

**Module 7: Balancing the Individual and Society**  
**Topic 5 Content: Themes in *The Importance of Being Earnest***

**Introduction**



Themes in  
*The Importance of Being Earnest*

Marriage

Truth  
and  
Lies

Social  
Propriety

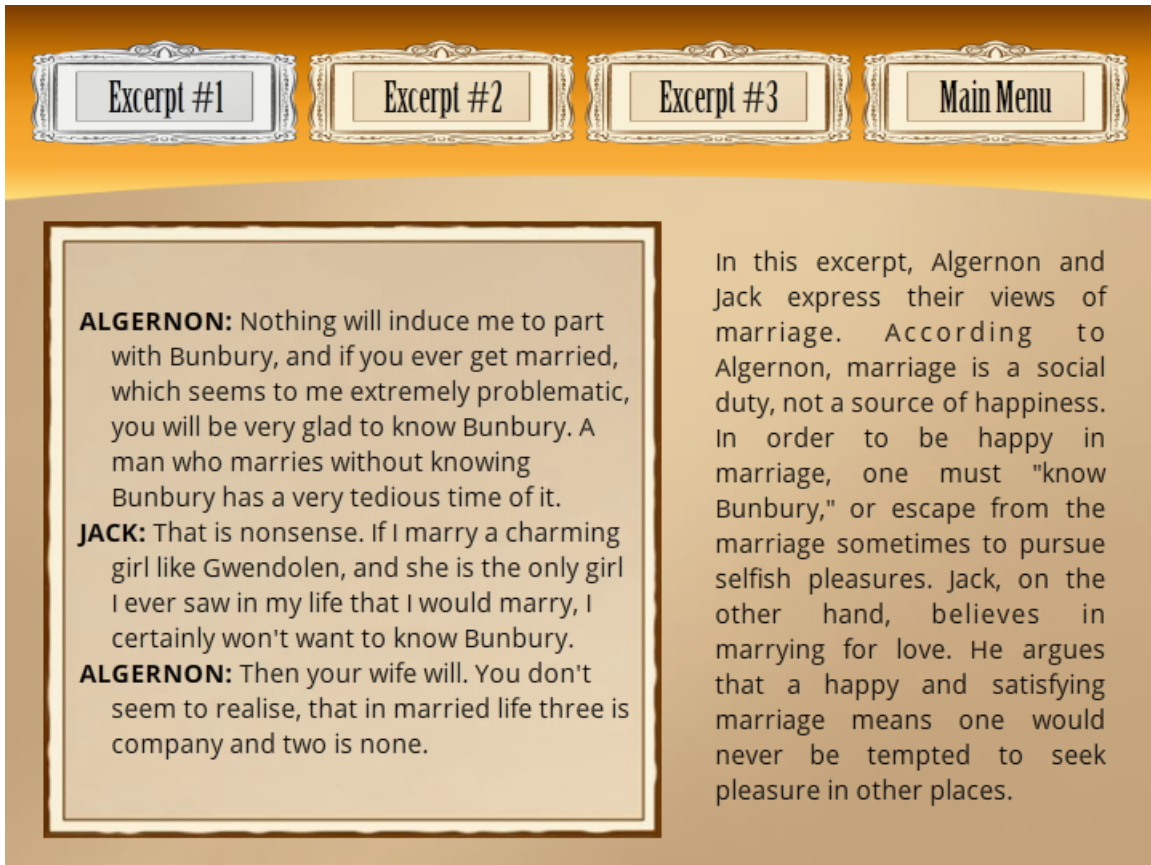
Dialogue is a powerful tool for developing themes within dramas. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, themes include the role of marriage, the interplay between truth and lies, and social propriety. Select a theme to explore how it is developed through dialogue.

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### Topic 5 Content: Themes in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

#### Marriage: Excerpt #1



**Excerpt #1**   **Excerpt #2**   **Excerpt #3**   **Main Menu**

**ALGERNON:** Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.

**JACK:** That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury.

**ALGERNON:** Then your wife will. You don't seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none.

In this excerpt, Algernon and Jack express their views of marriage. According to Algernon, marriage is a social duty, not a source of happiness. In order to be happy in marriage, one must "know Bunbury," or escape from the marriage sometimes to pursue selfish pleasures. Jack, on the other hand, believes in marrying for love. He argues that a happy and satisfying marriage means one would never be tempted to seek pleasure in other places.

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**Marriage: Excerpt #2**

**Excerpt #1**   **Excerpt #2**   **Excerpt #3**   **Main Menu**

**ALGERNON:** Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

**LANE:** I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

**ALGERNON:** Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralising as that?

**LANE:** I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

In this excerpt, Algernon searches for an explanation as to why the servants drink the champagne in a bachelor's home. His servant, Lane, observes that the champagne in a married man's home is usually inferior. Algernon laments that marriage, symbolized by the inferior champagne, is so deplorable. Lane argues that marriage is very pleasant, but he also admits that he not a reliable judge for his lack of marital experience.

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**Marriage: Excerpt #3**

**Excerpt #1**   **Excerpt #2**   **Excerpt #3**   **Main Menu**

**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.

Near the opening of this comic play comes a disheartening pronouncement from Lady Bracknell to her daughter, Gwendolen. When Lady Bracknell discovers that Gwendolen wants to marry Jack for love, she frankly declares that a woman does not get to choose her husband, for marriage is a social obligation and must be arranged by her parents. Lady Bracknell utterly rejects the idea of marriage for love. To her, it is irrelevant whether marriage is "pleasant or unpleasant."

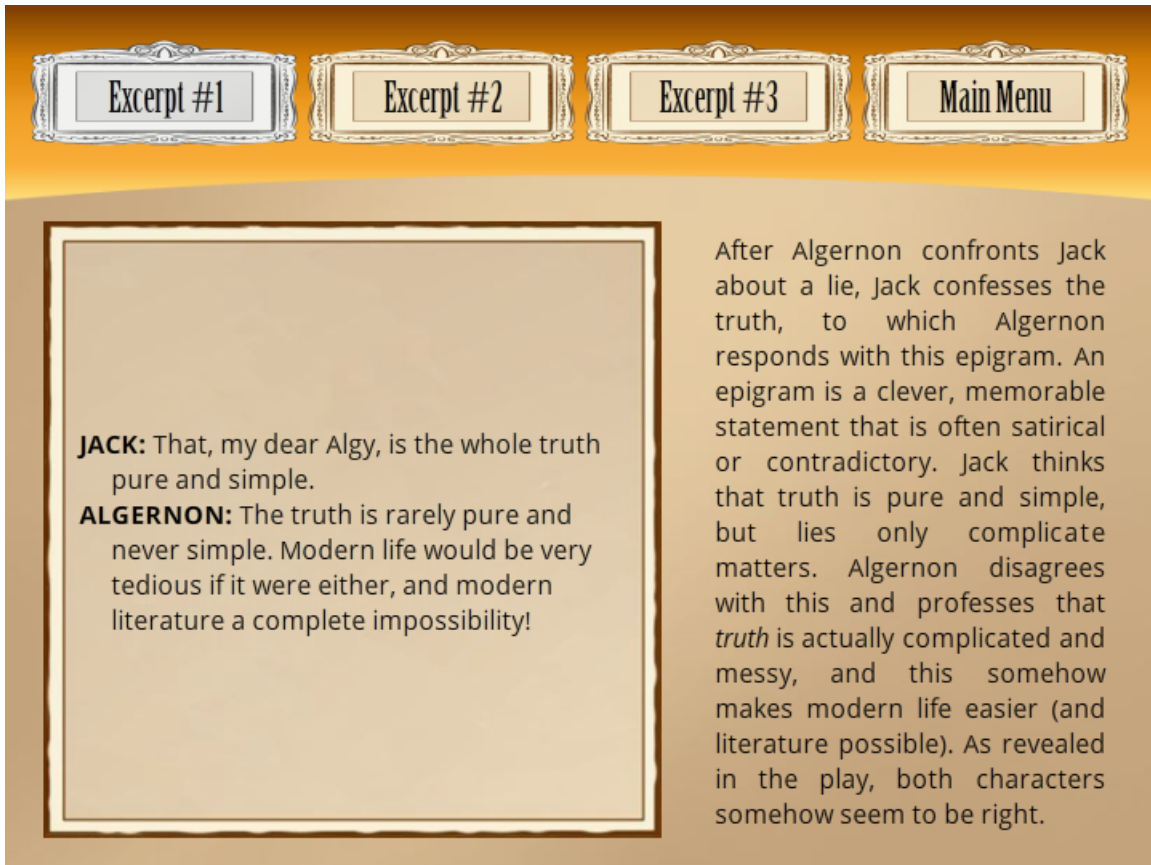
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#### Truth and Lies: Excerpt #1



The screenshot shows a digital interface with a top navigation bar containing four buttons: 'Excerpt #1', 'Excerpt #2', 'Excerpt #3', and 'Main Menu'. Below the navigation bar is a large text area with a light beige background. On the left side of this area is a framed box containing dialogue. On the right side is a paragraph of explanatory text.

**JACK:** That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.

**ALGERNON:** The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!

After Algernon confronts Jack about a lie, Jack confesses the truth, to which Algernon responds with this epigram. An epigram is a clever, memorable statement that is often satirical or contradictory. Jack thinks that truth is pure and simple, but lies only complicate matters. Algernon disagrees with this and professes that *truth* is actually complicated and messy, and this somehow makes modern life easier (and literature possible). As revealed in the play, both characters somehow seem to be right.

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**Truth and Lies: Excerpt #2**

**Excerpt #1**   **Excerpt #2**   **Excerpt #3**   **Main Menu**

**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 lies to Dr. Chasuble that her governess, Miss Prism, has a slight headache and encourages him to go on a walk with her. It is unclear whether Cecily's greater motive is to avoid her studies or to play matchmaker for Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism. However, Miss Prism's honesty about not having a headache reveals that Cecily is clearly lying, yet this lie appears to be harmless and perhaps even helpful.

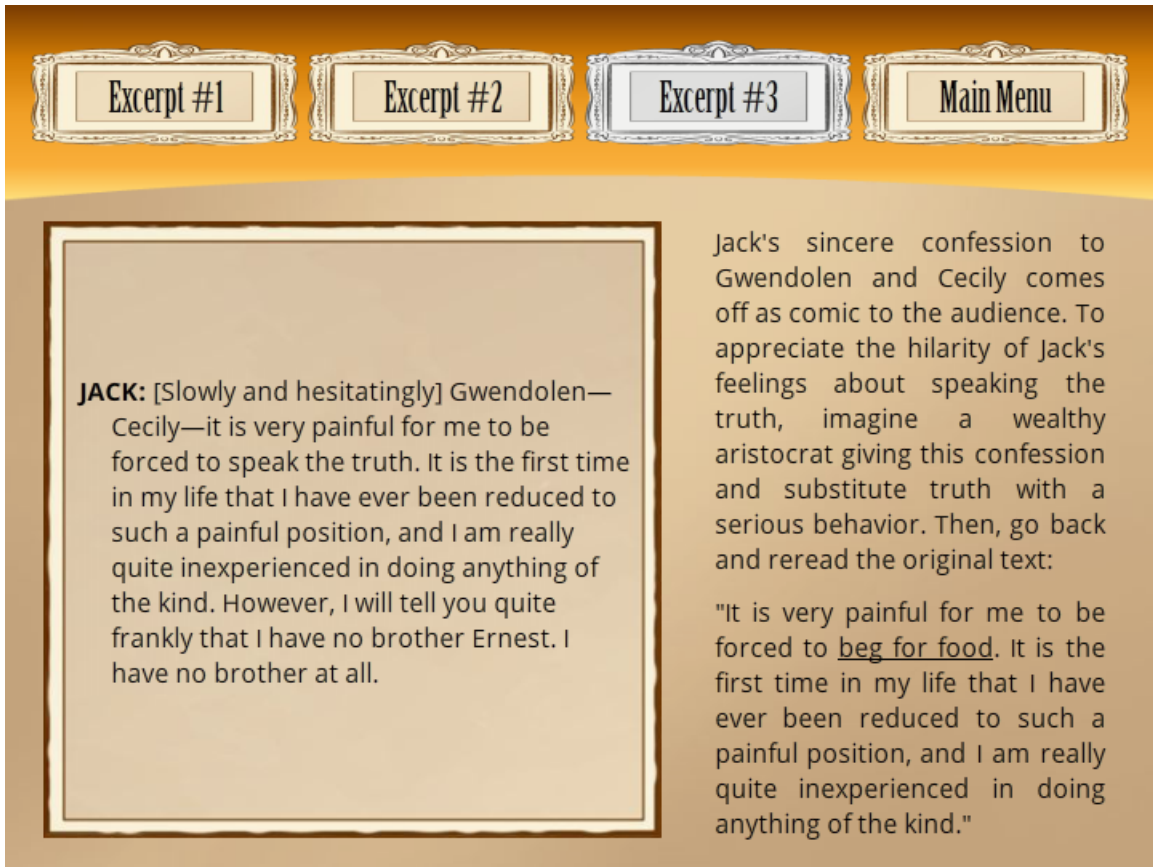
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**Truth and Lies: Excerpt #3**



**Excerpt #1**   **Excerpt #2**   **Excerpt #3**   **Main Menu**

**JACK:** [Slowly and hesitatingly] Gwendolen—Cecily—it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind. However, I will tell you quite frankly that I have no brother Ernest. I have no brother at all.

Jack's sincere confession to Gwendolen and Cecily comes off as comic to the audience. To appreciate the hilarity of Jack's feelings about speaking the truth, imagine a wealthy aristocrat giving this confession and substitute truth with a serious behavior. Then, go back and reread the original text:

"It is very painful for me to be forced to beg for food. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind."

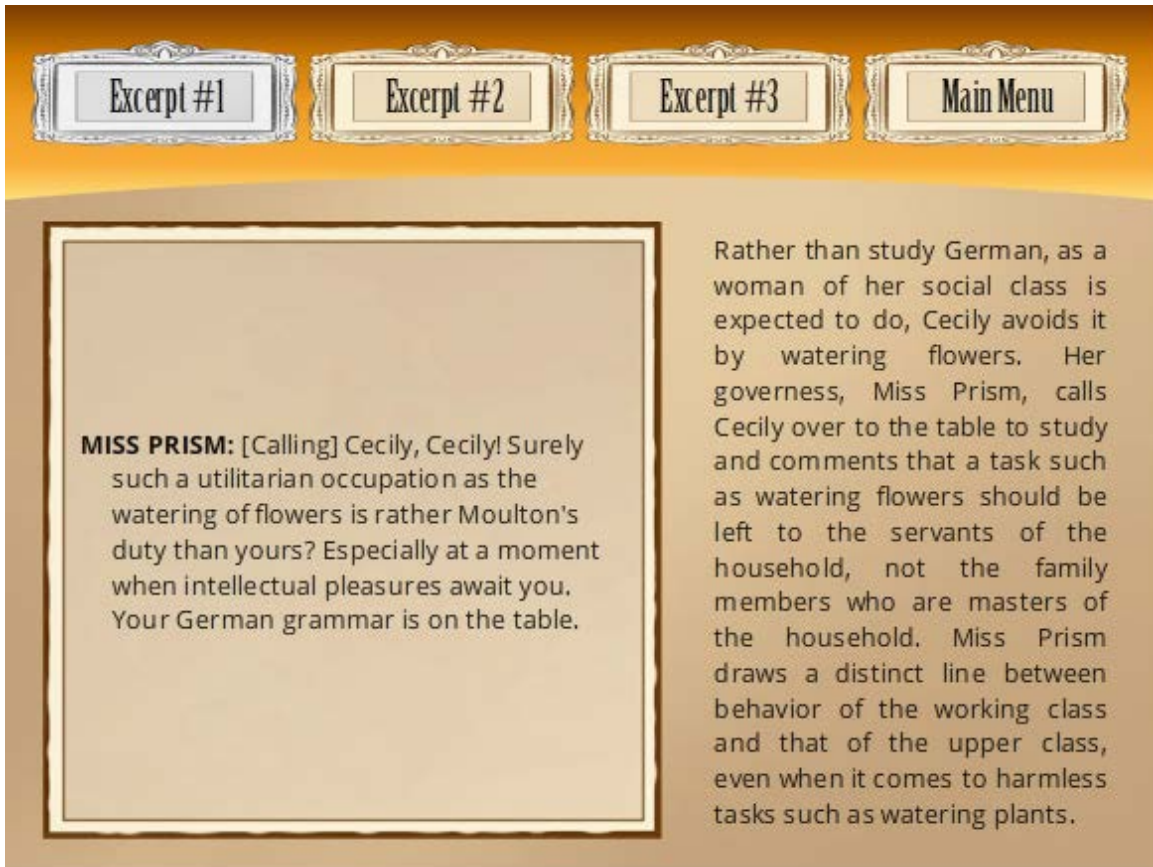
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**Social Propriety: Excerpt #1**



**Excerpt #1**      **Excerpt #2**      **Excerpt #3**      **Main Menu**

**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.

Rather than study German, as a woman of her social class is expected to do, Cecily avoids it by watering flowers. Her governess, Miss Prism, calls Cecily over to the table to study and comments that a task such as watering flowers should be left to the servants of the household, not the family members who are masters of the household. Miss Prism draws a distinct line between behavior of the working class and that of the upper class, even when it comes to harmless tasks such as watering plants.

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**Social Propriety: Excerpt #2**

**Excerpt #1**      **Excerpt #2**      **Excerpt #3**      **Main Menu**

**CECILY:** May I offer you some tea, Miss Fairfax?  
**GWENDOLEN:** [With elaborate politeness] Thank you. [Aside] Detestable girl! But I require tea!  
**CECILY:** [Sweetly] Sugar?  
**GWENDOLEN:** [Superciliously] No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more. [Cecily looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup.]  
**CECILY:** [Severely] Cake or bread and butter?  
**GWENDOLEN:** [In a bored manner] Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.  
**CECILY:** [Cuts a very large slice of cake, and puts it on the tray.] Hand that to Miss Fairfax.

In one of the most famous scenes of the play, Cecily and Gwendolen insult one another while feigning politeness. Although they are both of the upper class, their dislike of one another reveals the differences between country dwellers and city dwellers. A proud Londoner, Gwendolen considers herself superior to Cecily and corrects her "unfashionable" practices of putting sugar in tea and eating cake. Refusing to be disparaged, Cecily retaliates by doing everything that Gwendolen considers improper.

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**LADY BRACKNELL:** 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.

After Algernon reveals that he wants to marry Cecily Cardew, Lady Bracknell questions Jack about Cecily's lineage. Her biting sarcasm widens the chasm between social classes while offering a clever pun. Insulting Jack for being found in a railway station as a baby, Lady Bracknell substitutes *railway stations* for *aristocratic houses*. In a literal sense, Jack's origin is a "Terminus," or train station. Jack's family is also a *terminus* in the sense that, to Lady Bracknell, it is a dead-end for social advancement.

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