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Hypocrisy in Aestheticism

Following the guidelines of the Aestheticism movement, one must put beauty over substance when viewing art to truly understand it’s purpose. The artists of the Aesthetic style, embracing the precepts of “Art for Art’s Sake” (Drugeon 89) enforces that how one presents oneself depicts the truth, rather than what’s on the inside. Dualism is a concept that represents the two sides of one’s personality or opinions. Oscar Wilde believes that even when one is surrounded in a world full of the highest form of aesthetic beauty, there will always exist a dark side, which is reality. In *The Importance of Being Earnest,* Wilde demonstrates the dualism within the character Lady Bracknell, suggesting to those around her that she is of the highest class and intelligence with her outer persona, when in her darker reality, she focuses solely on materialistic and hollow subjects, thus revealing that Aesthetics are a shallow interpretation of a one’s true essence. The characters of IOBE each hold two personas, one being their darker true selves and the other being a superior counterpart.

During the Victorian era, one’s social class in society hierarchy was everything. This was proven through Lady Bracknell’s persona in front of the other characters in the play. Her carefully calculated mannerisms alludes to Lady Bracknell having a high reputation among the aristocracy. According to herself, she spoke, acted, and looked like the smartest and most important person in the room, with her blunt phrases and ornate outfits, “Lady Bracknell wears impressive picture hats and dresses which are meant to show (her) age and consequent importance, with Lady Bracknell’s dress being wider and more imposing.” (Drugeon 91) She intrudes on each of the character’s lives with her own opinions, portraying her desire to feel above those surrounding her. Aestheticism and dualism go hand in hand with this self-representation, as Lady Bracknell’s outward personality is hypocritical to her true identity. Her obsession of others respecting her for her intelligence and faultlessness, only shows her ignorance to real intellectual concepts. She, instead, finds value in exterior beauty and social hierarchy. “Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can’t get into it do that.” (Wilde 60) Being of a higher class, she believes that she is superior to those lower than her in any way, thus other characters seeking advice and acceptance from her, like blessings for marriages. Lady Bracknell’s “correct” opinions on serious topics, such as love and money are motivated by this sense of authority that society, and herself, have given her. When Gwendolen and Jack propose their marriage to Lady Bracknell, she bombards Jack with questions regarding his social status, financial situation and physical attributes. With this demonstration of character, Lady Bracknell reveals her aesthetic-based persona, while at the same time showing her accurate, surface-level self. Lady Bracknell’s contradictory behavior illustrates her hypocrisy of her absolute statements and opinions against people, who she believes to be, lesser than her. Lady Bracknell, being a symbol of the deception and insincerity of the Victorian era, honors the Aesthetic movement with her dualistic nature. She possesses a patronizing and superior exterior, when her true self is shallow and ignorant, satirizing the movement’s foundation of a false reality.

Lady Bracknell is the epitome of the aestheticism that existed in the Victorian era, with her confident personality being of more substance than her ignorant and close-minded behavior. *The Importance of Being Earnest* brings light to the darker side of the Aestheticism movement, being a shallow representation of actual reality. Wilde embraces Bracknell’s persona, with the desire to “provide refined sensuous pleasure for his spectators” (Drugeon 98) , thus highlighting her hypocrisy. Wilde uses Bracknell to embrace the philosophy that one must remove all substance in order to see and understand the art and beauty in it’s true form. At the same time, Wilde satirizes Aestheticism with Bracknell’s true identity of being a hollow and ignorant woman, condensing the play’s theme with the notion of Aestheticism being of dualistic nature with a real, darker reality contrasted against a perfect, yet false, façade.