The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde
(1854-1900)
Oscar Wilde - Author

- Witty, flamboyant, funny
- Believed in *Aesthetics*: “art for art’s sake”
- Wrote several plays, but only one novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*
- Rebelled against the prim, moral, religious Victorian culture
- Although homosexual, married and had children
- Being homosexual was illegal; he served two years in prison
Oscar Wilde Quotes

- “I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train.”
- “To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.”
The Victorian Period: Queen Victoria

- Became Queen as a young girl
- Married Albert, Prince Consort and adored him
- After he died, she wore black for the rest of her life
- Had 9 children
- Created a culture that valued family and stability; very moral and serious
Victorian Ladies

- Were expected to be the “angel in the house” - to take care of husband and family
- Were always chaperoned until they were married
- Clothing covered them from neck to ankle; had to be modest
- Were expected to marry well
Victorian Gentlemen

- The upper class: well-educated, came from rich and respected family ("old money")
- In the upper classes, people with a bad reputation were outcasts no matter how much money they had
- Having good manners mattered more than anything else
- Considered bad manners to flaunt wealth
Manners!

- People did not just “drop in” to visit - they made formal appointments
- Refreshments were expected when visitors came to call, usually tea and cake or tiny, elegant cucumber sandwiches
The Importance of Being Earnest

- Written in 1895
- A Comedy in 3 Acts
- Satire on Victorian moral and social values
- Immediate hit when first performed
- Uses wit, puns, exaggeration, and wordplay to create humor
Main Characters

- John Worthing, aka “Jack”, aka “Ernest”
- Algernon Montcrief, Jack’s friend
- Lane, the butler for Algernon
- Rev. Chausible, the preacher in the country
Main Characters

- Lady Bracknell, mother of Gwendolyn
- Gwendolyn, wants to marry a man named “Ernest”
- Cecily, Jack’s ward
- Miss Prism, Cecily’s governess
Settings

- Time: Around 1890
- Settings:
  - Algernon’s apartment in London ("the City")
  - Jack’s House in the Country (a very large estate)
  - The village church
Settings

- Algernon’s Apartment
Settings

- Jack’s Country House
Settings

- Jack’s Drawing Room
Settings

- Lady Bracknell’s mansion in London
Literary Vocabulary

- **Protagonist** – the main character
- **Foil** – the character who contrasts the main character (the foil “reflects” the traits of the main character)
- **Blocking figure** – a character, often old and cranky, who interferes with the romantic desires of the other main characters and provides comic action
- **Motif** – a recurring character or element repeated in a literary work. Food is a motif in *The Importance of Being Earnest*
Literary Vocabulary

- **Satire** – literary writing that makes fun of or criticizes the faults of people or groups in order to point out flaws
- **Comedy of Manners** – satirizes a class or set of people
- **Aphorism** – brief, cleverly worded observation about life
- **Pun** – a play on words
- **Epigram** – witty, pointed, antithetical saying which means nothing or is just plain silly
Importance of Being Earnest

- The title of the play is a **pun**: to be “earnest” means to be serious, and the main character (John/Jack) uses the name “Ernest” when he is in the city.
- “Bunburying” is using an alias to “get away with” avoiding social obligations.
What to watch for

- Wordplay – epigrams, aphorisms, puns, double-entendre
- Elements of satire – exaggeration, incongruity
- Deus ex machina – the artificial plot resolver
- Themes – love in different forms; illusion vs. reality