Act 1:

Algernon is hedonistic

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.

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’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’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.”

“I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.”

“Lane’s views on marriage seem somewhat lax… if the lower orders don’t set a good example, what on earth is the use of them? .... a class to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility”

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

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.

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.

“I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town to expressively propose to her”

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

“divorces are made in Heaven”

“please don’t touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. [Takes one and eats it.]”

“girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don’t think it right”

“isn’t Earnest it’s Jack”

“Well, my name is Earnest in town and Jack in the country”

“confirmed and secret Bunburyist”

“when one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone”

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple”

“Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner table”

“The amount of women who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous”

“It is simply washing one’s clean linen in public”

“I’m not a Bunburyist at all”

“in married life three is company and two is none”

“there were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went down twice”

“your uncle would have to dine upstairs. Fortunately, he is accustomed to that”

“I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or die”

“health is the primary duty of life”

“but German sounds a thoroughly respectable language”

“don’t talk about the weather, Mr Worthing. Whenever people talk about the weather, I always feel quite certain that they mean something else.”

“even before I met you…. My ideal has always been to love some one of the name Earnest”

“it produces vibrations”

“I pity any woman who is married to a man called John”

“may I propose to you now?”

“I hope you always look at me like that, especially when there are other people present

“[He tries to rise; she restrains him.]’

“It is hardly a matter she could be allowed to arrange for herself”

“The unfashionable side”

“to lose both is carelessness”

“Found!”

“A hand-bag”

“In cloak-room at Victoria Station” – baby was found in area known for prostitution – bottom of society

“I would try and acquire some relations as soon as possible… before the season is quite over”

“to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with parcel?”

“All woman become like their mothers. This is their tragedy. No man does. That’s his”

‘Make love to her if she is pretty and to someone else if she is plain”

“half an hour after they met, they will be calling each other sister”

“women only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things”

“The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out”

Act 2:

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.

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.

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.

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"

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.

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.

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.

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.

Their quarrel over muffins parallels Cecily and Gwendolen’s fight under the pretense of a civil tea service.

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.

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.

“I look quite plain after my German lesson”

“As a man sows so let him reap”

“I don’t see the point why you should keep a diary at all”

“The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means”

“Miss Prism has been complaining of a slight headache. I think it would do her so much good to have a short stroll with you in the park”

“I felt instinctively that you had a headache”

“I would hang upon her lips”

“I will stroll with you. I find I have a headache after all, and a walk might do it good”

“[picks up books and throws them on the table]”

“Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid, horrid German!”

“my wicked cousin Earnest”

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

“I have a business appointment that I am anxious… to miss?”

“you would have to choose between this world, the next world, and Australia”

“I don’t think I would care to catch a sensible man. I shouldn’t know what to talk to him about”

“you are too much alone, dear Dr. Chasuble. You should get married”

“No married man is ever attractive except to his wife”

“And often, I’ve been told, not even to her”

“Dead”

“He died abroad in Paris. I had a telegram last night from the manager of the Grant Hotel”

“a severe chill”

“as a man sows, so shall he reap”

“would half past five do”

“Earnest has just been telling me about his poor invalid friend Mr. Bunbury”

“Merriman order the dog cart at once”

“over-dressed”

“your vanity is ridiculous”

“I will copy your remarks into my diary”

“a very young girl’s record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication”

“we have been engaged for the last three months”

“how did we become engaged”

“I accepted you under this dear old tree here”

“the next day I bought this little ring in your name”

“Did I give this to you”

“This is the box which I keep all your letters”

“I have never written you any letters”

“I was forced to write your letters for you”

“the three you wrote me after I had broken off our engagement are so beautiful, and so badly spelled, that even now I can hardly read them without crying a little”

“you can see the entry if you like”

“it would hardly have been a serious engagement if it hadn’t been broken off at least once”

“it has always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Earnest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence”

“I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Earnest”

“something tells me we are going to be great friends”

“my first impressions of people are never wrong”

Act 3

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.

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.

“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.

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.

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.

Wilde underlines the absurd nature of reality by highlighting Miss Prism’s delight at retrieving her handbag over finally finding the child she lost.

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.

But the mystery of Jack’s true name remains, as his present name remains an “irrevocable” obstacle to Gwendolen’s consent.

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.

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”