

The Importance of Being Earnest

Curriculum Unit



The Center for Learning

The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde

Curriculum Unit

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Contents

	Page	Handouts
Introduction	v	
Teacher Notes	vii	
1 Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Period.....	1	1, 2, 3, 4
2 Act 1	9	5, 6, 7
3 English Education.....	15	8, 9
4 Act 2	21	10, 11, 12
5 The Aesthete’s Role in Victorian Society.....	27	13
6 Act 3	31	14, 15
7 What Is Comedy?	35	16, 17
8 Bunburying.....	39	18, 19
9 Setting, Plot, and Characterization	43	20, 21
10 Themes and Style	47	22, 23, 24
Supplementary Materials		
True/False Test: Act 1	52	
True/False Test: Act 2.....	53	
True/False Test: Act 3.....	54	
Fill-in Test: Act 1	55	
Fill-in Test: Act 2.....	56	
Fill-in Test: Act 3.....	57	
Multiple-Choice Test.....	58	
Answer Key: True/False Tests	62	
Answer Key: Fill-in Tests	63	
Answer Key: Multiple-Choice Test.....	64	
Topics for Papers and/or Research	65	
Additional Resources on Victorian England	66	
Selected Bibliography.....	68	

Introduction

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde: The very name conjures up the breadth and breath of Ireland, the idea of the playful use of language often associated with those born in Ireland.

His name alone might be sufficient expectation of great works, yet the total of his works is not vast. Except for "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," his poetry does not receive wide attention today. His lone novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is still in print and has become a film. Critical articles and his theory of art set forth in *De Profundis* are available.

Among his plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest* has survived. It is still being produced and popularly enjoyed in many parts of the world. In this singular work, Wilde's distinctive talents are readily apparent. His superior command of language, his wit and mocking of pretensions, and his unforgettable epigrams are revealed in this three-act comedy written in 1894.

Unaware of the source, people often encounter quotations originating from this frequently produced play. Thus, Wilde—a man who lived a relatively short life, who served a prison sentence, and who spent the last few months of his life in ignominy—still survives through his sparkling comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The source of humor and wit, the reformer who mirrored society's pretensions, rests with the laurels of his art in the quietness of a grave in Paris while actors give his words eternity.

Teacher Notes

The Importance of Being Earnest, with its wit, epigrams, mocking of Victorian customs, and romance, is enjoyable for most high school students of all ability levels. Emulating Oscar Wilde's belief that art is the realm not for the privileged few but for everyone, this play opens the door for students to see the art of playwriting merged with social criticism to produce a comedy in which readers are lured into a look at themselves. Usually acclaimed as Wilde's greatest work, it presents a plot of lovers, friends, rivals, and witty dialogue.

This curriculum unit allows for a variety of approaches from which to choose a method of instruction. Since both film and recorded versions of this play are available, reading, viewing, and/or listening may be done alternately or in any order most effective for students' interest and abilities. Students usually enjoy reading a play aloud. If the play is read first in its entirety, the lessons may then be used for close study of the structure and the elements of comedy.

The unit includes individual and small group assignments, creative art projects, discussions, formal essays, and various other types of writing assignments. A readers' theater approach to the play can make the dialogue really come alive for students.

In order to evaluate student achievement, handouts which cover the content of the play are included. The review sheets may also serve as reading guides for students who find independent comprehension difficult. The various tests included in the supplementary materials section at the end of the unit can be combined to form one test covering the entire play; they can also be used as review sheets or make-up tests for absentees.

The Importance of Being Earnest may be taught in tandem with, before, or after George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Both plays include views on Victorian social conventions; both offer humor; and both have intricate plots which appeal to teenage students. Both plays also offer a study in the charm of language and its effect on human attitudes and behavior.

Lesson 1

Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Period

Objectives

- To become acquainted with the life and works of Oscar Wilde
- To learn about the characteristics of the Victorian period

Notes to the Teacher

This lesson is introductory in nature and begins with a focus on some of the major points in Oscar Wilde's life. Wilde was notoriously witty, as students will see when they begin reading *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and he achieved great success as a playwright. When scandal broke out about his homosexual activity, resulting in his spending time in prison, he lost everything, including his health. It will seem strange to students that during Wilde's life, and for decades afterward, homosexual behavior was a crime in England, as well as elsewhere in the world. In this, as in many other ways, Wilde lived in a culture quite different from our own.

The Victorian period followed the romantic age and derived many of its mores from the monarch for whom it is named, Queen Victoria. An appearance of propriety was a dominant social value, especially for the middle and upper classes. In this lesson, students conduct online research regarding the norms of the time and go on to read information about it.

To conclude the lesson, **Handouts 3** and **4** introduce two cultural practices: the enduring practice of English tea time and the creation of decorative note cards. The latter was a hobby often practiced by girls and women. If possible, set aside class time for a British tea, complete with note card decorations.

Procedure

1. Ask students if they have ever heard of Oscar Wilde. Some may be familiar with his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Explain that the class will be starting one of Wilde's most famous plays, and it is useful, before beginning, to know something about the author's life and the culture in which he lived.

2. Distribute **Handout 1**, and ask students to complete the exercise.

Suggested Responses:

1. *Wilde had a great deal of personal charm and was a terrific conversationalist. He was also somewhat of a nonconformist, a fact that could appeal to free spirits in the class.*
 2. *He was intelligent, well educated, and talented as a writer. He was in the right place at the right time to achieve success.*
 3. *The publicity about his homosexual relationship ruined his reputation during a time that placed a very high value on appearances. Prison ruined his health.*
 4. *We can expect witty dialogue and, perhaps, some mockery of social norms.*
3. Explain that Wilde wrote during the Victorian period, an era named for Queen Victoria. Clarify that the norms of this culture were quite different from some of those evident in twenty-first-century America. A high value was placed on respectability, family, religion, and a good education, especially among the middle and upper classes. Emphasize that this does not mean that Victorians were better than we are; perhaps they just looked better.
 4. Divide the class into groups, and assign each group one of the following research topics:
 - Victorian dress for women
 - Victorian attire for men
 - Victorian tea time
 - Victorian manners
 - Victorian courtship

Allow students time to peruse some of the many excellent Web sites available on these topics. Then have groups report their findings to the class.

5. Distribute **Handout 2**, and ask students to read the information and answer the questions.

Suggested Responses:

1. *The emphasis on appearances has both positive and negative aspects. Women and members of the lower classes did not have many opportunities.*
2. *The anything-goes mentality that dominates some of today's media contrasts with Victorian norms.*
3. *Social classes were rigidly structured. Crossing from one class to another was rare.*
4. *Girls did not have the same opportunities boys had; making a good marriage was a major goal!*

6. Distribute **Handout 3**. If possible, let students prepare to serve a tea in Victorian tradition. Ask students if they believe the tradition would have any place or advantage in contemporary America. Point out that most tourists in England adopt the custom of having an afternoon tea, and some even bring that custom back home with them. You might want to have students consider whether Americans have a substitute for this custom.
7. Distribute **Handout 4**. Explain that in the Victorian age, young girls often enjoyed drawing and sketching. Their efforts were used to decorate note paper and place cards or merely as ladylike means of education or entertainment. Victorians were particularly fond of drawings of young animals, chubby children, fragile maidens, nature scenes, and floral arrangements. Ask volunteers to do a similar activity by designing note cards or place cards for use when the class celebrates its Victorian tea time.

Oscar Wilde

Directions: Read the following information about Oscar Wilde, and answer the questions.

Born in Dublin, Ireland, in the mid-nineteenth century (October 16, 1854), Wilde was christened Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, surely a most Irish collection of Christian names. His father was a prominent ophthalmologist. His mother, a large woman, was much given to romantic imaginings and causes. She even created a special name for herself in place of the one she had been given. Wilde was strongly attached to his mother and, in many respects, resembled her physically, with his large frame, rather prominent and soft-looking eyes, and gigantic hands.

At the age of seventeen, he entered Trinity College in Dublin, and in 1874 he matriculated at Magdalen College in Oxford, England. Slightly older than some of the other students, he for some time chose to ignore his years and claimed to be younger. When he was twenty-four years old, he won the Newdigate Prize for Poetry at Oxford and took a first in Greats to receive his B.A. in the fall of 1878. By this time, he was already known for his poetry, and he subsequently published a volume of poems. Then he went to London to earn his living as a writer.

In London he was his own best publicity agent. He was spoken about frequently in literary circles and attracted attention when he appeared in public. One of his remarkable features was his ability to produce spontaneous sparkling conversation and witty remarks. All who knew him attested to the fact that he was one of the most engaging conversationalists they had ever met and that it was a special pleasure to hear him talk. He never gave the impression of having stayed in his room carefully and cautiously planning and writing the epigrams with which he would startle the public when he next appeared. His remarks and responses were always new and fresh no matter what topic was introduced.

In January 1883, he arrived in New York to begin a speaking tour of America. He spent almost the entire year crossing the country, finding great delight and giving great delight to his audiences. One of his remarks that is representative of his wit is his comment to the New York customs official. On being asked if he had anything to declare, he replied, "Only my genius."

At the age of thirty, he married, and in 1885 moved to London. He was what was known as an aesthete and was considered a dandy (a man who paid a lot of attention to fine dress, including such things as velvet collars and patent leather dancing shoes). He and his wife decorated their home with both elegance and simplicity in a color scheme featuring white and yellow paint, a definite contrast to the darker, more somber colors and furnishings beloved by Victorians. The Wildes had two sons born in 1885 and in 1886. By this time he was publishing works of his own, as well as serving as editor of *The Woman's World*.

In a span of only three years, he wrote and saw productions of his plays mounted in London, with two running simultaneously. He was a great success. Then, as today, his most popular play was *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

His life fell apart when he was accused of homosexual behavior, then a crime in England. This led to lawsuits, several trials, and public disgrace because of the scandal. He was sentenced to prison, an experience which led to his poem, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," published after his release. When released, he went to live in France, primarily in Paris.

Even while near death, Wilde was unable to resist a witty quip. He complained, almost on his deathbed, about the unattractive wallpaper in his room in a hotel on the Left Bank in Paris and commented that either the wallpaper or he would have to go. He died at the Hotel d'Alsace on November 30, 1900, and is buried in a cemetery in Paris.

1. If you had the opportunity to go back in time to the Victorian period, would you like a chance to meet Oscar Wilde in person? Why, or why not?

2. What are some factors that led to his success?

3. What caused his failure?

4. What do you expect to find in plays written by him?

The Victorian Period

Directions: Read the following information about the period during which Oscar Wilde lived and wrote. Then answer the questions.

Victorian life was a relatively structured one, with most individuals fitting neatly into a niche of their own social class. Presumably, people accepted their station in life and were happy within their level of society. An individual who did move outside his or her class, either by marriage or wealth, was likely to be shunned by former peers. It would take a generation or two to gain acceptance in the upper strata of society. However, upper class members who lost their money usually retained their rank, albeit in straitened financial circumstances.

In Victorian society there were more restrictions on behavior than in English life today. The lower class did not have as many limits, probably because its members were often ignored as if they existed only to provide services. Members of the upper class usually lived off their wealth, enjoying a variety of pleasant pursuits. On rare occasions they might supervise their estates but more often had bailiffs and managers to handle the arduous day-to-day tasks.

Young men of the upper classes received an education, but their subsequent lives were often spent in leisure pursuits. If they were the first sons, they had little to worry about, for they would succeed to the family wealth and to any estates or titles. Second and subsequent sons fared less well. They had a choice of going into military service or becoming clergymen, both of which were respectable positions but lower on the social scale.

As for young women, their lot was acceptable if they managed to marry. If not, they usually became maiden-aunt members of the family. They sometimes had their own or inherited wealth but seldom controlled their own finances. As ladies, they were permitted to enjoy a round of pleasurable pursuits: parties, balls, and physical activities such as riding, fox hunting, playing croquet, or swimming. (Note that “going for a bathe” in the sea was in marked contrast to today’s “going to the beach.” Bathing costumes were elaborate, leaving ladies restricted to wading or sitting on the beach.) Daring young women of the time might have been found riding the new-fangled bicycles.

Young girls were taught to supervise a household, since to manage a country estate or a posh city dwelling required effort and skill. Consulting with the housekeeper and the cook and planning meals took up a major portion of the day. Ladies’ free time was often spent in painting china water pitchers, plates, cups, and saucers or in needlework. Many enjoyed music; some had an interest in literature; some even tried their hand at writing poetry and fiction.

One part of the daily routine that became a tradition in English life was afternoon tea. At four o’clock, everyone everywhere—at home, in shops and offices, even on the beach—stopped all activities for tea time, a meal of light refreshments, sometimes accompanied by a glass of sherry. Tea time, while not as ceremonial as in Japan, still followed certain rituals. Tea, the English beverage, was poured, usually from a silver tea service or fine china tea pot, by the lady of the household for the gathering of family members and guests. Delicate sandwiches and several sweets such as petits fours, tarts, or biscuits (cookies) were served on tiered trays. When guests were invited, the refreshments were sometimes more elaborate. Tea time was an important social interruption in the daily routine, with the evening meal served at eight o’clock or later. Often family members and guests changed into more formal clothing for this late meal.

After the more formal evening meal, the family and guests sometimes moved to the drawing room to enjoy musical entertainment provided by the younger girls in the family. This was a way by which they could display their talents and charms to any prospective suitors. The gentlemen could choose to retire to the billiards room. On festive occasions, family and guests played games or had dances.

Some members of the upper class kept an apartment "in town," which meant in London. If they did not own a house there, they rented one during the "season" so that the young girls could be presented to society and the young men could find brides. A young gentleman might own a house or rent a flat. (The word *flat* is the English equivalent for the American word *apartment*.) Titled families owned property in the country, often vast estates to which they retired at varied seasons of the year. Guests were invited for long weekends and gala house parties. For the upper classes, this style of living lasted until World Wars I and II, after which social structures underwent great changes and the balance of power among nations shifted. Despite changes in home life and industry, the Victorian tradition of tea time is still preserved.

1. What are some of the plusses and minuses of life during the Victorian period?

2. Identify some major differences between that period and our own time.

3. What can you observe about social classes during the 1800s?

4. What observations can you make about gender roles?

Please Come to Tea

Directions: Victorians enjoyed the afternoon tea break as a high point of the day. Tea was served with milk and sugar. Tiny sandwiches, scones with Devonshire cream and strawberry jam, or dainty cakes and pastries added elegance. Use the following information to help you organize a tea for your class.

Tea

- Obtain an urn for hot water and tea bags. You may want to limit yourself to English teas, or you may want to broaden your choice to some of today's popular herbal teas.
- To maintain a Victorian atmosphere, try to obtain china cups and saucers rather than using styrofoam cups.

Sandwiches

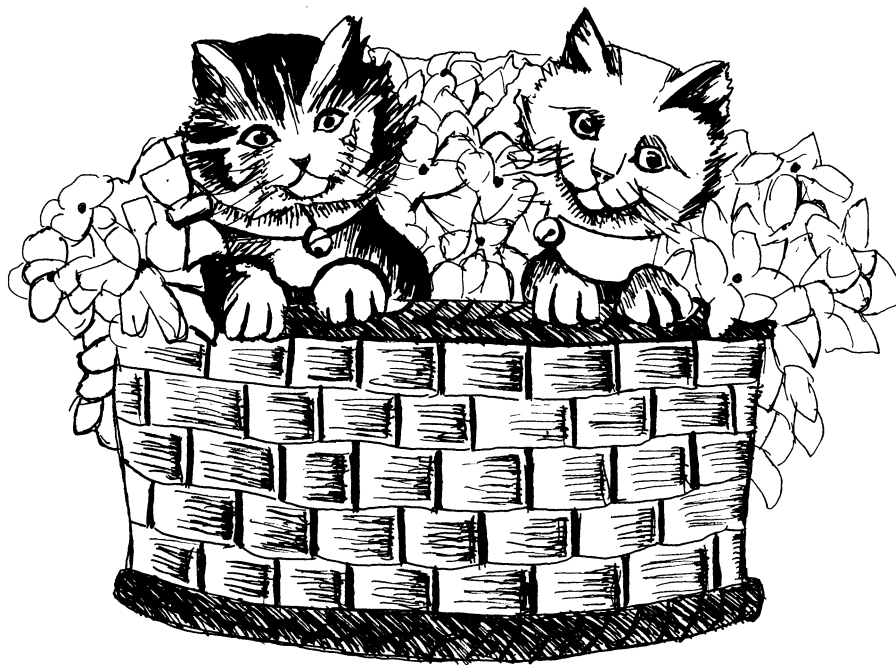
- Slice bread very thin. Trim off crusts. Butter slices lightly.
- Create the filling:
 - Cucumber* Peel the cucumber, slice thinly and place in a bowl. Sprinkle lightly with salt. Remove the slices, and pat them dry with a paper or cloth towel. Place the slices on the bread.
 - Radish* A very popular sandwich in England is made with thinly sliced breakfast radishes, small bright red radishes. Arrange slices on buttered bread.
 - Tomato* Slice small tomatoes thinly. Use only one layer in the sandwich.
- Cut each sandwich into four triangles, squares, or fingers. Place on silver or china sandwich tray.

Sweets (Desserts)

- Scones are very popular. You can make them easily by using a recipe for baking powder biscuits as the foundation. Cut the dough into small biscuits or triangles, about two-bite size. Add raisins to make sweet scones or finely shredded cheese to make savory scones. Serve the plain scones with whipped cream (a substitute for Devon or Cornish clotted cream) and jam. Yogurt might be a convenient substitute for cream.
- Shortbread is popular for teas. In a large mixing bowl, mix $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups of all-purpose flour and 3 tablespoons of sugar. Cut in $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of butter until mixture resembles fine crumbs. Form the dough into a ball and knead until smooth. On an ungreased cookie sheet pat or roll the dough into approximately an 8-inch circle. Use a sharp knife to cut dough into 12 or 16 pie-shaped wedges; do not separate the wedges. Prick each wedge with a fork; make a design if you wish. Bake for 25 to 30 minutes in a 325° oven or until the edges are very lightly browned. Remove from pan; recut the wedges; cool and serve.

Victorian Art: Small Note Cards

Directions: Sketched below are two examples of illustrations for Victorian note cards. Use good quality paper to create note cards or place cards of your own. Colored pencils or water colors are useful in doing the finishing touches.



Lesson 2

Act 1

Objectives

- To recognize the skills needed to read plays effectively
- To experience examples of Oscar Wilde's wit
- To understand the events and characters in act 1 of *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Notes to the Teacher

Students sometimes have difficulty entering the world of this comedy, in which all of the characters seem far from earnest. Both Algernon Moncrieff and Jack (Ernest) Worthing emerge as superficial and selfish. Lane is a stereotypical servant. Lady Bracknell exudes snobbishness and foolishness simultaneously. Gwendolen has fallen in love with a name rather than with a man. Everything seems so two-dimensional. To bring the play to life, the reader has to imagine the many aspects of a play that are not in the text, especially the nuances added by the actors' performances.

In this lesson, students consider the skills involved in reading plays effectively. They then analyze and respond to some of the witty epigrams in the first act, followed by an oral reading of the play. (If time does not allow for the oral reading, have students read act 1 prior to this lesson.) Students then complete a reading guide and conduct a preliminary discussion of the characters. They create bumper stickers using epigrams from the first act and begin a writing assignment based on act 1.

Note that art supplies are needed for procedure 5.

Procedure

1. Point out that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a play. In some ways, plays are quite different from novels; reading dramas requires specific skills. Ask students to discuss ways plays and novels differ. Lead them to see that plays of necessity tend to be relatively short; there is a limit to how long an audience can stay seated in front of a stage. Plays consist largely of dialogue. Actually, the text is only a part of a play; the other part consists of

everything the performers and other people involved in a production breathe into it. Play readers need to imagine all of that.

2. Remind students that Oscar Wilde was famed for his elegant wit, and state that they will see many examples in the play. Distribute **Handout 5**, and have small groups complete the activity. Point out the prevalent wry tone, and review the exercise.

Suggested Responses:

1. *Part of the excitement of being in love lies in being uncertain about the attitude of the other person.*
 2. *Being good is boring.*
 3. *Life is full of gray areas.*
 4. *Family can be very irritating.*
 5. *It is not very easy to be optimistic.*
 6. *The speaker appears ineffably shallow.*
 7. *Wasn't it supposed to turn gray?*
 8. *This philosophy provides a great excuse for not going to school.*
 9. *The truth might be pretty vulgar.*
 10. *Ironically, this is true.*
3. Assign roles for an oral reading of the first act. You may want to do this readers' theater style, with the actors seated so that they face the rest of the class when they are on stage. This act includes Algernon, Lane, Worthing, Lady Bracknell, and Gwendolen.
 4. When students have completed the reading, distribute **Handout 6**, and have small groups complete the study guide.

Suggested Responses:

1. *Bunburying is a way of getting out of commitments and responsibilities. Algernon has invented a friend whose ill health supposedly compels him to get out of the city, while Jack has invented a brother whose needs require him to go to the city.*

2. *Perhaps this silly play has something serious to say. The subtitle seems to compliment the audience.*
3. *This is almost slapstick, as Algernon, wanting to know about Cecily, keeps Jack from grasping the cigarette case.*
4. *Jack (Ernest) and Gwendolen confess their love for each other, but Gwendolen is actually in love with the name Ernest, which is not Jack's real name.*
5. *Lady Bracknell is most concerned with appearances.*
6. *Jack has no idea of his biological heritage; as a baby he was found in a handbag in Victoria Station.*
7. *Algernon is going to meet the mysterious Cecily.*
8. *Will the Bunburying be discovered? Will Gwendolen discover that Jack is not named Ernest? Will Jack discover his real parentage? Is Jack romantically involved with Cecily? Will Algernon and Cecily fall in love? Will Jack marry Gwendolen?*
9. *Earnestness does not seem to be part of their makeup at this point.*
10. Algernon—*selfish, witty, mischievous*
 Lane—*proper, sarcastic, clever*
 Jack—*self-centered, romantic, naïve*
 Lady Bracknell—*snobbish, superficial, materialistic*
 Gwendolen—*fashionable, forthright, naïve*
5. Remind students of the epigrams in **Handout 5**, and point out that they probably noticed additional epigrams as they were reading the first act. Make art materials available, and ask students to select sayings they liked and to create bumper stickers using them. When students have finished, display the bumper stickers in the classroom.
6. Distribute **Handout 10**. Offer students a choice of one of the three writing prompts or divide the class into three groups and assign one of the prompts to each group. Assign as in-class writing or as homework. (Note that writing prompts may also serve as the basis for class discussion, with a student moderator as leader.)

The Witty Mr. Wilde

Directions: The following quips all appear in the first act of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Paraphrase each one, and indicate whether or not you agree with it.

1. The very essence of romance is uncertainty.
2. A high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness.
3. The truth is rarely pure and never simple.
4. Once a week is quite enough to dine with one's own relations.
5. It's perfectly easy to be cynical.
6. I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them.
7. I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief.
8. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance.
9. The truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl.
10. It is awfully hard work doing nothing.

Study Guide: Act 1

Directions: Use the following questions to consider events and characters introduced in the first act of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

1. What is Bunburying? How do both Algernon and Jack practice it?
2. Oscar Wilde designated the play “a trivial comedy for serious people.” What does that suggest to you?
3. Describe the stage business with the cigarette case.
4. What happens during the marriage proposal scene?
5. What seem to be Lady Bracknell’s main concerns?
6. What do we learn of Jack’s family origins?
7. At the end of the act, where is Algernon planning to go? Why?
8. What problems do you expect to arise as the play continues into the next two acts?
9. Think about the play’s title. How earnest are the characters?
10. List three adjectives or descriptive phrases to describe each of the characters.
Algernon

Lane

Jack Worthing

Lady Bracknell

Gwendolen

Writing Prompts: Act 1

Directions: Respond to one of the following writing prompts.

1. Algernon has invented a system of Bunburying to allow him to escape from unwanted social obligations. He has a rather highly developed system and has even given it a name in order to make it more believable. Many people often want to evade or escape responsibilities but are only able to devise a rather feeble excuse.

Write an informal letter to your closest friend in which you delightedly inform your friend about your new system for getting out of doing what you do not want to do. Tell your friend why you invented the system, and give specific details about it, including a name. Give your friend advice on the benefits of developing such a system for personal use.

2. Algernon says to Jack, "I have always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist; and I am quite sure of it now."

Jack says, "My dear fellow there is nothing improbable about my explanation at all . . . When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town, I have always pretended to have a younger brother . . . who . . . gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple."

From your observation of the antics of Jack and Algernon in the first act, write an essay that explains the possibilities and the problems caused by the use of false identities. Is it possible for a person to get away with this kind of fraud in today's society?

3. Oscar Wilde uses his characters to capture a certain response from his audience of viewers or readers. In act 1 Lady Bracknell states, "Education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square."

Evaluate the validity of her statement. Consider the time and place in which this play was written. Decide whether you agree or disagree. In a letter to Oscar Wilde, express your views on this quotation. Support your judgment. Remember that you are writing to a respected playwright.

Lesson 3

English Education

Objectives

- To learn about education in England as a foundation for enjoying humor in *The Importance of Being Earnest*
- To compare American and English education

Notes to the Teacher

When Lady Bracknell interrogates Jack in the first act, she asks about his education and makes comments about the beauty of ignorance and the dangers of education in a passage that can be highly amusing, especially in a school setting.

Some of the humor in Oscar Wilde's play stems from his comments on education, both the formal and less formal education of the upper class. Background knowledge of English education in the Victorian period will increase students' enjoyment of the play and of other Victorian literature that they may study. Although many aspects of American and British education are similar, there are differences.

In this lesson, students discuss their own ideas about education. They revisit Jack's dialogue with Lady Bracknell; they then research the system of British education and compare it to schooling in America.

Procedure

1. Distribute **Handout 8**, and ask students to complete the exercise individually. When they have finished, conduct a general discussion. Prompt in-depth thought by posing questions and playing devil's advocate regarding students' opinions.

Suggested Responses:

1. *It is true that adolescents who do not want to go to school often do not achieve great academic success. On the other hand, could a very young teen make a bad decision that would have a major negative impact on his or her success and happiness as an adult?*
2. *There is probably nothing to be gained from "busy work"; however, some subjects seem to necessitate practice and investigation outside of the classroom.*

3. *Students usually laugh at this one; who wouldn't want a reprieve? Still, why is school sometimes an experience students would rather evade?*
4. *Does an advanced education guarantee a well-paying job? Should everyone go to college?*
5. *State and national testing results indicate that this is generally true. What are the reasons for this correlation?*
6. *This statement is supported by statistics.*
7. *Interesting questions arise. Should everyone go to college? What is the purpose of a college education?*
8. *Some careers necessitate advanced degrees and ongoing formal education. On the other hand, there is more to life than school-based education.*
9. *A half a century ago, this was a prevalent view. Today it is not politically correct.*
10. *This can be a hot topic for teens. Would the additional time in the classroom be quality learning time? Can other kinds of learning take place when children are not in school? Would year-round schools benefit some families?*

2. Have the students playing Lady Bracknell and Jack reread the part of their dialogue in which she questions him. Begin with the question about smoking, and stop with his answer that he has investments.
3. Ask students to summarize Lady Bracknell's attitude toward education. (*She seems to subscribe to the Noble Savage theory. She criticizes the educational system, but feels that it is at least harmless. Educating the lower classes, she says, would endanger the privileges of the upper class. She says all of this, however, as if she does not know what it means.*)
4. Distribute **Handout 9**, and have students read the information in part A. Ask them to point out aspects of English education

that seem appealing. (*The approach is highly individualized; lectures are not mandatory; courses do not always conclude with exams.*) Ask them to point out aspects that do not seem so appealing. (*Students may note the many papers, the oral exams, and the high-stakes exams.*)

5. Have students complete part B of the handout. When they have finished, share results. (*In both countries education is mandatory either in schools or through home-schooling. In England, public schools are not free; the school year is longer; at age 16 students finish high school; not as many English students go on to college.*)
6. Ask students to be prepared to take notes on what Wilde says about education in acts 2 and 3 of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Optional Activities

1. Interview an exchange student about the educational system in his or her native land. Share your findings with the class.
2. Research educational systems in other countries and report on the advantages and disadvantages of various educational approaches.

How Important Is Education?

Directions: Indicate whether you agree, disagree, or are undecided about each of the following statements.

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
1. Schooling should be optional after the ninth grade.			
2. Schooling is important, but homework should be abolished.			
3. I am eager to get to school in the morning.			
4. Education is necessary if a person wants a high quality of life.			
5. There is a positive correlation between socio-economic status and academic achievement.			
6. The higher a nation's literacy rate, the more advanced that nation will be in every other way.			
7. I plan to go to college.			
8. After college I plan to continue my education by earning an advanced degree.			
9. A solid education is more important for a boy than for a girl.			
10. The school year should be extended to allow for more instructional time.			

Education in Victorian England

Part A.

Directions: Read the following information about education in England.

During the Victorian era, only a comparatively small number of people were formally educated. Members of the lower classes had limited education, since they often had to work at an early age to help support their families. Boys might receive a modicum of education, while girls would have only as much as they might get informally through their work.

Boys in what is commonly known as the middle class could receive an education at a grammar school. If they did well, they might get a grant to attend a university. Girls received some limited education at home and in village church schools and in rare instances sought more formal education.

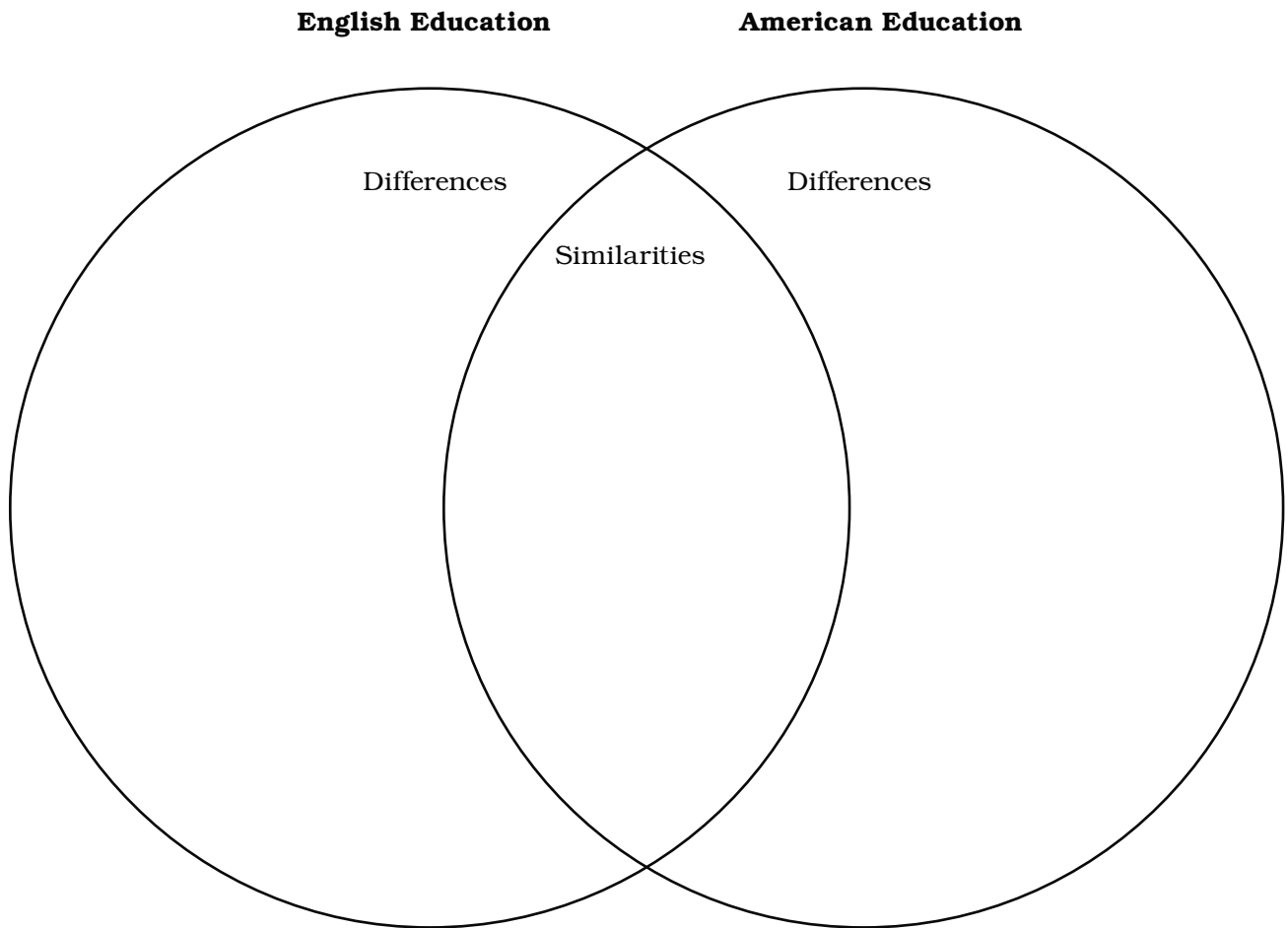
Members of the well-to-do upper class were educated, usually beginning at home in the nursery under the tutelage of a governess. After infancy, boys often acquired a live-in tutor to teach them, while girls continued under the guidance of the governess. Girls learned the feminine arts of fine sewing, embroidery, and music. A fine singing voice and the ability to entertain by playing the piano were essential skills for the well-brought-up miss. Girls often learned French in preparation for the future “Grand Tour.” At the age of seven, many boys were sent to the famous “public” schools (fee required): Eton, Harrow, Rugby. Their places in these schools were secured at birth through family names or titles.

After a number of years at the public school, the young man was ready for the university. Usually this meant going to one of the colleges at Oxford or Cambridge. The student stayed at the university for three or four years, during which he was said to be “reading” in a chosen field. He attended lectures at will, with the major portion of his education deriving from private sessions with his assigned tutor, usually a fellow or “don” at that particular college. Preparations for these sessions were rigorous, with extensive reading assignments and writing of papers to be completed for discussion and criticism. The student was obliged to defend the content of his papers and to answer probing questions. At the end of the years of study, the student took comprehensive examinations after a period of heavy “swotting” (reviewing). The subsequent evaluation resulted in the student’s receiving a highly desirable “first,” a not-too-bad “second,” or an unhappily accepted “third.” Should the young man have fallen into the hands of evil companions who led him astray into bad habits, such as excessive drinking, consorting with unsavory characters, or failing to meet with his tutor, he was “sent down,” which meant that he returned to his home in disgrace.

Although today Great Britain has many more universities than the Oxbridge complexes (the term used to indicate the two universities interchangeably) these two world-famed universities still hold a place of pride in education. Their form of education remains little changed except that the doors are open to women and the course offerings are more numerous. The heart of the university system at Oxbridge remains the tutorial approach, with comprehensive examinations at the conclusion. After the exams, lists of names are published and posted showing the field of study and the exam ranking. Although students already know the results, there are anxious moments before the lists first appear. Parents and relatives eagerly await seeing the name of their offspring in print, especially in the prestigious *London Times*.

Part B.

Directions: Complete the Venn diagram to compare and contrast English and American education. Use information from the reading in part A as well as information from print and online resources.



Lesson 4

Act 2

Objectives

- To understand the complications that develop in the second act
- To characterize Miss Prism, Cecily, and Canon Chasuble
- To recognize Oscar Wilde's use of satire

Notes to the Teacher

The second act moves to Jack's country manor, where we meet both Cecily and Miss Prism. Oscar Wilde takes pleasure in poking fun at the educational goals of the English through the introduction of Miss Prism and her ideas about education and what constitutes a girl of "good family."

Algernon arrives and introduces himself as Ernest, Jack's brother, and it transpires that Cecily is as much in love with the name Ernest as Gwendolen is. Jack arrives, and so does Gwendolen. The result is much confusion. The only one missing is Lady Bracknell, who will arrive during the third act.

In this lesson, students read act 2 aloud. They then use a study guide to clarify comprehension. Finally, they focus on satirical elements in Wilde's characterization.

Procedure

1. Have students read act 2 aloud. Use a readers' theater approach if the class enjoyed that method of presenting the first act. Readers are needed for the following characters:
 - Miss Prism
 - Cecily
 - Canon Chasuble
 - Algernon
 - Jack
 - Merriman
 - Gwendolen
2. Distribute **Handout 10**, and have small groups complete the exercise.

Suggested Responses:

1. *Miss Prism is Cecily's somewhat prim tutor, a kind of governess. She exhibits*

a Victorian love for respectability. Cecily is at best a reluctant student. She can be mischievous.

2. *It is evident that Chasuble has a romantic interest in Miss Prism.*
 3. *Algernon also has a strong mischievous side; he realizes that Jack's country household is likely to be quite curious about the troublesome younger brother. He himself is very curious about Cecily.*
 4. *Jack, completely unaware of Algernon's antics, announces that his brother Ernest died in Paris. Eager to forge a relationship with Gwendolen, Jack wants to put an end to his Bunburying days.*
 5. *Jack seems to distrust Algernon's attitudes toward and behavior with Cecily.*
 6. *Cecily uses her diary as an instrument to spin fantasies.*
 7. *Ironically both Gwendolen and Cecily are enamored of the name Ernest, and both think it is the name of a current love interest. In addition, Cecily does not seem in the least earnest.*
 8. *Both plan to be baptized with the new name Ernest.*
 9. *Gwendolen and Cecily know that there is no Ernest; the two girls renew their friendship and reject their suitors. Jack is very frustrated and just wants Algernon to leave; Algernon, however, contents himself with having tea.*
3. Use part A of **Handout 11** to explain the meaning of the term *satire*. Then have small groups complete the exercise in part B.

Suggested Responses:

1. *Cecily is satirized in so many ways, especially in her attitudes toward her diary, education, and Ernest.*
2. *Cecily and Algernon are quick to fall into infatuation with each other, although they do not know each other at all. Their mutual interests are based totally on superficial elements.*

3. *The prim Mrs. Prism is clearly more than just a little interested in Chasuble.*
4. *Cecily and Gwendolen form a quick friendship when they meet, quickly fall out over their mutual love for Ernest, and just as quickly reforge their friendship in opposition to Algernon and Jack.*
4. Remind students that Oscar Wilde dubbed his play “a trivial play for serious people.” Ask what his purpose might have been in including so many satirical elements. Lead the class to see that comedy aims to confront people with their own flaws, but it does so in ways that are more amusing than they are offensive. In this way it makes its criticisms palatable and invites the audience to change.
5. Distribute **Handout 12**, and review the writing topics. Set a deadline for the final papers. You may also want to schedule an earlier date for students to bring in rough drafts for peer consultation.

Study Guide: Act 2

Directions: Use the following questions to clarify your understanding of events and characters.

1. In the opening dialogue between Miss Prism and Cecily, what do we learn about each of them?
2. What seems to be Chasuble's reason for visiting?
3. Why does Algernon use the alias Ernest Worthing?
4. When Jack arrives, what bad news does he announce? What is his motivation?
5. Why is Jack so eager to have Algernon leave the manor and return to the city?
6. For what purposes does Cecily use her diary?
7. What is ironic about Cecily's attitude toward the name *Ernest*?
8. Why do both Algernon and Jack make appointments with Chasuble?
9. Summarize the situation at the end of the act. What events do you predict for act 3?

Satire

Part A.

Directions: Read the following description of the literary form called *satire*.

Satires are always highly critical in nature. The satirist holds human foibles, follies, weaknesses, and vices up in the limelight and invites others to laugh or even jeer at them. Satire can sometimes be gentle, but it can also be scathing. Among tools most prevalent in satire are exaggeration, irony, and humor. While satires make fun of people, their purpose is not just ridicule; the satirist aims to prompt change.

There are many examples of satire in act 1. We watch Algernon gobbling up all of the cucumber sandwiches intended for his aunt. The description of Bunburying itself satirizes some men's ways of avoiding responsibility. Gwendolen's infatuation with the name Ernest pokes fun at the superficial things that make people think they are in love with each other. Everything about Lady Bracknell satirizes pretentious behavior associated with the upper classes.

Part B.

Directions: Reexamine act 2, and explain how Oscar Wilde uses satire in the following areas.

1. The depiction of Cecily before Algernon arrives
2. The romance between Algernon and Cecily
3. Miss Prism's interactions with Chasuble
4. The friendship between Cecily and Gwendolen

Writing Prompts: Act 2

Directions: Respond to one of the following writing prompts.

1. In act 2 of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Cecily is introduced to Gwendolen and the two become great friends. During their conversation, Cecily tells Gwendolen that she is going to be married to Ernest. Gwendolen cannot believe her ears, for she too is to marry Ernest. The two girls instantly become jealous and begin to act rude and uncivil to each other. Later they learn that there are actually two Ernests (or no Ernest) and that each is going to marry a different one. The girls forgive each other and become friends again.

Describe a situation in which you and a good friend became jealous and got into a dispute but later realized that the grounds were inaccurate. Describe how you felt after finding out the information was inaccurate. State your conclusions about jealousy and friendship.

2. Miss Prism takes a very negative attitude toward John Worthing's brother, Ernest. She has never met him. She bases her evaluation of him solely upon hearsay. After hearing about Ernest's supposed death, Miss Prism says, "What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it," and adds, "As a man sows, so shall he reap."

Write a detailed autobiographical essay in which you describe a time when someone looked down upon you although he or she had no reason to do so. State not only the facts of the situation, but also why you think that person held that attitude toward you. Include how you felt about the situation.

3. Review the following dialogue between Algernon and Cecily.

ALGERNON: That is a great disappointment. I am obliged to go up by the first train on Monday morning. I have a business appointment that I am anxious . . . to miss!

CECILY: Couldn't you miss it anywhere but in London?

ALGERNON: No; the appointment is in London.

CECILY: Well, I know, of course, how important it is not to keep a business engagement, if one wants to retain any sense of the beauty of life.

Write an essay to explain the meaning and impact of this passage. What is Oscar Wilde saying about society as a whole?

Lesson 5

The Aesthete's Role in Victorian Society

Objectives

- To understand the aesthetic movement and its impact upon Oscar Wilde
- To define the term *aesthete*
- To identify aspects of aestheticism in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Notes to the Teacher

A complete understanding of the pre-Raphaelite or aesthetic movement is beyond the scope of this lesson. The aim here is to acquaint students with aestheticism as a reaction to Victorian mores and art and to consider Oscar Wilde's relationship with the movement. The Victorian ideal was a prim and proper appearance. Aesthetes reversed this code and devoted themselves to a celebration of beauty. This was evident not only in what they purchased, painted, and wrote, but also in what they wore. The term *dandy*, which originated in the nineteenth century, applies to a man who dresses in a fancy, elegant, dramatic way, as Wilde did. **Handout 13** presents a brief introduction to the aesthetic movement. You may want to extend the lesson by having students research and report on other notable figures of Wilde's time.

In this lesson, students consider the factors that cause various fashions to come in style and go out of style. They go on to encounter the aesthetic movement and to apply it to *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

For procedure 1 you will need copies of high school yearbooks, fashion magazines, or clothing catalogs from various decades in the past.

Procedure

1. Ask students what makes particular clothing styles or hairdos come into style and go out of style. Share materials that demonstrate the way styles differ in various decades. Allow time for informal responses to trends such as long flowing hair for men and close-cropped military looks; big bouffant hairdos and long, straight hair for girls; skintight jeans and the baggy pants

look. Lead students to see that new styles are often primarily responses to old styles; styles tend to be somewhat cyclical.

2. Ask students to describe Victorian society and art. Consider having them examine some short poems by Tennyson or another Victorian writer. Lead them to see a general emphasis on seriousness and propriety. Ask: What form would a reaction to this general seriousness take?
3. Distribute **Handout 13**. Have students read the information about the aesthetic movement and answer the questions.

Suggested Responses:

1. *Aesthetes responded to the proper stodginess and emphatic respectability of Victorian mores by viewing beauty as an absolute goal unto itself and by embracing flamboyant public lifestyles.*
2. *Aesthetes valued beauty and a kind of theatrical behavior. They received and enjoyed a lot of public attention. There were, however, limits to what the general public would accept.*
3. *Algernon is the clearest example of aesthetic behavior; throughout the play we also hear the aesthetic voice of Wilde himself.*
4. *Answers will vary according to the vagaries of fashion and the behavior of popular athletes and performers. Point out that aesthetic behaviors and styles are sometimes seen as a kind of decadence.*
4. Assign students to write essays in which they relate the ideals of aestheticism to the public images of today's pop stars. Emphasize the images celebrities seem to project of themselves in the press and on the Internet.
5. Ask students to find two or three poems by Victorian poets and two or three poems by pre-Raphaelite poets and to analyze and report on the elements of contrast.

Optional Activity

Create a series of drawings of Oscar Wilde based on portraits or sketches in books or on Web sites. Illustrations can be created by hand, with computer software, or with pictures from magazines or Web sites. Share your work in a bulletin board display.

The Aesthetic Movement

Directions: Read the following information about the literary milieu of Oscar Wilde's time, and answer the questions.

The aesthetic movement, sometimes called the pre-Raphaelite movement, represented a shift away from the traditional modes of writing and artistic expression. It began in the mid-Victorian period at Oxford, where a group of students looked at life in a somewhat less restrained, more romantic way and developed a different style of expression. They were strongly influenced by Arthurian legends and descriptions from medieval times. William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and others were encouraged and watched by Walter Pater, John Ruskin, and Algernon Swinburne, who formulated new theories of art and criticism.

When Oscar Wilde arrived at Oxford, he was influenced by these ideas but carried them even further. Because the effect was often one of languid appearance and stance or a romantic style of clothing at variance with the normally accepted style of the time, and because the members of this "aesthetic" outlook at times gave the appearance of being poseurs, public interest focused on them.

Wilde was not the least bit averse to this attention; he is even reputed to have developed his style while still in his rooms at Magdalen College, where he—like many others of that period—fell into the throes of a strong attraction for Blue Willow china, which was in vogue at the time. On one occasion, some of his friends teased him about sitting in his room admiring his china; he did not deny it.

Once he left Oxford and went to London to begin earning a living, he often appeared a rather strange sight. He frequently appeared in public in velvet knee breeches, black silk hose, and black dancing pumps. With his loose jacket, loose fitting shirt, and flowing stock or tie, set off by his long, flowing hair, he did appear somewhat aesthetic. He did not resemble the sturdy, more somberly dressed businessmen or the majority of the upper leisured class. He was even known to appear carrying and sniffing a flower. It was not surprising that many comments were written about him and other aesthetes, who thrived on public attention.

At this time, W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan were drawing large crowds to their lively operettas that satirized Victorian life. The public believed that Wilde was the model for Bunthorne, a poet swooned over by numerous maidens, who is the hero in *Patience*. Bunthorne dressed in a style that appealed to the pre-Raphaelites, and some of his actions were similar to those credited to Wilde.

An incident from a meeting of the churlish but talented Gilbert and the glib and effervescent Wilde, who had the well-deserved reputation for witty repartee, produced an intriguing exchange of words. Gilbert practically snarled, "I wish I could talk like you. I'd keep my mouth shut and claim it as a virtue." Wilde's reply ignored the snideness and showed that his self-respect could not be daunted. "Ah, that would be selfish! I could deny myself the pleasure of talking but not to others the pleasure of listening."

1. The aesthetes reacted to the mores of the Victorian age. To what were they reacting?
2. What did the aesthetes value?
3. Relate the pre-Raphaelite movement to *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
4. Are there any aesthetes in today's world? Be specific.

Lesson 6

Act 3

Objectives

- To recognize how Oscar Wilde resolves the conflicts in the play and achieves closure
- To consider whether the conclusion is too contrived

Notes to the Teacher

Is the conclusion of *The Importance of Being Earnest* too contrived? Since the play is a comedy, and coincidence is often a tool in comedy, we probably cannot fault Oscar Wilde for the ways he resolves the play's conflicts. All is forgiven; Jack seems to win Gwendolen and Algernon seems to win Cecily. Even Chasuble and Miss Prism seem to be together as the play rolls to its conclusion. En route, the mystery is solved. Because of Miss Prism's distracted behavior years ago, she lost the infant who grew up to be Jack Worthing. Jack finds to his surprise that he is Algernon's older brother, and that his name is, after all, Ernest!

In this lesson, students read the relatively brief act 3. They then respond to study guide questions and reflect on Wilde's conclusion.

Procedure

1. Have students brainstorm possible events in act 3. If necessary, prompt ideas with the following questions:
 - Will Cecily and Gwendolen forgive Algernon and Jack?
 - Will Jack always remain clueless about his biological family background?
 - Will Chasuble and Miss Prism become a couple?
2. Conduct an oral reading of act 3. Roles include the following:
 - Gwendolen
 - Cecily
 - Jack
 - Algernon
 - Merriman
 - Lady Bracknell
 - Chasuble
 - Miss Prism

3. Distribute **Handout 14**, and have small groups answer the questions.

Suggested Responses:

1. *The girls' ambivalence is obvious. They both want and do not want Algernon and Jack to pursue them.*
2. *The main sources of humor lie in the verbal contradictions and in the typical comic moment in which boy almost loses girl.*
3. *Like so many of the statements in the play, the statement is so ridiculous, and it is said so seriously, that it provokes laughter. The statement reflects some of the basic premises of the aesthetic movement. It also reflects on the play's central theme of the importance of being earnest.*
4. *Lady Bracknell has come because she knows Gwendolen is there, and she is determined to protect Gwendolen's reputation.*
5. *When she hears that Cecily is quite wealthy, Lady Bracknell suddenly becomes very fond of her.*
6. *"They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable." The implication is that if people really knew one another, they would not get married.*
7. *Long ago Miss Prism, a servant in Lady Bracknell's family, was responsible for the loss of a baby boy.*
8. *Miss Prism got mixed up and put the baby into her handbag rather than in the stroller. The result was that the baby was abandoned at the station, and the family had no idea what happened to the child.*
9. *Jack Worthing is really Ernest Moncrieff, Algernon's brother and Lady Bracknell's nephew.*
10. *Most comedy seems to indicate that no matter how badly people manage to muddle through their affairs, things*

can turn out okay. Certainly it is highly coincidental that all of the factors come together to resolve the conflicts at exactly the right moment.

4. Ask students to brainstorm alternative endings and their consequences. For example, what if Jack turned out to be Gwendolen's brother? What if Miss Prism never came into the room and encountered Lady Bracknell?
5. Distribute **Handout 15**. Review the writing prompts, and share the following information.
 - Irony always involves some kind of discrepancy. Jack could not possibly have expected to resolve the issue of his parentage at that exact moment when he most needed to know the truth.
 - *Ernest* seems like such a perfect name for a Victorian, and *earnest* is a great adjective to describe the norm of Victorian appearances. What does the play itself say about the importance (or unimportance) of being earnest (or Ernest)?
 - People make many judgments based on material assets. Is the girl in the most expensive dress always the prettiest girl at the prom? Is the man with the most luxurious car always the best date?

Study Guide: Act 3

Directions: Use the following questions to clarify your understanding of the resolution of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

1. What is the cause of the contradictory statements made by Cecily and Gwendolen at the beginning of the act?
2. What are the sources of humor in the opening pages?
3. Gwendolen says, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing." What does she mean? How does this quote relate to the play as a whole?
4. Why does Lady Bracknell come to Jack's country home?
5. What causes Lady Bracknell to approve of Cecily?
6. Why doesn't Lady Bracknell approve of long engagements?
7. Why does Miss Prism almost panic when she sees Lady Bracknell?
8. How did Jack happen to be abandoned in a handbag in Victoria Station?
9. Who, really, is Jack Worthing?
10. Does the play have a typical comic ending? Explain your answer.

Writing Prompts: Act 3

Directions: Respond to one of the following writing prompts.

1. In act 3 of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Jack Worthing, found in a handbag as a baby, finds out that his true surname is Moncrieff. He discovers this while being questioned about his worthiness to marry Lady Bracknell's niece.

Write an autobiographical essay relating to some ironic situation in your life. Make sure the essay leads to a central moment. Use vivid details.

2. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde uses a play on words with reference to the word *earnest*. During the play, two men are called Ernest. Why did Wilde develop their characters and allow each to call himself Ernest? Is there any significance in the fact that the true Ernest did not know that Ernest was his name?

Write a well-supported essay which defines the meaning of the word *earnest* and explains the author's use of the name *Ernest* for two characters. Formulate a thesis; support the relevance or irrelevance of their being called *Ernest*.

3. In act 3 Lady Bracknell questions Cecily in order to decide if she is worthy of marriage to Algernon. She asks questions about Cecily's parentage, geographical background, and wealth. Not once does she inquire as to Cecily's personality or goals in life.

In a reflective essay, describe a situation in which someone you know judged or was judged by material or tangible assets. Determine what effects this presumptuous evaluation had. Was it fair? Support your opinions.

Lesson 7

What Is Comedy?

Objectives

- To elicit students' concepts of comedy
- To consider the functions and types of comedy
- To identify comic elements and devices in *The Importance of Being Earnest*
- To compare Oscar Wilde's form of comedy with contemporary comedy

Notes to the Teacher

A review of the nature and types of comedy may help students to be better critics and judges of the writer's art and his or her influence on culture. It often surprises them to hear that comedy is about as old as tragedy, with the major difference being that a comedy usually has a happy resolution. Comedy often depends upon the use of language to achieve humor. The form called *farce* often achieves its humor through quick shifts of action to keep the characters from discovering each other or finding out about each other. Burlesque is a form of comedy which depends upon much physical action and buffoonery. A clown is a good example of burlesque; through the clown's makeup, actions, and physical stance, his or her whole attitude is sketched in broad strokes and is readily visible to the audience. The clown seldom displays any subtlety of action.

For the ancient Greeks, comedy was usually based upon events that called for satire, but as the centuries passed this form disappeared, reappearing later in some types of comedies. Because of the nature of comedy—it tends to deal with contemporary issues and topical events—it is more ephemeral than tragedy, which evokes a more universal level of thought within the audience. Comedy is often so topical in its allusions that it suffers more from translation than tragedy, and the passage of time may make a comedy lose its audience appeal.

In English literature, the Elizabethan age produced comedies of humours, which deal with the comedic elements found within the temperaments of humankind, a theory borrowed from the Greeks, who classified individuals according to four humours. Ben

Jonson's plays, seldom performed in today's theaters, epitomize this classification.

Although the comedy of manners was developed in France, the English playwrights William Congreve and Richard Sheridan wrote some excellent and highly amusing plays in this vein, some of which are still produced today. Romantic comedies focus on the follies associated with falling into and out of love.

In the Victorian period, comedies were often sentimental. With George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde, once again English theater reached a high point with comedies which made deft use of subtle shifts in language and took delight in language for the sake of language. In the 1920s and 1930s Noel Coward wrote some plays in the same mode. Since that time, the majority of comedies are less witty, less subtle in language delight, and more dependent on other sources of humor.

In this lesson, students consider their own experiences with humor and the nature of comedy. For procedure 1, you may want to show all or part of a classic television sitcom; some episodes of *I Love Lucy* or *The Cosby Show* work especially well. Students go on to discuss comic devices in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Finally, they analyze comedic elements in a contemporary television show or movie.

Procedure

1. Ask students to give their own definitions of the terms *humor* and *comedy*. Elicit examples of what to them is comic. Ask what forms of comedy they know. Lead students to think of cartoons, comics, editorial satires, television shows, etc. Discuss various types of comedy and their functions. If desired, show a video of a television sitcom and discuss the sources of the episode's humor.
2. Ask students to quickly write on what appeals to their sense of humor: Broad strokes of humor? Subtle interplay of language? Farcical mixups of individuals and situations? The burlesque of clowns?
3. Poll the class to determine the number of students who enjoy each type of comedy

listed in procedure 2. Write the categories on the board and tabulate responses. Let students observe and draw conclusions about the results. Which category is most popular? Use information from Notes to the Teacher to discuss the value of comedy in human existence.

4. Distribute **Handout 16**, and review the information about comedy.
5. Ask students to apply the terminology on the handout to *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Lead them to see that the play is high comedy. There are occasional elements that are near slapstick, for example, the business with the cigarette case in the first act. Much of the humor derives from the characters' dialogue and the ironic parallels. Wilde does not resort to coarse sources of humor.
6. Ask students to select humorous moments from *The Importance of Being Earnest* and to present them dramatically. Students may choose to work individually, for example as Lady Bracknell in the first or the third act or as Cecily in the second act ("Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid, horrid German!"). Others may opt to work with a partner or a small group.
7. Distribute **Handout 17**. Ask students to watch two sitcoms and take notes. Set an appropriate deadline. Have students share results in class discussions. Note that this can easily evolve into a major writing assignment on the nature of humor and comedy in today's world.

Types of Comedy

Directions: Review the following brief definitions of types of comedy. Add further clarifications and examples as you encounter them.

comedy—a form of literature, often drama, in which the protagonist overcomes obstacles, usually social in nature, facing him or her

high comedy—sophisticated humor, with an emphasis on witty dialogue and irony

low comedy—emphasis on more earthy forms of humor; sometime vulgar

farce—a plot intended primarily to make people laugh

satirical comedy—a plot intended primarily to ridicule the foibles and vices of society

sentimental comedy—a plot in which the protagonist, no matter how dissolute, reforms in the end

comedy of humours—a play in which an excess of one of the humours (blood, choler, melancholy, etc.) governs the protagonist, with caricature rather than character portrayal as the result

comedy of manners—a contrived plot in which the artificialities of a sophisticated society are exposed and satirized; emphasis on characterization and on witty dialogue

romantic comedy—makes fun of lovers' behaviors; usually ends with one or more happy couples

burlesque—a play which depends upon physical action and buffoonery

slapstick—a form in which performers use anything, especially physical gestures, that will make the audience laugh

fantasy—a play in which reality is disregarded and a fanciful world and situations predominate

tragicomedy—a play that blends comic and tragic elements

What Do You Find Funny?

Directions: Watch two television comedy shows and look for the elements of comedy. Use the following chart to organize your notes.

Topic	Show 1	Show 2
Title, date		
Main character		
Central problem		
Ending		
Satirical elements		
Witty dialogue		
Crude language or behavior		
Funniest moments		
Weaknesses		
Comic target		

Lesson 8

Bunburying

Objectives

- To consider both Algernon and Jack as Bunburyists
- To reflect on what it means to live a double life
- To write a formal essay on Bunburying in the play

Notes to the Teacher

You may want to explain to students how more formal dinners are set up, with fixed seating places, the arrangement of guests to allow for the best flow of conversation and enjoyment, and some of the rules for formal dinner parties. In previous times, and even today at most formal dinners, guests are expected to talk approximately an equal amount of time with the guests on either side of them. If the dinner table is relatively small and there are not too many guests, general conversation can be held, but in Victorian times when a large dinner party was given this was impossible. The men would have their opportunity to talk more freely after dinner, when they stayed at the table with port or other wine and the ladies withdrew to the drawing room for coffee and more intimate conversation. Husbands and wives were not seated close to each other, and it was always necessary to have the same number of each gender. These customs are at the heart of some of the dialogue in the first act.

Bunburying is essentially a way to escape the limits imposed by society and individual responsibilities. It involves having a handy way out, a ready-made excuse for a quick exit. Both Algernon and Jack are accomplished Bunburyists, but the events in the play lead to the disclosure of their double lives. By the end, their Bunburying days are over—perhaps.

In this lesson, students surface epigrams in acts 2 and 3. They examine Algernon and Jack and the impact of their Bunburying in all three acts. They then consider the stresses involved in living a double life, as both men do. Finally, they begin work on an essay about Bunburying.

Note that paper plates and art supplies are needed for procedure 2.

Procedure

1. Point out that students have already worked with epigrams from act 1 (Lesson 2), and that the other two acts also include many memorable and humorous sayings. Point out a few examples such as the following:
 - “I don’t think I would care to catch a sensible man. I shouldn’t know what to talk to him about.” (Cecily, act 2)
 - “It is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position.” (Jack, act 2)
 - “London society is full of women of the very highest birth who have, of their own free choice, remained thirty-five for years.” (Lady Bracknell, act 3)
 - “It is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth.” (Jack, act 3)
2. Direct students to peruse the text for amusing adages that appeal to them. Distribute small paper plates, and have students record their favorite epigrams in the centers of the plates and decorate them appropriately. (Note: Together, these can provide an interesting wall display, as well as a helpful review tool.)
3. Point out that Bunburying is a frequent topic of conversation throughout the play; both Algernon and Jack have become adept at it. Distribute **Handout 18**, and have small groups complete the exercise.

Suggested Responses:

Education/Occupation—*Both Jack and Algernon have the education and manners of gentlemen; neither shows much evidence of working for a living, although Jack is responsible for a country manor.*

Activities—*They both appear to be the type of man referred to as a dandy, although Jack seems more concerned with keeping a proper appearance.*

Personality—*Jack seems more serious, Algernon more cynical.*

Home—Algernon has a stylish flat in the city, Jack a nice country manor.

Bunburying—Both have invented escape hatches, one from the country to the city, the other from the city to the country.

Situation at the beginning of act 1—Jack is determined to propose marriage to Gwendolen. Algernon seems mainly concerned with self-gratification and amusement; he is very curious about Cecily.

Situation at the end of act 3—Jack knows he really is named Ernest, and it seems that he and Gwendolen will marry. It seems as if Algernon and Cecily will marry.

4. Ask students to define the term *Bunburying*. Explain that the term was coined by Oscar Wilde, but the practice is by no means limited to *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Ask students to brainstorm examples of Bunburying in everyday life. (Possible responses include the only child who can never stay to clean up after a game because of a younger sibling who supposedly needs to be taken care of, or the employee who has to take a few personal days because of the death of a nonexistent uncle.)
5. Distribute **Handout 19**, and have students complete the exercise.

Suggested Responses:

1. Ernest is Jack's imaginary brother, whose tendency to get into trouble often necessitates that Jack go to the city. Bunbury is Algernon's imaginary friend, a man whose precarious health often demands that Algernon go to the country.
2. Now that Jack wants to marry Gwendolen, he feels that he will no longer need his imaginary brother.
3. Algernon implies that, above all, a married man needs an excuse to get away. If the husband does not have such an excuse, the wife will need to invent one!

4. Both are very fond of fun and not too fond of responsibility.
5. Both get caught in the web of their own lies, and the truth comes out.
6. Perhaps their deeply ingrained Bunburyist selves will never be eradicated completely.
6. Point out that Bunburying can be a handy skill, but it can also get people into trouble. Ask for examples in the play. (For instance, because of Bunburying, both men want the name Ernest; both are caught in the complexity of their pretenses; of course, since this is comedy, all is well that ends well.)
7. Ask students to think of additional real or imaginary Bunburying in today's world and to share examples. (These abound, from a teen's nightly story of going to the library to study to the excuses provided by bigamists with wives in multiple states.) The bottom line is that Bunburying is based on a lie, and it nearly always leads to problems.
8. Assign students to write original short stories that center on some form of Bunburying.

Bunburyers: Two Men about Town

Directions: In the chart below, collect information about Jack and Algernon. Use both brief direct quotations from the play and your own words.

Topic	Jack	Algernon
Education/Occupation		
Activities		
Personality		
Home		
Bunburying		
Situation at the beginning of act 1		
Situation at the end of act 3		

Introducing Bunbury

Directions: Reread the sections near the opening of act 1 in which Algernon and Jack talk about their practice of Bunburying. Then answer the following questions.

1. Algernon refers to both Ernest and Bunbury. Who are they?
2. Why does Jack consider killing Ernest?
3. According to Algernon, why is Bunbury essential to a married man?
4. Why have both Algernon and Jack been active Bunburyists?
5. By the end of the play, what has Bunburying caused in their lives?
6. Do you think that, by the end of the third act, they are through with Bunburying forever? Explain.

Lesson 9

Setting, Plot, and Characterization

Objectives

- To recognize the impact of the setting and the role of the appearances of the characters
- To analyze the plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest*
- To analyze the characterization of Gwendolen and Cecily

Notes to the Teacher

Because students are reading the play instead of seeing it on a stage with a complicated set, it is easy for them to miss the undeniable attractiveness of the setting and characters. Act 1 places us in a luxurious and tasteful apartment, act 2 in a lovely country garden replete with roses, act 3 in an elegant manor. The characters, shallow as they are, are exceedingly good looking and well dressed, and they seem to have few real worries. Who wouldn't want to trade places with them?

The plot, though not extremely complicated, has twists and turns that may be more surprising to the characters themselves than to the audience. As in most comedies, the problems are all resolved by the end of the play, when the audience sees three happy couples on stage.

The characters all have stereotypical elements. Students have already considered Algernon and Jack in depth. In this lesson they focus on Gwendolen and Cecily. Students discuss whether Oscar Wilde is satirizing Victorian society or simply having some fun at its expense. Since satire uses humor as a means of illuminating the need for change, the question becomes whether Wilde sees evils that need to be remedied. Is he merely amused by the pretensions of society?

Note that art materials, including back issues of magazines that feature elegant home settings and stylish attire for men and women, are needed for procedure 1. You may also want to suggest Web sites that display images of stylish attire of the Victorian era.

Procedure

1. Point out that a play is not just a "page" experience. It is intended to be a staged event with stage sets, props, costumes, lighting, and other theatrical elements. Divide the class into five groups, and assign each group one of the following topics:

- stage set in act 1
- stage set in act 2
- stage set in act 3
- appearance of Algernon and Jack
- appearance of Gwendolen and Cecily

Ask the groups to peruse the play and to prepare visuals to explain their topics to the class as a whole.

2. Follow up the presentations with relevant questions.
 - a. What is the impact of Algernon's apartment? (*It is very attractive; Algernon has wealth and independence; he also has someone to take care of mundane tasks. The furnishings are elegant.*)
 - b. How appealing is the setting of the second act? (*What could be better? We see a lovely summer day in an exquisite garden full of roses.*)
 - c. How does the setting shift for the third act? (*We move indoors and look out at the garden from the interior of a very nice manor house.*)
 - d. How would all three settings affect audiences? (*Most audience members would love to be in the places where the characters are.*)
 - e. What do Algernon and Jack have in common in terms of appearance? (*They are both attractive, well-dressed young men.*)
 - f. What do the appearances of Gwendolen and Cecily have in common? (*They are both young, lovely, and chic.*)
3. Point out that the effect of all of these attractive sights can make even Oscar Wilde's intended audience of serious people eager to jump right into the trivial world of the play.

4. Use **Handout 20** to review the basic terminology used in analyzing plot. Then have students complete the exercise.

Suggested Responses:

The exposition introduces Algernon, Jack and Bunburying in general. It also mentions Gwendolen and Cecily, as well as Lady Bracknell.

In the rising action, Jack proposes to Gwendolen, who accepts him primarily because she thinks his name is Ernest. Lady Bracknell questions Jack and, on hearing of his unknown origins, nixes the engagement. Algernon goes to Jack's country manor eager to meet the mysterious Cecily and there introduces himself as Ernest. Algernon and Cecily quickly become romantically involved; she too is deeply enamored of the name Ernest. Gwendolen and Jack arrive. Gwendolen and Cecily develop a quick friendship.

The climax comes when Gwendolen and Cecily discover that they are both engaged to Ernest Worthing. A confrontation follows.

In the resolution, the truth about Jack's parentage is revealed by Miss Prism, and three happy couples highlight the stage.

5. Point out that the class has already given close attention to the characters of Algernon and Jack. Ask what the students see in Gwendolen and Cecily. What is Wilde's tone in presenting them? Distribute **Handout 21**, and have students complete the exercise.

Suggested Responses:

1. *Jack's responses make it clear that Gwendolen must be very good looking. In her conversation we see a deliberate effort to be clever, rather than sincere. Despite her independent manner, she seems to acquiesce to her aunt's decisions regarding marriage.*
2. *Apparently Gwendolen wants to see Jack. Perhaps she is independent after all.*

3. *Cecily is also a very pretty girl, perhaps less gifted in small talk. The two girls seem very much alike in background and attitudes. They even admire the same first name!*
4. *Gwendolen and Cecily bond based on similarities, then conflict over a perceived love interest. They then bond again in superficial opposition to the young Bunburyists. Finally, each becomes part of a romantic couple.*
5. *The girls are quite static; they seem almost incapable of any significant change.*
6. *The girls are also flat, almost caricatures.*
7. *As an aesthete, Wilde may have thought that really pretty was enough in itself. Certainly he satirizes some of the conventions of small talk and conventional views of marriage and family.*
6. Ask students to examine how Cecily and Gwendolen behave in their attitudes toward romance and love. Are their attitudes and behaviors more imaginative and less realistic than those of young girls in love today? What about Algernon and Jack? In terms of young romance, have things changed much since the Victorian period?
7. Remind students that comedies usually target human follies and point out areas in need of change. Have the class brainstorm the areas that Wilde targets in this play (*superficiality, snobbishness, lack of commitment, selfishness, upper class airs, courtship behaviors, Victorian values*).

Plot Analysis

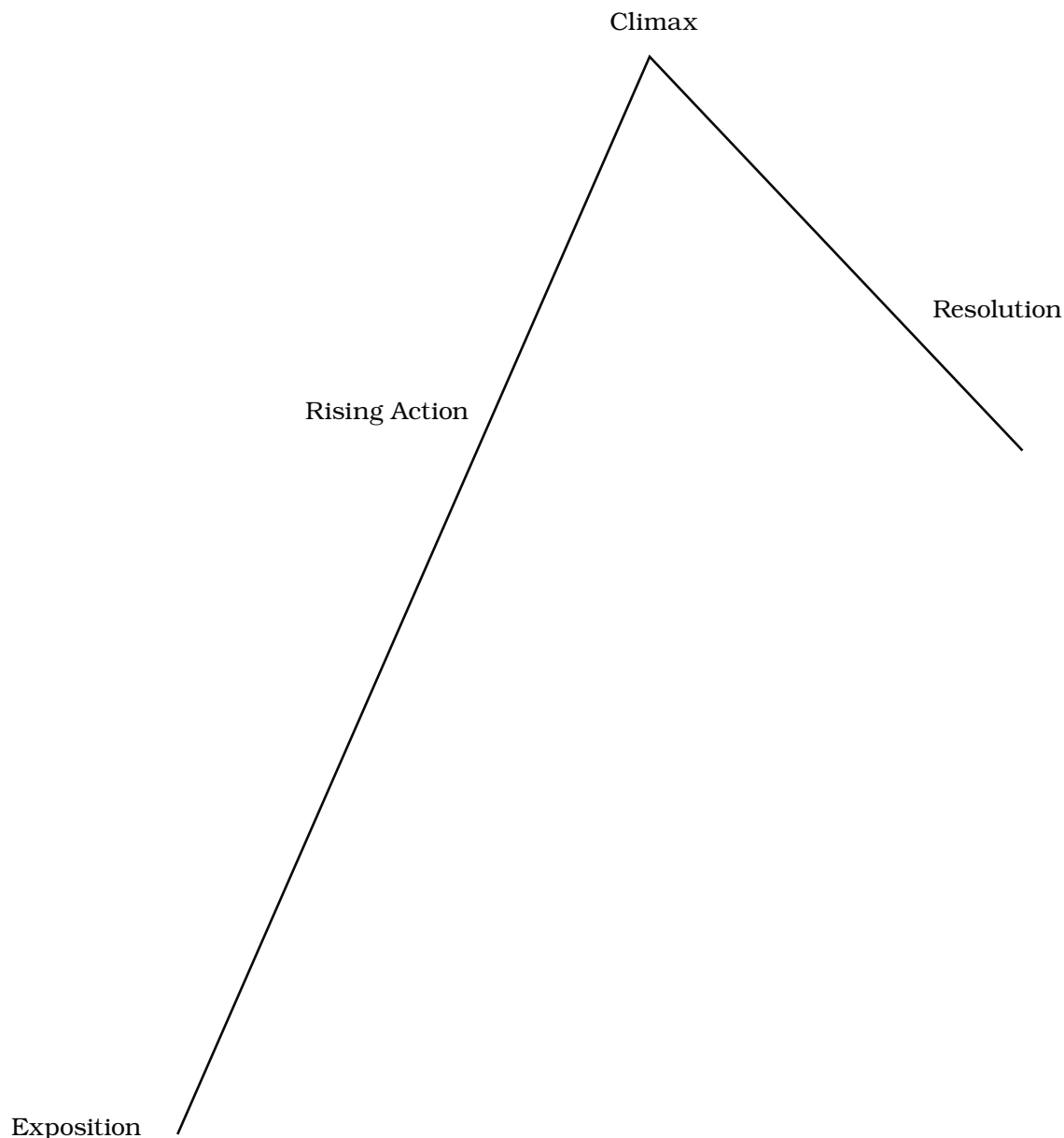
Directions: Review the terms usually associated with plot analysis. Then fill in the diagram with the relevant information from *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

exposition—the introduction, which establishes time and places and introduces the basic situation

rising action—a series of events in which a conflict or several conflicts escalate

climax—the highest point in the rising action, after which everything else ties together the loose ends

resolution—the ending of the play, which comes after the climax; also referred to as the denouement



Gwendolen and Cecily

Directions: Use the following questions to focus on Oscar Wilde's characterization of the two young women.

1. Look at the introduction of Gwendolen in the first act. What character traits seem most dominant?
2. Why does Gwendolen go to Jack's country home in the second act? What does this show about her?
3. Look at the introduction of Cecily at the beginning of the second act. Does she appear to be like or unlike Gwendolen in appearance and personality?
4. Explain the fluctuations in the relationship of the two young women.
5. In literary analysis, dynamic characters are those who change in some substantial way. Sometimes this change involves maturation or growth in insight; sometimes it involves deterioration. Static characters, on the other hand, do not change. Are Gwendolen and Cecily dynamic or static? Explain.
6. Round characters are complicated, multidimensional, like real people. Flat characters are not explored in depth; they may appear to be mere stereotypes. Are Gwendolen and Cecily round or flat? Explain.
7. What is Wilde trying to do in his portraits of these two women? Is he satirizing them, thus inviting some kind of change? Is he just mocking and having fun for his own amusement? What do you see as the author's tone?

Lesson 10

Themes and Style

Objectives

- To articulate central themes in *The Importance of Being Earnest*
- To describe Oscar Wilde's style
- To explore the use of language in both Victorian England and contemporary America

Notes to the Teacher

In Lesson 9, students commented on some of the play's major thematic concerns. In this lesson, they carefully articulate themes and consider whether they are particular to the late Victorian period or whether they are universal.

The class goes on to discuss the style of the play, which is often described as witty, even scintillating. In this respect Wilde is often compared to George Bernard Shaw, another great stylist. Wilde gives his characters witty lines, often with an irony or overtones of which they themselves are unaware.

Finally, students consider levels of speech in their own contemporary world, including the evolution of idioms characteristic of every generation.

Procedure

1. Remind students that a theme is more than just a topic. A theme is a statement or implication about human nature, relationships, or life in general. If necessary, provide the following examples.
 - "Love" is a topic; "love transcends difficulties" is a theme.
 - "Nature" is a topic; "nature can heal a wounded spirit" is a theme.
2. Distribute **Handout 22**. Point out that one way to approach a theme statement is to ask whether the author of the play seems to have a positive or a negative attitude toward the topic. Ask the class to identify Wilde's apparent general attitude toward each of the topics listed on the handout.

Suggested Responses:

1. *Mixed—Bunburying is fun, but it gets people in trouble.*

2. *Negative—Wilde makes fun of Lady Bracknell.*
3. *Mixed—The young couples aspire to marriage, but Algernon's early comments suggest that the courtship might be more enjoyable than the marriage.*
4. *Positive—The friendships seem quite superficial, however.*
5. *Positive—Note that commitment is new to these young characters, and the play does not allow us to see into the future.*
6. *Mixed—It is obviously more than convenient to be wealthy and upper class, but does that status limit people to lives of superficiality?*
7. *Positive—The courtship experience seems very much like a game, though.*
8. *Very positive—The play prizes wit.*

3. Ask small groups to collaborate on theme statements for each topic on **Handout 22**. Then conduct a general discussion based on responses. Accept all ideas for which students can surface sound evidence from the play.
4. Ask students to describe the style in the play (*witty, humorous, clever, ironic*).
5. Distribute **Handout 23**, and lead the class through the exercise, which entails a close reading of four passages from the play.

Suggested Responses:

1. *Lady Bracknell's fairly sophisticated language choices make a strong ironic contrast with the ignorance of her basic position blaming the infant for where it was found. Wilde's superior language control etches Lady Bracknell's snobbishness into the audience's awareness.*
2. *Again, we see Wilde's great control. Algernon is swept along on the flow of his own rhetoric. Cecily's reaction shows the basic practicality of her nature, as she openly invites him to continue courting her.*

3. *Wilde pokes fun at humans' aversion to waiting but willingness to make others wait.*
4. *Wilde cleverly closes the play with the title of the comedy and a clear play on the word earnest and the name Ernest.*
6. Point out that Gwendolen, Cecily, Algernon, and Jack reflect something of the style of the late Victorian period. Explain that every generation evolves idioms and phrases of its own. Distribute **Handout 24**, and review some colorful idioms of previous ages. Then explain directions for the assignment, and set a reasonable deadline.

Themes in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Directions: Listed below are some of the topics considered in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Formulate a theme statement for each one.

1. Bunburying
2. Snobbishness
3. Marriage
4. Friendship
5. Commitment
6. The upper class
7. Courtship
8. Witty dialogue

Style in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Directions: Style can be very difficult to pinpoint. It includes virtually every aspect of a piece of writing, from subject matter to diction/syntax to imagery and figures of speech. Reread each of the following passages from the play, and describe Oscar Wilde's style.

1. LADY BRACKNELL: To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found . . . it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognized position in good society. (act 1)

2. ALGERNON: Cecily, ever since I first looked upon your wonderful and incomparable beauty, I have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly.

CECILY: I don't think that you should tell me that you love me wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly. Hopelessly doesn't seem to make much sense, does it? (act 2)

3. CECILY: . . . I couldn't wait all that time. I hate waiting even five minutes for anybody. It always makes me rather cross. I am not punctual myself, I know, but I do like punctuality in others, and waiting, even to be married, is quite out of the question. (act 3)

4. JACK: I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest. (act 3)

Idioms Through the Ages

Part A.

Directions: Each age group of people in each decade tends to develop idioms of its own, a special means of communicating within a group to keep outsiders where they belong—outside!—and to bond insiders. Read the following examples of idioms from the past.

Idiom	Decade	Meaning	Example
the grapevine	1860s	rumor mill; general gossip	I heard it on the grapevine that you are engaged to be married.
the bee's knees	1920s	wonderful; outstanding	He is the bee's knees.
bag it	1960s	get rid of it; stop it	When the bore kept talking, I told him to bag it.

Part B.

Directions: For a week, take notes—either surreptitiously or boldly—on special words, phrases, and slang terms you hear in your daily life. Jot your findings down on this chart, and record the meanings as you understand them.

Word/Phrase	Meaning

True/False Test: Act 1

Directions: Label each statement *true* or *false*.

- _____ 1. Algernon believes the lower class has no sense of moral responsibility.
- _____ 2. Because of a misunderstanding he had with a young woman, Lane considers marriage a very demoralizing and unpleasant state.
- _____ 3. Oscar Wilde suggests that one goes to town to amuse other people and to the country to amuse oneself.
- _____ 4. Algernon finds it unromantic to be in love because it leads to a definite proposal.
- _____ 5. Algernon says that modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read, and it is absurd to have a rule about what one should or should not read.
- _____ 6. Jack calls himself "Ernest" in the country and "Jack" in town.
- _____ 7. Jack created a brother, Ernest, who is in constant trouble.
- _____ 8. In married life, Algernon believes, three is a crowd and two is none.
- _____ 9. Gwendolen says that they are living in an age of ideals, so she finds it ideal to love someone named Ernest.
- _____ 10. Lady Bracknell says that English society would be in better condition if the lower classes were more educated.
- _____ 11. After Jack's unsuccessful talk with Lady Bracknell, Algernon plays the funeral march on the piano in order to tease him.
- _____ 12. Lady Bracknell's primary concern about Jack is the fact that he does not have a respectable house in town.
- _____ 13. Lady Bracknell believes that all people "advanced in years" should be respected.
- _____ 14. Lady Bracknell's political views are associated with the status quo.
- _____ 15. Although Lady Bracknell disapproves of Jack, she feels that Gwendolen should have a say as to whom she will marry.

True/False Test: Act 2

Directions: Label each statement *true* or *false*.

- _____ 1. Miss Prism thinks that Jack's brother Ernest will profit by being dead.
- _____ 2. Miss Prism is romantically interested in Dr. Chasuble.
- _____ 3. Algernon says that he will not leave Jack's house as long as he is in mourning.
- _____ 4. Cecily accepts the absence of an old friend but not the separation from somebody she has just met.
- _____ 5. Cecily will not let Algernon read her diary, which contains her innermost thoughts, until it is published.
- _____ 6. Gwendolen is upset that Cecily has never heard of her father because he is such a fine and upstanding citizen.
- _____ 7. Cecily believes that when anyone has something unpleasant to say, one should keep quiet and say nothing.
- _____ 8. Gwendolen considers men, even of the noblest possible moral character, to be extremely susceptible to the influence of the physical charms of others.
- _____ 9. Gwendolen enjoys the company of many people and loves to be in a crowd of people.
- _____ 10. When Cecily asks Gwendolen what she prefers in her tea, Gwendolen asks for a squeeze of lemon.
- _____ 11. In the eyes of Gwendolen, bread and butter is the preferable side dish with tea instead of cake, because cake is rarely seen at the best houses.
- _____ 12. Immediately after finding that neither gentlemen is Ernest Worthing and that Ernest Worthing never existed, Gwendolen and Cecily find it in their hearts to forgive Jack and Algernon.
- _____ 13. Algernon's philosophy of life states that one must be serious about something if one wants to have any amusement in life.
- _____ 14. Even though Algernon approves of Jack's engagement to Gwendolen, Jack does not approve of Algernon's engagement to Cecily.
- _____ 15. Jack made an appointment with Dr. Chasuble to be christened fifteen minutes earlier than Algernon's christening.

True/False Test: Act 3

Directions: Label each statement *true* or *false*.

- _____ 1. Lady Bracknell thinks Cecily's physical appearance is exactly as a young lady should look.
- _____ 2. Lady Bracknell is continually conscious of what society thinks.
- _____ 3. Lady Bracknell never wants Cecily to call her Aunt Augusta.
- _____ 4. Jack wants Cecily and Algernon to marry as soon as possible.
- _____ 5. Cecily's actual age is twenty.
- _____ 6. Cecily will not become legally of age until she is thirty-five.
- _____ 7. Cecily is impatient about everything, even for marriage.
- _____ 8. Miss Prism accidentally placed the baby in the handbag.
- _____ 9. Jack leaves the room in anger when he hears Miss Prism's statement about the incident at the station.
- _____ 10. Jack was named after his father, whose Christian name was Ernest John.
- _____ 11. Jack finds out that Algernon is his elder brother.
- _____ 12. Miss Prism recognizes the handbag by initials on the lock.
- _____ 13. Lady Bracknell is Jack's natural mother.
- _____ 14. Lady Bracknell is more approving of Jack's engagement to Gwendolen than of Algernon's engagement to Cecily because Gwendolen is her only daughter.
- _____ 15. Algernon tells Lady Bracknell that Bunbury was a victim of a revolutionary outrage.

Fill-in Test: Act 1

Directions: Complete the statements by filling in the blanks.

1. Algernon seems confused as to why “at a bachelor’s establishment the servants invariably _____.”
2. Algernon states that “_____ are made in Heaven.”
3. Jack is upset when he finds out Algernon has kept his _____.
4. _____ was brought into the picture when Jack’s cigarette case was missing.
5. As a social truth, Algernon states that “more than half of modern culture depends on what one _____.”
6. “The truth is rarely _____ and never _____.”
7. In Jack’s case, _____ is not his forte, and he should leave it to people who haven’t been at a _____.
8. “A man who marries without knowing _____ has a very tedious time of it.”
9. “You don’t seem to realize, that in married life, _____ is company and two is _____.”
10. Lady Bracknell “strongly advises” Mr. Worthing “to make a definite effort to produce” at least one parent before _____ is quite over.
11. “It is awfully hard work _____.”
12. Lady Bracknell is happy to hear that Jack is a _____.
13. Lady Bracknell is reluctant to give Gwendolen to Jack because he was found in _____.
14. Jack was found in the _____ at Victoria Station.
15. Jack, though he doesn’t know what one is, believes that Lady Bracknell is a _____.

Fill-in Test: Act 2

Directions: Complete the statements by filling in the blanks.

1. Act 2 takes place during the month of _____.
2. Miss Prism believes that watering the flowers is _____ duty.
3. Miss Prism states that _____ is the diary each person carries around with him.
4. Cecily uses a _____ as an excuse for Miss Prism to take a stroll in the park with Dr. Chasuble.
5. As a classical allusion, Dr. Chasuble refers to Miss Prism as _____.
6. Cecily's Uncle Jack told her that he was sending his brother Ernest to _____.
7. Dr. Chasuble believes that the "precept as well as the practice of the Primitive Church was distinctly against _____.
8. Ernest (Algernon) refuses to leave Jack's home because his "brother" is _____.
9. Algernon believes he makes up for occasionally being over-dressed by being "immensely _____."
10. Jack wants Algernon to leave his home in the country immediately by the _____.
11. Jack immediately orders the _____ to take Algernon back to town.
12. Algernon believes Cecily is a "visible personification" of _____.
13. Cecily's engagement to "Ernest" was actually settled last _____.
14. Cecily believes her engagement to Ernest cannot be really serious unless it has been _____ at least once.
15. Gwendolen states that _____ is "rarely seen at the best houses nowadays."

Fill-in Test: Act 3

Directions: Complete the statements by filling in the blanks.

1. Gwendolen and Cecily agree to be _____ as Jack and Algernon approach them at the morning-room.
2. Jack and Algernon are to be _____ in order to please the girls they love.
3. Lady Bracknell discovers Gwendolen's destination from _____ by giving her a _____.
4. According to Algernon, Bunbury died after _____.
5. _____ is the cause of Lady Bracknell's sudden acceptance of Cecily.
6. Lady Bracknell believes that _____ are not advisable for a couple.
7. Jack consents to Cecily's marriage on the condition that _____.
8. In Miss Prism's mental abstraction, she _____.
9. When Algernon discovers himself to be Jack's brother, he _____.
10. Jack refuses to permit Cecily to marry until she reaches _____.
11. Lady Bracknell sees Cecily's hair as being _____.
12. _____ is the "very picture of respectability."
13. Jack's father was also known as _____.
14. Algernon later learns he must show more respect to Jack because _____.
15. _____ is what Cecily and Gwendolen believe women lack.

Multiple-Choice Test

Directions: Write the letter of the best answer in the blank.

- _____ 1. Lane is never formally introduced, but one can learn from the scene that he is
- Algernon's brother.
 - recently dead.
 - Algernon's servant.
 - none of the above.
- _____ 2. Algernon plays music on
- the radio.
 - a piano.
 - a violin.
 - an accordion.
- _____ 3. A Bunburyist is
- a baker.
 - a graveyard attendant.
 - a member of Parliament.
 - an expert at evasion.
- _____ 4. "The truth is rarely pure and never simple." Truth here seems to be
- extremely complicated.
 - negative.
 - ironic.
 - demented.
- _____ 5. When Algernon is described as "behaving very well," he is compared to
- a circus clown.
 - a child.
 - a tamed show animal.
 - a professional mime.
- _____ 6. Which of the following portrays a useless and purposeless youth that was created from a wealthy England?
- Lane
 - Miss Fairfax
 - Algernon
 - all of the above
- _____ 7. What does Algernon claim would be very tedious if truth were pure and simple?
- literature
 - government matters
 - science
 - modern life in general
- _____ 8. Wilde's cynical tone is most often directed to mock
- good manners.
 - societal pretense.
 - Lane.
 - marriage.

- _____ 9. The superficial and ignorant society that Wilde sought to reveal is demonstrated
- in Jack's instant and sudden love for Miss Fairfax.
 - in Gwendolyn's desire to love someone named Ernest.
 - in the civility expected of everyone.
 - only in items b and c.
- _____ 10. Lady Bracknell's note taking on Algernon's suitability best portrays
- a woman's control over a man at the time.
 - her concern for her own future and care.
 - a contradicting and ironic twist about the manners and civility of the Victorian period.
 - all of the above.
- _____ 11. Jack wants to be christened because
- he is fearful that Lady Bracknell will not allow Gwendolyn to marry him since he has not been baptized.
 - he needs to be baptized in order to receive an inheritance left by his adopted father.
 - he wishes to make his Christian name Ernest in order to please Gwendolen.
 - he has experienced a religious conversion.
- _____ 12. The letters from Ernest that Cecily keeps in a box tied up with blue ribbon were written by
- Cecily herself.
 - Jack as he pretended to be Ernest.
 - Algernon as he pretended to be Ernest.
 - Gwendolen.
- _____ 13. Jack claims his wild, irresponsible, and extravagant brother Ernest died in the Grand hotel in Paris because
- he was involved in a fist fight after he attempted to cheat at a game of poker.
 - he seemed to catch a severe chill.
 - he became excessively drunk and accidentally slipped off of his balcony.
 - the entire hotel burned down.
- _____ 14. Jack orders a dog-cart because
- he wants Algernon to go back to town at once.
 - he wants to take Algernon for a drive around the countryside.
 - he needs to speak privately with Cecily.
 - he wants to go to church to be baptized.
- _____ 15. Why does Jack agree to shake hands with Ernest?
- He is afraid that if he does not act glad to see his "brother," his lies will be uncovered.
 - He is afraid of losing Cecily's fondness.
 - He is afraid of seeming rude in front of Gwendolen.
 - He is afraid of Lady Bracknell's disapproval.

- _____ 16. Why does Gwendolen take her diary with her when she travels?
- She wants to have it handy in case she has the opportunity to ask a famous person for his signature.
 - Her important appointments are listed in her diary.
 - She believes that one should always have something sensational to read on a train.
 - She does not want anyone at home to read it while she is away.
- _____ 17. Cecily tells Chasuble that Miss Prism has a headache because
- Cecily does not wish to continue with her studies.
 - Cecily wants Miss Prism to take a walk with Chasuble.
 - Cecily wants to be alone with Chasuble.
 - Miss Prism needs a good excuse to avoid seeing Chasuble.
- _____ 18. Algernon arrives in the country at Jack's estate because
- Jack has invited him to stay with him as a guest.
 - Gwendolen has asked to meet him there.
 - he wants to ask Chasuble to baptize him.
 - Algernon is curious about Cecily.
- _____ 19. At the end of act 2,
- Cecily is still engaged, but Gwendolen is not.
 - neither Gwendolen nor Cecily is engaged.
 - both Cecily and Gwendolen are engaged.
- _____ 20. Merriman is
- Jack's true name.
 - the butler.
 - Jack's uncle.
 - the family's pet dog.
- _____ 21. At the end of act 2, Algernon refuses to leave because
- he is too in love with Cecily.
 - he has not finished his tea.
 - he is afraid to ride in the dog-cart.
 - he has no way to get back to the city.
- _____ 22. Whom does Lady Bracknell catch in a lie?
- Jack
 - Algernon
 - Gwendolen
 - Merriman
- _____ 23. What causes Lady Bracknell to suddenly appreciate Cecily?
- Cecily's education
 - Gwendolen's friendship with Cecily
 - Cecily's inheritance
 - the beauty of the manor garden

- _____ 24. Miss Prism reveals that years ago she misplaced
- a. a baby.
 - b. a large amount of money.
 - c. an important court document.
 - d. Lady Bracknell's watch.
- _____ 25. Jack discovers
- a. that his real name is Ernest.
 - b. that Algernon is his brother.
 - c. that Gwendolen really does want to marry him.
 - d. all of the above.

Answer Key: True/False Tests

Act 1

1. true
2. false
3. false
4. false
5. true
6. false
7. true
8. false
9. true
10. false
11. false
12. false
13. false
14. true
15. false

Act 2

1. true
2. true
3. true
4. true
5. true
6. false
7. false
8. true
9. false
10. false
11. true
12. false
13. true
14. false
15. true

Act 3

1. false
2. true
3. false
4. false
5. false
6. true
7. true
8. true
9. false
10. true
11. false
12. true
13. false
14. false
15. false

Answer Key: Fill-in Tests

Act 1

1. drink the champagne
2. divorces
3. cigarette case
4. Scotland Yard
5. shouldn't read
6. pure, simple
7. literary criticism, university
8. Bunbury
9. three, none
10. the season
11. doing nothing
12. smoker
13. a handbag
14. cloak room
15. Gorgon

Act 2

1. July
2. Moulton's
3. memory
4. headache
5. Egeria
6. Australia
7. matrimony
8. in mourning
9. over-educated
10. four-five train
11. dog-cart
12. perfection
13. February 14th
14. broken off
15. cake

Act 3

1. silent
2. christened under different names
3. a trusty maid, small coin
4. his doctor said that he could no longer live
5. 130,000 pounds
6. long engagements
7. Lady Bracknell consents to his marriage with Gwendolen.
8. placed her manuscripts in the bassinet instead of the handbag
9. drinks an entire pint of a Perrier-Juet, Brut
10. the age of 35
11. almost as Nature would have left it
12. Miss Prism
13. General Ernest John
14. Jack is discovered to be his older brother.
15. Physical courage

Answer Key: Multiple-Choice Test

1. c
2. b
3. d
4. c
5. b
6. c
7. d
8. b
9. d
10. c
11. c
12. a
13. b
14. a
15. b
16. c
17. a
18. d
19. b
20. b
21. b
22. b
23. c
24. a
25. d

Topics for Papers and/or Research

Directions: Use the following topics as springboards to devise the central focus of your culminating essay on *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

1. Compare or contrast *The Importance of Being Earnest* with another of Oscar Wilde's comedies.
2. Read an earlier English comedy. Compare or contrast it with Wilde's play.
3. Choose a contemporary comedy to compare or contrast with Wilde's play.
4. Wilde is noted for the power of his epigrams. He is often considered one of the wittiest authors in English literature. Read several of Wilde's plays. Write an essay giving your opinion of the effect of his wit. Does his wit appeal to contemporary audiences?
5. Oscar Wilde wrote several other major works, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." Choose one of these, and read it closely. Write a critique of it for a literary magazine or arts section of a newspaper.
6. Consult several biographies of Wilde. Read in them about one particular period during his life. Write a comparison/contrast paper about the authors' accounts.
7. Wilde also wrote poetry. Read several of his poems, and write a critical analysis of them for your school newspaper or literary magazine.
8. Wilde wrote "The Happy Prince" and a number of other fairy tales. Read several of them, and write a review to introduce them to young readers.
9. Research Wilde's letters to discover if they reveal the wit that is so evident in his plays. From his letters, can you discern his uniqueness as an individual? What can you find out about him as an artist? Write a paper to express your conclusions.
10. In the introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde wrote, "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all." Later this topic came up during one of Wilde's trials. He said that his statement represented his view on art: "Art for art's sake." Do you agree? Express your opinion in a well-reasoned essay.

Additional Resources on Victorian England

Directions: The following sources offer a variety of information on the late Victorian period in England. Some are scholarly; others are designed strictly for the lay reader.

Betjeman, John. *An Oxford University Chest*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

A hefty collection that fills the promise of the title—information somewhat above the gossipy level of people, students, and happenings at Oxford.

Brown, Russell. *Sherlock Holmes and the Mysterious Friend of Oscar Wilde*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

A delightful pastiche on the Conan Doyle style, with an added fillip of Wildean epigrams. Since this is a novel written by an English teacher, it could be deduced that he has studied both writers extensively. Filled with chuckles at the comments by Wilde, and delight at the working out of the puzzle by Holmes.

Gloucester, Richard, and Hermione Hobhouse. *Oxford and Cambridge*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980.

An excellent volume laden with pictures that gives the history and background of each college at both sites, plus historical background on the relationship between “town and gown” from the very beginning. Superb photographs lovingly show the beauty and detail of all the special places in both towns’ colleges.

Greene, Graham, ed. *The Old School*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

For everyone who has wondered about the expression “the old school tie” and the power of the public schools in the United Kingdom, this collection of essays by noted British men and women about their prep school days is highly evocative. Some detested the experience; some believed it built their character; some few seemed to enjoy the experience. An excellent antidote to heavy doses of praise for the public school system, particularly in the early years of the century.

MacNeil, Robert. *Wordstruck: A Memoir*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989.

For all who enjoy biography, the power of language, *The Story of English*, or Robert MacNeil as a news analyst, this is the perfect carry-with-you-and-read-while-waiting-on-others small volume. It is guaranteed to make you ignore the waiting period; you may even wish the person you were meeting would be even later! If you have favorite passages/lines or were brought up by a parent who read to you and introduced you to the glory of our language, this is a must!

Morris, Jan, ed. *The Oxford Book of Oxford*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

For some reason more books and collections seem to be available about Oxford than about Cambridge. This collection of anecdotes and lively bits of information about famous and infamous students at Oxford is an excellent addition. Some of the anecdotes cast quite a different light on the more well-known figures in British history than perhaps some would like to have cast. It does undoubtedly prove that *eccentric* is a fine adjective to use with the British.

Murphy, Sophia. *The Duchess of Devonshire's Ball*. Foreword by the Duchess of Devonshire. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1984.

In the very last part of the nineteenth century, the Duchess of Devonshire planned a ball that would outshine any ball or other social event in the memory of those attending it. Planning for it was similar to planning a major military campaign, and the efforts high society made to be sure to be invited offer some entertaining insights into human character. Additionally, numerous photographs and sketches detail the costumes that the guests wore for this very fancy dress ball. Students who are interested in fashion or in fashion design might find this book of historical interest, while those who enjoy the maneuvering of those at the top of the social ladder will encounter almost unbelievable machinations. One family was unable to attend the ball because a member of the family died, and it was necessary to observe the proper mourning period. Family members were so torn between the conventions of mourning and their desire to attend the ball that one could be forgiven the feeling that they resented the death occurring when it did, and almost considered it a personal affront! As a detailed account of high society in the last few years of the Victorian era, this book probably has no peers. Note that this may not be easily available, although a college library might have it.

Randall, Rona. *The Model Wife, Nineteenth-Century Style*. London: Herbert Press. 1989.

Oscar Wilde spends some time in his plays analyzing or commenting on marriage and more specifically romance or the lack thereof. He gives very little advice, but this volume details some of the responsibilities of the Victorian wife, particularly in furthering her husband's interests and career; she, poor woman, had none. This exploration of Victorian mores in the family might be an interesting counterpoint to Victorian novels on family and family obligations, particularly those written by the eminent male Victorian novelists.

Schur, Norman W. *British English, A to Zed*. New York: Facts on File Publications, 1987.

Bothered by some of the language that in the words of George Bernard Shaw serves to separate the English from the Americans? Then perhaps this lively little volume will clarify the differences. Most of us know "bonnet" and "motorway," but did you know that you need a "face flannel" if you want to wash your face? Don't search for a "washcloth"; they will expect you to do the dishes with that item. And "nappies" somehow sound less harsh than "diapers" but perhaps on a par with Pampers. "Windcheaters" will do the job of an American windbreaker, and "yobbo" is a new term we might want to use for those less-pleasant members of society known for their indifference and laziness.

Simpson, Helen. *The London Ritz Book of Afternoon Tea*. New York: Arbor House, 1986.

Tea, that peculiarly English institution now becoming more fashionable in America, is examined, explored, and enjoyed in this slender volume. Amusingly enough, an excerpt from *The Importance of Being Earnest* is included; it would not take an astute reader to know that the scene reprinted is the one where Algernon casually eats all the cucumber sandwiches prepared for tea with his aunt, while berating Jack for even eying the sandwiches. Wilde, who served as his own best publicity man, would no doubt delight in seeing the additional publicity given to one of his plays, particularly to an American audience. During his tour of America in the early 1880s, he was seldom at a loss for words about American life and customs and even Americans, so it might amuse him to know we are finally adopting one of England's most civilized pursuits—the enjoyment of afternoon tea!

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The Importance of Being Earnest

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Entire Unit

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| RL.9-10.2 | Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text. |
| RL.9-10.3 | Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme. |
| RL.9-10.4 | Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone). |
| RL.9-10.5 | Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise. |
| RL.9-10.6 | Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature. |
| RI.9-10.4 | Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper). |
| W.9-10.2a | Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension. |
| W.9-10.2b | Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic. |
| W.9-10.2c | Use appropriate and varied transitions to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts. |

- W.9-10.2d Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.
- W.9-10.2e Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.
- W.9-10.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.)
- W.9-10.5 Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.
- W.9-10.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.
- W.9-10.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.
- SL.9-10.1b Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision-making (e.g., informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, presentation of alternate views), clear goals and deadlines, and individual roles as needed.
- SL.9-10.1c Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.
- SL.9-10.1d Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.
- L.9-10.1a Use parallel structure.*
- L.9-10.1b Use various types of phrases (noun, verb, adjectival, adverbial, participial, prepositional, absolute) and clauses (independent, dependent; noun, relative, adverbial) to convey specific meanings and add variety and interest to writing or presentations.
- L.9-10.2c Spell correctly.
- L.9-10.3a Write and edit work so that it conforms to the guidelines in a style manual (e.g., *MLA Handbook*, *Turabian's Manual for Writers*) appropriate for the discipline and writing type.
- L.9-10.4a Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence, paragraph, or text; a word's position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

- L.9-10.5a Interpret figures of speech (e.g., euphemism, oxymoron) in context and analyze their role in the text.
- L.9-10.6 Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

Source

Common Core State Standards (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010)



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