

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

Background:

-First performed at the St. James's Theatre, London, in 1895; it was published in 1899.

Stylistically, it finds its predecessors in the "comedy of manners" tradition of the 18th century, relying on wit, farce and typical characters to create humour. It contributed to the rebirth of the English theatre during the Victorian period.

-This play is Wilde's most successful one.

The title:

The title is a pun (a play on words) based on the two meanings of the word EARNEST (both a man's name and an adjective meaning 'honest', 'sincere')

The plot:

The plot is based on a series of **confusions** that have to be resolved, **mysteries** that have to be explained and cases of **mistaken identity** that have to be corrected.

Its satire focuses attention, however entertainingly, on a number of social problems from education to property and privilege; money and marriage; ideology and economics; the decline of the aristocracy; nineteenth century morals; the class system.

It's a trivial comedy for serious people.

The brilliant surface is constantly broken up by the suggestion of depths.

Characterization:

Algernon Montcrieff is the typical dandy figure, amusing, rich, good-looking and well dressed.

Jack is also something of a dandy, but he is always more serious than Algernon.

Lady Bracknell is the caricature of the upper-class English snob;

Miss Prism is the funny forgetful servant figure;

Gwendolen and **Cecily** represent a silly and superficial approach to love (just a fashionable game, whose goal is marriage) and life.

- Opposition between town (Gwendolen) and country (Cecily) → Gwendolen, as a Lord's daughter living in London, is more snobbish and talkative than Cecily, a country orphan; in the end both girls prove to be vain and sharp-tongued and to have the same attitude towards life.

Language:

- The language is witty, light and full of paradoxes and epigrams.