

Dandyism in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*

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Abstract: In this essay, taking one of Oscar Wilde's plays "The Importance of Being Earnest" as the research object, the perspective of discourse analysis will be employed. The aim is to discuss and analyze how dandyism is embodied in the characters' language and actions that engraved in diverse characters in "The Importance of Being Earnest". Besides, the pragmatic use of elaborate politeness that facilitates to demonstrate and critique Victorian dandyism and social conventions will be presented.

Keywords: Dandyism, Discourse analysis, Earnest, Individualism

1. Introduction

The Importance of Being Earnest, A Trivial Comedy for Serious People is a play written by Oscar Wilde in the early 1890s. According to the British critic William Archer^[1], wave after wave of laughter "curling and foaming round the theatre" when this play was put on stage. The play's title is a play on words, "being Earnest" presents a contrast between one of the character's assumed name Earnest and the actual meaning of this word. It tells a story about four young people who are passionately in love and want to get married, while facing up with the obstacle of society. It is actually a contemporary story. As a vivid example of high comedy, witty dialogues play a critical role in the clever artificial coincidences in this play. There are many witty dialogues in the play. In addition, high comedy often focuses on humorous revelation of individual folly, raising social and moral issues through diverse characters' behavior and situation.

This paper is going to explore how dialogues are used, particularly, to build intriguing personalities and maintain shared understandings of social classness, to see how characters use linguistic interactions to scaffold the plot and engage in moral critique. On the other hand, for Oscar Wilde, dandyism was a philosophy and an attitude toward life^[2]. Dandyism functions as a rationale for the actions and attitudes of his characters, which has been represented in his plays as the basis for the thoughts and conducts of diverse characters. Since Wilde viewed the dandy as individualist who demonstrates his individualism and aristocratic superiority with wits and elegance, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, dandyism is embodied in dialogues and actions of those sophisticated and often fashionably dressed characters. In this play, the audience needs to be knowledgeable of certain cultural references. Dialogues in plays are authentic and complex, and may have great potential to have an impact on the way the readers and audience engage in comprehending sociocultural issues.

Furthermore, the pragmatic use of elaborate politeness also facilitates to demonstrate and critique Victorian dandyism and social conventions. It is this subtle merging of manner and form that helps to make *The Importance of Being Earnest* one of the greatest masterpieces of the theater as well as shape the development of the theater in 19th century.

2. The Dandy Jack and Algernon

If all values come from the self, then the moral standards of others are irrelevant to him, he can abuse or disregard them at will^[1]. Jack Worthing, one of the major characters, is seemingly a respectable rich country gentleman. As Cecily's guardian, Jack reckons that "he has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects", thus he needs a different identity to entertain himself without much moral restraints in the town, that's why he created a non-existing brother "Ernest" who always "gets into the most dreadful scrapes". When his friend Algernon questions whether Jack has told Gwendolen the truth about him "being Ernest" in town, Jack responds in a "very patronizing manner": "My dear fellow, the truth isn't

quite the soft of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl.” He is fully aware of the fact that he is lying and he does not have the slightest intention of telling the truth to the woman he claims to love. Later, when his deception is discovered, he “hesitatingly” explains in a manner of confession, “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.”

As a matter of fact, Jack has been living a double-life, Jack in the country and “Ernest” in town, for quite a while. He created a convincing story of a non-existing persona that is his prodigal brother “Ernest”, which provides sufficient excuses for him to step into and out of his double-divided life anytime he wants. At the end of the play, it is finally revealed that Jack’s actual name is Ernest, he can only exclaim, “Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?”

The change of Jack’s attitude indicates that Jack is rather self-centered by making the boundaries of his own personality as the boundaries of acceptable social reality so that he can protect himself from the moral demands of the society, which makes the ignorance of his social responsibility and moral standards reasonable. There is nothing that is intrinsically wrong with the life in town or life in the country. It is the social roles that they play deprive them of their pleasures in life. Jack is the guardian to Cecily, and respectable gentleman and Justice of the Peace in the country, therefore he cannot have any pleasures. Algernon is nephew to Aunt Augusta and obliged to attend her dinner parties, therefore he can’t have any pleasures. And they both want to escape their social roles and create a new identity for themselves, therefore a new name.

A fictitious friend called “Bunbury” who has “extraordinary bad health” has been made up by Algernon, as a ready excuse to avoid his social duties and responsibilities by claiming to have appointments with him. Thus Bunbury and bunburying represent deception and escapism. The detail of Algernon eating up the cucumber sandwiches that he says are prepared for Lady Bracknell serves the purpose to present his hedonistic attitude towards life. Although it is not a serious form of hedonism, only a form of hedonism that the audience can laugh about. It tells us about his selfishness, as well as his “rules are for other people, not for me” attitude, basically, his “morality are for other people” attitude, as we can see in his talk about the lower orders setting a good moral example, but not he or the upper class.

3. Cecily and Gwendolen’s individualism

Cecily settled an engagement with Jack’s brother “Ernest” in the absence of this “Ernest” on the 14th of February and she bought herself a ring in the name of “Ernest”, she even made promise to always wear it as a true lover’s knot. All the conducts took place before she first met “Ernest” which actually is Algernon. This imagined romance has been recorded in her diary with details. In addition, Cecily carefully kept all the letters that “Algernon wrote to her”. Cecily is immersed in her own affection because of her girlish dream of loving someone whose name is Ernest. Cecily, so does Gwendolen, firmly believes that “there is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence”. Cecily pities “any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest”, while Gwendolen knows she is in love with “Ernest” the moment Algernon mentioned that he has a friend called “Ernest”. Gwendolen attaches great importance to “style”, not sincerity. In other words, they both think the superficial is more important than the deep truth.

It is also an example of what Wilde says is the general principle behind this play - to treat the trivial seriously, and the serious with studied triviality. The state of being completely involved in their own feelings toward the name of “Ernest” presented intense individualism which Wilde intended to demonstrate, that is, these dandiacal individualists seem reluctant to admit the existence of others, or at least neglect to react to other individuals’ emotions.

4. Miss Prism’s individualism

The prim governess Miss Prism is another dandiacal individualist character that cannot be ignored in this play. At the climactic moment in the play, when the secret of Jack’s birth is about to be revealed, Miss Prism focuses her attention on the minor injury or stain on her long-lost bag. It is unexpected in such a circumstance, although the reader and the audience may laugh at the incongruity of her remark which is obviously lack of humanity, Miss Prism’s silly and selfish preoccupation with the handbag coincidentally echoes Gwendolen and Cecily’s response of Jack’s birth secret, Gwendolen comments with

“this suspense is terrible. I hope it will last”, while Cecily “hopes Algernon has not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time”, because she defines that as “hypocrisy”. Both of whom happily and unremittingly focus their feelings just on the name Ernest before they get to know who Ernest really is, they pay no attention to the dramatic change of Jack’s life. Wilde’s portrait of these dandyists puts the most commonsense actions of daily life on the stage, with the one important difference that the common sense has been left out from their language interactions.

In this play, there is something like real life in terms of the motives and the conducts of those characters, such as, dandyists Jack and Algernon’s double lives, Lady Bracknell’s soul-torturing questions toward Jack, Miss Prim’s recollection of losing the baby and so on; However, their interactions keep challenging the audience’s expectations. It is noted that the familiar materials of life have been rearranged in a strange pattern. It is this combination of the natural and the absurd which causes laughter from the reader and audience. Congreve (1696)’s definition of humor is that “A singular and unavoidable manner of doing or saying anything, peculiar and natural to one man only, by which his speech and actions are distinguished from those of other men” [3]. Therefore, if a self-centered person says things that are typically selfish and self-focused, then this is humorous.

Walkley (1895) stated that “the necessary condition for laughter is the simultaneous recognition of the absurd and the natural in the thing laughed at” [4]. For instance, Jack Worthing, who is Jack in the country and “Ernest” in town, determines to announce the accidental death of his imaginary brother “Ernest”, and arrives at his country house in mourning apparel. Just seeing him in this outfit makes the audience laugh because they immediately realize what he is going to do, and the audience just saw his friend come into the house as “Ernest” who will now be pronounced dead. In this context, it is acknowledged that Jack’s behavior is absurd; but on the other hand, it is natural, considering his plan as well as the development of the plot. Later, finding that his sweetheart only loves him because his name is Ernest, he determines to be christened as “Ernest”, and anxiously asks Mr. Chasuble whether he is likely to catch cold in the process, for his concerning of “dying of the same illness with his imagined brother and making it a family issue”.

Elaborate politeness [5] has been employed as a significant strategy by Wilde to present humor in the portrait of those dandyism characters. Given that these leading characters in this play are dandyists from upper-class or rich family, they still have to follow Victorian social requirements in daily social life. When Gwendolen and Cecily find out that they are both engaged with “Ernest”, the tension between the two women is on a state of touch and go. However, Gwendolen manages to reply to Cecily’s offer of tea “with elaborate politeness”, though she fails to get what she wants. This type of discourse frequently occurs in the play, which effectively facilitate to raise the audience’s laughter. After Lady Bracknell’s visit to Lady Harbury who just lost her husband, Lady Bracknell makes comment: “she looks quite twenty years younger”, and Algernon chimes in with “I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief”. It seems that grief from losing husband and “living entirely for pleasure” are not logically compatible, yet, based on the shared knowledge and attitudes of Victorian social norm between Lady Bracknell and Algernon, their conversation make sense as well as produce humorous effect.

In the context of this play, social convention of politeness also defines what is proper and what is improper between upper-class and lower-class. When Algernon asks Lane: “did you hear what I was playing?” The loyal servant of Algernon, Lane, answers to his lord: “I didn’t think it polite to listen, Sir”. This response presents a reversal of the audience’s expectations, which constitutes a flout of the Grice maxim of quality [6] which is concerned with truth-telling. The implicature of Lane’s response might be a refusal to point out the flaw of his master’s performance because of Lane’s concern of not being polite. This part of discourse enables Wilde to sabotage the social system and the cultural norm of polite behavior of servants, making the norm the butt of the joke.

Additionally, high comedy requires some intelligence on the part of the readers and the audience to appreciate the humor. As Wilde remarks that “truth is never pure and rarely simple” [7], he has given us a unique perspective to look into a society’s shallowness through direct exposure and ridicule of the idleness, vanities as well as the wits and spirits of those already graced by fortune. He also demonstrates the weaknesses of dandyism in Victorian times on the stage by manipulating seemingly simple but humorous discourses. Since humorous effect has been achieved when the author and the audience share the same social norms and values, the critique and reflection of Victorian social conventions have been constructed with irony, that’s why this comedy is a great success. To some extent, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is quite ahead of the times. Wilde treats man and woman as equals. For example, Jack says he will not do “bunburying” if he is married to Gwendolyn, but Algy says “then she will do”.

Wilde does not employ double standards towards man and woman in this play. In addition, women

in this play often take the initiative lead in the development of relationship or the dominant position in a relationship. This play also typifies the way high comedy explores human social behavior, combining social politesse with aggressively witty banter between characters from different social classes, which we can see from the interesting question and answer plot of Lady Bracknell and Jack Worthing. Jack says that he smokes, and Lady Bracknell says she is pleased and “man should always have an occupation of some kind”. The way Lady Bracknell talks about “smoking” as if it were something as serious as a decent occupation. Wilde makes fun of the idleness of the rich who treat the trivial seriously. Then Lady Bracknell says she is pleased to hear that Jack knows nothing. Usually, knowledgeable people are considered respectful in a civilised society. Here Wilde employs this reversal to make fun of the ignorance of the rich and the upper class, and the fact that they take pride in their ignorance.

What’s more, this part of interaction pushes forward the drastic change of Lady Bracknell’s attitude from satisfying with Jack’s wealth to his origin as an adopted child, in which Wilde deliberately exposes the stereotypical portraits of marriage and society in Victorian times. And Wilde jokes about marriage by the voice of Lady Bracknell, saying only people who know nothing would have enough courage to venture into marriage, which will also elicit a chuckle and deep thought of the audience even in modern times. Figure 1 is from the live play *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the Vaudeville Theatre in London.



Figure 1: Stage photo from a filmed live at the Vaudeville Theatre, London, 2015.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes dandyism in the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde through the characters’ language and actions. Witty dialogues play a critical role in the clever artificial coincidences in this play. They are good examples of dandyism. It seems that there is a little knife in Wilde’s witty language which enables the contemporary audience to feel tingly and alive. Oscar Wilde is a modernist, instead of looking back to the Victorian period, he was looking forward to the 20th century.

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