**THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST**

**YEAR 12 ENGLISH ASSIGNMENT**

Throughout the 1895 play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the author, Oscar Wilde, judiciously utilises specific themes and ideas pertaining to morality, hypocrisy, marriage and the importance of being earnest, in order to criticise the palpable division between ideals and reality in Victorian society. In addition, whilst this satirical play ridicules societal customs and behaviours in the Victorian Era, various aspects of the play have retained relevance even in today’s society.

To begin with, Wilde endeavours to critique the aspects of morality and theme of hypocrisy prevalent in Victorian society, throughout his play. Wilde chooses to ridicule the Victorian ideal which regards morality as a rigid body of rules that exists to determine what people should and shouldn’t do, in order to be considered acceptable in society. The essence of this is captured by aristocrat, Algernon Moncrieff, when, subsequently to Jack stating that reading private cigarette cases is “ungentlemanly”, he declares, “It is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should and shouldn’t read – more than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read.” This clearly demonstrates the extent of the restrictions which Victorian society enforced upon its people in order to present them ‘earnest’ and ‘acceptable’ to society. The irony of this concept is evident as this approach of an impractical strict moral code proved much too austere for everyone, no matter what class, to conform to and therefore, resulted in discouraging people from truly being earnest. Wilde effectively communicates this approach to be futile and instead, indicates the vital importance in realising that in order for people to be truly acceptable in society, they need to do it for the right reason: because they want to be good people. Next, unable to conform to the impractical expectations of society, people resorted to the base quality of hypocrisy through the formation of individual façades to present an outward appearance of acceptability to society, whilst hiding their hearts from view. This attribute is evident in each characters’ idiosyncrasies with Jack Worthing masquerading as Earnest in the country and Algernon Moncrieff creating the fictional character, Bunbury, to obscure the objectionable aspects of their lifestyles. Wilde clearly presents this deceitful hypocrisy, all with the pretence of being ‘earnest’, as strongly antagonistic to the intrinsically good quality of being earnest. He clearly exemplifies the Victorian society’s error in setting the acceptable standard for society impossibly high and implies that as the acknowledgement of human failings or the aspect of forgiveness is virtually non-existent, the society was setting itself up for failure. These aspects of moral constraints and hypocrisy are still relevant in society today, as humans will always endeavour to be seen as acceptable in the eyes of others in society. Though morality may not be stringently viewed from the same perspective as being a strict set of rules, appearances remain to be one of society’s leading pressures, and therefore hypocrisy is also prevalent. A clear example of this can be seen in social media, a powerful influence with an estimated 3.5 billion users worldwide[[1]](#footnote-1). Social media possesses an unprecedented world presence with its immensely popular platforms designed to allow people to present a façade to society in order to deflect its unrealistic expectations and supplement the aspects of their lives which reflect positively on themselves. Thus, it is evident that Wilde’s effective criticism of themes prevalent in Victorian society are valid and remain both relevant and prevalent in modern society.
Subsequently, a theme concerning the nature of marriage is also critiqued by Wilde throughout his play. Ignorantly viewed by Victorian society as a venture only for personal gain, Wilde clearly demonstrates their distinct lack of love and sincerity, key aspects of a successful marriage. This is evident throughout the play, with marriage negligently described as “business” and divorces said to be “made in heaven”. This is compounded by the shallowness demonstrated by Victorian society in terms of seeking a spouse, as the key qualities sought after involved: wealth, background, societal standing, class and heritage – again another reference to the fundamental misapplication in Victorian society of marriage, where their preference is for superficiality over sincerity, respectable outward appearances over far more valuable internal characteristics. This is exemplified in the play where both Cecily and Gwendolen choose to marry Jack and Algernon primarily based on their pseudonym of Earnest which they obliviously declare: “Inspires absolute confidence”. It seems that Victorian society valued being named Earnest over actually being earnest, in an ironic display emphasising their ignorance of the once-admirable quality. The foolishness is furthered by Victorian society’s attempt to enforce their own marital concepts through the use of various societal obstacles designed to prevent people from marrying primarily for love. This can be seen clearly using the instance of class, with Augusta grilling Jack with various almost-trivial questions centred around his background, current standing, finances, assets and seemingly insignificant habits in order to determine whether he was “worthy” to marry her daughter Gwendolen. Through all of this, Wilde endeavours to communicate that this self-inflicted issue with which Victorian society struggled concerning the application of selfish marital attitudes, came as a result of their focus and perspective in marriage. Divergently from their perspective concerning emphasis on what each spouse attains from their marriage, the focus needed to be shifted to what each spouse can give the other in order to bring the selfless, loving aspects of marriage to the fore. Sadly, this predicament remains to be both relevant and prevalent in modern society with marriages often being made hastily as a result of skewed predilections for other somewhat superfluous matters aside from love itself. Whilst marrying for love is encouraged to a much higher degree in modern society than it was at the time of Wilde’s play, often it is not the underlying motive for the constitution of a marriage. As a result of this, the median duration of marriage in Australia is only 12.3 years,[[2]](#footnote-2) highlighting the continual shallowness of affection and devotion in society, along with the distinct lack of true love regardless of the vows pledged at their wedding. This confirms Wilde’s philosophies concerning the vital significance of love and the importance of ensuring love is the primary motivating factor in any marriage. Thus, it is evident that Wilde’s adroit ridicule of themes common in Victorian society are both relevant and ubiquitous in modern society.

In conclusion, it is clear to see that throughout his play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, author Oscar Wilde effectively utilises specific themes and ideas concerning morality, hypocrisy, marriage and the importance of being earnest, to criticise the obvious disparity that existed between ideals and reality in Victorian Society. It is also evident that, whilst the playwas first performed in 1895, the principal philosophies behind Wilde’s satirical piece have retained relevance in modern society and are, thus, still of critical import today.

**Reference List**

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1. [Mohsin, 2020] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)