

The Importance of Being Earnest - Exploring Themes

Post-Show Activity for Grades 6-12

Goals

- Students will identify and analyze key themes in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
- Students will connect themes to characters, plot, and historical context.
- Students will develop critical thinking through group discussion and written reflection.

NOTE: This activity has been aligned with TEKS and [Universal Design for Learning](#). Demonstration of Learning and TEKS can be found at the end of this document. [Artful Thinking Routines](#) are regularly referenced to encourage critical thinking.

Materials Needed

- Re-Sourced Guide for *The Importance of Being Earnest* (found [here](#)).
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* Story Web and Outline (included).
- Writing materials or digital devices for note-taking.
- Art supplies.

Introduction

- Start with a brief discussion about the concept of themes in theatre. Explain how *The Importance of Being Earnest* addresses various themes such as:
 - Identity and Double Lives
 - Marriage as a Social Transaction
 - Appearance vs Reality
 - The Absurdity of Social Rules
 - The meaning of “earnestness”
- A printable Story Web and Outline is included with this document. Encourage students to use this outline to organize their notes during the discussion and group work time.
- Ask them to brainstorm any themes they observed during the play. Write their ideas on the whiteboard or chart paper. Guide them to consider specific scenes.

Group Discussion

- Divide students into small groups and assign each group a specific theme from the play.
- Have each group discuss how their assigned theme was portrayed in the play by analyzing:
 - Key scenes that highlighted the theme.
 - Character interactions that exemplified the theme.
 - Any dramatic or theatrical elements that contributed to their understanding of the theme.

Notes for UDL alignment: Bridge the language of the students (the way they phrased their ideas) with any academic or formal variations you wish to support. “Just cause you’re poor doesn’t mean you’re a bad person” would be another way of saying “Dickens’s critique of poverty and inequality.” Learn more about UDL guidelines for language and symbols [here](#).

Group Work Time

- Each group will create a visual representation of their assigned theme. They can choose from various formats, including:
 - A poster that includes memorable quotes from the play, visuals, and explanations of the theme.
 - A collage using magazine cutouts, drawings, or digital images that symbolize the theme.
 - A short multimedia presentation that combines images, text, and audio to convey the theme.
- Use a visible timer while students are creating and give them verbal warnings.
 - Keep the list of themes visible if possible.
 - Encourage the use of the Story Web and Outline and discussion notes.

Sharing and Feedback

- Designate a stage area and have each person or group present their work, explaining their theme and how it was expressed in the play.
- If time allows, students can display their work in a gallery walk.
- During presentations, use “See / Think / Wonder” to encourage reflection from the rest of the class:
 - What did you see in this visual? Objectively, without interpretation. Just visual details.
 - What do you think is happening in this visual? What do you see that makes you think that?
 - What do you wonder? What questions come up for you as you look at this stage picture?

TEKS

English Language Arts and Reading (Grades 6–12)

- (2A–E), (3A–C), (5A–C), (6A–B), (7A), (8A) – Analyze theme and genre; interpret character and plot development; make inferences and draw conclusions with textual evidence;

Theatre I–IV

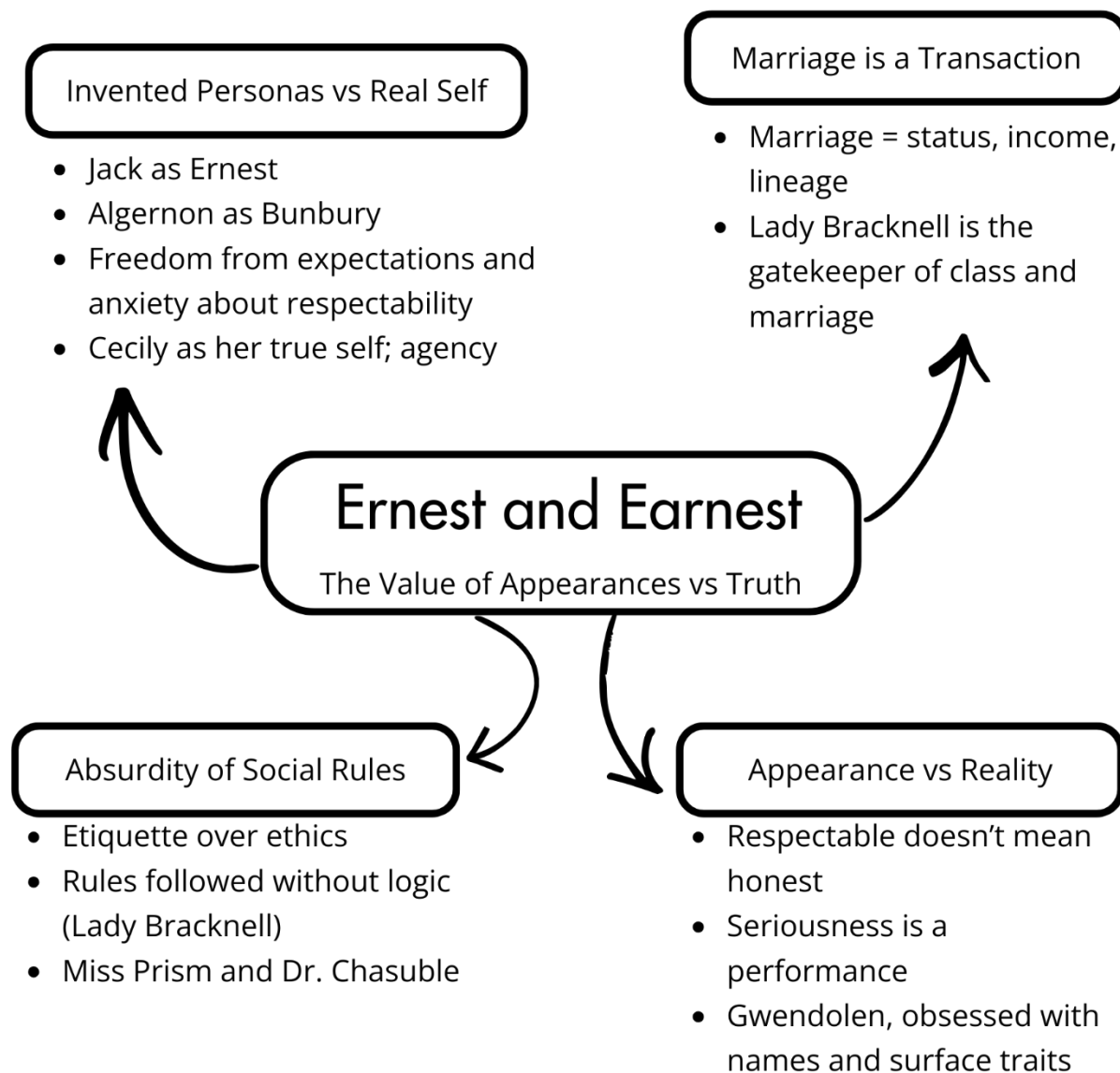
- (1A–C), (2A–C), (3A–B), (4A–B) – Develop and sustain characters using voice, movement, and imagination; interpret scripts and dramatic literature; collaborate to express ideas and themes through performance; analyze and critique theatrical works and performances.

The Importance of Being Earnest

Story Web & Outline

Story Web

This story web is a reference to help you remember the play. Use it to notice connections between characters, setting, and themes. You do not need to add anything unless your teacher asks you to. Use the web to support your analysis or creative response.



The Importance of Being Earnest

Story Web & Outline

Outline

This outline is a reference to help you remember the play. Use it to notice connections between characters, setting, and themes. You do not need to add anything unless your teacher asks you to. Use the outline to support your analysis or creative response.

Basic Play Information

- Title: The Importance of Being Earnest
- Playwright: Oscar Wilde
- Genre: Comedy of manners / Farce / Satire
- Time Period: Late 1890s (Victorian Era)
- Setting: London (upper-class drawing rooms); English countryside (Hertfordshire estate)
- Central Focus: How Victorian society values appearance, status, and labels over honesty, sincerity, and truth.

World of the Play

- It is a world governed by strict social rules, appearances, and expectations, especially among the upper and upper-middle classes.
- Social life is shaped by manners, reputation, and marriage, where personal freedom is often sacrificed for respectability.
- Although the world appears polite and orderly, it is sustained by deception, performance, and avoidance of responsibility.
- Humor and wit become tools for survival, allowing characters to bend rules without openly breaking them.

Major Themes

- Identity & Double Lives
- Marriage as a Social Transaction
- Appearance vs. Reality
- The Absurdity of Social Rules
- The Meaning of “Earnestness”

Key Moments / Ideas

- Jack invents a double life to balance duty in the country with freedom in the city.
- Algernon creates “Bunbury” as an excuse to escape unwanted social obligations.
- Gwendolen and Cecily fall in love with the name “Ernest,” not the person.
- Lady Bracknell interrogates Jack as if marriage were a business contract.
- The truth is repeatedly delayed, manipulated, or avoided to preserve comfort.
- Order is restored only when identities conveniently align — not because characters change.

Overall Impact

- The play uses farce and sharp wit to critique Victorian values without moralizing.
- It exposes how social systems reward performance over honesty.
- By resolving conflicts through coincidence rather than growth, the ending reinforces the play’s satire: society prefers neat solutions over genuine self-reflection.
- The Importance of Being Earnest remains relevant because it questions how much of identity is shaped by social expectation rather than personal truth.