

The importance of being earnest

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."

The play opens in the morning room of Algernon Moncrieff's flat in the fashionable Mayfair section of London's West End. As the curtain rises, Algernon's butler, Lane, is onstage laying out afternoon tea while Algernon, offstage, plays the piano badly. Before long, the music stops and Algernon enters talking about his playing, but Lane says ironically that he didn't feel it was "polite" to listen. Algernon briefly defends his musicianship, then turns to the matter of Lane's preparations for tea. Algernon asks particularly about some cucumber sandwiches he has ordered for Lady Bracknell, his aunt, who is expected for tea along with her daughter, Gwendolen Fairfax, Algernon's cousin. Lane produces the cucumber sandwiches, which Algernon begins to munch absentmindedly, casually remarking on an extremely inaccurate entry he's noticed in the household books. He speculates aloud on why it is that champagne in bachelors' homes always gets drunk by the servants. There follows some philosophical chat about the nature of marriage and the married state. Then Algernon dismisses Lane and soliloquizes briefly on the moral duty of the servant class.

Lane reenters and announces the arrival of Mr. Ernest Worthing, the play's protagonist, who shortly will come to be known as Jack. Algernon greets Jack with evident enthusiasm, asking whether business or pleasure has brought him to town. Jack says pleasure. He notices the elaborate tea service and asks whom Algernon expects. When Algernon tells him Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen will be coming by, Jack is delighted. He confesses that he has come to town for the express purpose of proposing to Gwendolen. A brief debate follows as to whether this purpose constitutes "business" or "pleasure," and in the course of it, Jack reaches for one of the cucumber sandwiches. Algernon

reprimands him, saying that they have been ordered expressly for his aunt. Jack points out that Algernon has been eating them the whole time they've been talking. Algernon argues that it's appropriate for him to eat the sandwiches since Lady Bracknell is his aunt and suggests that Jack help himself to the bread and butter, which has been ordered for Gwendolen. When Jack begins eating the bread and butter a bit too enthusiastically, Algernon accuses Jack of behaving as though he were already married to Gwendolen. He reminds Jack he isn't yet engaged to her and says he doubts he ever will be. Surprised, Jack asks what Algernon means. Algernon reminds Jack that Gwendolen is his first cousin and tells him that before he gives his consent to the union, Jack "will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily." Jack professes bewilderment and says he doesn't know anyone named Cecily. By way of explanation, Algernon asks Lane to find "that cigarette case Mr. Worthington left in the smoking room the last time he dined here."

The cigarette case, when it arrives, causes Jack some consternation and Algernon much glee. Jack seems to have forgotten that the case bears an inscription from "little Cecily" to "her dear Uncle Jack." Algernon forces Jack to explain what the inscription means, and Jack admits his name isn't really Ernest at all—it's Jack. Algernon pretends to be incensed and disbelieving. He points out that Jack has always introduced himself as Ernest, that he answers to the name Ernest, that he even looks as though his name were Ernest. He pulls out one of Jack's visiting cards and shows him the name and address on it, saying he intends to keep the card as proof that Jack's name is Ernest. With some embarrassment, Jack explains that his name is "Ernest in town and Jack in the country."

Algernon is still unsatisfied. He tells Jack he has always suspected him of being "a confirmed and secret Bunburyist," a term he refuses to define until Jack explains why he goes by two completely different names, and he requests that the explanation be "improbable." Jack protests that his explanation is not improbable. He says the old gentleman who adopted him as a boy, Mr. Thomas Cardew, in his will made him guardian to his granddaughter, Miss Cecily Cardew, who lives on Jack's country estate with her governess, Miss Prism, and addresses Jack as her uncle out of respect. Algernon slips in questions about the location of Jack's estate, but Jack refuses to answer and continues with his explanation.

Jack says that anyone placed in the position of legal guardian must have moral views about everything, and since the utmost morality doesn't bring great happiness, he has always pretended to have a troublesome younger brother named Ernest who lives at the Albany Hotel and who frequently gets in trouble. This false brother gives Jack an excuse to go to town whenever he wants to.

Algernon counters by telling Jack a secret of his own. Just as Jack has invented a younger brother so as to be able to escape to London, Algernon has invented a friend called Bunbury, a permanent invalid whose sudden and frequent relapses afford him a chance to get away to the country whenever he wants. Bunbury's illness, for instance, will allow Algernon to have dinner with Jack that evening, despite the fact that he has been committed, for over a week, to dining at Lady Bracknell's. Algernon wants to explain the rules of "Bunburying" to Jack, but Jack denies being a "Bunburyist." He says if Gwendolen accepts his marriage proposal he plans to kill off his imaginary brother, and that he's thinking of doing so in any case because Cecily is taking too much interest in Ernest. Jack suggests that Algernon

do the same with Bunbury. While the two men argue about the uses and merits of a married man's "knowing Bunbury," Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen are announced.

The opening scene of *The Importance of Being Earnest* establishes a highly stylized, unrealistic world in which no one talks the way ordinary people talk and very little seems to matter to anyone. Algernon and Lane, as well as most other characters in the play, are both literary constructs, that is, literary devices created solely to say particular things at particular moments. They have almost no life or significance apart from the way they talk. Their language is sharp, brittle, and full of elegant witticisms and mild, ironic pronouncements. Lane's first line, for example, regarding Algernon's piano playing, is an insult couched in polite, elegant language. We can see the play's lack of realism in the way Algernon and Lane behave over Lane's inaccurate entry in the household books. Lane has entered considerably more wine than was actually drunk to cover the fact that he himself has been drinking huge amounts of expensive champagne on the sly. Algernon shows no more concern over the stealing than Lane does over its having been discovered, and both men seem to take for granted that servants steal from their masters. In the world of the play, the deception is simply an expected daily nuisance.

A central purpose of the scene between Algernon and Lane is to lay the foundation for the joke about the cucumber sandwiches, an incident that marks the first appearance of food as a source of conflict as well as a substitute for other appetites. Algernon has ordered some cucumber sandwiches especially for Lady Bracknell, but during the scene with Lane, he absentmindedly eats all the sandwiches himself. In this particular scene, food substitutes for the idea of sex. Algernon's insatiable appetite, his preoccupation with food, and his habit of wantonly indulging himself politely suggest other forms of voraciousness and wanton self-indulgence. This idea becomes apparent in the early exchange between Algernon and Jack over the question of whether Jack should eat cucumber sandwiches or bread and butter. Here, Algernon interprets eating as a form of social, even sexual, presumption. Algernon can eat the cucumber sandwiches because he's Lady Bracknell's blood relation, but Jack, who hardly knows Lady Bracknell, should stay away from them. When Jack demonstrates too much enthusiasm for the bread and butter, Algernon reproaches him for behaving as though he were "married to [Gwendolen] already," as though he had touched her in an aggressive or salacious man

Though Jack's double life is amusing and light in many ways, his deception also suggests he has a darker, more sinister side, and to this extent his actions reveal the vast separation between private and public life in upper-middle-class Victorian England. Algernon suspects Jack of leading a double life when the play opens, and he goads him, asking where he's been. He asks Jack pointed questions about his house in Shropshire, knowing full well that Jack's country estate isn't in Shropshire, although this seems to be what Jack has always claimed. Algernon doesn't let on that he knows Jack is lying, and he lets Jack get deeper and deeper into his lie. The idea of a man not knowing where his best friend lives is absurd, of course, and this sort of unrealism gives *The Importance of Being Earnest* its reputation as a piece of light, superficial comedy. In fact, Jack's deception is more sinister than Algernon's rather innocent "Bunburying," and he ultimately misrepresents the truth to all those closest to him. Jack is in many ways the Victorian Everyman, and the picture he paints about social mores and expectations is, beneath the surface, a damning one

Lady Bracknell comes onstage gossiping about a friend whose husband has died recently. Seating herself, she asks for one of the cucumber sandwiches Algernon has promised her. However, no cucumber sandwiches are in sight—Algernon, without realizing what he was doing, has devoured every last one. He gazes at the empty plate in horror and asks Lane sharply why there are no cucumber sandwiches. Quickly sizing up the situation, Lane explains blandly that he couldn't find cucumbers at the market that morning. Algernon dismisses Lane with obvious, and feigned,

displeasure. Lady Bracknell is not concerned, and she chatters about the nice married woman she's planning to have Algernon take in to dinner that evening. Regretfully, Algernon tells Lady Bracknell that due to the illness of his friend Bunbury, he'll be unable to come to dinner after all. Lady Bracknell expresses her irritation about Bunbury's "shilly-shallying" over the question of whether he'll live or die. To appease her, and to give Jack a chance to propose to Gwendolen, Algernon offers to go over the musical program for an upcoming reception with her and takes her into the music room.

Alone with Gwendolen, Jack awkwardly stammers out his admiration, and Gwendolen takes charge. She lets Jack know right away that she shares his feelings, and Jack is delighted. However, he is somewhat dismayed to learn that a good part of Gwendolen's attraction to him is due to what she believes is his name — Ernest. Gwendolen is fixated on the name Ernest, which she feels has "a music of its own" and "inspires absolute confidence." Gwendolen makes clear that she would not consider marrying a man who was not named Ernest.

Lady Bracknell returns to the room, and Gwendolen tells her she is engaged to Jack. Lady Bracknell then interviews Jack to determine Jack's eligibility as a possible son-in-law. Jack seems to be giving all the right answers, until Lady Bracknell inquires into his family background. 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 him from marrying Gwendolen and leaves the house angrily.

Algernon enters, and Jack reviews the results of his interview with Lady Bracknell, explaining that as far as Gwendolen is concerned the two of them are engaged. Algernon asks mischievously whether Jack has told her the truth about being "Ernest in town, and Jack in the country," and Jack scoffs at the idea. He says he plans to kill off Ernest by the end of the week by having him catch a severe chill in Paris. Algernon asks whether Jack has told Gwendolen about his ward, Cecily, and again Jack scoffs at the question. He claims Cecily and Gwendolen will surely become friends and "will be calling each other sister."

Gwendolen reenters and asks to speak privately with Jack. She tells him how the story of his childhood has stirred her and declares her undying love, whatever happens. She asks Jack for his address in the country and Algernon listens in, jotting it down on his cuff. Jack exits with Gwendolen to show her to her carriage, and Lane comes in with some bills, which Algernon promptly tears up. He tells Lane he plans to go "Bunburying" the next day and asks him to lay out "all the Bunbury suits." Jack returns, praising Gwendolen, and the curtain falls on Algernon laughing quietly and looking at his shirt.

The scene in which Jack proposes to Gwendolen portrays a reversal of Victorian assumptions about gender roles. Propriety demanded that young women be weak and ineffectual, helpless vessels of girlish admiration and passivity, while men were supposed to be authoritative and competent. Here, however, Jack stammers ineffectually, and Gwendolen takes the whole business of the marriage proposal out of his hands. Wilde has some fun with the rigidity of Victorian convention when he has Gwendolen backtrack and insist that Jack start the whole proposal process over

again, doing it properly. The social commentary in this scene goes deeper than the Victorian concern with propriety. In the figure of Gwendolen, a young woman obsessed with the name Ernest, and not with actual earnestness itself, Wilde satirizes Victorian society's preoccupation with surface manifestations of virtue and its willingness to detect virtue in the most superficial displays of decent behavior. The Ernest/earnest joke is a send-up of the whole concept of moral duty, which was the linchpin of Victorian morality.

Wilde uses Lady Bracknell's interview of Jack to make fun of the values of London society, which put a higher premium on social connections than on character or goodness. More disquieting than the questions themselves is the order in which Lady Bracknell asks them. Before she even gets to such matters as income and family, she wants to know if Jack smokes, and she is pleased to hear that he does, since she considers smoking an antidote to idleness. Such trivial questions suggest the vacuity of London society, where more weighty issues are of secondary importance. The questions about Jack's family background, however, reveal Lady Bracknell's darker side. When Jack admits he has "lost" both his parents, Lady Bracknell replies with an elaborate pun: "To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness." Like so many of Lady Bracknell's pronouncements, this one is funny because it's absurd. However, the statement also reflects a heartlessness that's very real and not funny at all. Lady Bracknell responded in an equally callous way to Bunbury's lingering illness when she remarked, "I must say . . . that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd." In pronouncements such as these, Lady Bracknell reveals an unsettling notion that colored every aspect of Victorian life: poverty and misfortune are, to some extent, an outcome of moral unworthiness.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, conventional morality operates on two levels of hypocrisy. On one level is the portrait Algernon paints of what he sees as conventional married bliss, in which husband and wife appear faithful but either one or the other is carrying on behind the other one's back. He tells Jack that, in a marriage, either husband or wife will certainly want to know Bunbury, and that "in married life three is company and two is none." Confronted with a man who is "Ernest in town and Jack in the country," a conventional Victorian audience would probably have seen some reference to heterosexual infidelity. However, Wilde's audience must also have been full of people to whom "Ernest in town and Jack in the country" meant something quite different, something that had to be buried far below the surface of the dialogue. When Lady Bracknell says that "a cloakroom at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion—has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now," a twenty-first-century reader or audience member most likely will imagine another kind of life that Victorian hypocrisy required one to hide: the secret life of homosexuals, for which Wilde himself was condemned.

In the garden of The Manor House, Jack's country estate in Hertfordshire, Miss Prism is trying to interest Cecily in her German lesson. Cecily would prefer to water the flowers, but Miss Prism reminds Cecily that Jack encourages Cecily to improve herself in every way. Cecily expresses some slight irritation with the fact that her Uncle Jack is so serious, and Miss Prism reminds her of his constant concern over his troublesome brother Ernest. Cecily, who has begun writing in her diary, says she wishes Jack would allow Ernest to visit them sometime. She suggests that she and Miss Prism might positively influence him, but Miss Prism doesn't approve of the notion of trying to turn "bad people into good people." She tells Cecily to put away her diary and to rely on her memory instead. Cecily points out that memory is usually inaccurate and also responsible for excessively long, three-volume novels. Miss Prism tells her not to criticize those long novels, as she once wrote one herself.

Dr. Chasuble, the local vicar, enters. Cecily tells Dr. Chasuble teasingly that Miss Prism has a headache and should take a walk with him, obviously aware of an unspoken attraction between Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism. Miss Prism reproaches Cecily gently for fibbing, but she decides to take Cecily's advice, and she and Dr. Chasuble go off together. The butler, Merriman, then enters and announces to Cecily that Mr. Ernest Worthing has just driven over from the station with his luggage. Merriman presents Cecily with a visiting card, which is the one Algernon took from Jack in Act I.

The visiting Mr. Ernest Worthing is actually Algernon, masquerading as Jack's nonexistent brother, who enters dressed to the nines and greets Cecily as his "little cousin." When Cecily tells him Jack won't be back until Monday, Algernon pretends surprise and disappointment. Cecily tells Algernon that Jack has gone to town to buy Ernest some traveling clothes, as he plans on sending him to Australia as a last resort. Algernon proposes another plan: he thinks Cecily should reform him. Cecily says she doesn't have time. Algernon decides to reform himself that afternoon, adding that he is hungry, and he and Cecily flirt with each other as they head into the house to find sustenance.

Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble return from their walk, also flirting mildly. They are surprised when Jack enters from the back of the garden dressed in full Victorian mourning regalia. Jack greets Miss Prism with an air of tragedy and explains he has returned earlier than expected owing to the death of Ernest. Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble express surprise, shock, and condolences, and Miss Prism makes a few moralistic pronouncements.

Jack's story matches the one he and Algernon cooked up the previous evening: that Ernest passed away in Paris from a "severe chill." Dr. Chasuble suggests that he might mention the sad news in next Sunday's service and begins talking about his upcoming sermon. Jack remembers the problem of Gwendolen and his name, and he asks Dr. Chasuble about the possibility of being christened Ernest. They make arrangements for a ceremony that afternoon. As Dr. Chasuble prepares to leave, Cecily emerges from the house with the news that "Uncle Jack's brother" has turned up and is in the dining room.

From the beginning of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, books, fiction, and writing have played an important role in furthering our heroes' own fictions and deceptions. The writing in Jack's cigarette case exposes his secret identity, leading Algernon to develop suspicions about his other life. That life itself is a fiction to the extent that Jack has always lied to Algernon about what it entails. Jack has also been spinning fiction for the benefit of his friends and family in the country, where everyone believes him to be a paragon of virtue, his brow permanently creased with anxiety and woe. The all-important "three-volume novel" in the dour Miss Prism's past suggests that Miss Prism herself has had an alter ego at some point, or at least the capacity for telling stories of her own. Miss Prism tells Cecily not to "speak slightingly of" fiction and gives a definition of it: "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily." Even before this exchange, Cecily avoids her schoolbooks. She would rather write than read and pulls out her diary, where she records her "wonderful secrets." We might assume that these are themselves fictions of a

sort. Cecily's schooling is part of Miss Prism and Jack's desire for Cecily to "improve [herself] in every way," a sentiment that reeks of Victorian righteousness and solemnity, and Cecily foregoes this attempt to pursue her own writing.

The moral status of Jack's fictional brother Ernest has undergone a change between Acts I and II. At Algernon's flat in Half Moon Street, Algernon called Ernest merely "profligate." Jack explained that Ernest got in to "scrapes," or mischief. In the garden of the Manor House, where Miss Prism's moral viewpoint holds sway, Jack's brother graduates to "unfortunate," which Miss Prism uses as a euphemism for "immoral," "bad," and downright "wicked," the latter an adjective Cecily seems particularly to relish. Indeed, when the descriptions of Ernest reach this low point, he becomes all the more appealing to Cecily. The idea of wickedness fascinates Cecily, and she yearns to meet a "really wicked" person. This open interest in the idea of immorality is part of Cecily's charm and what makes her a suitable love interest for Algernon. Cecily is no dandy: she doesn't speak in epigrams and paradoxes, and, in fact, she's the only character who doesn't talk like a character in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. She's a moral eccentric. She hopes Jack's brother hasn't been "pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time," since that would be hypocrisy.

The difference between hypocrisy and mere fiction, or "Bunburying," begins to emerge when Jack enters and declares that Ernest is dead. He is dressed in full Victorian mourning regalia, a very elaborate affair, creating the play's most pungent visual gag. Jack has gone overboard in carrying out the deception of his double life, and his behavior highlights the essential difference between hypocrisy and "Bunburying." Algernon imposes on Cecily by pretending to be someone he's not, but he is still less malicious than Jack. First, Algernon scarcely knows Cecily, and second, he isn't actually leading a double life. Algernon has created a fictional friend, but he does not actually pretend to be that friend. When he finally does take on a second identity, it is in the company of near-strangers. Jack, however, not only lies to the people closest to him, but he lies elaborately, becoming, for all his amiability, a lowlife. Jack has a fundamental charmlessness to his attitude toward other people. In a theater production, his deception is compounded: the audience watches an actor pretending to be someone pretending. Jack's pretense seems almost never-ending.

When Algernon appears in the doorway, Jack is furious, not only because Algernon is there, but also because he is disguised as Jack's own invented, and now presumably dead, brother. Cecily takes Jack's anger as part of the long-standing ill feeling between the two brothers and insists that Jack shake hands with Algernon, who has evidently been telling her about his good offices toward his poor friend Bunbury. Jack is apoplectic at the idea of Algernon talking to Cecily about Bunbury, but he can do nothing. He cannot expose Algernon without revealing his own deceptions and hypocrisy, and so he has to go along with the charade.

Jack wants Algernon to leave, but Algernon refuses as long as Jack is in mourning. As Jack goes off to change his clothes, Algernon soliloquizes briefly about being in love with Cecily. When she comes back to water the garden, he uses the opportunity to propose to her. He is surprised to discover that Cecily already considers herself engaged to him and charmed when she reveals that her sustained fascination with "Uncle Jack's brother" had moved her, some months previously, to invent an elaborate romance between herself and Ernest. Cecily has created an entire relationship, complete with love letters (written by herself), a ring, a broken engagement, and a reconciliation, and chronicled it in her diary. Algernon is less enchanted with the news that part of Cecily's interest in him derives from the name Ernest, which, echoing Gwendolen, Cecily says "inspires absolute confidence."

Algernon goes off in search of Dr. Chasuble to see about getting himself christened Ernest. Meanwhile, Gwendolen arrives, having decided to pay an unexpected call at the Manor House. She is shown into the garden. Cecily, who has no idea who Gwendolen is or how she figures in Jack's life, orders tea and attempts to play hostess, while Gwendolen, having no idea who Cecily is, initially takes her to be a visitor at the Manor House. She is disconcerted to hear that Cecily is "Mr. Worthing's ward," as Ernest has never mentioned having a ward, and she confesses to not being thrilled by the news or by the fact that Cecily is very young and beautiful. Cecily picks up on Gwendolen's reference to "Ernest" and hastens to explain that her guardian is not Mr. Ernest Worthing but his brother Jack. Gwendolen asks if she's sure, and Cecily reassures her, adding that, in fact, 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 kind of catfight in which the two women insult one another with utmost civility.

Toward the climax of this confrontation, Jack and Algernon arrive, one after the other, each having separately made arrangements with Dr. Chasuble to be christened Ernest later that day. Each of the young ladies takes great pleasure in pointing 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. Shocked and angry, the two women demand to know where Jack's brother Ernest is, since both of them are engaged to be married to him, and Jack is forced to admit that he has no brother and that Ernest is a complete fiction. Both women are furious. They retire to the house arm in arm, calling each other "sister." Alone, Jack and Algernon must sort out their differences. Each taunts the other with having been found out and they end up squabbling over muffins and teacake.

Jack's confrontation with Algernon when Algernon appears unexpectedly at the Manor House pits the logic of dandyism against the logic of Victorian morality. Jack bristles protectively when Algernon tells Jack he thinks "Cecily is a darling." He tells Algernon he doesn't like him to talk about Cecily that way, but his concern pales against Algernon's sense of outrage over the inappropriateness of Jack's clothes. "It is perfectly childish to be in deep mourning for a man who is actually staying for a whole week with you in your house as a guest," Algernon fumes. "I call it grotesque." Jack ignores the insults and orders Algernon to leave on the next train, but Algernon then points out that it would be impolite of him to leave while Jack was in mourning. Jack is, of course, not really in mourning, and Algernon has derailed Jack's elaborate deception. By commenting ironically on Jack's mourning dress, Algernon is meeting fiction with fiction, buying time for his own agenda by playing into the ridiculous situation Jack has created for himself. Jack may be worried and outraged at Algernon's interest in Cecily, but Algernon the dandy cares little for those concerns. Instead, he treats everything as part of an elaborate game.

Cecily proves herself as capable as Jack and Algernon at creating fictions when she discusses her made-up relationship with Ernest, and in many ways she resembles Gwendolen when she discusses her relationship and love in general. Cecily's diary is the hard evidence of her own elaborate fiction, as are the letters she has written to herself in Ernest's name and the ring with the true-lover's knot she has promised herself always to wear. Like Gwendolen, Cecily has chosen to take charge of her own romantic life, even to the point of playing all the roles, and Algernon is left with very little to do in the way of wooing. When Cecily lays out the facts of her relationship with Ernest for the man she thinks is Ernest himself, she closely resembles Gwendolen. She makes a grand Gwendolen-like pronouncement or two and demonstrates a Gwendolen-like self-consciousness with regard to her diary. She wants to copy Algernon's compliments into it and hopes he'll order a copy when it is published. Even her explanation

for having broken off the engagement at one point, "It would hardly have been a really serious engagement if it hadn't been broken off at least once," echoes Gwendolen's need for gravitas and propriety. Her unexpected fascination with the name Ernest is the final link between her and Gwendolen. This fascination seems incongruous with what we've seen of Cecily thus far, but nonetheless, the revelation lends the play a symmetry and balance.

The two major confrontations at the end of Act II, between Cecily and Gwendolen and between Jack and Algernon, are both rooted in the fictions all four characters have created, believed, or perpetuated. Cecily and Gwendolen squabble over who has the right to consider herself engaged to Ernest Worthing and seek to establish their respective claims on him by appealing to their diaries, in which each recorded the date of her engagement, as though the mere act of having written something down makes it fact. Meanwhile, what they have recorded is fundamentally untrue, since neither woman's lover is the Ernest he has pretended to be. Both women are fully in the right, but wrong at the same time. Jack and Algernon, for their parts, bicker over who is a better candidate to be christened with the name Ernest, an argument that is just as absurd and fiction-based as the women's. Jack argues that he never was christened, so he has a perfect right to be. Algernon counters by saying the fact that he's survived the experience indicates that his "constitution can stand it." He reminds Jack that Jack's brother almost died this week from a chill, as though this damns Jack's own constitution—while, of course, that brother is the fabricated Ernest. These confrontations cannot and will not be decided, since their very subjects essentially do not exist.

Cecily and Gwendolen have retreated to the drawing room of the Manor House to get away from Algernon and Jack. They are eager to forgive the men and be reconciled. When Algernon and Jack enter from the garden, Cecily and Gwendolen confront them about their motives. Cecily asks Algernon why he pretended to be Jack's brother, and Algernon says it was in order to meet her. Gwendolen asks Jack if he pretended to have a brother so as to be able to come to London to see her as often as possible, and he asks if she can doubt it. Gwendolen says she has the gravest doubts but intends to crush them.

Cecily and Gwendolen are on the verge of forgiving Algernon and Jack when they remember that neither of them is any longer engaged to a man called Ernest. Algernon and Jack explain that each has made arrangements to be rechristened Ernest before the day is out, and the young women, bowled over by men's "physical courage" and capacity for "self-sacrifice," are won over.

As the couples embrace, Lady Bracknell enters, having bribed Gwendolen's maid for information about her destination. On seeing Algernon, she asks whether this house is the house where his friend Bunbury resides. Algernon, forgetting momentarily that he is supposed to be at his friend's bedside, says no, but quickly tries to cover himself and blurts that Bunbury is dead. He and Lady Bracknell briefly discuss Bunbury's sudden demise. Jack then introduces Cecily to Lady Bracknell, and Algernon announces their engagement. Lady Bracknell asks about Cecily's background, asking first, rather acidly, whether she is "connected with any of the larger railway stations in London." Jack obligingly volunteers information about Cecily, answering Lady Bracknell's presumptuous questions with a withering irony that goes over Lady Bracknell's head. Her interest is greatly piqued when she learns that Cecily is actually worth a great deal of money and stands to inherit even more when she comes of age.

Jack refuses to give his consent to Cecily's marriage to Algernon until Lady Bracknell grants her consent to his union with Gwendolen, but Lady Bracknell refuses. She summons Gwendolen to her side and prepares to depart. Before they can leave, however, Dr. Chasuble arrives to announce that everything is ready for the christenings. Jack explains that he and Algernon no longer need the christenings immediately and suggests that the ceremonies be postponed. The rector prepares to withdraw, explaining that Miss Prism is waiting for him back at the rectory. At the sound of Miss Prism's name, Lady Bracknell starts. She asks a number of incisive questions about Miss Prism then demands that she be sent for. Miss Prism herself arrives at that moment

Gwendolen's and Cecily's conversation at the beginning of Act III reveals exactly how eager they are to forgive Jack and Algernon, even to the point of bestowing on the men shame and repentance the men don't actually feel. Gwendolen and Cecily observe Jack and Algernon through the window of the morning room that looks out on the garden, where the two men are squabbling over the refreshments that have been laid out for tea. Gwendolen's opening line, "The fact that they did not follow us at once into the house . . . seems to me to show that they have some sense of shame left," indicates how eager she is for a reconciliation and anxious to find any reason at all to effect one. Her eagerness also reveals how willing she is to deceive herself about Jack. The fact that the men don't follow the women into the house is morally neutral, but Gwendolen projects onto it a moral interpretation: the men did not follow them, therefore they must be ashamed of themselves. We know, however, that they are not the least bit ashamed. The men think merely that they are in trouble, a circumstance Algernon, but not Jack, seems to relish. Cecily underscores the irony of Gwendolen's inane logic when she echoes Gwendolen's sentiments, remarking, "They have been eating muffins. That looks like repentance." Both women want to believe the men are truly sorry for what they've done.

The two couples have symmetrical conflicts and seem to have nearly symmetrical reconciliations, but an essential difference sets the two reconciliations apart: Algernon tells the truth about his deception, but Jack does not. When Cecily asks Algernon why he deceived her, he tells her he did it in order to have the opportunity of meeting her, and this is the truth. Algernon really didn't have any other reason for pretending to be Ernest. Jack, however, is another story. Gwendolen doesn't ask Jack directly why he deceived her, and instead frames the answer she wants from him in the form of a question. She asks if he pretended to have a brother in order to come to town to see her. Jack asks if she can doubt it, and Gwendolen declares she will "crush" the doubts she has. Gwendolen is right to have those doubts. Jack's reasons for inventing Ernest and then impersonating him were many, but getting away to see Gwendolen wasn't one of them. Jack could easily have courted Gwendolen as himself, and being Ernest to her was merely the result of having met her through Algernon. Despite the apparent uniformity of the two romances, only the relationship between Cecily and Algernon is now on truthful ground.

Just before Lady Bracknell begins her inquiry into Cecily's background, she makes a complicated pun that underscores the elaborate underpinnings of the joke of Victoria Station being Jack's ancestral home. In Act I she exclaimed indignantly on the idea of allowing the well-bred Gwendolen "to marry into a cloakroom, and form an alliance with a parcel." Now she asks whether Cecily is "at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London." The word connection was commonly used to refer to a person's social milieu (his or her friends and associates) as well as to family background. Lady Bracknell is making a joke on the fact that a railway station is as far back as Jack can trace his identity. The word connection also refers to transport: a connection was where a person could transfer from one railway line to another. The joke is even more involved than that. When Lady Bracknell says, "I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a Terminus," she is punning on the fact that in England, in Wilde's day as well as now, a "terminus" is the last stop on a railway line, and the first stop is its

“origin.” In calling Victoria Station Jack’s family’s “origin,” Lady Bracknell is getting off a very good line indeed, one that manages to be, like the joke in the title of the play, both pun and paradox.

When Miss Prism sees Lady Bracknell, she begins behaving in a frightened and furtive manner. Lady Bracknell asks her severely about the whereabouts of a certain baby that Miss Prism was supposed to have taken for a walk twenty-eight years ago. Lady Bracknell proceeds to recount the circumstances of the baby’s disappearance: Miss Prism left a certain house in Grosvenor Square with a baby carriage containing a male infant and never returned, the carriage was found some weeks later in Bayswater containing “a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality,” and the baby in question was never found. Miss Prism confesses apologetically that she doesn’t know what happened to the baby. She explains that on the day in question she left the house with both the baby and a handbag containing a novel she had been working on, but that at some point she must have absentmindedly confused the two, placing the manuscript in the carriage and the baby in the handbag.

Now Jack joins the discussion, pressing Miss Prism for further details: where did she leave the handbag? Which railway station? What line? Jack excuses himself and hurries offstage, returning a moment or two later with a handbag. He presents the handbag to Miss Prism and asks her if she can identify it. Miss Prism looks the handbag over carefully before acknowledging that it is the handbag she mislaid. She expresses delight at having it back after so many years. Jack, under the impression that he has discovered his true parentage, throws his arms melodramatically around Miss Prism with a cry of “Mother!” Miss Prism, shocked, reminds Jack that she is unmarried. Jack, misunderstanding her point, launches into a sentimental speech about forgiveness and redemption through suffering and society’s double standard about male and female transgression. With great dignity, Miss Prism gestures toward Lady Bracknell as the proper source of information about Jack’s history and identity. Lady Bracknell explains that Jack is the son of her poor sister, which makes him Algernon’s older brother.

The revelation removes all obstacles to Jack’s union with Gwendolen, but the problem of Jack’s name remains. Gwendolen points out that they don’t know his true name. Though Lady Bracknell is sure that as the elder son he was named after his father, no one can recall what General Moncrieff’s first name was. Fortunately, Jack’s bookshelves contain recent military records, and he pulls down and consults the appropriate volume. Jack’s father’s Christian names turn out to have been “Ernest John.” For all these years, Jack has unwittingly been telling the truth: his name is Ernest, it is also John, and he does indeed have an unprincipled younger brother — Algernon. Somewhat taken aback by this turn of events, Jack turns to Gwendolen and asks if she can forgive him for the fact that he’s been telling the truth his entire life. She tells him she can forgive him, as she feels he is sure to change. They embrace, as do Algernon and Cecily and Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble, and Jack acknowledges that he has discovered “the vital Importance of Being Earnest.”

In Victorian England, Lady Bracknell’s sudden start at the mention of Miss Prism’s name would have been a signal to the audience that a wild coincidence and recognition scene was approaching. Victorian melodrama was full of such coincidences and recognition scenes, in which true identities were revealed and long-lost family members were

reunited. Wilde was playing with genre here, making fun of the very form in which he'd been so successful in recent years. In these plays, the revelation of identity was often predicated on a long-kept secret that involved a woman who had committed a transgression in the past. The title character in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, for instance, discovers that a woman with a dubious past is her own mother. Wilde draws out the recognition scene in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, not only having Jack go to absurd lengths to identify the handbag Miss Prism lost, but also having Miss Prism entirely miss the implications of the handbag's reappearance: if the bag has been found, the baby has been found as well. Miss Prism's final comment on the whole incident is to express delight at being reunited with the handbag as it's been "a great inconvenience being without it all these years."

In the recognition scene, the image of the missing baby carriage containing the manuscript of a not-very-good novel allows Wilde to mock yet another social element of his time. On one level, Wilde is lampooning the kind of popular fiction that was considered respectable and acceptable for women to read—a trenchant observation from a writer whose own novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, had been reviled as "immoral." Beyond this, however, he's also crystallizing the theme of life as a work of art. In proposing the substitution of the baby for the manuscript and the manuscript for the baby, he connects, in a light-hearted way, the fiction that is the fruit of Miss Prism's imagination and the fiction that Jack's own life has been up to this point.

Jack's discovery that his life has not been a fiction, that he has indeed been both "Ernest" and "earnest" during the years he thought he was deceiving his friends and family, amounts to a complex moral paradox based on an elaborate pun. For years he has been a liar, but at the same time he spoke the truth: he really was being both "earnest" (sincere) and "Ernest." In a way, Jack has become his own fiction, and his real life has become the deception. His apology to Gwendolen and his observation that it is "a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth" is both a characteristic Wildean inversion of conventional morality and a last jibe at the hypocrisy of Victorian society.