The Importance of Being Earnest
The Importance of Being Earnest
by OSCAR WILDE
directed by DAVID IVERS
September 9 – October 15, 2023
Wurtele Thrust Stage

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About This Guide

This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show’s history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you’re a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We’re glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

NOTE: Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for more information.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Thanks for your interest in The Importance of Being Earnest. Please direct literary inquiries to Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org.

“In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.”
- Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax in The Importance of Being Earnest

PHOTO: ADELIN PHELPS AND HELEN CESPEDES (DAN NORMAN)
The play revolves around country gentleman Jack Worthing and carefree London dandy Algernon Moncrieff. Jack has invented a fictitious, dissolute brother Ernest, who frequently requires Jack’s attention in London. While in town, Jack himself assumes the name Ernest, and under that name he met Algernon and his cousin, Gwendolen, with whom Jack has fallen in love. Algernon discovers Jack’s secret and is delighted to share that he, too, has invented an imaginary friend named Bunbury — an invalid whose needs frequently call Algernon away from London (and conveniently gets him out of social obligations he wishes to miss).

Although Gwendolen loves Jack as Ernest (especially because his name is Ernest) and accepts his marriage proposal, her mother, the formidable Lady Bracknell, disapproves because of his unknown parentage, as Jack was a foundling discovered in a handbag in London’s Victoria Station. Algernon overhears Jack tell Gwendolen his country address and decides to “Bunbury” there to meet Jack’s pretty, young ward, Cecily.

Claiming to be Jack’s wayward brother Ernest, Algernon visits Jack’s country home, where he and Cecily meet and fall in love. She, too, loves the name Ernest. The plot thickens when Gwendolen, who has left London in pursuit of her Ernest, discovers that Cecily and Ernest have just become engaged. Through clever manipulations, mild treacheries and furious diary comparisons, the women uncover the truth about their supposedly earnest men and break off the engagements — only to make up shortly thereafter.

On the brink of a happy ending, Lady Bracknell arrives, and in a fortuitous coincidence, the mystery of Jack’s birth (including the detail that he really is named Ernest) is clarified with a grand comedic revelation resulting in multiple happy couples.
Responses to *The Importance of Being Earnest*

**LETTERS FROM OSCAR WILDE**

to George Alexander, the eventual producer of *The Importance of Being Earnest*

**July 1894:**

There really is nothing more to tell you about the comedy beyond what I said already. I mean that the real charm of the play, if it is to have charm, must be in the dialogue. The plot is slight, but, I think, adequate. …

Well, I think an amusing thing with lots of fun and wit might be made. If you think so, too, and care to have the refusal of it — do let me know — and send me £150. If when the play is finished, you think it too slight — not serious enough — of course you can have the £150 back — I want to go away and write it — and it could be ready in October.

**October 1894:**

I have been ill in bed for a long time, with a sort of malarial fever, and have not been able to answer your kind letter of invitation. I am quite well now, and, as you wished to see my somewhat farcical comedy, I sent you the first copy of it. It is called *Lady Lancing* on the cover: but the real title is *The Importance of Being Earnest*. When you read the play, you will see the punning title’s meaning.

*Oscar Wilde*

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**PALL MALL GAZETTE**

And very good nonsense, excellent fooling, is this new play of Mr. Oscar Wilde’s. It is, indeed, as new a new comedy as we have had this year. Most of the others, after the fashion of Mr. John Worthing, J.P., last night, have been simply the old comedies posing as their own imaginary youngest brothers. More humorous dealing with theatrical conventions it would be difficult to imagine. To the dramatic critic especially who leads a dismal life, it came with a flavour of rare holiday. As for the serious people who populate this city, and to whom it is addressed, how they will take it is another matter. Last night, at any rate, it was a success.

*H.G. Wells*

*The Pall Mall Gazette*, February 15, 1895

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**The New York Times**

Oscar Wilde may be said to have at last, and by a single stroke, put his enemies under his feet. Their name is legion, but the most inveterate of them may be defied to go to St. James’s Theatre and keep a straight face through the performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It is a pure farce of Gilbertian parentage, but loaded with drolleries, epigrams, impertinences and bubbling comicalities that only an Irishman could have ingrafted on that respectable Saxon stock. Since *Charley’s Aunt* was first brought from the provinces to London, I have not heard such unrestrained, incessant laughter from all parts of the theatre, and those laughed the loudest whose approved mission it is to read Oscar’s long lectures in the press on his dramatic and ethical shortcomings. The thing is as slight in structure and as devoid of purpose as a paper balloon, but it is extraordinarily funny, and the universal assumption is that it will remain on the boards here for an indefinitely extended period.

*H.F.*

*The New York Times*, February 17, 1895
Mr. Oscar Wilde’s new comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* ... is delightful to see; it sends wave after wave of laughter curling and foaming around the theatre; but as a text for criticism it is barren and elusive. It is like a mirage-oasis in the desert, grateful and comforting to the weary eye — but when you come close up to it, behold! It is intangible, it eludes your grasp. What can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle, whether of art or morals, creates its own canons and conventions and is nothing but an absolutely wilful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality? ... Its theme, in other hands, would have made a capital farce; but “farce” is far too gross and commonplace a word to apply to such an iridescent filament of fantasy.

*The Saturday Review*

I cannot say that I greatly cared for *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It amused me, of course; but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses me, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening. I go to the theatre to be moved to laughter, not to be tickled or hustled into it; and that is why, though I laugh as much as anybody at a farcical comedy, I am out of spirits before the end of the second act, and out of temper before the end of the third. ... If the public ever becomes intelligent enough to know when it is really enjoying itself and when it is not, there will be an end of farcical comedy. Now in *The Importance of Being Earnest* there is plenty of this rib-tickling: for instance, the lies, the deceptions, the cross purposes, the sham mourning, the christening of the two grown-up men, the muffin eating and so forth. These could only have been raised from the farcical plane by making them occur to characters who had, like Don Quixote, convinced us of their reality and obtained some hold on our sympathy.

*George Bernard Shaw*  
*The Saturday Review, February 23, 1895*
The Importance of Being Earnest is not really a comedy of manners in the sense of being primarily a criticism of the follies into which a society is betrayed by its conventions, and a tearing off of the masks. Nor is it primarily a comedy of wit, sure and sustained as the wit is. Attempts have been made to derive the play in some measure from the Restoration masters, but without much conviction, and while the manner employed by Wilde has clearly influenced later writers, ... The Importance of Being Earnest really forms a class in English drama by itself.

A.B. Walkley
Introduction to The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, 1923

That the joke about the name Ernest is doubtless a private one makes it less endurable to the audience, which is pointedly left out of the fun. To the bisexual man, it was perhaps deliciously comic that a man should have one name, the tamest in English, for his wife and female relations, and another for his male friends, for trips and “lost” weekends; but Wilde was a prude — he went to law to clear his character — and the antisocial jib dwindles on the stage to a refined and incomprehensible titter.

Yet, in spite of the exhausting triviality of the second act, The Importance of Being Earnest is Wilde’s most original play. It has the character of a ferocious idyl. Here, for the first time, the subject of Wilde’s comedy coincides with its climate; there is no more pretense of emotion. The unwed mother, his stock “serious” heroine, here becomes a stock joke. ...

The formula of this humor is the same as that of the detective story: the culprit is the man with the most guileless appearance. Normal expectations are methodically inverted, and the structure of the play is the simple structure of the paradox. ...

Written on the brink of his fall, The Importance of Being Earnest is Wilde’s true De Profundis; the other was false sentiment. This is hell, and if a great deal of it is tiresome, eternity is, as M. Sartre says, a bore. The tone of the Wilde dialogue, inappropriate to the problem drama, perfectly reflects conditions in this infernal Arcadia; peevish, fretful, valetudinarian, it is the tone of an elderly recluse who lives imprisoned by his comforts; it combines the finicky and the greedy, like a piggish old lady.

Mary McCarthy
“The Unimportance of Being Oscar,” Theatre Chronicles, 1963

The title of the play states Wilde’s case from the outset. The whole action of the play, such as it is, is directed to the moment when Jack, who is really Ernest, will recognize “the vital Importance of Being Earnest.” Since Jack is, indeed, Ernest, many critics have rightly pointed out that the play could as properly be called “The Importance of Being.” Earnest concerns the self-realization of the individual, the development of the soul. Each character in the play is an aesthete, an artist of the personality, who devotes him or herself wholly to — him or herself.

Susan Laity
“The Soul of Man Under Victoria: Iolanthe, The Importance of Being Earnest and Bourgeois Drama,” 1987
Selected Glossary of Terms

CHARACTER NAMES

EDITOR’S NOTE: Oscar Wilde often named his characters after people (or places) from his life as well as incorporated some punning. He had a field day with The Importance of Being Earnest.

Bracknell
A location in Berkshire, in western Greater London, where Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas’ mother, the Marchioness of Queensberry, lived.

Bunbury
Algernon’s imaginary friend was named after Wilde’s Oxford Trinity College friend Henry S. Bunbury.

Cecily Cardew
Wilde had friends named Cardew, whose daughter Cecily was born in May 1893. Wilde promised to name a heroine after her.

Lane
The Bodley Head publisher John Lane, with whom Wilde had been at odds. (Merriman was going to be named after Elkin Mathews, the other publisher at Bodley Head.)

Maxbohm
Among the Army names read aloud by Jack, this name is an inside joke for writer and artist Max Beerbohm, a friend of Wilde.

Worthing
Jack takes his last name from the seaside town in Sussex in southeast England, where Wilde wrote much of Earnest in 1894 while vacationing with his family.

Chasuble
A religious vestment worn by priests when celebrating communion, which was an early church practice revived in the 19th century (by the Oxford Movement).

Prism
The phrase “Prunes and Prism” or a “Miss Prunes and Prism” suggests a person of prim or affected manner or speech and derives from a phrase in Dickens’ Little Dorrit: “Papa gives a pretty form to the lips. Papa, potatoes, poultry and prism are all very good words for the lips; especially prunes and prism.”

PLACES

The Albany
Fashionable townhouse apartments for bachelors in central London built in the 1770s. It was the home of George Ives, a friend of Wilde and a gay rights activist.

Belgrave Square
The center of Belgravia, an affluent neighborhood of luxury residences and hotels, fine restaurants, embassies and diplomatic residences. It’s south of Hyde Park.

Dorking, Surrey
Dorking is a market town in Surrey, a county south of London, bordered by Kent on the east and Hampshire and Berkshire on the west. It’s about 25 miles southwest of London.

The Empire
The Empire Theatre of Varieties was a music hall in Leicester Square famous for its promenade.
Hertfordshire
A county north of Greater London, bordered by Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire to the north. It’s about 20–25 miles from London.

Shropshire
A landlocked county in the West Midlands, bordering Wales, about 150 miles northwest of London.

Fifeshire, N.B.
The British form of Fife, Scotland is Fifeshire, North Britain, demonstrating Jack’s British political inclinations toward Scotland. (The Irishman Wilde would have objected to referring to the Irish as West Britons as well.)

Tunbridge Wells
A fashionable inland resort/spa town in Kent, about 40 miles southeast of London.

Upper Grosvenor Street
A street off Park Lane to the east of Hyde Park, an affluent area of the Mayfair neighborhood.

Victoria Station

Willis'
A fashionable restaurant on King Street near the St. James’s Theatre, often frequented by Wilde and Bosie. It was known for its food, scarlet leather seats and yellow candle shades.

French Drama
The plays of French dramatists like Dumas fils and Sardou were popular in England but also considered potentially corrupting because of the depiction of adultery and infidelity and therefore were censored. English dramatists borrowed heavily on plots from the French dramatists, toning down more explicit elements.

Gorgon
Refers to something hideous (usually applied to women), derived from a monster in Greek mythology with snakes for hair, of which Medusa is the most famous. They were so ugly that glancing at them turned the viewer to stone.

Liberal Unionist
A member of the group of British Members of Parliament who left the Liberal party in 1886 because they didn’t support Prime Minister William Gladstone’s support for Irish Home Rule (self-government). They allied with the Conservative Party (aka Tories), which came to power in 1895.

Maréchal Niel
A yellow rose, introduced to England in the 1860s.

Morning Post
A fashionable society newspaper, the chief source for gossip and a more proper place than the Times to announce engagements and marriages.

smoking jacket
An indoor jacket, often velvet.

temperance beverage
A soft drink or nonalcoholic drink.

three-volume novel
Publishing novels in three volumes was a standard practice for most of the 19th century. Circulating libraries purchased them and could have three different readers of the same novel at a time. The three-volume novel ended when the two largest libraries stopped buying them at the regular price in 1894. 

PEOPLE AND THINGS

apoplexy
A sudden attack, like a stroke.

cloak room
Left-luggage office.

Court Guides
Annual or biannual publications that listed the names and London addresses of the British aristocracy and gentry.

Egeria
From Roman mythology: The nymph who taught the second king of Rome, Numa Pompilius, the wise principles that would be enshrined in the city’s laws. She’s associated with Diana and chastity as well as counseling and advising.
Oscar Wilde: An Author Who Defies Time

By Carla Steen
Resident Dramaturg

When The Importance of Being Earnest premiered at the St. James’s Theatre in London on the frigid evening of February 14, 1895, it became Oscar Wilde’s second play to open in the West End in six weeks. An Ideal Husband had opened in early January at the Haymarket Theatre, mostly to accolades, and the initial responses to Earnest promised another triumph for Wilde.

H.G. Wells (who called An Ideal Husband “unquestionably very poor”) celebrated the “rare holiday” Earnest’s humor provided in the drama critic’s dismal life. While thoroughly recommending seeing the play, William Archer lamented the critic’s job to analyze a play “which raises no principle, whether of art or morals, … and is nothing but an absolutely wilful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality.” The New York Times critic had not “heard such unrestrained, incessant laughter from all parts of the theatre” since Charley’s Aunt opened three years before. Only George Bernard Shaw, who adored An Ideal Husband, found Earnest wanting: While amused, Shaw also wanted to be moved, and Earnest was not up to that task.

Besides the two West End plays running simultaneously (a rare authorial achievement), Wilde’s comedies from 1892 and 1893, Lady Windermere’s Fan and A Woman of No Importance, were soon revived in productions elsewhere in London. Wilde’s earlier plays could be described as social comedies or comic dramas that treated serious topics with humor: a member of parliament’s wealth built on insider trading, a woman who abandoned her child, a child born out of wedlock.

Earnest, however, was a departure for Wilde. It shared significant DNA with the earlier plays — it, too, was a comedy set in a drawing room and filled with his observations of British society. But as Wilde declared with the play’s subtitle, “A Trivial Comedy for Serious People,” the play wasn’t about something. As Archer noted, it appeared determinedly to be about nothing.

Wilde wrote the bulk of the play (originally in four acts) while summering the previous August in the seaside town of Worthing with his wife Constance, their two young sons and a governess, plus the ever-present Lord Alfred Douglas (called “Bosie”). A few years earlier, Wilde had befriended Bosie, then a student at Magdalen College at Oxford (Wilde’s own college) and become enamored. They were frequent if not constant companions, and the relationship quickly went from infatuation to love and was in many ways complicated beyond the scope of this essay. For Wilde, the relationship would prove disastrous.
That summer, as was typical for Wilde, he needed money and knew producer George Alexander was interested in his next play. He sent the producer an outline of what would become *Earnest*, and Alexander paid Wilde a fee to secure the rights. Wilde intended to write a full-on comedy, perhaps even a farce, and delighted in its writing. Alexander produced the play and convinced Wilde during rehearsal that *Earnest* would be more effective in three acts. (A glimpse of the director-playwright relationship might be seen in Wilde’s remark to Alexander upon opening: “It was charming, quite charming. And, do you know, from time to time, I was reminded of a play I once wrote myself called *The Importance of Being Earnest.*”)

Some observers noted the play’s kinship to the work of W.S. Gilbert (of operetta fame) while Wilde described it as a contemporary comedy in the tradition of fellow Irishman Richard Brinsley Sheridan from a century earlier. But *Earnest* was also undeniably something more than familiar farce: It was an attempt by a serious artist to use modern English commercial theater as a vehicle for personal expression. Unapologetically modern and urban, it offered a look ahead to new forms as well as a callback to old.

February 1895 was spectacular, and the future looked limitless. But whatever Wilde had planned for his future was not to be. Aged 40 and at the height of his career, Wilde soon saw his world crumble to dust. Bosie’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry, was a volatile man who believed Wilde was corrupting his son. He made good on a longstanding threat to create a scandal when he left a card at Wilde’s club accusing the playwright of being a sodomite — then against the law in the U.K. — which prompted Wilde, at Bosie’s urging, to sue Queensberry for libel.

Unfortunately for Wilde, Queensberry could prove in court that the accusation was not libelous — evidence that prompted the Crown to arrest Wilde on charges of “gross indecency.” On the day Wilde was arrested in April, *An Ideal Husband* closed its West End run. *The Importance of Being Earnest* ran until May 8, and New York productions of both plays both closed shortly after opening. His name was being dragged through the mud, and his sources of income were rapidly disappearing.

The first criminal trial ended in a hung jury, but after a second trial, Wilde was found guilty and given two years’ imprisonment with hard labor. Upon his release in May 1897, he went to France, never to return to England. He and Bosie lived together for a short time in Italy before parting for good; Wilde never fully reconciled with Constance before her death in 1898. Wilde died in Paris in 1900.

Wilde could have no better legacy than *The Importance of Being Earnest.* His other ample writings — poetry, essays, criticism, fairy tales and novels — live on, but *Earnest* was his masterwork, a theatrical embodiment of his own personal philosophy: “That we should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.”

*Earnest’s* triviality — “serious” social issues of the time treated with a light, cavalier touch — belies its keen depiction and shrewd analysis of upper-class British society. Familiar tropes of an orphaned child or a lost parent (used by Wilde in his previous plays) are given fresh vigor in *Earnest’s* insouciance. A heavy dose of comic sugar has allowed Wilde’s critique to outlast its own period.

Wilde’s effervescent language (“perhaps the only pure verbal opera in English” according to poet W.H. Auden) gives the play its rhythm and music, with characters as witty as Wilde himself. At least one of the characters is so indelible as to have a life outside the play. As Hamlet has meaning and personhood beyond his play, so Lady Bracknell has become a person unto herself.

As a serious artist, a PR specialist cultivating an image and a challenger to the status quo, Wilde was arguably ahead of his time. It’s fitting that Director David Ivers chose to set this production in 1905 rather than the 1890s. If nothing else, it signals that Wilde was a man out of time, ahead of time and perhaps for all time.
Irish-born playwright, novelist, poet and essayist Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) is undoubtedly one of the most prominent personalities in the world’s literary canon. He is as important for the sparkling wit and refinement of his unforgettable paradoxes, his stupendous imagination and his exquisite command of the poetic power of the English language as for his brilliant advocacy of “art for art’s sake.”

Long at the center of the aesthetic movement in London, Wilde enjoyed great acclaim as a dazzling champion of the ideals of artistic beauty. In his youth, he became a celebrated dandy while he nimbly overcame his “outsider” condition, just like so many other major Irish authors who wrote in English. At the height of his career, however, he suffered a tragic fall from grace. Because of his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, he was charged with “gross indecency” during his famous trials. Homosexuality was illegal in England under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. Consequently and inescapably, Wilde’s notoriety shaped him as a martyr. Sentenced to two years of hard labor, he was left penniless and infirmed for the rest of his life, which he spent in Paris.

It seems uncannily prescient that in 1890, Wilde wrote in the novel *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*: “It often happens that the real tragedies of life occur in such an inartistic manner that they hurt us by their crude violence, their absolute incoherence, their absurd want of meaning, their entire lack of style. … Sometimes, however, a tragedy that possesses artistic elements of beauty … simply appeals to our sense of dramatic effect.”

Wilde’s genius marks him as one of the most quotable writers in the English language, particularly in comedy and epigram. His literary legacy comprises several insightful literary essays (such as “The Critic as Artist”), poetry and nine plays, including *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *Salome* and *An Ideal Husband*. His comedic masterpiece, however, remains *The Importance of Being Earnest*. One of the most vivid and inspired farces ever written, the play is an impeccably absurd dissection of Victorian norms, values and conventions, Wilde’s 1895 comedy has enjoyed countless revivals since its debut. Its far-reaching influence can be traced in the works of most important authors who made their mark in English dramatic literature after Wilde. A masterpiece of theatrical language, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is Wilde at his best: playful, satirical, audacious and, above all, superbly witty.
Selected Chronology of the Life of Oscar Wilde

1854 Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde is born on October 16 in Dublin to Protestant parents Dr. William Wilde, an eminent eye doctor, and Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde, an Irish patriot who writes poetry under the pen name “Speranza.”

1864 Dr. Wilde is knighted in recognition of his medical research and expertise.

1867 Wilde’s sister Isola dies at 8 years old.

1871–1874 Wilde attends Trinity College in Dublin. He studies classical literature and earns honors.

1874 Wilde enters Magdalen College, Oxford.

1875 Wilde travels to Italy with his tutor, Rev. John Mahaffy.

1876 Wilde’s father dies. His mother moves to England.

1878 Wilde wins Oxford University’s Newdigate English Poetry Prize for “Ravenna.” He graduates from Oxford with honors.

1879 Wilde moves to London. Before long, he gains a reputation for his extravagant dress and manner. The London periodical *Punch* regularly publishes satirical sketches and cartoons lampooning him.

1881 A collection of Wilde’s poetry is published under the title *Poems*. Wilde writes the play *Vera; or the Nihilists*. It premieres in New York City in 1883.

1882 Wilde tours the U.S. and Canada, lecturing on aesthetics. (In March, he visits St. Paul, Minnesota.)

1883 Wilde writes the blank-verse tragedy *The Duchess of Padua*. Its 1891 premiere in New York City runs for three weeks under the title *Guido Ferranti*.

1884 Wilde marries Constance Lloyd, a family friend from Dublin.

1885 A son, Cyril, is born. Wilde reviews books for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and contributes essays to various literary magazines.

1886 A second son, Vyvyan, is born.

1887 Wilde edits *The Woman’s World* magazine (until 1889).

1888 Wilde publishes *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, a collection of fables and allegories.

1890 Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is published in serial form in *Lippincott’s* magazine. His essay “The Critic as Artist” is published.


1892 *Lady Windermere’s Fan* is produced in London. The Lord Chamberlain bans *Salome* from production in Britain on the grounds that Biblical characters must not appear onstage. Wilde writes the play *A Woman of No Importance*.

1893 *A Woman of No Importance* opens at the Haymarket Theatre. Wilde travels to Cairo with Bosie.

1894 *Salome*, translated into English by Bosie and illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley, is published in England. Wilde writes *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

1895 *An Ideal Husband* is produced. *The Importance of Being Earnest* opens on February 14 at St. James’s Theatre in London. Prompted by a note from Bosie’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry, calling Wilde a “sodomite,” the playwright sues him for libel. The Marquess is acquitted, but Wilde is subsequently tried on charges of “gross indecency.” After the first trial results in a hung jury, a second trial results in Wilde’s conviction. He is sentenced to two years with hard labor.

1896 Wilde’s mother dies. *Salome* is produced in Paris.

1897 In prison, Wilde writes *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and a long letter to Bosie, which is later published in 1905 as *De Profundis*, in a version edited by Robert Ross. Upon his release from prison, Wilde travels through Europe with Bosie.

1898 Wilde’s wife Constance dies.

1899 Wilde continues to travel throughout Europe but makes his residence in Paris.

1900 Wilde dies of meningitis and is buried in Paris.
Responses to Wilde

I think his fate is rather like Humpty Dumpty’s, quite as tragic and quite as impossible to put right.

Constance Wilde
In a letter to her brother, March 26, 1897

His gaze was constantly fixed on himself; yet not on himself, but on his reflection in the looking glass... Introspection of the genuine kind he never achieved.

Harold Child
Times Literary Supplement, June 18, 1908

His name symbolizes him: Oscar, nephew of King Fingal and the only son of Ossian in the amorphous Celtic Odyssey, who was treacherously killed by the hand of his host as he sat at table. O’Flahertie, a savage Irish tribe whose destiny it was to assail the gates of medieval cities; a name that incited terror in peaceful men, who still recite, among the plagues, the anger of God, and the spirit of fornication, in the ancient litany of the saints: “from the wild O’Flaherties, libera nos Domine.” Like that other Oscar, he was to meet his public death in the flower of his years as he sat at a table, crowned with false vine leaves and discussing Plato. Like that savage tribe, he was to break the lance of his fluent paradoxes against the body of practical conventions, and to hear, as a dishonoured exile, the choir of the just recite his name together with that of the unclean.

James Joyce
From “Oscar Wilde: The Poet of Salome” in The Critical Writings of James Joyce, 1909

I think [Oscar Wilde] lived with no self-mockery at all, an imaginary life; perpetually performed a play which was in all things the opposite of all that he had known in childhood and early youth; never put off completely his wonder at opening his eyes every morning on his own beautiful house, and in remembering that he had dined yesterday with a duchess, and that he delighted in Flaubert and Pater, read Homer in the original and not as a schoolmaster reads him for the grammar. I think, too, that because of all that half-civilised blood in his veins, he could not endure the sedentary toil of creative art and so remained a man of action, exaggerating, for the sake of immediate effect, every trick learned from his masters, turning their easel painting into painted scenes.

William Butler Yeats
Autobiography, 1916

[Oscar Wilde’s] conversation left an indelible impression upon my mind. He towered above us all, and yet had the art of seeming to be interested in all that we could say. He had a delicacy of feeling and tact, for the monologue man, however clever, can never be a gentleman at heart. He took as well as gave, but what he gave was unique. He had a curious precision of statement, a delicate flavor of humor and a trick of small gestures to illustrate his meaning, which were peculiar to himself.

I should add that never in Wilde’s conversation did I observe one trace of coarseness of thought, nor could one at that time associate him with such an ideal. Only once again did I see him, many years afterwards, and then he gave me the impression of being mad. He asked me, I remember, if I had seen some play of his which was running. I answered that I had not. He said: “Ah, you must go. It is wonderful. It is genius!” All this with the gravest face.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
Memories and Adventures, 1924
I suppose there are now few survivors among the people who had the delight of hearing Oscar Wilde talk. Of these I am one. I have had the privilege of listening also to many other masters of table-talk ... all of them splendid in their own way. But assuredly Oscar in his way was the greatest of them all — the most spontaneous and yet the most polished, the most soothing and yet the most surprising. That his talk was mostly monologue was not his own fault. His manners were very good; he was careful to give his guests or his fellow-guests many a conversational opening; but seldom did anyone respond with more than a very few words. Nobody was willing to interrupt the music of so magnificent a virtuoso.

Max Beerbohm  
On the centenary of Wilde’s birth, October 16, 1954

The truth is that Wilde was an extraordinarily tough mind, a quick and far-darting intellect at home in all the realities.

Jacques Barzun  
The Permanence of Oscar Wilde, 1964

He should have known that he could not suddenly invoke the laws of a society that he had so volubly professed to despise. Who did he think would come to his aide? When you make fun of people, they laugh not because they feel free of your mockery but because they feel helpless. When they are no longer at your mercy, the laughter dies on their foaming lips.

Quentin Crisp  
The Wit and Wisdom of Quentin Crisp, 1984

From the beginning, Wilde performed his life and continued to do so even after fate had taken the plot out of his hands.

W.H. Auden  
Forewords and Afterwords, 1974

Wilde is the most extreme example of the Irishman as chameleon. Moving from Dublin to the imperial capital, London, he translated himself, with a stunning degree of success, into upper class English society. With his Oxford education and accent, his aristocratic airs and his assumption of a prominent place at all the best London dinner tables, he is the ultimate example of provincial conquering the metropolis. His performance was so assured, so arrogant even, that within no time at all he was telling the English how to be English.

Fintan O’Toole  
“Wilde, Friel and the Reinvention of Translation,” 1998

We expect so many irreconcilable things of him: both the first modern celebrity and a queer radical before his time; popular entertainer and harbinger of the avant-garde; Irish outsider and English wit. Subversion and sentiment equally stipple his fairy tales and drawing-room melodramas, while his capacity to challenge seems reduced by the facile flip of paradox ...

David Jays  
The New Statesman, September 25, 2000

In the open space between ... the aesthetic Wilde, who sincerely believed in the religion of pure art, and the sensational Wilde, who invented the role of the talk-show guest before there was a talk show to welcome him — he has become a genuinely pop, rather than a mere cult, figure.

Adam Gopnik  
“The Invention of Oscar Wilde,” The New Yorker, May 18, 1998

Wilde’s shimmering wit creates an open-ended discourse that encourages all heresies. And, in his posthumous existence, he has assumed quite as many masks as he did during his own life, and with the same élan. He has appeared as the counter-cultural rebel, the gay martyr, the victim of British colonial oppression, the proto-modernist, the proto-postmodernist, the precursor of “Cool.” And the list will continue. Wilde retains all his fabled ability to communicate. And he still has “a way of being right” which is both “astonishing” and delightful.

Matthew Sturgis  
Oscar: A Life, 2018
Witty Wilde: A Sampling of His Bon Mots

One's real life is so often the life that one does not lead.

Those whom the gods love grow young.

The old believe everything; the middle-aged suspect everything; the young know everything.

The soul is born old but grows young. That is the comedy of life.

I sometimes think that God in creating man, somewhat overestimated His ability.

When good Americans die, they go to Paris; when bad Americans die, they go to America.

Art should never try to be popular. The public should try to make itself artistic.

The only thing that the artist cannot see is the obvious. The only thing that the public can see is the obvious.

Art is the only serious thing in the world. And the artist is the only person who is never serious.

The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has yet discovered.

People who count their chickens before they are hatched, act very wisely, because chickens run about so absurdly that it is impossible to count them accurately.

The well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves.

No crime is vulgar, but all vulgarity is crime. Vulgarity is the conduct of others.

One should always be a bit improbable.

To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up.

Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live; it is asking others to live as one wishes to live.

Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.

No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist.

There are two ways of disliking art. ... One is to dislike it. The other, to like it rationally.

Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Genius lasts longer than Beauty. That accounts for the fact that we all take such pains to over-educate ourselves.

Philanthropy is the refuge of rich people who wish to annoy their fellow creatures.

Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.

There is no sin except stupidity.

Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.

It is only the superficial qualities that last. Man's deeper nature is soon found out.

All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.

The English are always degrading truths into facts. When a truth becomes a fact, it loses all its intellectual value.

The aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure. He is the very basis of civilized society.

A mask tells us more than a face.

Edited from a collection compiled by Kayla Skarbakka for the Guthrie's 2009 *The Importance of Being Earnest* play guide.
“WILDE” CHILD

“Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.”

– Oscar Wilde

Context
Oscar Wilde was born in the fall of 1854 in Dublin, Ireland. The second of three children born to Jane and William Wilde, he excelled in school and took to literature and the classics particularly. After moving to London and beginning his literary career around 1881, Wilde published essays, poems, novels and plays steadily until 1894 when he wrote The Importance of Being Earnest. He was as openly gay as one could be in 19th-century England. Wilde was put on trial for “gross indecency” and was imprisoned from 1895 to 1897. He died in Paris, France, destitute and exiled, in November 1900.

Discussion Questions
• There are many different identities we hold in our lives, such as child, sibling, friend, student or teammate. How do you behave differently when you are in one environment versus another (e.g., home versus school)? What is your identity or role when you are alone?
• In The Importance of Being Earnest, Algernon and Jack both create imaginary relations or identities to escape their public lives. If you were to create an alternate identity, who would they be and where would you go?
• Why do we hide parts of ourselves? What would happen if we revealed our “true” self to others?

Classroom Activity
Wilde spent much of his life writing the truth that he could not live. The Importance of Being Earnest is filled with subtle, and sometimes obvious, allusions to queer identity. De Profundis, a letter written near the end of his time in prison, is a deeply personal account of Wilde’s lifestyle, artistry and spirituality.
• Invite the students to write down 3–5 things that they know to be true about themselves. It can be an identity, such as their ethnic background, a strong belief or something as simple as the shoes they’re currently wearing.
• Next, have the students create a short piece of fiction that incorporates those 3–5 things. Encourage them to be as imaginative as they want — the more fantastical the world, the easier it will be to incorporate parts of themselves.
• Have the students share their list with a partner and then discuss the following:
  • What did you learn about your classmate that you didn’t know before?
  • Did you want to hear more about any of their truths?
  • Is there anything you have in common?
• Invite each group to share one or two things they learned about their partner with the class.
THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING FUNNY

“At the present moment, I am eating muffins because I am unhappy. Besides, I am particularly fond of muffins.”

- Algernon in The Importance of Being Earnest

Context

Comedy is a genre of dramatic performance having a light or humorous tone. This is achieved through comedic timing, witty dialogue and implementing humorous vocal or physical choices. The Importance of Being Earnest can be considered a satire, meaning the show engages audiences by using humor to critique British society — specifically its class system. When the play was written in 1894, it was common for playwrights to use theater as a way of communicating their opinions on social issues. Fellow playwright George Bernard Shaw called the play “extremely funny” and although the original production closed after only 86 performances, The Importance of Being Earnest was very popular with audiences.

Discussion Questions

• Reviews critiqued the play for being “heartless” and having no deeper meaning. One newspaper wrote of the play, “What can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle, whether of art or morals ... and is nothing but an absolutely wilful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality?” Do you think The Importance of Being Earnest makes a strong statement or is it just a skillful work of comedy? Can it be both? What is the value of each?

• This play combines witty humor and situational comedy to create a story that’s comedic on multiple levels. What makes a piece of art funny to you? Think of your favorite TV shows, movies or comedians: What about these works make you laugh? Do you recognize any of those comedic qualities in The Importance of Being Earnest?

• The central conflict in the play revolves around the literary device of dramatic irony (when the audience knows something that the characters do not). The audience knows that Jack and Algernon have both taken on the alias of Ernest Worthing; however, Cecily and Gwendolen believe they are engaged to the same man. What role does the audience play in the show through dramatic irony? Can you think of an instance when you experienced dramatic irony in real life?

Classroom Activity

In small groups, compile a list of words according to the prompts in the Mad Libs below. Then plug them into the scene and read aloud for the class.

CECILY: [TERM OF ENDEARMENT], Gwendolen, there is no reason why I should make a [NOUN] of it to you. Our little county [NOUN] is sure to [VERB] the fact next week. Mr. [NAME] and I are engaged to be [PAST TENSE VERB].

GWENDOLEN: My [TERM OF ENDEARMENT], Cecily, I think there must be some [ADJECTIVE] error. Mr. [SAME NAME] is engaged to me. The [NOUN] will appear in the Morning Post on [DAY OF THE WEEK] at the latest.

CECILY: I am [ADJECTIVE] you must be under some [NOUN]. Ernest, [PAST TENSE VERB] to me exactly [NUMBER] minutes ago.

GWENDOLEN: It is very [ADJECTIVE], for he asked me to be his [NOUN] yesterday afternoon at [TIME OF DAY]. If you would care to [VERB] the [NOUN], pray do so.
LADIES, LORDS AND A LOOK AT SOCIAL HYPOCRISY

“Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can’t get into it do that.”
– Lady Bracknell in The Importance of Being Earnest

Context
One of the central themes of The Importance of Being Earnest is social hierarchy and how Edwardian definitions of class determined a person’s place in British society. Throughout the play, many of the characters are navigating the barriers that come with their social standing in order to achieve their goals, and they often resort to tactics that include deceit, inventiveness, compromise and hypocrisy.

Discussion Questions
• The Edwardian class structure is divided into the upper class (people of noble birth or landowners who don’t have to work), middle class (focused on building wealth, self-improvement and education), working class (generally in service to the upper class) and underclass (people with limited access to resources, employment or education). Where do you see class structure in our modern time? If you had to label classes in your community, what would they be called?
• How do you think gender fits into the class system? How do people of different genders within the same class have distinct experiences? For example, how are the experiences of Dr. Chasuble different from those of Ms. Prism? How do Gwendolen’s options or opportunities differ from Algernon’s?
• In the play, both Jack’s and Algernon’s desires to wed are met with barriers based on class or family status. Have you ever witnessed or experienced barriers to social or personal aspirations based on modern-day class structures? (This can include intersections of race, socioeconomic status, gender and ability.)

Classroom Activity
• Round 1: On slips of paper, number each piece from one to the number of students participating (e.g., in a group of 15, there should be 15 slips of paper numbered 1–15). Have each student randomly select a number but not look at it. Students will hold their number up to their forehead so everyone can see their number except for them. Without any verbal communication, students should work together to arrange themselves in numerical order.
• Round 2: On slips of paper, write the names of each character in The Importance of Being Earnest. If you need more than nine, add other unseen characters, such as Lady Bracknell’s husband, other house staff or Mary Farquhar. Alternatively, students can work in groups of nine with the main characters of the play. Similar to Round 1, students should not look at their own slip and, without speaking, order the characters from the “lowest rank” to the “highest rank.”
• Round 3: On slips of paper, have the students write the name of one public figure (e.g., a former or current president, musician, actor, local politician, principal). Collect the slips, shuffle them and have the students select a new slip to place on their forehead without looking at it. Have the students wander around the class for two minutes and, without speaking, treat each other based on the public figure each student represents. Then ask the students to order themselves by rank or social influence based on what they observed from how their classmates treated them. Notice what happens when students assume the roles of public figures, considering “power” and “influence” across multiple sectors (arts, entertainment, politics, etc.). Then discuss the values that determine social class and influence.
• Reflection Questions:
  • What values did you use to determine rank?
  • How did moving between rounds challenge you to consider who holds power or status and how power dynamics are upheld?
  • What surprised you about this activity? Did you notice if any of your peers had different values or opinions about what order people should be in? How did you come to a decision without speaking?
**THE ORIGINAL INFLUENCER**

“Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life.”

– Oscar Wilde

**Context**

Oscar Wilde became editor of the Victorian magazine *The Woman’s World* from 1887 to 1889, transforming the publication from one that focused on what women wear to one that engaged women’s thoughts and ideas. He appealed to a growing audience of female readers, elevating “the expression of women’s opinions on all subjects of literature, art and modern life.” According to Eleanor Fitzsimons, “Wilde realized that intelligent, ambitious women were underserved by the plethora of magazines claiming to represent their interests. In response, he used *The Woman’s World* to point out the more absurd aspects of gender discrimination and to facilitate debate on the contentious issues faced by women who were attempting to enter the public sphere. He also offered a platform to emerging women writers who displayed a style that could be considered more edgy than that adopted by their peers.” In *The Woman’s World*, Wilde included serious articles about women in education and politics accompanied by style and society notes, short fiction and poetry.

**Discussion Questions**

- How do you think Wilde’s editorial experience influenced his portrayal of women in *The Importance of Being Earnest*?
- How did Wilde’s portrayals of women in his plays defy social expectations of the time period?
- Can you name a modern-day influencer who seeks to evolve or expand social norms? What media platforms do they use to influence popular culture?

**Classroom or Homework Activity**

While social media grows in popularity, our attention spans get shorter and shorter. This means that artists and creators have less time to get their points across. Invite students to prepare 15–30 seconds of live “content” explaining why they should become America’s Next Best Influencer. Remind them to consider things that could appeal to different classmates, such as fashion trends and school policies. This could be done as an individual project, with partners or in small groups.

After a student or group has presented their “content,” use these guidelines to have the students “engage” with the content by using their hands to reflect how they felt about it:

- One thumbs up = 1 point
- Two thumbs up = 2 points
- Heart shape = 3 points

Keep track of the points as they go. At the end, go “live” and announce America’s Next Best Influencer!
For Further Reading and Understanding

**BOOKS BY OSCAR WILDE**

*The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays.* Oxford University Press, 1995. (Includes Lady Windermere’s Fan, Salome, A Woman of No Importance and An Ideal Husband as well as explanatory notes.)


**BOOKS ABOUT OSCAR WILDE**


**BOOKS ABOUT THE EDWARDIAN ERA**


**PLAYS ABOUT OSCAR WILDE**


*The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde.* Irish playwright Thomas Kilroy explores the private life between Wilde and his wife, Constance, in his 1997 play. The Guthrie produced this play in 2000.

*The Invention of Love.* Tom Stoppard’s 1997 biographical play about British poet-scholar A.E. Housman transpires in part during the peak of Wilde’s career, and Wilde appears as a character. The Guthrie produced this play in 2008.

*Patience.* Gilbert and Sullivan’s 1881 comic opera lampoons the Aesthetic Movement of which Wilde was a part. The character of the poet Bunthorne has long been considered a caricature based on Oscar Wilde. Wilde helped popularize the opera in America.

**FILMS**

*Dorian Gray,* an adaptation of a Wilde’s novel The Picture of Dorian Gray directed by Oliver Parker with a screenplay by Toby Finlay. Starring Ben Barnes as Dorian Gray, Colin Firth as Henry Wotton, Rebecca Hall as Emily Wotton and Emilia Fox as Lady Victoria Wotton. 2009. 112 minutes.

*The Importance of Being Earnest,* adapted and directed by Oliver Parker. Starring Rupert Everett as Algernon, Colin Firth as Jack, Frances O’Connor as Gwendolen, Reese Witherspoon as Cecily and Judi Dench as Lady Bracknell. 2002. 97 minutes.

*An Ideal Husband,* adapted and directed by Oliver Parker. Starring Cate Blanchett as Gertrude, Minnie Driver as Mabel, Rupert Everett as Lord Goring, Julianne Moore as Mrs. Cheveley and Jeremy Northam as Sir Robert. 1999. 97 minutes.


*The Importance of Being Earnest,* adapted and directed by Anthony Asquith. Starring Michael Denison as Algernon, Michael Redgrave as Jack, Joan Greenwood as Gwendolen, Dorothy Tutin as Cecily and Edith Evans as Lady Bracknell. 1952. 95 minutes.

*The Trials of Oscar Wilde,* written and directed by Ken Hughes. Starring Peter Finch as Oscar Wilde, John Fraser as Lord Alfred Douglas, Yvonne Mitchell as Constance Wilde and Lionel Jeffries as the Marquess of Queensberry. 1960. 123 minutes.

**WEBSITES**

*The Oscar Wilde Society,* The official site of the Oscar Wilde Society includes historical and biographical information as well as updates on new publications and events. [www.oscarwildeassociation.co.uk](http://www.oscarwildeassociation.co.uk)

*The Trials of Oscar Wilde,* Created by Professor Douglas O. Linder, the site focuses on legal topics and features writings, images, law information and links concerning Wilde’s trials, including excerpts from the trial transcripts. [www.famous-trials.com/wilde](http://www.famous-trials.com/wilde)

*The 10 Most Popular Misconceptions About Oscar Wilde,* To coincide with the publication of *Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess,* Merlin Holland’s book about Wilde’s libel trial, *The Guardian* posted this list that surveys and challenges several popular views and myths about the writer’s life and work. Fun fact: Holland is Wilde’s grandson. [www.theguardian.com/books/2003/may/07/top10s.oscar.wilde](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/may/07/top10s.oscar.wilde)

*The Importance of Being Earnest (1899 publication),* Wake Forest University’s Z. Smith Reynolds (ZSR) library displays images from the 1899 first edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest.* [zsr.wfu.edu/2015/the-importance-of-being-earnest-by-oscar-wilde-1899](http://zsr.wfu.edu/2015/the-importance-of-being-earnest-by-oscar-wilde-1899)