

OSCAR WILDE'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE IMPROVEMENT OF MODERN COMEDY

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Abstract

Oscar Wilde, in spite of his moral failing that saw him into jail, is somebody whose contributions to the improvement of modern comedy cannot be easily overlooked. This is more so when even in this modern age, his plays are still produced, and they draw attention. Not only that, even in this modern age, they influence writers and film makers. Therefore, in this enquiry the aim of which is to highlight his achievements, his contributions towards the improvement and sustenance of comedy are looked into. What is more, despite his avowed Aesthetic Movement, he uses his art not only to correct the pretensions of the Victorian upper class but to entertain it.

INTRODUCTION

What does Oscar Wilde... bring us common readers most? His idea of aesthetic art? His satire on the society? His beautiful writing style? Or his focus on redemptuous and true love?

Vigil Wilde in *Literature Network*

The late-Victorian poet, playwright, novelist, wit, conversationalist and social critic Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854-1900) has a lot for which we must always remember him. In spite of his closing his literary career in ignominy, his achievements cannot be easily forgotten. More so, this is in view of those who do not take him serious because of his avowed stand on art for art's sake. But the *Wikipedia Free*

Library tells us that one of his plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest* has been translated into many languages, turned into a film, "... adapted for the English language cinema at least three times ...", used as the libretto in an opera, adapted and released on CD as part of the "Classic Radio Theatre" series by BBC Audio, etc.

In other words, Oscar Wilde has brought to us common readers a lot for which we must remember him. But in this enquiry, we have to concentrate on his contributions to the improvement of modern comedy. In this study, we can only use just three of his plays: *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*. All these works are contained in Geddes & Grosset's *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Therefore, page references are based on this collection.

Furthermore, any meaningful assessment of Oscar Wilde's contributions to the sustenance and improvement of modern comedy using these three texts entails a full knowledge of their nature and the period during which he wrote them. This can be understood when one considers the fact that he was neither the originator of the form nor did he write something which nobody had ever thought of. What is more, the age during which one writes affects the works involved. This is the basis for the next two segments of our enquiry.

Comedy of Manners

Even a cursory look at the three plays can show them to have the properties of comedy of manners. Such properties like stock character types, clever servants, vicissitudes of young lovers, stodgy parents, wealthy rivals, etc are what these plays are made of. According to M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, this type of comedy has its origin in the New Comedy of the Greek playwright, Menander (c345-299 BC) of Athens (39). If the development of comedy of manners is traced from this its origin to the days of Oscar Wilde, we can discover its passage through the era of Roman dramatists before its entrance into the Elizabethan theatre, then to the hands of the French playwrights. From the Elizabethan Age, we can see that it flourished well during the Restoration Age in the hands of such men like William Wycherley and William Congreve. The next transformation it had was the removal of bawdy and indecent scenes that changed it into the sentimental comedy of the eighteenth century. But despite its revival in such works like R. B. Sheridan's *The Rivals* and *A School for Scandal*, it came to a time when it seemed that the world had forgotten the form.

This situation must have motivated the writers of *Encyclopaedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite* to state that: "Drama did not flourish early in the 19th century" (n.p.). They go further to talk of Shelley and Byron who wrote verse dramas but these were "... intended for reading rather than for staging.... The stage however, was primarily interested in low melodrama and sentimental farce-comedy" (n.p.).

This was the time when Oscar Wilde came to the scene. What he did was a sort of resuscitation of a moribund form of drama. But to be more balanced in our assessment, such minor dramatists like Henry Arthur Jones and Sir Arthur Irving Pinero, and G. B. Shaw were there. However, *Encarta Premium* has it that none could match Wilde in his: "Frequently making use of short pithy and humorous sayings that are his trademark [and his ridiculing of] the frivolity of fashionable London society" (n.p.).

As the source summarizes, "Oscar Wilde used the late 19th century theatrical form called the society drama to create a brilliantly satirical comedy of manner" (n.p.). In other words, in spite of there being other playwrights, it was Oscar Wilde who saved the form from extinction even as the upper class for which it was meant was still thriving.

For him to achieve this, he injected certain things into the form. This is part of what distinguishes him today as a creative artist worthy of our attention. This was what earned him a position in the list of important English playwrights. It is in these additions, as can be seen in this enquiry that he contributed to the improvement of modern comedy.

But as everybody must know, the Victorian Age during which he wrote had a lot of contributory effects on him. This is more so when it was noted that the permissiveness of the Restoration Age, for example, could not be allowed during his time – a time of extreme Puritanism. So, it is important to look at the Age so as to access its effect on his work.

The Victorian Age

The most important aspect of the Age which can be seen in his work is its hypocrisy. This is the Age which raised a lot of dust on the publication of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. People then saw it as a sacrilege that Hardy would put a subtitle – *A Pure Maiden* – to a story of a girl who had an issue out of wedlock—irrespective of her condition, reason, resolutions, difficulties, and social subjugation.

Under this condition, one can infer that this is an Age with some spiritual ideas. However, while some were highly spiritual, others were not so. Therefore, when one takes a look at his works, one can discover “worldliness and negligence of the clergy and the indifference of the laity” (Kermode et al 789). Needless to say, these were topical issues during that Age.

Furthermore, one can see a society in its class distinctions – the upper class, the middle classes and the lower class. This idea of social stratification “... dictates differences in mode of life, manner and personal temperament” (Kermode and Hollander 789). This is the main area of interest in the present enquiry into the contributions of Oscar Wilde. It is here, therefore, that the major part of this topic is treated.

Oscar Wilde's greatest contribution is his revival of comedy of manners after its being in the doldrums for a very long time with only Romantic and Sentimental Comedy being acted. Hence, he took it up from the Restoration period and as was pointed out, he removed all bawdy scenes that were offending the sensibility of the Victorian Age. For an illustration, when you examine Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, you can discover that Horner optimizes all that is bawdy and so, he goes on “selling China” to the society women who after buying behave as if nothing has happened. It is only when the rustic Margery is involved that somebody can come out to swear that Horner is not impotent but is actually “giving horns” to his fellow men.

Such scenes of sexual innuendoes abound in the play: men are being given horns, women are buying China, wit is denounced in women because it enables them to cuckold their husbands, etc.

But when one comes to *The Importance of Being Earnest*, there is nothing that offends the moral man if he is not so squeamish as to look at some farcical situations as being out of taste. But note the observation of William Archer in *The World* as quoted in the *Wikipedia Free Library*. He has it that although he enjoys watching the play, he has: “... found it to be empty of meaning; what can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle, whether of art or morals, creates its own cannons and convention and is nothing but an absolutely willful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality” (n.p.).

What Archer fails to see is Wilde's stand for his Aesthetic Movement – art for art's sake. Or who does not enjoy the scintillating conversations? Even, in spite of Wilde's art for art's sake, which work of art does not have a meaning? In other words, which

extended literary creation does not have a theme? There is none. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, although different people have different interpretations based on their experiences and inclinations, Wilde tells us that "... we should treat all trivial things in life very seriously and all serious things of life with a sincere and studied triviality" (Wikipedia n.p.)

So, when one looks at this non-offensive play, one can discover that Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing create imaginary men whom they give as reasons for their travelling out of the city and out of the countryside respectively. These are in no way offensive and so even happen today. That they are looking for wives is not offensive either. The worst that can be said is that the lives of these people are shallow and pretentious. A consideration like this must have induced the compilers of *Encyclopedia Americana Vol. 16* to say that all "... that is usually taken seriously from birth to death is turned upside down in a comic world that only an extraordinarily serious moralist could regard as an offense to propriety" (825).

However, Karl Beckson in *Britannica* online sees the forte of the play not in shedding off of sexual innuendoes which can be seen in other comedies of manner. According to him, Wilde's "... greatest achievement [is in transforming] the conventional elements of farce into satiric epigrams – [these being] seemingly trivial but mercilessly exposing Victorian hypocrisies" (n.p.). This in itself can immortalize Wilde but Beckson goes further to say that:

Wilde's greatest successes were his society comedies [of which *The Importance of Being Earnest* is an illustration]. Within the conventions of the French "well-made play" with its intrigues and artificial devices to resolve conflict, he employed his paradoxical, epigrammatically wills to create a form of comedy new to the 19th century English theatre (n.p.).

The prominence which this drama text has in the English theatre can be garnered if we listen to Sampson who has it that: "It is one of the two best comedies written since the time of Sheridan" (618). A text so placed cannot fit into William Archer's observation. As was observed earlier, it is not empty of meaning. Now, if it is one of the two best comedies written since the time of R. B. Sheridan, the poor critic will have something to write on or let him become idle since he is suffering from myopia.

Situations not far from the above are equally obtainable in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Although Lady Windermere neatly elopes with Lord Darlington, but nearly, we all know, cannot kill a bird. As for *A Woman of No Importance*, we only know that Mrs. Arbuthnot, for example, behaved badly before the play begins but on our seeing her, she has so repented that she has immersed herself in social work and church activities.

Therefore, when Oscar Wilde took up the nearly lost comedy of manners, he pruned it of offensive parts so that it can be in conformity with the Victorian Age and its morality in order to earn himself a place in the history of serious English playwrights.

Also, when one looks at his plays, one can see that his preoccupation is to give people a "...satire on the British nobility and clergy" (Hartnoll 1008). Among the nobility, one can find such men like Lord Windermere in *Lady Windermere's Fan* whose only preoccupation is to shield his wife from knowing her real mother – for fear of a scandal. Darlington, another of the lords in the text, if allowed can cuckold Lord Windermere. His insinuation to the man's wife early in the play that a woman who discovers that her husband is having extramarital affairs can divorce him is his attempt to win the woman's love. In *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth is the closest to Mr. Horner who has been

portrayed in this essay. On the whole, these lords and ladies are shown as not being responsible citizens but people whose lives are hollow and whose conversations and manner of life are far from being good. Needless to say, because of this method, Wilde fails in all the works to distinguish the characters. He also fails to make them grow, probably because they are stock characters.

In the conversations of these characters, there is a resemblance between Wilde's personal wit and manner of expressing it and those of the characters. Because of this, it may be difficult for him to distinguish between the different characters since he has to do his best to make all of them to be good conversationalists like himself.

On this his remarkable conversations also shared by his characters, W. B. Yeats was quoted thus: "...Wilde was the only person he ever heard who spoke complete, rounded sentences that sounded as if he had written and polished them the night before. His witticisms, notorious in London, were often barbed and vicious but always appropriate and thoughtful" (Jacobus 358).

Therefore, if witticisms in his speech were so distinguished that all over London of his time they were well known and if these were put into the mouths of his characters, then these characters are worth being studied and can survive for a long time in the literary scene. This explains why even today, these plays are being acted and some of them are turned into films. In other words, Wilde does not only contribute to the improvement of modern comedy with refined conversations but also sustains modern theatres where his plays are today being produced, and modern film industries which turn his plays into films.

Furthermore, when one considers the clergy, one can find two of them in the three texts. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Dr. Chausable despite his avowed celibacy has some relationship with the old governess, Miss Prism. He is somebody easily swayed and from Algernon's question to Cecily Cardew, we hear that "Dr. Chausable is a most learned man. He has never written a single book, so you can imagine how much he knows" (189). Again, despite his being a doctor of divinity, he is empty intellectually. And in *A Woman of No Importance*, the Ven. Archdeacon Daubeny, D. D. is commented upon – this time on his association with social fops and gossips. His wife, we are told, is all the time at home with one sickness or another. The question Oscar Wilde wants everybody to ask is: To which extent will a man of God be in partnership with these societal people of questionable moral rectitude? This is an aspect of Wilde's social criticism which probably, Archer never observed.

Apart from social criticism which Wilde cleverly combines with refined conversations, his other important introduction as can be seen in the *Encyclopedia Americana* vol 16 is his usage of wit, paradox and epigrams (62). One discovers a level of verbal brilliancy throughout the three texts. This can be understood when one considers the social level of the characters-- those in the upper level of society. Sometimes, the wit flows over to the lower caste as can be seen in Lane, the manservant in *the Importance of Being Earnest* but since social gradation was reigning in the days when the play was written, the wit of the master always overrides that of the servant. For an illustration, Algernon is in doubt when he looks into the account book of Lane and he discovers that eight bottles of champagne were consumed the previous Thursday. His question to him is "Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment, the servants invariably drink champagne?" (180). Lane's reply that "I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir" gives him away as having consumed some of the drink (180).

The wit involved sometimes tends to lead to a form of verbal fencing and repartees since all the characters are witty as was observed earlier. This can be deciphered from the question of the distance between the house and Dr. Chausable's church:

Gwendolen: Five counties! I don't think I should like that; I hate crowds.

Cecily (sweetly): I suppose that is why you live in town? (190)

The implication of the repartee is that Gwendolen is merely pretending in her statement that she dislikes crowds. This is because the population of the city where she lives cannot be compared with that in the countryside. This sort of witty statements can be found in all the other texts.

Paradoxical situations are also numerous but let us look at just one from *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

Algernon: It is awfully hard work doing nothing. However, I don't mind hard work where there is no definite object of any kind (185).

Looking at this statement, we know that inactivity is not work – not to talk of its being hard. This is a critique on the members of the upper class some of whom inherited their wealth. What is implied here is the tedium and boredom in living such an idle life. But such boredom and tedium may not be perturbing if there is nothing serious waiting to be done.

The next point under consideration is the usage of epigrams. Oscar Wilde makes prodigious use of them to the highest level ever recorded in the English theatre. One expects to see these witty sayings dropping only from the mouths of those in the upper stratum of the society but they do come from even those in the lower ones. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, for example, Mrs. Erlynne has it that "A moment may ruin a life" when she is considering her daughters' relationship with Lord Darlington (132). Dumby, in his contribution, tells us that "Experience is the name every one gives to their mistakes" (135). In *A Women of No Importance*, Hester has it that "Nothing should be out of the reach of hope. Life is a hope" (140). The father of epigrams and aphorisms in the text Lord Illingworth tells us that "The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future" (149). He, it is who knows that "Moderation is a fatal thing, Lady Hunstanton. Nothing succeeds like excess" (150).

Also, Wilde uses the characters not only to criticize each other but to expose their shallow lives. As an illustration, one can see Mrs. Allonby's attempt to be like Lord Illingworth in wit and manner. She hates her husband because he is calm and does not go about flirting with other women. This exposes her intention to be flirted with by the Lord. At the same time, Lady Hunstanton tells us that Mrs. Allonby is reputed to have run away twice from her home before marriage and in a confidential manner, she says that she believes it was only once. In all these situations, one notices that the characters are not only exposing themselves but telling us of the moral decadence and shallow life style of the Victorian society.

This society is not far different from the Hampton court of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. In both societies:

Hither the heroes and the nymphs resort,
To taste a while the pleasures of a court;
In various talk the instructive hours they passed,
Who gave the ball or paid the visit hast; ...
At every word, a reputation dies (2241).

The only difference is that Pope's society people gather in one place to eat, gossip, wine and dine. In all the three texts of this study, there is no court of a queen or King.

What we have are mansions of lords and ladies. But common to them is the tendency to give a dinner, eat a launch or to be given such. While the “wining and dining” is in progress, gossips and verbal jibes do intermingle freely.

In order to satirize fully, Wilde creates some neologistic names that suit the characters. This is an innovation similar to Medieval usage of abstract names as characters. This can be seen in *Everyman* where Death has nothing to do but to kill “every man” in existence. Fellowship has nothing to do but to offer companionship, and Knowledge only teaches the way to the forgiveness of sins through confessions. What Wilde does is to coin these names to give the impression of names of real people. However, not all the names are from abstract ideas.

Therefore, in *The importance of Being Earnest*, a notable example is Chasuble who is a clergy man. What is it that suits him best than to get his name from his priestly garment? Or John Worthing whose surname is the station where he was picked up when he was only a baby mistakenly left in a basket? Later, when his real identity is revealed, he now becomes “worthy” to marry the lady of his desire. Also, he is constantly referred to as Jack--a form of Jack of all trade. Call him a city man, you are right; call him a man of the countryside, you are right also.

This coinage of names can also be seen in *A Woman of No importance*. The function of Lord Illingworth in the text is to make others “ill” through corrupting them with his distorted views on life and with his love escapades. His bad influences pervade the whole work. He, it is who is the father of Gerald Arbuthnot. He denied him and his mother when the boy was still young. Gerald then was brought up in suffering by a mother who also suffered. That explains why he has just little education. Even as a grown up man, his father still teaches him that “examinations are of no value whatsoever. If a man is a gentleman, he knows quite enough and if he is not a gentleman, whatever he knows is bad for him” (148).

But to him: “Who is a gentleman? What makes a gentleman – learning, birth or behaviour?” To him who inherited his father’s wealth and title because of the death of his elder brother, the answer is birth and the ability to mingle in society with utter ease. However, the Victorians have their answer to the question. To them, what makes a gentleman is only his good behaviour. Therefore the “worth” of this man is that he causes social “illness” no matter from which aspect you consider him. No wonder his name is Illingworth.

Lady Windermere’s Fan also contains neologisms in the formation of people’s names. Windermere, for example originated from wind, the result of waving the controversial fan. Wind in its nature is something that cannot be apprehended and can easily disappear. Such is the nature of the marriage of that couple if not for the intervention of the wayward Mrs. Erlynne. Also in the text is the name Lord Darlington. His function is just one dimensional: loving our protagonist, being a darling to her and trying to lure her out of her matrimonial home.

The case of Hester Worsely in *A Woman of No Importance* is worth noting. The only good thing about her from the view of the society ladies is her dressing. Lady Hustanton, although admiring it, is very doubtful of the source of her wealth which we are told came from her father. And because that her father did not belong to the upper social class but worked and earned his wealth, then it is not a genuine wealth. What is more, her social views are none conforming. She does not involve herself in their trivial and almost meaningless conversations. To “worsen” matters, who can ever believe a girl rebuffing a

kiss from Lord Illingworth? “Oh, say what stranger cause yet unexplored, / Could make a gentle belle [like her] reject a Lord [like Lord Illingworth]? (Pope 2235). Therefore, she must be the “worst” person alive. No wonder her name is Worsley.

Next in the list of names is Mrs. Allonby. She is from the lower class but has the pretensions of the aristocrat. Simply stated, she is an “alloy” of the two classes – a pastiche that cannot be classified.

In summary of his creating names, here is a quotation from John Gielgud in his observation of Lady Bracknell of *The importance of Being Earnest*. According to him: “Lady Bracknell is not called Augusta for nothing. She is never put out or surprised. She is never angry but she is frequently disapproving and almost always annihilating. If the author were anyone but Wilde, she would be unanswerable. She moves slowly and seldom” (X)

However, the compilers of the *New Encyclopedia Britannica* Vol 19 see Wilde’s contributions and success more in his technicality. According to them, they are in his usage of “the convention of the French well made play’ with its intrigues and artificial devices to resolve conflicts” (824).

Such social intrigues are what have been highlighted here; the artificial devices can be seen in Jack Worthing’s revelation as Algernon’s younger brother. This now brings his real name to be Ernest, a name necessary for his marriage to Gwendolen Fairfax and a total disregard of his obscure origin. Or, can we not see such artificial resolution in *The Woman of No Importance* where Illingworth turns out to be Gerald’s father but the American lady, Hester Worsely and her wealth finally separate them, for he is no longer in need of the job of being his father’s secretary. In all this, Wilde shows himself as a deft hand in imitation and adaptation.

Another aspect of his craftsmanship that has placed him as a contributor to the development of modern comedy can be seen in his imitation of the Neo-classical idea of the three unities. This gives his audience a little bit of realism, and those educated among them can see an erudite mind at work. For an illustration, the first notable stage direction in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* has the following information: “Time: 1892; Place: London. The action of the play takes place within twenty four hours beginning on a Tuesday afternoon at five O’clock and ending the next day at 1:30 pm” (124). Here, the specific timing of the events makes the whole thing look like a historical documentation--bringing more realism to be blended with social criticism.

This situation however, ill accords with Wilde’s spending: “much of his literary life promoting the philosophy of art for art’s sake” (Jacobus 358). Also emphasizing this his philosophy which can be seen as being impossible in serious works of art is Trivedi who says that “Wilde hated reality and stood aloof from the movement which demanded serious, realistic drama. According to him [Wilde], all art is decoration and ... artificial” (720).

Many are his artistic merits which mark him out as a serious comedy writer. Many also are his ways of satirizing the shallowness of the Victorian life. Hence, all these qualities endeared him to the people of his time with the result that later writers like George Benard Shaw had to revive his type of comedy of manner even after its being forgotten for a very long time. This in itself is an indication of his contribution in improving modern comedy.

In conclusion, the compilers of *Chambers Encyclopedia* vol. XIV after reviewing the three plays of our study and also adding a fourth one, *An Ideal Husband* say that these

texts “display a strange mixture of incongruous elements and present a quality which was to be of very great significance for the later development of the English theatre” (584). And on *A Woman of No Importance*, William Archer has it that Wilde’s plays “...must be taken on the very highest plane of modern English drama” (*Britannica* online n.p.). Finally, All Aynesworth has it that “In my fifty-three years of acting, I never remember a greater triumph than [that] first night” when *The importance of being Earnest* was first produced in St. James’ Theatre London in 1895 (Wikipedia n.p.).

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