The Importance of Being Earnest

Study Guide by Course Hero

What's Inside

Book Basics

AUTHOR
Oscar Wilde

FIRST PERFORMED
1895

GENRE
Comedy

ABOUT THE TITLE
The title *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a pun: this play is about people who learn what it means to be earnest, and it is also about a young man named Ernest. Wilde originally gave the play the subtitle "A Serious Comedy for Trivial People" but changed it to "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People." He explained, "We should treat all trivial things very seriously."

In Context

Victorian Morality

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

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

Homosexuality

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

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

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

The Aesthetic Movement

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

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

The Decadent Movement

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

19th-Century Theater

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

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

Author Biography

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

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

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

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

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

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

Characters

Jack Worthing

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

Algernon Moncrieff

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

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

Gwendolen Fairfax

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

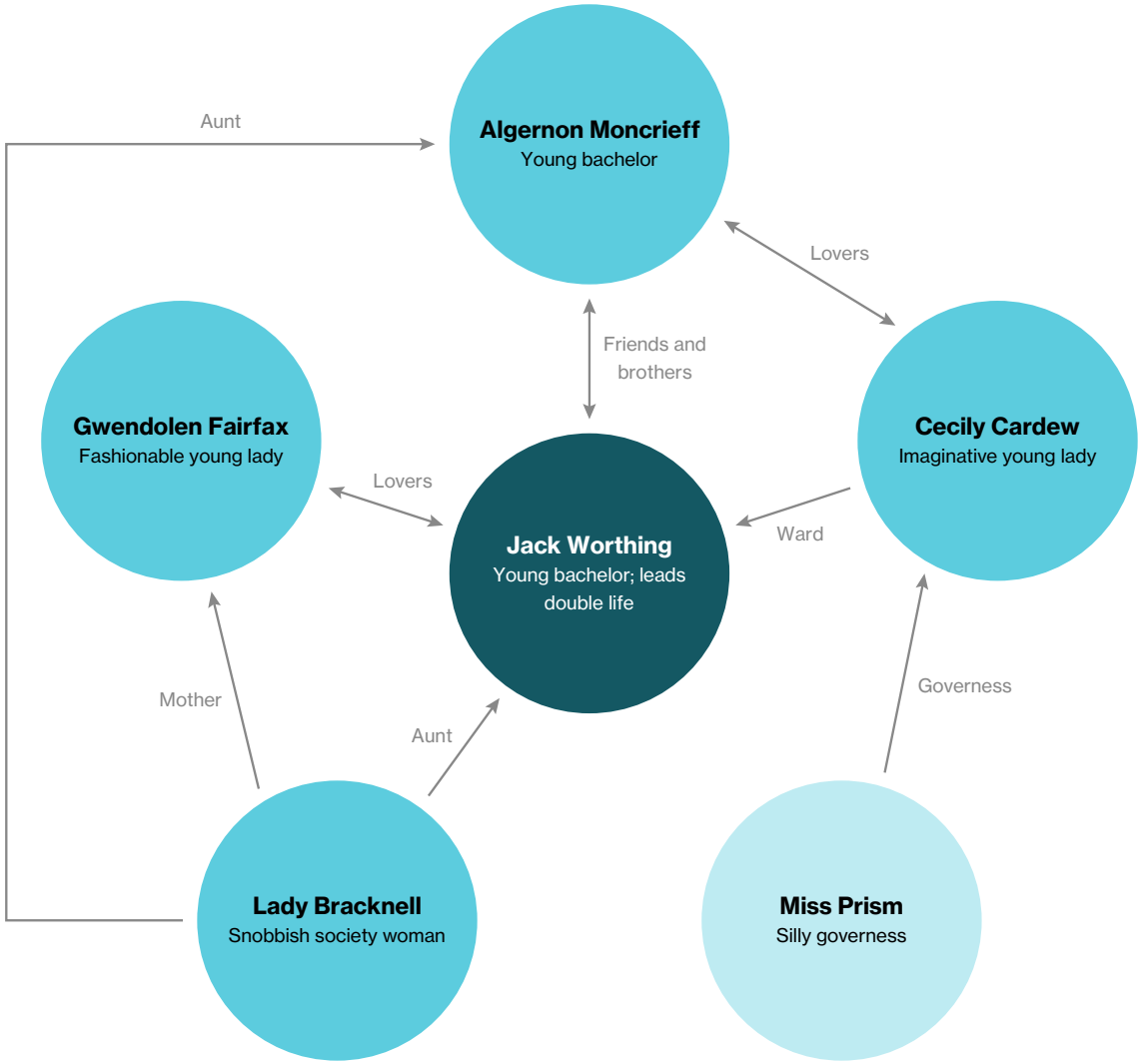
Cecily Cardew

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

Lady Bracknell

Lady Bracknell is the voice of authority and speaks with all the haughty self-righteousness of the conventional Victorian upper-class matron. An expert at social interaction, she is brash, interfering, greedy, and snobbishly conservative. She expects to be served and obeyed, and she is. One of her primary interests is to secure a suitable—in her world, rich and well-connected—husband for her daughter.

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

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

Plot Summary

Act 1

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

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

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

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

Act 2

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

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

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

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

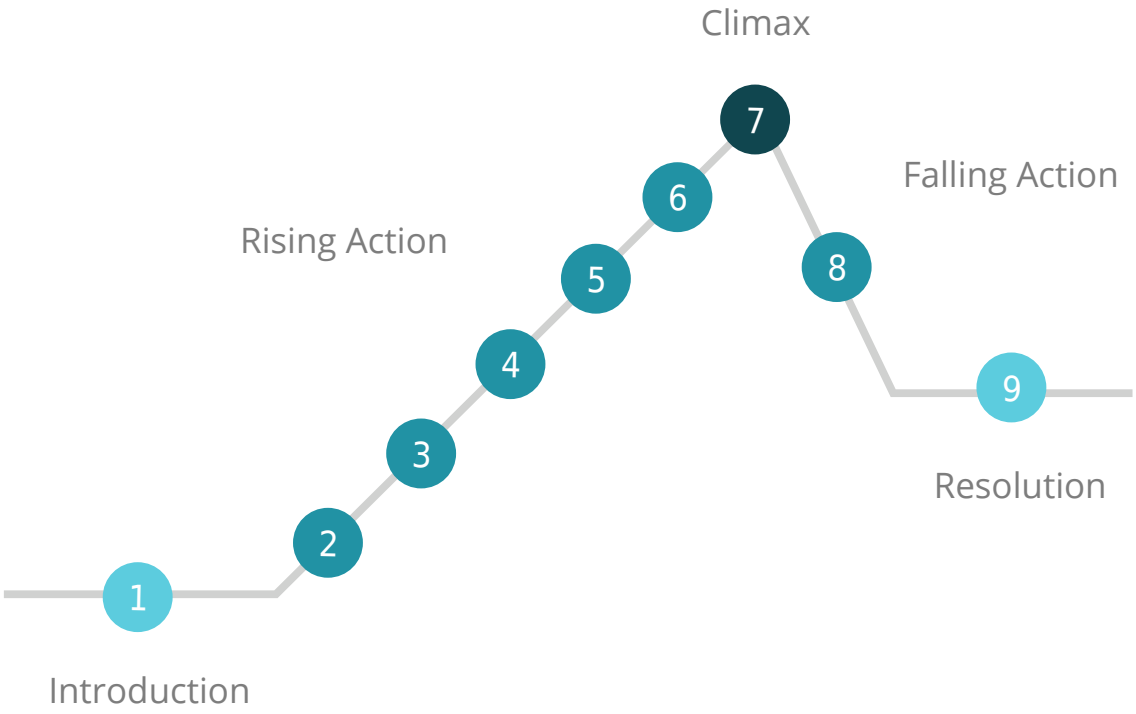
Act 3

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

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

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

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Jack reveals he has two identities.

Rising Action

2. Jack proposes to Gwendolen.

3. Lady Bracknell rejects Jack's proposal.

4. Algernon pretends to be Ernest to court Cecily.

5. Cecily and Gwendolen discover both are engaged to Ernest.

6. The couples reconcile; the men plan to be rechristened.

Climax

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

Falling Action

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

Resolution

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

Timeline of Events

1890s

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

Minutes later

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

One day later

Algernon pretends to be Ernest to court Cecily.

Minutes later

Jack announces his (imaginary) brother Ernest is dead.

Later that day

Algernon proposes to Cecily.

Minutes later

Jack must reconcile with Algernon, pretending to be Ernest.

Minutes later

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

Later that day

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

Minutes later

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

Minutes later

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

Section Summaries

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

Act 1, Section 1

Summary

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

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

Analysis

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

When Algernon claims he keeps "science for Life" rather than applying it to music, he sets up a focused kind of situational irony, where reality contradicts expectation. Though the audience has just been introduced to Algernon, they understand quickly this is not a man who applies science to any aspect of his reality. Instead the discussion of how much champagne has been consumed establishes his world as one of pleasure and extravagance. When Algernon follows by blaming the servants for this excessive consumption, the audience understands his lack of responsibility as well. The wit with which Wilde laces almost every line finishes the evocation of this world: a world of such joyous verbal pleasure that audiences are quite willing to have their expectations inverted and watch silly people do sillier things.

Act 1, Section 2

Summary

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

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

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

Analysis

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

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

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

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

Act 1, Section 3

Summary

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

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

Jack explains the situation to Algernon, telling him that Jack plans to get rid of his imaginary brother Ernest. They talk about what to do that evening, and then Gwendolen returns so she and Jack can plan their next steps. They agree to write regularly, and when Jack gives her his address, Algernon makes note of it. Jack sees Gwendolen to her carriage, leaving Algernon alone. Lane enters, bringing Algernon several envelopes and a sherry. Algernon drinks the sherry, tears up the envelopes without opening them, and informs Lane that he plans to go "Bunburying" the next day.

Analysis

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

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

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

in pursuit of love and marriage.

Act 2, Section 1

Summary

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

Analysis

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

The exchange between Cecily and Miss Prism creates several examples of dramatic irony, in which the audience understands something the characters do not. When Miss Prism discusses her abandoned novel, she says, "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means." The idea that an art form so predictable could influence anyone makes the idea absurd and critiques the shallowness of some Victorian literary conventions. The entire exchange becomes even sillier when Dr. Chasuble arrives and refers to Miss Prism as "Egeria." Egeria is a figure from Roman mythology who supposedly taught the second king of Rome, issuing both wisdom and prophecy. In contrast, Miss Prism is a silly woman, a product of her class and culture, rather than the blend of nature and spirit that defined Egeria.

Act 2, Section 2

Summary

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

Analysis

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

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

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

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

Act 2, Section 3

Summary

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

Analysis

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

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

Act 2, Section 4

Summary

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

Analysis

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

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

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

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

Act 2, Section 5

Summary

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

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

Analysis

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

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

Act 3, Section 1

Summary

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

Analysis

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

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

Act 3, Section 2

Summary

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

Analysis

Thematically this scene reveals an overt critique of social convention. In Victorian England, it would be common and expected for an older, respectable relative to review potential spouses, so Lady Bracknell's decision to evaluate Cecily would have been accepted as quite normal. Similarly, as Cecily's guardian, Jack could speak for Cecily to share facts about her good qualities in a way that her modesty would not allow, thereby protecting her from inappropriate matches in turn. The general form of such an exchange is usual. The specifics are not. Indeed they are the source of humor and insight. When Lady Bracknell switches suddenly from opposing Algernon's marriage to Cecily to embracing it, even hurrying it along, the snobbish matron reveals the tensions reshaping Victorian ideals. She blatantly equates Cecily's wealth with Cecily's character. In Jack's case it would be appropriate for him to block Algernon as a suitor, given Algernon's irresponsible behavior. But while Algernon has acted dishonestly by presenting himself as Ernest, Jack has done the same thing. To make the criticism shallower (and more amusing), Jack appears more upset about Algernon's consumption of muffins and wine than he is about the dishonesty. While in the moment this may seem (and be) hypocrisy on Lady Bracknell's part, this is also an instance in which she embodies the transformations Victorian society underwent as it was swamped by an emerging capitalist reality, a major aspect of Victorian hypocrisy.

Act 3, Section 3

Summary

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

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

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

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

Analysis

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

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

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

The climax of the play comes in two surges. The first occurs when Lady Bracknell interrogates Miss Prism to determine what happened to the missing baby. The second occurs when Jack discovers his identity, first as someone who has a family and then as someone named Ernest. Each of these final peaks incorporates the play's themes in strikingly intertwined fashion. For example, when interrogating Miss Prism about the baby, Lady Bracknell is accusatory, as fits the crime. But she does not particularly welcome Jack when he is revealed as a relative. Her focus is on the crime, not the lost family member. Although she presents herself as the defender of values, Lady Bracknell fails markedly here, thus reversing expectations and taking a swipe at social conventions.

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

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

“” Quotes

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

— Jack Worthing, Act 1, Section 2

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

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

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

"I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. Then the excitement is all over."

— Algernon Moncrieff, Act 1, Section 2

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

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

— Algernon Moncrieff, Act 1, Section 2

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

"I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw ... It is perfectly absurd ... that your name isn't Ernest."

— Algernon Moncrieff, Act 1, Section 2

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

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

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

— Algernon Moncrieff, Act 1, Section 2

Algernon's answer goes beyond simply dismissing Jack's

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

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

— Cecily Cardew, Act 2, Section 1

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

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

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

— Miss Prism, Act 2, Section 1

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

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

— Cecily Cardew, Act 2, Section 4

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

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

— Jack Worthing, Act 2, Section 5

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

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

— Gwendolen Fairfax, Act 3, Section 1

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

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

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

— Lady Bracknell, Act 3, Section 2

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

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

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

— Lady Bracknell, Act 3, Section 2

Lady Bracknell's lines are an excellent example of Wilde's completely exploding social conventions and not being subtle about it. Lady Bracknell is interviewing Jack and Cecily to learn about Cecily's character to determine if she is the sort of person Algernon should marry. Lady Bracknell approves of Cecily, but based on her wealth, not her character.

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

"Prism! Where is that baby?"

— Lady Bracknell, Act 3, Section 3

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

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

— Jack Worthing, Act 3, Section 3

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

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

Symbols

Handbag

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

Bunbury

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

Christening

No one is actually christened in this play. Once the young women indicate how important the name Ernest is to them, however, christening is continually referenced, and it carries considerable symbolic weight (even if it is comic in the moment). The rite is important in Christianity. As children are named and baptized they are welcomed as members of the Christian community. In this play christening is part of the satire of social conventions. Algernon and Jack both plan to have themselves christened to rename themselves. Adult christenings do occur, but these are generally part of religious conversions. Jack's and Algernon's desire to be renamed has nothing to do with joining a religious community but with joining the social community of marriage. Both men want to change their names to please the women in their lives. Because Dr. Chasuble is willing to go along with this endeavor, the play mocks the practice of religious ritual by drawing parallels with social rituals.

Themes

Social Conventions

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

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

Love

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

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

Language

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

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

Wilde uses a range of linguistic techniques to create humor. For example, when Gwendolen first appears, she says, "Oh! I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions," which suggests a double entendre about her physical development or sexual activity.

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

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

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

Reversal

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

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

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

Suggested Reading

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