Satiric Strategy in the Importance of Being Earnest
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of this rigidity, the Evangelical conscience, in which Lady Windermere was trained, and had demanded that the middle-class transform itself. Wilde showed how improbable it was that Arnold’s desires should be fulfilled. For in fostering absolute morality, the Philistine trained his children in rigid moral ideals, and so condemned them to a life of illusions, a life forever separated from reality. “Realities are better,” says Mrs. Erlynne. “They wound, but they are better.” “In the Rose Garden at Selby,” her daughter replies, “the roses are white and red.”


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**Satiric Strategy in The Importance of Being Earnest**

**Otto Reinert**

Almost everyone agrees that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is good fun, but few have tried to show that it is also a good play. To say that Wilde has written a brilliant farce is not to say why it seems both funnier and more significant than other superior farces, and to say that the farce satirizes Victorianism is not, at this late date, to tell us why it amuses at all. From some of the incidental comments one gets the impression that the play is untouchable, so exquisite that criticism would be fatal—stupid abuse of something bright and fragile. A few critics, who take their business more seriously, refuse even to be charmed. The play “never transcends . . . the incomplete or the trivial,” Edouard Roditi writes in his generally perceptive book on Wilde (1947). “Its tone is that of satire, but of a satire which, for lack of a moral point of view, has lost its sting and degenerated into the almost approving banter of a P. G. Wodehouse.”

But only a curious form of critical blindness can dismiss *Earnest* as a trifle of dialogues. It merits attention both as satire and as drama. The farce is meaningful. Tone and plot have been successfully integrated, and the whole is more truly comic—because normative—than a well-made play to end all well-made plays, a vehicle for the utterance of witty nonsense. Awareness of its satirical strategy precludes the criticism that it is elusive of reasoned analysis for lack of any kind of rationale.

Wilde first employed a pattern of ironic inversion in *An Ideal Husband*, the play immediately preceding *Earnest*. Its hero, Lord Goring, is not the irresponsible dandy he seems to be, the surface frivolity is not the real man, and his flippant paradoxes emphasize the irony of his moral position relative to that of Lord Chiltern, the pretended pillar of society. For the first time in his plays Wilde puts the fine art of epigram to serious purposes: it participates in the total meaning of the play.

Lord Goring’s wit expresses that ironic attitude to life that guarantees moral salvation in Wilde’s world. But though the brand of wit is similar in *Earnest*, such an attitude cannot be attributed to any one or several of the characters in the later play, simply because it has no hero (or heroine) in the sense in which Lord Goring is the hero of *An Ideal Husband*. The characters in *Earnest* never stop being flippant; their flippancy is their whole nature and not, like Lord Goring’s, the mocking mask of enlightened irony in a pompous society. The only ironist in *Earnest* is Wilde himself, who not only has abandoned the simple ethics of thesis melodrama but also
has deliberately sacrificed the illusionistic conventions of naturalism in order to gain what Francis Fergusson calls (in The Idea of a Theater, 1949) a “limited perspective, shared with the audience, as the basis of the fun,” showing “human life as comic . . . because . . . consistent according to some narrowly defined, and hence unreal, basis.”

That is why there is no reason to be embarrassed by the farce label. The play’s merit is that it is all farce, capable of serving as a lucid image of the non-farcical reality that is kept strictly outside the play. Wilde has respected his paradoxes. He is no longer putting them to menial service as bright spots in sentimental thesis plays or as devices of crude melodramatic irony. The Importance of Being Earnest is one sustained metaphor, and esthetic detachment is the only mood in which it can be intelligently enjoyed. It insists on being acted straight, for if we should feel, even for a moment, that the characters are aware of what absurdities they are saying, the whole thing vanishes. Once object and image are confused there is a blurring of vision. No one in his right mind gets emotionally involved with the destinies of Algernon and Cecily, Gwendolen and Jack. But it is precisely their emotive neutrality as figures of farce that allows Wilde’s characters to establish his “limited perspective”: Wilde’s basic formula for satire is their assumption of a code of behavior that represents the reality that Victorian convention pretends to ignore.

Algernon is explaining his reluctance to attend Lady Bracknell’s dinner party: “She will place me next Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the 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.” To say that Algernon’s tone here is consciously flippant is to miss the joke altogether. The quip is not a quip; it means what is says. Algernon is indignant with a woman who spoils the fun of extra-marital flirtation and who parades her virtue. He is shocked at convention. And his tone implies that he is elevating break of convention into a moral norm. He is not the first figure in English satire to do so; among his ancestors are Martin Scriblerus, other assumed identities in Pope and Swift (including Gulliver), and the apologist for Jonathan Wild. 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 environments, realists with a vengeance.

Here is Algernon on conventional love institutions: “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. Then the excitement is all over.” And here is his vision of the post honeymoon tea table:

**Algernon**: Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen, Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

**Jack**: And very good bread and butter it is too.

**Algernon**: Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you were married to her already . . .

The girls, too, implicitly accept this inverted code. In the proposal scene between Jack and Gwendolen the latter acts out reality: girls about to be proposed to quite realize the situation and are annoyed by their suitors’ conventionally bungling approach. In the second act Gwendolen explains to Cecily that she always travels with her diary in order to “have something sensational to read in the train.” One of Cecily’s first speeches expresses her concern for “dear Uncle Jack” who is so “very serious” that “I think he cannot be quite well.” When Algernon, at their
first meeting, begs her not to think him wicked, she sternly replies: "If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy." Paradoxical morality cannot be argued much further than this, and the speech upsets even Algernon. In context it cuts down to the very core of the problem of manners with which Wilde is concerned. It epitomizes the central irony of the play, for the Bunburying Algernon, in escaping the hypocrisy of convention, becomes a hypocrite himself by pretending to be somebody he is not. (Even Miss Prism participates. She is telling Cecily about her youthful novel: "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.")

Only Jack and Lady Bracknell seem at first glance to be outside the pattern of inversion, expressing shock when confronted with the code of cynical realism. But their conventionality is not genuine. Jack is a confirmed Bunburyist long before Algernon explains the term to him, and Bunburyism is most simply defined as a means of escape from convention. He occasionally acts the role of naïve elicitor of Algernon's discourses on Bunburyism and is not such a consistent theorist of the realist code, but his behavior is certainly not conventional.

One of Lady Bracknell's main plot functions is to be an obstacle to Jack's romance with Gwendolen, but a systematic analysis of her speeches will show, I think, that she has no illusions about the reality her professed convention is supposed to conceal: "... I do not approve of mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind." To her the speech is neither cynical nor funny. It represents that compromise between practical hardheadedness and conventional morality that she has worked out to her own satisfaction and behind which she has retired in dignified immunity. In other speeches she advocates Algernon's code with as much sanctimoniousness as he: "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." She moralizes on behalf of people who take it for granted that illness in others is always faked and that consequently sympathy with invalids is faked also, a concession to an artificial and—literally—morbid code. The frivolous banter accomplishes something serious. It exposes the polite cynicism that negates all values save personal convenience and salon decorum. Life and death have become matters of savoir-vivre.

The following speech presents a somewhat more complex case, because Lady Bracknell is here simultaneously deferring to convention and exposing its sham: "French songs I cannot possibly allow. People always seem to think that they are improper, and either look shocked, which is vulgar, or laugh, which is worse. But German sounds a thoroughly respectable language, and indeed, I believe is so." To laugh at presumably improper songs is to fly in the face of convention and break the delicate fabric of social decorum. But the opposite reaction is hardly less reprehensible. To register shock at indecency is indecently to call attention to something people realize the existence of but refuse to recognize. In her last sentence she quietly gives away the polite fiction that people in society know foreign languages.

When the pattern of inversion operates the characters either express or assume a morality that is deduced from the actual behavior of high society, though the existence of conventional morality is sometimes recognized as a fact to come to terms with. What the accumulation of paradox adds up to is an exposure both of hypocrisy and of the unnatural convention that necessitates hypocrisy. In elegant accents of pompous bigotry Wilde's puppets turn
moral values upside down. “Good heavens,” Algernon exclaims when Lane tells him that married households rarely serve first-rate champagne. “Is marriage so demoralizing as that?” We are made to share Wilde’s view of the ludicrous and sinister realities behind the fashionable façade of an over-civilized society where nothing serious is considered serious and nothing trivial trivial.

But *Earnest* is, before anything else, a play, an imitation of action, and no discussion of tone apart from its dramatic setting can account for the extraordinary impact of the play as play. It is rather odd, therefore, to notice that even critics who have been aware of serious satiric implications in the dialogue have been prone to dismiss the plot as negligible, as, at best, “inspired nonsense.” “The plot,” writes Eric Bentley, in *The Playwright as Thinker* (1946), “is one of those Gilbertian absurdities of lost infants and recovered brothers which can only be thought of to be laughed at,” and he defines the function of “the ridiculous action” as constantly preventing the play from “breaking into bitter criticism.” There is truth in that, but the action has another and far more important function as well: it informs the satiric dialogue with coherent meaning.

The action of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is about just that—the importance of being earnest. The title is as straightforward a statement of theme as any literalist could ask for. Specifically, the play deals with the consequences of that way of not being earnest that Algernon calls Bunburying, and it is Bunburying that gives the plot moral significance. The key speech in the play is Algernon’s little lecture to Jack: “Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth you are serious about I haven’t got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have an absolutely trivial nature.” Bunburying means to invent a fictitious character, who can serve as a pretext for escaping a frustrating social routine, regulated by a repressive convention. The pretended reason for getting away is perfectly respectable, even commendable, according to convention: to comfort a dying friend, to rescue a fallen brother. Thus defined, Bunburying is simply the mechanism that sets in motion the preposterously elaborate plot of mistaken identities. But the word has also a wider meaning. Significantly, Algernon happens to be serious about Bunburying—that is, it is not the subterfuge itself that is important, but the commitment to a course of action that will provide fun. The Bunburyist in the wider sense is serious about not being serious, and Bunburyism is the alternative to a convention that fails to reckon with the facts of human nature. It stands for behavior that will give experience the shading and perspective that convention denies it. To be serious about everything is to be serious about nothing; that is, to trifle. Algernon charges Jack (unfairly, as it happens) with a failure to discriminate among life values, to see that monotone of attitude blunts the spirit and deadens joy. And this is precisely Wilde’s charge against Victorianism.

The Bunburyist lives in a world of irresponsibility, freed from the enslavement of a hypocritical convention. He enjoys himself. But life beyond hypocrisy is life in a dangerous climate of moral anarchy, and, like most states of revolt, Bunburyism is not ideal. The escape from convention is itself a flagrant instance of hypocrisy: pretense is the price the Bunburyist pays for freedom from the pretense of convention. In his title pun Wilde catches the moral failure of dandyism. Just as the conformist pretends to be, but is not, earnest, so Algernon and Jack pretend to be, but are not, Ernest.

What Wilde is saying, then, is that all normal Victorians who want to retain the respect of their conventional society are, perforce, Bunburyists, leading double
lives, one respectable, one frivolous, neither earnest. Bunburyism, as Algernon confesses in the opening of the play, is the application of science to life, to the exclusion of sentiment. Sentiment properly belongs to art. The science is the science of having a good time. These are obviously false distinctions, and all that can be said for Bunburyism as a way of life is that it offers relief from a social round where, in Lady Bracknell’s words, good behavior and well being “rarely go together,” and where, according to Jack, “a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness.” Bunburyism marks one of the extreme points in the swing of the pendulum, Victorianism the other.

Neither of the two Bunburyists is either earnest or Ernest—before the very end.¹ It is only then that they become, and in more than a single sense, themselves. When the action begins they have already escaped the mortifying seriousness of convention, but it takes them three acts and the movement from town to country—the movement has symbolic relevance as a return to “naturalness”—to regain their balance and become earnest, that is, neither conventionally nor frivolously hypocritical. At the end of the play the respectable (though amorous) Miss Prism (her name suggests “prim prison”) has been unmasked, the four young people are romantically engaged, Jack has discovered his Bunburying identity to be his true self, and Lady Bracknell must recognize the contemptible orphan of Act I, “born, or at any rate, bred in a handbag,” as her own sister’s son. The plot, as it were, makes a fool of respectability and proves the two Bunburyists “right” in their escapade. But it also repudiates Bunburyism. Algernon, who as a Bunburyist spoke cynically about proposals and matrimony in Act I, is happily proposing marriage to Cecily in Act II, and at the end his initial false dichotomies between life and art, science and sentiment, have been resolved in romance. The radical remedy of Bunburying has effected a cure, the pendulum rests in the perpendicular, and we share Jack’s final conviction of “the vital Importance of Being Earnest.” The two adjectives have not been chosen lightly.

Wilde as Parodist: A Second Look at The Importance of Being Earnest

Richard Foster

The Importance of Being Earnest is apt to be a stumbling block both to the detractors and admirers of Oscar Wilde as a man of letters. Those who want to dismiss him as the greatest ass of aestheticism may be troubled to find themselves, in this play, laughing with rather than at Wilde. Those few, on the other hand, who see in the whole of Wilde’s work the same revolutionary quest for new means and materials of literary expression which characterized the poetic innovators of nineteenth-century France sometimes find it hard to laugh at all. Meanwhile, the play