

Summary and Analysis Act I: Part 1

Summary

The curtain opens on the flat of wealthy Algernon Moncrieff in London's fashionable West End. While Algernon (Algy, for short) plays the piano, his servant (Lane) is arranging cucumber sandwiches for the impending arrival of Algernon's aunt (Lady Bracknell) and her daughter (Gwendolen). Mr. Jack Worthing (a friend of Moncrieff's and known to him as Ernest) arrives first. Jack announces that he plans to propose marriage to Gwendolen, but Algernon claims that he will not consent to their marriage until Jack explains why he is known as Ernest and why he has a cigarette case with a questionable inscription from a mysterious lady.

Jack claims that he has made up the character of Ernest because it gives him an excuse to visit the city. In the country, however, he is known as Jack Worthing, squire, with a troubled brother named Ernest. At first he lies and says the cigarette case is from his Aunt Cecily. Algernon calls his bluff, and Jack confesses that he was adopted by Mr. Thomas Cardew when he was a baby and that he is a guardian to Cardew's granddaughter, Cecily, who lives on his country estate with her governess, Miss Prism.

Similarly, Algernon confesses that he has invented an imaginary invalid friend, named Bunbury, whom he visits in the country when he feels the need to leave the city. After speculating on marriage and the need to have an excuse to get away, the two agree to dine together at the fashionable Willis', and Jack enlists Algernon's assistance in distracting Lady Bracknell so that Jack can propose to Gwendolen.

Analysis

Wilde sets the tone for hilarious mischief in this first scene. The many layers of meaning work together to entertain and to provoke thought. He makes fun of all the Victorians hold sacred, but in a light-hearted, amusing wordfest. His humor has multiple layers of meaning: social criticism of the upper and middle Victorian class values, references to the homosexual community and its culture, use of locales and landmarks familiar to his upper-class audience, and epigrams — short, witty sayings — and puns that not only provide humor but also reinforce his social critique.

First, Wilde must introduce his characters and setting. Both Jack and Algernon are living their lives through masks; deliberately, their double lives parallel Wilde's living as a married man with a clandestine homosexual life. Both characters are also recognizable to the upper- and middle-class audiences as stock figures.

Algernon is a stylish dandy — a young man very concerned about his clothes and appearance — in the pose of the leisure-class man about town. His fashionable apartment in a stylish locale immediately tells the audience that they are watching a comedy about the upper class. After introducing Algernon, Wilde turns him into a comic figure of self-gratification, stuffing his mouth with cucumber sandwiches. Self-gratification is ammunition against the repressive Victorian values of duty and virtue. In fact, as Algernon and Jack discuss marriage and Gwendolen, food becomes a symbol for lust, a topic not discussed in polite society. Much of what Algernon says is hopeless triviality, beginning a motif that Wilde will follow throughout the play: Society never cares about substance but instead reveres style and

triviality. Wilde seems to be saying that in Victorian society people seem unaware of the difference between trivial subjects and the more valuable affairs of life.

Jack is a little more serious than Algernon, perhaps because of his position as a country magistrate and his concern over his unconventional lineage. Helplessly a product of his time and social standing, Jack knows the rules, the appropriate manners, and the virtue of turning a phrase beautifully. He is an accepted upper-class gentleman, mainly because of the Cardew fortune. Novels written during this period, such as those of Charles Dickens, often turned on melodramatic plot devices such as the orphan discovering his real identity and winning his true love. Wilde hilariously turns this popular orphan plot on its head by having Jack found in a handbag in a major railroad station. Absurdity is Wilde's forte.

Both men are living a secret life, Jack with his Ernest identity and Algernon with his friend, Bunbury. Even Lane, Algy's servant, seems to have a second life in which he filches champagne and sandwiches from his "betters." Wilde seems to be saying that in a society where all is respectable but dull, a fictitious identity is necessary to liven things up. The classic nineteenth-century farce often turned on such mix-ups.

The deliberate use of the name Ernest is calculated. Earnestness, or devotion to virtue and duty, was a Victorian ideal. It stood for sincerity, seriousness, and hard work. Duty to one's family and name was a form of earnestness. Wilde turns these connotations upside down, making Ernest a name used for deception. Some critics suggest that earnest (in this context) means a double life. Other critics believe that earnest is understood in some circles to mean homosexual. By using the name Ernest throughout the play, and even in the title, Wilde is making references to social criticism, his own life, and his plot devices. He playfully makes a pun using earnest/Ernest when Algernon says, "You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life," following his discussion of Ernest as Jack's name.

Marriage in Victorian England comes under fire throughout the first act. Wilde saw marriages filled with hypocrisy and often used to achieve status. Wilde also saw marriage as an institution that encouraged cheating and snuffed out sexual attraction between spouses. When Lane says that wine is never of superior quality in a married household, Algernon questions Lane's marital status. Lane flippantly mentions that his own marriage resulted from a "misunderstanding." The nonsense continues as Jack explains that his purpose in coming to the city was to propose. Algernon replies that he thought Jack had "come up for pleasure? ...I call that business." Algernon humorously explains that to be in love is romantic, but a proposal is never romantic because "one may be accepted." Marriage brings about an end to the romantic excitement of flirting: "...girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right." Each of these references to marriage or courtship trivializes a serious subject and turns around accepted values. Wilde corrupts the maxim, "Two's company; three's a crowd," to humorously chide the conservative audience. Algernon says, "In married life three is company and two is none." So much for the joys of wedded life. In short, Wilde seems to say that marriage is a business deal containing property, wealth, and status. Family names and bloodlines are deathly important.

Wilde uses food and eating as symbols for the sensual and/or for lust. Victorians did not discuss such subjects in polite society. Mouthing platitudes about the reverence of marriage, duty, and virtue, Victorian males often conducted extra-marital affairs with the blessings of a hypocritical society. Wilde expresses their repressed sexual drives with the hilarious scenes of his characters eating voraciously and discussing food. He also refers to sex and vitality with the euphemism of "health." When Algernon says that Gwendolen is "devoted to bread and butter," Jack immediately grabs some bread and butter and starts eating greedily.

Class warfare is also a subject of this first act. While the servants, such as Lane, wait on the upper classes, they also observe their morals. They might not comment, but their facial expressions betray their understanding of their own role in life, which involves waiting and doing, but not commenting.

Style and manners also come under attack. In Victorian England, style and correct manners were much more important than substance. Algernon feels his style of piano playing is much more important than his accuracy. Triviality is the witty, admired social repartee of the day, a perfect homage to style over substance. In fact, the characters in this play often say the opposite of what is understood to be true. In this way Wilde shows his audience the hypocrisy of their commonly held beliefs.

Victorian culture is also a target. Algernon's quip, "More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read," is a reference once again to hypocrisy. Read something scandalous to be in style, but do not speak of it in polite company. Double standards abound. Daily newspapers come under Algernon's attack as the writings of people who have not been educated and who think of themselves as literary critics. Perhaps Wilde is saying that the critical reviews of the day should be in the hands of people who are educated to understand art.

Wilde's upper-class audiences, far from being angered by his attack on Victorian values, were actually mollified by references to locations and cultural names with which they were familiar. British names of real places such as Willis', Grosvenor Square, Tunbridge Wells in Kent, or Half Moon Street, would have been well-known references in their world. Upper-class London audiences recognized these familiar locations and knew the character types that Jack and Algernon represented.

Some critics have suggested that Wilde began his writing projects by accumulating a group of epigrams he wished to explore. (Often, these sayings about life were widely known but not really examined closely.) He turned these hackneyed phrases upside down to suggest that, although they knew the clichés, most British audiences did not stop to think about how meaningless they were. For example, "Divorces are made in heaven" (a corruption of the familiar "Marriages are made in heaven") suggests that divorce contributes to happiness — perhaps a greater truism than the familiar phrase given the tenor of Victorian society. Wilde makes fun of peoples' trivial concerns over social status when he says, "Nothing annoys people so much as not receiving invitations."

Wilde's use of language as a tool for humor continues with his hilarious puns. A pun is a wordplay that often involves differing understandings of what a word means and how it is used in a given context. In speaking of dentists and their impressions, Jack says, "It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn't a dentist. It produces a false impression." Algernon counters, "Well, that is exactly what dentists always do." False teeth, dental impressions to mold them, and social impressions are all wrapped up in this pun. In a society where turning a phrase and witty repartee were considered much-admired skills, Wilde was at his best.

Glossary

Half Moon Street a very fashionable street in London's West End; its location is handy to gentlemen's clubs, restaurants and theatres.

"slight refreshment at five o'clock" known as light tea, served to people who visit at this time of day.

"Shropshire is your county" a reference to Jack Worthing's position as county magistrate.

Divorce Court Before 1857, divorces could only be granted by Parliament at great expense, and they rarely happened. In 1857, Divorce Court was passed by Parliament, making divorce easier.

Tunbridge Wells a fashionable resort in Kent.

The Albany Ernest Worthing's address on his calling cards was actually the home of George Ives, a friend of Wilde's and an activist for homosexual rights.

Bunbury the name of a school friend of Wilde's. Here, someone who deceives.

sent down to act as a lady's escort for dinner.

corrupt French Drama possibly a reference to the plays of Alexander Dumas in the 1850s.

PREVIOUS

Character List

Summary and Analysis Act I: Part 2

Summary

Lady Bracknell and her daughter, Gwendolen, arrive. She is expecting her nephew, Algernon, at a dinner party that evening, but Algy explains that he must go see his invalid friend, Bunbury, in the country. However, he promises to make arrangements for the music at her reception on Saturday. They exchange small talk about various members of the upper class, and Lady Bracknell exclaims at the lack of cucumber sandwiches. The butler, Lane, lies beautifully, explaining there were no cucumbers in the market.

In an effort to leave Jack alone with Gwendolen, Algernon takes Lady Bracknell into another room to discuss music. Meanwhile, Jack proposes to Gwendolen; unfortunately, she explains that her ideal is to marry someone named Ernest and that Jack has no music or vibration to it. Nevertheless, she accepts his proposal, and Jack decides to arrange a private christening so that he can become Ernest. Lady Bracknell returns and, seeing Jack on bended knee, demands an explanation. Denying the engagement, she sends Gwendolen to the carriage.

Lady Bracknell interrogates Jack to determine his suitability. When Jack explains that he was found in a handbag abandoned in a railway station, Lady Bracknell is shocked. Jack goes on to explain that Mr. Thomas Cardew found him in Victoria Station and named him "Worthing" for the destination of his train ticket. Lady Bracknell announces that Gwendolen cannot "marry into a cloakroom, and form an alliance with a parcel." She advises Jack to find some relations. She bids him good morning and majestically sweeps out as Algernon plays the wedding march from the next room. Turning his thoughts to Cecily, Jack decides to kill off his "brother" Ernest with a severe chill in Paris because Cecily Cardew, his ward, is far too interested in the wicked Ernest, and as her guardian, Jack feels it his duty to protect her from inappropriate marriage suitors.

Gwendolen returns and tells Jack they can never marry, but she will always love him, and she will try to change her mother's mind. She asks for his country address so that she can write him daily and, as he dictates the address, Algernon furtively writes it on his own shirt cuff because he is curious about Cecily Cardew.

Analysis

The action and satire in Act I is heightened with the arrival of Lady Bracknell. She is an aristocratic Victorian and Algernon's aunt. Arrogant, opinionated, and conservative, Lady Bracknell is the epitome of the Victorian upper-class dowager. Wilde uses Lady Bracknell to continue his satire of Victorian attitudes about marriage. Marriage is a process of careful selection and planning by parents. Social status, lineage, and wealth combine to make marriage a business proposition that unites power. Lady Bracknell will tell Gwendolen when and to whom she will be engaged, and Gwendolen has nothing to say about it. In fact, love is not a factor in marriage nor is the opinion of the children. Lady Bracknell cross-examines Jack, commenting on his wealth and politics. When she hears Jack has "lost" his parents, she exclaims at his "carelessness." Discovering he is the accident of an unknown line of ancestors, she suggests he produce at least one parent — no matter how he does it — to strengthen his marriage prospects. Absurdly, Jack says he can produce the handbag, and it should satisfy her need for a parent. As for other examples of Wilde's opinions on marriage, Lady Bracknell mentions a recently widowed Lady Harbury who looks 20 years younger since her husband died, and now she lives for pleasure instead of duty. Wilde is mocking Victorian attitudes toward marriage and asking why bloodlines and wealth should be more important than love. Once again marriage is a duty, not a pleasure.

As for education, the proper Victorian believed schooling should continue the status quo, and "fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square." A proper education is later echoed in the readings Miss Prism gives to Cecily Cardew, Jack's ward. Any revolution or change in thinking at any time is anathema to Lady Bracknell and the conservative upper class. Politics should be in the hands of the "right people." To the Victorian upper class, proper behavior, such as knowing who your parents are, keeps the standards where they should be. They feared that contempt for those things could lead to "the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to?" French aristocrats were executed, and Lady Bracknell would prefer to keep her head. Through the farcical Lady Bracknell, Wilde is once again criticizing a society where the upper class is determined to keep attitudes and power in the hands of the few; the radical idea that people should be taught to actually think and question is scary to those in power.

Wilde appears to be commenting on the traditional Victorian concept of family, also, where the restrictive bonds of duty smother initiative, imagination, and freedom. In Jack's case, Lady Bracknell feels family can be acquired, much like a luxurious home or expensive carriage. When Jack is critical of Lady Bracknell, instead of coming to his aunt's defense, Algernon says, "Relations are simply a tedious pack of people who haven't got the remotest knowledge of

how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die." Both Jack and Algernon can escape to the country and change into different identities, escaping the duties of family. Jack would like to know his true identity, and Gwendolen would like to break away from her mother's conservative opinions. Wilde seems to foresee the phrase, dysfunctional families.

Gwendolen's middle name could be "absurdity." She trivializes serious ideas and imagines people and events that have never existed. Strangely, she chooses a husband based on his name. Wilde is asking if marrying for a person's name is any more intelligent, or absurd, than marrying based on wealth and parents. Wilde presents Gwendolen as a character who accepts the social order simply because it is defined from pulpits and popular magazines. Once again, Wilde is being critical of people who mouth the public sentiments and do not think for themselves. Gwendolen is also constantly saying words that are the opposite of what is known to be true, illustrating Wilde's idea that upper-class conversation is trivial and meaningless. She tells Jack, "the simplicity of your character makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me." Instead of the young respecting their elders, Gwendolen laments, "Few parents nowadays pay any regard to what their children say to them. The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out."

Jack's proposal itself is ludicrous. Gwendolen is only concerned that the form is correct. In fact, she fully intends to say yes only if his name is Ernest. When Jack mentions the word marriage, she protests that he has not even discussed it with her yet, and he must do so in the correct style. She asserts that her brother even practices proposing to get the form correct. Wilde is taking a subject — love and marriage — that should be filled with passion and depth and turning it into an exercise in form. This scene is a parody of love and romance, capturing the emptiness of Victorian values that rely on style, not substance.

Throughout Act I, Wilde's characters worship the trivial at the expense of the profound. He seems to be saying that the audience should take a long look at what their society deems valuable. Society is described in multiple contexts as clever people talking nonsense and triviality. In a dialogue between Jack and Algernon, Jack says, "I am sick to death of cleverness. Everybody is clever nowadays. You can't go anywhere without meeting clever people. The thing has become an absolute public nuisance. I wish to goodness we had a few fools left." When Algernon says, "We have," Jack wonders what they talk about. Algernon replies, "about the clever people, of course." Wilde continues satirizing the Victorian love of the trivial when he ends the act with Jack and Algernon observing that nobody ever talks anything but nonsense. Each of these conversations reprimands British society's concern for the superficial at the expense of deeper values.

What subjects should a society take seriously? Wilde obviously thought society should revere sympathy and compassion for others. But Lady Bracknell treats the very human concerns of death and illness with irreverence and flippancy. She tells Algernon, "It is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd." Furthermore, she does not think a person's illnesses should be encouraged. Rather than being sympathetic, she hopes Mr. Bunbury will not have a relapse on Saturday, thus throwing a wrench in her party plans. Again, by having the farcical Lady Bracknell express these thoughts, Wilde conveys his desire for his audience to question their tendency to value social calendars at the expense of sympathy for others.

The subject of Cecily introduces a new kind of woman to the play. When Algy expresses some interest in Jack's ward, Jack explains that she is not at all like the usual young woman in society. "She has got a capital appetite, goes on long

walks, and pays no attention at all to her lessons." Unlike most young Victorian women, Cecily is independent, strong, and can figure out what she wants. Her description intrigues Algy, and plans start simmering in his head.

Besides using the character of Algernon to comment on the values of Victorian society, Wilde also uses him to illuminate the lifestyle of the young dandy or aesthete. When Jack and Algernon discuss their evening plans, it is described as hard work: "Shall we go out for dinner? Go to the theatre? Go to the club? Go to the Empire?" When Algy asks what they should do, Jack says, "Nothing!" Algernon retorts, "It is awfully hard work doing nothing." To take little seriously, to not work, and to artfully cultivate the air of doing nothing were all poses of the aesthetes. Algernon also tears up bills that arrive, illustrating the casual attitude of dandies toward responsibilities.

As the play progresses, Wilde continues his epigrams and puns. One of his most memorable refers to the nature of men and women. Algernon explains, "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his." Perhaps Wilde feels that while women might not wish to become their mothers, men would be wise to cultivate some of the attitudes and values of females; perhaps this is a nod to homosexuality. Throughout the act, epigrams deliver Wilde's social commentary on families, men and women, marriage, status, and the values of the upper class. A common lament of the titled gentry is also satirically mentioned by Lady Bracknell when discussing Jack's wealth: "What between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one's death, land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up." The use of the word duties is a delicious pun also. It means both the duties a person is expected to do according to his position and taxes placed on estates by the government.

Glossary

Grosvenor Square a very affluent area of London in the Mayfair district.

Belgrave Square another affluent London area in Belgravia.

Liberal Unionist a political group that voted against Home Rule for Ireland in 1886. Liberals were the conservative political group.

Tories members of the more conservative political circles. Lady Bracknell and other wealthy socialites would approve.

"only eighteen" Cecily is the precise age to "come out" as a Society debutante. During the Season, 18-year-olds were introduced as marriage material for suitable men.

The Empire a theatre in Leicester Square, London.

The Railway Guide an indispensable timetable of railway departures and arrivals, probably invented by Robert Diggles Kay in either 1838 or 1839.

Summary and Analysis Act II: Part 1

Summary

Act II is set at Jack Worthing's country estate where Miss Prism is seated in the garden giving her student, Cecily Cardew, a lesson in German grammar. When Cecily expresses an interest in meeting Jack's wicked brother, Ernest, Miss Prism repeats Jack's opinion that his brother has a weak character. The governess knows what happens to people who have weak characters. In her younger days, Miss Prism wrote a three-volume novel, and she proclaims that fiction shows how good people end happily and bad people end unhappily.

The local reverend, Canon Chasuble, enters and flirts with Miss Prism. The two leave for a turn in the garden. While they are gone, Merriman, the butler, announces Mr. Ernest Worthing has just arrived with his luggage and is anxious to speak with Miss Cardew. Algernon comes in, pretending to be Jack's brother, Ernest. When Cecily says that Jack is coming to the country Monday afternoon, Algernon/Ernest announces that he will be leaving Monday morning. They will just miss each other. Algernon compliments her beauty, and they go inside just before Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble return.

Jack enters in mourning clothes because his brother Ernest is dead in Paris. Jack takes the opportunity to ask Dr. Chasuble to re-christen him that afternoon around 5 p.m. Cecily comes from the house and announces that Jack's brother Ernest is in the dining room. Oops. Ernest is supposed to be dead. Algernon comes out, and Jack is shocked. Algernon/Ernest vows to reform and lead a better life.

Jack is angry that Algernon could play such a trick. He orders the dogcart for Algernon to leave in. After Jack goes into the house, Algernon announces he is in love with Cecily. Algernon proclaims his undying affection while Cecily copies his words in her diary. Algernon asks Cecily to marry him, and she agrees. In fact, she agrees readily because she has made up an entire romantic story of their courtship and engagement. She has even written imaginary letters to herself from Ernest/Algernon. She tells Algernon that her dream has always been to marry someone named Ernest because the name inspires such confidence. So, like Jack, Algernon decides he must be re-christened Ernest.

Analysis

Act II expands on many of the motifs introduced in Act I, but adds new characters and targets for Wilde's satire. The setting changes to the country — a bucolic setting for getting away from the artificial trappings of society and entering the simplicity of nature — and Wilde examines religion as well as courtship and marriage in the context of Victorian attitudes. But even in the countryside, the characters cannot escape Victorian manners and correctness, as the name Ernest presents humorous complications.

Idleness, duty, and marriage are brought together in the conversations of several characters. Sighing bitterly, Miss Prism observes that people who live for pleasure are usually unmarried. Duty, duty, duty. Servant of the upper class, Prism sees responsibility tinted with obligation as the correct form in Victorian society. Cecily, however, exclaims to Miss Prism, "I suppose that is why he [Jack] often looks a little bored when we three are together." In subtitled his play *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, perhaps Wilde is showing that setting one's jaw in a strong position for living rigidly with duty is both shortsighted and tediously boring.

Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble also provide a comic touch to the subject of religious zeal and its relationship to Victorian morals. Religion is presented as dry, meaningless, and expensive. The minister explains to Jack that the sermons for all sacraments are interchangeable. They can be adapted to be joyful or distressing, depending on the occasion. Through these thoughts Wilde expresses the meaninglessness of religion and the obviously hackneyed, empty words of sermons. Jack's request for a christening is humorous when one considers that he is a grown man — christening is a rite usually appropriate for small babies.

Wilde humorously captures the absurdity of rigid Victorian values when he utilizes Miss Prism as his mouthpiece, a morally upright woman who has, nevertheless, written a melodramatic, romantic novel. Obviously, hypocrisy lurks beneath the strict, puritanical surface of the prim governess. The height of her absurdity over rigid morals comes when she hears that Ernest is dead in Paris after a life of "shameful debts and extravagance." As if to follow through on her duty to raise Cecily with rigid values, she says, "What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it."

The Victorian mania to exclude anyone and everyone who did not conform to social norms is touched on by Wilde's satire of reform movements. His words come from Miss Prism when she says, "I am not in favour of this modern mania for turning bad people into good people at a moment's notice." Wilde is referring here to the duty of the upper class to provide moral role models and convert those who are wicked to the "good" way of life. An endless number of societies existed for the reform of various causes. Algernon gleefully utilizes the ruse of helplessness when he begs Cecily to reform him. However, she explains, "I'm afraid I've no time, this afternoon." Reform must have occurred quickly in 1890s' England. One of the clearest expressions of Wilde satirizing his upper-class audience members is in the words of the minister. Chasuble is discussing his sermons and mentions that he gave a charity sermon on behalf of the Society for the Prevention of Discontent Among the Upper Orders. This name is a parody of the long names of various societies that the wealthy dallied with in their quest for redemption.

The hidden and repressed sexual nature of Victorian society is emphasized in Act II. Cecily is fascinated by sin and wickedness — but from afar. She hopes Ernest looks like a "wicked person," although she is not sure what one looks like. She is particularly interested in the fact that the prim and proper Miss Prism has written a three-volume novel. Such novels were not deemed proper literature by Victorians, but were read in secret. Of course, the moral of the novel shows clearly that good people win, and bad people are punished. In fact, Miss Prism describes the conservative literary view of the day when she defines fiction as "the good ended happily, and the bad unhappily." As always, these rewards or punishments occur in a clear-cut manner and without exception — in novels.

Much worldlier than Cecily, the canon and Miss Prism flirt outrageously and make innuendoes about desire and lust. Where a headache is usually used as an excuse for a lack of sexual interest, Miss Prism uses it as a reason to go on a walk alone with the minister. The humorous cleric speaks in metaphors and often has to define what he means so that he will not be misunderstood. For example, he states, "Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips." His words elicit a glare from the prim Miss Prism. He continues to put his foot in his mouth by saying, "I spoke metaphorically. My metaphor was drawn from bees. Ahem!" Such an obvious allusion to the bees thinly veils a passionate inner life that must not be discussed. Miss Prism answers in kind, calling him "dear Doctor," which seems to be a flirtatious title. There is more than meets the eye here, and Wilde is clearly pointing out the sexual repression of his society and satirizing the societal concern for correct and proper appearances, regardless of what simmers under the surface.

The coded conversation between Miss Prism and Chasuble eventually turns to the discussion of the canon's celibacy, which becomes a joke throughout the act. When he defends the church's stand on celibacy, Miss Prism explains that remaining single is actually more of a temptation to women. To a Victorian audience, maturity, ripeness, and green are all coded words dealing with experience and naiveté. Suddenly, the canon realizes he has been saying things that might be interpreted as improper; he hastily covers up with, "I spoke horticulturally. My metaphor was drawn from fruits." All his veiled remarks reflect the cryptic nature of sexual experiences in the world of the 1890s. It is a world where adults do not discuss sex directly with their children or in polite society. No wonder Cecily is so fascinated by the subject of wickedness. In her society, young girls are protected from any knowledge of sex, and adults speak of it in obscure terms so as not to let out the big secret.

Class boundaries are also represented by the minister and Miss Prism. As the local canon, Chasuble is at Jack's beck and call and takes his orders from Jack and the local magistrate. If anyone needs a particular ceremony or sermon, the minister is ready to assist. While he is a scholarly man, Chasuble is still at the bottom of the social ladder in the countryside. Miss Prism must earn her living as a governess, and she too is a servant of the wealthy.

Cecily's schooling is a perfect opportunity for Wilde to comment on the grim, unimaginative education of England. Cecily is over protected lest her imagination run wild. Plain, guttural German is lauded, and Cecily feels plain after reciting it. "The Fall of the Rupee" is seen as "too sensational" for her to read. Political economy was a fast growing academic subject at the time — the province of male students, not young women. Grim, conservative, and unimaginative books are seen as the best way to educate the young. With this foundation, they learn not to question and not to change dramatically the society in which they live. Promoting the status quo is the goal of such learning — an idea that was an anathema to Wilde, hence his desire to satirize it.

Merriman's humor is a foil — or opposite — for Jack's seriousness. Even his name indicates his hidden humor. During the argument about Algernon taking a dogcart back to London, Merriman good-humoredly goes along with Cecily and Jack in the tugging to and fro of Algernon. While he does not express approval or disapproval, he accommodates his upper-class employers and carefully rehearses his facial expressions to show nothing, but through this deliberate rehearsal, Wilde is showing what an artificial, rehearsed society the upper class inhabits. Merriman's job is to orchestrate comings and goings and keep the house running smoothly; he's a proper English servant who knows his place. Similarly, Miss Prism chastises Cecily for watering flowers — a servant's job. By presenting these vignettes — subtle, carefully constructed literary sketches — within the context of a farce, Wilde pokes fun at the Victorian concept that everyone has his duty, and each knows his place.

In Act II, Wilde also exposes the vacuity of the Victorian obsession with appearance. Algernon declares to Cecily that he would never let Jack pick his clothing because, "He has no taste in neckties at all." Clothing is appearance, and appearance is everything. When Algernon travels to the country for just a few short days, he brings "three portmanteaus, a dressing-case, two hat boxes, and a large luncheon-basket." Once again, trifling subjects command excessive attention.

Cecily keeps a diary of her girlish fancies, and they are much more interesting than reality. Because her education is so dry and boring, she lives an interesting fantasy life, which comprises her own secret and self-directed education. She, like Algernon, seems to be interested in immediate gratification, and she puts him in his place when she first meets him. When he calls her "little cousin Cecily," she counters with, "You are under some strange mistake. I am not

little. In fact, I believe I am more than usually tall for my age." Algernon is totally taken aback by her forwardness. Wilde here is hinting at a new and more assertive woman.

Wilde also begins an attack on the concepts of romance and courtship in Act II. Gwendolen and Jack have already demonstrated that proposals must be made correctly, especially if anyone is nearby. Now, Cecily and Algernon present a mockery of conventional courtship and romance. As always, appearance is everything. Cecily's diary is a particularly useful tool to symbolize the deceptive character of romance and courtship. When Miss Prism tells Cecily that memory is all one needs to remember one's life, Cecily replies, "Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened." False memory is what provides for the romance in Miss Prism's three-volume novel. Young girls' heads are filled with romance and naïve ideas about marriage; the true nature of courtship in Victorian, upper-class society is a business deal, according to Wilde, where financial security and family names are traded for wives. Wilde shows this clearly when Algernon proposes to Cecily and tells her he loves her. He is a bit confused when she explains that they have already been engaged for three months, starting last February 14 — at least that is how she recorded her fantasy in her diary. In fact, she even mentions where, when and how their engagement took place. Furthermore, she has letters written by Ernest that purport his love and chronicle the breaking off of the engagement. (No engagement is serious if it is not broken off at least once and then forgiven.) Comically, she mentions in passing that Ernest has beautiful words but that they are "badly spelled." Through this comment, Wilde highlights the superficial Victorian approach to courtship and marriage by having Cecily criticize the spelling in a love letter. To emphasize this absurdity, Algernon comments on the weather in the same breath as their engagement.

Glossary

"As a man sows, so let him reap." This is a verse from the Bible, Galatians 6:7, meaning that actions determine fate.

three-volume novels Lending libraries circulated novels in three parts so that three different readers could be reading at the same time. This practice ended in the late 1800s.

Mudie a lending library.

egeria chastity. Egeria, a nymph, gave wise laws to Numa Pompilius of Rome that were used for the vestal virgins.

Evensong a Sunday evening religious service.

womanthrope a humorous word made up by Miss Prism for a person who hates women.

sententiously full of, or fond of using, maxims, proverbs and so on, especially in a way that is ponderously trite and moralizing.

the Primitive Church the pre-Reformation Catholic Church, whose priest remained celibate.

canonical practice church law.

Summary and Analysis Act II: Part 2

Summary

While Algernon rushes out to make christening arrangements, Cecily writes Ernest's proposal in her diary. She is interrupted by Merriman announcing The Honorable Gwendolen Fairfax to see Jack; unfortunately, Jack is at the rectory. Cecily asks her in, and they introduce themselves. Gwendolen did not know Jack had a ward, and she wishes Cecily were older and less beautiful.

Both announce that they are engaged to Ernest Worthing. When they compare diaries, they decide that Gwendolen was asked first; however, Cecily says that since then, he has obviously changed his mind and proposed to Cecily. Merriman and a footman enter with tea, which stops their argument. They discuss geography and flowers in a civilized manner while the servants are present. However, during the tea ceremony, Cecily deliberately gives Gwendolen sugar in her tea when Gwendolen did not want sugar and tea cake when Gwendolen expressly asked for bread and butter. The situation is very tense and strained.

Jack arrives, and Gwendolen calls him Ernest; he kisses Gwendolen who demands an explanation of the situation. Cecily explains that this is not Ernest but her guardian, Jack Worthing. Algernon comes in, and Cecily calls him Ernest. Gwendolen explains that he is her cousin, Algernon Moncrieff. The ladies then console each other because the men have played a monstrous trick on them. Jack sheepishly admits that he has no brother Ernest and has never had a brother of any kind. Both ladies announce that they are not engaged to anyone and leave to go into the house.

Analysis

Act II explores the personalities of Cecily Cardew and Gwendolen Fairfax. Both women have in common their singled-minded persistence in pursuing a husband named Ernest. They have strong opinions, are able to deal with unexpected situations, and are connected in many instances by dialogue that is repetitive and parallel. However, they also have many differences.

Cecily Cardew is passionate about her desires and her goals, but she is also overly protected in the country setting. She is being brought up far away from the temptations and social life of the city, protected until her coming out. Her goal is to marry a solid Victorian husband with the trustworthy name of Ernest. When she meets Algernon, she is sure she has found him.

Gwendolen Fairfax is a big-city, sophisticated woman in sharp contrast to Cecily Cardew. Gwendolen has ideas of her own. Like her mother, Gwendolen is determined. Gwendolen knows what she wants. She comes to the country to pursue her Ernest, thinking she will rescue him. She tells Cecily, "If the poor fellow has been entrapped into any foolish promise, I shall consider it my duty to rescue him at once, and with a firm hand." Whatever her opinion, she states it very clearly. With her lorgnette, she views her world with the shortsightedness instilled in her by her

Victorian mother — like mother, like daughter. However, this daughter occasionally chafes at the restraints placed on her by her class and time period. Humorously, Wilde displays Gwendolen's shortsightedness when he mentions her diary. Gwendolen's thoughts generally consist of observations about herself. She is totally self-absorbed, like most of the characters in Wilde's play.

Wilde links Cecily and Gwendolen very cleverly by using parallel conversations and by repeating bits and pieces of sentences. They both discuss liking and disliking each other with exactly the same words. Likewise, they both discuss marrying Ernest with the same phrases. Gwendolen says, "My first impressions of people are never wrong," and later counters with, "My first impressions of people are invariably right." Their artificial speech and comments on trivial subjects are part of polite conversation. Jack and Algernon are also linked with parallel lines that display the similarities in their situations. Jack says, "You won't be able to run down to the country quite so often as you used to do, dear Algy. And a very good thing too." Algernon parallels this line with "You won't be able to disappear to London quite so frequently as your wicked custom was. And not a bad thing either." The parallel words and lines are used almost like a minuet, where each partner circles around the other turning one way and then the other. Wilde has choreographed the lines to present a stylized, artificial milieu that exaggerates the art of manners and social discourse.

The culmination of Wilde's commentary on Victorian social rituals is the tea ceremony with Cecily and Gwendolen. This witty exchange of conversation is representative of Victorian social ritual where proposals, social calls, and parties are all carefully orchestrated. Because it is conducted under obvious duress, the tea becomes a ridiculous event. Throughout the tea pouring and the cake cutting, Cecily and Gwendolen are mindful of their manners in front of the servants. Even their anger is civilized. Once the servants leave they discover they are engaged to the same man, and the conversation heats up considerably. The servants, however, provide a calming influence, and the women must simply glare at each other across the table. Their sarcasm is revealed in Wilde's stage directions. When Cecily makes a satirical comment about Gwendolen living in town because she does not like crowds — indicating that she has few friends and little social life — Gwendolen bites her lip and beats her foot nervously. Cecily is instructed to make this comment "sweetly." For her own part, Gwendolen calls Cecily a detestable girl, but her comment is made in an aside to the audience.

For their part, the servants continue to serve as an opportunity for Wilde to comment on the all-knowing-but-seldom-commenting lower class. Merriman's function is to announce people and events, warn of the approach of Lady Bracknell with a discrete cough, and watch the happenings with amusement but without registering this with his face or manners. He carries to the tea ceremony all the traditional hardware: a salver, a tablecloth and a plate stand. Wilde says in his directions, "The presence of the servants exercises a restraining influence..." The women know they must not bicker in front of the hired help, and the servants understand that their very proximity will play a role in the outcome. Merriman asserts his mistress's role when he asks Cecily if he should lay the tea "as usual." Cecily answers, "sternly, in a calm voice, 'Yes, as usual.'" Mistress and servant are acknowledging her role as the lady of the house. Wilde seems to be asking what the British upper class would do without the stern but calming influence of its servants.

Several motifs that have been mentioned earlier are continued in this scene. Religion is once again referred to as a matter of form and format. The significance of a person's baptism is not even a matter for concern when Jack and Algernon get the canon to agree to baptize them. A person's rebirth is only a matter of a name on a piece of paper. It is a means to an end because it will get both men what they want: Cecily and Gwendolen.

Reform comes to mean the possibility that dissenters can be taught to see the error of their ways and conform to the status quo. Cecily's education is grooming her to be a member of the upper class, mindlessly repeating its virtues. She offers to reform Algernon, acting with forward zeal. She plans to turn Algernon into the perfect Ernest, a man who will be like other men and propose correctly, protect and support her financially, and stop his single life on the town.

Conventional Victorian values and behavior are often the subjects of bantering among the characters in this scene. Gwendolen is pleased that "outside the family circle" her father is unknown. Certainly idle gossip about the wealthy should not be a matter of public discussion. The appearance of Victorian family life is for the man to be part of the domestic setting, but, as always, Wilde is saying that this appearance is the ideal while the reality is quite different.

Truth and deception also continue to be a part of Wilde's country world. Gwendolen passionately comments on Jack's honest and upright nature. "He is the very soul of truth and honour. Disloyalty would be as impossible to him as deception." Of course, the audience knows that her Ernest has lied about himself throughout the course of their courtship. Algernon also engages in deception in this scene when he acknowledges that his trip to Jack's estate has been the most wonderful bunburying trip of his life. What began as trivial has become an engagement. Both men accuse each other of deceiving the women in their lives, and Jack says that Algernon cannot marry Cecily because he has been deceptive to her. Alternatively, Algernon accuses Jack of engaging in deception toward his cousin, Gwendolen. By the end of the scene, it seems that marriage plans will not materialize for either of them anytime soon. Their deception as Ernests is definitely over, and now they must figure out how to pick up the pieces. The hypocrisy of Victorian virtues, paid lip service in public but invariably denied in private lives, is aptly represented by Jack and Algernon's behavior.

Glossary

effeminate having the qualities generally attributed to women, such as weakness, timidity, delicacy and so on; unmanly; not virile.

the Morning Post a newspaper read by the upper class because of its reporting on engagements, marriages and social gossip.

lorgnette a pair of eyeglasses attached to a handle.

"a restraining influence" the presence of servants that causes the principal characters to be careful in their speech.

machinations an artful or secret plot or scheme.

Summary and Analysis Act III

Summary

No time has elapsed, but in Act III Gwendolen and Cecily are in the morning room of the Manor House, looking out the window at Jack and Algernon and hoping they will come in. If they do, the ladies intend to be cold and heartless. The men do come in and start explaining why they lied about their names. The women accept their explanations but still have a problem with them lacking the name Ernest. Both men proclaim that they plan to be rechristened, and Gwendolen and Cecily forgive them, and both couples embrace.

Merriman discretely coughs to signal the entrance of Lady Bracknell. She desires an explanation for these hugs, and Gwendolen tells her that she is engaged to Jack. Lady Bracknell says that they are not engaged and insists that they cease all communication. She inquires about Algernon's invalid friend, Bunbury, and Algernon explains that he killed him that afternoon; Bunbury exploded. He also adds that he and Cecily are engaged. Immediately, Lady Bracknell interrogates Jack about Cecily's expectations. However, because she has a fortune of 130,000 pounds, Lady Bracknell believes her to have "distinct social possibilities."

Lady Bracknell gives her consent to Algernon's engagement, but Jack immediately objects as Cecily's guardian. He says that Algernon is a liar and lists all the lies he has told. Also, Cecily does not come into her fortune and lose Jack as a guardian until she is 35 years old. Algernon says he can wait, but Cecily says she cannot. So Jack, in a moment of brilliance, declares that he will agree to the marriage if Lady Bracknell will consent to his engagement to Gwendolen. That is out of the question, and Lady Bracknell prepares to leave with Gwendolen.

Dr. Chasuble arrives and announces that he is ready for the christenings. Jack replies that they are useless now, and Chasuble decides to head back to the church where Miss Prism is waiting. The name Prism shocks Lady Bracknell, and she demands to see the governess. When Miss Prism arrives, she sees Lady Bracknell and turns pale. In a moment of great coincidence, Lady Bracknell reveals that Miss Prism left Lord Bracknell's house 28 years ago. On a normal walk with the baby carriage, she disappeared, along with the baby. She demands to know where the baby is. Prism explains that in a moment of great distraction, she placed the baby in her handbag and her three-volume manuscript in the baby carriage. The baby and handbag were accidentally left in the train station. When she discovered her error, she abandoned the baby carriage and disappeared. Jack excitedly asks her which station it was, and when she reveals that it was Victoria Station, the Brighton Line, he runs from the room and returns with a black leather bag. When Prism identifies it, he embraces her, believing her to be his mother. She protests that she is not married and says that he will have to ask Lady Bracknell for the identity of his mother.

Jack discovers that he is actually the son of Lady Bracknell's sister, Mrs. Moncrieff, and that Algy is his older brother. Jack is overcome to know that he really does have an unfortunate scoundrel for a brother. He asks what his christened name was, and Lady Bracknell explains that it is Ernest John. So, Jack asserts that he had been speaking the truth all along: His name is Ernest, and he does have a brother. Both couples embrace, as do Chasuble and Miss Prism, and Jack declares that he finally realizes the importance of being earnest.

Analysis

Act III offers happy resolution to the problems of identity and marriage that drive much of the humor in the previous acts. Wilde continues to mock the social customs and attitudes of the aristocratic class. He relentlessly attacks their values, views on marriage and respectability, sexual attitudes, and concern for stability in the social structure.

Wilde attacks social behavior with the continuation of speeches by his characters that are the opposite of their actions. While Cecily and Gwendolen agree to keep a dignified silence, Gwendolen actually states that they will not be the first ones to speak to the men. In the very next line she says, "Mr. Worthing, I have something very particular to ask you." Wilde seems to be saying that people speak as if they have strong opinions, but their actions do not support their words. If actions truly do speak louder than words, Wilde has made his point: Society, literally, speaks volumes, but the words are meaningless.

Wilde continues his criticism of society's valuing style over substance when Gwendolen says, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing." Lady Bracknell discusses Algernon's marriage assets in the same light. She says, "Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?" Indeed, in a society where looks are everything and substance is discounted, Algernon is the perfect husband.

What else do aristocrats value? They seem to esteem the appearance of respectability. Respectability means children are born within the context of marriage. Wilde once again mocks the hypocrisy of the aristocrats who appear to value monogamy but pretend not to notice affairs. Jack's speech to Miss Prism, whom he believes to be his mother, is humorous in both its indignant defense of marriage and also its mocking of the loudly touted religious reformer's virtues of repentance and forgiveness. He says to Miss Prism, "Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. Mother, I forgive you." His words are all the more humorous when Miss Prism indignantly denies being his mother. It was not at all unusual for aristocrats to have children born out of wedlock, but society turned its head, pretended not to know about those children, and did not condemn their fathers.

The gulf between the upper class and its servants is explored in the scenes with Merriman and Prism. When Lady Bracknell unexpectedly shows up at Jack's, Merriman coughs discretely to warn the couples of her arrival. One can only imagine his humorous thoughts as he watches the wealthy tiptoe around each other and argue about what should be important. When Lady Bracknell hears the description of Prism and recognizes her as their former nanny, she calls for Miss Prism by shouting "Prism!" without using a title in front of her name. Imperiously, Lady Bracknell divides the servant from the lady of the manor. Wilde's audience would recognize this behavior on the part of the servants and the upper class. The stuffy class distinctions defined the society in which they lived.

In an age of social registers, Lady Bracknell laments that even the Court Guides have errors. In the next breath, she discusses bribing Gwendolen's maid to find out what is happening in her daughter's life. In Act III she also reveals that her aristocratic brother's family entrusted their most precious possession — Jack — to a woman who is more interested in her handbag and manuscript than in what happens to the baby in her charge. Wilde seems to be questioning the values of a society that believes in social registers, hires other people to neglectfully watch its children, and uses bribery to keep track of the children who are not missing.

The death of Bunbury gives Wilde the opportunity to speak of aristocratic fears and have some continued fun with the upper class's lack of compassion about death. The 1885 Trafalgar Square riots brought on ruling-class fears of insurrection, anarchism and socialism. Wilde humorously touches on these fears when he allows Algernon to explain the explosion of Bunbury. Lady Bracknell, fearing the worst, exclaims, "Was he the victim of a revolutionary outrage? I was not aware that Mr. Bunbury was interested in social legislation. If so, he is well punished for his morbidity." Evidently, to Lady Bracknell's acquaintances, laws that protect the welfare of those less fortunate are strictly morbid

subjects. In fact, this attitude seems to contradict the upper-class concern for reform. However, in reality, Wilde is confirming the upper-class definition of social reform: conforming to the status quo.

In Act III Wilde makes a comment on the value of being homosexual with a veiled reference to Lady Lancing. When Lady Bracknell asserts that Cecily needs to have a more sophisticated hairstyle, she recommends "a thoroughly experienced French maid" who can make a great deal of change in a very short time. She explains that such a change happened to an acquaintance of hers, Lady Lancing, and that after three months "her own husband did not know her." Jack uses the opportunity to make a pun on the word know, using it in an aside — a comment only the audience can hear. Jack interprets know to mean they no longer had sex, insinuating Lady Lancing's preference for the French maid. He says, "And after six months nobody knew her," indicating that the homosexual experience made a new woman of her. Although homosexuality would have been seen as immoral to Wilde's audience, Jack indicates that being homosexual might be a good thing — almost as a social commentary — directly to the audience. It seems a double life is necessary after one is married, whether it be bunburying or the homosexual life Wilde was experiencing in an increasingly public way.

Wilde continues his assault on family life in Act III by mentioning its strange qualities in several conversations. It appears rather strange, for example, that Lady Bracknell cannot even recall the Christian name of her brother-in-law, Algy's father. Algernon's father died before Algernon was one, so stranger yet is Algernon's comment, "We were never even on speaking terms." He gives that as the reason he cannot remember his father's name. Further assaulting family life, Wilde has Lady Bracknell describe Lord Moncrieff as "eccentric" but excuses his behavior because it "was the result of the Indian climate, and marriage, and indigestions, and other things of that kind." Marriage is lumped together with things such as indigestion. In explaining Lord Moncrieff's marriage, Lady Bracknell says that he was "essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life." Her description invites suspicion that the local constabulary might have visited because of domestic disturbances. Family life and domestic bliss do not get high marks in Wilde's estimation.

When Miss Prism humorously resolves the problem of Jack's lineage, Wilde takes his hero of unknown origins and paints him as the aristocrat who will now be assimilated into his rightful place in the social structure. Through the sad melodrama of Jack's handbag parentage, Wilde exaggerates the Victorian cliché of the poor foundling who makes good. As soon as Jack is known to be a member of the established aristocracy, a Moncrieff in fact, he is seen as an appropriate person for Gwendolen to marry. They will, according to Wilde, live happily ever after in wedded bliss and continue the aristocratic blindness to anything that truly matters.

The tag line of the play, spoken by Jack, is a familiar convention in Victorian farces. In discovering that he has been telling the truth all along — his name is Ernest, and he has a brother — Jack makes fun of the Victorian virtues of sincerity and honesty and asks Gwendolen to forgive him for "speaking nothing but the truth." He now realizes the importance of being the person he is supposed to be. Wilde is saying perhaps that a new kind of earnestness exists, one that is different from the virtues extolled by the Victorians. Maybe it is possible to be honest and understand what should be taken seriously in life rather than being deceptive, hypocritical, and superficial. Some readers believe, however, that the ending shows Jack mockingly redefining Victorian earnestness as just the opposite: a life of lies, pleasure and beauty. Critics debate the interpretation of the last line.

A curious stage direction occurs in Act III, revealing the concern Wilde had for the staging of his play to compliment his ideas. As his couples come together and move apart, he emphasizes the choreography of the pairs. He has them speak in unison, both the women together and the men together. It matters not who they are; they are interchangeable. Marriage is simply an institution that is a gesture, like a christening. The unison speaking is very

stylistic, not meant to be realistic at all. It reveals Wilde's attitude that what is important in Victorian marriage — names — really should not be as important as other considerations.

In the end, Wilde leaves his audience thinking about the trivial social conventions they deem important. Their Victorian virtues perhaps need redefining. Institutions such as marriage, religion, family values and money should perhaps have new interpretations. The character of people, rather than their names and family fortunes, should weigh most heavily when considering their worth. Wilde was able to use humor to skewer these attitudes and convince his audience about the importance of being earnest.

Glossary

effrontery unashamed boldness.

German skepticism a German philosophy that examines style or appearance rather than substance.

University Extension Scheme The University of London began these extension courses that were early developments in adult education.

terminus (British) either the end of a transportation line, or a station or town located there; terminal.

Court Guides an annual reference manual listing the names and addresses of members of the upper class and aristocracy.

Funds government stocks that give a low yield of interest but are conservative and safe.

Oxonian someone who graduated from Oxford University.

Anabaptists a religious group that believes the only form of baptism should be complete immersion of the body in water.

pew-opener a person who works for a church by opening the private pews of the wealthy.

perambulator (chiefly British) a baby carriage; buggy.

Temperance beverage a drink that expressly does not contain alcohol.

Army Lists published lists of commissioned officers in the British Army.

Character Analysis John (Jack) Worthing

Jack Worthing, like the other main characters in Wilde's play, is less a realistic character and more an instrument for representing a set of ideas or attitudes. Wilde uses him to represent an upper-class character easily recognized by his audience. Jack also gives Wilde an opportunity to explore attitudes about Victorian rituals such as courtship and marriage. As an alter ego of Wilde, Jack represents the idea of leading a life of respectability on the surface (in the country) and a life of deception for pleasure (in the city). His name, Worthing, is related to worthiness, allowing Wilde to humorously consider the correct manners of Victorian society.

As a recognized upper-class Victorian, Jack has earned respectability only because of his adopted father's fortune. It has put him in a position to know the rules of behavior of polite society. His ability to spout witty lines about trivial subjects and say the opposite of what is known to be true are learned results of his position. When Lady Bracknell questions his qualifications for marrying her daughter, he knows she wants to hear about his pedigree. He recognizes that he needs the correct parents along with his wealth.

Of particular significance is Jack's role in the dialogues about social attitudes and rituals, such as courtship and marriage. He often plays the straight man to counter Algernon's humor, but occasionally, he gets the witty lines. Respectability is also a function of Jack's character. Although he leads a deceptive life in town, he represents the ideal of leading a responsible life in the country. He agrees more with the idea of Victorian earnestness or duty than Algernon does. However, because he deceives people in the city, he is still a symbol of Wilde's deceptive life of pleasure in the homosexual community. Jack longs for the respectability of marrying Gwendolen and is willing to do whatever it takes. In the long run, he assumes his rightful place in the very society he has occasionally skewered for its attitudes. Wilde is able to soften Jack's respectability and position as a symbol of the ruling class by showing his enormous sense of humor. The funeral garb for his fake brother's death and the story about the French maid both show that while Jack longs for respectability, he still has the wit and rebelliousness to recognize the ridiculous nature of trivial Victorian concerns.

Character Analysis Algernon (Algy) Moncrieff

Algernon Moncrieff is a member of the wealthy class, living a life of total bachelorhood in a fashionable part of London. He is younger than Jack, takes less responsibility, and is always frivolous and irreverent. As a symbol, he is wittiness and aestheticism personified. He — like Jack — functions as a Victorian male with a life of deception. Unlike Jack, he is much more self-absorbed, allowing Wilde to discuss Victorian repression and guilt, which often result in narcissism.

Along with Lady Bracknell, Algy is given witty lines and epigrams showing his humor and disrespect for the society he will inherit. In discussing the music for Lady Bracknell's reception, Algernon says, "Of course the music is a great difficulty. You see, if one plays good music, people don't listen, and if one plays bad music, people don't talk." This is Algernon's wit and wisdom contained in a single line. Occasionally, he even congratulates himself on his humor: "It's perfectly phrased!" He poses and moves luxuriously about the stage with the studied languor of the aesthete who has nothing to do but admire his own wittiness. One might certainly see him as a representation of Wilde's cleverness and position in the aesthetic cult of the 1890s.

Parallel to Wilde in deception, Algernon is leading a double life. He uses an imaginary invalid friend, Bunbury, to get out of boring engagements and to provide excitement in the otherwise dull life of Victorian England. As he says, "A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it." This secrecy, of course, was also a facet of Wilde's life, which was unraveling before his Victorian audiences all too quickly by the time the play opened in London. With his irreverent attitudes about marrying and his propensity for a secret life, Algernon represents the rule-breaker side of Oscar Wilde — the side that eventually would meet its downfall in a notorious trial.

Finally, Algernon functions as an expression of the lengths to which Victorians had to go to escape the stifling moral repression and guilt brought about by a society that values appearance over reality. Algernon's constant references to eating and his repeated actions of gorging himself on cucumber sandwiches, muffins, and whatever food might be handy are symbols of total self-absorption, lust, and the physical pleasures denied by polite society. Just as institutions such as the church (Chasuble) and the education system (Prism) function to keep people on the straight and narrow, human nature denies these restrictions and seems to have a will of its own. Algernon symbolizes the wild, unrestricted, curly-headed youngster who is happiest breaking the rules.

Character Analysis Lady Augusta Bracknell

The most memorable character and one who has a tremendous impact on the audience is Lady Augusta Bracknell. Wilde's audience would have identified most with her titled position and bearing. Wilde humorously makes her the tool of the conflict, and much of the satire. For the play to end as a comedy, her objections and obstacles must be dealt with and overcome.

Lady Bracknell is first and foremost a symbol of Victorian earnestness and the unhappiness it brings as a result. She is powerful, arrogant, ruthless to the extreme, conservative, and proper. In many ways, she represents Wilde's opinion of Victorian upper-class negativity, conservative and repressive values, and power.

Her opinions and mannerisms betray a careful and calculated speaking pattern. She is able to go round for round with the other characters on witty epigrams and social repartee. Despite her current position, Lady Bracknell was not always a member of the upper class; she was a social climber bent on marrying into the aristocracy. As a former member of the lower class, she represents the righteousness of the formerly excluded. Because she is now Lady Bracknell, she has opinions on society, marriage, religion, money, illness, death, and respectability. She is another of Wilde's inventions to present his satire on these subjects.

As a ruthless social climber and spokesperson for the status quo, Lady Bracknell's behavior enforces social discrimination and excludes those who do not fit into her new class. Her daughter's unsuitable marriage is an excellent example of how she flexes her muscles. She sees marriage as an alliance for property and social security; love or passion is not part of the mix. She bends the rules to suit her pleasure because she can. Jack will be placed on her list of eligible suitors only if he can pass her unpredictable and difficult test. She gives him ruthlessly "correct," but immoral, advice on his parents. "I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over." It matters not how Jack finds parent(s), just that he do it, following the requirements for acceptability.

Lady Bracknell's authority and power are extended over every character in the play. Her decision about the suitability of both marriages provides the conflict of the story. She tells her daughter quite explicitly, "Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to someone, I or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact." Done, decided, finished. She interrogates both Jack and Cecily, bribes Gwendolen's maid, and looks down her nose at both Chasuble and Prism.

Her social commentary on class structure is Wilde's commentary about how the privileged class of England keeps its power. Lady Bracknell firmly believes the middle and lower classes should never be taught to think or question. It would breed anarchy and the possibility that the upper class might lose its privileged position.

Wilde has created, with Augusta Bracknell, a memorable instrument of his satiric wit, questioning all he sees in Victorian upper-class society.

Character Analysis Gwendolen Fairfax & Cecily Cardew

Both Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew provide Wilde with opportunities to discuss ideas and tout the New Woman near the turn of the century. They are curiously similar in many ways, but as the writer's tools, they have their differences.

Both women are smart, persistent and in pursuit of goals in which they take the initiative. Gwendolen follows Jack to the country — an atmosphere rather alien to her experiences, and Cecily pursues Algernon from the moment she lays eyes on him. Both women are perfectly capable of outwitting their jailers. Gwendolen escapes from her dominating mother, Lady Bracknell; Cecily outwits Jack by arranging for Algernon to stay, and she also manages to escape Miss Prism to carry on a tryst with her future fiancé. The first moment Cecily meets Algernon, she firmly explains her identity with a no-nonsense reaction to his patronizing comment.

For both women, appearances and style are important. Gwendolen must have the perfect proposal performed in the correct manner and must marry a man named Ernest simply because of the name's connotations. Cecily also craves appearance and style. She believes Jack's brother is a wicked man, and though she has never met such a man, she thinks the idea sounds romantic. She toys with rebelliously and romantically pursuing the "wicked brother," but she has full intentions of reforming him to the correct and appropriate appearance. The respectable name of Ernest for a husband is important to her. Both women, despite their differences, are products of a world in which how one does something is more important than why.

Cecily and Gwendolen are dissimilar in some aspects of their personalities and backgrounds. Gwendolen, on one hand, is confident, worldly, and at home in the big city of London. While her mother has taught her to be shortsighted like the lorgnette through which Gwendolen peers at the world, she has also brought her daughter up in a traditional family, the only such family in the entire play. On the other hand, Cecily is introduced in a garden setting, the child of a more sheltered, natural, and less-sophisticated environment. She has no mother figure other than the grim Miss Prism, and she has a guardian instead of a parent.

Gwendolen provides Wilde with the opportunity to discuss marriage, courtship and the absurdities of life. Her pronouncements on trivialities and her total contradictions of what she said two lines earlier make her the perfect instrument for Wilde to provide humor and to comment on inane Victorian attitudes. Cecily provides Wilde with an opportunity to discuss dull and boring education, Victorian values, money and security, and the repression of passion. More sheltered than Gwendolen, Cecily is still expected to learn her boring lessons and make a good marriage.

Both women seem ideally matched to their fiancés. Gwendolen is very no-nonsense and straightforward like Jack. She believes in appearances, upper-class snobbery, correct behavior, and the ability to discuss, ad nauseam, the trivial. Jack too is practical and takes his responsibilities quite seriously. While he has a sense of humor, he also realizes — especially in the country — that he must maintain a proper image and pay his bills. Cecily and Algernon are both guided by passion and immediate gratification. More emotional than their counterparts, they pursue life with a vengeance, aiming for what they desire and oblivious to the consequences. Both couples indulge in witty epigrams and are perfectly matched.

While Wilde spends most of his play satirizing Victorian ideals of courtship and marriage, he gets the last laugh with his female characters. Despite their positions in society as victims of the machinations of men, marriage contracts and property, the women are the strong characters who are firmly in control. Wilde provides two female characters who lack Lady Bracknell's ruthlessness, but who have the strength and practical sense that the men lack.

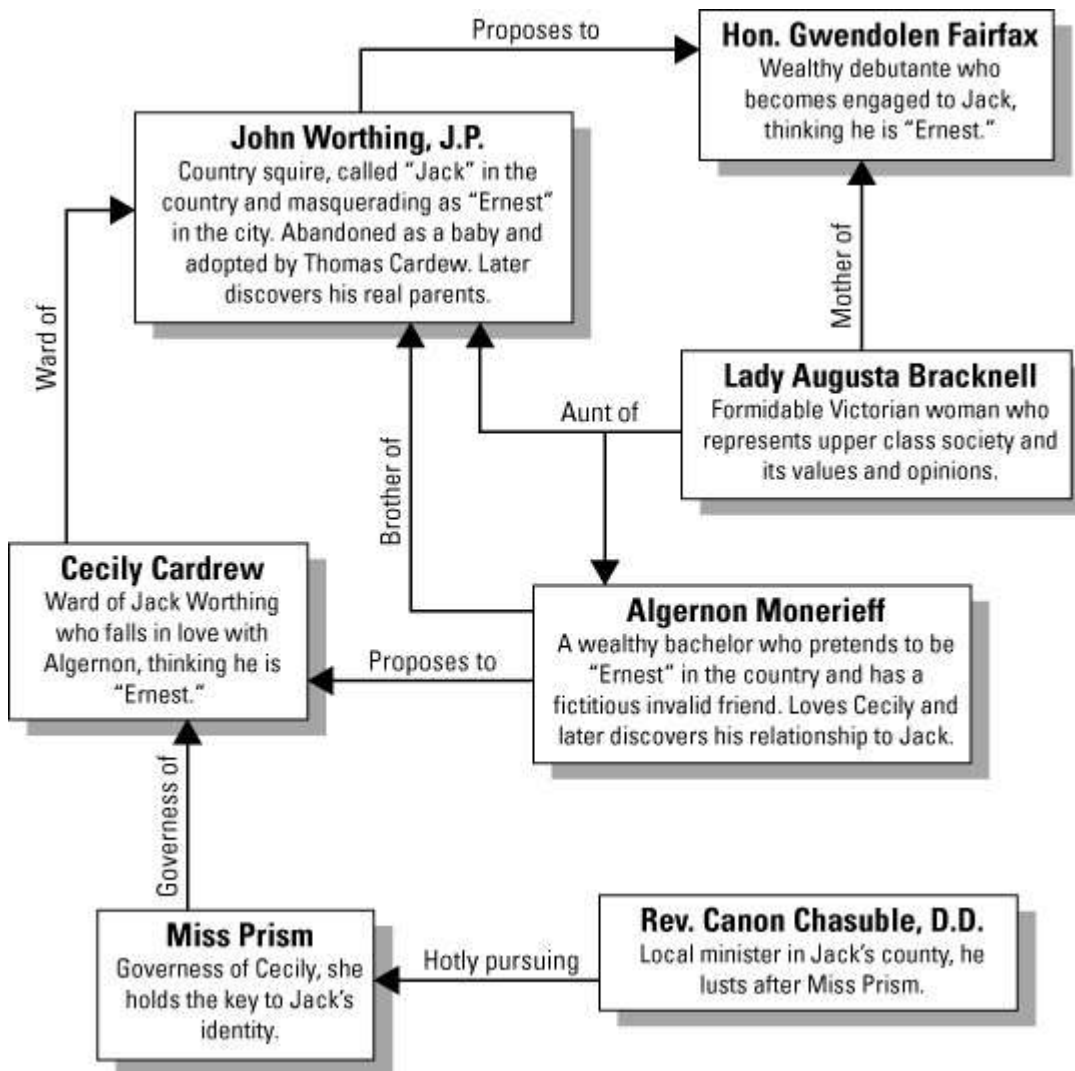
Character Analysis Rev. Chasuble & Miss Prism

These two comic and slightly grotesque caricatures are less developed than the principal players, and Wilde uses them to comment on religion and morality.

The minister is an intellectual character who speaks in metaphors. He is a "typical" country vicar who refers often to canon law and gives fatherly advice. Absent-mindedly in charge of his parishioners' souls, he performs christenings and interchangeable sermons, depending on the situation. Occasionally, however, his mask slips, and an interior world of lusty desire for Miss Prism appears. Often absent-minded, but always spouting moral platitudes, he symbolizes Wilde's view of Victorian religion and respectability.

Miss Prism is also intellectual, but in a literary way. She is a creative writer and a parody of "a woman with a past." She clearly had dreams of becoming a sensational romantic novelist, but, alas, she must make a living, so she is instead the jailer of Cecily and the guardian of her education and virtue. She, like the minister, makes constant moral judgments. Her favorite line, even to dead Ernest, is "As a man sows, so shall he reap." Repeating this often allows Wilde to show how meaningless and clichéd religion and values have become. As an instrument of the aristocracy, Miss Prism educates Cecily to conform to the dry, meaningless intellectual pursuits designed to keep the status quo. But, like Chasuble, beneath her surface she has a hedonistic streak; often her language slips when she ventures outside her Victorian appearance. She persists in inviting Chasuble to discuss marriage, pursues him diligently, and falls into his arms at the end.

Miss Prism is an appropriate character to uncover Jack's true history because she also is not what she seems. Wilde uses her to show what happens when dreams cannot be pursued in a society of strict social structure and stringent moral guidelines. Both she and Chasuble — with their lack of social opportunities — become servants to the system, promoting its continuation.



Oscar Wilde Biography

Early Years

Oscar Wilde's unconventional life began with an equally unconventional family. He was born Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde on October 16, 1854, at 21 Westland Row, Dublin, Ireland. His father, Sir William Wilde, was an eminent Victorian and a doctor of aural surgery.

Wilde's mother, Jane Francesca Elgee (or Lady Wilde), saw herself as a revolutionary and liked to trace her family through the Italian line of Alighieris, including Dante. An Irish nationalist, she wrote under the pen name Speranza. She attracted artists like herself and established a literary salon devoted to intellectual and artistic conversations of the day, through which Lady Wilde brought literature, an interest in art and culture, and an elegance and appreciation for wit into the lives of her children.

Wilde had two siblings: an older brother named Willie, born in 1852, and a sister, Isola, born in 1856, but who died at the age of 10. These offspring would not experience a standard, conventional childhood. Through their home passed intellectuals, artists, and internationally known doctors — and the children were not left to a governess or nanny.

Allowed to mingle and eat with the guests, they learned to value intellectual and witty conversation, an influence that would have profound and long-lasting effects on young Oscar Wilde.

Education, Travel, and Celebrity

Wilde was given the advantage of a superior education. At age 11, he entered the exclusive Portora Royal School and began to assert the scholarship and intellect that would bring him both great celebrity and great sadness. His long interest in all things Greek began at Portora. Winning several prizes, he was already a first-rate classics scholar and ready to pursue serious studies.

Wilde went on to Trinity College where he extended his interest in the classics and his long list of intellectual accomplishments. He won an additional scholarship, made first class in examinations, received a composition prize for Greek verse, and the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek. In 1874 he received a scholarship to Magdalen College in Oxford. His lifelong love of the classics would continue through his university career and immensely influence his subsequent writing. Little did he know what turns and twists his life would take when he entered Oxford and came under the influence of three very powerful professors.

Wilde's four years at Oxford (1874-1878) were dizzy, personality-changing times. By graduation he was firmly committed to the pursuit of pleasure and the careful devising of a public persona, which included unconventional clothing and the pose of a dandy. Wilde's direction in life changed because of the influence of three professors — Ruskin, Pater, and Mahaffy.

The magnetism of Professor John Ruskin, author of *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*, attracted Wilde's imagination. Ruskin believed civilizations could be judged by their art, which must consider and reflect moral values. Ruskin also stirred Wilde's aristocratic soul with social concerns in his insistence that his students identify with the working class and do manual labor. His influence on Wilde's social conscience is undeniable, and it permeates Wilde's plays and his essay, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." Wilde did not, however, agree with Ruskin on the moral purposes of art. Influenced by Keats and his ideas of truth and beauty, he believed art should be loved and appreciated for its own sake.

Yet another Oxford influence was Professor Walter Pater, author of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* and *Marius the Epicurian*. His prose style influenced young Wilde, and his ideas seemed to fit Wilde's new-found proclivities. Pater emphasized art for art's sake and urged his students to live with passion and for sensual pleasure, testing new ideas and not conforming to the orthodoxy. Pater was planting seeds in fertile ground. The Aesthetic Movement, an avant-garde philosophy of the 1870s, was in full bloom, and its advocates were critical of the heavy, moralistic Victorian taste. They wanted to pursue forms of beauty in opposition to the art and architecture of the day. Wilde could not agree more. He went overboard into aesthetics, adopting extravagant clothing styles, which continued when he left Oxford for London in 1878. He thought of himself as an aesthete, poet, writer, and nonconformist — and he wanted to be famous or at least infamous.

A third influence on Wilde at Oxford was Mahaffy, an Oxford professor of ancient history. Professor Mahaffy took him along on trips to Italy and Greece.

By 1878, when Wilde completed his degree at Oxford, he had won the coveted Newdigate Prize for his poem "Ravenna." Leaving Oxford, Wilde was now ready to take on the world with a classical education and an unequivocal inclination toward the unconventional. Wilde proved to be a master of public relations. Virtually unknown and unpublished, he single-handedly created his own celebrity. While his travels and lectures increased his fame both in England and abroad, his early writings were not critical successes.

London in the 1870s provided Wilde the opportunity to build a public persona and test the limits of what society would tolerate. He dressed in strange clothes and often sported flowers such as lilies and sunflowers. He built a reputation as a minor luminary by courting celebrities. In 1880, he privately printed his first play, *Vera*, and the following year published his first book of poems. The poems were a modest success, but the play died a quick death.

In April 1881, Gilbert and Sullivan opened a play titled *Patience* in which a primary character, Bunthorne, was assumed to be based on Wilde. This false assumption was promoted by Wilde through early attendance — in outrageous clothes — at the play. When the play moved on to New York in December 1881, Richard D'Oyly Carte, the producer, hired Wilde to do a series of lectures to introduce the play to American audiences. The press was alerted and ready for his arrival, and Wilde played to them by proclaiming at customs that he had nothing to declare but his genius.

What began as a modest tour ripened into a six-month nationwide tour. He spoke in New York, Chicago, Boston, Fort Wayne (Indiana), Omaha (Nebraska), Philadelphia, and Washington. He even lectured in the mining town of Leadville, Colorado, where his ability to hold his liquor brought him a silver drill and the good-humored admiration of the miners. America seemed intrigued by Wilde's odd character, and he, in turn, admired many things American, including the democratic insistence on universal education. While in America, Wilde's lectures included "The English Renaissance of Art," "The House Beautiful," and "Decorative Art in America." As a celebrity, he dined with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charles Eliot Norton (the famous Harvard professor), and Walt Whitman. He also had audiences with Lincoln's son, Robert, and Jefferson Davis.

Following his triumphant tour, Wilde had enough money to spend three months in Paris. There he finished a forgettable play titled *The Duchess of Padua*. He was befriended once again by celebrities; this time they were Europeans: Zola, Hugo, Verlaine, Gide, Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, and Pissarro. Obviously, early training at his mother's salon had paid off.

He returned to London looking for backers to produce his play. In an attempt to garner backing, he cut his hair short and dressed more conservatively. When he was unsuccessful in finding producers, he arranged for a production in New York for \$1,000. The play was not successful, closing in less than a week. So, Wilde went back to England, arranging a lecture tour of Great Britain and Ireland, where he encountered a previous acquaintance, Constance Lloyd, who would become his wife — for better or for worse.

Marriage and Commercial Success

During the seven years between his wedding to Constance and his first introduction to a young man who would become part of his downfall — Lord Alfred Douglas — Wilde settled down to a life of domestic respectability as a

husband and father. By all accounts the Wildes' marriage was happy, producing two sons: Cyril in June 1885 and Vyvyan in November 1886. Wilde played often with his children and loved them immensely. To support them he wrote book reviews for newspapers and magazines, including the Pall Mall Gazette and the Dramatic Review. Occasionally, he lectured. The Lady's World magazine named him its editor in 1887, and he converted it from a fashion magazine to The Woman's World with essays about women's viewpoints on art, music, literature, and modern life. He wrote essays that took women seriously as creative and intelligent human beings. When he was an editor, Wilde's life was financially more secure. In 1888 he wrote a book of fairy tales titled *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, and in 1889 he wrote an essay titled "The Decay of Lying." He left the magazine in July 1889 to begin his greatest period of playwriting.

A Playwright with a Secret Life

Within six months of leaving *The Woman's World*, Wilde had published the commercially successful novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, about a man with a secret life. This novel was quickly followed by *Intentions*, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*, and *A House of Pomegranates*. In the period from 1891 to 1892, he produced *Salome*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and an essay, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." He amused his audiences, and in return they offered standing ovations at his plays.

One would think all this good luck, publicity, and commercial success would be enough for a respectable married man with two sons, who finally was receiving acceptance from British aristocracy. However, during this amazingly prolific period, Wilde was beginning to frequent literary circles that were often homosexual. In 1886, he is said to have had his first homosexual affair with a Canadian named Robert Ross. He was also introduced to Alfred Taylor, who lived in Bloomsbury and often had male prostitutes at his home. One of these young men was the unemployed Charles Parker. Wilde became involved with several of these young men, who later testified against him at trial.

In 1891, Oscar Wilde met the young man who would change his life forever. Lord Alfred Douglas (known as Bosie) was the 21-year-old son of the Marquis of Queensberry. A very controversial figure, Douglas was often described as femininely beautiful, aristocratic, rich, homosexual, and poetic. His hold on Wilde has often been a subject of conjecture, but most writers believe that Wilde, 14 years Bosie's senior, was infatuated, obsessed, and besotted. By 1892, the two were together constantly. They traveled to France, Italy, and Algiers. Wilde rented homes for them outside London, and when they were apart he wrote letters and was careless with their whereabouts.

Wilde enjoyed unprecedented success in the London theatres from 1893 to 1895. He had two plays running simultaneously in the West End: *A Woman of No Importance* opened at the Royal Theatre, Haymarket, in January 1893, and *Lady Windermere's Fan* began in November of that same year. From August through September 1894, he wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the seaside resort of Worthing, Sussex, his wife and children enjoying the holiday with him. By 1895, he had the acclaim of all London for his witty society plays. However, he was also increasingly indiscreet about his personal life. The year 1895 marked the beginning of the end of his public acceptance and the privacy of his secret life.

Disaster and Ruin

Rumors about Wilde's secret life were already circulating in 1895, but he was still very amusing, and as long as his indiscretions were kept quiet, society did not care. *The Importance of Being Earnest* opened on February 14 at St. James' Theatre, beginning a run of 86 performances to standing ovations. On February 28, the Marquis of Queensberry left a card for Wilde at his club, the Albemarle Club. It read: "To Oscar Wilde, posing as a sodomite." (Actually, sodomite was misspelled.) Estranged from his father and hating him, Douglas encouraged Wilde to sue the Marquis for libel. Convinced he could triumph in court, Wilde declared to his lawyers that he was innocent and wanted to press the lawsuit. His friends, knowing he had been too indiscreet, urged him to go abroad with his wife until it all blew over, but Wilde intended to carry through with the case. The Marquis hired detectives and, using Alfred Taylor and his young prostitutes, Queensberry effectively put Wilde on trial for homosexuality.

The libel trial was disastrous. When the prosecution threatened to bring in male prostitutes to testify, Wilde dropped the case and left in disgrace. But tragedy was not over for Oscar Wilde. In 1885, Parliament had passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act. It was used to try acts of "gross indecency" between men and sometimes could result in hanging. Being a homosexual was not a crime; the sexual act itself was. When the first trial ended, Queensberry's lawyers sent a transcript of the trial to public prosecutors. Home Secretary Herbert Asquith decided to arrest, imprison, and try Wilde, but he delayed the warrant long enough for Wilde to leave on the last boat-train to France. Wilde, for various reasons, remained in England and was arrested. A new trial would take place, indicting Wilde.

The press had a heyday, viciously attacking Wilde and holding up Queensberry — hardly a model citizen. They pictured Wilde as a deviant but could not print the crime with which he was charged. Unflattering cartoons and caricatures appeared in magazines such as *Punch*, and Wilde was pictured in unmanly clothes with flowers in his lapel. The court found Wilde guilty and sentenced him to two years at hard labor.

Today, transcripts of the trials can be read in H. Montgomery Hyde's *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (The Notable Trials Library by Gryphon Editions, Inc., 1989). Just as Wilde's plays noted the huge gulf between the rich and the working class, the trials themselves displayed the disparity. Lord Alfred Douglas, protected by his powerful family name, was never charged, even though the jury inquired about this because he had committed the same crime. The names of upper-class people associated with the case could not be mentioned in court; in fact, some witnesses were instructed to write a name rather than say it aloud. The names of working class people, however, were readily identified aloud.

The immediate aftermath of the trial was a total disgrace for Wilde. He was abandoned by his friends, his book sales ended, his plays were closed down, and his belongings were sold at auction at low prices. He began his sentence in Newgate Prison but was moved to different prisons over the next two years.

Oscar Wilde was not a man well equipped to face such solitary adversity. His world was normally one of social calendars and lots of people. He was moved to Pentonville Prison where he spent 23 hours a day in poorly ventilated cells and 1 hour exercising without speaking to anyone. His cell was unsanitary, and his bed was nothing more than wooden boards. The food was unspeakable, and he could only read the Bible, a prayer book, and a hymn book. Wilde was not allowed photos of his wife or children or allowed to write or receive more than one letter in three months. In February 1896, his mother dying, Wilde requested leave to go to her. His request was denied; Constance visited the prison on February 19 to tell him in person of his mother's death. It was their last meeting.

By now Wilde had lost 30 pounds, and was not doing well physically or emotionally. He was transferred to Wandsworth Prison. A parliamentary committee looking into prison conditions took up his case and, because he was

destitute, transferred him to Reading Gaol — a debtors' prison — for the remainder of his time. While he was there, Wilde wrote a famous letter to Douglas justifying his life and position, which was later published as "De Profundis." When he left this prison on May 19, 1897, he was in decent health and departed immediately for France, never to return to England.

Last Years

Wilde's last years were spent in several towns in Europe. He settled in the small village of Berneval-sur-Mer near Dieppe, France, and sent letters to newspapers on prison reform while writing his greatest poem, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." His wife Constance had settled in Italy with the boys, changing their name to Holland because of the scandal. Wilde wanted to see her and the children, but she refused because he would not give up Douglas. He and Bosie reunited, and Constance died in April 1898. There was no more writing; Wilde drank heavily and begged money from friends. He and Bosie moved to Naples, Switzerland, and Paris, but Wilde's health was fading. During his time in prison, he had found an admiration for Jesus Christ and had written about his religious convictions. Just prior to his death in Paris on November 30, 1900, at the age of 46, Wilde converted to Roman Catholicism.

Over the last century and a half, many people have believed that Wilde died of cerebral meningitis, complicated by syphilis, and many have seen it as proof of his depravity. However, a November 2000 article in the British journal, *Lancet*, blames meningoencephalitis, complicated by a chronic right middle-ear disease (see Resource Center for the article). Wilde was treated before and during his imprisonment for a chronic ear infection. Surgery for an acute and life-threatening infection, which had moved into the mastoid, was allegedly performed on October 10, 1900, and was documented in Wilde's letters. He suffered a relapse in November of that year and fell into a coma, never to awaken. His son, Vyvyan, ironically underwent a similar operation for mastoid infection less than two months after his father died.

Wilde's death did not end the public's appreciation of his marvelous wit and staging. *The Importance of Being Earnest* returned to the West End with revivals in 1902, 1909, 1911, and 1913. The original producer, George Alexander, willed the copyright of the play to Wilde's son, Vyvyan.

After Wilde's death, many friends and acquaintances destroyed his letters for fear that their own reputations would be tainted by his scandal. Even letters to Constance during his imprisonment were destroyed. Most popular and academic writing about Wilde, since his death, has been about the scandal and speculation concerning his private life. His writing was largely ignored or devalued until the 1960s and 1970s. Now Wilde is often classified as a literary figure whose sensibilities, witticisms, and theatrical staging reflected the social commentary of the nineteenth century and influenced the theatre of the twentieth century.

Critical Essays Themes in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Duty and Respectability

The aristocratic Victorians valued duty and respectability above all else. Earnestness — a determined and serious desire to do the correct thing — was at the top of the code of conduct. Appearance was everything, and style was much more important than substance. So, while a person could lead a secret life, carry on affairs within marriage or have children outside of wedlock, society would look the other way as long as the appearance of propriety was maintained. For this reason, Wilde questions whether the more important or serious issues of the day are overlooked

in favor of trivial concerns about appearance. Gwendolen is the paragon of this value. Her marriage proposal must be performed correctly, and her brother even practices correct proposals. Gwendolen's aristocratic attitude is "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing." The trivial is important; the serious is overlooked.

The tea ceremony in Act II is a hilarious example of Wilde's contention that manners and appearance are everything. The guise of correctness is the framework for war. Both women, thinking they are engaged to the same person, wage a civilized "war" over the tea service while the servants silently watch. When Gwendolen requests no sugar, Cecily adds four lumps to her cup. Although she asks for bread and butter, Gwendolen is given a large slice of cake. Her true feelings come out only in an aside that Cecily supposedly cannot hear: "Detestable girl!" Gwendolen is also appalled to find that Cecily is living in Jack's country home, and she inquires about a chaperone. Wilde gives examples again and again of the aristocrat's concern for propriety, that everything is done properly no matter what those good manners might be camouflaging.

The Absence of Compassion

Two areas in which the Victorians showed little sympathy or compassion were illness and death. When Lady Bracknell hears that Bunbury died after his doctors told him he could not live, she feels he has — in dying — acted appropriately because he had the correct medical advice. "Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life." Lady Bracknell, like other aristocrats, is too busy worrying about her own life, the advantages of her daughter's marriage, and her nephew's errors in judgment to feel any compassion for others. Gwendolen, learning from her mother, is totally self-absorbed and definite about what she wants. She tells Cecily, "I never travel without my diary. One should have something sensational to read in the train." Wilde seems to be taking to task a social class that thinks only of itself, showing little compassion or sympathy for the trials of those less fortunate.

Religion

Another serious subject — religion — is also a topic of satire. While concerns of the next world would be an appropriate topic for people of this world, it seems to be shoved aside in the Victorian era. Canon Chasuble is the symbol of religious thought, and Wilde uses him to show how little the Victorians concerned themselves with attitudes reflecting religious faith. Chasuble can rechristen, marry, bury, and encourage at a moment's notice with interchangeable sermons filled with meaningless platitudes. Even Lady Bracknell mentions that christenings are a waste of time and, especially, money. Chasuble's pious exterior betrays a racing pulse for Miss Prism: "Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips." Quickly correcting his error, the minister hides his hardly holy desires in the language of metaphor. Wilde's satire here is gentle and humorous, chiding a society for its self-importance.

Popular Culture

The popular attitudes of the day about the French, literary criticism, and books are also subjects of Wilde's humor. Wilde wittily asserts that Victorians believe that nothing good comes from France, except for (in Wilde's mind) the occasional lesbian maid. Otherwise, France is a good place to kill off and request the burial of Ernest. As the good reverend says, "I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at the last." Literary criticism is for "people who haven't been at a University. They do it so well in the daily papers." Modern books are filled with truths that are never pure or simple, and scandalous books should be read but definitely in secret. Again Wilde criticizes the

Victorians for believing that appearance is much more important than truth. He takes the opportunity to insert many examples of popular thought, revealing bias, social bigotry, thoughtlessness and blind assumptions.

Secret Lives

Because Victorian norms were so repressive and suffocating, Wilde creates episodes in which his characters live secret lives or create false impressions to express who they really are. Jack and Algernon both create personas to be free. These other lives allow them to neglect their duties — in Algernon's case — or to leave their duties and pursue pleasure — in Jack's case. Very early in Act I, Wilde sets up these secret lives, and they follow through until the final act. When Jack and Algernon realize their marriages will end their pursuit of pleasure, they both admit rather earnestly, "You won't be able to run down to the country quite so often as you used to do, dear Algy," and "You won't be able to disappear to London quite so frequently as your wicked custom was." Marriage means the end of freedom, pleasure, wickedness, and the beginning of duty and doing what is expected. Of course, Jack and Algernon could continue to don their masks after they marry Gwendolen and Cecily, but they will have to be cautious and make sure society is looking the other way.

Passion and Morality

Wilde's contention that a whole world exists separate from Victorian manners and appearances is demonstrated in the girlish musings of Cecily. When she hears that Jack's "wicked" brother Ernest is around, she is intensely desirous of meeting him. She says to Algernon, "I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time." The thought of meeting someone who lives outside the bounds of prudery and rules is exciting to naïve Cecily. Even using the name Ernest for his secret life is ironic because Algernon is not being dutiful — earnest — in living a secret life.

Various characters in the play allude to passion, sex and moral looseness. Chasuble and Prism's flirting and coded conversations about things sexual, Algernon stuffing his face to satisfy his hungers, the diaries (which are the acceptable venues for passion), and Miss Prism's three-volume novel are all examples of an inner life covered up by suffocating rules. Even Algernon's aesthetic life of posing as the dandy, dressing with studied care, neglecting his bills, being unemployed, and pursuing pleasure instead of duty is an example of Victorians valuing trivialities. Once Algernon marries he will have suffocating rules and appearances to keep up. Wilde's characters allude to another life beneath the surface of Victorian correctness. Much of the humor in this play draws a fine line between the outer life of appearances and the inner life of rebellion against the social code that says life must be lived earnestly.

Courtship and Marriage

Oscar Wilde felt these Victorian values were perpetuated through courtship and marriage, both of which had their own rules and rituals. Marriage was a careful selection process. When Algernon explains that he plans to become engaged to Jack's ward, Cecily, Lady Bracknell decides, "I think some preliminary enquiry on my part would not be out of place." When Lady Bracknell pummels Jack with questions about parents, politics, fortune, addresses, expectations, family solicitors, and legal encumbrances, his answers must be proper and appropriate for a legal union between the two families to be approved. Fortune is especially important, and when Jack and Cecily's fortunes are both appropriate, the next problem is family background. Because Jack does not know his parents, Lady Bracknell suggests he find a parent — any with the right lineage will do — and find one quickly. Appearance, once again, is everything. Duty (not joy, love or passion) is important, further substantiating Algy's contention that marriage is a

loveless duty: "A man who marries without knowing Bunbury [an excuse for pleasure] has a very tedious time of it." Marriage is presented as a legal contract between consenting families of similar fortunes; background, love, and happiness have little to do with it.

Perpetuating the Upper Class

The strict Victorian class system, in which members of the same class marry each other, perpetuates the gulf between the upper, middle and lower classes. Snobbish, aristocratic attitudes further preserve the distance between these groups. Jack explains to Lady Bracknell that he has no politics. He considers himself a Liberal Unionist. Lady Bracknell finds his answer satisfactory because it means that he is a Tory, or a conservative. Jack's home in London is on the "unfashionable side" of Belgrave Square, so "that could easily be altered." When Jack inquires whether she means the "unfashionable" or the side of the street, Lady Bracknell explains, "Both, if necessary." The French Revolution is held up as an example of what happens when the lower class is taught to question its betters. Education is not for learning to think; it is for mindlessly following convention. Lady Bracknell approves of ignorance. In fact, she explains, "The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square." Thinking causes discontent, and discontent leads to social revolution. That simply will not do.

Class Conflict

One might think aristocrats would see the error of their ways and try to be more virtuous in a moral sense. However, they see their attitudes as the virtuous high ground and believe that other classes should conform to aristocratic attitudes and see the error of their own ways. When Miss Prism seems to chide the lower classes for producing so many children for Chasuble to christen, she appears to see it as a question of thrift. "I have often spoken to the poorer classes on the subject [of christenings]. But they don't seem to know what thrift is." Chasuble speaks humorously of the penchant of the aristocracy to dabble in good causes that do not disrupt their own lives too much. He mentions a sermon he gave for the Society for the Prevention of Discontent Among the Upper Orders. To the Victorians, reform means keeping the current social and economic system in place by perpetuating upper-class virtues and economy.

Every page, every line of dialogue, every character, each symbol, and every stage direction in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is bent on supporting Wilde's contention that social change happens as a matter of thoughtfulness. Art can bring about such thoughtfulness. If the eccentric or unusual is to be replaced with correct behavior and thought, human sympathy and compassion suffer. If strict moral values leave no room for question, a society loses much of what is known as humanity.

<https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/i/the-importance-of-being-earnest/study-help/quiz>

The importance of being Earnest. SPARKNOTES

Nothing will induce me to part with with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.

[See Important Quotations Explained](#)

Summary

The play opens in the morning room of [Algernon Moncrieff's](#) flat in the fashionable Mayfair section of London's West End. As the curtain rises, Algernon's butler, Lane, is onstage laying out afternoon tea while Algernon, offstage, plays the piano badly. Before long, the music stops and Algernon enters talking about his playing, but Lane says ironically that he didn't feel it was "polite" to listen. Algernon briefly defends his musicianship, then turns to the matter of Lane's preparations for tea. Algernon asks particularly about some cucumber sandwiches he has ordered for Lady Bracknell, his aunt, who is expected for tea along with her daughter, [Gwendolen Fairfax](#), Algernon's cousin. Lane produces the cucumber sandwiches, which Algernon begins to munch absentmindedly, casually remarking on an extremely inaccurate entry he's noticed in the household books. He speculates aloud on why it is that champagne in bachelors' homes always gets drunk by the servants. There follows some philosophical chat about the nature of marriage and the married state. Then Algernon dismisses Lane and soliloquizes briefly on the moral duty of the servant class.

Lane reenters and announces the arrival of Mr. Ernest Worthing, the play's protagonist, who shortly will come to be known as [Jack](#). Algernon greets Jack with evident enthusiasm, asking whether business or pleasure has brought him to town. Jack says pleasure. He notices the elaborate tea service and asks whom Algernon expects. When Algernon tells him Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen will be coming by, Jack is delighted. He confesses that he has come to town for the express purpose of proposing to Gwendolen. A brief debate follows as to whether this purpose constitutes "business" or "pleasure," and in the course of it, Jack reaches for one of the cucumber sandwiches. Algernon reprimands him, saying that they have been ordered expressly for his aunt. Jack points out that Algernon has been eating them the whole time they've been talking. Algernon argues that it's appropriate for *him* to eat the sandwiches since Lady Bracknell is his aunt and suggests that Jack help himself to the bread and butter, which has been ordered for Gwendolen. When Jack begins eating the bread and butter a bit too enthusiastically, Algernon accuses Jack of behaving as though he were already married to Gwendolen. He reminds Jack he isn't yet engaged to her and says he doubts he ever will be. Surprised, Jack asks what Algernon means. Algernon reminds Jack that Gwendolen is his first cousin and tells him that before he gives his consent to the union, Jack "will have to clear up the whole question of [Cecily](#)." Jack professes bewilderment and says he doesn't know anyone named Cecily. By way of explanation, Algernon asks Lane to find "that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left in the smoking room the last time he dined here."

The cigarette case, when it arrives, causes Jack some consternation and Algernon much glee. Jack seems to have forgotten that the case bears an inscription from "little Cecily" to "her dear Uncle Jack." Algernon forces Jack to explain what the inscription means, and Jack admits his name isn't really Ernest at all—it's Jack. Algernon pretends to be incensed and disbelieving. He points out that Jack has always introduced himself as Ernest, that he answers to the name Ernest, that he even *looks* as though his name were Ernest. He pulls out one of Jack's visiting cards and shows him the name and address on it, saying he intends to keep the card as proof that Jack's name is Ernest. With some embarrassment, Jack explains that his name is "Ernest in town and Jack in the country."

Algernon is still unsatisfied. He tells Jack he has always suspected him of being "a confirmed and secret Bunburyist," a term he refuses to define until Jack explains why he goes by two completely different names, and he requests that the explanation be "improbable." Jack protests that his explanation is not improbable. He says the old gentleman who adopted him

as a boy, Mr. Thomas Cardew, in his will made him guardian to his granddaughter, Miss Cecily Cardew, who lives on Jack's country estate with her governess, Miss Prism, and addresses Jack as her uncle out of respect. Algernon slips in questions about the location of Jack's estate, but Jack refuses to answer and continues with his explanation.

Jack says that anyone placed in the position of legal guardian must have moral views about everything, and since the utmost morality doesn't bring great happiness, he has always pretended to have a troublesome younger brother named Ernest who lives at the Albany Hotel and who frequently gets in trouble. This false brother gives Jack an excuse to go to town whenever he wants to.

Algernon counters by telling Jack a secret of his own. Just as Jack has invented a younger brother so as to be able to escape to London, Algernon has invented a friend called Bunbury, a permanent invalid whose sudden and frequent relapses afford him a chance to get away to the country whenever he wants. Bunbury's illness, for instance, will allow Algernon to have dinner with Jack that evening, despite the fact that he has been committed, for over a week, to dining at Lady Bracknell's. Algernon wants to explain the rules of "Bunburying" to Jack, but Jack denies being a "Bunburyist." He says if Gwendolen accepts his marriage proposal he plans to kill off his imaginary brother, and that he's thinking of doing so in any case because Cecily is taking too much interest in Ernest. Jack suggests that Algernon do the same with Bunbury. While the two men argue about the uses and merits of a married man's "knowing Bunbury," Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen are announced.

Analysis

The opening scene of *The Importance of Being Earnest* establishes a highly stylized, unrealistic world in which no one talks the way ordinary people talk and very little seems to matter to anyone. Algernon and Lane, as well as most other characters in the play, are both literary constructs, that is, literary devices created solely to say particular things at particular moments. They have almost no life or significance apart from the way they talk. Their language is sharp, brittle, and full of elegant witticisms and mild, ironic pronouncements. Lane's first line, for example, regarding Algernon's piano playing, is an insult couched in polite, elegant language. We can see the play's lack of realism in the way Algernon and Lane behave over Lane's inaccurate entry in the household books. Lane has entered considerably more wine than was actually drunk to cover the fact that he himself has been drinking huge amounts of expensive champagne on the sly. Algernon shows no more concern over the stealing than Lane does over its having been discovered, and both men seem to take for granted that servants steal from their masters. In the world of the play, the deception is simply an expected daily nuisance.

[Read more about Oscar Wilde and the historical context of the play.](#)

A central purpose of the scene between Algernon and Lane is to lay the foundation for the joke about the cucumber sandwiches, an incident that marks the first appearance of food as a source of conflict as well as a substitute for other appetites. Algernon has ordered some cucumber sandwiches especially for Lady Bracknell, but during the scene with Lane, he absentmindedly eats all the sandwiches himself. In this particular scene, food substitutes for the idea of sex. Algernon's insatiable appetite, his preoccupation with food, and his habit of wantonly indulging himself politely suggest other forms of voraciousness and wanton self-indulgence. This idea becomes apparent in the early exchange between Algernon and Jack over the question of whether Jack should eat cucumber sandwiches or bread and butter. Here, Algernon interprets eating as a form of social, even sexual, presumption. Algernon can eat the cucumber sandwiches because he's Lady Bracknell's blood relation, but Jack, who hardly knows Lady Bracknell, should stay away from them. When Jack demonstrates too much enthusiasm for the bread and butter, Algernon reproaches him for behaving as though

he were “married to [Gwendolen] already,” as though he had touched her in an aggressive or salacious manner.

[Read important quotes by Algernon Moncrieff.](#)

Though Jack's double life is amusing and light in many ways, his deception also suggests he has a darker, more sinister side, and to this extent his actions reveal the vast separation between private and public life in upper-middle-class Victorian England. Algernon suspects Jack of leading a double life when the play opens, and he goads him, asking where he's been. He asks Jack pointed questions about his house in Shropshire, knowing full well that Jack's country estate isn't in Shropshire, although this seems to be what Jack has always claimed. Algernon doesn't let on that he knows Jack is lying, and he lets Jack get deeper and deeper into his lie. The idea of a man not knowing where his best friend lives is absurd, of course, and this sort of unrealism gives *The Importance of Being Earnest* its reputation as a piece of light, superficial comedy. In fact, Jack's deception is more sinister than Algernon's rather innocent “Bunburying,” and he ultimately misrepresents the truth to all those closest to him. Jack is in many ways the Victorian Everyman, and the picture he paints about social mores and expectations is, beneath the surface, a damning one.

[Read important quotes by Jack Worth](#)

ACT 1 part 2

I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone.

[See Important Quotations Explained](#)

Summary

Lady Bracknell comes onstage gossiping about a friend whose husband has died recently. Seating herself, she asks for one of the cucumber sandwiches [Algernon](#) has promised her. However, no cucumber sandwiches are in sight—Algernon, without realizing what he was doing, has devoured every last one. He gazes at the empty plate in horror and asks Lane sharply why there are no cucumber sandwiches. Quickly sizing up the situation, Lane explains blandly that he couldn't find cucumbers at the market that morning. Algernon dismisses Lane with obvious, and feigned, displeasure. Lady Bracknell is not concerned, and she chatters about the nice married woman she's planning to have Algernon take in to dinner that evening. Regretfully, Algernon tells Lady Bracknell that due to the illness of his friend Bunbury, he'll be unable to come to dinner after all. Lady Bracknell expresses her irritation about Bunbury's “shilly-shallying” over the question of whether he'll live or die. To appease her, and to give [Jack](#) a chance to propose to [Gwendolen](#), Algernon offers to go over the musical program for an upcoming reception with her and takes her into the music room.

Alone with Gwendolen, Jack awkwardly stammers out his admiration, and Gwendolen takes charge. She lets Jack know right away that she shares his feelings, and Jack is delighted. However, he is somewhat dismayed to learn that a good part of Gwendolen's attraction to him is due to what she believes is his name—Ernest. Gwendolen is fixated on the name Ernest, which she feels has “a music of its own” and “inspires absolute confidence.” Gwendolen makes clear that she would not consider marrying a man who was *not* named Ernest.

Lady Bracknell returns to the room, and Gwendolen tells her she is engaged to Jack. Lady Bracknell then interviews Jack to determine Jack's eligibility as a possible son-in-law. Jack seems to be giving all the right answers, until Lady Bracknell inquires into his family background. Jack explains that he has no idea who his parents were, and that he was found, by the man who adopted him, in a handbag in the cloakroom at Victoria Station. Lady Bracknell is scandalized. She forbids him from marrying Gwendolen and leaves the house angrily.

Algernon enters, and Jack reviews the results of his interview with Lady Bracknell, explaining that as far as Gwendolen is concerned the two of them are engaged. Algernon asks mischievously whether Jack has told her the truth about being “Ernest in town, and Jack in the country,” and Jack scoffs at the idea. He says he plans to kill off Ernest by the end of the week by having him catch a severe chill in Paris. Algernon asks whether Jack has told Gwendolen about his ward, [Cecily](#), and again Jack scoffs at the question. He claims Cecily and Gwendolen will surely become friends and “will be calling each other sister.”

Gwendolen reenters and asks to speak privately with Jack. She tells him how the story of his childhood has stirred her and declares her undying love, whatever happens. She asks Jack for his address in the country and Algernon listens in, jotting it down on his cuff. Jack exits with Gwendolen to show her to her carriage, and Lane comes in with some bills, which Algernon promptly tears up. He tells Lane he plans to go “Bunburying” the next day and asks him to lay out “all the Bunbury suits.” Jack returns, praising Gwendolen, and the curtain falls on Algernon laughing quietly and looking at his shirt cuff.

Analysis

The scene in which Jack proposes to Gwendolen portrays a reversal of Victorian assumptions about gender roles. Propriety demanded that young women be weak and ineffectual, helpless vessels of girlish admiration and passivity, while men were supposed to be authoritative and competent. Here, however, Jack stammers ineffectually, and Gwendolen takes the whole business of the marriage proposal out of his hands. Wilde has some fun with the rigidity of Victorian convention when he has Gwendolen backtrack and insist that Jack start the whole proposal process over again, doing it properly. The social commentary in this scene goes deeper than the Victorian concern with propriety. In the figure of Gwendolen, a young woman obsessed with the name Ernest, and not with actual earnestness itself, Wilde satirizes Victorian society's preoccupation with surface manifestations of virtue and its willingness to detect virtue in the most superficial displays of decent behavior. The Ernest/earnest joke is a send-up of the whole concept of moral duty, which was the linchpin of Victorian morality.

[Read more about puns and inversions.](#)

Wilde uses Lady Bracknell's interview of Jack to make fun of the values of London society, which put a higher premium on social connections than on character or goodness. More disquieting than the questions themselves is the order in which Lady Bracknell asks them. Before she even gets to such matters as income and family, she wants to know if Jack smokes, and she is pleased to hear that he does, since she considers smoking an antidote to idleness. Such trivial questions suggest the vacuity of London society, where more weighty issues are of secondary importance. The questions about Jack's family background, however, reveal Lady Bracknell's darker side. When Jack admits he has “lost” both his parents, Lady Bracknell replies with an elaborate pun: “To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.” Like so many of Lady Bracknell's pronouncements, this one is funny because it's absurd. However, the statement also reflects a heartlessness that's very real and not funny at all. Lady Bracknell responded in an equally callous way to Bunbury's lingering illness when she remarked, “I must say . . . that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd.” In pronouncements such as these, Lady Bracknell reveals an unsettling notion that colored every aspect of Victorian life: poverty and misfortune are, to some extent, an outcome of moral unworthiness.

[Read important quotes by Lady Bracknell about wealth, class, and character.](#)

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, conventional morality operates on two levels of hypocrisy. On one level is the portrait Algernon paints of what he sees as conventional married bliss, in which husband and wife appear faithful but either one or the other is carrying on behind the

other one's back. He tells Jack that, in a marriage, either husband or wife will certainly want to know Bunbury, and that "in married life three is company and two is none." Confronted with a man who is "Ernest in town and Jack in the country," a conventional Victorian audience would probably have seen some reference to heterosexual infidelity. However, Wilde's audience must also have been full of people to whom "Ernest in town and Jack in the country" meant something quite different, something that had to be buried far below the surface of the dialogue. When Lady Bracknell says that "a cloakroom at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion—has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now," a twenty-first-century reader or audience member most likely will imagine another kind of life that Victorian hypocrisy required one to hide: the secret life of homosexuals, for which Wilde himself was condemned.

Literary Devices

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Puns

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the pun, widely considered to be the lowest form of verbal wit, is rarely just a play on words. The pun in the title is a case in point. The earnest/Ernest joke strikes at the very heart of Victorian notions of respectability and duty. Gwendolen wants to marry a man called Ernest, and she doesn't care whether the man actually possesses the qualities that comprise earnestness. She is, after all, quick to forgive Jack's deception. In embodying a man who is initially neither "earnest" nor "Ernest," and who, through forces beyond his control, subsequently *becomes* both "earnest" and "Ernest," Jack is a walking, breathing paradox and a complex symbol of Victorian hypocrisy.

In Act III, when Lady Bracknell quips that until recently she had no idea there were any persons "whose origin was a Terminus," she too is making an extremely complicated pun. The joke is that a railway station is as far back as Jack can trace his identity and therefore a railway station actually is his "origin," hence the pun. In Wilde's day, as in the England of today, the first stop on a railway line is known as the "origin" and the last stop as the "terminus." There's also a whole series of implicit subsidiary puns on words like *line* and *connection* that can refer to either ancestry or travel. Wilde is poking fun at Lady Bracknell's snobbery. He depicts her as incapable of distinguishing between a railway line and a family line, social connections and railway connections, a person's ancestral origins and the place where he chanced to be found. In general, puns add layers of meaning to the characters' lines and call into question the true or intended meaning of what is being said.

Inversion

One of the most common motifs in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the notion of inversion, and inversion takes many forms. The play contains inversions of thought, situation, and character, as well as inversions of common notions of morality or philosophical thought. When Algernon remarks, "Divorces are made in Heaven," he inverts the cliché about marriages being "made in heaven." Similarly, at the end of the play, when Jack calls it "a terrible thing" for a man to discover that he's been telling the truth all his life, he inverts conventional morality. Most of the women in the play represent an inversion of accepted Victorian practices with regard to gender roles. Lady Bracknell usurps the role of the father in interviewing Jack, since typically this was a father's task, and Gwendolen and Cecily take charge of their own romantic lives, while the men stand by watching in a relatively passive role. The trick that Wilde plays on Miss Prism at the end of the play is also a kind of inversion: The trick projects onto the play's most fervently moralistic character the image of the "fallen woman" of melodrama.

Death

Jokes about death appear frequently in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Lady Bracknell comes onstage talking about death, and in one of the play's many inversions, she says her friend Lady Harbury looks twenty years younger since the death of her husband. With respect to Bunbury, she suggests that death is an inconvenience for others—she says Bunbury is “shilly-shallying” over whether “to live or to die.” On being told in Act III that Bunbury has died suddenly in accordance with his physicians' predictions, Lady Bracknell commends Bunbury for acting “under proper medical advice.” Miss Prism speaks as though death were something from which one could learn a moral lesson and piously says she hopes Ernest will profit from having died. Jack and Algernon have several conversations about how to “kill” Jack's imaginary brother. Besides giving the play a layer of dark humor, the death jokes also connect to the idea of life being a work of art. Most of the characters discuss death as something over which a person actually has control, as though death is a final decision one can make about how to shape and color one's life.

The Dandy

To the form of Victorian melodrama, Wilde contributed the figure of the dandy, a character who gave the form a moral texture it had never before possessed. In Wilde's works, the dandy is a witty, overdressed, self-styled philosopher who speaks in epigrams and paradoxes and ridicules the cant and hypocrisy of society's moral arbiters. To a very large extent, this figure was a self-portrait, a stand-in for Wilde himself. The dandy isn't always a comic figure in Wilde's work. In *A Woman of No Importance* and [The Picture of Dorian Gray](#), he takes the form of the villains Lord Illingworth and Lord Henry Wootton, respectively. But in works such as *Lady Windermere's Fan*, [An Ideal Husband](#), and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde seems to be evolving a more positive and clearly defined moral position on the figure of the dandy. The dandy pretends to be all about surface, which makes him seem trivial, shallow, and ineffectual. Lord Darlington and Lord Goring (in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*) both present themselves this way. In fact, the dandy in both plays turns out to be something very close to the real hero. He proves to be deeply moral and essential to the happy resolution of the plot.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon has many characteristics of the dandy, but he remains morally neutral throughout the play. Many other characters also express dandiacal sentiments and views. Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell are being dandiacal when they assert the importance of surfaces, style, or “profile,” and even Jack echoes the philosophy of the dandy when he comes onstage asserting that “pleasure” is the only thing that should “bring one anywhere.” For the most part, these utterances seem to be part of Wilde's general lampooning of the superficiality of the upper classes. The point is that it's the wrong sort of superficiality because it doesn't recognize and applaud its own triviality. In fact, Cecily, with her impatience with self-improvement and conventional morality and her curiosity about “wickedness,” is arguably the character who, after Algernon, most closely resembles the dandy. Her dandiacal qualities make her a perfect match for him.

Previous section **Themes**

Summary

Act II, Part One

Summary

In the garden of The Manor House, [Jack's](#) country estate in Hertfordshire, Miss Prism is trying to interest [Cecily](#) in her German lesson. Cecily would prefer to water the flowers, but Miss Prism reminds Cecily that Jack encourages Cecily to improve herself in every way. Cecily expresses some slight irritation with the fact that her Uncle Jack is so serious, and Miss Prism reminds her of his constant concern over his troublesome brother Ernest. Cecily, who has begun writing in her diary, says she wishes Jack would allow Ernest to visit them sometime. She suggests that she and Miss Prism might positively influence him, but Miss Prism doesn't approve of the notion of trying to turn “bad people into good people.” She tells Cecily to put away her diary and to rely on her memory instead. Cecily points out that memory is usually inaccurate and also responsible for excessively long, three-volume novels. Miss Prism tells her not to criticize those long novels, as she once wrote one herself.

Dr. Chasuble, the local vicar, enters. Cecily tells Dr. Chasuble teasingly that Miss Prism has a headache and should take a walk with him, obviously aware of an unspoken attraction between Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism. Miss Prism reproaches Cecily gently for fibbing, but she decides to take Cecily's advice, and she and Dr. Chasuble go off together. The butler, Merriman, then enters and announces to Cecily that Mr. Ernest Worthing has just driven over from the station with his luggage. Merriman presents Cecily with a visiting card, which is the one [Algernon](#) took from Jack in Act I.

The visiting Mr. Ernest Worthing is actually Algernon, masquerading as Jack's nonexistent brother, who enters dressed to the nines and greets Cecily as his "little cousin." When Cecily tells him Jack won't be back until Monday, Algernon pretends surprise and disappointment. Cecily tells Algernon that Jack has gone to town to buy Ernest some traveling clothes, as he plans on sending him to Australia as a last resort. Algernon proposes another plan: he thinks Cecily should reform him. Cecily says she doesn't have time. Algernon decides to reform himself that afternoon, adding that he is hungry, and he and Cecily flirt with each other as they head into the house to find sustenance.

Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble return from their walk, also flirting mildly. They are surprised when Jack enters from the back of the garden dressed in full Victorian mourning regalia. Jack greets Miss Prism with an air of tragedy and explains he has returned earlier than expected owing to the death of Ernest. Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble express surprise, shock, and condolences, and Miss Prism makes a few moralistic pronouncements.

Jack's story matches the one he and Algernon cooked up the previous evening: that Ernest passed away in Paris from a "severe chill." Dr. Chasuble suggests that he might mention the sad news in next Sunday's service and begins talking about his upcoming sermon. Jack remembers the problem of [Gwendolen](#) and his name, and he asks Dr. Chasuble about the possibility of being christened Ernest. They make arrangements for a ceremony that afternoon. As Dr. Chasuble prepares to leave, Cecily emerges from the house with the news that "Uncle Jack's brother" has turned up and is in the dining room.

Analysis

From the beginning of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, books, fiction, and writing have played an important role in furthering our heroes' own fictions and deceptions. The writing in Jack's cigarette case exposes his secret identity, leading Algernon to develop suspicions about his other life. That life itself is a fiction to the extent that Jack has always lied to Algernon about what it entails. Jack has also been spinning fiction for the benefit of his friends and family in the country, where everyone believes him to be a paragon of virtue, his brow permanently creased with anxiety and woe. The all-important "three-volume novel" in the dour Miss Prism's past suggests that Miss Prism herself has had an alter ego at some point, or at least the capacity for telling stories of her own. Miss Prism tells Cecily not to "speak slightly of" fiction and gives a definition of it: "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily." Even before this exchange, Cecily avoids her schoolbooks. She would rather write than read and pulls out her diary, where she records her "wonderful secrets." We might assume that these are themselves fictions of a sort. Cecily's schooling is part of Miss Prism and Jack's desire for Cecily to "improve [herself] in every way," a sentiment that reeks of Victorian righteousness and solemnity, and Cecily foregoes this attempt to pursue her own writing.

[Read more about the symbolism of fiction and writing.](#)

The moral status of Jack's fictional brother Ernest has undergone a change between Acts I and II. At Algernon's flat in Half Moon Street, Algernon called Ernest merely "profligate." Jack explained that Ernest got into "scrapes," or mischief. In the garden of the Manor House, where Miss Prism's moral viewpoint holds sway, Jack's brother graduates to "unfortunate," which Miss Prism uses as a euphemism for "immoral," "bad," and downright "wicked," the latter an adjective Cecily seems particularly to relish. Indeed, when the descriptions of Ernest reach this low point, he becomes all the more appealing to Cecily. The idea of wickedness fascinates Cecily, and she yearns to meet a "really wicked" person. This open interest in the idea of immorality is part of Cecily's charm and what makes

her a suitable love interest for Algernon. Cecily is no dandy: she doesn't speak in epigrams and paradoxes, and, in fact, she's the only character who doesn't talk like a character in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. She's a moral eccentric. She hopes Jack's brother hasn't been "pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time," since that would be hypocrisy.

[Read an important passage about Cecily's curious obsession with wickedness.](#)

The difference between hypocrisy and mere fiction, or "Bunburying," begins to emerge when Jack enters and declares that Ernest is dead. He is dressed in full Victorian mourning regalia, a very elaborate affair, creating the play's most pungent visual gag. Jack has gone overboard in carrying out the deception of his double life, and his behavior highlights the essential difference between hypocrisy and "Bunburying." Algernon imposes on Cecily by pretending to be someone he's not, but he is still less malicious than Jack. First, Algernon scarcely knows Cecily, and second, he isn't actually leading a double life. Algernon has created a fictional friend, but he does not actually pretend to *be* that friend. When he finally does take on a second identity, it is in the company of near-strangers. Jack, however, not only lies to the people closest to him, but he lies elaborately, becoming, for all his amiability, a lowlife. Jack has a fundamental charmlessness to his attitude toward other people. In a theater production, his deception is compounded: the audience watches an actor pretending to be someone pretending. Jack's pretense seems almost never-ending.

Literary Devices

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Double Life

The double life is the central metaphor in the play, epitomized in the notion of "Bunbury" or "Bunburying." As defined by Algernon, Bunburying is the practice of creating an elaborate deception that allows one to misbehave while seeming to uphold the very highest standards of duty and responsibility. Jack's imaginary, wayward brother Ernest is a device not only for escaping social and moral obligations but also one that allows Jack to appear far more moral and responsible than he actually is. Similarly, Algernon's imaginary invalid friend Bunbury allows Algernon to escape to the country, where he presumably imposes on people who don't know him in much the same way he imposes on Cecily in the play, all the while seeming to demonstrate Christian charity. The practice of visiting the poor and the sick was a staple activity among the Victorian upper and upper-middle classes and considered a public duty. The difference between what Jack does and what Algernon does, however, is that Jack not only pretends to be something he is not, that is, completely virtuous, but also routinely pretends to be *someone* he is not, which is very different. This sort of deception suggests a far more serious and profound degree of hypocrisy. Through these various enactments of double lives, Wilde suggests the general hypocrisy of the Victorian mindset.

Food

Food and scenes of eating appear frequently in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and they are almost always sources of conflict. Act I contains the extended cucumber sandwich joke, in which Algernon, without realizing it, steadily devours all the sandwiches. In Act II, the climax of Gwendolen and Cecily's spat over who is really engaged to Ernest Worthing comes when Gwendolen tells Cecily, who has just offered her sugar and cake, that sugar is "not fashionable any more" and "Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays." Cecily responds by filling Gwendolen's tea with sugar and her plate with cake. The two women have actually been insulting each other quite steadily for some time, but Cecily's impudent actions cause Gwendolen to become even angrier, and she warns Cecily that she "may go too far." On one level, the jokes about food provide a sort of low comedy, the Wildean equivalent of the slammed door or the pratfall. On another level, food seems to be a stand-in for sex, as when Jack tucks into the bread and butter with too much gusto and Algernon accuses him of behaving

as though he were already married to Gwendolen. Food and gluttony suggest and substitute for other appetites and indulgences.

Fiction and Writing

Writing and the idea of fiction figure in the play in a variety of important ways. Algernon, when the play opens, has begun to suspect that Jack's life is at least partly a fiction, which, thanks to the invented brother Ernest, it is. Bunbury is also a fiction. When Algernon says in Act I, "More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read," he may be making a veiled reference to fiction, or at least reading material perceived to be immoral. In Act II, the idea of fiction develops further when Cecily speaks dismissively of "three-volume novels" and Miss Prism tells her she once wrote one herself. This is an allusion to a mysterious past life that a contemporary audience would have recognized as a stock element of stage melodrama. Cecily's diary is a sort of fiction as well: In it, she has recorded an invented romance whose details and developments she has entirely imagined. When Cecily and Gwendolen seek to establish their respective claims on Ernest Worthing, each appeals to the diary in which she recorded the date of her engagement, as though the mere fact of having written something down makes it fact. Ultimately, fiction becomes related to the notion of life as an art form. Several of the characters attempt to create a fictional life for themselves which then, in some capacity, becomes real. Wilde seems to regard as the most fundamentally moral those who not only freely admit to creating fictions for themselves but who actually take pride in doing so.

Summary

Act II, Part Two

I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.

[See Important Quotations Explained](#)

Summary

When [Algernon](#) appears in the doorway, [Jack](#) is furious, not only because Algernon is there, but also because he is disguised as Jack's own invented, and now presumably dead, brother. [Cecily](#) takes Jack's anger as part of the long-standing ill feeling between the two brothers and insists that Jack shake hands with Algernon, who has evidently been telling her about his good offices toward his poor friend Bunbury. Jack is apoplectic at the idea of Algernon talking to Cecily about Bunbury, but he can do nothing. He cannot expose Algernon without revealing his own deceptions and hypocrisy, and so he has to go along with the charade.

Jack wants Algernon to leave, but Algernon refuses as long as Jack is in mourning. As Jack goes off to change his clothes, Algernon soliloquizes briefly about being in love with Cecily. When she comes back to water the garden, he uses the opportunity to propose to her. He is surprised to discover that Cecily already considers herself engaged to him and charmed when she reveals that her sustained fascination with "Uncle Jack's brother" had moved her, some months previously, to invent an elaborate romance between herself and Ernest. Cecily has created an entire relationship, complete with love letters (written by herself), a ring, a broken engagement, and a reconciliation, and chronicled it in her diary. Algernon is less enchanted with the news that part of Cecily's interest in him derives from the name Ernest, which, echoing [Gwendolen](#), Cecily says "inspires absolute confidence."

Algernon goes off in search of Dr. Chasuble to see about getting himself christened Ernest. Meanwhile, Gwendolen arrives, having decided to pay an unexpected call at the Manor House. She is shown into the garden. Cecily, who has no idea who Gwendolen is or how she figures in Jack's life, orders tea and attempts to play hostess, while Gwendolen, having no idea who Cecily is, initially takes her to be a visitor at the Manor House. She is disconcerted to hear that Cecily is "Mr. Worthing's ward," as Ernest has never mentioned having a ward, and she confesses to not being thrilled by the news or by the fact that Cecily is very young and beautiful. Cecily picks up on Gwendolen's reference to "Ernest" and hastens to explain that her guardian is not Mr. *Ernest* Worthing but his brother Jack. Gwendolen asks if

she's sure, and Cecily reassures her, adding that, in fact, she is engaged to be married to Ernest Worthing. Gwendolen points out that this is impossible as she herself is engaged to Ernest Worthing. The tea party degenerates into a kind of catfight in which the two women insult one another with utmost civility.

Toward the climax of this confrontation, Jack and Algernon arrive, one after the other, each having separately made arrangements with Dr. Chasuble to be christened Ernest later that day. Each of the young ladies takes great pleasure in pointing out that the other has been deceived: Cecily informs Gwendolen that her fiancé is really named Jack and Gwendolen informs Cecily that hers is really called Algernon. Shocked and angry, the two women demand to know where Jack's brother Ernest is, since both of them are engaged to be married to him, and Jack is forced to admit that he has no brother and that Ernest is a complete fiction. Both women are furious. They retire to the house arm in arm, calling each other "sister." Alone, Jack and Algernon must sort out their differences. Each taunts the other with having been found out and they end up squabbling over muffins and teacake.

Analysis

Jack's confrontation with Algernon when Algernon appears unexpectedly at the Manor House pits the logic of dandyism against the logic of Victorian morality. Jack bristles protectively when Algernon tells Jack he thinks "Cecily is a darling." He tells Algernon he doesn't like him to talk about Cecily that way, but his concern pales against Algernon's sense of outrage over the inappropriateness of Jack's clothes. "It is perfectly childish to be in deep mourning for a man who is actually staying for a whole week with you in your house as a guest," Algernon fumes. "I call it grotesque." Jack ignores the insults and orders Algernon to leave on the next train, but Algernon then points out that it would be impolite of him to leave while Jack was in mourning. Jack is, of course, not really in mourning, and Algernon has derailed Jack's elaborate deception. By commenting ironically on Jack's mourning dress, Algernon is meeting fiction with fiction, buying time for his own agenda by playing into the ridiculous situation Jack has created for himself. Jack may be worried and outraged at Algernon's interest in Cecily, but Algernon the dandy cares little for those concerns. Instead, he treats everything as part of an elaborate game.

[Read more about the dandy as a motif.](#)

Cecily proves herself as capable as Jack and Algernon at creating fictions when she discusses her made-up relationship with Ernest, and in many ways she resembles Gwendolen when she discusses her relationship and love in general. Cecily's diary is the hard evidence of her own elaborate fiction, as are the letters she has written to herself in Ernest's name and the ring with the true-lover's knot she has promised herself always to wear. Like Gwendolen, Cecily has chosen to take charge of her own romantic life, even to the point of playing all the roles, and Algernon is left with very little to do in the way of wooing. When Cecily lays out the facts of her relationship with Ernest for the man she thinks is Ernest himself, she closely resembles Gwendolen. She makes a grand Gwendolen-like pronouncement or two and demonstrates a Gwendolen-like self-consciousness with regard to her diary. She wants to copy Algernon's compliments into it and hopes he'll order a copy when it is published. Even her explanation for having broken off the engagement at one point, "It would hardly have been a really serious engagement if it hadn't been broken off at least once," echoes Gwendolen's need for gravitas and propriety. Her unexpected fascination with the name Ernest is the final link between her and Gwendolen. This fascination seems incongruous with what we've seen of Cecily thus far, but nonetheless, the revelation lends the play a symmetry and balance.

[Read an in-depth analysis of Cecily Cardew.](#)

The two major confrontations at the end of Act II, between Cecily and Gwendolen and between Jack and Algernon, are both rooted in the fictions all four characters have created, believed, or perpetuated. Cecily and Gwendolen squabble over who has the right to consider herself engaged to Ernest Worthing and seek to establish their respective claims on him by appealing to their diaries, in which each recorded the date of her engagement, as though the mere act of having written something down makes it fact. Meanwhile, what they have recorded is fundamentally untrue, since neither woman's lover is the Ernest he has pretended to be. Both women are fully in the right, but wrong at

the same time. Jack and Algernon, for their parts, bicker over who is a better candidate to be christened with the name Ernest, an argument that is just as absurd and fiction-based as the women's. Jack argues that he never *was* christened, so he has a perfect right to be. Algernon counters by saying the fact that he's survived the experience indicates that his "constitution can stand it." He reminds Jack that Jack's brother almost died this week from a chill, as though this damns Jack's own constitution—while, of course, that brother is the fabricated Ernest. These confrontations cannot and will not be decided, since their very subjects essentially do not exist.

[Read an in-depth analysis of Gwendolyn F](#)

Summary

Act III, Part One

Summary

[Cecily](#) and [Gwendolen](#) have retreated to the drawing room of the Manor House to get away from [Algernon](#) and [Jack](#). They are eager to forgive the men and be reconciled. When Algernon and Jack enter from the garden, Cecily and Gwendolen confront them about their motives. Cecily asks Algernon why he pretended to be Jack's brother, and Algernon says it was in order to meet her. Gwendolen asks Jack if he pretended to have a brother so as to be able to come to London to see her as often as possible, and he asks if she can doubt it. Gwendolen says she has the gravest doubts but intends to crush them.

Cecily and Gwendolen are on the verge of forgiving Algernon and Jack when they remember that neither of them is any longer engaged to a man called Ernest. Algernon and Jack explain that each has made arrangements to be rechristened Ernest before the day is out, and the young women, bowled over by men's "physical courage" and capacity for "self-sacrifice," are won over.

As the couples embrace, Lady Bracknell enters, having bribed Gwendolen's maid for information about her destination. On seeing Algernon, she asks whether this house is the house where his friend Bunbury resides. Algernon, forgetting momentarily that he is supposed to be at his friend's bedside, says no, but quickly tries to cover himself and blurts that Bunbury is dead. He and Lady Bracknell briefly discuss Bunbury's sudden demise. Jack then introduces Cecily to Lady Bracknell, and Algernon announces their engagement. Lady Bracknell asks about Cecily's background, asking first, rather acidly, whether she is "connected with any of the larger railway stations in London." Jack obligingly volunteers information about Cecily, answering Lady Bracknell's presumptuous questions with a withering irony that goes over Lady Bracknell's head. Her interest is greatly piqued when she learns that Cecily is actually worth a great deal of money and stands to inherit even more when she comes of age.

Jack refuses to give his consent to Cecily's marriage to Algernon until Lady Bracknell grants her consent to his union with Gwendolen, but Lady Bracknell refuses. She summons Gwendolen to her side and prepares to depart. Before they can leave, however, Dr. Chasuble arrives to announce that everything is ready for the christenings. Jack explains that he and Algernon no longer need the christenings immediately and suggests that the ceremonies be postponed. The rector prepares to withdraw, explaining that Miss Prism is waiting for him back at the rectory. At the sound of Miss Prism's name, Lady Bracknell starts. She asks a number of incisive questions about Miss Prism then demands that she be sent for. Miss Prism herself arrives at that moment.

Analysis

Gwendolen's and Cecily's conversation at the beginning of Act III reveals exactly how eager they are to forgive Jack and Algernon, even to the point of bestowing on the men shame and repentance the men don't actually feel. Gwendolen and Cecily observe Jack and Algernon through the window of the

morning room that looks out on the garden, where the two men are squabbling over the refreshments that have been laid out for tea. Gwendolen's opening line, "The fact that they did not follow us at once into the house . . . seems to me to show that they have some sense of shame left," indicates how eager she is for a reconciliation and anxious to find any reason at all to effect one. Her eagerness also reveals how willing she is to deceive herself about Jack. The fact that the men don't follow the women into the house is morally neutral, but Gwendolen projects onto it a moral interpretation: the men did not follow them, therefore they must be ashamed of themselves. We know, however, that they are not the least bit ashamed. The men think merely that they are in trouble, a circumstance Algernon, but not Jack, seems to relish. Cecily underscores the irony of Gwendolen's inane logic when she echoes Gwendolen's sentiments, remarking, "They have been eating muffins. That looks like repentance." Both women want to believe the men are truly sorry for what they've done.

[Read more about food as a symbol.](#)

The two couples have symmetrical conflicts and seem to have nearly symmetrical reconciliations, but an essential difference sets the two reconciliations apart: Algernon tells the truth about his deception, but Jack does not. When Cecily asks Algernon why he deceived her, he tells her he did it in order to have the opportunity of meeting her, and this is the truth. Algernon really didn't have any other reason for pretending to be Ernest. Jack, however, is another story. Gwendolen doesn't ask Jack directly why he deceived her, and instead frames the answer she wants from him in the form of a question. She asks if he pretended to have a brother in order to come to town to see her. Jack asks if she can doubt it, and Gwendolen declares she will "crush" the doubts she has. Gwendolen is right to have those doubts. Jack's reasons for inventing Ernest and then impersonating him were many, but getting away to see Gwendolen wasn't one of them. Jack could easily have courted Gwendolen as himself, and being Ernest to her was merely the result of having met her through Algernon. Despite the apparent uniformity of the two romances, only the relationship between Cecily and Algernon is now on truthful ground.

[Read important quotes by and about Gwendolen Fairfax.](#)

Just before Lady Bracknell begins her inquiry into Cecily's background, she makes a complicated pun that underscores the elaborate underpinnings of the joke of Victoria Station being Jack's ancestral home. In Act I she exclaimed indignantly on the idea of allowing the well-bred Gwendolen "to marry into a cloakroom, and form an alliance with a parcel." Now she asks whether Cecily is "at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London." The word *connection* was commonly used to refer to a person's social milieu (his or her friends and associates) as well as to family background. Lady Bracknell is making a joke on the fact that a railway station is as far back as Jack can trace his identity. The word *connection* also refers to transport: a connection was where a person could transfer from one railway line to another. The joke is even more involved than that. When Lady Bracknell says, "I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a Terminus," she is punning on the fact that in England, in Wilde's day as well as now, a "terminus" is the last stop on a railway line, and the first stop is its "origin." In calling Victoria Station Jack's family's "origin," Lady Bracknell is getting off a very good line indeed, one that manages to be, like the joke in the title of the play, both pun and paradox.

Summary

Act III, Part Two

I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.

[See Important Quotations Explained](#)

Summary

When Miss Prism sees Lady Bracknell, she begins behaving in a frightened and furtive manner. Lady Bracknell asks her severely about the whereabouts of a certain baby that Miss Prism was supposed to have taken for a walk twenty-eight years ago. Lady Bracknell proceeds to recount the circumstances of the baby's disappearance: Miss Prism left a certain house in Grosvenor Square with a baby carriage containing a male infant and never returned, the carriage was found some weeks later in Bayswater containing "a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality," and the baby in question was never found. Miss Prism confesses apologetically that she doesn't know what happened to the baby. She explains that on the day in question she left the house with both the baby and a handbag containing a novel she had been working on, but that at some point she must have absentmindedly confused the two, placing the manuscript in the carriage and the baby in the handbag.

Now [Jack](#) joins the discussion, pressing Miss Prism for further details: *where* did she leave the handbag? *Which* railway station? What *line*? Jack excuses himself and hurries offstage, returning a moment or two later with a handbag. He presents the handbag to Miss Prism and asks her if she can identify it. Miss Prism looks the handbag over carefully before acknowledging that it *is* the handbag she mislaid. She expresses delight at having it back after so many years. Jack, under the impression that he has discovered his true parentage, throws his arms melodramatically around Miss Prism with a cry of "Mother!" Miss Prism, shocked, reminds Jack that she is unmarried. Jack, misunderstanding her point, launches into a sentimental speech about forgiveness and redemption through suffering and society's double standard about male and female transgression. With great dignity, Miss Prism gestures toward Lady Bracknell as the proper source of information about Jack's history and identity. Lady Bracknell explains that Jack is the son of her poor sister, which makes him [Algernon's](#) older brother.

The revelation removes all obstacles to Jack's union with [Gwendolen](#), but the problem of Jack's name remains. Gwendolen points out that they don't know his true name. Though Lady Bracknell is sure that as the elder son he was named after his father, no one can recall what General Moncrieff's first name was. Fortunately, Jack's bookshelves contain recent military records, and he pulls down and consults the appropriate volume. Jack's father's Christian names turn out to have been "Ernest John." For all these years, Jack has unwittingly been telling the truth: his name *is* Ernest, it is also John, and he does indeed have an unprincipled younger brother—Algernon. Somewhat taken aback by this turn of events, Jack turns to Gwendolen and asks if she can forgive him for the fact that he's been telling the truth his entire life. She tells him she can forgive him, as she feels he is sure to change. They embrace, as do Algernon and [Cecily](#) and Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble, and Jack acknowledges that he has discovered "the vital Importance of Being Earnest."

Analysis

In Victorian England, Lady Bracknell's sudden start at the mention of Miss Prism's name would have been a signal to the audience that a wild coincidence and recognition scene was approaching. Victorian melodrama was full of such coincidences and recognition scenes, in which true identities were revealed and long-lost family members were reunited. Wilde was playing with genre here, making fun of the very form in which he'd been so successful in recent years. In these plays, the revelation of identity was often predicated on a long-kept secret that involved a woman who had committed a transgression in the past. The title character in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, for instance, discovers that a woman with a dubious past is her own mother. Wilde draws out the recognition scene in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, not only having Jack go to absurd lengths to identify the handbag Miss Prism lost, but also having Miss Prism entirely miss the implications of the handbag's reappearance: if the bag has been found, the baby has been found as well. Miss Prism's final comment on the whole incident is to express delight at being reunited with the handbag as it's been "a great inconvenience being without it all these years."

[Read important quotes that satirize melodrama.](#)

In the recognition scene, the image of the missing baby carriage containing the manuscript of a not-very-good novel allows Wilde to mock yet another social element of his time. On one level, Wilde is lampooning the kind of popular fiction that was considered respectable and acceptable for women to

read—a trenchant observation from a writer whose own novel, [The Picture of Dorian Gray](#), had been reviled as “immoral.” Beyond this, however, he’s also crystallizing the theme of life as a work of art. In proposing the substitution of the baby for the manuscript and the manuscript for the baby, he connects, in a light-hearted way, the fiction that is the fruit of Miss Prism’s imagination and the fiction that Jack’s own life has been up to this point.

[Read more about hypocrisy vs. inventiveness as a theme.](#)

Jack’s discovery that his life has *not* been a fiction, that he has indeed been both “Ernest” and “earnest” during the years he thought he was deceiving his friends and family, amounts to a complex moral paradox based on an elaborate pun. For years he has been a liar, but at the same time he spoke the truth: he really was being both “earnest” (sincere) and “Ernest.” In a way, Jack has become his own fiction, and his real life has become the deception. His apology to Gwendolen and his observation that it is “a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth” is both a characteristic Wildean inversion of conventional morality and a last jibe at the hypocrisy of Victorian society.

Summary

Full Play Summary

Summary Full Play Summary

Jack Worthing, the play’s protagonist, is a pillar of the community in Hertfordshire, where he is guardian to Cecily Cardew, the pretty, eighteen-year-old granddaughter of the late Thomas Cardew, who found and adopted Jack when he was a baby. In Hertfordshire, Jack has responsibilities: he is a major landowner and justice of the peace, with tenants, farmers, and a number of servants and other employees all dependent on him. For years, he has also pretended to have an irresponsible black-sheep brother named Ernest who leads a scandalous life in pursuit of pleasure and is always getting into trouble of a sort that requires Jack to rush grimly off to his assistance. In fact, Ernest is merely Jack’s alibi, a phantom that allows him to disappear for days at a time and do as he likes. No one but Jack knows that he himself is Ernest. Ernest is the name Jack goes by in London, which is where he really goes on these occasions—probably to pursue the very sort of behavior he pretends to disapprove of in his imaginary brother.

Study Guide: Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night

Jack is in love with Gwendolen Fairfax, the cousin of his best friend, Algernon Moncrieff. When the play opens, Algernon, who knows Jack as Ernest, has begun to suspect something, having found an inscription inside Jack’s cigarette case addressed to “Uncle Jack” from someone who refers to herself as “little Cecily.” Algernon suspects that Jack may be leading a double life, a practice he seems to regard as commonplace and indispensable to modern life. He calls a person who leads a double life a “Bunburyist,” after a nonexistent friend he pretends to have, a chronic invalid named Bunbury, to whose deathbed he is forever being summoned whenever he wants to get out of some tiresome social obligation.

At the beginning of Act I, Jack drops in unexpectedly on Algernon and announces that he intends to propose to Gwendolen. Algernon confronts him with the cigarette case and forces him to come clean, demanding to know who “Jack” and “Cecily” are. Jack confesses that his name isn’t really Ernest and that Cecily is his ward, a responsibility imposed on him by his adoptive father’s will. Jack also tells Algernon about his fictional brother. Jack says he’s been thinking of killing off this fake brother, since Cecily has been showing too active an interest in him. Without meaning to, Jack describes Cecily in terms that catch Algernon’s attention and make him even more interested in her than he is already.

Gwendolen and her mother, Lady Bracknell, arrive, which gives Jack an opportunity to propose to Gwendolen. Jack is delighted to discover that Gwendolen returns his affections, but he is alarmed to learn that Gwendolen is fixated on

the name Ernest, which she says “inspires absolute confidence.” Gwendolen makes clear that she would not consider marrying a man who was not named Ernest.

Lady Bracknell interviews Jack to determine his eligibility as a possible son-in-law, and during this interview she asks about his family background. When Jack explains that he has no idea who his parents were and that he was found, by the man who adopted him, in a handbag in the cloakroom at Victoria Station, Lady Bracknell is scandalized. She forbids the match between Jack and Gwendolen and sweeps out of the house.

In Act II, Algernon shows up at Jack’s country estate posing as Jack’s brother Ernest. Meanwhile, Jack, having decided that Ernest has outlived his usefulness, arrives home in deep mourning, full of a story about Ernest having died suddenly in Paris. He is enraged to find Algernon there masquerading as Ernest but has to go along with the charade. If he doesn’t, his own lies and deceptions will be revealed.

While Jack changes out of his mourning clothes, Algernon, who has fallen hopelessly in love with Cecily, asks her to marry him. He is surprised to discover that Cecily already considers that they are engaged, and he is charmed when she reveals that her fascination with “Uncle Jack’s brother” led her to invent an elaborate romance between herself and him several months ago. Algernon is less enchanted to learn that part of Cecily’s interest in him derives from the name Ernest, which, unconsciously echoing Gwendolen, she says “inspires absolute confidence.”

Algernon goes off in search of Dr. Chasuble, the local rector, to see about getting himself christened Ernest. Meanwhile, Gwendolen arrives, having decided to pay Jack an unexpected visit. Gwendolen is shown into the garden, where Cecily orders tea and attempts to play hostess. Cecily has no idea how Gwendolen figures into Jack’s life, and Gwendolen, for her part, has no idea who Cecily is. Gwendolen initially thinks Cecily is a visitor to the Manor House and is disconcerted to learn that Cecily is “Mr. Worthing’s ward.” She notes that Ernest has never mentioned having a ward, and Cecily explains that it is not Ernest Worthing who is her guardian but his brother Jack and, in fact, that she is engaged to be married to Ernest Worthing. Gwendolen points out that this is impossible as she herself is engaged to Ernest Worthing. The tea party degenerates into a war of manners.

Jack and Algernon arrive toward the climax of this confrontation, each having separately made arrangements with Dr. Chasuble to be christened Ernest later that day. Each of the young ladies points out that the other has been deceived: Cecily informs Gwendolen that her fiancé is really named Jack and Gwendolen informs Cecily that hers is really called Algernon. The two women demand to know where Jack’s brother Ernest is, since both of them are engaged to be married to him. Jack is forced to admit that he has no brother and that Ernest is a complete fiction. Both women are shocked and furious, and they retire to the house arm in arm.

Act III takes place in the drawing room of the Manor House, where Cecily and Gwendolen have retired. When Jack and Algernon enter from the garden, the two women confront them. Cecily asks Algernon why he pretended to be her guardian’s brother. Algernon tells her he did it in order to meet her. Gwendolen asks Jack whether he pretended to have a brother in order to come into London to see her as often as possible, and she interprets his evasive reply as an affirmation. The women are somewhat appeased but still concerned over the issue of the name. However, when Jack and Algernon tell Gwendolen and Cecily that they have both made arrangements to be christened Ernest that afternoon, all is forgiven and the two pairs of lovers embrace. At this moment, Lady Bracknell’s arrival is announced.

Lady Bracknell has followed Gwendolen from London, having bribed Gwendolen’s maid to reveal her destination. She demands to know what is going on. Gwendolen again informs Lady Bracknell of her engagement to Jack, and Lady

Bracknell reiterates that a union between them is out of the question. Algernon tells Lady Bracknell of his engagement to Cecily, prompting her to inspect Cecily and inquire into her social connections, which she does in a routine and patronizing manner that infuriates Jack. He replies to all her questions with a mixture of civility and sarcasm, withholding until the last possible moment the information that Cecily is actually worth a great deal of money and stands to inherit still more when she comes of age. At this, Lady Bracknell becomes genuinely interested.

Jack informs Lady Bracknell that, as Cecily's legal guardian, he refuses to give his consent to her union with Algernon. Lady Bracknell suggests that the two young people simply wait until Cecily comes of age, and Jack points out that under the terms of her grandfather's will, Cecily does not legally come of age until she is thirty-five. Lady Bracknell asks Jack to reconsider, and he points out that the matter is entirely in her own hands. As soon as she consents to his marriage to Gwendolen, Cecily can have his consent to marry Algernon. However, Lady Bracknell refuses to entertain the notion. She and Gwendolen are on the point of leaving when Dr. Chasuble arrives and happens to mention Cecily's governess, Miss Prism. At this, Lady Bracknell starts and asks that Miss Prism be sent for.

When the governess arrives and catches sight of Lady Bracknell, she begins to look guilty and furtive. Lady Bracknell accuses her of having left her sister's house twenty-eight years before with a baby and never returned. She demands to know where the baby is. Miss Prism confesses she doesn't know, explaining that she lost the baby, having absentmindedly placed it in a handbag in which she had meant to place the manuscript for a novel she had written. Jack asks what happened to the bag, and Miss Prism says she left it in the cloakroom of a railway station. Jack presses her for further details and goes racing offstage, returning a few moments later with a large handbag. When Miss Prism confirms that the bag is hers, Jack throws himself on her with a cry of "Mother!" It takes a while before the situation is sorted out, but before too long we understand that Jack is not the illegitimate child of Miss Prism but the legitimate child of Lady Bracknell's sister and, therefore, Algernon's older brother. Furthermore, Jack had been originally christened "Ernest John." All these years Jack has unwittingly been telling the truth: Ernest is his name, as is Jack, and he does have an unprincipled younger brother—Algernon. Again the couples embrace, Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble follow suit, and Jack acknowledges that he now understands "the vital Importance of Being Earnest."

Summary

Full Play Analysis

Oscar Wilde's farcical comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* mocks the culture and manners of Victorian society, relying on satire and a comic resolution to make that mockery more palatable to viewers. Even the subtitle of the play, *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, aptly captures Wilde's tongue-in-cheek take on the cultural milieu to which he was subject. The play's characters, representing that milieu, rely on deception and hypocrisy as tools for obtaining what they want, underscoring the superficial nature of Victorian society. Appearances matter to the characters, while the truth does not, and the play's conflicts stem from the deceptions and hypocrisy of those characters.

The use of deceit begins in the opening scene of the very first act of the play, revealed in the interaction between Algernon and his butler, Lane. When confronted with Lane's deception—an alteration of the household books to hide the fact that Lane has been consuming his employer's wine—Algernon reacts with complete nonchalance. The deceit, his response seems to suggest, is something not only expected, but acceptable. The dialogue in the opening scene is full of veiled insults and the use of polite wit, satirical tools with which Wilde holds up a mirror to reflect the superficiality of Victorian society.

The major conflict of the play is formed from the obstacles that Jack faces in his attempt to marry Gwendolen, each of which is grounded in deception. Civility and customs, Wilde hints, are nothing but

a farce used by the upper class to hide their “wicked” ways. Jack has falsely led Gwendolen to believe that his name is Ernest, and he has lied to Cecily about the existence of a wayward brother, who also happens to be named Ernest. Algernon, in his own effort to create a false impression, engages in deceit through the practice of “Bunburying,” his escapes to the country to care for a fictional friend, an invalid named Bunbury. When Algernon discovers Jack’s country address, the plot’s inciting incident, this information sets subsequent events in motion. He has used deception, listening in on Jack’s conversation with Gwendolen, to get what he wants.

Wilde, as events of the rising action unfold, mocks the duplicity of Victorian views and customs of courtship. Gwendolen’s hypocrisy is clear as she tells Jack that she might marry someone else but would always be devoted to him. Algernon’s brief courtship of Cecily is deceptive; he attempts to court her while pretending to be Jack’s fictitious brother, Ernest. That courtship, obviously, is built on a lie; Cecily believes he is someone else. Wilde, during the play’s rising action, also turns a Victorian trope about marriage and courtship on its head; men, according to a naive understanding of relationships, take charge in matters of marriage and courtship; Cecily, contrary to this understanding, decides that she is engaged to Ernest before she has even met him. Men, this suggests, have very little say in the matter.

At the climax of the play, Jack’s hypocrisy is evident. Jack and Algernon come face to face and are forced to admit their deception. Neither of them is Ernest. Jack disapproves of the fact that Algernon is lying to Cecily, although he is essentially guilty of the same thing. When Lady Bracknell’s disdain for Cecily turns to delight upon finding out that she is wealthy, Wilde once again draws attention to how shallow Victorian society can be.

As the play approaches its complex resolution, the falling action reveals a final deception calling the Victorian sense of aristocratic ideal into question. Jack, despite all appearances, accidentally had been abandoned by Miss Prism at a railway station when he was a baby. The fact had been kept hidden for many years, and in the end, Jack’s lies about having a problematic younger brother and being called Ernest ironically prove to be true. He is, in fact, Algernon’s brother, and he is named Ernest after his father.

Despite all of the deceit and hypocrisy, in typical comedic fashion, Wilde resolves the play’s many conflicts happily. The couples are united, and no one faces any negative consequence for their deceitful actions. Still, Wilde’s criticism of Victorian society, while tempered by the use of comedy, exposes the rot that existed beneath the veneer of the upper class in Victorian society, where deception and hypocrisy, Wilde’s play suggests, had become rampant and even commonplace.

Summary

Key Facts

At a Glance:

Full TitleThe Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People

AuthorOscar Wilde

Type Of WorkPlay

GenreSocial comedy; comedy of manners; satire; intellectual farce

LanguageEnglish

Time And Place WrittenSummer 1894 in Worthing, England

Indepth Facts:

Date Of First Production February 14, 1895. In part because of Wilde's disgrace, the play was not published until 1899.

Publisher L. Smithers

Tone Light, scintillating, effervescent, deceptively flippant

Setting (Time) 1890s

Setting (Place) London (Act I) and Hertfordshire, a rural county not far from London (Acts II and III)

Protagonist John Worthing, known as "Ernest" by his friends in town (i.e., London) and as "Jack" by his friends and relations in the country

Major Conflict Jack faces many obstacles to his romantic union with Gwendolen. One obstacle is presented by Lady Bracknell, who objects to what she refers to as Jack's "origins" (i.e. his inability to define his family background). Another obstacle is Gwendolen's obsession with the name "Ernest," since she does not know Jack's real name.

Rising Action Algernon discovers that Jack is leading a double life and that he has a pretty young ward named Cecily. The revelation of Jack's origins causes Lady Bracknell to forbid his union with Gwendolen. Identifying himself as "Ernest," Algernon visits Jack's house in the country and falls in love with Cecily.

Climax Gwendolen and Cecily discover that both Jack and Algernon have been lying to them and that neither is really named "Ernest."

Falling Action Miss Prism is revealed to be the governess who mistakenly abandoned Jack as a baby and Jack is discovered to be Algernon's elder brother.

Themes The nature of marriage; the constraints of morality; hypocrisy vs. inventiveness; the importance of not being "earnest"

Motifs Puns; inversion; death; the dandy

Symbols The double life; food; fiction and writing

Foreshadowing In stage comedy and domestic melodrama, foreshadowing often takes the form of objects, ideas, or plot points whose very existence in the play signals to the audience that they will come up again. The fact that Jack was adopted as a baby, for instance, predicates a recognition scene in which Jack's true identity is revealed and the plot is resolved by means of some incredible coincidence. Miss Prism's "three-volume novel" is another example: Her very mention of it ensures that it will be important later. An instance of foreshadowing that operates in the more usual way is Jack's assertion that Cecily and Gwendolen will be "calling each other sister" within half an hour of having met, followed by Algernon's that "[w]omen only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first." This is literally what happens between Cecily and Gwendolen in Act II.



The Importance of Being Earnest

Study Guide by Course Hero



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👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

Oscar Wilde

FIRST PERFORMED

1895

GENRE

Comedy

ABOUT THE TITLE

The title *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a pun: this play is about people who learn what it means to be earnest, and it is also about a young man named Ernest. Wilde originally gave the play the subtitle "A Serious Comedy for Trivial People" but changed it to "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People." He

explained, "We should treat all trivial things very seriously."

🕒 In Context

Victorian Morality

Queen Victoria's long reign over England, from 1837 to 1901, saw great political, economic, and social change. Many of these changes were driven by scientific and technological advances. For example, Britain laid 6,000 miles of railroad tracks between 1820 and 1850 alone. New printing technology let people distribute books and magazines (and the ideas in them) much more quickly. Despite these changes, however, the English claimed largely to share a set of Victorian moral ideals. One of these was sexual restraint, even prudery, in public and especially for women. Socially, the ideology that the upper class was genuinely superior still held sway, and its members were expected to behave in a way appropriate to their class.

By the time Wilde was writing *The Importance of Being Earnest*, however, Victorian morality was facing complications. For all that schoolmasters, ministers, and established rhetoric might champion ideals like that of the Victorian gentlemen, society had simply moved on in a kind of social evolution. Victorian ideals about gentlemen clashed with the emerging ideal (and economic reality) of the self-made man. Victorian ideals about femininity clashed with the New Woman movement, the emergence of birth control, and Socialist agitation. The result was a claim to universal values that were, in fact, disturbed at every turn, much as the audience sees in this play.

Homosexuality

The Importance of Being Earnest is about a character who takes on a false identity to hide activities that cannot be

practiced openly. Although homosexuality is not explicit in the play, it played a major role in Wilde's life, and modern readers can easily find comparisons between Jack/Ernest's life and Victorian-era homosexuals. Because practicing homosexuality was a capital crime in England until 1828, and a felony throughout the 19th century, those who acted on their attraction to people of the same sex were often forced to lead double lives. A clue that Wilde likely had this context in mind is found in the word *earnest*; it is thought to have been a code word for *homosexual*, much as *gay* is today.

Independent of its criminal status, homosexual activity was also a contradiction of Victorian ideals: the purpose of sex was supposed to be reproduction.

The Aesthetic Movement

The 19th century was marked by the rise of the middle class and by a kind of pragmatism that emphasized hard work and practical results. With the Industrial Revolution and urbanization, much of the English landscape was destroyed; in cities slums and blight increased. Factories were crude and unsightly; workers' housing was often primitive and unsanitary. Such ugliness repelled artistic sensibilities. The art many Victorians embraced was often sentimental or practical, such as works intended to teach morality.

Starting in the 1860s, the Aesthetic Movement reversed this trend by emphasizing beauty and design. French poet Théophile Gautier gave the movement its slogan: "Art for art's sake." Starting in France with the visual arts, the movement spread across the disciplines and throughout Europe. English critic Walter Pater became a leading voice in the Aesthetic Movement. Where conventional Victorians celebrated what they thought of as objective truths and eternal values, Pater championed the sensory, the sensual, the ephemeral, and the individual. Pater influenced Wilde directly; in fact Wilde took a copy of Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* with him while he traveled and even memorized sections of it. The movement's influence is reflected in *The Importance of Being Earnest*'s focus on performance, artifice, and epigrams, or witty and often satirical sayings.

The Decadent Movement

The Romantics had celebrated nature and folk traditions. Many Victorians valued honesty, hard work, and modesty. The Decadent Movement reversed the values of both, glorifying artifice and the artificial over the natural. The movement started in France but moved to England. The Decadent Movement was closely linked to the Aesthetic Movement and championed its values as well as its own. Wilde was a major representative of the Decadent Movement in England, which rejected the ideas that art should imitate life, have a clear moral purpose, or support shared values. Instead, decadence celebrated style, excess, and pleasure—values celebrated in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

19th-Century Theater

One movement dominating 19th-century theater was the well-made play. In this highly formulaic structure, which developed in France in the 1820s, action moved within narrow boundaries, similar to those in genre fiction. Sets were limited and plots conventional. These plays tended to revolve around clear and specific problems, like romances in which a young woman must choose between two suitors. Suspense was a key element in these plays, which critics sneered at for running like machinery.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde used the conventions of the well-made play but satirized them, exaggerating them to the point of ridicule. Jack and Gwendolen face a standard problem: they want to get married, but there are obstacles. Jack's lack of background makes him an unacceptable suitor, as does his name. These issues are completely, if ridiculously, resolved by the end of the play.

Author Biography

Born in Dublin, Ireland, on October 16, 1854, Oscar Wilde lived a brief but turbulent life. His wit and talent brought him fame and admiration; however, his flamboyance and defiance of socially accepted behavior brought him ruin.

Wilde came from a well-respected family. His father, a doctor, was eventually knighted; his mother was an accomplished poet

and linguist. Wilde studied Greek and Latin and excelled in both. After attending Trinity College Dublin and then Oxford, to which he had won a scholarship, Wilde moved to London. He published his first poetry collection in 1881 and toured the United States in 1882, giving some 140 lectures and meeting American authors, among them Walt Whitman and Henry James. In London Wilde devoted much of his time to literary pursuits. He continued to write poetry and edited the magazine *The Lady's World*. He published his own fairy tales and wrote fiction, criticism, and plays. These three genres made his reputation. His novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (published in *Lippincott's Monthly* in 1890, then in an expanded book form in 1891) mixed social critique with dark fantasy. His essays "The Critic as Artist" and "The Decay of Lying" go furthest in expressing Wilde's artistic philosophy, which elevates artifice and beauty above truth and reality.

His earliest plays were tragedies and were not well received. Wilde became much more successful when he turned to writing comedies. The first of these, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), was Wilde's first truly popular play. Like *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it uses a number of conventions common to period drama, such as a case of mistaken identity and a child who is returned to its rightful parents. The second, *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), was a satire of the English upper class written specifically to build on the success of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Both plays derived their power and humor mainly from the witty lines Wilde wrote for the various characters rather than from the originality of plot or situation.

In 1894 Wilde was living in London when he decided he and his wife, Constance Lloyd, whom he married in 1884, and their two sons needed a vacation. They spent weeks by the sea in West Sussex, where Wilde wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest*. This comedy shared a number of structural elements with his earlier works, such as character types and hidden secrets. *The Importance of Being Earnest* was much lighter in tone, however, and, on its surface, more farcical. The play opened on February 14, 1895. The audience loved the play, but because his unconventional personal life was intruding on his professional life, Wilde refused to take a bow after the premiere. In fact he was trying to avoid the Marquis of Queensberry, who wanted to confront Wilde over his affair with the marquis's son, Lord Alfred Douglas. The play closed after 86 performances.

Though Wilde was married and had children, his homosexual relationships—illegal at the time—ultimately played a larger role

in shaping his life. The marquis made Wilde's homosexuality public, and Wilde sued him for libel. This action proved disastrous for Wilde. Considerable evidence of Wilde's homosexuality was publicized, and the libel suit was dismissed. Wilde was put on trial and sent to prison for two years for "gross indecency" starting May 25, 1895. When he got out, Wilde had lost his health, money, and artistic focus. He wrote very little and died on November 30, 1900.

Characters

Jack Worthing

John "Jack" Worthing's background provides the play with its mystery and plot conflicts, which start and end with his name. Jack leads a double life. He goes by the name of Ernest when he's in town and by Jack when he's in the country. Although he thinks he has invented Ernest, at the end of the play he learns that Ernest is really his name. Jack's character reveals certain contradictions. Jack is, by his own account, habitually dishonest. He even apologizes for telling the truth. On the other hand—although his deception has allowed him the freedom to indulge in the behavior Jack disapproves of—as the play opens he is in London not to misbehave but to court Gwendolen, whom he loves and wants to marry. Also he takes his country responsibilities seriously, including his guardianship of Cecily. If his double life has been hypocritical, by the start of the play Jack seems ready to confront the situation and go beyond it.

Algernon Moncrieff

Algernon is an idler and a dandy, a young, upper-class man who lives for pleasure, does not work, and moves from one social venue to another. If there is a challenge in his life, it is in aligning his pleasures just as he wants them and in not irritating his relatives too much. He also is bright and inventive, having created an invalid friend named Bunbury, whom he uses as an excuse to avoid unpleasant or unwanted social obligations. Algernon mocks social conventions but ends up living one of the most clichéd conventions in fiction: falling in love at first sight with Cecily Cardew. Algernon's actions drive the plot. It is "Algy" who listens in on Jack telling Gwendolen where he lives

and shows up there; it is Algy who pretends to be Ernest so he can meet and woo Jack's ward, Cecily. Algernon is the play's engine.

expects to be served and obeyed, and she is. One of her primary interests is to secure a suitable—in her world, rich and well-connected—husband for her daughter.

Gwendolen Fairfax

A shallow and conventional young woman, a well-indoctrinated product of conventional upper-class Victorian society, Gwendolen seems sure of herself and sure of what she wants in life. Some of these desires, however, seem like mockery. She wants love but is obsessed with the idea of marrying someone named Ernest. Even with her rational explanation, she sees the qualities of earnestness in a name rather than in a person. She appears smart and sophisticated, but only superficially. Gwendolen demonstrates her superficiality in her behavior toward Cecily as well. She is quite affectionate toward Cecily at first but quickly becomes her enemy when it appears they are engaged to the same man. Similarly when Jack's deception over his name is revealed, she is momentarily angry with him.

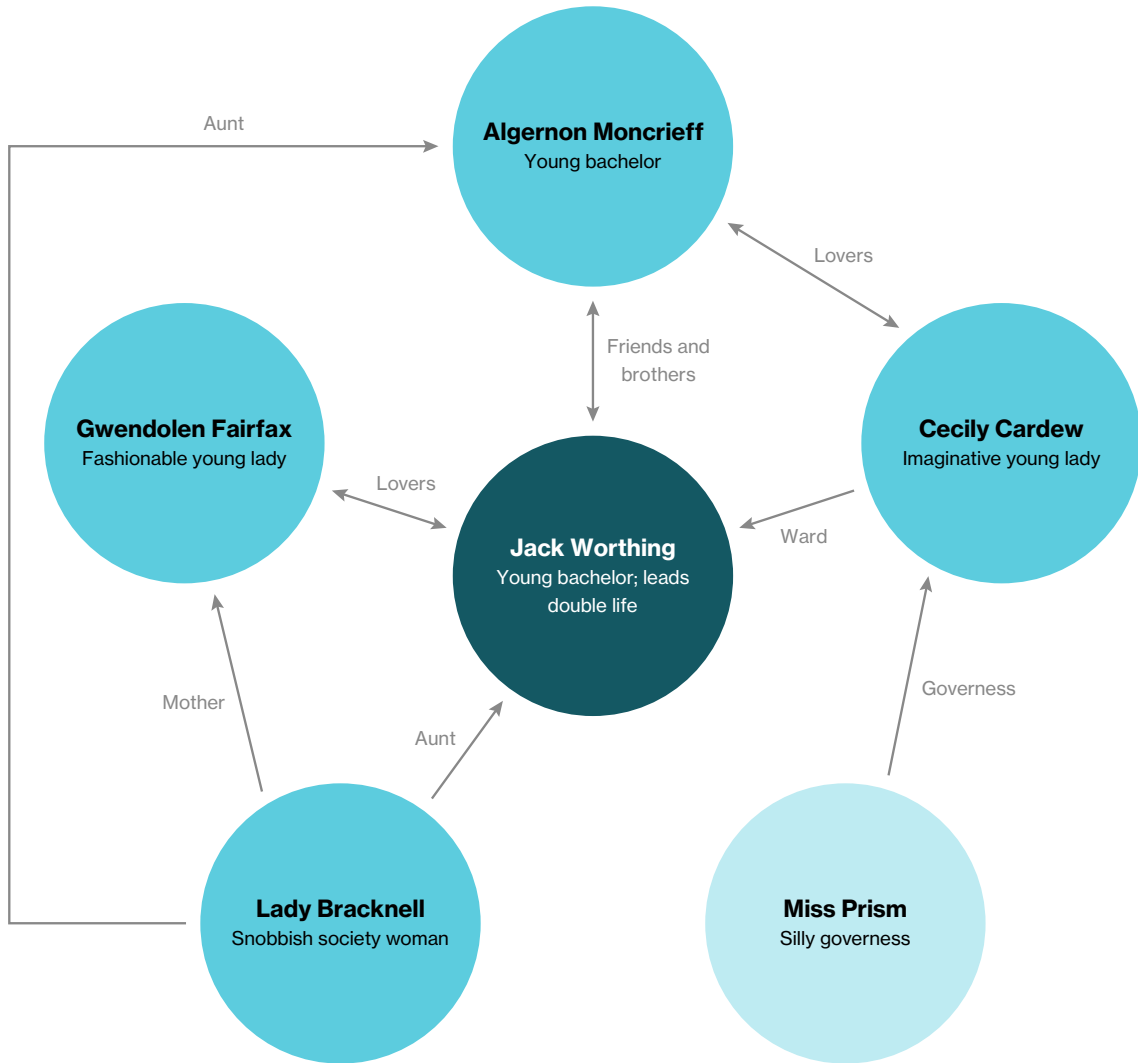
Cecily Cardew

Cecily is the granddaughter of Thomas Cardew, who adopted Jack. She is quite sheltered, having spent her life in the country rather than in the city, and is chafing under Jack's rules and Miss Prism's tutelage. Of all the characters, naive and innocent Cecily shows the loosest relationship to reality. This gap between fantasy and fact is clearly demonstrated when finally she meets Algernon (playing the part of Ernest). When Algernon says he loves her and wants to marry her, Cecily reveals that they've already been engaged for three months—a fantasy she has created, having fallen for the wayward Ernest solely on the basis of Jack's accounts. It is notable that the sophisticated Gwendolen and the naive Cecily both are taken with the idea of "Ernest"—Gwendolen for the admirable qualities of the word and Cecily for the negative qualities of the character.

Lady Bracknell

Lady Bracknell is the voice of authority and speaks with all the haughty self-righteousness of the conventional Victorian upper-class matron. An expert at social interaction, she is brash, interfering, greedy, and snobbishly conservative. She

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Jack Worthing	Adopted as an infant, Jack Worthing is a rich, young bachelor with no known family; he lives a double life.
Algernon Moncrieff	Algernon Moncrieff is a young, pleasure-seeking bachelor from a good family.
Gwendolen Fairfax	Gwendolen Fairfax is Algernon's first cousin, Lady Bracknell's daughter, and Jack's beloved.
Cecily Cardew	Cecily Cardew is Jack's beautiful 18-year-old ward.
Lady Bracknell	Lady Augusta Bracknell is Gwendolen's mother and Algernon's aunt.
Dr. Chasuble	Dr. Chasuble is a well-meaning but bumbling clergyman at the parish near Jack's country home.
Lane	Lane is Algernon's servant.
Merriman	Merriman is the butler at Jack's country home.
Miss Prism	Miss Laetitia Prism is Cecily's governess and was (unknown until the end of the play) Jack's nurse before she misplaced him when he was a baby.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The Importance of Being Earnest, set in England in the 1890s, focuses on the romantic relationships of two young couples. Act 1 opens in Algernon Moncrieff's flat. Algernon is playing the piano while his servant, Lane, prepares to host Algernon's Aunt

Augusta for tea.

Algernon's friend Jack Worthing, in his identity as "Ernest," enters. "Ernest" is pleased to learn that Algernon's aunt and her daughter Gwendolen are coming for tea. Algernon says "Ernest" must leave because he flirts with Gwendolen. "Ernest" says he plans to propose to Gwendolen, but Algernon refuses to give his consent until "Ernest" resolves the issue of Cecily. He produces a cigarette case that "Ernest" had left there and quizzes him about the inscription. "Ernest" explains that Cecily is his ward and admits he maintains two identities: Ernest when he's in town and Jack when he's in the country. Worthing's dual identity parallels Algernon's habit of using his imaginary invalid friend Bunbury as an excuse to avoid social obligations.

Lady Bracknell (Algernon's Aunt Augusta) and her daughter Gwendolen arrive. After serving them tea, Algernon accompanies his aunt to another room to plan a party. Once "Ernest" and Gwendolen are alone, "Ernest" proposes. Gwendolen accepts. When Lady Bracknell returns, Gwendolen informs her of the engagement. Lady Bracknell sends her daughter to wait in the carriage and quizzes "Ernest" to determine his suitability as a husband. His lack of family connections is a problem: he is a foundling, placed in a handbag that was left in a railway station. Lady Bracknell rejects "Ernest" and leaves.

As "Ernest" and Algernon talk, Gwendolen returns. She tells "Ernest" his uncertain origin makes her love him more. When "Ernest" shares his address in the country so they can write letters, Algernon takes note of it.

Act 2

Jack's ward, Cecily, is studying reluctantly with her governess, Miss Prism, at Jack's country home. When Dr. Chasuble, the minister, joins them, Cecily persuades Miss Prism—who is attracted to the minister—to take a walk with him. Their departure leaves Cecily alone when Algernon arrives, pretending to be Jack's brother Ernest. "Ernest" makes romantic overtures, and the two become attracted to each other. They disappear into the house. Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble return. Jack Worthing arrives. He says his brother Ernest has died and asks Dr. Chasuble to christen him.

Cecily comes out of the house and informs Jack that his brother is there. When Jack says he doesn't have a brother,

Cecily returns with "Ernest." The others leave Jack and "Ernest" alone to reconcile. Jack wants "Ernest" to leave. They agree "Ernest" will leave if Jack changes out of his mourning clothes. Jack goes to change his clothes. Cecily returns, and "Ernest" proposes. Cecily accepts and informs him they've already been engaged for months. She decided this without having met him. She also informs him she's always had a dream of marrying someone named Ernest. "Ernest" excuses himself to find Dr. Chasuble to ask to be christened as Ernest.

Gwendolen enters. The two women seem to be becoming friends, until they discover they are both engaged to marry Ernest Worthing. They argue over who has the better claim until Jack enters. Gwendolen asks if he is engaged to Cecily; he denies it. Cecily identifies Jack as Jack rather than Ernest. Algernon reenters. Cecily asks Algernon if he is engaged to Gwendolen. He denies it. Gwendolen identifies Algernon as Algernon rather than Ernest. The women are offended to learn they've been lied to and neither is engaged to a man named Ernest. They stalk off into the house angrily. When the two men are left alone, Jack expresses his love for Gwendolen and states his desire to marry her. Algernon denies him. Algernon expresses his love for Cecily and states his desire to marry her. Jack denies him. Both declare their intentions to be christened as Ernest so they can marry their respected beloveds.

Act 3

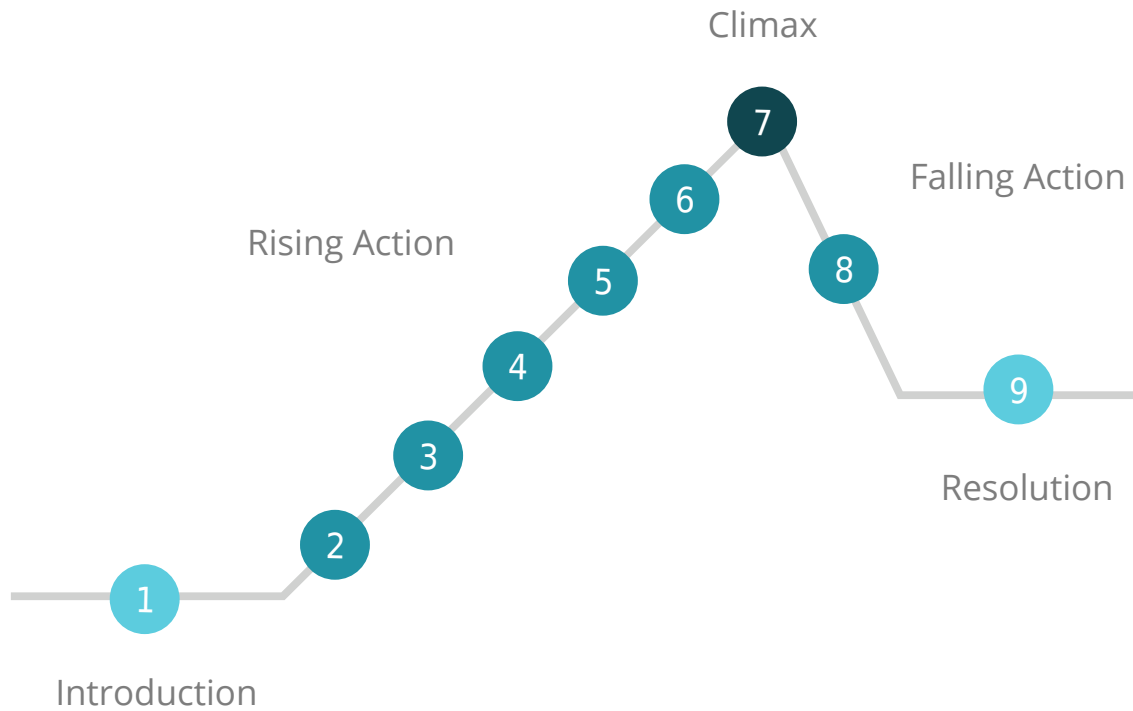
The lovers come together in the drawing room. The women quiz the men regarding their lies. The men argue that the purpose of the lies was to be close to the women. The women accept their stories but insist their names are nonnegotiable barriers. Lady Bracknell reenters. Jack announces he is engaged to Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell rejects this statement. Algernon informs her he is engaged to Cecily. Since Cecily is Jack's ward, Lady Bracknell quizzes Jack to see if she is a good match for Algernon. When she learns Cecily is wealthy, she approves of the marriage. Jack, however, withholds his consent.

Dr. Chasuble enters, looking for Jack and Algernon. Jack informs him there won't be any christenings. Dr. Chasuble is disappointed and says Miss Prism has been waiting at the church. Lady Bracknell recognizes the name and asks to see her. When Miss Prism enters, Lady Bracknell interrogates her about an event that happened 28 years ago. Miss Prism

accidentally left a baby, for whom she was responsible, in a handbag in a railway station.

Jack asks which station. When Prism tells him it was Victoria Station, the Brighton line, Jack disappears upstairs. He returns with a handbag. Miss Prism identifies it as hers. Lady Bracknell explains that the baby Miss Prism was caring for belonged to her sister, and Jack is revealed as Algernon's older brother. Because he was named for his father, Jack learns his real name has been Ernest all along.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Jack reveals he has two identities.

Rising Action

2. Jack proposes to Gwendolen.
3. Lady Bracknell rejects Jack's proposal.
4. Algernon pretends to be Ernest to court Cecily.
5. Cecily and Gwendolen discover both are engaged to Ernest.
6. The couples reconcile; the men plan to be rechristened.

Climax

7. Lady Bracknell quizzes Miss Prism about a missing baby.

Falling Action

8. Miss Prism identifies Jack as the baby she abandoned.

Resolution

9. Jack learns his real identity and can marry Gwendolen.

Timeline of Events

Minutes later

Jack proposes to Gwendolen; her mother, Lady Bracknell, blocks the couple because Jack is an orphan.

Minutes later

Jack announces his (imaginary) brother Ernest is dead.

Minutes later

Jack must reconcile with Algernon, pretending to be Ernest.

Later that day

The lovers reconcile, but the women insist on the men being named Ernest.

Minutes later

Jack learns he was the abandoned baby and is named Ernest.

1890s

Jack reveals to Algernon he has two identities: Jack in the country and Ernest in town.

One day later

Algernon pretends to be Ernest to court Cecily.

Later that day

Algernon proposes to Cecily.

Minutes later

Cecily and Gwendolen discover they are both engaged to Ernest Worthing and get angry.

Minutes later

Lady Bracknell reveals Miss Prism to be guilty of losing Lady Bracknell's infant nephew decades ago.

Section Summaries

Oscar Wilde divided *The Importance of Being Earnest* into three acts. This study guide further breaks down each act summary and analysis into sections.

Act 1, Section 1

Summary

Lane is setting up for tea while Algernon Moncrieff plays the piano in the next room. Algernon finishes and enters the morning room (a family living room) where Lane is working. Lane says he didn't think it polite to listen to Algernon playing the piano.

Algernon quizzes Lane about how much wine was consumed at a recent event, blaming the servants for the excessive consumption. They discuss marriage briefly. Algernon dismisses Lane, who returns a moment later to announce a visitor: Mr. Ernest Worthing.

Analysis

This brief scene sets the tone for the play and introduces some of its themes as well as its main characters. The tone is light and comic. When Lane says he didn't think it polite to listen to Algernon playing the piano, he reverses the usual situation in which people play the piano to entertain others. When Algernon claims anyone can play accurately, he reverses common wisdom and reality as well: in reality it is very difficult to play music accurately.

When Algernon claims he keeps "science for Life" rather than applying it to music, he sets up a focused kind of situational irony, where reality contradicts expectation. Though the audience has just been introduced to Algernon, they understand quickly this is not a man who applies science to any aspect of his reality. Instead the discussion of how much champagne has been consumed establishes his world as one of pleasure and extravagance. When Algernon follows by blaming the servants for this excessive consumption, the audience understands his lack of responsibility as well. The wit

with which Wilde laces almost every line finishes the evocation of this world: a world of such joyous verbal pleasure that audiences are quite willing to have their expectations inverted and watch silly people do sillier things.

Act 1, Section 2

Summary

As Algernon and Ernest talk, they eat the food Lane had set out. When Ernest asks who is coming to tea, Algernon says the guests will be his Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen Fairfax. Algernon chides Ernest for the way in which he flirts with Gwendolen. Ernest counters by explaining that he loves Gwendolen and has come to town specifically to propose to her. Algernon says that as Gwendolen's first cousin he forbids the marriage until Ernest clears up the question of Cecily.

Algernon has Lane bring in a cigarette case Ernest had left there. Algernon quizzes Ernest about the inscription on it. It was a gift from Cecily, who Ernest claims is his aunt. The case is inscribed, however, "From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack." Ernest then admits that he goes by two names: Ernest Worthing in town and Jack Worthing in the country. When he needs an excuse to do something, he claims his younger (fictitious) brother Ernest is always getting into trouble. He admits that Cecily is not his aunt but his ward, the granddaughter of the man who adopted him.

Algernon seizes on Jack's second identity as a parallel with something he does: Algernon has an imaginary invalid friend named Bunbury. Whenever he needs an excuse to do something, he claims Bunbury is ill. Jack denies any similarity and says that if Gwendolen accepts his proposal he will kill his imaginary brother.

Analysis

This extended expository scene between Jack and Algernon establishes the major plot points, deepens understanding of the themes and characters, and is, of course, continually funny. Jack has been living a double life, claiming he has a rogue brother named Ernest; Jack is in love with Gwendolen; he is adopted; and he is responsible for the granddaughter of the man who adopted him.

Algernon's Bunbury, the imaginary invalid, and Jack's misbehaving brother Ernest upend the Victorian ideal of duty. Jack and Algernon have both invented secondary identities that allow them to escape the weight of social expectations.

The play's complicated attitudes toward love are visible as Algernon discusses love and courtship. Algernon tells Jack that being in love is romantic but proposing and marriage are not.

Algernon's comments on love reveal how Wilde upends social norms to create humor and to comment on the institution of marriage. Although love stories in popular fiction may end with the couple marrying, Algernon points out that marriage is fundamentally different from courtship, more business than fun.

Act 1, Section 3

Summary

Lane ushers in Lady Bracknell, who is Algernon's Aunt Augusta, and Gwendolen, his cousin. Lady Bracknell mentions a friend, Lady Harbury, who looks much younger since her husband has died. She then asks Algernon to help her plan an upcoming reception, and the two leave the room briefly. While they are alone, Jack, in the guise of Ernest, tells Gwendolen how much he loves her. She says she loves him too and that it has always been her dream to marry someone named Ernest. Startled, Jack asks whether she could love him if his name were something else, like Jack. They discuss it, and then Jack proposes. Gwendolen accepts, and Lady Bracknell returns.

When Gwendolen tells her of the engagement, Lady Bracknell sends Gwendolen to wait in the carriage. She quizzes Jack to make sure he is a suitable candidate. He seems to be until they get to the matter of his family. Jack never knew his parents. When he was a baby, he was placed in a leather handbag and abandoned in a railway station. Mr. Thomas Cardew found and adopted him. Lady Bracknell rejects Jack's proposal to Gwendolen because he lacks family connections. She leaves.

Jack explains the situation to Algernon, telling him that Jack plans to get rid of his imaginary brother Ernest. They talk about what to do that evening, and then Gwendolen returns so she and Jack can plan their next steps. They agree to write

regularly, and when Jack gives her his address, Algernon makes note of it. Jack sees Gwendolen to her carriage, leaving Algernon alone. Lane enters, bringing Algernon several envelopes and a sherry. Algernon drinks the sherry, tears up the envelopes without opening them, and informs Lane that he plans to go "Bunburying" the next day.

Analysis

Jack and Gwendolen's eagerness to talk about their love shows the importance of love in their lives. Gwendolen's desire to marry someone named Ernest, however, which she says has been a lifelong dream, is absurd. Wilde mocks the ideal of romantic love and its arbitrary nature. Choosing someone based on a name is absurd, but is it any more or less absurd than other dreams regarding marriage? Audiences can also read this "dream" in another way. Earnestness was a desirable quality in the Victorian age. An earnest person is serious and sincere as opposed to lighthearted or playful. Gwendolen's desire to marry a man named Ernest is a case of linking language and reality too closely: she desires a man named Ernest because she wants a man who is earnest. Reducing earnestness to a label markedly satirizes this ideal.

On the surface Lady Bracknell's rejection of Jack as a husband for Gwendolen is arbitrary. She judges Jack for traits beyond his control. Jack is judged favorably based on the money he inherited from his adopted father, but he is rejected because he is abandoned by his biological family. Yet he did not choose either event, just as he did not choose his name (Gwendolen's potential reason for rejecting Jack as a husband). Wilde employs humor to critique the arbitrary nature of social interaction, which is largely based on surface-level traits rather than true character.

The action in this sequence provides commentary on several other aspects of romance. Lady Bracknell's comment regarding Lady Harbury serves as a warning about marriage: Lady Harbury looks much younger since her husband has died. The humor in this account lies on the surface; the wisdom comes from its juxtaposition to Jack and Gwendolen's eager pursuit of each other as they ignore this example of marital unhappiness. The closest Jack gets to questioning the nature of marriage is calling Lady Bracknell a "monster" and asking Algernon if Gwendolen is likely to become like her mother. When Algernon says yes, the audience understands this possibility but Jack dismisses the response and moves ahead

in pursuit of love and marriage.

Act 2, Section 1

Summary

When Act 2 opens at the Manor House, Jack's country estate, Miss Prism tries to get Cecily Cardew to study her German. Cecily resists and distracts Miss Prism by talking about Jack and his troublesome brother Ernest. Cecily suggests that Miss Prism could reform Ernest because she is so knowledgeable. Miss Prism chides her. Cecily blames memory for "nearly all the three-volume novels" they encounter. This statement leads Miss Prism to admit she wrote a three-volume novel when she was young but abandoned it. Dr. Chasuble enters. Cecily says Miss Prism has a headache and would benefit from going on a walk. Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism go for a walk, leaving Cecily alone to curse her lessons.

Analysis

As Act 2 opens Cecily's fascination with Ernest is clear. In this attraction Wilde alludes to a popular character type: the attractive bad boy whom women want to reform. Wilde wickedly critiques this cliché by having Cecily suggest that Miss Prism could reform Ernest because she knows "German, and geology, and things of that kind." Such a suggestion is, of course, flatly ridiculous. It also applies more widely to British society. In his influential 1869 work *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold explicitly argues that teaching the humanities could improve society and elevate ethically those who study them. Wilde, writing a generation later, mocks the idea: a teenage girl thinks a German lesson will reform an unethical man.

The exchange between Cecily and Miss Prism creates several examples of dramatic irony, in which the audience understands something the characters do not. When Miss Prism discusses her abandoned novel, she says, "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means." The idea that an art form so predictable could influence anyone makes the idea absurd and critiques the shallowness of some Victorian literary conventions. The entire exchange becomes even sillier when Dr. Chasuble arrives and refers to Miss Prism as "Egeria."

Egeria is a figure from Roman mythology who supposedly taught the second king of Rome, issuing both wisdom and prophecy. In contrast, Miss Prism is a silly woman, a product of her class and culture, rather than the blend of nature and spirit that defined Egeria.

Act 2, Section 2

Summary

Merriman announces Mr. Ernest Worthing has arrived. Algernon enters, pretending to be Jack's brother Ernest. He and Cecily immediately begin to talk and flirt. Algernon directly praises Cecily's beauty when they move into the house, still talking.

Analysis

When Cecily learns Ernest has arrived, she says, "I have never met any really wicked person before. I feel rather frightened. I am so afraid he will look just like everyone else." This line is a fine example of one of the comic structures scholar Robert Jordan points out: Wilde provides a comment that leads the audience to think they know what to expect, then he destroys that expectation by a shift at the end, creating a shock or even a jolt.

When Cecily sees Algernon, she realizes that he looks like everyone else. This gap between character and appearance is one to which Wilde returns in other works, especially *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published a few years before this play. In that book a man's portrait ages, showing all the signs of his wild, dissipated life, while the man himself stays young and handsome. Both the book and the play underscore a fundamental interest for Wilde: the gap between appearance and reality.

When Algernon tries to explain he is not really wicked, Cecily signals clearly that she prefers someone disreputable. Algernon plays along, but his alleged wickedness is only verbal: he says he's wicked but he doesn't actually do much that is bad at all. Their most important exchange comes at the end of the section, as Algernon praises Cecily's appearance. When Algernon says her good looks are "a snare that every sensible man would like to be caught in," Cecily replies she wouldn't

want a sensible man because she wouldn't know what to do with him. The exchange is both funny and profound: a man who is susceptible to his senses, a sensible man, would indeed likely want to be caught by beauty. On the other hand Cecily is not attracted to a man who is sensible or who shows good sense or judgment. She is attracted to Algernon, who pretends to be someone and something he is not.

Act 2, Section 3

Summary

Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble return, talking about marriage. Miss Prism argues unmarried men need to realize they present a temptation to women. Jack enters, dressed in mourning clothes. When Dr. Chasuble asks why, Jack says his brother Ernest has died. After explaining how Ernest died, Jack asks Dr. Chasuble if he would christen him, and they make arrangements for Jack to be christened. Cecily reenters. She tells Jack his brother Ernest is in the dining room. Jack denies he has a brother. Cecily goes back into the house and returns a moment later holding hands with Algernon. Algernon, playing the role of Ernest, apologizes. Jack refuses to shake his hand. Cecily thinks it is because he is angry with "Ernest," and the others leave the "brothers" alone to make up.

Analysis

When Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble enter, Miss Prism underscores her failings as a teacher by her comments on the primitive church. Her argument that it died out because of its attitudes on marriage, rather than evolving and flourishing as it clearly did, shows how she bends history to teach the lesson she wants to teach. In this case she tries to convince Dr. Chasuble to marry because she wants him to marry her. When she says an unmarried man is a "permanent public temptation" and might lead "weaker vessels astray," she hints as broadly as she can that she desires him.

In the main plot the first major reversal—or obstacle—occurs. Jack has been benefiting from his story about a brother. Now he has to pay the price for that story and live in a world in which he has a brother. In other words, having created a new reality he must face the consequences of his actions.

Act 2, Section 4

Summary

Merriman enters, announcing he has put away Algernon's (Ernest's) luggage. Algernon says he'll be staying for a week. Jack and Algernon argue over Algernon's stay. Algernon eventually says he cannot leave while Jack is in mourning, but he will leave if Jack changes out of his mourning clothes. When Jack goes into the house to change, Algernon, alone on stage, announces he is in love with Cecily. She returns to the garden, and Algernon (as Ernest) tells her Jack is making him leave. Algernon announces he loves Cecily. She takes out her diary and starts recording his declaration of love. When Algernon proposes, Cecily not only accepts but also tells him they have been engaged for three months. She proposed for him and accepted long before they ever met. As they express their love, she reveals she has always dreamed of marrying someone named Ernest. When Algernon asks if the name really is important, she insists it is, so he excuses himself to ask Dr. Chasuble to rechristen him as Ernest.

Analysis

The humor in the play alternates between social satire and silliness. Algernon's refusal to leave while Jack is in mourning is silly. Jack is not in mourning; he is pretending. But Jack plays along. Their pretense slides into social satire as the characters suggest that if Jack changes out of his mourning clothes, he will no longer be in mourning, implying that the depth of some people's mourning is as superficial as the clothing they wear and suggesting that clothing does not necessarily equate to what people feel.

The silliness continues when Algernon proposes and finds out he has already been engaged for several months. On the one hand, such an engagement is impossible and contradicts social norms. On the other hand, Cecily's explanation of their engagement carries a kind of profundity. She notes that Ernest was the main topic of conversation between Miss Prism and her and says, "And of course a man who is much talked about is always very attractive. One feels there must be something in him, after all." This is prescient on Wilde's part as this is the nature of celebrity: people become attractive because they are famous and talked about, not because of any innate qualities.

It is easy for an audience to laugh at Cecily. But an audience might laugh at Algernon as well. He goes along with her explanation of their engagement even though it is silly and unbelievable. Wilde underscores the absurdity of the world he's invented by having Cecily, like Gwendolen, dream of marrying a man named Ernest. While one woman having this dream is so unlikely as to be almost impossible, having two women with such a dream is absurd. The effect is to suggest that the characters in the play are, in some ways, interchangeable.

A small detail worth noting is that Cecily accepted Algernon's imagined proposal on February 14, Valentine's Day, when some people are pressured to feel romantic love and be in a relationship. This was also the day on which this play was first performed in London.

Act 2, Section 5

Summary

Cecily is alone for only a moment before Merriman announces Miss Fairfax's arrival. Gwendolen enters, and the two women get along well at first. When Gwendolen asks about Cecily's family, however, she learns Cecily has no living relatives and lives there as "Mr. Worthing's ward." The relationship between Cecily and her guardian arouses Gwendolen's suspicions. The women learn that both are engaged to Mr. Ernest Worthing and begin to argue over who has the better claim to Ernest. The fight cools slightly while Merriman serves tea, but it resumes once he leaves. They reach a state of open hostility, and Cecily tries to dismiss Gwendolen when Jack enters.

Jack denies he is engaged to Cecily and claims he is engaged to Gwendolen. In the process, however, he is revealed as Jack, rather than Ernest. Algernon enters. Algernon denies he is engaged to Gwendolen and claims he is engaged to Cecily. He is revealed as Algernon, rather than Ernest. Astounded by these revelations, the women reconcile. Gwendolen quizzes Jack on the location of his brother Ernest since both women are apparently engaged to him. Jack admits he has no brother. The women storm off into the house. Jack and Algernon eat the food set out for tea and argue about what will happen next.

Analysis

Cecily and Gwendolen's battle over tea shows both their anger and their well-taught social behavior. Before Merriman serves tea, the two women have already denounced each other's class and character. Yet when tea is served, they become quite polite again, at least superficially. Cecily, however, continues the war under the veil of politeness, showing how social conventions often mask hostility. Social conventions are also tested by something surprisingly realistic: Gwendolen is right to be concerned about Cecily's being Jack's ward: she is young, attractive, unattached, rich, and living in the same house as Jack.

For some time Jack's lies about Ernest have served him well, allowing him to enjoy himself. Now, however, his lies trap him as the women confront him and Algernon with the contradictory stories.

Act 3, Section 1

Summary

After Gwendolen and Cecily give Jack and Algernon the silent treatment, they ask the men why they assumed the false identity of Ernest. Both men say, in different ways, they did so to be with the women, a response the women accept. Both women, however, still find the men's real names unacceptable. The men tell the women they plan to be christened as Ernest that afternoon. The couples reconcile.

Analysis

In this scene the women take the lead in self-deception, although the men play willing parts. This self-deception is notable as Cecily decides the men are eating muffins as a sign of repentance. (This action is also humorous because it continues to demonstrate Algernon's greedy pleasure while eating the muffins at the end of the previous act.) Self-deception rises to a new level, however, when the women quiz the men about their actions. Wilde glorifies untruth—style over substance—as Cecily remarks that her disbelief in Algernon's answer in no way detracts from its beauty. At first glance this concept might seem another of Wilde's reversals. But is it? The

moral forces in Victorian society encouraged strong convictions about what one could and could not say, especially about sex. In this case Wilde may be executing a kind of "double reversal": seeming to reverse common beliefs while actually endorsing them. As for Gwendolen, she tells Jack what to say to get back into her good graces, so his statement of love should carry no more weight than Algernon's.

Act 3, Section 2

Summary

Lady Bracknell returns, disrupting this happy state of affairs. She tells Gwendolen that she and Jack are not engaged. She also rejects Algernon's engagement to Cecily until she has reviewed Cecily's character and prospects. She quizzes Jack about Cecily's background. When she learns Cecily is rich, Lady Bracknell suddenly approves and finds her attractive. She gives the engagement her blessing, tells Cecily to call her Aunt Augusta, and suggests Cecily and Algernon marry soon. Algernon and Cecily are happy. Jack, however, does not give Cecily permission to marry Algernon and refuses to do so unless Lady Bracknell permits him to marry Gwendolen, which she refuses to do. Lady Bracknell then suggests waiting until Cecily comes of age, but Jack reveals her coming of age will not happen until she reaches age 35. The situation seems deadlocked, and Lady Bracknell prepares to return to London with Gwendolen.

Analysis

Thematically this scene reveals an overt critique of social convention. In Victorian England, it would be common and expected for an older, respectable relative to review potential spouses, so Lady Bracknell's decision to evaluate Cecily would have been accepted as quite normal. Similarly, as Cecily's guardian, Jack could speak for Cecily to share facts about her good qualities in a way that her modesty would not allow, thereby protecting her from inappropriate matches in turn. The general form of such an exchange is usual. The specifics are not. Indeed they are the source of humor and insight. When Lady Bracknell switches suddenly from opposing Algernon's marriage to Cecily to embracing it, even hurrying it along, the snobbish matron reveals the tensions reshaping Victorian

ideals. She blatantly equates Cecily's wealth with Cecily's character. In Jack's case it would be appropriate for him to block Algernon as a suitor, given Algernon's irresponsible behavior. But while Algernon has acted dishonestly by presenting himself as Ernest, Jack has done the same thing. To make the criticism shallower (and more amusing), Jack appears more upset about Algernon's consumption of muffins and wine than he is about the dishonesty. While in the moment this may seem (and be) hypocrisy on Lady Bracknell's part, this is also an instance in which she embodies the transformations Victorian society underwent as it was swamped by an emerging capitalist reality, a major aspect of Victorian hypocrisy.

Act 3, Section 3

Summary

Dr. Chasuble enters, ready to christen Jack and Algernon. Lady Bracknell scorns the idea. Dr. Chasuble is sorry to hear this news and says he will return to the church where Miss Prism is waiting for him. Lady Bracknell is startled by the name and quizzes Chasuble about Miss Prism. Quite sure she knows Miss Prism, Lady Bracknell sends for her.

When Miss Prism arrives, Lady Bracknell interrogates her, asking, among other things, "Prism! Where is that baby?" Lady Bracknell explains that 28 years ago, Miss Prism left the Bracknell house pushing a pram containing a baby boy. She never returned. The police located the pram, which contained the unpublished manuscript for a novel but not the baby. Lady Bracknell ends this historical review by asking Miss Prism again where the baby is. Miss Prism says she doesn't know but admits that, at the time, she was distracted and accidentally swapped the baby for the manuscript she kept in a handbag. She then left the handbag and the baby in the cloakroom of Victoria Station, at the "Brighton line." When he hears this, Jack excuses himself and goes upstairs.

Jack reappears with an old handbag, which Miss Prism identifies as the one she left in the railway station. Jack embraces Miss Prism as his mother. She denies the relationship and refers him to Lady Bracknell, who identifies Jack as her sister's son and Algernon's older brother. After celebrating with his new relatives, Jack asks after his Christian

name. Lady Bracknell cannot remember, only that he was named after his father. Algernon doesn't know his father's name either because he died when Algernon was a year old. Since he was a military man, they check military records for the period. They discover Jack's father's name was Ernest. Gwendolen reiterates her love for the name Ernest. Jack asks for forgiveness. The couples reconcile, and Jack delivers his famous moral: "I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest."

Analysis

This final section brings most plot threads together, though it is worth noting that as carefully constructed as this play is, one plot thread is left hanging. Although Jack really is Ernest and fulfills Gwendolen's dream, Algernon is still named Algernon. The audience might forget it in the chaos of the play's final moments but his Aunt Augusta has forbidden him to be rechristened. Might Algernon and Cecily be left out of the play's happy ending? Probably not, because Ernest is likely to reverse his ruling and allow his new brother to marry Cecily.

There is so much humor in this final section that Wilde may actually get in his own way at times, stepping on his jokes by piling them too closely together. For example, when Lady Bracknell is trying to confirm Miss Prism's identity, she refers to the governess as having a "repellent aspect." Dr. Chasuble counters that she is the "very picture of respectability," and that is enough for Lady Bracknell to know they speak of the same person.

This is a useful dig at period social conventions. For conventional Victorians, respectability is something one must actively choose and maintain. In this scene Wilde suggests that Miss Prism maintains her respectability and reputation not because she is virtuous but because she's unattractive. She doesn't have to resist sexual advances if no one makes them.

The climax of the play comes in two surges. The first occurs when Lady Bracknell interrogates Miss Prism to determine what happened to the missing baby. The second occurs when Jack discovers his identity, first as someone who has a family and then as someone named Ernest. Each of these final peaks incorporates the play's themes in strikingly intertwined fashion. For example, when interrogating Miss Prism about the baby, Lady Bracknell is accusatory, as fits the crime. But she does not particularly welcome Jack when he is revealed as a

relative. Her focus is on the crime, not the lost family member. Although she presents herself as the defender of values, Lady Bracknell fails markedly here, thus reversing expectations and taking a swipe at social conventions.

The importance of language is shown through a pun as Jack delivers the play's final line: "On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest." This obvious echo of the title highlights the Ernest/Earnest pun.

The play ends with all the couples pairing off. Jack and Gwendolen are united relatively sensibly: they were courting throughout the play, and the only obstacles to their marriage (his name and lack of family) have been removed. Algernon and Cecily can unite only through absurdity. Perhaps they are carried along in the momentum of the moment since for them to wed means Cecily has to give up her longstanding objection to Algernon's name. And finally, Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism also fall into each other's arms, even though she has been accused of a crime and neither has openly expressed love before. That small detail may be Wilde's most telling critique of period artistic conventions. As Miss Prism said earlier of her novel, "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means." This dig at unimaginative fiction in fact makes no sense in the play as no one is particularly good. But the expectations of the form trump all, even rational thought.

“” Quotes

"When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring."

— Jack Worthing, Act 1, Section 2

Jack's comment to Algernon is an example of one of Wilde's epigrams: a brief line or couplet so well written that it is remembered for its wit (and satire) even outside its original context.

In fact, in its original context this line has little or no literal

meaning. While Jack is responsible in the country, taking care of his ward, he does not set out to amuse other people (except the audience). In fact, once he is in the country, he repeatedly tries to escape his duties as host and send Algernon packing. He certainly does not amuse Aunt Augusta. Fortunately for the audience, the final line is also wrong: the country is anything but boring.

"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. Then the excitement is all over."

— Algernon Moncrieff, Act 1, Section 2

Wilde reverses social conventions about love and marriage. A proposal does mark a shift in a romance but not a positive one here—an ending to romance rather than the beginning of a new phase of it. A proposal removes the uncertainty and excitement of courtship, and acceptance begins the predictable certainty, permanence, and responsibility of marriage.

"Oh! it is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read."

— Algernon Moncrieff, Act 1, Section 2

First, Wilde criticizes social conventions that made clear, firm judgments about what people should and shouldn't read.

Second, he reverses common wisdom about what is important, or not, to read. Third, while being amusing, Wilde inserts his opinion about literature and censorship. Important works were censored during this time, including Wilde's own *Picture of Dorian Gray*. Notable, too, is that women were discouraged from reading newspapers.

"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 ... It is perfectly absurd ... that your name isn't Ernest."

— Algernon Moncrieff, Act 1, Section 2

Exaggeration is a classic way to generate humor, and Algernon exaggerates here. He greets the revelation of Jack's name with a cascade of Ernest or Ernest-related points. Algernon's comments also accent the centrality of language in the play. He is arguing, essentially, that language and reality should align, even when he knows they often do not.

The situational irony of this statement is profound, even if it isn't revealed until the end of the play: Jack really is named Ernest. Algernon is right, and Jack, who thought he was playing a part, is wrong.

"The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!"

— Algernon Moncrieff, Act 1, Section 2

Algernon's answer goes beyond simply dismissing Jack's

statement. Instead it is remarkably self-aware for a character as shallow as Algernon. Not only is the statement profound in itself, but it reflects on the nature of the work in which it appears: this play is fun (and important) because it is neither pure nor simple.

"Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened. I believe that Memory is responsible for ... three-volume novels."

— Cecily Cardew, Act 2, Section 1

Cecily provides another profundity delivered as a simple joke. People like to believe they remember events. Even Cecily, who is a silly young girl, knows better. People fool themselves in what they remember and reshape events until they remember the impossible.

The second part of this statement addresses the relationship between the falsification of reality and the arts. People's false memories lead to bad art that falsifies reality.

"The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means."

— Miss Prism, Act 2, Section 1

Miss Prism expresses literary conventions of the time, which Wilde mocks. Popular Victorian fiction often taught explicit moral lessons, and good characters triumphed in the end (after much suffering). These outcomes were expected in fiction. Here, however, the characters whose situations end happily are neither especially good nor industrious. The young couples are rewarded for their charm and good looks; Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism seem to be rewarded for pompousness and negligence.

"It is always painful to part from people whom one has known for a very brief space of time."

— Cecily Cardew, Act 2, Section 4

This is another instance of reversing common wisdom and making sense. On the one hand Cecily's statement seems logically impossible. How can anyone care enough about a new acquaintance to find pain in parting? On the other hand, if one really believes in love at first sight—or finds the other person really attractive—the statement makes perfect sense.

"It is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind."

— Jack Worthing, Act 2, Section 5

Some Victorians raised honesty and earnestness to an ideal. It is therefore that much more extreme for Jack to say this is the first time he has ever spoken the truth—and that he does so only because he is forced. It is one of Wilde's most striking positions in this play.

"True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing."

— Gwendolen Fairfax, Act 3, Section 1

Gwendolen's comment aligns perfectly with Jack's statement that he has never told the truth. It subverts Victorian ideals,

which would claim sincerity is all, style is nothing. There is truth here, however, especially in affairs of the heart. How a man proposes is considered important, and how a man talks to a woman is considered a direct reflection of his character. Both are matters of social convention. And in fact, if a man addressed some things (like sexual desire) sincerely in his speech, he would be considered no gentleman at all.

"Hesitation of any kind is a sign of mental decay in the young, of physical weakness in the old."

— Lady Bracknell, Act 3, Section 2

This is another of Wilde's aphorisms. Lady Bracknell, Miss Prism, and Dr. Chasuble are the voices of responsible society and are made to look ridiculous.

This sort of pronouncement is conventionally Victorian in nature. It is black and white and generalizes broadly and falsely. It leaves out any need to gather information or to think.

"A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time. We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces."

— Lady Bracknell, Act 3, Section 2

Lady Bracknell's lines are an excellent example of Wilde's completely exploding social conventions and not being subtle about it. Lady Bracknell is interviewing Jack and Cecily to learn

about Cecily's character to determine if she is the sort of person Algernon should marry. Lady Bracknell approves of Cecily, but based on her wealth, not her character.

The verbal irony here is that Lady Bracknell implies her rejection of this "age of surfaces" yet embraces the surface-level aspects of others, such as Cecily's wealth.

"Prism! Where is that baby?"

— Lady Bracknell, Act 3, Section 3

In a play full of witty and convoluting speeches, this accusation stands out because it is so direct. At the same time it is as ridiculous as anything else said in the play. Prism disappeared with the infant 28 years ago, and Lady Bracknell has, by all appearances, forgotten the loss until she is reminded of it.

"On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest."

— Jack Worthing, Act 3, Section 3

This is the final line of the play and the final joke, truth, paradox, and pun. As Jack notes earlier, he has not told the truth as a matter of habit. One of his lies was about his name, which at times he claimed was Ernest. Now that Jack's family background has been revealed, he really is Ernest, which means the words he thought were lies were actually "in Earnest." He also seems surprised by real emotion rather than playing a role or amusing himself.

By inventing a fictional brother and lying so he could indulge himself, Jack ends up living one of the great conventions of a Romantic work: he thought he had no family but is reunited with his biological family at the end of the play. Now he can marry Gwendolen and live happily ever after.

Symbols

Handbag

The handbag Miss Prism accidentally abandoned at the railway station years ago is the only physical symbol in the play, and it appears only at the very end. There is a long tradition in myth and fairy tale of babies who are meant for greatness who are intentionally abandoned, such as the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, or the Trojan War hero Oedipus. Some of these babies are even abandoned in containers that take on symbolic significance, like the biblical Moses in the basket. The handbag is a parodic version of this tradition: baby Ernest is not abandoned because of a prophecy or because of some threat to his existence but because his nurse (Miss Prism) is distracted. This handbag therefore parodies the importance or significance of one's circumstances.

Bunbury

Bunbury is Algernon's imaginary invalid friend. Algernon uses Bunbury's illness as an excuse when he needs to get out of social obligations. This device is parallel to Jack's use of the double identity of Jack and Ernest, which he uses to carve out blocks of time free from such obligations. Bunbury does not exist physically but becomes a verbal symbol—and a verb—representing the act of telling small, useful lies as a way of navigating one's way through, or out of, social conventions. Contemporary critics might also see it as indicative of a double life—one of deception and lies, such as the one Wilde practiced because of his sexual orientation.

Christening

No one is actually christened in this play. Once the young women indicate how important the name Ernest is to them, however, christening is continually referenced, and it carries

considerable symbolic weight (even if it is comic in the moment). The rite is important in Christianity. As children are named and baptized they are welcomed as members of the Christian community. In this play christening is part of the satire of social conventions. Algernon and Jack both plan to have themselves christened to rename themselves. Adult christenings do occur, but these are generally part of religious conversions. Jack's and Algernon's desire to be renamed has nothing to do with joining a religious community but with joining the social community of marriage. Both men want to change their names to please the women in their lives. Because Dr. Chasuble is willing to go along with this endeavor, the play mocks the practice of religious ritual by drawing parallels with social rituals.

Themes

Social Conventions

From start to finish, *The Importance of Being Earnest* satirizes social conventions about class, relationships, acceptable behavior, and art. At times the satire is broad, as in Act 3 when Lady Bracknell suddenly realizes Cecily has extremely "solid qualities" as soon as she learns the girl has a considerable fortune. Lady Bracknell's remark mocks the way people's opinions of character can change once they learn someone is rich.

At other times the satire of social convention is more subtle, as in Act 1 when Jack says, "Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself." The joke satirizes the social convention of free choice. Wilde once told a story in conversation about several iron filings in the presence of a magnet, all of whom convinced themselves they were moving toward the magnet by free will when in fact magnetic forces were guiding them. Likewise the plot of this play challenges the social convention that people choose freely—in love or in other matters.

Love

Love, or the desire for it, drives many of the play's characters. While love may be central to Wilde's universe, he presents a version that is shallow and superficial. Wilde's characters fall in love based on hearsay, as Cecily does with Ernest before she meets him, or naming, as Gwendolen does by claiming she will marry an Ernest. Similarly shallow, Lady Bracknell wants her nephew to marry someone rich and physically attractive.

Structurally the play is a romantic comedy. One couple (Jack and Gwendolen) who are already in love must overcome obstacles to their marriage, while another couple (Algernon and Cecily) meet, fall in love, and then overcome obstacles to their marriage. A third couple, Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism, although no less naive or more worldly, exist in an amusing state of denial and blindness. Each has clearly admired the other but neither can make the move to declare attraction. The speed with which love develops in this play is part of the comedy and part of Wilde's satire of romance, as is the ease with which obstacles to love are waved away when the mood is right, as happens when Cecily embraces Algernon at the play's end despite his not being named Ernest.

Language

Language is central to this play. In many ways this play is about language: its power, its flexibility, and the sheer joy it can produce. W.H. Auden called it "the only pure verbal opera in English." Critic Dennis Spinninger built on this observation to argue that in this play Wilde creates "a verbal universe," in which language is used to translate life itself "into an aesthetic phenomenon."

Many of the statements in the play are so well formed as to be epigrams—brief, witty statements repeated for their own sake (rather than for the role they play in this drama). These start in the very first scene, as when Jack says, "When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people."

Wilde uses a range of linguistic techniques to create humor. For example, when Gwendolen first appears, she says, "Oh! I

hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions," which suggests a double entendre about her physical development or sexual activity.

As Spinninger indicates, one of Wilde's major linguistic techniques is juxtaposing something with its opposite. Gwendolen provides a good example of this technique when she tells Jack, "If you are not too long, I will wait here for you all my life."

The title of the play is, of course, a pun hovering over all its action: there is a continual tension between being earnest and being Ernest. Wilde skillfully maintains this tension throughout the play, resolving it only in the final lines when Jack is revealed as Ernest and realizes the importance of "Being Earnest."

Finally, as Jack and other characters explicitly note, Wilde repeatedly uses "nonsense" throughout the play. While this is sometimes used for satirical purposes, it is more often used, as Robert Jordan suggests, to develop a fantastical alternative to reality. Many of the characters say things that cannot possibly be true, as when Jack says, "Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself." Some, especially Lady Bracknell, speak as if their words could completely reshape reality.

Reversal

The Importance of Being Earnest uses the principle of reversal to satirize Victorian conventions. Nearly all of the main characters express ideals that reverse both social norms and common sense by expressing these ideals as if they were widely known truths. Such reversals start with the play's earliest exchange: Algernon's servant, Lane, says he didn't think it polite to listen to Algernon's attempt to play the piano, and Algernon says that anyone can play the piano accurately. Algernon's comment dismisses pragmatism, or playing notes correctly, in favor of expression.

This reversal continues throughout the play, as characters change opinions (Algernon dismisses marriage but wants to marry Cecily), names (Algernon to Ernest, Jack to Ernest), personal histories and families (Jack gains an entire family), and beliefs. These reversals go so far as to create

impossibilities and seemingly logical paradoxes, as when Gwendolen tells Jack in the third act, "If you are not too long, I will wait here for you all my life."

Suggested Reading

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