

Paradox through
pacing in oscar
wilde's "the
importance of being
earnest"



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In the closing lines of the first act of Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest," Algernon remarks, "I love scrapes. They are the only things that are never serious," to which Jack responds, "Oh, that's nonsense Algy. You never talk about anything but nonsense." Algernon caps off this exchange with a proclamation of the purpose of the whole work: "Nobody ever does" (1642). Wilde never allows anything in the work to conclude on a serious note. While Wilde repeatedly proclaims this direction for the play through his characters, he does not tell us the motivation for this direction. He never explains why there is this avoidance of earnestness. The most apparent answer lies in the veiled criticism of Victorian society contained at each level of the play. The quick paradoxical epigrams that form the core of the conversational comedy are pointed at Victorian society. Wilde also abuses the concept of characterization with paradox to create comical characters that expose Victorian deficiencies. Each of these criticisms relies upon the paradoxes that Wilde sets up on successively larger scales within the play. It is, in fact, this tool of humor, not the object of ridicule that truly defines this work. While each paradox is pointed at Victorian society, the individual paradoxes each take on a different element of Victorian society, thereby diminishing the pointedness of the overall criticism. The use of paradox allows Wilde to take this play beyond its narrow and somewhat scattered critique of Victorian society. The underpinning element then, is not Victorian society, but instead the paradox, the concept of dual, irreconcilable elements. This more lasting topic is, not coincidentally, the one that defined Wilde's own life. In his own struggle to cope with the deficiencies of prudish Victorian society, he was forced to create multiple identities to mask his homosexuality. While Wilde's ironic look at nineteenth-century Victorian

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England is funny, it is on the higher, abstract level that Wilde's work is unified and gains lasting and a-historical significance. The paradox is not something that is easily sustained or drawn out because of its inherent contradiction. Wilde relies upon fine tuned pacing to sustain his use of paradox and to allow for a vehicle between paradox. Wilde's use of these techniques is especially exaggerated in the first scenes of the first and third acts, where the characters of Jack and Lady Bracknell (Aunt Augusta) are particularly utilized by Wilde. The most fundamental element of Wilde's use of paradox lies in the paradoxical epigrams that pepper the work. In the first act we immediately see these in use. Jack tells Algernon that when he is in the country he amuses his neighbors, but then volunteers, "[I] Never speak to one of them," to which Algernon responds, " How immensely you must amuse them" (1630). The idea of amusing someone to whom you do not even talk is quickly dismissed as Wilde moves on. A few minutes later in the action, Algernon warns Jack to take care in his marital plans: " Well, in the first place girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right." Before answering who exactly it is that girls do marry, Wilde moves the characters to a new scenario that brings Algernon to quip, " More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read" (1631). This last paradox is especially apparent in its criticism of Victorian society, but at the root of each of the other paradoxes lies some facet of this society that Wilde puts up for hyperbolic ridicule. Lady Bracknell's use of paradox is even more subversive because she is made to be a model of high Victorian society (this will be discussed further later). In her most immediately stinging paradox, she admonishes Algernon, " Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that" (1662). Augusta delivers <https://assignbuster.com/paradox-through-pacing-in-oscar-wildes-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

lines akin to this one, that take Victorian values and practices to absurd lengths, throughout the work. Wilde sustains his use of these paradoxes by quick movement between them. In the varied subject matter of the above paradoxes, along with the page numbers that accompany each one, the rollicking nature of the dialogue can be seen. Wilde constructs his paradoxes so that they can be easily escaped without resolution. Algernon's remark about flirting girls is prefaced by, "In the first place," an opening that signifies his intention to discuss more than one aspect of eligible females. The second point he makes, however, is of negligible comic and ironic value. Wilde (as Algernon) chooses to first deliver the scandalous remark – "girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right first" with the mechanism for escaping this paradox (the option to move to a second point) already in place. When Lane questions Algernon's paradox, he replies, "It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place. In the second place I don't give my consent." The first sentence of this reply merely affirms Algernon's faith in the paradox, and does not explain it. In the second sentence Algernon takes advantage of the escape mechanism (the second point) to shift to a new topic with, "In the second place." The paradoxes of Lady Bracknell meet little resistance from the other characters. Lady Bracknell's phrases are so scandalous and twisted that it would be hard to object to them without the whole structure crumbling. Therefore Wilde uses Lady Bracknell's garrulousness to sustain the paradox, and to provide a vehicle between paradoxes and foolish statements. When she first enters the scene she delivers a rather long-winded diatribe aimed at the recently engaged couples. Towards the end of this, immediately after declaring her husband's belief, she says, "I do not propose to undecieve

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him. Indeed I have never undecieved him on any question. I would consider it wrong.” The morally misguided nature of this statement is not questioned because Wilde immediately moves Augusta to a new topic in her diatribe, “ But, of course you will clearly understand that all communication between yourself and my daughter must cease immediately from this moment” (1660). Her propensity for long-winded monologues allows Augusta to deliver her most absurd lines in the midst of monologues so that she can escape into the surrounding topics. Wilde’s quick movement from paradox to paradox serves two purposes. This construction allows him to move on before the old paradox is exposed. The comic effect of the paradoxes would be diminished significantly if each one were exposed. Wilde’s quick movement also serves a larger purpose, which will be discussed later. The quick movement also works because Wilde sets the reader up to expect a paradox to be exposed. Occasionally he goes so far as to have someone within the play question a paradox, engendering great hope that the paradox will be exposed. Jack says, “ Oh, that is nonsense” to Algernon’s quip about flirting girls, allowing the reader to believe that the paradox may be brought to the light. Fictional characters can always evade the reader’s questions, but it is harder to evade the questions of characters in the play. Even when characters do not question the paradoxes, there is a sense that the paradoxes should be exposed. Wilde’s escape mechanisms allow him to escape, but not before he has brought the reader to believe that the paradoxes will be exposed. When he quickly moves to a new subject and paradox this expectation is stunned. New and thought provoking elements are introduced before the old are brought to any conclusion. This makes for a welcoming dearth of dull moments, and increases the sense of speed, and <https://assignbuster.com/paradox-through-pacing-in-oscar-wildes-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

movement. The abrupt transitions create a sense of tumbling through subjects one after another with little respite. This quick movement brings a levity that dwelling on topics would kill. Wilde's pacing, then, is essential for the maintenance of the humor. On first glance it seems that Wilde's sardonic paradoxical epigrams define the work. But these small paradoxes are but a metaphor for the larger clashing of two irreconcilable elements: namely the multiple identities of the characters. The characters multiple identities are cast next to each other in much the same way that the disparate elements of a paradox are set next to each other. The misfit of the two elements creates a comic effect, both in the epigrams, and in the characters dual identities. Jack and Algernon both have an obvious outward identity crisis that fuels much of the action. In the beginning of the first act Jack explains, " Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country" (1632). This is immediately followed by Algernon's explanation that, " I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose" (1633). Through the play we learn that in fact both men would like to be known as Ernest so as to impress their prospective wives. In presenting characters who have not a shred of seriousness in them with the title Ernest, Wilde takes an obvious stab at the Victorian society which valued earnestness so dearly. This superficial identity crisis, as seen through the names, explains much of the action. But this identity crisis has worked its way inward, particularly with Jack. This is never more apparent than in the opening scene with Jack and Algernon. When Jack enters the room his first comments evince his alignment with the absurdity already displayed by Lane and Algernon in the opening scene of the play. His first line, as a response to the question of what has brought him to

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Algernon's house, is, " Oh pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?" (1630). This jesting attitude continues as he disparages the Divorce Court. But a dramatic break provided by the entry and exit of Lane allows Jack to suddenly slip into an earnest persona. For a succession of three lines Jack maintains a staid attitude. He first says, " Do you mean to say that you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know." Jack then moves to correct another of Algernon's foolish statements by saying, " There is no good offering a large reward now that the thing is found." Lane then enters and exits the room)not coincidentally some of the only prescribed physical action in the scene - thereby prolonging the sense of Jack's earnestness. Jack then answers Algernon's query as to the ownership of the cigarette case, " Of course it's mine. You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case" (1631). All of what he says seems very reasonable and in the last line even dignified, particularly when laid next to Algernon's practically hyperbolic jesting. This sense is exaggerated by the unusually long lines, and breaks for action. But after selling us so successfully on this persona of Jack, Wilde quickly drags him back into the jesting quagmire that Algernon wallows in. The subject over which Jack is earnest, his defense of what is written inside the cigarette case, is just that which exposes his ultimate jest, his dual identity. The earnest exchange leads directly to his admission that he is at times Jack, and at times Ernest. Looking back to the moments of earnestness it becomes apparent that Wilde prolonged the appearance of Jack's earnestness by Algernon's quote in the midst of the scene: " Now that I look at the inscription inside, I find that the

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thing isn't yours at all" (1631). This creates a situation of questioning, but not one in which the earnestness of Jack is brought into question. Wilde could have easily brought up the question of Jack's questionable use of two names here, but instead Wilde chooses to allow us to believe in Jack's earnest identity for that much longer, making it that much more surprising and revealing when Jack's absurd side is revealed again. Wilde's pacing, again, maintains the dual, contradictory nature of the play. Even Lady Bracknell – one of the characters who does not outwardly profess to a dual identity)evinces a tension between two irreconcilable elements. Augusta represents the highest and most earnest element of English society. This is principally seen, as with many other characters, in her name: Augusta. The name Augusta implies a respected and successful leader. She desires the suggestion that her name makes to extend to her relationships with others, as we see in her demand to govern over the engaged couples with moral certainty. At every moment she is telling the couples what they can and cannot do. As soon as she enters the scene she asks Gwendolyn about the intimate moment that she interrupted, " Gwendolyn! What does this mean?," and moments later says of the recent engagement of the couples, " You are nothing of the kind" (1660). The imperative tone that she sets upon entry indicates her confidence in her ruling powers, and her demands evidence her sense of earnest moral righteousness. But the reasoning behind her demands and questions completely betrays the earnestness Lady Bracknell desires. When appraising Cecily's worth as a potential wife for Algernon she says, " Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time. We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces" (1662). This quote in itself is easily believable as part of the <https://assignbuster.com/paradox-through-pacing-in-oscar-wildes-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

highest tea-time conversations. But the quality that Augusta is praising as solid is money, the very element of superficiality. This discrepancy between form and function displays Augusta's battling identities. She hopes to appear earnest and august, but her inner identity, that is aligned so closely with the absurdity of all the other characters, always manages to escape. With Lady Bracknell the quick pacing that allows for the contrasted identity is even more exaggerated than it is with Jack. Often the first half of her line will be believably earnest and Victorian, but in the second half of the same line, she betrays the earnestness that was established in the beginning of the line. Her demand that Algernon, "Never speak disrespectfully of Society" could come from the most earnest of mouths. Wilde has Augusta present the earnest half of the lines authoritatively and there is no sense of vacillation between conflicting thought patterns, or identities in these lines. This presentation forces the reader, for a short time, to believe that Lady Bracknell will finally speak seriously. But in the second part of her statement to Algernon, where she explains her demand, we see her second identity surface. It is again Wilde's pacing that allows these characters to exist so believably in this state of duality for the whole play. Wilde allows his characters to skip between identities, never allowing the reader to settle on the character's true identity. This skipping also allows Wilde to set the two identities next to each other for comparison. In much the same way as a paradox, when these two elements are set next to each other their irreconcilability gains its comic effect. Instead of establishing the existence of the two identities, and presenting them at unique times, Wilde chooses to present the irreconcilable elements together, skipping back and forth between the two, within scenes and acts. In both cases, when characters are

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thought to be serious we already know them to be jesters. But due to Wilde's quick pacing we forget our previous encounters, and what the characters had said because the reader's mind has had to work so quickly to keep up with the constantly changing subject matter or point of view. The earnestness is at first believable, but always returns to the absurd, at which point the irreconcilability of the two identities becomes obvious. This quick movement, and immediate contact between the earnest and the absurd nature of these characters' identities, always tending and ending on the absurd, exaggerates the irreconcilability of the characters two elements. There is a curious merging of the characters' fates as the play progresses. In the opening scene Jack immediately declares his intention to be speedily married to Gwendolyn. During this scene Algernon continually disparages the institution of marriage, going so far as to say, " If I ever get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact" (1631). Yet, in the beginning of the third scene we find both men aiming for the same thing: trying to address wrongs so that they can be quickly married. Algernon says here, " I am engaged to be married to Cecily, Aunt Augusta" (1661). In the end both are headed to marriage. This merging of characters extends further than just this superficial level. Immediately before Lady Bracknell enters the room to deliver her moral wanderings to the couples, the speech of the couples reveals the merging of their minds. Cecily and Gwendolyn chime in unison (following Wilde's stage directions), " Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!" To this, Algernon and Jack respond, again in perfect unison as dictated by Wilde, " Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon" (1660). Wilde allows us to believe that this exchange has been planned beforehand by telling Cecily, in <https://assignbuster.com/paradox-through-pacing-in-oscar-wildes-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

the stage directions to conduct the group as if they were an orchestra. But on second glance we realize that while their timing may have been planned, what they are saying was not planned. The couples have the same ideas, and Jack and Algernon do not even need timing instructions for these ideas to come out together. As the play proceeds the characters regress from distinct personalities to undistinguishable forms that share the same thoughts. At the end of the play there is some indication that the characters have become defined. While Algernon sits quietly aside, Jack learns that his name has been Earnest all along. Yet this ending means nothing when Wilde's treatment or respect for names is considered. Throughout the work Wilde depreciates the traditional value of words by his frequent inclusion of puns and word inversions. In the first act Jack remarks that pretending to be a dentist when you are not a dentist " produces a false impression."

Algernon immediately responds, twisting the meaning of " impression" by saying, " Well that is what dentists always do" (1632) referring now to the plaster impressions of teeth that dentists make. Wilde has exposed the multiple meanings of this word, and in doing so, has stripped the word of its constancy or ability to closely define anything. By repeating, throughout the play, this practice of twisting words to absurd lengths, Wilde depreciates the value of words. This undermining of words extends even to the most holy of words, one's name. Jack and Algernon have learned that in order to marry their prospective wives they must have the name Ernest. This poses absolutely no problem to the pair. They quickly arrange for a christening to rid themselves of their unattractive name. When Jack arranges for his christening Reverend Chasuble him, " At what hour would you wish the ceremony performed?," to which Jack gaily responds, " Oh, I might trot <https://assignbuster.com/paradox-through-pacing-in-oscar-wildes-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

around about five if that would suit you.” (1648). Wilde purposely uses this light, conversational tone to display the absolute lack of meaning this renaming will have. By presenting a name as something that can be changed in between ones afternoon appointments Wilde completely depreciates any value or certainty a name may have or provide. In the end Jack learns with great glee that his name has been actually been Ernest all along, a distinction from Algernon who receives no such news. This could be seen as a last differentiation between the characters, a mark of development. But by this time the possible importance that a name could bestow upon someone has consciously been completely destroyed by Wilde. In fact, this excitement over something we now know to be so trivial is Wilde’s final remark on triviality versus earnestness. Throughout the play Wilde has presented seriously all that is in fact trivial, and has presented trivially all that is serious. In this last line Wilde follows this trend by allowing Jack to be excited over something we now know to be completely meaningless, continuing his juxtaposition of perception and reality. In doing this Wilde in fact demarcates the triviality of this supposedly unique name, reminding us, once again, of the similarity and alignment of the two characters. Wilde challenges the traditional conception of dramatic or fictional work with this anti-development. The traditional sense of development is the delineation and definition of the characters involved. Traditionally a writer makes the characters and work memorable by defining the characters’ unique qualities. Beyond positing the truth of this assumption, it is not necessary to belabor this discussion. In Wilde’s work the characters are only memorable insofar as they don’t develop, and in fact, are memorable in that they become less unique, as is underscored in the scene of unified speech. Instead of allowing

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the play as a vehicle for the characters to define themselves, Wilde allows the characters to regress, and actually become less defined. This lack of development serves as a statement against the characters own inability to progress or develop. But, on a larger scale this anti-development, as the word suggests, is a paradox in itself. In presenting regression where development is expected Wilde turns the traditional conception of fictional works on its head. This conceptual paradox works in much the same way that the smallest paradoxes in the play – the epigrams – work. Wilde opens his statement by saying that he will present a play, a fictional work, which leads to the reader to assume the characters will undergo the typical process of individuation. But, through the play the opposite occurs. Wilde has subverted this assumption by dis-shapening the characters, thereby creating a paradox on the grandest scale. This largest paradox fuels the work, by the sense of surprise that it engenders, in much the same way that the other paradoxes in the work do. As a gay man in prudish nineteenth century England Oscar Wilde never felt comfortably assimilated into the strait society that surrounded him. He was forced to assume a double identity to cope with his divergence from the norms of the day. This tax that the society levied upon Wilde undoubtedly engendered an animosity, an animosity that is reflected in his ironic, and sardonic treatment of Victorian society in “ The Importance of Being Earnest”. However, the multiple and irreconcilable identities that Wilde was forced into are the more significant driving force behind this work. This struggle with identities is seen in the paradoxes that pervade all levels of the work. In the end though, these large themes build upon, rather than overshadow Wilde’s greatest genius which lies in his subtle

turns of phrases and words that keep even the most earnest reader chuckling throughout.