

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST



Study Guide

Jessa Cunningham, Dramaturg

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DRAMATURG'S NOTE: A PHOTO ALBUM OF THE VICTORIAN ERA



Have you ever wondered how the other half lives? While I can't tell you the modern version, I can show you how the upper class lived in the Victorian era. The pictures and information in this study guide will give you a perspective into the Victorian lifestyle. What sorts of rules did Victorians have to follow? What things occupied their minds? What was a typical courtship like?

Picture the characters as you read through this study guide. Can you imagine Algernon, or dear Jack, engaging in these activities? Can you see them walking the streets of London? Are there moments in the play where the characters truly embody the upper-class Victorian lifestyle? Remember, as Gwendolen says, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing."

—Jessa Cunningham, dramaturg



Sunday Night at the Victoria Theatre, Coderoy Burdard, 1872, Public Domain.



"The Municipal Parks Gardens, and Open Spaces of London: their history and associations... Illustrated, etc." John James Sparry, 1850, Public Domain.

VICTORIAN SOCIETY AND CONVENTIONS

Life in the Victorian era was very structured for those in the upper classes of society. Rules and conventions governed almost every aspect of Victorian life. One wonders how people got anything done at all!

Proper etiquette was the big thing for the wealthy during this time. There were specific things they could do and things they could not do. It was crucial not to mix them up, or they faced becoming a social pariah. For the rich, wearing the wrong fashion was just as bad as fumbling a person's title when addressing him or her.

Women could not dance with strangers, and young ladies were to be chaperoned at all times, as doing otherwise would send the wrong message. The gentlemen of the time had to keep track of when it was proper to smoke or drink in front of women. Knowing the right time to bow or to tip your hat was also a must. An incorrect move would result in social mockery.

These rules may seem trivial to us now, but for Victorians, they were the norm—one the wealthy clung to. Here are some more examples of the many rules of proper etiquette:

- ❖ A gentleman may take two ladies upon his arms, but under no circumstances should the lady take the arms of two gentlemen.
- ❖ No gentleman will smoke when walking with or standing in the street in the presence of a lady.
- ❖ At a dinner party, furniture and other room decor should be arranged in such a manner that it will not interfere with the guests' view of one another. A low dish of flowers with light to no fragrance is the preferred centerpiece.



Cartoon: Family Friend Vol. II, 1854, Public Domain.

"IF WE LIFT OUR SKIRTS, THEY LEVEL THEIR EYE-GLASSES AT OUR ANKLES."

"Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that."—Lady Bracknell

MARRIAGE CUSTOMS

Marriage was an important life decision during this time period. Typically, a marriage was looked on as mostly a smart business move, a partnership between two people within the same social class based on mutually beneficial financial aspects. Before this could happen, though, there was a specific process required to get to the wedding.



COURTSHIP

Due to the pressure to marry well, courting was a serious affair for both men and women. Before courting could begin, a young lady first had to “come out” to debut herself in the social world. She had to be chaperoned at all times, so the couple was never really alone.

A typical courtship began with a man and woman speaking together. After this initial meeting, they could take a walk together (with a chaperone, of course), and would then keep in contact with each other after a mutual attraction had been confirmed.

While marriage could occur within a week of meeting, most of the time the courtship and subsequent ceremony took quite some time.

NEGOTIATIONS

Dowries were a big part of the marriage deal. A lady would often provide a large dowry in order to entice her suitor to marry her. The man was responsible for reassuring the lady and her family that he would be able to keep his wife in the lifestyle she was accustomed to. Once the financials were arranged between the families, then discussion of engagement could begin.

ENGAGEMENT

An engagement had to follow specific conventions:

- ✦ The gentleman had to get permission from the woman's father.
- ✦ Proposals were best conducted in person so the woman would not misinterpret the man's intentions.
- ✦ A lady was not obligated to accept the first proposal—some women enjoyed playing hard to get.



Once the proposal was accepted by the woman, the mother of the bride would host a dinner party so the fiancé could meet his bride's family. The bride was then introduced to the groom's family. After all of these customs and technicalities were finished, the engagement was finalized with a ring. Once the couple was engaged, they could be more intimate—they could hold hands, go on walks alone, and go on unchaperoned rides.

While it could be a long process to get to the wedding, most wealthy Victorians followed the conventions of the time in order to maintain their status.

“The very essence of romance is uncertainty.” —Algernon



UPPER-CLASS LIFE IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND



"Now, my dear boy, if we want to get a good table at the Carlton, we really must go and dress." —Algernon

For rich people, especially men, during the Victorian Era, life was good if one had land, a large house, a title, and a doting spouse. To that end—and to attract a suitable wife—men worked hard to acquire and maintain their fortunes.

"A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her." —Lady Bracknell



Victorian women had one goal in life: to get married. That was their job from the moment they reached marrying age. Once married, they were able to relax and enjoy life. Parties and entertaining were the norm, with company coming over often for high tea, afternoon tea, and dinner parties.

*"Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays."
—Gwendolen*

The fine things in life were crucial to a wealthy household. Fancy clothing made from satin, silk, and velvet was a must, as were finely made hats covered with flowers and feathers. Upper-class homes with all the latest conveniences—including indoor toilets—were all signs of how well off a family was.



"Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them?" —Algernon

Servants did most of the work around the house, allowing the men and women to enjoy a life full of travel, parties, and extravagant goods. Nannies watched the children so women could go dancing, shopping, and to tea with friends.

"When one is in the town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring." —Jack

In what other scenes in the play can you tell the character's wealth by his or her words and actions? Are there any statements by characters that seem to reveal what the characters are really like?

A PERFECTLY DELIGHTFUL GAME!

Playwright Oscar Wilde described *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a trivial comedy for serious people. Oftentimes, the characters focus on trivial items during serious moments. Below are some lines from the play that demonstrate this, with the item in question left intentionally blank. Listen closely to the actors to figure out which item they are referring to, then check out the lobby displays to see if you can find them all.



1. LADY BRACKNELL: "To be born, or at any rate bred, in a _____, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution."
2. ALGERNON: "Well, I can't eat _____ in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs."
3. JACK: "Do you mean to say you have had my _____ all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard about it."
4. JACK: "I have already told you to go. I don't want you here. Why don't you go?"
ALGERNON: I haven't quite finished my _____ yet!"
5. GWENDOLEN: "You have filled my tea with _____, and though I asked most distinctly for bread and butter, you have given me cake. I am known for my gentleness of my disposition, and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I warn you, Miss Cardew, you may go too far."



1891 photograph from Act 1 of the original production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Unknown, 1895. Public Domain.

Answers: 1. Handbag 2. Muffins 3. Cigarette case 4. Tea 5. Lumps of sugar

TO LEARN MORE

To learn more about *The Importance of Being Earnest*, visit BYU's Dramaturgy blog, The 4th Wall: 4thwalldramaturgy.byu.edu/category/importance-of-being-earnest



PRODUCTION STAFF

Rodger Sorensen

Director

From Provo, Utah, Rodger is a professor in the Department of Theatre and Media Arts. He has taught in colleges and universities for 42 years, the past 20 at BYU. He recently directed *Fiddler on the Roof* at the University of Anchorage on the MatSu campus and the MicroBurst Theatre Festival at BYU. Rodger is married to Claudia Lunceford, and they are the parents of three children and eight grandchildren.

Susan Kupferer

Production Stage Manager

From Irvine, California, Susan is a sophomore in stage management. She was the assistant stage manager of BYU's production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* last winter and is excited to be a production stage manager for the first time for BYU's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. She also stays involved with the lighting and stage operations crews here on campus.

Bradlee Hager

Lighting Designer

From Camarillo, California, Bradlee is a senior studying theatre design and production. Recent credits include scenic designer for BYU Theatre Ballet's *Alice in Wonderland*, projection designer for BYU's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and scenic designer for BYU Opera's *The Lost Children of Hamelin*.

Sarah Beth Stewart

Costume Designer

From Evergreen, Colorado, Sarah is a super senior studying theatre arts with emphases in costume and makeup design and technology, and minors in nutrition and visual arts. Recent credits include costume designer for *Water Sings Blue* at the Microburst Theatre Festival in 2015, co-costume designer for *Mother Courage*, and makeup designer for *Twelfth Night* and *La Bohème*, all at BYU. She was the touring costumer for the Young Ambassadors on their South Africa and Zimbabwe tour this year.

Sarah Bult

Makeup & Hair Designer

From Salt Lake City, Utah, Sarah is a junior studying theatre studies with an emphasis in makeup design. She is excited to be designing her first production at BYU. She has previously worked on the makeup crew for *A Winter's Tale* and *Alice in Wonderland* at BYU. She has also designed for films and other projects. She will be continuing her BYU experience as the makeup designer for *Argonautika*.

Aubrianna Hockett

Properties Designer

From Spokane, Washington, Aubrianna is a senior studying theatre studies with an emphasis in playwriting. Recently, she was props designer for *Charlotte's Web* and for the Microburst Theatre Festival at BYU. She is the current manager of the BYU prop shop.

Christopher Bowles

Sound Designer

Christopher is a senior studying media arts. This is Christopher's sixth and final sound design opportunity at BYU, co-designed with the incredible Matthew Kupferer. If you've heard thunder in a show—*Our Town*, *Winter's Tale*, or *Taste of Sunrise*—then you've heard his work. He was also the FOH engineer for *Beauty and the Beast*. He will graduate this coming December and beyond that, he dreams of a smoggy, Glendale life. Enjoy!

Jessa Cunningham

Dramaturg

From Charleston, South Carolina, Jessa is a senior in theatre arts studies with a minor in history. Recent credits include dramaturg in *Charlotte's Web* at BYU. Jessa has enjoyed working with the great people associated with this production.

Matthew Kupferer

Asst. Sound Designer

A sophomore from Irvine, California, Matthew is pursuing a major in sound design with a minor in computer science. He has worked as stage manager and sound designer for the mask club and *Snegurochka*. Outside of BYU, he has worked as a sound designer for the Heritage Residential School's production of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Shelby Ré Renshaw

Asst. Makeup Designer

From Sandy, Utah, Shelby is a senior in theatre studies with an emphasis in makeup and design. She was recently makeup intern for Studio C, guest makeup designer for Mountain West Ballet's *Sleeping Beauty*, makeup supervisor for BYU's *Alice in Wonderland*, and makeup artist for BYU's *Mother Courage and Her Children* and *Charlotte's Web*. She is the head makeup designer for BYU's upcoming production of *Macbeth*.





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