The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde
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CHARACTER MAP

Lady Augusta Bracknell
Lives in London; aunt of Algernon; forbids Jack’s marriage to her daughter Gwendolen.

Merriman
Butler at the Manor House.

Gwendolen Fairfax
Lives in London; becomes engaged to Jack.

John (Jack) Worthing
Based at the Manor House; known as Ernest in London; discovers that he is Algernon’s brother and his name really is Ernest.

Cecily Cardew
Jack’s ward; lives at the Manor House.

Laetitia Prism
Cecily’s governess; lives at the Manor House; enjoys Dr Chasuble’s company.

Dr Frederick Chasuble
Rector of the Manor House’s parish church.

Lane
Algernon’s manservant.

Algernon Moncrieff
Lives in London; nephew of Lady Bracknell; claims to have an ill friend, Bunbury; becomes engaged to Cecily.

friends

servant of

mother and daughter

becomes engaged to

cousins

friends

becomes engaged to

governess of

servant of
OVERVIEW

About the author

Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1854. His father was a successful surgeon and his mother was a committed Irish nationalist and writer. Wilde excelled at school and later studied Classics at Trinity College, Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford. In 1878 Wilde moved to London, where he built a career in writing and editing. The forms of his writing ranged from essays and children’s stories to the novel, poetry and drama; it is for the latter that he is best known today. In his own time, Wilde was renowned for his wit and outrageous fashion sense, and was recognised as a leading figure of Aestheticism, an artistic movement that called for the celebration of beauty as its own reward.

In the 1880s, Wilde was a celebrity in the modern sense – he was more famous than his works. His attitudes and opinions were frequently satirised in the popular media. In 1881, Gilbert and Sullivan’s comic opera *Patience* parodied the Aesthetic movement and Wilde in particular. His becoming the subject of parody is an indication of Wilde’s status at this time, as is the fact that he was invited to tour the United States in 1882 with a series of lectures on Aesthetics.

Wilde married Constance Lloyd in 1884 and they had two sons, Cyril (born in 1885) and Vyvyan (born in 1886), to whom their father was devoted. The fairytales he devised for the children were published as *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* in 1888. Wilde’s first and only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared in 1891. This was also the year Wilde met Lord Alfred Douglas, or ‘Bosie’ as he was known: Wilde’s relationship with Bosie would lead to his downfall.

Before this, however, Wilde enjoyed a brilliant period of success between 1892 and 1895 when four of his plays (*Lady Windermere’s Fan, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*) achieved popular and critical acclaim on the London stage. In 1893, Wilde’s daring play *Salome*, based on a biblical character, was refused a licence by the Lord Chamberlain’s Office, which censored all plays appearing in London. *Salome* was finally staged by the great actress and theatre producer Sarah Bernhardt in Paris in 1896.
Despite the success he enjoyed in the early 1890s, Wilde was in danger. Bosie’s father, the Marquess of Queensbury, was suspicious of the playwright’s relationship with his son and determined to destroy Wilde. Two weeks after the opening of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde – who was now living apart from his wife – received the Marquess of Queensbury’s card. Written on the card was: ‘To Oscar Wilde, posing somdomite’ (the word Queensbury meant here was ‘sodomite’). Against the advice of his friends, Wilde brought a charge of libel against Queensbury. Wilde lost the case and, as homosexuality was a criminal offence, was subsequently arrested and charged with Gross Indecency under the Criminal Law Amendment Act. In May 1895, Wilde was found guilty and sentenced to two years’ hard labour. The trials garnered enormous public interest and the popular press poured vitriol (severe criticism) on Wilde. As an Irishman who at times expressed radical political views and frequented the homosexual underworld, Wilde was essentially an ‘outsider’ and held a precarious position in Victorian England. The scorn and suspicion that had been kept in check during his years of success were fully unleashed following the trials.

Upon his release from prison in 1897, Wilde travelled to France. He was ill, impoverished and estranged from his family; Constance refused all contact and had changed her own and the boys’ surname. Wilde continued to hope for reconciliation with his wife but she died in 1898. Wilde pursued a restless existence but continued to write; his long verse poem ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’ was published in 1898. Wilde finally settled in Paris, where he died on 30 November 1900.

**Synopsis**

Algernon Moncrieff is making preparations for a visit from his aunt Lady Bracknell and cousin Gwendolen when a friend calls. This friend, referred to by Algernon as ‘Ernest’, is in fact John – or Jack – Worthing. Jack is pleased to hear of the impending arrival of Gwendolen as he has come to town to propose to her. Algernon objects when Jack informs him of this plan, as he has seen the affectionate message from a female named ‘Cecily’ inscribed in Jack’s cigarette case. After some attempts to disguise Cecily’s identity, Jack is forced to reveal that she is his ward, whose care was entrusted to him by her late grandfather. Upon this revelation a deeper
secret emerges as Jack admits that his name is not actually Ernest. In order to escape the responsibilities of his country estate, Jack has developed a fictional younger brother, ‘Ernest’, who lives a life of pleasure in London. Algernon is delighted to hear Jack’s story as he is also leading a double life, having created a fictional friend, Bunbury, who is frequently in need of his assistance out of town.

Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive at the flat and Algernon manoeuvres his aunt out of the room so that Jack can propose to Gwendolen. Gwendolen readily accepts Jack’s offer although she stresses that her love for him is dependent on the fact of his being named ‘Ernest’. Jack resolves to have himself secretly re-christened. Lady Bracknell abruptly re-enters the room and ejects Gwendolen from the flat before subjecting Jack to a gruelling interview in which he is forced to reveal that he was discovered as a baby in a handbag in the cloakroom of Victoria Station. Lady Bracknell is horrified by Jack’s story and refuses to allow his marriage to Gwendolen unless he can trace the identity of his parents. Following Lady Bracknell’s departure, Gwendolen returns to reiterate her devotion to Jack and asks for his address in the country, which is overheard and noted by Algernon. Jack resolves to simplify his life by killing Ernest.

Act Two moves to Jack’s country estate where Cecily is taking lessons with her governess Miss Prism. Having encouraged Miss Prism to take a walk in the garden with the local curate Dr Chasuble, Cecily is surprised by the arrival of Algernon posing as Jack’s brother Ernest. Cecily reveals a lively interest in the misdeeds of Ernest, and the two exit the garden. Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble return from their walk to welcome the sudden arrival home of Jack, who announces the death of his brother Ernest. Amidst their condolences Jack arranges with Dr Chasuble to have himself re-christened. Cecily enters to announce the arrival of Ernest. In the presence of his household, Jack is forced to shake hands with Algernon and publicly uphold the fiction that the latter is Ernest.

Once alone, Jack furiously informs Algernon he will have to leave immediately. Algernon ignores these instructions and proceeds to court Cecily, declaring himself in love with her and asking her to marry him. Cecily surprises him with the news that they are already engaged. She has imagined all the details of their relationship and recorded them in her diary. Cecily is particularly delighted that her fiancé is named Ernest,
a revelation that prompts Algernon to also seek re-christening. While he is arranging this business, Gwendolen arrives. She is surprised to discover the existence of Cecily, who informs the visitor that Ernest has a brother named Jack who acts as her guardian. Gwendolen is further taken aback when Cecily announces that she is herself engaged to Ernest. Gwendolen promptly makes her own claim to Ernest’s hand in marriage. When Jack and Algernon appear, the women discover they are not in fact engaged to the same man. Their relief quickly turns to horror as they learn neither man is named Ernest.

In Act Three, Jack and Algernon announce their plans to be re-christened and the two couples are reconciled. Their happiness is short-lived as Lady Bracknell, having discovered Gwendolen’s whereabouts, arrives. She disallows Jack’s engagement to Gwendolen and questions him as to Cecily’s identity. Upon her discovery of the girl’s fortune Lady Bracknell warmly approves her engagement to Algernon. Jack, however, refuses to give his consent unless Lady Bracknell allows his own marriage to Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell will not agree to this and, as Cecily remains under Jack’s guardianship until the age of thirty-five, the couples are at an impasse. Upon Dr Chasuble’s arrival and mention of Miss Prism, Lady Bracknell demands to see the governess. She interrogates Miss Prism as to the whereabouts of a baby left in her charge twenty-eight years earlier. Miss Prism is unable to tell her, admitting she left the baby in a handbag at Victoria Station. Jack departs the room and returns with the handbag in question. He mistakenly assumes Miss Prism is his mother until Lady Bracknell informs him he is the son of her own sister and thus Algernon’s elder brother. Lady Bracknell cannot remember his name beyond the fact that he was named after his father, the General. Jack consults the Army Lists, which show that the General’s name was Ernest. The play closes with Jack and Gwendolen, and Algernon and Cecily, officially united and Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble confessing their love for one another.

**Character summaries**

**John Worthing, J.P. (Jack, Ernest)**

John Worthing, referred to as ‘Jack’, is the squire of the Manor House, an estate in the English county of Hertfordshire. He is a Justice of the Peace,
which means he acts as a local magistrate in his home county. When in London, Jack poses as his younger brother ‘Ernest’, a name Lane, Algernon, Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen all know him by.

**Algernon Moncrieff**
Algernon Moncrieff is a young bachelor who lives in London. He is a friend of Jack’s, and the nephew of Lady Bracknell and cousin of Gwendolen; at the end of the play we discover that he is Jack’s brother. Algernon claims to have an invalid friend, ‘Bunbury’, who often needs his care.

**Rev. Canon Frederick Chasuble, D.D.**
Dr Chasuble is canon of the parish within which Jack’s country estate is located. He is a Doctor of Divinity (D.D.) and thus has undertaken advanced study in theology.

**Merriman**
Merriman is employed as the butler at the Manor House.

**Lane**
Lane is Algernon’s manservant, based at the latter’s flat in Half-Moon Street.

**Lady Bracknell**
Lady Bracknell is wife of the unseen Lord Bracknell, mother of Gwendolen and aunt of Algernon. She is a formidable Society matron, based in London.

**Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax**
Gwendolen is the daughter of Lady Bracknell and potential fiancée of Jack. The term ‘Hon.’ (short for ‘ Honourable’) indicates that she is a member of the aristocracy.

**Cecily Cardew**
Eighteen-year-old Cecily lives at the Manor House under Jack’s guardianship. She was entrusted to his care by her late grandfather, Mr Thomas Cardew.

**Miss Laetitia Prism**
Miss Prism lives at the Manor House, where she is employed as Cecily’s governess. She was previously in service to the Moncrieff family in London.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Class and ‘Society’

Individuals in nineteenth-century England were organised into social classes. Class was defined by occupation, family connections and access to wealth. Individuals generally remained within the class they were born into. At the top of the scale were the upper class, consisting of the aristocracy, the landed gentry and a select number of wealthy professionals and manufacturers. At the pinnacle of the upper class were the members of ‘Society’, a social enclave (district) centred around the royal court. The middle class was represented by professionals (including doctors, lawyers and bankers), manufacturers, artists and retailers. The working classes consisted of domestic servants, tradespeople, retail workers and labourers. The poor and destitute existed outside this framework but remained visible and a significant source of anxiety.

Several classes are represented in The Importance of Being Earnest. Lane, Merriman and the footman who appears briefly in Scene 10 belong to the working class; Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble are part of the genteel middle class; and Jack, Algernon, Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell and Cecily are members of the upper class. (Note: Wilde’s text is not divided into scenes; Scene 10 here refers to the scene divisions used in this guide. See the Scene-by-scene analysis for the outlines of these scenes.)

Wilde’s play can be read as a satire of the class system, particularly of the upper-class elite who formed ‘Society’. Society was structured around social rituals, and governed by the strict rules of etiquette. The most significant rituals were those surrounding birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death: all of which are depicted or mentioned in the play.

Although the upper classes still retained immense power and privilege in the late nineteenth century, the distribution of wealth had changed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The development and expansion of new industries such as mining and manufacturing brought wealth to people outside the upper classes, and increasing numbers of people were moving up the social scale. The aristocracy responded with some anxiety
to this development and used the rules of etiquette as a means of policing entry to Society.

The growing numbers of people in the middle classes also meant the values and preoccupations of this class became more prominent, spreading throughout society and influencing all spheres of life. These values included respectability, earnestness, thrift, duty, self-improvement and piety. Miss Prism is an obvious representative of such values.

Significantly, *The Importance of Being Earnest* was first presented at the St James’s Theatre in London, perhaps the most fashionable theatre of its time. The St James’s attracted the most glittering and aristocratic members of Society, as well as many leading intellectuals and artists. It was also attended by lower-middle and working-class patrons; however, they were relegated to the back of the theatre. The focus in the auditorium was on Society. The upper-class theatregoers saw their world reflected back at them onstage at the St James’s. This was especially the case with Wilde’s play, to the extent that one reviewer suggested middle- and working-class patrons experienced it as a sightseeing trip into the world of Society: ‘The people in the humbler parts of the house evidently keenly enjoyed the graphic glimpses which the dramatist gave them of the inner life of those “higher ranks”’ (Donohue and Berggren 1995, p.281).

**The fin de siècle**

The period in which *The Importance of Being Earnest* appeared, the late nineteenth century, is sometimes referred to as the *fin de siècle*: a French term that literally means ‘end of the century’. The *fin de siècle* was characterised by a loss of confidence and a sense of impending doom, prompted by factors such as threats to British imperialism, economic competition from abroad, political turmoil at home and social upheaval as conventions of class and gender were challenged. We can see these preoccupations reflected in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In the ‘tea scene’ in Act Two, Cecily taunts Gwendolen with the spectre of ‘agricultural depression’, noting: ‘I believe the aristocracy are suffering very much from it just at present’ (p.337). When Gwendolen learns of Jack and Algernon’s plans to be re-christened she praises their bravery by exclaiming, ‘How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes! Where