

## Research Paper

## Literature



## Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest: A Critique of The Victorian Society

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### ABSTRACT

*Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) provides a mirror image of the late Victorian upper class life. The sham seriousness, hypocritical morality and artificial sophistry of this class are thoroughly criticized in this play. Victorian gentlemen maintained double identity under the garb of dignity. The quality of 'earnestness' has been treated paradoxically in this play. In his critique Wilde has focused on the issues of marriage, class, identity etc. Without any harsh satire, by exploiting the device of wit, humour and paradox, Wilde pinpoints the moral laxity of his contemporary period.*

**Keywords:** earnestness, double identity, hypocritical morality, Victorian society

The Victorian Period in English literature is roughly taken to be between 1830 and 1900, approximately coinciding with the long reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) in England. The age is well-known for its sham seriousness, hypocritical morality and artificial sophistry. Living a double life was quite a common practice of the period. Oscar Wilde hurls his shaft against the hypocrisy and snobbery of the aristocratic society of the late Victorian England.

The Importance of Being Earnest, Oscar Wilde's most stage-successful play, was first produced by George Alexander at the St James's Theatre on 14 February 1895. It is a portrait gallery of the Victorian upper class life. It focuses on certain binaries – moral / immoral, serious / trivial, town / country and so on. Studying the hypocritical morality of the period, Siddhartha Biswas in his book *Studies in The Importance of Being Earnest* comments:

Victorian morality, as we all know, was a storehouse of contradictions and inconsistencies. It was more dominated by taboos erected by social constructs rather than by any system based on rationality. By the end of the nineteenth century the baggage of this morality was creating pressure on socio-literary fields and a break was quite in the offing. (p.19) Wilde's play provides a mirror image of this society.

The plot of the play is overwhelmingly funny: Algernon Moncrieff creates a fictitious sick friend named "Bunbury" whose name and condition he uses to leave London when he finds his aunt, Lady Bracknell, too domineering. On the other hand, Algernon's friend, John (Jack) Worthing, also invents an equally fictitious brother, Ernest, a reprobate who always goes into some scrapes. Jack poses as Ernest to win the hand of Algernon's cousin, Miss Gwendolen Fairfax. Later, in the country house of Jack, Algernon impersonates the non-existent Ernest, in order to woo Cecily Cardew, Jack's ward. Thus the lynchpin of the plot is Bunburyism—an ingenious technique for impersonating false identities.

The title of the play is a pointer to Wilde's contempt for hypocritical morality. The word "earnest" implies seriousness, solemnity and propriety. From the title, it is assumed that the play would become a treatise on the value of solemnity. But what Wilde actually presents is an ironic reversal of that. Regarding this, Siddhartha Biswas clarifies the use of 'earnestness' in the Victorian context:

It was a kind of neo-Puritanism that ruled the society with very strict codes of conduct. If one was to look into this earnestness they would find a very complex interaction of obsession

with truth on the one hand and lies on the other. Anything and everything that were apparently threatening was fought with a stealth and a packaging of morality which was ultimately based on some form of deceit. (p.19)

Algernon and Jack, both of whom impersonate double identities throughout the play, are rewarded at the end proving that there is very little, if any, importance of being "earnest".

The sub-title of the play, "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People", captures the essence of the play is a nutshell. Here Wilde plays with the words, "trivial" and "serious" which become complimentary to each other in the play. Truly, it is the trivialization of earnestness that Wilde actually celebrates in this play.

The internal collapse of the make-belief culture of the late Victorian society is thoroughly criticized in the play. In his critique, Wilde focuses on certain issues: marriage, class relation, identity etc. Marriage as a sanctimonious institution becomes the target of the playwright. The issue is raised at the very beginning of the play:

**ALGERNON:** Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

**LANE:** I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

**ALGERNON:** Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?

**LANE:** I believe it is a very pleasant state, Sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person. (pp.1-2)

The concept of marriage as an ideal institution is mocked in good humour in the above conversation between Algernon and his manservant Lane. Marriage is conceived as a misunderstanding between the young couple and the first marriage cannot provide any experience! When Jack arrives, Algernon comments that women never marry the men they flirt with. Like all other issues, marriage too is treated paradoxically in this play. Algernon's remark that divorces are made in heaven, directly contradicts the divine saying, "Marriages are made in heaven." All these comments hint at the moral laxity of the time.

Next, the class issue. Victorian period saw the rise of the middle class which often posed a threat to the aristocrats. The exploitation of the poor in this age of industrialization became a serious concern for the social reformers and some legal actions were taken to protect the lower class. This lower class often features in the contemporary literary works. Wilde's dramas are no exceptions. After discussing with Lane the views on marriage, Algernon comments:

**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. (p.2)

Without any harsh satire, by using the device of paradox, Wilde pinpoints the irresponsibility and lasciviousness of the upper class.

Victorian gentlemen used to live a life of double identities. The entire plot of Wilde's drama hinges on the issue of assuming deceptive identities which he calls "Bunburyism". The dominance of this issue can be marked in the conversation between Jack and Algernon:

**ALGERNON:** [...] I may mention that I have always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist; and I am quite sure of it now.

**JACK:** Bunburyist? What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyist?

**ALGERNON:** I'll reveal to you the meaning of that incomparable expression as soon as you are kind enough to inform me why you are Ernest in town and Jack in the country. (p.6)

Both the young ladies, Gwendolen and Cecily are interested in the name "Ernest" which Wilde uses as a pun on "earnest". Gwendolen reveals that her "ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest" (p.13). To love a person named Ernest is the "girlish dream" of Cecily too. They are not interested in the quality of earnestness but the name Ernest. This highlights their reliance on superficiality and artificiality. They are guided by "first impressions". They fall in love, make engagements, break off from that relation and again fall in love with the same person. Their "first impressions" change in no time.

Wilde also captures the contemporary vogue of sentimental novels in this play. The young ladies of the time were obsessed with the three-volume novels. Miss Prism, the prude lady, was so engrossed in composing such a novel in her younger days that she had forgotten the baby (later Jack) which was in her charge and put the manuscript of the novel in the perambulator and the baby in a large hand bag and left it (the baby) in the cloak-room of a station! Gwendolen and Cecily are also interested in the tear-jerking novels full of excessive emotion. Regarding this, we may quote Algernon's words: "More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read" (p.5).

The Victorian obsession with 'gentleman' is also focused in this play. Lady Bracknell disapproves of the relation between her daughter Gwendolen and Jack because she could not allow her daughter "to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel" (p.19). But the same lady gladly accepts the relation between her nephew Algernon and Miss Cecily Cardew because Cecily's grandfather was a gentleman whose name could be found in the "court guide".

Wilde handles the finale with much dexterity. After the revelation of Jack's identity as Lady Bracknell's nephew and consequently Algernon's elder brother, Jack becomes anxious to know his Christian name. And finally it is found from the Army lists that Jack was named after his father Ernest John, who was a General in the army. After this revelation, Jack surprisingly tells Gwendolen, "it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth" (p. 70). Lady Bracknell snubs him—"My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality" (p.70). In turn, Jack retorts, "On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest" (p.70). This dialogue not only exploits the stock device of comedy of taking the audience back to the title but also leaves a final focus on the central theme of the play. The real importance of "earnestness" lies only in the superficial naming. The sham hypocritical morality which the Victorians practised under the garb of "earnestness" is totally done away with in this play.

Studying the background of Oscar Wilde's plays in general and *The Importance of Being Earnest* in particular, Russell Jackson comments in his essay "The Importance of Being Earnest":

Wilde simultaneously engaged with and mocked the forms and rules of Society. His stance as a dandy, a performer and (as an Irishman) an outsider gave him a particular use for the machinery and conventions both of the social world and of the Society drama of the theatre, which gave fictional expression to its values by dwelling on stories of fallen and falling women, reinforcing social and sexual discriminations, showing the righteous but hard consequences of maintaining ideals, and endorsing the cruel and absolute exclusion of those who erred. This is a subject matter *The Importance of Being Earnest* shares with the earlier plays, but now the spirit of Society's authoritative exclusiveness is analysed in the most satisfying way Wilde had yet devised, in its most absolute and at the same time funniest embodiment: Lady Bracknell (qtd. in Raby, p.169).

Wilde is often criticized for his moral laxities but none can deny the unqualified praise which *The Importance of Being Earnest* has received from theatre-goers and critics.

## REFERENCES

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