Alec Hernandez

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*The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of Oscar Wilde’s crowning masterpieces. The acclaimed comedic play tells the tale of Jack Worthing and the mischief he causes when he and his best friend, Algernon Moncrieff, assume double identities. When analyzing the play from various critical perspectives, the reader can divulge into the various historical roots and gender roles that the author uses to promote his message and criticize the Victorian upper class.

Evaluating the play from a historical critical perspective offers a retrospective look into the various references the play makes to Victorian England. The Victorian Era of England is typically defined as the period in which Queen Victoria reigned as monarch. “The Victorian period formally begins in 1837, the year Victoria became Queen, and ends in 1901, the year of her death” (“The Victorian Period”). This time in England is characterized by widespread developments in various sectors of life and its own unique customs and traditions, many of which are present throughout the play and the most predominant of which are those pertaining to marriage and courting. The first instance of this is when Algernon and his servant Lane are discussing marriage. Lane tells Algernon “’I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person’” (Wilde 8). The lighthearted manner in which Lane brushes off his previous marriage prompts Algernon to comment “’Lane’s views on marriage seem somewhat lax. They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility’” (Wilde 8). This seriousness of marriage is consistent with the historical Victorian ideals. “Courting was taken very seriously by both sides. Men and women were careful not to lead the other on unnecessarily” (Hoppe). Conventional etiquette was complex and strict during this period, and the sacredness of marriage to an even higher degree, which is evident in Algernon’s comment. This is later revisited when Algernon is discussing Jack’s informal relationship with Gwendolyn. He tells Jack that “ It is very romantic to be in love’” (Wilde 9). When talking about divorces, Algernon quips that “’Divorces are made in heaven’” (Wilde 9). These are just a few more examples in which Algernon displays the Victorian ideals of marriage. He believes in romance and falling in love, and that marriages are powerful bonds, ones that can only be broken by death. Lady Bracknell continues this convention when she finds Jack proposing to Gwendolyn. “’You are not engaged to anyone. When you do, I or your father will inform you of the fact. It is hardly a matter that [you] could be allowed to arrange for [yourself]. I have a few questions to put you to, Mr. Worthing’” (Wilde 21). During the Victorian Era, marriage was so much of an obligation that it was tradition to “have the bank accounts studied, the ancestral lineages inspected, and political connections explored. If both parties passed muster, the next step toward marriage was the engagement” (Hoppe). Lady Bracknell follows this almost to the tee. Throughout the interrogation, she asks him “’what is your income? What are your politics? Are your parents living?’” (Wilde 22-23). Beyond the broad references to marriage and courting, there are many distinct historical references throughout the play as well. When Algernon asks Jack out to have dinner together, Jack complies but says “’I can’t dine at the Savoy’” (Wilde 14). This is a reference to London’s famous Savoy Hotel, where eating at its fine dining restaurants could very well run up a high tab. “London is filled with historic hotels—some with tales of the rich and famous, others with stories centuries old—but among those, The Savoy stands out” (Bosch). When Cecily, Jack’s niece, is avoiding her academic studies, Miss Prism attempts to get her back on track. “’ Pray open your Schiller at once’” (Wilde 32). This is a reference to a works of Friedrich Schiller, a “German poet and playwright” (“Friedrich Schiller”) famous throughout the 1800’s. In Act II, when Jack is deciding whether to settle the bill that Grisby had just delivered for Algernon, he is in awe of the staggering amount. Jack, Miss Prism, and Dr. Chasuble are dumbfounded and for good reason. At the time the play was written, Algernon’s balance roughly translates to almost $4,000. As the other two make their comments, the doctor remarks ‘”We are far away from Wordsworth’s plain living” (Wilde 47). This is a reference to the William Wordsworth, a 19th Century poet who is “remembered as a poet of spiritual and epistemological speculation, a poet concerned with the human relationship to nature” (“William Wordsworth”). The doctor’s comment contrasts Algernon’s extravagant living and Wordsworth’s simple lifestyle. After analyzing the play from a historical critical perspective, it is evident that it is very much a product of the time it was written in. Mentions of the customs, events, and icons of the Victorian Era are laced throughout the dialogue.

Examining the play from a gender critical perspective can also offer insight into the male and female gender stereotypes reflective of the Victorian era. Perhaps the most overarching gender roles throughout the play are those associated with courting. Both Gwendolyn and Cecily are convinced that they could not be with someone who’s name isn’t Ernest. Gwendolyn tells Jack this in Act I. “I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain. The only really safe name is Ernest’” (Wilde 20). Cecily again reiterates a similar message to Algernon in Act III. ‘”You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest. There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest’” (Wilde 61). Both Gwendolyn and Cecily are convinced that Ernest is the optimal name for a partner due in large part to the qualities that society perceives from it. It is in this aspect of their attractiveness to the name that both characters reflect the gender roles of courting to satisfy society rather than themselves. They both like the name Ernest not because they themselves enjoy it but rather because they enjoy how society interprets it and how it makes them look. “Men and women searched for an ideal relationship based on the expectations of a demanding society. If a man or woman did not possess the qualities desired by the Victorian society, the opposite sex may have dismissed the person as an unsuitable mate” (Appell). Both men and women were expected to court those who fit society’s expectations, not their own, and this gender role is present in the play. Another gender stereotype present is patriarchal authority and superiority. Throughout the Victorian Era, men were valued more than women. The man was the head of the household and their word was final. This is very much present throughout much of the dialogue between Jack and Algernon in which they discuss how to manipulate their interests and yet have no qualms about the morality or ethics of doing so. “(in a very patronizing manner): ‘My dear fellow, the truth isn’t quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl. What extraordinary ideas you have about the way to behave to a woman!’” (Wilde 27). “When a man does exactly what a woman expects him to do, she doesn’t think much of him. One should always do what a woman doesn’t expect, just as one should always say what she doesn’t understand’” (Wilde 73). These are just a few of the instances in which both Jack and Algernon reflect the condescending and presumptuous attitude men had towards women in the Victorian era. “Men, allegedly controlled by their mind or intellectual strength, dominated society as the governing sex, given that they were viewed as rational, brave and independent” (“Victorian Women: The Gender of Oppression”). Male supremacy is also present when Lady Bracknell learns of Jack’s proposal to Gwendolyn. She quickly dismisses the idea of it and reminds Gwendolyn that “’You are not engaged to anyone. When you do, I or your father will inform you of the fact’” (Wilde 21). Gwendolyn, a female, is not deemed capable of making such a decision and it is left for her father to decide. A direct example of female gender roles present is in Cecily’s academic studies. Throughout the play, Cecily is seen being distracted from her studies and Miss Prism, the governess in charge of her education, continually tries to correct her. “’Cecily! I must beg you to return to your Political Economy’” (Wilde 55). This is consistent with the homeschooling wealthy girls would receive in Victorian England. “Poor girls did not go to school when the Victorian age began meaning they had little education. Girls from wealthy families would usually be taught at home by a governess” (“Victorian Britain: Children at School”). Different expectations were held different opportunities existed for men and women. Men would be allowed to receive an education at a school while girls would be restricted to homeschooling. After analyzing the play from a gender critical perspective, it is obvious that Wilde relies on many of the gender roles commonplace in the Victorian era in order to make the play relatable to its original audience.

Studying the play from a feminist critical perspective can also provide a look into the misogynistic portrayal of women. It could be argued with much confidence that a feminist would completely disagree with the way Wilde designed the female characters. In their most fundamental aspect, both Gwendolyn and Cecily are naive, incapable, unintelligent, and superficial in their obsession with the name Ernest. While both male and female characters are flawed, the women take on the role of the victim, the receiving end of Algernon and Jack’s deceptive lie. In this light, the men remain in a position of power while the women are submissive to them. This corresponds with the primary feminist argument that “women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is illegitimate and unjustified” (Haslanger). While Gwendolyn is presented as a bit more put-together, Cecily is written in a way to almost make her look delusional. This is most recognizable when Algernon confesses his love to her. As he proposes to her, she reminds him that they “’have been engaged for the last three months’” (Wilde 59). Puzzled by this information, he questions her and she reveals that she created a whole back story of their love before ever meeting him. “I dare say it was foolish of me, but I fell in love with you, Ernest. The next day I bought this little ring in your name. Here in this drawer are all the little presents I have given you. And this is the box in which I keep all your letters’” (Wile 59-60). She is portrayed as unintelligent with low enough self-esteem as to create a person and events that never happened in order satisfy her desires. Cecily’s fantasy of having the perfect spouse is so powerful that she has actually received imaginary gifts and fought with Algernon before ever meeting him. A feminist would argue that Cecily is damaging to the representation of women because the “media often presents women as cleaners, housewives, domestic servants; providing comfort and support for men” (“Feminism”). Cecily and Gwendolyn act as comfort and support for men, the object of Jack and Algernon’s desires. The design of both Gwendolyn and Cecily in their need of the perfect man supports the idea that women need a man in order to be fulfilled and happy. In addition to this, Cecily is portrayed as a poor academic scholar. Evidence for this can be found in Miss Prisms many attempts to keep her dedicated to her studies. “’Cecily! Surely such a utilitarian occupation as the watering of flowers is rather Moulton’s duty than yours? Especially at a moment when intellectual pleasures await you. Your German grammar is on the table’” (Wilde 32). This is also reinforced in the subtle comments that display her poor understanding of common phrases. As Miss Prism comments on Jack’s brother, she tells Cecily that “’as a man sows so let him reap’” (Wilde 33), to which Cecily responds ‘”But men don’t sew, Miss Prism. And if they did, I don’t see why they should be punished for it’” (Wilde 33). A feminist would argue that Cecily’s education is the result of an “education system that is patriarchal. Education as it stands promotes male domination” (“Feminism”), an idea that is accurately represented in the fact that she is homeschooled instead of being allowed to attend school like men. Her intellect is obviously below average after inspecting many of the comments she makes and considering the make-believe story she created. Later in the story, the naivety of both Gwendolyn and Cecily surface when they decide to look past both men’s chicanery. After being confronted by Jack and Algernon and being told the truth, that they lied in order to be in good standing with them, both Cecily and Gwendolyn remain high in their suspicions yet decide to look past them anyways. When asked if she believes Algernon, Cecily replies “’I don’t. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer’” (Wilde 76). Gwendolyn agrees and states that ‘”In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing’” (Wilde 76). The fact that both women agreed to ignore the entire charade for the mere reason that the sentiment behind the lie was appropriate validation for it puts women in a poor position. A feminist would argue that this decision reinforces the notion that “women are oppressed because their socialized to be dependent on men and remain in second place” (“Feminism”). These character’s actions reinforce the idea that women are so dependent on men to the point where they are expected to look past whatever poor treatment they may be on the receiving end of. The need for a relationship and its fulfillment trumps the need to be treated honestly and fairly. A feminist would argue that this is just one of the many instances in which women are portrayed as secondary to men. After analyzing *The Importance of Being Earnest* from a feminist critical perspective, it is clear that a feminist would denounce the work due to its poor portrayal of women.

Dissecting *The Importance of Being Earnest* from a Marxist perspective delves into the author’s intent of writing the play as a means to propagandize against the Victorian elitist class. Much of the play was written as a satire by contrasting how the Victorian upper class presented themselves versus how they actually behaved. In this regard, Wilde is propagandizing against the upper class by showing the audience how flawed they are through the actions of his characters. The Victorian elite were typically very religious. “Victorian England lived under the Anglican church. The Bible was considered the foundation of moral behavior and people took its words literally” (Kanobi). Despite this precept, Wilde reveals that the Victorian elite were neither religious nor moral based upon the actions of Algernon and Jack. Both men lie and deceive each other’s families. When Jack is speaking out against Lady Bracknell to Algernon, Algernon takes no offense and says ‘” I love hearing my relations abused’” (Wilde 26). It is clear that he does not respect his family and both men treat their lies as a game, where the person who is discovered first loses. This also contradicts the Victorian aristocracy’s idea of the gentleman, something all men of the upper class aspired to be. “The concept of the gentleman was not merely a social or class designation. There was also a moral component inherent in the concept. The essence of a gentleman is what the word says, that he comes from a pure gens, or is perfectly bred. After that, gentleness and sympathy, or kind disposition and fine imagination” (Cody). Men of the noble class aspired to possess the qualities associated with the idea of a gentleman. However, Algernon and Jack’s deception places them far away from being consistent with a gentleman’s values. In regards to education, Wilde shows that despite appearing to be well-educated and intelligent, the upper class was actually quite ignorant and dumb. This is best exhibited in Miss Prism’s character, the governess in charge of Cecily’s academics. Despite her large vernacular and her willingness to demonstrate it in almost every sentence, it is revealed that she has made rather poor decisions in the past. When discussing her past employment and the circumstances of the missing baby, Miss Prism replies ‘”Lady Bracknell, I admit with shame that I do not know. I only wish I did. In a moment of mental abstraction, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette and placed the baby in the hand-bag. I left it in the cloak-room of one of the larger railway stations in London’” (Wilde 86). Only a true fool and someone with no common sense could mistake an infant for a manuscript. Miss Prism’s clumsiness and stupidity is Wilde’s way of propagandizing against the intelligence of the aristocracy. He is trying to tell the audience that despite their attempts to appear intelligent by attending the finest boarding schools and receiving the best education, the upper class is still dumb. Finally, Wilde best satirizes the upper class as a whole simply through the basic plot and title of the play. The entire idea surrounding the work is that two men pretend to be someone who they are not and reap the consequences that follow. Despite ending on a happy note, both men suffer unnecessary stress and have to continually lie in order to not be found out. Both men are not sincere, or earnest. It is in this aspect and the title of the play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, that Wilde makes his intent known. He doesn’t feel that the members of the upper class are honest people. He believes that they are all putting on a façade for the sake of convention and manners in order to appear better than they actually are. Algernon and Jack’s fake identities are representative of this. Wilde most purely captures his purpose and propagandizes this point in the use of the word “earnest” as a pun. While it is literally important for the characters to be named Ernest for the sake of securing their lover’s commitment, it is more literally important for the elites to be earnest in virtue, a quality he feels they are lacking. Wilde builds his case in various instances throughout the play which eventually culminate into a very direct message by the end of it. The characters reveal moments when they appear to be something else, aside from what many people expect them to be, such as smart, moral, and honest. As the play ends, the audience realizes that the upper class is nothing like what they’re supposed to be and Wilde is successful in propagandizing this very message. After inspecting the play from a Marxist critical perspective, it is apparent that Wilde uses his characters and their actions to propagandize his message of elitist insincerity and fakeness.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* enjoyed critical acclaim and success during its first publication and has continued to receive it throughout its many reincarnations. Within its two acts, Wilde draws upon many references to Victorian England to tell his story. The accuracy of which lends credence to the seriousness of his message. After analyzing the play’s dialogue from various critical perspectives, it is clear that Wilde masterfully draws upon historical references and gender roles, while at the same time propagandizing his message of aristocratic phoniness.

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