

British Masterpiece

from The Importance of Being Earnest

Play by Oscar Wilde



Oscar Wilde
1854–1900



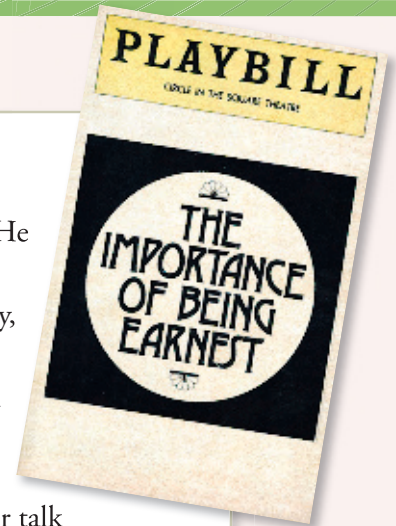
READING 4 Evaluate how the structure and elements of drama change in the works of British dramatists across literary periods.

BACKGROUND Oscar Wilde, one of the wittiest writers of the Victorian age, is famous for his brilliant conversation and flamboyant style. At Oxford University and later in London, he distinguished himself as a poet and scholar and became associated with the aesthetic movement, which stressed the importance of artistic expression for its beauty alone, or “art for art’s sake.” Although Wilde published poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, his clever conversational skills are most vividly evident in four comedies that he wrote for the London stage in the 1890s: *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

The Importance of Being Earnest is one of the most frequently staged comedies in the English language. It is a hilarious romantic farce about two upper-class bachelors who each claim to be named Ernest but have trouble *being* earnest, or honest. Jack Worthing, country gentleman and guardian to a young lady named Cecily, escapes his responsibilities in the country by inventing a scandalous younger brother named Ernest to whose rescue he must often fly. This allows for frequent visits to London, where he takes on the role of Ernest, pursuing pleasure and courting the lovely Gwendolen. Meanwhile, his friend Algernon, Gwendolen’s cousin, similarly escapes family duties in London by inventing a friend named Bunbury whose bad health demands frequent country visits. On discovering Jack’s real identity and learning of the existence of Jack’s ward, Algernon goes off on another country junket, this time posing as Jack’s wicked brother Ernest in order to meet the mysterious—and hopefully beautiful—Cecily. In the following scene, Algernon, posing as Ernest, arrives at Jack’s country estate and meets Jack’s ward, Cecily, for the first time.

LITERARY ANALYSIS Wilde is a master of using comedic language, specifically witty repartees and epigrams. In this excerpt, you see an example of an **epigram**, or clever contradictory statement, when Cecily says that she is afraid to meet a “wicked person,” not because, as you might expect, she is terrified of someone who is bad, but because she is fearful that a bad person “will look just like every one else.” The excerpt also contains an example of a repartee, an exchange of witty comments. Cecily and Algernon go back and forth about his wickedness. Cecily teases Algernon, telling him she hopes he is not “pretending to be wicked.” He assures her that he has in fact been “rather reckless.” Instead of scolding him for this behavior, she then retorts, “I am glad to hear it,” and so it continues.

DISCUSS Read the excerpt through silently. Then, with two partners, assume the roles of Merriman, Cecily, and Algernon, and read the scene aloud. Discuss why you think audiences continue to respond with delight to such dialogue.



from ACT TWO

Merriman. Mr. Ernest Worthing has just driven over from the station. He has brought his luggage with him.

Cecily (*takes the card and reads it*). 'Mr. Ernest Worthing, B.4, The Albany, W.' Uncle Jack's brother! Did you tell him Mr. Worthing was in town?

Merriman. Yes, Miss. He seemed very much disappointed. I mentioned that you and Miss Prism were in the garden. He said he was anxious to speak to you privately for a moment.

Cecily. Ask Mr. Ernest Worthing to come here. I suppose you had better talk to the housekeeper about a room for him.

10 **Merriman.** Yes, Miss. (*Merriman goes off.*)

Cecily. I have never met any really wicked person before. I feel rather frightened. I am so afraid he will look just like every one else. (*Enter Algernon, very gay and debonair.*) He does!

Algernon (*raising his hat*). You are my little cousin Cecily, I'm sure.

Cecily. You are under some strange mistake. I am not little. In fact, I believe I am more than unusually tall for my age. (*Algernon is rather taken aback.*) But I am your cousin Cecily. You, I see from your card, are Uncle Jack's brother, my cousin Ernest, my wicked cousin Ernest.

20 **Algernon.** Oh! I am not really wicked at all, Cousin Cecily. You mustn't think that I am wicked.

Cecily. If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.

Algernon (*looks at her in amazement*). Oh! Of course I have been rather reckless.

Cecily. I am glad to hear it.

Algernon. In fact, now you mention the subject, I have been very bad in my own small way.

Cecily. I don't think you should be so proud of that, though I am sure it must have been very pleasant.

30 **Algernon.** It is much pleasanter being here with you.

Cecily. I can't understand how you are here at all. Uncle Jack won't be back till Monday afternoon.

Algernon. That is a great disappointment. I am obliged to go up by the first train on Monday morning. I have a business appointment that I am anxious . . . to miss!

Cecily. Couldn't you miss it anywhere but in London?

Algernon. No: the appointment is in London.