



***READING AND WRITING SKILLS FOR STUDENTS OF
LITERATURE IN ENGLISH: THE VICTORIAN PERIOD***

Eric Monforte
Jacqueline Hurlley
Bill Phillips

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya



3.4. Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)

Reading Skills

I

1. What possible readings does the title of the play allow?

Act I

1. What does the fact that Algernon's room is "luxuriously and artistically furnished" tell us about him?
2. What do Algernon and Jack do for a living? Which class do they belong to? Give examples from the text.
3. Who are Bunbury and Ernest? What is their function in Algernon's and Jack's lives, respectively?
4. Why do Algernon and Jack invent alternative identities?
5. Who is Lady Bracknell? What is her function in the play?
6. Who is Gwendolen? How is she related to Algernon? Why is she attracted to Jack?
7. Where was Jack found?
8. Why can't Jack marry Gwendolen?

Act II

1. Who is Cecily? How is she related to Jack?
2. Who are Miss Prism and Reverend Chasuble? What is their function in the play?
3. Why does Algernon turn up at the Manor House?
4. Why is Cecily attracted to Algernon? Who does she think he is?
5. Why does Gwendolen turn up at the Manor House?
6. Who does Gwendolen think Cecily is engaged to?
7. Who does Cecily think Gwendolen is engaged to?
8. What do Algernon and Jack intend to do about their names?
9. Why can't Algernon marry Cecily?

Act III

1. When does Lady Bracknell accept Cecily as a suitable partner for her nephew?
2. Why did Miss Prism misplace Jack?
3. What is the real relationship between Jack and Lady Bracknell?
4. What is the real relationship between Algernon and Jack?
5. What is Jack's real name?
6. In what ways can the ending of the play be understood?

II

1. What are the implications behind the title of the play?
2. What does the play's subtitle, "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People", imply?
3. Discuss the significance of the movement from Algernon's flat in Act I to the garden at the Manor House in Act II and, finally, to the drawing-room at the Manor House in Act III.
4. Look for examples of the use of irony in the play.
5. Find examples of the use of satire in the play.
6. Discuss the presence of the androgynous in the play.
7. It has been suggested that the play demolishes "Victorian antithetical thought: English vs. Irish; man vs. woman; good vs. evil". (Mireia Aragay and Ana Moya, *Literatura anglesa del segle XIX fins a l'actualitat: English Literature from the XIXth Century to the Present*. Barcelona: Edicions Universitat de Barcelona, 2001. p. 97). How is this achieved and to what effect?
8. Is Englishness parodied at all in the play? Could this be related to Wilde's Irishness?
9. In what way is identity important in the play?
10. How is earnestness relevant to the play? And to Victorian society at large?
11. "ALGERNON. Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility". Comment on the above lines, discussing the centrality of the issue of class in the play. What perspective does the text offer?
12. "ALGERNON. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact". In what light can these words be understood?
13. How do the different couples escape the rigours of Victorian morality? In this sense, does the fact that they seem to subvert the gender definitions of the time appear as relevant?
14. What is the function performed by Canon Chasuble and Miss Prism? What is the main element Wilde uses to make them grotesque?
15. Make a list of the aphorisms Wilde uses in the play. Then, group them according to their themes. Considering them generally, what do they say about the play?
16. Consider the representation of Lady Bracknell in the play. Could she be seen as a monstrous parody of Victorian society? Why?
17. Make a list of the issues Lady Bracknell is interested in in her interview with Jack in Act I and analyse their significance. Bear also in mind her questioning of Cecily in Act III.
18. Wilde has been said to anticipate the Theatre of the Absurd in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Identify some elements from the play that could belong to this category.

19. "JACK. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes".
"ALGERNON: You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's tonight, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week".
Bearing in mind the exchange between Jack and Algernon, comment on the function of both Ernest and Bunbury in the play.
20. Compare the wooing scenes between Jack/Gwendolen in Act I and Algernon/Cecily in Act II. In what ways can they be considered a parody of romantic comedies and of gender roles?
21. "LADY BRACKNELL. I'm sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger. And now I'll have a cup of tea, and one of those nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me". Bearing these words in mind, in what way does the play expose issues like deceit, appearances or hypocrisy?
22. Discuss the use and symbolism of the tea ceremony in the play.
23. "CECILY. (to Algernon) I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy". In what way can Cecily's words be understood?
24. "JACK. I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest". In the light of the whole play, what is the significance of Jack's words?

Writing Skills

1. "ALGERNON. You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life". Comment on the above lines concentrating on the meaning of the play-on-words used by the playwright. What is the ultimate implication of the use of the pun?
2. "LADY BRACKNELL. Mr Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that

- unfortunate movement led to? ... I would strongly advise you, Mr Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over". Comment on Lady Bracknell's words and analyse them bearing in mind the Victorian frame of mind. In your answer, you should also bear in mind the rest of the conversation between Jack and herself in Act I.
3. In the play, "Ernest-ness" is identified "with the cant and hypocrisy of Victorian life". (Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. p. 121). Starting off from the above quote, discuss the workings of Wilde's oblique critique of Victorianism in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
 4. "[T]he cumulative effect of language and action is to function as a subversive critique of Victorian attitudes and institutions, all the more telling for being so lightly elegant in expression. It is the hypocrisy of society that Wilde aims at". (Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. p. 129). Discuss.
 5. The play shows "the central lies on which Victorian and most other societies are founded". (Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. p. 131). Discuss.
 6. "Wilde's plays are obsessed with the boundaries of Society". (Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. p. 36). Consider Sinfield's words in the light of Wilde's own Irishness and homosexuality/bisexuality. How does this obsession appear in *The Importance of Being Earnest*?
 7. "Each of Wilde's comedies ends with the reassertion of moral standards: marriages and reputations are saved, a family reunited with paternal authority upheld, class distinctions preserved by the discovery that an orphan's antecedents are no less respectable than those of the girl he loves. Yet by the time these 'happy endings' are achieved, everything they stand for has been discredited". (Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. p. 217). Comment on the above quote in relation to *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Illustrate your answer by close reference to the play.
 8. "Wilde's plays trivialized the values they so ostentatiously appeared to uphold". (Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. p. 217). Discuss.
 9. Wilde "shows up social hypocrisy by trivializing earnestness". (Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. p. 221). Discuss.