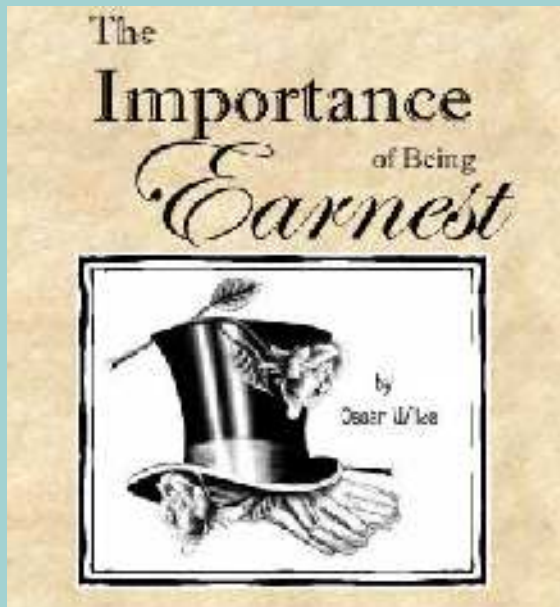


THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST



ANALYSIS OF THE ONLY PLAY
OF OSCAR WILDE – 1895 -

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THE ONLY PLAY BY OSCAR WILDE

- It premiered on 14 February 1895 at the St. James's Theatre in London. Set in England during the late Victorian era;
- It has proved Wilde's most enduringly popular play. The successful opening night marked the climax of Wilde's career but also heralded (annunciare) his impending downfall → The Marquess of Queensberry intended to throw vegetables at the playwright when he took his bow (inchino) at the end of the show.
- Despite its success, this play counts only 83 performances.

PLOT

Characters:

Algernon → Bunbury

Jack → Ernest Worthing

Cecily → an 18-year old
heiress (ereditiera)

Gwendolen

Lady Bracknell



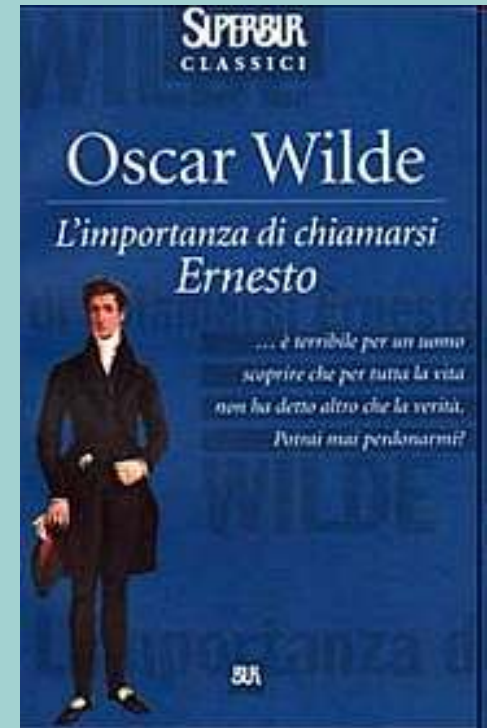
3-ACTS AND 4-ACTS VERSIONS

When Wilde handed his final draft of the play over to theatrical impresario George Alexander, it was complete in four acts. The actor manager of the St. James' Theatre soon began a reworking of the play. Wilde agreed to the cuts, and various elements of the second and third acts were combined.

The greatest impact was the loss of the character Mr. Gribbsby, a solicitor who turns up from London to arrest the profligate "Ernest" for his unpaid dining bills. Algernon, who is going by the name "Ernest" at this point, is about to be led away to Holloway Jail unless he settles his accounts immediately, but Jack finally agrees to pay for him.

TRANSLATIONS

The comedy has been successful even when performed in translation. The title being translatable only to a few languages—it relies on "Ernest" and "earnest" being homophones in English—it is sometimes staged under the title *Bunbury*.



IS THERE A REFERENCE TO HOMOSEXUALITY?

-Some have implied that Wilde's use of the name *Ernest* might possibly be an inside joke. **Theo Aronson** has suggested that the word "earnest" became a **code-word for homosexual**, as in: "Is he earnest?", in the same way that "Is he so?" and "Is he musical?" were also employed.

- The words *bunbury* and *bunburying*, meanwhile, which are used to imply double lives and as excuses for absences, are, according to a letter from Aleister Crowley to Sir R. H. Bruce Lockhart, an inside joke that came about after Wilde boarded a train at Banbury on which he met a schoolboy. They got into conversation and subsequently arranged to meet again at Sunbury.

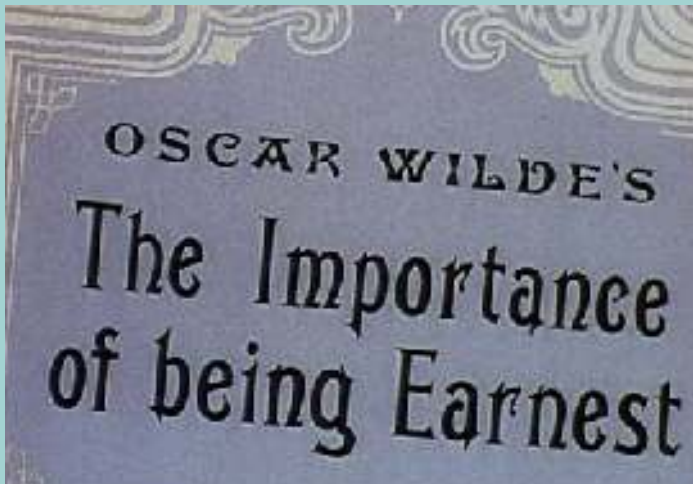
IS THERE A REFERENCE TO HOMOSEXUALITY?

→ Contrary to claims of homosexual terminology, the actor **Sir Donald Sinden** wrote to *The Times* to dispute suggestions that 'Earnest' held **any sexual connotations**:

"Although they had ample opportunity, at no time did any of them even hint that Earnest was a synonym for homosexual, or that Bunburying may have implied homosexual sex. The first time I heard it mentioned was in the 1980s and I immediately consulted Sir John Gielgud whose own performance of Jack Worthing in the same play was legendary and whose knowledge of theatrical lore was encyclopaedic. He replied in his ringing tones: "No-No! Nonsense, absolute nonsense: I would have known.". The latter remark gains additional salience from the fact that Gielgud himself was well-known in theatrical circles to be gay".

THE NATURE OF MARRIAGE

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. This question reflects 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.”

THE CONSTRAINTS OF MORALITY

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. Wilde makes fun of the whole Victorian idea of morality as a rigid body of rules about what people should and shouldn't do.

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

THE IMPORTANCE OF NOT 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.

The word earnest comprised two different but related ideas: the notion of false truth and the notion of false morality.



The moralism of Victorian society impels Algernon and Jack to invent fictitious alter egos, so as to be able to escape the strictures of propriety and decency.

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.

Jack is a walking, breathing paradox and a complex symbol of Victorian hypocrisy.

THE DANDY

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 their feelings of dandies. Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell are dandies 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 some critics the figures that embody the most a dandy are: Cecily and Algernon.