**The Importance of Being Earnest:**

Oscar Wilde’s play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, expresses ideas regarding Victorian society’s disparity between ideals and reality. Wilde uses these themes to illustrate the lost perspectives of what is important and what is foolishness, upper-class society’s lies and deceit, and the hypocrisy represented within love and marriage. These themes also have applications within modern society; so hopefully you will leave this talk a bit wiser.

Augusta clearly displays a skewed understanding of what is important, devaluing a man’s health below her dinner party’s smooth operation. When berating Algernon, she affirms that Bunbury should quickly decide “whether he was going to live or die”, as Algernon was required to arrange the dinner’s music and ensure even tables. Here, Augusta displays incredible foolishness, deciding life and death as though she were choosing her day’s outfit. She feels anger towards a supposedly deathly-ill man, simply for his disadvantageous illness. Even more foolish is Augusta’s further rationalisation of her anger: “illness… [should not] be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life.” She acts as though Mr Bunbury has failed within life by being ill, therefore having forfeited his right to continue living. Through Augusta, Wilde attempted to display, albeit on an extreme level, that high-class Victorians were like spoilt children. Augusta couldn’t understand that there were realistic limits to what she could do, as her subjection to constant pampering had stripped her of understanding what truly was important. And so, when she didn’t get her way, she arrogantly attempted to blame others.

Likewise, within modern society we often lose sight of what is important. The adage is “work hard, play hard.” And so, people will work for eight plus hours daily, fuelled by fantastic ideals of coming home to play with kids, or enjoy hobbies. In reality, these people return home so tired that they barely have time for kids, instead plonking down at the tv to slowly decompose their minds. Modern society values earning money so highly that those things which truly are important, like caring for family, are made of secondary importance. Therefore, Oscar Wilde’s ideas are highly relevant; modern society’s foolish, dogged pursuit of earning money has made us lose sight of reality, and that which truly is important.

Oscar Wilde also displays ideas regarding upper-class society’s constant deceit, exemplified through Jack, who created his alter-ego Ernest to escape his oppressive lifestyle. When Algernon uncovers Jack’s deceit, he calls him a fellow “Bunburyist”, the man whom Algernon created to avoid his own unpleasant lifestyle. When pressed, Jack reveals the reason behind his deceit; he finds the high-class Victorian ideals to which he professes following oppressive, restricting him to adopting a “very high moral tone on all subjects.” Through Jack, Wilde comments on how although high-class Victorians profess to follow societal morals and ideals, they really don’t. In fact, Jack engages in such constant deceit that it becomes second nature for him, shown by the difficulty which he had in telling Cecily the truth about his “brother” Ernest. And when his lies are discovered, Jack continues to act as though nothing has changed, still professing his adherence to Victorian ideals.

Similarly, modern society places oppressive ideals upon celebrities and the wealthy. With millions of teenagers and adults idolising them, the bar of responsibility is set incredibly high. Celebrities are expected to follow each era’s cultural ideologies to a tee, spouting only politically correct, left-leaning ideas. After all, they must possess a “high moral tone on all subects”. But when celebrities stray from liberal ideas, they are immediately turned upon by the media. This was recently seen with Kanye West, who has received unfair amounts of backlash for supporting the right-wing and unpopular Donald Trump. Although all celebrities profess having these “high moral tones”, this is simply a front displayed towards the media. In actuality, celebrities are much more likely to suffer from panic attacks, substance abuse disorders, suicidal thoughts, sex addiction and deviant sexual behaviour than you or me! [[1]](#footnote-1) Hence, Oscar Wilde’s ideas regarding deceit are highly relevant!

Oscar Wilde also displays themes of hypocrisy within love and marriage, which are perceived differently by older and younger generations within the play. The older generation, like Augusta, think of marriage as a way of bettering your social standing. For example, Augusta only becomes fully interested in Cecily’s proposal to Algernon upon hearing of Cecily’s fortune, after which she states “Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her.” Now Cecily is eligible, as she has qualities which “improve with time”. The younger generation, however, falsely believe they are interested in love, although they never actually try breaking the rules to achieve that. Jack would have let Gwendolen go if Augusta didn’t approve, even though he professed that he “loved” her. Through this, Wilde displays his ideas regarding hypocrisy within love and marriage. Marriage is for money and status, and love is meaningless!

This hypocrisy is still rampant nowadays, with people marrying each other under professions of ‘true love’. In reality, most marriages occur due to infatuation; one person sees another as physically, sexually or monetarily attractive and therefore naturally feels attracted. Of course, this infatuation is incredibly temporary, explaining why marriages nowadays last only 9 years on average[[2]](#footnote-2). This is especially obvious within celebrity culture. For example \*cough cough\*: Kris Humphries and Kim Kardashian spend $10mill on their self-described “fairy-tale wedding.” Then not even 10 weeks later they state: “After careful consideration, we have decided to end our marriage.”[[3]](#footnote-3) So much for “till death do us part”. And yet, people still profess these ideals of true love to one another, although what they really mean is “I find you good-looking”.

So, these three themes represent Oscar Wilde’s ideas of separation between ideals and reality. How can you take these themes to heart within your own lives? Well, you should try to evaluate the true importance of things. Attempt to humanise those you idolise. And remember, don’t fool yourself, because infatuation isn’t love.

*-999 words*

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1. Elaine Yau, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. H, Benson, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marie Claire, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)