

The Importance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*

By Kelli Frost-Allred
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The Importance of Being Earnest has proven to be Oscar Wilde's most enduring—and endearing—play. Filled with witty Victorian aphorisms and Wilde's own brand of wisdom, *The Importance of Being Earnest* tells the story of Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff who use clever deception and truth-bending to accommodate their social pursuits. Jack bends the truth to include an imaginary brother, Ernest, whom he uses as an excuse to escape from the country to party among urban socialites, while urbane Algernon uses a similar technique (Bunburying) that provides him opportunities for taking adventures in the country. Of course, courting and liaisons ensue, but not without complications. Oscar Wilde builds a farcical—albeit realistic—world of Victorian social mores by using double entendre, aphorisms, and witty repartee.

Wilde seems to have been toying with audiences by giving the play a title with more than one meaning. The play's title can be deceptive. Rather than a form of the name Ernest, the title implies earnestness as a quality one should seek to acquire, as in being honest, sincere, sober, and serious. Throughout the play, Ernest is a name that encompasses qualities of the ideal man: deeply trustworthy, truly loving, honorable and passionate, and absolutely sincere. Gwendolyn says, "We live in an age of ideals . . . and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. . . . The only really safe name is Ernest." That both Gwendolyn and Cecily dream of marrying a man named Ernest seems more than a coincidence. Cecily admits, "It had always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Ernest. There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence."

Indeed, there is almost a worship of the name more than what it represents. "It is a divine name. It has a music of its own," explains Gwendolyn. "It produces vibrations." And Cecily describes the man she thinks to be named Ernest as "the very soul of truth and honour. Disloyalty would be as impossible to him as deception." So, what's in a name? Would a rose by any other name, as Shakespeare asserts, smell as sweet? Absolutely not, unless that name were Ernest, according to Oscar Wilde's portrayal of shallow, yet charming, Victorian women.

Within the context of the play, add confidence, safety, and gravity to the ideal man named Ernest. But audiences are left to wonder if Wilde meant to use "Earnest" and "Ernest" interchangeably. After all, one is a description and the other is a man's name. No, Wilde reminds viewers that to be earnest is more important than to be named Ernest. The social deceptions of Victorian England were rampant, and Wilde simply wished to call things as he saw them. One way he did this was through double entendre; however, his use of aphorisms went further in exposing the widespread use of deception among the gentry. Wilde peppered the play with aphorisms, those pithy witticisms that purportedly derive from exalted thought. Indeed, the playwright spoke in aphorisms on his deathbed when he stated through fevers, "My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go." The following quotes from *The Importance of Being Earnest* exemplify Wilde's adept use of aphorisms:

"Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever" (Act 1).

"Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die" (Act 1).

"All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his" (Act 1).

The Importance of Being Earnest: **Sparkle and Wit**

By Patricia Truxler Aikins
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"It's perfectly phrased and quite as true
as any observation in civilized life ought to be."
(Algernon to Jack, on the nature of wit)

While it may be claiming a great deal to say that there is little in all of English drama to rival the sparkle and wit of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it is certainly not claiming too much. Lovers of language, comedy of manners, satire, parody, and even burlesque will find much here to admire. But so will probers of complex social issues; for beneath the surface of this immensely entertaining play runs a serious thread of intense social criticism, so much so that what many have called this play's critical weakness--the lack of any serious, respectable, thoughtful character--is, in fact, its great critical achievement. Here Wilde has delineated for us the ultimate consequences of a decorous but decadent society--empty-headed, useless, silly human beings.

The achievement of the play is simply this: that on the surface, we are positively delighted, indeed enchanted, with the complex humor that is the result of a gross incongruity between the way people behave and what exactly it is that they are "behaving" about. Thus, we delight in Algernon's incredible capacity to render, flippantly and unwittingly, profoundly truthful observations about human nature. But, at the same time, as we laugh uproariously at the apparently harmless nature of these people's lack of self-consciousness, we are struck by the serious consequences for a society that puts form over function, for a society where what matters most is not what you value but how you value it, not what you mean but how you mean it.

As amusing as the play is on the surface, its comic energy springs ultimately from the realities that are being mocked. Thus Algernon, who can speak perfectly, speaks perfect nonsense. Cecily, who is too addled to be anything but naive, declares that it would be a "truly awful thing for a man to be only pretending to be wicked." Gwendolen, who is clearly not the pattern of all patience, declares that she "will wait forever as long as it doesn't take too long." And Jack, who behaves impeccably, behaves with impeccable silliness about "the supreme importance of being Earnest." The play itself is constructed over an abyss of disquietude and apprehension. While deception is everywhere, all men Bunbury, all women lie about their age, the deception is of no more significance than a name. Passion competes with ambition and innocence with idiocy; and even deception itself is deceived by its accidental accuracy.

The Importance of Being Earnest, then, is a rollicking good play about some pretty serious problems. After all, in a world where there is no discrepancy between appearance and reality because there is no reality, where there is nothing beneath the surface because there is only surface, Wilde offers a different answer to that great Shakespearean dilemma of what's in a name. While, for Shakespeare, "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," for Wilde, a Jack by any other name is Earnest, but only accidentally.