

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)



[http://www.cmgww.com/historic/wilde/
photo2.htm](http://www.cmgww.com/historic/wilde/photo2.htm)



“The Critic as Artist”

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_wilde





“The Critic as Artist”

- 1. Why is the artist superior to other people?
- 2. Why is the critic superior even to the artist? What can a critic do for the work, according to Gilbert?
- 3. Why does Gilbert reject romantic expressivism in favor of his own impressionist doctrine?

The Importance of Being Earnest (1895)



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The Importance of Being Earnest

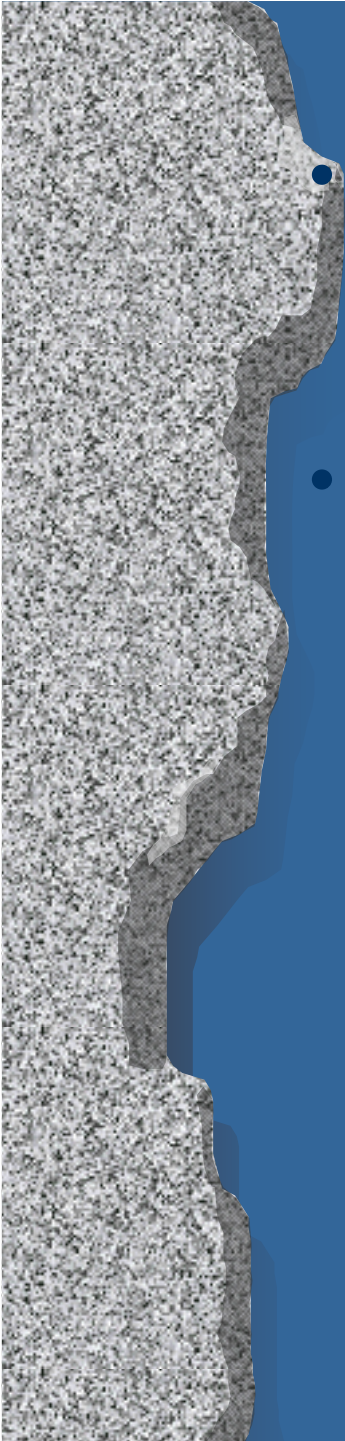
- Comedy of Manners
- A denunciation of a frivolous, vacuous high society
- Wildely burlesquing the clichés of the farce, the drama reduces to inanity all the stock features of coincidence, mistaken identity, and incredible dénouement.

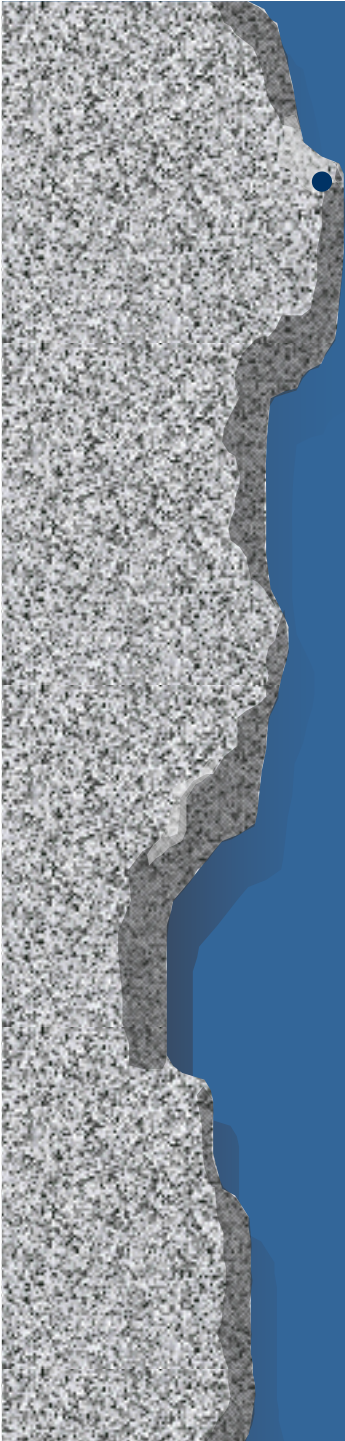


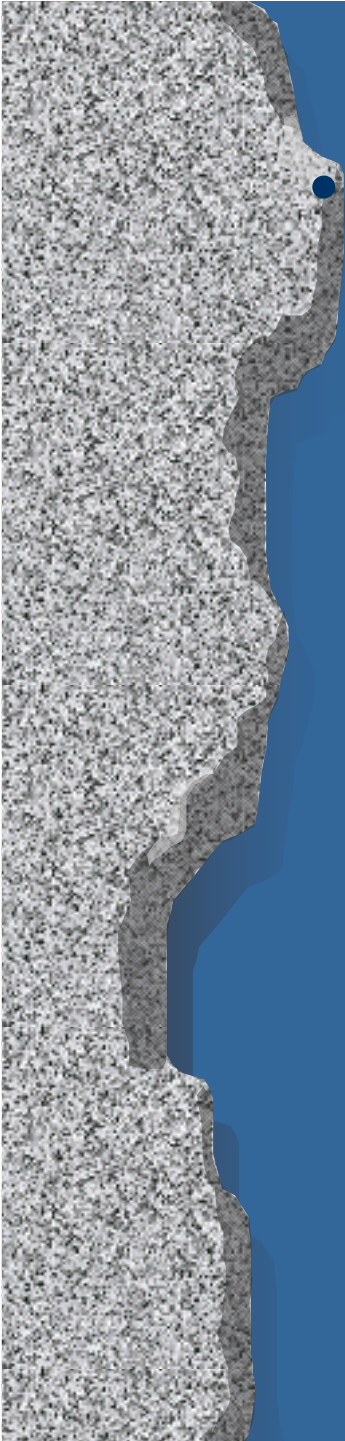
Summary

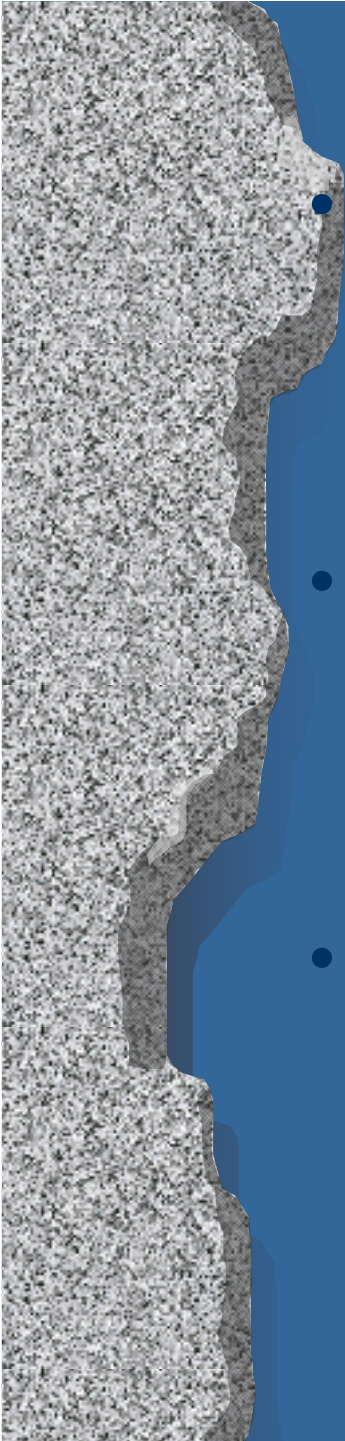
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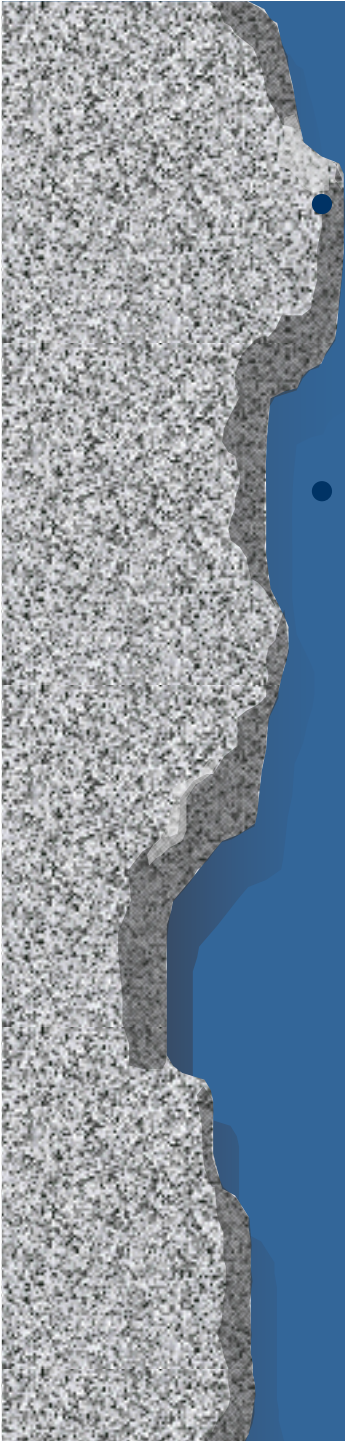
- Algernon, an aristocratic young Londoner, pretends to have a friend named Bunbury in the country who is frequently in ill health. Whenever Algernon wants to avoid an unwelcome social obligation, he "visits Bunbury" instead. Algernon's real-life best friend lives in the country but makes frequent visits to London. Algernon knows him as Ernest Worthing.

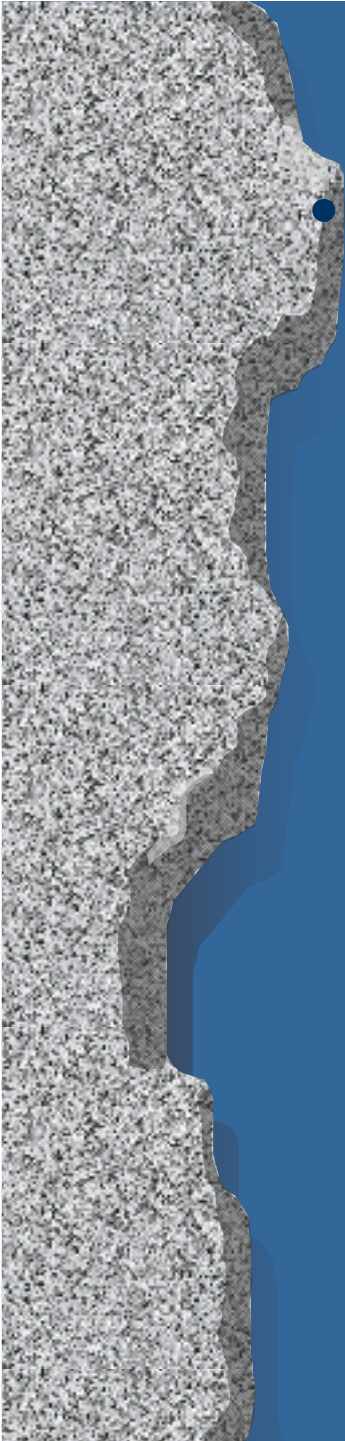
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- But Ernest left his silver cigarette case in Algernon's flat, and Algernon found an inscription in it: "From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack."
 - "Ernest" is thus forced to disclose that he too is leading a double life. In the country, he goes by the name of John (or "Jack"), and pretends that he has a wastrel brother named Ernest living in London and requiring his frequent attention. In the country Jack assumes a serious attitude for the benefit of his young ward, Cecily, an 18-year old heiress and the granddaughter of Jack's late adoptive father. When in the city, he assumes the name and behaviour of the libertine Ernest.

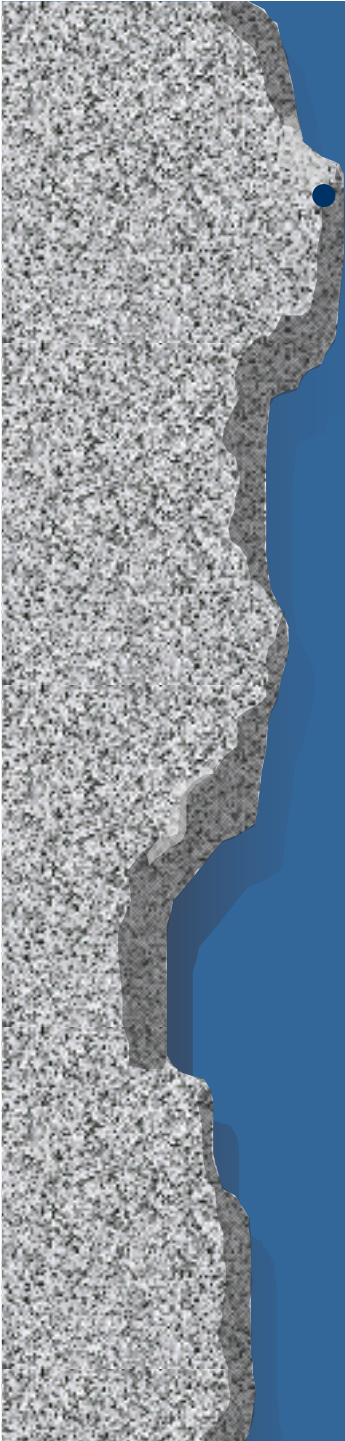
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- Jack wants to marry Algernon's cousin Gwendolen, but faces two obstacles. Firstly, Gwendolen seems to love him largely for his professed name of Ernest. Secondly, Gwendolen's terrifying mother, Lady Bracknell, disapproves of Mr. Worthing and insists on thoroughly questioning him. His financial position, his politics, and his three addresses are broadly acceptable, but she is horrified to learn that he was adopted as a baby after being discovered in a handbag at a railway station. It is unthinkable for her daughter to "marry into a cloakroom and form an alliance with a parcel."

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- Meanwhile, Jack's description of his pretty young heiress ward Cecily has so appealed to Algernon that he resolves to meet her in spite of Jack's objections. Algernon goes to Jack's country house, where he announces himself as "Ernest". Cecily has for some time imagined herself in love with her Uncle Jack's "wicked" younger brother Ernest (even fantasizing that they are engaged), and she is soon swept off her feet by Algernon. Jack, meanwhile, has decided to put his life as Ernest behind him.

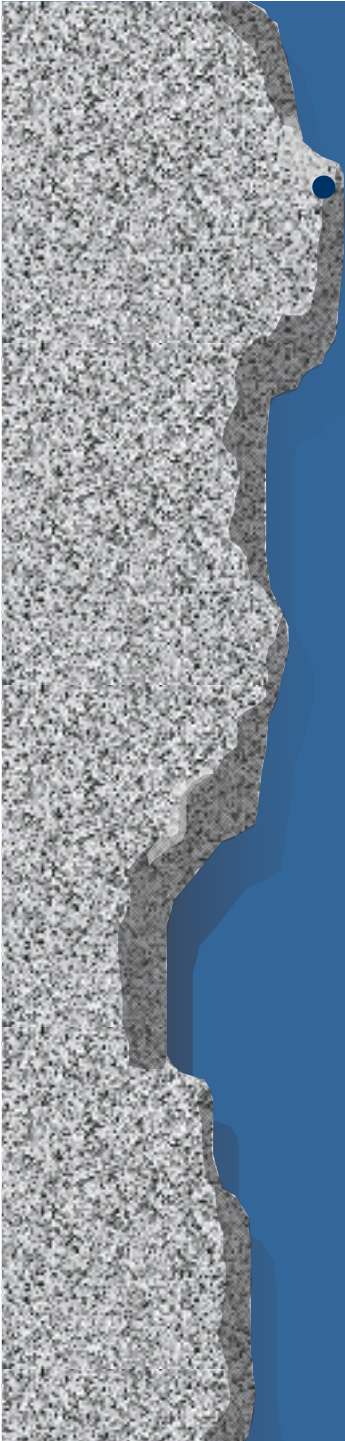
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- He arrives at his country house with the news that his brother Ernest has died in Paris of a "severe chill", but is forced to abandon this claim by the presence of Algernon in the role of "Ernest."
 - Like Gwendolen, Cecily loves her "Ernest" at least in part for his name, and thus Algernon and Jack both ask the local rector, the Reverend Dr. Chasuble, to baptise them.
 - Gwendolen, meanwhile, had fled London and her mother to be with her love. When she and Cecily meet for the first time, each indignantly

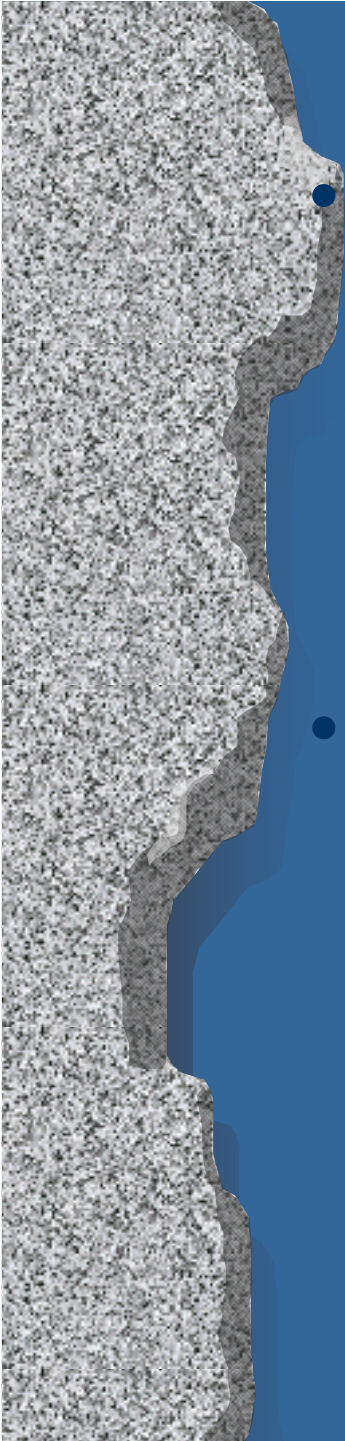
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- insists that *she* is the one engaged to "Ernest" - until Jack and Algernon appear and their deceptions are exposed.
 - Lady Bracknell now arrives in pursuit of her daughter. She meets Cecily, and initially doubts her suitability as a wife for her nephew Algernon - until the size of Cecily's trust fund is revealed. Stalemate transpires when Jack denies his consent to the marriage of his ward Cecily to Algernon until Lady Bracknell consents to his marriage to Gwendolen.

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- The impasse is broken by the appearance of Cecily's governess, Miss Prism. Lady Bracknell recognizes Miss Prism, who twenty-eight years earlier was a family nursemaid. One day she left Lord Bracknell's house with a baby boy in a perambulator and never returned.



• "*Prism!* Where is that baby?" Lady Bracknell demands. Miss Prism explains that, in a moment of "mental abstraction", she had put the manuscript of a novel she was writing in the perambulator, and put the baby in a handbag, which she left at Victoria Station. Jack produces the very same handbag, showing that he is the lost baby: the elder son of Lady Bracknell's late sister, and thus Algernon's elder brother!

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- With Jack's provenance established, only one thing now stands in the way of the young couple's happiness. In view of Gwendolen's continued insistence that she can only love a man named Ernest, what is Jack's real name? Lady Bracknell informs him that, as the firstborn son, he must have been named after his father, General Moncrieff, but cannot remember the general's first name. Jack looks in the Army Lists and discovers that his birth name was in fact Ernest after all.

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- As the happy couples embrace, including also Miss Prism and her clerical admirer, Dr. Chasuble, Lady Bracknell complains to her new-found relative: "My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality."
 - "On the contrary, Aunt Augusta," he replies, "I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest."

Question

- Wilde's play has two settings — the city of London and the country. How does he create differences between the two settings?

Question

- What attitudes toward marriage do Wilde's characters explore?

Question

- What is important about the title?

Question

- What is it to “be Earnest,” and what is the importance of doing so?