

# The importance of being earnest – oscar wilde

Literature



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We may be experiencing an Oscar Wilde resurgence; not quite as dramatic as the flurry of Jane Austen inspired films of the nineties, but something is going on. Wilde's farce of social position and courtship revolves around two friends who secretly share a tendency to use deception to avoid boredom. Jack Worthing is known to his London friends as Ernest, not Jack. Jack has a country estate where his ward Cecily Cardew and her governess, Miss Letitia Prism, reside. When they become tiresome, Jack claims that his younger, troublesome brother, Ernest, has gotten himself into yet another dreadful scrape and requires his aid in town.

When in London, Jack simply assumes the identity of Ernest. Algernon Moncrieff - Algy to his friends - has invented a fictional character of his own, an invaluable invalid named Bunbury. Whenever Algy wishes to escape a particularly unwelcome invitation, he claims to have been called to his sickly friend's side in the country. Jack is in love with Gwendolyn Fairfax, Algy's cousin and the daughter of the authoritative Lady Bracknell. When Jack realizes that Gwendolyn fancies him as well (she insists that she was destined to marry an Ernest and will have a man by no other name), he proposes. Lady Bracknell objects.

No daughter of hers shall marry without the suitor getting a thorough grilling interview, of which it seems not many survive the first few minutes ... " I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should either know everything or nothing. Which do you know? " " I know nothing, Lady Bracknell. " " I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit: Touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is

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radically unsound. Fortunately, in England at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever.

During the interrogation, Jack is forced to admit that he has no family, having been found in a leather handbag and adopted by a rich gentleman. So despite his having an eight thousand pound annual income (a small fortune one hundred years ago) and a fifteen hundred acre country estate, he is found totally unsuitable. But all is not lost; Gwendolyn sneaks back into Algy's flat and gets Jack's, uh... Ernest's Hertfordshire country address. So does Algy, who's intrigued by the eighteen-year-old ward who may be found there, and wishes to delve further into " Ernest's" private life.

Our cast converge on Jack's country estate (by none other than hot-air ballon), where Algy assumes the role of Jack's brother Ernest, and where Gwendolyn impulsively follows by motor car with her mother in hot pursuit. Hilarity ensues... In an amusingly nonsensical afternoon, Algy becomes engaged to Cecily. In the midst of confusion the two love-struck women bicker over being engaged to the same man. To make matters worse Lady Bracknell pushes her way into the proceedings, and coincidences abound. The plot may be silly, improbable but it's a tad droll.

Being a hollywood remake of the play, the cast-list is impressive, but luckily still sticks with British actors doing what they do best, the one American, Reese Witherspoon puts on a most remarkable performance, her post Victorian accent is impeccable and I commend her on her acting. The rest of the cast put on a first-class performance, Colin Firth is stupendous and

presents a bumbling gentleman perfectly, he is no doubt one of Britain's finest actors and most definitely up there with others such as Hugh Grant.

I feel Judi Dench's usual imposing aura is somewhat dampened, sure, she is a fantastic actor, but I believe that her talent is barely taxed. No matter though, I am merely commenting, not complaining. However, I cannot finish this without pointing out a few of those niggling little problems. Being 2003, the film has been edited for modern audiences and so loses some of its dry satirical wit which only us British seem able to be able to churn out in immeasurable amounts.

Failing that, would have to say that some of the physical mannerisms and actions which I am quite certain have been added in, are slightly over done, in order to draw some more humour into it. I would have to say, that it is unnecessary and could quite possibly ruin it for some people. One thing that leaves me questioning, is the actual point of "the importance of being earnest", it has no moral, no message, there is nothing what so ever to be learnt from it. In November 2000, the hundredth anniversary of Oscar Wilde's death was commemorated, so his dramatic form was not the screenplay, it was the stage play.

Those origins are revealed here, beyond the book-ended and unnecessary curtains. There are few settings and the show is very wordy, but such words. Upon searching, I came across a sentence stating that during that era, earnest meant gay, such a revelation, knowing Wilde's sexuality adds certain depth. Wilde was a master of the English language, able to twist the most polite exchange into the subtlest of disparaging remarks. When a

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woefully off-key Algy asks his butler, " Did you hear what I was singing, Lane? " The ever so proper servant instantly replies, " I didn't think it polite to listen, Sir. " Delightful dialog, delightfully played.