

## **The Importance of Being Earnest: A Critical Study**

**Mr. Shivaji Sargar:** Mahatma Phule College, Panvel

### **Abstract**

Oscar Wilde is a very famous name in the history of English dramatic literature. His play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of the all-time entertaining piece of art which throws light on the social environment of his time. It is the story of young men and women who were more interested in fulfilling their individual whims rather than following the traditions of their families and the society. This paper attempts a critical study of the major artistic aspects of this play with its focus on the plot, characters and theme of the play.

**Kew Words:** Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, comedy.

Oscar Wilde, a son of William and Lady Jane Francesca Wilde, was born in 1854 in Dublin, Ireland. Being a member of a well-to-do family, Oscar received all the essential educational facilities needed to develop him as an intellectual. His thirst for knowledge led him first to Trinity College, Dublin and then to Oxford, where he got an opportunity to take lessons from the great academicians of his time like John Ruskin and Walter Pater. He graduated from Oxford and then lived for some time in Chelsea. , Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde went on a lecture tour to America in 1882 and expressed his thoughts on variety of subjects, particularly aesthetics. He was a strong supporter of the artistic movement called 'art for art's sake'. After getting back home, Wilde married a rich Irish woman, Constance Lloyd and settled in London. Though he was one of the most popular celebrity of his time, his personal life was marred by controversies. Particularly, his views about homosexuality and his relation with Lord Alfred Douglas, a young poet put him in socially embarrassing situations. He got entangled in legal controversy for his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. The court of law found him guilty of 'indecent acts' for which he was sentenced to two years imprisonment. After getting out of the prison, Wilde went to Paris where he lived a lonely life until his death in 1900.

Some of the well-known works by Oscar Wilde are *Vera* (1880), *The Picture of Dorian Gray*(1890), *Intentions* (1891), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *Salome* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), *De Profundis* (1897) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898).

### **The Importance of Being Earnest**

The play *The Importance of Being Earnest* is written by Oscar Wilde and was first performed on February 14, 1895 in London. The play is "a farcical comedy in which the protagonists maintain fictitious personæ in order to escape burdensome social obligations."([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Importance\\_of\\_Being\\_Earnest](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Importance_of_Being_Earnest)) It is the story of Algernon Moncrieff, a young man who usually tries to escape the cumbersome social obligations

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by one or the other way. The play was an instant hit for its masterly craftsmanship, witty humour and crispy dialogues. Many of the critics wrote favorable reviews of the play, calling it as the best of Oscar Wilde's literary creations. The popularity of the play led the drama lovers to revive many times. It is also adapted for the cinema thrice, the latest being in 2002.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is set in 1890s in London and the country. It is divided in three Acts. The first Act of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is set in London flat of Algernon Moncrieff. At the beginning, the audiences are introduced with Algernon Moncrieff. He is a young man in his thirties. He is shown preparing for the arrival of his Aunt Lady Bracknell and her daughter, Gwendolen. At that time, he is informed of the arrival of his friend, Ernest Worthing. Mr. Worthing was in love with Gwendolen and now had come there to propose her marriage. **Algernon**, who was a carefree young lad and believed in free life, laughs at the idea of marriage. When Mr. Worthing expresses his firm resolve to get married with Gwendolen, Algernon objects to this proposal. His objection was due to the fact that Worthing has a cigarette case with an inscription 'From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.' In this matter, Algernon wanted to know why Mr. Worthing was referred as 'Jack' instead of Ernest. Now Algernon insists that Mr. Worthing should explain everything to Algernon if he wanted to marry with Gwendolen. Caught in such a difficult situation, Mr. Worthing admits of leading a double life. He tells Algernon that:

"In the country, he assumes a serious attitude for the benefit of his young ward, the heiress Cecily Cardew, and goes by the name of John (or Jack), while pretending that he must worry about a wastrel younger brother named Ernest in London. In the city, meanwhile, he assumes the identity of the libertine Ernest. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Importance\\_of\\_Being\\_Earnest](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Importance_of_Being_Earnest))

When Algernon heard this story, he was amused. He told Mr. Worthing that he himself had invented an invalid friend, named Bunbury, who lived in the country. Whenever Algernon wanted to avoid any of the social obligations of his Aunt, he used to escape from it by saying that he was required to visit Bunbury. Then Algernon enquired more about Cecily and Mr. Worthing's country address. But Mr. Worthing refused to tell anything more about it.

At this moment, Lady Bracknell and her daughter, Gwendolen appear on the scene. As was earlier decided, Algernon took his aunt out of the room allowing Mr. Ernest Worthing to propose Gwendolen. She readily accepted his proposal as she was fascinated by his name 'Ernest'. She also added that she had always thought of marrying a man with a name of Ernest. When Mr. Worthing came to know about her intense liking for the name of 'Ernest', he immediately resolved to get rechristened as 'Ernest.' When the lovers were talking about their love, Lady Bracknell arrived there and discovered their love for each other. But before giving her consent, it was necessary for her to interrogate her would-be son-in-law properly. However, she is shocked:

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“to learn that he (Ernest) was adopted after being discovered as a baby in a handbag at Victoria Station, she refuses him and forbids further contact with her daughter”.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Importance\\_of\\_Being\\_Earnest](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Importance_of_Being_Earnest))

When Lady Bracknell left the scene, Gwendolen reappeared there and promised him of her firm resolve to get married none other than him. As now her mother was against their union, Gwendolen was required to visit his country home. Therefore, she asked Mr. Worthing his country address. When he told her that he lived at Manot House in Woolton, Hertfordshire, this address was overheard by Algernon. As his interest was aroused by Mr. Worthing’s pretty and wealthy ward Cecily, he noted down it on the sleeve and declared that he was going ‘Bunburying’ immediately.

The second Act is set in Mr. Worthing’s country house. Here the audiences are introduced with Cecily and her governess, Miss Prism. Cecily was taking her lessons from her governess. At the arrival of Dr. Chasuble, Miss Prism left with him for a short walk. Now Cecily was all alone. At that time, Algernon arrived there and introduced himself as Ernest Worthing, the younger brother of Mr. Jack Worthing. As Cecily had never seen Ernest Worthing before, she believed in him and heartily welcomed him. Actually, she was:

“long fascinated by Uncle Jack’s hitherto absent black sheep brother, (so) she is predisposed to fall for Algernon in his role of Ernest - whose name she’s particularly fond of”.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Importance\\_of\\_Being\\_Earnest](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Importance_of_Being_Earnest))

She even told Algernon that she had been fantasizing about Earnest for quite some time, and had even imagined that she had engaged to him. Her interest in ‘Ernest’ made Algernon plan to meet Dr. Chasuble and get himself rechristened as ‘Ernest’.

When Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism returned from their walk, they met Jack Worthing who had just returned from London. He was dressed in black mourning clothes. As was decided earlier Jack was to return back home on Monday. However, he had come early because his brother, Ernest, had died in Paris. Dr. Chasuble left the place after promising Jack to christen him in the afternoon. Then there came Cecily and told Uncle Jack that his brother, Ernest has come there and was waiting in the dining room. Jack tried to tell her that he didn’t have a brother. But instead of listening to him, she ran into the house and came out with Algernon. When Jack saw him, he refused to shake hand with him. Cecily tried to pacify Uncle Jack by telling him that Ernest was a good person as he was taking care of his invalid friend, Bunbury. When everyone except Jack and Algernon left, Jack ordered Merriman to arrange for the dogcart, as Ernest wanted to leave for London immediately. Actually, Jack did not want Algernon to stay there anymore.

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As soon as Algernon left to arrange for his baptism, there came Gwendolen in search of her lover. Cecily welcomed her on behalf of her Uncle. However, soon both the ladies started fighting thinking that both of them were engaged to one and the same man, Ernest Worthing. But when Algernon and Jack came on the scene together their misunderstanding is cleared. Now they understood that both of them were deceived by their respective lovers as none of them had the name, Ernest. This united the ladies against the men. Now the men were left thinking about the way to come out of this situation.

The third Act takes the audience into the drawing room of Jack's house. Lady Bracknell has arrived there following her daughter, Gwendolen. When she came to know that Algernon and Cecily are engaged, she was surprised. But she was doubtful about the Cecily's suitability for her nephew, Algernon. But all her doubts are cleared when she was told that Cecily had a large fortune. She gave her consent to the marriage. However, Jack Worthing refused to allow Cecily to marry Algernon as Lady Bracknell was against his marriage with Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell was against Jack's marriage with her daughter as he was an orphan and from social point of view it would have been improper to accept an orphan as a son-in-law.

The deadlock continued until the arrival of Miss Prism, whom:

“Lady Bracknell recognises as the person who, twenty-eight years earlier, as a family nursemaid, had taken a baby boy for a walk in a perambulator (baby carriage) and never returned. Challenged, Miss Prism explains that she had abstractedly put the manuscript of a novel she was writing in the perambulator, and the baby in a handbag, which she had left at Victoria Station. Jack produces the very same handbag, showing that he is the lost baby, the elder son of Lady Bracknell's late sister, and thus indeed Algernon's elder brother. Having acquired such respectable relations, he is acceptable as a suitor for Gwendolen after all”.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Importance\\_of\\_Being\\_Earnest](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Importance_of_Being_Earnest))

But it was not the end of Jack's problem. As Gwendolen had determined only to marry with a man having the name 'Ernest', the stalemate continued. So she wanted to know the real name of Jack. Then Lady Bracknell told Jack that as he was the first-born child of the family and as per the tradition, he might have been named after his father, General Moncrieff. This explanation led Jack to examine the army lists. There he came to know that his father's name was Ernest and hence his own name was also Ernest. This discovery made everybody happy. It led to the happy union Jack and Gwendolen, Algernon and Cecily, and Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism. When Lady Bracknell saw Jack Worthing, now Ernest, embracing Gwendolen, she remarked that his behaviour showed the signs of triviality. Thereupon Ernest remarked that it was for the first time in his life that he had realized “the vital Importance of being Earnest”. With this remark the play comes to an end.

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The play contains both major and minor characters. The important amongst them are Algernon Moncrieff, Jack or Ernest Worthing, Gwendolen, Cecily and Lady Bracknell.

**Jack Worthing:** Jack or Ernest Worthing is one of the the central characters of the play, ‘The Importance of Being Earnest’. He is introduced to the audience at the very beginning of Act I. He had come to London to visit his beloved, Gwendolen Fairfax. But here we come to know that he was leading a double life. In the country, he was known as Jack Worthing and in London he had taken the name of Ernest. The readers are surprised to know the ‘double’ life Jack was leading. Even his friend, Algernon, fails to understand why was he doing so. Therefore, he says to Jack:

“You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them... ‘Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany.’ I'll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to anyone else”.

(<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/844/pg844.txt>)

While explaining the reason for his double identity, Mr. Worthing tells his friend, Algernon that he was given the responsibility of Cecily by Mr. Thomas Cardew. Therefore, he was required to be serious. But as a young man, he used to get bored of playing this serious role. And to get temporary relief of this burden, he used to visit London under the pretext of meeting his Brother, Ernest. Actually, he had circulated a false story about his fictitious brother, Ernest that he was a careless young man who was spoiling his life in London. And so to take care of him Jack was required to visit him often. When Algernon heard this story, he says:

“You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's to-night, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week.”

(<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/844/pg844.txt>)

Now Jack had come to London with an intention to propose his beloved, Gwendolen. During the course of his interrogation by Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen's mother, he told her that he was an orphan and was found in a handbag on Victoria Station to Mr. Thomas Cardew. This information about Jack's origin made him unsuitable for the hand of Gwendolen as socially he was inferior to her. Though Lady Bracknell refused to accept Jack as her son-in-law, Gwendolen

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had determined to marry none other than Jack. Perhaps the most important reason for Gwendolen to choose him as her husband was his name Ernest. She was fascinated by his being Ernest. That is why Jack decided to rechristen him as Ernest as early as possible.

However, at the end of the play it becomes clear that Jack's real name was Ernest and he was the elder brother of Algernon Moncrieff and Nephew to Lady Bracknell. It was so because as a child he was under the care of a nursemaid, named Miss Prism. One day Miss Prism put the baby in a perambulator and went for a walk. At that time, absent-mindedly, she put the manuscript of a three volume novel which she was writing in the perambulator and the baby was put in a handbag. Then she left the handbag on Victoria Station and disappeared from the scene. Afterwards this handbag was found by Mr. Thomas Cardew, who adopted the baby. Jack Worthing was the same baby put in the handbag by Miss Prism. Lady Bracknell recognized Miss Prism to be the same nursemaid who had disappeared twenty years ago with a baby boy of her sister. It means Jack was the nephew of Lady Bracknell. As per the convention of the time, being the eldest son, he was named after his father. So it was required to examine the list of the army. Accordingly, after due examination of the army records, it became clear that his father's name was Ernest and so his name was also Ernest. This fact made it clear that he was a suitable husband for Gwendolen.

Thus it becomes clear that the whole life Jack was speaking truth. Here it has to be taken into consideration that though Jack Worthing had assumed a double identity, he had no any evil plan in his mind. He did not want to deceive anybody. He had taken the name of Ernest only because he wanted to get free, at least for the time being, from his serious responsibility and spend some happy moments in London. There is no any proof in the play which shows that at any moment he wished to take disadvantage of anybody. Therefore, it can be said that Jack or Ernest Worthing is really a lovable character of the play.

**Algernon Moncrieff:** Algernon Moncrieff is one of the important characters in 'The Importance of Being Earnest'. By nature, he is light and playful. All the time, he has nothing but playfulness on his mind. To achieve his purpose, he is seen using wit and paradoxical utterances. He can be considered as a mouthpiece of the author himself because like him, Algernon also possesses the socio-cultural point of view.

Algernon is introduced to the audience at the beginning of Act I. The Act opens in his house in London. He was a rich person who lived in a well-furnished apartment on the Half-Moon Street in London. The opening conversation between Algernon and his servant throws ample light on the witty nature of this man. He was also a man of high intellectual capacities. It becomes clear in his meeting with his friend Ernest Worthing. He very pointedly asked Mr. Worthing why on his cigarette case his name was inscribed as Jack rather than Ernest. This question compels Mr. Worthing to disclose his double identity to Algernon. After this disclosure, he tells Mr. Worthing that he himself had also invented an imaginary friend, Bunbury.

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Whenever, he used to get rid of the social events of his Aunt, he used to go to the country on the pretext of visiting his friend.

So far as his love for Cecily is concerned, it is seen that he was very sincere and serious about it. In his very first meeting with Cecily, he impresses her so much that she confesses her love for him. Even, she tells him that she was already in love with him in her imagination. However, her love for Algernon was due to the fact that his name was Ernest. When Algernon comes to know about Cecily's fascination for the name 'Ernest', he decides to rechristen him as Ernest. This shows his sincerity in his relationship with Cecily. But it is observed that Jack Worthing, his friend did not like Algernon's coming there and meeting Cecily. While expressing his displeasure, he says to Algy:

“Your vanity is ridiculous, your conduct an outrage, and your presence in my garden utterly absurd. However, you have got to catch the four-five, and I hope you will have a pleasant journey back to town. This Bunburying, as you call it, has not been a great success for you”.

(<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/844/pg844.txt>)

It is seen that his aunt, Lady Bracknell always thinks of his well-being. That is why when she comes to know about the love affair between Algernon and Cecily, she confirms that Cecily had a large fortune. But he cannot marry his beloved unless Mr. Worthing gives his consent as Cecily was under his charge. And unless and until Lady Bracknell gives her consent to the marriage between her daughter and Mr. Worthing, he would not allow Cecily to get married with Algernon. However, at the end of the play, all the obstacles are removed and Algernon is united with Cecily.

**Gwendolen Fairfax:** Gwendolen Fairfax is a pretty young girl who lives with her mother, Lady Bracknell. At the very beginning of the play, it becomes clear that she is in love with Mr. Worthing. But the main reason of her love for him is neither his richness nor his handsomeness but it is his name Ernest. Surprisingly, she was very much fascinated by this name. Though Jack Worthing tries to explain the fact about his name, she was not ready to listen to him. On the contrary, she announces her decision of marrying only that a man whose name was Ernest. That is why Jack Worthing decides to rechristen him as Ernest.

Gwendolen was under the influence of the imposing personality of her mother. Her general behaviour shows that she had adopted the manners and tendencies of high class society. Her mother always tries to impose her own views on Gwendolen. Though she had chosen her husband, it seems to be impossible for her to get married with him unless her mother gives her consent. It is seen from the fact that when Lady Bracknell comes to know about her daughter's love for Jack, she interrogates him thoroughly in order to find out his suitability. And when she comes to know that Jack was an orphan, she declared him to be unfit for Gwendolen. However,

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Gwendolen tries to come out of her mother's influence by telling Jack that she would certainly marry him. To fulfill her wish, she gets Jack's country address and visits him all alone.

After reaching Jack's country house, she meets Cecily there. Initially, she behaves in cordial and friendly manner with Cecily. But when she comes to know that Cecily is Jack's ward, her womanly jealousy is also seen in Gwendolen. And when she mistakenly thinks that both Cecily and she are in love with one and the same person, named Ernest, she fights with Cecily. But it has to be taken into consideration that Gwendolen had also the ability to forgive. Though she fights with Cecily, within a short span of time, she settles her differences with her and becomes her close friend. Similarly, she also forgives Jack for his deceptive ways and accepts him as her husband. This nature of Gwendolen makes the audience sure about her happy married life with Jack.

**Cecily Cardew:** Cecily Cardew is young and pretty ward of Jack Worthing who stays with him in his country house. She receives her lesson from an elderly woman, named Miss Prism. But it seems that she is more interested in watering the plants than taking lessons in German grammar. Though she is referred in the first act of the play, the audiences could only meet her in the second Act. At this time she was watering the flower garden. Though she is quite young, she is clever enough to understand that Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble were interested in each other. Therefore, when Dr. Chasuble arrives there, she sends Miss Prism with him for a walk.

Her helping nature is also seen from the fact that she wanted to meet Uncle Jack's brother, Ernest and cure him of his wickedness. She believed that it would help the brothers to understand each other in a better way, which would bring them emotionally closer. Therefore, when Algernon introduces himself as Ernest Worthing, she happily welcomes him. Even she notes down his words of admiration in her diary. She also tells him that she was so much fascinated by his name Ernest that she has imagined they are already engaged to each other, even before they met. Like Gwendolen, Cecily too would marry the man whose name is Ernest.

Cecily is a friendly person, who was always ready to welcome her guests. It is seen when Gwendolen comes there in order to meet Jack. Cecily very cordially welcomes Gwendolen and makes her feel comfortable in her new surroundings. But when she suspects that Gwendolen has come there to meet Ernest, her own fiancée, she expresses her womanly attitude towards her. However, after her doubt gets cleared, she readily unites with Gwendolen as if they are sisters. Thus, Cecily's is a lovable character in 'The Importance of Being Earnest'.

**Lady Bracknell:** Lady Bracknell is the mother of Gwendolen Fairfax and aunt of Jack and Algernon Moncrieff. She is the true representative of the fashionable high class society of London. By nature she is dominating. It is seen in her treatment of her daughter, Gwendolen and her nephew, Algernon. Though Gwendolen had selected her would be husband, Lady Bracknell would not accept him until she is satisfied with his worthiness. Therefore, when she comes to

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know that Gwendolen likes Jack, she thoroughly interrogates him. When she comes to know that Jack is an orphan, she refuses to accept him as her son-in-law.

Her same dominating attitude is seen in her dealing with Cecily-Algernon episode. Before giving her consent to the marriage, she confirms that Cecily had a large fortune. However, it has to be taken into consideration that Lady Bracknell's such kind of behaviour is the result of her too much concern for the well-being of her loved ones. Behind her domineering nature, Lady Bracknell is full of compassion for all those who come in her contact. It is seen in her attitude towards Cecily and Miss Prism. Actually, Miss Prism had committed a grave crime by taking away the baby. But Lady Bracknell readily forgives her as she is reunited with her nephew. Thus, the character of Lady Bracknell is a successful creation of Oscar Wilde that remains in the memory of the audience for quite a long time.

**Themes of *The Importance of Being Earnest*:** The comedy of manners has a long history beginning with Menander in Greek literature. This type of comedy flourished in England during the Restoration period. These plays are usually set in upper class society and make fun of the people who consider themselves socially superior. This comedy generally uses witty dialogue and complex scenes to comment on false social beliefs. Usually, it deals with the subject of marriage. The characters are types rather than individuals. The plot is rather complex with rapid twists in events. Now let's study 'The Importance of Being Earnest' in the light of above characteristic features.

The play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is set in high class society in London. Lady Bracknell and her daughter, Gwendolen are the true representatives of Victorian aristocracy. They are highly educated women who take much interest in fashions and mannerisms of the city life. Similarly, the other characters, Mr. Jack Worthing, Algernon Moncrieff and Cecily also belong to upper class society.

The dramatist presents all these characters in such a way that the audiences hardly succeed in laughing at their hollow mannerisms and empty sophistication. For example, there are two young girls, Gwendolen and Cecily, who are shown to be mad about the name 'Ernest', Both of them were so fascinated by 'Ernest' that they were even ready to disobey their parents. It is particularly true of Gwendolen who runs away from the home and reaches to the country house of Mr. Worthing only with the hope of marrying 'Ernest'. However, it turns out that both the gentlemen were not 'Ernest'.

The dramatist has made an ample use of witty dialogues to expose the false beliefs of his characters. The plot is full of complex scenes like that of Jack's meeting with Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell's interrogation of Jack, Algernon's clever observation of Jack's cigarette case, his noting down the address on the sleeve, Miss Prism's pretentious walk with Dr. Chasuble and others.

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The play deals with the subject of marriage. Towards the end, the audiences meet three couples – Jack and Gwendolen, Algernon and Cecily, Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism – who are waiting for the ringing of the marriage bells. Though these characters are cleverly drawn, all of them lack individuality. They are types rather than individuals. During the Victorian period one would come across such types in abundance all around oneself.

The dramatist has woven all these characters cleverly together and made his plot complex. There are turns and twists all over the plot. For example, Miss Prism's disappearance from the scene twenty eight years ago with a baby boy, Mr. Thomas Cardew's bringing the baby home and appointing him as the caretaker of his daughter, Miss Prism's chance meeting with Lady Bracknell again in the third Act, and Jack's being 'Ernest'. Thus, the play 'The Importance of Being Earnest' employs almost all the characteristic features of a comedy of manners and hence it can be called as a typical comedy of manners.

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