

Words for Earnest – Compiled by Emily Miller

Act 1:

1. **Morning room.**

“**Morning room** in Algernon’s flat in Half Moon Street.” (Stage Directions 3).

An informal room for receiving morning visitors. Later visitors would be received in the more formal drawing room.

2. **Half Moon Street**

“Morning Room in Algernon’s flat in **Half Moon Street**.” (Stage Directions 3).

Located off Piccadilly Street in Mayfair, a fashionable district of London’s West End.

3. **Shropshire**

“Got nice neighbors in your part of **Shropshire**?” (Algernon 5).

A county of England in the west Midlands, adjoining the Welsh border (About 150 miles northwest of London.)

4. **Tunbridge Wells**

“Charming old lady she is, too. Lives at **Tunbridge Wells**.” (Jack 7).

A fashionable spa town in Kent, about thirty miles southeast of London.

5. **The Albany**

“Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4, **The Albany**.” (Algernon 8).

A popular bachelor’s quarters near Piccadilly Street, in Central London.

6. **Willis’s**

“If it wasn’t for Bunbury’s extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn’t be able to dine with you at **Willis’s** to-night, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week.” (Algernon 10).

A fashionable restaurant on King Street, near Piccadilly Circus. It was frequented by Wilde and his companion Alfred Lord Douglass.

7. **Sent Down**

“In the second place, whenever I do dine there I am always treated as a member of the family, and **sent down** with either no woman at all, or two.” (Algernon 10).

Directed to accompany someone to dinner. Victorian dinner guests would gather upstairs in the drawing room, and then gentlemen would escort ladies to the dining room in arranged couples.

8. **Corrupt French Drama**

“That, my dear young friend, is the theory that the **corrupt French Drama** has been propounding for the last fifty years.” (Jack 11).

Because its plots frequently involved adultery and infidelity, French drama was often viewed by the English as immoral.

9. **Wagnerian manner**

“Ah! that must be Aunt Augusta. Only relatives, or creditors, ever ring in that **Wagnerian manner**.” (Algernon 11).

Loud and imposing, like the operas of the German composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883).

10. **Smart**

“Dear me, you are **smart**!” (Algernon 11).

Neatly stylish in appearance.

11. **Ready Money**

“No, sir. Not even for **ready money**.” (Lane 12).

Immediate cash payment. (The well-off often bought goods on credit).

12. **Completely Out**

“It would put my table **completely out**.” (Lady Bracknell 13).

This would ruin the seating arrangement, which was always carefully planned to balance male and female guests.

13. **The Season**

“It is my last reception, and one wants something that will encourage conversation, particularly at the end of **the season** when everyone has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in most cases, was probably not much.” (Lady Bracknell 13).

Refers to the social season in London, which began in May and lasted through July. During this time fashionable society attended balls, dinners, and other entertainments.

14. **Domesticity**

“Besides, Jack is a notorious **domesticity** for John!” (Gwendolen 15).

A domestic or familiar expression.

15. **Grosvenor Square**

“If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in **Grosvenor Square**.” (Lady Bracknell 18).

A Mayfair neighborhood east of Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park.

16. **Belgrave Square**

“I own a house in **Belgrave Square**, but it is let by the year to Lady Bloxham.” (Jack 18).
The center of Belgravia, a fashionable neighborhood just west of Buckingham Palace.

17. **Liberal Unionist**

“Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a **Liberal Unionist**.” (Jack 19).
The Liberal Unionists were a splinter group of the Liberal Party that joined with the Conservatives (Known as Tories) to defeat William Gladstone’s Home Rule Bill of 1886, which would have granted political autonomy to Ireland.

18. **Tories**

“Oh, they count as **Tories**. They dine with us.” (Lady Bracknell 19).
A member of a British political party, founded in 1689, that was the opposition party to the Whigs and has been known as the Conservative Party since about 1832.

19. **Purple Commerce**

“Was he born in what the Radical papers call **the purple of commerce**, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?” (Lady Bracknell 19).
A comical inversion of expectations, purple being historically associated with aristocracy, if not royalty, while one would rise from the ranks of commerce. Bracknell, or Wilde, may be subtly acknowledging the growing reversal of position, in which wealth in the form of capital was accumulating among the commercial classes—while the aristocracy increasingly had to marry into money.

20. **Worthing is a place in Sussex**

“**Worthing is a place in Sussex**. It is a seaside resort.” (Jack 19).
Wilde, who frequently named characters after places, wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest* while vacationing with his family in the coastal town of Worthing. Sussex is a county south of London.

21. **Victoria Station**

“In the cloak-room at **Victoria Station**.” (Jack 20).
One of London’s main rail stations, located in Belgravia.

22. **Brighton Line**

“Yes. The **Brighton line**.” (Jack 20).
The Rail line to Brighton, a popular seaside resort in Sussex on England’s south coast.

23. **French Revolution**

“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 that reminds one of the worst excesses of the **French Revolution**.” (Lady Bracknell 20).

A period of radical social and political change within France, when the monarchy was overthrown and replaced with liberties for the people in the form of a republic.

24. **Right as a Trivet**

“Oh, Gwendolen is as **right as a trivet**.” (Jack 21).

Proverbial expression for steadiness; a trivet is a three-footed stand used to support cooking vessels over a fire.

25. **Gorgon**

“Never met such a **Gorgon**.” (Jack 21).

In Greek mythology, one of the three snake-haired sisters, the sight of whom turned all who looked at them to stone.

26. **Make Love**

“The only way to behave to a woman is to **make love** to her, if she is pretty, and to someone else, if she is plain.” (Algernon 22).

That is, flirt with her, court her.

27. **Apoplexy**

“I’ll say he died in Paris of **apoplexy**” (Jack 22).

Sudden impairment of neurological function, especially that resulting from a cerebral hemorrhage; a stroke.

28. **The Club**

“Well, let us go to **the Club?**” (Algernon 23).

Any one of a number of exclusive, members-only clubs for men.

29. **The Empire**

“Well, we might trot round to **the Empire** at ten?” (Algernon 23).

The Empire Theatre of Varieties, a well known

30. **Woolton, Hertfordshire**

“The Manor House, **Woolton, Hertfordshire**.” (Jack 24).

A rural county just northeast of London.

31. **Put Up**

“You can **put up** my dress clothes, my smoking jacket, and all the Bunbury suits . . .”
(Algernon 25).

To pack.

32. **Smoking Jacket**

“You can put up my dress clothes, my **smoking jacket**, and all the Bunbury suits . . .”
(Algernon 25).

A loose fitting casual jacket worn at home, usually in the evening.

Act 2

1. **Mudie**

“I believe that Memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that **Mudie** sends us.” (Cecily 28).

Charles Edward Mudie (1818-1890) was an English publisher, who in 1842, founded a lending library that charged subscribers to borrow books.

2. **Three-Volume Novel**

“Do not speak slightly of the **three-volume novel**, Cecily. I wrote one myself in earlier days.” (Miss Prism 28).

Most Victorian fiction was published in three volumes (a practice that benefited for free libraries.)

3. **My Metaphor was Drawn from Bees**

“I spoke metaphorically.—My **metaphor was drawn from bees**.” (Chasuble 29).

A reference to the honey of Miss Prism’s instruction.

4. **Egeria**

“But I must not disturb **Egeria** and her pupil any longer.” (Chasuble 29).

In Roman mythology, Egeria was one of the Camenae (prophetic nymphs), said to have counseled Numa Pompilius, the legendary second king of Rome; thus and female adviser or patron.

5. **Laetitia**

“Egeria? My name is **Lætitia**, Doctor” (Miss Prism 29).

A Latin name (Literally, “beauty, grace, joy”).

6. **Fall of the Rupee**

“The chapter on the **Fall of the Rupee** you may omit. It is somewhat too sensational.”
(Miss Prism 30).

India’s currency had been declining in value for a number of years. Referring specifically to *Political Economy*: That is, an economics textbook.

7. **Australia**

“I don’t think you will require neckties. Uncle Jack is sending you to **Australia**.” (Cecily 31).

While Australia was no longer a penal colony in Wilde’s day, it was still seen widely as a place where disreputable family members might be sent.

8. **Quixotic**

“It is rather **Quixotic** of you. But I think you should try.” (Cecily 32).

Impulsively idealistic, like the hero of Miguel de Cervante’s *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615).

9. **Marechal Niel?**

“A **Marechal Niel**?” (Cecily 32).

A fragrant yellow rose, developed in France and first grown in England in 1864; it was named after Adolphe Niel, marshal of France under Napoleon III.

10. **Neologistic**

“Believe me, I do not deserve so **neologistic** a phrase.” (Chasuble 33).

Chasuble is pained by the illogical coinage “womanthrope,” which mixes Old English and Greek roots.

11. **Primitive Church**

“The precept as well as the practice of the **Primitive Church** was distinctly against matrimony.” (Chasuble 33).

That is, the marriage of clergy (permitted in the Church of England.) *The Primitive Church*: The Early Christian church. As his comment on celibacy indicates, the High Church Anglicanism practiced by Chasuble- whose name evokes a vestment worn during services- saw itself maintaining that tradition.

12. **Green**

“Ripeness can be trusted. Young women are **green**.” (Miss Prism 33).

Unripe, and thus inexperienced, easily deceived; understood by Chasuble as suffering from greensickness, an anemic condition found especially in adolescent girls and long believed to be caused celibacy.

13. **Crape Hatband**

“He is dressed in the deepest mourning, with **crape hatband** and black gloves” (Stage Directions 33).

A band of crepe material, worn to signify mourning.

14. **Grand Hotel**

“I had a telegram last night from the manager of the **Grand Hotel**.” (Jack 34).
A luxurious Paris Hotel.

15. **Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders**

“The last time I delivered it was in the Cathedral, as a charity sermon on behalf of the **Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders**.” (Chasuble 35).

Earnest reformers engaged in the public debate about education, which expected to "improve" the middle and working classes and enhance the "culture," as Matthew Arnold wrote, of the country in general. One forum for popular education, begun during the eighteenth century, was public lectures, and Wilde satirizes the earnest, if misdirected, efforts of educational societies whose talks have titles like "Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders" and a "Lecture by the University Extension Scheme on the Influence of a Permanent Income on Thought."

16. **Dressing-Case**

“Three portmanteaus, **a dressing-case**, two hat-boxes, and a large luncheon-basket.” (Merriman 39).
A case for Toiletries.

17. **Dog Cart**

“He’s gone to order the **dog-cart** for me.” (Algernon 40).
A light, two-wheeled open carriage, originally designed with a small rear compartment to hold sportsmen’s dogs.

18. **Equanimity**

“The absence of old friends one can endure with **equanimity**.” (Cecily 40).
The quality of being calm and even-tempered; composure.

19. **Bankruptcy Court**

“Half of the chaps who get into the **Bankruptcy Court** are called Algernon.” (Algernon 44).

It was not uncommon for gentlemen to fall into bankruptcy, as they depended much on credit and on eventualities that might be thwarted (inheritance not coming through or not being substantial enough to cover the debt, etc.). For the upper class, those who ended up bankrupt had probably lived in lavish style (perfectly tailored suits, ornate furniture, and elaborate dinners led to staggering charges), and so those entering the Court earned a reputation of being fashionable.

Thus, while the middle class fought tooth and nail against debt and loss of position, for the upper class, it was just another day, another dollar (well, pound, shilling, what you will) gone down the tube. Wilde himself lived largely on credit and was declared bankrupt soon after the opening of *Earnest* (on account of the infamous trials, as the show itself had been a success).

20. **Morning Post**

“The announcement will appear in the *Morning Post* on Saturday at the latest.”
(Gwendolen 48).

The London *Morning Post*, a conservative daily newspaper.

21. **Agriculture Ball**

“This is what the newspapers call **agricultural depression**, is it not?” (Cecily 49).
British agriculture had been in an economic slump since the 1870s.

22. **Off Colour**

“Your brother is a little **off colour**, isn’t he, dear Jack?” (Algernon 53).
That is, in poor health.

Act III

1. **British Opera**

“They whistle some dreadful popular air from a **British Opera**” (Stage Directions 57).
Possibly a reference to the comic operas of W.S. Gilbert (1836- 1911) and Sir Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900), whose 1881 *Patience* satirized Wilde and the aesthetic movement.

2. **German Scepticism**

“But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for **German scepticism**.
(Gwendolen 58).

German biblical scholars of the 19th century were notorious among the British for their skepticism toward scriptural authority and claims of divine revelation.

3. **Luggage Train**

“Apprised, sir, of my daughter’s sudden flight by her trusty maid, whose confidence I purchased by means of a small coin, I followed her at once by **a luggage train**.” (Lady Bracknell 59).

A Freight train.

4. **University Extension Scheme**

“Her unhappy father is, I am glad to say, under the impression that she is attending a more than usually lengthy lecture by the **University Extension Scheme** on the Influence of a permanent income on Thought.” (Lady Bracknell 60).

An extramural education program in which university instructors delivered lectures to students not pursuing regular degrees.

5. **Terminus**

“Until yesterday I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a **Terminus**.” (Lady Bracknell 61).

The station at the end of a railway line.

6. **Gervase Park, Dorking, Surrey; and the Sporrn, Fifeshire, N.B.**

“Miss Cardew is the grand-daughter of the late Mr. Thomas Cardew of 149 Belgrave Square, S.W.; **Gervase Park, Dorking, Surrey; and the Sporrn, Fifeshire, N.B.**” (Jack 61).

That is, with residences in Belgravia, in a county south of London, and in Scotland (“North Britain.”)

7. **Solicitors**

“Miss Cardew’s family **solicitors** are Messrs. Markby, Markby, and Markby.” (Jack 61).
British lawyers who advise and represent clients, but do not argue cases in court.

8. **Messers**

“Miss Cardew’s family solicitors are **Messrs.** Markby, Markby, and Markby.” (Jack 61).
The plural of “Mister.”

9. **Nobody knew her**

“And after six months **nobody knew her.**” (Jack 62).
Acknowledged her socially (i.e. her behavior had become scandalous).

10. **Oxonan**

“Untruthful! My nephew Algernon? Impossible! He is an **Oxonian.**” (Lady Bracknell 63).

A student at or graduate of Oxford University.

11. **Perrier-Jouet, Brut, '89; wine**

“Under an assumed name he drank, I’ve just been informed by my butler, an entire pint bottle of my **Perrier-Jouet, Brut, '89; wine** I was specially reserving for myself.” (Jack 64).

A particularly fine vintage of dry champagne.

12. **Anabaptists**

“They savour of the heretical views of the **Anabaptists**, views that I have completely refuted in four of my unpublished sermons.” (Chasuble 66).

Members of a radical Protestant sect, established in Germany in the 16th century that advocated the baptism only of adult believers. (Anabaptist literally means “one who baptizes over again”); the label was sometimes applied pejoratively to Baptists or to others who rejected Anglican doctrine.

13. **Pew-Opener**

“Indeed, I have just been informed by the **pew-opener** that for the last hour and a half Miss Prism has been waiting for me in the vestry.” (Chasuble 66).

An usher who unlocked the private pews provided by many churches.

14. **Bayswater**

“A few weeks later, through the elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan police, the perambulator was discovered at midnight, standing by itself in a remote corner of **Bayswater**.” (Lady Bracknell 67).

A fashionable residential area of West London, north of Kensington Gardens.

15. **Perambulator**

“On the morning of the day you mention, a day that is for ever branded on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its **perambulator**.” (Miss Prism 67).

Baby carriage (pram).

16. **Gower Street Omnibus**

“Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a **Gower Street** omnibus in younger and happier days.” (Miss Prism 68).

Public carriage (bus). *Gower Street*: a street in the Bloomsbury section of central London. (Where the University of London and the British Museum are located.)

17. **Temperance Beverage**

“Here is the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a **temperance beverage**, an incident that occurred at Leamington.” (Miss Prism 68).

A drink acceptable to those opposing alcohol (the drink might contain either no or very slight traces of alcohol). The temperance movement grew as part of Victorian England’s mania for social reform and philanthropic work. Alcohol was branded the devil’s brew (particularly in middle class eyes), an impression perhaps egged along by the devastation caused among the working classes by the ready availability of cheap gin. Of course, none of this stopped the upper class from downing its share of liquor.

18. **Leamington**

“Here is the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an incident that occurred at **Leamington**.” (Miss Prism 68).

Royal Leamington Spa, in Warwickshire, about 100 miles northwest of London.

19. **Army Lists**

“His name would appear in the **Army Lists** of the period, I suppose, Aunt Augusta?”
(Jack 70).

The official lists of all the commissioned officers in the army.

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The majority of the definitions came from the Norton Anthology, though several did come from Baltimore Centerstage's online Dramaturgy Glossary. Basic definitions of words came from the free dictionary online, and one definition came from Arnold Schmidt's essay. I edited these definitions as well as added a few of my own.