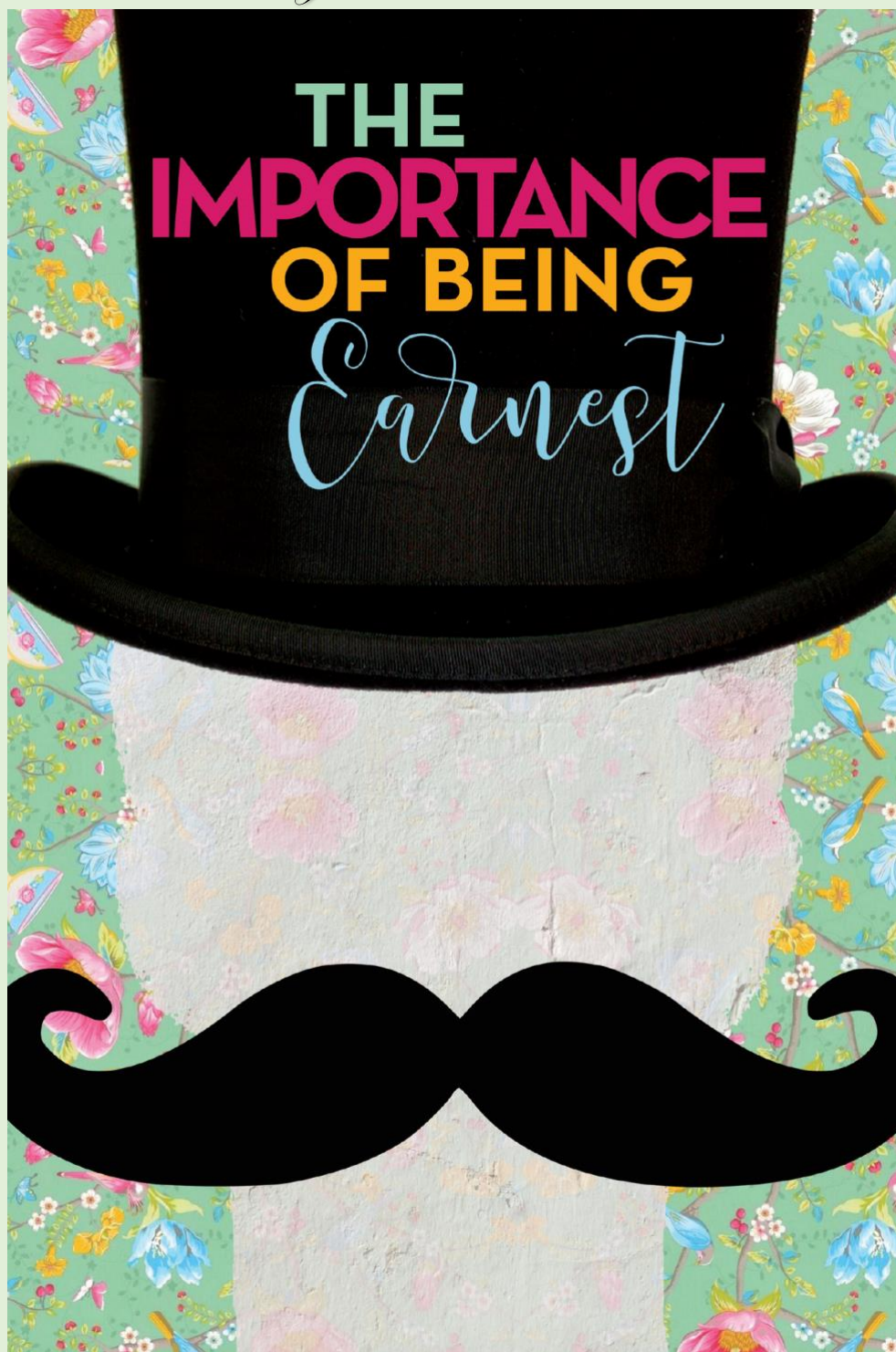


The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde



STUDY GUIDE

By Dramaturg Kristin Curley

SYNOPSIS



Jack Worthing has invented a fictional brother named “Ernest” on whom he blames the silly and scandalous activities he takes part in while in London. When Jack leaves his home in the country, he says he is “visiting his brother,” when really he is spending time with his best friend Algernon and flirting with Algernon’s cousin, Gwendolen. Algernon and Gwendolen both think that Jack’s name is Ernest—which is good because Gwendolen has declared she will only marry a man called Ernest! On top of that, when he asks for Gwendolen’s hand in marriage from her mother, Lady Bracknell, Jack must reveal that he is an orphan who was left in a handbag at a train station. This is very disturbing to Lady Bracknell, who insists that he produce at least one parent before she consents to the marriage. Jack returns to his country home only to find that Algernon has gotten there first. Algernon poses as the non-existent “wicked brother Ernest,” and falls in love with Jack’s young ward, Cecily. Cecily reveals she has always loved the “wicked Ernest,” and the two become engaged. With the arrival of Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen at Jack’s country home, chaos erupts.

Who is Ernest, really? All will be revealed...



THE SETTING



Summer, 1895

London, England & Hertfordshire, England. 1895

THE CHARACTERS



Jack Worthing- a seemingly responsible and respectable young man who leads a double life. In the country, Jack is known as Jack. In London he is known as Ernest. As a baby, Jack was discovered in a handbag in the cloakroom of Victoria Station by an old man who adopted him and made Jack guardian to his granddaughter, Cecily Cardew. Jack is in love with his friend Algernon's cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax.

Algernon ("Algy") Moncreiff- a charming, idle, bachelor, who is constantly in debt. He is the nephew of Lady Bracknell, the cousin of Gwendolen Fairfax, and the best friend of Jack Worthing (whom he knows as Ernest). He has invented a fictional friend, "Bunbury," an invalid whose frequent sudden sicknesses allow Algernon to slip out of unpleasant or dull social obligations.

Gwendolen Fairfax- is Algernon's cousin and Lady Bracknell's daughter. Gwendolen is in love with Jack (whom she knows as Ernest). A model of high fashion and society, Gwendolen speaks with sophisticated authority on matters of taste and morality. Gwendolen is fixated on the name Ernest and says she will not marry a man without that name.

Cecily Cardew- is Jack's ward. Like Gwendolen, she is obsessed with the name Ernest, but she is even more interested by the idea of wickedness. She falls in love with Algernon masquerading as Ernest and tells him of the elaborate romance she has invented between them.

Lady Bracknell- is Algernon's snobbish aunt and Gwendolen's mother. Lady Bracknell's primary goal in life is to see her daughter marry well. She has a list of "eligible young men" and a prepared interview she gives to potential suitors.

Miss Prism- is Cecily's governess. Miss Prism is an endless source of academic nonsense and clichés. She approves of Jack's respectability and harshly criticizes his "unfortunate" brother. Despite her rigidity, Miss Prism seems to have a softer side. She speaks of having once written a novel whose manuscript was "lost" or "abandoned." Also, she entertains romantic feelings for Dr. Chasuble.

Dr. Chasuble- is the resident rector on Jack's estate. Both Jack and Algernon approach Dr. Chasuble to request that they be christened "Ernest." Dr. Chasuble entertains secret romantic feelings for Miss Prism.

Lane- is Algernon's manservant. When the play opens, Lane is the only person who knows about Algernon's practice of "Bunburying." Lane appears only in Act I.

Merriman- is the butler at the Manor House, Jack's estate in the country. Merriman appears only in Acts II and III.

THE PLAYWRIGHT



OSCAR WILDE (1854-1900)

Born in Dublin, Ireland, author, playwright and poet Oscar Wilde was a popular literary figure in late Victorian England, known for his brilliant wit, flamboyant style and infamous imprisonment for homosexuality. After graduating from Oxford University in England, he lectured as a poet, art critic and a leading proponent of the principles of aestheticism. In 1891, he published *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his only novel, which was panned as immoral by Victorian critics, but is now considered one of his most notable works. As a dramatist, many of Wilde's plays were well received including his satirical comedies *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), his most famous play. He was later imprisoned for two years on charges of "gross indecency" and died in poverty three years after his release at the age of 46.

VICTORIAN ERA ETIQUETTE



The characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are bound by the strict rules of etiquette that governed the society in Victorian England. A social faux pas could mean the end of your social prospects, and for women in particular this could mean a life of spinsterhood! Below are some examples of the kind of rules Victorians followed every day. How many can you spot in *The Importance of Being Earnest*?

Bowing: “A gentleman should not bow from a window to a lady on the street, though he may bow slightly from the street upon being recognized by a lady in a window. Such recognition should, however, generally be avoided, as gossip is likely to attach undue importance to it when seen by others.”

Dignity: “To greet someone by saying ‘Hello, old fellow’ indicates ill-breeding. If you are approached in this vulgar manner, it is better to give a civil reply and address the person respectfully, in which case he is quite likely to be ashamed of his own conduct.”

Small talk: “No topic of absorbing interest may be admitted to polite conversation. It might lead to discussion.”

Marriage: “Anyone with bright red hair and a florid complexion should marry someone with jet-black hair. The very corpulent should marry the thin and spare, and the body, wiry, cold-blooded should marry the round-featured, warmhearted, emotional type.”

Husbands: “Always leave home with a tender goodbye and loving words. They may be the last.”

Kissing: “Upon the meeting of intimate friends, among ladies, at the private house, the kiss as a mode of salutation is yet common; but this is a custom which ought to be abolished for physiological and other reasons.”

Learn more at <https://kristincurley94.wixsite.com/earnest/rules-of-etiquette>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



TEXT

1. Why is it important to be Ernest? Is this different from the importance of being earnest?
2. Why does Jack spend time in the city, and why does Algernon “Bunbury” in the country?
3. How does gender play a role in the lives of the characters?
4. Why isn’t Jack allowed to marry Gwendolen until he figures out who his parents are?
5. What does the aristocracy in *Earnest* value? In your opinion, does Wilde approve of their values?
6. What rules of etiquette do we still follow today? Why?



PRODUCTION

1. What elements of the costumes, sets, props and furniture, music or lighting made you realize that you were watching a play from a time and place other than your own?
2. Lady Bracknell is constantly praising “German sensibility” and speaking negatively about “the corrupt French” — is the difference between these two countries reflected in the scenery or the costumes?
3. How does the scenery change between the three acts of the play?