

The Importance of Being Earnest Paper due Wednesday, December 6th:

1. Consider what it is that makes Earnest a great play (that is, if it is great; you might argue that it is not). Certainly the characters are flat, or "stock," and the plot is contrived with very unbelievable turns. Earnest has justifiably been called a "farce," which is a comedy with improbable events, mistaken identities, slapstick and physical humor, thinly-veiled sexual references and, more often than not, a god-from-the-machine ending where mistaken identities are worked out, someone inherits a great deal of money, etc. The form of the play, then, does not make it great, nor do its characters. I want you to convince me that The Importance of Being Earnest is, or is not, a great play. This will obviously require you to define "greatness" and then show how the play does, or does not, meet the requirements you set forth.
2. In his preface to our edition, Michael Gillespie argues that the play offers us "considerable insights on the human condition." Do you agree? If so, point to places where you think Wilde is particularly insightful. Your response might also apply these insights to contemporary events/circumstances (although this is not mandatory). In some ways the play seems very contemporary. I would be happy to read a response that focuses on this aspect.
3. Analyze the play's title beyond the obvious earnest/Ernest pun. Is it a well-chosen title? Does it work beyond the wordplay? Alternatively, you might consider Wilde's subtitle for the play, "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People." Meaning?
4. How and where does Wilde deal with sexuality in the play? What do these instances reveal about the nature of sexuality in Victorian society?
5. Wilde was a prominent figure in the aesthetic movement. In brief, he believed that art was its own justification and did not bear the responsibility of moral instructiveness. Does The Importance of Being Earnest live up to his credo of "art for art's sake"? Or does it have a "moral" of some kind?
6. In what way is the scene where Cecily and Gwendolen have tea a microcosm of the entire play? In what way does Wilde (hilariously, it must be said) use his stage directions to enhance the scene?