The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde’s play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* pokes fun at the hypocrisy in the late Victorian Era, and people’s over-idealistic, unrealistic expectations for marriage. These themes still have continued relevance in today’s world.

The protagonist of the play, Jack Worthing, is a wealthy, upper-class young man who lives in the country. He’s named “Jack” in the country but goes by the name “Earnest” in the city. When asked about his double life, he says, “A high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness, in order to get up to town I’ve always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Earnest.” In reality, Jack has no regard for morality. However, since high moral standards are expected from the Victorian Era upper class, Jack, because of his prestigious identity and duties, must be cautious in his behaviours to maintain a flawless, virtuous image to his ward and public. As a result, Jack chooses to lead a double life, so he can pretend to value the idea of earnestness, meanwhile, be able to escape responsibilities to do what he wants to do. By highlighting the inconsistency in Jack’s behaviours, Wilde is criticising the hypocrisy demonstrated by the Victorian Era upper class to maintain their appearance of respectability.

In today’s world, hypocrisy is made easier by the Internet and social media. While platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook provide an awesome medium for people to capture and share moments of their life, connect with friends and meet new people; at the same time, they’re platforms where people can put on a mask and pretend to be someone they’re not, without consequences. This is quite prevalent among social media personalities; they post content that portrays them as moral, kind-hearted people. For example, in response to the death of George Floyd, many social media users posted a black square to declare their stand against racism. Although the “Black Lives Matter” campaign and the motives of most supporters are well-intended, some so-called “supporters” of the movement are simply posting the black square in their feed for the sake of looking righteous and kind-hearted in front of their followers. Meanwhile, in reality, they aren’t willing to take actions to counter racism. This resembles Jack’s practice of using excuses to make himself look virtuous and highly noble. Sadly, a major part of the society is blinded by these fabricated images and fall attracted to Internet personalities because of their pretended kind-heartedness and shiny lifestyle, when none of it is true.

While the anonymity of the Internet enables people to pretend to be someone they’re not, to display fake, pleasant images of themselves, the Internet also discloses their dark, evil side under a hidden identity. For example, one could apply moral ethics in their life on a daily basis, act responsibly, and appear that they value the idea of earnestness. However, in the online world, they could behave very differently than they would in real life. An example is cyberbullying, a growing problem among teenagers that has caused increased self-harm and suicide rates among young people. Just like Jack who lives a double life in the city and the country, under an anonymous online identity, one could secretly post hateful, harassing comments that will hurt the feelings of people who see them. Meanwhile, their offline identity wouldn’t be affected by their outrageous online behaviours. Today, cyberbullying has surpassed common types of physical harassment and verbal harassment at school.[[1]](#footnote-1) This shows that many people, although courteous in their day-to-day life, feel like they can desert basic decency and hide behind the Internet to do something wrong. In a way, these people are similar to Jack and Algernon, who hide behind their excuses and disguise to escape social responsibility to do something else they want to do.

In the play, characters hold unrealistic beliefs about love and marriage. For example, Gwendolen and Cecily both value the surface quality of their future spouses over personal virtues; they’re both obsessed to marry a man called “Earnest” because the name “inspires absolute confidence”. They say they can hardly imagine marrying a man with any other name and are too stubborn to alter their unrealistic ideals about marriage. Using this example, Wilde is criticising the common misconception during the Victorian Era that one’s surface qualities are representative of their character.

These aspects are still relevant in today’s society. With the influence of mainstream media such as movies, music and reality TV bachelor show, many people have a misguided perception that love is a mutual attraction that happens spontaneously at first sight. In reality, these people, like Cecily and Gwendolen, are purely attracted to surface qualities, such as appearance. A relationship like this quickly falls apart as both people fail to live up to the pre-conceived, over-idealistic expectations from their partner. The data from 2018 shows that the average marriage in Australia is about 12.3 years, while 1 in 3 marriages end in divorce. This shows that the misguided expectations that society had for marriage and love in the Victorian Era are still prevalent for people today.

In conclusion, the aspects of hypocrisy and marriage explored in *The Importance of Being Earnest* remain relevant to this day. With the invention of the Internet, hypocrisy has gotten much easier when it’s practised behind a screen, instead of in person. On the other hand, many people today feel longings for love and partnership. However, many of them fail to maintain a relationship because of their false, over-idealistic beliefs about love and marriage.

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# Bibliography

Gordon, S. (2019). *More Kids Are Cyberbullied Than Are Bullied*. [online] Verywell Family. Available at: https://www.verywellfamily.com/how-common-is-cyberbullying-4570942.

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