

In Oscar Wilde's, The Importance of Being Earnest, several recurrent themes are explicitly and extravagantly exhibited throughout the text through the use of satire, clever rhetoric, and comical dialogue. These themes do not only apply to the characters of the text; rather, Wilde manipulates these themes to satirize the entire English upper class of the Victorian era. Two particular themes that are most evident in the text are the idea of marriage, and idea of earnestness. The inverted concept of marriage in aristocratic society is exploited through Wilde's various methods of satire. Secondly, the characters are portrayed of having an extreme lack of earnestness. As a result, the play as a whole becomes a satirical comedy that examines the lifestyle of the English upper class through the clever use of these two themes.

The opening act of the play houses a great deal of dialogue dealing with marriage. Each character has his or her own perspective on the idea of marriage; some feel it is a positive thing, while others feel it is quite bland. Wilde satirizes the English upper class through their inverted ideas and point of views on this topic. Algernon and his manservant, Lane, initiate the theme when they begin to discuss the quality of wine in certain households. Algernon learns that "in married households, the champagne is rarely of the first-rate brand" to which he replies "Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?"(1). Right away we are given an indication to

Algernon's view on marriage. Lane, on the other hand, "believe[s] it *is* a very pleasant state". This suggests that the upper class in the Victorian era saw marriage as a political endeavor, whereas the lower class still believed in its romantic significance. Wilde, throughout the rest of the text, exploits this tendency by exaggerating the ridiculousness of the aristocratic perception of marriage. Soon after, Algernon and Jack have a very similar discussion. Algernon learns that Jack has come to propose to Gwendolen. Algernon replies:

Algernon: I thought you had come up for pleasure?...I call that business.

Jack: How utterly unromantic you are!

Algernon: I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If I ever get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact. (3)

which, again, shows his viewpoint on marriage. Algernon goes as far as to say that "divorces are made in Heaven"(3), which is one of the many examples of the inversion of the character's view on marriage. Normally, marriage is viewed as one of the many beautiful and great things in life, where two people are able to express their love for each other not only to the world, but to each other. In the play, however, marriage is simply an obstacle that two must overcome. This inversion of marriage being evil, and divorce being good, is one example of Wilde satirizing the English upper class society's view on marriage. Too often, people in high social and political standings throw marriage around as if it were worth nothing. Even today, celebrities and aristocrats arrange for divorces as if they were a common daily practice. Wilde notices this abnormality in society, and exaggerates it in the underlying theme of this text.

After Jack proposes to Gwendolen and they confront Lady Bracknell about it, another interesting conversation arises. In order for Jack to gain Lady Bracknell's approval for marriage, he must undergo a series of interrogative questions. All of these questions ("Do you smoke", "How old are you", "What is your income", "How many bedrooms", "What are your politics", "Are your parents living" etc.) have nothing to do with whether or not Jack and Gwendolen love each other. In the English upper class society during the Victorian era, it was very common for the marriages to be arranged by the parents, instead of the couple deciding for themselves. By Lady Bracknell saying "An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself"(12), she shows the Victorian way of thinking. However, marriage, in its purest state, should not be a political business deal; instead, it should be a decision between two people who love each other very much. Wilde, again, notices this unnatural tendency, and satirically exploits it through Lady Bracknell's barrage of materialistic questions.

When we are introduced to Cecily, we quickly learn of her position on marriage. She views it as more of a fantasy, as she has already been engaged to "Ernest" (more accurately, Algernon) and then broke of the engagement, before she actually met him in reality. We see a rather comical scene between Gwendolen and Cecily when they are fighting over who has the right to marry Ernest. Of course, they do not know that they are engaged to two totally different people; however, the satirical implication of the scene still holds. Wilde is poking fun at how lightly the two women take the process of engagement. They do not see it as a matter of love; rather, they exhibit feelings of possession and believe that whoever was proposed to first – or most recent – determines who has the right to marry Ernest. This passage suggests a lot about the English upper class and their inverted perceptions of marriage -- it has been devalued and demoralized by the Victorian way of thinking.

The entire Act III consists of Algernon and Cecily, and Jack and Gwendolen trying to sort out the details of their engagements, just as one would "hammer" out a business deal. They

throw the idea of marriage around so lightly, that the scene becomes quite comical, and at the conclusion of the play, the reader is left in awe of how little sincerity is put into the concept of marriage. Wilde uses this lack of sincerity to finally and ultimately satirize the English upper class' view on marriage.

This lack of sincerity - or lack of *earnestness* – is the other main theme of the novel. The characters rarely ever take anything seriously. For instance, Jack and Algernon both have a “second identity” of sorts. Jack pretends to be “Ernest” when he is in the city, and Jack while in the country. Algernon created a fake friend, “Bunbury”, in order to create excuses to get out of tight “scrapes”. The fact that these two men can be so dishonest and act so care-free about it shows the mentality of the English upper class. They do not take anything seriously. Algernon appears to contradict this idea when he says “Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth, you are serious about I haven't got the remotest idea.”(40). However, a sub-theme arises with this statement – hypocrisy. Algernon says he is serious about Bunburying, but Bunbury is not a real person! This paradoxical statement is merely one example of the characters being hypocritical. They say one thing, then soon after they contradict their words with their actions. In this example, Algernon states that one must be serious about something to have any “amusement”. However, Algernon rarely demonstrates any feelings of seriousness or earnestness. This tendency rises in numerous occasions, and Wilde is subtly using this tendency to suggest that the entire aristocratic society is filled with hypocrites.

In addition to this hypocrisy, the characters also exhibit a complete lack of honesty and prefer to lie over telling the truth. Jack says “it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind”. This inversion of truth and lie further suggests the inverted way of life of the Victorian aristocrats, and shows their lack of

earnestness. In entirety, the characters are all consumed in joking around and not taking anything seriously.

Through showing characters that exhibit a severe lack of earnestness and an inverted view of marriage, Wilde successfully manages to satirically exploit the underlying problems with the English upper class.