

26. Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde

The Importance of Being Earnest (1895)

An interview at tea-time 94

Lady Bracknell is interviewing Jack Worthing to check whether he is an appropriate match for her only daughter Gwendolen. This is how the scene develops.

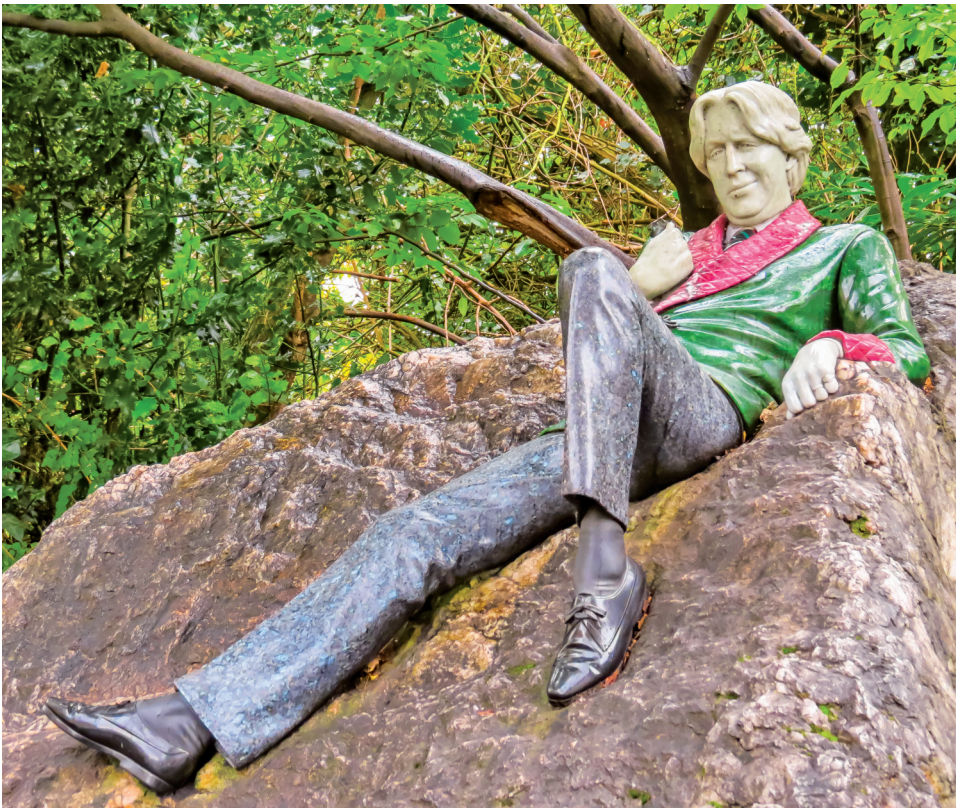
5	LADY BRACKNELL	Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to someone, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself... And now I have a few questions to put to you, Mr. Worthing. While I am making these inquiries, you, Gwendolen, will wait for me below in the carriage ¹ .
	GWENDOLEN	Mamma!
10	LADY BRACKNELL	In the carriage, Gwendolen! Gwendolen, the carriage!
	GWENDOLEN	Yes, Mamma.
	LADY BRACKNELL	You can take a seat, Mr. Worthing.
	JACK	Thank you, Lady Bracknell, I prefer standing.
15	LADY BRACKNELL	I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?
	JACK	Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.
20	LADY BRACKNELL	I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you?
	JACK	Twenty-nine.
25	LADY BRACKNELL	A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?
	JACK	I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.
	LADY BRACKNELL	I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with ² natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit;

1. **carriage:** it. *carrozza*

2. **tampers with:** interferes with

- 30 touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound³. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square. What is your income?
- 35 JACK Between seven and eight thousand a year.
LADY BRACKNELL In land, or in investments?
JACK In investment, chiefly.
LADY BRACKNELL That is satisfactory. What between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted⁴ from one after one's death, land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up. That's all that can be said about land.
- 40 JACK I have a country house with some land, of course, attached to it, about fifteen hundred acres, I believe; but I don't depend on that for my real income. In fact, as far as I can make out, the poachers⁵ are the only people who make anything out of it⁶.
- 45 LADY BRACKNELL A country house! How many bedrooms? Well, that point can be cleared up afterwards. You have a town house, I hope? A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.
- 50 JACK Well, I own a house in Belgrave Square, but it is let by the year to Lady Bloxham. Of course, I can get it back whenever I like, at six month's notice.
- LADY BRACKNELL Lady Bloxham? I don't know her.
- 55 JACK Oh, she goes about⁷ very little. She is a lady considerably advanced in years.
- LADY BRACKNELL Ah, nowadays that is no guarantee of respectability of character. What number in Belgrave Square?
- JACK 149.
- 60 LADY BRACKNELL The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However, that could easily be altered.
- JACK Do you mean the fashion, or the side?
- LADY BRACKNELL Both, if necessary, I presume. What are your politics?
- JACK Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist⁸.
- 65 LADY BRACKNELL Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening, at any rate. Now to minor matters. 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 carelessness⁹. 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?
- 70

3. **unsound**: wrong and unreliable4. **exactd**: required (it. *che si richiedono*)5. **poachers**: it. *bracconieri*6. **make anything out of it**: it. *che guadagnano qualcosa da lì*7. **goes about**: goes out8. **Liberal Unionist**: it is an absurd political reference9. **carelessness**: it. *negligenza, disattenzione*



Sculpture at Merrion Square Park, near House of Oscar Wilde in Dublin, Ireland. The famous statue of the Irish poet and playwright was made by Danny Osborne.

- 75 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!
- 80 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?
- 85 JACK In a handbag.
- LADY BRACKNELL A handbag?
- JACK Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a handbag a somewhat large, black leather handbag, with handles¹⁰ to it an ordinary handbag, in fact.
- 90 LADY BRACKNELL In what locality did this Mr. James, or Thomas, Cardew come across this ordinary handbag?
- JACK In the cloakroom¹¹ at Victoria Station. It was given to him in mistake for his own.
- LADY BRACKNELL The cloakroom at Victoria Station?
- 95 JACK Yes. The Brighton line.

10. handles: *it. manici*

11. cloakroom: *it. guardaroba*

- LADY BRACKNELL The line is immaterial, Mr. Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered¹² by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate, bred in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that remind one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? As for the particular locality in which the handbag was found, a cloakroom at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognized position in good society.
- 100
- 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.
- 105
- 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.
- JACK Well, I don't see how I could possibly manage to do that. I can produce the handbag at any moment. It is in my dressing-room at home. I really think that should satisfy you, Lady Bracknell.
- 110
- LADY BRACKNELL Me, sir! What has it to do with me? You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter, a girl brought up with the utmost care, to marry into a cloakroom, and form an alliance with a parcel? Good morning, Mr. Worthing!
- 115
- 120

12. **bewildered:** perplexed

Oscar Wilde

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890)

Sybil 95

In the following passage Dorian Gray has just fallen in love for the first time in his life: the apple of his eye is a young actress he has admired on stage, in many roles, including that of Juliet. He is talking to Lord Henry about his experience.

Harry, imagine a girl, hardly seventeen years of age, with a little, flowerlike face, a small Greek head with plaited coils¹ of dark-brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose. She was the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life.

5 You said to me once that pathos left you unmoved, but that beauty, mere beauty, could fill your eyes with tears. I tell you, Harry, I could hardly see this girl for the mist of tears that came across me. And her voice – I never heard such a voice. It was very low at first, with deep mellow² notes that seemed to fall singly upon one's ear.

10 Then it became a little louder, and sounded like a flute or a distant hautboy³. In the garden-scene it had all the tremulous ecstasy that one hears just before dawn when nightingales are singing. There were moments, later on, when it had the wild passion of violins. You know how a voice can stir one. Your voice and the voice of Sibyl Vane are two things that I shall never forget.

15 When I close my eyes, I hear them, and each of them says something different. I don't know which to follow. Why should I not love her?

Harry, I do love her. She is everything to me in life. Night after night I go to see her play. One evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen. I have seen her die in the gloom of an Italian tomb, sucking the poison from her lover's lips. I have watched her wandering through the forest of Arden, disguised as a pretty boy in hose and doublet and dainty cap⁴. She has been mad, and has come into the presence of a guilty king, and given him rue⁵ to wear and bitter herbs to taste of.

25 She has been innocent, and the black hands of jealousy have crushed her red-like throat. I have seen her in every age and in every costume. Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination. They are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. One knows their minds as easily as one knows their bonnets.

30 One can always find them. There is no mystery in any of them.

They ride in the park in the morning and chatter at tea-parties in the afternoon.

They have their stereotyped smile and their fashionable manner. They are quite obvious. But an actress! How different an actress is! Harry! Why didn't you tell me

that the only thing worth loving is an actress?

1. **plaited coils:** it. *riccioli intrecciati*

2. **mellow:** it. *dolci*

3. **hautboy:** it. *oboe*

4. **in hose and doublet and dainty cap:** it. *in calzamaglia e farsetto ed elegante cappello*

5. **rue:** it. *pentimento, rammarico*

Oscar Wilde

Salome (1891)

A one-act play written at first in French for the actress Sarah Bernhardt, then translated into English by Wilde's friend, Lord Alfred Douglas. It was censored for about forty years in Britain.

It is the story of the destructive love of the biblical princess for John the Baptist, who has been imprisoned by Herod and put into a cistern. Salome is deeply attracted to him, but the prophet rejects her passionate desire and humiliates her. Therefore she takes revenge: if she cannot have him alive, she will have him dead. After dancing an erotic dance for Herod with only seven veils on, she asks him for John's head, which will be carried to her on a silver tray. Afraid of her power and morbid insanity, Herod orders her execution at the end of the play. The style of the tragedy is an example of the decorative and ornate style which made a work of art beautiful for the aesthetes: it is full of images appealing to all the senses, of metaphors and similes 'as rich as orchids', that mix the sacred and the profane.

Fatal seduction 96

In the following extract from the play, Salome is wooing John the Baptist, who is imprisoned in the cistern. She uses daring language (drawing heavily on the biblical Song of Songs) and is not afraid of showing her attraction to him.

	SALOME	Iokanaan!
	IOKANAAN	Who speaketh ¹ ?
5	SALOME	I am amorous of thy body, Iokanaan! Thy body is white, like the lilies of the field that the mower hath never mowed ² . Thy ³ body is white like the snows that lie on the mountains of Judaea, and come down into the valleys. The roses in the garden of the Queen of Arabia are not so white as thy body. Neither the roses of the garden of the Queen of Arabia, the garden of spices of the Queen of Arabia, nor the feet of the dawn when they light on the leaves, nor the breast of the moon when she lies on the breast of the sea... There is nothing in the world so white as thy body. Suffer me ⁴ to touch thy body.
10		
	IOKANAAN	Back! Daughter of Babylon! By woman came evil into the world. Speak not to me. I will not listen to thee ⁵ . I listen but to ⁶ the voice of the Lord God.
15	SALOME	Thy body is hideous. It is like the body of a leper. It is like a plastered wall ⁷ , where vipers have crawled; like a plastered wall where the

1. **speaketh**: speaks

2. **mower hath never mowed**: it. *che il tagliaerba non ha mai tagliato*

3. **thy**: arch. for 'your'

4. **Suffer me**: Let me

5. **thee**: arch. for 'you'

6. **but to**: only to

7. **plastered wall**: it. *muro intonacato*

scorpions have made their nest. It is like a whited sepulchre, full of loathsome⁸ things. It is horrible, thy body is horrible. It is of thy hair that I am enamoured, Iokanaan. Thy hair is like clusters of grapes⁹, like the clusters of black grapes that hang from the vinetrees of Edom in the land of the Edomites. Thy hair is like the cedars of Lebanon, like the great cedars of Lebanon that give their shade to the lions and to the robbers who would hide in them by day. The long black nights, when the moon hides her face, when the stars are afraid, are not so black as thy hair. The silence that dwells in the forest is not so black. There is nothing in the world that is so black as thy hair... Suffer me to touch thy hair.

IOKANAAN Back, daughter of Sodom! Touch me not. Profane not the temple of the Lord God.

30 SALOME Thy hair is horrible. It is covered with mire and dust. It is like a crown of thorns placed on thy head. It is like a knot of serpents coiled round thy neck. I love not thy hair... It is thy mouth that I desire, Iokanaan. Thy mouth is like a band of scarlet¹⁰ on a tower of ivory. It is like a pomegranate cut in twain with a knife of ivory. The pomegranate flowers that blossom in the gardens of Tyre, and are redder than roses, are not so red. The red blasts of trumpets¹¹ that herald the approach of kings, and make afraid the enemy, are not so red. Thy mouth is redder than the feet of those who tread the wine in the winepress. It is redder than the feet of the doves¹² who inhabit the temples and are fed by the priests. It is redder than the feet of him who cometh from a forest where he hath slain¹³ a lion, and seen gilded tigers. Thy mouth is like a branch of coral that fishers have found in the twilight¹⁴ of the sea, the coral that they keep for the kings!... It is like the vermilion that the Moabites find in the mines of Moab, the vermilion that the kings take from them. It is like the bow of the King of the Persians, that is painted with vermilion, and is tipped¹⁵ with coral. There is nothing in the world so red as thy mouth... Suffer me to kiss thy mouth.

IOKANAAN Never, daughter of Babylon! Daughter of Sodom! Never!

50 SALOME I will kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan. I will kiss thy mouth.

THE YOUNG SYRIAN Princess, Princess, thou who art like a garden of myrrh, thou who art the dove of all doves, look not at this man, look not at him! Do not

8. **loathsome:** disgusting (it. *ripugnanti*)

9. **clusters of grapes:** it. *ammassi di grappoli*

10. **scarlet:** it. *scarlatto*

11. **red blasts of trumpets:** it. *i rossi squilli di trombe*

12. **doves:** it. *colombe*

13. **slain:** killed

14. **twilight:** it. *crepuscolo*

15. **tipped:** its end is decorated with

Carol Ann Duffy

The World's Wife (1999)

Salome 97

In a deeply cynical tone, a modern Salome comments about how she woke up 'with a head on the pillow' beside her, something that didn't bother her at all. An unrhymed dramatic monologue slowly unveils her personality.

I'd done it before
 (and doubtless I'll do it again,
 sooner or later)
 woke up with a head on the pillow beside me – whose? –
 5 what did it matter? Good-looking, of course, dark hair, rather matted¹;
 the reddish beard several shades lighter;
 with very deep lines around the eyes,
 from pain, I'd guess, maybe laughter;
 and a beautiful crimson mouth that obviously knew
 10 how to flatter²...
 which I kissed...
 Colder than pewter³.
 Strange. What was his name? Peter?
 Simon? Andrew? John? I knew I'd feel better
 15 for tea, dry toast, no butter,
 so rang for the maid.
 And, indeed, her innocent clatter⁴
 of cups and plates,
 her clearing of clutter⁵,
 20 her regional patter⁶,
 were just what I needed –
 hungover and wrecked as I was from a night on the batter⁷.
 Never again!
 I needed to clean up my act⁸,
 25 get fitter,
 cut out the booze and the fags⁹ and the sex.
 Yes. And as for the latter,
 it was time to turf out the blighter¹⁰,
 the beater or biter¹¹,
 30 who'd come like a lamb to the slaughter¹²
 to Salome's bed.
 In the mirror, I saw my eyes glitter.
 I flung back the sticky red sheets¹³,
 and there, like I said – and ain't life a bitch –
 35 was his head on a platter¹⁴.

1. **matted:** it. *arruffati*
2. **flatter:** overpraise
3. **pewter:** it. *peltro* (a metal)
4. **innocent clatter:** noise of the pottery (it. *acciottolio*)
5. **clutter:** a mess
6. **patter:** it. *chiacchierio*
7. **hungover ... batter:** she is suffering from the effects of alcohol and feels shuttered. Going 'on the batter' means going out to drink heavily
8. **clean up my act:** wipe away what I have done
9. **booze and the fags:** stop with alcohol and cigarettes
10. **turf out the blighter:** slang for 'send the guy away'; blighter has a negative connotation since it refers to a rude and irritating person
11. **the beater or biter:** these are onomatopoeic sounds hinting at passionate sex
12. **a lamb to the slaughter:** biblical reference
13. **I flung ... sheets:** I pulled back the bedsheets: they were sticky and red because of the blood
14. **his head on a platter:** the poem recalls the cruelty of the Gospel story, the sensuality of Wilde's play, but it adds something that can be called black humour. The girl turns into a serial killer