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books

Oscar Wilde

**The Importance
of *Being Earnest***

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 FCE Cambridge First Certificate in English-style exercises



These symbols indicate the beginning and end of the listening extracts.

Oscar Wilde

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland, on 16 October 1854. He was the second son of Sir William Wilde, an eminent surgeon, and Jane Francesca Elgee ('Speranza'), an Irish nationalist poet.

He attended Trinity College in Dublin, and at the age of 20 left Ireland to study at Oxford University. At Oxford he distinguished himself as a scholar and wit. He was deeply influenced by the aesthetic theories of Pater and Ruskin, and the cult of 'Art for Art's sake'. All through his life he was interested in the pursuit of beauty, not only in literature, but in the arts, interior design, clothes, furniture and objects. In 1878 he moved to London, where he began writing. His eccentric personal style, brilliant conversation and stylish clothes made him a well-known figure in fashionable London circles.

In 1882 he spent a year in the United States, where he toured and lectured.

On his return to London in 1884, he married Constance Lloyd. They had two sons, Cyril (1885) and Vyvyan (1886).

His period of true achievement began in 1888, when he published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, a collection of fables and fairy tales for children. He became famous in London as a writer, poet and playwright.

Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), is a longer version of a moral fable. It describes a man whose portrait ages and becomes ugly, as a reflection of his great moral corruption, while his actual appearance remains the same. There are several autobiographical elements in the novel. It was immediately attacked by the critics of the time because of its ambiguous morality.

In 1891 Wilde published the play *Salomé* in French. He also published his second volume of tales, *The House of Pomegranates*, and *Intentions*, a collection of essays including the well-known work 'The Decay of Lying'.

Wilde's most important works were his plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895). These plays combined the fashionable drama of social intrigue with sparkling comedy.

The Importance of Being Earnest is his masterpiece. In the play Wilde very skilfully combines high comedy with farce, and creates the perfect example of the 'comedy of manners'. He ridicules the Puritan ideals of earnestness and sincerity. He laughs at the manners, morals and social hypocrisy of the Victorian Age. The play is a jewel in its genre.



A Private View at the Royal Academy (1881) by William Powell Frith.

In 1895 Wilde was at the peak of his brilliant career, and had two hit plays running at the same time in London. But in that year he was accused of homosexual behaviour. At his trial he was sentenced to imprisonment and two years' hard labour.

His rapid decline began with his imprisonment. He was declared bankrupt and his name was removed from some of his works. While in prison he wrote *De Profundis*, a long letter to his friend Lord Alfred Douglas, which was published after his death. After his prison experience he was a devastated man. He went to live in France, where he wrote his best poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). He spent his last years in solitude and illness. Wilde died of meningitis in Paris on 30 November 1900.



1 Answer the following questions.

- 1 Where was Oscar Wilde born?
- 2 What were his parents famous for?
- 3 Where did Wilde go to university?
- 4 Why did he become famous in London society?
- 5 When did he marry?
- 6 Why did he go to the United States?
- 7 What is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* about?
- 8 What are the names of his four most important plays? When were they published?
- 9 What kind of play is *The Importance of Being Earnest*?
- 10 Why was he sentenced to two years' hard labour?

Before reading

- 1 Oscar Wilde wrote that this is a 'trivial play for serious people'. Make a list of three things that you think are trivial and three things that you think are serious. In pairs, ask each other whether you agree with each other's choices.

Example: Student A: 'Arriving at dinner on time.'

Student B: 'In my opinion that is serious.'

Student A: 'Well, I think it is completely trivial.'

- 2 Read the description of Victorian earnestness on page 11. Which things do you think were considered serious and which trivial by a middle-class man of that period?

- FCE** **3** Listen to Algernon, a refined young man, talking with Lane, his butler. The extract ends on page 29 with Jack's arrival. For questions 1-7, complete the sentences.

- 1 Lane did not listen to Algernon playing the piano because he did not think it
- 2 Algernon does not play the piano
- 3 Lane has prepared for Lady Bracknell.
- 4 Algernon has noticed that at a bachelor's establishments the servants invariably
- 5 Lane has noticed the champagne is never of a first-rate brand in households.
- 6 Lane has very little experience in marriage because he has only been
- 7 Algernon is not very interested in
- 8 Algernon says that the lower orders have absolutely no

*SCENE: Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street.*¹ *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.² 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.³ I keep science for Life.

LANE. Yes, sir.

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.*)⁴

ALGERNON (*inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa*). Oh! ... by the way, Lane, I see from your book⁵ that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.⁶

LANE. Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

ALGERNON. Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment⁷ the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

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

2 **for your sake** : for your benefit, for your good.

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

4 **salver** : a gold or silver tray.

5 **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.

6 **are entered as having been consumed** : the number of bottles of champagne that were drunk were written in a register.

7 **bachelor's establishment** : the home of a man who isn't married.