



The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde



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UPPER LEVEL

OSCAR WILDE

The Importance of Being Earnest

Retold by F H Cornish



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Starter	about 300 basic words
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Intermediate	about 1600 basic words
Upper	about 2200 basic words

Vocabulary

Some difficult words and phrases in this book are important for understanding the story. Some of these words are explained in the story, some are shown in the pictures, and others are marked with a number like this: ...³. Phrases are marked with ^P. Words with a number are explained in the *Glossary* at the end of the book and phrases are explained on the *Useful Phrases* page.

Answer Keys

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A Note About The Author

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on October 16th 1854 in Dublin, the capital city of Ireland. Wilde's father, Sir William Wilde, was a famous surgeon. His mother, Jane, was a woman with literary interests. She was well known as the hostess of a literary salon¹ and she was also a writer herself. Using the pen name 'Speranza', she published Irish legends and folk stories. She was also interested in Irish politics. At that time, Ireland was part of the United Kingdom and Speranza was devoted to the cause of freeing her country from British rule. Oscar Wilde was always very close to his extraordinary mother.

Wilde was educated at the Portora Royal School at Enniskillen, then at Trinity College, Dublin, and finally at Magdalen College, Oxford. At Oxford, Wilde studied Greek, Latin and ancient history. He was a brilliant student and he achieved a first class degree. Besides this, he also won the Newdigate Prize for poetry. Wilde also became very interested in aesthetics² at Oxford and was influenced³ by the works of two famous authors who wrote about the theory of beauty – John Ruskin and Walter Pater.

Wilde's earlier career as a writer centred mostly on poems and short stories. Some of the stories were written for his two sons – he had married Constance Lloyd in 1884 and soon after the couple had had Cyril and Vyvyan. Many of the stories are still read and admired – *The Happy Prince*, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*, *The Canterville Ghost*, *The Portrait of Mr W. H.*, for example. Wilde became famous – even infamous⁴ – with the publication of his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a classic of 'decadent'⁵ literature, in 1890.

During this period, Wilde was also trying to influence people's taste in clothes, the decoration of their houses and the kind of furniture they bought. He toured Britain and the United States lecturing on these subjects, as well as on literary topics. He was

not always taken seriously – in fact he was often satirized⁶ in the press, in novels and even on the stage.

Wilde's main interest in the early 1890s was the writing of plays. He wrote several serious plays, including *Salomé* (which he wrote in French) and *A Florentine Tragedy*, and four comedies, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, all of them full of wit and epigrams⁷.

Soon after the first performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1895, Wilde's wife divorced him and in his later years, he went to live in France. He died there from meningitis on November 30th 1900. Two works from this later period of his life were published – *De Profundis* (a collection of letters) and a poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which is centred on the thought that each man kills the thing he loves.

Oscar Wilde is now remembered for his novel, his light-hearted stories and his comedies. His more serious works have almost been forgotten. But we should remember that several of them were made into musical works in the early twentieth century – Richard Strauss's opera *Salomé* is based on Wilde's play of that name and Alexander von Zemlinsky wrote an operatic version of *A Florentine Tragedy* and another opera, *Der Zwerg*, based on Wilde's short story *The Birthday of the Infanta*. Franz Schreker and John Alden Carpenter both wrote music for ballets based on that story too.

Wilde's most popular works have also interested film-makers: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was filmed in 1945 and again in 2009. There have been two major films of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, one made in 1952 and the other in 2002.

A Note About This Play

Wilde gave *The Importance of Being Earnest* – his last and, many believe, best play – a subtitle: *A Trivial⁸ Comedy for Serious People*. And he wrote that the play ‘has its philosophy: that we should treat all the trivial things in life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere triviality’. The serious matter treated with the most triviality in the play is marriage. Like many comedies, *The Importance of Being Earnest* ends with impending⁹ marriages, but by then Wilde has used the play to attack and satirize marriage as it was understood by the upper classes of Victorian¹⁰ England.

The play certainly takes some ideas from several other late-Victorian comedies: W. S. Gilbert’s *Engaged* and Lestocq and Robson’s *The Foundling* are often mentioned as important sources. But most English comedies of that period are written in a tradition that began with the ancient Roman comedies of Plautus and Terentius.

Wilde wrote the play in the late summer and autumn of 1894. His first version of the play was in four acts, like his other comedies, but the final text was reduced to three acts. In making the changes, Wilde was helped by George Alexander, who directed and acted in the first production, which opened on February 14th 1895 in London. Together they removed a sub-plot¹¹ and concentrated the action entirely on the double marriage plot, which resulted in a play of great technical perfection. The first-night audience must have enjoyed watching this very subversive¹² account of love and marriage on Saint Valentine’s Day – the day of love.

Wilde’s humorous attack on the social habits of the Victorian upper classes uses satire and the constant inversion¹³ of accepted ideas of normal behaviour and attitudes as its weapons. The play is full of jokes, but it is very important to remember that they are mostly jokes between the author and the audience – the characters on the stage don’t hear them as jokes; they don’t laugh. The title

of the play itself turns out to be a joke. Earnest is a ‘pun’ – or a play on words – based on the fact that the adjective ‘earnest’, meaning ‘serious and sincere’, has the same pronunciation as the man’s name ‘Ernest’. Both the young women in the play come to think they are engaged to young men called Ernest, when in fact neither of the men really has that name. Both men sometimes use the name to take advantage of social situations in ways that show their basic *unseriousness* and lack of earnestness.

Wilde attacks many things about upper class society in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The play’s main satirist and inverter of society’s beliefs and opinions, Algernon, even pretends to have a reversed view of class relations. What use are the lower classes, he asks us, if they do not set a good example to the upper classes? Both the lead male characters are cynical¹⁴ and decadent young men. They – especially Algernon – are like comic equals to Dorian Gray, the wicked hero of Wilde’s horror novel. But while Dorian Gray is guilty of great wickedness, the worst sin that Algernon demonstrates is a kind of mild greed – he loves sandwiches and cakes. And Jack’s deviousness¹⁵ is intended for nothing worse than escaping boredom.

Despite Algernon’s cynicism about marriage in general – he alters¹⁶ the well-known proverb ‘marriages are made in Heaven’ to ‘divorces are made in Heaven’ – he, like his friend Jack, becomes enthusiastic about marriage when it affects him. They both exhibit at least some conventional attitudes about proposing to their intended brides. Social conventions say that the men should make the first move, while the young women should appear shy and meek¹⁷. However, the young women in the play prove to be so ‘modern’ and cynical in their own approaches to the traditions of proposal and engagement that they leave the men far behind. They are so impatient with the conventions that they have accepted the men’s proposals before they have been made – in Cecily’s case before she has even met her fiance¹⁸ – simply because they are both called Ernest.

The young women's 'modernity' is even more clearly demonstrated when Wilde makes fun of the serious ideas of repentance¹⁹ and forgiveness, which were important to Victorian society. Having found out that they have been deceived²⁰ over their fiancés' names, Gwendolen and Cecily watch Algernon and Jack for signs of repentance. They are so eager to forgive, however, that they will accept almost anything as such a sign. 'They have been eating muffins²¹. That looks like repentance to me,' says Cecily. This line sums up²² the attitude of the main female characters perfectly.

The other main character in the play, Lady Bracknell, is more complicated. In some ways, Wilde portrays her as a 'dinosaur' with very fixed, old-fashioned beliefs about good families and education. Jack cannot marry her daughter because his parents are unknown, she says. Indeed her anger at the circumstances of Jack's discovery in a handbag as a baby is the play's most famous moment. And when Jack claims that Algernon is devious, Lady Bracknell claims that this is impossible because he was educated at Oxford University.

But in other ways, Wilde shows Lady Bracknell to be a realist. She accepts the inversion of the old stereotypes whereby poor women married rich men for their money, and she sees nothing wrong in the idea of her poor but aristocratic²³ nephew, Algernon, marrying the very rich Cecily for *her* money. By the late nineteenth century, this kind of marriage was a reality in Britain, even if people sometimes pretended differently.

When Lady Bracknell tells her daughter that she is certainly not Jack's fiancée, and that she (Lady Bracknell) or her husband will tell Gwendolen when she is engaged, Wilde is not joking about arranged marriages. This would not have been a joke to his audience.

In fact, the main idea of the London 'season'²⁴ at that time was that it provided a series of parties and dances at which parents of eighteen-year-old girls from 'good' families (or 'good society')

could introduce them to 'eligible'²⁵ young men. The idea was that by the end of the season, all the girls would be engaged to someone from an equally 'good' family. Lady Bracknell explains that Jack is not on her list of eligible men, which she shares with other aristocratic ladies. Here, Wilde is making fun of the way such ladies treat marriage as a kind of market-trading.

A final thing to mention is the upper class custom of 'afternoon tea'. Afternoon tea is served in both Acts One and Two of the play. This was not just a drink, but a light meal served late in the afternoon. It consisted of thin sandwiches (usually containing cucumber) as well as bread and butter, cakes of various kinds and tea to drink.

Wilde made his portrayal of a section of the society of his time cynical and humorous, but it was very recognizable. So *The Importance of Being Earnest* was a great success when it opened in London in 1895. It was successfully brought back to the stage not long after Wilde's death and has been a popular favourite in the British theatre ever since.

The People In This Play

Jack Worthing, also known as Ernest Worthing; a rich bachelor²⁶
Algernon Moncrieff, Jack's friend; also a rich bachelor. He is a little younger than Jack. His friends call him Algy.

Lady Augusta Bracknell, Algernon's aunt

Gwendolen Fairfax, Lady Bracknell's daughter

Cecily Cardew, Jack Worthing's ward²⁷

Miss Laetitia Prism, a middle-aged spinster; Cecily's governess²⁸

Canon²⁹ Frederick Chasuble, an elderly clergyman

Lane, Algernon's servant

Merriman, Jack's servant

Act One

[The living room of Algernon Moncrieff's flat in Mayfair, London.
Lane is arranging afternoon tea on a table. Algernon enters]

Algernon: Lane, have you made the cucumber sandwiches for Lady Bracknell's tea?

Lane: Yes, sir. [Handing them to Algernon on a silver tray]

Algernon: [Looking carefully at them, taking two and sitting down on the sofa] Oh, by the way^P, Lane, I looked at your notebook. I noticed that when Lord Shoreman and Mr Worthing dined with me on Thursday night, eight bottles of champagne were drunk.

Lane: Yes, sir; eight bottles.

Algernon: Why is it that, in a bachelor's home, the servants always drink the champagne? I just ask because I am interested, Lane.

Lane: I think that it is because the champagne is better in a bachelor's home. I have noticed that the champagne in married people's homes is rarely very good.

Algernon: Good heavens^P! Is marriage so depressing?

Lane: I believe marriage is very pleasant, sir. I haven't had much experience of it myself. I have only been married once, and that was because of a misunderstanding³⁰ between myself and a young person.

Algernon: [Lazily, without interest] I am not very interested in your family life, Lane.

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

Algernon: That is very understandable. Well, thank you, Lane.

[Lane goes off]

Algernon: [To himself] Lane's views on marriage seem very casual. Really, if the servants don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem to have no morals³¹.

[Lane enters]

Lane: Mr Ernest Worthing is here, sir.

[Jack enters. Lane goes off]

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

Jack: Oh, pleasure brings me, pleasure, of course! What else should bring one anywhere? You're eating as usual, I see, Algry!

Algernon: [Very formally] I believe it is normal in good society to have some light refreshment at five o'clock. [In a normal voice] Where have you been since last Thursday?

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

Algernon: What on earth do you do in the country?

Jack: [Taking off his gloves] When one is in town one entertains oneself. When one is in the country one entertains other people. It is very boring.

Algernon: And who are the people you entertain?

Jack: Oh, neighbours, neighbours!

Algernon: Have you got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire³²?

Jack: No, they're all horrid. I never speak to any of them.

Algernon: You must entertain them very much, then! [Going over to the table and taking a sandwich] By the way, Shropshire is where you come from, is it not?

Jack: Shropshire? Yes, of course. My dear fellow³³! Why are all these cups here? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why are you being so extravagant³⁴? Who is coming to tea?

Algernon: Oh, just Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

Jack: How perfectly delightful!

Algernon: Yes, but I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't be happy that you're here.

Jack: And why is that?

Algernon: My dear fellow, the way that you flirt³⁵ 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 to town in order to propose marriage to her.

Algernon: I thought you had come to town for pleasure. I call a marriage proposal business.

Jack: How very unromantic you are!

Algernon: I really don't think proposing is romantic. It is *very* romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a proposal. Someone might accept. They usually do, I believe. Then the exciting time is over. The most important thing about romance is the uncertainty. If I ever marry, I'll certainly try to forget that I am married.

Jack: I believe you, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was especially invented for people with memories like yours.

[Jack puts out his hand to take a cucumber sandwich; Algernon immediately stops him]

Algernon: Oh, there is no point in thinking about that. Divorces are made in Heaven. Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They were ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. *[Taking a sandwich himself and eating it]*

Jack: Well, you have been eating them all the time.

Algernon: That is different. She is my aunt. *[Offering Jack a different plate]* Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen loves bread and butter.

Jack: *[Helping himself to bread and butter]* And very good bread and butter it is too.

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

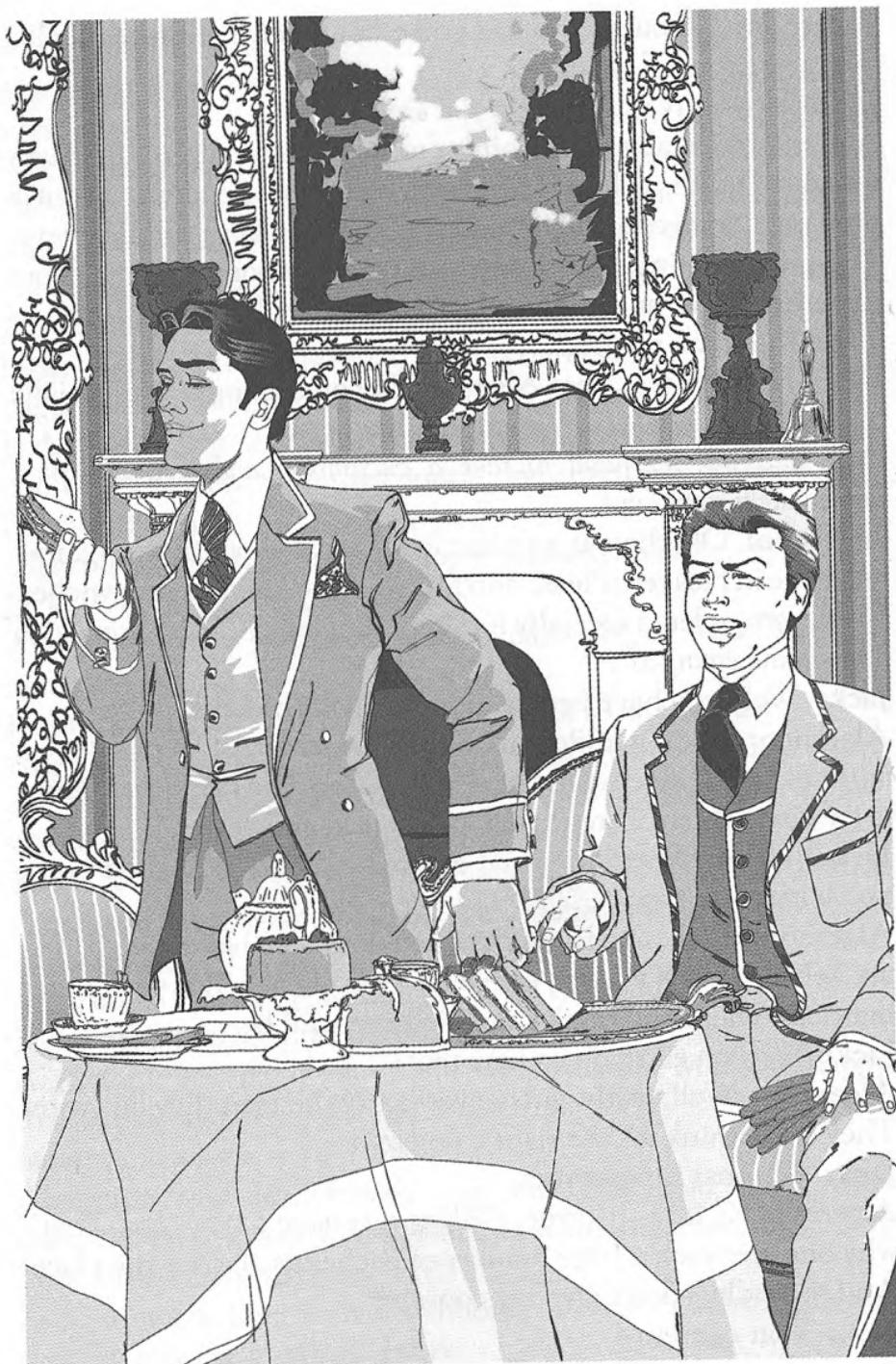
Jack: Why on earth do you say that?

Algernon: Well, firstly, girls never marry the men they flirt with. They don't think it's the right thing to do.

Jack: Oh, that is nonsense!

Algernon: It isn't. It's true. *[Taking two more sandwiches]* That's why one sees such a large number of bachelors all over the place. And secondly, I don't give my consent³⁶.

Jack: Your consent!



Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches.
They were ordered specially for Aunt Augusta.

Algernon: Gwendolen is my cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up³⁷ the matter of Cecily.

[Algernon rings a bell]

Jack: Cecily? What on earth do you mean, Algy? I don't know anyone called Cecily.

[Lane enters]

Algernon: Lane, bring me the cigarette case which Mr Worthing left last time he dined here.

Lane: Yes, sir.

[Lane goes off. Algernon takes the last of the cucumber sandwiches]

Jack: Have you had my cigarette case all this time? I wish you had told me. I have been writing letters to the police about it. I nearly offered a large reward.

Algernon: Well, I wish you *would* offer a large reward. I am very poor at the moment.

Jack: There is no point in offering a large reward now that you've found it.

[Lane enters with the cigarette case on a silver tray. Algernon takes it immediately. Lane goes off]

Algernon: I think that is mean of you, Ernest, I must say^p.

[Opening the case and examining it] However, it doesn't matter. Now I look at the inscription³⁸ inside, I see that this isn't yours.

Jack: Of course it's mine. [Moving towards Algernon] You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you shouldn't be reading what is written inside it. It is very impolite to read a private cigarette case.

Algernon: Oh! It is ridiculous to have rules about what one should read and what one shouldn't. Most of modern culture depends on reading what one shouldn't read.

Jack: I know that, and I am not going to discuss modern culture. I simply want my cigarette case back.

Algernon: Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from someone called Cecily. And you said you don't know anyone called Cecily.

Jack: Well, if you want to know, Cecily is my aunt.

Algernon: Your aunt?

Jack: Yes. She is a charming old lady. Just give it back to me, Algry.

Algernon: [Going behind the sofa] But why does she call herself 'little Cecily' if she is your aunt? [Reading] 'From little Cecily, with all her love.'

Jack: [Going to the front of the sofa and kneeling on it] My dear fellow, some aunts are tall. Some aunts are not tall. My aunt should be allowed to decide her height for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be like your aunt, Lady Bracknell! That is ridiculous. Now, give me back my cigarette case. [Following Algernon all around the room]

Algernon: Yes. But why does your aunt call you her uncle? [Reading] 'From little Cecily, with all her love to her dear Uncle Jack.' I don't object to an aunt being a small aunt. But why does an aunt, whatever her size, call her own nephew 'uncle'? I don't understand. And your name isn't Jack; it is Ernest.

Jack: It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.

Algernon: You have always told me that your name is Ernest. I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest. You answer to the name Ernest. You look as if your name is Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I have ever seen in my life. It is perfectly ridiculous to tell me your name isn't Ernest. It is on your visiting cards³⁹. Here is one of them. [Taking it from a case] 'Mr Ernest Worthing, B.4, The Albany, London.' I'll keep this as proof that your name is Ernest. Don't ever try to deny it to me or to Gwendolen or to anyone else. [Putting the card in his pocket]

Jack: Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.

Algernon: That does not explain why your small Aunt Cecily calls you her dear uncle. My dear fellow, you had better tell me everything. Go on! I have always suspected that you were a secret Bunburyist and now I am quite⁴⁰ sure.

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

Algernon: I'll tell you the meaning of Bunburyist when you tell me why you are Ernest in town and Jack in the country.

Jack: Well, give me my cigarette case first.

Algernon: Here it is. [*Handing Jack the cigarette case*] Now give me your explanation and please make it unbelievable. [*Sitting on the sofa*]

Jack: My dear fellow, there is nothing unbelievable about my explanation. In fact, it's perfectly ordinary. I was brought up by an old gentleman called Thomas Cardew. He adopted me when I was a little boy and he made me the guardian of his granddaughter, Miss Cecily Cardew, in his will⁴¹. Cecily is my ward and calls me uncle because she respects me, although you wouldn't understand that! You don't understand respect. Cecily lives in my house in the country and is looked after by her excellent governess, Miss Prism.

Algernon: Where is your house in the country, by the way?

Jack: That is nothing to do with you, my dear fellow. I am not going to invite you there ... but I will tell you honestly that the house is not in Shropshire.

Algernon: I guessed that, my dear fellow! I have Bunburyed all over Shropshire twice. Now, go on. Why are you Ernest in town and Jack in the country?

Jack: My dear Algy, I don't know whether you will understand. You are not a very serious person. I will try to explain it to you. I am a responsible guardian and I have to behave well all the time in the country. It is my duty. But it is not very good for my health or my happiness. So, when I want to leave the country and come to town, I pretend to have a younger brother called Ernest. I tell everyone that he lives in The Albany and that he gets into the most terrible trouble. That, my dear Algy, is the truth.

Algernon: You *are* a Bunburyist! I was right to say 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 younger brother called Ernest so that you can come to town as often as you like. I have invented an invalid⁴² called Bunbury so that I can go to the country as often as I like. When I pretend to visit him, I call it Bunburying. And I call someone who visits imaginary people a Bunburyist. Bunbury is very valuable. For example, if it wasn't for Bunbury's very bad health, I wouldn't be able to dine with you tonight. I should be dining with Aunt Augusta.

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

Algernon: I know. You are very careless about sending out invitations. It is very foolish of you. Nothing annoys people more than not receiving invitations.

Jack: You ought to dine with your Aunt Augusta.

Algernon: I don't have any intention of dining with Aunt Augusta. Firstly, I dined there on Monday and once a week is enough time to spend with one's relations. Secondly, Aunt Augusta will either give me two women to talk to at dinner or none. And thirdly, I know that tonight she will make me sit next to Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner table. It is not very pleasant. In fact, respectable women should not behave like that ... and more and more women are doing it. The number of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is terrible. It looks so bad. Well, now I know that you are a Bunburyist, I want to talk to you about Bunburying. I want to tell you the rules.

Jack: I am not a Bunburyist. If Gwendolen agrees to marry me, I am going to kill my brother. In fact, I think I will kill him anyway. Cecily is a little too interested in him. So I am going to get rid of Ernest. And I think you should kill Mr ... your invalid friend with the ridiculous name.

Algernon: Nothing will make me kill Bunbury, and, if you ever get married, you will be glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury will have a very boring marriage.

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 want to know him. You don't understand that in married life three is company and two is none.

Jack: Don't try to be cynical. It's perfectly easy to be cynical.

Algernon: My dear fellow, it isn't easy to be anything these days. There is so much competition. [*There is the sound of a doorbell being rung for a long time*] Ah! That must be Aunt Augusta. Only relatives ring like that. Now, I will take her out of the room for ten minutes so that you can propose to Gwendolen. So I can dine with you tonight, can't I?

Jack: I suppose so, if you want to.

Algernon: Good.

[*Lane enters*]

Lane: Lady Bracknell and Miss Fairfax are here, sir.

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

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

Algernon: I'm feeling very well, Aunt Augusta.

Lady Bracknell: Feeling very well is not the same as behaving very well. In fact, the two things rarely go together.

Algernon: [To Gwendolen] Good heavens, you are smart!

Gwendolen: I am always smart! Aren't I, Mr Worthing?

Jack: You're quite perfect, Miss Fairfax.

Gwendolen: Oh! I hope I am not perfect. There would be no room for development and I intend to develop in every direction.

[*Gwendolen and Jack sit down together in a corner of the room*]

Lady Bracknell: I am sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I had to visit Lady Harbury. I hadn't seen her since her poor husband died. She has changed very much; she looks quite twenty years younger. And now I'll have a cup of tea and one of those nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me.

Algernon: Certainly, Aunt Augusta. [*Going over to the tea table*]

Lady Bracknell: Will you come and sit here, Gwendolen?

Gwendolen: Thanks, Mama, I'm quite comfortable over here.

Algernon: [Picking up the empty plate of sandwiches in horror]

Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially.

Lane: [Seriously] There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went there twice.

Algernon: No cucumbers?

Lane: No, sir.

Algernon: Thank you, Lane. You may go.

Lane: Thank you, sir. [Goes off]

Algernon: I am very upset that there were no cucumbers, Aunt Augusta.

Lady Bracknell: It doesn't matter, Algernon. I had some crumpets with Lady Harbury.

Algernon: I hear that her hair has turned quite blonde from grief.

Lady Bracknell: It certainly has changed its colour. I do not know why, of course. [Algernon takes her a cup of tea] Thank you. I've got quite a treat for you at dinner tonight, Algernon. I am going to seat you next to Mary Farquhar. She is such a nice woman and she is so sweet to her husband. It's delightful to watch them.

Algernon: I am afraid, Aunt Augusta, I cannot dine with you tonight after all.

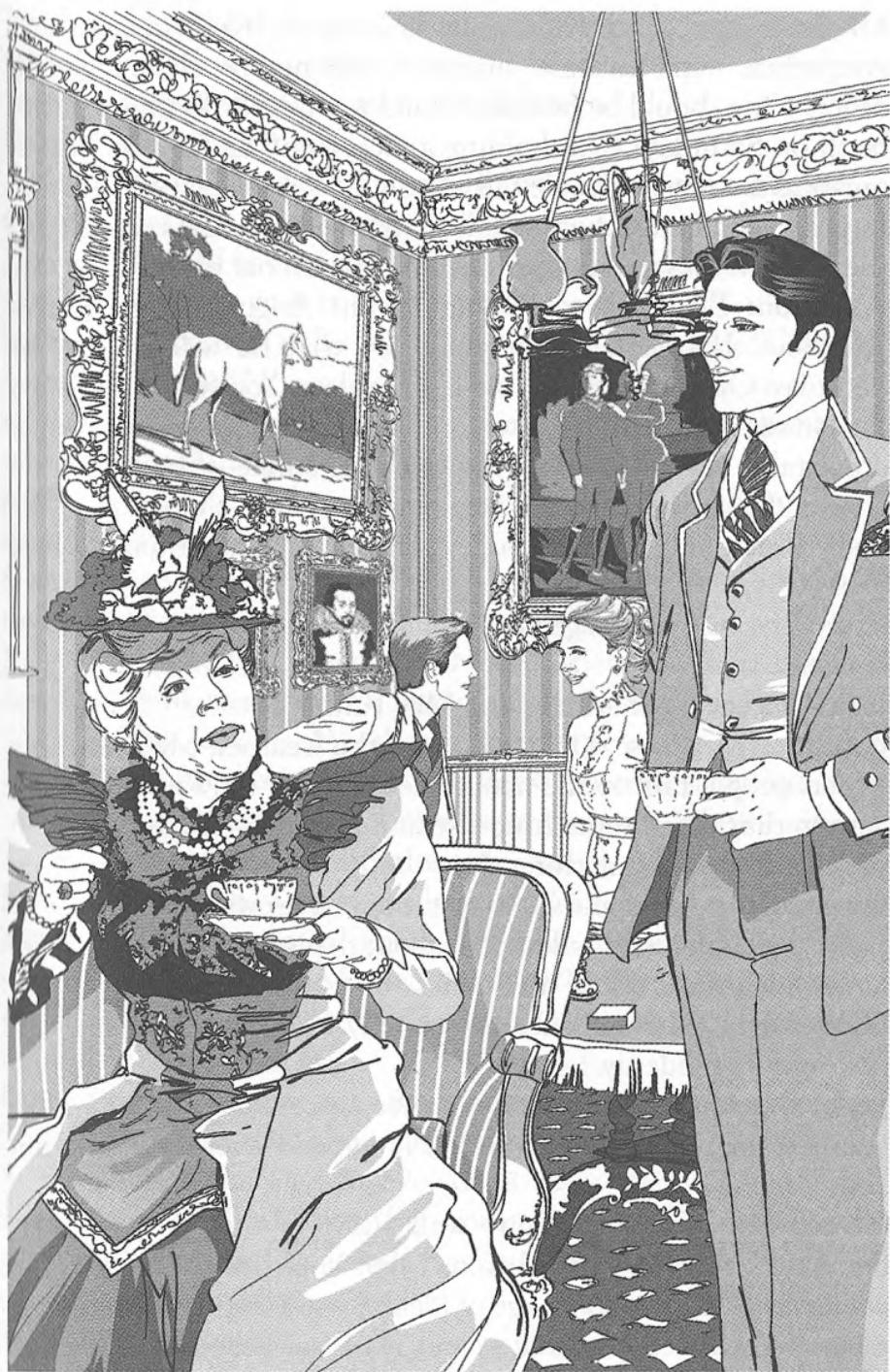
Lady Bracknell: [Frowning⁴³] I hope you can, Algernon. There will be thirteen people at the dining table if you aren't there. That is unlucky. Your uncle will have to eat upstairs. Fortunately, he often has to do that.

Algernon: It is terribly disappointing to me, but I've had a telegram⁴⁴ to say that my poor friend Bunbury is very ill again. [Smiling quickly at Jack] They think I should be with him.

Lady Bracknell: It is very strange. Mr Bunbury seems to suffer from very bad health.

Algernon: Yes, indeed. He is a permanent invalid.

Lady Bracknell: Well, Algernon, I think it's about time^p that



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

Mr Bunbury decides whether he is going to live or die. I don't sympathize with invalids. Illness should not be encouraged in others. One should be healthy. Could you ask Mr Bunbury not to be ill on Saturday? I am holding a reception⁴⁵ and I want you to organize the music. People talk during performances of music and I want to encourage them to talk, particularly since it is the end of the London season and they have nearly run out of things to say.

Algernon: I'll speak to Bunbury, Aunt Augusta, if he is still conscious. I think I can promise you that he will be well by Saturday. Of course, the music is a problem. You see, if one plays good music, people don't listen and if one plays *bad* music, people don't talk. But I will show you the programme of music I have chosen if you will come into the music room for a moment.

Lady Bracknell: Thank you, Algernon. It is very thoughtful of you.

[Lady Bracknell and Algernon go into the music room, Gwendolen remains behind]

Jack: It's been a charming day, Miss Fairfax.

Gwendolen: Please don't talk about the weather, Mr Worthing. When people talk to me about the weather, I always feel quite certain they mean something else and I get nervous.

Jack: I do mean something else.

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

Jack: I would like to talk to you about the 'something else' while Lady Bracknell is out of the room.

Gwendolen: Then talk about it quickly. Mama often comes back into a room suddenly.

Jack: [Nervously] Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you, I have admired you more than any girl ... I have met ever since ... I met you.

Gwendolen: Yes, I am quite well aware of that. I was always fascinated by you – even before I met you. [Jack looks at her in amazement] We live in an age of ideals⁴⁶ – any expensive monthly magazine will tell you that – and my ideal has always been to

love someone called Ernest. When Algernon mentioned he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I would love you.

Jack: Do you really love me, Gwendolen?

Gwendolen: Very much!

Jack: Darling! You don't know how happy you have made me.

Gwendolen: My own Ernest!

Jack: But could you love me if my name wasn't Ernest?

Gwendolen: But your name is Ernest.

Jack: Yes, I know it is. But what if it was something else? Couldn't you love me then?

Gwendolen: [Cleverly] Ah! But you *are* called Ernest, so there is no reason to think about you not being called Ernest.

Jack: Personally, darling, I don't really like the name Ernest ... I don't think the name suits me.

Gwendolen: It suits you perfectly. It is a wonderful name. It is musical.

Jack: Well, really, Gwendolen, I think there are a lot of nicer names. I think that Jack, for instance, is a charming name.

Gwendolen: Jack? ... No, there is very little music in the name Jack. It does not excite me. I have known several Jacks and they all were very ordinary. I feel pity for any woman who is married to a man called Jack. I think the only really good name is Ernest.

Jack: Gwendolen, I must get baptized⁴⁷ at once ... I mean we must get married at once. There is no time to lose.

Gwendolen: [Shocked] Married, Mr Worthing?

Jack: Well ... you know that I love you and you told me, Miss Fairfax, that you love me.

Gwendolen: I do love you. But you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said about marriage.

Jack: Well ... may I propose to you now?

Gwendolen: I think that this would be an excellent time to propose to me. And I will tell you now that I will accept you so that you aren't worried.

Jack: Gwendolen!

Gwendolen: Yes, Mr Worthing? What are you going to say to me?

Jack: You know what I am going to say to you.

Gwendolen: Yes, but you haven't said it.

Jack: Gwendolen, will you marry me? [Going down on his knees]

Gwendolen: Yes, of course I will. You have taken a long time to ask. I am afraid you have had very little experience of proposing.

Jack: My dear, I have never loved anyone in the world but you.

Gwendolen: Yes, but men often practise proposing. My brother, Gerald, often proposes to people. All my friends tell me. What wonderful blue eyes you have, Ernest! They are quite, quite blue. I hope you will always look at me like that, especially when there are other people in the room.

[Lady Bracknell enters]

Lady Bracknell: Mr Worthing! Get up from that position. It is not respectable to behave like that.

Gwendolen: Mama! [Jack tries to stand up but Gwendolen makes him stay in a kneeling position] Please go away. Mr Worthing has not finished yet.

Lady Bracknell: Finished what, may I ask?

Gwendolen: I am engaged to be married to Mr Worthing, Mama.

[Jack stands up]

Lady Bracknell: Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone, Gwendolen. When you are engaged to someone, I, or your father, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come as a surprise to a young girl. A pleasant surprise or an unpleasant surprise. It is not something that she is allowed to arrange for herself. ... And now, I have a few questions to ask you, Mr Worthing. While I am asking these questions, you, Gwendolen, will wait for me in the carriage⁴⁸.

Gwendolen: Mama!

Lady Bracknell: Wait in the carriage, Gwendolen! [Gwendolen goes to the door. She and Jack kiss their hands and pretend to blow the kisses to each other behind Lady Bracknell's back. Lady Bracknell

looks around for the cause of the noise. Finally she turns round and sees them. Frowning] Gwendolen, I said wait for me in the carriage!

Gwendolen: Yes, Mama. [Going off, looking back at Jack]

Lady Bracknell: You can sit down, Mr Worthing. [Looks in her pocket for a notebook and pencil]

Jack: Thank you, Lady Bracknell, I prefer to stand.

Lady Bracknell: [Notebook and pencil in hand] I must tell you that you are not on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the Duchess of Bolton. We work together during the season. However, I am quite ready to add your name to the list if your answers are satisfactory. Do you smoke?

Jack: Well, yes, I do smoke.

Lady Bracknell: I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation⁴⁹. There are far too many men in London who don't have an occupation. How old are you?

Jack: Twenty-nine.

Lady Bracknell: That's a very good age to get married. I have always believed that a man who wants to get married should know everything or nothing. Which do you know?

Jack: [After hesitating] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell: I am pleased to hear it. I approve of ignorance. I don't approve of modern education. Fortunately, in England at least, education has no effect at all. What is your income?

Jack: It's between seven and eight thousand pounds a year.

Lady Bracknell: [Making a note in her book] Do you earn this income from land that you own or from investments⁵⁰?

Jack: From investments.

Lady Bracknell: That is satisfactory. Owning land is neither profitable nor pleasurable – it costs money to look after it when one is alive and then there are taxes when one is dead. That's all I can say about land.

Jack: I have a country house with some land, but I don't depend upon it for my income.

Lady Bracknell: A country house! How many bedrooms? Well, that doesn't matter. I hope you have a house in town. Gwendolen must have a house in town.

Jack: Well, I do have a town house in Belgrave Square but it is rented to Lady Bloxham.

Lady Bracknell: Lady Bloxham? I don't know her.

Jack: Oh, she doesn't go out very much; she's very old.

Lady Bracknell: She's not necessarily respectable even if she is old. What number Belgrave Square?

Jack: 149.

Lady Bracknell: [Shaking her head disapprovingly] But that is the unfashionable side of the street. However, that could easily be changed.

Jack: Do you mean the fashion or the side?

Lady Bracknell: [Very disapprovingly] Both, if necessary. Now, let us discuss less important details. Are your parents living?

Jack: I have lost both my parents.

Lady Bracknell: To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, is unfortunate; to lose both seems like carelessness. Who was your father? He must have been a wealthy man. Was he a businessman or an aristocrat?

Jack: I am afraid I don't know. Lady Bracknell, I said that I had lost my parents. In fact, my parents lost me ... I don't know who I am. I was ... well, I was found.

Lady Bracknell: Found?

Jack: The late⁵¹ Mr Thomas Cardew, a very kind and charitable old gentleman, found me and called me 'Worthing' because he had a train ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a seaside town.

Lady Bracknell: Where did the kind gentleman who had a train ticket for this seaside town find you?

Jack: [Seriously] In a handbag.

Lady Bracknell: A handbag?

Jack: [Very seriously] Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a handbag – a large, black leather handbag – an ordinary handbag with handles.