

the literary world, marriage, and many other situations that we believe should be taken seriously. A comedy's main goal is to take a real life situation which a person would not usually make fun of and make it into a comedic fiction.

The major target of Wilde's scathing social wit is the hypocritical mask of society. Frequently in Victorian society, its participants comported themselves in overly sincere, polite ways while they harbored manipulative, cruel attitudes. The rapid flip-flopping of truths and lies, of earnestness and duplicity, shows how truly muddled the Victorian values of honesty and responsibility were; its characters don and take off their masks of manners whenever it is convenient. A subset of the "mask of manners" theme, Wilde explores in depth what it means to have a dual identity in Victorian society.

People say:

"Oscar Wilde's best known work always had a claim to be the wittiest play in the English language" – *Financial Times*

"Comes as close to perfection as any comedy I can think of." --*Daily Telegraph*

"Wilde is to me our only thorough playwright. He plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audiences, with the whole theatre" – George Bernard Shaw

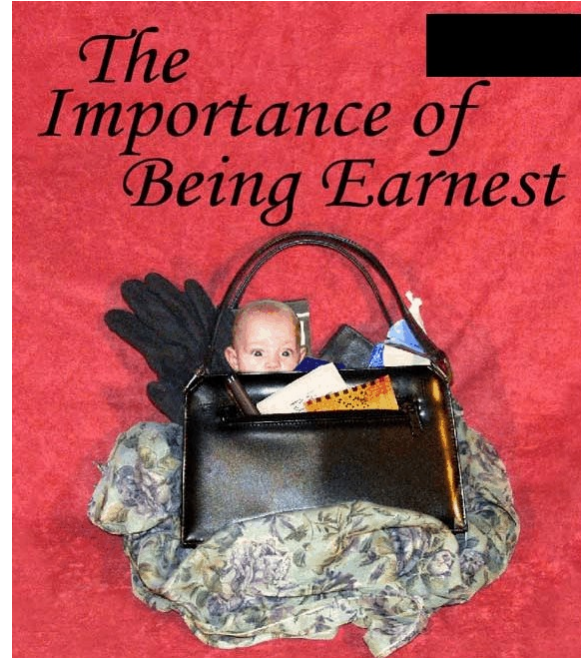
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From the Page to the Stage
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Oscar Wilde's

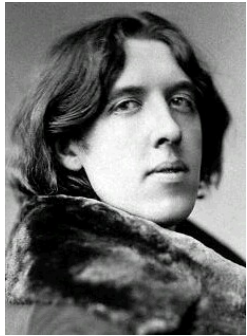


A Playgoer's Guide

“Earnest”:

- Marked by or showing deep sincerity or seriousness; serious; important
- Money paid in advance as part payment to bind a contract or bargain.
- A token of something to come; a promise or an assurance
- Ardent in the pursuit of an object; eager to obtain or do; zealous with sincerity; with hearty endeavor; heartfelt; fervent; hearty
- A person's name usually indicating one of the male sex

Oscar Wilde:



Oscar Fingal O'Flaherty Wills Wilde was born on October 16, 1854. Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland to Sir William Wilde and Lady Jane Wilde. His father was a gifted writer and a specialist of diseases of the eyes and ears. His mother was a poet and a journalist who wrote under the pen name Speranza.

Wilde studied at Portora Royal School, Ennis Killen, County Fermanagh, Trinity College in Dublin, and Magdalen College in Oxford. He received his BA in 1876 and moved to London in that same year. In 1881

he worked as an art reviewer, lectured in Canada and the States in 1882, and lived in Paris in 1883. In 1884 he married Constance Lloyd. The couple had two children, Cyril in 1885 and Vyvyan in 1886. To support his family Wilde took a job editing a magazine called *Women's World* from 1887-1889. Wilde went on to publish two collection of children's stories, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* in 1888 and *The House of Pomegranates* in 1892. In 1890, his first and only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was published in an American magazine. Oscar's first play *Lady Windermere's Fan* was very successful and provided Wilde with a lot of financial help. This prompted him to continue writing for the theatre. He wrote three more plays in his lifetime: *A Woman of no Importance* in 1893, *An Ideal Husband* in 1895, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1895. All of them were highly acclaimed and established Wilde as a playwright.

Although he was married and had two children, Wilde's personal life was still open to rumours. It has been considered that Wilde was bisexual or homosexual. His relations with other men were fairly well known. An intimate relation that Wilde had with Lord Alfred Douglas led to a confrontation with John Sholto Douglas, the ninth Marquess of Queensbury. Queensbury publicly insulted Wilde with a misspelled note left at Wilde's club. The note read "Mr. Wilde posing as a sodomite." Wilde charged Queensbury with libel; however, he lost the libel suit and was formally accused of "gross indecency." Wilde was arrested on April 6, 1895, and was convicted on May 25 of "Sodomy and gross indecency" and sentenced to two years of hard labour in a London prison. Wilde's health was not favourable while he was in prison. He was released on May 19, 1897 and spent the last few years of his life penniless. Wilde lived under the name Sebastian Melmoth in self exile from society. He converted to Roman Catholicism shortly before his death; he died of cerebral meningitis on November 30, 1900 in a Paris hotel.

Summary:

John Worthing, a carefree young gentleman, is the inventor of a fictitious brother, "Ernest," whose wicked ways afford John an excuse to leave his country home from time to time and journey to London, where he stays with his close friend and confidant, Algernon Moncrieff. Algernon has a cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax, with whom John is deeply in love. During his London sojourns, John, under the name Ernest, has won Gwendolen's love, for she strongly desires to marry someone with the confidence-inspiring name of Ernest. But when he asks for Gwendolen's hand from the formidable Lady Bracknell, John finds he must reveal he is a foundling who was left in a handbag at Victoria Station. This is very disturbing to Lady Bracknell, who insists that he produce at least one parent before she consents to the marriage.

Returning to the country home where he lives with his ward Cecily and her governess Miss Prism, John finds that Algernon has also arrived under the identity of the nonexistent brother Ernest. Algernon falls madly in love with the beautiful Cecily, who has long been enamored of the mysterious, fascinating brother Ernest.

With the arrival of Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen, chaos erupts. It is discovered that Miss Prism is the absent-minded nurse who twenty years ago misplaced the baby of Lady Bracknell's brother in Victoria Station. Thus John, whose name is indeed Ernest, is Algernon's elder brother, and the play ends with the two couples in a joyous embrace. Even though Lady Bracknell accuses Jack of triviality, he retorts that he has only just discovered "the vital Importance of Being Earnest." (Adapted from Utah Shakespeare festival note)



The Use of Comedy:

One of the main reasons *The Importance of Being Earnest* is so popular and is regarded as one of the greatest works of literature to come from Victorian England is its witty sense of dry humor. The play makes a mockery of, and pokes fun, at many aspects of Victorian English upper class society. This comedic play points its jokes towards serious human themes and real life situations – for example, love, religion, truthfulness, men, women, aristocracy,

