# Victorian Era As The Background Time Of Oscar Wilde's The Importance Of Being Earnest

It was 1837 when Queen Victoria became the Queen of England, and marked the beginning of Victorian era. She ruled England for about 60 years, until her death in 1901. During this period, England was growing into a more advanced country. Starting from the invention of electric telegraph and telephone, the abolishment of slavery, until economic and political events, they have impacted the era in their own ways. However, in Victorian era, the social and cultural aspects are prominent in constructing the ideals, values, and society at that time. There were also social classes in this era. The social classes are divided into three classes: the upper, middle, and working class. The upper class is the Royal Class. They do not have to work to earn money, because they already inherited the wealth from their family. Some of them run a business, which is also the same with the middle class. This latter class gets the rights to education. However, the working class—or the labourer—had to experience the exploitation because they did not have properties, but they are obligated to work and supply the upper and middle classes. In the Victorian era, it does not matter about how much you earn, but what is more important is you family history and your position. If you are clergy, you are more respected than a laborer, even though the latter was getting paid more. To sum it all up, manners and etiquettes are considered as an important aspect in Victorian era more than anything else.

The Importance of Being Earnest is a comedy of manner play written by Oscar Wilde. The play itself, first performed on February, 14th 1895 at the St James's Theatre. The play, The Importance of Being Earnest is a farce about a protagonist who uses fictitious personae to avoid social burden. The story were initially written to mock the social situation on the Victorian era, when the story took place. During the Victorian era, social class were everything. Lower and uneducated class found it hard to rise to the top of society. In The Importance of Being Earnest, satire was used by Wilde to expose and highlight some of these realities through his characters (Sayre 2017). In this essay we would like to find out why did Wilde use Victorian era as the background and how it compare to the reality of the age itself.

The play by Oscar Wilde used Victorian era as its time. There are some action that shows and support this claim. First, the 'age of ideals' as what Gwendolen said in her dialog with Jack.

"We live, as I hope you know, Mr Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines and has reached the provincial pulpits, I am told; and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest." - Gwendolen (Act 1, pg 23)

Age of ideals is one of the period during the Victorian Era when people and the society itself have many ideals as their standard. One of their topmost ideal was earnestness. This ideal was the one that led Victorians to create another identity, a double life.

Second, the Victorian Era prioritized parents' approval for marriage. Usually parents will arrange or choose a suitable partner for their daughter. It is shown when Lady Bracknell indirectly interviewed Jack about his proposal to Gwendolen.

Lady Bracknell: Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to someone, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. … And now I have a few questions to put to you, Mr Worthing. While I am making these inquiries, you, Gwendolen, will wait for me below in the carriage.

Third, Victorians usually spends their free time by having a dine or just drinking together. This lifestyle is based on each class. For example, the upper classes usually only want to drink with people they consider on the same level as theirs. This lifestyle can also be seen from the function in daily life, and what they consume. Each social class has its own food, like a cucumber sandwich that is a symbol of food consumed by the upper classes like Lady Bracknell.

Algernon: Have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

Algernon: Please don’t touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta.

Fourth, Victorian women often wrote their daily life in a diary as it was a symbol of private text to keep a person’s story. It can be seen from Cecily that wrote her secrets in her diary.

Cecily: I keep a diary to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn’t write them down I should probably forget all about them.

In Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest, the representation of society during the Victorian Era is obvious. Oscar Wilde reflect the real Victorian Era and make it as the setting of time for his play. It can be seen from their manner, speech, and marriage.

The play reflected the manner and speech used by the upper-class society in the Victorian age. The upper class always want to appear better in every way than the lower class. Because they thought that being better than lower class is what distinguished them. Upper-class people always looked down on the lower class. The upper-class manner is what differentiates them from other. The upper class in Victorian-era tends to be arrogant. In the play it can be seen from the dialogue of Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell with Jack Worthing. In the play it is portrayed, Gwendolen as the upper class and Jack Worthing as a lower class because he has no knowledge about his background of family.

“I adore you. But you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.” – Gwendolen (Act 1, pg 25)

“To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?” – Lady Bracknell (Act 1, pg 30)

Hypocritical was crucial in the Victorian age. Men, due to his freedom, it was easy for them to have double identity or personality. For example where Algernon and Jack Worthing created their imaginary friend for Algernon and imaginary brother for Jack, to satisfy and to ease their life.

“Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.” – Jack Worthing (Act 1, pg 15)

“I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose.” – Algernon (Act 1, pg 17)

It can be seen from the play that in terms of marriage, Victorian society place women in the stake. Patriarchal as the social system that used by Victorian society. Because of this, men represented the control and authority in the family. This makes women’s best life was marriage. In Victorian age, women have certain kind of standards. They have to meet certain standard for singing, playing musical instruments, and speaking French, Italian, or German. One of the examples of this is through the play when Cecily is taught by Miss Prism.

Cecily: [Coming over very slowly.] But I don't like German. It isn't at all a becoming language. I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my German lesson.

Miss Prism: Child, you know how anxious your guardian is that you should improve yourself in every way. (Act 2, pg 41)

Because of how the patriarchal oppress women, in Victorian age, women whether married or not, were dependent. Women appeared to be weak, fragile, and delicate. They also seen as unable to make any decision for themselves. This result in cannot choose their own spouse or husband. Their parents especially their father is the only one that is allowed to give consent for the marriage. The parents also choose the rightful spouse for their daughter whether the daughter was willing or not. In the play, one of Lady Bracknell’s speech portrayed this type of aspect that reflects the dependence of young women and the father figure consent for marriage.

“Pardon me, you are not engaged to any one. When you do become engaged to some one, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. 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... And now I have a few questions to put to you, Mr. Worthing. While I am making these inquiries, you, Gwendolen, will wait for me below in the carriage.” – Lady Bracknell (Act 1, pg 26- 27)

Until the end of 1887, women were forbidden from owning their own property. Thus result in, their property was inherited by her family or husband after married. This is the reason why during Victorian era when a man proposed to a woman, then the woman accepted, her parents will ask about his intentions and inform them about his financial situation. In turn, her parents will inform the man of her fortune. In Oscar Wilde’s, The Importance of Being Earnest, it reflected when Lady Bracknell interrogates Jack about his wealth, money, and parentage.

Lady Bracknell: What is your income?

Jack: Between seven and eight thousand a year.

Lady Bracknell: [Makes a note in her book.] In land, or in investments?

Jack: In investments, chiefly.

Lady Bracknell: That is satisfactory. Are your parents living?

Jack: I have lost both my parents.%

Lady Bracknell: To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?

Jack: I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me... I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was... well, I was found. (Act 1, pg 28-32)

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