

## Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of Wilde's most famous comedies, known for its ironical style and witty language, as well as for its brilliant and elaborate plot.

Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff are two bachelors who decide to create two alter egos named Ernest to escape their tiresome lives. They attempt to win the hearts of two women who, conveniently, claim to only love men called Ernest. The pair struggle to keep up with their own stories and become tangled in a tale of deception, disguise and misadventure. The play ridicules Victorian sensibilities with some of the best loved, and bizarre characters to be found on the modern stage.

In the following excerpt Jack-Ernest has just proposed to Gwendolen, but the girl's mother, Lady Bracknell, wants to know more about Jack, before giving her assent to their union.



### Lady Bracknell's Interview

LADY BRACKNELL: 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?

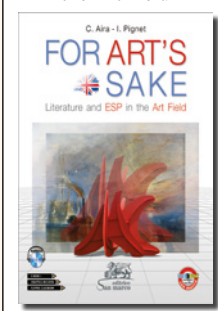
JACK: Yes. The Brighton line.

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. [...] 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 [...] 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.





## ACTIVITIES

### 1 Answer the following questions.

- 1 What genre does the passage belong to?
- 2 How many characters are involved?
- 3 What is the main theme of the passage?
- 4 Who found Jack?
- 5 Where did Mr Cardew find Jack?
- 6 Why is Jack's surname Worthing?

### 2 Choose the correct alternative.

- 1 What surprises Lady Bracknell most about Jack's origin?
  - a The fact he lost both his parents.
  - b The fact he was born – and bred – in a hand-bag.
- 2 Why is Lady Bracknell worried about Jack's origin?
  - a Because he does not know what social class he belongs to.
  - b Because he is poor.
- 3 What does Lady Bracknell suggest Jack do?
  - a To produce at any rate one parent, of either sex.
  - b To go to the police.
- 4 Why does Jack ask Lady Bracknell what to do?
  - a Because he wants to get a job.
  - b Because he wants Gwendolen's happiness.

### 3 Match the following words with their Italian equivalents.

- |                |                            |
|----------------|----------------------------|
| 1 Carelessness | a Alquanto                 |
| 2 Charitable   | b Disprezzo                |
| 3 Disposition  | c Pelle                    |
| 4 Resort       | d Guardaroba               |
| 5 Somewhat     | e Noncuranza, sbadataggine |
| 6 Leather      | f Indole                   |
| 7 Handles      | g Sbalordito, sorpreso     |
| 8 Cloak-room   | h Luogo di villeggiatura   |
| 9 Bewildered   | i Manici                   |
| 10 Contempt    | j Caritatevole             |

