

The Importance of Being Earnest Questions

The First Act

1. Throughout Act I several Victorian attitudes are being slighted. Identify three and support your answer with examples.
2. Why does Jack say that Algernon sounds like a dentist? What does he say the result will be? How is this relevant to the play in general?
3. What does Algernon mean when he calls Jack a “confirmed Bunburyist”?
4. Freudian psychology suggests that we interpret a great deal of publicly displayed gaiety, frivolity, and flippancy as a mode for covering up some serious content. The formula “I was only joking” is a cover-up for things that we really mean. It is our way of evading the real issue. How do the final lines of Act I exemplify this idea?

The Second Act

5. One way Wilde consciously avoids issues is, as we have seen, through his “I was only joking formula.” Another way Wilde skirts the issue, but still makes his point is with a “Let’s not go into that: this is a comedy” attitude. How does the Chasuble’s reaction to Jack’s imaginary brother’s request, that he be buried in Paris, exemplify this idea? What Victorian attitudes is Wilde poking fun at? What is his point?
6. How is the argument between Cecily and Gwendolen also representative of the “Let’s not go into that” attitude?
7. Is Gwendolen’s short sightedness a physical defect? Explain.

The Third Act

8. Why does Gwendolen think that the equality of the sexes is absurd? Is this really Wilde’s point?
9. Why does he present Algernon’s and Jack’s desire to be christened as self-sacrificing and courageous?
10. What aspect of Victorian society is Wilde making fun of when Lady Bracknell identifies the ridiculous title of the lecture that Gwendolen is supposedly attending?
11. When replying to Lady Bracknell’s inquiry, as to what position Miss Prism holds in his household, the Chasuble’s inappropriate reply shows the audience where his mind really is. How does this relate to his previous remark concerning how he “would hang on Miss Prism’s lips”? How can we interpret these reactions as a comment on Victorian hypocrisy and righteousness?
12. Why is Miss Prism’s remark on the inconvenience of doing without her handbag for so many years ludicrous? How is Wilde commenting on life in general?
13. What is Wilde’s general comment about earnestness?
14. Explain the double meaning of the title and its significance.
15. Wilde called this play a “trivial comedy for serious people.” Explain this statement in terms of the play’s satirical elements.