

Modern Critical

# INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

## Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest



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*Modern Critical Interpretations*

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Oscar Wilde's  
The Importance of Being Earnest

*Edited and with an introduction by*

Harold Bloom

*Sterling Professor of the Humanities*

*Yale University*



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## Editor's Note

This book gathers together the best modern critical interpretations of Oscar Wilde's masterpiece of stage comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Susan Laity for her erudition and judgment in helping me to edit this volume.

My introduction centers first upon Wilde as critical theorist and then traces Wilde's aesthetic in the play. Ian Gregor begins the chronological sequence of criticism by relating *Earnest* to Wilde's other plays, after which Robert J. Jordan balances the childlike fantasy of innocence against the elements of satire in the comedy.

In David Parker's reading, Wilde's farce balances the metaphysical contraries of being and nothingness, while Rodney Shewan examines the play's four-act version in the context of Wilde's career as a dramatist. Beckett and Ionesco enter Katharine Worth's reading, which centers upon the metaphysics of identity in *Earnest*.

Camille A. Paglia, superb and flamboyant chronicler of sexual personae throughout Western literature, attempts to restore the play's repressed or displaced sexual aspects, brilliantly connecting the thematic slippage to the art of the Wildean epigraph. Another restorer of evaded meaning, Joseph Loewenstein, gives us a subtly modulated account of Wilde's aphoristic moral stance in his best comedy.

Regenia Gagnier reminds us that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is conditioned by its marketplace. To see the play as a commodity is to understand Wilde's consummate art of self-advertisement, here and elsewhere.

In this book's final essay, published here for the first time, Susan Laity illuminates *Earnest* by comparing it to W. S. Gilbert's *Iolanthe*, a parallel vision of "the Soul of Man under Victoria." Gilbert permanently parodied Wilde as the poet Bunthorne in *Patience*, where the Aesthete is pilloried as

a sham, but Laity exposes the way in which *Iolanthe* is also an aesthetic critique of Victorian middle-class drama and life. She concludes, though, with Wildean rightness, that *Iolanthe* is paradoxically the less original work, even though it comes first, since it shares attributes with what it satirizes, while *The Importance of Being Earnest* transcends genre and prophetically darts forward into the Absurd.

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# Introduction

## I

Oscar Wilde first published a book in 1881 and after more than a hundred years literary opinion has converged in the judgment that Wilde, as Borges asserts, was almost always right. This rightness, which transcends wit, is now seen as central to the importance of being Oscar. Daily my mail brings me bad poetry, printed and unprinted, and daily I murmur to myself Wilde's apothegm: "All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling." Arthur Symons, like Wilde a disciple of Walter Pater, reviewed the Paterian *Intentions* of Wilde with this exquisite summary: "He is conscious of the charm of graceful echoes, and is always original in his quotations." Symons understood that Wilde, even as playwright and as storyteller, was essentially a critic, just as Pater's fictions were primarily criticism.

Wilde began as a poet, and alas was and always remained quite a bad poet. An admirer of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* should read the poem side by side with *The Ancient Mariner*, in order to see precisely its crippling failure to experience an anxiety of influence. Of course, Ruskin and Pater also began as poets, but then wisely gave it up almost immediately, unlike Matthew Arnold who waited a little too long. It is deeply unfortunate that the young Wilde gave the world this poem about Mazzini:

He is not dead, the immemorial Fates  
Forbid it, and the closing shears refrain,  
Lift up your heads, ye everlasting gates!  
Ye argent clarions sound a loftier strain!  
For the vile thing he hated lurks within  
Its sombre house, alone with God and memories of sin.

This dreadful travesty and amalgam of Shelley, Swinburne, the Bible, Milton, and whatnot, is typical of Wilde's verse, and opened him to many attacks which became particularly nasty in America during his notorious



lecture tour of 1882. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whom we remember as Emily Dickinson's amiable and uncomprehending "Mentor," made a public attack upon Wilde's poetic immorality which expanded into an accusation of cowardice for not taking part in the Irish national struggle: "Is it manhood for her gifted sons to stay at home and help work out the problem; or to cross the Atlantic and pose in ladies' boudoirs or write prurient poems which their hostesses must discreetly ignore?" The force of Higginson's rhetoric evaporates for us when we remember that the burly Wilde was no coward, physical or moral, and also when we remember that Higginson, with his customary blindness, linked Wilde's tour to Whitman's work as a wound-dresser in the Washington, D.C., Civil War hospitals: "I am one of many to whom Whitman's 'Drum-Taps' have always sounded as hollow as the instrument they counterfeit." Why, Higginson demanded, had not Whitman's admirable physique gone into battle with the Union armies? A Civil War hero himself, Higginson would have had no scruples about hurling the middle-aged bard and idler into battle. We can credit W. B. Yeats with more insight into Wilde, let alone into Whitman, than Higginson displayed, since Yeats insisted that Wilde was essentially a man of action displaced into a man of letters. In some curious sense, there is a sickness-unto-action in Wilde's life and work, a masked despair that led him to the borders of that realm of fantasy the Victorians called "nonsense" literature, the cosmos of Edward Lear. Lionel Trilling aptly located Wilde's masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in that world, and it seems to me never far from Wilde's work. The metaphysical despair of ever knowing or speaking truth Wilde probably absorbed from his nearest precursor, Walter Pater, whose "Sebastian Van Storck" in *Imaginary Portraits* is a major depiction of intellectual despair. Wilde, deliberately less subtle than his evasive master, Pater, speaks out directly through his mouthpiece, Algernon, in the original, four-act version of *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

My experience of life is that whenever one tells a lie one is corroborated on every side. When one tells the truth one is left in a very lonely and painful position, and no one believes a word one says.

Wilde's most profound single work is "The Decay of Lying: An Observation," an essay in what now would be called literary theory, brilliantly cast in dialogue form. Vivian, speaking for Wilde, rejects what passes for lying in mere politicians:

They never rise beyond the level of misrepresentation, and actually condescend to prove, to discuss, to argue. How different

from the temper of the true liar, with his frank, fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility, his healthy, natural disdain of proof of any kind! After all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence. If a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth at once.

Lying then is opposed to misrepresentation, because aesthetic lying is a kind of supermimesis, and is set, not against truth or reality, but against time, and antithetically against time's slave, nature. As Vivian remarks: "Nothing is more evident than that Nature Hates Mind. Thinking is the most unhealthy thing in the world, and people die of it just as they die of any other disease. Fortunately, in England at any rate, thought is not catching." Nature's redemption can come only through imitating art. We can believe that Wilde's deathbed conversion to the Church was simply a reaffirmation of his lifelong belief that Christ was an artist, not in Wilde a frivolous belief but an heretical one, indeed an aesthetic version of Gnosticism. Hence Wilde's preference for the Fourth Gospel, which he shrewdly regarded as Gnostic:

While in reading the Gospels—particularly that of St. John himself, or whatever early Gnostic took his name and mantle—I see this continual assertion of the imagination as the basis of all spiritual and material life, I see also that to Christ imagination was simply a form of Love, and that to him Love was Lord in the fullest meaning of the phrase.

This is Wilde speaking out of the depths, in *De Profundis*, the epistle addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas from Reading Gaol. G. Wilson Knight, startlingly linking Wilde and Christ, hints that the ideology of Wilde's homosexuality was its dominant element, involving the raising of love to the high realm of aesthetic contemplation. Without disputing Knight (or Wilde), one can observe that such an elevation is more like Pater than Plato, more like the lying against time that is the privileged moment than the lying against mortality that is the realm of the timeless Ideas. As Pater's most dangerous disciple, Wilde literalizes Pater's valorization of perception over nature, of impression over description.

## II

Wilde stands between Pater and Yeats, between a doctrine of momentary aesthetic ecstasies, phantasmagoric hard gemlike flames, and a vision

of lyric simplification through aesthetic intensity, what Yeats called the Condition of Fire. Pater, and not Lord Alfred Douglas, was Wilde's disaster, as Yeats knew and intimated. Though his immediate sources were in Ruskin, Swinburne, and the Pre-Raphaelites, Pater's sensibility went back to the Keats of the "Ode on Melancholy." Wilde, High Romantic in every way, nevertheless did not have a Romantic sensibility, which is why his verse, derived from all of the Romantics, is so hopelessly inadequate. As a sensibility, Wilde is a fantastic version of Congreve and Sheridan and Goldsmith; an Anglo-Irish wit wandering in the regions of Lewis Carroll, W. S. Gilbert, and Edward Lear, to repeat Trilling's insight again. Nonsense is the truest rejection of mere nature, and the strongest program for compelling nature to cease imitating itself and to imitate art instead. Wilde's theory of criticism achieves magnificence when it extravagantly leaps over sense into the cognitive phantasmagoria of a true theory of the lie, an escape from time into the fantasy of interpretation:

I know that you are fond of Japanese things. Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? If you do, you have never understood Japanese art at all. The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists. If you set a picture by Hokusai, or Hokkei, or any of the great native painters, beside a real Japanese gentleman or lady, you will see that there is not the slightest resemblance between them. The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people. One of our most charming painters went recently to the Land of the Chrysanthemum in the foolish hope of seeing the Japanese. All he saw, all he had the chance of painting, were a few lanterns and some fans.

*In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people.* That is certainly one of the grand critical epiphanies, one of those privileged moments that alone make criticism memorable. Japan momentarily becomes one with that far and wide land where the Jumbies live, where the Pobble who has no toes and the Dong with a luminous nose dwell together. It is also the land of Canon Chasuble and Miss Prism and Lady Bracknell, the land of cucumber sandwiches where Wilde deserved and desired to live. Call it, surprisingly enough, what Wilde called it, the land of the highest Criticism:

I would say that the highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing, and, as the Greeks would put it, in itself, and to itself, an end. Certainly, it is never trammelled by any shackles of verisimilitude. No ignoble considerations of probability, that cowardly concession to the tedious repetitions of domestic or public life, affect it ever. One may appeal from fiction unto fact. But from the soul there is no appeal.

Call this Wilde's credo, or, as Richard Ellmann, his crucial scholar, words it: "The Critic as Artist as Wilde." It leads to an even finer declaration, which catches the whole movement from Ruskin and Pater through Wilde and on to Yeats and Wallace Stevens in their critical essays:

That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul. It is more fascinating than history, as it is concerned simply with oneself. It is more delightful than philosophy, as its subject is concrete and not abstract, real and not vague. It is the only civilized form of autobiography, as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one's life; not with life's physical accidents of deed or circumstance, but with the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind.

*The only civilized form of autobiography:* I know of no better description of authentic criticism. What we want from a critic is not ideology and not method, not philosophy and not history, not theology and not linguistics, not semiotics and not technique, not feminism and not sociology, but precisely the moods and passions of cognition, of imagining, of the life of the spirit. If you want Marx and Hegel, Heidegger and Lacan, and their revisionists, then take them, but if you want literary criticism, then turn to Hazlitt and Ruskin, to Pater and Wilde. Wilde's unique gift is the mode of wit by which he warns us against falling into careless habits of accuracy, and by which he instructs us that the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not.

### III

Why then did Wilde rush to social destruction? On February 14, 1895, *The Importance of Being Earnest* opened in London, only six weeks after the opening of *An Ideal Husband*. Wilde was forty-one, in the full possession

of his talents and his health. On February 28, he found the Marquess of Queensberry's card waiting for him at the Albemarle Club, with its illiterate, nasty address, "To Oscar Wilde, posing as a somdomite [sic]," in which the weird touch of "posing" failed to amuse him. His note of that day to his close friend Robert Ross has an uncharacteristic tone of hysteria:

Bosie's father has left a card at my club with hideous words on it. I don't see anything now but a criminal prosecution. My whole life seems ruined by this man. The tower of ivory is assailed by the foul thing. On the sand is my life spilt. I don't know what to do.

Had he done nothing, he would not have found himself, less than three months later, sentenced to two years' hard labor. Richard Ellmann speaks of Wilde's "usual cycle which ran from scapegrace to scapegoat," and presumably Ellmann's forthcoming biography will explain that compulsion. Whatever its psychopathology, or even its psychopoetics, its most salient quality seems to be a vertigo-inducing speed. Freud presumably would have found in it the economics of moral masochism, the need for punishment. Yeats subtly interpreted it as due to the frustrations of a man who should have spent himself in action, military or political. One remembers Lady Bracknell remarking of Jack's and Algernon's father that, "The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life," an observation that perhaps precludes any vision of Wilde in battle or in political strife. The economic problem of masochism doubtless had its place within Wilde, but few moralists hated pain more than Wilde, and nothing even in Wilde surpasses the moral beauty of the closing pages of "The Soul of Man under Socialism":

Pain is not the ultimate mode of perfection. It is merely provisional and a protest. It has reference to wrong, unhealthy, unjust surroundings. When the wrong, and the disease, and the injustice are removed, it will have no further place. It will have done its work. It was a great work, but it is almost over. Its sphere lessens every day.

Nor will man miss it. *For what man has sought for is, indeed, neither pain nor pleasure, but simply Life.* (Wilde's italics)

We remember, reading this, that Wilde was Ruskin's disciple as well as Pater's. Ruskin's credo, as phrased in *Unto This Last*, is the prophetic basis for Wilde's social vision:

*There is no wealth but Life*—Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings.

Why then was the author of “The Soul of Man under Socialism” and of *The Importance of Being Earnest* so doom-eager? His best poem was not in verse, but is the extraordinary prose-poem of 1893, “The Disciple”:

When Narcissus died the pool of his pleasure changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, and the Oreads came weeping through the woodland that they might sing to the pool and give it comfort.

And when they saw that the pool had changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, they loosened the green tresses of their hair and cried to the pool and said, “We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he.”

“But was Narcissus beautiful?” said the pool.

“Who should know better than you?” answered the Oreads. “Us did he ever pass by, but you he sought for, and would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty.”

And the pool answered, “But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored.”

Kierkegaard might have called this “The Case of the Contemporary Disciple Doubled.” Narcissus never saw the pool, nor the pool Narcissus, but at least the pool mourns him. Wilde’s despair transcended even his humane wit, and could not be healed by the critical spirit or by the marvelous rightness of his perceptions and sensations.

#### IV

*The Importance of Being Earnest*, in the longest perspective, is one of the handful or so of masterpieces given us by the Anglo-Irish tradition of stage comedy. Congreve’s *Way of the World*, Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer*, Sheridan’s *School for Scandal* are joined in later times by Wilde’s best play and by Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*, and Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Wilde’s *Earnest* stands apart from this company because of its affinities, already cited from Lionel Trilling, with W. S.

Gilbert's libretti and with the fantastic visions of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. Congreve and Sheridan and Shaw intend their representations to reflect social realities but Wilde (like Beckett) rejects both nature and society and will not imitate them. He wishes only to originate or set in motion, which is the root meaning of "earnest." Wilde, Pater's disciple, followed his master in playing with the finer edge of words, in restoring their etymological meaning, and he charmingly keeps in mind that the ultimate meaning of his title therefore is "the importance of being original."

Only Oscar is earnest in that sense in his great comedy, because none of his characters is in any way at all original. They are splendidly outrageous, but in traditional modes. The most sublimely outrageous is Lady Bracknell, consummately played by Dame Edith Evans in the film version, where her exquisite delivery of: "Rise, sir, from this semirecumbent posture" lingers always in my memory. The conclusion of her interview with Jack is one of Wilde's triumphs:

LADY BRACKNELL: In what locality did this Mr James, or Thomas, Cardew come across this ordinary hand-bag?

JACK: In the cloak-room at Victoria Station. It was given to him in mistake for his own.

LADY BRACKNELL: The cloak-room at Victoria Station?

JACK: Yes. The Brighton line.

LADY BRACKNELL: The line is immaterial. Mr Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found, a cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion—has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now—but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognized position in good society.

JACK: May I ask you then what you would advise me to do? I need hardly say I would do anything in the world to ensure Gwendolen's happiness.

LADY BRACKNELL: I would strongly advise you, Mr Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and

to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over.

JACK: Well, I don't see how I could possibly manage to do that. I can produce the hand-bag at any moment. It is in my dressing-room at home. I really think that should satisfy you, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL: Me, sir! What has it to do with me? You - can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter—a girl brought up with the utmost care—to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel. Good morning, Mr Worthing!

(LADY BRACKNELL *sweeps out in majestic indignation.*)

Lady Bracknell's literary lineage is Shakespearean and Johnsonian. Her rolling periods are indebted to Sir John Falstaff's marvelous mockeries of pomposity and to Dr. Samuel Johnson's characteristic mode of discourse. Like Johnson, Lady Bracknell talks for victory, but her involuntary Falstaffian gusto qualifies her never-defeated aura. The joy of Wilde's originality is in her asides: "whether it had handles or not," "of either sex," "a girl brought up with the utmost care," "the line is immaterial." The accent there is new.

Richard Ellmann, Wilde's definitive biographer, says of *Earnest* that it "is all insouciance where *Salome* is all incrimination." Sin and guilt, according to Ellmann, are displaced by *Earnest* into cucumber sandwiches and harmless Bunburying. Biographical criticism is much more to my taste than, say, deconstruction is, but here even Ellmann nods, and I strongly deny any understructure of sin and guilt in *Earnest*, a play whose theology is Pelagian. Wilde's deathbed conversion was a long way off, and there are no scapegoats in *Earnest*, not even Lady Bracknell.

Innocence is clearly the spiritual condition of everyone in *Earnest*, and it is what Blake would have called Organized Innocence. Everyone in the play tells the truth, whether as an afterthought or through hyperbole, or else in the majestic outrageousness that touches the Sublime in Lady Bracknell: "I see no reason why our dear Cecily should not be even still more attractive at the age you mention than she is at present. There will be a large accumulation of property."

Camille A. Paglia shrewdly interprets the four young lovers in *Earnest* as being versions of what she calls "the Androgyne of Manners." Pragmatically this allies Paglia with Ellmann, since she joyously uncovers the



erotic of High Decadence in the apparent innocence of Gwendolen and Cecily, particularly in the “sexual solipsism” of their diaries. Paglia’s particular triumph comes in her High Decadent interpretation of Lady Bracknell’s anxiety as to visible deviation from a train schedule, which she reads as a prophecy of that terrible scene of public humiliation endured by Wilde at Clapham Junction.

I admire Paglia’s essay the other side of idolatry, but still vote for a more innocent *Importance of Being Earnest*, one in which the oxymoronic “passionate celibacy” is more a wise joke and less a refined perversion. “Nothing that actually occurs is of the smallest importance” is one of Wilde’s aphorisms “for the use of the young.” Another, yet more germane, is: “It is only the superficial qualities that last. Man’s deeper nature is soon found out.”

Joseph Loewenstein, gently giving us Wilde as a Blakean or imaginative moralist, catches the truth of Wilde’s subtle exaltation of “moral labour,” even as the play makes clear it is antinomian on the question of moral laws. I give the last word to Wilde’s other masterpiece, “The Decay of Lying”: “The only real people are the people who never existed.” I stumble about the world booming out Lady Bracknell’s pronunciamientos, sustained by her gorgeous reality that so far exceeds our own.