The Importance of Being Earnest (1895)

The story

The Importance of Being Earnest is Wilde’s most famous play and is about two young aristocratic men: Ernest Worthing, and Algernon Moncrieff. Ernest, who is actually called Jack, was adopted at an early age by a Mr Thomas Cardew who, in his will, made him guardian to his grand-daughter, Miss Cecily Cardew, who lives in the country under the charge of her governess, Miss Prism. In order to facilitate his social mobility Jack has invented an alter ego, a younger brother called Ernest who lives in the City. Even Algernon pretends to have a friend, called Bunbury, whose invalidity requires frequent attention, so ensuring his departure to the country. The story develops around the two young men’s attempts to marry Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily respectively. Jack has to overcome the obstacle of Gwendolen’s mother, Lady Bracknell who interviews him as a prospective son-in-law but on finding that he was a foundling – found in a hand-bag – dismisses him. She could not dream of allowing her only daughter ‘to marry into a cloakroom and form an alliance with a parcel’.

The second and third acts take place in the country where Cecily studies supervised by Miss Prism. Algernon enters in the guise of Jack’s younger brother Ernest, and begins to flirt with Cecily. Shortly afterwards Jack appears announcing the death of his brother. A comic situation is created when Algernon and Jack face each other. Even Gwendolen is shown in: jealousy and curiosity have brought her down to the country to find out more about Jack whom she knows only as Ernest. The two young women find that they seem to be engaged to an Ernest Worthing. In the third act Lady Bracknell arrives and she refuses to allow a marriage with Algernon until she knows Cecily is the heiress of an immense fortune. Miss Prism confesses that she put the manuscript of a novel on which she had been working in the perambulator and had placed the baby in a hand-bag

A new comedy of manners

Wilde’s contribution to the theatre was a new sort of Restoration comedy of Manners, in which the problems of his age were reflected through his witty remarks. His society drama was a mirror in which fashionable audiences could see reflected the images of their own fashionable world of dinner parties, and country-house weekends; a world in which the best kept secrets were the ones that everyone knew; a world in which everyone knew very well that their world was not as stable, as exclusive, or as moral as it pretended to be.

The institution of marriage

The Importance of Being Earnest presents an aristocratic society whose members are typical Victorian snobs; they are often arrogant, formal, and concerned with money. Lady Bracknell in particular embodies the stereotype of the Victorian English aristocrat. The main concern of all the characters in the play is marriage. In basing his work on the problems of marriage, Wilde deliberately adds a Victorian-era interpretation to the old English formula of the marriage plot. The works of Jane Austen and George Eliot alone provide multiple examples of this genre. Wilde makes fun of the institution of marriage, which he saw as a practice surrounded by hypocrisy and absurdity. Although the play ends happily, it leaves the audience under the impression that marriage and social values are often tied together in destructive ways. In fact the aristocracy does not see marriage as the result of love, but rather as a tool for achieving social stature.

Irony and imagination

The whole play is built on witty dialogues, amusing puns, misunderstandings and paradoxes which help deal with the complexity of social and personal identification; the title is a pun in itself: the name ‘Earnest’ (misspelling for ‘Ernest’) evokes the adjectives “earnest, honest and sincere”, while none of the characters is truthful. The characters, used by the playwright to criticise the Victorian prudery and exaggerated seriousness, exist only because they take part in conversation. What is important to them is not what they say, but how they say it; thus Wilde’s social satire comes from the ironic use of a solemn language in situations that are utterly ridiculous and frivolous. In this sense irony is a dominant feature of the play rather than mere decoration.

Imagination is quite important in this play, since in this world the laws of reality can be suspended, parents produced by an act of will, and the characters may change their identities as they wish.

1 REVISE your knowledge about the play The Importance of Being Earnest answering the following questions.

1 Who are the protagonists of the play? Which social class do they belong to?
2 What comedy did Wilde create?
3 What is the main theme of The Importance of Being Earnest?
4 What are the main dramatic techniques adopted?
Mother’s worries

Oscar Wilde

The Importance of Being Earnest (1895)

Act I

WARM-UP

1. MAKE a list of the worries a mother is likely to have when her daughter announces her engagement.

Jack Worthing has proposed to Gwendolen Fairfax, a girl belonging to London’s upper classes. Gwendolen’s mother, Lady Bracknell, tests him through a series of personal questions before giving her blessing.

LADY BRACKNELL [Pencil and note-book in hand] I feel bound¹ to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?

JACK Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

LADY BRACKNELL I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle² men in London as it is. How old are you?

JACK Twenty-nine.

LADY BRACKNELL A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

JACK [After some hesitation] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance³. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. […] What is your income⁴?

JACK Between seven and eight thousand a year.

LADY BRACKNELL [Makes a note in her book] In land, or in investments?

JACK In investments, chiefly.

LADY BRACKNELL That is satisfactory. […]

JACK I have a country house with some land, of course, attached to it, about fifteen hundred acres, I believe; but I don’t depend on that for my real income. In fact, as far as I can make out, the poachers are the only people who make anything out of it⁵.

LADY BRACKNELL A country house! How many bedrooms? Well, that point can be cleared up afterwards. You have a town house, I hope? A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.

JACK Well, I own a house in Belgrave Square, but it is let⁶ by the year to Lady Bloxham. Of course, I can get it back whenever I like, at six months’ notice.

LADY BRACKNELL Lady Bloxham? I don’t know her.

JACK Oh, she goes about⁷ very little. She is a lady considerably advanced in years.

LADY BRACKNELL Ah, nowadays that is no guarantee of respectability of character. What number in Belgrave Square?

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¹ I feel bound. Mi sento obbligata.
² idle. Oziosi.
³ do not approve ... ignorance. Sono contraria a qualsiasi cosa che reprimi la naturale ignoranza.
⁴ income. Guadagno.
⁵ as far as ... out of it. Per quanto ne so, I bracconieri sono gli unici a ricavarci qualche cosa.
⁶ let. Affittata.
⁷ goes about. Esce.
Lady Bracknell [Shaking her head] The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However, that could easily be altered. [...] Are your parents living?

Jack I have lost both my parents.

Lady Bracknell Both? ... To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune ... to lose both seems like carelessness. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?

Jack I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seemed to have lost me. ... I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was ... well, I was found.

Lady Bracknell Found!

Jack The late Mr. Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort.

Lady Bracknell Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this seaside resort find you?

Jack [Gravely] In a hand-bag.

Lady Bracknell A hand-bag?

Jack [Very seriously] Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a hand-bag – a somewhat large, black leather hand-bag, with handles to it – an ordinary hand-bag in fact. [...] I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over.

COMPREHENSION

2 PROVIDE a heading to each of the two sections in which the text can be divided.

3 IDENTIFY the topics of Jack and Lady Bracknell's conversation.

4 WHAT is the woman's point of view on Jack's origin?

5 WHAT does Jack have to do if he wants to marry Gwendolen?

ANALYSIS

6 FOCUS on the characters.

1 Analyse the way Lady Bracknell speaks and reacts to Jack's replies. How would you describe her?

2 What do Jack's words reveal about him as a person? Choose from among the following:

   - ambitious
   - frivolous
   - empty-headed
   - privileged

3 What kind of humour do these two characters reflect?

4 What information do the stage directions provide?

7 HOW would you define the language used in this scene?

8 DISCUSS. Do you think Wilde wanted to criticise his society? If so what was his target?

9 WHAT typical elements of the comedy are there in the text?