

Unit Five: Underscoring A Comedic Scene

Consider the possibilities for underscoring the following scene from *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde. In this comedy from 1895, Gwendolen and Cecily compete over the man they know as Ernest. The scene takes place in a garden during the second act when Cecily comes to confront Ernest. As in the dramatic scene, consider what role the underscoring might play in accompanying the scene.

GWENDOLEN

Do you allude to me, Miss Cardew, as an entanglement? You are presumptuous. On an occasion of this kind it becomes more than a moral duty to speak one's mind. It becomes a pleasure.

CECILY

Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into an engagement? How dare you? This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.

GWENDOLEN

[Satirically.] I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.

[Enter MERRIMAN, followed by the footman. He carries a salver, tablecloth, and plate stand. CECILY is about to retort. The presence of the servants exercises a restraining influence, under which both girls chafe.]

MERRIMAN

Shall I lay tea here as usual, Miss?

CECILY

[Sternly, in a calm voice.] Yes, as usual.

[MERRIMAN begins to clear table and lay cloth. A long pause. CECILY and GWENDOLEN glare at each other.]

GWENDOLEN

Are there many interesting walks in the vicinity, Miss Cardew?

CECILY

Oh! yes! a great many. From the top of one of the hills quite close one can see five counties.

GWENDOLEN

Five counties! I don't think I should like that; I hate crowds.

CECILY

[Sweetly.] I suppose that is why you live in town?

[GWENDOLEN bites her lip, and beats her foot nervously with her parasol.]

GWENDOLEN

[Looking round.] Quite a well-kept garden this is, Miss Cardew.

CECILY

So glad you like it, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN

I had no idea there were any flowers in the country.

CECILY

Oh, flowers are as common here, Miss Fairfax, as people are in London.

GWENDOLEN

Personally, I cannot understand how anybody manages to exist in the country, if anybody who is anybody does. The country always bores me to death.

CECILY

Ah! This is what the newspapers call agricultural depression, is it not? I believe the aristocracy are suffering very much from it just at present. It is almost an epidemic amongst them, I have been told. 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.

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[MERRIMAN does so, and goes out with footman. GWENDOLEN drinks the tea and makes a grimace. Puts down cup at once, reaches out her hand to the bread and butter, looks at it, and finds it is cake. Rises in indignation.]

GWENDOLEN

You have filled my tea with lumps of sugar, and though I asked most distinctly for bread and butter, you have given me cake. I am known for the gentleness of my disposition, and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I warn you, Miss Cardew, you may go too far.

CECILY

[Rising.] To save my poor, innocent, trusting boy from the machinations of any other girl there are no lengths to which I would not go.

GWENDOLEN

From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right.

CECILY

It seems to me, Miss Fairfax, that I am trespassing on your valuable time. No doubt you have many other calls of a similar character to make in the neighbourhood.

[Enter JACK.]

GWENDOLEN

[Catching sight of him.] Ernest! My own Ernest!

JACK

Gwendolen! Darling! *[Offers to kiss her.]*

GWENDOLEN

[Draws back.] A moment! May I ask if you are engaged to be married to this young lady? *[Points to Cecily.]*

JACK

[Laughing.] To dear little Cecily! Of course not! What could have put such an idea into your pretty little head?

GWENDOLEN

Thank you. You may! *[Offers her cheek.]*

CECILY

[Very sweetly.] I knew there must be some misunderstanding, Miss Fairfax. The gentleman whose arm is at present round your waist is my guardian, Mr. John Worthing.

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