

The Importance of Being Earnest - Context Clues

Pre-Show Activity for Grades 6-12

Goals

- Students will analyze historical, social, and moral contexts from *The Importance of Being Earnest* by matching textual evidence with historical clues.
- Students will use research and reasoning to articulate in writing or speech how each selected quote reflects different aspects of the time period or author's life.

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 Routines](#) are regularly referenced and utilized to encourage critical thinking.

Materials

- *The Importance of Being Earnest*: Clues and Quotes handout (included).
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* Who's Who handout (included).
- Chart paper or whiteboard space for each group.
- Research devices (optional – for digital reasoning extension).
- Access to Alley Re-Sourced guide.

Introduction

- Begin by reviewing the time period and setting, outlined on Alley Re-Sourced.
- Discuss: "How does an author's world impact how they write? How does an author's writing tell us about their world?"
- Use this line from Algernon as an example:
 - ALGERNON: "The truth is rarely pure and never simple."
- Ask: "What might have inspired the playwright to write that? What does this tell us about how honesty works in this world?"

Note for UDL alignment: Students can Think-Pair-Share, write answers in a journal, or discuss answers in small groups before sharing with the class.

Reviewing the Clues

- Students can work in pairs or small groups. Each group should receive a few "Clue" cards from the handout. If working in groups, each group may receive their own complete set.
- Give students a few minutes to examine their cards, using "See-Think-Wonder" as a framework.
 - *What do you see?*
 - *What do you think this tells you the world of the play? The playwright's life? Their point of view?*

- *What do you wonder?*

Matching Clues with Quotes

- Give each group a set of “Quote” cards from the included handout.
- Students match each quote with one or more clues they believe align thematically.
- They use reasoning or additional research to justify their pairing. Example:
 - Clue: “Marriage was all business...”
 - Quote:
 - LADY BRACKNELL: “I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men.”
 - Reasoning: A match is being planned based on some kind of criteria other than love.

Reflection and Reasoning

- Each group selects one or two pairings to present.
- Use the Artful Thinking Routine “*What makes you say that?*” to encourage critical reasoning.
 - “What evidence supports your match?”
 - “How does this reflect the author’s point of view or time period?”

Note for UDL alignment: Encourage multiple expression modes: oral presentations, visual charts, digital slides, 1-on-1 reports.

Closure

- Revisit: “How does an author’s world impact how they write? How does an author’s writing tell us about their world?”
- Invite brief, one-sentence reflections from each group using one of these sentence frames:
 - “I used to think...now I think...”
 - “The story connects to the past because....”
 - “What surprised me was....”

Optional Extensions

- Gallery Walk: Display quote–clue pairings; students use sticky notes to leave feedback or alternative interpretations.
- Research Challenge: Students choose one category from the “Clue” cards and find one new fact that deepens understanding.
- Performance Connection: Have students stage a brief tableau illustrating one of their matched quote–clue pairs.

TEKS

- ELA 6–12
 - (6A–C), (7A–B), (8A–C) – Analyze how historical, cultural, and social contexts influence literature; draw connections between themes and author perspective; use textual evidence to support interpretation and discussion.
- Theatre I–IV
 - (2A–B), (3A–C), (4A–B), (5A–B) – Interpret characters and social context through performance; collaborate to express narrative meaning; analyze dramatic structure and moral themes.

Who's Who: The Cast and Character Descriptions of Alley Theatre's *The Importance of Being Earnest*



Christopher Salazar
Jack Worthing

Jack Worthing (a.k.a. Ernest)

A respectable gentleman with a secret double life. In the country, Jack is serious, responsible, and Cecily's strict guardian. But in the city, he becomes "Ernest": a charming bachelor free to have fun. He wants to be honest but finds lying much easier than facing society's expectations.

Key Traits:

- Respectable
- Anxious
- Secretive

"I have now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest."



Dylan Godwin
Algernon Moncrieff

Algernon Moncrieff

A witty, lazy aristocrat who avoids responsibility whenever possible. Algernon invents fake emergencies—and even fake people—to escape boredom. He values pleasure over honesty and believes life should never be taken too seriously.

Key Traits:

- Witty
- Indulgent
- Irresponsible

"The truth is rarely pure and never simple."



Amelia Pedlow
Gwendolen Fairfax

Gwendolen Fairfax

A fashionable, confident young woman who believes deeply in appearances and ideals. Gwendolen is romantic, dramatic, and absolutely convinced she knows what she wants—especially when it comes to names, manners, and love.

Key Traits:

- Confident
- Romantic
- Strong-willed

"I could not love you were you the only man left."



Melissa Molano
Cecily Cardew

Cecily Cardew

A bright, imaginative teenager who lives in the countryside. Cecily romanticizes life, love, and rebellion—creating entire stories in her diary. Though she appears innocent, she is clever, bold, and quietly in control.

Key Traits:

- Imaginative
- Playful
- Independent

“I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life.”



Candy Buckley
Lady Bracknell

Lady Bracknell

A powerful, judgmental matriarch obsessed with wealth, status, and social rules. Lady Bracknell believes marriage is a business arrangement and sees love as far less important than income, family name, and respectability.

Key Traits:

- Authoritative
- Snobbish
- Controlling

“To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.”



Elizabeth Bunch
Miss Prism

Miss Prism

Cecily’s strict but well-meaning governess. Miss Prism believes deeply in education, morality, and discipline, though her past mistakes suggest she is not as perfect as she appears. She represents Victorian ideas about propriety and self-improvement.

Key Traits:

- Moralistic
- Anxious
- Old-fashioned

“The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means.”



Spencer Plachy
Dr. Chasuble

Dr. Chasuble

A polite, mild-mannered clergyman who enjoys giving sermons and offering moral advice. Though serious on the surface, he is easily flustered and clearly fond of Miss Prism.

Key Traits:

- Gentle
- Formal
- Awkward

“Charity, dear Miss Prism, charity!”



Spencer Plachy
Lane

Lane

Algernon’s servant, who quietly observes his employer’s behavior with dry humor. Lane speaks politely but often reveals sharp insight into marriage and class through his calm responses.

Key Traits:

- Observant
- Reserved
- Dryly humorous

“I have only been married once.”



Chris Hutchison
Merriman

Merriman

Jack’s loyal and professional servant in the country. Merriman is efficient, polite, and unbothered by the chaos around him—maintaining order while everyone else behaves absurdly.

Key Traits:

- Proper
- Efficient
- Unflappable

“Yes, sir.”



CLUE
from the

Life of Oscar Wilde

He had a Public Persona

Wilde crafted his public persona. He was widely known for being witty and flamboyant, and treated identity as a performance. He valued being deliberate over being authentic.



CLUE
from the

Life of Oscar Wilde

He was at the Top of His Game

When *The Importance of Being Earnest* premiered, he was at the height of his fame and embraced by the elite of London. His play criticizes society from inside the system, not from the margins.

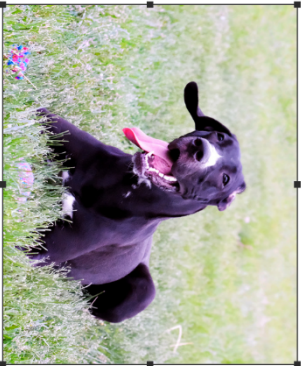


CLUE
from the

Life of Oscar Wilde

Seriousness is Overrated

Wilde openly rejected Victorian moral seriousness, arguing in essays and lectures that art and life should value pleasure, wit, and style over rigid morality.



CLUE
from the

Life of Oscar Wilde

He was a “Licensed Jester”

Wilde’s criticisms of society were seen as clever, not threatening. His witty dialogue and exaggerated characters were welcomed by the very people he criticized. Victorians were comfortable being laughed at, as long as the joke felt elegant.





CLUE

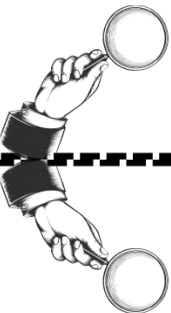
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Victorian Morals

Reputation was Everything



In late-Victorian England, reputation mattered more than truth. Social class, family background, and appearances determined a person's worth far more than honesty or kindness.



CLUE

from some

Victorian Morals

Marriage was all Business



Marriage among the Victorian upper class was often viewed as a business decision tied to money, property, and status—not love.



CLUE

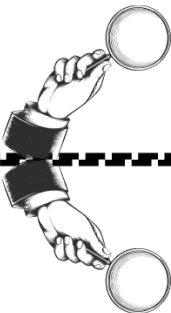
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Victorian Morals

Morality was Public, Not Private



Being seen as moral was more important than actually being proper or virtuous. Scandalous behavior was only devastating if it was exposed. Historians call it a “culture of performance” rather than integrity.



CLUE

from some

Victorian Morals

Women had Zero Agency



Young women were expected to obey family authority, especially regarding marriage and reputation. Marriages were arranged based on what would benefit the family, not what the woman wanted.





QUOTE

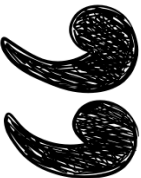
from

The Importance of

Being Earnest

LADY BRACKNELL:

“To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.”



QUOTE

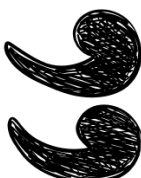
from

The Importance of

Being Earnest

LADY BRACKNELL:

“An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be.”



QUOTE

from

The Importance of

Being Earnest

JACK:

“When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects.”



QUOTE

from

The Importance of

Being Earnest

ALGERNON:

“I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them.”



<p>QUOTE</p> <p>from</p> <p><i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i></p> <p>ALGERNON:</p> <p>“You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life.”</p>	<p>QUOTE</p> <p>from</p> <p><i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i></p> <p>GWENDOLEN:</p> <p>“In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.”</p>
<p>QUOTE</p> <p>from</p> <p><i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i></p> <p>ALGERNON:</p> <p>“The truth is rarely pure and never simple.”</p>	<p>QUOTE</p> <p>from</p> <p><i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i></p> <p>LADY BRACKNELL:</p> <p>“Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes...”</p>

<p>“ QUOTE from <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i></p> <p>LADY BRACKNELL: “I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men.”</p>	<p>” QUOTE from <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i></p> <p>ALGERNON: “Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life.”</p>
<p>“ QUOTE from <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i></p> <p>GWENDOLEN: “I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train.”</p>	<p>” QUOTE from <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i></p> <p>(Regarding an “immoral” man who has died.) MISS PRISM: As a man sows, so shall he reap. CHASUBLE: Charity, dear Miss Prism, charity! None of us are perfect.</p>