

English essay.

Why/How is the Importance of Being Earnest a Comic Play? (25 marks)

There are several reasons why *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a comedy in terms of the linguistic content. Ironies, linguistic comedy and triviality through language and farce. Through his clever use of language, Wilde creates paradoxes throughout thereby giving an overall incongruous feel to the dialogue which, in turn with the juxtapositions, creates comedy. This supports the idea of incongruity theory as a source of humour as he clearly uses ironies and contrasts within the text. Wilde also employs ironies of truth as a comedic device with his use of overstatements and simplified generalisations. It is a predominantly linguistic comedy with elements of farce throughout and is filled with witticisms and absurdities in the language used which then make it a comic play. Certain key structures and ideas explored in the play are present which also serves to identify it as a comedy and solidify its place within the genre. Triviality, farce and a typical comedic structure are but a few examples.

Firstly, the clear use of paradoxes within Wilde's work creates comedy as it follows with Incongruity Theory. This claims that mismatched ideas and the juxtaposition of incompatible things is what causes us to laugh. These paradoxes and inversions are created in many different ways throughout the text with ironies of reversal, situation, truth and comparison as well as disparate levels of reference, contrast of tone with the subject and unexpected contradictions. These juxtaposing statements often come from Algernon and Lady Bracknell perhaps to show the ridiculousness of upper class society and to emphasise the idea that their way of life makes no sense by very literally, making the characters make no logical sense. For example, when Lady Bracknell mentions Lady Harbury she explains that following her husband's death, the woman came to look "quite twenty years younger." This is almost the opposite of what audiences expect to hear in this conversation as mourning is a traditionally respected concept in this time period, especially in the higher classes. Algernon quips in with "I heard her hair has turned quite gold from grief." The difference here is that Algernon is very aware of the comment he is making and its effect. This Wildean paradox can be placed on the specific use of the word "gold" in a context that renders it incongruous. Statements such as this serve to create comedy as they make a mockery of a typically respected process by changing their use of language enough to make the sentences lose sense. In contrast to Algernon, Lady Bracknell states her genuine views and opinions which happen to come out as inversions and create paradoxes by juxtaposing the ideals of upper class society which she is part of. This is clearly meant to show the hypocrisy of the upper classes through the unintentional contradictions she makes when speaking about society. This mockery of the establishment is a recurring theme throughout and is a typical way of creating comedy. The paradox here is situational as Lady Bracknell unconsciously mocks the society to which she so unironically proud to be a part of. The first thing that creates humour is her lack of awareness on the effect of her statements and the second is the irony of undermining concepts which she deems highly important. Mocking the very foundations of society is a typical way to create comedy dating back to Greek theatre where it was commonplace to use politics, marriage and any other relevant societal structure to critique in order to create comedy. This could be argued to be comedic because audiences are so used to having to respect these concepts that hearing them mocked in this way is shockingly out of place and causes a cathartic reaction; perhaps from the build up of tension surrounding these topics which is then brutally broken down in comic conversation. This follows with Bergson's theory of humour which

explores the idea of “the detection of rigidity in life’s flux”. This could be interpreted to mean physical rigidity but also subconscious rigidity in the tension surrounding certain concepts as well as the unspoken rules about how we approach them. Comedy undoes all of this and makes these concepts fluid by undermining their importance. Bergson even goes on to state that “ words are ridiculous if we try to fit an absurd idea into a well established phrase or form.” as Algernon and Lady Bracknell so often do. The rigidity of the human mind is disturbed by incongruous patterns in language which catch us off guard and thereby create comedy. Which proves the first source of comedy in Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* to be the juxtapositions in language which create paradoxes and therefore - comedy.

Secondly, use of ironies of truth and key linguistic techniques creates comedy not so much in the statements themselves but in the reactions and intent behind the phrases. Truth is used throughout as an ironic device through overstatements and simplified generalisations. Wilde purposefully employs his dandical characters to manipulate truth (these are the more rigid upper class characters such as Lady Bracknell and Algernon). Algernon states early on that “Girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don’t think it is right.” This is presented in the form of a declarative statement as most ironies of truth are and although on the surface the claim he makes is seen as false, the underlying implication of marriages having to be unhappy and lacking in passion or flirtation rings very true in the context of the time period. This is a simplified generalisation that Algernon makes and the comedy derives from truth in a seemingly false statement. Bergson also states that comedy is a strictly human convention as it concerns human behaviour. This adds a further layer of comedy to the generalisation made as the subject of the joke is in fact the preposterous nature of human behaviour, specifically towards marriage. These implied truths are made consciously by the more intelligent characters but accidentally by the least intelligent. This intent creates comedy as Lady Bracknell’s accidental truths are comedic as she reveals the warped truth of a society she simultaneously tries to defend and recommend. In addition, the overstatements used by the more intelligent characters creates comedy as they are targeted comments which others fail to catch. The underlying truth completely goes over their head while being perfectly understandable to the audience. This way, viewers are directly involved as the comments are designed for their understanding. The comedy here is the ignorance of the other characters who fail to understand or completely catch the meaning of a phrase from superior acting characters. This links to Thomas Hobbes’ Superiority Theory which claims that one laughs at something when made to feel superior to it. This theory is also seen as having a social and political dimension as what is seen as “superior” is subject to change depending on the societal context which is constantly evolving. This can be said to be a method of confirming and maintaining hierarchies and therefore adds a strange layer of irony to the intent of Wilde’s comedy in breaking down social hierarchies with his comments highlighting its hypocrisy and ridiculous behaviour. Due to Wilde’s style in the sense of layering his statements, the play becomes comedic for a multitude of reasons but especially the underlying truth behind everything which pushed audiences to laugh at their own human behaviour.

Finally, the use of farce and trivial behaviour throughout creates comedy as it discredits and undermines the establishment and society. The ridiculous behaviours of the characters are suggestive of the ridiculousness of upper class society. Once again linking back to Bergson’s theory of comedy as concerning human behaviour. The majority of the scenes in *The Importance of Being Earnest* which involve food are a microcosm for the attitudes of upper society. By replacing certain

key ideas such as marriage and identity with food, audiences are more easily able to understand the fault in their behaviour and thinking. The first instance of this in the play would be the “cucumber sandwich” debacle over which Algernon obsesses instead of focusing on the more important matters. This highlights how upper classes prioritise things like reputation, social standing and financial motivations. This is used throughout the play and most notably in the chaos section of the plot where Algernon and Jack avoid the immediate problem of their identity reveal in favour of arguing about muffins. This is mirrored in the conversation between Cecily and Gwendolyn when they have tea together. Here, instead of arguing normally, Cecily purposefully serves Miss Fairfax the wrong food. Gwendolyn requests “bread and butter” and Cecily hands her “a very large slice of cake” and is then warned that she “may go too far”. This entire interaction is ridiculous and farcical and represents the triviality of upper class behaviour in a manner which is easily understood by the audience. Furthermore, by approaching more serious subjects through farce and triviality, a lighthearted tone is created. This is typical of comedy as the play would move into tragedy should this light tone slip too far. Any negative emotion seen or created would cause the audience to empathise with the characters and therefore distract them from the comedic side. Bergson also touches on comedy as receding before emotions. In order to find something funny, a person must subvert their emotions to view the situation in a detached manner. Wilde’s use of triviality and farce when the plot could potentially become too heavy secures it as a comedy and ensures the play does not become too emotional.

To conclude, Wilde’s *Importance of Being Earnest* is comic due to its use of juxtapositions to create irony and transform the rigid into the fluid. In addition to this, use of truth behind every statement creates comedy on multiple levels while triviality and farce ensure it remains light and audiences are emotionally detached. These methods without doubt demonstrate that Oscar Wilde’s play is in fact comedic.