

# Hypocrisy and morality as central themes in oscar wilde's the importance of being...

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Oscar Wilde's 1894 play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, explores Victorian era morals with satire and humor as the main character, Jack Worthing, creates an alter-ego in order to relax from his day-to-day duties as a guardian to his friend's daughter, a land-owner and a judge. The themes of morality, the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, as well as hypocrisy, the disconnect between what Jack believes and how he acts, are central to the development of the play.

The theme of morality is introduced immediately. Jack is introduced as a highly organized and proper man who is a land-owner, guardian and justice of the peace. By Victorian standards, he is the perfect citizen and Jack understands that it's important for him to act in a morally upright way when he says, " You are hardly serious enough. When one adopts the role of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects" (Wilde 6). However, Jack's fictitious brother, Earnest, is portrayed as a detriment to society and is always engaging in immoral behavior. In order for Jack to engage in immoral behavior or to simply get out of engagements, he must create an alter-ego so that his reputation is not destroyed.

Hypocrisy is another key theme in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. While Jack lives a respectable life, he creates an alibi so that he can leave his morally upright life behind and do what he would truly like to do. His friend, Algernon also participates in this hypocrisy by creating his own alibi. " If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinarily bad health, for instance, I would not be able to dine with you at Willis to-night, for I have really been engaged to Aunt Willis for more than a week." (Wilder 7) is just one example of Algernon using his alibi as a way to get out of social commitments. Although Jack

claims that his life requires a high level of morality, he lies about his family situation to get out of commitments, which is hypocritical for someone who claims to live a highly moral life.

Throughout the story the prominence of these two themes of morality and hypocrisy shift. At the beginning of the play, Jack is very concerned with his moral position as an upstanding citizen and guardian of his friend's daughter. However, as the play continues, Jack becomes more and more entwined with the role hypocrisy plays in his life. As his friend, Algernon, catches on to Jack's shenanigans, Jack becomes more concerned with how his hypocritical actions affect his life. He then spends more of his time trying to keep his acquaintances from finding out that his brother Ernest is a lie, which becomes increasingly difficult after Algernon comes in to town pretending to be Jack's brother.

The Importance of Being Earnest explores the themes of hypocrisy and morality throughout the play as two concepts that work together in order to make life for bearable. The main characters must appear to be morally upright in order to maintain their high-status lives, however, in order to maintain their sanity and ability to have fun, they must create alibis and lie to people, which contradicts their morality.

## **Works Cited**

Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Mineola: Dover Publishing, 1991. Print.