

John (Jack) Worthing A young, eligible bachelor about town. In the city he goes by the name Ernest, and in the country, he is Jack — a local magistrate of the county with responsibilities. His family pedigree is a mystery, but his seriousness and sincerity are evident. He proposes to The Honorable Gwendolen Fairfax and, though leading a double life, eventually demonstrates his conformity to the Victorian moral and social standards.

Algernon Moncrieff A languid poser of the leisure class, bored by conventions and looking for excitement. He, too, leads a double life, being Algernon in the city and Ernest in the country. Algernon, unlike Jack, is not serious and is generally out for his own gratification. He falls in love and proposes to Jack's ward, Cecily, while posing as Jack's wicked younger brother, Ernest.

Lady Bracknell The perfect symbol of Victorian earnestness — the belief that style is more important than substance and that social and class barriers are to be enforced. Lady Bracknell is Algernon's aunt trying to find a suitable wife for him. A strongly opinionated matriarch, dowager, and tyrant, she believes wealth is more important than breeding and bullies everyone in her path. Ironically, she married into the upper class from beneath it. She attempts to bully her daughter, Gwendolen.

The Honorable Gwendolen Fairfax Lady Bracknell's daughter, exhibiting some of the sophistication and confidence of a London socialite, believes style to be important, not sincerity. She is submissive to her mother in public but rebels in private. While demonstrating the absurdity of such ideals as only marrying a man named Ernest, she also agrees to marry Jack despite her mother's disapproval of his origins.

Cecily Cardew Jack Worthing's ward, daughter of his adopted father, Sir Thomas Cardew. She is of debutante age, 18, but she is being tutored at Jack's secluded country estate by Miss Prism, her governess. She is romantic and imaginative, and feeling the repression of Prism's rules. A silly and naïve girl, she declares that she wants to meet a "wicked man." Less sophisticated than Gwendolen, she falls in love with Algernon but feels he would be more stable if named Ernest.

Miss Prism Cecily's governess and a symbol of Victorian moral righteousness. She is educating Cecily to have no imagination or sensationalism in her life. Quoting scripture as a symbol of her Victorian morality, she reveals a secret life of passion by her concern for the whereabouts of her misplaced novel and her flirtation with the local vicar. She becomes the source of Jack's revelation about his parents.

Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D. Like Miss Prism, he is the source of Victorian moral judgments, but under the surface he appears to be an old lecher. His sermons are interchangeable, mocking religious conventions. Like the servants, he does what Jack (the landowner) wants: performing weddings, christenings, sermons, funerals, and so on. However, beneath the religious exterior, his heart beats for Miss Prism.

Lane and Merriman Servants of Algernon and Jack. Lane says soothing and comforting things to his employer but stays within the neutral guidelines of a servant. He is leading a double life, eating sandwiches, and drinking champagne when his master is not present. He aids and abets the lies of Algernon. Merriman keeps the structure of the plot working: He announces people and happenings. Like Lane, he does not comment on his "betters," but solemnly watches their folly. His neutral facial expressions during crisis and chaos undoubtedly made the upper-class audience laugh.