

Satirical Dualities and the Victorian Paradox Propounded By Oscar Wilde in ‘The Importance of Being Earnest’

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ABSTRACT

The 1890s saw a change in Victorian Literature where plays began to present vivid social conditions in a picturesque manner. Written by Oscar Wilde in 1895, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one such play that discusses the Victorian society of England in a satirical manner. He attacks the follies and foibles and employs humour, paradoxes and epigrams. Social issues are addressed in the play and the structure of the play was largely influenced by French theatre, melodrama, social drama and farce. Oscar Wilde was also a proponent of the Aesthetic movement, which celebrated art for art's sake. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one such piece of entertainment which delights its contemporary audiences.

Keywords: Epigrams, Farce, Follies, Humour, Melodrama, Paradoxes, Victorian Society.

INTRODUCTION

The aristocratic Victorians valued duty and responsibility above all else. Earnestness- sincerity, the desire to do things correctly was the top code of conduct. Appearance was key and style was important than substance. So, while a person could lead a secret life and carry on false affairs, society would look the other way as long as the appearance of propriety was maintained. Wilde criticized this and his play analyses the double identity of human nature in the Victorian age, and the reason behind this duality (Hussein 1).

The same is expounded in the play. A secret life is carried on by two important characters in the play-Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff. Jack, a boy from the country, who was found in “large, black leather hand bag” (Wilde80) and was taken into disposition by “an old gentleman, very charitable” Mr Thomas Cardew. (Wilde 80). His actual line of descent remains undetermined almost till the end of the play. Being from the country, he naturally glamorizes the city life. With no means of joy and amusement in the countryside, it becomes rather dull and uninteresting so he resorts to city life. “When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.”(Wilde 56). Jack invents a rakish character called Ernest living in London for an excuse to travel to the city in the name of visiting this younger brother. When in fact in the city he himself goes by the name Ernest.

Algernon is a wealthy bachelor, frivolous and irreverent, living in a fashionable part of London. His pleasures in life comes from fashion, food, music and ‘bun burying’. Like Jack, Algernon too uses his invented character of Mr. Bunbury, an invalid friend, to live a secret life, “in order that I may be able to go down into country whenever I choose” (Wilde 60).

This dual lifestyle that the two adopts provides the major narrative source and heightens the absurdity and farcical elements in the play.

Even the two young ladies of the play, Gwendolen and Cecily, representing city and the country lead dual lives.

Gwendolen, time and again pretends to go to lecture while running away to Earnest in the country. Cecily's fancy life that comes out of her diary leads her to live an imaginary life where she is engaged to Jack's brother, Earnest and her subsequent fantasies becomes a part of her realities. This constant duality is evident in almost all of the characters in the play and Wilde gives his characters carefully chosen names to give the right connotations and the importance of names is emphasized as a theme in the play (Fridell10).

The title of the play is a notable for serving dual purposes. The real importance of whether or not being earnest is presented but in a satirical tone. The fact that earnest meaning sincerity is presented as paradox as both Jack and Algernon actually deceives people through the false identity of Ernest. The contradiction heightens when Gwendolen and Cecily mentions

that “there is something in the name that inspires absolute confidence” (Wilde70) and how both the women would not be able to love a man who was not named Ernest. Cecily mentions had it not been for the name Ernest “I might respect you, I might admire your character. But I fear that I should be able to give you my undivided attention” (Wilde 127). Their fascination with the name is perhaps the only reason both Gwendolen and Cecily is ready to marry their suitors as “the only really safe name is Ernest.” (Wilde 72). This serves to provide a sort of a paradox. The women praise the affirmations attached to the name Ernest and link with its literal meaning while Jack and Algernon merely use it as tools of false identity to achieve their goals of marrying Gwendolen and Cecily, respectively. This social deception by means of what Algernon called ‘bunburying’ is said to have been a common practice that men of the Victorian England indulged in. As, “A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it” (Wilde 62).

The play reaches its climax in Act 2 with the appearance of Algernon in the Manor House with its ‘garden, an old-fashioned one, full of roses’ (Wilde 92) while he presents himself as Mr. Ernest Worthing, Jack’s brother. Tensional situations arise when Jack discovers that Algernon has been impersonating Ernest to woo Jack’s younger ward Cecily.

Eventually time comes for the confrontation of the true identities of both Jack and Algernon and by the end of the play it is revealed how important being earnest really is without of course slipping past the playful pun that Wilde employs in the word.

Therefore the word ‘Earnest’ and ‘Ernest’ is then used to contrast the morals that comes with it. As much absurd it is, it does play an important role in creating the narrative and serves the purpose for incorporation of several ideals of Victorian society and Wilde uses this in a satirical manner.

For Wilde, the word earnest comprised two different but related ideas: the notion of false truth and the notion of false morality, or moralism. The moralism of Victorian society, its smugness and pomposity, impels Algernon and Jack to invent fictitious alter ego so as to be able to escape the strictures of propriety and decency. Pretensions and social deceptions were common in the Victorian age.

The subtitle of the play ‘A trivial comedy for serious people’ is also an ironic comment on trivial lives of the aristocracy.

Much of the events that appears comic to the audience is dealt seriously in the play which all the more enhances the satire.

Oscar Wilde says that “we should treat all trivial things very seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality”. This is quite evident in his characters like Algernon, Lady Bracknell and girls like Gwendolen and Cecily who addresses trivial things with utmost seriousness. This only serves the purpose of mockery and Wilde does not hesitate to employ such impression to let out the social follies of the times.

Therefore we see that the title of the play ‘The Importance of Being Earnest, A Trivial Comedy for Serious People’ itself is a form of expression that at once triumphantly unite and constantly comment each other. The play surfaces brilliant satire on Victorian social hypocrisy where Upper class English people are bound by artificial code of conduct and manners. Wilde uses witty dialogues and paradoxical maxims that exposes the absurdities of the society and has clearly delighted his audience with his play as much as his title has evoked impressive wit.

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