

LESSON 23

from **The Importance of Being Earnest** (drama)
by Oscar Wilde

LADY BRACKNELL: . . . What is your income?

JACK: Between seven and eight thousand a year.

LADY BRACKNELL: [*Makes a note in her book.*] In land, or in investments?

JACK: In investments, chiefly.

LADY BRACKNELL: That is satisfactory. . . .

JACK: I have a country house with some land, of course, attached to it . . . but I don't depend on that for my real income. . . .

LADY BRACKNELL: A country house! How many bedrooms? . . . 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.

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 months' notice.

LADY BRACKNELL: Lady Bloxham? I don't know her.

JACK: Oh, she goes about 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.

LADY BRACKNELL: [*Shaking her head.*] 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: [*Sternly.*] Both, if necessary, I **presume**. What are your politics?

JACK: Well, I am afraid I really have none. . . .

LADY BRACKNELL: . . . 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 carelessness. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. . . .

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. . . .

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. . . .

Exercise 1: Context Clues

Read the selection, paying special attention to the words in dark type. These are the Master Words you will study in this lesson. As you read, look for context clues in the sentences and paragraphs around each Master Word. Circle any words and phrases that give clues to the meaning of the Master Words.

Master Words

Place a check by words you feel you know; underline words you don't know.

decency

immaterial

let

presume

respectability

display

late

minor

reside

somewhat

Exercise 2: Using Context Clues

Fill in the form for each of the Master Words listed below with context clues (if any), your definition, and the dictionary definition. If you have difficulty writing a definition, try using the word in a sentence instead.

1. **decency** Part of Speech: *n.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

2. **display** Part of Speech: *v.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

3. **immaterial** Part of Speech: *adj.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

4. **late** Part of Speech: *adj.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

5. **let** Part of Speech: *v.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

6. **minor** Part of Speech: *adj.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

7. **presume** Part of Speech: *v.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

8. **reside** Part of Speech: *v.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

9. **respectability** Part of Speech: *n.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

10. **somewhat** Part of Speech: *adv.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

• • Exercise 3: Synonyms and Antonyms

Use the synonyms and antonyms in the word list to fill in the blanks.

	Synonyms	Antonyms
1. reside	_____	_____
2. let	_____	_____
3. respectability	_____	_____
4. presume	_____	_____
5. minor	_____	_____
6. late	_____	_____
7. immaterial	_____	_____
8. somewhat	_____	_____
9. display	_____	_____
10. decency	_____	_____

Word List	
deceased	living
disbelieve	meaningful
expect	major
hide	manners
immorality	move
impropriety	not at all
inhabit	properness
insignificant	sell
irrelevant	show
lease	slightly

• • Exercise 4: Sentence Completion

Choose the appropriate Master Word for the blank in each of the following sentences. Write the word in the space provided at the right. Then circle the word or phrase that gives you a context clue.

- The road construction was only a ...?... inconvenience because the detour was only two blocks long. _____
- Carlotta's impeccable manners made her a model of ...?... . _____
- Tanya was happy to find an apartment to ...?... near her school. _____
- She was also thrilled to ...?... near a good library. _____
- It is only common ...?... to avoid playing loud music late at night. _____
- Jay was ...?... surprised to see Jan at the party; he thought she was ill. _____
- A person's wealth is ...?... to me when considering friendship. _____
- Vicky makes it a point to ...?... respect when speaking with older people. _____
- I wouldn't ...?... to volunteer your services without checking with you first. _____
- Dr. Miller inherited his dental practice from his ...?... father. _____

Exercise 5: Foreign Words and Phrases

The Master Word **late** has different meanings depending on how it is used in a sentence. Choose the number of the correct definition for late for each of the following sentences.

<i>late</i>	
1.	<i>adj.</i> occurring after the regular time
2.	<i>adj.</i> former
3.	<i>adj.</i> most recent
4.	<i>adv.</i> after delay
5.	<i>adv.</i> until an advanced hour

1. The **late** state treasurer is planning to run for governor. _____
2. Cameron arrived **late** to the party because his car broke down. _____
3. Pat worked **late** to prepare for the big presentation the next day. _____
4. The **late** news bulletin about the forest fire interrupted the regular news broadcast. _____
5. The **late** frost threatened to destroy the peach crop. _____

Exercise 6: Shades of Meaning

Based on shades of meaning, decide whether a Master Word (the first of the pair inside the parentheses) or its synonym would better complete each sentence. Write that word on the line next to the sentence. Use a dictionary if necessary.

1. Jack had the (decency, manners) to be honest about the mistakes he made. _____
2. The examples Makayla chose for her essay were interesting but (immaterial, irrelevant) to her central idea. _____
3. With their huge new swimming pool, my neighbors seemed determined to (display, flaunt) their wealth in front of the whole block. _____
4. Mrs. Woods seemed obsessed with maintaining all appearances of (respectability, honesty) in the strict way she limited her children's social lives. _____
5. Austin finds the produce at the discount store to be of (minor, inferior) quality compared to that at the farmer's market. _____

Write About It: What's In a Name?

The title of *The Importance of Being Earnest* contains a pun whose meaning is central to understanding the play. **Conduct some research** to find out the meaning of this pun and **write a brief essay** explaining how the pun is related to the overall meaning of the play. How does knowing about this pun affect your understanding of this excerpt? Use at least four Master Words or words related to the Master Words in your essay.