

Aspects of comedy: Text overview – *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Read our overview which shows how teachers can consider *The Importance of Being Earnest* in relation to the genre of comedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

Overview

A comedy of dual-identity and romance.

The Importance of Being Earnest is a comedy of manners and openly ridicules Victorian conventions of etiquette and aestheticism as represented in the play. Wilde artistically creates a world that is to be laughed at – where cards are left to show arrivals, where proposals of marriage are formal, where chaperones are demanded, where meals are ceremonious and values of rank, birth and fashion are exaggerated. Central to the comedy is the word play around the name and the meaning of Ernest / earnest. Jack reveals early on that he calls himself 'Ernest in the town and Jack in the country' thereby setting up the country / town opposition and Algernon claims that Jack looks as if his 'name was Ernest' and that he 'is the most earnest looking person he ever saw in his life'. Jack's duplicity sets the tone for the entire play. Interestingly, however, by the play's conclusion, the plot reveals that Jack really is an Ernest, so Algernon was not far wrong. Similarly, Algernon also adopts the name and the character of Ernest – this time to woo Jack's ward Cecily, who like Jack's intended fiancée Gwendolen, has always dreamt of 'marrying someone with the name of Ernest'. Cecily is also attracted to the idea of the reprobate Ernest, whom Jack has invented as his brother, and who excites her romantic imagination. The confusion caused by the pretences induces conflict, particularly between Gwendolen and Cecily, and Algernon and Jack. The story is complicated by the presence of Gwendolen's mother, Lady Bracknell who wants her daughter to marry someone on her list of eligible young men and not Jack, whose parentage is unknown and who was found in a hand-bag at Victoria Station.

As comic villain, Lady Bracknell takes the form of the stock Victorian dowager. She is presented as an absurd figure, one without compassion or tact. Lady Bracknell's influence stretches not only over the main plot but also over the subplot involving Miss Prism, Cecily's spinster governess. The subplot forms a parody of melodramatic and farcical conventions and ends in the revelation that it was, in fact, Miss Prism who accidentally 'placed the baby in the hand-bag',

meaning that Jack and Algernon are brothers thereby allowing the multiple marriages to take place. The happy ending, while resolving the problems experienced during the characters' courtships, also suggests that deception will continue to be present in their lives. On hearing that Jack has been accidentally telling the truth his whole life (he really is called Ernest) and after his begging of forgiveness for this, Gwendolen responds in a traditionally Wildean way saying that she can forgive him because she feels that he is 'sure to change'.

Complex Plotting

Wilde follows traditional farcical conventions in the complex plotting of the play. The plot moves from the relative order of the opening act to disorder when Jack 'kills off Ernest', whilst, unbeknown to him, Algernon has arrived and adopted the role of Cecily's 'wicked cousin'. Furthermore, Cecily and Gwendolen, believing they are engaged to the same man, each declare the other 'detestable' and then minutes later, after discovering Jack and Algernon's deception, claim that in their pain they are now 'sisters'. The added comic tension over Jack's true identity and the identity of the owner of the hand-bag, brings the play to its climax, where all true identities are revealed and marriages are proposed, restoring order and allowing Jack to realise the 'vital Importance of Being Earnest'.

Comic Stereotypes

Algernon adopts the typical Wildean characteristics of the dandy. His opening admission that he doesn't play the piano 'accurately' but that he 'plays with wonderful expression' demonstrates the value he places on appearance and style, seen again when he later states that he has no appetite unless he has a 'button hole first'. Similarly, his invention of an 'invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury' allows him to shirk all responsibility and provides him with the perfect excuse to do whatever he pleases. The invention of an alter ego is suggested to be a common necessity in the masculine world of high society. Lady Bracknell is herself stereotypical, a harriidan full of pomposity and arrogance. Her statement that Jack should 'try and acquire some relations' and her disapproval of 'anything that tampers with natural ignorance' allow Wilde to mock the snobbishness of the upper echelons of Victorian society and particularly women of this type. Furthermore Miss Prism, with her delight in 'the three volume novel' and her disapproval of Ernest's 'shameful debts and extravagance', is presented as a stereotypical comic spinster. In her comic backstory, she was clearly more interested in her romantic novel than in the baby for whom she was caring: the manuscript is safe in the pram; the baby is left in a handbag.

Comedy as Self-reflexive

Wilde pokes fun at the absurdity of his own plot throughout the play drawing attention to its own silliness. Algernon, seemingly unable to distinguish between truth and deception, states that it is 'perfectly childish to be in deep mourning for a man who is actually staying for a week in your house', and on Jack's

demand that he leave, follows this up with 'I certainly won't leave you so long as you are in mourning'. Through the dialogue Wilde acknowledges the absurdity of his own plot lines, inviting the audience to find comedy here too. Furthermore, on hearing that his 'brother' has turned up at his house, Jack states 'I think it is perfectly absurd': here again Wilde draws attention to the play's artifice and creates comedy by looking inwards.

Settings and Social Commentary

The play opens on 'Half Moon Street', a fashionable and exclusive area of London, immediately presenting Algernon as upper class and privileged. The self-indulgence of his city lifestyle is quickly presented by Wilde when Jack states that he has come to town for 'pleasure' and that 'when one is in town one amuses oneself'. This use of setting allows Wilde to comment on the excesses and the idleness of the upper classes through a sharply ironic tone, perhaps best exemplified by Lady Bracknell's paradoxical belief that 'a girl with a simple unspoiled nature like Gwendolyn could hardly be expected to reside in the country'. The city setting is contrasted by the bucolic country setting of the second two acts at 'The Manor House'. Here Algernon feels free to 'bunbury' and Gwendolyn to play out her romantic escape with Jack. Indeed, the contrasting settings are reflected in the oppositions within characters, and induce witty repartee between Gwendolyn and Cecily. When Cecily declares it is time to call 'a spade a spade', Gwendolyn remarks that she has 'never seen a spade' and that it is obvious that their 'social spheres have been widely different'. However, their subsequent declaration of dedicated friendship allows Wilde to pass comment on the fickle nature of relationships in a time in which appearance was everything.

Witticisms, paradoxes, epigrams and language choices

The play could be said to be overloaded with punning, wit and paradox. Wilde clearly enjoys his own word play sometimes for its own sake and if the audience is not keenly tuned much could be missed.

Two of the most common words in the play are serious and nonsense, words that are significant because all that is serious is reduced to nonsense by the characters. Yet, there is much to delight in many of the utterances, for example when Jack confesses to Lady Bracknell that he has 'lost his parents' her reply is 'To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness' and when Lady Bracknell insists at the play's conclusion that the marriages need to take place at once because of her dislike of long engagements: 'I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable'.

Parody and Satire

The Importance of Being Earnest borrows from a range of comic genres. Wilde parodies melodrama at the climax when Jack believes he is reunited with his

mother and cries 'Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Mother I forgive you!' This hyperbolic treatment of a serious subject creates comedy whilst parodying attitudes of an outwardly pious society's treatment of women. Similarly Wilde employs a sharply satirical tone when addressing a society 'where more than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read' and attacks literary critics who 'haven't been to university'. This comic treatment of censorship and criticism allows Wilde to satirise the attitudes that led to his later imprisonment.