

Analysis of the 'Importance of Being Earnest'

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Introduction:

The Importance of Being Earnest depicts a scathing critique on Victorian society, especially by elaborating high-levelled satire of its overall values, adopted customs, and expectations. Fabulously depicting the backbone of England society in nineteenth century, the play portrays duality prevalent present in the social fabric. In this context, Wilde identifies flaws in the practices and aspirations of Victorian high society by using satire tone and ironic witticism. Hence, he leaves the final decision on the reader to judge the true essence and worth of values and customs. Undoubtedly, the era was adorned with particular moral codes, social status quo, the rigid hierarchy, and show-off manners of concocted prosperity. The play serves the purpose to highlight artificiality embedded in the overall social fabric (Haesche). So, the depiction of aspirations of characters, expectations of members and shallow values illustrates the mastery of writer. For example, the characters of Lady Bracknell and Jack are the exemplary manifestations, especially the conversation between these two. The lust of power and wealth to show-off ones' prosperity among the members of society is portrayed here. However, the attitude and reaction of some characters like Jack also display the presence of reality in society, though in an oppressed manners. Meanwhile, the play also depicts a unique aspect of comedy carved in particular manner with sophisticated realm. While having deep consideration on clever dialogue, sharp delivery with wit, satirical twists and characters' brilliant exchange of wordplay, Wilde's play falls under the category of high comedy. However, this essay will explore the effective criticism on Victorian high society by Oscar Wilde regarding shallowness of values, satire on adopted customs, and ironic witticism in alliance with sophisticated comedy element. In addition, it will also describe the brief sketches of various characters, their tones, rationale attitudes and overall reflections concerning the play.

Analysis of Act I in the context of Social Setting:

The Act I of "The Importance of Being Earnest" usually revolves around the critique of social settings of Victorian high society along with the expectations of respective members. The play takes the reader directly within the elegant drawing room, the symbolic representation of upper class's luxury ventures. Apparently, it resembles London townhouse of the era. The fascinated neat and clean atmosphere, marvelous decorations, collections of antiques, gorgeous furniture and privileged wealth display are the primary settings. The settings within four walls of a drawing room are basically the depiction of overall society's values, evolved traditions, customs and high-levelled expectations of Victorian upper society. Besides the manifestation of overall environment, the conversation among the characters, their tone and interaction provides the insights of prevailing attitudes in the social

fabric. It shows that the respectability of members is strictly aligned to social status and social codes. Individual place in society is lingered with the social standing in connection with the show-off status quo among the members instead of genuineness.

A closely related analysis is available in [The Importance Of Being Earnest Drama Response](#).

Meanwhile, various themes in play are the backbone which depicts the cleavage of expectations and reality of the members. Hence the contradiction of Victorian society is vivid like in the theme of marriage. Marriage has become the source of financial security, sign of status quo and symbol of connection instead of personal affection and fulfillment of love expressions (Guan). Multiple characters in the play reflect contradictory perspectives regarding marriage. For example, Algernon declares marriage as “demoralizing” tie. As he speaks in Act I to present his thought about marriage as: Then your wife will. You don’t seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none” (Wilde 14). While the females like Gwendolen and Cecily resemble it with love, fake or concocted emotions. Similarly, the social status and the class of individual are the primary realm of recognition and respect. For example, Lady Bracknell is representative of upper class obsessed with hierarchy, status, wealth and family background, etc.

Lady Bracknell; a Brief Character Analysis:

Lady Bracknell is a dominated character in the play I that embodies the symbolic values of Victorian upper class i.e., expectations and social status. She represents social elitism and Wilde masterfully provides the detailed depiction by elaborating criticism and satire. Her criteria are family background, wealth and social potential instead of affection and love. Her main ideology and notion of values is exemplified by her views on marriage and class status which are purely materialistic and rigid. Instead of considering marriage a respectful social institution and contract, she elaborates it a strategic alliance characterized by acquisition of social status. Her insecurities about marriage for not getting the desired goals are commented in the play in a comic way as: “My dear fellow, the truth isn’t quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl” (Wilde 22).

Similarly, the tone of Lady Bracknell represents the hypocrisy of the society in alliance with the high aspirations. Her ideas and words highlight shallowness of Victorian high society along with manifestation of superficiality. Wilde criticizes and satires her actions, notions, views and activities throughout the play. For example, on the confession words of Algernon for not knowing his parents, she exclaimed with hideous way as, “To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness” (Wilde 22). These are the witty assertions that depict the use of witticism by Wilde in the play. Similarly, she is so conscious about the class status that she urges others to act and behave like the aspirations of upper class. Such witty remarks are given by her when she looks at Mr. Worthing, “Mr. Worthing! Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture. It is most indecorous” (Wilde 20).

Character of Jack; a Short Analysis:

In Act I of “The Importance of Being Earnest”, the tone and the character of Jack is displayed through conversation with Lady Bracknell. He is also known as Ernest concerning the play and carries Wilde’s high criticisms on the upper class regarding values, customs and practicality instead of superficiality. During the massive conversation, he occasionally amuses the readers with clever and fast delivery where he vividly exposes the shallowness of Victorian high society. His main purpose is to impress the lady by proving him a compatible suitor for her daughter. That is why, he feels somewhat reluctant, nervous and worried. He tries to answer her questions with precision by sticking to the societal expectations. However, at the same hand he also dares to please her with keen awareness. So, his tone looks very pleasing and inspiring.

Surprisingly, his tone fluctuates between eagerness and nervousness also transfers some amusement. Meanwhile, Wilde satires the upper society while reflecting on the values and customs through the responses of Jack. On giving remarks about the institution of marriage he criticizes the upper class by giving his own viewpoint as, “If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won’t want to know Bunbury” (Wilde 14).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, “The Importance of Being Earnest” by Oscar Wilde is a high-leveled comedy that dares reality based satire and criticism on Victorian upper society. The use of tone, sharp responses, ironic witticisms and dialogues delivery make it a masterpiece that leaves question on the superficial values and customs prevailed in the upper class. In this context, various characters and their tones represent their unique domination either an agent of upper class or critique on social status, family background and aspirations. The depiction of flaws in Victorian society and its echoes in modern society are main interests of the audience. Overall, it is masterpiece piece of social commentary by Wilde.

Work Cited

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