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The Absolute Aestheticism in Beauty

The movement of Aestheticism is centralized around the concept of beauty being the most important element in life, concentrating on the beauty of art itself rather than the substance. The artists at the time of the Aesthetic movement, professed “that the beauty of art had to take precedence over realistic representations of life, and over moral questionings,” (Drugeon 89) demonstrating that truth is found on the surface of one’s appearance as opposed to within one’s true character. The desire for one to have a dualistic nature comes from the necessity of conforming to the Victorian societies’ norms, thus creating a distinct division between one’s contrasting characteristics. Oscar Wilde explores the idea of a world where beauty is held to be of the highest standard, ultimately revealing that along with the aesthetic side of one’s persona, there exists an opposing darker side. In the play, *The Importance of Being Earnest,* Wilde shows the character’s dualism through the main character, Jack, accentuating the struggle of balancing his darker nature with the aesthetic identity that he has created. Additionally, by using contradicting absolutes to further satirize dualism, Wilde reveals that Aesthetics have a superficial interpretation of reality. The characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest,* hold their reputations to be of great value, and therefore use the identities of their ‘fake’ counterparts to suppress their true personalities, allowing them to appear beautiful on the surface.

Wilde presents his characters as works of art, created to be judged by their peers on a superficial and aesthetic level, thus creating a notion of dualism that they must maintain. Wilde highlights said dualism through the main character, Jack, as he attempts to balance the double life that he has created. After Algernon discovers a cigarette case engraved to a man named Jack, his secret identity is exposed and he is forced to confess the truth, revealing that he has in fact been living by the name of “Ernest in town and Jack in the country” (Wilde 6). Jack’s desire to develop facades in different social contexts originates from the necessity of adopting a high moral tone and therefore the desire to create a persona of a dualistic nature. Ernest is the man that Jack wants others to see, a persona created to fully express himself and used as an escape from the realities of his life in the country. Ernest is merely a front used to hide his dark nature and is consequently a shallow interpretation of reality. Wilde additionally incorporates the use of absolutes in conversation amongst the characters, however they are almost always proven wrong or contradicted, therefore demonstrating a dualistic nature throughout the play. Wilde’s use of negating definite statements further satirizes the character’s dualism. At first acquaintance, Gwendolyn’s attitude towards Cecily is nothing but positive, “Cecily Cardew? What a very sweet name! Something tells me that we are going to be great friends… My first impressions of people are never wrong” (Wilde 42). However, after a sudden turn of events Gwendolyn’s first impression of Cecily quickly changes, “From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right” (Wilde 47). Gwendolyn disclaims her initial impression of Cecily moments after they discover the truth about Ernest. The absolute stances of the characters that are later contradicted, testify to the superficial perception of reality that was associated with the Victorian culture.

Aestheticism is explored through Jack, as Ernest, as he is an archetype for going against Victorian norms and pursuing the true meaning of the Aesthetic by having a dualistic nature. Furthermore, *The Importance of Being Earnest* uses contradicting absolutes to support the irony of the character’s dualities. The play explores Jack’s growth throughout, from creating a ‘fake’ counterpart to hide his flaws and dark nature, to his later discovery of the significance of the name Ernest. Wilde’s ideas and world came to life through the characters, as “duplication and duplicity are at the center of the plot” (Drugeon 97) and both embody and satirize the shallowness of the Aesthetic. To fully understand true beauty, one must look within themselves before searching for absolute beauty in both surface level and meaningful works of art. Wilde approaches the Aesthetic movement by embracing not only both sides, but also by exploring the dualism of the characters.