

Major Themes in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Manners and Sincerity

The major target of Wilde's scathing social criticism is the hypocrisy that society creates. Frequently in Victorian society, its participants comported themselves in overly sincere, polite ways while they harbored conversely manipulative, cruel attitudes. Wilde exposes this divide in scenes such as when Gwendolen and Cecily behave themselves in front of the servants or when Lady Bracknell warms to Cecily upon discovering she is rich. However, the play truly pivots around the word "earnest." Both women want to marry someone named "Ernest," as the name inspires "absolute confidence"; in other words, the name implies that its bearer truly is earnest, honest, and responsible. However, Jack and Algernon have lied about their names, so they are not really "earnest." But it also turns out that (at least in Jack's case) he was inadvertently telling the truth. The rapid flip-flopping of truths and lies, of earnestness and duplicity, shows how truly muddled the Victorian values of honesty and responsibility were.

Dual Identities

As a subset of the sincerity theme (see above), Wilde explores in depth what it means to have a dual identity in Victorian society. This duality is most apparent in Algernon and Jack's "Bunburying" (their creation of an alter ego to allow them to evade responsibility). Wilde hints that Bunburying may cover for homosexual liaisons, or at the very least serve as an escape from oppressive marriages. Other characters also create alternate identities. For example, Cecily writes correspondence between herself and Ernest before she has ever met him. Unlike real men, who are free to come and go as they please, she is able to control this version of Ernest. Finally, the fact that Jack has been unwittingly leading a life of dual identities shows that our alter egos are not as far from our "real" identities as we would think.

Critique of Marriage as a Social Tool

Wilde's most concrete critique in the play is of the manipulative desires revolving around marriage. Gwendolen and Cecily are interested in their mates, it appears, only because they have disreputable backgrounds (Gwendolen is pleased to learn that Jack was an orphan; Cecily is excited by Algernon's "wicked" reputation). Their shared desire to marry someone named Ernest demonstrates that their romantic dreams hinge upon titles, not character. The men are not much less shallow—Algernon proposes to the young, pretty Cecily within minutes of meeting her. Only Jack seems to have earnest romantic desires, though why he would love the self-absorbed Gwendolen is questionable. However, the sordidness of the lovers' ulterior motives is dwarfed by the priorities of Lady Bracknell, who epitomizes the Victorian tendency to view marriage as a financial arrangement. She does not consent to Gwendolen's marriage to Jack on the basis of his being an orphan, and she snubs Cecily until she discovers she has a large personal fortune.

Idleness of the Leisure Class and the Aesthete

Wilde good-naturedly exposes the empty, trivial lives of the aristocracy-good-naturedly, for Wilde also indulged in this type of lifestyle. Algernon is a hedonist who likes nothing better than to eat, gamble, and gossip without consequence. Wilde has described the play as about characters who trivialize serious matters and solemnize trivial matters; Algernon seems more worried by the absence of cucumber sandwiches (which he ate) than by the serious class conflicts that he quickly smoothes over with wit. But Wilde has a more serious intent: he subscribes to the late-19th-century philosophy of aestheticism, espoused by Walter Pater, which argues for the necessity of art's primary relationship with beauty, not with reality. Art should not mirror reality; rather, Wilde has said, it should be "useless" (in the sense of not serving a social purpose; it is useful for our appreciation of beauty). Therefore, Algernon's idleness is not merely laziness, but the product of someone who has cultivated an esteemed sense of aesthetic uselessness.

Farce

The most famous aspect of Oscar Wilde's literature is his epigrams: compact, witty maxims that often expose the absurdities of society using paradox. Frequently, he takes an established cliché and alters it to make its illogic somehow more logical ("in married life three is company and two is none"). While these zingers serve as sophisticated critiques of society, Wilde also employs several comic tools of "low" comedy, specifically those of farce. He echoes dialogue and actions, uses comic reversals, and explodes a fast-paced, absurd ending whose implausibility we overlook because it is so ridiculous. This tone of wit and farce is distinctively Wildean; only someone so skilled in both genres could combine them so successfully.

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