

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 8 (last part of Act 3)

Author: Daniel Barber

Level: Upper intermediate

Age: Young adults / Adults

Duration: Approx. 90 minutes

Aims: In this lesson, the students will:

1. prepare for the end of the play by discussing questions that are still unanswered;
2. learn some vocabulary essential to understand the ending;
3. listen extensively to find out how the play ends;
4. discuss their response to the play as a whole and the ending in particular.

Materials: one copy of the worksheet per student; one copy of the script per student; Track 1 (full audio) downloaded from onestopenglish.

Summary: Two young gentlemen friends use false names to live double lives. These convenient secret identities become a problem, however, when they both fall in love at the same time. As the situation develops, it becomes more and more complicated for these fun-loving men. The story is told in eight parts. In the final instalment, a very strange coincidence has far-reaching consequences for our romantic couples. But will it end happily for them all?

Activity 1

Aims: to prepare students for the end of the play, when everything is explained; to identify key problems that need to be resolved in the final scene

1. Hand out the worksheet and show the class the illustration of the five main characters in the living room. Quickly ask the class to identify them and to summarize the situation.
2. Now point to Activity 1 on the worksheet. Put the students into pairs or threes and get them discussing the questions.
3. When they have had two or three minutes to talk, bring the class together to tell each other their answers. You may decide to mention one phrase that is said during the last part of the play: 'strange coincidence'. You could invite the students to make guesses as to what the strange coincidence might be.

Key:

1. *Because Lady Bracknell won't let him marry Gwendolen.*
2. *Lady Bracknell would have to let him marry Gwendolen.*
3. *Because Jack has no parents and doesn't know his family.*

4. *Jack would have to find out about his parents.*
5. *She doesn't like his name.*
6. *He would have to be called Ernest.*
7. *There is evidence that they are in love with one another.*

Activity 2

Aim: to review vocabulary essential to the understanding of the play

1. Hand out the illustration of Miss Prism at Victoria Station. Ask the class the following questions about the picture:
 - *Where are they?* (Victoria Station)
 - *What can you see?* (Here, you want to make sure the students know *handbag*, *pram* and *manuscript*)
2. Ask the class if they can remember any connections between this picture and any conversation from earlier in the play. At least a few students should be able to remember that Jack was discovered in a handbag in the cloakroom of Victoria Station. (See Part 2, second part of Act 1) It is possible someone may remember that Miss Prism lost the manuscript of a novel many years ago (Part 4, first part of Act 2) but do not mention this unless a student does.

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Activity 3

Aim: to listen for the resolution of the play

1. Write on the board: *How are the problems in Activity 1 resolved?* Tell the class that they are now going to listen to the end of the play to answer the question on the board. Play Track 1.
2. When the play has finished, put the students in pairs to discuss the question you wrote on the board. Give them a few minutes, as there may be a certain amount of clarification needed between the students. Visit the different pairs and check that they have understood enough to piece together the resolution.
3. Hand out the script so that the students can check their understanding. Again, they will need a few minutes to read it carefully and ask you any questions and doubts.
4. Ask the class to tell you how the play is resolved. Start by asking: *So, who are the people in the picture of Victoria Station?* Keep asking questions until all the following aspects have been discussed:
 - Miss Prism's mistake, and the reason Lady Bracknell is angry with her.
 - Jack's relationship with Lady Bracknell, Algernon and Gwendolen.
 - The fact that although Algernon pretended to be Jack's younger brother, he was not, in fact, lying.
 - The fact that Jack's real name (the one he was baptized with) is Ernest, after his father.
 - The fact that Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble finally show their love for one another.

Activity 4

Aim: to respond to the play as a whole and the ending in particular

1. Tell the class that the play was first performed in London in 1895. Ask the students what they think the first critics thought about it, and briefly, what they would say if they were writing a review of the play.
2. Explain that they are now going to interview each other as if they were theatre critics. First of all, elicit some questions that you could ask

a critic to find out about their opinion of the play. Write them on the board. If the students are short of ideas, you could suggest:

- *Did you enjoy the play?*
- *Would you recommend it?*

3. Put the students into groups of three or four. Indicate Activity 4 on the worksheet. Tell them to use the words and phrases to write questions they can ask the rest of the class. Give them five to ten minutes for this and monitor their progress as they write, checking their use of English. Make sure that each member of the group has a copy of the questions.

4. Now tell the class that they are going to imagine they are all theatre critics discussing the play for a theatre review podcast. They will all be able to ask questions as well as answer each other's. It is important that everyone gets a chance to give their opinions. Regroup the class by putting people from different groups together. You could number the students in each group 1-3 or 1-4, then put the 1s together, the 2s together, etc. Once they have formed new groups, elect one person from each group as the 'host'. Explain that it is his or her job to start the discussion, to ask the first question and to make sure everyone is involved. You may want to choose a more confident student to take this role.

5. Tell the students to start the discussion. As they chat, don't interrupt but do listen in to gauge the participation and quality of discussion. Make a note of any interesting comments you hear.

6. After a few minutes, (or longer if the students really get into the discussion!) stop the discussions and get everyone's attention. Round off the lesson by asking whether:

- the students enjoyed the play
- they thought the ending was expected / funny / satisfying / silly
- they would recommend it to others
- they think that listening to and reading plays and other works of literature is good for their English
- they would like to study more plays and stories as part of their English studies

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Follow-up tasks

1. The students write a review of the play for a student magazine.
2. The students design a poster advertising the play.
3. The students watch a film version of the play, of which there are at least three (1952, 1986, 2002). The 2002 film stars Reese Witherspoon, Rupert Everett, Judi Dench and Colin Firth and is highly recommended. Using the film version they could:
 - review it
 - compare the film to the play
 - watch another film version or scene at home and compare them
4. The students read a scene from Wilde's original version and compare it with Macmillan's simplified version.
5. The class puts on a performance, either of a scene from the play or the entire play. Onestopenglish has published a guide to putting on a play with your students, available here <http://www.onestopenglish.com/skills/listening/serialized-macmillan-readers/the-importance-of-being-earnest/putting-on-a-play/>.

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Activity 1

Discuss these questions about the play.

1. Why is Jack refusing to let Cecily marry Algernon?
2. What would have to change for Jack to let them get married?
3. Why is Lady Bracknell refusing to let Jack marry Gwendolen?
4. What would have to change for Lady Bracknell to let them get married?
5. What is Gwendolen's problem with Jack?
6. What would have to change for her to be totally happy with him?
7. What about the other characters: Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble?

Activity 4

You are going to interview a group of theatre critics. Use some of the words and phrases below to make questions about The Importance of Being Earnest to ask the critics.

plot	scene	lines	Why ...?	film version
character	theme	actress	serious	
actor	funny	favourite	least favourite	
What ...?	coincidence	recommend	In your opinion ...	
Do you think ...	Who ...?	comedy	How ...?	

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Activity 2

Worksheet



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Script

Track 1

- Jack:** I beg your pardon, Lady Bracknell, but their engagement is not acceptable. I am Miss Cardew's guardian and she cannot marry without my consent until she comes of age. I will not give my consent.
- Lady Bracknell:** Why, may I ask? Algernon is an extremely eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks as if he has everything. What more can one want?
- Jack:** I am very sorry to have to say this to you, Lady Bracknell, but the fact is that I do not approve of his character. I suspect that he is devious. *[Algernon and Cecily look at him, amazed and indignant]*
- Lady Bracknell:** Devious? My nephew Algernon? Impossible! He was educated at Oxford University.
- Jack:** There can be no doubt about it. This afternoon, while I was away in London, he was allowed into this house because he said he was my brother. While pretending to be my brother, he drank, I am informed by my servant, a complete bottle of very good quality champagne which I was keeping especially for myself. He also succeeded in turning my ward against me. He then stayed to tea and ate every muffin we had. He behaved completely heartlessly. And what is worse, he knew that I don't have a brother, that I have never had a brother and that I don't intend to ever have a brother of any kind. He knew because I told him so myself yesterday afternoon.
- Lady Bracknell:** *[Coughing]* Ahem! Mr Worthing, after thinking about this carefully, I have decided to forget about the way my nephew behaved towards you.
- Jack:** That is very good of you, Lady Bracknell. I have decided, however, not to change my mind. I will not give my consent.
- Lady Bracknell:** *[To Cecily]* Come here, sweet child. *[Cecily goes to her]* How old are you, my dear?
- Cecily:** Well, I am really only eighteen, but I always say I am twenty when I go to parties.
- Lady Bracknell:** You are perfectly right to make a small alteration. Indeed, no woman should ever be quite accurate about her age. It looks so devious. *[Speaking again, thoughtfully]* Well, it will not be very long before you come of age. So I don't think your guardian's consent is very important.
- Jack:** Excuse me for interrupting you again, Lady Bracknell. I must tell you that, according to her grandfather's will, Miss Cardew does not come of age until she is thirty-five.
- Lady Bracknell:** That does not seem to me to be a problem. Thirty-five is a very attractive age. London society is full of women who have, by their own free choice, remained thirty-five for years. Lady Dumbleton is an example. She has been thirty-five ever since she reached the age of forty, which was many years ago. Our dear Cecily will be even

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Script

- more attractive at the age of thirty-five than she is at present. She will have even more money than she has now.
- Cecily:** Algy, could you wait for me till I was thirty-five?
- Algernon:** Of course I could, Cecily. You know I could.
- Cecily:** Yes, I believe that you could, but I couldn't wait all that time. I hate waiting even five minutes for anybody. It always makes me rather cross. I am not punctual myself but I do like other people to be punctual. Waiting, even to be married, is quite out of the question.
- Algernon:** Then what are we going to do, Cecily?
- Cecily:** I don't know, Mr Moncrieff.
- Lady Bracknell:** My dear Mr Worthing, Miss Cardew states that she cannot wait till she is thirty-five – a remark that tells me she has a rather impatient nature – however, I beg of you to think again about your decision.
- Jack:** My dear Lady Bracknell, the decision is entirely in your own hands. When you consent to my marriage with Gwendolen, I will gladly consent to your nephew's marriage with my ward.
- Lady Bracknell:** *[Standing and looking very tall]* You must know that your marriage with my daughter is not possible.
- Jack:** Then none of us can look forward to ever getting married.
- Lady Bracknell:** I cannot agree to Gwendolen never getting married. Algernon, of course, may choose for himself. Come, dear, *[Gwendolen stands up]* we have already missed five, if not six, trains. *[Canon Chasuble enters]*
- Chasuble:** Everything is quite ready for the baptisms.
- Lady Bracknell:** The baptisms? Is it not a little early for baptisms? First marriage, then children, then baptisms!
- Chasuble:** *[Looking puzzled and pointing at Jack and Algernon]* Both these gentlemen have said they wish to be baptized immediately.
- Lady Bracknell:** Baptized? At their age? The idea is ridiculous and quite irreligious. Algernon, I forbid you to be baptized. My husband, Lord Bracknell, would be very displeased to hear that you were wasting your time and money like this.
- Chasuble:** Do I understand you correctly? Is neither of you gentlemen to be baptized?
- Jack:** I don't think that baptism would be much use to either of us at the moment, Canon Chasuble.
- Chasuble:** I am very sorry to hear you say so, Mr Worthing. That sounds like the view of an irreligious man. I have written four unpublished sermons on this subject. However, since you have decided to ignore religion for now, I will return to the church where Miss Prism has been waiting for me for an hour and a half.
- Lady Bracknell:** *[Looking shocked and sitting down again]* Miss Prism? Did I hear you say 'Miss Prism'?
- Chasuble:** Yes, Lady Bracknell. I am going to the church to join her now.

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Script

Lady Bracknell: Please wait a moment, Canon Chasuble. This is something which may be important to Lord Bracknell and myself. Is this Miss Prism a rather ugly female who is remotely connected with education?

Chasuble: *[Rather indignantly]* She is a very respectable lady.

Lady Bracknell: It must be the same person. May I ask what position she has in your household?

Chasuble: *[Severely]* I am **celibate**, madam.

Jack: Lady Bracknell, Miss Prism has been Miss Cardew's valued governess and companion for the last three years.

Lady Bracknell: I must see her at once. Let her be sent for.

Chasuble: *[Looking offstage]* She's approaching. She's nearly here. *[Miss Prism enters very quickly]*

Miss Prism: I was told you were coming to the church, dear canon. I have been waiting there for an hour and three-quarters. *[Seeing Lady Bracknell, who is glaring at her, Miss Prism turns pale. She looks round her as if she wants to escape]*

Lady Bracknell: *[In a severe voice, as if she is a lawyer in a courtroom]* Prism! *[Miss Prism lowers her head, looking ashamed]* Come here, Prism! *[Miss Prism approaches looking nervous]* Prism! Where is that baby? *[Everyone looks horrified. The canon takes a step backwards. Algernon and Jack pretend to be anxious to stop Gwendolen and Cecily from hearing something shocking]* Prism, twenty-eight years ago, you left Lord Bracknell's house, Number 104, Upper Grosvenor Square, London, in charge of a **pram** containing a baby boy. You never returned. A few weeks later, after a police investigation, the pram was discovered at midnight in a remote part of the city. It contained the manuscript of a very bad three-volume novel. *[Miss Prism looks indignant]* But the baby was not there. *[Everyone looks at Miss Prism]* Prism, where is that baby? *[There is a pause]*

Miss Prism: Lady Bracknell, I am ashamed to say I don't know. I wish I did. These are the facts. On the morning of that day, a day I will remember forever, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in the pram. I had with me a large old handbag in which I had intended to put the manuscript of a three-volume novel that I had written. In a moment of forgetfulness, for which I can never forgive myself, I put the manuscript in the pram and the baby in the handbag.

Jack: *[Who had been listening very carefully]* But where did you put the handbag?

Miss Prism: Do not ask me, Mr Worthing.

Jack: Miss Prism, this is very important to me. I must know where you put the handbag which contained the baby.

Miss Prism: I left it in the cloakroom of one of the larger railway stations in London.

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Script

- Jack:** Which railway station?
- Miss Prism:** *[Looking very miserable]* Victoria. *[Sitting down slowly on an armchair]*
- Jack:** I must go to my bedroom for a moment. Gwendolen, wait for me here.
- Gwendolen:** If you are not too long, I will wait for you all my life. *[Jack leaves, very excited]*
- Chasuble:** What do you think this means, Lady Bracknell?
- Lady Bracknell:** I dare not guess, Canon Chasuble. You must know that strange coincidences are not supposed to happen in families with a high position in society like ours. They are not appropriate. *[Noises are heard above as if someone is throwing boxes around. Everyone looks up]*
- Cecily:** Uncle Jack sounds very agitated.
- Lady Bracknell:** The noise is extremely unpleasant.
- Chasuble:** *[Looking up]* It has stopped now. *[The noises start again, sounding even louder]*
- Lady Bracknell:** I wish he would stop.
- Gwendolen:** The suspense is terrible. I hope it will last. *[Jack enters, with a black leather handbag in his hand]*
- Jack:** *[Rushing over to Miss Prism]* Is this the handbag, Miss Prism? Examine it carefully before you speak. The happiness of more than one person depends on your answer.
- Miss Prism:** *[Calmly]* It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the damage which happened in an accident on a bus. Here is the stain caused by a drink which exploded at Leamington. And here, near the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that I had had them put there. The bag is definitely mine. I am delighted to have it returned to me so unexpectedly. It has been inconvenient not to have it all these years.
- Jack:** *[In a pathetic voice]* Miss Prism, you have had more returned to you than the handbag. I was the baby you placed in it.
- Miss Prism:** *[Amazed]* You?
- Jack:** *[Embracing her]* Yes ... Mother!
- Miss Prism:** *[Pulling away from him indignantly]* Mr Worthing, I am unmarried.
- Jack:** Unmarried! That is a serious problem. But who has the right to speak badly of someone who has suffered? Why should society treat men and women differently? Mother, I forgive you. *[Trying to embrace her again]*
- Miss Prism:** *[Now even more indignant]* Mr Worthing, you are wrong. *[Pointing to Lady Bracknell]* There is the lady who can tell you who you really are.
- Jack:** *[After a pause]* Lady Bracknell, would you kindly inform me who I am?
- Lady Bracknell:** I am afraid that my news may not please you. You are the son of my

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- Jack:** poor sister, Mrs Moncrieff, and therefore Algernon's elder brother. Algy's elder brother! Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother! Cecily – how could you ever have doubted that I had a brother? *[Getting hold of Algernon and leading him around the room]* Canon Chasuble, here is my unfortunate brother. Miss Prism, my unfortunate brother. Gwendolen, my unfortunate brother. Algy, you will have to treat me with more respect in the future. You have never behaved to me like a younger brother should.
- Algernon:** Well, I haven't done until today. I did my best, though. *[They shake hands]*
- Gwendolen:** *[To Jack]* My own – but my own – what? What is your name, now that you are not Jack Worthing?
- Jack:** Good heavens! I had forgotten about my name. I suppose that you won't change your mind about your favourite name?
- Gwendolen:** Never!
- Jack:** Then the question must be cleared up at once. Aunt Augusta, had I been baptized?
- Lady Bracknell:** Your loving parents had done everything for you, including baptism.
- Jack:** Then I was baptized! That is clear. Now what name was I given? Let me know the worst!
- Lady Bracknell:** You were the elder son so you were given your father's name.
- Jack:** *[Irritably]* Yes, but what was my father's name?
- Lady Bracknell:** *[Thoughtfully]* I cannot at present remember what the general's name was. But I have no doubt that he had one.
- Jack:** Algy! Can't you remember what our father's name was?
- Algernon:** My dear fellow, we never even spoke to each other. He died before I was a year old.
- Jack:** His name will appear in the **Army Lists** of that period, I suppose, Aunt Augusta?
- Lady Bracknell:** The general was a man of peace, except in his domestic life. So I have no doubt that his name will appear in an Army List.
- Jack:** The Army Lists for the last forty years are here. I should have read them all! *[Rushes over to a bookcase and pulls lots of books out]* Mmm ... generals ... Mallam, Maxbohm, Magley – what awful names they have – Markby, Migsby, Mobbs, Moncrieff! Lieutenant: 1840, Captain, Lieutenant-Colonel, Colonel, General: 1869: names Ernest John. *[Putting down the book and speaking quite calmly]* I always told you, Gwendolen, that my name was Ernest, didn't I? Well, it is Ernest after all. I mean it really is Ernest.
- Lady Bracknell:** Yes, I remember now that the general called you Ernest. I knew I had a reason for disliking that name.
- Gwendolen:** Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first time I met you that you could have no other name!

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- Jack:** Gwendolen, it is terrible for a man to find out suddenly that he has been speaking the truth all his life. Can you forgive me?
- Gwendolen:** I can. Because I feel that you are going to change.
- Jack:** My own darling!
- Chasuble:** *[To Miss Prism]* Laetitia! *[Embracing her]*
- Miss Prism:** *[Enthusiastically]* Frederick! At last!
- Algernon:** Cecily! *[Embracing her]* At last!
- Jack:** Gwendolen! *[Embracing her]* At last!
- Lady Bracknell:** My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of a lack of seriousness.
- Jack:** On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the Importance of Being Earnest.
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Glossary

indignant angry because of an unfair situation or someone's unfair behaviour

celibate not married and never having sex, often because of religious beliefs

pram a large object with four wheels that a baby can lie in while you push it around. This is a shortened form of the original word *perambulator*, which is no longer used in English.

Army List an official list of all the officers in the British army which gives information about their position in the army and their careers