

Comedy of Manners in the Importance of Being Earnest

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ABSTRACT

Oscar Wilde, an English author, was born in Dublin. Oscar distinguished himself in classics or the standard books of Greek and Latin authors at Trinity College, Dublin. At Oxford he gave evidence of his keen devotion to the subject of 'Art for Art's sake' and became one of the most prominent writers. His Works: 'A Woman of No Importance' in 1893, 'An Ideal Husband' 1895, and 'The Importance of Being Earnest' 1895. As a writer exception of 'The Importance of Being Earnest'- their merits are wholly shallow but not deep and their merits are derived from other writers. As a Dramatist: 'Wilde might have become a great playwright-certainly a great maker of 'artificial' comedy. "The Importance of Being Earnest", produced February 14, 1895, bears witness to that, for there he is himself, his witty paradoxes expressed with a fine sense of dramatic form, and not flung into the play as brilliant irrelevancies.

Keywords: Surpassed, Announcess, Profligate, Controversy, Elegantly, Contemporaries

INTRODUCTION

The drama of the last years of the nineteenth century was made illustrious by a single comedy, "*The Importance of Being Earnest*". In this comedy Oscar Wilde brought back to the English theatre something of the distinction absent from it since Sheridan ceased to write, a century before. And Wilde surpassed Sheridan in combining with the sense of comedy and feeling for literary style, aintense, and bold and fantastic wit which does not get old and surprises with renewed delight, however often heard. In this Play not only is the situation fresh, but the unbelievable characters have real individuality and a life of their own within the path of their disbelief; if John Worthingand Lady Bracknell, Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble are unlike mortals they have the finer quality of immortality.

Wilde was neither dull nor lazy; he had a brilliant mind and literary gifts of no common order. There are those who say that the comedies amuse but do not move us but Wilde's contribution to the literature of his time is not to be dismissed thus lightly. By all means let us think of him as a great romantic individualist, a master of epigram. But we shall do him a dis-service if achievement as a literary artist and under-estimate his influence on world literature.

Oscar Wilde has written this Comedy of Manners in a satiric Vein Satire means a criticism of man and his works, whom it holds up either to ridicule or scorn,-its chief instruments, irony, sareasm, abuses, wit and humour. He is a past master in holding out all social evils to ridicule so that the members of the society may be able to give up those evils and lead better lives. This is the real moral purpose of satire. The following examples will make it clear. Oscar Wilde has presented numerous examples of what is called Dramatic Irony. It is a mode of speech which enables the speaker to convey his meaning with greater force by means of a contrast between the thought which he evidently designs to express and that which his words properly signify.

The title of this Play is "The Importance of Being Earnest." The word Earnest indicates that a good man should be fully determined to achieve his goal or ambition in life. On comparing Algernon with Jack, the reader will find Algernon

not quite serious but he will find Earnest John Worthing to be fully determined upon achieving the goal of his life-hence the dramatist is fully justified in entitling this Play as "The Importance of Being Earnest." Mr. John Earnest Worthing is the hero of this play. In this respect his younger brother Algernon presents a direct contrast to the hero's character. He is present throughout the play. He is the greatest character of the play. He is the eldest son of General Earnest John Monerief and is a seeker after truth all his life. He is great because of his moral virtues and his keen sense of duty and responsibility. He is generous and forgiving.

Oscar Wilde has sprinkled rich wit and humour on every page of this play. He charms the reader with the aid of his paradoxes. He combines deep feeling with mirth in creating his characters. He makes his characters talk in a brilliant manner. He tries to delight his readers with ridiculous and mirthful ideas. He creates amusing situations which make people laugh. Lady Bracknell forces Miss Prism to admit her guilt in leaving the infant Jack in a hand-bag at Victoria Station. Then Lady Bracknell discovers that Jack is Earnest John Moncrieff and that Algernon Moncrieff is his younger brother. Oscar Wilde wants to laugh at the evil customs that prevailed amongst English people of his own time and he wants to remove those evils to enable the English people to lead better lives. He takes up one social evil after another and wants the reader to benefit himself by escaping and avoiding such evils.

Drama being a criticism of life, the dramatist wants to teach us the great art of 'How to live'. He gives us three examples to illustrate his point. Her Ladyship easts a slur on the love of pleasure that makes a widow fall into sinful ways after the death of her Lord. He also laughs at the artificial manner of courtship that was current among the lovers of those days. Algernon arrives at cecily's Manor House. She hails him as her wicked cousin Earnest. He promises her to reform himself and behave better in the future. Then Jack returns home. Cecily informs him of Algy's presence. Jack asks Algy to leave the house, but Cecily requests them to become friends again. When Cecily is left alone, Algy makes a proposal of love to her; she accepts him as her lover and

presents the wedding ring to him. Irony is a mode of speech in which the words convey the sense that is opposed to the real meaning of the speaker. Satire is biting wit used to discredit folly and vice. Algernon announces himself to Cecily as Earnest Worthing but Jack arrives then to announce Algernon's death. Cecily says Algernon is in the dining room. This is an example of 'Dramatic Irony'.

Algernon arrives secretly at Cecily's Manor House and announces himself as Earnest Worthing, being younger brother to Jack. Cecily welcomes him as her wicked cousin Earnest and Algy promises to reform himself under her guidance. She tells him that she had fallen in love with him on when she had heard about him from her guardian Jack. She presents to him the wedding ring and shows to him the bangle with the true lover's knot which she would wear on her wrist in his honour. Just then Jack arrives there. Cecily informs him of Algy's presence in the dining-room. Jack orders him to leave the house but Algy's insists on staying on for a week till he has married Cecily. The reader should understand the real motive of Oscar Wilde's Play "The Importance of Being Earnest". What he means by this title is that the hero of this play should be earnestly devoted to win success in life by being Earnest.

Gwendolen calls Jack by the name of Earnest Worthing. Cecily calls Algernon as Earnest Worthing. But Jack calls Algernon the 'profligate Earnest'. At last Lady Bracknell discovers that Jack's real name is Earnest John Moncrieff and Algernon's real name is not Earnest Worthing but Algernon John Moncrieff. It is Gwendolen who insists on calling Jack as Earnest Worthing. The controversy about Earnest ranges itself between Gwendolen and Cecily. At last it comes out that Algernon is not Earnest Worthing.

Algernon had the undesirable habit of doing good things in an underhand manner. He wanted to make false pretences of assured motives to conceal reality. He intended to absent

himself from Lady Bracknell's invitation to dinner when her Ladyship added that she would send Algy with Mary Farquhar for a walk. He intended them to go and see his poor friend Bunbury. Again when Jack said he would stay on till Monday in Algernon's room, Algernon secretly made up his mind to, go and meet Cecily to make love to her but he never wanted his elder brother, Jack, to have knowledge of it. That is why he asked Lane to put up his Bunbury suits. When he was successful in winning Cecily's love, he told Jack that Bunbury is dead. In short he wanted to say that he will never put up any pretexts but from that time he will lead a very sincere and truthful life.

Oscar Wilde in "The Importance of Being Earnest" has followed the method of Congreve. He has blended a witty style with moralization, Sentiment and startling dialogues. Oscar Wilde in this play has created such witty characters as have in them "an inner consciousness of fun, the fun with which one plays seriously a very elaborate, practical joke and the more elegantly the characters give and take, the more will the intrinsic quality of wit emerge." "Wilde said that he put his genius into his living and his talent into his writing," but even if his contemporaries paid generous tribute to his brilliance as playwright and conversationalist, they were not wholly unaware of the malign influences which shaped his conduct and led to his plunges and downfall. Wilde's contribution to the literature of his time is not to be dismissed thus lightly.

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