

The Importance of Being Earnest is simply an example of the Comedy of Manners and nothing more. How far do you agree with this view?

In the Victorian era, specifically the 1890's, there were drastic changes – comedy changed from being moralistic to being purely for entertainment value. The Comedy of Manners was deeply popular at the time of Wilde's writing, as it represented the upper classes in a truthful yet also comedic style, which they identified with and also laughed at. Wilde took advantage of this because, despite being a member of the fashionable upper class, he felt like somewhat of an outsider, due to his sexuality and flamboyance in an oppressive society, and saw them as pretentious and supercilious whilst also oppressively genteel, using his work to force them to laugh at representations of themselves to amuse himself. In some ways, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a Comedy of Manners – the Comedy of Manners focuses on love intrigues of cynical and sophisticated young aristocrats and relies on verbal wit, not slapstick and reflects the life, ideals and manners of upper class society in a way that is true to its traditions and philosophy. Indeed, Wilde incorporates many of the typical characteristics of the Comedy of Manners; Cecily the ingénue, Lady Bracknell the elderly upper class beholder of manners, the dénouement in the final act and the representation of the ridiculed aristocrats. Wilde's work is also so much more than a simply Comedy of Manners – his ingénue is actually worldly-wise, he includes farce and slapstick and represents a dandy in Algernon, a literary construct of himself almost, a sexuality that would have been persecuted in society at the time. I see *The Importance of Being Earnest* as much deeper than a superficial Comedy of Manners.

Originally, Wilde hesitated in submitting the play, as the audience were used to serious plays and Wilde knew his was farcical, and his characters and situations were constructed to be trivial – he explained that *The Importance of Being Earnest* was a response to a request for a play with 'no real serious interest', however, Wilde's play was actually full of social criticism and ridicule. He concealed these criticisms through the constructs of Lady Bracknell, who does not approve "of...modern sympathy", "of long engagements" or "speaking disrespectfully of society".

Wilde's critics often received his work well yet still complained it was empty. The critic William Archer said of *The Importance of Being Earnest* that he had "not the slightest intention of criticising Mr O'Wilde's new piece...one might as well sit down after dinner and attempt to gravely discuss a soufflé". He also said the play could not be criticised as it 'lacked substance'. While this might be a reasonable critique of a futile Comedy of Manners, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is actually brimming with social criticism. One example is Lady Bracknell's line "I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance...the whole theory of modern education is radically unsound ...it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes" – Wilde not only mocks the boorish ignorance of the upper classes but makes the disputable point that if good education was effective in Victorian England, it would threaten the precarious class system of the time, implying that if the lower classes were educated, they would overthrow the aristocrats and "lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square." This question of social system and place is raised so slyly by Wilde that even the critics do not pick up on his play's analysis of the class system, as he upends this by trivializing these principles after raising them – after Lady Bracknell mentions this point, she immediately forgets it and switches topics, asking Jack "what is your income?", demonstrating the play's more light-hearted, frivolous side.