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Why does Gwendolen want to marry an Ernest

Like the two male leads, Gwendolen and Cecily also have a lot in common. There's the Ernest thing: marrying a man named Ernest seems to be the founding principal of their lives. The two women even say it in unison: "Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!" (III.29). Gwendolen and Cecily both keep a diary, which they believe would pretty much stand up in a court of law as proof of whatever they say. And both are willing to fight tooth and nail to get what they want... though not in front of the servants. Neither Cecily nor Gwendolen has much of a character arc, because the absurd plot simply unfolds to their advantage. In the end, Cecily does have to make do with an "Algernon." So we guess Gwendolen wins since she alone ends up marrying an "Ernest." Why did Oscar Wilde make them so similar? Because his main interest was in satirizing the society that produced women like them—not in the individuals themselves. Lady Bracknell Junior"You don't think there is any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her mother in about a hundred and fifty years, do you Algy?" (I.227). Jack asks in the first scene. Bad news, Jack. You may not be able to see beyond the blond ringlets and cute Victorian corset, but the signs are all there. Gwendolen is opinionated and forceful like her mother; she bosses Cecily around with ease. Gwendolen also has strong ideas about social protocol, which we see in the first scene. Jack's marriage proposal has to be exactly right:Gwendolen: Yes, Mr. Worthing, what have you got to say to me?Jack: You know what I have got to say to you.Gwendolen: Yes, but you don't say it.Jack: Gwendolen, will you marry me? [Goes on his knees.]Gwendolen: Of course I will, darling. How long you have been about it! I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose. (I.161-165)The City GirlGwendolen has been raised in the city and is polished and sophisticated. She enjoys this advantage over Cecily, whom she considers a country bumpkin. There are a number of hilarious town vs. country barbs in their tea scene, the least veiled of which happens here:Cecily: Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into an engagement? How dare you? This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.Gwendolen: [Satirically.] I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different. (II.295-29)Based on this snippet of dialogue, it certainly looks like it's fighting time. But no—the servant Merriman enters and quickly restores calm. One woman may be a country girl and the other a city girl, but both know that you don't let it all hang out in front of the servants. 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. See Important Quotations Explained 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. Regrettfully, 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 reenters 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 lay out "all the Bunbury suits." Jack returns, praising Gwendolen, and the curtain falls on Algernon laughing quietly and looking at his shirt cuff. Analysis 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 were 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 whole 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 Ernest, 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 behavior. The Ernest/earnest joke is a send-up of the whole concept of moral duty, which was the linchpin of Victorian morality. Read more about puns and inversions. 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 colored every aspect of Victorian life: poverty and misfortune are, to some extent, an outcome of moral unworthiness. Read important quotes by Lady Bracknell about wealth, class, and character. 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 or audience 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. Read more about marriage, morality, and hypocrisy as themes.

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