CHAPTER 4

Genre and Structure in The Importance of Being Earnest

Wilde’s Use of Ironic Counterpoint

Eric Bentley

Eric Bentley writes that The Importance of Being Earnest is about false seriousness, priggishness, and hypocrisy. According to Bentley, Wilde presents a new type of comedy, one that is not dependent on plot and character. Instead, Wilde offers an unbroken stream of dialogue that dances around but never directly attacks the problems of society. Wilde skims over topics like death, money, beauty, morals, the class system, and truth, taking verbal shots as he goes. Bentley maintains that Wilde hovers on the edge of criticism throughout the play, but never really crosses over.

Bentley argues that Wilde’s witticisms are not comic; rather, they serve as ironic counterpoints to the absurdities of the action. This counterpoint is also seen in the characters, who display a great contrast between their surface elegance and the silliness of what they do. Bentley writes that there is always a great contrast between the assured appearances of the characters and their inner emptiness.

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The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) is a variant, not of domestic drama like Candida or of melodrama like Brassbound (plays by George Bernard Shaw), but of farce, a genre which, being the antithesis of serious, is not easily put to serious uses. In fact nothing is easier than to handle this play without noticing what it contains. It is so consistently farcical in tone, characterization, and plot that very few care to root out any more serious content. The general conclusion has been that Wilde merely decorates a silly play with a flip...
Heedings on The Importance of Being Earnest

pert wit. Like [Irish dramatist George Bernard] Shaw he is dismissed as "not really a dramatist at all." Unlike Shaw he does not have any such dramatic structure to offer in refutation of his critics as underlies a Major Barbara or a Candida.

We cannot turn to him for the dialectical steel frame of a [French comic dramatist] Molière or a Shaw. Yet we shall only display our own insensitivity if we dismiss him.

Insensitiveness to slight and delicate things is insensitivity simply to tout court. That is what Wilde meant when he declared that the man who despises superficiality is himself superficial. His best play is connected with this idea. As its title confesses, it is about earnestness, that is, Victorian solemnity, that kind of false seriousness which means priggishness, hypocrisy, and lack of irony. Wilde proclaims that earnestness is less praiseworthy than the ironic attitude to life which is regarded as superficial. His own art and the comic spirit which [English dramatist William] Congreve embodied and which [English novelist George] Meredith had described, were thereby vindicated. 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. The latter will perceive that Wilde is as much of a moralist as Bernard Shaw but that, instead of presenting the problems of modern society directly, he flits around them, teasing them, declining to grapple with them. His wit is no searchlight into the darkness of modern life. It is a flickering, a corrosion, intermittently revealing the upper class of England in a harsh, bizarre light. This upper class could feel about Shaw that at least he took them seriously, no one more so. But the outrageous Oscar (whom they took care to get rid of as they had got rid of Byron) refused to see the importance of being earnest.

WILDE'S TOPIC SKIMMING

One does not find Wilde's satire embedded in plot and character as in traditional high comedy. It is a running accompaniment to the play, and this fact, far from indicating immaturity, is the making of a new sort of comedy. The plot is one of those Gilbertian [English dramatist Sir William] absurdities of lost infants and recovered brothers which can only be thought of to be laughed at. 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. Perhaps comment is too flat and downright a conception. Wildean "comment" is a pseudo-irresponsible jabbing at all the great problems, and we would be justified in removing the prefix "pseudo" if the Wildean satire, for all its naughtiness, had not a cumulative effect and a paradoxical one. Flippancies repeated, developed, and, so to say, elaborated almost into a system amount to something in the end—and thereby cease to be flippant. What begins as a prank ends as a criticism of life. What begins as intellectual high-kicking ends as intellectual sharp-shooting.

The margins of an annotated copy of The Importance would show such headings as: death; money and 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. The possibility of such notations in itself means little. But if we bear in mind that Wilde is skimming steadily over mere topics all through The Importance, we can usefully turn to a particular page to see precisely how this works. To choose the opening page is not to load the dice in a dramatist's favor, since that page is usually either heavy-going exposition or mere parter which allows the audience to get seated. Here is Wilde's first page:

ALGERNON: Did you hear what I was saying, 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.
ALGERNON: And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches out for Lady Bracknell?
LANE: Yes, sir.
ALGERNON: Oh!... by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Sherman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.
LANE: Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.
ALGERNON: Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.
LANE: I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.
We are accustomed to play in which a degree of and so if yours on

There is no such thing as "meant" it is the lowest orders

The motor of summation of actions: these forms

The motor of summation of actions: these forms

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The motor of summation of actions: these forms
take is in believing that these men deceived themselves. If we patronize them the joke is on us. If Wilde seems shallow when we want depth, if he seems a liar when we want truth, we should recall his words. "A Truth in Art is that whose contradictory is also true. The Truths of metaphysics are the Truths of masks." These words lead us to Pirandello.

The Tedium of The Importance of Being Earnest

Mary McCarthy

Mary McCarthy writes that Wilde not only imposes himself and his opinions on his audience, but also outstays his welcome. She suggests that Wilde's outrageousness becomes monotonous. The play's tedium is exemplified in act 2, where the joke of glutony surrounding the muffins has, according to McCarthy, already been exhausted in the first act with the cucumber sandwiches. She criticizes the playwright for including in the play private jokes for the bisexual man that are lost on the audience.

McCarthy argues that Wilde's stock characters become stock jokes and the formula for the humor is like a detective story device in which paradox is used to shock the audience. Insensitivity is the comic "vice" of the characters and selfishness is their moral alternative. McCarthy claims that the play has the tone of emotionally bankrupt people imprisoned in a world of comfort. All of the characters have different shades of depravity, but none can compare to the insensitivity of Lady Bracknell, who epitomizes effrontery.

Novelist, influential literary critic, and essayist, Mary McCarthy taught English at Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, New York, and lectured at University College, University of London.

One of Oscar Wilde's acquaintances wrote of him that he could never be quite a gentleman because he dressed too well and his manners were too polished. The same criticism can be made of his art. There is something outrage in all of Wilde's work that makes one sympathize to a degree with