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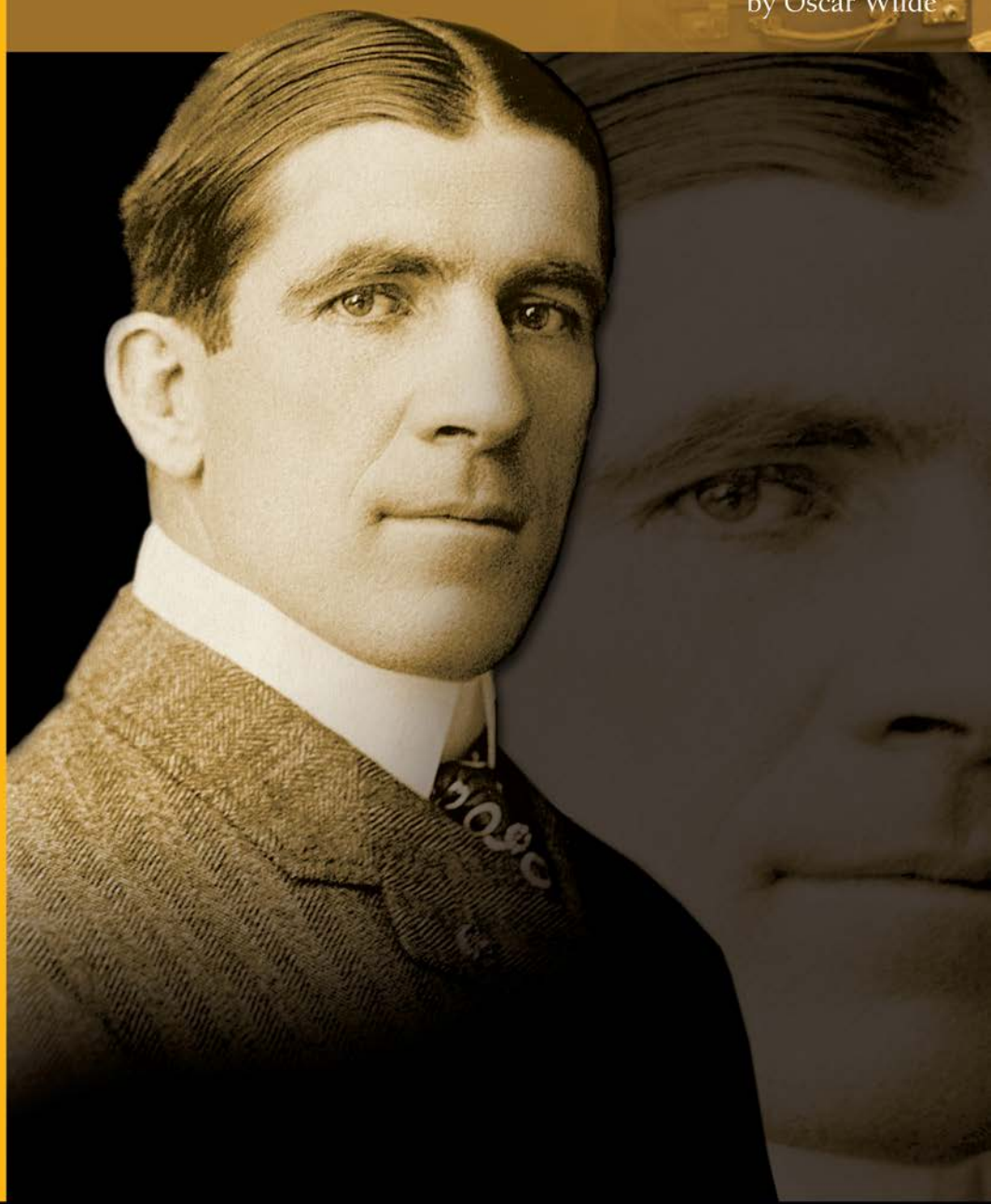
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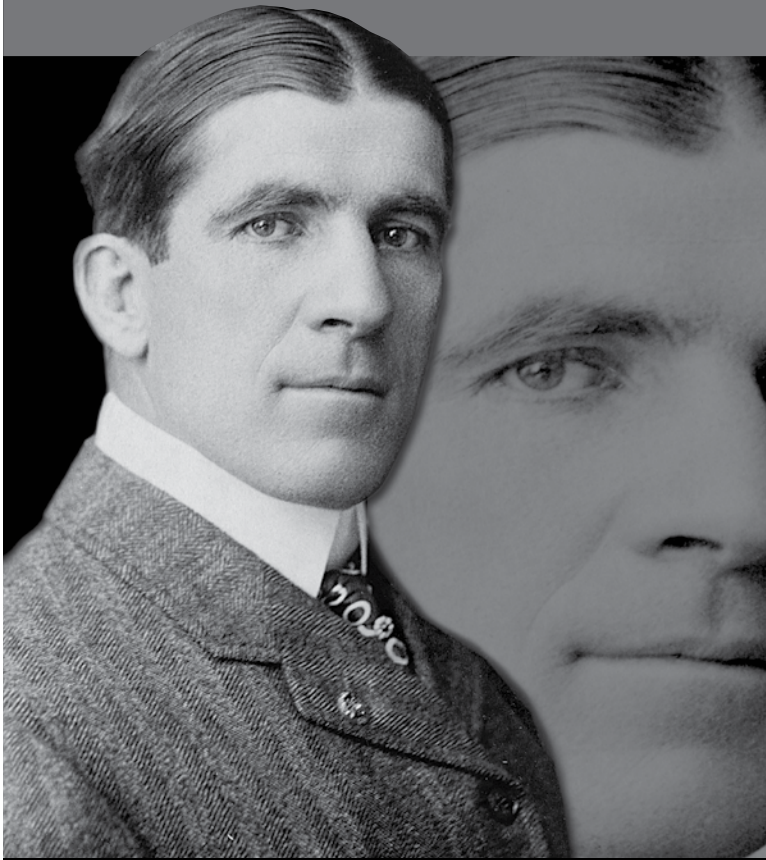
# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

by Oscar Wilde



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST



Oscar Wilde



**Prestwick House**

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

B Y O S C A R W I L D E

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# NOTES

**What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?**

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) wrote in a variety of literary forms and genres, including poetry, short stories, plays, fairy tales, comedies, and literary criticism. Among his well-known works are *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde's comical play, written with satirical wit and sarcasm, has lasted through the years, showing many generations the beauty and ease of his writing ability. In referring to this play, Wilde stated: "It has as 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."

# POINTERS

## READING POINTERS

### Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

1. Wilde uses puns throughout this play, but the major pun is found within the title. The title, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, suggests the importance of being honest and truthful, while playing on the male name, Ernest. As you read the play, try to find some other examples of puns and entendres.
2. Wilde satirizes the life of the elite by exaggerating their ideals and their idle way of life. Consider the many ways that Wilde mocks Victorian social standards through language. What institutions, if any, does Wilde seem to be particularly critical of?
3. Confused or hidden identity is a motif that is apparent from the beginning: Even Algernon thinks Jack's name is Ernest, introducing him as Ernest, and even stating that Jack looks like an Ernest. This motif is developed throughout the story and the play's cast of deceptive and deceived characters.
4. One of *The Importance of Being Earnest's* main themes is that of appearance and fantasy versus reality. Examine the appearances and dual personalities presented in the play. How separate are the characters from their "identities"? What impact do the alternate selves have on others and the true selves?
5. Wilde is famous for his epigrams, which are seen throughout the play. For example: "More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read," "Divorces are made in Heaven," and "The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted." What effect do these short sayings have on the tone and message of the play? How do the characters respond to these statements?

6. Irony is used to emphasize sarcasm and satire. Verbal irony consists of such devices as puns, entendres, and epigrams. Situational irony occurs in the plot and amongst characters. What examples of verbal and situational irony seem most unrealistic in the play? Are there any that seem realistic? Keep in mind what Wilde sees as the purpose of satire when considering the irony of a situation.
7. Foil characters are those whose purpose in the play is to contrast the ideals, situations, and characterization of the main characters. Often times, however, the main characters act as foils to each other. What pairings of foil characters can you think of? Are there any characters that have parallel characters (e.g., Gwendolen and Algernon)?
8. Wilde's attempt at satire requires the creation of an ideal elite—the perfect portrait of those whom he is criticizing. How Wilde uses irony, paradox, contradiction, and humor to create a play that succeeds in its satire at the same time as it succeeds in its entertainment value has been the object of many attempts at recreation. What aspects of the play, whether characterization, plot, setting, language, etc., do you see as acting in Wilde's favor. In other words, are there any areas where the satire fails?
9. The play seems to end with a so-called “Hollywood ending,” that is, all the characters seem to be happy. But, as this is a satire, do you think Wilde intends the audience to view the conclusion as a happy one? Reflect on the individual stories of Wilde's characters. Do you foresee happy futures for the main characters, or is there a hidden darkness waiting to emerge?



# C H A R A C T E R S

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)

# S C E N E S

- ACT I.                   Algernon Moncrieff's Flat in Half-Moon Street, W.
- ACT II.                   The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton.
- ACT III.                 Drawing-Room of the Manor House, Woolton.

Time—The Present.  
Place—London.





A C T I

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—anyone 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 demoralizing 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 woman.

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.

[*Enter JACK. LANE goes out.*]

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?

---

## Glossary

### Act I

**Wagnerian** – an allusion to the musical style and theories of Richard Wagner (1873)

**Liberal Unionist** – a British political party who separated themselves from the Liberals in 1886 and joined with the Conservatives, whose union was complete by 1912

**Tories** – supporters of the British political group during the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, who were against parliamentary reform

**French Revolution** – (1787-1799) a revolution that began due to many reasons: peasants stopped supporting the current feudal system, reformers began gaining acceptance because of their philosophical writings, the middle class was excluded from power, and crop failures

“as right as a trivet” – idiomatic: to be absolutely correct

**Gorgon** – a reference to any one of the three sisters in Greek mythology (one of which is Medusa) who are so grotesque that anyone who looks directly at them will be turned to stone

### Act II

**Egeria** – an allusion to the nymph adviser of the Roman king Numa Pompilius; also a female adviser or companion

**Fall of the Rupee** – referring to the fall of Indian currency

**Quixotic** – impractically idealistic

**Maréchal Niel** – a yellow rose

### Act III

**Terminus** – a terminal, referring to railway stations

**Oxonian** – a graduate of Oxford University

**Anabaptists** – a Protestant sect of the 16<sup>th</sup> century; advocates of only baptizing adult members of the church, as well as the separation of church and state

## Vocabulary

### Act I

apoplexy – a stroke  
aristocracy – nobility, privileged  
conduce – to contribute  
cynical – distrustful of human nature and its motives  
demonstrative – expressive; affectionate  
demoralizing – depressing, disheartening  
glibly – with easy lack of concern; indifferently  
immoderately – excessively; uncontrollably  
incomprehensible – complex, puzzling  
indignation – fury, anger  
induce – to force, persuade  
languidly – sluggishly, lacking energy  
lax – not strict; loose  
metaphysical – abstract, theoretical  
patronising – the act of talking down to someone believed to be inferior  
profligate – dissolute, immoral  
propounding – putting forward for consideration  
radically – absolutely, completely  
salver – a serving tray  
scrapes – predicaments, situations  
semi-recumbent – half lying down  
surmised – guessed  
tedious – boring, tiresomely dull

### Act II

alluring – enticing, charming, enchanting  
arduous – difficult  
betoken – to represent, signify  
calamity – a tragedy, disaster  
candour – honesty, frankness  
canonical – biblical law, rule  
chafe – to become irritated  
debonnair – suave  
effeminate – having feminine qualities  
equanimity – the quality of being even-tempered under stress  
festal – festival, festive  
green – inexperienced; innocent  
hypocrisy – a profession of beliefs or feelings that one does not really hold; the act of being false, phony  
impetuous – spontaneous, impulsive  
lorgnette – eyeglasses with a handle, typically when watching an opera or play