

## How Does Satire Operate In The Text? – Charlie Colman

Oscar Wilde's *'The Importance Of Being Earnest'* employs satire as one of its key themes as an instrument to critique late Victorian society, which he regarded to be rife with hypocrisies and faux idealism throughout his fraternisation with the English aristocracy. Wilde's cardinal aspects to satirize in the play are the superficiality of love in high society, the vain importance of maintaining a façade of earnestness as Wilde derides with the treatment of all things serious as trivial and in reverse, and finally, the conceited and narcissistic nature of the avaricious aristocracy, of which many of the play's characters exhibit. Hence, It is through this operation of satire that Wilde conveys his views of Victorian society.

One of Wilde's most prominent uses of satire in the play is in regard to love and its often hollow ostensible nature found in high society. The key examples of this is the love felt by Gwendolyn and Cecily to their respective suitors; Jack and Algernon, especially when juxtaposed with the far more sincere love shared by Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble. Gwendolyn and Cecily are the prime way in which Wilde satirises love, with both of them founding their love simply on the name Ernest. Gwendolyn reveals to a besotted Jack, that her reciprocation of his love is wholly responsible for the name she knows him by; "*The moment Algernon mentioned... a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.*" Similarly, Cecily, in conjunction with Gwendolyn, is prepared to break off her engagement to Algernon, purely on the basis on his name not being Ernest, declaring "*Your Christian names are an insuperable barrier*". Wilde uses Cecily and Gwendolyn to satirise how he believe aristocratic marriages were often for pretty reasons as opposed to true love. This is highlighted even further when contrasted with a love between two members of a lower class, which Wilde writes in the play to be profound and guileless. Unlike the faux love Gwendolyn and Cecily show, the love between Dr Chasuble and Miss Prism is wholehearted and blooms out of a long history of mutual but unspoken attraction, evidenced by the nervousness and romantic tension present when the two interact. Miss Prism proclaims "*maturity to always be depended on*", an obvious reference to Dr Chasuble's attraction to her despite her age. Thus, Wilde makes use of the varying circumstances of the characters' intimacy with each other in order to satirise love in high society.

The title of Wilde's play is a reflection of one of the key satirical themes in the text, with Wilde ridiculing the literal "*Importance of Being Earnest*" and the value of it in Victorian Society most prominently by having his characters treat all matters of seriousness as trivial, and all matters of triviality with seriousness. In a time where the value of earnestness was heled so highly in a stiff moral society, Wilde places numerous accounts of the reversal of this throughout the play. Many of Algernon's lines of dialogue are vital examples of this, with his most noteworthy of which being his expression to Jack, the character of whom most resembles the highly strung nature of the aristocracy, that "*one has to be serious about something if one is to have any amusement in life.*" His irreverence for the value of seriousness in Victorian times establishes the character as one of Wilde's chief means of satire of society. Wilde further exemplifies this by having Algernon again reproach Jack most vehemently for "*being serious about everything*", a quality that was taken in very high esteem in Victorian times. Similarly, Cecily displays this same characteristic of levity, describing Jack, to be "*so serious I think he cannot be quite well*", an obvious turnaround of the belief that is those who acted devoid of earnestness that were unwell.

Perhaps Wilde's most prevalent exercise of satire within the play is that of the aristocracy, of whom he portrays many of the play's nobility to be self-obsessed and possessing a significant avidity for the pursuit of wealth or social status, in particular Lady Bracknell. Lady Bracknell is portrayed as possessing the worst of the qualities widespread in the aristocracy, particularly in her view of marriage. She ardently disagrees with the prospect of marrying who you love, and sees marriage as a source of social advancement for her daughter Gwendolyn. She quizzes Jack zealously and upon finding out that due to his humble heritage, refuses the prospect of his engagement to Gwendolyn on the basis that it will bring her no social promotion, informing Jack that "*You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel?*" However, her vain aristocratic view on marriage is eventually overlooked at the revelation that Jack possess a considerable fortune and her she relents to allow her nephew Algernon to marry Jack's ward Cecily, revealing that due to the prospect of wealth, Lady Bracknell now considers Cecily to possess "*really solid qualities*". Similar to her mother, Gwendolyn possess egotistical and vain morals. She states "*my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest*" to constitute a justifiable example of living "*in an age of ideals*". Her evident self-obsession is further demonstrated when she pronounces that "*I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read*". In this light we see how Wilde portrays the aristocracy to be rampant with morally devoid idealism and vain characteristics.

Thus, Oscar Wilde satirises several key aspects of Victorian high society in the play which he considers to be at times remarkably vain or trivial. Among these, love appears to be one of the most prevalent, with Wilde utilising many of his characters to appear shallow and unfounded in their approach to love, most notably Cecily and Gwendolyn, who he contrasts with Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble to show the far more genuine love shown by lower classes. Another of Wilde's most significant operations of satire in the text is his ridicule of the grave importance society places of earnestness in society, and makes a point to treat all matters of seriousness as trivial affairs in the play. Finally, Wilde makes use of satire to deride the egotism and hypocritical greed that was frequent in the Victorian aristocracy, in particular Lady Bracknell, who Wilde writes to not be above sacrificing her beliefs for financial gain. Hence, Wilde uses a multitude of ways to implement satirical themes and characters into "*The Importance of Being Earnest*" to lambast Victorian high society.