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## Oscar Wilde's *'The Importance of Being Earnest'* as a caricature of Victorian England

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to present Wilde's enchanting play *'The Importance of Being Earnest'* as a ridicule on the Victorian society of England which remains a quintessence of the so-called gentlemanliness and mannerisms even today. The play has succeeded in displaying how triviality was valued in the then-England and basic human values and morals were given least importance. The paper extrapolates the Victorian society for its derogatory human values and principles through the text. It highlights the trivialities in the lives of the Victorian people and exposes their showy attitudes. The inferences and findings are supported by using extracts from the text which enlighten the readers about the people of the then-

England and their social codes and conducts. The paper illustrates how the writer has used the play to hold a mirror to the Victorian people so that they see their own virtual selves and get to know how shallow and materialistic their ways of life are. Wilde has put the characters in the best possible situations so that they reveal their real nature and demonstrate their true selves. These characters inadvertently exemplify the Victorianism while they are busy making their best out a situation and trying their best to win a person.

**Keywords:** Victorian, Class, Materialism, Elitism, Mannerism, Earnest.

## **Introduction**

The society in Victorian England is marked by its aristocracy, class consciousness and elitism, scantiness of human values, materialistic endeavors, hypocrisy and chauvinism. The drive for social and material advancement had corrupted the heart and soul of man. People were judged by their wardrobe, their dining manners, by their way of talking and on the basis of other petty issues. People knew each other from external appearances rather than the inner realities. The Importance of Being Earnest is an extraordinary experiment in Victorian melodrama, crammed with its ludicrous conventions and tweaking mockery/satire.

Oscar Wilde belonged to the *fin de siècle* aesthetic movement which believes in 'art less as an escape from

than as a substitute for life'. W.H. Hudson says "*Wilde's wit was more than a display of verbal gymnastics: It often crystallized into a memorable phrase some truth or some serviceable critical judgement which a pedestrian or a pedantic style would obscure in a mist of words. Even when his wit was exercised playfully, it left a lasting mark as in The Importance of Being Earnest...*" (Hudson 234). As David Daiches points out, "*The play wrought entirely out of the studied wit of the dialogue, which projects the society of upper-class leisure as an English world so emptied of earthiness and genuine emotional, moral, or physical reality, that it is pure style, a world where action exists in order to make possible the appropriate conversation and where the appropriate conversation is a ballet-like exchange of epigrams.*" (Daiches 1104).

Wilde has satirized Victorian people and society for the formalities they expressed for each other which were but superficial and hollow. From the utterances the characters make to the stage directions set by the playwright, this play is hell bent on justifying Wilde's proposition that the people of Victorian era were pompous in behavior and valued mere appearances rather than the essence. Elites of the society were particularly all showy in expression and had customary etiquettes of eating. The snobbish aristocratic etiquettes maintained the gap between upper and lower classes. This forced proletariats of the society to masquerade themselves with elitism and imitate the bourgeois life styles.

## Discussion

In Act I we see Jack Worthing irritated by Algernon Moncrieff's hospitality who is all set to impress Gwendolen and Aunt Augusta, two upper class ladies, by offering them their favorite food;

Algernon: ... Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. (*Takes one and eats it.*)

Jack: Well, you have been eating them all the time.

Algernon: That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt. (*Takes plate from below.*) Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

Jack: (*Advancing to table and helping himself.*) And very good bread and butter it is too.

Algernon: Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all... (TIOBE: 15)

The materialistic people of then England would value small and petty objects more than a person and would not hesitate in fighting for a small thing as is seen from the following dialogue how important a cigarette case could be to someone;

Jack: Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward.

Jack: Of course it's mine. (*Moving to him.*) You have seen me with it hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.

Algernon: Oh! It is absurd to have a hard rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read. (TIOBE: 17)

Wilde both highlights as well as mocks the Victorian people for the dining customs and habits. Customary invitations were a part and parcel of their lives. One would be immediately judged if he, even by mistake, pick up the frock by right hand or refuse to drink wine. Dining had its own etiquettes which were to be followed mandatory or you were not a 'gentleman' at all;

Jack: I haven't asked you to dine with me anywhere to-night.

Algernon: I know. You are absurdly careless about sending out invitations. It is very foolish of you. Nothing annoys people so much as not receiving invitations.

Jack: You had much better dine with your Aunt Augusta.

Algernon: I haven't the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind. To begin with, I dined there on Monday, and once a week is quite enough to dine with one's own relations. In the second place, whenever I do dine there I am always treated as a member of the family, and sent down with either no woman at all, or two. In the

third place, I know perfectly well whom she will place me next to, to-night. She will place me next Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner-table. That is not very pleasant. Indeed, it is not even decent . . . and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase. The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public. ... (TIOBE: 22, 23)

Lady Bracknell, who may be called as an epitome of Victorian elites in the play, can be seen bragging about her class and her descent. She looks down upon lower class people who were worthless to her. She adores German language but detests French songs for they might give rise to another French revolution;

Lady Bracknell: Thank you, Algernon. It is very thoughtful of you. I'm sure the programme will be delightful, after a few expurgations. French songs I cannot possibly allow. People always seem to think that they are improper, and either look shocked, which is vulgar, or laugh, which is worse. But German sounds a thoroughly respectable language, and indeed, I believe is so. (TIOBE: 29)

The upper classes in every society have always been frightful of a growing consciousness in lower classes and a possible revolution as such which might disrupt the social stratification and bring a notion of equality in subservient masses. Lady Bracknell, like any other Victorian elite, does not want proletariats to be educated as she fears for the

hierarchal stature which might be jeopardized. She considers ignorance bliss;

Lady Bracknell: I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square. (TIOBE: 35)

Wilde has also brought tinges of female suppression by patriarchy in Victorian England. Not necessarily men but women also dominated other women and often a young girl's wishes and choices were suppressed under familial and/or societal pressures. Marriage would often be decided by parents and one's own consent and choice would matter least;

Gwendolen: I am engaged to Mr. Worthing, mamma. (*They rise together.*)

Lady Bracknell: Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to someone, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself . . . (TIOBE: 33)

We see how a simple name 'Earnest' is given importance and considered of great significance for a man who comes with a marriage proposal. Lady Bracknell starts inquiring Jack Worthing with some petty questions to see if he can be an 'eligible man'. She gives weightage to mere external appearances rather than digging deep into Jack's personality from a humanistic point of view. When Jack admits that he smokes, Lady Bracknell remarks, "I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind." (TIOBE: 34)

Wilde also exposes the pretenses and masks people would put on to maintain decorum in casual as well as formal meetings. People often said something but deep inside their hearts meant something else. One would shake hands very well to give the other person a feeling of warmth but in the heart of hearts both of them would feel cold for each other. Goodbye often meant good riddance. In act II we see how two young ladies try to impress each other at first supposedly by their sweet tongues but later reveal their real faces;

Gwendolen: 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. (TIOBE: 77)

Gwendolen: From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never



deceived in such manners. My first impressions of people are invariably right. (TIOBE: 85)

The ladies can be seen at war with each other by using fashions and styles of eating and eatables as the ammunition. This also shows how important food and dishes were to Victorian materialistic social beings;

Cecily: (*Sweetly.*) Sugar?

Gwendolen: (*Superciliously.*) No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more. (Cecily looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup.)

Cecily: (*Severely.*) Cake or bread and butter?

Gwendolen: (*In a bored manner.*) Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.

Cecily: (*Cuts a very large slice of cake, and puts it on the tray.*)  
... (TIOBE: 84)

Although the characters seem to be matured towards the end and even Lady Bracknell starts dealing with situations with compassion and instills respect for people, the play exposes its characters for their Victorian mind-set and materialistic sense. In pursuit of someone named Earnest, the play draws striking parallels between what is right and what was considered right. The mental development and morally grown selves of characters towards the finale of the play shows that social and moral developments do happen as a matter of introspection and art can surely help bringing such evolution.

In this excellent piece of work, Wilde exposes the scurrilous social values and ideals of Victorian aristocratic society by mocking their superficial style of living. Wilde thus helps to bring to limelight the breakdown of Victorian values.

## **Conclusion**

By the time *The Importance of Being Earnest* was published, the Victorian society had already been satirized in many works of fiction. Oscar Wilde has also succeeded in portraying the then England as a society of materialistic people with mechanical lives for whom the notion of being earnest was on the top of Victorian code of conduct. Wilde has successfully unraveled the hypocrisy of these strict social Victorian mores in this masterpiece.

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