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London, February 14, 1895—it was a bitterly cold evening. Winds whipped snowflakes through the frigid air. Common sense would tell you, stay inside, don’t go out. And yet, that night, in the fashionable part of the city called the West End, crowds of elegantly dressed men and women stepped from their carriages and entered the brightly lit St. James Theatre. For people who loved theater, or who loved being seen at the theater, no biting winter wind would keep them away from this highest of high-society events, the opening of Oscar Wilde’s new play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

At the time, Oscar Wilde was very popular—some might say, notorious. He was a successful playwright. *Earnest* was his fourth play to open in the West End in only three years. A few years before, in 1891, he had published a novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that some reviewers attacked as scandalous and immoral, which of course brought him much attention. Beyond his literary achievements, Wilde was famous for the way he
dressed and the way he spoke: his outfits were extravagant and his conversation sparkled with brilliant wit.

That brilliant wit was on full display in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It is hard to think of another play that is so consistently funny from beginning to end—funny in situation, in character, and especially in language.

On the basic level of plot, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a farce—a lighthearted play in which
the characters find themselves in ridiculous and unlikely situations. Like many a farce, *Earnest* relies on the plot device of mistaken identity. The bare outline of events shows just how ridiculous and unlikely the plot is:

- The wealthy Jack Worthing lives on a country estate and serves as guardian to his young niece, Cecily Cardew. Jack tells Cecily that he has a wicked younger brother, Ernest, who lives in London. But Ernest isn’t real; he is simply a fiction that Jack has made up. When Jack wants to go to the city for fun, he tells Cecily that he must go help Ernest get out of some trouble.

- In London—where Jack himself goes by the name of Ernest—he visits his friend Algernon Moncrieff. Algernon learns that his friend Ernest is really named Jack, and that Jack has a lovely young niece in the country. So Algernon sneaks off to visit Cecily, to whom he introduces himself as Jack’s wicked brother, Ernest.

- Jack becomes engaged to marry Algernon’s cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax, though she knows him only as Ernest, a name she adores. Jack decides to do
away with his fictional younger brother. He returns to his country estate bearing news of Ernest’s “death,” only to find Ernest (that is, Algernon pretending to be Ernest) alive and well, and engaged to Cecily.

- Gwendolen meets Cecily. The two ladies learn that they are both engaged to be married to Ernest, whom they assume to be the same man, not realizing that there are two different men (Jack and Algernon), both calling themselves Ernest.

- Algernon’s imposing aunt, Lady Bracknell, expresses in haughty (and humorous) terms her disapproval of the engagements and of a great deal else.

The action of the play involves the working out of these complications, as well as the solving of a mystery surrounding Jack’s origins. (He had been adopted as an infant and does not know who his parents were.) Clearly, the situations are silly. But what makes this play more than just a silly farce is the language. While the characters may act in silly ways, the words they speak are beautifully crafted and brilliantly witty.

Wilde gifted all of the major characters in
The Importance of Being Earnest with his own epigrammatic wit. (An epigram is a brief and witty turn of phrase.) Wilde’s epigrams continue to be quoted long after his lifetime, for example: “I can resist everything except temptation”; or, “To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance”; or, “There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.”

As Sir Max Beerbohm, a fellow writer and artist, noted in his review of Earnest when it was revived for performance in 1909, “The absurdity of the situations is made doubly absurd by the contrasted grace and dignity of everyone’s utterance.” Later in the twentieth century, the poet W. H. Auden observed that in Earnest Oscar Wilde created “a verbal universe in which the characters are determined by the kinds of things they say, and the plot is nothing but a succession of opportunities to say them.” But oh, what wonderful things they say!

At the opening performance of Earnest in 1895, the audience so enjoyed the farcical comedy and the witty dialogue that they probably didn’t notice just how much the play was making fun of many of them. Oscar Wilde portrayed the wealthy British
aristocracy as smug and snobbish. He laughed at sentimental ideas about romance and marriage—Lady Bracknell’s actions clearly demonstrate that in the making of an upper-class marriage, what matters most is not love but wealth and social status. Like fairy tales and the comedies of Shakespeare, *The Importance of Being Earnest* moves toward marriage as the expected “happy ending,” but all along the way it makes fun of the very idea.

Wilde originally subtitled *The Importance of Being Earnest* “A Serious Comedy for Trivial People,” but then changed it to “A Trivial Comedy for Serious People.” Perhaps he did not want to put off his audience by calling them “trivial.” Or perhaps by choosing to call his own play “trivial” Wilde thought that he could mock the selfish smugness of the British aristocracy while laughing it off as something to be taken lightly, not as a social critique but as a pleasant entertainment.

At the same time, in calling his audience “serious people,” Wilde was not paying them an unmixed compliment. As young Cecily says at one point during the play, “Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious! Sometimes he is so serious that I think
he cannot be quite well.” Wilde had little patience for people who presented themselves as serious, sincere, and dutiful—in other words, earnest people.

You may have noticed that the spelling of the word earnest differs slightly from that of the name “Ernest.” To be “earnest” is to be very serious, sincere, and diligent—qualities expected of a gentleman in Wilde’s time. Wilde lived in Victorian England, an era named for Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837 to 1901. Victoria’s name has become associated with duty, seriousness, hard work, and self-control. In accordance with Victorian social standards, gentlemen were expected to act in a serious, dignified, and reserved manner—or, as Jack says in the play, “to adopt a high moral tone”—in short, to be earnest. In the play, however, Wilde often pokes fun at Victorian earnestness. For example, even as Jack asserts the need “to adopt a high moral tone,” he immediately observes that “a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness.”

Whatever social commentary Oscar Wilde may be making in The Importance of Being Earnest, there is no need to justify the play as having a serious social
message beneath the brilliant surface—that would be a very earnest thing to do, and probably not at all to the playwright’s liking.

Wilde, along with other artists of his time, did not believe that art needs to have a deeper meaning, or teach us something, or be morally uplifting. These artists were part of what is known as the Aesthetic Movement, which thrived in Britain from about 1860-1900. The Aesthetic artists believed in “art for art’s sake.” They rejected the traditional Victorian notion that art should be useful and instead insisted that art must be beautiful. “Beauty reveals everything,” said Wilde, “because it expresses nothing.” Furthermore, he asserted, “All art is quite useless.”

Useless or not, as a work of art *The Importance of Being Earnest* creates its own universe in which everything is as it must be. The dialogue is impossibly clever, the characters artificial, the situations contrived beyond belief. But we never question how believable it all is. Our joy is in the exquisitely crafted creation that makes no apology for its lack of utility, but in itself dazzles, delights, and makes us laugh.
For a 1939 revival of *Earnest* in London, an artist sketched these drawings of the main characters (from top left, clockwise: Jack Worthing, Cecily Cardew, Algernon Moncrieff, Gwendolen Fairfax, and, at center, Lady Bracknell).