The Importance of Being Earnest – Pre-Reading

1) Names of the characters:

Your job is to look at the list of names from the play and try to deduce something about their personality. Feel free to use a dictionary or hunt online.

John “Jack” Worthing

Ernest Worthing

Algernon “Algy” Moncrieff

Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D.

Merriman (Butler)

Lane (Manservant)

Lady Bracknell

Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax

Cecily Cardew

Miss Prism (Governess)
Oscar Wilde, celebrated playwright and literary provocateur, was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford before settling in London. During his days at Dublin and Oxford, he developed a set of attitudes and postures for which he would eventually become famous. Chief among these were his flamboyant style of dress, his contempt for conventional values, and his belief in aestheticism—a movement that embraced the principle of art for the sake of beauty and beauty alone. After a stunning performance in college, Wilde settled in London in 1878.

Literary and artistic acclaim were slow in coming to Wilde. In 1884, when he married Constance Lloyd, Wilde’s writing career was still a work in progress. He had gone on a lecture tour of North America and been lampooned in the 1881 Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Patience* as the self-consciously idiosyncratic philosopher-poet Reginald Bunthorne, but he was celebrated chiefly as a well-known personality and a wit. He may have been the first person ever to become famous for being famous.

During the late 1880s, Wilde wrote reviews, edited a women’s magazine, and published a volume of poetry and one of children’s stories. In 1891, his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, appeared and was attacked as scandalous and immoral. In that same year, he met Lord Alfred Douglas, who would eventually become his lover, and Wilde finally hit his literary stride. Over the next few years, he wrote four plays: *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. 
Lady Windermere’s Fan and A Woman of No Importance enjoyed successful runs in the West End in 1892 and 1893, respectively. An Ideal Husband opened in January 1895, but it was The Importance of Being Earnest, which opened a month later, that is regarded by many as Oscar Wilde’s masterpiece. Its first performance at the St. James’s Theatre on February 14, 1895 came at the height of Wilde’s success as a popular dramatist. Wilde was finally the darling of London society, a position he had striven for years to attain.

In many ways, The Importance of Being Earnest was an artistic breakthrough for Wilde, something between self-parody and a deceptively flippant commentary on the dramatic genre in which Wilde had already had so much success. Wilde’s genre of choice was the Victorian melodrama, or “sentimental comedy,” derived from the French variety of “well-made play” popularized by Scribe and Sardou. In such plays, fallen women and abandoned children of uncertain parentage figure prominently, letters cross and recross the stage, and dark secrets from the past rise to threaten the happiness of seemingly respectable, well-meaning characters. In Wilde’s hands, the form of Victorian melodrama became something else entirely. Wilde introduced a new character to the genre, the figure of the “dandy” (a man who pays excessive attention to his appearance). This figure added a moral texture the form had never before possessed. The character of the dandy was heavily autobiographical and often a stand-in for Wilde himself, a witty, overdressed, self-styled philosopher who speaks in epigrams and paradoxes, ridicules the cant and hypocrisy of society’s moral arbiters, and self-deprecatingly presents himself as trivial, shallow, and ineffectual. In fact, the dandy in these plays always proves to be deeply moral and essential to the happy resolution of the plot.

The Importance of Being Earnest was an early experiment in Victorian melodrama. Part satire, part comedy of manners, and part intellectual farce, this play seems to have nothing at stake because the world it presents is so blatantly and ostentatiously artificial. Below the surface of the light, brittle comedy, however, is a serious subtext that takes aim at self-righteous
moralism and hypocrisy, the very aspects of Victorian society that would, in part, bring about Wilde’s downfall. During 1895, however, a series of catastrophes stemming from Wilde’s relationship with Lord Alfred, also a poet, led to personal humiliation and social, professional, and financial ruin. On February 28, 1895, two weeks after *The Importance of Being Earnest*’s opening night, Lord Alfred’s belligerent, homophobic father, the Marquess of Queensberry, publicly accused Wilde of “posing as a sodomite.” The nobleman meant “sodomite,” of course, an insulting and potentially defamatory term for a homosexual. Queensberry had for some time been harassing Wilde with insulting letters, notes, and confrontations and had hoped to disrupt the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest* with a public demonstration, which never took place. Against the advice of his friends, Wilde sued for libel and lost. Wilde probably should have fled the country, as the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had made homosexual acts punishable by up to two years’ imprisonment. However, Wilde chose to stay and was arrested. Despite information about Wilde’s private life and writings that emerged at the trial, the prosecution initially proved unsuccessful. However, Wilde was tried a second time, convicted, and sentenced to prison for two years.

Wilde may have remained in England for a number of reasons, including self-destructiveness, denial, desperation, and a desire for martyrdom. However, some historians have suggested that Wilde’s relentless persecution by the government was a diversionary tactic. Lord Alfred’s older brother was reportedly also having a homosexual affair with Archibald Philip Primrose, Lord Rosebery, the man who would become prime minister. Queensberry was apparently so outraged that he threatened to disclose the relationship, and the government reacted by punishing Wilde and his lover in an effort to assuage the marquess. In any case, Wilde served his full sentence under conditions of utmost hardship and cruelty. Following his release from prison, his health and spirit broken, he sought exile in France, where he lived out the last two years of his life in poverty and obscurity under an assumed name. He died in Paris in 1900.
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3) Read the following excerpts from the play carefully and make educated guesses about the different targets of Wilde’s satire.

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 serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square.”

JACK: “You don’t think there is any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her mother in about a hundred and fifty years, do you, Algy?”
ALGERNON: “All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That’s his.”
JACK: “Is that clever?”
ALGERNON: “It is perfectly phrased! and quite as true as any observation in civilized life should be.”

ALGERNON: “Divorces are made in heaven.”

ALGERNON: “...in married life three is company and two is none.”

ALGERNON: “Really, if the lower orders don’t set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.”
ALGERNON: “You are absolutely careless about sending out invitations. It is very foolish of you. Nothing annoys people so much as not receiving invitations.”

JACK: “Miss Fairfax, ever since I have met you I have admired you more than any girl...I have ever met since...I met you.”

CECILY: “You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Earnest.”
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4) Read through the following information about Victorian Era views of sexuality and gender and take note of important information to share with the class. Please ask me if you have any questions---some of this is difficult stuff.

Victorian Sexuality

It is against this cultural and political horizon that an understanding of modern sexuality needs to be contextualised. The Victorian era of the nineteenth century, like no other period preceding it, became dominated by the belief that an individual's sex and sexuality form the most basic core of their identity, potentiality, social/political standing and freedom. It is a curious irony that we moderns commonly portray Victorian sexual mores as puritanistic, moralistic and highly repressive, when like never before, sexuality became a focus of public and private attention. The Victorian bourgeois may have covered their piano legs out of modesty, but as an emergent social and political force they chose sexuality as the basis for delineating their identity from the aristocracy, peasants and emergent working classes. As Michel Foucault (The History of Sexuality - 1976) points out ...

Toward the beginning of the eighteenth century, there emerged a political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex. ..... This need to take sex ‘into account’, to pronounce a discourse on sex that would not derive from morality alone but from rationality as well, was sufficiently new that at first it wondered at itself and sought apologies for its own existence. How could a discourse based on reason speak like that?

But speak they did, with increasing intensity and authority, bringing into the objective light of science, a multitude of distinctive sexual species. The
pervert, child masturbator, homosexual, hysterical, prostitute, primitive and nymphomaniac, all emerged as distinctly classified sexual species possessing their own internal "secret" which had been revealed by the penetrating gaze of science.

The polarization of public and private spheres becomes the foundation upon which the ascendant bourgeoisie constructed the family and its sexuality. The passionless reproductive wife confined to private domesticity, along with her publicly and competitively orientated husband becomes the central reference point for discussions concerning sexuality. The prostitute, homosexual and the solitary masturbator emerged as entities posing the greatest threat to heterosexual reproduction, bourgeois morality and social order.

**Purity, intellect, and puberty: Advice for the middle classes**

"It is of the highest importance to remove young girls from boarding-school, when they approach the age of puberty, in order to exercise a constant watch over them. We should prevent, as far as possible, the false emotions produced by the reading of licentious books, especially of the highly-wrought romances of the modern school, which are the more injurious, as all the faculties become, as it were, overpowered by the desire to experience the sentiment which these works always represent in an imaginary and exaggerated strain. Frequent visits to the theatre ought to be carefully avoided, because they, also, may give rise to sensations conformable to the moral conditions, which is, naturally, at puberty, already too much exalted. These powerful, exciting agents, and still more frequently, the violent intimacies formed at boarding-school, tear the veil of modesty, and destroy, for ever, the seductive innocence which is the most charming ornament of a young girl. Endowed with an organization eminently impressionable, she soon contracts improper habits, and constantly tormented by an amorous melancholy, becomes sad, dreamy, sentimental and languishing. Like a delicate plant, withered by the rays of a burning sun, she fades and dies under the influence of a poisoned breath. The desires for happiness and love, so sweet and attractive in their native truth, are in her converted into a
devouring flame, and onanism, that execrable and fatal evil, soon destroys her beauty, impairs her health, and conducts her almost always to a premature grave! . . ."

"They should also avoid cold feet; they should not remain with the arms or neck uncovered, and must abstain from iced, exciting and alcoholic drinks, such as sherbets, coffee, tea, liqueurs, etc."

"It is well, also, to avoid sitting upon cold and damp places, or example the earth, a stone bench, a grassy bank, etc."


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5) Read the information below regarding courtship in the Victorian era and take notes of the important information to share with the class. Be prepared to make a fan out of paper and demonstrate the last section.

Courting in the Victorian Era

Dating in the Victorian Era was not as free and unregulated as it is in today's society. Couples had to follow strict rules in all aspects of their relationships.

It was not considered appropriate for a young man to approach a young lady. Even if they had already met, he must still be introduced by a mutual friend a second time before he can speak to her freely. Once they had been formally introduced, if the gentleman wished to escort the lady home he would present his card to her. At the end of the evening the lady would look over her options and chose who would be her escort. She would notify the lucky gentleman by giving him her own card requesting that he escort her home.

The relationship progressed in stages. The first step was for the couple to speak to each other. Only after a mutual attraction was confirmed could they begin to keep company with each other. After this point the couple could begin to be seen together, but only in supervised public situations only. If, after an appropriate amount of time, the young man wished to propose marriage, he asked the lady first. If she accepted, he then went to her parents for permission. A lady did not have to accept a marriage proposal at first, she was allowed time to consider the proposal before accepting or declining.
Victorian women had their own set of rules dictating their behavior in certain situations that differed from that of the men. It was very important that a young lady follow each rule precisely if she wished to maintain an honorable reputation in society. These rules included:

- Never approaching a person of higher rank, unless introduced by a mutual friend
- A person of lower rank could be introduced to a person of higher rank only if the higher-ranking person gave their permission
- After introductions, the person of higher rank did not have to maintain the acquaintance
- Single women never addressed a gentleman without an introduction
- Single women never walked alone, preferably with an older, married chaperone
- In a stage of courtship, the couple always walked apart - the only contact allowed was for him to offer her his hand over rough spots while walking
- Women never rode alone in a closed carriage with a man who was not a relative
- Women did not call on an unmarried gentleman at his home
- Men could not be received into the home if a woman was there alone, a family member must be present in the room at all times
- Impure conversation was never held in front of a single woman
- There was absolutely no sexual contact before marriage
- Intelligence or interest in politics was not encouraged
Flirting with Fans

Since it was not considered appropriate for young men and women to openly talk to each other, they developed a way of communicating using the hand-held fans that the ladies carried. Each movement of the fan was a different message from the young lady to the young gentleman.

- Fan fast - I am independent.
- Fan slow - I am engaged.
- Fan with right hand in front of face: - Come on, follow me.
- Fan with left hand in front of face: - Leave me.
- Fan open and shut: - Kiss me.
- Fan open wide: - Love.
- Fan half open: - Friendship.
- Fan shut: - Hate.
- Fan swinging: - Can I see you home?
- Drawing fan across forehead: - We are watched.
- Letting fan rest on right cheek: - Yes.
- Letting fan rest on left cheek: - No.
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6) Use the following questions to start a discussion in your group. Take notes for each question so that you can share important items or conclusions from your discussions with the rest of the class.

(a) Does a person’s name have anything to do with how you perceive them?

(b) In your opinion, is marriage considered to be an important institution in our society?

(c) When, if ever, is it okay to lie?
(d) Are there different social classes in Canada today?

(e) What are some overt symbols of wealth in our society? (Think of behaviours, actions, appearance, speech, etc.)

(f) What are some characteristics of modern-day courtship, love and marriage that deserve to be made fun of (or satirized)?