

Notes on The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde

Context

Oscar Wilde, celebrated playwright and literary provocateur, was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford before settling in London. During his days at Dublin and Oxford, he developed a set of attitudes and postures for which he would eventually become famous. Chief among these were his flamboyant style of dress, his contempt for conventional values, and his belief in aestheticism—a movement that embraced the principle of art for the sake of beauty and beauty alone. After a stunning performance in college, Wilde settled in London in 1878, where he moved in circles that included Lillie Langtry, the novelists Henry James and George Moore, and the young William Butler Yeats.

Literary and artistic acclaim were slow in coming to Wilde. In 1884, when he married Constance Lloyd, Wilde's writing career was still a work in progress. He had gone on a lecture tour of North America and been lampooned in the 1881 Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Patience* as the self-consciously idiosyncratic philosopher-poet Reginald Bunthorne, but he was celebrated chiefly as a well-known personality and a wit. He may have been the first person ever to become famous for being famous.

During the late 1880s, Wilde wrote reviews, edited a women's magazine, and published a volume of poetry and one of children's stories. In 1891, his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, appeared and was attacked as scandalous and immoral. In that same year, he met Lord Alfred Douglas, who would eventually become his lover, and Wilde finally hit his literary stride. Over the next few years, he wrote four plays: *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Lady Windermere's Fan and *A Woman of No Importance* enjoyed successful runs in the West End in 1892 and 1893, respectively. *An Ideal Husband* opened in January 1895, but it was *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which opened a month later, that is regarded by many as Oscar Wilde's masterpiece. Its first performance at the St. James's Theater on February 14, 1895 came at the height of Wilde's success as a popular dramatist. Wilde was finally the darling of London society, a position he had striven for years to attain.

In many ways, *The Importance of Being Earnest* was an artistic breakthrough for Wilde, something between self-parody and a deceptively flippant commentary on the dramatic genre in which Wilde had already had so much success. Wilde's genre of choice was the Victorian melodrama, or "sentimental comedy," derived from the French variety of "well-made play" popularized by Scribe and Sardou. In such plays, fallen women and abandoned children of uncertain parentage figure prominently, letters cross and recross the stage, and dark secrets from the past rise to threaten the happiness of seemingly respectable, well-meaning characters. In Wilde's hands, the form of Victorian melodrama became something else entirely. Wilde introduced a new character to the genre, the figure of the "dandy" (a man who pays excessive attention to his appearance). This figure added a moral texture the form had never before possessed.

The character of the dandy was heavily autobiographical and often a stand-in for Wilde himself, a witty, overdressed, self-styled philosopher who speaks in epigrams and paradoxes, ridicules the cant and hypocrisy of society's moral arbiters, and self-deprecatingly presents himself as trivial, shallow, and ineffectual. In fact, the dandy in these plays always proves to be deeply moral and essential to the happy resolution of the plot.

The Importance of Being Earnest was an early experiment in Victorian melodrama. Part satire, part comedy of manners, and part intellectual farce, this play seems to have nothing at stake because the world it presents is so blatantly and ostentatiously artificial. Below the surface of the light, brittle comedy, however, is a serious subtext that takes aim at self-righteous moralism and hypocrisy, the very aspects of Victorian society that would, in part, bring about Wilde's downfall.

During 1895, however, a series of catastrophes stemming from Wilde's relationship with Lord Alfred, also a poet, led to personal humiliation and social, professional, and financial ruin. On February 28, 1895, two weeks after *The Importance of Being Earnest's* opening night, Lord Alfred's belligerent, homophobic father, the Marquess of Queensberry, publicly accused Wilde of "posing as a sodomite." The nobleman meant "sodomite," of course, an insulting and potentially defamatory term for a homosexual. Queensberry had for some time been harassing Wilde with insulting letters, notes, and confrontations and had hoped to disrupt the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest* with a public demonstration, which never took place. Against the advice of his friends, Wilde sued for libel and lost. Wilde probably should have fled the country, as the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had made homosexual acts punishable by up to two years' imprisonment. However, Wilde chose to stay and was arrested. Despite information about Wilde's private life and writings that emerged at the trial, the prosecution initially proved unsuccessful. However, Wilde was tried a second time, convicted, and sentenced to prison for two years.

Wilde may have remained in England for a number of reasons, including self-destructiveness, denial, desperation, and a desire for martyrdom. However, some historians have suggested that Wilde's relentless persecution by the government was a diversionary tactic. Lord Alfred's older brother was reportedly also having a homosexual affair with Archibald Philip Primrose, Lord Rosebery, the man who would become prime minister. Queensberry was apparently so outraged that he threatened to disclose the relationship, and the government reacted by punishing Wilde and his lover in an effort to assuage the marquess. In any case, Wilde served his full sentence under conditions of utmost hardship and cruelty. Following his release from prison, his health and spirit broken, he sought exile in France, where he lived out the last two years of his life in poverty and obscurity under an assumed name. He died in Paris in 1900.

For sixty or seventy years after Wilde's death, critics and audiences regarded *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a delightful but utterly frivolous and superficial comedy, a view that partly reflects the mindset of a period in which homosexuality remained a guarded topic. The decriminalization of homosexuality in England in 1967 and the

emergence in American of an interest in gay culture, and particularly in the covert homosexual literature of the past, has made it possible to view the play in a different light. The play's danger and subversion are easier to see from a twenty-first-century perspective. In the ambiguity over exactly what people refer to when they speak of "wicked" or immoral behavior, we can detect a system of coded references to homosexuality, just as we can infer a more general comment on the hypocrisy of late Victorian society.

Plot Overview

[Jack Worthing](#), the play's protagonist, is a pillar of the community in Hertfordshire, where he is guardian to [Cecily Cardew](#), the pretty, eighteen-year-old granddaughter of the late Thomas Cardew, who found and adopted Jack when he was a baby. In Hertfordshire, Jack has responsibilities: he is a major landowner and justice of the peace, with tenants, farmers, and a number of servants and other employees all dependent on him. For years, he has also pretended to have an irresponsible black-sheep brother named Ernest who leads a scandalous life in pursuit of pleasure and is always getting into trouble of a sort that requires Jack to rush grimly off to his assistance. In fact, Ernest is merely Jack's alibi, a phantom that allows him to disappear for days at a time and do as he likes. No one but Jack knows that he himself is Ernest. Ernest is the name Jack goes by in London, which is where he really goes on these occasions—probably to pursue the very sort of behavior he pretends to disapprove of in his imaginary brother.

Jack is in love with [Gwendolen Fairfax](#), the cousin of his best friend, [Algernon Moncrieff](#). When the play opens, Algernon, who knows Jack as Ernest, has begun to suspect something, having found an inscription inside Jack's cigarette case addressed to "Uncle Jack" from someone who refers to herself as "little Cecily." Algernon suspects that Jack may be leading a double life, a practice he seems to regard as commonplace and indispensable to modern life. He calls a person who leads a double life a "Bunburyist," after a nonexistent friend he pretends to have, a chronic invalid named Bunbury, to whose deathbed he is forever being summoned whenever he wants to get out of some tiresome social obligation.

At the beginning of Act I, Jack drops in unexpectedly on Algernon and announces that he intends to propose to Gwendolen. Algernon confronts him with the cigarette case and forces him to come clean, demanding to know who "Jack" and "Cecily" are. Jack confesses that his name isn't really Ernest and that Cecily is his ward, a responsibility imposed on him by his adoptive father's will. Jack also tells Algernon about his fictional brother. Jack says he's been thinking of killing off this fake brother, since Cecily has been showing too active an interest in him. Without meaning to, Jack describes Cecily in terms that catch Algernon's attention and make him even more interested in her than he is already.

Gwendolen and her mother, Lady Bracknell, arrive, which gives Jack an opportunity to propose to Gwendolen. Jack is delighted to discover that Gwendolen returns his affections, but he is alarmed to learn that Gwendolen is fixated on the name Ernest,

which she says “inspires absolute confidence.” Gwendolen makes clear that she would not consider marrying a man who was *not* named Ernest.

Lady Bracknell interviews Jack to determine his eligibility as a possible son-in-law, and during this interview she asks about his family background. When Jack explains that he has no idea who his parents were and that he was found, by the man who adopted him, in a handbag in the cloakroom at Victoria Station, Lady Bracknell is scandalized. She forbids the match between Jack and Gwendolen and sweeps out of the house.

In Act II, Algernon shows up at Jack’s country estate posing as Jack’s brother Ernest. Meanwhile, Jack, having decided that Ernest has outlived his usefulness, arrives home in deep mourning, full of a story about Ernest having died suddenly in Paris. He is enraged to find Algernon there masquerading as Ernest but has to go along with the charade. If he doesn’t, his own lies and deceptions will be revealed.

While Jack changes out of his mourning clothes, Algernon, who has fallen hopelessly in love with Cecily, asks her to marry him. He is surprised to discover that Cecily already considers that they are engaged, and he is charmed when she reveals that her fascination with “Uncle Jack’s brother” led her to invent an elaborate romance between herself and him several months ago. Algernon is less enchanted to learn that part of Cecily’s interest in him derives from the name Ernest, which, unconsciously echoing Gwendolen, she says “inspires absolute confidence.”

Algernon goes off in search of Dr. Chasuble, the local rector, to see about getting himself christened Ernest. Meanwhile, Gwendolen arrives, having decided to pay Jack an unexpected visit. Gwendolen is shown into the garden, where Cecily orders tea and attempts to play hostess. Cecily has no idea how Gwendolen figures into Jack’s life, and Gwendolen, for her part, has no idea who Cecily is. Gwendolen initially thinks Cecily is a visitor to the Manor House and is disconcerted to learn that Cecily is “Mr. Worthing’s ward.” She notes that Ernest has never mentioned having a ward, and Cecily explains that it is not *Ernest* Worthing who is her guardian but his brother Jack and, in fact, that she is engaged to be married to Ernest Worthing. Gwendolen points out that this is impossible as she herself is engaged to Ernest Worthing. The tea party degenerates into a war of manners.

Jack and Algernon arrive toward the climax of this confrontation, each having separately made arrangements with Dr. Chasuble to be christened Ernest later that day. Each of the young ladies points out that the other has been deceived: Cecily informs Gwendolen that her fiancé is really named Jack and Gwendolen informs Cecily that hers is really called Algernon. The two women demand to know where Jack’s brother Ernest is, since both of them are engaged to be married to him. Jack is forced to admit that he has no brother and that Ernest is a complete fiction. Both women are shocked and furious, and they retire to the house arm in arm.

Act III takes place in the drawing room of the Manor House, where Cecily and Gwendolen have retired. When Jack and Algernon enter from the garden, the two

women confront them. Cecily asks Algernon why he pretended to be her guardian's brother. Algernon tells her he did it in order to meet her. Gwendolen asks Jack whether he pretended to have a brother in order to come into London to see her as often as possible, and she interprets his evasive reply as an affirmation. The women are somewhat appeased but still concerned over the issue of the name. However, when Jack and Algernon tell Gwendolen and Cecily that they have both made arrangements to be christened Ernest that afternoon, all is forgiven and the two pairs of lovers embrace. At this moment, Lady Bracknell's arrival is announced.

Lady Bracknell has followed Gwendolen from London, having bribed Gwendolen's maid to reveal her destination. She demands to know what is going on. Gwendolen again informs Lady Bracknell of her engagement to Jack, and Lady Bracknell reiterates that a union between them is out of the question. Algernon tells Lady Bracknell of his engagement to Cecily, prompting her to inspect Cecily and inquire into her social connections, which she does in a routine and patronizing manner that infuriates Jack. He replies to all her questions with a mixture of civility and sarcasm, withholding until the last possible moment the information that Cecily is actually worth a great deal of money and stands to inherit still more when she comes of age. At this, Lady Bracknell becomes genuinely interested.

Jack informs Lady Bracknell that, as Cecily's legal guardian, he refuses to give his consent to her union with Algernon. Lady Bracknell suggests that the two young people simply wait until Cecily comes of age, and Jack points out that under the terms of her grandfather's will, Cecily does not legally come of age until she is thirty-five. Lady Bracknell asks Jack to reconsider, and he points out that the matter is entirely in her own hands. As soon as she consents to his marriage to Gwendolen, Cecily can have his consent to marry Algernon. However, Lady Bracknell refuses to entertain the notion. She and Gwendolen are on the point of leaving when Dr. Chasuble arrives and happens to mention Cecily's governess, Miss Prism. At this, Lady Bracknell starts and asks that Miss Prism be sent for.

When the governess arrives and catches sight of Lady Bracknell, she begins to look guilty and furtive. Lady Bracknell accuses her of having left her sister's house twenty-eight years before with a baby and never returned. She demands to know where the baby is. Miss Prism confesses she doesn't know, explaining that she lost the baby, having absentmindedly placed it in a handbag in which she had meant to place the manuscript for a novel she had written. Jack asks what happened to the bag, and Miss Prism says she left it in the cloakroom of a railway station. Jack presses her for further details and goes racing offstage, returning a few moments later with a large handbag. When Miss Prism confirms that the bag is hers, Jack throws himself on her with a cry of "Mother!" It takes a while before the situation is sorted out, but before too long we understand that Jack is not the illegitimate child of Miss Prism but the legitimate child of Lady Bracknell's sister and, therefore, Algernon's older brother. Furthermore, Jack had been originally christened "Ernest John." All these years Jack has unwittingly been telling the truth: Ernest *is* his name, as is Jack, and he does have an unprincipled younger brother—Algernon. Again the couples embrace, Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble

follow suit, and Jack acknowledges that he now understands “the vital Importance of Being Earnest.”

Character List

John (Jack/Ernest) Worthing, J.P. - The play’s protagonist. 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. As a baby, Jack was discovered in a handbag in the cloakroom of Victoria Station by an old man who adopted him and subsequently made Jack guardian to his granddaughter, Cecily Cardew. 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 - The play’s secondary hero. 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, and given to making delightful paradoxical and epigrammatic pronouncements. He has invented a fictional friend, “Bunbury,” an invalid whose frequent sudden relapses allow Algernon to wriggle out of unpleasant or dull social obligations.

Gwendolen Fairfax - Algernon’s cousin and Lady Bracknell’s daughter. Gwendolen is in love with Jack, whom she knows as Ernest. A model and arbiter of high fashion and society, Gwendolen speaks with unassailable authority on matters of taste and morality. She is sophisticated, intellectual, cosmopolitan, and utterly pretentious. Gwendolen is fixated on the name Ernest and 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. Cecily is probably the most realistically drawn character in the play. Like Gwendolen, she is obsessed with the name Ernest, but she is even more intrigued by the idea of wickedness. This idea, rather than the virtuous-sounding name, has prompted her to fall in love with Jack’s brother Ernest in her imagination and to invent an elaborate romance and courtship between them.

Lady Bracknell - Algernon’s snobbish, mercenary, and domineering aunt and Gwendolen’s mother. Lady Bracknell married well, and her primary goal in life is to see her daughter do the same. She has a list of “eligible young men” and a prepared interview she gives to potential suitors. Like her nephew, Lady Bracknell is given to making hilarious pronouncements, but where Algernon means to be witty, the humor in Lady Bracknell’s speeches is unintentional. Through the figure of Lady Bracknell, Wilde manages to satirize the hypocrisy and stupidity of the British aristocracy. Lady Bracknell values ignorance, which she sees as “a delicate exotic fruit.” When she gives a dinner party, she prefers her husband to eat downstairs with the servants. She is cunning, narrow-minded, authoritarian, and possibly the most quotable character in the play.

Miss Prism - Cecily’s governess. Miss Prism is an endless source of pedantic bromides and clichés. She highly approves of Jack’s presumed respectability and

harshly criticizes his “unfortunate” brother. Puritan though she is, Miss Prism’s severe pronouncements have a way of going so far over the top that they inspire laughter. 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.” Also, she entertains romantic feelings for Dr. Chasuble.

Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D. - The rector on Jack’s estate. Both Jack and Algernon approach Dr. Chasuble to request that they be christened “Ernest.” Dr. Chasuble entertains secret romantic feelings for Miss Prism. The initials after his name stand for “Doctor of Divinity.”

Lane - Algernon’s manservant. When the play opens, Lane is the only person who knows about Algernon’s practice of “Bunburying.” Lane appears only in Act I.

Merriman - The butler at the Manor House, Jack’s estate in the country. Merriman appears only in Acts II and III.

Jack Worthing

Jack Worthing, the play’s protagonist, was discovered as an infant by the late Mr. Thomas Cardew in a handbag in the cloakroom of a railway station in London. Jack has grown up to be a seemingly responsible and respectable young man, a major landowner and Justice of the Peace in Hertfordshire, where he has a country estate. In Hertfordshire, where he is known by what he imagines to be his real name, Jack, he is a pillar of the community. He is guardian to Mr. Cardew’s granddaughter, **Cecily**, and has other duties and people who depend on him, including servants, tenants, farmers, and the local clergyman. For years, he has also pretended to have an irresponsible younger brother named Ernest, whom he is always having to bail out of some mischief. In fact, he himself is the reprobate brother Ernest. Ernest is the name Jack goes by in London, where he really goes on these occasions. The fictional brother is Jack’s alibi, his excuse for disappearing from Hertfordshire and going off to London to escape his responsibilities and indulge in exactly the sort of behavior he pretends to disapprove of in his brother.

More than any other character in the play, Jack Worthing represents conventional Victorian values: he wants others to think he adheres to such notions as duty, honor, and respectability, but he hypocritically flouts those very notions. Indeed, what Wilde was actually satirizing through Jack was the general tolerance for hypocrisy in conventional Victorian morality. Jack uses his alter-ego Ernest to keep his honorable image intact. Ernest enables Jack to escape the boundaries of his real life and act as he wouldn’t dare to under his real identity. Ernest provides a convenient excuse and disguise for Jack, and Jack feels no qualms about invoking Ernest whenever necessary. Jack wants to be seen as upright and moral, but he doesn’t care what lies he has to tell his loved ones in order to be able to misbehave. Though Ernest has always been Jack’s unsavory alter ego, as the play progresses Jack must aspire to become Ernest, in name if not behavior. Until he seeks to marry **Gwendolen**, Jack has used Ernest as an escape from real life, but Gwendolen’s fixation on the name Ernest obligates Jack to embrace

his deception in order to pursue the real life he desires. Jack has always managed to get what he wants by using Ernest as his fallback, and his lie eventually threatens to undo him. Though Jack never really gets his comeuppance, he must scramble to reconcile his two worlds in order to get what he ultimately desires and to fully understand who he is.

Algernon Moncrieff

Algernon, the play's secondary hero, is closer to the figure of the dandy than any other character in the play. A charming, idle, decorative bachelor, Algernon is brilliant, witty, selfish, amoral, and given to making delightful paradoxical and epigrammatic pronouncements that either make no sense at all or touch on something profound. Like [Jack](#), Algernon has invented a fictional character, a chronic invalid named Bunbury, to give him a reprieve from his real life. Algernon is constantly being summoned to Bunbury's deathbed, which conveniently draws him away from tiresome or distasteful social obligations. Like Jack's fictional brother Ernest, Bunbury provides Algernon with a way of indulging himself while also suggesting great seriousness and sense of duty. However, a salient difference exists between Jack and Algernon. Jack does not admit to being a "Bunburyist," even after he's been called on it, while Algernon not only acknowledges his wrongdoing but also revels in it. Algernon's delight in his own cleverness and ingenuity has little to do with a contempt for others. Rather, his personal philosophy puts a higher value on artistry and genius than on almost anything else, and he regards living as a kind of art form and life as a work of art—something one creates oneself.

Algernon is a proponent of aestheticism and a stand-in for Wilde himself, as are all Wilde's dandified characters, including Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband*, Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance*, and Lord Henry Wootton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Unlike these other characters, however, Algernon is completely amoral. Where Lord Illingworth and Lord Henry are downright evil, and Lord Goring and Lord Darlington are deeply good, Algernon has no moral convictions at all, recognizing no duty other than the responsibility to live beautifully.

Gwendolen Fairfax

More than any other female character in the play, Gwendolen suggests the qualities of conventional Victorian womanhood. She has ideas and ideals, attends lectures, and is bent on self-improvement. She is also artificial and pretentious. Gwendolen is in love with [Jack](#), whom she knows as Ernest, and she is fixated on this name. This preoccupation serves as a metaphor for the preoccupation of the Victorian middle- and upper-middle classes with the appearance of virtue and honor. Gwendolen is so caught up in finding a husband named Ernest, whose name, she says, "inspires absolute confidence," that she can't even see that the man calling himself Ernest is fooling her with an extensive deception. In this way, her own image consciousness blurs her judgment.

Though more self-consciously intellectual than Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen is cut from very much the same cloth as her mother. She is similarly strong-minded and speaks with unassailable authority on matters of taste and morality, just as Lady Bracknell does. She is both a model and an arbiter of elegant fashion and sophistication, and nearly everything she says and does is calculated for effect. As Jack fears, Gwendolen does indeed show signs of becoming her mother “in about a hundred and fifty years,” but she is likeable, as is Lady Bracknell, because her pronouncements are so outrageous.

Cecily Cardew

If [Gwendolen](#) is a product of London high society, Cecily is its antithesis. She is a child of nature, as ingenuous and unspoiled as a pink rose, to which [Algernon](#) compares her in Act II. However, her ingenuity is belied by her fascination with wickedness. She is obsessed with the name Ernest just as Gwendolen is, but wickedness is primarily what leads her to fall in love with “Uncle [Jack](#)’s brother,” whose reputation is wayward enough to intrigue her. Like Algernon and Jack, she is a fantasist. She has invented her romance with Ernest and elaborated it with as much artistry and enthusiasm as the men have their spurious obligations and secret identities. Though she does not have an alter-ego as vivid or developed as Bunbury or Ernest, her claim that she and Algernon/Ernest are already engaged is rooted in the fantasy world she’s created around Ernest. Cecily is probably the most realistically drawn character in the play, and she is the only character who does not speak in epigrams. Her charm lies in her idiosyncratic cast of mind and her imaginative capacity, qualities that derive from Wilde’s notion of life as a work of art. These elements of her personality make her a perfect mate for Algernon.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

THE NATURE OF MARRIAGE

Marriage is of paramount importance in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, both as a primary force motivating the plot and as a subject for philosophical speculation and debate. The question of the nature of marriage appears for the first time in the opening dialogue between [Algernon](#) and his butler, Lane, and from this point on the subject never disappears for very long. Algernon and [Jack](#) discuss the nature of marriage when they dispute briefly about whether a marriage proposal is a matter of “business” or “pleasure,” and Lady Bracknell touches on the issue when she states, “An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be.” Even Lady Bracknell’s list of bachelors and the prepared interview to which she subjects Jack are based on a set of assumptions about the nature and purpose of marriage. In general, these assumptions reflect the conventional preoccupations of Victorian respectability—social position, income, and character.

The play is actually an ongoing debate about the nature of marriage and whether it is “pleasant or unpleasant.” Lane remarks casually that he believes it to be “a very pleasant state,” before admitting that his own marriage, now presumably ended, was the result of “a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.” Algernon regards Lane’s views on marriage as “somewhat lax.” His own views are relentlessly

cynical until he meets and falls in love with [Cecily](#). Jack, by contrast, speaks in the voice of the true romantic. He tells Algernon, however, that the truth “isn’t quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl.” At the end of the play, Jack apologizes to [Gwendolen](#) when he realizes he had been telling the truth all his life. She forgives him, she says, on the grounds that she thinks he’s sure to change, which suggests Gwendolen’s own rather cynical view of the nature of men and marriage.

THE CONSTRAINTS OF MORALITY

Morality and the constraints it imposes on society is a favorite topic of conversation in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Algernon thinks the servant class has a responsibility to set a moral standard for the upper classes. Jack thinks reading a private cigarette case is “ungentlemanly.” “More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read,” Algernon points out. These restrictions and assumptions suggest a strict code of morals that exists in Victorian society, but Wilde isn’t concerned with questions of what is and isn’t moral. Instead, he makes fun of the whole Victorian idea of morality as a rigid body of rules about what people should and shouldn’t do. The very title of the play is a double-edged comment on the phenomenon. The play’s central plot—the man who both is and isn’t Ernest/earnest—presents a moral paradox.

Earnestness, which refers to both the quality of being serious and the quality of being sincere, is the play’s primary object of satire. Characters such as Jack, Gwendolen, Miss Prism, and Dr. Chasuble, who put a premium on sobriety and honesty, are either hypocrites or else have the rug pulled out from under them. What Wilde wants us to see as truly moral is really the opposite of earnestness: irreverence.

HYPOCRISY VS. INVENTIVENESS

Algernon and Jack may create similar deceptions, but they are not morally equivalent characters. When Jack fabricates his brother Ernest’s death, he imposes that fantasy on his loved ones, and though we are aware of the deception, they, of course, are not. He rounds out the deception with costumes and props, and he does his best to convince the family he’s in mourning. He is acting hypocritically. In contrast, Algernon and Cecily make up elaborate stories that don’t really assault the truth in any serious way or try to alter anyone else’s perception of reality. In a sense, Algernon and Cecily are characters after Wilde’s own heart, since in a way they invent life for themselves as though life is a work of art. In some ways, Algernon, not Jack, is the play’s real hero. Not only is Algernon like Wilde in his dandified, exquisite wit, tastes, and priorities, but he also resembles Wilde to the extent that his fictions and inventions resemble those of an artist.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NOT BEING “EARNEST”

Earnestness, which implies seriousness or sincerity, is the great enemy of morality in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Earnestness can take many forms, including boringness, solemnity, pomposity, complacency, smugness, self-righteousness, and sense of duty, all of which Wilde saw as hallmarks of the Victorian character. When characters in the play use the word *serious*, they tend to mean “trivial,” and vice versa. For example, Algernon thinks it “shallow” for people not to be “serious” about meals,

and Gwendolen believes, “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing.”

For Wilde, the word *earnest* comprised two different but related ideas: the notion of false truth and the notion of false morality, or moralism. The moralism of Victorian society—its smugness and pomposity—impels Algernon and Jack to invent fictitious alter egos so as to be able to escape the strictures of propriety and decency. However, what one member of society considers decent or indecent doesn’t always reflect what decency really is. One of the play’s paradoxes is the impossibility of actually being either earnest (meaning “serious” or “sincere”) or moral while claiming to be so. The characters who embrace triviality and wickedness are the ones who may have the greatest chance of attaining seriousness and virtue.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

PUNS

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the pun, widely considered to be the lowest form of verbal wit, is rarely just a play on words. The pun in the title is a case in point. The earnest/Ernest joke strikes at the very heart of Victorian notions of respectability and duty. Gwendolen wants to marry a man called Ernest, and she doesn’t care whether the man actually possesses the qualities that comprise earnestness. She is, after all, quick to forgive Jack’s deception. In embodying a man who is initially neither “earnest” nor “Ernest,” and who, through forces beyond his control, subsequently *becomes* both “earnest” and “Ernest,” Jack is a walking, breathing paradox and a complex symbol of Victorian hypocrisy.

In Act III, when Lady Bracknell quips that until recently she had no idea there were any persons “whose origin was a Terminus,” she too is making an extremely complicated pun. The joke is that a railway station is as far back as Jack can trace his identity and therefore a railway station actually is his “origin,” hence the pun. In Wilde’s day, as in the England of today, the first stop on a railway line is known as the “origin” and the last stop as the “terminus.” There’s also a whole series of implicit subsidiary puns on words like *line* and *connection* that can refer to either ancestry or travel. Wilde is poking fun at Lady Bracknell’s snobbery. He depicts her as incapable of distinguishing between a railway line and a family line, social connections and railway connections, a person’s ancestral origins and the place where he chanced to be found. In general, puns add layers of meaning to the characters’ lines and call into question the true or intended meaning of what is being said.

INVERSION

One of the most common motifs in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the notion of inversion, and inversion takes many forms. The play contains inversions of thought, situation, and character, as well as inversions of common notions of morality or philosophical thought. When Algernon remarks, “Divorces are made in Heaven,” he

inverts the cliché about marriages being “made in heaven.” Similarly, at the end of the play, when Jack calls it “a terrible thing” for a man to discover that he’s been telling the truth all his life, he inverts conventional morality. Most of the women in the play represent an inversion of accepted Victorian practices with regard to gender roles. Lady Bracknell usurps the role of the father in interviewing Jack, since typically this was a father’s task, and Gwendolen and Cecily take charge of their own romantic lives, while the men stand by watching in a relatively passive role. The trick that Wilde plays on Miss Prism at the end of the play is also a kind of inversion: The trick projects onto the play’s most fervently moralistic character the image of the “fallen woman” of melodrama.

DEATH

Jokes about death appear frequently in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Lady Bracknell comes onstage talking about death, and in one of the play’s many inversions, she says her friend Lady Harbury looks twenty years younger since the death of her husband. With respect to Bunbury, she suggests that death is an inconvenience for others—she says Bunbury is “shilly-shallying” over whether “to live or to die.” On being told in Act III that Bunbury has died suddenly in accordance with his physicians’ predictions, Lady Bracknell commends Bunbury for acting “under proper medical advice.” Miss Prism speaks as though death were something from which one could learn a moral lesson and piously says she hopes Ernest will profit from having died. Jack and Algernon have several conversations about how to “kill” Jack’s imaginary brother. Besides giving the play a layer of dark humor, the death jokes also connect to the idea of life being a work of art. Most of the characters discuss death as something over which a person actually has control, as though death is a final decision one can make about how to shape and color one’s life.

THE DANDY

To the form of Victorian melodrama, Wilde contributed the figure of the dandy, a character who gave the form a moral texture it had never before possessed. In Wilde’s works, the dandy is a witty, overdressed, self-styled philosopher who speaks in epigrams and paradoxes and ridicules the cant and hypocrisy of society’s moral arbiters. To a very large extent, this figure was a self-portrait, a stand-in for Wilde himself. The dandy isn’t always a comic figure in Wilde’s work. In *A Woman of No Importance* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he takes the form of the villains Lord Illingworth and Lord Henry Wootton, respectively. But in works such as *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde seems to be evolving a more positive and clearly defined moral position on the figure of the dandy. The dandy pretends to be all about surface, which makes him seem trivial, shallow, and ineffectual. Lord Darlington and Lord Goring (in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*) both present themselves this way. In fact, the dandy in both plays turns out to be something very close to the real hero. He proves to be deeply moral and essential to the happy resolution of the plot.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon has many characteristics of the dandy, but he remains morally neutral throughout the play. Many other characters also express dandiacal sentiments and views. Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell are being dandiacal

when they assert the importance of surfaces, style, or “profile,” and even Jack echoes the philosophy of the dandy when he comes onstage asserting that “pleasure” is the only thing that should “bring one anywhere.” For the most part, these utterances seem to be part of Wilde’s general lampooning of the superficiality of the upper classes. The point is that it’s the wrong sort of superficiality because it doesn’t recognize and applaud its own triviality. In fact, Cecily, with her impatience with self-improvement and conventional morality and her curiosity about “wickedness,” is arguably the character who, after Algernon, most closely resembles the dandy. Her dandiacal qualities make her a perfect match for him.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

THE DOUBLE LIFE

The double life is the central metaphor in the play, epitomized in 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. Jack’s imaginary, wayward brother Ernest is a device not only for escaping social and moral obligations but also one that allows Jack to appear far more moral and responsible than he actually is. Similarly, Algernon’s imaginary invalid friend Bunbury allows Algernon to escape to the country, where he presumably imposes on people who don’t know him in much the same way he imposes on Cecily in the play, all the while seeming to demonstrate Christian charity. The practice of visiting the poor and the sick was a staple activity among the Victorian upper and upper-middle classes and considered a public duty. The difference between what Jack does and what Algernon does, however, is that Jack not only pretends to be something he is not, that is, completely virtuous, but also routinely pretends to be *someone* he is not, which is very different. This sort of deception suggests a far more serious and profound degree of hypocrisy. Through these various enactments of double lives, Wilde suggests the general hypocrisy of the Victorian mindset.

FOOD

Food and scenes of eating appear frequently in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and they are almost always sources of conflict. Act I contains the extended cucumber sandwich joke, in which Algernon, without realizing it, steadily devours all the sandwiches. In Act II, the climax of Gwendolen and Cecily’s spat over who is really engaged to Ernest Worthing comes when Gwendolen tells Cecily, who has just offered her sugar and cake, that sugar is “not fashionable any more” and “Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.” Cecily responds by filling Gwendolen’s tea with sugar and her plate with cake. The two women have actually been insulting each other quite steadily for some time, but Cecily’s impudent actions cause Gwendolen to become even angrier, and she warns Cecily that she “may go too far.” On one level, the jokes about food provide a sort of low comedy, the Wildean equivalent of the slammed door or the pratfall. On another level, food seems to be a stand-in for sex, as when Jack tucks into the bread and butter with too much gusto and Algernon accuses him of behaving as

though he were already married to Gwendolen. Food and gluttony suggest and substitute for other appetites and indulgences.

FICTION AND WRITING

Writing and the idea of fiction figure in the play in a variety of important ways. Algernon, when the play opens, has begun to suspect that Jack's life is at least partly a fiction, which, thanks to the invented brother Ernest, it is. Bunbury is also a fiction. When Algernon says in Act I, "More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read," he may be making a veiled reference to fiction, or at least reading material perceived to be immoral. In Act II, the idea of fiction develops further when Cecily speaks dismissively of "three-volume novels" and Miss Prism tells her she once wrote one herself. This is an allusion to a mysterious past life that a contemporary audience would have recognized as a stock element of stage melodrama. Cecily's diary is a sort of fiction as well: In it, she has recorded an invented romance whose details and developments she has entirely imagined. When Cecily and Gwendolen seek to establish their respective claims on Ernest Worthing, each appeals to the diary in which she recorded the date of her engagement, as though the mere fact of having written something down makes it fact. Ultimately, fiction becomes related to the notion of life as an art form. Several of the characters attempt to create a fictional life for themselves which then, in some capacity, becomes real. Wilde seems to regard as the most fundamentally moral those who not only freely admit to creating fictions for themselves but who actually take pride in doing so.