



Victorian Morality and society in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Smirti Priya Das
Dibrugarh University
Smritipriyadas69@gmail.com

Abstract:

Victorian values emerged in all classes and reached all facets of Victorian living. The values of the period which can be classed as religion, morality, evangelicalism, industrial work ethic, and personality improvement took root in Victorian morality. It is noted that the Victorian morality is associated with family values, charity and thriftiness along with the social tendencies of time including rampant prostitution, child labour and the exploitation of the lower classes. Victorian morality set the standards for different roles that were considered respectable. For example A respectable upper-caste man, for instance, would give to charity to help the deserving poor, a respectable upper-caste women would not violate standards of sexual propriety.

Keywords: Religion, Respectable Morality, Victorian, Uppercaste.

DOI Number: 10.48047/nq.2022.20.22.NQ10136

NeuroQuantology 2022; 20(22):1523-1525

Introduction

The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) is a comedy play by Oscar Wilde, was first performed in 1895. The play was an early attempt in Victorian melodrama. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is remain to be the greatest play till date in the English language. It is a sharp satire of the upper-class Victorian society. Wilde play eradicates clear distinction between earnest and seriousness on one hand and triviality on other hand. Wilde ridicules the proper used of “*earnest*”, and also hypocritical behaviour of the Victorian upper classes, who advocates a strict moral code and notions of duty and propriety. Moreover, *The Importance of Being Earnest* exposes the obsession with trivial matters often exhibited by the Victorian upper class. Still, Wilde simultaneously observance of empty social rules can indeed pave the path toward genuine sincerity.

Objective of the Study:

To know about the Victorian morality in Society and analyse the importance of being Earnest.

Victorian Morality and society in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Wilde is not much concerned with what is moral and immoral. He makes fun of the Victorian idea of morality. The very title of the play is a double-edged comment on the phenomenon. Wilde exposes the hypocrisy of the Victorian strict social norms through used of puns, paradoxes, epigrams, and inversions in the characters. In the Victorian world women were tight control over by the male elders like-fathers, brothers, uncles etc with whom they interacted, even dated.

Morality and the restraints impose on society are often discussed in the play ‘*The Importance of Being Earnest*’. Algernon believes that the working class has an accountability to set a moral standard for the upper classes. Jack thinks reading a private cigarette case is “*ungentlemanly*” while



Algernon believes “*more than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t tread*”. These restraints and assumptions suggest a strict code of morals that existed in the Victorian society.

Oscar Wilde also satirizes morality and restrictions of Victorian society. Algernon thinks that lower class has a responsibility to set a moral standard for the upper class. He says, “*Really, if the lower orders don’t set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them?*”. Jack emphasizes that: “*it is very ungentlemanly to read a private cigarette case*”. Algernon replies: “*more than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read*”. However, Oscar Wilde does not want to discuss what is moral and what is not moral. He wants to show us the absurdity of Victorian society as a strict group of rules about what people should and should not be. Marriage is quite important in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It works both as a primary force for the plot and as a topic for philosophical speculation and debate. The nature of marriage is discussed for the first time in the opening dialogue between Algernon and his butler, Lane. Algernon’s servant, Lane says: “*I believe it is a very pleasant state, Sir*”. Algernon remarks: “*Lane’s view on marriage seems somewhat lax*”. He also believes that: “*Divorces are made in Heaven*”. Lady Bracknell’s opinion of marriage is very cynical. Gwendolen’s view of the nature of men and marriage is rather cynical as well. When Jack asks her whether she can forgive him, Gwendolen answers: “*I can for I feel that you are sure to change*”. The author makes significant comments about social class and the institution of marriage. Again, Algernon and Jack dispute briefly discussing the nature of marriage. The point of discussion is whether a marriage proposal is a matter of “*business or pleasure*”. These observations include the prevalent utilization of deceit in everyday affairs and also throw light on the conventional obsessions of the Victorian morality which determine social position, income and character. The play has lot of such debates about the nature of marriage.

The Victorian upper-class society judged things by appearance and the present play makes us laugh at those values by turning them upside down through a language which is satirical, funny and witty. Different characters in the play embody those values and provide us insight into the upper-class society of the Victorian period. The play centres on the questions of identity, love, marriage and money. Wilde’s basic purpose in writing the play was to expose and prove as sham the norms and values of the Victorian aristocracy what needed to qualify for marriage was wealth and good family background. Lady Bracknell rejected Jack as the candidate for Gwendolen after she knew that he was a foundling. While asking him questions she gave last priority to his abilities on education and gave importance to family background. When she came to know that there is a handsome amount of money in Cecily’s account, she is ready to get her married to Algernon. The two female characters Cecily and Gwendolen love their respective boys just for the beauty of their name ‘*Earnest*’. They find everything in the name and love for name which expose the false value of the Victorian upper society. Wilde uses the contradictory meanings embedded in the notion of being earnest/Ernest in order to reveal the superficial, fake and fabricated moral fabric of Victorian upper-class society. Wilde exposes the hypocrisy of the upper classes further when Algernon meets Cecily and pretends to be Jack’s rowdy younger brother Ernest. Wilde light-heartedly suggests that people should never judge others’ behaviours based on the way they adhere to social norms or present themselves in public. Identity is a complex matter that cannot easily be explained or discarded on a superficial level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Wilde tried to convey about the English society in which he lived about the Victorian morality and society. *The Importance of Being Earnest* criticizes Victorian manners and attacks the society of the rich and luxurious. Oscar Wilde incorporated his own beliefs and ideology into the play. The title of the play suggests a

treatise on the value of solemnity in everyday life. *The Importance of Being Earnest* strongly focuses on those of the upper-class society and the vanity of the aristocrats who place emphasis on trivial matters concerning marriage. Both Algernon and Jack assume the identity of “*Earnest*” yet ironically, they both are beginning their marital lives based on deception and lies. Lady Bracknell represents the archetypal aristocrat who forces the marriage based on wealth or status rather than love. Through farce and exaggeration, Wilde satirically reveals the foolish and trivial matters that the upper-class society looks upon as being important. As said earlier, a satiric piece usually has a didactic side of it. In this case, Lady Bracknell learns that the same person she was criticising is actually her own flesh and blood.

Works Cited

Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Penguin Classics, 1994.

Rahman, Khaleel. “Importance of Being Earnest as a Comedy of Manners a Short Note.” *Academia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/8762803/importance_of_being_earnest_as_a_comedy_of_manners_a_short_note.

Kiran, Shaiza. “Absurdity and Satire in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.” *Academia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/18195702/Absurdity_and_Satire_in_The_Importance_of_being_Earnest

Xhelilaj, Kozeta. “*The Importance of Being Earnest*.” *Academia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/33366878/The_Importance_of_Being_Earnest.

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Harcourt Brace College Publishing, 1993.