

Applause! Cary Youth Theatre presents

The Importance of Being
EARNEST

By Oscar Wilde



Get ready for Applause!'s upcoming production by learning about plot, characters, and themes in the play.

Want to know more? Call Rachel Baranski, (919) 465-4792.

The Victorian Era

The Importance of Being Earnest is set in England in 1895, during Queen Victoria's reign. This was a time marked by a general earnestness about life, and a confidence in Britain's status as the most powerful nation in the world. The Victorian Era was also known for a rather stern morality and emphasis on proper manners and polite behavior. Many marriages began as a business deal rather than for love, although many couples grew to love each other. Maybe all that propriety is where flowery Victorian love notes and poetry came from!

Victorian manners for proper ladies and gents:

- ❖ *Though advised on the importance of catching a man, a lady must not be too liberal in display of her charms. Meekness and modesty were considered beautiful virtues.*
- ❖ *When crossing the street, a lady may raise her dress a bit above the ankle by lifting it with her right hand. It is vulgar to raise the dress with both hands, unless the mud was very deep (too much ankle!).*
- ❖ *A lady should shine in the art of conversation – but not too brightly – and should speak in a distinct but subdued tone. Also, conversation is not to talk continually, but to listen and speak in your turn.*
- ❖ *A lady never joins in any rude plays that will subject her to be kissed or handled in any way by a gentleman.*
- ❖ *While courting, a gentleman caller may only bring certain gifts such as flowers, candy or a book. A gentleman may not accept any present at all from a lady unless he has extended one to her, and then he may only accept from the lady something artistic, handmade, and inexpensive.*
- ❖ *Gentlemen should be seen and not smelled. Use but very little perfume, as too much of it is in bad taste.*
- ❖ *Do not monopolize conversation or interrupt another speaker to finish his story for him.*
- ❖ *Unmarried women must always be accompanied by a chaperone, and should never speak, walk, or ride alone with a gentleman.*

Activity: Times, They are A-Changin'

How have manners changed since the Victorian Era? Would you have enjoyed living back then? Ask your parents or another adult what manners were like when they were growing up. Would you have enjoyed growing up when they did?

Play Summary

ACT I: Algernon's flat in London

Jack arrives to propose to Algernon's cousin Gwendoline, but Algy will not help until Jack explains an inscription on his cigarette case, which reveals the existence of Jack's young ward, Cecily. Gwendoline accepts Jack's (or Ernest's, as she knows him) proposal; she loves the name Ernest; but her mother, Lady Bracknell, rejects Jack/Ernest as a potential suitor after learning that all Jack knows about his identity is that he was found as a baby in a handbag at Victoria Station.

Act II: The Garden of the Manor House

Cecily is studying with her governess, Miss Prism, when Algernon arrives pretending to be Jack's brother Ernest. Algy and Cecily quickly become engaged; Cecily also loves the name of Ernest. Jack returns to announce his "brother's" sudden death; this story is immediately undermined by Algy's presence in the house. Jack and Algy leave the house on separate errands, in their absence, Gwendoline arrives. She and Cecily learn they are both engaged to "Ernest". This upsetting situation is cleared up when Jack and Algy return.

Act III: Morning-Room at the Manor House

Lady Bracknell arrives to fetch Gwendoline and learns of Algernon and Cecily's engagement, which she approves upon hearing of Cecily's fortune. Jack, as Cecily's guardian, refuses his consent unless Lady Bracknell agrees to his union with Gwendoline; Lady Bracknell refuses. Lady Bracknell recognizes Miss Prism, who recounts a story that clears up Jack's identity and reveals him to be Algy's lost brother. Now Lady Bracknell will allow the marriage, but Gwendoline insists she can only love a man named Ernest. More recount of Jack's history reveals that his name actually *is* Ernest, and matters are settled for everyone.

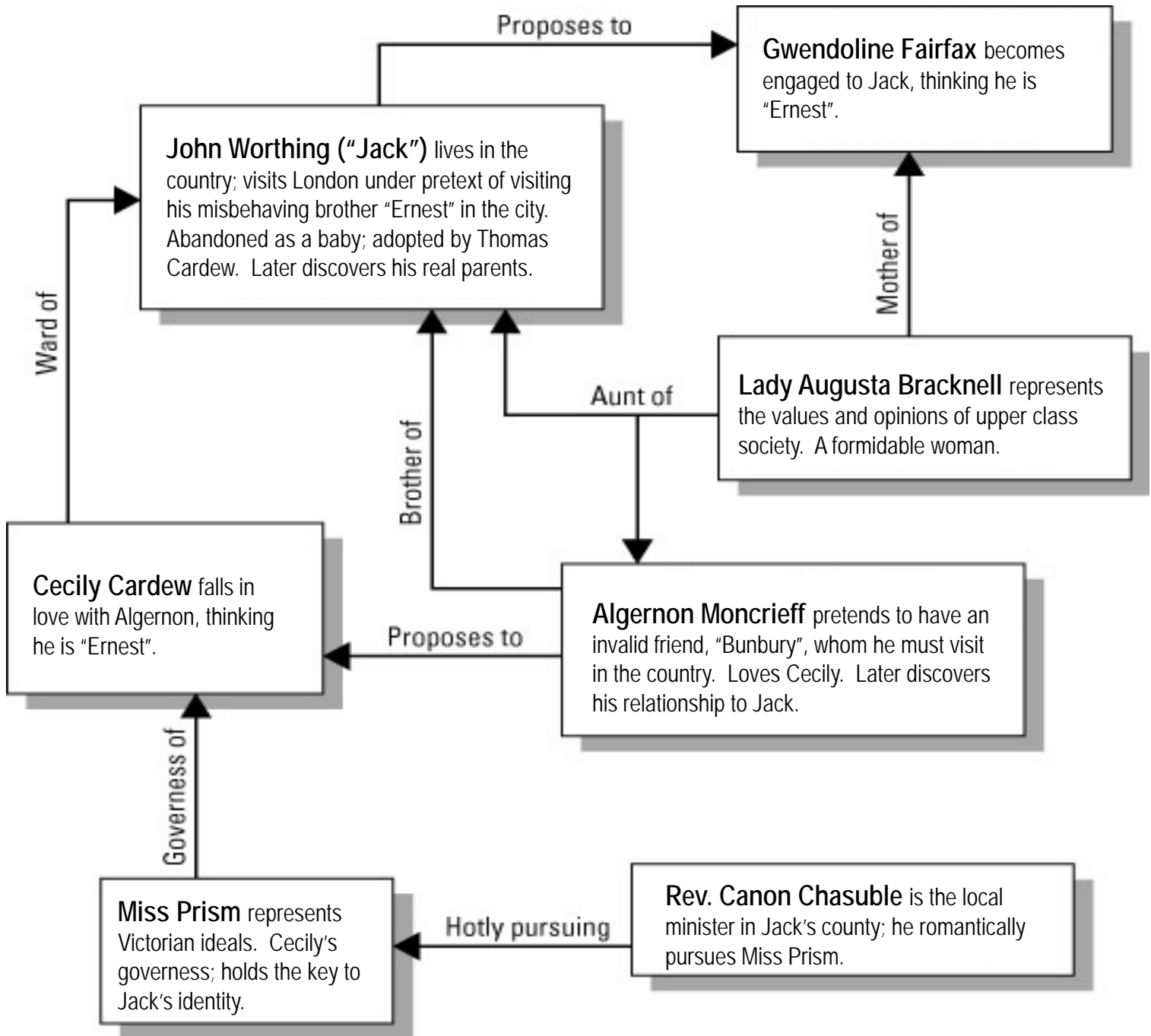
Activity: Cucumber Sandwiches

Algernon and Jack ate all the cucumber sandwiches before Lady Bracknell and Gwendoline arrived for tea, so Lane must make more. All four guests will eat three sandwiches each. If two slices of bread makes four sandwiches, how many slices of bread must Lane use? _____

Cucumber Mint Tea Sandwiches

- ❖ Mix together 2T butter, 2T cream cheese, and $\frac{1}{4}$ c. finely chopped mint; spread onto 6 slices of your favorite bread.
- ❖ Thinly slice a fresh cucumber and layer on 3 slices of the bread.
- ❖ Top each bread slice with another bread slice, and cut sandwich into small rectangles. Cutting off the crust is optional!

Meet the Characters



Activity: Character Report Card

After watching the play, grade your favorite character (use A-F) for each of the traits listed below. Why did you give him or her the grades you did?

REPORT CARD FOR _____

Responsibility _____

Respect _____

Punctuality _____

Humor _____

Hard Worker _____

Honesty _____

Friendliness _____

Politeness _____

Victorian Fashion



Activity: Closet Remix

Take a look at these images of Victorian clothing. Which outfit would you be most likely to wear? Do you think it would be comfortable?

Activity: Dear Diary

Mistaken and fabricated identities are part of the plot and comedy of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Create an alter-ego for yourself with any qualities, abilities, super powers, or talents you'd like. Then, write a diary entry about your alter-ego's escape from a sticky situation without any harm or embarrassment.

DEAR DIARY,

Bibliography

- ❖ The Orlando Shakespeare Theatre in Partnership with UCF Curriculum Guide, http://orlandoshakes.org/pdfs/curriculum-guides/Earnest_CG.pdf
- ❖ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Importance_of_Being_Earnest
- ❖ www.theatrehistory.com
- ❖ Active Literacy Strategies: Connecting Readers To Text, Grades K – 8, <http://www.ufttc.org/ftp/pub/flipbooks/literacyflipbook.pdf>
- ❖ <http://home.kendra.com/victorianrituals/victor/ritualsll.htm>
- ❖ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/victorian+period>
- ❖ www.epicurious.com
- ❖ www.fashion-era.com
- ❖ ardnasselas.wordpress.com
- ❖ bustledress.com
- ❖ citelighter.com