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## A Study of the Theme of Triviality as Brought Out in "The Importance of Being Earnest"

The interpretation that “we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality” greatly applies to the Importance of Being Earnest. The Importance of Being Earnest is a subversive comedy of manners with the intention to give a satirical portrayal of social and moral conventions and create humour for the audience. The theme of triviality or, lack of seriousness in subjects considered of high value in Victorian Society is a predominant theme in the play. Therefore it may be argued that the statement previously expressed significantly applies to the play, especially in the themes of marriage, identity which are explored throughout the play.

The topsy-turvy ideas of marriage in “The Importance of Being Earnest” clearly show that “serious” ideas are treated with complete and honest “triviality”, especially through the exploration of Gwendolen’s attitude towards appearances and marriage. Gwendolen and Cecily both doubt Algernon and Jack’s intentions of their identity change, but they both agree that “the wonderful beauty” of Jack’s and Algernon’s answer overrules their intentions and is self-explanatory enough as “in matters of grave importance, style not sincerity is the vital thing”. In much the same way it is the “style” of the play that matters; and this is clearly reflected throughout the book from Algernon’s flamboyant manner of speech and his excessive use of flourishing words. This line also easily sums up the play in a few words, as it explores how appearances are of importance in the play and thus portrays what the important values were in Victorian Society. Gwendolen speaks in reference to Wilde’s views on the aesthetic movement. In Wilde’s view, the superficial or the appearance of things, is what really matters - beauty for the sake of beauty; hence, all that is meant to be beautiful, romantic and exquisite must be taken at face value. To most people in today’s society, these views would be juxtaposed, with the idea that we should “not judge a book by its cover”, and that there is a deeper meaning in most things. Thus the view that “serious” things in life should be treated with “triviality” is a prominent theme in the play through the exploration of the appearances involved in marriages and the lack of importance honesty was treated with.

Another part of the play where the theme or marriage supports the statement that “we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality”, is when Lane proposes his views on marriage and they are quickly dismissed as unimportant. This is a key theme in exploring the many contradictions of values within the play, Lane. Lane is seen by his employer; Algernon as a character who should set a good example; it could almost be argued that Lane is used as a scapegoat by Algernon, so he can

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justify himself, his views on the irrelevance of marriage and it could further reflect how the Victorian society, had their appearances so polished that they almost saw themselves as perfect and pinned any blame on their servants to keep their record spotless. Lane's view on marriage is seen as rather lax on the idea of marriage as he claims that his marriage was only a "consequence of a misunderstanding" - therefore we can see that his view on marriage is flippant and dismissive, and he acts as if it's unnatural to have "only been married once"; this to a person of current society seems to be a social norm, this creates comedy through the use of elements of comedy of manners, as it seems almost absurd that the servants should be taken as role models in society. Lane's remark clearly creates humour as the absurdity and the surrealism in the statement is said with such conviction (as seen in the 1964 tv episode version of the play direct by Bill Bain, Lane's grave attitude added even more humour and weight to his comment) so that it challenges and stretches social boundaries of marriage where many people are led to believe that one marriage is the ideal marriage; no matter how happy it is, or how much/how little financial gain came from it. Therefore the view that "serious" things in life should be treated with "triviality" is prominent theme in the play, and it's explored through the use of the class system and their contrast of status and their attitudes.

Identity is another key theme in which can be seen that uniqueness and singularity of each person, is treated with no importance, to the point that honesty has become trivial in the play and the lives of Jack and Algernon become sub plots in comparison to their life of their Bunburys which are of higher interest and thus of higher importance. One can clearly see that Gwendolen and Cecily have no interest in a honest and faithful marriage - instead they are both interested for their future husband to have the name "Ernest" - the point it becomes ironic and in some way morbid that this is all they intend to focus on, and they will not accept to marry Jack or Algernon unless they have this name. The play on words is particularly interesting; it could be argued that the pun emphasises the layers of Victorian Society; the private sphere and the public sphere, and how one layer (Ernest) was built on deceit and lies which were expressed towards others, and in the private sphere it was possible to meet the "earnest" person underneath. On the other hand it can be seen that the name nicely links back to the title of the play, "The Importance of Being Earnest" and the pun is made more complex, and the reader realises that for both Algernon and Jack it is important to become "Ernest", however if they were "Earnest" from the very beginning then they would never face the issues they did. This situation further shows how much surfaces and appearances mattered during the Victorian times; and the play portrays the image that not even marriages were of that high importance, rather; they were conducted at the spur of the moment. Hence the view that "serious" things in life should be treated with "triviality" is prominent theme in the play, and it is seen especially through lack of identity in the character and the acceptance of this, or even encouragement of this.

On the other hand it may be argued that this play does not encourage the idea of treating "trivial

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things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality”, but instead it is a moral play with a deeper meaning when explored. This play epitomises the Victorian Society at the time and explores its surface nature through comedy of manners and farce and through the exploration of such characters as Lady Bracknell or Gwendolen. It can be argued that indeed these characters are a spokesman for Oscar Wilde, and through their witty repartees and speech they are actually commenting on the Victorian Society. For example when Gwendolen and Cecily argue about who is really the fiancé of Ernest; it can be seen that they only get frustrated - however, Gwendolen only really gets annoyed when she finds that “too much sugar” has been added to her tea. This further pronounces that “trivial” things in life were treated “seriously” and shows the nature of the Victorian society and how subversive it was however it is seen that this play comments on the Victorian society, so although at first glance these “trivial” things are treated “seriously”, it can be argued that in fact, Wilde toys around with the idea of triviality, and seriousness making them into the opposite in order to create a statement therefore the expressed idea that “trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality” may be argued to not apply to this play.

Therefore the statement that “trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality” greatly applies to this play as not only does it create humour and irony but it also creates reflects The Victorian Society and it’s unmoral nature and in fact it point out its flaws through the running commentary in the characters which just needs to be read the right way in order to create a ironical and satirical view of the Victorian society during Wilde’s time. However as it is also a satirical portrayal of the Victorian society it can also be considered to be an overall serious play with undertones of triviality which when studied are just pointing out triviality of the time. Hence the phrase that “trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality” applies immensely to this play.

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