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May 3, 2016

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July 6, 2011

Expert unveils the disturbing satire in Wilde's 'Earnest' play

By Farhan Nuruzzaman

Themes of marriage, sexuality and class relations figure prominently in Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest" and still resonate with us today, said Cornell English professor Ellis Hanson, speaking at the 92nd Street Y in New York City June 29.

"This play is incredibly funny, but you have to be laughing really hard not to notice that it's also drop-dead cynical about things that are very important to us," said Hanson, noting how Wilde used satire to criticize elements of Victorian society. "I think it's cynical and offensive in a good way; it doesn't resolve our problems for us, but it gives us a particular kind of view of how we use language to negotiate political and social problems as well as problems of identity to our advantage."

Hanson explored Wilde's ample use of double entendre and its relationship to Wilde's double life (a respectable, married man who, on the side, was having sex with boys). "For instance, Ernest is a person's name, as well as a character trait that means moral seriousness. It also refers to Oscar Wilde's own double life in the sense that we can say someone is earnest, meaning morally serious, and we can also say that someone is in earnest, which means that person really means what he says," said Hanson. "But if you say that man is in Ernest, then you naturally say Ernest who, and you start to understand the homosexual double entendre that Wilde was getting at."

Hanson also noted how marriage is mocked throughout the play. For instance, Lady Bracknell, one of the main characters in the play, believes that one should marry for money and fall in love for a particular kind of lifestyle. Hanson related how disturbing some of his students at Cornell found this idea, who believed that people should marry for love only. Logically, Hanson said, if one marries for love, then it follows that one should also divorce for love as well.

"In fact, I think most of us marry for more than love, and we stay in marriage for something more than love," said Hanson.

The play, Hanson said, "invites us to think about what exactly we think a marriage is, and why we all want it and yet why we all find it a form of torture at the same time. Could marriages be between people of the same sex, could you marry two or three people, could you marry members of your family, could you marry your mom?" asked Hanson. "What do we think marriage is, and why are we putting these constrictions on other people?"

Hanson described how the play is also a satire on the decay of lying. According to Hanson, lying makes a great deal of sense in this play, where reality follows from language instead of language following from reality. "Most of what we call social life is an ability to navigate certain hypocrisies and lies, and the people who are best at it are the ones who win in the end," said Hanson.

"Since we have to make up things to tell one another, and since we live social lives that are pure theater, and we perform for each other all the time, it seems that people who have the most art are the people who are going to have the best lives," said Hanson. "And so we should have more faith in lying."

STORY CONTACTS

Cornell Chronicle
Susan S. Lang
607-255-3613
ssl4@cornell.edu

Media Contact
Syl Kacapyr
607-255-7701
vpk6@cornell.edu

Farhan Nuruzzaman '12 is a writer intern for the Cornell Chronicle.