*The Importance of Being Earnest,* a play by Oscar Wilde, regards the complex societal ideals within the Victorian era. The themes of hypocrisy, duality, and the upper-class societal values are displayed through the marriages within the play. Furthermore, these themes are also observed within modern-day society; with this all said, I hope that you can reflect upon these themes and understand its problematic effect on modern society.

Wilde displays the theme of hypocrisy through Jack’s characteristics, as he belabours Algernon for using the same sneaky scheme that he undertook to win his fiancée’s heart. Whilst criticizing Algernon, Jack affirms that “I won’t have any Bunburying here”, as he discovers Algernon’s devious plan to create a fake identity as an excuse to visit Jack’s countryside residency. Here, Jack depicts his hypocritical characteristics as he himself is “Bunburying” as an excuse to socialise with Gwendolen. Although Algernon clearly states that Jack is a fellow “Bunburyist”, Jack argues that Algernon is “deceiving” and his actions were “inexcusable”, thus depicting that Jack is blind to his own hypocrisy due to his selfish characteristics. Furthermore, when Jack’s alter-ego is discovered by Gwendolen, he places all responsibilities of the unsatisfactory situation on Algernon, even though he himself was the one to blame for his deceitful actions. Therefore, through Jack’s actions, Wilde displays his views on the problematic aspects of hypocrisy; hypocrisy blinds a man from taking responsibility for his own actions.

Similarly, this issue is still relevant in modern society. This can be seen through the similar actions of Jack and President Trump, as they both impose a moral standard on others. However, as soon as that same standard is imposed on them, they withhold accountability. This is substantiated within Trump’s hypocritical arguments as he states that, "The World Trade Center came down during the reign of George Bush”, implying that Bush should’ve taken liability for 9/11 (Gluek, 2016). However, when journalists question Trump’s responsibility and actions of handling the integral national health, against COVID-19, he simply states, “I don’t take responsibility at all” (Oprysko, 2020). Furthermore, Trump isn’t the only one displaying hypocrisy as the Trump administration is supported by over 80 million Twitter followers. His large following are complicit with Trump’s arguments, thus condoning his hypocrisy as they ‘blindly’ accept Trump’s statements (trackalytics, 2020). Thus, Oscar Wilde’s themes of hypocrisy are relevant in modern society.

Oscar Wilde also displays themes of the inconsequential societal values upheld by the upper-class, depicted by Aunt Augusta’s belabouring of Jack’s social status. Soon after Jack’s proposal, Aunt Augusta interrogates Jack to determine his worthiness for marriage as she investigates his social status. This depicts Aunt Augusta’s twisted understanding of what is truly important, valuing Jack’s character below his social status. Furthermore, when enquiring about Jack’s parent’s she is told, “I’ve lost both my parents” and, totally oblivious to Jack’s emotions, she replies, “to lose both looks like carelessness”. Instead of sympathising with Jack’s loss, Aunt Augusta insists that Jack should “make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent of either sex”, thus clearly depicting that Aunt Augusta prioritises social status over Jack’s emotions and character. Because of this, Jack feels oppressed due to the Victorian so-called “high moral tones” as he is not acknowledged as an individual but rather a ‘stepping stone’ to uplift Aunt Augusta’s social status. This displays Wilde’s criticism of the upper-class Victorian societal standards as they’ve lost sight of “the importance of being earnest”. This is substantiated through Augusta’s profound devotion and earnestness to upholding these Victorian values, instead of being ardent to a moral value that is truly important.

Likewise, modern society also upholds wrong perceptions of what is truly important. This is substantiated by the upper-class’s discernment of relationships as 88% of the affluent view building ‘power relationships’ as a key factor in a sustainable relationship (Corley, 2020). These ‘power relationships’, like Aunt Augusta’s idea of relationships, are also founded on the basis of wealth and success. Thus, the upper-class society prioritises financial gain over personality, morals and beliefs. Moreover, through the ever-growing power of social media, affluent society has influenced millions through publicly displaying their personal life. This induces society to uphold the same societal values of the upper-class as the perception is created that the method of obtaining high social status is to live ‘the upper-class way of life’. Thus, Wilde’s criticism of the Victorian societal standards is still relevant within modern society.

All in all, these themes visualise Wilde’s concepts of problematic aspects within the upper-class Victorian society. From these themes, his message can be applied intergenerationally in order to educate us: to take accountability of our actions, to avoid hypocrisy, and to be earnest about what truly is important. Thus, we should all take these messages to evaluate ourselves and to better ourselves as individuals within society.

Thank you…

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