

The Importance of Being Earnest - Play Review

Post-Show Activity for Grades 6-12

Goals

- Students will analyze and reflect on the performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
- Students will express understanding through discussion and/or written response.
- Students will write a structured play review, incorporating analysis of theatrical elements and personal response.

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

Materials Needed

- Paper and pen or laptops/tablets for writing.
- Whiteboard or digital board for group discussion.
- Story Web (Characters and Themes), included in this file.
- Sample play review (a Houston Press review of *Pictures from Home* is included in this file).

Introduction- Two Truths and a Lie

- Engage students with “Two Truths and a Lie” about *The Importance of Being Earnest* to spark interest and recall. Example statements:
 - Ernest is a pillar of virtue in London society (False).
 - This play is a satire (True).
 - Both Jack and Algernon have secret identities in the city (True).
- Ask:
 - What was your initial reaction to the play?
 - What rating would you give it (stars, thumbs up/down, 1-10, etc.)?

Notes for UDL alignment: Encourage students to share in pairs, small groups, or through written reflection to offer varied ways of participating or give students who need it some additional processing time.

Example- What is a Review?

- Present a sample play review highlighting structure and key components: introduction, summary without spoilers, analysis of acting, directing, design, and personal opinion.
- Discuss theatrical elements that critics analyze (acting, directing, set/costumes, sound, lighting, pacing).
- Explain the balance between objective analysis and subjective opinion.

Guided Practice- Group Discussion

- Divide students into small groups; assign each a different aspect of the production to analyze:
 - Acting (e.g. Jack, Algernon, Cecily, Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell).
 - Set and costume design (Victorian London and the countryside).
 - Use of sound and lighting to create environment and tone (sound effects and music).
 - Themes (identity and double lives, marriage as a transaction, appearances vs reality, social rules).
- Groups brainstorm observations and prepare to share key points.
- Facilitate whole-class discussion to craft effective thesis statements for reviews, e.g., “*The Importance of Being Earnest* uses farce to highlight the hypocrisy of societal norms and expectations.”

Notes for UDL alignment: To provide multiple ways of expressing understanding, consider letting students act or physicalize their responses. You can also utilize Think-Pair-Share to provide additional solo and partner processing time. Bridge student vocabulary with grade-level terminology.

Independent Practice | Writing Your Review

- Students draft a 500-word review of the *The Importance of Being Earnest* performance, using guided questions and the group’s observations:
 - What was the play about? (brief summary without spoilers)
 - Which performances stood out and why?
 - How did the set, costumes, and technical elements enhance the story?
 - How did the play make you feel? Did it surprise or engage you?
 - What themes or messages did the play explore?
 - Would you recommend this play? Why or why not?
- Scaffold writing with sentence starters such as:
 - “The play *The Importance of Being Earnest* is set in a sewing factory and tells the story of...”
 - “One of the most powerful performances was...”
 - “The use of lighting and sound helped build the world of the play by...”
 - “The play explores themes such as...”
 - “Overall, I would rate this play...”
- Encourage use of theatre vocabulary and examples from the play’s script or performance. Bridge language from student expression as needed.
- Optional extension: create a visual companion piece like a poster or digital presentation highlighting key points from their review.

Notes for UDL alignment: Students can record their reviews or present them as short videos. You can also allow alternative formats for students needing support: oral reviews, storyboards, or graphic organizers.

Reflection | Headlines

- Students write or brainstorm a headline that captures the essence of their review.
- Share headlines with a partner or small group.
- Discuss which headline best captures the core of the play and why.

Notes for UDL alignment: Encourage students to share in pairs, small groups, or through written reflection to offer varied ways of participating.

TEKS

Fine Arts- Theatre, Middle School 6-8, High School Levels I-IV

- (5) Critical evaluation and response. The student responds to and evaluates theatre and theatrical performances.

English Language Arts and Reading, Middle School 6-8

- 6(H): respond orally or in writing with appropriate register, vocabulary, tone, and voice;

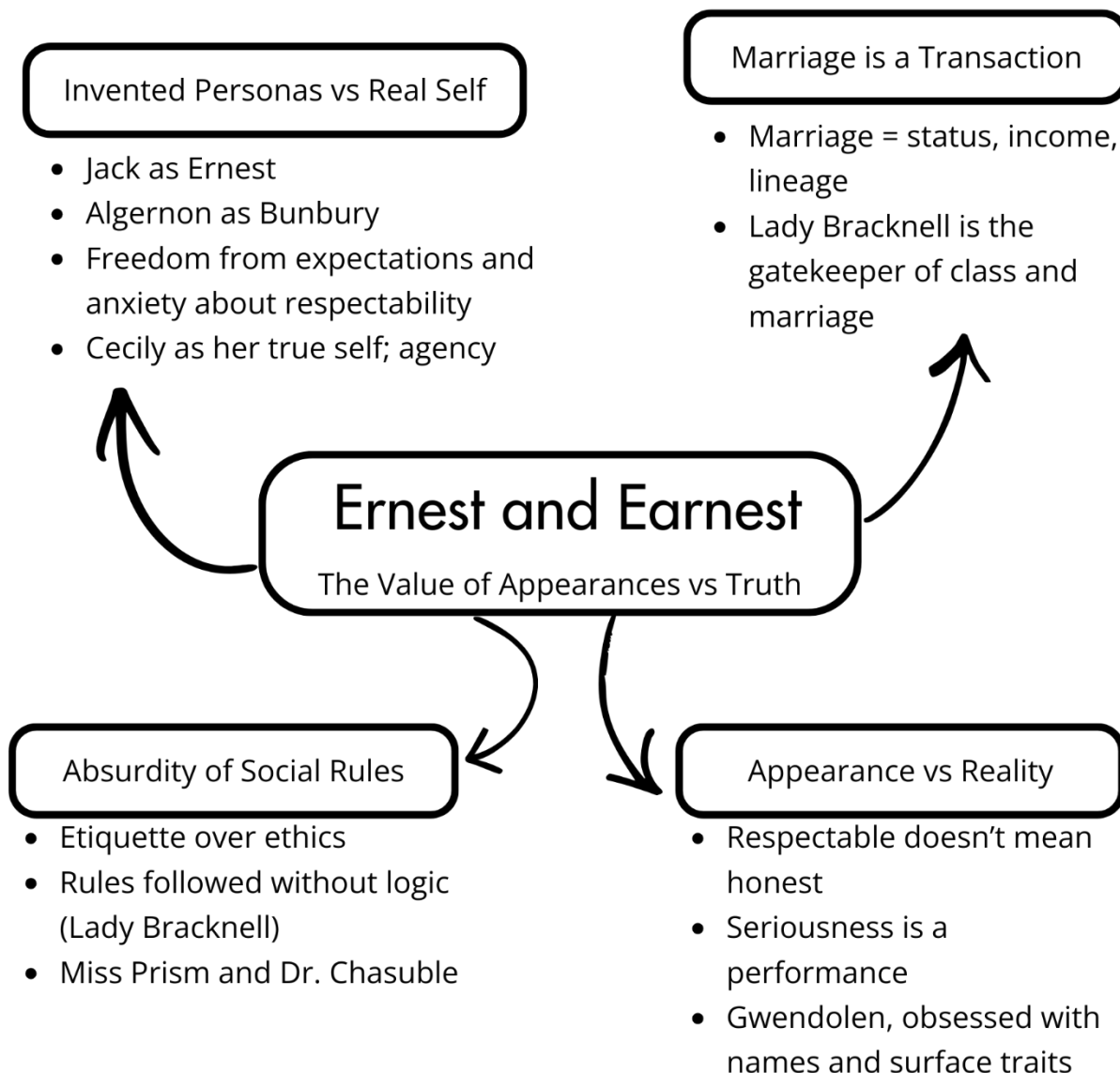
English Language Arts and Reading, High School- English I-IV

- 5(C): use text evidence and original commentary to support a response;
- 5(H): respond orally or in writing with appropriate register, vocabulary, tone, and voice;

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.

Pictures From Home Looks At The Parent Behind The Photo

by Jessica Goldman, Houston Press



Todd Waite and Zachary Fine in Alley Theatre's production of Pictures from Home. Credit: Photo by Lynn Lane

Larry's favorite photograph of his dad is the one his father hates the most.

The shot, taken by Larry, a distinguished photographer, is a close-up of his father, Irv, sleeping peacefully on the family's California living room couch. Through Larry's eyes, the image captures the vulnerability his father masks in real life. A chance to see the real him without all the masculine confidence Irv swings around daily like his beloved golf club.

But for Irv, the shot is all wrong. He looks old, for one thing. He may be 70 but he sure doesn't feel it. Plus it's dimly lit. And who the hell would want to look at a sleeping man anyway, what's the point? Where's the rigor in that?

Images, how we see them, how we interpret them, the stories they tell about us and the slippery accuracy of those tales are at the center of Larry and Irv's prickly father/son relationship in Sharr White's, *Pictures From Home*, now getting a handsomely sensitive and whimsical production at the Alley.

Based on the acclaimed 1992 photo memoir of Larry Sultan, the show (developed at the 2020 Alley All New Festival) follows Larry (Zachary Fine) as he leaves his wife and children several times a month to fly to his aging parents' home for "the project". A loosely defined photo safari where Larry hopes to capture his parents' lives accurately through his lens. Certainly, more accurately than the family photos and Super 8 reels he's seen of them.

Retired executive salesman Irv (Todd Waite) and Larry's Real Estate Agent mum, Jean (Susan Koozin) may look like the definition of the perfectly successful American nuclear family in snapshot, but Larry doesn't want the perfect. He wants the people, warts and all. To understand his parents, to better understand himself. To keep his gaze on them, therefore keeping them present and alive.

Set mostly in the 1980s over eight years, we watch Larry drop in and photograph his parents mostly going about their lives, much to his father's piqued annoyance and mother's more measured acceptance. All the while, real photos of Larry's parents are seen projected on screens that drop in and out of the stage. A chance for the characters to discuss and disagree on them.

There's lots of humor to be mined in their encounters, parents bickering, Larry and Irv seemingly speaking different languages when it comes to expressing feelings and self-truths, Jean trying to keep the peace and her mind in the process.

Director Rob Melrose astutely never lets these funny moments fall prey to tropes. There's lots of room to laugh here at Irv's cuss-inflected exasperations, Larry's endlessly annoying probing questions and Jean's flappability. But we do so feeling the undercurrent of sadness throughout.

Funny as this family's miscommunications and inability to provide what the other wants is, we see the frustration underneath. Frustration that they can't quite be heard. Or access the tools to understand what to say. Or be respected for who they think they are. There's love there for sure though, otherwise, they wouldn't keep trying.

It could all be so sentimental, this dance they do. After all, at an hour and forty-five minutes with no intermission, we're held captive in father and son's endless and often repetitive arguments over Larry's work, all the while knowing that "the project" is a commercial success in the end.

What keeps the show fresh for us is the acting. This review could have easily been three words divided only by exclamation points. Zachary! Susan! Todd!

Returning to the Alley, this time without the lizard skin he so superbly sported in Edward Albee's *Seascape*, Zachary Fine gives an expressive sweetness to Larry that helps stretch our patience with his neediness and

intrusion. Not that what he's reaching for is wrong or unworthy, it's just selfish and a little annoying. Yet thanks to Fine's open-heartedness, we can't help but root for Larry.

It's hard to name a production that Susan Koozin doesn't make better and this is no exception. As Jean, Koozin gets to show off her impeccable comic timing, but it's her motherly, loving moments that really hit.

"You act as if you're the only child in the world and we're the only parents," she says to Larry trying to persuade him that all children yearn for the understanding he's desperate for. That Koozin can make this sound both admonishing and assuring is the work of an actor fully driving her character's emotional bus.

Finally, anyone waiting for Todd Waite to step out of the camp roles and into something meatier, more expansive and demanding - this is your chance and you will not be disappointed. As Irv, Waite is tasked with the heavy lifting in this show and he carries multitudes - abrasiveness, charm, disappointment, self-aggrandizement, self-doubt, jokester and, of course, fatherly judgment.

That we are utterly frustrated by Irv's immovability/refusal to admit to inner life/mistreatment of his wife and son and yet feel so protective of him is thanks to Waite's wonderfully nuanced performance.

As Larry's project winds up, we're not really sure what he discovered about his parents. That they're flawed people just like everyone else? Perhaps. There's no big aha moment here. No satisfying takeaway. Much like life itself, things just move on. The only difference is Larry had photographs to prove it.

Pictures From Home runs to February 11 at Alley Theatre, 615 Texas. For more information, call 713-220-5700 or visit alleytheatre.org. \$27-\$81.

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