The Importance of Being Earnest

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde led a cosmopolitan lifestyle as a writer, playwright, journalist, intellectual, and aesthete. An exceptionally gifted student, Wilde studied at Trinity College, Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford, on scholarship. At Oxford, Wilde came under the influence of tutor Walter Pater's Aesthetic philosophy—"art for arts sake"—and developed a reputation as an eccentric, flamboyant, and foppish young man. Moving from Oxford to London upon graduation, Wilde then published his first volume of poems to some critical acclaim. Though a fledgling writer, Wilde's fame as a proponent of Aestheticism grew during his yearlong lecture tour of the United States, England, and Ireland. Wilde married Dublin heiress Constance Lloyd in 1884. In the years following the couple had two sons, while Wilde published his serialized novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and made his way as writer and editor in London's publishing scene. Wilde met his lover Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas, an undergraduate at Oxford, in 1891. Wilde's career as a playwright flourished in the coming years as he wrote a number of successful plays for the Paris and London stages including *Lady Windemere's Fan*, *Salomé*, *An Ideal Husband*, and finally *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1895. But Wilde's success was short-lived as he became embroiled in scandal. A series of trials that pitted Wilde against Lord Alfred's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, exposed Wilde's homosexuality, causing him to be charged and sentenced for "gross indecency." After serving two years in prison, Wilde retired to the European continent, where he wrote occasionally under an assumed name, briefly rekindled his romance with Lord Alfred, and converted to Catholicism. Shrouded in infamy, Wilde died of cerebral meningitis in Paris at the turn of the 20th century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the initial run of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Lord Alfred's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, accused Wilde of being a "somdomite" (sic). Under his lover's influence, Wilde countered by suing the Marquess for libel. Queensberry was acquitted, but enough evidence of Wilde's homosexuality surfaced during the first trial that Wilde was charged with "gross indecency." Against the advice of his friends, Wilde remained in London to face the charges. Wilde's writings, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, were used against him and Wilde was sentenced to Wandsworth Prison for two years' hard labor. The scandal did irreparable damage to Wilde's career, shutting down *The Importance of Being Earnest's* otherwise successful run and causing Wilde to spend his remaining days living abroad in obscurity. Despite Wilde's infamy, his writings became an integral part of the Aesthetic movement, which has informed contemporary conceptions of art. While the Victorians believed that art should have a positive moral influence, aesthetes like Wilde believed that art could be valued for its beauty alone. The saying "art for art's sake" is a lasting mantra that resonates in modern works of art—in part—because of Wilde's writings.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Lady Windemere's Fan, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband* are related plays that Wilde wrote during his successful period as a playwright for the London stage, between 1892 and 1895. Showing aspects of comedy and drama they feature themes and figures similar to those in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, including fallen women, children of uncertain parentage, dark secrets from the past, mistaken identities, clever wordplay, and skewering critiques of Victorian morality and social standards.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Importance of Being Earnest*
- **When Written:** Summer 1894
- **Where Written:** Worthing, England
- **When Published:** First produced as a play on February 14, 1895; published in 1899
- **Literary Period:** Aestheticism; Victorian Era
- **Genre:** play; Victorian melodrama; comedy of manners; intellectual farce; satire
- **Setting:** The 1890s in London, England (Act I), and then Hertfordshire, a rural country outside of London (Acts II and III).
- **Climax:** Gwendolen and Cecily discover that neither Jack, nor Algernon holds the name of "Ernest."
- **Antagonist:** Lady Bracknell

EXTRA CREDIT

Just dandy: Known for his long hair and the ever-present flower in his button-hole, Wilde popularized the figure of the "fop," or "dandy," a man devoted to his personal appearance, style, and dress.

PLOT SUMMARY

The play opens as Algernon Moncrief plays the piano in his fashionable London flat, while his butler Lane prepares a tea

service for Algernon's Aunt Augusta, (Lady Bracknell), and her daughter, Gwendolen Fairfax, whom Algernon expects to arrive shortly. Surprisingly, Lane announces the arrival of Algernon's friend Mr. Ernest Worthing (Jack).

Algernon greets his friend, who has been in the country. Jack discloses to Algernon that he has returned to town to propose to Gwendolen, whom he has been courting. Upon hearing this news Algernon confronts Jack about a woman named Cecily.

Jack initially denies the existence of this woman, but Algernon produces a cigarette case that he left behind the last time they dined together. The case is engraved with an inscription: "From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack." Faced with such evidence Jack comes clean, revealing that he has been leading a double life. Cecily is actually his ward. "Jack" is the name he goes by in the country, while "Ernest" is his alias in the city. He shares this name with his fictional brother, a mischievous character, whose scandalous lifestyle frequently calls Jack back to the city to straighten out his "brother's" affairs. In reality, Jack uses "Ernest" as an excuse to escape his responsibilities in the country and pursue a life of pleasure in the city.

Jack's charade confirms Algernon's suspicion that his friend is a practiced "Bunburyist," or a person who uses deception to shirk his duties. Algernon reveals that he is also an expert "Bunburyist," having coined the term after his fictional, invalid friend, "Bunbury," whose poor health frequently calls him to his so-called friend's bedside.

Shortly thereafter, Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive at Algernon's flat. Algernon distracts Lady Bracknell, while Jack proposes to Gwendolen. She accepts on the account that she has always been enamored of the name "Ernest;" she makes it clear that she could never marry a man of any other name. This alarms Jack, whose composure becomes even more unsettled when Lady Bracknell bursts onto the scene, interrupting his proposal.

When Gwendolen announces her engagement, Lady Bracknell clears the room so that she can question Jack on his living arrangements, finances, and family relations. Upon learning that Jack has no parents and was adopted by Mr. Thomas Cardew, who found the infant Jack in a handbag left at a coatroom in Victoria station, she forbids Gwendolen from marrying Jack and leaves the flat in huff. Jack and Gwendolen bid each other adieu, while Algernon, intrigued by Jack's young ward, makes plans to visit his friend "Bunbury."

Act II begins at Jack's country estate in Hertfordshire, where Miss Prism is failing to focus Cecily's attention onto her German studies. The rector Dr. Chausible arrives and invites Miss Prism on a walk. While Cecily is alone, Merriman announces the arrival of Mr. Ernest Worthing. It is Algernon masquerading as Jack's brother "Ernest," but Cecily believes him to be the real deal. hortly thereafter, Jack arrives, dressed in mourning clothes, because his brother "Ernest" has just died. When Jack learns that Algernon is at the estate pretending to be "Ernest," he is infuriated, but must keep up appearances so that his own lies and deceptions will not be revealed.

Meanwhile, Algernon, smitten by Cecily's beauty and charm, proposes to her. She is not at all surprised because according to her diary they have been engaged for three months. She relates to him their love story and reveals that she has always dreamed of marrying a man named "Ernest."

While Algernon rushes off to find Dr. Chausible, Gwendolen arrives to pay Jack an unexpected visit. Cecily invites her into the garden for tea, where she announces her engagement to Ernest Worthing, but Gwendolen counters that she is in fact Ernest's fiancée. The ladies fling snide remarks at each other before Jack and Algernon arrive separately, each having gone to see Dr. Chausible about being christened "Ernest."

The two women realize that Jack and Algernon have deceived them. They demand to know the whereabouts of the elusive "Ernest." Jack reveals that "Ernest'" is not a real person, but a fiction, angering Cecily and Gwendolen even more.

In Act III Cecily and Gwendolen confront Jack and Algernon about their lies. Jack discloses that he assumed the name of "Ernest" so that he could visit Gwendolen often and Algernon admits that he pretended to be "Ernest" in order to meet Cecily. These explanations satisfy the two women, but they only fully forgive Jack and Algernon after the two men reveal that they are to be christened "Ernest" that afternoon.

Lady Bracknell breaks this moment of bliss by arriving to collect Gwendolen. Gwendolen reaffirms her engagement to Jack, while Algernon announces his engagement to Cecily. Lady Bracknell reiterates her disapproval of Jack and also objects to Cecily, until Jack reveals that Cecily is the heiress to a great fortune.

Interest piqued, Lady Bracknell advocates for Algernon's engagement, but Jack, as Cecily's ward, will not consent to the match until Lady Bracknell approves of his engagement to Gwendolen.

Lady Bracknell refuses, but turns her attention to Miss Prism, accusing her of losing her sister's infant son twenty-eight years ago. Miss Prism confesses, explaining that she misplaced the boy in a handbag in a coatroom at Victoria station. Jack figures out that he was that abandoned child and presents the handbag as proof. Jack and ensemble turn to the manor's library for verification finding an Army List that lists Jack's father as "Mr. Ernest John Moncrief." Jack's real name is indeed Ernest; he has found a family name in Moncrief, a name and bloodline he shares with his real younger brother Algernon; and he has learned the "vital importance" of living up to his family name, as he embraces his betrothed.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jack – a.k.a. Ernest / Mr. Ernest Worthing / Uncle Jack / John Worthing, J.P. / Ernest John. The protagonist of the play, Jack seems like a respectable young man, but leads a double life as a clever dandy. He goes by "Ernest" in town and "Jack" in the country. Meanwhile, he pretends to have a brother also named "Ernest" whose mischief frequently calls him back to town. The adopted son of Mr. Thomas Cardew, Jack is not only heir to a fortune, but also guardian to Cardew's granddaughter, Cecily. Jack's engagement to Gwendolen Fairfax is endangered after a comedy of errors leads her to uncover Cecily's existence and Jack's true identity. The "J.P." initials after his name stand for "Justice of the Peace."

MINOR CHARACTERS

Algernon Moncrieff – Jack's best friend, Gwendolen's cousin, and Lady Bracknell's nephew. He is a charming bachelor and extravagant dandy, who specializes in making witty remarks and "Bunburying," or finding clever ways of getting out of his social obligations. He masquerades as Jack's cousin "Ernest" in order to meet Cecily Cardew.

Gwendolen Fairfax – Jack's betrothed, Algernon's cousin, and Lady Bracknell's daughter. Cosmopolitan, stylish, and sophisticated, she has opinionated views on matters of taste, morality, and fashion. She is also very vain and pretentious, as demonstrated by her refusal to marry anyone, but "Ernest."

Cecily Cardew – Jack's ward, Mr. Thomas Cardew's granddaughter, and Algernon's love interest. Cecily is a starry-eyed young lady who prefers writing in her diary to studying. She dreams of meeting Jack's cousin, "Ernest," and constructs an elaborate, fictional engagement between herself and this elusive persona.

Lady Bracknell – Called Aunt Augusta by her nephew Algernon, she is Gwendolen's stuffy and judgmental mother. Lady Bracknell's views are entrenched in Victorian social mores, so she will not allow Jack to marry Gwendolen until he finds some suitable "relations."

Miss Prism – Cecily's prim and pedantic governess, she espouses such rigid views on morality that they seem quite ridiculous. Her love interest is Dr. Chausible.

Dr. Chasuble – The rector on Jack's country estate. Algernon and Jack turn to him to be christened, "Ernest." Dr. Chasuble's love interest is Miss Prism.

Lane – Algernon's butler.

Merriman – Jack's butler at his country estate, Manor House.

Mr. Thomas Cardew – The rich man who adopts Jack as a baby and charges him with the guardianship of Cecily. Though he never actually appears as a character in the play, he's referenced a few times.

Lord Bracknell – Referenced in passing, he is Lady Bracknell's husband and Gwendolen's father.

Mrs. Moncrieff – Mentioned sparingly, she is Lady Bracknell's sister and Algernon's mother. She is also the mother of the baby boy accidentally abandoned in a handbag in a coatroom at Victoria station, making her Jack's mother as well.

General Moncrief – Mrs. Moncrieff's husband, Algernon's father, and Lady Bracknell's brother-in-law. He also turns out to be Jack's father. Jack is his namesake.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE ART OF DECEPTION: FACT V. FICTION

As a leader of the Aesthetic movement, Wilde was especially interested in the relationship between life and art, pondering the eternal question, "Does art imitate life, or life imitate art?" Wilde explores this relationship in *The Importance of Being Earnest* through the conflict that arises when fact collides with fiction. The conflict between fact and fiction is driven by Algernon and Jack's lies about their respective identities, specifically the fictional personas they create in order to mask their doings, shirk their duties, and deceive their loved ones.

Jack invents his brother "Ernest" so that he can excuse himself from the country, where he serves as Cecily's guardian. Under such pretense he can escape to town, where he can court Gwendolen and entertain himself with extravagant dinners. Similarly, Algernon invents his invalid friend "Bunbury," so that he has an excuse to escape from the city when he does not care to dine with his relations. Fact and fiction collide when Algernon arrives at Jack's country estate, pretending to the elusive "Ernest". His arrival upsets Jack's plan to kill off his fictional brother and nearly derails Jack's real engagement to Gwendolen. That Algernon coins the terms "Bunburying" and "Bunburyist" after his imaginary invalid to describe such impersonations highlights the deceptive, as well as the fictive quality of Jack and Algernon's actions.

But Algernon and Jack are not the only characters that craft careful fictions. Cecily innocently creates a detailed backstory to her engagement to "Ernest," (himself a fictional entity), writing in her diary that she has not only been engaged to her

beau for three months, but that they have been engaged in an on-again-off-again romance. When Cecily recites this revelation from her diary to Algernon, he continues this fiction by believing in it as earnestly as Cecily believes in "Ernest's" authenticity. Algernon's willingness to participate in Cecily's fictional engagement, so that he might actually become engaged to her, parallels Jack's eagerness to change his name to "Ernest," so that reality might more closely align with Gwendolen's matrimonial fantasies. Algernon pretends to be "Ernest" in order to actualize his engagement to Cecily, while Jack will verily transform into "Ernest," (if only in name), so that Gwendolen's fantasies may be fulfilled. Ultimately, the play's main characters participate in the fine art of fabrication not just to deceive, but also to create a reality that is *more like* fiction. The line between fact and fiction blurs when the fictional name of "Ernest" turns out to be Jack's real birth name. In this way, Wilde doesn't just question whether art imitates life, or life imitates art, but suggests that life itself is an *artifice*, quite literally a *making of art*.

THE PURSUIT OF MARRIAGE

The pursuit of marriage is a driving force behind much of the play's action. Similar to many Victorian novels of the period, the play reads as a marriage plot, documenting the errors in social etiquette and romantic upheavals that come about as Jack and Algernon stumble towards the altar. Jack pursues Gwendolen's hand, while Algernon pursues Cecily. Because Jack and Algernon are willing to go to such outlandish lengths to appease Gwendolen and Cecily's fickle desires, engagement—which will ultimately lead to marriage—becomes the primary goal of the main players.

Each couples' engagement is fraught with roadblocks, albeit trivial ones. Gwendolen shows hesitance at marrying a man not named "Ernest." Cecily shows that same hesitation when Algernon suggests that his name may not actually be "Ernest." Lady Bracknell objects to Gwendolen and Jack's engagement on the basis of Jack's lack of legitimate relations. Meanwhile Jack objects to Cecily and Algernon's engagement to spite Algernon for "Bunburying" and Lady Bracknell for disapproving of his marriage to Gwendolen. The elderly Dr. Chausible puts off marriage, citing the "Primitive Church's" emphasis on celibacy, while Miss Prism embraces her spinsterhood as a governess. Despite these trivial obstacles, all couples are finally engaged—Jack to Gwendolen, Cecily to Algernon, Miss Prism to Dr. Chausible.

While engagement appears to be the endgame of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it is actually the fodder uses to entertain the audience. While each couple exhales "at last" with relief once they are engaged, Wilde uses the delays and stumbles to the altar to entertain his audience. Gwendolen's melodramatic quote, "This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last," speaks to this idea. While the characters are relieved to be engaged "at last," like Gwendolen, we in the audience hope that the suspense "will last" so that we can continue to indulge in the characters' foibles and follies. Unlike the Victorians he depicts, Wilde is preoccupied with the amusements that arise on the road to marriage, rather than marriage as an end in of itself.

CASH, CLASS, AND CHARACTER

The Victorian society in which Wilde lived was concerned with wealth, family status, and moral character, especially when it came to marriage. Lady Bracknell's interrogation of Jack's proposal to marry Gwendolen demonstrates the three "Cs"—cash, class, and character. First she asks him about his finances and then his family relations, a measure of his class. That Jack has none—no family relations, or family name, reflects poorly on his character. Upon finding that Jack has no "relations" she exclaims, "To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune…to lose both seems like carelessness," (as if were Jack's fault for being an orphan.)

In the Victorian world one's name was the measure of one's social capital, so the fact that Jack doesn't have any family is an insurmountable obstacle to his marrying Gwendolen, a daughter of the titled gentry. According to Lady Bracknell's marriage standards, Jack has the cash, but he doesn't have the class, so his character comes into question. (Although of all three "Cs," character is probably the least important of Lady Bracknell's criteria, since income and family take precedence in her line of questioning over Jack's actual intentions for her daughter, which might more accurately reflect the content of his character).

Nonetheless, Lady Bracknell's scrutiny of Jack's socioeconomic status is reflective of the Victorian world in which she was created. Her evaluation of cash, class, and character is one that Wilde interrogates throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest*, especially through the relations between classes. In Act I Algernon comments to Lane that the lower classes should set a "good example" of "moral responsibility" for the upper classes, otherwise they are of little "use." Algernon's statement is odd precisely because he seems more concerned with the morality of his servants than with his own moral compass. Meanwhile he continues to lead a deceptive and excessive lifestyle, never bothering to question the ethical implications of such a life. Algernon's fixation on the morality of his subordinates actually reveals the shortsighted outlook of the aristocratic class. This class scrutinizes the behavior of others so much that it fails to examine its own flaws and foibles. By pointing attention to Algernon's lack of self-examination, Wilde further undermines the Victorians' criteria for character by suggesting that it is inherently faulty.

NAME AND IDENTITY

Through Jack's search for his origins and family name, Wilde satirizes the Victorian Era's intense scrutiny of cash, class, and character. Wilde subversively prods this question through the name of "Ernest," a Christian name, or given name, as opposed to a family name. The name of "Ernest" comes to symbolize different things for different people. For Gwendolen and Cecily it "inspires absolute confidence" but also symbolizes the ideal husband/lover. For Jack, "Ernest" is an alter ego, an identity through which he can court Gwendolen and cavort in the pleasures of city life. The name holds similar meaning to Algernon, who masquerades as "Ernest" to escape to the country to meet Cecily under false pretenses.

While the name of "Ernest" holds different values for each character, Wilde shows that a name, in of itself, is quite meaningless in comparison to the person who holds that name. Contrary to the play's title, in this dramatic world, being "earnest" is not nearly as important as being named "Ernest." Gwendolen does not accept Jack's proposal because he is earnestly in love with her, but she believes him to be named "Ernest," a name she find melodious, aesthetically pleasing, and irresistibly fascinating. Cecily in a similar manner commits to Algernon not because he is earnest, but because she believes him to be "Ernest," a man whom she has fantasized about in her diary and "girlish dream[s]." Because Gwendolen and Cecily are so enamored of the name "Ernest," they confuse the shared name of their lovers with their respective identities. Both women believe that they are engaged to a name rather than a person. Upon finding out that neither Jack, nor Algernon is named "Ernest," Gwendolen exclaims to Cecily, "neither of us is engaged to be married to anyone." Through this conflation Wilde shows the ridiculousness of marrying someone purely for his/her name alone. But in Wilde's world, it was an all too common practice for men and women to capitalize upon an advantageous family name through marriage. Wilde's play on the name of "Ernest" with the quality of being "earnest," turns this Victorian obsession with names and their social meaning on its head.

Ultimately Jack gets the girl because he has the cash, acquires class and gains character by taking on the name of "Ernest," which validates his family ties and social standing. Yet Jack's new name—"Ernest John Moncrieff"—only has meaning because society assigns value to it; his name is verified in the Army List, a listing of the names of English generals. Wilde is quick to point out that this list is merely a piece of paper, whose authority is shoddy in comparison to Jack's earnestness to find his true identity. While Jack feverishly combs over volumes to uncover his lineage, Wilde refers to "wrong pages," antiquated books," and lists of "ghastly names," suggesting the piece of paper that Jack's new name is printed on is not much better than the woman who confuses a man named "Ernest" for a man in "earnest." Wilde's subtle jab at the ridiculousness of claiming one's name from a stack of books points to the relative meaningless of names in comparison to one's actions and the contents of one's character, thereby undermining the Victorians' marriage of class and character.

HYPOCRISY, FOLLY, AND VICTORIAN MORALITY

A witty wordsmith, Wilde exposes the hypocrisy of the Victorians' strict social mores through puns, paradoxes, epigrams, and inversions in the characters' actions and dialogue. For instance the characters often say and do the opposite of what they mean, or intend. Gwendolen flips "style" and "sincerity" when she says, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing." One would expect that "sincerity" should take precedence over "style" in "matters of grave importance" so Gwendolen's inversion of these words appears not only funny, but also a tad foolish. Another notable inversion is Lady Bracknell's quicksilver reversal of her approval of Algernon and Cecily's engagement. Lady Bracknell does not think much of Cecily until she finds out that she is the heiress to a great fortune, which immediately encourages Lady Bracknell to advocate for the match. Ironically, while money alone is sufficient for Lady Bracknell to approve of Algernon's engagement to Cecily, it is not enough for her to approve of Jack's proposal to her own daughter Gwendolen.

Lady Bracknell exposes her hypocritical nature further when she says she disapproves of "mercenary marriages." Yet her marriage to Lord Bracknell was motivated primarily by money—"When I married Lord Bracknell I had not fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed of allowing that to stand in my way." Lady Bracknell's hypocritical attitude towards marriage is not just humorous and ironic; it is also a sharp stab at the paradoxical nature of Victorian social mores. Like Lady Bracknell, Dr. Chausible's opinion on marriage reverses quickly. In his proposal to Miss Prism he staunchly holds that the "Primitive Church did not condone marriage" yet by the plays end he seems well on his way to marrying Miss Prism anyways. Through such reversals Wilde points out the hypocrisy and foolishness of Victorian social standards.

MEN AND WOMEN IN LOVE

In the game of love that Wilde plays throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Jack and Algernon, who strive for love, are pitted against the fickleness of the women they desire. Even though Wilde assigns stereotypical gender roles to each sex—Jack and Algernon are suave dandies, while Cecily and Gwendolen are vapid beauties—when it comes to marriage and love, he places women in a position of power because they are able to actively choose their mates and influence their partners' behaviors. In

the Victorian world women were rarely afforded this influence, as their male elders—fathers, brothers, uncles, etc.—had tight control over the men with whom they interacted, even dated. Yet Gwendolen and Cecily wield a great deal of power over their suitors. For instance, Jack and Algernon strive to christen themselves "Ernest" precisely because Gwendolen and Cecily threaten to withhold their affections from any man who does not hold this name. In doing so, they effectively compel Jack and Algernon to change their names.

Even though Gwendolen and Cecily's engagements are restricted by a patriarchal system of cash, class, and character, it is important to note that Lady Bracknell, not ***Lord Bracknell***, is the one who becomes master of matrimony, dictating who may marry whom. The general absence of male patriarchs points to the diminished presence of men in Wilde's dramatic world, thereby highlighting women, like Gwendolen, Cecily, and Lady Bracknell in positions of power and prominence.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TOWN AND COUNTRY

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* one's residence is a key signifier of one's social standing and sophistication. Lady Bracknell's keen interest in Jack's address exemplifies this alignment between class, fashion, and residence. She finds Jack's house in town to be "unfashionable," and his country estate to be neither a "profit or a pleasure," but sufficient, as "it gives one position." Just as Lady Bracknell judges Jack's class upon the value of his real estate, Gwendolen evaluates Cecily's tastes based upon her upbringing in the country. Gwendolen, a fashionable urbanite, makes several oblique remarks about country girl Cecily's lack of taste: "I had no idea there was anything approaching good taste in the more remote country districts…Personally I cannot understand how anybody manages to exist in the country—if anybody who is anybody does." While Gwendolen views Cecily as a country-bumpkin-nobody for her rural roots, Cecily associates city living with vulgarity and aristocratic snobbishness: "I believe most London houses are extremely vulgar…I believe the aristocracy are suffering very much." Through Gwendolen and Cecily's attitudes about country and city life, Wilde upsets the characters' alignment of the city with sophistication and the country with poor taste. Instead, he suggests that town and country, alike are paradoxical places—the city is urbane, but it is also "vulgar;" and while the country lacks taste it also affords one "position" in society. Wilde also suggests that town and country are a means of fantasy and escape. Jack escapes to the city, under false pretenses, to avoid his obligations to Cecily in the country, while Algernon similarly escapes to the country to avoid his social obligations to his aunt and cousin.

BUNBURY

Bunbury is a fictional invalid that Algernon makes up so that he has a ready excuse whenever he wishes to get out of any social commitment, particularly when he would like to escape to the country. Algernon describes this pretext as "bunburying," but he also uses the term to describe Jack's false representation of himself as "Ernest" and his own masquerade as "Ernest." Bunbury and "bunburying" thus represent deception, fiction, and escapism.

ERNEST

Similar to Bunbury, Ernest represents deception, fiction, and escapism, but also idealism. While Algernon and Jack attempt to masquerade as the real Ernest, he is just as fictional as Algernon's Bunbury. Similarly Jack uses the mischievous antics of his brother Ernest to escape to the city, just as Algernon uses Bunbury as an excuse to escape to the country. Even so, Gwendolen and Cecily hold up Ernest as an ideal name, as well as husband. Both women not only fantasize about marrying a man named Ernest, they say it is a name that "inspires absolute confidence." Their idealism is reflected in these "girlish dream[s]" and definitive assertions.

TEA SERVICE

The Importance of Being Earnest depicts several pivotal scenes that revolve around tea. While these moments might seem mundane, they are actually carefully crafted scenes in which the characters negotiate tricky scenarios. In Act II Cecily and Gwendolen thinly veil their antagonism towards each other during a tea service, a delicate demonstration of grace and manners. Gwendolen makes digs at Cecily's lack of taste by refusing her offer of sugar and cake on account that such cuisine is out of date in London. Cecily masks her displeasure under the pretense of graciousness, offering Gwendolen healthy helpings of cake and sugar, as a good hostess should. Despite this appearance of composure, each woman's jealousies are reaching their boiling points. From slicing cake to sipping tea, the tea service is a means by which the characters negotiate tense social situations under the pretense of civility.

FOOD

Food symbolizes excess, or overindulgence. For instance, Algernon cannot stop eating cucumber sandwiches, or muffins when they are put in front of him,

suggesting that his appetites are just as excessive as his eccentric, flamboyant, and extravagant airs.

THE DANDY

The dandy, or fop, was a figure popularized by Wilde. In Wilde's world, the dandy is a man who pays particular attention to his appearance, dress, and lifestyle, almost to the point of excess, while using his wit and charm to point out society's hypocrisy and double standards. Algernon and Jack are examples of this figure. When Algernon dresses up as "Ernest" and when Jack dresses up in mourning clothes, these instances show the affected, flamboyant, and extravagant nature of the dandy. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the dandy, as represented by Algernon and Jack, symbolizes self-indulgence, as well as the revelation of truth.

ORPHANS AND WARDS

Both Jack and Cecily are orphans. Jack's lack of family relations makes it difficult for him to marry Gwendolen and settle into a traditional family arrangement. While Cecily's ancestry is officially documented in books, she becomes an orphan, or ward when her grandfather dies. Her parents aren't even mentioned. Cecily's parental figures, Jack and Miss Prism, at best, are only mildly attentive to her needs. Jack and Cecily's status as orphans highlight the place of love and imagination in the creation of family bonds. Both Jack and Cecily invent fictional relationships in order to forge real connections with the other characters. Jack creates a brother "Ernest" so that he can more easily court Gwendolen in town, while Cecily imagines a romance with "Ernest," which ends up developing into a real engagement with Algernon. While characters like Lady Bracknell place heavy emphasis on the importance of family ties in society, Jack and Cecily don't have such social connections, instead relying on love and imagination to form relationships with others.

CHRISTENINGS

Jack and Algernon each arrange a christening with Dr. Chasuble so that they can change their names to "Ernest." The eager willingness of these characters to change their names symbolize the fluid nature of identity in the play.

JACK'S MOURNING CLOTHES

Jack's extravagant mourning attire for a brother who is nonexistent and not even dead represents the extravagance of the dandy as well as duplicity.

DIARIES

Normally diaries document real life events, but diaries *In the Importance of Being Earnest* tend to document fictions. Cecily writes about her fictional engagement to "Ernest" in her diary, showing it to be a conflation of fantasy and fiction, rather than a record of fact. Gwendolen also travels with a diary, in which she records her engagement to "Ernest," a fictional character, rather than a real man. Because diaries are more like fictions, or novels they highlight the conflict between fact and fiction that courses throughout the play.

CECILY'S LOVE LETTERS

Cecily writes loves letters between her self and "Ernest." This is another example of Cecily's penchant for inventing stories, thereby serving as another symbol of imagination and fiction making.

MISS PRISM'S THREE-VOLUME-NOVEL

Miss Prism's three-volume-novel symbolizes the engrossing nature of fiction and the loss of one's sense of reality. Miss Prism mentions to Cecily in Act II that she once wrote a "three-volume-novel." At the end of the play it is revealed that she absentmindedly placed the manuscript of the novel in the infant Jack's stroller, while placing the Jack in a handbag forgotten in a coatroom at Victoria station. The manuscript, being a work of fiction, and its inadvertent role in Jack's childhood disappearance, represents the captivating quality of fiction. One may become so engaged in a work of fiction, that like Miss Prism he/she, may lose track of reality.

JACK'S HANDBAG

The handbag in which Jack was found as a baby is a symbol for the comedy of errors. Jack's inadvertent abandonment in a place as obscure and ridiculous as a handbag at a train station demonstrates the absurd results that arise when silly, as well as serious, mistakes are made.

JACK'S CIGARETTE CASE

Because Jack's cigarette case reveals his dual identity as "Ernest" in town and "Jack" in the country it represents his double life.

JACK'S BUSINESS CARD

In his cigarette case Jack stores business cards with his pseudonym and address in London printed

on them. Algernon later uses the card to verify his identity to Cecily. The business card is thus another sign of duplicity and dual identity.

THE COATROOM AT VICTORIA STATION AND THE BRIGHTON LINE

The coatroom at Victoria Station is a symbol for Jack's lack of family "relations" and unknown origins. The Brighton Line is Wilde's play on the notion of a family bloodline. Instead of having a lineage to his name, Jack has a place of origin and a train line to his credit, underlining the obscurity of his roots as well as the ridiculous value characters like Lady Bracknell place on family "lines".

THE ARMY LIST

The Army List is a listing of English army generals. It symbolizes name and identity because Jack uncovers his real name and his origins through this source.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest* published in 1990.

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

Related Characters: Algernon Moncrieff (speaker), Lane

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Lane comments to Algernon that he was once married, as the consequence of a "misunderstanding" between himself and a "young person." In this quote, Algernon is appalled at Lane's "lax" views on marriage.

Though a hedonistic bachelor himself, Algernon's views on marriage reflect those of the aristocratic class in Victorian society. Marriages were often arranged between families, as it was considered important to preserve upper class pedigrees within these unions. To Algernon, Lane's lackadaisical approach to marriage represents the "immoral" ways in which he believes members of the lower class engage in unions. Coming from Algernon, this statement is hypocritical, since he himself often acts fairly immoral—he lives luxuriously, and often beyond his means, despite being a member of a wealthy aristocratic family. His tone in this quote is also condescending and classist. Though he is young and careless with his actions and money, he believes that his pedigree is enough to know what is best for those with less money and education.

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

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

Related Characters: Jack, Algernon Moncrieff (speaker), Gwendolen Fairfax

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Jack visits Algernon shortly before Lady Bracknell, Algernon's aunt, and Gwendolen, Algernon's cousin, stop by for tea. He does so with the intent to have a moment alone with Gwendolen in order to propose to her.

In this quote, Algernon quips that he calls a marriage proposal "business" due to the complicated marriage arrangements between members of the aristocratic class during Victorian England. Marriages, frequently arranged between families to preserve what were essentially sociopolitical ties, were often more akin to business contracts than to unions of love. This exchange is exemplary of the relationship between Jack and Algernon. Jack is more sincere and responsible than Algernon, and Algernon is more often careless, condescending, and flippant.Jack is also much more of a romantic, and was adopted into the aristocratic class—he does not have a recorded pedigree (that he yet knows of) and therefore feels less pressure to seek out a marriage for reasons other than love. However, Gwendolen's aunt does expect her to marry a fellow member of the aristocracy, and definitely views marriage as more of a business arrangement rather than a sign of love. It is due to this expectation that Jack's lack of a pedigree will come to be a problem.

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

Related Characters: Algernon Moncrieff (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Jack accuses Algernon of being "unromantic" when he refers to a marriage proposal as "business." In this quote, Algernon asserts that while love can be romantic, proposals and marriage are, by their very nature, not romantic. In Victorian society, marriages were designed to continue and create economic and social ties between elite families. It was well-known that these matches were often made for convenience, not for love. Romance was seen as illicit, fleeting, and frivolous, whereas arranged marriages were more enduring in terms of financial and social capital. Algernon notes that if he ever gets married, he will try to "forget" the banalities of the contract, since he would prefer to enjoy the thrill of romantic relationships in his bachelorhood.

> I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest.

Related Characters: Algernon Moncrieff (speaker), Jack

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Jack reveals to Algernon that he goes by the name of Ernest in the city, and the name of Jack in the country. In this quote, Algernon relies heavily on the homophones of "Ernest," the name, and "earnest," the adjective connoting one who is honest and sincere to a fault, to tease Jack about his two identities of Ernest and Jack. Jack is older than Algernon and often acts as if he is more responsible, so Algernon is gleeful to find his friend caught in a lie, particularly one in which he pretends to be someone whose name sounds the same as a word that means "honest." The extent of this glee can be discerned by the number of times that Algernon repeats the name, digging deeper into Jack's feelings of shame. Wilde uses the wordplay of Ernest/earnest throughout the play to question the role of true sincerity in Victorian England, a society that prided itself on a strict code of conduct, stringent morals, and a "stiff upper lip."

> Jack: When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone…And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness if carried to excess, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger borther of the anem of Ernest…who gets into the most dreadful scrapes. The, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.
>
> Algernon: The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility.

Related Characters: Jack, Algernon Moncrieff (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Further explaining the extent of his two identities, Jack reveals to Algernon that he is the guardian of a ward named Cecily, who lives in the country and refers to him as her "Uncle Jack."

In this quote, Jack explains to Algernon that as a guardian, he must maintain a "high moral tone." In order to enjoy the antics of bachelorhood in the city, he invented a younger brother named Ernest, so that the repercussions of his actions would not be traced to Jack the serious guardian. Like Algernon's condemnation of Lane's marriage views, the tension between Jack's beliefs and his actions reveal the hypocrisy of the young and wealthy. Both young men do whatever they please, and get away with it, because they have the influence and means to ensure that their less-than-proper antics are not linked to their upper-class identities—and indeed, their hypocrisy is seen as almost entirely comic.

In Algernon's response, he quips that the truth to Jack's story cannot possibly be as simple as he makes it sound. Jack's two identities mean that he must maintain addresses in both the city and the country, and ensure that no one finds out the truth. Such a feat would not be possible if Jack was not adopted by a wealthy and connected family at birth. However, Algernon also notes that the drama regarding the prospect of people finding out is what keeps life interesting, and it is the same drama that makes works of fiction like novels or plays intriguing to watch and read. Here, Wilde characteristically winks at the audience to comment on the very nature and dramatic tension of his own work.

I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose.

Related Characters: Algernon Moncrieff (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

After Jack admits that he is Jack in the country and Ernest in the city, Algernon reveals that he, too, uses a made-up identity to escape to the country: he pretends that he has a friend named "Bunbury" who is very ill and lives outside of the city. Whenever Algernon feels that life in the city has become unbearable, he pretends to have received news that Bunbury is on death's doorstop, and that he must be by his side at once. He brands Jack's practice of inventing a brother named Ernest as "Bunburying." As bachelor members of the upper class, both Jack and Algernon want to do things that are considered "immoral" but fear social repercussions if found out by their families and peers. This leads to a "do as I say, not as I do" attitude that renders them both hypocritical in many of their actions. It is only due to their wealth and status in society that they are able to maintain such extravagant lifestyles—really, two each—and not get caught. Of course, their servants, such as Lane, whom they look down upon as "immoral" people, are well aware of the ironic gap between their views about society and the ways in which they actually act.

Act 1, Part 2 Quotes

Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you...my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence.

Related Characters: Gwendolen Fairfax (speaker), Jack

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

When Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell finally arrive for tea, Algernon invents a reason to pull Lady Bracknell into the next room in order to give Jack and Gwendolen private time for the proposal. In this quote, Gwendolen reciprocates Jack's declarations of love. The irony in this quote is of course that Jack's name is not really Ernest—Ernest is the caddish brother that Jack has invented in order to get up to whatever he pleases in the city. Thus, Jack is suddenly forced to wonder if Gwendolen loves him for who he truly is, or if she only loves him because his name is Ernest. Wilde uses Gwen's ridiculous whim of loving someone by the name of Ernest to parody the various reasons why members of the Victorian upper class got married—usually because of wealth or family ties (i.e., one's name). Here, Wilde uses the notion of loving someone simply because they were given a certain name at birth to comment on how this method of choosing a partner may be just as wise as choosing a partner based on what family they were born into.

To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune...to lose both seems like carelessness.

Related Characters: Lady Bracknell (speaker), Jack

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

After walking in on Jack proposing to Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell sends Algernon and Gwendolen out of the room

in order to interrogate Jack as to his suitability as a husband for her daughter.

In this quote, Lady Bracknell is appalled when Jack states he has "lost" both of his parents. As a baby, Jack was found in a handbag in a cloak room in Victoria station and adopted by a wealthy aristocrat, Mr. Thomas Cardew. As the epitome of high Victorian society, Lady Bracknell directly associates someone's birth and familial pedigree with their character. Therefore, she immediately characterizes Jack as someone who is "careless" because of his lack of recorded parentage, even though this is, of course, not his fault. Throughout the play, Lady Bracknell continues to make similarly ridiculous statements that she herself takes utterly seriously. Wilde uses the character of Lady Bracknell to represent Victorian elitists who held themselves and the people around them to what they believed to be high moral standards—the irony being that these moral standards were both created and fulfilled only to impress the high society around them.

> You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter—a girl brought up with the utmost care—to marry into a cloak-room and form an alliance with a parcel.

Related Characters: Lady Bracknell (speaker), Jack, Gwendolen Fairfax, Lord Bracknell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

As Lady Bracknell further presses Jack about his history, he admits that he was found by his adopted father in a cloak room at Victoria Station. Though already wealthy and aristocratic, Lady Bracknell is always seeking out ways in which her family can climb higher on the social ladder. One of the quickest ways of gaining socioeconomic capital was for a son or daughter to marry into a family of equal or higher social status. Thus, Lady Bracknell clearly hopes to marry Gwendolen into a highly esteemed family—not to "form an alliance with a parcel." To Lady Bracknell, someone's character is directly related to their birth. Jack, therefore, is in her eyes not a product of the wealthy Cardews, with whom he was raised, but of a handbag and the Brighton line at Victoria station.

> The good end happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.

Related Characters: Miss Prism (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Prism tells Cecily that she once wrote a novel, but lost the manuscript a long time ago. In this quote, she succinctly explains what happened in the novel. This statement is partly humorous because in claiming that "the good end happily, and the bad unhappily" is a rule of fiction, it's suggested that this rule must be mostly untrue in real life—where indeed, one's fate seems unrelated to one's morality. Wilde here also pokes fun at the ways in which strict Victorian society rules often invaded other aspects of cultural life, such as works of literature. These rules on practiced morality largely stemmed from the Church, so when Miss Prism states that the "good end happily, and the bad unhappily," she refers to the idea that those who sin are punished, and those who behave responsibly are rewarded. Though both characters like Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism take the rules of Victorian morality very seriously, Miss Prism is prompted more so by religion and in the name of being proper, while Lady Bracknell's views are influenced by society and aristocracy.

> Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips.

Related Characters: Dr. Chasuble (speaker), Miss Prism

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

While Cecily and Miss Prism are talking, Dr. Chasuble, the rector, comes by to say hello. He is the clergyman in charge of the local parish on the estate. Though Miss Prism's job as Cecily's governess and Dr. Chasuble's work in the parish rarely intersect, the two are often seen together because they maintain a fairly obvious flirtation. The two bookish characters, however, have both resigned themselves to spinsterhood, and have not made their relationship public

for fear of impropriety. In this quote, Dr. Chasuble fails to catch himself before making a suggestive remark about Miss Prism. In an attempt to encourage Cecily to pay attention to her studies, he foolishly makes a statement about "hanging upon" Miss Prism's lips. He means to say he would hang upon her words, but his attraction to her causes him to fumble and comically misspeak.

If you are not [wicked], then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. 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.

Related Characters: Cecily Cardew (speaker), Algernon Moncrieff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

When Algernon and Cecily find themselves alone in the garden, they strike up an immediate flirtation. Both characters are clever and charming, and attempt to both one-up and impress the other with their wit. In this quote, Cecily tells Algernon (whom she believes to be Ernest, Jack's immoral brother) that she would be disappointed if he turned out to be a good person rather than the "bad" one she has heard so many stories about. This statement is an instance of dramatic irony, in which the audience knows that Algernon is pretending to be someone who technically doesn't exist, and is in this moment living a "double life." In a way, however, by assuring Cecily that he is in fact the "bad" Ernest, Algernon is partly telling the truth about his own hypocrisy—he acts rather foolishly in the city, and pretends to have a dying friend in order to escape to the country. However, he is mostly just lying, because Ernest does not even exist; his antics are really those of Cecily's "responsible" guardian Jack. Here, Wilde further exposes the ridiculous rules of Victorian society, in which it is perhaps better to be truthful about living a life of sin than to be lying and to actually be a person of upstanding morals.

Cecily: Miss Prism says that all good looks are a snare.

Algernon: They are a snare that every sensible man would like to be caught in.

Cecily: Oh! I don't think I would care to catch a sensible man. I shouldn't know what to talk to him about.

Related Characters: Algernon Moncrieff, Cecily Cardew (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

As Cecily and Algernon continue their flirtation, Cecily frequently cites things that Miss Prism has told her to be true. In this quote, Cecily says that she would not like to catch a "sensible man" because she doesn't think she would have anything to talk to him about. In this statement, Cecily references that fact that in Victorian society, propriety was, especially to young people, associated with being bland and boring. A sensible man—the kind of man whom Cecily fears she is destined to marry—is therefore a person whom people like Miss Prism approve of, and so is boring to the point of having nothing of interest to converse about. In her sheltered life in the country, Cecily rarely had the chance to meet people who were not her relatives or hired to instruct her. Therefore, she becomes smitten with the idea of the improper Ernest, whom she heard about from Jack. To Cecily, Ernest represents freedom and adventure, things she has read about in books and in stories but has yet to really experience.

You are too much alone, dear Dr. Chasuble. You should get married. A misanthrope. I can understand—a womanthrope never!

Related Characters: Miss Prism (speaker), Dr. Chasuble

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Though Dr. Chasuble has committed to remaining celibate according to his interpretation of the Bible, Miss Prism continues to suggest that she is a worthy candidate as a wife. Though she never explicitly states that she wants to

marry Dr. Chasuble, she frequently flirts with him and tells him that he should get married. As both Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism are well-educated people, their flirtation is humorous because of the high level of diction they use in their banter. In this quote, Miss Prism notes that she can understand people who hate other people (misanthropes) but she cannot understand why anyone would feel an aversion to women (what she terms a "womanthrope"). In Victorian society, women were considered the "fair sex," a designation that ultimately meant that women were idolized and idealized, but also objectified and essentially used as pawns in the marriage game. In the context of Oscar Wilde's life, this joke may also be a reference to the fact that he was secretly gay, an identity that was illegal in England during the period. He was eventually jailed for several years when his sexual orientation came to light, and many of his critiques of marriage and heterosexual romance in the play may be due in part to Victorian society's abhorrence of anything that was outside of the perceived norm.

Miss Prism: And you do not seem to realize, dear Doctor, that by persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation. Men should be more careful; this very celibacy leads weaker vessels astray.

Dr. Chausible: But is a man not equally attractive when married?
Miss Prism: No married man is ever attractive except to his wife.

Related Characters: Miss Prism, Dr. Chasuble (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Alone and continuing their conversation from their walk around the estate, Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble discuss marriage. Both are spinsters: Miss Prism because she is a governess, and Dr. Chasuble because of his religious beliefs. In the society of the period, a woman was looked down upon for not marrying after a certain age. Miss Prism refers to Dr. Chasuble as a "public temptation" because his eligibility as a bachelor makes him "tempting" to women who are still single past typical the marriageable age. She hints that she is interested in marrying him, and that she would continue to be attracted to him, even after they are married. Her quip about no married man being attractive, except to the woman he is married to, is a joke both about how the strictness of Victorian romance means infidelity is considered appalling, and how men tended to let themselves go after they were finally wed, and were thus only attractive to the women they were married to and supporting financially. In Victorian society, a bachelor like Dr. Chasuble retained the same status as a married man, whereas a spinster like Miss Prism was stigmatized for remaining single.

[Christening is], I regret to say, one of the Rector's most constant duties in this parish. I have often spoken to the poorer classes on the subject. But they don't seem to know what thrift is.

Related Characters: Miss Prism (speaker), Dr. Chasuble

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Separately, and unbeknownst to the other, Jack and Algernon have both asked Dr. Chasuble to christen them "Ernest" so as to satisfy the respective wishes of Cecily and Gwendolen.

Though not a member of the aristocracy, Miss Prism's moral beliefs mirror those of the elite in Victorian society. This is due to her role as a governess for a wealthy family, and her attempt to indoctrinate Cecily with these views. Though she is not a member of the upper class, her employment means that she is not of the "lower" and poorer laboring class, like people who worked in factories in London. The lower classes were stereotypically associated with immoral practices, such as alcoholism and having too many children. In this quote, Miss Prism chastises the poorer classes in the country for producing too many children, thus rendering more mouths to feed and stretching the families' already meager incomes even further. It is due to these large families that Dr. Chasuble often performs christenings.

Act 2, Part 2 Quotes

My duty as a gentleman has never interfered with my pleasures in the smallest degree.

Related Characters: Algernon Moncrieff (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Jack is furious with Algernon for arriving in the country and pretending to be Ernest when Jack has just announced to everyone that Ernest has died. Jack calls a carriage to send Algernon back to town, telling him he must go back to complete his "gentlemanly duties." In this quote, Algernon states that despite his duties in town as a member of the aristocracy, he's never had any problem doing as he pleases. This is in large part due to his "Bunburying" and his wealth—if he had to hold a consistent job, of course, he would not be able to escape to the countryside whenever he pleased. Men of wealth and influence like Jack and Algernon can essentially do whatever they wish and never have to worry about their actions having repercussions.

> The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive.

Related Characters: Gwendolen Fairfax (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Determined to become engaged to Jack (whom she thinks is named Ernest) despite her mother's wishes, Gwendolen arrives at the country estate unannounced. When she meets Cecily, she is very put-off by the young, beautiful woman living in the home of the man she hopes to marry. The two women speak to each other in tones that are very polite on the surface, though the content of their conversation is rather disparaging of the other person.

In this quote, Gwendolen is referring to her father, Lord Bracknell, of whom Cecily has no knowledge. Here, Gwendolen claims that she prefers it that way, since this means that he often remains in the home and not in the public eye. Upper-class aristocratic families such as the Bracknells were wealthy to the point that work was not a necessity, thus allowing both parents to live a life of total leisure. If the fathers did work at all, it was as a member of Parliament or through investments, finance, or real estate. The lower classes, of course, needed to work outside of the home in order to provide for their families. Thus, Gwendolen's upbringing means she is attracted to men who are "domestic," meaning that they are not worn from labor and attend to duties in the home instead. She asserts that it should be women who socialize outside of the home—a progressive moment in which Wilde challenges (although humorously and ironically) traditional Victorian gender roles using a strong female character.

Act 3, Part 1 Quotes

> Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!

Related Characters: Gwendolen Fairfax, Cecily Cardew (speaker), Jack, Algernon Moncrieff

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Despite the their first tense conversation, Gwendolen and Cecily become fast friends when they discover that they have both been duped by men who claim to have the name "Ernest." Gwendolen has always wanted to love someone by the name of Ernest, while Cecily has fallen in love with the idea of the rebellious Ernest who lives in the city. When Gwendolen discovers that her Ernest's real name is Jack, and Cecily discovers that Algernon is Jack's friend, not his crazy brother Ernest, the girls both call off their engagements. Just like Lady Bracknell's dismissal of Jack because of his lack of a proper lineage, so Gwendolen and Cecily have their own seemingly random stipulation for a potential partner—the "Christian" name of Ernest—and they initially refuse to settle otherwise. This quote is spoken simultaneously by both women to comment on how quickly two women can become fast friends when they discover they have been manipulated by men, and to underscore the improbable and comic melodrama the action of the play has come to at this point.

> Mr. Worthing, is Miss Cardew at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? I merely desire information. Until yesterday I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a Terminus.

Related Characters: Lady Bracknell (speaker), Jack, Cecily Cardew

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

When Lady Bracknell discovers that Algernon is engaged to Cecily, she demands to know her lineage. Since Algernon is her nephew, anyone that he marries is associated with her, too, and she does not want to mar her social capital with relatives who marry below their stature. Lady Bracknell speaks extremely condescendingly to everyone around her, as her status and social-climbing sensibilities mean that she is constantly trying to impress people with her aristocracy and wealth. Wilde writes many witty, self-defeating lines for Lady Bracknell, as she is the character who most obviously parodies the worst tendencies of the aristocratic class in Victorian society. Her question as to whether Cecily is associated with any of the "larger railway stations" is very dry satire regarding what Lady Bracknell previously learned about Jack being found in the cloakroom as a baby. For Lady Bracknell, allowing anyone in her family to marry into such appalling lineage would be "the end"—hence her scathing comment about someone whose "origin," or lineage, is a "Terminus," or a train terminal.

> Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and surfaces...There are distinct social possibilities in your profile. The two weak points in our age are its want of principle and its want of profile.

Related Characters: Lady Bracknell (speaker), Cecily Cardew

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

When Jack tells Lady Bracknell of Cecily's large trust fund, available to her when she comes of age, Lady Bracknell immediately becomes more interested in the prospect of Algernon marrying the young girl. In this quote, she inspects Cecily's face, suddenly very taken with the girl (of course, the audience knows that this change of opinion is because she now knows that Cecily is rich). Here, the "lasting qualities" that Lady Bracknell alludes to are not looks, as she hopes to imply, but money. She pretends to have taken interest in Cecily because of her sudden astonishment with her beauty, but the "profile" she is really intrigued by is her socioeconomic profile, not her chin. In the last sentence of the quote, Wilde's signature witty puns come into play with the phrase "want of profile," which at "face" value means "lack of a chin," but here really means "lack of proper social and financial status." Finally, Lady Bracknell has found someone whose beauty is surpassed only by her bank account—a partner she wholly approves of for her bachelor nephew.

> But I do not approve of mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell, I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way.

Related Characters: Lady Bracknell (speaker), Lord Bracknell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Despite being an aggressive social climber, Lady Bracknell pretends to look down upon marriages that are made to raise social status. This represents her consistently flaky and hypocritical nature, in which she tailors her morals to her own needs. In this case, she has just discovered that Cecily has a large trust fund, and is therefore (in her opinion) a suitable marriage candidate for Algernon. Lady Bracknell, never one to lose the chance to make a snide remark, states that Algernon has "nothing but his debts to depend on." Despite his aristocratic status and familial wealth, Algernon handles his personal finances badly and is often in debt. Though initially Lady Bracknell thought Cecily was the one who was attempting to "climb" by becoming engaged to Algernon, she here states that it would be Algernon who would gain socioeconomic status by marrying Cecily, the wealthier party. This is an example of Lady Bracknell tailoring her views to whatever leads to the most gain in a certain situation. Though she looks down upon the poorer classes, she notes that she herself had no fortune before marrying into the aristocracy. In a further example of her hypocrisy, she made sure to marry upwards in order to ensure that she could enjoy the leisurely life of the

extremely wealthy and connected—those with enough status to look down upon those who must make "mercenary marriages."

"To speak frankly, I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable.

Related Characters: Lady Bracknell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Jack tells the people in the room that Cecily's trust states that she does not "come of age" until she is 35. This shocks Algernon, who had hoped that she would be free to marry as she pleased much sooner than that. In this quote, Lady Bracknell quips that she would not be in favor of a long engagement because she fears the two partners would realize that they are emotionally incompatible, despite being the "correct" socioeconomic match based on the standards of Victorian society. In traditions of arranged marriages, it was believed that familial compatibility would create a more successful union than would romantic love, which was fleeting and far less enduring than social status and class.

Act 3, Part 2 Quotes

"Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men and another for women?

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Prism

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

When Jack finds out that the handbag he was found in in Victoria Station was Miss Prism's, he jumps to the conclusion that she is his mother. She denies his assumption by stating that she is unmarried. Without waiting for further information, Jack jumps to yet another conclusion: that Miss Prism gave birth to him out of wedlock, and continued to deny her maternal connection to him in order to avoid the stigma of being an unwed mother (which was quite significant in the Victorian era). However, what she means to actually say is that she, a highly moral woman, could not possibly be his mother *because* she is unmarried, and would never have a child out of wedlock. In this quote, Jack attempts to gallantly defend the woman he believes to be his mother, and in doing so, puts forth a progressive argument for equality between the sexes—explicitly pointing out the double standard that forgives men for having extramarital affairs, but condemns women for doing the same. The irony of this statement, of course, is that Jack does not think that *his* actions warrant the same repentance as do those of an unmarried woman with a child.

"Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Gwendolen Fairfax

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

When Jack finds his birth father's name in the Army list, he realizes that he has indeed been truthful when calling himself Ernest in the city—he is actually named Ernest Moncrieff Jr. In this quote, Jack is responding to Gwendolen's delight at discovering that Jack's name really is Ernest, as she believed it to be when she fell in love with him. Jack, however, is almost disappointed at the fact that he is really named Ernest, because he felt very clever in creating the identity of a sinful brother who lived in the city. As men of wealth and leisure, Algernon and Jack essentially do and say whatever they like without fear of repercussions, particularly thanks to their double identities in the city and country. Jack is shocked to realize that, when he believed himself to be lying in the city, he was really telling the truth in both the city and country—in aristocratic society he is technically the son of Ernest Moncrieff and is, by christening, Ernest Moncrieff Jr., while in the country he is John Worthing, the adopted son of Thomas Cardew. Regardless of his location or identity, or whether or not he

was aware of it, Jack has been telling the truth all along—he is both Ernest and the most earnest of the characters.

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

Related Characters: Jack (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

It is only in the very last line of the play that the title of the work is spoken. Wilde's characteristic wit and wordplay, particularly on the interplay between the name "Ernest" and the word "earnest," endures until the very end of the drama. Though the word is written out as "Earnest," to an audience member watching the production, it is not clear whether Jack is saying "Ernest" the name or "earnest" the word, which means to be sincere and truthful.

Jack's own wit as a character likely means that he, too, is intending to make this pun, showing that he now understands the importance of being Ernest—his true Christian name and the name of his birth father—and earnest—being honest and confessing the truth to Gwendolen, meaning that he now knows who his family is.

In Wilde's play, which provides a scathing critique of Victorian society and romance through painfully polite yet daringly clever dialogue, all the lovers end up together, and in class-affirming unions as well. Of course, in Wilde's experience, this rarely ever happens—usually unions for love were scorned in favor of arranged marriages. Thus, if the happy engagements between Algernon/Cecily and Gwendolen/Jack feel too good to be true, that is because for Wilde (and the rest of Victorian society who first saw the play), they are—marriages for both love and class were rarely made at the time. But, as Miss Prism declared must be the case in fiction, the "good ended happily"—once Jack and Algernon tell the truth, they are rewarded with their loves.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, PART 1

In his fashionable London flat, Algernon plays the piano from an adjoining room offstage while his butler Lane sets the parlor on stage for tea. While Algernon absentmindedly munches on cucumber sandwiches, prepared for Aunt Augusta (Lady Bracknell) and cousin Gwendolen's visit, he remarks on an inaccurate entry in the household books. Wondering why eight bottles of champagne have been consumed, he asks Lane why it is that servants drink so much champagne in bachelor's homes. Lane replies that top tier champagne is rare in married households, implying that servants drink fine wine instead when they work for married couples.

Even though The Importance of Being Earnest *begins in the apartment of a single man, marriage becomes its primary concern quite quickly. Lane's comment juxtaposes Algernon's lavish bachelor lifestyle, characterized by the overconsumption of champagne and cucumber sandwiches, against the more conservative lifestyle of a married couple. Though Algernon's lifestyle is overindulgent and excessive, like that of dandy, the prospect of marriage and a tamer life looms in the background.*

This discussion leads Lane and Algernon to philosophize about marriage. Lane remarks that he has only been married once as a consequence of a "misunderstanding between [himself] and a young person." Algernon sends Lane away to get some more sandwiches and comments to himself that Lane's views on marriage are rather "lax," considering that the "lower orders" should set a "good example" for the upper classes.

Algernon's shock at Lane's "lax" marriage views conveys the hypocrisy of his aristocratic class. While Lane's morality appears less firm—as he refers to marriage as a past "misunderstanding" rather than a long-term commitment—Algernon is the more hedonistic character. He easily blames his servant for not being a "good example" when he himself is not.

Lane announces the arrival of Algernon's friend, Mr. Ernest Worthing (Jack) who has been away in the country. Seeing the tea service, Jack asks Algernon whom he is expecting. Upon learning that Algernon is waiting his aunt and cousin Gwendolen to arrive, Jack reveals that he has come to London to propose to Gwendolen, whom he has been courting. Algernon comments that proposals are a matter of "business," not "pleasure."

Algernon's comment on proposals speaks to the business-like nature of marriage in the Victorian world. Marriage was not always simply a matter of the heart, or "pleasure" but an economic exchange between families who aligned their wealth, power, and prestige through marriage.

Jack attempts to take one of the cucumber sandwiches set out for tea, but Algernon insists that they are reserved for Lady Bracknell, and then eats one himself. Algernon offers Jack some bread and butter, instead, since he ordered them expressly for Gwendolen. When Algernon notices Jack eating rather voraciously, he remarks that it seems as if Jack were already married and warns that he may never be wed. Alarmed, Jack asks what he means. At this point Algernon confronts his friend about a woman named Cecily.

Algernon and Jack's voracious appetites reflect their extravagant airs and excessive lifestyles as dandies. Algernon cannot allow his friend to eat a single sandwich; he must eat them all. Overeating is also a nervous habit that Algernon leverages when he has to confront his friend on a contentious topic—infidelity. In effect, Algernon's denial of food to his friend is far less impolite than the accusation he is about to make.

Jack initially denies the existence of Cecily, but Algernon instructs Lane to bring out the cigarette case that Jack left at their last dinner party. To Jack's annoyance, Algernon discloses that he has read the private inscription inside the case. In order to coax his friend into revealing the meaning of the inscription, Algernon produces a business card from the case with the name "Mr. Ernest Worthing" printed on it and insists that he has only every known his friend as "Ernest."

The appearance of the cigarette case and business cards show that Algernon is on to Jack's secret, but unwilling to let on that he knows about his friend's double life. While Algernon's presentation of the business cards seem to show his faith in the veracity of Jake's fake identity, he only feigns this belief, instead hoping that the presentation of the cigarette case will compel his friend to tell the truth.

Irked, Jack says that Cecily is his aunt. Algernon goads his friend further, gradually building up contradictions against Jack by asking why the case's inscription reads: "From little Cecily with her fondest love to her Uncle Jack." Running out of reasonable excuses, Jack reluctantly confesses that his name is actually Jack and that he goes by "Ernest" in town and "Jack" in the country.

The inscription on the cigarette case not only unravels Jack's secret, but also symbolizes his double life. While the business cards in Jack's case say that he is "Ernest," the case itself shows that he is actually Jack. Just as the case tells two stories, Jack claims two identities.

Jack's confession confirms Algernon's suspicion that his friend is a practiced "Bunburyist." Algernon demands to know why Jack goes by one name in town and the other in the country.

Though the meaning of "Bunburyist," is not entirely clear, Algernon's use of the term suggests that he too might be well practiced in the art of deception.

Jack confides in Algernon that Mr. Thomas Cardew adopted him as a young boy. At the time of Cardew's passing, he left Jack his fortune and made him guardian to his granddaughter, Miss Cecily Cardew, who lives on a country estate. Jack explains that he leads a double life because his responsibilities to Cecily requires him to set a "high moral tone" when he is with her in the country. In the city, Jack can let loose and enjoy himself, so he pretends to have an unruly younger brother named "Ernest," whose antics in the city compel him to rush off to London frequently.

Jack's explanation establishes the symbolic role of town and country. Because Jack must set a good example for his ward in the country, it represents a place that is morally strict, prudish, even repressive. Because Jack is able to indulge in the pleasures of city life, town represents a place where the rules are looser and less strict. That Jack's unruly alter ego "Ernest" resides in the city emphasizes the urban world's wildness.

Algernon reveals that he has also invented an invalid friend named "Bunbury," whose maladies are a ready excuse for Algernon whenever he chooses to go into the country. While Jack finds "Bunbury" to be an "absurd name," Algernon cautions his friend against doing away with a fictional figure, like "Bunbury," once he is married.

Algernon's "Bunbury" parallels Jack's alter ego "Ernest." Through these personas, Jack and Algernon can escape from their duties and live out their fantasies elsewhere. Ironically, Jack does not recognize that his "Ernest" is just as "absurd" as Algernon's "Bunbury."

ACT 1, PART 2

Lane announces the arrival of Lady Bracknell and Miss Gwendolen Fairfax. Gwendolen flirts with Jack, while Lady Bracknell gossips with Algernon about her recently widowed friend. Lady Bracknell asks for one of the cucumber sandwiches Algernon has promised her. Algernon, realizing that he has devoured every single sandwich, directs blame on Lane, asking him why there are no cucumber sandwiches. Lane takes it in stride reporting that there were no cucumbers available at the market, even for purchase on "ready money," or credit.

Algernon's consumption of all the cucumber sandwiches is characteristic of his excessive nature, dandyish lifestyle, and selfishness. Lane appears to help Algernon save face in front of Lady Bracknell. Yet his comment about the cucumbers is actually a subtle dig at Algernon's reliance on credit, rather than real money. It suggests that Algernon is constantly living above his means and not minding his manners.

Lady Bracknell asks Algernon if he will be able to attend her dinner party on Saturday. He tells her he will not be able to attend on account of "Bunbury." Lady Bracknell wishes that "Bunbury" would just choose to live or die, but Algernon distracts his aunt from sermonizing further by inviting her into the adjoining room to review the music program he has put together for her party.

Algernon's excuse for missing dinner shows his deception in action. Lady Bracknell's assessment that "Bunbury" is rather wishy-washy is ironic (and funny) because while life and death is not an easy or simple matter of choice, Algernon's ready use of "Bunbury" most certainly is.

Algernon leads Lady Bracknell out of the parlor, allowing Jack and Gwendolen a moment alone. Jack declares his love for Gwendolen and she expresses her affection for him, announcing that it is her "ideal" to love someone named "Ernest" because the name inspires "absolute confidence." When Worthing suggests that she might marry a "Jack," she shows disdain and disgust because the name produces no "music," "thrill," or "vibrations." "Ernest" is the only "safe" name. Jack, realizing Gwendolen's earnest belief in "Ernest," shows visible discomfort, but proposes anyway at his beloved's urging.

Gwendolen is more in love with an idealized version of Jack—"Ernest." While Gwendolen expresses affection towards Jack, her fascination with "Ernest" stems from her aesthetic tastes in music. Gwendolen also confuses the "safety," security, and "confidence" that marriage could provide her with her fiancé's name. By projecting these ideal qualities onto "Ernest", she actually creates her own illusion of love and marriage.

As Jack is down on one knee, proposing to Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell bursts on to the scene, appalled by the compromising position in which she has found Jack and her daughter. Though Gwendolen assertively announces her engagement to Jack, Lady Bracknell immediately shows disapproval of the match, declaring that she and Lord Bracknell will arrange their daughter's engagement. Infuriated, Lady Bracknell ushers Gwendolen out of the room to their awaiting carriage and begins to interrogate her daughter's suitor.

By showing her over-the-top outrage, Lady Bracknell establishes herself as the master of matrimony. Though she mentions that she and Lord Bracknell will decide Gwendolen's engagement, his influence is minor in comparison to her tight grip on her daughter's marriage plans. Lady Bracknell's control and direction of the scene emphasize the powerful role she will play in the game of love.

Alone, Lady Bracknell asks Jack a series of questions relating to his wealth, residences, and family relations. Jack replies that he is bachelor of twenty-nine with a sizable income, a fashionable London townhouse in Belgrave Square, and property in the country, all of which appears to appease Lady Bracknell, until he is unable to name his family relations. Instead of describing his parents, Jack reveals to Lady Bracknell that he is an orphan. He was found tucked in a handbag in a cloak roam at the Victoria railway station on the Brighton line. Lady Bracknell finds this lineage to be an unacceptable pedigree—"the line is immaterial"—and forbids Jack from contacting her daughter, until he finds some respectable relations.

Lady Bracknell's interrogation of Jack demonstrates the three "C"s: cash, class, and character. Endowed with riches, a fashionable address, and land, Jack appears like a suitable candidate, but his lack of proper family relations is an obstacle to Lady Bracknell's consent. Wilde's reference to a train "line," instead of a family line emphasizes the (in Wilde's opinion, ridiculous) premium Lady Bracknell places on family ties. While Jack has a "line" to his credit, it is "immaterial" to Lady Bracknell precisely because it is not an exact lineage.

Lady Bracknell leaves in a huff and Algernon enters the parlor to ask Jack what happened. Jack explains that while Gwendolen accepted his proposal, her mother, acting like a monstrous "Gorgon," refused on account that he has no family relations. As Algernon comforts his friend for having no relations, Jack decides to kill off his fictional brother "Ernest," deciding that he will "die" in Paris of a "severe chill."

Because Jack has no family he envisions one. He regards his prospective mother-in-law as a mythical beast, or "Gorgon." Meanwhile he entertains thoughts of killing off "Ernest." Jack's creation and destruction of family ties in his imagination reflects his struggle to create a real family with Gwendolen.

The conversation transitions as Algernon plies Jack for information about Cecily. Unaware that his descriptions of Cecily are encouraging Algernon's interest in her, Jack reveals that she is a young and beautiful girl of eighteen holding an intense fascination with Jack's brother, "Ernest."

Jack's pretty portrait of Cecily invites Algernon to imagine an ideal love interest. Algernon's curiosity in a woman he has never met mirrors Cecily's soon-to-be-revealed obsession with Jack's made-up brother "Ernest," a man that she has never met, and suggests that love takes root in the imagination rather than real life.

Gwendolen reenters and asks to speak with Jack privately. Algernon turns around but eavesdrops, anyway. She tells Jack that though their marriage may never be realized, on account of her mother's disapproval, that she will always be devoted to him. So that she can write to him, Gwendolen asks Jack for his address in the country, which Algernon slyly writes down on his shirt cuff.

Gwendolen makes a bold move by returning to the flat to declare her love to Jack. Her initiative shows that despite her mother's disapproval she is still an active agent in her and Jack's love story. Yet her steadfastness will later be shown to be to a man named Ernest, not to Jack himself.

Jack sees Gwendolen out to her carriage and Algernon informs Lane that he will be going out "Bunburying" tomorrow. Jack returns and Algernon comments that he is "anxious" about his friend "Bunbury." Jack cautions that if Algernon doesn't "take care" "Bunbury" might get him into serious trouble.

In directing Algernon to "take care," Jack shows his fundamental misunderstanding of deception. While lying requires careful attention to detail, it is actually a careless act. It is ironic that Jack takes such a high moral tone, when he has been pretending to be somebody he is not, all along.

ACT 2, PART 1

At the Manor House, Jack's country estate, Miss Prism struggles to focus Cecily's attention on her studies. Prism reminds Cecily that Mr. Worthing has placed particular emphasis on her German, but Cecily comments that Uncle Jack is so "serious" and "bored" when he is with them. Prism remarks that Mr. Worthing is an upstanding man whose "unfortunate" younger brother "Ernest" causes many "troubles in his life." Cecily wishes that "Ernest" would visit them, suggesting that they might be a "good influence" on him. Miss Prism believes that there's no point in trying to make a bad person good.

Miss Prism and Cecily's exchange demonstrates differing views on morality. Miss Prism has a rigid perspective of human nature, insisting that people are either good or bad and cannot change. Unlike Cecily, she does not consider that a person might change through good influences, or works. Miss Prism's great expectations of others, like Jack, make her a mouthpiece for Victorian social mores, even if her moral standards are impossibly high.

Cecily begins writing in her diary, "things that never happened and couldn't possibly happen," but Miss Prism directs her to put it away, suggesting that Cecily should rely on her memory, instead. Cecily defends writing in her diary, pointing out that memory is responsible for sentimental three-volume novels. Slighted by this comment, Miss Prism reveals that she was the author of a three-volume-novel that was never published because the manuscript was lost.

Cecily precociously, yet insightfully, points out the blurry boundaries between fact and fiction. She points out that memory is not always factual and has the ability to be just as fictitious as a novel. A "three-volume novel" (usually sentimental novels popular in Victorian England, will become important later in the play.

The local reverend Dr. Chasuble arrives and Cecily suggests that he take Miss Prism on a walk to relieve her governesses' "headache." Cecily is clearly aware that there is an attraction between her governess and the vicar, who says that he would "hang upon [Miss Prism's] lips." Miss Prism scolds Cecily gently for fibbing and admonishes the minister, but goes off on a walk with Dr. Chausible anyways.

Dr. Chasuble's line "hang upon her lips" speaks to the devotional state of love that the play's male figures fall into. While Chasuble hangs upon Prism's every word, the quote is a reminder that women's words are influential, even if their position in society is not always strong.

When Cecily is alone in the garden, Merriman announces the arrival of Mr. Ernest Worthing and presents his business card. It is the same card that Jack stored in his cigarette case. The visitor is actually Algernon, masquerading as Jack's fictional brother "Ernest."

Algernon uses the tools of Jack's deception—the business card and cigarette case—to assume "Ernest's" identity. Algernon makes "real" this fictional persona, showing the fluid borders between between fact and fiction.

Algernon, dressed extravagantly like a dandy, greets his "little cousin" Cecily, who is excited to finally meet her "wicked cousin Ernest." She tells Algernon that Jack will not be back until Monday because he is buying traveling clothes for "Ernest" to take with him to Australia. This news surprises and disappoints Algernon, who suggests that Cecily "reform" him instead. As Algernon flirts with Cecily, she invites him into the house to eat.

While Gwendolen idolizes "Ernest" because he is "ideal," Cecily fantasizes about "Ernest" because he is "wicked." That Algernon asks Cecily to "reform" him signals that their attraction is based on a fascination with behavior that bends the rules of conventional morality. That they interact without chaperones only further pushes past the boundaries of Victorian social customs.

Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble talk of marriage as they return from their walk. Prism suggests that Chasuble should marry because an unmarried man is a either a temptation, or a "womanthrope" (misogynist), but the vicar asserts that the Primitive Church doctrine he follows restricts marriage on the clergy.

Though Dr. Chasuble appears to have strict religious views on marriage, Miss Prism's words have a powerful effect on him, as his beliefs crumble by the play's end, cementing Miss Prism's influence over him.

Jack enters slowly dressed in mourning clothes, surprising Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble. Jack tells them that his brother "Ernest" has just died abroad in Paris of a "severe chill." While Dr. Chasuble offers his condolences and begins to sermonize, Miss Prism makes a moralistic pronouncement: "As a man sows so let him reap." Remembering he has to change his name for Gwendolen, Jack proceeds to ask Chasuble if he is available to christen him at 5:30 that day. Yet Cecily emerges from the house and tells Jack that his brother "Ernest" is here at the estate and has been telling her a great deal about his friend "Bunbury."

Though Miss Prism's biblical quote is directed at "Ernest's" death, it speaks to Jack's situation, as the harvest of his lying ways comes to fruition in the form of a real "Ernest." Jack's impending encounter with Algernon, impersonating "Ernest," demonstrates the collision between fact and fiction. Jack, pretending to mourn his fictional brother, must confront a real-life "Ernest," distorting the truth even more and blurring the contours of his double identity.

ACT 2, PART 2

Jack greets Algernon coldly, furious that Algernon has showed up at his country estate, masquerading as "Ernest" and shocked that he has been talking to Cecily about "Bunbury." At Cecily's prompting, Jack begrudgingly shakes Algernon's hand. Miss Prism, Dr. Chasuble and Cecily leave the brothers alone to talk things out.

Jack and Algernon must pretend to reconcile and switch identities in order to preserve their alter egos. Though Jack resists this transition, the relative ease with which Algernon becomes "Ernest" marks the fluid nature of name and identity in the play.

Outraged, Jack tells Algernon that he has to leave. Algernon insists that that he is staying for week, but Jack asserts that "Ernest" has been called back to town and instructs Merriman to order a dog-cart to take "his brother" back to the train station. Algernon refuses to leave until Jack changes out of his mourning clothes, saying that he is absurdly over-dressed.

Jack's attempt to send Algernon /"Ernest" back to town represents his endeavor to keep not only fact and fiction apart, but also his lives in town and country separate. Because Algernon/"Ernest" are associated with his city life, Jack tries to expel them from the country.

Jack goes to change and Cecily comes out to the garden. Before departing, Algernon declares his love for her. But Cecily insists that they have already been engaged for three months. Taking out her diary, she relates their elaborate romance, complete with a ring, a broken engagement, and love letters.

While diaries tend to record fact, Cecily's diary is an instrument of fiction making. Her diary shows Cecily's powerful ability to align fact with fiction, as she and Algernon fall in love through her made-up love story between her and the fictional "Ernest" (who she thinks is real).

With their engagement confirmed, Cecily confesses that she has always dreamed of marrying a man named "Ernest" because it inspires "absolute confidence." When Algernon asks if she could love a man with his own name, she immediately declares her dislike for it. This revelation unsettles Algernon, who rushes to see Dr. Chasuble about getting christened.

Even though Cecily is initially attracted to "Ernest" for his wicked nature, her declaration of love mirrors Gwendolen's. Like Gwendolen, Cecily holds up "Ernest" as an ideal. Her echo of "confidence" redoubles the irony underscoring her and Gwendolen's love affairs, because Algernon and Jack are not trustworthy insofar as they are not Ernest. Though it is worth noting that their love is *real; their love is* in earnest.

Meanwhile, Merriman announces Gwendolen's unexpected arrival at the manor house to Cecily. The two women, unaware of each other's connections to Jack or Algernon, greet each other in the garden. Gwendolen assumes that Cecily is a visitor to the house, but shows concern when she learns that Cecily is actually Mr. Ernest Worthing's young and beautiful ward. Cecily corrects her, informing Gwendolen that Jack Worthing is her guardian. "Ernest" is actually Jack's brother and her fiancé. Shocked, Gwendolen asserts that *she* is in fact, "Ernest's" fiancée, reading an entry from her diary as proof.

Jack and Algernon's carefully crafted cover stories and fake identities unravel, as Cecily and Gwendolen believe themselves to be engaged to the same man. Mistaken identities motivate their emerging jealousies. Lastly, because diaries read more like fictions in the play, Gwendolen's diary does not appear as an authoritative source, but a paltry piece of evidence.

Believing that they are both engaged to "Ernest," Cecily and Gwendolen's jealousies play out over the course of a tea service. Gwendolen refuses Cecily's offer of sugar and cake, while making snide remarks about Cecily's tasteless country upbringing. Cecily responds, dumping healthy doses of both into Gwendolen's cup and onto her plate, while making comments about the city's "vulgar" nature.

Gwendolen and Cecily's food fight not only pivots on romantic jealousies, but also exposes class biases. Gwendolen, being a sophisticated urbanite, finds Cecily's country manners to be uncouth, while Cecily finds Gwendolen's snobbishness to be evidence of the city's vulgarity.

As tensions come to a head, Jack and Algernon arrive, one after the other, having separately made appointments with Dr. Chasuble to be christened later that day. Gwendolen confronts Jack, asking if he is engaged to Cecily. He firmly denies this. Yet Cecily takes great pleasure in pointing out that Gwendolen's betrothed is not "Ernest," but her guardian Uncle Jack. Cecily goes to Algernon's side and declares that he is "Ernest." Gwendolen takes even greater pleasure in pointing out that Cecily's fiancé is not "Ernest," but her cousin Algernon.

Gwendolen and Cecily each play a part in dismantling the fantasy of "Ernest." By revealing Jack and Algernon's true identities to each other they essentially destroy the figure with which they are so enamored. While it is gratifying for Cecily and Gwendolen to expose Jack and Algernon, their mean-spirited revelations showcase an empty truth, where no "Ernest," or earnest man exists at all.

Realizing that they have both been fooled, Gwendolen and Cecily embrace each other and demand to know the whereabouts of Jack's brother and their fiancé, "Ernest." Jack confesses that he does not have a brother at all. Cecily and Gwendolen, distraught at no longer being engaged to "Ernest," retreat into the house.

Cecily and Gwendolen's distress at no longer being engaged to "Ernest" shows that they have confused the name they adore with the men whom they admire. They loved the name, not the men. In this way Wilde mocks the Victorian aspect of marriage as a uniting of "names"—wealth and reputation being more important than a possible lover's actual traits.

Realizing that they have ruined their chances of getting married, Algernon and Jack argue about their failed "Bunburying" schemes, which prohibit them from further excursions in town or country. They also debate about who will ultimately take the name of "Ernest" at their upcoming christenings with Dr. Chasuble. Jack asserts that he should take the name because there is no proof that he has ever been christened. Attempting to manipulate his friend, so that he can take the name for himself, Algernon insists that such a name change could be dangerous. Meanwhile, the two men squabble over muffins and teacake, until the curtain drops.

Jack and Algernon do not bemoan the loss of their fiancées, but the loss of a good alibi for Bunburying—"Ernest." Without "Ernest" their double lives in the country and city can no longer live on. Even as the fictional "Ernest" disappears, Jack and Algernon still fight over who will actually assume his name in real life, showing their willingness to make real this character to please their partners. Their quarrel over muffins parallels Cecily and Gwendolen's fight under the pretense of a civil tea service.

ACT 3, PART 1

From the Manor House's drawing room Cecily and Gwendolen watch the two men argue from a window; the women eagerly await the men to enter. Gwendolen intends to give Jack and Algernon the silent treatment, but when the two men enter from the garden, Cecily demands to know why Algernon pretended to be Jack's brother, "Ernest." Algernon replies that he masqueraded as "Ernest" so that he could meet her. Cecily finds this answer satisfactory. Gwendolen then asks Jack if he pretended to have a brother so that he could visit her in London often, to which Jack responds affirmatively. Gwendolen finds his explanation acceptable and both women appear on the verge of forgiving their suitors.

Though Jack and Algernon assert that they assumed "Ernest's" identity so that they could pursue romances with Gwendolen and Cecily, all their actions building up to this point also suggest that they created alternative personas in order to escape to the places that would offer the most enjoyment and least responsibility. While Gwendolen and Cecily may find their lovers' explanations satisfactory, Wilde has conditioned his audience to be skeptical of Jack and Algernon's seemingly selfless statements.

But even though Algernon and Jack tell Cecily and Gwendolen exactly what they want to hear, both ladies insist that Algernon and Jack's Christians names are "insuperable barrier[s]" to their respective unions. Jack and Algernon counter by saying that they are to be christened that afternoon.

The characters' intense commitment to the name of "Ernest," highlights their willingness to bring fantasy and fiction into accord and emphasizes Gwendolen and Cecily's continued influence over their lovers' actions.

Embracing their suitors, Gwendolen and Cecily praise Jack and Algernon for their "physical courage" and "self-sacrifice" when Lady Bracknell unexpectedly arrives. Having bribed Gwendolen's maid into disclosing her whereabouts, Lady Bracknell has followed Gwendolen from town to prevent her from seeing Jack and is appalled to see the couple together.

Wilde uses the words "physical courage" and "self-sacrifice" to point out Jack and Algernon's self-serving nature. Changing their names will please Gwendolen and Cecily's aesthetic sensibilities, but will probably not change Jack and Algernon's selfish and duplicitous ways.

Distracted by Algernon's presence on the scene, Lady Bracknell asks him if this is the residence of his friend "Bunbury." Forgetting that he had told his aunt that he would be at his ailing friend's bedside, Algernon says no and then tries to quickly cover his faux pas by announcing "Bunbury's" death. Lady Bracknell is relieved that "Bunbury" has finally made up his mind to die.

"Bunbury's" sudden demise at Algernon's hands parallels Jack's attempts to do away with "Ernest," as well as reinforces the capricious quality of Algernon's exploits with "Bunbury." Just as Algernon could call up Bunbury's illnesses in an instant, he can kill him off in seconds, too.

Seeing Cecily holding hands with Algernon piques Lady Bracknell's interest. Jack explains that Cecily is his ward, and Algernon announces her as his fiancée. Lady Bracknell immediately inquires into Cecily' background, snidely asking whether she is "connected with any of the larger railways stations in London."

Lady Bracknell's reduction of family ties to railways lines recalls her derogatory attitude towards Jack's background and highlights the clash between the aristocratic class that she represents and the moneyed merchant class that Jack and Cecily exemplify.

Jack obligingly offers information about Cecily, conveying to Lady Bracknell that her relations are respectably recorded, her three residences are well regarded, and that she is the heiress to a great fortune. Even though Lady Bracknell suspects that Cecily's relations are dubiously recorded, the news of her wealth entices Lady Bracknell to stay at Jack's manor, instead of rushing off with Gwendolen back to London. After learning that Cecily stands to inherit even more money when she comes of age and pleased with the "social possibilities in her profile," Lady Bracknell proposes that the wedding should take place as soon as possible, even though she is against "mercenary marriages," like her own to Lord Bracknell.

Paralleling Lady Bracknell's inquiry into Jack's background, Jack breaks down Cecily's profile into cash, class, and character. While Cecily's relations are not quite aristocratic, Cecily's net worth more than makes up for this lack of noble blood lines. Lady Bracknell's quicksilver change of opinion about Cecily displays her hypocritical and money-grubbing nature. Though opposed to "mercenary marriages," Lady Bracknell reveals that she is in fact the product of one and is more than ready to work Algernon into an advantageous and wealthy match, as well.

Jack, realizing that he can use his position as Cecily's guardian to persuade Lady Bracknell into permitting his marriage to Gwendolen, refuses to consent to Cecily and Algernon's engagement. He explains to Lady Bracknell that he cannot approve of the match because he suspects Algernon of being "untruthful," listing the crimes his friend has perpetrated while masquerading as "Ernest." Jack will not consent to Cecily's marriage, until Lady Bracknell consents to Gwendolen's.

Jack challenges Lady Bracknell's authority as master of matrimony by questioning Algernon's character. In contrast to Lady Bracknell's evaluation of family background, Jack bases his assessment of Algernon on his behavior, which is selfish and deceitful. Refusing his consent on the grounds that Algernon is dishonest, Jack turns the tables on Lady Bracknell and her worldviews.

Refusing to give her consent, Lady Bracknell is about to leave with Gwendolen when Dr. Chasuble arrives, prepared to christen Jack and Algernon. Jack explains that the ceremony is no longer necessary and Dr. Chasuble says that he will return to the vestry, where Miss Prism is waiting.

Though Jack stands up to Lady Bracknell, she maintains control over Gwendolen's marriageability. That Jack and Algernon give up their scheme to get christened shows their defeat to Lady Bracknell.

ACT 3, PART 2

Upon hearing Miss Prism's name, Lady Bracknell immediately inquires about her, insisting that she be sent for. At the same moment, Miss Prism enters, sees Lady Bracknell, and begins to show a great deal of anxiety and fear. In a sharp tone, Lady Bracknell demands to know the whereabouts of a baby boy Miss Prism lost 28 years ago.

Lady Bracknell puts the usually impervious Miss Prism ill at ease, suggesting that she is not as perfect as she seems. Lady Bracknell's damning accusation threatens to destroy Miss Prism's pristine reputation, overturning Algernon's presumption that the servant classes should be pillars of moral uprightness.

Lady Bracknell proceeds to relay the details of the child's disappearance. Departing from Grosvenor Square, Miss Prism took the baby boy out in a stroller, but never returned with the child. The pram was found three weeks later in Bayswater containing no trace of the baby, but a three-volume-novel. Overwhelmed by incriminating evidence, Miss Prism confesses that she does not know what happened to the baby. She explains that she left the house that day with the baby in the stroller and the manuscript for her three-volume-novel in a handbag. She conjectures that in a moment of absentmindedness she put the manuscript in the stroller and the baby in the handbag.

Miss Prism's carefully crafted appearance of moral perfection is actually a lie. While making moralistic pronouncements on others, she has been hiding a dark and embarrassing secret that undermines her self-righteous façade. Miss Prism's past reveals her hypocrisy as well as her folly. As a writer with her head in the clouds she makes the silly, yet grave error of mistaking a manuscript for a baby, showing that she is just as susceptible to the lure of fantasy as her pupil Cecily.

Upon hearing this detail, Jack feverishly asks Miss Prism about where she left the handbag. Whimpering, she admits to having left it in a coatroom at Victoria station on the Brighton line. Excited, Jack rushes out of the room and returns onstage with the handbag, asking Miss Prism is she can identify it as the handbag she misplaced. She looks it over carefully and confirms that it is hers, delighted that it is back in her possession. Having pieced together the mysterious disappearance of the baby boy, Jack declares that he is the lost boy who was abandoned in Miss Prism's handbag and embraces her as his mother.

Through this story, Wilde unites Miss Prism's absentmindedness as a fiction writer with the backstory behind Jack's fictional life. While the handbag and coatroom have come to represent blanks in Jack's personal history, they are now filled with a colorful story, created because of Miss Prism's focus on fiction rather than the duties at hand. Wilde underlines the absurd nature of reality by highlighting Miss Prism's delight at retrieving her handbag over finally finding the child she lost.

Miss Prism recoils, reminding Jack that she is unmarried. Jack misconstrues her point, launching into a speech about forgiveness and redemption that criticizes society's double standards for men and women. But Miss Prism suggests that Jack should look to Lady Bracknell for the truth about his identity.

With Jack's speech, Wilde makes a pointed statement about the unequal treatment of men and women. Jack seems progressive in forgiving a "fallen woman" (i.e. one who he thinks gave birth without being married), while thinking his own duplicitous actions require no forgiving at all.

Without fanfare, Lady Bracknell explains that Jack is the son of her poor dead sister, Mrs. Moncrief, which also makes him Algernon's older brother, but also Lady Bracknell's nephew, and Gwendolen's first cousin. Jack's newfound family relations overturns Lady Bracknell's prohibition against his marriage to Gwendolen. Jack joyfully announces that he does indeed have a brother!

Jack's discovery of his family line breaks down one barrier against his marrying Gwendolen. (Cousin marriage was acceptable in Victorian England). By gaining a mother and brother, he gains the relations he was lacking before, making Jack's visions of family a reality.

But the mystery of Jack's true name remains, as his present name remains an "irrevocable" obstacle to Gwendolen's consent. Lady Bracknell believes that Jack, as the first born son, is likely named after his father, General Moncrief, but she, nor Algernon can remember his full name. Jack rushes to his bookshelves, which house volumes of Army Lists from the last forty years. Jack feverishly flips through the books' long lists of "ghastly names", until he finds General Moncrieff's first name: "Ernest John."

Wilde makes fun of the union between class and character by making Jack's marriageability contingent upon his name, as well as family background. Jack's relations satisfy Lady Bracknell's criteria, but they are not enough for Gwendolen, who wants him to be "Ernest." That Jack has to prove his "Ernestness"/ earnestness by verifying his name from a list of "ghastly names" is absurd, and highlights the general absurdity of the importance of names and family lines in Victorian decisions about love and marriage.

Jack realizes that he has been telling the truth the entire time: his name is in fact Ernest, but also John, and he does have a troublesome younger brother, Algernon. Jack turns to Gwendolen and asks if she will forgive him for telling the truth. She does, declaring him "my own!" Each couple—Jack and Gwendolen, Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble, and Cecily and Algernon—embrace "at last," while Jack declares to Lady Bracknell that he has learned the "vital Importance of Being Earnest."

The marriage chase concludes when Gwendolen asserts her hold on Jack by claiming him as her "own." Meanwhile, the verification of Jack's lies with concrete proof of their legitimacy makes his fictional life a bonafide reality. By pretending to be "Ernest," Jack's art of deception has actually become "earnest," or a sincere depiction of his real life as it is. His life is art; his art is life.

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