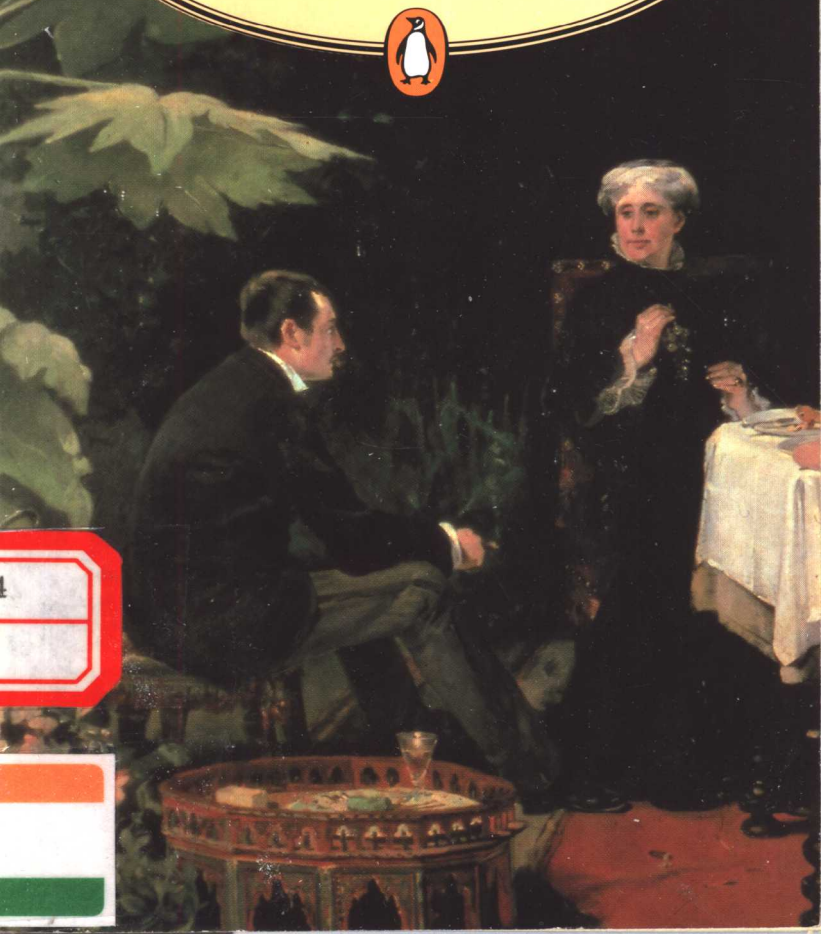


Penguin Popular Classics

THE IMPORTANCE
OF BEING EARNEST

OSCAR WILDE



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PENGUIN BOOKS

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PENGUIN POPULAR CLASSICS

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

BY OSCAR WILDE

OSCAR WILDE (1854-1900). Playwright, poet, essayist and wit he is now as famous for his flamboyant lifestyle and idioms as for his plays, poems and fiction.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in 1854 in Dublin. His father was the eminent surgeon Sir William Wilde and his mother a literary hostess who was also known as a writer under her pen name, 'Speranza'. Studying classics first at Trinity College in Dublin before going on to Magdalen College, Oxford, Wilde proved to be a brilliant scholar, winning the Newdigate Prize for his poem 'Ravenna'. While at Oxford his flamboyant appearance and conspicuous espousal of aestheticism – art for art's sake – attracted great attention, much of it hostile. With his talent, wit, charm and instinct for publicity Wilde soon became a familiar name in the literary world, as much for his conversational skills as for his writing. His first collection, *Poems*, was published in 1881 shortly before he embarked on a one-year lecture tour of North America. Arriving in New York, Wilde is recorded as saying, 'I have nothing to declare but my genius' – one of the many idioms attributed to him. After his marriage to Constance Lloyd in 1884 he published several books of stories for children, originally written for his own sons. *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* appeared shortly before his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). After 1890 Wilde had increasing success on stage with his shrewd and sparkling comedies, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and his masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Wilde's last play, *Salomé*, written in French, was refused a licence in London but was later adapted as an opera by Richard Strauss. Translated by Wilde's close friend Lord Alfred Douglas ('Bosie'), it later appeared for publication in England. Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, strongly disapproved of his son's friendship with the notorious play-

wright, and after he publicly insulted Wilde a quarrel ensued which eventually led to Wilde's imprisonment in 1894 for homosexual offences. He was sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labour, which left him on his release bankrupt and weakened. Relying on the generosity of friends, he went to live in France, adopting the name of Sebastian Melmoth. While here he wrote his famous poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Wilde died in exile in France in 1900. Letters he had written to Lord Alfred while in prison were published in 1905 under the title *De Profundis*.

Of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, his most famous play, Wilde wrote 'It is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy, and it has its philosophy . . . that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.'

Readers may also find the following books of interest: Neil Bartlett, *Who was That Man?* (1992); K. Beckson (ed.), *Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (1970); Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (1987); H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde: A Biography* (1976); R. Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (1977); and P. Raby, *Oscar Wilde* (1988).

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	Framley Parsonage
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Mark Twain	Huckleberry Finn
	Tom Sawyer
Jules Verne	Around the World in Eighty Days
	Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea
Oscar Wilde	Lord Arthur Saville's Crime
	The Picture of Dorian Gray

*The Importance of
Being Earnest*

*

**TO
ROBERT BALDWIN ROSS
IN APPRECIATION
AND
AFFECTION**

★

The Persons of the Play

JOHN WORTHING, J.P.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

REV. CANON CHASUBLE, D.D.

MERRIMAN, *Butler*

LANE, *Manservant*

LADY BRACKNELL

HON. GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX

CECILY CARDEW

MISS PRISM, *Governess*

LONDON: ST JAMES'S THEATRE

Lessee and Manager: Mr George Alexander
14 February 1895

JOHN WORTHING, J.P.	<i>Mr George Alexander</i>
ALGERNON MONCRIEFF	<i>Mr Allen Aynesworth</i>
REV. CANON CHASUBLE, D.D.	<i>Mr H. H. Vincent</i>
MERRIMAN (Butler)	<i>Mr Frank Dyall</i>
LANE (Manservant)	<i>Mr F. Kinsey Peile</i>
LADY BRACKNELL	<i>Miss Rose Leclercq</i>
HON. GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX	<i>Miss Irene Vanbrugh</i>
CECILY CARDEW	<i>Miss Evelyn Millard</i>
MISS PRISM (Governess)	<i>Mrs George Cunnings</i>

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 III

Drawing-room at the Manor House, Woolton

TIME

The Present

FIRST ACT

SCENE

Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room.

[LANE is arranging afternoon tea on the table and, after the music has ceased, ALGERNON enters.]

ALGERNON: Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

LANE: I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

ALGERNON: I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately – anyone can play accurately – but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

LANE: Yes, sir.

ALGERNON: And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

LANE: Yes, sir. [*Hands them on a salver.*]

ALGERNON [*Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa*]: Oh! . . . by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

LANE: Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

ALGERNON: Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

LANE: I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

ALGERNON: Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?

LANE: I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

ALGERNON [*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: Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE: Thank you, sir.

[LANE goes out.]

ALGERNON: 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 goes out.]

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

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

ALGERNON [*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 [*sitting down on the sofa*]: In the country.

ALGERNON: What on earth do you do there?

JACK [*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: And who are the people you amuse?

JACK [*airily*]: Oh, neighbours, neighbours.

ALGERNON: Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire?

JACK: Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.

ALGERNON: How immensely you must amuse them! [*Goes over and takes sandwich.*] By the way, Shropshire is your country, is it not?

JACK: Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course. Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

ALGERNON: Oh! merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

JACK: How perfectly delightful!

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

JACK: May I ask why?

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

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

JACK: How utterly unromantic you are!

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

ALGERNON: 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.] Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. [Takes one and eats it.]

JACK: Well, you have been eating them all the time.

ALGERNON: 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 [advancing to table and helping himself]: And very good bread and butter it is too.

ALGERNON: 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: Why on earth do you say that?