

Deception in
shakespeare's hamlet
and wilde's the
importance of being
earnest



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The desperate need to be moral within society contributes to the motivations, choices, and actions made by people everyday. It is society which defines what morality is and applies the necessary pressure to force individuals to conform. Often, failing under these societal pressures, individuals are forced to use deception to escape the oppressive nature of their society. Oscar Wilde, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and William Shakespeare, in *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, venture into nature of society and how it effects the individuals within that society.

Shakespeare and Wilde assert that deception is a symptom of a corrupt society not a character flaw. The plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest* centers around deception. Algernon is a wealth bachelor that lives in London. He often pretends to have a friend Bunbury who is sick and lives in the country. Whenever Algernon wishes to escape certain social "duties" he explains that he simply can no because he has to visit his sick friend. He can then escape and enjoy the pleasures that Victorian society called improper. However, his friend, Bunbury, does not exist.

Through this form of deception Algernon not only gets pity from his friends he also has the perfect excuse to do whatever he wants. Algernon's believes his best friend is named Ernest. Ernest is actually John Worthing. John Worthing is also using deception to escape his restrictive and boring existence. He tells his friends that he has a wayward brother who lives in London and is often in trouble. Therefore he must go to London to bail his brother out. When John is in London he goes by the name of Ernest. He pretends to be a good man in country only to be a "bad" man in the city.

John wants to marry Gwendolen, but she wants to marry a man named Ernest. Deception plays a vital role in this play. If John and Algernon did not lie there would be no play. If each character followed the Victorians standards of society, there would be no plot. While this play is a comedy, Wilde's point is clear: only through deception can people exist in Victorian society. If they did not use deception everyone would surely die from boredom and the suffocating grasp of society. Similarly, Shakespeare Hamlet is based on deception. Hamlet begins with the death of the King of Denmark. He has been killed by his wife and brother.

It is Hamlet who is first deceived by his mother. She gets married without telling Hamlet. When Hamlet arrives he is disgusted by his mother's actions. The role of deception is seen throughout the play. Hamlet pretend to be crazy, he pretends not to love Ophelia, and pretends not to know that his mother killed his father. Claudius and Gertrude pretend to care for Hamlet only to try to have him killed. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pretend to be Hamlet's friends but are really acting like spies for the king. Deception in Elsinore is a symptom of disease society where ambition and greed run rampant and uncontrolled.

All the characters in Hamlet must lie to survive and in the end deception kills them all. The societies in Importance of Being Earnest and Hamlet are both portrayed as corrupt. In " Hamlet" the court of Elsinore is the representative evil society. It is a toxic environment that breeds blind ambition, betrayal, and evil. Hamlet comments "'Tis an unweeded garden that grows to seed; Things rank and gross in nature possess it merely" (Shakespeare Act I, sc ii).

Claudius and Polonius are to of the top officials in Elsinore and therefore <https://assignbuster.com/deception-in-shakespeares-hamlet-and-wildes-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

responsible for the destruction of a good society and the good people residing within it.

"Something rotten in the state of Denmark" refers to both of them and the climate of an evil society they have created. Similarly, Wilde finds Victorian society equally as corrupt. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* he uses the character of Lady Bracknell to symbolize Victorian society. She represents "earnestness" which is demanded within her society as well as the discontent that it breeds. She is dominating, conceited, bitter, frigid, and extremely proper. It is through Lady Bracknell that the Victorian standards in regards to marriage, religion, money, respectability, and society are revealed.

Lady Bracknell comments "I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance ... touch it and the bloom is gone... whole theory of modern education is radically unsound... education produces no effect ... it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes" (Wilde Act II) Elsinore is used by Shakespeare as an ever present influence which causes each of the characters within *Hamlet* to use deception to survive. The cruel and unforgiving nature of Victorian society is equally as influential causing the characters of *Importance of Being Earnest* to use deception to acquire socially desirable things.

Hamlet and Jack are both individuals which are forced by society to deceive their family and friends. Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, is a bright young man with many talents. He is disgusted not just by his home community but the evil which existed in his family. Upon the realization that the world was cruel he describes life as a "prison" (Act II sc ii). He finds it difficult to

resolve his illusions of what his world was with the reality of the situation.

Hamlet continues “ Seems, madam! nay, it is; I know not “ seems. ’T is not alone my inky cloak, good mother, Nor customary suits of solemn black”

(ACT I Sc ii).

It only after coming home Elsinore, after being away at college, that Hamlet acquires immoral thoughts and commits evil acts. His deception and betrayal of Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Gertrude can all be attributed to the state of Elsinore. Jack lives two lives and both are false. In the country he remains a respectable and upstanding upper class man who is miserable. However, he leads a secret life in the city which brings him both pleasure and inner disgrace. Jack comments “ When one is in town one amuses oneself.

When one is in the country one amuses other people” (Wilde Act I). He lies to his friends and recounts stories of his invented brother Ernest who is always getting into trouble. Jack uses Ernest as his excuse to go into the city and find a few moments of happiness. It is only through deception that Jack can find happiness within the restrictive Victorian society. Jack's real family is not of the upper class. His current position in society is only through his adoptive family and his adoptive father's money. Jack knows, understand, and pretends to conform to crushing societal norms.

When confronted with his deception he admits “ it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind” (Importance Act II). Hamlet and Jack are both

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victims of corrupt societies which contribute to their deceptive behavior. Even the more minor characters, in Hamlet and The Importance of Being Earnest, are controlled by societal norms and use deception to keep their place within society.

In Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are close friends to Hamlet are convinced to deceive him. The new king, Claudius, convinces the pair that they must talk to Hamlet and suggests “ by your companies to draw him on to pleasures, and to gather so much as from occasion you may glean” (Shakespeare 2. 2). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are employed by Claudius, who symbolizes the evil and corruption within Elsinore, as a tool of deception. Certainly under normal circumstances Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would never betray Hamlet. It is society which also corrupts Algernon in The Importance of Being Earnest.

Unlike Jack, Algernon has been completely destroyed by Victorian society. Algernon has learned that only through deception can he be both an upstanding man within society and be happy. He too leads a double life. He is completely self absorbed and represents how far Victorians will go to escape the claustrophobic nature of his society. His over indulgence in food in public parallels his other vices like women, drinking, and gambling which are pleasures he is denied by proper society. Algernon comments “ Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner.

The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them” (Wilde Act I). If an evil and restrictive society did not exist none of these characters would be forced to

lie about their true motives and actions. Wilde and Shakespeare both examine the effect of a crippling society on the character and morality of its citizens. Wilde asserts that the restrictive nature of Victorian society caused Jack and Algernon to employ deceptive choices in their lives to escape the discontent of a proper society.

If Jack lived in a more liberal and understanding society he would be able to honestly pursue the activities which make him happy. Each play offers a mirror through which the brutal tendencies of society and weakness of human nature are reflected for the reader. The condition of society is easily reflected in the character and actions of members of that society. Societies use fear of cruel punishment (especially social outcasting) to encourage and direct the behavior of people within that society. As members of this society we become immune and blind to the influence of these forces and conform without question.