I'm not a bot

Act I - Part 2:Lane introduces Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen. Algernon express horror that there are no cucumber sandwiches. He tells Lady Bracknell that he will be unable to attend her dinner tonight, as Bunbury is ill. He promises to be present to arrange music at her reception next Saturday. He goes with her into the music room. Jack confesses his feelings to Gwendolen and she admits that she likes him most especially because she has always wanted to marry someone named Ernest. Jack is happy, but he asks her if she would still love him if his name were not Ernest, for example, if it were Jack. She would not, she maintains. He proposes to her, and she accepts. Lady Bracknell comes in, and Gwendolen informs her of their engagement. Lady Bracknell says that only she or her father can engage Gwendolen, and orders her to wait in the carriage. After she leaves, Lady Bracknell interrogates Jack, asking about his habits, his income, his background, and so on. He admits that he was an orphan, found in a handbag on a train. She is aghast at this disclosure and says she will not allow her daughter to marry him. She leaves and Algernon enters. Jack tells Algernon what happened, and also says he will "kill off" his brother Ernest later in the week. Algernon expresses interest in meeting Cecily, but Jack does not want this to happen, as she is young and pretty. He has no doubt, however, that she and Gwendolen will become good friends. They debate what to do tonight and settle on doing nothing. Lane introduces Gwendolen, who has re-entered the house. She tells Algernon to turn his back, and expresses her fear to Jack that her mother will not let them marry. She asks for his address in the country, and Algernon slyly writes this down and checks a train timetable. She promises to write Jack daily when he returns to the countryside, and Jack escorts her out. Lane comes in, and Algernon tells him he will be going Bunburying tomorrow. Jack returns, glowing over Gwendolen, but Algernon expresses some anxiety over Bunbury. Jack warns him that Bunbury will only get him in trouble. Analysis:The main conflict of the play, Lady Bracknell's snobbery about Jack's disreputable background, is presented in this act. The conventional parental blockade to love maintains our interest in the plot, but the secondary conflict is far more original and engaging: Gwendolen will only marry someone named Ernest, which she believes Jack's real name to be. Jack's warning to Algernon that Bunbury will get him into trouble some day is a projection of his own anxieties--he has already gotten himself into a mess with his own dual identity. While the play is a farce, and we are not expected to take the relationships too seriously, it is possible to examine Gwendolen's desire to marry someone named Ernest. She calls it her "ideal," and this word resounds with Wilde's aesthetic philosophy. He believes art should strive to attain an ideal beauty and not mirror a dull reality. In the same sense, Gwendolen's idea of marriageand most people's revolves around an ideal romance that does not exist. The many epigrammatic critiques of marriage in the play demonstrate the cruel reality of marriage. Romance, Wilde shows, is the only kind of art most people can practice; it is the one field in which they can project ideals, as artists do. Marriage, however, frequently falls short of its ideal, whereas art--at least good art--can survive in the rarified atmosphere of the ideal. Lady Bracknell is a remarkable comic creation, the paragon of the Victorian lady who stresses good breeding above all else. But she is far from a flat stereotype. Wilde gives her some of his wittiest lines to bring out her quirky way of seeing the world, for example one of her most famous pronouncements: "To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness." But these lines are always linked to her character; when Jack informs her that he was found in a handbag on the Brighton line, she replies "The line is immaterial." That he was found in a handbag on a train is enough of a black mark on his record, and even the word "immaterial" reminds us that it is Jack's very lack of a material (substantial, or money-related) background that disturbs her so greatly. When Jack and Algernon debate what do at night, we get a glimpse into their social options: ballet, theater, restaurants. They live the life of Victorian dandies, indulging in art and pleasure. Algernon states that "It is awfully hard work doing nothing. However, I don't mind hard work where there is no definite object of mind." He swiftly diagnoses the "problem" of the leisure class, that maintaining their idleness is "work" itself. This renders leisure similar to art (which, it is clear, does require hard work). Neither should have a point, no "definite object of mind." Prefacing his novel The Picture of Dorian Gray with a series of maxims about art, Wilde ends with "All art is quite useless." He does not suggest that art has no place in society--quite the contrary--but argues that it should not be used as a social tool. In this view, Wilde pitted himself against more traditional writers like Charles Dickens, a man who used his art to galvanize reform for England's oppressed working class. Jack and Algernon, then, are two social aesthetes who recognize that their lives, like art, are "quite useless" and have little effect on reality. If anything, they appreciate their lives as works of art, playgrounds which they can manipulate to their pleasing. Their creation of alter egos makes them virtual playwrights, authors of not only their own destinies, but of fictional lives. Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen greet Algernon. Lady Bracknell gossips about an aristocratic lady who seems rejuvenated since her husband died. She asks why there are no cucumber sandwiches. Algernon has absent-mindedly eaten them all himself, though Lane rescues him from having to admit this by claiming that there were no cucumbers at the market. Lady Bracknell tells Algernon that at dinner that evening she plans to sit him next to a woman who is devoted to her husband. Algernon replies that unfortunately he will not be able to dine with her, as he has to tend to Bunbury, who is ill again. Lady Bracknell says that Bunbury should decide once and for all whether he is going to live or die instead of shilly-shallying with the question. Algernon placates her by arranging the musical program for her reception on Saturday. He takes her into the next room, giving Jack a chance to propose to Gwendolen. Alone with Gwendolen, Jack nervously confesses his admiration for her. She says that even before she met him, she always knew that she was destined to love him, chiefly because he is called (as she believes) Ernest: my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. Jack is delighted that Gwendolen returns his affection, but unnerved by the importance she places on the name of Ernest. He asks her if she means that she could not love him if his name were not Ernest. Her answer suggests that she could not. Jack proposes, and Gwendolen accepts. Lady Bracknell re-enters the room, and Gwendolen tells her that she is engaged to Jack. Lady Bracknell assures Gwendolen that she is not engaged to anyone until her parents inform her of the fact. She sends Gwendolen out while she interrogates Jack about his suitability as a husband for her daughter. The interview begins well for Jack. Lady Bracknell is impressed by his claim to know nothing, as I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. She is satisfied with his income, but disappointed that his town house is on the unfashionable side of its square. Then she asks about his parents, a subject on which Jack cannot satisfy her. He explains that he has no idea who his parents were. He was found abandoned as a baby in a handbag at Victoria railway station in London by the man who was to adopt him, Mr. Thomas Cardew. Lady Bracknell is shocked, and says that Jack can hardly expect her to allow her daughter to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel. She tells Jack that to have any hope of marrying Gwendolen, he will have to find at least one parent by the end of the social season, and sweeps out. Jack, in angry mood, tells Algernon the outcome of his interview with Lady Bracknell. He says that Gwendolen assumes they are engaged, but that Lady Bracknell is behaving unbearably. Algernon wants to know whether Jack has told Gwendolen the truth about your being Ernest in town, and Jack in the country. Jack replies that the truth is not something that one tells to a sweet, refined girl like Gwendolen. He adds that he has decided to get rid of Ernest by having him die of a chill in Paris by the end of the week. Algernon asks Jack if he has told Gwendolen about his ward, Cecily, but Jack impatiently dismisses the question, saying that the two girls are sure to be great friends. Gwendolen re-enters and asks Algernon to turn his back so that she can speak privately to Jack. She tells Jack that she fear they may never marry, due to her mothers disapproval. She adds that she has heard the story of Jacks origin and finds it very romantic, and swears her undying devotion to him. She asks Jack for his address in the country (it turns out to be in Hertfordshire and not Shropshire, as he previously told Algernon). As Jack tells her his address, Algernon smiles to himself and writes it on his shirt cuff, then picks up the Railway Guide. Jack leaves the room to see Gwendolen off. Lane brings Algernon his letters. They appear to be bills, as Algernon tears them up. Then he tells Lane that tomorrow he is going Bunburying in the country. He looks at his shirt cuff and smiles. Analysis of Act 1 (part 2) In line with the principles of the Aesthetic movement, the characters in the play are highly artificial. They speak and act in a stylized, unrealistic way, and they focus on style, rather than substance, as when, for instance, Gwendolen cares more about the name of her betrothed than the inner man (my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest). Thus, when Lady Bracknell pronounces, A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, can hardly be expected to reside in the country, the notion of nature meaning the inner character or essence of a person, has already been heavily subverted. Contrary to Lady Bracknells claim, Gwendolens nature is not simple. The other connotation of nature, the innocent, unspoiled countryside of literary and artistic tradition, has also been subverted. After all, the country is a place from which Jack creates a fictional other life for himself and where Algernon escapes to avoid his responsibilities by Bunburying. As a result of all this, Lady Bracknells words come over as ironic, though she is quite unaware of any irony and means everything she says to be taken at face value. In the world of the play, the nature that is found in the countryside is no longer simple, if it ever was. Both mans inner nature and the external nature of the countryside have been complicated by the artifice of man. Thus Wilde, as befits an author dedicated to the ideals of the Aesthetic movement, undermines traditional preconceptions about what is natural. In Lady Bracknells interrogation of Jack, Wilde satirizes the conventions of upper-class Victorian English society. In an inversion of common-sense values, Lady Bracknell attaches great value to the trivial matter of whether Jack smokes; she is glad that he does, as A man should always have an occupation of some kind. This, along with her subsequent praise of ignorance as an exotic fruit, satirically comments on the idle and trivial lifestyle of the English upper-class male. Lady Bracknell, as ever, is innocent of any satirical or ironic intention; she genuinely believes the outrageous statements that she makes, which makes her a living parody of upper-class values. Occasionally, Lady Bracknells views seem to be at one with Wildes authorial voice, such as her statement that it is fortunate for the upper classes that English education has no effect, as if it did, it would lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square. Her attitude to such a possibility is, however, at odds with that of the author. Lady Bracknell would be appalled if such events took place, since her character is as repressive as the tenacious English Victorian class system. But her views are discredited through her oppositional attitude to the young lovers. Wilde suggests that anyone with a greater sense of freedom and justice than Lady Bracknell may have viewed the prospect of revolution in Grosvenor Square with satisfaction. Just as it is the young lovers natural duty to resist Lady Bracknells tradition-bound tyranny, the author implies, a properly educated underclass would not tolerate the continuation of the unfair class system. For the most part, Lady Bracknell is, as Jack says, a monster, without being a myth, which is rather unfair. Her appalled reaction to the news that Jack does not know who his parents were, but was found in a railway station, is emblematic of the Victorian upper-class obsession with pedigree and good family. She is quite unconcerned with the human trauma of Jacks childhood, showing a chilling heartlessness and lack of compassion that comments satirically on the inhumanity of class snobbery. Within the traditions of romantic comedy, Gwendolen, as a young woman in love with the young romantic lead, Jack, is a sympathetic character. In this context, she stands in opposition to Lady Bracknell, who, in line with comedic convention, is a representative of a stuffy older generation who opposes the young lovers marriage for reasons other than those of the heart. However, there is a darker side to Gwendolen that matches Jacks darker side. In her obsession with style over substance (she is excessively attached to Jacks false name of Ernest), she shows the potential of growing into a version of her mother. Both she and Lady Bracknell place an expectation on Jack that he cannot meet: Gwendolen insists that he really be called Ernest, and Lady Bracknell insists that he produce a parent. Both are superficial requirements to which the women attach extreme weight. In reply to Jacks concerned question to Algernon, You dont think there is any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her mother in about a hundred and fifty years, do you, Algy?, Algernon replies, All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. The obsession with trivia and superficial matters in the play is satirized in the title, The Importance of Being Earnest. Earnest means serious, but the only things that the plays characters are concerned about are trivial. In a society ruled by common sense, a man who made romantic overtures to a woman would be judged by the seriousness, or earnestness, of his intentions. In the world of the play, Jack is judged, not by his inner earnestness, but by whether or not his name is Ernest. This comments satirically upon the obsession of contemporary society with form and appearance. In spite of all this, any conclusion by the reader that the author disapproves of such superficiality would be simplistic. Wildes Aesthetic stance, his devotion to elegance and beauty of form, and his contempt for moral lessons in art, mean that his authorial voice is most heard via the superficial wit and dandy, Algernon. Algernons life is a beautifully constructed series of elegant and harmless deceptions, the main purposes of which seem to be amusement and avoiding responsibility. The difference between Algernon and Lady Bracknell is, however, significant. Algernon is aware of the fictions and deceptions that he creates, and never uses them to hurt or exclude others. In fact, his awareness that deception is a universal human activity makes him more humane and forgiving, as in his attitude to the servants stealing his champagne, and his amused indulgence of Jacks deceptions. Lady Bracknell, on the other hand, is blind to the hypocrisy and falseness of the values that she embraces. She uses the forms and fictions of respectable society (such as the belief that pedigree is more important than intrinsic worthiness as a human being) to exclude and condemn others. Critics have pointed out that Lady Bracknell embodies the Victorian tendency to equate poverty, sickness, and misfortune with moral unworthiness: she disapproves of Bunbury for shilly-shallying in ill health rather than recovering or dying; and she condemns Jacks lack of parents as carelessness, as if it were his own fault that he was abandoned. Such attitudes enabled respectable Victorians to dismiss vast sections of society on the grounds that their misfortune was in some way their own fault. Wilde, whose instincts in art and life were humanitarian and compassionate, was certainly attacking Lady Bracknells conventional yet warped values. Summary The play, opens in the morning room of Algernon Moncrieff's flat in the fashionable Mayfair section of London's West End. As the curtain rises, Algernon's butler, Lane, is onstage laying out afternoon tea while Algernon, offstage, plays the piano badly. Before long, the music stops and Algernon enters talking about his playing, but Lane says ironically that he didn't feel it was "polite" to listen. Algernon briefly defends his musicianship, then turns to the matter of Lane's preparations for tea. Algernon asks particularly about some cucumber sandwiches he has ordered for Lady Bracknell, his aunt, who is expected for tea along with her daughter, Gwendolen Fairfax, Algernon's cousin. Lane produces the cucumber sandwiches, which Algernon begins to munch absentmindedly, casually remarking on an extremely inaccurate entry he has noticed in the household books. He speculates aloud on why it is that champagne in bachelors' homes always gets drunk by the servants. There follows some philosophical chat about the nature of marriage and the married state. Then Algernon dismisses Lane and soliloquizes briefly on the moral duty of the servant class. Lane reenters and announces the arrival of Mr. Ernest Worthing, the play's protagonist, who shortly will come to be known as Jack. Algernon greets Jack with evident enthusiasm, asking whether business or pleasure has brought him to town. Jack says pleasure. He notices the elaborate tea service and asks whom Algernon expects, when Algernon tells him Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen will be coming by, Jack is delighted. He confesses that he has come to town for the express purpose of proposing to Gwendolen. A brief debate follows as to whether this purpose constitutes "business" or "pleasure," and in the course of it, Jack reaches for one of the cucumber sandwiches. Algernon reprimands him, saying that they have been ordered expressly for his aunt. Jack points out that Algernon has been eating them the whole time they've been talking. Algernon argues that it's appropriate for him to eat the sandwiches since Lady Bracknell is his aunt and suggests that Jack help himself to the bread and butter, which has been ordered for Gwendolen. When Jack begins eating the bread and butter a bit too enthusiastically, Algernon accuses Jack of behaving as though he were already married to Gwendolen. He reminds Jack he isn't yet engaged to her and says he doubts he ever will be. Surprised, Jack asks what Algernon means. Algernon reminds Jack that Gwendolen is his first cousin and tells him that before he gives his consent to the union, Jack "will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily." Jack professes bewilderment and says he doesn't know anyone named Cecily. By way of explanation, Algernon asks Lane to find "that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left in the smoking room the last time he dined here." The cigarette case, when it arrives, causes Jack some consternation and Algernon much glee. Jack seems to have forgotten that the case bears an inscription from "little Cecily" to "her dear uncle Jack." Algernon forces Jack to explain what the inscription means, and Jack admits his name isn't really Ernest at all it's Jack. Algernon pretends to be incensed and disbelieving. He points out that Jack has always introduced himself as Ernest, that he answers to the name Ernest, that he even looks as though his name were Ernest. He pulls out one of Jack's visiting cards and shows him the name and address on it, saying he intends to keep the card as proof that Jack's name is Ernest. With some embarrassment, Jack explains that his name is "Ernest in town and Jack in the country." Algernon is still unsatisfied. He tells Jack he has always suspected him of being "a confirmed and secret Bunburyist," a term he refuses to define until Jack explains why heroes by two completely different names, and he comments that the explanation is "improbable." Jack protests that his explanation is not importable. He says the old gentleman who adopted him as a boy, Mr. Thomas Cardew, in his will made him guardian to his granddaughter, Miss Cecily Cardew, who lives on Jack's country estate with her governess, Miss Prism, and addresses Jack as her uncle out of respect. Algernon slips in questions about the location of Jack's estate, but Jack refuses to answer and continues with his explanation. Jack says that anyone placed in the position of legal guardian must have moral views about everything, and since the utmost morality doesn't bring great happiness, he has always pretended to have a troublesome younger brother named Ernest who lives at the Albany Hotel and who frequently gets in trouble. This false brother gives Jack an excuse to go to town whenever he wants to. Algernon counters by telling Jack a secret of his own. Just as Jack has invented a younger brother so as to be able to escape to London, Algernon has invented a friend called Bunbury, a permanent invalid whose sudden and frequent relapses afford him a chance to get away to the country whenever he wants. Bunbury's illness, for instance, will allow Algernon to have dinner with Jack that evening, despite the fact that he has been committed, for over a week, to dining at Lady Bracknell's. Algernon wants to explain the rules of "Bunburying" to Jack, but Jack denies being a "Bunburyist." He says if Gwendolen accepts his marriage proposal he plans to kill off his imaginary brother, and that he's thinking of doing so in any case because Cecily is taking too much interest in Ernest. Jack suggests that Algernon do the same with Bunbury. while the two men argue about the uses and merits of a married man's "knowing Bunbury," Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen are announced. Lady Bracknell comes onstage gossiping about a friend whose husband has died recently. Seating herself, she asks for one of the cucumber sandwiches Algernon has promised her. However, no cucumber sandwiches are in sight-Algernon, without realizing what he was doing, has devoured every last one. He gazes at the empty plate in horror and asks Lane sharply why there are no cucumber sandwiches. Quickly sizing up the situation, Lane explains blandly that he couldn't find cucumbers at the market that morning. Algernon dismisses Lane with obvious, and feigned, displeasure. Lady Bracknell is not concerned, and she chatters about the nice married woman she's planning to have Algernon take in to dinner that evening. Regretfully, Algernon tells Lady Bracknell that due to the illness of his friend Bunbury, he'll be unable to come to dinner after all. Lady Bracknell expresses her irritation about Bunbury's "shilly-shallying" over the question of whether he'll live or die. To appease her, and to give Jack a chance to propose to Gwendolen, Algernon offers to go over the musical program for an upcoming reception with her and takes her into the music room. Alone with Gwendolen, Jack awkwardly stammers out his admiration, and Gwendolen takes charge. She lets Jack know right away that she shares his feelings, and Jack is delighted. However, he is somewhat dismayed to learn that a good part of Gwendolen's attraction to him is due to what she believes is his name - Ernest. Gwendolen is fixated on the name Ernest, which she feels has "a music of its own" and "inspires absolute confidence." Gwendolen makes clear that she would not consider marrying a man who was not named Ernest. Lady Bracknell returns to the room, and Gwendolen tells her she is engaged to Jack. Lady Bracknell then interviews Jack to determine Jack's eligibility as a possible son-in-law. Jack seems to be giving all the right answers, until Lady Bracknell inquires into his family background. Jack explains that he has no idea who his parents were, and that he was found, by the man who adopted him, in a handbag in the cloakroom at Victoria Station. Lady Bracknell is scandalized. She forbids him from marrying Gwendolen and leaves the house angrily. Algernon enters, and Jack reviews the results of his interview with Lady Bracknell, explaining that as far as Gwendolen is concerned the two of them are engaged. Algernon asks mischievously whether Jack has told her the truth about being "Ernest in town, and Jack in the country," and Jack scoffs at the idea. He says he plans to kill off Ernest by the end of the week by having him catch a severe chill in Paris. Algernon asks whether Jack has told Gwendolen about his ward, Cecily, and again Jack scoffs at the question. He claims Cecily and Gwendolen will surely become friends and "will be calling each other sister". Gwendolen re-enters and asks to speak privately with Jack. She tells him how the story of his childhood has stirred her and declares her undying love, whatever happens. She asks Jack for his address in the country and Algernon listens in, jotting it down on his cuff. Jack exits with Gwendolen to show her to her carriage, and Lane comes in with some bills, which Algernon promptly tears up. He tells Lane he plans to go "Bunburying" the next day and asks him to layout "all the Bunbury suits." Jack returns, praising Gwendolen, and the curtain falls on Algernon laughing and looking at his shirt cuff.Critical Analysis The opening scene of The Importance of Being Earnest establishes a highly stylized, unrealistic world in which no one talks the way ordinary people talk and very little seems to matter to anyone. Algernon and Lane, as well as most other characters in the play, are both literary constructs, that is, literary devices created solely to say particular things at particular moments. They have almost no life or significance apart from the way they talk. Their language is sharp, brittle, and full of elegant witticisms and mild, ironic pronouncements. Lane's first line, for example, regarding Algernon's piano playing, is an insult couched in polite, elegant language, we can see the play's lack of realism in the way Algernon and Lane behave over Lane's inaccurate entry in the household books. Lane has entered considerably more wine than was actually drunk to cover the fact that he himself has been drinking huge amounts of expensive champagne on the sly. Algernon shows no more concern over the stealing than Lane does over its having been discovered, and both men seem to take for granted that servants steal from their masters, in the world of the play, the deception is simply an expected daily nuisance. A central purpose of the scene between Algernon and Lane is to lay the foundation for the joke about the cucumber sandwiches, an incident that marks the first appearance of food as a source of conflict as well asa substitute for other appetites. Algernon has ordered some cucumber sandwiches especially for Lady Bracknell, but during the scene with Lane, he absentmindedly eats all the sandwiches himself. In this particular scene, food substitutes for the idea of sex. Algernon's insatiable appetite, his preoccupation with food, and his habit of want only indulging himself politely suggest other forms of voraciousness and wanton self-indulgence. This idea becomes apparent in the early exchange between Algernon and Jack over the question of whether Jack should eat cucumber sandwiches or bread and butter. Here, Algernon interprets eating as a form of social, even sexual, presumption. Algernon can eat the cucumber sandwiches because he's Lady Bracknell's blood relation, but Jack, who hardly knows Lady Bracknell, should stay away from them, when Jack demonstrates too much enthusiasm for the bread and butter, Algernon reproaches him for behaving as though he were "married to 'Gwendolen' already," as though he had touched her in an aggressive or salacious manner. Though Jack's double life is amusing and light in many ways, his deception also suggests he has a darker, more sinister side, and to this extent his actions reveal the vast separation between private and public life in upper-middle-class Victorian England. Algernon suspects Jack of leading a double life when the play opens, and he goads him, asking where he has been. He asks Jack pointed questions about his house in Shropshire, knowing fully well that Jack's country estate is not in Shropshire, although this seems to be what Jack has always claimed. Algernon does not let on that he knows Jack is lying, and he lets Jack get deeper and deeper into his lie. The idea of a man not knowing where his best friend lives is absurd, of course, and this sort of unrealism gives The Importance of Being Earnest its reputation as a piece of light, superficial comedy. In fact, Jack's deception is more sinister than Algernon's rather innocent "Bunburying," and he ultimately misrepresents the truth to all those closest to him. Jack is in many ways the Victorian Everyman, and the picture he paints about social mores and expectations is, beneath the surface, a damning one. The scene in which Jack proposes to Gwendolen portrays a reversal of Victorian assumptions about gender roles. Propriety demanded that young women be weak and ineffectual, helpless vessels of girlish admiration and passivity, while men are supposed to be authoritative and competent. Here, however, Jack stammers ineffectually, and Gwendolen takes the whole business of the marriage proposal out of his hands. Wilde has some fun with the rigidity of Victorian convention when he has Gwendolen backtrack and insist that Jack start the A hole proposal process over again, doing it properly. The social commentary in this scene goes deeper than the Victorian concern with propriety. In the figure of Gwendolen, a young woman obsessed with the name Earnest, and not with actual earnestness itself, Wilde satirizes Victorian society's preoccupation with surface manifestations of virtue and its willingness to detect virtue in the most superficial displays of decent behaviour. The Ernest/earnest joke is a send-up of the whole concept of moral duty, which was the linchpin of Victorian morality. Wilde uses Lady Bracknell's interview of Jack to make fun of the values of London society, which put a higher premium on social connections than on character or goodness. More disquieting than the questions themselves is the order in which Lady Bracknell asks them. Before she even gets to such matters as income and family, she wants to know if Jack smokes, and she is pleased to hear that he does, since she considers smoking an antidote to idleness. Such trivial questions suggest the vacuity of London society, where more weighty issues are of secondary importance. The questions about Jack's family background, however, reveal Lady Bracknell's darker side, when Jack admits he has "lost" both his parents, Lady Bracknell replies with an elaborate pun: "To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness." Like so many of Lady Bracknell's pronouncements, this one is funny because it's absurd. However, the statement also reflects a heartlessness that's very real and not funny at all. Lady Bracknell responded in an equally callous way to Bunbury's lingering illness when she remarked. "I must say.....that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd." in pronouncements such as these, Lady Bracknell reveals an unsettling notion that coloured every aspect of Victorian life: poverty and misfortune are, to some extent, an outcome of moral unworthiness. In The Importance of Being Earnest, conventional morality operates on two levels of hypocrisy. On one level is the portrait Algernon paints of what he sees as conventional married bliss, in which husband and wife appear faithful but either one or the other is carrying on behind the other one's back. He tells Jack that, in a marriage, either husband or wife will certainly want to know Bunbury, and that in married life three is company and two is none. Confronted with a man who is "Ernest in town and Jack in the country," a conventional Victorian audience would probably have seen some reference to heterosexual infidelity. However, Wilde's audience must also have been full of people to whom "Ernest in town and Jack in the country" meant something quite different, something that had to be buried far below the surface of the dialogue, when Lady Bracknell says that "a cloakroom at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion - has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now," a twenty-first-century reader oraudience member most likely will imagine another kind of life that Victorian hypocrisy required one to hide: the secret life of homosexuals, for which Wilde himself was condemned. All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. 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Ernest; this is Jacks invented brother who is supposedly living a disreputable life in town. We learn that in reality, Jack has used Ernest as a convenient excuse to leave his country home and adopt a second, freer lifestyle in London. Algernon uses this discovery to intimidate Jack causing tensions to raise between them; threatening Jacks secret lifestyle. The Act ends as Algernon expresses interest in visiting Jacks beautiful ward Cecily Cardew in the country, posing as the nonexistent brother Ernest. Character Analysis Algernon Moncrieff: Algernons curiosity and love for adventures is revealed as he manipulates the situation to meet Cecily. Jack Worthing (Ernest): The discovery of Jacks double life provides insight into his character, revealing his willingness to deceive and manipulate to maintain his lifestyle. Cecily Cardew: While Cecily doesnt appear in person, her attractive description piques Algernons interest, revealing her to be a pivotal character. Themes Deception and duplicity: The revelation of Jacks double life and Algernons scheme to meet Cecily emphasise the theme of deception. Freedom and constraint: Jacks made-up brother Ernest represents his longing for freedom from societal constraints. Class and social status: Jacks double life, which involves him changing his identity depending on his location, illustrates how different behaviors are attributed to different social classes. Language and Style Wilde uses dramatic irony; the audience knows about Jacks deception before Algernon does, increasing tension and humour. Wildes continued use of epigrams and satire comments subtly on the absurdities and hypocrisies of the Victorian upper class. The developing plot introduces comic misunderstanding, foreshadowing the comic situations to follow with Algernons intention to impersonate Ernest. Wilde structures the scene to end on a cliffhanger, maintaining the audiences interest in the complications to follow.

The importance of being earnest act 1 summary. Importance of being earnest act 1. Importance of being earnest act 2. The importance of being earnest act 2 summary.