

SUBJECT: BRITISH LITERATURE 19TH CENTURY
TOPIC: The Importance of being Earnest
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The background features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of green, ranging from light lime to dark forest green. These shapes are primarily located on the left and right sides of the frame, creating a modern, layered effect. The central area is a plain white space where the text is placed.

The Importance of being Earnest

Comedy of Manners

- ▶ A Comedy of Manners is a play concerned with satirising society's manners
- ▶ A manner is the method in which everyday duties are performed, conditions of society, or a way of speaking. It implies a polite and well-bred behaviour.
- ▶ Comedy of Manners is known as high comedy because it involves a sophisticated wit and talent in the writing of the script. In this sense it is both intellectual and very much the opposite of slapstick.

Comedy of Manners

- ▶ In a Comedy of Manners however, there is often minimal physical action and the play may involve heavy use of dialogue.
- ▶ A Comedy of Manners usually employs an equal amount of both satire and farce resulting in a hilarious send-up of a particular social group.
- ▶ This was usually the middle to upper classes in society.
- ▶ The satire tended to focus on their materialistic nature, never-ending desire to gossip and hypocritical existence.

Comedy of Manners

- ▶ The plot of such a comedy, usually concerned with an illicit love affair or similarly scandalous matter, is subordinate to the play's brittle atmosphere, witty dialogue, and pungent commentary on human foibles.
- ▶ This genre is characterized by realism (art), social analysis and satire. These comedies held a mirror to the finer society of their age. These comedies are thus true pictures of the noble society of the age.
- ▶ This genre held a mirror to the high society of the Restoration Age. The society was immoral and so was its image represented by the comedy.

Comedy of Manners

- ▶ Comedy of Manners has spread itself over several periods in theatre history
- ▶ Greek playwright Menander (c. 342–c. 292 BC) inaugurated New Comedy, the forerunner of comedy of manners. Menander's smooth style, elaborate plots, and stock characters were imitated by the Roman poets Plautus (c. 254–184 BC) and Terence (186/185–159 BC), whose comedies were widely known and copied during the Renaissance.
- ▶ The most valuable material of this genre occurred during the Restoration. English theatres were officially closed between 1642 and 1660 when Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans ruled England and there was no aristocracy.

Comedy of Manners

- ▶ Although influenced by Ben Jonson's comedy of humours, the Restoration comedy of manners was lighter, defter, and more vivacious in tone.
- ▶ Playwrights declared themselves against affected wit and acquired follies and satirized these qualities in caricature characters with label-like names such as Sir Fopling Flutter (in Sir George Etherege's *Man of Mode*, 1676) and Tattle (in William Congreve's *The Old Batchelour*, 1693).

Comedy of Manners

- ▶ Major contributors to the genre in England at the time were William Wycherley with his play *The Country Wife* (1675) and William Congreve with *The Way of the World* (1700).
- ▶ During this period in France, Moliere was also writing Comedy of Manners plays. Three of his most famous works include *The School for Wives* (1662), *Tartuffe* (1664) and *The Misanthrope* (1666) where Moliere satirised aspects of 17th century French society.

- ▶ Irish playwright Richard Sheridan and Englishman Oliver Goldsmith revived the Comedy of Manners genre. The best examples of their work include Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (1777) and Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773).
- ▶ Comedy of Manner plays were being perfected in England by famous Irish playwright Oscar Wilde, with wonderful works like *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).