

**Fin-de-Siècle Decadence and  
Oscar Wilde, "The Importance of Being Earnest"**

**1. THE NINETIES**

- a. **Those writers we consider "modernists" are beginning their careers about now;** Thomas Hardy, after publishing Tess and Jude and being ridiculed by his critics, is about to give up novel writing for poetry; Yeats is formulating the cosmology which characterizes his later poems; Henry James is having failures at play-writing which will cause him to turn to the novel instead.
- b. **These pre-modernists/late Victorians, like Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites, are truly "wandering between two worlds."** They define themselves as anti-Victorian, and yet they are utterly products of Victorian culture, whether they embrace that culture or reject it. Sigmund Freud, who published the first of his influential works during this decade, is probably the best example of a writer that rejected Victorian culture and yet was a product of his age.
- c. **The movement Wilde symbolizes is called "aestheticism," a movement that promoted the uselessness of art, the pursuit of beauty, the absurdity of everything serious or "earnest," to use Wilde's term, in short, the adulation of "art for art's sake," the phrase that became the rallying cry of the movement.** The beautiful object moves center stage. "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things." [From "Preface to the Picture of Dorian Gray"]
- d. **You can imagine how this attitude went over with many of the Victorians who were NOT resisting their Victorian upbringing.** Charges of decadence dogged all the "aesthetes," and Wilde particularly suffered terrible consequences of his willingness to speak out and to lead a life not considered "proper." (In fact, there are some people who STILL wouldn't consider Wilde's life "proper.")
- e. **In addition, the aesthetes and its most important offshoot group, the "Rhymers' Club" were pro-French and anti-English.** French writers, not English writers, were their role models, and they rejected fellow writers who would not give preference to the French point of view. The French poets, called the "Symbolistes," are best represented by Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal, or The Flowers of Evil. They were interested in sexual experimentation - what their fellow citizens sometimes viewed as debauchery - and they were outspokenly anti-bourgeois and anti-religious. (The latter comes across in this play as the casual attitude about having oneself rechristened "Ernest" just because it's the name one's girlfriend prefers.) Yeats, in his reminiscence of Wilde, recalls him speaking of Pater's History of the Renaissance. Yeats overhears Wilde talking with another man, and "in a slow, carefully modulated voice," Wilde is saying:

"It is my golden book; I never travel anywhere without it; but it is the very flower of decadence, the last trumpet should have sounded the very moment it was written."

[pause here]

"But," said the dull man, "would you not have given us time to read it?"

"Oh, no," was [Wilde's] retort, "there would have been plenty of time afterwards - in either world."  
(Norton II 1971)

- f. **Some works being written during this period:** Havelock Ellis's books on sexuality; Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams, Dracula, Hardy's novels of sexual freedom and penalties; Swinburne's erotic poetry; Shaw's Mrs. Warren's Profession, and finally Wilde's Ballad of Reading Gaol.
- g. **How did this decadence manifest itself in their art?** These writers are concerned with a variety of topics that are now, a hundred years later, still current: sex, changes in sex roles; duplicity and truthfulness; the attractiveness and repulsiveness of artificiality; breaking down artificial barriers of "morality" prescribed arbitrarily by their precursors; the breakdown of ideas of God and English dominance resulting from Darwin's theories of species regeneration and from the influence of science on the literature of belief.

## 2. OSCAR WILDE: BACKGROUND

- a. **Yeats's brief and pungent reminiscence (part of your reading for today; Norton II 1971-1972) captures Wilde's personality.** Yeats writes:

I think he seemed to us, baffled as we were by youth, or by infirmity, a triumphant figure, and to some of us a figure from another age, an audacious Italian fifteenth-century figure.

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- b. **Yeats puts his finger on Wilde's Renaissance quality:** that emphasis on the body as well as the mind, on the things of the world as serious and the things of the spirit as somewhat trivial or even overrated - that characterized the great hubristic geniuses of the English and Italian renaissances such as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Lorenzo de Medici, Henry VIII, Thomas Cranmer, and Lucrezia Borgia. Remember Browning writing about such a patron in "My Last Duchess," memorializing that fascinating combination of power and destructiveness.

**Wilde got away with this because he had done his homework. For all his nonconformism, he was one of the most brilliant of academic successes at Oxford and had a flawless memory;** he simply dispensed with what he saw as empty rituals conducted for the sake of appearances. Yeats continues by comparing Wilde to Henley, one of his contemporaries, who was hired like Wilde as an editor.<sup>1</sup> Wilde was a success, the employer reported, "so indolent but such a genius," while the workmanlike and earnest Henley, who showed up for work every day, was terrible. Wilde bragged:

"I used to go [to work] three times a week for an hour a day but I have since struck off one of the days."

"My God," said Henley, I went five times a week for five hours a day and when I wanted to strike off a day they had a special committee meeting."

"Furthermore," was Wilde's answer, "I never answered their letters. I have known men come to London full of bright prospects and seen them complete wrecks in a few months through a habit of answering letters."

Yeats concludes: "He knew how to keep our elders in their place, and was plainly the more successful, for Henley had been dismissed."

- c. **As your biographical summary of Wilde indicates, he was a brilliant extemporaneous conversationalist and an actor, a flamboyant dresser who loved to be the center of attention.**

- d. **Wilde's downfall was the ultimate Victorian heresy. Though Wilde married and had two children, he was a homosexual.**

i. Affair with Lord Alfred Douglas; pursued by Douglas's father, the Marquis of Queensberry, who accused him of homosexuality; Wilde sued for libel, lost, and was imprisoned.

ii. Prison broke his health and his spirit, and he only lived for three years after his release. He lived under an assumed name; the shocked literary world and public ostracized him; he died penniless and friendless.

iii. You could argue that in his battle against propriety, propriety won.

### 3. **BACKGROUND OF PLAY**

- a. **Wilde enjoyed critical success, but liked financial success even better, and was always hard up and always writing for money.** His usual tactic was

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<sup>1</sup> Henley's poems are reprinted before Wilde's; he is the author of those deathless and very earnest lines, "I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul."

to ask for an advance from his producers, then to go off and write the play and collect the balance of his fee "on spec," if the producers liked what he came up with. We don't usually think of "great works" being written for money, but Wilde's letter to his producer, George Alexander, at the St. James Theatre, shows that money was his primary concern:

I think an amusing thing with lots of fun and wit might be made. If you think so too. . .do let me know, and send me £150. If when the play is finished, you think it too slight, you have have the £150 back. In the meantime, I am so pressed for money that I don't know what to do. Of course I am extravagant. You have always been a good wise friend to me, so think what you can do.

(Wilde, Letters 359)

- b. **Wilde wrote novels and poetry as well, and didn't make much money on them, so always enjoyed the proceeds from his plays, which in general were well received.** He wrote the play in 3 weeks, sent it back, and said to a friend: "I am in a very much worse state for money than I told you. HBut I am just finishing a new play which, as it is quite nonsensical and has no serious interest, will I hope bring me in a lot of red gold" (Letters 364).
- c. **George Alexander, who was also the leading actor of the company, didn't like the play and originally opted not to produce it.** But the terrible failure of Henry James's play "Guy Domville" shortly after Wilde sent him "Earnest" convinced Alexander that they needed another play to fill the gap. They did Wilde's play at the St. James, and it was a spectacular success. One of the actors in the play reported years later, "In my 53 years of acting, I never remember a greater triumph than the first night of The Importance of Being Earnest. The audience rose in their seats and cheered and cheered again."

#### 4. **EARNESTNESS AND NAMING**

- a. **Wilde's instructions about performing the play:**

It is absolutely essential to the success of this piece that it should be played with the most perfect earnestness and gravity throughout. . . . [As soon as] the actors show that they are conscious of the absurdity of their utterances, the piece begins to drag.
- b. **What does it mean to be in earnest? To be earnest? What do you make in the differences in spelling?** The names of things: G tells J: "[The name] suits you perfectly. It is a divine name. It has a music of its own. It produces vibrations." "No there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations. . . . I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain. Besides, Jack is a notorious domesticity for John!"
- c. **"The only really safe name is Ernest."**
  - i. **"Earnestness" is the idea that things can "be" a certain way - that there's a truthfulness in the universe** that humans can identify and strive toward.

- ii. **Wilde's aim in writing "earnest" was antimorality, a revision of Victorian priorities:** "that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality."

His inversion of priorities is delightful as an antidote to Victorian sincerity and earnestness, but ultimately is limited by its very studiedness - its very sense of opposition. Not an alternative morality - an antimorality. The comedy of Wilde's works is mirrored - inversely - by the tragedy of his life. Failing to solve the problem of being a beautiful liar: that one is still lying, that the art one creates, no matter how antimoral and beautiful, is artificial.

## 5. **CONTRADICTIONS/PARADOXES AND EPIGRAMS**

- a. **Contradictions and epigrams:** the stuff of Wilde's life. His imprisonment and early death as a result of England's sodomy laws; his disgrace and sense of living a double life. He was married; he was also homosexual; a dandy and great dresser who prided himself on his appearance and knew the value of a strong visual impression while he knew how deceiving such appearances can be.
- b. **A key paradox/contradiction in all Wilde's works is the gap between beauty and ugliness:** the fallacy/attractiveness of beauty, the "flowers of evil" in Baudelaire's terms. Beauty as the organizing hierarchical principle of art: yet the beautiful surface we find so seductive is what brings us down; beauty is never mirrored by substance, or only rarely. Beauty as extreme of conservatism. Wilde's reaction was to reject all valuations as invalid. Example of inversion:  
  
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.
- c. **Love labors under a similar paradoxical tension:** marriage: boring when the woman accepts the proposal; infidelity is inevitable; yet note the peculiar romanticism with which both men approach marriage proposals.
- d. **Some of the play's oppositions are traditional ones.** For example, the contrast between the countryside, where everything is resolved after the battles are fought, and the corruption of the city, resembles the Wordsworthian green world where conflict is resolved.

## 6. **DECIPHERING THE PLAY**

- a. **The play is made up of a tension between truth and falsehood, which are given equal value** - both are mere rhetorical strategies - and of plays on language, meaning, communication that relate to this fundamental contradiction. Auden, in reviewing Wilde's letter in 1963, noted the extraordinarily verbal nature of this play:

In "The Importance of Being Earnest" Wilde succeeded - almost, it would seem, by accident, for he never realised its infinite superiority to all his other plays - in writing what is perhaps the only pure verbal opera in English. The solution that, deliberately or accidentally, he found was to subordinate every other dramatic element to dialogue for its own sake and create a verbal universe in which the character are determined by the kind of things they say, and the plot is nothing but a succession of opportunities to say them.

**No "Dramatis Personae" at the beginning of the play, so that we have to go along with the disguises:**

Jack	Algernon
fake: Ernest brother	fake: Bunbury (friend)
"Ernest in town and Jack in the country"	A. in town, Ernest in country
Jack turns out to be Ernest	A turns out to be E's real brother

- b. **The play, like most farces, is constructed on a series of secrets; the action arises from disclosure or the fear of disclosure.** Unlike most farces, however, deception and deceit in The Importance of Being Earnest are given relatively light moral value. The lies Jack and Algy tell at the beginning - which we think are faintly immoral - actually turn out to be the real truth of the situation.

7. **DECEIVERS:**

- a. **John/Jack/Ernest Worthing** is leading a double life between the town and the country, and he lies to Algernon about his relationship to Cecily - why? He has a fake "bad" brother named "Jack," while he himself is "Ernest." Etymology of "jack" for "knave," connotations of sexuality.
- b. **Algernon** gets Jack's country address by stealth and shows up pretending to be Ernest. He wheedles the truth out of Jack by tempting him with the cigarette case and pretending not to know what's happening. He lies about where the cucumber sandwiches have gone. (Notice that Lane, the servant, colludes in this lie, in the process revealing how debased a world of credit exists everywhere: the cucumbers, he claims, are not to be got, "even with ready money"). He has a fake friend named "Bunbury," who is a kind of giant white lie that he invokes to get out of engagements he doesn't want to participate in.
- c. **Gwendolen** secretly steals off to the country, having gotten Jack's address by pretending that she may need to talk to him when he is there, to see what's happening.
- d. **Lady Bracknell** bribes Gwendolen's maid to find out where she has vanished to. She also has a skeleton in the closet: the disappearing baby.
- e. **Miss Prism** is guilty of having lost the baby in the train station, and seems to be living in hiding, and is only found out when Lady Bracknell sees and accuses her.
- f. **Canon Chasuble: Both Jack and Algernon** try to hoodwink Canon Chasuble into christening them as "Ernest," which would be false, since both have other names. Also, though Chasuble declares, "I am a celibate," he is secretly in love with Miss Prism.

- g. **Finally, Cecily writes the story of her love for Ernest in her diary before it has even happened;** constructs the love letters herself; even describes the proposal. She relies on this outrageously fictionalized document as though it were a Bible, as Gwendolen relies on her diary, when the two are trying to decide whom Ernest has engaged to marry.

8. **TRUTH-SEEKERS:**

- a. **Lady Bracknell, like any good society matron, is concerned about genealogy, and well she should be, though she is too stupid to recognize her own nephew.** "'Tis a wise child that knows its own father."
- b. **Both Cecily and Gwendolen recognize the value of "earnestness,"** and both insist on the traditional marriage proposal and the vows of eternal fidelity that marriage symbolizes. But they make the mistake of assuming that the appearance of earnestness - the name itself - guarantees truthfulness. They are proven wrong when the men they suppose to be "earnest" turn out to be something else entirely, though that something else is acceptable.
- c. **Both Cecily and Gwendolen (a little disturbingly like Lady Catherine de Bourgh)** pride themselves on their frankness, though they are also capable of being passive/aggressive and indirect
- d. **Miss Prism sternly wants Cecily to learn facts** - not to carry on the fiction of her diary, which Cecily acknowledges shall be put out "in volume form" - though Miss Prism has little success. Miss Prism rejects her three-decker, admonishing Cecily that such fictional "speculations are profitless," and that "memory. . . is the diary that we all carry about with us." Cecily ironically notes that memory is notoriously unreliable: "Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened."

Miss Prism undermines the truthfulness of fiction by defining it as an artificial scenario where "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means."

- e. **Jack and Algernon** both prize what we would call "true" love, though neither of them seems equipped to deal with it. Both seem far more bothered by the penalties that attach to the discovery of lies rather than by the problems of lying itself; in fact, they play at deceiving as though it were an art.