Portrayal of power and social status in “The Importance of Being Earnest” by Oscar Wilde and “The Taming of the Shrew” by William Shakespeare, as exemplified through slapstick and dialogue.

“The Taming of the Shrew” and “The Importance of Being Earnest” are both plays where the characters overcome the complications faced along the story, eventually unfolding the events that result in a happy ending, i.e. a classical comedy. Though both Shakespeare and Wilde use both physical and verbal comic elements to address their purposes, the emphasis is placed differently while advancing their respective messages. While “The Importance of Being Earnest” satirically comments on the absurdities of the higher class through senseless and shallow standards in dialogue, as well as by juxtaposing serious circumstances against ridiculous situations, Shakespeare demonstrates the achievement of power in “The Taming of the Shrew” with the mastering of clever language and physical ability, measured by masculinity and male superiority.

Verbal comedy is portrayed similarly in the two plays, both adopting witty and sarcastic dialogue between the high-class characters. They respond to their opponents with clever comebacks and are not afraid of ‘accidently’ insulting the other. However, Wilde clearly mocks the allegorical roles of his characters, taking particular note of the fact that nearly all characters included in the play are of the upper-class. The playwright achieves this satire by exaggerating and emphasizing how shallow and dramatic this high society is. Significant examples are the values and ‘philosophies of reality’ that the characters follow. Money and social reputation are considered of the highest value, notably evident in Lady Bracknell’s hasty change in opinion of Cecily being a marital candidate for Algernon; the girl suddenly appears to be “a most attractive
young lady, now that I look at her,” (71) after having heard about Cecily's inherited fortune. The dominating character also gives her view on marriage, arguing that long engagements “give people the opportunity of finding out each other’s character before marriage, which … is never advisable,” (73) as well as being pleased to hear of Algy’s smoking habits since “a man should always have an occupation of some kind” (18). These statements are examples of the characters’ principles that completely invert common sense, which demonstrates Wilde’s criticism of the narrow-minded community’s foolishness.

In “The Taming of the Shrew,” on the other hand, Shakespeare uses rapid stichomythia as a representation of power. The playwright clearly values the ability of active verbal skills, and therefore the importance of being prepared with clever arguments and comebacks since they demonstrate one’s social position. Shakespeare is also known for writing the speech of higher society in the rhythm of iambic pentameter. This is particularly exemplified in the transformation Sly undergoes in the introductory expositional act of the play. The character sees a transition from ‘colloquial’ non-rhythmic prose: “For God’s sake, a pot of small ale,” (7) to a more respected style of verse when convinced of being a nobleman: “I do not sleep: I see, I hear, I speak” (9).

Physical comedy generally allows for light-hearted humour and mocking, as demonstrated in “The Importance of Being Earnest.” However, the slapstick presented in Shakespeare’s work reveals some heavy, rather dark undertones as opposed to direct comedy. Although the play incorporates traditional slapstick, for example during the knocking incident between Grumio and Petruchio in Act 1, this playful line is crossed when “taming” Katherina. Petruchio adopts harsh and abusive techniques when trying to force his wife into succumbing to his will. He essentially tortures her, leaving Kate “starved for meat, giddy for lack of sleep” (73) until she finally gives in to his persistency, admitting that “thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper / thy head, thy sovereign” (99). According to Shakespeare, physical strength was seen
as a declaration of superiority, and since this power was determined by masculinity, Petruchio’s actions are accepted rather than judged. Despite him being “more shrew than she [Kate],” (62) masculinity was measured through the obedience of a man’s wife, thus Petruchio’s abusing was considered necessary in order to force Katherina “from a wild Kate to a Kate / comfortable as other household Kates,” (42) back to a woman’s submissive obligation to “serve, love, and obey” (99).

Referring back to Shakespeare’s verbal techniques, this idea of male superiority over the traditional female position can be deduced from the witty stichomythic arguments between the two protagonists. Although both Kate and Petruchio are skilled users of swift wordplay, Petruchio manages to set the final terms in nearly all their verbal battles. It is important to note how most of them are won by a sexual reference to Petruchio “bedding” Katherina, for example during their first meeting in Act 2 he suggests that they “marry… in thy bed” (42). The fact that Kate allows herself to give in to Petruchio’s battering despite her own “scolding tongue” (25), supports the playwright’s view on these distinct gender roles.

Contrary to “The Taming of the Shrew,” because Wilde’s intention is to satirize the lifestyle and standards of the higher class, his physical humour is purely to amplify their absurdities and foolishness, and therefore simply serves as a trigger for laughter. In “The Importance of Being Earnest,” this slapstick comedy is presented by setting absurd situations against serious ones, often in the presence of food. For instance, during the resolution after Gwendolen and Cecily discover Jack and Algernon’s deception, the men proceed to argue whether it is “heartless” (62) for Algernon to eat muffins given the circumstances, even if the character is “particularly fond of muffins” (62). The food acts as a distraction and a comical means of diluting the seriousness of the situation, which highlights and reflects the characters’ ridiculous priorities.
What further exemplify these traits are Wilde’s characters’ inappropriate responses to their surrounding circumstances. Lady Bracknell is a character who distinctively accentuates this approach. She is deeply disappointed when learning of Jack owning a house on the “unfashionable side,” (19) of Belgrave Square, nearly rejecting him completely as a possible husband for Gwendolen. Contrarily, her reaction to the illness of Mr. Bunbury was one of indifference and impatience as she felt that “it was high time that [he] made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die,” (13) arguably a much severer situation than the location of a house. By the juxtaposition of these reversed circumstances, Wilde successfully achieves his social criticism through the inversion of common sense and natural responsiveness.

Despite belonging to the same genre of comedic literature, as well as both commenting on similar aspects of society, the approaches of each playwright are distinct from each other. Oscar Wilde comments on the absurdity and shallowness of the upper-class in “The Importance of Being Earnest,” while William Shakespeare emphasizes the distribution of power in setting specific gender roles. As common to most playwrights, the two address these issues through a combination of the use of both physical and verbal comic elements. In “The Taming of the Shrew,” the slapstick and clever dialogue act as indications of genuine superiority, whereas “The Importance of Being Earnest” satirically parodies a similar power by ridiculing the expectations of the higher class characters. Through these humouristic means, the two playwrights are able to allegorically advance their purposes, thereby developing their respective social statements.