

The Importance of Being Earnest, by Oscar Wilde

Jack and Algernon are good friends. Jack takes great care of his reputation and has a serious morality complex. Algernon doesn't care much about what people think of him, never considering the moral shortcomings of his actions. However, it becomes apparent that the two are not actually that different. Algernon has created an imaginary friend, who is always ill at the exact times that he wants to escape from an uncomfortable social situation, which causes him to leave to "tend" to his friend. Jack, for all his attention to morality, has created an even worse situation, in which he himself poses as two separate people, depending on the situation, in order to escape his dull life in the country, and to see his lover Gwendolyn, who only knows him by his false identity.

Oscar Wilde pokes fun at all the Victorian's sacred cows of the day. Much of what the culture believed in word was very different than what they believed in practice. In practice, one's true character and substance in life was no match for his stylistic manners, and duty to one's family name came before anything else, including truth and justice. "Earnestness" represents the Victorian ideal of duty, virtue, and sincerity. Therefore, Wilde turns the connotation around, ascribing the name of "Ernest" to Jack's double identity, making it a symbol of deception. He is in essence saying that for all the Victorian's ideals on character and morality, they have sacrificed truth for a symbol.

Many of the characters in this play often say the opposite of what we accept to be true, thereby revealing what is actually true in society. For example, Algernon explains to Jack that "half of modern culture depends upon what one shouldn't read." It is simply bringing to light what no one will admit in the open. Statements like these can be applied to our own culture. Can we deny that half our modern culture takes its cues from the latest junk novels and movies, instead of from Scripture, or classic, wholesome literature?

Though this play was written for its day and its own problems, it is very applicable to our own culture – a culture that trivializes what's really important and making a big deal over unimportant matters. This play has very unrealistic characters, but through them, a very real issue is outlined. If mankind simply took off its mask and revealed its true colors, society would be just as ridiculous and laughable as this theatrical demonstration.

As Lady Bracknell so aptly put it, it is certain that they all live in "an age of surfaces." It will be a long, upward climb for them all to change their habits and values, if they are willing. Likewise in today's culture, we face a long, upward climb back to a society that values truth and sincerity over style. Our earthly statuses of wealth, social standing, marriage, style, or good looks should not eclipse our desire for ethical character, according to God's standards, which are everlasting.

"In all things, shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity. Sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you." Titus 2:7. "For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever." 1 Peter 1:24-25