

SYDNEY
THEATRE
CO
EDUCATION

ON CUE

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

BY OSCAR WILDE
DIRECTED BY SARAH GILES



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Cover: Helen Thompson. Photo: Rene Vaile.

Compiled by Kelly Young

The activities and resources contained in this document are designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this production. Kelly is the Education Manager for the Sydney Theatre Company. You can contact Kelly on kyoung@sydneytheatre.com.au

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ABOUT *ON CUE* & STC

ABOUT *ON CUE*

STC Ed has a suite of resources located on our website to enrich and strengthen teaching and learning surrounding the plays in the STC season.

Each school show will be accompanied by an *On Cue* e-publication which will feature essential information for teachers and students, such as curriculum links, information about the playwright, synopsis, character analysis, thematic analysis, and suggested learning experiences.

For more in-depth digital resources surrounding productions, please visit the STC Ed page on our website: sydneytheatre.com.au/education

Such resources include:

- Director documentaries
- Design sketchbooks

STC acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora nation who are the traditional custodians of the land on which the Company gathers. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and we extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with whom we work and with whom we share stories.

ABOUT SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY

In 1980, STC's first Artistic Director Richard Wherrett defined STC's mission as to provide "first class theatrical entertainment for the people of Sydney – theatre that is grand, vulgar, intelligent, challenging and fun."

Just over 40 years later, that ethos still rings true.

STC offers a diverse program of distinctive theatre of vision and scale at its harbourside home venue, The Wharf; Roslyn Packer Theatre at Walsh Bay; and Sydney Opera House, as a resident theatre company.

STC has a proud heritage as a creative hub and incubator for Australian theatre and theatre-makers, developing and producing eclectic Australian works, interpretations of classic repertoire and great international writing. STC strives to create theatre experiences that reflect Sydney's distinctive personality and engage audiences.

Strongly committed to engagement in the community, STC's Education and Communities programs aim to inspire theatre appreciation and participation not only in theatres but also in schools, community halls; wherever people get together. STC offers an innovative School Drama™ program; partners with groups in metropolitan Sydney. Through these partnerships and initiatives, STC plays a part in ensuring a creative, forward-thinking and sociable future by engaging with young people, students and teachers.

STC has toured work internationally to great acclaim and has worked with many of Australia's internationally renowned artists including Benedict Andrews, Cate Blanchett, Wayne Blair, Rose Byrne, Toni Collette, Judy Davis, Elizabeth Debicki, Joel Edgerton, Barrie Kosky, Ewen Leslie, Deborah Mailman, Tony McNamara, Suzie Miller, Joanna Murray-Smith, Tim Minchin, Richard Roxburgh, Sarah Snook, Andrew Upton, Mia Wasikowska, Jackie Weaver and Hugo Weaving.

STC often collaborates with international artists and companies and, in recent years, the Company's international profile has grown significantly with productions touring extensively to great acclaim.

STC is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its principal arts investment, development and advisory body; and by the New South Wales Government through Create NSW.

sydneytheatre.com.au

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS



SUITABLE FOR

Students in Years 7 – 12

CURRICULUM LINKS

NSW Drama Syllabus Drama Stage 5 and 6

- Stage 4 and 5 Dramatic Forms and Performance Styles
- Stage 6 Theatrical Traditions and Performance Styles

NSW English Syllabus English Stages 4, 5 and 6

Themes and Ideas

- Class and Morality
- The Nature of Marriage
- Honesty and Hypocrisy

CAST & CREATIVES

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST BY OSCAR WILDE

MERRIMAN, BUTLER / SERVANT

GARETH DAVIES

CECILY CARDEW

MELISSA KAHRAMAN

MISS PRISM, GOVERNESS / SERVANT

LUCIA MASTRANTONE

JOHN WORTHING

BRANDON McCLELLAND

LANE, MANSERVANT

SEAN O'SHEA

MOULTON, FOOTMAN / SERVANT

EMMA O'SULLIVAN

REV CANON CHASUBLE / SERVANT

BRUCE SPENCE

LADY BRACKNELL

HELEN THOMSON

GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX

MEGAN WILDING

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

CHARLES WU

DIRECTOR

SARAH GILES

SET DESIGNER

CHARLES DAVIS

COSTUME DESIGNER

RENÉE MULDER

LIGHTING DESIGNER

ALEXANDER BERLAGE

COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER

STEFAN GREGORY

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

KENNETH MORALEDA

FIGHT DIRECTOR

TIM DASHWOOD

INTIMACY COORDINATOR

CHLOÉ DALLIMORE

VOICE & TEXT COACH

CHARMIAN GRADWELL

DESIGN ASSOCIATE (COSTUME)

JAMES LEW

PRODUCTION MANAGER

TONY PAPP

STAGE MANAGER

KATIE HANKIN

DEPUTY STAGE MANAGER

BROOKE KISS ASSISTANT

STAGE MANAGER

JULIA ORLANDO

COSTUME COORDINATOR

SAMANTHA PERKINS

BACKSTAGE WARDROBE SUPERVISOR

SIMONE EDWARDS

WIG, HAIR & MAKE-UP SUPERVISOR

LAUREN A PROJETTI

DRESSER

GEORGINA LAMB

WARDROBE DAY MAINTENANCE

DAMIEN ROSS

LIGHTING SUPERVISOR

ESSE GREIG

LIGHTING PROGRAMMER

CORINNE FISH

LIGHTING OPERATOR

SAM SCOTT

SOUND SUPERVISOR

LUKE DAVIS

HEAD SOUND OPERATOR

BEN ANDREWS

RADIO MIC TECH

JESS PIZZINGA

SWING SOUND OPERATOR

STEPHEN POTTER

STAGING SUPERVISOR / HEAD**MECHANIST**

MAITE MARCHIORI

FLY OPERATOR

ZACH WHITE

STAGING TECHNICIAN

ASH LYONS

REHEARSAL PHOTOGRAPHER

DANIEL BOUD

2 HOURS 20 MINS, INCLUDING INTERVAL

THIS PLAY PREMIERED AT SAINT JAMES THEATRE,
LONDON ON 14 FEBRUARY 1895THIS PRODUCTION OPENED AT ROSLYN PACKER THEATRE,
SYDNEY ON 9 SEPTEMBER 2023

THIS PRODUCTION IS SUPPORTED BY THE STC ANGELS

ASSOCIATE PARTNER

**SYDNEY
THEATRE
CO**

DIRECTOR'S NOTE: SARAH GILES



Melissa Kahraman and Sarah Giles

“Arguably the greatest comedy ever written”

- Sarah Giles, Design Presentation 27 June 2023

There is a line of thinking that says theatre can be either a mirror or a window; a mirror reflects our world back at us and a window is an opportunity to look into another world. People assume that Oscar Wilde’s play *The Importance of being Earnest* is a window, through which we are looking at a different world, a different time. But there is a mirror inside that window. Perhaps a fun house mirror, but a mirror nonetheless. And this mirror is doing a very good job of reflecting many of our contemporary issues back at us, if we’re willing to look beyond the laughter. It’s why his play has lasted so long and is so widely performed. Not because it is perfectly structured, and incredibly funny and clever, but because it has the ability to tell us so much about ourselves now.

Wilde’s play is filled with characters who focus on all the wrong things. All the time. It’s incredibly entertaining. They are caught up in what they look like. What they’re wearing. The women are in love not with a specific person called Ernest, but rather the idea of a man who has the name of Ernest. They are caught up in the idea of the thing, the rule of the thing. In short, they focus on all the wrong things.

We are not much better despite having close to one hundred and fifty years to try and make some progress. We are all so distracted. Distracted by work emails, by how others are living their lives, by an imminent work crisis, or by Instagram, perhaps we’re online shopping and thinking about buying something new – in all circumstances we’re giving our precious attention to the wrong things. Wilde’s characters, loveable but flawed, are also astonishing hypocrites. In their defence they are a product of the times they lived in. The hypocrisy of Victorian society is breathtaking. We look back at it and go – gosh, bloody glad I didn’t live then. And yet the parallels are clear. How far have we really come?

Wilde knew that in order for his audience to hear some hard truths they had to be entertained. It is a sentiment I share. Comedy is the greatest theatrical form to delve into political ideas and ask hard questions. And Wilde certainly trojan-horsed in a lot of very controversial ideas to this genius play.

I think if we can take a moment, to laugh at ourselves, at the hypocrisy of it all, and take a good look in this fun house mirror, perhaps tomorrow morning we might realise we’ve been giving our precious time and energy to the wrong things, and maybe we’ll shift our focus.

As Wilde himself said, “life is too important to be taken seriously.”

SYNOPSIS

Friends and gadabout bachelors, Algernon Moncrieff and Jack (John) Worthing enjoy all the delights that Victorian London has to offer young men of means. In order to maintain a veneer of propriety and keep their exploits secret, the two adopt alter egos.

When Algernon sets his sights on Jack's young ward Cecily, and Jack is barred from marrying his beloved Gwendolen by her imperious aunt, Lady Bracknell, their alter egos spring into action – amongst them, a man named Ernest.

Will these antics result in a mastermind game of deception? Or will they devolve into a hilarious mess of mistaken identities?



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

LANE, MANSERVANT

Lane is Algernon's manservant. A manservant is a male servant with the personal responsibility for looking after the personal needs of his employer. Lane takes care of Algernon's every need including preparing food for Algernon, cleaning his clothes and home, and running his household.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

A young and confirmed bachelor, Algernon lives in a fashionable London apartment, looked after by his manservant, Lane. Algernon is young, irresponsible, and committed to having an enjoyable youth, which has led to him creating a needy fictional friend, Bunbury, whose misadventures allow him to live outside Victorian codes of behaviour without consequence.

JOHN (JACK) WORTHING J.P.

A member of the British upper class, John (Jack) Worthing was adopted by his father after being found abandoned in a railway station in London as a baby. This has meant that Jack has been able to live his life respectably as part of the aristocracy. Jack, like Algernon, has invented a fictional brother that allows him to live respectably in the country and less conventionally in London. After the death of his adopted father, Jack has been given the responsibility of being the guardian of his niece, Cecily Cardew, a role that Jake takes very seriously.

REV. CANON CHASUBLE. D.D.

Chasuble is a Minister, or Reverend, in the Anglican Church. The title Canon indicates that Chasuble is the assistant of the Dean, whose role it is to run their cathedral. The D.D. after his name means that he has a Doctorate in the study of Divinity. Chasuble is middle aged and unmarried. He is deeply intelligent but Wilde's characterisation of him suggests that whilst he may be academically well read, he is a bumbling, awkward and impractical man.

MERRIMAN, BUTLER

Merriman is the butler at the estate of John Worthing and Cecily Cardew. A butler is the head manservant. Merriman says little throughout Act II and Act III, but he is clearly intelligent and insightful.

LADY BRACKNELL

Lady Augusta Bracknell is a member of the aristocracy, having married Lord Bracknell as a young woman. Lady Bracknell is the mother of one daughter, Gwendolen Fairfax. Lady Bracknell is a formidable character. She is headstrong, traditional, and determined. Wilde uses the character of Lady Bracknell to thwart the love affairs of Gwendolen, Jack, Algernon, and Cecily, based on her ruthless social climbing. She represents the conservative, selfish privilege of the aristocracy.

HON. GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX

The only daughter of Lord and Lady Bracknell. Gwendolen is a well brought up, worldly, beautiful, and headstrong young woman who has determined that she will marry John (Jack) Worthington, even though her mother does not approve.

CECILY CARDEW

An orphaned only child, Cecily is an eighteen-year-old country girl who has been carefully brought up by her guardian, John (Jack) Worthing. She dislikes study and tries to avoid learning from her governess, Miss Prism. Cecily is described by all characters in the play as being exceptionally beautiful. She is natural, unsophisticated, and sheltered.

MISS PRISM, GOVERNESS

Miss Prism is the governess of Cecily Cardew. She is middle aged, middle class and plain. She has a love of learning, ideas, and romance, having written a romance novel as a young woman. Miss Prism has unrequited feelings for the Rev. Canon Chasuble.

FORM, STYLE & CONVENTION

The following activities are designed to explore the issues and concerns of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Before the class begins this exploration, it is important for the students to understand the theatrical forms, styles, and conventions that both Wilde and STC's production used to create meaning for the audience.

FORM

Oscar Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* was first produced at St James Theatre in London on 14 February 1895. *The Importance of Being Earnest* fused Melodrama and traditional understandings of Victorian mannered comedy to create a completely new form of comedy, now defined as Comedy of Manners. This new form was uniquely Late Victorian, interrogating the social, cultural, and economic inequalities of late Victorian England, in the face of rapidly developing consumer capitalism, the impact of Empire and the challenges of the emergent bourgeoisie for the entirety of English society.

The link below provides detailed information about 19th century theatres such as those in which that Wilde's plays were produced.

bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/19th-century-theatre



Gareth Davies

STYLE

Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a fusion of several theatrical styles of theatre, each working together to wittily satirise the British aristocracy.

Heightened Realism

Heightened Realism is an exaggeration of the theatrical style of Realism.

Realism aims to recreate the experience of real life on the stage using all the available theatrical elements, including acting, the elements of production and the construction of the narrative. The aim of Realism is to create an empathetic or emotional response in the audience.

Heightened Realism is the exaggeration of the conventions of Realism to create a more intense emotional experience for the audience. This means that the acting, elements of production and narrative are 'larger than life' so that the audience experiences the production more keenly.

Melodrama

Melodrama, a staple of popular Victorian theatre making, is defined as a style of theatre in which the plot, characters, dialogue, and Elements of Production are highly exaggerated to create a heightened impact on the audience. At its core, Melodrama was a conservative theatrical style.

Melodrama relied on fantastical plots for their connection to the audience, building tension through ever escalating sensationalised events. Each plot portrayed simple binary understandings of good/evil and morality/immorality. In Melodrama, good always triumphed over evil, with the definition of these concepts driven by the dominant discourse of the period. Melodrama favoured those that were either wealthy, beautiful, or suffered their station in life with acceptance. This meant that the values of the dominant group in society was unchallenged by the playwright and reminded the audience, who were from all classes in society, that challenging one's position in life was doomed to failure.

Characters, or stock characters, tended to be built on stereotypes reinforcing contextual understandings of gender, class and ethnicity. The journey of each character was propelled primarily by the action, rather than any psychological development. Each character played a heightened, or exaggerated version of their emotions, typically using exaggerated gestures and voice to communicate to a large audience in a huge theatre.

FORM, STYLE & CONVENTION (cont.)

Satire

Satire is a form of comedy that relies on comic exaggeration, irony, humour, or ridicule to make a comment about society. Satire is a form of comedy that challenges and criticises dominant values by exposing the ugliness in the world of the play.

Farce

A form of comedy that creates laughter in the audience by placing simplified, one-dimensional characters in ridiculous, or improbable situations. Farce is often characterised by miscommunication and mistaken identity, with characters missing each other as they exit or enter the stage. It may also include physical comedy, such as tripping, slipping, and falling.

Comedy of Manners

Comedy of Manners satirises the values and beliefs of a particular group in society - usually those that enjoy a large degree of privilege. This style of comedy relies on exaggerated characters, sophisticated word play and witty verbal sparring to create and release comic tension. Wilde used this to significant effect to explore the values of the aristocracy for a newly powerful middle class theatre going audience, eager to challenge the dominance of the upper class. The influence of Melodrama had meant that actors and audiences were used to exploring characters in highly exaggerated ways, including gesture and voice, allowing Wilde to expand the depth of the dramatic action beyond that of traditionally sensationalised, one-dimensional plots.

A Comedy of Manners explores the values that underpins the attitudes of the dominant group in society, often focusing on sex, friendship, and money. *The Importance of Being Earnest* explores these three areas, with particular focus on the mercenary approach of the upper class to the use of marriage to maintain and control their economic, cultural, and societal privilege. One of the key techniques that Wilde used to expose the illogical and paradoxical nature of privilege was his use of the epigram – an insightful statement delivered in a way that is both funny and pointed.

Camp

Camp is not a theatrical style but rather a way of being in the world. It has been generated over time by queer people as a response to extended periods of oppression and invisibility. Camp involves a parody of human interactions through gesture, posture, voice, movement, style, decoration, and design. It is often ironic, exaggerated, and theatrical. Over history, queer people have relied on Camp to communicate their experience of the world to those who understood, without placing themselves in danger of being prosecuted for their identities. Oscar Wilde, with his command of witticisms, dandified appearance, and love of artistic expression, relied on a Camp aesthetic to communicate his understanding of the world to those in the audience.



Lucia Mastrantone and Brandon McClelland

OSCAR WILDE & HIS CONTEXT

The Victorian period was one of immense change for England. The Industrial Revolution, having begun in 1750, meant that the British were the most technologically advanced, wealthy country in the world. The British Empire was at its zenith, with colonists around the world extracting raw materials from the lands that they had invaded and transforming these materials into manufactured goods back in the United Kingdom. These were able to be resold globally, making huge profits. Factories, owned by the middle class, were operated by the working class, who lived in poverty in the world's first industrial cities including London, Liverpool, Manchester, and Glasgow. Extremes of wealth and poverty were a source of societal discontent, with working class anger periodically boiling over throughout the 18th and 19th centuries in the form of riots, rebellions and the development and consolidation of the union movement, designed to fight for the interests of the working poor.

During this period, the middle class was expanding enormously and, using their wealth to leverage their interests, competed for control of the industrial economy and British culture. This emergent economy - with its focus on free markets, enterprise, hard work and making a profit - challenged not only the agrarian economy that had been established in Britain for centuries, but the established paradigms of class and gender. Importantly for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, this challenge was focused on the reproduction of class and gender, through the institution of marriage. This period is characterised by a fluidity in the relationships and boundaries between upper and middle classes, both anxious about their position, future, and influence. The importance of the minutiae of class distinctions became more important as the aristocracy and established members of the professional class doubled down on subtle, traditional distinctions, in the attempt to retain political, economic, and social power.

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1854. The son of intellectuals, Wilde studied literature at university, both in Dublin and later at Oxford. During his youth and early adulthood, he wrote poetry and plays, publishing his own work to catch the attention of the public and the critics. Wilde's first commercial success was the play *The Duchess of Padua*, which launched his reputation. Novels, poetry and plays soon followed, including *An Ideal Husband*, *Salome*,

The Happy Prince, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and his most famous work, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

In 1895, Wilde became embroiled in a homosexual scandal involving his lover Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas and Lord Douglas' father, the Marquess of Queensbury. The Marquess, angered by the affair between his son and Wilde, left a note for Wilde calling him a 'sodomite,' a pejorative word used to describe a homosexual person. Wilde sued the Marquess of Queensbury for libel, who responded by offering evidence of Wilde's homosexuality. Wilde was ordered to stand trial for homosexual acts, lost the case and was imprisoned. After his release from prison, he left the United Kingdom for France, where he lived in poverty and died in 1900.



PRE-TEACHING EARNEST

VICTORIAN LONDON

Before launching into world of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, contextualise the development of industrial capitalism and its impact on the city of London using images and descriptions from the historical sources included. The clip below is a simple and brief explanation of capitalism and where it came from.

youtube.com/watch?v=PjctCS1kZp4

The British Library Website has evocative images of Victorian London. View the images and discuss what can be seen, with reference to Victorian understandings of working-class London including fog, darkness, pollution, overcrowding and substance abuse.

britishlibrary.cn/en/articles/slums



Classroom Activities

1. Discuss the images and documents above that explore the ugly side of poverty in Victorian London, including an adjective 'dump' on the white board, that encapsulates the world of the poor. From these adjectives, work in groups to create two freeze frames that represent this world.
2. Watch:
 - Downtown Abbey Trailer (Season 3). This trailer provides a brief glimpse into a fictionalised aristocratic family facing some of the challenges of the decline of the aristocracy.
youtube.com/watch?v=MruKx7Tkxys
 - Born to Rule: The British Aristocracy (link below). This clip is the start of a documentary that investigates the world of a member of the British aristocracy in the Twentieth Century in which their purpose and understanding of their world is articulated. This perspective on society will provide an understanding of the world of the Victorian aristocracy.
youtube.com/watch?v=Kq-zlV9Qxyc
3. Discuss the images presented in both clips, including completing an adjective dump to encapsulate the world of the aristocracy. From these adjectives, work in groups to create two freeze frames that represent this world.
4. Working in the same groups, perform the four freeze frames to the audience.
5. Evaluate as a class using the following questions as a guide:
 - What are the similarities between the images created of the poorer areas of London?
 - What are the similarities between the images created of the aristocracy?
 - What are the differences between the two worlds that co-existed in London?
 - How do you imagine it might have felt to be a member of either group and be faced with the other?
 - Why might Wilde have written a play that satirises the lives of those who lived in great wealth?

PRE-TEACHING *EARNEST* (cont.)

THE SEASON

In Act I of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Lady Bracknell refers to the 'Season.' Originating in the 17th Century and coming into its own in the 19th Century, the 'Season' began after Christmas and continued until early summer. Designed to coincide with sitting days in the British Parliament, its purpose was to allow the aristocratic class to mingle with each other whilst the Parliament was in session. As such, it became a de facto marriage market, in which wealthy young aristocrats could meet each other and form attachments that ended in marriage.

Watch the clip below from *Downton Abbey* that recreates the process by which a young aristocratic woman is presented to the reigning monarch at court as part of this process.

[youtube.com/watch?v=VaaJam9myNo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaaJam9myNo)

Classroom Activities

Discuss the following questions;

- What relationships do you see enacted in *Downton Abbey*? How are gender relationships organised? Why might this be the case?
- What might be the political benefits of a London season?
- Why might the parents of the next generation of aristocrats invest so heavily in such social activities?
- Do we have a 'Season' in Australia? Think about the wealthy of Sydney. What activities do they participate in that might have a similar function?
- Oscar Wilde saw the city of London as an important character in his work. London was a metaphor for the extreme social, political, and economic inequalities of capitalism and more importantly, had become synonymous with the working class.



Helen Thomson, Emma O'Sullivan, Gareth Davies and Sarah Giles

PRE-TEACHING EARNEST (cont.)

WILDE'S LONDON

In his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde describes the East End of London in the following way:

“... the streets (were) like the black web of some sprawling spider. Now and then fantastic shadows were silhouetted against some lamplit blind... They moved like monstrous marionettes and made gestures like live things... Over the low rooftops and jagged chimney stacks of the houses rose the black masts of ships.” (Wilde pg. 44)

When Dorian Gray ventures into the underside of London to visit an opium den, the opium den is described thus:

“Dorian winced and looked around at the grotesque things that lay in such fantastic postures on the ragged mattress. The twisted limbs, the gaping mouths, the staring lustreless eyes...” (Wilde pg. 44)

Interestingly, London is relegated to a lesser role in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The locations in the play are grounded in specific enough references to invoke the social hierarchy of the aristocracy, whilst generic enough to allow the audience to focus on their flaws. Act 1 is set in London and the rest of the play in the English countryside. Wilde describes London in his stage directions in the following way:

Morning room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of the piano is heard in the adjoining room.

Lane is arranging afternoon tea on the table, and after the music has ceased, Algernon enters.

(Act 1, Scene 1 pg. 1)

Classroom Activities

1. As a class make a list of the adjectives found in Wilde's description of Victorian (urban) Gothic London in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Then, make a list of the adjectives found in Wilde's description of Algernon's London flat. As a class, discuss the difference between them and pose reasons for their differences. Predict the reason Wilde does not reference the darker side of London in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

2. Evaluate Renee Mulder's costume design. How has she used the Elements of Production to visually represent the privilege of aristocratic London?
3. Take on the role of Set Designer for a production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* set in Sydney. Where would you set this production? Why would you set it there? What are the parts of Sydney that are unspoken and unacknowledged? Why?

OSCAR WILDE

The British Library offers a variety of resources that explore the life of Oscar Wilde. The link below is one that explores *The Importance of Being Earnest* including its queer subtext. The second link discusses the importance of the Victorian period in defining modern understandings of same sex orientation.

- [bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-importance-of-being-earnest](https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-importance-of-being-earnest)
- [bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/victorian-sexualities](https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/victorian-sexualities)

Classroom Activities

1. Oscar Wilde considered himself a Socialist. As a class, watch the clip below that explains the definition of Socialism. Discuss the links between the clip and the classes' understanding of Wilde's context. [youtube.com/watch?v=FrtdZ-LQXfw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrtdZ-LQXfw)
2. Some of Wilde's other work explored the connections between the aristocracy and the world of working-class London. As a class, predict why Wilde might write a Comedy of Manners that drew attention to the values and belief systems of the aristocracy?

THEMES & IDEAS

CLASS, CAPITALISM, AND THE COMEDY OF PRIVILEGE

The Importance of Being Earnest examines the ways in which the economic system of capitalism engulfed and revolutionised English society. It can be argued that Wilde, as a socialist, was critical of the extremes of capitalism, with excessive wealth held by both the aristocracy and the emerging middle class sitting in confronting difference to the poverty of the working class.

The English aristocracy emerged from the Feudal System, the traditional method of organising the agrarian economies of Western Europe throughout the Middle Ages, with a “born to rule” mentality. Society had been organised as a strict hierarchy, ordained by God, in which the monarch, their nobility and the church owned most of the land and the wealth that was generated from it. There was a small middle class and many peasants, who were tied to the land and created income for their feudal overlord through the generation of an agricultural surplus. This surplus allowed aristocracy to live a life of leisure because they lived off the income generated by their peasants on the land. In return, they were expected to provide armies for the monarchy and protect their peasants in times of difficulty, which was, in practice, not always the case. This connection between property rights, economic privilege, and cultural understandings of the role of the aristocrat in society was born out of this social contract. The nobility came to see their privilege and refinement as being innate, God given and unavailable to anyone who was not born into it. Rigid barriers ensured that access to the aristocracy was all but impossible, even under the forces of emergent consumer capitalism led by the bourgeoisie.

Wilde’s work in *The Importance of Being Earnest* was a sustained, comedic challenge to the privilege of the aristocratic class. By drawing attention to the ways in which class is reproduced and the hypocrisy that underpins their values, Wilde was able to explore, expose and ridicule the logic that underpinned hegemonic beliefs that sustained the power of the ruling elite. One of Wilde’s key devices was to create shallow, one-dimensional characters that reflected the cultural values of the aristocratic class. In particular, the creation of the character of Algernon, the hollow, cucumber

sandwich eating aristocrat, allowed a witty critique of the excesses enabled by wealth and privilege. Wilde, from the beginning of the play, heightened the impact of the aristocratic characters through the inclusion of the (almost) silent but ever-present domestic staff, through whom the audience is positioned to view the upper classes and their behaviour. In addition, Wilde’s inversion of class behaviours was a subversive challenge to the morality of the aristocracy, who embodied the behaviour ascribed to the lower classes whilst judging them harshly.

Wilde’s wit is directed toward the education of the upper classes, their inability to manage their wealth and their superficiality. The classroom activities below explore the areas in which the aristocracy controlled the discourse and the flaws Wilde saw within.

Classroom Activities

A. Relationships between the Aristocracy and the Working Classes

The Importance of Being Earnest opens with an exchange between Algernon and his manservant, Lane. This relationship, and the relationship between Jack and his butler, Merriman, inform the way that the audience is positioned to view the aristocracy.

1. As a class, watch the clip below from Butler School. [youtube.com/watch?v=ow7KcAYtmSw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ow7KcAYtmSw)
2. Once the class has completed their viewing, they should create and fill in a table with the following cells:

The Butler in English Society	
Function of a Butler	Qualities of a Butler
Expectations of a Butler	Expectations of the Employer

3. Once the table is complete, as a class read the stage directions from *The Importance of Being Earnest* on the following page.

THEMES & IDEAS (cont.)

Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room.

(Lane is arranging afternoon tea on the table and after the music has ceased, Algernon enters).

Algernon: Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

Lane: I didn't think it polite to listen, sir. (pg. 1)

Does the interaction between Algernon and Lane appear to fit into our understanding of the role of the butler/manservant? Why? Or, why not?

4. As a class, work in groups of four to rehearse the argument between Gwendolen and Cecily in Act II. This argument occurs in front of the butler, Merriman, and an unnamed footman. The extract begins as follows;

Enter Merriman, followed by the footman. He carries a salver, tablecloth, and plate stand. Cecily is about to retort. The presence of the servants exercises a restraining influence, under which both girls chafe. (pg. 48)

The extract ends with;

Merriman... goes out with the footman. (pg. 50)

As the class experiments with this moment, encourage them to find the farcical nature of the exchange, using the serving of food to communicate a territorial dispute between two women. Encourage the students to find the comedy in the difference in status between the servants and the women. Each group could perform their work for the class.

Once this is complete, students could consider the following question and answer it, using examples from the performance work of the class to support their answer;

- How does Oscar Wilde use comedy to challenge traditional understandings of class in this scene?
5. The following quotes are spoken by the upper and middle-class characters in the play about the perceived qualities of the classes below them. Using the quotes below, create three freeze frames. These freeze frames should represent the views of the aristocracy toward the

lower class and the middle class. The final freeze frame should be that of the attitude of the middle class toward the lower class.

Algernon: Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. 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 of moral responsibility. (pg. 2)

Miss Prism: (Christenings are)... 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. (pg. 34)

Algernon: If it was my business, I wouldn't talk about it. [*Begins to eat muffins*] It is very vulgar to talk about one's business. Only people like stockbrokers do that, and then merely at dinner parties. (pg. 54)

Once the freeze frames are complete, present them to the class and answer the following questions:

- What are the similarities in attitudes toward each class of people?
- What are the differences?
- Whose voice does the audience not hear in *The Importance of Being Earnest*? Why might this choice have been made by the playwright?

B. The Greed of the Aristocracy

The character of Algernon is a one dimensional and exaggerated version of aristocratic privilege. One of the major characteristics given to Algernon is his love of food.

Working in groups of approximately 4 – 5, find all the references in the play to Algernon's relationship with food. Each group could be allocated Act I, II or III to delve into. Once this has been completed, each group could report back to the class.

Working in groups, answer the following question;

- What does Oscar Wilde intend for the audience to understand about the British aristocracy by creating the character of Algernon as a greedy person?

THEMES & IDEAS (cont.)

In groups, the class could take on the role of playwright Oscar Wilde, Director Sarah Giles and the actors playing Algernon, Lane, Merriman, and the additional character of Morton. In these groups, script and perform a conversation about what they would like the STC audience to understand about the character of Algernon and what he represents about privilege. As a challenge task, students could include in their discussion an adaptation of the script to explore contemporary Australian privilege.

C. Lady Bracknell and Class

Lady Bracknell is representative of traditional, conservative aristocratic privilege. Her authoritarian and dogmatic approach to society, status and its political underpinnings is evident from her first entrance.

1. Working in pairs, students choose one of the quotes included below from Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Ask students to rehearse their dialogue together – one student as Lady Bracknell and the other as her inner voice.
2. Perform the script extract with the two student actors speaking Lady Bracknell's scripted dialogue interspersed with her inner voice that lifts the subtext to the surface.
3. After the performances have occurred, make a list of the attitudes that Lady Bracknell holds toward each social class mentioned in the quotes below.
4. Create a freeze frame that represents the views of the aristocracy towards themselves and the lower classes.

Lady Bracknell: 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 danger to the upper classes, and probably led to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square. What is your income? (pg. 16)

Lady Bracknell: To be born, or at any rate bred, in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? (pg. 18)

Lady Bracknell: Exploded! Was he the victim of revolutionary outrage? I was not aware that Mr Bunbury was interested in social legislation. If so, he is well punished for his morbidity. (pg. 60)

Lady Bracknell: [*Sitting down again.*] A moment, Mr. Worthing. A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. (pg. 62)

Lady Bracknell: Dear child, of course you know that 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 of allowing that to stand in my way. (pg. 63)

D. Class and Set Design

Examine images of STC's production directed by Sarah Giles. Set designer Charles Davis and Sarah Giles have made the choice to make the space occupied by the servants in *The Importance of Being Earnest* explicit for the audience.

As a class discuss the following questions;

- Make a list of the key differences between the world of the aristocracy and the world of the servants.
- Make a list of the scripted moments in which the servants are in the space of the aristocratic characters in the play. Then, make a list of the times that Giles has worked with the actors to bring them into the world of the servants in Act 1. Do they? Why might this be the case?
- Given what is known about the Victorian era and Wilde's views on class, hypothesise about the reasons that Giles and Davis might have made these decisions about the set.

THEMES & IDEAS (cont.)

REPLICATING CAPITALISM AND THE PRIVILEGE OF THE ARISTOCRACY: THE ROLE OF GENDER, ROMANCE, AND MARRIAGE

The Importance of Being Earnest satirises the Victorian narrative of marriage, romantic love, and its role in reproducing class privilege. Victorian understandings of romance and marriage, like other cultural narratives, were generated by and sustained in the interests of those with a societal investment in the values that underpin them, and the privilege that is perpetuated as a result. Notions of romance, falling in love, sexual purity until marriage for women and the discursive/actual repression of female sexual desire were viewed as the appropriate and respectable approach to organising the romantic lives of the Victorians.

One of the ways of understanding these narratives is to consider the shift between feudalism and capitalism and the ways in which the values of the aristocracy found their way into a capitalist context. As with most experiences for women across the two periods, biological considerations shaped their experience of love and marriage, with the production and reproduction of the family being the key determinant of women's lives. With no birth control and a lack of status, women's rights were secondary to the importance of providing legitimate children and servicing male desire. Females in Victorian England were all viewed through the prism of their biology, which shaped their life choices and trajectories. Class-based expectations impacted on the experiences of different classes of women, however, with aristocratic women enjoying options in their lives that were unavailable to the middle and working classes.

As noted above, the aristocracy were at the top of the social hierarchy in the feudal system, and the politics of marriage was designed to ensure that land ownership (and hence the means of generating wealth) was secured for the following generations. In this context, marriage was designed to ensure that the first-born son of the aristocrat was able to inherit wealth and pass it onto the next generation. Access to sexual activity for women was highly controlled to ensure the heir to the family lands was the 'true' heir – that is – the biological son of the aristocrat.

Chastity, purity, fidelity, and virginity were highly valued in a marriage partner. It is important to note that aristocratic wives were more than just a companion for their husband, but rather, embodied an entire social structure and entire landed estate, unlike their middle-class sisters, who were isolated as individual mothers and carers. Working class women were held to these same ideals but unable to embody them in their lives, as survival of the family depended on their ability to earn a wage.

Wilde's creation of this world explores the hypocrisy of these beliefs, juxtaposing the businesslike approach of Lady Bracknell with the younger women's views of love and romance, whilst at the same time, offering the audience an unusual sense of the agency of both Gwendolen and Cecily for the Victorian period, in a marriage market that has, hidden at its core, a ruthless control of women's' biology.

Wilde's clarity in bringing forward the business of marriage, hidden beneath societal constructions of love and romance are brutally funny and noticeably led by the women in the play. The women in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are completely in control of the action and seek self-completion in terms of Victorian values – a good marriage based on class and privilege. Lady Bracknell, the voice of established privilege, moves ruthlessly through the marriage market, disguising her ambitions for her daughter Gwendolen as being that of an "affectionate mother." (pg. 15) Gwendolen, from her first entrance, is created as a character who responds in unexpected ways, suggesting an independence of thought and action that challenges notions of appropriate behaviour for women. Lady Bracknell immediately approves of Cecily because she brings to her family an injection of wealth, allowing them to retain their privilege. Cecily, too, invents Algernon in her diary, seeking and achieving "absolute perfection" as she manoeuvres into her engagement and, as such, into her adult identity as part of the aristocracy.

Wilde's satire of the myth of romantic love and the idea of falling in love at first sight foregrounds the politics of reproduction of privilege. Gwendolen falls in love with Jack for the romance of his name. Act II sees Cecily take charge of Algernon's declaration of love at first sight by recounting from her diary the story of their imagined engagement,

THEMES & IDEAS (cont.)

letters written to herself from Algernon by herself and the breaking and remaking of their engagement. Wilde's explosion of these myths arises from his choice to reverse the dynamic between the male and female characters, with the women driving these narratives, with the men powerless to resist. The narrative complication used in both relationships is over the misuse of the name Earnest, which is quickly rectified and forgiven in such an absurd way that the power of the myths of love are exposed for what they are – marriage to reproduce privilege.

Classroom Activities

Victorian Narratives on Romance and Marriage

1. The link below is from the British Library and it is a guide to writing appropriate romantic love letters. The final page has an acrostic poem based on the word 'love.' Using this as inspiration, break the class into groups and ask them to take on the role of Jack or Algernon and write either Gwendolen or Cecily an acrostic poem in which Victorian conventions of romance are evident.
bl.uk/collection-items/guide-to-writing-love-letters

In groups, perform these poems as the characters from *The Importance of Being Earnest* and discuss with the class the values that underpin them.

In the same groups, go back to the acrostic poem and rewrite it for a contemporary version of the characters. These characters might be found in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney. Perform them in character and discuss the differences in the values that underpin them.

2. Act I of Wilde's script includes many witticisms that speak to the truth behind the narrative of love and romance. Allocate the following extracts from Act I to the class and rehearse them through to performance. As each group perform their extract, make a note on the board of the values being expressed.
 - Act I pg. 3 – 4
 - Act 1 pg. 8 – 9 (Algernon: I haven't the smallest intention... to Algernon: Yes; and that the happy English home has proved in half the time)
 - Act 1 pg. 20

3. As a class, make a list of Lady Bracknell's requirements for the ideal husband pg. 15 – 17 that answers the question 'What does Lady Bracknell value in a potential son-in-law'? Once this list has been generated, the teacher could provide quotes from the Instagram account 'Overheard in Paddington' to the class.

Break the class into groups and provide them with pg. 15 – 17 of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and selected images from 'Overheard in Paddington'. Students could rewrite and perform Lady Bracknell's requirements for a future son in law as a wealthy socialite from the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney.

Perform these for the class and evaluate the following questions;

- What are the similarities between Lady Bracknell's requirements and a contemporary Australian mother-in-law?
 - What are the differences?
 - How did each group create a contemporary version of Lady Bracknell?
 - How was the humour created?
 - What does this humour tell us about class? Values about romance and marriage?
4. Using STC's Design Sketchbook, look at the ways in which costume designer, Renee Mulder has chosen to costume the characters of Gwendolen and Cecily.
 - As a class, make a list of adjectives that describe their costumes in Act 1 and in Acts 2 and 3. Why might designer Renee Mulder have exaggerated these costumes?
 - As a class, choose two Australian influencers with a large following. As a class, make a list of adjectives that describe their carefully curated images.
 - Using the adjectives that the class generated from the costumes of Gwendolen and Cecily, work in groups to design contemporary, satirical costumes for these two characters. What does this reveal about contemporary values about romance, marriage, and gender?

THEMES & IDEAS (cont.)

5. Using the activities above as a guide, work in groups to rehearse and perform an extract of the group's choosing that reinterprets *The Importance of Being Earnest* and its satirical views on romance and marriage for a contemporary audience. Some questions to guide post-performance discussions include;
- What values about class, gender and romance remain the same?
 - What values about class, gender and romance are different?
 - How do you imagine that people from outside Australia's most wealthy group of people might react to the satire you have created? Why?



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THE HYPOCRISY VICTORIAN ENGLAND (OR, MORALITY AS A PERFORMANCE)

Wilde begins *The Importance of Being Earnest* by establishing the perception of Victorian England having high moral standards. Wilde then presents his subversive analysis of society – one in which the stifling demands of good manners result in the development of subterranean behaviours and patterns of profound hypocrisy. Dr Holly Furneaux (2014) has argued that Victorian England was the epitome of “high prudery” in which sexuality, and particularly women’s sexuality, was repressed in both discourse and reality, designed to facilitate the image of the ideal mother – the “angel of the house” in which nurture, care and support was offered to the family as a refuge from the outside world. This ideal was counterbalanced by the fascination with the ‘fallen woman’ – women who were prostitutes, committed adultery or were unable to marry respectably because they had already been with a man before marriage.

Gwendolen: We live, as I hope you know, Mr Worthing, in an age of ideals (pg. 13)

The characters of *The Importance of Being Earnest* rely on the creation of fictitious characters that allow them to exist within the authoritarian and prudish environment of Victorian England. This environment is characterised by Lady Bracknell, whose domineering, privileged understanding of society reflects traditional Victorian morality. The creation of imaginary characters by Jack (Earnest) and Algernon (Bunbury) allows each to maintain their respectability by shifting the unacceptable parts of their behaviour onto the fictional characters they have created. Each character is then free to behave as they wish, away from the constraints of societal disapproval. Wilde suggests that these fictions are the foundations upon which Victorian society is built – a double standard of behaviour for certain groups in society. Wilde’s creation of the device of the double reflects society’s problems back to itself in that, in Victorian London, with its emphasis on respectability, morality and repression, needs to hide from itself the space for humans to explore their sexual lives free from constraint.

THEMES & IDEAS (cont.)

Classroom Activities

1. Working as a class, brainstorm class understanding of the idea of the double. For example, double agent, double bind, double cross. What do these ideas tell us about humans and the value of honesty in individuals and in wider societal groups?
2. Remaining in the same class configuration, brainstorm the ways in which Wilde has included the ideas of doubles in his script. Examples might include the audiences' understandings of London, binaries of gender, the idea of surfaces, ideals, and artificiality and what is underneath. Why might these ideas lend themselves to the creation of comedy?
3. Working in groups, use pg. 7 – 8 of Act 1 to create freeze frames that represent the two sides of both Jack and Algernon. Present these images to the class and discuss the two sides of each character. As a class, discuss the reasons why privileged Algernon and Jack might need to employ a double? Encourage students to explore their freeze frames in the style of Melodrama and the aesthetic of Camp. What might these choices bring to the images?
4. Choose an extract from *The Importance of Being Earnest* that relies on the use of the 'double' to create comedy for the audience. This could include Jack and Algernon's exchange in Act II after the 'death' of his brother Earnest (pg. 36 – 40). Using understandings of the 'double' and the theatrical styles used in the play, create a chosen moment from the extract that both makes the audience laugh whilst recognising the hypocrisy of the 'double.'
5. Director Sarah Giles' vision for her production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* involves bringing the double explicitly to the stage by having the working classes on the stage with the aristocracy. Look at the Design Brief that includes images of the set, designed by Charles Davis. Why do you think that this is so important to Giles' vision? What might Giles and Davis be trying to communicate to an audience about our society in 2023?
6. Extension Discussion 1: It has been noted by academics that the character of Jack Worthing is the one that Wilde modelled on himself. Given what you know about Wilde's personal life, why might the role of the double be so important for Wilde to explore?

Written Task

1. Answer the extended response question below using the PEAL format.
Wilde called *The Importance of Being Earnest* a "Trivial Comedy for Serious People." Explain why you agree with Wilde's assessment. Use your experience of the STC production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and in class workshops as theatrical evidence to support your thinking.
2. Questions for younger students. These can be adapted as required.
 - Write a PEAL paragraph describing Charles Davis' set design for STC's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Focus on Act I in this paragraph.
 - Write a PEAL paragraph describing Renee Mulder's costume design for Gwendolen in Act 1 for STC's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
 - Write a PEAL paragraph describing the costumes of the servants in STC's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
 - Students to put these paragraphs together and write down three ideas that that their paragraph descriptions might tell the reader about class in STC's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.



THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION

The Elements of Production in *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be found in STC's *Design Sketchbook*.



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