The Importance of Being Earnest
by Oscar Wilde

BYU English 378
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*the Concept Analysis, Bibliography, and Taxonomy Unit Plan give more ideas for pre-reading, during reading, and after reading than are listed here
Rationale for Teaching

The Importance of Being Earnest

Appropriate Grade Level: 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup>
Unit Length: 1-2 weeks

I chose to put together a unit on this play basically because of the appeal it’s had for me ever since high school. As a comedy of manners it’s refreshing to read or watch just because of its simplicity and quick-witted humor. You and your students can laugh together at the triviality and absurdity of the whole thing.

At the same time, however, the play can teach some wonderful concepts. There are the literary terms such as satire and irony that the students can be taught through this play, but then there are also deeper concepts that the satire pulls out. I’ve seen this play a number of times, but to actually talk about it in a classroom setting would be a treat with all the underlying themes. Decadence is one of those themes and can be examined both as we use the term now to mean self-indulgence and as it applied to Victorian England and specifically Oscar Wilde himself as a decadent. Within that is room for talking about Victorian views on marriage, society, morality, and honesty as they relate to the play and perhaps looking at those things in relation to our modern age, as well.

Probably the best teaching angle of the play comes from the title itself. The unit I’ve designed through the taxonomy guide culminates with the evaluative question: what is it important to be earnest about? This is a great opportunity for the students to reflect on and discuss what they value and what things they feel should be taken seriously and what shouldn’t be taken so seriously. Through this simple question they can begin to recognize or develop their own worldviews.

The unit is likely best taught to more mature high school students, such as those probably the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade, just because with satire they have to be able to look beyond the literal structure of the play to catch the underlying messages. Because the play is so short the unit will likely take no more than a week or two, although the bibliography gives ideas for other works that can be taught or looked at in connection with The Importance of Being Earnest to create a longer unit.