

The Importance of Being Earnest: Discussion Questions

1. Explain the pun of the title. Who is being Earnest in this play? Do Gwendolen and Cecily prefer having husbands named Ernest to having earnest husbands?
2. What are the conflicts in *The Importance of Being Earnest*? What types of conflict (physical, moral, intellectual, or emotional) did you notice in this work?
3. How does Oscar Wilde reveal character in *The Importance of Being Earnest*?
4. Are the characters consistent in their actions? Which of the characters are fully developed? How? Why?
5. How does dramatic irony create humor in *The Importance of Being Earnest*? Identify a handful of instances in which the audience members know more about what is going on than the characters on stage. Why does this create humor?
6. What is the role of textuality in this play-do letters and diaries have a stronger reliability or ring of truth than conversation?
7. How do words take on a life of their own in this play? How does this relate to why it is so easy for Prism to substitute her manuscript for a baby? Analyze diaries as a source of power and truth-making.
8. How essential is the setting? Could the play have taken place anywhere else?
9. Analyze the various times that the characters eat in this play, primarily the cucumber sandwiches and the muffins. Does eating serve a primarily social or anti-social function?
10. What is the role of women in the text? How are mothers represented? What about single/independent women?
11. How does the play relate to Victorian literature?
12. What does the common classification of *The Importance of being Earnest* as a "comedy of manners" refer to? Could this play operate in a classless, non-hierarchical society?
13. What are some themes in the story? How do they relate to the plot and characters?
14. What are some symbols in *The Importance of Being Earnest*? How do they relate to the plot and characters?
15. Does the play end the way you expected? How? Why?

16. What is the central/primary purpose of the play? Is the purpose important or meaningful?
17. How does the play relate to Victorian literature?
18. How essential is the setting? Could the play have taken place anywhere else?
19. Analyze the role of class in Lady Bracknell's worldview. Is she more impressed by land, by nobility, or by wealth?
20. What is the role of women in the text? How are mothers represented? What about single/independent women?
21. Does Wilde prevent any version of true love? Does the extent to which Gwendolen and Cecily are self-centered affect your analysis?
22. Algernon observes that: "Women only call each other sister when they have called each other a lot of other things first." How does the development of the relationship between Cecily and Gwendolen bear out this remark? What causes them to bond together? What causes them to behave competitively?
23. Analyze the gender reversals in this text. Does the feminized Lord Bracknell foreshadow what Jack and Algernon may become? Are males or females more passive/dominated in this play?
24. What elements of the story, plot, characterization, etc. are the most controversial? Why do you think the play was banned?

Works Cited

- Esther Lombardi, "*Importance of Being Earnest* Questions for Study and Discussion: Oscar Wilde's Controversial Drama. Classic Literature. About.com Guide. Web. 29 December 2011.
- Wayne, Derek. Nolan, Rachel ed. "*The Importance of Being Earnest* Suggested Essays." GradeSaver, 27 April 2006. Web. 29 December 2011.