



Connections Academy Study Guide

Title

The Importance of Being Earnest

Author

Oscar Wilde

Plot Summary

The protagonist of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Jack Worthing, leads a double life. In the country, he is a responsible member of the community and guardian to Cecily Cardew, his late adoptive father's granddaughter. In the city; however, he is his own made-up brother Ernest, best friend to Algernon Moncrieff. When Algernon finds a watch inscribed to "Uncle Jack," he begins to suspect Ernest has been hiding something. Jack confesses that he is not named Ernest and describes his life in the country. Algernon is quite taken with Jack's description of Cecily in particular, and decides to cast himself as Jack's brother Ernest for a trip to the country.

When the scheming Jack, having decided to "kill off" his imagined brother, arrives in the country to find "Ernest" very much alive and wooing Cecily, and his own love Gwendolen insisting that *she* is engaged to Ernest, he is forced to confess his deception. Still, both girls are consumed with their desire to marry Ernest, even if he doesn't exist, leaving both men scrambling and scheming to win the hands of their ladies.

Setting

Act I takes place in an apartment in London, while in Acts II and III the action shifts to a manor house in the country.

Major Characters

- Jack Worthing, who pretends to be Ernest in the city
- Algernon Moncrieff, who decides to become Ernest to woo Cecily in the country
- Gwendolen Fairfax, engaged to Jack thinking he is Ernest
- Cecily Cardew, Jack's ward in the country who falls for Algernon thinking he is Ernest
- Lady Bracknell, Algernon's aunt and Gwendolen's mother
- Miss Prism, Cecily's governess
- Rev. Chasuble, the rector

Review Questions

Answering the following questions will increase your comprehension of the play. Respond to these questions by writing the answers in your notebook.

Some of the questions require you to express an opinion or describe your reaction to events in the story. In these instances, there is no right or wrong answer and responses will vary. The answers to factual questions are included in this study guide.

Act I, First Half

Vocabulary: forte, salver, demoralizing, earnest, improbable, invalid, expurgations

1. Of what aspects of each other's characters and behaviors are Jack and Algernon most critical? How does this relate to Wilde's intentions as outlined in the introduction you read in Lesson 1?
2. What is Bunburying? How does it serve the pursuit of pleasure so valued by these characters and by Wilde himself?
3. Why does Jack pretend to have a brother?
4. With what is Lady Bracknell concerned when Algernon declines her invitation to dinner? Is this surprising to you?

Act I, Second Half

Vocabulary: provincial, metaphysical, candidly, entrancing, indecorous, disposition, bewildered, indiscretion, indignation, trivet, Gorgon, profligate, apoplexy

1. What makes Gwendolen nervous? Why?
2. What is Gwendolen's "ideal"? Do you think she is missing the point of an ideal? How or why not?
3. What is Lady Bracknell's opinion of education? Why is this surprising?
4. How does Jack plan to kill off his "brother"?
5. Where is Algernon planning to go? What clues are you given in the text?

Act II, First Half

Vocabulary: utilitarian, commended, vacillating, debonair, emigrating, Quixotic, misanthrope, neologistic, calamity, draughts, interment, melancholy, portmanteaus, grotesque, equanimity

1. What part of the Political Economy text does Miss Prism instruct Cecily to skip? Why?
2. Why is Cecily frightened of meeting "Ernest"? What is surprising about the reason behind her fear?
3. To what unexpected thing is Algernon's appetite linked (i.e., he does not have an appetite without what)? What does this indicate about his character?
4. What does Cecily say about Algernon's pronouncements of love? Do you think her criticism is valid? Why?

Act II, Second Half

Vocabulary: impetuous, philanthropic, effeminate, arduous, candour, susceptible, misconception, lorgnette, reproach, presumptuous, epidemic, machinations, deception, constitution

1. What is Cecily's response when Algernon proposes? How is this ironic?
2. How is the subject of marriage trivialized in the interaction between Cecily and Algernon?
3. What is the dramatic irony in Cecily and Gwendolen arguing about who has claim to Ernest?
4. Cecily says to Gwendolen, "Oh, flowers are as common here, Miss Fairfax, as people are in London." How is this an insult? (Hint: Could *common* have a dual meaning?)
5. How do Jack and Algernon feel about Bunburying after the episode with Cecily and Gwendolen?

Act III

Vocabulary: effrontery, credulity, insuperable, apprised, morbidity, solicitors, mercenary, ostentatiously, Oxonian, heretical, secular, quails, consternation, perambulator, abstraction, eccentric

1. How is Lady Bracknell's description of Gwendolen's made as "trustworthy" an example of verbal irony?
2. How does Lady Bracknell determine that Cecily's lawyers are a good firm?
3. What about Cecily changes Lady Bracknell's mind about the engagement?

4. About what is Jack most angry when describing Algernon’s deception to Lady Bracknell? What is the relevance of this?

Answers to Review Questions

Act I, First Half Answers

1. They are most critical of the more trivial, appearance-based aspects of their characters and behaviors, such as when and how they eat. Answers to second part will vary, but should recall Wilde’s comments to Robert Ross in which he points out that trivial things should be treated seriously and serious things should be trivialized.
2. Algernon has made up an invalid friend named Bunbury. He uses the term to describe any situation in which a person invents a cover story to excuse himself from boring duty-based tasks and gatherings in favor of doing whatever he wants to do instead. Both Jack and Algernon are willing to go to elaborate lengths in pursuit of pleasure—this is how important that goal is to them.
3. He pretends to have a brother in order to escape the country for trips to London whenever he likes.
4. She is concerned that it will put her table “completely out,” indicating that she has carefully planned seating arrangements and the number of guests. Answers to second part will vary, but may point out that she is more concerned with appearances than spending time with her nephew.

Act I, Second Half Answers

1. People talking about the weather makes Gwendolen nervous because it always makes her think they mean something else.
2. Her ideal is to marry a man named Ernest. Answers to second part will vary.
3. She does not approve of anything that “tampers with natural ignorance.” She thinks the concept of modern education is ridiculous, but that it doesn’t do anything anyway. This is surprising because one would expect a parent to value education.
4. He is going to say he died of a severe chill in Paris.
5. He is planning to go to Jack’s manor house in the country. The stage directions say he writes the address on his shirt cuff when Jack gives it to Gwendolen, and he then tells Lane is is planning on going Bunburying.

Act II, First Half Answers

1. She asks her to skip the section on the Fall of the Rupee because it is “somewhat too sensational.”
2. She is frightened because she has never met a wicked person before. It is surprising because her fear is not based on fear of wicked people, but on fear that he will look just like everyone else.
3. Algernon cannot have an appetite without a flower in his jacket buttonhole. Answers to second part will vary, but may note his concern with appearance and decorum even over basic human needs.
4. She says she doesn’t think he should say he loves her “wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly.” Answers to second part will vary, but may note that it is odd to link hopelessness to what is supposed to be a positive feeling.

Act II, Second Half Answers

1. She informs him that they have been engaged for three months. The irony comes from the fact that they have just met—it is impossible for them to have been engaged before now.
2. Answers will vary, but might include the fact that Cecily has entirely made up their courtship, the fact that she was “forced” to write Ernest’s letters, her diary entry that notes their breakup and a comment on the weather, her assessment of what makes for a serious engagement, and so on.

3. The audience knows they are talking about two different men.
4. *Common* might mean that something is ordinary or familiar, but it can also be used to indicate that something is crude or vulgar. Cecily is carefully choosing her words for her insults.
5. Jack thinks Bunburying is disastrous, while Algernon thinks this is the best Bunbury in which he has ever engaged.

Act III Answers

1. She goes on to describe that she was able to bribe the maid with money—the maid is in fact the opposite of “trusty.”
2. One of the lawyers attends dinner parties.
3. Lady Bracknell is informed that Cecily has quite a large fortune.
4. He focuses on Algernon drinking an entire bottle of his Champagne and eating all of the muffins. This is another example of treating trivial things seriously, and of food as a symbol for (here, Algernon’s) self-indulgence and obedience to impulse.