The Importance of Being Earnest

1. Identity card

Title: *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Author: Oscar Wilde

Date of publication: 1895

Genre: Comedy of manners / Satirical play

Historical and Cultural Context: Written during the Victorian era, the play satirises the values of the British upper class, including marriage, social conventions and appearances. Through wit and irony, Wilde criticises hypocrisy while entertaining his audience.

2. Plot summary

In a nutshell: the play follows two young gentlemen: Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, who both invent false identities to escape social obligations. Their deceptions lead to a series of misunderstandings, romantic complications and comic situations. In the end, the truth is revealed, relationships are restored and Jack unexpectedly discovers his true identity.

Key Moments:

- ➜ Jack admits his double life to Algernon.
- ➜ Algernon pretends to be Jack's fictional brother, Ernest.
- ➜ Gwendolen and Cecily both believe they are engaged to «Ernest.»
- ➜ Lady Bracknell opposes Jack's marriage proposal.
- ➜ Jack discovers his real identity and family origins.

3. Main characters

Name	Role	Symbol
Jack Worthing	protagonist	identity, honesty
Algernon Moncrieff	Jack's friend	freedom, wit
Gwendolen Fairfax	Jack's beloved	social expectations, appearances
Cecily Cardew	Jack's ward	innocence, imagination
Lady Bracknell	Gwendolen's mother	Victorian society, authority
Miss Prism	governess	morality, comic irony

4. Major themes and links to the LLCER program

Première – Rencontres

How does the play illustrate this theme?

- Encounters create misunderstandings and comic situations.
- Relationships are shaped by deception and mistaken identity.
- Love develops through unexpected meetings.

Key examples

- Jack meeting Gwendolen.
- Algernon meeting Cecily.
- The confrontation between Gwendolen and Cecily.

Terminale – Arts and debates of ideas

How does the play illustrate this theme?

- Satire questions Victorian values and social conventions.
- The play criticises hypocrisy, class prejudice and marriage expectations.
- Humour becomes a way to challenge accepted ideas.

Key examples

- Lady Bracknell's views on marriage.
- The invention of false identities.
- Wilde's ironic dialogue throughout the play.

5. Key quotes and key words

"The truth is rarely pure and never simple."

identity – appearances – satire – hypocrisy – marriage – society – wit

6. Author's message

- Society often values appearances over truth.
- Social conventions can be absurd and restrictive.
- Identity is more complex than social status.
- Humour is a powerful way to criticise society.