

Structural stereotypes of the characters in the importance of being earnest



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Names play a pivotal role in Oscar Wilde's drama "The Importance of Being Earnest." The naming of the characters is deliberate and well thought-out. Their name alludes to the pigeonhole for each of their characters. A name is a typecast and in Victorian times, when this play was written, a name would have determined whether you were to become a prince or a pauper. It is ironic that a child is at the mercy of its parents for its name just like the characters in this play were predetermined by Wilde. An expectation for the way in which society is run is also a label and Oscar Wilde sets out to prove the triviality of these brands through his characters use of wit, irony, and humor. The stereotypes of the five main characters in this play help to reveal societal masks through comedic timing. The comic creation of Lady Bracknell is a marvelous outlet for the actions of the plot and to obtain a glimpse into the ideals of the Victorian Era^{2E} Lady Bracknell is the quintessential matronly elite who stresses good breeding above all else. Some of Wilde's funniest lines are played out through her character. Also, it is Lady Bracknell that introduces Wilde's views on marriage and how it falls short of the romantic ideal. When Lady Bracknell is interviewing Jack to be a candidate for marrying her daughter, Gwendolyn, her physical and linguistic actions illustrate that she is disturbed by Jack's disreputable background. For instance, when Jack tells her he was found in a handbag at the train station in the Brighton line, she states that, "The Line is immaterial." (Act I p. 1439). This shows how greatly Jack's lack of a material background distresses her. Lady Bracknell is a stereotype for the importance in Victorian culture of a good upbringing and family name. Gwendolyn is Lady Bracknell's daughter and is the reason for Lady Bracknell's snobbery towards Jack. Gwendolyn is in love with Jack whom she knows as Ernest. Her frivolity is stereotypical of <https://assignbuster.com/structural-stereotypes-of-the-characters-in-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

the time period in regards to thoughts about marriage. For example, she says she was destined to love Ernest because of his name (Act I p. 1435). This displays her obsession with her fantasy for the ideal romance. But, many of the epigrams in the play denote the ironic fact that Wilde felt there was a cruel reality to marriage. Much like Gwendolyn is Cecily, in as much as they are both set on their romantic fantasies about marriage. She even holds the same opinion about the name Ernest being the essence of perfection. Cecily has even gone as far as to write love letters to herself and to imagine a proposal from Algernon (Ernest) before she has even met him (Act III p. 1452-3). It is amusing that she would not trust her fianc to write them on his own which is a hint at the fact he would never be able to write something on his own that would fulfill all of her expectations. Cecily is also the one to unequivocally assert the theme of the play when she says, " I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy." (Act III p. 1445). Both Cecily and Gwendolyn are obviously aroused by the dangerousness of a man's character. Wilde has reversed his intent in a comedic manner because what he was alluding to is the people who pretend to be moral all the time but in reality live corruptly. He is commenting on the fact that society compels people to wear a mask. Algernon is a symbol of the upper crust British bachelor. Wilde even leads into the play by illustrating that Algernon enjoys the finer things in life, (dining, artistic culture, and music) through his conversation with Lane about his piano playing (Act I p. 1427). Algernon is also depicted as over-indulgent through the visually comical expression of always eating. His opinions about love and marriage are hilariously contradictory. This is exemplified in the line, " If ever I get married, I'll

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certainly try to forget the fact.” (Act I p. 1429). It would be completely improbable that someone would forget that they are married. Algernon is a typical pseudo-intellectual, creating witty phrases about life that have little value. Jack, or Ernest, is similar to Algernon because they both live the life of Victorian over-indulgent Victorian bachelors. They live their lives like works of art, in as much as they are playing grounds that they can manipulate to their pleasing. This is part of Jack’s comedic charm. He is the vessel for the entire play because it is his lying that creates the humorous conflict of morals. It is also his name that creates the pun for the drama. Jack treats solemn events with casual abandon and yet he becomes stressed over trifles. For Instance, when Cecily comes outside to tell Jack that Ernest is in the living room, after just having told, Miss Prism and Chasuble that he was dead, he just rolls with the punches and acts completely unaffected yet; he bothers Scotland Yard over the loss of his cigarette case (Act III p. 1449 and Act I p. 1429). The Importance of Being Earnest is a comedy of manners that ridicules social stereotypes and breaks down societal masks. The five main characters help to highlight the differences between men and women and to poke fun at their beliefs about love and marriage. Through Wilde’s comedy and wit it becomes apparent that this drama is as much a microcosm of our ideals in the present as in his time. The message through the humor of Lady Bracknell, Algernon, Jack, Gwendolyn, and Cecily is to appreciate the beauty in life and to let go of the confused sense of values and stereotypes that society imposes.