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# MARRIAGE, RELIGION AND RESPECTABILITY IN *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST* BY OSCAR WILDE*:* A BRIEF ANALYSIS ON THE MASKS OF VICTORIAN SOCIETY

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**ASTRACT:** According to Facina (2005), there is no author beyond his times. Therefore, literary production is constrained by its own cultural and social context, what allows us to read literature also as an historical document. In this fashion, this works aims to briefly analyze the satires to the Victorian morals deployed by Oscar Wilde in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1985), as a means to depict the *zeitgeist* of that period. In order to do so, this paper focuses on some aspects of marriage, religion and respectability portrayed in the play, concluding that Wilde brings to light a particular representation of Victorian reality by his conspicuous but limited portrayal, as he focuses on peculiar classes, leaving aside minor strata.

**Key words**: Victorianism; Oscar Wilde; Satire

## CASAMENTO, RELIGIÃO E RESPEITABILIDADE EM *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST* DE OSCAR WILDE: UMA BREVE SOBRE AS MÁSCARAS DA SOCIEDADE VITORIANA

**RESUMO:** Para Facina (2005), não existe autor à frente de seu tempo. Destarte, a produção literária é restringida por seu próprio contexto sociocultural de criação, permitindo-nos ler literatura também como uma forma de documentação histórica. Nesta perspectiva, o presente trabalho tem como objetivo analisar as sátiras ao período Vitoriano trazidas por Oscar Wilde em *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1985), como uma possibilidade de se retratar o *zeitgeist* desta época. Para tanto, esse trabalho foca em alguns aspectos acerca de casamento, religião e respeitabilidade trazidos na obra, constatando-se que Wilde traz à tona uma representação particular e coerente da realidade Vitoriana por meio de seu retrato conspícuo, porém limitado, já que concentra-se em uma classe social particular, deixando de lado outros estratos.

**Palavras-chave:** Vitorianismo; Oscar Wilde; Sátira

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## INTRODUCTION

According to Pasco (2004, p. 01), a great number of cultural historians have suggested that our historical reality would be augmented if it were infused by the information provided by art and literature. In that sense, according to Facina (2004), even the most renowned artist is made of flesh and bone, conditioned to his social class, ethnical origin, gender and historical processes he belongs to or is situated into. Therefore, his free will is constrained by his creative competences shaped by the history and the society of his own time. In that light, thus, literature can be considered a historical product, a written document of a certain period in time. In such fashion, we intend to analyze the play *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* by Oscar Wilde in this article as a peculiar portrayal of the Victorian era Age.

The play by Wilde portrays the fortunes and misfortunes of two young upper-class Victorian Englishmen who have invented fictional entities in order to scape from tedious social and family obligations. Accordingly, this comic play is a sendup of Victorian values and manners in which Wilde criticizes the masks of the Victorian society, and, by means of such mockery, the *zeitgeist*[3] of that time is brought to light. The deep-seated conservatism and institutionally enforced style of normativity go against pleasure seeking and the liberating behavior of the young lovers, and are mocked by the play's comic undercutting on the social rituals of marriage, christening and mourning (SAMMELLS, 2004). Even though many values are mocked in this work, we are going to focus on marriage, religion and mainly respectability: cornerstones of understanding both the play and its representative scope.

## 1. THE PLAY/ MOCKERY

Materialism, vulgarity, sheer waste were typical of the Victorian period. According to Hazra (2013), the Victorian Period in English Literature is roughly taken to be between 1830 and 1900, approximately coinciding with the long reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) in England. “The age is well-known for its sham seriousness, hypocritical morality and artificial sophistry. Living a double life was quite a common practice of the period (2013, p. 03)”, a fertile soil and incentive to Wilde’s play/ mockery.

[3] The general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of a given era.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde is, in short, his last and most famous play, first produced on 14th February 1895 at the St. James's Theatre (HAZRA, 2013). Its title is an indicator to Wilde's ambiguous discontent for hypocritical morality, as the world "earnest" insinuates seriousness, solemnity and property. Therefore, from its title, one expects that this piece would develop into an exposition of solemnity. However, Wilde, as a matter of fact, introduces the opposite of such value be means of mockery.

Also according to Harza (2013), the subtitle of the play, *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, would capture the essence of the plot. To the scholar, Wilde plays with the counteraction between triviality and seriousness, which become complimentary to each other in the play. During the whole play that describes a Victorian upper-class lifestyle, certain dichotomies are focused, such as morals and immorality, gravity, the burlesque and so on.

In the play, Algernon Moncrieff – one of the main characters – creates a fictitious sick friend named Bunbury as an alibi to leave London once he thinks his aunt, Lady Bracknell, is too domineering. Algernon's friend, also a main character, John/Jack Worthing creates an immoral fictitious brother as well named Ernest. Being so, Jack plays the role of Ernest to win the hand of Algernon's cousin, Miss Gwendolen Fairfax. Later, in the countryside, Algernon embodies Ernest in order to try to have the love of Cecily Cardew, Jack's ward. Thus, the token of the whole plot is "Bunburyism"— an ingenious technique for impersonating false identities and a neologism for Hedonism (HARZA, 2013).

## 2. VICTORIAN VALUES UNVEILED: A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY'S DICHOTOMIES

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* in which satirization to Ernest's earnestness is the key to the comedy; Wilde is making use of fun to portray conventional seriousness. The author mockingly uses ceremonious and dignifying moral language to frivolous actions. In this standpoint, the Victorian Age is a synonym of prudery and extreme repression, in which even furniture legs sometimes had to be concealed under heavy cloth as it could be considered sexually suggestive, for example.

Wilde, in many ways, represents his opinion of Victorian upper-class negativity, conservative and repressive values and power. The character Lady Bracknell embodies authority, being both the foremost symbol of Victorian earnestness and the unhappiness it brings along in result (SAMMELLS, 2004). She is powerful, arrogant, ruthless to the

extreme, conservative and, and self-assured her views of society, marriage, religion, financial downfall, death, and respectability are mocked all over the play.

Aristocratic Victorians valued duty and respectability above everything else. Earnestness – a determined and serious desire to do the correct thing – was at the top of their code of conduct. Appearance really mattered, and style was much more important than intellect. Thus, if a person led a secret life, carry on affairs outside marriage or have children outside the wedlock, society would ignore it as long as social appearance was maintained. For that reason, Wilde questions if the most important or serious issues of the day are overlooked in favor of trivial concerns about appearance, for example. Banality is important and the seriousness is overlooked, for instance, when Algernon, one of the main characters, says at the piano:

> ALGERNON: *[...] I don't play accurately – anyone can play accurately – but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. [...]*(1994, p. 01)

The teatime scene in Act II is a hilarious example of Wilde's idea that manners and appearance were quintessential. The guise of correctness is the framework for disarray. Both Gwendolen and Cecily, when thinking they are engaged to the same Ernest, compete to each other over the tea service while the servants silently watch to it. When Gwendolen requests no sugar, Cecily adds lumps of it to her cup. Moreover, even though Cecely asks for bread and butter, Gwendolen gives her a large piece of cake. Her true feelings come out in a manner that Cecily cannot supposedly hear: "*Detestable girl!*" (1994, p. 47). Then, everything is done properly, no matter if those good manners are camouflaging.

According to Jackson (2000), it is impossible to discuss the play's depiction of authority – its politics, in fact – without considering the style, what is of a paramount importance in the play. Fashion is the subject of almost obsessive comment. Lady Bracknell states that Jack's house is on the unfashionable side of the street; furthermore, she is just willing to accept Algernon to marry Cecily because the latter has chances in life due to her profile despite the *sadly simple* dress she is wearing (1994, p. 58). Lady Bracknell is happy to welcome Cecily into her 'charmed circle', but she must get the signifiers of membership right, for example, to pose her chin up. Style, as Lady Bracknell knows, is politics, to maintain the style of her society is to maintain its power, its privilege and exclusivity (SAMMELLS,

2004). One of the many ways Wilde uses to criticize such topic is the prolix over properly wording used by the characters to talk non-senses.

According to Altick (1973), in everyday Victorian vocabulary, 'respectable' and 'earnest' were nearly always terms of approbation. Adding weight to that, to be serious was to cherish Evangelical religious views, more generally, a serious person was puritanically opposed to the vanities and frivolities of life, devoid of humor, and intolerant to others' frivolity and indulgences (1973, p. 175). Altick also points out that

> less dour in its implication but equally descriptive of the middle-class moral ideal was the epithet "earnest", which while not excluding humor and innocent pleasure, alluded to the same zealousness and above all sincerity in the pursuit of presumably worthwhile personal and social goals (1973, p. 175).

However, such respectability and earnestness are completely mocked, for example when Jack and Algernon say:

> JACK*: [slowly and hesitatingly]: Gwendolen – Cecily – it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind. (p. 50)*
> *[...]*
>
> ALGERNON: *When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Indeed, when I am in really great trouble, as any one who knows me intimately will tell you, I refuse everything except food and drink. At the present moment I am eating muffins because I am unhappy. Besides, I am particularly fond of muffins. (p. 51)*
> *[...]*
>
> JACK*: Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me? (p. 67)*

Wilde's characters allude to another life beneath the surface of Victorian correctness. In our opinion, much of the humor in the play frames a borderline between one's public life with appearances and a transgressive private lifestyle against a social code, which preaches that life must be lived earnestly. In the very final scene, Jack *realized for the first time in* his *life the vital importance of Being Earnest.* However, according to his profile, a man that has created a phony wicked brother *for pleasure, pleasure,* to be Earnest/Ernest – in a shallow interpretation – is just a matter of appearance, style to consolidate an engagement, to be

accepted by Augusta, Lady Bracknell, the representative of Victorian upper-classes exclusiveness.

Another serious subject – religion – is also a topic of satire. Dr. Chasuble is the symbol of religious thought, and Wilde uses him to show how little the Victorians concerned themselves with attitudes reflecting religious faith. Dr. Chasuble can rechristen, marry, bury, etc. Even Lady Bracknell mentions that christenings are a waste of time and, especially, money, however it was considered a luxury, as we can see in the following fragment:

> LADY BRACKNELL*: Every luxury that money could buy, including christening, had been lavished on you by your fond and doting parents (1994, p. 66).*

Furthermore, Dr. Chasuble's devout appearance is contradicted when he manifest a concealed attraction to for Miss Prism: "*Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips*" (1994, p. 30). Quickly correcting his error, the minister hides his hardly holy desires in the language of metaphor again.

On the very first page, Algernon says "*Good Heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?*" when he hears that in married households the champagne is rarely of a top quality, rather, brand. Then, marriage is also a recurrent target to satire. Lady Bracknell, in act III, says:

> LADY BRACKNELL*: To speak frankly, I am not in favor of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable. (p. 59)*

Marriage, as we can perceive throughout the play, was a careful selective process. When Algernon explains that he plans to become engaged to Jack's ward, Cecily, Lady Bracknell decides, "*I think some preliminary inquiry on my part would not be out of place*" (1994, p. 57). When Lady Bracknell strikes Jack with questions about parents, politics, fortune, addresses, expectations, family solicitors, and legal encumbrances, his answers must be proper and appropriate for a legal union between the two families to be approved. Fortune is especially important, and when Jack and Cecily's fortunes are both appropriate, the next problem is family background. Because Jack does not know his parents, Lady Bracknell

suggests he finds a parent – "any with the right lineage will do" – and find one quickly, as we can see in the following passage:

> LADY BRACKNELL: *I would strongly advise you, Mr Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over.* (p. 22)

Appearance is everything, once again. Duty (not joy, love or passion) is important, substantial, so that Algernon's contention that marriage is a loveless duty is presented: *"A man who marries without knowing Bunbury* [an excuse for pleasure] *has a very tedious time of it*" (1994, p. 14). Marriage is presented as a legal contract between consenting families of similar fortunes; background, love, and happiness have little to do with it, evidence of that is when Algernon says: *"the amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous* (1994, p. 14). Marriage is business, and must be just so. Furthermore, end of a marriage can be seen as the breaking up with the duty's chains, freedom. Lady Bracknell says:

> *LADY BRACKNELL: I'm sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbudy. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger.*
> *[...]*
>
> *LADY BRACKNELL: It really makes no matter, Algernon. I had some crumpets with lady Harbury, who seems to me to be living entirely for pleasure now. (p. 15)*

Indeed death is also a target to satire, but in our opinion, what one should highlight is the fact that after marriage, that is, after duty, it is time for pleasure.

For Sammells (2004), Wilde's willingness to employ conventional plot-devices and dramatic structure has encouraged a critical approach to his plays which is premised on a surface/depth model of analysis, maybe best exemplified in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: as "as amusing as the surface is, the comic energy springs from the realities that are mocked" (2004, p. 111). There are systematic inversions of common values (moral / immoral, male / female, serious / trivial etc.), and through such inversions and the realities satirized, Wilde's imitation of the English ruling class, in Raby's words (2000), is sufficiently well informed and accurate to anchor it to reality. In other words, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, by problematizing Victorian society's fall of masks, produces a particular representation of

reality through Wilde's conspicuous, but limited portrayal of that society, as he focuses on peculiar classes, leaving aside minor strata.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As pointed out in our introduction, it is possible that our historical reality is improved if it is fed with information provided by art and literature. In that sense, Pasco (2004) states that the last half of the eighteenth century gives reason to believe that literature is capable of offering a particular useful opening onto the reality of people's lives. Therefore, in the perspective that literature can be read as a historical document, through the satires brought by Wilde, at least for the more attentive readers, it is possible to perceive some issues and values in the Victorian Society.

While some scholars use literary works for an illustration of conclusions about a given period, others turn to them as a source of indication of that reality. In the case of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as we have pointed out, aspects of marriage, religion and respectability in the Victorian period are clear and in a process of on-going perpetuation by Oscar Wilde. However, while literature in one way or another is going to reflect the *zeitgeist* of its creation, we must not believe that a single work in isolation is capable of providing trustworthy insights into the thoughts, feelings, customs, and details of everyday live of a given period (PASCO, 2004). In the case of *The Importance of Being Earnest,* specifically, the Victorian society describe is quite coherent to what historians claim it to be as pointed out in our analysis, but we should not take it as a complete guide to such period. As already signalized, Wilde produces a particular representation of that reality, but also limited as the focus falls on peculiar classes.

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