

Study Guide - The Importance of Being Earnest

Characters

Jack Worthing/Ernest - Main protagonist. Lives in Hertfordshire, where he is guardian to his adopted father's granddaughter, Cecily Cardew. Uses the alibi of "Ernest", his imaginary younger brother, to escape to London and misbehave however he wants.

Algernon Moncrieff - Jack's best friend in London, but knows Jack as Ernest. Similar to Jack in that he has an imaginary friend, "Bunbury", who is constantly sick and thus needs Algernon to visit him. Algernon uses "Bunbury" as an excuse to get out of social situations. Cousin to Gwendolen Fairfax, to whom Jack wants to be married.

Cecily Cardew - Jack Worthing's ward, left under his protection when her grandfather, Thomas Cardew, passed away. The late Mr. Cardew was the man who found Jack in a handbag at a train station decades ago. Cecily is 18, pretty, and believes she has been engaged to Jack's imaginary brother "Ernest" for months, ever since she heard of him. She does not know, of course, that Ernest is merely Jack's escape card.

Gwendolen Fairfax - Loves "Ernest" so much that she wants to marry him. Jack is left in a conundrum when she says that she wouldn't want to marry anyone *not* called Ernest. Miss Fairfax is from the upper tiers of society.

Lady Bracknell - Mother of Gwendolen. Refuses to allow her daughter to marry Jack when she discovers that he does not know who his parents are, and therefore might be far below Gwendolen's social class.

Setting

The Importance of Being Earnest is set in late 19th century England, during the Victorian era. Act I occurs in London, where Jack, Algernon, Gwendolen, and Lady Fairfax are engaged in a series of interactions. Acts II and III occur in the Hertfordshire countryside at Jack's mansion, Woolton.

Historical Relevance

The purpose of the play was to mock culture at the time, which was filled with people who made massive conundrums out of trivial matters and treated serious events as unimportant. It is labeled as a "farcical comedy", which by definition uses hyperbole, sarcasm, and ridiculous situations to mock certain targets. In this case, Oscar Wilde, the author of the play, is mocking British culture in his time period. He employs farce, as it is sometimes used, to attack folly and foolishness of a significant number of people, all while making them laugh at themselves.

Major Plot Events

ACT I

1. Jack tells Algernon he wants to marry Gwendolen, but Algernon forces Jack to come clean about "Ernest" before he will allow his friend to marry his cousin.
2. Jack proposes to Gwendolen while Algernon is distracting Lady Bracknell; Jack is in a bundle when Gwendolen says that she wouldn't marry someone not named Ernest.
3. Lady Bracknell refuses to allow Jack and Gwendolen to be married when she learns that Jack was adopted and therefore may not be eligible in terms of societal status.

4. Jack gives Gwendolen the address to his mansion so that she can visit him, which Algernon spies and notes to himself; the knowledge of Cecily Cardew's existence piques his curiosity.

ACT II

5. Algernon shows up at the mansion under the guise of "Ernest", whom Cecily has only heard about from Jack; Jack shows up about to say that Ernest has died, but finds Algernon pretending to be the imaginary brother and thus must go along with it to keep his secret hidden.
6. Algernon, who has fallen hopelessly in love with Cecily, proposes to her; he is surprised to find that she already thinks them engaged, for she imagined it in her journals ever since she first heard of Ernest from Jack.
7. Jack and Algernon both arrange to be rechristened Ernest with the same rector at different times later that day.
8. Gwendolen appears at the mansion and meets Cecily, and the two get in an argument because they both believe they are engaged to Ernest; the truth is that Cecily is engaged to Algernon's Ernest and Gwendolen to Jack's Ernest.
9. Jack and Algernon appear just as things between Cecily and Gwendolen are escalating; the truth comes out and the two women exit angrily into the house, feeling betrayed and united in their frustration.

ACT III

10. The two girls learn that Jack and Algernon both pretended to be Ernest in their different locations so as to get closer to their crushes, and everyone makes up when the men reveal that they are both to be renamed Ernest.
11. Lady Bracknell appears and again forbids Gwendolen to wed Jack, but suddenly becomes interested when she learns that Cecily is heir to a great fortune, and should she marry Algernon, it would connect more riches to Bracknell's estate. Jack, as Cecily's guardian, refuses to allow Algernon and Cecily to be married unless Lady Bracknell rescinds her statement about Jack and Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell says that they can wait; Cecily will come of age in 3 years. Jack points out that this is wrong, as the late Mr. Cardew's will does not allow Cecily to inherit the estate until age 35.
12. The rector arrives to perform the rechristenings and chances to mention Miss Prism, a servant at Woolton, after having met her just before. Lady Bracknell startles and asks for Miss Prism to be brought over.
13. Lady Bracknell interrogates Miss Prism; it is discovered that she was the one who lost Jack in the handbag he was found in when a baby. As it would happen, Jack was originally christened "Ernest John" and is actually Algernon's older brother. Lady Bracknell then consents to Jack's marriage to Gwendolen, to which Jack responds in kind by blessing Algernon and Cecily's union. The couples embrace and everyone is happy. As a last line, Jack notes that he finally understands "the vital Importance of Being Earnest".

Major Themes

- “Earnestness” - Also meaning seriousness or maturity, it is a stab at the folly of society in Wilde’s time.
- Marriage - This theme particularly points out the stupidity of marrying for wealth/class instead of love, particularly highlighted by Lady Bracknell.
- Morality - This one is evident. Algernon and Jack both use deception to their own ends, Algernon and Lady Bracknell both use subterfuge to discover the location of Jack’s mansion, and all characters throughout the play are generally subscribed to actions that could be considered immoral.

OVERALL MEANING

Long story short, the meaning of this work is to give import to the important stuff and don’t make a big deal out of the unimportant stuff. Life is short, and there’s no need to focus your time and energy in the wrong places.