

OSCAR WILDE

The Importance of Being Earnest

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A Trivial Comedy for Serious People

The Importance of Being Earnest
Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

First performed at the St James's Theatre, London, on 14 February 1895.

First published in 1899.

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INTRODUCTION

When *The Importance of Being Earnest* opened at the St James's Theatre in London on 14 February 1895, Oscar Wilde was at the height of his fame. Born in Dublin in 1854 and educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and Magdalen College, Oxford, he had made his name as a poet, critic, conversationalist and the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In the early 1890s he turned to the stage, and a run of society comedies (*Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*) made him the most talked-about dramatist in London. When *Earnest* opened, *An Ideal Husband* was still playing at the Haymarket.

Wilde wrote the play in the summer of 1894 at the seaside town of Worthing, which gave its hero his surname. He first conceived it in four acts; at the request of George Alexander, the actor-manager who produced it and created the part of John Worthing, he reduced it to the three acts printed here.

The plot is built on a pun. Jack Worthing calls himself Ernest in town and keeps an imaginary wicked brother in the country; his friend Algernon Moncrieff keeps an imaginary invalid, Mr. Bunbury, whose sudden relapses let him escape tedious engagements. Both young men fall in love with women who have resolved to marry no one but a man called Ernest, and the comedy follows the consequences, through muffins, cucumber sandwiches, a christening and a handbag, to a final discovery that turns the title inside out.

Wilde called the play "a trivial comedy for serious people", and its triviality is deliberate. Where the earlier comedies still carry the machinery of Victorian melodrama (secrets, fallen women, compromising letters), *Earnest* empties that machinery

of weight. Duty, respectability, marriage, money and moral earnestness itself are all treated with the same unruffled seriousness as the question of whether there is enough bread and butter. Lady Bracknell's pronouncements, Miss Prism's three-volume novel and Canon Chasuble's all-purpose sermon have become part of the language of English comedy.

The first night was a triumph, but the run was short. Within days the Marquess of Queensberry, father of Wilde's friend Lord Alfred Douglas, left an insulting card for Wilde at his club. Wilde's libel action against him collapsed, and he was himself prosecuted, convicted and sentenced in May 1895 to two years' hard labour. His name was removed from the playbills, and the play was withdrawn after eighty-six performances. It was published in 1899 as the work of "the Author of *Lady Windermere's Fan*". Wilde died in Paris on 30 November 1900.

The play has since become one of the most frequently revived comedies in English, and the work by which Wilde is best remembered. The text of this edition follows the three-act version.

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

John Worthing, J.P.

Algernon Moncrieff

Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D.

Merriman, Butler

Lane, Manservant

Lady Bracknell

Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax

Cecily Cardew

Miss Prism, Governess

THE SCENES OF THE PLAY

ACT I. *Algernon Moncrieff's Flat in Half-Moon Street, W.*

ACT II. *The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton.*

ACT III. *Drawing-Room at the Manor House, Woolton.*

Time: The Present.

LONDON: ST. JAMES'S THEATRE

Lessee and Manager: Mr. George Alexander

February 14th, 1895

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John Worthing, J.P.	Mr. George Alexander.
Algernon Moncrieff	Mr. Allen Aynesworth.
Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D.	Mr. H. H. Vincent.
Merriman	Mr. Frank Dyll.
Lane	Mr. F. Kinsey Peile.
Lady Bracknell.....	Miss Rose Leclercq.
Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax.....	Miss Irene Vanbrugh.
Cecily Cardew	Miss Evelyn Millard.
Miss Prism	Mrs. George Canninge.

FIRST ACT

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SCENE

Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room.

[Lane is arranging afternoon tea on the table, and after the music has ceased, Algernon enters.]

ALGERNON. Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

LANE. I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

ALGERNON. I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—any one can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

LANE. Yes, sir.

ALGERNON. And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

LANE. Yes, sir. *[Hands them on a salver.]*

ALGERNON. *[Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa.]*
Oh! . . . by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing

were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

LANE. Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

ALGERNON. Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

LANE. I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

ALGERNON. Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralising as that?

LANE. I believe it *is* a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

ALGERNON. [*Languidly.*] I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

LANE. No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

ALGERNON. Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE. Thank you, sir. [*Lane goes out.*]

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

[*Enter Lane.*]

LANE. Mr. Ernest Worthing.