English 7/8 -- Victorian Drama

Oscar Wilde

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST・

ACT I

CHARACTERS

Algernon Moncrieff

Lane

Jack Worthing

Lady Bracknell

Honorable Gwendolen Fairfax

## QUESTIONS

1. (a) Explain the double lives led by Jack and Algernon. (b)Where and to whom is Jack known as “Ernest”? (c)What does Algernon mean when he saysto Jack, “I have always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist”?
2. (a) Why does Algernon say to Jack just before the arrival of Lady Bracknell, “I am afraid Aunt Augusta won’t quite approve of your being here”? (b)What evidence to we have that Lady Bracknell does not approve of Jack’s presence? (c)What are Lady Bracknell’s requirements for a proper suitor for Gwendolen?
3. One conventional feature of most social comedy is the presence of what isoften called a blocking figure—a character in the play, often an old and ill-tempered person, whose opposition to the romantic impulses of the other main characters provides the basis for much of the comic action. In what sense could Lady Bracknell be described as the blocking figure in *The Importance of Being Earnest ?*
4. The comic wit of Wilde’s writing often depends on a character’s directly contradicting what we normally assume to be logical or true. We can seean example of this in Algernon’s comment that “the amount of women inLondon who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous.” Find other examples in Act One of this kind of wit.

KEY LINES・

1. “I don’t play [the piano] accurately -- anyone can play accurately -- butI play with wonderful expression.” (AM)
2. “And, speaking of the science of life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?” (AM)
3. “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.” (AM) [Noblesse oblige]
4. “It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn’t a dentist. It produces a false impression.” (AM)
5. “To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; tolose both looks like carelessness.” (Lady B)

ACT II

CHARACTERS

Miss Laetitia Prism

Cecily Cardew

Merriman

The Reverend Canon Chasuble

QUESTIONS:

1. (a) How do Gwendolen and Cecily respond to each other when the first meetin this act? (b) How do their feelings about each other change as theact progresses? What finally unites the two girls as they go into thehouse together “with scornful looks”?
2. The comedy of mistaken identity is a very old dramatic form -- as old, infact, as comedy itself -- which Wilde manages to revitalize in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The key mistaken identity in this play, of course, is that of “Ernest” himself. (a) What comic consequences result from Algernon’s assuming the role of Ernest Worthing? (b) How are these consequences made more complicated when Gwendolen arrives on the scene from London?

KEY LINES

4. “I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. IfI didn’t write them down, I should probably forget all about them.” (Cecily)

5. “Memory . . . is the diary that we all carry about with us.” (Prism)

6. “I spoke metaphorically. My metaphor was drawn from bees.” (Chasuble)

7. “He said you would have to choose between this world, the next world,and Australia.” (Cecily)

8. “I never have any appetite unless I have a buttonhole first.” (AM)

9. “On an occasion of this kind it becomes more than a moral duty to speak one’s mind. It becomes a pleasure.

ACT 3

QUESTIONS:

7. Describe in your own owrds the story Miss Prism tells when she isrecognized and questioned by Lady Bracknell. Looking back now at MissPrism’s speeches early in the play, what is amusing about her having toldCecily near the beginning of Act Two, “Do not speak slightingly of thethree-volume novel, Cecily. I wrote one myself in earlier days”?

8. A recognition scene・is a scene near the end of a play when characterswho have previously had mistaken roles finally discover or reveal theirtrue identities. Describe the recognition scene in 乃he Importance ofBeing Earnest・ In how many senses is John Worthing’s discovery of hisreal identity ironic?

9. Another traditional feature of comedy is the all-inclusive nature of thefinal resolution, when minor as well as major characters are brought into harmonious relationship. How is this tradition of inclusivenesscomically emphasized at the end of 乃he Importance of Being Earnest・ Why is it significant that Reverend Chasuble and Miss Prism join the twoyoung couples in openly expressing their love for each other? What roledoes Lady Bracknell play in the final resolution?

WRITING ASSIGNMENT・

Many people have resorted to Bunburying. Relate an experience of yoursor a friend’s in which an attempt to avoid an unpleasant situationresulted in being found out. If this experience has never happened toyou, try writing a comic sketch in which it happens to a fictionalcharacter.

KEY LINES・

9. “They have been eating muffins. That looks like repentence.” (Cecily)

10. “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vitalthing.” (Gwen)

11. “Hesitation of any kind is a sign of mental decay in the young, ofphysical weakness in the old.” (LadyB)

12. “Three addresses always inspire confidence, even in tradesmen.” (LadyB)