

An Analysis of the Union of Seriousness and Triviality in the Importance of Being Earnest from Paradox

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Keywords: the Importance of Being Earnest, Paradox, Seriousness, Triviality

Abstract: Wilde subtitled the importance of being earnest “a trivial comedy for serious people” and describe is as “exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy.” Wilde once remarked to a reporter, but “it has its philosophy.” The philosophy is “that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.” Wilde’s characters embody paradoxes as they reflect the philosophy of the play. This thesis examines the union of seriousness and triviality from Cleanth Brooks’s theory of paradox and the paradox’s function in the importance of being earnest. This paper mainly focuses on the analysis characters in the play.

1. Introduction

Considered the Embodiment the Aesthetic Theories Wilde Had Proposed in the Essay Collection *Interntions, the Importance of Being Earnest* is Recognized as the Quintessential Wildean Comedy. Allan Aynesworth, “Algernon” in the Original Production, Later Recalled: “in My Fifty-Three Years of Acting, I Never Remember a Greater Triumph Than the First Night of *the Importance of Being Earnest*. the Audience Rose in Their Seats and Cheered Again.”^[1]

Wilde subtitled this work “A trivial comedy for Serious People” and describe is as “exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy.” The play itself is capricious enough to dress its seriousness in the bangles of absurdity and to imply that the costume is more important than what lies underneath. Judging from Wilde’s own comments, the earnestness and the triviality are meant to reinforce each other. Wilde once remarked to a reporter, but “it has its philosophy.” The philosophy is “that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.” Wilde’s characters embody paradoxes as they reflect the philosophy of the play.

This thesis examines the union of seriousness and triviality from the paradox and paradox’s function in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. This paper mainly focuses on the analysis characters in the play, such as Jack, Miss Prism and Cecily. They eventually reconcile triviality and seriousness and get the union of seriousness and triviality. In this way, we can have an objective and all round understanding of this play.

2. Literature Review and Research Question

In international studies, critics analyze the features of paradox in the language of the play. But no critic analyzes theme and characters in the play from paradox. In domestic study, critics analyze the features of Wilder’s language, such as irony, parody, and paradox. However, few critic analyzes theme and characters in the play from paradox.

In this paper, the characters in the play are analyzed from Cleanth Brooks’s theory of paradox to examine the union of seriousness and triviality and the paradox’s function in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

3. Theoretical Framework and Critical Approach-Brooks’s Theory of Paradox

Brooks is a famous New Critic. He presented that a poem contains tensions and paradoxical meanings. Paradox means union of opposites. He said in 1942: “Paradox is the language; of sophistry, hard, bright, witty; it is hardly the language of the soul. We are willing to allow that

paradox is a permissible weapon which a Chesterton may on occasion exploit. We may permit it in epigram, a special subvariety of poetry; and in satire, which though useful, we are hardly willing to allow to be poetry at all. Our prejudices force us to regard paradox as intellectual rather than emotional, clever rather than profound, rational rather than divinely irrational. Yet there is a sense in which paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox.”^{[2]P62}

Paradox means that a statement that reveals a kind of truth, although it seems at first to be self-contradictory and untrue.^{[3]P387}

4. Analysis

Paradox means union of opposites.^{[2]P62} Wilde subtitled *The Importance of Being Earnest* “A trivial comedy for Serious People” and describe it as “exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy.” Judging from Wilde’s own comments, the earnestness and the triviality are meant to reinforce each other. Wilde once remarked to a reporter, but “it has its philosophy.” The philosophy is “that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.”^[1] Wilde’s characters embody paradoxes as they reflect the philosophy of the play.

The wit and the seriousness, then, contribute to each other. In terms of character, this means that Jack, Algernon, and others must come to reconcile triviality and seriousness.

4.1 Jack’s View of the Union of Seriousness and Triviality

Jack is in failing to grasp the paradox of serious triviality at the beginning of the play. Eventually, he comes to reconcile triviality and seriousness.

The crisscrossing of names may seem to imply that he embraces the paradox from the beginning: “Ernest”, like “Worthing,” a name suggesting seriousness and stability, is the town delinquent. While “Jack”, suggesting the rake, is the conservative moral guardian of a country niece. Actually, however, until his comic anagnorisis “recognition of his true identity”, he is lacking in “proper” values and requires instruction in the pursuit of the trivial from Algernon. Algernon in turn ultimately assumes the role, and proposes to assume the name, of “earnestness”, whereas he has previously lived by the “science” of Bunburying and reserved sentiment for the piano. Even in town Jack is conservative. He does not care about Bunburying and is quite willing to kill off his “brother” Ernest; in other words, despite the fact that he has his own brand of humor, he does not sufficiently understand the importance of being trivial. His upstage position consistently gives Algernon the initiative.

Jack: For Heaven’s sake, don’t try to be cynical. It’s perfectly easy to be cynical.

Algernon: My dear Fellow, it isn’t easy to be anything nowadays. There’s such a beastly competition about.^{[4]P134}

He is against divorce, and at times even against eating, while such things can be special arts when performed with style, as Algy performs when devouring the muffins:

Jack: How you can sit here, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble, I can’t make out. You seem to be perfectly heartless.

Algernon: Well, I can’t eat muffin in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them.^{[4]P174}

The style is everything and the situation exists to make the style possible. As Wilde notes in “*Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*” and has Gwendolen comment in the play, “in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.”^[5] It is this lesson that Jack must learn, and does learn eventually, even though, until the resolution, he frequently retreats behind established values.

But Lady Bracknell finds him lacking in other regards as well. He is disqualified from wedding Gwendolen because he is not respectable enough. Being the child of an “ordinary” handbag from Victoria station, Brighton line, is bothersome and bourgeois; to be so born shows “a contempt for

the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution.”^{[4]P43} He is in the embarrassing position of being respectable in moral outlook and yet unfit for good society, whereas precisely the opposite is required if one is to live “earnestly,” that is, to put into practice and into daily manners the philosophy of the play.

4.2 Miss Prism Cannot Get the Union of Seriousness and Triviality Immediately

Miss Prism is also in failing to grasp the paradox immediately because she errs on the side of over-seriousness.

Miss Prism’s name, as critics have pointed out, is a combination of prim, prissy, and perhaps prison. “Idle merriment and triviality”^[6] she finds out of place in those sensible of high duty and responsibility. Her moral outlook is uncompromising at times: the good should end happily and bad unhappily, as they do in fiction. Yet like Jack she has an obvious charm and a sense for the trivial that requires only the right kind of stimulation. As the conductor of German lessons, she is, of course, a formidable obstacle to joy, or “laetitia.” The Rev. Canon Chasuble at one point calls her “Egeria” after the mythical patron of Roman law and order. But she shows sign of living up to her given name. The chief difference between her triviality when it comes forward and that of Algy or Lady Bracknell is its moral and sentimental nature. Informed that the profligate “Ernest” is dead, for example, she finds it “a blessing of an extremely obvious kind.”^{[4]P157} But she undermines her arch solemnity by unconsciously making a game of it, as in the remark, immediately following this one, that “After we had all been resigned to his loss, his sudden return seems to me peculiarly distressing.”^{[4]P158} The latter comment is doubly ironic since she herself has lost “Ernest” at the station, or rather, substituted for him “the manuscript of a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality”^{[4]P187} and, even while the lighter side of “earnestness” keeps intruding upon her, wishes to be disembarrassed of it altogether.

4.3 Cecily Comes Much Closer to the Union of Seriousness and Triviality

Cecily comes much closer to embodying consistently the proper mixture of seriousness and triviality required of earnestness. She is said to be innocent and overly “natural” but can behave with ingratiating lightheartedness. Her taste for the incongruous is unsurpassed even by Algernon’s. Nature and artifice are fused in her but completely inverted: nature is sacrificed to artifice. Her fertile imagination absorbs nature and transforms it into a delicate and witty fantasy, the quality of which is set off by contrast to Lady Bracknell’s less spontaneous artifice and Miss Prism’s less gracious sense of duty. The essence of Wilde’s wit as Cecily illustrates it is lightness, brilliance, and a refusal, on the surface at least, to concede anything to reality. Cecily’s mask is worn in the sport of self-creation; no real enemy exist to guard against, unless perhaps boredom. Algernon is absorbed into her extravagant dream like a Prince Charming in Dandy-clothes.

Yet Cecily’s world is fragile, “a delicate bubble of fancy.”^[1] With the entrance of Gwendolen, Cecily is made aware of its precarious existence. A more enduring and satisfactory marriage of serious romance and lightheartedness must await the conclusion. The balance which must be maintained in the world of artifice remains upset until the final pairing off. Lack of balance, in fact, replaces, or rather lies behind, the stock comic obstacles to harmonious resolution. Cecily and Gwendolen speak of their respective loves “meditatively,” “thoughtfully and sadly,” yet attack each other “satirically,” and “superciliously.” Decorum is shattered in the brutal frankness of their exchange, as it is in the parallel clash between Jack and Algernon. The potential ugliness of social relations comes just close enough to the surface to set off the value of taking things less seriously. Jack’s summary of Algernon’s overdressed flippancy, while he himself stands ludicrously dressed in black, is the most extreme point of divergence: “Your vanity is ridiculous, your conduct an outrage, and your presence in my garden utterly absurd,”^{[4]P160} he remarks. Equilibrium and social tact are seemingly destroyed; Bunburying is over, even though Algernon still stands by it in principle and reassures us that somehow the artifice will be salvaged: “well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth you are serious about, I haven’t got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely trivial nature”.^[4]

Cecily and Algernon, then, like Jack and Gwendolen, seek a means to reconcile play and “real life.” The frequency of remarks such as the one just quoted from Algernon is too great to suppose that the wit is meant to be merely embellishment. The very persistence of the trivial testifies to its importance and to its durability. It is a quality not of single characters or particular dialogues but of the entire play; it will not be purged or chastised. It has a metaphysical and metalogical order of its own which asserts itself against other kinds of order. As Johan Huizinga writes in *Homo Ludens*, “Play only becomes possible. when an influx of mind break down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation.” Dandies such as Algernon are play-boys whose function is to view culture “under the appearance of a game” and to fight off encroachments of moral and practical affairs.^[7]

The play reshapes conventions, then, to fit the central action of learning to live the basic paradox.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Main Statement

In terms of character, this means that Jack, Algernon, and others must come to reconcile triviality and seriousness. A proposal that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is genuinely in earnest is likely to evoke Algernon’s pronouncement, “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.”^{[4]P132} But the play itself is capricious enough to dress its seriousness in the bangles of absurdity and to imply that the costume is more important than what lies underneath. It is called *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, and judging from Wilde’s own comments, the earnestness and the triviality are meant to reinforce each other. The play “is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy,” Wilde once remarked to a reporter, but “it has its philosophy.” The philosophy is “that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.” This, its is true, may not seem the sort of philosophy calculated to reward critical analysis; and if this is not enough, there is the additional warning that Wilde has Gilbert make in “The Critics as Artist”: “there are two ways of disliking art... One is to dislike it. The other, to like it rationally.”^[5] But it is suggested quite solemnly that the play asks us to resist the inclination to bask uncritically in the wit and to examine closely the paradox of serious triviality. By its sheer abundance, the wit tends to be cloying and if left without gravitational center, to spin off under its own dazzling energy.

Jack, Miss Prism, Cecily, and others must come to reconcile triviality and seriousness. As Wilde said: “that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.” They eventually get the union of seriousness and triviality.

5.2 Significance

In theory, paradox means union of opposites. The theory of paradox is not only used to analyze the features of the language, but also used to analyze the theme and characters in the play.

In practice, we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality. It is this lesson that everyone must learn how to reconcile triviality and seriousness. We can harmonically live in a balance situation.

5.3 Limitation

In this paper, only three characters--- Jack, Miss prism and Cecily---are analyzed from the theory of paradox. However, other characters should be analyzed. For example, Algernon is an important character who represents Wilde’s view. For example, Algernon says: “well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth you are serious about, I haven’t got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely trivial nature”.^{[4]P173} Algernon seeks a means to reconcile play and real life. And he gets the union of seriousness and triviality.

5.4 Suggestion for Future Study

In future, we should use the theory of paradox to analyze the other works, so that we can learn

many philosophies as Wilde's philosophy "we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality." We can harmonically live in a balance situation.

Acknowledgment

The Scientific Research Foundation of Department of Education of Yunnan Province, China (No. 2017ZDX259).

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