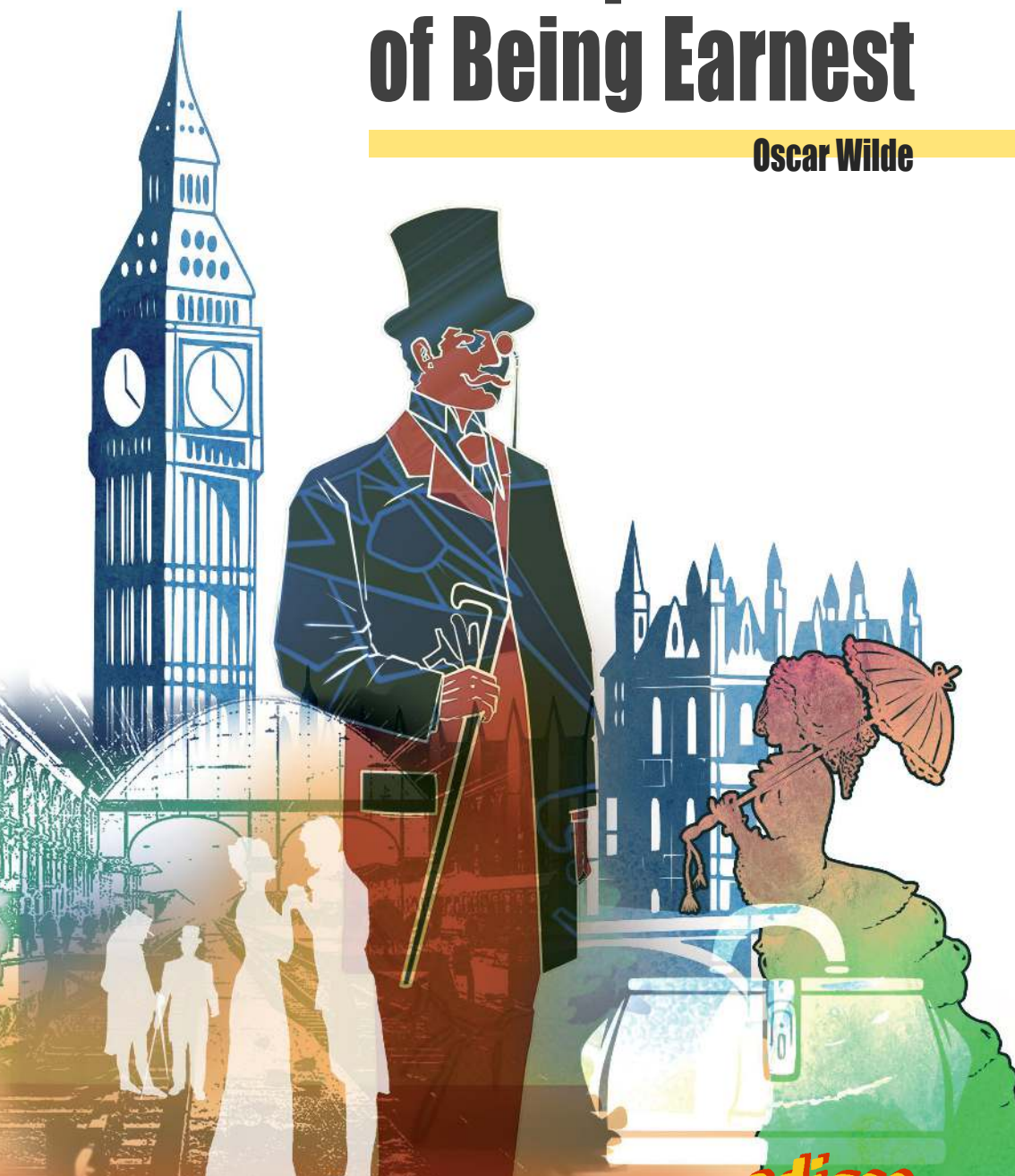




The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde





R A I N B O W S

Oscar Wilde

The Importance of Being Earnest

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by Manuela Barbero



edisco

The Importance of Being Earnest

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

• Oscar Wilde	4
Chapter 1 – A find and a secret	6
Chapter 2 – A proposal and an interview	22
• Extension: <i>England in Victorian times</i>	36
Chapter 3 – A meeting, a death and a reconciliation	38
Chapter 4 – Another proposal and a quarrel	53
• Extension: <i>Drama in the Victorian Age</i>	67
Chapter 5 – Another quarrel and two more reconciliations	69
Chapter 6 – More problems and secrets revealed	82
• Extension: <i>Interesting facts on The Importance of Being Earnest</i>	100
• SUMMING-UP ACTIVITIES	102
• GLOSSARY	106



The Author

Oscar Wilde



Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin on 16 October 1854. His father was a prominent¹ surgeon, philanthropist and expert in archaeology and folklore, and his mother was an eccentric and popular patriotic poet.

The context he lived in was quite wealthy and prestigious and, ever since he was a child, he was used to taking part in his parents’ parties and social gatherings to “train” his ears as to what society was about and wanted. His mother taught him that facts should not get in the way of a good story and that he could do whatever he wanted for the sake of entertaining people.

What he had learned in his youth from his family, combined with what he learned at Trinity College in Dublin and at Oxford University in England, and especially with the teachings and ideas of the aesthetic theories of Pater and Ruskin and their cult of “art for art’s sake”, contributed to forming the essence of Oscar Wilde and the eccentric and flamboyant² character he became famous for.

By the time he moved to London in 1878, in fact, he had turned into quite a dandy, and he soon became well known in most social circles, where his elegant and unconventional style, together with his witty and brilliant conversation, were always sought after.

He began writing reviews and poems and, when he came back to London after a year-long tour lecturing in the US, he got married and had two children.

His children’s stories (like, for example, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *The House of Pomegranates*) and, later, his plays (*Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*), provided him with a very good income, which he used to keep up his very expensive lifestyle and, also, his double life. In 1891, in fact, he met lord Alfred Douglas

1. *prominent*: important and well-known.

2. *flamboyant*: different, confident, noticeable and exciting in a way that attracts attention.

and started a secret homosexual relationship with him, which would later prove to be his destruction.

In 1891 he also published his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which, despite modern popularity, was badly received by the Victorian public of the time because of its not too subtle references to homosexuality and immorality.

In April 1895, a few years after the publication of some of his most popular plays and tales, when he was at the height of his career and popularity and only weeks after his acclaimed successes of *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Lord Alfred's father accused him of homosexuality. Wilde lost the trial³, details of his private life were revealed, his reputation was destroyed, and he was sentenced to imprisonment and two years of hard labour⁴.

When he was released, he was a broken man, both physically and mentally, and he left for France where he lived the last two years of his life, in poverty and sadness, before dying of meningitis on 30th November 1900. His last works were *De Profundis*, a dramatic monologue addressed to Lord Alfred, and the *Ballad of the Reading Gaol*, his best long poem which deals with the inhuman conditions of prisons.

Though at times mostly known for his private life and excesses, Oscar Wilde is now recognised as the leading author of the late Victorian period. He contributed to the development of the movement of aestheticism, in, for example, his Preface to the *Picture of Dorian Gray*, where he states that “[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all. [...] No artist desires to prove anything. [...] No artist is ever morbid⁵. The artist can express everything,” and he gently but openly criticised the hypocrisy of the upper class society of his time by subtly laughing at them and catching them in a crossfire⁶ of paradoxes, epigrams and witty remarks.

3. *trial*: a formal examination of evidence in court by a judge and often a jury, to decide if somebody accused of a crime is guilty or not.

4. *hard labour*: punishment that involves a lot of very hard physical work.

5. *morbid*: expressing a strong interest in unpleasant things, especially disease or death.

6. *crossfire*: an energetic exchange of opposing opinions.



BEFORE READING

1 Tick the six true pieces of information about the text.

- a. Its subtitle is "A trivial play for serious people".
- b. Oscar Wilde played one of the main characters in a performance.
- c. The play was published in 1899.
- d. The original play is divided into three acts.
- e. The play is set in London and Shropshire.
- f. The play was first shown in 1895 in London.
- g. The play was originally written in Irish.
- h. The play is one of Wilde's most famous comedies.
- i. The play takes place over two days.
- j. Oscar Wilde published the book under a pseudonym.

2 Read the list of contents and imagine what the play is about and who the protagonists are.

- a. The play is about...
 - 1. love and death.
 - 2. family relationships.
 - 3. love and honesty.
- b. The main characters are...
 - 1. two middle-aged, poor people.
 - 2. three noble people from Ireland.
 - 3. four young, British people.
- c. The story is set...
 - 1. in Scotland, in the 17th century.
 - 2. in England, at the end of the 19th century.
 - 3. in Wales, at the beginning of the 20th century.
- d. Oscar Wilde wrote this play to...
 - 1. mock contemporary Victorian society.
 - 2. entertain the audience with some silly jokes.
 - 3. stress the importance of seriousness and honesty.



The Importance of Being Earnest

A find¹ and a secret

BEFORE READING

Chapter 1

It was early afternoon in Half-Moon Street, in Algernon's luxurious and very elegantly furnished flat in London. Lane, his faithful butler², was arranging tea on the table while the attractive, young flat owner was playing the piano in the nearby room. A few minutes later,

"Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?"

"I didn't think it polite³ to listen, sir."

"Oh, I'm sorry for you! You've certainly missed something... You know, I don't play very well, but with wonderful expression! Anyway, my dear Lane, have you prepared the cucumber⁴ sandwiches for Lady Bracknell?"

"Yes, sir, here they are."

"Good! Let me taste one, just to make sure they're good..." said Algernon, while helping himself⁵ to several others. "I noticed that last night, when Mr Worthing was here, we drank eight bottles of champagne. Why do people always drink more at a bachelor⁶'s house, do you know?"

"I believe because wine is rarely of a fine quality in married households, sir."


"Good heavens! Is marriage so depressing?", asked a surprised Algernon.

"Well, I don't know, how can I? I've only been married once, and only because of a misunderstanding⁷ between myself and a young woman, sir."

"Stop, Lane, I'm not interested in your family life."

"Nor am I, sir. I never think about it."

1. *find*: a thing or person that has been found, especially one that is interesting, valuable or useful.
2. *butler*: main man servant in a large house.
3. *polite*: having or showing good manners.

4. *cucumber*: 
5. *helping himself*: serving, taking for himself.
6. *bachelor*: unmarried man.
7. *misunderstanding*: situation in which something is not well understood by the people involved.

The Importance of Being Earnest

“I understand. Thanks, Lane, you may go,” added Algernon, thinking, ‘Why is it that the lower classes never set a good example⁸? What else are they here for? Servants have no sense of moral responsibility these days...’

After a few minutes, Mr Worthing was announced.

“How are you, my dear Ernest? What are you doing here in town? Please, take a seat!”

Mr Worthing sat down on the sofa. “Oh, pleasure, pleasure... What else, Algy?”

“Well, what have you been up to in the last few days?”

“I was in the country, you know... same old story. When you are in town, you amuse yourself, when you’re in the country, you amuse other people,” replied Mr Worthing.

“And who exactly are the people you amuse, Ernest?”

“Oh, neighbours, neighbours...”

“Are your neighbours nice people?”

“Perfectly horrid, thank you. I’ve never spoken to them.”

“I can imagine you amusing them, then... in Shropshire, you said?” enquired Algernon, while taking another cucumber sandwich from the tray⁹.

“Shropshire? Oh, yes... yes! Hey, Algy! Who’s coming to tea?”

“Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen... and I don’t think my aunt will be very pleased to see you. You flirt with Gwendolen so badly, I’d say... just about the way she flirts with you!” added Algernon with a nudge¹⁰.

“Algernon, please. I’m in love with Gwendolen and I’ve come to town specifically to propose to her.”

“But you said you had come to town for pleasure... this is business! There’s nothing pleasurable or romantic in proposing. You know, you could be accepted! Well, in fact most people usually are, I think, and then the excitement is all over... The essence of love is uncertainty and this is why, if I ever get married, I’ll try to forget about it!”

8. *set a good example*: to fix something so that others copy it or try to achieve it.

9. *tray*:

10. *nudge*: a slight push, usually with the elbow.





Broad Hinton Village Hall – *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2009) –
Photo credit: David Eagle



Allan Walpole's production of the play, 2017

The Importance of Being Earnest

Mr Worthing helped himself to a sandwich, but Algernon stopped him and ate it himself.

“Don’t eat the sandwiches, they’ve been especially ordered for Aunt Augusta!”

“But... you’re eating them!”, protested Mr Worthing.

“Of course, she’s *my* aunt, not yours! Anyway... Married to Gwen? No, I don’t think so, you’ll never marry her!”

“What are you saying?”, asked an indignant¹¹ Mr Worthing.

“Well, first of all it is a fact that girls never marry the men they flirt with, that’s why there are so many bachelors around London,” explained Algernon while standing up. “Secondly, I don’t give my consent¹².”

“Your consent? Are you joking?”, replied an even more indignant Mr Worthing.

“Of course not. As you well know, Gwen is *my* cousin and I won’t allow you to marry her unless you clear up¹³ the question of Cecily.”

“Cecily? Who is Cecily? What are you talking about, Algy? I don’t know anyone of the name of Cecily!”

“Lane! Please, bring me the cigarette case Mr Worthing left here last week,” Algernon called out.

“Are you saying that you’ve had my cigarette case for this whole week without telling me? I’ve written hundreds of letters to Scotland Yard to have it back! I was about to offer a reward for it!”

“Well, I’ll accept it with no offence, I need money in this period...”

“Enough! Come on, give me my cigarette case, Algy!”

Lane entered with the cigarette case and handed it to Algernon, who sat down again and opened it, reading the inscription¹⁴ inside.

“Well, never mind... Anyway, this is not your cigarette case, Ernest, so, calm down.”

11. *indignant*: feeling or showing anger and surprise because you think that you have been treated unfairly.

12. *consent*: permission.

13. *clear up*: to explain.

14. *inscription*: words cut in stone or metal.



“Of course it’s mine! You’ve seen me use it hundreds of time, hand it back! And it’s very impolite to read a gentleman’s private cigarette-case, so stop it!”, replied Mr Worthing, while trying to seize¹⁵ the case.

“There shouldn’t be any rules as to what one should read or not... after all, more than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read! And, in this case, I can read this is not yours, since it’s a present from someone of the name of Cecily, and you said you don’t know anyone of the name of Cecily,” added Algernon with a satisfied smile, making himself comfortable on the sofa.

“Well, if you really want to know, Cecily is my aunt, a very charming old lady. Come on, hand it back now, Algy!”

“Ok, your aunt, you say... but then, why does she call herself little Cecily?”

“For goodness sake, Algy! What’s the problem? Can’t an aunt be little? They can’t all be like yours! This is absurd!”

Mr Worthing was getting more and more irritated and started running after Algernon, who quickly stood up, around the room.

15. *seize*: to take something in your hand suddenly and using force.

The Importance of Being Earnest

“Fine, she is little, but why, if she is your aunt, does she call you her uncle? Listen: ‘From little Cecily, with her fondest love, to her dear Uncle Jack’. Did you hear? Moreover, your name isn’t Jack, it’s Ernest, so this isn’t yours,” gloated¹⁶ Algernon.

Mr Worthing finally gave up the chasing and sat down heavily onto the sofa. “It’s not Ernest, it’s Jack.”

“But...” started Algernon, hurrying to the sofa, next to Mr Worthing, “you’ve always told me it was Ernest. I call you by the name of Ernest, you answer to the name of Ernest, you look like an *Ernest*. Look, here’s a card you’ve given me... ‘Mr Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany’”, enquired a surprised and curious Algernon, putting the card back into his jacket pocket.

“Well, if you really want to know, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and they gave me the cigarette case in the country,” explained a resigned¹⁷ Mr Worthing.

“Fine, but this doesn’t explain why your aunt calls you her uncle. Come on, Ernest, it’s better to get it all out¹⁸ at once!” Algernon said, then added in a whisper¹⁹, “I’ve always known you were a Bunburyst, and a top level one, too, I see!”

“Bunburyst? What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyst? I’m no Bunburyst!”, exclaimed Mr Worthing, offended.

“I’ll explain to you the meaning of this wonderful expression as soon as you explain to me why you are Ernest in town and Jack in the country. Here is your cigarette case. Now, talk!”, ordered Algernon while handing Jack his precious possession.

“OK,” started Jack. “You must know that I was adopted by an old gentleman, Mr Thomas Cardew, who, at his death, made me guardian to his grand-daughter, Miss Cecily Cardew. This young and sweet lady lives at my residence in the country and calls me ‘Uncle’ out of respect. Something you certainly know nothing about.”

“In the country, you said... where exactly?”

“Don’t you even dare²⁰ ask! You’ll never be invited, don’t you worry! Just know that it’s not in Shropshire.”

16. *gloated*: showed that he is happy about his success.

17. *resigned*: ready to accept something unpleasant that you cannot change.

18. *get it all out*: to say everything you know about something.

19. *whisper*: low quiet voice.

20. *dare*: to have the courage to do something.



“Bunburyst? What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyst?” – Gregory Wooddell and Anthony Roach in Keith Baxter’s production of 2014. Photo credit: Scott Suchman

“I thought so. I’ve Bunburied a couple of times there and I haven’t heard about you... So, go back to the Jack-Ernest thing, please...”, prodded²¹ a curious Algernon.

“My dear Algy, I’m not sure you’ll be able to understand. When one has the position of guardian, one must behave on all occasions and set a high moral example, so I’ve pretended²² to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest who lives in London and who regularly runs into trouble and needs rescuing²³. That’s it. Pure truth, nice and simple.”

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple, anyway... You’re a Bunburyst, and very good at being one, may I say!”, commented a proud Algernon.

“What – does – it – mean???”

“*You* have invented a very useful young brother so that you have the perfect excuse to run up to town whenever you want. *I* have invented a permanent invalid friend called Bunbury to have the

21. *prodded*: tried to make someone do something, especially when they are unwilling.

22. *pretended*: claimed that something is true even if it isn’t.

23. *rescue*: to help from a difficult or dangerous situation.

WORKING ON THE TEXT

1 Match the sentences to complete them.

- a. Algernon believes marriage is depressing...
 - b. Algernon says Lady Bracknell will not approve of Jack being there...
 - c. Algernon says a marriage proposal is not romantic...
 - d. Algernon can eat the cucumber sandwiches while Jack can't...
 - e. Algernon thinks Jack will never marry Gwendolen...
 - f. Algernon doesn't give Jack his cigarette case back...
 - g. Algernon agrees to leave Jack alone with Gwendolen for some time...
 - h. Algernon says there are no cucumber sandwiches for his aunt...
-
- 1. because they were especially ordered for his aunt.
 - 2. because girls never marry the men they flirt with.
 - 3. because wine is of a poor quality in married households.
 - 4. because there weren't any cucumbers at the market.
 - 5. because he flirts with Gwendolen too much.
 - 6. because the inscription says it isn't his.
 - 7. because he wants to dine with him that night.
 - 8. because it may be accepted.

2 Complete the sentences with the missing words.

- a. Jack says he has come to town for
- b. Jack says he has come to town because he wants to
to Gwendolen.
- c. Jack says the cigarette-case is his even if it has a different name on it
because he got it when he was in the
- d. At first, Jack says that Cecily is his, then he
confesses she is his
- e. To go to town as often as he likes, Jack says he has invented a wicked
.....
- f. Jack confesses that he is known as in the country
and as in town.
- g. Jack says that he's going to kill Ernest because Cecily is getting too
..... in him.
- h. When Jack sees Gwendolen, he tells her she's quite
.....

3 Complete this little summary of the main facts so far with the given words.

Gwendolen • family • ward • scoundrel • confident • respectable • invalid • Bunbury • opportunity • bachelor

Algernon is a young, attractive **a** who likes eating and going out. To free himself from his **b** commitments, he has invented an **c** friend who lives in the country, called **d**, whom he says he meets when he needs an excuse to leave. He has a beautiful cousin who is very **e** and a real flirt, Gwendolen.

Jack, a **f** young man from the country-side, must keep high moral standards to set an example to his good-looking **g** Cecily, so, to do as he likes sometimes, he has pretended he has a **h** younger brother who lives in the city so as to have the **i** to go there as often as he likes. He's in love with **j**

WORKING ON VOCABULARY

4 Direct speech may be introduced by different verbs which give a different perception of what is being said. Match each of these reporting verbs to its correct meaning.

- a. Reply 1. To say something suddenly and loudly, because of strong emotion.
- b. Enquire 2. To tell somebody about something in a way that makes it easy to understand.
- c. Add 3. To ask somebody for some information.
- d. Protest 4. To give an explanation or excuse for doing something.
- e. Explain 5. To say that you disapprove of somebody or something.
- f. Gloat 6. To use your position of authority to tell somebody to do something.
- g. Justify 7. To say something more.
- h. Exclaim 8. To say something to show that you disapprove of something.
- i. Order 9. To express an opinion. →

- j. Comment 10. To say as an answer to somebody.
- k. Criticise 11. To speak very quietly so that other people cannot hear what you are saying.
- l. Whisper 12. To show that you are happy about your own success.

WORKING ON GRAMMAR

5 *Let* and *Allow*. Look at the structures of these two verbs which indicate permission and write two sentences using the prompts.

E.g. → *Algernon doesn't allow Jack to eat his cucumber sandwiches.*
Algernon doesn't let Jack eat his cucumber sandwiches.

- a. Algernon/his friends/drink his champagne/at his house

- b. Jack/Algernon/come to dinner with him/at Willis's

- c. Algernon/Jack/propose to Gwendolen/by distracting his aunt

- d. Jack/Algernon/not read the inscription/in his cigarette case

- e. Algernon/Jack/not marry Gwendolen/if he doesn't clear up the question of Cecily

- f. Algernon/Lane/listen to him/while playing the piano

- g. Ernest is the brother who/ Jack/go to town/as often as he likes

- h. Bunbury is the friend who/ Algernon/not go to his aunt's dinner/that night



WORKING ON SKILLS

Listening



Listen to these paradoxes, aphorisms and epigrams that were used in the chapter and correct them.

- a. The upper classes should set a good standard.
- b. Men have no sense of social responsibility these days.
- c. The essence of marriage is love.
- d. Girls never love the men they go out with.
- e. There shouldn't be any specifications as to what one should read or not. More than half of modern education depends on what one must read.
- f. The truth is rarely interesting and never easy.
- g. Nothing pleases people so much as not receiving bills.
- h. Once a day is enough to eat with one's friends.
- i. In public life three is company and two is bliss.
- j. Happiness is the primary objective of life.

Writing



Imagine you are Algernon. Write a short letter about Bunbury's relapse to send yourself as a justification for not going to dinner at Aunt Augusta's.

My dear friend Algernon,
I'm not feeling very well. Unfortunately

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Your invalid friend,
Bunbury

Speaking



Work with a friend. Imagine you are Lady Bracknell and Lady Harbury, whose husband has just died. Talk about Lady Harbury's new look and Lady Bracknell's jealousy.



The Importance of Being Earnest

What do you do if you have to live up to a reputation, but still want to have some fun? What do you do if you want to marry the woman you love, but you do not completely satisfy her standards? What do you do if you cannot choose who to marry because you have to respect social conventions, financial requirements and your mother's choices? What do you do if you live isolated from society, but still want some romance in your life? What do you do if you are expected to conform to social respectability, but you are an orphan? Find out in this elegant, witty and humorous comedy by the most renowned author of the last period of the Victorian Era, Oscar Wilde.

beginner

• **A1** (*Breakthrough*)

elementary

• **A2** (*Waystage*)

pre-intermediate

• **B1** (*Threshold*)

✓ **intermediate**

• **B2** (*Vantage*)

post-intermediate

• **C1** (*Effectiveness*)

Levels of accredited examination boards:

Cambridge ESOL: *FCE*

Trinity: *Grade 7, 8 / ISE II*

City & Guilds (Pitman): *Intermediate*

ESB: *Intermediate 2, 3*

Edexcel: *Intermediate*



Teacher's Resources available on line:
Answer Key, Audioscripts, Summing-up Activities.