

The Influence of “The Importance of Being Earnest” on Modern Comedy

Modern comedies build from the established conventions of the various comedic genres; however, what sets them apart is the extent to which they combine various genres. One genre of comedy that has seen continued popularity throughout time is the comedy of manners. Oxford defines the genre as “A kind of comedy representing the complex and sophisticated code of behavior current in fashionable circles of society, where appearances count for more than true moral character,” though in the modern age, this genre has seen expansion past these initial boundaries. Modern comedies diverge from this and instead shifted to other genres including the sitcom; however, these modern comedies still build on the tropes of the classics. Modern comedies share many traits with *The Importance of Being Earnest* since they still rely on witty dialogue and satire of daily life to convey its humor.

Oscar Wilde’s distinct flavor of comedic wit does not exist in a literary bubble, and instead he derived from earlier comedies and influenced future comedies. An early example of a work that clearly lends itself in the direction of Earnest is Shakespeare’s “Much Ado About Nothing”. The play itself is simple and devoid of tragedy compared to Shakespeare’s more notable works; however, it remains well regarded as one of his finest comedies. The play itself partly revolves around a group of colleagues tricking their friends Benedick and Bernadette into falling in love through a series of follies. Earnest, although not directly inspired by Much Ado, shares numerous traits with it. Both plays feature two couples which run parallel to each other throughout the story, and the inclusion of an underlying plot which helps move the relationships forward. This plot though, is secondary to the dialogue and character interactions which provide the bulk of the humor throughout the play.

Wilde's style of wit can be seen taken to a dark extreme in Edward Albee's play "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" The play centers around Martha and George, a dysfunctional couple and their houseguests. The play is unique in its satire of comedies and in doing so, it becomes a disturbing yet humorous psychological drama. Martha and George engage in a series of psychological games, and these represent the battle of wits found in *Ernest* and *Much Ado* taken to the dark extremes. These games tear at the couples' insecurities while also existing on a higher order of understanding. As a result, the two are portrayed as extremely intelligent and aware of what they are doing as their wit turns to psychological attacks. The guests Nick and Honey are shown to be not as acutely aware as the main couple, and it is this dichotomy between the couples that provides the dark humor found throughout the play. Overall, despite the darkness of the play, the extreme battle of wits provides a basis of comedy which then translates into the psychological drama.

One of the most popular genres of modern comedy, the sitcom, extends greatly upon past comedic genres; however, it derives most of its tropes from the comedy of manners. One such example is Jerry Seinfeld's self-titled television sitcom, which foregoes satire of the upper class in favor of satirizing the mundaneness of life in New York City. "Seinfeld" was pitched as a "show about nothing"; however, despite its nothingness, it is regarded as a true comedic innovator and one of the greatest comedies of all time (VanDerWerff). Seinfeld himself famously referred to his show as one where there is "no hugging and no learning" referring to the ability of a viewer to drop in on any episode without need for context. As a result, the show is still able to retain popularity with audiences who were not present during its original syndication. The show shares much of its traits with earlier comedies, and it modernizes many of these traits for the sitcom genre.

One of the show's highest rated episodes, *The Chinese Restaurant*, defies many expectations because of its classification as a bottle episode. Bottle episodes are episodes that typically reside in one location, utilize only the core cast, and forego extensive sets and elaborate costumes. These changes help reduce the overall cost of an episode, allowing the remainder of the series more budget to work with. Typically, this means that an effective bottle episode must rely on its script to carry it, and *The Chinese Restaurant* is no exception. The episode centers around the cast waiting for a table at the restaurant and their attempts to circumvent the misery of waiting. The exchange between Jerry and Elaine in which he asks "In a Chinese restaurant? Do they take money?" is extremely reminiscent of exchanges between Algernon and Jack in *Earnest*, and the rest of the scene's dialogue follows suit with witty one-liners. The next scene utilizes comedic pause to invoke humor as Elaine attempts to bribe the restaurant's host. The ensuing miscommunication resulting from Elaine trying to hide the bribery pushes the tension in the scene to a climax through dialogue alone.

"Kaguya-sama: Love is War", written and drawn by mangaka Aka Akasaka, provides a unique take on the comedy of manners genre. The premise of the manga is straightforward; Miyuki Shirogane and Kaguya Shinomiya, the student body president and vice-president respectively, engage in a grandiose battle of romantic wits where each is forcing the other to confess their love first. The comedic style of the series hearkens back to the comedy of manners by taking seemingly mundane situations to intense levels of romantic satire. For example, the first chapter of the series sees Kaguya and Shirogane overcomplicating the simple premise of going to see a movie together. The tension between the two is brought to a climax when Kaguya asserts that Shirogane's mere invitation is a confession of love. The wit in this scene is derived from the faulty generalization fallacy that the two fail to see, despite their high-ranking

intelligence and prestige within their school. Neither of the two is willing to let their love supersede their pride, and the entirety of the series revolves around this internal conflict alongside the external romantic psychological warfare between the two.

The most recent arc discusses the developing sexual tension in the main couple months after they have started dating, and Aka continues to use elements of wit that were used in the pre-relationship chapters. Chapter 216 specifically, sees a meeting between 4 of the cast where they discuss developments in their families' business and political conflicts. Kaguya stays out of this high-brow discussion, and when finally called upon, breaks the tension by asking "Do you all... ever think about sex?" After a one page pause in dialogue, the chapter continues with witty dialogue and over the top expressions. This comedic moment is reminiscent of the ways in which Oscar Wilde broke tension between Algernon and Jack in *Earnest*. This specific instance also reinforces the satire of the upper elite while retaining relatability to the teenage and young adult audience that the series is marketed towards. While not directly inspired by comedies of wit, in a 2020 interview Aka revealed a view on comedy like Wilde's wit (Okamoto). He claimed that "The joy of comedy lies in the gap between expectations and reality. The larger the gap, the funnier something is." Overall, the ongoing battle of wits, juxtaposition between the high-class setting, relatable situations, deadpan narrator, dialogue focused humor, and the comedic release of tension all contribute to the success of the series' comedy and relate it to Wilde's style of comedy in *Earnest*.

Modern comedies such as *Seinfeld* and *Kaguya* demonstrate that while comedic genres change, the use of witty dialogue remains timeless. Nearly 100 years after *Earnest*, *Seinfeld*'s bottle episode serves as a shining example for dialogue's ability to carry comedy regardless of the ongoing plot. *Kaguya* furthers this to the extremes by relying heavily on dialogue for the first

two years of its publication. Although Aka has since developed an ongoing plot, the battle of wits remains at the forefront of the series as evident throughout moments in season 2 of the anime adaptation. In addition, the works discussed satirize the daily lives of their cast instead of developing extreme circumstances for comedic effect. As a result, Wilde's style of comedy still remains relevant in the modern age even without the Victorian context. The works can be clearly seen in a timeline fashion as they were indirectly influenced by each other. Core elements of the humor found in Shakespeare's comedy are also found in Aka's, and Earnest serves as a perfect middle between the old and new. The comedies over time demonstrate that dialogue and its delivery contribute greatly to the effectiveness of humor regardless of its context. Even though modern audiences are not intimately acquainted with the intricacies of Victorian life, the comedic effectiveness of Earnest is still present. The 2002 movie adaptation of the play proves this idea through its moderate box office success. The changes that were made did not detract from the core of the play, and instead, they served to better caricaturize the distinctly Victorian elements of the play.

Works Consulted

Akasaka, Aka. *Kaguya-Sama: Love Is War*. Shueisha, 2015.

Albee, Edward. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Berkley, 1983.

The Importance of Being Earnest. Directed by Oliver Parker, performances by Rupert Everett and Colin Firth, Miramax Films, 2002.

Much Ado About Nothing. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, Renaissance Films, 1993.

Okamoto, Daisuke. “Wielding Emotions to Create a Story: ‘Kaguya-Sama Wants to Be Confessed To’ Author Aka Akasaka Shares His Strategy for Writing Manga.” Guya.moe, guya.moe/pages/livedoor-aka-akasaka-interview/.

Seinfeld, Jerry, and Larry David. “The Chinese Restaurant.” Seinfeld, season 2, episode 11, NBC, 23 May 1991.

Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing*. Folger Shakespeare Library, Simon & Schuster, 2018.

VanDerWerff, Emily. “Seinfeld Is 30 Years Old. Here Are 5 Ways It Changed Television.” Vox, 6 July 2014, www.vox.com/2014/7/6/5874267/how-seinfeld-changed-tv-30th-anniversary.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The Norton Anthology of English Literature Volume 2 Tenth Edition, edited by Robson, Norton & Company, pp. 2019, 942-948.