

Questions on The Importance of Being Earnest:

1. What is the purpose of the opening exchange between Algernon and Lane?
2. What do we learn about the opening situation of the play from the conversation between Algernon and Jack? How does Wilde use the cigarette case for expository and comic purposes?
3. What does Algernon offer Jack in exchange for a free dinner? How does he fulfill his share of the agreement? What plot complication results from it?
4. How does Lady Bracknell react to the news of Gwendolen's engagement to Jack? What does her maternal interrogation of Jack tell us about her values and those of her society?
5. How does Wilde use the fact that Jack was found in a handbag? What further information do we get from Miss Prism early in act two that contributes to the solution of the play's problems?
6. Why does Algernon suggest that Jack's brother died of a chill rather than of apoplexy? What use is made of this suggestion later in the play?
7. How does Algernon discover the address of Jack's country place? How has Jack attempted earlier to keep it secret?
8. What bargain does Jack offer to Lady Bracknell? How does she react? What might have happened if the problem had not been resolved?
9. Describe the steps by which the problems are resolved by the appearance of Miss Prism, including any new misunderstanding that may have arisen.
10. Are we prepared for the embrace of Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble? If not, why do we accept it?
11. What is the meaning of the final line of the play?
12. Certain of the characters in this play have names that suggest something about their characters. Of which ones is this true, and what do we learn about each from the name?
13. Why does Gwendolen insist that Jack make a formal proposal of marriage?
14. In the opening scene of act two, what conclusions does the audience reach about the attitudes and relative intelligence of Miss Prism and Cecily?
15. Why is Miss Prism shown misunderstanding the meaning of the allusion to Egeria?
16. Describe the relation between the attitudes of Gwendolen and Cecily and what they actually say in the opening scene of act three.
17. The last part of act two - the scenes between Gwendolen and Cecily, then between them and the two young men, and finally between the two young men - are full of examples of syntactic and rhetorical balance and parallelism. Describe the effect of this device.
18. Compare Lady Bracknell's examination of Cecily in act three with her interrogation of Jack in act one. What accounts for the similarities and differences?
19. Much of the humor in this play, and much of the meaning depends on the contrast between appearance and reality. For example, in the first exchange of the play, Algernon asks Lane if he has heard what Algernon was playing on the piano. What are we to make of Lane's reply, "I didn't think it polite to listen, sir"? Can you find other examples of this phenomenon? What do they tell us about the meaning of the play?
20. Find some of the play's numerous references to food and drink. What is their meaning in the play?
21. How does Wilde use diaries as a structural and comic device in the play?