The Importance of Being Ernest Oral

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Shakespeare himself said, “expectation is the root of all heartache” (Denham, 2016). In his play, *The Importance of Being Ernest,* Oscar Wilde criticises Victorian society by accentuating the gaps between Victorian expectations and the reality of Victorian society, by developing themes about deceit, lies and the shallowness of appearances. Many of Wilde’s criticisms are relevant to today and reveal to us how in many ways, there is inconsistency between our society’s expectations and reality.

One theme that Wilde uses to highlight the difference between Victorian standards and reality is the theme of deceit which demonstrates his frustration with the shallowness of Victorian morals and their obsession with appearances. This theme is developed by the characters Algernon and Jack who lie to make their lives easier but really complicate them and show the morals that they outwardly promote to be very shallow. Algernon and Jack both lie about their identities and go by the name of Ernest. Jack has a mischievous brother called Ernest and Algernon and invalid friend called Bunbury both of whom conveniently require Jack and Algernon’s help. This allows the gentleman to avoid duties like family dining and being a good example to charges, allowing them to do more pleasurable activities like escaping to town while maintaining a respectable reputation. This becomes more evident when Jack and Algernon do not, nor are expected to, feel guilty about their deceit as they justify it by saying they did it for the women they love and not for their own pleasure and gain (shmoop, 2008). Wilde uses these characters to show that people in Victorian society only valued morals when it benefited them and secretly abandon morals where they can cover it with lies, to maintain appearances.

Wilde’s criticisms about Victorian deceit and lies to maintain a reputations, can be applied to modern society. Today, our society encourages people to weave deceiving appearances through social media. Facebook and Instagram are devoted to individuals **promoting** themselves. Today cool is the new respectable and to this people devote much time, money and attention to maintaining that appearance.

Wilde further contrasts Victorian **ideals** with **real** Victorian society through the exaggerated theme about the importance of appearances which he disagrees with as your appearance does not necessarily reflect your character. These hyperboles show the **pointless** Victorian emphasis on proper appearances because, as Wilde believes, because it does not determine one’s character. Jack, for example is concerned about being “correctly garbed” in black for the funeral and white for the christening and declares Algernon to be always overdressed. Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell’s outfits in the play are extremely overstated with bright colours, elaborate embroidery and ridiculous hats leading them to resemble Christmas trees. They would believe that their lavish dressing would make them look more respectable, partly because it showed their wealth and status which Lady Bracknell, who is the play’s authority on proper Victorian standards, was particularly obsessed with. Lady Bracknell shows her belief in the importance of appearances when she dismisses Cecily as an appropriate match for her nephew, purely based on appearances. When discovering that Cecily is a wealthy heiress, she decides Cecily is quite pretty but needs improvement. She says, “we live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces... Your dress is sadly simple and your hair seems almost as nature might have left it. But we can soon alter that… There are distinct social possibilities in your profile.” Not **once** does she question Cecily’s character. Rather, she is concerned about how well Cecily’s wealth can be reflected in her appearance as to whether the marriage is fitting. These examples show how Victorian society placed strong emphasis on appearances and how wearing the right things was considered symbolic of your good manners, social status and implied a good character. Wilde mock’s this concept through Lady Bracknell’s outrageous ideals to show that being judged by one’s wardrobe rather than character is a very prejudiced approach. This approach is **still** encouraged in society with fashions people are expected to follow to have a cool reputation. The amount of money spent on the most coveted brands, body building, sun-tans, plastic surgery, and excessive makeup is testimony to this. A recent survey showed, in their life, American women spend roughly $300 000, solely on their face (Denton, 2017). This undeniably proves that modern society, just like the extravagant Victorian upper class, places extreme and unreasonable value on an individual’s appearance.

This principle of appearances determining the character can also be applied our churches. Some would wear a suit and tie and other may not and this can unfortunately lead to judging people’s appearance as a measure of their morals. As is Wilde’s point, appearances and background can have very little to do with one’s character and therefore it is foolish for society to place so much weight and judgement on appearances.

Thus, Wilde uses shows to us what he believes to be the flaws in Victorian society, using themes about appearances and deceit, that appearances cannot be used to judge a person’s character. We can use Wilde’s criticisms as a warning to us today to not be so shallow as to only be concerned with surfaces and reputation but to explore true character and morals. Let’s not dress to impress, but instead be true to ourselves and forget the charade.

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