

Oscar wilde's the importance of being earnest

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Art from its very beginning has played the role of upgrading the value of the society. Literature works have taken the responsibility of improving the value of the degraded societies. Literature works are the perfect mirrors of the nature, culture and practices prevailed in societies existed in different ages. Literature of twentieth century would differ from that of the twenty-first century. The characters of the literature works are the representatives of the generation of that period. Poets and authors were very much aware and bothered about the society and people and used their pen as a sword to destroy the evilness that existed. The best way to learn history and culture and the life of early generations is to move through the literature works of that particular period.

Plays of famous playwrights beautifully illustrate the whole generation of that age. It will also reflect the dialect and standard of the generation. Writings in particular have the capability to touch the very base of the society by criticizing and applauding its activities, conventions, customs and practices. All the plays, novels and other works have something good to exhort to the society. A piece of writing will be highly influenced by the background of the author and the place which he represents. The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde and Hamlet by William Shakespeare are two examples of such works that contain high moral and social theme in it. The Importance of Being Earnest of Oscar Wilde is an ultimate demolition of late nineteenth-century moral and social attitudes and is a comic critique of late Victorian value.

Oscar Wilde's witty remark ' The truth is rarely pure and never simple' exhibits a major theme of the play. ' Truth' in Victorian England was revealed

in the stagnant social conventions that suppressed individual expression. The play openly criticized various sluggish and vein practices. Oscar Wilde was against this conventional notion of truth as it was used to keep blinders on the society and prevented individuals from looking at life from different angles. He wanted define truth to a different way. He did not respect anything which is traditionally considered as truth value or morality.

He was against the rigid set of rules that are supposed to be as truth or justice. There were various examples of human nature and reality that were evident throughout the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Human practices and the belief about morality or justice often will be quite away from the actual truth or justice. It is also a fantasy in which unattainable human ideals are permitted to realize themselves. He wonders what does it mean to be perfectly earnest? How does it differ from society and people? He himself was found to be perplexed while exploring certain things and cry out what meaning does the word earnest give. Oscar Wilde himself addressed this play as 'A trivial comedy for serious people'. The moral confusion in the play is an example of the mishap that prevailed in the contemporary Victorian society.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the concept of marriage is of paramount importance. The question of the nature of marriage appears first time in the opening dialogue among Algernon and his butler, Lane, and this point continues for a while. The play depicts an ongoing debate about the nature of marriage, discussing whether it is 'pleasant' or 'unpleasant.' Lane says that marriage is a pleasant state though he later says that his marriage was the consequence of a serious 'misunderstanding between myself and a

young person'. The concepts of Lane about marriage is 'somewhat lax' as far as Algernon is concerned.

His concepts are found to be persistently cynical till he falls in love with Cecily. Algernon, but, opines that the truth "isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl." These contrasting and confusing views of these characters of the play are the original reflection of the chaotic Victorian society and their morality. The Importance of Being Earnest intended nothing but pure criticism.

In general these assumptions reveal the conventional preoccupations of Victorian respectability; its social position, character and income. Morality and the constraints is also a major topic throughout The Importance of Being Earnest. Algernon (character) is of the opinion that it is the responsibility of the servant class to set a moral standard for the upper classes. In Jack's (character) opinion, reading a private cigarette case itself can be 'ungentlemanly.' Algernon points that 'More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read'. All these assumptions and restrictions formulated a strict code of morals that prevail in Victorian society. Oscar Wilde is not bothered with questions of what is moral and what is not.

He however criticizes the whole Victorian concept of considering morality as a rigid body of rules defining what people should and should not do. 'Earnestness', which stands for the quality of being serious and the quality of being sincere, is the chief object of satire of the play. Oscar Wilde wants us to consider irreverence, the opposite of earnestness, as the true moral character. But, earnestness, seriousness or sincerity is the chief most enemy of morality in The Importance of Being Earnest. Earnestness may appear in <https://assignbuster.com/oscar-wildes-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

different styles like boringness, solemnity pomposity, smugness, self-righteousness, sense of duty, and complacency all of which Wilde saw as hallmarks of the Victorian character.

For Oscar Wilde, the term earnest is a combination of two ideas: the notion of false truth as well as the idea of false morality. We can see Jack and Algernon attempting to break away from the strictures of modesty and decency by inventing some fabricated alter egos. It is nothing but the false morality and values of the Victorian society that impelled them for this. These incidents are the pure example of the haughtiness, smugness and other false practices prevailed in the Victorian society. The Importance of Being Earnest. Criticizes the whole Victorian morality; their false strictness and practices.

The pun in the play strikes at the core of the Victorian concept of duty and respectability. We can see Gwendolen desiring to marry Earnest though she is not sure of this earnestness. She simply forgives the deception of Jack. Jack pretends to be both 'Earnest' and 'earnest' and become the representative of Victorian hypocrisy in the play. The notion of inversion (different types of inversion) found in The Importance of Being Earnest. is also intended to criticize similar morality in the Victorian society. Algernon says that 'Divorces are made in Heaven' which is against the common notion that 'Marriages are made in Heaven'. Jack later says that it is 'terrible' for a man to be truthful throughout his life.

This represents the decayed morality and practices prevailed in the contemporary Victorian society. The characters of the play simply inverted the conventional morality and displayed the standard of the Victorian society

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in their actions. The female characters of *The Importance of Being Earnest* symbolize an inversion of accepted Victorian practices with respect to the gender roles. Gwendolen, Cecily, Lady Bracknell and all other characters possess a face of deception and false morality. The weakness of the characters represents the weakness of the contemporary Victorian society. The moral paradox, the moral breakdown of the Victorian society is the most evident theme of the play.

Jokes about death are also visible throughout the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. These death jokes give a layer of dark humor to the play and connect to the concept of life being a work of art. The characters in the play discuss death as a happening over which a person can gain control. Double life is another concept that is visible in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. One of the important paradoxes of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the state of impossibility to become earnest or moral even though some people claim to be so. We can see Lady Bracknell commenting about death. An incident of inversion happens as she says that her friend Lady Harbury appears twenty years younger after her husband's death. She is of the opinion that 'death is an inconvenience for others'. When she hears about the death of Bunbury (as per the physicians' predictions) she praises Bunbury as she moved 'under proper medical advice'.

As per the talk of Miss Prism, death is an experience from which people can learn a moral lesson. She opines that it would be good for Ernest to die. Algernon and Jack put plans for killing the imaginary brother of Jack. These superstitions, ignorance, death jokes or dark humor explain life as a work of art. The character of the play considers death as something which is under

the control of man. For them death is the ultimate decision that one can take to shape and color his life. These characters, their beliefs, thoughts and morality are directly pulled out from the life in the Victorian society. Victorian people maintained the same ideology during those times. Oscar Wilde was planning an open criticism through his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

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