

# Oscar wilde earnest



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Trivial Comedy for Serious People:

Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*

" Since we know *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a trivial play for serious people, our task as serious people is not to be content to say it's funny, but to be careful when describing the fun" (Sale 479). First staged in February 1895 at the St. James Theatre, people packed the theater to see Oscar Wilde's new play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* . The play " was an immediate hit" (Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2221). It was a promising time as Wilde's plays had been the talk of the town for the past several years.

Generally, Wilde's plays were " serious even when trying to evoke comedy; his previous plays ranged from social satire and criticism ( *Lady Windermere's Fan* ), to themes that defied propriety and incited some moral indignation ( *Salome* )" (Barnet xxix). In reply to criticism [surrounding *Lady Windermere's Fan* ,] printed in the St. James Gazette of February 26, 1892, Wilde wrote a letter to the editor published on February 27<sup>th</sup> , under the heading " Mr. Oscar Wilde Explains"(Mason 390). In this letter, Wilde claimed " that he did not want the play to be viewed as ' a mere question of pantomime and clowning,' but that ' he was interested in the piece as a psychological study'" (Mason 390). His " tendency was to make his people ' real,' and then to take his audience through the looking-glass into a world which seemed to reflect modern life" (Raby 159).

This new play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* , therefore, revealed a novel side of Wilde not exposed before. One of his contemporary critics, H. G. Wells, said " that it was much harder to listen to nonsense than to talk it, but

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not if it is good nonsense.... and this is very good nonsense” (Beckson 187).

Hamilton Fyfe, on the other hand, found it “ slight in structure, devoid in purpose” nevertheless “ extraordinarily funny” (Beckson 187).

“ One critic failed to find it delightful; curiously this was Wilde’s fellow playwright from Ireland, Bernard Shaw”(Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2221). Although he claimed he did find it amusing, “ George Bernard Shaw said that it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening” (Beckson 221). He even poked fun at those who praised the sheer nonsense of Wilde, remarking that “ if the public ever becomes intelligent enough to know when it is really enjoying itself and when it is not, there will be an end of farcical comedy” (Beckson 221-222). Since George Bernard Shaw had a reputation for being a harsh critic, this criticism was characteristic of him. After reading the play, one might even agree with Shaw’s review.

However, the play does have an understandable plot (“ a gross anachronism,” according to Shaw (Beckson 221). The main character, Jack Worthing, is courting the affections of Gwendolen Fairfax, but is impeded by her mother, Lady Bracknell, who opposes the match (Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2229-2231). This part of the plot is serious enough. Wilde then adds a comical aspect: Jack has been introducing himself as Ernest while in town, and when back at his country estate he refers to a “ younger brother” named Ernest (Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2223). While Wilde tries to inject a sense of seriousness into the comedy, he allows his plot twists to develop into the ridiculous. For example, the case of Miss Prism’s losing an infant is nonchalantly explained as an absent minded switch between a book and a baby; the baby being placed in a handbag and the book in the perambulator

(Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2261). There is also Algernon's behavior and his imaginary friend called "Bunbury...which he invented as an invaluable permanent invalid in order that he might be able to go down into the country whenever he chooses" (Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2226), eventually Bunbury simply explodes.

As ridiculous as Wilde made his plots, is the way he resolved them:

Algernon's way of killing off Bunbury was to calmly say that he "was quite exploded" (Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2256). When pressed for a better answer, Algernon simply explains that the doctor found that Bunbury was going to die and he expired right then and there. Gwendolen's (and for that matter Cecily's) outrage after discovering the truth about Ernest is won back by the ridiculous attempt by Jack to christen himself Ernest. And the hard to believe predicament of Miss Prism and the lost baby eventually resolved Jack's impediment with Gwendolen.

Very often when offered questionable storylines, one can expect relief from the moral of the story or the play, which the author might try to instill. The search, in this case, would be in vain. Algernon never gets his due over his continued deceit in Bunburying, and Jack Worthing is redeemed by the discovery of his being "Ernest" all along. Jack's confession that "it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth" (Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2263) is simply accepted and forgiven. None of the characters get chastised for their bad behavior or prejudice. So, one is left to think that Wilde, in not condemning these actions, absolutely agrees with them.

Therefore it might be considered that the plot is only a prop for Wilde's more implicit messages, hidden within his side notes, his characters, and their situations. The message may not be understood by looking at the play as a whole; but in its parts. The gems hidden within the play are the commentaries of Wilde on topics such as medicine, relationships and social norms, with "considerable insight on the human condition, in particular issues of class, gender, sexuality, and identity" (P. P. F 288: 538). He places these commentaries either as asides in the dialogue or in the intricacy by which a scene is played out. For example, Algernon's skepticism regarding Jack's proposal to Gwendolen echoes the social dilemma, "girls never marry the men they flirt with...girls don't think it right...it accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place" (Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2224). As for the dialogue of the two young ladies towards each other (they will call each other a lot of things before they become friends); Wilde portrays the younger gal as naively idealistic, while portraying the other as an impractical romantic. They are represented as fickle, although Gwendolen's attitude towards Cecily ranges from quite friendly to jealous rivalry and then to faithful friend (all in one scene). At the same time, Lady Bracknell's impression of Cecily goes from the unthinkable to the idea that "[Cecily] has distinct social possibilities," and as such would make a suitable member of London High Society (Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2258).

While most of Wilde's contemporaries were thrilled at the "nonsense" of the play, Shaw had expected a serious comedy by the playwright. Instead he saw it as having no structure and a real disappointment. The play does begin

to make sense though, when we look away from the perspective of the critic and into the author's mind. If we accept that the plot is a prop, which Wilde used to throw abuse and amusement at his audience, we can then conclude that the play was meant as one big commentary on sensibilities, on society, and on theater. Furthermore, if we look at Wilde's own problems at the time of the play's fame, we might understand Wilde.

In the scene where Lady Bracknell is interviewing Jack, and then reacting to Jack's helpless admission that he has lost his parents, Lady Bracknell states that "losing both parents seem an act of carelessness" (Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2232), and adds that to rectify the situation he should "make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over" (Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2233). As absurd as this may seem, it does have a purpose: Lady Bracknell represents Victorian High Society. Because of this, she is ready to condemn based on one's birth or unfortunate circumstance; yet she makes a complete turnaround in her disapproval of Cecily once she realizes that the girl has good ancestry (namely, her father is rich) (Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2257).

The absurdity of Jack posing as Ernest mirrors the life of the playwright himself. Oscar Wilde, at this time, had begun to scandalize London with his lifestyle and had been largely condemned as a homosexual. Jack Worthing explains that the pressures of leading a "high moral life" in the country does not provide him with the happiness he needs; rather, that happiness is found in Ernest whose reputation is entirely opposite of Jack's (Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2226). In the same way, perhaps Wilde feels somehow trapped in the need to conform to London's High Society standards.

The lack of a decent plot is an attack of the sensibilities of the audience to a serious play. Oscar Wilde once explained “ that the play has an underlying philosophy: ‘ that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality’” (Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2222). The whole point was not the progression of the story, but the progression of the absurdity: starting with the truth of “ Ernest”, then the nonsense of “ Bunburying”, until the play escalates to the ridiculous in Miss Prism. His characters’ crude commentaries, which seemed to offend, *were* meant to offend; if anything, none of it needed to be taken seriously.

The play is an exercise of triviality. George Bernard Shaw couldn’t see past the nonsense of Wilde. *The Importance of Being Earnest* was actually quite an accomplishment. Wilde worked hard writing and rewriting the script until he felt he had the perfect combination of wit and humor shrouded in seriousness. It was absolute nonsense, yet it was a masterpiece of nonsense.

There is a lesson to be learned here. Something serious need not be treated to death as serious; it can be allowed some form of triviality. These few lines say it best:

Jack: “ I am sick to death of cleverness... The thing has become an absolute public nuisance. I wish to goodness we had a few fools left.”

Algernon: “ We have.”

Jack: “ I should extremely like to meet them. What do they talk about?”

Algernon: “ The fools? Oh! About the clever people, of course!”

(Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams 2234).

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