
Morality Of Hypocrisy & Sincerity

At the heels of the satirical Victorian morality delineated through Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a judiciously executed perception directed at society is apparent. To study a text 120 years on, what's the point? At the time Oscar Wilde's satirical view and the way which he composed his judgments on the Victorian society was thought to be quite ahead of its time. Only viewed for the admirable comedy and array of humour? Was the deeper meaning of the hypocrisy accurately received? As critic William Archer alleged in *The World*, "(The play) imitates nothing, represents nothing, is nothing, except a sort of rondo capriccioso, in which the artist's fingers run with crisp irresponsibility up and down the keyboard of life." *The Importance of Being Earnest* was first performed at St James's Theatre, on Valentine's Day and the Victorian aristocratic society seemingly embraced this aesthete's depiction, hailing it the greatest stage comedy of all time. Far from being angered by Wilde's attack on Victorian values, was the Victorian society changed or was the maxim of this satirical outrage/ egregious masked too well? However, as society grasped a profound understanding, the play became recognised as a satirical (mockery through humour) rather than a comical play. Oscar Wilde purposed to highlight issues such as the hypocritical Victorian morality of society and the sincerity which it harnessed. These themes portray Wilde's attitude towards identity development during the Victorian era and the play undoubtedly illustrates Wilde's tenacious views on these themes, through the use of frivolous natured characters, engaging literary devices and aesthetic features.

Society in the Victorian era was evidently characterised for its intense hypocrisy and the strong sense of distorted morality. Perfectly mirrored in the play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the sham seriousness, hypocritical morality and artificial sophistry of the society are cleverly criticised through the implicit characterisation of the deployed characters, familiar to aristocrat audiences. Wilde was a preeminent figure amid Victorian society, being an aesthete, he acquired many aristocratic connections. However, Wilde was able to identify the contradictions in Victorian morals, or more specifically the gap between ideals and behaviour. This may have been a result of his Irish patrimony and high level of education. Evidently, Wilde seems to be making a travesty of the society as a whole, though this is what makes the play satirical as it seems the characters don't even realise what their actions, which is folly in itself. Through subtle introduction of the mimicked characters the audience is to deduce for themselves their characteristics, observing the intriguing thought process, behaviour, speech, verbal style and manner of communication with other characters. Wilde has developed characters which exist entirely on the surface, folly and ill morality are barely words to describe them. One example of Wilde's deplore of society is when Gwendolen is used to represent the contradictory nature of the upper-class through stating, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing". (Pg)1 Well of course our common sense can tell us that Gwendolen has this statement backwards. It is not only our expectation the sincerity takes precedence over style. This line not only encapsulates the genius of the play but also illustrates Wilde is utilizing his characters to expose the extreme hypocrisy of Victorian society. Wilde once again capitalises on his satirical style manipulating society when Algernon declares, "Really if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility." (Pg 296)2 In this section it is evident Wilde was demonstrating the hypocritical nature of the aristocrat Victorian nature, principally when considering their formal

relationships with the lower societal classes, such as the servants in this instance. Was Wilde in scripting a sardonic at the fourfold of the society? Nonetheless, the play seemingly captivated the masses. It is evident that through the use of refined characterisation Wilde had the ability to demonstrate his perspective of the hypocrisy ever so substantial in the Victorian society.

During the Victorian era the reality of a hypocritical society, was more evident than ever. As Wilde once aforesaid, "The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either". (Kloeppel, 2003)³ Wilde's philosophy is strongly evident throughout the play, with his perspective insidiously shaming the hypocrisy of the Victorian era and the sincerity which it bestowed, with the preeminent focus on what society deemed correct and what really possessed this selection of patrician characters. Is it possible Wilde so heavily questioned the attitudes of society, not for comedy as it was believed, but rather to display a much more significant prospect? However, Wilde unmistakably demonstrates that despite being an aesthete himself, he was strongly opposed to the values this denomination exercised. Wilde's ingenious use of his artistic sensibilities, palpable through the extensive use of language devices, he has pointed out the cretinism of building an identity entirely through hypocrisy and the significant sincerity. As Gwendolen proclaims, "We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals" (Pg 10)⁴, this witty line in itself is just one of the many paradoxes Wilde has employed to fustigate the melodramas of the 19th century. Wilde's use of parodies, seems contradictory but presents truth, has a metaliterary tendency. Via imitating and distorting the play, laying bare the conventions, pulling the audience out of the represented world, making them aware of the means and methods of presentation. Wilde also uses inversions of language, including unexpected reversals or clichés and truisms, to develop identities through hypocrisy. Algernon perfectly depicts this remarking, "Divorces are made in Heaven" (Pg 297???)⁵, a version of the cliché, "Marriages are made in Heaven". It would be logical to believe Wilde's inversion aims is to subvert conventional morality. Similarly, during the final act, Wilde once again inverts conventional morality when Jack proclaims it "a terrible thing" (Pg)⁶ for a man to discover that he's been telling the truth all his life. Wilde's craftily structured technique of inverted logic allows stark criticism of the hypocritical Victorian morality, while seemingly still maintaining a satirical context.

Of course, one would never contemplate this idea of hypocrisy to bring forth identity would be seen in our modern-day world. Society was relentlessly pointed out by Wilde for its dictation of right and wrong, despite never actually conforming to these assertions. So, have we changed? Rather, they could just be our cultural norm, oblivious to man. Begin to question the ways of modern-day society it becomes undeniably apparent just how similar to two epochs in time really are. With technology presenting itself as an in expendable factor of life each, day increasingly proves its link with the nostalgia of the past. In our modernistic society there is an accumulation of social networks, enabling individuals to connect around the globe. What are these applications used for you might ask? Well in simplistic terms for influencers and idealist to contrive society by a satirical morality, which they themselves do not fasten to. This insincerity is hypocritical and, in a sense, manipulative. As a former influencer once commented, "Social media is our stage, and our audience is only filled with our claims, which we cannot hold true to", proving the hypocritical nature of our modern culture. In this way, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is just as relevant to contemporary society as it was 120 years prior. Despite this, society today does not appear as it did then, as humanity works towards unity, bringing all together as one.

Ultimately, after 120 years we can concede the play still holds a relevant message which society

may not yet have fully grasped, although still effortlessly pertinent to contemporary society, Wilde's "rondo capriccioso" is a tune that audiences are drawn to. Purposing the play as a hypocrisy of Victorian morality and sincerity Wilde satirically criticizes the Victorian aristocrats dramatic insistence of hypocrisy, morality and sincerity to define an identity, which is mirrored in the 21st century society through our technological forwardness. Wilde's philosophy of the Victorian society is the keynote of the satirical, developed through thorough implicit characterisation, intriguing use of language devices and aesthetic features evident in the Victorian era. To wittingly grasp the deeper message of Oscar Wilde's, play *The Importance of Being Earnest* genuinely astounds oneself to recognise that society in itself is really has not altered.