

The Importance of Being Earnest and Social Masks

Norbert Kohl

Norbert Kohl writes that the humor in *The Importance of Being Earnest* stems from the interplay between the seriousness of the situations and the characters' unexpected reaction to these situations. This clash of opposites, called the technique of inversion, is used to jolt the audience's expectations as the characters react frivolously to the serious emotions of love, grief, birth, and death. Kohl argues that Lady Bracknell's separation of emotion from intellect gives her an absurd perspective, as she continually focuses on superficial, rather than essential, matters. She represents the severe Victorian middle-class tradition of devotion to duty, a strict work ethic, and the hatred of idleness. Kohl maintains that the comic nature of Miss Prism also flows from an unexpected interplay, the contrast between her moral severity and the actual situation. In short, where she should be emotionally touched she lapses into moral righteousness.

Kohl suggests that Cecily and Gwendolen are characters dependent on a ritual of manners. For example, when it appears that both are engaged to the same man they mask their real feelings with exaggerated politeness and a façade of formality. According to Kohl, this artificiality permeates the play. The characters are more like puppets than actual people because they cover authentic emotional responses with the masks of social convention. Kohl argues that Wilde thus exposes the middle-class materialistic concerns and motives that lurk behind the masks.

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It is understandable that theatre critics who were used to the plays of [English playwright Sir Henry Arthur] H.A. Jones, [English dramatist Sir Arthur Wing] Pinero, [Norwegian playwright Henrik Johan] Ibsen and [Irish dramatist George Bernard] Shaw should have found themselves somewhat disorientated by such a work, and inclined to throw up their hands in helpless protest rather than accept the challenge of something quite new in the history of English comedy. The anonymous critic of *Truth*, for instance, thought that any serious review of the play would be like investigating the ingredients of a soufflé after dinner. Even the famous critic William Archer regarded this 'absolutely wilful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality'—as he called the play—as being only the product of a fantasy that 'imitates nothing, represents nothing, means nothing, is nothing'. Following a dictum of [English critic Walter] Pater's, he set it in the context of music, calling it a '*rondo capriccioso*, in which the artist's fingers run with crisp irresponsibility up and down the keyboard of life'.

How Wilde runs up and down the 'keyboard of life' may already be seen from closer inspection of the title, which is perhaps the best starting-point for any interpretation. The obvious homonymic word-play between 'Ernest' and 'Earnest' is underlined by the sub-title, which is, 'A trivial comedy for serious people'. The earnest folk to whom the play is addressed are, of course, the Victorians, for whom the epithet is highly apposite. Devotion to duty, a strict work ethic, hatred of idleness—these were characteristic of the puritanical and evangelical traditions that marked the Victorian attitude to life. . . .

The irony of Wilde's title consists in the fact that the only earnest item in the play is the name Ernest—there is little sign of seriousness in the situations or the characters. The verbal irony of the title continues logically and consistently throughout the action, with earnestness being trivialised and the name Ernest being taken seriously. Cecily and Gwendolen set so much store by the name that they make their choice of marriage partner dependent upon it. On the other hand, Lady Bracknell considers Jack's being found in a hand-bag as nothing but a cause for reproach that he should have shown such contempt for the 'ordinary decencies of family life'; she is not in the least interested in the extraordinary fate of such a founding. By focusing on this violation of the 'decencies', she reduces a potentially pathetic

situation to a mere breach of social etiquette, and life to a question of style. Gwendolen sums up the priorities that apply to this whole play: 'In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.'

Wilde opposes Victorian earnestness with a philosophy of the surface, which his sub-title denotes with the word 'trivial'. This is his conceptual counter to 'serious' and 'earnest', and carries connotations of intellectual and moral detachment from reality, concentrating on the inessential and insignificant surface of things. His view of the trivial is expressed in *De Profundis*:

The trivial in thought and action is charming. I had made it the keystone of a very brilliant philosophy expressed in plays and paradoxes.

WILDE'S COMIC TECHNIQUE

The contrast between the trivial and the serious, as expressed in the sub-title, and the punning irony of the name Ernest coupled with the quality of earnestness, prefigure the comic effect of the play. The irony and the comedy arise primarily from the continual interplay between, on the one hand, an intellectual and trivialising perspective of events and situations that seem to demand an earnest, emotional response or conformity to social propriety, and on the other hand an earnest and ponderous way of looking at things that are trivial and external. This constant clash of opposing perspectives results in the reader's or spectator's habitual expectations for ever being punctured. The method governing this continual alienation of reality by way of the artistic imagination at play is the principle of inversion. This becomes the behavioural norm, while paradox is its verbal expression. The role of the sexes, for instance, is reversed in the matter of courtship: when Jack wishes to propose to Gwendolen, he stutters to a halt, and she has to take the initiative; similarly, Algernon—so experienced in 'Bunburying'—learns that for three months, as can be proved by her diary, Cecily has already cast him as her fiancé. The comedy of this scene, however, does not reside solely in the fact that the action springs from Cecily, but also in the parody of 'love at first sight', an ever-popular romantic theme. Imagination does not follow reality, but anticipates it, in accordance with the paradoxical thesis of Vivian in 'The Decay of Lying': 'Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life.'

In this apparently weightless, light-hearted world of fantasy, where Jack wears mourning because of the death of a non-existent brother, while his friend Algernon is simultaneously pretending to be the brother as he declares his love to Cecily, the laws of Nature are flouted as blatantly as those of everyday life. Nothing is safe from the playfulness of the intellect—the emotions of love and grief, and the objective extremes of birth and death. Even these are deprived of their factuality and become subject to the whims of the subjective viewpoint, being unexpectedly transformed into malleable phenomena. When she hears from Algernon that Bunbury is dead, after the doctors had discovered that he could no longer be alive, Lady Bracknell responds:

LADY BRACKNELL: He seems to have had no great confidence in the opinion of his physicians. I am glad, however, that he made up his mind at the last to some definite course of action, and acted under proper medical advice.

What matters to Lady Bracknell is not the fact of Bunbury's death but the fact that he 'acted under proper medical advice'. Conventional expectations are thereby stood on their head, since Bunbury apparently did not benefit from this advice but simply died. It is even conceivable here that this paradox represents a satirical jibe at the deficiencies of medical practice in Wilde's day. But what matters above all to Lady Bracknell is social propriety. In a form of cross-examination satirising the conventional Victorian approach to marriage, she questions Jack about his age, income, property in town and country, political beliefs and origin. After learning, to her consternation, that he has lost both parents—which she regards as a sign of 'carelessness'—and appears to have no relations at all, as he was found in a hand-bag, she urges him 'to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over'.

LADY BRACKNELL AND SOCIAL CONVENTIONS

Lady Bracknell's worship of rank and title, respectability and social prestige makes her the classic figure of social snobbery and narrow-mindedness. She shakes her head to hear that Jack lives on the 'unfashionable side' of Belgrave Square, and in her arrogance she embodies that stratum of society which Wilde himself could never reach, however much he loved to bask in its glamour. This was the meeting-place of rigid conservatism, philistinism, and dandified aes-

theticism. In no other character is the separation of emotion from intellect, already a feature of characterisation in the earlier comedies, so consistent and so dominant as in Lady Bracknell. She regards sympathy with invalids as 'morbid', and tells Algernon to ask the sick Bunbury to avoid a relapse on Saturday if possible, as she has arranged the last dinner-party of the season for that day and would like Algernon to attend. There is a fine example of this mixture of Victorian conventionality and aesthetic alienation in the scene where Jack kneels in order to propose, and Lady Bracknell enters unexpectedly:

LADY BRACKNELL: Mr Worthing. Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture. It is most indecorous.

GWENDOLEN: Mamma! [*He tries to rise; she restrains him.*] I must beg you to retire. This is no place for you. Besides, Mr Worthing has not quite finished yet.

LADY BRACKNELL. Finished what, may I ask?

GWENDOLEN: I am engaged to Mr Worthing, mamma. [They rise together].

LADY BRACKNELL: Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. 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 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 . . .

Lady Bracknell does not ask why Jack is kneeling, and she is not concerned with her daughter's feelings towards him. All that matters to her is the visitor's extraordinary posture, and her sole purpose is to restore social decorum. What is basically a serious situation is rendered ridiculous by the formal perspective through which she views it, and the visual comedy of the tableau is underlined by the rigid formality of the language. The dignified stiltedness of Lady Bracknell's dialogue effectively shatters one's expectations of a spontaneous emotional reaction. Jack's kneeling position is viewed neither as the unbearable servility of a potential marriage candidate, nor as a symbolic, pre-marital exchange of roles, but it simply arouses her repugnance because it clashes with her idea of what is 'decorous'. The absurdity of this perspective, which concentrates on the surface and not on the essence, serves to throw a satirical light on the Victorian convention of parents deciding on their children's choice of partner. All too often the daughter's emotions counted for less than the financial situation of the wooer, and here as elsewhere in the play Lady Bracknell be-

comes the mouthpiece for such conventions. When later on, for instance, Jack reveals that his ward Cecily has a fortune of about £130,000, Lady Bracknell suddenly finds Cecily a 'most attractive lady'.

MISS PRISM'S EMOTIONAL DETACHMENT

A character like Lady Bracknell, whose urbanity barely disguises her relationship to the matchmaker of classical comedy, stands out as a comic figure primarily because she combines Victorian conventions with aesthetic attitudes. The latter throw into relief the deficiencies of the former, so that in laughing at her, the predominantly middle-class Victorian audience could scarcely avoid also laughing at themselves. There is a similar incongruity of perspective to be observed in Miss Prism, Cecily's governess and the authoress of a lost three-volume novel 'of more than usually revolting sentimentality'. Unlike Lady Bracknell she brings a more moral tone to her insistence on propriety. Her Christian name, Laetitia, stands in ironic contrast to the stiff conformity of her conduct and the sententious nature of her somewhat affected language—already hinted at by her surname, which suggests a combination of 'prim' and 'prissy'. The superficiality of her ostentatious respectability is evidenced by her response to the news of Ernest's death: 'What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it.' The paradox of this reaction lies in the fact that she regards Ernest's dissolute life style as being responsible for his death, and so death should now inspire him to a greater insight into his own wrongdoing. Just how a dead man is supposed to see his own death as a punishment, and profit from the insight, is left unclear. The triviality of her attitude lies in the grotesque clash between her moral severity and the actual situation. There is a similar reaction when Jack asks her to identify the hand-bag in which he was found:

MISS PRISM [calmly]: It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days. Here is the stain on the 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 am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years.

While Jack waits in great suspense for her answer, she pro-

ceeds to go into all the minute details when, in the context, one would simply have expected her to say whether or not this really is the bag she lost twenty-eight years ago in Victoria Station. And even after she has at last confirmed that the bag is hers, she does not say a single word about the all-important fact that this clears up the mystery of Jack's origins. The 'injury', the stain and the initials are not regarded as clues to the existential significance of the bag, but merely evoke memories of the past. Jack's agony of suspense is in stark contrast to Miss Prism's total disinterest in the fate of the baby she once deposited in the bag. Just as Ernest's death served only to inspire her to moral sentimentousness, so too does this hand-bag episode leave her emotionally quite untouched—she seems to have completely shut out any sense of personal responsibility for what happened. Thus she trivialises a serious situation, ignoring both the fate of the child and her own part in that fate, and concentrating all her attention on one superficial aspect of the affair, which is the identity of the bag. This alone is worthy of 'earnestness'.

THE ARTIFICIALITY OF CECILY AND GWENDOLEN

Not all the characters succeed in replacing emotional involvement with intellectual detachment as completely as does Miss Prism; nor do they all conform to the social conventions of propriety as perfectly as Lady Bracknell. The long dialogue between Cecily and Gwendolen in Act 2, when they both realise that they appear to be engaged to the same man, is one instance where the protective coating of perfect manners is seen merely to be a cover for 'that dreadful universal thing called human nature'.

CECILY [*Advancing to meet her*]. Pray let me introduce myself to you. My name is Cecily Cardew.

GWENDOLEN: Cecily Cardew? [*Moving to her and shaking hands*.] What a very sweet name! Something tells me that we are going to be great friends. I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong.

CECILY: How nice of you to like me so much after we have known each other a comparatively short time. Pray sit down.

GWENDOLEN: [*Still standing up*]. I may call you Cecily, may I not?

CECILY: With pleasure!

GWENDOLEN: And you will always call me Gwendolen, won't you?

CECILY: If you wish

GWENDOLEN: Then that is all quite settled, is it not?

CECILY: I hope so [*A pause. They both sit down together*].

Then they discover that they are apparently engaged to the same man:

CECILY: Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into an engagement? How dare you? 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 obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.

The excessive affection of the first dialogue is already rather suspect as it is so unmotivated. One would in fact have expected Gwendolen to be rather more reserved and indeed surprised to find such a pretty young girl in her fiancé's house. And shortly before meeting Gwendolen, Cecily had presumed that she must be 'one of the many good elderly women who are associated with Uncle Jack in some of his philanthropic work in London'. Both have good cause to be suspicious, but they mask their feelings with exaggerated politeness.

The exchange of elaborate courtesies is like a ritual whose ceremonial character is underlined by the symmetry of the movements. Cecily and Gwendolen move towards each other, shake hands, stand for a moment or two, and then sit down together. Once they have sat, both the physical and the verbal ceremonies of introduction are completed. In these symmetrical movements, which are also to be observed elsewhere in the play, [literary critic] Otto Reinert detects 'a kind of dance, slow and elaborate, a visual image of the artifice of sophisticated courtship and a major device in the play's esthetic distancing'. Gradually, ineradicable differences emerge, but at first the two young ladies retain their polite tone. Their adherence to the formalities laboriously holds up a façade which threatens at any moment to collapse. The stage directions reveal a formal parallel between their actions and their words. After Cecily has revealed that she is engaged to Ernest Worthing, they both rise 'quite politely' (Gwendolen) and 'very politely' (Cecily), and produce their diaries in order to prove their engagements. The tempo of the dialogue slows down: Gwendolen speaks 'meditatively', Cecily 'thoughtfully and sadly', but then it accelerates

through such key words as 'entanglement' and 'entrapped', until it reaches a climax with the passage quoted. The ritual of manners is now denounced as a masquerade, though the masks are only laid aside for a brief moment. Gwendolen's barbed comment on their different social spheres wounds through satire and not through crude insults or ranting complaints. The entrance of servants immediately exercises a 'restraining influence' on the two girls, who then proceed to talk in the most formal terms about town and country life, while nevertheless firing little arrows at each other through the formality.

The symmetrical gestures and movements express an artificiality that permeates the whole play and indeed links it together. It becomes an artistic mode of alienating reality, with the characters at times appearing almost mechanical, like puppets rather than people. As well as shaping the dramatic situation, as in the rivalry and reconciliation of Acts 2 and 3, for instance, or in the final tableau of the three couples embracing, the symmetry and parallelism also shape the dialogue, which abounds in repetitions and inversions. When the two young ladies realize that the supposed Ernest is actually Algernon, and Ernest alias Jack is really John, they react so uniformly that they no longer seem to be individuals:

GWENDOLEN: My poor wounded Cecily!

CECILY: My sweet wronged Gwendolen!

This reduction of individuality, and hence of possible variation, is conveyed by the syntactic parallel which has a comic effect as described by Bergson: 'du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant'. The process is taken one step further in the chorus at the beginning of Act 3:

[*Gwendolen beats time with uplifted finger*]

GWENDOLEN AND CECILY [Speaking together]: Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!

JACK AND ALGERNON [Speaking together]: Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon.

MOTIVES BEHIND THE SOCIAL MASKS

Of all the formal techniques, however, the most potent in this play is the paradox. As the stylistic pendant to the construal principle of inversion, it systematises the counter to

orthodox opinion. It arises from the desire to disconcert the partner by way of the unexpected formulation. Effect is all, and at times one has the impression of being confronted by perfect rhetorical specimens, each little gem exquisitely prepared and mounted. But the paradoxes cannot simply be dismissed as cheap effects, for in many instances they serve to explode established conventions, thereby exposing to view those aspects of reality that had hitherto been cloaked by existing norms. In Act 1, for instance, Lady Bracknell and Algernon are talking about the widowed Lady Harbury, whose husband died fairly recently:

LADY BRACKNELL: I'm sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger.

ALGERNON: I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief.

The reader or spectator is not surprised that Lady Harbury has been altered by her husband's death, but he certainly does not expect her to have become younger or to have hair that has turned 'quite gold from grief'. The conventional cliché of the grieving widow, ageing and with even more grey hair than before, is quite shattered by Wilde, who depicts a rejuvenated woman 'who seems . . . to be living entirely for pleasure now'. The substitution of 'gold' for the expected 'grey' is particularly effective, for the unconventional and unnatural change of hair colour may also allude to the inheritance which the pleasure-loving widow is now enjoying. Such paradoxes illustrate vividly how social decorum is to be seen merely as a mask of conformity, and they also bring out the true motives that lurk behind the mask. Lady Harbury's inability to mourn, thanks to the golden days that now lie ahead of her, may be seen as a parallel to Lady Bracknell's evaluation of Jack and Algernon as candidates for the hands of Gwendolen and Cecily—their suitability being judged in accordance with their incomes. Emotions such as grief and love have no place in either case. Materialistic considerations are all-important, and morality is reduced to a matter of business.