



CORE CLASSICS

ABRIDGED FOR YOUNG READERS

The Importance of Being Earnest

BY **OSCAR WILDE**



The Importance of Being Earnest

A Trivial Play for Serious People

by
Oscar Wilde

CORE CLASSICS®

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COVER IMAGE: The face of the playwright Oscar Wilde is framed by a background of a wallpaper design by the artist and writer William Morris (1834–1896), who was Wilde's contemporary in the Aesthetic Movement in Britain.

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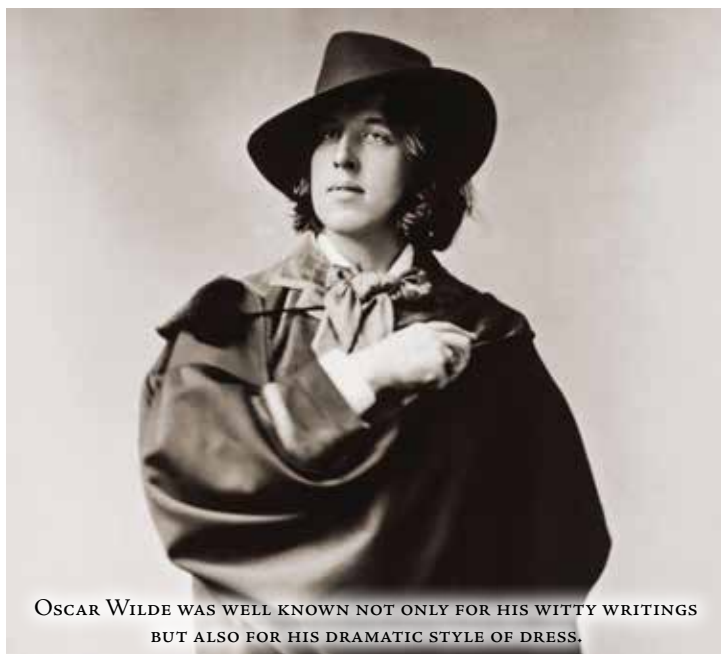
INTRODUCTION

London, February 14, 1895—it was a bitterly cold evening. Winds whipped snowflakes through the frigid air.

Common sense would tell you, stay inside, don't go out. And yet, that night, in the fashionable part of the city called the West End, crowds of elegantly dressed men and women stepped from their carriages and entered the brightly lit St. James Theatre. For people who loved theater, or who loved being seen at the theater, no biting winter wind would keep them away from this highest of high-society events, the opening of Oscar Wilde's new play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

At the time, Oscar Wilde was very popular—some might say, notorious. He was a successful playwright. *Earnest* was his fourth play to open in the West End in only three years. A few years before, in 1891, he had published a novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that some reviewers attacked as scandalous and immoral, which of course brought him much attention. Beyond his literary achievements, Wilde was famous for the way he

dressed and the way he spoke: his outfits were extravagant and his conversation sparkled with brilliant wit.



That brilliant wit was on full display in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It is hard to think of another play that is so consistently funny from beginning to end—funny in situation, in character, and especially in language.

On the basic level of plot, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a farce—a lighthearted play in which

the characters find themselves in ridiculous and unlikely situations. Like many a farce, *Ernest* relies on the plot device of mistaken identity. The bare outline of events shows just how ridiculous and unlikely the plot is:

- ✦ The wealthy Jack Worthing lives on a country estate and serves as guardian to his young niece, Cecily Cardew. Jack tells Cecily that he has a wicked younger brother, Ernest, who lives in London. But Ernest isn't real; he is simply a fiction that Jack has made up. When Jack wants to go to the city for fun, he tells Cecily that he must go help Ernest get out of some trouble.
- ✦ In London—where Jack himself goes by the name of Ernest—he visits his friend Algernon Moncrieff. Algernon learns that his friend Ernest is really named Jack, and that Jack has a lovely young niece in the country. So Algernon sneaks off to visit Cecily, to whom he introduces himself as Jack's wicked brother, Ernest.
- ✦ Jack becomes engaged to marry Algernon's cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax, though she knows him only as Ernest, a name she adores. Jack decides to do

away with his fictional younger brother.

He returns to his country estate bearing news of Ernest's "death," only to find Ernest (that is, Algernon pretending to be Ernest) alive and well, and engaged to Cecily.

- Gwendolen meets Cecily. The two ladies learn that they are both engaged to be married to Ernest, whom they assume to be the same man, not realizing that there are two different men (Jack and Algernon), both calling themselves Ernest.
- Algernon's imposing aunt, Lady Bracknell, expresses in haughty (and humorous) terms her disapproval of the engagements and of a great deal else.

The action of the play involves the working out of these complications, as well as the solving of a mystery surrounding Jack's origins. (He had been adopted as an infant and does not know who his parents were.) Clearly, the situations are silly. But what makes this play more than just a silly farce is the language. While the characters may act in silly ways, the words they speak are beautifully crafted and brilliantly witty.

Wilde gifted all of the major characters in

The Importance of Being Earnest with his own epigrammatic wit. (An *epigram* is a brief and witty turn of phrase.) Wilde's epigrams continue to be quoted long after his lifetime, for example: "I can resist everything except temptation"; or, "To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance"; or, "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."

As Sir Max Beerbohm, a fellow writer and artist, noted in his review of *Earnest* when it was revived for performance in 1909, "The absurdity of the situations is made doubly absurd by the contrasted grace and dignity of everyone's utterance." Later in the twentieth century, the poet W. H. Auden observed that in *Earnest* Oscar Wilde created "a verbal universe in which the characters are determined by the kinds of things they say, and the plot is nothing but a succession of opportunities to say them." But oh, what wonderful things they say!

At the opening performance of *Earnest* in 1895, the audience so enjoyed the farcical comedy and the witty dialogue that they probably didn't notice just how much the play was making fun of many of them. Oscar Wilde portrayed the wealthy British

aristocracy as smug and snobbish. He laughed at sentimental ideas about romance and marriage—Lady Bracknell’s actions clearly demonstrate that in the making of an upper-class marriage, what matters most is not love but wealth and social status. Like fairy tales and the comedies of Shakespeare, *The Importance of Being Earnest* moves toward marriage as the expected “happy ending,” but all along the way it makes fun of the very idea.

Wilde originally subtitled *The Importance of Being Earnest* “A Serious Comedy for Trivial People,” but then changed it to “A Trivial Comedy for Serious People.” Perhaps he did not want to put off his audience by calling them “trivial.” Or perhaps by choosing to call his own play “trivial” Wilde thought that he could mock the selfish smugness of the British aristocracy while laughing it off as something to be taken lightly, not as a social critique but as a pleasant entertainment.

At the same time, in calling his audience “serious people,” Wilde was not paying them an unmixed compliment. As young Cecily says at one point during the play, “Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious! Sometimes he is so serious that I think

he cannot be quite well.” Wilde had little patience for people who presented themselves as serious, sincere, and dutiful—in other words, *earnest* people.

You may have noticed that the spelling of the word *earnest* differs slightly from that of the name “Ernest.” To be “earnest” is to be very serious, sincere, and diligent—qualities expected of a gentleman in Wilde’s time. Wilde lived in Victorian England, an era named for Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837 to 1901. Victoria’s name has become associated with duty, seriousness, hard work, and self-control. In accordance with Victorian social standards, gentlemen were expected to act in a serious, dignified, and reserved manner—or, as Jack says in the play, “to adopt a high moral tone”—in short, to be *earnest*. In the play, however, Wilde often pokes fun at Victorian earnestness. For example, even as Jack asserts the need “to adopt a high moral tone,” he immediately observes that “a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness.”

Whatever social commentary Oscar Wilde may be making in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, there is no need to justify the play as having a serious social

message beneath the brilliant surface—that would be a very earnest thing to do, and probably not at all to the playwright’s liking.

Wilde, along with other artists of his time, did not believe that art needs to have a deeper meaning, or teach us something, or be morally uplifting. These artists were part of what is known as the Aesthetic Movement, which thrived in Britain from about 1860-1900. The Aesthetic artists believed in “art for art’s sake.” They rejected the traditional Victorian notion that art should be useful and instead insisted that art must be beautiful. “Beauty reveals everything,” said Wilde, “because it expresses nothing.” Furthermore, he asserted, “All art is quite useless.”

Useless or not, as a work of art *The Importance of Being Earnest* creates its own universe in which everything is as it must be. The dialogue is impossibly clever, the characters artificial, the situations contrived beyond belief. But we never question how believable it all is. Our joy is in the exquisitely crafted creation that makes no apology for its lack of utility, but in itself dazzles, delights, and makes us laugh.



FOR A 1939 REVIVAL OF *EARNEST* IN LONDON, AN ARTIST SKETCHED THESE DRAWINGS OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS (FROM TOP LEFT, CLOCKWISE: JACK WORTHING, CECILY CARDEW, ALGERNON MONCRIEFF, GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX, AND, AT CENTER, LADY BRACKNELL).

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

BY OSCAR WILDE

Abridged for young readers and actors

This book presents a shortened version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* that can be performed in about ninety minutes. It can also be enjoyed as a readers' theater performance. Almost without exception, this abridgment uses Oscar Wilde's language, with only a few words changed.

Most of the stage directions [*the notes in brackets, like this*] are precisely as Oscar Wilde wrote them. A few have been changed or added to better suit the needs of a school or community theater performance.

To Oscar Wilde's cast of characters, this script adds two young British gentlemen. They do not take part in the action. In a Prologue they introduce the play, and later during an Interlude their dialogue allows time for a scene change into the second act. To emphasize, both the Prologue and Interlude have been added to this version of the play and may be considered optional for any performance.

The script is printed on the left-hand pages, with some words underlined. On the right-hand pages you will find definitions of the underlined words, as well as occasional explanatory notes.

This book also features an Image Gallery (beginning on page 14), with photographs from various productions of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. And at the end of the book, in a section titled “About the Author,” you may read a brief biographical sketch of Oscar Wilde’s life.



AN ENGRAVED PORTRAIT OF OSCAR WILDE

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

Algernon Moncrieff [a young gentleman and friend of Jack; first cousin of Gwendolen, and nephew of Lady Bracknell]

Lady Bracknell [Algernon's Aunt Augusta]

Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax [Lady Bracknell's daughter]

Lane, Manservant [to Algernon Moncrieff]

John ["Jack"] Worthing, J.P. [a wealthy young gentleman, owner of a large country estate, in love with Gwendolen]

Cecily Cardew [ward of Jack Worthing]

Miss Prism, Governess [in Jack Worthing's household]

Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D. [Rector of the church near Jack's country estate]

Merriman, Butler [in Jack Worthing's household]

[OPTIONAL]

Two Young British Gentlemen

Moncrieff: pronounced *mahn-creef*

Lady: in the United Kingdom, a title for a woman of high social rank

Hon.: Honorable, a title used before the names of some people of high social rank in the United Kingdom

manservant: a male servant who attends to the personal needs of his employer, such as preparing his clothes

J.P.: Justice of the Peace. (As a Justice of the Peace—also called a magistrate in the English legal system—Jack serves as a judge in his community, ruling on various legal matters and deciding punishments for minor offenses.)

ward: a person placed under the care of a guardian

governess: a woman who lives with a family and is employed to teach their children

Rev.: Reverend

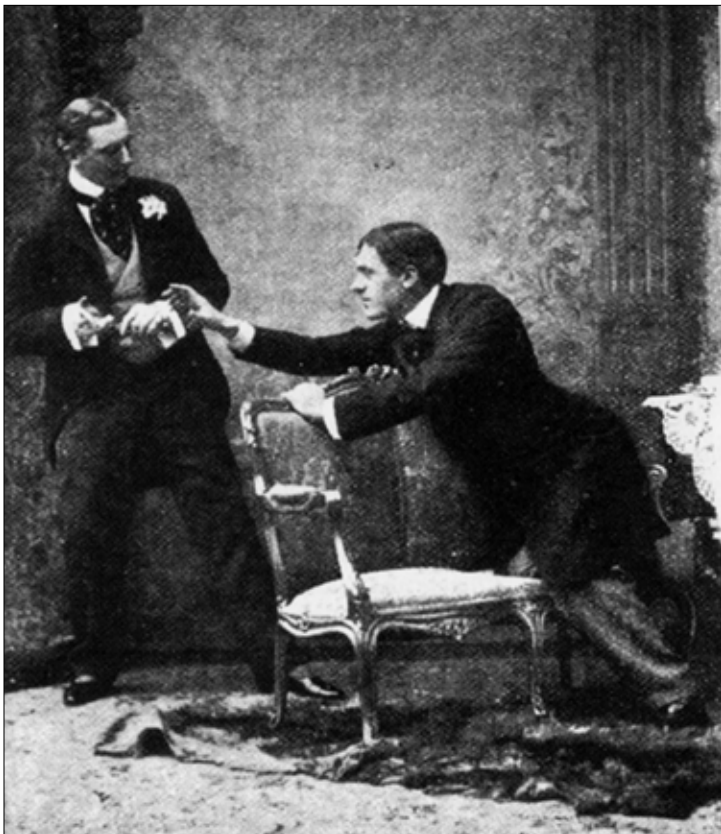
canon: a priest with special duties in the Church of England

D.D.: Doctor of Divinity (an advanced degree in religious studies)

Rector: a churchman in charge of a parish (a church district)

butler: a male servant in charge of a household

***The Importance of Being Earnest:* An Image Gallery**



ALGERNON AND JACK

THIS PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE ORIGINAL PRODUCTION OF *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST* IN 1895 SHOWS ALGERNON (LEFT, PLAYED BY ALLAN AYNESWORTH) REFUSING TO RETURN THE CIGARETTE CASE THAT BELONGS TO JACK (RIGHT, PLAYED BY GEORGE ALEXANDER).



ALGERNON AND JACK

FROM A 1982 PRODUCTION AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE IN LONDON, WITH NIGEL
HAVERS AS ALGERNON (LEFT) AND MARTIN JARVIS AS JACK (RIGHT)



ALGERNON

FROM A 2014 PRODUCTION AT OTTERBEIN UNIVERSITY IN WESTERVILLE,
OHIO, WITH JORDAN DONICA AS ALGERNON



GWENDOLEN AND JACK

FROM A 1952 FILM DIRECTED BY ANTHONY ASQUITH, WITH JOAN GREENWOOD AS GWENDOLEN AND MICHAEL REDGRAVE AS JACK



ALGERNON AND LADY BRACKNELL

FROM A 1982 PRODUCTION AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE IN LONDON, WITH
NIGEL HAVERS AS ALGERNON AND JUDI DENCH AS LADY BRACKNELL



GWENDOLEN AND JACK

FROM A 2017 CONNECTICUT REPERTORY THEATRE PRODUCTION, WITH
TABATHA GAYLE AS GWENDOLEN AND NICK NUDLER AS JACK



CECILY AND GWENDOLEN, with MERRIMAN
FROM A 1952 FILM DIRECTED BY ANTHONY ASQUITH, WITH DOROTHY
TUTIN AS CECILY, JOAN GREENWOOD AS GWENDOLEN, AND AUBREY
MATHER AS MERRIMAN



LADY BRACKNELL

FROM A 1952 FILM DIRECTED BY ANTHONY ASQUITH, WITH EDITH EVANS
AS LADY BRACKNELL



MISS PRISM, ALGERNON, AND CECILY

FROM A 2014 PRODUCTION AT OTTERBEIN UNIVERSITY IN WESTERVILLE, OHIO,
WITH AFTON WELCH AS MISS PRISM (LEFT), JORDAN DONICA AS ALGERNON
(CENTER), AND HALEY JONES AS CECILY (RIGHT)



JACK, REV. CHASUBLE, AND MISS PRISM

FROM A 1987 PRODUCTION AT THE ROYALTY THEATRE IN LONDON WITH
CLIVE FRANCIS AS JACK (LEFT), HAROLD INNOCENT AS REV. CANON
CHASUBLE (CENTER), AND PHYLLIDA LAW AS MISS PRISM (RIGHT)



JACK AND MISS PRISM (AND THE HANDBAG)

FROM A 1952 FILM DIRECTED BY ANTHONY ASQUITH, WITH MICHAEL REDGRAVE
AS JACK AND MARGARET RUTHERFORD AS MISS PRISM



GWENDOLEN, JACK, ALGERNON, AND CECILY

FROM A 1952 FILM DIRECTED BY ANTHONY ASQUITH, WITH (FROM LEFT TO
RIGHT) JOAN GREENWOOD AS GWENDOLEN, MICHAEL REDGRAVE AS JACK,
MICHAEL DENISON AS ALGERNON, AND DOROTHY TUTIN AS CECILY

PROLOGUE

[Enter two well-dressed young British gentlemen.]

GENTLEMAN 1

Greetings, one and all, and welcome to our play!

GENTLEMAN 2

We're delighted that you could join us. Truly delighted!

GENTLEMAN 1

As you can plainly see, we are two sophisticated young British gentlemen.

GENTLEMAN 2

Indeed! Shall we show them how British we are?

GENTLEMAN 1

Quite so! How about this? I say, old sport!

GENTLEMAN 2

Tally ho, dear chap!

GENTLEMAN 1

Smashing!

GENTLEMAN 2

Spot on!

GENTLEMAN 1

Jolly good!

This optional Prologue (not written by Oscar Wilde) is offered as a way to introduce a school or community theater performance of the play. The gender of the persons playing the “gentlemen” does not matter.

GENTLEMAN 2

Brilliant!

GENTLEMAN 1

Pip pip, cheerio!

GENTLEMAN 2

Who's your mama?

GENTLEMAN 1

Who's your mama?

GENTLEMAN 2

Not British enough, eh?

GENTLEMAN 1

Not British at all, I'd say.

GENTLEMAN 2

Rather missed the target, did I?

GENTLEMAN 1

Yes, quite.

GENTLEMAN 2

Well, it's *hard work*, you know, trying to keep up appearances.

GENTLEMAN 1

You're absolutely right. Hard work indeed.

GENTLEMAN 2

Not that I'm opposed to hard work. I mean, after all, we young British gentlemen have many responsibilities.

GENTLEMAN 1

Quite so. And countless duties.

GENTLEMAN 2

Indeed. Such as...

GENTLEMAN 1

Such as?...

GENTLEMAN 2

Such as...

[awkward silence]

I say, don't all young British gentlemen have household servants to do the hard work for them?

GENTLEMAN 1

Quite right!

GENTLEMAN 2

And it is hard work, don't you think, introducing a play?

GENTLEMAN 1

Exhausting. It's a wonder we're still standing.

GENTLEMAN 2

So, since this is such hard work, perhaps we should, you know...

GENTLEMAN 1

Ah, indeed.

[He rings a bell. Enter Lane and Merriman, from opposite directions.]*

[To Lane:] I say, Lane, you wouldn't happen to know anything about the proper way to introduce a play, would you?

LANE

In my youth, sir, I did indulge in a smattering of amateur theatricals, though it has been some years since I pursued any thespian endeavors.

GENTLEMAN 2

And how about you, Merriman?

MERRIMAN

No, sir. I fear my previous employers considered acting a vulgar pursuit, and the theater a place of dubious morality.

GENTLEMAN 2

[Pointing to the audience:] So *that's* why they like going to plays so much!

* A small handbell would already be on stage as part of the set for Algernon's apartment, where the play begins.

thespian: having to do with acting or the theater

vulgar: lacking good taste; not appropriate for the upper classes

dubious: doubtful; uncertain; questionable

GENTLEMAN 1

[To Lane and Merriman:] Thank you, that will be all.

[Lane and Merriman exit.]

[To Gentleman 2:] Well, old chap, I'm afraid we're going to have to do this on our own.

GENTLEMAN 2

Quite so. Stiff upper lip. Ready?

GENTLEMAN 1

Ready! *[To the audience:]* Ladies and gentlemen, once again, we thank you for joining us...

GENTLEMAN 2

...and it gives us great pleasure to welcome you to this performance of Oscar Wilde's...

GENTLEMAN 1 and GENTLEMAN 2

[Speaking together:] *The Importance of Being Earnest.*

[They exit.]

ACT ONE

SCENE 1: *Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room. Lane is arranging afternoon tea on the table, and after the music has ceased, Algernon enters.*

ALGERNON

Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

LANE

I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

ALGERNON

I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression.

LANE

Yes, sir.

ALGERNON

Have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

LANE

Yes, sir. [*Hands them on a salver.*]

morning-room: a living room placed to get the morning sunlight

flat: an apartment in a larger building

Half-Moon Street: a street in a wealthy part of London, just west of the center of the city

adjoining: bordering; located next to

afternoon tea: In England, afternoon tea—which consists of tea, small sandwiches, and pastries—is usually served around 4:00 p.m., as a refreshment between lunch and a late dinner.

salver: a tray used for serving food or beverages

ALGERNON

[Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa.]

Oh! . . . by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreham and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

LANE

Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

ALGERNON

Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.*

LANE

I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

ALGERNON

Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?

LANE

I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

your book: the account books for the household, in which Lane keeps track of items used and consumed

Lord: in the United Kingdom, a title for a man of high social rank

champagne [pronounced *sham-PAIN*]: a bubbly white wine from the region of Champagne in France

establishment: household

invariably: always; without exception

* Algernon has noticed that in the household account books, Lane wrote that on Thursday night eight bottles of champagne were consumed by Algernon and his two guests. Since that is many more bottles than the gentlemen actually drank, Algernon knows that Lane and the household servants helped themselves to the champagne. Algernon does not accuse Lane but asks him in a casual way, "merely for information." And Lane answers matter-of-factly. Like many an English butler or manservant in fiction and theater, he cannot be flustered.

attribute it to: consider it as being caused by

demoralizing: deeply discouraging

in consequence of: the result of

ALGERNON

[Languidly.] I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

LANE

No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

ALGERNON

Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE

Thank you, sir. *[Lane goes out.]*

ALGERNON

Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.*

[Enter Lane.]

LANE

Mr. Ernest Worthing.**

[Enter Jack. Lane goes out.]

ALGERNON

How are you, my dear Ernest?*** What brings you up to town?

languidly: without energy; lazily

lax: loose; careless; vague and imprecise

lower orders: lower classes of society

* Algernon's snobbish (and quite funny) comments are typical of his unquestioning sense of social superiority. Wilde does not criticize this attitude, but he puts it to comic use. Here, for example, he reverses the cliché that the upper classes should set a good example for the lower classes. And as the play proceeds, it will become clear that if any character lacks a "sense of moral responsibility," it is Algernon himself!

** Lane is announcing the name of a visitor.

*** It will soon become clear why Algernon calls Jack "Ernest."

JACK

Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? Eating as usual, I see, Algy!

ALGERNON

[Stiffly.] I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock. Where have you been since last Thursday?

JACK

[Sitting down on the sofa.] In the country.

ALGERNON

What on earth do you do there?

JACK

[Pulling off his gloves.] When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.

ALGERNON

And who are the people you amuse?

JACK

[Airily.] Oh, neighbors, neighbors.

ALGERNON

Got nice neighbors in your part of Shropshire?

JACK

Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.

airily: in a casual, offhand way that shows no concern or serious thought

Shropshire: a rural county in western England, bordering Wales

ALGERNON

How immensely you must amuse them! [*Goes over and takes sandwich.*] By the way, Shropshire is your county, is it not?

JACK

Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course.* Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?

ALGERNON

Oh! merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

JACK

How perfectly delightful!

ALGERNON

I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here.

JACK

May I ask why?

ALGERNON

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

JACK

I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.

* Algernon's question about whether Jack lives in Shropshire suggests that Algernon might suspect that Jack lives elsewhere. Jack's response—"Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course."—suggests that he is caught off guard by the question and might be hiding the facts. Notice also how Jack quickly changes the subject.

hallo: hello (used here as an exclamation of surprise)

extravagance: excessively expensive actions

Aunt Augusta: Lady Bracknell, mother of Gwendolen, and Algernon's aunt

expressly: for the specific purpose of

ALGERNON

I thought you had come up for pleasure? ... I call that business.

JACK

How utterly unromantic you are!

ALGERNON

I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

JACK

I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.

ALGERNON

Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven*—*[Jack puts out his hand to take a sandwich. Algernon at once interferes.]* Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. *[Takes one and eats it.]*

constituted: formed

* In his comic writing, Oscar Wilde often reverses what one has often heard or expects to hear. In this case, Algernon reverses the old saying that "marriages are made in Heaven."

JACK

Well, you have been eating them all the time.

ALGERNON

That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt. *[Takes plate from below.]* Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

JACK

[Advancing to table and helping himself.] And very good bread and butter it is too.

ALGERNON

Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you were married to her already. You are not married to her already, and I don't think you ever will be.

JACK

Why on earth do you say that?

ALGERNON

Well, in the first place girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right.

JACK

Oh, that is nonsense!

ALGERNON

It isn't. It is a great truth. It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place. In the second place, I don't give my consent.

JACK

Your consent!

ALGERNON

My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily. [*Rings bell.*]

JACK

Cecily! What on earth do you mean? What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily! I don't know anyone of the name of Cecily.

[*Enter Lane.*]

ALGERNON

Bring me that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left the last time he dined here.

LANE

Yes, sir. [*Lane goes out.*]

consent: permission; agreement; approval

Cecily: pronounced *SES-uh-lee*

Rings bell: a signal to summon a household servant

cigarette case: a container, often made of decorated metal (such as bronze or silver), in which some gentlemen in Oscar Wilde's time (long before the health hazards of smoking were known) would carry their cigarettes

JACK

Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward.

ALGERNON

Well, I wish you would offer one. I happen to be more than usually hard up.

JACK

There is no good offering a large reward now that the thing is found.

[Enter Lane with the cigarette case on a salver. Algernon takes it at once. Lane goes out.]

ALGERNON

I think that is rather mean of you, Ernest, I must say. *[Opens case and examines it.]* However, it makes no matter, for, now that I look at the inscription inside, I find that the thing isn't yours after all.

JACK

Of course it's mine. *[Moving to him.]* You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.

Scotland Yard: the headquarters of the London police
[Wilde is poking fun at Jack, since the loss of a cigarette case is hardly an important enough matter for the attention of the police.]

hard up: in need (of money)

inscription: words (usually of dedication, gratitude, or affection) written on a page or engraved on a surface

ALGERNON

Oh, it is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

JACK

I am quite aware of the fact, and I don't propose to discuss modern culture. It isn't the sort of thing one should talk of in private. I simply want my cigarette case back.

ALGERNON

Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from someone of the name of Cecily, and you said you didn't know anyone of that name.

JACK

Well, if you want to know, Cecily happens to be my aunt.

ALGERNON

Your aunt!

JACK

Yes. Charming old lady she is, too. Lives at Tunbridge Wells. Just give it back to me, Algy.

Tunbridge Wells: This town southeast of London was known in Wilde's time as a location where many elderly people lived in retirement.

ALGERNON

*[Retreating to back of sofa.]** But why does she call herself little Cecily if she is your aunt and lives at Tunbridge Wells? *[Reading.]* "From little Cecily with her fondest love."

JACK

[Moving to sofa and kneeling upon it.] My dear fellow, what on earth is there in that? Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt! That is absurd! For Heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case. *[Follows Algernon round the room.]*

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 objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own nephew her uncle, I can't quite make out. Besides, your name isn't Jack at all; it is Ernest.

JACK

It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.

* Wilde's stage directions here and below suggest that the scene should have the physical comedy of a game of "keep-away," as Jack and Algernon move around the sofa, with Jack attempting to get his cigarette case back from Algy.

ALGERNON

You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them. *[Taking it from case.]* "Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany." I'll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to anyone else. *[Puts the card in his pocket.]*

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 does not account for the fact that your small Aunt Cecily, who lives at Tunbridge Wells, calls you her dear uncle. Come, old boy, you had much better have the thing out at once.

JACK

My dear Algy, you talk exactly as if you were a dentist. It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn't a dentist. It produces a false impression.

earnest: deeply serious and sincere [To describe someone as earnest is often to imply that the person is all work and no play, devoted to duty but lacking a sense of humor.]

cards: calling cards or visiting cards, small cards with one's name and address, presented when paying a visit

B. 4, The Albany: room number B.4 in The Albany, an apartment building in the fashionable West End of London

have the thing out: tell the truth; openly explain the matter

ALGERNON

Well, that is exactly what dentists always do. Now, go on! Tell me the whole thing. I may mention that I have always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist; and I am quite sure of it now.

JACK

Bunburyist? What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyist?

ALGERNON

I'll reveal to you the meaning of that incomparable expression as soon as you are kind enough to inform me why you are Ernest in town and Jack in the country.

JACK

Well, produce my cigarette case first.

ALGERNON

Here it is. [*Hands cigarette case.*] Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable. [*Sits on sofa.*]

JACK

My dear fellow, there is nothing improbable about my explanation at all. In fact it's perfectly ordinary. Old Mr. Thomas Cardew, who adopted me when I was a little boy, made me in his will guardian to his

Bunburyist: Algernon has invented this silly word to describe someone who leads a double life, as he will soon explain in more detail.

pray: please

guardian: a person who is legally responsible for the care of someone else

granddaughter, Miss Cecily Cardew.* Cecily, who addresses me as her uncle from motives of respect that you could not possibly appreciate, lives at my place in the country under the charge of her admirable governess, Miss Prism.

ALGERNON

Where is that place in the country, by the way?

JACK

That is nothing to you, dear boy. You are not going to be invited . . . I may tell you candidly that the place is not in Shropshire.

ALGERNON

I suspected that, my dear fellow! I have Bunburiyed all over Shropshire on two separate occasions. Now, go on. Why are you Ernest in town and Jack in the country?

JACK

My dear Algy, I don't know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in

* Here we learn two important facts: First, that as a little boy Jack was adopted by Mr. Thomas Cardew; and second, that when Mr. Cardew died, he made Jack the legal guardian of his (Mr. Cardew's) granddaughter, Cecily.

under the charge of: in the control and care of

candidly: honestly and truly

conduce: to lead toward or contribute to a certain result

the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.

ALGERNON

The truth is rarely pure and never simple.* Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!

JACK

That wouldn't be at all a bad thing.

ALGERNON

What you really are is a Bunburyist. I was quite right in saying you were a Bunburyist. You are one of the most advanced Bunburyists I know.

JACK

What on earth do you mean?

ALGERNON

You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at

scrapes: difficult, awkward, or embarrassing situations

* Algernon here (and many times during the course of the play) demonstrates Oscar Wilde's epigrammatic humor. An epigram is a brief and witty turn of phrase.

tedious: boring, tiresome

invaluable: extremely useful; worth more than any price

invalid [pronounced *IN-vuh-lid*]: a sickly person who needs to be taken care of by others

Willis's tonight, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week.

JACK

I haven't asked you to dine with me anywhere tonight.

ALGERNON

I know. You are absurdly careless about sending out invitations. It is very foolish of you. Nothing annoys people so much as not receiving invitations.

JACK

You had much better dine with your Aunt Augusta.

ALGERNON

I haven't the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind. I dined there on Monday, and once a week is quite enough to dine with one's own relations. Besides, now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying. I want to tell you the rules.

JACK

I'm not a Bunburyist at all. If Gwendolen accepts me, I am going to kill my brother,* indeed I think I'll kill him in any case. Cecily is a little too much interested in him. It is rather a bore. So I am going to get rid of Ernest. And I strongly advise you to do the same with Mr. . . . with your invalid friend who has the absurd name.

Willis's: a fashionable restaurant in London (located very near the theater where *Ernest* was first performed)

engaged: committed; pledged [in this case, to dine with Lady Bracknell]

* In other words, "I am going to stop pretending that I have a brother named Ernest."

ALGERNON

Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.

JACK

That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury.

ALGERNON

Then your wife will.*

JACK

For heaven's sake, don't try to be cynical. It's perfectly easy to be cynical.

ALGERNON

My dear fellow, it isn't easy to be anything nowadays. There's such a lot of beastly competition about. [*The sound of an electric bell is heard.*] Ah! That must be Aunt Augusta. Now, if I get her out of the way for ten minutes, so that you can have an opportunity for proposing to Gwendolen, may I dine with you tonight at Willis's?

induce: to persuade or influence to do something

problematic: full of difficulties; highly uncertain

* In other words: If you don't want a ready excuse for going out and having fun on your own, then your wife will want one for going out and having fun without you.

cynical: distrustful; expecting the worst of other people

beastly: extremely unpleasant

electric bell: a doorbell

JACK

I suppose so, if you want to.

ALGERNON

Yes, but you must be serious about it. I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them.

[Enter Lane.]

LANE

Lady Bracknell and Miss Fairfax.

[Algernon goes forward to meet them. Enter Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen.]

LADY BRACKNELL

Good afternoon, dear Algernon, I hope you are behaving very well.

ALGERNON

I'm feeling very well, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL

That's not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together. *[Sees Jack and bows to him with icy coldness.]*

ALGERNON

[To Gwendolen.] Dear me, you are smart!

smart: stylish and elegant in appearance

GWENDOLEN

I am always smart! Am I not, Mr. Worthing?

JACK

You're quite perfect, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN

Oh! I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions. *[Gwendolen and Jack sit down together in the corner.]*

LADY BRACKNELL

I'm sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger. And now I'll have a cup of tea, and one of those nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me.

ALGERNON

Certainly, Aunt Augusta. *[Goes over to tea-table.]*

LADY BRACKNELL

Won't you come and sit here, Gwendolen?

GWENDOLEN

Thanks, mamma, I'm quite comfortable where I am.

altered: changed; very different in appearance

mamma: pronounced *muh-MAH*, with the accent on the second syllable

ALGERNON

[Picking up empty plate in horror.] Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially.

LANE

[Gravely.] There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went down twice.*

ALGERNON

No cucumbers!

LANE

No, sir.

ALGERNON

That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE

Thank you, sir. *[Goes out.]*

ALGERNON

I am greatly distressed, Aunt Augusta, about there being no cucumbers.

LADY BRACKNELL

It really makes no matter, Algernon. I had some crumpets with Lady Harbury, who seems to me to be living entirely for pleasure now.

gravely: with deep seriousness

* Lane proves himself a model of the unflappable, always-capable British manservant. Here, without blinking an eye, he effortlessly invents a fiction to hide the fact that Algernon has eaten all the cucumber sandwiches.

crumpets: small round breads, often enjoyed toasted with butter or fruit jam

ALGERNON

I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief.*

LADY BRACKNELL

It certainly has changed its color. From what cause I, of course, cannot say. [*Algernon crosses and hands tea.*] Thank you.

ALGERNON

I am afraid, Aunt Augusta, I shall have to give up the pleasure of dining with you tonight.

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Frowning.*] I hope not, Algernon.

ALGERNON

It is a terrible disappointment to me, but the fact is I have just had a telegram to say that my poor friend Bunbury is very ill again. [*Exchanges glances with Jack.*] They seem to think I should be with him.

LADY BRACKNELL

It is very strange. This Mr. Bunbury seems to suffer from curiously bad health.

ALGERNON

Yes; poor Bunbury is a dreadful invalid.

LADY BRACKNELL

Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether

* Algernon is mischievously playing on the expected notion that Lady Harbury's hair would turn gray from grief after the death of her husband; instead, as a widow, she apparently looks and acts much younger than she did as a wife.

he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life. I should be much obliged if you would ask Mr. Bunbury, from me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse on Saturday, for I rely on you to arrange my music for me. It is my last reception,* and one wants something that will encourage conversation, particularly when everyone has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in most cases, was probably not much.

ALGERNON

I'll speak to Bunbury, Aunt Augusta, if he is still conscious, and I think I can promise you he'll be all right by Saturday. Of course the music is a great difficulty. But I'll run over the program I've drawn out, if you will kindly come into the next room for a moment.**

LADY BRACKNELL

Thank you, Algernon. It is very thoughtful of you. *[Rising, and following Algernon.]* I'm sure the program will be delightful, after a few expurgations. French songs I cannot possibly allow. But German sounds a thoroughly respectable language, and indeed, I believe is so. Gwendolen, you will accompany me.

shilly-shallying: going back and forth without being able to make up your mind

relapse: to fall back into a state of sickness after seeming to be getting better

reception: a formal party

* At the upcoming reception, to entertain her guests, Lady Bracknell intends to provide live music—typically, a pianist accompanying a singer or singers—and she has asked Algernon to help plan the program of musical selections.

** Algernon is taking his aunt to another room so that Jack will have a chance to propose to Gwendolen.

expurgations: changes made by removing words or selections considered offensive or immoral

GWENDOLEN

Certainly, mamma.

[Lady Bracknell and Algernon exit; Gwendolen remains behind.]

JACK

Charming day it has been, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN

Pray don't talk to me about the weather, Mr. Worthing. Whenever people talk to me about the weather, I always feel quite certain that they mean something else. And that makes me so nervous.

JACK

I do mean something else.

GWENDOLEN

I thought so. In fact, I am never wrong.

JACK

And I would like to be allowed to take advantage of Lady Bracknell's temporary absence . . .

GWENDOLEN

I would certainly advise you to do so. Mamma has a way of coming back suddenly into a room that I have often had to speak to her about.

JACK

[Nervously.] Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you I have

admired you more than any girl . . . I have ever met since . . . I met you.

GWENDOLEN

Yes, I am quite well aware of the fact. And for me you have always had an irresistible fascination. Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you. [*Jack looks at her in amazement.*] We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines; and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.

JACK

You really love me, Gwendolen?

GWENDOLEN

Passionately!

JACK

Darling! You don't know how happy you've made me.

GWENDOLEN

My own Ernest!

indifferent: feeling no interest or concern; not caring

ideals: high-minded principles; lofty ideas; inspiring goals

passionately: intensely; in a way marked by very strong feelings

JACK

But you don't really mean to say that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Ernest?

GWENDOLEN

But your name is Ernest.

JACK

Yes, I know it is. But supposing it was something else? Personally, darling, to speak quite candidly, I don't much care about the name of Ernest . . . I don't think the name suits me at all.

GWENDOLEN

It suits you perfectly. It is a divine name. It has a music of its own. It produces vibrations.

JACK

Well, really, Gwendolen, I must say that I think there are lots of other much nicer names. I think Jack, for instance, a charming name.

GWENDOLEN

Jack? . . . No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations. The only really safe name is Ernest.

JACK

Gwendolen, I must get christened at once*—I mean we must get married at once. There is no time to be lost.

* Christening is a church ceremony in which an infant is baptized and given a name. Jack is thinking that he must promptly change his name to Ernest if he is to have any hope of marrying Gwendolen.

GWENDOLEN

Married, Mr. Worthing?

JACK

[Astounded.] Well . . . surely. You know that I love you, and you led me to believe, Miss Fairfax, that you were not absolutely indifferent to me.

GWENDOLEN

I adore you. But you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.

JACK

Well . . . may I propose to you now?

GWENDOLEN

I think it would be an admirable opportunity. And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr. Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you.

JACK

Gwendolen!

GWENDOLEN

Yes, Mr. Worthing, what have you got to say to me?

JACK

You know what I have got to say to you.

GWENDOLEN

Yes, but you don't say it.

JACK [*Goes on his knees.*]

Gwendolen, will you marry me?

GWENDOLEN

Of course I will, darling. How long you have been about it! I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.

JACK

My own one, I have never loved anyone in the world but you.

GWENDOLEN

Yes, but men often propose for practice. I know my brother Gerald does. All my girlfriends tell me so. What wonderful eyes you have, Ernest! I hope you will always look at me just like that, especially when there are other people present. [*Enter Lady Bracknell.*]

LADY BRACKNELL

Mr. Worthing! Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture. It is most indecorous.

GWENDOLEN

Mamma! [*He tries to rise; she restrains him.*] I am engaged to Mr. Worthing, mamma.

semi-recumbent: halfway lying down

indecorous: improper; going against standards of good taste or decency

restrains: holds back; prevents from doing something

LADY BRACKNELL

Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to someone, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself . . . And now I have a few questions to put to you, Mr. Worthing. While I am making these inquiries, you, Gwendolen, will wait for me below in the carriage.

GWENDOLEN

[Reproachfully.] Mamma!

LADY BRACKNELL

In the carriage, Gwendolen! *[Gwendolen goes to the door. She and Jack blow kisses to each other behind Lady Bracknell's back. Lady Bracknell looks vaguely about as if she could not understand what the noise was. Finally turns round.]* Gwendolen, the carriage!

GWENDOLEN

Yes, mamma. *[Goes out, looking back at Jack.]*

LADY BRACKNELL

[Sitting down.] You can take a seat, Mr. Worthing.

[Looks in her pocket for notebook and pencil.]

reproachfully: in a tone expressing blame or disapproval
or a sense of injury at some perceived offense or injustice

JACK

Thank you, Lady Bracknell, I prefer standing.

LADY BRACKNELL

[Pencil and notebook in hand.] I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men,* although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. How old are you?

JACK

Twenty-nine.

LADY BRACKNELL

A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

JACK

[After some hesitation.] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL

I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is

* Through Lady Bracknell's "list of eligible young men" and her questioning of Jack, Oscar Wilde humorously suggests that among the upper class, marriage is more of a business transaction than a romantic union.

radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes. What is your income?

JACK

Between seven and eight thousand a year.*

LADY BRACKNELL

[Makes a note in her book.] In land, or in investments?

JACK.

In investments, chiefly.

LADY BRACKNELL

That is satisfactory.

JACK.

I have a country house with some land, of course, attached to it, about fifteen hundred acres, I believe.

LADY BRACKNELL

A country house! You have a town house, I hope? A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.

JACK.

Well, I own a house in Belgrave Square.

LADY BRACKNELL

What number in Belgrave Square?

* In the 1890s Jack's income was more than enough to set him apart as a very wealthy man.

Belgrave Square: a wealthy neighborhood in London

JACK

149.

LADY BRACKNELL

[Shaking her head.] The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However, that could easily be altered.

JACK

Do you mean the fashion, or the side?

LADY BRACKNELL

[Sternly.] Both, if necessary, I presume. Now to minor matters. Are your parents living?

JACK

I have lost both my parents.

LADY BRACKNELL

To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth.

JACK

I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me . . . I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was . . . well, I was found.

LADY BRACKNELL

Found!

JACK

The late Mr. Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a seaside resort.

LADY BRACKNELL

Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this seaside resort find you?

JACK

[Gravely.] In a handbag.

LADY BRACKNELL

A handbag?*

JACK

[Very seriously.] Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a handbag—a somewhat large, black leather handbag, with handles to it—an ordinary handbag in fact.

LADY BRACKNELL

In what locality did this Mr. James, or Thomas, Cardew come across this ordinary handbag?

disposition: characteristic mood or outlook on life

* In performance, the actor playing Lady Bracknell often speaks this line in a very expressive way, full of surprise or even horror, sometimes extending the word "handbag" for comic effect ("haaaaaand-baaaaag").

JACK

In the cloakroom at Victoria Station. It was given to him in mistake for his own.

LADY BRACKNELL

The cloakroom at Victoria Station?

JACK

Yes. The Brighton line.

LADY BRACKNELL

The line is immaterial. Mr. Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. It could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognized position in good society.

JACK

May I ask you then what you would advise me to do?

LADY BRACKNELL

I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex.

cloakroom: a room in a public building (such as a theater, restaurant, or, in this case, a railway station) where you can temporarily leave a coat, bag, or other personal items

Victoria Station: main railway station in London

Brighton: a seaside resort south of London

immaterial: unimportant; irrelevant

JACK

Well, I don't see how I could possibly manage to do that. I can produce the handbag at any moment. It is in my dressing-room at home. I really think that should satisfy you, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL

Me, sir! What has it to do with me? You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter—a girl brought up with the utmost care—to marry into a cloakroom, and form an alliance with a parcel?* Good morning, Mr. Worthing!

*[Lady Bracknell sweeps out in majestic indignation. Algernon, from offstage, strikes up the Wedding March.** Jack looks perfectly furious.]*

JACK

For goodness' sake don't play that ghastly tune, Algy. How idiotic you are!

[The music stops and Algernon enters cheerily.]

ALGERNON

Didn't it go off all right, old boy? You don't mean to say Gwendolen refused you?

JACK

Oh, as far as Gwendolen is concerned, we are

utmost: maximum; to the greatest degree possible

* For a young woman in high society, the goal in marriage would typically be to marry into wealth and prestige, and form an alliance with a reputable family. But Lady Bracknell, having heard Jack's story, reduces his status and family history to a thing—a parcel (package) found in a cloakroom.

indignation: anger or great displeasure about something you find insulting, offensive, or unfair

** The "Wedding March" is often played even to this day as the bride walks up the aisle in a church. It was composed by Felix Mendelssohn in 1842, as part of the music he wrote to accompany Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

ghastly: awful; terrible; horrible

engaged. Her mother is perfectly unbearable. I beg your pardon, Algy, I suppose I shouldn't talk about your own aunt in that way before you.

ALGERNON

My dear boy, I love hearing my relations abused. It is the only thing that makes me put up with them at all.

JACK

You don't think there is any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her mother in about a hundred and fifty years, do you, Algy?

ALGERNON

All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his.

JACK

Is that clever?

ALGERNON

It is perfectly phrased! By the way, did you tell Gwendolen the truth about your being Ernest in town, and Jack in the country?

JACK

[In a very patronizing manner.] My dear fellow, the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice,

patronizing: condescending; in a way that looks down on someone or implies they are ignorant

sweet, refined girl. What extraordinary ideas you have about the way to behave to a woman!

ALGERNON

What about your brother? What about the profligate Ernest?

JACK

Oh, before the end of the week I shall have got rid of him. I'll say he died in Paris of a severe chill. That gets rid of him.

ALGERNON

But I thought you said that . . . Miss Cardew was a little too much interested in your poor brother Ernest? Won't she feel his loss a good deal?

JACK

Oh, that is all right. Cecily is not a silly romantic girl, I am glad to say. She has got a capital appetite, goes long walks, and pays no attention at all to her lessons.

ALGERNON

I would rather like to see Cecily.

JACK

I will take very good care you never do. She is excessively pretty, and she is only just eighteen.

profligate: given to immoral, wicked, or excessively wasteful behavior

capital: excellent

ALGERNON

Have you told Gwendolen yet that you have an excessively pretty ward who is only just eighteen?

JACK

Oh! one doesn't blurt these things out to people. Cecily and Gwendolen are perfectly certain to be extremely great friends. I'll bet you anything you like that half an hour after they have met, they will be calling each other sister.

ALGERNON

Women only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first. Now, my dear boy, if we want to get a good table at Willis's, we really must go and dress.* I'm hungry.

JACK

I never knew you when you weren't . . .

ALGERNON

What shall we do after dinner?

JACK

[Irritably.] Nothing!

ALGERNON

It is awfully hard work doing nothing. However, I don't mind hard work where there is no definite object of any kind.

* At a fancy restaurant, Algernon and Jack would be expected to dress in formal attire.

[Enter Lane.]

LANE

Miss Fairfax.

[Enter Gwendolen. Lane goes out.]

ALGERNON

Gwendolen, upon my word!*

GWENDOLEN

Algy, kindly turn your back. I have something very particular to say to Mr. Worthing.

ALGERNON

Really, Gwendolen, I don't think I can allow this at all.

GWENDOLEN

Algy, you always adopt a strictly immoral attitude towards life. You are not quite old enough to do that.

[Algernon retires to the fireplace.]

JACK

My own darling!

GWENDOLEN

Ernest, we may never be married. From the expression on mamma's face I fear we never shall. Few parents nowadays pay any regard to what their children say to them. The old-fashioned respect for

* Algernon is surprised to see Gwendolen on her own, unaccompanied by Lady Bracknell. Proper etiquette at the time would require that in the presence of young men, a young unmarried woman should be accompanied by a chaperone.

retires: withdraws, moves apart

the young is fast dying out. Whatever influence I ever had over mamma, I lost at the age of three. But although she may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I may marry someone else, and marry often, nothing that she can possibly do can alter my eternal devotion to you.

JACK

Dear Gwendolen!

GWENDOLEN

The story of your romantic origin, as related to me by mamma, with unpleasing comments, has naturally stirred the deeper fibers of my nature. Your town address at the Albany I have. What is your address in the country?

JACK

The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire.

[Algernon, who has been carefully listening, smiles to himself, and writes down the address.]

GWENDOLEN

There is a good postal service, I suppose? I will communicate with you daily.

JACK

Hertfordshire: a county in southeastern England, just north of London

My own one!

GWENDOLEN

Algy, you may turn round now.

ALGERNON

Thanks, I've turned round already.

GWENDOLEN.

You may also ring the bell.

JACK

You will let me see you to your carriage, my own darling?

GWENDOLEN

Certainly.

JACK

[To Lane, who now enters.] I will see Miss Fairfax out.

LANE

Yes, sir. *[Jack and Gwendolen go off.]*

ALGERNON

Tomorrow, Lane, I'm going Bunburying.

LANE

Yes, sir.

ALGERNON

I shall probably not be back till Monday.

LANE

Yes, sir.

ALGERNON

I hope tomorrow will be a fine day, Lane.

LANE

It never is, sir.

ALGERNON

Lane, you're a perfect pessimist.

LANE

I do my best to give satisfaction, sir.

[Enter Jack. Lane goes off. Algernon is laughing.]

JACK

What on earth are you so amused at?

ALGERNON

Oh, I'm a little anxious about poor Bunbury, that is all.

JACK

If you don't take care, your friend Bunbury will get you into a serious scrape someday.

pessimist: a person who expects the worst to happen

ALGERNON

I love scrapes. They are the only things that are never serious.

JACK

Oh, that's nonsense, Algy. You never talk anything but nonsense.

ALGERNON

Nobody ever does.

[Jack leaves the room. Algernon reads the note on which he has written Jack's country address, smiles, and exits.]

INTERLUDE

[As Algernon exits, the two Young Gentlemen enter.]

GENTLEMAN 1

I say, I rather like those two fellows.

GENTLEMAN 2

Indeed. They remind me of someone—for the life of me, can't say who.

GENTLEMAN 1

Smashing girl, that Gwendolen.

GENTLEMAN 2

Yes, quite fetching.

GENTLEMAN 1

Stunning.

GENTLEMAN 2

Dishy.

GENTLEMAN 1

Tip-top.

GENTLEMAN 2

Fish and chips.

GENTLEMAN 1

Fish and chips?

This optional Interlude (not written by Oscar Wilde) is offered for school or classroom performance as a way to allow time for the scene change into the next act.

GENTLEMAN 2

Well, I've quite run out of ways to say "good-looking."
Besides, I'm hungry.

GENTLEMAN 1

I never knew you when you weren't.

GENTLEMAN 2

Though I really don't care much for cucumber sandwiches.

GENTLEMAN 1

Good thing—they've all been eaten.

GENTLEMAN 2

I think I fancy something a bit more . . . more . . .

GENTLEMAN 1

Substantial?

GENTLEMAN 2

Quite so! I could go for . . . steak and kidney.

GENTLEMAN 1

Or toad in the hole.

GENTLEMAN 2

Or bangers and mash.

GENTLEMAN 1

Or bubble and squeak.

steak and kidney: usually a pie filled with diced steak, kidney, onion, and gravy

toad in the hole: meat (such as sausage) baked into a batter pudding

bangers and mash: sausage served with mashed potatoes

GENTLEMAN 2

Oh, come now—I mean, everyone knows about toad in the hole and bangers and mash, but “bubble and squeak”? Confess, old boy, you made that up.

GENTLEMAN 1

On the contrary. *[Takes cell phone from pocket, taps it, speaks into it:]* What is “bubble and squeak”? *[Hands phone to GENTLEMAN 2.]* There, see for yourself.

GENTLEMAN 2

[pretending to read from phone] “Bubble and squeak is a British dish made from cooked potatoes and cabbage, mixed together and fried.”

GENTLEMAN 1

There you are.

GENTLEMAN 2

[Handing phone back to GENTLEMAN 1.] Rather explains why the French are better known for their cooking, doesn’t it?

GENTLEMAN 1

I say, here we are nattering on about food but we really should get back to the play.

GENTLEMAN 2

Quite so. *[Addressing the audience:]* Thank you—you’ve been wonderfully patient.

GENTLEMAN 1

So, Jack is engaged to Gwendolen. But she thinks his name is Ernest.

GENTLEMAN 2

And she does not like the name Jack, no indeed.

GENTLEMAN 1

[Addressing the audience:] Our play now moves from Algernon's London flat to Jack's country estate.

GENTLEMAN 2

Specifically, to a lovely little garden on the estate, on a bright July day.

[Enter Cecily and Miss Prism.]

GENTLEMAN 1

[Speaking as he exits.] Where we find Jack's young ward, Cecily. . .

GENTLEMAN 2

[Speaking as he exits.] . . . and her governess, Miss Prism.

ACT TWO

SCENE: *Garden at the Manor House. A flight of grey stone steps leads up to the house. The garden, an old-fashioned one, full of roses. Time of year, July. Wicker chairs, and a table covered with books, are set under a large tree. Miss Prism is seated at the table. Cecily is at the back, watering flowers.*

MISS PRISM

[Calling.] Cecily, Cecily! Your German grammar is on the table. Pray open it at page fifteen. We will repeat yesterday's lesson.

CECILY

[Coming over very slowly.] But I don't like German. It isn't at all a becoming language. I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my German lesson.

MISS PRISM

Child, you know how anxious your guardian is that you should improve yourself in every way. He laid particular stress on your German, as he was leaving for town yesterday.

CECILY

Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious! Sometimes he is so serious that I think he cannot be quite well.

the Manor House: Jack's house in the country

becoming: giving a pleasing or attractive effect to a person or thing

MISS PRISM

Your guardian is to be commended. I know no one who has a higher sense of duty and responsibility.*

CECILY

I suppose that is why he often looks a little bored when we three are together.

MISS PRISM

Cecily! I am surprised at you. Mr. Worthing has many troubles in his life. Idle merriment and triviality would be out of place in his conversation. You must remember his constant anxiety about that unfortunate young man his brother.

CECILY

I wish Uncle Jack would allow that unfortunate young man, his brother, to come down here sometimes. We might have a good influence over him, Miss Prism. I am sure you certainly would. You know German, and geology, and things of that kind influence a man very much. *[Cecily begins to write in her diary.]*

MISS PRISM

[Shaking her head.] I do not think that even I could produce any effect on a character that according to his own brother's admission is irretrievably weak and vacillating. You must put away your diary, Cecily. I really don't see why you should keep a diary at all.

commended: highly praised

* That Jack is seen as having a “high sense of duty and responsibility” suggests that, at least at home, he comes across as an earnest person.

irretrievably: in a state beyond recovery or repair

vacillating: indecisive; inconstant; changeable

CECILY

I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn't write them down, I should probably forget all about them.

MISS PRISM

Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry about with us.

CECILY

Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened. I believe that Memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that the lending library sends us.*

MISS PRISM

Do not speak slightinglly of the three-volume novel, Cecily. I wrote one myself in earlier days.

CECILY

Did you really, Miss Prism? How wonderfully clever you are! I hope it did not end happily? I don't like novels that end happily. They depress me so much.

MISS PRISM

The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.

* In the 1890's in England, novels, when first published, would usually be issued in three volumes. Many readers paid a fee to subscribe to a lending library, which allowed them to borrow one volume at a time. Some of these lending libraries, such as the very successful Mudie's in London, delivered books to people across the country.

slightingly: in a manner that dismisses something as unimportant or unworthy of interest

CECILY

I suppose so. But it seems very unfair. And was your novel ever published?

MISS PRISM

Alas, no! The manuscript unfortunately was lost. To your work, child.

CECILY

[Smiling.] But I see dear Dr. Chasuble* coming up through the garden.

MISS PRISM

[Rising and advancing.] Dr. Chasuble! This is indeed a pleasure.

[Enter Canon Chasuble.]

CHASUBLE

And how are we this morning? Miss Prism, you are, I trust, well?

CECILY

Miss Prism has just been complaining of a slight headache. I think it would do her so much good to have a short stroll with you in the park, Dr. Chasuble.**

MISS PRISM

Cecily, I have not mentioned anything about a headache.

manuscript: an author's handwritten original text

* The name for this character, who is a priest, is fitting since the word *chasuble* refers to a sleeveless garment worn by a priest. The title "Dr." refers to the degree he received for advanced religious studies (not medicine).

park: the area of land around the large house on a country estate

** In making up the claim that Miss Prism has a headache and would benefit from a walk, Cecily achieves two goals: she is relieved of her studies, and she furthers the attraction between Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble.

CECILY

No, dear Miss Prism, I know that, but I felt instinctively that you had a headache. Indeed I was thinking about that, and not about my German lesson, when the Rector came in.

CHASUBLE

I hope, Cecily, you are not inattentive.

CECILY

Oh, I am afraid I am.

CHASUBLE

That is strange. Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips.* [*Miss Prism glares.*] I spoke metaphorically. Ahem! Mr. Worthing, I suppose, has not returned from town yet?

MISS PRISM

We do not expect him till Monday afternoon.

CHASUBLE

Ah yes, he usually likes to spend his Sunday in London. He is not one of those whose sole aim is enjoyment, as, by all accounts, that unfortunate young man his brother seems to be.

MISS PRISM

I think, dear Doctor, I will have a stroll with you. I find I have a headache after all, and a walk might do it good.

* The expression “to hang upon someone’s lips” means to listen to someone with devoted and focused attention. Here, the mention of “lips” seems to shock Miss Prism.

glares: stares in a stern way

metaphorically: figuratively, not literally; in an imaginative, poetic way

sole: only

CHASUBLE

With pleasure, Miss Prism, with pleasure.

MISS PRISM

Cecily, you will read your Political Economy in my absence. *[Goes to the garden with Dr. Chasuble.]*

CECILY

[Picks up books and throws them back on table.] Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid, horrid German!

[Enter Merriman with a card on a salver.]

MERRIMAN

Mr. Ernest Worthing has just driven over from the station. He has brought his luggage with him.

CECILY

[Takes the card and reads it.] "Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany, W."* Uncle Jack's brother! Did you tell him Mr. Worthing was in town?

MERRIMAN

Yes, Miss. He seemed very much disappointed. I mentioned that you and Miss Prism were in the garden. He said he was anxious to speak to you privately for a moment.

* This calling card is, of course, Jack's card, which he had presented when visiting Algernon in the city.

CECILY

Ask Mr. Ernest Worthing to come here. I suppose you had better talk to the housekeeper about a room for him.

MERRIMAN

Yes, Miss. *[Merriman goes off.]*

CECILY

I have never met any really wicked person before. I feel rather frightened. I am so afraid he will look just like everyone else.

[Enter Algernon.]

He does!

ALGERNON

You are my little cousin Cecily, I'm sure.

CECILY

You are under some strange mistake. I am not little. In fact, I believe I am more than usually tall for my age. *[Algernon is rather taken aback.]* But I am your cousin Cecily. You, I see from your card, are Uncle Jack's brother, my cousin Ernest, my wicked cousin Ernest.

ALGERNON

Oh! I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily. You mustn't think that I am wicked.

taken aback: surprised and unsettled; astonished

CECILY

If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.

ALGERNON

[Looks at her in amazement.] Oh! In fact, now you mention the subject, I have been very bad in my own small way.

CECILY

I don't think you should be so proud of that, though I am sure it must have been very pleasant.

ALGERNON

It is much pleasanter being here with you.

CECILY

I can't understand how you are here at all. Uncle Jack won't be back till Monday afternoon.

ALGERNON

That is a great disappointment. I am obliged to go up by the first train on Monday morning.

CECILY

Well, I think you had better wait till Uncle Jack arrives. I know he wants to speak to you about your emigrating.

hypocrisy: the practice of acting in ways that contradict what you say you believe

emigrating: leaving one country or place to settle in another

ALGERNON

About my what?

CECILY

Your emigrating. He has gone up to buy your outfit.

ALGERNON

I certainly wouldn't let Jack buy my outfit. He has no taste in neckties at all.

CECILY

I don't think you will require neckties. Uncle Jack is sending you to Australia.

ALGERNON

Australia! I'd sooner die.

CECILY

Well, he said at dinner on Wednesday night, that you would have to choose between this world, the next world, and Australia.

ALGERNON

Oh, well! The accounts I have received of Australia and the next world are not particularly encouraging. This world is good enough for me, cousin Cecily.

CECILY

Yes, but are you good enough for it?

ALGERNON

I'm afraid I'm not that. That is why I want you to reform me.

CECILY

I'm afraid I've no time, this afternoon.

ALGERNON

Well, would you mind my reforming myself this afternoon?

CECILY

It is rather Quixotic of you. But I think you should try.

ALGERNON

I will. I feel better already.

CECILY

You are looking a little worse.

ALGERNON

That is because I am hungry.

CECILY

How thoughtless of me. I should have remembered that when one is going to lead an entirely new life, one requires regular and wholesome meals. Won't you come in?

ALGERNON

Thank you. You are the prettiest girl I ever saw.

Quixotic [pronounced *kwiK-SOT-ik*]: full of impossible dreams and impractical visions (like the title character of the novel *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes)

CECILY

Miss Prism says that all good looks are a snare.

ALGERNON

They are a snare that every sensible man would like to be caught in.

CECILY

Oh, I don't think I would care to catch a sensible man. I shouldn't know what to talk to him about.

[They pass into the house. Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble return.]

MISS PRISM

You are too much alone, dear Dr. Chasuble. You should get married. You do not seem to realize, dear Doctor, that by persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation.

CHASUBLE

But is a man not equally attractive when married?

MISS PRISM

No married man is ever attractive except to his wife.

CHASUBLE

And often, I've been told, not even to her.

MISS PRISM

But where is Cecily?

snare: a trap (literally, a device for catching small animals and birds)

*[Enter Jack slowly from the back of the garden. He is dressed in the deepest mourning.]**

Mr. Worthing! This is indeed a surprise. We did not look for you till Monday afternoon.

JACK

[Shakes Miss Prism's hand in a tragic manner.] I have returned sooner than I expected. Dr. Chasuble, I hope you are well?

CHASUBLE

Dear Mr. Worthing, I trust this garb of woe does not betoken some terrible calamity?

JACK

My brother.

MISS PRISM

More shameful debts and extravagance?

CHASUBLE

Still leading his life of pleasure?

JACK

[Shaking his head.] Dead!

CHASUBLE

Your brother Ernest dead?

JACK

Quite dead.

mourning: the customary all-black clothes worn to show sorrow for a person's death

* Jack's entrance—dressed in black, and probably walking very sadly and slowly, with a grief-stricken expression—is often one of the funniest moments in the performance of this play and a fine example of dramatic irony—a situation in which the audience knows something that the characters in the play do not. Jack is dressed in mourning because he is about to announce the death of his (made-up) brother, Ernest. But we know—as Jack, Miss Prism, and Dr. Chasuble do not—that Ernest (or rather, Algernon, pretending to be Ernest) is alive and well inside the house and flirting with Cecily.

look for you: expect you to return

garb: clothing

betoken: indicate; be a sign of something

calamity: great misfortune; disaster

MISS PRISM

What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it.

CHASUBLE

Mr. Worthing, I offer you my sincere condolence. You have at least the consolation of knowing that you were always the most generous and forgiving of brothers.

JACK

Poor Ernest! He had many faults, but it is a sad, sad blow.

CHASUBLE

Very sad indeed. Were you with him at the end?

JACK

No. He died abroad; in Paris, in fact. I had a telegram last night from the manager of the Grand Hotel.

CHASUBLE

Was the cause of death mentioned?

JACK

A severe chill, it seems.

MISS PRISM

As a man sows, so shall he reap.*

CHASUBLE

Will the interment take place here?

condolence: sympathy for a person who is grieving

consolation: something that eases sadness or disappointment

blow: an unexpected and negative event; a sudden shock

* Miss Prism is quoting a verse from the Bible (Galatians 6:7), which means that a person's present actions will have later consequences.

interment: burial

JACK

No. He seems to have expressed a desire to be buried in Paris.

CHASUBLE

In Paris! [*Shakes his head.*] I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at the last. Your brother was, I believe, unmarried, was he not?

JACK

Oh yes.

MISS PRISM

[*Bitterly.*] People who live entirely for pleasure usually are.

CHASUBLE

Dear Mr. Worthing, I beg you not to be too much bowed down by grief. What seem to us bitter trials are often blessings in disguise.

MISS PRISM

This seems to me a blessing of an extremely obvious kind.

[*Enter Cecily from the house.*]

CECILY

Uncle Jack! Oh, I am pleased to see you back. But what horrid clothes you have got on! Do go and

change them. You look as if you had toothache, and I have got such a surprise for you. Who do you think is in the dining-room? Your brother!

JACK

Who?

CECILY

Your brother Ernest. He arrived about half an hour ago.

JACK

What nonsense! I haven't got a brother.

CECILY

Oh, don't say that. However badly he may have behaved to you in the past he is still your brother. You couldn't be so heartless as to disown him. I'll tell him to come out. And you will shake hands with him, won't you, Uncle Jack? *[Runs back into the house.]*

CHASUBLE

These are very joyful tidings.

MISS PRISM

After we had all been resigned to his loss, his sudden return seems to me peculiarly distressing.

JACK

My brother is in the dining-room? I don't know what it all means. I think it is perfectly absurd.

[Enter Algernon and Cecily hand in hand. They come slowly up to Jack.]

JACK

Good heavens!

ALGERNON

Brother, I have come down from town to tell you that I am very sorry for all the trouble I have given you, and that I intend to lead a better life in the future.

[Jack glares at him and does not take his hand.]

CECILY

Uncle Jack, you are not going to refuse your own brother's hand?

JACK

Nothing will induce me to take his hand. I think his coming down here disgraceful. He knows perfectly well why.

CECILY

Uncle Jack, do be nice. There is some good in everyone. Ernest has just been telling me about his poor invalid friend Mr. Bunbury whom he goes to visit so often. And surely there must be much good in one who is kind to an invalid, and leaves the pleasures of London to sit by a bed of pain.

JACK

Oh! he has been talking about Bunbury, has he?

CECILY

Yes, he has told me all about poor Mr. Bunbury, and his terrible state of health.

JACK

Bunbury! Well, I won't have him talk to you about Bunbury or about anything else.

ALGERNON

Of course I admit that the faults were all on my side. But I must say I expected a more enthusiastic welcome, especially considering it is the first time I have come here.

CECILY

Uncle Jack, if you don't shake hands with Ernest I will never forgive you.

JACK

Never forgive me?

CECILY

Never, never, never!

JACK

Well, this is the last time I shall ever do it. [*Shakes hands with Algernon and glares.*]

CHASUBLE

It's pleasant, is it not, to see so perfect a reconciliation? I think we might leave the two brothers together.

MISS PRISM

Cecily, you will come with us.

CECILY

Certainly, Miss Prism. My little task of reconciliation is over. I feel very happy. *[They all go off except Jack and Algernon.]*

JACK

You young scoundrel, Algy, you must get out of this place as soon as possible. I don't allow any Bunburying here.

[Enter Merriman.]

MERRIMAN

I have put Mr. Ernest's luggage in the room next to yours, sir.

JACK

His luggage?

ALGERNON

I am afraid I can't stay more than a week this time.

reconciliation: friendly agreement after some argument

scoundrel: a selfish person without moral principles

JACK

Merriman, order the carriage at once. Mr. Ernest has been suddenly called back to town.

MERRIMAN

Yes, sir. *[Goes back into the house.]*

ALGERNON

What a fearful liar you are, Jack. I have not been called back to town at all.

JACK

Your duty as a gentleman calls you back.

ALGERNON

My duty as a gentleman has never interfered with my pleasures in the smallest degree. Well, Cecily is a darling.

JACK

You are not to talk of Miss Cardew like that. I don't like it.

ALGERNON

Well, I don't like your clothes. Why on earth don't you go up and change? It is perfectly childish to be in deep mourning for a man who is actually staying for a whole week with you in your house as a guest.

JACK

You are certainly not staying with me for a whole week as a guest or anything else. You have got to leave.

ALGERNON

I certainly won't leave you so long as you are in mourning. If I were in mourning you would stay with me, I suppose. I should think it very unkind if you didn't.

JACK

Well, will you go if I change my clothes?

ALGERNON

Yes, if you are not too long. I never saw anybody take so long to dress, and with such little result.

JACK

Well, at any rate, that is better than being always over-dressed as you are.

ALGERNON

If I am occasionally a little over-dressed, I make up for it by being always immensely over-educated.

JACK

Your vanity is ridiculous, your conduct an outrage, and your presence in my garden utterly absurd. However, I hope you will have a pleasant journey

vanity: excessive interest in your own appearance or achievements

outrage: a shocking or morally unacceptable action

back to town. This Bunburying, as you call it, has not been a great success for you. *[Goes into the house.]*

ALGERNON

I think it has been a great success. I'm in love with Cecily, and that is everything. I must see her before I go.

[Enter Cecily at the back of the garden. She picks up the can and begins to water the flowers.]

Ah, there she is.

CECILY

Oh, I merely came back to water the roses. I thought you were with Uncle Jack.

ALGERNON

He's going to send me away.

CECILY

Then have we got to part?

ALGERNON

I am afraid so. It's a very painful parting.

CECILY

It is always painful to part from people whom one has known for a very brief space of time. The absence of old friends one can endure with equanimity. But even a momentary separation from anyone to whom one has just been introduced is almost unbearable.

endure: to suffer something unpleasant or painful
equanimity: complete calm, especially in a tense or difficult situation

[Enter Merriman.]

MERRIMAN

The carriage is at the door, sir. *[Algernon looks appealingly at Cecily.]*

CECILY

It can wait, Merriman . . . for . . . five minutes.

MERRIMAN

Yes, Miss. *[Exit Merriman.]*

ALGERNON

I hope, Cecily, I shall not offend you if I state quite frankly and openly that you seem to me to be in every way the visible personification of absolute perfection.

CECILY

I think your frankness does you great credit, Ernest. If you will allow me, I will copy your remarks into my diary. *[Goes over to table and begins writing in diary.]*

ALGERNON

Do you really keep a diary? I'd give anything to look at it. May I?

CECILY

Oh no. *[Puts her hand over it.]* You see, it is simply a

appealingly: in a way that makes an appeal, that is, that asks for help or support

personification: the embodiment of a certain quality

very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication. When it appears in volume form* I hope you will order a copy. But pray, Ernest, don't stop. I delight in taking down from dictation. I have reached "absolute perfection." You can go on. I am quite ready for more.

ALGERNON

[Speaking very rapidly.] Cecily, ever since I first looked upon your wonderful and incomparable beauty, I have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly.

CECILY

I don't think that you should tell me that you love me wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly. Hopelessly doesn't seem to make much sense, does it?

ALGERNON

Cecily!

[Enter Merriman.]

MERRIMAN

The carriage is waiting, sir.

ALGERNON

Tell it to come round next week, at the same hour.

MERRIMAN

[Looks at Cecily, who makes no sign.] Yes, sir.

* Compare Miss Prism's reference to her "three-volume novel."

dictation: speaking words for someone else to write down

[Merriman exits.]

ALGERNON

I love you, Cecily. You will marry me, won't you?

CECILY

You silly boy! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months.

ALGERNON

For the last three months?

CECILY

Yes, it will be exactly three months on Thursday.

ALGERNON

But how did we become engaged?

CECILY

Well, ever since dear Uncle Jack first confessed to us that he had a younger brother who was very wicked and bad, you of course have formed the chief topic of conversation between myself and Miss Prism. And of course a man who is much talked about is always very attractive. One feels there must be something in him, after all. I daresay it was foolish of me, but I fell in love with you, Ernest.

ALGERNON

Darling! And when was the engagement actually settled?

daresay: would go so far as to say

CECILY

On the 14th of February last. Worn out by your entire ignorance of my existence, I determined to end the matter one way or the other, and after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old tree here. The next day I bought this little ring in your name, and this is the little bangle with the true lovers' knot I promised you always to wear.

ALGERNON

Did I give you this? It's very pretty, isn't it?

CECILY

Yes, you've wonderfully good taste, Ernest. It's the excuse I've always given for your leading such a bad life.

ALGERNON

[Kneeling.] What a perfect angel you are, Cecily.

CECILY

You dear romantic boy. *[She puts her fingers through his hair.]* I hope your hair curls naturally, does it?

ALGERNON

Yes, darling, with a little help from others.

CECILY

I am so glad. You must not laugh at me, darling, but it has always been a girlish dream of mine to love

bangle: a kind of bracelet

true lovers' knot: a double knot regarded as a symbol of
true love

someone whose name was Ernest. *[Algernon rises.]*

There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest.

ALGERNON

But, do you mean to say you could not love me if I had some other name?

CECILY

But what name?

ALGERNON

Oh, any name you like—Algernon—for instance . . .

CECILY

But I don't like the name of Algernon.

ALGERNON

Well, my own dear, sweet, loving little darling, I really can't see why you should object to the name of Algernon. It is not at all a bad name. If my name was Algy, couldn't you love me?

CECILY

[Rising.] I might respect you, Ernest, I might admire your character, but I fear that I should not be able to give you my undivided attention.

ALGERNON

Ahem! Cecily! I must see the Rector here at once on a most important christening—I mean on most important business.

CECILY

Oh!

ALGERNON

I'll be back in no time.

[Rushes down the garden.]

CECILY

What an impetuous boy he is! I like his hair so much. I must enter his proposal in my diary.

[Enter Merriman.]

MERRIMAN

A Miss Fairfax has just called to see Mr. Worthing. On very important business, Miss Fairfax states.

CECILY

Pray ask the lady to come out here; Mr. Worthing is sure to be back soon. And you can bring tea.

MERRIMAN

Yes, Miss. *[Goes out.]*

CECILY

Miss Fairfax! I suppose one of the many good elderly

the Rector here: Dr. Chasuble (Like Jack, Algernon immediately plans to change his name and be christened as "Ernest.")

impetuous: impulsive; tending to act quickly and without thought

women who are associated with Uncle Jack in some of his philanthropic work in London.

[Enter Merriman.]

MERRIMAN

Miss Fairfax.

[Enter Gwendolen. Exit Merriman.]

CECILY

[Advancing to meet her.] Pray let me introduce myself to you. My name is Cecily Cardew.

GWENDOLEN

Cecily Cardew? *[Moving to her and shaking hands.]*
What a very sweet name! Something tells me that we are going to be great friends. I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong.

CECILY

How nice of you to like me so much after we have known each other such a comparatively short time. Pray sit down.

GWENDOLEN

[Still standing up.] You are here on a short visit, I suppose.

philanthropic: charitable; related to helping the needy

CECILY

Oh no! I live here.

GWENDOLEN

[Severely.] Really? Your mother, no doubt, or some female relative of advanced years, resides here also?

CECILY

Oh no! I have no mother, nor, in fact, any relations. My dear guardian, with the assistance of Miss Prism, has the arduous task of looking after me.

GWENDOLEN

Your guardian?

CECILY

Yes, I am Mr. Worthing's ward.

GWENDOLEN

Oh! It is strange he never mentioned to me that he had a ward. How secretive of him! He grows more interesting hourly. I am not sure, however, that the news inspires me with feelings of unmixed delight. *[Going to her.]* I am very fond of you, Cecily; I have liked you ever since I met you! But I am bound to state that now that I know that you are Mr. Worthing's ward, I cannot help expressing a wish you were—well, just a little older than you seem to be—and not quite so very alluring in appearance. In fact, if I may speak candidly—

arduous: very difficult; requiring great effort

alluring: very attractive

CECILY

Pray do! I think that whenever one has anything unpleasant to say, one should always be quite candid.

GWENDOLEN

Well, to speak with perfect candor, Cecily, I wish that you were fully forty-two, and more than usually plain for your age. Ernest has a strong upright nature. Disloyalty would be as impossible to him as deception. But even men of the noblest possible moral character are extremely susceptible to the influence of the physical charms of others.

CECILY

I beg your pardon, Gwendolen, did you say Ernest?

GWENDOLEN

Yes.

CECILY

Oh, but it is not Mr. Ernest Worthing who is my guardian. It is his brother—his elder brother.

GWENDOLEN

[Sitting down.] Ernest never mentioned to me that he had a brother.

CECILY

[Sitting down.] I am sorry to say they have not been on good terms for a long time.

candor: complete honesty, even about something difficult or painful

susceptible to: easily affected or influenced by

GWENDOLEN

Ah! That accounts for it. Cecily, you have lifted a load from my mind. It would have been terrible if any cloud had come across a friendship like ours, would it not? Of course you are quite, quite sure that it is not Mr. Ernest Worthing who is your guardian?

CECILY

Quite sure. *[A pause.]* In fact, I am going to be his.

GWENDOLEN

[Inquiringly.] I beg your pardon?

CECILY

[Rather shy and confidently.] Dearest Gwendolen, there is no reason why I should make a secret of it to you. Mr. Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married.

GWENDOLEN

*[Quite politely, rising.]** My darling Cecily, I think there must be some slight error. Mr. Ernest Worthing is engaged to me.

CECILY

[Very politely, rising.] I am afraid you must be under some misconception. Ernest proposed to me exactly ten minutes ago. *[Shows her diary.]*

inquiringly: with eager curiosity

confidingly: in a way that shows you trust someone to keep a secret

* Part of the humor of the following exchange between Gwendolen and Cecily comes from the contrast between what they are feeling—suspicious jealousy of each other—and their way of saying it, with almost excessive courtesy and politeness. The comedy of this scene also relies on dramatic irony—Gwendolen and Cecily think they are talking about one and the same man, but we know that there are two different men posing as Ernest.

misconception: a mistaken idea

GWENDOLEN

[Examines diary carefully.] It is certainly very curious, for he asked me to be his wife yesterday afternoon at 5.30. If you would care to verify the incident, pray do so. *[Produces diary of her own.]* I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train. I am so sorry, dear Cecily, if it is any disappointment to you, but I am afraid I have the prior claim.

CECILY

It would distress me more than I can tell you, dear Gwendolen, if it caused you any mental or physical anguish, but I feel bound to point out that since Ernest proposed to you he clearly has changed his mind.

GWENDOLEN

[Meditatively.] If the poor fellow has been entrapped into any foolish promise I shall consider it my duty to rescue him at once, and with a firm hand.

CECILY

[Thoughtfully and sadly.] Whatever unfortunate entanglement my dear boy may have got into, I will never reproach him with it after we are married.

verify: to prove something as true or correct

prior: earlier; existing or happening before

anguish: extreme unhappiness caused by great suffering

meditatively: in a thoughtful and serious way

reproach: blame; find fault with

GWENDOLEN

Do you allude to me, Miss Cardew, as an entanglement? You are presumptuous.

CECILY

Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into an engagement? How dare you?

[Enter Merriman with the tea service and refreshments. His presence exercises a restraining influence, under which both girls chafe.]*

MERRIMAN

Shall I lay tea here as usual, Miss?

CECILY

[Sternly, in a calm voice.] Yes, as usual. *[She sits; Gwendolen also. As Merriman sets out the tea service, Cecily and Gwendolen glare at each other.]*

GWENDOLEN

[Looking round.] Quite a well-kept garden this is, Miss Cardew.

CECILY

So glad you like it, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN

I had no idea there were any flowers in the country.

allude: refer indirectly

presumptuous: disrespectfully pushy; overly forward in a rude way

* From the action that follows, we see that the tea service needs to include tea cups, a pot of tea, a sugar bowl, cake, English muffins, bread and butter, and utensils and napkins.

chafe: show irritation and impatience

CECILY

Oh, flowers are as common* here, Miss Fairfax, as people are in London. May I offer you some tea, Miss Fairfax?

GWENDOLEN

[With elaborate politeness.] Thank you. *[Aside.]***
Detestable girl! But I require tea!

CECILY

[Sweetly.] Sugar?

GWENDOLEN

[Superciliously.] No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more. *[Cecily looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs, and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup.]****

CECILY

[Severely.] Cake or bread and butter?

GWENDOLEN

[In a bored manner.] Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.

CECILY

[Cuts a very large slice of cake, and puts it on the tray.]
Hand that to Miss Fairfax.

[Merriman does so, and goes out. Gwendolen drinks the tea and makes a grimace. Puts down cup at once,

* Cecily means “common” in two senses: both “frequently seen” and “vulgar, coarse, and low-class.”

elaborate: carefully detailed

** In a play, when an actor speaks an *aside*, the lines are heard by the audience but it is understood that the other actors do not hear them.

detestable: deserving strong dislike

superciliously: snobbishly; in a way that shows you think you are better than other people or look down on them

tongs: a utensil with two arms joined at one end, where there is a hinge, allowing you to press the arms together to pick things up

*** Usually in performance, as Cecily is serving the tea, Gwendolen is looking elsewhere and does not notice what Cecily is doing.

grimace: a twisted facial expression that shows strong dislike, disapproval, or pain

reaches out her hand to the bread and butter, looks at it, and finds it is cake. Rises in indignation.]

GWENDOLEN

You have filled my tea with lumps of sugar, and though I asked most distinctly for bread and butter, you have given me cake. I am known for the gentleness of my disposition, and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I warn you, Miss Cardew, you may go too far.

CECILY

[Rising.] To save my poor, innocent, trusting boy from the machinations of any other girl there are no lengths to which I would not go.

GWENDOLEN

From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right.

CECILY

No doubt, Miss Fairfax, you have many other calls to make in the neighborhood.

[Enter Jack.]

GWENDOLEN

[Catching sight of him.] Ernest! My own Ernest!

distinctly: in a clear and precise way

machinations: sneaky and complicated plots or schemes

deceitful: dishonest, deceptive, untrustworthy

invariably: without change or exception

JACK

Gwendolen! Darling! *[Approaching her.]*

GWENDOLEN

[Draws back.] A moment! May I ask if you are engaged to be married to this young lady? *[Points to Cecily.]*

JACK

[Laughing.] To dear little Cecily! Of course not! What could have put such an idea into your pretty little head?

GWENDOLEN

Thank you. *[She moves to his side.]*

CECILY

[Very sweetly.] I knew there must be some misunderstanding, Miss Fairfax. The gentleman whose arm is at present round your waist is my guardian, Mr. John Worthing.

GWENDOLEN

I beg your pardon?

CECILY

This is Uncle Jack.

GWENDOLEN

[Receding.] Jack! Oh!

[Enter Algernon.]

John: "Jack" is a common nickname for a man named John.

receding: moving away from; withdrawing

CECILY

Here is Ernest.

ALGERNON

[Goes straight over to Cecily without noticing anyone else.] My own love!

CECILY

[Drawing back.] A moment, Ernest! May I ask you—are you engaged to be married to this young lady?

ALGERNON

[Looking round.] To what young lady? Good heavens! Gwendolen!

CECILY

Yes! To good heavens, Gwendolen, I mean to Gwendolen.

ALGERNON

[Laughing.] Of course not! What could have put such an idea into your pretty little head?

CECILY

Thank you. *[She moves to his side; he puts his arm around her.]*

GWENDOLEN

I felt there was some slight error, Miss Cardew. The gentleman who is now embracing you is my cousin, Mr. Algernon Moncrieff.

CECILY

[Breaking away from Algernon.] Algernon Moncrieff! Oh! [Cecily and Gwendolen move towards each other and put their arms round each other's waists as if for protection.]

CECILY

Are you called Algernon?

ALGERNON

I cannot deny it.

CECILY

Oh!

GWENDOLEN

Is your name really John?

JACK

[Standing rather proudly.] I could deny it if I liked. But my name certainly is John. It has been John for years.

CECILY

[To Gwendolen.] A gross deception has been practiced on both of us.

GWENDOLEN

My poor wounded Cecily!

CECILY

My sweet wronged Gwendolen!

gross: extreme

GWENDOLEN

[Slowly and seriously.] You will call me sister, will you not? *[They embrace. Jack and Algernon groan and pace back and forth.]*

CECILY

[Rather brightly.] There is just one question I would like to be allowed to ask my guardian.

GWENDOLEN

An admirable idea! Mr. Worthing, there is just one question I would like to be permitted to put to you. Where is your brother Ernest? We are both engaged to be married to your brother Ernest, so it is a matter of some importance to us to know where your brother Ernest is at present.

JACK

[Slowly and hesitatingly.] Gwendolen—Cecily—it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind. However, I will tell you quite frankly that I have no brother Ernest. I have no brother at all. I never had a brother in my life, and I certainly have not the smallest intention of ever having one in the future.

CECILY

[Surprised.] No brother at all?

JACK

[Cheerily.] None!

GWENDOLEN

[Severely.] Had you never a brother of any kind?

JACK

[Pleasantly.] Never. Not even of any kind.

GWENDOLEN

I am afraid it is quite clear, Cecily, that neither of us is engaged to be married to anyone.

CECILY

It is not a very pleasant position for a young girl suddenly to find herself in. Is it?

GWENDOLEN

Let us go into the house. They will hardly venture to come after us there.

CECILY

No, men are so cowardly, aren't they?

[They retire into the house with scornful looks.]

JACK

This ghastly state of things is what you call Bunburying, I suppose?

venture: dare to go somewhere or do something

ALGERNON

Yes, and a perfectly wonderful Bunbury it is. The most wonderful Bunbury I have ever had in my life.

JACK

Well, you've no right whatsoever to Bunbury here.

ALGERNON

That is absurd. One has a right to Bunbury anywhere one chooses. Every serious Bunburyist knows that.

JACK

Serious Bunburyist! Good heavens!

ALGERNON

Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth you are serious about I haven't got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely trivial nature.

JACK

Well, the only small satisfaction I have in the whole of this wretched business is that your friend Bunbury is quite exploded. You won't be able to run down to the country quite so often as you used to do, dear Algy. And a very good thing too.

fancy: imagine

wretched: miserable
exploded: proven false

ALGERNON

Your brother is a little off, isn't he, dear Jack? You won't be able to disappear to London quite so frequently as your wicked custom was. And not a bad thing either.

JACK

As for your conduct towards Miss Cardew, I must say that your taking in a sweet, simple, innocent girl like that is quite inexcusable. To say nothing of the fact that she is my ward.

ALGERNON

I can see no possible defense at all for your deceiving a brilliant, clever, thoroughly experienced young lady like Miss Fairfax. To say nothing of the fact that she is my cousin.

JACK

I wanted to be engaged to Gwendolen, that is all. I love her.

ALGERNON

Well, I simply wanted to be engaged to Cecily. I adore her.

JACK

There is certainly no chance of your marrying Miss Cardew.

taking in: deceiving; tricking

ALGERNON

I don't think there is much likelihood, Jack, of you and Miss Fairfax being united. *[Begins to eat muffins.]*

JACK

How you can sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble, I can't make out. You seem to me to be perfectly heartless.

ALGERNON

Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them.

JACK

I say it's perfectly heartless your eating muffins at all, under the circumstances.

ALGERNON

When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Besides, I am particularly fond of muffins. *[Rising.]*

JACK

[Rising.] Well, that is no reason why you should eat them all in that greedy way. *[Takes muffins from Algernon.]*

make out: figure out; understand

agitated: worried and upset; very nervous from some worry or fear

consoles: gives comfort to; eases sorrow or disappointment

ALGERNON

[Offering cake.] I wish you would have cake instead.
I don't like cake.

JACK

Good heavens! I suppose a man may eat his own muffins in his own garden.

ALGERNON

But you have just said it was perfectly heartless to eat muffins.

JACK

I said it was perfectly heartless of you, under the circumstances. That is a very different thing.

ALGERNON

That may be. But the muffins are the same. *[He seizes the muffin-dish from Jack.]*

JACK

Algy, I wish to goodness you would go.

ALGERNON

You can't possibly ask me to go without having some dinner. It's absurd. I never go without my dinner. No one ever does, except vegetarians and people like that.

JACK

[Taking back the muffin-dish.] Oh, that is nonsense; you are always talking nonsense.

ALGERNON

Jack, you are at the muffins again! I wish you wouldn't. There are only two left. *[Takes them.]* I told you I was particularly fond of muffins.

JACK

Algernon! I have already told you to go. I don't want you here. Why don't you go!

ALGERNON

I haven't quite finished my tea yet! And there is still one muffin left.

[Jack groans and sinks into a chair. Algernon still continues eating.]

ACT THREE

SCENE: *As before: Garden at the Manor House.* Enter Gwendolyn and Cecily. They pause at a distance from Algernon and Jack.*

GWENDOLEN

[Aside to Cecily.] The fact that they did not follow us at once into the house, as anyone else would have done, seems to me to show that they have some sense of shame left.

CECILY

They have been eating muffins. That looks like repentance.

[Algernon and Jack notice the ladies.]

GWENDOLEN

They're looking at us. What effrontery!

CECILY

They're approaching. That's very forward of them.

GWENDOLEN

Let us preserve a dignified silence.

CECILY

Certainly. It's the only thing to do now.

* In the original script, Oscar Wilde calls for a scene change to the "Morning-room at the Manor House." To simplify matters for school and community theater performance, this abridged version of the play maintains the same setting as we move from the second act into the third and final act.

repentance: feeling sorry and regretful for some wrong you have done

effrontery: rude, brash, shameless behavior

forward: overly familiar to the point of rudeness

dignified: impressively calm and serious

GWENDOLEN

We will not be the first to speak.

CECILY

Certainly not.

GWENDOLEN

Mr. Worthing, I have something very particular to ask you. Much depends on your reply.

CECILY

Gwendolen, your common sense is invaluable. Mr. Moncrieff, kindly answer me the following question. Why did you pretend to be my guardian's brother?

ALGERNON

In order that I might have an opportunity of meeting you.

CECILY

[To Gwendolen.] That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not?

GWENDOLEN

Yes, dear, if you can believe him.

CECILY

I don't. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer.

GWENDOLEN

True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing. Mr. Worthing, what explanation can you offer to me for pretending to have a brother? Was it in order that you might have an opportunity of coming up to town to see me as often as possible?

JACK

Can you doubt it, Miss Fairfax?

GWENDOLEN

I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. [*To Cecily.*] Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory, especially Mr. Worthing's. That seems to me to have the stamp of truth upon it.

CECILY

I am more than content with what Mr. Moncrieff said. His voice alone inspires one with absolute credulity.

GWENDOLEN

Then you think we should forgive them?

CECILY

Yes. I mean no.

GWENDOLEN

True! I had forgotten. There are principles at stake that one cannot surrender. Which of us should tell them? The task is not a pleasant one.

vital: extremely important; absolutely necessary

credulity: willingness to believe or trust (perhaps too readily)

CECILY

Could we not both speak at the same time?

GWENDOLEN

An excellent idea! I nearly always speak at the same time as other people.

GWENDOLEN and CECILY

[Upon Gwendolen's signal, speaking together.] Your Christian names* are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!

JACK and ALGERNON

[Speaking together.] Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon.

GWENDOLEN

[To Jack.] For my sake you are prepared to do this terrible thing?

JACK

I am.

CECILY

[To Algernon.] To please me you are ready to face this fearful ordeal?

ALGERNON

I am!

* In Western countries (including North America, Great Britain, and much of Europe), the term “Christian name” refers to a person’s first name, the name a child was given when baptized.

insuperable: incapable of being overcome; (in describing a problem or challenge) beyond any successful solution

ordeal: an extremely difficult or painful experience

GWENDOLEN

How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes!
Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men
are infinitely beyond us.

JACK

We are. *[Clasps hands with Algernon.]*

CECILY

They have moments of physical courage of which we
women know absolutely nothing.*

GWENDOLEN

[To Jack.] Darling!

ALGERNON

[To Cecily.] Darling! *[They fall into each other's arms.]*

*[Enter Merriman. When he enters he coughs loudly,
seeing the situation.]*

MERRIMAN

Ahem! Ahem! Lady Bracknell!

JACK

Good heavens!

*[Enter Lady Bracknell. The couples separate in alarm.
Exit Merriman.]*

* The ceremony of Christening involves baptism, in which a person may be immersed in water, or, as is more likely for Jack and Algernon, have water sprinkled on their heads. While being sprinkled with water would cause no real difficulty or suffering for Algernon or Jack, for comic effect Oscar Wilde has Gwendolen and Cecily speak of it as though it were a challenge requiring great bravery.

LADY BRACKNELL

Gwendolen! What does this mean?

GWENDOLEN

Merely that I am engaged to be married to Mr. Worthing, mamma.

LADY BRACKNELL

Come here. Sit down. Sit down immediately. [*Turns to Jack.*] Apprised, sir, of my daughter's sudden flight by her trusty maid, whose confidence I purchased by means of a small coin, I followed her at once. Of course, you will clearly understand that all communication between yourself and my daughter must cease immediately from this moment. On this point, as indeed on all points, I am firm.

JACK

I am engaged to be married to Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell!

LADY BRACKNELL

You are nothing of the kind, sir. And now . . . Algernon!

ALGERNON

Yes, Aunt Augusta.

apprised: informed; notified

confidence: willingness to share a secret

LADY BRACKNELL

May I ask if it is in this house that your invalid friend Mr. Bunbury resides?

ALGERNON

[Stammering.] Oh! No! Bunbury doesn't live here. Bunbury is somewhere else at present. In fact, Bunbury is dead.

LADY BRACKNELL

Dead! When did Mr. Bunbury die? His death must have been extremely sudden.

ALGERNON

[Airily.] Oh! I killed Bunbury this afternoon. I mean poor Bunbury died this afternoon.

LADY BRACKNELL

What did he die of?

ALGERNON

Bunbury? Oh, he was found out! The doctors found out that Bunbury could not live, that is what I mean—so Bunbury died.

LADY BRACKNELL

He seems to have had great confidence in the opinion of his physicians. I am glad, however, that he made up his mind at the last to some definite course of action, and acted under proper medical advice. And now that we have finally got rid of this

Mr. Bunbury, may I ask, Mr. Worthing, who is that young person whose hand my nephew Algernon is now holding in what seems to me a peculiarly unnecessary manner?

JACK

That lady is Miss Cecily Cardew, my ward.

ALGERNON

I am engaged to be married to Cecily, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL

I beg your pardon?

CECILY

Mr. Moncrieff and I are engaged to be married, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL

[With a shiver, sitting down.] The number of engagements that go on here seems to me considerably above the proper average that statistics have laid down for our guidance. I think some preliminary inquiry on my part would not be out of place. Mr. Worthing, is Miss Cardew at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? I merely desire information.

JACK

[In a clear, cold voice.] Miss Cardew is the granddaughter of the late Mr. Thomas Cardew.

preliminary: coming before or leading up to the main matter at hand

I have in my possession, you will be pleased to hear, certificates of Miss Cardew's birth, baptism, whooping cough, registration, vaccination, confirmation, and the measles, both the German and the English variety.

LADY BRACKNELL

Ah! A life crowded with incident, I see, though perhaps somewhat too exciting for a young girl. I am not myself in favor of premature experiences. [*Rises, looks at her watch.*] Gwendolen! The time approaches for our departure. We have not a moment to lose. As a matter of form, Mr. Worthing, I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune?

JACK

Oh! about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds.* That is all. Goodbye, Lady Bracknell. So pleased to have seen you.

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Sitting down again.*] A moment, Mr. Worthing. A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time. We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces. [*To Cecily.*] Come over here, dear.

a matter of form: a mere formality; something that must be done as a matter of custom or necessity, though it makes no real difference [though for Lady Bracknell, Cecily's wealth in fact makes all the difference]

* Cecily is a very wealthy woman.

[Cecily goes across.] Kindly turn round, sweet child.
[Cecily presents her profile.] Yes, quite as I expected.
Algernon!

ALGERNON

Yes, Aunt Augusta!

LADY BRACKNELL

There are distinct social possibilities in Miss Cardew's profile.

ALGERNON

Cecily is the sweetest, dearest, prettiest girl in the whole world. And I don't care twopence about social possibilities.

LADY BRACKNELL

Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that. Well, I suppose I must give my consent.

ALGERNON

Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL

Cecily, you may kiss me!

CECILY

[Kisses her.] Thank you, Lady Bracknell.

twopence [pronounced *TUP-ense*]: two pennies

LADY BRACKNELL

You may also address me as Aunt Augusta for the future.

CECILY

Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL

The marriage, I think, had better take place quite soon. To speak frankly, I am not in favor of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable.

JACK

I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Lady Bracknell, but this engagement is quite out of the question. I am Miss Cardew's guardian, and she cannot marry without my consent until she comes of age. That consent I absolutely decline to give.

LADY BRACKNELL

Upon what grounds may I ask? Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?

JACK

Lady Bracknell, the fact is that I do not approve at all of your nephew's moral character. I suspect him of

comes of age: In legal terms, when people “come of age” they reach a specific age at which they are allowed to make certain decisions or enjoy certain privileges that were not allowed before.

ostentatiously: in an obvious, showy way that draws attention

being untruthful. *[Algernon and Cecily look at him in indignant amazement.]*

LADY BRACKNELL

Untruthful! My nephew Algernon? Impossible!

JACK

I fear there can be no possible doubt about the matter. This afternoon he obtained admission to my house by means of the false pretense of being my brother. Continuing his disgraceful deception, he succeeded in alienating the affections of my only ward. He subsequently stayed to tea, and devoured every single muffin. And what makes his conduct all the more heartless is, that he was perfectly well aware from the first that I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don't intend to have a brother, not even of any kind. I distinctly told him so myself yesterday afternoon.

LADY BRACKNELL

Ahem! Mr. Worthing, after careful consideration I have decided entirely to overlook my nephew's conduct to you.

JACK

That is very generous of you, Lady Bracknell. My own decision, however, is unalterable. I decline to give my consent.

alienating: turning away; diverting from a proper path
or goal

unalterable: unchangeable

LADY BRACKNELL

[To Cecily.] Come here, sweet child. *[Cecily goes over.]*

How old are you, dear?

CECILY

Well, I am really only eighteen, but I always admit to twenty when I go to evening parties.

LADY BRACKNELL

You are perfectly right in making some slight alteration. Indeed, no woman should ever be quite accurate about her age. It looks so calculating . . .

[In a meditative manner.] Eighteen, but admitting to twenty at evening parties. Well, it will not be very long before you are of age, so I don't think your guardian's consent is, after all, a matter of any importance.

JACK

Pray excuse me, Lady Bracknell, but it is only fair to tell you that according to the terms of her grandfather's will Miss Cardew does not come legally of age till she is thirty-five.

LADY BRACKNELL

That does not seem to me to be a grave objection. Thirty-five is a very attractive age. London society is full of women of the very highest birth who have, of their own free choice, remained thirty-five for years.

calculating: selfishly scheming

CECILY

Algy, could you wait for me till I was thirty-five?

ALGERNON

Of course I could, Cecily. You know I could.

CECILY

Yes, I felt it instinctively, but I couldn't wait all that time. I hate waiting even five minutes for anybody. It always makes me rather cross.

ALGERNON

Then what is to be done, Cecily?

CECILY

I don't know, Mr. Moncrieff.

LADY BRACKNELL

My dear Mr. Worthing, as Miss Cardew states positively that she cannot wait till she is thirty-five—a remark which seems to me to show a somewhat impatient nature—I would beg of you to reconsider your decision.

JACK

But my dear Lady Bracknell, the matter is entirely in your own hands. The moment you consent to my marriage with Gwendolen, I will most gladly allow your nephew to form an alliance with my ward.

LADY BRACKNELL

[Rising and drawing herself up.] You must be quite aware that what you propose is out of the question.
[Pulls out her watch.] Come, dear, *[Gwendolen rises]* we have already missed five, if not six, trains. To miss any more might expose us to comment on the platform.

[Enter Dr. Chasuble.]

CHASUBLE

Everything is quite ready for the christenings.

LADY BRACKNELL

The christenings, sir!

CHASUBLE

[Pointing to Jack and Algernon.] Both these gentlemen have expressed a desire for immediate baptism.

LADY BRACKNELL

At their age? The idea is grotesque and irreligious! I will not hear of such excesses.

CHASUBLE

Am I to understand then that there are to be no christenings at all this afternoon?

JACK

I don't think that, as things are now, it would be of much practical value to either of us, Dr. Chasuble.

CHASUBLE

I am grieved to hear such sentiments, Mr. Worthing. I will return to the church at once. Indeed, I have just been informed that for the last hour and a half Miss Prism has been waiting for me in the vestry.

LADY BRACKNELL

[Starting.] Miss Prism! Did I hear you mention a Miss Prism?

CHASUBLE

Yes, Lady Bracknell. I am on my way to join her.

LADY BRACKNELL

Pray allow me to detain you for a moment. This matter may prove to be one of vital importance. Is this Miss Prism remotely connected with education?

JACK

Miss Prism, Lady Bracknell, has been for the last three years Miss Cardew's esteemed governess and valued companion.

LADY BRACKNELL

I must see her at once. Let her be sent for.

[Enter Miss Prism hurriedly.]

MISS PRISM

[To Dr. Chasuble, not noticing the others.] I was told you expected me in the vestry, dear Canon. I have

vestry: a room in (or a building attached to) a church,
often used for meetings or other practical purposes

starting: moving suddenly because of some shock or
surprise

esteemed: highly respected

been waiting for you there for an hour and three-quarters. *[Catches sight of Lady Bracknell, who has fixed her with a stony glare. Miss Prism grows pale and quails. She looks anxiously round as if desirous to escape.]*

LADY BRACKNELL

[In a severe, judicial voice.] Prism! [Miss Prism bows her head in shame.] Come here, Prism! [Miss Prism approaches in a humble manner.] Prism! Where is that baby? [General consternation. Dr. Chasuble starts back in horror. Algernon and Jack pretend to be anxious to shield Cecily and Gwendolen from hearing the details of a terrible public scandal.] Twenty-eight years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell's house in charge of a perambulator that contained a baby of the male sex. You never returned. A few weeks later, through the elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan police, the perambulator was discovered. It contained the manuscript of a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality. But the baby was not there! [Everyone looks at Miss Prism.] Prism! Where is that baby? [A pause.]

MISS PRISM

Lady Bracknell, I admit with shame that I do not know. I only wish I did. The plain facts of the case are these. On the morning of the day you mention, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old,

quails: shrinks back in fear

consternation: shock and confusion

perambulator: baby carriage

Metropolitan: having to do with a large city

revolting: disgusting

sentimentality: overly sweet and gushy emotions

but capacious handbag in which I had intended to place the manuscript of a work of fiction that I had written during my few unoccupied hours. In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I never can forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the perambulator, and placed the baby in the handbag.

JACK

[Who has been listening attentively.] But where did you deposit the handbag?

MISS PRISM

Do not ask me, Mr. Worthing.

JACK

Miss Prism, this is a matter of no small importance to me. I insist on knowing where you deposited the handbag that contained that infant.

MISS PRISM

I left it in the cloak-room of one of the larger railway stations in London.

JACK

What railway station?

MISS PRISM

[Quite crushed.] Victoria. The Brighton line. *[Sinks into a chair.]*

capacious: roomy; capable of holding much

unoccupied: not busy

mental abstraction: absent-mindedness

JACK

I must retire to my room for a moment. Gwendolen, wait here for me.

GWENDOLEN

If you are not too long, I will wait here for you all my life.

[Exit Jack in great excitement.]

CHASUBLE

What do you think this means, Lady Bracknell?

LADY BRACKNELL

I dare not even suspect, Dr. Chasuble. I need hardly tell you that in families of high position strange coincidences are not supposed to occur. They are hardly considered the thing.

[Noises heard as if someone was throwing trunks about.]

CECILY

Uncle Jack seems strangely agitated.

LADY BRACKNELL

This noise is extremely unpleasant. It sounds as if he was having an argument. I dislike arguments of any kind. They are always vulgar, and often convincing.

GWENDOLEN

This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.

[Enter Jack with a handbag of black leather in his hand.]

JACK

[Rushing over to Miss Prism.] Is this the handbag, Miss Prism? Examine it carefully before you speak. The happiness of more than one life depends on your answer.

MISS PRISM

[Calmly.] It seems to be mine. Yes, here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had had them placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years.

JACK

[In a pathetic voice.] Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this handbag. I was the baby you placed in it.

MISS PRISM

[Amazed.] You?

JACK

[Embracing her.] Yes . . . mother!

MISS PRISM

[Recoiling.] Mr. Worthing! I am unmarried!

pathetic: pitiful, or causing feelings of pity and compassion

recoiling: moving back quickly in fear or disgust

JACK

Unmarried! But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered?* Mother, I forgive you. [*Tries to embrace her again.*]

MISS PRISM

[*Still more indignant.*] Mr. Worthing, there is some error. [*Pointing to Lady Bracknell.*] There is the lady who can tell you who you really are.

JACK

[*After a pause.*]** Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am?

LADY BRACKNELL

I am afraid that the news I have to give you will not altogether please you. You are the son of my poor sister, Mrs. Moncrieff, and consequently Algernon's elder brother.

JACK

Algy's elder brother! Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother! Cecily—how could you have ever doubted that I had a brother? Algy, you young scoundrel, you will have to treat me with more respect in the future. You have never behaved to me like a brother in all your life.

* Jack here refers to the words in the Bible spoken by Jesus (John 8:7): "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her."

** The actor playing Jack can heighten the comic effect here through a sudden contrast: after speaking with intense emotion to Miss Prism, he switches to a cool, calm, reserved tone in addressing Lady Bracknell.

consequently: as a result

ALGERNON

Well, not till today, old boy, I admit. I did my best, however, though I was out of practice. [*Shakes hands.*]

GWENDOLEN

[*To Jack.*] But what is your Christian name, now that you have become someone else?

JACK

Good heavens! . . . I had quite forgotten that point. Your decision on the subject of my name is irrevocable, I suppose?

GWENDOLEN

I never change, except in my affections.

CECILY

What a noble nature you have, Gwendolen!

JACK

Then the question had better be cleared up at once. Aunt Augusta, what name was I given? Let me know the worst.

LADY BRACKNELL

Being the eldest son you were naturally christened after your father.

JACK

[*Irritably.*] Yes, but what was my father's Christian name?

irrevocable: impossible to change

LADY BRACKNELL

[Meditatively.] I cannot at the present moment recall what the General's Christian name was. But I have no doubt he had one.

JACK

Algy! Can't you recollect what our father's Christian name was?

ALGERNON

My dear boy, we were never even on speaking terms. He died before I was a year old.

JACK

His name would appear in the Army Lists of the period, I suppose, Aunt Augusta?

LADY BRACKNELL

I have no doubt his name would appear in any military directory.

JACK

The Army Lists of the last forty years are here.

*[Starts to rush into the house but is met by Merriman, who holds a large encyclopedia-like volume. Jack takes the book; Merriman exits. Jack quickly thumbs through the book, finds a page, and reads:]**

M. Generals . . . Mallam, Markby, Migsby, Mobbs, Moncrieff! Christian names, Ernest John. *[Puts book*

Army Lists: official publications listing all members of the British Army

* In the original play, in which this third act is set inside the Manor House, Wilde provides a stage direction stating that Jack “rushes to bookcase and tears the books out.” In this adapted version of the play, in which Act Three remains outside in the garden, Merriman (anticipating every need) appears with the book.

very quietly down and speaks quite calmly.] I always told you, Gwendolen, my name was Ernest, didn't I? Well, it is Ernest after all. I mean it naturally is Ernest.

LADY BRACKNELL

Yes, I remember now that the General was called Ernest. I knew I had some particular reason for disliking the name.

GWENDOLEN

Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first that you could have no other name!

JACK

Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?

GWENDOLEN

I can. For I feel that you are sure to change.

JACK

My own one!

CHASUBLE

[To Miss Prism.] Laetitia! *[Embraces her.]*

MISS PRISM

[Enthusiastically.] Frederick! At last!

Laetitia [pronounced *luh-TISH-uh*]: Miss Prism's first name

ALGERNON

Cecily! [*Embraces her.*] At last!

JACK

Gwendolen! [*Embraces her.*] At last!

LADY BRACKNELL

My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs
of triviality.

JACK

On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for
the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being
Earnest.

TABLEAU

tableau [pronounced *tab-low*]: In a tableau, the actors momentarily freeze to form a silent picture onstage, with the effect of conveying a specific message or feeling. (In this case, the tableau, with its display of multiple couples engaged to be married, highlights an ending that is at once both very happy and very silly.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



He was born October 16, 1854, in Dublin, Ireland—full name, Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde. His father was a surgeon as well as a scholar of archaeology and folklore. His mother wrote poetry and was an expert on Irish folklore. Young Oscar excelled as a student at the finest schools, including Trinity College in Dublin and then Oxford University in England, from which he graduated in 1878 with honors, and where he was also the recipient of a prize for his poetry.

As an aspiring writer, Wilde was influenced by the ideas of the Aesthetic Movement. Rejecting the prevailing belief that art must be useful or serve a moral purpose, the Aesthetic artists believed in “art for art’s sake.” They urged the pursuit of beauty—not only in painting and poetry but also in interior decorating, furniture making, and other activities affecting everyday life.

In 1881, Oscar Wilde published a volume of poetry. He was, however, perhaps best-known at this time not for his writing but for his public personality—for his brilliantly witty conversation and for his extravagant outfits. A humorous line spoken by Algernon Moncrieff, one of the main characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, applies to Wilde himself: “If I am occasionally a little over-dressed, I make up for it by being always immensely over-educated.”

In 1882, Wilde took his wit and learning to the United States and Canada. Presenting himself as a representative of the Aesthetic Movement, he delivered a generally popular series of lectures on such topics as “The English Renaissance,” “Irish Poets and Poetry,” and “The Decorative Arts.” Once back in England, he gave lectures about his impressions of America.

Wilde married Constance Lloyd, a wealthy English woman, in 1884. They had two sons. In 1888, Wilde published *The Happy Prince and Other Stories*, a collection of five stories for children. These lovely and touching stories appeal to readers of all ages, and have since been adapted into musicals, animated tales, and plays.

In 1891, Wilde published his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which tells the story of a young man who sells his soul in exchange for eternal youth and beauty. Some reviewers attacked the story as immoral. One reviewer wrote, "Mr. Wilde has brains, and art, and style; but . . . the sooner he takes to tailoring (or some other decent trade) the better for his own reputation and the public morals." In a preface to his novel, Wilde took a stand for beauty over morality in art:

The artist is the creator of beautiful things. . . . Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. . . . There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.

Wilde is perhaps best known today as a playwright. His first popular play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, opened in London in 1892. He followed it with three more successful plays in as many years, including, in 1895, the play for which he is best known, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

If he were alive today, Oscar Wilde would very likely be a star of social media. On one account he would post witty epigrams to the delight of his millions of followers. On another, he would feature photographs of himself wearing fashionable outfits in very fashionable locations with very fashionable people. He might even host a podcast, in which he would unvaryingly speak with wit, eloquence, and charm. Among a constellation of popular gay artists and celebrities, he would stand out as a particularly brilliant star.

But in Victorian England, Oscar Wilde could not openly declare his homosexuality, for there were laws against it. In 1891 Wilde began having an affair with a young nobleman, and they were not always careful to remain discreet. The young man's father found out and made harsh public accusations against Wilde. Wilde responded by suing the father for libel—for purposefully spreading lies that damaged Wilde's reputation. In court, the case was dismissed, and evidence was presented of Wilde's homosexuality. Then, within two months of the triumphant opening of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde was arrested for "gross indecency."

For information on Victorian England, see page 7.

The scandal ruined Wilde's reputation and led to the early closure of *Earnest*. Wilde was put on trial, found guilty, and sentenced to two years of jail and hard labor.

When his sentence ended in 1897, Wilde was penniless and in poor health. He left England to live in France. He died on November 30, 1900, at the age of only forty-six. In his final few years, he published a long poem about his time in jail, and he managed to prepare for publication the final version of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, his greatest play, which continues to be performed and enjoyed to this day.

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It is hard to think of another play so funny from beginning to end as Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. What makes this "trivial comedy for serious people"—as Wilde called it—more than just a lighthearted farce is the language; while the characters' actions are often silly, the words they speak are brilliantly witty. Wilde created a play so perfect of its kind that it remains a frequently performed favorite. This Core Classics volume presents a shortened version of Wilde's best-known play, with background information and helpful notes.

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