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ENGL 226

12 April 2019

Examining Dramatic Irony in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*

In the Victorian Era, home life and marriage were seen as sacred, as escapes from the harsh world, and therefore, the pursuit of finding a partner was very important. Earnestness was one of the most sought-after ideals in the Victorian Era, and many would go to extremes to achieve this ideal, leaving morals thrown to the wayside. In his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde criticizes the Victorian notion that being earnest is the best trait you can be. Throughout his play, he shows that their true ideals of love were empty and superficial and that many people of the time were just selfish and worried about their public image. One of the ways that Wilde executes this criticism is through dramatic irony. Dramatic irony occurs when the audience knows something is going on but the characters in the play do not know, or have a different understanding of the situation. For example, in a horror movie the audience is normally well aware that there is an intruder in the closet before the protagonist opens the closet door, often prompting phrases such as "Don't open it!" or "Don't be stupid, run and hide!" The audiences' emotions are more heightened than if they were not aware of the intruder in the closet. Oscar Wilde's use of dramatic irony in *The Importance of Being Earnest* works to humanize the characters in the eyes of the audience, while also enhancing the elements of humor and suspense.

Wilde's use of dramatic irony has an impact on how the audience perceives the characters. Dramatic irony works to humanize the characters even more because than they would be otherwise because there is a gap between what they think they know and what the actual truth is. In Act 2, right before Gwendolen and Cecily realize that they are marrying the same man (who does not even exist), Gwendolen says, "Ernest has a strong upright nature. He is the very soul of truth and honour. Disloyalty would be as impossible to him as deception" (Wilde, Lines 708-710). Gwendolen has yet to find out that Ernest (Jack) has completely lied to her, so she has no reason to believe that he would ever do so. The audience immediately feels bad for her because they know what is coming next; they know that the truth about Ernest will be revealed. This emotion that the audience feels toward Gwendolen would not exist if they did not know the truth themselves. After all, Gwendolen cannot see the whole story from everyone's point of view like the audience can. Dramatic irony gives the audience a godlike perspective, allowing them to understand the sometimes outrageous and incredible situations humans find themselves in when one lie spins out of control. The audience realizes just how human these characters are because they are in an omniscient position that is not humanlike or true to reality. Of course, Wilde's play is a bit more dramatic than reality, but the audience can certainly relate some of these experiences and situations back to their own lives.

Along with humanizing the characters, dramatic irony also increases the feeling of suspense or anticipation in the audience. One of the most obvious forms of dramatic irony that Wilde uses in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is Jack's "brother," Ernest. The audience is well aware that Ernest does not exist, that he is a product of "Bunburying," as Algernon puts it. However, characters like Cecily and Gwendolen have no idea that Ernest does not exist; they believe they are both engaged to him. Because of their birds-eye view of the action, the audience

is anticipating how the messiness of the situation will work itself out. This anticipation comes to a head in Act Three when Gwendolen and Cecily argue over Ernest. Cecily says, “Mr. Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married,” and Gwendolen responds, “I think there must be some slight error. Mr. Ernest Worthing is engaged to me” (Lines 740-741, 743-744). Of course, the two women then attack each other with petty remarks and snide comments. If the audience had not previously been clued in that neither Gwendolen nor Cecily are to marry Ernest, then they would perceive these insults as serious. However, because of dramatic irony, this interaction between the two woman becomes ridiculous and comical, and it builds anticipation for what is to come. What is so important about this scene is that Wilde does not give everything up right away. Even after the two women realize that they have been lied to, there is still built-up suspense that does not get resolved until the end of the play. Wilde is slowly dragging out his use of dramatic irony to let the audience feel as much anticipation and suspense as possible. By letting the audience in on all the little secrets and conversations between characters, like this one between Cecily and Gwendolen, Wilde is making them feel more a part of the story as a whole. There is so much suspense because they feel that they are a fly on the wall in every single interaction, learning all the juicy secrets before everyone else does.

As has been mentioned before, Wilde’s use of dramatic irony has an overall effect on making his play much more comedic. As a whole, the entire play is very comical and a delight to read, but one of the most comedic parts is when Algernon arrives at the Manor House, pretending to be Jack’s brother, Ernest. At the same time, Jack returns to the Manor House, announcing that Ernest has passed away. Algernon has no idea that Jack returned early, and Jack has no idea that Algernon is pretending to be Ernest. The audience, having been clued in on everything beforehand, can predict that Algernon and Jack will have to face each other at the

Manor House and explain themselves. When they finally do confront each other, all of the complexities and layers about who knows what is so ridiculous that it is hilarious. The line that best portrays how absurd the situation is occurs when Algernon tells Jack, “It is perfectly childish to be in deep mourning for a man who is actually staying for a while week with you in your house as a guest. I call it grotesque” (Lines 438-441). Without the use of dramatic irony, if the audience had not been clued in about Algernon’s plans to travel to Jack’s, this scene would probably be shocking or even confusing. Instead, it is comical because the audience watches as the characters struggle internally and externally to try and figure out what is going on, while the audience knows the entire time. Once again, their birds-eye, godlike perspective allows them to sit back and laugh as the ridiculousness unfolds.

The function of Oscar Wilde’s use of dramatic irony in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is to humanize the characters in the eyes of the audience, as well as to make the play more suspenseful and comedic. Allowing the audience to have a birds-eye view of the action, giving them access to many perspectives, raises the anticipation of the play. The audience has to wait and see how the characters will work through their problems and lies while they know all the answers. Dramatic irony works to make the events of the play even more absurd and outrageous than they otherwise would be. It would be hilarious to watch the characters stumble and freak out over these superficial events in general, but having an inside scoop of all of their secrets makes it even more enjoyable. The big purpose of using dramatic irony is to heighten the emotions of the audience. After all, a play is put on and written with an intended audience in mind. In the grand scope of the Victorian Era, Wilde’s use of dramatic irony is a key component of his overall goal to criticize the norms of society. He highlights and dramatizes the absurdity of the notion of being earnest and all the internal emptiness that comes with it.

Reference List

Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest*. *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*, 2nd ed., vol. B, edited by Joseph Black, Broadview, 2013, pp. 924-955.