THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

OSCAR WILDE

Key Facts

FULL TITLE · The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People

AUTHOR · Oscar Wilde

TYPE OF WORK · Play

GENRE · Social comedy; comedy of manners; satire; intellectual farce

LANGUAGE · English

TIME AND PLACE WRITTEN · Summer 1894 in Worthing, England

DATE OF FIRST PRODUCTION · February 14, 1895. In part because of Wilde's disgrace, the play was not published until 1899.

PUBLISHER · L. Smithers

TONE · Light, scintillating, effervescent, deceptively flippant

SETTING (TIME) · 1890s

SETTING (PLACE) · London (Act I) and Hertfordshire, a rural county not far from London (Acts II and III)

PROTAGONIST · John Worthing, known as “Ernest” by his friends in town (i.e., London) and as “Jack” by his friends and relations in the country

MAJOR CONFLICT · Jack faces many obstacles to his romantic union with Gwendolen. One obstacle is presented by Lady Bracknell, who objects to what she refers to as Jack's “origins” (i.e. his inability to define his family background). Another obstacle is Gwendolen's obsession with the name “Ernest,” since she does not know Jack's real name.

RISING ACTION · Algernon discovers that Jack is leading a double life and that he has a pretty young ward named Cecily. The revelation of Jack's origins causes Lady Bracknell to forbid his union with Gwendolen. Identifying himself as “Ernest,” Algernon visits Jack's house in the country and falls in love with Cecily.

CLIMAX · Gwendolen and Cecily discover that both Jack and Algernon have been lying to them and that neither is really named “Ernest.”

FALLING ACTION · Miss Prism is revealed to be the governess who mistakenly abandoned Jack as a baby and Jack is discovered to be Algernon's elder brother.

THEMES · The nature of marriage; the constraints of morality; hypocrisy vs. inventiveness; the importance of not being “earnest”

MOTIFS · Puns; inversion; death; the dandy

SYMBOLS · The double life; food; fiction and writing

FORESHADOWING · In stage comedy and domestic melodrama, foreshadowing often takes the form of objects, ideas, or plot points whose very existence in the play signals to the audience that they will come up again. The fact that Jack was adopted as a baby, for instance, predicates a recognition scene in which Jack's true identity is revealed and the plot is resolved by means of some incredible coincidence. Miss Prism's "three-volume novel" is another example: Her very mention of it ensures that it will be important later. An instance of foreshadowing that operates in the more usual way is Jack's assertion that Cecily and Gwendolen will be "calling each other sister" within half an hour of having met, followed by Algernon's that "[w]omen only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first." This is literally what happens between Cecily and Gwendolen in Act II.

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 somdomite.” 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.

Analysis of Major Characters

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 progressesJack 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.

Summary and Analysis

Act I, Part One

Nothing will induce me to part with with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.

Summary

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. Worthing 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.

Analysis

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 manner.

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.

Act I, Part Two

I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone.

Summary

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 cuff.

Analysis

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.

All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his.

Act II, Part One

Summary

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.

Analysis

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 into “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.

Act II, Part Two

I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Act III, Part One

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Act III, Part Two

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

Summary

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."

Analysis

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.