

LITERATURE 2A

TEACHER'S NOTES

AUTHOR: Oscar Wilde
TITLE: *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Act I)
THEMES: Family (unit 4), Home (unit 5), Friendship (unit 6)
WRITING: Summaries
THINK STYLE: Wit

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) was born in Dublin, Ireland. His works include *The Canterville Ghost* (1887), *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1891) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1897).

He went to Oxford University in England and after university, became popular in fashionable social circles in London because he was talented and funny. He wrote poems, plays, short stories and one novel. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which took just one month to write, is Wilde's most famous play. One journalist said it was 'the second most known and quoted play in English after *Hamlet* (Shakespeare)'.

Wilde lived during the Victorian era (called this because Queen Victoria was the reigning queen). Victorian Britain was characterised by social inequality and a strict moral code. People were expected to behave in a correct and proper manner. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the main character behaves correctly in public, but has found a way to misbehave in private. His private life is shown to be more fun than the life he leads in public.

Wilde was controversial because he made fun of Victorian society by criticising many of its values, such as work, marriage and religion. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* he uses inversion (reversing the normal order) to poke fun at the rigid social structure, for example by allowing the wealthy Lady Bracknell to interview potential husbands for her daughter which would traditionally have been the father's role. Lady Bracknell is a humorous figure and Wilde uses this humour to show what he thinks about the class system (the differences between the wealthy and the poor).

INTRODUCTION

Ask students if they have heard of Oscar Wilde or *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Write any ideas on the board in note form. Use the information in the *About the author* box to provide an introduction. Depending on the class, it may be appropriate to use L1 at this stage.

START THINKING ...

- 1 Draw students' attention to the film still at the top right of the worksheet. Elicit responses to the questions: *Do you know the actors?* (Colin Firth and Rupert Everett) *Do they look rich or poor?* (rich) *Are they friends or enemies?* (friends)

Organise the class into pairs or small groups. Set a time limit of a few minutes for students to discuss the questions. Then ask students for their opinions. Encourage them to back up their answers with reasons (in L1 if necessary). For example, 'It is

important to have a best friend so you can tell them your problems.'

- 2 Draw students' attention to the text above the film still which 'sets the scene' and clarify understanding. Play the audio. When students have read and listened to the text once, allow time to check unfamiliar words in the glossary.

Optional extension

Ask some comprehension questions to check general understanding of the text: *How many characters are mentioned in the text?* (7: Jack, Algernon, Cecily, Miss Prism, Ernest, Bunbury, Gwendolen) *Which two characters don't really exist?* (Ernest, Bunbury) *What is Algernon's nickname?* (Algy)

- 3 Students read through the questions. Check for understanding and remind them to refer closely to the text to find the answers.

Answers

1 His other name is Ernest. He has two names because he likes to be one person in London and a different person in the country. 2 Jack behaves well with Cecily because he's responsible and wants to set a good example. 3 Ernest is very sociable and he likes to have fun and go to parties. He is confident and easy-going. 4 Mr Bunbury is Algernon's invented friend who lives in the country. 5 A Bunburyist is someone who invents another person that they can pretend to visit when they want to avoid doing something that they find boring. 6 Jack advises Algernon to make Bunbury disappear.

- 4 Students read the text again. Discuss the questions and answers with the class.

Suggested answers

1 They're good friends. 2 Perhaps he doesn't want Algernon to visit him there and see him as a serious, responsible person. 3 Ernest will probably disappear if Jack marries Gwendolen

VOCABULARY

- 5 Read through the sentences one at a time to check comprehension of any unknown vocabulary. If necessary, refer to the information in the *About the author* box for more detail on Queen Victoria and Victorian society. Working individually, students complete the sentences with the correct form of the words in the glossary. Ask individual students for answers.

Answers

1 governess 2 behaved 3 truth 4 rarely
5 pretended 6 explanation

Optional extension

Ask students which facts they find interesting or surprising and why. Point out that these facts all relate to life in Victorian society in England. Ask students to make another sentence for each item in the glossary. Explain that writing new vocabulary items in context is a good way to remember them.

Optional extension

Ask students to read the text again and to underline five more words that are new to them. Ask them to write the words in sentences. They then read their sentences in pairs and correct each other's mistakes.

ROLE PLAY

- 6 Organise the class into groups of three. Read the instruction and check that students understand what they are going to do. Ask two students to read the first part of the conversation. Brainstorm ideas and write the ideas on the board (the country / London; parties; why he's got two names). Set a time limit of 5–10 minutes and then when they have finished, ask a group of three to perform their role play to the class.

LISTENING

- 7 This conversation (between Jack and Lady Bracknell) is one of the most famous scenes in the play. It is also one of the most amusing. Students read through the notes on the notepad before listening. Elicit predictions of answers from the students. Play the recording twice. The first time, encourage students to listen without taking notes. The second time, they complete Lady Bracknell's notes.

Answers

- 1 29 2 8,000 3 149 4 0 5 a kind old gentleman
6 a (black) handbag (in Victoria Station) 7 No

Optional extension

Ask students which part of the dialogue they found funny and why.

AUDIOSCRIPT

Lady Bracknell	Please sit down, Mr Worthing. First of all, I must tell you that you are not on my list of suitable young men for my daughter Gwendolen to marry. However, I will put your name on the list if you can give good answers to my questions. How old are you?
Jack	I'm twenty-nine.
Lady Bracknell	In my opinion, that's a very good age to get married. How much money do you earn in a year?
Jack	About eight thousand pounds.
Lady Bracknell	That is very satisfactory.
Jack	I also have a house in the country.
Lady Bracknell	A house in country? How many bedrooms has it got? Well, we won't worry about that now. I hope you've got a house in London too.

Jack	I've got a house in Belgrave Square.
Lady Bracknell	What number in Belgrave Square?
Jack	149
Lady Bracknell	Oh dear! That's on the unfashionable side of the street, but we can soon change that.
Jack	What can we change? The side of the street or the fashion?
Lady Bracknell	We can change both if necessary! Now where are your parents living?
Jack	I have lost both my parents – actually it's more correct to say, they lost me when I was a baby. I don't know who my parents are. A very kind old gentleman found me.
Lady Bracknell	Found you! Where exactly did he find you?
Jack	In a hand-bag.
Lady Bracknell	A hand-bag!
Jack	Yes, in a large, black hand-bag
Lady Bracknell	And where did he find this bag?
Jack	At Victoria Station in London.
Lady Bracknell	Found in a bag at a station! That's ridiculous! Well, in that case, Mr Worthing, I advise you to find some relatives quickly. I suggest you produce at least one parent – either mother or father – as soon as you can.
Jack	Well, I don't see how I can possibly do that! But I can show you the hand-bag – it's at home in my bedroom. I really think that should satisfy you, Lady Bracknell.
Lady Bracknell	You can't possibly imagine that Lord Bracknell and I will let our only daughter marry a man with only a bag as family! Good morning, Mr Worthing!



CRITICAL THINKING

Write the following on the board: '29 is a very good age to get married'. Ask students to put their hands up if they agree with the statement. Working individually, students make a list of reasons for and against the statement. When students have finished, ask them to work in small groups to compare their ideas. You can then bring their arguments together on the board and discuss their ideas as a class. Ask students to put their hands up again if they agree with the statement now. Ask students who have changed their minds for their reasons.

Suggested answers

For: By the age of 29, some people might have met someone they want to marry; they may have a good career and be happy where they are living; they may want to have children and want to be married first; in some countries, there are financial benefits to being married.
Against: when they are 29, some people still want to travel and don't want to have to live in the same place; not everyone has met the person they want to marry; not everyone feels responsible enough in their twenties; some people don't think that marriage is important.

WRITING: SUMMARIES

- 8 Ask students to explain what a summary is. Read through the *Writing* skills box. Ask students to explain what a synonym is and to give an example (a word

or phrase that has the same, or nearly the same meaning as another word or phrase in the same language. Intelligent = bright, upset = sad). Help students if necessary to identify and underline the key information in the text. Students can write the summary in class or for homework. Students then swap their summaries with a partner. They read each other's work and highlight any mistakes. They then return the summaries to the original student who looks at the highlighted mistakes and corrects them. Ask some students to read their summaries out loud to the class.

THINK WIT

- 9 Read and check that students understand the meaning of *wit* (the ability to use words in a clever and humorous way). Students match the Oscar Wilde quotations with their meanings. Ask individual students for answers. Ask students to discuss in pairs which quotations they agree with and which ones they disagree with.

Answers

1 c 2 a 3 b

Optional extension

You could ask students if they know any other Oscar Wilde quotations, or any famous witty quotations. They may know some translated into their L1. Ask them to explain what the quotations mean.

- 'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking up at the stars.' (Wilde) – The gutter is the edge of the road where water runs away. It is used in this case to describe being at the lowest level of society. Wilde is saying that we are all struggling, but while some people accept their fate, other people are aiming higher.
- 'All that glitters is not gold.' (Shakespeare) – not everything that looks expensive is valuable.
- 'Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies.' (Oliver Goldsmith) – if you don't ask me anything, then I won't need to lie.

Additional reading or internet research topics

- Victorian Britain
- Class structure in Victorian Society
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* themes
- The life of Oscar Wilde