

# The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde

## Act One

- 1 In a further discussion of marriage, Algernon tells Jack, 'You don't understand that in married life three is company and two is none.' This inverts the sense of a familiar proverb: 'Two is company, three is a crowd.'
- 2 Jack has taken a phrase that people might use about something personal, like a letter, which is truly private, and applied it to an object (a cigarette case) which would not be thought of as personal and private.
- 3 Jack is trying to distract Algernon's attention from the real meaning of the words 'little Cecily' in the inscription. It is an affectionate form of the name of Jack's ward. He is pretending that 'little' refers to height, and that Cecily is his aunt, whose height is no concern of Algernon's.
- 4 To 'lose' one's parents is a polite way of saying that they are dead. But Lady Bracknell is pretending to think that Jack is using 'lose' literally, in the sense of 'mislaid', as if he has put them somewhere and cannot find them.
- 5 Jack has decided to stop pretending he has a wicked brother. He has suggested he should tell Gwendolen that his brother has died of a heart attack. But Algernon points out that heart problems can be hereditary and he hints that Gwendolen might not marry Jack if she thinks there are heart problems in his family. But a bad cold can never be hereditary. In order to make a joke, Wilde makes Algernon suggest an illness which no one can die from.

## Act Two

- 1 Each character is expressing an attraction for the other, in an indirect way. This hints at the possibility that they might become a couple in the future.
- 2 Miss Prism's dislike of young men who behave badly – even ones she doesn't know – is so strong that it overcomes logic and common sense. She is speaking about a dead man as if he is alive.
- 3 Wilde is suggesting that a sermon which is suitable for all occasions is probably equally *unsuitable* for all occasions.
- 4 Cecily has not heard Jack's announcement of the death of his imaginary brother, and she thinks that his brother is at that moment in the house. So she understands that Jack is saying that he doesn't want to be friends with his living brother.

Canon Chasuble has heard Jack say that his brother has died. He now believes there has been a mistake or a misunderstanding and Jack's brother is not dead. He believes that Jack will be pleased to learn that he was wrong about his brother's death.

- 5 We learn that both young women are vain and that they think their lives are very interesting. Cecily thinks that she is so interesting that her diary will be published, and be of interest to everyone. Gwendolen wants something exciting to read on trains and thinks her diary is more thrilling than any book she could buy.
- 6 Gwendolen has become engaged to Jack in London, believing his name is Ernest Worthing, which is the name he uses in the city. Cecily has become engaged to Algernon, who has come to Hertfordshire pretending to be Jack's wicked brother Ernest Worthing. So they both think they are engaged to someone called Ernest Worthing.

7 Gwendolen pretends not to know that flowers grow in the country. She is emphasising her urban sophistication compared with Cecily's simple country personality. Cecily says that flowers are as common in the country as people are in London. She is really using 'common' to mean rude and ignorant rather than numerous. She is suggesting that Gwendolen is a rude and ignorant Londoner, and that she is a well-mannered country-girl.

8 Algernon claims that an improvement in science might have resulted in bad colds becoming hereditary and therefore that, since he claimed that his (imaginary) brother has died of a cold, Jack might die of one too. Since baptism involves water, he hints, Jack might easily catch a cold. And since Jack claims to have no memory of being baptized, he cannot know whether his health is strong enough to survive baptism.

This is meant to sound very intelligent and reasonable but it is in fact nonsense for two reasons. Firstly, science couldn't make anything become hereditary. Secondly, Jack did not have a brother so his brother couldn't have died.

### Act Three

- 1 In the same sentence, Lady Bracknell says she bribed the maid 'with a small coin' to betray Gwendolen's trust. But Wilde makes Lady Bracknell unaware that she has said anything ironic.
- 2 Lady Bracknell is still pretending to think that Jack is somehow related to Victoria Station because he was found there. She really wants to know whether Cecily is from a 'good' or 'respectable' family, but she puts the question in this way in order to make clear her social superiority.
- 3 Cecily is very rich and her money is invested in Government Stocks, the value of which will continue to grow. Lady Bracknell thinks that having large investments is a good quality which will 'last and improve' unlike beauty, which will not.
- 4 Most of the characters are anticipating the solution to the mystery of Jack's origins when the bag is identified – a matter of great seriousness. However, Miss Prism is concerned only with a very trivial inconvenience – the inconvenience of not having had the use of the bag for so many years.