


约克文学作品辅导丛书

YORK NOTES ON

# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

认真的重要

Oscar Wilde



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GUIDES

# YORK NOTES

*General Editors: Professor A. N. Jeffares (University of Stirling) & Professor Sobeil Bushrui (American University of Beirut)*

Oscar Wilde

# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

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LONGMAN  
YORK PRESS



世界图书出版公司

北京·广州·上海·西安

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This edition of York Notes on  
The Importance of Being Earnest  
is Published by arrangement  
with Addison Wesley Longman  
Limited, London.

约克文学作品辅导丛书:认真的重要(王尔德)

C. S. 纳萨尔 著

英国朗曼出版公司出版  
世界图书出版公司北京公司重印  
北京朝阳门内大街 137 号 邮编:100010  
北京中西印刷厂印刷  
世界图书出版公司北京公司发行  
各地新华书店和外语书店经销

\*

1997 年 1 月第 一 版 开本:850×1168 1/32  
1997 年 1 月第一次印刷 印张:2  
印数:0001—2000 字数:51 千字

ISBN: 7-5062-2895-5/I·17

著作权合同登记 图字:01-96-0046 号

定价:4.60 元

世界图书出版公司北京公司向艾迪生—韦斯利  
朗曼出版有限公司购得重印权在中国大陆发行

## 《约克文学作品辅导丛书》介绍

《约克文学作品辅导丛书》(York Notes)系 Longman 集团有限公司(英国)出版。本丛书覆盖了世界各国历代文学名著,原意是辅导英国中学生准备文学课的高级会考或供英国大学生自学参考。因此,它很适合我国高校英语专业学生研读文学作品时参考。

丛书由 A. N. Jeffares 和 S. Bushrui 两位教授任总编。每册的编写者大都是研究有关作家的专家学者,他们又都有在大学讲授文学的经验,比较了解学生理解上的难点。本丛书自问世以来,始终畅销不衰,被使用者普遍认为是英美出版的同类书中质量较高的一种。

丛书每一册都按统一格式对一部作品进行介绍和分析。每一册都有下列五个部分。

① 导言。主要介绍:作者生平,作品产生的社会、历史背景,有关的文学传统或文艺思潮等。

② 内容提要。一般分为两部分:a. 全书的内容概述;b. 每章的内容提要及难词、难句注释,如方言、典故、圣经或文学作品的引语、有关社会文化习俗等。注释恰到好处,对读懂原作很有帮助。

③ 评论。结合作品的特点,对结构、人物塑造、叙述角度、语言风格、主题思想等进行分析和评论。论述深入浅出,分析力求客观,意在挖掘作品内涵和展示其艺术性。

④ 学习提示。提出学习要点、重要引语和思考题(附参考答案或答案要点)。

⑤ 进一步研读指导。介绍该作品的最佳版本;版本中是否有重大改动;列出供进一步研读的参考书目(包括作者传记、研究有关作品的专著和评论文章等)。

总之,丛书既提供必要的背景知识,又注意启发学生思考;既重视在吃透作品的基础上进行分析,又对进一步研究提供具体指导;因此是一套理想的英语文学辅导材料。



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## Part 1

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# Introduction

## The life of Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) first attracted public attention as a sort of clown with a great conversational talent. He preached that the pursuit of beauty is the most crucial thing in life, and he went about teaching people how to dress and how to decorate their homes. He himself dressed in a very flashy way that made him the subject of many jokes. Then he went on to write some fairy tales and a novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The novel, which deals with the evil in human nature and the pursuit of evil beauty, was condemned as immoral by many people, but it was widely read and it helped to establish Wilde as a literary figure. Real success came, however, with a series of plays that dominated the London stage – *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and finally *The Importance of Being Earnest*. People were amused and entertained by those plays, and Wilde's reputation soared. Especially attractive were the brilliant witty statements that filled the plays. At the height of his success, though, tragedy struck. He was convicted of homosexual practices and sentenced to two years in prison with hard labour. His prison experiences broke his spirit and destroyed his health. On his release, he found himself a rejected man in England, and so went to France, where he was to spend the last few years of his life. He died in poverty in a third-class hotel in Paris.

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### Early life and Oxford

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Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1854. His parents were distinguished but highly eccentric. The father, Sir William Wilde, was a well-known and successful Dublin doctor, but he was famous in Dublin not only for the practice of medicine but also for his personal untidiness and uncleanness. He paid no attention to clothes and rarely ever bathed. Thus, there was usually a thin layer of dirt on his skin, and his fingernails were black. He was also famous for his many love affairs. Despite his unattractive appearance – or perhaps because of it – he insisted on conquering the hearts of as many ladies as possible. One of his love affairs ended in a lawsuit and created a great scandal. While



Sir William was a very short man, almost a dwarf, Wilde's mother was an unusually tall and well-built woman, so that the two together must have presented a comic appearance. In her own way, Lady Wilde was as eccentric as her husband. A good-looking woman, her main concern in youth was politics, and she became an Irish revolutionary seeking to liberate Ireland from British rule. Under the name 'Speranza', she published a volume of mainly revolutionary poems. She drifted away from politics in later years, but remained eccentric if also clever and well-read.

Oscar Fingal O'Flaherty Wills Wilde (this was his full name) spent the first ten years of his life at home, where he was tutored privately. At ten, he was sent to Portora Royal School, one of the best schools in Ireland, where he remained for seven years. He then went to Trinity College, Dublin, for three years, where he was influenced by John Pentland Mahaffy, a famous classical scholar. At the age of twenty he won a scholarship that allowed him to go to Magdalen College, Oxford. As a schoolboy he began to develop and perfect the wit for which he was to become famous. His witty conversation won him the admiration of many of his schoolmates. At Oxford he made full use of his wit to gain attention, and also began to dress in a very dandiacal, flashy manner. In his pursuit of beauty he also decorated his rooms, filling them with a collection of porcelain. Some of his college mates, masculine and athletic, found his ways effeminate and decided to smash up his rooms. Wilde, however, took after his mother physically. Very tall and large-boned, he was able to repel the attack, tossing one of the assailants down the stairs. Having proved his masculinity, he then invited the attackers to his rooms for a drink.

Two men greatly influenced Wilde's development and helped to shape his intellect at Oxford – John Ruskin and Walter Pater. Ruskin, who was Slade Professor of Art, was a deeply religious man who insisted that literature and painting should ally themselves with morality, and who preached the dignity of labour. One of his projects was to organise Oxford undergraduates to build a road between two villages, and thus instruct those upper-class young men to take a pride in physical labour. Wilde, although known for his physical laziness, nevertheless joined this work-party under the influence of Ruskin. A more significant and lasting influence, though, was Pater. In *The Renaissance*, published in 1873, a year before Wilde's arrival at Oxford, Pater declared himself an atheist, spoke of modern human nature as largely evil, found a strange beauty in evil, and urged that this life should be lived as completely and fully as possible, since it is short and is the only life we have. A shy and retiring man, Pater asserted that the highest pleasure is to be found in art. Many of the young men who read his book, however, misunderstood him, and

felt that he was advocating a life of sensations. *The Renaissance* was to remain Wilde's favourite book throughout most of his life.

In 1875 Wilde went on a tour of Italy, and in 1877 he visited Greece. In 1878 he received a degree in classics with first-class honours from Oxford. His success as a student shows very clearly that, despite his affectations, he was a brilliant and hard-working young man. His education accounts for the many classical references in his works. During his years at Oxford, moreover, he began to produce poetry, and his poem 'Ravenna' won the Newdigate Prize in 1878.

The year 1879 marks another change in Wilde's life, for in that year he went to live in London. Almost immediately he became a famous figure, and within two years his fame had become so widespread that he accepted an invitation to go on a year-long lecture tour in the USA. This fame was not the result of any literary achievements. In 1881, Wilde published a volume of poetry which was considered mediocre, and rightly so, since most of the poems in it are poor imitations. Because of the many friendships he had formed at Oxford, where the undergraduates came mostly from the upper-classes, Wilde was able to enter this society with relative ease, and his incomparable wit immediately made him one of its most celebrated members. English upper-class society of that time formed a separate group, and many of its members lived a life of gaiety, splendour, balls, and dinner parties. The activities of those people were of great interest to the general public and were regularly reported in the press, much as the goings-on of film and TV stars are reported today. And because of his social reputation, by the time he was twenty-seven, much of Europe and the USA had heard of Oscar Wilde.

But Wilde was not simply a charming wit in those days. He was also an apostle of the doctrine of aestheticism, which preached to the duty-obsessed Victorians that the pursuit and enjoyment of beauty was the chief purpose of life. Wilde declared that the highest beauty manifests itself in art, but he considered that everything created by human beings was a kind of art. He felt that dress, for instance, is of supreme importance, for the human body is like an empty canvas and clothes are like the paint we use to draw a picture on this canvas. The fully clothed human body, then, is a work of art, and we should strive to make ourselves as beautiful as possible through the way we dress. We should also take great care to build beautiful homes and to make sure that their interior decoration is aesthetically pleasing. Inevitably, such a doctrine was ridiculed by many people, but it caught the attention of the middle-classes, who listened eagerly, if amusedly, to what Wilde had to say.

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**The turning point**

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After his return from America in 1883, Wilde fell in love with a very attractive and gentle young woman, Constance Lloyd, and the two got married later that same year. She bore him two sons, the first in 1885, the second in 1886. For a while, he was happily married and very much in love with Connie, but there was latent in him a tendency towards homosexuality. It is possible, though by no means definite, that he had had some mild homosexual experiences while at Oxford. At any rate, his first known homosexual contact occurred late in 1886, at the age of thirty-two, when he was seduced by Robert Ross, a young man fifteen years his junior. From that time on, his history is one of steadily increasing homosexual involvement until he was exposed and imprisoned in 1895.

Homosexual contact sharpened Wilde's sense of evil and strengthened his ability to handle this theme in literature. After 1886, his literary output increased a great deal in quantity and became much better in quality. Strangely enough, the first product of the post-homosexual Wilde was a series of fairy tales, written between 1886 and 1889. These stories deal with the serious themes of innocence, evil, and suffering, but within a delightful fairy-tale framework. They constitute Wilde's attempt to fight the homosexual urge and remain in a childlike world of innocence – the world of his two sons Cyril and Vyvyan. Some of those tales, such as 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' and 'The Canterville Ghost', are quite famous and still entertain both children and adults today.

Along with the fairy tales, Wilde wrote a considerable amount of criticism. In one of his critical essays, *Pen, Pencil and Poison* (1889), he speaks of the excellent effect that crime had on the art of the poisoner Thomas Wainwright. Since homosexuality was considered a crime punishable by law in Victorian England, it is easy to connect Wilde with Wainwright and to see Wilde as talking indirectly about the effect of sin and crime on his own work. The best essays, however, are *The Decay of Lying* (1889) and *The Critic as Artist* (1890), both of them more complex than their playful, witty style might lead one to assume.

By 1890, it had become evident to Wilde that for him to resist the homosexual urge was futile. He had become progressively more involved homosexually, and his new decision was to yield to the impulse rather than fight it. Both in his art and life, he initiated a new and darker phase. In life, his homosexual activity became more intense. (His wife Constance did not find out that her husband was a practising homosexual until his exposure in 1895). In art, he wrote *The Picture*

of *Dorian Gray* (1890), his only novel and a good one, despite its many imperfections. The book relates the story of Dorian Gray, a handsome young man who wishes for eternal youth and beauty. He gets his wish, and as he grows older it is his picture that shows signs of age while he remains intact. Dorian also decides to follow a life of sensuality and pleasure, moreover, and the sinful acts that scar his soul are also revealed in his picture. Although it is never openly stated in the novel, Dorian's main sin is homosexuality. In the end, Dorian's pursuit of evil beauty ceases to give pleasure and he begins to yearn desperately for his lost innocence. In an attempt to recover this innocence, he stabs his picture. Far from being destroyed, however, the picture returns to its original state of youthfulness and beauty, while Dorian the man ages in a flash and dies. The novel ends with Dorian's servants finding him dead in the attic, with a knife sticking in his heart. It is only with great difficulty that they recognise the aged corpse as that of their master.

Wilde's view of human nature in *Dorian Gray* is a simple one: he regarded it as grey, a mixture of good and evil. Despite its apparently moral ending, the novel created an uproar, and Wilde was attacked in the press. His first great success did not come until 1892, with the production of his play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*. In a very real sense, the play is a joke on the Victorian public, since it repeats the basic theme of Wilde's novel that human nature is grey. Lady Windermere, a Puritan, discovers in the course of the action that she has a good deal of badness in her. Mrs Erlynne, on the other hand, who is reputedly all bad, finds out that there is a hard core of goodness within herself. The play is a light social comedy full of sparkling wit, and it lacks the dark, sinister atmosphere of *Dorian Gray*. It proved very popular on the London stage.

*Lady Windermere's Fan* was followed by *A Woman of No Importance* (produced in 1893) and *An Ideal Husband* (produced in 1895). The three plays, all successful, turned Wilde into a famous playwright. Beneath their deceptive conventional framework, they deal with the theme of human evil. The public, however, not understanding the real meaning of the plays and fascinated by their epigrammatic wit, applauded; so that when Wilde sat down to write *The Importance of Being Earnest*, he did so from a position of fame and popularity.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is Wilde's funniest and most attractive play, one of the masterpieces of comedy. Written in 1894 while he was on vacation in Brighton, it was first conceived as a four-act play. It proved too long for the stage, however, so Wilde cut parts of it, strengthened it, and recast it as a three-act play. It is the second, shorter version which we read today, although the first version was discovered and published many years ago. *The Importance of*

*Being Earnest* is a farce, taking us into the realm of absurdity in an attempt to recover a lost innocence. Through laughter, it tries to purge us of sin and evil. It is the only one of Wilde's plays that has not caused much disagreement among his modern-day readers and viewers: practically everyone agrees that it is perfect or nearly so. Ever since its first production in 1895, it has held the stage easily, delighting generation after generation of viewers.

One play that was never produced in England in Wilde's lifetime is *Salomé* (1893; 1894), his darkest and most terrifying work. Written originally in French in 1891, it was banned from the English stage by the Lord Chamberlain. An anti-Christian play, it presents the prophet Jokanaan (John the Baptist) as a person who has repressed his nature. The cruel and sexually perverse Salomé, on the other hand, is a symbol of human nature. In the final decade of the nineteenth century, many people believed that the appearance of the Antichrist was imminent. Wilde in *Salomé* presents himself as the Antichrist, preaching that human nature is totally and irredeemably evil. *Salomé* is Wilde's most evil and terrible work, and its interpretation of human nature is wholly satanic.

In 1891 Wilde met and formed an association with Lord Alfred Douglas, who from that time on became his chief homosexual love. Douglas's father, however, was the Marquess of Queensberry, a highly eccentric and violent man, who soon began a campaign of threats and scandal against Wilde, in an attempt to rescue his son from his influence. (In fact, it was more truthfully Wilde who had fallen under the influence of the younger but more corrupt Alfred). In 1895, Wilde finally decided to take action against Queensberry, and he imprudently sued him for criminal libel. At the trial, Wilde's homosexual activity was exposed, Queensberry was acquitted, and Wilde was placed under arrest. He was then tried on charges of homosexuality. At the first trial the jury disagreed, but at the second he was found guilty and given the maximum sentence of two years' imprisonment with hard labour.

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### The end

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His prison years, spent mostly in Reading Gaol, were difficult and psychologically destructive ones. In 1897 and while in prison, he wrote *De Profundis*, which is both a literary document and a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas. After his release, he wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1895), a good poem but flawed. This was to be his last literary production, however, for he discovered that prison had permanently destroyed his ability to write. Soon after his release, and finding himself a shunned man in England, he assumed the name

Sebastian Melmoth and departed for the Continent, where he spent the last three years of his life, a lonely and broken man. He died in Paris in November 1900, at the age of forty-six. Throughout his mature literary career, Wilde consciously wrote literature that he wished to be regarded as the culmination of nineteenth-century literary history. It is therefore fitting that he died at the turn of the century.

## The history of nineteenth-century British drama

In one significant way, however, Wilde's literature was not the end of the nineteenth-century impulse but the beginning of a twentieth-century one. Throughout the nineteenth century, the English theatre was in a state of decline and decay, but in the 1890s what was called the 'new drama' appeared. The chief apostles of this movement which revived the English theatre were George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde.

In the nineteenth century, a special type of drama referred to as melodrama had come more and more to dominate the English stage. Melodramas were intended for lower-class people without much education, who lived in crowded, unattractive homes and worked long hours. These were the people who provided the basic audience for the playwrights. When such people did have free evenings to go to the theatre, they were not in the mood for intellectual entertainment. They wanted something exciting, emotional, funny, and this is what the melodramas of the period gave them. The main characteristics of melodrama are the following: (i) simple, easy dialogue, though pretentious and seldom realistic. (ii) visual variety; there were usually a number of short scenes per act, with many changes of setting. (iii) much music and sound effects for emotional stimulation. (iv) stiff, flimsy, unconvincing pasteboard characters; usually, a character had simply one basic characteristic that identified him, such as drunkenness, courage, villainy, purity. (v) accidental and unconvincing appearances, sudden reversals, suspense, and excitement were preferable to probability.

The first departure from this crude type of melodrama came with the plays of T.W. Robertson. Such plays of his as *Society* (1865), *Caste* (1867), and *School* (1869) displayed some serious intellectual content, and characters were fuller and more rounded. Then came the plays of Henry Arthur Jones and A.W. Pinero. Pinero wrote such plays as *The Silver King* (1882) and *Saints and Sinners* (1884), while Jones's plays included *The Profligate* (1889) and *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1893).

These playwrights, however, simply paved the way for Shaw and Wilde. Moreover, by the final decades of the century, the middle and upper-classes had begun to frequent the theatres, and they wanted a more sophisticated type of drama. The plays of Shaw and Wilde, though they owe much to the conventions of melodrama, present us with many-sided and convincing characters. Much more significant, though, is that they have a good deal of intellectual content. Indeed, the main difference between melodrama and the New Drama is that, while the former is unintellectual, the latter is a drama of ideas.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* – a unique play of its kind in English literature – cannot be considered a drama of ideas despite the fact that it does have intellectual content. Nevertheless, in its break with melodrama and its almost total originality, it is very definitely part of the late nineteenth-century revival of the drama. It stands today as the best play that Great Britain produced in the nineteenth century.

## A note on the text

Although produced on the London stage in 1895, *The Importance of Being Earnest* was not published until 1899, when Leonard Smithers brought out the first edition in London. This was the three-act version, which Wilde rightly considered to be the stronger one. Since then, the play has been published many times and translated into many languages. The 1899 edition is the authoritative text on which all subsequent editions have been based.

## Part 2

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# Summaries

of THE IMPORTANCE OF  
BEING EARNEST

## The characters

It is best to begin a summary of *The Importance of Being Earnest* by introducing, very briefly, the characters in the play and outlining their roles.

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### John (Jack) Worthing, J.P.

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One of the main characters in the play, he has a double identity. In the country, where he has an estate and is in charge of the upbringing of Cecily Cardew, he is the respectable Jack Worthing, a very serious and upright young man (Jack is the diminutive of John, just as Algy is the diminutive of Algernon). He makes frequent trips to London, however, where he assumes the name of Ernest Worthing and pursues a life of pleasure. In the play, he is in love with Gwendolen Fairfax and seeks her hand in marriage.

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### Algernon Moncrieff

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Another main character in the play, he lives in London, where he is constantly watched over by his ultra-respectable aunt, Lady Bracknell. However, he has invented a permanent invalid friend, Bunbury, who lives in the country. In the play, he goes 'Bunburying' under the name of Ernest Worthing, Jack's fictitious wicked younger brother, in order to meet Cecily Cardew, with whom he falls immediately in love and to whom he proposes marriage.

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### The Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax

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The daughter of Lady Bracknell, she is an aristocrat and a beautiful young girl. She is in love with Jack Worthing in the play, and wishes to marry him despite her mother's strong disapproval. She knows him, however, under the assumed name of Ernest Worthing. In keeping with the nonsensical nature of the play, one of Jack's chief attractions for Gwendolen is his assumed name – Ernest – without which she would refuse to marry him.



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### **Cecily Cardew**

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Jack's beautiful eighteen-year-old ward. She lives in the country and is tutored by Miss Prism. She nurses a secret love for Jack's nonexistent brother Ernest, mainly because of his name and his wicked reputation. When Algernon appears under the assumed name and identity of Ernest Worthing, she sees him as her prospective husband, but soon discovers that his real name is not Ernest.

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### **Lady Bracknell**

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Gwendolen's mother and Algy's aunt, she is a member of the British aristocracy. Her chief passion in life is to maintain and strengthen her superior social position. Thus, she is intent on making a good match for her daughter, and also interferes in Algy's matrimonial plans. She strongly opposes the marriage of Gwendolen and Jack in the play.

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### **Reverend Canon Chasuble, D.D.**

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The Rector of Jack's country parish, he strictly follows the rules of the Primitive Church as regards matrimony, and is therefore a celibate. However, he has a nonsensical passion for the unattractive Miss Prism. He represses this passion, but it shows nevertheless. In the play, he undertakes to christen both Jack and Algy.

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### **Miss Prism**

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A humourless middle-aged woman, she is Cecily Cardew's governess. She disapproves of Cecily's playfulness and vivaciousness, and would like her to be serious and apply herself to the study of German grammar and similar subjects for the sake of 'improving' herself. Miss Prism, moreover, is very interested in Canon Chasuble, and tries in the play to persuade him to marry her.

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### **Lane**

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A minor character in the play, he is Algernon's devoted manservant.

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### **Merriman**

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Another minor character, he is Jack's butler.

The student should remember that **Mr Bunbury** and **Ernest Worthing** are not actual characters in the play. Bunbury is a fictional character in-