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# The Importance Of Being Earnest As A Representation Of England In 19th Century

England in the late 19th Century was a time of great change in terms of women's rights but also a time where society was ruled by strict social conventions governing how they interact with others. The introduction of the 1870 Women's Property Act signposted a new dynamic in the relationship between man and wife; a dynamic very loudly stated within the painting 'The First Cloud' by William Quiller Orchardson in 1887. However, with the emergence of power from the middle class, removing much of the authority that aristocracy long held, strong emphasis was put on high moral conduct; the reduction of society to Georgian-like social conventions; moral conventions that Oscar Wilde satirises in his 1894's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Succeeding the Edwardian era, and in part due to strong industrial advances society made, Queen Victoria ruled society romantically. With the shift of powers from the upper class to middle, more and more men and women were given a voice, both politically and domestically. This became immediately apparent with the introduction of the Women's Property Act of 1870 which came to abolish coverture – the husband's legal and authoritative protection of his wife bound by marriage. Orchardson's painting highlights how a young woman seems to hold the power in the marriage, even though her husband is of late age and hence high status. In 1882, an update of the Act was passed to acknowledge women as legally independent and responsible for their own debts. This furthered women's status in society and later aided them receiving the ability to vote. Wilde too, makes a farce of Victorian marriage in commenting on its pleasantness. Throughout the entire play, marriage is constantly debated as either being "pleasant" or "unpleasant", or in other words either for pleasure or business. With a changing dynamic between men and women, the characters are forced to reflect on the very nature of marriage and repeatedly question its importance.

Furthermore, both Orchardson and Wilde both question Victorian morality and its importance. The high-strung characters of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the very well-appointed drawing room in *The First Cloud* indicate very high society morals, but these values were quite a new reality to England. Harold Perkin wrote: "Between 1780 and 1850 the English ceased to be one of the most aggressive, brutal, rowdy, outspoken, riotous, cruel and bloodthirsty nations in the world and became one of the most inhibited, polite, orderly, tender-minded, prudish and hypocritical." Thus, Wilde takes the opportunity to comment on this new change and satirises the rigid body of rules that govern what people can and cannot do. When Jack expresses how ungentlemanly it is to read another man's cigarette case, Algernon points out that "More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read".

Orchardson thoroughly investigates marriage and its nuances in his painting. From his biography written by his daughter Hilda Orchardson Gray, we know that he was blessed with a very happy marriage which meant that he was confused when he saw other marriages failing. Hence why marriage, and its impersonalism is the centre point to Orchardson's paintings. In *The First Cloud*, we see a young woman walking away from a man of much older age who looks distressed and regretful. From the way they are dressed, and the fact that there is no fire in the grate, we can assume that they are wedded and have either just come back from a function or just about to leave. A woman so young, compared to a man in his early 50's would be expected

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to have the less power in such a relationship. However, she seems victorious as she walks away with the final word. Audiences of the time would have read this piece as a comment on the changing dynamics within a marriage due to the newly passed marriage acts.

England in the late 19th century was very concerned with prudent behaviour in the quest for reformation. With the 1832 Reform Act, parliament was made accessible to a much higher majority of the middle class, allowing for the social status of the middle class to lift considerably. Following the French revolution, England heavily rejected France's sinful practices and steered heavily towards high class. The drawing room being the backdrop for this intimate scene in *The First Cloud* is very well furnished with parquet flooring and fine velvet curtains allowing the audience – the middle class – to better sympathise with the couple. Orchardson also placed individual items in the room to symbolise certain characteristics of their relationship. He has placed a finely crafted tri-fold screen to symbolise the woman screening herself from her husband but also England obscuring itself from France's societal values. Orchardson also used subtle uses of colour to draw the viewer to the focal points of his comments. At first glance, the painting seems monochrome, but upon closer inspection, some parts use quite vivid pastel colours, such as the lamp which can suggest a light and the end of the tunnel for the couple within this argument, but also for England and its quest to further itself from old Georgian morals.

Wilde too, chose to comment on the nature of Victorian-era marriage but farcically. He too, brings to light the absurdity of marrying only for the intention of furthering wealth or status by revealing the character Lady Bracknell's true desires in trying to wed her son Jack to only those who fit her brief. The play is essentially a running debate on whether marriage is for love or business, which exactly encompasses the views of the middle class in the late 19th century. Continuing from the benefits afforded to the population by the 1832 Reform Act, the middle class began acting a lot more aristocratic by putting great emphasis on maintaining high status and only wedding those either as wealthy and powerful or more.

The question of Victorian morality and its role in England of the 19th Century also made a big part of Wilde piece. Even the title is a reference to the over the top rules in its ambiguous nature. Jack, the play's protagonist both is and isn't Ernest/earnest, creating a foundation for the play to satirise sincerity. With social reform amongst the middle class, men and women were making sure they stuck to these well-established rules. However, Wilde, rather than accept them, decided to question them and their absurdity. Even further, Wilde may have been commenting on Parliaments mistake in allowing access to a higher percentage of the population and hence those not apt for the job.

England in the late 19th Century was a time of great change. More and more rights were afforded to women while general English morality was being improved. Both Wilde and Orchardson decide to question the nature of marriage but in different ways. Orchardson investigated how women now hold more power than they did, setting the stage for further advances in gender equality. Wilde decided to stage the absurdity of wedding purely for business by using exaggerated characters and character motivations. In the same farcical manner, Wilde commented on the ridiculousness of the rigid code of moral rules that govern England's middle class. While Orchardson merely used England's aristocratic Middle class as the backdrop of his tale of a doomed marriage. Orchardson and Wilde successfully write texts that epitomise England in the late 19th century.