

The Importance of Being Earnest

by Oscar Wilde



ETF Resource Pack for Teachers
Comprehensive Version

Arbeitsmaterialien für den Englisch - Unterricht
(Oberstufe Gymnasium)

Contents

1 A Wild(e) Life	p. 2
2 The first stage production	p. 5
3 Plot and text extracts	p. 7
4 Glimpses into Victorian Life	p. 15
5 Themes of the Play	p. 17
6 Further Questions for Study and Discussion	p. 21
7 Different Approaches to the play	p. 21
8 Recent productions	p. 26

1 A Wild(e) Life

Oscar Wilde, celebrated playwright and literary provocateur, was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford before settling in London. During his days at Dublin and Oxford, he developed a set of attitudes and



postures for which he would eventually become famous.

Chief among these were his flamboyant style of dress, his contempt for conventional values, and his belief in aestheticism—a movement that embraced the principle of art for the sake of beauty and beauty alone. After a stunning performance in college, Wilde settled in London in 1878, where he moved in circles that included the novelists Henry James and the young William Butler Yeats.

Literary and artistic acclaim were slow in coming to Wilde. In 1884, when he married Constance Lloyd, Wilde's writing career was still a work in progress.

During the late 1880s, Wilde wrote reviews, edited a women's magazine, and published a volume of poetry and one of children's stories. In 1891, his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, appeared and was attacked as scandalous and immoral. In that same year, he met Lord Alfred Douglas, who would eventually become his lover, and Wilde finally hit his literary stride. Over the next few years, he wrote four plays: *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

In many ways, *The Importance of Being Earnest* was an artistic breakthrough for Wilde, something between self-parody and a deceptively flippant commentary on the dramatic genre in which Wilde had already had so much success. Wilde's genre of choice was the Victorian melodrama, or "sentimental comedy," derived from the French variety of "well-made play". In such plays, fallen women and abandoned children of uncertain parentage figure prominently, letters cross and recross the stage, and dark secrets from the past rise to threaten the happiness of seemingly respectable, well-meaning characters. In Wilde's hands, the form of Victorian melodrama became something else entirely. Wilde introduced a new character to the genre, the figure of the "dandy" (a man who pays excessive attention to his appearance). In fact, the dandy in these plays always proves to be deeply moral and essential to the happy resolution of the plot.

The Importance of Being Earnest was an early experiment in Victorian melodrama. Part satire, part comedy of manners, and part intellectual farce, this play seems to have nothing at stake because the world it presents is so blatantly and ostentatiously artificial. Below the surface of the light, brittle comedy, however, is a serious subtext that takes aim at self-

righteous moralism and hypocrisy, the very aspects of Victorian society that would, in part, bring about Wilde's downfall.

During 1895, however, a series of catastrophes stemming from Wilde's relationship with Lord Alfred, also a poet, led to personal humiliation and social, professional, and financial ruin. On February 28, 1895, two weeks after *The Importance of Being Earnest's* opening night, Lord Alfred's belligerent, homophobic father, the Marquess of Queensberry, publicly accused Wilde of "posing as a sodomite." The nobleman meant "sodomite," of course, an insulting and potentially defamatory term for a homosexual. Queensberry had for some time been harassing Wilde with insulting letters, notes, and confrontations and had hoped to disrupt the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest* with a public demonstration, which never took place. Against the advice of his friends, Wilde sued for libel and lost. Wilde probably should have fled the country, as the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had made homosexual acts punishable by up to two years' imprisonment. However, Wilde chose to stay and was arrested. Despite information about Wilde's private life and writings that emerged at the trial, the prosecution initially proved unsuccessful. However, Wilde was tried a second time, convicted, and sentenced to prison for two years.

Wilde may have remained in England for a number of reasons, including self-destructiveness, denial, desperation, and a desire for martyrdom. He served his full sentence under conditions of utmost hardship and cruelty. Following his release from prison, his health and spirit broken, he sought exile in France, where he lived out the last two years of his life in poverty and obscurity under an assumed name. He died in Paris in 1900.

From: O. Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Goal*

In Reading goal by Reading town

There is a pit of shame,

And in it lies a wretched man

Eaten by the teeth of flame,

In a burning winding-sheet he lies,

And his grave has got no name.

And all men kill the thing they love,

By all let this be heard,

Some do it with a bitter look,

Some with a flattering word,

The coward does it with a kiss,

The brave man with a sword!

Assignment 1:

Transfer the stanzas from the Ballad into prose of your own trying to express the attitudes and feelings of Oscar Wilde in prison!



For sixty or seventy years after Wilde's death, critics and audiences regarded *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a delightful but utterly frivolous and superficial comedy, a view that partly reflects the mindset of a period in which homosexuality remained a guarded topic. The decriminalization of homosexuality in England in 1967 and the emergence in American of an interest in gay culture, and particularly in the covert homosexual literature of the past, has made it possible to view the play in a different light. The play's danger and subversion are easier to see from a twenty-first-century perspective. In the ambiguity over exactly what people refer to when they speak of "wicked" or immoral behavior, we can detect a system of coded references to homosexuality, just as we can infer a more general comment on the hypocrisy of late Victorian society.



2 The first stage production (1895)

Irene Vanbrugh as Gwendolen Fairfax and George Alexander as Jack Worthing in the 1895 production of 'The Importance of Being Earnest', from *The Sketch* magazine, London, March 1895.



Programme for the first production of 'The Importance of Being Earnest' by Oscar Wilde, St James's Theatre, London, 1895.

'The Importance of Being Earnest' premiered on St Valentine's Day 1895 at the St James's Theatre, London. It was Oscar Wilde's fourth West End hit in only three years. His earlier play, 'An Ideal Husband' had only opened a month before and was still playing to packed houses at the Haymarket Theatre a few streets away.

The first night was a glittering occasion, with audiences in evening wear. Wilde himself was in attendance, wearing what one biographer called 'the depth of fashion' - his coat had a black velvet collar, he wore a green scarab ring on his finger and carried white gloves. The production was a huge success. Allan Aynesworth, who played Algernon Moncrieff said 'I never remembered a greater triumph, the audience rose to their seats and cheered and cheered again'.

At the final curtain, Wilde was called for but he refused to take a bow. He was avoiding the Marquess of Queensberry, the father of Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde had issued a libel charge to the Marquess because he had implied that Wilde was conducting an illicit relationship with his son. At the time, homosexuality was regarded as a serious criminal offence.

However, on 5 April 1895, Wilde was arrested on a charge of gross indecency. On 6 April his name was removed from the programme and all advertising for the play. The box office collapsed immediately and the play closed on 8 May, having run for 83 performances.

Assignment 2:

Make up a diary entry of Oscar Wilde after this incident!

3 Plot and text extracts

Jack is in love with Gwendolen Fairfax, the cousin of his best friend, Algernon Moncrieff. When the play opens, Algernon, who knows Jack as Ernest, has begun to suspect something, having found an inscription inside Jack's cigarette case addressed to "Uncle Jack" from someone who refers to herself as "little Cecily." Algernon suspects that Jack may be leading a double life, a practice he seems to regard as commonplace and indispensable to modern life. He calls a person who leads a double life a "Bunburyist," after a nonexistent friend he pretends to have, a chronic invalid named Bunbury, to whose deathbed he is forever being summoned whenever he wants to get out of some tiresome social obligation.

At the beginning of **Act I**, Jack drops in unexpectedly on Algernon and announces that he intends to propose to Gwendolen.

Algernon. How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

Jack. Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? Eating as usual, I see, Algy!

Algernon. [Stiffly.] I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock. Where have you been since last Thursday?

Jack. [Sitting down on the sofa.] In the country.

Algernon. What on earth do you do there?

Jack. [Pulling off his gloves.] When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.

Algernon. And who are the people you amuse?

Jack. [Airily.] Oh, neighbours, neighbours.

Algernon. Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire?

Jack. Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.

Algernon. How immensely you must amuse them! [Goes over and takes sandwich.] By the way, Shropshire is your county, is it not?

Jack. Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course. Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?

Algernon. Oh! merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

Jack. How perfectly delightful!

Algernon. Yes, that is all very well; but I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here.

Jack. May I ask why?

Algernon. My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.

Jack. I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.

Algernon. I thought you had come up for pleasure? . . . I call that business.

Jack. How utterly unromantic you are!

Algernon. I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

Jack. I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.

Algernon. Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven—[**Jack** puts out his hand to take a sandwich. **Algernon** at once interferes.] Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. [Takes one and eats it.]

Jack. Well, you have been eating them all the time.

Algernon. That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt. [Takes plate from below.] Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

Jack. [Advancing to table and helping himself.] And very good bread and butter it is too.

Algernon. Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you were married to her already. You are not married to her already, and I don't think you ever will be.

Jack. Why on earth do you say that?

Algernon. Well, in the first place girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right.

Jack. Oh, that is nonsense!

Algernon. It isn't. It is a great truth. It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place. In the second place, I don't give my consent.

Jack. Your consent!

Algernon. My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily. [Rings bell.]

Jack. Cecily! What on earth do you mean? What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily! I don't know any one of the name of Cecily.

Algernon confronts him with the cigarette case and forces him to come clean, demanding to know who "Jack" and "Cecily" are. Jack confesses that his name isn't really Ernest and that Cecily is his ward, a responsibility imposed on him by his adoptive father's will. Jack also tells Algernon about his fictional brother. Jack says he's been thinking of killing off this fake brother, since Cecily has been showing too active an interest in him. Without meaning to, Jack describes Cecily in terms that catch Algernon's attention and make him even more interested in her than he is already.

Gwendolen and her mother, Lady Bracknell, arrive, which gives Jack an opportunity to propose to Gwendolen. Jack is delighted to discover that Gwendolen returns his affections, but he is alarmed to learn that Gwendolen is fixated on the name Ernest, which she says

“inspires absolute confidence.” Gwendolen makes clear that she would not consider marrying a man who was *not* named Ernest.

Lady Bracknell interviews Jack to determine his eligibility as a possible son-in-law, and during this interview she asks about his family background.

Jack. Gwendolen!

Gwendolen. Yes, Mr. Worthing, what have you got to say to me?

Jack. You know what I have got to say to you.

Gwendolen. Yes, but you don't say it.

Jack. Gwendolen, will you marry me? [Goes on his knees.]

Gwendolen. Of course I will, darling. How long you have been about it! I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.

Jack. My own one, I have never loved any one in the world but you.

Gwendolen. Yes, but men often propose for practice.

I know my brother Gerald does. All my girl-friends tell me so. What wonderfully blue eyes you have, Ernest! They are quite, quite, blue. I hope you will always look at me just like that, especially when there are other people present. [Enter **Lady Bracknell.**]

Lady Bracknell. Mr. Worthing! Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture. It is most indecorous.

Gwendolen. Mamma! [He tries to rise; she restrains him.] I must beg you to retire. This is no place for you. Besides, Mr. Worthing has not quite finished yet.

Lady Bracknell. Finished what, may I ask?

Gwendolen. I am engaged to Mr. Worthing, mamma. [They rise together.]

Lady Bracknell. Pardon me, you are not engaged to any one. When you do become engaged to some one, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself . . . And now I have a few questions to put to you, Mr. Worthing. While I am making these inquiries, you, Gwendolen, will wait for me below in the carriage.

Gwendolen. [Reproachfully.] Mamma!

Lady Bracknell. In the carriage, Gwendolen! [**Gwendolen** goes to the door. She and **Jack** blow kisses to each other behind **Lady Bracknell's** back. **Lady Bracknell** looks vaguely about as if she could not understand what the noise was. Finally turns round.] Gwendolen, the carriage!

Gwendolen. Yes, mamma. [Goes out, looking back at **Jack.**]

Lady Bracknell. [Sitting down.] You can take a seat, Mr. Worthing.

[Looks in her pocket for note-book and pencil.]

Jack. Thank you, Lady Bracknell, I prefer standing.

Assignment 3:

Present a synopsis of the play in class. Enrich it with reading and acting out scenes like this! Work on positions, movements, voice, facial expressions!

Lady Bracknell. [Pencil and note-book in hand.] I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?

Jack. Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

Lady Bracknell. I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you?

Jack. Twenty-nine.

Lady Bracknell. A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

Jack. [After some hesitation.] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell. I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. 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 in Grosvenor Square. What is your income?

Jack. Between seven and eight thousand a year.

Lady Bracknell. [Makes a note in her book.] In land, or in investments?

Jack. In investments, chiefly.

Lady Bracknell. That is satisfactory. What between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one's death, land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up. That's all that can be said about land.

Jack. I have a country house with some land, of course, attached to it, about fifteen hundred acres, I believe; but I don't depend on that for my real income. In fact, as far as I can make out, the poachers are the only people who make anything out of it.

Lady Bracknell. A country house! How many bedrooms? Well, that point can be cleared up afterwards. You have a town house, I hope? A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.

Jack. Well, I own a house in Belgrave Square, but it is let by the year to Lady Bloxham. Of course, I can get it back whenever I like, at six months' notice.

Lady Bracknell. Lady Bloxham? I don't know her.

Jack. Oh, she goes about very little. She is a lady considerably advanced in years.

Lady Bracknell. Ah, nowadays that is no guarantee of respectability of character. What number in Belgrave Square?

Jack. 149.

Lady Bracknell. [Shaking her head.] The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However, that could easily be altered.

Jack. Do you mean the fashion, or the side?

Lady Bracknell. [Sternly.] Both, if necessary, I presume. What are your politics?



**A scene from the 1947 Theatre Guild production, (directed by John Gielgud)
with Margret Rutherford as Lady Bracknell**

Jack. Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist.

Lady Bracknell. Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening, at any rate. Now to minor matters. Are your parents living?

Jack. I have lost both my parents.

Lady Bracknell. To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?

Jack. I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me . . . I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was . . . well, I was found.

Lady Bracknell. Found!

Jack. The late Mr. Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort.

Lady Bracknell. Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this seaside resort find you?

Jack. [Gravely.] In a hand-bag.

Lady Bracknell. A hand-bag?

Jack. [Very seriously.] Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a hand-bag—a somewhat large, black leather hand-bag, with handles to it—an ordinary hand-bag in fact.

Lady Bracknell. In what locality did this Mr. James, or Thomas, Cardew come across this ordinary hand-bag?

Jack. In the cloak-room at Victoria Station. It was given to him in mistake for his own.

Lady Bracknell. The cloak-room at Victoria Station?

Jack. Yes. The Brighton line.

Lady Bracknell. The line is immaterial. Mr. Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found, a cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion—has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now—but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognised position in good society.

Jack. May I ask you then what you would advise me to do? I need hardly say I would do anything in the world to ensure Gwendolen's happiness.

Lady Bracknell. I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over.

Jack. Well, I don't see how I could possibly manage to do that. I can produce the hand-bag at any moment. It is in my dressing-room at home. I really think that should satisfy you, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell. Me, sir! What has it to do with me? You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter—a girl brought up with the utmost care—to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel? Good morning, Mr. Worthing!

[**Lady Bracknell** sweeps out in majestic indignation.]

In **Act II**, Algernon shows up at Jack's country estate posing as Jack's brother Ernest. Meanwhile, Jack, having decided that Ernest has outlived his usefulness, arrives home in deep mourning, full of a story about Ernest having died suddenly in Paris. He is enraged to find Algernon there masquerading as Ernest but has to go along with the charade. If he doesn't, his own lies and deceptions will be revealed.

While Jack changes out of his mourning clothes, Algernon, who has fallen hopelessly in love with Cecily, asks her to marry him. He is surprised to discover that Cecily already considers that they are engaged, and he is charmed when she reveals that her fascination with "Uncle Jack's brother" led her to invent an elaborate romance between herself and him several months ago. Algernon is less enchanted to learn that part of Cecily's interest in him derives

from the name Ernest, which, unconsciously echoing Gwendolen, she says “inspires absolute confidence.”

Algernon goes off in search of Dr. Chasuble, the local rector, to see about getting himself christened Ernest. Meanwhile, Gwendolen arrives, having decided to pay Jack an unexpected visit. Gwendolen is shown into the garden, where Cecily orders tea and attempts to play hostess. Cecily has no idea how Gwendolen figures into Jack’s life, and Gwendolen, for her part, has no idea who Cecily is. Gwendolen initially thinks Cecily is a visitor to the Manor House and is disconcerted to learn that Cecily is “Mr. Worthing’s ward.” She notes that Ernest has never mentioned having a ward, and Cecily explains that it is not *Ernest* Worthing who is her guardian but his brother Jack and, in fact, that she is engaged to be married to Ernest Worthing. Gwendolen points out that this is impossible as she herself is engaged to Ernest Worthing. The tea party degenerates into a war of manners.

Jack and Algernon arrive toward the climax of this confrontation, each having separately made arrangements with Dr. Chasuble to be christened Ernest later that day. Each of the young ladies points out that the other has been deceived: Cecily informs Gwendolen that her fiancé is really named Jack and Gwendolen informs Cecily that hers is really called Algernon. The two women demand to know where Jack’s brother Ernest is, since both of them are engaged to be married to him. Jack is forced to admit that he has no brother and that Ernest is a complete fiction. Both women are shocked and furious, and they retire to the house arm in arm.

Act III takes place in the drawing room of the Manor House, where Cecily and Gwendolen have retired. When Jack and Algernon enter from the garden, the two women confront them.

Morning-room at the Manor House.

[**Gwendolen** and **Cecily** are at the window, looking out into the garden.]

Gwendolen. The fact that they did not follow us at once into the house, as any one else would have done, seems to me to show that they have some sense of shame left.

Cecily. They have been eating muffins. That looks like repentance.

Gwendolen. [After a pause.] They don’t seem to notice us at all. Couldn’t you cough?

Cecily. But I haven’t got a cough.

Gwendolen. They’re looking at us. What effrontery!

Cecily. They’re approaching. That’s very forward of them.

Gwendolen. Let us preserve a dignified silence.

Cecily. Certainly. It’s the only thing to do now. [Enter **Jack** followed by **Algernon**. They whistle some dreadful popular air from a British Opera.]

Gwendolen. This dignified silence seems to produce an unpleasant effect.

Cecily. A most distasteful one.

Gwendolen. But we will not be the first to speak.

Cecily. Certainly not.

Gwendolen. Mr. Worthing, I have something very particular to ask you. Much depends on your reply.

Cecily. Gwendolen, your common sense is invaluable. Mr. Moncrieff, kindly answer me the following question. Why did you pretend to be my guardian's brother?

Algernon. In order that I might have an opportunity of meeting you.

Cecily. [To **Gwendolen.**] That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not?

Gwendolen. Yes, dear, if you can believe him.

Cecily. I don't. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer.

The women are somewhat appeased but still concerned over the issue of the name. However, when Jack and Algernon tell Gwendolen and Cecily that they have both made arrangements to be christened Ernest that afternoon, all is forgiven and the two pairs of lovers embrace. At this moment, Lady Bracknell's arrival is announced.

Lady Bracknell has followed Gwendolen from London, having bribed Gwendolen's maid to reveal her destination. She demands to know what is going on. Gwendolen again informs Lady Bracknell of her engagement to Jack, and Lady Bracknell reiterates that a union between them is out of the question. Algernon tells Lady Bracknell of his engagement to Cecily, prompting her to inspect Cecily and inquire into her social connections, which she does in a routine and patronizing manner that infuriates Jack. He replies to all her questions with a mixture of civility and sarcasm, withholding until the last possible moment the information that Cecily is actually worth a great deal of money and stands to inherit still more when she comes of age. At this, Lady Bracknell becomes genuinely interested.

Jack informs Lady Bracknell that, as Cecily's legal guardian, he refuses to give his consent to her union with Algernon. Lady Bracknell suggests that the two young people simply wait until Cecily comes of age, and Jack points out that under the terms of her grandfather's will, Cecily does not legally come of age until she is thirty-five. Lady Bracknell asks Jack to reconsider, and he points out that the matter is entirely in her own hands. As soon as she consents to his marriage to Gwendolen, Cecily can have his consent to marry Algernon. However, Lady Bracknell refuses to entertain the notion. She and Gwendolen are on the point of leaving when Dr. Chasuble arrives and happens to mention Cecily's governess, Miss Prism. At this, Lady Bracknell starts and asks that Miss Prism be sent for.

When the governess arrives and catches sight of Lady Bracknell, she begins to look guilty and furtive. Lady Bracknell accuses her of having left her sister's house twenty-eight years before with a baby and never returned. She demands to know where the baby is. Miss Prism confesses she doesn't know, explaining that she lost the baby, having absentmindedly placed it in a handbag in which she had meant to place the manuscript for a novel she had written. Jack asks what happened to the bag, and Miss Prism says she left it in the cloakroom

of a railway station. Jack presses her for further details and goes racing offstage, returning a few moments later with a large handbag. When Miss Prism confirms that the bag is hers, Jack throws himself on her with a cry of “Mother!” It takes a while before the situation is sorted out, but before too long we understand that Jack is not the illegitimate child of Miss Prism but the legitimate child of Lady Bracknell’s sister and, therefore, Algernon’s older brother. Furthermore, Jack had been originally christened “Ernest John.” All these years Jack has unwittingly been telling the truth: Ernest *is* his name, as is Jack, and he does have an unprincipled younger brother—Algernon. Again the couples embrace, Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble follow suit, and Jack acknowledges that he now understands “the vital Importance of Being Earnest.”

4 Glimpses into Victorian Life



4.1 The Queen and her period

Queen Victoria has to have position number one on this list because the era is named for her and, frankly, she was bloody creepy. When her husband Albert died in 1861, she went into mourning – donning black frocks until her own death many years later – and expected her nation to do so too. She avoided public appearances and rarely set foot in London in the following years. Her seclusion earned her the name “Widow of Windsor.”

Her sombre reign cast a dark pall across Britain and her influence was so great that the entire period was fraught with creepiness. Ironically, since Victoria disliked black funerals so much, London was festooned in purple and white when she died.

4.2 Entertainment

The Victorian upper class (and later middle class) had no televisions to entertain them, so they entertained themselves. One of the popular forms of entertainment was for friends and family to dress up in outrageous costumes and pose for each other. This sounds innocent – but just think: can you imagine your grandmother dressing up as a greek wood nymph posing on a table in the living room while everyone applauds? No. You can't. The idea is, in fact, creepy. But for the Victorians, this was perfectly normal and fun.



4.3 Memento Mori



Memento mori is a Latin phrase meaning “Remember you shall die”. In the Victorian era, photography was young and extremely costly. When a loved one died, their relatives would sometimes have a photograph taken of the corpse in a pose – oftentimes with other members of the family. For the vast majority of Victorians, this was the only time they would be photographed. In these post-mortem photographs, the effect of life was sometimes enhanced by either propping the subject’s eyes open or painting pupils onto the photographic print, and many early images have a rosy tint added to the cheeks of the corpse. Adults were more commonly posed in chairs or even braced on specially-designed frames. Flowers were also a common

prop in post-mortem photography of all types. In the photo above, the fact that the girl is dead is made slightly more obvious (and creepy) by the fact that the slight movement of her parents causes them to be slightly blurred due to the long exposure time, while the girl is deathly still and, thus, perfectly in focus.

4.4 The Dandy

A **dandy** (also known as a **beau** or **gallant**) is a man who places particular importance upon physical appearance, refined language, and leisurely hobbies, pursued with the appearance of nonchalance in a cult of Self. Historically, especially in late 18th- and early 19th-century Britain, a dandy, who was self-made, often strove to imitate an aristocratic lifestyle despite coming from a middle-class background.

Charles Baudelaire defined the dandy as one who elevates aesthetics to a living religion: "These beings have no other status, but that of cultivating the idea of beauty in their own persons, of satisfying their passions, of feeling and thinking Contrary to what many thoughtless people seem to believe, dandyism is not even an excessive delight in clothes and material elegance. For the perfect dandy, these things are no more than the symbol of the aristocratic superiority of his mind."

The linkage of clothing with political protest had become a particularly English characteristic during the 18th century. Given these connotations, dandyism can be seen as a political protestation against the rise of levelling egalitarian principles, often including nostalgic adherence to feudal or pre-industrial values, such as the ideals of "the perfect gentleman" or "the autonomous aristocrat", though paradoxically, the dandy required an audience. Oscar Wilde and Lord Byron, who exemplify the dandy's roles in the public sphere, both as writers and as *personae* providing sources of gossip and scandal.

5 Themes of the Play

5.1 Death

Jokes about death appear frequently in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Lady Bracknell comes onstage talking about death, and in one of the play's many inversions, she says her friend Lady Harbury looks twenty years younger since the death of her husband. With respect to Bunbury, she suggests that death is an inconvenience for others—she says Bunbury is "shilly-shallying" over whether "to live or to die." On being told in Act III that Bunbury has died suddenly in accordance with his physicians' predictions, Lady Bracknell commends Bunbury for acting "under proper medical advice." Miss Prism speaks as though death were something from which one could learn a moral lesson and piously says she hopes Ernest will profit from having died. Jack and Algernon have several conversations about how to "kill" Jack's imaginary brother. Besides giving the play a layer of dark humor, the death jokes also connect to the idea of life being a work of art. Most of the characters discuss death as something over which a person actually has control, as though death is a final decision one can make about how to shape and color one's life.

5.2 The Dandy

In Wilde's works, the dandy is a witty, overdressed, self-styled philosopher who speaks in epigrams and paradoxes and ridicules the cant and hypocrisy of society's moral arbiters. To a very large extent, this figure was a self-portrait, a stand-in for Wilde himself. The dandy isn't always a comic figure in Wilde's work. In *A Woman of No Importance* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he takes the form of the villains Lord Illingworth and Lord Henry Wootton, respectively. But in works such as *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde seems to be evolving a more positive and clearly defined moral position on the figure of the dandy. The dandy pretends to be all about surface, which makes him seem trivial, shallow, and ineffectual. Lord Darlington and Lord Goring (in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*) both present themselves this way. In fact, the dandy in both plays turns out to be something very close to the real hero. He proves to be deeply moral and essential to the happy resolution of the plot.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon has many characteristics of the dandy, but he remains morally neutral throughout the play. Many other characters also express dandiacal sentiments and views. Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell are being dandiacal when they assert the importance of surfaces, style, or "profile," and even Jack echoes the philosophy of the dandy when he comes onstage asserting that "pleasure" is the only thing that should "bring one anywhere." For the most part, these utterances seem to be part of Wilde's general lampooning of the superficiality of the upper classes. The point is that it's the wrong sort of superficiality because it doesn't recognize and applaud its own triviality. In fact, Cecily, with her impatience with self-improvement and conventional morality and her curiosity about "wickedness," is arguably the character who, after Algernon, most closely resembles the dandy. Her dandiacal qualities make her a perfect match for him

5.3 The Nature of Marriage

Marriage is of paramount importance in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, both as a primary force motivating the plot and as a subject for philosophical speculation and debate. The question of the nature of marriage appears for the first time in the opening dialogue between Algernon and his butler, Lane, and from this point on the subject never disappears for very long. Algernon and Jack discuss the nature of marriage when they dispute briefly about whether a marriage proposal is a matter of "business" or "pleasure," and Lady Bracknell touches on the issue when she states, "An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be." Even Lady Bracknell's list of bachelors and the prepared interview to which she subjects Jack are based on a set of assumptions about the nature and purpose of marriage. In general, these assumptions reflect the conventional preoccupations of Victorian respectability—social position, income, and character.

The play is actually an ongoing debate about the nature of marriage and whether it is "pleasant or unpleasant." Lane remarks casually that he believes it to be "a very pleasant

state,” before admitting that his own marriage, now presumably ended, was the result of “a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.” Algernon regards Lane’s views on marriage as “somewhat lax.” His own views are relentlessly cynical until he meets and falls in love with Cecily. Jack, by contrast, speaks in the voice of the true romantic. He tells Algernon, however, that the truth “isn’t quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl.” At the end of the play, Jack apologizes to Gwendolen when he realizes he had been telling the truth all his life. She forgives him, she says, on the grounds that she thinks he’s sure to change, which suggests Gwendolen’s own rather cynical view of the nature of men and marriage.

5.4 The Constraints of Morality

Morality and the constraints it imposes on society is a favorite topic of conversation in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Algernon thinks the servant class has a responsibility to set a moral standard for the upper classes. Jack thinks reading a private cigarette case is “ungentlemanly.” “More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read,” Algernon points out. These restrictions and assumptions suggest a strict code of morals that exists in Victorian society, but Wilde isn’t concerned with questions of what is and isn’t moral. Instead, he makes fun of the whole Victorian idea of morality as a rigid body of rules about what people should and shouldn’t do. The very title of the play is a double-edged comment on the phenomenon. The play’s central plot—the man who both is and isn’t Ernest/earnest—presents a moral paradox. Earnestness, which refers to both the quality of being serious and the quality of being sincere, is the play’s primary object of satire. Characters such as Jack, Gwendolen, Miss Prism, and Dr. Chasuble, who put a premium on sobriety and honesty, are either hypocrites or else have the rug pulled out from under them. What Wilde wants us to see as truly moral is really the opposite of earnestness: irreverence.

5.5 Hypocrisy vs. Inventiveness

Algernon and Jack may create similar deceptions, but they are not morally equivalent characters. When Jack fabricates his brother Ernest’s death, he imposes that fantasy on his loved ones, and though we are aware of the deception, they, of course, are not. He rounds out the deception with costumes and props, and he does his best to convince the family he’s in mourning. He is acting hypocritically. In contrast, Algernon and Cecily make up elaborate stories that don’t really assault the truth in any serious way or try to alter anyone else’s perception of reality. In a sense, Algernon and Cecily are characters after Wilde’s own heart, since in a way they invent life for themselves as though life is a work of art. In some ways, Algernon, not Jack,

is the play's real hero. Not only is Algernon like Wilde in his dandified, exquisite wit, tastes, and priorities, but he also resembles Wilde to the extent that his fictions and inventions resemble those of an artist.

5.6 The Double Life

The double life is the central metaphor in the play, epitomized in the notion of “Bunbury” or “Bunburying.” As defined by Algernon, Bunburying is the practice of creating an elaborate deception that allows one to misbehave while seeming to uphold the very highest standards of duty and responsibility. Jack's imaginary, wayward brother Ernest is a device not only for escaping social and moral obligations but also one that allows Jack to appear far more moral and responsible than he actually is. Similarly, Algernon's imaginary invalid friend Bunbury allows Algernon to escape to the country, where he presumably imposes on people who don't know him in much the same way he imposes on Cecily in the play, all the while seeming to demonstrate Christian charity. The practice of visiting the poor and the sick was a staple activity among the Victorian upper and upper-middle classes and considered a public duty. The difference between what Jack does and what Algernon does, however, is that Jack not only pretends to be something he is not, that is, completely virtuous, but also routinely pretends to be *someone* he is not, which is very different. This sort of deception suggests a far more serious and profound degree of hypocrisy. Through these various enactments of double lives, Wilde suggests the general hypocrisy of the Victorian mindset.

5.7 The Importance of Not Being “Earnest”

Earnestness, which implies seriousness or sincerity, is the great enemy of morality in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Earnestness can take many forms, including boringness, solemnity, pomposity, complacency, smugness, self-righteousness, and sense of duty, all of which Wilde saw as hallmarks of the Victorian character. When characters in the play use the word *serious*, they tend to mean “trivial,” and vice versa. For example, Algernon thinks it “shallow” for people not to be “serious” about meals, and Gwendolen believes, “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing.”

For Wilde, the word *earnest* comprised two different but related ideas: the notion of false truth and the notion of false morality, or moralism. The moralism of Victorian society—its smugness and pomposity—impels Algernon and Jack to invent fictitious alter egos so as to be able to escape the strictures of propriety and decency. However, what one member of society considers decent or indecent doesn't always reflect what decency really is. One of the play's paradoxes is the impossibility of actually being either earnest (meaning “serious” or “sincere”) or moral while claiming to be so. The characters who embrace triviality and wickedness are the ones who may have the greatest chance of attaining seriousness and virtue.



Colin Firth in the movie version 2002

7 Different Approaches

The Importance of Being Earnest is most obviously a comic critique of late Victorian values. Some sixty years ago, Eric Bentley wrote that the play "is about *earnestness*, that is, Victorian solemnity, that kind of false seriousness which means priggishness, hypocrisy, and lack of irony".

As a work of art, Wilde's last play has been recognized from its first performance on 14 February 1895 as a masterpiece of comedy, one of the supreme examples in English of the genre, and consequently it has been interpreted from a variety of critical points of view.

6 Further Questions for Study and Discussion

- What is important about the title?
- What types of conflict (physical, moral, intellectual, or emotional) did you notice in this play?
- Which themes in the play seem prominent to you?
- Are the characters consistent in their actions? Which of the characters are fully developed?
- Do you find the characters likable? Are they characters persons you would want to meet?
- Does the play end the way you expected?
- What is the central/primary purpose of the play?
- How essential is the setting? Could the play have taken place anywhere else?
- Describe the setting of the ETF production and explain the function of the pictures!
- What elements of the story, plot, characterization, etc. are the most controversial?
- Why do you think the play was banned?

7.1 Social Criticism

The Importance of Being Earnest is Oscar Wilde's most well-known and best loved play, as well as being an enormous success in his lifetime. For many people it is the apogee of the playwright's work. Like Wilde, the play is the very embodiment of *fin de siècle* British dandyism.

However, this seemingly frivolous play has a much darker side. Its critique of Victorian society--though delivered in a velvet glove--is every inch a clunking-iron fist. The play is a satire both of the hypocrisies of the society in which Wilde lived, and the damaging effect that these hypocrisies can have on the souls of those live under their rule. It is a criticism of an elaborate mask worn by the ruling elites, behind which each is engaged in precisely the opposite modes of behaviour. In short the principle characters will go to any lengths to avoid their responsibilities and place self interest at the top of their own agendas. Through the literary techniques of dramatic irony parody and reversals Wilde reveals the moral hypocrisy at the heart of the Victorian establishment. Wilde was to become one of those souls shortly after the first performance of the play when he initiated a libel trial that was to lead to his imprisonment for being a homosexual.

7.2 The gay Code



At the 1895 opening of Oscar Wilde's most famous play, "The Importance of Being Earnest," the audience was liberally sprinkled with well-dressed young men wearing green carnations, Wilde's approved symbol for his gay followers. These patrons knew the play, an essay in appearances and secrets, was also written in code for gay men, starting with the title itself.

By common consent, then and after, "The Importance of Being Earnest" is Wilde's masterpiece. Its title is meant as a double-entendre.

The protagonist, called Jack in the country and Ernest in town, is chasing a young lady who will only marry a man named Ernest because she desires the quality of being earnest above all others in her future husband. The play's second half revolves around attempts by not one but two characters to be christened officially with that same name as part of their frenzied skirt-chasing.

The boys in green carnations knew that "earnest" was also gay code for homosexual. If you were lunching at the Savoy Grill and wanted to nail someone's sexual identity, you quietly asked, "Is he earnest?" This converts a double-entendre to a triple one, and decoding the play further will open up delicious new meanings.

Two books enable us to do this decoding. Richard Ellmann's 1987 biography "Oscar Wilde" (Vintage paperback) is not only definitive; all Wilde studies coming after were based squarely on it. Another book approaches from a sleazier angle: Theo Aronson's "Prince Eddy and the Homosexual Underworld" (Barnes & Noble Books, 1994) chronicles the play culture of London's gay men of that time with its elaborate system of protected spaces and passwords. Chapter Eight of Karl Beckson's "London in the 1890s: A Cultural History" (Norton, 1992) adds still more detail. All of this was dramatized effectively in the 1997 film "Wilde."

-The silver cigarette case: Algernon has come to return Jack's silver cigarette case. This is how well-off gay men paid their male prostitutes to avoid prosecution; favorites even got their names engraved inside. The cases, of course, could be pawned for far more than the cash value of the services. But despite this precaution, the customer could still be blackmailed, and Wilde flirted with blackmailers regularly.

-Bunbury: Whenever his Aunt Augusta required Algernon to perform some dull social service, Algie's imaginary friend Bunbury became ill or disconsolate in ways that required Algie's urgent attention. Bunbury, of course, was the English equivalent of bone-smuggling, and Algie certainly preferred bun-burying to dining with his aunt. Wilde also had a classmate by that name.

Cecily: the name of Jack Worthing's young ward, cloistered carefully in his country house, protected by her governess Miss Prism from the corrupting influence of guys like Algernon, who of course spends most of the play chasing her. Cecily is also gay slang for a kept boy, especially one kept away from the prying eyes of other gay men.

7.3 Deceit

Both Algernon and Jack use their fictitious friend or brother, Bunbury and Ernest, to wander from the city to the country and vice versa. Algernon, for instance, declares he has "Bunburied all over Shropshire on two separate occasions". And, of course, he, among the several tricksters in the play, is the one with the unquenchable appetite. None of the major characters is governed by conventional morality. Indeed, part of the humor--the play, as it were--of *Earnest* is the inversion of conventional morality. "Divorces are made in Heaven," says Algy. Both he and Jack are ready to be christened, not on grounds of faith but on their perceived need to change their names to Ernest. One of the chief reasons Cecily is enamored with Algernon/Ernest is that she thinks he is leading an evil life: "I hope you have not been leading a double life," she says to him, "pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy". And Lady Bracknell, who views christening as a "luxury", also views Cecily as a suitable bride for Algernon only after she learns how much money Cecily has.

More so than he does in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or *Salomé*, Wilde keeps sex implicit in *Earnest*. His characters are too child-like for readers or audiences to imagine them actually having sex. And it should be said that the child-like playfulness is part of the action appealing to the reader/viewer's inner child.



7.4 The role of the women

Gwendolen and Cecily are hopelessly in love, at least by Victorian standards, with their male counterparts. Cecily is described as “a sweet simple, innocent girl.” Gwendolen is depicted as “a brilliant, clever, thoroughly experienced lady.” (These claims come from Jack and Algernon respectively). Despite these supposed contrasts, it seems that the women in Oscar Wilde’s play possess more similarities than differences. Both women are:

*All women become like
their mothers. That is their
tragedy. No man does.
That is his.*

Intent on marrying a man named Ernest.

Eager to embrace one another as sisters.

Quick to become rivals pitted against each other.

**Gwendolen Fairfax:
Aristocratic Socialite**

Gwendolen is the daughter of the pompous Lady Bracknell. She is also the cousin of the whimsical bachelor Algernon. Most importantly, she is the love of Jack Worthing’s life. The only problem: Gwendolen believes that Jack’s real name is Ernest . (“Ernest” is the name Jack has been using whenever he sneaks away from his country estate).

As a member of high society, Gwendolen exhibits fashion and a working knowledge of the latest trends in magazines. During her first lines during Act One, she exhibits self-confidence. Check out her dialogue: **First line: I am always smart! Second line: I intend to develop in many directions. Sixth line: In fact, I am never wrong.**

Her inflated self-appraisal makes her seem foolish at times, especially when she reveals her devotion to the name Ernest. Even before meeting Jack, she claims that the name Ernest “inspires absolute confidence.” The audience might chuckle at this, in part because

Gwendolen is quite wrong about her beloved. Her fallible judgments are humorously displayed in Act Two when she meets Cecily for the first time. First she declares:

“Cecily Cardew? What a very sweet name! Something tells me that we are going to be great friends. I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong.” Moments later, when she suspects that Cecily is trying to steal her fiancé,

Gwen changes her tune: ***“From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right.”*** Gwendolen’s strengths include her ability to forgive. It does not take long for Gwendolen to reconcile with Cecily, nor does much time pass before she forgives Jack’s deceptive ways. She may be quick to anger, but she also rushes to absolve. In the end, she makes Jack a very happy man.

Cecily Cardew: Hopeless Romantic? When the audience first meets Cecily she is watering the flower garden, even though she should be studying German grammar. This signifies Cecily’s love of nature and her disdain for the tedious socio-academic expectations of society. (Or maybe she just likes to water flowers.)

Cecily delights in bringing people together. She senses that the matronly Miss Prism and the pious Dr. Chausuble are fond of each other, so Cecily plays the role of matchmaker, urging them to take walks together. Also, she hopes to “cure” Jack’s brother of wickedness so that there will be harmony between the siblings.

Similar to Gwendolen, Miss Cecily has a “girlish dream” of marrying a man named Ernest. So, when Algernon poses as Ernest, Jack’s fictional brother, Cecily happily records his words of adoration in her diary. She confesses that she has imagined that they are engaged, years before they even met.

Some critics have suggested that Cecily is the most realistic of all characters, in part because she does not speak in epigrams as frequently as the others. However, it could be argued that Cecily is just another outrageous romantic, prone to flights of fancy, just as all of the other wonderfully silly characters in Oscar Wilde’s play.

Assignment 4:

1. Present the different approaches to the play in class and get a discussion started. Which one makes sense to you?

2. Conceive a scene transferring the female characters Cecily and Gwendolen with their particular attitudes and manners into a modern setting! Does that work?

And mothers like Lady Bracknell?

Or are they figures of a past period?

Discuss!

8 Recent productions



A Stylish Monster Conquers at a Glance

Brian Bedford as Lady Bracknell and Charlotte Parry as Cecily Cardew in

“The Importance of Being Earnest.” *New York Times Review* by

CHARLES ISHERWOOD *January 13, 2011*

Within seconds of sweeping onstage, and with a wordless gesture as funny as it is subtle, the great actor Brian Bedford proves beyond question that gender is of no importance whatsoever in portraying the imposing Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde’s greatest comedy, “The Importance of Being Earnest.”

Mr. Bedford’s Lady Bracknell enters the drawing room of her nephew Algernon Moncrieff (Santino Fontana) as she would enter any room, with the authority of one who believes firmly in her right to be welcomed anywhere, preferably with tea and cucumber sandwiches. Advancing to greet Algernon, she registers the presence of his friend Jack Worthing (David Furr).

She pauses in dismay, and the grim aspect becomes a little grimmer. The icy blue eyes sweep and pierce, and then the lids slowly descend in a gesture as expressive of disgust as it is possible to imagine. Clearly Lady Bracknell would be most gratified — possibly not surprised, either — if she opened her eyes to discover that Mr. Worthing had had the good breeding to obey her unspoken command and disappear.

This magnificent gorgon, “a monster, without being a myth,” as the horrified Jack describes her at one point, has perhaps never been more imperious, more indomitable — or more delectably entertaining — than in Mr. Bedford’s brilliant portrayal, the highlight of this effervescent revival of Wilde’s 1895 comedy of manners.

It is not necessarily rare for actors — male actors, that is — to take on the role of Wilde’s arch parody of a paragon of high Victorian propriety. I’ve seen two other productions with men in the part, including an all-male version at the Abbey Theater in Dublin.

Assignment 5:

1. Write a review of the ETF 2011 production and describe your favorite actor/actress and moment in the show!
2. Should all female characters be played by male actors? What would be the effect or the message cf. 6.2?