
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

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.

Drama

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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 Algy.

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

fellow

(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.