

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

by
Oscar Wilde

L'autore

Scrittore, poeta e drammaturgo, Oscar Wilde, il dandy per eccellenza, nacque a Dublino il 16 ottobre 1854; studiò al Trinity College e frequentò l'Università a Oxford. Affabile e brillante conversatore, imparò ben presto l'arte teatrale cimentandosi nelle commedie più notevoli e sprezzanti dell'Età Vittoriana. Fu grande sostenitore della dottrina estetica portata al suo estremo, in nome dell'arte pura (art for art's sake). Nel 1884 sposò Constance Mary Lloyd: un matrimonio di convenienza che durò fino alla nascita dei suoi due figli e alla scoperta della sua omosessualità. Nel 1891 pubblicò il suo primo e unico romanzo *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, l'opera che gli diede l'indiscussa fama e l'autorevolezza di scrittore. Nel 1895 fu imputato con l'accusa di sodomia e per questo condannato a due anni di lavori forzati; fu il periodo in cui scrisse l'epistola *De Profundis*, una delle opere più poetiche e strazianti del secolo. Visse gli ultimi anni della sua vita a Parigi, sotto falso nome, fino alla morte, che giunse il 30 novembre del 1900. Oggi le sue spoglie sono sepolte nel cimitero di Père Lachaise.

Alcune opere

Vera, or the Nihilists (1880); *The Canterville Ghost* (1886); *A House of Pomegranates* (1888); *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888); *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891); *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* (1891); *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892); *Salomè* (1893); *A Woman of No Importance* (1893); *An Ideal Husband* (1895); ***The Importance of Being Earnest*** (1895); *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1897); *De Profundis* (1905).

La trama

Commedia in tre atti, rappresentata per la prima volta nel 1895 al St. James's Theatre di Londra, il giorno di San Valentino. ***The Importance of Being Earnest*** narra la storia di Jack Worthing e Algernon Moncrieff, due gentiluomini londinesi che fingono di chiamarsi Ernest per attirare le simpatie delle belle ereditiere Gwendolen, cugina di Algernon, e Cecily, nipote di Jack. L'amata di Jack è però ostacolata dalla madre, la pungente Lady Bracknell, che non sopporta l'idea che la figlia si fidanzi con lui, orfanello ritrovato in una stazione ferroviaria. Algernon invece, innamorato della giovane Cecily, è contrastato proprio da Jack, che essendo zio e tutore della ragazza, vuole proteggerla dalla pericolosa superficialità dell'amico. Tra divertenti equivoci e in un crescendo di colpi di scena, Wilde ha saputo denunciare, con grande ironia e cinismo, tutta la superficiale retorica e le vuote convenzioni sociali dell'Età Vittoriana, elaborando una trama nella quale il duello verbale ha la meglio sulle azioni e conduce a un lieto fine niente affatto scontato.

Note di regia

L'adattamento che proponiamo è ambientato nell' "età del jazz" tanto cara a Scott Fitzgerald e, per molti aspetti, vicina all'epoca di Wilde: quella del periodo delle grandi innovazioni tecnologiche, ma anche della grande depressione causata dal crollo di Wall Street e dalla sontuosità dell'Art Déco. Un periodo decadente ma d'influenze artistiche e scientifiche talmente avanti da permettersi di dettar leggi di stile, cosa che ben si adatta alle commedie wildiane. Lo spettacolo è un omaggio a Hollywood, tanto nel look da dive Anni '20 e da icone maschili alla Gary Cooper, quanto nell'espressività dei film muti. L'Art Déco, con il suo stile sofisticato e le forme moderniste, influenza la ricostruzione dei tre ambienti principali (l'appartamento di Algernon a Londra, il giardino e il salotto della tenuta di Hertfordshire) in cui si svolge la vicenda. La musica jazz e ragtime, dal tono positivo, energico e spiritoso, permette di scandire l'azione scenica, mentre brevi momenti di danza Charleston o Tango segnano lo sviluppo delle vicende. Uno spettacolo fisico, dinamico e decisamente espressivo, capace di guidare il pubblico all'interno dell'ironia tipica della lingua inglese e far apprezzare anche visivamente l'opera di Wilde.

Regia di John O'Connor

SYNOPSIS OF ACTS

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CHARACTERS *(in order of appearance)*

ALGERNON
LANE
JACK
LADY BRACKNELL
GWENDOLEN
MISS PRISM
CECILY
MERRIMAN
DR. CHASUBLE

ACT I

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. Algernon on stage. Enter Lane.

Lane. Mr. Ernest Worthing.

Enter Jack. Exit Lane.

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

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.

Jack. 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. Yes, that is all very well; but 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. 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.

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

Algernon. You left your cigarette case in the smoking-room the last time you dined here.

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 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.

Algernon. I think that is rather mean of you, Ernest, I must say. (*Opens cigarette 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.

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 in Tunbridge Wells. Just give it back to me, Algy.

Algernon. But why does she call herself "little Cecily"? (*Reading.*) "From little Cecily with her fondest love".

Jack. My dear fellow, what on earth is there in that? Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. For Heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case.

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.

Algernon. You have always told me it was Ernest. 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 calling 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 in Tunbridge Wells, calls you her dear uncle. Come, old boy, you had better much have the thing out at once. 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 grand daughter, Miss Cecily Cardew, who addresses me as her uncle, 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...

Algernon. 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. 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. In order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in 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. 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. Now that I know you are going 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. So I am going to get rid of Ernest. And I strongly advise you to do the same with Mr.... Bunbury.

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 I certainly won't want to know Bunbury.

Algernon. Then your wife will. You don't seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none.

Enter Lane.

Lane. Lady Bracknell and Miss Fairfax.

*Exit Lane. 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!

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. 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.

Algernon. I am greatly distressed, Aunt Augusta, there were no cucumbers in the market this morning.

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

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

Lady Bracknell. It certainly has changed its colour. From what cause I, of course, cannot say. *(Algernon hands tea.)* Thank you.

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

Lady Bracknell *(frowning)*. I hope not, Algernon. It would put my table completely out.

Algernon. It is a great bore, and, I need hardly say, a terrible disappointment, 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 he is going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd.

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. I'll run over the programme 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 programme will be delightful. Gwendolen, you will accompany me.

Gwendolen. Certainly, mamma.

*Lady Bracknell and Algernon go into the music-room,
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 it.

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 I often wish that in public, at any rate, you had been more demonstrative. 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 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!

Jack. But you don't 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. Do you mean to say you couldn't love me then?

Gwendolen (*glibly*). Ah! That is clearly a metaphysical speculation, and like most metaphysical speculations has very little reference to the actual facts of real life as we know them.

Jack. 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... I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain. No, the only really safe name is Ernest.

Jack. Gwendolen, I must get baptised at once... I mean we must get married at once. There is no time to be lost.

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 is 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. Gwendolen, will you marry me?

Goes on his knees.

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 friends tell me so. What wonderfully blue eyes you have, Ernest! They are quite, quite blue. 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 from this semi-recumbent posture. It is most indecorous.

Gwendolen. Mamma! (*He tries to rise, she restrains him.*) I must beg you to retire. This is no place for you. Besides, Mr. Worthing has not quite finished yet.

Lady Bracknell. Finished what, may I ask?

Gwendolen. I am engaged to Mr. Worthing, mamma.

They rise together.

Lady Bracknell. Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. 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. Gwendolen, in the carriage! (*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 is. Finally turns round.*) Gwendolen! In the carriage!

Gwendolen leaves blowing kisses to Jack.

Lady Bracknell (*sitting down*). You can take a seat, Mr. Worthing.

Looks in her pocket for note-book and pencil.

Jack. Thank you, Lady Bracknell, I prefer standing.

Lady Bracknell (*pencil and note-book in hand*). I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?

Jack. Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

Lady Bracknell. I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. 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.

Lady Bracknell. Where did this charitable gentleman find you?

Jack (*gravely*). In a hand-bag.

Lady Bracknell. A hand-bag?

Jack (*very seriously*). Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a hand-bag, a somewhat large, black leather hand-bag with handles to it, an ordinary hand-bag in fact.

Lady Bracknell. In what locality did this Mr. James, or Thomas Cardew come across this ordinary hand-bag?

Jack. In the cloak-room at Victoria Station. It was given to him in mistake for his own.

Lady Bracknell. The cloak-room 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. A cloak-room at a railway station could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognised position in good society.

Jack. May I ask you then what you would advise me to do? I need hardly say I would do anything in the world to ensure Gwendolen's happiness.

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, before the season is over.

Jack. Well, I don't see how I could possibly manage to do that. I can produce the hand-bag 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!

Exit Lady Bracknell in majestic indignation.

Jack. Good morning! (*Algernon, from the other room, strikes up the Wedding March. Jack looks perfectly furious, and goes to the door.*) For goodness' sake don't play that ghastly tune, Algy! How idiotic you are!

The music stops and enter Algernon cheerily.

Algernon. Didn't it go off all right, old boy? You don't mean to say Gwendolen refused you? I know it is a way she has. She is always refusing people. I think it is most ill-natured of her.

Jack. Oh, Gwendolen is as right as a trivet. As far as she is concerned, we are engaged. Her mother is perfectly unbearable. Never met such a Gorgon.

Algernon. What about your brother? What about Ernest?

Jack. Oh, before the end of the week I shall have got rid of him. I'll say he died suddenly in Paris.

Algernon. But I thought you said that... Cecily was a little too much interested in your 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 for 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.

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. (*Enter Gwendolen.*) 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. 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 fibres of my own nature. Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination. 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 the address on his shirt-cuff.

Gwendolen. There is a good postal service, I suppose? It may be necessary to do something desperate. That of course will require serious consideration. I will communicate with you daily.

Jack. My own one!

Gwendolen. How long do you remain in town?

Jack. Till Monday.

Gwendolen. Good! Algy, you may now turn round.

Algernon. Thanks, I've already turned round.

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

Gwendolen. Certainly.

Jack. I will see Miss Fairfax out.

Exit Jack and Gwendolen.

Algernon. Tomorrow, I'm going Bunburying.

Enter Jack.

Jack. There's a sensible, intellectual girl! The only girl I ever cared for in my life. (*Algernon is laughing immoderately.*) 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 some day.

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 looks indignantly at him, and leaves the room.
Algernon lights a cigarette, reads his shirt-cuff, and smiles.*

ACT II

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. Basket chairs, and a table covered with books, are set under a large yew-tree.

Miss Prism (*calling*). Cecily, Cecily! Intellectual pleasures await you. 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. Indeed, he always lays stress on your German when he is leaving for town. 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. I really don't see why you should keep a diary at all.

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. Do you know, Cecily, I wrote a three-volume novel 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 ended unhappily. That is what Fiction means.

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

Miss Prism. Alas! No. The manuscript unfortunately was abandoned. (*Cecily starts.*) I use the word in the sense of lost or mislaid. To your work, child, these speculations are profitless.

Cecily (*smiling*). But I see dear Dr. Chasuble coming up through the garden.

Miss Prism. Oh, Dr. Chasuble oh! Well, I think, dear Cecily, I will have a stroll with Dr. Chasuble. I find I have a headache and a walk might do it good. You will read your Political Economy in my absence.

Exit Miss Prism.

Cecily (*picks up school 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.

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.

Exit Merriman.

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, very gay and debonair.*) He does!

Algernon (*raising his hat*). 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. This world is good enough for me.

Cecily. Yes, but are you good enough for it?

Algernon. I'm afraid I'm not. That is why I want you to reform me. You might make that your mission, if you don't mind, cousin Cecily.

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

Algernon. Well, would you mind my reforming myself this afternoon?

Cecily. 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. Might I have a buttonhole first? I never have any appetite unless I have a buttonhole first.

Cecily. A Marechal Niel?

Picks up scissors.

Algernon. No, I'd rather have a pink rose.

Cecily. Why?

Cuts a flower.

Algernon. Because you are like a pink rose, cousin Cecily.

Cecily. I don't think it can be right for you to talk to me like that. Miss Prism never says such things to me.

Algernon. Then Miss Prism is a short-sighted old lady. *(Cecily puts the rose in his buttonhole.)* You are the prettiest girl I ever saw.

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 returns.

Miss Prism. But where is Cecily?

Enter Jack slowly from the back of the garden. He is dressed in the deepest mourning, with crape hatband and black gloves.

Miss Prism. 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.

Miss Prism. 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?

Jack *(shaking his head).* Dead!

Miss Prism. Your brother Ernest dead?

Jack. Quite dead.

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

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

Miss Prism. 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.

Miss Prism. Was the cause of death mentioned?

Jack. A severe chill, it seems.

Miss Prism. As a man sows, so shall he reap. Will the interment take place here?

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

Miss Prism. In Paris! I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at the last. You would no doubt wish me ask Dr. Chasuble to make some slight allusion to this tragic domestic affliction next Sunday. *(Jack presses his hand convulsively.)* His sermon on the meaning of the manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful, or, as in the present case, distressing. *(All sigh.)* He has preached it at harvest celebrations, baptism, confirmations, on days of humiliation and festal days.

Jack. Ah! That reminds me, you mentioned baptisms I think.

Dr. Chasuble knows how to christen all right? I mean, of course, he is continually christening?

Miss Prism. It is, I regret to say, one of the Rector's most constant duties in this parish. But is there any particular infant in whom you are interested, Mr. Worthing? Your brother was, I believe, unmarried, was he not?

Jack. Oh yes.

Miss Prism (*bitterly*). People who live entirely for pleasure usually are.

Jack. But it is not for any child, dear Miss Prism. No! The fact is, I would like to be christened myself, this afternoon, if the Doctor has nothing better to do.

Miss Prism. But surely, Mr. Worthing, you have been christened already.

Jack. I don't remember anything about it.

Miss Prism. At what hour would you wish the ceremony performed?

Jack. Oh, I might come around about five if that would suit Dr. Chasuble.

Miss Prism. Admirably! Admirably! 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.

Miss Prism. Cecily!

Cecily goes towards Jack, he kisses her brow in a melancholy manner.

Cecily. What is the matter, Uncle Jack? Do look happy! 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. I'll tell him to come out. And you will shake hands with him, won't you, Uncle Jack?

Runs back into the house.

Miss Prism. These are very joyful tidings.

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.*) Good Heavens!

Motions Algernon away.

Algernon. Brother John, 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, hasn't 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. It is enough to drive one perfectly frantic.

Algernon. Of course I admit that the faults were all on my side. But I must say that I think that Brother John's coldness to me is peculiarly painful 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 with Algernon and glares.

Miss Prism. It's pleasant, is it not, to see so perfect a reconciliation? I think we might leave the two brothers together. Cecily, you will come with me.

Cecily. Certainly, Miss Prism. My little task of reconciliation is over.

Miss Prism. We must not be premature in our judgments.

Cecily. I feel very happy.

Exit all except for 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.

Algernon. Well, Cecily is a darling.

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

Algernon. Well, I don't like your clothes. You look perfectly ridiculous in them. 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. I call it grotesque.

Jack. You are certainly not staying with me for a whole week as a guest or anything else. You have got to leave... by the four-five train.

Algernon. I certainly won't leave you so long as you are in mourning. It would be most unfriendly. 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, you have got to catch the four-five, and I hope you will have a pleasant journey back to town. This Bunburying, as you call it, has not been a great success for you.

He goes into the house.

Algernon. I think it has been a great success. I'm in love with Cecily, and that is everything. *(Enter Cecily at the back of the garden. She picks up the watering can and begins to water the flowers.)* But I must see her before I go, and make arrangements for another Bunburying. Ah, there she is.

Cecily. Oh, I merely came back to look at the flowers. I thought you were with Uncle Jack.

Algernon. Oh, I don't care about Jack. I don't care for anybody in the whole world but you. I love you, Cecily. You will marry me, won't you?

Cecily. You silly boy! Of course.

Algernon (*crossing to her, and kneeling*). What a perfect angel you are, Cecily.

Cecily. You dear romantic boy.

He kisses her, she puts her fingers through his hair.

Algernon. You'll never break off our engagement, Cecily?

Cecily. I don't think I could break it off now that I have actually met you. Besides, of course, there is the question of your name.

Algernon (*nervously*). Yes, of course.

Cecily. You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest. (*Algernon rises, Cecily also.*) 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, my dear child, 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, (*moving to her*) 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! (*Picking up hat.*) Your Rector here is, I suppose, thoroughly experienced in the practice of all the rites and ceremonials of the Church?

Cecily. Oh, yes. Dr. Chasuble is a most learned man. He has never written a single book, so you can imagine how much he knows.

Algernon. I must see him at once on a most important baptism, I mean on most important business.

Cecily. Oh!

Algernon. I shan't be away more than half an hour.

Cecily. I think it is rather hard that you should leave me for so long a period as half an hour. Couldn't you make it twenty minutes?

Algernon. I'll be back in no time.

Kisses her and kisses her again and rushes down the garden.

Cecily. What an impetuous boy he is! 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. Isn't Mr. Worthing in his library?

Merriman. Mr. Worthing went over in the direction of the Rectory some time ago.

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.

Exit Merriman.

Cecily. Miss Fairfax! I suppose one of the many good elderly women who are associated with Uncle Jack in some of his philanthropic work in London. I don't quite like women who are interested in philanthropic work. I think it is so forward of them.

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*). I may call you Cecily, may I not?

Cecily. With pleasure!

Gwendolen. And you will always call me Gwendolen, won't you?

Cecily. If you wish.

Gwendolen. Then that is all quite settled, is it not?

Cecily. I hope so.

A pause. They both sit down together.

Gwendolen. Do you mind my looking at you through my glasses?

Cecily. Oh! Not at all, Gwendolen. I am very fond of being looked at.

Gwendolen (*after examining Cecily carefully through a lorgnette*). You are here on a short visit, I suppose.

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.

Gwendolen. Indeed?

Cecily. 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. (*Rising and 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 that 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... I wish that you were fully forty-two, and more than usually plain for your age. Ernest has a strong upright nature. He is the very soul of truth and honour. 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 again*). Ernest never mentioned to me that he had a brother.

Cecily. I am sorry to say they have not been on good terms for a long time.

Gwendolen. Ah! That accounts for it. Cecily, you have lifted a load from my mind. I was growing almost anxious. 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 confidingly*). Dearest Gwendolen, there is no reason why I should make a secret of it to you. Our little county newspaper is sure to chronicle the fact next week. 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. The announcement will appear in the Morning Post on Saturday at the latest.

Cecily (*very politely, rising*). I am afraid you must be under some misconception. Ernest proposed to me exactly ten minutes ago.

She shows the diary.

Gwendolen (*examines the diary through her lorgnette 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 on 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.

Gwendolen. Do you allude to me, Miss Cardew, as an entanglement? You are presumptuous. On an occasion of this kind it becomes more than a moral duty to speak one's mind. It becomes a pleasure.

Cecily. Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest in an engagement? How dare you? This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.

Gwendolen (*satirically*). I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.

Enter Merriman. He carries a salver, table cloth, and plate stand.

Cecily is about to retort, but the presence of the servant 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.

Merriman begins to clear table and lay cloth. A long pause.

Cecily and Gwendolen glare at each other.

Gwendolen. Are there many interesting walks in the vicinity, Miss Cardew?

Cecily. Oh! Yes! A great many. From the top of one of the hills quite close one can see five counties.

Gwendolen. Five counties! I don't think I should like that. I hate crowds.

Cecily (*sweetly*). I suppose that is why you live in town?

Gwendolen bites her lip, and beats her foot nervously with her parasol.

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.

Cecily. Oh, flowers are as common here, Miss Fairfax, as people are common 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 anymore.

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.

Exit Merriman. Gwendolen drinks the tea and makes a grimace. Puts down cup at once, 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. It seems to me, Miss Fairfax, that I am trespassing on your valuable time. No doubt you have many other calls of a similar character to make in the neighbourhood.

Enter Jack.

Gwendolen (*catching sight of him*). Ernest! My own Ernest!

Jack. Gwendolen! Darling!

Offers to kiss 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. You may!

Offers her cheek.

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.

Cecily. Here is Ernest.

Algernon (*goes straight over to Cecily without noticing any one else*). My own love!

Offers to kiss her.

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. (*Presenting her cheek to be kissed.*) You may.

Algernon kisses 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!

The two girls move towards each other and put their arms round each other's waists for protection.

Cecily. Are you called Algernon?

Algernon. I cannot deny it.

Cecily. Oh!

Gwendolen. Is your name really Jack?

Jack (*standing rather proudly*). I could deny it if I liked. I could deny anything if I liked. But my name certainly is Jack. It has been Jack for years.

Cecily (*to Gwendolen*). A gross deception has been practised on both of us.

Gwendolen. My poor wounded Cecily!

Cecily. My sweet wronged Gwendolen!

Gwendolen (*slowly and seriously*). You will call me sister, will you not?

They embrace. Jack and Algernon groan and walk up and down.

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. 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?

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

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. Besides I have just made arrangements with Dr. Chasuble to be baptised at a quarter to six under the name of Ernest.

Jack. My dear fellow, the sooner you give up that nonsense the better. I made arrangements with Dr. Chasuble to be baptised myself at half past five, and I naturally will take the name of Ernest. Gwendolen would wish it. We can't both be baptised Ernest. It's absurd. Besides, I have a perfect right to be baptised if I like. There is no evidence at all that I have ever been baptised by anybody. It is entirely different in your case. You have been baptised already.

Algernon. Yes, but I have not been baptised for years.

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 III

Morning-room at the Manor House. Gwendolen and Cecily are at the window, looking out into the garden.

Gwendolen. The fact that they did not follow us at once into the house, as any one 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.

Gwendolen (*after a pause*). They don't seem to notice us at all. Couldn't you cough?

Cecily. But I don't have a cough.

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.

Enter Jack followed by Algernon.

They whistle some dreadful popular air from a British Opera.

Gwendolen. This dignified silence seems to produce an unpleasant effect.

Cecily. A most distasteful one.

Gwendolen. But 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 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. This is not the moment for German scepticism. (*Moving 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.

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. Will you take the time from me?

Cecily. Certainly.

Gwendolen beats time with uplifted finger.

Gwendolen and Cecily (*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!

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 Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell. Ahem! Ahem!

Jack. Good Heavens!

Lady Bracknell. Gwendolen! What does this mean?

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

Lady Bracknell. Leave the room. Leave the room immediately! (*Turns to Jack.*) 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, as regards Algernon!... Algernon!

Algernon. Yes, Aunt Augusta.

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 exploded.

Lady Bracknell. Exploded! Was he the victim of a revolutionary outrage? I was not aware that Mr. Bunbury was interested in social legislation.

Algernon. My dear Aunt Augusta, I mean Mr. Bunbury was found out! The doctors found out that Bunbury could not live, so Mr. 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.

Lady Bracknell bows coldly to Cecily.

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, crossing to the sofa and sitting down*). I do not know whether there is anything peculiarly exciting in the air of this particular part of Hertfordshire, but the number of engagements that go on seems to me considerably above the proper average. Mr. Worthing, is Miss Cardew at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? I merely desire information. Until yesterday I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a terminus.

Jack looks perfectly furious, but restrains himself.

Jack (*in a clear, cold voice*). Miss Cardew is the grand-daughter of the late Mr. Thomas Cardew of 149 Belgrave Square, S.W.; Gervase Park, Dorking, Surrey; and the Sporrán, Fifeshire, N.B.

Lady Bracknell. That sounds not unsatisfactory. Three addresses always inspire confidence, even in tradesmen. But what proof have I of their authenticity?

Jack. I have carefully preserved the Court Guides of the period. They are open to your inspection, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell (*grimly*). I have known strange errors in that publication.

Jack. Miss Cardew's family solicitors are Messrs. Markby, Markby, and Markby.

Lady Bracknell. Markby, Markby, and Markby? A firm of the very highest position in their profession. Indeed I am told that one of the Mr. Markby's is occasionally to be seen at dinner parties. So far I am satisfied.

Jack (*very irritably*). How extremely kind of you, Lady Bracknell! I have also 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 favour 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 in the Funds. 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! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Kindly turn round, sweet child. (*Cecily turns completely round.*) No, the side view is what I want. (*Cecily presents her profile.*) Yes, quite as I expected. There are distinct social possibilities in your profile. The two weak points in our age are its want of principle and its want of profile. The chin a little higher, dear. Style largely depends on the way the chin is worn. They are worn very high, just at present. 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 tuppence about social possibilities.

Lady Bracknell. Never speak disrespectfully of society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that. *(To Cecily.)* Dear child, of course you know that Algernon has nothing but his debts to depend upon. Well, I suppose I must give my consent.

Algernon. Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

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. It pains me very much to have to speak frankly to you, Lady Bracknell, about your nephew, but the fact is that I do not approve at all his moral character. I suspect him of 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 during my temporary absence in London on an important question of romance, he obtained admission to my house by means of the false pretence of being my brother. He succeeded in the course of the afternoon in alienating the affections of my only ward. 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.

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 and free from the restraints of tutelage. So I don't think your guardian's consent is, after all, a matter of any importance.

Jack. Pray excuse me, Lady Bracknell, for interrupting you again, 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. I see no reason why our dear Cecily should not be even still more attractive at the age you mention than she is at present. There will be a large accumulation of property.

Cecily. Algy, could you wait for me till I am 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. I am not punctual myself, I know, but I do like punctuality in others. And waiting, even to be married, is quite out of the question.

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, 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.

Jack. Then a passionate celibacy is all that any of us can look forward to.

Lady Bracknell. That is not the destiny I propose for Gwendolen. Algernon, of course, can choose for himself. (*Pulls out her watch.*) Come Gwendolen!

Jack. It seems that I will have to tell Miss Prism to ask Dr. Chasuble to cancel the baptisms.

Lady Bracknell (*starting*). Miss Prism! Did I hear you mention a Miss Prism?

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

Lady Bracknell. Pray allow me to detain you for a moment. Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?

Jack (*somewhat indignantly*). She is the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability.

Lady Bracknell. It is obviously the same person. I must see her at once. Let her be sent for.

Jack (*looking off*). She approaches. She is nigh.

Enter Miss Prism, hurriedly.

Miss Prism. Mr. Worthing, I have been waiting for you 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.*) Twenty-eight years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell's house, Number 104, Upper Grosvenor Street, in charge of a perambulator that contained a baby of male sex. You never returned. A few weeks later, through the elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan Police, the perambulator was discovered at midnight, standing by itself in a remote corner of Bayswater. It contained the manuscript of a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality. (*Miss Prism starts in involuntary indignation.*) 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, a day that is forever branded on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old, but capacious hand-bag 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 basinette, and placed the baby in the hand-bag.

Jack (*who has been listening attentively*). But where did you deposit the hand-bag?

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 hand-bag 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.

Jack. I must retire to my room for a moment.

Exit Jack in great excitement.

Algernon. What do you think this means?

Lady Bracknell. I dare not even suspect. 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 overhead as if some one was throwing trunks about.
Everyone looks up.*

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. I wish he would arrive at some conclusion.

Cecily. This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.

Enter Jack with a hand-bag of black leather in his hand.

Jack (*rushing over to Miss Prism*). Is this the hand-bag, 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 is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier

days. Here is the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an incident that occurred at Leamington. And 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 hand-bag. I was the baby you placed in it.

Miss Prism (*amazed*). You?

Jack (*embracing her*). Yes... Mother!

Miss Prism (*recoiling in indignant astonishment*). Mr. Worthing! I am unmarried!

Jack. Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? 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.

Exit Miss Prism.

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? (*Seizes hold of Algernon.*)

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.

Algernon. Well, not till today, old boy, I admit. I did my best, however, though I was out of practice.

They shake hands. Enter Gwendolen.

Gwendolen (*to Jack*). My own! But what own are you? 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, a moment. At the time when Miss Prism left me in the hand-bag, had I been baptised already?

Lady Bracknell. Every luxury that money could buy, including christening, had been lavished on you by your fond and doting parents.

Jack. Then I was baptised! That is settled. Now, 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?

Lady Bracknell (*meditatively*). I cannot at the present moment recall what the General's Christian name was.

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. The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life. But I have no doubt his name would appear in any military directory.

Jack. The Army Lists of the last forty years are here. These delightful records should have been my constant study. (*Rushes to bookcase and tears the books out.*) M. Generals... Mallam, Maxbohm, Magley, what ghastly names they have, Markby, Migsby, Mobbs, Moncrieff! Lieutenant 1840, Captain, Lieutenant-Colonel, Colonel, General 1869. Christian names, Ernest John. (*Puts 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.

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 realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.

THE END

ENJOY YOURSELF WITH OUR GAMES!

Practical exercises edited by Gianfranca Olivieri
Theatrical Season 2011/2012

The Importance of Being Earnest



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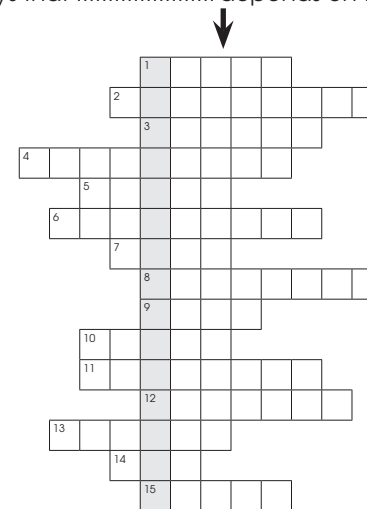
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1. PUZZLE

The play "The Importance of Being Earnest" can be viewed as a satire on...?

Find the missing words in the 15 sentences below, taken from the text to complete them and then write them in the puzzle.

- Gwendolen says that style, not sincerity is the thing.
- Jack left his case in Algernon's smoking-room.
- Gwendolen is Algernon's first
- Algernon writes Gwendolen's address in the country on his
- Lady Bracknell says that Algernon has nothing, but he everything.
- Lady Bracknell says that three always inspire confidence.
- Algernon says that in married three is company and two is none.
- Algernon needs a buttonhole to have some
- Gwendolen says that there is little music in the Jack.
- Algernon says that the truth is rarely pure and simple.
- Gwendolen says that men often propose for
- Jack was found in a large, black hand-bag.
- Miss Prism wrote a three novel in her earlier days.
- Jack is not down in Lady Bracknell's list of eligible young
- Lady Bracknell says that depends on the way the chin is worn.



Now read the column under the arrow to find the solution.

Solution:

2. CHARACTERS

How can Miss Prism be considered?

In the box below there are 6 adjectives which belong to the characters of the play. Match each adjective with the appropriate character in list (A) and write it on the broken lines in list (B).

SNOBISH - ROMANTIC - AMBITIOUS
FASHIONABLE - CONVENTIONAL - SERIOUS

LIST (A)

1. GWENDOLEN
2. CECILY
3. MISS PRISM
4. LADY BRACKNELL
5. JACK
6. ALGERNON

LIST (B)

 _____ _____

Now read the letters in the circles in the correct order and write them on the line below to find the solution.

Solution:

3. GUESS

Why are Algernon's views on definite marriage proposals antiromantic?



Rearrange the letters in the "hearts" and write them on the line below to find the solution.

Solution:

4. PHRASAL VERBS

Bunburying provides Algernon with an excuse to keep a secret on what?

In each sentence in box (A) there is a phrasal verb, quoted from the text. Find its definition in box (B).

Example: ① I'll RUN OVER the programme: ⑤ REVIEW

BOX (A)

① I'll RUN OVER the programme.	A PAY A VISIT
2. I can't quite MAKE OUT.	E END IT
3. Mr. Bunbury MADE UP his mind.	S UNDERSTAND
4. I was obliged to CALL ON dear Lady Harbury.	⑤ REVIEW
5. Algernon STRIKES UP the wedding march.	D FIND AN EXPLANATION
6. I've DRAWN OUT the programme.	C TAKE A DECISION
7. The question had better be CLEARED UP at once.	A PLANNED
8. You'll never BREAK OFF our engagement.	S GOES OUT QUICKLY
9. Lady Braknel SWEEPS OUT in majestic indignation.	P BEGINS TO PLAY

BOX (B)

Now match letters with numbers in box (C) to find the solution.

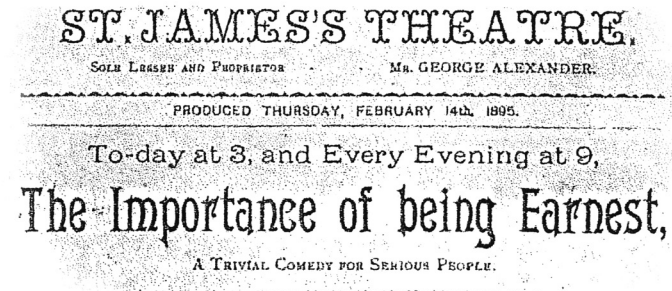
BOX (C)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
⑤								

Solution: HIS

5. A SPOT OF RELAXATION

The Importance of Being Earnest?
A trivial comedy for serious people



Oscar Wilde explains, in his paradoxical way, that the subtitle has its philosophy: "that we should treat all the trivial (not serious) things of life very seriously, and all the serious things of life with studied triviality". In this "trivial play, serious people have found serious meanings". Do you agree/disagree? State your reasons.



Victorian high society

TEXT ANALYSIS

- **About the title**

- 1) In the play the name of a person, Ernest, appears, but what is the meaning of the similarly sounding word "Earnest" in the title of the play? What is the importance of the name Ernest?

.....

.....

.....

- **About the plot**

- 2) A hand-bag is mentioned by Jack. Where was the hand-bag found and what was in it?

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.....

.....

- 3) Who lives at the Manor House in Woolton?

.....

.....

.....

- 4) What does Jack tell Miss Prism happened to Ernest and where did it happen?

.....

.....

.....

- 5) Algernon describes to Lady Bracknell how Mr. Bunbury died. When and how did he die and who killed him?

.....

.....

.....

- **About the characters**

- 6) Jack proposes marriage to a young woman. Who does he propose to? Does she accept the proposal?

.....

.....

.....

- 7) Who is Cecily? What does Cecily say about Political Economy, Geography, and German? Who is her teacher?

.....

.....

.....

- **About the relationship between the characters**

- 8) What is a Bunburyist? What is the relationship between Jack and Ernest?

.....

.....

.....

- 9) Who impersonates Ernest? When Gwendolen and Cecily ask Jack where Ernest is, what is his reply?

.....

.....

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- 10) Some characters of the play declare their love to the person they love. Who are they? Who do they address to?

.....

.....

.....