The Importance
of Being Earnest
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Cover photo: Tyler Layton in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 2003.
# The Importance of Being Earnest

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Synopsis: The Importance of Being Earnest

John Worthing, a carefree young gentleman, is the inventor of a fictitious brother, “Ernest,” whose wicked ways afford John an excuse to leave his country home from time to time and journey to London, where he stays with his close friend and confidant, Algernon Moncrieff. Algernon has a cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax, with whom John is deeply in love. During his London sojourns, John, under the name Ernest, has won Gwendolen’s love, for she strongly desires to marry someone with the confidence-inspiring name of Ernest. But when he asks for Gwendolen’s hand from the formidable Lady Bracknell, John finds he must reveal he is a foundling who was left in a handbag at Victoria Station. This is very disturbing to Lady Bracknell, who insists that he produce at least one parent before she consents to the marriage.

Returning to the country home where he lives with his ward Cecily Cardew and her governess Miss Prism, John finds that Algernon has also arrived under the identity of the nonexistent brother Ernest. Algernon falls madly in love with the beautiful Cecily, who has long been enamored of the mysterious, fascinating brother Ernest.

With the arrival of Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen, chaos erupts. It is discovered that Miss Prism is the absent-minded nurse who twenty years ago misplaced the baby of Lady Bracknell’s brother in Victoria Station. Thus John, whose name is indeed Ernest, is Algernon’s elder brother, and the play ends with the two couples in a joyous embrace.

Characters: The Importance of Being Earnest

John Worthing: His friends in the city know him only as Ernest, but in the country John Worthing goes by Jack, which he believes is his real name. He does not know his personal history, only that he was discovered as a baby in a handbag in Victoria Station. He is in love with Gwendolen Fairfax and is the legal guardian of Cecily Cardew.

Algernon Moncrieff: Living in the city, Algernon Moncrieff is a good friend of Jack. At the beginning of the play he thinks that Jack’s name is Ernest. Algernon lives in a flat in a prestigious part of London. He is the nephew of Lady Bracknell and in love with Cecily Cardew.

Gwendolen Fairfax: The daughter of Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen Fairfax is in love with Jack but believes that she could not love him if he were named anything other than Ernest.

Cecily Cardew: Jack’s niece and ward, Cecily Cardew falls in love with Algernon when he visits her under the assumed name of Ernest, and she tells him that she could never love a man named anything but Ernest.

Lady Bracknell: The aunt of Algernon and the mother of Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell is a respected member of the English aristocracy. She refuses to allow her daughter to marry Jack because he does not have a suitable family history.

Dr. Chasuble: The rector of the Manor House, Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism flirt with one another throughout Act 2 and 3, and he is asked by both Jack and Algernon to re-christen them as Ernest.

Miss Prism: Cecily’s governess, Miss Prism is a woman with a mysterious past involving former employment at Lady Bracknell’s house, a missing novel, and a lost baby. She spends much of her time flirting with Dr. Chasuble.

Lane: Algernon’s manservant.

Merriman: The butler at the Manor House.
About the Playwright: Oscar Wilde
From Insights, 1990

Oscar Wilde was a brilliant Irishman who received both the adulation and ridicule of his London world and the world outside. He fascinated audiences with his theory of “Art for Art’s sake”; his epigrams convulsed dinner tables and tickled the world. He was one of America’s most publicized lecturer. (Following his American lecture tour, Wilde observed “In America, life is one long expectoration.”)

As with James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and a cluster of other Irish literary figures, Wilde found his native country inhospitable to his philosophy and lifestyle. Born in Dublin in 1854, he was the son of an aural surgeon and a fiery Irish patriot. Little is known of his early childhood, but his later choice of lifestyle may have been enhanced by his mother’s fondness for dressing him as a girl.

He gained the reputation of being a brilliant although lazy student who seemed almost casually to win gold medals for classical scholarship. By the time he arrived at Oxford, he was renowned as a prodigious wit and raconteur. Throughout his life it was his genius for the quip, the epigram, the bon mot and the paradox that made him well-known and hated by those who fell afoul of his sharp tongue.

Wilde cut an eccentric figure in late Victorian London, with the knee breeches, velvet jacket and shoulder-length hair he affected invariably set off by a sunflower or lily carried in his hand. Perhaps his studied frivolity in behavior and dress did more than poetry to win him first fame. (He was lampooned by Gilbert and Sullivan as “Walking down Picadilly with a poppy or a lily... in your hand.”)

In 1884 he married Constance Mary Lloyd, a loyal, affectionate wife who shared little of his life in the great world. By 1886 Wilde found himself supporting two sons. For the next five years he produced a constant stream of criticism, short stories, poetry, novels, and essays. His most important works appeared during this time, culminating with The Importance of Being Earnest, a super-farce that was witty as well as literate and as finished in its writings as it was extravagant in its absurdities.

In February 1895, a tragic series of events began that were to result in Wilde’s infamy and imprisonment. The eighth marquess of Queensberry, father of Lord Alfred Douglas, with whom Wilde had been keeping intimate company, accused Wilde of sexual impropriety. Wilde sued for libel, which turned out to be a tragic mistake, for the charge was accurate.

Three notorious trials followed, ending in Wilde’s imprisonment for two years at hard labor. While in Reading Prison, he wrote The Ballad of Reading Gaol. Broken in health and spirit, he was released in 1897. Shortly afterward he converted to the Roman Catholic faith and left immediately for France. For three years he traveled through France, Italy and Switzerland, a lonely and pathetic figure. He died in Paris in 1900, with one last epigram: “I am dying, as I have lived, beyond my means.” His fame is sure as long as audiences enjoy wit.
More about the Playwright:
The Incomparable Oscar Wilde
By Daniel Frezza
From Insights, 2003

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854. His father, Sir William, was an eminent eye-and-ear surgeon and author of books on medicine and Irish folklore. Wilde's mother, Jane (who used the pen name "Speranza"), was also a prolific writer and ardent Irish nationalist.

An avid reader, Oscar could be casual about studying and exams. Nevertheless he won scholarships to Trinity College, Dublin and later to Oxford. In his final year at Trinity he won a gold medal for Greek. It proved useful: throughout his life whenever money was scarce he would pawn it (Merlin Holland, The Wilde Album [New York, Henry Holt & Co., 1997], 30). A frequent party-giver, Oscar did so well in exams without apparent work that one Oxford classmate suspected he studied on the sly. His secret may actually have been his prodigious memory (Hesketh Pearson, Oscar Wilde: His Life and Wit [New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1946], 19). During these years he became interested in Catholicism—initially more for esthetic than religious reasons, but the interest endured (Richard Ellman, Oscar Wilde [New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1988], 54).

After graduating with distinction in 1878, Oscar joined his now widowed mother and older brother in London and soon made himself famous by his extravagant style of dress and brilliant wit. "Not to know Mr. Wilde is not to be known," said the prince of Wales (Karl Beckson, Ed. The Oscar Wilde Encyclopedia [New York, AMS Press, 1998], 90).

In 1881 Gilbert and Sullivan's Patience parodied Wilde. Capitalizing on the publicity its New York production brought him, Wilde toured America in 1882, lecturing on aestheticism and interior design. The tour covered the entire country and did quite well financially. It included Salt Lake City and a visit to a Colorado silver mine where he was entertained by the miners and outdrank them all.

Around 1881 Wilde met Constance Lloyd. They were married in 1884 and had two sons: Cyril and Vyvyan. At first they lived mainly on Constance's modest inherited income; then in the late ’80s Wilde supported his family by journalism, becoming in 1887 managing editor of a women's magazine. This gave him financial security and an opportunity to establish himself as a front-line writer beginning with The Happy Prince and Other Tales (1888). Many of these and later works were elaborations of stories he first told in conversation (Ellman, 268, 309).

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) brought Wilde's name to widespread, frenzied critical attention, most of it highly negative—the sort of reviews that today would generate enormous sales. It scandalized the Victorians, however. Constance remarked "Since Oscar wrote Dorian Gray no one will speak to us" (Ellman, 320).

Late in 1891 Wilde began his first play in nine years. (Two early plays had received unsuccessful New York productions.) He wrote Salomé in French, hoping to interest Sarah Bernhardt in playing the title role. It worked; Bernhardt started rehearsals, but the Lord Chamberlain's office, the official censor, refused a performance license. Bernhardt, having financed the production herself, was furious with Wilde for not foreseeing trouble.

Around this time Wilde began his association with the actor-manager George Alexander who encouraged him in creating a string of spectacular hits: Lady Windermere's Fan (premiered 1892), A Woman of No Importance (1893) and An Ideal Husband (January 1895). The prince of Wales attended and was delighted, along with everyone else. All three plays are society melodramas lightened by Wilde's inimitable witty epigrams which subvert their conventional values.
With his next hit, The Importance of Being Earnest (February 1895), Wilde distilled a pure comedy, perhaps the most perfect in the English language.

The spring of 1895 was the zenith of Wilde's career--then disaster! Its roots stretched back to 1891, when Wilde first met Lord Alfred Douglas, (known to his family as "Bosie"). Dorian Gray had been Bosie's introduction to Wilde; when they met, Bosie told him he had read it nine times (Holland, 138). From 1891 to 1895 Wilde and Douglas spent increasing amounts of time together. Around this time Wilde also began liaisons with young men in London. Douglas's father, the marquess of Queensbury, objected to his son's relationship with Wilde and made increasingly violent attempts to end it, without success. Foiled in his plan to disrupt the opening night of The Importance of Being Earnest, Queensbury left at Wilde's club his calling card on which he wrote a libelous remark. A number of Oscar's friends tried to persuade him to ignore the incident; others, particularly Bosie, persuaded Wilde to sue Queensbury.

Queensbury's lawyers produced a number of young men with whom Wilde allegedly had had affairs. Many of them gave perjured testimony; nevertheless, there was enough evidence to support Queensbury's position as a father trying to protect his son from an evil influence, and Wilde withdrew his suit. Shortly afterward Wilde was charged with "gross indecency." He was given time to leave the country but chose to stay and was arrested. Queensbury had been awarded court costs and he pressed to recover them. Though Wilde's income had been high, his expenses were higher. He was declared bankrupt, and his possessions were sold at auction.

The first trial against Wilde ended in a hung jury. The crown chose to try him again, apparently for political motives (Ellman, 450). This time he was convicted and sentenced to two years hard labor. During his imprisonment (1895 to 1897), he wrote a long letter to Douglas (published after Oscar's death under the title De Profundis) meditating on their relationship.

After the scandal of the trials, Constance changed the family name to Holland and moved to Italy with the boys. She still, however, loved her husband; despite poor health, she traveled to England to break the news when his mother died.

Upon his release Wilde settled in France and spent his remaining years traveling, drinking, cadging money from friends but, unfortunately, writing very little. He wrote two influential letters to the newspapers on prison reform and The Ballad of Reading Gaol. That was all.

Oscar wished to be reconciled to Constance and see his sons again, but friends persuaded her to delay. The delay was probably instrumental in pushing Wilde to see Douglas again. They spent several increasingly unhappy months together in Italy. Afterwards they saw each other only once or twice.

Constance's death in 1898 ended Wilde's hope of seeing his sons again. His last two years were spent unhappily wandering the Continent. An ear injury received in prison and improperly treated continued to trouble him. Late in 1900 the recurring infection required surgery; complications developed into meningitis. Shortly before Wilde's death, Robert Ross, a former lover and now devoted friend, fulfilled an old promise and brought a priest who received Wilde into the Catholic Church. Wilde died on November 30, 1900 at the age of 46, surrounded by Ross, another friend, and the hotel proprietor who had generously provided for Wilde's comfort. Douglas attended the funeral.

Wilde was buried in a Paris suburb. In 1908 Ross received £2000 from a friend of Wilde's, Helen Carew, to move his body to the French National cemetery of Père Lachaise and to commission the sculptor Jacob Epstein to create his tomb (Beckson, 377).

While in jail, Wilde wisely made Ross his literary executor. By 1906 Ross had cleared Wilde's estate of bankruptcy. He edited the first edition of Wilde's collected works and was a friend to Wilde's sons. Ross's ashes now rest in Wilde's tomb (Holland, 187).

Cyril died in World War I. Vyvyan survived and pursued a literary career. His son, Merlin Holland, writes and lectures about his grandfather.
Wilde’s Optimum Opus

By Marilyn Scharine

From Midsummer Magazine, 1990

Miss Prism’s famous satchel is not the only baggage to be found in Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest. Often cited for the “lazy” luggage of theatrical conventions of its day, it is just as often commended for the unprecedented manner in which it stands beyond time and place. Just as he had lavishly decorated the rooms of Number 16 Tite Street, where he and his new bride moved in 1885, with an eclectic and aesthetic collection of the new and the old, Wilde mixes them in The Importance of Being Earnest, his optimum opus. The play is a culmination of earnest payments, echoed in his epigrams.

Where did Wilde fit into the theatre of late Victorians? Steamships and railroads had made touring possible, and Wilde even traveled with art lectures on a vast American circuit which included Salt Lake City and the Colorado mines. Modern technology enabled actor-managers like Sir Henry Irving to create sensational melodramatic effects. Husbands and wives co-managed companies; playwrights were paid well; Henry Irving was knighted; and theatre became respectable. People liked to be entertained, to laugh, to see happy endings, and to have their middle class moralities confirmed. Later dinner hours made shorter theatre evenings with a single bill. Productions were spectacular, and gilt extended from the picture-frame arch of Haymarket to the actor’s chairs in the wings of George Alexander’s St James where The Importance of Being Earnest was first produced. Wilde fit well. His flourish, the theatricality of his dress and lifestyle, had made him easily one with the glitter. Until his deviances were uncovered, his marriage to a lovely woman and his two sons made him respectable.

As to scripts, “the good ended happily, and the bad unhappily,” as in Miss Prism’s three-volume novel “That is what Fiction means” (369; the source for all quotations from this play is Best Known Works, Wise and Co.: New York). It was an era of domestic tragedies and romantic extravagances, of elaborate scenic effects and even more exaggerated acting. There were French farces, melodramas, drawing room comedies, mutilated Shakespeare, and pantomimes with equally spectacular productions. W. S. Gilbert’s outrageous assaults on conventions, as in Engaged, may have primed Wilde’s creative approach to his times. Strindberg, Ibsen, Zola, and Shaw also experimented with newer forms, attempting to affix a growing sense of reality as described by the new sciences of psychology and sociology. Pinero and Jones similarly wrote problem plays in response to growing awareness of social conditions in a country whose potential audience included 80 percent working people. Debating Darwin, people began to see human fates as influenced by both environment and heredity.

Of Oscar Wilde’s plays, three, Lady Windennere’s Fan, A Woman of No Importance, and An Ideal Husband, can be called drawing room dramas, with the stylish settings and “pink lamps” Wilde himself attributed to that genre (George Rowell, Theatre in the Age of Irving, Rowman and Littlefield: Totowa, N.J., 1981, 122). Their spectacle was for both eyes and ears. The melodramatic speeches of the wronged woman, now sacrificing her future for her child, thrilled actresses playing them, as well as audiences. Certainly morals must not be compromised, but had society punished a woman unfairly? Social conventions upheld, Wilde had it both ways because he questioned their application. In A Woman of No Importance, Mrs. Arbuthnot was censured, while Lord Illingworth, whose name says it all, managed to be as irresponsible as he was waggish—both amoral and amusing.

The witty first act of A Woman reveals Wilde warming up to write Earnest while satisfying the Victorian theatre public. Wilde fit the problem play pattern: fallen women, the double standards for men and women, poverty, and other issues. He also borrows, from Scribe and Saniou, the structure of the well-made play with its inciting incident, obligatory confrontation, and denouement. Social judgments in Earnest aren’t as severe as in these three earlier dramas where the upper classes are brutally revealed in all their shallowness, immorality, and snobbery. Here the woman with a past is Miss Prism and not an unwed mother, though Jack gamely offers to forgive even this. “But afterall, who has
the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and other for women?” (394) In England, until 1923, adultery alone was grounds for divorce from a wife, while she must prove desertion and cruelty as well to obtain divorce from a husband. Marriage, materialism, education, and the church too are criticized. The play, as Eric Bentley has reminded us, “is about earnestness, that is, Victorian solemnity, that kind of false seriousness which means priggishness, hypocrisy and lack of irony” (“The Importance of Being Earnest” in Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Essays, ed. Richard Ellmann. Prentice-Hall, Inc.: Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1969,111).

“Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon,” advises Lady Bracknell. “Only people who can’t get into it do that” (390). Not a member of the English aristocracy, Wilde ensured his place there by becoming its provocateur, a career begun at Oxford as he shed his Irish accent and donned the clothes that made his fame as a dandy. On the lecture circuit, in drawing rooms, and at dining tables, he delighted and enraged, by drawing attention to forms devoid of sense. Once, still at Magdalen College, he began the daily scripture readings by announcing The Song of Solomon to a suddenly alert audience (Richard Ellmann, Four Dubliners, Library of Congress: Washington D.C., 1986, 17).

“All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That’s his” (365). Was it Wilde’s gift or his tragedy that he resembled his mother? His Irish heritage was his mother’s penchant for repartee A flamboyant dresser, poet, and speaker, Francesca Speranza Wilde was often quoted. To Wilde’s phrase “show to the world my sin and shame;” she responded typically, “sin is respectable and highly poetical, but shame is not” (Ellinarn 17).

“How charming you are, dear Lord Illingworth,” says Lady Hunstanton to the ‘Wilde card” of A Woman of No Importance. “You always find out that one’s most glaring fault is one’s most important virtue. You have the most comforting views of life.” Not everyone was comforted, and Wilde’s excesses were his making and his unmaking. As quickly as Lady Bracknell would have rejected Jack without the proper credentials, society expelled Wilde when, a few months after the first production of Earnest, his own name was struck from the playbills as a result of his conviction on a charge of homosexuality.

When conventions are stripped to essences, Wilde was free to concentrate on the now evident paradoxes. Not laziness, but genius, his borrowing of forms allowed him to move in Earnest to pure form minus the elements of melodrama or even realistic society mirrored in other Victorian dramas or his earlier plays. The drawing rooms look alike, but the characters are stock and the situations are venerable scenarios. The masks of Menander’s Greek New Comedies included young lovers, and Wilde has two sets. Their path to true love is ensnared by a gorgon of a woman, “a monster without being a myth” (365). The very name no doubt suggested tangles to Wilde. Lady Bracknell often, like her Greek counterpart, was played by a man.

Unlike their predecessors neither Cedily nor Gwendolen is vapid. Cedily calls “a spade a spade,” and Gwen is glad that she has “never seen a spade” (379). Algernon and Jack fit the prototypes of both the young lovers and the rascal servant personae of New Comedy. They are assisted by their alter egos, Earnest and Bunbury. In refusing to allow his ward to marry Algernon, Jack also becomes the intractable guardian. Dr. Chasuble echoes the stock role of the foolish scholar. “Dr. Chasuble is a most learned man. He has never written a single book, so you can imagine how much he knows,” says Cedily. The servant is found in loyal Miss Prism, governess, romantic, and snare for the chaste Chasuble. It is from her missing handbag that the magic is drawn to untangle the skeins of the plot.

In addition to thwarted lovers, Menander’s plots involved lost children, mistaken identities, and other such domestic doings. Victorians also loved mistaken identities. In The Victorian Theatre, George Rowell tells us, “no experienced play-goer put any trust in the family relationships indicated by the list of characters when all his training told him that by the end of Act II one or more would certainly have changed partners or parents in midplay” (The Victorian Theatre, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1978, 109). (The confusion may have been experienced by actors in repertory theatres which might require them to perform forty roles in thirty-six days.) Both young women insist on marrying a man named Ernest “There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence” (361). An excess of fiances
named Ernest is compounded by Jack’s fiction of a brother named Ernest and Algernon’s invention of a scandalous Bunbury to draw him from town. (A real Henry Bunbury was a friend of Wilde at Oxford, and the name has led to speculation.) What’s in a name indeed? Given a name whose meaning he had lived to fulfill, Wilde was to see it taken from the bills of his very play.

More troublesome than mixed identity is the question of true identity. Found in a handbag, Jack’s “origin was a Temminus,” says Lady Bracknell (389). His frequent use of misplaced children (there are incidents in A Woman of No Importance and in Lady Windermere’s Fan) may owe something to Wilde’s three siblings, fathered by his reputedly randy parent, and born to mothers unknown to Oscar. But Victorians were heavily supplied with lost children from Little Nell to Peter Pan, Alice in Wonderland, and even the lost Christ child wandering in Wilde’s fairy garden of “The Selfish Giant.” True to formula, Wilde reunites lost children with their true parents, and what seemed false is found to be true. “It is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?” Gwendolen can, for she feels that Jack is “about to change” (396).

“The truth in art,” Wilde tells us, “is that whose contradictory is also true” (Bentley 115)

The very concept of paradox suggests duality—the meaning and its opposite. Says Lord Darlington in Lady Windermere’s Fan: “If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn’t. Such is the astounding stupidity of optimism.” Of course part of the baggage lugged into that drawing room of the Manor House, Woolton, arose from the dualities in Wilde’s personal relationship with his world. In that pre-Edwardian decadence of the 1890s, there was much pretense, a society of public expressions of conventions amid unmentioned shadowy private practices. Wilde’s real crime was the social faux pas of citing the marquis of Queensbury (his lover’s father) for libel—the marquis whose country address was, incidentally, Bracknell. “The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks” (Bentley 115).

Having once said that “life should imitate Art,” Wilde lacked the balance of art in his life. He, like his famous Dorian Gray, was drawn to excesses and split by resulting contradictions like that man and his portrait. An aesthete, he loved the beautiful, deplored the ugly, yet created both, often destroying the first with the second. He struggled with religion, deplored the institution, yet drawn to writing nearly maudlin religious sentiments. As a student he was drawn to both Catholicism and Free Masonry—rather opposing movements. He ridiculed the shallowness of society, but did so in such a way as to ensure his place in it. He was an advocate of art for art’s sake, yet wrote plays and commentary with other intent. The last of these, The Ballad of Reading Gaol was quite effective in winning reforms for the prisoners there, and the essay “The Soul of a Man under Socialism” matches him to Fabianist fellow Irishman, George Bernard Shaw. In 1895, The Importance of Being Earnest and Wilde’s arrest are the climax of both his private and literary paradoxes.

Miss Prism’s handbag originally carried a “three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality” (395). It was exchanged for the offspring in the perambulator, a child named Ernest. Likewise, reaching into the past, Wilde has, from his own set of sensibilities, combined the traditions of his progenitors with the conventions of contemporaries and produced a unique reflection of timeless truth. As Algic reminds us: “The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility” (358).
Sparkle and Wit
By Patricia Truxler Aiklins
From Souvenir Program, 1990
“It’s perfectly phrased and quite as true
as any observation in civilized life ought to be.”
(Algernon to Jack, on the nature of wit)

While it may be claiming a great deal to say that there is little in all of English drama to rival the
sparkle and wit of Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest, it is certainly not claiming too much.
Lovers of language, comedy of manners, satire, parody, and even burlesque will find much here to admire.
But so will probers of complex social issues; for beneath the surface of this immensely entertaining play
runs a serious thread of intense social criticism, so much so that what many have called this play’s critical
weakness—the lack of any serious, respectable, thoughtful character—is, in fact, its great critical achieve-
ment. Here Wilde has delineated for us the ultimate consequences of a decorous but decadent society—
empty-headed, useless, silly human beings.

The achievement of the play is simply this: that on the surface, we are positively delighted, indeed
enchanted, with the complex humor that is the result of a gross incongruity between the way people
behave and what exactly it is that they are “behaving” about. Thus, we delight in Algernon’s incredible
capacity to render, flippantly and unwittingly, profoundly truthful observations about human nature. But,
at the same time, as we laugh uproariously at the apparently harmless nature of these people’s lack of self-
consciousness, we are struck by the serious consequences for a society that puts form over function, for a
society where what matters most is not what you value but how you value it, not what you mean but how
you mean it.

As amusing as the play is on the surface, its comic energy springs ultimately from the realities that are
being mocked. Thus Algernon, who can speak perfectly, speaks perfect nonsense. Cecily, who is too addled
to be anything but naive, declares that it would be a “truly awful thing for a man to be only pretending to
be wicked.” Gwendolen, who is clearly not the pattern of all patience, declares that she “will wait forever
as long as it doesn’t take too long.” And Jack, who behaves impeccably, behaves with impeccable silliness
about “the supreme importance of being Earnest.” The play itself is constructed over an abyss of disqui-
etude and apprehension. While deception is everywhere, all men Bunbury, all women lie about their age,
the deception is of no more significance than a name. Passion competes with ambition and innocence with
idiocy; and even deception itself is deceived by its accidental accuracy.

The Importance of Being Earnest, then, is a rollicking good play about some pretty serious problems.
After all, in a world where there is no discrepancy between appearance and reality because there is no real-
ity, where there is nothing beneath the surface because there is only surface, Wilde offers a different answer
to that great Shakespearean dilemma of what’s in a name. While, for Shakespeare, “a rose by any other
name would smell as sweet,” for Wilde, a Jack by any other name is Earnest, but only accidentally.
The Preposterous Becomes the Norm
From Insights, 1990

This play is Oscar Wilde's masterpiece. The Importance of Being Earnest is wholly dedicated to wit; it is written in Wilde's best style, and directly comments on the drabness of ordinary speech and the real world. The play, in fact, represents the full embodiment of Wilde's lifelong assault upon what he deemed to be commonplace life and commonplace values. It is pure farce in which paradox and artificiality reign supreme and the preposterous becomes the norm.

Wilde termed Sin an essential element of progress, believing that without it the world would stagnate, grow old, or become colorless. His fiction and drama invariably tend to give prominence to some secret sin, and The Importance of Being Earnest is no exception. Both its heroes assume false identities to sow their wild oats, although Wilde apparently felt sufficiently carefree about secret sin to be here lampooning the idea.

Defiance was always part of Wilde's public attitude, but only in this play was he so bold as to make this defiance plain from the beginning to the end. The Importance of Being Earnest shares some traits with plays belonging to the great Restoration period of English high comedy, including the two country boors Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble, both of whom know nothing of fashion and whose wit is invariably unintended. Jack and Algemon are obviously dandyish masters of wit and fashion; both are foppish. Algernon tells us, "If I am occasionally a little overdressed, I make up for it by being always immensely overeducated." Likely both Wilde and his work would have been more accepted in the roistering days of Charles II than they were in the England of Queen Victoria.

When asked what sort of a play to expect with The Importance of Being Earnest, Wilde replied, "It is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy, and it has its philosophy . . . that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality."

Wilde gave his characters such lines as "Divorces are made in Heaven. . . . It is simply washing one’s clean linen in public. . . . I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief. . . ." To invert these respectable, conventional cliches was to subvert respectability itself, and that is just what Wilde intended.

It was inevitable that the conventional world should strike back at Wilde, at his character and his ideas, if not specifically at his play, but the speed and cruelty of the retribution surpassed expectation. Four days after the opening of The Importance of Being Earnest, his last and finest comedy, the succession of events began that brought about his disgrace, imprisonment and exile.

The Importance of Being Earnest disappeared from the stage in the years immediately following Wilde's disgrace, but it quickly returned as a classic. Sir John Gielgud brought a particularly outstanding production to America in 1947. Scarcely a season goes by without a distinguished professional production somewhere, and while amateur productions can fall prey to a broad, farcical approach, the fact that The Importance of Being Earnest still survives is perhaps the greatest proof of its indestructible worth. As Wilde himself modestly admitted, "The first act is ingenious; the second, beautiful; the third, abominably clever."
The Importance of Being Earnest

By Kelli Frost-Allred

From Insights, 2003

The Importance of Being Earnest has proven to be Oscar Wilde’s most enduring—and endearing—play. Filled with witty Victorian aphorisms and Wilde’s own brand of wisdom, The Importance of Being Earnest tells the story of Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff who use clever deception and truth-bending to accommodate their social pursuits. Jack bends the truth to include an imaginary brother, Ernest, whom he uses as an excuse to escape from the country to party among urban socialites, while urbane Algernon uses a similar technique (Bunburying) that provides him opportunities for taking adventures in the country. Of course, courting and liaisons ensue, but not without complications. Oscar Wilde builds a farcical—albeit realistic—world of Victorian social mores by using double entendre, aphorisms, and witty repartee.

Wilde seems to have been toying with audiences by giving the play a title with more than one meaning. The play’s title can be deceptive. Rather than a form of the name Ernest, the title implies earnestness as a quality one should seek to acquire, as in being honest, sincere, sober, and serious. Throughout the play, Ernest is a name that encompasses qualities of the ideal man: deeply trustworthy, truly loving, honorable and passionate, and absolutely sincere. Gwendolyn says, “We live in an age of ideals . . . and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest . . . The only really safe name is Ernest.” That both Gwendolyn and Cecily dream of marrying a man named Ernest seems more than a coincidence. Cecily admits, “It had always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Ernest. There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence.”

Indeed, there is almost a worship of the name more than what it represents. “It is a divine name. It has a music of its own,” explains Gwendolyn. “It produces vibrations.” And Cecily describes the man she thinks to be named Ernest as “the very soul of truth and honour. Disloyalty would be as impossible to him as deception.” So, what’s in a name? Would a rose by any other name, as Shakespeare asserts, smell as sweet? Absolutely not, unless that name were Ernest, according to Oscar Wilde’s portrayal of shallow, yet charming, Victorian women.

Within the context of the play, add confidence, safety, and gravity to the ideal man named Ernest. But audiences are left to wonder if Wilde meant to use “Earnest” and “Ernest” interchangeably. After all, one is a description and the other is a man’s name. No, Wilde reminds viewers that to be earnest is more important that to be named Ernest. The social deceptions of Victorian England were rampant, and Wilde simply wished to call things as he saw them. One way he did this was through double entendre; however, his use of aphorisms went further in exposing the widespread use of deception among the gentry.

Wilde peppered the play with aphorisms, those pithy witticisms that purportedly derive from exalted thought. Indeed, the playwright spoke in aphorisms on his deathbed when he stated through fevers, “My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go.” The following quotes from The Importance of Being Earnest exemplify Wilde’s adept use of aphorisms:

“Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever” (Act 1).

“Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven’t got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die” (Act 1).

“All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That’s his” (Act 1).

“The only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her, if she is pretty, and to someone else, if she is plain” (Act 1).

“Women only [call each other sister] when they have called each other a lot of other things first” (Act 1).
“In married life, three is company and two is none” (Act 1).
“No married man is ever attractive except to his wife” (Act 2).
“Divorces are made in Heaven” (Act 2).

Oscar Wilde possessed an unmatched intuition about people that he wove into the fibers of his plays, which include An Ideal Husband, Salome, and Lady Windermere’s Fan. Moreover, he seemed to accept with resignation his role as the most daring of writers in his era, and though he spoke freely of marriage and male/female relationships, his own life contradicted those values. Instead he chose to poke fun at the society that embraced him with all his eccentricities.

Wilde mingled truth and humor using tongue-in-cheek and witty repartee, both of which fit beautifully into farce. And his adept use of truth in jest makes The Importance of Being Earnest a perennial favorite of Western theatre audiences and literary critics. The following quotes by characters in The Importance of Being Earnest reveal Oscar Wilde’s clever wit in holding the mirror up to reveal truth and human nature:

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!” (Algernon).
“My dear fellow, the truth isn’t quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice sweet refined girl” (Jack).
“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).
“In matters of grave importance style, not sincerity is the vital thing” (Gwendolyn).
“Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only those who can’t get into it do that” (Jack).
“London society is full of women of the very highest birth who have, of their own choice, remained thirty-five for years” (Lady Bracknell).
“It is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?” (Jack).
“I’ve now realized for the first time in my life the vital importance of being earnest” (Jack).

The 1890s saw the resurgence of live theater in fashionable London, and Oscar Wilde’s plays were the most popular venues for theatergoers. In an era of strict social mores, Wilde’s version of society was greatly humorous. Today, in an era of few social constraints, Wilde’s version of society still reminds us to laugh at ourselves.

Inspiring Paradoxes
By Carly Hughes
From Midsummer Magazine, 2003

In The Importance Of Being Earnest, a play of pun and paradox, Oscar Wilde delightfully exercises the brain as he explores the rules and exploits the expectations of his society. Neither condemning nor championing that society, the play, as satire, is always celebrating the entertainment it affords an observant spectator. Yet, this comedy serves a greater purpose than providing an escape from pressures and doldrums into a simpler, more sensational realm.

Intentionally or not, Oscar Wilde created, through brilliant use of paradox, an avenue to examine behavior, explore assumptions, and ultimately redeem humanity, for amid Wilde’s cutting cynicism lies the wonderful paradox of a latent optimism. Used as a sheer covering for shallow characters, paradox glitters throughout the play to such an extent that some critics argue it becomes tedious. However, Norbert Kohl aptly argues in his analysis, “Paradoxes cannot simply be dismissed as cheap effects, for in many instances they serve to explode established conventions, thereby exposing to view those aspects of reality that had hitherto been cloaked by existing norms” (Readings on The Importance Of Being Earnest, ed. Thomas Siebold [San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2001] 123).

When Algernon says of marriage, “Three is company and two is none,” the statement, is in direct contradiction to the boundaries that, in fact, define the state of matrimony, and its cavalier treatment of the subject is itself an inversion of the seriousness generally given the marriage, since it is being treated less as a
promise than as a protocol. Yet, of even greater importance than the rift between societal convention and Algernon’s personal convictions is the revelation of the hypocrisy of his society’s practice of superficially condemning but secretly condoning infidelity. Algernon’s insistence that his philosophy has been “proved” by “the happy English home,” is meant to be amusing and is therefore evidence of the commonplace nature of love affairs, since humor requires first and foremost familiarity. In this instance, the significance of the paradox lies in its ability to reveal society’s simultaneous disdain of unfaithfulness in word and dismissal of faithfulness in action. As Kohl continues, “Such paradoxes illustrate vividly how social decorum is to be seen merely as a mask of conformity” (123).

Early in the play, Algernon bemoans the failure of the “lower orders” to, as he says, “set us a good example,” claiming, “They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.”

Superficially, this paradox proclaims the duality of Algernon as a character who appreciates morality but finds it applicable only in others. On a deeper level, the words are specifically chosen to steal a smile as the notion of the “lower orders” being expected to be pinnacles of virtue is considered. The idea that Algernon, a person of luxury, land, and distinguished lineage, should require any refinement by his manservant, Lane, is utterly ridiculous, or intended to seem so, a paradox. That it could be, in any way, perceived as such uncovers a practice of deducing a person’s character from his class in society.

However, as the play continues, the excesses and indulgences of its characters become a contradiction to the intended humor of Algernon’s underlying paradox; in other words, a paradox within a paradox. Thus, the play is rendered inconclusive concerning assumptions of positive or negative correlations between title and integrity, and that truly is the best possible conclusion. As one critic recognized, “Wilde anticipated a major development of the 20th century: the use of farce to make fundamentally serious explorations into the realm of the irrational” (Oscar Wilde, ed. Harold Bloom [Broomal, Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002], 26). Regardless of whether this is the product of intent or coincidence, Wilde’s ingenuity stimulates examinations of logic, rationality, and reality, and thus reveals that the real power of the paradox lies not in its ability to present clear conclusions but to inspire critical thinking.

Perhaps the most crucial utilization of paradox and, for that matter, the crowning achievement of the play is in supplying charm to characters bankrupt of integrity. Jack, described as the “very soul of honor and truth” by Gwendolen is, in fact, a master “Bunburyist,” adopting the deviant alter ego of “Ernest” when he needs a vacation from the drudgery of virtue and dictates of conscience. Though scandalous, Algernon exhibits greater “Earnestness” in that he remains a scoundrel under any name, including when he too uses “Ernest” to cover his escapade. Gwendolen and Cecily, portraits of perfection in the sight of their suitors, reveal an inner prettiness to contrast with their outer prettiness when their knowledge of etiquette is used as a mask for well-mannered cruelty. Simultaneously gullible and conniving, forward and coy, their affections prove shallowly attached to a name, and though they are not unintelligent, they show a deficit in insight concerning those they profess to love, and thus, an ignorance of love itself. Yet, even in the disappointing moment when their confidence and charisma dissolve in an uncharacteristic, sickening deprecation of their sex, the expected bitterness disappears in an overall flavor of sweet innocence. The characters are living paradoxes, void of the beauty of the oxymoron that holds a greater coherent meaning but endearing nonetheless. Their paradoxical wit unveils their imperfections and vulnerability, and somehow “human” becomes a more fitting term than “hypocrite” for them.

In the end, all is well and all the story strands are properly unwound for the characters. In fact, the play is so neatly concluded and the plot so pristinely resolved that it verily declares itself a work of fiction. Yet fiction, as defined by Miss Prism, is a world where the “good” and the “bad” are justly recompensed for their work. These characters hardly qualify as good but neither do they qualify as bad; they do, however, qualify for redemption, and it is, ironically, their flaws that give them that claim. The audience also may feel a part of this; in reality, all are compositions of vice and virtue, and in the paradox of fictitious characters conquering the constraints of fiction, we may well see a reflection of our own possibilities for happiness and redemption.