

Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest: A Comedy of Errors

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Abstract:

The Plot

The plot of the play is absurd. The play tells the story of two men, Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, who both assume the identity of a fictional man named Earnest. Jack, who has a young ward named Cecily, invents a brother Earnest, to account for his visits to London, where he courts Gwendolen. Algernon, Gwendolen's cousin, likewise has an imaginary invalid friend Bunbury to get him out of tedious engagements. Absurd as it may seem, Gwendolen and Cecily both dream of marrying a man called Earnest. This leads to a series of complications as both Jack and Algernon take on the name 'Ernest' to woo the ladies they love. Jack decides to 'kill' his brother Earnest, but simultaneously Algy decides to impersonate him and falls in love with Cecily. The double deception is revealed when the two girls meet. Gwendolen's mother, Lady Bracknell, wishes Algernon to marry Cecily because he is wealthy, but Jack forbids this unless he is permitted to marry Gwendolen. After a series of unlikely coincidences, it turns out that Jack's name is Earnest and that Algy is his brother, and the couples are free to marry.

Keywords: Satire, farce, absurdity, lightness. Themes /issues analyzed Marriage, wealth, and earnestness.

Special Effects, Satire, Facial Elements

The play is a satire of famous romantic plays and parallel love stories. Every romantic space has a couple falling in love, facing obstacles coming in the way, a period of suspense, and finally, a happy ending. The comedy, in this case, is produced by the two short stories of Jack and Algernon, very similar, both dependents on girlish idealized coincidence, unexpected discoveries, and of course, on the ridiculous importance of Gwendolen and Cecily attached to the proper name Ernest.

The play is miraculously balanced on a fine edge between real life and the utterly absurd. We see so much of the wild because we are more ready to laugh at the gentle satire of real life

and the stock theatrical productions of Wilde's time. The humor in society is represented, for instance, by Lady Bracknell, the matriarchal supreme with her fixed notions on all subjects and her long list of eligible bachelors for Gwendolen. The sting is removed from the satire in her interrogation of Jack. She asks him questions like does he smoke? How old is he? How much money does he have? Who are his parents?

What are his political views? The distortion of the expected scales of values leaves the scene more amusing.

Misunderstandings are resolved, the air is cleared, and everyone is paired off, each gaining the partner of his choice. The final scene runs riot, but the end is happy with happy couples, Algernon and Cecily, Jack and Gwendolen, and Frederick and Miss Prism.

The play abounds in a weird chain of coincidence and well-timed revelation. Wilde includes laughter in his comedies, with Gwendolen and Cecily and their intention to marry a loving man, Ernest.

It comes through as one complete whole and sustains the same delightful mock-series note. Quoting Wilde, "A butterfly writes it for butterflies."

The sparkles of the dialogue, and Wilde's methods of making us laugh, are subtly varied. Everyday speech is replaced with discussions that are not spoken in day-to-day conversations. Strangely they do not come across as affected but, on the contrary, have a lot of truth in them and show the insincerity of everyday speech.

Cecily hides her diary. Talking about her diary to Algernon, she says:

The sarcasm intended is hilarious.

Lady Bracknell is impressed with questions regarding money and property and says:

"But I do not approve of mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell, I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way." (p.137)

When Cecily leaves Algernon, he begins to eat muffins. Jack finds this attitude heartless as the romantic lover is above food and material things.

Algy comfortably replies:

"When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Indeed, when I am in really great trouble, as anyone who knows me intimately will tell you, I refuse everything except food and drink." (p130)

Conclusion

"The Importance of Being Earnest" is one of Wilde's best-known comedies. The secret of its success lies in the lightness and absurdity of the plot and dialogues. The satire is gentle and goes

down well with the audience because Wilde does not stand outside Victorian Society and criticizes it. He stands within the circle, satirizing it for the benefit and amusement of its members. His criticism partly serves to show what he loves and values in the shimmering, artificial Victorian world of trying 'To be Ernest.'

References:

Wilde, Oscar The Importance of Being Ernest, New Orchard Editions Ltd., Poole, Dorset, 1977