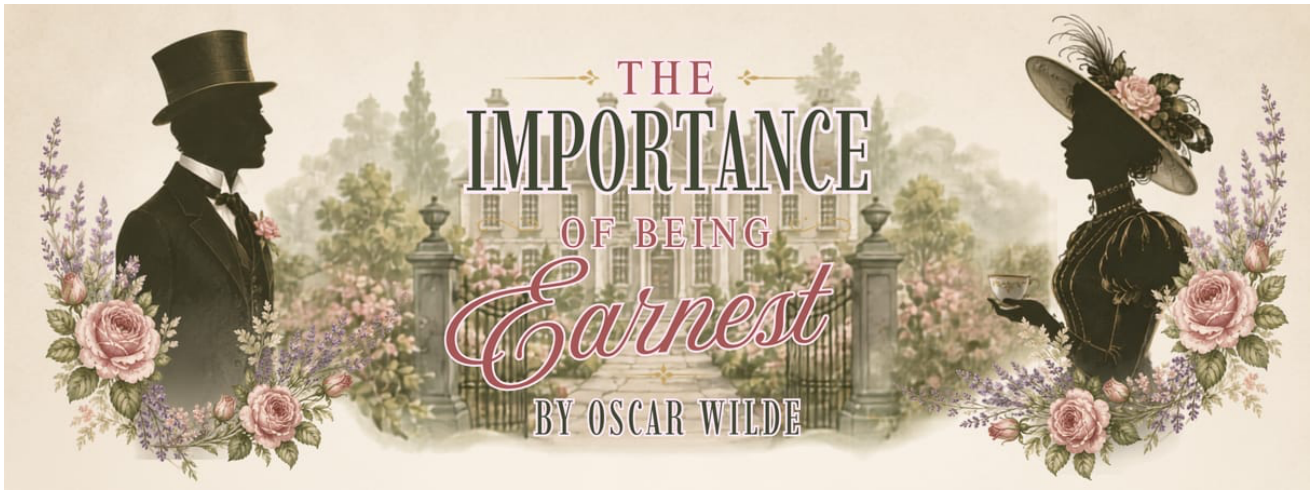


The Importance of Being Earnest

Audience Companion

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Dramaturg's Note

"In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing."

—Gwendolen, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

What does it take to pass for respectable? In Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a good name matters more than good behavior, marriage resembles a business transaction, and telling the truth threatens to ruin everything. Beneath the muffins and cucumber sandwiches lies a double consciousness familiar to modern life: knowing who you are while watching who the world expects you to be. For LGBTQ+ people, navigating that divide has often been a matter of survival.

Wilde understood the pleasures and perils of such a double life. A leading figure in the Aestheticism movement and a celebrated dandy, he made self-fashioning an art. His desires, however, exposed him to punishment in a society that criminalized sexual intimacy between men, or "the love that dare not speak its name."

In the play, Jack and Algernon invent other identities to escape social obligations and pursue forbidden pleasures. Their double lives turn identity into an improvisation and respectability into a costume anyone with the right accessories can wear. Wilde's queer wit makes this instability deliciously entertaining. Every reversal exposes the absurdity of supposedly natural truths about gender, class, desire, and even handbags. His satire invites us into respectable Victorian society while teaching us to see through its elaborate fictions.

In his own lifetime, the stakes of identity extended beyond the stage. In April 1895, roughly two months after the play opened, Wilde himself went on trial for "gross indecency." He would die just five years later, at forty-six. The society that applauded his wit was also prepared to punish his desires. Yet his plays continue to invite audiences to laugh at the conventions that constrained him.

As we laugh at Wilde's perfectly structured comedy, we might ask: Whose freedom depends on keeping up appearances? Perhaps we should give Wilde the last word on this: "Good taste is the excuse I've always given for leading such a bad life."

—Benjamin Gillespie, PhD

About the Playwright



Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was an Anglo-Irish poet, novelist, critic, and playwright born in Dublin to Sir William Wilde and Lady Jane Francesca Wilde. He studied at Trinity College, Dublin (1871–1874), and Oxford (1874–1878), where Greek and Roman literature and philosophy helped shape his ideas about art, beauty, and education. He moved to London in 1879 to pursue a literary career and published his first poetry collection in 1881.

His 1882 lecture tour of the United States and Canada helped establish his reputation as a fashionable dandy, a leading voice of Aestheticism, and a celebrated public wit. Wilde became especially famous for his mastery of the epigram: a brief, witty statement with a surprising twist. "The truth is rarely pure and never simple," from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is just one memorable example.

In 1884, Wilde married Constance Lloyd; their sons were born in 1885 and 1886. He edited *Woman's World* from 1887 to 1889 and published fairy tales, essays, and his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. His four major society comedies premiered within four years: *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

Wilde also had relationships with men. In 1891, he began a relationship with the poet Lord Alfred Douglas, known as "Bosie." In 1895, his unsuccessful libel case against Douglas's father led to Wilde's prosecution for "gross indecency," a charge used to criminalize sexual intimacy between men. He served two years in prison with hard labor, then lived in exile, mostly in France, until his death in Paris in 1900, aged forty-six.

The Victorian Era



Queen Victoria

The Victorian era (1837–1901) was a period of rapid change in Britain, marked by industrial growth, scientific discoveries, and debates about religion, morality, and social roles. Respectability mattered enormously, especially among the upper classes, whose public reputations did not always reflect their private lives.

Middle-class ideals placed women in the home as sources of moral guidance and emotional support, while men were associated with business and public affairs. These expectations often concealed a more complicated reality: women participated in politics, and private diaries reveal desires and experiences that challenged conventional ideas about gender and sexuality.

Although romantic love became increasingly important to marriage, wealth, inheritance, and family connections remained powerful considerations, particularly among the upper classes. Social rituals such as afternoon tea, fashionable in the 1840s, offered opportunities to display manners, status, and taste. Meanwhile, newspapers, novels, and scientific books reached growing audiences, circulating both new ideas and familiar prejudices.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde turns this world of strict etiquette and social ambition upside down, exposing how easily respectable appearances can disguise selfish motives and absurd double standards. This is most visible with the infamous Lady Bracknell.

Art for Art's Sake

Oscar Wilde was a leading voice of **Aestheticism**, a movement associated with the phrase "art for art's sake." For its advocates, art did not need to teach a moral lesson or serve a practical purpose to have value. Wilde's declaration that "All art is quite useless" playfully challenges the expectation that beauty and imagination must justify their existence through usefulness. Freed from those demands, art could offer pleasure, provoke thought, and invite audiences to see familiar customs differently.

In his dialogue essay *The Decay of Lying*, collected in 1891, Wilde argues that art should invent "beautiful untrue things" rather than simply copy everyday life. For him, strict realism could limit imagination and beauty. He even reverses our usual assumptions by suggesting that life and nature imitate art: artworks shape what we notice and how we see the world around us.

Wilde brought this spirit to the comedy of manners, using fashionable society's behavior and conversation to expose its contradictions.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, subtitled "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People," elaborate deceptions and improbable revelations turn courtship into farce. Jack and Algernon embody the dandy's devotion to style, wit, and self-invention, while sharp epigrams—brief, witty statements—turn conventional morality upside down. Muffins, cucumber sandwiches, and the name "Ernest" receive extravagant attention, making supposedly serious matters such as marriage, class, and respectability look delightfully absurd.

The play's pleasure is also its provocation: what happens when style reveals more than sincerity?



Queer Tendencies

Wilde's relationships with men unfolded in a society that criminalized sexual intimacy between men and placed enormous pressure on public respectability. In 1891, he began a relationship with the poet and aristocrat Lord Alfred Douglas ("Bosie"). His marriage, celebrity, and relationships reveal the complicated overlap between public identity and private desire. Although Wilde's distinctive clothing and manner challenged masculine conventions, they did not carry precisely the same meanings that audiences might assign to them today.

These tensions also animate his writing. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in book form in 1891, explores beauty, desire, secrecy, and the distance between an immaculate appearance and a hidden life. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, invented identities and convenient excuses allow characters to escape social obligations and pursue forbidden pleasures. Although the play does not explicitly depict same-sex relationships, its double lives invite queer readings: who gets the freedom to invent themselves, and what must remain unsaid?

In his essay collection *Intentions* (1891), Wilde similarly champions interpretation and criticism as creative acts, encouraging readers to question accepted meanings and imagine other possibilities.

In 1895, at the height of his theatrical success, Wilde brought a criminal libel case against the Marquess of Queensberry, the father of his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. The case collapsed that April, and evidence gathered against Wilde led to his own prosecution. In May, he was convicted of "gross indecency," a charge used to criminalize sexual intimacy between men, and sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labor. His public reputation and livelihood were devastated.

While imprisoned, Wilde wrote *De Profundis*, a long letter addressed to Douglas that reflects on their relationship, suffering, love, and art. An edited version appeared posthumously in 1905; the complete text was published much later. After his release in 1897, Wilde lived in exile in France and published *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), drawing on his prison experience to expose the cruelty of punishment. He died in Paris on November 30, 1900, aged forty-six.



Bunburying and Double Lives

Algernon invents an imaginary friend named Bunbury, whose recurring illnesses provide a convenient excuse to escape unwanted social obligations. He calls this practice "Bunburying," creating a fictional identity or situation that makes room for pleasures respectable society might otherwise deny.

Jack has his own version, becoming "Ernest" whenever he leaves the country for London. In Wilde's comic world, double lives seem almost necessary for enjoying life.

Bunburying also invites a queer reading. In a society that criminalized sexual intimacy between men, secrecy, aliases, and carefully managed appearances could offer protection and freedom. The characters' deceptions can therefore resonate with the experience of concealing desires while maintaining a respectable public identity.

The play operates with a double consciousness: its sparkling comedy of courtship coexists with an awareness of the distance between who people are and who society permits them to be.

Bunburying need not have a single hidden meaning to raise a revealing question: What kinds of freedom become possible when you can be someone else?



The Well-Made Play and Social Satire

The **well-made play**, developed and popularized in nineteenth-century France, builds entertainment around carefully arranged secrets, misunderstandings, and revelations. Audiences often know something that certain characters do not, creating suspense as the truth threatens to emerge.

Letters, documents, or misplaced objects can become crucial clues, leading to an anticipated confrontation—the "obligatory scene"—and a resolution that ties the plot together. Here, "well-made" names a particular European dramatic formula rather than a universal standard for good theatre.

Wilde applies this structure in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and pushes its conventions toward farce. Hidden identities, an abandoned handbag, and a misplaced manuscript turn the machinery of revelation into something delightfully improbable.

His witty exchanges keep the action sparkling while exposing the upper classes' obsession with names, ancestry, and suitable marriages. The elaborate plot doesn't just solve a mystery; it makes a society that bases human worth on family connections look as absurd as the coincidences that bring the story to its conclusion.

Social satire uses humor, irony, exaggeration, and absurdity to expose hypocrisy and challenge social conventions. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde makes respectable society look ridiculous by reversing its priorities: cucumber sandwiches become urgent business, while truth and marriage receive remarkably casual treatment. His characters defend ignorance, prize appearances, and deliver outrageous judgments with perfect confidence. Their wit invites us to question ideas they take for granted.

Marriage becomes a financial negotiation, a name matters more than someone's character, and family connections determine who deserves acceptance. Moving between town and country allows Jack and Algernon to perform different identities, exposing how respectability depends on managing appearances. Wilde's studied frivolity gives these jokes their bite: instead of delivering a moral lecture, he lets society reveal its own absurdities.

As you watch, notice what the characters treat seriously—and what they find easy to overlook.



Glossary

- **Epigram:** A brief, clever, witty statement or short satirical poem that expresses an idea with a surprising twist.

- **Profligate:** Recklessly extravagant or shamelessly indulgent in behavior considered immoral.

- **Apoplexy:** A historical term for a stroke or sudden internal bleeding.

- **Quixotic:** Idealistic to an impractical degree, often involving extravagant romantic or chivalrous ambitions. The word comes from *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes.

- **Dogcart:** A light, two-wheeled carriage with two seats positioned back to back.

- **Effrontery:** Shameless boldness or insolence.

- **Pink rose (in the language of flowers):** Associated with admiration, gratitude, grace, happiness, and gentleness. Meanings vary, but darker pink often suggests admiration and gratitude, while lighter pink suggests grace and gentleness.

Program Crossword Answers

Finished the crossword in your program? Check your answers below.



