

The Importance of Being Earnest Reading Schedule A-Day Classes

You need to have each reading assignment completed by the dates listed below. Dates are subject to change due to the weather and/or other circumstances. My recommendation is to always read ahead.

Expectations:

- Annotate your book as you read. This is what will be expected of you in college.
 - Maintain a character list.
 - Come prepared to class with questions and comments for the class discussion.
- *Schedule is subject to change!

□ Due February 2

Act 1 & 2 Discussion

- **Dialectical Journal:** Complete 5 entries for Act II
- **Act I Questions:** Address the following questions in your journal.
 1. At the very beginning of the act I, Algernon states, “I don’t play accurately – anyone can play accurately – but I play with wonderful expression.” How does this comment establish a theme for the play?
 2. How does Wilde portray the relationship between Algernon and his servant Lane in act I? What do their conversations suggest about class differences and the society in which the play is set? Is there some irony in their interactions?
 3. How does the scene description for act I prepare the reader for Wilde’s satire of Victorian society? Throughout the first act, how do specific stage directions contribute to the play’s tone?
 4. Consider the invented word *Bunburyist*. Why is the term used so many times in quick succession in act I with such relish? How many variations (different parts of speech, different definitions) does this word undergo? Why does a made-up term play such an important role in the play?
- **Act II Questions:** Address the following questions in your journal.
 1. What is the significance of Jack’s leading a double life, with one persona for the city and another for the country? How is this similar to what Algernon has created with his invalid friend Bunbury? How is it different? What is ironic about Algernon later impersonating Jack’s alter ego, Ernest?
 2. What do the scenes of Algernon and Jack jostling over cucumber sandwiches (act I) and muffins (act II) suggest about their characters and their priorities? Explain how Wilde uses these props to produce a comic effect.
 3. Look closely at the exchange in act II between Cecily and Gwendolen in which they both believe they are engaged to the same man. What self-contradicting values do their cutting remarks about city life and country life reveal?
 4. Generally, this play sticks to the conventions of the comedy of manners – a satiric form of drama that lampoons social conventions. However, it occasionally becomes a farce, marked by wholly absurd situations, slapstick, raucous wordplay, and innuendo. Identify a shift to farce in the play. How does it contribute to the plot? What is its effect on the tone of the play?

□ Due Feb. 8

Act III Discussion

- **Dialectical Journal:** Complete 5 entries for Act III
- **Questions:** Address the following questions in your journal.
 1. How does Wilde make *The Importance of Being Earnest* funny? Identify what you consider to be the most humorous part of the play, and explain your choice. Now, think about the purpose of the humor in this play. Find instances where Wilde uses humor to satirize some of the more ridiculous aspects of society.
 2. Explain the role of the black handbag in the play. What other objects serve as important props, and how do they advance the plot?
 3. A hallmark of Wilde’s style is his use of epigrams – a short, witty, often paradoxical statement designed to surprise the audience. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* is full of such lines, such as “It is better to be beautiful than to be good. But... it is better to be good than to be ugly.” Identify three types of epigrams in the play, and consider the purpose of each statement. What role do epigrams serve collectively, and how do they affect the tone of the play?
 4. How do the final moments of the play conform to the “happily ever after” conventions of romantic comedy? How do they deviate from (or comment on) such conventions?