

College Literature

More Notes on *The Importance of Being Earnest*

--from novelguide.com's "The Importance of Being Earnest Essay Q & A":

Jack and Algernon both create fictional identities for their own convenience. Are there any important differences between their deceptions?

Algernon's deceptions are less serious than Jack's. He appears never to hurt anyone with his fiction of Bunbury. He keeps his imaginary creation is kept at arm's length; he does not actually pretend to be Bunbury. His motive for creating Bunbury appears to be to have an excuse to escape from tiresome duties and responsibilities in town, such as dining with Lady Bracknell. Because Algernon pretends that he goes to the country to look after the invalid Bunbury, he gains the additional benefit of borrowing the appearance of dutiful and charitable behavior. Algernon only adopts the persona of Ernest in order to meet Cecily, dropping the pretense immediately Cecily challenges him and honestly confessing his motive.

Jack, on the other hand, does pretend actually to be someone he is not. His motives for pretending to be Ernest in town are never made explicit, but the audience of Wilde's time would naturally assume that Jack is an adherent of that by-product of strict Victorian morality, the double life. They would assume that Jack, under his false identity in town, gets up to the kinds of mischief and dissolute behavior of which respectable society disapproved. Blaming his wicked brother "Ernest" for his town activities, Jack is able to preserve the appearance of moral impeccability at his estate in the country. He is known only as a morally upright guardian to Cecily and a Justice of the Peace (judge) to the wider community, not to mention a concerned and dutiful brother to the reprobate Ernest.

Jack deceives even those closest to him. Both Algernon and Gwendolen, the woman whom Jack wants to marry, initially know him as Ernest. Jack's deception comes under pressure when Gwendolen turns out to be irrevocably attached to the idea of marrying someone called Ernest, meaning that Jack cannot carry out his plan to kill off his fictional brother. Jack never admits to Gwendolen the real reasons for his long-term pretence of being someone else; instead, he merely allows her to believe an idea she puts forward, that he wanted an excuse to come to town frequently in order to visit her. His relationship with Gwendolen is therefore never placed on an honest footing, unlike Algernon's with Cecily. In his unrepentant dedication to deception and a double life, Jack represents Victorian hypocrisy, which turned a blind eye to all kinds of immoral behavior as long as a virtuous appearance was preserved. He wants others to think of him as the epitome of moral rectitude, when, in fact, he lives a lie.

Lady Bracknell tells Jack, "You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter – a girl brought up with the utmost care – to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel?" What is the significance of Lady Bracknell's words in relation to the play as a whole?

In Victorian English middle- and upper-class society, marriage was seen as an opportunity for social and financial advancement. Lady Bracknell wants her daughter Gwendolen and nephew Algernon to marry someone of 'good family,' with a respectable or even noble pedigree. She also wants them to be rich. This is shown by her keen interest, when she interrogates Jack as to Cecily's suitability to marry Algernon, in Cecily's social connections and the number of large houses her family owned. Lady Bracknell is appalled by the fact that Jack's only known "origin" is not a noble family but "a Terminus" (as well as "origin" meaning a family line, there is a pun on its other meaning of the railway station from which a train starts its journey). It is especially repugnant to her that Jack was a foundling discovered in a handbag. This image conjures up connotations of illegitimacy, which carried a huge social stigma in Wilde's time. Such babies were often delivered in secret and abandoned in a public place, which the baby Jack's situation superficially resembled.

It is typical of the ironic inversions of the play that Jack turns out to be Lady Bracknell's own sister's baby, and therefore has a pedigree to which she cannot reasonably object. This revelation satirically undermines Lady Bracknell's snobbish attitudes. One of Wilde's main satirical targets in the play is the tendency of middle- and upper-class society to focus on the superficial trappings of respectability rather than examining what is really important, such as a person's inner worth. In the story line of Jack's origins, such preoccupations are discredited as nonsensical.

In addition, in Lady Bracknell's remark that "a cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion," Wilde satirizes the prudery about sexual affairs, especially those that crossed class boundaries, exhibited by respectable Victorian society. That she attaches great importance to the superficial matter of Jack's lack of pedigree but cares nothing about his character is Wilde's satirical comment on the trivial values and hypocrisy of society. Society, it is implied, is willing to overlook serious and substantial matters as long as the forms (such as having identifiable parents, and living on the fashionable side of the street) are preserved.

It is possible that Lady Bracknell's remark about the cloakroom's concealing a social indiscretion also contains a coded reference to homosexual activity, which some members of Wilde's audience would have understood. In 1895, shortly after *The Importance of Being Earnest* opened, Wilde was charged and sentenced for "gross indecency" for having homosexual affairs; sex between men was called sodomy, and sodomy was an illegal act. Well into the second half of the twentieth century, the social stigma attached to homosexuality meant that much homosexual activity took place in anonymous places such as public toilets (then often called cloak-rooms as the two functions were combined in one area).

How does Wilde use inversions in the play?

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde inverts the audience's expectations in many ways. A large part of the humor of the play springs from these inversions, occurring in the areas of character, plot, morality, and language.

One of the major inversions is of conventional morality. Cecily falls in love with "Ernest's" wicked reputation, saying to Algernon/Ernest, "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" (Act 2).

And after Jack finds out that his name really is Ernest, when he thought he was only pretending to be called that, he says, "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." In these inversions, Wilde lampoons conventional morality by drawing attention to the fact that in this age of hypocrisy, no one is quite what they seem. They also highlight the perverse attraction of the 'forbidden fruit' of wickedness in an age that condemned as unacceptable so much of the darker aspect of individuals and society.

Inversions of plot include the discovery that Jack, far from being one of society's outcasts, is in fact Lady Bracknell's nephew. This inversion exposes Lady Bracknell's (and by extension, upper-class society's) superficial values and snobbery. The inner Jack has not changed at all, yet simply by being identified as a scion of the upper class, he automatically becomes a suitable husband for Gwendolen in Lady Bracknell's eyes.

Inversions of character include the revelation that Miss Prism, who has appeared to be a very paragon of rectitude, has a hidden past that includes writing a three-volume novel and misplacing an aristocratic baby (Jack). These are not quite the classic 'fallen woman' scenarios of Victorian melodrama: in fact, they have an absurd flavor, with Wilde taking a satirical swipe at the kind of novels that were thought suitable for ladies to read. Rather, Wilde uses the convention of the revelation about a fallen woman to cast the respectable Miss Prism in a story of absent-mindedness and shame. In another inversion of character, Lady Bracknell, because of her close relationship to the woman (her sister, Mrs. Moncrieff) whose baby was lost, is forced to share in any shame she imposes upon Jack's origins or Miss Prism's fit of absent-mindedness. In these two inversions, Wilde suggests that in the matters of Victorian conventional morality, no one has the right to cast the first stone, since everyone's story is somewhat open to censure.

Inversions of language include unexpected reversals of clichés and truisms (self-evident truths). For example, Wilde has Algernon pronounce, “Divorces are made in Heaven” (Act 1), a version of the cliché, “Marriages are made in Heaven.” Here, the aim is to subvert conventional morality. In another example, Algernon says, “it’s awfully hard work doing nothing,” (Act 1) which is the opposite to the usual assumption that hard work means doing many things and that the way to relax is to do nothing. The statement is one of many that mark Algernon out as a dandy, one who cultivates a leisurely lifestyle. On another level, however, many people, if they were to give this statement a moment’s thought, would accept that it touches on truth. Who has not been trapped in some social or public situation, deprived of his usual activities and ‘props’ and therefore having nothing particular to do, and not felt that it is the hardest “work” imaginable? In this instance, as in many of Wilde’s inversions, the aim is to amuse, but also to make people think beyond the accepted wisdom.

Sometimes, the point of a linguistic inversion is to satirize conventional society. In the case of Lady Bracknell, she does not stand apart from her comments and deliver them in order to be witty (like Algernon) but truly believes them. It is the audience who stands apart and laughs at the absurdity of her (and conventional society’s) prejudices. An example is her statement, “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” (Act 1). This inverts the usual truism, strongly held by Victorian social reformers, that education is a desirable and improving thing. In her additional comment that effective education could lead to “acts of violence in Grosvenor Square” (Act 1),

Lady Bracknell makes clear Wilde’s satirical point: that the ignorance of the majority serves the upper classes well because it preserves the status quo.

What is the role of women in the play?

Wilde inverts the usual gender roles of Victorian (and most pre-twentieth-century) literature by portraying the women as the sexual aggressors in relationships and the men as fairly passive. Both Jack and Algernon have to do very little wooing, as Gwendolen and Cecily have already completed much of the process in the fictions they have created around the name “Ernest,” which each of them erroneously believes to be the name of their lover.

This female dominance is not confined to the younger generation of women. It is clear from Gwendolen’s and Lady Bracknell’s comments that Lord Bracknell, who never appears in the play, is utterly under the thumb of the women in his household. Gwendolen remarks that her father is “entirely unknown” outside their family circle, and reflects, “The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not?” (Act 2) This is a comic reversal of the strong expectation in Victorian times that a woman’s role was in the home. It is Lady Bracknell, and not her husband, as is the convention, who interviews Jack and Cecily about their suitability to marry Gwendolen and Algernon. Similarly, Lady Bracknell reveals that she often confines her husband to an upstairs room to dine, in order to preserve the considered arrangement of her dining table (Act 1).

Wilde subverts the Victorian expectation that women whose husbands have died should decorously confine themselves in deep mourning for many years, in the exchange between Lady Bracknell and Algernon about Lady Harbury. Lady Harbury is so rejuvenated since her husband died that Lady Bracknell comments that he lives “entirely for pleasure” and Algernon notes that “her hair has turned quite gold from grief” (Act 1), a satirical inversion of the cliché of turning grey with grief. Evidently, Lady Harbury has dyed her hair blonde and is enjoying life as never before.

Lady Bracknell shows the kind of ruthless ambition that was generally viewed as being the preserve of men when she says that she “had no fortune of any kind” when she married Lord Bracknell, “But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way.” However, in a move typical of the Victorian hypocrisy that Wilde lampoons, she does not offer the same tolerance to the match between Algernon and Cecily: she only warms to Cecily and consents to the marriage

when she knows that she has a fortune.

What is a dandy? Discuss the significance of the figure of the dandy with regard to *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

A dandy is a man who places unusual importance on his clothes and appearance. He cultivates wit and refined language, and leads a leisured life. Dandies were common in the literature and drama of certain periods, notably comic plays of the Restoration period (1660-1700), and in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature. They were usually ridiculous figures who embodied the absurd fashions and mores of their time, and were meant to be laughed at by the audience or reader.

Many of Wilde's works feature a dandy, and in many cases, the dandy stands in for the author. As the Wildean dandy's life is a work of art, he represents the ideal of the Aesthetic movement of which Wilde was a spokesman and figurehead. Wilde's innovation was to make his dandies heroes with whom the audience can identify. His dandies are often profoundly good and moral people (such as Lord Goring in his play *An Ideal Husband*). Unlike the dandies of tradition, Wilde's dandies are not meant to be laughed at; rather, in their role of a truthful observer of society and individuals, they point to what is ridiculous or hypocritical, and the audience laughs with them.

The most dandified character in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is Algernon. Idle and charming, Algernon surrounds himself with beautiful objects and furnishings, speaks in witty epigrams, and dresses with great style, if somewhat extravagantly. Algernon is amoral and neither good nor evil. He is also, in his own way, an artist, whose aim is to create beauty, style, and ingenious fictions that delight both himself and the audience. Because he is an artist, he can be assumed to be close to a stand-in for the author. Algernon's epigrammatic observations have a satirical edge, as they puncture the hypocrisies of conventional Victorian morality. For instance, his comment, "More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read" (Act 1) points to the heavy censorship of the Victorian period and the narrow conventional view of what was acceptable.