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.”