

A quest for freedom in the Victorian age: Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnes*

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Abstract

Oscar Wilde known for his unrestrained passion for freedom created the present drama under study. Set during the Victorian age that was well-known for its restrained and restricted view of life, Wilde used it as a background for his drama *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Equally well-known was Wilde's philosophy regarding the aesthetic movement that was raging during his period. "Art for art's sake" was Wilde's punch line and this is what put him in league literary stalwarts such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Arthur Symons and Walter Pater. Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* portrays the hypocrisy and the double standards that were inherently found during the Victorian era. The Victorian era known for its immoral stance was nevertheless was quite notorious for the interplay of morality and immorality. The immoral character of the Victorian era was however, well cloaked. It is this contradictory nature of the era that Wilde attempts to portray especially in his social comedies such as *The Importance of Being Earnest* by adding the following subtitle: *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*. The present study aims to capture the morality versus immorality stance that is flagrantly flaunted by many a character in Wilde's work *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Keywords: Emancipation, restrictions, hypocrisy, immoral, deprived nature

1. Introduction

It is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy, and it has its philosophy. that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things in life with sincere and studied triviality. (Pearson xiv)

So says Oscar Wilde in an interview that was conducted just before the first showing of his comic drama *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Critics the world over agree to disagree about the intentions behind Wilde's creation of this drama. While there are some critics who believe that Wilde was making an effort to reveal or "come out of the closet" as it is called in common parlance, and declare his homosexual tendencies during an era that considered such practices as deviant, there are other critics who perceive that Wilde had created this drama as a commentary about the so-called social life that was inundated with highly dubious moral practices and activities during the Victorian era.

Though the work appears to be quite superficial, upon closer reading, one gets to see the underlying high seriousness of Wilde's philosophy. Wilde's writing depicts the conglomeration of various influences and how this coming together of the influences effected his literary production is quite an interesting aspect because of the highly eclectic nature of these influences. Factors such as an epicurean belief system, the romanticism in John Keats' romanticism, Walt Whitman's individualism, Charles Dickens' social-consciousness and the objectivism of Samuel Johnson can be seen in the way he pen's his literary works, be it poetry, drama, novel, short story or even an essay.

One can go so far and claim that Wilde's work is partially autobiographical in nature and that one can also occasionally

see elements of his personal life being reflected in his works. However, one also realizes that one does not need to be acquainted with his personal life in order to enjoy and analyze his works. While studying Wilde's work one can see how a society gains the power to motivate an artist into providing a commentary regarding the ills that might be plaguing the aforementioned society. However, when seen from the context of the era it was situated in it is easy to understand why there was a denial to place this work among other serious writers of Wilde's era. Wilde and his works were never accorded a place in the main stream British literary world probably because of his unconventional personal life. In order to comprehend Wilde one needs to focus one's attention onto his biography. This Ireland born master story teller was the son of the renowned doctor in Dublin, Sir William. Wilde studied classics in Dublin and later moved to Oxford, England to further his education at Oxford University with the help of a scholarship. It was at Oxford that he began his association with aesthetics with the help of John Ruskin and William Pater and this association led to the formation of what will later bear fruit and become known as the theory of aesthetics. The influence of Pater is not one that can be ignored, since Wilde himself commented in Pater's work, entitled, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) that:

It is my Golden Book; I never travel anywhere without it. But it is the very flower of decadence; the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written. (1686)

Wilde's fledgling notions of aesthetics took strong root with Wilde finishing his graduation and going to London, wherein he began interacting with literary giants such as George Bernard Shaw and William Butler Yeats. It was here that

Wilde proactively began his “art for art’s sake” and grounded his philosophy on poets ranging from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Algernon Charles Swinburne and finally to John Keats.

The controversial nature of Wilde’s works can best be perceived in the manner in which he talks about England and all that was wrong in such a country. Wilde was of the opinion that “to disagree with three fourths of all England on all points of view is one of the first elements of sanity.”

The importance of Being Earnest, a play that consists of three acts begins with an exchange that takes place between the two main male characters, Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing in London. The intention behind Worthing’s visit is revealed by Worthing himself and the reader then gets to know that Worthing has come to reveal his intent to marry Moncrieff’s cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax. Subsequently, Moncrieff gets to know about Cecily Cardew, Worthing’s ward, who lives with him in Hertfordshire.

It is at this juncture that the main element of the drama is divulged to the reader/ audience. One gets to know about the parentage of Worthing when Algernon confronts him about the names engraved in Worthing’s cigarette case, Ernest and Cecily.

Worthing reveals that he has been living a double life; that of a responsible and land-owning mature man in the country and as having a rake of a brother in London called Ernest, who is constantly in trouble. Worthing’s intention behind the fabrication of a brother is to give himself a chance to be in London as a cover to show the world that he is making every effort to help his wayward brother. The fabricated brother is depicted as being irresponsible, fun-loving and totally unbound by strict rules of the upper class’s snobbery in the Victorian era. A firm believer of noblesse oblige, Worthing probably believes that it would be detrimental to the wellbeing of his ward and thus hides his fun loving and adventurous facet of his life by creating a make-belief brother.

Worthing also tells Algernon that Cecily is the granddaughter of the man who had adopted him and that he personally responsible for her well-being. Worthing then tells Algernon about what he has in store for his make-belief brother and that he plans on killing him, since Cecily had been very curious about him. However, the manner in which Worthing talks about the eighteen year old Cecily triggers Algernon’s interest. Algernon too tells Worthing about his so-called sickly friend Bunbury, and how he uses Bunbury to get out of engagements that he has no interest in.

Lady Augusta Bracknell, Algernon’s aunt enters the stage along with Gwendolen Fairfax and a conversation about a party sometime in the near future and the kind of music that they would need for the party occupies their attention. Considering these favourable circumstances, Worthing calling himself Ernest pledges his undying love for Gwendolen and asks for her hand in marriage. Gwendolen too seems eager enough to marry Worthing as she claims that she had always wanted to marry a man named Earnest. The pretentiousness of the upper class is quite humorous and one gets to see how superficial and shallow women during the Victorian era were. Though Wilde’s narration is quite exaggerated the essence of the Victorian era does sound true. Worthing’s name and his so-called shady past entice Gwendolen into rebelling and going against her mother’s wishes. One also gets the feeling that Gwendolen is only attracted to Worthing because she understands that she might never be allowed to get married to

him and it is probably be the forbidden aspect of the relationship that appeals to her. Gwendolen’s answer to Worthing’s proposal is a case in point.

The story of your romantic origin, as related to me by mamma, with unpleasant comments, has naturally stirred the deeper fibres of my nature. Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination. The simplicity of your character makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me. Your town address at the Albany I have. (26)

When Lady Bracknell gets to know about Worthing’s and Gwendolen’s relationship, she is vehemently against their union since Worthing does not have a family nor does he have any recollection of ever having a family and that as a child he was in fact found abandoned in a handbag at Victoria Station. It is here that Gwendolen tells Worthing that even if she does get married to any other man she vows to be “eternally devoted” only to him. (26)

Act two unfolds in Hertfordshire with an exchange between the governess, Miss. Prism and her ward, Cecily who does not attend the German classes as she is told to by her guardian, Worthing. One also gets to know about the fact that at one point in her life, Miss. Prism had written a novel, which goes to prove that she had indeed quite a colourful past and was not always merely a boring old spinster that one usually associates with the term “governess”.

Canon Frederick Chasuble, the rector pays a visit to the manor and takes Miss. Prism for a walk, since she says that she has quite a severe headache. Here, one again comes across the not so subtle hint that one usually associates with headaches and Wilde is probably suggesting that there is a sexual connotation with regards to Miss. Prism and the rector. What is surprising is that the Victorian era is quite commonly associated with repressed wants and desires, especially those that are of a sexual nature. Though there is never a flagrant disregard to morality, the amoral stance is featured largely in this era and this is dealt with skill and expertise in this play.

Cecily is now visited by none other than Algernon, who in the guise of Worthing’s rakish brother, Earnest. However, they too go off for a walk and when Worthing comes to the manor he is greeted by Miss. Prism and the Rector. Tired of his double life, Worthing intends to kill off his imaginary brother, Earnest. Worthing tells them that having caught a “severe chill” and that he had passed away in Paris. However, he is shocked to see Cecily in the company of Algernon, now posing as his brother, Earnest and his bewilderment is seen by Cecily as Worthing’s disapproval of Earnest’s (Algernon’s) depraved life. After having come to this conclusion Cecily implores them to mend their relationship and come to terms with each other’s lives. Left to their own devices Algernon offers his hand in marriage to Cecily and is surprised to know that he and Cecily had been engaged to each other for the past three months, because according to Cecily she had fallen in love with Algernon after learning about him from Worthing.

This morally upright eighteen-year-old girl had fallen in love with a man named Earnest after having heard of him. She had also quite devotedly written in her diary about her pretend proposal, acceptance of the aforesaid proposal, break-up and reconciliation, all of which only goes to show the ludicrous nature of the Victorian era that Wilde wanted to highlight.

To make matters even more complicated, Gwendolen comes to Worthing’s manor and both she and Cecily mistakenly realize that they are in fact in love with the same man, Earnest.

The ladies are joined by Algernon and Worthing and realizing that their game is up decide to re-christen themselves, Earnest in an attempt to appease their ladies.

Act three begins a little later at the same place, Worthing's manor and both Gwendolen and Cecily recover from their disappointment that they had felt when they realized that neither of the two men is actually named Earnest. The play's action reaches its peak in this act with Lady Bracknell coming in pursuit of Gwendolen. Upon entering the manor Lady Bracknell comes to know that Worthing is a guardian to the wealthy Cecily and wants Algernon, her nephew to marry her. She notices Miss. Prism and recognizes her as the servant who went missing at the same time as her infant nephew.

Miss. Prism then tells everyone present that she had left the house with the infant and her novel. She had intended to post the finished manuscript of her novel but had mistakenly placed the infant in the handbag at Victoria Station and the novel in the baby carriage. It is this revelation that clarifies the chaos on stage and the reader/audience come to understand that Worthing is in actuality the elder brother of Algernon. Lady Bracknell, satisfied with Moncrieff's parentage gives her consent to the marriage of Algernon and Cecily. However, Moncrieff refuses to give in until Lady Bracknell gives her consent for the marriage of Gwendolen and Moncrieff. The play ends with Moncrieff getting to know that he was in fact named after his father, General Earnest John Moncrieff, leaving one with the feeling that Gwendolen had indeed gotten what she had wished for.

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