

The importance of being earnest by oscar wilde essay sample

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



Set in England in the 1890s, the play tackles the life of Algernon Moncrieff, an aristocratic Londoner who gets away from unwanted social obligation by pretending to have an ill friend named Bunbury and his friend Jack Worthing, who Algernon calls Earnest, thinking that is his real name (" Being Earnest" 2007). Jack, who goes by the name " Earnest" in town and " Jack" in the country, wants to marry Gwendolyn, even though Gwendolyn's mother, Lady Bracknell does not like him for Jack is unable to describe his family background. Algernon finds out that Jack is living a double life when he visits Jack in the country and falls in love with Cecily, Jack's ward (2007). Adding more twist is Gwendolyn and Cecily's obsession with the name " Ernest" (2007).

" *The Importance of Being Earnest* " came at a time when the British Empire had conquered most countries around the world (" Being Earnest" 2007). At that time, the English nobility was depicted as patronizing and snooty, a trait epitomized in the play. This can be seen in the scene where Lady Bracknell becomes cordial to Cecily when she discovers how rich the latter is. Victorian society is likewise illustrated by people being exaggeratedly polite while harboring scheming and manipulative attitudes, like people with social masks.

Moreover, social divide is peppered throughout the play. In the play, this is exemplified in scenes involving Gwendolyn, Cecily and their servants. Lady Bracknell also presents this trait when she expressed total disgust upon learning that Jack was adopted after being left in a handbag in a railway station, no less. According to her, marrying Jack would be like getting a

relationship with a parcel (" Being Earnest" 2007). Yet, this class tension was dealt comically most of the time and with wit. When Algernon found out that his supply of wine was spent by the servants, Lane, the butler, turned the conversation to marriage. This is one play where conflicts are easily resolved with humor.

As stated earlier, both Gwendolyn and Cecily have an obsession with the word " earnest." Both want to marry a man named " Earnest" for the name insinuates honesty yet both did not know that the men they loved were neither named " Earnest," thereby lying to them. The truth and lies are reflections of the Victorian society and Wilde was able to showcase artfully in the play.

Epigrams were Wilde's forte and " *The Importance of Being Earnest* " is sprinkled with them. He criticized society using witty lines. His retorts were quick and razor-sharp. " *The Importance of Being Earnest* " was targeted at societal flaws of his era. Marriage, for instance, was given a large amount of criticism: Gwendolyn and Cecily's obsession in marrying a man named " Ernest" simply because of its connotation and Lady Bracknell's view of marriage to ensure financial stability. There is also a line where Algernon deems marriage is discouraging, even saying that for married folks, " three is company and two is none" (" Being Earnest" 2007).

Wilde was a genius in creating epigrams. He begins with a statement that is extreme or outrageous then follows it up with a more outrageous statement but is true. An example is Algernon's declaration that the truth is never real

and that a modern life is boring likewise (“ Being Earnest” 2007). Another one is when Jack warns Algernon that Bunbury will cause him trouble [as a result of leading a dual identity] when Jack is in fact already deep into trouble with his “ Jack-Ernest” identity. Cecily expresses this dual identity theme when she said to Algernon that her prayer that Algernon is not having a dual identity, pretending to be bad and good at the same time (“ Being Earnest” 2007).

The quick shift in the dialogues is also another Wildean gem. This is best exemplified in the scene where Gwendolyn asks Cecily whether they should forgive Jack and Algernon after finding out that they lied to them, “ Yes. I mean no” was Cecily’s reply (“ Being Earnest” 2007).

But of all the characters in the play, Lady Bracknell is perhaps the most comical. When Jack said that he was found in a handbag as an infant, Lady Bracknell dismisses him, saying that the “ line is immaterial” (Being Earnest” 2007). That line is not immaterial but for Lady Bracknell’s character, a Victorian lady who emphasizes social class and all, being found in a handbag is irrelevant. It implies how she thinks of Jack, as an unimportant person. Another Lady Bracknell quote that is remarkable is when she informs Jack that losing one parent is bad luck but losing both is reckless.

The play also shows Victorian living of the aristocrats at night- theaters, restaurants and ballets. This is even a line where Algernon expresses his dilemma of doing nothing (“ Being Earnest” 2007). Again, this insinuates the trivial lives of the aristocrats.

Dual identity is also another theme expressed in the play. In the play, both Algernon and Jack lead such lives, either to protect their identity or to avoid challenging situations. Algernon's "Bunbury" is also something. Wilde is a known homosexual and while neither Algernon nor Jack is gay, there is a tinge of homosexuality in the scene where Algernon said that nothing will make him want to give up "Bunbury" ("Being Earnest" 2007). He even suggests that a married man is in dire need of a Bunbury. Again, again bullet aimed at marriage, especially marriages at that time.

Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, whose complete title goes "*The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*" is indeed a trivial comedy, a play intended to amuse the viewers. However, it is wrong to assume that it is just that, a farce for delving into the play, one can see the critical issues pressed during Wilde's time yet remained obscured by the characters' own worries.

Work Cited

"Being Earnest." Intuitive Online Reading Library. 2007. 3 December 2007

<http://www.intuitive.com/library/BeingEarnest.shtml>.