



The Importance of Being Earnest

(1895)

PLOT AND SETTING

The Importance of Being Earnest is Wilde's most famous play. The first act takes place in the fashionable Mayfair in London's West End. Here the aristocratic **Algernon Moncrieff** waits for the arrival of his aunt, **Lady Bracknell**, for tea in his luxurious house. He is surprised at the intrusion of his wealthy friend, **Ernest**, who has come from the country to propose to Lady Bracknell's daughter, Gwendolen. Algernon finds out that the man he calls Ernest is actually **Jack Worthing**, who lives in the country and who was adopted at an early age by a Mr Thomas Cardew who, in his will, made him guardian to his granddaughter, Cecily Cardew, under the charge of her governess, Miss Prism. Jack explains that he is Jack in the country and that he has invented an *alter ego*, a **wicked younger brother called Ernest who lives in the city**, as a pretext to avoid his responsibilities. Even Algernon confesses he has invented a **friend, called Bunbury who lives in the country**, whose invalidity requires frequent attention, so that he can get away from his London social obligations.

The story develops around the two young men's attempts to marry Gwendolen and Cecily respectively. Jack has to overcome the obstacle of Gwendolen's mother, Lady Bracknell, who interviews him as a prospective son-in-law, but on finding that he was a foundling – found in a handbag –, she dismisses him. The second and third acts take place **in the country** where Cecily's studies are supervised by Miss Prism. Algernon enters in the guise of Jack's younger brother Ernest, and begins to flirt with Cecily. Shortly afterwards Jack appears announcing the death of his brother. A comic situation is created when Algernon and Jack face each other. Then Gwendolen is announced: jealousy and curiosity have brought her down to the country to find out more about Jack, whom she knows only as Ernest. The two young women find that they both seem to be engaged to an Ernest Worthing. In the third act Lady Bracknell arrives and she refuses to allow a marriage with Algernon until she knows Cecily is the

heiress of an immense fortune. Lady Bracknell recognises Miss Prism, who confesses that she put the manuscript of a novel she was working on into the perambulator and the baby in her care into a handbag which she then deposited in the cloak-room of Victoria Station. Lady Bracknell is thus able to solve the riddle about Jack's birth: he is the eldest son of her poor sister, Mrs Moncrieff, and therefore Algernon's brother. In the end both men succeed in marrying the women they want.

CHARACTERS

Wilde's contribution to theatre was a **new sort of the Restoration comedy of manners** (→ 3.6), in which the problems of his age were reflected through his **witty remarks**. His social drama was a mirror in which fashionable audiences could see reflected the images of their own fashionable world of dinner parties and country-house weekends; a world in which everyone knew very well that the life they led was not as stable, as exclusive or as moral as it pretended to be.

The Importance of Being Earnest presents an **aristocratic society** whose members are **typical Victorian snobs**; they are often arrogant, formal and **concerned with money**. Lady Bracknell, in particular, embodies the stereotype of the Victorian English aristocrat.

THEMES

The main concern of all the characters in the play is **marriage**. In basing his work on the problems of marriage, Wilde deliberately adds a Victorian-era interpretation to the old English formula of the marriage plot. The works of Jane Austen (→ 4.16) provide multiple examples of this genre. Wilde **makes fun of the institution of marriage**, which he saw as a practice surrounded by hypocrisy and absurdity. Although the play ends happily, it leaves the audience under the impression that marriage and social values are often tied together in destructive ways. In fact, Victorian aristocracy does not see marriage as the result of love, but rather as a tool for achieving social status.

Key idea

Irony and appearance

The whole play is built on witty dialogues, amusing puns, misunderstandings and paradoxes which help deal with the complexity of social and personal identification. The title is a pun in itself: the name 'Earnest' (a misspelling for 'Ernest') evokes the adjective 'earnest', that is, serious or sincere, while none of the characters is truthful. The characters, used by the playwright to criticise the Victorian prudery and exaggerated seriousness, exist only because they take part in conversation.

What is important to them is not what they say, but how they say it; thus Wilde's social satire comes from the ironic use of solemn language in situations that are utterly ridiculous and frivolous. In this sense irony is a dominant feature of the play rather than mere decoration.

Appearance is quite important in the play, since in this world the laws of reality can be suspended and the characters may change their identities as they wish.

**COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION****1 READ the texts and answer the following questions.**

- 1 Who are the protagonists of the play? Which social class do they belong to?
- 2 What comedy did Wilde create?
- 3 What are the main themes of *The Importance of Being Earnest*?
- 4 What are the main dramatic techniques adopted?

**The vital importance of being Earnest**

What follows is the last scene of the play set in Jack's country house where his real identity is revealed.

LADY BRACKNELL [*in a severe, judicial voice*] Prism! [*MISS PRISM bows her head in shame.*] Come here, Prism! [*MISS PRISM approaches in a humble manner.*] Prism! Where is that baby? [*General consternation. The CANON¹ starts back in horror.*

ALGERNON and **JACK** pretend to be anxious to shield CECILY and GWENDOLEN from hearing the details of a terrible public scandal.] Twenty-eight years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell's house, Number 104, Upper Grosvenor Street, in charge of a perambulator² that contained a baby of the male sex. You never returned. A few weeks later, through the elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan police, the perambulator was discovered at midnight, standing by itself in a remote corner of Bayswater³. It contained the manuscript of a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality. [*MISS PRISM starts in involuntary indignation.*] But the baby was not there! [*Everyone looks at Miss PRISM.*] Prism! Where is that baby? [*A pause.*]

MISS PRISM Lady Bracknell, I admit with shame that I do not know. I only wish I did. The plain facts of the case are these. On the morning of the day you mention, a day that is for ever branded⁴ on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old, but capacious hand-bag in which I had intended to place the manuscript of a work of fiction that I had written during my few unoccupied hours. In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I never can forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette⁵, and placed the baby in the hand-bag.

JACK [*who has been listening attentively*] But where did you deposit the hand-bag?

MISS PRISM Do not ask me, Mr Worthing.

JACK Miss Prism, this is a matter of no small importance to me. I insist on knowing where you deposited the hand-bag that contained that infant.

MISS PRISM I left it in the cloak-room of one of the larger railway stations in London.

JACK What railway station?

MISS PRISM [*quite crushed*⁶] Victoria. The Brighton line. [*Sinks into a chair*⁷.]

JACK I must retire to my room for a moment. Gwendolen, wait here for me. [...]

[*Enter JACK with a hand-bag of black leather in his hand.*]

JACK [*rushing over to Miss PRISM*] Is this the handbag, Miss Prism? Examine it carefully before you speak. The happiness of more than one life depends on your answer.

MISS PRISM [*calmly*] It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus⁸ in younger and happier days. Here is the stain on the lining⁹ caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage¹⁰, an incident that occurred at Leamington. And here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had had them placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years.

Oscar Wilde
The Importance of Being Earnest
(1895)

Act 3

1 *The CANON.* Dr Chasuble, il pastore venuto per il battesimo di Jack e Algernon.

2 *perambulator.* Carrozzina.

3 *Bayswater.* Quartiere nella parte occidentale di Londra.

4 *branded.* Impresso.

5 *bassinette.* Culla.

6 *quite crushed.*

Completamente sopraffatta.

7 *Sinks into a chair.* Si lascia cadere su una sedia.

8 *the upsetting ... omnibus.*

Il capovolgimento di un omnibus (trainato all'epoca da cavalli) in Gower Street.

9 *the stain on the lining.* La macchia sulla fodera.

10 *temperance beverage.* Bevanda non alcolica.



- 40 **JACK** [*in a pathetic voice*] Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this hand-bag. I was the baby you placed in it.
- MISS PRISM** [*amazed*] You?
- JACK** [*embracing her*] Yes... mother!
- MISS PRISM** [*recoiling*¹¹ *in indignant astonishment*] Mr Worthing! I am unmarried.
- 45 **JACK** Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow¹². But after all, who has the right to cast¹³ a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out¹⁴ an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you. [*Tries to embrace her again.*]
- MISS PRISM** [*still more indignant*] Mr Worthing, there is some error. [*Pointing to LADY BRACKNELL*] There is the lady who can tell you who you really are.
- JACK** [*after a pause*] Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am?
- LADY BRACKNELL** I am afraid that the news I have to give you will not altogether please you. You are the son of my poor sister, Mrs Moncrieff, and consequently
- 55 Algernon's elder brother.
- JACK** Algy's elder brother! Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother! [...]
- Then the question had better be cleared up at once. Aunt Augusta, a moment. At the time when Miss Prism left me in the hand-bag, had I been christened¹⁵
- 60 already?
- LADY BRACKNELL** Every luxury that money could buy, including christening, had been lavished¹⁶ on you by your fond and doting¹⁷ parents.
- JACK** Then I was christened! That is settled. Now, what name was I given? Let me know the worst.
- 65 **LADY BRACKNELL** Being the eldest son you were naturally christened after your father.
- JACK** [*irritably*] Yes, but what was my father's Christian name?
- LADY BRACKNELL** [*meditatively*] I cannot at the present moment recall what the General's Christian name was. But I have no doubt he had one. He was eccentric, I admit. But only in later years. And that was the result of the Indian climate, and
- 70 marriage, and indigestion, and other things of that kind.
- JACK** Algy! Can't you recollect what our father's Christian name was?
- ALGERNON** My dear boy, we were never even on speaking terms. He died before I was a year old.
- JACK** His name would appear in the Army Lists of the period, I suppose, Aunt
- 75 Augusta?
- LADY BRACKNELL** The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life. But I have no doubt his name would appear in any military directory.
- JACK** The Army Lists of the last forty years are here. These delightful records should have been my constant study. [*Rushes to bookcase and tears the books out*¹⁸.] M
- 80 Generals... Mallam, Maxbohm, Magley, what ghastly names they have – Markby, Migsby, Mobbs, Moncrieff! Lieutenant 1840, Captain, Lieutenant-Colonel, Colonel, General 1869, Christian names, Ernest John. [*Puts book very quietly down and speaks quite calmly.*] I always told you, Gwendolen, my name was Ernest, didn't I? Well, it is Ernest after all. I mean it naturally is Ernest.
- 85 **LADY BRACKNELL** Yes, I remember now that the General was called Ernest, I knew I had some particular reason for disliking the name.
- GWENDOLEN** Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first that you could have no other name!
- JACK** Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he
- 90 has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?
- GWENDOLEN** I can. For I feel that you are sure to change.
- JACK** My own one!
- [...]

- 11 *recoiling*. Indietreggiando.
 12 *blow*. Colpo.
 13 *cast*. Scagliare.
 14 *repentance wipe out*. Il pentimento lavar via.
 15 *christened*. Battezzato.
 16 *had been lavished*. Era stato profuso.
 17 *fond and doting*. Affezionati e amorevoli.
 18 *tears ... out*. Tira fuori con foga i libri.



- ALGERNON Cecily! [*Embraces her.*] At last!
- 95 JACK Gwendolen! [*Embraces her.*] At last!
- LADY BRACKNELL My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality.
- JACK On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- | | | | |
|---|------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| 1 | difendere, proteggere | 5 | terribili, terrificanti |
| 2 | andando di corsa verso | 6 | chiusura |
| 3 | battesimo | 7 | distrazione |
| 4 | critica | 8 | china |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text again and find out

- what Lady Bracknell wants to know from Miss Prism;
- when the baby disappeared;
- what Miss Prism confesses;
- what Jack suddenly realises and what he produces;
- what Lady Bracknell tells Jack;
- what a search through the military periodicals of the time reveals;
- what happens in the end.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

3 CONCENTRATE on Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism.

- 1 What are they like?
- 2 What social classes do they represent?
- 3 What aspects of Victorianism are criticised through Miss Prism's words?

4 FOCUS on Jack.

- 1 The episode of Jack's recognition, which takes place in this extract, is comic. What makes it so?
- 2 He discovers that he has always been earnest because of a number of remarkable circumstances. What does his last sentence reveal?
- 3 What kind of humour do these characters reflect?

5 FOCUS on the stage directions. Do they affect the overall meaning of the scene?

6 DEFINE the language used in this scene.

> COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE CONTEXT OF THE AGE

7 DISCUSS. Underline the paradoxes of this scene. They are mainly used by Lady Bracknell and Jack. Then say which institutions and values of Victorian society are challenged.