



February 2019

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Azare (2019) "The Importance of Being Dramatically Ironic," *SWOSU Sayre Student Anthology*.
Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 32.

Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/sayre_student_anthology/vol1/iss2/32

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The Importance of Being Dramatically Ironic

Literary commentary by Azure Williams

Haven't we all watched a piece of art being preformed or read a book and come across a part where we thought to ourselves, "Isn't it funny how that happened?" I know we have even come to point where we've said, "Oh, I would have never seen that coming!" Those are some examples of reactions we might have to *irony*. In the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, we are presented and entertained with dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is created when the audience knows something that the characters on stage haven't yet discovered. Many times dramatic irony was used in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and comedy ensues as the characters were always left oblivious; however, the audience was fully aware of the pun. That is what played a major role in the humor of this well known piece of literature, and the movie version, starring Reese Witherspoon and Colin Firth, keeps in tune by adding two scenes of dramatic irony that do not occur in the original play.

With that in mind, one of the more humorous times when dramatic irony was used in the movie was when Gwendolen gets the name "Earnest" tattooed on her rear end. It is very ironic for two reasons. The first being that Earnest is not even the real name of her "true love." Gwendolen is unaware that his name is, in fact, Jack. Then every other character is left very unaware that she even got the tattoo in the first place, but not the audience. The second way that scene was so ironic is because she is in the family of Lady Bracknell. Lady Bracknell herself is a very good example of the strict expectations held up for people at that time in Victorian society. She is a very prim and proper woman whose goal it is to uphold the social status of her family. It's very comical how Gwendolen goes way beyond the boundary line of her expected class to get a tattoo in a seedy Asian shop for a man she barely knows, yet swears to love. In the time that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is taking place, it was forbidden for a young lady of a higher social class to get a tattoo.

Another way that dramatic irony is shown so well in the movie version of this play is when Lady Bracknell is shown to have been a saloon dancer in her earlier years before marrying into a high society family to avoid a scandalous pregnancy. She is extremely strict with Gwendolen and very disapproving of her reckless love interest with Jack, or "Earnest," as they all think him to be. She wants nothing to do with him as soon as she finds out he has no family history because he was found in a hand bag. She is a very uptight Victorian who believes all young ladies should remain pure and proper until a respectable gentleman comes along to asked for their hand, so comedy ensues as poor Jack is subjected to her scrutiny and everyone tries to measure up to her standards.

Jack meets Gwendolen through his friend and Lady Bracknell's nephew, Algy. He proposes after just minutes in her presence. Lady Bracknell refuses to take any seriousness in the proposal and forbids Gwendolen from pursuing it. We see a flashback in her memory as Lady Bracknell danced scandalously in front of several men in her much earlier years before being married into a family of higher social class. Dramatic irony is demonstrated in this certain incident of how highly she holds herself while the innuendo is she came from a much lower class.

The greatest way that dramatic irony is shown is at the end when everything came together and Earnest admitted that his name was, in fact, Jack. He admits to everyone that he is an only child and Algy is nothing more than his ornery friend and not actually his brother. The lies startle everyone and throws them all into a huge argument about the marriages and honesty and the social status of Jack. It is at that time that Lady Bracknell gets word of the presence of Mrs. Prism. She knows of her from years prior. She goes to find her, followed by the rest of the group. When she finds her, she asks what had become of the baby she was said to have many years back. Mrs. Prism, under the eyes and pressure of Lady Bracknell and the others, confesses to leaving a baby boy many years back at a train station in a handbag. It all of a sudden comes to a conclusion in Jack's head, and he races off to find the handbag he was left in. He returns with it, only for it to be confirmed in fact as the handbag Mrs. Prism had left. He says to have "always wanted a brother," so, as it turns out, Algy was in fact his true brother after all. It is extremely ironic in the way that they have been pretending to be brothers in order for Algy to pursue his love for Cecily and Jack to pursue his bunburying. After they are confirmed to be brothers, Jack looks up the name of his father in an old war book, for he had been a soldier. In the play, the audience assumes he really is named Earnest, because the audience can't see inside the book. But in the movie version, we see inside the book as he finds his father under the name of "John," which is Jack's given name; but that is another one of the ways this movie proves to be so ironic and comical. The audience is fully aware that the name given in the book is actually *John*, but Jack lies and tells everyone that his and Algy's father's name is "Earnest" after all. He keeps the name Earnest and replaced the book before anyone is to question it, and answers Lady Bracknell's question as to his showing signs of triviality with the money line, "On the contrary, my Dear Aunt Augusta. I am only just now realizing the vital importance of being earnest." Everyone is happy with the end results and connections, and the audience is aware that he never will be earnest in anything!

Dramatic irony is used to perfection in *The Importance of Being Earnest*--most of it in humor, but it can be used in many different ways. The characters were also usually left unaware and oblivious to it. That's just part of the ironic humor being played so naively. Dramatic irony fits this play very well for the fact of how it flows and allows events to occur that make this play appealing to an audience of today.