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Social Satire in The Importance of Being Earnest

In Oscar Wilde's satirical play, The Importance of Being Earnest, Wilde uses humour and social satire to depict his image of how the elite portray themselves. Through the use of puns, epigrams, and wit, he pokes fun at their absurdities and arrogance. While the issue of social class is undoubtedly an underlying theme of the entire play, some specific examples of how Wilde satirizes upper class society are identified in the opening act, between lines 230 and 261. By focusing on each individual character in this scene, it can best be described as to how Wilde uses each one of them uniquely to portray the upper classes idiosyncrasies.

In this section of the play, Wilde shows the character of Algernon to be idle and lazy, as is often seen in individuals who have a high social standing and no need, nor desire, to work. A good example of this is in Algernon's opening statement to Jack, when he says, "My dear fellow, it isn't easy to be anything nowadays. There's such a lot of beastly competition about" (1.230,231). Algernon is referring to his bunburying in this conversation and the humour in this is that even the effort of being deceitful, by pretending to be someone he's not, is portrayed as being incredibly hard work for him. The other aspect of Algernon's character that Wilde uses this scene to exemplify is that of his shallowness, which is seen to be another common trait of the upper class society. The pun that Wilde uses to illustrate this is when Algernon states, "I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them" (1.237,238). The irony in this statement is that it is the exact opposite that is true and that Algernon is constantly consuming food with no respect for others. We see this demonstrated by the fact that his aunt, Lady

Bracknell, has previously requested that cucumber sandwiches be served when she comes for tea and Algernon has already consumed the entire plate prior to her arrival. When she arrives and requests the sandwiches, we see Algernon reveal another trait of the upper class that Wilde displays throughout the play, which is that of using the lower class as objects of ridicule. Wilde carries the satire even further when he allows Lane, the butler, to tolerate this treatment. We see an example of this when Algernon responds to Lady Bracknell's request by picking up the empty plate in horror and saying to Lane, "Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially" (1.258,259), to which Lane responds, "There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went down twice" (1.260,261).

The tone of the relationship between Lane and Algernon is set right at the beginning of the play. This can be identified in the conversation they have regarding the amount of champagne that had been consumed when Algernon was entertaining one evening. When Algernon asks, "Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne?" (1.15,16), Lane responds with, "I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir" (1.17), knowing fully well that Algernon and his guests had in fact drank the champagne themselves. This initial introduction into the type of relationship that Wilde intends to portray between Algernon, being of nobility, and Lane, being of the working class, is what will eventually lead into the scene regarding the sandwiches where Lane takes the full blame, as it has already been established that Lane is Algernon's scapegoat. By now, the fact that Lane takes responsibility for there not being any cucumber sandwiches, it seems to the reader, is not an unnatural thing to do.

Through the character of Lady Bracknell, Wilde portrays the image of a typical upper class aristocrat. She is wealthy, controlling, authoritative and arrogant. The fact that she has actually requested a specific type of sandwich be prepared for her is a prime illustration of her

character. In the statement she makes to Algernon where she says, "...I hope you are behaving very well" (1.240,241), her pretentiousness is obvious again. When he responds back, "I'm feeling very well, Aunt Augusta" (1.242), we see his attempt to alter her initial statement so he will not have to directly deceive her. Her quick response of, "That's not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together" (1.243,244), is an example of her condescending attitude even towards her own nephew, for whom it seems she does not hold a lot of respect. The fact that he is related to her and yet has no financial claims left other than debt, attribute to the reality that later in the play we see her accept Cecily to be Algernon's wife even though Cecily has no social standing, but she does have money. This will help to ensure Lady Bracknell that Algernon will be able to maintain his social status and therefore not reflect negatively on her.

The character of Gwendolyn in this scene is used to depict a variation away from the norm of what a typical young lady of upper class standing is ideally like. She would consider herself to be above others and not imperfect in any way. It is assumed that she will be courted and eventually married to a member of the same level of aristocracy and her life will be complete. When Jack comments to Gwendolyn, "You're quite perfect, Miss Fairfax" (1.247) and she responds, "Oh! I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions" (1.248,249), Wilde intends to be creating fun of this concept.

The last character that participates in this scene is Jack. Wilde does not portray him here to be of any particular social deviation although he utilizes him well throughout the rest of the play in a similar respect as to the others. Each of the characters within the play identifies themselves well as to what social standing they undoubtedly belong to. Through his continual use of satire and wit, Wilde does an outstanding job of portraying the ludicrousness and eccentricity of the upper class during the era that this play is written. The scene in Act 1 discussed here is only one very brief example of how he effectively does this.

Works Cited

Wilde, Oscar. The Importance of Being Earnest. *The Harbrace Anthology of Literature*.

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