

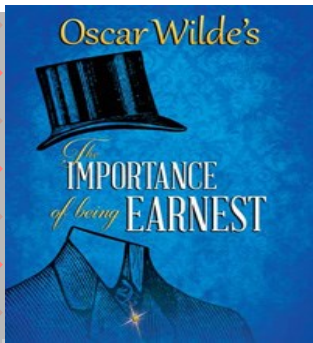


WALNUT STREET THEATRE

THE
IMPORTANCE
OF BEING
EARNEST



Study Guide



SHOW SYNOPSIS

Two young gents have taken to bending the truth in order to put some excitement into their lives. Worthing has invented a brother, Earnest, whom he uses as an excuse to leave his dull life behind to visit Gwendolyn. Montcrieff decides to take the name Earnest when visiting Worthing's young and beautiful ward, Cecily. Things start to go awry when they end up together in the country and their deceptions are discovered.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

BEFORE THE SHOW

1. Has anyone ever been to a live play before? How was it different from television or a movie?
2. What is the difference between a play and a musical?
3. Are you familiar with Victorian literature or the Victorian era?
4. Have you ever wished that you were someone else?
5. Are you familiar with the genre, "farce?"

AFTER THE SHOW

1. Did you enjoy this performance? What was your favorite part?
2. What did you see in the play that indicated that this production was taking place in a different time than today? What scenery was used? What did the costumes look like?
3. What were different ironies that you noticed throughout the play? What is the definition of Earnestness and why is it ironic that the gentlemen in this show claimed the name Earnest?
4. How was the humor in this play different than the humor that you may be used to?



THEATRE 101



Ever wondered how to put on a play?

There are many different elements that go into putting a show up on its feet. Please review the following with your students:

PLAYWRIGHT The playwright writes the script.

DIRECTOR The director is in charge of orchestrating the entirety of the production. They lead the actors, designers, and production crew to put the show on its feet.

COSTUME What the actors wear during the show.

SCENERY Everything on stage (*except props*) used to represent the place at which action is occurring.

PROPS All physical items on stage with the exception of the scenery. This includes lamps, chairs, pens, paper, books, and more!

LIGHTS Stage lights illuminate the actors so that they look their best. The colors used, focus of the light, and amount of lighting can really set the mood and environment of a scene.

SOUND Everything that you hear during a performance that does not come from the actors.

ACTORS The actors are the people that perform the show onstage.

AUDIENCE The lucky people that get to watch the show. New to being an audience member? Follow these rules and you will be a natural!

AUDIENCE RULES

- ◆ Unlike a movie, the actors are performing in front of you. They can see everything that you do. Talking, sleeping, poking your neighbor, or making noise during the performance distracts the actors and others around you.
- ◆ Don't bring electronics to the performance. The use of cell phones, cameras, computers, tablets, and video game devices are **not allowed**.
- ◆ Use your better judgment on when to laugh, clap, and/or cry during the performance. But don't forget to clap at the end of the show!
- ◆ Stay in your seat during the performance.
- ◆ Make sure you go to the bathroom *before* the show starts.

TRY IT YOURSELF!

DIRECTIONS:

Give students a chance to act out a scene from *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Before jumping into the performance, think about all of the elements that go into a play. Are there any props that we can use to help improve the scene? Where are the characters when this scene is taking place? What might the scenery look like?



SAMPLE SCENE

GWENDOLYN: In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing. Mr. Worthing, what explanation can you offer to me for pretending to have a brother? Was it in order that you might have an opportunity of coming up to town to see me as often as possible?

JACK: Can you doubt it, Miss Fairfax?

GWENDOLYN: I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German skepticism. Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory, especially Mr. Worthing's. That seems to me to have the stamp of truth upon it.

CECILY: I am more than content with what Mr. Moncrieff said. His voice alone inspires one with absolute credulity.

GWENDOLYN: Then you think we should forgive them?

CECILY: Yes. I mean no.

GWENDOLYN: True! I had forgotten. There are principles at stake that one cannot surrender. Which of us should tell them? The task is not a pleasant one.

CECILY: Could we not both speak at the same time?

GWENDOLYN: An excellent idea! I nearly always speak at the same time as other people. Will you take the time from me?

CECILY: Certainly.

GWENDOLYN & CECILY: Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier! That is all.

JACK & ALGERNON: Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon.

GWENDOLYN: For my sake you are prepared to do this terrible thing?

JACK: I am.

CECILY: To please me you are ready to face this fearful ordeal?

ALGERNON: I am!

GWENDOLYN: How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes! Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men are infinitely beyond us.

JACK: We are!

CECILY: They have moments of physical courage of which we women know absolutely nothing.

GWENDOLYN: *(To Jack)* Darling!

ALGERNON: *(To Cecily)* Darling! *(They fall into each other's arms)*

START WITH A WARM-UP! "Rumors Down The Lane"

DIRECTIONS: In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the characters are very gossipy. People back then felt defined by how their neighbors viewed them. In this game, you will be playing a version of "whisper down the lane."

- Everyone arranges in a circle.
- One person starts by saying aloud to the class, "Did you hear about..." and whispers something to the person to the left of them. The "rumor" then travels around the circle and always begins with "Did you hear about..." aloud.
- The blank can be anything, from "Did you hear about soup" to "Did you hear about how I'm secretly an alien." Just as long as the message is positive.
- At the end, the last person will reveal the message to the class and see if the rumor made its way successfully around the circle. Then the game starts over.

LIKE THE SHOW? LET US KNOW!

Send letters or drawings to:
Walnut Street Theatre
ATTN: Education Department
825 Walnut St.
Philadelphia, PA 19107



STUDY ACTIVITY: STATUS QUO

Status Quo

Engage the student actors in a conversation regarding "status." What does it mean in life (at school, at home or in the wider community)? What does it mean on stage (between characters or between actors and the audience). We discuss how status can affect the body language, the voice, the dialogue...the overall truthful portrayal of a character.

Materials

- A deck of cards (in order Ace through King, you will only need one suit)
- 8-10 chairs
- double sided tape

Space Required

Medium to large open space

Instructions

1. Split the class in half. One set of student actors becomes the audience and the other half sit in chairs that are set up in a line. The facilitator places a playing card on the forehead of each participant (with a small piece of double sided tape) without the participant seeing what card it is.
2. Instruct the actors that an Ace is the highest status in the room and TWO is the lowest. When the facilitator claps his/her hands, the actors are

to mill around the room as if they are at a social engagement, meeting new people for the first time. They are to treat the other people at the party according to the status (card ranking) on their forehead. They are to quickly adapt their character by responding to the cues given to them by their fellow actors.

3. The first round is silent and entirely delivered through body language and facial expression. Freeze.
4. Clap again and the second round introduces improvised dialogue. Freeze.
5. The actors sit back down in their seats and are asked to sit from low to high status, having to guess what external status they have been given. One at a time actors remove their cards and discuss if their predictions were correct, how they guessed their status, how they were treated and how it felt.
6. Large class discussion and the groups switch. The entire activity is repeated for this new group.
7. Assessment in the form of reflection in class discussion.

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STUDENT ACTIVITY: DEAR DIARY

Dear Diary

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Cecily fills her diary with details of her fictional relationship with Earnest including mementos (multiple love letters and a ring).

Have your students create a journal as one of the characters in the play. The students should not feel limited to write about the actual events that occur in the play, but rather should be encouraged to let their imagination run wild and create a fictional world or relationship in the same way Cecily does—complete with mementos! Students can also show off their artistic talents by designing a cover that fits the character's personality.

- For a different version of this activity, have the students create a journal about their own fictional adventures (perhaps started by bunburying), complete with mementos.

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OSCAR WILDE AND THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY

Oscar Wilde, celebrated playwright and literary provocateur, was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford before settling in London. During his days at Dublin and Oxford, he developed a set of attitudes and postures for which he would eventually become famous. Chief among these were his flamboyant style of dress, his contempt for conventional values, and his belief in aestheticism—a movement that embraced the principle of art for the sake of beauty and beauty alone. After a stunning performance in college, Wilde settled in London in 1878, where he moved in circles that included Lillie Langtry, the novelists Henry James and George Moore, and the young William Butler Yeats.



Literary and artistic acclaim were slow in coming to Wilde. In 1884, when he married Constance Lloyd, Wilde's writing career was still a work in progress. He had gone on a lecture tour of North America and been lampooned in the 1881 Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Patience* as the self-consciously idiosyncratic philosopher-poet Reginald Bunthorne, but he was celebrated chiefly as a well-known personality and a wit. He may have been the first person ever to become famous for being famous.

During the late 1880s, Wilde wrote reviews, edited a women's magazine, and published a volume of poetry and one of children's stories. In 1891, his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, appeared and was attacked as scandalous and immoral. In that same year, he met Lord Alfred Douglas, who would eventually become his lover, and Wilde finally hit his literary stride. Over the next few years, he wrote four plays: *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Lady Windermere's Fan and *A Woman of No Importance* enjoyed successful runs in the West End in 1892 and 1893, respectively. *An Ideal Husband* opened in January 1895, but it was *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which opened a month later, that is regarded by many as Oscar Wilde's masterpiece. Its first performance at the St. James's Theater on February 14, 1895 came at the height of Wilde's success as a popular dramatist. Wilde was finally the darling of London society, a position he had striven for years to attain.

In many ways, *The Importance of Being Earnest* was an artistic breakthrough for Wilde, something between self-parody and a deceptively flippant commentary on the dramatic genre in which Wilde had already had so much success. Wilde's genre of choice was the Victorian melodrama, or "sentimental comedy," derived from the French variety of "well-made play" popularized by Scribe and Sardou. In such plays, fallen women and abandoned children of uncertain parentage figure prominently, letters cross and recross the stage, and dark secrets from the past rise to threaten the happiness of seemingly respectable, well-meaning characters. In Wilde's hands, the form of Victorian melodrama became something else entirely.



Wilde introduced a new character to the genre, the figure of the "dandy" (a man who pays excessive attention to his appearance). This figure added a moral texture the form had never before possessed. The character of the dandy was heavily autobiographical and often a stand-in for Wilde himself, a witty, overdressed, self-styled philosopher who speaks in epigrams and paradoxes, ridicules the cant and hypocrisy of society's moral arbiters, and self-deprecatingly presents himself as trivial, shallow, and ineffectual. In fact, the dandy in these plays always proves to be deeply moral and essential to the happy resolution of the plot.

The Importance of Being Earnest was an early experiment in Victorian melodrama. Part satire, part comedy of manners, and part intellectual farce, this play seems to have nothing at stake because the world it presents is so blatantly and ostentatiously artificial. Below the surface of the light, brittle comedy, however, is a serious subtext that takes aim at self-righteous moralism and hypocrisy, the very aspects of Victorian society that would, in part, bring about Wilde's downfall.



During 1895, however, a series of catastrophes stemming from Wilde's relationship with Lord Alfred, also a poet, led to personal humiliation and social, professional, and financial ruin. On February 28, 1895, two weeks after *The Importance of Being Earnest's* opening night, Lord Alfred's belligerent, homophobic father, the Marquess of Queensberry, publicly accused Wilde of "posing as a sodomite." The nobleman meant "sodomite," of course, an insulting and potentially defamatory term for a homosexual. Queensberry had for some time been harassing Wilde with insulting letters, notes, and confrontations and had hoped to disrupt the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest* with a public demonstration, which never took place. Against the advice of his friends, Wilde sued for libel and lost. Wilde probably should have fled the country, as the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had made homosexual acts punishable by up to two years' imprisonment. However, Wilde chose to stay and was arrested. Despite information about Wilde's private life and writings that emerged at the trial, the prosecution initially proved unsuccessful. However, Wilde was tried a second time, convicted, and sentenced to prison for two years.

Wilde may have remained in England for a number of reasons, including self-destructiveness, denial, desperation, and a desire for martyrdom. However, some historians have suggested that Wilde's relentless persecution by the government was a diversionary tactic. Lord Alfred's older brother was reportedly also having a homosexual affair with Archibald Philip Primrose, Lord Rosebery, the man who would become prime minister. Queensberry was apparently so outraged that he threatened to disclose the relationship, and the government reacted by punishing Wilde and his lover in an effort to assuage the marquess. In any case, Wilde served his full sentence under conditions of utmost hardship and cruelty. Following his release from prison, his health and spirit broken, he sought exile in France, where he lived out the last two years of his life in poverty and obscurity under an assumed name. He died in Paris in 1900.



WALNUT STREET THEATRE

BIOGRAPHY



Walnut Street Theatre has the unique distinction of being the oldest, continuously operating theatre in the English-speaking world, having served Philadelphia audiences for over 200 years!

Today, under the direction of Producing Artistic Director Bernard Havard, Walnut Street Theatre is in its 34th season as a self-producing, non-profit theatre company. Walnut Street Theatre continues to entertain and enlighten diverse audiences with high quality theatrical programming. With more than 50,000 subscribers, the Walnut is also the most subscribed theatre company in the world!

Last season, **172,000** children and adults were impacted by the Walnut's Education Programs: including our theatre school with classes for kids and adults, Camp Walnut, Our Touring Outreach Program to local schools and our artist in residency programs.

WALNUT STREET THEATRE EDUCATION STAFF

DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION	Thomas Quinn
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION	Ashley Kerns
EDUCATION PROGRAMS ASSOCIATE	Patrick Shane
EDUCATION PRODUCTION ASSOCIATE	Angie Confredo
RESIDENT TEACHING ARTIST	Jasmine Hammond
EDUCATION APPRENTICE	Amanda Pasquini
ACTING APPRENTICES	Anne Bragg Alexa Cepeda Dana Orange Austin Turner

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

WEB

- **Walnut Street Theatre Touring Outreach Company**
<https://walnutstreettheatre.org/education/outreach.php>
- **Creative Drama Lesson Plans**
<http://www.childdrama.com/lessons.html>
- **Drama Games**
<http://dramaresource.com/drama-games/>

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST CREATIVE TEAM

DIRECTOR

Bob Carlton
PLAYWRIGHT

Oscar Wilde



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Born on October 16, 1854 in Dublin, Irish writer Oscar Wilde is best known for the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as well as for his infamous arrest and imprisonment for being gay. More than a century after his death, Wilde is still better remembered for his personal life—his exuberant personality, consummate wit and infamous imprisonment for homosexuality—than for his literary accomplishments. Nevertheless, his witty, imaginative and undeniably beautiful works, in particular his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, are considered among the great literary masterpieces of the late Victorian period. ([www. Biography.com](http://www.Biography.com))