The Importance of Being Earnest
by Oscar Wilde
25 July – 16 August
Dunstan Playhouse

duration approx: Approx 2 hours & 30 mins (including interval)
suitable for Years 10 - 12
DWS performance followed by a 20 - 30 min Q&A session
Index

Index..................................................................................................................................................4
CAST & CREATIVE TEAM ..................................................................................................................5
PLAYWRIGHT....................................................................................................................................6
OSCAR WILDE ....................................................................................................................................6
DIRECTOR...........................................................................................................................................8
  GEORDIE BROOKMAN ..................................................................................................................8
ACTOR PROFILES ..............................................................................................................................10
  Yalin Ozucelik (John Worthing, J.P.) ............................................................................................10
SYNOPSIS..........................................................................................................................................12
PLOT....................................................................................................................................................13
CHARACTERS.....................................................................................................................................16
THEMES.............................................................................................................................................20
STYLE................................................................................................................................................27
GLOSSARY........................................................................................................................................28
DESIGNER..........................................................................................................................................31
SET DESIGN.......................................................................................................................................33
COSTUME DESIGN............................................................................................................................34
INTERESTING READING....................................................................................................................35
ESSAY QUESTIONS.............................................................................................................................42
Immediate Reactions.........................................................................................................................44
Design Roles.......................................................................................................................................45
REFERENCES.......................................................................................................................................46
## CAST & CREATIVE TEAM

### CREATIVE TEAM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Geordie Brookman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designer</td>
<td>Ailsa Paterson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting Designer</td>
<td>Gavin Norris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composer</td>
<td>Stuart Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>Yasmin Gurreebou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accent Coach</td>
<td>Simon Stollery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### CAST

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Actor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Worthing, J.P.</td>
<td>Yalin Ozucelik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algernon Moncrieff</td>
<td>Nathan O’Keefe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev. Canon Chasuble Merriman Lane</td>
<td>Rory Walker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Bracknell</td>
<td>Nancye Hayes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax</td>
<td>Anna Steen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecily Cardew</td>
<td>Lucy Fry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Prism</td>
<td>Caroline Mignone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### PRODUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Company Stage Manager</td>
<td>Melanie Selwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Stage Manager</td>
<td>Alex Hayley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde was a novelist, playwright, poet, critic and celebrity in late 19th century London. He wrote nine plays, one novel and several poems, articles and reviews.

Born on 16 October 1854 in Ireland, he was the youngest of three siblings. With his father a surgeon and his mother a poet, Wilde grew up in an eccentric but well-educated environment. Whilst never rich, Wilde was a socialite and was always perfectly dressed.

Well known for being a man of great wit and friendliness, Wilde was a beloved party guest who would entertain his companions with amusing stories and conversation. He was also noticed for his flamboyant dress sense, wearing velvet coats and silk shirts. In 1874 he won a scholarship to study the classics at Oxford University. Here he began to develop his own style of aesthetics; the study of beauty and art for art's sake.

After he graduated he travelled through Europe, wrote award-winning poetry and in 1884 he married Constance Lloyd, the daughter of a barrister. Wilde became an editor, published essays and a collection of fairy tales called *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1889) and eventually published his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).

Wilde’s written characters regularly have two sides to themselves; the side that is socially accepted by those around them and a concealed or secret side that must remain hidden. In *Dorian Gray*, Dorian is seen as handsome, young and extravagant, but hides his dark portrait that shows his true, horrifying inner self. In *An Ideal Husband*, Sir Robert must appear as the perfect high society husband, but hides a past of political corruption and blackmail. And in *The Importance of Being Earnest* Jack wants to be accepted as a rich, aristocratic dandy, but moonlights as Ernest a man of ill-repute.

*Dorian Gray* focused on the darker side of aesthetics, commenting that life could not be judged by looks alone and that excess does not necessarily mean happiness. The character of Dorian was shameless and the novel was fiercely criticised for its lustful and potentially homosexual nature.

The novel caught the attention of the young and vibrant Lord Alfred Douglas, the son of the Marquess of Queensbury. Douglas, known to Wilde as Bosie, became the writer’s greatest companion and the main passion in his life. For years, Wilde had been aware of his own homosexual tendencies, but as it was illegal in England at the time, he never acted upon them before 1886 and even then it was in secret.

After writing a series of murder mysteries and ghost stories, Wilde turned his eyes to playwriting. His first play, *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (staged at St. James Theatre in 1893) was a roaring success. He then wrote *Salome* and *A Woman of No Importance*. This was followed by poems, and in 1894 he wrote his final two plays *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* opened in London in February 1895 and was Wilde’s biggest triumph to date. It was apparent that the two main characters of Jack and Algernon were heavily based on Wilde himself, both embodying the role of a witty, social dandy.

However, a scandal arose soon after the play’s release. Angered by his son’s relationship with Wilde, the Marquess of Queensbury accused Wilde of homosexual activity and Wilde was put on trial. The jury
found him guilty and he was sentenced to two years in prison with hard labour, which was the severest punishment that could be given at the time.

Life in prison ruined Wilde and his health began to fail. Upon his release he found most of his friends had left him, his wife Constance had filed for a legal separation and he was socially rejected. He moved permanently to France, where Douglas would visit him. On his deathbed Wilde jibed, “I am dying as I have lived, beyond my means.”

He died on November 30, 1900 of cerebral meningitis at the age of 46.

**List of Works**

*Poems (1881)*
- *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* (1889 fairy stories)
- *Lord Arthur Saville's Crime and Other Stories* (1891 mystery stories)
- *House of Pomegranates* (1891 fairy stories)
- *Intentions* (1891 essays)
- *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891 novel)
- *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891 political essay)
- *De Profundis* (1897 a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas)
- *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898 poem)

*Plays*

*Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892)
- *A Woman of No Importance* (1893)
- *An Ideal Husband* (1895)
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)
GEORDIE BROOKMAN

Geordie is the Artistic Director of State Theatre Company. Since graduating from Flinders University Drama Centre in 2001 Geordie has directed work around Australia, the UK and Asia. His State Theatre Company directing credits include The Seagull, Maggie Stone, Hedda Gabler, The Kreutzer Sonata, Speaking In Tongues, romeo&juliet, Ghosts, Attempts on Her Life, The Dumb Waiter, Ruby Moon and Hot Fudge, Toy Symphony (Queensland Theatre Company & State Theatre Company), Knives In Hens (Malthouse & State Theatre Company). Other directing credits include Spring Awakening: The Musical (Sydney Theatre Company), Baghdad Wedding (Belvoir), Metro Street (Arts Asia Pacific, Power Arts, Daegu International Musicals Festival and State Theatre Company), The City and Tender (nowyesnow), Marathon, Morph, Disco Pigs and The Return (Fresh Track), Tiny Dynamite (Griffin), Macbeth and The Laramie Project (AC Arts).

His productions have won or been nominated for Helpmann, Greenroom, Sydney Critics Circle, Adelaide Critics Circle and Curtain Call awards.

He has also worked as a producer, dramaturg, teacher, event director and curator for organisations including the Adelaide Festival, The National Play Festival, University of Wollongong, Australian Theatre for Young People, Australian Fashion Week and Queensland Theatre Company.
FROM THE DIRECTOR

Oscar Wilde was a remarkably prescient human. Part of the reason his beautifully ridiculous play remains an enduring challenge for artists and a delight for audiences is because he manages to aim all his satirical and absurdist powers at a core group of innate human flaws while retaining a unique warmth.

*Earnest* is one of those legendary texts that, as a theatre practitioner, you feel somewhat intimidated by and through my student years I found it oddly easy to avoid engaging with it. I loved Wilde as a character (Neil Armfield’s production of David Hare’s *Judas Kiss* with a towering performance by Billie Brown as Wilde still sparkles in the memory), but I skirted around his texts.

That all changed when I was lucky enough to encounter the anarchically inventive British theatre makers *Ridiculusmus* and their two man version of *Earnest*. Their version of Act III remains one of the best pieces of physical comedy I’ve seen. Since then, I’ve devoured a lot of Wilde’s work and am thrilled to now throw myself up against the behemoth that is *Earnest*. Divining the moments when to break the ever present code of manners (who knew that doing that with your gloves meant that!?) or cut across the extraordinary musicality of his text has been invigorating and made for a wonderful, silly rehearsal room.

It is a play about many things. Identity, lust, control, gender, class and hypocrisy as well as countless other themes flow within it, touched on as lightly as a feather by Wilde’s wit and perception. But in the end, *Earnest* is about people acting like a bunch of idiots in the pursuit of love and happiness. Now, when we live more than ever in what Lady Bracknell would call ‘a world of surfaces’, I think it’s important to remind ourselves that acting like an idiot in the pursuit of love and happiness is a seriously important thing.
Yalin Ozucelik (John Worthing, J.P.)
Yalin last performed in Adelaide in John Doyle’s play Vere [Faith] (State Theatre Company/ Sydney Theatre Company co-production). Earlier this year, Yalin received a Sydney Theatre Award for his performance of the title role in Sport For Jove’s outdoor production of Cyrano de Bergerac. Last year he performed in This Is Where We Live for Just Visiting/Griffin Independent at Griffin Theatre and toured Bell Shakespeare’s Henry 4. In 2012 he toured Europe in Gross Und Klein for the Sydney Theatre Company.

Other theatre credits include: A Midsummer Night’s Dream, As You Like It, The Tempest, Comedy Of Errors (Sport For Jove); Romeo & Juliet, King Lear (Bell Shakespeare); Frost/Nixon (Melbourne Theatre Company); The Lost Echo, Blood Wedding (STC); When The Rain Stops Falling (Brink); Baghdad Wedding, The Kiss (Belvoir); The Bald Soprano (NIDA Productions); A Beautiful Life (Matrix/La Boite/Brisbane Festival); Zig Zag St, X-Stacy, Romeo and Juliet, After January, Milo’s Wake (La Boite); Seems Like Yesterday (Kooemba Jarra); The Pitchfork Disney (Better Than Nuthin’). Yalin graduated from NIDA in 2007. He helped voice the computer game Rome: Total War and is also the central character in the web comic Burger Force.

INTERVIEW WITH YALIN

1. Where did you study acting, and how essential is this in the process of learning stagecraft? As with most things, stagecraft can only be developed through experience. So going to drama school is not essential to learn stagecraft, but dedicating 3 years to learn about acting with other like minded, creative people can, of course, reap benefits. I studied at the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney.

2. When process do you go through to work on character development? What research have you done into the era of the play and how society behaved and what elements are you focusing on? The first step, especially with a period piece, is to research the world of the play, the context in which it was written and some information about the playwright. This is also the time to start looking at the text itself in greater detail for any information or clues as to the character (eg. the character’s words and actions and what is spoken of the character by others.) For this production, our assistant director Yasmin also compiled a wonderful compendium of useful information about that period in England, including a glossary of terms used in the play and the (very strict) rules of etiquette. We have been particularly careful about crossing legs, holding teacups and proper greetings.

2. Do you find your approach to this piece different to a contemporary play? If so, how? The approach is not necessarily all that different. However there are demands on the actor that are specific to this style of English comedy. This type of play requires a certain precision in the use of language, pace and rhythm that you don’t ordinarily encounter in every contemporary play.
3. There are many comedic moments throughout the play, the main being the confusion between the names and their pseudonyms. How difficult is it to establish the timing of the comedy and what advice would you give to those trying to learn comedic acting?

I guess, as with most things, practice makes perfect! Watching great comics can teach you a load of things too. Rehearsals are for exploration and play, and we have been trying out different ways of delivering the lines. The priorities are truth of the moment, clarity of storytelling, and how can we make it funnier! (In whichever order!) The outside eye of the director is, of course, invaluable in this process. But you don't really know whether it's going to work with a comedy until you have an audience! Fingers crossed...

However, particularly with Wilde, it's safe to say that trusting the text will get you far; over a century of successful productions tells you so. Most of the comedy is in Wilde's witty dialogue and one-liners.

4. What do you think young contemporary audiences will take away from seeing this production?

I hope they'll have a good laugh and appreciate the wit. It has a marvellous structure and the production will hopefully paint a vivid picture of a particular time and place that has both differences and similarities to our contemporary world. Wilde has written characters with tongue firmly in cheek, laying bare their absurdities and eccentricities, their very human desires and foibles that are readily identifiable by all - hence the play's enduring appeal.
SYNOPSIS

In a fashionable flat in London’s West End, eligible young bachelor Algernon Moncrieff is expecting the arrival of his aunt, Lady Bracknell and her daughter, Gwendolen Fairfax, when he is surprised by the arrival of his friend Ernest Worthing. Algernon soon discovers that Ernest is living a double life, and that his real name is Jack Worthing. To escape his dull country life, Jack has invented a wayward brother, Ernest, whose escapades provide him the excuse to come to the city and visit the ravishing Gwendolen, whom he is courting.

On this occasion, Jack/Ernest has come to town specifically to propose to Gwendolen. Although Lady Bracknell intervenes and prevents the engagement from going ahead, Gwendolen is taken with the proposal as she has always wanted to marry a man named Ernest. In order to pursue Jack’s ward Cecily, Algernon arrives at Jack’s house in the country pretending to be Jack’s brother, Ernest. Cecily too is taken with the proposal, saying that she had always wanted to marry a man by the name of Ernest. But how will both Gwendolen and Cecily react when they discover that neither of their fiancés’ names are, in fact, Ernest?
PLOT

ACT ONE
Algernon’s flat in Half-Moon Street.

Algernon is preparing for the arrival of his Aunt, Lady Bracknell and her daughter Gwendolen Fairfax. We learn that Algernon disapproves of marriage and reveres his bachelor lifestyle, ‘Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralising as that?’

Algernon receives a visit from his friend Jack Worthing, whom he knows as Ernest. Jack reveals that he is in love with Algernon’s cousin Gwendolen. Algernon jokes that he must first approve the marriage before Ernest may propose, as he is suspicious of an inscription in Jack’s cigarette case that was left at his house: ‘From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.’

After making up a story about Cecily being an old, but tiny aunt, Jack finally reveals that he is the guardian of Cecily Cardew, the granddaughter of Thomas Cardew, who adopted Jack as a baby. Algernon also learns that his real name is Jack. “Jack in the country and Ernest in the city,” revealing that in the country he uses his made up brother, Ernest, as an excuse to visit London.

Algernon confirms his suspicion of Jack being a ‘Bunburyist’ and reveals his own invention of a friend called Bunbury who he uses as an excuse to get out of social obligations. Algernon agrees to help Jack propose to Gwendolen when she visits by distracting Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive. Algernon excuses himself from their dinner obligations by using his imaginary friend Bunbury, ‘My poor friend Bunbury is very ill again. They seem to think I should be with him.’ He then creates a diversion taking Lady Bracknell into another room allowing Gwendolen and Jack some time to speak in private.

Jack proposes to Gwendolen and she accepts only on the basis that his name is Ernest, ‘My ideal has always been to love someone of the name Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence.’ Knowing that Ernest is his fictional name, Jack suggests other appropriate names. She is not impressed, ‘I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain.’ Jack declares quietly that he must be re-christened at once.

Lady Bracknell rejoins them and rejects the marriage proposal after questioning Jack and discovering that he was abandoned as a child and found in a handbag at Victoria Station. Lady Bracknell states that she will not accept the engagement to Gwendolen until Jack produces some parents of proper status, ‘I would strongly advise you, Mr Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible.’

Gwendolen returns, having heard of Lady Bracknell’s disapproval and asks Jack for his address in the country as, "It may be necessary to do something desperate.” Algernon, intrigued by Jack’s ward Cecily, also notes the address down.

Jack tells Algernon that it’s time to kill off Ernest because Cecily is becoming too interested in him.

ACT TWO
The garden at Jack’s Manor House.

Miss Prism is teaching Jack’s ward Cecily, German and geography. Miss Prism describes Jack as a sensible and responsible man, unlike his brother Ernest, who is wicked and weak of character. Rev
Chasuble, the country rector enters and flirts with Miss Prism: ‘Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism’s pupil, I would hang upon her lips.’ Cecily tells Chasuble that Miss Prism has a headache and needs to take a walk to get some fresh air. They take a walk around the estate.

Algernon, pretending to be Jack’s brother Ernest, arrives to meet Cecily. He immediately falls in love with Cecily’s beauty and decides to stay for the weekend and escape before Jack arrives on the Monday.

Jack returns early from London with grave news of his ‘fictional’ brother, Ernest’s death. He also sets a time to be christened with Rev Chasuble for the same day. While he is speaking to Chasuble and Miss Prism, Cecily comes out of the house and informs Jack that his brother has arrived.

Jack is angry with Algernon pretending to be Ernest, and orders his servant to call the cart to take Algernon to the train. When Jack heads inside Algernon proposes to Cecily and she agrees based on her love for the name Ernest: ‘It has always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Ernest.’ Algernon runs other names past Cecily: ‘Do you mean to say you could not love me if I had some other name? Algernon for instance?’ Cecily then produces her diary explaining that she had already imagined their engagement and that she always wanted to marry someone named Ernest. Algernon now has the same problem as Jack and resolves to be re-christened that day.

Gwendolen arrives at the Manor House and meets Cecily. After declaring to be ‘best friends,’ they learn that they are both engaged to one Ernest Worthing. They become involved in a competition of manners being very falsely polite to one another as they argue the identity of their partners. Algernon and Jack return. When the two women begin to question the men in order to resolve their own engagement, the men confess they have lied and that neither of them is named Ernest. Both women call off their engagements and go inside upset at the men’s deception.

Jack and Algernon argue over who will be christened Ernest, Jack saying, ‘I made arrangements this morning with Dr Chasuble to be christened myself at 5.30, and I naturally will take the name of Ernest.’ Jack reflects on the trouble with ‘Bunburying’ and is in a panic about being in trouble with Gwendolen, while Algernon sits back and eats all the muffins, enjoying the situation. Jack refuses to give Algernon permission to marry Cecily and Algernon refuses to leave the country.

ACT THREE
Inside the Manor House.

Algernon and Jack explain their deception to Cecily and Gwendolen and their plans to be re-christened to please them. Lady Bracknell arrives and announces that Gwendolen and Jack are not to be engaged due to Jack’s lack of parents and therefore social standing. Lady Bracknell asks after Algernon’s friend Bunbury to which he replies that he has died before announcing his engagement with Cecily. Lady Bracknell approves of Cecily as she is from a wealthy family: ‘There are distinct social possibilities in Miss Cardew’s profile.’

Jack refuses the engagement as Cecily’s caregiver unless Lady Bracknell agrees to permit his engagement to Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell still refuses and prepares to leave with Gwendolen. Rev Chasuble enters ready to re-christen the men and says that Miss Prism is waiting.

Lady Bracknell is startled by the mention of Miss Prism’s name and on seeing her, reveals that Miss Prism was the nanny at her brother’s house and demands to know what happened to the baby that disappeared 28 years earlier. Miss Prism confesses that she mistakenly placed her novel manuscript in the baby carriage and the baby in her handbag which was lost at Victoria Station. Jack, suddenly realizing that he was that baby fetches the handbag in which he was found. Miss Prism confirms it as hers and Lady Bracknell confirms that Jack is the son of Mrs. Moncrieff and consequently Algernon’s elder brother.
A search of the military periodicals of the time reveals that their father’s first name was Ernest, and because first sons are always named after their father, they realise Jack’s name, has, indeed, all along been Ernest. Gwendolen and Jack embrace. Algernon and Cecily embrace. Dr Chasuble and Miss Prism embrace. Jack states: ‘I’ve now realized for the first time in my life the vital importance of Being Earnest.’
CHARACTERS

JACK WORTHING J.P (John/Ernest)
Jack (John) is a 29 year old respectable young bachelor. He owns a country estate and an apartment in London, which he lets throughout the year. However, he leads a double-life being Jack in the country and pretending to have an irresponsible brother named Ernest, in London. In fact, he himself is this Ernest, which is how his friend Algernon and Gwendolen Fairfax know him.

Jack is in love with his friend Algernon’s cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax. When her mother, Lady Bracknell refuses the marriage it is discovered that Jack has no parents, having been abandoned as a baby in a handbag in the cloakroom of Victoria train station. He is found by Thomas Cardew who adopts him and subsequently makes Jack guardian to his granddaughter, Cecily Cardew.

Jack detests Lady Bracknell, but seeks approval and acceptance so that he can marry Gwendolen. Whilst he is initially nervous of her, in Act III he is quick witted enough to withhold his consent to the marriage of Cecily and Algernon if his engagement to Gwendolen is denied, essentially black-mailing Lady Bracknell.

Jack represents conventional Victorian values, adhering to notions such as; duty, honour and respectability. But by becoming his alter-ego Ernest, Jack is able to act as he wouldn't dare under his real identity. Ernest provides a convenient excuse for Jack, invoking Ernest whenever he wants to get away from the country, but it also allows him to keep his honourable image of Jack intact. Gwendolen’s fixation on the name Ernest obligates Jack to embrace his deception and eventually this threatens to undo him.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF
Algernon is a charming, idle, well-dressed and decorative bachelor – a ‘dandy’. He is the nephew of Lady Bracknell and cousin of Gwendolen Fairfax and friends with Jack Worthing, whom he knows as Ernest. Algernon is brilliant, witty, selfish, amoral and given to making absurd and contradicting statements. He is typical 'dandy' and squanders his money lavishly, “I happen to be more than usually hard up.”

Algernon has invented a fictional friend, 'Bunbury', an invalid whose illness allows him to avoid unpleasant or dull social obligations. The use of Bunbury allows Algernon a way of indulging himself, whilst also suggesting to society his great seriousness and sense of duty by attending to a sick friend.

Algernon discovers that Jack is a fellow 'Bunburyist', "I have always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist." But whilst Algernon revels in his deception, Jack does not admit to doing anything wrong, instead insisting that he has a high sense of duty and morals.

As a character, Algernon allows Oscar Wilde to reveal his wit and cleverness in language and Algernon delights in his own cleverness and ingenuity and enjoys baiting his friend Jack.

He goes to Jack’s country estate to meet Cecily and is overwhelmed by her beauty. After his discussion with Jack regarding marriage, he quickly changes his mind and proposes to Cecily. Although he doesn’t understand Cecily’s fantasy of their courtship, he is intrigued by her character and calls her, "a perfect angel." He is a man who has yet to grow up. Even in his engagement to Cecily there is an immaturity where he falls in love with the image of Cecily before knowing her true nature.
In Act III he becomes more of an observer as the revelations involving Jack, Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism take over the plot.

Algernon sums himself up saying, "My duty as a gentleman has never interfered with my pleasures in the smallest degree."

GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX
Is Algernon’s cousin and Lady Bracknell’s daughter. Gwendolen is in love with Jack, whom she knows as Ernest, “Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination.”

Gwendolen is sophisticated, intellectual and utterly pretentious. She is so caught up in finding a husband named Ernest, a name that “inspires absolute confidence,” that she can’t see Jack’s deception. While agreeing to her mother to obey and appear submissive, she returns to see Jack against her mother's wishes and offers her love. She also travels to the country on her own, showing independence, strength and determination. Gwendolen is inconsistent in her readiness to forgive Jack and immediately returns to her shallow love once all the deception has been revealed.

Like her mother, Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen is strong-minded and speaks with authority on matters of taste and morality. As Jack fears, she shows signs of becoming like her mother, “in about a hundred and fifty years.” However, she is a strong, beautiful and intelligent woman who has Jack cowering to her demands.

CECILY CARDEW
Is Jack’s ward and the granddaughter of Thomas Cardew, the gentleman who found and adopted Jack when he was a baby. At eighteen she represents youth and beauty and is compared to “an unspoilt pink rose.”

Cecily is obsessed with the name Ernest and intrigued by the idea of philandering and wickedness. This idea has prompted her to fall in love with and obsess over Jack’s brother Ernest, whom she has invented an elaborate romance and courtship with, noting everything in her diary. She shows an immaturity through her fantasy life that she has created, yet maturity when she uses this life to gain her own will, for example, when Algernon proposes she completely dominates the situation.

She is clever and cunning in her exchanges with Gwendolen, appearing outwardly submissive, but controls and manipulates the situations around her. She also starts the matchmaking process between Rev Chasuble and Miss Prism.

LADY AUGUSTA BRACKNELL
Is Algernon’s snobbish, mercenary and domineering aunt and Gwendolen’s mother. Her world is dictated by birth and status. Lady Bracknell married well and wants her daughter to do the same, creating a list of eligible young men and interview questions for potential suitors, which include questions about financial stability and societal standing.

She is therefore disapproving of Jack for Gwendolen because he doesn’t have a family. "I would strongly advise you, Mr Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over."

Through the figure of Lady Bracknell, Wilde manages to satorise hypocrisy and aristocracy, showing her conservative and repressive values and social discrimination. For example, she fails to give Miss Prism a title, referring to her only as Prism, reminding her of her status as a servant.

It is clear she runs her household with aplomb and prefers Lord Bracknell to stay out of affairs, including preferring him to eat in the servants’ quarters.
Lady Bracknell isn’t afraid to spout her opinions and keeps up with the other characters displaying wit and repartee. She has strong opinions on society, marriage, religion, money, illness, death and respectability.

She is powerful, cunning, narrow-minded and authoritative and all the characters look to her for approval. Her decision about the suitability of both of Algernon and Gwendolen’s marriages provides conflict in the story. She tells Gwendolen, "You are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to someone, I or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact." Throughout the play she manages to interrogate Jack, Cecily and later Miss Prism.

**MISS LAETITIA PRISM**

Is an older single woman and Cecily’s governess. She is absent minded and cheerful and her role in the play is to unravel the plot. She talks in clichés and bores Cecily, "Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry about with us." Miss Prism educates Cecily to conform to the dry, meaningless intellectual pursuits designed to keep her in society.

Her love contrasts to the younger couples in the play. Whilst their pairings are shallow and based on image and status, Miss Prism’s love has a great deal more passion and innuendo. She makes her feelings for Rev Chasuble clear, "You do not seem to realise, dear Doctor, that by persistently remaining single, a man coverts himself into a permanent public temptation." She discusses marriage with him, pursues him diligently and eventually falls into his arms.

She approves of Jack's respectability, "I know no one who has a higher sense of duty and responsibility and harshly criticises his brother Ernest, "As a man sows so let him reap," even though she has never met him. Her puritan pronouncements are often so over the top that they inspire laughter from the audience.

Despite being rigid and strict, she has a softer side particularly when speaking of her manuscript which was lost and when conversing with Dr Chasuble.

**REV CANON CHASUBLE**

Is the rector on Jack’s estate. He entertains secret romantic feelings for Miss Prism, "Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism’s pupil, I would hang upon her lips." When discussing the possibility of marriage he pronounces, "The practice of the Primitive Church was distinctly against matrimony."

He speaks in metaphors and gives fatherly advice. As a rector he performs mainly christenings and interchanges sermons depending on the occasion, "My sermon on the meaning of the manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful, or, as in the present case, distressing."

**LANE**

Is Algernon’s manservant. Lane actively engages with characters even lying for Algernon to disguise the fact that Algernon ate all the cucumber sandwiches, showing strength of character and a strong relationship with Algernon. He also makes comment on what is happening, be it money or marriage and expresses his own opinions. His formal front leads him to have a very dry sense of humour.

At the opening of the play Lane is the only person who knows about Algernon's practice of 'Bunburying.' Algernon discusses the idea of marriage with Lane, but reminds him of his place when he enquires about the consumption alcohol, "Why is it that at a bachelor’s establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne?"

**MERRIMAN**

Jack’s butler at his country estate. As a servant he is privy to what goes on but he doesn’t engage or intrude on the action. He merely follows orders.
THEMES

“A Trivial comedy for Serious People”

EARNEST
1. serious in intention, purpose, or effort; sincerely zealous: an earnest worker.
2. showing depth and sincerity of feeling
http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/earnest

Earnestness
Victorians valued duty and respectability above all else, with Earnestness at the top of the code of conduct. The Importance of Being Earnest is more than just a play on words. The Ernest/earnest joke embraces the Victorian notions of respectability and duty. The play's central plot and main source of satire present a moral paradox, about the man who both is and isn’t Ernest/earnest.

The word earnest has two different but related meanings: the notion of false truth and the notion of false morality. Earnestness can take many forms, including boringness, solemnity, pomposity, complacency, smugness, self-righteousness and sense of duty, all trademarks of the upper classes. This smugness and pomposity impels Algernon and Jack to invent fictitious alter egos to escape the propriety and decency of society they must conform to.

Gwendolen wants to marry a man called Ernest, but doesn’t care whether the man actually possesses the qualities of earnestness. She quickly forgives Jack's deception and even though is he neither 'earnest' nor 'Ernest', but he subsequently becomes both.

MORALITY
Morality is a favourite topic of conversation in the play. Wilde makes fun of the Victorian ideal of morality and the rigid rules about what people should and shouldn't do. Appearance was everything. So, while a person could lead a secret life, have affairs or children outside wedlock; society would look the other way as long as the appearance of propriety was maintained.

Jack chides Algernon for reading his cigarette case calling it 'ungentlemanly,' which Algernon responding, "More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read." This implies that he finds the intrigue more interesting than the confines of moral society.

Gwendolen says of Ernest (Jack), "He is the very soul of truth and honour. Disloyalty would be as impossible to him as deception. But even men of the noblest possible moral character are extremely susceptible to the influence of the physical charms of others."

Jack has been accepted into society due to the money he has inherited. He uses the correct manners and phrasing to belong in this world. As Ernest, he revels in the opportunity to break free of those conventions. The moral status of Ernest undergoes changes between Acts I & II. Jack says he gets into 'scrapes' or 'jams'. But once the action moves to the Manor House, Miss Prism's moral viewpoint on Ernest graduates from 'unfortunate' to 'bad', then 'wicked'.

Cecily's fantastical life is based on the interest of 'immorality' and she worships Ernest for his 'wickedness' before she has even met him. Her notion that if Jack's brother isn’t really wicked, he has "been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner," underlies her desire to break away from the moral standards set by society.
One of the play’s paradoxes is the impossibility of actually being either earnest or moral while claiming to be so. But the characters who embrace triviality and wickedness are the ones who may have the greatest chance of attaining seriousness and virtue.

**CRITICISM OF VICTORIAN SOCIETY (CLASS STRUCTURE)**

One of the key themes in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a criticism of the Victorian era class structure. Wilde explores the roles of various social classes and illustrates them often in a highly satirical manner, using the characters to analyse and criticize the role of the class hierarchy.

This is reflected by Algernon, ‘Really, if the lower orders don’t set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense or moral responsibility.’ Algernon’s aesthetic life of a ‘dandy’, dressing with care, neglecting his bills, being unemployed and pursuing pleasure instead of duty is an example of Victorians valuing trivialities.

Lady Bracknell is an excellent example of a humorous caricature representing upper class values and ideals. In particular her view that marriages are planned and arranged according to social status. She rejects the idea of Jack as a suitor when he has no lineage, but accepts his suitability once she discovers who his parents were. She also remarks that education is a danger to the upper classes and only addresses Miss Prism as Prism, reminding her of her place as a servant.

Wilde also uses the butlers to comment on the classes. Merriman, Jack’s butler, is privy to what goes on in the upper class, but does not engage or intrude. He is an observer acting only on what he is told. Lane, Algernon’s butler, on the other hand makes commentary on issues of marriage and money until Algernon puts him in his place, “I don’t know that I’m much interested in your family life, Lane.”

Miss Prism, being part of the middle class also makes comments on status, when talking about christenings she says, “I have often spoken to the poorer classes on the subject. But they don’t seem to know what thrift is.”

**APPEARANCES**

‘In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.’

Appearance was everything, and style was more important than substance in Victorian society. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde questions whether the more serious issues were overlooked in favour of trivial concerns about appearance. Algernon’s aesthetic life of a ‘dandy’, dressing with care, neglecting his bills, being unemployed and pursuing pleasure instead of duty is an example of the Victorian values of keeping up appearances.

Gwendolen represents the value more than any other character in the play, particularly being obsessed with the name Ernest. “My ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.” She is also adamant that her proposal must be performed correctly and says, “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing.”

Style and manners are also commented on throughout the play. Cecily disapproves of Jack’s clothing, “What horrid clothes you have got on. Do go and change them.” In her diary, love and courtship are trivial concepts, however she describes that Ernest bought her a ring and a bangle and has ‘wonderfully good taste.’ She also tells him that, “a man who is much talked about is always attractive.” She is also vain telling Gwendolen, “I am very fond of being looked at.”

The tea service between Gwendolen and Cecily is a hilarious example of manners and keeping up appearances. This guise of correctness is the framework for war, as both women think they are engaged
to the same person. When Gwendolen requests no sugar, Cecily adds four lumps. When she asks for bread and butter, she is given a large slice of cake.

Lady Bracknell approves of Cecily because she will inherit a considerable fortune. However, when she physically assesses Cecily she says, "There are distinct social possibilities in your profile. The two weak points in our age are its want of principle and its want of profile. The chin a little higher, dear. Style largely depends on the way the chin is worn. They are worn very high, just at present."

Jack initially presumes Miss Prism is his mother and 'forgives' her for being unmarried as the stigma of an unmarried mother is something that the upper class want to avoid and is relieved when he discovers she is not his mother.

DANDY
Algernon is described as a dandy and is essentially a self-portrait of Wilde himself. A dandy is a man who affects extreme elegance in clothes and manners. Algernon is a true example being witty, overdressed, self-stylised and a philosopher. The dandy pretends to be all about surface, which makes him seem trivial, shallow and ineffectual. But in effect, the character of Algernon remains morally neutral through the play.

Being a vain man, Algernon cares about his own personal appearance and the surroundings he lives in. Obsessed with image and eating he says, "If I am occasionally a little over-dressed, I make up for it by being always immensely over-educated." He also takes care when stuffing his face with muffins to not get any on his cuffs, "I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs."

He also teases Jack on the subject saying, "I don't like your clothes. You look perfectly ridiculous in them. Why on earth don't you go up and change."

HYPOCRISY
1. a pretense of having a virtuous character, moral or religious beliefs or principles, etc., that one does not really possess.
2. a pretense of having some desirable or publicly approved attitude.
http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/hypocrisy

Algernon and Jack create similar deceptions using a guise of another person to avoid unpleasant situations. When Jack fabricates his brother Ernest's death, he dresses in his mourning suit to convince others that he's in mourning, yet we know that he doesn't actually have a brother. He also demonstrates hypocrisy in his willingness to deceive Gwendolen to achieve his desire, yet feels Algernon is unsuitable for his ward Cecily.

Jack's refusal to admit that he is a 'bunburyist' makes him a hypocrite, particularly as he believes he's morally different that Algernon. When he is forced to confess that Ernest was fiction, he makes a speech about the pain involved in speaking the truth. "It is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position." When it is discovered at the end that his name really is Ernest he tells Gwendolen, "It is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth." This is again hypocritical as he is trying to raise his moral code again, acting as though he was always morally just.

THE NATURE OF MARRIAGE
In this play Wilde looks at the nature of marriage in a comedic light and from various perspectives. He uses the theme of marriage in two ways: by motivating the plot; and as a subject for philosophical debate. But, the overarching question Wilde is raising about marriage is whether it is enjoyable and good or restrictive and bad.
Wilde idolises bachelorhood using the character of Algernon who jokes about womanizing: ‘The only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her is she is pretty, and to someone else, if she is plain.’ Algernon presents sarcastic opinions on marriage and couples, saying to his manservant Lane, "Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?" Lane remarks, "I believe it is a very pleasant state," before admitting that his own marriage was the result of, "a misunderstanding between myself and a young person." To this Algernon regards Lane’s views on marriage as "somewhat lax."

Jack and Algernon also discuss the nature of marriage when they dispute whether a marriage proposal is 'business' or 'pleasure'. Algernon is highly supportive of divorce saying, "Divorces are made in Heaven," and is cynical of marriage. Jack on the other hand, is a true romantic saying, "I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her." He has some reservations after meeting with Lady Bracknell and asks Algernon, "You don't think there's any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her mother in about a hundred and fifty years, do you?" To which Algernon replies, "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his."

Jack thinks that once he is married to Gwendolen he will no longer need the disguise of Ernest, but Algernon suggests that a married man needs 'Bunbury' most of all, as all husbands lead double lives. However in the end, both Ernest and Algernon become willingly engaged despite their reservations about marriage.

Lady Bracknell highlights marriage from the perspective of a mature and long-married woman. She speaks of Lord Bracknell in a patronising manner, "Your uncle would have to dine upstairs. Fortunately he is accustomed to that."

Later in the play when giving her consent to Algernon and Cecily, Lady Bracknell says, "I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable."

Gwendolen and Cecily have fantastical views on marriage, particularly as they both assume that they should marry someone called 'Ernest' and pity those who marry someone with a plain name, such as John; "She would probably never be allowed to know the entrancing pleasure of a single moment's solitude."

There are other flippant comments made regarding marriage from Rev Chasuble, "the Primitive Church was distinctly against marriage;" Miss Prism, "No Married man is ever attractive except to his wife;" and Cecily who forgives Jack on the grounds that he's sure to change, which suggests her own rather naïve and cynical view of the nature of men and marriage.

PASSION
The hidden nature of sexuality in Victorian culture is developed in many ways. Cecily has a fascination with wickedness and she hopes that Ernest looks wicked. She is held back by society's repression of knowledge and passion.

When Cecily hears that Jack's brother Ernest is around she desires to meet him. She says to him, "I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. " The thought of meeting someone 'wicked' is exciting to Cecily, although she is "afraid he will look just like everyone else."
Various characters allude to passion, sex and moral looseness. Rev Chasuble and Miss Prism’s flirting and conversations exudes sexual undertones but nothing is actually stated. Algernon stuffs his face to satisfy his various hungers, Cecily and Guendolen's' document their inner passions, and Miss Prisms’ three-volume romantic novel are all examples of a life covered up by suffocating rules.

**FOOD & EATING**

Food and eating appears throughout the play and almost always causes conflict. On one hand, jokes about food provide low level comedy, the equivalent of a slammed door. On another level food and gluttony seems to be a substitute for sexual repression.

Act I contains the cucumber sandwiches, in which Algernon eats all the sandwiches specially made for Lady Bracknell’s visit. Jack comments on Algernon's eating of the sandwiches and is offered bread and butter only. He devours these in a manner that suggests an appetite unfulfilled. Algernon says, "You need not eat as if you were going to eat it all."

In Act II Gwendolen and Cecily spat over 'tea'. In this undertone of jealousy and societal standing Gwendolen tells Cecily, sugar "is not fashionable anymore" and "cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays." Cecily responds by filling Gwendolen's tea with sugar and her plate with cake, which makes Gwendolen even angrier.

Once Jack and Algernon's deception has been discovered they start eating muffins saying:

Jack:  "How can you sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble? You seem to me to be perfectly heartless."

Algernon:  "Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitate manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them."

Jack:  "I say it's perfectly heartless your eating muffins at all, under the circumstances."

Algernon:  "When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Indeed, when I am in really great trouble, as any one who knows me intimately will tell you, I refuse everything except food and drink. At the present moment I am eating muffins because I am unhappy. Besides, I am particularly fond of muffins."

Jack:  "Well, there is no reason why you should eat them all in that greedy way."

**DECEPTION/SECRET LIVES**

The concept of a double life is the central metaphor of the play. The idea of a hidden identity reflects Wilde’s own double life, as a married man and a secret homosexual and is used in many of his works. Because Victorian norms were so repressive and suffocating, Wilde created characters with secret lives or who give a false impressions to express who they really are.

Algernon and Jack both use masks to escape the confines of society. These secret lives are revealed to each other in Act I, setting up the premise for the remainder of the play. When Jack and Algernon realise their marriages will end their pursuit of pleasure they earnestly admit, "You won't be able to run down to the country quite so often as you used to do, dear Algy," and "You won't be able to disappear to London quite so frequently as your wicked custom was."

Jack's mask of becoming his brother Ernest reveals his hypocrisy of Victorian society and values. His whole life has been built upon mistaken identity that exposes the falseness of the society in which he lives, where one is judged by material birth rather than ability and character. Miss Prism says of Jack, "I know no one who has a higher sense of duty and responsibility."

However, as Ernest, Jack is able to break free of society's impositions. He becomes wild and carefree, traits that Cecily falls in love with long before meeting Ernest. "In order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name Ernest, who lives in Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes."

Study Guide The Importance of Being Earnest

By Robyn Brookes © 2014
When Algernon presses Jack to tell Gwendolen about his 'bunburying’ Jack admits that, "the truth isn’t quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl.”

Algernon’s mask, or as he calls it, 'bunburying,’ is used to escape dull and unpleasant responsibilities of society. His bunburying amuses him and allows him to play a game, "I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose.” Visiting the poor and the sick was a staple activity among the Victorian upper classes and considered a public duty. Lady Bracknell who has little sympathy Bunbury is only concerned that his illness does not affect her social calendar, not whether he lives or dies.

The difference between Jack and Algernon is that Jack becomes someone he is not. This deception suggests a far more serious degree of hypocrisy, deceiving his family and friends. Algernon’s deception is more an escape from the confines of society.

The idea that both 'Bunbury' and 'Ernest' might die (the end of the façade) is introduced during Act I, preparing for their respective masks to be dropped by Algernon and Jack. Even though marriage is seen as the end of freedom, pleasure and wickedness, Jack and Algernon could continue to don their masks after they marry Gwendolen and Cecily, but they will have to be cautious and make sure society is looking the other way.

**LACK OF COMPASSION**

Two areas in which the Victorians showed little sympathy or compassion were illness and death. Most of the characters discuss death as something that someone has control over, or as though death is a decision one can make about how to shape one’s life.

When Lady Bracknell hears that Algernon is visiting the invalid Bunbury again she says, "I think it is high time that Mr Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid.” When she hears that he has died, she feels that by doing this he acted appropriately, "Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life.”

She also has no compassion when she hears that Jack doesn’t have any parents, ‘To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.’

When Jack tells Miss Prism and Rev Chasuble that his brother Ernest has died instead of comforting him Miss Prism says, "What a lesson for him!” and also, "as a man sows, so shall he reap," indicating that death is where one could learn a moral lesson.

**RELIGION**

Wilde uses religion as a topic of satire. The characters of Miss Prism and Rev Chasuble are used to comment on religion and morality.

Although Rev Chasuble is a respectable country vicar, underneath he desires Miss Prism saying, “I would hang on her lips,” before quickly adding that he was referring to bees. Wilde uses Chasuble’s repressed sexuality to criticise the institution he represents.

Chasuble is the symbol of religious thought, but is used to show how little the Victorians concerned themselves with the attitudes reflecting religious faith. When Rev Chasuble says that "The Primitive Church was distinctly against matrimony," Miss Prism replies, "That is obviously the reason why the Primitive Church has not lasted up to the present day.”
Lady Bracknell mentions that christenings are a waste of time and money and Miss Prism says, "One of the Rector's most constant duties in this parish. I have often spoken to the poorer classes on the subject. But they don't seem to know what thrift is."

Chasuble can rechristen, marry, bury, and use interchangeable sermons, "My sermon on the meaning of the manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful, or in the present case, distressing. I have preached it at harvest celebrations, christenings, confirmations, on day of humiliation and festal days." In many ways this reflects his lack of compassion for the emotion of the aforementioned ceremonies.

Miss Prism is an intellectual in a literary way, being a creative writer. She has dreams of being a sensational romantic novelist, but must make a living, so is instead guardian of Cecily's education and virtue. Like the vicar, she makes constant moral judgements, even to Jack's dead brother Ernest, "As a man sows, so shall he reap."

INVERSION
One of the most common motifs in the play is the notion of inversion. These inversions encompass thought, situations, characters, morality and philosophical thought. Algernon's remark, "Divorces are made in Heaven," is inverting the cliché about marriage being 'made in heaven.'

After comments are made about Algernon who eats all the time, including the cucumber sandwiches and muffins, he says, "I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them,' defending his own eating and how shallow this makes him seem. When he discovers that there are no cucumber sandwiches left because he eaten them all he says, "I am greatly distressed, Aunt Augusta, about there being no cucumbers, not even for ready money.' He turns the situation around so that it seems no cucumbers were available to cover the fact that he's really eaten them all.

At the end of the play Jack says, "It's a terrible thing" about discovering that he's been telling the truth all of his life by calling himself Ernest, when really he has perpetuated a deception and been caught out.

Lady Bracknell’s first entrance has her talking about death and her friend, Lady Harbury who "looks twenty years younger since the death of her husband." As usually in this situation one expects someone to look older from their grief.

The women represent an inversion of accepted Victorian practices with regard to gender roles. Lady Bracknell takes over the father role in interviewing Jack, and Gwendolen and Cecily take control of their own romantic lives, while the men are quite passive.

DEBT
Algernon makes a few flippant comments about his debts during the play. The original play included the arrival of a lawyer who serves a writ for debt on 'Ernest'. This is for Jack, but it is Algernon pretending to be Ernest that deals badly with the situation leading to farcical misunderstanding. Unfortunately this scene was deleted when Wilde realised the play was too long. However, some of the references to Algernon's spending have been kept.

In Act I he tears up letters that demand money from him. In Act III Lady Bracknell tells Cecily, "Algernon has nothing but his debts to depend upon. But I do not approve of mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment that allowing that to stand in my way."
**STYLE**

**SATIRE**
1. the use of irony, sarcasm, ridicule, or the like, exposing, denouncing or deriding vice, folly, etc.
2. a literary composition, in verse or prose, in which human folly and vice are held up to scorn, derision, or ridicule.

http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/satire

The humour in *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be described as satire. As a performing art, satire is often used to ridicule vices, follies and shortcomings, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals, corporations, government or society itself. Although satire is humorous, its greater purpose is often social criticism, using wit as a weapon and as a tool to draw attention to both particular and wider issues in society.

A feature of satire is irony or sarcasm but can include parody, burlesque, exaggeration, juxtaposition, comparison, analogy and double entendre.

**HUMOUR**

Wilde uses humour and the absurd to show the farcical nature of the characters: Jack having been found in a handbag; Gwendolen basing her love solely on the name Ernest and Cecily fantasizing about her courtship with Ernest, whom she's never met.

**FORESHADOWING**

Foreshadowing is bringing in objects, ideas or plot points into the play whose existence signals to the audience that they will come up again. There are several instances in *The Importance of Being Earnest* where foreshadowing occurs that play an important role in developing the plot.

The fact that Jack was adopted as a baby, predicates a recognition scene in which Jack's true identity is revealed and the plot is resolved by means of an incredible coincidence. The mention of the handbag is also important as it helps lay truth to his claim, suddenly producing it when identifying himself.

Miss Prims' three-volume novel is another example. When she mentions it, it ensures that it will be important later and indeed it is, as this novel is swapped with the baby, taken out of the handbag and put into the perambulator.

Jack's assertion that Cecily and Gwendolen will be “calling each other sister” within half an hour of meeting, followed by Algernon saying, “women only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first,” predicts what literally happens between the two girls.
GLOSSARY

**Aesthetics** - A branch of philosophy that explores the nature of art, beauty and taste.

**Anabaptists** – A radical sect of the Christian faith who saw christening as a self-conformation of faith, so the baptising of infants was deemed unsuitable. They chose adult baptism instead.

**Apoplexy** – Internal bleeding with indefinite cause that can lead to death; either by stroke or a form of hemorrhaging.

**Aristocrat** - A member of the highest end of the upper class, mostly with family ties to royalty. They often had titles such as Duke, Marquess, Lord or Baron and had a large estate and a great fortune.

**Bunburyist** – A term invented by Wilde for his character Algernon. It entails creating a fake person or situation that means you can escape your current situation.

**Cucumber sandwiches** – A popular snack amongst the British upper classes in Wilde’s time. They were a statement to show one’s wealth; that the rich could afford to eat food for leisure.

**Dandy** - A man who places a lot of importance on physical appearance, sophisticated language and maintaining an air of ease and wealthy living. More often than not, these men were not actually rich and so the main task was to appear and behave aristocratic without actually being so.

**Dog cart** - A light horse-drawn vehicle used for travel.

**Earnest** - Marked by or showing deep sincerity or seriousness.

**Equanimity** – To be calm, composed and to possess a stability of mind, despite emotional upset.

**Evensong** – A late afternoon or evening service at an Anglican Church. The services were often sung, hence the name ‘evensong’.

**Expurgation** – A form of censorship that involved purging material that was considered offensive or immoral from artistic works.

**Gorgon** – An ancient Greek mythological creature, said to have snakes for hair and whose gaze could turn someone to stone. Medusa is the most well known from legend.

In the play, Jack uses the term to describe Lady Bracknell, to show the depths of her unpleasantness: “Never met such a Gorgon... I don’t really know what a Gorgon is like, but I am quite sure that Lady Bracknell is one.”

**Idle merriment** – To be idle is to be lazy; to avoid work; to spend time doing nothing. Idle merriment can be used to describe an activity that has no real purpose or produces nothing.

**Interment** - to be confined or imprisoned, normally in large groups and without trial.
**Maréchal Niel** – A type of yellow/cream French rose.

**Metaphysical speculation** – To contemplate one’s existence or current state of being. In the context of the play, we see Jack and Gwendolen have the following exchange in Act 1:

Gwendolen: But your name is Earnest.  
Jack: Yes, I know it is. But supposing it was something else? Do you mean to say you couldn’t love me then?  
Gwendolen: Ah! That is clearly a metaphysical speculation, and like most metaphysical speculations has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life, as we know them.

Gwendolen is simply saying that Jack’s questioning of his own name is just the same as questioning his own existence; to her, it is irrelevant and therefore doesn’t actually have any consequence.

**Misanthrope** – A person who hates/distrusts human kind or, more commonly, human nature.  
Miss Prism: “You are too much alone, dear Dr Chasuble. You should get married. A misanthrope I can understand – a womanthrope, never!”

**Neologism** – The name for a new word. In reply to Miss Prism’s previous statement using the made-up word, womanthrope, Rev Chasuble replies, “Believe me, I do not deserve so neologistic a phrase…”

**Oxonian** – A current or former member of Oxford University, England.

**Perambulator** – A pram for infants.

**Philanthropic work** – Philanthropy is the opposite of misanthropy; it means to love and care for humanity. A philanthropist will see where humankind needs assistance or improvement and will be willing to help in its development, for example through giving and volunteering.

**Portmanteau** - a case or bag to carry clothing in while traveling, especially a leather trunk or suitcase that opens into two halves.

**Profligate** – Or ‘spendthrift’ – a person who spends extravagantly and without thought, often spending way beyond what they have in terms of wealth.

**Purple of commerce** – A play on the phrase ‘born in the purple’, which meant to be born into royalty, as purple was deemed a royal colour. Those who worked in commerce at the time had no high social ranking, but could become wealthy through profit; these ‘nouveau (new) rich’ would try and live like the upper class. Lady Bracknell uses the phrase ‘purple of commerce’ to mock people of this kind, as the upper classes had no respect for them.

**Quixotic** – A person or act that is impulsive. A Quixotism refers to an ideal that is held without thought for practicality or consequence.

**Rupee** – The basic monetary unit of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Mauritius, and the Seychelles.

**Socialite** - Someone who attends parties with the higher members of society. They are frequently going to fashionable events and gatherings and are well known to other guests.

**Society** - The term given to a group of people who share the same country, share the same class (for example either the working class, middle class or upper class) or simply live in community with each other.
**Tea** – Originally used medicinally by the Chinese, tea became a popular drink in England in the 18th century and was available to all members of society, not just the rich. To ‘take tea with someone’ referred to a social visit that would involve drinking the beverage, as well as eating sandwiches and cakes.

**Terminus** – The end of the line or last stop for transport services.

**Wagnerian manner** – Referring to Richard Wagner, a great writer of operas. His operas were very dramatic and exaggerated; Algernon uses this phrase to describe how Lady Bracknell is ringing the doorbell.

**Wit** - Officially known as a form of intelligent humour that is fast and clever. When someone is referred to as witty, it means they can make quick, smart and funny remarks.

**Womanthrope** – not a real word, but Miss Prism means; one who does not trust women.

**Vacillate** – To be indecisive; to waver between different actions or opinions.

There are also references to various places in London;

**Belgrave Square** - one of the largest and grandest squares in central London, built in the 1820's.

**Hertfordshire** – A county in England just north of London. During the 1800-1900's it was a very fashionable place to have a country house.

**Shropshire** – An English county north of Hertfordshire.

**Tunbridge Wells** – A large town in western Kent, England. In the 19th century it was a stylish place to live and was very modern for the time.

**Worthing** – A seaside resort in Sussex. Like Tunbridge Wells, it was a favourite place of the wealthy in Wilde’s time.

www.touristnetuk.com/south-east-england/hertfordshire/
AILSA PATERSON

Ailsa completed the Bachelor of Dramatic Art in Design (NIDA) in 2003.

Set and Costume Design credits for State Theatre Company include *Hedda Gabler* (Associate Set Design), *In the Next Room or The Vibrator Play, War Mother, The Ham Funeral, The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged), The Price and The Cripple of Inishmaan*. Costume Design credits include *Little Bird, The Seagull* and *Three Sisters*.

Other theatre design credits include *Cranky Bear* (Patch), *Mouse, Bird and Sausage* (Costume Design, Slingsby), *Seminar* and *Skylight* (Ensemble), *You, Me and the Bloody Sea* (Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2013), *Ode to Nonsense* (Costume Design, Slingsby/State Opera of SA), *Shining City* (Griffin Theatre Company), *Hansel and Gretel* and *La Sonnambula* (Pacific Opera), *Faustus* and *Madame Melville* (BSharp), *Vampirella, The Internationalist* and *Bone* (Darlinghurst Theatre), *A Couple of Blaguards* (Seymour Centre/Comedy Theatre), *Shifted* (Sydney Dance Company) and *Debris* (Old Fitz /Melbourne Fringe). Ailsa worked in costume on *The Straits* (ABC), *LAID* (ABC), *Underbelly — A Tale of Two Cities*, *Underbelly — The Golden Mile*, *Blue Water High, The Last Confession of Alexander Pearce, Ten Empty, The Boy from Oz Arena Spectacular, Priscilla, Queen of the Desert The Musical* and *High School Musical*.

Ailsa received the 2011 Mike Walsh Fellowship.

QUESTIONS FOR THE DESIGNER

1. For any classic play there is always a discussion about doing a contemporary version, versus the traditional. Can you explain the reasons you and Geordie have chosen to keep *The Importance of Being Earnest* set in the 1890s?

The decision to keep *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the 1890s was largely Geordie Bookman’s. It is becoming increasingly rare for theatre companies to stage large period productions due to the time and cost involved in creating them. However, audiences respond with great excitement to period costuming and sets, and Earnest focusses so specifically on the social mores, mannerisms and particulars of etiquette and speech of this time that it is illogical to update the setting for the sake of a modern interpretation. Not only do audiences appreciate the spectacle of a period production, but it is also a wonderful project for the teams in workshop and wardrobe who bring the designs to life.

If an annual season is programmed with a series of back-to-back contemporary pays for which the costumes are largely bought and altered, rather than custom made, then the incredible skills of the cutters and sewers are not being used to their full capacity.

2. What important elements of the script influenced your design? (Eg. Class)

The set design is a more stylized interpretation of the period, and is inspired by a number of script elements. Similarly the costume design is influenced by the social class of the characters, their age and sophistication, their personal wealth and the amount of attention they pay to appearances.

3. The curved curtain track plays an important role in the set design. Can you tell us the decision behind this and how it works?
The curved curtain track is an important element of the design. It provides a scale for the set, by giving the space a visual ‘ceiling’ so that the characters are not placed in an environment that swamps them with super-human scale. The molded fascia provides a sense of a Victorian interior without spelling it out, and the track gives the ability to make a choreographed feature of the set changes with fluid, dance-like transitions.

Each act is represented by a different curtain, and as it sweeps on we are reminded of the swish of a lady’s skirt – we want to give a sense of movement, fluidity and vibrancy.

4. **How important is the budget when completing your final design for a show and how can this alter your decisions?**

The budget is incredibly important when completing a design. It determines the scale of the design and dictates the materials and methods that are used. During the initial design process I try to disregard the budget in order to not stifle my imagination and to open my mind to more possibilities, but as the design progresses it is essential to assess the approximate cost of each element, and to think about the techniques to use in order to present a realistic design.

5. **What has been the most exciting component of the design in the production and why?**

The most exciting component of the design for me was the opportunity to move away from realism and present a stylized interpretation of the period. This is a set that required us to move between different locations with great ease, speed and flair. It is a great challenge to find a solution for this requirement, while still creating a distinct, stylish look for each act, and maximizing the ability to use light in interesting ways. On top of this, the requirements for a touring set are very specific and require great thought.
SET DESIGN

SETTING

The action takes place in London and the countryside in 1895, the last few years of the period that would be termed Victorian England. The English aristocracy flourished during this time. It is this group on which Wilde’s satire focuses, along with their view that marriage has nothing to do with love, but it rather a means for achieving social status.

"The Importance of Being Earnest" has 3 Acts and 3 locations. For this production the spaces are designed as representations of the setting, with allowances for the dynamics and flow between Acts. The main component for the distinction between the settings is a curved curtain track. This curtain enables scenes to be closed and opened, doorways to be revealed, as well as setting the style of the scene.

Whilst everything is designed for the 1890s period, there are only 3 – 4 set pieces in each scene to avoid cluttering the stage. This is a non-realistic approach that indicates the setting without being a complete representation.

ACT I
The play begins in Algernon Moncrieff’s flat in Half-Moon Street, close to London’s west end. His flat has a distinct highly-stylized, sleek London look, reflecting bachelorhood and Algernon's desire to look good. A curved double layered curtain is a main feature made of red organza. Formal entrances are made through the curtains, which form doorways. There is a hanging formal light form the ceiling.

ACT II
The Garden at Jack Worthing's Manor House.
This is a representation of a country garden, complete with a circular astro-turf mat on the floor and a rose curtain behind. The curtain is designed so that it is saturated with colour, similar to an impressionist look. Entrances are made through the curtain, with people emerging from behind the rose bush curtain. There is also a garden table setting and the central hanging piece in this Act is a swing.

ACT III
Drawing-room at the Manor House.
This room has a gentle and warm feel in contrast to the slick and spiky feel of Algernon’s apartment in Act I. The curtain is translucent white with large stencils of trees on the back of it, which is lit from various angles. This gives a feeling of being a room off the garden. The curtain has a central split for entrances from the outside.
COSTUME DESIGN

CHARACTERS
Lady Bracknell - is the strongest character and therefore displays colour and wealth in her costuming. In traditional 1890s style the dress has a tiny waist, bell skirt and big shoulders. She also wears extravagant hats. In Act II/III she has a travelling cape to match her rich patterned ensemble, again with the emphasized silhouette of the tiny waist and big shoulders.

Both butlers are dressed in typical butler attire, quite stylish for the city in Act I and a less sophisticated country style in Act II.

Algernon – Is a sharp dresser complete with hat, waist coat and tail coat. There is a very sleek line in his clothing and he wears slim peg pants. In Act II & III he is more relaxed in a 3-piece tailored suit in a plaid design.

Gwendolen – Her outfit is not quite as extreme as her mother, Lady Bracknell. There is softness to her colouring, but she dresses for allure and she very aware of its effect on men. In Act II & III her dress is a vibrant blue/green and her hat is very detailed, complete with fake birds.

Jack – Is conservative in his attire, but still has money. He begins in typical morning wear, top hat and cut away coat. In Act II & III he appears in full mourning suit.

Cecily – She wears a very romantic lingerie style gown typical in the 1890s. There is softness to all the elements; colour and material, highlighting her soft femininity. She has no gloves or hat, as she is outside studying when we first meet her.

Miss Prism – Is very conservative and sensible, with a simple masculine way of dressing, with a 3-piece suit and tie.

Priest – Uses a traditional collar, jacket and boots, although in a more relaxed manner as though he's stumbled across the estate. He has a rumpled likeability represented in an old straw hat.
INTERESTING READING

AESTHETICS: BEAUTY IN EARNEST
Aesthetics is a word more commonly heard in the phrase ‘aesthetically pleasing’, used to describe someone or something that is physically attractive or has a pleasing effect. Aesthetics is regarded as a part of philosophy that discusses the nature of art, taste and the concept of beauty. During his time at Oxford, Wilde began to develop his own unique ideas on aesthetics.

He created characters that would embody those ideas; take the example of Algernon Moncrieff, the nephew of Lord and Lady Bracknell in The Importance of Being Earnest. He can be called both an aesthete and a dandy; he appreciates beauty in appearance as his clothes are bold yet meticulous, but this appreciation spreads to his lifestyle as well as his wardrobe. He has cucumber sandwiches for Lady Bracknell as a statement of wealth and dines at expensive restaurants such as Willis’s.

A dandy was known to be witty and dress immaculately and Oscar Wilde was perhaps the most prominent dandy of his era, being a socialite and the epitome of sophistication. He was described by biographer Peter Raby as “the archetypal artist of late romanticism, one of the figures not only associated with the doctrines of aestheticism flowering in the decadent 1890s, but someone who epitomized them.” It is agreed that Wilde’s character of Algernon Moncrieff in The Importance of Being Earnest is greatly influenced by such dandyism.

Algernon is the perfect aesthete; other characters of similar flamboyance in Wilde’s other plays have an obvious moral or immoral attitude, but Algernon is distinctly amoral. He is neither good (as he revels in his deceit and his own cleverness at the use of the make-believe Bunbury) nor evil (he treats his friends well and is altogether a charming gentleman who offers praise of himself and others). His task in life is simply to live beautifully, whether that means dressing and eating well, or living each day as he desires by avoiding tiresome social obligations through ‘Bunburyism’.

The main character of Jack Worthing is altogether very different. Whereas Algernon dresses boldly, Jack is less brash in his fashion. He is the figure of the upright Victorian gentleman in the play; a leading male character the audience of the time could relate to. Yet, Wilde uses him to comment on Victorian social ideals; Jack has created a fictional alter-ego, a younger brother called Ernest. To an audience, Jack sounds and appears as their champion of virtue, yet he is weaving a falsehood.

When questioned about it by Algernon, Jack merely states in Act 1, “My dear Algy, I don’t know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It’s one’s duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health, or one’s happiness...I have always pretended to have a younger brother called Ernest, who gets into the most dreadful scrapes.”

It would appear that Wilde thinks that a strict and high set of morals is, in fact, unhealthy. It is interesting to note as well that, whereas Algernon has created a separate person to use as an escape route, Jack has created a double life; Algernon may use Bunbury somewhat immorally, but Jack actually becomes Ernest and gets himself into those ‘dreadful scrapes’ he preaches so much against.

Algernon frequently comments on Jack’s behaviour, as well as the behaviour of nearly all the other characters in the play. He has been written to bring the flaws of his fellow society members to light and that is what Wilde used aesthetics for; not just to appreciate beauty, but to comment on the social idiocies of his time; by pointing out that Victorian society’s earnestness for perfection is exactly what his play is; laughable.
THE RECEPTION OF WILDE’S WORK IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

Due to the satirical nature of Wilde’s works and the way in which he often criticised Victorian values, his works were subject to varied reception amongst audiences. By the time The Importance of Being Earnest opened Wilde had earned himself many fans and many critics. Nevertheless, people were all interested and intrigued by his works. The Importance of Being Earnest was reviewed with the general attitude being that the work was funny, but it lacked substance. Wilde disagreed with these claims and often wrote into newspapers to challenge reviews of his works. However, Wilde is regarded in contemporary society as a theatrical and literary pioneer and we still study and perform his works.

OSCAR WILDE’S HOMOSEXUALITY

The debut of The Importance of Being Earnest” on 14 February 1895 marked his greatest stage triumph. However, it also led to a nightmarish descent into disrepute and public scorn. The father of Alfred Douglas, the Marquess of Queensbury, outraged by his son’s relationship with Wilde, went to the theatre on opening night. Denied entrance, he left a bouquet of vegetables and followed this with an insulting card.

Wilde decided to sue the Marquess for libel, but when his own homosexuality came under scrutiny he was arrested and charged for committing indecent acts. (As homosexuality was illegal in England at the time). He was sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labour, the harshest sentence allowed. Prison broke his spirit and his health. His wife sought a legal separation, his friends deserted him and the press vilified his name. After his release in 1898 he settled in France where he died from cerebral meningitis.

19TH CENTURY ENGLAND - VICTORIAN ERA

In order to understand the extravagant setting of The Importance of Being Earnest, it is important to know what world its writer, Oscar Wilde, was experiencing.

The Victorian Era describes the 19th century period in England spanning 1837-1901 from the year of Queen Victoria’s reign to the year of her death. During her reign Britannia ruled one quarter of the world’s population.

The nature of Victorian society was ever changeable; although Britain gained huge amounts of wealth during the era, it was only available to the very few and the lower classes were still stricken by disease and poverty.

London was prosperous and proud and wealthy Victorians relished their stability and sought to maintain it. To do this, strict adherence to conventional attitudes was necessary. Upsetting this traditional respectability was feared as threatening chaos and lack of control. This tradition included: ritual and regularity, upward marriage, pursuit of leisure activities and keeping up appearances. As long as one looked good, the façade of normality was protected. Proper Victorians typically swam on the surface avoiding what lurked beneath.

For many Victorians, the public self and the private self were separate. The private self at times went underground – usually to London’s East End red light district – while the public life adhered to routine.

When Wilde was born in 1854, Queen Victoria had been on the throne for seventeen years and Britain was undergoing fast and exciting changes. New movements such as Darwinism, socialism, Marxism and feminism had appeared, workers had begun to form unions and the idea of a democracy was starting to take shape. Industry had been reformed with the introduction of factories and the British Empire was expanding. A severe class system was in operation and Britain was ruled by an elite minority of men who were allowed to vote. Women were not allowed in this class, nor were they allowed to vote.
The workforce was competitive and about 80% of people were considered to be working class. Even when great advancements in science were being made and questions being asked about the very origin of nature, society was still very set in its ideologies and beliefs.

By the time Oscar Wilde died in 1900, the Empire included over 25% of the world's area, including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, parts of South Africa, Hong Kong, India, Gibraltar, a number of islands in the West Indies, Rhodesia and colonies along the African coastline. Trade was abundant and those with investments (primarily the upper classes) received huge amounts of wealth.

The workforce was competitive and about 80% of people were considered to be working class. Even when great advancements in science were being made and questions being asked about the very origin of nature, society was still very set in its ideologies and beliefs. Consequently, many English people migrated to America and Australia to escape this poverty.

The era ended with the death of Queen Victoria at the beginning of a new century.

**Parlour games**
Victorian aristocratic families often had an abundance of free time. Not needing to work, but living off their estate money they had many trivial pursuits. They enjoyed numerous parlor activities ranging from cards and board games to charades. Young ladies and their mothers spent time learning needlework, creating ornaments and reading novels and families frequently gathered around the piano to have a 'sing.'

**Religion**
Organised religion was very important in 19th century English society with Christianity being most prevalent. A survey in 1851 illustrated that 40% of the population were at church or chapel on any given Sunday. This was surprising given that many of the poor had little or no contact with their church. A similar survey in 1991 showed approximately one third of the population attended church on Sundays; demonstrating a decline in organised religion.

**The role of women**
Most servants were female because male servants were paid more. The role of the woman was either leisure in the higher classes; or housekeeping, cooking, cleaning and education in the middle classes. In the working class many women were forced to take on 'man’s work' to help provide for their families, which included factory labour and mining. Women were not allowed to vote, at this kind of decision making was seen as best left to the men.

**CLASS SYSTEM**
The Victorian era was an age of class systems; at the top were the upper classes; the aristocratic gentry and at the bottom were the lower class factory workers, manual labourers and soldiers. Then there were the middle classes; doctors, lawyers and clerks, whose families were neither rich nor poor. Oscar Wilde considered middle class gentleman as the son of a surgeon.

Wilde was lucky enough to have a good education as boys of his social class were often tutored at home before being to prestigious schools, where great emphasis was placed on the classics. Wilde followed in the footsteps of other members of the gentry and attended Oxford University to complete a scholarship.
The upper class
Were the aristocracy in possession of land, titles or born into wealth. Upper class gentlemen did not have jobs, as they lived primarily off their estates which were inherited from father to son. The aristocracy would have had up to £30,000 a year (approx. $5,000,000 in today’s figures) to spend on servants, leisure, clothing and possessions.

They were not only defined by their wealth, but by their family name, which provided the individual political, social and financial opportunities. Some members of the class fit the common stereotype of pompous and unsympathetic while others used their wealth to aid the less fortunate.

The middle classes
The middle class expanded during the Industrial Revolution due to increased economic opportunities. A middle class clerk could earn £300 ($50,000) per year and doctors up to £500, but in comparison to the factory workers, it was still a sizeable amount.

People described as upper middle class were generally, mill-owners, doctors and lawyers and were wealthy and often powerful. Some of these were elevated to the upper classes by increasing their land and titles, often to the annoyance of traditional aristocrats. Lower middle class were usually, clerks, managers, civil servants and 'upstairs' servants in upper class houses (butlers and housekeepers).

The working class
This was the highest populated class comprised of factory workers, soldiers, ‘downstairs’ servants (cooks, maids, cleaners, stable-hands) and builders. The general rule was that is you worked with your hands, you were working class. This impacted your pay, conditions and your life.

Work life was difficult, unsafe and often short. They experienced poor conditions, worked long hours and often lived in overcrowded or disease infested conditions. The upper class saw them as disposable and would offer them poor pay, making them struggle to provide for their families. This class was widely dissatisfied and disenfranchised within their community. As voting rights were reserved for male land-owners, this class were not allowed their say in the politics of the time.

The poor
These poor people were made up of beggars, criminals and the unemployed. They were often sick and lived relatively short lives. It is estimated that approximately 25% of the population belonged to the poor.
Hired Help

Upper and high middle class families employed many servants to help care for their households and families. Here is a list of the servants one might expect to see in an upper class family home:

- The butler - in charge of the house, coachmen and footmen. He looked after the family and the wine cellar
- The housekeeper - responsible for the housemaids and carried the keys to the china and linen cupboards
- The ladies maid - the mistress of the house's personal attendant, helping her to dress and do her hair
- The valet - the master's manservant, attending to his requests and preparing his clothes and shaving tools
- The cook – who ran the kitchen and larder, overseeing the kitchen, dairy and scullery maids
- The governess - who educated and cared for the children with the head and under nurse
- The hall boy – who worked 16-hour days, lighting all the lamps and candles and polishing the staff boots before they woke up

ETIQUETTE

Proper etiquette was of upmost importance to the upper classes in Victorian England. Abiding by appropriate etiquette was an essential aspect of class membership and brought respect to yourself and your family name. Etiquette is a set of social customs to enforce politeness and upright social standing with each class having defined social etiquettes. There were also different expectations for men and women.

Gentlemen

*Always*
- Wears gloves on the street, in church & at other formal occasions
- Stands up when a lady enters a room
- Offers a lady your seat if no others are available
- Assists a lady with her chair when she sits down or stands
- Retrieves dropped items for a lady
- Opens doors for a lady
- Helps a lady with her coat, cloak, shawl, etc.
- Offers to bring a lady refreshments
- Offers his arm to escort a lady
- Removes his hat when entering a building
- Lifts his hat to a lady when she greets him in public

*Never*
- Refers to another person by their first name in public
- Curses or discusses “impolite” subjects when ladies are present
- Leaves a lady unattended
- Uses tobacco when ladies are present
- Greets a lady in public unless she acknowledges him first
- Eats or drink while wearing gloves

Ladies

*Always*
- Graciously accept gentlemanly offers of assistance
- Wears gloves on the street, at church & other formal occasions, except when eating or drinking
- Shakes hands with another woman
Never

- Refers to another adult by his or her first name in public
- Grabs her skirts higher than is absolutely necessary to go up stairs
- Adjusts hair or make-up in public
- Sits with her legs crossed (except at the ankles if necessary for comfort or habit)
- Speaks in a loud, coarse voice
- Kisses or embraces in public
- Walks alone
- Accompanies a gentleman alone without her mother’s permission
- Rides in a closed carriage with a man who is not her father, guardian, husband, family member or her betrothed.

COURTSHIP, MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

The era was one of intense social formality; there were strict rules for mingling, courtship and activities set by the more powerful members of the upper class. A middle/upper class lady would have to be chaperoned by another female (often her governess or an older relative) when in the company of men and by law she could not own property or possessions.

Homosexuality was forbidden by law and was never openly discussed, but before Wilde’s trial, blind eyes had normally been turned on such activities as long as they were in private. After the trial however, homosexuality was condemned openly and the public became fearful of the concept.

Courtship

Relationships were strictly monitored and anything more intimate than a kiss on the hand or an arm around the waist between engaged couples was frowned upon.

Etiquette and social norms meant men and women were much more reserved about courtship and behaved with modesty and prudence. Men and women faced strict rules when it came to finding a partner. Society viewed courtship as a strict process of a woman securing a partner to cement her position in the social class and secure the future of her children. A man could gain wealth by marrying a wealthy woman, as her property would transfer to him upon marriage.

Very little was left to romance and parents and families took a lead role in introducing and dictating whom their child would marry. Parents did not arrange marriages as such, but did take a huge role in approving or disapproving and sourcing eligible partners for their child.

Marriage

After courtship a couple would make arrangements for their wedding as soon as possible. Weekends were considered unlucky; so many couples wed during the week. The wedding ceremony would take place in the church or at the home of the bride and groom. The decorations were very important and were usually elegant and grand. The clothing for the wedding was also very important for the bride, groom, family and guests. Brides wore soft, elegant gowns generally in white.

Wedding and engagement rings were also an important part of the process. Diamonds were quite scarce at the time so often coloured stones or jewels appeared in rings.
Divorce
Divorce was much less common in the Victorian era than today with only one in ten women seeking a divorce. This could be attributed to the difficulties faced with the law, church, social stigma and the limited financial opportunities for women. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 saw the first court hear a divorce case and prior to this, only four divorces had been granted through private act. Divorce was highly stigmatized in Victorian society and frowned upon by many.

TEA
The first samples of tea reached England between 1652 and 1654. Tea quickly proved popular enough and replaced ale as the national drink of England. Prior to the introduction of tea into Britain, the English had two main meals, breakfast and dinner. Breakfast consisted of ale, bread and beef. Dinner was a big meal at the end of the day.

The Duchess of Bedford adopted the European tea service format, inviting friends to join her for a meal at five o’clock in her rooms at Belvoir Castle. The menu consisted of small cakes, bread and butter sandwiches, assorted sweets and tea. The practice proved so popular that it was quickly picked up by other social hostesses.
ESSAY QUESTIONS

ENGLISH QUESTIONS

1. Research the class system of Victorian England. Discuss how Wilde comments and criticises this system drawing examples from specific characters.

2. Does a class system still exist in Australia? Create a piece of persuasive writing to sway the reader to your argument.

3. Discuss how Wilde draws comedy from contradiction, mistaken identity and/or illusion in the play using examples and quotes.

4. Wilde’s written characters regularly have two sides to themselves; the side that is socially accepted by those around them and a concealed side or secret that must remain hidden. Research other works by Wilde and discuss the common elements between them.

5. How does Wilde present his views on relationships and marriage through the play The Importance of Being Earnest?

6. Why or how is The Importance of Being Earnest funny? Analyse some aspects of the play in your response.

7. Discuss the importance of the title The Importance of being Earnest. How does this apply to the play?

8. How does Wilde portray food as both a weapon and as a means of demonstrating one’s power?

9. Compare the characters of Algernon and Jack. Think about their character and the deceptions they make.

10. Algernon is described as a 'dandy'. Describe a contemporary 'dandy' and compare the characters from these two eras.

11. What is the overall tone during Act III? How has this altered from the previous Acts?

12. Discuss the characters of Miss Prism and Rev Chasuble. What kind of people are they and what is their function in the play?
DRAMA QUESTIONS

1. ‘My name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country.’ Discuss how Wilde implements a Shakespearean comedic technique of ‘mistaken identity’ to the comedy of this play. Give an example of a scene where mistaken identity is the basis for comedy.

2. Discuss the staging of the play. How are the different locations illustrated? What elements are used to indicate time and place and how do they transition between acts? What is the effect of this staging?

3. Explore the impact of dramatic irony on this production. Use specific examples where dramatic irony forms the basis of the comedy in this play.

4. Explain using examples how the costuming, hair and make-up of this production reflect the era it is set in. Include images or sketches where relevant to illustrate your ideas.

5. Discuss how any three of these quotes are significant to the theme and style of the play:
   i) ‘I may mention that I have always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist: and I am quite sure of it now.’
   ii) ‘To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.’
   iii) ‘I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.’
   iv) ‘Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that.’
   v) ‘It is a terrible thing for a man to find out that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth.’

6. This play is located in Victorian English society; would it be as effective and entertaining set in a contemporary society? Why/why not? What references would be lost, changed or impacted? Discuss with particular reference to class structures, etiquette, gender roles and earnestness.

7. Think about putting this play into a contemporary setting. If you think about famous people, what characters could they be? What changes would you make to the characters and themes to make it more believable?

DESIGN

Research the clothing of the period and create a costume portfolio for one character reflecting your research and their characterisation throughout the play.

OR

Thinking about the themes represented in the play, re-design the set in a contemporary setting. Explain the reasons behind the choices that you made.
## Immediate Reactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>production elements</th>
<th>performance elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>strengths</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>impact on audiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>weaknesses</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Design Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>design role</th>
<th>technique</th>
<th>what did this contribute to the performance?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lighting</td>
<td>one</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>two</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>three</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>music</td>
<td>one</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>two</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>three</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES

dictionary.reference.com/
www.umass.edu/theater/pdf/earnestsg.pdf
www.educationscotland.gov.uk/resources/nq/d/nresource_tcm4486248.asp
www.sparknotes.com/lit/earnest
www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/j/the-importance-of-being-earnest/character-map
www.sparknotes.com/lit/earnest/context.html
www.umass.edu/theater/pdf/earnestsg.pdf
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_Wilde
www.biography.com/people/oscar-wilde-9531078
www.egs.edu/library/oscar-wilde/biography/

INTERESTING READING
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreshadowing
http://literarydevices.net/foreshadowing/

www.localhistories.org/19thcent.html
www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/industry_invention/britain_workshop_world_01.shtml
www.writing.com/main/view_item/item_id/1798024-The-19th-Century-British-Class-System
www.hierarchystructure.com/victorian-england-social-hierarchy

home.earthlink.net/~gchristen/Etiquette.html
www.datehookup.com/content-an-online-dating-guide-to-courting-in-the-victorian-era.htm
shsaplit.wikispaces.com/Marriage_In_The_Victorian_Era
www.junesuniquelyyoursweddings.com/c-17-victorian.aspx
www.flowofhistory.com/units/eme/17/FC116
www.victorianlondon.org/finance/money.htm
gypsyscarlett.wordpress.com/2010/03/29/victorian-diaries/

www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/25421/Master_Thesis.pdf?sequence=1
wikipedia.org/wiki/Satire
www.touristnetuk.com/south-east-england/hertfordshire/
www.sparknotes.com/lit/earnest/canalysis.html
wikipedia.org/wiki/Dandy