

LITERARY ANALYSIS

WILDE

IMPORTANCE OF
BEING EARNEST

15

Suggestions for Reading Stories, Plays, and Poems

The parallel rules for reading imaginative literature that were discussed in the last chapter were general ones, applying across the board to all kinds of imaginative literature—novels and stories, whether in prose or verse (including epics); plays, whether tragedies or comedies or something in between; and lyric poems, of whatever length or complexity.

These rules, being general, must be adapted somewhat when they are applied to the different kinds of imaginative literature. In this chapter we want to suggest the adaptations that are required. We will have something particular to say about the reading of stories, plays, and lyric poems, and we will also include notes on the special problems presented by the reading of epic poems and the great Greek tragedies.

Before proceeding to those matters, however, it is desirable to make some remarks about the last of the four questions that the active and demanding reader must ask of any book, when that question is asked of a work of imaginative literature.

You will recall that the first three questions are: first, What is the book about as a whole?; second, What is being said in detail, and how?; and third, Is the book true, in whole or part? The application of these three questions to imaginative literature was covered in the last chapter. The first question is answered when you are able to

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describe the unity of the plot of a story, play, or poem—"plot" being construed broadly to include the action or movement of a lyric poem as well as of a story. The second question is answered when you are able to discern the role that the various characters play, and recount, in your own words, the key incidents and events in which they are involved. And the third question is answered when you are able to give a reasoned judgment about the poetical truth of the work. Is it a likely story? Does the work satisfy your heart and your mind? Do you appreciate the beauty of the work? In each case, can you say why?

The fourth question is, What of it? In the case of expository books, an answer to this question implies some kind of action on your part. "Action," here, does not always mean going out and doing something. We have suggested that that kind of action is an obligation for the reader when he agrees with a practical work—that is, agrees with the ends proposed—and accepts as appropriate the means by which the author says they can be attained. Action in this sense is not obligatory when the expository work is theoretical. There, mental action alone is required. But if you are convinced that such a book is true, in whole or part, then you must agree with its conclusions, and if they imply some adjustment of your views of the subject, then you are more or less required to make those adjustments.

Now it is important to recognize that, in the case of a work of imaginative literature, this fourth and final question must be interpreted quite differently. In a sense, the question is irrelevant to the reading of stories and poems. Strictly speaking, no action whatever is called for on your part when you have read a novel, play, or poem well—that is, analytically. You have discharged all of your responsibilities as a reader when you have applied the parallel rules of analytical reading to such works, and answered the first three questions.

We say "strictly speaking," because it is obvious that imaginative works have often led readers to act in various ways. Sometimes a story is a better way of getting a point across—be it a political, economic, or moral point—than an expository work making the same

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It does not always occur to such fainthearted readers that exactly the same thing happens to them when they move to a new town or part of a town, when they go to a new school or job, or even when they arrive at a party. They do not give up in those circumstances; they know that after a short while individuals will begin to be visible in the mass, friends will emerge from the faceless crowd of fellow-workers, fellow-students, or fellow-guests. We may not remember the names of everyone we met at a party, but we will recall the name of the man we talked to for an hour, or the girl with whom we made a date for the next evening, or the mother whose child goes to the same school as ours. The same thing happens in a novel. We should not expect to remember every character; many of them are merely background persons, who are there only to set off the actions of the main characters. However, by the time we have finished *War and Peace* or any big novel, we know who is important, and we do not forget. Pierre, Andrew, Natasha, Princess Mary, Nicholas—the names are likely to come immediately to memory, although it may have been years since we read Tolstoy's book.

We also, despite the plethora of incidents, soon learn *what* is important. Authors generally give a good deal of help in this respect; they do not want the reader to miss what is essential to the unfolding of the plot, so they flag it in various ways. But our point is that you should not be anxious if all is not clear from the beginning. Actually, it should *not* be clear then. A story is like life itself; in life, we do not expect to understand events as they occur, at least with total clarity, but looking back on them, we do understand. So the reader of a story, looking back on it after he has finished it, understands the relation of events and the order of actions.

All of this comes down to the same point: you must finish a story in order to be able to say that you have read it well. Paradoxically, however, a story ceases to be like life on its last page. Life goes on, but the story does not. Its characters have no vitality outside the book, and your imagination of what happens to them before the first page and after the last is only as good as the next reader's. Actually, all

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such speculations are meaningless. Preludes to *Hamlet* have been written, but they are ridiculous. We should not ask what happens to Pierre and Natasha after *War and Peace* ends. We are satisfied with Shakespeare's and Tolstoy's creations partly because they are limited in time. We need no more.

The great majority of books that are read are stories of one kind or another. People who cannot read listen to stories. We even make them up for ourselves. Fiction seems to be a necessity for human beings. Why is this?

One reason why fiction is a human necessity is that it satisfies many unconscious as well as conscious needs. It would be important if it only touched the conscious mind, as expository writing does. But fiction is important, too, because it also touches the unconscious.

On the simplest level—and a discussion of this subject could be very complex—we like or dislike certain kinds of people more than others, without always being sure why. If, in a novel, such people are rewarded or punished, we may have stronger feelings, either pro or con, about the book than it merits artistically.

For example, we are often pleased when a character in a novel inherits money, or otherwise comes into good fortune. However, this tends to be true only if the character is "sympathetic"—meaning that we can identify with him or her. We do not admit to ourselves that we would like to inherit the money, we merely say that we like the book.

Perhaps we would all like to love more richly than we do. Many novels are about love—most are, perhaps—and it gives us pleasure to identify with the loving characters. They are free, and we are not. But we may not want to admit this; for to do so might make us feel, consciously, that our own loves are inadequate.

Again, almost everyone has some unconscious sadism and masochism in his makeup. These are often satisfied in novels, where we can identify with either the conqueror or victim, or even with both. In each case, we are prone to say simply that we like "that kind of book"—without specifying or really knowing why.

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are the authors that every good poet, to say nothing of other writers, has read. Along with the Bible, they constitute the backbone of any serious reading program.

How to Read Plays

A play is fiction, a story, and insofar as that is true, it should be read like a story. Perhaps the reader has to be more active in creating the background, the world in which the characters live and move, for there is no description in plays such as abounds in novels. But the problems are essentially similar.

However, there is one important difference. When you read a play, you are not reading a *complete* work. The complete play (the work that the author intended you to apprehend) is only apprehended when it is acted on a stage. Like music, which must be heard, a play lacks a physical dimension when we read it in a book. The reader must supply that dimension.

The only way to do that is to make a pretense of seeing it acted. Therefore, once you have discovered what the play is about, as a whole and in detail, and once you have answered the other questions you must ask about any story, then try *directing* the play. Imagine that you have half a dozen good actors before you, awaiting your commands. Tell them how to say this line, how to play that scene. Explain the importance of these few words, and how that action is the climax of the work. You will have a lot of fun, and you will learn a lot about the play.

An example will show what we mean. In *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene ii, Polonius announces to the king and queen that Hamlet is insane because of his love for Ophelia, who has spurned the prince's advances. The king and queen are doubtful, whereupon Polonius proposes that the king and he hide behind an arras, in order to overhear a conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia. This proposal occurs in Act II, Scene ii, at lines 160–170; immediately thereafter Hamlet enters, reading. His speeches to Polonius are enigmatic; as Polonius

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says, "though this be madness, yet there is method in't!" Later on, early in Act III, Hamlet enters and delivers the famous soliloquy, beginning "To be or not to be," and then is interrupted by catching sight of Ophelia. He speaks to her quite reasonably for a time, but suddenly he cries: "Ha, ha! are you honest?" (III, i, line 103). Now the question is, has Hamlet overheard Polonius say earlier that he and the king planned to spy on him? And did he perhaps also hear Polonius say that he would "loose my daughter to him"? If so Hamlet's conversations with both Polonius and Ophelia would mean one thing; if he did not overhear the plotting, they would mean another. Shakespeare left no stage directions; the reader (or director) must decide for himself. Your own decision will be central to your understanding of the play.

Many of Shakespeare's plays require this kind of activity on the part of the reader. Our point is that it is always desirable, no matter how explicit the playwright was in telling us exactly what we should expect to see. (We cannot question what we are to hear, since the play's words are before us.) Probably you have not read a play really well until you have pretended to put it on the stage in this way. At best, you have given it only a partial reading.

Earlier, we suggested that there were interesting exceptions to the rule that the playwright cannot speak directly to the reader as the author of a novel can and often does. (Fielding, in *Tom Jones*, is an example of this direct addressing of the reader in one great novel.) Two of these exceptions are separated by nearly twenty-five centuries of time. Aristophanes, the ancient Greek comic playwright, wrote the only examples of what is called Old Comedy that survive. From time to time in an Aristophanic play, and always at least once, the leading actor would step out of character, perhaps move forward toward the audience, and deliver a political speech that had nothing whatever to do with the action of the drama. It is felt that these speeches were expressions of the author's personal feelings. This is occasionally done nowadays—no useful artistic device is ever really lost—but perhaps not as effectively as Aristophanes did it.

size of the tragic protagonists, on the one hand, and the members of the chorus, on the other hand, was thus highly significant. Therefore you should always imagine, when you read the words of the chorus, that the words are spoken by persons of your own stature; while the words spoken by the protagonists proceed from the mouths of giants, from personages who did not only seem, but actually were, larger than life.

How to Read Lyric Poetry

The simplest definition of poetry (in the somewhat limited sense implied by the title of this section) is that it is what poets write. That seems obvious enough, and yet there are those who would dispute the definition. Poetry, they hold, is a kind of spontaneous overflowing of the personality, which may be expressed in written words but may also take the form of physical action, or more or less musical sound, or even just feeling. There is something to this, of course, and poets have always recognized it. It is a very old notion that the poet reaches down deep into himself to produce his poems, that their place of origin is a mysterious "well of creation" within the mind or soul. In this sense of the term, poetry can be made by anyone at any time, in a kind of solitary sensitivity session. But although we admit that there is a kernel of truth in this definition, the meaning of the term that we will be employing in what follows is much narrower. Whatever may be the origin of the poetic impulse, poetry, for us, consists of words, and what is more, of words that are arranged in a more or less orderly and disciplined way.

Other definitions of the term that similarly contain a kernel of truth are that poetry (again, primarily lyric poetry) is not truly poetry unless it praises, or unless it rouses to action (usually revolutionary), or unless it is written in rhyme, or unless it employs a specialized language that is called "poetic diction." In that sentence we have intentionally mixed together some very modern and some very antiquated notions. Our point is that all of these definitions, and a dozen

more that we might mention, are too narrow, just as the definition discussed in the last paragraph was too broad (for us).

Between such very broad and such very narrow definitions lies a central core that most people, if they were feeling reasonable about the matter, would admit was poetry. If we tried to state precisely what the central core consisted in, we would probably get into trouble, and so we will not try. Nevertheless, we are certain that you know what we mean. We are certain that nine times out of ten, or perhaps even ninety-nine times out of a hundred, you would agree with us that X was a poem and Y was not. And that is fully sufficient for our purposes in the following pages.

Many people believe that they cannot read lyric poetry—especially modern poetry. They think that it is often difficult, obscure, complex, and that it demands so much attention, so much work on their part, that it is not worthwhile. We would say two things. First, lyric poetry, even modern poetry, does not always demand as much work as you may think if you go about reading it in the right way. Second, it is often worth whatever effort you are willing to spend.

We do not mean that you should not work on a poem. A good poem can be worked at, re-read, and thought about over and over for the rest of your life. You will never stop finding new things in it, new pleasures and delights, and also new ideas about yourself and the world. We mean that the initial task of bringing a poem close enough to you to work on it is not as hard as you may have believed.

The first rule to follow in reading a lyric is to read it through without stopping, whether you think you understand it or not. This is the same rule that we have suggested for many different kinds of books, but it is more important for a poem than it is for a philosophical or scientific treatise, and even for a novel or play.

In fact, the trouble so many people seem to have in reading poems, especially the difficult modern ones, stems from their unawareness of this first rule of reading them. When faced by a poem of T. S. Eliot or Dylan Thomas or some other "obscure" modern, they plunge in with a will, but are brought up short by the first line

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*Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.*

But the almost equally famous 138th sonnet, which begins with the lines:

*When my love swears that she is made of truth
I do believe her, though I know she lies,*

is also about the conflict between love and time, although the word "time" appears nowhere in the poem.

That you will see without much difficulty. Nor is there any difficulty in seeing that Marvell's celebrated lyric "To His Coy Mistress" is about the same subject, for he makes this clear right at the beginning:

*Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyneſs, lady, were no crime.*

We do not have all the time in the world, Marvell says—for

*... at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.*

Therefore, he adjures his mistress,

*Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the iron gates of life.*

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*Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.*

It is perhaps a bit harder to see that the subject of "You, Andrew Marvell," by Archibald MacLeish, is exactly the same. The poem begins:

*And here face down beneath the sun
And here upon earth's noonward height
To feel the always coming on
The always rising of the night*

Thus MacLeish asks us to imagine someone (the poet? the speaker? the reader?) as lying in the noonday sun—but all the same, in the midst of that brightness and warmth, aware of "the earthly chill of dusk." He imagines the line of the shadow of the setting sun—all the cumulative successive setting suns of history—moving across the world, across Persia, and Baghdad . . . he feels "Lebanon fade out and Crete," "And Spain go under and the shore / Of Africa the gilded sand," and . . . "now the long light on the sea" vanishes, too. And he concludes:

*And here face downward in the sun
To feel how swift, how secretly,
The shadow of the night comes on . . .*

The word "time" is not used in the poem, nor is there any mention of a lover. Nevertheless, the title reminds us of Marvell's lyric with its theme of "Had we but world enough and time," and thus the combination of the poem itself and its title invokes the same conflict, between love (or life) and time, that was the subject of the other poems we have considered here.

One final piece of advice about reading lyric poems. In general, readers of such works feel that they must know more about the au-

OSCAR WILDE

Drama

Author: Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

Title: The Importance of Being Earnest

Year: 1895

Genre: Drama

Big Idea: The Quest for Truth and Beauty

Grade: 12

Country: USA

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Drama

The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde

*London: St. James' Theatre: Lessee and Manager,
Mr. George Alexander, February 14, 1895.*

Characters

JOHN WORTHING, J.P. (Jack)	Mr. George Alexander
ALGERNON MONCRIEFF	Mr. Allen Ayresworth
REV. CANON CHASUBLE, D.D.	Mr. H. H. Vincent
MERRIMAN (Butler)	Mr. Frank D'yll
LANE (Manservant)	Mr. F. Kinsey Pelle
LADY BRACKNELL	Miss Rose Lelecterq
HON. GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX	Miss Irene Vanbrugh
CECILY CARDEW	Miss Evelyn Millard
MISS PRISM (Governess)	Mrs. George Canninge

The Scenes of the Play

Act I	Algernon Moncrieff's Flat in Half Moon Street, W.
Act II	The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton.
Act III	Drawing-room of the Manor House, Woolton.

Time—The Present
Place—London

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- 70 JACK: Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course. Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?
- ALGERNON: Oh! merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.
- JACK: How perfectly delightful!
- ALGERNON: Yes, that is all very well; but I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here.
- 75 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.
- 80 ALGERNON: I thought you had come up for pleasure?... I call that business.
- JACK: How utterly unromantic you are!
- ALGERNON: I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.
- 90 JACK: I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.
- ALGERNON: Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven—[JACK puts out his hand to take a sandwich. ALGERNON at once interferes.] Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. [Takes one and eats it.]
- JACK: Well, you have been eating them all the time.
- ALGERNON: That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt. [Takes plate from below.] Have some bread and butter. The
- 100

- bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.
- JACK: [Advancing to table and helping himself.] And very good bread and butter it is too.
- 105 ALGERNON: Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you were married to her already. You are not married to her already, and I don't think you ever will be.
- JACK: Why on earth do you say that?
- 110 ALGERNON: Well, in the first place girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right.
- JACK: Oh, that is nonsense!
- ALGERNON: It isn't. It is a great truth. It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place. In the second place, I don't give my consent.
- 115 JACK: Your consent!
- ALGERNON: My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily. [Rings bell.]
- 120 JACK: Cecily! What on earth do you mean? What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily? I don't know any one of the name of Cecily.
- [Enter LANE.]
- ALGERNON: Bring me that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left in the smoking-room the last time he dined here.
- 125 LANE: Yes, sir. [LANE goes out.]
- JACK: Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward.
- 130 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.

- 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. Cecily, who addresses me as her uncle from motives of respect that you could not possibly appreciate, lives at my place in the country under the charge of her admirable governess, Miss Prism.
- ALGERNON: Where is that place in the country, by the way?
- JACK: That is nothing to you, dear boy. You are not going to be invited.... I may tell you candidly that the place is not in Shropshire.
- ALGERNON: I suspected that, my dear fellow! I have Bunburyed all over Shropshire on two separate occasions. Now, go on. Why are you Ernest in town and Jack in the country?
- JACK: My dear Algy, I don't know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest,

- who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.
- ALGERNON: The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!
- JACK: That wouldn't be at all a bad thing.
- ALGERNON: Literary criticism is not your forte, my dear fellow. Don't try it. You should leave that to people who haven't been at a University. They do it so well in the daily papers. What you really are is a Bunburyist. I was quite right in saying you were a Bunburyist. You are one of the most advanced Bunburyists I know.
- JACK: What on earth do you mean?
- ALGERNON: You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's to-night, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week.
- JACK: I haven't asked you to dine with me anywhere to-night.
- ALGERNON: I know. You are absurdly careless about sending out invitations. It is very foolish of you. Nothing annoys people so much as not receiving invitations.
- JACK: You had much better dine with your Aunt Augusta.
- ALGERNON: I haven't the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind. To begin with, I dined there on Monday, and once a week is quite enough to dine with one's own relations. In the second place, whenever I do dine there I am always treated as a member of the family, and sent down with either no woman at all, or two. In the

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger.
And now I'll have a cup of tea, and one of those nice
cucumber sandwiches you promised me.
- 340 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.
- 345 ALGERNON: [*Picking up empty plate in horror.*] Good heavens!
Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches! I ordered
them specially.
- LANE: [*Gravely.*] There were no cucumbers in the market this
morning, sir. I went down twice.
- 350 ALGERNON: No cucumbers!
LANE: No, sir. Not even for ready money.
ALGERNON: That will do, Lane, thank you.
LANE: Thank you, sir. [*Goes out.*]
- ALGERNON: I am greatly distressed, Aunt Augusta, about
355 there being no cucumbers, not even for ready money.
LADY BRACKNELL: It really makes no matter, Algernon. I had
some crumpets with Lady Harbury, who seems to me to be
living entirely for pleasure now.
- ALGERNON: I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief.
- 360 LADY BRACKNELL: It certainly has changed its colour. From
what cause I, of course, cannot say. [*ALGERNON crosses and
hands tea.*] Thank you. I've quite a treat for you to-night,
Algernon. I am going to send you down with Mary
Farquhar. She is such a nice woman, and so attentive to
365 her husband. It's delightful to watch them.
- ALGERNON: I am afraid, Aunt Augusta, I shall have to give up
the pleasure of dining with you to-night after all.
- LADY BRACKNELL: [*Frowning.*] I hope not, Algernon. It would
370 put my table completely out. Your uncle would have to
dine upstairs. Fortunately he is accustomed to that.

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- ALGERNON: It is a great bore, and I need hardly say, a terrible
disappointment to me, but the fact is I have just had a
375 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.
- 380 LADY BRACKNELL: Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it
is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether
he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the
question is absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the
modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid.
385 Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in
others. Health is the primary duty of life. I am always
telling that to your poor uncle, but he never seems to take
much notice...as far as any improvement in his ailments
goes. I should be much obliged if you would ask Mr.
Bunbury, from me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse
390 on Saturday, for I rely on you to arrange my music for me.
It is my last reception, and one wants something that will
encourage conversation, particularly at the end of the
season when everyone has practically said whatever they
had to say, which, in most cases, was probably not much.
- 395 ALGERNON: I'll speak to Bunbury, Aunt Augusta, if he is still
conscious, and I think I can promise you he'll be all right
by Saturday. Of course the music is a great difficulty. You
see, if one plays good music, people don't listen, and if one
plays bad music people don't talk. But I'll run over the
programme I've drawn out, if you will kindly come into the
400 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, after a few

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- 475 JACK: Gwendolen, I must get christened at once—I mean we must get married at once. There is no time to be lost.
- GWEDOLEN: 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.
- 480 GWEDOLEN: 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?
- GWEDOLEN: I think it would be an admirable opportunity. And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr. Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you.
- 485 JACK: Gwendolen!
- GWEDOLEN: Yes, Mr. Worthing, what have you got to say to me?
- JACK: You know what I have got to say to you.
- GWEDOLEN: Yes, but you don't say it.
- 490 JACK: Gwendolen, will you marry me? [Goes on his knees.]
- GWEDOLEN: 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.
- 495 JACK: My own one, I have never loved anyone in the world but you.
- GWEDOLEN: Yes, but men often propose for practice. I know my brother Gerald does. All my girl 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, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture. It is most indecorous.

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- 505 GWEDOLEN: Mamma! [He rises 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?
- 510 GWEDOLEN: I am engaged to Mr. Worthing, mamma. [They rise together.]
- LADY BRACKNELL: Pardon me, you are not engaged to any one. When you do become engaged to some one, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself....And now I have a few questions to put to you, Mr. Worthing. While I am making these inquiries, you, Gwendolen, will wait for me below in the carriage.
- 515 GWEDOLEN: [Reproachfully]. Mamma!
- LADY BRACKNELL: In the carriage, Gwendolen!
- 520 GWEDOLEN goes to the door. She and JACK blow kisses to each other behind LADY BRACKNELL'S back. LADY BRACKNELL looks vaguely about as if she could not understand what the noise was. Finally turns round. Gwendolen, the carriage!
- 525 GWEDOLEN: Yes, mamma. [Goes out, looking back at JACK.]
- LADY BRACKNELL: [Sitting down]. You can take a seat, Mr. Worthing. [Looks in her pocket for note-book and pencil.]
- 530 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, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?
- 535 JACK: Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- 605 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.
- 610 LADY BRACKNELL: Found!
- JACK: The late Mr. Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort.
- 615 LADY BRACKNELL: Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this seaside resort find you?
- JACK: [Graveily]. 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?
- 625 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. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found, a cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- 640 indiscretion—has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now—but it 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.
- 645 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 quite over.
- 650 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.
- 655 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 cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel! Good morning, Mr. Worthing!
- [LADY BRACKNELL sweeps out in majestic indignation.]
- 660 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 ALGERNON enters cheerily.]
- 665 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... I don't really know what a Gorgon is like, but I am quite sure that Lady

- 745 JACK: Oh! one doesn't blurt these things out to people. Cecily and Gwendolen are perfectly certain to be extremely great friends. I'll bet you anything you like that half an hour after they have met, they will be calling each other sister.
- ALGERNON: Women only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first. Now, my dear boy, if we want to get a good table at Willis's, we really must go and dress. Do you know it is nearly seven?
- JACK: [Irritably.] Oh! It always is nearly seven.
- ALGERNON: Well, I'm hungry.
- JACK: I never knew you when you weren't....
- ALGERNON: What shall we do after dinner? Go to a theatre?
- JACK: Oh no! I loathe listening.
- ALGERNON: Well, let us go to the Club?
- JACK: Oh, no! I hate talking.
- ALGERNON: Well, we might trot round to the Empire at ten?
- JACK: Oh, no! I can't bear looking at things. It is so silly.
- ALGERNON: Well, what shall we do?
- JACK: Nothing!
- ALGERNON: It is awfully hard work doing nothing. However, I don't mind hard work where there is no definite object of any kind.
- [Enter LANE.]
- LANE: Miss Fairfax.
- [Enter GWENDOLEN. LANE goes out.]
- ALGERNON: Gwendolen, upon my word!
- GWEDOLEN: 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.
- GWEDOLEN: 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!

- 775 GWEDOLEN: Ernest, we may never be married! From the expression on mamma's face I fear we never shall. Few parents now-a-days pay any regard to what their children say to them. The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out. Whatever influence I ever had over mamma, I lost at the age of three. But although she may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I may marry someone else, and marry often, nothing that she can possibly do can alter my eternal devotion to you.
- JACK: Dear Gwendolen!
- GWEDOLEN: The story of your romantic origin, as related to me by mamma, with unpleasing comments, has naturally stirred the deeper fibres of my nature. Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination. The simplicity of your character makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me. 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. Then picks up the Railway Guide.]
- GWEDOLEN: 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!
- GWEDOLEN: How long do you remain in town?
- JACK: Till Monday.
- GWEDOLEN: Good! Algy, you may turn round now.
- ALGERNON: Thanks, I've turned round already.
- GWEDOLEN: You may also ring the bell.
- JACK: You will let me see you to your carriage, my own darling?
- GWEDOLEN: Certainly.

Drama

- 875 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. Indeed I am not sure that I would desire to reclaim him. I am not in favour of this modern mania for turning bad people into good people at a moment's notice. As a man sows so let him reap. You must put away your diary, Cecily. 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: Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry about with us.
- CECILY: Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened. I believe that Memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that Mudie sends us.
- MISS PRISM: Do not speak slightingly of the three-volume novel, Cecily. I wrote one myself in earlier days.
- CECILY: Did you really, Miss Prism? How wonderfully clever you are! I hope it did not end happily? I don't like novels that end happily. They depress me so much.
- MISS PRISM: The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.

Drama

- 910 CECILY: I suppose so. But it seems very unfair. And was your novel ever published?
- MISS PRISM: Alas! no. The manuscript unfortunately was abandoned. 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: [Rising and advancing.] Dr. Chasuble! This is indeed a pleasure.
- [Enter CANON CHASUBLE.]
- CHASUBLE: And how are we this morning? Miss Prism, you are, I trust, well?
- CECILY: Miss Prism has just been complaining of a slight headache. I think it would do her so much good to have a short stroll with you in the Park, Dr. Chasuble.
- MISS PRISM: Cecily, I have not mentioned anything about a headache.
- CECILY: No, dear Miss Prism, I know that, but I felt instinctively that you had a headache. Indeed I was thinking about that, and not about my German lesson, when the Rector came in.
- CHASUBLE: I hope, Cecily, you are not inattentive.
- CECILY: Oh, I am afraid I am.
- CHASUBLE: That is strange. Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips. [MISS PRISM glares.] I spoke metaphorically.—My metaphor was drawn from bees. Ahem! Mr. Worthing, I suppose, has not returned from town yet?
- MISS PRISM: We do not expect him till Monday afternoon.
- CHASUBLE: Ah yes, he usually likes to spend his Sunday in London. He is not one of those whose sole aim is enjoyment, as, by all accounts, that unfortunate young man, his brother, seems to be. But I must not disturb Eggera and her pupil any longer.

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- 1010 wait till Uncle Jack arrives. I know he wants to speak to you about your emigrating.
- ALGERNON: About my what?
- CECILY: Your emigrating. He has gone up to buy your outfit.
- ALGERNON: I certainly wouldn't let Jack buy my outfit. He has no taste in neckties at all.
- CECILY: I don't think you will require neckties. Uncle Jack is sending you to Australia.
- ALGERNON: Australia! I'd sooner die.
- CECILY: Well, he said at dinner on Wednesday night that you would have to choose between this world, the next world, and Australia.
- ALGERNON: Oh, well! The accounts I have received of Australia and the next world, are not particularly encouraging. This world is good enough for me, cousin Cecily.
- CECILY: Yes, but are you good enough for it?
- ALGERNON: I'm afraid I'm not that. That is why I want you to reform me. 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: It is rather Quixotic of you. But I think you should try.
- ALGERNON: I will. I feel better already.
- CECILY: You are looking a little worse.
- ALGERNON: That is because I am hungry.
- CECILY: How thoughtless of me. I should have remembered that when one is going to lead an entirely new life, one requires regular and wholesome meals. Won't you come in?
- ALGERNON: Thank you. Might I have a button-hole first? I never have any appetite unless I have a button-hole first.
- CECILY: A Maréchal Niel? [Picks up scissors.]

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- 1045 ALGERNON: No, I'd sooner 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 button-hole.] 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 and DR. CHASUBLE return.]
- 1060 MISS PRISM: You are too much alone, dear Dr. Chasuble. You should get married. A misanthrope I can understand—a womanthrope, never!
- CHASUBLE: [With a scholar's shudder]. Believe me, I do not deserve so neologistic a phrase. The precept as well as the practice of the Primitive Church was distinctly against matrimony.
- 1065 MISS PRISM: [Sententiously]. That is obviously the reason why the Primitive Church has not lasted up to the present day. And you do not seem to realise, dear Doctor, that by persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation. Men should be more careful; this very celibacy leads weaker vessels astray.
- CHASUBLE: But is a man not equally attractive when married?
- MISS PRISM: No married man is ever attractive except to his wife.
- 1075 CHASUBLE: And often, I've been told, not even to her.
- MISS PRISM: That depends on the intellectual sympathies of the woman. Maturity can always be depended on. Ripeness

- 1145 JACK: But it is not for any child, dear Doctor. I am very fond of children. No! the fact is, I would like to be christened myself, this afternoon, if you have nothing better to do.
- CHASUBLE: But surely, Mr. Worthing, you have been christened already?
- JACK: I don't remember anything about it.
- CHASUBLE: But have you any grave doubts on the subject?
- JACK: I certainly intend to have. Of course I don't know if the thing would bother you in any way, or if you think I am a little too old now.
- CHASUBLE: Not at all. The sprinkling, and, indeed, the immersion of adults is a perfectly canonical practice.
- JACK: Immersion!
- CHASUBLE: You need have no apprehensions. Sprinkling is all that is necessary, or indeed I think advisable. Our weather is so changeable. At what hour would you wish the ceremony performed?
- 1160 JACK: Oh, I might trot round about five if that would suit you.
- CHASUBLE: Perfectly, perfectly! In fact I have two similar ceremonies to perform at that time. A case of twins that occurred recently in one of the outlying cottages on your own estate. Poor Jenkins the carrier, a most hard-working man.
- JACK: Oh! I don't see much fun in being christened along with other babies. It would be childish. Would half-past five do?
- 1170 CHASUBLE: Admirably! Admirably! [*Takes out watch.*] And now, dear Mr. Worthing, I will not intrude any longer into a house of sorrow. I would merely beg you not to be too much bowed down by grief. What seem to us bitter trials are often blessings in disguise.
- 1175 MISS PRISM: This seems to me a blessing of an extremely obvious kind.

[*Enter CECILY from the house.*]

- 1180 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!
- CHASUBLE: My child! my child! [*CECILY goes towards JACK; he kisses her brow in a melancholy manner.*]
- 1185 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.
- 1190 JACK: What nonsense! I haven't got a brother.
- CECILY: Oh, don't say that. However badly he may have behaved to you in the past he is still your brother. You couldn't be so heartless as to disown him. I'll tell him to come out. And you will shake hands with him, won't you, Uncle Jack? [*Runs back into the house.*]
- 1195 CHASUBLE: These are very joyful tidings.
- MISS PRISM: After we had all been resigned to his loss, his sudden return seems to me peculiarly distressing.
- 1200 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.*]
- 1205 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.*]
- 1210 CECILY: Uncle Jack, you are not going to refuse your own brother's hand?

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- man who is actually staying for a whole week with you in your house as a guest. I call it grotesque.
- 1280 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.
- 1285 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.
- 1290 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.
- 1295 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. *[Goes into the house.]*
- 1300 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 can and begins to water the flowers.]*
- 1305 But I must see her before I go, and make arrangements for another Bunbury. Ah, there she is.
- CECILY: Oh, I merely came back to water the roses. I thought you were with Uncle Jack.
- ALGERNON: He's gone to order the dog-cart for me.
- CECILY: Oh, is he going to take you for a nice drive?
- ALGERNON: He's going to send me away.
- 1310 CECILY: Then have we got to part?

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- ALGERNON: I am afraid so. It's a very painful parting.
- 1315 CECILY: It is always painful to part from people whom one has known for a very brief space of time. The absence of old friends one can endure with equanimity. But even a momentary separation from anyone to whom one has just been introduced is almost unbearable.
- ALGERNON: Thank you.
- [Enter MERRIMAN.]*
- 1320 MERRIMAN: The dog-cart is at the door, sir. *[ALGERNON looks apprehendingly at CECILY.]*
- CECILY: It can wait, Merriman...for...five minutes.
- MERRIMAN: Yes, Miss. *[Exit MERRIMAN.]*
- 1325 ALGERNON: I hope, Cecily, I shall not offend you if I state quite frankly and openly that you seem to me to be in every way the visible personification of absolute perfection.
- CECILY: I think your frankness does you great credit, Ernest. If you will allow me I will copy your remarks into my diary.
- [Goes over to table and begins writing in diary.]*
- 1330 ALGERNON: Do you really keep a diary? I'd give anything to look at it. May I?
- CECILY: Oh no. *[Puts her hand over it.]* You see, it is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication. When it appears in volume form I hope you will order a copy. But pray, Ernest, don't stop. I delight in taking down from dictation. I have reached 'absolute perfection.' You can go on. I am quite ready for more.
- ALGERNON: *[Somewhat taken aback.]* Ahem! Ahem!
- 1340 CECILY: Oh, don't cough, Ernest. When one is dictating one should speak fluently and not cough. Besides, I don't know how to spell a cough. *[Writes as ALGERNON speaks.]*
- ALGERNON: *[Speaking very rapidly.]* Cecily, ever since I first looked upon your wonderful and incomparable beauty, I

- 1415
 CECILY: It would hardly have been a really serious engagement if it hadn't been broken off at least once. But I forgave you before the week was out.
 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.*] I hope your hair curls naturally, does it?
 ALGERNON: Yes, darling, with a little help from others.
 CECILY: I am so glad.
 ALGERNON: You'll never break off our engagement again, 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: Yes, of course. [*Nervously.*]
 CECILY: You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one 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, my own dear, sweet, loving little darling, I really can't see why you should object to the name of Algernon. It is not at all a bad name. In fact, it is rather an aristocratic name. Half of the chaps who get into the Bankruptcy Court are called Algernon. But seriously,

- 1445
 Cecily... [*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. Chauble 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 christening—I mean on most important business.
 CECILY: Oh!
 ALGERNON: I shan't be away more than half an hour.
 CECILY: Considering that we have been engaged since February the 14th, and that I only met you to-day for the first time, 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 rushes down the garden.*]
 CECILY: What an impetuous boy he is! I like his hair so much. I must enter his proposal in my diary. [*Enter MERRIMAN.*]
 MERRIMAN: A Miss Fairfax has just called to see Mr. Worthing. On very important business Miss Fairfax states.
 CECILY: 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. [*Goes out.*]
 CECILY: Miss Fairfax! I suppose one of the many good elderly women who are associated with Uncle Jack in some of his

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to the influence of the physical charms of others. Modern, no less than Ancient History, supplies us with many most painful examples of what I refer to. If it were not so, indeed, History would be quite unreadable.

1550 CECILY: I beg your pardon, Gwendolen, did you say Ernest?

GWEDOLEN: Yes.

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

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

1555 CECILY: I am sorry to say they have not been on good terms for a long time.

1560 GWEDOLEN: Ah! that accounts for it. And now that I think of it I have never heard any man mention his brother. The subject seems distasteful to most men. 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?

1565 CECILY: Quite sure. [A pause.] In fact, I am going to be his.

GWEDOLEN: [Enquiringly.] I beg your pardon!

1570 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.

1575 GWEDOLEN: [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. [Shows diary.]

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

1580 GWEDOLEN: [Examines 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 in the train. I am so sorry, dear Cecily, if it is any disappointment to you, but I am afraid I have the prior claim.

1585 CECILY: It would distress me more than I can tell you, dear Gwendolen, if it caused you any mental or physical

1590 anguish, but I feel bound to point out that since Ernest proposed to you he clearly has changed his mind.

1595 GWEDOLEN: [Meditative.] 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.

1600 GWEDOLEN: 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.

1605 CECILY: Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into 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.

GWEDOLEN: [Sarcasically.] I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.

1610 [Enter MERRIMAN, followed by the footman. He carries a sash, table cloth, and plate stand. CECILY is about to retort. The presence of the servants exercises a restraining influence, under which both girls change.]

MERRIMAN: Shall I lay tea here as usual, Miss?

- is at present around your waist is my dear guardian, Mr. John Worthing.
- 1685 GWEDOLEN: I beg your pardon?
 CECILY: This is Uncle Jack.
 GWEDOLEN: [Receding.] Jack! Oh!
- [Enter ALGERNON.]
- 1690 CECILY: Here is Ernest.
 ALGERNON: [Goes straight over to CECILY without noticing anyone 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 around]. 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.]
 GWEDOLEN: 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 waist as if for protection.]
 CECILY: Are you called Algernon?
 ALGERNON: I cannot deny it.
 CECILY: Oh!
 GWEDOLEN: Is your name really John?
 JACK: [Standing rather proudly]. I could deny it if I liked. I could deny anything if I liked. But my name certainly is John. It has been John for years.
 CECILY: [To GWEDOLEN]. A gross deception has been practised on both of us.

- 1720 GWEDOLEN: My poor wounded Cecily!
 CECILY: My sweet wronged Gwendolen!
 GWEDOLEN: [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.
 GWEDOLEN: An admirable ideal! Mr. Worthing, there is just one question I would like to be permitted to put to you. Where is your brother Ernest? We are both engaged to be married to your brother Ernest, so it is a matter of some importance to us to know where your brother Ernest is at present.
 JACK: [Slowly and hesitatingly]. Gwendolen—Cecily—it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind. However, I will tell you quite frankly that I have no brother Ernest. I have no brother at all. I never had a brother in my life, and I certainly have not the smallest intention of ever having one in the future.
 CECILY: [Surprised]. No brother at all?
 JACK: [Cheerily]. None!
 GWEDOLEN: [Severely]. Had you never a brother of any kind?
 JACK: [Pleasantly]. Never. Not even of any kind.
 GWEDOLEN: 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?
 GWEDOLEN: 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.]

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- 1815 ALGERNON: But you have just said it was perfectly heartless to eat muffins.
 JACK: I said it was perfectly heartless of you, under the circumstances. That is a very different thing.
 1820 ALGERNON: That may be. But the muffins are the same. [He seizes the muffin-dish from JACK.]
 JACK: Algy, I wish to goodness you would go.
 ALGERNON: You can't possibly ask me to go without having some dinner. It's absurd. I never go without my dinner: No one ever does, except vegetarians and people like that.
 1825 Besides I have just made arrangements with Dr. Chasuble to be christened 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 this morning with Dr. Chasuble to be christened myself at 5.30, and I naturally will take the name of Ernest. Gwendolen would wish it. We can't both be christened Ernest. It's absurd. Besides, I have a perfect right to be christened if I like. There is no evidence at all that I ever have been christened by anybody. I should think it extremely probable I never was, and so does Dr. Chasuble. It is entirely different in your case. You have been christened already.
 ALGERNON: Yes, but I have not been christened for years.
 JACK: Yes, but you have been christened. That is the important thing.
 1840 ALGERNON: Quite so. So I know my constitution can stand it. If you are not quite sure about your ever having been christened, I must say I think it rather dangerous your venturing on it now. It might make you very unwell. You can hardly have forgotten that someone very closely connected with you was very nearly carried off this week in Paris by a severe chill.
 1845

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- 1850 JACK: Yes, but you said yourself that a severe chill was not hereditary.
 ALGERNON: It usen't to be, I know—but I daresay it is now. Science is always making wonderful improvements in things.
 JACK: [Picking up the muffin-dish] Oh, that is nonsense; you are always talking nonsense.
 1855 ALGERNON: Jack, you are at the muffins again! I wish you wouldn't. There are only two left. [Takes them.] I told you I was particularly fond of muffins.
 JACK: But I hate tea-cake.
 ALGERNON: Why on earth then do you allow tea-cake to be served up for your guests? What ideas you have of hospitality!
 JACK: Alge-mon! I have already told you to go. I don't want you here. Why don't you go!
 1860 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-DROP
 1865

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- 1935
 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. [*Claps hands with ALGERNON.*]
 CECILY: They have moments of physical courage of which we women know absolutely nothing.
 GWENDOLEN: [To JACK.] Darling!
 ALGERNON: [To CECILY.] Darling! [*They fall into each other's arms.*]
 [Enter MERRIMAN. *When he enters he coughs loudly, seeing the situation.*]
 MERRIMAN: Ahem! Ahem! Lady Bracknell!
 JACK: Good heavens!
 [Enter LADY BRACKNELL. *The couples separate in alarm. Exit MERRIMAN.*]
 LADY BRACKNELL: Gwendolen! What does this mean?
 GWENDOLEN: Merely that I am engaged to be married to Mr. Worthing, mamma.
 LADY BRACKNELL: Come here. Sit down. Sit down immediately. Hesitation of any kind is a sign of mental decay in the young, of physical weakness in the old. [*Turns to JACK.*] Apprised, sir, of my daughter's sudden flight by her trusty maid, whose confidence I purchased by means of a small coin, I followed her at once by a luggage train. Her unhappy father is, I am glad to say, under the impression that she is attending a more than usually lengthy lecture by the University Extension Scheme on the Influence of a Permanent Income on Thought. I do not propose to undecieve him. Indeed I have never undecieved him on any question. I would consider it wrong. But of course, you will clearly understand that all communication between

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- 1970
 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: [*Awkly.*] Oh! I killed Bunbury this afternoon. I mean poor Bunbury died this afternoon.
 LADY BRACKNELL: What did he die of?
 ALGERNON: Bunbury? Oh, he was quite exploded.
 LADY BRACKNELL: Exploded! Was he the victim of a revolutionary outrage? I was not aware that Mr. Bunbury was interested in social legislation. If so, he is well punished for his morbidity.
 ALGERNON: My dear Aunt Augusta, I mean he was found out! The doctors found out that Bunbury could not live, that is what I mean—so Bunbury died.
 LADY BRACKNELL: He seems to have had great confidence in the opinion of his physicians. I am glad, however, that he made up his mind at the last to some definite course of action, and acted under proper medical advice. And now that we have finally got rid of this Mr. Bunbury, may I ask, Mr. Worthing, who is that young person whose hand my nephew Algernon is now holding in what seems to me a peculiarly unnecessary manner?

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- 2070 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 twopence 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. But I do not approve of mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way. Well, I suppose I must give my consent.
- ALGERNON: Thank you, Aunt Augusta.
- LADY BRACKNELL: Cecily, you may kiss me!
- CECILY: [Kisses her]. Thank you, Lady Bracknell.
- LADY BRACKNELL: You may also address me as Aunt Augusta for the future.
- CECILY: Thank you, Aunt Augusta.
- LADY BRACKNELL: The marriage, I think, had better take place quite soon.
- ALGERNON: Thank you, Aunt Augusta.
- CECILY: Thank you, Aunt Augusta.
- LADY BRACKNELL: To speak frankly, I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of

The Importance of Being Earnest, cont.

- 2105 finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable.
- JACK: I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Lady Bracknell, but this engagement is quite out of the question. I am Miss Cardew's guardian, and she cannot marry without my consent until she comes of age. That consent I absolutely decline to give.
- LADY BRACKNELL: Upon what grounds, may I ask? Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?
- JACK: 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 of 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! He is an Oxonian.
- 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. Under an assumed name he drank, I've just been informed by my butler, an entire pint bottle of my Perrier-Jouet, Brut, '89, a wine I was specially reserving for myself. Continuing his disgraceful deception, he succeeded in the course of the afternoon in alienating the affections of my only ward. He subsequently stayed to tea, and devoured every single muffin. And what makes his conduct all the more heartless is, that he was perfectly well aware from the first that I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don't intend to have a brother, not even of any kind. I distinctly told him so myself yesterday afternoon.

- 2205 hear of such excesses. Lord Bracknell would be highly displeased if he learned that that was the way in which you wasted your time and money.
- CHASUBLE: Am I to understand then that there are to be no christenings at all this afternoon?
- 2210 JACK: I don't think that, as things are now, it would be of much practical value to either of us, Dr. Chasuble.
- CHASUBLE: I am grieved to hear such sentiments from you, Mr. Worthing. They savour of the heretical views of the Anabaptists, views that I have completely refuted in four of my unpublished sermons. However, as your present mood seems to be one peculiarly secular, I will return to the church at once. Indeed, I have just been informed by the pew-opener that for the last hour and a half Miss Prism has been waiting for me in the vestry.
- 2220 LADY BRACKNELL: [Startling. Miss Prism! Did I bear you mention a Miss Prism?
- CHASUBLE: Yes, Lady Bracknell. I am on my way to join her.
- LADY BRACKNELL: Pray allow me to detain you for a moment. This matter may prove to be one of vital importance to Lord Bracknell and myself. Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?
- CHASUBLE: [Somewhat indignant]. She is the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability.
- 2230 LADY BRACKNELL: It is obviously the same person. May I ask what position she holds in your household?
- CHASUBLE: [Severely]. I am a celibate, madam.
- JACK: [Interposing]. Miss Prism, Lady Bracknell, has been for the last three years Miss Cardew's esteemed governess and valued companion.
- 2235 LADY BRACKNELL: In spite of what I hear of her, I must see her at once. Let her be sent for.
- CHASUBLE: [Looking off]. She approaches; she is nigh.

- 2240 [Enter Miss Prism hurriedly.]
- MISS PRISM: I was told you expected me in the vestry, dear Canon. I have been waiting for you there for an hour and three-quarters. [Catches sight of LADY BRACKNELL, who has fixed her with a stony glare. MISS PRISM grows pale and quails. She looks anxiously round as if desirous to escape.]
- 2245 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. The Canon starts back in horror. ALGERNON and JACK pretend to be anxious to shield CECILY and GWENDOLEN from hearing the details of a terrible public scandal.] Twenty-eight years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell's house, Number 104, Upper Grosvenor Street, in charge of a perambulator that contained a baby, of the male sex. You never returned. A few weeks later, through the elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan police, the perambulator was discovered 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 for ever 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 bassinet, and placed the baby in the hand-bag.
- 2270

- 2340 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!
- 2345 Cecily,—how could you have ever doubted that I had a brother. [Seizes hold of ALGERNON.] Dr. Chasuble, my unfortunate brother. Miss Prism, my unfortunate brother. Gwendolen, my unfortunate brother. Algy, you young scoundrel, you will have to treat me with more respect in the future. You have never behaved to me like a brother in all your life.
- ALGERNON: Well, not till to-day, old boy, I admit. I did my best, however, though I was out of practice. [Shakes hands.]
- 2350 GWEDOLEN: [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?
- GWEDOLEN: 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 christened already?
- 2360 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 christened! That is settled. Now, what name was I given? Let me know the worst.
- 2365 LADY BRACKNELL: Being the eldest son you were naturally christened after your father.
- JACK: [Irritably.] Yes, but what was my father's Christian name?
- 2370 LADY BRACKNELL: [Mediocrity.] I cannot at the present moment recall what the General's Christian name was. But I have no doubt he had one. He was eccentric, I admit. But

- 2375 only in later years. And that was the result of the Indian climate, and marriage, and indigestion, and other things of that kind.
- 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.
- 2380 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.
- 2385 JACK: The Army Lists of the last forty years are here. These delightful records should have been my constant study. [Rushes to bookcase and turns the books out.] M. Generals!... Mallam, Maxbohm, Magley, what ghastly names they have—Markby, Migsby, Mobbs, Moncrieffi Lieutenant 1840, Caprain, 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.
- 2395 LADY BRACKNELL: Yes, I remember now that the General was called Ernest. I knew I had some particular reason for disliking the name.
- GWEDOLEN: Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first that you could have no other name!
- 2400 JACK: Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?
- GWEDOLEN: I can. For I feel that you are sure to change.
- JACK: My own one!
- 2405 CHASUBLE: [To MISS PRISM.] Lætitia! [Embraces her.]
- MISS PRISM: [Enthusiastically.] Frederick! At last!