The Importance of Being Earnest

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.

Background info

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The Importance of Being Earnest

Thomas Cardew, who found the infant Jack in a handbag left at a coatroom in Victoria station, 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. Chasuble 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. Shortly 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. Chasuble, 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. Chasuble 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. Cecily invites her into the garden for tea, where she has always dreamed of marrying a man named “Ernest.” She is not at all surprised because according to her 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. Chasuble.

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 Moncrieff – 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.

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.

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.”

Themes

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,”
The Importance of Being Earnest

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 *Algermon* 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 couple’s engagement is fraught with roadblocks, albeit trivial ones. *Gwendolen* shows hesitation at marrying a man not named “Ernest.” *Cecily* shows that same hesitation when *Algermon* 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 *Algermon* 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 governing. 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 stumbling 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 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.” *Algermon*’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. *Algermon*’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 *Algermon*’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* subvertsedly provokes 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 *Algermon*, 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 finds melodious, aesthetically pleasing, and irresistibly fascinating. *Cecily* in a similar manner commits to *Algermon* 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 *Algermon* is named “Ernest,” *Gwendolen* explains to *Cecily*, “neither of us is engaged to be married.” By pointing attention to these name/character confusions *Wilde* satirizes the hypocrisy of the Victorians’ naming conventions.

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 “ghostly 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 meaninglessness 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.

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 vulgar…” While Gwendolen views Cecily as a country-bumpkin—nobody for her rural roots, Cecily associates city living with vulgarity and aristocratic snobishness: “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 her own homemade pleasantries. The quicksilver reversal of her approval of Algernon and Cecily’s engagement. Lady Bracknell exposers 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.

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 top, 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 love letters between herself 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.

ACT 1, PART 1

Algeron: Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?

Lane: I believe it is a very pleasant state...I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

—Algernon, Lane

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.

—Algernon

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.

—Algernon

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 brother of the same name, Ernest...who gets into the most dreadful scrapes. The, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.

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

—Jack, Algernon

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.

—Algernon

ACT 1, PART 1

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.

—Algernon
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**ACT 1, PART 2**

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.

—Gwendolen

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 cloakroom and form an alliance with a parcel.

—Lady Bracknell

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**ACT 1, PART 2**

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

—Lady Bracknell

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**ACT 2, PART 1**

Your guardian enjoys the best of health, and his gravity of demeanour is especially to be commended in one so comparatively young as he is. I know no one who has a higher sense of duty and responsibility... Mr. Worthing has many troubles in his life. Idle merriment and triviality would be out of place in his conversation. You must remember his constant anxiety about that unfortunate young man his brother.

—Miss Prism

Cecily: I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn't write them down, I should probably forget all about them.

Miss Prism: Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry about us. Cecily: Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened. I believe that Memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that Mudie sends us.

—Cecily, Miss Prism

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

—Miss Prism

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

—Dr. Chasuble

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.

—Cecily, Algernon

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

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**ACT 2, PART 2**

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.

—Cecily to Algernon (masquerading as "Ernest")

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**ACT 2, PART 2**

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

—Algernon

I think it has been a great success. I'm in love with Cecily, and that is everything.

—Algernon

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**ACT 3, PART 1**

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

—Gwendolen

How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes! Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men are infinitely beyond us... They have moments of physical courage of which we women know absolutely nothing.

—Gwendolen

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[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.

—Miss Prism
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.

—Lady Bracknell

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.

—Lady Bracknell to Cecily

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. 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.

ACT 3, PART 2

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?

—Jack

My own! But what own are you? What is your Christian name, now that you have become someone else?

—Gwendolen to Jack

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.

—Jack

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

—Jack

SUMMARY & ANALYSIS

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. 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.

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.

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.”

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.
ACT 1, PART 2

Lane announces the arrival of Lady Bracknell and Miss Gwendolen Fairfax. Gwendolen flirts with Jack, while Lady Bracknell gossipis 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 to 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.

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 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.” While 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.

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. Inruriated, Lady Bracknell ushers Gwendolen out of the room to their awaiting carriage and begins to interrogate her daughter’s suitor.

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.

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.

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.
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 “ideal” 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.

The Importance of Being Earnest

Summary & Analysis

Lady Bracknell asks Jack a series of questions relating to his wealth, residences, and family relations. Jack replies that he is a 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 room 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 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.”

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.”

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, 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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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 a man named Ernest, not to Jack himself.

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.

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 fact and fiction.

While Gwendolen idealizes “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.

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.

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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.
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 either a temptation, or a “womanatcher” (misogynist), but the vicar asserts that the Primitive Church doctrine he follows restricts marriage on the clergy.

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.”

ACT 2, PART 2

Jack greets Algernon coldly, furious that Algernon has shown 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.

Outraged, Jack tells Algernon that he has to leave. Algernon insists 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 overdressed.

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.

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.

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 him, 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.

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 sugar in Gwendolen’s cup and onto her plate, while making comments about the city’s “vulgar” nature.

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 his engagement for a sign of his affection and will not leave, declaring that she will remain until Jack confirms his love for her. Algernon and Jack are not trustworthy men, however, and Gwendolen’s indecision is relieved by 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.

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.

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.

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.

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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.

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.

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.

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’s background, snidely asking whether she is “connected with any of the larger railways stations in London.”

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 is 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.

The Importance of Being Earnest

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 unsatisfactory. 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Jack obligingly offers information about Cecily, conveying to Lady Bracknell that her relations are respectively 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.

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.
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.

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 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.

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 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 fiction as her pupil Cecily.

Without fanfare, Lady Bracknell explains that Jack is the son of her poor dead sister, Mrs. Moncrieff, 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!

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 Moncrieff, 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 "ghostly 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 "Earnest." That Jack has to prove his "Earnestness?" 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 "Earnest," 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.

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.

ACT 4, PART 1

Lady Bracknell demands to know the whereabouts of a baby boy Miss Prism was to christen shows their defeat to Lady Bracknell. Without further ado, Jack explains that the baby was christened and named Jack for telling the truth. He does, also John, and he has 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 "Earnest," 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.

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.

Jack explains that 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.

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.

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 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 fiction as her pupil Cecily.

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