

WILD
RICE

OSCAR WILDE'S
THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING
EARNEST



Learning Resource Pack

CONTENTS

About The Play

Synopsis	4
The Playwright	5
Creative and Production Team	6
Production History	7
Characters	8

Interviews and Articles

A Comedy of Earnest Proportions	11
Lady Bracknell's Hot Wheels!	14

Discussion and Activities

General Discussion Points	19
Literary Devices	20
Themes and Issues	24
- Morality & Deception	
- Class	
For Drama Clubs	32

Further Resources	34
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ABOUT THE PLAY

Synopsis

Two romeos bend the truth to spice up their love lives. Jack has invented a brother, Ernest, whom he uses to escape his dull country life and to woo the ravishing Gwendolyn. His best friend, Algernon, also decides to take the name 'Ernest' to cosy up to Jack's beautiful ward, Cecily, in the country. But things spin hilariously out of control when their deceptions are discovered, threatening to spoil their romantic pursuits.

Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of the world's most popular comedies, boasting some of the funniest lines in the English language. In WILD RICE's award-winning production, celebrated theatre and film director Glen Goei puts a joyous spin on this comic masterpiece by casting an all-male ensemble - revealing fresh insights into this classic tale about courtship, hidden identities and the foibles of high society.

With a sensational international cast, dressed to the nines by renowned fashion doyen Frederick Lee and accompanied live by The Concordia Quartet, *The Importance of Being Earnest* promises to lift your spirits with an evening of sparkling wit, laughter and love.

The Playwright



Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854 - 1900) was an Irish poet and playwright. He was a leading spokesman for England's Aesthetic movement, which championed art for art's sake. In 1881, at the age of 27, Wilde published his first collection of poetry. His only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), was poorly received upon publication but has since become a classic. In the early 1890s, Wilde became one of the most popular playwrights in London, producing a string of beloved comedies like *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Wilde's career came to an untimely end in 1895, when he was convicted on the charge of 'gross indecency' and sentenced to two years' hard labour. In 1900, Wilde died of meningitis at the age of 46.

Creative & Production Team

Written by **Oscar Wilde**
Directed by **Glen Goei**
Set Designer **Wong Chee Wai**
Lighting Designer **Tai Zi Feng**
Costume Designers **Frederick Lee**
Hair Designer / Stylist **Ashley Lim**
Producer **Koh Bee Bee**
Production Manager **Melissa Teoh**
Technical Manager **David Sagaya**
Stage Manager **Nureen Raidah**

Cast

Lane/Merriman played by **Crispian Chan**
Algernon Moncieff played by **Brendon Fernandez**
John Worthing played by **Daniel York Loh**
Lady Bracknell played by **Ivan Heng**
Gwendolen Fairfax played by **Chua Enlai**
Miss Prism played by **Hossan Leong**
Cecily Cardew played by **Gavin Yap**
Rev. Canon Chasuble played by **Lim Kay Siu**

Live Musical Accompaniment

The Condordia Quartet: **Kim Kyu Ri, Matthias Oestringer, Edward Tan & Theophilus Tan**

Production History

Wild Rice Productions of *The Importance of Being Earnest*

25th March - 11 April 2009

Drama Centre Theatre, Singapore

Directed by **Glen Goei**

Starring **Crispian Chan, Brendon Fernandez, Daniel York, Ivan Heng, Chua Enlai, Hossan Leong, Gavin Yap & Zahim Alkbar**

10th April - 4th May 2013

Drama Centre Theatre, Singapore

Directed by **Glen Goei**

Starring **Crispian Chan, Brendon Fernandez, Daniel York, Ivan Heng, Chua Enlai, Hossan Leong, Gavin Yap & Lim Kay Siu**

16th - 17th May 2014

Dom Pedro V Theatre, Macao

Directed by **Glen Goei**

Starring **Crispian Chan, Brendon Fernandez, Daniel York, Ivan Heng, Chua Enlai, Hossan Leong, Gavin Yap & Lim Kay Siu**

11th - 13th September 2015

Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Playhouse Theatre, Brisbane

Directed by **Glen Goei**

Starring **Crispian Chan, Brendon Fernandez, Daniel York, Ivan Heng, Chua Enlai, Hossan Leong, Gavin Yap & Lim Kay Siu**

7th February - 8th March 2020

The Ngee Ann Kongsi Theatre @ WILD RICE, Singapore

Directed by **Glen Goei**

Starring **Crispian Chan, Brendon Fernandez, Daniel York, Ivan Heng, Chua Enlai, Hossan Leong, Gavin Yap & Lim Kay Siu**

20th - 30th August 2020

Wild@Home On Demand on Vimeo

This is a recording of the 2020 production.

Directed by **Glen Goei**

Starring **Crispian Chan, Brendon Fernandez, Daniel York, Ivan Heng, Chua Enlai, Hossan Leong, Gavin Yap & Lim Kay Siu**

CHARACTERS



JOHN WORTHING *played by Daniel York*

'Jack', a young gentleman from the country is our protagonist who wants to marry Gwendolen. A seemingly responsible and respectable man, Jack leads a double life, going by the name of 'Ernest' in London and 'Jack' in Hertfordshire.



ALGERNON MONCRIEFF *played by Brendon Fernandez*

Algernon is the charming upper-class bachelor who is also nephew of Lady Bracknell, cousin of Gwendolen, and best friend to 'Ernest' Worthing. The play's brilliant but amoral secondary hero falls in love at first sight with Cecily, Jack's Ward.



LANE *played by Crispian Chan*

Lane is Algernon's butler whose droll words prove that he is far from a passive servant.



LADY BRACKNELL *played by Ivan Heng*

Lady Bracknell speaks with all the haughty self-righteousness of the conventional Victorian upper-class matron. She is brash, snobbishly conservative and has only one thing on her mind, securing a rich and well-connected husband for her daughter, Gwendolen.



GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX *played by Chua Enlai*

Gwendolen is Lady Bracknell's superficially sophisticated daughter and Algernon's utterly pretentious cousin. A model and arbiter of high fashion and society, Gwendolen seems sure of herself and what she wants in life - to marry someone named Ernest.



CECILY CARDEW *played by Gavin Yap*

Cecily is Jack's sheltered ward. This pretty country girl spent her days chafing under Jack's rules and Miss Prism's tutelage until she finds herself attracted to Ernest's wicked character and invents an elaborate romance between the two.



MERRIMAN *played by Crispian Chan*

Merriman is Jack's butler in his estate in the country.



MISS PRISM *played by Hossan Leong*

Miss Prism is Cecily's rigid Puritan governess who harbors a soft side and a secret love for Rev. Chasuble. She highly approves of Jack's presumed respectability and harshly criticizes his 'unfortunate' brother, Ernest.



REV. CANON CHASUBLE *played by Lim Kay Siu*

Rev. Chasuble is the priest of Jack's parish. This rector frequents Jack's country estate to visit the educated Miss Prism who he secretly entertains romantic feelings for despite being celibate.

INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES

A Comedy of Earnest Proportions

By Shawne Wang

The Importance of Being Earnest is regarded by many as Oscar Wilde's greatest achievement as a playwright. Ironically, it also marked the beginning of the end of his career...

In the early 1890s, Oscar Wilde was at the very height of his career (and powers) as a playwright. He had become the toast of London following the popular success of his two satirical comedies, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*, and was reportedly earning up to £100 a week. (That's about \$22,000 in today's money!)

At the urging of his producers, Wilde wrote the first draft of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (subtitled *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*) in August 1894. The farcical play, whose protagonists invent alter egos to circumvent social duties and societal expectations, drew inspiration from Wilde's daily life. Lady Bracknell, for instance, was named after the hometown of Lady Queensberry - mother of Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas.

Over the next few months, Wilde revised his handwritten draft, refining it into the masterpiece it finally became. This involved condensing the play from four acts into three, tweaking every line, and cutting entire characters.



Opening Night-mare

The Importance of Being Earnest opened at the St James's Theatre in London on Valentine's Day in 1895. By all accounts, the opening-night performance was a smashing success - it received a standing ovation that prompted Allan Aynesworth (who originated the role of Algernon Moncrieff) to later observe that he had experienced no "greater triumph" in his decades-long acting career.

But the play's triumphant reception by audiences was marred by the plans of the Marquess of Queensberry, Lord Douglas' father.

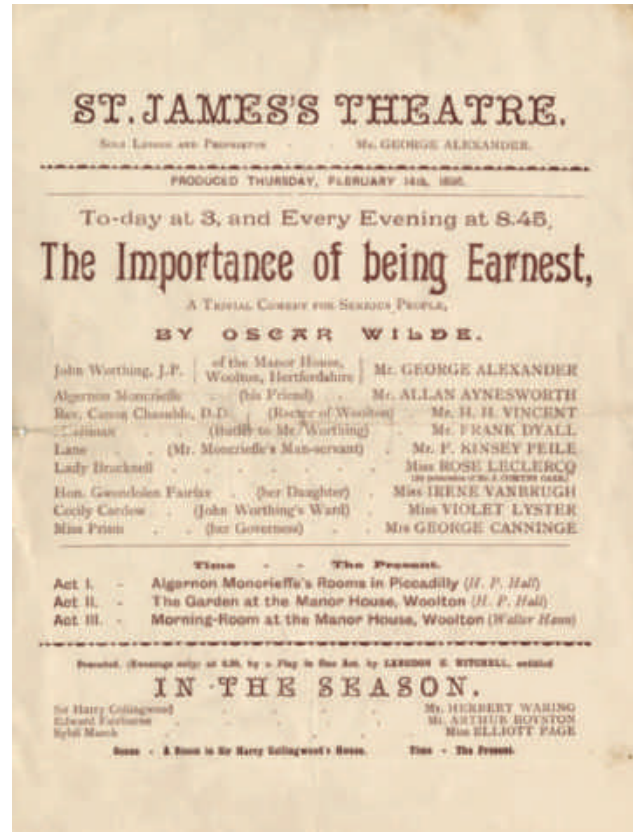
To save his son's (and his own) reputation, the Marquess had already begun to publicly denounce the flamboyant Wilde for his homosexual proclivities. He planned to disrupt the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest* by throwing a bouquet of rotten vegetables at Wilde during the curtain call. Wilde and his producer learned of this scheme and thwarted it by cancelling the Marquess' ticket and preventing his entry into the theatre.

The Beginning of The End

Frustrated by the Marquess' continued harassment, Wilde sued his lover's father for criminal libel. This decision proved to be a catastrophic one. The Marquess hired private investigators to dig up evidence of Wilde's homosexual liaisons, and salacious details soon began spreading through the press.

Following a series of trials over the next few months, Wilde was convicted on the charge of gross indecency on 25 May 1895. (The laws that incarcerated him were repealed in England in 1967, but remain in force in Singapore today as Section 377A of the Penal Code.) Barely 15 weeks after *The Importance of Being Earnest* had opened on the West End, Wilde was in prison - serving a sentence of two years' hard labour.

Thus began Wilde's tragic decline. His health suffered greatly during his incarceration. Released in 1897, he spent the final three years of his life, impoverished and practically friendless, in France. On 30 November 1900, Wilde died of meningitis at the age of 46.



A Legacy of Wit and Wisdom

Wilde's wit, words and wisdom have outlived him - from his extraordinarily funny quips and bon mots, to his profoundly insightful novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

But it is *The Importance of Being Earnest* that perhaps best encapsulates Wilde's enduring appeal and brilliance as an artist. On the surface, the play is a dazzling fireworks display of literature

and language - according to renowned poet W.H. Auden, "perhaps the only purely verbal opera in English". It is a feather-light confection, written by "a butterfly, for butterflies", as Wilde himself described it.

However, the comedy's madcap hijinks hide a mighty sting. Apart from being one of the funniest comedies ever written, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is also a merciless satire of the uptight Victorian society and rigid moral codes that ultimately proved to be Wilde's own undoing.

Most of all, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a celebration of individualism: a reminder of the importance of being true to oneself. In every sparkling line of this classic play, Wilde demonstrates his keen understanding of the Herculean efforts that go into leading a double life - as well as the immeasurable happiness that comes with shedding falsehoods to embrace love, life and laughter.

Images from the original 1895 production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Lady Bracknell's Hot Wheels!

By Ashley Chin

In this candid interview, Ivan Heng opens up about a crippling injury to his knee, and how it radically changed his performance in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.



Ivan had to reinvent the wheel when it came to his performance as Lady Bracknell!

When Ivan Heng's knee buckled midway through the gala night performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, he realised that there was simply no way Lady Bracknell – the character he plays – could stride her way on stage for the rest of the run.

Decades of performing with great physicality in the theatre had finally caught up with him. From prancing around in high heels to kicking spears in full Chinese opera regalia, Ivan has done it all.

"Actors are athletes. I act with my entire being, completely changing my own

shape to embody my characters – and that's very physically demanding," notes Ivan. "Unfortunately, that means I now have the knees of a 90-year-old!"

That fateful night, he had torn his meniscus (the cartilage) in his right knee and dislocated it.

"My leg was literally dangling at an angle, but I finished my lines through gritted teeth," Ivan recalls. "Curtain call was a blur; I had speeches to make, flowers to present and a birthday cake to cut as we celebrated WILD RICE's 20th Anniversary. But the adrenaline got me through it."



If you know what to look for, you'll see how Ivan was favouring his left leg on gala night!

"When I finally hobbled to my dressing room right after the show, I sat down and I just couldn't get up."

"Our gala was going on outside in the foyer, with our greatest supporters all asking, 'Where's Ivan?'"

"But I was in excruciating pain and I couldn't move. All I could think about was: 'How am I going to do the next show?'"

For Ivan, the show simply had to go on. "So I asked for a large glass of wine and, remembering that we had a wheelchair from **Supervision** stored away in our warehouse in Tuas, I arranged to have it delivered to the theatre first thing in the morning."

All Hands on Deck

The ensuing countdown until the next performance - a matinee at 2.30pm the day after - was a whirlwind of activity. With the help of the entire cast and just an hour and fifteen minutes of rehearsal, a new Lady Bracknell was born.

Ivan is quick to express his gratitude for his castmates. "I couldn't have done it with any other cast!"

"I always say, 'You can't play King Lear by yourself; everyone plays King Lear for you.'"



Frederick Lee creating a wheelchair fit for a lady - Lady Bracknell!

Together with Crispian Chan, who plays butlers Lane and Merriman, Ivan devised how Lady Bracknell would make all her new entrances into her scenes.

The result: an already imposing Lady Bracknell becomes an even more formidable figure who barely has to lift a finger to send shivers down your spine.

“Now, when I barrel my way into a scene, everyone snaps to attention and is just jumping out of the way to avoid her! It’s very funny,” Ivan laughs. “You can’t really argue with a dragon lady in a wheelchair, can you?”

To complete Lady Bracknell’s transformation, her wheelchair needed a glamorous makeover.

The original wheelchair had been of the unprepossessing, standard-issue variety for Patrick Teoh’s stroke-recovering Teck in *Supervision*. Certainly not the kind of wheelchair the financially endowed Lady B would be caught dead in.

Enter Frederick Lee, the production’s brilliant costume designer.

“Over two days, Frederick was on his hands and knees, giving the wheelchair a complete overhaul,” Ivan recalls.

The grueling process involved swapping the leather upholstery for a luxurious velvet, and adding rhinestones to all visible surfaces.



Bling It On! Lady Bracknell is ready to make her entrance!

"We only had brief pockets of time between performances to work with. So, with every successive performance, you get a little bit more bling."

A Theatre For Everyone

"My experience performing in a wheelchair has driven home to me just how much our society disables those who are different," Ivan reflects. "From the way we treat others, to the spaces we design."

Hiring other venues for past WILD RICE productions had long ago opened his eyes to how many public spaces excluded patrons with different needs.

"So, when we started designing a theatre of our very own three years ago, we intuitively knew we needed it to be wheelchair-friendly if we wanted to build a theatre for everyone."

"My injury gave me the opportunity to walk the talk or, more precisely, to wheel the talk: to put our theatre to the test."

"I'm quite happy to report that our theatre is indeed wheelchair-friendly," Ivan chuckles.

"There's always room for improvement, but I'm happy that WILD RICE is taking a step in the right direction in fostering the kind of inclusivity we want to see in the world."

10 Facts about the Victorian Era

1. The Victorian Era in British history refers to the period approximately between 1820 and 1914, which corresponds roughly to the period in which Queen Alexandrina Victoria reigned from her ascension in 1837 to her death in 1901.
2. Under Queen Victoria's rule, the British Empire saw great expansion and grew into the largest, richest and most powerful empire in history.
3. Victorian Hierarchy: People were classified chiefly into three groups; Upper Class, Middle Class and Working Class during this era.
4. Gender Roles: Victorian ideology dictated that males are physically superior and morally inferior to woman, thus men were the breadwinners and women become homemakers.
5. Feminist Ideology: Educated middle-class women were critical of the patriarchy society and began fighting for greater autonomy in their lives in a movement called 'New Woman'.
6. Child Labor: The Industrial Revolution called for more hands, attracting children to work under brutal and unsanitary conditions for meagre pay.
7. Sanitation: Attributed to the booming Industry and poor dumping practices of the Victorians, pollution was rampant throughout England, contaminating the water and air quality which consequently contributed to the high mortality rates.
8. Fashion: The sooty London atmosphere not only affected people's health but their fashion, spurring the population to wear dark colours to hide the black specks that would inevitably decorate their clothes.
9. Arsenic, a toxic metalloid was a common ingredient found in supplements and cosmetics during this era which lead to many citizens being poisoned during this period.
10. Innovation and industrialization took the forefront during this era, resulting in the inventions of the telephone, motorcar, typewriter, bicycle and moving film (many things we still use and enjoy today!).

DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

General Discussion Points

1. Why did you think the playwright choose the title, *'The Importance of being Earnest'*?
2. Which part(s) of the play were you most engaged in? Why so?
3. What do you think are the main themes of the play?
4. Do you think the deception and lies in the play are justified?
5. What do you think of the expectations the characters have?
 - Gwendolyn's and Cecily's expectations of a partner;
 - Lady Bracknell's expectations of a husband for her daughter;
 - Jack and Algernon's expectations of life and responsibilities.
6. Do you relate to any parts of the story told during the performance? Which parts were you most excited or affected by?
7. Did the play end the way you expected? What surprised you?
8. Think about how the staging of the play - the sets, props, lighting, sound and costumes. What effect did these elements have on your experience?
9. Oscar Wilde has many witty quotes, we compiled a list of some of his most famous quips. Discuss what you make of them. Do you agree with them?
 - To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.
 - Some cause happiness wherever they go; others whenever they go.
 - To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance.
 - Everything in moderation, including moderation.
 - I am not young enough to know everything.
 - Experience is merely the name men gave to their mistakes.
 - You can never be overdressed or overeducated.
 - The truth is rarely pure and never simple.
 - A good friend will always stab you in the front.

Literary Devices

The genre of a performance is the style or category of the piece of literature. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is categorised as a comedy of manners or satirical farce – meaning that there's a satirical portrayal of behaviour in a particular social group.

Themes such as marriage, morality, class and even trivial aspects of life, such as the amount of in tea, are full of humour, exaggeration and irony.

In this section, we explore different literary devices commonly utilised in a comedy.

The word 'Comedy' has been derived from the Greco-Latin word *κωμωδία* (*kōmōidía*) which is made of two words 'komos', which means revel and 'aeidein' means to sing. It had originally referred to a play with a happy ending. While the motif of this dramatic work remains, it has developed into a literary genre and a type of dramatic work that is written to evoke positive reactions from the audience.

There are many different forms of comedy, such as screwball comedy, innuendo, parody, satire, pun, comedy of manners, romantic comedy, farce, burlesque, sarcasm, dramatic irony, and self-deprecation. The type of comedy depends upon the source of the humour, the context in which an author delivers dialogues, and delivery methods. Different forms of comedy are more popular in different cultures and in different eras.

The Importance of Being Earnest would be considered a prime example of Comedy of Manners. This type of comedy is satirical and deals with intrigues and relations of ladies and gentlemen living in a sophisticated society. Humour is derived from witty dialogues, violations of social traditions, and good manners of nonsense characters like jealous husbands and foppish dandies. By doing this, authors expose the foibles and follies of individuals and society.

The Importance of Being Earnest can be regarded as a satire, farce, parody, among many others for it parodies the hypocrisy, frivolity, superficiality, artificiality and money mindedness of the Victorian upper class.

These are a list of some examples of comic devices from the text:

Pun

A joke exploiting the different possible meanings of a word or the fact that there are words which sound alike but have different meanings. An example of this would be the title of the play, '*The Importance of Being Earnest*'.

Irony

A literary technique that makes an event seem deliberately contrary to what one expects and is often wryly amusing as a result.

Example from the play:

CECILY: Oh, yes. Dr. Chasuble is a most learned man. He has never written a single book, so you can imagine how much he knows.

Epigram

A terse, sage, or witty and often paradoxical saying that is humorous in nature.

Example from the play:

LADY BRACKNELL: To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.

Droll

Droll utilises capricious or eccentric humour.

Example:

ALGERNON: I hope to-morrow will be a fine day, Lane.

LANE: It never is, sir.

ALGERNON: Lane, you're a perfect pessimist.

LANE: I do my best to give satisfaction, sir.

Satire

Earnest is also a satire because it makes fun of its characters –most of whom are members of the aristocratic class. Wilde constantly exaggerates the upper class’s shallowness and frivolity to show their corrupt morals.

Example:

LADY BRACKNELL: (*pencil and note-book in hand*) I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?

JACK: Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

LADY BRACKNELL: I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you?

JACK: Twenty-nine.

LADY BRACKNELL: A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

JACK: (*after some hesitation*) I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL: I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square.

Farce

A comic dramatic work that includes a ludicrously improbable situations.

Example:

- JACK: How can you sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble, I can't make out. You seem to me to be perfectly heartless.
- ALGERNON: Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated 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. *(Rising)*
- JACK: *(rising)* Well, that is no reason why you should eat them all in that greedy way. *(Takes muffins from ALGERNON)*
- ALGERNON: *(offering tea-cake)* I wish you would have tea-cake instead. I don't like teacake.
- JACK: Good heavens! I suppose a man may eat his own muffins in his own garden.
- ALGERNON: But you have just said it was perfectly heartless to eat muffins.
- JACK: I said it was perfectly heartless of you, under the circumstances. That is a very different thing.
- ALGERNON: That may be. But the muffins are the same. *(He seizes the muffin-dish from JACK)*

Themes and Issues: Morality and Deception

Discussion Prompts

1. What is the significance of the idea of “being earnest” in the play?
2. At times, people adopt a different personality or showcase a different side of themselves with different social groups (family, friends, figures of authority etc). What does this say about the society we live in?
3. Discuss the internet phenomenon of ‘Catfishing’ and compare it to the actions of Jack.

Key Ideas

Earnest

A word used to describe someone that shows sincere or intense conviction.

Catfishing

A deceptive activity where a person creates a fake identity and profile on a social networking service.

Deception

The act of hiding the truth, especially to get an advantage.

Morality

Principles or a code of conduct as put forward by society that dictates right from wrong.

Virtue

Behaviour that shows high moral standards.

Manners

Ways of behaving towards other people.

Social Groups

A group consisting of two or more individuals who are in some kind of interrelation and share a common identity.

Social Expectation

The general standards of behaviour that individuals who live within a society are expected to uphold.

White Lie

A harmless or trivial lie, told to avoid hurting someone's feelings.

Suggested Activities

Read: Why Do We Act Differently Around Different People?

Ever wondered why sometimes we act differently around different people?

Read this post about “Why Do We Act Differently Around Different People”, to understand more about Schemas – a mental structure that guides how we think and what we do. Schemas helps us in understanding the world, our experiences and the rapidly changing environment we are in.

Each of us has a number of self-schemas, that we utilise when in different situations and when interacting with different people - a schema as a child, a student, a friend etc.

Refer to this article to find out more about Schemas:

<https://thecircleofpsyche.wordpress.com/2015/05/26/why-do-we-act-differently-around-different-people/>

Discussion: Reasons People Lie

There are a number of reasons why people lie. Here are some reasons:

1. To protect someone else from punishment
2. To obtain a rewards
3. To get out of awkward situations
4. To avoid punishment
5. To win admiration from others
6. To project one’s self from physical harm
7. To exercise power over others
8. To avoid embarrassment.

Discussion Prompts

- Do you think any of these reasons are acceptable motivations for someone to lie?
- Do the different motivations make it any more justifiable to tell a lie?

Discussion: Morality and Deception

Read the short excerpt from Act 1 of *The Importance of being Earnest*. In this short scene, Jack attempts to explain to Algernon why he has an alternate persona.

ALGERNON: Now, go on. Why are you Ernest in town and Jack in the country?

JACK: 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, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany,

and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.

ALGERNON: The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!

JACK: That wouldn't be at all a bad thing.

ALGERNON: Literary criticism is not your forte, my dear fellow. Don't try it. You should leave that to people who haven't been at a University. They do it so well in the daily papers. What you really are is a Bunburyist. I was quite right in saying you were a Bunburyist. You are one of the most advanced Bunburyists I know.

JACK: What on earth do you mean?

ALGERNON: You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. 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. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's to-night, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week.

Discussion Prompts


- What do you think they mean by “bunburying”?
- Is telling a white lie acceptable? Why or why not?
- Can you think of examples when telling a lie or exaggerating the truth is acceptable?
- Can you think of any time when a small lie can lead to a bigger lie?

Activity: Two Truths and A Lie

In this game, Players tell two truths and one lie about themselves (in any order). The aim is for everyone else to figure out which statement is actually the false one.

Give students a slip of paper, and ask them to write down two truths and one lie about themselves.

Have players read aloud what they wrote while the rest of the class votes on which one is the lie.

 Tip: Try to make their lie believable and try to throw other players off with unusual truths!

Discussion Prompts

- What did it feel like to lie? Why do people lie?
- Why is it difficult for some people to tell the truth?
- Is it always easy to know the difference between a lie and the truth? Why?
- In what ways might people’s non-verbal behaviours indicate whether they are lying or telling the truth?
- Is there a time when it might be necessary to be deceptive in order to protect yourself or do what you need to do?

Themes and Issues: Class

Discussion Prompts

1. What is the significance of “being earnest” in the play?
2. “Education is the great equaliser.” Do you agree?
3. Does socio-economical background affect one’s ability to access to programmes such enrichment and tuition classes?

Key Ideas

Prejudice

An unfair and unreasonable opinion or feeling typically formed without enough thought or knowledge.

Class

A group of people within society who have the same economic and social position.

Privilege

A special right or an advantage granted only to some (a particular person or a group).

Power

The capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events.

Status

The level or position of someone or something in relation to others in a group.

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

The social standing or class of an individual or group. It is often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation.

Inequality

The unfair situation in society when some people have more opportunities, money, etc. than other people due to various factors, such as the unequal accumulation of wealth between the rich and the poor

Game: A Demonstration on Class & Privilege

Class is something that is typically first assigned when one is born, as its based on a family's economic and social position. Class is a group of people within society who have the same economic and social position. The 'class' one is born into may provide them with certain privileges.

Everyone has some privilege (this could be based on SES, gender, race, disability etc). It is important from the beginning to recognise that privilege itself is not a bad thing, so young people should not be made to feel ashamed if they recognise that they are privileged. It is useful instead to see it as a reminder. Recognising privilege is an opportunity to foster empathy, increase understanding and play our own part in correcting some of the inequities that exist in our society.

With privilege, it is often that the person who is privileged does not realised they are privilege in some way or another. This is a simple activity that will enable students to understand the concept of privilege.

1. Give each student a scrap piece of paper, instructing them to crumple it up.
2. Place a recycling bin or trash can at the front of the class.
3. Each of them are part of the country's population and to become wealthy and part of the higher class. To advance, they have to throw their crumpled paper and get it into the bin, while they are still sitting in their chair.
4. Instruct each row to take turns, allowing the students to see the if anyone managed to get their crumpled paper into the bin from each row.

Post-Activity Discussion Prompts:

- Who had the advantage? How did these people come to have the advantage?
- Is there any other way we can make this situation more fair? (See extension activity below)

Extension Activity: The Effects of Privilege in a Meritocratic Society

In Singapore, a large part of our country is run on the idea of meritocracy. That means that people are rewarded solely for their merits, and not their social class or background.

Run the activity again. This time, those who managed to get their paper ball into the bin during the first round will move up to the front of the class. Those that did not will move to the back of the class. Repeat this a couple of rounds.

Post-Activity Discussion Prompts:

- Do you think playing the game this way is more fair? Why or why not?
- Did your starting position affect your final position in the class? How?
- What is our 'starting position in life'? How does this affect our ability to thrive?

For Drama Clubs

In this section, we have prepared some exercises that can be conducted as part of Drama CCAs.

Rewriting the Scene: Wilde's Work in Singlish

The language in '*The Importance of Being Earnest*' is somewhat from a different era. It's not the English we use nowadays, and being in Singapore - it does not have a hint of 'Singlish'. For this activity, split into groups and rewrite the scene below set in a local context and to have the conversation in 'Singlish'.

Once you have completed it, in your groups, act out the scene! Ensure that you capture the nuances of the 'Singlish' language.

A long pause. CECILY and GWENDOLEN glare at each other.

GWENDOLEN: Are there many interesting walks in the vicinity, Miss Cardew?

CECILY: Oh! yes! a great many. From the top of one of the hills quite close one can see five counties.

GWENDOLEN: Five counties! I don't think I should like that; I hate crowds.

CECILY: *(sweetly)* I suppose that is why you live in town?

GWENDOLEN bites her lip, and beats her foot nervously with her parasol.

GWENDOLEN: *(looking round)* Quite a well-kept garden this is, Miss Cardew.

CECILY: So glad you like it, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN: I had no idea there were any flowers in the country.

CECILY: Oh, flowers are as common here, Miss Fairfax, as people are in London.

GWENDOLEN: Personally I cannot understand how anybody manages to exist in the country, if anybody who is anybody does. The country always bores me to death.

CECILY: Ah! This is what the newspapers call agricultural depression, is it not? I believe the aristocracy are suffering very much from it just at present. It is almost an epidemic amongst them, I have been told. May I offer you some tea, Miss Fairfax?

GWENDOLEN: *(with elaborate politeness)* Thank you. *(Aside)* Detestable girl! But I require tea!

CECILY: *(sweetly)* Sugar?

GWENDOLEN: *(superciliously)* No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more.

CECILY looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup.

CECILY: *(severely)* Cake or bread and butter?

GWENDOLEN: *(in a bored manner)* Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.

CECILY (cuts a very large slice of cake, and puts it on the tray)

GWENDOLEN drinks the tea and makes a grimace. Puts down cup at once, reaches out her hand to the bread and butter; looks at it, and finds it is cake. Rises in indignation.

GWENDOLEN: You have filled my tea with lumps of sugar, and though I asked most distinctly for bread and butter, you have given me cake. I am known for the gentleness of my disposition, and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I warn you, Miss Cardew, you may go too far.

CECILY: *(rising)* To save my poor, innocent, trusting boy from the machinations of any other girl there are no lengths to which I would not go.

GWENDOLEN: From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right.

CECILY: It seems to me, Miss Fairfax, that I am trespassing on your valuable time. No doubt you have many other calls of a similar character to make in the neighbourhood.

FURTHER RESOURCES

This section contains links and information to additional resources that you may use to supplement the students learning.

Plays by Oscar Wilde

Apart from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde has written a number of other plays, they are:

Plays

- **A Florentine Tragedy**
- **A Woman of No Importance**
- **An Ideal Husband**
- **La Sainte Courtisane**
- **Lady Windemere's Fan**
- **Salomé**
- **The Duchess of Padua**
- **Vera, or the Nihilist**

Aside from plays, Wilde also has written prose (such as the *Picture of Dorian Gray*), short stories and poetry. You can find more information and read Wilde's work at <https://www.wilde-online.info/>

Articles

- **To succeed, Singapore needs citizens with values: PM Lee** – The Straits Times: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/to-succeed-spore-needs-citizens-with-values-pm>
- **Inequality is a threat - name it, and face it** – The Straits Times: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/inequality-is-a-threat-name-it-and-face-it>
- **Experts call for policies to bridge class divide in Singapore** – The Straits Times: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/experts-call-for-policies-to-bridge-class-divide>
- **To tackle inequality, ensure everyone is progressing: Tharman** – The Straits Times: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/to-tackle-inequality-ensure-everyone-is-progressing-tharman>