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Living A Lie: A Guide to Success

All of us have a fake identity. We don’t want to admit it, but the truth is that we all have fake identities, and these doppelgangers are the norm-respecting citizens in our idealized world. Our evil halves, our true selves, are the sources of our ambition and desire to eat each other alive for a chance at success. We believe that the world can’t handle what we have to offer, so we must do what we think is right although it may contradict societal norms. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, Jack and Algernon create false identities until their lovers and society accept them. In “Advice to Youth” and “The Story of the Boy that Didn’t Come to Grief”, Mark Twain instructs the young to create false identities so that they can achieve their goals. Therefore, creating a false identity is the best way to survive in a world that isn’t ready for our ingenuity.

Jack and Algernon create false identities to avoid the demands of Victorian Society, but their false identities are what lead them to find the loves of their lives. These demands include marrying into a wealthy family and upholding one’s reputation. Algernon states, “The very essence of romance is uncertainty”(5). Wilde uses this line to foreshadow Algernon’s deceitful relationship with Cecily to show how it results in success. The idea of love in Victorian Society is ridiculous. It means nothing because it is a business, and Algernon’s “ingenuity” proves that the only way for a man to find love in such a society is to fight the system and lie his way into a woman's heart. That explains why Lady Bracknell is opposed to Algernon’s engagement to Cecily. Lady Bracknell thought of Cecily as a poor ward, but as soon as Jack reveals that Cecily is wealthy she takes interest in her and ironically fights with Jack for Algernon and Cecily’s marriage. With this blatant disregard of Algernon and Cecily’s emotional bond it is obvious why Algernon lies through life. He must uphold his family’s reputation, although he doesn’t care for his much. In reality, he spends like a King with the bank account of a fish monger. Love is no object to Lady Bracknell, and her character represents the essence Victorian Society. This sheer disregard for others and the elitist attitude that comes with it is also seen when Lady Bracknell states, “Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can’t get into it do that”(53). This aphorism is Wilde’s attempt to promote false identities. People who can’t get into society are those that play by the rules of Victorian Society and they are angry because they do what is expected of them, but are never rewarded for it. Unless one is born wealthy, one is condemned to a life of mediocrity. Those that get into “society” don’t complain because they follow their own set of norms. Wilde himself was one of these people that had to get into society, and he did so on his terms.

Wilde entered “society”, because of his wealth and high level of education. Wilde was flamboyant, and a great conversationalist, which explains why he is one of the key figures during the rise of aestheticism. Wilde played by societal norms only to promote the ideals he truly embraced. He was a homosexual, a feminist, and he wasn’t afraid to show this in his plays. Wilde’s fake identity allowed him to pursue his poetic, and unorthodox lifestyle. Therefore, Wilde focuses on fake identities in the *Importance of Being Earnest* because it is his way of revealing his true identity to the world. If anyone can match Wilde’s focus on fake identities it is Mark Twain.

In “The Story of the Bad Boy Who Didn’t Come to Grief”, Twain uses parody to convey that we should be individual thinkers. Twain begins the piece by stating, “Once there was a bad little boy”(1). This line sets up a sunday school type story that is meant to program virtue and a sense of morality into children. However, Twain’s story shows how the “bad boy’s” individual thinking and disregard of authority resulted in his success. James, the “bad boy” did what he wanted to do when he wanted to do it. He stole apples from a farmer’s tree and instead of being caught in the act or sustaining injury, James knocked out the guard dog and went about his day. In a sunday school story James would have been hurt and would have seen the error of his ways, but Twain makes sure to make James a success no matter how outrageous the scenario may seem. Twain creates this paradox to show that we should actually be showing children how to think individually instead of having them think in a group mindset. Although Twain exaggerates the “bad boy’s” success and the evil of his deeds, he does so to highlight the power of individual thought. Twain was an individual thinker himself. Once a steamboat pilot, Mark Twain lived a life of fake identities and ambition. His real name, Samuel Clemens, is not the name that Twain is known by because he constructed his fake life around the “Twain Identity”. As Samuel Clemens, Twain was a failure, first at gold mining, and later in investing. However, Twain is nothing like Clemens. Twain is a legend in American literature, and he might have fooled many people if they knew the circuitous path he took to success. This is why Twain wrote “Advice to Youth”. He is a champion of overcoming adolescence, and he wants to share his secrets with those that need them most. Much of Twain’s life was plagued by tragedy. He lost multiple siblings, and blamed himself for his brother’s death in a steamboat explosion. Nonetheless, Twain is a successful writer, and these experiences were just barriers that he knocked down with his “manual” on success. In a sense, “Advice to Youth”, is the set of guidelines that you need to become the bad boy that didn’t come to grief. In “Advice to Youth”, Twain states, “Always obey your parents, when they are present”(1). This aphorism is the epitome of false identity preaching. Your parents are those that know the most about you, and if you create a false personality with them, you do so to portray a different “self” to the world. You want to be an individual thinker, and the only way you can do so is to eliminate the arbitrators in your life, your parents. Although Twain’s speech is humorous, it serves as a manual that individuals can use when they feel conflicted about the their ambitions and societies norms.

Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain use satirical writing as a way to teach others that individual thought is the key to success. They use a variety of rhetorical devices to convey this message in a way that only a satirist can, through comedic relief. They made statements about their societies that resonate today in this era of individual thinking, and movements. Wilde wrote plays that highlighted the traits of Victorian society he despised, and Twain wrote literature that taught others how to reach their goals. Both individuals were failures or outcasts in their society and that explains why they relied on fake identities to improve their futures. This goes to show that satires can be as didactic, if not more didactic than any other pieces of literature.

**Works Cited**

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