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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING

EARNEST

A Literary Commentary by Tracy Dixon



Oscar Wilde was a very talented, proficient, and versatile writer, but he had a personal life that most in his time would not approve. He had to live a “double life” in order to be seen for his talent because in his day, being homosexual was against the law. It was very much frowned upon, and not many people could understand why a person would choose to be that way. He tried to be the man everyone wanted him to be, and he even married a woman and had two children. Even though deep down, his love did not belong to his wife, but to the man that was believed to be just his friend. His works consist mainly of feelings that he was experiencing that he could not express to anyone, so he hid it in his art. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, many characters had secrets they were trying to hide.

In Oscar’s life, he used letters to speak his thoughts of love to Bosie. One of his characters, Cecily, had a secret compartment of letters from her “Earnest.” Algernon: “My letters! But, my own sweet Cecily, I have never written you any letters.” Cecily: “You need hardly remind me of that, Earnest. I remember only too well that I was forced to write your letters for you. I wrote always three times a week, and sometimes oftener.” In her mind, all was right with her relationship, even though she still had not met her future husband yet. When they finally come face-to-face, she is so enthralled by her fantasy that she is about ready to give herself to him completely. It shows resemblance to Oscar’s one-sided relationship with Bosie.

Another similarity of Oscar’s life to the play is when Jack and Algernon make up their make-believe friends in order to escape from the reality of their lives. Algernon: “I suspected that, my dear fellow! I have Bunbured all over Shropshire on two separate occasions. Now, go on. Why are you Ernest in town and Jack in the country?” Jack: “My dear Algy, I don’t know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It’s one’s duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness, in order to get up to town, I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest who lives in the Albany and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.” I believe Oscar came up with this idea for the script after making up his own stories at home to his wife.

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He and Bosie were lovers for about four years before their secrets were revealed, so I can imagine what stories his wife Constance was subjected to in order for him to get some time away from home.

Finally, Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism kept a life-changing secret for many years. Miss Prism never told the story about the baby in the bag until she was confronted by Lady Bracknell in front of everyone to see, as in this exchange: Lady Bracknell: “Prism! Come here, Prism! Prism, where is that baby?” Miss Prism: “Lady Bracknell, I admit with some shame that I do not know. I only wish I did. The plain facts of the case are these. On the morning of the day you mention, a day that is forever branded on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old, but capacious hand-bag in which I had intended to place the manuscript of a work of fiction that I had written during my few unoccupied hours. In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I never can forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette and placed the baby in the hand-bag.” Oscar and Bosie’s relationship was also brought to light for the world to see. Their relationship was brought before the courts, and a judgment was placed on them both regarding their homosexuality. Miss Prism held onto this secret that meant a lot of changes for a lot of people, just as Oscar and Bosie’s secret changed the lives of many. Once found out, Oscar’s wife moved away with their children and changed her name.

Oscar Wilde was a talent for the world to admire, but was soon shunned by the same world for the decisions he made. He was only searching for his own happiness without having to be judged for it by society. This script being his last says a lot about his character, and I feel as if he wanted this to be his way of coming out discreetly. A life of secrets can be hard for anyone to hold onto for so long, and I feel his love for Bosie affected his decision to come clean. The things we do for love are reflected in this script, as well as Oscar’s life.



The flamboyant writer, Oscar Wilde