

Oscar Wilde

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Overview — the story in simple English

Jack Worthing is a serious young gentleman who lives in the country and looks after his young *ward* (অভিভাবকের অধীনে থাকা মেয়ে) Cecily. To escape to London for pleasure, Jack has invented a wicked younger brother named "Ernest," and while in town he himself uses the name Ernest. His friend Algernon Moncrieff plays a similar trick: he has invented a sick friend called "Bunbury" so he can avoid boring social duties whenever he likes (Wilde calls this "Bunburying"). In London, Jack (as "Ernest") loves Gwendolen Fairfax, and she loves him back — but she says she can only marry a man named Ernest. When Jack proposes, Gwendolen's mother Lady Bracknell interviews him and rejects him, because as a baby he was found in a handbag at a railway station and has no respectable family (পরিবার-পরিচয় নেই). Meanwhile Algernon secretly goes to Jack's country house pretending to be the wicked brother "Ernest," and falls in love with Cecily — who also declares she can only love a man named Ernest. The two women meet, discover that *neither* man is truly named Ernest, and there is a comic quarrel. Both men secretly arrange to be re-*christened* (নতুন করে খ্রিস্টীয় নামকরণ) as Ernest. At the end, Miss Prism, Cecily's *governess* (গৃহশিক্ষিকা), is revealed to be the woman who lost a baby years ago — and that baby was Jack. Jack turns out to be Lady Bracknell's own nephew, Algernon's elder brother, and his real name genuinely is Ernest. So Jack marries Gwendolen, Algernon marries Cecily, and everyone ends happily.

💡 **One-line meaning:** *The play laughs at Victorian society, which cared more about names, class, and "respectability" than about honesty and real love.*

Quick Fact	Detail
First performed / Published	First performed 1895 (St James's Theatre, London); published 1899
Genre	Comedy of manners / farce; subtitle: <i>A Trivial Comedy for Serious People</i>
Setting	London (Algernon's flat) and a country manor house in Hertfordshire, 1890s
Narration / Form	Stage play — told through dialogue and action, no narrator; built on epigrams and wit
Author's remark	Wilde said the play's philosophy was that we should treat trivial things seriously and serious things with "studied triviality"

Themes & Technique

- Satire on Victorian society and hypocrisy.** Under the jokes, the play attacks the Victorian upper class — its snobbery, its false morality, and its worship of "respectability" (সম্মান/মর্যাদা). Lady Bracknell's marriage interview shows a society that judges people by family and money, not by character.
- The triviality of "earnestness" (the Ernest / earnest pun).** "Earnest" means serious and sincere — the highest Victorian virtue. Wilde makes it just a *name*, "Ernest." The whole plot turns on a name, showing that Victorians valued the appearance of seriousness more than being truly good.

3. **Marriage as a social contract, not romance.** For Lady Bracknell, marriage is about class, land, and income; she keeps "a list of eligible young men." Gwendolen and Cecily love a *name* rather than a man. Wilde mocks a world where love has become fashion and business (ব্যবসায়িক লেনদেন).
4. **The double life (Bunburying) and appearance versus reality.** Both Jack and Algernon lead double lives to escape duty. This exposes the gap between the public "respectable" self and the private self who wants pleasure. The double life is Wilde's image of Victorian hypocrisy.
5. **Wit, paradox, and the power of language.** The characters live through their clever sayings. Wilde inverts (উল্টে দেওয়া) common proverbs to make paradoxes. In this play, style is more important than sincerity, and words carry the real meaning.
6. **Food, manners, and surface over feeling.** Eating replaces emotion — cucumber sandwiches, bread and butter, and the famous muffin quarrel. Characters fuss over trivial manners while ignoring serious matters, which is itself the joke.
7. **Inversion of gender roles.** The women (Gwendolen, Cecily, Lady Bracknell) are strong, decisive, and dominant, while the men are passive and easily managed. Wilde reverses Victorian expectations for comic and satirical effect.

Classroom techniques (know these terms):

- **Comedy of manners** — comedy that mocks the behaviour and fashions of upper-class society.
- **Farce** — comedy built on absurd, improbable situations (handbag baby, mistaken identity).
- **Epigram** — a short, witty, surprising saying.
- **Paradox / inversion** — turning a familiar idea upside down to shock and amuse.
- **Pun** — a play on words (Ernest / earnest).
- **Dramatic irony** — the audience knows more than the characters.
- **Recognition / discovery (anagnorisis)** — the revealing of Jack's true birth at the end.
- **The dandy** — the elegant, witty, idle gentleman (Algernon) who speaks Wilde's paradoxes.
- **Well-made play** — a tightly plotted structure ending in a neat resolution.

Key Quotations — memorize

"The truth is rarely pure and never simple." — **Algernon (Act I)**

"To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness." — **Lady Bracknell (Act I)**

"A handbag?" — **Lady Bracknell (Act I)**

"All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his." — **Algernon (Act I)**

"In married life three is company and two is none." — **Algernon (Act I)**

"I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train." — **Gwendolen (Act II)**

"The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means." — **Miss Prism (Act II)**

"In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing." — **Gwendolen (Act III)**

"Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that." — **Lady Bracknell (Act III)**

"I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest." — **Jack (Act III, final line)**

Critics' Views (safe to cite)

Critic	View	Use for
Oscar Wilde (subtitle)	Called it "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People" — triviality is deliberate art, not weakness	Farce, artificial comedy, overall thesis
George Bernard Shaw	Admired its brilliance but found it "heartless" and mechanical — wit without feeling	Critical balance, "artificial" comedy, limitations
W. H. Auden	Described it as almost pure "verbal opera" — its true subject is language and wit	Wit and humour, style over substance
Eric Bentley	Argued the play seriously satirises Victorian "earnestness" and solemnity beneath the fun	Social satire, theme of earnestness
Northrop Frye (comedy theory)	Lady Bracknell is the "blocking figure" of New Comedy; the plot resolves through marriage and recognition	Structure, farce, Lady Bracknell
Camille Paglia	Read Wilde's epigrams and elegant, "epicene" wit as overturning Victorian earnestness	Wit, aestheticism, character of the dandy
Katharine Worth	Placed Wilde as a forerunner of modern drama, his artifice pointing toward later playwrights	"Modern Drama" course framing

Exam Q&A Bank

Part A — Reference to Context (5 marks)

Passage 1 ( **Very likely**): "To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness."

These lines are from Oscar Wilde's comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), spoken by **Lady Bracknell** in **Act I**. She is interviewing Jack Worthing to judge whether he is a suitable husband for her daughter Gwendolen. Jack has just confessed that he never knew his parents, because he was found as a baby in a handbag at Victoria Station. Instead of showing sympathy, Lady Bracknell treats the loss of both parents as a personal fault — as if Jack were "careless." The line is a perfect **epigram** built on **inversion**: she turns a tragic fact into a social crime. Its significance is that it exposes Lady Bracknell's snobbery and the cold, class-obsessed values of Victorian high society, where family and respectability matter more than human feeling. It also advances the satire and the plot, since Jack's unknown birth becomes the obstacle to his marriage.

Passage 2 ( **Very likely**): "I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest."

This is the **final line** of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), spoken by **Jack Worthing** in **Act III**. It comes just after the great discovery: Miss Prism is revealed to have lost him as a baby, Jack is really Lady Bracknell's nephew and Algernon's elder brother, and — best of all — his true name really is Ernest. He can now marry Gwendolen, who insisted she could only love a man named Ernest. The line depends on the play's central **pun** between "Ernest" (the name) and "earnest" (serious and sincere). The **dramatic irony** is sharp: Jack has spent the whole play lying and leading a double life, yet he "becomes earnest" not by moral change but by luck of a name. This crystallises the play's **satire of Victorian earnestness** — showing that society rewards the appearance of virtue, not virtue itself — and neatly closes the comedy on its title.

Part B — Short Notes (5 marks)

Note 1 — Sources of laughter in the play (🔥 Very likely, both years)

Wilde's comedy makes us laugh from several sources working together. The first is **verbal wit** — brilliant **epigrams** and **paradoxes** that invert ordinary ideas, as when Algernon declares, "The truth is rarely pure and never simple," or "Divorces are made in Heaven." The second is the **pun** on Ernest / earnest, the joke that runs through the whole plot. The third is **farce**: the wildly improbable situations — a baby found in a handbag, two men both pretending to be "Ernest," and two women engaged to the same imaginary man. The fourth is **character comedy**, above all Lady Bracknell's absurd, self-important pronouncements and Miss Prism's confusion of a baby with a novel manuscript. The fifth is **situation comedy**, such as the polite tea-table quarrel between Gwendolen and Cecily and the famous muffin-eating dispute. Finally, laughter comes from **satire** — treating serious subjects like marriage, death, and class with cool triviality. Together these give the play its constant sparkle.

Note 2 — Why does Lady Bracknell reject Jack's proposal? (🔥 Very likely, both years)

Lady Bracknell rejects Jack Worthing's proposal to marry Gwendolen because he cannot show a respectable **family background**. During her interview in Act I, Jack's wealth, property, and income are all acceptable to her — she treats a suitable marriage as a matter of class, land, and money, keeping "a list of eligible young men." The problem is Jack's origin: as a baby he was found in a handbag at Victoria Station on the Brighton line, and he knows nothing of his real parents. To Lady Bracknell, being "born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag" shows "a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life" and could not be allowed to marry into a good family. She famously advises him to "acquire some relations" and "to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent" before the season ends. Her rejection is not personal dislike but pure **class snobbery**, and it is Wilde's sharpest attack on the mercenary, pedigree-obsessed values of Victorian high society.

Part C — Essays (15 marks)

"Evaluate *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a social satire." (🔥 Very likely — marked v.v.i.)

Oscar Wilde subtitled his masterpiece *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, and that phrase holds the key to the whole work. On the surface *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) is a light, laughing farce of mistaken identities and lovers who quarrel over a name. Yet beneath the sparkling dialogue lies a sharp **social satire**, an attack on the hypocrisy, snobbery, and false values of the Victorian upper class. Wilde's method is not to preach but to turn society's own solemn language upside down until its absurdity is exposed.

The clearest target of the satire is **marriage**, which Wilde presents as a business deal rather than a matter of love. Lady Bracknell's interview of Jack in Act I reads like the examination of goods for sale: she inquires about his income, his property, his politics, and above all his family. She keeps "a list of eligible young men," and marriage for her is an alliance of class and money. When she learns that Jack was found as a baby in a handbag, she rejects him instantly, advising him to "acquire some relations" before the season is over. Love has been reduced to social arithmetic, and Wilde lets Lady Bracknell condemn herself out of her own mouth.

Closely linked is the satire on **class and pedigree**. To Lady Bracknell, a person without known parents has shown "a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life." Her horror at the handbag — and her care about which railway line it came from — mocks an aristocracy that values birth over worth. Her snobbery reaches its height when she says, "Never speak disrespectfully

of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that." Wilde exposes a ruling class that protects itself with rules, appearances, and exclusion.

The deepest satire, though, is on **"earnestness" itself** — the very Victorian virtue of being serious, moral, and respectable. Wilde makes this grand ideal into a mere *name*, "Ernest." Both Gwendolen and Cecily fall in love with the name, not the man. Meanwhile the two heroes actually lead **double lives**, "Bunburying" to escape duty, so the men who seem most respectable are the ones telling the most lies. The critic **Eric Bentley** rightly argued that beneath the fun the play seriously mocks Victorian solemnity: the highest value of the age turns out to be an empty word.

The satire on **money** deepens when Lady Bracknell suddenly reverses herself in Act III. Having refused Jack, she learns that his ward Cecily has a large fortune of about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds, and at once discovers "distinct social possibilities" in the girl she had ignored moments before. The speed of the change lays bare the mercenary heart of the aristocracy: their fine manners follow the money. Wilde also satirises the **cult of appearances** through small things — cucumber sandwiches eaten in secret, christenings arranged like appointments, and the muffin quarrel in which two men fight over food while pretending nothing is wrong. Society, Wilde suggests, is all performance.

Wilde's chief weapon is **language** — the **epigram** and the **paradox**. He inverts familiar sayings until the polite surface of society cracks. "To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness" turns grief into a fashionable joke, and in doing so reveals a society that has lost its heart. **George Bernard Shaw** felt exactly this, calling the comedy brilliant but "heartless" — yet that heartlessness is part of the satire, a mirror of a class that treats feeling as bad manners.

In conclusion, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is far more than a trivial farce. Its improbable plot and glittering wit are a disguise; underneath, Wilde satirises Victorian marriage, class snobbery, and the hollow cult of respectability. The subtitle tells the truth in reverse — it is a trivial comedy *for serious people*, offering serious criticism dressed in laughter. That balance of surface fun and hidden attack is what makes it one of the finest social satires in English drama.

"In what sense is *The Importance of Being Earnest* an artificial (or farcical) comedy?" (🔥 Very likely — both years)

The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) is often called an "artificial comedy," and the phrase fits it perfectly. An artificial comedy — sometimes called a **comedy of manners** or a **farce** — does not try to copy real life. Instead it builds a bright, unreal world of clever talk and improbable events, where style matters more than truth and wit matters more than feeling. Wilde makes this artificiality his art, and the whole play celebrates surface, elegance, and design over realism.

First, the **plot is openly farcical and improbable**. A respectable gentleman turns out to have been found as a baby in a handbag at a railway station. Two young men both pretend to be a brother named "Ernest"; two young women are each engaged to this same imaginary Ernest; and a governess long ago mistook a baby for the manuscript of a three-volume novel. These coincidences are far too neat for real life. Wilde is not careless — he is deliberately building a **well-made play** whose machinery of mistaken identity and final recognition we are meant to enjoy as pure construction.

Second, the **characters value form over feeling**, which is the mark of the artificial comedy. They fuss endlessly over cucumber sandwiches, christenings, clothes, and diaries, while treating love and death lightly. Gwendolen declares, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing" — a line that could be the play's motto. The people are not deep, realistic psychologies; they are elegant figures who exist to speak wit. This is a strength, not a fault: Wilde wants surface, not soul.

Third, the play depends on **stock devices** of comedy handled with fresh brilliance. There is the **blocking figure** who stands in the way of the lovers — Lady Bracknell — and the **recognition scene** in which true identities are revealed and the couples are united. As comedy theory (associated with **Northrop Frye**) reminds us, this is the ancient shape of New Comedy: obstacles, confusion, discovery, and marriage. Wilde fills that old, artificial frame with dazzling new dialogue.

Fourth, the true life of the play is its **language**, which is itself artificial and polished. Every character speaks in the same perfect **epigrams** and **paradoxes**, so the play sounds like a single, glittering surface of wit. "The truth is rarely pure and never simple," says Algernon, turning honesty into a joke. **W. H. Auden** described the work as almost pure "verbal opera," meaning that its real subject is language performing for its own delight. The artifice *is* the meaning.

Finally, this artificiality explains why some found the play cold. **George Bernard Shaw** admired its skill but called it "heartless" and mechanical, as if the characters were puppets of wit. But this "heartlessness" is exactly what an artificial comedy needs: emotion would break the spell. Wilde keeps everything light so that nothing weighs the laughter down.

In conclusion, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is an artificial, farcical comedy in the fullest and best sense. Its improbable plot, its worship of style, its stock devices, and its unbroken surface of epigram all place elegance above realism. Wilde does not fail to show real life; he chooses instead to build a perfect comic machine. As his own subtitle promises, it is "a trivial comedy for serious people," and its triviality is a deliberate, glittering art.

⚡ One-Page Revision Sheet

Item	Content
Story in 3 lines	Jack invents a brother "Ernest" and Algernon invents a friend "Bunbury" so both can lead double lives. Both men court women (Gwendolen, Cecily) who insist on loving a man named Ernest, causing comic confusion. In the end Jack is revealed as Lady Bracknell's lost nephew whose real name is Ernest, so both couples marry happily.
2 must-quotes	"To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness." (Lady Bracknell) • "I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest." (Jack, final line)
2 backup quotes	"The truth is rarely pure and never simple." (Algernon) • "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing." (Gwendolen)
2 critics	Eric Bentley — satire on Victorian earnestness beneath the fun • G. B. Shaw — brilliant but "heartless" and mechanical
Technique words	Comedy of manners, farce, epigram, paradox, pun (Ernest/earnest), inversion, dramatic irony, recognition/anagnorisis, the dandy, well-made play
Top 3 likely essays	1) Social satire (v.v.i.) 2) Artificial / farcical comedy 3) Wit and humour — OR treatment of love and marriage / character of Lady Bracknell

Exam-timing tip: In a 4-hour paper, give about 40 minutes to each 15-mark essay; write a quick thesis first, then plant one verbatim quotation and one critic in every essay to lift your marks.