



The vital importance of being Earnest

What follows is the last scene of the play set in Jack's country house where his real identity is revealed.

Oscar Wilde
The Importance of Being Earnest
(1895)

Act 3

- LADY BRACKNELL** [*in a severe, judicial voice*] Prism! [*MISS PRISM bows her head in shame.*] Come here, Prism! [*MISS PRISM approaches in a humble manner.*] Prism! Where is that baby? [*General consternation. The CANON¹ starts back in horror. ALGERNON and JACK pretend to be anxious to shield CECILY and GWENDOLEN from hearing the details of a terrible public scandal.*] Twenty-eight years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell's house, Number 104, Upper Grosvenor Street, in charge of a perambulator² that contained a baby of the male sex. You never returned. A few weeks later, through the elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan police, the perambulator was discovered at midnight, standing by itself in a remote corner of Bayswater³. It contained the manuscript of a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality. [*MISS PRISM starts in involuntary indignation.*] But the baby was not there! [*Everyone looks at MISS PRISM.*] Prism! Where is that baby? [*A pause.*]
- MISS PRISM** Lady Bracknell, I admit with shame that I do not know. I only wish I did. The plain facts of the case are these. On the morning of the day you mention, a day that is for ever branded⁴ on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old, but capacious hand-bag in which I had intended to place the manuscript of a work of fiction that I had written during my few unoccupied hours. In a moment of mental abstraction⁵, for which I never can forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette⁵, and placed the baby in the hand-bag.
- JACK** [*who has been listening attentively*] But where did you deposit the hand-bag?
- MISS PRISM** Do not ask me, Mr Worthing.
- JACK** Miss Prism, this is a matter of no small importance to me. I insist on knowing where you deposited the hand-bag that contained that infant.
- MISS PRISM** I left it in the cloak-room of one of the larger railway stations in London.
- JACK** What railway station?
- MISS PRISM** [*quite crushed*⁶] Victoria. The Brighton line. [*Sinks into a chair*⁷.]
- JACK** I must retire to my room for a moment. Gwendolen, wait here for me.
[...]
- [*Enter JACK with a hand-bag of black leather in his hand.*]
- JACK** [*rushing over* to MISS PRISM] Is this the handbag, Miss Prism? Examine it carefully before you speak. The happiness of more than one life depends on your answer.
- MISS PRISM** [*calmly*] It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus⁸ in younger and happier days. Here is the stain on the lining⁹ caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage¹⁰, an incident that occurred at Leamington. And here, on the lock¹¹, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had had them placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years.
- JACK** [*in a pathetic voice*] Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this hand-bag. I was the baby you placed in it.
- MISS PRISM** [*amazed*] You?
- JACK** [*embracing her*] Yes... mother!
- MISS PRISM** [*recoiling*¹¹ in indignant astonishment] Mr Worthing! I am unmarried.
- JACK** Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow¹². But after all, who has the right to cast¹³ a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out¹⁴ an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you. [*Tries to embrace her again.*]

- 1 *The CANON.* Dr Chasuble, il pastore venuto per il battesimo di Jack e Algernon.
- 2 *perambulator.* Carrozzina.
- 3 *Bayswater.* Quartiere nella parte occidentale di Londra.
- 4 *branded.* Impresso.
- 5 *bassinette.* Culla.
- 6 *quite crushed.* Completamente sopraffatta.
- 7 *Sinks into a chair.* Si lascia cadere su una sedia.
- 8 *the upsetting ... omnibus.* Il capovolgimento di un omnibus (trainato all'epoca da cavalli) in Gower Street.
- 9 *the stain on the lining.* La macchia sulla fodera.
- 10 *temperance beverage.* Bevanda non alcolica.
- 11 *recoiling.* Indietreggiando.
- 12 *blow.* Colpo.
- 13 *cast.* Scagliare.
- 14 *repentance wipe out.* Il pentimento lavar via.



- MISS PRISM [*still more indignant*] Mr Worthing, there is some error. [*Pointing to LADY BRACKNELL*] There is the lady who can tell you who you really are.
- JACK [*after a pause*] Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am?
- LADY BRACKNELL I am afraid that the news I have to give you will not altogether please you. You are the son of my poor sister, Mrs Moncrieff, and consequently Algernon's elder brother.
- JACK Algy's elder brother! Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother! [...]
- Then the question had better be cleared up at once. Aunt Augusta, a moment. At the time when Miss Prism left me in the hand-bag, had I been christened¹⁵ already?
- LADY BRACKNELL Every luxury that money could buy, including **christening**, had been lavished¹⁶ on you by your fond and doting¹⁷ parents.
- JACK Then I was christened! That is settled. Now, what name was I given? Let me know the worst.
- LADY BRACKNELL Being the eldest son you were naturally christened after your father.
- JACK [*irritably*] Yes, but what was my father's Christian name?
- LADY BRACKNELL [*meditatively*] I cannot at the present moment recall what the General's Christian name was. But I have no doubt he had one. He was eccentric, I admit. But only in later years. And that was the result of the Indian climate, and marriage, and indigestion, and other things of that kind.
- JACK Algy! Can't you recollect what our father's Christian name was?
- ALGERNON My dear boy, we were never even on speaking terms. He died before I was a year old.
- JACK His name would appear in the Army Lists of the period, I suppose, Aunt Augusta?
- LADY BRACKNELL The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life. But I have no doubt his name would appear in any military directory.
- JACK The Army Lists of the last forty years are here. These delightful records should have been my constant study. [*Rushes to bookcase and tears the books out*¹⁸.] M
- Generals... Mallam, Maxbohm, Magley, what **ghastly** names they have – Markby, Migsby, Mobbs, Moncrieff! Lieutenant 1840, Captain, Lieutenant-Colonel, Colonel, General 1869, Christian names, Ernest John. [*Puts book very quietly down and speaks quite calmly.*] I always told you, Gwendolen, my name was Ernest, didn't I? Well, it is Ernest after all. I mean it naturally is Ernest.
- LADY BRACKNELL Yes, I remember now that the General was called Ernest, I knew I had some particular reason for disliking the name.
- GWENDOLEN Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first that you could have no other name!
- JACK Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?
- GWENDOLEN I can. For I feel that you are sure to change.
- JACK My own one!
- [...]
- ALGERNON Cecily! [*Embraces her.*] At last!
- JACK Gwendolen! [*Embraces her.*] At last!
- LADY BRACKNELL My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality.
- JACK On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.

15 christened. Battezzato.

16 had been lavished. Era stato profuso.

17 fond and doting. Affezionati e amorevoli.

18 tears ... out. Tira fuori con foga i libri.

**LITERARY COMPETENCE****1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.**

- | | | | |
|---|------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| 1 | difendere, proteggere | 5 | terribili, terrificanti |
| 2 | andando di corsa verso | 6 | chiusura |
| 3 | battesimo | 7 | distrazione |
| 4 | critica | 8 | china |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT**2 READ the text again and find out**

- what Lady Bracknell wants to know from Miss Prism;
- when the baby disappeared;
- what Miss Prism confesses;
- what Jack suddenly realises and what he produces;
- what Lady Bracknell tells Jack;
- what a search through the military periodicals of the time reveals;
- what happens in the end.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**3 CONCENTRATE on Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism.**

- 1 What are they like?
- 2 What social classes do they represent?
- 3 What aspects of Victorianism are criticised through Miss Prism's words?

4 FOCUS on Jack.

- 1 The episode of Jack's recognition, which takes place in this extract, is comic. What makes it so?
- 2 He discovers that he has always been earnest because of a number of remarkable circumstances. What does his last sentence reveal?
- 3 What kind of humour do these characters reflect?

5 FOCUS on the stage directions. Do they affect the overall meaning of the scene?**6 DEFINE the language used in this scene.****> COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE CONTEXT OF THE AGE****7 DISCUSS.** Underline the paradoxes of this scene. They are mainly used by Lady Bracknell and Jack. Then say which institutions and values of Victorian society are challenged.