The Importance of being Earnest

A What do you know about the author Oscar Wilde? What sort of plays did he write? Why is he so famous?

B Complete these quotations from Oscar Wilde with one of the words from the list.

life mistakes enemies temptation

1 I can resist anything but ________.
2 Always forgive your ________ — nothing annoys them so much.
3 One’s real life is often the ________ that one does not lead.
4 Experience is the name everyone gives to their ________.

C Read the information in this section and check your answers to task A.

The book

The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) is a play by Oscar Wilde. The action takes place in Victorian England. The play’s success comes from the case of mistaken identity at the centre of the story, its comic characters and witty dialogue. It is Wilde’s most popular play.

The author

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was an Irish writer and he became famous for his wit, his style and his amusing conversation. He wrote only one novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, but he also wrote many poems, short stories and comedies for the theatre, including his masterpiece The Importance of Being Earnest.

D Read the plot.

Algernon Moncrieff, a rich young gentleman, receives a visit from his best friend, Ernest Worthing. Ernest wants to marry Algernon’s cousin, Gwendolen, but ‘Ernest’ is leading a double life. In the country, he uses his real name Jack and pretends he has a brother named ‘Ernest’ living in London and that he often goes to visit him. In London however, he uses the name ‘Ernest’ and has different friends and amusements.

Jack asks Gwendolen to marry him and she accepts, but says she loves him because of his name ‘Ernest’, which of course is not his real name! Lady Bracknell (Gwendolen’s mother) then arrives and says she wants to ask Mr Worthing some questions before he can marry Gwendolen. When Lady Bracknell finds out that Mr Worthing is an orphan and doesn’t know his parents, she refuses to let him marry Gwendolen. Gwendolen tells Jack she will always love him, and asks for his address in the country. When Jack gives it to her, Algernon also writes it down in secret. Algernon goes to the country to try to meet Cecily, Jack’s beautiful niece. Algy tells her he is Jack’s brother, ‘Ernest Worthing’. Cecily falls in love with him as ‘Ernest’.

Jack arrives at the country house and decides to tell the truth about his life. He announces ‘Ernest’s death’. Gwendolen arrives and she and Cecily meet while the two men are out. They discover they are both engaged to the same man – ‘Ernest Worthing’! When Jack and Algernon appear at the house together, the girls find out the truth…

E Answer the questions.

1 Who does Jack want to marry?
2 Why does Gwendolen love Jack?
3 Where are Jack’s parents?
4 Why does Algy go to Jack’s country house?
5 What name does Algy use in the country?
6 When do the girls discover the truth?
Listen and watch the film clip and read the dialogue. Complete the dialogue with one word in each gap.

**Cecily**
Ernest! You’re back so soon!

**Algy**
My own (1) _______!

**Cecily**
A moment Ernest. May I ask you, are you engaged to be married to this young lady?

**Algy**
What young lady? Good heavens, Gwendolen!

**Cecily**
Yes, to good heavens, Gwendolen!

**Algy**
Of course, not. What put such an idea into your pretty little (2) _______?

**Cecily**
Thank you. You may.

**Gwendolen**
I felt there must be some slight error, Miss Cardew. The gentleman who is now embracing you is my (3) _______, Mr Algernon Moncrieff.

**Cecily**
Algernon? Moncrieff?

**Gwendolen**
Yes.

**Cecily**
Algernon. Oh.

**Gwendolen**
Here is Ernest. My own Ernest.

**Jack**
Gwendolen. My (4) _______!

**Cecily**
I knew there must be some misunderstanding, Miss Fairfax. The gentleman whose arm is at present around your waist is my guardian, Mr John Worthing.

**Gwendolen**
I beg your (5) _______?

**Cecily**
This is Uncle Jack.

**Gwendolen**
Jack?

**Engaged to be married:** fidanzato  
**Good heavens:** Santo cielo  
**Waist:** vita  
**I beg your pardon?** Mi scusi?