

# Free essay on the lack of social message in the importance of being earnest

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The Importance of Being Earnest, a play by Oscar Wilde, is often considered a classic, and ahead of its time in terms of social commentary. The play, a comedy of errors in which people put on fictitious personalities to get what they want, touches on the triviality of Victorian culture and the institution of marriage, among other things. However, despite its ravaging of the continental lifestyle that many rich people in the Victorian era experienced, the play does not reach to the point of moralizing, or providing solutions or lessons to be learned from the work. Instead, the play is more of a superficial comedy, poking fun at these conventions without providing a social message to accompany it. Instead, the play itself is merely meant to be funny for comedy's sake, not as a treatise on the evils of high society.

Romance is but one of Oscar Wilde's target for humor in The Importance of Being Earnest. In particular, Wilde seeks to make fun of those people who are overly romantic about their lives and about relationships (Ellmann 74). Cecily, for example, as an impressionable, naive and romantic young girl, makes up a handsome suitor for herself - Ernest - and writes letters from him addressed to her. Cecily romanticizes this fictional relationship to the point where, when she finally gets engaged to the man pretending to be Ernest, she pretends that they have been engaged for three months prior to that. In both her and Gwendolyn's diaries, they talk about their lives not for their own edification, but in the hopes that they will be published (and therefore famous). By doing this, they elevate their lives beyond what they really are for the sake of fame. Oscar Wilde shows us all of these attempts at exacerbating and exaggerating one's lives and romances for attention or drama, but does not wish to prevent it from happening (Bloom 45). To

Wilde's mind, this phenomenon is merely silly and worthy of ridicule, but it is not presented as a systemic problem that needs to be addressed in a serious manner. These notices are trivialities, negligible in the grand scheme of things, and Wilde merely jokes about them instead of actually instigating social changes.

A much broader and socially relevant topic covered by Oscar Wilde in the play is the subject of marriage. At the time, marriage was essentially a business transaction, meant for mutual convenience and advantage for both families involved. There is no passion in marriages in the play, as there were not in Victorian times; in fact, marriage for personal relationships is openly joked about in the play. " I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity to find out one's character before marriage, which is never advisable" (Wilde 70). Even Lady Bracknell describes the precarious divide between business and love in the forming of a marriage when she says, " An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be" (Wilde 17).

The whole play actually talks about the idea of whether or not marriage is " pleasant or unpleasant," with Lane stating that it is, even though his own marriage came about as a misunderstanding. Algernon is also very cynical about marriage, only coming around when he meets and falls for Cecily. The difference between " niceness" and honesty in a marriage is summed up fairly well with Jack, who says that the truth " isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl" (Wilde 23). Gwendolyn is equally distrustful of marriage, even as she forgives Jack for his deceptions, because

she believes that he will change into a more honest person. When Wilde depicts the emptiness of these unions, he is not necessarily advocating a change, or condemning them for their superficiality.

Wilde also addresses the issue of education in the rich and upper class citizens of the Victorian Era. As the rich often placed a great emphasis on education and academics, they may have also forgotten social graces or decorum. Wilde satirizes this with characters like Lady Bracknell, who is perpetually crass and rude with her questions and inquiries (Bloom 66). She always asks impertinent queries including the person's age and their level of income. While she is academically smart, she does not have social education, making Lady Bracknell an abrasive but endearing figure. Wilde, in his portrayal of this character, meant to use this character to create laughs and generate hilarious moments, instead of portraying the character as a tragic figure plagued by the lack of social education she was allotted. There is little to no consequence to her flaws, but for her simple awkwardness and the generation of humor for the audience. To that end, Wilde is not advocating that people stop becoming educated; he just wanted to show a character with no social graces who relied too much on her academic education to support herself as an independently intelligent woman. Without an advocacy for social change as a result, it cannot be reasonably said that Wilde intended to moralize on this issue in the play.

Wilde's treatment of morality itself throughout the play is further evidence of his predilection towards irreverence - he does not necessarily see the need to make serious changes, but instead embrace the silliness of the way

society at the time behaved. Algernon, for example, believes that it is up to the lower classes to set the standards of behavior and morality for the upper crust. " More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read," he says, making his ignorance even more transparent and making a blanket statement on Victorian culture as a whole. Because of all of the caveats and restrictions that take place in Victorian society, it is easy to state that Wilde simply wants these ideas to change. However, Wilde does not address the ideas of what should and should not be right. Instead, the entire strict adherence to Victorian morality is the target; Wilde feels as though there shouldn't be as big an emphasis on strict rules and creating rigid codes for " being a good person" (Ellmann 53).

The title itself is a play on Wilde's perspective on morality - satirizing the idea that it is " important" to be " earnest," Wilde believes instead that people should lighten up and be more irreverent. So many characters in the play take themselves far too seriously - Jack, Miss Prism, Dr. Chasuble and Gwendolyn - and are mocked by the play for it through the hardships they have to endure by keeping up their various charades (Bloom 9). To that end, Wilde is not advocating a serious social message; to do so would be to become one of the subjects he is satirizing. Instead, he wishes for people to note how silly they are being, and not take their morality and activities too seriously.

Many characters, virtuous and charismatic in their own right, resort to deceit and hypocrisy to get what they want. However, this is often viewed as inventiveness, as Wilde simply wishes to show the foolish upper class

characters get their comeuppance. When Jack pretends that his brother Ernest has died, he makes his loved ones believe that this fictional person has died as well. While this is shown as being somewhat unscrupulous, Algernon does the same thing by inventing his own life in order to elevate it. In this way, he is inventive instead of hypocritical, just the kind of man Wilde would appreciate. However, Wilde is not saying that hypocrisy should stop; just that we should be aware of it and make light of it (Raby et al. 87).

According to Wilde, it is impossible to be self-consciously moral; the most virtuous people in the play are those who accept that they are wicked and engage in trivial matters. Acknowledging that triviality is an important part of growth of the characters of the play, and Wilde demonstrates that accordingly. This is in no way a means of enacting social change; the attitudes that force or advocate social change are often the ones being satirized. By taking life and manners too seriously, these characters become miserable or pathetic. Wilde simply wants the characters (and the audience) to lighten up and have some fun with life.

In conclusion, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is Oscar Wilde's attempt to simply use the humor of mistaken identities, false personalities and the silliness of Victorian largesse to create easy humor. There is little to no moralizing in the play itself; instead, the messages are taken as given, if intended at all. This satire of Victorian life is simply meant to entertain, not insult or be subject to moralizing; Wilde does not present solutions or alternate philosophies for this type of lifestyle and its flaws; instead, he just wishes to show how entertaining the foibles of said society can be. With that

said, despite the ability to point out the flaws of Victorian society, *The Importance of Being Earnest* itself does not show an indicator that Wilde wanted to imbue the play with a social message.

## **Works Cited**

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