

The Importance of Being Earnest Summary

Writer: Oscar Wilde | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Background: Oscar Wilde wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1894. He finished it while staying in the town of Worthing, England. The play was first performed on 14 February 1895 at the St. James's Theatre in London. Wilde called it "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People." It was his last and most successful play. The play satirizes Victorian society. People at that time cared too much about money, family, and appearances. Marriage was often seen as a social duty, not just love. Wilde used wit and comedy to show the foolishness of these ideas. The play turns serious matters into jokes and makes trivial things seem important. Soon after the play opened, Wilde faced scandal. He was accused of homosexuality, which was illegal in Victorian England. He was put on trial, found guilty, and sent to prison for two years. Because of this, the play closed early despite its success. Today, the play is remembered as Wilde's masterpiece. It broke away from serious moral drama and gave the stage a new kind of witty, light comedy. It remains one of the funniest and most important English plays of the late nineteenth century.

summary

Act I

The Story of the City (London): The play begins in the year 1895. It opens in the afternoon in Algernon Moncrieff's London flat. The flat is fashionable and stylish, full of elegance. Algernon is shown playing the piano with no skill. This is comic because he plays with false seriousness. Meanwhile, his servant Lane prepares the tea table carefully. Before the guests arrive, Algernon and Lane exchange witty remarks. They joke about marriage, champagne, and the habits of the upper class. Their short conversation adds humor and sets the comic tone. They are expecting three important guests for the afternoon. Lady Bracknell, Algernon's aunt, is one of them. Another guest is Lady Bracknell's daughter, Gwendolen Fairfax. The last guest is Algernon's friend, called Ernest Worthing. This Ernest is actually Jack Worthing. He is a guardian of Cecily. Jack calls himself Ernest when he comes to London.

The Mystery of Jack's Identity: Jack (as Ernest) arrives first at Algernon's flat. Algernon jokes that Jack cannot stay for long. Because Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen will soon arrive here. He also warns Jack about flirting with Gwendolen. Jack happily says he came to propose

marriage. Algernon then plays a trick with a cigarette case. It has Cecily's handwriting and calls Jack her uncle. Algernon demands that Jack explain this strange mystery. Jack then reveals his secret true identity. He says, "My name is really Jack." He was found as a baby in a handbag. The handbag was discovered at Victoria railway station. A kind man, Thomas Cardew, adopted and raised him. Before dying, Cardew made Jack Cecily's legal guardian. Cecily is Cardew's young granddaughter, now about 18 years old. Jack admits he invented a wicked brother called Ernest. This brother was an excuse for Jack's London visits. Thus, he could live a double life freely. Algernon laughs and explains that he also invented a friend called Bunbury. Bunbury is always ill, and this excuse lets Algernon escape boring dinners. He proudly calls himself a "Bunburyist."

Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen Arrive: Soon, Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive at the flat. Algernon pretends he must visit his sick friend Bunbury. He excuses himself, leaving Jack alone with Gwendolen. Jack seizes the chance and declares his love. Gwendolen confesses she also loves Jack very deeply. But she insists she can only love an Ernest. She says she adores the name Ernest passionately. Jack worries about revealing his true name. Still, he proposes, and she happily accepts him.

Lady Bracknell's Interrogation: Lady Bracknell suddenly enters and interrupts the romance. Gwendolen announces she has accepted Ernest's proposal proudly. Lady Bracknell dismisses her daughter and questions Jack strictly. She demands information about his fortune and family. Jack admits his story without hiding the truth. He explains he was found in a handbag. It was left in a cloakroom at Victoria Station. Lady Bracknell is shocked and offended by this. She refuses to accept an orphan for her daughter. She declares Jack completely unsuitable for Gwendolen's marriage. She orders Gwendolen to leave immediately and departs angrily.

The Address for Love Letters: After Lady Bracknell leaves, Jack feels heartbroken. But Gwendolen secretly returns to speak with him. She says she still loves him more deeply now. She even finds his mystery very romantic and brave. She asks for his country address to write letters. Jack gives her his Hertfordshire home address truthfully. Algernon secretly overhears and writes down the address. He now decides to visit Cecily using Ernest's name. This ends the London story and prepares the village story.

Act-II

The Story of the Village (Hertfordshire): The second act begins in Jack's country house in Hertfordshire. The garden is beautiful and peaceful. Cecily Cardew, Jack's young ward, studies with Miss Prism, her governess. Cecily dislikes her lessons and prefers daydreaming. She imagines love stories and writes them in her diary. Miss Prism advises Cecily to be serious and

avoid foolish thoughts. Miss Prism also tells Cecily that she once wrote a long manuscript. But she lost it inside a handbag long ago. This becomes an important clue for the future.

Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble: Miss Prism secretly admires Dr. Chasuble, the local rector. She flirts with him in her strict and shy way. Their romance adds gentle humor to the story. Miss Prism tells Cecily that Jack's brother Ernest is very wicked. She hopes Ernest will reform himself someday. Cecily becomes curious about this "wicked" Ernest.

Algernon Arrives as Ernest: Suddenly Algernon enters the garden. He introduces himself as Ernest, Jack's brother. Cecily is delighted to meet him. She already imagined a romance with this "Ernest." Algernon flirts with Cecily and enjoys her youthful charm. They quickly fall into comic love. Cecily writes in her diary that they are engaged. Algernon is surprised but pleased. She says they have already been engaged for months in her imagination. She even shows Algernon the letters she pretended he wrote. She also says he once gave her a ring in this fantasy. He happily accepts the fantasy.

Jack Returns in Mourning: Jack returns home wearing black clothes. He announces his wicked brother Ernest is dead in Paris. At the same moment, Algernon is in the garden, pretending to be Ernest. Jack is shocked and angry at this trick. Cecily introduces Algernon to Jack as her dear Ernest. Jack cannot expose the lie in front of Cecily.

Gwendolen's Visit: Suddenly, Gwendolen arrives at Jack's country house. She has come to meet Jack secretly. Cecily and Gwendolen meet each other politely. But soon they begin to quarrel. Each believes she is engaged to Ernest Worthing. They comically insult each other. Their fight is full of wit and pride.

The Truth about Ernest: Finally, Jack enters and denies having a brother. Gwendolen and Cecily discover that both men are liars. Jack and Algernon admit they used the name Ernest. They explain that they wanted to win true love. The women forgive them but insist they must be named Ernest. Jack and Algernon quickly plan to be christened as Ernest. Dr. Chasuble agrees to baptize them later that afternoon. This ends the village story with confusion, comedy, and new romance.

Act- III

The Story of Resolution: The last act takes place in the drawing room of Jack's country house. Algernon and Cecily sit together happily. Algernon wants to marry Cecily soon. But Jack strongly refuses at first. He says Algernon cannot marry her without his consent. Cecily replies that she will only marry Algernon if Lady Bracknell agrees. At the same time, Dr. Chasuble enters and reminds both men that the christenings are ready in the church. Jack replies that it

is no longer necessary. This adds comic irony, since the truth of names will soon be revealed.

Lady Bracknell Arrives: Suddenly, Lady Bracknell enters the house. She is angry because Gwendolen ran away from home. She finds Gwendolen with Jack, who again asks permission to marry her. Lady Bracknell firmly refuses because of his family's mystery. But before discussing Cecily, she asks sharp questions about her background and social status. She wants to know if Cecily has proper family connections. When she hears that Cecily is very rich, she becomes interested. She now agrees to Cecily's marriage to Algernon.

The Obstacle of Jack's Consent: Jack still refuses to give consent for Cecily's marriage. He says he will only agree if Lady Bracknell allows him to marry Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell refuses once more. The situation becomes tense and comic. Jack then adds that Cecily cannot legally marry without his consent until she is 35. This gives him strong power over Lady Bracknell and Algernon. At this point, Miss Prism enters the room.

The Secret of the Handbag: Lady Bracknell suddenly recognizes Miss Prism. She angrily demands to know what happened to the baby that disappeared twenty-eight years ago. Then she says Miss Prism was the governess of her sister's household. Miss Prism trembles and confesses the truth. She explains that she once took a baby out in a perambulator. At the same time, she carried a handbag containing a manuscript of a novel she had written. By mistake, she placed the baby inside the handbag and left it in the cloakroom at Victoria Station. Absentmindedly, she carried the manuscript away in the perambulator instead. The baby was lost, and the handbag remained in the station.

Jack is shocked, because this is the story of his own past. He explains that he was adopted and raised by Thomas Cardew after being found in such a handbag. He rushes out to the library and brings in the old handbag he has kept since childhood. Miss Prism looks at it with deep shame and admits, "Yes, this is the very handbag I lost." Lady Bracknell confirms that this handbag once belonged to her family. The great secret is now revealed. Now it is clear that Jack, who was the lost baby. He was abandoned at Victoria Station and later raised by Thomas Cardew.

Jack's True Identity: Then, Lady Bracknell reveals the rest of the truth. Jack is actually her late sister's son. This makes him Algernon's elder brother and Gwendolen's first cousin. Jack is delighted to finally learn about his true family. But he still worries about Gwendolen. He wonders what his real name was at birth.

The Importance of Being Ernest: Jack searches through the family records to discover his father's name. He learns that his father was a general named Ernest John Moncrieff. This means his true name is also Ernest. Gwendolen is overjoyed because she always wanted to

marry a man named Ernest. Jack happily declares that he has now truly learned “the importance of being earnest.”

The play ends with all the lovers united. Jack will marry Gwendolen. It is confirmed that Algernon will marry Cecily. Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism will also be married. Lady Bracknell is satisfied now that Jack’s family background is respectable. The comedy closes with wit, laughter, and a perfectly happy ending.

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