The Importance of Being Earnest Study Guide

The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The Importance of Being Earnest is a very popular play written by Oscar Wilde. In the satire, Algernon and Jack are two young members of the English gentry who pursue their romantic desires dishonestly. Both men want to adopt the name "Ernest," who is Jack's imaginary younger brother. The idea of name changing comes about when Algernon wants to marry Cecily, and Jack wants to marry Gwendolen. However, it just so happens that Cecily and Gwendolen are only interested in marrying men named Ernest!

Act I opens in Algernon's morning-room. His friend "Ernest" arrives and asks about Algernon's cousin Gwendolen. Ernest has every intention of marrying Gwendolen, despite the fact that both Algernon and Gwendolen's mother Augusta Bracknell refuse to entertain the idea. In the conversation between Algernon and his friend during, it becomes clear that "Ernest" is really named Jack and that he has invented a younger brother named Ernest to have an excuse to escape from his dreary life on the countryside. Jack was adopted at a young age by a very wealthy man named Thomas Cardew. He has spent his adult life caring for his now-deceased benefactor's daughter Cecily, whom he finds exceedingly dull. Algernon, who has expressed nothing but cynicism about life in general and, in particular, the concept of marriage, expresses great interest in this young Cecily. He wishes to meet her. However, their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Lady Bracknell and Cecily. Bracknell is displeased that Jack is present and makes every attempt to keep Gwendolen at a distance, but the young woman is clearly interested in Jack and ignores her mother. Soon, Bracknell and her nephew Algernon move to another room because Algernon agrees to give his friend time alone with Gwendolen to make the proposal. "Ernest" professes his love to Gwendolen. The proposal is a total success, with one exception: Gwendolen loves the false name "Ernest," which Jack has been calling himself. She cannot envision herself with a man by any other name. Jack resolves to have his name changed as soon as possible, and Bracknell returns to the room with Algernon. When Gwendolen tells her mother that she is married, Bracknell dismisses her nephew and daughter and discusses the matter with Jack. She is very pleased at his wealth, but she is horrified by his origins when she discovers he was found by the generous Mr. Cardew in a handbag. She requires him to find relatives immediately or forget the idea of marriage altogether.

Act II opens with Cecily and her governess, Miss Prism, in the countryside at Jack's home. Cecily is bored of her studies and encourages her to go on a walk with the local rector, Dr. Chasuble. She is eventually successful, and Algernon shows up, pretending to be Jack's younger brother Ernest, whom Cecily has heard a great deal of but never met. Algernon is smitten with her, and he asks her to marry him, to which she agrees. Jack returns home and finds Algernon pretending to be his brother. He attempts to send Algernon away immediately, but Algernon instead remains and continues speaking to Cecily, who makes it clear that, like Gwendolen, she cannot love or marry a man by any other name than Ernest. Algernon quickly resolves to have his name changed as well. Subsequently, he goes to Dr. Chasuble to become "Ernest." While Cecily is on her own in the garden, Gwendolen appears, looking for Ernest. Confusion breaks out when they

both assume they have become engaged to the same man, until Algernon and Jack both return. They are confronted by the women, who leave them in the garden alone to dwell on their dishonesty.

In Act III, the four reunite, and the women forgive them for their lies. But, they explain that they cannot marry men without the name of Ernest. Both men confess to agreeing to have their names changed. They begin arguing when they decide that they cannot both be called Ernest. Bracknell appears, furious at her daughter's escape, and meets Cecily. When she discovers she is very wealthy, she immediately approves of the bankrupt Algernon's marriage to her, but Jack refuses to allow it unless he is allowed to marry Gwendolen. Augusta refuses him in turn. Miss Prism returns, and she is stunned to see the elder woman. It turns out that Prism once lost Bracknell's nephew a long time ago, and the baby was never again found. Jack realizes he might be exactly this baby, and the fact is confirmed when he reproduces Prism's handbag, being the one he was found in. The play ends with Jack discovering he truly is Algernon's older brother and that his true name is, in fact, Ernest.

Act One, Part One

Summary

Lane prepares Algernon's morning-room for guests as Algernon plays piano offstage. Algernon shortly enters and exchanges a rapid volley of witticisms about his poor playing with the servant. He then remarks that the servants have clearly been drinking his wine. Jack enters unexpectedly, and Lane announces him as Ernest Worthing. Algernon, unhappy to see the other man, asks about his disappearance and subsequent absence since the prior Thursday, Jack remarks dismissively that he's been in the countryside. He claims to live in Shropshire where he despises his neighbors. He notices the food that has been set out. It is for his Aunt Augusta, or Lady Bracknell, and his cousin Gwendolen. Augusta dislikes Jack because he's in love with Gwendolen. Algernon tells Jack not to eat the cucumber sandwiches and expresses a strong belief that Jack's planned proposal to Gwendolen will fail entirely. Algernon returns Jack's cigarette case, asking for a reward since he is tight on funds. Algernon realizes the case actually belongs to someone else. The name Cecily is inscribed on it, and it seems to suggest that she is the niece of someone named Jack. Jack explains that his name is only Ernest when he is in town, and it is Jack when he is in the country. Algernon demands the entire story before he returns the cigarette case. So, the two sit in Algernon's morning-room and Jack begins to explain to Algernon what he is up to.

Jack was adopted as a little boy by a Mr. Thomas Cardew. He was later made guardian to Mr. Cardew's granddaughter Cecily, who lives with Jack under the care of Miss Prism, who is her tutor and governess. Jack calls himself Ernest in the city because he pretends to Cecily and Prism to have a younger brother by the name of Ernest who is constantly in trouble. Algernon calls Jack a Bunburyist, by which he means Jack has simply invented Ernest as an excuse to get away from his boring life. Algernon himself has similarly invented a poor, sick invalid by the name of Bunbury for the exact same reason. Algernon invites himself to dinner with Jack in order to get out of having to eat with his aunt and niece. Jack plans to rid himself of Ernest once he has gotten Gwendolen to agree to a marriage, and he suggests that Algernon do the same with Bunbury. Algernon rejects the idea. The bell rings, and Algernon agrees to allow Jack to propose to Gwendolen if Jack agrees to dinner with him. Jack does agree, and Lane announces the arrival of Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen.

Analysis

Though exceedingly brief, this section is dense with information, humor, and meaning. The first interaction between Algernon and his servant Lane represents the absurd relationship between the serving class and gentry during the time in which it was written. Lane is extremely clever, and every word that escapes his mouth is dismissive or insulting toward his employer. When Lane expresses his feelings that it is rude to listen to Algernon play, he is making a scathing comment on Algernon's poor musical

ability. Algernon is neither offended nor discouraged by his servant's nastiness, however, and not so subtly implies that Lane is both a thief and and alcoholic by asking about the disappearance of his wine. When Algernon refers to servants, he seems to be talking about many different employees of his, but it later comes out that he is broke, and, in fact, Lane is the only servant mentioned of Algernon's throughout the entire play. In perfect fashion, Lane turns the accusation into a compliment, congratulating Algernon on remaining single for such a long time. This conversation is extremely important because it establishes the cynical and hilarious tone adopted by the entire play.

Jack's appearance explores this cynicism further, and journeys into hypocrisy. Algernon instinctively disapproves of Jack, as he suspects he is up to no good while in town. When it is discovered that Jack is only pretending to be Ernest, Algernon subsequently admits to doing more or less the same thing in order to escape his own life. Both characters seem to chafe at one another's presence. Yet, both characters are very similar in nature. In this act, Algernon pretends to hold the high moral ground, but he exudes cynicism and disbelief at every turn. Jack confesses to believing in certain social institutions, such as marriage and family. While Jack also engages in dishonesty quite openly. his soon discovered origins go far in explaining this reservation about the nuisance family becomes. This is not so for Algernon, who has been surrounded by his family since the beginning.

Discussion Question 1

What is Lane's opinion of Algernon? What is Algernon's opinion of Lane? Do the two have respect for each other? Lane makes only the briefest of appearances in the play, but he has some of the harshest things to say. Discuss his personality in relation to the rest of this part of the act.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Algernon seem to want Jack to go away? What does their relationship really seem to be? Are they friends? If so, how is it that Algernon has never known Jack's real name?

Discussion Question 3

During the conversations, family and society are brought up a number of times. Discuss three comments made by any of the characters about either family or society. Explain their significance in the play.

Vocabulary

luxuriously, sentiment, establishment, customary, excessively, immensely, extravagance, constituted, bachelors, consent, frantic, inscription, absurd,

incomparable, improbable, motives, admirable, dreadful, invaluable, scandalous, problematic, propounding

Act One, Part Two

Summary

Algernon immediately pays compliments to Gwendolen when she enters the room. Lady Bracknell, or Aunt Augusta, apologizes for her lateness, explaining that she visited a Lady Harbury, who looks wonderful after her husband's death. Jack and Gwendolen sit next to each other, and Gwendolen opts not to move when Lady Bracknell directs her to sit beside her. Algernon suddenly realizes, mortified, that there are no cucumbers in the sandwiches he had made for Bracknell. Lane says there are none in the market available. Bracknell is fine with the development, explaining that she ate with Lady Harbury. Bracknell then tells Algernon that he is to spend time with a Mary Farquhar and them that evening, but Algernon says he can't because his friend Bunbury is once again very sick. Bracknell disapproves and expresses dislike for invalids. She asks Algernon to tell Bunbury not to get sick on Saturday because Algernon is responsible for arranging music that night. Algernon agrees and invites Bracknell into the other room with him. Bracknell calls Gwendolen to come with her. Gwendolen agrees, but she remains seated with Jack. When they are alone, Jack remarks on the nice weather, but Gwendolen knows that he means to speak of something else. She tells him to say whatever he means quickly because Bracknell could come back into the room suddenly. Jack tells her that he admires her, and Gwendolen knows this. She is mutually interested in him because she has always believed that she would one day grow up to marry a man by the name of Ernest, which Jack is still pretending to have. This causes Jack to realize that Gwendolen will not marry him if his name is not Ernest. Indeed, she confirms the idea of marrying him if his name were not Ernest as "metaphysical speculation," and Jack is greatly disturbed. He tells Gwendolen that he has never liked the name Ernest, but Gwendolen disagrees with him and totally insists that the name is wonderful. She will only marry someone with that name.

Jack persists, trying out his real name on her, but she rejects it, saying that "Jack" is merely a nickname for "John," and every "John" she knows is boring. Jack secretly resolves to change his name legally and says that they should be married immediately. Gwendolen is confused by this because even though she has agreed to marry him, he has not yet proposed. She encourages him to propose on the spot, but she warns him that she intends to accept. Jack finally manages a clumsy proposal, and Gwendolen accepts. She teases him for his nervousness and suggests that he should have practiced proposing to other girls beforehand. She then tells him he has beautiful eyes and hopes he'll look at her like the way he is looking at her presently when others are around. Bracknell comes back into the room and tells Jack to get off of his knee at once, but Gwendolen tells her to leave because Jack is not finished. Jack has just proposed to her. They are engaged. Bracknell says that they are not engaged. If Gwendolen ever becomes engaged, she or her father will be the first to tell her. Bracknell sends Gwendolen to their carriage and speaks with Jack alone, even though Gwendolen protests at being sent away. Bracknell then directs Jack to sit, even though Jack declines. She then produces a pencil and notebook and informs him that he is not on

her list of eligible suitors for Gwendolen. She asks him if he smokes, and she expresses approval when he admits to doing so, saying every man should have a "profession." She remarks positively about his age and asks him if he knows everything or nothing. When he confesses to knowing nothing, she again expresses approval. She asks of his income, and he reveals a somewhat impressive figure. She is pleased at this and at the fact it is primarily in investments as opposed to land.

He admits to having a country house, however, and this makes Bracknell uneasy. She makes certain he has a house in town as well, but she is similarly unhappy that it is on the "unfashionable" side of the avenue. Jack rents the house to an elderly woman named Lady Bloxham, but he says he can throw her out at six months notice. He also tells her that he does not have any "politics," and continues to explain that he is a liberal unionist. Bracknell is satisfied with this news because her family dines with liberal unionists. However, the conversation rapidly becomes tense when Jack says he has lost both of his parents. Bracknell misunderstands him, thinking his parents are dead, and matters only grow worse for him when he explains that his parents actually lost him. When he tells her that he was adopted by a Mr. Thomas Cardew, who found him in a handbag at a train station, she is horrified. Jack asks out he can set things right to be allowed to marry Gwendolen, and Bracknell tells him to find his family quickly. Jack insists such a thing would be very difficult to do. Bracknell leaves, and Algernon begins playing "The Wedding March" from the other room. Upset, Jack tells him to stop. Algernon comes back into the morning-room and teases Jack, believing that Gwendolen shot down his marriage proposal. Jack explains that Bracknell is actually the problem, and he calls the older woman a Gorgon. Algernon, who loves hearing his relatives insulted, begs Jack to go on. Jack does not, and he rejects the idea that anyone should be so mean to their own family. Suddenly, Jack wonders if Gwendolen will ever be like her mother, and Algernon insists she will at some point. Algernon continues to joke about the matter, but Jack stops him and says he is tired of everyone always trying to be clever.

Algernon then asks Jack if he told Gwendolen the truth about his name, and Jack says would never tell the truth to such a nice girl he was about to marry. Jack plans to tell his ward and her governess that his imaginary brother Ernest has died of severe apoplexy in Paris. Algernon warns him that apoplexy is hereditary and suggests he "kill" Ernest with a severe chill instead. Algernon worries about the impact Ernest's death might have on Cecily, since Jack has mentioned that she is far too interested in him for her own good. He also wishes to meet Cecily, but Jack refuses to allow it. He is also certain that Cecily will get along with Gwendolen, even though Algernon is convinced that attractive women always hate each other. Algernon suggests that Jack get ready for dinner, and asks what the two of them should do afterward. Jack insists that they won't be doing anything together. Once again, Lane enters and announces Gwendolen, who has Algernon turn away from her and Jack. Gwendolen explains that even though she might be forced to marry someone else, she will always love him. She found the story of his discovery in the handbag very romantic. She asks for his address in the country. Algernon pays attention and writes the number down when Jack says it. Gwendolen promises to write Jack and communicate with him regularly. They say their farewells, and Jack sees her to her carriage. Lane enters again and hands Algernon a glass of

sherry. When Jack returns, Algernon is laughing. He says that he is worried about his imaginary friend Bunbury. Jack leaves, and Algernon looks at his cuff, where he wrote Jack's country address down. Then, he smiles.

Analysis

This section of the play introduces and explores broad family relationships between the characters. Algernon has already stated that he does not care for Bracknell in the least. He expresses glee when Jack refers to her as a Gorgon. Jack may feel differently about family, but he still expresses concern that Gwendolen will turn out to be like her mother. This introduces the concept of heredity and similarity between family members, which becomes increasingly important in the play. In fact, it is mocked closely by in the text when Algernon warns Jack not to have Ernest die with apoplexy since it runs in the family. This is an absurd warning considering Ernest is not real. By the end of the first act, the reader has a very clear sense of the world in which the play takes place. Although it is not an accurate depiction of the Victorian Era in which the play was written, it is an extraordinary satire that allows the reader to explore Victorian society and it's lack of self-satisfaction. Both of the male characters are intensely bored and unemployed, being lower members of the nobility. Each of them has invented a lie in order to escape toward some form of entertainment. But, Jack makes it clear that such entertainment is not even very satisfactory, as he dreads the idea of doing anything social in town. Bracknell, however, is easily the strongest voice for the unhappiness of Victorian times, and it is no small accident that she is also the most powerful person in the play. The way in which she refers to the death of her friend's wife is completely sarcastic, and the truth is that the death has made the widow much happier. She's back on the market for a new husband. Thus, Bracknell implies, marriage is just one more of their lives' many trivialities, and it has nothing to do with romance. Algernon agrees with this sentiment, at least for now, but Jack does not. This is a very critical and subtle aspect of the text, but the play cannot be fully understood or appreciated without it. Jack, and later Algernon, both believe in love and romance. The way in which they shower their respective romantic goals with praise tends to bring the play's general cynicism and satirical mood to a halt. Of course, on stage, it looks and feels quite bizarre to have these men suddenly become incredibly romantic, and one could view or read these entries by interpreting them to be ironic. That may be so, but the characters are otherwise intentionally ironic unless they engage in hypocrisy.

Discussion Question 1

The name "Bracknell" does not have any specific associations or meanings, but is very indicative of the way in which the author uses names in the play to supplement the personalities of his female characters. Briefly discuss words that sound like "Bracknell." By using the name, what associations does the author mean to give to the character? Her first name is Augusta. Again, the author chose this name intentionally. What associations come with this name?

Discussion Question 2

Gwendolen is very ready to accept Jack's marriage proposal. She cites his false name, "Ernest," as the reason for accepting. Do you believe that Gwendolen is being completely honest with Jack when she confesses this, or might she have other reasons for marrying Jack? If so, what are they?

Discussion Question 3

On the basis of this act alone, consider Algernon's interest in Cecily. Through discussion, try to determine what Algernon will do in the second act, given that he deliberately wrote Jack's address down.

Vocabulary

obliged, altered, attentive, accustomed, ailment, morbid, relapse, programme, expurgations, vulgar, indifferent, pulpits, metaphysical, speculation, notorious, christened, indecorous, vaguely, radically, aristocracy, disposition, locality, contempt, indiscretion, indignation, ghastly, Gorgon, patronizing, capital, immoral, exquisitely, pessimist

Act Two, Part One

Summary

In the garden of Jack's country manor house, Miss Prism sits at a table while Cecily waters the garden. Prism discourages the chore and tells her to leave it to Moulton, the gardener. They are supposed to be studying German. Cecily hates German because she believes that German lessons make her look plain afterwards. Prism reminds her that her German lessons are important to her Uncle Jack, who evidently acts very serious and responsible around them. Cecily wishes he would allow his younger brother Ernest to visit, but Prism rejects the idea that he would have a good influence on either her or Cecily because Jack has said he is nothing but trouble. Cecily begins to write in her diary, and Prism tells her not to do so. Instead, she should just rely on her memory. At this point, Prism admits to once having written a three-volume novel. When Cecily asks to see it, Prism confesses to having misplaced it somewhere.

Dr. Chasuble appears in the garden and greets them. Cecily immediately tries to get him to go on a walk with Prism, saying she has a headache. Cecily admits to not paying any attention to Prism, and to this, Chasuble remarks that if he were her student, he would pay very close attention. This is a romantic advance on the part of Chasuble, who then asks if Jack is still away. When Prism confirms that he is still away, Chasuble excuses himself, making another flattering and romantic remark. This time it is a reference to classical literature. Prism misses its meaning completely, but when Chasuble explains what he tried to say, Prism agrees to go on a walk with him, telling Cecily to read from Political Economy. When they leave, Cecily throws the books in disgust. A servant named Merriman arrives and announces that Ernest Worthing has just arrived. Excited to finally meet her guardian's brother, she tells Merriman to bring "Ernest" to her and to make sure he has a room to stay in. Ernest is, of course, Algernon. She greets him and teases him for being her wicked cousin. She is playfully defensive with him. Algernon insists he is not wicked at all, but he does admit to being very reckless. He pretends to be disappointed that Jack is away, and Cecily tells him to stay and wait for his brother because she knows that Jack wishes to speak with Ernest about emigrating to Australia. Algernon openly admits he is not good enough for England and asks Cecily to reform him. She says she has not time, to which Algernon says he will instead reform himself. She invites Algernon in for a meal, still believing that he is Ernest. He asks her for a flower for his buttonhole and then compares Cecily to a pink rose. Cecily again grows defensive, and they go into the house. Prism and Chasuble return, and Prism is in the middle of trying to convince Chasuble that he should be married. When they realize Cecily is no longer in the garden, Jack comes onstage. He is dressed in mourning clothes. They are both surprised to see him, but they asked about the way he is dressed. He says that his brother Ernest has died in Paris of a severe chill. Chasuble digresses on academic affairs after a brief apology, and Jack interrupts him to ask if he can change his name later that day. Chasuble is confused by the request, but agrees to do so.

Jack then plans with him to come by his rectory at five-thirty that evening. Cecily comes back into the garden and greets Jack. She is disgusted by his clothes. She tells him that his brother is in the dining-room, to everyone else's confusion. Prism is disappointed that they are being visited by Jack's trouble-making brother and has no idea that Ernest is not real. When Cecily retrieves "Ernest" from the house, Jack is stunned and infuriated to discover it is Algernon, who immediately jumps into the role of his younger brother and begins to apologize for all of the trouble he has caused. Jack refuses to shake hands with Algernon after the apology, and Cecily tells him to be nice, since his brother Ernest has a very sick friend in town called Bunbury. That proves he cannot be such a bad person. Algernon acts as though Jack's reaction is deeply hurtful to him. Cecily promises never to forgive Jack if he doesn't agree to shake hands. Jack finally does so. Chasuble expresses joy while Prism is disgusted and takes the rector away with her and Cecily. This leaves Jack with Algernon, and Jack immediately scolds the other man for what he has done. He is furious for Algernon's interference and tells him that he must leave immediately. At that moment, Merriman enters to say that the room has been arranged. Jack is baffled, and Algernon jokingly apologizes for not being able to stay more than a week. Jack tells Merriman that his brother has been called back to town. Merriman goes back into the house, and the two argue again when they are alone. Algernon agrees to leave as long as Jack agrees to change his clothes. To himself, Algernon admits to being in love with Cecily. She comes back into the garden, and Algernon goes over to her. He tells her that Jack is sending him away. Cecily is sorry to see him go. Merriman returns and tells him that the dog-cart is ready, and Cecily tells him to wait. Algernon showers Cecily with compliments, and she writes them into her diary. He asks to see the book, but she refuses and, instead, tells him to order a copy when it is published. She tells him to repeat what he said, and she edits the comments while he speaks. Merriman returns again, and Algernon tells him to bring the cart back in a week's time, implying he means to stay despite what Jack has told him. He then asks Cecily to marry him. She laughs and tells him that they have already been engaged for three months.

Analysis

The roles of Jack and Algernon have been reversed somewhat in this chapter, and Jack seems entirely unaware or uninterested in the reality that Algernon hasn't really done anything worse than what he himself did to Jack. Instead of the playful and somewhat mischievous Jack of the previous act, we see someone who at least makes an attempt to adopt a mature and overbearing manner. Jack feels that it is his responsibility to do so around Cecily and Prism. The characters of Prism and Chasuble are constructed so as to make fun of a middle-class that the author appears to regard as over-educated and absurd. Both Prism and Chasuble are academics, and, as such, both use over-complicated language to make very simple points. Prism unknowingly mocks herself when she admits to writing a three-volume novel, but having it go unpublished because she quite simply misplaced it. There is clearly a romantic attraction present between herself and Chasuble, but the two tend to pretend that there isn't one around Cecily, who uses the fact to her advantage anyway. Algernon's meeting of Cecily is to be expected from his curiosity over the girl in the previous act. The humor of the play

reaches a definitive high-point after Jack has announced his brother is dead. Shortly thereafter, Cecily tells him his brother has come to visit. When Algernon appears, Jack cannot risk explaining that he is not Ernest, or he might be exposed as a "Bunburyist" himself. Instead, Jack is furious with Algernon, but cannot say why. It is very important to note that no one asks why it is that Jack thought Ernest had passed away or why Ernest appears so healthy when he was just recently extremely ill. Ironically enough, it also becomes clear that Cecily is interested in Algernon mainly because of the name Ernest. This is very similar to Gwendolen's attraction to Jack, which rests on the same idea.

Discussion Question 1

Consider the way Cecily describes her German lessons. Why does she think they make her look ugly? What is her attitude toward the rest of her studies?

Discussion Question 2

What causes Algernon to ask Cecily for a buttonhole? What does Cecily say when he compares her to a pink rose, and how does she usually react to Algernon's compliments?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the reasons why none of the characters find it suspicious that "Ernest" turns up at Jack's home right when Jack announces that he is dead. Could Jack's anger toward the other man have anything to do with it?

Vocabulary

utilitarian, demeanour, commended, vacillating, allusion, melodramatic, hypocrisy, Quixotic, misanthrope, calamity, consolation, internment, immersion, cannonical, melancholy, scoundrel, grotesque, immensely, personification, frankness

Act Two, Part II

Summary

Algernon is confused that he is somehow already engaged to Cecily, and she explains that she found conversation about Ernest very attractive. She describes an imaginary encounter with him. Then, she shows him their engagement ring and letters he has written to her. She expresses mild frustration at having had to write the letters herself, but she has, in fact, made her entire relationship with Ernest into a fantasy. She also tells him that the engagement was broken off several weeks ago. Algernon asks why, and Cecily explains that it wouldn't be a serious engagement if it hadn't been broken off. However, they have since made up. She also tells him that she will not break off the engagement again, and she loves the name Ernest. Algernon is confused. He asks her if she could possibly love someone by the name of Algernon. Cecily dislikes the name. Algernon tries to defend his name, but Cecily is very clear. She can only love someone named Ernest. Algernon asks if Dr. Chasuble would be available in his rectory. Cecily says that he is there. He is so smart that he's never written a single book. Algernon excuses himself suddenly, which displeases her, but he agrees to hurry back to her. She commits to writing her proposal down in her diary when Merriman appears and tells her that a Miss Fairfax is here to see Jack, who left for the rectory some time ago.

Cecily assumes the woman is elderly and interested in matters of charity with Jack. When she tells Merriman to bring the woman in, he produces Gwendolen. The two girls are extremely polite to one another as they introduce themselves, and they go so far as to agree to call each other by their first names. Gwendolen asks if Cecily knows of Lord Bracknell, her father, and Cecily does not. When Cecily tells Gwendolen that she lives at the manor house, Gwendolen is surprised. Still being polite, Gwendolen confesses that the news is disappointing, even though she knows Ernest would never be unfaithful. Cecily corrects her, saying that Ernest is her guardian's brother, which confuses Gwendolen more, because her "Ernest" never said anything about having a brother. Cecily explains that they haven't gotten along in years, which relieves Gwendolen until Cecily tells her that she is engaged to Ernest. Instantly, Gwendolen insists there must be some mistake because she is engaged to Ernest. Cecily argues and explains that Ernest proposed to her minutes ago. Gwendolen argues that since Ernest proposed to her first, her engagement takes precedence. Cecily says that since she was proposed to second, Ernest must have changed his mind. The two engage in a very polite-sounding argument, although it is clear they are both horrified.

This politeness quickly evaporates, however, when they resort to name-calling. Merriman arrives and arranges tea for them, which causes them both to be polite once again. Gwendolen asks about good walks in the area, and Cecily suggests that she go to the top of a nearby hill. They attempt to remain polite in front of the servants but hurl concealed insults at one another. Cecily asks if Gwendolen wants sugar, and Gwendolen says no because sugar is out of style. Cecily dumps four large lumps of sugar into Gwendolen's tea. Cecily asks if Gwendolen would like cake or bread and

butter. When Gwendolen asks for bread and butter, Cecily instead gives her a huge slice of cake. Gwendolen rises in outrage and warns Cecily not to insult her again. Gwendolen goes on to say that she mistrusted Cecily from the moment she saw her. Jack comes into the garden. Gwendolen rushes to him and asks if he intends to marry Cecily. Jack laughs at the idea, and Cecily explains that she isn't talking to Ernest, but rather to Jack. Algernon comes into the garden, and Cecily rushes to him and asks if he intends to marry Gwendolen, and he is stunned to see everyone there. Gwendolen corrects Cecily, telling her that her cousin's name is Algernon, not Ernest. The two men admit to their real names, and the women comfort each other and agree to call one another sister. They both ask where Ernest is, and Jack admits to not having a brother at all. The girls decide that they are not engaged to anyone at all.

They retreat into the house. Jack turns to Algernon and complains about Bunburying, but Algernon is thrilled. The two argue briefly, and each scolds the other for how they have behaved. Algernon begins eating muffins, and Jack expresses disgust that he's able to do so at such a time, then begins eating muffins himself. Algernon tells him to eat cake instead and grabs the muffins back. Jack asks him to leave, but Algernon wants dinner first. They both reveal to each other that Chasuble is going to rename them Ernest on the same night, but Jack says they can't both be called by the same name. They continue to argue as they fight for the muffins.

Analysis

The meeting of Gwendolen and Cecily is highly comical primarily because it plays out exactly the way that both Algernon and Jack have predicted, even though they predicted two very different outcomes. Both determined to marry a man named Ernest, the girls fight for him without reservation. It is the name and fantasy that they fight for, and even when the men reveal neither of them is Ernest, the two girls still quite comically demand to know the whereabouts of Ernest. The women sympathize and console one another once they discovered their engagements were false. At this point, the two men begin arguing, even though both of them are guilty of exactly the same thing. The word "absurd" is flung around during this argument frequently, as it has been throughout the rest of the play, but neither seems to admit that he did anything absurd, rather that he acted in a perfectly rational way for someone who wanted to get married. Each insists that the other man was responsible for the disaster. The muffins become the subject of their debate, and the hypocrisy is heightened when Jack scolds Algernon for eating them, but then proceeds to eat them himself. This scene is a clever exaggeration of Jack's first introduction in the first act, when Algernon complains that he is always eating. The two have this behavior in common, and it is clear that the real problem occurs when one eats the other's food, just as when one tries to marry the other's family member. Of course, there is also the matter of the name Ernest, which is perfectly fine for each to have to himself, but not for them to share. In essence, the two fight like the brothers they are pretending to be.

Discussion Question 1

What causes Gwendolen to finally stand up in anger at Cecily? What does Gwendolen say to the younger girl when this happens? Why is this funny?

Discussion Question 2

What do the girls ask when they discover neither Jack nor Algernon is named Ernest? What happens after the men answer honestly?

Discussion Question 3

The word absurd has been used very often throughout the play to describe many actions. Discuss why the author opted to use this word so much. What does it mean to the individual characters of Algernon and Jack?

Vocabulary

conceited, ceremonials, impetuous, Rectory, philanthropic, effeminate, arduous, candidly, susceptible, satirically, chafe, vicinity, epidemic, detestable, superciliously, indignation, venture, scornful, trivial, consitution

Act III

Summary

In the morning-house of Jack's Manor, Gwendolen and Cecily watch the men as they eat muffins, and Cecily assumes that means they are sorry. The men are whistling when they approach the women. Even though both Gwendolen and Cecily promise not to say the first words, Gwendolen speaks immediately and Cecily shortly afterwards. They ask the men if they pretended to be named Ernest to be allowed to propose to them. The women seem pleased when both men admit it is the truth, even though neither Gwendolen nor Cecily truly believe it. However, the fact that neither of the men is named Ernest is still a problem for both of them. Jack and Algernon confess to planning to change their names, and the women are impressed. Merriman enters and coughs to let everyone know he is nearby. He explains that Lady Bracknell has just come to the house. This startles everyone. Bracknell calls out to Gwendolen, who insists that her engagement to Jack is real. Bracknell refuses to agree, and orders her daughter to sit down next to her. She says that she paid Gwedolen's maid to tell her where her daughter had gone. Lord Bracknell believes that she is at a university lecture. Bracknell asks Algernon if Bunbury lives in the house they are in, and Algernon says that Bunbury "exploded."

When Bracknell asks him what he means, he tries to recover from the error, saying instead that he died when the doctors told him it was impossible for him to live. Bracknell is pleased that Bunbury finally made up his mind. She asks Jack who Cecily is and learns that Algernon is engaged to her. When Bracknell asks if Cecily was also found at a train station, Jack grows angry and tells her about Thomas Cardew, offering to present her with legal documentation regarding Cecily's birth. She also asks if Cecily has money, at which point Jack admits to her having a large fortune. Bracknell, who was almost ready to leave before she heard this, stops suddenly and says that she likes Cecily a great deal. She examines Cecily and decides she's worthy of the bankrupt Algernon, due to "distinct social possibilities." Algernon professes not to care about social possibilities, but Bracknell interrupts him. She informs Cecily that Algernon is deeply in debt and gives her consent for their marriage, suggesting that they do so soon. Jack, being Cecily's guardian, refuses to allow the marriage. He cites Algernon's moral character as the reason, explaining what Algernon has done to deceive his ward. Bracknell does not care in the least. Instead, she asks Cecily how old she is, and Cecily says she is eighteen, but pretends to be twenty at parties. Jack says that she is not in control of her money or allowed to give her consent to marriage until the age of 35.

Cecily asks Algernon if he would wait that long, and he says he would. Cecily says that she personally can't do it. Bracknell insists that Jack change his mind, but Jack will only reconsider if Bracknell decides to allow him to marry her daughter. She refuses again and begins to take herself and Gwendolen away. Chasuble enters and says that he is ready for the christenings. Bracknell forbids Algernon to change his name. Chasuble expresses disappointment because neither of the men want their names changed

anymore. He begins to hurry away because he believes that Prism has been waiting for him in the vestry. When Bracknell hears Prism's name, she stops Chasuble and asks about her. When Chasuble describes her, Bracknell realizes she knows the woman. Jack tells Bracknell that Prism is Cecily's governess. Bracknell demands to see her at once, and Prism appears suddenly. She begins to complain to Chasuble about how long he kept her waiting until she sees Bracknell, at which point she freezes in fear. She looks for a way to escape from the room. Bracknell calls Prism to her and demands to know what has happened to a baby. Prism was apparently responsible for misplacing a baby 28 years ago. The governess does not know what has happened to it, but she does know that she accidentally left the baby in her handbag at the train station, while leaving her manuscript in the perambulator. Jack leaves to go to his room while Chasuble speculates with Bracknell about what this could possibly mean. They hear noises above in Jack's room, and everyone begins to worry until he comes down with the handbag. When Prism confirms that it is her old handbag, he explains that he is the baby she lost. He momentarily mistakes her for his real mother, but Bracknell corrects him. He is actually Algernon's older brother, which makes Bracknell his aunt. When Jack asks his original name, Bracknell says he was named after his father. She doesn't remember the name instantly. Finally, Jack takes out the army list, since his real father was a general, and he looks through the records until he discovers his birth name. It is, in fact, Ernest.

Analysis

The final act of the play curiously leaves a few conflicts unresolved, but the most important thing to take into consideration when analyzing it is the name "Ernest." Here more than anywhere else in the play, irony is present. Algernon pretends to be Jack's younger brother. He is, in fact, Jack's younger brother without knowing it, which makes the way the two fought in the previous act all the more humorous. It suggests what Algernon believes. Family members are bound to fight with each other. Bracknell's personality also plays a very strong role near the end of the play, especially when she is sizing up Cecily. It is also important to note that although none of Bracknell's relatives listen to her when she directs them as to where they should sit or stand, Prism does so. This demonstrates the influence that the Victorian class society had on behavior. The play continues to satirize the relationship when Jack makes the mistake of believing himself to be Prism's son, but Bracknell corrects him immediately. It is also fairly humorous that Bracknell cannot remember the name of her sister's husband. She turns out to be just the relative that she demanded him to find. Jack's real name also turns out to be Ernest, which is the greatest irony of all, but it does not resolve the main conflicts in the play which involved the potential marriages of Jack and Algernon to Gwendolen and Cecily respectively. Naturally, there are still obstacles in the way of these marriages, and the play does not bother to resolve them. Instead, the reader is left just before the conflict is resolved, as the discovery of Jack's true name is an ironic and ultimately satirical commentary on the importance of being earnest, or honest.

Discussion Question 1

What does Bracknell's constant ordering of those around her suggest about her? How successful is she and why?

Discussion Question 2

Prism is supposed to be a highly educated woman; yet, she mistakenly places a baby in a handbag and a manuscript in a carriage. What does this accident say about her? What statement is the author of the play trying to make about academics in general?

Discussion Question 3

Lord Bracknell, Augusta's husband, has been mentioned several times. Discuss Lady Bracknell's final mentioning of him. Why does she use his name? What can be understood about Lord Bracknell from the way others have spoken about him?

Vocabulary

repentence, invaluable, credulity, insuperable, legislation, morbidity, peculiarly, authenticity, solicitors, mercenary, ostentatiously, punctually, forbid, heretical, consternation, capacious, indignant, irrevocable, eccentric, vital

Characters

Algernon

Algernon is a man in his late twenties. Although he is a member of an important family, he is currently broke and in debt. It is strongly suggested that he is, in fact, bankrupt. He is very cynical and dislikes his family. He falls instantly in love with Cecily. He criticizes Jack for immoral behavior, but he himself pretends to care for an invalid friend in the country by the name of Bunbury. Both of Jack's parents have passed away, and his Aunt Augusta Bracknell visits him often with her daughter Gwendolen. Algernon disapproves of Jack's feelings for Gwendolen, and he does not believe that the feeling is mutual. In a heightened display of hypocrisy, Algernon pretends to be Jack's younger brother Ernest and visits Jack's manor in the country. There, he instantly falls in love with Jack's ward, the young Cecily. He proposes to her. He finds himself in a similar bind as Jack, when he discovers that Cecily will only marry someone named Ernest because she has come to like the name so much. Algernon professes to despise the institution of marriage, but he proposes to Cecily and resolves to change his name. He is genuinely romantic despite his previous lack of belief in romance. Following Jack's suggestion, he "kills" his imaginary friend Bunbury once he has Cecily agree to marry him. Bracknell approves of the marriage when she discovers that Cecily is extremely wealthy, but it is much to Algernon's credit that despite the fact he is broke, he is committed to marrying her regardless of what money she might have,

Jack

Jack is a man in his early thirties who was found in a hand-bag by a Mr. Thomas Cardew and adopted. He is wealthy and has houses on the countryside and in town. He keeps his ward and the daughter of Mr. Cardew in his country home, and considers the countryside extremely boring. He acts stiff and formal around his "niece" Cecily and her governess Miss Prism, but he has invented a younger brother by the name of Ernest. Ernest gets into trouble so that Jack has an excuse to visit town. Interestingly enough, when Jack does visit town, he goes by the name of Ernest. He is also a different kind of person altogether, as he invented Ernest as a means of escaping his boring life in the first place. In this respect, he bears striking similarity to Algernon, who turns out to be his brother, but whereas Algernon is cynical and bored of societal life, Jack has grown very weary of the countryside and looks there for his excursions. Unlike Algernon, he is actually wealthy this makes it all the more ironic when Algernon accuses Jack of being immoral, because Algernon merely pretends to still have money left. Jack begins the play in love with Algernon's cousin Gwendolen, who returns the feelings readily and agrees to marry him, but this is only the case because she believes that his name is Ernest, and has always dreamt of marrying someone with that name.

Gwendolen

Gwendolen is Algernon's cousin and the daughter of Lord and Lady Bracknell. She is young,and single. She has mutual feelings for Jack. She agrees to marry Jack in the first act, but mistakenly believes his name is Ernest. This is the only reason she agrees to marry him. She meets Cecily at Jack's home, and the two engage in a fight, both believing themselves to be engaged to the same man. However, once Gwendolen discovers that she has been deceived, she quickly becomes friends with Cecily and calls her "sister." Gwendolen ignores her mother's orders for the most part and disobeys Lady Bracknell whenever she can.

Cecily

Cecily is the young ward of Jack. She hates schooling, especially German, and she is very prone to ignore her studies. She keeps a diary but writes down fake incidents, hoping to someday have it published as though it were a dramatic novel. She is very interested in Jack's imaginary younger brother Ernest. She has, in fact, made up an engagement between them that she has even gone so far as to break off. When she meets Algernon, who introduces himself as Ernest, she continues the engagement with him, as she has grown very fond of the name Ernest itself. She fights with Gwendolen briefly when they believe they are engaged to the same man. Then, she quickly makes up with her and calls her "sister" when they discover they have been deceived. She is fond of gardening, even though Prism discourages the work.

Lady Bracknell/Augusta

Lady Augusta Bracknell is Gwendolen's mother. She is very arrogant and constantly orders people around, even though no one in her family listens to her. She is also Algernon's aunt. Though she disapproves of her daughter's marriage to Jack, she does try to arrange one between Algernon and Cecily once she discovers that Cecily is wealthy. Bracknell reveals to everyone that Prism once lost her nephew 28 years earlier, and that baby turns out to be Jack.

Lane

Lane is Algernon's manservant. Although he only makes a brief appearance in the first act, he is a significant character, for he seems to disregard the importance of his employer. He is at least as clever as Algernon and manages to insult him a number of times. He also implies that Algernon is broke when he admits that there were no cucumbers in the market for "ready money."

Miss Prism

Prism is Cecily's governess. She is a somewhat elderly woman, supposedly of excellent education, who can also be careless and foolish in many cases. She admits to Cecily that she once wrote a three-volume novel, but she lost it. It later comes out that she switched it with a baby and left it at a train station. Prism has romantic feelings for the Rector, Dr. Chasuble. The two appear to have something of a similar academic background. She does not like Jack's imaginary brother Ernest. She is displeased when Algernon, pretending to be him, arrives at the country manor.

Chasuble

Dr. Chasuble is the local Rector. He is well-educated, but many of the characters make an effort to emphasize that he has never published anything. He has strong feelings for Prism. He is also the one called upon to change both Jack and Algernon's name to Ernest. He expressed pleasure when the two, with Algernon pretending to be Ernest, shake hands.

Merriman

Merriman is a servant at Jack's home in the countryside. He is forced to prepare a room for Algernon, then unprepare it and fetch a carriage for him instead. Once he fetches the carriage he is told to wait five minutes, and then a week. He does all of this without complaining.

Ernest

Ernest is not a real person. Instead, he is Jack's imaginary brother, but he has a very real influence on Cecily, Jack's young ward. Jack also pretends to be Ernest when he visits town. As a result, Gwendolen falls in love and agrees to marry him. In the second act, Algernon pretends to be Ernest and gets Cecily to agree to marrying him.

Bunbury

Bunbury, like Ernest, is a fake person made up by Algernon so that he can get out of family activities. He "kills" Bunbury in the third act when Lady Bracknell asks about him. Throughout the play, both Jack and Algernon refer to pretending to be another person as "Bunburying."

Symbols and Symbolism

The Handbag

The handbag is a simple carrying case in which Jack was discovered as an infant. It is used to great comedic effect throughout the play, as when Lady Bracknell expresses horror over Jack's having been discovered in it. It turns out to have once belonged to Miss Prism, who misplaced Jack in it when she accidentally put her manuscript in the infant's carriage. The handbag is also a method by which the author can poke fun at family relations in general. Bracknell, for instance, vaguely suggests that Jack is related to the handbag and fears that Cecily is related to it as well.

Three Volume Novel

This is still a very popular format today, known more commonly as a trilogy. Miss Prism reveals that she once wrote a three-volume novel only after Cecily insults them as form of art. This format is mocked throughout the play, until finally Bracknell admits to having read Prism's book. She found it horrible, which causes Prism to become defensive even when she is terrified at confronting Bracknell.

The Town

Algernon's residence is in the town. He personally finds city life boring, despite the fact that his aunt clearly thinks no one of importance would ever live in the country. Jack, on the other hand, lives in the country and always tries to escape into town for fun. Gwendolen, who is from town, pokes fun at Cecily for living in the countryside.

The Country

Oppositional to the lifestyle of the town is the country. Though there are no apparent differences between the two inherent in the play, Algernon is clearly smitten with Cecily's countryside mannerisms, although many of the other characters dislike it and regard it as unimportant.

The Garden

While both Algernon and Jack have morning-rooms in which parts of various acts take place, only Jack's country manor has a garden. The garden represents a country lifestyle, and Gwendolen drives this point home when she offers Cecily a backhanded compliment on its appearance.

Muffins

Both Jack and Algernon are very fond of muffins, and they become a subject of serious debate when they are discovered by the women not to be named "Ernest." The muffins themselves are not necessarily significant, but the argument over them does become highly representative of the way in which the two men argue by accusing each other of the same kinds of activities.

The Diary

Cecily's diary becomes increasingly significant throughout the play. Ironically, it is filled with imaginary events, many of which are centered around Ernest, who does not actually exist. Despite this fact, Cecily quotes from it to prove that she is, in fact, engaged to Ernest. Much like the imaginary characters, the diary serves to represent the characters' lack of interest in reality.

Cucumbers

Despite the fact that Algernon expresses shock when there are no cucumbers in the cucumber sandwiches, it is entirely possible, even likely, that he never intended there to be any. His dislike of his aunt would cause him to do this in order to remove her from his house more quickly. The comment that Lane makes about "ready money" also suggests that Algernon is so broke the vendors in town would never accept credit.

Tea

English tea time is used mockingly in the play. English tea-time is meant to be a social gathering centered on kindness and polite conversation. The convention is ridiculed in the play when Gwendolen and Cecily hurl passive-aggressive insults at one another.

Flowers

The garden at Jack's home has many flowers in it, and these are quickly associated with Cecily, who tends to them as the play introduces her. Flowers are the most specific symbol of true romance present in the novel, and it is very important to note that they are virtually the only symbol or social convention which is not turned on its head.

Settings

Algernon's Morning-Room

Algernon's morning-room is part of his house in the town of London. In the first act, Lane has prepared it for guests, specifically Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen. A piano is situated close to the room, so that playing can be heard easily inside the morning-room. Algernon is supposedly broke, so it is not be surprising that Lane is the only servant in this scene.

Jack's Country-Manor

Jack's large country manor is the play's setting. The manor consists of a garden and morning-room. Jack is said to be wealthy, so it is very likely that aside from Merriam and the foot-man mentioned in the text, there would be many other servants about both places.

Setting 3

Setting 4

Setting 5

Themes and Motifs

Marriage

The entire play can be seen as a social conversation about the benefits versus the drawbacks of marriage. Half of the characters think the idea of marriage is bad, including several characters who are or were married at one point. Marriage was important in the Victorian era. It was not only a social institution but an economical one. For a woman it was essentially the only means available for a stable life. Work was considered, especially for the upper classes, highly undesirable. The Importance of Being Earnest contrasts the social importance of getting married with the idea of romance, which constantly battles the practical considerations of those like Bracknell. who refuses to entertain the idea of allowing her only daughter to marry a man who does not know his actual family. Bracknell herself seems to agree with Algernon that marriage is a form of social confinement, especially when the two begin to joke about the death of her friend's husband. Within the context of marriage itself, Prism and Chasuble are seen as potential mates who are waiting for reasons unknown, and this combines well with their overly thoughtful and clumsy manners. Bracknell, Jack, Algernon, Gwendolen, and Cecily agree that swift marriages are the way to go, even if Bracknell believes this is the case for very different reasons than the others. The play never concludes whether or not it is actually better to be married, which is a major reason it does not end with the marriages of the four major characters.

Death

Death is openly mocked and trivialized in the play. Nowhere is this clearer than in Algernon's reference to Lady Harbury's hair having turned gold with grief, which is a not-so-carefully veiled remark about the fact that she has dyed her hair to make herself look younger for another potential husband. Bracknell is completely unsympathetic to Algernon when he suggests that both of his parents have died, and instead scolds him for managing to lose both of them. Jack admits to planning to have his younger brother Ernest without a thought to the grief it might cause Cecily, and when Algernon says to Bracknell that Bunbury has died, she expresses only relief at the matter having been resolved. The open ridicule that play displays toward death lends the entire work an irreverent tone that greatly adds to the air of cynicism, and demonstrates openly that the characters--with the exceptions of Prism and Chasuble--are extraordinarily self-centered. Even Cecily, the younger girl, expresses extreme distaste for Jack's mourning clothes, without even taking a moment to pay her respects to whomever Jack might have lost. Just as with the rest of this work, the satirical presentation of death serves to highlight the contemporary absurdities inherent in Victorian society, where showing emotion was generally frowned upon. It is, in this sense, a demonstration of the way in which their society prevents them from being earnest at all.

Deception

Jack and Algernon seem to only know how to engage in lying in order to obtain what they want. It is deeply ironic that both of them can only obtain successful marriage arrangements from Gwendolen and Cecily by being completely dishonest about who they are. It is just as Ironic that Algernon, pretending to be Jack's younger brother by the name of Ernest, turns out in fact to be Jack's younger brother, while Jack's true name is Ernest. The situation behaves as though the two have lied so much that they have managed to make their way back into at least partial truths. When Jack admits at the end of the play to having learned the importance of being earnest, or honest, he is lying completely. Jack does not claim that the truth has freed him in any way. Instead, the name "Ernest" is where the real importance lies, for neither girl really cares about whom she marries, so long as it is someone by that name. This implies that their marriage desires are essentially empty and not fettered to a particular person, which in turn suggests that Victorian society is similarly void of meaning. It is also no mistake that pretending to be "Ernest" is the primary lie in the play, yet the name implies complete honesty. In much the same way the play mocks death and marriage, it makes a similar mockery of the virtue of honesty, as when Jack claims he would never harm Gwendolen with such an awful thing as the truth. Neither girl really believes her suitor when Jack and Algernon admit (honesty, no less) to pretending to be Ernest. The ladies are not interested in whether or not the answer to the question about why each man lied is true, only that it is flattering to them.

Hypocrisy

At several times in the play, Jack and Algernon accuse each other of immoral behavior. This is the crux of the play, and the author's ultimate criticism of Victorian society--namely, that each of these characters really only pursues his direct interests, and conversely only complain about the other's immoral behavior when it interferes with their own plans. Of course, since they are doing the exact same thing, the natural reaction might be to stop the behavior on both ends entirely. This conclusion is not reached by either character. Instead, their hypocritical natures continue to inflame one another until Jack insists Algernon is a horrible person for eating muffins. Then, he commences eating muffins himself, insisting it is entirely different because they are his muffins. The behavior is, of course, exactly the same. Neither character feels anything like remorse, and both are only trying to figure out how they can still get what they want. The theme of hypocrisy goes hand-in-hand with that of deception. Jack confesses to Bracknell, for example, of being able to throw an elderly woman out of his town-home in a rather cruel fashion, while pretending to his niece or guardian Cecily to have many interests in charity. The essence of saying and praising one thing while doing another is a constant within the play. Again, Victorian society is fundamentally hypocritical, and the author makes it very clear through his representation of his contemporary society that he considers style far more important than substance within the context of British society.

Theme/Motif 5

Styles

Point of View

The point of view of the play's text is third-person. There are two main characters, Jack and Algernon, although much activity within the second act transpires without their presence. As the work is a theatrical performance, there is no narrator. There is no way to tell what the characters think or feel aside from the way in which they act and in what they say. This is important to keep in mind because different directors would invariably change the actions of the characters to suit their own needs. Since the story is told completely through the words and actions of the characters, any given two performances might actually be very different from one another in terms of meaning, intent, and quality. Whatever the case, the text provides a solid background from which to elicit strong emotional responses from the reader and viewer alike. In essence, it makes the reader becomes the primary point of view. The story is told primarily through dialogue, which makes this viewpoint possible. The characters engage in various conversations about social institutions, primarily marriage but also death, money, illness, and education. Conclusions are always avoided, and these conversations are usually interrupted by the arrival of new characters who change the nature of the argument completely. The author of this play was a master writer, who did an excellent job in constructing the events and dialogue of the play in such a way as to ridicule society rather than draw specific conclusions about it.

Language and Meaning

The language of the play is somewhat dated. The reader can comprehend the conversations held among the characters with relative ease, but the play also contains references to Victorian events and ideas. In order to capture these ideas thoroughly, it might be necessary for the reader to consult supplemental texts with more information about the play's historical significance. The author did a masterful job of constructing his characters out of the dialogue with which he provided. Chasuble, for example, is an academic character who tends to ramble on with the use of overcomplicated words. Lady Bracknell is an authoritarian noblewoman who is constantly ordering her family and servants to stand, sit, or follow nearby. Each of the characters, except Jack and Algernon, has a very particular way of speaking. The fact that Jack and Algernon speak similarly is important because it demonstrates how much they truly have in common despite what they seem to think. The text is also full of allusion, sarcasm, and absurdity, all of which serve to support and enhance the humor of the play. As the play was written in England for London theater, it relies on British spellings of words, but this is in no way an obstruction to understanding the work as a whole.

Structure

The play is divided into three brief acts. The acts stand alone and are not further divided into scenes. The play takes place in a very short amount of time. Though several days might pass between Act I and Act II, Act II and Act III are written as back-to-back events. As a result, the play has a very fast-paced feel to it. This is usually considered as necessary for satires. For the most part, the story unfolds through the dialogue between characters.

The plot of the play is complex. Algernon and Jack want to marry Gwendolen and Cecily, respectively. For the women to accept their engagement offers, both suitors must have the name of Ernest. Neither will marry a man with a different name. As both men resolve to have their names changed, the women they intend to marry meet and mistake one another for being engaged to the same man. As a consequence, Jack and Algernon are found out. Gwendolen's disapproving mother arrives, and the entire group discovers that Jack truly is Algernon's older brother. The play ends before the matter of the engagements has been resolved, but it is discovered that Algernon's true name is, in fact, Ernest after all!

The play is incredibly fast-paced, and very entertaining. Each of the characters is exaggerated in order to poke fun at British society. Many of the events in the play rely entirely on very unlikely coincidences, as again is the general nature of satire or farce-type theater, and it suits the play very well to have such a fast pace in order to suspend the reader's disbelief.

Quotes

I don't play accurately--any one can play accurately--but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for life.
-- Algernon (Act One paragraph 5)

Importance: This quotes demonstrates the constant attempts Algernon makes to seem clever. It also illustrates that he has poor playing abilities on the piano, but he dismisses his lack of technical ability by sarcastically admitting to keeping that sort of thing to life itself.

When one is in town one amuses oneself. When on is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.
-- Jack (Act One paragraph 29)

Importance: This is Jack referring to the country manor in which he lives with Cecily and Prism. He indicates that he finds this life dull and comes to the city in order to escape from it.

I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But, there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over.
-- Algernon (Act One paragraph 44)

Importance: This is Algernon's response to the revelation that Jack is going to propose to Gwendolen. It is a perfect demonstration of his attitude toward marriage, and it mirrors his attitude toward family in general.

I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief.
-- Algernon (Act One paragraph 131)

Importance: This is one of the most cynical lines in the play. Not surprisingly, it is part of a conversation between Bracknell and Algernon, in which both are remarking on Lady Harbury's efforts to look younger after the death of her husband.

Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others.
-- Lady Bracknell (Act One paragraph 138)

Importance: This is Lady Bracknell's response to learning that Bunbury, Algernon's imaginary friend, has once again grown ill. It establishes Bracknell's overbearing and callous nature. Bracknell expresses relief when she learns of Bunbury's "death" in Act III.

The line is immaterial. Mr. Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution.
-- Lady Bracknell (Act One paragraph 245)

Importance: In her tirade against Jack's origins, Lady Bracknell openly blames him for having been found as an infant in a handbag, as though he had any control over the matter. This is typical of Lady Bracknell, who also holds the imaginary Bunbury responsible for not making up his mind whether to live or to die. Bracknell has many such lines in the play, often cushioned with long monologue lectures about the issues.

Cecily! I am surprised at you. Mr. Worthing has many troubles in life. Idle merriment and triviality would be out of place in his conversation. You must remember his constant anxiety about that unfortunate young man his brother.
-- Miss Prism (Act Two paragraph 10)

Importance: This line is comical because, in fact, Jack is very bored with Cecily, Prism, and his life in the country. He has invented his brother Ernest as an excuse to engage in idle merriment and triviality. His fake younger brother is, of course, exactly the reason Prism things these things have no place in his life.

Believe me, I do not deserve so neologistic a phrase. The precept as well as the practice of the Primitive Church was distinctly against matrimony.
-- Chasuble (Act Two paragraph 91)

Importance: This illustrates Chasuble's absurdly academic nature, especially in his odd choice of words. Chasuble completely misses the idea that Prism is trying to suggest to him gently--namely, that they should both get married. Instead of seeing Prism's suggestion to him, he turns it into an academic matter entirely.

You have filled my tea with lumps of sugar, and though I asked most distinctly for bread and butter, you have given me cake. I am known for the gentleness of my disposition and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I warn you, Miss Cardew, you may go too far.
-- Gwendolen (Act Two paragraph 345)

Importance: This is one of the more humorous lines of the play, and highlights the sentiments that many of the characters express about food--namely that it is a very serious affair. Cecily's treatment of Gwendolen during tea is petty and passive-aggressive, and it is very comedic that such an immature attempt to anger Gwendolen succeeds so powerfully.

In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing. Mr. Worthing, what explanation can you offer me for pretending to have a brother? Was it in order that you might have an opportunity of coming up to town to see me as often as possible?
-- Gwendolen (Act Three paragraph 21)

Importance: Gwendolen echoes the moral sentiment of the entire play when she says style is more important than sincerity (or, rather, being earnest). This line is also important because both of the girls resolved not to speak until the men explained their intentions. Yet, both Gwendolen and Cecily provide those explanations to the men, who barely have to speak at all.

Exploded! Was he the victim of a revolutionary outrage? I was not aware that Mr. Bunbury was interested in social legislation. If so, he is well punished for his morbidity.
-- Bracknell (Act Three paragraph 58)

Importance: This is Lady Bracknell's response to Algernon saying that his imaginary friend, Mr. Bunbury, was "exploded." Algernon is referring to the fact that both he and Jack were discovered to be liars, but Bracknell takes it to mean instead that Bunbury was literally killed in an explosion. She approves of Bunbury's end.

A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, and of the qualities that last, and improve with time. We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces.
-- Bracknell (Act Three paragraph 75)

Importance: It is obvious from this line that Bracknell wants Algernon to marry Cecily for her money. Ironically, and apparently without being self-aware, Bracknell sees this money as a solid quality, implying that it grows with time because the Funds acquire more money over time. Her regret over living in an age of surfaces is nowhere more obvious than in the way she behaves.