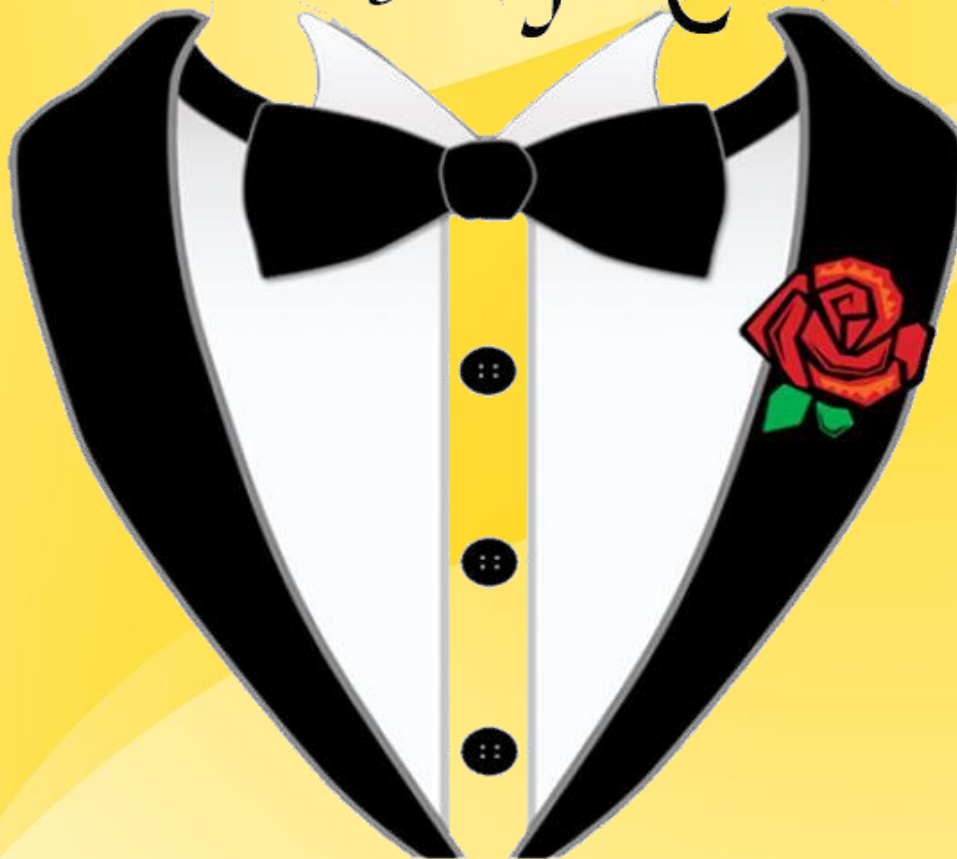


The Importance of being Earnest



Summary

- A «Fien de Siècle» Work
- Performance
- Jack Worthing
- Algernon Moncrieff
- Gwendolen Fairfax
- Cecily Cardew
- Lady Bracknell
- Miss Prism
- Plot
- Lady Bracknell's interview
- Themes
- Symbols



A «Fien de Siècle» Work

- *The Importance of Being Earnest* is an artistic testament to the values of the aesthetic movement.
- First performed at the St. James' Theatre in London on February 14th, 1895.
- This era, the end of the Nineteenth Century, is typically described as *fin de siècle*
- The phrase was applied to a wide range of trivial behaviour, which were meant to be perverse ,paradoxical or shocking"
- This manner was adopted by many aesthetes

WHY?

To **disrupt**, **counteract**, the strict morality that characterized the Victorian Age.

The aesthetes, and many others, sought an **alternative lifestyle**, or one that was not subjected to the **Victorian** perception of **morality**.



Performance

- Performance is a central theme in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
- Both Wilde's main characters, Jack and Algernon, lead **double lives**,

HENCE,

they are each pretending to be someone they are not, or performing.



Jack Worthing

- Jack Worthing is a **seemingly responsible** and **respectable** young man who leads a double life.
- In Hertfordshire, where he has a country estate, **Jack** is known as Jack. In London he is known as **Ernest**.
- Jack is in love with his friend **Algernon's** cousin, **Gwendolen Fairfax**.
- The initials after his name indicate that he is a Justice of the Peace.



Algernon Moncrieff

- Algernon is a charming, idle, decorative bachelor
- Nephew of Lady Bracknell, cousin of Gwendolen Fairfax, and best friend of Jack Worthing, whom **he has known for years as Ernest.**
- Algernon is brilliant, witty, selfish, amoral.
- He has invented a fictional friend, "Bunbury," an invalid whose frequent sudden relapses allow Algernon to wriggle out social obligations.



TOWN

COUNTRY

*Invents
Bunbury*

ALGERNON

JACK

*Invents
Earnest*

COUSIN

*loves
Pretends to be
Earnest in the country*

*loves
Pretends to be
Earnest in town*

WARD

LADY BRACKNELL

WATCHES OVER

MISS PRISM

WATCHES OVER

GWENDOLEN

CECILY



Gwendolen Fairfax

- Algernon's cousin and Lady Bracknell's daughter.
- Gwendolen is **in love with Jack**, whom she knows as **Ernest**.
- She is **sophisticated, intellectual, cosmopolitan**, and utterly **pretentious**.
- Gwendolen is **obsessed** with the **name Ernest**.
- She says she will not marry a man without that name.



Cecily Cardew

- Jack's ward.
- The granddaughter of the old gentlemen who found and adopted Jack when Jack was a baby.
- Like Gwendolen, she is **obsessed** with the **name Ernest**
- More intrigued by the idea of his **wickedness**.
- This idea has prompted her to fall in love with Jack's brother Ernest (in her imagination) before meeting him.



Lady Bracknell

- Algernon's **snobbish, mercenary, and domineering aunt** and Gwendolen's mother.
- She is **cunning, narrow-minded, authoritarian**.
- She want her daughter to marry well has prepared a list of "eligible young men" on this purpose
- Through the figure of Lady Bracknell, Wilde manages to **satirize** the **hypocrisy** and **stupidity** of the **British aristocracy**.



Miss Prism

- **Cecily's governess.**
- She is pedantic and severe.
- She highly approves of Jack's presumed respectability and harshly criticizes his "unfortunate" brother.
- Despite her **rigidity**, Miss Prism seems to have a **softer side**.
- She speaks of having once written a novel whose manuscript was "lost" or "abandoned."
- She entertains romantic feelings for Dr. Chasuble.



Plot

- 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.
- Surprisingly, Lane announces the arrival of Algernon's friend Mr. Ernest Worthing (Jack).
- Jack discloses to Algernon that he has returned to town to propose to Gwendolen



Earnest

- Upon hearing this news Algernon confronts Jack about a woman named Cecily.
- Jack initially denies the existence of this woman.
- Algernon produces a cigarette case on which there is inscribed. *"From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack."*
- Jack confesses he has been leading a double life.
- Cecily is actually his ward.
- "Jack" is the name he goes by in the country,
- "Earnest" is his alias in the city.
- Earnest is also his fictional brother, whose scandalous lifestyle frequently calls Jack back to the city.
- Jack uses "Ernest" as an excuse to escape his responsibilities in the country and pursue a life of pleasure in the city.





Bunbury

- Algernon calls his friend is a "Bunburyist," that is , a person who uses deception to shirk his duties.
- Algernon coined the term after his fictional, invalid friend, "Bunbury," whose poor health frequently calls him to his so-called friend's bedside.
- Bunbury provides him with the excuse to escape his responsibilities in the country and pursue a life of pleasure in the city





The Proposal

- Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive at Algernon's flat.
- Algernon distracts Lady Bracknell, while Jack proposes to Gwendolen.
- She accepts as she has always been enamoured of the name "Ernest;"
- She makes it clear that she could never marry a man of any other name.
- This alarms Jack, when Lady Bracknell bursts onto the scene, interrupting his proposal.....





Act 1

- *Jack (Ernest) Worthing meets Lady Bracknell for an interview during which he will have to prove worthy of her daughter's hand, Gwendolen Fairfax – a girl of London's upper class to whom he has proposed –, Lady Bracknell is seated with a pencil and notebook on hand ready to ask Jack questions for this test.*
- **LADY BRACKNELL** : I feel bound to tell you that you are not on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?
- **JACK**: Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.
- **LADY BRACKNELL**: I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you?
- **JACK**: Twenty-nine.
- **LADY BRACKNELL**: A very good age to be married at. I have always been of the opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?
- **JACK**: *(after some hesitation)* I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.
- **LADY BRACKNELL**: I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. [...] What is your income?
- **JACK**: Between seven and eight thousand a year.



- **LADY BRACKNELL:** (*makes a note in her book*) In land or investments?
- **JACK:** In investments, chiefly.
- **LADY BRACKNELL:** that is satisfactory. [...]
- **JACK:** I have a country house with some land, of course, attached to it, about fifteen hundred acres, I believe; but I don't depend on that for my real income. In fact, as far as I can make out, the poachers are the only people who make anything out of it.
- **LADY BRACKNELL:** A country house! How many bedrooms? Well, that point can be cleared up afterwards. You have a town house, I hope? A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.
- **JACK:** Well, I own a house in Belgrave Square, but it is let by the year to lady Bloxham. Of course, I can get it back whenever I like, at six months' notice.
- **LADY BROCKNELL:** Lady Bloxham? I don't know her.
- **JACK:** Oh, she goes about very little. She is a lady considerably advanced in years.
- **LADY BROCKNELL:** Ah, nowadays that is no guarantee of respectability of character. What number in Belgrave Square?
- **JACK:** 149.
- **LADY BRACKNELL:** (*shaking her head*) The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However, that could easily be altered. [...] Are your parents living?



- **JACK:** I have lost both my parents.
- **LADY BRACKNELL:** Both? ...**To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune... to lose both seems like carelessness.** Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?
- **JACK:** I am afraid i really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seemed to have lost me. ...I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was ... well, I was found.
- **LADY BRACKNELL:** Found!
- **JACK:** The late Mr Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort.
- **LADY BRACKNELL:** Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this seaside resort find you?
- **JACK:** (*gravely*) In a hand-bag.
- **LADY BRACKNELL:** A hand-bag?
- **JACK:** (*very seriously*) Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a hand-bag – a somewhat large, black leather hand-bag, with handles to it – an ordinary hand-bag in fact. [...]
- **LADY BRACKNELL:** I would strongly advise you, Mr Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over.....



Earnest 1 the Pretender

- Having learnt that Jack has no parents and was adopted by Mr. Thomas Cardew, Lady Bracknell forbids the marriage.
- Algernon plans to visit Jack as he is intrigued by Cecily.
- Act II begins at Jack's country estate in Hertfordshire.
- While Cecily is alone, the arrival of Mr. Earnest Worthing is announced.
- 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, pretending his brother "Ernest" has just died.
- When Jack learns that Algernon is at the estate as "Ernest," he is infuriated, but must keep up appearances so that his own lies 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.
- Cecily declares to love him because his name is Earnest.





Earnest 2 the Pretender

- While Algernon rushes off to find Dr. Chausible, Gwendolen pays 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.
- Jack and Algernon arrive separately, each having gone to see Dr. Chausible about being christened "Ernest."
- The two women realize that Jack and Algernon have deceived them.





Time for Forgiveness

- In Act III Cecily and Gwendolen forgive Jack and Algernon when the two men reveal that they are to be christened "Ernest" that afternoon.
- Lady Bracknell breaks in and reiterates her disapproval of Jack and also objects to Cecily, until Jack reveals that Cecily is the heiress to a great fortune.
- Interest piqued, Lady Bracknell advocates for Algernon's engagement, but Jack, as Cecily's ward, will not consent to the match until Lady Bracknell approves of his engagement to Gwendolen.
- Lady Bracknell refuses



Earnest, at last!

- Miss Prism arrives and Lady Bracknell accuses her of losing her sister's infant son twenty-eight years before.
- Miss Prism confesses, explaining that she misplaced the boy in a handbag in a coatroom at Victoria station
- Jack figures out that he was that abandoned child and presents the handbag as proof.
- Thus Jack learns he is Algernon's elder brother and having being named after his father, who had been a general, checks the Army List to find that the old man's name was "Mr. Ernest John Moncrief."
- Jack's real name is indeed Ernest.
- *«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. Can you forgive me?»*

The End



Themes

- **The Nature of Marriage**

Each character's response reflects the conventional preoccupations of Victorian respectability—social position, income, and character.

- **The Constraints of Morality**

- **Hypocrisy vs. Inventiveness (DECEPTION)**

- **The Importance of Not Being "Earnest"**

Earnestness can take many forms, including boringness, solemnity, pomposity, complacency, self-righteousness, and sense of duty, all of which Wilde saw as hallmarks of the Victorian character.



Symbols



- **1. The Double Life:** the notion of “**Bunbury**” or “**Bunburying**.”

As defined by Algernon, **Bunburying** is the practice of creating an elaborate deception that allows one to misbehave while seeming to uphold the very highest standards of duty and responsibility.

- **2. Food:** Food and gluttony suggest and substitute for other appetites and indulgences.
- **3. Fiction & Writing:** Life as an art form, i.e., diary.



