

**CRITICISM AGAINST MATERIAL - ORIENTED LIFE REFLECTED IN OSCAR  
WILDE'S *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST* DRAMA (1895):  
A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH**



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A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The major problem of this study is how criticism against material-oriented life reflected in *The Importance of Being Earnest* drama by Oscar Wilde on 1895. The objective of this study is to analyze the drama based on the sociological analysis. In analyzing *The Importance of Being Earnest* drama, the writer uses qualitative method and Sociological approach. The data sources consists of primary data and secondary data sources. The primary data source is the script of *The Importance of Being Earnest* drama and the secondary data sources are books or any information related to material-oriented life. The method of the data collection is library research. The technique of data analysis is descriptive analysis. The outcome of the study is shown material oriented life in *The Importance of being Earnest* drama. Oscar Wilde shows that nature of material-oriented life cannot be separated from the material, so the people justify any means to get what they want. Such as lies and hypocrisy to get their love as portrayed in the drama. Oscar Wilde shown the issues raised in this works are about marriage and social norms, which are social class distinctions made the Victorian society at that time weak so they justify a variety of ways to get what they want included in the wedding. Social class differences make the separation between the rich and the poor.*

**Key words:** Material-Oriented Life, *The Importance of Being Earnest* drama,  
Sociological Approach

## A. INTRODUCTION

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is a drama comedy written by Oscar Wilde on 1895. This drama was first staged on Valentine's Day February 14, 1895 in St. James' Theatre, London in English language. Script of this drama consist of 83 pages in three act, drama is a tool to express our feeling that performed in a stage before audiences and combine with music, dance, or something art that support the drama. Various studies related to the drama has been conducted, are as follows.

*The first study on The Importance of Being Earnest drama* is conducted by Jeffrey (2009) in her research *Questioning the importance of being earnest: A conversation analysis of the use and function of humour in the serious business of therapy*. This thesis explores the long-standing debate in the field of psychotherapy around the use of humour in psychotherapy and the shift from outcome to process research in psychotherapy research. Results are discussed in relation to humour's potential place in pertinent areas of therapy such as the therapeutic relationship, empathy and emotional connectedness, unconditional positive regard, congruence, resistance, uncertainty and change.

*The Second study* the researcher found a journal which discusses *The Duality of Human Nature in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest*, written by Hussein (2012). This paper is divided into two sections and a conclusion. Section one deals with an introduction about Oscar Wilde and the Victorian age as a new age which was converted from rural into urban. It sheds light on the Victorian women and their role in that society. Section two tackles *The Importance of Being Earnest* and its genre. This section analyzes the double identity of human nature in the Victorian age, and the reason behind this duality.

*The Third study* the researcher found the same issue by Hebben-Wadey (2011) which discusses *Materialism and Well-Being in Children*. This thesis addresses the question of whether school-based interventions to reduce and prevent aggression in pre-adolescent children are effective as a first-line treatment approach. Empirical literature that reports on the effectiveness of social-cognitive problem-solving school-based aggression reduction interventions are reviewed, followed by a review of alternative approaches to aggression reduction.

*The Fourth* study was conducted by Poyraz (2010), with the title *Science versus Religion: The Influence of European Materialism on Turkish Thought, 1860-1960*. The study concludes that there are two different and competing approaches to modernity in Turkish intellectual history, accompanied by great social tension, which continues to this day, between those who want to Europeanize entirely and those who want to modernize while preserving what they perceive as the “culturally authentic” spiritual core of their society.

*The Fifth* research was conducted by Haloho (2011), this thesis entitled *Analysis of materialism as reflected in Sidney Sheldon The Stars Shine Down*. This analysis aims to explain the material success that makes people become greedy so waning sense of humanity caused by materialistic in the novel.

*The Sixth* research is written by Burcham (2012) entitled “*I Do*” *Want it All: Weddings, Materialism, and Marital Satisfaction*. The purpose of the present research is to understand the emphasis placed on extravagant weddings in today's society, and to explore its effects on the perception of the marriage relationship as a result.

*Seventh* research is written by Troisi (2006), entitled: *Materialism and money spending disposition as predictors of economic and personality variables*. This research explores the relationships between materialism and money spending attitudes on impulse buying tendencies, attitudes toward debt, sensation seeking, and openness to experience.

From previous studies above the writer found five analysis that examines the same issue, but using different data, and two analysis with the same data but using a different issue. It can be concluded that there is a chance for the writer to analyze Criticism Against Material Oriented Life Reflected in *Oscar Wilde`s The Importance Of Being Earnest* drama. This study will be elaborating as well as examining the meaning of material oriented life happening in the social context. Limited access will be described in this study, specifically Criticism Against Material Oriented life Reflected in *Oscar Wilde`s The Importance Of Being Earnest* drama.

## **B. RESEARCH METHOD**

In doing this research, the writer uses qualitative research. This research was aimed to describe Criticism Against Material Oriented Life Reflected In Oscar Wilde`s *The Importance Of Being Earnest* drama. The object of the research is a script of Oscar Wilde`s *The Importance of Being Earnest* drama, it consists of 83 pages in three act. The writer uses a sociological perspective to analyze the drama.

The data in this studies could be divided in two kinds of data, namely primary and secondary data (Berg, 2001: 214). In this research, primary data were the drama and script of *The Importance Of Being Earnest*. The data were taken from the dialogues, character`s description, plot and all of the statement related to the problems. Secondary data sources in this research were collected from other sources related to the research such as theories, internet sources and other data required the research in sociological approach. (Hikmat, 2011:71), the technique of collecting data in this study was library research. The necessary steps were as follows:

- a) Watching the drama for several times, repeatedly.
- b) Reading the script carefully to get the best comprehension.
- c) Taking notes of the important parts in both primary and secondary data sources.
- d) Browsing to the internet to get some information article that related to the topic ( the director, producer, actors, script, scenario, etc)
- e) Reading the related the books.

In this study the writer employs: interactive model of analysis proposed by Miles and Huberman (1992:20) which included: data collection, data reduction, data display and conclusion. In this model, the components of data analysis were interacting each other.

## **C. FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Patterns of Spending Free Time**

Many people who are bored with their daily activity that monotonous, to overcome this, they do nice things which can encourage them to forget about the problem and work. Many activities undertaken to spend their free time, this can be

done depends on sex, age and where they live and the environment is very influential in the way they spend their free time. Like Victorian who spending their free time in a way come together to dine, drink outside, and traveling.

#### **a. Dining**

*The Importance of Being Earnest* drama written by Oscar Wilde is tells about lifestyle of Victorian age at that time. Class difference was striking at the time, people in the Victorian age, especially the upper classes, particularly liked gathered only to dine outdoors and drinking with people they consider equivalent ( *Wilde, 2012:5*), (*Wilde, 2012:11*), and (*Wilde, 2012:13*).

#### **b. Drinking**

The following is a conversation that indicates that the Victorian behavior at the time to gathering to spend free time and there is always a drink served( *Wilde, 2012:6*) and *Wilde, 2012:24*).

#### **c. Travelling**

Besides gathered for dinner and drink outside, Victorian behavior of the upper and middle classes also likes traveling to spend their free time by visiting to the city (*Wilde, 2012:24*).

## **2. Patterns of Consumption**

### **a. Drinking and Eating**

In Merriamwebster (2014), Consumption is “the act of eating or drinking something.” It means that consumption patterns are influenced by the behavior, habits, and income. The higher of their income will affect their consumption (*Wilde, 2012:5*).

Similarity according to Pmahabal (2014), “Tea became the important drink that serve, the drinking of tea led to the birth of a thing beyond a mere habit or addiction. It became a culture.” Victorian age at that time usually served tea and cake in their meeting (*Wilde, 2012:12*) and (*Wilde, 2012:44*).

The lifestyle can be seen from the need and use of goods, income, and purchases consumption in daily life. The higher of their social status in the society, hence their consumption patterns is higher than people who are in the middle or

lower class. Cucumber sandwich is a symbol of food consumed by the upper classes like Lady Bracknell.

#### **b. Way spending their money**

According to Ronsen (2010), “Consumerism by the middle-classes was contributed to by greater leisure and the development of department stores. These stores were bright and spacious, with gas-lights and plate-glass windows. They offered an opportunity for the newly well-off middle-class, particularly the middle-class matrons, to spend their money on all the new and wonderful products that were constantly being made available to the market. As quoted in Ronsen`s article from Lawrence James, in his history of the middle-class comments, the "middle class expended as much time, energy and ingenuity on spending money as they did earning it." (*Wilde, 2012:23*).

### **3. Patterns of Marriage**

According to Steinmetz (2014), Marriage is “the term which describes both the ritual with which a relationship between partners is established as well as the relationship itself, not only creates households and families, it also ties existing households and families together.”

#### **a. Occupation**

According to Oxford dictionary (2014), Occupation is “A job or profession.”

Victorian lifestyle behaviors in *The Importance of Being Earnest* drama does not stop on their consumption patterns, but also in the wedding. The upper class usually have criteria in a marriage (*Wilde, 2012:17*).

#### **b. Income**

According to Elmbald (2014), income as “money comes into your personal household, usually generated as compensation in the form of a paycheck for work you have done.”

Victorians think that marriage is one way to maintain the social status that has been carried by a family or even in certain cases be a booster for increased status, They are not going to marry someone who are in the lower class (*Wilde, 2012:17*).



### **c. Descent**

In Oxford dictionary (2014), Descent is “The origin or background of a person in terms of family or nationality”

Marriage is an important issue of the Victorian era this is because marriage can determine the fate of the family in the public or society. The fate of the family means the status and dignity, family background is one of the criteria to be able to maintain the status and dignity in society (*Wilde, 2012:19-20*).

## **4. Patterns of Speech**

In Freedictionary (2014), Speech patterns “is a distinctive manner of oral expression.”

### **a. Likes to Show Off**

In Urban dictionary (2011), Show off is a “Describing somebody as a show-off carries an implicit endorsement of their capability: someone can only "show off" if they actually have something to show. An individual who seeks attention that they are not perceived to deserve is usually described much more dismissively as an attention-seeker or loudmouth.”

Class distinction is not only based on income but also can be seen from the manner of speech and manners (*Wilde, 2012:17*).

### **b. Arrogant**

In Cambridge dictionary (2014), Arrogant is “unpleasantly proud and behaving as if you are more important than, or know more than, other people.”(*Wilde, 2012:4*).

Upper class people always want to look more in every way, because it is exactly what distinguishes between upper class and lower class. As in the story that Gwendolen is highborn while Jack unclear about the background of his family (*Wilde, 2012:12*).

## **5. Patterns of Education**

Differences Victorian class also affects in the education uneven, at the beginning of the Victorian era extremely rare and not considered important, as time

passes the public consciousness appeared that education can improve their mindset in solving a problem.

**a. Woman education**

As quoted from Nickson (2009) , “The young women were mainly educated in accomplishments like French, drawing, painting, singing, dancing - everything which helped them to get a perfect suitor!”

And similarity quoted from Chrips (in Mandasari 2012), “a middle or upper class Victorian woman was not expected to do any work, for she had servants to do anything for her. Her role was to be the “chief ornament” of her husband or of her father’s household” (*Wilde, 2012:26* .

**b. Man education**

Stockton (2011), wrote that “Like young girls, boys were often taught at home by governesses, but their lessons were given in anticipation for their eventual entry into the business world and/or public life. Focus was on the "three R's," reading, writing and [a]rithmetic. “Young men usually get the education from governesses before they went to public school, formal education started to emerge, but the difference in class make education in Victorian era uneven. Formal education is considered a luxury and only for the upper and middle class men, whereas for men from lower class can’t get formal education. Most of them work as factory worker earn money to help their family (*Wilde, 2012:10*).

*The Importance of Being Earnest* Oscar Wilde's play is a work which criticized the social situation of England at that time. In this case, social criticism presented in the play is the hypocrisy of the nation Victoria at the time that the focus of the figures shown Algernon and Jack Worthing with social class differences in reaching their love.

Social criticism is shown as a sign of social status seems apparent ambition Algernon and Jack Worthing who uses the pseudonym "Earnest", the moral degradation of British society-related money making everything becomes impossible, and justifies any means to get what they want. Moreover, criticism was delivered regarding the concept of capitalist society and social status differences are very striking.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* drama illustrate the Victorian habit in spending their free time to eat and drink outside. As performed by the family of Lady Bracknell, Algernon's aunt. As told in the drama that they are descendants of nobles who live in luxury. They do not want to seem familiar with the lower classes such as Jack Worthing when they eat, it is considered to be dropping their dignity. It is as a criticism to be conveyed by the author that at the time the upper class likes to spend his free time with having fun, visiting places of entertainment, and traveling with their families. It was contrasts with the lives of the lower class who tend to be little or hardly have any free time because they have to work in a factory for 14 hours (*Barker:2008*).

The habits of the upper classes do not just stop in how they spend their leisure time, but also their habits in eating certain foods. In the drama illustrated by Oscar Wilde that the upper class is eating certain types of food and even the food must be present in every dish served, as well as beer with a high-quality brand is considered that must be owned for them as described in the conversation between Algernon and his servant. For the upper classes they have servant that can serve them all day. Their habit to spend money by visiting the cinema, club, or any other entertainment because if they do not like it, that is considered terrible. It is one of the authors of the reality of social criticism at the time that stated in the drama, which when the lower classes had to work for low wages and a potluck meal. Upper class people actually spoiled with luxuries with their wealth (*Pulham in Williams, 2004:451*).

Class differences are also influential in terms of marriage, as a shown in the part of the drama that highlights their hypocrisy in social gaps at the time, tells about the two young men in London, Algernon 'Algy' Moncrieff and John 'Ernest' Worthing. Because of the lack of norms and social conditions in the social life of London, Algy and Ernest deliberately lied to have a double identity: Algy claimed to have 'friends' who named Bunbury, while John or Ernest has a dual identity as John or Uncle Jack in the village who is always concerned with 'brother ', Ernest who live in the city of London. Jack called himself 'Ernest'. Jack uses the name Earnest to captivate Gwendollen, daughter of Lady Bracknell. The name Earnest is also used by Algernon uncle of Gwendolen to captivate Cecily, foster children of Jack. They both

use the same pseudonym of "Earnest". Gwendolen was accepted the proposal known Jack named Earnest, because at that time the name Earnest considered a family name of the upper classes of high standing. From here, the first problem arose: Jack must be officially named Ernest in order to marry Gwendolen, beside that Cecily also captivated by Algernon named Earnest well known. Until the Algernon who visited the Jack`s house in the village to meet Cecily, not long after Gwendolen also came to the Jack`s house. That is where the problem re-emerged, where Gwendolen and Cecily fought to be able to marry a man named Earnest. In this point of view has the potential to create a gap between the rich and the poor at the time due to lack of awareness among the community (*Hewit in Williams, 2004:305*).

One criticism to be conveyed by the author in the drama is how the patterns of speech in upper class that was impressed more arrogant and like to show off. As told in the drama when Lady Bracknell interrogating Jack Worthing about how much his salary and other wealth when Lady Bracknell know that Jack proposed her daughter, Gwendolen. The more wealth owned considered as a determinant of the quality of life of the person, as described in the social reality of the nation Victoria at the time that the quality of one's life is determined by the real wage, income, and their educational background. While not all people get an education like that be obtained the upper class. Lady Bracknell is a noble descent who wants his daughter to marry someone from the top to maintain wealth and dignity. Industrial revolution brought positive and negative impact, positive impact is the establishment of factories that can create jobs and reduce unemployment. The industrial revolution also brought negative impact, one of which is the presence of a large urbanization of the lower classes who wish to seek their welfare improvement. Many children drop out of school to be factory workers for helping their families. This makes education is uneven, as described in the social reality in Britain at that time, where there are schools that stand and give lessons as needed and the level of their social class. As criticism of the author is told in the drama that Cecily, Jack`s foster child who taught by a governess. Education for girls is not considered important at that times, the most important thing for girls is to learn how she be a wife and mother in the family. In contrast to the men who learn more and prepared to get a job (*Gillard:2011*).

From the explanation above can be concluded that the result of analyze the issues in the drama is related to the some theories that researcher applied in this research, such as according to the Swingewood and Laurenson (1972:11) that Sociology deals with the human being in society, as illustrated in the drama that presented and packed with a variety of characteristics and situation at that time. The writer wrote the play as one of the reflection and criticism Victorian era`s life in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Similarity according to Eagleton (1996:2) that the literature is covers in some genres. One of them is drama, where the drama is produced that focuses with the nature of our situation in history and the direction in which of our situation move, and according to Bouman (1976:9) that Sociology does not stand alone as its object, but also because it has methods and preparation of their own understanding. As the result of the analysis the *Importance of Being Earnest* drama that shown positive and negative impact of industrial revolution in various aspect of society at that time. In other hand relationship about sociology and literature also explained in Pospelov (1967:534) in the International Science Journal that the relationship between literary creation, the social background, and historical reality are most powerful creative imagination as related to the result of analyze the drama that the industrial revolution made the capitalist society, and class differences arose that caused the gap between rich poor and various other differences in the community, that followed by the amount of hypocrisy and lies because of weak morality of society at that time.

Different issue in this analysis is material oriented life, which can be explained through the materialism theory by (Marx and Engels in Swingewood and Laurenson, 1972:40), (Crane in Moser, 2005:16) and some other experts in materialism and material oriented life that materialism is an understanding where the people who care about the material such as property, money, and other property that can be seen. Like illustrated on the drama which are class differences that happened make the upper classes has different characteristics habits and lifestyle with the lower class that described in various aspects of life on the drama clearly. Lifestyles and habits of the upper class and the lower class is also shown in the drama that makes

social stratification in society which cause the emergence of social conflict as a negative impact of the industrial revolution.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

The study concluded that there is relationship between the play with the English society at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *The Importance of Being Earnest* written by Oscar Wilde is one of the works that criticize the morality hypocrisy of Victorian society that is packaged and presented through a skit. The issues raised in this works are about marriage and social norms, which are social class distinctions made the Victorian society at that time weak so they justify a variety of ways to get what they want included in the wedding. Social class differences make the separation between the rich and the poor that give rise to new problems in society such as the increasing rate of crime at that time.

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