About the author
There was never a boring moment in the life of Oscar Wilde. A witty, intelligent, flamboyant figure on the late Victorian London scene, he was probably the first person to have become famous for being famous, or infamous, as his trial and imprisonment for homosexuality in 1898 revealed. Some commentators have remarked that he had a sort of split personality, a sinner and a saint at the same time, which contributed to his ability to see both sides of an argument and agree with neither. He left behind him a great number of quotations. One, which sums up his enthusiasm for life in all its manifestations, is ‘I can resist anything but temptation.’

Summary
Algernon lives in London and his friend, Jack, moves between London and his country house. Jack has invented a brother called Ernest, a name which he calls himself in London. He falls in love with Algernon’s cousin, Gwendolen, who is under the impression his real name is Ernest. Algernon goes to Jack’s country house and introduces himself as Ernest to Cecily, Jack’s adopted cousin. They fall in love. She believes she is in love with Jack’s brother, Ernest. The plot revolves around the two girls insisting on marrying Ernest, but of course Ernest doesn’t really exist. Jack decides to change his name to Ernest, to suit Gwendolen, but in the end it is not necessary. As a young boy he had been abandoned in a railway station, adopted, and given the name Jack. However, it transpires that his real name, at birth, had indeed been Ernest.

Act 1, pages 1–6 (line 8): The play begins in the sitting room of Algernon Moncrieff’s flat in London. Algernon is expecting a visit from his aunt, Lady Bracknell. Before she arrives, his friend, Jack Worthing, visits him. Jack declares that he intends to marry Lady Bracknell’s daughter, Gwendolen. Algernon points out that Jack has overlooked the problem with another girl called Cecily, who Jack pretends at first not to know, but later says she is an aged aunt of his. Algernon produces Jack’s cigarette box with the words ‘to dear Uncle Jack from little Cecily’ written inside, and remarks that the message doesn’t sound like one an old woman would write. Jack reveals that Cecily’s grandfather had looked after him when he was young, and, that when he died, he became young Cecily’s guardian. Algernon wants to know why Jack calls himself Ernest in town and Jack when he in his country house. Jack replies he has invented a younger brother called Ernest as an excuse to come to London and live a bad life from time to time. Algernon admits that he too has an imaginary friend, Bunbury. Whenever he is invited to a boring party, he tells the host that Bunbury is ill and he has to visit him.

Act 1, pages 6 (line 9)–15: Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive. Jack and Gwendolen sit down together while Lady Bracknell and Algernon go to the music room. Jack tells Gwendolen he loves her and she tells him she loves him, and especially his name, Ernest. Jack says he doesn’t really like the name Ernest, and asks her what she thinks of the name Jack. She doesn’t like it and so he resolves to change his name. He proposes to her. At that moment, Lady Bracknell enters the room, and wants to know what is happening. After informing the couple that she makes the decisions about her daughter’s future husband, she sends Gwendolen out of the room and begins to interrogate Jack. He tells her his age, financial status, that he had never known his parents, and that someone had found him, as a baby, in a large black handbag in Victoria railway station. Lady Bracknell is shocked, and will on no account allow her daughter to marry someone who had been found in a handbag. She leaves the room and Algernon comes in. Algernon mentions he would like to meet Cecily but Jack doesn’t want Algernon to meet the pretty, eighteen-year-old girl. Gwendolen returns, saying she still wants to write to Jack, at his country house. He gives her the address, which Algernon secretly writes down.
The Importance of Being Earnest

Act 2, pages 16–23 (line 1): Cecily Cardew and her governess, Miss Prism, are sitting in the garden of Jack’s country house. Cecily wants to know why her Uncle Jack never brings his brother, Ernest, to visit them. Miss Prism then goes for a walk with Dr Chasuble. A servant announces that Mr Ernest Worthing is in the house and that he would like to speak to Cecily. It is in fact Algernon, posing as Jack’s brother. He comes into the garden, where Cecily questions him on his reputation for being bad. Algernon swears to change his ways and become a good man, and tells Cecily she is the prettiest girl he has ever seen. They go into the house and Miss Prism and Doctor Chasuble return. They meet a very sad looking Jack, who tells them that his brother Ernest has died in Paris. He also asks the doctor if he still does christenings, and whether the doctor could change his name for him. The doctor says he can. Cecily appears and announces that Jack’s brother is in the house. She fetches him into the garden, and Jack gives him a very frosty welcome. The others leave the two men alone.

Act 2, pages 23 (line 2)–30: Jack tells Algernon to leave immediately. He walks off, leaving Algernon alone. When Cecily reappears in the garden, Algernon declares undying love for her. She tells him she has been in love with him ever since Jack had started talking about his brother. She agrees to marry him because she loves the name Earnest. He doesn’t like the name and suggests Algernon as an alternative, much to her disgust. He decides he must change his name and runs off to see the doctor. Gwendolen is shown into the garden and during their conversation, Cecily mentions that Mr Worthing is her guardian. Gwendolen assumes she is referring to Ernest Worthing, and becomes suspicious, on account of Cecily’s youth and beauty. Cecily corrects her by telling her that Jack Worthing, the brother of Ernest, is her guardian. Gwendolen is at first relieved, but when Cecily adds that she is engaged to Ernest, she is shocked, and tells Cecily that she is engaged to him too, and that her engagement is the valid one because it predates Cecily’s by a day. The two women are now enemies. Jack arrives and is asked by Gwendolen if he is engaged to Cecily. He denies it and they embrace but then, Cecily reveals Algernon’s true name to Gwendolen and she is shocked. Algernon arrives and is asked by Cecily if he is engaged to Gwendolen. This he denies, and Gwendolen reveals Algernon’s true name. Cecily can’t believe it, and the two women run into each other’s arms. Jack confesses he had never had a brother. The two women, realising they are not engaged to anybody now, leave the garden. The men consider their situation.

Act 3: In the sitting room of the Manor House, the two women question the men about why they had invented names. Both men give satisfactory answers. Lady Bracknell arrives and is told of the marriage plans of her daughter to Jack and her cousin, Algernon, to Cecily. She refuses to allow Gwendolen to marry Jack, but does agree to Algernon’s marriage to Cecily, after she discovers Cecily is very rich. As her guardian, Jack says he will not give his consent to the marriage unless Lady Bracknell consents to his marriage to Gwendolen. She refuses again. Miss Prism enters the room and Lady Bracknell forces a confession out of her. Twenty-eight years ago, she had accidentally put a baby in a handbag and a book in a baby carriage, and had left the handbag at Victoria station. Jack assumes Miss Prism is his mother but he is mistaken. Lady Bracknell reveals that Jack is the son of her sister, and therefore is Algernon’s older brother. Jack demands to know what his real name had been. He discovers that it had been Ernest all the time.

Background and themes

Dramatic irony: The play is a classic example of dramatic irony at work. One of the main reasons the audience laughs is that they know the truth of what is happening on stage but some of the characters do not.

Lies and deceit: Both Jack and Algernon invent new identities for themselves. Jack to be able to lead a double life and Algernon to introduce himself as someone Cecily is already aware of. However their deceit is not punished for they are forgiven in the end, because their motives were not evil.

Romance: Wilde is satirising romance when he portrays Gwendolen’s love for Jack to be based nearly entirely on the fact that she loves his false name, Ernest. Cecily’s love for a man she has never met, and writing letters to herself, is also an example of a rather silly romantic notion.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Discuss: Put the students in small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: Have you ever seen a play at the theatre or on television? Have you ever acted in a play? Do you like watching plays? Do you think it is more difficult to be an actor in a play or in a film and if so why? What are the popular plays in your country?
The Importance of Being Earnest

2 Write: After the students have read the Introduction, ask them to write down the answers to the following questions. Where was Oscar Wilde born? When was he born? What was his father’s job? Where did he study in England? What was the name of his first book? Who did he marry? What was his most famous book? What was his first play? When did he move to Paris? When did he die?

Act 1, pages 1–6 (line 8)

While reading (p. 5, after ‘I must visit him.’)
3 Discuss: Explain to the students that Algernon uses his fictitious friend as an excuse not to do things. He tells a ‘white lie’. Put them in groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: Do you always tell the truth? Is it sometimes OK to say things that are not the truth? Your friend buys a new jacket and you hate it. Do you say it is nice, OK or ugly? Is it sometimes very bad to say things that are not the truth?

4 Role play (p. 12, after ‘In a handbag.’): Put the students in pairs. Tell them they are going to act out a conversation between Mr Cardew and his wife, when he returns home and finds the baby in the bag. Mr Cardew doesn’t want to keep the baby, and Mrs Cardew does. See Discussion activities key for an example start.

After reading
5 Write and ask: Write What time do most people have tea? on the board and elicit the answer (At five o’clock). Ask students to write another question about something in Act 1, pages 1–6 (line 8). Now have students stand up and walk around the classroom, asking and answering each other’s questions.

Act 1, pages 6 (line 9)–15

While reading (p. 9, after ‘I said yes.’)
6 Discuss: Put the students in small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions about marriage: Are you married? When did you marry? Who did you marry? Do you want to be married in the future? Do more people marry today than before? Is it important to marry somebody rich/pretty/from the same country?

7 Write and ask (p. 10, after ‘Do you smoke?’): Put the students in pairs and tell them to write ten questions (as if they were in a dating agency) that they would ask a potential partner. The students then ask each other their questions, and decide if they would marry their partner or not. If they are uncomfortable with the marriage idea, say the questions are to find a person to share a flat with.

8 Pair work: Write the following words on the board: shops, letter, weather, five, twenty-nine, ticket, walks, train times. Have the students talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Act 1, pages 6 (line 9) to 15.

Act 2, pages 16–23 (line 1)

While reading (p. 17, after ‘I hate lessons.’)
9 Discuss: Tell the students they are going to talk about school subjects. If they have already left school, then they will have to use the past tense. Put them in groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: What are your best/worst lessons at school and why? What are the most difficult/easiest lessons and why? What are the most important lessons? Do you like learning English? Do you use the Internet in lessons?

After reading
10 Write and guess: Write Cecily was very short for her age. on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (tall not short). Now students choose a sentence from Act 2, pages 16–23 and rewrite it changing one word. Students walk around the classroom, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

Act 2, pages 23 (line 2)–30

While reading (p. 24, after ‘You asked me last Valentine’s Day.’)
11 Research: Ask the students to look for information on the Internet about Valentine’s Day. Then they give a short oral presentation of what they have found out. Put them in groups to talk about the following questions: Do people do anything on Valentine’s Day in your country? Do you think it is a good thing or a stupid thing? Would you like to send somebody a Valentine card?

After reading
12 Game: Remind the students that Jack has told a lie. Put them in groups of four. Tell them to write three short stories about things that have happened to them in their life. Two of the stories must be true and one not true. Then each student reads out their stories and the rest have to identify which story isn’t true. Encourage them to write about interesting, frightening or funny events.

Act 3

While reading (p. 31, after ‘We do not like your names.’)
13 Pair work: Put the students in pairs and ask them to make a list of ten boys names and ten girls names in their country. Then ask them to put them in order from one, the best name, to ten, the worst name. Then the pair talk to another pair and discuss their choices.

After reading
14 Write: Ask the students to write a summary of the play. The summary must contain exactly fifty words, not one more nor one less. Put them in groups of four and each student reads his/her summary to the other three.