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Satire and parallelism in Oscar Wilde's the importance of being earnest

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UNIVERSITY OF BURUNDI

FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Satire and Parallelism in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*

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DEDICATION

To my husband,

Gilbert Nizigama,

I warmly dedicate this work.

ACKNOWLEGEMENTS

This works is a result of a joint effort of a great number of people to whom I owe much gratitude:

A very special note of indebtedness is addressed to my supervisor Dr. Divine Che Neba for reading through my work with a critical, analytical and intellectual mind. I also thank him for his availability and counsel whenever I sought his academic guidance.

I should not fail to express my gratitude to all my teachers from primary school to the University, particularly those of the Department of English Language and Literature for the knowledge they imparted to me.

I want to single out my parents Paul Ndabaneze and Liberate Nzinahora for their vision, for sending me to school.

I also owe great thanks to my beloved husband Gilbert Nizigama for his stimulating and constant encouragements.

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ABSTRACT

This work examines *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a comedy of manners and a comedy of ideas. As a comedy of manners, *The Importance of Being Earnest* pokes fun at Victorian upper class mannerism. As comedy of ideas, it ridicules all form of respectability in Victorian England: from love to marriage, through education and religion to death and burial. It finally shows how through parallelism the author satirizes the artificial and deceptive nature of the Victorian society. This work intends to prove that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not trivial but is rather a play of grave importance, which depicts the upper class in all its mannerism and ideals. It is also anchors on the premise that Wilde's satiric tone only helps in bringing to limelight the moral decadence in Victorian England, where materialism is the order of the day. Written against the background of the Formalistic and New Historicism approaches, this works concludes that *The Importance of Being Earnest* itself represents the reality that the Victorian convention pretends to ignore.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Being Earnest is one of Oscar Wilde's literary productions written in 1895. It belongs to the Victorian tradition orchestrated partly by the reform Bill of 1832, although Victoria did not become Queen of England until 1837. The Victorian period was a period of many conflicts: political conflicts, conflicts between property owners and arising worker's class with a developing political consciousness and conflicts between science and religion. Within the world of science, there was another conflict between applied and theoretical science. It is in this perspective that Dickinson Clark, in *English Literature: A College Anthology writes:*

> We must remember, too, that the Victorians faced giant problems which are still plaguing the twentieth century-problems of education, science and religion, labour and capital, government regulation and interference, and a society dedicated to materialistic values. (519)

All these problems and conflicts in the Victorian period are reflected in its literature which is famous of its richness and variety. The novel became at the same period the best conveyer of Victorian ideas. Regarding the novels

during the Victorian period, Daiches David in *A Critical History of English Literature*, writes:

> The Novel in nineteenth century rapidly became the maid-of-all work of literature, and most popular way of presenting an extended argument on social, political, or even religious questions was to cast into novel form. (1082)

This quotation draws our attention to the idea that most of the problems which plagued the twentieth century, especially Victorian England, were mostly depicted in novels. However, this does not cancel the fact that plays as well as poems at the same range did not portray the evolution in the changing British society.

Wilde had his own way of presenting the problems of the Victorian society. He has his way of showing his attitude towards art, life and society. A brief look at his obvious use of epigram and paradox reveal his central concerns. Compared to other plays, the *Importance of Being Earnest* is said to have little importance. At this point Eric Bentley in *The Playwright as a Thinker* says that the *Importance of Being Earnest* is a variant, not of domestic drama like Candida or of melodrama like Brassbound, but of farce, a genre which, being the antithesis of serious, is not easily put to serious uses. From this perspective, one may think that since *The Importance of Being Earnest* is considered as having little importance, it should be

neglected or be taken as something that has nothing to add to the existing knowledge of Victorian England. However, as already said, problems and conflicts in Victorian England were all reflected in literature. In this conflicting state of affair, one is tempted to ask the following questions: Can the *Importance of Being Earnest* truly reflect the ideals of Victorian England or it is purely farce as Bentley says? What are the means used by Wilde to satirize the Victorian England? How does *The Importance of Being Earnest* expose the Victorian upper class mannerism? From the above questions, this work is going to expose the pretentious, deceptive and artificial nature of human beings in Victorian England.

Before one proceeds, it is necessary to define some terms that will centre our discussion in this work. The key terms include: satire and parallelism. According to the *Encyclopedia Americana,* a satire is a kind of literary composition in verse or prose, in which wickedness or folly is censured and helped up to reprobation. Juvenal, one of the four princes of Roman satire and who appears to have produced satires in the reign of Domitian, uses satire with consummate power and spirit, as an engine for attaching the brutalities of tyranny and crimes, the follies and the frenzies of a degenerate society. Horace during the Augustan period developed satire into a branch of composition peculiarly his own: he ridicules the follies of the world from the point of view of a man of the world. M.H. Abrahams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th Edition, defines "satire" as follows:

> Satire can be described as the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, concept, scorn, or indignation. (98)

In this work, satire is a kind of literary composition used by Oscar Wilde to show how ideas and manners are ridiculed. This literary composition is built up by Wilde's use of epigrams, paradox, wit and humour.

As far as the word parallelism is concerned, it is derived from parallel, a noun derived from the verb to parallel, which means to place one thing beside another or (two or more things), side by side mentally, so as to exhibit a likeness between them. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines parallel as to compare, as being like. It further mentions that parallelism is the state or position of being parallel. According to the *Encyclopaedia Americana,* parallelism is a parallel or comparison used in any sense of the word parallel. Spinoza uses it to suggest that every material object has corresponding to it an ideal counterpart. In psychology the word is used in connection between matter and mind, notably between brain process and mental process. In literature parallelism is a double statement of the same notion, either by simple variation of the idea or by negation in the second member of the opposite of the statement in the first.

Parallelism in this work anchors on the fact that Victorian society was known to be made of people of different classes, and what is done in one

side almost what is done on the other side. In this light, imitation runs from the lower class to the upper class.

In order to better analyze the play, it is quite indispensable to have a look at Oscar Wilde's life, since his personality is greatly reflected his writings. Oscar Fingal O' Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854 as second son of sir William Wilde, an eye surgeon, and Jane Wilde. Both his parents were quite eccentric, especially his mother who published revolutionary poetry under the name "Speranza". However, he received a very good education at home, and at the age of ten, Oscar was sent to one of the best schools in Ireland.

At the age of twenty he was awarded a scholarship in Oxford, where he studied classics (Roman and Greek philosophy and literature). There he developed the wit for which he was to become so famous and began to dress like a dandy. But he was a brilliant scholar and won a double first in his degree. In Oxford he was mainly influenced by John Ruskin and Walter Pater. Furthermore during his time there he started to produce poetry.

In 1879, he moved to London and established himself as an exponent of aestheticism. Wilde made various friends in London's high society and intellectual circles (e.g. Sarah Bernhardt, the most famous actress of the day, or the pointer James whistler).

Within two years his fame had become so widespread that in 1881 he accepted an invitation to a lecture tour in the United States. He preached to

them that the pursuit of beauty is the most crucial thing in life and also taught the people how to dress and how to decorate their homes. The tour was quite a success and increased his fame, mainly because of his flamboyant style of dress and also because of his extravagant manners (for example it is reported that he said to a customs officer: "I have nothing to declare except my genius." (Quoted Ell Man, 152)

After his return from America in 1883, he fell in love with Constance Lloyd. They got married in the following year, and she bore him two sons. At the same time he started to write reviews and worked as an editor for a magazine. However, in 1886 he made his first homosexual experiences when he was seduced by a young man. After that his literary output increased a lot, and the quality of his writing improved also.

In 1888, he published some fairy tales (*The Happy Prince and Other Stories*), followed by various critical essays about sin and crime, among the best were 'The Decay of Lying', 'The Critic as Artist', and 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'. Other works of Oscar Wilde are: *The Picture of Dorian Gray, Intention, A House of Pomegranates, Salomé, The Sphinx, Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of an Importance, An Ideal Husband, The Ballad of Reading Gad De Profundis.*

In 1895, he was sentenced to prison for two years and on release he lived at Berneval and then at Paris, where he died on 30 November 1900.

This work examines *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a comedy of manners and a comedy of ideas. As comedy of manners, *The Importance of Being Earnest* pokes fun at Victorian upper class mannerism. As comedy of ideas, it ridicules all forms of respectability in Victorian England; from love to marriage, through education and religion to death and burial. It finally shows how through parallelism the author satirizes the artificial and deceptive nature of the Victorian society. This work covers the nineteenth century, an epoch in which Oscar Wilde wrote his plays and, other works. It focuses on *The Importance of Being Earnest*, one of Oscar Wilde's works written in the Victorian period, a period where England was characterized by prevalent theories, such as, Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarianism, which advocated for the greatest good for the greatest number; Darwinism of Charles Darwin, which simply saw life as a survival for the fittest; and Karl Marx's Marxism, which viewed life as a permanent struggle of man to cope with economic exigencies of his society.

The theories that are going to centre this discussion are the Formalism and New Historicism. The Formalistic approach whose proponents are Roman Jacobson, Boris Eichenbanm and Victor Shklousky, is a literary approach which conceives literary language to be self-focussed in that its function is not to convey information by making extrinsic references, but to offer the reader a special mode of experience by drawing attention to its own

"formal features", that is, to the qualities and internal relations of the linguistic signs themselves.

Formalism has been a reaction against the attention of scholars, in the early part of the twentieth century to the biographical and historical context of works, thereby diminishing the attention given to a work itself. The movement began informally in 1920 in Vanderbilt University in US and discussion between John Corve, Robert Penn, Warren, Alley Tate, Cleanth Brooks and others. For three years, they published a literary magazine called "The Figurative". Their ideas were supported by foreign theorists such T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, William Empson, and they began to develop ideas of how to read a text. Most important of their vision, was earlier, the announcement of high place of art as art rather than as expression of social, religious or political ideas.

Therefore instead of examining historical periods, authorial biography or literary styles for example, the critic approaches the work with the assumption that it is a self contained entity, and that he is looking the governing principles that allow it to review itself.

Using the formalistic approach, one can be able to see how the work's organization (structure) affects its meaning and how the denouement in the plot surprises or satisfies the readers. The formalistic approach will be relevant to this work in that it will help the researchers to analyze the intrinsic features of the text.

New Historicism, whose main proponent is Stephen Greenblatt, will also be useful to this work. The New Historicism is concerned with reading, writing, and teaching as actions rather than as descriptions of actions. It has allied itself in varying degrees to such activist approaches as Marxism and feminism since its inception. The New Historicism seeks to bring down the boundaries between separate disciplines, particularly politics and literature. John Klancher has postulated that the new historicism first appeared in Renaissance studies because the Renaissance uniquely appeals to post modern culture in that it did not separate politics and literature as subsequent eras did. Similarly, he observes that British Romanticism has appealed to New Historicists, precisely because it has so strongly attempted to keep literature and politics separate.

Greenbalt defines the approach as a practice rather than a doctrine, and names the major influences on his own practice as Michel Foucault, Frederic Jameson and Jean François Lyotard, all French social and anthropological critics, who raised the question off art and society as related institutionalized practices. Another important influence on this issue has been that of the French Marxist Louis Althusser.

It is a challenging task to pin down what the New historicism is for it seems to draw from widely diverse fields. At times, it seems to be grounded in Sociology, at times in Psychology, or even in Economics. However, researchers in the field converge on the point that its investigation is limited

to no specific single field. H. Aram Veeser recognized his uneasiness in defining the theory and writes:

> It brackets together literature, Ethnography, Arts, Anthropology, History, and other sciences in such a way that its politics, its novelty, its historicality and its relationship to other prevailing ideology, all remain open questions. (Qtd Bart Moore, 320)

New Historicists assume that within any society there is a dominant group which determines what is acceptable and what is unacceptable for the larger body. This group defines the culture's state and values, in short, its ideology. Also referred to as "cultural critics", because they are above all concerned with cultural studies, New Historicists are interested in those groups of people who do not belong to the dominant group, but who always, and inevitably challenge the hegemony of the powerful. This movement arose to oppose the views and assumptions of traditional Historicism, which advanced that the history or the past of a people at a given place and time can be fully captured in analysing records of human past by historians.

New Historicists assert that history is not only subjectively set down, being coloured by the cultural context of the recorder, but also subjectively read and interpreted. On the one hand, it is subjectively set down because the recorder is often, if not always, the person of power and leaves the story of the powerless untold. According to New Historicists, the losers or those

who lack political or social power have there own stories to tell, just as the winner and indeed, they have published their stories in official documents or textbooks, and they have circulated them as separate ways of seeing and talking about the world. On the other hand, history is subjectively read and interpreted because according to New Historicists, historians work from texts that have already been told or written recasting them in the light of their own particular concerns, regardless of the commitment to produce objective readings. They can never manage to do so because they cannot transcend their own values, experiences, and knowledge. Inevitably caught up in their own social and cultural context, they cannot escape their viewpoint provided by ideas and institutions of their own days.

Another assumption of New Historicists is that the presence and use of power and the lack of it is implicit in the search of previously silenced voices. Those with power established norms and define what is deemed acceptable; and the discourse that differs from those norms is likely to be suppressed. This is because it threatens the values of the dominant culture. Nevertheless, that discourse is there, despite being rejected, scorned, and silenced. Without it, the reader would not understand the power itself. Besides, even the most powerful discourse is not permanent. Power moves through all social levels by way of marriage, commerce and intellectual exchanges. Where power reinforces its bases is some cases, it inevitably

stimulates opposition in other cases. As a result, culture is dynamic; changing concepts of what is good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable.

New historicism will be relevant to this work in that it will help the researcher to find out sources that have been over looked in the past because of the emphasis on finding an overrule of explanation of periods practices and product, since according to New Historicism, there is no single discourse that can explain the complexity of any "event or artefact. In this light Wilde's satire on ideas and upper class mannerism, style will be fully comprehended with all its complexity, which has set many authors into considering the play fully as farce. Both approaches complement than contradict each other.

Many critics have had interest in the works of Oscar Wilde and particularly to *The Importance of Being Earnest.* Eric Bentley in his work *The Play Wright as Thinker* argues that Wilde calls *The Importance of Being Earnest* " a trivial comedy for serious people" meaning in the first place a comedy which will be thought negligible by the earnest and, in the second a "comedy of surface" for connoisseurs. He goes on to say that the connoisseurs will perceive that Wilde is as much as a moralist as Bernard Shaw but that, instead of presenting the problem of modern society directly, he flits around them, teasing them, declining to grapple with them. Bentley thinks that Wilde's wit is no searchlight into the darkness of modern life. He maintains that the plot is one of those Gilbertian absurdities of lost infants

and recovered brothers which can only be thought of to be laughed at. He adds that yet the dialogue which sustains the plot or is sustained by it, is an unbroken stream of comment on all the themes of life which the plot is so far from broaching. He concludes that perhaps *The Importance of Being Earnest* should be defined as almost a satire.

Vincent O' Sullivan in his *Aspects of Wilde* quotes that he believes that Wilde thought his plays to be the most important thing he has done. He argues that what Wilde has put in his play is what he thought was important. He further emphasises that the substance which is Wilde's plays is melodramatic. Sullivan thinks that Wilde finds his inspiration in a French school. Sullivan maintains that what makes Oscar Wilde's plays viable and what casts a glamour over them is the style and the wit which was Wilde's very own. He says that Wilde's wit and style are not only different from what any of his contemporaries produced, but different from what any one at anytime in the history of literature has produced. He sums up his argument by saying that in reality Wilde has only a small number of ideas in his plays and they are very simple.

Richard Foster in '*Wilde as Parodist: A Second Look at The Importance of Being Earnest*' believes that the terms "farce" and "comedy" are unsuitable for *The Importance of Being Earnest* because it is far more subtle, complicated, and artistic than such labels imply. He adds that Wilde's play is to be a satiric demonstration of how art can lie romantically

about human beings and distort the simple laws of real life with melodramatic complications and improbably easy escapes from them. He further concludes that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is in fact an elaborate lampoon.

Karl Beckson in 'Oscar Wilde: *Modern British Dramatists*', contents that what was central to Wilde's life and art was the idea of the dandy. He goes on to show that characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* embody the aesthetic principles. He concludes that the embodiment of the heroic ideal as well as of the aesthetic temperament hostile to bourgeois sentiment and morality is also central to Wilde's life and art.

Robert Boyle in 'Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). *British Novelists'* describes Wilde's last play as a humorous treatment of decay and death and of human suffering, in which Wilde finally abandons the effort to balance conventional moral norms with the realities of human behaviour.

The aforementioned works differ from this present venture in that it analyzes *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a comedy of manners, a comedy of ideas and it moves ahead to portray Oscar Wilde's usage of parallelism as a structural device to ridicule the artificial Victorian society.

This work intends to prove that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not trivial but is a play of grave importance, for it depicts the upper class in all its mannerism and ideals. It is also anchors on the premise that Wilde's

satiric tone only helps in bringing to limelight the moral decadence of Victorian England, where materialism is the order of the day.

Including the general introduction, this work is divided into three chapters and a general conclusion. The first chapter entitled "*The Importance of Being Earnest*: A Comedy of Manners" shows how Wilde satirizes the upper class mannerism in Victorian England. It moves ahead by showing how through the use of epigrams and irony, the author satirizes life in Victorian England. The second chapter entitled "*The Importance of Being Earnest*, A Comedy of Ideas" focuses on how all forms of respectability are trivialized in Victorian England. The third chapter entitled "Parallelism in *The Importance of Being Earnest*" exposes more the artificial nature of Victorian England. Finally, the general conclusion summarizes the main arguments raised in the work, brings out findings and recommendations, and suggests possible areas for future researches.

CHAPTER ONE

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNST: A COMEDY OF MANNERS

This chapter examines the upper classes mannerism in Victorian England. It also tackles the subjects dear to the Victorian heart, such as, marriage, music religion and social class, and shows how the Victorians react to such subjects. It finally shows characters' foible and attitudes as proof of the artificiality of the society, content with their status and jealous of the intrusion from the outside. The characters and themes are also superficial.

Before we proceed, it is necessary to define some key terms which are recurrent in this chapter. These terms include: comedy and manners. *The Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines the term comedy as a drama of light and amusing character, and typically with a happy ending. As far as the term manners is concerned, this same dictionary defines it as a natural or normal behaviour. Comedy of manners can then be defined as a play deriving its comedy from the social habits of a given society. In this play, the comedy of manners chronicles the foibles of the upper classes with some attention to the lower classes as they interact with the gentry in their roles as servant, trade people and the like. However some authors think that

The Importance of Being Earnest is not a comedy as such, thereby rejecting the proposition that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a satire or social criticism. Robert J. Jordan in 'Satire and Fantasy in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest'* says that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not a satire but that at the most important level it seems to be a fantasy in which unattainable human ideas are allowed to realize themselves. Richard Foster also supports the fact that *The Importance of Being Earnest* cannot be said to be a comedy. In *Wilde as Parodist*, Richard Foster puts:

> Farce... depends for its effects upon extremely simplified characters tangling themselves up in incongruous situations and upon a knowing audience gleefully anticipating their falling victim, in their ignorance, to some enormous but harmless confusion of fact or identity. (19)

From this quotation, we understand that there are some authors who support that that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not a comedy.

Richard Faster further adds:

> A comedy of manners is fundamentally realistic: it requires the audience to accept the world presented on the stage as a real world, a possible world; and its human foibles, even if heightened and exaggerated in

> the play's satirical exposure of them, are nevertheless laughed at as representations of real excesses. (19)

Foster believes that the terms "farce" and "comedy" are unsuitable for this Wilde's play because it is so far more subtle, complicated, and artistic than such labels imply. Yes, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is full Wit, but this chapter is not concerned mostly with Witticism rather it also deals with the artificiality of the 19th century upper class manners in Victorian England. And with a deep analysis of characters behaviour, one will discover that the play is a true comedy of manners.

As the plays opens, we discover that Algernon and Jack have both been "Bunburying", that is assuming different identities in order to enjoy themselves in a guilt-free manner. Jack pretends to attend to his invalid younger brother, Ernest, in order to serve as a model of moral rectitude to his young ward, Cecily. All this pretentious attitude results from the fact that he wants to propose to Gwendolen. Gwendolen, on her part exposes her artificiality when she draws our attention to the fact she loves him because his name is Ernest. Because of this, he sets out to be rechristened. When Cecily intends to meet her bad cousin Ernest, Algernon seizes the opportunity to present himself as the bad brother. This draws us to the Climax of the play where both characters are unmasked. Miss Prism's recollections about her handbag and an army list clears up the matter, and

allow true love to run its course. Wilde uses this to expose and ridicule the artificiality and conduct of the Victorian society.

One point to show that this play is a comedy of manners is just at the beginning of the play on Act I Scene I, when Algernon who has been playing the piano in the next room, come in and addresses his servant:

> Algernon: Did you hear what I was playing Lane?
>
> Lane: I didn't think it polite to listen, Sir.
>
> Algernon: I'm sorry for that for your sake. I don't play accurately-anyone can play accurately -but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned sentiment is my forte. I keep science for life.
>
> Lane: Yes, sir. (Act I, Scene I, 347)

This reveals the nature of the relationship between the characters in this play. Algernon, the master, characteristically is playing the piano, and he is delighting in his own art, but wants his servant's approval. Lane, as a servant, busy with his daily chores of arranging afternoon tea on the table, does not have the opportunity to listen to what his master is playing. Commenting on this conversation between Algernon and his servant, Ian Gregor in "Comedy and Oscar Wilde" says that

> Lane's reply is interesting. Taken in isolation it is the archetypal expression of deference from servant to

> master. Taken in this particular context it is of course the reverse: lane is excising his liberty to refuse to say what Algy expects from a servant on such an occasion. But when we take the question and answer together, we think neither of Algy's request nor of Lane's skilfully evasive reply, and what this may imply about them as people, we think simply of the perfect way in which they encounter each other. In other words we think of expression, of form of the manner in which Wilde reveals the perfect servant as one who is equal of his master. (121)

Gregor wants to show the relationship between a master and his servant. A perfect servant knows well his responsibilities. Here, Gregor shows that the discussion between Lane and Algernon is a normal conversation between a servant and his master, and that Wilde's upper class characters have a language which is appropriate to everyone. Wilde exposes the nature of human being by presenting Lane as equal to his master, in the domain of language. The servants serve as an opportunity for Wilde to comment on the all-knowing but seldom commenting lower class. In this play, Lane and Merriman act as servants. The Merriman's function is to announce visitors and events; this is seen in Act II, scene II when he says: "Mr. Ernest Worthing has just driven over from the station. He has brought his luggage

with him" (369). He also says: "I have put Mr. Ernest's things in the room next to yours, sir. I suppose that is all right?" (375); "The dog-cart is at the door, sir" (377). And "A Miss Fairfax has just called to see Mr. Worthing. On very important business Miss Fairfax states"(380). He also warns of the approach of Lady Bracknell with a discrete cough. This is seen in Act III, Scene III when he enters and finds Algernon and Cecily fall into each other's arms. He warns as follows "Ahem! Ahem! Lady Bracknell!" (391) The Merriman watches the happenings with amusement but without registering this with his face or manners.

Merriman carries to the tea ceremony all the traditional hardware: a salver, a tablecloth and a plate stand. He asserts his mistress' role when he asks Cecily if he should lay tea 'as usual'. He says:

Merriman: Shall I lay tea here as usual, Miss?

Cecily: [sternly, in a calm voice] Yes, as usual.

[Merriman begins to clear and lay cloth.

(Act II, Scene II, 384)

The Mistress and Servant are acknowledging her role as the lady of the house. Wilde seems to be asking what the British upper class would do without the stern but calming influence of its servants.

Another point to show that the play is the comedy of manner is also seen when Algernon and his servant discuss about marriage. Algernon says:

> Lane's view on marriage is somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility. (Act I, scene I, 347)

Algernon says this after he and his servant have a discussion about marriage. He questions what is the use of the lower classes if they are not setting good examples for the upper class. Here Wilde is commenting on the absurdity of the upper classes and their lack of moral responsibility. Wilde touches on the frequently reiterated piety about the upper classes having responsibility to serve as an example of conduct to the "lower orders". This quotation is ironic because in the 19th century England, the upper class was supposed to be a respectable class, setting examples for every one else.

The Victorian England upper class had the habit of offering dinner parties and sending out invitations. In their reception, they invited people who belong to the same upper class, mostly their relatives. Algernon though from the same class comment on the artificial behaviour of this class, when he expresses his reluctance to attend Lady Bracknell's dinner party:

> I haven't the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind. To begin with, I dined there on Monday, and once a week is quite enough to dine with one's own relations. In the second place, whenever I do dine there

> I am always treated as a member of family and sent down with either no woman at all, or two. In the third place, I know perfectly well whom she will place me next to, tonight. She will place me next Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across dinner table. That is not very pleasant. Indeed, it is not even decent ... and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase. The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public. Besides, now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist, I naturally want to talk to you about bunburying. I want to tell you the rules. (Act I, scene I, 353)

Algernon is indignant with a woman who spoils the fun of extra-marital flirtation, and who parades her virtue. Theoderek Wayne in *Maxims and Masks*: *The Epigram in The Importance of Being Earnest*, writes this of Algernon's indignation: "His distaste for public displays of "clean" heterosexual affection implies his deep-seated resentment that his linen is considered dirty and must be washed in private" (2). Through Algernon's indignation with a woman who parades her virtue, Wilde satirizes the artificial behaviour of the upper class in the Victorian England. Otto Reinert

is not indifferent to what Algernon says. He says in "Courtship Dance in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: modern drama" that "He is shocked at convention. And his tone implies that he is elevating break of convention into moral norm" (256). Reinert believes that Algernon is not the first figure in English satire to do so. He adds that "among his ancestors are Martin Scriblerus, other assumed identities in Pope and Swift (including Gulliver), and the apologist for Jonathan Wild" (256). He shows what all have in common. He states that

> What they all have in common is that they derive their ideals for conduct from the actual practice of their societies, their standards are the standards of common corruption, they are literal- minded victims of their environment, realists with a vengeance. (257)

Algernon as well as his ancestors derive their ideals for conduct from the actual practice of their societies. But they are literal-minded victims of their environment.

Wilde satirizes the conduct of Victorians by using the term "bunburying". This word is introduced at the first time by Algernon when he says that he has always suspected Jack of being a confirmed and secret bunburyst. Algernon explains this term to Jack. According to him, bunburying means to invent a fictitious character, who can serve as pretext

for escaping a frustrating social routine, regulated by a repressive convention:

> Algernon: ... What you really are is a Bunburyist. I was quite right in saying you were Bunburyist. You arte one of the most advanced Bunburyist I know.
>
> Jack: What on earth do you mean?
>
> Algernon: You have invited a very useful young brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invited an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's to-night, for I have really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week. (Act I, scene I, 352-353)

What Wilde is saying is that the Victorians, who want to retain the respect of their conventional society are, perforce, Bunburyst, leading a double life.

U. B.

In this light, Wilde ridicules the manners of the upper class. His characters assume false identities in order to achieve their goals. Algernon and Jack are not the only characters who lead a double life in order to liberate themselves from the repressive norms of society, but Cecily does the same through her diary, as she records the secrets of her life. She says: "I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn't write them down, I shouldn't probably forget all about them." (Act II, Scene II, 367). Cecily also leads a double life. She has a diary in which she writes secrets of her life.

Flirtation is another point that helps Wilde to ridicule the upper class mannerism. Algernon says:

> ... She will place me next Mary Farquhar, who flirts with her own husband across the dinner table the amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. (Act I, scene I, 353)

Flirt is used to refer to unmarried persons, especially a boy and a girl when they are used to go out or make love secretly. It is obvious that this term cannot be used when we are talking about a woman and her own husband. When Algernon says that "a woman flirts with her own husband" (Act I, Scene I, 353), it is paradoxical, thereby exposing the behaviour of the upper class in showing their affection. Algernon puts another clause to show that flirt is used to refer to unmarried persons. He says "Well, in the first place,

girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right" (Act I, Scene I, 349). Algernon criticizes human behaviour in general, he also ridicules the behaviour of Jack and Gwendolen in particular as he tries to convince Jack that Aunt Augusta (Lady Bracknell) does not like their behaviour. He asserts as follows:

Algernon: yes, that is all very well; but I am afraid
Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your
being here.

Jack: May I ask why?

Algernon: My dear fellow, the way you flirt with
Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is
almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirt
with you."

Jack: I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come
up to town expressly to propose to her.
(Act I, Scene I, 348-349)

Through Algernon's speech, Oscar Wilde mocks the stuffiness and hypocrisy of dating among the upper class in Victorian England.

Another point that shows that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a comedy of manners is seen through the character of Lady Bracknell. With regard to her behaviour. W.S. Bunnell in *The Importance of Being Earnest Edited with a Critical Commentary* writes:

> Lady Bracknell offers a much needed contrast to the languid and exquisite attitude of the two bachelors. Energetic and domineering, she bluntly says what she means. Her name Augusta suggests the proud majesty and command of her character... Blame comes to her more easily than praise. Tact is not part of her personality. A blind acceptance of the ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of society is natural to her because the social conventions are her Ten Commandments and good form is her guide to conduct. Enthusiasm and the display of emotion she obviously detests. She has really been born a century too late, for she has to perfection all the qualities and limitations of the eighteenth century aristocrat. Because she never dreams that any one could be so foolish, so daring, or so disrespectful as to disagree with her, she is beyond argument. (15)

Lady Bracknell's behaviour shows that she is a domineering woman. When she enters and finds her daughter and Jack into each other's arms, on one side, and her nephew Algernon, in Cecily's arms on the other, her first speech shows that she is a force to reckon with. She says: "Gwendolen! What does this mean?" (Act III, Scene III, 391). Gwendolen's reply is

consciously cool, but Lady Bracknell rides roughshod over her display of independence, taking complete command of the situation. This is inevitable, because she has a greater personality, and speaks more loudly and more often than anyone else. Lady Bracknell is inhuman in character. She does not tolerate being spoken of about invalids. She contends that

> Well I must say, Algernon that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life. I am always telling that to your poor uncle, but he never seems to take much notice...as far as any improvement in his ailments goes. I should be much obliged if you would ask Mr. Bunbury, from me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse on Saturday, for I rely on you to arrange my music for me. It is my last reception and one wants something that will encourage conversation, particularly at the end of the season when every one has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in

> most cases was probably not much. (Act I, Scene I, 355-356)

Lady Bracknell naturally has no sympathy for the sick Bunbury. She considers illness as a sign of weakness. Her speech also shows the character of Victorian aristocrats. When she says that she wants "something that will encourage conversation" (Act I, Scene I, 356), this makes the established joke that English upper classes are likely to talk while music is being played at private homes.

Lady Bracknell as a domineering and energetic woman interferes with the engagement of her daughter, Gwendolen, and Jack. When her daughter announces to her that she is engaged to Mr. Worthing, she voices out as follows:

> ... Pardon me, you are not engaged to any one, when you do become engaged to someone, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself ... And now I have a few questions to put to you, Mr. Worthing; while I am making those inquiries, you, Gwendolen, will wait for me below in the carriage. (ACT I, Scene I, 358-359)

Lady Bracknell interferes with the engagement of Gwendolen and Mr Worthing because according to her an engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise. It is not a girl who arranges it for herself, but her parents.

In Victorian England, marriages were contracted within classes, or at worse on material basis. The problem of rank or class is always crucial when it comes to matter of marriage. Lady Bracknell first wants to see whether Mr. Worthing is among the 'eligible young men' before she gives her consent to the engagement. She says:

Lady Bracknell: [sitting down] you can take a seat Mr. Worthing (looks in her pocket for note-book and pencil)

Jack: Thank you Lady Bracknell, I prefer standing.

Lady Bracknell: [pencil and note-book in hand] I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together in fact. However I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires" (Act I,

Scene I, 359)

Lady Bracknell has a list in which she writes the names of the eligible young men. Here, Wilde satirises the conduct of the upper class regarding marriage; because marriages are contracted not on basis of the love but purely on materialism and class. If someone is not in a particular class, he must fulfil some conditions before he is given the opportunity to marry out of his own class. Below are some of the conditions that Lady Bracknell requires for Mr. Worthing, the young man who desires to marry her daughter Gwendolen:

Lady Bracknell: Do you smoke?

Jack: Well, yes, I must admit I smoke

Lady Bracknell: I am glad to hear it ... There are far too many idle many in London as it is How old are you?

Jack: Twenty nine

Lady Bracknell: A very good age to be married at ... I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either every thing or nothing. Which do you know?

Jack: [after some hesitation] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell: I am pleased to hear it ... What is your income?

Jack: Between seven and eight thousand a year

Lady Bracknell: [makes a note in her book] In land or in investments?

Jack: In investments chiefly.

Lady Bracknell: That is satisfactory. (Act I, Scene I, 359)

It is only when jack talks about his income that Lady Bracknell takes note in her book. This is to show that what is important for Lady Bracknell is to know how wealthy Jack is. William Keach in *Teacher's Manual Adventures in English Literature* maintains that "Lady Bracknell cross-examination of Jacks lays the groundwork for much of the rest of the plot (184)". From this quotation, we see that Lady Bracknell's inquiries about Mr. Worthing's income show her hot quest for wealth. After inquiring about Jack's income she wants to know his origin. She asks:

Lady Bracknell:... Are your parents living?

Jack: I ha have lost both my parents.

Lady Bracknell: Both? ... That seems like carelessness. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. Was

he born in what the Radical papers
call the purple of commerce, or did
he rise from the ranks of the
aristocracy?

Jack: I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me ... I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was ... well, I was found.
(Act I, Scene I, 360-361)

Jack does not know exactly his origin. He was found. This gives to Lady Bracknell, who has ambition to know jack's father, a pretext to refuse Jack's proposal to Gwendolen.

In Victorian England, there was problem of class. M. Mediatrice Akobaseka in her thesis title "Portrayal of Women in Middlemarch, a novel by George Eliot" brings to limelight the question of class consciousness in Victorian England. She says that on the top of the society, there was the family of royalty which governed England for many centuries. Below we have the aristocracy where marriages were between members of the same class which had important roles in the political life of England. Agricultural economy was their base of power, since they possessed the greatest part of

the land until the production of industrial mode of production. The result was that landowners became richer and politically more powerful for many years.

The coming of the industrial Revolution during the Victorian period changed the situation. The middle-class industrialists, representing industrial capitalism, took over and oriented England to a new economic course. The influence of the aristocrats lost it influence. Aristocrats were also accused of bribery and corruption in parliamentary elections, since a no-vote from a tenant meant joblessness and poverty. In Victorian England, aristocracy was against any social change.

The next in line were the gentry. They resembled the aristocrats in many ways. They too possessed material wealth and some social privileges due to the birth and marriage relations. Among them we find young people who lost their right to family fortune, others were baronets in possession of hereditary knighthood or the customary title of "gentleman". They were influential in religious and parliamentary circles. Most of them were magistrates, responsible for law, order and so forth.

The next class is the middle-class. It emerged with the industrial Revolution in 19th century England. Their emergence orchestrated a class inferiority or superiority complex in the English society. It was for this reason that the middle class had an ambition to rise above its class. The middle class was composed of manufactures, merchants, shopkeepers,

businessmen and professional men. These men were powerful, but still considered as socially inferior. Consequently, they all dreamed of integrating themselves with the gentry for prestigious purpose. If the high middle class dreamed of nobility, the lower fought to occupy the position left vacant, until they too could climb higher. This social circuit became endless. This help us to understand the reason why Lady Bracknell asks Jack if his father "was born in what the Radical paper call the purple of commerce, or if he has rise from the ranks of the aristocracy" (Act I, Scene I, 360).

At the bottom the social ladder there were the masses. Richard D. Altick gives us different names of that class. In *Victorian People and Ideas,* he writes this:

> In earlier centuries it was called simply "the poor". Now it is "The masses", "the millions", "the working class", "the low rank", "the industrial population", "the inferior orders", "the labouring", and increasingly, "the people", although at first this term was normally confined to the middle class in its broadest aspect. (34)

This category constituted the highest percentage of the population. They did all kind of menial jobs and had the lowest wages like the middle-class; they distinguished themselves in status according to what one had.

The problem of class consciousness existed all over the world. Even in African societies, there were similar problems. As an example, in Burundi there were no classes, but those problems occurred between tribes. "The Batwa" was said to be bad tribe compared to "the Hutu" and "the Tutsi". Wealth was also more important as a link between people than tribes. A young man could not marry a girl of rich family if he himself was not from a rich family and vice versa. Emile Mworoha in *Peuple et Rois de l'Afrique des Lacs,* says that in Burundi traditional society there were no serious conflict between social categories but he adds:

> S'il existe un mépris de ce type, on pourrait à la rigueur le voir dans les relations existant entre les Batwa et le reste de la population. On refusait de manger, de boire et d'établir des liens matrimoniaux avec eux ...on pourrait donc parler à leur sujet d'une infériorité de rang social. (30)
>
> If there is a dislike of that type, they could at least notice it in the relationships existing between Batwa and the others. They refused to eat, drink and create matrimonial relations with them...we could say about them that it is an inferiority of social rank. (Trans, mine)

Mworoha shows how the problem of social rank and ethnic group was always crucial even in Burundi, especially when it was a matter of marriage. If the lady wanted to marry a young man of another ethnic group, her parents or the whole family stood against the proposal. Unless the young girl had strong character, the marriage was never contracted. People from the privilege ethnic group thought that nobility would be no more pure if in the family there was somebody who was not noble.

In conclusion, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a true revelation of the excesses of upper class mannerism in Victorian England. Wilde depicts a society composed of people who led a double life in order to achieve their goals. He also ridicules the artificial behaviour of upper classes in varied domains.

CHAPTER TWO

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST: A COMEDY OF IDEAS

This chapter intends to show how ideas are ridiculed. It equally focuses on the form through which the author ridicules the Victorian society. It shows that the ideas of characters are brought to limelight through language, and that all respectable concepts are trivialised in Victorian England.

The *Chamber's Encyclopaedia* contends that while in the comedy of manners, the only problem is the preservation of a particular form of society in the drama of ideas; problems are almost always capable of being expressed in intellectual terms and tend to submerge the individual characters through whom the plot is developed. Wilde uses figurative language such as epigram, paradox, and irony to satirize the Victorian ideas. As the *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* notes, the term epigram is a short poem treating concisely, pointedly and often satirically of a single thought or event and often ending a witticism or ingenious turn of thought. It can either be a tenet or proposition contrary to received opinion, a statement or sentiment that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet perhaps true in fact, a statement that is actually self-contradictory and hence false even though its true character is not immediately apparent, or an argument that apparently derives self-contradictory conclusions by valid deduction from acceptable premises. An

example of the use of epigrams is shown when Algernon and Jack are discussing about love. Algernon puts that "divorces are made in Heaven" (Act I, Scene I, 349). This epigram pokes fun at the popular phrase 'A marriage made in heaven'. Another epigrammatic statement is seen when Algernon says that "the truth is rarely pure and never simple" (Act I, Scene I, 352). This epigram is used to attack the popular phrase 'The pure and simple truth'. Later Algernon adds that "in marriage, three is company, two is one" (Act I, Scene I, 353). Here Wilde has taken the popular saying 'Two is company, three is crowd', and adapted it to suit his own purpose.

The characters' views on marriage are both a source of laughter and an issue for serious discussions. Lane gives his view on married households while answering his master's question:

> Algernon: Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment
> The servant invariably drinks the
> champagne? I ask merely for information.
>
> Lane: I attribute it to the superior quality of wine
> sir. I have often observed that in married
> households the champagne is rarely of first-
> rate brand. (Act I, Scene I, 347)

Lane thinks that if someone is married he/she has many obligations to the extent that the buying of champagne may not come at a first-rate brand. Lane's view on marriage is quite understandable. The International Students

Association, in their book, *Questions Young People Ask, Answers That Work*, write this about marriage: "But marriage is neither a fantasy nor a cure-all for problems. If anything, it presents a whole new set of problems to deal with" (237). A family needs food and clothing; it also needs some where to live. The children need an education, and there are medical bills and expenses. Lane believes that even if marriage has many duties, it is a very pleasant state. He says:

> I believe it is a very pleasant state sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person. (Act I, Scene I, 347)

Lane makes an exclusive use of paradox, when he later adds that his family life is not a very interesting subject and that he never thinks of it. Paradox as an idea of absurdity is a statement which seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd. Lane's view on marriage is lax. Wilde through Lane pokes fun at respectable concepts like marriage in Victorian England. To show how the Victorians viewed marriage, W.S. Bunell in *The Importance of Being Earnest Edited with a Critical Commentary* puts:

> Marriage is an important undertaking to us, but it was even more serious to the Victorians, because for them

> it had financial, social and sentimental implications which it has now lost. (11)

Marriage is something that we must take seriously. Bunell says this as to make Lane change his view on marriage.

The discussion between Algernon and his servant Lane shows also Algernon's concern. Algernon is asking why in a bachelor establishment, there is the consumption of a large quantity of champagne. But Lane's explanation changes the subject from the introductory topic of champagne to marriage. Algernon is not indifferent to the subject; he shows his view on marriage by saying that

> Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury; and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it. (Act I, Scene I, 353)

Algernon tries to convince Jack that every man who marries must lead a double life by having an affair with another woman behind his own wife's back. Wilde uses Algernon's speech to mock the marital institution during the Victorian era.

For Algernon, to get married is to plunge yourself into complications. He also shows his view by proposing that

> I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is I believe. The excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainly. If I ever get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact. (Act I, Scene I, 349)

Algernon says this when Jack comes to town expressly to propose to Gwendolen; but Algernon remains annoyingly calm and cynical about the proposal in particular and marriage in general. Algernon's talk is very shocking but it is also very amusing. Bunnell once more holds that "the shocking and the amusing were often connected in the nineties" (13). He adds:

> Wilde directs most his satire at ideas rather than people, and where the writer himself is not serious in his criticism, the audience will always be amused rather than shocked. Wilde is not Bernard Shaw, who uses the theatre as a convenient pulpit from which to reform society. (13)

Here Bunnell shows us Wilde's concern. What Wilde wants is to mock at his world. He is different from Bernard Shaw who has given the comedy of morals, and thus uses theatre as a means to change the society.

The proposal of Jack to Gwendolen is not accepted by Lady Bracknell. Jack is disappointed, but Algernon is unmoved on Jack's reversal. Algernon is not sympathetic, he even likes to hear his relations abused. He expressed himself as follows:

> My dear boy, I love hearing my relations abused. It is the only thing that makes me put up with them at all. Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about how to die. (Act I, scene I, 362)

Algernon has no feelings. Jack has been rejected, and he is furious but Algernon does not care about his "friend's" state. Wilde shows us how the two men are in different moods:

> Jack: Good morning! [Algernon from the other room, strikes up the wedding March, Jacks looks perfectly furious, and goes to the door.] For goodness' sake don't play that ghastly tune Algy! How idiotic you are! [the music stops, and Algernon enters cheerily]
>
> Algernon: oh didn't it go off all right, old boy! You don't mean to say Gwendolen refused you? I know it is away she has. She is always

refusing people. I think it is most ill-natured

of her." (Act I, Scene I, 362)

Algernon is not interested in Mr. Worthing disappointment, rather he makes fun of him by striking the wedding March, as if Jack's proposal to Gwendolen is accepted. However, his cheery manner when he learns of Jack's reversal goes well with his choice of music. This shows us Algernon's cleverness.

Jack is furious and begins to abuse Algernon's aunt, yet he has a sense of good breeding. He directly apologizes to Algernon for running down his relations. He says this: "I beg your pardon, Algy. I suppose I shouldn't talk about your own aunt in that way before you" (Act I, Scene I, 362). He need not to apologise to Algernon, he need not have worried; Algernon has no feelings. He says: "My dear boy, I love hearing my relations abused" (Act I, Scene I, 362).

Algernon's indifference towards Jack's disappointment over Gwendolen does not help jack in anything. Jack is a man of pleasure (when he arrives at Algernon's house he says that what brings him up to town is pleasure), but now he does not see where he can find pleasure, contrary to Algernon, whose concern is food. He is unable to push aside his disappointment. He says:

Algernon: Do you know it is nearly seven?

Jack: [irritably] oh! It always is nearly seven.

Algernon: Well, I'm hungry.

Jack: I never knew you when you weren't.

Algernon: What shall we do after dinner? Go to a theatre?

Jack: Oh no! I loathe listening

Algernon: Well let us go to the club?

Jack: Oh no! I hate talking.

Algernon: Well, we might trot round to the Empire at ten?

Jack: Oh no! I can't bear looking at things. It is so silly.

Algernon: Well, what shall we do?

Jack: Nothing

Algernon: It is awfully hard word doing nothing. However, I don't mind hard work where there is no definitive object of any kind

(Act I, Scene I, 364)

Jack cannot get any comfort from Algernon. Algernon is selfish, yet he wants to share pleasure with Jack. This represents more accurately what goes on in Wilde's plays: paradox. William Empson in *The Structure of Complex Word* posits that: "There is an obscure paradox that the selfish man

is the generous one, because he is not repressed, has "good nature" and so on" (192).

Normally, Algernon, as a selfish man cannot be generous. Yet he is clever. Even if Algernon is clever and wants to share pleasure with Jack, he lacks the understanding, the imagination and the sincerity that would allow him to share Jack's feelings.

Gwendolen has her own view on marriage and love. For her it is normal to love someone you do not know. She loves and wants to marry not a good person but a good name. She expresses herself as follows:

> Yes, I am quite aware of the fact. And I often wish that in public, at my rate, you had been more demonstrative. For me you have always had an irresistible fascination. Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you. We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits I am told and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend

> called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you. (Act I, Scene I; 356-357)

People of Wilde's world, as Gwendolen mentions live in an epoch where people have the desire for success and power. They live in an age of ideals. It is natural to have ideals on how to love or to be loved. But a name does not inspire absolute confidence. A name does not help one to learn about a person, for it does not reveal character. Gwendolen's view on love is somewhat strange. Jack knows exactly that his name is not Ernest. That is why he asks: "But you don't really mean to say that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Ernest" (Act I, Scene I, 357). Gwendolen believes that Ernest is his name. She answers that "But your name is Ernest" (Act I, Scene I, 357), she does not even want to hear about the name Jack. Here is her idea on the name Jack:

> Jack? ... No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations... I have known several Jacks and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain. Besides, Jack is a notorious domesticity for John! And I pity any woman who is married to a man called John. She would probably never be allowed to know the entrancing pleasure of a single moment's

> solitude. The only really safe name is Ernest. (Act I, Scene I, 357)

This talk of Gwendolen is a reaction to the suggestion made by Jack. He proposes the following. "Well, really, Gwendolen, I must say that I think there are lost of other much nicer names. I think Jack, for instance, a charming name" (Act I, Scene I, 357).

Gwendolen has an idea that the name Ernest is the only safe name. She believes that this name will bring her pleasure particularly when she will be married. This is the means of ridiculing marriage in Victorian England.

Wilde also uses dramatic irony to satirize the Victorian ideas. An irony is a term with the range of meanings, all of them involving some sorts of discrepancy and incongruity. It is a contrast in which one term of the contrast in some ways mocks the other term. As far as dramatic irony is concerned, it involves a situation in play or narrative in which the audience shares with the author knowledge of present or future circumstances of which a character is ignorant. Jack and the audience know what Gwendolen ignores. Concerning what a man or a woman might look for when considering a prospective marriage mate, The International Bible Students Association, in *The Secret of Family Happiness*, write:

> A woman might ask what kind of reputation does this man have? Who are his friends? Does he display self

> control? How does he treat elderly persons? What kind of family does he come from? How does he interact with them? What is his attitude toward money? Does he abuse alcoholic beverages? Is he temperamental, even violent? What congregation responsibilities does he have, and how does he handle them? Could I deeply respect him? (22)

Concerning the man we read in this same book this:

> A man might ask, does this woman display love and respect for God? Is she capable of caring for a home? What will her family expect of us? Is she wise, industrious, thrifty? What does she talk about? Is she genuinely concerned about the welfare of others, or is she self-centred, a busy-body? Is she trust worthy? Is she willing to submit to headship, or is she stubborn, perhaps even rebellions? (22)

From the aforementioned, we say that Gwendolen's view on marriage touches none of these subjects. Her focus is that the name Ernest will bring her pleasure in marriage. Ironically, the name Ernest will not help her to know his thoughts, hopes, fears, plans, habits, skills or abilities.

Lady Bracknell is another character whose view on marriage is somewhat materialistic, and she has very definite ideas about occupation,

suitable ages, education, income, property, politics, parents and the fashionable side of squares. According to her these are what a really affectionate mother requires. While making her inquiries to see whether she can accept Jack as an eligible young man, she says that "a girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country" (Act I, Scene I, 360). Finally, to confirm that she is totally against her daughter's engagement to Mr. Worthing, she concludes:

> Me, sir! What has it to do with me? You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter- a girl brought up with the utmost care-to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel? Good morning, Mr.Worthing!
> (Act I, Scene I, 362)

Because of her materialistic ambition, Lady Bracknell refuses her daughter to marry the man she loves. Her discussion exposes the characteristics of a Victorian mind. In Victorian England, parents forced their children to marry rich people. Lady Bracknell's materialistic ambition is also emphasized when she asks if Cecily has fortune, to see whether she can be engaged to her nephew, Algernon. She utters this:

> Ah! A life clouded with incident I see; though perhaps somewhat too exciting for a young girl. I am myself in favour of premature experiences... As a matter of

> form, Mr. Worthing, I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any fortune? (Act II, Scene II, 394)

This speech shows Lady Bracknell's materialistic inclination. Just when she is about to go, she learns that Cecily has about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the funds, and sits down to discuss with Jack on the possibility of an engagement. She does not even hide her ambition. She says this "There are distinct social possibilities in Miss Cardew's profile" (Act III, Scene III, 394). Later she adds this "... Well I suppose I must give my consent" (Act III, Scene III, 395).

Lady Bracknell is selfish. This is one of the characteristic of people presented in the play. Mary MacCarthy in *Sight and Spectacle*, comments on the characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. She remarks that "it has the character of ferocious idyll and complains that 'Selfishness and servility are the moral alternatives presented" (105-6). Lady Bracknell wants her relatives to be engaged to rich people but she does not like poor people being engaged to her relatives. She says to Cecily this:

> ... Dear child, of course you know that Algernon has nothing but his debts to depend upon. But I do not approve mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way ... (Act III, Scene III, 395)

Aristocrats want others to do what can please them but care less about giving pleasure in return. This is seen through Lady Bracknell's discussion. It is also seen through the following speech of Cecily: "I am not punctual myself, I know, but I do like punctuality in others" (Act III, Scene III, 397).

Another idea of materialism is seen through Miss Prism's discussion in the last scene when Jack brings the handbag in which he was found. She examines it carefully and declares:

> It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a cower omnibus in younger and happier days. Here is the stain on lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an incident that occurred at Leamington. And here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had had them placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I'm delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years. (Act III, Scene III, 400)

Here, Miss Prism shows how Victorian England attaches importance to materialism than human being. Miss Prism is happy to see her handbag but does not care about the baby she had put in.

Materialism is also seen through doctor Chausuble. When doctor Chausuble hears that Jack's 'brother', Ernest, is dead and buried in Paris, he

is asking Jack if he would like to celebrate a mass for the dead Ernest. He says:

> In Paris! [Shakes his head] I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at last. You should no doubt wish me to make some slight allusion to this tragic domestic affliction next Sunday. [Jack presses his hand convulsively] My sermon on the meaning of the manna in the Wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful, or as in the present case distressing. [All sigh] I have preached it at harvest celebrations, Christenings, confirmations, on days of humiliation and festal days. The last time I delivered it was in the cathedral, as a charity sermon on behalf of the society for the prevention of Discontent among upper orders. The bishop who was present was much struck by some of the analogies I drew. (Act II, Scene II, 372)

Doctor Chausuble has a materialistic mind. He wants to adapt his preaching of manna to any occasion, joyful or distressing. For him what is important is to get the money that is paid for his service.

Wilde also criticizes the Victorian idea about birth and relations. The irony begins when Jack and Algernon pretend to be someone that they are

not, to escape their daily duties. Jack lives at the countryside, but escapes under the name of Ernest to visit the city. Algernon leaves in the city, and goes to the country under the name of Bunbury. This situation of leading a double life is recurrent through out the whole play, till when Jack discovers that Algernon is actually his brother. William Keach in *Teacher's Manual: Adventure in English Literature* notes that "the underlying tension of the play depends upon the contrast of city and country so important to the double lives being lead" (183). These false appearances is irony of duplicity.

The irony continues to explain how Jack and Algernon are biological brothers. Jack has told every body he has a brother in which he uses as justification to leave his home in the country to visit the city. Algernon pretends to be Jack's brother 'Ernest', in order to win Cecily's love. Jack later denies of having any brother. He says:

> Gwendolen - Cecily – it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind. However I will tell you quite frankly that I have no brother Ernest. I never had a brother in my life, and I certainly have not the smallest intention of ever having one in the future. (Act II, Scene II, 386-387)

This is ironical especially towards the end of the play, when Jack proves and is pleased to have a brother. He says this:

> Algy's elder brother! Then I have brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother! Cecily how could you ever doubted that I had a brother? (Act III, Scene III, 401)

Finally the irony comes again into play when Jack who thinks he has no parents finds out what really happened to him at childhood, and, this coincides that Lady Bracknell who has been ill-treating him through out the whole play is his aunt.

Eventually, the idea that is seen in the play is the idea of taking revenge. Lady Bracknell is eager for a marriage between Cecily and Algernon. Jack sees in this moment a possible bargaining power. First of all he pretends that Cecily is not at age of being married. He expresses himself as follows:

> I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Lady Bracknell, but this engagement is quite out of the question. I am Miss Cardew's guardian, and she can not marry without my consent until she comes at age. That consent I absolutely decline to give. (Act III, Scene III, 395)

Secondly, he expresses some of his displeasure at Algernon's heartless conduct in masquerading as his brother, in drinking his best wine, in successfully gaining Cecily's affection, and in devouring every muffin at tea. He adds

> It pains me very much to have spoken frankly to you Lady Bracknell, about your nephew, but the fact is that I do not approve at all his moral character. I suspect him of being untruthful. (Act III, Scene III, 395)

His idea of bargaining with Lady Bracknell is not so successful. All these talks are mere pretexts. Lady Bracknell goes as far as pleading with him to reconsider his decision; that is a great concession for her. She will not, however, change her mind. Jack has already been pronounced ineligible; so he must stay in that unhappy state. Lastly, Jack reveals his real reason for refusing any marriage between Cecily and Algernon:

> But my Lady Bracknell, the matter is entirely in your own hands. The moment you consent to my marriage with Gwendolen, I will most gladly allow your nephew to form an alliance with my ward. (Act III, Scene III, 397)

This is Jack's revenge. He wants Lady Bracknell's consent to his marriage with Gwendolen and then the question between Cecily and Algernon will be cleared.

Another point that Wilde uses to satirize the Victorian idea is baptism. Jack and Algernon are ready to be christened in order to please the girls they love. Jack says: "Gwendolen, I must get christened at once. I mean we must get married at once" (Act I, Scene I, 357). Algernon on his side he says "I must see him at once on a most important christening- I mean on most important business" (Act II, Scene I, 380). For Jack, to be baptised means to get the name Ernest, and therefore marry Gwendolen. As far as Algernon is concerned, his immediate baptism is the most important business because he too wants to be called Ernest so as to marry Cecily. What Jack and Algernon want to do is sinful. The way they consider baptism is very different from how Jesus considers it. In the Bible, *Holy scriptures, New world Translation,* in *Matthew*, we read that when Jesus went to John the Baptist in order to be baptized by him, he said to him this: " Let it be, this time, for that way it is suitable for us to carry out all that is righteous" (Matthew Chapter 3, verse 15). According to the Holy Scriptures, one must be baptized in order to carry out all that is righteous. In other words baptism means that one is ready to go into a new alliance with God. Baptism then is not for the pleasure of a man, otherwise it is idolatry.

Algernon and Jack are not the only persons in this play who want to do idolatry. Doctor Chausuble also supports them in their desire of being baptized. He accepts to baptize them without considering their motives. Doctor Chausuble, as one who is devout, should know exactly when

someone can be baptized. Algernon and Cecily say this of Doctor Chausuble:

> Algernon: Ahem! Cecily! [Picking up hat] your Rector here is, I suppose, thoroughly experienced in the practice of all rites and ceremonials of the church?
>
> Cecily: Oh yes. Doctor Chausuble is a most learned man. He has never written a single book, can imagine how much he knows. (Act II, scene II, 380)

This discussion between Algernon and Cecily shows us Wilde's satire on religion. Here Wilde does not satirize only religion but also, the utilitarian education in Victorian England. He uses a paradox when Cecily says that Doctor Chausible is a learned man who has never written a single book.

Another point which shows Wilde's satire on religion is seen when Lady Bracknell hears that her nephew Algenon, and Mr. Worthing have expressed a desire for immediate baptism. She says this:

> At their age? The idea is grotesque and irreligious! Algernon, I forbid you to be baptised. I will not hear of such excesses. Lord Bracknell would be highly displeased if learned that that was the way in which

you wasted your time and money. (Act III, Scene III, 397)

Lady Bracknell is a Christian, but instead of counselling her nephew on the issue of an immediate baptism, she is more concerned with the idea that her nephew wants to waste money. For her, money is of prime importance than God's requirements for us.

In conclusion, this chapter has set out to examine Wilde's satire on ideas in Victorian England. We have seen that language is a tool that reveals the state of mind. We have also realised that the use of epigrams, paradox and irony is another means through which Oscar Wilde passes to ridicule the ideas of Victorian England.

CHAPTER THREE

PARALLELISM IN *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNERST*

The *Encyclopedia Americana* defines the term parallelism as follows:

> In literature parallelism is a double statement of the same notion, either by simple variation of the idea or by negation in the second member of the opposite of the statement in the first. (282)

Parallelism is then a literary technique in which two narrative contain similar elements. It can also refer to similar sentence structures. As the title of this chapter reveals, this chapter sets out to examine the similarities and contrasts between characters. It moves ahead to show that the way characters in this play think, move and behave is almost the same, and thereby, through this structure, Wilde is able to bring to limelight satire, trivialities, and artificial nature of Victorian England.

The first use of parallelism is seen between Lady Brackenell and Gwendolen on one side and between Jack and Algernon on the other side. This is seen in the following conversation between Jack and Algernon.

> Algernon: ... [Jack puts out his hand to take a sandwich. Algernon at once interferes.] Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for

Aunt Augusta. [Takes one and eats it]

Jack: Well, you have been eating them all time.

Algernon: That is quite a different matter. She is my Aunt. [Takes plate from below]. Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter are for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter?

Jack: [Advancing to table and helping himself] And very good bread and butter it is too. (Act I, Scene I, 349)

From that conversation we learn that Lady Bracknell likes cucumber sandwiches and Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter. The parallelism between Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell resides on what one likes. In this same conversation we see also parallelism in Algernon and Jack's reaction. Algernon takes the cucumber sandwich of his aunt and eats but when Jack puts out his hand to take a sandwich, Algernon interferes and gives him the bread and butter of his lover, Gwendolen.

The parallelism between Jack and Algernon is also seen through their means of using false identities in order to achieve their goal. Jack reveals his real motives of using two names by expressing himself as follows:

> My dear Algy, I don't know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do also. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a young brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes ... (Act I, Scene I, 352)

Algernon also has the habit of inventing an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order to go down in the country. He expresses himself as follows:

> You have invited a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose ... (Act I, Scene I, 352)

The parallelism between Jack and Algernon resides in the fact that Algernon and Jack are both Bunburyist. They both use false identities. Jack pretends to have a brother called Ernest in order to go up to town, as often he wants

while Algernon pretends to have an invaluable permanent invalid friend called Bunbury, in order to go down in the country as often as he likes. What they have in contrary is that, while Algernon goes down in the country, Jack goes up to town. Though both men are Bunburyists, one is perfectly happy to be Bunbury and wants to remain bunburyist while the other is repellent to the idea. Jack says:

> I'm not a Bunburyist at all. If Gwendolen accepts me, I am going to kill my brother; indeed I think I'll kill him in any case. Cecily is a little too much interested in him. It is rather a bore. So I am going to get rid of Ernest. And I strongly advise you to do the same with Mr. ... with your invalid friend who has the absurd name. (Act I, Scene I, 353)

Algernon does not fully buy Jack's idea. He responds:

> Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to be extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know bunbury. A man who marries without knowing bunbury has a very tedious time of it. (Act I, Scene I, 353)

Theoderek Wayne in *Maxims and Masks: The Epigram in The Importance of Being Earnest,* equally espouses the idea that even if Algernon and Jack

are both Bunburyists, Algernon is happy to be so but Jack is not. He says in Maxims and Masks: *The Epigram in The Importance of Being Earnest:*

> Though both men are 'Bunburyists', Wilde holds and heightens dramatic tension through Jack's denial of the fact. The characters are given to hyperbolic conviction in their brief speeches, a fast-placed technique that magnifies the play's distant relationship to vaudevillian humour ... Algernon is perfectly happy to be gay, while jack is repellent to the idea. (3)

According to Wayne, even if the two men are Bumburyists, they are different on how they see that attitude. One wants to remain a life Bunburist while the other does not fully like the state.

Parallelism is also seen in the relationship between the two couples, Jack and Gwendolen on the one hand, and Algernon and Cecily, in the other hand. Both girls love a man called Ernest. Gwendolen shows her feelings on the name Ernest. She says:

> ... We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits I'm told: and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Earnest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute

> confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest; I knew I was destined to love you. (Act I, Scene I, 357)

After she asserts that "she pity any woman who is married to a man called John", because "she would probably never be allowed to know the entrancing pleasure of a single moment's solitude." After she concludes that 'the only really safe name is Ernest' (Act I, Scene I 1140)

Cecily has almost the same feelings on the name Ernest. She says:

> You must not laugh at me darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest. There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest. (Act II, Scene II, 379)

This similarity between Gwendolen and Cecily's feelings on the name Ernest reveals the satirical view of Wilde on how the artificial nature of Victorian England and how victirians attach themselves more to trivialities. As already said in chapter two, it is unwise to love a person simply because of the name, for what is in a man's name?

David Parker In *Oscar Wilde's Great Force* says this about the two girls: "The two girls place a similar reliance on impulse; both have faith in first impression" (173). When both men express their love to the girls, their

proposals are received positively. The conversation between both couples is similar. Jack and Gwendolen discuss as follows:

Jack: Gwendolen, will you marry me?

Gwendolen: Of course I will darling … (Act I, Scene I, 358)

As far as Algernon and Cecily are concerned, they say:

Algernon: … I love you Cecily. You will marry me, want you?

Cecily: … of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months. (Act II, Scene II, 378)

Gwendolen accepts Jack's proposal on marriage because she believes that Jack's name is Ernest. Cecily on her part accepts Algernon because she is sure that he is Ernest.

Wilde uses parallelism between Jack's reaction to Gwendolen's declaration of love of the name Ernest and that of Algernon to Cecily's. Algernon asks: "But my dear child, do you mean to say you could not love me if I had some other name?" (Act II, Scene II, 379). As far as Jack is concerned he asks: "But you don't really mean to say that you couldn't love if my name wasn't Ernest?" (Act I, Scene I, 357)

When both men hear that Cecily and Gwendolen cannot love a man whose name is not Ernest, they react similarly. Jack plans an immediate

baptism. He says: "Gwendolen, I must get christened at once. I mean we must get married at once. There is no time to be lost" (Act I, Scene I, 357). Algernon expresses the same idea when he discovers that Cecily loves much the name Ernest. He asks Cecily: "Your Rector here is, I suppose, thoroughly experienced in the practice of all the rites and ceremonial of church?" (Act II, Scene II, 380) After he adds "I must see him at once on a most important christening- I mean on most important business" (Act II, Scene II, 380).

Jack and Algernon plan an immediate baptism because they find that their assumed name is a prerequisite for a successful courtship. This situation is ridiculous. Wilde makes his audience to believe that the name Ernest is an essential prelude to matrimony. W.S Bunell in *The Importance of Being Earnest, Edited with a Critical Commentary* supports that

> When a similar event occurs to two groups of characters there is an increase of credibility, because it is always easier for an audience to believe in a situation that can happen twice. The characters grow in sympathy and understanding each other and the plays gains in unity because a larger amount of common ground and experience exists. (26-27)

According to W.S. Bunell, not only Algernon and Jack have found that the name Ernest is an essential condition of their successful courtship, but also

the audience believes it because the situation happens twice. Wilde uses this parallel incidents cleverly. He wants to mock his world, which considers trivial things as important.

There is a parallelism between Cecily and Gwendolen in their certitude of the man they love. Cecily is convinced that Ernest is Jack's brother and that he is engaged to her. She tells Gwendolen:

> Dearest Gwendolen, there is no reason why I should make a secret of it to you. Our little country newspaper is sure to chronicle the fact next week. Mr. Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married. (Act II, Scene II, 383)

Gwendolen on her part is certain that Mr. Ernest Worthing is hers. She tells Cecily: "My darling Cecily, I think there must be some slight error. Mr. Ernest Worthing is engaged to me. The announcement will appear in the 'Morning Post' on Saturday at the latest." (Act II, Scene II, 383)

There are also some similarities in their arguments. Cecily convinces Gwendolen by telling her the exact time of her engagement with Ernest. She says: "I am afraid you must be under some misconception. Ernest proposed to me exactly ten minutes ago" (Act II, Scene II, 383). She even shows her diary. After examining the diary, Gwendolen produces the same argument to convince Cecily that she is engaged to Mr. Ernest Worthing. She says: "It is certainly very curious, for he asked me to be his wife yesterday afternoon at

5:30. If you would care to verify the incident pray do so" (Act II, Scene II, 383). She also produces a diary of her own.

Gwendolen and Cecily discover that they are apparently both engaged to Ernest, amid this, both are determined not to give up. Gwendolen says: "If the poor fellow has been entrapped into any foolish promise I shall consider it my duty to rescue him at once, and with firm hand" (Act II, Scene, II, 383). This statement is similar to the following statement of Cecily. She says: "Whatever unfortune entanglement my dear boy may have got into, I will never reproach him with it after we are married" (Act II, Scene II, 383).

Concerning that rapid discovery of being apparently both engaged to Ernest Bunell says:

> The rapid discovery that there are apparently both engaged to Ernest reveals the worst of the feminine character and the finest of comedy. They display the whole range of polite verbal insult, without ever departing from the strictest demand of good form" (28)

Here, Bunnell shows us that the conversation of both girls heats up considerably when they discover that they are both engaged to the same man. Through the character of Cecily and Gwendolen, Wilde satirizes the character of women in general and that of the Victorian upper classes in particular. Gwendolen's main weapon is her consciousness of belonging to a superior class, which she considers as a standing that the social world

confers to her. Once the women are officially at odds, Wilde is able to critique the Victorian politeness that often shadows ill will. In the absence of witness, a no holds- barred fight progresses:

> Cecily: ... This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.
>
> Gwendolen: [satirically] I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obviously that our social spheres have been wildly different.
>
> Act II, scene II, 383-384)

On this quarrel, Theoderek Wayne remarks that

> In class-conscious England, this is a divesting insult and interestingly it is 'the presence of the servant that exercises a restraining influence, under which both girls chafe' as Wilde points out in the stage direction. (3)

Wayne shows how the presence of the servant exercises restraining influence in the quarrel of both girls. Once the servant leaves Gwendolen and Cecily discover that they are engaged to the same man, and they quarrel. When the servant reappears, his presence provides a calming influence and both girls simply glare at each other across the table. The sarcasm is revealed in Wilde's stage directions. From the stage directions, Wilde makes

more visible and immediate the women's reversals of emotions. Gwendolen asks Jack if he is engaged to be married to Cecily, once Jack denies his engagement to Cecily, she offers her cheek for a kiss. Cecily goes through the same process. She says: "A moment, Ernest! May I ask you are you engaged to be married to this young lady?" (Act II, Scene II, 386) Algernon denies the fact and Cecily presents her cheek to be kissed and just as Gwendolen she says "Thank you. You may" (Act II, Scene II, 386).

The parallelism in speeches is also seen when Jack and Algernon assure both girls. When Gwendolen asks Jack if he is engaged to Cecily, he jokingly assures her as follows: "To dear little Cecily! Of course not! What could have put such as an idea into your pretty little head?" (Act II, Scene II, 385). When Cecily asks Algernon the same question, he similarly replies as follows: "Of course no! What could have put such an idea into your pretty little head?" (Act II, Scene II, 386)

The parallelism in speeches is stressed on stage by both pairs of characters going through the same sequence of experience. Jack has already been exposed, and Algernon is very quickly given away by Gwendolen. Jack now looks for comfort, something that will make Algernon realise the evils of his Bunburying. He says:

> Well, the only small satisfaction I have in the whole of this wretched business is that your friend Bunbury is quite exploded. You won't be able to run down to the

country quite so often as you used to do dear Algy.

And a very good thing too. (Act II, Scene II, 387)

Algernon is unaffected and confronts Jack. He replies: "Your brother is a little off colour, isn't he, dear Jack? You won't be able to disappear to London quite so frequently as your wicked custom was. And not a bad thing either" (Act II, Scene II, 387). From this conversation between Algernon and Jack, we see that though there are similarities in their discussion, there are also differences in their meaning. Here, Jack tries in vain to instil some sense of morality and repentance into Algernon, but Algernon remains adamant.

Finally, parallelism is also seen when Lady Bracknell appears again. The way Algernon announces his engagement to Aunt Augusta is similar to that of Gwendolen in Act I. Algernon tells his aunt: "I am engaged to be married to Cecily, Aunt Augusta" (Act III, Scene III, 393). These same words have been pronounced by Gwendolen in Act I when she says: "I am engaged t Mr. Worthing, mama" (Act I, Scene I, 358). There is also the parallelism in Lady Bracknell's answer. In Act I she replies:
"Pardon me ..." (Act I, Scene I, 358). And in Act III she says "I beg your pardon ..." (Act III, Scene III, 393.)

This chapter set out to examine Wilde's use of parallelism in *The Importance of Being Earnest.* In the course of the chapter, we realized that, Wilde's use of parallel ideas, characters and scenes only help to expose the

manners and the artificial nature of the Victorian society. Finally, we found that this technique also exaggerates the arts manners and social discourse in *The Importance of Being Earnest.*

GENERAL CONCLUSION

This work set out to validate the thesis that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not trivial but is a play of grave importance that depicts the upper class in all its mannerism and ideals. The play equally proved that Wilde's satiric tone only helps in bringing to limelight the moral decadence in Victorian England. In the course of discussion we realized that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a true revelation of the upper class mannerism in Victorian England. We also discovered that the ideas of the upper class in Victorian England showed how man became so mean because of his hot quest for wealth.

We equally discovered the Victorians' concern through Wilde's characters. The characters' view on marriage shows Wilde's attitude towards the Victorian society. Lane's view on marriage is lax as he thinks that his family life is not a very interesting subject. As for Algernon, he does not see anything romantic in proposing. For Algernon, it is very romantic to be in love but there is noting romantic about a definite proposal. Cecily and Gwendolen both have almost the same view on marriage. They both find the act of loving someone they do not know as normal. They both have in common their singled-minded persistence in pursuing a husband called Ernest. They have strong opinions, and are able to deal with unexpected

situations. When Cecily meets Algernon, she is sure she has found Ernest. Gwendolen on her part comes to the country site to pursue her Ernest.

Like the aforementioned characters, we realized that Lady Bracknell's view on marriage is also very strange. She has very definite ideas about occupation, suitable ages, education, income, property, politics, parents, and the fashionable side of squares. And according to her these are the qualities an affectionate mother requires for the one who wants to be her son-in-law. Lady Bracknell is determined. She is of the opinion that marriage should come to a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant. She also holds that an engagement is hardly a matter that a young girl could be allowed to arrange for herself. In this light, materialism becomes the major deciding factor for marriage in Victorian England.

We also found that the issues which began as triviality ends up as committed engagements. Both men accuse each other of deceiving women in their lives, and Jack says that Algernon can not marry Cecily because he has been deceptive to her. In a similar view, Algernon accuses Jack of engaging in deception towards his cousin, Gwendolen. By the end of the scene, it seems that the marriage plan will not materialize for either of them. This deception only helps to bring to limelight the hypocrisy that characterizes Victorian England.

This work has also shown how Wilde parallels both ideas, characters and scenes. Wilde links Cecily and Gwendolen very cleverly by using

parallel conversations and by repeating bits and pieces of their sentences. They both discuss the likes and dislikes to each other with exactly the same words. Likewise, both characters are all engaged in marrying and using the same language. Jack and Algernon are presented as parallels, especially when it comes to the idea of Bunbury. Both have invented a device that will take them out of their normal dwelling with much ease. Wilde has choreographed the lines to present a stylized, artificial milieu that exaggerates the art of manners and social discourse. We have found in this work how Wilde ridicules the manners of high society by using characters, who assume false identities in order to achieve their goals. We have also seen how Wilde mocks the stuffiness and hypocrisy of dating among the upper class.

By way of contribution to literature, this work is a continuation of the debate on moral decadence in Victorian England, with special emphases on *The Importance of Being Earnest.* This work will be useful, we hope, for those young people who want to set up new homes, to look for what is more important when searching for a prospective marriage mate.

By reflecting on the conduct of human being in general and those who are from the upper class in particular, this work will help parents, especially those who still maintain the idea that marriage should be between equal families to revisit their view by placing love at the centre of every engagement.

We cannot however pretend to have been exhaustive in analysing Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the sense that only satire and parallelism have been dealt with. Many other ideas need to be given asterisks. Future researcher should examine *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a melodrama.

Finally, the government should continue to encourage studies especially in domain of literature and provide researchers grants within this domain because literature helps to liberate the society as it gives clues to man to have a better inside of his society, and also help in conflict resolution.

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