

**AN ANALYSIS OF OSCAR WILDE'S PLAY:  
THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST**



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## I. INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde is one of those scandalous yet humorous writers, his ingenuity is uniquely crafted into his writings. Wilde was always a flamboyant person since his early age and he have this sense of critics towards traditional morals and cultural values among the society especially in the Victorian era. His prominent figure in English Literature is widely influenced by his satirical nature in his works, not exceptionally in one of his most popular play, "*The Importance of Being Earnest*". Wilde is well known for his works relating to someone's double identity such as this play and his novel, '*The Picture of Dorian Gray*'.

Just like many of his other works, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a controversial one for its satirical elements. This play is divided into 3 acts, which was set in Victorian England with each character with their own unique personality that seems somehow hilariously connected. Unlike his other works such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* does not contain any sacred values in it, just pure hilarious satirical romantic-comedy. Wilde's work is a satire of how the Victorian society values thing such as earnestness. It was a mockery of ideals of the Victorians, the way people at the time seems to overvalue to a false earnestness and how anyone would do anything for something.

The main elements that builds up to the plot of the story opens up when Algernon discovered a particular Cecily, a name found in Jack's cigarette case, Jack then revealed to his friend Algernon that he has two different identities, Jack in the country, and Ernest in town, and that Cecily is his Ward in the country, this then led into Jack's proposal to Gwendolen, a woman who longs to marry a man named Ernest, so Jack went ahead with his double identity as Ernest and proposed to Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen's mother however is a very conservative lady who constantly stand in Jack's way, she questioned Jack to see if he fits her "suitability check" to be Gwendolen's husband. Algernon on the other hand, is not much different to Jack, he used a double identity as "Ernest", Jack's imaginary brother, to make it possible for him to approach Cecily, who also longs to marry a man named Ernest. Things then went awry when they all ended up in the country and both men's deception is revealed.

The story uncovers a lot of hilarious yet genius surprise throughout the narration, all which lead to its final reveal which really tells the true meaning of its title. In this journal, those reveals, issues, and the satirical elements are going to be analysed.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

### **MAIN SOURCE**

The source of this journal is mainly cited from the play itself, most analyzation will come out of it for its intrinsic values. Elements from the stories provides many information and point of interests to be furtherly analysed in this journal for examples are the unique characters in the story that almost every single one of them provides a support to the main narrative of the story, even the minor ones such as Miss Prism plays a crucial role towards the end of the story. Other things that includes dialogues, or a particular scene will also be used to provide additional information to determine the extrinsic features of the story.

### **ADDITIONAL SOURCE**

The other main focus of this journal is also the way of how the story relates, criticize, or satirize the real-life society at the time, and to understand that, sources that provides information about Victorian England society and characteristics will also be cited in order to truly understand the matter at hand. This particular work of Oscar Wilde just like many of his other works is aimed towards the people of the Victorian age, so information about the said elements will also be provided to increase the historical accuracy.

## **III. DISCUSSION**

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is interestingly fun to be analysed, and it is also interesting to understand how one element affects the other.

### **A. INTRINSIC ELEMENTS ANALYSIS**

*The Importance of Being Earnest* set in the Victorian England towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a time where ideals are valued highly especially for people who are in the middle-upper class. The story focuses on the romantic relationship of two couples, John “Ernest” Worthing with Gwendolen Fairfax, and Algernon “Ernest” Moncrieff with Cecily Cardew. The play opens up with Act 1 where Algernon is playing piano in his flat while his servant, Lane is preparing to welcome Algernon’s Aunt Augusta or also known as Lady Bracknell. Algernon’s friend, Jack Worthing, who distinguished himself as “Ernest” was happy that Gwendolen is coming over. Jack is in love with Gwendolen, Algernon’s cousin, Algernon does not give his consent for Jack unless he told him about Cecily, Jack then revealed that his name is Jack in country, and Ernest in town, and that Cecily is his ward in the country. Long

story short, Jack, or “Ernest” proposed to Gwendolen, who has been longing to marry a man named Ernest, Gwendolen accepted, but her mother does not, John revealed to Lady Bracknell that he was an abandoned baby, Lady Bracknell is a very conservative woman who does not want her only daughter to marry a man not from a respectable family. Algernon on the other hand, after learning about Jack’s imaginary brother and his country home address, went to meet Cecily in disguise as Jack’s long afar brother, Ernest. Algernon is in love with Cecily and proposed to her, she accepted, but just like Gwendolen, Cecily wants to marry a man named Ernest. From this point in the country, Jack is known as Jack, and Algernon is known as Jack’s brother, Ernest. Both men then planned to get christened under the name of Ernest, so they can marry their women, but things went awry when Cecily and Gwendolen met and they learned that they are both engaged to be married to a man named Ernest Worthing. Both Gwendolen and Cecily demands explanation, but the true explanation came from Lady Bracknell instead when she questioned about the abandoned baby to Miss Prism, Miss Prism told the story and Jack learned that the baby was him, Lady Bracknell then revealed that Jack is her sister’s son, meaning that Algernon is in fact Jack’s brother, Lady Bracknell said that Jack was actually named after his father, and his father’s name is Ernest, so Jack’s real name was actually Ernest all along.

The theme of the story is Morality vs Earnestness. The title of the story is as you can tell an intended pun as it tells a story about two men earnestly wanting to become Ernest. While for the theme itself is the way of one’s Earnestness can make them forget about morality, in both men’s life they have their own imagination and pretends in the story, Jack have an imaginary brother named Earnest, and Algernon have an imaginary friend named Bunbury, Jack pretended to be Ernest to marry Gwendolen, and Algernon pretended to be Jack’s brother Ernest to marry Cecily, all this lies and imagination to get social convenience for both of them, these things are also the earnestness by both men two achieve what they wanted, marrying the women they loved.

Each character in the story have their own personality in which contributed to the way the story is narrated, Jack Worthing, the play’s protagonist, is a young responsible yet respectable man, he goes by the name of Ernest in town, despite of his respectable personality, he is a deceitful man, and this affected Algernon, Algernon is a charming and clever young pleasure-seeking bachelor and he sure know how to seize an opportunity when he sees one, after learning about Jack’s true identity, Algernon used it to his advantage to try and marry Cecily Cardew. The ladies, Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew, are almost the same, both are

obsessed with the name “Ernest”, both are very sophisticated and values highly romantic relationship. And Lady Bracknell is a conservative woman who achieved a good life after marrying a good man from a respectable family, and she wouldn’t die before seeing her daughter experiencing the same, she constantly stands in Jack’s way of marrying Gwendolen.

Symbolization plays an important role to the story’s satirical nature, first symbol is the name “Ernest” this name symbolizes the ideals in which the Victorian society believed in, Ernest represent Earnestness, Ernest is the two main men characters earnestness to achieve something they both wanted, this ideal, earnestness is mocked by Wilde as the Victorian society believe this as its one of the topmost ideas, it is sometimes overvalued and led people in believing false earnestness. The handbag is another symbolization that satirized fairy tales or myths that said babies who are meant for greatness are usually abandoned in bag, and in this story, it meant nothing. Lady Bracknell, Lady Bracknell symbolizes the Victorian people, the character of Lady Bracknell satirized how Victorian people of the higher class treat people, near the end of the story, Lady Bracknell denied to give consent to Algy’s marriage with Cecily, but that suddenly changed after she learned about Cecily’s inheritance. The last symbol is christenings, both men characters wanted to be christened just for the sake of marrying a woman, not because of its religious value, christening in this story satirized the societies believes.

## **B. EXTRINSIC AND SOCIAL ISSUE ANALYSIS**

Oscar Wilde was born from a literary family, and he grew up as a flamboyant man who disregards traditional moral or cultural values, he was in fact a hedonist who put his life merely for his talent and his works. His homosexuality made him an enemy of the law at the time, this could be one of the reasons to why he disregarded traditional moral and values. Wilde’s work is bound to be influenced by his personal life, he often criticizes, satirize, or bring up minor issues. In *the Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde criticizes the Victorian society through many satirical symbols.

The Victorian society has also one of the reasons why Wilde wrote this story, at the time, the society were distinguished by classes, and they believed to a certain ideal. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a mockery out of those ideals and how the higher-class people treated each other. For Victorians, finding someone of the right status and temperament was crucial. Love often came afterwards. Choosing a suitable spouse was essential at a time when it was difficult to get out of a marriage. Before 1858, divorce was only available by private Act of

Parliament; even after that date, adultery was the only basis for divorce, and wives had to prove additional aggravating factors, such as desertion or cruelty. This characteristic can be found in Lady Bracknell, the way she constantly gets in a way of her daughter's marriage with Jack, Lady Bracknell questioned about Jack's inheritance because she does not want her daughter to marry a man without a respectable family.

At the beginning of the story, Gwendolen was seemed to be very obedient to her mother, in the Victorian Era, motherhood is a very respectable thing, it even is considered as the highest achievement a woman can get in life, just like the royal family, the higher class family treat parents with utmost respect, so it would only be proper for a daughter to be obedient to her mother, and so did Gwendolen.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of Oscar Wilde's best work, humour, romance, satire, critics is all packed into a 3 act plays in a hilariously unique form. This play is a satire critic for the Victorian people but the message is not only for those in the Victorian Society but to every people of every age. This play is also a mockery of how one's earnestness is sometimes overvalued and overtly done. This play also taught us in a way to be authentic "I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy."

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