

# The Importance of being Earnest



# Summary

- A «Fien de Siècle» Work
- Performance
- Jack Worthing
- Algernon Moncrieff
- Gwendolen Fairfax
- Cecily Cardew
- Lady Bracknell
- Miss Prism
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# A «Fien de Siècle» Work

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

## WHY?

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

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



# Performance

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

**HENCE,**

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



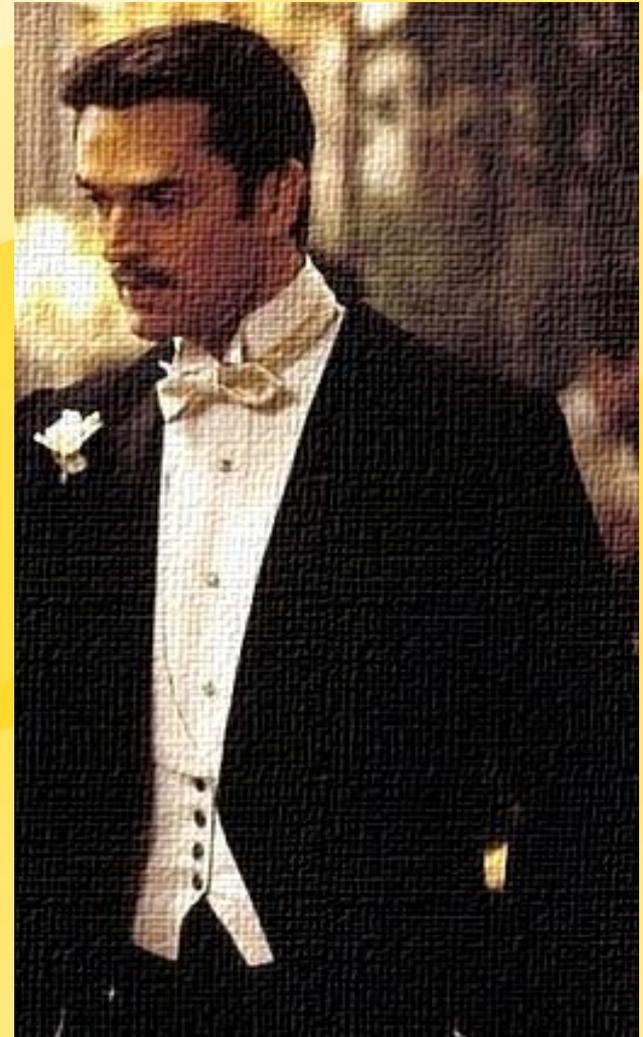
# Jack Worthing

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



# Algernon Moncrieff

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



# TOWN

# COUNTRY

Invents  
Bunbury

ALGERNON

JACK

Invents  
Earnest

COUSIN

WARD

LADY BRACKNELL

MISS PRISM

WATCHES OVER

WATCHES OVER

GWENDOLEN

CECILY

loves  
Pretends to be  
Earnest in the country

loves  
Pretends to be  
Earnest in town



# Gwendolen Fairfax

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



# Cecily Cardew

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



# Lady Bracknell

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



# Miss Prism

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



# Plot

- The play opens as Algernon Moncrief plays the piano in his fashionable London flat, while his butler Lane prepares a tea service for Algernon's Aunt Augusta, (Lady Bracknell), and her daughter, Gwendolen Fairfax.
- Surprisingly, Lane announces the arrival of Algernon's friend Mr. Ernest Worthing (Jack).
- Jack discloses to Algernon that he has returned to town to propose to Gwendolen



# Earnest

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





# Bunbury

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





# The Proposal

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





## Act 1

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



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



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



# Earnest 1 the Pretender

- Having learnt that Jack has no parents and was adopted by Mr. Thomas Cardew, Lady Bracknell forbids the marriage.
- Algernon plans to visit Jack as he is intrigued by Cecily.
- Act II begins at Jack's country estate in Hertfordshire.
- While Cecily is alone, the arrival of Mr. Earnest Worthing is announced.
- It is Algernon masquerading as Jack's brother "Ernest," but Cecily believes him to be the real deal.
- Shortly thereafter, Jack arrives, dressed in mourning clothes, pretending his brother "Ernest" has just died.
- When Jack learns that Algernon is at the estate as "Ernest," he is infuriated, but must keep up appearances so that his own lies will not be revealed.
- Meanwhile, Algernon, smitten by Cecily's beauty and charm, proposes to her.
- She is not at all surprised because according to her diary they have been engaged for three months.
- Cecily declares to love him because his name is Earnest.





# Earnest 2 the Pretender

- While Algernon rushes off to find Dr. Chausible, Gwendolen pays Jack an unexpected visit
- Cecily invites her into the garden for tea, where she announces her engagement to Ernest Worthing, but Gwendolen counters that she is in fact Ernest's fiancée.
- Jack and Algernon arrive separately, each having gone to see Dr. Chausible about being christened "Ernest."
- The two women realize that Jack and Algernon have deceived them.





# Time for Forgiveness

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



# Earnest, at last!

- Miss Prism arrives and Lady Bracknell accuses her of losing her sister's infant son twenty-eight years before.
- Miss Prism confesses, explaining that she misplaced the boy in a handbag in a coatroom at Victoria station
- Jack figures out that he was that abandoned child and presents the handbag as proof.
- Thus Jack learns he is Algernon's elder brother and having being named after his father, who had been a general, checks the Army List to find that the old man's name was "Mr. Ernest John Moncrief."
- Jack's real name is indeed Ernest.
- *«Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?»*

The End



# Themes

- **The Nature of Marriage**

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

- **The Constraints of Morality**

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

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

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



# Symbols



Professional  
BUNBURYIST

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

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

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



