

The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde

A Before Reading

- 1 The picture shows the five main characters from the play. From the picture, can you guess:
 - a when the play is set?
 - b the background of the characters (e.g. their nationality and social class)?
 - c the relationship between the 5 characters shown?



- 2 The title *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a play on words based on the adjective *earnest* (meaning 'serious and sincere') having the same pronunciation as the man's name, *Ernest*. Do you know any other pairs of words which are pronounced the same but have different meanings? The following words are all part of such a pair. What is the other half of each pair?

write two there see meet for weight week

Example: write, right

3 The play includes the themes of marriage, birth and death. Complete the table by matching the following words to the theme they relate to.

funeral heart attack will ring baby baptize propose
 fiancé grieve mourn bride bury engagement name

Marriage	Birth	Death

B While Reading

4 a When Lady Bracknell learns that Jack/Ernest wishes to marry her daughter, she ‘interviews’ him. Jack’s answers to her questions are in the table below. Before reading page 24, use Jack’s answers to guess the questions Lady Bracknell asks him (pages 24–7).

Lady Bracknell’s questions	Jack’s answers
<i>Example: Do you smoke?</i>	Well, yes, I do smoke.
	I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.
	Twenty-nine.
	It’s between seven and eight thousand pounds a year.
	From investments.
	I have lost both my parents.
	I’m afraid that I don’t know, Lady Bracknell. I said that I had lost my parents.

b If you introduced a new boyfriend or girlfriend to your family, what questions do you think your family would ask him/her? Write a list.

5 a Throughout the play, Oscar Wilde satirises or makes fun of many aspects of Victorian society. Match the beginnings of the jokes (1–4) with the ends (A–D). Then check as you read the play.

1 What shall we do after dinner? Go to the theatre?	A I have preached it at baptisms, weddings and funerals.
2 I do not approve of long engagements.	B Impossible! He was educated at Oxford University.
3 Devious? My nephew Algernon?	C They give people a chance to find out about each other’s character before marriage, which I think is never advisable.
4 My sermon on the mercy of God can be used on any occasion, happy or sad.	D Oh no! One has to listen at the theatre. I hate listening.

