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Tributes and Travesty

The fundamental of aestheticism, is beauty taking “precedence over realistic representations of life” (Durgeon 89). The appreciation for what appears to be pleasing aesthetically is paramount in comparison to the caliber of substance withheld amongst not only pieces of art, but in real life experiences. Oscar Wilde pays homage while simultaneously mocking aestheticism through the implementation of dualism within the characters personas’ in his farcical play *The Importance of Being Earnest.* Wilde puts forth dialogue, in which characters state their desires to be associated with the opposite of what they truly are at their essence. Jack Worthington, is the epitome of split personality, he embodies the paradox of priding himself on how deep he is in the city, living as Earnest, while his character as Earnest does not go beyond artificiality. At the same time, he prides himself on how shallow he is in the country as Jack, while his story is truly much more profoundly motivating. The irony of a character wanting to be surface-level and truly having many more layers, while another yearns for the depth and complexity that it attempts to make it up in materialistic qualities is prevalent throughout the play.

The audience experiences the dimensioned characters created by Wilde as he “inherently mingles with the characters….and their various embodiments on the stage” (Durgeon 98). Wilde conveys his contradicting theory on aestheticism through the manipulation of antithesis within characters. He allows them to encapsulate many absolutes within their core beliefs as well as in their character portrayals, both figuratively and literally. His characters are presented in a superficial manner, while they truly contain a mature depth to them, revealing a common characteristic in society. The most prominent theme is the strive for impractical standards, which can be viewed primarily through Jack Worthington. Jack explores a desired version of himself by curating a tangible double personality, known as Earnest. Tearing himself away from his role as guardian, he escapes to the city wearing his mask as Earnest in attempt to go beyond his characteristics in the country. Earnest is Wilde’s tribute to and glorification of aestheticism. By constructing a whole new identity, Jack gets the women he wants and succeeds at being portrayed quite high in society. However, his falsified reality is doubtful. So doubtful that his own conscious can be found questioning “you couldn’t love me if my name wasn’t Earnest?” (Wilde 12) In addition to this, there is no decency amongst his fabrication. His character is viewed as immoral, and tainted with wrongful values. When the truth “rarely pure and never simple” (Wilde 7) begins to reveal itself back in the country, a travesty is made of aestheticism. Aestheticism can be defined by beauty over substance. Jack, the profoundly more realistic character was far more receptive then Earnest the “invaluable permanent invalid” (Wilde 9) , therefore mocking the idea of superficiality trumping significance. Jack shielded his true identity in order to put forward a much more superior semblance, when in reality his true self bore much more substance. By revealing that Jacks, name is in fact Earnest, Wilde demonstrates how aestheticism is simply surface-level, and has a short mortality within the life-span of those who embody it. The depth to Jacks intentions is revealed, ironically, through his attempt to refine superficial appearances in order to be perceived a realistic perfection.

Oscar Wilde’s aesthetic style, highlights the importance of appearances and visuals. His true intent behind the use of color, description and beauty is not to paint his audience a perfected reality but to demonstrate that a world in which inhabitants depend on beauty, lacks the substance needed to carry the weight of human livelihood. *The Importance of Being Earnest*  entertains the audience, while informing them of this idea. Wilde choses aestheticism as the vehicle to drive his characters forward “as if associating their physical aspect with particular artistic movements could help the spectators better understand their personalities” (Drungeon 94). By giving his characters a double-face value he is able to prove through dualism without any variables, how homo-sapiens are inbred to strive for perfection. This is most prominent in a strict reality that holds us down and bounds us to stay ethical, while also being wired to treat substance with a higher value than anything that the appearance of beauty can offer.

# Works Cited

Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest*. London: Longman, 1895.

(Drugeon, Aestheticism on the Wildean Stage 88 to 99)