**The Importance of Being Earnest**

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| ACT 1 | The play begins with a discussion about cucumber sandwiches and marriage between Lane and Algernon at a flat in Half Moon. Jack enters and explains his desire to marry Gwendolen, to which Algernon states his disapproval. Algernon questions Jack about the identity of the woman Cecily, whose name is inscribed in Jack’s cigarette case. Jack explains how he possesses two distinct identities: Ernest in the city, and Jack in the country. Algernon admits he himself possesses an imaginary friend whom goes by the name of Bunbury, has terrible health and lives in the country. Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive. Algernon takes to occupy Lady Bracknell while Jack proposes to Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell interrupts the event and questions Jack on his occupation and ancestors. Lady Bracknell is horrified and opposes the engagement when she learns that Jack does not have any knowledge on his lineage. Lady Bracknell leaves, and Jack explains the entire predicament to Algernon. Gwendolen comes back, and she asks for Jack’s address in the country, which Algernon overhears. Algernon rips up some letters and explains to Lane that he will leave the next day to go bunburying. |
| ACT 2 | The act begins at the Manor House where Cecily is watering flowers rather than focusing on studying. Mrs. Prism and Cecily speak on the importance of diaries and about three-volume novels. Dr. Chausable enters and flirts with Mrs. Prism, calling her the Roman goddess Egeria. Chausable & Prism exit, leaving Cecily to her studies. Algernon arrives at the Manor house pretending to be Ernest. Cecily and Algernon address Ernest’s wickedness and Jack’s intentions of sending “Ernest” off to Australia. Cecily puts a pink rose in Ernest’s button-hole. Chausable and Prism return, and they meet Jack whom enters the from the back garden. Jack relays to them information about Ernest’s death in Paris from a severe chill, and he asks Chausable to christen him. Jack enters the house and meets Algernon and demands that he leave. Jack leaves, and Cecily enters. She shows Algernon her diary and describes how their engagement has been set for three months already. Algernon leaves to talk to Chausable, and Gwen enters the house and meets with Cecily. They both realize that they are both engaged to a man named Ernest. Algernon and Jack enter and they admit that neither one of their names is Ernest. Gwen and Cecily become angry and leave together. Algernon and Ernest argue about muffins and who gets to be christened as Ernest |
| ACT 3 | Cecily and Gwendolen have retreated to a room to get away from Algernon and Jack. When both the men enter the room, Cecily and Gwendolen ask Algernon and Jack why they pretended to be Earnest, and both the men say it was in order to meet the ladies. Algernon and Jack tell the ladies that they have an appointment to be rechristened as Earnest and the young women embrace the men due to their “self-sacrifice” and bravery. Lady Bracknell enters the room and she asks Algernon whether this house is the house of Bunbury. Algernon quickly says no and covers it up by saying that Bunbury died. Jack then introduces Cecily to Lady Bracknell and Algernon announces his engagement to Cecily. Lady Bracknell begins to question Cecily about her background and Jack answers. Jack refuses to give his consent to Cecily’s marriage to Algernon unless Lady Bracknell agrees to his marriage with Gwendolen, but Lady Bracknell refuses and prepares to leave. Before they leave, Dr.Chasuble enters announcing that everything for the christenings are ready, but since it is not needed, Dr.Chasuble begins to depart and mentions Miss Prism. Lady Bracknell asks a number of questions about Miss Prism and demands that she be sent for. When Miss Prism arrives and sees Lady Bracknell, Lady Bracknell begins to question Miss Prism about a certain baby. Lady Bracknell begins to explain the circumstances of the baby’s disappearance. Jack then enters the discussion and asks Miss Prism about little details. Jack runs off and returns with a handbag which Miss Prism identifies as her own and in which she had placed the baby in. Lady Bracknell explains that Jack is the son of her sister, which makes him Algernon’s older brother. Lady Bracknell says that he was named after his father, General Moncrief, and finds that his name is actually Ernest and also John. Jack turns to Gwendolen and asks if she can forgive him for telling the truth and she does. They all embrace and Jack discovers “the vital Importance of Being Ernest”. |

# Characters

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| Jack Worthing | * Jack is the protagonist of the play. * He was adopted by Thomas Cardew, the grandfather of Cecily Cardew, after being found in a hand bag in the cloak room of the Victoria Station. * ​Cecily is his ward and lives in his country estate. * He uses the alias of Ernest in the town to commit acts that are not accepted in society. He tells those in the country that Ernest is his brother. * Jack is in love with Gwendolen, but he lacks a respectable family lineage that is not discovered until the end of the play.​ * His true name is Ernest Moncrieff. * ​Jack represents new money and is flawed by his inability to accept reality and escape into his perfect fantasy. * Quotes to describe him include:   + "Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country..."(Act I)   + "I need hardly say I would do anything in the world to ensure Gwendolyn's happiness."(Act I) * Adjectives to describe him are charming, deceptive, and determined. |
| Algernon Moncrieff | * Algernon lives a lavish lifestyle, even though he is in debt. * To escape creditors and seek pleasure, he goes “bunburying.” * He represents the typical aristocratic man with old money who is an escapist in the name of pleasure. * Quotes to describe him include:   + "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."(Act I)   + "That is why I want you to reform me. You might make that your mission, if you don't mind, cousin Cecily."(Act II) * Adjectives to describe him are unromantic, immature, deceptive and flirtatious. |
| Gwendolen Fairfax | * Gwendolen is an aristocratic woman that desires to marry “Ernest.” * She represents the city. * Quotes to describe her include :   + “You’re quite perfect, Miss Fairfax” (Act I) * Adjectives to describe her are rebellious and smart. |
| Lady Augusta Bracknell | * Lady Bracknell is an aristocratic woman who is deeply concerned with her appearance and raising her economic and social status. * Quotes to describe her include:   + ​​"You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter...to marry into a clock-room, and form an alliance with a parcel?" (Act I)   + ​"So I don't think your guardian's consent is, after all, a matter of any importance."(Act III) * Adjectives to describe her are concerned, protective and arrogant. |
| **Cecily Cardew** | * She is the daughter of Thomas Cadrew, and she is the ward of Jack Worthing. * She fantasizes about getting engaged to a man named Ernest. * She represents the countryside. * Quotes to describe her include:   + ​​"There is some good in everyone. Ernest was just been telling me about his poor invalid friend Mr.Bunbury, whom he goes to visit so often."(Act II)   + "I remember only too well that I forced to write your letters for you."(Act II) * ​Adjectives to describe her are charming, naive and childish. |
| **Miss Prism** | * She is Cecily's governess and educator. * She represents Victorian righteousness, though she has a love interest in Dr. Chausable that she keeps relatively hidden and a previous history of writing novels. * Quotes to describe her include:   + "How wonderfully clever you are!" (Act II) * ​An adjective to describe her is knowledgeable. |
| **Dr. Chausable** | * A local vicar and celibate whom Algernon and Jack seek out for christenings. * He is the love interest of Miss Prism. * He represents morality and righteousness, similar to Miss Prism. * His practices and beliefs are interchangeable, though he is a strict celibate * Quotes to describe him include:   + ​“He has never written a single book, so you can imagine how much he knows” (Act II). * An adjective that describes him is knowledgeable. |

# Genre: Satire

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| * A satire is comedic sarcasm that pokes fun at human flaws or foibles and social institutions to promote change in society. * In comedies, all the problems are solved at the end. * The flaws Wilde criticizes in the play are listed and supported below: | |
| **Hypocrisy** | * Jack says, "It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one is not a dentist. It produces a false impression." in Act I.   + Jack produces a false impression when pretending to be Ernest. * In Act II, Cecily says, "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." * In Act III, Cecily says "I am not punctual myself, I know, but I do like puncuality in others, and waiting, even to be married, is quite out of the question."   + This quote represents the epitome of hypocrisy: expecting more from others in comparison to one's expectations for themselves. |
| **Marriage** | * In Act I, Lane says, “I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding…”   + Marriage is a consequence of failed communication. * In Act I, Algernon says, “Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty.”   + This quote criticizes marriage and says that it is routine and boring and takes the fun out of romance.   + Excitement and pleasure are elements people faultily deem a need; this is also a criticism of seeking pleasure. * In Act I, Algernon says, “Divorces are made in heaven.”   + This is a paradox which pokes fun at marriage by mentioning divorces, rather than true love, as that which is made in heaven. * In Act I, Algernon claims in conversation with Jack that marriage shares a more striking resemblance to a business proposal than pleasure and romance. Lady Bracknell confirms this notion when putting more interest in peerage and funds than character to ensure her daughter is able to marry up the rings of the social ladder. |
| **Seeking Pleasure/Escape v. Responsibility** | * In Act I, Algernon says, “then the excitement is over.” * Algernon suggests that pursuing a lasting relationship with a person is more about the pleasure an excitement and marriage is flawed in that it takes away that excitement. * In Act I, Jack says, “Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring anyone anywhere?”   + The pleasure in the quote is the paramount responsibility/task. * In Act I, Algernon says, “Tomorrow, Lane, I’m going Bunburying”   + Algernon is an escapist in the name of pleasure.   + He tears up the bills and goes to the country to escape debtors prison.​ * In Act I, Lady Bracknell says, “That’s not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together.”   Feeling well and behaving well are not the same thing. The aristocracy is more concerned with behaving well and promoting a good image of themselves. ​ |
| **Religion** | * In Act I, Jack says, “Gwendolen, I must get christened at once”   + This shows that Jack is using religion for his personal needs. * In Act III, Jack and Algernon say, "Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon."   + This quote shows that both the men are exploiting religion for their own benefit. |
| **Peerage** | * In Act I, Lady Bracknell: “To be born or at any rate bred…”   + It shows that handles on the bag means having money and no handles means having less money and being less money   + That does not matter, family history does * In Act III, Gwendolen and Cecily say, "Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier!"   + ​Criticism of the fact that in the Victorian era, people valued the name over the person's character. |
| **Rich-Poor Gap** | * In Act I, Algernon says, “If the lower orders don’t set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them?” * In Act I, Lady Bracknell says, “Ignorance is like a delicate, exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone." * In Act II, Miss Prism says, "I have often spoken to the poorer classes on the subject. But they don't seem to know what thrift is." |

# Author’s Style

**Allusions**

* Gorgon: In Greek mythology, the three Gorgon sisters, Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa who had snakes as hair and had the ability to turn anyone who looked at them into stone are considered Gorgon.
  + "Never met such a Gorgon...I don't really know what a Gorgon is like, but I a quite sure that Lady Bracknell is one."(Act I)
* ​Egeria: She is a Roman mythological water nymph known for giving wisdom.
  + "But I must not disturb Egeria and her pupil any longer."(Act II)​
* Quixotic: It is an adjective that means not sensible about practical matters, but it is based on the Spanish character Don Quixote who is so intrigued by the romance of noble deeds, but he fails miserably and comically at them.
  + ​"It is rather Quixotic of you. But I think you should try."(Act II)

**Paradoxes and Epigrams**

* “Divorces are made in heaven.” (Act I)
* ​"The truth is rarely pure and and never simple."(Act I)
* ​"He has nothing, but he looks everything."(Act III)

**Puns**

* "You should get married. A misanthrope I can understand-a womanthrope, never!"(Act II)
* ​​“They are approaching. That's very forward of them.” (Act III)
* "On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance if Being Earnest."(Act III)

**Symbols**

* Muffins show that Algernon is wasteful. Running out of muffins symbolizes running out of money as well.
* Cucumber sandwiches display the lavishness of the aristocracy.
* Food represents the source of a conflict.
* Ernest and Bunbury symbolize empty promises deceit.
* Miss Prism shows different perspectives to one issue/topic; she took one person and made him three different people.​

**Other Literary Devices**

* **Metaphor**: “Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism’s pupil, I would hang upon her lips.” (Act II)
* **Verbal** **Irony**: “you are the most earnest looking man I ever saw in my life” (Act I)
* **Situational** **Irony**: Jack: "Well, yes, I must admit I smoke."  Lady Bracknell: "I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind." (Act I)

# Themes for Discussion

1. Double standards lead to hypocrisy.
2. People lie and use deceit to seek pleasure, but the truth always comes out.
3. Strict social standards often restrict personal desires and eventually lead to people living double lives. ​

# Elements of Drama

## Blocking

## ACT 1

* Jack immediately sits down on the sofa when he enters Algernon’s flat, without any invitation. This action exemplifies Jack and Algernon’s close relationship (2).
* Algernon retreats to the sofa and continues to flee from Jack, as Jack attempts to retrieve his cigarette case back (4). This creates an authentic scene of two friends involved in a small, playful dispute.
* Gwendolen and Jack sit down together when she arrives. This scene reflects the flirty nature between the two (8).
* Lady Bracknell enters as Jack is on one knee proposing to Gwendolen. Her entrance serves as an obstacle to the engagement between Gwen and Jack. Also, Gwendolen pushes Jack back down when he rises, which displays the reversal of gender roles (12).

## ACT 2

* After Algernon and Cecily greet each other, “they pass into the house” (25). This gives an opportunity for Jack to arrive and explain the death of his brother Ernest.
* Gwendolen and Cecily meet and become conflicted when they find out that they are both engaged to a man by the name of Ernest. They physically rise as does the tension in the room (36).
* Algernon crosses to Cecily and kneels, displaying the submission of men to women (33).

## ACT 3

* In the morning, Algernon follows Jack to meet with Cecily and Gwendolen (43). The two men enter as if they are a surrendering party trying to make amends for their mistakes.
* Lady Bracknell enters the Manor House as the two couples are embracing each other (45). Her entrance is another example of her being an obstacle to marriage.
* Lady Bracknell rises from her seat and is eager to leave the Manor House, however, when she learns of Cecily’s fortune, she sits back down to further engage in a discussion regarding the marriage between Algernon and Cecily (46).

## Gestures and Facial Expressions

**ACT 1**

* Lady Bracknell greets Algernon warmly, whereas she greets Jack with an “icy coldness” (8). This reflects Lady Bracknell’s previous negative feelings towards Jack.
* “Picking up empty plate in horror” (8) – Algernon is an excellent liar, and it seems he does it for all sorts of situations, even about little cucumber sandwiches.
* “Pencil and note-book in hand” (12) – Displays Lady Bracknell’s eagerness to learn of ways she can increase her status or wealth.
* Algernon tears up the envelopes after Lane presents them to him, and then hands him sherry. This displays Algernon’s unstable financial situation. He is in debt, but he continues living lavishly and bunburys around the country. (18)
* “Algernon, who has been carefully listening, smiles to himself, and writes the address on his shirt-cuff. Then picks up the Railway guide” (18) – Foreshadows Algernon’s plan to bunbury at the Manor House.

**ACT 2**

* When Algernon arrives at the Manor House he is described as being “very gay and debonair” (24). His mannerisms display his pretentious nature, and his skillful lying abilities.
* Jack “glares” (29) as he shakes hands with Algernon. This act displays Jack’s true feelings, and that he is not happy with Algernon’s presence.

**ACT 3**

* Dr. Chausable looks “rather puzzled” and starts “pointing at Jack and Algernon” (50) as he blames the young men for wanting to get christened.
* Lady Bracknell shivers as she learns that Cecily and Algernon are engaged. She does not like the idea of Algernon marrying someone who lacks a rich family background (46).

## Voice Delivery/Tone

**ACT 1**

* Gwendolen speaks “Glibly” (10), and thus displays her superficial nature. She wants a man by the name of Ernest, and she wants all the other formalities, like a proper proposal.
* Jack responds to Lady Bracknell’s question regarding his origins “gravely” (14). The nature of his response displays his shame of not having a family name.

**ACT 2**

* Gwendolen responds to Cecily’s offering of sugar in her tea by saying no “superciliously” (38). Her response is demeaning and emphasizes the differences between the country folk and the town folk.
* Miss Prism concedes that “people who live entirely for pleasure usually are” (27) single in a bitter tone. Her contempt for single people displays her hypocrisy as she too is single, and

**ACT 3**

* Gwendolen and Cecily begin "speaking together" (44) when they explain they want husbands named Ernest. This situation adds a comedic element as they speak in unison, and it displays the superficiality of the girls' affections towards Algernon and Jack. They want to marry a man with the name of Ernest because that is all that really matters.
* Algernon stammers as he tries to explain to Lady Bracknell about the state of Bunbury (45). Although Algernon is quite skillful in sneaking around and lying, he finds himself this time getting caught in the lie, and he does not know how to act.

# Brief Biography

* Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland during the Victorian Era. As an Irishman, Wilde had the ability to look into English society and observe its shortcoming rather than be blinded to them as a result of his nationality bias.
* Family: Wilde's mother was a poet and Irish nationalist and his Father was a doctor. Wilde's mother introduced him to literature, and he made a successful career from it.
* Wilde's affinity for Greek and Latin at Trinity College translated into a deep appreciation for the beauty of the art (drama, prose, and poetry) and his signature riddling of Greek and Roman allusions throughout his works.
  + - At Oxford, Wilde came under influence of tutor Walter Pater’s Aesthetic philosophy. Wilde once said: "Aestheticism is the science of the beautiful. It is a search for the secret of life. By the by, do you know, I was very much disappointed in the Atlantic Ocean. It was very tame. I expected to have it roar about and be beautiful in its storms. I was disappointed in it."

# Victorian Era

* Morality can be described as a set of values that supported the following concepts:
  + ​sexual repression
  + low tolerance of crime
  + strong social ethic
* Late Victorian writing included "proper" behavior being used as satire.
* ​The upper class valued heritage, history, lineage, and continuity of their family line.​​
* ​It was very rude to show arms and legs during the Victorian era.