

Individual Learning Packet

**Advance Placement Teaching Unit**

**The Importance of Being Earnest**

by Oscar Wilde

written by Eva Richardson

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# The Importance of Being Earnest

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. outline the social and moral conventions and expectations associated with upper-class society in Victorian England.
2. describe and analyze the practice of creating alternative identities for Jack and Algernon.
3. explore the principles of Aestheticism and its relation to traditional Victorian upper-class society.
4. discuss the play as a critical commentary on the superficiality and insincerity of the upper class in Victorian England.
5. analyze the play as a commentary on social identities and social masks.
6. study the relationship between writing and reality with regard to the diaries of Gwendolen and Cecily.
7. discuss the play as a critical commentary on marriage.
8. trace the connection between names and identities in the play.
9. examine the language of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and analyze the impact Wilde's irony and sarcasm have on the reader.
10. analyze how the play complicates nineteenth-century notions of gender and sexuality.
11. analyze the complex and contradictory meanings of "being earnest/Ernest."
12. explain the relationship between earnestness and triviality.
13. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
14. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
15. offer a close reading of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

## **Background Information**

### England during the Victorian Era:

The Victorian Era was a time in British history marked by drastic social and economic changes, conflicts, and contradictions. Named in honor of the long reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), the Victorian Age defined most of the nineteenth century. During Victoria's reign, England became the wealthiest country in the world, and British expansion under Colonialism turned England into a mighty and influential world power. The widespread notion of the "White Man's Burden" determined that it was Britain's *duty* to spread western culture and order throughout the world. Victorians witnessed the rapid progress of the Industrial Revolution, which changed England from a rural society into a fully industrialized, modern, urban state. The city of London became a multicultural metropolis.

### Modernization and Industrialization:

The Victorian Era was marked by a number of significant inventions and innovations that changed the face of England's social and geographical landscape forever. The expansion of the railroad system enabled Britain to develop an infrastructure that could promote the swift and efficient distribution of goods, ideas, and services. The world's first subway system was built in London, turning the city into the first truly modern urban center. The Colonial system brought a wealth of commodities and exotic wares into the kingdom, and the Victorian middle and upper classes quickly developed an obsession with luxury articles that could be imported from the British colonies.

Advancements in industry and modernization came at a high price, however: urbanization led to overcrowding in cities, and the living conditions of the working poor were often deplorable. Child labor was a common practice, and common workers had no voice in the political process. It was not until 1838 that the Chartist Movement began to unite factory workers and tradesmen and encourage them to call for reforms and political participation. A number of public health and factory reforms followed and continued through the end of the century.

### Victorian Society and Gender Roles:

Victorian society was marked by strict class distinctions. The nineteenth century witnessed the "rise of the middle class," and the middle class quickly became the most influential segment in British society. Middle- and upper-class society was characterized by a strict and conservative moral code that dictated rigid formal manners and an unwavering adherence to duty, family, and propriety. Gender roles were firmly defined. Men dominated the public sphere in politics and industry, while women were relegated to the private sphere where they were to oversee the household and supervise the educations of their children. The ideal Victorian woman was a domestic "angel"—always quiet and demure. She had no business participating in public life or politics.

### Age of Contradictions and Uncertainty:

The Victorian age was also a time of great uncertainty. The theories of Charles Darwin challenged people's belief in the literal truth of the Bible. At the same time, the harsh working conditions of the lower classes posed a threat to British law and order. Karl Marx, who described the Victorians' fascination with exotic goods and luxury items as "commodity fetishism," predicted that an uprising of the working classes was inevitable and imminent. The age also saw the birth of modern psychology and psychoanalysis. In order to confront some of these innovations and uncertainties that jeopardized the status quo, middle- and upper-class Victorians turned toward philanthropy in order to ease their fears and feelings of guilt about the injustices inherent in the British class system. Consequently, charities for poor children, unwed mothers, and repentant prostitutes sprang up throughout the Empire.

### The Shift from Victorianism to Modernism:

The closing decade of the Victorian Age is frequently referred to as the *fin de siècle*, a French term meaning "the end of the age." The term denotes the closing decades of the nineteenth century, when England transitioned from Victorianism into twentieth-century modernism. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, Victorians realized that there was a sharp disconnect between the conservative rules of Victorian culture and the new world marked by post-Darwinism, science, and social injustice. The contradictions of the Victorian Age could no longer be denied, and the discrepancy between a conservative social code on the one hand and the unsettling realities of social, cultural, and economic everyday life on the other resulted in a sense of disillusionment and a tendency toward escapism. Consequently, the closing decade of the nineteenth century saw a turn toward new artistic styles, modern attitudes, and shifting gender notions. The atmosphere of the *fin de siècle* most significantly found its expression in the artistic and literary movements known as **Aestheticism** and **Decadence**.

### Aestheticism and Decadence:

As a reaction to the conservatism and restrictive moral and social code of the Victorian Age, the **Aesthetic** and **Decadent Movements** championed artistic excess and rejected morality as a measure for the value of artistic expression. The Aesthetes considered art as a means to obtain unbounded pleasure, and they promoted the creation of “art for art’s sake.” Writers and artists of the Aesthetic Movement (or Decadent Movement, as it was often referred to in France) believed that art should not be judged on moral grounds but, instead, should be valued for pure beauty, sophistication and refinement, and the pleasure derived from its design and composition. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Gwendolen accurately expresses the credo of the Aesthetic Movement when she declares that “in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing” (Act III).

Aestheticism and Decadence also influenced notions of sex and gender. The idea of the effeminate man (often referred to as a “dandy”) and the manly woman became popular. Furthermore, terms such as “homosexual” or “lesbian” were coined to describe the complex range of human sexuality. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde ridicules conservative notions of gender and the division between the public sphere as the realm of men and the private or domestic sphere as the realm of women. His play turns notions of gender upside down and upsets the clear division between the sexes. The following exchange between Cecily and Gwendolen from Act II wonderfully portrays Wilde’s ridicule of rigid gender relations:

GWENDOLEN: My father is Lord Bracknell. You have never heard of papa, I suppose?

CECILY: I don’t think so.

GWENDOLEN: Outside the family circle, papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don’t like that. It makes men so very attractive.

Oscar Wilde himself can be considered a quintessential representative figure of the Aesthetic Movement. He dressed flamboyantly and made the enjoyment of “art for art’s sake” the focus of his writing. Wilde, although married, was engaged in homosexual relationships with younger men, most notably Lord Alfred Douglas. When Wilde was arrested for sodomy and put on trial in 1895, the conservative backlash against the Aesthetes brought about the end of the movement. Nonetheless, many literary and artistic ideas as well as the notion of fluid gender identities carried on into the twentieth century and became cornerstones of the age of modernism.

### Victorian England and Social Class:

Between approximately 1750 and 1830, the Industrial Revolution had transformed England and Europe from an agricultural society to an industrial, capitalist economy. The Industrial Revolution had far-reaching effects on **social class** and family structures. England witnessed the rise of a **middle class** that could develop wealth and status independent of aristocratic origins. Many of these “new-money” middle-class families aspired to become members of the **upper class**. They purchased land, settled in elaborate and luxurious country mansions, and became known as the **landed gentry**.

Because boundaries between social classes became increasingly less defined throughout the nineteenth century, class awareness became more pronounced—members of the growing middle class, for example, coined the phrase “working class” in order to set themselves clearly apart from the lower class. In fact, the nineteenth century witnessed the “rise of the middle class,” as members of the middle class gained political and social power.

The **social class system** consisted of three distinctive groups:

The **working class** consisted of agricultural workers, factory workers, mine workers, maids, servants, housekeepers, soldiers, etc. The status of the working class slowly improved throughout the nineteenth century as health reforms and factory laws were implemented to improve working conditions for the poor.

The **middle class** became the most influential segment of British society. Middle-class men gained the right to vote and generally received a sound education at one of Britain’s elite boarding schools. The middle class consisted of administrators, merchants, professionals, and business owners.

The **upper class** consisted of the hereditary aristocracy and the **landed gentry** who had come into money through commercial enterprise and ascended from the middle class. Members of the upper class were unquestionably considered to be ladies and gentlemen, even if their conduct was less than honorable. Members of the upper class did not work.

### The Theme of Earnestness vs. Triviality:

Wilde’s play eradicates any clear distinction between earnestness and seriousness on the one hand and triviality on the other hand. Clearly, Wilde ridicules the proper, “earnest,” but often hypocritical behavior of the Victorian upper classes, who advocated a rigid adherence to a strict moral code and notions of duty and propriety while, at the same time, engaging in dishonorable conduct and exploiting women and the working poor. Moreover, *The Importance of Being Earnest* exposes the obsession with trivial matters often exhibited by the Victorian upper class. Still, Wilde simultaneously claims that deliberate attention to the trivial matters of life—rather than a false observance of empty social rules—can indeed pave the path toward genuine sincerity.

## Earnestness:

In the play, earnestness becomes a character trait that embodies haughtiness and affectation rather than true seriousness. The complex and contradictory notion of being “earnest” is exemplified through the invention of Jack’s imaginary wicked brother Ernest on the one hand and the serious and respectable expectations Cecily and Gwendolen associate with the name Ernest on the other hand. Jack’s imaginary brother Ernest is a shady character who gets himself into trouble constantly. Jack explains:

In order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in Albany, and gets himself into the most dreadful scrapes. (Act I)

Ernest’s reputation indicates that he does not possess any of the “desirable” characteristics of a proper, “earnest” Victorian gentleman.

Both Cecily and Gwendolen, on the other hand, are attracted to the name Ernest based on very different criteria. Gwendolen states, “My ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence” (Act I). Gwendolen’s expectations of a man named Ernest are entirely different from the character Ernest invented by Jack, who clearly is *not* a man who could “inspire confidence”; notions of earnestness are twisted and escape any definite meaning. Wilde uses the contradictory meanings embedded in the notion of being earnest/Ernest in order to reveal the superficial, fake, and fabricated moral fabric of Victorian upper class society.

Wilde exposes the hypocrisy of the upper classes further when Algernon meets Cecily and pretends to be Jack’s rowdy younger brother Ernest:

CECILY: You, I see from your card, are Uncle Jack’s brother, my cousin Ernest, my wicked cousin Ernest.

ALGERNON: Oh! I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily. You mustn’t think that I am wicked.

CECILY: If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.

Wilde lightheartedly suggests that people should never judge others’ behaviors based on the way they adhere to social norms or present themselves in public. Identity is a complex matter that cannot easily be explained or discerned on a superficial level.

## Triviality:

Much like the idea of being “earnest,” the notion of triviality is treated ambiguously throughout the play. References to food, in particular, serve to highlight Wilde’s suggestion that attention to trivial matters often reveals more sincerity than a conceited and affected earnestness. When Cecily and Gwendolen find out that neither Jack nor Algernon is, in fact, Ernest (or earnest, for that matter), they leave the men to ponder their mistakes. Instead of lamenting the errors they have committed that estranged (if only temporarily) Gwendolen and Cecily, Jack and Algernon enter into a discussion about the propriety of eating muffins:

JACK: How can you sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble, I can’t make out. You seem to me to be perfectly heartless.

ALGERNON: Well, I can’t eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them.

JACK: I say it’s perfectly heartless you eating muffins at all, under the circumstances.

ALGERNON: When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Indeed, when I am in really great trouble, as anyone who knows me intimately will tell you, I refuse everything except food and drink. At the present moment I am eating muffins because I am unhappy. Besides, I am particularly fond of muffins.

The exchange between Jack and Algernon suggests a preoccupation with trivial matters displayed by the upper classes. At the same time, it shows that an attention to trivialities is more sincere than pretentious seriousness and false morality.

### The Theme of “Bunburying”:

In order to escape the rigid expectations of upper-class Victorian society, both Jack and Algernon invent imaginary characters that allow them to take on an alternative identity. Algernon explains that he has “invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose” (Act I). For Algernon, the character Bunbury allows him to escape undesirable social obligations and gives him a way to avoid being held accountable for his mounting debts.

Jack has likewise invented an alter ego, a younger brother Ernest:

In order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in Albany, and gets himself into the most dreadful scrapes. (Act I)

The notion of “coming up to town” is associated with visiting clubs, enjoying London’s nightlife, associating with disreputable women, and gambling. Jack would be unable to pursue these activities as Jack Worthing, since doing so would jeopardize his reputation as a gentleman and a fit guardian for his ward, Cecily Cardew. Jack states, “When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects” (Act I). Since this “high moral tone” does not allow Jack to participate in the pleasures offered by city life, he is forced to invent—and then occasionally become—his younger brother Ernest.

The false morality beneath the surface of Victorian culture is the target of Wilde’s blatant criticism of proper behavior. Wilde’s characters complicate the idea of personal identity or character and call into question whether or not any moral standards can or should ever be applied to judge an individual.

### The Theme of Marriage:

Throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest*, marriage is described as an institution that highlights both the superficial sense of moral decorum and class consciousness so widespread in Victorian society as well as the tendency to engage in trivialities displayed by Wilde's characters.

When Jack and Algernon discuss marriage, it becomes clear that Algernon views marriage as a social requirement that usually hinders true happiness:

JACK: I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.

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 I ever get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

To Algernon, marriage is a social convention entirely separate from emotion. It represents the Victorian desire to fit into a preconceived societal "role" and behave appropriately. Hence, Algernon does not believe that marriage is compatible with love or romance in any way. In fact, Algernon later ridicules the possibility that a husband and wife could possibly be truly in love when he states that "the amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous" (Act I).

Algernon believes that marriages are usually based on financial gains and advancements in social rank. Consequently, he is convinced that a man can only be happy in marriage if he reserves the right to invent an alter ego who allows him to pursue "true" happiness. He explains, "A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it" (Act I).

## Literary and Narrative Techniques

### Elements of Irony:

Oscar Wilde uses irony throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest* in order to expose the ridiculousness and pretension of Victorian society. The title of his play itself is an ironic pun on the word “earnest”: While it is important to Cecily and Gwendolen that they each marry a man named Ernest, such an aspiration is not important at all.

Irony is a literary device that involves a breach between what a writer, speaker, or narrator says in a text and what is understood by the reader or by other characters. There are three major types of irony used in fiction, poetry, and drama: **situational irony, verbal irony, and dramatic or tragic irony.**

**Situational Irony**—Situational irony occurs when an event that takes place (in a novel, poem, or on stage in a play) produces a completely unexpected outcome.

**Verbal Irony**—Verbal irony occurs when a writer, speaker, or narrator uses words to say one thing when he really means the opposite of what he says. One popular form of verbal irony is **sarcasm.**

**Dramatic or Tragic Irony**—Dramatic irony occurs when the words or actions of a character reveal his ignorance toward a particular situation, while the reader correctly understands the situation.

Wilde incorporates a combination of different ironic elements throughout his entire play. For example, Lady Bracknell’s reaction to the death of Lady Harbury’s husband is built on an ironic twist of expectations:

LADY BRACKNELL: I’m sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn’t been there since her poor husband’s death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger.

Readers would expect that Lady Harbury has suffered after her husband’s death and looks ill, but Lady Bracknell ironically informs readers that the “poor” woman never looked better.

Later, Wilde ridicules expectations of courtship when Jack proposes to Gwendolen. Gwendolen criticizes Jack’s hesitation when he makes his offer of marriage and states, “I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.” Since Jack is not married, he, obviously, has not “practiced” proposing.

## Elements of Satire

Satire is a literary practice closely related to irony. In a satirical text, the writer uses humor and wit in order to criticize or ridicule a particular person or group of people. Satires cleverly disguise criticism of an intended target by clothing it in humorous language, funny characterizations, and sarcasm.

For example, Wilde uses sarcasm to ridicule the pretentious superficiality of the Victorians' philanthropic spirit. When discussing acts of charity, Lady Bracknell explains, "Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others."

## Comedy of Manners:

The Comedy of Manners is a literary genre that became particularly popular in England during the Restoration period of the seventeenth century. It usually uses elements of Satire in order to ridicule or expose the behaviors, manners, flaws, and morals of members of the middle or upper classes. Frequently, Comedies of Manners incorporate love affairs, witty and comical exchanges between characters, and the humorous revelation of societal scandals and intrigues.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon's practice of "bunburying" and Jack's invention of his brother Ernest mock the superficial manners of Victorian upper classes. The witty dialogue and Wilde's superior use of irony qualify the play as a fine example of the Comedy of Manners genre.

With its excessive use of irony and its focus on triviality, ambiguity, and absurd situations, *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be considered one of the most significant forerunners of the Theater of the Absurd which prospered in the 1950s and 1960s.

**DISCUSSION TOPICS/QUESTIONS**

1. What is the significance of the notion of “being earnest” for the play?
2. What attitudes toward marriage do Algernon and Lady Bracknell represent?
3. What is the correlation between “bunburying” and wearing social masks?
4. What effect do instances of irony and sarcasm have on the reader? How do Wilde’s tone and style help reinforce his critical perspective on social class in Victorian England?
5. How does the play challenge conventional notions of sex and gender, and the public and private spheres?
6. What is the importance of being trivial within the play?
7. What significance do names and acts of naming or christening hold within the play?
8. What is Wilde’s attitude toward the Victorian preoccupation with philanthropy?
9. To what extent is Gwendolen a typical Victorian lady? To what extent does she *not* fulfill typical Victorian standards and requirements for being a lady?
10. How does Cecily create reality? What is the connection between reality and writing?
11. What function does the character of Miss Prism fulfill within the play?
12. What role does food play within the play?
13. To what extent does the play champion the principles of the Aesthetic Movement?

## PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTIONS

### PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 1:

Read the following passage from Act I and write a well-organized essay in which you analyze Algernon's attitude toward marriage and describe how his attitude serves as a commentary on social convention. Be sure to ground all your assertions firmly in the text.

Do not merely summarize the passage.

**Algernon.** [Stiffly.] I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock. Where have you been since last Thursday?

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

**Algernon.** What on earth do you do there?

**Jack.** [Pulling off his gloves.] When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.

**Algernon.** And who are the people you amuse?

**Jack.** [Airily.] Oh, neighbours, neighbours.

**Algernon.** Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire?

**Jack.** Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.

**Algernon.** How immensely you must amuse them! [Goes over and takes sandwich.] By the way, Shropshire is your county, is it not?

**Jack.** Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course. Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?

**Algernon.** Oh! merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

**Jack.** How perfectly delightful!

**Algernon.** Yes, that is all very well; but I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here.

**Jack.** May I ask why?

**Algernon.** My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.

**Jack.** I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.

**Algernon.** I thought you had come up for pleasure?...I call that business.

**Jack.** How utterly unromantic you are!

**Algernon.** I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

**Jack.** I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.

**Algernon.** Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven— [Jack puts out his hand to take a sandwich. Algernon at once interferes.] Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. [Takes one and eats it.]

**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 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.

**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?

**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.

**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.]

**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.

## PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 2:

Carefully study the conversation between Algernon and Cecily. Then, write a well-organized essay in which you analyze Wilde's use of absurdity as a narrative and thematic technique.

Do not merely summarize the passage.

**Merriman.** Mr. Ernest Worthing has just driven over from the station. He has brought his luggage with him.

**Cecily.** [Takes the card and reads it.] 'Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany, W.' Uncle Jack's brother! Did you tell him Mr. Worthing was in town?

**Merriman.** Yes, Miss. He seemed very much disappointed. I mentioned that you and Miss Prism were in the garden. He said he was anxious to speak to you privately for a moment.

**Cecily.** Ask Mr. Ernest Worthing to come here. I suppose you had better talk to the housekeeper about a room for him.

**Merriman.** Yes, Miss.

[Merriman goes off.]

**Cecily.** I have never met any really wicked person before. I feel rather frightened. I am so afraid he will look just like every one else.

[Enter Algernon, very gay and debonnaire.] He does!

**Algernon.** [Raising his hat.] You are my little cousin Cecily, I'm sure.

**Cecily.** You are under some strange mistake. I am not little. In fact, I believe I am more than usually tall for my age. [Algernon is rather taken aback.] But I am your cousin Cecily. You, I see from your card, are Uncle Jack's brother, my cousin Ernest, my wicked cousin Ernest.

**Algernon.** Oh! I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily. You mustn't think that I am wicked.

**Cecily.** If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.

**Algernon.** [Looks at her in amazement.] Oh! Of course I have been rather reckless.

**Cecily.** I am glad to hear it.

**Algernon.** In fact, now you mention the subject, I have been very bad in my own small way.

**Cecily.** I don't think you should be so proud of that, though I am sure it must have been very pleasant.

**Algernon.** It is much pleasanter being here with you.

**Cecily.** I can't understand how you are here at all. Uncle Jack won't be back till Monday afternoon.

**Algernon.** That is a great disappointment. I am obliged to go up by the first train on Monday morning. I have a business appointment that I am anxious... to miss?

**Cecily.** Couldn't you miss it anywhere but in London?

**Algernon.** No: the appointment is in London.

**Cecily.** Well, I know, of course, how important it is not to keep a business engagement, if one wants to retain any sense of the beauty of life, but still I think you had better 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 buttonhole first? I never have any appetite unless I have a buttonhole first.

**Cecily.** A Marechal Niel? [Picks up scissors.]

**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 buttonhole.] You are the prettiest girl I ever saw.

**Cecily.** Miss Prism says that all good looks are a snare.

**Algernon.** They are a snare that every sensible man would like to be caught in.

**Cecily.** Oh, I don't think I would care to catch a sensible man. I shouldn't know what to talk to him about.

## PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 3:

Study the following passage from Act II and write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the sources of humor in the scene.

Do not merely summarize the plot.

**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.]

**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!

**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 have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly.

**Cecily.** I don't think that you should tell me that you love me wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly. Hopelessly doesn't seem to make much sense, does it?

**Algernon.** Cecily!

[Enter **Merriman**.]

**Merriman.** The dog-cart is waiting, sir.

**Algernon.** Tell it to come round next week, at the same hour.

**Merriman.** [Looks at **Cecily**, who makes no sign.] Yes, sir.

[**Merriman** retires.]

**Cecily.** Uncle Jack would be very much annoyed if he knew you were staying on till next week, at the same hour.

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

**Cecily.** You silly boy! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months.

**Algernon.** For the last three months?

**Cecily.** Yes, it will be exactly three months on Thursday.

**Algernon.** But how did we become engaged?

**Cecily.** Well, ever since dear Uncle Jack first confessed to us that he had a younger brother who was very wicked and bad, you of course have formed the chief topic of conversation between myself and Miss Prism. And of course a man who is much talked about is always very attractive. One feels there must be something in him, after all. I daresay it was foolish of me, but I fell in love with you, Ernest.

**Algernon.** Darling! And when was the engagement actually settled?

**Cecily.** On the 14th of February last. Worn out by your entire ignorance of my existence, I determined to end the matter one way or the other, and after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old tree here. The next day I bought this little ring in your name, and this is the little bangle with the true lover's knot I promised you always to wear.

- Algernon.** Did I give you this? It's very pretty, isn't it?
- Cecily.** Yes, you've wonderfully good taste, Ernest. It's the excuse I've always given for your leading such a bad life. And this is the box in which I keep all your dear letters.  
[Kneels at table, opens box, and produces letters tied up with blue ribbon.]
- Algernon.** My letters! But, my own sweet Cecily, I have never written you any letters.
- Cecily.** You need hardly remind me of that, Ernest. I remember only too well that I was forced to write your letters for you. I wrote always three times a week, and sometimes oftener.
- Algernon.** Oh, do let me read them, Cecily?
- Cecily.** Oh, I couldn't possibly. They would make you far too conceited. [Replaces box.]  
The three you wrote me after I had broken off the engagement are so beautiful, and so badly spelled, that even now I can hardly read them without crying a little.
- Algernon.** But was our engagement ever broken off?
- Cecily.** Of course it was. On the 22nd of last March. You can see the entry if you like.  
[Shows diary.] 'To-day I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel it is better to do so. The weather still continues charming.'
- Algernon.** But why on earth did you break it off? What had I done? I had done nothing at all. Cecily, I am very much hurt indeed to hear you broke it off. Particularly when the weather was so charming.
- 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, 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.

## PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 4:

Read the following passage from Act II of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and write a well-organized essay in which you analyze Wilde's use of irony to challenge traditional ideas of sex and gender. Be sure to indicate which aspects of conventional gender identities Wilde confronts.

Do not merely summarize the plot.

- Cecily.** [Advancing to meet her.] Pray let me introduce myself to you. My name is Cecily Cardew.
- Gwendolen.** Cecily Cardew? [Moving to her and shaking hands.] What a very sweet name! Something tells me that we are going to be great friends. I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong.
- Cecily.** How nice of you to like me so much after we have known each other such a comparatively short time. Pray sit down.
- Gwendolen.** [Still standing up.] I may call you Cecily, may I not?
- Cecily.** With pleasure!
- Gwendolen.** And you will always call me Gwendolen, won't you?
- Cecily.** If you wish.
- Gwendolen.** Then that is all quite settled, is it not?
- Cecily.** I hope so. [A pause. They both sit down together.]
- Gwendolen.** Perhaps this might be a favourable opportunity for my mentioning who I am. My father is Lord Bracknell. You have never heard of papa, I suppose?
- Cecily.** I don't think so.
- Gwendolen.** Outside the family circle, papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive. Cecily, mamma, whose views on education are remarkably strict, has brought me up to be extremely short-sighted; it is part of her system; so do you mind my looking at you through my glasses?
- Cecily.** Oh! not at all, Gwendolen. I am very fond of being looked at.
- Gwendolen.** [After examining Cecily carefully through a lorgnette.] You are here on a short visit, I suppose.
- Cecily.** Oh no! I live here.
- Gwendolen.** [Severely.] Really? Your mother, no doubt, or some female relative of advanced years, resides here also?
- Cecily.** Oh no! I have no mother, nor, in fact, any relations.
- Gwendolen.** Indeed?
- Cecily.** My dear guardian, with the assistance of Miss Prism, has the arduous task of looking after me.
- Gwendolen.** Your guardian?
- Cecily.** Yes, I am Mr. Worthing's ward.

**Gwendolen.** Oh! It is strange he never mentioned to me that he had a ward. How secretive of him! He grows more interesting hourly. I am not sure, however, that the news inspires me with feelings of unmixed delight. [Rising and going to her.] I am very fond of you, Cecily; I have liked you ever since I met you! But I am bound to state that now that I know that you are Mr. Worthing's ward, I cannot help expressing a wish you were—well, just a little older than you seem to be—and not quite so very alluring in appearance. In fact, if I may speak candidly—

**Cecily.** Pray do! I think that whenever one has anything unpleasant to say, one should always be quite candid.

**Gwendolen.** Well, to speak with perfect candour, Cecily, I wish that you were fully forty-two, and more than usually plain for your age. Ernest has a strong upright nature. He is the very soul of truth and honour. Disloyalty would be as impossible to him as deception. But even men of the noblest possible moral character are extremely susceptible 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.

## PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 5:

Oscar Wilde can be considered one of the most significant figures of the Aesthetic Movement whose members celebrated “art for art’s sake.” Study the following passage from Act III of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the trivial banter between the characters. Explain how using trivial subject matter and light-hearted language helps Wilde convey his preoccupation with “art for art’s sake” to his audience.

[Gwendolen and Cecily are at the window, looking out into the garden.]

**Gwendolen.** The fact that they did not follow us at once into the house, as any one else would have done, seems to me to show that they have some sense of shame left.

**Cecily.** They have been eating muffins. That looks like repentance.

**Gwendolen.** [After a pause.] They don’t seem to notice us at all. Couldn’t you cough?

**Cecily.** But I haven’t got a cough.

**Gwendolen.** They’re looking at us. What effrontery!

**Cecily.** They’re approaching. That’s very forward of them.

**Gwendolen.** Let us preserve a dignified silence.

**Cecily.** Certainly. It’s the only thing to do now. [Enter **Jack** followed by **Algernon**. They whistle some dreadful popular air from a British Opera.]

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

**Cecily.** A most distasteful one.

**Gwendolen.** But we will not be the first to speak.

**Cecily.** Certainly not.

**Gwendolen.** Mr. Worthing, I have something very particular to ask you. Much depends on your reply.

**Cecily.** Gwendolen, your common sense is invaluable. Mr. Moncrief, kindly answer me the following question. Why did you pretend to be my guardian’s brother?

**Algernon.** In order that I might have an opportunity of meeting you.

**Cecily.** [To **Gwendolen**.] That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not?

**Gwendolen.** Yes, dear, if you can believe him.

**Cecily.** I don’t. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer.

**Gwendolen.** True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing. Mr. Worthing, what explanation can you offer to me for pretending to have a brother? Was it in order that you might have an opportunity of coming up to town to see me as often as possible?

**Jack.** Can you doubt it, Miss Fairfax?

**Gwendolen.** I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German scepticism. [Moving to **Cecily**.] Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory, especially Mr. Worthing’s. That seems to me to have the stamp of truth upon it.

**Cecily.** I am more than content with what Mr. Moncrief said. His voice alone inspires one with absolute credulity.

**Gwendolen.** Then you think we should forgive them?

**Cecily.** Yes. I mean no.

**Gwendolen.** True! I had forgotten. There are principles at stake that one cannot surrender. Which of us should tell them? The task is not a pleasant one.

**Cecily.** Could we not both speak at the same time?

**Gwendolen.** An excellent idea! I nearly always speak at the same time as other people.

Will you take the time from me?

**Cecily.** Certainly. [**Gwendolen** beats time with uplifted finger.]

**Gwendolen and Cecily** [Speaking together.] Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!

**Jack and Algernon** [Speaking together.] Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon.

**Gwendolen.** [To **Jack**.] For my sake you are prepared to do this terrible thing?

**Jack.** I am.

**Cecily.** [To **Algernon**.] To please me you are ready to face this fearful ordeal?

**Algernon.** I am!

**Gwendolen.** How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes! Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men are infinitely beyond us.

**Jack.** We are. [Clasps hands with **Algernon**.]

**Cecily.** They have moments of physical courage of which we women know absolutely nothing.

**Gwendolen.** [To **Jack**.] Darling!

**Algernon.** [To **Cecily**.] Darling! [They fall into each other's arms.]

## PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 6:

Authors frequently use irony in order to shape readers' evaluation of plot developments and characters' actions. Write a well-organized essay in which you explore the impact specific instances of irony have on readers' perceptions of plot and character development in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Do not merely summarize the plot or list elements of irony.

## PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 7:

Both the Comedy of Manners and plays representative of the Aesthetic Movement relied heavily on word-play, puns, and verbal irony. Consider the significance of the play's title and subtitle *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*. Then, write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the how witticism and word-play helps Wilde provide structure for his play and establish his theme(s).

Avoid plot summary.

## PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 8:

Much comedy relies on the implausible—coincidences, unlikely accidents, inexplicable behavior. In a well-organized essay, discuss the role of the implausible in both establishing and resolving the primary conflicts in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Avoid plot summary.

**PRACTICE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS**

## PRACTICE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS 1-5:

Carefully read the following passage from Act I of *The Importance of Being Earnest* before choosing your answers:

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

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

**Lady Bracknell.** That's not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together.

[Sees **Jack** and bows to him with icy coldness.]

**Algernon.** [To **Gwendolen**.] Dear me, you are smart!

**Gwendolen.** I am always smart! Am I not, Mr. Worthing?

**Jack.** You're quite perfect, Miss Fairfax.

**Gwendolen.** Oh! I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions. [**Gwendolen** and **Jack** sit down together in the corner.]

**Lady Bracknell.** I'm sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a 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.

**Algernon.** Certainly, Aunt Augusta. [Goes over to tea-table.]

**Lady Bracknell.** Won't you come and sit here, Gwendolen?

**Gwendolen.** Thanks, mamma, I'm quite comfortable where I am.

**Algernon.** [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.

**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 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.

**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 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 put my table completely out. Your uncle would have to dine upstairs. Fortunately he is accustomed to that.

**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 telegram to say that my poor friend Bunbury is very ill again. [Exchanges glances with **Jack**.] They seem to think I should be with him.

**Lady Bracknell.** It is very strange. This Mr. Bunbury seems to suffer from curiously bad health.

**Algernon.** Yes; poor Bunbury is a dreadful invalid.

**Lady Bracknell.** Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he 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. 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 ailment goes. I should be much obliged if you would ask Mr. Bunbury, from me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse 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 every one has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in most cases, was probably not much.

**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 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 expurgations. French songs I cannot possibly allow. People always seem to think that they are improper, and either look shocked, which is vulgar, or laugh, which is worse. But German sounds a thoroughly respectable language, and indeed, I believe is so. Gwendolen, you will accompany me.

**Gwendolen.** Certainly, mamma.

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

1. All of the following are examples of the use of the unexpected for comic effect EXCEPT
  - (A.) Lady Bracknell's description of Lady Harbury.
  - (B.) Lane and Algernon's exchange about the cucumber sandwiches.
  - (C.) Lady Bracknell's comments about Bunbury.
  - (D.) Gwendolen's refusal to sit beside her mother.
  - (E.) Gwendolen's behavior at the end of the scene.
2. The tone of Lady Bracknell's comments about Bunbury's illness can best be described as
  - (A.) sympathetic.
  - (B.) empathetic.
  - (C.) condescending.
  - (D.) indifferent.
  - (E.) judgmental.

3. Which of the following does Lane suggest about Algernon?
  - (A.) Algernon has overextended his credit with local merchants.
  - (B.) Algernon blames others for his own misdeeds.
  - (C.) Algernon would like to flirt with Mary Farquhar.
  - (D.) Algernon is devoted to his aunt.
  - (E.) Algernon is generous to his servants.
  
4. The humor in Lady Bracknell's statement, "Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others" is the result of a(n)
  - (A.) ad hominem.
  - (B.) non-sequitor.
  - (C.) zeugma.
  - (D.) polysyndeton.
  - (E.) dirimens copulatio
  
5. Algernon's taking Aunt Augusta into the next room is a convention to
  - (A.) introduce the topic of the recital.
  - (B.) express Wilde's aesthetic theory of music.
  - (C.) allow Jack and Gwendolen to be alone.
  - (D.) create suspense for the audience.
  - (E.) expand the setting of the play.

## PRACTICE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS 6-10:

Carefully read the following passage from Act I of *The Importance of Being Earnest* before choosing your answers:

**Jack.** You really love me, Gwendolen?

**Gwendolen.** Passionately!

**Jack.** Darling! You don't know how happy you've made me.

**Gwendolen.** My own Ernest!

**Jack.** But you don't really mean to say that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Ernest?

**Gwendolen.** But your name is Ernest.

**Jack.** Yes, I know it is. But supposing it was something else? Do you mean to say you couldn't love me then?

**Gwendolen.** [Glibly.] Ah! that is clearly a metaphysical speculation, and like most metaphysical speculations has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life, as we know them.

**Jack.** Personally, darling, to speak quite candidly, I don't much care about the name of Ernest... I don't think the name suits me at all.

**Gwendolen.** It suits you perfectly. It is a divine name. It has a music of its own. It produces vibrations.

**Jack.** Well, really, Gwendolen, I must say that I think there are lots of other much nicer names. I think Jack, for instance, a charming name.

**Gwendolen.** Jack?... No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations... I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain. Besides, Jack is a notorious domesticity for John! And I pity any woman who is married to a man called John. She would probably never be allowed to know the entrancing pleasure of a single moment's solitude. The only really safe name is Ernest.

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

**Gwendolen.** Married, Mr. Worthing?

**Jack.** [Astounded.] Well... surely. You know that I love you, and you led me to believe, Miss Fairfax, that you were not absolutely indifferent to me.

**Gwendolen.** I adore you. But you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.

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

**Gwendolen.** I think it would be an admirable opportunity. And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr. Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you.

**Jack.** Gwendolen!

**Gwendolen.** Yes, Mr. Worthing, what have you got to say to me?

**Jack.** You know what I have got to say to you.

**Gwendolen.** Yes, but you don't say it.

**Jack.** Gwendolen, will you marry me? [Goes on his knees.]

**Gwendolen.** Of course I will, darling. How long you have been about it! I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.

**Jack.** My own one, I have never loved any one in the world but you.

**Gwendolen.** 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.

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

**Lady Bracknell.** Finished what, may I ask?

**Gwendolen.** I am engaged to Mr. Worthing, mamma. [They rise together.]

**Lady Bracknell.** Pardon me, you are not engaged to 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.

**Gwendolen.** [Reproachfully.] Mamma!

**Lady Bracknell.** In the carriage, Gwendolen! [**Gwendolen** goes to the door. She and **Jack** blow kisses to each other behind **Lady Bracknell's** back. **Lady Bracknell** looks vaguely about as if she could not understand what the noise was. Finally turns round.] Gwendolen, the carriage!

**Gwendolen.** 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.]

**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?

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

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

**Jack.** Twenty-nine.

**Lady Bracknell.** A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

**Jack.** [After some hesitation.] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

**Lady Bracknell.** I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square. What is your income?

**Jack.** Between seven and eight thousand a year.

**Lady Bracknell.** [Makes a note in her book.] In land, or in investments?

**Jack.** In investments, chiefly.

**Lady Bracknell.** That is satisfactory. What between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one's death, land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up. That's all that can be said about land.

**Jack.** I have a country house with some land, of course, attached to it, about fifteen hundred acres, I believe; but I don't depend on that for my real income. In fact, as far as I can make out, the poachers are the only people who make anything out of it.

**Lady Bracknell.** A country house! How many bedrooms? Well, that point can be cleared up afterwards. You have a town house, I hope? A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.

**Jack.** Well, I own a house in Belgrave Square, but it is let by the year to Lady Bloxham. Of course, I can get it back whenever I like, at six months' notice.

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

**Jack.** Oh, she goes about very little. She is a lady considerably advanced in years.

**Lady Bracknell.** Ah, nowadays that is no guarantee of respectability of character. What number in Belgrave Square?

**Jack.** 149.

**Lady Bracknell.** [Shaking her head.] The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However, that could easily be altered.

**Jack.** Do you mean the fashion, or the side?

**Lady Bracknell.** [Sternly.] Both, if necessary, I presume. What are your politics?

**Jack.** Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist.

**Lady Bracknell.** Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening, at any rate. Now to minor matters. Are your parents living?

**Jack.** I have lost both my parents.

**Lady Bracknell.** To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?

**Jack.** I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me... I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was... well, I was found.

**Lady Bracknell.** Found!

**Jack.** The late Mr. Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort.

**Lady Bracknell.** Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this seaside resort find you?

**Jack.** [Gravely.] In a hand-bag.

**Lady Bracknell.** A hand-bag?

**Jack.** [Very seriously.] Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a hand-bag—a somewhat large, black leather hand-bag, with handles to it—an ordinary hand-bag in fact.

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

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

**Lady Bracknell.** The cloak-room at Victoria Station?

**Jack.** Yes. The Brighton line.

**Lady Bracknell.** The line is immaterial. Mr. Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. 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 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.

**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.

**Jack.** Well, I don't see how I could possibly manage to do that. I can produce the hand-bag at any moment. It is in my dressing-room at home. I really think that should satisfy you, Lady Bracknell.

**Lady Bracknell.** Me, sir! What has it to do with me? You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter—a girl brought up with the utmost care—to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel? Good morning, Mr. Worthing!

[Lady Bracknell sweeps out in majestic indignation.]

6. Much of the humor early in this scene relies on
- (A.) metaphysical speculation.
  - (B.) dramatic irony.
  - (C.) situational irony.
  - (D.) romance.
  - (E.) supposition.
7. The treatment of love and marriage in this scene helps to categorize this play as a
- (A.) social satire.
  - (B.) situation comedy.
  - (C.) comedy of ideas.
  - (D.) comedy of manners.
  - (E.) bedroom farce.

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8. Gwendolen's tone during her conversation with Jack can be characterized as
- (A.) shy and insecure.
  - (B.) careless and indifferent.
  - (C.) romantic and idealistic.
  - (D.) serious and thoughtful.
  - (E.) self-assured and confident.
9. Many of Lady Bracknell's lines suggest her fear of
- (A.) idleness
  - (B.) illness.
  - (C.) poverty.
  - (D.) suffrage.
  - (E.) revolution.
10. Lady Bracknell's interview with Jack can best be described as
- (A.) cynical.
  - (B.) pragmatic.
  - (C.) illogical.
  - (D.) absurd.
  - (E.) serendipitous.

## PRACTICE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS 11-15:

Carefully read the following passage from the opening of Act II of *The Importance of Being Earnest* before you choose your answers.

**Miss Prism.** [Calling.] Cecily, Cecily! Surely such a utilitarian occupation as the watering of flowers is rather Moulton's duty than yours? Especially at a moment when intellectual pleasures await you. Your German grammar is on the table. Pray open it at page fifteen. We will repeat yesterday's lesson.

**Cecily.** [Coming over very slowly.] But I don't like German. It isn't at all a becoming language. I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my German lesson.

**Miss Prism.** Child, you know how anxious your guardian is that you should improve yourself in every way. He laid particular stress on your German, as he was leaving for town yesterday. Indeed, he always lays stress on your German when he is leaving for town.

**Cecily.** Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious! Sometimes he is so serious that I think he cannot be quite well.

**Miss Prism.** [Drawing herself up.] Your guardian enjoys the best of health, and his gravity of demeanour is especially to be commended in one so comparatively young as he is. I know no one who has a higher sense of duty and responsibility.

**Cecily.** I suppose that is why he often looks a little bored when we three are together.

**Miss Prism.** Cecily! I am surprised at you. Mr. Worthing has many troubles in his life. Idle merriment and triviality would be out of place in his conversation. You must remember his constant anxiety about that unfortunate young man, his brother.

**Cecily.** I wish Uncle Jack would allow that unfortunate young man, his brother, to come down here sometimes. We might have a good influence over him, Miss Prism. I am sure you certainly would. You know German, and geology, and things of that kind influence a man very much. [Cecily begins to write in her diary.]

**Miss Prism.** [Shaking her head.] I do not think that even I could produce any effect on a character that according to his own brother's admission is irretrievably weak and vacillating. 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 slightly 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.

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

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

**Cecily.** [Smiling.] But I see dear Dr. Chasuble coming up through the garden.  
**Miss Prism.** [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 Egeria and her pupil any longer.  
**Miss Prism.** Egeria? My name is Laetitia, Doctor.  
**Chasuble.** [Bowing.] A classical allusion merely, drawn from the Pagan authors. I shall see you both no doubt at Evensong?  
**Miss Prism.** I think, dear Doctor, I will have a stroll with you. I find I have a headache after all, and a walk might do it good.  
**Chasuble.** With pleasure, Miss Prism, with pleasure. We might go as far as the schools and back.  
**Miss Prism.** That would be delightful. Cecily, you will read your Political Economy in my absence. The chapter on the Fall of the Rupee you may omit. It is somewhat too sensational. Even these metallic problems have their melodramatic side.  
[Goes down the garden with **Dr. Chasuble.**]  
**Cecily.** [Picks up books and throws them back on table.] Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid, horrid German!

11. What do Miss Prism's opening lines imply about academic studies?
- (A.) Academic studies improve one's character.
  - (B.) Academic studies render young women unattractive.
  - (C.) Academic studies have little practical application.
  - (D.) Academic studies should be reserved for the upper classes.
  - (E.) Academic studies prepare young women for adulthood.

12. Miss Prism's reference to Cecily's guardian's "higher sense of duty and responsibility" is humorous due to its
- (A.) truth.
  - (B.) ambiguity.
  - (C.) verbal irony.
  - (D.) dramatic irony.
  - (E.) poetic justice.
13. Through Miss Prism, Wilde seems to be poking fun at the
- (A.) hypocrisy of Victorian morality.
  - (B.) Victorian spinster.
  - (C.) role of the Church in moral instruction.
  - (D.) popular literature of the day.
  - (E.) tutor-student relationship.
14. The contradiction in Dr. Chasuble's character is that he
- (A.) is apparently attracted to Miss Prism.
  - (B.) is apparently better educated than Miss Prism.
  - (C.) seems overly interested in Cecily's education.
  - (D.) uses classical and not biblical allusions.
  - (E.) accepts rather than condemns Jack's stay in London.
15. All of the following support Wilde's theme of truth versus fabrication EXCEPT
- (A.) "[Memory] usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened."
  - (B.) "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means."
  - (C.) "Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious!"
  - (D.) "I find I have a headache after all, and a walk might do it good."
  - (E.) "Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips."

## PRACTICE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS 16-20:

Carefully read the following passage from Act II of *The Importance of Being Earnest* before you choose your answers.

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

**Miss Prism.** Mr. Worthing!

**Chasuble.** Mr. Worthing?

**Miss Prism.** This is indeed a surprise. We did not look for you till Monday afternoon.

**Jack.** [Shakes **Miss Prism's** hand in a tragic manner.] I have returned sooner than I expected. Dr. Chasuble, I hope you are well?

**Chasuble.** Dear Mr. Worthing, I trust this garb of woe does not betoken some terrible calamity?

**Jack.** My brother.

**Miss Prism.** More shameful debts and extravagance?

**Chasuble.** Still leading his life of pleasure?

**Jack.** [Shaking his head.] Dead!

**Chasuble.** Your brother Ernest dead?

**Jack.** Quite dead.

**Miss Prism.** What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it.

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

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

**Chasuble.** Very sad indeed. Were you with him at the end?

**Jack.** No. He died abroad; in Paris, in fact. I had a telegram last night from the manager of the Grand Hotel.

**Chasuble.** Was the cause of death mentioned?

**Jack.** A severe chill, it seems.

**Miss Prism.** As a man sows, so shall he reap.

**Chasuble.** [Raising his hand.] Charity, dear Miss Prism, charity! None of us are perfect. I myself am peculiarly susceptible to draughts. Will the interment take place here?

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

**Chasuble.** In Paris! [Shakes his head.] I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at the last. You would no doubt wish me to make some slight allusion to this tragic domestic affliction next Sunday. [**Jack** presses his hand convulsively.] My sermon on the meaning of the manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful, or, as in the present case, distressing. [All sigh.] I have preached it at harvest celebrations, christenings, confirmations, on days of humiliation and festal days. The last time I delivered it was in the Cathedral, as a charity sermon on behalf of the Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders. The Bishop, who was present, was much struck by some of the analogies I drew.

**Jack.** Ah! that reminds me, you mentioned christenings I think, Dr. Chasuble? I suppose you know how to christen all right? [**Dr. Chasuble** looks astounded.] I mean, of course, you are continually christening, aren't you?

**Miss Prism.** It is, I regret to say, one of the Rector's most constant duties in this parish. I have often spoken to the poorer classes on the subject. But they don't seem to know what thrift is.

**Chasuble.** But is there any particular infant in whom you are interested, Mr. Worthing?  
Your brother was, I believe, unmarried, was he not?

**Jack.** Oh yes.

**Miss Prism.** [Bitterly.] People who live entirely for pleasure usually are.

**Jack.** But it is not for any child, dear 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?

**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 carter, 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?

**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.

**Miss Prism.** This seems to me a blessing of an extremely obvious kind.

[Enter Cecily from the house.]

**Cecily.** Uncle Jack! Oh, I am pleased to see you back. But what horrid clothes you have got on! Do go and change them.

**Miss Prism.** Cecily!

**Chasuble.** My child! my child! [Cecily goes towards Jack; he kisses her brow in a melancholy manner.]

**Cecily.** What is the matter, Uncle Jack? Do look happy! You look as if you had toothache, and I have got such a surprise for you. Who do you think is in the dining-room? Your brother!

**Jack.** Who?

**Cecily.** Your brother Ernest. He arrived about half an hour ago.

**Jack.** What nonsense! I haven't got a brother.

**Cecily.** Oh, don't say that. However badly he may have behaved to you in the past he is still your brother. 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.]

**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.

**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**.]  
**Jack**. Good heavens! [Motions **Algernon** away.]  
**Algernon**. Brother John, I have come down from town to tell you that I am very sorry for all the trouble I have given you, and that I intend to lead a better life in the future. [**Jack** glares at him and does not take his hand.]  
**Cecily**. Uncle Jack, you are not going to refuse your own brother's hand?  
**Jack**. Nothing will induce me to take his hand. I think his coming down here disgraceful. He knows perfectly well why.  
**Cecily**. Uncle Jack, do be nice. There is some good in every one. Ernest has just been telling me about his poor invalid friend Mr. Bunbury whom he goes to visit so often. And surely there must be much good in one who is kind to an invalid, and leaves the pleasures of London to sit by a bed of pain.  
**Jack**. Oh! he has been talking about Bunbury, has he?  
**Cecily**. Yes, he has told me all about poor Mr. Bunbury, and his terrible state of health.  
**Jack**. Bunbury! Well, I won't have him talk to you about Bunbury or about anything else. It is enough to drive one perfectly frantic.  
**Algernon**. Of course I admit that the faults were all on my side. But I must say that I think that Brother John's coldness to me is peculiarly painful. I expected a more enthusiastic welcome, especially considering it is the first time I have come here.  
**Cecily**. Uncle Jack, if you don't shake hands with Ernest I will never forgive you.  
**Jack**. Never forgive me?  
**Cecily**. Never, never, never!  
**Jack**. Well, this is the last time I shall ever do it. [Shakes with **Algernon** and glares.]  
**Chasuble**. It's pleasant, is it not, to see so perfect a reconciliation? I think we might leave the two brothers together.  
**Miss Prism**. Cecily, you will come with us.  
**Cecily**. Certainly, Miss Prism. My little task of reconciliation is over.  
**Chasuble**. You have done a beautiful action to-day, dear child.  
**Miss Prism**. We must not be premature in our judgments.  
**Cecily**. I feel very happy. [They all go off except **Jack** and **Algernon**.]

16. In this scene, Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble lightheartedly satirize the
- (A.) Victorian preoccupation with mourning.
  - (B.) Victorian ambivalence toward charity.
  - (C.) strictness of Victorian courtship.
  - (D.) laxity of Victorian religion.
  - (E.) Victorian obsession with proper etiquette.

17. All of the following comic techniques operate in this scene EXCEPT
- (A.) mistaken identity.
  - (B.) duplicity.
  - (C.) double entendre.
  - (D.) absurd naivety.
  - (E.) hyperbole.
18. The character of Dr. Chasuble can best be described as
- (A.) well-meaning but inept.
  - (B.) hypocritical.
  - (C.) efficacious but adroit.
  - (D.) naïve and paternalistic.
  - (E.) solemn.
19. Jack's attitude toward his imminent christening can be considered
- (A.) apprehensive
  - (B.) impatient.
  - (C.) spiritual.
  - (D.) condescending.
  - (E.) blithe.
20. Jack's blurting out that he does not have a brother is humorous because
- (A.) it is true.
  - (B.) the others believe he is mourning the dead Ernest.
  - (C.) he is about to be baptized Ernest.
  - (D.) Cecily has an overactive imagination.
  - (E.) he is Ernest.

## PRACTICE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS 21-25:

Carefully read the following passage from Act III of *The Importance of Being Earnest* before you choose your answers.

**Jack.** That lady is Miss Cecily Cardew, my ward. [**Lady Bracknell** bows coldly to Cecily.]

**Algernon.** I am engaged to be married to Cecily, Aunt Augusta.

**Lady Bracknell.** I beg your pardon?

**Cecily.** Mr. Moncrief and I are engaged to be married, Lady Bracknell.

**Lady Bracknell.** [With a shiver, crossing to the sofa and sitting down.] I do not know whether there is anything peculiarly exciting in the air of this particular part of Hertfordshire, but the number of engagements that go on seems to me considerably above the proper average that statistics have laid down for our guidance. I think some preliminary inquiry on my part would not be out of place. Mr. Worthing, is Miss Cardew at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? I merely desire information. Until yesterday I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a Terminus. [**Jack** looks perfectly furious, but restrains himself.]

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

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

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

**Lady Bracknell.** [Grimly.] I have known strange errors in that publication.

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

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

**Jack.** [Very irritably.] How extremely kind of you, Lady Bracknell! I have also in my possession, you will be pleased to hear, certificates of Miss Cardew's birth, baptism, whooping cough, registration, vaccination, confirmation, and the measles; both the German and the English variety.

**Lady Bracknell.** Ah! A life crowded with incident, I see; though perhaps somewhat too exciting for a young girl. I am not myself in favour of premature experiences. [Rises, looks at her watch.] Gwendolen! the time approaches for our departure. We have not a moment to lose. As a matter of form, Mr. Worthing, I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune?

**Jack.** Oh! about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds. That is all. Goodbye, Lady Bracknell. So pleased to have seen you.

**Lady Bracknell.** [Sitting down again.] A moment, Mr. Worthing. A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time. We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces. [To Cecily.] Come over here, dear. [Cecily goes across.] Pretty child! your dress is sadly simple, and your hair seems almost as Nature might have left it. But we can soon alter all that. A thoroughly experienced French maid produces a really marvellous result in a very brief space of time. I remember recommending one to young Lady Lancing, and after three months her own husband did not know her.

**Jack.** And after six months nobody knew her.

**Lady Bracknell.** [Glares at **Jack** for a few moments. Then bends, with a practised smile, to **Cecily**.] Kindly turn round, sweet child. [**Cecily** turns completely round.] No, the side view is what I want. [**Cecily** presents her profile.] Yes, quite as I expected. There are distinct social possibilities in your profile. The two weak points in our age are its want of principle and its want of profile. The chin a little higher, dear. Style largely depends on the way the chin is worn. They are worn very high, just at present. Algernon!

**Algernon.** Yes, Aunt Augusta!

**Lady Bracknell.** There are distinct social possibilities in Miss Cardew's profile.

**Algernon.** Cecily is the sweetest, dearest, prettiest girl in the whole world. And I don't care 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 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; 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.

21. This scene employs all of the following comedic techniques EXCEPT
- (A.) puns.
  - (B.) hyperbole.
  - (C.) miscommunication.
  - (D.) witty repartee.
  - (E.) character inconsistency.
22. Jack's refusal to consent to Cecily's marriage to Algernon is an example of (a)
- (A.) conflict.
  - (B.) climax.
  - (C.) denouement.
  - (D.) reversal.
  - (E.) complication.
23. Lady Bracknell's overall treatment of Cecily can best be described as
- (A.) maternal.
  - (B.) condescending.
  - (C.) domineering.
  - (D.) hypocritical.
  - (E.) aloof.
24. Lady Bracknell's claim that she does "not approve of mercenary marriages" is ironic because
- (A.) she herself was a poor woman who married for money.
  - (B.) Cecily's fortune is larger than Algernon's.
  - (C.) Cecily will not have enough money to pay Algernon's debts.
  - (D.) she will not allow Algernon to marry for money.
  - (E.) Algernon has already sworn his love for Cecily.
25. The humor in Lady Bracknell's objection to a long engagement lies in
- (A.) Cecily's age.
  - (B.) the fact that Jack has not yet consented.
  - (C.) the rashness of her decision.
  - (D.) the contrast to Victorian conventions.
  - (E.) the absurdity of her reason.

## MULTIPLE CHOICE ANSWERS

### With Explanations

1. One would expect a recent widow to show physical signs of distress and grief, so Lady Bracknell's description of Lady Harbury (A) is surprising. (B) is surprising due to the fact that Lane so quickly and readily covers for Algernon. Likewise, (C) is surprising in Lady Bracknell's absolute insensitivity about Bunbury. Gwendolen's behavior at the end of the scene (E) is surprising since she first agrees to leave and then does not. **(D), Gwendolen's refusal to sit beside her mother, is the best answer since the audience already knows of the flirtation between Gwendolen and Jack and would expect her to want to sit beside him.**
2. Certainly Lady Bracknell displays a complete lack of sympathy (A) for a man who, if real, would undoubtedly be suffering. Lacking sympathy, she certainly does not share his pain with him (B). (C) might tempt some students, but she does not ultimately assume an air of superiority, she simply criticizes the man's inability to decide whether to live or die. Likewise, (D) might tempt some, but indifference implies a certain neutrality, whereas Lady Bracknell certainly criticizes Bunbury and judges him as "absurd" and says that she does not approve of modern sympathy for the sick. **Thus (E) is the best answer.**
3. **(A) is clearly suggested when Lane emphasizes that there were no cucumbers even "for ready money."** The implication is that Lane may not have been able to get the cucumbers because the vendors would extend no more credit to Algernon. (B) might tempt some, but the audience sees Algernon do this, and Lane plays along. It is not Lane's suggestion. While students might conclude (C) from Algernon's complaint that Farquhar flirts with her husband, this is not Lane's suggestion. (D) is eliminated by the fact that Lane does cover for his employer but does not imply anything about Algernon's relationships. Finally, one might conclude (E) from Lane's willingness to cover for Algernon, but Lane does not imply this in anything he says or does.
4. Lady Bracknell's statement is indeed the result of a logical fallacy, the assumption that one can completely control one's own health and that caring for the ill would motivate others to be ill. This faulty logic is closest to the *non-sequitor* **(B), in which the conclusion does not necessarily follow from the premises.** (A) is the fallacy by which a person is attacked rather than his or her argument. (C) is a literary device involving an unusual linking of terms. (D) is a literary device in which a conjunction is inserted after every item in a list rather than just the penultimate item. (E) is the rhetorical device of balancing a positive point with a negative or *vice versa*.

5. (A) is eliminated by the fact that the recital is brought up onstage and does not necessitate the characters' leaving. (B) likewise occurs onstage. (D) might tempt some students but is too general. (E) is eliminated by the fact that the setting does not include the room to which Algernon and Lady Bracknell retire. **The only plausible answer is (C). Wilde needs some way to clear the two characters from the stage in order to show Jack's proposal.**
6. Once the audience knows that Algernon's friend's name is Jack and not Ernest (and, therefore, the man Gwendolen loves is named Jack and not Ernest), all of Gwendolen's protestations that she could love only a man named Ernest and that she, in fact, despises the name Jack are humorous in their **dramatic irony**.
7. While social themes are casually mentioned, there is not enough to consider the play a true social satire (A). Situation comedy (B) requires at least one of the characters to be placed in a ridiculous predicament, which is not the case here. (C) is tempting, but, as is the case with social satire, the ideas are casually mentioned and easily dropped. None is held up for any close scrutiny. (E) is likewise tempting due to the amount of double entendre and sexual innuendo in the dialogue, but the sexual comedy is not ribald enough for the play to be considered a bedroom farce. **The setting of the tea, however, the interplay of servant with upper class, the comments about how men and women are to act toward one another, and the emphasis on proper seatings for dinner parties, etc., clearly make this play a comedy of manners (D).**
8. The way Gwendolen admits that she knows what Jack is going to ask her and tells him in advance that she intends to accept clearly eliminates (A). While some students may see her as careless, she is not indifferent (B). She does want to be proposed to "properly." Her desire for a "proper" proposal, however, does not render her absurd bluntness "serious and thoughtful" (D). (E) is tempting, but even her self-assurance is overshadowed by **the absurdity of how she wants Jack to propose and what constitutes a "proper" proposal. Thus (C) is the best answer.**
9. As a representative of the aristocracy, Lady Bracknell makes a few comments suggesting her distrust of the democratizing of Britain and the upper classes' loss of power: *"Fortunately...education produces no effect.... If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square."* *"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?"* **Thus (E) is the best answer.** Idleness (A) is mentioned only in her approval of Jack's smoking, not as something she fears. She abhors, not fears, illness (B). Poverty (C) and suffrage (D) are not mentioned in the scene at all.

10. The fact that Lady Bracknell approves of every one of Jack's answers of which she should *disapprove* (he smokes, he claims to know nothing, his fortune is in securities and not land, etc.) and her reasons for her approval (smoking keeps men from being idle) strongly suggest (D) absurd. The absurdity, however, reaches its peak in the exchange about Jack's having been found in a handbag in a train station. (C) is tempting, but "illogical" does not connote the extremity of the ludicrousness of the conversation. And, while Lady Bracknell's tone might seem pragmatic (B), this ultimately becomes part of the absurdity.
11. Miss Prism insists that Cecily's guardian wants his ward to improve herself "in every way," thus including her character, but not limiting the improvement to character (A). Gwendolen is the one who insists that she looks plainer after studying her German (B). (D) might tempt some, but there is no clear implication that the lower classes should *not* be educated. Likewise, there is nothing in the text to support (E). **When Miss Prism refers to watering the flowers as a "utilitarian" (i.e. useful) occupation, especially in contrast to "intellectual pleasures," she clearly implies those intellectual pleasures will have no utilitarian or useful application. Thus (C) is the best answer.**
12. The audience already knows that Cecily's guardian (Jack) has lied about his younger brother in order to lead a double life, thus eliminating (A). **As the audience already knows what neither Cecily nor Prism knows, (D) is the correct answer. Both characters admire Jack's "higher sense of duty," while the audience knows it is a sham.** While "duty" and "responsibility" might be ambiguous terms, nothing in Jack's real behavior can be defined by any accepted understanding of those words. Thus (B) and (C) are eliminated. (E) would be illustrated were Jack to suffer some consequence, but this does not happen in this scene.
13. There certainly is an element of (B) in Prism's character, but this is not the *best* choice for this question. (C) is also present in the scene but is portrayed in the character of Dr. Chasuble, not Prism. (D) is a small—but the not best—possibility, and (E) is present but not made fun of. **With all of Miss Prism's judgments and pronouncements about Mr. Worthing's dissolute brother and her own unwillingness to try to reform him, she clearly demonstrates (A).**
14. As Chasuble is an Anglican rector and not a Catholic priest, (A) is certainly no contradiction. Nor is (B), as one would expect a clergyman to be well-educated. Chasuble does ask Cecily about her studies but does not seem overly interested (C), and, as a clergyman, it is appropriate that he would approve of Jack's staying in London to assist his struggling brother (E). **It is unusual, however, that Chasuble does not allude to the foundation of his education and livelihood, the Bible, in his conversation, instead referring exclusively to classical (what he himself calls pagan) sources. Thus (D) is the correct answer.**

15. In (A), Cecily either confuses memory for imagination, or believes that the memory is faulty and “remembers” what didn’t happen. In either case, as her diary shows, accounts of the past might not reflect any actuality. In (B), Prism also points out the difference between fiction—which is created and can be made to turn out as it *should*—and reality—which is unpredictable and often unsatisfactory. (C) is a naïve statement that the audience knows does not reflect the reality, and (D) is a ruse devised for Miss Prism to be able to spend some time alone with Dr. Chasuble. (E), **however, while untrue, is stated in the subjunctive, the “if contrary to fact,” clearly admitting that it is not true.**
16. (A) might be suggested by Jack’s dress and behavior, but not by Prism and Chasuble. (C) is tempting, but the two have freely taken a walk. There is no sense that they desired more and were prevented by social convention. (D) is likewise tempting but is displayed more through Chasuble than through the pair. (E) is almost a throw-away, and *everything* in the play could be said to satirize Victorian etiquette. **However, throughout the scene, Dr. Chasuble represents a much more caring and forgiving aspect of Victorian morality while Prism, who also clearly considers herself good, is judgmental and condemning. Thus (B) is the correct answer.**
17. (A) is eliminated by the fact that everyone except Jack believes that Algernon is Ernest. (B) is eliminated by the facts that (1) Jack claims his brother is dead, and (2) Algernon claims to be that brother. (C) is eliminated by all of the sexual innuendo about the number of christenings Chasuble must perform and the lower classes’ being unable to practice “thrift.” (D) is eliminated by everyone’s naïve willingness to believe that Algernon is Ernest even after Jack has claimed that Ernest is dead. **Only (E), hyperbole, is not present in this scene.**
18. For all of his comic faults, we do not see any discrepancy between what Chasuble says and does (B). Nothing in the scene suggests that he is an effective and skilled clergyman, either as a moralizer or pastor (C). Likewise, some students might believe he acts paternalistically to Gwendolen, but there is no evidence of naivety (D), and we cannot say he is particularly solemn (E), especially given some of the comments he makes to Miss Prism. **He does, however, seem genuinely concerned about Jack’s bereavement and joyful at “Ernest’s” restoration to life. He is merely something of a clown in his desire to serve the lord of his parish (A).**
19. Chasuble, not Jack, expresses some apprehension about immersing Jack, given the weather (A). Rather than being impatient (B), Jack actually *delays* the ceremony a half hour to avoid being christened with babies. (C) is almost laughable as he is having himself christened only to take a name for an absurd reason. (D) is not in keeping with Jack’s character. (E), **however, is the correct answer. Jack brings up the topic in a casual, off-handed way and even says that it would not be “fun” to be baptized with babies. The experience, to Jack, will be something of a lark.**

20. This is probably the first and only time in the entire play when one of the characters actually speaks the truth clearly and unambiguously. It is an example of dramatic irony because the audience knows it is true, but none of the characters on stage does. It also provides that element of surprise because, by now, the audience does not expect the truth, and it is uttered in the context of Jack's being presented with a reality he knows cannot be real. **Thus (A) is the correct answer.**
21. Lady Bracknell's pun, "...persons whose *origin* was a *Terminus*," excludes (A). Jack's insistence that he can produce documentation of Cecily's family history right down to her birth certificate and medical records (including both English and German measles) eliminates (B). Lines like Lady Bracknell's admonition to Algernon: "Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that," eliminate (D). Likewise, Lady Bracknell's contradicting herself about marriage: "I do not approve of mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind," eliminates (E). **There is, however, no miscommunication in the scene. Thus, (C) is the correct answer.**
22. This late in the play, conflicts are being resolved, not introduced, and Jack's refusal is merely one in a line of obstacles to Algernon and Cecily's getting married. Thus (A) is eliminated. If Algernon and Jack were protagonist and antagonist, and the play were to end with Algernon and Cecily *not* getting married, (B) might be possible, but these are not the facts of the story. Rather than bringing a plotline to a conclusion, the refusal keeps a plotline open, thus eliminating (C). (E) is tempting, but a complication would add to an already-existing obstacle, not introduce a new one. **For Jack to withhold his consent, just as Lady Bracknell is convinced to give hers, is a reversal of the audience's expectation. The situation seems resolved, and then the audience learns that it is not. Thus (D) is the correct answer.**
23. Clearly Lady Bracknell's early coldness to Cecily eliminates (A). (B) is tempting, but Lady Bracknell is considerably less condescending once she learns of Cecily's fortune, so (B) does not describe Lady Bracknell's *overall* treatment. (C) is likewise tempting, but, ultimately, Lady Bracknell is unable to dominate when Jack withholds his consent. (E) simply does not apply, especially once Lady Bracknell learns of Cecily's fortune. (D), **however, is clearly the best choice. Lady Bracknell is thoroughly dismissive of Cecily and calls her plain and simple until she learns of the girl's fortune. It is then that she first notices Cecily's "social possibilities."**
24. In the same sentence, as if to justify her disapproval, Lady Bracknell admits that she had no fortune when she married Lord Bracknell. The implication is clearly that she married for money and is apprehensive that Cecily might think of marrying Algernon for his. Thus (A) is the best answer.

25. Cecily's age (A) figures into Jack's withholding his consent and would more likely make a long engagement advisable. Jack's lack of consent (B) does not affect the length of the engagement but renders it impossible. (C) is ambiguous—to whom does "her" refer?—and would, again, indicate a long engagement, not a short one. (D) might be tempting, but Lady Bracknell does not refer to the customs of the time. **She does, however, assert that it is advisable for the two to marry *before* they have a chance to know one another well. This is contrary to the audience's expectations of what an engagement should do, and is, thus, the source of the humor. Thus (E) is the correct answer.**

# The Importance of Being Earnest

## First Act

1. How does Algernon's statement that he does not play the piano "accurately" but "with wonderful expression" exemplify the principles of the Aesthetic Movement?

*The Aesthetic Movement championed "art for art's sake." Aesthetes were interested in enjoying art for pure pleasure without paying attention to the conventional laws of composition. Algernon plays the piano in order to express and experience the powerful expression of the music.*

2. What does Wilde suggest is going to be one of the primary sources of humor when Algernon asks Lane about the champagne?

*The frank but unaccusing attitude with which Algernon insinuates that Lane has been drinking his champagne, and the frank, unrepentant manner in which Lane responds suggest that, in this comedy, although the characters will maintain a façade of genteel civility, they will speak bluntly and honestly to one another.*

3. Where is the humor in Algernon's comments on the lack of "moral responsibility" among the lower classes?

*Theoretically, one would expect the well-mannered and educated upper classes to set the moral example for the coarser lower classes. In his comments, however, Algernon completely reverses this concept, essentially justifying upper-class irresponsibility and self-indulgence.*

4. What does Algernon's comment on marriage as a "business" reveal about his attitude toward married life?

*Algernon believes that people get married for monetary or social reasons. Very rarely is love of any consideration at all. Algernon further believes that married life puts an end to all pleasure: men have to stop engaging in their former pastimes, at the same time, being forced to spend time with a woman they likely cannot stand.*

5. Why does Jack praise the bread and butter Algernon offers him? What does his praise reveal about Jack?

*Jack praises the bread and butter as soon as he hears that the food has been specially ordered for Gwendolen. Jack adores Gwendolen and is determined to like everything she likes. He seems truly infatuated with Gwendolen.*

6. According to Algernon, why is it unlikely that Jack will ever be married to Gwendolen?

*Algernon does not believe that love and marriage have anything to do with one another. Also, Algernon has suspicions about Jack's apparent relationship with a woman in the country named Cecily.*

7. Why does Jack initially lie about Cecily's identity? What does his decision to lie reveal about his attitude toward Algernon?

*Jack does not want Algernon to know about his true identity as Jack Worthing. More importantly, Jack knows that Algernon is a womanizer and a reckless young man. He does not trust Algernon to be around his ward Cecily, because he fears that Algernon would be a corrupting influence on her. Thus, he hopes to keep her identity a secret from Algernon.*

8. What do notions of "town" and "country" stand for? What do the two concepts reveal about the hypocrisy of Victorian upper-class culture?

*The town symbolizes a life of pleasure marked by drinking, parties, women, and gambling. The country, on the other hand, symbolizes the respectable lifestyle of the quintessential Victorian gentleman. The fact that Jack (and Algernon) feels a need to create separate identities for living in the city on the one hand and living in the country on the other hand exposes the hypocrisy of Victorian culture that pretends to focus on morality at all times.*

9. How does Cecily Cardew function as a motivating factor for Jack to invent his younger brother Ernest?

*Jack is Cecily Cardew's guardian. He feels that he must "adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects" whenever he is around Cecily in order to bring her up as a well-behaved young lady. He wants to teach Cecily the moral values of Victorian society, and he wants to set a good example for her through his own righteous behavior. Jack cannot indulge in luxuries and pleasures when he is around Cecily. Therefore, he has been forced to invent the alternative identity of Ernest.*

10. How does Algernon use Bunbury as a tool to maintain a respectable social image?

*Algernon has invented an invalid named Bunbury, who enables him to escape undesirable social obligations. Whenever Algernon wants to escape a dinner party or other obligation, he claims that he must visit his sick friend Bunbury. The character of Bunbury allows Algernon to violate social conventions (i.e., cancel dinner plans and undesirable visits) without gaining the reputation of being unreliable.*

11. What reasons does Jack give for wanting to “kill” Ernest?

*Jack believes that he will not be able to maintain the identity of Ernest once he becomes engaged and then married to Gwendolen. He believes he will no longer want to maintain a double life. Moreover, Jack fears that his ward Cecily has developed an interest in the mysterious brother Ernest.*

12. What does Algernon’s statement that “a man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it” reveal about his attitude toward marriage?

*Algernon believes that people who get married are rarely in love. He is convinced that any married man needs a Bunbury-like character in order to have an opportunity to escape the obligations of married life and continue leading a life of pleasure in secrecy.*

13. What is ironic about Algernon’s statement, “I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them”?

*Algernon urges Jack not to cancel their dinner plans at Willis’s restaurant for the evening. His warning that Jack should be serious about their dinner plans is ironic because Algernon himself intends to cancel his dinner plans with Aunt Augusta in order to join Jack at Willis’s.*

14. What does Algernon’s statement that he is “feeling very well” in response to Aunt Augusta’s questions whether or not he is “behaving very well” reveal about the superficial nature of Victorian upper-class culture?

*Algernon’s statement plays with the idea that there is a difference between “being” and “seeming” in Victorian upper-class culture. In other words, members of the upper class know that appearances and outward behaviors are not necessarily a reliable indicator of a person’s true feelings.*

15. What is ironic about Lady Bracknell’s statement that Lady Harbury “looks quite twenty years younger”?

*Lady Harbury’s husband has recently died, and—as a grieving widow—she could be expected to look and feel ill. Instead, her husband’s death has rejuvenated Lady Harbury, and she looks better than ever.*

16. Analyze the several layers of humor in Lady Bracknell's reaction to Algernon's breaking his dinner engagement with her. At what is Wilde most likely poking fun?

*Algernon uses his invalid friend Bunbury as his excuse for not being able to go to dinner. In her reaction, Lady Bracknell is both callous and clueless, callous in her apparent indifference to whether the man lives or dies, and clueless in speaking as if the man himself had a choice in the matter. Wilde is most likely poking fun at the wealthy's stereotypical self-centeredness. Someone else's most extreme difficulty is—to the wealthy—an inconvenience and an obstacle to fulfilling their own desires.*

17. What is ironic about Gwendolen's wanting to marry a man named Ernest?

*Gwendolen considers Ernest to be a name that "inspires absolute confidence." She believes it is a "divine name" that "has a music of its own." The irony is that she is basing her choice of husband on a most ridiculous assumption and thoroughly superficial trait.*

18. What does Lady Bracknell's reaction to hearing about Gwendolen's engagement reveal?

*To some extent, Lady Bracknell represents the tradition of a girl's parents choosing her husband for her. We see further evidence of the self-indulgence of the wealthy in Lady Bracknell's insistence that Gwendolen's happiness need not enter into the equation of whom she is to marry. Further, Wilde continues to poke fun at social trivialities. Many of Lady Bracknell's questions to Jack are ludicrous as are most of her reactions to his answers.*

19. How realistic a character is Lady Bracknell?

*Given the absolute firmness of her opinions and the bluntness with which she voices them, Lady Bracknell is clearly a caricature of the upper class of the older generation.*

20. How does Lady Bracknell's question whether Jack was born in the "purple of commerce" or "the ranks of the aristocracy" reflect on the social make-up of the upper class in Victorian England?

*In Victorian England, the upper class consisted of the landed gentry and the aristocracy. The landed gentry rose from the ranks of the middle class and gained wealth and possessions through business and commerce. After having earned enough money to buy an estate, these former members of the middle class abandoned their professions and moved into the upper class. The aristocracy, on the other hand, enjoyed inherited upper-class status and wealth. Some aristocrats looked unfavorably on the members of the upper class who had come from the middle class.*

21. Why do Jack's origins in the "cloak-room at Victoria station" make him an ineligible match for Gwendolen in Lady Bracknell's eyes?

*Since Jack does not know his parents, he cannot prove that he has any kind of respectable heritage. Lady Bracknell will not allow her daughter to marry a man whose origins are a mystery and who cannot align himself with any of Britain's respectable families. An alliance with Jack would jeopardize Gwendolen's social status.*

22. What comic convention does Lady Bracknell's insistence that Jack produce some relations and at least one parent illustrate?

*It will, of course, be utterly impossible for Jack to acquire a parent or any other relations. Lady Bracknell's request is an example of absurdity.*

23. How does Gwendolen react when she realizes that her mother will not allow a marriage with Jack? Why is this comic?

*Gwendolen realizes that she will likely be unable to act against her mother's wishes. She tells Jack that she may have to marry another man but assures him that she will always love him. It is comic because, again, one would expect love and marriage to accompany one another. One would not expect a young woman like Gwendolen to anticipate entering a loveless marriage while still harboring affection for another man.*

## Second Act

1. What is Cecily implying in her reason for disliking her German lesson?

*Cecily is acknowledging the stereotype of intelligent, educated girls being unattractive (or, conversely, of attractive women being silly).*

2. What is ironic about Miss Prism's expressing concern for Jack and admiration for his devotion to his brother? What kind of irony is this?

*This is dramatic irony. The audience already knows that Jack does not have a brother and that he himself moves about in London society as Ernest Worthing.*

3. How does Cecily's concept of "memory" differ from Miss Prism's idea of "memory"? What stereotype is Wilde comically reinforcing?

*Miss Prism believes that memories are the recollections of events that happen throughout a person's life. Cecily, on the other hand, considers memories to be the fantasies and wishes a person dreams about and hopes to experience one day, no matter how unrealistic these wishes may be. Wilde is reinforcing the stereotype that sensible women, like Miss Prism, are plain and dull and likely to become spinsters. Beautiful girls like Cecily are foolish.*

4. Why does Dr. Chasuble explain that he was speaking metaphorically when he expresses a desire to "hang upon" Miss Prism's lips?

*Dr. Chasuble explains that he would "hang upon" Miss Prism's lips if he were her student, meaning that he would pay close attention to every word she says. Since his expression carries an erotic undertone, he quickly explains that he spoke metaphorically. Dr. Chasuble does not want Miss Prism to think that he has been fantasizing about kissing her.*

5. What can readers infer about Miss Prism when she corrects Dr. Chasuble upon being called "Egeria" and reminds him that her name is Laetitia?

*Dr. Chasuble calls Miss Prism Egeria in order to compare her to a Roman goddess who was known as an instructress of young women. Miss Prism does not understand his allusion and assumes that he has forgotten her name. She, consequently, corrects him and reminds him that her name is Laetitia. Miss Prism's failure to understand Dr. Chasuble's allusion reveals her ignorance.*

6. What are Cecily's expectations upon hearing that Mr. Ernest Worthing has arrived? What do her expectations reveal about her character?

*When Cecily hears that Mr. Ernest Worthing has arrived, she is excited to meet a "wicked" man and hopes that he will not be like all the other men she knows. So far, Cecily has led a sheltered life, and she is curious about the stories her Uncle Jack has told about his wicked brother Ernest. She has a wild side and cannot wait to encounter somebody who deviates from the social norm.*

7. How does Cecily's fear that Ernest might have been leading a double life reverse Jack's and Algernon's reasons for creating an alternative identity?

*When Cecily refers to Ernest's double life, she indicates her suspicion that he might "have been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time." Her fear reverses the notion of alternative identities: Jack created an alternative identity to lead a wicked life and transgress Victorian moral norms, not to lead a good life.*

8. Why does Algernon—as Ernest—claim that he must be back in London on Monday?

*Algernon knows that Jack will return on Monday. He plans to disappear from Jack's home before Jack returns.*

9. According to Cecily, what plans does Jack have in store for his brother Ernest?

*Cecily tells Algernon that Jack plans to send Ernest to Australia or force him to choose between this world and the next.*

10. What is Miss Prism's attitude toward the practices of the Primitive Church? What does her attitude reveal about her relationship with Dr. Chasuble?

*Miss Prism does not approve of the practices of the Primitive Church. Specifically, she does not believe that the practice of celibacy is particularly useful. Instead, she thinks that priests should get married so that they are no longer a "public temptation." Clearly, Miss Prism has romantic feelings for Dr. Chasuble.*

11. Why does Jack appear at his estate wearing the "garb of woe"?

*Since Jack has decided to "kill" Ernest, he arrives at his house prepared to announce that his brother Ernest has unexpectedly died of a "severe chill" while staying in Paris.*

12. What does Miss Prism's reaction to the news of Ernest's death suggest about Victorian morality?

*Miss Prism's statement is not terribly different from Lady Bracknell's pronouncement about poor Mr. Bunbury in Act One. The suggestion is that, perhaps, the Victorian preoccupation with morality may have blinded people to the obvious fact that many misfortunes simply cannot be avoided and used as opportunities for learning.*

13. At what stereotype about the church is Wilde poking fun in Chasuble's response to the news that Ernest will be buried in Paris?

*Dr. Chasuble offers to preach a sermon that he has apparently preached many times before on many occasions. Rather than speaking from his Christian heart, he delivers a sort of "one-size-fits-all" message.*

14. Why does Dr. Chasuble accuse the lower classes of not being thrifty?

*Dr. Chasuble explains that he has to conduct many christenings a month. He has asked his parishioners many times to be thriftier, meaning that he has urged them not to have too many children that must be christened by him.*

15. What is Jack's motivation for wanting to be christened by Dr. Chasuble?

*Jack believes that Gwendolen will only love a man named Ernest. Therefore, he is determined to change his name from Jack to Ernest.*

16. How is Algernon's insistence that his "duty as a gentleman has never interfered with [his] pleasures in the smallest degree" ambiguous?

*On the one hand, the statement could indicate that Algernon is a "true" gentleman and that his duty and pleasure are one and the same thing. On the other hand, the audience knows Algernon and knows that he uses deceit to look the proper gentleman while living the pleasurable life he chooses.*

17. How do descriptions of Algernon qualify him as a "dandy" in the tradition of the Aesthetic Movement?

*Algernon pays close attention to his physical appearance and takes a long time getting dressed. Jack claims that his "vanity is ridiculous" and that he "never saw anybody take so long to dress." The dandy in the Aesthetic tradition is a man who dresses flamboyantly and pays close attention to the impeccability of his physical appearance.*

18. How can Cecily's diary be considered a lighthearted attack on Victorian morality?

*Cecily has lived a sheltered life in the country in the company of her "Uncle Jack" and Miss Prism. She is almost the archetype of an unspoiled Victorian lady. Rather than enjoying her morality, however, she leads a scandalous fantasy life, writing her diary almost as if she were a character in a romance novel.*

19. How does Cecily's diary mirror Jack's brother and Algernon's invalid friend?

*All three are means of maintaining a double life, a public façade of propriety and a secret life of amusement.*

20. According to Cecily, why was it necessary for her to break her engagement with Ernest?

*Cecily is an old-fashioned, romantic girl. In her mind, an engagement does not count if it were not broken off at least once. It is part of the rules of courtship.*

21. Why does Algernon decide to get christened?

*Cecily tells Algernon that she could not love a man whose name is not Ernest.*

22. How does Gwendolen's assessment of her father's status within his family stand in contrast to conventional Victorian notions of gender?

*Gwendolen explains that her father is little known outside of the family circle. She states, "The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man." Her assessment of her father's situation stands in stark contrast to conventional Victorian notions of gender: while Victorian society insisted that the male sphere was the public sphere and the female sphere was the domestic sphere, Gwendolen's father is confined to the home and is barely known in public.*

23. What does Gwendolen imply about Cecily when she states that their "social spheres have been widely different"?

*Gwendolen indicates that she believes Cecily to be beneath her on the social ladder. Although Gwendolen knows that Cecily is also an upper-class lady, she considers her inferior because she is a country girl and not a lady living in the city. Gwendolen considers herself to be superior because she lives in fashionable London and stays up-to-date with all the latest trends.*

24. How does Wilde maintain an atmosphere of light humor in the disagreement between Gwendolen and Cecily?

*First, of course, Gwendolen instantly likes Cecily, predicts they will be best friends forever, and claims that her first impressions are never wrong. Now, when both women believe they are engaged to the same man, Gwendolen insists that she disliked Cecily from the very first and that her first impressions are never wrong.*

25. What is the significance of eating? When else has food figured into the play?

*Food is used as the medium through which characters can mask their true feelings—especially of nervousness or distress. In Act I, Algernon was preparing tea for his aunt; eating the cucumber sandwiches and the bread and butter were mild sources of comedy. Earlier in Act 2, Cecily was serving tea to Gwendolen and, despite her polite façade, insulted her guest by providing exactly the food she did not want. Now, instead of fretting about his love life, Algernon is calmly eating buttered muffins. As tea is a social construct—especially among the upper classes—it is ironically appropriate that Wilde would use various tea settings for moments that should be highly emotional but cannot be because of the constraints of proper social etiquette.*

### Third Act

1. What contradictions can be found in the conversation between Cecily and Gwendolen as they observe Jack and Algernon eating muffins in the garden? What is the primary purpose of these contradictions?

*First, the women are annoyed that Jack and Algernon are not paying them any attention. Then they express indignation that the men are staring at them. When the men come in, Gwendolen insists that the women will not speak first, but she does. Wilde employs these contradictions for pure comic effect.*

2. How does Wilde continue a bit of humor he began in the previous act concerning Gwendolen and Cecily's friendship? What might Wilde be poking fun at?

*Just as Gwendolen and Cecily went from instantly liking to instantly disliking, now that they have the common enemies of the men, they are close and loving again—like sisters. Wilde is probably poking fun at human superficiality—especially, perhaps, the superficiality of the upper classes who stereotypically base many of their personal relationships on traits unrelated to the other person's character.*

3. What artistic viewpoint does Gwendolen's statement that "in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing" reflect?

*This statement of style over substance or form over function is the foundation of the Aesthetic Movement. Gwendolen's statement mirrors the attempt made by the Aesthetes to relish the beauty of style regardless of any moral concerns.*

4. What is Lady Bracknell worried about when she learns that Algernon is engaged to Cecily?

*When Lady Bracknell hears that Cecily is Jack's ward, she fears that, like Jack, Cecily lacks family relations.*

5. How does hyperbole contribute to the humor in the discussion of Algernon's engagement to Cecily?

*Since a person's identity, family connections, and history are so important to Lady Bracknell, Jack assures her that, not only can he produce documentation of Cecily's birth and parentage, but he can produce her entire history—almost as if he were selling a thoroughbred horse or something.*

6. On what grounds does Lady Bracknell recognize "distinct social possibilities" in Cecily's profile?

*Cecily was born into a respectable and rich family and has a considerable fortune at her disposal.*

7. Why is Lady Bracknell's claim that she does not "approve of mercenary marriages" ironic?

*Lady Bracknell herself married for money, although she makes it sound as if, by being poor, she prevented her husband from marrying for money.*

8. How does Jack's refusal to consent to Cecily's marriage with Algernon poke fun at Victorian propriety?

*First, every reason Jack uses to support that Algernon is not fit to marry Cecily (Algernon lied about his identity, ate Jack's food, etc.) is something that can also be said of Jack in his courtship with Gwendolen. Second, ultimately, he is not at all concerned with Cecily's well-being but his own. He admits that he is prepared to consent to Cecily's marriage to Algernon as soon as Lady Bracknell consents to his marriage to Gwendolen.*

9. Why is Dr. Chasuble insulted when Lady Bracknell asks him what "position" Miss Prism occupies in his household?

*Wilde's audience would have recognized the sexual innuendo in Lady Bracknell's question.*

10. What is humorous about Jack's calling Miss Prism "mother" when he hears about her losing the handbag?

*When Jack learns that Miss Prism left the handbag carrying him as a baby at Victoria Station, he immediately assumes that she must be his (unwed) mother and that, in her distress and shame, she abandoned him. Miss Prism is, of course, shocked to hear herself suspected of behavior that runs counter to all of their society's standards, which Miss Prism strongly upholds.*

11. What common humorous convention does Wilde employ in Jack's discovery that he is Algernon's elder brother?

*Earlier, while disowning Algernon as his brother Ernest, Jack insisted on a number of occasions that he did not have a brother, never had a brother, and never intended to have a brother. Now he completely contradicts those earlier statements: "I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother!"*

12. How did Miss Prism "lose" Jack? Aside from the absurdity of losing a baby, where is the humor in this story?

*When Jack was a baby, Miss Prism took him for a walk in his perambulator. She also carried a large handbag containing a manuscript of the three-volume novel she was writing. Absorbed in her own work, Miss Prism accidentally placed the child in the handbag and the manuscript in the perambulator. She consequently forgot the handbag with the baby at Victoria Station. The humor lies in the incongruity of a person like Miss Prism writing a work of fiction.*

13. What is significant about the fact that no one apparently remembers Algernon and Jack's father's first name?

*As Gwendolen indicated in Act II that her father had been relegated to the private sphere and was completely unknown beyond the family circle, so too must the late Ernest Moncrieff have been so utterly unknown that even his son and sister-in-law do not remember his name.*

14. What is ironic about Gwendolen's statement that Jack has "become someone else"?

*The irony lies in the fact that Gwendolen's statement is at once true and not true. Jack is, of course, the same person he always was. He simply has more information about his background and parentage. On the other hand, he has indeed become a different person—Ernest Moncrieff instead of Jack Worthing, and Algernon's brother. The irony is further complicated because, as the orphaned Jack Worthing, he was unworthy to marry the daughter of Lord and Lady Bracknell, but now that he is a Moncrieff, he is a suitable match—even though none of his qualities as a person has changed.*

# The Importance of Being Earnest

## First Act

1. How does Algernon’s statement that he does not play the piano “accurately” but “with wonderful expression” exemplify the principles of the Aesthetic Movement?

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2. What does Wilde suggest is going to be one of the primary sources of humor when Algernon asks Lane about the champagne?

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3. Where is the humor in Algernon’s comments on the lack of “moral responsibility” among the lower classes?

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4. What does Algernon’s comment on marriage as a “business” reveal about his attitude toward married life?

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5. Why does Jack praise the bread and butter Algernon offers him? What does his praise reveal about Jack?

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6. According to Algernon, why is it unlikely that Jack will ever be married to Gwendolen?

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7. Why does Jack initially lie about Cecily’s identity? What does his decision to lie reveal about his attitude toward Algernon?

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8. What do notions of “town” and “country” stand for? What do the two concepts reveal about the hypocrisy of Victorian upper-class culture?

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9. How does Cecily Cardew function as a motivating factor for Jack to invent his younger brother Ernest?

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10. How does Algernon use Bunbury as a tool to maintain a respectable social image?

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11. What reasons does Jack give for wanting to “kill” Ernest?

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12. What does Algernon’s statement that “a man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it” reveal about his attitude toward marriage?

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13. What is ironic about Algernon’s statement, “I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them”?

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14. What does Algernon’s statement that he is “feeling very well” in response to Aunt Augusta’s questions whether or not he is “behaving very well” reveal about the superficial nature of Victorian upper-class culture?

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15. What is ironic about Lady Bracknell’s statement that Lady Harbury “looks quite twenty years younger”?

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16. Analyze the several layers of humor in Lady Bracknell’s reaction to Algernon’s breaking his dinner engagement with her. At what is Wilde most likely poking fun?

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17. What is ironic about Gwendolen’s wanting to marry a man named Ernest?

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18. What does Lady Bracknell’s reaction to hearing about Gwendolen’s engagement reveal?

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19. How realistic a character is Lady Bracknell?

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20. How does Lady Bracknell's question whether Jack was born in the "purple of commerce" or "the ranks of the aristocracy" reflect on the social make-up of the upper class in Victorian England?

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21. Why do Jack's origins in the "cloak-room at Victoria station" make him an ineligible match for Gwendolen in Lady Bracknell's eyes?

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22. What comic convention does Lady Bracknell's insistence that Jack produce some relations and at least one parent illustrate?

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23. How does Gwendolen react when she realizes that her mother will not allow a marriage with Jack? Why is this comic?

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**Second Act**

1. What is Cecily implying in her reason for disliking her German lesson?

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2. What is ironic about Miss Prism’s expressing concern for Jack and admiration for his devotion to his brother? What kind of irony is this?

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3. How does Cecily’s concept of “memory” differ from Miss Prism’s idea of “memory”? What stereotype is Wilde comically reinforcing?

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4. Why does Dr. Chasuble explain that he was speaking metaphorically when he expresses a desire to “hang upon” Miss Prism’s lips?

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5. What can readers infer about Miss Prism when she corrects Dr. Chasuble upon being called “Egeria” and reminds him that her name is Laetitia?

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6. What are Cecily’s expectations upon hearing that Mr. Ernest Worthing has arrived? What do her expectations reveal about her character?

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7. How does Cecily’s fear that Ernest might have been leading a double life reverse Jack’s and Algernon’s reasons for creating an alternative identity?

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8. Why does Algernon—as Ernest—claim that he must be back in London on Monday?

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9. According to Cecily, what plans does Jack have in store for his brother Ernest?

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10. What is Miss Prism’s attitude toward the practices of the Primitive Church? What does her attitude reveal about her relationship with Dr. Chasuble?

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11. Why does Jack appear at his estate wearing the “garb of woe”?

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12. What does Miss Prism’s reaction to the news of Ernest’s death suggest about Victorian morality?

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13. At what stereotype about the church is Wilde poking fun in Chasuble’s response to the news that Ernest will be buried in Paris?

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14. Why does Dr. Chasuble accuse the lower classes of not being thrifty?

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15. What is Jack's motivation for wanting to be christened by Dr. Chasuble?

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16. How is Algernon's insistence that his "duty as a gentleman has never interfered with [his] pleasures in the smallest degree" ambiguous?

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17. How do descriptions of Algernon qualify him as a "dandy" in the tradition of the Aesthetic Movement?

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18. How can Cecily's diary be considered a lighthearted attack on Victorian morality?

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19. How does Cecily's diary mirror Jack's brother and Algernon's invalid friend?

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20. According to Cecily, why was it necessary for her to break her engagement with Ernest?

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21. Why does Algernon decide to get christened?

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22. How does Gwendolen's assessment of her father's status within his family stand in contrast to conventional Victorian notions of gender?

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23. What does Gwendolen imply about Cecily when she states that their "social spheres have been widely different"?

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24. How does Wilde maintain an atmosphere of light humor in the disagreement between Gwendolen and Cecily?

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25. What is the significance of eating ? When else has food figured into the play?

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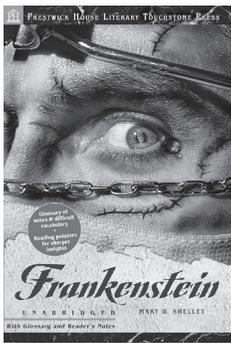
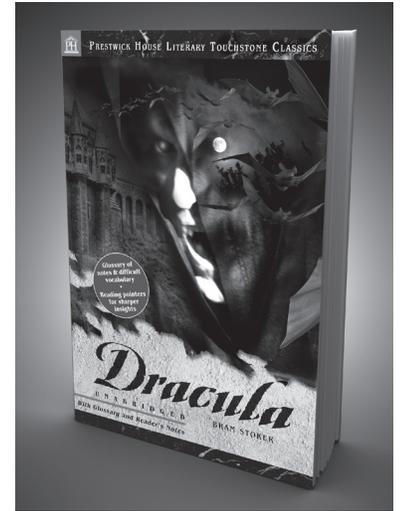
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