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## Sample MonkeyNotes

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# *The Importance of Being Earnest*

by

Oscar Wilde

1899



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes Staff

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

Setting is a key element in this play because it offers a guise for the main character's alias. This adds to the hilarity that develops from misunderstandings both intended and.....

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**John Worthing, J.P.** - Known as Jack in the country, Ernest in the city. He escapes country life by pretending to have a brother, Ernest, who continuously gets into trouble in the city and requires his assistance. He is the guardian of Cecily and wants to marry Gwendolen, but is not allowed to because her mother does not approve of his being found as an infant in Victoria Station.

#### Minor Characters

**Algernon Moncrieff** - Algernon in the city, Ernest in the country. Algernon is the cousin of Gwendolen and wants to marry Cecily. He claims to have an ill friend, Bunbury, whom he visits in the country when he wants to escape the city.

**Rev. Canon Chasuble D.D.** - Chasuble is the pedantic reverend who resides in.....

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

### CONFLICT

The major conflict in this play is that Jack wants to marry Gwendolen, who believes his name is really Ernest-and loves him for that, and that he cannot because Lady Bracknell does not approve of Jack's background.

**Protagonist** - The protagonist is the main character of the story, and the one around whom most of the action revolves. In this story, the protagonist is Jack Worthing. He is the protagonist because the plot.....

**Antagonist** - The antagonist is the principle character that opposes the protagonist. This story is a bit unusual, as it is more rooted in satire than anything else, in that its antagonist is Lady Bracknell. This is because she opposes the main intentions of.....

**Climax** - The climactic moment (moment when the plot reaches a high point in its action after which everything leads toward resolution) is when the two main female characters, Gwendolen and Cecily, confront Jack and Algernon, who have both .....

### SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The play opens in Algernon Moncrieff's home in London. Algernon and his manservant are discussing marriage. After Lane exits, Algernon remarks that it is the job of the lower classes to set an example.

Algernon's friend, Ernest Worthing, whose real name is Jack, stops in for a visit. It becomes apparent that Jack wants to marry Algernon's cousin Gwendolen. Algernon refuses to give consent because he has found a cigarette case that Jack previously left behind. The inscription reveals it is from a lady named Cecily to her Uncle Jack. Jack admits that he goes by the name Ernest in the city and Jack in the country. Cecily is his ward. To escape country life, he pretends that he has a brother, named Ernest, whom gets into trouble and needs his assistance. Algernon admits that he has the same habit, and he refers to it as Bunburying. He pretends to have an ill friend named Bunbury, whom he must visit, when he wishes to escape the country.

Lady Bracknell and her daughter Gwendolen arrive. Jack proposes to Gwendolen and she accepts, claiming also that she could not love him if his name were not Ernest, which she still believes it to be. However, upon questioning Jack, Lady Bracknell learns that he was.....

## THEMES

### Major Theme

*Triviality of the Upper Class* - The major theme of this play is the triviality of the upper class. This is expressed in the nature of the writing, which is satirical. By examining the language and interaction of the characters, one can see that they are simply absurd.

### Minor Themes

*Triviality of Marriage* - This is perhaps the most obvious theme, and a subset of the triviality theme. This theme exposes the aristocracy as shallow and.....

Additional themes are discussed in the complete study guide.

## MOOD

The mood of the *Importance of Being Earnest* is largely satirical. This is because Wilde is seeking to mock the triviality of the upper class society of London. Wilde's satire is characterized by wit and is, throughout, lighthearted. He often portrays lines that.....

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Oscar O'Flahertie Fingal Wills Wilde was born on October 16, 1854 in Dublin, Ireland. He was born into an interesting and somewhat eccentric family, which would prove to be a very appropriate backdrop for the man Wilde would become. His mother, Lady Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde (1820-96), was a journalist and poet. She published revolutionary poetry under the pseudonym "Speranza"; Lady Jane gained attention as a poetess in 1846 when her work appeared in the Irish newspaper *The Nation*.

Wilde's father, Sir William Wilde was an accomplished physician who specialized in diseases of the eyes and ears. He published two books by age twenty-eight and was named medical advisor to the Irish Census of 1841. This was ground-breaking for the time, as no other nation had a collection of such extensive data. William was appointed the Assistant Commissioner for the next three censuses; in 1864 he was knighted for his diligent work. The same year of his knighting, Sir William was.....

## LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Victorian Age (1830- 1901) is named after the reign of Queen Victoria of England (1837-1901). This was an era of great prosperity for Great Britain; the time when the sun never set on the British Empire because of its vast land claims. This time period also saw the increase in disparity between the very wealth and the very poor. Many technological and scientific discoveries (The Industrial Revolution; Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, 1859) led to rapid change in day to.....

## ACT SUMMARIES WITH NOTES AND ANALYSIS

### ACT I

#### Summary

The play opens in the morning room of Algernon Moncrieff's flat in London. His servant, Lane, is arranging tea and Algernon is in another room playing the piano. Algernon enters and asks Lane if he has heard him playing. Lane says he did not think it was polite to listen. Algernon tells him that is terrible because while he does not play accurately, he plays with wonderful expression.

It becomes apparent that Algernon's aunt, Lady Bracknell, is coming for tea. The discussion turns to marriage when Algernon asks Lane why servants always drink the champagne during dinner parties. Lane informs him that bachelors always have the best wine. Algernon asks if marriage is so demoralizing. Lane informs us that he was married once but only as the result of a misunderstanding, so he is not sure. Lane exits; Algernon comments that Lane's views seem lax and the lower orders have no use if they will not set an example. He comments that Lane's class seems to have a lack of moral responsibility.

Unexpectedly, Algernon's friend Jack Worthing drops in. Jack resides most of the time in the countryside and is visiting town. Lane and Algernon are under the impression that Jack's name is Ernest and refer to him as so. Jack is happy to learn that Lady Bracknell (Aunt Augusta) and her daughter Gwendolen are coming because he wants to propose marriage to Gwendolen. Algernon says that he will not be able to marry her because he flirts with her, which Aunt Augusta does not like. Furthermore, as Gwendolen's first cousin he will refuse to offer his consent unless Jack settles a question for him.

He has found a cigarette case that Jack had forgotten upon his last visit. There is an inscription, which states: "From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack." Jack tries to pretend it is from an aunt. Eventually, he must admit that Cecily is his ward. To escape the country whenever he likes, he pretends to have a brother in the city named Ernest who continually needs help getting out of trouble. Algernon is amused by this and tells Jack that he is a "Bunburyist." This is a term Algernon has coined for someone who creates a character that he must visit, thus allowing him an excuse to leave. Algernon himself has created a friend named Bunbury, who is frequently ill and in need of care.

Jack further explains that Cecily is the granddaughter of a man named Thomas Cardew, who has passed away. Cardew adopted Jack as a baby and now Cecily has been entrusted to Jack. Because he feels that he must be respectable around Cecily and always set a good example, he had to create Ernest so he would be able to escape and be himself whenever he wanted. Jack tries to assure Algernon that he is through with "Ernest," but Algernon tells Jack that if he does marry he better keep Ernest around because he will need him more than ever.

Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive. Jack is able to witness Algernon's "Bunburying" when he tells his aunt that he will be unable to attend her dinner that evening because he must attend to his sick friend.

Algernon escorts Lady Bracknell into the music room, leaving Jack and Gwendolen alone. They confess their love for one another, and Cecily accepts Jack's marriage proposal. However, she says that she loves him particularly because his name is Earnest and that if he were named anything else, like Jack for example, she could not love him.

Lady Bracknell returns and Gwendolen informs her of the engagement. Lady Bracknell informs Gwendolen that she does not have the autonomy to engage herself; that is the job of her parents. She orders Gwendolen to leave in order to ask Jack some questions. She inquires about all aspects of Jack's life and background and seems somewhat satisfied until she asks him who his parents are. Lady Bracknell is appalled to find out that Jack was found in a cloakroom in Victoria's station and raised by Thomas Cardew- the man who found him. Lady Bracknell tells Jack she will not allow Gwendolen to marry him and leaves.

Jack is very upset and tells Algernon that he plans to kill Ernest and return to being Jack all of the time. In the meantime, Gwendolen returns and tells him that her mother will never allow the marriage but Jack will always have her undying love, no matter what.

## **Notes**

This section sets the tone for the rest of the play, which is very satirical. It is also the exposition. Wilde cleverly harnesses characterization and dialogue to convey the absurdities of Victorian London “society.” Wilde establishes, here, his major themes for the duration of the play: absurdity of society, marriage as a superficial contract, and his satirical wit. This play can be considered as a comedy of manners, because it uses an ironic tone while observing upper class society, whose members seem to value the wrong things. Because of this, the play is humorous

In the very beginning Wilde presents an interaction between Algernon, a man of status, and Lane, his manservant. Algernon asks Lane if he has heard him playing the piano. When Lane responds that he has not, Algernon thinks it a pity because he plays with “wonderful expression,” if not accurately. One can take this as an example of Wilde’s support of the Aesthetic movement, which valued art for art’s sake. This philosophy did not require art to instruct or handle political issues. Unconcerned with the accuracy of his music, and in appreciation of its artistic value, Algernon can, here, be viewed as an aesthete.

Algernon and Lane discuss the institution of marriage and, ironically, consider it demoralizing. This is unusual because Victorian society held marriage in high esteem. Consistently, throughout this play, Wilde will repeat this satirical view of marriage. Finally, in another surprising moment, Algernon states that he believes it is the job of the lower classes to set an example for the upper classes. This is interesting, because it re-situates the hierarchical nature of society, which assumes richer to be better.

Lacy Bracknell is an interesting character because she is of high society and acts seemingly irrationally. Her decision to not allow Gwendolen to marry Jack, based on his being found in a cloakroom as a baby, seems ridiculous. She disregards love as a basis for marriage. Wilde uses her to display the superficiality of the upper class. Interestingly, he also portrays Gwendolen as shallow when she says that she could not love Ernest if he had another name.....

## **OVERALL ANALYSES**

### **CHARACTER ANALYSIS**

The Main character and protagonist of this play is John Worthing (known as Jack in the city). He is the main character because he responsible to the major plot developments; most action revolves around him: the conflict is his; the main setting of the play occurs at his home; the plot becomes complicated when his pursuits are jeopardized, and the plot is not finally resolved until his interests are settled.

He is a man of mysterious background: he was found at Victoria Station as an infant, in a hand-bag. He now cares for the grand-daughter of his deceased patron. To escape.....

### **PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS**

As mentioned in the “Literary / Historical Information” section, the 1890s saw a change in Victorian Literature, and can be debatably called the beginning of modernism. Writers like Oscar Wilde or Bernard Shaw are concerned less with reaffirming the audience's cherished values, as they are with offering shocking ideas, which cause people to question their basic.....

### **THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS**

The major theme of this play is the satire of the upper classes. This is a particularly appropriate theme for Wilde to choose because of his experience among upper class people. Wilde’s leisurely setting- the country, where almost no action takes place- is a perfect backdrop, because it insinuates that the wealthy do nothing with their time. He characterization is also clever. None of the upper class characters have any real depth,

which suggests a one-dimensional nature. They are trivial, and shallow as well. An example of this can be found in the interaction between Gwendolen and Cecily, who.....

## POINT OF VIEW

While narration does sometimes occur in drama, there is no narrator in this play. The characters speak.....

## QUOTATIONS – QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

1.) Algernon: "I don't play accurately- anyone can play accurately- but I play with wonderful expression." Act I

One can take this as an example of Wilde's support of the Aesthetic movement, which valued art for art's sake. This philosophy did not require art to instruct or handle political issues. Unconcerned with the accuracy of his music, and in appreciation of its artistic value, Algernon can, here, be viewed as an aesthete.

2.) Algernon: "Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them?" Act I

Algernon says this after he and his servant, Lane, have a discussion about marriage during which.....

## SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

*The Importance of Being Earnest* employs the use of symbolism in many of the character's names:

**Chasuble** - the word chasuble is a vestment worn during services. This is, of course, appropriate given the nature of Chasuble's profession. It could be interpreted that, because Wilde chose to name him after the "garment," the covering, the outer vestment- that there is more.....

## IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

**Title:** *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy For Serious People*

**Author:** Oscar Wilde

**Date Published:** 1899

**Meaning of the Title:** Earnest is a play on words of the character name Ernest. While the name Ernest inspires one to believe a person may be trustworthy and honest, in fact the character Jack/Ernest is deceitful and dishonest. Ironically Jack realizes that, despite his efforts, his whole life has been truthful; he now knows the "Vital Importance of Being Earnest."

**Setting:** The play is set in England in the 1890s. Act I is in London and Acts II & III take place in the country (Hertfordshire).

**Genre:** Social Comedy; farce.

**Protagonist:** Jack Worthing, the main character. He is.....

## STUDY QUESTIONS – MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. Why is Jack not allowed to marry Gwendolen?

A. He is already married

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- B. Her mother does not approve
- C. He is her brother

**2. What does Algernon find that leads him to believe Jack “Ernest” has another life?**

- A. A letter, addressed to Ernest
- B. A handkerchief with the initials “J.W.”
- A. A cigarette case with “Uncle Jack” engraved into it.....

**Answer Key**

1. B 2. C 3. A 4. C 5. C 6. A 7. B 8. B 9. A 10. C 11. C 12. A 13. B 14. A 15. C

**ESSAY TOPICS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS**

1. Consider the theme of marriage; by using textual evidence, create an argument stating what Wilde is trying to say about marriage and why he might be saying this.

Contrast and compare the 4 women characters in this play. What does each represent of Victorian society. Do you think these are realistic stereotypes, why or why not?.....

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