

Biography of noel coward

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Few writers have invested as much care into the personal image they publicly project as did Noel Coward. As a result, within popular culture the name "Coward" has become synonymous with a certain English style: the elegant silk dressing gown, the cigarette holder, charm, wit, clipped phrases, upper-class accents, and sex appeal. His plays reinforced this image, and Coward was not averse to audiences confusing him with his leading male heterosexual characters.

Coward's homosexuality is now well understood, as is the fact that his public persona was a careful construction designed to hide his homosexuality from the general public. He was, for example, unimpressed with Oscar Wilde, calling him "a silly, conceited, inadequate creature . . . a dreadful self-deceiver" (The Noel Coward Diaries, 135). Although by the 1960s Coward was writing openly about the Homosexual Bill in Parliament in both his diaries and his play *Shadows of the Evening*, he failed to realize that his whole mannerism--the silk dressing gown, the cigarette holder, the raised eyebrow--was deeply artificial and camp.

In addition to the creation of an immensely enjoyable persona, Coward's homosexuality may have also led him to the acidly witty exposure of society characteristic of so many of his plays and the comedy of manners (Lahr). He well understood society's double standards and knew exactly how they might best be exposed through language. However, his success lay not with the epigrammatic phrase, but rather with the timing so that ordinary phrases become witty, hilarious, hysterical, or loaded with desperation. The recent revival of Coward in London, labeled by some critics as Coward for the nineties, attests to Coward's enduring qualities.

To a certain extent he ignored modernism and sweeping changes in the theater, preferring instead to perfect the comedy of manners. Yet his sparse but witty dialogue that relies on situation and moment, his consciousness of language as a weapon that can damage, and the gap between the grace of the language and what people actually do to one another ensure that Coward is more than merely an entertaining period comedy writer. Even Coward's birth date of 16 December 1899 seems suspiciously auspicious, falling at the end of an old century, and early on Coward appeared determined to embody the new century.

He was born into a middle-class suburb in Teddington, Middlesex, and not into the world of cocktails and dressing gowns that his plays were to celebrate. His devoted mother Violet had married a piano salesman, Arthur, from a musical family, and she adored the theater and certainly passed that on to her son. With her encouragement, Noel took acting lessons at the age of ten in Miss Janet Thomas's Dancing Academy, and in September, 1911 he auditioned for his first part in *The Goldfish*.

The year 1911 saw the beginning of his relationship with Charles Hawtrey, one of the great Edwardian actor-managers, when Noel first appeared in *Hawtrey The Great Name*. Hawtrey cast him in a series of plays: *The Great Name*, *Where the Rainbow Ends*, *A Little Fowl Play*, and *The Saving Grace*. Between 1911 and 1917 Coward appeared in a number of plays and quickly learned to appreciate the pleasure of an audience, which, he claimed, launched him on his writing career. He was finally drafted into the army in 1918, but his tubercular tendency and neurasthenia ended his army career after a few short months.

Between 1918 and 1920 Coward survived by acting in a few small roles and writing stories for magazines and song lyrics. Early success came with *I'll Leave It to You*, a vehicle he wrote for himself and Esme Wynne-Tyson staged in Manchester and London. Critics agreed that a new talent had emerged. At the age of twenty-four, Coward confirmed this with *The Vortex*. Coward was hailed as a sensational talent. He shocked audiences with the subject matter of the play, but those who got beyond shock appreciated Coward's talent for writing. He seemed to epitomize the age's need to live life at a fast rate.

His early success was confirmed with *Hay Fever*, produced in 1925, and *Easy Virtue*. Coward's finest play, *Private Lives*, written, like so many others, at high speed and as a vehicle for his dear friend Gertrude Lawrence, opened the 1930s. During this decade Coward wrote his finest work. In 1931 he wrote *Cavalcade*, in 1932, *Design for Living*, in 1935, ten one-act plays in *Tonight at 8: 30*, and in 1939, *This Happy Breed*. During this decade he also acted as a somewhat unsuccessful spy and more successful patriot. In 1940 he toured Australia for the armed forces and in 1941 toured New Zealand.

In that same year *Blithe Spirit* was produced, and he wrote the screenplay for *In Which We Serve*. During the early 1940s Coward enjoyed success with films. In 1943 he produced *This Happy Breed*; in 1944 he produced *Blithe Spirit*; also in 1944 he wrote the screenplay for *Brief Encounter*, based on *Still Life*, a play from the ten in *Tonight at 8: 30*, and the film was produced in 1945. With the end of the war Coward's popularity declined. His musical *Pacific 1860* was not successful and was followed by the equally

unsuccessful *Peace in Our Time in Our Time*, written in 1946 and produced in 1947.

These failures continued through the 1950s with the musical *Ace of Clubs* in 1950 and the plays *Relative Values* in 1951 and *Quadrille* in 1952. In 1953 his career took a new shift when he performed as a cabaret entertainer at *Cafe de Paris*. In 1954 he wrote *Nude with Violin* and moved first to Bermuda and then in 1959 to Switzerland. During the late 1950s and 1960s Coward once more enjoyed success with a production of *Waiting in the Wings* in 1959, the musical *Sail Away*, and an attack on the new drama written by Coward himself in 1961 for *The Sunday Times*. In 1964 *Hay Fever* was revived and directed by Coward at the National Theatre.

His last appearance on the West End stage came in 1966 with *Suite in Three Keys*. In 1970 Coward was knighted, and there followed in 1972 a revue in London named *Cowardy Custard* and *Oh! Coward* in Toronto, which reached Broadway in 1973. Coward died of a heart attack in 1973 at his retreat in Jamaica. This play, dealing with a mother's affair with a young man the same age as her son, and a son addicted to drugs, launched Coward's career. Both characters long to be adored, and both promise to change at the end of the play and give up their respective vices.

Although the Lord Chamberlain almost refused the play a license, Coward managed to obtain one by persuading the Lord Chamberlain that the play was really a moral tract. Agate noted that Coward lifted the play from disagreeable to "philosophic comment," but complained that "the third act is too long" (Mander and Mitchenson, 69). Hastings commented firmly that this was a "dustbin of a play" (Morley 83). Nevertheless, most critics praised

the play, especially those in America such as the reviewers for the New York World, the New York Post, and the New York Tribune, who called it " the season's best new play" (Cole 47).

Later critics such as Lahr (18-26) and Gray (34-41) still praised the play for the literary leap Coward exhibited. The 1952 revival was set in the 1920s and received mixed praise: the London Daily Mail complained about its " frantic piano-playing at every crisis" but noted that " the wit still sparkles and that final hysterical scene between the son and the mother with a lover of just his own age has lost little of its old dramatic sting" (Mander and Mitchenson 21-22). Coward's finest play, *Private Lives*, claims no political message, and each element is fully resolved in this beautifully symmetrical play.

Amanda and Elyot have each remarried and meet on their honeymoons with their exceedingly dull spouses. Elyot and Amanda appear in turn on their Riviera balconies, each having a similar conversation with their new spouses. The play begins by contrasting balanced scenes in which Amanda and Elyot discover that the only way to communicate with their new spouses is through language, but they are unable to do so. Thus, when Elyot attempts to probe Sibyl's mind and discover her future plans, she responds: " I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about.

" She functions on the simplest level of language as talk, of words having a precise and limited meaning. Similarly, Amanda finds Victor equally limited. When she articulates her belief that communication depends on " a combination of circumstances" and takes place " if all the various cosmic thingummies fuse at the same moment, and the right spark is struck," Victor

can only reply that she is not nearly as complex as she thinks she is. For Elyot and Amanda, language communicates all too well on a literal level, but their feelings do not align with the words or with each other's words.

They use the language of the commonplace as a weapon. In one of their most memorable scenes, they display their sophisticated barbs when Amanda asks, " Whose yacht is that? " and Elyot replies " The Duke of Westminster's, I expect. It always is. " Amanda, opening herself for the next retort, exclaims, " I wish I were on it," to which Elyot replies, " I wish you were too. " None of these lines is especially witty alone, but given their context and the timing, they are funny and sad.

This couple cannot live apart, and yet as act 2 reveals, neither can they live together. Indeed, in the second act language becomes too effective a weapon, so that periodically Amanda and Elyot must resort to a technique to literally stop communicating. When language threatens to communicate their old jealousies and recriminations too starkly, they resort to using the word " sollocks"; the device fails and language refuses to submit to such control. When Amanda and Elyot refrain from relying on language, they can communicate.

Thus, if they divert themselves with word games such as deciding whether it is a " covey of Bisons, or even a school of Bisons," or perhaps " the Royal London school of Bisons," they succeed. But when they try to discuss something meaningful, such as their five years apart and the question of other lovers, they find language powerful and disturbing. Amanda says that she would not expect Elyot to have been more or less celibate than she was

in their five years apart, but he cannot separate the words from the meaning they imply.

He cannot bear the thought that she was not celibate, and in the ensuing argument he concludes, " We should have said sollocks ages ago. " They should have ceased conversation because language is too destructive. What makes Coward very much a twentieth-century writer is his refusal to restore harmony to this chaos. We must accept that Amanda and Elyot cannot live together without fighting and there will be no happy ending because their attempts to control language are futile.

Moreover, this futility infects Victor and Sibyl so that their previous united front disintegrates, and as they echo the arguments of Amanda and Elyot, Amanda and Elyot sneak out to fight another day. Coward's couples find that language communicates only too well so that they can neither live together nor apart, and in this, Coward embodies the awful dilemma of the human condition. Contemporary scholarship should continue to explore Coward to dispel the notion that he is just a period writer. Works Cited Cole Stephen. Noel Coward: A Bio-Bibliography.

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