



Satire In Oscar Wilde's Play "The Importance Of Being Earnest"

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ABSTRACT

This research first explores the concept of satire, its origin, purposes and types. It deals with Oscar Wilde' play " The Importance of Being Earnest" which is regarded as the farcical Victorian play in the sense that it satirizes the rigid norms of the English society in the Victorian Period. In this paper, the Victorian era is shown as the age of aristocracy, vanity, hypocrisy, depression, strictness and many other norms which are detected in various literary works, one of them is Wilde's farcical play. The Importance of Being Earnest is a satirist play. Satire , as a concept, is a literary means that tends to criticize and ridicule the faults, abuses, stupidity and follies of either individual or an entire society. The reason behind this satire not to defame it, but to reform it. Thus, this paper points out that Wilde, as one of the great satirists, develops satire in his trivial comedy for serious people to attack and reform the shallowness of the Victorian society. That's to say the research implies to reveal the different ways in which the playwright utilizes the play as a device to ridicule the social conventions of the English society of the Victorian Age, especially hypocrisy, vanity, marriage, wealth and class.

Keywords: *satire, The Victorian Age, hypocrisy, injustice and marriage.*



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INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Being Earnest is one of the great plays in English literature, written in 1896 by the eminent Irish playwright, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). The author lived and wrote during the Victorian period which is realized of its sever ethical standards. In his play, Oscar Wilde seeks the social justice among the English society of the Victorian Age. Being a socialist, Wilde criticizes the emergence three social classes, upper, middle and lower class and their inequality. He makes a mockery on the vanity of the dominant figures in the society. He represents the bad conditions of the lower class . He ridicules what is sacred and essential for the life of the Victorian people.

The play, consisted of three acts, is regarded as a fine example of the dramatic genre known as Comedy of Manners, the satirical comedy, which became very popular in English literature during the Restoration Age in the late seventeenth century. It comments upon the manners and social conventions of the artificial English society at that time. In other words, as the comedy of manners, fashion and outlook, *The Importance of Being earnest* lies heavily on the elements of satire and the use of irony. That's to say, irony is a literary device which involves a breach between what is said by the writer and what is understood by the reader. Oscar Wilde uses irony in his play order to expose and criticize the behavior, the flaws and the trivial values of the upper and even the middle class. Throughout the play, Wilde derides and criticizes the ridiculousness and pretentiousness of Victorian culture. It highlights on the importance of wealth and social status of the society rather than pleasure and happiness. The play is a severe critic to the importance of the double existence and the hypocrisy of the Victorian morality. Hence, The play can be seen as a literary work which intends to raise awareness for themes such as ethical standards, , religion, real value, love affairs, education, and family issues. <https://www.prestwickhouse.com/samples/303135.pdf>

1.Origin and Purposes of Satire

The eternal fact of satire is the condition of a human being. Such a man is born for troubles. During his life, he suffers from different diseases , and face various natural shocks . His mental and physical desires are unlimited, and most of them remained unfulfilled, those which are, those which are fulfilled often having unexpected unhappy consequences. Man is continuously engaged in solving the problems which set by nature. But every trouble that he solves causes new ones. Thus, the subjection to disease leads to unpleasant survival of the old, the demands of human civilization lead to more tension and frustration. So, there are several ways to respond to this life , satire is one of them.https://www.google.iq/books/edition/Satire/_pcuDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1

The term satire originally comes from Latin word "*Satura*" which means "full" and it is related to the gastronomical expression '*satura lanx*, referring to a mixture of food. As being mixed, the concept of satire is indefinitely defined to accord with its nature as a genre because of many forms of satiric work. (www.researchgate.net/publication/308861073_Satire)

Satire can be defined as a literary work of certain kind, in which abuses, stupidities, follies and evils are held up to contempt and ridicule. It also can be used for different kinds of literary works. That's to say, satire, the process of attacking, is not merely represented by literature, but also it is appeared on TV, radio, the cinema, visual arts...etc.)Hodgart concentrates on the pleasure of satire, saying:

"Satire can turn from a state of mind into art only when it combines aggressive denunciations with some aesthetic features which can cause pure pleasure in the spectator. The spectator, indeed, may identify himself with the satirist and share his sense of superiority; but that is not enough. There must be other sources of pleasure in the satire, as for example patterns of sound and meaning, or the kind of relationship of ideas that we call wit, which we feel as beautiful or exciting in themselves, irrespective of the subject of satire".

Satire is an artistic genre which uses different types of humor like irony, sarcasm or parody to ridicule politicians, social conventions or situations for the sake of revealing as well as criticizing the harmful actions and beliefs and provoking change. (<https://study.com/learn/lesson/satire-types-examples.html>)

The purpose of satire implies that once an individual or an organization act unacceptably. We wish to correct this unacceptable behavior in different ways as by forcing them to change their ways through threats of punishment, by persuading them to change through conversation or giving moral lectures, or by the satirist who encourages everyone to laugh at them and to see them as ridiculous. In doing so, the satirist has two purposes, the first is to affect and reform the unacceptable behavior of the target, the second is to encourage and urge the others to behave correctly. (<https://www.jacksonsd.org/cms/lib/NJ01912744/Centricity/Domain/808/IntroductiontoSatire.pdf>)

2.Types of Satire

2.1.Horatian Satire

Horatian Satire was called for the writings of the Roman satirist 'Horace' (65–8 BCE) who ridicules the social vices through mild humor. He criticized the controlling opinions and the philosophies of ancient Rome and Greece. This type of satire basically uses light-hearted humour, exaggeration and wit towards what is regarded as folly and evil. It tends to heal and correct some situations through smile and laugh rather than anger and seriousness. (Wikipedia)

Horatian started satirical poetry in 35 BC. His aim is to make people laugh and entertain with wit and humor. Such kind of satire avoids the negativity and passivity in the sense that it refuses to place the blame on others for any aspect of negativity. The objective of Horatian satire, hence, is to be knowing and clever. (<https://thanetwriters.com/essay/technicalities/understanding-different-types-of-satire/>)

2.2. Juvenalian Satire

Juvenalian Satire was named according to the Roman satirist 'Juvenal'(late first century – early second century AD). It is more serious ,harsh and tough than Horatian satire. Juvenal criticized civilizations, the dominant opinions, power and the organizations of the government at that time. He attacked them through his satire, considering them not just wrong, but evil too..He employs parody and exaggeration in order to make the target look incompetent and monstrous.That's to say the goal of Juvenalian satire is to make change publically and socially since he regards his opponent as harmful and evil. (Wikipedia)

It is often criticizes and attacks political class, religious leaders and organizations for the sake of revealing and exposing their hypocrisy. It is in contrary with Horatian satire since anger ,Irony and sarcasm is the base of the type. (<https://thanetwriters.com/essay/technicalities/understanding-different-types-of-satire/>)

3.Oscar Wilde's Satire

At the end of the eighteenth century, English history witnessed a remarkable event which is the French revolution, but what is more noteworthy is the British revolution, the revolution of ideas. The Victorian Age is regarded as the age of development, aristocracy, strictness, depression and taboo which are counted as great topics for many literary works. Several writers appeared and wrote about these changes in Victorian Age, which is also described as the period of deterioration, religious conviction, uneasiness, financial aspect and pretention. One of these major writers is Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), who is considered as a prominent figure ,wrote about the vanity of the dominant opinions and about the bad conditions of the working class. (<https://cdnx.uobabylon.edu.iq/research/bdFJJw1AvEub0Zqmg3i7hw.pdf>)

Oscar Wilde in his farcical comedy "The Importance of Being Earnest" as a result, portrays these themes as satire in his plays. One of them is 'The Importance of Being Earnest' (1889), which is regarded as Wilde's masterpiece. It reflects the aspects of the Victorian period. It highlights the significance of wealth and the life of marriage and love. It also mocks artificiality, hypocrisy, superficiality, frivolity and money-mindedness in the Victorian Age. The play helps the readers to laugh and ridicule at those values through using irony, sarcasm or parody.

Wilde shows through his literary works the significance of double existence to reveal the hypocrisy of the society of Victorian Age. Such society refuse religion and death, while name and pleasure are their priority. The playwright also concentrates on the duality of Victorian people since they show their elegance on the outside and their silliness on inside to prove the artificiality and hypocrisy of men in that age. [file:///C:/Users/DELL/Downloads/2.+163-1741_544_Triviality+and+Seriousness_13\(2\)_Sept2022-Proofread.pdf](file:///C:/Users/DELL/Downloads/2.+163-1741_544_Triviality+and+Seriousness_13(2)_Sept2022-Proofread.pdf)

4. Satire in Oscar Wilde' play' The Importance of Being Earnest"

Oscar Wilde in his play "The Importance of Being Earnest" makes use of satire as a main theme to criticize the society of Victorian Age. The Victorian people, according to Wilde's point of view, is characterized by it hypocrisy and artificial idealism under the rule of aristocracy. The writer derides the trivial importance of the society through treating the matters seriousness with triviality and the matters of triviality as serious. That's to say, the title of the play "The Importance of Bing Earnest" reflects one of the main satirical themes in the play in the sense that the characters of the play deal with the serious things as trivial and trivial things as serious. Moreover, Wilde shows satire in the play mainly about the aristocracy in the sense that he depicts dominant leaders and politicians as possessing wealth and social statue through his characters, one of them is Lady Bracknell who doesn't believe in marriage which based on love, rather than she considers marriage as a source of wealth and social statue. Hence, Oscar Wilde comedy ridicules the culture of the society in Victorian era. According to the title "The Importance of Being Earnest" the play can be counted as a trivial comedy for serious people in that it depicts the hypocrisy, duplicity, deception and the customs of the Victorian society as a devise to obtain the ideas of earnestness. <https://www.tsfx.edu.au/resources/46587.pdf>

Perhaps Wilde's most prevalent exercise of satire in the play is that of Victorian ideals. The society is characterized by the fake ideals of earnestness. The concept of living in a serious way is the priority of the Victorian society to the extent that it can pay any price for such fake ideals. The playwright critically shows that selfishness, hypocrisy, unnecessary pride and ugliness are symbols of evil within the late nineteenth century British people. Their appearance is everything and their style is more important than substance. Wilde critically exposes the haughtiness and arrogance of upper middle class in English society at that time through the characters of the play. Lady Bracknell haughtily dismisses Jack who comes to propose to Gwedolen. Her interrogation to Jack, whether he is qualified to be her son in law or not, is a symbol of her arrogant manner which reflects appearance. This is a hint that Lady Bracknell has a whole control over her daughter to choose her husband. Such arrogant manner depicts the impossibility of the young to choose their suitable life friends by themselves.

Furthermore, characters in Wilde's play represent the aspect of earnestness who are unpleasant with it. One of these characters is Jack Worthing. He lives in a countryside who realizes an urban woman loves a man called Earnest. But Earnest has already had another name, Jack, in his village. To capture the lady's heart, Jack Worthing went to London after choosing a false name, Earnest. The lady falls in love with him immediately. The reason behind that is the Victorian urban woman loves those names are Earnest. So the double life of Jack embodies the hypocrisy of the Victorian society which encourages the youth to get engaged and then married just for the verbal charm of a name. Wilde, thus, makes use of the Victorian people who are really ridiculous. <https://www.scribd.com/document/436622277/A-Satire-on-the-Victorian-Age-in-the-Importance-of-Being-Earnest#>

5. Class Discrimination and it's Satire

The great deal of his piece Oscar Wilde confronts embodies the condition of class. The society in the Victorian period is classified into three social classes, upper, middle and lower class which appeared in Wilde's play "The Importance of Being Earnest". Wilde shows the big differences between of behavior of the upper class that of the lower class. Wilde, hence, makes use of satire on the hypocrisy of the aristocracy. The people of the upper class reflect the aspects of pride and arrogance, considering themselves as the men of wealth and nobility. <https://edubirdie.com/examples/social-classes-reputation-and-social-conventions-in-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

In another aspect, the writer tends to reveal the fact of the upper class system as a strict one in a sense the people of this class marry each other. They don't marry from the middle or lower class. Oscar Wilde ridicules this strict system that makes a big gap between the upper class and the other ones. The aristocrats try to conserve perpetuating gulf between the classes. Furthermore, Wilde in his satirical play mocks at the Victorian individuals of the upper class who consider their attitudes and behaviors as virtuous. He attacks the belief that the middle and the lower class should follow

the attitudes of the upper class people. <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/i/the-importance-of-being-earnest/critical-essays/themes-in-the-importance-of-being-earnest>

The characters of the play 'The Importance of Being Earnest' represent the class differences in the society of Victorian Age through their behaviors. The language which is used among the people of the social classes depicts this difference. That's to say Oscar Wilde in his play describes the people of high class as superior to the people of the other social classes. The aristocrats are arrogant and they are the people of high pride, wealth and appearance. Lady Bracknell, for example, appeared in the play, saying in act one *"I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here. The way you (Jack) flirt with Gwendolen is very disgraceful. It's almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you"*. Her quotation indicates that Lady Bracknell, an individual of the upper class, describes the people of the lower class as "disgraceful" and "bad". What is unethical here that Lady Bracknell despises the other people from different class like her bad behavior to Jack. Another case regarding the underestimation of the upper class people to others when Gwendolen says to Cecily, a girl who lives in the countryside, with a very rude intonation: *"I had no idea there were any flowers in the country. Personally I cannot understand how anybody manages to exist in the country, if anybody who is anybody does. The country always bores me to death"*. <https://www.scribd.com/document/487652545/Final#>

6. Nature of marriage in Victorian Age and its Satire

Another important subject that Oscar Wilde mocks in his play is marriage. Wilde shows marriage as unions which are characterized as they are devoid of sincerity, but they are filled with hypocrisy. Victorian people take advantage to such marriage to gain social status and money rather than to live together happily. The author criticizes the marriage which is devoid of true love which consequently failed. He points out in his drama that the individuals of the society aim to attain standards and social status from the marriage, neglecting their happiness and pleasure. One character represents the marriage of that period, Algernon. The character expresses that there is no more romantic marriage, the one which relied on love and the most important part of love. Wilde, through the character Algernon, debates that this marriage is ruined because Victorians exploit it for pretending as people wealth and aristocracy. https://www.academia.edu/8966294/The_Importance_Of_Being_Earnest_Composition

When Algernon discusses marriage with Jack, saying:

"I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romantic is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact"

We can realize from Algernon's words that he doesn't regard marriage as serious. Marriage, according to his opinion, is not romantic and there is no harmony between Algernon and his wife, and this is clear when he met her for the first time and fell in love with her, there was a contradiction between them, saying; *"... Cecily, I first looked upon your wonderful and incomparable beauty, I have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly"* and he wanted to marry her immediately when he said *"... I love you, Cecily. You will marry me, won't you?"*

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7. Attitude to religion and its satire

Oscar Wilde in his drama makes use of satire of the English in the Victorian era. The playwright utilizes Canon Chasuble as a clearest symbol of the religiousness. The people were concerned with religion faith in the sense that people had to meet the standard of the religion and the society in order to be counted as civilized people. Religion is the basic requirement for changing Algernon and Jack's name. That's to say, the religion plays an important role for every one of the society who wants to meet his aims and desires. https://www.academia.edu/8966294/The_Importance_Of_Being_Earnest_Composition

Religion is a serious topic which the writer satirizes in his play 'The Importance of Being Earnest'. It is an appropriate topic for all the people in the world since it concerns with next generations. Canon Chasuble, as a character in the play, symbolizes the religion. The playwright utilizes this character to reflect the triviality of the people in the Victorian Age. Such people concerned themselves to certain attitudes as a way of reflecting faith to religion. Canon Chasuble is shown in the play that he can marry, rechristen and encourage sermons filled with trivial and meaningless speeches. The character, Even Lady Bracknell, points out that christenings are nothing, but a waste of time and gaining money. Chasuble's untrue worship betrays Miss Prism: *"Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips."* That's why, Wilde's satire in terms of religion is very clear in the play to deride and mocks at the Victorian society for their self-importance.

<https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/i/the-importance-of-being-earnest/critical-essays/themes-in-the-importance-of-being-earnest>

CONCLUSION

This paper basically tends to show satire through Wilde's play "The Importance of Being Earnest". The purpose of this satire is to reveal the reality of the English society during the Victorian Age. The people of that society are realized by hypocrisy, triviality, pretentiousness and ridiculousness in this play throughout satire. The paper refers that the play is a severe condemnation and attack to the importance of the double existence, money and social status of the Victorian society rather than happiness and pleasure. Wilde satirizes the strict system which causes a big gap between the upper and lower class, attacking the belief that the lower class should follow the attitudes of the aristocrats who consider themselves as superior to others. The paper also deals with Wilde's satire to the notion of marriage in the Victorian society. The people of the upper class gain social status and money through this kind of marriage. They don't live together happily since their marriage is devoid from true love. Furthermore, there is a big satire on the concept of religiousness in the Victorian era which is symbolized by the Victorian people who want their aims and desires come true. The religion is very important to those who want to social status and wealth.

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