

The Importance of Being Earnest: Social Criticism Through Humor

(APA Style, American English)

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Abstract

Most of the literature written on the subject of humor in Wilde's work concentrates on its psychological aspects or on the literary devices which make the humor work. In this essay, little attention is paid to either those psychological aspects or the literary devices. Instead, the essay provides a sociological approach to the play and focuses on the society that Wilde was attacking through humor. It is important to understand that late Victorian society was benefitting and suffering from the effects of the Industrial Revolution. The two major moneyed classes – the old landowning class and the *bourgeoisie*, the new capitalist class which had thrived on industry – now jostled for prestige in high society. In particular, Wilde exposes the landed gentry as being contemptuous of education, pretentious and over-preoccupied with appearances.

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To 21st century eyes, much of the Wilde's *Earnest* seems extremely trivial and contrived. Indeed, earlier titles of the play – *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* and *A Serious Comedy for Trivial People* (Jackson, 1997, p. 162) – would seem to back up this vision. When seen in the context of life in late Victorian England, however, the play takes on a different dimension – that of a veiled criticism of the social values of the time.

We can see how many people might have interpreted it as simply a light comedy as much of the play is pure fantastical social interaction which crosses the line into the absurd. For example, Cecily lives, mainly, in a fantasy world where her betrothed writes to her three times a week. He does not, of course: Cecily writes the letters to herself. Today, this is painfully contrived but, for the Victorians? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

To understand what Wilde concealed beneath the veil of superficial social interaction, we have to know something about late Victorian society. Before the 19th century, the traditional moneyed class had been that of the landowners. The Industrial Revolution had, however, produced a new capitalist class, the *bourgeoisie*, made up of the *nouveaux riches*, which represented a threat to the landowning class. They had started to gain political ground since the First Reform of Parliament in 1832 and, by the end of the 19th century, they were the dominant political class. From the mid-nineteenth century industrial progress was increasingly linked with academic science: telegraphy, artificial dye-stuffs, explosives, photography and the Gilchrist-Thomas “basic” process of steel production, came out of higher education (Hobsbawm, 1980). But to the traditional landed class, wealth was acquired through heritage, and “breeding” was more important than education. Education threatened the landed gentry. Lady Bracknell, whose title immediately betrays the fact that she is connected to the old landed gentry, proclaims: “I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is

gone” (1. 496–7). There were new opportunities for social advancement through education but, in Lady Bracknell’s opinion, “in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square” (1. 499–502). Her fear of education also explains Lady Bracknell’s abhorrence of the French Revolution: “that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to?” (1. 572–574).

What it had led to was the end of absolutism and the setting up of democracy, but it had taken place over a century before. It had given political power to the rising bourgeoisie and taken it from the landed classes – the clergy and the nobility. Part of the joke here is that Lady Bracknell is nostalgic for a time that she could never have experienced, and the line – “you know what that unfortunate movement led to” – assumes that Jack would be sympathetic to her reactionary views. Her class had suffered from the rise of the bourgeoisie. Land was no longer an important asset of wealth, and businessmen who had acquired wealth through industry, had few economic incentives to purchase land (Nicholas, 2000, p. 22). Indeed, Jack explains that most of his money is in investments rather than land (1. 505). Lady Bracknell mourns the lost income of her class: “What between the duties expected of one during one’s lifetime, and the duties¹ exacted from one after one’s death, land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up” (1. 506–9).

It is clear that Wilde does not share the opinion of Lady Bracknell. When Algernon admonishes Jack for wanting the truth to be pure and simple, it sounds like he is taking a swipe at his own critics: “Literary criticism is not your forte my dear fellow. Don’t try it. You should leave that to people who haven’t been at a University. They do it so well in the daily

¹ Note the pun on “duties” – first, implying obligations; next, implying taxes.

papers” (1. 18–20). The literary critics are depicted as ignoramuses who have not been to university. Wilde was wary of the newspaper critics. The reception he received when *Earnest* was presented was varied. One critic wrote: “it cannot be pretended that in such matters as construction, invention—or adaptation—of subject, contrivance of comic business or delineation of character, Mr. Wilde has shown much ability” (Jackson, 1980, p. 27). But posterity might disagree with the critic’s assessment. Wilde was adept at the art of caricature.

Caricature has long been a form of criticism. It aims to take a serious subject and stretch it until it goes well beyond the normal. When it achieves its objective it produces humor, but if it fails, it can leave the audience wondering what is happening. The key to success is to put words into the mouths of the characters which, though perhaps incongruous, are just about credible. One way of identifying social satire through caricature is to explain what it is not. It is not the kind of slapstick comedy that we might associate with Benny Hill. It is also not so absurd that it would fit into Monty Python’s Flying Circus – recall the Dead Parrot sketch, where a man tries to return a dead parrot to the pet shop. Social satire works on the edge of the absurd: it is just about possible, given the characters involved, but it is highly unlikely. Social satire differs from Benny Hill and (most of) Monty Python in that it pokes fun at specific people or social conventions. This is where Wilde is a master.

An important aspect of the caricature is that the character being ridiculed must not be aware of the ridicule. Everything must appear normal to the character while, for the rest of us, it is not. We laugh *at*, not *with*, the character because we recognize the absurdity of the person or people he or she represents, so the task of the social satirist is to make the character represent a class or a convention which must be ridiculed. The central character in *Earnest*, Lady Bracknell, although she does not know it, is the mouthpiece of Wilde’s social criticism. Snobbery and pretentiousness are the target of Wilde’s attack. This is a lady who has an encyclopedic knowledge of everybody and anything worth knowing in London high society.

She knows the numbers of the houses in Belgrave Square, and remarks that Jack's house is on the "unfashionable side" (1. 529); she is surprised she has never heard of Jack's tenant, Lady Bloxham, even though the population of Inner London in 1891, was almost four and a half million (GB Historical GIS, n.d.).

Snobbery abounds throughout the play. Gwendolen remarks: "Sugar is not fashionable any more" (1. 704) and "Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays" (1. 706–707). For the upper class, appearances are everything: "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing" (3. 28–29). But the snobbery which Wilde depicts in Lady Bracknell is not just snobbery; there is an undercurrent of callous indifference towards the less fortunate: "To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune — to lose both seems like carelessness" (1. 539–540). We laugh because of the pun on "lose", but orphans may not feel the same inclination to find this funny. And when she says, "I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die" (1. 341–343), her total indifference to the misfortunes of others drains the scene of comic effect.

Comedy through satire always runs the risk of offending those people who are the butt of the satirical attack. As satire implies a criticism of somebody or of some social convention, it is never to everyone's taste. It must be deemed offensive, particularly by the person whose social class it attempts to ridicule. Kuipers argues that social classes may find different types of humor funny. There is highbrow (for the more educated classes) and lowbrow (for the common man) humor (Kuipers, 2006, p. 72). "Bawdy" humor, which is present throughout English literature (Chaucer, Shakespeare, etc.), is usually there for the consumption of the masses. In *Earnest* there is the occasional sexual innuendo. When Gwendolen says, "I intend to develop in many directions," we can see how the line might fit into Monty Python's "Nudge, nudge; wink, wink" sketch or perhaps into Benny Hill's *Ernie (The Fastest Milkman in the West)*:

She said she'd like to bathe in milk, he said, "All right, sweetheart,"

And when he'd finished work one night he loaded up his cart.

He said, "D'you want it pasturize? 'Cause pasturize is best,"

She says, "Ernie, I'll be happy if it comes up to my chest." (Hill, 1971)

The play is, of course, all about duplicity. The pun on Earnest is the obvious example, but all of the major characters are engaged in some form of deception. Wilde's mocking of Jack's town and country selves and of the male chauvinism, which is normal for the Victorians, throws light on the social personages the characters present while concealing their true feelings and aspirations: "the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice sweet refined girl." (1. 641–643). The supreme use of deception, however, is that of Lady Bracknell. We only discover at the end of the play that she is, in reality, a social climber who "had no fortune of any kind" (3. 192–194).

A final word must be said about the social composition of Wilde's contemporary audience. Jackson tells us that "the West End theatres were never completely insulated from society with a small 's', and it is a mistake to think of them as playing to a homogeneous middle- and upper-class audience. The masses and the classes were not wholly separated" (Jackson, 1997, p. 162). Although some of "the lower orders" may have been in the audience, the bulk of the audience was composed exactly of the social classes that he was making fun of. Regenia Gagnier writes: "He mercilessly exposed his audiences' superficiality and lack of moral substance while he simultaneously presented to them images of themselves so glamorous and powerful that they could not help but forgive, even lionise, him" (Gagnier, 1980, p. 27). It is perhaps a mark of Wilde's genius that the very people he was mocking adored his plays.

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