COMEDY AND OSCAR WILDE

BY IAN GREGOR

REPEATED revivals of The Importance of Being Earnest suggest that it has generally been found a very amusing and a very satisfying play. Accounts of why it is very amusing and very satisfying are harder to come by. In fact, the play seems to be singularly unilluminated by criticism, a curious state of affairs for a work which has frequently been praised in terms which indicate that it is among the best English dramatic comedies.

In trying to understand the kind of success represented by The Importance of Being Earnest, two things become clear. The first is that the play has a very precise place in Wilde’s development as a dramatist, and that consequently any description of it involves taking into account the nature of his earlier plays; the second, that such a critical description of Wilde’s dramatic progress casts a rather unexpected light on some fairly widely held assumptions about the proper relation of the play world to the moral world, form to content, the author to his creation. For Wilde’s development as a dramatist is intimately connected with his ability to translate into fully dramatic terms the importance of not being earnest; and the earlier plays contained a lesson which, when fully absorbed by him, led to his most satisfying play.

It is possible to regard Wilde’s four principal plays as a series of attempts to resolve a particular clash between manners and morals, between style and content, between the author and his characters. The problem which faced him, as a dramatist, was a very specific one—that of finding a world fit for the dandy to live in; fit, in the sense that such a world would help to make clear the meaning of the dandy. Considered in general terms, the
role of the dandy is defined largely by his alienation from the social world in which he lives. He is the visible emblem of non-attachment. His best audience is himself; his favourite view, that presented him by his mirror. Like the tramp, who was to succeed him in the mythology of a later drama, the dandy is a displaced person, but, unlike the tramp’s, this displacement is voluntary, indeed it is ostentatiously sought. It is not in a pair of worn-out boots, but in a buttonhole, that the dandy proclaims himself.

For the dramatist the accommodation of such a figure presents special problems. In so far as his role is mythic and not individualized he requires for his embodiment a special form of play. Drama usually involves its characters in ethical judgments; the dandy elaborately abjures them. Drama is an exploration of character in action; the dandy is self-consciously static, and the art he requires of the dramatist is precisely that which sees the mind’s construction in the face. The dramatic role of the dandy would seem to lead into a world where, of necessity, everything was amoral, inconsequential, and superficial. Was it possible to create such a figure and such a world, and yet produce a play which itself would be none of these things? This, basically, was Wilde’s problem. He solved it only once with complete success, in his last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In the varying achievement of the three plays which preceded it, however, we can see what were the conditions for such a “solution”, and this enables us to understand more clearly the nature of Wilde’s single dramatic masterpiece.

*Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), Wilde’s first play, illustrates very clearly the difficulties that beset a dramatist whose aesthetic ideology includes a belief that manners take precedence over morals and style over content. In this play there are two characters, Lord Darlington and Mrs. Erlynne, who have important sympathies with the dandy view of life. The play, in common with *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*, has as
a central theme the hazards of precipitate and inflexible moral judgment—in this case a wife judging, or misjudging, the nature of her husband’s liaison with another woman—and the way in which that judgment has to be modified. And it is in this modification that the dandy has his special role to play. The critical problem in all the plays arises from the nature of the wisdom the dandy dispenses and the relationship of this wisdom to the dilemmas which constitute the plot of the play.

*Lady Windermere’s Fan* opens with the direct confrontation of the dandy and the moralist, Lord Darlington and Lady Windermere:

Lord Darlington: I think life too complex a thing to be settled by these hard and fast rules.
Lady Windermere: If we had ‘these hard and fast rules’ we should find life much more simple.

This is sufficiently indicative of the kind of opposition involved. But of course it is not his attitudes that distinguish the dandy, it is the way in which those attitudes are validated by his mode of expression.

Lord Darlington: It’s a curious thing, Duchess, about the game of marriage—a game, by the way, that is going out of fashion—the wives hold all the honours, and invariably lose the odd trick.

Duchess of Berwick: The odd trick? Is that the husband, Lord Darlington?

Lord Darlington: It would be rather a good name for the modern husband.

Duchess of Berwick: Dear Lord Darlington, how thoroughly depraved you are!
Lady Windermere: Lord Darlington is trivial.

Lord Darlington: Ah, don’t say that, Lady Windermere.

Lady Windermere: Why do you *talk* so trivially about life, then?

Lord Darlington: Because I think that life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it.
Here we have the usual mutual criticism of dandy and moralist with its accompanying paradoxes about things serious and trivial, but the important thing to note is that Darlington’s flippant tone authenticates the seriousness of his remarks. He is doing two “serious” things here—one directed at the Duchess of Berwick and the other at Lady Windermere. The first is simple satire, aimed at the social set. Adopting a tone of raffish insouciance—“the game”, “the odd trick”, “the modern husband”—Darlington parodies current “advanced” views about marriage, views which the Duchess really thinks and acts on. Indulgently, she can assume indignation with the coy: “Dear Lord Darlington, how thoroughly depraved you are!” It is a remark which justifies Darlington’s satire without disturbing the blithe tone in which it is expressed. But Darlington is also speaking to Lady Windermere, and he intends these remarks as a warning. “The game”, “the modern husband” now have a specific reference—to Windermere himself and his relations with Mrs. Erlynne. Darlington, of course, is serious about this, because he is in love with Lady Windermere. But the dandy has his social sense of what is fitting. Public politeness is an outward sign of inward grace; his language, no less than his buttonhole, must be a testimony.

In this exchange Wilde is able to exhibit perfectly the seriousness of the dandy. But it is a precarious poise; the exigencies of the plot are to drive Darlington into an explicit declaration of love, and immediately he forfeits his right to the paradoxical language of the dandy. The fatal place for the dandy’s heart to be is on his sleeve. It is interesting to notice that as Darlington fades in the role of the dandy, Wilde tries to keep this element present in the play through one of his friends, Cecil Graham. But, because Graham is nothing more than a choric voice, his wit remains unassimilated into the action of the play, and so remains a collection of cynical obiter dicta, some Wildean epigrams in search of a character. The transformation of Darlington and the coarsening of the dandy in Graham is caught in this exchange:
Lord Darlington: This woman has purity and innocence. She has everything we men have lost.

Cecil Graham: My dear fellow, what on earth should we men do going about with purity and innocence? A carefully thought-out buttonhole is much more effective.

If Lady Windermere disturbs Wilde's presentation of Darlington in his role of dandy, she also exercises a distorting effect on his presentation of Mrs. Erlynne. Admittedly the demands of plot are strong here: Mrs. Erlynne has to be seen as supposed temptress of Windermere, and devoted mother to her unsuspecting daughter. But there is no reason why this should affect her credibility, and it is not on the level of her dramatic role that she seems to make contrary demands on the audience. Rather, it is because Wilde presents her alternately as both "inside" and "outside" the action of the play—a protagonist in a moral plot turning, at times, into a Wildean commentator. Her role in the plot makes us react critically to sentiments which we are meant to approve—approve not because they are Mrs. Erlynne's but because they are Wilde's. This crisscross role is sometimes exemplified within a single speech; here, for example, she is speaking to Windermere and leading into a blackmailing request:

... You have a delightful opportunity now of paying me a compliment, Windermere. But you are not very clever at paying compliments. I am afraid Margaret doesn't encourage you in that excellent habit. It's a great mistake on her part. When men give up saying what is charming they give up thinking what is charming. But seriously, what do you say to £2000? £2500, I think. In modern life margin is everything.

The attitude here to compliments, the notion of "saying" controlling "thinking", has the full Wildean approval, but juxtaposed to the blackmailing threat it merely becomes cynical. And the same applies to the final phrase, "In modern life margin is every-
thing”, which has the authentic dandiesque ring, but which, in this context, comes over as ruthlessly casual. It is involvement in plot that affects, in varying degree, the dandyish roles allocated initially to Lord Darlington and fitfully to Mrs. Erlynne. For involvement in plot means involvement in a world of judgments, a world of character.

This discussion of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, concentrating on the particular problem of accommodating the dandy to the moral world, is necessarily a partial one, and a fuller account would have to indicate that the play is *une pièce bien faite* and has an evenness about it which is lacking in *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*. More important for our present purpose, however, is that in the closing episode at least Wilde succeeds in obtaining just the right tone for dramatically harmonizing the parts of the dandy and the moralist. A climax in the plot is reached towards the end of the last act. Will Mrs. Erlynne explain her behaviour by telling Lady Windermere the truth—that she is her mother? Will she tell Lord Windermere that his wife was thinking of leaving him? In fact she does neither. The joint happiness of the Windermers is secured by a discreet omission in the one case and a false explanation in the other. Lady Windermere is deeply grateful, and Lord Windermere modifies his condemnation, “She is better than one thought her”; and the play ends with them giving their respective estimates of Mrs. Erlynne to her future husband:

Lord Windermere: Well, you are certainly marrying a very clever woman.
Lady Windermere (taking her husband’s hand): Ah, you’re marrying a very good woman.

Wilde directs his irony perfectly. Lady Windermere is now very happy, when her honour is threatened, to see goodness in a well-intentioned lie; her “hard and fast rules” have been quietly waved aside. Beyond this gently satiric touch, however, the lines have
a greater interest, in that they establish with delicate sureness the relationship of the dandy with the orthodox moral judges. The assessments of Mrs. Erlynne by the Windermeres are both wide of the mark. For the husband she is simply a good strategist; for his wife she is virtuous. She is in fact, up to a point, both. But the important fact is that her strategy is bound up with self-sacrifice in a way that Windermere does not recognize, while her virtue is quite other than Lady Windermere imagines it to be. Her behaviour in fact cannot be described exclusively in terms of either artifice or ethics. Her future husband too is satisfied that she has "explained every damned thing"; but she has really done nothing of the sort. Rather she has built out of her conduct a beautiful, false image of herself, which will give pleasure to Lady Windermere and sustain the couple's happiness. Her behaviour is seen as a praiseworthy and effective embodiment of the dandy's aspiration to turn his own life into a work of art, and recalls the Wildean dictum that "lying, the telling of beautiful, untrue things, is the proper aim of Art". But in the play as a whole this "proper aim" is only fitfully achieved, and behind the successful conclusion lie unresolved moral and aesthetic tensions.

If the dandy as lover causes difficulty in Lady Windermere's Fan, the dandy as villain in A Woman of No Importance (1893) causes considerably more. It would seem that Wilde had not yet grasped the fatal significance of making his dandy into a character, equipped, in however simple a way, with complexity of motive and a capacity for involvement in emotional affairs. By nature a bystander, the dandy is forced in these first two plays to become a participant, and confusion results. In Darlington's case he was at least cast favourably in both roles; in Illingworth's, it seems, we have to admire him in one and dislike him in the other.

"The world says that Lord Illingworth is very, very wicked," remarks Lady Stutfield. And Illingworth rejoins: "But what world says that, Lady Stutfield? It must be the next world. This world and I are on excellent terms." Unfortunately for Wilde's
play it is neither Lady Stutfield nor the next world that judges Illingworth to be wicked, but Mrs. Arbuthnot, the central character and, from one point of view, the heroine of the play. Wooed by Illingworth in the past, she was promised marriage and then deserted and left to bring up her child without any support. She now finds herself again in Illingworth’s social circle, and her son has just been offered the prospect of a successful career as his private secretary. Indifferent to the situation of the mother, patronizing to her son, flirtatious towards the girl with whom the boy is in love—the moral case against Illingworth is a strong one, and Lady Stutfield’s remark, for all its archness, points to a reality. But if Illingworth is the villain of the piece, he is also, for long stretches, its hero. His intelligence, vitality, and wit make the rest of the characters seem anaemic. If he can show up the triviality and malice of the social set which surrounds him, he is equally capable of making us sense the rigidity and self-satisfaction behind Hester’s puritan values and Mrs. Arbuthnot’s religioso grief. And yet this superiority of attitude seems to exist quite apart from the moral situation in which he finds himself. This has nothing to do with complexity of character—it is not that kind of play; it arises from an ambiguity in his conception.

If we look at Illingworth more carefully we shall see that this “superiority” does not belong to him in propria persona; it is the author temporarily speaking through him. When it comes to advancing the plot, however, Wilde has as it were to desert Illingworth and think of him in the wicked role in which he has cast him. The more Illingworth moves into the plot, the less Wilde cares about what he says; so that his final lines, as he leaves Mrs. Arbuthnot, have all the clichés of phrase and attitude of the stock-in-trade villain:

... Quarter to two! Must be strolling back to Hunstanton. Don’t suppose I shall see you there again. I’m sorry, I am, really. It’s been an amusing experience to have met amongst people of one’s own rank, and treated quite seriously too, one’s mistress and one’s—
It seems quite fitting that Illingworth's stagey words should be brought to an end by a melodramatic gesture—and Mrs. Arbuthnot duly "snatches up glove and strikes Lord Illingworth across the face with it". This routine melodramatic finale suggests how little Wilde's attention is really engaged with the moral questions which his plot genuinely seems to raise. Justice has to be done to Mrs. Arbuthnot, but it is enough for Wilde if it is seen to be done. The center of his interest remains in the dandy and in trying to realize the significance of the dandy in an appropriate action. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* he had become a sympathetic lover and had been rendered null; in *A Woman of No Importance* he has been a faithless lover and is degraded into a melodramatic villain.

Involvement of one kind or another was the root defect of these plays, and in writing his third play, *An Ideal Husband* (1895), Wilde seems to have taken special care to keep his dandy free from commitment. If Lord Goring is to be in love it will be with a minor figure of the play, and his "love" will simply be there to testify to his status as hero. His connection with the central figures of the play will not be a profoundly emotional one, and will not involve him with a woman, faithfully or otherwise. And so we find Wilde giving Goring a friendship with Sir Robert Chiltern and hoping that the dandy, limited to the more fitting role of guide and philosopher, will at last find insurance against loss of wit.

Connected with Wilde's clearer insight into the dramatic requirements of the dandy was his decision to make the central plot of *An Ideal Husband* much wider, much more public in concern, than that of the earlier plays. Here, for the first and only time, a man's profession is central to the play. If Lady Chiltern demands an ideal husband this is intimately connected with the requirement that he must be an ideal politician. Corruption in the one sphere is, for her, corruption in the other.

This, then, is the world that faces the dandy; and now Wilde introduces him to us:
Enter Lord Goring. Thirty-four, but always says he is younger. A well-bred, expressionless face. He is clever, but would not like to be thought so. A flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic. He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world. He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage.

It is from this post of vantage that he sees an eminent politician being blackmailed, because of a past misdeed, into supporting a political scheme which he considers fraudulent; he sees his vain attempts to keep this from his wife, and her reactions when she learns the truth. At critical moments he is appealed to for help, and through his successful intervention the plot is happily resolved.

For the first time Wilde gives us a satisfactory portrait of the dandy. Unlike Darlington's and Illingworth's it is not a portrait confused by the plot. In Goring we feel that Wilde can use his own voice and remain confident that the character is appropriate to the play. But it is an appropriateness that has a significant limitation. This is a play of political intrigue, of action; and such intrigue, such action, are alien to the dandy. It is interesting to note how Wilde overcomes the difficulties which ensue. Goring has two decisive actions in the play. The first, his thwarting of Mrs. Cheveley's plans of blackmail, is made possible by his finding a bracelet which she has lost and which he knows to have been stolen. The blackmailer become blackmailed. It is a significantly arbitrary device, too casually introduced by Wilde. Goring is lucky enough to be in a position to expose Mrs. Cheveley. But it is good fortune which has nothing to do with his specific role as "the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought". Goring's second crucial action is to persuade Lady Chiltern to allow her husband to remain in public life and accept the seat in the cabinet which has just been offered him. And this takes the form of a set speech, in Wilde's characteristic anti-
puritanical manner, prefaced by a stage-direction to the effect that Goring here shows "the philosopher that underlies the dandy". The action is not really resolved in dramatic terms; it is arrested, and dialectic is allowed to demolish the plot. But as Goring is inseparable from Wilde, this dialectic simply belongs to the author, and clearly it must end in victory. Goring resolves the problems in the play, certainly, but this is because Wilde has endowed him with an effortless superiority over everyone else. In Goring, then, Wilde has found an appropriate dramatic voice for himself, but he has not found a world where that voice can have a really appropriate dramatic effect.

However lightly it may be sketched in, the world of An Ideal Husband is a world where ambition and disgrace, love and suspicion, are possible. It is, uniquely in Wilde, a world of work. From his post of vantage the dandy may observe keenly and comment shrewdly, but he can never affect this world except through the arbitrary good fortune which the author has conferred on him. On his own, Goring is Wilde's most successful dandy; in the Chiltern-Cheveley world he is a wraith, lucky enough to be his author's Scarlet Pimpernel. His father's constant rebuke that he is wasting his time is not so easily dismissed as Wilde would like us to think.

It seems reasonable to think that, in creating a dandy satisfactorily, even though in isolation, Wilde was beginning to realize precisely the dramatic action he required. There are significant stage-directions in the third act. The first refers to a completely minor character, Goring's butler:

The distinction of Phipps is his impassivity. He has been termed by enthusiasts the Ideal Butler. The Sphinx is not so incommunicable. He is a mask with a manner. Of his intellectual or emotional life history knows nothing. He represents the dominance of form.

The second refers to Goring:
One sees that he stand in immediate relation to modern life, 
*makes it indeed, and so masters it.* [my italics]

In these two directions we find, indicated abstractly, the solution to the problem that has dogged Wilde's progress as a dramatist. Repeatedly the dandy has been broken on the wheel of the everyday world, sometimes too involved a figure, sometimes incapable of being involved enough. And now Wilde begins to see that, if the dandy is to master the world, it can be only a world of his own making. Only in a *world* of dandies will his voice and actions become harmonious: a world where the categories of serious and frivolous will no longer apply, where every character can speak like the author and the author like every character, where everything that can be seen is harmonious and there is nothing that cannot be seen. The dandy can exist fully only in a world of idyll, of pure play. And at last, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), he finds himself in such a world.

II

The prevalence of cant is a constant target for Wilde, and a topic which receives significant mention in three of his four plays is the varying attitudes taken up by—and towards—men and women in matters of sexual morality. It is there in Hester's upholstered rhetoric in *A Woman of No Importance*:

... If a man and woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love or loathe each other there. Let them both be branded. Set a mark, if you wish, on each, but don't punish the one and let the other go free. Don't have one law for men and another for women.

More coolly, it is there in Lord Darlington's exchange with Lady Windermere:

Lord Darlington: ... do you think seriously that women who have committed what the world calls a fault should never be forgiven?
Lady Windermere: I think they should never be forgiven.
Lord Darlington: And men? Do you think that there should be the same laws for men as there are for women?
Lady Windermere: Certainly!
Lord Darlington: I think life too complex a thing to be settled by these hard and fast rules.

And then we find it again towards the end of *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

Jack: Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you.

The most cursory reading, of course, reveals that, however similar these passages may be, the last one is markedly different in tone from the other two. And it is this difference in tone which constitutes the essential difference between *Earnest* and the plays which preceded it. It is a tone which emerges as a result of sentiments from widely different contexts being fused together into a single statement. Beginning with mock-understatement—"I do not deny that is a serious blow"—it moves on through biblical reference to the clichés of romantic melodrama. The effect of this on the audience is to maintain a complete moral disengagement. But though Wilde's tone cuts out any ethical response to the sentiment, it makes completely real a character and a world where the sentiment seems quite appropriate. In other words, if we are kept deliberately disengaged from ever thinking of Jack's world as our own, we are kept no less deliberately engaged, by seeing the reality of Jack's world for him.

In the earlier plays, as we have seen, the reality of the dandy's world crumbled at the point where he became involved in the dramatic action. Now, in *Earnest*, at the height of the dramatic action, Jack's world is still perfectly viable. This testifies to
Wilde's complete success in finding, in this play, the appropriate context for the dandy, and it is a characteristic touch of bravura that the testimony consists in making sustained play with the very situation which had earlier taken such toll of the dandy. We are now in a position to describe directly how Wilde has succeeded in finding a world fit for dandies to live in.

Everything starts from language. The characteristic language of the dandy is the paradox, and the essence of paradox is contradiction. This draws attention to two things—the attitude or sentiment which the paradox is concerned to reverse, and the language itself in which the reversal is done. We should say of paradox that it is a form of expression which is at once critical and self-delighting. And the same definition would apply very well to Earnest as a whole. Wilde is able to achieve this extension and uniformity because in this play the language of the dandy is a language appropriate to everyone. In the earlier plays, where the dandy was a figure involved with others who were not dandies, his idiom belonged to him in a very personal way: we were driven to reflect on his criticism, his self-delight. But when all the characters can speak with the author's voice they are completely insulated against each other; the criticism is then cut free to apply to a world beyond the characters, to the world of the audience. And in their turn the audience cannot think of any of the characters critically, because the delighting, and self-delighting, form of paradox creates a comic response which encloses these characters in a protective shell. Something of the way this works can be seen from the opening lines of the play; Algernon, who has been playing the piano in the next room, comes in and addresses his servant:

Algernon: Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?
Lane: I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

This reveals, with splendid economy, the nature of the relationships between the characters in this play. The dandy, character-
istically playing the piano and delighting in his own art, asks his servant for approval. 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 exercising 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 the equal of his master.

If, at the end of the play, we are left thinking more of the dramatist than of his creation, this is not because of a personal intrusiveness—indeed, if this were so, the play would hardly have succeeded; but rather because of the precise rhetorical means through which Wilde has obtained and controlled our attention. The use of striking linguistic display, such as paradox, instantly draws attention to the author as manipulator; it is a reminder that words are man-made things. In realistic drama the author works in the opposite way: everything is done to give the impression that the characters are autonomous; the writer puts his skill into re-creating exact speech rhythms, idiosyncratic turns of phrase. The same is true in the realm of plot. The realistic dramatist will try to follow out as faithfully as possible the subtle configurations of daily life; Wilde finds his ideal plot in farce, because he sees art as exaggeration, and “selection, which is the very spirit of art, is nothing more than an intensified mode of over-emphasis”. Nothing is more over-emphatic than farce, permitting as it does the maximum of coincidence and unlikelihood. Paradox in language, farce in plot—these are Wilde’s chief resources in directing our response away from the characters and towards the play. Because for him it is in the play as such, embodying an imaginative world of perfect harmony, that life, “so
terribly deficient in form”, is given a meaning. Before exploring this, it is worth looking more exactly at the elements of farce and character in *Earnest*.

One of the ways in which Wilde defines his conception of plot and character is by making the characters themselves take on the role of plot-makers. They will shape their lives with the same complete confidence as they shape their phrases. So we find Act I opening with Jack playing the part of Ernest and coming up to town to woo Gwendolen, and closing with Algernon playing the part of Ernest and going down to the country to woo Cecily. In the second act Algernon appears as Ernest and Jack as Ernest’s bereaved brother. The girls dramatize their lives in their diaries and plan to marry not the right man, but the right name—Ernest. Eventually the mythical plot takes over and is shown to be “truer” than the real plot—Jack is, in fact, Ernest. Plot-makers of this sort can never be taken by surprise, they feel too sure of themselves for that. And consequently, at the times when things appear to be going wrong—Lady Bracknell’s refusal to let Gwendolen marry Jack, Algernon’s appearance as Ernest at the moment when Jack is mourning his death, the girls’ discovery that “Ernest” is a fiction—no one is abashed; there is just a momentary pause and new resources of plot are immediately called upon. Shaw found the play “inhuman” and of course, in a sense, he was right: Wilde’s whole art is calculated to prevent his characters’ becoming people. If they did, they could no longer say perfectly all they have to say, they could no longer act as the masters of fortune, they could no longer co-operate with the author in validating the truth of his world, a truth founded not in reality but in imaginative cohesiveness, a truth sensed in shape.

Whenever the plot seems to be moving towards reality we see language taking it over and designing it into fantasy. There is, for example, the love-scene in Act I, which culminates like this:

Gwendolen: . . . We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worth-
ing, 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.

Jack: You really love me, Gwendolen?
Gwendolen: Passionately!
Jack: Darling! You don’t know how happy you’ve made me.
Gwendolen: My own Ernest!

It is a splendid climax, perfectly appropriate for the “love-scene”, and at the same time perfectly undercutting its reality. When Jack goes on to hint that his name might not be Ernest, Gwendolen dismisses the suggestion briskly as having “very little reference at all to the actual facts of life, as we know them”—another ironical gloss on the question of reality.

Lady Bracknell is interesting in that we do feel, here, that we have in a quiet ordinary sense of the word a “character”. But she too builds up her whole mode of speech out of bemusing herself with her own voice. If she exists at all, it is in an echo-chamber. She is so used to speaking in tones of imperious command that these persist regardless of what she is talking about:

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 . . . I consider . . . I am always telling . . . etc., etc.

It is not only her own tone that hypnotizes her, it is often a phrase itself: “But German sounds a thoroughly respectable language, and indeed, I believe, is so.” The first rather curious statement gets a splendid endorsement from the would-be pedantic accuracy of the second.
A good example of "serious" situation, tone, and individual phrase combining together in this process of de-realization occurs when Jack arrives dressed in his mourning clothes:

Chasuble: Dear Mr. Worthing, I trust this garb of woe does not betoken some terrible calamity?
Jack: My brother.
Miss Prism: More shameful debts and extravagance?
Chasuble: Still leading his life of pleasure?
Jack (shaking his head): Dead!
Chasuble: Your brother Ernest dead?
Jack: Quite dead.
Miss Prism: What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it.

It is a rich exchange. Chasuble, reacting automatically to black, goes into his trade language—"garb of woe", "betoken", "terrible calamity". One routine response fades and is immediately replaced by another, "Still leading his life of pleasure?"—which is an odd hypothesis as to why Jack should be in mourning. It is after "pleasure" that Jack drops his monosyllable, "dead". Chasuble, still in the same mechanically solicitous tone, repeats, "Your brother Ernest dead?" Jack then returns his splendidly superfluous "quite dead". Interspersed with these exchanges are those of Miss Prism, who is as eccentrically unresponsive to the situation as Chasuble is eccentrically responsive. The effect of this triple play—Jack solemnly in mourning for a fiction, the other two quite incapable of making an appropriate response to the announcement—is to make form everything and content nothing. The interesting point that emerges from looking at this passage is that here Wilde is exercising his linguistic control for a purpose very different from the one revealed in the Jack-Gwendolen passage which we looked at earlier. There, the rhetorical situation kept feeling at bay, it was impossible to think of the scene as either passionate or heartless; now the rhetoric keeps farce at bay. The fact that Ernest is a fictitious character, and that Jack is solemnly
arrayed in mourning for him, certainly goes far towards creating a merely farcical situation; but Wilde’s scrupulous attention to the exact responses of Chasuble and Miss Prism keeps our attention, as always, on the language, rather than on the pure comedy of situation. Farce in Wilde is always shaped and controlled by precision of language, and it is this which distinguishes it from farce in general, which is shaped by arbitrariness of event.

The dramatic creation of the dandy, the creation of a world capable of projecting the dandy—we can see the problems involved in these undertakings, and we shall probably be willing to admit that Earnest solves them satisfactorily. But a question still remains about the nature of the success, a question which can be brought into sharper focus if we think of Wilde’s play in relation to the comedies of other dramatists.

When we finish reading or seeing a play of Shakespeare’s we are left thinking of the profound imaginative world which he has created; at the end of a Jonson play we can see how farce can bring to vivid life human vice and folly. But what are we left with at the end of The Importance of Being Earnest? There is here no “perilous stuff that weighs upon the heart”, nor “sport that plays with follies, not with crimes”. Eric Bentley attempts an answer to this question in The Playwright as Thinker. After commenting that nothing is easier than to handle this play without noticing what it contains, he goes on to exhibit its contents:

The margins of an annotated copy of The Importance of Being Earnest would show such things as death, money, marriage, the nature of style, ideology and economics, beauty and truth, the psychology of philanthropy, the decline of aristocracy, nineteenth century morals, the class system. What begins as a prank ends as a criticism of life. What begins as intellectual high-kicking ends as intellectual sharp-shooting.

This seems a misleading description because Bentley gives
the impression of a play containing serious ideas which have been attractively packaged in wit. The best critic is he who opens the parcel most dextrously. But nothing, surely, is gained by recommending this play as if it were one of Shaw's. Yet again it is possible to see, only too clearly, Mr. Bentley's difficulty. Our vocabulary of approval for the drama is dominated by representational considerations like "truth to character", "truth to situation", or else by didactic ones like "social or moral vision". A dramatist who offers neither character nor social or moral vision would seem to be offering only triviality. What is it, then, which distinguishes Earnest from Charley's Aunt?

The difference, ultimately, is the same as that which distinguishes Shakespeare and Jonson from countless less successful dramatists, the use of language. But whereas their language was a means to an end, and their end conforms fairly directly with Johnson's definition of the function of literature—"to enable readers better to enjoy life or better to endure it", Wilde was concerned with the linguistic artifact itself, with a kind of poetry which Auden has described as "a verbal earthly paradise, a timeless world of pure play, which gives us delight because of its contrast to our historical existence with all its insoluble problems and inescapable suffering". To think of Wilde's art as merely "escapist" is to oversimplify the position. What he gives us is a completely realized idyll, offering itself as something irrevocably other than life, not a wish-fulfilment of life as it might be lived. Consequently, to think of Wilde's idyll in terms of "aspiration" or "rejection" is as idle as the notion of "accepting" or "rejecting" Keats's Ode on a Grecian Urn, or the urn itself, or Mozart's Marriage of Figaro. "Truth in art is the unity of a thing with itself," and the truth in Wilde's dictum can be falsified by art too self-consciously pursued, as well as by life. Salome, Wilde's last produced play, is a monument to art, not art itself; it is as entangled with an aesthetic commentary on life as A Woman of No Importance is with a moral one. Earnest is the dramatic expression of a
precise aesthetic ideology, where Art is seen as the supreme ordering and perfection of life. In such a play the plot can never be our sort of plot, and so, in Wilde, it is a farce; the characters can never be human, and so, in Wilde, they are pure and simple; the language has to be our language, but if it is the language of paradox it can continually contradict us. Such a play can contain oblique criticism of life, but it will never be a direct imitation of life, since that would imply an intrinsic value in life superior to that of art. Even at its most topical The Importance of Being Ernest avoids the didactic and the narrowly satirical, and remains resolutely faithful to its aesthetic aim. It was a success which Wilde achieved only once, and we can feel reasonably certain that the sudden ending of his dramatic career did not deprive us of any better play.