



KALAMAZOO CIVIC

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OSCAR WILDE'S  
THE IMPORTANCE  
OF BEING  
EARNEST

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DRAMATURGY PACKET 2020

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## WHO'S WHO

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### The Playwright

**Oscar Wilde** (born 1854, died 1900) is a renowned English poet, author, and playwright. He first published poems when he was a student at Oxford; notably his poem "Ravenna" won a Newdigate prize. He published his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in 1890. Wilde's first dramatic success was *Lady Windermere's Fan*, which opened in London in 1892. From then, he also wrote and produced *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), solidifying Wilde as a successful playwright.

Wilde wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a comedy of manners. A comedy of manners is a social critique of contemporary society (in this case, the aristocratic society) characterized by whether characters meet their sort of social standard (i.e. Jack and Algernon having to prove themselves Ernest/earnest) and usually involves some illicit love affair.

### The Characters

- **John (Jack) Worthing, J.P** - Algernon's friend; engaged to Gwendolen; Cecily's guardian; 'Ernest' in the city; found as an infant in a handbag
- **Algernon Moncrieff** - Jack's friend; Gwendolen's cousin; Lady Bracknell's nephew; engaged to Cecily; 'Ernest' in the country;
- **Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D.** - Woolton's clergyman; flirts with Miss Prism
- **Merriman** - Jack's butler in the country
- **Lane** - Algernon's city manservant
- **Lady Bracknell** - Algernon's aunt and Gwendolen's mother; unmoving
- **Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax** - Bracknell's aunt and Algernon's cousin; engaged to Jack; in love with the 'idea' of Ernest
- **Cecily Cardew** - Jack's ward; engaged to Algernon; in love with the 'idea' of Ernest
- **Miss Prism** - Cecily's prudish governess; harbors feelings for Rev. Chasuble



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## ACT 1 SYNOPSIS

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Algernon Moncrieff prepares for the arrival of his aunt Lady Bracknell and cousin Gwendolen when his friend Ernest Worthing stops by. Ernest expresses his desire to propose to Gwendolen, but Algernon disapproves, saying he must first "clear up the whole question of Cecily." Algernon produces Ernest's missing cigarette case, which includes the inscription 'From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.' Found out, Ernest admits that his name is really John (nicknamed Jack) and that Cecily is the young ward he takes care of. He reveals he invented a younger brother named Ernest, whose identity he assumes when he is in the city. Algernon calls him a 'Bunburyist,' sharing that he himself has invented a deathly ill friend named Bunbury so he could get out of unwanted social engagements.

Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive, interrupting the conversation. Jack proposes to Gwendolen. She accepts, but admits that it's only because his name is 'Ernest' that she loves him. Lady Bracknell questions Jack and disapproves of the engagement when he shares that he was an orphan found in the coatroom of a train station. The women leave.

Jack plans to 'kill off' Ernest and to stop living a double life. Algernon expresses a desire to meet Cecily, but Jack refuses. Gwendolen interrupts and professes her undying love to Jack. She asks to visit him in the country and Jack gives her his address. Listening in, Algernon also writes down Jack's address. Jack and Gwendolen exit. Algernon begins to pack, stating he is going to visit 'old Bunbury' - it is implied he is going to see Cecily himself.





## ACT 2 SYNOPSIS

The scene opens up on Cecily and her governess Miss Prism in the garden. Cecily waters flowers while Miss Prism begs her to study. The women talk about Jack, with Cecily sharing that she always thinks he's sad and serious when he stays with them. Cecily wonders out loud if Jack's troublesome younger brother Ernest will ever stay with them and she believes that she can tame him to be a better man. The Rev. Chasuble arrives and flirts with the prudish Miss Prism. The Rev, Chasuble and Miss Prism go for a walk in the park, leaving Cecily to write about Ernest in her diary. Algernon, disguised as Ernest, appears and, charmed by Cecily, proposes to her. She surprises Algernon by stating they've been engaged before - she had imagined a whole courtship with Ernest through her Uncle Jack's stories of him. She accepts Algernon (as Ernest) and they kiss.

Meanwhile, Jack returns to his country home in black mourning clothes. He shares that his 'brother' Ernest has died, but Cecily tells him that Ernest is actually in the house. When Jack sees Algernon, he tries to throw him out. Cecily, alone in the garden, is introduced to Gwendolen, who has arrived to visit *her* Ernest (Jack). The two women talk over tea and discover they are both engaged to Mr. Ernest Worthing. Jack and Algernon arrive and both of the women reveal their true identities. The women band together, stating they will only marry a man named Ernest.





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## ACT 3 SYNOPSIS

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The women have banded together, expressing their desire to only marry a man named Ernest. The men explain that they have already made appointments with Rev. Chasuble to be christened 'Ernest' that afternoon. The women are satisfied and forgive them. Before the lovers can be officially reunited, Lady Bracknell appears. She has followed Gwendolen from London and wants her to return. Algernon shares that he is now engaged to Cecily. Lady Bracknell questions her similarly to how she questioned Jack earlier in the play. This time, she is satisfied with Cecily's beauty, connections, and wealth. She approves of the match. Jack, as Cecily's guardian, refuses and gives Lady Bracknell an ultimatum: He will allow Cecily to marry Algernon if she allows Gwendolen to marry him. She refuses, stating that his unknown origin is still a barrier.

It is Miss Prism who breaks the stalemate. When she arrives, Lady Bracknell remembers her as the nurse who misplaced her infant nephew. Miss Prism explains that she accidentally placed the infant in her handbag instead of the pram and that she then lost her handbag on the train. Excited, Jack retrieves the handbag he was found in and shows it to Miss Prism. It is revealed that Jack is really Algernon's older brother Ernest and therefore Lady Bracknell's nephew. His identity found, Lady Bracknell gives her blessing to all the couples.



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## TERMS TO KNOW

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### Places

- **Half Moon Street:** [Act I scene location] Known in the 1880s to be a bohemian place filled with arts, pubs, and bachelors. Algernon's home is based on a house on Half Moon Street where men rented out single room apartments called 'bachelor pads.' Oscar Wilde spent time visiting friends on Half Moon Street and was inspired by these bachelor pads and its bachelors to write *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
- **Shropshire:** [pg. 5] A country county; Jack lies about being from here.
- **Grosvenor Square:** [pg. 21] pronounced "Grove-nor;" a known affluent area in London.
- **Belgrave Square:** [pg. 21] a fashionable region home to the Austrian ambassador and various earls, dowagers, lords, dukes, etc.

### Props

- **Salver:** [used by Lane & Merriman] a silver tray, usually to present glasses, food, or a letter by a servant.
- **Marechal Niel:** [pg. 41] a yellow rose

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## TERMS TO KNOW

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### What's That?

- **"Wagnerian manner":** [pg. 12] Algernon refers to the German composer Richard Wagner. Wagner is characterized for using increased orchestra sizes and full voices. Implies that the doorbell is possibly loud, forceful, full of energy.
- **Liberal Unionist:** [pg. 22] a political third party formed in 1886 (less than a decade from *Earnest's* first performance). The party formed when select Liberals allied with the Conservative party. Thus explains Jack's illogical statement when he replied to Lady Bracknell, "I am afraid I really have none."
- **Tories:** [pg. 22] Conservative political party
- **Egeria:** [pg. 38] Can be interpreted in two ways; 1) Can refer to the world's first published woman author in history (and also refers to Miss Prism efforts as a writer) or 2) the nymph Egeria who advised the second King of Rome (this could also be considered a saucy statement from Chausable as Egeria was also the King's lover).
- **Misanthrope:** [pg. 41] Someone who hates men. Miss Prism uses 'womanthrope' as to mean someone who hates women, but the correct term is 'misogynist.'