

## A TYPOLOGY OF OSCAR WILDE'S COMIC DEVICES

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In the present article we will concentrate on the application of comic devices in Wilde's plays. We will focus our attention on his four comedies: *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the last of which testifies to Wilde's progress as a comedist. The first three plays are on the surface extensions of sentimental drama based on the melodramatic pattern, but, in fact, their real issue is the attempt to rationalize the theme of the individualist's position in a conformist and hypocritical society. Besides, although including rudiments from Restoration comedy and domestic drama, Wilde's society comedies are built upon the non-fulfilment of traditional and common theatrical plot devices such as a long-lost orphan and a recognition or discovery scene. The comic characterization in these comedies is grounded on a hierarchy of wit stemming from the Restoration pattern, according to which Truewits are the most sophisticated, mediating dandies who preserve their humane responses under the mask of triviality, like Lord Goring. Witwouds, on the other hand, are treated as a conversational chorus and they often compromise their own creed. The next group includes puritans without intellectual authority, and, finally, the last class is composed of lackwits, the members of the older generation suffering from poor memory or malapropisms.

Generally, Wilde's three society comedies are abundant in conversational gambits, but in comparison with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the scale of their comic devices is considerably limited to dandiacal paradoxes, witticisms, or witty aphorisms that are grounded on different types of irony.

Accordingly, the irony of reversal is the most frequent comic device of the first three comedies. Contrary to the irony of situation "it carries its context with itself" (Poague 1973: 251), and, like other types of irony, it constitutes witty remarks, retorts, and repartees. This can be exemplified by Lord Darlington's witticism: "I can resist everything except temptation" (*Lady Windermere's Fan* 260), the parts of which contradict each other, forming a perverse

implication. Thus, the ordinary values are reversed, the impression being additionally deepened by the paradoxical quality of the remark. The irony of reversal forms the basis of another remarkable paradox uttered by Lord Illingworth defining women as "sphinxes without secrets" (*A Woman of No Importance* 329). As the sphinx has always been considered mysterious, being deprived of its major trait it becomes nothing. In this way, the popular notions are again essentially transposed, an impudent charge against women, however, is produced in a graceful and flippant manner. Lord Goring, Wilde's most perfect dandy, reflects on women: "Women have a wonderful instinct about things. They can discover everything except the obvious" (*An Ideal Husband* 385). Thus, through the ironical reversal of the degree of difficulty in discovering things a paradox is brought into being, whose "everything" and "the obvious" seem to exclude each other on the surface.

Unlike in Wilde's society comedies, the irony of reversal is not a prevalent comic device in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which does not mean, however, that it is not present in this play. This may be illustrated by Algernon's passage: "The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 434). The irony of reversal of this declaration is produced by the incongruity between its moral tone and amoral content. As a result, implications are also inverted; here a woman who parades her virtue is considered sinful. An additional bite is given by stirring a proverbial cliché by an injection of the word "clean", which changes the meaning into its opposite.

The fundamental difference between the irony of reversal and the irony of situation lies in the fact that the latter needs a "larger dramatic context" (Poague 1973: 252) to be fully understood. This disparity can be clearly demonstrated by the following passage, which reveals the multiple irony of situation and reversal:

*Lady Bracknell*: Dear child, of course you know that  
Algernon has nothing but his debts to depend upon.  
But I do not approve of mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell, I had  
no fortune of any kind.

(*The Importance of Being Earnest* 466)

First, Lady Bracknell's condemnation of "mercenary marriages" is ironic in reference to her ordinary procedure of checking the eligibility of her daughter's suitors — in order to realize this the reader should know the whole play; thus this represents the irony of situation. On the other hand, the statement itself carries a context which contradicts her words — this, in turn, is the irony of reversal. As a result, her character becomes inconsistent, for her deeds are in open conflict with her declarations. Thus, another comic device is applied,

which is caused by her inability to perceive any difference between the real and the make-believe; she treats her own acquisitive attitude as a virtue. This is made possible by the fact that she deals with the real affairs and the language structure simultaneously. In this way, the language denotes reality, and consequently, all the moral values that she promotes and compromises at the same time become relative and inconsequential. Such a flippant, light and playful tone is prevalent throughout the whole of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, whereas in other comedies by Wilde it appears only occasionally and only when it reflects a dandy's attitude to the world.

Another example of the irony of situation comes from the passage in which Jack, pressed by Algernon for exposition of his state, wittily upbraids his friend: "My dear Algy, you talk exactly as if you were a dentist. It produces the false impression" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 432). Jack's disdain of deception is ironic considering his own conduct and some statements scattered throughout the play. Thus, the propriety urged by him is called into question by the irony of situation (cf. Poague 1973: 251—7).

Although to a smaller extent than in his last comedy, irony of situation is also applied in Wilde's society dramas. This can be exemplified by the exchange of words between Lord Goring and his father, Lord Coversham in *An Ideal Husband*:

*Lord Coversham*: Do you really always understand what you say, sir?  
*Lord Goring*: Yes, father, if I listen attentively.

(*An Ideal Husband* 405)

Here again a larger context is necessary to comprehend Lord Goring's retort. First, he concentrates on his father's cynical remark, distorting and ironically exaggerating it. (cf. Bergler 1956: 182—6). Secondly, his rejoinder epitomizes his behaviour and creed, according to which he does not want people to take him and his statements seriously.

The frequency of the irony of comparison, although lower than that of the irony of reversal, is much greater than the instances of irony of situation in Wilde's three society comedies. By means of this comic device different objects are placed at a distance to facilitate evaluation of their relationship. (cf. Poague 1973: 251—6). How the mechanism functions Lord Darlington's definition of the cynic shows: "a man who knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing" (*Lady Windermere's Fan* 286). The man described in this statement is equated with the notion of price; as a result the former is deflated, the more so as this is compared with "the value of nothing".

Many more examples of irony of comparison are to be found in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Thus, when in the love scene Jack is about to propose to Gwendolen, she makes a declaration that strikes a note of bathos:

*Gwendolen:* We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits I am told: and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest.

(*The Importance of Being Earnest* 437)

The statement includes the ironic device of deflation by comparison; the serious issue is equated with the trivial one, undercutting the significance of the former. In this case, the Philistine values are deflated, as one of their exponents professes the ideal of marrying a man named Ernest. Consequently, ideals in general become mere labels; in other words, the investment of moral value in accidental objects chosen arbitrarily by putting appropriate names on them.

The same device is used in the conversation between Cecily and Algernon. When she learns that her fictitious cousin is hungry, she reacts: "I should have remembered that when one is going to lead an entirely new life, one requires regular and wholesome meals" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 447). Thus, the momentous issue of the improvement of one's morals is to be solved by a wholesome meal; in other words, the serious is once again equated with the trivial. As a result, the importance of the problem is undercut by its physiological expansion rather than interpretation.

Another type of irony of comparison — that by overstatement — is applied in Algernon's speech: "If I am occasionally a little overdressed, I make up for it by being always immensely overeducated" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 452). In his elaborated witticism, the two disparate levels of reference meet to make up an ostensibly nonsensical fusion, which, when analyzed from the dandiacal point of view, proves fairly reasonable. Irony of comparison is also included in Cecily's notation of the broken engagement with imaginary Ernest: "Today I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel it is better to do so. The weather still continues charming" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 454). This statement is built upon an incongruous juxtaposition. Consequently, the significant is again deflated by an equation with the trivial.

The following example of irony of comparison by undercutting comes from the exchange of words between Lady Bracknell and Dr. Chasuble:

*Lady Bracknell:* Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?

*Chasuble:* (Somewhat indignantly). She is the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability.

*Lady Bracknell:* It is obviously the same person.

(*The Importance of Being Earnest* 468)

In this way, the arch-Philistine Lady Bracknell, speaking in her dandiacal voice now, most overtly defies the conventional standards (cf. Reinert 1956:

14–16). The dialogue is built on the irony of comparison technique, and, as a result, the traits considered to be virtues are deflated by the equation with those of the pejorative connotations. Thus, ordinary morality represented here by Dr. Chasuble's judgement of Miss Prism is made to seem ridiculous, in other words, the notion of "the very picture or respectability" becomes closely associated with that of "a female of repellent aspect". The impressive effectiveness of Lady Bracknell's witticism is pointed up by her sarcastic, acute remark: "It is obviously the same person", which concisely unifies the exchange of words between her and Dr. Chasuble.

The next type of irony, the irony of the literal mind, reveals "the ironic incongruity between the literal and the figurative" (Poaque 1973: 254). It works in one of two ways depending upon the speaker's degree of awareness of this discrepancy. The comic device is used mainly in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Thus, when in the final scene Jack rushes upstairs and looks for the bag to prove his identity, Lady Bracknell remarks: "I need hardly tell you that in families of high positions strange coincidences are not supposed to occur. They are hardly considered the thing" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 469). In this passage, she applies the irony of the literal mind, unintentionally exposing the unnatural convention that necessitates hypocrisy. She does it through the juxtaposition of such disparate levels of reference as vicissitudes and fashion. In this way, although a confirmed follower of social decorum, she attacks it due to her practical hardheadedness. In other words, her ironical associations are evoked by the overlooking of any difference between the literal and the figurative. The comic in words is enhanced by the flippant and indifferent tone that she assumes, which forms a striking contrast to the dramatic situation in which the characters are involved.

Another example of the irony of the literal mind comes from the scene in which Lady Bracknell mentions her visit to her friend: "I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered. She looks quite twenty years younger" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 435). Thus, the truth is revealed, maybe unconsciously, to shock with the unexpected contradiction, embodied in a traditionally respected concept, namely, the theme of mourning. An additional quip about Lady Harbury is made by Algernon: "I heard her hair has turned quite gold from grief" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 435), which constitutes one more Wildean paradox whose perverse irony of literal mind is formed by placing a word "gold" that now seems incongruous in its new context.

As it has been demonstrated, the mechanism of the irony of the literal mind may be utilized by such sophisticated principals as Algernon or Cecily who exploit the incongruities between illusion and reality or by characters like Lady Bracknell who seems not to be wholly competent in perceiving this discrepancy. Although this kind of verbal wittiness is nearly completely

confined to the *Importance of Being Earnest*, the latter type of its subdivision is foreshadowed in Wilde's previous plays where witty statements are tinged with apparent naivety and are produced seemingly inadvertently by the Duchess in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and by Lady Caroline, Lady Stutfield, and Archdeacon Daubeny in *A Woman of No Importance*. This can be illustrated in the Duchess's speech in which she ludicrously describes Australia, running down her daughter's and future son-in-law's idea of living in that country; "There are lots of vulgar people live in Grosvenor's Square, but at any rate there are no horrid kangaroos crawling about" (*Lady Windermere's Fan* 275). In this way, she expresses her disapproval through a concentration on a minor aspect of the concept, which, nevertheless, renders it ridiculous. And this is how the irony of the literal mind works; the literal stands for the figurative, and irony is produced as though unintentionally by the speaker.

The final ironic device, according to L. A. Poaque, is truth. "This usually involves some overstatement" (Poaque 1973: 253) associated with the distortion of veracity to the degree that it will be recognized. The comic device is exemplified by Lord Illingworth's epigram about marriage: "Men marry because they are tired; women because they are curious. Both are disappointed" (*A Woman of No Importance* 436). He formulates his witticism by means of the simplified generalisation; however, his conclusion, although it makes the impression of being exaggerated, reveals the truth to some extent.

If the irony of truth is applied in Wilde's society comedies, it is produced exclusively by ultra-sophisticated dandies who quite consciously denounce some pejorative aspects of human nature or social conventions. This device is more widely used in *The Importance of Being Earnest* where it is adopted to the less complex personages that produce it inadvertently. To illustrate, when Lady Bracknell announces in an assertive tone. "An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she should be allowed to arrange for herself" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 438), she discloses the truth about the fact. Unaware that she herself, being a follower of the Philistine dogmas, is contradicting them, she ridicules the prevailing marriage convention of the upper class.

On the whole, verbal wit in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is introduced in the form of much more varied types than in Wilde's society comedies. To illustrate, there are sixty-seven cases of the irony of reversal, seventeen of the irony of situation, thirty-three of comparison, thirteen of the literal mind, and only nine of truth in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband* altogether, while in *The Importance of Being Earnest* Lady Bracknell alone produces about twenty ironies of truth. Thus, half of the ironies in Wilde's society comedies are composed of the device of reversal, whereas the ironies of situation, of the literal mind, and of truth are only occasionally used. On the other hand, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the

scale of ironies becomes larger, which makes the play more daring and exceptional in its style than its predecessors.

Accordingly, being more diversified in its quality, Wilde's last comedy creates more vivid and more unique comic scenes, as it concentrates not only on epigrams that do not need any larger context to be grasped, but also on the verbal wit that contributes to the comic in character and in situation. Furthermore, it shows how perfectly nonsense can be transformed into a witticism (Grotjahn 1957: 14) which is made possible by the introduction of the ironies of the literal mind and of truth. These are produced both intentionally by the intelligent principals like Algernon and Cecily and inadvertently by less clever but even more energetic characters like Lady Bracknell. Consequently, the predominant feeling of the absurd becomes tangible throughout the whole play; while in the previous comedies, it is present only in some paradoxes.

Thus, the play with the linguistic artifact itself is of primary importance in *The Importance of Being Earnest* which consequently becomes a linguistic comedy. However, as far as the absurd and the fantastic are concerned, these qualities also refer to the extralinguistic phenomena of the play, as its characters do not hesitate to shape their lives with the same positiveness as they modify their speeches (cf. Gregor 1956: 514-21). As a result, form becomes the most important element of the play.

The feeling of the absurd is deepened by the use of a great number of paradoxes. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband* most witticisms are based on them. The way in which they are constructed and work may be illustrated by Mr. Dunby's remark: "In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it" (*Lady Windermere's Fan* 286). Thus, it is a witty and elaborate epigram, which reveals the truth to some extent, but which is a typical witticism that does not add to the plot. Most paradoxes from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, on the other hand, are perhaps less brilliant when analyzed separately, but they play an important role in their contexts, facilitating the construction of a clever and comic plot, and, moreover, a comic idea. The difference between the paradoxes from this play and from the three society comedies can be epitomized in Algernon's phrase directed to Jack: "Now produce your explanation and make it improbable" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 433). The paradoxical note of his request is achieved by the fitting of the absurd word into the context; normally, one wants to get a probable explanation. The expression itself would not be funny if utilized under different circumstances; as it is, it testifies to Algernon's desire to savour a novel experience essential in the dandy's canon of aesthetics (cf. Ganz 1963: 45-8).

Another paradox, this time resembling witticisms from the three other comedies by Wilde, is produced by Algernon when he reacts to Jack's outrageous words about Lady Bracknell, Algernon's aunt: "My dear boy, I love

hearing my relations are abused. It is the only thing that makes me put up with them at all" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 441). This paradox, unlike the former one, does not depend upon its context, and it can be uttered as a generalized opinion on one's relations. Therefore, it is equipped with all the traits of a typical epigram.

Wildean paradoxes often give the impression of banalities turned upside-down. To illustrate, when Algernon says that his parting from Cecily is very painful to him, she replies: "the absence of old friends one can endure with equanimity. But even a momentary separation from anyone to whom one has just been introduced is almost unbearable" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 452). Thus, the commonly held opinion that it is very sad to lose an old friend is transformed into its opposite, and, in this way, the cliché becomes a paradox that reveals Cecily as the confirmed adventuress for whom the loss of sensation is more important than that of a friend.

The functioning of paradox is based on the combination of improbably opposing ideas, and as Wilde's wit aims at an economy of expression, some of his paradoxical phrases are built upon oxymorons, these being the most concise structures disclosing contradiction in terms. When in *The Importance of Being Earnest* Lady Bracknell refuses to agree to Jack and Gwendolen's marriage, Jack does not consent to Algernon's marriage with Cecily, announcing: "Then a passionate celibacy is all that any of us can look forward" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 467). Thus, the paradoxical utterance is built upon the oxymoron "passionate celibacy"; additional irony is given by the incongruous phrase "look forward". Consequently, all the components contradict one another, forming an absurdity which is yet not far from telling the truth. Therefore, Jack's statement may be regarded as one more experiment with linguistic artifacts, the whole process being performed in a playful, flippant, and insouciant way.

Unlike in the previous comedies, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* paradoxes that present the dandiacal philosophy are frequently in close relationship with the plot. This is clearly shown in the scene in which Jack is upstairs frantically searching for the hand-bag, and Gwendolen, who waits with the others downstairs, comments on the situation: "This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last". (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 469). In this way her self-centered relishing of sensation is dependent upon Jack's distress. Moreover, she formulates the ironical statement based on a perverse reversal of the commonly accepted notion, according to which, the expression "terrible suspense" would be considered unpleasant in its quality. However, the astonishing and controversial implication of the phrase becomes perfectly logical in the world ruled by aesthetics.

As it has already been stated, most of the absurd phrases are derived from the fantastic transformations of the language structure, which is turned comple-

tely upside-down to fit the inner reality of the play. This is illustrated in the dialogue between Lady Bracknell and her nephew, when he tries to inform her about the death of his non-existent friend Bunbury:

*Algernon:* My dear Aunt Augusta, I mean he was found out! The doctors found out that Bunbury could not live, that is what I mean — so Bunbury died.

*Lady Bracknell:* He seems to have had great confidence in the opinion of his physicians. (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 464).

Algernon's intentional mistake based on the ambiguity of the phrase "found out" is effectively countered by his aunt's retort. She pretends to take her nephew's explanation verbatim to exaggerate it. In order to achieve this aim, she applies the irony of the literal mind. Speaking of death in terms of appropriate and inappropriate reactions, she violates not only social norms, but also the semantic functions of language. Simultaneously, being quite candid about the most drastic and controversial matters, she reveals much brute sense which makes her the most aggressive character of the play.

Accordingly, most witticisms in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are grounded on linguistic operations. This can be exemplified in another speech of Lady Bracknell: "I cannot recall what the General's Christian name was. But I have no doubt he had one. He was eccentric, I admit. But only in later years. And that was the result of the Indian climate, and marriage, and indigestion, and other things of that kind" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 471). The monologue is begun with the nonsensically superfluous statement that the General must have had a name. The comic feature of this speech is deepened by the incoherent enumeration of such phenomena as "the Indian climate, and marriage, and indigestion", all of which have pejorative connotations according to Lady Bracknell, speaking now in her dandiacal voice. She again undercuts the conventional standards of morality, namely the traditional marriage dogma by the application of the ironies of comparison and reversal. As a result, the important is equated with the trivial and the implication is reversed. Another absurdity can be found in Lady Bracknell's description of Jack's father: "The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 471). In this way, she formulates a double paradox revealing a content thoroughly contrary to ordinary opinions about soldiers. The device is again based on a linguistic experiment consisting in the shifting of lexical meanings; "the General" thus signifies "a man of peace".

The next comic device applied in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and totally absent from the three society comedies is verbal reaction contrary to the expected one. Let us then analyze Gwendolen's passage, when she introduces herself to Cecily. She says that she is Lord Bracknell's daughter and that her father is unknown "outside the family circle" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 455). She adds then: "The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties, he

becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 455). The statement conceals a triple negation of the traditionally accepted notions of masculinity. Gwendolen's reasoning is thus based on three illogical premises; first, "home", is "the proper sphere for the man"; secondly, if he neglects it, he becomes "painfully effeminate"; and finally, it is his femininity that makes him "so very attractive". In this way, the utterance is grounded on the speaker's doubly unexpected verbal reaction to her own previously spoken words.

The next example of the same kind comes from the unmasking scene in which it turns out that Jack is not named Ernest and that he does not have a brother.

*Gwendolen*: (Severely) Had you never a brother of any kind?

*Jack*: (Pleasantly) Never. Not even of any kind.

(*The Importance of Being Earnest* 460)

Although Jack's deception is discovered, he does not seem to be abashed; on the contrary, he is in a playful and flippant mood. His frivolous answer is constructed on the basis of a deformation of the appropriate reaction expected from him on such an occasion. Moreover, his superfluous "Not even of any kind" ironically exaggerates Gwendolen's phrase, which in this way appears ridiculous.

However, the most copious source of unexpected verbal reaction is Lady Bracknell, the involuntary truth-speaker of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. When Jack refuses to give his consent to the marriage between Cecily and Algernon, Lady Bracknell asks: "Upon what grounds may I ask? Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 466) Like in the course of the whole play, her reaction is unexpectedly contrary to the demanded one. Her paradoxical statement involves two contrary components, and, as a result, her exaltation of Algernon plays the role of flippant criticism of his personality as well as of the social norms of an upper class ruled by appearances.

Generally, the various types of paradoxes, absurdities, and comic devices named by us as 'linguistic operations' and 'unexpected verbal reactions' are much more frequently applied in *The Importance of Being Earnest* than in the three previous society comedies. This is due to the fact that the comic in words in the last comedy is more varied, and although it includes less pure paradoxes in the form of witticisms not affecting the action than *A Woman of No Importance*, it comprises other types of paradoxical statements such as witty contextual remarks and clever utterances pointing up the plot — devices that are nearly completely excluded from the other plays.

Accordingly, society comedies are abundant mainly in pure witticisms and absurdities produced consciously by intelligent and sophisticated personages,

whereas in *The Importance of Being Earnest* these devices are accompanied by clever statements pointing up the plot, absurd remarks uttered inadvertently, and unexpected verbal reactions; the first two are entirely non-existent in other comedies by Wilde, and the third one occurs only occasionally and is included in dandies' witticisms composed on purpose to shock the listener.

Although satire is not a comic form of primary importance in Wilde's comedies, each of his plays has some satirical overtones or even passages that are quite overtly directed against the "venerated institutions, cherished beliefs and accepted customs" (Bergler 1956: 75). Similarly as the comic devices previously discussed here, satirical remarks in society comedies are always produced consciously by highly intelligent characters, while in the last comedy they are often based on the irony of the literal mind and of truth applied by less sophisticated characters such as Lady Bracknell, who does it inadvertently, or even contrary to her intention. To illustrate, when Lord Goring formulates his witticism: "Only people who look dull ever get into the House of Commons, and only people who are dull ever succeed there" (*An Ideal Husband* 417), the meaning conveyed by the remark is intentional. On the other hand, Lady Bracknell attempts to defer to the social conventions, dogmas, and institutions of England of those years, whereas her intended praise of them results in the exposing of their sham. This may be exemplified in her speech about education in England: "the whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 439). Paradoxically, being a confirmed follower of a Philistine morality, she defies conventional standards, and, in fact, the most satirical sections of *The Importance of Being Earnest* are formed by her assertions that slide into analyses without any apparent awareness on her part (cf. Reinert 1956: 14–17).

Similarly, another literary method, parody, is quite frequently used in Wilde's last comedy. To illustrate, the preference for town sophistication over country simplicity, a theme typical of Restoration comedy, recurs as its own parody in Lady Bracknell's words: "You have a town house, I hope? A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 439). The paradoxical statement is constructed upon the nonsensical reversal of the traditional idea, according to which the concept of "a simple, unspoiled nature" and "the country" are closely associated. The utterance is also a witty self-parody of Wilde's preference for the artificial over the natural, namely of the dandy's world. Admittedly, there are distinct marks of self-parody in many dialogues of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Thus, its passages strikingly resemble the deformed versions of those extracted from the three previous comedies. To illustrate, Algernon's declaration of love directed to Cecily is as if quoted from Darlington's to Lady Windermere.

In Wilde's last comedy, the parody-like style is centred around the established verse convention of love-romance. Thus, when Cecily and Gwendolen find out that their fiancés are not Ernests, but impostors named respectively Algernon and Jack, they feel insulted. In this way, the standard complication of the literature of love that is parodied here is the love breach caused by the lie, in other words, the secret sin out of the past on the part of Jack and Algernon. As a result, Cecily and Gwendolen realize their error in judgement and they consider the actual state of things a threat to destroy love's ideality. A burlesque-like device is that they do not think themselves to be cheated because of their boys' lies about their names; on the contrary, they feel slighted because these lies are only lies. In other words, the buried flaw of character that rises unbidden to the surface appears to be the lovers' inability to turn their fraud into reality, and, accordingly, the theme of love breach is parodied (cf. Foster 1956: 20—23). However, the girls' hostility is averted by the boys' readiness to re-christen themselves to become Ernests. Thus, the principals easily change their conduct and opinions, and the only constant phenomenon is the playful and flippant mood. Moreover, all the characters seem to know that they are in a play in which archetypal roles are being gravely travestied and the relative meaning of their words may be interpreted ambiguously. This may be exemplified by the scene in which Algernon, being prostrate with devotion, is preposterously ready to wait seventeen years until his beloved comes of age, which according to her grandfather's will will take place when she is thirty five; whereas Cecily confesses: "I couldn't wait all that time. I hate even waiting five minutes for anybody. It always makes me rather cross" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 467). The lovers' reactions are thoroughly contrary to the expected ones; Algernon, a supposed young worldling appears a sentimentalist and Cecily, a supposed unspoiled country lass, perversely declines his devotion. Thus, a parody of the innocence of love at first sight comes into being, for nothing is quite what it seems in the play and all the characters contradict themselves either in words or in actions.

Generally, in Wilde's society comedies, the satirical passages are produced consciously by refined and intelligent dandies like Lord Illingworth and Lord Goring, whereas in *The Importance of Being Earnest* they are uttered either intentionally by the wittier characters like Algernon or Jack, or inadvertently by Lady Bracknell, who trying to support the social conventions, defies and consequently compromises them. However, Wildean satire should be distinguished from satire in general, for his characters satirize not the abuses of the institutions, but the institutions themselves. Thus, while "the satirist accepts the social norm to criticise deviations from it" (Ganz 1963: 45), Wilde's personages criticise the social norm itself. As regards the elements of parody and self-parody, they are introduced in many scenes of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, whereas in Wilde's first three comedies, self-parody is utterly

absent, and parody is used much less frequently, and when it is, it does not have any comic features. To illustrate, *Lady Windermere's Fan* is built upon a non-fulfilment of the most ancient and common theatrical plot devices" (Peckham 1956: 12): the recognition scene uniting a parent and a child; the meeting of the rival women; and the discovery scene. All these stock situations are anticipated, but they are not implemented, and the usual emotional release associated with them is thus frustrated. In brief, the application of parody and satire in Wilde's comedies was greatly extended in his last play.

According to Henri Bergson, the comic can be found in form, movement, character, situation, and words (cf. Bergson 1956: 104—46). The comic in form, signifying physical deformity, and the comic in movement, based on automatism, are devices typical of farcical comedy and they do not exist in any of Wilde's comedies. On the other hand, the comic in character is applied mainly in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and it is associated with the less witty characters, namely Dr Chasuble and Miss Prism. This may be exemplified by the scene in which Jack announces his fictitious brother's death:

*Chasuble*: Was the cause of death mentioned?

*Cock*: A severe chill, it seems.

*Miss Prism*: As a man sows, so shall he reap.

*Chasuble*: (Raising his hand.) Charity, Miss Prism, charity! None of us is perfect. I myself am peculiarly susceptible to draughts.

(*The Importance of Being Earnest* 448—9)

Miss Prism's cliché is followed by Chasuble's utterance, showing his inability to distinguish between a moral and a physical quality. As Bergson puts it, "Once our attention is fixed on the material aspect of a metaphor the idea expressed becomes comic" (Bergson 1956: 135). Chasuble lacks wit and flexibility, and therefore, the ironical note of his statements is unvariably unintentional. In this may the accumulation of the paradox in the passage is due to his and Miss Prism's rigidity and mechanical responses, which are enhanced by their incapability of perceiving their laughable errors that can reappear under any new conditions. All these factors, according to Bergson, are conducive to the comic in character.

When Cecily informs Jack, Dr Chasuble, and Miss Prism that Ernest is not only alive, but that he is also waiting in the dining-room, the responses are again unexpected:

*Chasuble*: These are very joyful tidings.

*Miss Prism*: After we had all been resigned to his loss his sudden return seems to me peculiarly distressing.

(*The Importance of Being Earnest* 450)

The comic situation is evoked by the sharp contrast between their reactions. Miss Prism's unresponsiveness reveals irony of the literal mind; being unaware

that something is amiss in her statement, she is trapped in her inability to differentiate between reality and illusion.

The device classified by Bergson as the comic in words is much more frequently applied in Wilde's comedies than the comic in character or in situation. Thus, when in *The Importance of Being Earnest* Cecily acknowledges her inattentiveness during the lessons with Miss Prism, Dr. Chasuble rejoins: "Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips. (Miss Prism glares) I spoke metaphorically. My metaphor was drawn from bees" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 445). In this way, he makes a verbal indiscretion which he then attempts to lessen. In the case of Chasuble, the comic in words is often based on malapropisms of both words and ideas and on an ineptitude of his verbal reactions to the corresponding situations.

Repetition is, according to Bergson, one of the main sources of the comic either in situation or in words. Let us present an example of the latter:

*Algernon:* What shall we do after dinner? Go to the theatre?

*Jack:* Oh, no. I loathe listening.

*Algernon:* Well, let us go to the club?

*Jack:* Oh, no! I hate talking.

*Algernon:* Well, what shall we do?

*Jack:* Nothing.

*Algernon:* It is awfully hard work doing nothing.

(*The Importance of Being Earnest* 442)

The simple, repeated phrase is conducive to a relaxed mood of insouciant joy. The form of the dialogue resembles a song with a refrain produced by Jack. Its leitmotif is observed and formulated by Algernon whose paradox is banality turned into a witty remark by means of a clever linguistic operation. As a result, two types of the comic in words are combined: repetition and the inversion of meaning.

Obviously, the technique of repetition is widely used in the scene in which Gwendolen and Cecily sarcastically imitate each other's speeches, thinking themselves to be rivals. Such a mechanical repetition containing ready-made formulae and intentionally stereotyped phrases arouses smiles and occasionally laughter. This in turn gives the impression of a refrain which binds together all the passages, uniting the whole play. Admittedly, both Gwendolen and Cecily, contrary to a model of contemporary woman, are highly affected and attack each other in an oblique way, which adds to the ironical tone of their conversation. At the same time, the two girls are engaged to the fictitious Ernest and this is why they are hostile to each other. This device is termed "reciprocal interference" by Bergson and it belongs to the comic in situation. Thus, the audience see the real meaning of the situation, while the girls are not aware of it. This results in dramatic irony built on the discrepancy of their awareness.

Dramatic irony is also used in Wilde's society comedies, for example in *Lady Windermere's Fan* where the titular heroine never learns that Mrs. Erlynne is her mother. Moreover, Lady Windermere fights to exclude her own mother from her birthday party, while she receives Lord Darlington, who tries to seduce her. Finally, her ignorance ironically seems to be conducive to her marital happiness. All these devices, however, are only modified and slightly remote versions of the comic in situation, the tone being here rather serious than playful. On the other hand, nearly all the comic devices in the three society comedies centre around verbal wit; while in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the comic in character and in situation is as important as the comic in words.

On the whole, in Wilde's society comedies the comic in character played a relatively more significant role than the comic in situation, and although it was not widely applied as in his least comedy, such characters as the Duchess from *Lady Windermere's Fan* and Archdeacon Daubeny or Lady Caroline in *A Woman of No Importance* may be considered prototypes of Dr. Chasuble, Miss Prism, and Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Whenever such devices as recognition, discovery, or inopportune appearance are introduced in Wilde's society comedies, they are not tinged with the comic. On the other hand, in his last comedy, his sophisticated verbal wit is frequently intertwined with the comic devices derived from farcical comedy, which are also typical of Restoration comedy. These are: mistaken identity, misunderstanding, unmasking, and *quid pro quo*. The mistaken identity technique is employed in the scene in which Algernon is announced as Mr. Ernest Worthing. However, Cecily, although deceived by his trick, is able to ridicule him:

*Algernon:* Oh! I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily.

*Cecily:* If you are not, then you have been certainly deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope that you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.

(*The Importance of Being Earnest* 446)

She perceives that there is only a slight difference between his assumed appearance of virtue and the reputation for vice that accompanies the name of Ernest Worthing, and she plays one against the other, putting Algernon out of countenance, and unexpectedly on the defensive. Thus the combination of the irony of the literal mind and of reversal and dramatic irony caused by the mistaken identity device, displays the complexity of the structure of Wilde's comedy. What is interesting is that from this point on Algernon's wit is passed to Cecily and he never regains it at any time she is on the stage. Consequently, the mistaken identity technique is transformed; in fact, not Cecily, but Algernon, who is a deceiver, is ridiculed. Accordingly, both the situation and the characters are parodied; Algernon's supposedly irretrievable sophistication is defeated by an artless country girl's attack.



Reverting to the conflict between Gwendolen and Cecily, it originates from plot complications. There are some traditional well-made plot devices engaged here; the whole affair springs from the mistaken identity technique — the two girls think themselves to be engaged to the same man named Ernest — and the result is manifested in the misunderstanding between them and in their ostensibly cross purposes. The climax of the succession of plot devices is reached when Jack is unmasked by Cecily, who discloses his name. The same happens to Algernon which produces the exact correspondence between the procedures of identifying the two impostors, and according to Bergson, the repetition on the stage is invariably humorous.

When Jack and Algernon declare themselves to be ready to get rechristened and the lovers become reconciled, their idyll is interrupted by Lady Bracknell's inopportune appearance, another plot device. Although furious to see Gwendolen embraced by Jack, she assures them that she will not tell the truth to her husband, for she has "never undeceived him on any question" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 463). Her utterance is the next in the series of running jokes about Lord Bracknell, a symbol of masculine passivity.

Admittedly, the running joke is a comic device often used in Wilde's society comedies, especially in *A Woman of No Importance*, where Lady Carolina continuously mispronounces Mr. Kelvil's name as Kettle; Lady Hunstanton suffers from bad memory and absent-mindedness; Lady Stutfield tends to use adverbs in pairs; and the Archdeacon tells stories about his wife who is deaf and dumb, paralyzed, does not remember anything, but "has nothing to complain of" (*A Woman of No Importance* 350).

Reverting to *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the last misunderstanding included in it occurs when Jack supposes Miss Prism to be his mother. The situation then develops into a false recognition scene, which becomes still more amusing when Jack thinks his fictitious mother has been unmarried.

*Jack:* Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But, after all, who has a right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out the act of folly? Why should be one law for men and another for women? Mother, I forgive you.

(*The Importance of Being Earnest* 470)

Jack tries to embrace Miss Prism who becomes "still more indignant": the ludicrous disparity between their behaviours deepens the comic situation. It is a burlesque-like tone which emerges as a result from sentiments of utterly different contexts being fused together into a single statement. Thus, the passage beginning with mock-understatement — "I do not deny that is a serious blow" — moves on through biblical reference — "... who has the right to cast..." — to the clichés of the Romantic melodrama. The issue of the same laws for men and women has already been introduced in Wilde's first two comedies, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*; however, in

*The Importance of Being Earnest*, the matter, so seriously treated in the previous plays, is distorted and ironically turned into its own parody. And it is the difference in tone which constitutes the essential discrepancy between the last comedy and the former ones.

On the whole, the scale of plot devices in Wilde's society comedies is narrower than in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. However, the most fundamental difference lies in the fact that in the former ones the plot is not comic at all, and only verbal wit and a few amusing characters counterbalance the serious problems; whereas in the latter the plot contributes to the playful mood and reinforces other comic devices. All these remarks inevitably lead to the conclusion that in Wilde's first three comedies, plot devices are not so varied and that they are much less frequently applied than in his last comedy. And even if the technique of the mistaken identity or discovery is introduced in them, it is not so closely associated with the notion of the comic as in *The Importance of Being Earnest*; and that is why some of the plot devices are simply non-comic.

According to Alan Reynolds Thompson, plot devices are more complex than indecent jokes and the physical comic, but nevertheless, they do not require high intelligence to be understood (cf. Thompson 1972: 192—206). However, Wilde completely abjures obscenity and the acrobatic in his plays, while the plot devices he uses are always combined with sophisticated verbal wit. At this point it should be noticed that in his first three comedies, verbal wit is dispensed by dandies mainly in the form of witticisms standing alone and very rarely it is revealed through a comic situation or character. On the other hand, *The Importance of Being Earnest* comprises all these types of verbal wit as well as devices termed by Thompson as "inconsistencies of character" and "comedy of ideas", the most sophisticated devices conducive to high comedy.

Let us consider some examples of these techniques from Wilde's last comedy. Jack and Algernon argue which of them has the right to get rechristened-

*Algernon:* I haven't been christened for years.

*Jack:* Yes, but you have been christened. That is the important thing.

*Algernon:* Quite so. So I know my constitution can stand it.

(*The Importance of Being Earnest* 461)

Jack's serious tone is distorted in Algernon's phrases. Algernon proves a more skillful Bunburyist, in other words, more serious about not being serious. Consequently, Jack's arguments are unconvincing and ridiculous, for he does not stick to the rules he set himself. Thus, from a dandiacal point of view, his character is inconsistent, while Algernon's paradoxes sound perfectly logical in the fantastic and care-free land created by Wilde.

Another example comes from the scene in which Algernon, asked by Lady Bracknell to arrange music for her Saturday party, puts forward a paradoxical witticism: "... if one plays good music, people don't listen" (*The Importance of*

*Being Earnest* 436). Displaying the perfect economy of expression, the statement juxtaposes seemingly opposing concepts, but in fact it penetrates the platitudinous nature of a human being. This is a typical verbal wit standing by itself and, composed of the irony of reversal independent of any larger context to be grasped. Lady Bracknell also remarks on music: "French song I cannot possibly allow... But German sounds a thoroughly respectable language" (*The importance of Being Earnest* 436). She attempts to defer social convention and simultaneously exposes its sham. Consequently, the inconsistency of her character arises accompanied by a slight tone of social satire.

Finally, Gwendolen's declaration of love directed to Jack combines verbal wit with inconsistency of character and comedy of ideas; "The story of your romantic origin... has stirred the deeper fibres of my nature. Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination. The simplicity of your character makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 443). The scene from which this passage is extracted is based on the reversal of the roles of the sexes; Jack's passivity is sharply contrasted with Gwendolen's ardent declaration. The speech rings ridiculously pathetic and is unequivocally a parody of a romantic love scene. Furthermore, Gwendolen, the exponent of ideal love, undermines her statement by proving that her affection is mere self-admiration combined with the desire for novel experiences. The monologue itself comprises two paradoxes built on the reciprocal interference of opposing concepts. As a result, a comic mixture of parody, nonsense, and irony sets in motion the comic in situation as well as inconsistencies of characters emerging from the reversal of their traditional roles. The crucial point of the speech is, however, the name Ernest and, in fact, it is the whole play that centres around the disparity between the Philistine Earnest and the dandiacal Ernest. This opposition is wittily epitomized in the titular pun; as a result, the play is about the importance of being Ernest, in other words, frivolous, flippant, and not earnest. Thus, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is grounded on the comic idea, and its comic feature is revealed both through verbal wit and through the plot. This, in turn, makes this play a model high comedy.

Undoubtedly, *The Importance of Being Earnest* testifies to Wilde's development as a dramatist, and especially a comedist. Unlike the previous plays, this one integrates nearly all possible comic devices except the most farcical ones like obscenity or physical mishaps. Thus, while Wilde's society comedies focus on verbal wit, his last comedy comprises plot devices typical of farce and Restoration drama as well as the comic idea found in high comedy. In other words, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, there are more comic devices and their scale is much larger than in Wilde's first three comedies. This is made possible by the exclusion of the Philistine world from the play. Consequently, the values of ordinary importance disappear in the world of dandies

where the categories of serious and frivolous no longer apply. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband*, such a playful, flippant, and liberated tone is frustrated by the prevalent conventional morality represented by Philistine society. As a result, the dandies are involved in too much action, compromising their creed at the same time, like Lord Illingworth, or are confined only to the role of guide and philosopher, like the most perfect of them, Lord Goring. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* it is the dandy who rules, and thus the absurd appears to be irrevocably logical and vice versa, the rational view belonging to the real world is rendered ludicrous in the comedy, whose "purpose is to entertain and evoke the laughter of amusement, rather than to instruct or reform" (Hunt 1971: 169). Thus, in this land of linguistic improbability, the application of the complete scale of the comic devices seems virtually natural; a cliché may be easily stirred into a brilliant paradox, and a farcical plot device is refined by the accumulation of verbal wit.

#### SOURCES

Whenever we quote Wilde's works, we follow the following convention: we mention the title of his play and the page. The edition we refer to is *The works of Oscar Wilde*, Roslyn, New York: Black Raeders Company, 1927.

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