

Dhiren Pooran

EN 3191

Natalia Khomenko

30 March 2022

The Life of Being Earnest – Self Fictionalization

The aspect of alternative identities has been a staple of comedy for its adaptability into almost any scenario. A simple spur-of-the-moment disguise to a wildly complicated alias has the potential for sustainable comedy that keeps evolving. In some comedies, these are used to convey certain ideas and call attention to the norm of what had been cotemporary in the time through repeated themes and symbols. Both *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Life of Brian* are guilty of this type of subtle statement. Both works employ aspects of self fictionalization which work toward the revelation and parody of normative ideals. Despite the difference in time periods between the two works, the contradictory ideas remain prevalent.

The Importance of Being Earnest tells the tale of two duplicitous men vying for two women's hands in marriage. Algernon Moncrief and Jack Worthing (Moncrief) assume false identities both when in the country or in the city to live in excitement as their usual life is lacking. While Algernon uses a persona to escape his duties in the city, Jack uses his persona to escape his responsibilities in the country and so they both bond over their similar practice. This lands them in hot water when Jack returns to the countryside to find Algernon masquerading as his fictional brother Ernest in an attempt to court Jack's ward, Cecily. Despite Jack's efforts, the web of lies is unraveled and laid bare. The two men talk their way out of the situation and, thanks to Lady Bracknell's interference, learn of Jack's true lineage as Algernon's brother.

The Life of Brian depicts the escapades of a man named Brian, from his mistaken identity as Jesus Christ at his birth to his crucifixion at his death. This film features a comedic series of events in which Brian fights back against the Roman empire only to find himself as a criminal, a figure of divinity, a prisoner and finally crucified. The main reason for his adventures in his hatred for the Romans paired with his apparent half-Roman lineage which spurs on his want for revenge against the Romans.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Jack takes on the persona of Ernest in the city and uses a fictional brother to escape his responsibilities in the country. As of today's societal norms, a double life such as the one presented is less believable, however in times where networking over long distances was difficult, Jack's lie could continue unabated. The process of Jack's persona invention is to rebel against those who expect much of him. Regardless of the amount of work it may have taken to keep his lie convincing, he found that less agonizing than his responsibilities. According to Jack, his duties require a certain principled standing which simply drained him, so he concocted his 'brother' Ernest, justifying his decision by saying, "a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness if carried to excess," (Wilde, 206 - 207).

Similarly, Algernon invents a persona, Bunbury, whom he uses to shirk his responsibilities and enjoy himself in the country. One of the main differences between Algernon and Jack's aliases is that while Jack uses his to escape the stress placed upon him, Algernon uses his to simply have fun and live his fantasies. Furthermore, Algernon is observed borrowing Jack's persona to get closer to a woman, potentially and eventually destroying Jack's escape excuse. Throughout the story, they seem to be parallel to each other, their aims similar while their process differs; even their personas seem to parallel as one escapes to the country from the

city while the other escapes to the city from the country. However, both men have decided to do away with the expectations they once deemed necessary to uphold in favour of pleasure.

While the characters of *The Importance of Being Earnest* willingly invent their personas, Brian, of *The Life of Brian*, is roped into the situations of mistaken identity. The beginning of the movie shows Brian learning of his Roman lineage and even still rebelling against the Romans. As he is arrested in a failed attempt of kidnapping, he pleads that he is a Roman, comedically abandoning the hatred he holds to be pardoned. At this point, his adoption of a Roman lineage comments on the norms of the time, wherein if you were a Roman, you would be less likely to be arrested and punished. Brian realizes this and uses a pitiful display of surrender to gain an opportunity.

Later, Brian falls onto a stage where prophets preach and avoids the Roman's chasing him by pretending to be one. He paraphrases the words of Jesus Christ and by withholding the end of one sermon, the listeners interpret its meaning and begin to follow him as a God. In his unintended pretense of divinity, it becomes apparent that the film is parodying the gullibility of most people at that point in time. In using Brian's inadvertent Godhood, the masses easily and erroneously interpret his words and actions as miracles, such as when he falls on a man who has taken a vow of silence causing him to yell. The man says, "I hadn't said a word for eighteen years till he came along," (Jones, 19), to which they interpret as the miracle of speech. These comical antics poke fun at what most people of the time would consider divine and miraculous.

The earnest nature is what is made fun of the most in comedy, mostly due to its easily contradictable gags. *The Importance of Being Earnest* uses this contradiction in relation to its title, naming the fictitious character Ernest, while the actor exhibits the most insincere of actions and dialogue. This relates to *The Life of Brian* in which individuals are subjected to a lie

and are easily fooled. The main love interests, Cecily and Gwendolen, are both charmed by men who technically do not exist. Cecily, especially, is blinded by her superficial love for the name Ernest believing the name to guarantee earnestness. This speaks to Cecily's character, a woman lost in her fantasies, opting out of studying in favour of daydreaming and diary entry. Through the lies which Algernon furthers, Cecily represents the stereotypical wealthy woman, claiming, "Oh! I don't think I would care to catch a sensible man. I shouldn't know what to talk to him about," (Wilde, 186), a statement used to call attention to the norm of aristocrats, which was to marry another not based on intelligence but on beneficial wealth.

Upon his crucifixion, there is another case of mistaken identity when Brian is to be released from his punishment but the wisecracking man in line with him jokes that he is Brian. This in turn sets off a chain reaction of numerous people claiming that they are Brian in a parodied version of the film *Spartacus*. The comedy of this scene when compared is that in *Spartacus*, the numerous people claiming to be Spartacus is an attempt to protect him from crucifixion whereas in *The Life of Brian*, they are seeking to sacrifice Brian for a chance at escaping crucifixion. In this mass self fictionalization, the film humorously depicts an anticlimactic, realistic turn of events due to human nature. The man who claimed to be Brian is taken down and spared all while admitting, "I'm not him! I'm just having you on! Put me back! Bloody Romans!" (Jones, 35), to deaf ears as he is carried off screen. This admittance is a comedic jab at the Romans who, throughout the film, are shown to have zero tolerance for humor.

Approaching the end of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the personas crafted by Algernon and Jack crumble as they try to explain their predicament. In the fray, Lady Bracknell appears to pick up Gwendolen and Algernon decides to announce his marriage to Cecily in front

of Lady Bracknell. At first, she expresses discontent while inquiring about Cecily's background, however, quickly changes her tune to praises upon hear her net worth. Lady Bracknell, originally skeptical of Cecily now says, "A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her," (Wilde, 160 – 162), enamored by her wealth. Algernon's adoption into the character of Ernest lands him in both Cecily and Lady Bracknell's good graces, which in this case is revealed to depend on a considerable sum of money for acceptance.

These works use the quality of self fictionalization to express concerns and reveal the true nature of societal norms of the time. *The Importance of Being Earnest* uses this theme to explore the Victorian nature and the expectations those of higher-class place on those even slightly below them. *The Life of Brian* uses this theme to poke fun at the norms of society before Jesus Christ. Burkhard Niederhoff suggests that, "In playing with the word "Earnest," the final pun repeats what the entire play has done with the name "Ernest" and the concept of seriousness," which holds true for *The Life of Brian* in a relative sense. Both stories parallel the importance of being earnest. Jack and Algernon do nothing but lie throughout the play and when they are found out, they realize that they should have exhibited candor while Brian is nothing but earnest and, through a series of events, is crucified for his efforts. Each story presents an opposing theme about being earnest which mirrors the other perfectly.

Works Cited

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