

# Study Guide

## *The Importance of Being Earnest* By Oscar Wilde

### Setting

**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.

### The Playwright: Oscar Wilde

"Oscar Wilde was an author, playwright, and poet in late Victorian England known for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Originally from Ireland, he began writing poetry while studying at Oxford University. In 1891, he published *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his only novel, which was panned as immoral by Victorian critics but is now considered one of his most notable works.

Many of Wilde's plays were well received, including his satirical comedies *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman*

*of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, his most famous play. Through his works and his lectures, Wilde became a leading proponent of aestheticism, a creative movement emphasizing the pursuit of beauty for its own sake. Unconventional in his writing and life, Wilde's affair with a young man led to his arrest for homosexuality in 1895. He was imprisoned for two years and died in poverty, not long after, in 1900 at the age of 46.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on October 16,

#### What's Inside?

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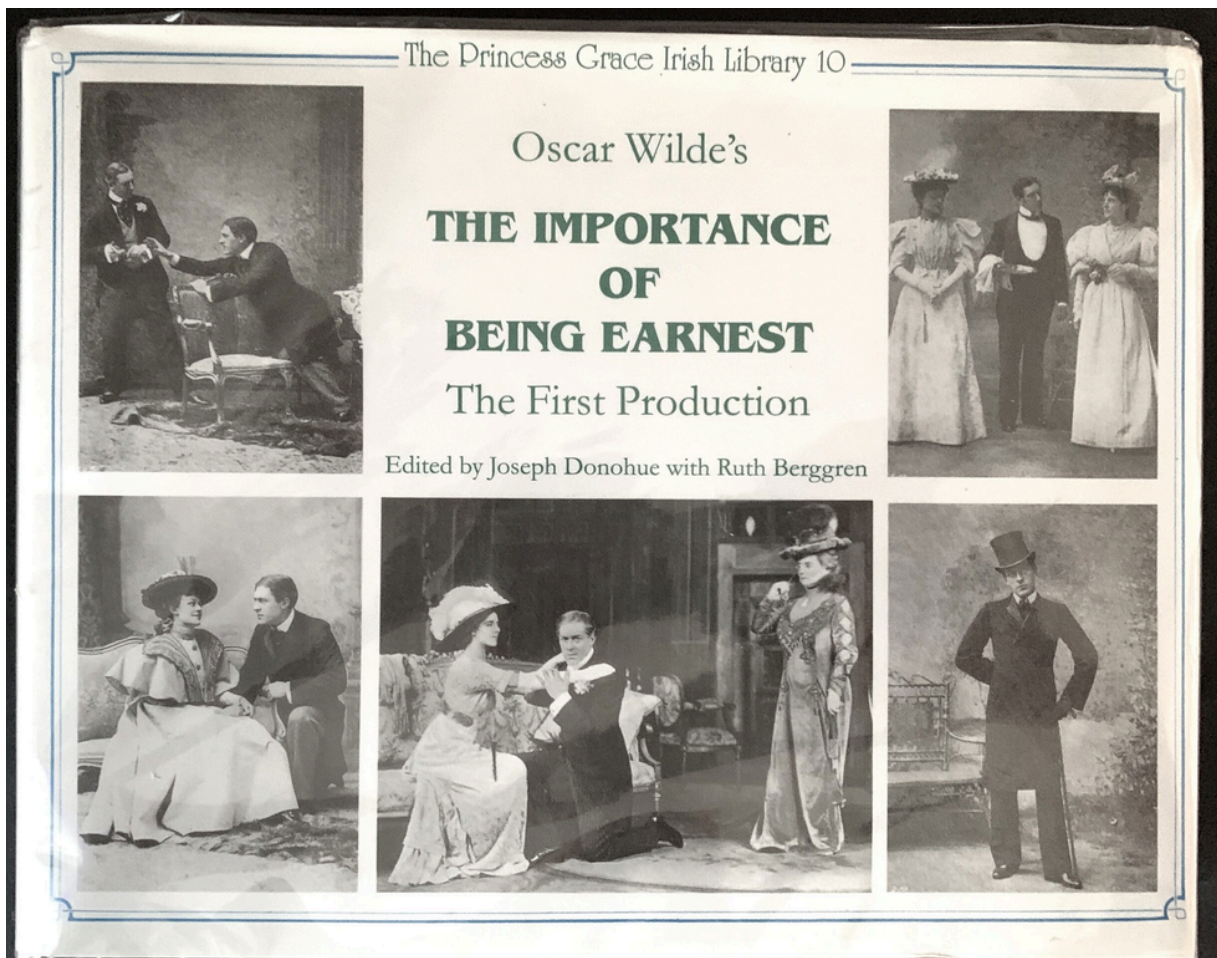
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1854, in Dublin. His father, William Wilde, was an acclaimed doctor who was knighted for his work as a medical advisor for the Irish censuses. William later founded St. Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital, entirely at his own expense, to treat the city's poor. Wilde's mother, Jane Francesca Elgee, was a poet who was closely associated with the Young Irelander Rebellion of 1848. The skilled linguist's acclaimed English translation of the Pomeranian novel *Sidonia the Sorceress* by Wilhelm Meinhold had a deep influence on her son's later writing.

After graduating from Oxford, Wilde moved to London to live with his friend and began his writing career, publishing his first collection, *Poems*, in 1881. Although the book received only modest critical praise, it nevertheless established Wilde as an up-and-coming writer. The next year, in 1882, Wilde traveled from London to New York City to embark on an American lecture tour. He delivered a staggering 140 lectures in just nine months and still found time to meet with some of the



leading American scholars and literary figures of the day. Through his lectures, as well as his early poetry, Wilde established himself as a leading proponent of the aesthetic movement, a theory of art and literature that emphasized the pursuit of beauty for its own sake rather than to promote any political or social viewpoint.



Multiple accounts report Wilde and his wife, Constance Lloyd, were very much in love, but a few years into their marriage, the writer began a series of affairs with men. At around the same time that he was enjoying his greatest literary success, Wilde commenced an affair with a young man named Lord Alfred Douglas. His father, the Marquis of Queensberry, had gotten wind of the relationship and on February 18, 1895, left an insulting calling card at Wilde's home addressed to "Oscar Wilde: Posing Somdomite," (a misspelling of sodomite.) Although Wilde's homosexuality was something of an open secret, he was so outraged by Queensberry's note that he sued him for libel. The decision ruined his life.

When the trial began that March, Queensberry and his lawyers presented evidence of Wilde's homosexuality—homosexual passages from his literary works as well as his love letters to Douglas—that quickly resulted in the dismissal of Wilde's libel case and his arrest on charges of "gross indecency." Wilde was convicted on May 25, 1895, and sentenced to two years in prison. Wilde never fully recovered physically from his time in prison. Some mishaps led to surgery by a questionable physician. During one of the operations, he developed an infection, and that led to meningitis. His supposed last words were, "My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us must go."

Source: Raskin, Donna. "Oscar Wilde." Biography.com. Last Update: May 25, 2025.  
<https://www.biography.com/authors-writers/oscar-wilde>



### Further reading:

Oscar Wilde was one of the first modern celebrities; famously for his personality and his writing. For more information about Oscar Wilde's life and works, check out these resources:

- Oscar Wilde Online (website): [www.wilde-online.info/oscar-wilde-biography.htm](http://www.wilde-online.info/oscar-wilde-biography.htm)
- The Life of Oscar Wilde (short video): [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvAttYhwqCs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvAttYhwqCs)

## The Setting: The Victorian Era

As a playwright, Oscar Wilde was famous for including characters, plots and dialogue that poke fun at wealthy Victorian society. This article gives a good summary of some of the cultural norms that were common in the Victorian Era—particularly in the upper class. As you watch *The Importance of Being Earnest*, listen for lines or character situations that purposely subvert these norms.

"Victorian era, in British history, is the period between approximately 1820 and 1914, corresponding roughly but not exactly to the period of Queen Victoria's reign (1837–1901) and characterized by a class-based society, a growing number of people able to vote, a

growing state and economy, and Britain's status as the most powerful empire in the world. During the Victorian period, Britain had a stable government, controlled a large empire, and it was a wealthy nation. This wealth in the hands of the upper class was



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largely due to Britain's degree of industrialization and its imperial holdings. However, three-fourths or more of the British population during this era was working-class. Victorian society valued a high standard of personal conduct across all sections of society. The emphasis on morality gave impetus to social reform but also placed restrictions on certain groups' liberty. Prosperity rose during the period, but debilitating undernutrition persisted. Literacy and childhood education became near universal in Great Britain for the first time. Whilst some attempts were made to improve living conditions, slum housing and disease remained a severe problem.

## The Victorian stereotype and double standard

Today "Victorian" connotes a prudish refusal to admit the existence of sex, hypocritically combined with constant discussions of sex, thinly veiled as a series of warnings. There is some truth to both sides of this stereotype. Some few educated Victorians did write a lot about sex, including medical treatises and psychological studies. Most others never talked about sex; respectable middle-class women in particular were proud of how little they knew about their own bodies and childbirth. In addition, Victorians lived with a sexual double standard that few ever questioned before the end of the period. According to that double standard, men wanted and needed sex, and women were free of sexual desire and submitted to sex only to please their husbands. These standards did not mesh with the reality of a society that featured prostitution, venereal disease, women with sexual desires, and men and women who felt same-sex desire, but they were important nonetheless.

## Gender and class in Victorian society

Victorian society was organized hierarchically. While race, religion, region, and occupation were all meaningful aspects of identity and status, the main organizing principles of Victorian society were gender and class. As is suggested by the sexual double standard, gender was considered to be biologically based and to be determinative of almost every aspect of an individual's potential and character. Victorian gender ideology was premised on the "doctrine of separate spheres." This stated that men and women were different and meant for different things. Men were physically strong, while women were weak. For men sex was central, and for women reproduction was central. Men were independent, while women were dependent. Men belonged in the public sphere, while women belonged in the private sphere. Men were meant to participate in politics and in paid work, while women were meant to run households and raise families.



In 1846, the popular royals, Queen Victoria and her German Prince, Albert, were sketched in the Illustrated London News standing with their children around a Christmas tree. Victoria was very popular with her subjects, and what was done at court immediately became fashionable.





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Women were also thought to be naturally more religious and morally finer than men (who were distracted by sexual passions by which women supposedly were untroubled). While most working-class families could not live out the doctrine of separate spheres, because they could not survive on a single male wage, the ideology was influential across all classes.

Class was both economic and cultural and encompassed income, occupation, education, family structure, sexual behaviour, politics, and leisure activities. The working class, about 70 to 80 percent of the population, got its income from wages, with family incomes usually under £100 per annum. Many middle-class observers thought that working-class people imitated middle-class people as much as they could, but they were mistaken; working-class cultures (which varied by locality and other factors) were strong, specific, and premised on their own values. The middle class, which got its income (of £100 to £1,000 per annum) from salaries and profit, grew rapidly during the 19th century, from 15 to over 25 percent of the population. During the 19th century, members of the middle class were the moral leaders of society (they also achieved some political power). The very small and very wealthy upper class got its income (of £1,000 per annum or often

much more) from property, rent, and interest. The upper class had titles, wealth, land, or all three; owned most of the land in Britain; and controlled local, national, and imperial politics.

## Political Events in the Victorian era

Important political events during this period included the abolition of slavery in the British Empire; the expansions of the franchise; working-class political activism, most notably Chartism; the rise of liberalism as the dominant political ideology, especially of the middle class; and the nationalization of Conservative and Liberal parties (and the emergence of the British Labour Party in 1906). The growth of the state and state intervention were seen in major acts that limited hours for factory workers and miners, in public health acts, and in the provision of elementary education by the state. Political conflicts between Ireland and Britain and the rise of Irish nationalism were also hallmarks of the era, as were women's rights activism, which resulted in the Married Women's Property Acts, the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, and the growth of education and employment options for women."

Source: Steinbach, Susie. "Victorian Era." Britannica online. Last Update: August 25, 2025.  
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Victorian-era>

# The Players/Characters



Tim Gouran  
as  
**Lane/Merriman**



Chris Clark  
as  
**Algernon Moncrief**



Calder Shilling  
as  
**Jack Worthing**



Shaunyce Omar  
as  
**Lady Bracknell**



Kelly Karcher  
as  
**Gwendolen Fairfax**



Alegria Batara  
as  
**Cecily Cardew**



Jonelle Jordan  
as  
**Miss Prism**



Nik Doner  
as  
**Reverend Chasuble**

## Understudies



Jeremy Steckler  
as  
**Algernon/Rev. Chasuble**



Sebastian Wang  
as  
**Jack/Lane/Merriman**



Marena Kleinpeter  
as  
**Gwendolen/Cecily**



Candace Vance  
as  
**Bracknell/Prism**

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# The Importance of

## *The Importance of Being Earnest* By Oscar Wilde

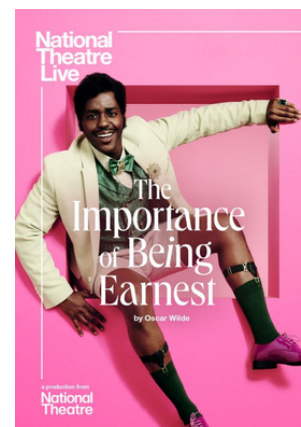
The first production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* was a resounding success. Opening on February 14, 1895, at the St. James's Theatre in London, it was met with an ovation for Oscar Wilde and a generally positive critical reception. The play was praised for its cleverness and humor, with reviewers noting the audience's laughter throughout the performance. Despite the initial positive reception, the play was later seen as controversial due to its satire of British society, and there were even calls for a ban.

Since that initial premiere, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, has become widely recognized as Wilde's finest work and, indeed, one of the best examples of classic British comedy. Several notable productions of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* have shaped its legacy. Productions at the Royal Court Theatre in London and the National Theatre have garnered significant acclaim for their interpretations of the play's wit and social

commentary. In a 1939 production at the Globe Theatre (now the Gielgud), John Gielgud directed and starred in this production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which included the acclaimed Edith Evans as Lady Bracknell. This rendition toured North America and was revived multiple times, including a Royal Command Performance, solidifying the play's place as a classic.

In recent years, some productions have chosen to delve into the potential gay subtext within the play, reflecting contemporary discussions about Wilde's life and work. The Abbey Theatre in Dublin (2005) mounted an all-male production and even included Wilde as a character. More recently, the National Theatre in London presented a "wild revival" in 2024 with a decidedly queer sensibility and starring Ncuti Gatwa.

Source: "The Importance of Being Earnest." SparkNotes. © 2025 SparkNotes.  
<https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/earnest/>. Accessed 9.25.25





# Why Earnest?

In the late 19th century, "earnest" primarily meant: Serious in intention, purpose, or effort, Sincere and honest, or Grave or solemn. Being "earnest" was a Victorian virtue—connoting moral uprightness, integrity, and a rejection of frivolity. Victorian society prized this quality, especially in men, as a marker of trustworthiness and respectability. Today, "earnest" still means serious and sincere, but it often has a slightly negative or awkward connotation—as in, overly sincere, naively intense, or even cringeworthy (e.g., "He gave an earnest speech about recycling."). The moral gravity it carried in Wilde's time is now somewhat diminished.

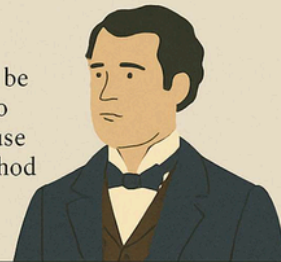
Wilde's title, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is a pun on both the virtue (being "earnest") and the name "Ernest"—which both protagonists adopt to woo women who claim to love the name. In 1895, Wilde's audiences saw the ironic tension between Victorian seriousness and the frivolous, deceptive behavior of the characters. The joke was that the characters are anything but earnest in behavior, despite trying to appear morally upright. The pun exposes the hypocrisy and artificial morality of upper-class society.

Today, modern audiences may miss the full weight of "earnest" as a moral ideal, reading it more as a quirky or old-fashioned term. The play becomes more of a romantic farce than a biting satire of Victorian values—unless the historical meaning is understood. The title may

seem merely punny or whimsical, rather than deeply ironic. Understanding the Victorian depth of the word makes Wilde's satire sharper. Without that, we risk reading the play as charmingly clever rather than piercingly critical.

## SATIRICAL NAME CHANGE BY CHRISTENING IN 'THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST'

In the play, Jack declares that he will be "christened Ernest" that afternoon to satisfy Gwendolen's whims. Wilde's use of christening as a name change method is a sharp satire of Victorian conventions.



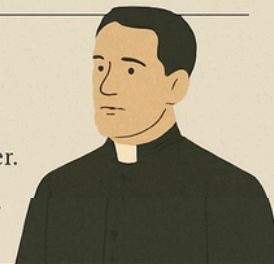
## VICTORIAN OBSESSION WITH NAMES AND APPEARANCES

Gwendolen and Cecily care about the name "Ernest," not the person himself. Wilde mocks the arbitrariness of identity defined by superficial factors.



## RELIGIOUS RITUAL AS CONVENIENCE

Jack reduces a sacrament of the Church to more paperwork to make his life easier. Wilde satirizes Victorians' performance of religious piety for appearances rather than faith.



## THE ABSURDITY OF LEGAL AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

Jack treats a new name as a quick way to sewrite his entire identity. Wilde uses the pun "earnest" vs "Ernest" to show the hollowness of Victorian



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# Victorian Courtship

## Victorian Fan Flirtation

In the 19th century, a lady's fan was more than a fashion accessory—it was a tool for discreet communication. Within the strict codes of etiquette, women could use subtle gestures to send messages of interest, refusal, or affection.



- Letting the fan rest on the right cheek: “Yes.”
- Letting the fan rest on the left cheek: “No.”
- Drawing the fan through the hand: “I hate you!”
- Drawing the fan across the cheek: “I love you!”
- Touching the finger to the tip of the fan: “I wish to speak with you.”
- Half-opened fan pressed to the lips: “You may kiss me.”



## A Trivial Comedy

Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* derives much of its comedic and thematic heft from the way in which it inverts the values of everyday life. The play constantly pokes fun at conventionally serious topics like love, death, and religion, while simultaneously handling trivialities (e.g., which teatime snacks are trendy this season) with the utmost seriousness. This irreverence takes its most perfect form in the dozens of epigrams and witticisms that make up so much of the play's dialogue.

In a 1895 interview for a London newspaper, Wilde describe his comedy saying, "[*The Importance of Being Earnest*] is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy, and it has its philosophy... That we should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality."

—Oscar Wilde, from a January 1895 interview with Robbie Ross, published in the *St. James Gazette*



## Food for Thought

- All of the characters in *Earnest* are ridiculous in their own unique ways, and yet we always laugh with them, never at them. **What is the difference between the two, and why does it matter?**
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* lampoons the affects and idiosyncrasies of Victorian high society, and yet it was enormously popular, especially among those whom it parodies. **How do we account for this? What about the play's language and characters made it so enjoyable for the Victorians? What makes it so enjoyable for us today?**
- George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde's friend and fellow playwright, wrote a review about Wilde's writing saying, "In a certain sense Mr. Wilde is to me our only thorough playwright. He plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre." **What does Shaw mean by the verb, "play"? Do agree with this description of Wilde's writing style?**

Source: McVarish, Connor. "Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*." EDSITEMENT: The Best of Humanities on the Web. <https://edsitement.neh.gov/student-activities/oscar-wildes-importance-being-earnest> Accessed 9.26.25





# Mission Statement



Taproot Theatre Company tells stories of hope, serving the Pacific Northwest through live theatre and educational programs.

Taproot Theatre Company was founded in 1976 by six friends, five of them graduates from Seattle Pacific University. From its humble beginnings as a touring group, the company is now Seattle's largest mid-size theatre company. Today Taproot Theatre serves over 150,000 people annually throughout the Pacific Northwest with its Jewell Mainstage season, Isaac Studio Theatre season, Touring programs and Acting Studio.

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| <p>Producing Artistic Director<br/><b>Karen Lund</b></p> <p>Associate Artistic Director<br/><b>Bretteney Beverly</b></p> <p>Director of Production<br/><b>Mark Lund</b></p> <p>Director of Marketing<br/><b>Daytona Danielsen</b></p> <p>Director of Development<br/><b>Gina Cavallo</b></p> | <p><b>In-school Residencies,<br/>Workshops, and Tours</b></p> <p><b>Jeremy Ehrlich</b>, Education and Outreach Manager<br/>206.329.3674</p> <p><b>Karissa Chin</b>, Education and Outreach Associate<br/>206.529.3669</p> <p><b>Midweek Matinees</b><br/>206.529.3676<br/>Box Office: 206.781.9707<br/>Administrative Office: 206.781.9705</p> <p>taproottheatre.org</p> |
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# Education Programs



## In-School Residencies & Workshops

From drama games to acting classes to putting on a production, Taproot Theatre's residencies can range from several weeks to months, or an entire school year. Whether during the school day or after school as an enrichment program, let Taproot's trained teaching artists introduce a whole new world to your students.

Our theatre arts professional will visit your classroom for a workshop that will inspire and excite your students. They will develop basic acting skills and explore non-theatre curriculum using theater as a medium.



## Camps & Classes

Taproot Theatre Company's Acting Studio is a year-round instructional program for theatre artists of all ages and experience levels. We are devoted to the wholeness of the artist with the goal of creating a nurturing environment to help each student develop his or her unique gifts.



## Touring Productions

The Road Company performs social-emotional learning plays for elementary and secondary schools, focusing on bullying prevention and social responsibility.

Taproot also provides touring Christmas productions during the holidays and Improv comedy year-round for churches, clubs, office parties, and other groups.