

Prompt: In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, characters often use words such as bad and wicked and make pronouncements about what is and isn't acceptable behavior. Do true virtue or wickedness appear in the play? If the characters are committing sins, what sins are they committing?

The Importance of Watching Ernest Goes to Camp

I found Oscar Wilde's play "The Importance of Being Earnest" to be completely devoid of true virtue and wickedness. The characters are simply a small bunch of privileged upper class folk that react to the goings-on in their lives only as much as they are required to (which is not very). Each behaves about as well or poorly as the other and no good or harm is ever done. The story highlights these behaviors and shows how they materialize into harmless absurdity: Algernon and Jack both have fictitious brothers which they employ to disengage from undesirable social situations, meanwhile their objects of affection, Cecily and Gwendolen, end up being entirely satisfied with the deceitful overtures that stem from these fabricated relations. In the end everybody is jubilant and also quite content with the ridiculous sequence of events that unfolded, possibly suggesting that it was just another normal day in their lives.

The characters' use of words such as "bad" and "wicked" only feigns true contempt and reproach: they are incapable of being stirred to higher moral ground. As Algernon says to Jack in Act 2: "Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth you are serious about I haven't got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely trivial nature" (1859).

Re: True Virtue and Wickedness?

The words "bad" and wicked" are used lightheartedly in the play. In fact, most of the times these two words are used, they almost have a positive connotation to them, as if the speaker approves of the action he/she just termed "bad" or "wicked."

Forgive me for bringing modern slang into the conversation, but when I read this I immediately thought of how many people use these types of words today to describe things positively. "Bad", "sick", "gnarly" and "wicked" are frequently used by skateboarders when they properly land a trick (other cool people use these words too, of course). I would not say it is the same thing as in the play, but it did make me think about how the meanings of certain words have become distorted and/or less meaningful over time. Perhaps there is a connection?

Re: Earnest

When viewed as comedy, the exaggerations seem to help support the theme.

The comments I've read in the discussion so far seem to be somewhat less than receptive to Oscar Wilde's play. I think that if we experienced it as it was intended to be, sitting in a theater and watching a live performance, most of us would be laughing either to ourselves or out loud from beginning to end. It is maybe hard to see the comedy in the words as they are written in our textbook, but I was able to imagine many opportunities where an actor could emphasize the delivery of a particular line to great comedic effect—there are many "exaggerations", as you said.

Whenever people are behaving absurdly, there is always plenty of space to poke fun at their actions, words, mannerisms, etc. I think that Wilde loaded this play up with heaps of it so that there would be an incredible amount of space for entertaining, unique performances.

Re: Earnest

Might I politely and respectfully suggest otherwise: having heard it as a radio play (on BBC 4), and having seen it on stage (OSF)... I still wish we'd had GBS instead of Wilde. I suspect the play made more sense in its era...

Our reading assignment for this class was my first time being exposed to it. I take a hearty pleasure in making fun of absurd people, so maybe that's why I would expect to enjoy a good production of the play.