The Play at a Glance

SUMMARY

This play is a comical tale of love and intrigue in Victorian England. Two wealthy young bachelors, Algernon and Jack, have been leading double lives to escape their tiresome social duties. Now that Jack wants to marry his love Gwendolyn, he has to tell her he is really Jack, not Ernest. But Gwendolyn thinks she loves “Ernest” for his name, and Gwendolyn’s mother, the frightening Lady Bracknell, disapproves of Jack. Meanwhile, Algernon complicates the situation by showing up at Jack’s country home and pretending to be Jack’s imaginary brother Ernest. He instantly falls in love with Jack’s cousin Celia and proposes to her. After much confusion, the couples are married—after it is discovered that Jack is Algernon’s long-lost older brother, whose real name is Ernest.

MORE ABOUT THE WRITER

Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland. In 1881, he published his first work, a book of poems influenced by his father’s death and Wilde’s subsequent travels through Greece and Italy. Wilde became a part of the social world of artists and intellectuals in London, and he championed the cause of Aestheticism, a movement critical of the commercialism of the time. Wilde’s motto was “Art for art’s sake.”

Wilde traveled across the United States following the release of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta *Patience*; the musical satirized the entire Aesthetic movement and, by extension, Wilde himself. He was an enormous success both as a showman and a lecturer, shocking his audiences with his unconventional views and dress. Sporting a sunflower in his buttonhole or carrying a lily, he usually wore knee breeches and a flowing tie.

Wilde lived for a while in Paris, leading the bohemian life while studying art, the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, and the novels of Honoré de Balzac. He married Constance Lloyd in 1884 and set up a fashionable home in London. He wrote fairy tales for his two sons, book reviews, and essays. In 1887, he became the editor of *Woman’s World*, a prominent publication, and during the next few years, he wrote critical essays and short stories. In 1891, he wrote his famous novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In this extremely controversial (and popular) work, Dorian Gray’s evil deeds leave their mark only on his portrait, while he continues to look like Adonis. Wilde deliberately challenged conventional Victorian morality by declaring in the preface, “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all.”
Wilde’s first play was a sentimental comedy called *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. Wilde wrote two more plays using the same ingredients: *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and *An Ideal Husband* (1894). Though both plays are filled with the standard items of Victorian melodrama (stolen letters, blackmail, “shocking” revelations, and intrigue), Wilde peppered his dialogue with barbs ridiculing Victorian ideas of respectability. The lines are fresh, impertinent, and witty: “One should never take sides in anything, Mr. Kelvil. Taking sides is the beginning of sincerity, and earnestness following shortly afterwards, and the human being becomes a bore.” Or, another gem: “Duty is what one expects of others; it is not what one does oneself.”

The Marquess of Queensberry, enraged by Wilde’s influence on his son, began to persecute Wilde in 1895, blackening the author’s name around London. Wilde decided to sue the Marquess for libel, but Wilde dropped the case and was himself prosecuted for, and convicted of, immoral conduct, for which he was sentenced to two years in prison.

Because of the scandal, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) closed at the height of its success, and Wilde was ruined, both financially and socially. After his release from prison, he lived in France under the name of Sebastian Melmoth. He wrote a long poem about prison life, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). Oscar Wilde died, deserted by all but a few friends, in a Paris hotel in November 1900.

**MAJOR CHARACTERS**

*Algernon Moncrieff* is a well-to-do young bachelor living in London who has many social commitments. He has invented an invalid friend named Bunbury whom he uses as an excuse to get out of the city and to avoid commitments he does not want to keep.

*Jack Worthing*, the protagonist, is Algernon’s friend, also a wealthy young man. Jack calls himself “Ernest” in town; in order to escape his household in the country, he has invented a younger brother named Ernest who needs assistance.

*Gwendolen Fairfax* is an attractive young lady who is Algernon’s cousin and Jack’s love interest.

*Cecily Cardew* is Jack’s ward, an eighteen-year-old woman who lives with him at his countryside manor.

*Lady Bracknell* is Algernon’s aunt and Gwendolen’s mother. She is a stock character representing the very proper English lady.

**MAJOR THEMES**

*What Is Love?*

Though *Earnest* may seem frivolous, it does make a serious attempt to examine the issue of love between adults. One kind of love between a man and a woman strikes both at first meeting; it is exemplified by Algernon and Cecily. A second kind has a somewhat longer gestation period; it is typified by Jack and Gwendolen. A third builds over a considerable time with the participants hardly acknowledging its existence; it is represented by Chasuble and Prism.
Creating Illusion and Accepting Reality
Appearance is confused with reality throughout much of the play. Both Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff masquerade as Ernest Worthing, who in fact does not exist. Jack Worthing is in truth Ernest Moncrieff, an identity he discovers only at the end of the play. Cecily Cardew invents a close relationship with Ernest Worthing, whom she has never met (though she thinks he exists), and even writes letters to herself in Ernest’s name. Throughout the play there is a suggestion that illusion is more fun and more interesting than reality.

Satirizing the English Leisure Classes
Wilde tosses a few good-natured barbs at England’s leisured rich, who, in Wilde’s representation, spend much of their time indulging in flighty romances, traveling about for no real reason, and worrying about cucumber sandwiches and muffins.

KEY LITERARY ELEMENT
Literary Devices
Wilde’s wordplay takes many forms, from puns (the word “earnest” with its multiple meanings, for example) to aphorisms, which are brief, cleverly worded statements that make wise observations about life, to epigrams, which are witty, pointed, often antithetical sayings which mean nothing or are simply quite silly.
Wilde’s characters’ diction, or choice of words, shows they are more concerned with language’s form than its meaning. In this way, Wilde uses language to illustrate the play’s themes.
Actions between characters are superbly balanced. This is known as parallelism, meaning that significant interactions involving characters have a corresponding incident later on.
The play abounds in situational irony, and, as a comedy of confused identities, relies on dramatic irony for humor.
Wilde uses many comedic conventions, such as
- Exaggeration: the treatment of something as though it has more importance or greater significance then it actually has
- Incongruity: something that seems out of time, place, or character
- Anticipation: looking forward to something funny (Anticipation can be created with a plant—an idea, line, or action that shows up early on in the play and is repeated.)
- Deus ex machina: an artificial plot contrivance used to resolve comedic plots
- Double-entendre: double meaning
Introducing the Play

ENGAGING ISSUES

The issues raised in The Importance of Being Earnest have their serious side and are as relevant and controversial today as they were at the turn of the century. Prepare students for the play by engaging them in confronting these issues as they might affect their own lives. This activity is effective with small groups. Ask students to discuss both sides of each of these scenarios, come to a consensus, and present their conclusions to the class.

Scenarios:

Superficial standards for a dating partner or friend

- You’ve said you won’t date anyone shorter than you, and here is Taylor—a whole five inches shorter. Taylor is everything else you’ve ever said you wanted. Taylor has the looks, the same interests, and a great personality. You laugh at the same things and get angry at the same things. You love to be around Taylor. You hang out at school and talk on the phone. Then, Taylor suggests that you go to the prom, but you give an excuse. You can tell that Taylor is hurt by your refusal. What kind of person are you to ignore all of Taylor’s other qualities and focus on that five-inch difference in height? Why is that five-inch difference so important? Should it be?

- You attended a summer dance camp, had a wonderful time, and met Meredith. For the whole month, you two were inseparable. You’d never met anyone you could talk to so easily. You opened up and told Meredith about your family, about school, and about everything. You promised to write, came home. Now, unexpectedly, here is Meredith at your school. Your stomach does that sinking thing. Meredith doesn’t fit in with your group of friends or with your family. Already your friends are making snide remarks about the newcomer. Your mother wants to know who is on the phone. What are you going to do?

Avoiding social or family responsibilities

- There’s a party Saturday night. It’s at your best friend’s house, and he is counting on you. You promised to be there. However, Saturday afternoon you’re going into town and picking up the special equipment you ordered for your hobby, and you know you’re going to want to assemble it and see if it works right away. That means you won’t make it to the party. You’re clear on that, but you’re not so clear on how to get out of this social obligation. What do you do?

INTRODUCING WORDPLAY

Listen to a recording or read the Abbott and Costello routine “Who’s on First?” aloud. Discuss the humor and the role of wordplay (especially puns) in the piece.
LOOKING FOR LOVE

_The Importance of Being Earnest_ is a comedy about people looking for love. What qualities do your students hope for in friends and loved ones? Ask students to express their ideas in their Reader’s Logs. Have students include characteristics they think are most important in those with whom they share their lives. (This should be a private reflection. Students should not have to share their thoughts with anyone else, unless they choose to do so.)