Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde

- Born October 16, 1854
- Died November 30, 1900
- Some published works:
  - *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* (1888)
  - *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)
  - *Poems in Prose* (1894)
- Selected Plays:
  - *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892)
  - *A Woman of No Importance* (1893)
  - *An Ideal Husband* (1895)
  - *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)
The Importance of Being Earnest

- First produced in St. James’s Theatre, London
- Opened February 14, 1895
- Closing date uncertain
- George Alexander-Jack (right)
- Allan Aynesworth-Algernon (left)
- Considered to be Wilde’s masterpiece
"A handbag?"

- Stockard Channing "responds to Jack Worthing’s (Keenan) tale of abandonment on the Brighton line with a barely audible "A handbag?", rapidly swallowed up with a sharp intake of breath. An understated take, to be sure, but with such a well-known play, packed full of witticisms and aphorisms with a life of their own, it’s the little things that make a difference."

-Fintan Walsh, review in *Irish Theatre Magazine*
Victorian Values and Ideals

• Influenced by aristocracy, upper-class/land owners and by the monarchs who are portrayed as spiritual leaders of the nation.

• 'Respectability': a creed and a code of conduct for personal and family life for the middle class.

• Establishing respectable credentials by: duty, hard work and mannerisms.

• Social pressure compliance: Religion - Church congregations, Sunday schools, mass.

• Created a mass psyche of fear in order to control the public.
Victorian Values and Ideals cont...

- Discourage youth from more sinful pleasure and deprive the potential of leisure freedoms.
- Focused on sin, guilt and possibly a potential of redemption.
- Media was another main source of social compliance: Newspapers, magazines, advertisement.
- Values were predominantly both constructed and maintained by women, and therefore conflicted with the ideals of 'masculinity' - head of the family, patriotic, brave knights, defend their country.
Wilde’s Punchlines in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

- **JACK:** Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? (Act 1, pg. 1700)
  - Mocks the ideal of man’s duty and hard work.

- **JACK:** 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... (Act 1, pg. 1703)
  - Mocks both morality and hypocrisy to social standards

- **ALGY:** The only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her, if she is pretty, and to someone else if she is plain. (Act 1, pg. 1711)
  - Mocks the possessions of good manners.
Wilde’s Punchlines in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, continued

- LADY BRACKNELL: [Christening] at their age? The idea is grotesque and irreligious! Algernon, I forbid you to be baptized. I will not hear of such excesses. Lord Bracknell would be highly displeased if he learned that that was the way in which you wasted your time and money. (Act 3, pg. 1736)
  - Mocks the conformity of religions and the leisure of the upper class

- Gwendolen: We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals...and my ideal has always been to love someone by the name of Earnest. (Act 1, pg. 1706)
  - Mocks the ideals of marriage in the upper class
The Role of Marriage

• The play is a critique and parody of marital beliefs in the Victorian period

• Is marriage for pleasure or profit?
  – 19th-century women married for security; it was rare to marry for love

• Is marriage something that is very pleasant or is it something very unpleasant?
  – Algernon has a very cynical view of marriage until he meets (and falls in love with) Cecily
  – Jack is the romantic throughout the entire play up until the end
  – Gwendolen and Cecily are primarily obsessed with marrying a man with the name of Earnest
Marriage, cont...

- Lady Bracknell’s views on marriage are much more strict and Victorian
  - Believes “An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself…” (Act 1)
  - Holds social status, wealth and one’s character as high importance when choosing a husband for her daughter
Role of Women in *Earnest*

- Main women are Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen, and Cecily
  - Lady Bracknell: The typical Victorian lady, very stern, very strong willed
  - Gwendolen: Very girlish, head in the clouds, obsessed with the name Ernest
  - Cecily: 18 years old, Inattentive to her lessons, very naïve and protected, also obsessed with the name Ernest (almost frighteningly so)
Women, cont...

• Very rarely did women have power in Victorian society. However, in *Earnest*, they hold most of the power, even if they don’t completely realize it.
  
  – It is because of Gwendolen and Cecily that the men choose to change their names and are forced to give up their double lives and start being honest.
  
  – Lady Bracknell is the head of her household; her husband very seldom is involved