

The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde

Level B1.2

and 2 other stories:

- Lady Windermere's Fan
- An Ideal Husband



The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde

Retold by Ken Methold

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The Importance of Being Earnest

CHAPTER

1

Imaginary Friends and Relations

Preview Questions

1. What are some reasons why a person would create an imaginary friend?
2. Why do you think some people do not like the name they have been given by their parents?
3. If you could have any name you wanted, what would it be?

Algernon Moncrieff was a **bachelor**. Like many wealthy young men, he lived a life of pleasure in the city of London. One morning, he was playing the piano when he heard his **butler** opening the front door to a visitor. He was expecting a visit from his aunt, Lady Augusta Bracknell and her daughter, his cousin, Gwendolen. Unexpectedly, it was neither of them: it was a bachelor friend of his, Mr. Ernest Worthing.

“I haven’t seen you for weeks, Ernest,” Algernon said. “Where have you been?”

“I have been away in the country,” Ernest replied. “As you know, I am in love with your cousin, Gwendolen, and I have come to London to ask her to marry me.”

Algernon knew that his Aunt Augusta did not approve of Ernest because of the way he looked at Gwendolen and the way she looked at Ernest. At any rate, he had no intention of allowing his cousin, whom he loved dearly, to marry Ernest.

“You are forgetting about Cecily,” Algernon said. “What about

her?”

“But I don’t know anyone by the name of Cecily,” Ernest objected.

“I think you do,” Algernon **retorted**. “I have found a cigarette
 5 case of yours, and there is writing inside which says . . . ‘from little Cecily with love to dear Uncle Jack!’ You even lie about your name. I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest. Indeed, you are the most **earnest**-looking person I have ever seen in my life. It’s ridiculous of you to say your name is not Ernest. Here,
 10 I have one of your cards. It states your name clearly: ‘Mr. Ernest Worthing.’ I shall keep it as proof that your name is Ernest. Then you can never deny to me, or to Gwendolen, or to any one else what your name is!”

“In the city, my name is Ernest, and in the country, it is Jack,”
 15 Ernest, also known as Jack, explained.

“That still does not explain who Cecily is and why she has called Jack her ‘dear uncle.’ I need you to tell me the truth about Cecily.”

“Very well, I will,” Jack said. He explained that he had been
 20 adopted as a little boy by old Mr. Thomas Cardew. In Mr. Cardew’s will, Ernest had been made **guardian** to Mr. Cardew’s granddaughter, Cecily. Out of respect for Ernest, Cecily called him “Uncle Jack” because he used the name Jack when he was in the country. He was, of course, not her real uncle.

25 She was no relation to him. She was technically his **ward**.

Algernon did not think much of this explanation. He demanded to know where Cecily lived. Jack said she lived in the country with a **governess** called Miss Prism. He was careful not to tell Algernon exactly where he lived in the country.

30 “This is all very confusing, Ernest - or do you want me to call you Jack?” Algernon said. “Why do you have two names?”

Most people are happy with one.”

“It’s like this,” Jack admitted. “Jack, of course, is my real name, which is why Cecily calls me her Uncle Jack. But I need to get away from the country sometimes. I need an excuse to
5 leave, so I have invented a younger brother by the name of Ernest. He lives in the city and is always getting himself into trouble. I tell everyone that I have to visit him from time to time so I can get away to the city and enjoy myself.

Algernon was very impressed by this explanation.

10 “I understand your situation completely,” he said. “I, too, have invented someone - an **invalid** friend called Mr. Bunbury. By saying I have to visit Mr. Bunbury, I can get away from the city to the country whenever I choose. I intended to use a visit to Mr. Bunbury today so that we could have dinner together this
15 evening.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be having dinner with your Aunt Augusta?” Jack said.

“Certainly not. I dined with her on Monday. Once a week is quite enough to dine with one’s own relations! Actually, if you
20 intend to get married, you ought to have a Mr. Bunbury so that you can get away from your wife whenever you want to.”

“Nonsense!” Jack exclaimed. “Why would I want to be so
25 **deceitful** if I married a beautiful girl like Gwendolen - the only girl I have ever wanted to marry? In fact, I plan to get rid of my imaginary younger brother Ernest by saying that he has died!”

Further conversation on this subject was interrupted by the arrival of Lady Bracknell and her daughter, Gwendolen. Algernon greeted his aunt and cousin warmly. Lady Bracknell immediately noticed Jack and **glared** at him with a cold look of disapproval.
30 She had invited Algernon to dinner that evening, but he had refused the invitation, explaining that his invalid friend Bunbury

was very ill, and he had to go at once to his assistance. But here Algernon was with Ernest Worthing!

She said, “I am very disappointed you are unable to come. It will mean that the numbers at my dinner table will not be even. Lord Bracknell will have to dine upstairs. Fortunately, he is quite used to having to do that.”

She added that she found it very strange that Mr. Bunbury seemed to suffer from such extremely bad health.

“If you want my opinion,” Lady Bracknell declared, “it’s time Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he’s going to live or die. Illness of any kind is not something I encourage in other people. Anyway, I’ll be most grateful if you will ask Mr. Bunbury not to be ill on Saturday. I am relying on you to arrange the music for my afternoon tea party.”

“Very well, Aunt Augusta,” Algernon agreed. I will speak to him if he is still conscious. I am sure he’ll be all right by Saturday.”

“Thank you, Algernon. That’s very thoughtful of you. Perhaps you’ll now help me to select some suitable pieces of music.”

With these words, Lady Augusta Bracknell and Algernon left the room.

Review Questions

1. Why and where did Jack sometimes call himself Ernest?
2. Who was Mr. Bunbury?
3. Who was Cecily?

N E W W O R D S

The Importance of Being Earnest

Chapter 1

bachelor *n.* an unmarried man

butler *n.* the main, male servant of a household

retort *v.* to reply quickly in a sarcastic manner

earnest *adj.* serious in mind or intention

guardian *n.* someone legally appointed to manage the affairs of a person, who is usually a young person

ward *n.* a minor placed under the care and protection of a legal guardian

governess *n.* a woman teacher employed in a private household to teach children

invalid *adj.* suffering from chronic health

deceitful *adj.* acting in a deceptive manner

glare *v.* to stare angrily

Chapter 2

christen *v.* to give a name to a person in a Christian church

engaged *adj.* promised to be married

Chapter 3

canon *n.* a senior clergyman

wicked *adj.* very cruel or mischievous

mourning *n.* expressions of one who shows sadness at the death of a person

Chapter 4

rogue *n.* a mischievous and unprincipled person; a scoundrel

carriage *n.* a four-wheeled, horse-drawn vehicle for persons

orphan *n.* a child whose parents are dead

Chapter 5

pram *n.* a baby carriage

Lady Windermere's Fan

Chapter 1

fan *n.* a series of flat segmented pieces of cardboard used to create a current of air

ball *n.* social function for dancing

conceited *adj.* having an exaggerated opinion of oneself

unfaithful *adj.* not loyal, particularly to one's husband or wife

vile *adj.* wicked or evil

scandal *n.* a disgraceful action or event

Chapter 2

dismayed *adj.* frightened or shocked

Chapter 3

ballroom *n.* a large room for dancing

terrace *n.* a paved area alongside a building

foolish *adj.* unwise; silly; ridiculous

Chapter 4

blackmail *n.* the act of attempting to get money by threats

Chapter 5

plead *v.* to appeal humbly; to beg

Chapter 7**maid** *n.* a female servant**disgrace** *n.* a condition of shame or dishonour**fog** *n.* thick mist**An Ideal Husband****Chapter 1****diplomat** *n.* a person who works in an embassy**idle** *adj.* unemployed; lazy**season** *n.* a period of the year for social activities, usually April until August**charm** *v.* the quality of pleasing or attracting people**foreign office** *n.* the department of a government concerned with the activities of other countries**Chapter 2****canal** *n.* an artificial waterway**share** *n.* a unit of ownership in a stock of a company**swindle** *n.* a dishonest scheme**speculation** *n.* involving high risk, but also possible high profits**Chapter 3****attempt** *n.* an effort made to do something**brooch** *n.* an ornamental piece of jewellery with a pin and catch which is worn on one's clothing**noble** *adj.* with high moral values**worship** *v.* to adore**Chapter 4****state** *n.* a country**Chapter 5****fraudulent** *adj.* engaging in deliberate deception or cheating**Chapter 7****theft** *n.* the act of stealing**triumphant** *adj.* victorious**Chapter 8****most promising** *phr.* most likely to succeed**Chapter 9****cabinet** *n.* the policy-making body of a government



The Importance of Being Earnest: It's All in the Name

Cast

Cecily	Jack
Algernon	Lady Bracknell
Miss Prism	Gwendolen

Everyone is in the garden of Jack's Manor House. Cecily is delighted to see Jack back from London. Jack is dressed in deep mourning.

Cecily: Uncle Jack! I'm so glad you're back. Why are you dressed like that?

Jack: He is dead, dear Cecily. Ernest is dead!

Cecily: But, Uncle Jack. I don't understand You are mistaken. I have a wonderful surprise for you. Ernest is here. Your brother Ernest is here.

Jack: Who?

Cecily: Your wicked brother, Ernest.

Jack: Nonsense! I haven't got a brother.

Cecily: Uncle Jack, please be nice to him. I know he's been wicked, but perhaps he isn't just as wicked as you think. He seems

Algernon interrupts as he appears in the garden looking very pleased with himself.

Algernon: Hello, Brother John.

Jack glares at Algernon.

Introduction

Oscar Wilde was born on October 16, 1854, in Dublin, Ireland. His parents were well known and were often the subject of gossip. However, Wilde was an excellent student and won scholarships to college. It was there that he developed his interest in writing poetry, plays, and short stories. After a while, he lost interest in school and moved to London, where he became a member of high society. Scandal and criticism quickly followed because many people did not approve of his lifestyle. Perhaps it was this treatment and the behaviour of those in high society that inspired the stories in this collection.

The three short stories in this collection were originally written as plays. They portray the problems surrounding people in high society, such as deceit, scandal, and hypocrisy. They are also studies in what motivates people to behave the way they do. Although the people in high society would like to appear ideal, they, too, have secrets and problems that they would rather not have exposed. The threat of having their secrets revealed is humbling, and sometimes terrifying. However, once their secrets or faults are exposed, they are freed, forgiven, and redeemed.

Although the characters in these stories belong to high society, readers from all social classes and backgrounds can relate to them. They are judgemental, hypocritical, and deceitful, just like most people have been at some point in their lives. However, the characters in these stories do not admit that they behave so poorly. They are so busy pointing out other people's flaws and mistakes that they fail to see their own. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and *An Ideal Husband* share important lessons that can be applied to life today and in years to come.

Before You Read

I. Work with your classmates. Answer the questions. Write as much as you can.

1. What does it mean to be earnest? Why is it important to be earnest?

2. What does it mean to be unfaithful? Could you forgive someone for being unfaithful?

3. What is an ideal husband?

II. Scan through the book and write the answers.

1. a. Which characters have their names mentioned in chapter titles?

b. Which of the stories has the most chapters?

c. In chapter 1 of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, how old is Lady Windermere?

d. In chapter 1 of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, what is Ernest's real name?

e. In chapter 3 of *The Ideal Husband*, who is trying to blackmail Sir Robert?

f. In chapter 4 of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, what do Jack and Algernon want Canon Chasuble to do?

2. Write the correct chapter title that matches each clue.

a. A present given on the day one was born

b. A dishonest woman states what she wants

c. Information that is not wanted

d. A problem appears

e. Make-believe people we like and family members

f. A man also known as Jack is deceased and living

The Importance of Being Earnest

[Chapter 1] Imaginary Friends and Relations

I. Put the sentences in order from 1 (first) to 5 (last).

- _____ Ernest explained why he used two different names.
- _____ Lady Bracknell gave Jack a look of disapproval.
- _____ Mr. Ernest Worthing visited Algernon Moncrieff.
- _____ Lady Bracknell told Algernon to ask Mr. Bunbury not to be sick on Saturday.
- _____ Algernon told Ernest about his imaginary friend, Mr. Bunbury.

II. Choose the best answer.

1. Why did Ernest go to London?
 - a. To meet Jack
 - b. To have dinner with Lady Bracknell
 - c. To ask Gwendolen to marry him
 - d. To visit Cecily
2. How did Algernon discover Ernest's real name?
 - a. Gwendolen told him.
 - b. He found it in Ernest's cigarette case.
 - c. Cecily introduced Ernest by his real name.
 - d. Algernon overheard Mr. Cardew talking about him.
3. Why did Algernon invent an imaginary friend called Mr. Bunbury?
 - a. Because he was lonely
 - b. So he could get away from the city whenever he wanted to
 - c. Because he wanted to make Ernest jealous
 - d. So he would have an excuse to not have dinner with Ernest
4. Why was Lord Bracknell going to eat dinner upstairs?
 - a. Because he was ill
 - b. Because his wife was unhappy with him
 - c. Because he enjoyed eating in his room
 - d. Because Lady Bracknell wanted an even number of people at the dinner table

III. Match the word with the meaning used in the chapter.

- | | | |
|--------------|---|--|
| 1. bachelor | • | • a. to reply quickly in a sarcastic manner |
| 2. butler | • | • b. a minor placed under the care and protection of a legal guardian |
| 3. retort | • | • c. serious in mind or intention |
| 4. earnest | • | • d. an unmarried man |
| 5. guardian | • | • e. acting in a deceptive manner |
| 6. ward | • | • f. one who suffers from chronic health problems |
| 7. governess | • | • g. the main male servant of a household |
| 8. invalid | • | • h. to stare angrily |
| 9. deceitful | • | • i. a woman teacher employed in a private household to teach children |
| 10. glare | • | • j. someone legally appointed to manage the affairs of another person, who is usually young |

IV. Write a summary by answering the questions.

1. Who was Algernon expecting to visit him, and who arrived instead?
2. How did Algernon know that Ernest had another name?
3. Why did Ernest use two different names, and why did Algernon have an imaginary friend?
4. How did Lady Bracknell feel about Ernest and Mr. Bunbury?

Summary: _____

