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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

A Trivial Comedy for Serious People



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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST - A TRIVIAL COMEDY FOR SERIOUS PEOPLE

inspired by
Oscar Wilde

written by
Allison Kuznia

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Synopsis

A shortened version of the laughable comedy by Oscar Wilde tells the story of two bachelors who create alter egos named Ernest to escape their tiresome lives. The pair attempt to win the hearts of two ladies who, conveniently, claim to only love men called Ernest.

Cast of Characters

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)	a young gentleman from the country, in love with Gwendolen Fairfax
ALGERNON MONCRIEFF	a young gentleman from London, the nephew of Lady Bracknell, in love with Cecily Cardew
GWENDOLEN FAIRAX	a young lady, loved by Jack Worthing
LADY BRACKNELL	a society lady, Gwendolen's mother, Algernon's aunt
CECILY CARDEW	a young lady, the ward of Jack Worthing
MISS PRISM	Cecily's governess
REV. CANON CHASUBLE	the priest of Jack's parish
LANE	Algernon's butler
MERRIMAN	Jack's servant

Director Notes

THE SCENES OF THE PLAY

ACT I	Algernon Moncrieff’s Flat in Half-Moon Street, W.
ACT II	The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton

ACT I

Scene 1

Setting: Morning-room in Algernon's flat. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished.

At Rise: ALGERNON is pacing. LANE enters with a platter of cucumber sandwiches.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

LANE

Yes, sir.

(sets down the platter)

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Do you think that this is a suitable display of tea and sandwiches for a marriage engagement, Lane?

LANE

I believe it IS very suitable, sir. Although, I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF *(languidly)*

I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

LANE

No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE

Thank you, sir.

(LANE exits.)

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.

(Enter LANE.)

LANE

Mr. Ernest Worthing.

(Enter JACK.)

(LANE exits.)

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? Eating as usual, I see, Algy!

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF *(stiffly)*

I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock. Where have you been since last Thursday?

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

(sitting down on the sofa)

In the country.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

What on earth do you do there?

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

(pulling off his gloves)

When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

And who are the people you amuse?

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST) *(airily)*

Oh, neighbors, neighbors.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Got nice neighbors in your part?

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

How immensely you must amuse them!

(He goes over and takes a sandwich.)

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Oh! merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

How perfectly delightful!

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Yes, that is all very well; but I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

May I ask why?

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

I thought you had come up for pleasure?...I call that business.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

How utterly unromantic you are!

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven—

(JACK puts out his hand to take a sandwich. ALGERNON at once interferes.)

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta.

(ALGERNON takes one and eats it.)

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Well, you have been eating them all the time.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt.

(takes plate from below)

Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

(advancing to table and helping himself)

And very good bread and butter it is too.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you were married to her already. You are not married to her already, and I don't think you ever will be.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Why on earth do you say that?

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

I don't give my consent.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Your consent!

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily.

(rings bell to summon LANE)

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Cecily! What on earth do you mean? What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily! I don't know any one of the name of Cecily.

(Enter LANE.)

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Bring me that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left in the smokingroom the last time he dined here.

LANE

Yes, sir.

(LANE exits.)

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Well, I wish you would offer one. I happen to be more than usually hard up.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

There is no good offering a large reward now that the thing is found.

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ACT II

Scene 1

Setting: Garden at Jack'S house

At Rise: MISS PRISM discovered seated at the table. CECILY is at the back watering flowers.

MISS PRISM *(calling)*

Cecily, Cecily! Surely such a utilitarian occupation as the watering of flowers is rather Merriman's duty than yours? Especially at a moment when intellectual pleasures await you.

CECILY CARDEW

I don't mind, Miss Prism. Oh, but how I wish Uncle Jack would allow that unfortunate young man, his brother, to come down here sometimes. We might have a good influence over him. I am sure you certainly would.

MISS PRISM

(shaking her head)

I do not think that even I could produce any effect on a character that according to his own brother's admission is irretrievably weak and vacillating. Indeed I am not sure that I would desire to reclaim him. I am not in favour of this modern mania for turning bad people into good people at a moment's notice. As a man sows so let him reap. You must put away your diary, Cecily.

(CECILY begins to write in her diary.)

MISS PRISM

I really don't see why you should keep a diary at all.

CECILY CARDEW

I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn't write them down, I should probably forget all about them.

MISS PRISM

Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry about with us.

CECILY CARDEW

Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened.

MISS PRISM

To your work, child, these speculations are profitless.

CECILY CARDEW *(smiling)*

But I see dear Dr. Chasuble coming up through the garden.

MISS PRISM

(rising and advancing)

Dr. Chasuble! This is indeed a pleasure

(Enter CANON CHASUBLE)

REV. CANON CHASUBLE

And how are we this morning? Miss Prism, you are, I trust, well?

CECILY CARDEW

Miss Prism has just been complaining of a slight headache. I think it would do her so much good to have a short stroll with you in the Park, Dr. Chasuble.

MISS PRISM

Cecily, I have not mentioned anything about a headache.

CECILY CARDEW

No, dear Miss Prism, I know that, but I felt instinctively that you had a headache.

MISS PRISM

I think, dear Doctor, I will have a stroll with you. I find I have a headache after all -

(stares annoyingly at CECILY)

-and a walk might do it good.

REV. CANON CHASUBLE

With pleasure, Miss Prism, with pleasure.

(MISS PRISM and CHASUBLE exit. MERRIMAN enters with a card on a salver.)

MERRIMAN

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

CECILY CARDEW

(takes the card and reads it)

'Mr. Ernest Worthing.' Uncle Jack's brother! Did you tell him Mr. Worthing was in town?

MERRIMAN

Yes, Miss. He said he was anxious to speak to you privately for a moment.

CECILY CARDEW

Ask Mr. Ernest Worthing to come here.

MERRIMAN

Yes, Miss.

(MERRIMAN goes off. Enter ALGERNON, very gay and debonair.)

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

(raising his hat)

You are my little cousin Cecily, I'm sure.

CECILY CARDEW

You are under some strange mistake. I am not little. In fact, I believe I am more than usually tall for my age.

(ALGERNON is rather taken aback.)

CECILY CARDEW

But I am your cousin Cecily. You are my wicked cousin Ernest.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Oh! I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily. You mustn't think that I am wicked.

CECILY CARDEW

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 MONCRIEFF

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

CECILY CARDEW

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

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

It is much pleasanter being here with you.

CECILY CARDEW

I know Jack wants to speak to you about your emigrating.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

About my what?

CECILY CARDEW

Your emigrating. Uncle Jack is sending you to Australia.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Australia! I'd sooner die.

CECILY CARDEW

Well, he said that you would have to choose between this world, the next world, and Australia.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Oh, well! The accounts I have received of Australia and the next world, are not particularly encouraging. This world is good enough for me, cousin Cecily.

CECILY CARDEW

Yes, but are you good enough for it?

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

I'm afraid I'm not that. That is why I want you to reform me.

CECILY CARDEW

I'm afraid I've no time, this afternoon.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Well, would you mind my reforming myself this afternoon?

CECILY CARDEW

I think you should try.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

I will. I feel better already.

CECILY CARDEW

You are looking a little worse.

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ALGERNON MONCRIEFF *(stammering)*

Oh! No! Bunbury doesn't live here. Bunbury is somewhere else at present. In fact, Bunbury is dead.

LADY BRACKNELL

Dead! When did Mr. Bunbury die? His death must have been extremely sudden.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF *(airily)*

Oh! I killed Bunbury this afternoon. I mean poor Bunbury died this afternoon.

LADY BRACKNELL

What did he die of?

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Banbury? Oh, he was found out! I mean, the doctors found out that Bunbury could not live, that is what I mean—so Bunbury died.

LADY BRACKNELL

He seems to have had great confidence in the opinion of his physicians. I am glad, however, that he made up his mind at the last to some definite course of action, and acted under proper medical advice. And now that we have finally got rid of this Mr. Bunbury, may I ask, Mr. Worthing, who is that young person whose hand my nephew Algernon is now holding in what seems to me a peculiarly unnecessary manner?

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

That lady is Miss Cecily Cardew, my ward.

(LADY BRACKNELL bows coldly to CECILY.)

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

I am engaged to be married to Cecily, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL

I beg your pardon?

CECILY CARDEW

Mr. Moncrieff and I are engaged to be married, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL

(with a shiver, crossing to the sofa and sitting down)

The number of engagements that go on seems to me considerably above the proper average. Mr. Worthing, is Miss Cardew at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? I merely desire information. Until yesterday I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a railway station.

(JACK looks perfectly furious, but restrains himself.)

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

(very irritably)

How extremely kind of you, Lady Bracknell! I have also in my possession, you will be pleased to hear, certificates of Miss Cardew's birth, baptism, whooping cough, registration, vaccination, confirmation, and the measles; both the German and the English variety.

LADY BRACKNELL

Ah! A life crowded with incident, I see; though perhaps somewhat too exciting for a young girl. I am not myself in favour of premature experiences.

(rises, looks at her watch)

Gwendolen! The time approaches for our departure. We have not a moment to lose. As a matter of form, Mr. Worthing, I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune?

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Oh! about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds. That is all. Goodbye, Lady Bracknell. So pleased to have seen you.

LADY BRACKNELL

(sitting down again)

A moment, Mr. Worthing. A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time. We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces.

(to CECILY)

Come over here, dear. Kindly turn round, sweet child.

(CECILY turns and presents her profile.)

LADY BRACKNELL

Yes, quite as I expected. There are distinct social possibilities in your profile.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Cecily is the sweetest, dearest, prettiest girl in the whole world. And I don’t care twopence about social possibilities.

LADY BRACKNELL

Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can’t get into it do that.

(to CECILY)

Well, I suppose I must give my consent.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL

Cecily, you may kiss me!

CECILY CARDEW

(kisses her)

Thank you, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL

The marriage, I think, had better take place quite soon. To speak frankly, I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Lady Bracknell, but this engagement is quite out of the question. I am Miss Cardew's guardian, and she cannot marry without my consent until she comes of age. That consent I absolutely decline to give.

LADY BRACKNELL

Upon what grounds may I ask? Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

The fact is that I do not approve at all of his moral character. I suspect him of being untruthful.

(ALGERNON and CECILY look at him in indignant amazement.)

LADY BRACKNELL

Untruthful! My nephew Algernon? Impossible!

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

I fear there can be no possible doubt about the matter. This afternoon in his disgraceful deception, he succeeded in alienating the affections of my only ward. He subsequently stayed to tea, and devoured every single muffin. And what makes his conduct all the more heartless is, that he was perfectly well aware from the first that I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don't intend to have a brother, not even of any kind.

LADY BRACKNELL

I would beg of you to reconsider your decision.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

But my dear Lady Bracknell, the matter is entirely in your own hands. The moment you consent to my marriage with Gwendolen, I will most gladly allow your nephew to form an alliance with my ward.

LADY BRACKNELL

(rising and drawing herself up)

You must be quite aware that what you propose is out of the question.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Then a passionate celibacy is all that any of us can look forward to.

LADY BRACKNELL

That is not the destiny I propose for Gwendolen. Algernon, of course, can choose for himself.

(pulls out her watch)

Come, dear-

(GWENDOLEN rises.)

LADY BRACKNELL

-we have already missed five, if not six, trains. To miss any more might expose us to comment on the platform.

(MERRIMAN enters, but before he can announce a guest, MISS PRISM enters hurriedly. MERRIMAN throws up his arms and exits. DR. CHASUBLE enters behind.)

MISS PRISM

Cecily, there you are. I have been looking...

(She catches sight of LADY BRACKNELL, who has fixed her with a stony glare. MISS PRISM grows pale and quails. She looks anxiously round as if desirous to escape.)

LADY BRACKNELL

(in a severe, judicial voice)

Prism!

(MISS PRISM bows her head in shame.)

LADY BRACKNELL

Come here, Prism! So it is you!

(MISS PRISM approaches in a humble manner.)

LADY BRACKNELL

Prism! Where is that baby?

(General consternation. ALGERNON and JACK pretend to be anxious to shield CECILY and GWENDOLEN from hearing the details of a terrible public scandal.)

LADY BRACKNELL

Twenty-eight years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell's house, in charge of a perambulator that contained a baby of the male sex. You never returned. A few weeks later, through the elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan police, the perambulator was discovered in a remote alley. But the baby was not there!

(Every one looks at MISS PRISM.)

LADY BRACKNELL

Prism! Where is that baby?

MISS PRISM

(a pause)

Lady Bracknell, I admit with shame that I do not know. I only wish I did. The plain facts of the case are these. On the morning of the day you mention, a day that is for ever branded on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby

MISS PRISM (CONT)

out in its perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old, but capacious hand-bag. In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I never can forgive myself, I placed the baby in the hand-bag. I… I… I left it in the cloak-room of one of the larger railway stations in London.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

What railway station?

MISS PRISM

(quite crushed)

Victoria. The Brighton line.

(She sinks into a chair.)

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

I must retire to my room for a moment. Gwendolen, wait here for me.

GWENDOLEN FAIRAX

If you are not too long, I will wait here for you all my life.

(Exit JACK in great excitement.)

REV. CANON CHASUBLE

What do you think this means, Lady Bracknell?

LADY BRACKNELL

I dare not even suspect...I need hardly tell you that in families of high position strange coincidences are not supposed to occur.

(Enter JACK with a hand-bag of black leather in his hand.)

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

(rushing over to MISS PRISM)

Is this the hand-bag, Miss Prism? Examine it carefully before you speak. The happiness of more than one life depends on your answer.

MISS PRISM *(calmly)*

It seems to be mine. Yes, here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had had them placed there. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

(in a pathetic voice)

Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this hand-bag. I was the baby you placed in it.

MISS PRISM *(amazed)*

You?

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

(embracing her)

Yes...mother!?

MISS PRISM

(recoiling in indignant astonishment)

Mr. Worthing! I am unmarried!

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Mother, I forgive you.

(tries to embrace her again)

MISS PRISM

(still more indignant)

Mr. Worthing, there is some error.

(pointing to LADY BRACKNELL)

There is the lady who can tell you who you really are.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

(after a pause)

Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am?

LADY BRACKNELL

I am afraid that the news I have to give you will not altogether please you. You are the son of my poor sister, Mrs. Moncrieff, and consequently Algernon's elder brother.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Algy's elder brother! Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother! Cecily,—how could you have ever doubted that I had a brother?

(seizes hold of ALGERNON)

Algy, you young scoundrel, you will have to treat me with more respect in the future. You have never behaved to me like a brother in all your life.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Well, not till to-day, old boy, I admit. I did my best, however, though I was out of practice.

(shakes hands)

GWENDOLEN FAIRAX

(to JACK)

My own! But what own are you? What is your given name, now that you have become some one else?

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Good heavens!...I had quite forgotten that point. Your decision on the subject of my name is irrevocable, I suppose?

GWENDOLEN FAIRAX

I never change, except in my affections.

CECILY CARDEW

What a noble nature you have, Gwendolen!

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Then the question had better be cleared up at once. Algy! Can't you recollect what our father's name was?

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

My dear boy, we were never even on speaking terms. He died before I was a year old.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Aunt August! At the time when Miss Prism left me in the handbag, what name was I given? Let me know the worst.

LADY BRACKNELL

Being the eldest son you were naturally named after your father.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST) *(irritably)*

Yes, but what was my father's name?

LADY BRACKNELL

Yes, I remember now… that your father's name was… Ernest John. I knew I had some particular reason for disliking the name.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Ernest John! I always told you, Gwendolen, my name was Ernest, didn't I? Well, it is Ernest after all. I mean it naturally is Ernest.

GWENDOLEN FAIRAX

Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first that you could have no other name!

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?

GWENDOLEN FAIRAX

I can. For I feel that you are sure to change.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

My own one!

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Cecily!

(embraces her)

At last!

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

Gwendolen!

(embraces her)

At last!

LADY BRACKNELL

My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality.

JACK WORTHING (ERNEST)

On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.

(END OF PLAY)



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