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Teachers' Notes

Author / Work: Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*
Theme: A Close Reading

Rationale
In this activity, students will consider several of the many aspects of Wilde’s most popular of comedies, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The play itself inverts the Victorian melodrama that had dominated the London stage of the late 19th century, becoming instead a brilliant comedy of manners and an ingenious farce. Its themes explore marriage, lineage, duty, deception, love and money; Wilde’s characterisation draws on an established tradition in which characters swap roles and mirror each other. Its lasting success rests partly on Wilde’s genius as a wit; but its other enduring quality is its examination of moral principles – in this case, the Victorian notion that sincerity, or earnestness, is its own reward. Students will examine the reasons why Wilde doubted the authenticity of sincerity as a virtue and what he advocated in its place.

‘A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal’ (Oscar Wilde: The Critic as Artist, PII, 189)

Content
Literary and historical sources:
- **Manuscript draft of The Importance of Being Earnest, Oscar Wilde (1894)**
- **The Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885)**
- **Photographs of a production of The Importance of Being Earnest (1895)**

Recommended reading (short articles):
*An introduction to The Importance of Being Earnest* by John Stokes
*Aestheticism and decadence* by Carolyn Burdett
*Daughters of Decadence: The New Woman in the Victorian fin de siècle* by Greg Buzwell

Key questions
- What aspects of late Victorian society is Wilde satirizing?
- What are the virtues Wilde considers to be important?
- What are the ironies of the play in terms of Oscar Wilde’s own life?

Activities
1) *The Importance of Being Earnest* is in part a satire on Victorian hypocrisy. For Wilde, being earnest is hypocritical, since earnestness is an expression of stuffy morality. The concept of duty, which Wilde clearly despises, is connected with being earnest – sincere and serious. For
Wilde, this seriousness is the object of satire – all those who claim to privilege earnestness are in fact hypocrites, and for Wilde, an irreverent approach to life is truly moral by comparison. Is duty, as Wilde suggests, to be despised or does it still have a role in society? Debate.

2) Wilde himself was an outstanding classicist, studying at Magdalen College, Oxford, and Trinity College, Dublin. Research and consider the four cardinal virtues from ancient Greek philosophy – prudence, justice, temperance and courage - and the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. How do you think studying these ideas might have influenced Wilde’s opinion of the social mores of the later 19th century? Can you see expression of any of the seven virtues played out in the comedy itself?

3) The theme of marriage dominates the play and is the subject of much philosophical debate between the characters – is marriage for business or pleasure, is it pleasant or unpleasant, is it about love or status? At the end of the play, Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble challenge the existing social order by considering a union based on love. Was marriage as a means of advancement solely the concern of the upper classes? Ask students to consider the following:

- Is the idea of marriage today still essentially the same as it was in the 19th century?
- If not, how have ideas of marriage changed?

4) The characters of Gwendolen and Cicely represent two different kinds of women who are unafraid to express themselves. In what ways do their characters depart from traditional Victorian values about women?

5) The theme of doubles and double lives is central to the comedy, and the characters themselves create fictions to suit their own ends. Wilde himself is most clearly identified with the character of Algernon, the dandy, who delights in his own fictions and doesn’t pretend they are anything other than deliberate fabrications. Algernon, like Wilde, creates for himself a pleasing artifice, and is aesthetically hostile to bourgeois sentiment and morality. In the play, the dandy is the hero of the piece. At Oxford, Wilde studied under both Walter Pater and John Ruskin and was influenced by the rising philosophy of aestheticism. Research the cult of aestheticism and how its proponents justified their position.

6) What was the nature of Oscar Wilde’s double life?

7) Lady Bracknell is concerned with ancestry and lineage. Some of the best puns play on the idea of lines, connections, termini and origins. Explore some of the reasons why the Victorians were so preoccupied with class and parentage. Considering Wilde’s original audience when the play opened at the St James’s Theatre in King Street, February 14th 1895. What do you think the reaction to the play might have been?

8) Examine the way Wilde represents Victorian morality. Ask students to compile a list of sources that could be used to further validate his observations about 19th century hypocrisy. Students could consider events that immediately followed the successful opening of the play at the St James's Theatre and Wilde’s treatment before, after and during his conviction.

9) The opening of the play was famously marred by the actions of the Marquis of Queensberry, father of Lord Alfred Douglas, with whom Wilde was having an affair.
Queensberry set in motion the chain of events that brought about Wilde’s downfall. Research the case.

10) Some critics suggest that the play is more of a fantasy than a satire, allowing it characters to realise the unattainable that was not achievable at the end of the 19th century. In terms of the confines of Victorian society, debate the extent to which this statement is accurate.

**Extension activities**

- Compile a list of homonyms and examine their double meanings.
- Examine Oscar Wilde’s book of epigrams. Debate the reasons for their popularity and longevity.
- Study the photographs of Wilde and the actors in the Album listed as one of the collection items relating to Wilde. Study the dress code of the dandy. What does this tell you about gender roles and aestheticism?
- Research the law regarding the treatment of homosexuals up until 1967.
- Research and debate the controversy around same sex marriage.
- Towards the end of the century, drama became considered a more respectable and serious art form, and plays were elevated widely as literature to be studied. What is the difference between reading *The Importance of Being Earnest* first and watching it afterwards? Debate.
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* is based heavily on W.S. Gilbert’s play *Engaged* (1877) and John Maddison Morton’s play *Box and Cox* (1847). Compare one of the two sources and how Wilde’s play departs from its predecessor(s). Comment on your findings.
- Research *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Wilde, 1890) and consider Wilde’s darker look at the duplicity of Victorian society.