

# Oscar in a way that undermines the sanctity

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Oscar Wilde's farcical comedy "The Importance of Being Earnest" was set in the Victorian era, with the first performance on the 14th February 1895. This play comes at the 'fin de siècle', and marks the point of Wilde's greatest artistic piece. Wilde's play works within the social conventions and values of late Victorian London, following major themes such as the institution of marriage, social class/ hierarchical society and the idea of duty and respectability. Wilde cleverly composes his themes to deconstruct the traditional Victorian thought of the time, hiding behind a facade of 'triviality', whilst posing important questions and theories of how society should be run as he presents the failings and flaws of the Victorian era. Oscar Wilde explores the theme of marriage, a key Victorian value, in his play, 'The Importance of Being Earnest' as a trivial matter, he jokes about the subject and presents it in a way that undermines the sanctity of it. The question of the nature of marriage appears for the first time in the opening dialogue between Algernon and his butler, Lane, with Lane stating "I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first rate brand", Lane immediately implies that married life in the Victorian times was unhappy, there was a desire for 'champagne' as they needed alcohol in order to stay afloat. This idea of marriage being bleak and unfavourable is further enforced when Algernon replies saying "Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralising as that?", this comment is a subversion as marriage in the Victorian times was thought of as a holy state. Wilde's play was written in 1894, towards the beginning of the twentieth century, however, it had only become legal for women to file for divorce less than forty years pre the writing of his play (through the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act),

although this act had recently been passed it was still uncommon for divorces to occur as it was widely frowned upon.

Equally, the recency of the Act become legislation highlights the Victorian ideals and how sacred marriage was to them. Further still, perhaps marriage represents all Victorian values and so, when Wilde uses the word 'demoralising' as a seemingly good thing, it can be argued that he has the freedom to invert Victorian morals as the Victorian morals were corrupt. Moreover, when Jack expresses that he has come up to town to propose, Algernon exclaims "I thought you had come up for pleasure — I call that business?", this is yet another way in which the value of marriage is broken down. Sigmund Freud, in his publication 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious', argues that "Jokes can either be innocent or tendentious", an innocent reading of this play may see this as a joke about morale, stating that marriage is hard work, with Algernon implying that he sees marriage as an obligation.

However, this may also be interpreted as a tendentious joke; one that uses humour to initiate an attack on a personal trait or social convention. This joke may be hostile as it accentuates the fact that marriage in the Victorian era was simply a means of achieving financial security for the woman and a way to maintain an orderly household for the man, this becomes evident because Lady Bracknell does actually see marriage as a business contract, not only is she trying to arrange for her daughter to be married but she subjects Jack to an interview based on social position, income, and character. Another way in which this can be read is as an obscene joke, suggesting that wives are not pleasure but in actual fact prostitutes are as it was not

uncommon in the Victorian times to think of wives as solely for childbearing. Prostitution was extremely popular in the Victorian era, with many men leading secret/double lives seeking pleasure in brothels etc.

It is estimated that there were over 200,000 prostitutes in London alone in the late 19th/ beginning of the 20th century. This idea is embedded in the character of Jack as he states he has come up to town for 'pleasure'. In addition to this, Algernon states "in married life three is company and two is none", this pokes at the Victorian tradition that most men abided to, almost revealing that many were living a double life, furthering the idea that the Victorian value of marriage was certainly corrupted.

This comment also directly relates to and mirrors Oscar Wilde's personal life, as there were three people in his marriage – him, his wife and his lover Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas. Not only this, but, Oscar Wilde also went to brothels and had his sexual appetite fed through prostitution. Poem 'The Happiest Girl in the World' by Augusta Webster is about a young girl (the narrator) expressing her joy following her recent engagement, this highlights the domestic ideal and what was expected of marriage and family life in the Victorian era. This is backed up by the opinions of John Ruskin who wrote "The man's work for his own home is... to secure its maintenance, progress and defence; the woman's to secure its order, comfort and loveliness". This reinforces the idea that Victorians thought that marriage was sacred, a holy state that demands respect and is at the forefront of Victorian lifestyle, it also proves that Victorians firmly believed in gender roles within marriage;

therefore Wilde was introducing the key themes in his reality into a fictional world to disprove the ideas that they believed in.

Overall, Wilde cleverly constructs his play to joke about the Victorian views of marriage, he breaks down their expectations of marriage, sexuality and gender. Wilde also presents the Victorian values of duty and respectability, he takes this theme and inverts it in a comical manner, in order to avoid offending his audience. A determined and serious desire to do the correct thing is at the top of the Victorian code of conduct, however, Wilde provides insight into a Victorian way of life and proves that society ignored a great deal of issues as long as social appearance was maintained, with appearance and style being more important than intellect.

Wilde's character Gwendolyn represents the idea that appearance is more important than depth and what is actually occurring beneath the surface, she states "in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing", this strongly implies the importance of maintaining appearances in the Victorian era, she seems to be denoting that 'style' is more important than 'sincerity', which suggests that for Victorians it is what is on the surface that counts and nothing other than that. Also, when talking about Algernon, Lady Bracknell says "He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?", highlighting this idea of keeping up pretences and the grave importance it bore on the lives of Victorians.

Aristocrats value the appearance of respectability, the respectability means being socially acceptable, in the Victorian times this would've meant being straight, having children within wedlock and not divorcing. Throughout his

play Wilde seemingly mocks the hypocrisy of the aristocrats who, on the surface, appear to value monogamy but, in reality, pretend not to notice scandalous affairs, as it was fairly common for aristocrats to have children born out of marriage, but society turned its head. Additionally, Jack states “ It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case”, the word ‘ gentlemanly’ has connotations of chivalry and respectability, also, it becomes apparent here that Jack has a sense of morality – he views it as dishonourable for a man to pry into another’s private life. This could also be interpreted as Jack being secretive and hiding something, he doesn’t want Algernon to go through his belongings, furthering the idea that Victorians liked to keep things on the surface.

There is a very niche group in Wilde’s audience that would’ve heard this line and understood a hidden message, the use of a ‘ cigarette case’ is a symbol for sexual exchange, it is thought that Wilde paid for male prostitution using cigarette cases, immediately breaking down this idea of being chivalrous and gentlemanly. As long as appearances were upheld and carefully maintained aristocrats would have no problems in the Victorian times, however, it was Wilde’s breaking of respectability that meant he was punished. Wilde contemptuously went against Victorian values, being caught with a male lover and accused of ‘ gross indecency’, as made illegal by the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, Wilde’s punishment is proof that what matters is what’s on the surface. Critic Kohl stated “ Wilde opposes Victorian earnestness with a philosophy of the surface, which his sub-title denotes with the word ‘ trivial’.

This is his conceptual counter to ‘serious’ and ‘earnest’ and carried connotations of intellectual and moral detachment from reality, concentrating on the inessential and insignificant surface of things”. Kohl believes that Wilde is mocking the Victorians standards and values of the time, thinking his play is carefully constructed to break down their values, hiding behind the facade of a ‘farce’ – his jokes are so outrageous the Victorians would’ve laughed at them, not taking offence and furthering their sense of superiority. He implies that Wilde has written his play to reveal the moral corruption of the Victorian era. Overall, Oscar Wilde has presented the stereotypical and common thought of the time, that respectability was the most important thing in Victorian society, however, he uses this idea to convince his audience that in actuality all that mattered was keeping up appearances.

Another key theme that Oscar Wilde explores is the Victorian value of class, and a hierarchal society, the upper class in England at the time firmly believed that they were superior beings. This thought is rooted in the British Empire, many men, such as Cecil Rhodes, stated “I contend that we are the finest race in the world”, the sheer pride is evident as well as the idea of superiority. The first way in which Oscar Wilde presents this value is through trivialising it, he seems to be mocking his audience for upholding such a firm belief that they are superior whilst hiding behind a facade of flattery.

Algernon says “Really, if the lower orders don’t set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them?”, to an upper class audience this line is amusing as the lower class is considered inferior, the idea that the upper class should learn from the dirty, poor, lower class is comical as it is an inversion of

expectations. However, this line can be interpreted as Wilde highlighting the vain nature of the Victorian upper class, as they are laughing at the absurdity of learning from the lower class, it becomes apparent to others in the audience that Wilde is accentuating Algernon's hypocrisy, he states the lower class isn't setting a good example for the upper class yet he is the one being 'languid' and not achieving anything.

As well as this the fact he doesn't know or comprehend what the role of the working class is in society shows his complete disconnection with the reality of everyday life, perhaps mirroring the state of the upper class in the Victorian era, with Wilde arguing that they live in a bubble of their own. It is apparent that the upper class Victorians were in fact blissfully unaware of the events that didn't affect them directly, for example, in 1834 Benjamin Disraeli (former Prime Minister of Britain) passed a law named 'The Poor Law', announcing that in England "poverty is a crime". If it weren't for the second boer war (1899-1902), when the poverty in England was to such an extent that they could not conscript and deploy to war as they were not physically fit enough, no measures would've been taken to sort out the drastic lifestyle of the lower classes in Victorian England. To Disraeli, as to many traditional Tories, the cure for the 'disease' of poverty was worse than the 'disease' itself, for any new law that could have jeopardised the legitimacy of the social order.

Furthermore, when Miss Prism seems to reproach the lower class for producing so many children for Chasuble to christen, she views it as a matter of control, she states "I have often spoken to the poorer classes... But they



don't seem to know what thrift is.", thrift means the quality of using resources carefully and not wastefully, she implies that they cannot control themselves and seems to be belittling them, describing them as inferior, stupid and providing the audience with means to laugh at them. Yet again Wilde seems to be flattering the upper class members of his audience as he uses his characters to dismiss the working class, furthering the aristocratic sense of superiority. However, as Miss Prism argues that the working class "don't seem to know what thrift is", makes this line ironic, during the late 1800's a labourer's average wage was between 20 and 30 shillings a week in London; this would just cover his rent, and a very short supply of food for himself and his family. The line is ironic as the working class could not afford to be anything other than thrifty, it was actually the upper class that could not control themselves, as clearly seen through the problems of prostitution and affairs in the upper class at the time. Further still, Lady Bracknell reprimands Algernon, stating he should "never speak disrespectfully of society... Only people who cant get into it do that.", this is a comic line as it flatters the upper class, the audience would have felt pride and a feeling of fulfilment for achieving a place in society, but also it mocks their ideals due to the irony behind the comment, Lady Bracknell herself only achieved her status through marriage, proving once again that Victorian values and standards were satirical and almost hypocritical.

Overall, Wilde highlights the Victorian value of class, and a hierarchal society as well as reinforcing the idea that Victorians thought that the upper class was superior and held power they could yield over the lower classes, however, Wilde presents the lies behind these social truths, trying to convey

that the lower class is not inherently inferior to the upper class and he seeking to upset the current order. In conclusion, Wilde begins his play with exploring the theme of marriage, a key Victorian value, as a trivial matter, he jokes about the subject and presents it in a way that undermines the sanctity of it, disproving the Victorian ideals and breaking down their expectations. Not only does he do this with marriage but he also inverts the value of duty and respectability in a comical manner, presenting the audience with the idea that all that mattered in the Victorian era was keeping up appearances. Finally, Oscar Wilde also explores the Victorian value of class, and a hierarchal society, presenting the upper class's belief that they were superior beings and could yield their power over others whilst mocking his audience. Wilde deconstructs all Victorian values within his play whilst hiding behind a facade of 'triviality' and 'farce', his play seems light hearted and jovial on the surface, but when read deeper it reads much differently to how it appears (much like a member of the upper class during the Victorian era).