



Oregon
Shakespeare
Festival.

2025 Study Guide



The Importance of Being Earnest Quick Facts

- First performed February 14, 1895 at St. James Theatre in King Street, London.
- It wasn't published until 1899 while Wilde was exiled in France.
- Critics didn't care much for the play. William Archer wrote: "What can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle, whether of art or morals...and is nothing but an absolutely wonderful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality?"
- Though critics might have questioned its "principles," audiences enjoyed its witty language and depiction of the silliness of the idle rich.

Illustration from *The Importance of Being Earnest* 2025 OSF play art



Who was Oscar Wilde?

- Born Oct. 16, 1854 in Dublin, Ireland. Died Nov. 30, 1900 in Paris, France.
- Wilde was the second son of Jane Wilde, a poet and Irish revolutionary, and Sir William Wilde, an eye and ear surgeon.
- His beloved younger sister, Isola, died at a young age. He carried a lock of her hair the rest of his life.
- Willie Wilde, Oscar's older brother, moved to London and became a drama critic, journalist, and editor. Linking Oscar to the theatre scene.
- Known as a witty conversationalist, he was frequently invited to dinner by the wealthy and famous. Based on fairy tales told at dinner parties, Wilde published collections of short stories intended for children.
- He is best known for his plays of the late-1880's and a novel, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1891), Oscar Wilde was author of nine plays. His most produced plays are *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Who was Oscar Wilde? Research his life. What were his contributions to literature? To theatre? These and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_Wilde
<http://www.cmgtw.com/historic/wilde/index.php>
the official website of Oscar Wilde
2. Wilde was a leader of the “aesthetic movement.” Research the movement. What does “art for art’s sake” mean? How does *The Importance of Being Earnest* reflect the movement’s values? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.fashion-era.com/aesthetics.htm>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesthetic_movement



“The way you flirt with Gwendolyn is perfectly disgraceful. It’s almost as bad as the way Gwendolyn flirts with you.”

3. Wilde stated that art was superior to life and that the one obligation was to transform life into art—to be as “artificial” as possible. Referring to your research about Oscar Wilde, consider his life as a work of art. What elements are beautiful? Dramatic? Novelistic? Comic? Tragic?
4. *The Importance of Being Earnest* has been called both a satire and a farce. What characteristics of satire and/or farce show up in the text? In what ways does the play not fit either genre?
<https://www.dbu.edu/mitchell/history-of-comedy/basicss.html>
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satire>
<https://arvadacenter.org/blog/understanding-farce-in-theatre>
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farce>
5. Define “earnest.” In what ways is earnestness a valuable trait? In what ways is it a less than valuable trait? Compare and contrast “earnestness” and “seriousness.” This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.dictionary.net/earnest>
6. Oscar Wilde was known as a great wit. What is “wit”? What examples of wit can be found in *Earnest*? What modern people are famous for their wittiness?
<https://www.umass.edu/theater/book/oscar-wilde-writer-wit>
<https://literaryterms.net/wit/>
7. Wilde lived during the Victorian era. Who was Queen Victoria? What were the values of the Victorian era? What were the social expectations that prevailed at the time of the play (1895)? For men, what behaviors

were required and what behaviors were punished? For women? These and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_Victoria
<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/sochistov.html>
http://www.fashion-era.com/a_womans_place.htm

8. Wilde subtitled the play “*A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*.” In 1895, when the play opened, what did people consider “trivial?” What did they consider “serious?” What were their opinions regarding: employment, leisure, wealth, society, education, marriage, family, morality? How have opinions changed? How have they stayed the same? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.victoriaspast.com/FrontPorch/victorianera.htm>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victorian_morality
<http://www.logicmgmt.com/1876/intro.htm>
<https://theconversation.com/actually-we-are-amused-how-the-victorians-helped-to-shape-britains-unique-sense-of-humour-82714>
9. The names of the characters are: John (Jack) Worthing, Algernon Moncrieff, Reverend Canon Chasuble, Lady Bracknell, Gwendolyn Fairfax, Cecily Cardew, Miss Prism, Merriman and Lane. What meaning can you derive from each character’s name? What does each name lead you to expect of the character?
10. What is a gentleman? How did the Victorians define the word? How is it used today? How do you account for the changes? These and other websites provide information:
<https://victorianweb.org/history/gentleman.html>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victorian_masculinity
<https://hollandmvp.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/victorian-manners-etiquette.pdf>
11. In the Victorian age, young unmarried women like Cecily and Gwendolyn would have been chaperoned during social functions and activities outside of their homes. What does it mean to be chaperoned? What was the significance of a chaperone or a lady’s companion in Victorian society? What were the dangers for a young lady who was not chaperoned? This and other websites provide information:
<https://victorian-era.org/victorian-era-courtship-rules-and-marriage.html>



Intermission Model Photo. Designed by Se Hyun Oh.

2. What is a ward? In what circumstances does a person become a ward? Who selects the ward's guardian, and what powers and responsibilities does the guardian have? How and when does a person cease to be a ward?

13. Consider the importance placed on the following issues in the Victorian era: birth order, legitimacy, parentage, social class, and gender. In what ways did these issues determine a person's future? What opportunities did a person have to determine their own future? How important are these issues today? In what ways have things changed? In what ways have they stayed the same?
<https://backinthedayof.co.uk/the-victorian-class-system>
http://victorian-era.org/victorian-era-society.html-classes_01.shtml

14. Research the conventions and practices of Victorian theatre, staging and dramatic construction. This and other websites provide information:
<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/victorian-special-effects-stage-machinery-at-alexandra-palace-alexandra-palace/MgUBF2DC1eiZKg?hl=en>
<https://victorian-era.org/19th-Century-Drama.html>



Lady Bracknell costume design by Melissa Torchia.

After seeing/reading the play

1. What's in a name? Find at least three meanings in the play's title. How does the play live up to its subtitle, "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People?" How does each character meet, and fail to meet, your expectations of a person with that name? Why are both Gwendolyn and Cecily determined to marry a man for his name?
2. Why does *The Importance of Being Earnest* continue to be such a favorite with audiences? In what ways does it seem contemporary? In what ways does it seem old-fashioned?
3. Refer to your research of Victorian theatre. Imagine how the play would have been staged in 1895 and describe your thoughts. How is the staging of the OSF production similar? Different? Why do you think there are differences between past production methods and modern ones?
4. Which characters work for a living? What do the others do? How is work viewed in this society? How have views about work changed? How are they the same?
5. Refer to your research on Victorian society. Describe how characters in the play feel about wealth, education, marriage and family. Are there differences between Jack and Algy versus Gwendolyn and Cecily? The younger characters and older ones? The working-class characters versus the wealthy?
6. Describe why each of these issues was important in Victorian society and in the play: birth order: oldest son vs. younger son. Marriage between first cousins: what was acceptable in the Victorian era? What is allowed now? Why have the rules changed?
7. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is subtitled "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People." What trivial pursuits occupy the people in the play? What is the theatrical effect of their taking these pursuits seriously?



Act I Model Photo. Designed by Se Hyun Oh.

After seeing/reading the play (Continued)

8. What roles—social, familial and moral—are the women expected to play, and how do they fulfill them? What roles are expected of the men, and how do they fulfill them? How do the interests and goals of the women differ from those of the men?
9. Why does Jack want to marry Gwendolyn? Why does Gwendolyn want to marry Jack? Why does Cecily want to marry Algernon? Why does Algernon want to marry Cecily? What is Lady's Bracknell's opinion of each of these arrangements? From this variety of motives and ideals, what can you conclude about Wilde's vision of the romantic, social and financial implications of marriage in the Victorian era?

Define "earnest." In what ways is earnestness a valuable trait? In what ways is it a less than valuable trait?

10. What are Lady Bracknell's requirements for a suitable marriage partner? For herself? For Gwendolyn? For Algernon? Who passes her tests, who fails, and why?
11. What is the source of Lady Bracknell's power?
12. According to Cecily, what function does a diary serve? According to Gwendolyn? Compose a short passage from Cecily's diary. From Gwendolyn's. From Lady Bracknell's.
13. Describe the relationship of Cecily and Gwendolyn. What brings them together initially? What makes them rivals? How do they conduct their warfare? What ordeal reconciles them?
14. Language is very important in this play, including the tone, the style and the words used. Discuss how characters speak to each other. How do the tone, the style and the words used vary depending on who the character is speaking to? How does this change throughout the play? When do characters say what they mean? When do they not?
15. What is the significance of christening? At what point in the play is it treated trivially? At what point is it treated seriously?
16. What meals are served during the play? What food is consumed at each? Which foods are fashionable? Which are unfashionable? What determines the status of food? For what purposes, other than for nutrition, is food used? What foods are "fashionable" nowadays and what are out of fashion?

17. The play presents many contrasts. Pick a few from the list below and describe ways these concepts show up in the play. What do these contrasts tell you about the values of the characters and the society in which they live?
 - Private vs. public
 - Earnest vs. trivial
 - Honesty vs. dishonesty
 - Country vs. city
 - Men vs. women
18. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, both Jack and Algy have alter-egos. Describe each. How are the alter-egos similar to and different from the "real" men? What can the alter-egos do that Jack and Algy cannot? What dangers do Jack and Algy run into when their alter-egos are in control? Name other instances of alter-egos that occur in the play.
19. Both *Earnest* and *Merry Wives* look at the dynamics between couples. What differences are there between those we meet in each of the plays? In what ways are they the same? How does the society they inhabit influence the way they treat one another?
20. Though the couples are brought together in different ways, both *As You Like It* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* feature couples courting. How do the depictions of courtship differ? Which couples feel like they'll "make it?" Which seem unlikely to be successful? Why?

Flash from the Past

For our 90th Anniversary Season we thought it would be fun to see pictures from past productions of *The Importance of Being Earnest*

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Kevin Kenerly and Julie Ota in OSF's 2005 production.



Michael Kevin in OSF's 1973 production.

21. Many of the shows in this season feature older generations interacting with and influencing the behavior of the youth around them. How do the younger characters from the following plays react to their elders: *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Jitney, Shane, Into the Woods*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Fat Ham*, *As You Like It*, and *Quixote Nuevo*. How do the elder characters react to the younger?



Jack Worthing Costume Rendering by Melissa Torchia.

The Aesthetic Movement and Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde is associated with an artistic movement called the Aesthetic Movement, which arose in opposition to the constraints of the Victorian Era. He and other artists including writers, painters, poets, sculptors, architects, and designers pushed against the Victorian insistence on depicting moral good art. Landscapes, Biblical and classical references were commonly used to convey moral, industrious messages. In reaction to this emphasis on industry, idealism, reform, and education, the Aesthetic Movement formed.



Proserpina. Aesthetic Era painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Devoted to “art for art’s sake,” the aesthetes believed that beauty should be the primary goal of one’s life, from dressing and decorating one’s home to artistic pursuits like writing, painting, and sculpting. These artists were pushing against factory produced furnishings, clothing, and styles influenced by industrialism. Rather than highlighting the external energy and productivity of classically Victorian works, aesthetes were drawn toward the internal drama of a subject. Ironically, the art produced by this movement in reaction to the harsh reality of post-Industrial Revolution Britain, was most often purchased by wealthy industrialists.



Victorian Era painting by Ford Madox Brown, 1865

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