



TRIVIALITY AND SERIOUSNESS IN OSCAR WILDE'S PLAY 'THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST'

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Abstract

This paper aims to elaborate triviality and seriousness portrayed in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1898). The play was considered Wilde's masterpiece, and it highlights the life in the Victorian era. The play portrays the marriage life also the importance of wealth, land, and beauty. This paper employs textual and historical approaches. The findings revealed that the play exemplifies triviality by treating serious things like trivial objects and vice versa. Marriage was seen as insignificant by the male characters in the play. Lane saw it as the reason for the champagne downgrading and a bargaining part for Algernon and Jack to have their goals. Meanwhile, unimportant thing like the name was treated as if it was life matter. Cecily and Gwendolen saw a particular name as the main requirement for choosing a husband. This paper concludes that Oscar Wilde made use of such a technique on purpose to make fun of the Victorian way of life.

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INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde's last and most renowned play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was first performed on February 14, 1895, at the St. James's Theatre (Hazra, 2013). The word "earnest" connotes seriousness, solemnity, and property, which hints at Wilde's ambivalent disgust with sham morality. As a result, one may expect this piece to grow into a gloomy exposition based on its title. Wilde, on the other hand, presents the polar opposite of such value through satire. Also, according to Hazra, the play's subtitle, *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, captures the plot's spirit. Wilde, according to the scholar, plays with the tension between triviality and seriousness, which complement one another. Various themes emerge throughout the play, which depicts a Victorian upper-class society. Morals and immorality, gravity, the burlesque, and other dichotomies are highlighted.

The Importance of Being Earnest is about marriage and love. Aside from their uniqueness, all of the characters exhibit a tendency toward superficiality and hypocrisy. Each of them dismisses serious issues, such as death and religion, while prioritizing name and pleasure. The comedy's central theme is the duality of Victorian people, who appear earnest and elegant on the outside but are superficial and silly on the inside, and who wear the mask of manners while lying anytime they choose. Wilde has a critical view of society, frequently utilizing terms with negative connotations or in unfavorable contexts. Some terms take on new meanings to represent events that cannot be controlled but which people act as if they can, demonstrating characters' ability to manipulate objects and other people. All of the preceding assertions are supported by textual lexical features.

Wilde has a diametrically opposing and sardonic perspective toward the world in which he lived. He understood the upper class, and he knew that their lives were almost inhumanly dry, monotonous, preoccupied with manners and customs, and perfectly earnest. As a result, there are numerous drawbacks. In the text, the characters' ideas often go against convention and people's expectations, as shown by the high number of negatives in the story (Junmei, 2017).

Several critics have tackled Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* from different views. In the last decade, for instance, any writings about the play portray Victorian masculinities (Valentukeviciute, 2022) and criticize its society (Hazra, 2013). Meanwhile, others address the aspects of realism (Balkin, 2016; Singh et al., 2019) and the construction of power by naming (Garland, 2012). Regarding the genre, Foster (1956) looks at the play as a parody. On the other hand, Jordan (1970) wrote about satire and fantasy, while Poague (1973) dealt with irony type in the play.

Concerning the author's writing style, Wilde experimented with various forms of writing, including poetry, fiction, theatre, and essay. Cazamian & Vergnas (1960) make observations about Wilde's approach to composing plays. They claim that Wilde's plays are incredibly successful and stand out against the nearly unrelieved mediocrity of theatrical productions. For a century's worth of production, his comedies are hilarious. They have a great and quick animation; the effortless flow of the traditional dialogue can be seen in the exchange between the characters. The storylines are cleverly woven in a French way. The majority of the comic characters are only sketches. No claim to depth is made by them. Wilde, on the other hand, had in his comedies to write problem pieces with a wry sense of humor when confronted with the truth. The goal is blatantly detrimental. He dialed back the public's resistance and anxieties. The content of his work was diluted by his themes. He wrapped up his plots to delight the audience's unsophisticated taste.

The current paper intends to demonstrate the triviality and seriousness of the characters and events of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. A similar discussion was conducted by Toliver (1963), who studied the play in terms of its sincerity and triviality. However, Toliver differs in that he highlights the philosophy behind the sincere and trivial content of the play. Wang's (2019) study also focuses on the play's seriousness and triviality but sees it from the paradox of the characters' attitudes. Even though recent research analyzes a similar topic, the researchers believe it is still worth discussing since it serves as Wilde's vehicle to deliver his satirical view on the Victorian way of life by focusing on serious matters seen as trivial and vice versa. Thus, this study offers a complementary discussion for the previous studies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many people have criticized Wilde's work. Some people may like his work, but not everyone does. It is difficult to say whether his own life decisions influenced some of his opinions, whether objective or not. Bernard Shaw (1895), in the play's first year of publication, published his perspective about *The Importance of Being Earnest* not being all that fantastic. Shaw continued that it was undoubtedly composed before *Lady Windermere's Fan* and was presumably not Wilde's first play. Shaw saw Wilde as too prone to fine art to have started with anything other than a strained imitation of great dramatic poetry, Greek or Shakespearian. Still, it was possibly the first he intended for commercial usage in the West End theatres (249). Shaw acknowledges that the play amused him as any other comedies did. Unfortunately, he was nonetheless dissatisfied with the play's overall experience. Shaw continues his assessment by

saying that the play had him “out of spirits before the end of the second act, and out of temper before the end of the third” (Shaw, 1895, p. 150).

Another critic, William Archer (1895 in Beckson, 2005), had a similar reaction to Shaw’s on *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Archer sees the play as “delightful to see” but “barren and delusive” for the criticism. This judgment was based on the four categories of all plays, “(1) plays which are good to see, (2) plays which are good to write about, (3) plays which are both, and (4) plays which are neither. Class 4 is naturally the largest; Class 3 the smallest; Classes 1 and 2 balance each other pretty evenly.” By this category, Archer puts *The Importance of Being Earnest* into the first category, thus, comes the assessment.

DISCUSSION OF MAIN THEMES

Triviality in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

The Importance of Being Earnest is an enlightening example of a comedy of manners because it mocks the Victorian aristocracy’s hypocrisy, frivolity, superficiality, artificiality, and money-mindedness. Victorian upper-class society appraised things based on their appearance. The current play helps us laugh at those values by turning them upside down using caustic, amusing, and witty language. The subtitle Wilde gave after the play’s title, “A Trivial Comedy for Serious People,” serve as foreshadowing for the readers about how the characters in the play will take serious matter trivially while considering trivial things very seriously.

Marriage is one thing seen as a trivial thing in this play. Algernon questions it being “demoralizing” when Lane states that “in married households, the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand,” blaming marriage as the cause of ill-quality champagne. Although Lane did that to justify the servants’ act who drank the champagne before serving it “at a bachelor’s establishment.” Lane also considers marriage as a “consequence of a misunderstanding,” made him has “only been married once,” and thus, comes with “very little experience” (Wilde, 2004, Act I, p. 46).

When Algernon discusses marriage with Jack, he says:

I really don’t see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romantic is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I’ll certainly try to forget the fact (Act I, p. 48).

We can see from Algernon’s speech that he does not take marriage seriously. Algernon does not consider marriage to be romantic, believing that the enthusiasm would fade once someone is married. However, a contradiction happens when Algernon confesses to Cecily that

he has fallen in love with her at the first sight, “(*Speaking very rapidly*) Cecily, I first looked upon your wonderful and incomparable beauty, I have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly” (Act I, p. 102) and immediately wants to marry her without hesitation, “... I love you, Cecily. You will marry me, won’t you?” (Act I, p. 103).

When Jack and Algernon discuss Gwendolen, whom Jack adores and wishes to marry, Algernon says, “.... I don’t give my consent.” Algernon then continues, “My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily” (Act I, p. 50). Algernon takes it seriously when he refuses Jack’s intention to marry Gwendolen. However, Algernon’s opinion is irrelevant because Algernon is not Gwendolen’s legal guardian. Algernon says such a thing because he only wants Jack to tell him about Cecily.

The same situation also happens when Jack refuses to let Algernon marry Cecily. His refusal is supposed to be based on the severe cause of ethics or morality. However, Jack tells Lady Bracknell, “But my dear Lady Bracknell, the matter is entirely in your own hands. The moment you consent to my marriage with Gwendolen, I will most gladly allow your nephew to form an alliance with my ward” (Act III, p. 136) indicates that his refusal is just a condition for him to be able to marry Gwendolen. Jack uses the situation as a means to fulfill his intention, not for the sake of Cecily’s wellbeing.

Another serious situation the character deems unimportant is when Lady Bracknell thinks it does not matter for a girl lying about her age when she goes to evening parties.

LADY BRACKNELL. (*To CECILY*) Come here, sweet child. (*CECILY goes over*) How old are you, dear?

CECILY. Well, I am really only eighteen, but I always admit to twenty when I go to evening parties.

LADY BRACKNELL. You are perfectly right in making some slight alterations. Indeed, no woman should ever be quite accurate about her age. It looks so calculating—(*In a meditative manner*) Eighteen, but admitting to twenty at evening parties. Well, it will not be very long before you are of age and free from the restraints of tutelage. So I don’t think your guardian’s consent is, after all, a matter of any importance (Act III, p. 135).

The dialogue above happens when Jack, as Cecily’s guardian, states that he cannot give his consent for Cecily and Algernon’s marriage. Lady Brackwell then asks Cecily about her age and looks completely fine, knowing that Cecily used to lie about her age when she attended parties. When a girl lies about her age at a party, she might put herself in danger, especially when she is still underage. However, Lady Brackwell sees this situation as trivial to be paid attention to.

Seriousness in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Many characters in the play show a very serious attitude in responding to the trivial situation. For example, in the first act, Algernon and Lane discuss cucumbers. Algernon is shocked to discover that there are no cucumber sandwiches available, and he wonders why there are not any, even for cash.

ALGERNON. (*Picking up empty plate in horror*) Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially.

LANE. (*Gravely*) There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went down twice.

ALGERNON. No cucumbers!

LANE. No, sir. Not even for ready money.

...

ALGERNON. I am greatly distressed, Aunt Augusta, about there being no cucumbers, not even for ready money (Act I, p. 59).

The quote shows how Algernon took the absence of cucumber sandwiches seriously. It makes him “greatly distressed” despite the fact that the cucumber could be easily replaced with other food or any type of sandwich.

Another serious situation concerning food also happens when Jack tells Lady Bracknell that he cannot approve of Algernon marrying Cecily due to Algernon’s “moral character” that Jack considers “untruthful.” However, how Jack explains why he sees Algernon in such a way is quite trivial.

JACK. I fear there can be no possible doubt about the matter. This afternoon, during my temporary absence in London on an important question of romance, he obtained admission to my house by means of the false pretence of being my brother. Under an assumed name he drank, I’ve just been informed by my butler, an entire pint bottle of my Perrier-Jouet, Brut, ’89, a wine I was specially reserving for myself. Continuing his disgraceful deception, he succeeded in the course of the afternoon in alienating the affections of my only ward. He subsequently stayed to tea, and devoured every single muffin. And what makes his conduct all the more heartless is, that he was perfectly well aware from the first that I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don’t intend to have a brother, not even of any kind. I distinctly told him so myself yesterday afternoon (Act III, p. 134).

The quote implies that Jack is more concerned about Algernon, who drank the entire bottle of Jack’s favorite wine and ate all the muffins, than the fact that he lied about his identity. Jack indeed mentions that Algernon comes to his house pretending as his brother. However, by Jack’s detailed account of the food and wine that Algernon devoured, it seems that Jack puts more significance on the food to say that Algernon is unfit to marry Cecily.

The name also becomes a serious matter for some characters in the play to the extent that someone might cancel a marriage due to the less-likely name. This situation occurs when Gwendolen considers Ernest a better name than Jack. When Jack asks Gwendolen what if his name was Jack instead of Ernest, she responds that the name Ernest “is a divine name” since “[I]t has a music of its own” and “produces vibration” (Act I, p. 64). Gwendolen then compares the name of Ernest with Jack:

GWENDOLEN. Jack?--No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations--I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain. Besides, Jack is a notorious domesticity for John! And I pity any woman who is married to a man called John. She would probably never be allowed to know the entrancing pleasure of a single moment's solitude. The only really safe name is Ernest (Act I, p. 64).

Gwendolen insists that she does not prefer the name Jack since there are many people named Jack. She sees that those named Jack are all plain and that the name does not make any vibration and has a minimal melody in it. After all, she insists that Ernest is a name she takes very seriously and sees as a holy name with melody and thrills, and she would not have loved him as much if he was not named Ernest.

GWENDOLEN. Yes, I am quite well aware of the fact. And I often wish that in public, at any rate, you had been more demonstrative. For me you have always had in irresistible fascination. Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you. (JACK *looks at her in amazement*) We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits, I am told: and my ideal have always been to love someone of the name Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you (Act I, p. 62-63).

In this quote, Gwendolen considers the name Ernest the most important factor in her decision to marry Jack. She could not have loved or married him if his name had not been Ernest, which is ludicrous. It is unreasonable to take someone for granted merely because of their name.

The name of Ernest is the most significant thing the ladies fought for in the play. When Gwendolen first meets Cecily, she says:

“Cecily Cardew? (*Moving to her and shaking hands*) What a very sweet name! Something tells me that we are going to be great friends. I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong.” (Act II, p. 108).

However, when both ladies argue about being engaged to the man named Ernest Worthing, Gwendolen says something completely different from what she said earlier, “From the moment I saw you I distrust you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such

matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right.” (Act II, p. 114). Gwendolen trusts her first impression blindly, although it often leads her to judge people wrongly. It is not very sensible to choose someone based on their appearance and attitude. As the saying goes, “don’t judge a book by its cover.”

Furthermore, the name of Ernest also becomes an argument between Algernon and Jack.

ALGERNON. You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I have ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn’t Ernest. It’s on your cards. Here is one them. (*Taking it from case*) ‘Mr. Ernest Worthing, B.4, The Albany’. I’ll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to anyone else. (*Puts the Card in his pocket*). (Act I, p. 52)

As the above quotation shows, Algernon was taken aback by a seemingly little detail such as a name. He is adamant that Jack’s name be Ernest, and he considers Ernest to be a serious name.

Dualism in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

The value or condition of having two distinct or opposing fragments or elements is referred to as dualism. *The Importance of Being Earnest* mocks the Victorian mannerism of “earnestness,” which is associated with seriousness and soberness (Moss, 2001, p. 193). The title’s numerous meanings represent the contrast between seriousness and triviality. The title emphasizes the importance of becoming a sincere person, referring to the lies Jack and Algernon told that led to many uncomfortable situations. Although, the title also discloses a more ordinary meaning when it refers to Cecily and Gwendolen, who made a big deal about not wanting to marry anyone unless his name was Ernest.

In Act I, Gwendolen states that her “... idea has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence” (p. 63). Gwendolen then adds that the name of Ernest is “a divine name. It has a music of its own. It produces vibrations” (p. 64). Anyone named Ernest, according to her, is a trustworthy individual. Similarly, Cecily Cardew reveals to Algernon that she wants to adore someone named Ernest.

CECILY. You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest. There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest (Act II, p. 105).

Algernon also shows his consciousness about the desire of the Victorian people for “earnestness” at the time Jack discloses his actual name (Moss, 2001, p. 194).

ALGERNON. You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most Earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. (Act I, p. 52).

The play focuses on the one word 'earnest,' which describes a man's honesty and sincerity. Wilde's wittiness is evident in the title puns in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It infers a connection between the term sincerity and the hero's name, Ernest, which is both amusing and leads to a quandary (Reinert, 1956).

Reinert (1956) asserts that the play's action is about how important it is to make one valuable. The drama explores the implications of not being sincere, or "Bunburying," as Algernon makes a reference to it. "Bunburying" is explained as inventing a fictional character that might be beneficial, like a justification to evade a boring, repetitive action forced by a cruel custom. Reinert adds, 'Bunburying' is simply the mechanism that sets in motion the preposterously elaborate plot of mistaken identities" (Reinert, 1956, p. 17). Dualism makes the story of the play ethical sense. Algernon informs Jack about the following:

ALGERNON. Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth you are serious about I haven't got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely trivial nature (Act II, p. 119).

Algernon can live in a utopian world as a Bunburyist. The unserious character who takes everything seriously is not serious at all (Reinert, 1956, p. 17); this is on the one hand. On the other hand, Jack creates Ernest to avoid the guardian's heavy duty (Jackson, 2004, p. xxxv). Moss (2001) describes how the two protagonists of *The Importance of Being Earnest* create false identities to avoid social rules and customs. Algernon invents a fictitious friend named Bunbury as a way to avoid social obligations. While Jack's fictitious brother Ernest represents a side of himself that he tries to conceal from Cecily, his young ward (198).

JACK. ... When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. (Act I, p. 54)

Dualism in life was what drew the attention of the Victorians. It is confirmed that Victorians were disposed to dualism in life secretly and publicly, separating their lives into two parts. The Victorian man with two lives does seem respectable in his home with his good relationship. However, he leads a second life of sexual activity and immorality that his wife is

completely unaware of (Moss, 2001, p. 198). Married men must be truthful, honest, and devoted to their wives. Algernon, for example, is not sincere. Even though he is impoverished and reckless, he lives a different life (Sale, 2004, p. 476). To be an honorable, popular, and famous Aristocratic man, one must retract from life's pleasures and follow strict norms. It limits the man's ability to express his true self.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde talks about the importance of double existence to mock the unpleasant aspects of Victorian society. He wants to demonstrate how males are supposed to behave by having them create an artificial identity in order to circumvent society's rules and restraints. As a result of such societal constraints, individuals were obliged to be poseurs and lairs.

CONCLUSIONS

The Importance of Being Earnest is a satirical comedy of manners that aims to make the audience laugh by portraying social and moral traditions in a humorous light. This play demonstrates the nature of Victorian society and how subversive it was. However, it is clear that this play comments on Victorian society. So, while these "trivial" things appear to be treated "seriously," it can be argued that Wilde plays with the idea of triviality and seriousness, turning them into the polar opposite. It is to create a sense of irony and reflects the themes of marriage and identity, which are discussed throughout the play ironically. The topsy-turvy marital notions in *The Importance of Being Earnest* plainly demonstrate that "serious" subjects are dealt with total and honest "triviality," mainly through the characters' attitude towards appearances and marriage.

It becomes clear how appearances are crucial in the play and depict the essential values in Victorian society. It was all about appearances, and style was far more essential than content. As a result, while a person could have a secret life, have extramarital affairs, or have children out of wedlock, society would look the other way as long as the image of propriety was maintained. Wilde wonders if the day's more pressing or serious issues are being disregarded in favor of superficial worries about beauty. Thus, by investigating the appearances involved in marriages and the lack of seriousness honesty handled, the play explores the concept that "serious" matters in life should be treated with "triviality."

Marriage was a deliberate choice. Also, many people are persuaded to believe that one marriage is ideal, regardless of how joyful it is or how much/little money it brings in. As a result, the idea that "serious" things in life should be treated with "triviality" is a major theme

in the play, which is explored through the usage of the class system and the disparity in status and attitudes between the classes. So, to understand the play, one needs to think of the opposite of every episode and speech by the entire characters.

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