

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 1 (first part of Act 1)

Author: Daniel Barber

Level: Upper intermediate

Age: Young adults / Adults

Duration: Approx. 90 minutes

Aims: In this lesson, the students will:

1. become familiar with the social setting of the play;
2. listen for gist and detail;
3. become more aware of, and practise, contrastive stress;
4. explore the nature of the main characters' actions (i.e. 'Bunburying').

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student; Track 1 (beginning of Part 1); Track 2 (rest of Part 1); Track 3 (short extracts) and Track 4 (full audio) downloaded from onestopenglish; one copy of full script per student

Summary: Two young gentlemen use false names to lead double lives. These convenient secret identities become a problem, however, when they both fall in love at the same time. As the situation develops, it becomes more and more complicated for these fun-loving men. The story is told in eight parts. In Part 1, Algernon receives a surprise visit from his good friend Jack, who has decided to declare his love for Algernon's cousin. Before Algernon can agree to their marriage, he has one or two questions to ask.

Note: Before you start, you may want to check that your students are familiar with the format of a play. Ask if they have read any other plays and discuss the differences between a novel and a play in terms of layout and construction.

Activity 1

Aim: to familiarize students with the social setting of the play; to introduce important cultural concepts; to activate students' prior knowledge

1. Write the following words on the board: *champagne, 1890, servant, gentleman, afternoon tea, country house*. Explain that the class is going to listen to a play and that all these words come from it. Tell them you are going to ask them some questions about the play which they should try to answer in their heads by imagining it. Slowly read aloud the questions below, leaving a few seconds between questions for students to ponder. If students call out answers, gently remind them to just think about the answers, not say them yet:

- *Where are the main characters?*
- *What are they wearing?*
- *What are they doing?*
- *Are they rich or poor?*

2. When you have asked all the questions, put the students in pairs and ask them to discuss and compare their answers. Write key words from the questions on the board to help them remember: *where?, wearing?* etc.

3. Allow students time to discuss their answers, then invite them to suggest answers. You should treat all answers as possible without saying whether they are right or wrong but challenge the students for a justification for their answers. Write the answers on the board.

Note: Use this feedback to clarify cultural knowledge as follows: the question 'What are they doing?' can be exploited to ensure that the students understand *afternoon tea* (a light meal that used to be served for the upper classes, and which consisted of sandwiches, cakes and tea to drink); 'Are they rich or poor?' might lead to the idea of earning money by owning land – introduce the idea of the *country house*.

4. Tell the students that they are going to see a picture of the beginning of the play. Invite them to suggest things that might be in the picture. Encourage a variety of ideas with prompts such as *What furniture is there?, And what about the background?* and so on. When they start to run out of ideas, hand out

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 1 (first part of Act 1)

the worksheet so they can see the picture. Ask the students to say how much the picture confirms their initial ideas and how it is different.

Activity 2

Aims: to listen for gist; tune in to the main characters' voices with a short excerpt and easy questions

1. Explain that the class is going to listen to the first few minutes of the play. Dictate the below questions and ask students to write them down.

- *Who are the first three characters in the play?*
- *What are their relationships to one another?*
- *Where are they?*
- *What is going to happen soon?*

2. Play Track 1. When it has finished, let the students compare answers. Hand out the script and ask them to read the script for Track 1 and check their answers. Give the class a few minutes before you ask for answers. Ask how many of the questions they got right and give plenty of praise for understanding the general idea.

Note: With Question 1, observant students should have noticed an issue with Jack's name. Don't explain the false name yet, but invite explanations as to why Algernon calls him Ernest but it is written as Jack in the script.

Key: 1. *Algernon, Ernest / Jack (see note above) Lane; 2. Lane is Algernon's servant, Jack is Algernon's friend; 3. They are at Algernon's apartment; 4. Algernon's aunt and someone called Gwendolen are going to come for tea*

Activity 3

Aim: to read or listen for gist and detail

Note: Remember, the students have a copy of the script. Decide whether you want them to read the script for this next activity. If you want them to practise listening comprehension, tell them not to look at the script. However, if they struggled with the

questions in Activity 2 you may feel that they require the support that the script gives.

1. Direct students to Activity 3 on the worksheet. Explain that they are going to listen to the rest of Part 1 of the play and will need to decide whether the ten statements are true or false. Give them a couple of minutes to read through the statements and ask you any questions they may have about any unknown vocabulary. For example, you should be ready to explain *cucumber*, *cigarette case*, *to pretend* and *to propose*.

2. Play Track 2. When it is finished, let them compare their answers in pairs. If they have not been allowed to read the script, they could then check their answers with the script. Then go through the answers with the whole class.

Key:

1. *F. He wants to marry Gwendolen.*
2. *F. He says being in love is romantic, proposing and being married is not.*
3. *F. He eats them all and refuses to give Jack any.*
4. *T (at first)*
5. *T*
6. *F. He refuses to give it back until Jack has told him his secret.*
7. *F. He pretends to have a younger brother called Ernest.*
8. *T*
9. *F. Algernon assumes that they are and Jack accepts.*
10. *T*

Activity 4

Aims: to raise awareness of contrastive stress; to practise meaningful sentence stress in context

1. Direct students to the first dialogue in Activity 4 on the worksheet. Ask for a volunteer to read the part of Jack and respond yourself as Algernon. Explain that the two of you will read the dialogue three times. Each time you will say the part of Algernon differently. Ask the students to listen for the words that you stress differently each time. Read it the first time stressing 'I', the second stressing 'would' and the third

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 1 (first part of Act 1)

stressing 'large'. Ask them to tell you which words were stressed each time and which was the correct way (*would* should be stressed).

2. Let the students check their answers by playing the first dialogue in Track 3. Ask them to explain why *would* is stressed (because the idea of offering a large reward contrasts with what Jack has said – *nearly* offering one).

3. Tell them to work in pairs to decide which words should be stressed in the second lines in dialogues two and three to contrast with the phrases in bold in the first lines. Play the second and third dialogues in Track 3.

4. When you have made sure the class knows which words are stressed, have them practise stressing the sentences correctly in pairs.

Key: 2. Jack stresses 'not' ('Bunburyist' could also be stressed but 'not' should always be stressed in this context); 3. Algernon stresses 'pleasure'

Activity 5

Aims: to explore the theme of lying; to gauge the seriousness of the characters' wrongdoing

1. Ask the class to define *Bunburying* in their own words. Invite suggestions from the class and put their key words and ideas on the board.

2. Ask the class what they think about the act of Bunburying.

Is it something they would or could do? Why? / Why not?

Do they know of anyone (real or fictional) who leads a double life with a false name? How would you feel if you found out a friend was Bunburying?

3. Put students in groups of three or four. Direct them to Activity 5 on the worksheet. Explain that they are going to evaluate whether the situations are 'Bunburying' or not. They should discuss each situation and try to agree which of them are good examples of Bunburying and which are not.

4. Regroup the students so that they are with different people. Ask them to compare and justify their answers.

Note: The answers below are possible answers, but the activity is designed to be suitable for debate.

Key: 1. *Bunburying*; 2. *not Bunburying*; 3. *not Bunburying*; 4. *Bunburying*; 5. *Bunburying*; 6. *Bunburying*; 7. *not Bunburying*

Activity 6

Aims: speaking fluency; asking and answering questions about people; to end the lesson with a fun game

Note: Beforehand, you will need to prepare enough small slips of paper for everyone in the class. On half of these pieces of paper write *Real* and on the other half, *Bunbury*. Fold them up so that the word is impossible to see.

1. Explain that in order to be successful at Bunburying, you need to build a character that people are going to believe. If people ask you questions about them you need to be able to respond convincingly. Tell the class that they are going to play a game in groups where they have to convince the rest of their group that they are telling the truth about a friend. Show them two slips with *Real* or *Bunbury* written on. Explain that you are going to give everyone a slip. If their slip says 'Real', they must think of a friend that they know (but no one else in the class knows) and make notes about some information. If their slip says 'Bunbury' they must invent a fictitious friend and make notes. They *must not* show anyone their slip.

2. Hand out the slips. Give students a few minutes to make notes. As they write, help the class with ideas by calling out questions, e.g. *What is your friend's name?; How do you know them?; What do they look like?; How old are they?; What was the best day you spent with them?; What do you and your friend have in common?; Is there anything you don't like about them?* etc.

3. Ask the students to form groups of 4-7 people, sitting in a circle if possible. Smaller

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 1 (first part of Act 1)

groups will take less time to play the game so decide according to how much time is left. Nominate one person in each group to start. Tell the rest of the group to ask the the nominated person questions to try to find out if the friend is real or a Bunbury. Explain that when they have finished asking questions, they should vote individually by writing down their answer. When everyone has voted, the real answer can be revealed. If they guess correctly they get a point. They then ask another member of the group and repeat the interrogation process. The winner is the person who guesses correctly the most number of times.

Follow-up task

For homework, ask students to research different aspects of upper class life in Britain during the nineteenth century. Search terms could include: *Mayfair, English country house, domestic servants*. Have a class discussion in the following lesson to feedback on their research.

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 1 (first part of Act 1)

Activity 1

Look at the picture. Does it match your ideas about what the scene would look like?



Activity 2

Your teacher will dictate some questions to you. Listen to the extract and answer the questions.

Activity 3

Listen and decide whether the statements are true (T) or false (F).

1. Jack wants to marry Augusta. _____
2. Algernon says he does not believe in romance. _____
3. Algernon shares his cucumber sandwiches. _____
4. Algernon does not agree to Jack's marriage. _____
5. Jack left his cigarette case at Algernon's house the last time he visited. _____
6. Algernon doesn't believe that it belongs to him. _____
7. Jack has a younger brother called Ernest. _____
8. Algernon pretends to have a friend who is very sick. _____
9. Jack had asked Algernon to dine with him that night. _____
10. Jack is going to propose to the woman he loves. _____

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 1 (first part of Act 1)

Activity 4

a. Listen to the extract below. Which word does Algernon stress to contrast with Jack's 'nearly'. Underline the stressed word.

1.

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

b. Underline the words that should be stressed in the second lines to contrast with the phrases in bold in the first lines.

2.

Algernon: Well, now I know that **you are a Bunburyist**, I want to talk to you about Bunburying. I want to tell you the rules.
Jack: I am not a Bunburyist.

3.

Jack: I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come to town **in order to propose marriage** to her.
Algernon: I thought you had come to town for pleasure. I call a marriage proposal business.

Listen and check your answers.

c. With a partner, practise saying the lines, paying attention to the correct contrastive stress.

Activity 5

Decide which of these are good examples of Bunburying and which are not.

1. You tell your parents that you regularly babysit for a family. The family is not real. You do this so that you can escape from the house and go out with your friends. _____
2. You find out that your best friend has been dressing up as the football team's lucky tiger mascot for the last three years without telling you. You watch the match every week but you never knew it was her. _____
3. It is almost impossible to make reservations at the number one restaurant in the city. For your boyfriend's birthday, you manage to get a table by saying that you are Matt Damon's sister. _____

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 1 (first part of Act 1)

4. Your uncle has invited you to a day with him at a museum. Although you are free, you tell him you can't go because you have promised to take a friend to hospital for an operation. _____
5. It is your turn to clean the house, a job you *hate*. You tell your housemates that you cannot do it this week because you are volunteering at an old people's home. This is not true. _____
6. A police officer gives you a parking ticket for stopping in a disabled parking space. You tell her that your brother is in a wheelchair and that you are picking him up. You don't have a disabled brother. _____
7. You have an identical twin who is much better than you at maths. He sits your maths exam instead of you. _____

Worksheet

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 1 (first part of Act 1)

Script

Track 1

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

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

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

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

Lane: Yes, sir; eight bottles.

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

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

Algernon: **Good heavens!** Is marriage so depressing?

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

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

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

Algernon: That is very understandable. Well, thank you, Lane. *[Lane goes off]*

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

Lane: Mr Ernest Worthing is here, sir. *[Jack enters. Lane goes off]*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Algernon: And who are the people you entertain?

Jack: Oh, neighbours, neighbours!

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

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

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

Jack: Shropshire? Yes, of course. My dear **fellow!** Why are all these cups here?

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 1 (first part of Act 1)

Script

Why cucumber sandwiches? Why are you being so **extravagant**? Who is coming to tea?

Algernon: Oh, just Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

Jack: How perfectly delightful!

Jack: My dear fellow! Why are all these cups here? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why are you being so extravagant? Who is coming to tea?

Algernon: Oh, just Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

Jack: How perfectly delightful!

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

Jack: And why is that?

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

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

Jack: How very unromantic you are!

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

Jack: I believe you, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was especially invented for people with memories like yours. *[Jack puts out his hand to take a cucumber sandwich; Algernon immediately stops him]*

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

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

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

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

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

Jack: Why on earth do you say that?

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

Jack: Oh, that is nonsense!

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

Track 2

Track 3.3

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 1 (first part of Act 1)

Script

- Jack:** Your consent!
- Algernon:** Gwendolen is my cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to **clear up** the matter of Cecily. *[Algernon rings a bell]*
- Jack:** Cecily? What on earth do you mean, Algy? I don't know anyone called Cecily. *[Lane enters]*
- Algernon:** Lane, bring me the cigarette case which Mr Worthing left last time he dined here.
- Lane:** Yes, sir. *[Lane goes off. Algernon takes the last of the cucumber sandwiches]*
- Jack:** Have you had my cigarette case all this time? I wish you had told me. I have been writing letters to the police about it. I nearly offered a large reward.
- Algernon:** Well, I wish you would offer a large reward. I am very poor at the moment.
- Jack:** There is no point in offering a large reward now that you've found it. *[Lane enters with the cigarette case on a silver tray. Algernon takes it immediately. Lane goes off]*
- Algernon:** I think that is mean of you, Ernest, **I must say**. *[Opening the case and examining it]* However, it doesn't matter. Now I look at the **inscription** inside, I see that this isn't yours.
- Jack:** Of course it's mine. *[Moving towards Algernon]* You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you shouldn't be reading what is written inside it. It is very impolite to read a private cigarette case.
- Algernon:** Oh! It is ridiculous to have rules about what one should read and what one shouldn't. Most of modern culture depends on reading what one shouldn't read.
- Jack:** I know that, and I am not going to discuss modern culture. I simply want my cigarette case back.
- Algernon:** Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from someone called Cecily. And you said you don't know anyone called Cecily.
- Jack:** Well, if you want to know, Cecily is my aunt.
- Algernon:** Your aunt?
- Jack:** Yes. She is a charming old lady. Just give it back to me, Algy.
- Algernon:** *[Going behind the sofa]* But why does she call herself 'little Cecily' if she is your aunt? *[Reading]* 'From little Cecily, with all her love.'
- Jack:** *[Going to the front of the sofa and kneeling on it]* My dear fellow, some aunts are tall. Some aunts are not tall. My aunt should be allowed to decide her height for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be like your aunt, Lady Bracknell! That is ridiculous. Now, give me back my cigarette case. *[Following Algernon all around the room]*
- Algernon:** Yes. But why does your aunt call you her uncle? *[Reading]* 'From little Cecily, with all her love to her dear Uncle Jack.' I don't object to an aunt being a small aunt. But why does an aunt, whatever her size, call her own nephew 'uncle'? I don't understand. And your name isn't Jack; it is Ernest.
- Jack:** It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.

Track 3.1

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 1 (first part of Act 1)

Script

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

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

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

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

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

Jack: Well, give me my cigarette case first.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Algernon: You are a Bunburyist! I was right to say you were a Bunburyist. You are one of the most advanced Bunburyists I know.

Jack: What on earth do you mean?

Algernon: You have invented a younger brother called Ernest so that you can come to town as often as you like. I have invented an **invalid** called Bunbury

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 1 (first part of Act 1)

Script

so that I can go to the country as often as I like. When I pretend to visit him, I call it Bunburying. And I call someone who visits imaginary people a Bunburyist. Bunbury is very valuable. For example, if it wasn't for Bunbury's very bad health, I wouldn't be able to dine with you tonight. I should be dining with Aunt Augusta.

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

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

Jack: You ought to dine with your Aunt Augusta.

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

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

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

Jack: That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury.

Algernon: Then your wife will want to know him. You don't understand that in married life three is company and two is none.

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

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

Jack: I suppose so, if you want to.

Algernon: Good.

Track 3.2

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 1 (first part of Act 1)

Glossary

bachelor a man who has never been married. An eligible bachelor is one who many women want to marry because he is rich or attractive. A woman who is not married and is past the age when women usually get married is called a spinster. Spinster is an old-fashioned and insulting word. Now, it is more usual to say that a man or woman who is not married is single.

misunderstanding a failure to understand someone or something correctly
 morals principles of right or wrong behaviour that are generally accepted by a society

Shropshire a county – a region that has its own local government – on the west coast of England. Shropshire has more countryside and fewer inhabitants than most other regions in England.

fellow used for talking to a man in an old-fashioned, friendly way

extravagant spending or costing a lot of money, especially more than is reasonable

flirt (to flirt with someone) to behave towards someone in a way that shows your sexual or romantic interest in them

consent permission to do something

clear up (to clear up something) to solve a problem or a mystery

inscription a piece of writing written or cut on or in something, especially as a record of an achievement or in order to honour someone

visiting card a small card with your name printed on it that people left in the past with people who they visited

quite quite usually means to some degree, but not completely or extremely, but speakers of British English sometimes use quite to mean 'very'. This is only possible before words with an extreme meaning. When Algernon says that he is quite sure, he means that he is very sure.

will a legal document that explains what you want to happen to your money and possessions after you die. This is often more formally called a last will and testament.

ward someone, especially a child, who is officially being looked after by a court of law or by someone who is not their parents. The person who looks after them is their guardian.

governess a woman whose job is to look after and teach her employer's children in their home, especially in the past

invalid someone who is ill or injured and is unable to look after themselves

Useful phrases

by the way used for introducing a new or extra fact or comment into a conversation

Good heavens used for showing that you are very surprised, angry or upset

I must say used in spoken English for emphasizing a statement