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# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Oscar Wilde's

## **The Importance of Being Earnest**

from

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by

Eva Richardson



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## General Introduction to the Work

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### Introduction to *The Importance of Being Earnest*

**T**HE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST is a play in three Acts. Originally written as a four-Act play, Wilde was forced to combine several scenes and cut one Act in order to accommodate the requests of his producer. The four-Act version is rarely performed today. The play can be considered one of the finest examples of the dramatic genre known as Comedy of Manners. The Comedy of Manners became popular in England during the Restoration period in the seventeenth century. It relies on elements of satire and irony in order to ridicule or expose the behaviors, manners, flaws, and trivial or ridiculous values of members of the middle or upper classes. (In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde portrays the false morality and empty charity of England's upper class during the late Victorian era.)

Frequently, a Comedy of Manners incorporates love affairs, mistaken identities, witty and comical exchanges between characters, and the humorous revelation of societal scandals and intrigues. (Wilde's main characters, Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, invent alternative identities in order to escape the mundane responsibilities of their everyday lives as well as the conservative social code of Victorian England. Algernon's practice of "bunburying" and Jack's invention of his brother Ernest are elements of the play that criticize and ridicule the two-faced, superficial façade of Victorian society. Both Algernon and Jack fall in love while using their false identities, and the confusion that ensues humorously reveals the hypocrisy of the Victorian upper class and the emptiness of class consciousness.)

The style of *The Importance of Being Earnest* relies heavily on the use of irony and satire. Irony is a literary device that involves a breach between what a writer, speaker, or narrator says and what is understood by the reader or by other characters. (Oscar Wilde uses irony throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest* in order to expose the ridiculousness and pretentiousness of Victorian culture. The title of his play itself is an ironic pun on the word "earnest": the leading female characters in the play, Cecily and Gwendolen, are determined to marry a man named Ernest, but the men they fall in love with—although both presumably named "Ernest"—are doing everything possible in order to escape the strict, earnest moral code of their society. Wilde's irony reveals his conviction that the earnest manner of the Victorian upper classes is marked by superficiality and pretense. For Wilde, it is not important at all for a human being to behave in the affected, falsely earnest manner of the Victorian upper class.)

In a satire, the writer uses humor and wit in order to criticize or ridicule a particular person or group of people. Satires cleverly disguise criticism of an intended target by clothing it in humorous language, funny characterizations, and sarcasm. (Wilde uses sarcasm, for example, to ridicule the pretentious obsession with charity practiced by many members of the Victorian upper classes. For instance, when discussing acts of charity, Lady Bracknell's reasoning illustrates Wilde's mastery of satire. She explains that she does not "in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others.") Plays often illustrate one or more themes. (Some of the significant themes in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are views on marriage, social class and class mobility, names and identities, reputation and propriety, gender relations, false earnestness, and the importance of triviality.)

## New Historicism Applied to *The Importance of Being Earnest*



### Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.

## Activity One

### Examining the Correlation Between Literature and Culture by Studying the Victorian Era as it is Portrayed in—and Shaped by—*The Importance of Being Earnest*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: New Historicism—Activity One: Factsheet: The Victorian Era.
2. Have students review the handout, individually, in pairs, or in small groups, paying particular attention to social changes, gender roles, the division between the public and the private spheres, the development of the philanthropic spirit, technological innovations and economic changes, and emerging religious doubts.
3. Use the following questions to generate a classroom discussion on elements of the Victorian era as they are presented in *The Importance of Being Earnest*:
  - Is the play's title a reflection or a mockery of the social attitudes of Victorian England? Why?
  - What is the importance of “being earnest” in Victorian culture?
  - How does the play shape an understanding of the cultural, social, and economic situation in England during the Victorian era?
  - How does Lady Bracknell exemplify the decaying rigid social class structure?
  - Are there segments of British society that might have found certain elements of *The Importance of Being Earnest* “objectionable” in England during the Victorian era? Why? What about England today?



## Feminist Approach Applied to *The Importance of Being Earnest*



### Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The feminist movement in society found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has been accepted as the norm by both men and women. Feminist critics have even dissected many words in Western languages that they believe to be rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females need to be added and read from a feminist perspective.

## Activity One

### Evaluating Views on Marriage in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

1. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small group) review the following sections:

- Act I: Algernon's attitude toward marriage
- Act I: The relationship and engagement between Gwendolen and Jack
- Act I: Lady Bracknell's comments on Lady Harbury

Students should take detailed notes on the views on marriage and love presented by the characters in Act I.

2. Use the following questions to generate a classroom discussion:

- According to Algernon, what is the connection between “marriage” and “business”?
- What does Algernon consider to be the most alluring aspect of romance?
- How does Algernon view the typical relationship between husband and wife in marriage? What does his view reveal about his expectations of married life and married people?
- Why does Algernon consider “Bunbury” an essential part of any marital union?
- What does Lady Bracknell's assessment of Lady Harbury reveal about Lady Harbury's marriage?
- Why does Lady Bracknell resent Lady Harbury for looking twenty years younger? What does her resentment reveal about her own life and marriage?
- What are Gwendolen's expectations for love and marriage?
- What are Jack's expectations for love and marriage?
- What does Gwendolen consider her love “destiny”?
- How does Gwendolen want to be treated by Jack in public? What does her wish reveal about her?
- Why does Gwendolen promise to love Jack even after her mother forbids her to become engaged to Jack?
- What is the role of parental choice in marriage?

## Psychoanalytic/Freudian Criticism Applied to *The Importance of Being Earnest*



### Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.





## Activity One

### Examining the Text as A Testament to Wilde's Own Life Experiences

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: Psychoanalytic/Freudian Theory—Activity One: Oscar Wilde Biographical Fact Sheet and Psychoanalytic/Freudian Theory—Activity One: Definition of a Dandy.
2. Consider the following questions in a classroom discussion:
  - To what extent does Algernon embody the qualities of the quintessential Aesthete and dandy as Wilde did? What aspects of Algernon's character correspond to Wilde's personal life and attitudes? Consider Algernon's piano playing, the role he plays for his Aunt Augusta, etc.
  - What is the significance of male-male friendship in *The Importance of Being Earnest*?
  - What is Gwendolen's definition of the "effeminate" man?
  - What is the social—and psychological—significance of Jack's leading a double-life (Jack in the country, Ernest in the city)?
  - Why are Algernon and Jack compelled to invent alter egos (Bunbury and Ernest)?
  - How does Algernon's attitude toward marriage highlight or parallel Wilde's own attitude toward marriage?
  - How might the writing of *The Importance of Being Earnest* have functioned as a vehicle to express Wilde's secret desires?
  - What is the significance of decorum and social propriety in the play? How does this mirror their significance in Wilde's personal life?