Oscar Wilde’s, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, focuses on themes such as deception, the power of a name, and the British institutions of marriage, education, and the church. Just as Jack and Algernon are frivolous characters, so seems the nature of the play. Following its first U.S. opening, as gleaned from the introduction, *The New York Times* wrote that, “The thing is as slight in structure and as devoid of purpose as a paper balloon, but is extraordinarily funny,” which is true, it is funny however, not devoid of purpose. It has been said that its subject matter raises important questions of identity and reality, existing as “a commentary on a society that judges things only by appearance” (Wilde, 435).

One irony that I found to be particularly interesting within Wilde’s play is the relationship of Algernon Moncrieff and Jack (John Worthing, J.P.) both under their alter ego Earnest, to the meaning of the name itself. While the actions of both men are earnestly pursued in the sense that they are both putting forward a serious effort to win the trust and love of both Cecily Cardew and Gwendolyn Fairfax who are unaware of their fiancé’s real names. The ladies are easily wooed, especially Cecily, who agrees to take Algernon’s hand in marriage upon their first meeting, based on his looks and the assumption that he is Uncle Jack’s younger brother. In moments such as this, Wilde seems to be addressing the absurdity of society’s willingness to put trust in people they know nothing about. The men themselves and their intentions more so embody the antonym of the word, stringing the two naïve ladies along their road of deception. Dictionary.com defines “earnest,” as a serious intention, purpose, or effort; showing depth and sincerity of feeling, while its antonym is first, “frivolous”: characterized by a lack of seriousness or sense; and is self-indulgently carefree. The men think little about the potential consequences of hiding their identities, using the name, Earnest either for themselves or as a soon to be killed imaginary brother. They live purely in the moment, using Earnest to skirt around the truth in many situations, avoiding the sticky intricacies of explaining
one’s own life. Jack, one could surmise, uses the name Earnest along with an indiscernible tangle of lies, in order to hide the truth of his being “found” as a baby in a train station and his lowly status from Gwendolyn, his “love” and her cousin, Algernon whom are of higher status.

The importance of one’s name is the primary theme that brings the play to life. It isn’t just the name one is gifted at birth, but a name in terms of social status and what that implies about one’s origins and identity. As mentioned above, Jack and Algernon use imaginary brothers that are sometimes used as alter egos, depending on the situation. Bunbury, Algernon’s imaginary friend is “an invaluable permanent invalid,” as he describes his invention, which he may use in order to go down to the country at his own will. He uses Bunbury as a mode of escape from the dry commonalities of his daily life, or at least that is what he explains to Jack upon unveiling his true identity. But the truth is never as simple at that, and rarely pure, as Algernon points out (439), later stating that, “If one plays good music, people don’t listen, and if one plays bad music people don’t talk.” This is a sort of diversion strategy that is used throughout the play by both Algernon and Jack when avoiding pressing questions about their past.

Wilde seems to lace hidden meaning within everything that the characters say, giving everything an essence of irony and uncertainty. Examples of this can be found at many different moments throughout the play, forcing the reader to rethink or examine more closely the true meaning and alternate implications of words and assumptions we make of people described by them. In Act 1, Lady Bracknell enters saying, “Good afternoon, dear Algernon, I hope you are behaving very well.” To which he answers, “I’m feeling very well, Aunt Augusta,” who retorts with, “That’s not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together (440).” Moments such as this attempt to point out a very great confusion of the human race that is not limited to the society in which Wilde lived in and examined. We so often confuse true love and sincerity with excitement and fascination, judging or putting trust even in people whom are mere acquaintances, marrying them even. In Act II,
following her engagement to Algernon (whom she believes is Earnest), 18 year old Cecily says, “It is always painful to part from people whom one has known for a very brief space of time,” showing her age and brevity of thought put into the idea and implications of marriage and true love.

Similar to Cecily’s rash decision to marry a man she only just met, Dr. Chasuble agrees to perform an immediate baptism to take place in order to join the young couples in marriage. His willingness to do so and without good reason from the two men, aims to satirize the role of the church and the lengths it goes to expand their way of life, assuming that their intentions are pure. Most of the characters within Wilde’s play act or make judgments solely based off of assumptions, especially Lady Bracknell, whose lines highlight many ironies in terms of marriage, status, and religion. She seems to be a representative for the rest of society; her statements are hypocritical and general at the same time, and are not backed up by any evidence. She often decides one’s worth depending on their status, their finances, education, upbringing, and beliefs. Wilde is getting at some of the many faults of the human race, including our self-importance, the way we see others, as well as the way we choose to communicate with one another -- some of the many things that keep us from seeing each other and the world around us clearly.