

Practice Prose Essay

The following passage is an excerpt from *Lady Windermere's Fan*, a play by Oscar Wilde, produced in 1892. Read the passage carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the playwright reveals the values of the characters and the nature of their society.

5 DUCHESS OF BERWICK (*shaking hands*). Dear Margaret, I am so pleased to see you. You remember Agatha,¹ don't you? How do you do, Lord Darlington? I won't let you know my daughter, you are far too wicked.

10 LORD DARLINGTON. Don't say that, Duchess. As a wicked man I am a complete failure. Why, there are lots of people who say I have never really done anything wrong in the whole course of my life. Of course they only say it behind my back.

15 DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Isn't he dreadful? Agatha, this is Lord Darlington. Mind you don't believe a word he says. No, no tea, thank you, dear. (*Sits on sofa.*) We have just had tea at Lady Markby's. Such bad tea, too. It was quite undrinkable. I wasn't at all surprised. Her own son-in-law supplies it. Agatha is looking forward so much to your ball tonight, dear Margaret.

20 LADY WINDERMERE (*seated*). Oh, you mustn't think it is going to be a ball, Duchess. It is only a dance in honour of my birthday. A small and early.

LORD DARLINGTON (*standing*). Very small, very early, and very select, Duchess.

25 DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Of course it's going to be select. But we know *that*, dear Margaret, about your house. It is really one of the few houses in London where I can take Agatha, and where I feel perfectly secure about dear Berwick. I don't know what society is coming to. The most dreadful people
30 seem to go everywhere. They certainly come to my parties—the men get quite furious if one doesn't ask them. Really, some one should make a stand against it.

35 LADY WINDERMERE. I will, Duchess. I will have no one in my house about whom there is any scandal.

LORD DARLINGTON. Oh, don't say that, Lady Windermere. I should never be admitted. (*Sitting.*)

¹ the Duchess's daughter

40 DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Oh, men don't matter. With women it is different. We're good. Some of us are, at least. But we are positively getting elbowed into the corner. Our husbands would really forget our existence if we didn't nag at them from time to time, just to remind them that we have a perfect legal right to do so.

45 LORD DARLINGTON. It's a curious thing, Duchess, about the game of marriage—a game, by the way, that is going out of fashion—the wives hold all the honours² and invariably lose the odd trick.³

50 DUCHESS OF BERWICK. The odd trick? Is that the husband, Lord Darlington?

LORD DARLINGTON. It would be rather a good name for the modern husband.

55 DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Dear Lord Darlington, how thoroughly depraved you are!

LADY WINDERMERE. Lord Darlington is trivial.

LORD DARLINGTON. Ah, don't say that, Lady Windermere.

60 LADY WINDERMERE. Why do you *talk* so trivially about life, then?

LORD DARLINGTON. Because I think that life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it.

65 DUCHESS OF BERWICK. What does he mean? Do, as a concession to my poor wits, Lord Darlington, just explain to me what you really mean.

70 LORD DARLINGTON. I think I had better not, Duchess. Nowadays to be intelligible is to be found out. Good-bye! (*Shakes hands with DUCHESS.*) And now—Lady Windermere, good-bye. I may come tonight, mayn't I? Do let me come.

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes, certainly. But you are not to say foolish, insincere things to people.

75 LORD DARLINGTON. (*smiling*). Ah! you are beginning to reform me. It is a dangerous thing to reform any one, Lady Windermere. (*bows and exit*).

² high cards

³ round of a card game