

Beyond farce



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Richard Foster states that *The Importance of Being Earnest* has a “multivalent nature”[1] and thus implies that a farce or comedy of manners are not particularly urbane genres and are therefore ‘unsuitable’ for *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Foster argues that the play could be interpreted as more satirical and complex than a farce or comedy of manners. The play has many clever, intricate and inventive concepts specifically regarding the hypocrisies of Victorian society, which Wilde exposes, as well as the subtle comparison between the play and Wilde’s own life.

Despite many who describe the play as a comedy of manners, Foster refers to Wilde as an “elaborate literary lampoon” due to his satirising of conventional Victorian literature and thus interprets the play as a parody. Wilde satirises the traditional romantic idea of love as written by authors such as Austen and Shakespeare. The superficial love shared between Jack and Gwendolen hardly compares to the eternal love felt between Darcy and Elizabeth[2]. This is exposed through the lacking of true Victorian values and the choice of “style over substance.” Such notions are subtly displayed through Gwendolen knowing of a man called Ernest and knowing that she was “destined to love” him simply due to his name. This hardly promotes the eternal, sincere and passionate love seen in other Victorian texts such as *Jane Eyre* and thus parodies traditional Victorian passionate love stories. Gwendolen herself acknowledges this concept as “in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing.” This subtle parodying is an example of how a term as “farce” is unsuitable for such a play as it seems more satirical. This coincides with Wilde’s satirical take on Victorian society.

Wilde satirises the hypocrisies of Victorian society specifically through the pun in the title regarding the Victorian ideal of “earnestness.” Earnestness was regarded as a conventional value of upper class society. Jack represents conventional Victorian values of wanting to appear as a man of duty, moral responsibility and earnest, namely a “man of the world.” However, his alter-ego is a man of no morals and no sense of duty or earnestness which is displayed in his language showing disregard for morality by inventing a brother “who gets into the most dreadful scrapes.” This is a contradiction of Victorian values as well as satirising the general tolerance for hypocrisy in the upper class societies. The subtlety of this inversion and complexity of the play is revealed through the language in the play displaying the irony of the alter-ego lacking earnestness having the name of Ernest. Algernon, conversely, is an a moral character who gives no thought to “appearances” and is therefore the foil to Lady Bracknell and Jack. Algernon closely compares to the flamboyant character of Lord Darlington in Wilde’s ‘Lady Windermere’s Fan’ revealing that satirising Victorian values and hypocritical tolerance is a running theme for Oscar Wilde. The play’s focus on style over substance, according to Nicola Onyett[3], allows for gambling, homosexuality, deceit and illegitimacy as long as “an appropriate veneer of respectability is maintained” which displays the Victorian’s requirement of sincerity and earnestness as hypocritical. This irony provides a ‘complex’ interpretation of the play and implies it to be more ‘complex’ than a simple farce.

Wilde observed that “life imitates art” and therefore the play could be considered artistic in its subtle and personal imitation to Wilde’s own life.

Algernon could be interpreted as a recreation of Wilde himself due to his flamboyancy, dandy-like characteristics and being discreet in an indiscreet way with regards to his idea of 'Bunburying'. The artistic subtlety in the play is evident in the homosexual subtext within the play which is thought to have been directed at Wilde's gay community and is not often noticeable for others, thus especially during Victorian times in London, was significant and discreet. The name "Cecily" is believed to have been slang for male prostitute as Algernon professes his love for her, could be seen as a metaphor for Wilde's own love for Lord Alfred Douglas. There are also implicit double entendres in the word "Bunbury" and cucumber sandwiches. It is sometimes thought that modern critics have explicitly exposed the subtext behind the play reading into the division of 'bun' and 'bury' as a code for male to male intercourse, intended for Wilde's gay audience in an implicit way as to keep up Victorian importance of appearance. Algernon's phrase "nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it" is believed to have reference to Wilde's own 'masked life', forced to marry a woman to cover his discreetly indiscreet ventures into the world of homosexuality. This implicit subtle subtext is a clear example of how the play is more "subtle" and "artistic" than a mere farce or comedy of manners.

However, the play's themes have certain explicitness revolving around a comedy of manners which is why it may be interpreted as so. Extensive verbal wit is utilised to provoke humour but is quite obvious and lacks subtlety. As seen in Lady Bracknell's sharp repartee in her interview with Jack, with her clever response of forbidding her daughter "to marry into a

cloak-room and form an alliance with a parcel". The play is clearly influenced by Restoration Comedy due its sharp repartee and a plot revolving around love and marriage. The forbidding of engagements is a classic plotline in a comedy of manners and is therefore obvious in that there is no deeper meaning behind it other than to create humour and long standing jokes as seen in Act III where Lady Bracknell continues with her reference to Jack's origins, " I had no idea that there were any persons whose origin was a Terminus". This palpable joke could support an argument in that The Importance of Being Earnest lacks subtlety and complexity and entails that the play is more of a comedy of manners, this is also displayed in the structure of the play.

The structure demonstrates a comedy of manners and a farce rather than a satire. The exposition of The Importance of Being Earnest prepares the audience for a comedy of manners in that the opening scene displays interaction between Algernon and his servant which is an aspect of comedy in a comedy of manners. Their exchange establishes a tone of light hearted, witty and " beyond the reach of conventional morality" commentary and linguistic humour. The use of epigrams in reference to the topic of marriage illustrates a reversal in the social norms of the times as they both are equal in wit even though Lane is of an inferior social position. Typical of a comedy of manners the unscrupulous characters, Jack and Algernon, are rewarded with Lady Bracknell's approval of their marriages at the resolution of the play. This follows the comic structure of a comedy of manners. The play finishes in the archetypal Victorian style of a farce using the title of the play in the final phrase, as Jack " now realized for the first time in my life the vital

Importance of Being Earnest." The comic climaxes throughout the play reflect those of a farce, as in Act II in the revelation of both Gwendolen and Cecily discovering that they are engaged to ' Ernest'. This misunderstanding is typical of a farcical climax. This infers that the play is most definitely a fusion of both a farce and comedy of manners. The fusion of genres adds " complexity" to the play.

However the childish and, to an extent, innocent characters of the play add a farcical concept to the play and doubt its ingeniousness and originality. The comic pairing of Jack and Algernon can come across as childish in the pettiness of their arguments such as in their quarrel over muffins. Although the term " muffins" may be read into further metaphorically, the argument in itself appears petty and childlike due to repetition of the word " muffins" and irrelevant acknowledgement of how one ought to eat muffins as Algernon professes " one should always eat muffins quite calmly" scolding Jack for eating them all in an " agitated manner." Their farcical banter often reaches a childish conclusion, as in Act II where Algernon states he will not leave because, " I haven't quite finished my tea yet! And there is still one muffin left!" Although the banter in itself has an air of cleverness, the topic and overall appearance could seem childish and simple. This doubts as to whether the play is " complex" and " subtle".

Thus, although The Importance of Being Earnest is a play which possesses the conventions of a farce or comedy of manners, in certain aspects it is inventive, " subtle" and " artistic" as suggested by Richard Foster. As to how farcical or ' simple' the humour is presented in the play is up to the director as this may vary between productions. In his review, William Archer wrote <https://assignbuster.com/beyond-farce/>

that he found the play empty of meaning, “ What can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle, whether of art or morals” and claimed it to only be a play of “ irrepressibly witty personality.” Although linguistic humour is a strong feature in the play, the notion that it raises no principle is erroneous as the play does raise the principle, although perhaps discreet, of hypocrisy in Victorian times and the value of “ being earnest.” The structure of the play and comic climaxes, however illustrate that the play, in the structural aspect, is a comedy of manners and a farce, but this fusion of genres adds to the complexity of the play. In conclusion, Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest is most certainly an ‘ artistic’ and ‘ subtle’ play as well as ‘ complex’ and therefore Foster was correct in saying that the terms “ farce” and “ comedy of manners” are unsuitable as they do not begin cover the depth, complexity and originality behind the play. [1]

Richard Foster: Wilde as a Parodist: A second look at the Importance of Being Earnest. College English, 18 October 1956. [2]Jane Austen: Pride and Prejudice. [3] Chief examiner and principle moderator for A-level English literature.