be a mixture of neutral tones of marble and wood in an intricate pattern. Here, furniture and set dressing will switch out for each Act. I am planning to pull colors from the painting themselves to relate them to the surroundings.



ATTENDING THE PERFORMANCE

House rules (and we don't mean your mama's house!)

It goes without saying that when most children today hear the word "theatre" they think "Oh, MOVIE theatre." And with that thought comes all of those things that we do at movie theatres: eat popcorn, drink noisily from soda cups, put feet on the seats, text message—and the list goes on from there.

But live theatre is just that: it's LIVE with LIVE HUMANS who react and respond to the audience, something that we at Prime Stage think is the beauty of the theatre experience. Because of this, live theatre requires a higher level of respect between the audience and performer in order for the experience to be a positive one. As an audience member, **you** are the final and most important component of this production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Thinking Like a Critic

Critics play an important role in theatre. They are often the first to see the show and can write a wonderful - or horrendous - review for all the world to see. Prepare your students to attend the show by "thinking like a critic."

Read the following questions before the show.

Think about the questions as you're watching the show and write your answers in a notebook or journal during intermission or on the bus ride home.

Write a critique of the show based on your responses.

PDE Academic Standards 9.1-9.4, 1.4-1.5



Curriculum
Connections

Please review the following "house rules" with your students prior to attending our production:

- Please stay together with your group and wait for an usher to help you find your seat.
- Please turn all cell phones & pager **completely off** before the performance. If you are texting during the performance, you will be asked to leave. (FYI, the theater will be dark, and light from your phone shines up on your face when you text. Everybody, including the actors on stage, can see you!)
- No photography or videotaping.
- Please stay in your seat until the intermission or the end of the play.
- No eating, drinking, or chewing gum during the performance.
- We encourage active listening and appropriate responses such as laughing or clapping. Please do not talk during the performance!
- Be polite and attentive. Show your appreciation by clapping. (FYI – the actors really love to see how much you enjoyed the show!)

PDE Academic Standards 1.6, 9.1

Actor choices—How did they move and speak? Did they seem like people we know? How did they relate to other characters?

Designer choices—What design element captured your attention the most –the set, costumes, lights, or sound –and why? How did the design elements work together to support the entire production? What choices did the designers make in materials, colors, intensity, detail, etc.? Were the design elements more descriptive or suggestive? What symbols were in the designs?

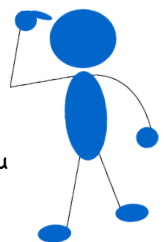
Director choices—What was the style, pace, and rhythm of the play? What stage pictures helped to tell the story?

Interpretation—Did the director make a statement about life now? How did the characters, design, and play make you feel? What did the play mean to you? What might it mean to others?

Evaluation—Why do you suppose the playwright wrote the play? Why was the play produced now? When were moments where the storytelling was very clear? When were moments you were confused about the story? Who would enjoy the play and why?

Remember—it's all about choices!

Whether you loved the play or not, identify the specific choices that made you feel that way!





BOOKED YOUR TICKETS YET???

Prime Stage Theatre's student matinees for *The Devil's Arithmetic* will be held May 13, 14 & 15, 2014. All performances begin at 10 AM at the New Hazlett Theater and are followed by a brief post-show chat session.

Tickets are \$10 per student.

Book tickets by emailing studentmat@primestage.com or calling 412-841-7353

Matinees fill up quickly so BOOK EARLY!

Prime Stage Theatre performs all of its shows at The New Hazlett Theater in Pittsburgh's Historic North Side.

New Hazlett Theater

6 Allegheny Square East
Pittsburgh, PA 15212



PST Education Box Office

Phone: 412-841-7353

E-mail: studentmat@primestage.com

LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION OF *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST* AND GO BEHIND THE SCENES WITH PST'S EDUCATION BLOG!
<http://primestage.com/wordpress/>

The Works of Oscar Wilde

"I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning, and took out a comma. In the afternoon I put it back again." –Oscar Wilde

Prose

- *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)
Radio dramatization available on *CBS Radio Mystery Theater* site (first broadcast - August 7, 1974)
- *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* (1891)
- *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (discussion)
- *A House of Pomegranates* (discussion)
- *The Canterville Ghost*
- *The Sphinx Without A Secret*

Plays

- *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892)
- *Salome* (1894) [introduction]
- *A Woman of No Importance* (1893)
- *An Ideal Husband* (1895)
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)

Poems

- "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"
- "Les Ballons"
- "Charmides"
- *De Profundis*
- "The Harlot's House"
- "Helas!"
- "Impression du Matin"
- "Pan — Double Villanelle"
- "The Sphinx"
- "Symphony In Yellow"

Criticism by Wilde

- "The Decay of Lying" (January 1889)

CLASSROOM RESOURCES

INTERNET RESOURCES

Oscar Wilde's biography & great videos
<http://www.biography.com/people/oscar-wilde-9531078>

Activities for *The Importance of Being Earnest* presented in a fun way.

<http://www.shmoop.com/importance-of-being-earnest/>

Amazing photos and information from The Victoria and Albert Museum in London

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/t/the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

The Victorian Era

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/>

DVD or VIDEO RESOURCES

The Importance of Being Earnest. Miramax Films, 2002 *Starring Colin Firth, Reese Witherspoon and Judi Dench

The Importance of Being Earnest. *The Great British Films*, 1952.

Wilde. *The Story of Oscar Wilde*, Sony Pictures Classic, 1997 *Starring Stephen Fry, Jude Law and Vanessa Redgrave



COMPREHENSION, CREATIVITY, AND COMMON CORE

Prime Stage Theatre aligns with the Common Core State Standards

English Language Arts College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards

Students attend theater performances of adaptations of Literature on the High School and Middle School reading lists.

Reading *Integration of Knowledge and Ideas* (7) **Speaking & Listening** *Comprehension and Collaboration* (2 & 3) **Language** *Knowledge of Language* (3)



Students participate in active discussions and Q&A sessions with actors, directors and designers after each performance.

Speaking & Listening *Comprehension and Collaboration* (1 2 & 3) *Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas* (4 & 6) **Language** *Conventions of Standard English* (1) *Knowledge of Language* (3) *Vocabulary Acquisition and Use* (4 5 & 6)



Students warm-up and improvise during in-school workshops led by specialized arts education teachers.

Speaking & Listening *Comprehension and Collaboration* (1 2 & 3) *Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas* (4 & 6) **Language** *Knowledge of Language* (3) *Vocabulary Acquisition and Use* (4 5 & 6)

Writing is an essential part of each workshop! Students create narratives, defend a claim and convey experiences. They even collaborate on original plays, stories and poems.

Writing *Text Types and Purposes* (1 2 & 3) *Production and Distribution of Writing* (4 & 5) *Research to Build and Present Knowledge* (7 8 & 9) *Range of Writing* (10) **Language** *Conventions of Standard English* (1 & 2) *Knowledge of Language* (3) *Vocabulary Acquisition and Use* (6)



Our students read & analyze literature. They study and perform scenes! They examine characters and relate them to personal experiences.

Reading *Key Ideas and Details* (1 2 & 3) *Craft and Structure* (4 5 & 6) *Integration of Knowledge and Ideas* (7 8 & 9) *Range or Reading and Level of Text Complexity* (10) **Writing** *Text Types and Purposes* (3) *Research to Build and Present Knowledge* (7 & 9) **Speaking & Listening** *Comprehension and Collaboration* (1 2 & 3) *Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas* (4 & 6) **Language** *Conventions of Standard English* (1) *Knowledge of Language* (3) *Vocabulary Acquisition and Use* (4 5 & 6)



Students present their own original ideas and observations in our workshops.

Speaking & Listening *Comprehension and Collaboration* (1 2 & 3) *Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas* (4 5 & 6) **Language** *Conventions of Standard English* (1) *Knowledge of Language* (3) *Vocabulary Acquisition and Use* (5 & 6)

Students use technology, including the Internet, to communicate with other students from schools in Washington and Allegheny Counties!

Reading *Integration of Knowledge and Ideas* (7 8 & 9) **Writing** *Production and Distribution of Writing* (6) **Speaking & Listening** *Comprehension and Collaboration* (1 & 2) *Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas* (4 5 & 6)





Thank you for using this Resource Guide.

To make sure we are meeting your needs and those of your students, we would appreciate hearing from you about how you used this guide and if there are topics or areas you would like us to address in future ones.

You can email your comments to Monica Stephenson at MStephenson@primestage.com. Thank you.