The Importance Of Being Earnest: Summary Of The Content And Short Analysis

Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest is a play that follows the lives of four Victorians that including Jack, Algernon, Cecily, and Gwendolen. The story is about Jack (known to his friend Algernon as Ernest) who lives a respectable life in the country providing an example to his young ward Cecily. Meanwhile, Algernon lives in luxury in London and has invented an imaginary invalid friend (Bunbury) whom he visits in the country whenever a social engagement that seems unappealing presents itself. There are many ways that Wilde ties in the characters’ personalities and the use of metaphysics into the play. One article that describes the use of metaphysics is “The Formal Structure of Metaphysics and The Importance of Being Earnest” by Jeremy Barris. Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that examines the fundamental nature of reality, including the relationship between mind and matter, between substance and attribute, and between possibility and actuality. One frequent aim of metaphysics is to understand the world as a whole. Another article that explains the characters’ personalities is “Realizing Personality in The Importance of Being Earnest” by Sarah Balkin. Balkin examines in her writing what it meant to realize a personality on the late-nineteenth-century stage. She argue that because theatre shows the constructed-ness of material and human being, The Importance of Being Earnest uniquely locates personality in a human. Wilde creates characters who largely live in a world of fantasy to criticize the rigidity of real life.

The play features imaginary people that reflect the personality of each character. Balkin states in her article that “Ernest facilitates an understanding of personhood as fiction made flesh.” In the play, Jack creates Ernest to get away from the day to day life in the country, where his family thinks he is a productive member of society. Jack’s first line in the play explains his motivation for escaping his country home for the excitement of the city; he says, 'Oh pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?' (Importance act 1). Here, Jack is trying to cover up the fact that he has an excuse that doesn’t bring him somewhere else while he does; in this sense, it is Ernest bringing him to the city. Algernon is the only person who knows the truth and everyone else believes that Jack and Ernest are brothers, not the same person.

Algernon has also been leading a double life. He has created “Bunbury,” who also happens to be a permanent invalid friend. Whenever Algernon wants to avoid family obligations or important dinner parties, he says that Bunbury is “ill” and needs to be taken care of so he can run off to the country whenever he pleases. During act two of the play, Algernon intensifies Jack’s conflict by posing as Jack’s delinquent brother Ernest as discussed in the following scene:

Algernon: “Oh! I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily. You mustn’t think that I am wicked.”

Cecily: “If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.” (Importance act 2).

Here, Algernon is saying that he isn’t crazy and that he is the person that he says he is, even though he is lying about living a double life as Ernest. Cecily comes back at him saying that she thinks that he could be a lier and that she hopes he isn’t truly wicked. Algernon then realizes

that lying about who he truly is probably isn't the best idea.

Within the play, Cecily also makes up a fiancee out of Algernon, whom she knows only as Ernest, her caretaker Jack's badly-behaving brother. When Algernon asks Cecily to marry him, she responds by saying, "You silly boy! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months" (Importance act 2). Cecily consults her diary while narrating their relationship, which she uses to show authority; this shows that the play parodies history-making, privacy, and the idea of singular identity (Balkin).

Algernon: Darling. And when was the engagement actually settled?

Cecily: On the 14th of February last. Worn out by your entire ignorance of my existence, I determined to end the matter one way or the other, and after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old tree here. The next day I bought this little ring in your name, and this is the little bangle with the true lover's knot I promised you always to wear ….. And this is the box in which I keep all your dear letters. (Kneels at table, opens box and produces letters tied up with blue ribbon.)

Algernon: My Letters! But, my own sweet Cecily, I have never written you any letters.

Cecily: You need hardly remind me of that, Ernest. I remember only too well that I was forced to write your letters for you. (Importance, Act 2)

Balkin then summarizes what happens in the play; Cecily goes on to the story of their engagement, which she temporarily broke off, and announces her ideal of love to someone with the name Ernest. Algernon agrees with the story that she is telling even though he knows it is not true. His agreement "constitutes a shared history that is also a binding contract…… Marriage is a social contract….. And he is reconciled to the institution by a young woman who had transformed the contract into fiction that is nonetheless binding" (Balkin). Algernon is showing that with him going along with the story, he is falling into a tap of getting stuck in the engagement and won't be able to get himself out.

There are many ways that Wilde shows metaphysics within his play. Barris' article states that "the play is concerned with interacting circles of meaning and not with reality and truth each as a whole," which Jack, Algernon, and Cecily all show this. There are many places that metaphysics shows through in the play, but the main places are: Jack lies about having a brother who lives in the city who he uses as an escape, Algernon made up Bunbury to get out of important events, and Cecily talked Algernon into being her so-called "fiance" even though he never truly knew and asked.

The Importance of Being Earnest succeeds in showing the rigidity of really life through personality and metaphysics. Whether it is through made-up people or even the props, the personalities show through. Wilde wrote the play in a great way to show the personalities of the characters and how they explain them. Wilde also shows through the play that Jack and Algernon start to show that they are starting to think that lying about who they are isn't a good thing and started to change their thinking. As Wilde once wrote, "One should always be a little improbable" for, "if one tells the truth, one is sure, sooner or later, to be found out."