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The Importance of Being Earnest



Oscar Wilde

Introduction, notes and activities by

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Turin Polytechnic

Introduction, notes and activities

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Appendix I

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Front cover:

The Luncheon (detail) by Claude Monet

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Printed in Italy by L.E.G.O. S.p.A. – Lavis (TN)

CONTENTS

<i>Phonetic Symbols</i>	VI
<i>Introduction</i>	
Wilde's Life and Literary Background	IX
Wilde and Aestheticism	XXV
Wilde's Place in English Comedy	XXVI
<i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i>	XXIX
The Early Critical Reception	XXIX
Some Critical Approaches	XXXIV
The Play as Farce	XXXV
The Play as Absurd Drama	XXXVI
The Play as Satire	XXXVII
The Play as Parody	XLII
Characterisation	XLIV
Wilde's Language	L
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	LVII
<i>Chronology</i>	LX
<i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i>	1
<i>Appendix I: The Gribbsby Episode</i>	121
<i>Activities</i>	131

The Importance of Being Earnest was first performed at the St James's Theatre, London on 14th February, 1895, with the following cast:

JOHN WORTHING, J.P.	Mr George Alexander
ALGERNON MONCRIEFF	Mr Allen Aynsworth
REV. CANON CHASUBLE, D.D.	Mr H. H. Vincent
MERRIMAN (Butler)	Mr Frank Dyall
LANE (Manservant)	Mr F. Kinsey Peile
LADY BRACKNELL	Miss Rose Leclercq
HON. GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX ¹	Miss Irene Vanbrugh
CECILY CARDEW	Miss Evelyn Millard
MISS PRISM (Governess)	Mrs George Canninge

Lessee and Manager: Mr George Alexander

THE SCENES OF THE PLAY

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.
TIME:	The present.


1. The prefix Hon. (Honourable) indicates that Gwendolen is the daughter of a Viscount or Baron. It is correct to address her as Miss.

ACT I

SCENE

Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street¹. 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 – any one can play accurately – but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte.² I keep science for Life.

LANE. Yes, sir.

1. *Half-Moon Street* : street in London's West End, at that time a fashionable street for bachelors' rooms or chambers.

2. *my forte* : my particular strength. Note the play on words, since the full name of the piano is *pianoforte*.

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 book¹ 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 demoralising as that?

LANE. I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir.² 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 person.

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.

1. *your book* : a manservant in a wealthy establishment would keep a 'cellar book' in which he would enter details of wine consumed, its vintage, when and by whom it had been drunk, etc.
2. *I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir* : Lane's answer is unexpected, suggesting that something demoralising is pleasant. This is typical of Wilde's comic inversions.

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 orders¹ 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?²

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.

1. *the lower orders* : the working class, including servants like Lane.
2. *up to town* : 'town' means London.

ALGERNON. And who are the people you amuse?

JACK (*airily*). Oh, neighbours, neighbours.

ALGERNON. Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire? ¹

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 ² 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. ³

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

1. *Shropshire* : county in England near the Welsh border.
2. *reckless* : lacking caution, regardless of consequences. Jack's question is comically inappropriate to the subject of the expense of cucumber sandwiches.
3. *propose to her* : ask her to marry him.

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 ¹ for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.

ALGERNON. Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven – ² (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, ³ 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.

1. *the Divorce Court was specially invented* : in England the Divorce Court was established in 1857 by the Matrimonial Causes Act. Before then, a divorce decree could only be granted by Act of Parliament.
2. *divorces are made in Heaven* : the saying is that 'marriages are made in Heaven'.
3. *fellow* : (here) man, friend.

JACK. Why on earth do you say that?

ALGERNON. Well, in the first place girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right.

JACK. Oh, that is nonsense!

ALGERNON. It isn't. It is a great truth. It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place. In the second place, I don't give my consent.

JACK. Your consent!

ALGERNON. My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin.¹ And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up² the whole question of Cecily. (*Rings bell.*)

JACK. Cecily! What on earth do you mean? What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily! I don't know any one of the name of Cecily.

Enter LANE.

ALGERNON. Bring me that cigarette case Mr Worthing left in the smoking-room³ the last time he dined here.

LANE. Yes, sir.

LANE goes out.

JACK. Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have

1. *first cousin* : person whose father or mother is brother or sister to one of one's own parents.
2. *clear up* : phrasal verb meaning explain, resolve.
3. *smoking-room* : room in the houses of the rich where the gentlemen would go to smoke after dinner, apparently so that the smell of the smoke would not cause the ladies displeasure but also so that the gentlemen could indulge in conversation not considered suitable for the ears of the ladies.

been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard¹ about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward.

ALGERNON. Well, I wish you would offer one. I happen to be more than usually hard up.²

JACK. There is no good offering a large reward now that the thing is found.

Enter LANE with the cigarette case on a salver.³ ALGERNON takes it at once. LANE goes out.

ALGERNON. I think that is rather mean of you, Ernest, I must say. (*Opens case and examines it.*) However, it makes no matter, for, now that I look at the inscription inside, I find that the thing isn't yours after all.

JACK. Of course it's mine. (*Moving to him.*) You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.

ALGERNON. Oh! it is absurd to have a hard and fast⁴ rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

JACK. I am quite aware of the fact, and I don't propose to discuss modern culture. It isn't the sort of thing one should talk of in private. I simply want my cigarette case back.

1. *Scotland Yard* : headquarters of the London Metropolitan Police. Still popularly referred to as the headquarters of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID).
2. *hard up* : short of money.
3. *salver* : gold or silver tray.
4. *hard and fast* : rigid, strict, fixed. 'Fast' here means strong.

ALGERNON. Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from some one of the name of Cecily, and you said you didn't know any one of that name.

JACK. Well, if you want to know, Cecily happens to be my aunt.

ALGERNON. Your aunt!

JACK. Yes. Charming old lady she is, too. Lives at Tunbridge Wells. ¹ Just give it back to me, Algy.

ALGERNON (*retreating to back of sofa*). But why does she call herself little Cecily if she is your aunt and lives at Tunbridge Wells? (*Reading*.) 'From little Cecily with her fondest love.'

JACK (*moving to sofa and kneeling upon it*). My dear fellow, what on earth is there in that? Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt! That is absurd! For Heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case. (*Follows ALGERNON round the room.*)

ALGERNON. Yes. But why does your aunt call you her uncle? 'From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.' There is no objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own nephew her uncle, I can't quite make out. ² Besides, your name isn't Jack at all; it is Ernest.

JACK. It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.

1. *Tunbridge Wells* : town in Southern England with a mineral water spring, which had been a fashionable place for 'taking the waters' since 1700. It would be a suitable place for a 'charming old lady'.
2. *make out* : understand.

ALGERNON. You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them. (*Taking it from case*.) 'Mr Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany.' ¹ I'll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to any one else. (*Puts the card in his pocket*.)

JACK. Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.

ALGERNON. Yes, but that does not account for the fact that your small Aunt Cecily, who lives at Tunbridge Wells, calls you her dear uncle. Come, old boy, you had much better have the thing out ² at once.

JACK. My dear Algy, you talk exactly as if you were a dentist. ³ It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn't a dentist. It produces a false impression.

ALGERNON. Well, that is exactly what dentists always do. Now, go on! Tell me the whole thing. I may mention that I have always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist; and I am quite sure of it now.

1. *The Albany* : block of exclusive bachelor apartments near Piccadilly.
2. *have the thing out* : give a full explanation ('to have it out with someone' is to insist on an explanation of a misunderstanding or agreement).
3. *you talk exactly as if you were a dentist* : Jack is telling Algy that he talks like a person not fit to be in high society. There are also two puns drawn from the field of dentistry: (1) a person has a tooth out; (2) dentists make an impression of people's jaws in order to make false teeth.

JACK. Bunburyist? What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyist?

ALGERNON. I'll reveal to you the meaning of that **incomparable** expression as soon as you are kind enough to **inform** me why you are Ernest in town and Jack in the country.

JACK. Well, produce my cigarette case first.

ALGERNON. Here it is. (*Hands cigarette case.*) Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable. (*Sits on sofa.*)

JACK. My dear fellow, there is nothing improbable about my explanation at all. In fact it's perfectly ordinary. Old Mr Thomas Cardew, who adopted me when I was a little boy, made me in his will ¹ guardian ² to his grand-daughter, Miss Cecily Cardew. Cecily, who addresses me as her uncle from motives of respect that you could not possibly appreciate, lives at my place in the country under the charge of her admirable governess, Miss Prism.

ALGERNON. Where is that place in the country, by the way?

JACK. That is nothing to you, dear boy. You are not going to be invited. ... I may tell you candidly that the place is not in Shropshire.

ALGERNON. I suspected that, my dear fellow! I have **Bunburied** all over Shropshire on two separate occasions. Now, go on. Why are you Ernest in town and Jack in the country?

JACK. My dear Algy, I don't know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious

1. *will* : document that stated Mr Cardew's wishes after his death.
2. *guardian* : because Cecily is an orphan, Jack is legally responsible for her.

enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. ¹ That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.

ALGERNON. The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!

JACK. That wouldn't be at all a bad thing.

ALGERNON. Literary criticism is not your forte, my dear fellow. Don't try it. You should leave that to people who haven't been at a University. They do it so well in the daily papers. What you really are is a Bunburyist. ² I was quite right in saying you were a Bunburyist. You are one of the most advanced Bunburyists I know.

JACK. What on earth do you mean?

ALGERNON. You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country

1. *dreadful scrapes* : difficult situations.
2. *Bunburyist* : from the name Bunbury, Algy makes the verb 'to Bunbury' and the noun 'Bunburyist'. The idea is clear from Algy's description on this page.