

**Unit # 16**  
**Fourteen**  
**(One-Act Play)**

**~Alice Gerstenberg**

**Comprehension**

**1. Who was Mrs. Pringle? Describe her personality.**

Mrs. Pringle is the hostess and central character in the play "Fourteen." She is a socialite who is highly concerned with maintaining her status and reputation in society. She is meticulous, controlling, and obsessed with social appearances. Her personality is characterized by a constant desire to impress others, and she can be impatient, demanding, and frantic when things don't go as planned.

**2. Who were the two gentlemen waiting in the lower hall?**

The two gentlemen in the lower hall are never fully identified by name in the play. They are simply part of the many adjustments Mrs. Pringle has to make for her guest list due to last-minute changes.

**3. Did Mrs. Pringle like Oliver Farnsworth?**

Mrs. Pringle did not seem to have any personal affection for Oliver Farnsworth; her interest in him was mainly due to his wealth and social status. She viewed him as an advantageous match for her daughter, Elaine, which would elevate their family's social standing.

**4. What was the impact of Oliver Farnsworth's secretary calling to cancel?**

The cancellation threw Mrs. Pringle into a frenzy because it disrupted her carefully arranged seating and guest list. Since her dinner party was meant to have exactly 14 guests, Mr. Farnsworth's absence meant she had to rearrange everything to maintain that number, leading to chaos and stress.

**5. What value did Mrs. Pringle see in a marriage between Elaine and Mr. Farnsworth?**

Mrs. Pringle viewed a marriage between Elaine and Mr. Farnsworth as an opportunity to elevate their family's social and financial status. She believed that marrying a wealthy and prominent man like Farnsworth would secure a prosperous future for Elaine and increase their own prestige.

**6. Which word sums up Mrs. Pringle's motivations in the story?**

The word "status" sums up Mrs. Pringle's motivations. Her actions throughout the play are driven by a desire to maintain and enhance her social standing.

**7. Why did Mrs. Pringle insist on having only 14 people at the dinner party?**

Mrs. Pringle insisted on having exactly 14 people because it was considered a suitable number for a formal dinner, maintaining balance in the seating arrangement. It was also a matter of social propriety and avoiding the superstition associated with the number 13.

**8. How did Mrs. Pringle react to the cook's anger?**

Mrs. Pringle was surprisingly relieved to hear that the cook was angry. She felt that if the cook was in a bad mood, it would reflect the effort and seriousness put into preparing the dinner, potentially making it more impressive to the guests.

**9. Why did Mrs. Pringle make new place cards and a new diagram?**

She made new place cards and a diagram to reorganize the seating arrangement after Oliver Farnsworth's cancellation and other last-minute changes to the guest list. This was her way of trying to restore order and ensure that the dinner party maintained a sense of elegance and balance.

**10. Why was Mrs. Pringle so upset when she learned Mr. Farnsworth would be unable to attend the dinner?**

Mrs. Pringle was upset because Mr. Farnsworth was a prestigious guest who could enhance the status of her dinner party. His presence was also important for her plans to match him with her

daughter Elaine. Without him, the party's social value diminished, leading to frantic attempts to find a suitable replacement.

**11. Why was Mrs. Pringle happy to know that the cook was in a bad temper?**

Mrs. Pringle thought that an angry cook indicated a more refined, labor-intensive meal, suggesting a higher quality dinner. It added a sense of importance and sophistication to the occasion.

**12. What is the theme of the one-act play "Fourteen"?**

The theme of "Fourteen" revolves around social status, pretentiousness, and the absurdity of societal norms. It satirizes the obsession with appearances and the lengths people go to in order to impress others.

**13. Discuss the elements of the plot of the play.**

The plot of "Fourteen" is built around a dinner party Mrs. Pringle is hosting. Her obsessive concern with maintaining the perfect guest list leads to frantic adjustments as guests cancel and replacements are sought. The main conflict arises from the constant changes in the number of guests, showcasing the superficial nature of high society. The play's structure follows a traditional plot arc: exposition (introducing the dinner plans), rising action (cancellations and guest changes), climax (scrambling to fill Mr. Farnsworth's place), and resolution (the dinner proceeding, albeit in a chaotic manner).

## **Analysis of the Play:**

### **1. Plot**

The plot of "Fourteen" centers on the preparations for a formal dinner party hosted by Mrs. Pringle, who is concerned with maintaining social propriety by having exactly 14 guests. As guests cancel and new ones are invited, the frantic adjustments to maintain the ideal number of attendees form the primary action of the play. The plot unfolds in a linear progression:

#### **i. Exposition:**

The play opens with Mrs. Pringle and her maid, Dunham, preparing for the dinner, setting up the social importance of the event.

#### **ii. Rising Action:**

Cancellations start to come in, leading Mrs. Pringle to frantically find replacements and rearrange the seating chart multiple times.

#### **iii. Climax:**

The situation becomes increasingly chaotic when Mr. Farnsworth cancels, and Mrs. Pringle is forced to make last-minute changes to keep the guest list at 14.

#### **iv. Falling Action:**

Mrs. Pringle manages to make the necessary adjustments, but the strain of the process reveals the absurdity of her obsession.

#### **v. Resolution/Denouement:**

Although the dinner party is set to proceed, the play ends with a humorous sense of irony, highlighting the ridiculous lengths to which Mrs. Pringle went to uphold social appearances.

### **2. Character**

The play features a small cast of characters:

**Mrs. Pringle:** The protagonist, whose main concern is the success of her dinner party. Her character is defined by her obsession with social status and appearances. She is controlling, meticulous, and at times frantic in her efforts to maintain propriety.

**Elaine Pringle:** Mrs. Pringle's daughter, who is mostly a passive character but serves as a foil to her mother's exaggerated anxieties. Elaine's potential marriage to Mr. Farnsworth adds to the social stakes.

**Dunham:** The maid, who is more of a functional character aiding Mrs. Pringle's efforts. Dunham's calm demeanor contrasts with Mrs. Pringle's frenzied state, highlighting the latter's extreme concern with appearances.

### **3. Setting**

The play is set entirely in the dining room of the Pringle household, which serves as a symbol of the social aspirations of the family. The formal setting and the meticulous preparations for the dinner party emphasize the importance placed on social customs and status. The limited setting also allows the play to focus on the characters' interactions and the escalating tension caused by the guest list changes.

### **4. Theme**

The central theme of "Fourteen" is the absurdity and superficiality of social conventions. The play satirizes the obsession with appearances and the pressure to conform to societal expectations. Mrs. Pringle's frantic efforts to keep the guest list at exactly 14 people highlight the arbitrary nature of these customs and the lengths people go to in order to maintain social respectability.

### **5. Dialogue**

The dialogue in "Fourteen" is brisk and filled with a sense of urgency, reflecting Mrs. Pringle's preoccupation with the dinner arrangements. Her exchanges with Dunham and Elaine reveal her character's motivations, as well as the comedic elements of the play. The dialogue often exposes the ridiculousness of her concerns, allowing the audience to see the humor in the situation.

### **6. Conflict**

The primary conflict in "Fourteen" is internal and social. Mrs. Pringle's struggle to maintain the ideal number of guests is driven by her internal anxiety about social status. The cancellations and last-minute changes create a situational conflict, as Mrs. Pringle must continuously adapt to keep up appearances. The tension between her need for control and the chaotic reality of the situation drives the plot forward.

### **7. Tone**

The tone of "Fourteen" is light-hearted and satirical. Throughout the play, there is an undercurrent of humor as it mocks the trivial concerns of the upper-class society. Mrs. Pringle's frantic obsession with having exactly 14 guests at her dinner party is portrayed with a comedic touch, highlighting the absurdity of her social anxieties. While the tone remains humorous, it

also carries a critical edge, pointing out the superficial nature of social conventions and the lengths people go to maintain appearances.

## **8. Style**

The style of the play is characterized by its concise, fast-paced dialogue and situational comedy. As a one-act play, "Fourteen" moves quickly through the action, using snappy exchanges between characters to drive the plot and highlight the escalating tension. The play relies heavily on dialogue to develop the characters and build the humorous atmosphere. There is also a focus on exaggerated reactions, especially from Mrs. Pringle, which adds to the farcical nature of the events.

## **9. Irony**

Irony is a significant element in "Fourteen." The fact that so much stress and chaos revolve around the arbitrary number of guests at a dinner party illustrates the futility of Mrs. Pringle's efforts. Her relief at the cook's anger and the frantic preparations reveal the absurd priorities placed on social rituals.

## **10. Point of View**

The play is presented from a third-person objective point of view, as it doesn't delve into the internal thoughts of any character. The audience learns about the characters' motivations, desires, and conflicts through their spoken words and actions. The third-person approach allows the audience to observe the events unfold in the dining room, emphasizing the ridiculousness of the situation without providing any subjective insight into the characters' thoughts.

## **11. Theme**

The main theme of "Fourteen" is the superficiality and absurdity of social conventions. The play critiques how societal status and appearances drive people to irrational behaviors, as seen in Mrs. Pringle's extreme efforts to maintain a perfect guest list. The theme highlights the triviality of these social customs, exposing how such concerns can lead to unnecessary stress and chaos. Additionally, the play touches on themes of class consciousness, as Mrs. Pringle's actions reflect a desire to uphold her perceived social standing by associating with important guests like Mr. Farnsworth.

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## **Conclusion**

Alice Gerstenberg's *Fourteen* explores identity, social expectations, and the complexities of human relationships. Through its setting, conflict, plot, and character development, the play shows the challenges of finding oneself in a society that values conformity. The themes connect with audiences, encouraging them to think about the ongoing struggle between following personal dreams and meeting societal standards.