The Importance of Being Earnest 1: Earnest or Ernest?

This is not a word-for-word transcript

LANGUAGE FOCUS:
Reported speech

Narrator
Algernon Moncrieff, a wealthy young man from the upper classes of society, is passing the time playing the piano in his luxurious flat in central London. He's waiting for his aunt and cousin to come to tea. Algernon is a well-dressed and pleasant-looking man. His servant, Lane, is busy preparing the table.

Algernon
Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

Lane
I thought it would be rude to listen, sir.

Algernon
Oh, that's a pity. Now, have you made the cucumber sandwiches yet for Lady Bracknell? They said they would be here at five.

Lane
Yes, sir. Here they are.

Algernon
Oh! Good… By the way, Lane, I noticed eight empty bottles of champagne were drunk on Thursday night while I was having dinner with Mr Worthing.

Lane
That's correct, sir.

Algernon
Why do bachelors' servants always drink their champagne?

Lane
It's probably because a bachelor's wine is better than the wine you'd find in married families.
Algernon
Good heavens! Is marriage as bad as that?

Lane
People tell me that it is very pleasant, sir. I don't have much experience. I've only been married once.

(a bell rings)

Algernon
Aha! That will be my dear aunt, Lady Bracknell… Tell her that I'm in the morning room.

Narrator
But it isn't Algernon's aunt. It's a young gentleman who follows Lane into the room. He's good-looking and has a serious expression on his face. Algernon is pleased, though surprised, to see him.

Lane
Mr Ernest Worthing.

Algernon
How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you to London?

Jack
Oh, pleasure of course!

Algernon
Where have you been since last Thursday?

Jack
In the country.

Algernon
What on earth do you do there?

Jack
When you are in town you entertain yourself. When you are in the country you entertain other people. It is really quite boring.

Algernon
And who do you entertain?

Jack
Oh, neighbours.
**Algernon**
Got nice neighbours where you live in Shropshire?

**Jack**
Perfectly horrid! Never speak to any of them.

**Algernon**
They must find you very entertaining, then!

**Jack**
Hello! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Who's coming to tea?

**Algernon**
Oh! Just my aunt Lady Bracknell and… her daughter Gwendolen…

**Jack**
How wonderful!

**Algernon**
Yes, but Lady Bracknell won't approve of you being here.

**Jack**
Why not?

**Algernon**
My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It's almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.

**Jack**
I'm in love with Gwendolen. I've come to London to ask her to marry me.

**Algernon**
You told me you had come here for pleasure? I call that business.

**Jack**
You are so unromantic!

**Algernon**
I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It's very romantic to be in love. But there's nothing romantic about asking someone to marry you. They may accept you. Then the excitement is all over. If I ever get married, I'll certainly try to forget that I am.

**Jack**
I'm sure you will, dear Algry.
Algernon
I don't think you will ever marry Gwendolen.

Jack
Why on earth do you say that?

Algernon
Well, in the first place, girls never marry the men they flirt with.

Jack
Oh, that's nonsense!

Algernon
It's true. It explains why there are so many bachelors. In the second place, I won't give you my permission.

Jack
Your permission?

Algernon
My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin, and before I allow you to marry her, you will have to explain about… Cecily.

Jack
Cecily? What do you mean? Who is Cecily? I don't know any one called Cecily.

(A bell rings)

Lane
You called, sir?

Algernon
Bring me that cigarette case Mr Worthing left here last Thursday.

Lane
Yes, sir.

Jack
Have you had my cigarette case all this time? I wish you'd told me. I've been to the police. I nearly offered a large reward.

Algernon
Well, I wish you would. I'm quite hard up at the moment.
Jack
There's no point offering a large reward now it's been found.

Lane
The cigarette case, sir.

Algernon
I think that's rather mean of you, Ernest. However, it's not important now because according to the inscription inside, the case isn't yours anyway.

Jack
Of course it's mine. You've seen me use it hundreds of times. Now, could I have my cigarette case back?

Algernon
Yes, but this isn't your cigarette case. It's a present from someone called Cecily, and you said you didn't know anyone of that name.

Jack
Well, actually, Cecily is my aunt.

Algernon
Your aunt!

Jack
Yes. Lovely old lady she is, too. Lives in Tunbridge Wells.

Algernon
But why does she call herself "little Cecily" if she is your aunt? "From little Cecily with her fondest love."

Jack
What's wrong with that? Some aunts are tall, some are small.

Algernon
Yes. But why does your aunt call you her uncle? "From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack." There is no problem, I admit, to an aunt being small, but why should an aunt call her own nephew... uncle? Besides, your name isn't Jack. It's Ernest.

Jack
It isn't Ernest. It's Jack.

Algernon
You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest. You
look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life – so honest and serious.

**Narrator**
Ah yes, we should just say that the name Ernest was very common at the time, and the adjective 'earnest' – which sounds exactly the same - means, well, honest and serious.

**Algernon**
Here, it's written on your card: "Mr Ernest Worthing, B4, The Albany."

**Jack**
Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.

**Algernon**
Yes, but that doesn't explain why your small Aunt Cecily calls you her dear uncle. Or why you have two names to start with. Come on, you'll have to explain.
Vocabulary

bachelor
man who isn’t married

morning room
a room used as a sitting room in the morning

what on earth…?
a stronger way of saying 'what'

Shropshire
a rural area in the west part of England beside Wales

perfectly
(old-fashioned) completely

horrid
awful

approve
to think someone or something is good

coward
(old-fashioned) man

flirts
behaves towards someone as if romantically or sexually interested in them

proposing
asking someone to marry you

hard up (idiom)
not having a lot of money

inscription
words that are written or cut into something

fondest
dearest, most loving

earnest
honest, serious and determined
Quiz

1. Ernest is Algernon's…?
   a) Cousin
   b) Friend
   c) Servant

2. Who does Ernest want to marry?
   a) Algernon's cousin
   b) Lady Bracknell
   c) Cecily

3. Why doesn't Algernon think that the cigarette case belongs to Ernest?
   a) Because it says inside that it is from Cecily to her dear uncle.
   b) Because Ernest calls himself Jack in the country and Ernest in town.
   c) Because Ernest looks like a very earnest person.

Feedback

1. Ernest is Algernon's…?
   a) Cousin - Wrong answer.
   b) Friend - Correct answer – well done!
   c) Servant - Wrong answer.

2. Who does Ernest want to marry?
   a) Algernon's cousin - Correct answer – well done!
   b) Lady Bracknell - Wrong answer – He wants to marry someone else.
   c) Cecily - Wrong answer – He wants to marry someone else.

3. Why doesn't Algernon think that the cigarette case belongs to Ernest?
   a) Because it says inside that it is from Cecily to her dear uncle - Correct answer – well done!
   b) Because Ernest calls himself Jack in the country and Ernest in town - Wrong answer – Ernest does call himself Jack in the country and Ernest in town, but that is not why Algernon thinks that the case does not belong to him.
   c) Because Ernest looks like a very earnest person - Wrong answer – Ernest does look like a very earnest person but that is not why Algernon thinks that the case does not belong to him.