

## Contraversy on Being Earnest

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**Abstract-** Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) provides a mirror image of the late Victorian upper class life. The sham seriousness, hypocritical morality and artificial sophistry of this class are thoroughly criticized in this play. Victorian gentlemen maintained double identity under the garb of dignity. The quality of 'earnestness' has been treated paradoxically in this play. In his critique Wilde has focused on the issues of marriage, class, identity etc. Without any harsh satire, by exploiting the device of wit, humour and paradox, Wilde pinpoints the moral laxity of his contemporary period. The importance of being earnest belongs to the genre, the comedy of implies manners, handled with consummate skill and artistry by Congreve in the restoration period and later by Sheridan in the eighteenth century. The comedy of manners, as its name implies, concentrates upon the depiction of men and women in a social world ruled by convention. Its manner are not simply the behavior of a humanity in general but the affectations and cultured veneer of a highly developed and self-conscious grouping the Whitehall which was ruled by Charles II, intellectual refinement, epigrammatic wit and easy dalliance had been made the prime qualities which are reflected in the 'manner' comedy.

**Index Terms-** consummate skill, humanity, refinement.

### INTRODUCTION

Satire is an integral part of the comedy of manners. Its satire was airy and delicate. According it preferred to satirize by utilizing that species of spirit which depended fundamentally upon the incongruity between two ideas or between an idea and an object. The comedy of manners did not confine itself to satire. It utilized far more what Jonson knew the power of wit. It is essentially intellectual. It permits the introduction and expression of practically intellectual. It permits the introduction and expression of practically no emotion whatsoever. It therefore does not play upon our feelings in any way but appeals primarily and always to our reason its wit

is purely intellectual, and the appreciation of it comes from our minds, not from our hearts.

The comedy of manners, moreover stresses deeply that tendency in all high comedy, the artificiality of personality and of theme. This comedy is realistic, but not in the way that Jonson's plays were realistic. In his works there is decided attempt to display through the humours or through the types traits of contemporary life; there is a mass of topical allusion, and the subjects are often taken from real aspects of his time. The comedy of manners also reflects real life, but it is a real life artificialized, and still, further, it is the airier, what we might almost call the more spiritual parts of real life.

The importance of being earnest conforms to the norms laid down for the comedy of manners. The play depicts the aristocratic, convention ridden and mid-Victorian society. This high comedy stresses the artificiality of personality and theme. All the characters of the play are highly eccentric and for them the normal values of our world stand reversed. To Algernon a marriage proposal is a matter of business and not pleasure. He considers a wife flirting with her own husband as highly scandalous for it amounts to washing one's clean linen in public. Jack considers Algernon's lavish arrangements for tea and cucumber sandwiches a reckless extravagance quite unbecoming a young man. Cecily tells Algernon that it is easy to part with an old friend but it is not so in the case of a person who is known only for a short space of time. Gwendolen feels sorry that the old fashioned respect for the young is fast disappearing. Lady Bracknell is extremely happy that Jack knows nothing. Equally artificial is the love theme depicted in the play. Gwendolen and Cecily fall in love with Jack and Algernon for what they are not rather than what they are.

Satire is also an integral part of Wilde's 'the importance of being earnest'. Its satire is airy and delicate. It is exquisitely encapsulated in wit. It is

essentially intellectual. In it Wilde makes fun of the ridiculously exaggerated values of the birth, rank fashion etc. lady Bracknell, the dreadnought dowager would not condescend to give his only daughter gwendolen to “marry into a cloak-room and from an alliance with a parcel”. She considers jack, s hand-bag origin “to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the excesses of the French revolution. She is willing to accept Cecily as the bride of her nephew Algernon on being assured of her rank and social status coupled with her health and finds in the young girl,s profile distinct possibilities of social success. She has her list of eligible bachelors drawn from that of her elite friend duchess of Bolton. The pride of the town bred young lady gwendolen is pricked by the simple, innocent and sharp-witted country-bred young lady Cecily. Contemporary standards of education come in for criticism in the hands of lady Bracknell. Victorian sense of duty and code of morality are satirized in the personage of miss prism, the governess of Cecily. Irresponsible newspaper critics are debunked through the remarks of Algernon. But Wilde does not aim his shaft of satire directly on the object. He flits around and runs about his object, side-tracking instead of straight shooting. By this process, he takes the sting out of his satire by rubbing in sparkling wit.

‘Comedy of manners ‘is also known as ‘comedy of wit’. The importance of being earnest is an excellent comedy of wit. It is by its wit that the play has won its place among the classics. It must surely be one of the wittiest plays ever written. Wilde’s wit turns accepted ideas upside down, throws fresh light on the most of everyday happenings and feelings, and of course makes the dialogue sparkle like a glass of champagne. The play is distinguished by its super verbal acrobatics in which the characters revel. At the same time, it deals with certain permanent values and attitudes of English social life. “beneath the veneer of sparkling wit and dialogue, and a seeming preoccupation with trivialities, could be seen the writer’s sense of social reality. Which laugh at the foibles of mankind in a good humoured, indulgent manners and his anxiety to establish some values of permanence in the phantasmagoric life that he represents”.

#### REFERENCE

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