Directed Reading Thinking Activity
The Importance of Being Earnest (Signet Classics, 2004)

Purpose of the Activity
Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a lighthearted comedy on the surface, but on a deeper level, it has a serious subtext that takes aim at the hypocrisies and artificiality of the Victorian society. This text cannot be fully understood or appreciated without some guidance and background knowledge provided by the teacher. The purpose of this DRTA is to encourage students to engage in critical thinking before beginning a novel that will aid in activating background knowledge prior to reading as well as comprehending the text better during reading. Since this activity is meant to help students tap into their background knowledge, it should be done before starting the reading. Students will be able to use background knowledge and information to help them make predictions about what will happen next in the play.

Objectives
Students will:
1. Tap prior knowledge of 19th century British society to make predictions about the play
2. Search existing schemata for knowledge about the author and the genre
3. Make inferences as to why the author chose this particular title
4. Determine the definition of *satire* and why it may be important in this play
5. Make predictions, based on background knowledge, as to what will happen next

Directions

Step One
Ask the students, “What do we know about the Victorians?” Have the students say what they know about this era in general. Students might not know very much, but write down everything they say on the board. Draw lines, underline, and connect the things they write down so it starts to make sense for them.

Step Two
After the students have exhausted themselves, start filling in the gaps. Instruct them about the manners and conventions of British society in the 19th century. Tell them about the main characteristics of this era: incredible prosperity, industrialization, slums, prostitution, the rise of a middle class, the increase in the gap between the rich and the poor, and the absurd pomposity of the upper crust of society. It is important to be very explicit and descriptive in this step of teaching. Having this background knowledge and understanding how Victorian society was and how the classes were divided is crucial to student understanding and appreciation of the novel. Use as many images, film clips, and other tools to keep your students interested and engaged in the learning during this step. During the lecture, be sure that students are recording and taking notes.

Step Three
The theme and nature of this play requires that students have a good understanding of the meaning of the term “satire.” Begin by asking the students to define this term and ask what they know about how it is generally used in writing. Write their ideas and responses on the board.

After hearing all student answers, once again, fill in the gaps. Help them come up with a strong definition of the term and write that on the board as well.

Now have them use the definition. Give each student time to write down a few satirical sentences. Ask each student to pick their favorite one, and then go around the room hearing all the sentences. This will reinforce what has been taught and ensure that every student understands the term.

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Step Four
Have a modern example to help the students see how satire is relevant and still used in our texts today. Show a three-minute clip of a Saturday Night Live skit portraying a debate between Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton. After the clip, discuss how and why this is a good depiction of political satire. Ask the students to write down the answers.

Step Five
Explain to students that we will start reading the play as a class, and we will be stopping at predetermined points to discuss what is happening, and what we expect will happen next. Ask students to fill out answers on their worksheet as we go through them. Stop at the following points to ask questions to the class to check comprehension:

- Page 2, after Lane’s comment about marriage and Algernon’s assessment of Lane’s low standards (Why do you think Algernon feels this way? What was it that Lane said that provoked Algernon to conclude that the lower class has no moral responsibility?).
- Page 3, after Algernon says, “Divorces were made in Heaven” (How would you characterize the way Algernon and Jack communicate with each other? What are they talking about here? Why does Jack call his nice neighbors “perfectly horrid?” Can you detect some patterns in their speech?).
- Page 7, after Jack tells Algernon that he is Ernest when in the country and Jack when in town (How does Algernon react to this shocking news? Why? Why do you think they are treating their identities so trivially?).

Step Six
Assign the students to read the rest of Act I for homework. Assign a writing assignment. Students are to make a list of the serious things that they noticed were treated trivially in what they read. Then they are to write an analysis of why the characters are behaving this way, given what they have learned about Victorian society. Then they are to write of a time in which something serious and important to them was treated lightly by others, and how it made them feel.

Assessment
Students’ involvement in the class discussion will display how well they understand the text, the characters, and the heavy satire. The questions and discussion will encourage them to use background knowledge to negotiate meaning of what is happening. The writing assignment will encourage them to explore seriousness vs. triviality, one of the main themes in the play, and how it relates to their own lives.

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The Importance of Being Earnest: Act I
Directed Reading Thinking Activity

Page 2

Why do you think Algernon feels the way he does about marriage?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

What did Lane say that provoked Algernon to conclude that the lower class has no moral responsibility?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

Page 3

How would you characterize the way Algernon and Jack communicate with each other?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

What are Algernon and Jack talking about?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

Why does Jack call his nice neighbors “perfectly horrid?” What patterns can you detect in his speech?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

Page 7

How does Algernon react to the news that Jack is Ernest in the country and Jack in town? Why?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

Why do you think both Algernon and Jack are treating their own identities so trivially?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
Finish reading Act I. Along the way, make a list of the serious things that you notice are being treated trivially.

Then, using what you have learned about Oscar Wilde and the moral conventions of the Victorian society, write an analysis of why you think the characters are behaving this way.

Finally, write about a time when something important and serious to you was treated too lightly by other people. How did it make you feel? Why?

This assignment should be two double-spaced pages, and it is due the next time we meet in class.