

Sincere triviality: the comedy of oscar wilde



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Oscar Wilde creates a successful, complex comedy by maintaining consistent conflict and contradiction in the action, dialogue, and characters of *The Importance of Being Ernest*. Dramatic or comedic action is essentially exaggerated conflict. Wilde preserves the conflict between what is and what should be important in every interaction. That which is most trivial is treated with the most sincerity, and vice versa. This reversal is his greatest contradiction and fundamental tool as a writer of comedies. By portraying the upper class, a group of people characteristically trivial in their social conventions, his exaggerations are close enough to reality to be convincing. Etiquette places importance on petty details that seem even sillier when they replace more important concerns. This does not mean, however, that his play is restricted to social commentary. He is using the inherent triviality of social intercourse as a dramatic vehicle. In the first meeting of Cecily and Gwendolen, the conversation and stage directions provide both contradiction and conflict. It is when they should be the most emotional that they are the most restrained. When the two women discover that they are both engaged to Ernest Worthing, Gwendolen responds “ quite politely, rising” and Cecily follows “ very politely, rising.” They speak “ meditatively,” or “ thoughtfully and sadly,” about becoming enemies and being lied to by their shared lover. They remain within the boundaries of politesse, becoming more polite as they get increasingly angry, referring to each other as “ Miss Cardew” and “ Miss Fairfax.” Just when it seems there will be an emotional confrontation, tea is served and calmly shared. What is important when Cecily offers tea is that Gwendolen hates her now, calling her “ detestable girl!” However, it is clear that what she feels should be important to her is her social obligation, as she says “ but I require tea!” (1655)After Jack and Algernon have

confessed their crimes, and lost their engagements, they calmly discuss the disaster they have caused. They argue mildly about “Bunburying,” and criticize each other briefly. What sparks any significant emotion or action is not the loss of love, but the loss of muffins! Most of the conversation is dominated by arguments over the proper time and way to eat. Although Jack says “I wanted to be engaged to Gwendolen...I love her,” (1657) he does not budge at her departure. Immediately after, he is moved to rise and “[take] muffins” from Algernon, who in response rises and “seizes the muffin dish from Jack.” (1658) Their conversation about any significant turn of events, such as their christenings or the women they’ve lost, is cold and reasonable. The issues of tea cake and muffins, however, are marked by action as they rise and fight over a dish! The play moves forward in a series of parallel situations, each equally similar and opposite. Parallelism and repetition make blatant contradiction more obvious by simplifying any situation. The parallelism is in the identical series of statements or ideas in dialogue and action. Opposite ideas are more clearly opposite when presented in exactly the same words or actions. Characters constantly say exactly the same thing back and forth, a clear remark upon the conflict inherent in language. Two people can use or interpret the same thing differently, and this provides a typical comic effect. Repetition reveals the boundaries and complexities of language and interaction, and provides for obvious contradictions. Cecily and Gwendolen repeat things both individually and between each other. In the beginning of the scene, Gwendolen proclaims: “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.” (1653) Moments later, after Cecily has threatened her engagement, she contradicts herself with utter sincerity,

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as she says “ from the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariable right.” (1656) This reduces her statements to a silly and comedic level. They repeat whole phrases back and forth in conversation as though each were unique. When Gwendolen rises and says “ I think there must be some slight error. Mr. Ernest Worthing is engaged to me,” Cecily responds by rising and saying “ I am afraid you must be under some misconception. Ernest proposed to me exactly ten minutes ago.” (1654) Repetition is more excessive in scene two as the two men interact for lines at a time using the same words and phrases as questions and answers, attacks and defense, or simple conversation. Their entire mode of discourse is based in echoing each other in utter seriousness. One example is the initial discussion of muffin-eating. “ Eat [or eating] muffins” is repeated five times in four lines of dialogue. (1658) Wilde chooses words that are especially trite, and in themselves sound funny to repeat. He even creates words with a silly ring, such as “ Bunbury,” for this effect. Note the serious treatment and excessive repetition of the nonsense word in these few lines: JACK: This ghastly state of things is what you call Bunburying, I suppose? ALGERNON: Yes, and a perfectly wonderful Bunbury it is. The most wonderful Bunbury I have ever had in my life. JACK: Well, you’ve no right whatsoever to Bunbury here. ALGERNON: That is absurd. One has a right to Bunbury anywhere one chooses. Every serious Bunburyist knows that. JACK: Serious Bunburyist! Good Heavens! ALGERNON: ...I happen to be serious about Bunburying. JACK: ...your friend Bunbury is quite exploded. (1657) Wilde has taken an imagined name and made it into a functional noun and verb. What adds to the comedy is the absolute sincerity of this

conversation. This inappropriate tone adds yet more contradiction and is thus extremely successful as a comic effect. As a writer of comedies, Wilde also uses typical comedic tools to keep the story funny. His use of language is witty, and he often relies on wordplay for humor. When Gwendolen says “[p]ersonally I cannot understand how anybody manages to exist in the country...[t]he country always bores me to death,” it seems a simple and common statement. It becomes funny with a play on words when Cecily responds “[a]h! This is what the newspapers call agricultural depression, is it not? I believe the aristocracy are suffering very much from it just at present.” As the footnote explains, the epidemic of “ agricultural depression” she is referring to was that “ landowners (including aristocrats) had been suffering severe losses because of adverse economic conditions.” (1655) The audience thus reconsiders the line before in a more humorous light, and the comedy is increased through wordplay. Pacing is aided by the constant sense of approaching disaster. The play moves forward as the characters steadily realize crucial information already supplied to the audience. The action speeds up with a sense of suspense, as these inevitable revelations are stalled. The meeting of Gwendolen and Cecily is one of many highly anticipated situations. Both have been separately introduced and simultaneously deceived. This will bring them together and force them apart, conflicting in its role in the story and creating a comic effect by causing confusion. From the moment they begin to talk, one is waiting for someone to say “ Ernest.” Cecily first refers to Jack as “ Mr. Worthing,” and Gwendolen’s disaster is avoided. (1653) It is Gwendolen who finally refers to “ Ernest” in praising the man who is actually Jack. As expected, Cecily notices and replies “ I beg your pardon, Gwendolen, did you say Ernest?...Oh,

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but it is not Mr. Ernest Worthing who is my guardian. It is his brother his elder brother." Wilde continues to delay the inevitable, as Gwendolen remarks " Ernest never mentioned to me that he had a brother," sparking a discussion about these nonexistent brothers. She even projects the next turn of events in saying " It would have been terrible if any cloud had come across a friendship like ours." (1654) Soon after, the long-awaited discovery of parallel deception occurs and is more effective due to its delay. Beyond the witty use of language and pacing, Wilde understands the importance of visual comedy. He uses action and props to punctuate his jokes and to develop characters. With only three acts and therefore limited change of scene, Wilde must create action on stage. But his understanding of visual communication goes well beyond simple necessity. He is able to make subtle distinctions using certain movements on stage. The physical behavior of the women and the men is very different. While the two women seem slightly frustrated in their restrained movement, the men are surprisingly childish and spontaneous. If one considers only the events of each scene, it would seem that the men have more control in their ability to deceive the women. Their physical interaction proves just the opposite. The two women are constantly sitting and rising, one character following another or both acting simultaneously. Sitting accompanies the delay of action. Comfortable in a state of ignorance, Cecily and Gwendolen repose. They " both sit down together" upon deciding that they are friends. (1653) Sitting is also a form of restraint, forced just when they want to be active, and creating a conflict between the image and events of a scene. Rising accompanies progress or emotion, as when Gwendolen reacts to the news of Cecily's engagement. (1654) The frustration of senseless convention is apparent in their discomfort

during tea. Just when “ Cecily is about to retort,” she is reminded of convention by the entrance of servants. It is clear that the “ presence of servants exercises a restraining influence, under which both girls chafe,” since they obviously should be standing. This conflict is reinforced when “ Gwendolen bites her lip, and beats her foot nervously with her parasol,” and Cecily rebels with “ elaborate politeness,” asking the proper questions both “ sweetly” and “ severely.” Gwendolen finally “ rises in indignation,” unable to bear the discomfort, and followed immediately by Cecily. (1655)The action in the second scene surrounds the muffin dish. The two men resemble little boys in their stubborn competition. The muffins go back and forth, objectifying the power struggle in their petty conversation. This scene comes soon after the womens’ tea, and is a direct contrast of gender characteristics. Gwendolen avoided commenting on obviously inappropriate action, displaying her capacity for patience and restraint. But Jack complains the moment Algernon’s actions offend his sensibility. Immediately after Algernon “ begins to eat muffins,” (1657) Jack remarks upon his inappropriate behavior, and they proceed to discuss the action occurring on stage. Action is a crucial tool among many in Wilde’s characterization. In his characters he continues to present the conflict of convention and reality. In the second scene, during conversation, the men actually describe the assumed characteristics of each woman. Jack refers to Cecily as the “ sweet, simple, innocent girl,” one would expect to find in the country. Algernon describes the urban Gwendolen as a “ brilliant, clever, [and] thoroughly experienced young lady.” (1657) However, when considering their behavior in the first scene, it would appear that neither woman fits her stereotype. The comparison of country and city yields unconventional results, once again

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contradicting expectation and normalcy. This is revealed in Cecily's ability to triumph over convention. She uses the tools of her restriction, revolting with tea and cake. Despite the shared language and behavior, Algernon and Jack are clearly distinguished in their scene. It becomes clear that Algernon is more childish, but extremely witty. Jack seems more sincere and mature, almost as a scolding adult with phrases such as "good heavens! I suppose a man may eat his own muffins in his own garden," and "Algernon! I have already told you to go. I don't want you here. Why don't you go!" (1658) The Importance of Being Ernest is not simply a social commentary or amusing satire. Its message is more complex. Wilde's treatment of characters interacting and experiencing inner conflict in a humorous way presents a distinct vision of morality. The Importance of Being Ernest is more than a descriptive title. It is at the core of his perception of human interaction. The word "ernest," has obvious significance in its meaning. The fundamental sincerity with which each character plays into ridiculous and humiliating situations is more than a comic strategy. It is Wilde's interpretation of human nature.