

Reflection essay on the importance of being earnest

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The Importance of Being Earnest The Importance of Being Earnest a play written by Oscar Wilde is set in England in the late Victorian era. Wilde uses obvious situational and dramatic irony within the play to satirize his time period. According to Roger Sale in " Being Ernest" the title has a double meaning to it and is certainly another example of satire used by Wilde. With a comedic approach, Wilde ridicules the absurdities of the character's courtship rituals, their false faces, and their secrets (478). In the Victorian era, courtship rituals were slightly different from modern time courtships.

It started with couples speaking first, going out together, and finally they would keep each other company after mutual attraction was confirmed. The character Jack, in all his seriousness, refutes these rituals. Gwendolyn says " I adore you. But you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on" (622). This shows that Jack is ignoring the stages of courting and jumping right into marriage. Wilde is certainly satirically commenting on courting and how there really just has to be a mutual attraction.

Upon Gwendolyn's acceptance of his proposal, the problems with different social affairs begin to be unraveled. Gwendolyn says " I am told; and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence..." (622) In fact, Ernest's love for Gwendolyn seems rather arbitrary while Gwendolyn indirectly admits that she loves Ernest only for his name. This just adds to the satirizing of courtship because the girl only will marry him because he has the name Ernest.

The characters Lady Bracknell's and Algernon's objections are prime examples of dating issues during this era. Otto Reinhart in *Satiric Strategy in the Importance of Being Earnest* says that Wilde viewed marriage to be full of hypocrisy and used to achieve social status which these two characters exemplify. Lady Bracknell does not feel Earnest is good enough, and would rather her marry someone who she feels is of good financial standing. "Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to someone, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact.

An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself" (622). Lady Bracknell's harsh criticism and stubborn ways are customary of upper-class mothers in the era. Ironically enough, Algernon later develops a kind of forbidden love. The object of his affection is young and being taught to be unimaginative and serious. One thing that Jack and Algernon have in common is that they both have these false faces. Algernon's alter ego Bunbury is a version of himself used in the country but he uses Ernest to marry Cecily.

The story deals with Ernest, this immorally imaginary man that both Cecily and Gwendolyn become engaged to, it exemplifies the irony within the name. Most of the irony comes from this character. One of Wilde's satiric targets is romantic and sentimental love, which he ridicules by having the women fall in love with a man because of his name rather than more personal attributes. Gwendolyn said "No, there is very little music in the

name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations...The only really safe name is Ernest" (622).

Cecily says the same "... it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest"(632). It seems that the reason the two women want to marry a man named Ernest is because of the meaning of the word earnest. It means to be truthful and sincere. However, the many faces of Ernest are anything but honest. Wilde uses these two characters to ridicule not only false appearances but even the roots of the conflicts within marriage and dating. He seems to do this because in the Victorian era you had to be something or someone; social class was of the utmost importance.

Wilde also makes fun of the idea of people lying just to impress others. The double life led by Algernon, Jack, and Cecily, who does it through her diary, is simply another means by which they liberate themselves from the repressive norms of society. These characters have this freedom to create theses double identities that give them the opportunity to show opposite sides of themselves. They mock every custom of the society and challenge its values. Wilde not only creates this comic effect with the play but also makes the audience think of the more serious aspects of life, hence a trivial comedy for serious people.

In the last act of the play, Jack and Algernon's relationship reaches new heights. Well hidden throughout the entire play, the discovery of their kinship is the most ironic part of the play. " Algy's elder brother! Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! "(Wilde, 641) Now as friends, brothers, and holders of the same name, Jack and Algernon are used as

ridiculing devices. Their friendship is this rocky slope with bump after bump; as the play unwinds their brotherhood is newly discovered, and the name Ernest becomes this imaginary character. Wilde continues to mock the social customs and attitudes of the aristocratic class.

He relentlessly attacks their values, views on marriage, respectability, sexual attitudes, and concern for stability in the social structure but he also attacks their secrets. A not so well kept secret is the relationship between Miss Prism and Reverend Canon Chasuble. This is another forbidden love of Wilde's, which is quite ironic because of his now known sexuality. These secrets are not just ridiculing of the hierarchy rule of England but also the era in general, which put a little emphasis on the strain of morality. Morality and its constraints imposed on society are favorite topics brought up in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Algernon thinks the servant class has a responsibility to set a moral standard for the upper classes. Jack believes that reading a private cigarette case is somewhat ungentlemanly. These restrictions and assumptions suggest a strict code of morals that existed in Victorian society, but Wilde isn't concerned with questions of what is and isn't moral. Instead, he ridicules of the Victorian idea of morality as this strict set of rules about how a person should and shouldn't act. The title of the play is such a double-edged comment on this phenomenon.

So as one can conclude *The Importance of Being Earnest*, written by Oscar Wilde is this satirical play full of dramatic and situational irony. It ridicules the Victorian era by attacking dating, marriage, alter egos, and secrets. The

word earnest is comprised of two different but related ideas; one being this notion of false truth and the other being the notion of false morality. The morality of the Victorian society impels Algernon and Jack to invent these fictitious alter egos so they are able to escape the restraints of propriety. However, different members of the society have different viewpoints of what is decent and what is not.

A paradox within the play is the impossibility of being earnest and moral within the society. The characters who embrace triviality and wickedness are the ones who may have the greatest chance of attaining virtue. Works Cited
Christ, Carol. "The Importance of Being Earnest." The Norton Anthology of English Literature. 8th Edition. Vol. 2. Print. Reinert, Otto. "Satiric Strategy in the Importance of Being Earnest." College English 18. 1 (1956); 14-18. JSTOR. Oct. 1956. Web. 09 Apr. 2013
Sale, Roger. "Being Earnest" The Hudson Review 56. 3 475-84. JSTOR. Autumn 2003.