

An age of surfaces: oscar wilde's society above and below the surface



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“ We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces” (2257). So the character of Lady Bracknell observes at the conclusion of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The play as a whole is one firmly preoccupied with the idea of surfaces and their importance in Victorian society, where it must have often seemed (especially to someone as flamboyant as Wilde) that appearance mattered more than anything else. Wilde uses this play to unveil some of the flaws of a superficial society—by first exaggerating frivolity’s influence, then making it absurd, and lastly unfolding some of its logic to make it both more understandable and more reprehensible. In so doing he exposes the unnaturalness, even the danger, of a world where exteriors have completely replaced interiors and the surface is all that remains—which is as much a menace today as it was during Wilde’s own time. Lady Bracknell’s inquisition of Jack, her daughter’s suitor, in Act I serves as a telling prototype. Having already questioned Jack about his income, knowledge, and personal habits, Lady Bracknell now turns to “ minor matters”: his background (2232). Her first of many reproaches on this score is a fine example of the baseless social appraisal that Wilde critiques so cleverly throughout the play. When Jack informs Lady Bracknell that he has “ lost” both of his parents, her reaction is not one of sympathy or even curiosity, but instead of consternation. “ Both?” she says. “ To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune—to lose both looks like carelessness” (2232). Lady Bracknell is unabashedly blaming Jack not for being a smoker, or having no politics, or knowing nothing, as her interrogation just prior to this passage has revealed, but for losing his parents—a shortcoming that, unlike all the others, has arisen entirely by chance and through no fault of Jack’s. It is significant that Lady Bracknell

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uses the word “ look” to say that having no parents “ looks like carelessness” (in some editions the word is “ seems”), because it brings the focus quite literally to the idea of superficial appearances. The Victorian tendency to judge a person’s worth by their lineage may have ostensibly been based on a vague idea of inner worth as hereditary, but Wilde here exposes this convention as one based on outer presentation alone. For as Lady Bracknell’s command for Jack to produce some parents—or rather, she implies, any parents—later shows, she is interested only in someone who looks worthwhile, based on arbitrary standards that can be satisfied while entirely overlooking a person’s real character. She wants Jack to be someone like her nephew Algernon—who, as she says later in the play, “ has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?” (2258). If this much seems ridiculous, Lady Bracknell’s next accusation is even more so. Ernest reveals that he is not only a foundling, but was found inside of a handbag—to which Lady Bracknell replies that “ to be born, or at any rate, bred in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution” (2233). Obviously her blaming Jack for being “ bred” in a handbag is completely ridiculous, in some ways even more than her disdain for his having lost his parents. For while before we initially knew only that Jack had lost contact with his parents, at whatever age and for whatever reason, here we know immediately that in this instance of alleged culpability, Jack was actually an infant. Perhaps the only way to make Lady Bracknell’s annoyance more absurd at this point is to direct it towards a newborn child—one who is blamed for, of all things, being placed in a handbag. The faintly-traceable syllogism of her logic is still present here, in <https://assignbuster.com/an-age-of-surfaces-oscar-wildes-society-above-and-below-the-surface/>

the sense that there is some rhetorical connection at least between an “ordinary handbag,” as Jack calls it, and the ordinary people behind such upheavals as the French Revolution (2233). And the sheer bizarreness of being found in a handbag is in some ways in opposition to “the ordinary decencies of family life” (2233). It is interesting that we see this word “ordinary” come up again, here in a positive context as opposed to the negative one used just before. [“In what locality did this Mr. James, or Thomas, Cardew come across this ordinary handbag?” asks Lady Bracknell just before (2233).] Lady Bracknell’s hypocritical refashioning of the word is just one of many subtle hints Wilde sends to the reader about the consistency, or rather inconsistency, of her logic. Yet Wilde is not so simplistic as to suggest that she has no logic at all, which is one of the reasons this passage—and the play as a whole—is so compelling. Lady Bracknell is extremely logical in some of the details she dismisses in this case—such as the line of the cloak room in which the bag was found or whether or not the bag had handles. The language she uses to brush off such absurdly random details is often uncommon in its directness; “The line is immaterial,” for instance, is just about as simple and as short as her usually orotund sentences get (2233). In this way Wilde is able to present these moments as instances of plain, direct common sense—which is probably how Lady Bracknell looks at them herself. This makes them all the more confounding and hilarious for the pure improbability of these phrases’ actual content. Nothing could be less relevant to Jack’s character than the line of the handbag’s cloakroom, or the presence or absence of handles; points like these are in fact so wide of the mark that no coherent person would ever bother to point out how trivial they are. The fact that Lady Bracknell admits

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that these things don't matter, but others that are equally inane somehow do [i. e. the fact that Jack was found in a handbag, or the fact that the handbag was in a cloak room that " might serve to conceal a social indiscretion" (2233)] cause her to appear simultaneously more and less ridiculous, an impressive feat. On the one hand it is encouraging to see that she has some sound judgment at least, but on the other it is disturbing to find that an apparently rational person can follow this judgment to such a misdirected conclusion. Lady Bracknell's use of the word " seems" to describe her impressions [" seems to me to display a contempt" (2233)] like her previous choice of the word " look", ultimately ties this deconstruction of logic back in with the idea of surface and appearances. The reasoning Lady Bracknell uses here is completely arbitrary; there is no earthly reason why the fact of a handbag should be any more or less important than whether or not it has handles. By highlighting the ridiculousness of such gradations, Wilde suggests that any focus on mere appearance alone is in fact equally arbitrary—that a person shouldn't be blamed for their family any more than an infant should be blamed for a handbag, and exteriors are only significant if they are clearly distinguished from interiors. In exactly this spirit, *The Importance of Being Earnest* strives not to create a realistic representation of an outer reality, but an artistic summation of an inner one. In the context of aestheticism Wilde compiles the most ridiculous parts of human nature and places them on stage—so that even today when his spectators laugh, they do so with the dim sentience that in a play seemingly all about surfaces, he's deriding the innermost part of themselves.