Rachel Clough

Foster

AP Literature and Composition

4 January 2016

Earnestly Ernest

To feature the humor and satire of his work to the reader, as well as his view on the outwardly stoic and hypocritical upper class of England, within his popular play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde utilizes distinct dramatic and situational irony through the knowledge he supplies the reader or audience and the play on words used in the title.

Situational Irony within the play largely focuses on the use of names, or more specifically, the name Ernest. The title of the work highlights the virtue of being “Earnest” while within the first scene of the play a character is introduced first under the name Jack, but privately by his friend as Ernest. Without previous characterization of Jack/Ernest, the reader or audience can easily assume Ernest is a charactonym, yet this character goes on to tell his companion “… my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country…” (Wilde, 432), so one way or another, he is lying somewhere and failing to live up to the name “Ernest” and its underlying meaning, the opposite of what one would immediately assume. The female counterparts of the two leading men also have a fixation on the name “Ernest”, each wishing to marry a man of that name, and only that name, which causes the both men to claim the name, falsifying their own identities, to wed the women they adore. Though the title reads as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a more telling title for the content might have “The Importance of Being Ernest” as the name seems to hold far more importance to the characters than the virtue. With the apparent ease the characters have changing their moods and identities to fit the moment, Wilde pokes fun at the aesthetic nature of his time and the upper class of England by creating in this play a satire of society and the nature marriage. To properly characterize the society of the day, “… Wilde has created … a world of nonsense” (Snider). Each character in the play shows themselves at one point or another to be decidedly not earnest, all while expecting it from those around them, making Wilde’s comical view of his fellows clear to the audience in a fittingly comical way.

Pulling away from the slightly offensive portrayal of society as Wilde saw it, the dramatic irony softens the blow, giving the protagonists a happy ending after all the grief and foolishness they experienced. The leading women, Cecily and Gwendolyn, have an argument nearing the end of the play after they find out they both are engaged to a man named Earnest Worthing, yet the audience knows that neither are engaged to a man with that name, making it a humorous scene in which the ladies fight for a name with no owner while both being engaged to the cousin of the other woman (Wilde, 455-458). The argument seems ridiculous to the audience, again proving the shallowness of Wilde’s compatriots, or at least his own opinion of them. But the jab isn’t as offensive as it could be. Because the women were lied to, in addition to the humor, the reader can feel a sort of sympathy or empathy with the two characters making them into more relatable characters instead of caricatures. In addition, the close of the play includes a twist, revealing Jack’s parentage, meaning his best friend is actually a mischievous younger brother – which he had been telling his household he had, though he believed it was a lie – and his true name, which happens to be Ernest. With one swift motion, all of Jack’s lies are absolved into truths, “… so that being earnest is tantamount to not being earnest” (Pablé, 303), and he lives up to his charactonym. The portrayal of Jack/Ernest is negative throughout a majority of the piece, and as a result, so is the upper class of England as a whole, but Wilde did not write this play to offend or to change society, simply to make fun of it. So by wrapping up the play with a happy ending and an absolution of Jack’s hypocrisy acts as a subtle apology. The reader can perceive Wilde’s views as condescending, but it is also clear Wilde finds the faults of society somehow endearing, and wishes to show his affections through the same attention he himself received from society, mockery and attention.

Works Cited

Pablé, Adrian. “The importance of re-naming Ernest?.” *Université de Neuchâtel (Switzerland)*.

John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005. Web. 23 December 2015.

< http://www.oscholars.com/TO/Appendix/Library/Pable.pdf >

# Snider, Clifton. “Synchronicity and the Trickster in *The Importance of Being Earnest.*”

# *California State University, Long Beach.* California State University, 23 August 2009

# Web. 23 December 2015.

# < http://web.csulb.edu/~csnider/wilde.earnest.article/>

Wilde, Oscar. *The Works of Wilde*. New York: Walter J. Black Co., 1927. 429-471. Print.