

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

by Oscar Wilde



THE AUTHOR

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was born into a prominent family in Dublin, Ireland. His unusual talents were evident at an early age, though it was also at an early age that his later proclivities were shaped - as a child, his mother loved to dress him like a little girl. He went on to great success at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he won a distinguished degree in classics along with the university's poetry prize.

After graduation from the university, he traveled in Italy and Greece, where he became enamored of the beauty of the classical age. His obsession with aesthetics eventually led him in the direction of decadence in his personal life as well as in some of his writing. His search for beauty led him to champion the outrageous, tweaking the standards of Victorian society wherever possible. His novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), told of a man who, while engaged in a life of increasing perversion and violence, aged not a day, while his portrait increasingly showed the decay of the protagonist's soul. Wilde himself engaged in perverted sexual behavior, including a celebrated homosexual affair with the son of the Marquess of Queensbury. This affair led eventually to a public trial after Wilde sued the Marquess for slander in 1895, and the subsequent revelations of Wilde's excesses destroyed his public reputation. After being sentenced to two years at hard labor for sodomy, his health failed and he died in Paris, in destitute condition, in 1900.

Wilde was perhaps the most celebrated wit of his day, and today is best known for his stage comedies. *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), and *An Ideal Husband* (1895) were Victorian drawing-room comedies that stretched the boundaries of the genre by incorporating Wilde's personal aesthetic values as well as his criticism of what he considered to be hypocritical Victorian morality and worthless upper-class lifestyles. His greatest achievement, however, is the farce *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), in which he twits the British aristocracy with a style that has rarely been matched on the stage.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Jack Worthing (Ernest) - A young English gentleman of uncertain parentage (as a baby he was discovered in a handbag in Victoria Station) who is in love with Gwendolen Fairfax, but cannot secure her hand because of the opposition of her mother, Lady Bracknell. He is the legal guardian of Cecily Cardew.
- Algernon Moncrieff - A good friend of Jack's, he lives in a nice flat in one of the nicer parts of London. He is Lady Bracknell's nephew. He enjoys avoiding his social obligations by "Bunburying" - claiming to visit an invalid friend named Bunbury while instead doing whatever pleases him. When he finds out about Jack's young ward, he secretly pays Cecily a visit and falls in love with her.
- Gwendolen Fairfax - The daughter of Lady Bracknell, she is in love with Jack (whom she knows as Ernest - the name he uses in town), and is convinced that she could never love anyone whose name was *not* Ernest.
- Cecily Cardew - The ward of "Uncle Jack" Worthing, she falls in love with Algy, but tells him that she can only love a man named Ernest - which he has given as his name.
- Lady Augusta Bracknell - Aunt of Algernon and mother of Gwendolen, she is the quintessential British upper-class snob. She forbids the marriage of Jack and Gwendolen because his social background is unknown.
- Dr. Chasuble - The rector of Manor House, he serves as Wilde's vehicle for satirizing the established Church. He and Miss Prism flirt with each other throughout the play. Both Jack and Algy ask him to christen them - as quickly as possible - in order to take on the name "Ernest."
- Miss Prism - Cecily's tutor, she was formerly employed by Lady Bracknell as a governess. Her past is clouded by an incident involving a trashy three-volume novel and a missing baby.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

"Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of their moral responsibility." (Algernon, Act I)

"When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring." (Jack, Act I)

"Girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right." (Algernon, Act I)

“It’s perfectly absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn’t read. Why, half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read.” (Algernon, Act I)

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple.” (Algernon, Act I)

“The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one’s clean linen in public.” (Algernon, Act I)

“I’m sorry if we’re a little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn’t been there since her poor husband’s death. I never saw a woman so altered. She looks quite twenty years younger.” (Lady Bracknell, Act I)

“Oh that is clearly a metaphysical speculation and, like all metaphysical speculations, has very little reference to the actual facts of life as we know them.” (Gwendolen, Act I)

“Yes, but men often propose for practice. I know my brother does; all my girlfriends tell me so.” (Gwendolen, Act I)

“I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate, exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom has gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately, in England at any rate, it seems to make no difference whatsoever.” (Lady Bracknell, Act I)

“Both? To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune - to lose both seems like carelessness.” (Lady Bracknell, Act I)

“To be born, or at any rate, bred, in a handbag, 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 - and I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to?” (Lady Bracknell, Act I)

“Her mother is perfectly unbearable. Never met such a gorgon. I don’t really know what a gorgon is, but I’m quite sure Lady Bracknell is one. In any case, she’s a monster without being a myth, which is really unfair.” (Jack, Act I)

“All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That’s his.” (Algernon, Act I)

“Few parents nowadays pay any regard to what their children say to them. The old-fashioned respect for the young is rapidly dying out.” (Gwendolen, Act I)

“I am not in favor of this modern mania for turning bad people into good people at a moment’s notice.” (Miss Prism, Act II)

“The good ended happily and the bad unhappily. That is the meaning of fiction.” (Miss Prism, Act II)

“I have never met any really wicked person before. I feel rather frightened. I am afraid he will look just like anyone else.” (Cecily, Act II)

“I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.” (Cecily, Act II)

“Oh, I don’t think I would care to catch a sensible man. I wouldn’t know what to talk to him about.” (Cecily, Act II)

“My sermon on the meaning of the manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful or, as in the present case, distressing. I have preached it at harvest celebrations, christenings, confirmations, on days of humiliation and festal days. The last time I delivered it was in the Cathedral, as a charity sermon on behalf of the Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Classes.” (Chasuble, Act II)

“Oh, yes, Dr. Chasuble is a most learned man. He has never written a single book, so you can imagine how much he knows.” (Cecily, Act II)

“Outside the family circle, Papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man.” (Gwendolen, Act II)

“I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train.” (Gwendolen, Act II)

“It is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind.” (Jack, Act II)

“Mr. Worthing, is Miss Cardew at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? Before yesterday, I had no idea there were any families or persons whose origin was a terminus.” (Lady Bracknell, Act III)

“Never speak disrespectfully of society, Algernon. Only people who can’t get into it do that.” (Lady Bracknell, Act III)

“To speak frankly, I am not in favor of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other’s characters before marriage, which I think is never advisable.” (Lady Bracknell, Act III)

“A woman should never be completely accurate about her age. It looks so calculating.” (Lady Bracknell, Act III)

“Thirty-five is a very attractive age. London society is full of women of the very highest birth who have, of their own free choice, remained thirty-five for years.” (Lady Bracknell, Act III)

NOTES

Act I - The play begins with Algernon Moncrieff receiving a visit from his friend Ernest Worthing in his London flat. As the conversation proceeds, Algy finds out that Ernest’s name is really Jack, but that he calls himself Ernest in town and tells his friends in the country that he has to come to town to visit his wayward brother Ernest whenever he wants to escape social obligations. Algy accuses him of Bunburying, and explains that he has an imaginary invalid friend named Bunbury whom he uses as an excuse to avoid social obligations in town.

Jack has come to town to propose to Gwendolen Fairfax, Algy’s cousin. Algy refuses to give his consent unless Jack tells him who Cecily is (the name is inscribed on Jack’s cigarette case); Jack then reveals that Cecily is his eighteen-year-old ward, who lives at his country estate. Algy is interested, but Jack refuses to tell him where the estate is.

When Gwendolen and her mother Lady Bracknell arrive for tea, Algy maneuvers Lady Bracknell out of the room so Jack can be alone with Gwendolen. He proposes and she accepts, but in the process reveals her firm conviction that she can never marry anyone whose name is not Ernest - the name by which she knows Jack. Lady Bracknell interrupts the conversation, and proceeds to interrogate Jack in order to ascertain whether or not he is a suitable match for her daughter. His answers are satisfactory until he mentions that he knows nothing of his parents because he was found in a handbag as an infant by his benefactor, Cecily’s grandfather. She rejects the very idea of uniting her family with one of unknown parentage, and advises him to acquire some relations as quickly as possible. Prior to parting, Jack and Gwendolen agree to meet at Jack’s country estate to determine their next move. Algy overhears the conversation and writes down the address that Jack gives her.

Act II - The scene now moves to Manor House, where we meet Jack’s young ward, Cecily, her tutor, Miss Prism, and the local rector, Canon Chasuble. Algy soon arrives and introduces himself as Jack’s wayward brother Ernest, and he and Cecily quickly begin to develop an interest in one another. They go inside to get something to eat, and Jack arrives. He is wearing mourning clothes, and announces that his brother Ernest has died of a chill in Paris. Cecily reenters and informs Jack that his brother is not dead, but is in the house. When Algy appears, Jack is furious. After Cecily leaves, they argue, and Algy finally agrees to leave. Jack goes into the house, Cecily comes out again, and Algy proposes to her. She agrees, noting that they had already been engaged for months - she had been carrying on an imaginary romance with Jack’s brother Ernest in her diary, and through correspondence of which she wrote both sides. She, as Gwendolen had done earlier, insists that she could never marry anyone whose name was not Ernest, and Algy decides he suddenly needs to make arrangements to get himself christened again.

Gwendolen then arrives to meet Jack, but encounters Cecily instead. She never knew Jack had a ward, and is quite upset to see how pretty Cecily is. As the conversation progresses, both reveal that they have recently become engaged to Mr. Ernest Worthing - the name being used by both Jack and Algy in their Bunburying episodes. The girls fling increasingly cutting verbal blows at one another, then Jack and Algy enter. Each is forced to admit that his name is not really Ernest, whereupon both girls announce that they are engaged to no one, and go into the house in tears. Jack and Algy then commiserate, as Algy stuffs himself with Jack’s muffins.

Act III - As the scene begins, the men apologize to the girls, and their apologies are accepted, though the girls still refuse to marry them because their names are not Ernest. They announce their plans to be christened that day, but then Lady Bracknell arrives. She refuses to give her consent to Jack and Gwendolen's marriage, and Jack retaliates by refusing to allow Algy to marry Cecily - a marriage that Lady Bracknell views as extremely desirable when she finds out that Cecily will inherit a fortune. But Jack refuses to consent to the marriage unless he is allowed to marry Gwendolen.

Dr. Chasuble then arrives, and is told that the christenings will not be necessary. He goes off to meet Miss Prism, but when Lady Bracknell hears the name, she demands that the woman be brought to her. It turns out that Miss Prism had been the nurse hired to take care of Lady Bracknell's sister's baby, but that the baby had been lost. Miss Prism confesses that she had mistakenly put the baby in her handbag and her three-volume novel in the perambulator, and left the handbag in Victoria Station. Jack puts two and two together, realizes that he is the baby in question, and produces the handbag, which Miss Prism identifies. Lady Bracknell then tells Jack that he is in actuality Algy's older brother, and that his name is Ernest. The scene ends with intimations of marriages for all three couples, including Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Oscar Wilde is considered to have been one of the great satirists of the British aristocracy. In one of his plays, *A Woman of No Importance*, he described the fox-hunting British country gentleman as "the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable." In what ways does *The Importance of Being Earnest* embody this tendency to satirize the upper classes? Support your answer with specific references to the text of the play.
2. What does Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* reveal about the way in which marriage was viewed by the Victorian aristocracy of the late nineteenth century? What does the play reveal about the playwright's own attitude toward the institution?
3. Oscar Wilde is noted for his epigrams - short pithy sayings that have a way of sticking with the hearer and communicating truth in a witty way. Many of the epigrams in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are twists on popular clichés. Choose three such epigrams, identify the clichés on which they are based, and discuss how the twists of language in which Wilde engages contribute to the social criticism of the play.
4. Oscar Wilde once wrote, in reference to his classic farce *The Importance of Being Earnest*, that the philosophy behind the play is "that we should treat all the trivial things in life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality." Discuss the ways in which the play demonstrates this philosophy of life. What serious view of reality underlies this seemingly flippant attitude?
5. Discuss the relationships in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* between Algernon and Jack and between Gwendolen and Cecily. What do the nature of their relationships say about the differences between men and women?

6. In Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, does the playwright think it is really important to be earnest? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with specific details from the play.
7. In Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, analyze how Wilde distinguishes the three couples in the play from one another by the types of language they use. Choose one conversation involving each couple and use it to demonstrate your point.
8. Choose either the pair of Algernon and Jack or Cecily and Gwendolen from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and analyze the differences between their characters. Why is the play less successful if either the men or the women are indistinguishable?
9. Oscar Wilde presented himself as an aesthete - someone who believed in art for art's sake rather than art for the sake of some higher good or purpose. How is this belief illustrated by *The Importance of Being Earnest*?
10. Discuss the roles played by lying and truth-telling in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. What does the play reveal about the views of the playwright concerning the importance of truth in one's life?
11. Discuss the view of the established church presented in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In what sense does Wilde view the church as being no more than an extension of the society of which it is a part?
12. George Bernard Shaw described Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* as "rib-tickling fun," but claimed that it lacked humanity. Do you agree or disagree? Support your conclusion with specific details from the play.
13. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains many epigrams, most of which are spoken by Lord Henry Wotton. Interestingly, a number of these epigrams reappear in the author's best-known play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which was written four years later. Choose three epigrams that appear in both works and analyze their contexts. In what ways does Wilde use these witty sayings differently? What do these differences indicate about the alteration in Wilde's thinking in the period between the two works?
14. Oscar Wilde was one of the literary world's most flamboyant homosexuals, despite the fact that he married and fathered two children. Given his sexual orientation, did he have any real understanding of the love between men and women? Use evidence from his greatest play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to answer the question.

15. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* was written four years after *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Though the two differ markedly in tone, they contain many similar ideas; even some of the witticisms are similar. Analyze the extent to which the practice of Bunburying in the play is a comic version of the escape from real-life responsibilities portrayed by the protagonist in the novel. What is the author's opinion of this practice? What are its consequences in both stories? Would the teachings of Scripture support or refute Wilde's conclusions?
16. George Bernard Shaw once said, "It is most unwise for people in love to marry," while Oscar Wilde's Algernon Moncrieff intoned that "divorces are made in heaven." Compare and contrast the views of love and marriage expressed in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Which do you consider the more cynical with regard to marriage, and why?
17. In George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon Moncrieff and Alfred P. Doolittle are very different characters, yet they have one very important characteristic in common - both serve as mouthpieces for the playwright's social criticism. Which character do you consider the more effective vehicle for communicating the playwright's ideas? Support your conclusion with specific incidents or quotations from the two plays.
18. Both George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* are notably passionless romances. In your opinion, is this due more to their function as witty criticism of the British upper classes, or to the playwrights' ambivalence on the subject of sexuality? Support your conclusion with specifics from the two plays.
19. Compare and contrast Lydia Languish in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals* with Cecily Cardew in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. What particular characteristics are the two playwrights mocking by the ways they portray the two girls? In what ways are they different? How do their characteristics relate to the major themes of the plays?
20. Compare and contrast Mrs. Malaprop in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals* with Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. What particular characteristics are the two playwrights mocking by the ways they portray the two women? In what ways are they different? How do their characteristics relate to the major themes of the plays?
21. Compare and contrast the scenes in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* in which the true identities of the young men are revealed to their lovers. What are the functions of these scenes in the respective plays? Which do you consider to be the more humorous? Why?

22. Tom Stoppard, the author of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, loved the English language, and his plays are full of wordplay. In this respect he had much in common with Oscar Wilde, the author of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Compare and contrast the nature of the wordplay in the two theatrical masterpieces. Do the playwrights use puns and other forms of witty language in the same way or do they have different purposes for their wordplay? Support your arguments with specific quotations from both plays.
23. In Act II of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the Player says, "The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means." This statement is an allusion to the words that Oscar Wilde places in the mouth of Miss Prism in Act II of *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means." Compare and contrast the ideas communicated by the two playwrights concerning the meaning of human life.
24. Running someone else down under a veneer of mannerly speech is often a technique used by playwrights in comedies of manners. Compare and contrast Act III, scene 5 in Moliere's *The Misanthrope* with the initial meeting of Gwendolyn and Cecily in Act II of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. How do both scenes satirize the manners of the day by allowing the girls involved to say horrible things about one another while maintaining a polite exterior?