The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde

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Introduction

Oscar Wilde's most successful play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* became an instant hit when it opened in London, England, in February, 1895, running for eighty−six performances. The play has remained popular with audiences ever since, vying with Wilde's 1890 novel *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* as his most recognized work The play proves vexing to critics, though, for it resists categorization, seeming to some merely a flimsy plot which serves as an excuse for Wilde's witty epigrams (terse, often paradoxical, sayings or catch−phrases). To others it is a penetratingly humorous and insightful social comedy.

When *Earnest* opened, Wilde was already familiar to readers for *Dorian Gray*, as well as for collections of fairy tales, stories, and literary criticism. Theatre−goers knew him for his earlier dramatic works, including three previous successes, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Women of No Importance* (1893), and *An Ideal Husband* (1895), as well as for his more controversial play, *Salome* (1896), which was banned in Britain for its racy (by nineteenth century standards) sexual content.

The Importance of Being Earnest has been favorably compared with William Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* and Restoration plays like Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *School for Scandal* and Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer.* While it is generally acknowledged that Wilde's play owes a debt to these works, critics have contended that the playwright captures something unique about his era, reworking the late Victorian melodramas and stage romances to present a farcical, highly satiric work−though audiences generally appraise the play as simply great fun.

Tragically, as *The Importance of Being Earnest,* his fourth and most successful play, received acclaim in London, Wilde himself became embroiled in the legal actions against his homosexuality that would end his career and lead to imprisonment, bankruptcy, divorce, and exile.

Author Biography

Oscar (Fingal O'Flahertie Wills) Wilde was born on October 15 (though some sources cite October 16), 1854 (some sources cite 1856) in Dublin, Ireland, where he would spend his youth His father was a celebrated eye and ear surgeon who was knighted by Queen Victoria for founding a hospital and writing an influential medical textbook. Wilde's mother, Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde, came to be called "Speranza," writing poems, stones, essays, and folklore meant to give hope to advocates of rights for women and Ireland.

Wilde won prizes in the classics at Portora Royal School in Ulster, and his continued success in classic studies at Dublin's Trinity College won him a scholarship to attend Magdalen College, Oxford, where he earned a B.A. In 1878, me undergraduate Wilde won the Newdigate Prize for his poem "Ravenna."

While at Oxford, the ideas of Walter Pater and John Ruskin shaped Wilde's thinking about art. He became known for flamboyance in dress (his trademark became wearing a green carnation in his lapel), collecting peacock feathers, and blue china; he came to personify the term "Dandy" used to descnbe men who paid excessive attention to their appearance. He also became a spokesman for Aes−theticism, a belief in the supreme importance of "Art for Art's sake," without regard for its practical, ethical, or social purpose. ("The object of Art is not simple trudi but complex beauty," Wilde wrote later in his 1889 essay "The Decay of Lying.") Following publication of the first volume of his *Poems* in 1881, which included "The Harlot's House" and "Impression du Matin," Wilde spent ten months giving 125 lectures throughout the United States. The Aesthetics movement and Wilde were satirized in the magazine *Punch* and in W. S. Gilbert's *Patience* (1881).

After the disappointing reception of his first play, *Vera,* in 1883, Wilde returned to Britain to spend eighteen months lecturing on "Impressions of America." In 1884, he married Constance Lloyd and began working as a reviewer and editor. *The Happy*

Prince and Other Tales, a volume of fairy tales originally wntten for his sons appeared in 1888, followed two years later by Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

Success eluded Wilde's second play, *The Duchess of Padua* (1891), but his subsequent theatrical efforts received increasing acclaim: *Lady Windermere 's Fan* in 1892, *A Women of No Importance* in *1893*, *An Ideal Husband* in 1895, and, that same year, his greatest theatrical success, *The Importance of Being Earnest.*

While in Paris, Wilde wrote *Salome* in French, but the play was refused a license for performance in England, though the 1896 Pans production starred noted actress Sara Bernhardt. An English translation of *Salome* appeared in 1894 with illustrations by famed illustrator Aubrey Beardsley and the play provided the libretto for Richard Strauss successful 1905 opera of the same name.

Social criticism of Wilde's openly homosexual behavior (though married with children, he professed a deep passion for young men) led to the end of his career. Wilde's relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas led Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, to publicly accuse Wilde of sodomy. Encouraged by Lord Alfred, Wilde sued the Marquess for slander, losing his suit when the Marquess offered evidence of Wilde's homosexuality. Wilde refused the advice of friends to flee to the Continent and in subsequent trials was convicted of "public indecency" and sentenced to two years of hard labor With the scandal, Wilde's plays ceased production.

Two major works written in prison were published following Wilde's release. *De Profundus* appeared in 1905, offering an apologetic confession of Wilde's conduct, while *The Ballad of Reading Gaol,* published initially in 1898, indicts England's prison system and tells of his experiences there. Upon his release, Wilde, divorced and bankrupt, adopted the name Sebastian Melmouth and moved to Pans, France, where he died in 1900.

Wilde's literary reputation enjoyed a considerable resurgence in the years following his death. He is now regarded as one of modern literature's major figures. His skill and

diversity within multiple genres has earned him respect as a poet, novelist, essayist, and playwright. His works are still widely studied and his plays enjoy frequent revivals.

Plot Summary

Act One

The play opens in the fashionable London residence of Algernon Moncrieff. His friend Jack (who goes by the name '"Earnest") Worthing arrives, revealing his intention to propose matrimony to Algernon's cousin Gwendolen Fairfax. In the course of their conversation. Jack admits that he is the ward to a young woman, Cecily Cardew. Also, he admits to leading a double life, stating that his "name is Earnest in town and Jack in the country." In the country, he pretends to have a brother in London named Earnest whose wicked ways necessitate frequent trips to the city to rescue him.

Algernon's aunt Lady Augusta Bracknell arrives with his cousin Gwendolen Fairfax. While Algernon and his aunt discuss the music for her next party. Jackclaiming his name is Earnestconfesses his love for Gwendolen and proposes marriage. She is delighted, because her "ideal has always been to love someone of the name Earnest." When the lovers tell Lady Bracknell their news, she responds frostily, forbidding marriage outright after learning that while Jack has an occupationhe smokesand money, he has no lineage to boast ofin fact, he has no knowledge of his real family at all. He was discovered as an infant, abandoned in a handbag in Victoria Station.

Because Cecily seems too interested in Jack's imaginary brother. Earnest. Jack decides to "kill" him. Gwendolen informs Jack that while Lady Bracknell forbids their marriage and that she "may marry someone else, and marry often," she will retain her "eternal devotion" to him.

Act Two

July in the garden of Jack's Manor House in Hertfordshire. Miss Prism, Cecily's governess, chides her for not attending to her German lesson, as Jack has requested.

Prism informs Cecily that when younger, she had written a novel. The Rector, Canon Frederick Chasuble enters, suggesting that a stroll in the garden may cure Miss Prism's headache. She feels fine but a headache develops soon after his suggestion, and they walk off together.

Algernon arrives, and, finding Cecily alone, introduces himself as Jack's "wicked" city brother, Earnest. Cecily and Algernon (as Earnest) walk off. Prism and Chasuble return as Jack shows up unexpectedly. Hoping to end his double−life. Jack informs them that his brother Earnest has died in Paris of a "severe chill." They console him, until Cecily enters with Earnest (Algernon), who seems very much alive. Jack is bewildered, but Cecily, thinking Jack's coolness is resentment at his brother's dissipated lifestyle, insists that the "brothers" mend their relationship.

Left alone, Algernon proposes to Cecily, only to discover thataccording to Cecilythey have already been engaged for three months. It seems that since Cecily heard from Jack about his wicked brother, Earnest, she fell in love with him. She entered in her diary their entire romance, complete with proposal, acceptance, break−up, and reconciliation.

Gwendolen arrives and chats with Cecily, until both women realize they are engaged to a man named Earnest. When Algernon and Jack return, their true identitiesand the fact that neither of them is actually named Earnestare revealed. As the scene ends, both men admit to having arranged for Chasuble to re−christen them with the name Earnest.

Act Three

Later the same day at the Manor house, Gwendolen and Cecily prepare to forgive the men, though they are disappointed that neither is named Earnest. Lady Bracknell arrives, in pursuit of Gwendolen. She learns from Jack that his ward Cecily is quite wealthy and therefore a desirable match for her nephew Algernon. When she hears of

Miss Prism, Lady Bracknell recognizes her as a former family servant. Prism and Lady BracknelFs infant nephew had disappeared at the same time under mysterious circumstances.

Miss Prism confesses that she had left the house with her novel manuscript in one hand and the baby in the other. In her confusion, however, she had put the book in the baby carriage and the baby m the handbag at the train station. The baby, Jack, turns out to be Lady Bracknell's lost nephew and Algernon's older brother. Lady Bracknell now gives her permission for Algernon to wed Cecily, but Jack, as Cecily's guardian, refuses his permission unless Lady Bracknell consents to his marriage to Gwendolen. She does, and as the act closes, they learn that Jack was named after his father, General Earnest John MoncrieffEarnest for short.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The play takes place in London in 1895, and this act is held in Algernon Moncrieff's artistically appointed, luxurious apartment. Someone is playing the piano in a side room. The music stops, and Algernon enters and greets Lane, the butler, who is putting out the settings for an afternoon tea. Algernon asks him if he has prepared the cucumber sandwiches for his aunt, Lady Bracknell, and mentions the inordinate amount of champagne consumed at a dinner held a few nights ago. Lane tells him that servants only drink the champagne in bachelor households. Those of married men have inferior wine. He leaves and then re−enters to announce Mr. Ernest Worthing.

Ernest is also known as Jack and that is how Algernon greets him. Jack tells him that he has come to town to propose to Gwendolen, Algernon's cousin. As luck would have it, she and her mother, Lady Augusta Bracknell, are due at any time for tea. Algernon doesn't understand Jack's need to propose. A proposal takes the anticipation out of any romance. Jack also needs to take care of the issue of Cecily. He is a little startled that Algernon knows about her, and Algernon produces an inscribed cigarette case from Cecily to Jack. Jack had left it behind at a dinner party and thought he had lost it.

Jack stumbles through several iterations of who Cecily is. Algernon wants to know why the inscription is dedicated to Jack and not Ernest, which he thought was his real name. The name Ernest is on all his correspondence, and he is always introduced as Ernest. Jack tells him that his name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country. The cigarette case was given to him in the country, and that's why the inscription is to Jack.

Algernon accuses him of being a Bunburyist and tells Jack he will tell him the meaning of that when he learns who Cecily is. Jack finally admits that Cecily is the young charge appointed to him by the man who had adopted him as a young boy.

Cecily considers Jack her uncle, and lives in the country with her governess. Algernon tries to get the location from him without success.

Algernon still wants to know why he is called Ernest in town and Jack in the country. Jack tells him that he has created the persona of 'Ernest,' who is his brother who lives in Albany and is always in trouble. Algernon tells him that this is an example of a Bunbury, a fictitious character used to make excuses to attend or decline invitations. Algernon has created a fictitious character with very poor health by the name of Bunbury. A Bunbury has proven to be an invaluable asset. For example, Algernon is going to tell his aunt Augusta that he cannot attend her dinner party this evening because he must go see the ailing Bunbury. In actuality, he will be dining with Jack.

Lane announces Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen, and pleasantries are exchanged. Algernon tells her that he won't be able to attend dinner with her tonight. He has received an urgent message that his friend Bunbury is very ill, and he must go to him. She comments that Bunbury seems to have very poor health. He diverts her by escorting her to another room to discuss his music selections for her upcoming reception.

Jack and Gwendolen are left alone, and he proposes marriage. She tells him that she has always wanted to love someone whose name is Ernest. It just reeks with confidence and ambition. He asks her if she could love him if his name weren't Ernest. What if he were simply Jack? She says that there's no poetry in that name. It's a moot point, because his name is Ernest, and that's what she loves.

When Aunt Augusta reenters, Gwendolen tells her that she is now engaged to Jack. Her mother sends her to the carriage and grills Jack on his family and financial situation. His answers are acceptable until he admits that he was abandoned in a cloak room when he was a child and he is adopted. She ends the questioning and tells him that he has no future with her daughter. She leaves, and Gwendolen returns to tell him that she will always love him but cannot marry him. She will correspond with him, and he gives her his country address. Algernon writes the address on his shirt cuff and

seems quite pleased to have the information he wanted.

Gwendolen leaves, and the two men discuss their dinner plans.

Act 1 Analysis

Algernon and his friend, Jack, are privileged young men living in London in the late 1800's. They are not quite 30 years old. Jack is ready to marry, but Algernon is not even considering it. Jack seems to be weary of the bachelor days, while Algernon still enjoys the games and the chase. He has invented the Bunbury character to give him excuses for denying invitations or avoiding unpleasant situations. You're not sure whether you should be angry at his deceit or applaud him for his wit. Much is made of names as the two men play the word games of the idle rich. The play on the name Ernest/earnest has been noted in Jack's conversation with Gwendolen, and will no doubt surface again.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Cecily and her governess, Miss Prism, are in the garden of Jack's Manor House. Miss Prism is trying to get her to focus on her studies as her Uncle Jack had requested before he left for London. She is easily distracted and quite pleased when the Rev. Chasuble enters the garden and takes Miss Prism for a walk.

To Cecily's surprise, the butler announces that her Uncle Jack's brother, Ernest, has arrived. It is Algernon acting under the pseudonym. She informs him that Uncle Jack has gone to London to buy his new wardrobe as he is sending him to Australia. Algernon passes that news off and invites himself to dinner. They leave the garden just as Miss Prism and Rev. Chasuble return from their walk.

Jack enters the garden and is greeted by Miss Prism and Rev. Chasuble. They comment on his mourning clothes, and he tells them that his brother, Ernest, has died in Paris and left instructions to be buried there, not in England. They make the appropriate condolences, and Jack asks the minister if he could christen him this afternoon. The minister is a little surprised by the request but agrees to do so.

Cecily comes out of the house and runs to her Uncle Jack, but she is put off by his dark clothes. She tells him to cheer up because his brother, Ernest, has arrived for a visit. He tells the group that this is preposterous. They agree, having been told a few minutes ago that Ernest was dead. Algernon emerges with Cecily and apologizes to Jack for his misbehavior in the past. He is determined to change his ways.

Cecily senses the strain between the two and implores them to be nice to each other. After all, Ernest (Algernon) has been telling her about how he has been a good friend to Bunbury during his illness.

When the two men are alone, Jack chastises Algernon for his duplicity and tells him that he must leave on the next train back to London. His Bunburying has not been successful here. Jack returns to the house, and Algernon tells no one in particular that he loves Cecily. She comes back to the garden to water the roses, and the two of them are alone. He tells her that he must leave very soon. He confesses his love for her, and she admits that she has loved him ever since she heard her uncle talk about him. He asks her to marry him and she says of course. They have been engaged for three months after all. She has even written letters to herself pretending that he was the one who sent them. She tells him that it was fate. She has always wanted to marry a man named Ernest. He wants to know if she could love him if he had another name, Algernon perhaps. She would respect him, of course, but she couldn't love him completely. He tells her that he has an imminent appointment with the reverend and must leave. He kisses her and departs, vowing to return as soon as he can.

The butler announces Gwendolen to Cecily, who is still in the garden. Gwendolen has come to see Mr. Worthing. Cecily tells the butler to bring her outside. After the introductory pleasantries, Gwendolen begins to question the young lady. She is annoyed when Cecily tells her that her parents do not live there, but lightens a bit when she reveals that Mr. Worthing is her guardian.

Cecily is a lovely young woman, and Gwendolen tells her that she wishes she were 42 and plain. Ernest is a decent man, but even decent men are susceptible to lovely, charming girls. Cecily informs her that it is not Ernest Worthing who is her guardian, but his elder brother. She herself is engaged to Ernest Worthing. Gwendolen declares that it is she who is engaged to Ernest Worthing and they argue heatedly.

Cecily and Gwendolen are finally interrupted by Jack, whom Gwendolen addresses as Ernest. She wants to know if he is engaged to Cecily, and he says he is not. Cecily tells Gwendolen that she knew there must have been a misunderstanding. The man she is embracing is her Uncle Jack. Algernon enters, and Cecily declares that he is Ernest Worthing. She asks him if he is engaged to Gwendolen, which he denies. Gwendolen then tells Cecily that the man she is embracing is her cousin, Algernon Moncrieff.

Both women are in shock over the deceptions and embrace in their shared insult. Gwendolen puts a question to them: Where is Ernest? Both women are engaged to a man named Ernest Worthing, and they would like to know where he is. Jack admits that there is no Ernest. He has no brother. The two girls leave the garden together with scornful glares at Jack and Algernon.

Algernon is elated, This is the best Bunbury ever! Jack is appalled at the woeful situation. They admit that they are in love with the two girls. Jack reveals that he has made a 5:30 appointment with Rev. Chasuble to be christened with the name Ernest. Algernon has made a 5:45 appointment with the same objective.

Act 2 Analysis

Having secured the address for the Manor House in the previous act, Algernon arrives to get a good look at little Cecily, who is not so little after all. He has presented himself as her uncle's brother, Ernest, and she is a little afraid and a little bit in love with him. She has heard all the stories that her uncle has told, and Ernest seems to be an attractive if bad man.

Jack has decided to end his games and arrives home with the news that his brother has died. Unfortunately, he doesn't know that Algernon is inside acting as that brother. Jack is angry at Algernon's intrusion and the fact that he can't end the charade as he had hoped. Cecily, unaware of the deception, declares that she loves Algernon because she always wanted to marry a man named Ernest. Gwendolen had made the same claim in the first act. It seems a shallow qualification for a husband. Both women are ready to relinquish their so−called beloveds had their names not been Ernest.

Both men make appointments with the reverend to be christened with the name Ernest to end the confusion and secure the hearts and hands of the women they love.

In the meantime, the game continues when the two women realize that they are each in love with Ernest Worthing, although neither one of them really is.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

Gwendolen and Cecily have agreed to maintain a stony silence with the two men but can't resist asking them pivotal questions. Why did Algernon pose as Ernest? Why did Jack lie about having a brother? Algernon tells Cecily that he had to pose to meet her, and Jack tells Gwendolen that he had to fake a brother to escape into town to see her. Both women are charmed by the answers and forgive the men.

Aunt Augusta arrives without notice, to the couples' surprise. Gwendolen tells her again that she is engaged to Jack, but her mother says that she will not allow it. When Algernon tells her that he is engaged to Cecily, she wants to know more about Cecily's credentials. Once she is satisfied with Cecily, she gives her approval for Algernon to marry. Jack, denies his approval as Cecily's guardian. He feels that Algernon is a deceitful man. However, he might change his mind if Aunt Augusta will release Gwendolen to marry him.

The reverend enters and the two men sadly tell him that there is no need for the christenings. He mentions that Miss Prism has been waiting for him and he needs to get back to the church at once. Aunt Augusta perks up at Miss Prism's name and demands to see her. Miss Prism becomes visibly shaken in Aunt Augusta's presence. It turns out that Miss Prism was the nanny for her sister's child 28 years ago. She took the child out one day in his carriage. At a train station, she became confused and put a manuscript in the carriage and the baby in a satchel and lost the child. That child was Jack. Jack realizes that he is Aunt Augusta's nephew and Algernon's older brother.

Jack also discovers that his real name is Ernest, having been named after his father. Gwendolen is pleased to marry a man whose name really is Ernest. Aunt Augusta chides him for acting childish, He tells her that he realizes the vital importance of being Ernest.

Act 3 Analysis

Aunt Augusta's sudden appearance turns out to be favorable. Had she not been there and heard Miss Prism's name, the secret of Jack's history and parentage would have never been revealed. The women have already forgiven the men for their deceptions, which were created in the name of love. The whole play is a satire of the lives of the idle rich and their shallow value system. They have at least devised some very clever games to pass the time. In the end, no one is harmed, Jack returns to his family and the couples can be married. It just shows what good things can happen when you are Ernest.

Characters

Algy

See Algernon Moncrieff

Lady Augusta Bracknell

Algernon's aunt and the sister of Jack's mother. She opposes Jack's marriage with her daughter Gwendolen, though relents when she learns that Jack is actually her nephew. More accurately, she wants Algernon to be able to marry the very wealthy Cecily, but that match cannot take place without Jack's permission, which he refuses to give unless Lady Bracknell approves his marriage with Gwendolen. Overall, she is realistic, hard−nosed, and an upholder of conventionthough not entirely conventional herself.

Cecily Cardew

Jack's pretty, young ward, whom Algernon woos but who remains determined to marry a man named Earnest. Not quite as naive as she may appear, Cecily keeps a diary, which "is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions and consequently meant for publication." Tutored by Miss Prism, Cecily fails to attend to her studies and marries Algernon at the play's conclusion.

Canon Frederick Chasuble

Canon Chasuble is the rather foolish, pedantic Rector attracted to Miss Prism. Both Jack and Algernon ask Chasuble to christen them Earnest, though no christening actually takes place. As Cecily says, "He has never written a single book, so you can

imagine how much he knows."

Earnest

See John Worthing

Gwendolen Fairfax

Algernon's cousin, with whom Jackas Earnestis in love and to whom he proposes marriage. She accepts, believing him to be Algy's friend Earnest. As she explains to Jack, her "ideal has always been to love someone of the name Earnest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence." Her mother, Lady Augusta Bracknell, initially forbids their marriage, because while Jack seems an otherwise eligible bachelor, he cannot identify his parents, as he was found abandoned in a handbag. The play's end, however, establishes Jack's identity; Lady Bracknell grants permission, and the lovers are united.

Lane

The self−deprecating butler who serves Algernon in his London residence.

Merriman

The servant at Jack's country manor house in Hertfordshire.

Algernon Moncrieff

Jack (Earnest) Worthing's friend, Lady Bracknell's nephew, and Gwendolen's cousin. In order to free himself from unwanted social and family responsibilities, Algy has

invented an invalid friend, Bunbury, whose ailing health frequentlyand conveniently requires Algernon's attention, enabling him to skip dinners with boring guests and tiresome relatives.

Ostentatiously cynical and constantly hungry, Algernon pretends to be Jack's brother Earnest and visits Jack's ward Cecily Cardew. He falls in love with her and proposes matrimony. Jack refuses his permission for Algernon to marry Cecily unless Lady Bracknell gives her permission for Jack to marry Gwendolen, which, at the play's end, she does. The mystery of Jack's parentage reveals that Jack and Algy are actually brothers.

Miss Laetitia Prism

Cecily's absent−minded governess who is wooed by Chasuble. Formerly, while working for Lady Bracknell, she wrote a novel then lost Jack in the railway station. She "deposited the manuscript in the bassinet, and placed the baby in the handbag," which was lost in the cloak room of Victoria Station.'

John Worthing

John "Jack" Worthing (Earnest) begins the play of unknown parentage, an orphaned infant found in a handbag in a cloak room at London's Victoria Station. Discovered and raised by Thomas Cardew, Jack becomes guardian of Cardew's granddaughter, Cecily. Though he calls himself Jack in the country, he identifies himself as Earnest when in the city. In order to excuse himself when he leaves for the city, he tells Cecily that he must get his wicked citified brother, Earnest, out of various scrapes. In time, Cecily becomes infatuated with this imaginary brother Earnest. By the play's end, it is revealed that Miss Prism had left Jack at the station, that Lady Bracknell's sister Mrs. Moncneff is his mother, and that Jack is Algy's elder brother. Also, significantly, Jack, who has been named after his father General Earnest John Moncrieff, actually *is* named Earnest.

Themes

Morals and Morality

Much of *The Importance of Being Earnesfs* comedy stems from the ways various characters flaunt the moral strictures of the day, without ever behaving beyond the pale of acceptable society. The use of the social lie is pervasive, sometimes carried to great lengths as when Algernon goes "Bunburying" or Jack invents his rakish brother Earnest so that he may escape to the city. Another example is Miss Prism's sudden headache when the opportunity to go walking (and possibly indulge in some form of sexual activity) with Canon Chasuble presents itself.

Love and Passion

One of Wilde's satiric targets is romantic and sentimental love, which he ridicules by having the women fall in love with a man because of his name rather than more personal attributes. Wilde carries parody of romantic love to an extreme in the relationship between Algernon and Cecily, for she has fallen in love with himand in fact charted their entire relationshipbefore ever meeting him She writes of their love in her diary, noting the ups and downs of their affair, including authoring love letters to and from herself.

Culture Clash

The play's action is divided between the city and the country, London and the pastoral county of Hertfordshire. Traditionally, locations like these symbolize different attitudes toward life, contrasting, for example, the corruption of urban living with the simple bucolic pleasures of rural farm life. As Jack says, "when one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring." Wilde's symbolism does not adhere rigidly to audience expectations,

however. Though Jack is more sedate while in the country and more festive when m London, Cecily is far from the innocent she appears (and pretends to be around her guardian). Her handling of her "affair" with Algernon/Earnest shows her to be as competent in romance as any city woman. The trait is seen again when Gwendolen visits. During their tiff over just who gets Earnest (who they believe to be one man), Cecily holds her own and then some against her sophisticated city guest.

Language and Meaning

Those familiar with semiotic theory (signs and symbols) will notice the ways various characters in the play obsess over the signifier. The best example is the desire of both Gwendolen and Cecily to love men named Earnest. They see something mystical in the processing of naming and assume some connection between the word (the signifier) and the person (the signified), that one who is named Earnest will naturally behave earnestly.

Freedom

Both Jack and Algernon struggle to remain free of the restrictions of Victorian convention. Jack does so by maintaining a double identity, being Jack in the country and Earnest in the city. Algernon achieves similar results by inventing an invalid named Bunbury who constantly requires his attentions. This similarity in Algernon and Jack's behavior also offers a clue to the men's true relationship as brothers (further duality is indicated by their respective attractions to very similar women, Gwendolen and Cecily).

Style

Romantic Comedy

Most commonly seen in Shakespeare's romance plays like *As You Like It* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the plot of a typical romantic comedy involves an idealized pan: of lovers who the circumstances of daily life or social convention seem destined to keep apart. Along the way, the lovers escape their troubles, at least for a while, entenng an ideal world (like the Garden of Eden) where contacts resolve and the lovers ultimately come together. The plots of such comedies contain pairs of characters and conclude happily, often exhibiting poetic justice, with the good rewarded and the evil punished.

While *The Importance of Being Earnest* certainly fits this description, it is a play that is appraised beyond simple romantic comedy. In fact, part of the play' s wide and lasting appeal is that it so competently fits into any number of comedy genres, including comedies of manners, farces, and parodies.

Comedy of Manners

Generally set in sophisticated society, this type of intellectual comedy privileges witty dialogue over plot, though social intrigue involving the problems of loversfaithful and unfaithfulcan be complicated. The comedy anses from the critique of the fashions, manners, and behavior of elevated society. While often featuring standard characters such as fools, fops, conniving servants, and jealous husbands, the action itself is largely realistic. At least one character, like the audience, accurately comprehends the foolish nature of the people and their situations. In addition to Restoration Comedies like William Congreve' s *The Way of the World,* other examples would be Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer,* Sheridan's *School for Scandal,* and Noel Coward's *Private Lives.*

Farce

This type of low comedy relies on physical gags, coarse wit, and generally broad humor. Laughter arises as exaggerated characters, sometimes caricatures of social types, extricate themselves from improbable situations. Farce occasionally involves disguise or the confusion of gender roles. Algernon's indulgence with food and his short attention span qualify him as a farcical character, as does Miss Prism's bumbling mix−up with her novel and the infant Jack.

Parody

A work which, for comic or satiric effect, imitates another, familiar, usually serious work, mocking the recognizable trademarks of an individual author, style, or genre. Successful parody assumes an informed audience, with knowledge of the parodied target. For example, one of the most parodied works today is the "Mona Lisa" painting which shows up in cartoons, advertisements, and fine art. In *Earnest*, Wilde parodies, among other things, love at first sight by having his characters fall in love before they ever see each other.

Historical Context

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, England witnessed a cultural and artistic turn against the values of Queen Victoria's reign (1837−1901). These earlier virtues, such as self−help and respectability, were widely touted during the boom years of the 1860s and 1870s. However, people were less able to help themselves and raise their social standing in the late 1870s, when farming practices underwent a change which affected society as a whole.

Wheat−fields were converted to cattle pastures on a sweeping scale, and fanners suffered. While farmers were struggling, industrialists were profiting from their factones which employed workers at cheap wages. Factory owners and other businessmen formed the new middle class in England, and as they rose on the social ladder, they desired to imitate the aristocracy by owning houses in the countryside and becoming patrons of art.

As people began questioning the values of the mid−nineteenth century, artists responded in their own way by reacting against the mass−produced goods which were made possible by the Industrial Revolution and technological advances. Artists such as William Morris desired a return to simpler times when handmade furniture, for example, was valued for its craftsmanship. Morris despised the mass−produced objects which filled the Victorian home, fearing that traditional crafts such as woodworking and bookbinding would be lost in an era that overlooked the beauty of handmade objects in favor of high quantity. The term "Arts and Crafts," coined in 1888, refers to Morns's revival of traditional crafts, which he considered to be equal to any form of so−called "high art."

Morris argued that in earlier times, such as the Middle Ages (of which he held a decidedly romantic view), art was all around, in everyday life, m the form of beautifully worked tapestries, furniture, and books, which were not just admired as art objects but had a practical function as well another way in which artists reacted

against earlier Victorian values was by challenging the view that art had to be didactic or morally instructive. The leading critic of the time, John Ruskin, had earlier written that art's highest purpose was to instruct and enlighten. Ruskin was shocked when he saw a sketchy, impressionistic painting by James Abbot McNeill Whistler which had paint spattered on it; he claimed that Whistler had "flung a pot of paint in the public's face." Whistler sued Ruskin for libel, winning the case and bringing the debate over the purpose of art into the public.

Supporters of Whistler approved of "art for art's sake," meaning that paintings Like Whistler's need not have a purpose other than to be aesthetical−, ly pleasing. Even if it was pleasing to see paint spattered on the canvas. The public could now decide for themselves what was "good" art; they did not need to rely on the views of critics like Ruskin to instruct them in the meaning of a painting.

This new movement in art came to be known as Aestheticism, as art could now be appreciated on purely aesthetic terms. Wilde followed Whistler as the chief spokesperson for the movement, writing and lecturing on the beauty of art for art's sake and became known for his own desire to have life imitate art, not the other way around. Aesthetes such as Wilde were mocked in the popular British magazine *Punch* as foppish, unrealistic individuals who strove to live up to the beauty of their home furnishings.

Critical Overview

Two major issues predominate much of *The Importance of Being Earnest's* criticism. First, while audiences from the play's opening have warmly received it, Wilde's contemporaries questioned its seeming amorality. Playwright George Bernard Shaw *(Major Barbara),* after seeing the original London production, attacked the play's "real degeneracy" in an article reprinted in *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays.* Shaw described Wilde's repartee as "hateful" and "sinister." A second and related concern arises about *Earnest's* dramatic structure, which exhibits elements of the farce, comedy of manners, and parody. Critics often disagree as to how the play should be categorized.

On the play's morality, critical opinion remains divided. In his book *Oscar Wilde,* Edouard Roditi, for example, believed that Wilde's comedy never rises above "the incomplete or the trivial." Because none of the characters see through the others or critique their values, Roditi believed the play lacks an ethical point of view. Eric Bentley, in *The Playwright As Thinker,* raised similar issues, concluding that because of its "ridiculous action," the play fails to "break . . into bitter criticism" of serious issues

For Otto Remert, writing in *College English,* Wilde's comedy results in *'fan* exposure both of hypocrisy and of the unnatural convention that necessitates hypocrisy." As a consequence, "bunburying," the reliance on white lies that keeps polite society polite, "gives the plot moral significance." For example, when Lady Bracknell criticizes Algernon for caring for his imaginary friend, Bunbury, who should decide "whether he was going to live or to die," she voices the conventional belief that "illness in others is always faked [and] ... consequently sympathy with invalids is faked also."

Though Lady Bracknell respects convention, Reinert wrote, "she has no illusions about the reality her professed convention is supposed to conceal." She assumes that both Algernon and Bunbury are "bunburying," and her behavior "exposes the polite

cynicism that negates all values save personal convenience and salon decorum."

Nor is Lady Bracknell immune from her own lapses in earnestness. Stating her disapproval of mercenary marriages, she admits,"When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind." That is, though she opposes marrying for money, she had no money when she married a wealthy lord. For her, according to Reinert, this position "is neither cynical nor funny. It represents ... [a] compromise between practical hardheadedness and conventional morality."

Overall, the play does not endorse social dishonesty, for while the plot ridicules respectability, "it also repudiates Bunburyism." Wilde's use of "paradoxical morality" serves as a critique of "the problem of manners," for "Bunburying Algernon, in escaping the hypocrisy of convention, becomes a hypocrite himself by pretending to be somebody he is not." Wilde sees that Victorian respectability forces people to lead "double lives, one respectable, one frivolous, neither earnest."

The second critical issue concerns the play's categorization. Reinert unapologetically describes the play as a farce "that represents the reality that Victorian convention pretends to ignore." The characters themselves are not being ironic, i.e. saying one thing and meaning another. They actually mean what they say. For example, Algernon despairs of attending Lady Bracknell's dinner party because she will sit him beside "Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband." As Remert wrote, "Algernon is indignant with a woman who spoils the fun of extramarital flirtation and who parades her virtue. He is shocked at convention. And his tone implies that he is elevating break of convention into a moral norm," that is, making the unconventional conventional.

Characters like Algernon, who resemble those in works by Alexander Pope *(The Rape of the Lock)* and Jonathan Swift *(Gulliver's Travels),* "derive their ideals for conduct from the actual practice of their societies, their standards are the standards of common corruption, they are literal−minded victims of their environments, realists with a vengeance."

For Richard Foster, writing in *College English,* Wilde's comedy works through parody, by transforming "stock comedic techniques, plot devices, and characters." Foster defended the play against charges that it is merely farce, because farce "depends for its effects upon extremely simplified characters tangling themselves up in incongruous situations," as in Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* or Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer.* Instead, "the comedy of *Earnest* subsists, for the most part, not in action or situation but in dialogue" which is too witty and intellectual "to be described simply as a farce."

Nor is *Earnest* actually a comedy of manners, according to Foster, though it does use verbal wit to expose and ridicule "the vanities, the hypocrisies, and the idleness of the upper classes." After all, a "comedy of manners is fundamentally realistic," requiring the audience to see the stage world as real or possible, if exaggerated. To assist in this recognition, some characters and the audience recognize the fools. In a comedy of manners, folly is recognized by some characters and the audience, while in *Earnest,* according to Rosemary Pountney in *The International Dictionary of Theatre.* Wilde creates "a world of deliberately reversed values" in which the wicked are charming and the good, boring.

Rather than a farce or comedy of manners, then, Foster saw Wilde using familiar plot devices and characters to satirize Victorian society. Jack's relationship with Gwendolen evidences a stock problem of lovers prevented from marriage by class differences. Wilde's solution: establishing the true patrimony of Jack, the railway station infant. Another commonplace of romantic literature is love at first sight, but in *Earnest,* Cecily has fallen in love with Algernon before first sight, solely because she believes his name to be Earnest. And while Algernon is cynical, there is evidence that his cynicism is superficial, for immediately on meeting Cecily, "Algernon is engaged to be married and reconciled to getting christened."

Cecily, seemingly sheltered and innocent, suggests it would be hypocritical for Algernon to actually be good while presenting to be wicked. "The moral of Wilde's parody: the rake is a fake, girlish innocence is the bait of a monstrous mantrap, the

wages of sin in matrimony." What some critics identify as dramatic problems, then, are perceived by others as the play's strengths. "Nothing in the play," wrote Foster, "is quite what it seems. .. The play's 'flaws'the contrivances of plot, the convenience of its coincidences, and the neatness of its resolutionare," according to Foster, "of course, its whole point."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Schmidt holds a Ph.D.from Vanderbilt University and specializes in literature and drama. In this essay, he examines Wilde's play in the context of Victorian concepts of "earnestness,"

To modern theatre audiences, the title of Oscar Wilde's most popular play, *The Importance of Being Earnest,* seems a clever play on words. After all, the plot hinges on the telling of littleand not so littlewhite lies, while the title suggests that honesty (earnestness) will be the rule of the day. The title also implies a connection between the name and the concept, between a person named Earnest and that person being earnest. The narrative action does not bear out this assumption but rather its opposite. Audiences who saw the play when it opened in London in 1895 would have brought to it more complex associations with "earnestness," a word which historians, sociologists, and literary critics alike see as, at least in part, typifying the Victorian mindset.

The word "earnest" has three related meanings: to be eager or zealous; to be sincere, serious, and determined; and to be important, not trivial. During Queen Victoria's more than half−century reign, tremendous economic, social, and political changes rocked Great Britain. These were caused by earnest actions and their consequences required, indeed demanded, earnest responses. The Agricultural Revolution dislocated rural populations, forcing people to leave the countryside for cities. There, those people became workers in the factories created by the Industrial Revolution. While, over the long term, the British nation as a whole benefited from these changes, individuals often suffered greatly.

Even the wealthy were not immune to the changing economy's negative impact on land values. In *The Importance of Being Earnest,* this becomes clear when Lady Bracknell inquires into the finances of Jack Worthing, Gwendolen's choice for a husband. When Jack indicates that he has suitable income, she is pleased it comes

from stock rather than land, for the declining value of "land .. gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up."

By the mid−nineteenth century, discussions concerning issues of economic disparity came to be known as the "two Englands" debate. People considered what would happen to Britain if economic trends continued to enrich the few while the majority of the population worked long hours in dangerous factories, underpaid and living in squalor.

Writers and intellectuals as well as evangelicals and politicians earnestly engaged in this debate. Poets and novelists such as Elizabeth Barrett, Charles Dickens, and Elizabeth Gaskell, created literary works which portrayed the lives of the underprivileged. Writings such as these ultimately contributed to changing public attitudesand more importantlypublic policy toward practices like child labor and public executions. Reforms in hospitals and orphanages, prisons and workhouses, schools and factories can all be traced to debates initiated or fueled by writers. The earnestness of all these reformersartistic, intellectual, religious, and politicalimproved the quality of the life in Victorian Britain.

Earnestness did not characterize only those who addressed social evils, however, but also those whose activities created social problems in the first place. The farmers, investors, and manufacturers whose actions dislocated rural populations and resulted in the squalor of factory towns like Manchester, were also "earnest" about their actions. They believed they were improving the quality of peoples' lives and, in some ways, they were.

Overall, the country produced more abundant, cheaper food and better quality, affordable mass produced goods like clothing. Indeed, historian As a Briggs termed the middle of the nineteenth century "The Age of Improvement" (a phrase he employed as the title of his book on the subject), because of the rising living conditions but also because of the concern to improve the quality of life, to ensure that each generation lived better than the last.

Like British fanners and industrialists, British colonial administrators also justified the nation's imperial ambitions because they "improved" the lives of "uncivilized" peoples, giving them Christianity, British cultural values, and higher living standards. This attitude came to be know as, in author Rudyard Kipling's words, "the white man's burden."

Many of those enriching themselves in this way would acknowledge that their actions caused suffering as well as benefits. They justified their actions based on the utilitarianism of thinkers like John Stewart Mill. Utilitarians determine therightness of an action by asking if certain actions produce the most good for the most people. If people in general benefited, the suffering of a few specific people could be tolerated as the price paid for progress. While this approach may seem callous and self−serving, these thinkers and tycoons were also "earnest" in their actions.

Yet the characters in Wilde's play are not earnest in this sense. Their actions satirize popular notions of the idle rich but also poke fun at Utilitarianism as well. When Jack admits to Lady Bracknell that he smokes, she replies that "a man should have an occupation." Later, Algernon admits that he doesn't "mind hard work where there is no definite object of any kind." Jack and Algernon have no real occupations or professions; their purposelessness critiques the "earnest" nature of Utilitarian activities.

Now we can see that Wilde's use of "earnestness" is more complex than it may first appear to modern audiences. Indeed, his play offers rather biting, if understated, criticism of the institutions and values that had, by the end of the nineteenth century, made Britain the world's greatest colonial power. Ironically, it is exactly the earnestness exhibited by Britain's exploitative class, industrial, and colonial systems that enables the life of leisure enjoyed by the play's main characters. When asked about his politics, Jack replies, "Well, I am afraid I really have none," though the Liberal Unionist party with which he identifies supports the continued colonial status of Ireland.

Britain's colonial system comes up again when Algernon jokes about sending Jack to Australia, emigration then being a common way to prevent excess population from causing unemployment and lower wages. Investment in stocksthe source of Jack's wealthprovided economic support for Britain's expanding economy, and by the play's end, we learn that his father served as a general in colonial India, a common road to personal enrichment during the Victorian age.

The rich are not the only targets of Wilde's wit, for the playwright satirizes earnestness and reformers of all kinds, in morality, education, women's rights, and marriage.

Reformers religious and secular alike expended much energy on improving the morals of the working classes, particularly in regard to family life, procreation, and child−rearing. In this regard reformers often emphasized the importance of the positive example to be set by upper class behavior. The servant Lane tells Algernon he had "only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person." Algernon turns the reformers' ideas on their heads, observing "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." The comedy comes by satirizing the serious ideas of earnest critics of the class system (particularly communist thinkers such as Karl Marx), who wondered exactly what the purpose of the wealthy might be. Finally, Miss Prism's conversation about christening the poor reveals an underlying anxiety about the sexuality and population growth of the working classes.

Earnest reformers engaged in the public debate about education, which expected to "improve" the middle and working classes and enhance the "culture," as Matthew Arnold wrote, of the country in general. One forum for popular education, begun during the eighteenth century, was public lectures, and Wilde satirizes the earnest, if misdirected, efforts of educational societies whose talks have titles like "Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders" and a "Lecture by the University Extension Scheme on the Influence of a Permanent Income on Thought"

Wilde also satirizes the ineffectiveness of the education for the privileged in the scenes between Miss Prism and her reluctant student Cecily. More generally, though, Lady Bracknell proclaims: "The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes and probably lead to acts of violence." Lady Bracknell links education of the poor with social unrest, fearing that the educated masses might forget their place and reject hierarchical class structure.

The independence and audacity of Wilde's female characters reflects the changing status of Victorian women, part of a public debate known as "The Women Question." It was only with the passage of a series of Married Women's Property Acts (1870−1908) that women could hold property in their own names. The opinions of Queen Victoria herself, who opposed women's suffrage but advocated women's education, including college, exemplified the ambiguous situation of women in England during this period.

Cecily and Gwendolen discuss changing gender roles in their conversation about male domesticity, indicating their belief that "home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man." Marriage, however, remained most women's primary goal and occupation. Arranged marriages had been on the decline since the late−eighteenth century but were not unknown among the Victorian era's upper classes. This may have made economic sense, but it did not always create domestic harmony. Consider Algernon's lament about the low quality of champagne in the homes of married men and his belief in the necessity of adultery, "for in marriage, three is company and two is none." Both comments highlight the lack of companionship resulting from marriage without compatibility and love, suggesting that the Victorian husband requires alcohol and a mistress to be happy.

Wilde describes the situation for married women in equally depressing terms. When Lady Bracknell tells of her visit with the recently widowed Lady Harbury, Algernon remarks that he's heard that "her hair has turned quite gold from grief." The audience

anticipates the cliched response, that her hair turned gray or white from sorrow, but Wilde turns the phrase around.

Why might her hair have turned gold instead? Like many Victorian women, Lady Harbury seems to have been trapped in a loveless marriage, the kind Lady Bracknell proposes to arrange for Gwendolen. Now that Lady Harbury's husband is dead, she is finally free to become who and do what she wants. She feels younger, more attractive and changes her hair color. While the joke requires that we associate aging and grief, Wilde turns that around, associating widowhood instead with gold hair and joy. Algernon's statement could also be an indication of the new wealth and independence Lady Harbury gained in inheriting her husband's money. The simple turn of a phrase communicates a complex reality, in this case, about economic, social, and sexual politics.

The status of the nineteenth century's educated women remained grim, however, with few occupational outlets other than teaching. Miss Prism, Cecily's governess, combines two common female occupations, teaching and novel writing, another activity at which women flourished (and for which they were criticized). Prism's confusion between a baby and a manuscript pokes fun at changing ideas about parenthood and child−rearing. The misplaced baby symbolizes what cntics saw as a confusion of gender roles, when women entered the traditionally masculine world of the mind. The plight of orphaned baby Jack illustrates the destabilization of family ties, which in his case are sequentially lost, invented, changed, and discovered.

As Lady Bracknell says, "we live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces," a position echoed by her daughter's comment that "in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing." To many, Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* may seem a work of "surface" and "style," but further examination shows it to have depth and substance as well as humor.

Source: Arnold Schmidt, for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In a review that was originally published on March4,1947, Atkinson offers words of praise for a production of Wilde's play starring John Geilgud.

Owing to unavoidable circumstances, this department cannot solemnly swear that John Gielgud's performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is immeasurably superior to the original performance in 1895. Even Mr. Gielgud, wise though he is, cannot know that from personal observation. But traditions grow slowly, and it is highly unlikely that the original actors blessed Oscar Wilde's comedy with the knowing perfection that Mr. Gielgud and his colleagues are bestowing on it.

Having played *The Importance* triumphantly in London, Mr. Gielgud has now brought it across the Atlantic with no appreciable seachangenot, let it be said, with the entire original cast, but with superb players of artificial comedy, and they all set it meticulously on the stage of the Royale last evening. By the accuracy and uniformity of their style in acting, directing and setting they transmute a somewhat mechanical comedy into a theatre masterpiece.

Even when it was new, to judge by the records, "The Importance of Being Earnest" seemed mechanically contrived in plot and dialogue. It was a bit like Gilbert without the Sullivan music. Especially in the central parts of the second act the brilliance of the wit today shines with an effort as though Wilde were puffing a little.

That might be a point worth dwelling upon in a performance less stylized than Mr. Gielgud's. But he has approached it as if it were a score to be played for its own sake as artificial comedy without laying emphasis on the plot and without speaking the lines Eke jokes or deliberate rejoinders Absurdly self−conscious, dry and arrogant, Mr. Gielgud and his associates are marvelously entertaining. In the purest meaning of the word they are "playing" Oscar Wilde. Nothing here is seriously intended except the manner of the comedy.

Notice how all the actors hold their heads high as though they were elevating themselves above vulgarity. Notice how they greet each other with dainty touches of the fingers, avoiding at all costs the heartiness of a handshake. The lines of dialogue are written elaborately; each word is carefully chosen for its satiric value; by modern standards, some of the lines are long. But notice how disdainfully these actors speak them. Instead of hammering away at the jokes, they speak dryly in an insufferable fashion, as perhaps Oscar Wilde spoke when he, too, had a large, admiring audience at some fashionable reception.

As John Worthing, who has invented a dissolute brother, Mr. Gielgud plays with an ascetic arrogance that is enormously witty quite apart from the dialogue. No play could ever match the sustained perfection of his stylized acting. But this is no exercise in star−casting. For Mr. Gielgud has surrounded himself with actors who have mastered the same attitudes. As the overbearing Lady Bracknell, Margaret Rutherford is tremendously skillfulthe speaking, the walking and the wearing of costumes all gathered up into one impression of insufferability.

Pamela Brown plays Gwendolen with the same icy condescension. As the more rustic Cecily, Jane Baxter is lovely and full of merriment in a more humane style. Jean Cadell is playing the spinster Schoolma'm with an acidulously sweet and nervous virtue. Robert Flemyng's Algernon Moncrieff is an excellent foil for Mr. Gielgud's John Worthing. Without rubbing the edge off the style, Mr. Moncneff gets a dash of well−bred revelry into his acting. As the bachelor's servant, Richard Wordsworth is also immensely expert; and John Kidd is delightfully dull and fatuous as the rector.

Especially for the two interiors Motley's settings are models of period decor; they can be played against without staring the acting out of countenance or overwhelming the performance with color. The costumes, which presumably Motley has also designed, convey the character of the parts and the satire of the comedy without sacrificing beauty. What Motley has accomplished completes Mr. Gielgud's design for artificial comedy. Like the play, it is inhuman. It sacrifices personality to styledetached, egotistical, condescending, arid, satirical and marvelously enjoyable.

Source: Brooks Atkinson, review of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1947) in On *Stage Selected Theater Reviews from the New York Times, 1920−70,* edited by Bernard Beckerman and Howard Siegman, Arno Press, 1973, p. 277

Critical Essay #3

In this chapter from his book, Beerbohm appraises The Importance of Being Earnest, *finding it to be that rare play that stands the test of time and continues to appeal to audiences of numerous generations*

Of a play representing actual life there can be, I think, no test more severe than its revival after seven or eight years of abeyance. For that period is enough to make it untrue to the surface of the present, yet not enough to enable us to unswitch it from the present. How seldom is the test passed! There is a better chance, naturally, for plays that weave life into fantastic forms; but even for them not a very good chance; for the fashion in fantasy itself changes.

Fashions form a cycle, and we, steadily moving in that cycle, are farther from whatever fashion we have just passed than from any other. The things which once pleased our grandfathers are tolerable in comparison with the things which once pleased us. If in the lumber of the latter we find something that still pleases us, pleases us as much as ever it did, then, surely, we may preen ourselves on the possession of a classic, and congratulate posterity. Last week, at the St. James', was revived "The Importance of Being Earnest," after an abeyance of exactly seven yearsthose seven years which, according to scientists, change every molecule in the human body, leaving nothing of what was there before. And yet to me the play came out fresh and exquisite as ever, and over the whole house almost every line was sending ripples of laughtercumulative ripples that became waves, and receded only for fear of drowning the next line. In kind the play always was unlike any other, and in its kind it still seems perfect. I do not wonder that now the critics boldly call it a classic, and predict immortality. And (timorous though I am apt to be in prophecy) I join gladly in their chorus.

A classic must be guarded jealously. Nothing should be added to, or detracted from, a classic. In the revival at the St. James', I noted several faults of textual omission.

When Lady Bracknell is told by Mr. Worthing that he was originally found in a handbag in the cloak room of Victoria Station, she echoes "The cloak−room at Victoria Station?" "Yes," he replies; "the Brighton Line." "The line is immaterial," she rejoins; "Mr Worthing, I confess I am somewhat bewildered," Now, in the present revival "the line is immaterial" is omitted. Perhaps Mr. Alexander regarded it as an immaterial line. So it is, as far as the plot is concerned. But it is not the less deliriously funny. To skip it is inexcusable. Again, Mr. Wilde was a master m selection of words, and his words must not be amended. "Cecily," says Miss Prism, "you will read your Political Economy in my absence. The chapter on the Fall of the Rupee you may omit. It is somewhat too sensational." For "sensational" Miss Laverton substitutes "exciting"a very poor substitute for that mot juste. Thus may the edge of magnificent absurdity be blunted. In the last act, again, Miss Laverton killed a vital point by inaccuracy. In the whole play there is no more delicious speech than Miss Prism's rhapsody over the restored hand−bag. This is a speech quintessential of the whole play's spirit."It seems to be mine," says Miss Prism calmly. "Yes here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days. There is the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beveragean incident that occurred at Leamington. And here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant moment I had had them placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years." The overturning of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days! Miss Laverton omitted "and happier". What a point to miss! Moreover, she gabbled the whole speech, paying no heed to those well−balanced cadences whose dignity contributes so much to the funwithout whose dignity, indeed, the fun evaporates. In such a play as this good acting is peculiarly important. It is, also, peculiarly difficult to obtain. The play is unique in kind, and thus most of the mimes, having trained themselves for ordinary purposes, are bewildered in approaching it.

Before we try to define how it should be acted, let us try to define its character. In scheme, of course, it is a hackneyed farcethe story of a young man coming up to London "on the spree," and of another young man going down conversely to the

country, and of the complications that ensue. In treatment, also, it is farcical, in so far as some of the fun depends on absurd "situations," "stage−business," and so forth. Thus one might assume that the best way to act it Would be to rattle through it. That were a gross error. For, despite the scheme of the play, the fun depends mainly on what the characters say, rather than on what they do. They speak a kind of beautiful nonsensethe language of high comedy, twisted into fantasy. Throughout the dialogue is the horse−play of a distinguished intellect and a distinguished imaginationa horseplay among words and ideas, conducted with poetic dignity. What differentiates this farce from any other, and makes it funnier than any other, is the humorous contrast between its style and matter. To preserve its style fully, the dialogue must be spoken with grave unction. The sound and the sense of the words must be taken seriously, treated beautifully. If mimes rattle through the play and anyhow, they manage to obscure much of its style, and much, therefore, of its fun. They lower it towards the plane of ordinary farce. This was what the mimes of the St. James' were doing on the first night. The play triumphed not by their help but in their despite. I must except Miss Lilian Braithwaite, who acted in precisely the right key of grace and dignity. She alone, in seeming to take her part quite seriously, showed that she had realised the full extent of its fun. Miss Margaret Halstan acted prettily, but in the direction of burlesque. By displaying a sense of humour she betrayed its limitations. Mr. Lyall Swete played the part of Doctor Chasuble as though it were a minutely realistic character study of a typical country clergyman. Instead of taking the part seriously for what it is, he tried to make it a serious part. He slurred over all the majestic utterances of the Canon, as though he feared that if he spoke them with proper unction he would be accused of forgetting that he was no longer in the Benson Company. I sighed for Mr. Henry Kemble, who "created" the part. I sighed, also, for the late Miss Rose Leclerq, who "created" the part of Lady Bracknell. Miss M. Talbot plays it in the conventional stage−dowager fashion. Miss Leclerq but no! I will not sink without a straggle into that period when a man begins to bore young people by raving to them about the mimes whom they never saw. Both Mr. George Alexander and Mr. Graham Browne rattled through their parts. Even m the second act, when not only the situation, but also the necessity for letting the audience realise the situation, demands that John Worthing should make the slowest of entries, Mr. Alexander came

bustling on at break−neck speed. I wish he would reconsider his theory of the play, call some rehearsals, and have his curtain rung up not at 8.45 but at 8.15. He may argue that this would not be worth his while, as "Paolo and Francesca" is to be produced so soon. I hope he is not going to have "Paolo and Francesca" rattled through. The effect on it would be quite as bad as on *The Importance of Being Earnest*though not, I assure him, worse.

Source: Max Beerbohm, review of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in his *Around Theatres Volume 1*, Knopf, 1930, pp. 240−43

Media Adaptations

Universal International Films released a film adaptation of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1953. Directed by Anthony Asquith, the film stars Michael Redgrave as Jack/Earnest It is available on video from Paramount.

Topics for Further Study

Wilde's play revolves around the necessity of telling lies in order to keep polite society polite. Is such dishonesty really necessary? What would the world be like if everyone were absolutely honest? What would happen to you if you were honest for one week?

Many psychologists, sociologists, and literary scholars consider Oscar Wilde's trial as the moment which marks the birth of the modern homosexual identity. Read an account of Wilde's trial or his novel *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* and consider the social and aesthetic issues which surround sexual identity.

In many ways, Wilde's play is a send up of gender roles and a travesty of romantic idealism. Are love and marriage really as simpleor complicatedas they seem in *Earnest?* How should men and women behave toward each other? What do people really want in relationships? What makes for a successful or unsuccessful marriage?

In *Earnest*, people in the country behaveor at least, are expected to behavedifferently from their counterparts in the city Are the stereotypes of city and country life stall with us Identify those stereotypes and consider how population growth, shifting demographics, and urbanization have affected the ways we think about rural and urban life.

Critics have commented on the "triviality" of Wilde's playthat is, it's celebration of the superficial at the expense of earnest seriousness. As an advocate of the Aesthetic movement, though, Wilde might agree with those characters in *Earnest* who value form over content. Consider the ways Wilde's play critiques contemporary Victorian values.

Compare & Contrast

1800s: Theatre is one of the most popular forms of mass entertainment. The number of theatres built in England doubles between 1850 and I860, and on a given night in London alone, 150,000 people attend the theatre.

Today: While theatre remains an important force in contemporary culture, many more people watch television and films.

1800s: Women in England cannot vote or control their own property until a series of Married Women's Property Acts (1870−1908). Though the first college offering advanced education to women is founded in London in 1848, by the 1890s, women can take degrees at twelve British universities, and study, though not take degrees, at Oxford and Cambridge.

Today: British women, like their American counterparts, vote, control their own property, and have all the same legal rights as men, including the right to advanced degrees in education.

1800s: During the Victorian period, travel by rail makes business and vacation travel possible. Trains bring city and country closer together, expediting mail service and supplying rural areas with London newspapers and magazines.

Today: Few people in American travel by rail; most drive cars or fly.

1800s: Britain has a far−flung imperial empire, with colonies around the globe.

Today: Most of Britain's colonies have achieved their independence, though they continue to be affiliated with the former empire as members of the British Commonwealth.

What Do I Read Next?

William Congreve's comedy *The Way of the World* (1700), like *The Importance of Being Earnest,* features romance, mix−ups, and high comedy, though of a broader and bawdier variety.

Wilde's novel *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* has elements of gothicism and melodrama. It tells the story of a corrupt young man who never ages, instead, his portrait ages as he should.

Noel Coward's plays *Private Lives* (1930) and *Blithe Spirit* (1941) have much of the polish and wit of Wilde's writing. Coward was particularly noted for his skill with the comedy of manners.

Further Reading

Beckson, Karl, Editor. *Oscar Wilde. The Critical Heritage,* Routlege, 1970

Focusing on the years 1881 to 1927, this book offers particular msight into Wilde's theatrical writings.

Bnggs, Asa. *The Age of Improvement,* Longman, 1988 A readable, comprehensive history of the mid−Victo−nan years in England. Useful for understanding the nineteenth century generally, including social history.

Ellmann, Richard *Oscar Wilde,* 1988.

This is the standard literary biography of Wilde, providing a wealth of detail about his personal life as well as insight into the composition of his works.

Ellmann, Richard, Editor. *Oscar Wilde. A Collection of Critical Essays,* Prentice−Hall, 1969

Most helpful for exploring the thinking about Wilde by his contemporaries such as W. B. Yeats and George Bernard Shaw.

Hobsbawm, *Enc.The Age of Capital, 1848−1875,* McKay, 1975.

Although this history concentrates on the middle of the nineteenth century, Hobsbawm usefully situates die roots of social trends that would influence British society in the 1890s.

Holland, Vyvyan B *Oscar Wilde. A Pictorial Biography,* Viking, 1961.

Holland is Wilde's son While this book contains a bnef biography, the highlights are

the fine photographs of Wilde and many of the people in his life, public and private

Sources

Beckson, Karl. "Oscar Wilde" in *Concise Dictionary of British Literary Biography,* Volume 4: *Victorian Writers, 1832−1890,* Gale, 1991, pp 340−55,

Bentley, Eric. *The Playwright As Thinker,* Reynal &Hitchcock, 1946.

Foster, Richard "Wilde As Parodist: A Second Look at "The Importance of Being Earnest"' in *College English,* Vol. 18, no. 1, October, 1956, pp 18−23.

Pountney, Rosemary "The Importance of Being Earnest" in *The International Dictionary of Theatre,* Volume 1− *Plays,* edited by Mark Bawkins−Dady, St. James Press, 1992

Reinert, Otto. "Satiric Strategy in 'The Importance of Being Earnest'" *m College English, Vol* 18, no 1, October, 1956, pp 14−18

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale’s“For Students” Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate

college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on “classic” novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard−to−find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel’s author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character’s role in the novel as well as discussion about that character’s relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for

College−Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty−five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the

character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross−reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."

- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts

from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at−a−glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty−first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

> “Night.” Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

> Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

> Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

> Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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