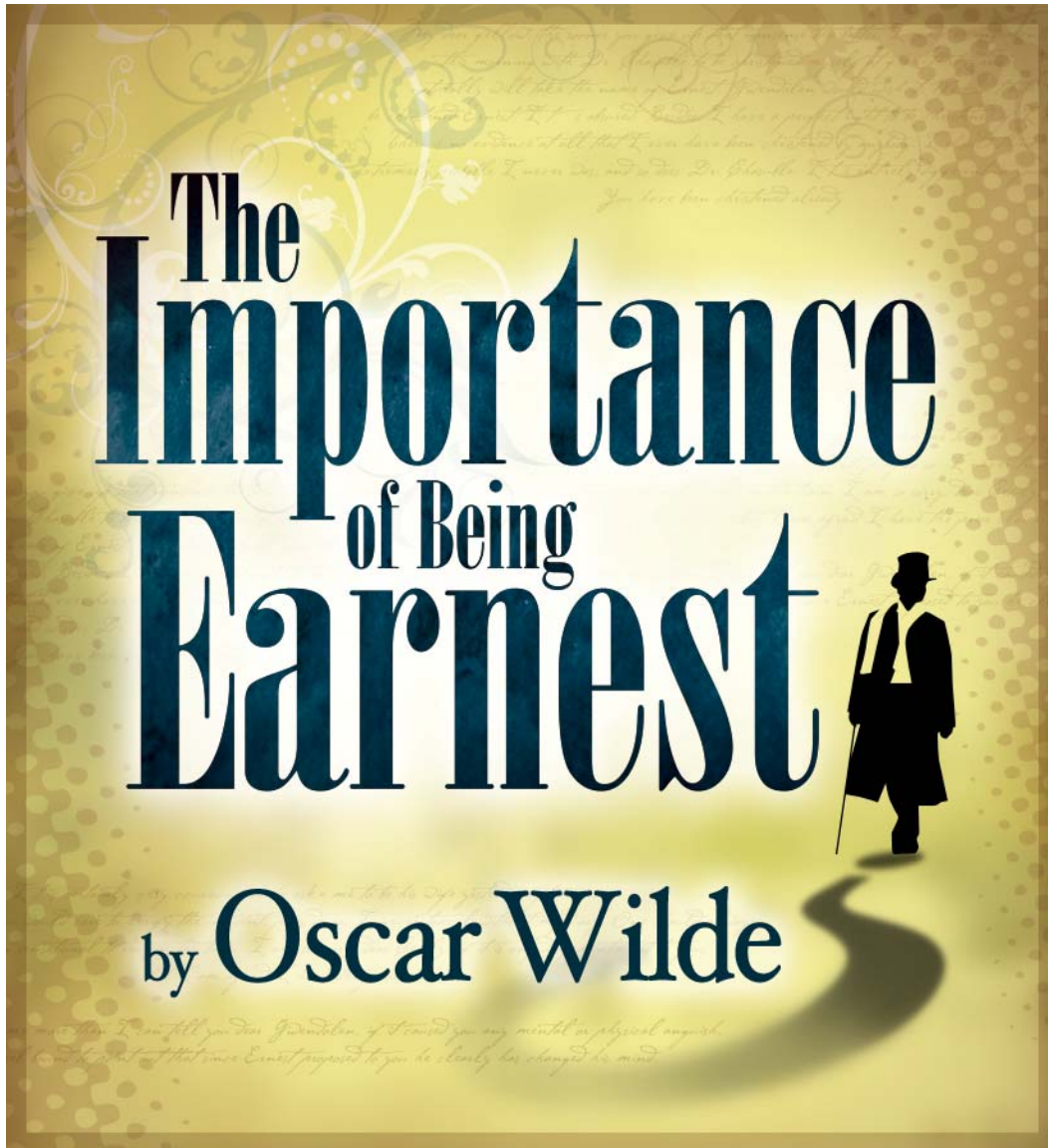


THEATRE JACKSONVILLE PRESENTS



**STUDY GUIDE 2009-2010**



Little Theatre. Big Voice.

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# ABOUT THEATRE JACKSONVILLE

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Since its inception in 1919, the Little Theatre (which became Theatre Jacksonville in 1972) has thrived in good times as well as through some of the 20th Century's worst – the Depression, a Second World War, political assassinations, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and most recently, the threat of terrorist activities. Today, Theatre Jacksonville has the distinction of being one of America's oldest continually producing community theatres and one of Jacksonville's most cherished cultural treasures.

At this writing, Theatre Jacksonville is celebrating its 90th season. The theatre still resides at 2032 San Marco Boulevard, a building that was named to The National Register of Historic Places in 1991. Maintaining the vision of the Theatre Jacksonville pioneers, the theatre produces a season of high quality plays and musicals as well as offerings like the annual Shakespeare production, a performing arts Training Center for youth and adults, and an annual Creative Arts Summer Camp for children. The theatre is also dedicated to providing opportunities for the Jacksonville community to become involved in the artistic process – whether onstage, behind the scenes, in workshops, in the classroom or in the audience. Since 1919, Theatre Jacksonville's volunteers, patrons and staff have been the backbone of the theatre's success.

Because of this vital community involvement, the theatre has forged a remarkable legacy that continues to make a long-lasting impact on the First Coast.

— Staci Cobb, Development Director

## A GUIDE TO THEATRE ETIQUETTE

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Theatre, unlike movies or television, is a LIVE performance. This means that the action unfolds right in front of an audience. The performance, though well rehearsed, is constantly evolving. The actors respond to the audience: laughter, clapping, gasps and general reactions. Therefore the audience is a critical part of the theatre experience. In fact, without the audience, the actors would still be in rehearsal!

As an audience member, it is important to observe certain etiquette so that you may enjoy the best theatre experience possible.

When the performance is about to begin, the lights will dim. This is a signal for the actors and the audience to put aside concerns and conversation and settle into the world of the play.

The performers expect the audience's full attention and focus. This is the time for the audience to think inwardly, not a time to express your thoughts aloud. Talking to neighbors (even whispering) carries easily to others in the audience and to the actors onstage.

There is no food allowed in the theatre: soda, candy, and other snacks are noisy and therefore, distracting. (Not to mention messy!)

Walking through the aisles during the performance is disruptive. Actors occasionally use the aisles and stairways as entrances and exits. The actors will notice any movement in the performance space.

Please use the restroom and take care of all other concerns before the show, or at intermission.

Cell phones, pagers, watch alarms and other electronic devices must be turned off before the performance begins. When noisy objects of this type go off it is very distracting for the actors and audience. Absolutely no text messaging.

Again, attending a live performance is a time to sit back and look inward, question what is being presented to you and be curious about worlds that are different than yours. As theatre artists we approach our audiences with respect and expect the same in return. Live theatre offers the opportunity to experience new ideas and discover people and lives previously unknown to you. Your open mind, curiosity, and respect will allow a whole other world to unfold right before your eyes!

# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

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"In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing"

– Gwendolen, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

## THE PLAY

Theatre Jacksonville proves that across the pond and a century later, Oscar Wilde's irreverent look at English society can still be funny. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a parlor comedy of the most trivial sort, tells of two bachelors with secret identities that serve as an escape from the demands of social appearances.

## THE PLAYWRIGHT

**OSCAR WILDE** | Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (October 16, 1854 – November 30, 1900) was an Irish playwright, poet and author of numerous short stories and one novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Known for his biting wit, he became one of the most successful playwrights of the late Victorian era in London, and one of the greatest celebrities of his day. As the result of a widely covered series of trials, Wilde suffered a dramatic downfall and was imprisoned for two years' hard labor after being convicted of "gross indecency" with other men. After Wilde was released from prison he set sail for Dieppe by the night ferry. He never returned to Ireland or Britain.

Other plays by Oscar Wilde include *Salomé*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), and *An Ideal Husband* (1895).

## THE CAST

John "Jack" Worthing.....	MICHAEL LIPP
Algernon Moncrieff.....	DAVID PATTON
Lady Bracknell.....	HAROLYN SHARPE
Gwendolen Fairfax.....	AMY NOEL CANNING
Cecily Cardew.....	STACY WILLIAMS
Miss Prism.....	SANDY SPURNEY
Reverend Canon Chasuble.....	GEOFFREY KING
Lane.....	FRED GATLIN
Merriman.....	BRIAN CURRIE

## THE SETTING

Setting: England during the Victorian Era (circa 1895)

Act 1: Algernon Moncrieff's flat in Half-Moon St., W.

Act 2: The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton

Act 3: Drawing Room at the Manor House, Woolton

# SUMMARIES

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## ACT ONE

Algernon Moncrieff, an upper-class English Bachelor, and his Manservant, Lane, are preparing for the arrival of Algernon's aunt, the Lady Bracknell. He is visited by his friend Jack Worthing—though Algernon knows Jack as "Ernest."

Jack reveals that he has come to town to propose to Gwendolyn Fairfax, the daughter of Lady Bracknell. Algernon jokingly tells him that, as Gwendolen's first cousin, he refuses to give consent for the marriage until Jack can explain why the name Cecily is inscribed in his cigarette case. After making up a story about Cecily being an old (but tiny) aunt, Jack finally admits that Cecily is his young, beautiful ward who lives in the country. This is precisely the information Algernon is seeking. Jack also admits that his name is not Ernest, but rather Jack; he goes by Jack in the country and Ernest in the city. Algernon confirms a suspicion he has long had by accusing Jack of "Bunburying," or making up a situation in order to be able to escape unwanted social responsibilities. Algernon explains that he himself has an imaginary friend called Bunbury who frequently gets sick, giving Algernon an excuse to get out of social obligations such as family dinner parties.

The Honorable Gwendolen Fairfax and the Lady Bracknell arrive at Algernon's flat for tea. Algernon tells Lady Bracknell that, due to the illness of his friend Bunbury, he must leave London, and as a result will not be able to attend her dinner that night. Algy distracts her in another room so that Jack can make his marriage proposal to Gwendolen. Jack tells Gwendolen that he loves her, and she replies that she loves him too, particularly because he is named Ernest, a name that "seems to inspire absolute confidence." Jack, knowing that his name is actually Jack, gets worried, and privately resolves to get baptized to change his name. Gwendolen meanwhile, accepts his proposal just as Lady Bracknell returns; Lady Bracknell announces that Gwendolen may not marry Jack until she gives her approval. Algernon and Gwendolen exit while Lady Bracknell interrogates Jack to determine how suitable a husband he is. She is pleased with his answers until she asks him about his parents. When Jack admits that he was abandoned by his parents and found in a handbag by a Mr. Thomas Cardew in Victoria Station, Lady Bracknell is horrified. She refuses to let her daughter marry a man with no knowledge of his own parentage, and suggests to Jack that he "produce at least one parent before the season is over."

Gwendolen returns, having heard of Lady Bracknell's disapproval, and she asks Jack for his address in the country. Algernon overhears it and copies it down.

## ACT TWO

At Jack's country estate, his ward, Cecily, is learning German and geography at the hands of Miss Prism, a tutor who once wrote a long novel that mysteriously disappeared. The house Rector, Dr. Chasuble, arrives and begins to flirt with Miss Prism. While she is taking a walk with him, Algernon, pretending to be Jack's brother Ernest, arrives to meet Cecily. The two show an immediate romantic interest in one another. As they leave, Prism and Chasuble return and meet Jack as he arrives back home from the city. He is dressed in mourning clothes in order to keep up the ruse that his brother, who does not actually exist, has died. While Jack is speaking with Chasuble and Prism, Cecily comes out of the house and informs him that his brother has arrived. Jack is shocked and angered when his "brother" Algernon

comes out of the house. As the others exit to allow the two reunited brothers time to resolve their differences, Jack tells Algernon that he must leave the house at once. Algernon replies insincerely that he will, but only if Jack changes out of his morbid mourning clothes. As Jack exits to do so, Cecily returns. Algernon proposes to her and she agrees, although she tells him that she particularly loves him because his name is Ernest, and that she pities any poor married woman whose husband is not called "Ernest." Cecily, in fact has already been pretending in her journal to be engaged to "Ernest" ever since she first discovered that her guardian had an unsavory, dangerous brother by that name. Algernon begins to worry that he is not named Ernest, and he also resolves to get christened.

After Algernon exists, Gwendolen arrives to see Jack, but in the meantime she chats with Cecily, whom she has never before met. Gwendolen is surprised to hear that "Ernest" has a ward but has never told her about it. Cecily is confused when Gwendolen says that she is engaged to Ernest, and their relationship becomes very cold as they realize that they may be engaged to the same man. Both try to refute the engagement claims of the other until Algernon and Jack return. When the two young ladies begin to question the men in order to resolve their own engagement, the men confess they have lied and that neither of them is named Ernest. The two women are shocked and retreat together into the house. Meanwhile, Jack begins to panic while Algernon sits back and eats all the muffins.

### **ACT THREE**

Inside the Manor House, Algernon and Jack join Cecily and Gwendolen. Algernon tells Cecily that he lied to her only so that he could have a chance to see her, and Jack confesses to Gwendolen that he lied to her about having a brother so that he could spend more time in the city with her. The women are satisfied, although they still cannot accept the men because they are not named Ernest. When the men reply that they scheduled to be christened that afternoon, all seems well until Lady Bracknell arrives. She again refuses to give her consent regarding Gwendolen's engagement. Algernon tells her that he is engaged to Cecily, and when Lady Bracknell learns that Cecily is extremely wealthy thanks to her father's estate, she gives her consent. However, as Cecily's legal guardian, Jack will not give his consent to his marriage unless Lady Bracknell approves of his engagement to Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell refuses yet again and prepares to leave with Gwendolen. Dr. Chasuble enters and learns that the christenings will no longer be necessary, so he states that he will return to Miss Prism. Lady Bracknell, hearing the name Prism, asks to see this woman because she suspects she may be the same person that once took care of her sister's baby. When Miss Prism arrives, Lady Bracknell demands to know what happened to the baby that had disappeared twenty-eight years previously when Miss Prism was supposed to be taking it for a stroll in the perambulator. Miss Prism confesses that she accidentally put her three-volume novel in the perambulator and the baby in her handbag, which she mistakenly left in the cloakroom of Victoria Station. Jack suddenly realizing that he was that baby, fetches the briefcase in which he was found, which Miss Prism confirms as being hers. Lady Bracknell tells Jack that he is the son of her sister and the elder brother of Algernon. A search through the military periodicals of the time reveals that their father's first name was Ernest, and because first sons are always named after the father, they realize Jack's name has, indeed, all along been Ernest. Overjoyed, Jack realizes he has been telling the truth his whole life even though he thought he was lying.

In the end, he is permitted to marry Gwendolen, Algernon is permitted to marry Cecily, and although Lady Bracknell accuses Jack of triviality, he retorts that he has only just discovered "the vital Importance of Being Earnest."

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

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**Anabaptist** | A radical Christian sect that saw christening as a confirmation of faith so deemed it inappropriate for infants and supported adult baptism, instead

**Apoplexy** | A fit of extreme anger that causes death; stroke

**Bunburying** | Although not a real word, Bunburyist became often-used throughout English speaking countries because of the popularity of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It refers to Algernon's made-up friend Bunbury, whom he uses as an excuse to get out of unpleasants social responsibilities.

**Buttonhole** | Referencing the flower which men in Victorian England often placed through the buttonhole of their coat.

**Egeria** | A Roman nymph who advises a king; any female advisor

**Exurgation** | The act of removing erroneous or vulgar material from something before it is exposed to the public.

**Evensong** | Another word for the daily evening service in the Anglican Church

**Gorgon** | In Greek mythology, the three sisters including Medusa who had snakes for hair; here, an ugly or terrifying woman.

**Lorgnette** | A pair of glasses with a handle

**Marechal Niel** | A variety of rose, fragrant and soft-yellow in color

**Misanthrope** | One who hates and mistrusts mankind

**Oxonian** | Describing a graduate of Oxford University

**Perambulator** | Baby carriage

**Portmanteau** | A large suitcase

**Profligate** | Something or someone who is shamefully immoral

**Purple of Commerce** | Another phrase coined by Wilde implying money that comes through work or trade rather than privileged birth.

**Quixotic** | Idealistic without being practical; seeking something unattainable

**Salver** | Tray for serving food and/or drinks

**Smart** | Well dressed

**Trivet** | A small three-legged table

# ENGLAND DURING THE VICTORIAN ERA

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## AN OVERVIEW

*Selection printed with permission from the Department of Education and Community Programming at the Huntington Theatre Company in Boston Massachusetts)*

During the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), Britannia ruled not just the waves but one quarter of the world's population and one quarter of the world's land. London, her mother city, was prosperous and proud. Wealthy Victorians relished their stability and sought to maintain it, no matter what the cost.

John Buchan, describing the London Society of his youth, wrote in 1989:

*London at the turn of the century had not yet lost her Georgian air. Her ruling society was aristocratic till Queen Victoria's death and preserved the modes and rites of aristocracy. Her great houses had not disappeared or become blocks of flats. In the summer she was a true city of pleasure, every window-box gay with flowers, her streets full of splendid equipages, the Park a show ground for fine horses and handsome men and women. The ritual went far down, for frock-coats and top-hats were the common wear not only for the West End, but about the Law Courts and in the City. On Sunday afternoons we dutifully paid a round of calls. Conversation was not the casual thing it has now become, but was something of an art, in which competence conferred prestige. Also, clubs were still in their hey-day, their waiting lists were lengthy. Membership of the right ones was a stage in a career...Looking back, that time seems to me unbelievably secure and self-satisfied. The world was friendly and well-bred as I remember it, without vulgarity and the worship of wealth which appeared with the new century.*

Many prominent Victorians wished to retain this milieu. But, in order to do so, strict adherence to the conventional attitudes of the time was necessary. Upsetting traditional respectability was feared as threatening chaos and a lack of control society could not tolerate.

This Victorian affinity for tradition, ritual and regularity, married to upper class wealth and pursuit of leisure activity, tended to breed a sterile morality. Attitudes proliferated defining and curbing behavior in all walks of life. Appearances were believed to be everything. Comedian Billy Crystal would parody the attitude one hundred years later: "You look marvelous! It is better to look good than feel good!" As long as one looked good, the façade of normalcy was protected. (A bandage, or crutches, conversely, always invites the question, "What happened?") Proper Victorians typically swam on the surface of life to avoid probing what lurked beneath the appearance of normalcy (e.g., the penchant for child pornography, prostitution and sexual indulgence.)

For many Victorians, the public self and the private self were separate. The private self at times went underground—primarily to London's East End red light district—while the public self adhered to routine. This dichotomy seemed to arouse Victorian extremes—society's sins were masked tightly by piety priggishness and hypocrisy.

Gertrude Himmerfarb, another chronicler of Victorian Society, writes:

*Mid-Victorian England was more moral, more proper, more law-abiding than any other society in recent history. What made morality problematic...was the breakdown of religious consensus...There is the clue to the Victorian obsession with morality. Feeling guilty about their religious faith...they were determined to make morality a substitute for religion – to make of it, indeed, a form of religion.*

Other Victorians recognized the change in London and the ill effects wrought by the Industrial Revolution – poverty, homelessness, child exploitation, crime and pollution were growing social problems. Reformists such as Andrew Mearns demanded attention. (He wrote a pamphlet called, “The Bitter Cry of Outcast London.”) Art historians John Ruskin and William Morris decried the commercialization of labor, fearing man would lose the beauty and spiritual affinity associated with fine craftsmanship. Oscar Wilde noted the necessity for change when one of his fictional characters announces, “A man who can’t talk morality twice a week to a large, popular immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician.” Queen Victoria died at the very beginning of a new century and the previous epoch ended with her death. Historians will continue to debate the ethics of the period that bore her name.

## **EARNESTNESS AND SINCERITY**

The major target of Wilde's scathing social criticism is the hypocrisy that society creates. Frequently in Victorian society, its participants behaved themselves in overly sincere, polite ways while they felt the exact opposite. One might say this was the birthplace of the term “two-faced.” Wilde exposes this divide in scenes such as when Gwendolen and Cecily behave themselves in front of the servants or when Lady Bracknell warms to Cecily upon discovering she is rich. However, the play truly pivots around the word “earnest.” Both women want to marry someone named “Ernest,” as the name inspires “absolute confidence”; in other words, the name implies that its bearer truly is earnest, honest, and responsible. However, Jack and Algernon have lied about their names, so they are not really “earnest.” But it also turns out that (at least in Jack's case) he was inadvertently telling the truth. The rapid flip-flopping of truths and lies, of earnestness and duplicity, shows how truly muddled the Victorian values of honesty and responsibility were.

## **CLASS DISTINCTION, IDLENESS, AND THE AESTHETIC**

Wilde good-naturedly exposes the empty, trivial lives of the Victorian Aristocracy. After all, he benefits from this lifestyle, so any scathing criticism might come off as self-hatred, and he is too witty and fun-loving for that. Algernon is a hedonist who likes nothing better than to eat, gamble, and gossip without consequence. Wilde has described the play as about characters who trivialize serious matters and solemnize trivial matters; Algernon seems more worried by the absence of cucumber sandwiches (which he ate) than by the serious class conflicts that he quickly smooths over with wit. But Wilde has a more serious intent: he subscribes to the late-19th-century philosophy of aestheticism, proposed by Walter Pater, which argues for the necessity of art's primary relationship with beauty, not with reality. Art should not mirror reality; rather, Wilde has said, it should be “useless” (in the sense of not serving a social purpose; it is useful for our appreciation of beauty). Therefore, Algernon's idleness is not merely laziness, but the product of someone who has cultivated an esteemed sense of aesthetic uselessness.

## DUEL IDENTITIES

Wilde explores in depth what it means to have a dual identity in Victorian society. This duality is most apparent in Algernon and Jack's "Bunburying" (their creation of an alter ego to allow them to evade responsibility). Wilde hints that Bunburying may cover for homosexual liaisons, or at the very least serve as an escape from oppressive marriages. Other characters also create alternate identities. For example, Cecily writes correspondence between herself and Ernest before she has ever met him. Unlike real men, who are free to come and go as they please, she is able to control this version of Ernest. Finally, the fact that Jack has been unwittingly leading a life of dual identities shows that our alter egos are not as far from our "real" identities as we would think.

## MARRIAGE AS A SOCIAL TOOL

Wilde's most concrete critique in the play, and the one most fraught with irony, is of the manipulative desires revolving around marriage. Gwendolen and Cecily are interested in their mates, it appears, only because they have disreputable backgrounds (Gwendolen is pleased to learn that Jack was an orphan; Cecily is excited by Algernon's "wicked" reputation). Their shared desire to marry someone named Ernest demonstrates that their romantic dreams hinge upon titles, not character. The men are not much less shallow—Algernon proposes to the young, pretty Cecily within minutes of meeting her. Only Jack seems to have earnest romantic desires, though why he would love the self-absorbed Gwendolen is questionable. However, the sordidness of the lovers' ulterior motives is dwarfed by the priorities of Lady Bracknell, who epitomizes the Victorian tendency to view marriage as a financial arrangement. It is as if Jack is on a job interview with Lady Bracknell when he comes forth with his desire to propose to Gwendolen. However, she does not consent to their marriage on the basis of his being an orphan, and she snubs Cecily until she discovers she has a large personal fortune..

## POINTS TO PONDER

- Our society views marriage very differently today than they did in Victorian England. In what ways do you view marriage differently than the characters in the play? Which character's views of marriage more closely match those of modern society?
- What do you think about the pun of the title? Is it more important to have a husband named Ernest or a husband who is earnest?
- How does dramatic irony create humor in *The Importance of Being Earnest*? Identify a handful of instances in which the audience members know more about what is going on than the characters on stage. Why does this create humor?
- Analyze the role of class in Lady Bracknell's worldview. Is she more impressed by land, by nobility, or by wealth?
- Algernon observes that: "Women only call each other sister when they have called each other a lot of other things first." How does the development of the relationship between Cecily and Gwendolen relate to this remark? What causes them to bond together? What causes them to behave competitively? Do you find this comment to be true of modern society as well?
- Do you find the idea of "Bunburying" enticing? Try creating your own personal Bunbury and describe a situation you might use this long, lost, "friend" to avoid. Be very detailed in your description of the event and of your Bunbury.

## SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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**An Old New Play** from *Our Theatres in the Nineties* by *George Bernard Shaw* (1932)

**Oscar Wilde and the Theatre** from *James Agate: An Anthology*, edited by *Herbert Van Thal* (1961)

**The Official Website of Oscar Wilde**

<http://www.cmgww.com/historic/wilde/index.php>

**The Importance of Being Earnest – Grade Saver Reference**

<http://www.gradesaver.com/the-importance-of-being-earnest/>