

Free essay on the importance of being earnest by oscar wilde

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English Literature

The play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is amongst the most famous in the world of literature. It tells the tale of two young men, both of whom adopt of the moniker ' Ernest', in the pursuit of two young women. It is the original farcical tale which sees the two young men become ever-more embroiled in the lies and tales that they've spun. The play is heavy in themes which help to further the comical circumstances within which the plot unfolds. These themes include the satire of society and triviality within Victorian society.

Wilde is well known for his wit and is widely seen as being " Ireland's greatest wit and perhaps even the greatest wit the human race has ever produced" (MacHale 59). His plays and stories are littered with examples of his witty repertoire and *The Importance of Being Earnest* is no exception. The entire story acts as a close-knit satire of society and the ridiculous attitudes that it holds. The satire begins when Jack ' Jack' Worthing, a well to do gentleman of upper class breeding, invents a wayward brother called Ernest. This brother acts as an excuse for Jack to leave the stuffy formality of his

daily life and visit the exciting streets of London. Once there, he adopts the name Ernest and sets about drinking and gambling, whilst also wooing the beautiful and upper-class Gwendolen Fairfax, who believes Jack to be Ernest. Jack is friends with another gentleman rogue, Algernon Moncrieff who is playful and rascally. Upon discovering Jack's secret, and realising that there is a game to be played, Algernon arrives, unexpectedly, at Jack's country home and introduces himself as the brother, Ernest. Whilst there, Algernon falls in love with Jack's ward, Cecily Cardew, who believes him to be Ernest. Jack arrives home from London, newly engaged to Gwendolen, to find Algernon wooing Cecily and, upon being blackmailed, allows Algernon to stay. Some days later, Algernon and Cecily are engaged, and when Jack's fiancée, Gwendolen, arrives, both women realise that they are engaged to 'Ernest' before both men admit to neither of them being the wayward brother.

The satirical nature of the play begins with its title: the use of the name 'Ernest' is a play on the word 'earnest' which is what actually features in the title. By making both men use the name Ernest, Wilde is encouraging a satirical view of Victorian Britain's obsession with earnestness: the Victorians saw this value as being above all others, with the exception of a belief in God (Wohlfarth 4). The ridiculing of this is seen throughout the play, for example when Algernon says to Jack: "You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life." (Wilde 300) and when Gwendolen says to Jack: "The only really safe name is Ernest." (Wilde 263). The irony of both of these statements is that Jack is then forced to continue

lying and pretending to be Ernest and, therefore, failing to be earnest. Wilde is attempting to show how unlikely it is that people are genuinely earnest. Both Jack and Algernon are earnest in their affection towards the two women but both are lying and claiming to be Ernest. Wilde is attempting to establish a clear view that the Victorian obsession with earnestness is a ridiculous one because it is possible to be earnest without being completely honest. The situation, complicated further by Algernon's decision to wade into the fray, is farcical and is representative of Victorian values.

The name Ernest is the core to the play's satirical humour. Never more so than when Algernon first arrives at Jack's house; it has just been announced that Jack's brother Ernest has died when Algernon arrives claiming to be Ernest. The house staff is, understandably, confused but to cover the lie, Jack lies further and conforms to Algernon's lie of pretending to be Ernest. The name 'Ernest' is also the basis of Algernon's blackmail of Jack when trying to convince him to pretend along with him. When Cecily and Gwendolen rumble the two men, it is because of the name Ernest and them both thinking that they were engaged to him.

This satire of earnestness in Victorian society is continued through the way the characters act towards one another. The term 'earnestness' implies a degree of humourless activity and priggish attitudes (Gregory 40), and this is demonstrated by Jack when he discusses his role as a guardian: he feels that he is required "to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects" (Wilde 301). Many of the characters intone similar views, and it has been suggested that by using the word 'adopt', Wilde is suggesting that earnestness is not a

natural situation but rather something which requires posing and posturing (Gregory 41). Some literary critics consider this as Wilde making a social commentary about how the idea of earnestness is, perhaps, evolving: “ Maybe it is possible to be honest and understand what should be taken seriously in life rather than being deceptive, hypocritical and superficial.” (Kirk 43). By satirising earnestness in Victorian society, Wilde is demonstrating that it is actually a fake virtue and presents Jack and Algernon as being representative of this, whilst still showing them to be thoughtful, honest and loving gentleman. Their willingness to continue with the Ernest façade is both juxtaposed with their ability to be earnest whilst also being comparable with their willingness to make their fiancées happy.

Another satirical aspect of Victorian society that Wilde presents is the level of triviality which the Victorians were obsessed with. A prime example of this is how Wilde presents the idea of vice. In his other works such as *Salome*, vice takes on a far more sinister tone. In *The Importance of being Earnest*, it is presented through Algernon’s addiction to cucumber sandwiches: in Act One, he cries, “ Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially!” with the precursor stage direction “ picking up empty plate in horror.” (Wilde 260). The use of the word ‘ horror’ is designed to add comedic value to this instance. The lack of cucumber sandwiches is extremely trivial but the way that Algernon reacts is over the top and ridiculous. This echoes Wilde’s presentation of earnestness in as much as it is important to be earnest but everyone is false in the pursuit of this. Wilde clearly presents the Victorian character as being pompous,

boring, solemn, smug and complacent, and he does this throughout the ongoing presentation of his characters' desire to conform to society.

Wilde presents Algernon and Jack as being two sides of the same coin but, in doing so, he, arguably, presents Jack as being the play's hero whereas, in reality, it is easier to identify with Algernon in this role. It is clear that the latter is a rogue and a scallywag but upon arriving at Jack's home, he merely adopts a role. It is Jack who creates this role and goes out of his way to create a false sense of reality for his loved ones and servants. In a sense, it is Jack who lies and cheats as opposed to Algernon who simply picks up the lie and continues it in a harmless and fun way. Upon returning from London, Jack informs his ward's tutor of Ernest's death:

“ Jack: My brother.

Chasuble: More shameful debts and extravagance?

Jack: (Shaking his head) Dead!” (Wilde 277)

In doing so, Jack is going so far as to create a person, carve out his personality and then kill him off in a manner which will impact upon those around him: his immediate peers obviously care for him and so would, undoubtedly, grieve for his brother. Upon arriving at the house, Algernon, who already embodies many of Ernest's qualities quite naturally, merely takes up the role. However, it is important to remember that the play was written in a time where morality was key so long as your sense of it fitted in with society. At the time of the play's opening night, Wilde himself was embroiled in a court case surrounding his homosexuality: “ Wilde was said to

have engaged in ' sodomy and other acts of gross indecency and immortality'" (Lubet 47). With modern eyes, it is easy to see that Wilde was just a young man, engaging in sexual activity but to the Victorians, it would have been a crime which Wilde had knowingly engaged in. Therefore, it is important to recognise that the sense of immortality in the play, displayed through the lies which the characters tell, is one which is based on an intense and unabashed desire to conform to biblical structures of morality and truth. Wilde's characters are fun and are, much like Wilde, in want of a good time - as all young men and women are. For the characters to be labelled as immoral is an unfair statement but, arguably, the character who is most dishonest is Jack who embellishes a simple lie which could have an undesirable effect on those around him but is still, just a young man who is trying to have a good time - a sense which Wilde, undoubtedly, would have recognised in himself.

The idea of ridiculing earnestness is further echoed by Wilde's presentation of the nature of marriage. In Victorian society, marriage was still seen as being an earnest agreement between two people who love one another. It is the ultimate earnest declaration. However, in the play, Wilde brings two couples together in a relatively short space of time, raising questions of how earnest their love and devotion to one another truly is. Most notably is the engagement between Algernon and Cecily: upon meeting one another in Act Two, Algernon attempts to charm Cecily who is not susceptible to this and questions his nature. Algernon asks, " Well, would you mind my reforming myself this afternoon?" to which Cecily says he should try, and Algernon

claims to feel better already (Wilde 276). With this as the basis to their relationship, Wilde is clearly suggesting that earnestness is merely a formality - a box to be ticked, as opposed to an actual way of behaving in life. It also underpins a questionable engagement which happens after a relatively short space of time.

Marriage is a crucial aspect of the plot in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It is what drives the plot forwards (Grill 4), right from the opening pages as it is discussed in the opening discussion between Algernon and his butler, Lane: whilst discussing the quality of champagne in married households verses non-married households, Algernon declares, " Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralising as that?" (Wilde 253). Marriage is the force behind the actions of both Algernon and Jack who, upon telling the initial lie of being Ernest, are forced to continue lying and, therefore, not being earnest, in order to maintain the happiness of their respective relationships - both of which are with women who view the name Ernest as being a significant factor in their willingness to marry the men. Therefore, marriage is also the underpinning factor behind the play's humour and mocking of Victorian society.

The scene where Lady Bracknell (Gwendolen's mother) interviews Jack is demonstrative of how Victorian society expected a certain set of values in its populace. She enquires about his place of residence, his parentage, his age, his habits (upon admitting he smokes, Lady Bracknell states: " I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind" (Wilde 265) which immediately belittles occupations of every kind), and his income. It is clear that in the stakes of marrying off her daughter, all that she is

concerned with is money and social prestige (Grill 10), rather than the couple's love and happiness.

This scene, as well as the others discussed, actively compounds Wilde's desire to ridicule all aspects of the austere Victorian society in which the play is set. He satirises all aspects of their values and beliefs whilst playing on trivial issues and creating far bigger reactions and discussions than they deserve. In doing so, Wilde is demonstrating to his reader that the societal expectations are ridiculous whilst also debunking them brutally. The use of the name Ernest and its crucial importance to the plot is a clever way of showing how trivial and ridiculous the Victorian's social expectations were and Wilde leans heavily on these themes to do so. The entire play is designed to mock and belittle Victorian society meaning that the actual plot of the play comes second to its sub-text.

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