

BRIT. LIT.
VOLUME 7

COMIC THEATER

OSCAR WILDE
GILBERT AND SULLIVAN

COMIC THEATER

Selected and Edited by
REBEKAH MERKLE



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READING SCHEDULE

This volume should take you a grand total of five days. Here's the official schedule:

DAY 1:	Reading 1 in this volume <i>Poetry Workbook: Lesson 75</i>	13
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19TH CENTURY COMIC THEATER

In this volume, you'll be reading two plays which were produced in the very late 19th century. The first is *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, a drawing room comedy. The second is a comic opera by Gilbert and Sullivan called *The Pirates of Penzance*.

Both of these are quite funny, and both have great film productions which are well worth a watch after you've read the scripts. The movie *Pirates of Penzance* features Kevin Kline and Linda Ronstadt, and is just as funny and cheesy as the play. (Don't get your hopes up for special effects.) It's quite helpful to see this performed - when you simply read it you don't get to hear the music, which is (obviously) an important part of a musical. There are several film versions of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and although the most recent version with Colin Firth and Reese Witherspoon is quite funny, it should be noted that Hollywood inserted several offensive bits which are not in the original script.

The story of Oscar Wilde's life is quite a sad one, and a very vivid example of genius being smothered by sin. He was born in Ireland in 1854, and died young in 1900. Both of his parents were quite accomplished intellectuals, and he was educated at home until he was nine. After this he attended school, went on to Trinity College in Dublin, and from there moved to Oxford. It was during his University years that he became attracted to the Aesthetic Movement, which is loosely defined as a "cult of beauty." The members of the Aesthetic Movement were primarily artists and writers, and it is they who are credited with originating the phrase, "art for art's sake." They maintained that there was no real association between art and morality. Art and literature had no didactic purpose whatsoever, the only point was to be beautiful. They also maintained that life should copy art in this regard. The main point is beauty, enjoyment of the moment, and that is all.

This, as you hopefully notice, is directly opposed to Sir Philip Sidney's point in *Defense of Poesy*. Sidney asserted that the point of poesy is to

teach and to delight, and the final goal is to move men to virtue. Contrary to this, the aesthetes believed that the ultimate point of art is to delight. Period.

At Oxford, Wilde began to develop his public persona as an aesthete, a dandy, and a wit. He decorated his college room with lilies and blue china, and one day remarked to his friend, "I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china." This quip of his quickly became famous, and was used as a slogan among aesthetes. He is famous for his epigrams, many of which are quite hilarious and witty. He is, in fact, one of the most quoted authors of all time, due to observations like these:

"America is the only country that went from barbarism to decadence without civilization in between."

"The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about."

"The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it."

Wilde spent his time writing poetry, novels, plays, and delivering lectures about interior decoration, personal adornment, and the importance of a life devoted to beauty. His mantra was, "There is no truth but beauty."

He was quickly becoming notorious, and making a name for himself as a writer. Meanwhile, W.S Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan were already quite well known in both England and America for their comic operas. Gilbert wrote the words, and Sullivan composed the music for fourteen incredibly popular operas. *The Pirates of Penzance* debuted in 1879. They began to work on another next piece, entitled *Patience*, which happened to be a satire of the Aesthetic Movement. As they were preparing to debut it in America, their manager arranged for Oscar Wilde to tour the United States giving a series of lectures on Aestheticism in order to help with publicity. The Aesthetes were well known in England but relatively

unheard of in America, and they wanted their American audiences to understand what *Patience* was all about. Wilde was sent as Exhibit A.

The tour was scheduled to last four months, but Wilde was such a success that it was continued for over a year. When he returned to England, he married a woman named Constance and they had two children together. Shortly after the birth of his second son, however, Wilde began to pursue a homosexual lifestyle. He had cultivated a foppish persona and mocked “manly sports” for years, so the transition was hardly a shocking one. He was sexually involved with a number of men, but began a more lengthy relationship with an undergraduate from Oxford named Lord Alfred Douglas. It was during this phase of Wilde’s career that he wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which is now considered his masterpiece. It was first performed in 1895, and was a brilliant success in London. While it was still running on stage, however, Wilde’s whole world came crashing down.

His licentious lifestyle was a sort of open secret, and Douglas’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry, was furious about his son’s relationship with Wilde. (Oddly enough, this is the man who created the modern rules of boxing.) He publicly accused Wilde of being a sodomite, and Wilde responded by bringing a lawsuit against him for libel. This meant that the whole question of Wilde’s lifestyle went to the courts, and Douglas’s father hired private investigators to find proof of Wilde’s homosexuality in order to defend himself against the charge of libel.

During the trial at the Old Bailey, Wilde was cross examined about the moral content of some of his previous works. Wilde’s opinion, which he maintained in court, was that works of art are incapable of being moral or immoral, but only well or poorly made. He went further when asked whether his book *The Picture of Dorian Grey* was perverted, and said, “That could only be to brutes and illiterates. The views of Philistines on art are incalculably stupid.” Throughout the trial, Wilde was witty and flippant, until it became clear that Queensberry (Douglas’s father) actually had accumulated indisputable evidence of Wilde’s flamboyantly de-

praved lifestyle. Wilde dropped the charge of libel, but all the evidence against him had been brought into court, and he was very shortly arrested and prosecuted for sodomy and gross indecency.

In his second trial, the one in which he was the defendant, his manner was noticeably changed. He was much less sarcastic and flippant. He pleaded not guilty, but also made a striking speech defending the beauties of “Greek love.” He was convicted and sentenced to two years of hard labor, all while *The Importance of Being Earnest* was still running.

Wilde’s experiences in prison left him a very different man. Immediately upon his release he moved to the Continent, and never revisited England. He was penniless, destitute, and in poor health. He wanted to convert to Catholicism, and he moved back in with Lord Alfred Douglas. They eventually separated because both families refused to send money if they were together, and Wilde eventually ended up in a shabby hotel in Paris. His health declined badly, and soon he was too ill to leave the hotel. On one of his last trips outside, he said, “My wallpapaer and I are fighting a duel to the death. One of us has got to go.” As he was dying, a Catholic priest was sent for and he was baptized into the Catholic Church, with one of his old homosexual lovers at his bedside. He died the next day, at the age of 46.

It’s very noticeable that for a man who worshipped beauty, the end of his life was marked by nothing but ugliness, grief, and heartbreak. He believed in never being serious about anything, and yet his story is profoundly and seriously tragic.

The Importance of Being Earnest is hilarious, light-hearted, witty, clever, and at times terribly insightful. It’s a scathingly satirical treatment of society, but one so absurd that it would be nearly impossible for anyone to take offense. As Wilde himself put it, “If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they’ll kill you.”

Meanwhile, between 1871 and 1896, Gilbert and Sullivan had produced fourteen comic operas, and the Savoy Theatre in London was built in order to showcase their works. While Oscar Wilde was a philosopher,

Gilbert and Sullivan were much more simple in their approach to their work. They wrote funny stories, produced them, enjoyed great success, and produced more funny stories. Their operas are all quite silly, and like *The Importance of Being Earnest*, they are spoofs on the society of their day. They laugh and poke fun at many of the very serious institutions of Britain, but in the artists' personal lives they were archtypical Victorian English Gentlemen, not visionary eccentrics like Wilde. Where Wilde grew his hair out long and wore purple velvet jackets with knee breeches, Gilbert and Sullivan were very respectable, paunchy gentlemen with sideburns and impressive moustaches.

Gilbert, who wrote the words to the operas, was known for his exceptionally ridiculous plots, told in a completely deadpan way. In fact, his innovations in this regard are seen as quite influential on Oscar Wilde and others. Sullivan wrote the music, and together they made a very impressive team. Unfortunately, however, the two didn't get along very well, and had a number of personal clashes.

The influence of Gilbert and Sullivan on future drama and music has been quite profound, and together they pioneered many innovations in musical theater which have had long term effects well into the twentieth century. Their works are still performed very frequently throughout the English speaking world, and are still an international success over a hundred years after they were written.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

*A Trivial Comedy
for Serious People*

OSCAR WILDE

THE PERSONS IN THE PLAY

John Worthing, J.P.

Algernon Moncrieff

Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D.

Merriman Butler

Lane. Manservant

Lady Bracknell

Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax

Cecil Cardew

Miss Prism Governess

THE SCENES OF THE PLAY

ACT I.

Algernon Moncrieff's Flat in Half-Moon Street, W.

ACT II.

The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton.

ACT III.

Drawing-Room at the Manor House, Woolton.

TIME: THE PRESENT.

FIRST ACT

SCENE

Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room.

[*Lane is arranging afternoon tea on the table, and after the music has ceased, Algernon enters.*]

Algernon. Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

Lane. I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

Algernon. I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—any one can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

Lane. Yes, sir.

Algernon. And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

Lane. Yes, sir. [*Hands them on a salver.*]

Algernon. [*Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa.*] Oh! . . . by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of

champagne are entered as having been consumed.

Lane. Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

Algernon. Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

Lane. I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

Algernon. Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralising as that?

Lane. I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

Algernon. [*Languidly.*] I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

Lane. No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

Algernon. Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

Lane. Thank you, sir. [*Lane goes out.*]

*"Lower orders"
means the servant
class.*

Algernon. Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.

[Enter *Lane*.]

Lane. Mr. Ernest Worthing.

[Enter *Jack*.]

[*Lane goes out*.]

Algernon. How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

Jack. Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? Eating as usual, I see, Algy!

Algernon. [*Stiffly*.] I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock. Where have you been since last Thursday?

Jack. [*Sitting down on the sofa*.] In the country.

Algernon. What on earth do you do there?

Jack. [*Pulling off his gloves*.] When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.

Algernon. And who are the people you amuse?

Jack. [*Airily*.] Oh, neighbours, neighbours.

Algernon. Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire?

Jack. Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.

Algernon. How immensely you must amuse them! [*Goes over and takes sandwich*.] By the way, Shropshire is your

county, is it not?

Jack. Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course. Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?

Algernon. Oh! merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

Jack. How perfectly delightful!

Algernon. Yes, that is all very well; but I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here.

Jack. May I ask why?

Algernon. My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.

Jack. I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.

Algernon. I thought you had come up for pleasure? . . . I call that business.

Jack. How utterly unromantic you are!

Algernon. I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

Jack. I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.

Algernon. Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven—*[Jack puts out his hand to take a sandwich. Algernon at once interferes.]* Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. *[Takes one and eats it.]*

Jack. Well, you have been eating them all the time.

Algernon. That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt. *[Takes plate from below.]* Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

Jack. *[Advancing to table and helping himself.]* And very good bread and butter it is too.

Algernon. Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you were married to her already. You are not married to her already, and I don't think you ever will be.

Jack. Why on earth do you say that?

Algernon. Well, in the first place girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right.

Jack. Oh, that is nonsense!

Algernon. It isn't. It is a great truth. It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over