Literary Text: *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde (Signet Classics, 2004)

Plot Summary

Algernon Moncrieff and Ernest Worthing are best friends. One day, they reveal to each other that they both deceptively lead double lives: in the city, they are known as someone different than in the country. “Ernest” is really Jack. Algernon pretends to have an invalid friend named Bunbury. Both men find this advantageous, especially in avoiding unwelcome social obligations. Jack is interested in Gwendolyn Fairfax, cousin to Algernon and daughter to Lady Bracknell, who disapproves of Jack because he is an orphan and doesn’t know the whereabouts of his parents. Algernon is interested in meeting Jack’s ward, Cecily, in the country. He goes to the country and pretends to be Ernest, Jack’s long-lost younger brother. Jack is shocked and dismayed to find him there, as he had just “killed” Ernest earlier that day. In pursuing their love interests, Algernon and Jack find that both of the women are mostly in love with the name “Ernest.” When the two women meet, each insists that she is the one engaged to “Ernest.” Both Jack and Algernon appear and their deceptions are exposed. They are forgiven after explaining themselves, and the women agree to marry them only after each man announces his intention to be re-christened as “Ernest.” Through a miraculous coincidence, Jack is revealed to be Algernon’s elder brother and all is resolved happily.

Essential Questions

**What is the value of your identity?** Both Algernon and Jack take advantage of their fake doubles in order to elude the demanding and undesirable social constraints. In certain situations, they love to pretend to be another person in order to make things different for themselves. This issue of wishing to escape the world you live in to become someone different is still very relevant today.

**What are the effects of using humor and satire to expose humanity’s foibles?** Oscar Wilde uses farcical elements in this play to mock the arrogance and pretentiousness of the Victorian aristocracy. This play seems to have nothing at stake because the world it presents is so obviously artificial; however, below the surface of the lighthearted comedy is a serious subtext that aims at ridiculing the self-righteous hypocrisy that Wilde perceived in the world around him.

Organizational Patterns

Part satire, part comedy of errors, and part intellectual farce, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a comic play. It is comprised of three acts. In Act I, the audience primarily sees interaction between Algernon and his best friend Jack, or “Ernest,” at Algernon’s London apartment. Lady Bracknell, Algernon’s stuffy aunt, and Gwendolyn, her daughter and Jack’s love interest, also appear. Act II takes place in the garden at the Manor House, Jack’s country house, and introduces Jack’s niece Cecily, as well as her tutor, Miss Prism, and Dr. Chausable, the reverend of the church near Jack’s house. This act also builds the action rapidly and brings major conflict as Gwendolyn and Cecily confront each other and begin to argue over who really belongs with “Ernest,” and Algernon and Jack squabble as well. Of course, all action is resolved in Act III, in which Lady Bracknell arrives and the mess is all straightened out. The end is predictable, with three couples enthusiastically embracing each other, and Jack saying that he, for the first time in his life, realizes the vital Importance of Being Earnest.
Issues Related to this Study of Literature

THEME

Hypocrisy vs. Sincerity – Wilde wrote this play to show his contempt for the self-righteous moralism and superficiality he saw in the Victorian society around him. All of the characters in this book, to one degree or another, reveal their hypocritical natures to the audience. Algernon speaks of marriage in a trifling manner and then becomes perplexed when his servant has lax views on the matter. He is alarmed that as a whole, the lower class doesn’t seem to have much moral responsibility and they aren’t setting a good standard for the upper class. Jack wants to be christened as Ernest, and asks the reverend Chausable if he has a free afternoon in which Jack might pop in and be christened. Gwendolyn and Cecily are both empty-headed and in love with the idea of being engaged to someone called Ernest, for that name “inspires absolute confidence.” However, Jack and Algernon have both lied about their names, so neither of them is really “earnest.” Lady Bracknell doesn’t care one jot for people of humble backgrounds. She denies her approval for her nephew Algernon to be engaged to Cecily until it is revealed that Cecily is heiress to a rather large fortune. Algernon and Jack both act hypocritically by creating fictitious doubles to escape to. Earnestness and sincerity are the opposite of morality in this play. When characters in the play use the word serious, they tend to mean “trivial.”

The Nature of Marriage – Marriage is of great importance in the play. As noted above, the question of the nature of marriage is first discussed between Algernon and his butler, Lane. Algernon and Jack then discuss the nature of marriage when they dispute about whether a marriage proposal is business or pleasure. When Gwendolyn becomes engaged to Jack and informs her aunt, Lady Bracknell says, “Pardon me, but you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to some one, I will inform you of the fact.” Wilde illustrates the Victorian expectations and conventions of marriage through Lady Bracknell’s interviewing Jack to find out if he is suitable enough for her daughter. These conventions include, first and foremost, social status and income. No one marries for love. Gwendolyn and Cecily obsess over the idea of being married to someone with such a refined and confident name as “Ernest.” They seem also to be interested in their mates solely because they both have dishonorable backgrounds (Gwendolyn is glad to hear that Jack is an orphan; Cecily is excited by Algernon’s “wicked” reputation). Their desire to marry someone named “Ernest” demonstrates that their romantic aspirations pend on titles more than character.

The Societal Constraints of Morality – Victorian character and “morality” have many other names in this play: pomposity, boringness, complacency, smugness, conceit, self-importance, and aloofness. What one person considers to be moral does not always reflect what morality really is. Algernon and Jack are forced to invent counterfeit identities so as to be able to escape the rigid and rules of society. Wilde mocks the idea of Victorian morality and their conventions and rules of how people should act and what they should do, and, more importantly, how people shouldn’t act and what they shouldn’t do. In a sense, the characters who embrace irreverence, triviality and “wickedness” are the ones who most likely have the greatest chance of arriving at sobriety and integrity.

Idleness and Leisure of the Upper Class – In this play, Wilde exposes the empty, trivial lives of the upper class. Algernon values pleasure above everything else and loves to eat, gamble, and gossip. He and the other characters trivialize serious matters and solemnize trivial matters; Algernon is more distressed by the absence of cucumber sandwiches than by the fact that Lady Bracknell’s arrival signifies a serious clash in social standing with his friend Jack. Algernon visits Cecily in the country and pretends to be the long-lost younger brother Ernest. Jack has already told everyone that Ernest had died of a severe chill, but Algernon doesn’t seem to think this a serious issue at all. While Jack begs him to leave, Algernon sits in the garden eating muffins, refusing to budge. Wilde believes in the philosophy of aestheticism, which argues that art should be appreciated for art’s sake, and nothing more. It does not need to serve a social purpose; it should

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really be “useless”. It should only be useful for our appreciation of beauty. Thus, the idleness in this play is meant to be more than laziness. It is the product of cultivating an esteemed sense of aesthetic uselessness.

**Dual Identities** – Wilde explores the theme of dual identities primarily through Algernon’s “Bunburying” in the country and Jack’s fake younger brother, Ernest. This duality allows the men to escape the oppressive conventions of society and to become another person. Cecily also creates a second identity. She writes letters between herself and Ernest, her guardian’s younger brother, before she has even met him. She even becomes engaged to him, and then breaks it off, because “it would hardly have been a really serious engagement if it hadn’t been broken off at least once. But I forgave you before the week was out.” Unlike real men, who are free to come and go as they please, Cecily is able to control this version of Ernest. In the end, the fact that Jack has been inadvertently leading a life of dual identities shows that our alter egos are not as far from our “real” identities as we would think.

**Other Themes** – Manners, Shallowness, Critique of Marriage as a Social Tool, and Farce

**SETTING**

_The Importance of Being Earnest_ takes place in late 19th century England. Act I takes place in London at Algernon’s downtown apartment on Half Moon Street. Act II and III take place in Hertfordshire, a rural country not far from London, at Manor House, Jack’s country estate and the place where Cecily, Miss Prism and the reverend Chausable live. Usually, having two differing locales – like the lavish London of the 19th century and an unspoiled countryside estate – would mark a stark contrast for readers. But Wilde is parodying Victorian high society. Algernon’s and Jack’s city homes are just as opulent as the Manor House in the country. Indeed, the same frivolous tone established in the city transfers directly over into the country estate. Both Act I and Act III are set in separate “morning-rooms.” Only the second act takes place outdoors among the trees and rose gardens. Jack and Cecily have much the same agenda as the urban aristocrats do. They educate themselves as much as possible to improve their prospects for the future. Cecily is just as vain as Gwendolyn is. Even the respected instructor Miss Prism has a slippery past involved with Lady Bracknell in London. So Wilde makes the country setting just as frivolous as the city setting. He makes a strong point that the Victorian aristocracy maintains the same values – flirtation, vanity, and shallowness – no matter where they are.

**CONFLICT**

Jack faces several obstacles to his marriage to Gwendolyn. One obstacle is presented in the form of Lady Bracknell, who heavily objects to what she refers to as Jack’s “origins,” or his inability to determine his family background and who his parents are. Another obstacle for Jack is Gwendolyn’s obsession with the name “Ernest.” She does not know Jack’s real name.

Algernon presents another large conflict when he appears in the countryside and claims to be Ernest, Jack’s long-lost younger brother. Cecily meets him and falls in love with him within a few minutes. This is problematic because Jack has just told the reverend and Miss Prism that his younger brother has died suddenly in Paris of a severe chill. Algernon and Jack dispute. Jack insists that Algernon leave at once; of course, he refuses.

Lady Bracknell arrives at Manor House in pursuit of her daughter. She is surprised to find that Algernon and Cecily are engaged. She doubts her suitability as a wife for her nephew until the size of Cecily’s trust fund is

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revealed. However, stalemate occurs when Jack denies his consent to the marriage of his ward until Lady Bracknell consents to his marriage to Gwendolyn.

RISING ACTION

The climax of the action (and conflict) arises when Gwendolyn and Cecily discover that both Jack and Algernon have been deceiving them and that neither is really named “Ernest.”

RESOLUTION

The impasse is broken by the appearance of Miss Prism, Cecily’s governess. Lady Bracknell recognizes Miss Prism, who was a family nursemaid thirty years ago. One day she left Lord Bracknell’s home with a baby boy in a pram and never returned. Miss Prism explains that she had accidentally put the novel she was reading in the pram, and put the baby in a handbag, which she left at Victoria Station. Jack produces the very same handbag, proving that he is the lost baby, and therefore Algernon’s elder brother. Lady Bracknell tells Jack that she remembers him being named after his late father. After checking the Army Lists for General Moncrieff’s first name, Jack finds that he was in fact named Ernest after all. Three happy couples – Ernest and Gwendolyn, Algernon and Cecily, and Dr. Chausable and Miss Prism – embrace. Lady Bracknell comments on Ernest’s triviality, to which he replies, “On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I’ve now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.”

POINT OF VIEW/NARRATIVE VOICE

Because *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a play, there is no narrative voice. The story is revealed to an omniscient audience of whom the characters are not aware. The audience is given all the clues to comprehend the misunderstanding long before the characters figure it out.

AFFECTIVE ISSUES RELATED TO THE WORK

Every student, at one time or another, feels insecure in his or her own shoes. Every student, at some time, would love to escape from the world they live in. Wilde’s description of “Bunburying” and dual identities will be exciting and intriguing to young people; this issue of wanting to escape from society can be brought out in instruction.

Students may also be able to relate to feeling like some things are treated far too seriously and other things that are really important are treated too lightly. They may ask themselves: What is really important in life? How should important things be treated? In which situations is it acceptable to treat things more lightly? When something is important to you, should it be important to everyone?

Students may also consider honesty as it relates to their own lives. They may ask themselves: What is earnestness and honesty? When do you feel justified in not revealing everything? When is it morally wrong not to be honest about everything? How much should honesty weigh should the quality of honesty have in a relationship? Do you hold others to the same standard of truthfulness that you do yourself?

Students will also be encouraged to develop an appreciation and enjoyment for reading texts of this humorous and exaggerative nature. Hopefully they will find Wilde’s writing to be entertaining on the surface as well as thought-provoking on a deeper level.

VOCABULARY ISSUES

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Although written over a hundred years ago, Wilde's play is simply constructed and the language is generally easy to understand. However, this is a British text and there are spelling differences (such as “neighbourhood”) and some words that are not used by Americans (such as “perambulator”). Other vocabulary issues are caused by the pontificating of the stuffy Lady Bracknell and also occasionally the reverend Chausable; students may experience trouble with defining words such as “Quixotic,” “canonical,” “effrontery,” “apoplexy,” “machinations,” and “credulity.” Not knowing the definitions of some of these words could interfere with clear comprehension; therefore, it is necessary that students note these foreign terms and receive help in defining them when they come across them in reading the play.

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

To fully appreciate *The Importance of Being Earnest*, students must first have an understanding of 19th century Victorian England. It is important to know that England was experiencing a long period of prosperity under Queen Victoria's reign. Britain was a very class-based society. There was a severe contrast between the rich and the poor. London exploded with growth and factories filled with immigrant workers. Imminent problems such as slums, poverty, child labor, and prostitution ensued. The aristocracy of this period turned a blind eye to the horrors of their day and amused themselves in frivolous parties and social gatherings. This was a time of “decadence” for them. Students will more fully appreciate the novel if a context is built about the massive growth that Britain experienced during this era, the palpable distinction between classes, and the frivolity and superficiality expressed by the elite. They should also have a basic understanding of Aestheticism, the movement led by Wilde that argued that it was possible for art to be appreciated merely for the sake of art, and nothing more.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS OF DIVERSITY

This play has little to no mention of race or ethnicity. It does, however, describe primarily the upper crust of society, so there is the potential for discussing economic diversity. Students should be aware of the rigid class system that existed in 19th century British society. They should realize that the aristocracy’s turning its back on the rest of the poor in society was detrimental in many ways. Lady Bracknell’s treatment of Jack at the beginning of the play, for example, is unacceptable and demeaning. It’s important to discuss why some people treat others differently, even sometimes within their own race, because of class or economic status.

GENDER ISSUES

*The Importance of Being Earnest* was written in the late 19th century at a period in time when gender roles in society were not only significant to the structure of society but were highly restrictive to individuals. This was especially true for women, who were seen as the upholders of morals in polite society and were expected to act accordingly. This play challenges society and its inclination to categorize and expect certain behavior of people based on what gender they are; most of the women represent an inversion of accepted Victorian practices with regard to gender roles. Lady Bracknell assumes the role of the man and father in interviewing Jack as a potential suitor for her daughter; this was (and still is) typically a father’s task. Gwendolyn and Cecily take charge of their own romantic lives, while the men stand by watching and in relatively passive roles. Cecily and Gwendolyn actually discuss changing gender roles in their conversation about male domesticity, indicating their belief that “home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man.”

RESEARCH ISSUES/PROJECT IDEAS

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Research Paper

Oscar 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?

Define “earnest.” In what ways is earnestness an admirable trait? In what ways is it a less than admirable trait? Compare and contrast “earnestness” and “seriousness.”

Wilde subtitled the play “A Trivial Comedy for Serious People.” In the late 19th century, 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, and morality? How have opinions changed? How have they stayed the same?

Why does *The Importance of Being Earnest* continue to be such a favorite with audiences? What makes Wilde’s writing so good? In what ways does it still seem contemporary? In what ways does it seem old-fashioned?

Projects

Map out the class structure in London at the time, determining what it took to be considered aristocracy, nobility, middle class, farmer, etc. On a poster, make a chart showing the different social status levels and what sorts of occupations each might have, what kind of lifestyle they might have led, what type of clothing they might have worn, and any other factor that would be different between classes.

Considering that Wilde wrote this play aiming to make fun of the hypocritical nature of his society, choose one aspect of society today that you find troubling and phony. Write a short piece, satirizing this element of society in a way that Wilde might have done.

Gather costumes and props and act out scenes from the play. Make the scene as authentic as possible.

In a multimedia project, gather images, sound clips, and video clips that relate to your definitions of “identity” and “earnestness.” Organize your material into a coherent slide show and present your findings to the class.

As a class, separate into two groups and have a debate of whether or not Algernon was being “earnest” the entire time (as opposed to Jack, who openly and hypocritically “killed” his fake brother). This debate could work with a number of issues in the play.

ENRICHMENT RESOURCES

Excerpts from Wilde’s other works
Websites that define and describe the Aestheticism movement
Informational websites and books about the Victorian Period in 19th century Britain
Clips from “Saturday Night Live” to show modern satirical societal commentary
Images of artifacts from the Victorian Age

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