

**MARRIAGE ISSUES IN ENGLAND IN THE LATE 19th CENTURY
PORTRAYED IN OSCAR WILDE'S *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING
EARNEST***



AN UNDERGRADUATE THESIS

**Submitted to Faculty of Cultural Sciences Hasanuddin University in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements to Obtain a Sarjana Degree in English Literature Study Program**

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ENGLISH LITERATURE STUDY PROGRAM

FACULTY OF CULTURAL SCIENCES

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MARRIAGE ISSUES IN ENGLAND IN LATE 19TH CENTURY PORTRAYED IN OSCAR WILDE'S THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

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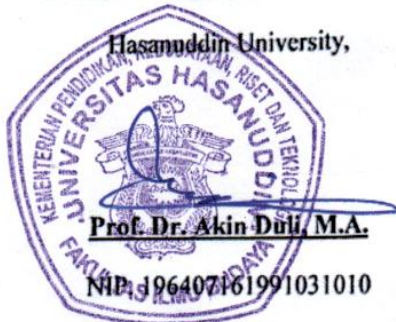
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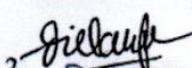




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MARRIAGE ISSUES IN ENGLAND IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY PORTRAYED IN OSCAR WILDE'S THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

Submitted in fulfillment one of the requirements of undergraduate thesis examination to obtain Sarjana Degree at English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University.

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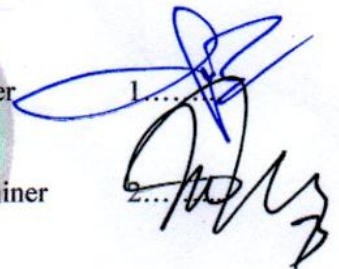
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APPROVAL FORM

With reference to the letter of the Dean Faculty of Cultural Sciences Hasanuddin University No. 043/UN4.9.1/KEP/2022 regarding supervision, we hereby confirm approve the undergraduate thesis draft by Amirah Ainunsabilah (F041181317) to be examined at the English Literature Study Program of Faculty of Cultural Sciences.

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STATEMENT LETTER

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Hereby, the writer declares that this thesis is written by herself. This thesis does not contain any materials which have been published by other people, and it does not cite other people's ideas except quotations and references.

Makassar, October 28th 2022



Amirah Ainunsabilah

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The first and the biggest gratitude to be expressed in this opportunity is to the Lord, Allah Subhana wa Ta'ala, The Truth, The Guide, The All Knowing, who destined this thesis to be completed, that entitled *Marriage Issues in England in The Late 19th Century Portrayed in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest*. Abundant blessings and peace also sent to Rasulullah, Muhammad Sallallahu 'Alaihi wa Salam, who had brought human to the lightness. This research is submitted as the final requirements in accomplishing undergraduate degree in English Literature Study Program at Hasanuddin University.

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ABSTRAK

AMIRAH AINUNSABILAH. 2022. Isu Pernikahan Pada Masyarakat Inggris Akhir Abad 19 yang Tergambar dalam *The Importance of Being Earnest* oleh Oscar Wilde (dibimbing oleh **Burhanuddin Arafah** dan **A. St. Aldilah Khaerana**).

The Importance of Being Earnest adalah drama satiris tentang kehidupan masyarakat Victorian yang dibungkus menggunakan komedi. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis tentang keterkaitan antara isu pernikahan pada masyarakat Victorian dan pengaruh isu tersebut terhadap karakter yang ada pada drama *The Importance of Being Earnest* karya Oscar Wilde.

Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian deskriptif kualitatif yang menggunakan pendekatan sosiologi sastra. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan sosiologi sastra, analisis data dilakukan dengan saling menghubungkan kejadian pada naskah dan kejadian pada masyarakat Victorian yang sebenarnya. Adapun data primer dari penelitian ini diperoleh dari naskah drama *The Importance of Being Earnest*, dan data pendukung diperoleh dari buku-buku lainnya yang memuat kondisi sosial masyarakat Victorian pada masa itu.

Setelah analisis dilakukan, penulis menyimpulkan bahwa isu tentang pernikahan pada cerita mempengaruhi seluruh karakter utama dengan perubahan yang berbeda-beda. Isu pernikahan masyarakat Victorian pun tergambar jelas pada cerita, dan mempengaruhi berbagai aspek dalam kehidupan masyarakat Victorian pada masa itu.

Kata kunci: isu pernikahan, masyarakat Victorian, kelas sosial.

ABSTRACT

AMIRAH AINUNSABILAH. 2022. The Marriage Issues in England in The Late 19th Century Portrayed in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (supervised by **Burhanuddin Arafah** dan **A. St. Aldilah Khaerana**).

The Importance of Being Earnest is a satirical play about Victorian society that is wrapped in comedy. The aim of this study is to analyze the interconnections between marriage issues among Victorian society and the effect of the marriage issue toward the characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde.

This research is a descriptive qualitative method with sociology of literature approach. By using the sociology of literature approach the analysis conducted by correlating what happened in the scenes and what happened in Victorian society. The main data of this research is collected from the original script of the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and the supporting data collected from other books about life of Victorian society.

After analyzing, the writer concludes that the marriage issue in the story has affected the main characters in the play with various type of transformation. The marriage issue among Victorian society is clearly portrayed in the play and also affects people as depicted in the drama.

Keywords: marriage issues, Victorian society, social class.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

England is a country that has implemented a monarchical system of government for years. Britain has passed various histories as a country based on the wisdom of its leaders from time to time. Mitchell (2009: 1) stated that the Victorian era was an era of the British with most transitions. English had a feudal and agricultural society before then became the first country to move to an industrial democracy. One of the eras that has the best history in British history was the Victorian era, which was led by Queen Victoria in the 19th century, for 64 years from 1837 to 1901. The Victorian era is referred to as the glorious era of British society due to the achievement by society after the Industrial Revolution in the previous era. The increase in living and economic standards finally occurred at the end of the Victorian era, where people demanded a prosperous life after the Georgian era where British society at that time faced economic difficulties which gradually recovered in the Victorian era.

According to Souza and Kupske (2015: 118) materialism, marital, and social class were some of the identical problems of the Victorian era. This was the reason for a living standard as a family was also having a new value as the time passed. Men and women who are going to get married must be in equal social status. Lifestyle was required to reflect someone's social status after getting married. Socializing and holding banquets for acquaintances from other

famous families is considered a need between married women in the upper-middle class. This was because of a significant gap between each social class, so that marriage stereotypes were formed as men and women only allowed to marry someone who came from the same social class as themselves.

Not only the increase in living and economic standard in England happened during the Victorian period. There was a huge production of literary works in this era. The issues that existed at that time have often been told in diverse literary works. One of the writers who lived and published works of that era was Oscar Wilde. Oscar Wilde was famous for his works, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, *A Woman of No Importance* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Wilde was popular for his new ideas in writings and raised social issues that were rarely discussed in any literal works at that time. His works were loved by many people and gradually became popular in a few years. In his peak of career in 1895, his theater work, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was performed and was one of his other successful and famous works that addressed the social phenomenon among British society at the time.

The Importance of Being Earnest portrayed how the social class, wealth, and family become the issues that should be considered before getting married. These issues, particularly marriage, are interesting to discuss as how people in the Victorian era strictly held a marriage to just only between a man and woman with the same social status or level. However, nowadays the

British have a better standard for marriage and what happened in the Victorian era should be a good history to reflect a social issue especially marriage.

In this study, the researcher discusses the marriage issues that developed at the end of the 19th century, by looking at the special points raised in the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde that are relevant to the discussion about marriage issues at the time the manuscript was published. The drama tells the story of a young man (Jack Worthing) who wants to marry a woman (Gwendolen Fairfax), but does not reveal his real name. The story is complicated by a comedic conflict caused by the pretense of Jack and his friend (Algernon Moncrieff) when they want to marry a woman. This drama script displays the stereotype about marriage and family that developed at the end of the 19th century, namely marriage based on social class and economic status. The play was published in 1895 and has become Wilde's most popular work and has been re-played many times since it was first performed.

1.2 Identification of the Problems

After reading the novel several times, the writer identifies some problems presented in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*;

1. Gendering social responsibility among English society in the last 19th century was very impactful.
2. Materialism highly influenced social life in the 19th century in England

3. Early marriage among English society in the 19th century is a common thing.
4. Social hierarchy in last 19th century in England is highly leads to discrimination.

1.3 Scope of The Problem

After identifying the problems, the writer tries to limit the problems to only discuss marriage issues in *The Importance of Being Earnest* that are portrayed in the drama and the impacts towards the characterization by using the sociology of literature approach.

1.4 Research Question

Related to scope of problem above, the research questions of this study are set as follow:

1. How does the marriage issue in the late Victorian era affect the main characters in the Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*?
2. What marriage issue is specifically portrayed in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*?

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The objectivities aimed to be achieved by the study are as follow:

1. To identify how the marriage issue in the late Victorian era affects the main characters in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
2. To identify what marriage issue is specifically portrayed in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

1.6 Significances of the Study

This study is expected to be useful as an academic discussion in the development of literature and humanism study. This study is also expected to be a reference for the reflection of the social state of English society in the late 19th century.

1.7 Sequences of the Study

The research is divided into five chapters that are explained as follows:

1. **Chapter 1** is the Introduction. This chapter consists of background, scope of the problems, research questions, objectives of the study, and sequences of the writing.
2. **Chapter 2** is the Literary Review. This chapter consists of literature review which provides review of some previous study and applies some theories to support this analysis.
3. **Chapter 3** is the Research Methodology. This chapter provides the method of collecting data and method of analyzing data.

4. **Chapter 4** is the findings and discussions. This chapter contains all the data found in the research, and the discussion about the findings further.
5. **Chapter 5** is the conclusion of the matter based on the findings and discussions part, including some suggestions about the writing of the Thesis.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Related Research

Based on the problems that have been raised, the authors try to solve these problems by looking at several relevant sources to discuss *The Importance of Being Earnest* drama as follows.

The first related research is research by Tita Puspita Sukirman (2021) entitled *The Social Status in Bronte's Jane Eyre*. The research explains social status and its influence on the main characters using a structural approach. The result of the study indicates that social status has great influence to fight for someone's honor. Social status was signed and given based on family background and really helps the lives of the characters in the story.

Jumianti (2015), did a study entitled *The Social Classes of Characters in Bronte's Agnes Grey*. Her study proposed the portrayal of social classes among society in the novel. The study used structural approach and social class theory to analyze the social class. The result of the study classified all characters in the novel into three classes. Upper, medium, and lower class. Most of the characters are from the upper class.

Ratih Ajeng Oktorina (2015) in her research entitled *The Portrait of Marriage in Victorian Era in Jane Austen's Persuasion*. The study uses a library research, and using sociological and historical-biographical approach. The study discussed how marriage in the Victorian age was portrayed in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. Through this study, the author identified that marriage is

for getting social status. Women will find men with the large fortune to become their husband.

Muhammad Fajar Aryana (2012) in his study titled *Social Criticism in Victorian Society through The Characters in Bernard Shaw's Arms and The Man*. The study is a library research that uses a sociocultural-historical approach to analyze how the characters put a criticism about marriage and social class. This study found out that each character of the novel gives a different point of view about marriage and social class in their society. The main character decides to follow the rule of marriage in the Victorian upper class designed for financial prospect, political connection and social status.

The four studies mentioned above are related to each other, where the three of them discuss how marriage and social class in the Victorian era were in mutual relations and giving influence. The first and third study discuss how social status can influence someone's honor, and can be gained or signed through marriage in the Victorian era. The second and fourth study is related to this study because it also has related findings to this study which want to portray the issues of marriage between social classes. Marriage is one of the factors that are directly related to the social conditions. However, none of the four studies above have examined the phenomenon of marriage in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Thus, the research that the writer is currently doing is an necessary thing to do because it has not been done by other researchers before. In addition, the researcher tries to frame marriage issues in

The Importance of Being Earnest, which is quite clearly shown in the drama but has not been highlighted by many people.

Based on the existing research, the researcher wants to develop the social theme in *The Importance of Being Earnest* drama further. This is done by analyzing the stereotype of marriage among British society in the late 19th century in the drama of *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde. The results of related research can support the theory and analysis of new research that has not been discussed in previous research. This research is different from previous research because it focuses on the issue of marriage and family, and has different objectives with the same issue.

2.2. Intrinsic Elements of Drama

1. Plot

Plot is an arrangement or series of events that systematically forms a story in a literary work. A story develops gradually through stages of interconnected plots to form a complete story structure. In short, the plot is the flow of the story.

According to Abrams:

The plot in dramatic or narrative work is constituted by its events and actions, as these are rendered and ordered toward achieving particular artistic and emotional effects. (Abrams, 2009: 265)

There are five stages of plot:

- 1) **Exposition** or the introduction to the setting, characters, and characters involved in the story.

- 2) **Rising Action** is the part where the story is introduced to a problem that will grow gradually and intensely so that it becomes a bigger problem.
- 3) **Climax** is the climax of a story where a big problem or peak conflict arises.
- 4) **Falling Action** is the part where the problem begins to be solved and slowly finds its solution.
- 5) **Resolution** is the end of the story after all the problems in the story are resolved.

2. Characterization

Characterization is an element of literature work that is closely related to the characters in a story, as how it represents a human emotion or motives in a story. Characterizations are the boundaries that form a role that must be carried out by the character or cast according to the storyline that has been arranged. This will help the audience or the reader to understand how a character would respond to a case or plot matter. A characterization of a character could be changed as how the character developed as the plot grows, as a representation of huma that could be changed as time flies after a certain condition.

According to Abrams:

“Characters are the persons represented in a dramatic or narrative work, who are interpreted by the reader as possessing particular moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by inferences from what the

persons say and their distinctive ways of saying the dialogue and from what they do the action." (Abrams, 2009:42)

There are two types of characters based on the plot:

- 1) **The protagonist**, or the main character, is the character that gives a big influence towards the plot of the story.
- 2) **The antagonist** is the character that blocks up the protagonist to achieve the target, or the opposite of the protagonist.

Another types of the characters are based on its development along the story:

- 1) **The static** or flat character is the character that does not change throughout the story. The appearance of static characters is usually only for a brief time to help the main character to stand out during the story.
- 2) **The dynamic** or changing character is the opposite of the static. This character gets the role that develops and changes in certain scenes in the story.

3. Setting

Setting is information needed to put the story in chronological order and to distinguish between an event and another one. Setting serves to provide a detailed description of a scene, starting from the place, time, and atmosphere. It helps the audience or the reader in order to distinct the storyline systematically. Not only about place and time, the setting can also be in the form of a social or

cultural setting depicting a scene in a drama or other literature works. Settings also functioned as the element that brings the situation to let the audience understand the cultural matter and the tensed emotions of the character.

There are three types of the settings:

According to Abrams:

“The overall setting of a narrative or dramatic work is the general locale, historical time, and social circumstances in which its action occurs.” (Abrams, 2009: 330)

There are three types of the settings:

- 1) **Setting of place** is the information about where an event in the story took place. Could be the name of a city, country, a room, or building.
- 2) **Setting of time** is the information about when an event in the story happens. Could be part of a day, date, year, or era.

4. Theme

In general terms, theme is the topic or the major object of a creation. Theme in literary works is the main idea that builds a whole story in terms of characterization, dialogue, setting and other elements in a drama as a whole. As a main idea, theme itself has a dominant function in leading other elements and put it all together to make an integrated storyline and meaning that wanted to be delivered by a literary work. Theme is a general approach or abstract element as it is defined as the main idea. Therefore, theme needs to be expounded to a long linked plot as a complete work.

2.3 Sociology of Literature

Sociology of literature is a theory that has developed for a long time, and has been detailed by experts, as Hippolyte Taine. Although the concept of sociology of literature is said to have developed since ancient Greece, the era of Plato and Aristotle, the theory of sociology of literature did not stand alone as a scientific discipline in the 18th century. Swingewood (1972: 23-24) states that the earliest ideas in the sociology of literature was mentioned by Plato, namely his view of literature as a reflection of social society. However, the theory of the development of the sociology of literature was put forward by Taine, and he stated that the previous theory of sociology of literature was not considered as science before the 17th century.

In the early 17th century, men began to pay attention to society and its institutions. Swingewood (1972: 25) suggests that social aspects observers in society have begun to voice their thoughts. 17th century writers published various documentaries on literature containing social values. This is because humans realize that the social aspects of human life are built by humans themselves, unlike natural science which is formed naturally.

Swingewood, (1972: 25) mentions that in early 18th century, "Mechanical Materialism" began to be spread. This term implies the relationship between culture, human instincts and consciousness, and the material basis of society. Thoughts to change world society began to emerge,

so that the sociology of literature as an empirical science began to develop significantly in this era.

Social analysis of literature continued to develop, until entering the early 19th century, although at that time it did not yet have a series of accurate analytical methods. Swingewood (1972: 28) mentioned that new writers also provide further views such as Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. Both put forward the idea that society should develop commercially and industrially. Their understanding then develops into a critical understanding of various social aspects in the literature. On the other hand, an understanding that leads to a structuralism develops through positivism. Positivism seeks to find scientifically verifiable sources such as climate, geography, race and literature, to be linked to philosophy and political science. Thus, Swingewood (1972: 29-31) mentions the development of the sociology of literature which in the end became a science with standard and critical analytical and empirical method, and “would tend to keep the separated perspective – positivism through the writings of Taine, and the critical tendency through Marxist such as Lukacs and Goldmann”

In conclusion, sociology of literature is an approach in literary research that could help to comprehend a literal work by reflecting toward related phenomenon that happened among the society at the same time. The related phenomenon will be seen through the intrinsic and the extrinsic elements as well. The society is refers to a group of people that live at a particular time that

set either in the literary work and the history. By using the sociology of literature approach, the researcher will analyze the relation among the conceptual, the reality among society, and the issues found in *The Importance of Being Earnest* drama by Oscar Wilde.

2.4. Life in England during the Victorian Period

Living in the Victorian era tended to depend on the level of society, social status, and area of residence. At the beginning of the Victorian era, the quality of life was not as good as when it entered the middle of the century. But gradually life in that century improved. Society in this era is classified as prosperous and guaranteed life due to several factors. Some of them are the availability of jobs and natural resources.

In detail, Mitchell (2009: 104-105) states that life in the England countryside in the Victorian era was classified as prosperous and thick with values and norms that bound several groups. Women were not allowed to visit bars, meetings with priests were often held, and rural schools had separate entrances for boys and girls. In terms of economic quality, the Victorian era society was classified as prosperous where farmers had comfortable homes for their families, and most of the workers (laborers) had decent wages, thus opening up opportunities for them to do farming as their side job. This is because in the Victorian era, machines were not widely used for production fields, so that the production and agricultural sectors still needed human labor.

In urban areas, Mitchell (2009: 28) also mentions that urban life is growing rapidly due to migration. Urban people migrate to cities in search of

better jobs in factories. Social classes began to form in urban areas based on income and formed a significant pattern of community development in urban areas due to the denser population and more intense competition.

Based on job and occupation, people in the Victorian era were divided into classes. Each class has their own way to live, their own values, and culture. It is determined that people should act and live as their class, and it is inappropriate to act the opposite way. Mitchell (2009: 21-22) stated that England was somehow only divided into two classes, aristocrats who had inherited title and land, and commoners who had other than title and land. This is stricter than the theory that mentioned, where the man from the middle class did clean works and rather chose the works that use less physical effort, and the working class or the lower class will do the opposite.

Based on the fact in Victorian society, Grusky (2008: 6) had generally classified social stratification into 8 aspects, namely economics, power, cultural, social, honorific, civil, human, and physical. All of these aspects group each human class in detail. Economic status, including property, income and ownership, is at the top level of social stratification. This becomes a benchmark in society to place someone in a respectable position and determine a proper social class for them to associate with each other. After economic status, power is also a primary thing to consider among society, shown from someone's political power or in a narrow space it could be in someone's job authority. As in family, stratification also counts and gives a difference between the head of household's authority and a child in a small family. In a

cultural aspect, stratification could be seen from a knowledge or a cultural background that also shows the manners someone's had. Those things can be a ruler or place someone either in an advantaged position among society or disadvantaged.

In terms of family or marriage, there were laws binding marriage at that time. Marriage arrangements must be carried out with the permission of the ministry rather than the church. A marriage must be carried out openly and has been announced to the local population in an effort to ensure the marriage is carried out based on the consent of both parties and there is no coercion in the marriage. Men and women who are under the age of 21 are allowed to marry with the permission of their guardians. Furthermore, Mitchell (2009: 104-105) revealed that a married woman will change her social status (civil status). This is because the life of a married woman will be centered on the life of her family and husband, so that there is no longer a woman's right as a legally independent individual. Women's freedom like this greatly limited the movement of women at that time. In a family, a woman is only allowed to own something with the permission or gift of her husband. Even in custody, only the husband has the right to power and custody of legitimate children.

Gradually, at the end of the century women fought for their property rights to be able to get their work wages, and the ownership they obtained was legally recorded in the Married Women's Property Act in 1882. From this phenomenon, the impact on society was that families only would approve of his daughter's marriage to someone of an apparently equal level or social

status. That way, disputes over material rights and obligations between couples after marriage will be guaranteed.

The social class stratification is related to the Victorians that divided the society based on occupation and amount of wealth. In many literature works depicted this social class phenomenon, which leads to other issues, such as same-class marriage. Therefore, the social class stratification goes side by side with literary works, and could help in comprehending the social background that is reflected in literature.