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*Dramatic Publishing*

A decorative border with a repeating pattern of stylized, symmetrical motifs, possibly representing leaves or scrolls, framing the text.

# The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde  
Adapted by Aurand Harris

# The Importance of Being Earnest

This superb adaptation is ideal for high school one-act play contests, classroom studies and mini-productions.

*Comedy. Adapted by Aurand Harris. From the play by Oscar Wilde.*

*Cast: 5m., 4w.* A masterpiece of high comedy. All of the highlights of the play are retained in this short adaptation—the plot’s unexpected farcical twists, the characters and the dialogue—sparkling with provocative observations. Wilde called his play “A trivial comedy for serious people.” He commented that the first act is “ingenious,” the second act “beautiful,” and the third “abominably clever.” Audiences and critics alike applaud the play as a celebration of wit.

*Simple set. 1895 fashionable English costumes.*

*Code: IAS*

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The Importance of Being  
Earnest (Harris)



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# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

Comedy

by

**OSCAR WILDE**

Adapted

by

**AURAND HARRIS**



**Dramatic Publishing**

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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## *Introduction*

It has been noted that like Dr. Samuel Johnson, but without the aid of a Boswell, Oscar Wilde is a writer whose life is better known than most of his writings. The exception is *The Importance of Being Ernest*, his one play that deservedly has achieved classic status and continues to be produced. Wilde, fortunately for us, functioned as his own Boswell, including his best witticisms and epigrams in his writings.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland, October 16, 1845, the second son of a prominent physician. He studied literature at Trinity College, Dublin, and entered Oxford University in 1874, where he won academic honors, and began to be known as an eccentric. Later in London he wrote romantic poetry and adopted a distinctive way of dressing—knee breeches, a velvet jacket, and carrying a sunflower or a lily. With studied frivolity in behavior and dress, he became heir to the dandyism of Beau Brummel. This, at first, did more than his poetry to make him famous.

His first plays were second-rate melodramas, modeled on the “well-made play” of the period. With *An Ideal Husband*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, which were still essentially melodramas, he added occasional moments which anticipated Wilde's unique touch. Only in *The Importance of Being Ernest*, his last play, did he totally free himself from melodramatic plots and unconvincing moralizing, to write a masterpiece of high comedy.

With the success of *The Importance of Being Ernest*, Wilde became the toast of London. But on the gala opening night, 1895, the Marquis of Queensbury, father of Lord Alfred Douglas, a young poet and friend of Wilde's, created a public scene, accusing Wilde of improper behavior. Wilde sued for libel, lost, and was himself tried for immoral practices and found guilty. With Wilde's advocacy of the philosophy of “Art for art's sake”; his insistence that life's goal is the pursuit of pleasure; his exotic public posturing; and his written assaults upon commonplace values, it was no surprise that the conventional world would strike back at him, impugning his character and ideas. Four days after *The Importance of Being Ernest* opened, events began which brought about his

disgrace, imprisonment and exile. Wilde, a broken man, died in Paris in 1900.

*The Importance of Being Ernest* is a celebration of wit. Max Beerbohm, reviewing a revival of the play in 1902, wrote, “The fun depends mainly on what the characters say, rather than on what they do. They speak a kind of beautiful nonsense . . . Throughout the dialogue is the horse-play of a distinguished intellect and a distinguished imagination—a horse-play among words and ideas, conducted with poetic dignity.”

Wilde called *The Importance of Being Ernest* “A Trivial Comedy for Serious People,” commenting that the first act is “ingenious,” the second “beautiful,” and the third “abominably clever.” The play stylishly satirizes birth, romance, the institution of marriage, and death—all the things that society values as important.

CAST

JOHN WORTHING, J.P.  
ALGERNON MONCRIEFF  
REV. CANON CHASUBLE, D.D.  
MERRIMAN, *Butler*  
LANE, *Manservant*  
LADY BRACKNELL  
HON. GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX  
CECILY CARDEW  
MISS PRISM, *Governess*

SCENES: 1. *Algernon's flat in London*  
2. *A room in the Manor House, Woolton*

TIME: 1895



## The Importance of Being Ernest

*SCENE 1: (ALGERNON'S flat in London. The sound of a piano is heard in the next room. LANE is arranging tea on the table. Music stops.)*

ALGERNON: (*Enters.*) Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

LANE: I didn't think it polite to listen, sir. (*Exits.*)

ALGERNON: I don't play accurately— anyone can play accurately— but I play with wonderful expression. Ah, I see you have got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Brecknell. (*Tastes a sandwich. Bell rings.*) Who can that be— so early?

LANE: (*Enters.*) Mr. Ernest Worthing. (*Enters JACK. LANE exits.*)

ALGERNON: How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

JACK: Oh, pleasure, pleasure! Eating as usual I see, Algy!

ALGERNON: (*Stiffly.*) I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock.

JACK: Who is coming to tea?

ALGERNON: Oh, merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

JACK: How perfectly delightful!

ALGERNON: I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here. The way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.

JACK: I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressively to propose to her.

ALGERNON: I thought you had come up for pleasure. I call that business. (*JACK starts to take a sandwich.*) Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. (*He takes another one and eats it.*)

JACK: Well, you have been eating them all the time.

ALGERNON: That is quite different. She is my aunt. Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen.

JACK: (*Helps himself.*) And very good bread and butter it is too.

ALGERNON: Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were already married to her. You are not married to her, and I don't think you ever will be.

JACK: Why do you say that?

ALGERNON: Well, in the first place, girls never marry the men they flirt with. In the second place, I don't give my consent.

JACK: Your consent?

ALGERNON: My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily. (*Gets cigarette case.*)

JACK: Cecily? I don't know anyone of the name of Cecily.

ALGERNON: This is the cigarette case you left last time you dined here. But when I look at the inscription inside, I find that the thing isn't yours after all. This cigarette case is a present from someone of the name of Cecily, and you said you didn't know anyone of that name.

JACK: Well, if you want to know, Cecily happens to be my aunt.

ALGERNON: But why does she call herself little Cecily if she is your aunt? (*Reading.*) "From little Cecily with her fondest love."

JACK: My dear fellow, some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. For Heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case. (*Follows Algernon around the room.*)

**ALGERNON:** But why does your aunt call you her uncle? “From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.” Besides, your name isn’t Jack, it is Ernest.

**JACK:** It isn’t Ernest; it’s Jack.

**ALGERNON:** You have always said it was Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw. It’s on your cards. Here is one of them. (*Takes card from case.*) “Mr. Ernest Mowthing. The Albany.” I’ll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest. (*Puts card in his pocket.*)

**JACK:** My name is Ernest in town, and Jack in the country; and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.

**ALGERNON:** Yes, but that does not account for the fact that your small Aunt Cecily calls you her dear uncle. Come, old boy, you had much better have the thing out at once. I have always suspected you of being a secret Bunburyist; and I am quite sure of it now.

**JACK:** Bunburyist? What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyist?

**ALGERNON:** I’ll reveal to you the meaning of the incomparable expression as soon as you inform me why you are Ernest in town and Jack in the country.

**JACK:** Old Mr. Thomas Cardew, who adopted me when I was a little boy, made me in his will guardian to his grand-daughter, Miss Cecily Cardew. Cecily, who addresses me as her uncle, lives at my place in the country under the charge of her admirable governess, Miss Prism.

**ALGERNON:** Where is that place in the country, by the way?

**JACK:** That is nothing to you, dear boy. You are not going to be invited.

**ALGERNON:** But why are you Ernest in town and Jack in the country?

**JACK:** When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone. And as a high moral tone is hardly conducive to one’s health or one’s happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.

ALGERNON: The truth is rarely pure and never simple. What you really are is a Bunburyist. You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, I wouldn't be able to dine with you tonight, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week.

JACK: I haven't asked you to dine.

ALGERNON: I know. You are absurdly careless about sending out invitations. Besides, now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist, I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying.

JACK: I am not a Bunburyist at all. If Gwendolen accepts me, I am going to kill my brother. Cecily is a little too much interested in him.

ALGERNON: (*Bells are heard.*) Ah! that must be Aunt Augusta. Now if I get her out of the way for ten minutes, so that you can have an opportunity for proposing to Gwendolen, may I dine with you tonight?

LANE: (*Enters.*) Lady Bracknell and Miss Fairfax.

LADY BRACKNELL: (*She and GWENDOLEN enter.*) Good afternoon, dear Algernon, I hope you are behaving very well.

ALGERNON: I am feeling very well, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL: That is not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together. (*Nods to Jack with icy coolness.*)

ALGERNON: (*To Gwendolen.*) Dear me, you are smart!

GWENDOLEN: I am always smart. Am I not, Mr. Worthing?

JACK: You are quite perfect, Miss Fairfax.

LADY BRACKNELL: I am sorry if we are late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger. And now I'll have a cup of tea and one of those nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me.

**ALGERNON:** Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches?

**LANE:** (*Gravely.*) There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir.

**ALGERNON:** No cucumbers!

**LANE:** No, sir. Not even for ready money.

**ALGERNON:** That will do, Lane, thank you.

**LANE:** Thank you, sir. (*Exits.*)

**LADY BRACKNELL:** It really makes no matter, Algernon. I had some crumpets with Lady Harbury, who seems to me to be living entirely for pleasure now.

**ALGERNON:** I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief. (*Serves tea to Lady Bracknell.*) I am afraid, Aunt Augusta, I shall have to give up the pleasure of dining with you tonight. I have just had a telegram to say that poor Bunbury is very ill again.

**LADY BRACKNELL:** This Mr. Bunbury seems to suffer from curiously bad health.

**ALGERNON:** Yes, poor Bunbury is a dreadful invalid.

**LADY BRACKNELL:** Well, I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. I should be much obliged if you would ask Mr. Bunbury to be kind enough not to have a relapse on Saturday, for I rely on you to arrange my music for my last reception.

**ALGERNON:** Ah yes. We will run over the program now, if you will kindly come into the next room for a moment.

**LADY BRACKNELL:** Thank you, Algernon. Gwendolen, you will accompany me. (*LADY BRACKNELL and ALGERNON exit. GWENDOLEN remains behind.*)

**JACK:** Charming day it has been, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN: Pray don't talk about the weather, Mr. Worthing. Whenever people talk about the weather, I always feel certain that they mean something else.

JACK: I do mean something else.

GWENDOLEN: I thought so. In fact, I am never wrong.

JACK: (*Nervously.*) Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you I have admired you more than any girl . . . I have ever met since . . . I met you.

GWENDOLEN: Yes, I am quite well aware of the fact. For me you have always had an irresistible fascination. We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. And my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. The moment Algernon first mentioned that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.

JACK: You mean to say that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Ernest?

GWENDOLEN: It is a divine name. It produces vibrations.

JACK: I can think of lots nicer names. Jack, for instance, is a charming name.

GWENDOLEN: Jack? It produces absolutely no vibrations. The only safe name is Ernest.

JACK: Gwendolen, I must get christened at once—I mean we must get married at once.

GWENDOLEN: Married? But you haven't proposed to me yet. And I think it only fair to tell you beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you.

JACK: (*On his knees.*) Gwendolen, will you marry me?

GWENDOLEN: Of course, I will, darling. How long you have been about it.

LACY BRACKNELL: (*Enters.*) Mr. Worthing! Rise, sir, from this semirecumbent posture. It is most indecorous.

GWENDOLEN: Mamma! Mr. Worthing has not quite finished yet.

LADY BRACKNELL: Finished what, may I ask?

GWENDOLEN: I am engaged to Mr. Worthing. (*They rise together.*)

LADY BRACKNELL: Pardon me, you are not engaged to any one. When you do become engaged, I will inform you. And now I have a few questions to put to you, Mr. Worthing. While I am making these inquiries, you, Gwendolen, will wait for me below in the carriage.

GWENDOLEN: Mamma!

LADY BRACKNELL: In the carriage, Gwendolen! (*GWENDOLEN blows kisses to Jack as she goes to door.*) Gwendolen, the carriage!

GWENDOLEN: Yes, mamma. (*Exits.*)

LADY BRACKNELL: (*Sits, takes out note-book.*) You can take a seat, Mr. Worthing.

JACK: Thank you, Lady Bracknell. I prefer standing.

LADY BRACKNELL: Do you smoke?

JACK: Yes, I must admit I smoke.

LADY BRACKNELL: I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation. Are your parents living?

JACK: I have lost both my parents.

LADY BRACKNELL: To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness. Who was your father?

JACK: I am afraid I really don't know. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me. I—I was found.

LADY BRACKNELL: Found!

JACK: The late Mr. Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable 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.

LADY BRACKNELL: In what locality did this Mr. Cardew come across this ordinary hand-bag?

JACK: In the cloak-room at Victoria Station. It was given to him in mistake for his own.

LADY BRACKNELL: The cloak-room at Victoria Station?

JACK: Yes. The Brighton line.

LADY BRACKNELL: The line is immaterial. Mr. Worthing, I confess I am bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for ordinary decencies.

JACK: May I ask you then what you would advise me to do?

LADY BRACKNELL: I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to try to acquire some relations.

JACK: I can produce the hand-bag at any moment.

LADY BRACKNELL: Sir, you can hardly imagine that I would allow my only daughter to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel. Good morning, Mr. Worthing! (*She sweeps out in majestic indignation.*)

JACK: Good morning! (*From the other room, ALGERNON starts playing the Wedding March on the piano.*) For goodness' sake don't play that ghastly tune, Algy!



**ALGERNON:** (*Music stops. He enters.*) Didn't it go off all right, old boy? You don't mean to say Gwendolen refused you?

**JACK:** Oh, Gwendolen is right as a trivet. But her mother is perfectly unbearable.

**ALGERNON:** Did you tell Gwendolen the truth about your being Ernest in town and Jack in the country?

**JACK:** Before the end of the week I shall have got rid of Ernest. I will say he died in Paris of apoplexy.

**ALGERNON:** Apoplexy is hereditary. You had much better say a severe chill.

**JACK:** Very well then. My poor brother Ernest is carried off suddenly by a severe chill. That gets rid of him.

**ALGERNON:** But I thought you said that . . . Miss Cardew was a little too interested in your poor brother Ernest. Won't she feel his loss a good deal?

**JACK:** Cecily is not a silly romantic girl. She has got a capital appetite, goes for long walks, and pays no attention at all to her lessons.

**ALGERNON:** I would rather like to see Cecily.

**JACK:** I will take very good care you never do.

**LANE:** (*Enters.*) Miss Fairfax.

**GWENDOLEN:** (*She enters. LANE exits.*) Algy, kindly turn your back. I have something very particular to say to Mr. Worthing.

**JACK:** My own darling!

**GWENDOLEN:** Ernest, we may never be married. From the expression on mamma's face, I fear we never shall. But although she may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I may marry someone else, and marry often, nothing can alter my eternal devotion to you. Your town address at the Albany I have. What is your address in the country?

**JACK:** The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire. (*ALGERNON, who has been listening, smiles, and writes the address on his shirt-cuff.*)

GWENDOLEN: (*Repeats.*) The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire. I will communicate with you daily. Algy, you may turn around now. You may also ring the bell.

JACK: You will let me see you to your carriage, my own darling?

GWENDOLEN: Certainly.

JACK: (*To LANE, who enters.*) I will see Miss Fairfax out. (*They exit.*)

LANE: Yes, sir.

ALGERNON: Tomorrow, Lane, I am going Bunburying.

LANE: Yes, sir.

ALGERNON: I shall probably not be back till Monday. You can pack all the Bunbury suits.

LANE: Yes, sir.

ALGERNON: (*Reads.*) The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire. (*ALGERNON exits. Music. LANE and MERRIMAN, another butler, move a few pieces of furniture, etc., setting the next scene.*)

*SCENE 2: (A room in the Manor House. LANE and MERRIMAN exit, as MISS PRISM enters.)*

PRISM: Cecily, Cecily! Come. (*CECILY enters.*) It is time for intellectual pleasures. Your German grammar is on the table. We will repeat yesterday's lesson.

CECILY: But I don't like German. It isn't at all a becoming language. I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my German lesson.

PRISM: Child, you know how anxious your guardian is that you should improve yourself in every way.

CECILY: Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious! Sometimes he is so serious that I think he cannot be quite well.

PRISM: You must remember his constant anxiety about his unfortunate brother — Ernest.

CECILY: I wish Uncle Jack would allow his unfortunate young brother – Ernest – to come down here sometimes. I am sure you would be a good influence on him. (*Begins to write in her diary.*)

PRISM: I do not think that even I could produce any effect on a character so irretrievably weak and vacillating. Indeed, I am not in favour of this modern mania for turning bad people into good people at a moment's notice. As a man sows so let him reap. Put away your diary, Cecily. Memory, my dear child, is the diary that we all carry about with us.

CECILY: I believe that memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels we read.

PRISM: Do not speak slightly of the three-volume novel. I wrote one myself in earlier days.

CECILY: Did you really, Miss Prism? And was your novel published?

PRISM: Alas! no. The manuscript unfortunately was abandoned. I used the word in the sense of lost or mislaid.

CECILY: Oh, I see Dr. Chasuble coming up through the garden.

PRISM: Dr. Chasuble! This is indeed a pleasure.

CHASUBLE: (*Enters.*) And how are we this morning? Miss Prism, you are, I trust, well?

CECILY: Miss Prism has just been complaining of a slight headache. I think it would do her so much good to have a short walk with you in the park, Dr. Chasuble.

PRISM: Cecily, I have not mentioned anything about a headache.

CECILY: No, dear Miss Prism, I know that, but I felt instinctively that you had a headache.

CHASUBLE: I hope, Cecily, you are not being inattentive in your studies. Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips. (*PRISM reacts.*) I spoke metaphorically.

PRISM: Dear Doctor, I find I have a headache after all; and a walk might do it good.