

**To the student:**

- 1. Do the all the video clip activities**
- 2. Print out just the texts (the ones highlighted in yellow), not the notes.**
- 3. In class we will decide who is going to report on what!**
- 4. If possible enjoy yourselves, Oscar Wilde is just a great artist, worth studying and appreciating with some kind of in-depth approach.**

**Watch the following videos on Oscar Wilde's biography and take notes. Stick to the sequence:**

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXWaoMwKmA>
2. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLj\\_LmFSn2o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLj_LmFSn2o)
3. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqRwZz7n8o8>
4. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gehpDtxANEE>
5. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6S0AmZFw7k>
6. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSkNvzbgs\\_E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSkNvzbgs_E)
7. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABrGNothfP0>
8. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bk\\_TstA7cK4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bk_TstA7cK4)
9. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GNvQL3lwgs>

## **Biography**

OSCAR WILDE WAS BORN on October 16, 1854, in Dublin, Ireland. He was educated at Trinity College in Dublin and at Magdalen College, Oxford, and settled in London, where he married Constance Lloyd in 1884. In the literary world of Victorian London, Wilde fell in with an artistic crowd that included W. B. Yeats, the great Irish poet, and Lillie Langtry, mistress to the Prince of Wales. A great conversationalist and a famous wit, Wilde began by publishing mediocre poetry but soon achieved widespread fame for his comic plays. The first, *Vera; or, The Nihilists*, was published in 1880. Wilde followed this work with *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and his most famous play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Although these plays relied upon relatively simple and familiar plots, they rose well above convention with their brilliant dialogue and biting satire.

Wilde published his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, before he reached the height of his fame. The first edition appeared in the summer of 1890 in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. It was criticized as scandalous and immoral. Disappointed with its reception, Wilde revised the novel in 1891, adding a preface and six new chapters. The Preface (as Wilde calls it) anticipates some of the criticism that might be leveled at the novel and answers critics who charge *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with being an immoral tale. It also succinctly sets forth the tenets of Wilde's philosophy of art. Devoted to a school of thought and a mode of sensibility known as aestheticism, Wilde believed that art possesses an intrinsic

value—that it is beautiful and therefore has worth, and thus needs serve no other purpose, be it moral or political. This attitude was revolutionary in Victorian England, where popular belief held that art was not only a function of morality but also a means of enforcing it. In the Preface, Wilde also cautioned readers against finding meanings “beneath the surface” of art. Part gothic novel, part comedy of manners, part treatise on the relationship between art and morality, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* continues to present its readers with a puzzle to sort out. There is as likely to be as much disagreement over its meaning now as there was among its Victorian audience, but, as Wilde notes near the end of the Preface, “Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital.” In 1891, the same year that the second edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published, Wilde began a homosexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, an aspiring but rather untalented poet. The affair caused a good deal of scandal, and Douglas's father, the marquess of Queensberry, eventually criticized it publicly. When Wilde sued the marquess for libel, he himself was convicted under English sodomy laws for acts of “gross indecency.” In 1895, Wilde was sentenced to two years of hard labor, during which time he wrote a long, heartbreaking letter to Lord Alfred titled *De Profundis* (Latin for “Out of the Depths”). After his release, Wilde left England and divided his time between France and Italy, living in poverty. He never published under his own name again, but, in 1898, he did publish under a pseudonym *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, a lengthy poem about a prisoner's feelings toward another prisoner about to be executed. Wilde died in Paris on November 30, 1900, having converted to Roman Catholicism on his deathbed.

## The Picture of Dorian Gray

### Plot Overview

IN THE STATELY LONDON HOME of his aunt, Lady Brandon, the well-known artist Basil Hallward meets Dorian Gray. Dorian is a cultured, wealthy, and impossibly beautiful young man who immediately captures Basil's artistic imagination. Dorian sits for several portraits, and Basil often depicts him as an ancient Greek hero or a mythological figure. When the novel opens, the artist is completing his first portrait of Dorian as he truly is, but, as he admits to his friend Lord Henry Wotton, the painting disappoints him because it reveals too much of his feeling for his subject. Lord Henry, a famous wit who enjoys scandalizing his friends by celebrating youth, beauty, and the selfish pursuit of pleasure, disagrees, claiming that the portrait is Basil's masterpiece. Dorian arrives at the studio, and Basil reluctantly introduces him to Lord Henry, who he fears will have a damaging influence on the impressionable, young Dorian.

Basil's fears are well founded; before the end of their first conversation, Lord Henry upsets Dorian with a speech about the transient nature of beauty and youth. Worried that these, his most impressive characteristics, are fading day by day, Dorian curses his portrait, which he believes will one day remind him of the beauty he will have lost. In a fit of distress, he pledges his soul if only the painting could bear the burden of age and infamy, allowing him to stay forever young. In an attempt to appease Dorian, Basil gives him the portrait.

Over the next few weeks, Lord Henry's influence over Dorian grows stronger. The youth becomes a disciple of the “new Hedonism” and proposes to live a life dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure. He falls in love with Sibyl Vane, a young actress who performs in a theater in London's slums. He adores her acting; she, in turn, refers to him as “Prince Charming” and refuses to heed the warnings of her brother, James Vane, that Dorian is no good for her. Overcome by her emotions for Dorian, Sibyl decides that she can no longer act, wondering how she can pretend to love on the stage now that she has

experienced the real thing. Dorian, who loves Sibyl *because* of her ability to act, cruelly breaks his engagement with her. After doing so, he returns home to notice that his face in Basil's portrait of him has changed: it now sneers. Frightened that his wish for his likeness in the painting to bear the ill effects of his behavior has come true and that his sins will be recorded on the canvas, he resolves to make amends with Sibyl the next day. The following afternoon, however, Lord Henry brings news that Sibyl has killed herself. At Lord Henry's urging, Dorian decides to consider her death a sort of artistic triumph—she personified tragedy—and to put the matter behind him. Meanwhile, Dorian hides his portrait in a remote upper room of his house, where no one other than he can watch its transformation. Lord Henry gives Dorian a book that describes the wicked exploits of a nineteenth-century Frenchman; it becomes Dorian's bible as he sinks ever deeper into a life of sin and corruption. He lives a life devoted to garnering new experiences and sensations with no regard for conventional standards of morality or the consequences of his actions. Eighteen years pass. Dorian's reputation suffers in circles of polite London society, where rumors spread regarding his scandalous exploits. His peers nevertheless continue to accept him because he remains young and beautiful. The figure in the painting, however, grows increasingly wizened and hideous. On a dark, foggy night, Basil Hallward arrives at Dorian's home to confront him about the rumors that plague his reputation. The two argue, and Dorian eventually offers Basil a look at his (Dorian's) soul. He shows Basil the now-hideous portrait, and Hallward, horrified, begs him to repent. Dorian claims it is too late for penance and kills Basil in a fit of rage.

In order to dispose of the body, Dorian employs the help of an estranged friend, a doctor, whom he blackmails. The night after the murder, Dorian makes his way to an opium den, where he encounters James Vane, who attempts to avenge Sibyl's death. Dorian escapes to his country estate. While entertaining guests, he notices James Vane peering in through a window, and he becomes wracked by fear and guilt. When a hunting party accidentally shoots and kills Vane, Dorian feels safe again. He resolves to amend his life but cannot muster the courage to confess his crimes, and the painting now reveals his supposed desire to repent for what it is—hypocrisy. In a fury, Dorian picks up the knife he used to stab Basil Hallward and attempts to destroy the painting. There is a crash, and his servants enter to find the portrait, unharmed, showing Dorian Gray as a beautiful young man. On the floor lies the body of their master—an old man, horribly wrinkled and disfigured, with a knife plunged into his heart.

**The Preface** is a series of epigrams, or concise, witty sayings, that express the major points of Oscar Wilde's aesthetic philosophy. In short, the epigrams praise beauty and repudiate the notion that art serves a moral purpose.

The Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a collection of epigrams that aptly sums up the philosophical tenets of the artistic and philosophical movement known as aestheticism. Aestheticism, which found its footing in Europe in the early nineteenth century, proposed that art need not serve moral, political, or otherwise didactic ends. Whereas the romantic movement of the early and mid-nineteenth century viewed art as a product of the human creative impulse that could be used to learn more about humankind and the world, the aesthetic movement denied that art must necessarily be an instructive force in order to be valuable. Instead, the aestheticists believed, art should be valuable in and of itself—*art for art's sake*. Near the end of the nineteenth century, Walter Pater, an English essayist and critic, suggested that life itself should be lived in the spirit of art. His views, especially those presented in a collection of essays called *The Renaissance*, had a profound impact on the English poets of the 1890s, most notably Oscar Wilde.

Aestheticism flourished partly as a reaction against the materialism of the burgeoning middle class, assumed to be composed of philistines (individuals ignorant of art) who responded to art in a generally unrefined manner. In this climate, the artist could assert him- or herself as a remarkable and rarefied

being, one leading the search for beauty in an age marked by shameful class inequality, social hypocrisy, and bourgeois complacency. No one latched onto this attitude more boldly, or with more flair, than Oscar Wilde. His determination to live a life of beauty and to mold his life into a work of art is reflected in the beliefs and actions of several characters in Wilde's only novel.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* has often been compared to the famous German legend of Faust, immortalized in Christopher Marlowe's sixteenth-century play *Doctor Faustus* and in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's nineteenth-century poem *Faust*. The legend tells of a learned doctor who sells his soul to the devil in return for knowledge and magical abilities. Although Dorian Gray never contracts with the devil, his sacrifice is similar: he trades his soul for the luxury of eternal youth. For its overtones of supernaturalism, its refusal to satisfy popular morality, and its portrayal of homoerotic culture, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was met with harsh criticism. Many considered the novel dangerously subversive, one offended critic calling it “a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction.”

The fear of a bad—or good—influence is, in fact, one of the novel's primary concerns. As a work that sets forth a philosophy of aestheticism, the novel questions the degree and kind of influence a work of art can have over an individual. Furthermore, since the novel conceives of art as including a well-lived life, it is also interested in the kind of influence one person can have over another. After all, the artful Lord Henry himself has as profound an effect upon Dorian's life as Basil's painting does.

While Lord Henry exercises influence over other characters primarily through his skillful use of language, it is Dorian's beauty that seduces the characters with whom he associates. Basil, a serious artist and rather dull moralist, admits that Dorian has had “[s]ome subtle influence” over him; it is this influence that Basil is certain that his painting reveals. As he confides to Lord Henry, “I have put into it some expression of all this curious artistic idolatry.” Ultimately, however, Lord Henry's brilliant speech is a much more influential force than aesthetic beauty. His witty and biting epigrams threaten to seduce not only the impressionable young Dorian but the reader as well. Lord Henry's ironic speech cuts through social convention and hypocrisy to reveal unexpected, unpleasant truths.

The characters whose lifestyles Lord Henry criticizes resist his extreme theories. Basil's resistance to Lord Henry's argument that scandal is a function of class typifies the reactions of the characters whom Lord Henry criticizes; after all, their position and comfort depend upon the hypocrisies he tends to expose. To some degree, every character in the novel is seduced by Lord Henry's philosophies, Dorian Gray more so than anyone else. In these opening chapters, Dorian emerges as an incredibly impressionable young man, someone who Basil fears is open to the “influence” of Lord Henry, which will “spoil” him. Basil's fear is well founded, as before the end of his first conversation with Lord Henry, Dorian is “dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him.”

## Preface

The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things. The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.

Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only beauty.

Teacher: Ms. C. Ziraldo  
Liceo Scientifico "M. Grigoletti", class: 5B/5H

Object: Oscar Wilde

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.

The nineteenth century dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.

The nineteenth century dislike of romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass. The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved. No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style. No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything. Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art. Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art. From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician. From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type. All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital. When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself. We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.

All art is quite useless.

-- OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde's preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* consists of a list of Wilde's aphorisms that deal directly with art, artists, critics, and audience but only obliquely with the novel. They speak to the importance of beauty espoused by the Aesthetic movement.

The preface offers one of Wilde's most famous aphorisms: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." According to Wilde, the artist might consider the moral or immoral lives of people as part of the subject matter of a work, but art itself is not meant to instruct the reader. The true artist is not out to prove anything and makes no judgments of right or wrong. What people call "vices" or "virtues" are merely materials for the artist. Those who attempt to go beneath the surface of a work, or to read meaning into a symbol, do so at their own risk. Considerable disagreement about a work of art only proves that the work is "new, complex, and vital."

Wilde concludes the preface by saying that it is fine to create something useful so long as it is not admired as art. The only reason for creating something useless *is* to admire it a great deal. Thus, "All art is quite useless." That is, it exists for its own sake as art ("art for art's sake") and not for some moral purpose.

The preface sets the tone for the book and lets the reader know that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* will be a book of expansive ideas and wonderful language.

## **The Picture of Dorian Gray (excerpt from chapter II)**

"And yet," continued Lord Henry, in his low, musical voice, and with that graceful wave of the hand that was always so characteristic of him, and that he had even in his Eton days, "I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream—I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediaevalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal—to something finer, richer than the Hellenic ideal, it may be. But the bravest man amongst us is afraid of himself. The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives. We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful. It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also. You, Mr. Gray, you yourself, with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood, you have had passions that have made you afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror, day-dreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame—"

"Stop!" faltered Dorian Gray, "stop! you bewilder me. I don't know what to say. There is some answer to you, but I cannot find it. Don't speak. Let me think. Or, rather, let me try not to think."

[...]

"Let us go and sit in the shade," said Lord Henry. "Parker has brought out the drinks, and if you stay any longer in this glare, you will be quite spoiled, and Basil will never paint you again. You really must not allow yourself to become sunburnt. It would be unbecoming."

"What can it matter?" cried Dorian Gray, laughing, as he sat down on the seat at the end of the garden.

"It should matter everything to you, Mr. Gray."

"Why?"

"Because you have the most marvellous youth, and youth is the one thing worth having."

"I don't feel that, Lord Henry."

"No, you don't feel it now. Some day, when you are old and wrinkled and ugly, when thought has seared your forehead with its lines, and passion branded your lips with its hideous fires, you will feel it, you will feel it terribly. Now, wherever you go, you charm the world. Will it always be so? . . . You have a wonderfully beautiful face, Mr. Gray. Don't frown. You have. And beauty is a form of genius—is higher, indeed, than genius, as it needs no explanation. It is of the great facts of the world, like sunlight, or spring-time, or the reflection in dark waters of that silver shell we call the moon. It cannot be questioned. It has its divine right of sovereignty. It makes princes of those who have it. You smile? Ah! when you have lost it you won't smile. . . . People say sometimes that beauty is only superficial. That may be so, but at least it is not so superficial as thought is. To me, beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible. . . . Yes, Mr. Gray, the gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away. You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully.

When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you, or have to content yourself with those mean triumphs that the memory of your past will make more bitter than defeats. Every month as it wanes brings you nearer to something dreadful. Time is jealous of you, and wars against your lilies and your roses. You will become sallow, and hollow-cheeked, and dull-eyed. You will suffer horribly.... Ah! realize your youth while you have it. Don't squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar. These are the sickly aims, the false ideals, of our age. Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing. . . . A new Hedonism—that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol. With your personality there is nothing you could not do. The world belongs to you for a season. . . . The moment I met you I saw that you were quite unconscious of what you really are, of what you really might be. There was so much in you that charmed me that I felt I must tell you something about yourself. I thought how tragic it would be if you were wasted. For there is such a little time that your youth will last—such a little time. The common hill-flowers wither, but they blossom again. The laburnum will be as yellow next June as it is now. In a month there will be purple stars on the clematis, and year after year the green night of its leaves will hold its purple stars. But we never get back our youth. The pulse of joy that beats in us at twenty becomes sluggish. Our limbs fail, our senses rot. We degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of the passions of which we were too much afraid, and the exquisite temptations that we had not the courage to yield to. Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!"

## The Purpose of Art

When *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890, it was decried as immoral. In revising the text the following year, Wilde included a preface, which serves as a useful explanation of his philosophy of art. The purpose of art, according to this series of epigrams, is to have no purpose. In order to understand this claim fully, one needs to consider the moral climate of Wilde's time and the Victorian sensibility regarding art and morality. The Victorians believed that art could be used as a tool for social education and moral enlightenment, as illustrated in works by writers such as Charles Dickens and George Gissing. The aestheticism movement, of which Wilde was a major proponent, sought to free art from this responsibility. The aestheticists were motivated as much by a contempt for bourgeois morality—a sensibility embodied in *Dorian Gray* by Lord Henry, whose every word seems designed to shock the ethical certainties of the burgeoning middle class—as they were by the belief that art need not possess any other purpose than being beautiful.

If this philosophy informed Wilde's life, we must then consider whether his only novel bears it out. The two works of art that dominate the novel—Basil's painting and the mysterious yellow book that Lord Henry gives Dorian—are presented in the vein more of Victorian sensibilities than of aesthetic ones. That is, both the portrait and the French novel serve a purpose: the first acts as a type of mysterious mirror that shows Dorian the physical dissipation his own body has been spared, while the second acts as something of a road map, leading the young man farther along the path toward infamy. While we know nothing of the circumstances of the yellow book's composition, Basil's state of mind while painting Dorian's portrait is clear. Later in the novel, he advocates that all art be "unconscious, ideal, and remote." His portrait of Dorian, however, is anything but. Thus, Basil's initial refusal to exhibit the work results from his belief that it betrays his idolization of his subject. Of course, one might consider that these breaches of aesthetic philosophy mold *The Picture of Dorian Gray* into something of a cautionary tale: these are the prices that must be paid for insisting that art reveals the artist or a moral

lesson. But this warning is, in itself, a moral lesson, which perhaps betrays the impossibility of Wilde's project. If, as Dorian observes late in the novel, the imagination orders the chaos of life and invests it with meaning, then art, as the fruit of the imagination, cannot help but mean something. Wilde may have succeeded in freeing his art from the confines of Victorian morality, but he has replaced it with a doctrine that is, in its own way, just as restrictive.

### **The Supremacy of Youth and Beauty**

The first principle of aestheticism, the philosophy of art by which Oscar Wilde lived, is that art serves no other purpose than to offer beauty. Throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, beauty reigns. It is a means to revitalize the wearied senses, as indicated by the effect that Basil's painting has on the cynical Lord Henry. It is also a means of escaping the brutalities of the world: Dorian distances himself, not to mention his consciousness, from the horrors of his actions by devoting himself to the study of beautiful things—music, jewels, rare tapestries. In a society that prizes beauty so highly, youth and physical attractiveness become valuable commodities. Lord Henry reminds Dorian of as much upon their first meeting, when he laments that Dorian will soon enough lose his most precious attributes. In Chapter Seventeen, the Duchess of Monmouth suggests to Lord Henry that he places too much value on these things; indeed, Dorian's eventual demise confirms her suspicions. For although beauty and youth remain of utmost importance at the end of the novel—the portrait is, after all, returned to its original form—the novel suggests that the price one must pay for them is exceedingly high. Indeed, Dorian gives nothing less than his soul.

### **The Superficial Nature of Society**

It is no surprise that a society that prizes beauty above all else is a society founded on a love of surfaces. What matters most to Dorian, Lord Henry, and the polite company they keep is not whether a man is good at heart but rather whether he is handsome. As Dorian evolves into the realization of a type, the perfect blend of scholar and socialite, he experiences the freedom to abandon his morals without censure. Indeed, even though, as Basil warns, society's elite question his name and reputation, Dorian is never ostracized. On the contrary, despite his "mode of life," he remains at the heart of the London social scene because of the "innocence" and "purity of his face." As Lady Narborough notes to Dorian, there is little (if any) distinction between ethics and appearance: "you are made to be good—you look so good."

### **BACKGROUND:**

In 1890, Oscar Wilde published the first version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in *Lippincott's Magazine*. After vociferous public responses to the novel's "one element... which will taint every young mind that comes in contact with it," Wilde completed his revisions, expanding the novel by half again and adding his now famous "Preface." How we read this "Preface" -- as an ironic way of deflecting the growing criticism or as a sincere aesthetic manifesto -- influences our view of the novel as a whole, though we also need to ask 'which' novel we are reading. Wilde's aesthetic declarations shift rapidly between the two published versions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and his comments in other contemporary works again point to different interpretive ventures.

The aesthetic opinions and descriptions of the relationship between art and artist here are more akin to those found in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." and other works of the same period, often in defiance of those stated in the later "Preface" to the novel. The reader is told (after a poor critical response to the novel) that "The artist is the creator of beautiful things" and "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim." The implication would seem to be that the artist is not himself among 'beautiful things' and that not only, in anticipation of T.S. Eliot, is the artist not in the final artistic product, she or he must be

more than absent. She must be actively concealed. Yet, this immediately runs contrary to the greatest artwork in the novel: Basil Hallward's picture of Dorian Gray. It is great insofar as it shows his soul while concealing Dorian's. The artist is revealed in precisely the same image that the audience, in this case Dorian himself, refuses to see.

This is also very much akin to Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," in which another portrait of a beautiful young man is created in order to support a new interpretation of Shakespeare's Sonnets, so long as the portrait can reveal the soul of its instigator (though not its artist) while concealing its secret. For both scenarios, the audience is unable or refuses to understand what the image communicates apart from its overt image, and both result in death. In the reading strategies instigated in this contemporary story to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde argues that these great works of art (Shakespeare's Sonnets) not only fail to privilege art over artist, but rather than conceal, they actively express the artist's life. The portrait communicates the same message, and like Basil's love to Dorian, it communicates a form of love that is also censored in tandem with the interpretive activities it would prompt. Likewise, even as Wilde later contends "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book," he gives Dorian a beautiful 'yellow book' that is certainly corrupting, leading the reader to Huysmans. In all three regards, the novel itself and its contemporaries in Wilde's oeuvre lead the reader away from the overt declarations of the later "Preface." A form of reading intent on insinuation, obfuscation, and allusion is certainly privileged in all of Wilde's narratives of reading or interpreting, even while his "Preface" declares such approaches a 'risk' -- this suggests the "Preface" must itself be read using similar strategies, and this places the standard 1891 text of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and its "Preface" in a position of dependence in relation to its predecessor from 1890.

The implication, then, is that Wilde's later "Preface" and revisions reflect a different spirit of reading and his own desire to avoid the spirited responses of his readership. It is clearly more than a scurrilous distraction from the revealing 1890 edition, yet it is too often taken as injunction to grant preference or authority to the later edition that avoids social complications and difficulties. The "Preface," then, becomes dangerous if it leads readers to refrain from acknowledging what was communicated in the less obfuscated primary text of 1890. Moreover, while the later edition is significantly enlarged, it is also significantly cut. In many ways, what had spoken perhaps too earnestly in *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1890 did not dare to speak again in 1891.

The novel also shows Dorian learning how to read and interpret, just as many first-time readers of the novel are often in a first year university course, developing skills of analysis and active reading by engaging with the novel. As the self-censorship and concealment of the artist seems to suggest, the reader has materials hidden from view just as Dorian does in the narrative. As with Wilde's later description of the love that dare not speak its name, which is certainly a part of what was concealed ever more fully by the continued development of the artwork, a shift in emphasis from 'dare' to 'speak' alters potential critical interventions. In 1890, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* dared, as did "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." It dared to communicate, as the critical response proves. What it did not dare was to 'speak' what it communicated. Instead, the speaking voice, the voice of the narrator, displaces ambiguity at precisely the moment when Dorian learns to read what has been hidden from him throughout the entire novel: his own censored wishes.

While it is tempting to anachronistically read such a moment in psychoanalytic terms, Wilde does not require this. The reader need not move beyond contemporary questions about the stability of the self and its introspection. In 1890, when Dorian sees the hypocritical visage adopted by his hideous image in the painting, following after his decision to reclaim "his rose-white boyhood" (98), the reader is left with a question from the narrator: "Hypocrisy? Had there been nothing more in his renunciation than that? There had been something more. At least he thought so. But who could tell?" (99). This "something more" that cannot be seen by another person ("who could tell?"), or that cannot be spoken, is instead given voice in Wilde's 1891 revision: "No. There had been nothing more. Through vanity he

had spared her. In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness. For curiosity's sake he had tried the denial of self. He recognized that now." The contrast between the editions is striking: "There had been something more" (99) in 1890, but this is denied in 1891 after public recriminations as "No. There had been nothing more." The reader is guided away from a subtle examination of this 'more' and away from reading beneath the surface of the text that denies it. The reader does not need to engage in a Freudian notion of repression in order to recognize the suppression apparent in the original and revised forms of the text.

Furthermore, rather than speaking what this "something else" might be, something that might illuminate Dorian's interior life or that might explore the nature of the homosocial relations in the novel, the narrator dares not speak anything that might reveal the artist. Unlike "The Decay of Lying" or the vital importance of being earnest, Dorian does not learn to lie in a manner that communicates truthfully or that allows self-exploration. Instead, the socially normative punishment for transgression must fall on the transgressor, matching Wilde's own definition of Fiction in his later "The Importance of Being Earnest." As Miss Prism explains to Cecily, in a moment that must surely reflect on Wilde's own novel, "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means." The problem, however, lies in Wilde's own Symbolist language in this ending scene in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian wishes to reclaim "his rose-white boyhood" without 'speaking' the "rose-red youth" (14) that accompanied it, the two phrases having occurred in immediate juxtaposition at the outset of the novel. To recognize the 'red' being read in this colour-laden novel would be to repeat "the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass," as Wilde describes in his later "Preface." Like Caliban's rage, Dorian cannot face what he does not dare to speak, and the result is his demise in the act of denial or self-censorship.

Like Basil's fear that in his painting of Dorian "I have shown... the secret of my own soul" (6), Wilde appears to have feared showing that which he dared not speak in this first version of his own picture of Dorian Gray. The result is a knife taken to the canvas just as a knife (and pen) were taken to this first publication. By making students and readers aware of this as not only an ancillary text but a primary text in its own right, suitable for classroom use and general reading for which the later revisions become ancillary, the "secret" may once again be shown even if not spoken.

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### **Reading of the Ballad of Reading Gaol (Part 1)**

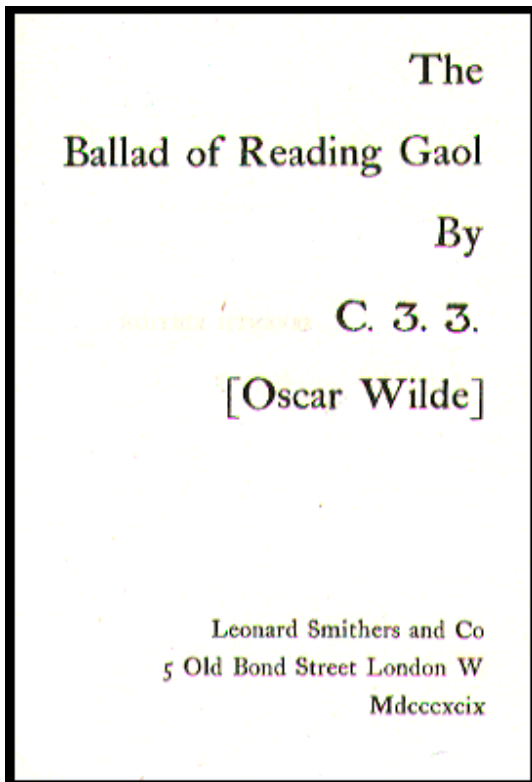
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CL6QCKLtmRU>

### **The Ballad of Reading Gaol - Oscar Wilde (Part 2)**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9T1oIS\\_Amo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9T1oIS_Amo)

### **The Ballad of Reading Gaol - Oscar Wilde (Final Part)**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kD9ppdx5jA>



## ***The Ballad of Reading Gaol***

I

HE did not wear his scarlet coat,  
For blood and wine are red,  
And blood and wine were on his hands  
When they found him with the dead,  
The poor dead woman whom he loved,  
And murdered in her bed.  
He walked amongst the Trial Men  
In a suit of shabby grey;  
A cricket cap was on his head,  
And his step seemed light and gay;  
But I never saw a man who looked  
So wistfully at the day.  
I never saw a man who looked  
With such a wistful eye  
Upon that little tent of blue  
Which prisoners call the sky,  
And at every drifting cloud that went  
With sails of silver by.  
I walked, with other souls in pain,  
Within another ring,

And was wondering if the man had done  
A great or little thing,  
When a voice behind me whispered low,  
"That fellow's got to swing."  
Dear Christ! the very prison walls  
Suddenly seemed to reel,  
And the sky above my head became  
Like a casque of scorching steel;  
And, though I was a soul in pain,  
My pain I could not feel.  
I only knew what hunted thought  
Quickened his step, and why  
He looked upon the garish day  
With such a wistful eye;  
The man had killed the thing he loved  
And so he had to die.  
Yet each man kills the thing he loves  
By each let this be heard,  
Some do it with a bitter look,  
Some with a flattering word,  
The coward does it with a kiss,  
The brave man with a sword!  
Some kill their love when they are young,  
And some when they are old;  
Some strangle with the hands of Lust,  
Some with the hands of Gold:  
The kindest use a knife, because  
The dead so soon grow cold.  
Some love too little, some too long,  
Some sell, and others buy;  
Some do the deed with many tears,  
And some without a sigh:  
For each man kills the thing he loves,  
Yet each man does not die.  
He does not die a death of shame  
On a day of dark disgrace,  
Nor have a noose about his neck,  
Nor a cloth upon his face,  
Nor drop feet foremost through the floor  
Into an empty place  
He does not sit with silent men  
Who watch him night and day;  
Who watch him when he tries to weep,  
And when he tries to pray;  
Who watch him lest himself should rob  
The prison of its prey.  
He does not wake at dawn to see  
Dread figures throng his room,

The shivering Chaplain robed in white,  
The Sheriff stern with gloom,  
And the Governor all in shiny black,  
With the yellow face of Doom.  
He does not rise in piteous haste  
To put on convict-clothes,  
While some coarse-mouthed Doctor gloats, and notes  
Each new and nerve-twitched pose,  
Fingering a watch whose little ticks  
Are like horrible hammer-blows.  
He does not know that sickening thirst  
That sands one's throat, before  
The hangman with his gardener's gloves  
Slips through the padded door,  
And binds one with three leathern thongs,  
That the throat may thirst no more.  
He does not bend his head to hear  
The Burial Office read,  
Nor, while the terror of his soul  
Tells him he is not dead,  
Cross his own coffin, as he moves  
Into the hideous shed.  
He does not stare upon the air  
Through a little roof of glass;  
He does not pray with lips of clay  
For his agony to pass;  
Nor feel upon his shuddering cheek  
The kiss of Caiaphas.

## II

Six weeks our guardsman walked the yard,  
In a suit of shabby grey:  
His cricket cap was on his head,  
And his step seemed light and gay,  
But I never saw a man who looked  
So wistfully at the day.  
I never saw a man who looked  
With such a wistful eye  
Upon that little tent of blue  
Which prisoners call the sky,  
And at every wandering cloud that trailed  
Its ravelled fleeces by.  
He did not wring his hands, as do  
Those witless men who dare  
To try to rear the changeling Hope  
In the cave of black Despair:  
He only looked upon the sun,  
And drank the morning air.  
He did not wring his hands nor weep,

Nor did he peek or pine,  
But he drank the air as though it held  
Some healthful anodyne;  
With open mouth he drank the sun  
As though it had been wine!  
And I and all the souls in pain,  
Who tramped the other ring,  
Forgot if we ourselves had done  
A great or little thing,  
And watched with gaze of dull amaze  
The man who had to swing.  
And strange it was to see him pass  
With a step so light and gay,  
And strange it was to see him look  
So wistfully at the day,  
And strange it was to think that he  
Had such a debt to pay.  
For oak and elm have pleasant leaves  
That in the spring-time shoot:  
But grim to see is the gallows-tree,  
With its adder-bitten root,  
And, green or dry, a man must die  
Before it bears its fruit!  
The loftiest place is that seat of grace  
For which all worldlings try:  
But who would stand in hempen band  
Upon a scaffold high,  
And through a murderer's collar take  
His last look at the sky?  
It is sweet to dance to violins  
When Love and Life are fair:  
To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes  
Is delicate and rare:  
But it is not sweet with nimble feet  
To dance upon the air!  
So with curious eyes and sick surmise  
We watched him day by day,  
And wondered if each one of us  
Would end the self-same way,  
For none can tell to what red Hell  
His sightless soul may stray.  
At last the dead man walked no more  
Amongst the Trial Men,  
And I knew that he was standing up  
In the black dock's dreadful pen,  
And that never would I see his face  
In God's sweet world again.  
Like two doomed ships that pass in storm

We had crossed each other's way:  
But we made no sign, we said no word,  
We had no word to say;  
For we did not meet in the holy night,  
But in the shameful day.  
A prison wall was round us both,  
Two outcast men were we:  
The world had thrust us from its heart,  
And God from out His care:  
And the iron gin that waits for Sin  
Had caught us in its snare.

### III

In Debtors' Yard the stones are hard,  
And the dripping wall is high,  
So it was there he took the air  
Beneath the leaden sky,  
And by each side a Warder walked,  
For fear the man might die.  
Or else he sat with those who watched  
His anguish night and day;  
Who watched him when he rose to weep,  
And when he crouched to pray;  
Who watched him lest himself should rob  
Their scaffold of its prey.  
The Governor was strong upon  
The Regulations Act:  
The Doctor said that Death was but  
A scientific fact:  
And twice a day the Chaplain called  
And left a little tract.  
And twice a day he smoked his pipe,  
And drank his quart of beer:  
His soul was resolute, and held  
No hiding-place for fear;  
He often said that he was glad  
The hangman's hands were near.  
But why he said so strange a thing  
No Warder dared to ask:  
For he to whom a watcher's doom  
Is given as his task,  
Must set a lock upon his lips,  
And make his face a mask.  
Or else he might be moved, and try  
To comfort or console:  
And what should Human Pity do  
Pent up in Murderers' Hole?  
What word of grace in such a place  
Could help a brother's soul?

With slouch and swing around the ring  
We trod the Fool's Parade!  
We did not care: we knew we were  
The Devil's Own Brigade:  
And shaven head and feet of lead  
Make a merry masquerade.  
We tore the tarry rope to shreds  
With blunt and bleeding nails;  
We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors,  
And cleaned the shining rails:  
And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank,  
And clattered with the pails.  
We sewed the sacks, we broke the stones,  
We turned the dusty drill:  
We banged the tins, and bawled the hymns,  
And sweated on the mill:  
But in the heart of every man  
Terror was lying still.  
So still it lay that every day  
Crawled like a weed-clogged wave:  
And we forgot the bitter lot  
That waits for fool and knave,  
Till once, as we tramped in from work,  
We passed an open grave.  
With yawning mouth the yellow hole  
Gaped for a living thing;  
The very mud cried out for blood  
To the thirsty asphalt ring:  
And we knew that ere one dawn grew fair  
Some prisoner had to swing.  
Right in we went, with soul intent  
On Death and Dread and Doom:  
The hangman, with his little bag,  
Went shuffling through the gloom  
And each man trembled as he crept  
Into his numbered tomb.  
That night the empty corridors  
Were full of forms of Fear,  
And up and down the iron town  
Stole feet we could not hear,  
And through the bars that hide the stars  
White faces seemed to peer.  
He lay as one who lies and dreams  
In a pleasant meadow-land,  
The watcher watched him as he slept,  
And could not understand  
How one could sleep so sweet a sleep  
With a hangman close at hand?

But there is no sleep when men must weep  
Who never yet have wept:  
So we -- the fool, the fraud, the knave --  
That endless vigil kept,  
And through each brain on hands of pain  
Another's terror crept.  
Alas! it is a fearful thing  
To feel another's guilt!  
For, right within, the sword of Sin  
Pierced to its poisoned hilt,  
And as molten lead were the tears we shed  
For the blood we had not spilt.  
The Warders with their shoes of felt  
Crept by each padlocked door,  
And peeped and saw, with eyes of awe,  
Grey figures on the floor,  
And wondered why men knelt to pray  
Who never prayed before.  
All through the night we knelt and prayed,  
Mad mourners of a corpse!  
The troubled plumes of midnight were  
The plumes upon a hearse:  
And bitter wine upon a sponge  
Was the savour of Remorse.  
The cock crew, the red cock crew,  
But never came the day:  
And crooked shape of Terror crouched,  
In the corners where we lay:  
And each evil sprite that walks by night  
Before us seemed to play.  
They glided past, they glided fast,  
Like travellers through a mist:  
They mocked the moon in a rigadon  
Of delicate turn and twist,  
And with formal pace and loathsome grace  
The phantoms kept their tryst.  
With mop and mow, we saw them go,  
Slim shadows hand in hand:  
About, about, in ghostly rout  
They trod a saraband:  
And the damned grotesques made arabesques,  
Like the wind upon the sand!  
With the pirouettes of marionettes,  
They tripped on pointed tread:  
But with flutes of Fear they filled the ear,  
As their grisly masque they led,  
And loud they sang, and loud they sang,  
For they sang to wake the dead.

"Oho!" they cried, "The world is wide,  
But fettered limbs go lame!  
And once, or twice, to throw the dice  
Is a gentlemanly game,  
But he does not win who plays with Sin  
In the secret House of Shame."  
No things of air these antics were  
That frolicked with such glee:  
To men whose lives were held in gyves,  
And whose feet might not go free,  
Ah! wounds of Christ! they were living things,  
Most terrible to see.  
Around, around, they waltzed and wound;  
Some wheeled in smirking pairs:  
With the mincing step of demirep  
Some sidled up the stairs:  
And with subtle sneer, and fawning leer,  
Each helped us at our prayers.  
The morning wind began to moan,  
But still the night went on:  
Through its giant loom the web of gloom  
Crept till each thread was spun:  
And, as we prayed, we grew afraid  
Of the Justice of the Sun.  
The moaning wind went wandering round  
The weeping prison-wall:  
Till like a wheel of turning-steel  
We felt the minutes crawl:  
O moaning wind! what had we done  
To have such a seneschal?  
At last I saw the shadowed bars  
Like a lattice wrought in lead,  
Move right across the whitewashed wall  
That faced my three-plank bed,  
And I knew that somewhere in the world  
God's dreadful dawn was red.  
At six o'clock we cleaned our cells,  
At seven all was still,  
But the sough and swing of a mighty wing  
The prison seemed to fill,  
For the Lord of Death with icy breath  
Had entered in to kill.  
He did not pass in purple pomp,  
Nor ride a moon-white steed.  
Three yards of cord and a sliding board  
Are all the gallows' need:  
So with rope of shame the Herald came  
To do the secret deed.

We were as men who through a fen  
Of filthy darkness grope:  
We did not dare to breathe a prayer,  
Or give our anguish scope:  
Something was dead in each of us,  
And what was dead was Hope.  
For Man's grim Justice goes its way,  
And will not swerve aside:  
It slays the weak, it slays the strong,  
It has a deadly stride:  
With iron heel it slays the strong,  
The monstrous parricide!  
We waited for the stroke of eight:  
Each tongue was thick with thirst:  
For the stroke of eight is the stroke of Fate  
That makes a man accursed,  
And Fate will use a running noose  
For the best man and the worst.  
We had no other thing to do,  
Save to wait for the sign to come:  
So, like things of stone in a valley lone,  
Quiet we sat and dumb:  
But each man's heart beat thick and quick  
Like a madman on a drum!  
With sudden shock the prison-clock  
Smote on the shivering air,  
And from all the gaol rose up a wail  
Of impotent despair,  
Like the sound that frightened marshes hear  
From a leper in his lair.  
And as one sees most fearful things  
In the crystal of a dream,  
We saw the greasy hempen rope  
Hooked to the blackened beam,  
And heard the prayer the hangman's snare  
Strangled into a scream.  
And all the woe that moved him so  
That he gave that bitter cry,  
And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats,  
None knew so well as I:  
For he who live more lives than one  
More deaths than one must die.

#### IV

There is no chapel on the day  
On which they hang a man:  
The Chaplain's heart is far too sick,  
Or his face is far too wan,  
Or there is that written in his eyes

Which none should look upon.  
So they kept us close till nigh on noon,  
And then they rang the bell,  
And the Warders with their jingling keys  
Opened each listening cell,  
And down the iron stair we tramped,  
Each from his separate Hell.  
Out into God's sweet air we went,  
But not in wonted way,  
For this man's face was white with fear,  
And that man's face was grey,  
And I never saw sad men who looked  
So wistfully at the day.  
I never saw sad men who looked  
With such a wistful eye  
Upon that little tent of blue  
We prisoners called the sky,  
And at every careless cloud that passed  
In happy freedom by.  
But their were those amongst us all  
Who walked with downcast head,  
And knew that, had each got his due,  
They should have died instead:  
He had but killed a thing that lived  
Whilst they had killed the dead.  
For he who sins a second time  
Wakes a dead soul to pain,  
And draws it from its spotted shroud,  
And makes it bleed again,  
And makes it bleed great gouts of blood  
And makes it bleed in vain!  
Like ape or clown, in monstrous garb  
With crooked arrows starred,  
Silently we went round and round  
The slippery asphalte yard;  
Silently we went round and round,  
And no man spoke a word.  
Silently we went round and round,  
And through each hollow mind  
The memory of dreadful things  
Rushed like a dreadful wind,  
An Horror stalked before each man,  
And terror crept behind.  
The Warders strutted up and down,  
And kept their herd of brutes,  
Their uniforms were spick and span,  
And they wore their Sunday suits,  
But we knew the work they had been at

By the quicklime on their boots.  
For where a grave had opened wide,  
There was no grave at all:  
Only a stretch of mud and sand  
By the hideous prison-wall,  
And a little heap of burning lime,  
That the man should have his pall.  
For he has a pall, this wretched man,  
Such as few men can claim:  
Deep down below a prison-yard,  
Naked for greater shame,  
He lies, with fetters on each foot,  
Wrapt in a sheet of flame!  
And all the while the burning lime  
Eats flesh and bone away,  
It eats the brittle bone by night,  
And the soft flesh by the day,  
It eats the flesh and bones by turns,  
But it eats the heart away.  
For three long years they will not sow  
Or root or seedling there:  
For three long years the unblessed spot  
Will sterile be and bare,  
And look upon the wondering sky  
With unrepentant stare.  
They think a murderer's heart would taint  
Each simple seed they sow.  
It is not true! God's kindly earth  
Is kindlier than men know,  
And the red rose would but blow more red,  
The white rose whiter blow.  
Out of his mouth a red, red rose!  
Out of his heart a white!  
For who can say by what strange way,  
Christ brings his will to light,  
Since the barren staff the pilgrim bore  
Bloomed in the great Pope's sight?  
But neither milk-white rose nor red  
May bloom in prison air;  
The shard, the pebble, and the flint,  
Are what they give us there:  
For flowers have been known to heal  
A common man's despair.  
So never will wine-red rose or white,  
Petal by petal, fall  
On that stretch of mud and sand that lies  
By the hideous prison-wall,  
To tell the men who tramp the yard

That God's Son died for all.  
Yet though the hideous prison-wall  
Still hems him round and round,  
And a spirit man not walk by night  
That is with fetters bound,  
And a spirit may not weep that lies  
In such unholy ground,  
He is at peace -- this wretched man --  
At peace, or will be soon:  
There is no thing to make him mad,  
Nor does Terror walk at noon,  
For the lampless Earth in which he lies  
Has neither Sun nor Moon.  
They hanged him as a beast is hanged:  
They did not even toll  
A requiem that might have brought  
Rest to his startled soul,  
But hurriedly they took him out,  
And hid him in a hole.  
They stripped him of his canvas clothes,  
And gave him to the flies;  
They mocked the swollen purple throat  
And the stark and staring eyes:  
And with laughter loud they heaped the shroud  
In which their convict lies.  
The Chaplain would not kneel to pray  
By his dishonoured grave:  
Nor mark it with that blessed Cross  
That Christ for sinners gave,  
Because the man was one of those  
Whom Christ came down to save.  
Yet all is well; he has but passed  
To Life's appointed bourne:  
And alien tears will fill for him  
Pity's long-broken urn,  
For his mourner will be outcast men,  
And outcasts always mourn.

V

I know not whether Laws be right,  
Or whether Laws be wrong;  
All that we know who lie in goal  
Is that the wall is strong;  
And that each day is like a year,  
A year whose days are long.  
But this I know, that every Law  
That men have made for Man,  
Since first Man took his brother's life,  
And the sad world began,

But straws the wheat and saves the chaff  
With a most evil fan.  
This too I know -- and wise it were  
If each could know the same --  
That every prison that men build  
Is built with bricks of shame,  
And bound with bars lest Christ should see  
How men their brothers maim.  
With bars they blur the gracious moon,  
And blind the goodly sun:  
And they do well to hide their Hell,  
For in it things are done  
That Son of God nor son of Man  
Ever should look upon!  
The vilest deeds like poison weeds  
Bloom well in prison-air:  
It is only what is good in Man  
That wastes and withers there:  
Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate,  
And the Warder is Despair  
For they starve the little frightened child  
Till it weeps both night and day:  
And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool,  
And gibe the old and grey,  
And some grow mad, and all grow bad,  
And none a word may say.  
Each narrow cell in which we dwell  
Is foul and dark latrine,  
And the fetid breath of living Death  
Chokes up each grated screen,  
And all, but Lust, is turned to dust  
In Humanity's machine.  
The brackish water that we drink  
Creeps with a loathsome slime,  
And the bitter bread they weigh in scales  
Is full of chalk and lime,  
And Sleep will not lie down, but walks  
Wild-eyed and cries to Time.  
But though lean Hunger and green Thirst  
Like asp with adder fight,  
We have little care of prison fare,  
For what chills and kills outright  
Is that every stone one lifts by day  
Becomes one's heart by night.  
With midnight always in one's heart,  
And twilight in one's cell,  
We turn the crank, or tear the rope,  
Each in his separate Hell,

And the silence is more awful far  
Than the sound of a brazen bell.  
And never a human voice comes near  
To speak a gentle word:  
And the eye that watches through the door  
Is pitiless and hard:  
And by all forgot, we rot and rot,  
With soul and body marred.  
And thus we rust Life's iron chain  
Degraded and alone:  
And some men curse, and some men weep,  
And some men make no moan:  
But God's eternal Laws are kind  
And break the heart of stone.  
And every human heart that breaks,  
In prison-cell or yard,  
Is as that broken box that gave  
Its treasure to the Lord,  
And filled the unclean leper's house  
With the scent of costliest nard.  
Ah! happy day they whose hearts can break  
And peace of pardon win!  
How else may man make straight his plan  
And cleanse his soul from Sin?  
How else but through a broken heart  
May Lord Christ enter in?  
And he of the swollen purple throat.  
And the stark and staring eyes,  
Waits for the holy hands that took  
The Thief to Paradise;  
And a broken and a contrite heart  
The Lord will not despise.  
The man in red who reads the Law  
Gave him three weeks of life,  
Three little weeks in which to heal  
His soul of his soul's strife,  
And cleanse from every blot of blood  
The hand that held the knife.  
And with tears of blood he cleansed the hand,  
The hand that held the steel:  
For only blood can wipe out blood,  
And only tears can heal:  
And the crimson stain that was of Cain  
Became Christ's snow-white seal.

## VI

In Reading gaol by Reading town  
There is a pit of shame,  
And in it lies a wretched man

Eaten by teeth of flame,  
In burning winding-sheet he lies,  
And his grave has got no name.  
And there, till Christ call forth the dead,  
In silence let him lie:  
No need to waste the foolish tear,  
Or heave the windy sigh:  
The man had killed the thing he loved,  
And so he had to die.  
And all men kill the thing they love,  
By all let this be heard,  
Some do it with a bitter look,  
Some with a flattering word,  
The coward does it with a kiss,  
The brave man with a sword!

**Cult Book - La ballata del carcere di Reading (Oscar Wilde)**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpUX4Lj4Py4>

## De Profundis (Excerpts)

Desire at the end was a malady, a madness or both. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character...

I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art....I altered the minds of men and the colours of things....I treated art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction....I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me...I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a flaneur, a dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with smaller natures and meaner minds. I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in search of new sensations...

I ceased to be Lord over myself. I was no longer captain of my soul. I allowed you [Douglas] to dominate me, and your father to frighten me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute Humility.

# The Importance of Being Earnest

## A Trivial Comedy for Serious People

### Plot Overview

Jack Worthing, the play's protagonist, is a pillar of the community in Hertfordshire, where he is guardian to Cecily Cardew, the pretty, eighteen-year-old granddaughter of the late Thomas Cardew, who found and adopted Jack when he was a baby. In Hertfordshire, Jack has responsibilities: he is a major landowner and justice of the peace, with tenants, farmers, and a number of servants and other employees all dependent on him. For years, he has also pretended to have an irresponsible black-sheep brother named Ernest who leads a scandalous life in pursuit of pleasure and is always getting into trouble of a sort that requires Jack to rush grimly off to his assistance. In fact, Ernest is merely Jack's alibi, a phantom that allows him to disappear for days at a time and do as he likes. No one but Jack knows that he himself is Ernest. Ernest is the name Jack goes by in London, which is where he really goes on these occasions—probably to pursue the very sort of behavior he pretends to disapprove of in his imaginary brother.

Jack is in love with Gwendolen Fairfax, the cousin of his best friend, Algernon Moncrieff. When the play opens, Algernon, who knows Jack as Ernest, has begun to suspect something, having found an inscription inside Jack's cigarette case addressed to "Uncle Jack" from someone who refers to herself as "little Cecily." Algernon suspects that Jack may be leading a double life, a practice he seems to regard as commonplace and indispensable to modern life. He calls a person who leads a double life a "Bunburyist," after a nonexistent friend he pretends to have, a chronic invalid named Bunbury, to whose deathbed he is forever being summoned whenever he wants to get out of some tiresome social obligation.

At the beginning of Act I, Jack drops in unexpectedly on Algernon and announces that he intends to propose to Gwendolen. Algernon confronts him with the cigarette case and forces him to come clean, demanding to know who "Jack" and "Cecily" are. Jack confesses that his name isn't really Ernest and that Cecily is his ward, a responsibility imposed on him by his adoptive father's will. Jack also tells Algernon about his fictional brother. Jack says he's been thinking of killing off this fake brother, since Cecily has been showing too active an interest in him. Without meaning to, Jack describes Cecily in terms that catch Algernon's attention and make him even more interested in her than he is already.

Gwendolen and her mother, Lady Bracknell, arrive, which gives Jack an opportunity to propose to Gwendolen. Jack is delighted to discover that Gwendolen returns his affections, but he is alarmed to learn that Gwendolen is fixated on the name Ernest, which she says "inspires absolute confidence." Gwendolen makes clear that she would not consider marrying a man who was *not* named Ernest.

Lady Bracknell interviews Jack to determine his eligibility as a possible son-in-law, and during this interview she asks about his family background. When Jack explains that he has no idea who his parents were and that he was found, by the man who adopted him, in a handbag in the cloakroom at Victoria Station, Lady Bracknell is scandalized. She forbids the match between Jack and Gwendolen and sweeps out of the house.

In Act II, Algernon shows up at Jack's country estate posing as Jack's brother Ernest. Meanwhile, Jack, having decided that Ernest has outlived his usefulness, arrives home in deep mourning, full of a story about Ernest having died suddenly in Paris. He is enraged to find Algernon there masquerading as Ernest but has to go along with the charade. If he doesn't, his own lies and deceptions will be revealed.

While Jack changes out of his mourning clothes, Algernon, who has fallen hopelessly in love with Cecily, asks her to marry him. He is surprised to discover that Cecily already considers that they are engaged, and he is charmed when she reveals that her fascination with "Uncle Jack's brother" led her to invent an elaborate romance between herself and him several months ago. Algernon is less enchanted to learn that part of Cecily's interest in him derives from the name Ernest, which, unconsciously echoing Gwendolen, she says "inspires absolute confidence."

Algernon goes off in search of Dr. Chasuble, the local rector, to see about getting himself christened Ernest. Meanwhile, Gwendolen arrives, having decided to pay Jack an unexpected visit. Gwendolen is shown into the garden, where Cecily orders tea and attempts to play hostess. Cecily has no idea how Gwendolen figures into Jack's life, and Gwendolen, for her part, has no idea who Cecily is. Gwendolen initially thinks Cecily is a visitor to the Manor House and is disconcerted to learn that Cecily is "Mr. Worthing's ward." She notes that Ernest has never mentioned having a ward, and Cecily explains that it is not *Ernest* Worthing who is her guardian but his brother Jack and, in fact, that she is engaged to be married to Ernest Worthing. Gwendolen points out that this is impossible as she herself is engaged to Ernest Worthing. The tea party degenerates into a war of manners.

Jack and Algernon arrive toward the climax of this confrontation, each having separately made arrangements with Dr. Chasuble to be christened Ernest later that day. Each of the young ladies points out that the other has been deceived: Cecily informs Gwendolen that her fiancé is really named Jack and Gwendolen informs Cecily that hers is really called Algernon. The two women demand to know where Jack's brother Ernest is, since both of them are engaged to be married to him. Jack is forced to admit that he has no brother and that Ernest is a complete fiction. Both women are shocked and furious, and they retire to the house arm in arm.

Act III takes place in the drawing room of the Manor House, where Cecily and Gwendolen have retired. When Jack and Algernon enter from the garden, the two women confront them. Cecily asks Algernon why he pretended to be her guardian's brother. Algernon tells her he did it in order to meet her. Gwendolen asks Jack whether he pretended to have a brother in order to come into London to see her as often as possible, and she interprets his evasive reply as an affirmation. The women are somewhat appeased but still concerned over the issue of the name. However, when Jack and Algernon tell Gwendolen and Cecily that they have both made arrangements to be christened Ernest that afternoon, all is forgiven and the two pairs of lovers embrace. At this moment, Lady Bracknell's arrival is announced.

Lady Bracknell has followed Gwendolen from London, having bribed Gwendolen's maid to reveal her destination. She demands to know what is going on. Gwendolen again informs Lady Bracknell of her engagement to Jack, and Lady Bracknell reiterates that a union between them is out of the question. Algernon tells Lady Bracknell of his engagement to Cecily, prompting her to inspect Cecily and inquire into her social connections, which she does in a routine and patronizing manner that infuriates Jack. He replies to all her questions with a mixture of civility and sarcasm, withholding until the last possible moment the information that Cecily is actually worth a great deal of money and stands to inherit still more when she comes of age. At this, Lady Bracknell becomes genuinely interested.

Jack informs Lady Bracknell that, as Cecily's legal guardian, he refuses to give his consent to her union with Algernon. Lady Bracknell suggests that the two young people simply wait until Cecily comes of age, and Jack points out that under the terms of her grandfather's will, Cecily does not legally come of age until she is thirty-five. Lady Bracknell asks Jack to reconsider, and he points out that the matter is entirely in her own hands. As soon as she consents to his marriage to Gwendolen, Cecily can have his consent to marry Algernon. However, Lady Bracknell refuses to entertain the notion. She and Gwendolen are on the point of leaving when Dr. Chasuble arrives and happens to mention Cecily's governess, Miss Prism. At this, Lady Bracknell starts and asks that Miss Prism be sent for.

When the governess arrives and catches sight of Lady Bracknell, she begins to look guilty and furtive. Lady Bracknell accuses her of having left her sister's house twenty-eight years before with a baby and never returned. She demands to know where the baby is. Miss Prism confesses she doesn't know, explaining that she lost the baby, having absentmindedly placed it in a handbag in which she had meant to place the manuscript for a novel she had written. Jack asks what happened to the bag, and Miss Prism says she left it in the cloakroom of a railway station. Jack presses her for further details and goes racing offstage, returning a few moments later with a large handbag. When Miss Prism confirms that the bag is hers, Jack throws himself on her with a cry of "Mother!" It takes a while before the situation is sorted out, but before too long we understand that Jack is not the illegitimate child of Miss Prism but the legitimate child of Lady Bracknell's sister and, therefore, Algernon's older brother. Furthermore, Jack had been originally christened "Ernest John." All these years Jack has unwittingly been telling the truth: Ernest *is* his name, as is Jack, and he does have an unprincipled younger brother—Algernon. Again the couples embrace, Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble follow suit, and Jack acknowledges that he now understands "the vital Importance of Being Earnest."

## (Excerpt from Act III)

[Enter DR. **Chasuble**.]

**Chasuble**. Everything is quite ready for the christenings.

**Lady Bracknell**. The christenings, sir! Is not that somewhat premature?

**Chasuble**. [Looking rather puzzled, and pointing to **Jack** and **Algernon**.] Both these gentlemen have expressed a desire for immediate baptism.

**Lady Bracknell**. At their age? The idea is grotesque and irreligious! Algernon, I forbid you to be baptized. I will not hear of such excesses. Lord Bracknell would be highly displeased if he learned that that was the way in which you wasted your time and money.

**Chasuble**. Am I to understand then that there are to be no christenings at all this afternoon?

**Jack**. I don't think that, as things are now, it would be of much practical value to either of us, Dr. Chasuble.

**Chasuble**. I am grieved to hear such sentiments from you, Mr. Worthing. They savour of the heretical views of the Anabaptists, views that I have completely refuted in four of my unpublished sermons. However, as your present mood seems to be one peculiarly secular, I will return to the church at once. Indeed, I have just been informed by the pew-opener that for the last hour and a half Miss Prism has been waiting for me in the vestry.

**Lady Bracknell**. [Starting.] Miss Prism! Did I hear you mention a Miss Prism?

**Chasuble**. Yes, Lady Bracknell. I am on my way to join her.

**Lady Bracknell.** Pray allow me to detain you for a moment. This matter may prove to be one of vital importance to Lord Bracknell and myself. Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?

**Chasuble.** [Somewhat indignantly.] She is the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability.

**Lady Bracknell.** It is obviously the same person. May I ask what position she holds in your household?

**Chasuble.** [Severely.] I am a celibate, madam.

**Jack.** [Interposing.] Miss Prism, Lady Bracknell, has been for the last three years Miss Cardew's esteemed governess and valued companion.

**Lady Bracknell.** In spite of what I hear of her, I must see her at once. Let her be sent for.

**Chasuble.** [Looking off.] She approaches; she is nigh.

[Enter **Miss Prism** hurriedly.]

**Miss Prism.** I was told you expected me in the vestry, dear Canon. I have been waiting for you there for an hour and three-quarters. [Catches sight of **Lady Bracknell**, who has fixed her with a stony glare. **Miss Prism** grows pale and quails. She looks anxiously round as if desirous to escape.]

**Lady Bracknell.** [In a severe, judicial voice.] Prism! [**Miss Prism** bows her head in shame.] Come here, Prism! [**Miss Prism** approaches in a humble manner.] Prism! Where is that baby? [General consternation. The **Canon** starts back in horror. **Algernon** and **Jack** pretend to be anxious to shield **Cecily** and **Gwendolen** from hearing the details of a terrible public scandal.] Twenty-eight years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell's house, Number 104, Upper Grosvenor Street, in charge of a perambulator that contained a baby of the male sex. You never returned. A few weeks later, through the elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan police, the perambulator was discovered at midnight, standing by itself in a remote corner of Bayswater. It contained the manuscript of a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality. [**Miss Prism** starts in involuntary indignation.] But the baby was not there! [Every one looks at **Miss Prism**.] Prism! Where is that baby? [A pause.]

**Miss Prism.** Lady Bracknell, I admit with shame that I do not know. I only wish I did. The plain facts of the case are these. On the morning of the day you mention, a day that is for ever branded on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old, but capacious hand-bag in which I had intended to place the manuscript of a work of fiction that I had written during my few unoccupied hours. In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I never can forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the basinette, and placed the baby in the hand-bag.

**Jack.** [Who has been listening attentively.] But where did you deposit the hand-bag?

**Miss Prism.** Do not ask me, Mr. Worthing.

**Jack.** Miss Prism, this is a matter of no small importance to me. I insist on knowing where you deposited the hand-bag that contained that infant.

**Miss Prism.** I left it in the cloak-room of one of the larger railway stations in London.

**Jack.** What railway station?

**Miss Prism.** [Quite crushed.] Victoria. The Brighton line. [Sinks into a chair.]

**Jack.** I must retire to my room for a moment. Gwendolen, wait here for me.

**Gwendolen.** If you are not too long, I will wait here for you all my life. [Exit **Jack** in great excitement.]

**Chasuble.** What do you think this means, Lady Bracknell?

**Lady Bracknell.** I dare not even suspect, Dr. Chasuble. I need hardly tell you that in families of high position strange coincidences are not supposed to occur. They are hardly considered the thing.

[Noises heard overhead as if some one was throwing trunks about. Every one looks up.]

**Cecily.** Uncle Jack seems strangely agitated.

**Chasuble.** Your guardian has a very emotional nature.

**Lady Bracknell.** This noise is extremely unpleasant. It sounds as if he was having an argument. I dislike arguments of any kind. They are always vulgar, and often convincing.

**Chasuble.** [Looking up.] It has stopped now. [The noise is redoubled.]

**Lady Bracknell.** I wish he would arrive at some conclusion.

**Gwendolen.** This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last. [Enter **Jack** with a hand-bag of black leather in his hand.]

**Jack.** [Rushing over to **Miss Prism.**] Is this the handbag, Miss Prism? Examine it carefully before you speak. The happiness of more than one life depends on your answer.

**Miss Prism.** [Calmly.] It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days. Here is the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an incident that occurred at Leamington. And here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had had them placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years.

**Jack.** [In a pathetic voice.] Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this hand-bag. I was the baby you placed in it.

**Miss Prism.** [Amazed.] You?

**Jack.** [Embracing her.] Yes... mother!

**Miss Prism.** [Recoiling in indignant astonishment.] Mr. Worthing! I am unmarried

**Jack.** Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you. [Tries to embrace her again.]

**Miss Prism.** [Still more indignant.] Mr. Worthing, there is some error. [Pointing to **Lady Bracknell.**] There is the lady who can tell you who you really are.

**Jack.** [After a pause.] Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am?

**Lady Bracknell.** I am afraid that the news I have to give you will not altogether please you. You are the son of my poor sister, Mrs. Moncrieff, and consequently Algernon's elder brother.

**Jack.** Algy's elder brother! Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother! Cecily, - how could you have ever doubted that I had a brother? [Seizes hold of **Algernon.**] Dr. Chasuble, my unfortunate brother. Miss Prism, my unfortunate brother. Gwendolen, my unfortunate brother. Algy, you young scoundrel, you will have to treat me with more respect in the future. You have never behaved to me like a brother in all your life.

**Algernon.** Well, not till to-day, old boy, I admit. I did my best, however, though I was out of practice.

[Shakes hands.]

**Gwendolen.** [To **Jack.**] My own! But what own are you? What is your Christian name, now that you have become some one else?

**Jack.** Good heavens!... I had quite forgotten that point. Your decision on the subject of my name is irrevocable, I suppose?

**Gwendolen.** I never change, except in my affections.

**Cecily.** What a noble nature you have, Gwendolen!

**Jack.** Then the question had better be cleared up at once. Aunt Augusta, a moment. At the time when Miss Prism left me in the hand-bag, had I been christened already?

**Lady Bracknell.** Every luxury that money could buy, including christening, had been lavished on you by your fond and doting parents.

**Jack.** Then I was christened! That is settled. Now, what name was I given? Let me know the worst.

**Lady Bracknell.** Being the eldest son you were naturally christened after your father.

**Jack.** [Irritably.] Yes, but what was my father's Christian name?

**Lady Bracknell.** [Meditatively.] I cannot at the present moment recall what the General's Christian name was. But I have no doubt he had one. He was eccentric, I admit. But only in later years. And that was the result of the Indian climate, and marriage, and indigestion, and other things of that kind.

**Jack.** Algy! Can't you recollect what our father's Christian name was?

**Algernon.** My dear boy, we were never even on speaking terms. He died before I was a year old.

**Jack.** His name would appear in the Army Lists of the period, I suppose, Aunt Augusta?

**Lady Bracknell.** The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life. But I have no doubt his name would appear in any military directory.

**Jack.** The Army Lists of the last forty years are here. These delightful records should have been my constant study. [Rushes to bookcase and tears the books out.] M. Generals... Mallam, Maxbohm, Magley, what ghastly names they have - Markby, Migsby, Mobbs, Moncrieff! Lieutenant 1840, Captain, Lieutenant-Colonel, Colonel, General 1869, Christian names, Ernest John. [Puts book very quietly down and speaks quite calmly.] I always told you, Gwendolen, my name was Ernest, didn't I? Well, it is Ernest after all. I mean it naturally is Ernest.

**Lady Bracknell.** Yes, I remember now that the General was called Ernest, I knew I had some particular reason for disliking the name.

**Gwendolen.** Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first that you could have no other name!

**Jack.** Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?

**Gwendolen.** I can. For I feel that you are sure to change.

**Jack.** My own one!

**Chasuble.** [To Miss Prism.] Laetitia! [Embraces her]

**Miss Prism.** [Enthusiastically.] Frederick! At last!

**Algernon.** Cecily! [Embraces her.] At last!

**Jack.** Gwendolen! [Embraces her.] At last!

**Lady Bracknell.** My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality.

**Jack.** On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.

## **The Nature of Marriage**

Marriage is of paramount importance in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, both as a primary force motivating the plot and as a subject for philosophical speculation and debate. The question of the nature of marriage appears for the first time in the opening dialogue between Algernon and his butler, Lane, and from this point on the subject never disappears for very long. Algernon and Jack discuss the nature of marriage when they dispute briefly about whether a marriage proposal is a matter of "business" or "pleasure," and Lady Bracknell touches on the issue when she states, "An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be." Even Lady Bracknell's list of bachelors and the prepared interview to which she subjects Jack are based on a set of assumptions about the nature and purpose of marriage. In general, these assumptions reflect the conventional preoccupations of Victorian respectability—social position, income, and character. The play is actually an ongoing debate about the nature of marriage and whether it is "pleasant or unpleasant." Lane remarks casually that he believes it to be "a very pleasant state," before admitting that his own marriage, now presumably ended, was the result of "a misunderstanding between myself and a young person." Algernon regards Lane's views on marriage as "somewhat lax." His own views are relentlessly cynical until he meets and falls in love with Cecily. Jack, by contrast, speaks in the voice of the true romantic. He tells Algernon, however, that the truth "isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl." At the end of the play, Jack apologizes to Gwendolen when he realizes he had been telling the truth all his life. She forgives him, she says, on the grounds that she thinks he's sure to change, which suggests Gwendolen's own rather cynical view of the nature of men and marriage.

## **The Constraints of Morality**

Morality and the constraints it imposes on society is a favorite topic of conversation in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Algernon thinks the servant class has a responsibility to set a moral standard for the upper classes. Jack thinks reading a private cigarette case is "ungentlemanly." "More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read," Algernon points out. These restrictions and assumptions suggest a strict code of morals that exists in Victorian society, but Wilde isn't concerned with questions of what is and isn't moral. Instead, he makes fun of the whole Victorian idea of morality as a rigid body of rules about what people should and shouldn't do. The very title of the play is a double-edged comment on the phenomenon. The play's central plot—the man who both is and isn't Ernest/earnest—presents a moral paradox. Earnestness, which refers to both the quality of being serious and the quality of being sincere, is the play's primary object of satire. Characters such as Jack, Gwendolen, Miss Prism, and Dr. Chasuble, who put a premium on sobriety and honesty, are either hypocrites or else have the rug pulled out from under them. What Wilde wants us to see as truly moral is really the opposite of earnestness: irreverence.

## **Hypocrisy vs. Inventiveness**

Algernon and Jack may create similar deceptions, but they are not morally equivalent characters. When Jack fabricates his brother Ernest's death, he imposes that fantasy on his loved ones, and though we are aware of the deception, they, of course, are not. He rounds out the deception with costumes and props,

and he does his best to convince the family he's in mourning. He is acting hypocritically. In contrast, Algernon and Cecily make up elaborate stories that don't really assault the truth in any serious way or try to alter anyone else's perception of reality. In a sense, Algernon and Cecily are characters after Wilde's own heart, since in a way they invent life for themselves as though life is a work of art. In some ways, Algernon, not Jack, is the play's real hero. Not only is Algernon like Wilde in his dandified, exquisite wit, tastes, and priorities, but he also resembles Wilde to the extent that his fictions and inventions resemble those of an artist.

### **The Importance of Not Being "Earnest"**

Earnestness, which implies seriousness or sincerity, is the great enemy of morality in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Earnestness can take many forms, including boringness, solemnity, pomposity, complacency, smugness, self-righteousness, and sense of duty, all of which Wilde saw as hallmarks of the Victorian character. When characters in the play use the word *serious*, they tend to mean "trivial," and vice versa. For example, Algernon thinks it "shallow" for people not to be "serious" about meals, and Gwendolen believes, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing." For Wilde, the word *earnest* comprised two different but related ideas: the notion of false truth and the notion of false morality, or moralism. The moralism of Victorian society—its smugness and pomposity—impels Algernon and Jack to invent fictitious alter egos so as to be able to escape the strictures of propriety and decency. However, what one member of society considers decent or indecent doesn't always reflect what decency really is. One of the play's paradoxes is the impossibility of actually being either earnest (meaning "serious" or "sincere") or moral while claiming to be so. The characters who embrace triviality and wickedness are the ones who may have the greatest chance of attaining seriousness and virtue.

### **Puns**

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the pun, widely considered to be the lowest form of verbal wit, is rarely just a play on words. The pun in the title is a case in point. The earnest/Ernest joke strikes at the very heart of Victorian notions of respectability and duty. Gwendolen wants to marry a man called Ernest, and she doesn't care whether the man actually possesses the qualities that comprise earnestness. She is, after all, quick to forgive Jack's deception. In embodying a man who is initially neither "earnest" nor "Ernest," and who, through forces beyond his control, subsequently *becomes* both "earnest" and "Ernest," Jack is a walking, breathing paradox and a complex symbol of Victorian hypocrisy.

In Act III, when Lady Bracknell quips that until recently she had no idea there were any persons "whose origin was a Terminus," she too is making an extremely complicated pun. The joke is that a railway station is as far back as Jack can trace his identity and therefore a railway station actually is his "origin," hence the pun. In Wilde's day, as in the England of today, the first stop on a railway line is known as the "origin" and the last stop as the "terminus." There's also a whole series of implicit subsidiary puns on words like *line* and *connection* that can refer to either ancestry or travel. Wilde is poking fun at Lady Bracknell's snobbery. He depicts her as incapable of distinguishing between a railway line and a family line, social connections and railway connections, a person's ancestral origins and the place where he chanced to be found. In general, puns add layers of meaning to the characters' lines and call into question the true or intended meaning of what is being said.

### **Inversion**

One of the most common motifs in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the notion of inversion, and inversion takes many forms. The play contains inversions of thought, situation, and character, as well

as inversions of common notions of morality or philosophical thought. When Algernon remarks, "Divorces are made in Heaven," he inverts the cliché about marriages being "made in heaven." Similarly, at the end of the play, when Jack calls it "a terrible thing" for a man to discover that he's been telling the truth all his life, he inverts conventional morality. Most of the women in the play represent an inversion of accepted Victorian practices with regard to gender roles. Lady Bracknell usurps the role of the father in interviewing Jack, since typically this was a father's task, and Gwendolen and Cecily take charge of their own romantic lives, while the men stand by watching in a relatively passive role. The trick that Wilde plays on Miss Prism at the end of the play is also a kind of inversion: The trick projects onto the play's most fervently moralistic character the image of the "fallen woman" of melodrama.

## Death

Jokes about death appear frequently in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Lady Bracknell comes onstage talking about death, and in one of the play's many inversions, she says her friend Lady Harbury looks twenty years younger since the death of her husband. With respect to Bunbury, she suggests that death is an inconvenience for others—she says Bunbury is "shilly-shallying" over whether "to live or to die." On being told in Act III that Bunbury has died suddenly in accordance with his physicians' predictions, Lady Bracknell commends Bunbury for acting "under proper medical advice." Miss Prism speaks as though death were something from which one could learn a moral lesson and piously says she hopes Ernest will profit from having died. Jack and Algernon have several conversations about how to "kill" Jack's imaginary brother. Besides giving the play a layer of dark humor, the death jokes also connect to the idea of life being a work of art. Most of the characters discuss death as something over which a person actually has control, as though death is a final decision one can make about how to shape and color one's life.

## The Dandy

To the form of Victorian melodrama, Wilde contributed the figure of the dandy, a character who gave the form a moral texture it had never before possessed. In Wilde's works, the dandy is a witty, overdressed, self-styled philosopher who speaks in epigrams and paradoxes and ridicules the cant and hypocrisy of society's moral arbiters. To a very large extent, this figure was a self-portrait, a stand-in for Wilde himself. The dandy isn't always a comic figure in Wilde's work. In *A Woman of No Importance* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he takes the form of the villains Lord Illingworth and Lord Henry Wootton, respectively. But in works such as *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde seems to be evolving a more positive and clearly defined moral position on the figure of the dandy. The dandy pretends to be all about surface, which makes him seem trivial, shallow, and ineffectual. Lord Darlington and Lord Goring (in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*) both present themselves this way. In fact, the dandy in both plays turns out to be something very close to the real hero. He proves to be deeply moral and essential to the happy resolution of the plot.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon has many characteristics of the dandy, but he remains morally neutral throughout the play. Many other characters also express dandiacal sentiments and views. Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell are being dandiacal when they assert the importance of surfaces, style, or "profile," and even Jack echoes the philosophy of the dandy when he comes onstage asserting that "pleasure" is the only thing that should "bring one anywhere." For the most part, these utterances seem to be part of Wilde's general lampooning of the superficiality of the upper classes. The point is that it's the wrong sort of superficiality because it doesn't recognize and applaud its own triviality. In fact, Cecily, with her impatience with self-improvement and conventional morality and her

curiosity about "wickedness," is arguably the character who, after Algernon, most closely resembles the dandy. Her dandiacal qualities make her a perfect match for him.

### **Listen to the song by Company of Thieves - "Oscar Wilde" (Official)**

**Why do you think they drew inspiration from Oscar Wilde? Is this song a tribute to Oscar Wilde's genius?**

Episodes and parallels  
Don't you want the invitation  
Big bright accent, catty smile  
Oscar Wilde confrontation  
Ah, Live like it's the style  
When we waltz on your front porch  
We are all our-own devil  
We are all our-own devil  
We make this world our hell  
Porcelain teacups decorate  
Tables and the conversation  
Beauty pageants, all the time  
Is running out, the time is running out  
Time keeps on ticking away  
Always running away  
We're always running in time  
We're always running from time

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH0hf0qU\\_zQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH0hf0qU_zQ)

**Watch the short video clip about Wilde's aphorisms. Be prepared to comment them and choose the one you like the most and explain why.**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9J\\_bp2ors4U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9J_bp2ors4U)

### **Oscar Wilde Walking Tour of London**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hasPVgNoF1I>

#### **If interested:**

1. <http://www.cmgww.com/historic/wilde/> (The Official Website of Oscar Wilde)
2. <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/wilde/index.html> (Oscar Wilde: An Overview)