

Poster: A Wildean Poetics: mimesis in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

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“El arte es una mentira que nos acerca a la verdad”.

Pablo Picasso

1. Introduction

The most evident aspect in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the criticism made through witty comedy to the aristocratic customs of the age it was written: a comic inversion of the novel of manners, characteristic of the Victorian period. There is another factor however worthy of analysis: the protagonist's enunciations regarding the fictional (fictional within the fiction) characters of Earnest and Bunbury. I believe these fictional figures represent, in each of the personae's conceptions, different views on imitation. Only two of the protagonists—Algernon and Jack—are aware of the farce at first, and both build considerations concerning the necessity (or the importance), the nature and the characteristics of each one's creations. Given the specificity of such considerations, and bearing in mind that they deal with fictional beings who are performed by these characters with stated purposes¹—besides the fact that this play is a work by Oscar Wilde, very well known for his artistic criticism—I suppose there are enough reasons to believe that underlying the play's discourse there is an aesthetic appreciation, or, more specifically, an outlining of the modern poetics (the art of imitation/representation) in contrast with the classic one.

Some of the characters believe in the real existence of the fictional Earnest and Bunbury. Given that they respond to Earnest's and Bunbury's stated characteristics

¹ Despite the fact that the purpose is rather practical than aesthetic the result of such invention is, for example, Caroline's love, which is based in Earnest's characterisation.

in ways frequently frustrating to their author's intentions it is possible to analyse the effect of Earnest and Bunbury's characterisation on them, which is known in artistic criticism as "reader-response"². The romantic, idealising Cecily, for example, regards Earnest—who is meant to be a wicked young man—as a personification of perfection, which is doubled by the semantic emphasis of his name. Another paradox in the play results in a comic effect: Jack and Algernon create Earnest and Bunbury in order to have fun and enjoy the pleasures of life whenever they wanted, for these invented characters would allow them both to evade tedious social obligations as well as to perform the wickedness accredited to Earnest; marriage is accounted by them as being the ultimate end for all pleasures; despite that, it is because of their performances as Earnest that they become engaged to be married to Gwendolen and Cecily.

Another evidence that mimesis is a theme in the play is the women's diaries and the importance attributed to them. All the four female protagonists of Wilde's work keep, or kept in their youth, a diary. These diaries are portrayed as a possibility of fulfilling a dull life with idealism, excitement, mystery and they are always meant for publication. There actually are some references to the three-volume novels, common in Victorian era, in the play. One interesting characteristic of the women in Wilde's work is their utilitarianism. This feature, despite present in Gwendolen and Cecily, seems to be stronger in the elder women, since they say, for example "I really don't see why you should keep a diary at all" (29) even though they themselves have once kept a diary similarly. Related to this practice of keeping a diary and to the female's utilitarianism is the subject of "fiction, fact and truth". The idea of truth is tried throughout the play; facts seem to inspire discontent and fiction is always presented as a solution. These

² Reader-response is usually grounded on a basic premise of art: the receptor's previous knowledge of the fictional nature of the work. What can be analysed in this case are the effects of specific traits of their characterisation in the comprehension of them as real, what frequently frustrates the purposes of their creators (Jack and Algernon) in such a manner that their intentionality reaches a comic effect.

diaries allow the same evasion that the figures of Earnest and Bunbury allow for Jack and Algernon: they are a means to evade tedious social duties and at the same time a possibility to experience a more vivid and desired reality. Analysing why men are granted with the possibility of performing their creations whilst women have as unique choice the writing of diaries would certainly be an interesting topic to discuss, however it is not be pertinent to this paper.

Aristotle's classic *The Poetics* deals with the theory of mimesis, which, to put it simply, accounts all arts as a means of imitating nature. This concept formed the basis of the traditional literary field and developed into the conception of art as something that should convey moral or sentimental messages (truths), that is, art should have a function—most generally a didactic one. Being absolutely contrary to that, Oscar Wilde was the leading figure of the Decadent movement in Britain. This movement defended that the arts should have the sole purpose of being pleasurable to the senses and that it should evade morality and sentimentality. Considering the fact that the Decadent movement in literature represented a transition between Romanticism and Modernism, and taking Wilde's importance to this movement into account, I believe the aesthetic ideas underlying *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be regarded as the announcement of the forthcoming modern poetics. (Wikipedia)

2. Bunburyists

Bunburyist is a term coined by the character Algernon Moncrieff in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* to refer to anyone leading a double life. The etymology of the term is an allusion to an invented invalid friend of his, Mr Bunbury, whose extremely bad health always prevents Algernon from attending to social obligations on the excuse of sitting by Bunbury's death bed. Algernon is not the sole

Bunburyist in the play: his friend Earnest is actually called John Worthing, a character who is always “obliged” to leave his residence in the country in order to rescue his wicked younger brother from some scrape in London. In such occasions, John in reality escapes from the duties imposed by the respectability of his character in the country and indulges himself to the wicked habits natural to his invented brother in London, where he in fact assumes the name of Earnest.

The comparison between the concept of Bunburyism built up throughout the play and the classic concept of mimesis is particularly significant to this paper, for I consider the former to be a figurative transformation of the latter into the modern culture. In the following passage Jack admits to be a Bunburyist and explains his reasons³:

ALGERNON. [. . .] Why are you Ernest in town and Jack in the country?

JACK. My dear Algy, I don't know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.

ALGERNON. The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!

³ The extension of this excerpt is justified by the fact that it not only presents Jack's justification of his Bunburyism as it also mentions “truth”, “modern life”, “modern literature” and “literary criticism”, elements particularly relevant to this paper.

JACK. That wouldn't be at all a bad thing.

ALGERNON. Literary criticism is not your forte, my dear fellow. Don't try it. You should leave that to people who haven't been at a University. They do it so well in the daily papers. What you really are is a Bunburyist. I was quite right in saying you were a Bunburyist. You are one of the most advanced Bunburyists I know.

JACK. What on earth do you mean?

ALGERNON. You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's to-night, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week. (12-3)

As this excerpt characterises it, both Algernon and Jack practice Bunburyism for reasons that could easily be regarded as immoral. In this context where immoral practices are laid bare without remorse or hesitation their dialogue strangely mentions “seriousness.” This strangeness marks a thematic transition that ultimately connects the concept of Bunburyism to “truth”, “modern life”, “modern literature” and “literary criticism”. The progression of such concepts is certainly not random and its sequence points to intricate notions that could not possibly be encompassed in this paper. I am going to comment on them briefly however.

The paradox between Algernon's and Jack's immoral postures and the term "seriousness" calls attention to what is being dissented in the dialogue. Algernon's assertiveness is also shocking as a means of highlighting what is being said: truth is so inextricably associated to literature that if it were either pure or simple it would not be possible to think about modern literature. Modern life, on its turn, would be tedious—and we already know how much, and by which means, these characters escape dullness. The essential connection between literature and truth is perhaps one of the few things that are not arguable in relation to arts as Picasso's famous quotation affirms in the quotation presented here as an epigraph. When Algernon relates literary criticism to the newspapers, he is presenting the fundamental change that took place in modern literature: the daily, ordinary life started being portrayed in literature.

3. Memories versus Diaries

As well as Jack and Algernon, the female characters also have a means to escape from trivial obligations and ordinary life: their diaries. Thus, Cecily can ignore her grammar lessons and Miss Prism could leave the heavy work she was used to in her old days; and also the young girls are able to enter the wonderful secrets of their lives (29) and they "always have something sensational to read" (46). Despite the fact that utility and practicality are words always present in their dialogues, all of them give, or gave, way to fancy, idealisation and sentimentalism in the form of a diary. The following excerpt exemplifies that:

"MISS PRISM. [Shaking her head.] [. . .] I am not in favour of this modern mania for turning bad people into good people at a moment's notice.

As a man sows so let him reap. You must put away your diary, Cecily.

I really don't see why you should keep a diary at all.

CECILY. I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If

I didn't write them down, I should probably forget all about them.

MISS PRISM. Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry about with us.

CECILY. Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened. I believe that Memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that Mudie sends us.

MISS PRISM. Do not speak slightingly of the three-volume novel, Cecily. I wrote one myself in earlier days.

CECILY. Did you really, Miss Prism? How wonderfully clever you are! I hope it did not end happily? I don't like novels that end happily. They depress me so much.

MISS PRISM. The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.

CECILY. I suppose so. But it seems very unfair. And was your novel ever published?

MISS PRISM. Alas! no. The manuscript unfortunately was abandoned. [Cecily starts.] I use the word in the sense of lost or mislaid[jack and earnest are born here]. To your work, child, these speculations are profitless.” (29)

Both Cecily and Miss Prism attribute certain utilities to a diary. To the former it is a means of registering “wonderful secrets” of her life in order not to forget them; to the

latter it is a fictional manifestation where “the good end[ed] happily and the bad unhappily”. Cecily’s affirmation that memory usually “chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened” is absolutely surprising, which, as usual, is not random: in this dialogue—filled with utilitarian reasons and definitions—literature, or fiction, is regarded as something moralistic. The didacticism of this view is reinforced by the fact that the two characters are about to start a German lesson. By the end of the play we learn that this three-volume novel by Miss Prism presented a “more than usually revolting sentimentalism” (63). As forwarded in the introductory section of this paper, Oscar Wilde was absolutely contrary to didactic, moralistic or sentimentalist art. It is thus possible to infer that Miss Prism—and possibly all the other female characters of the play—represent this conception of art effusively refused by Wilde. This is reinforced by the women’s utilitarianism being ridiculed throughout the play.

4. Classic versus Modern mimesis

This paper is an attempt to comprehend the extension to which Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* deals with the thematic of mimesis, or artistic imitation/representation. Considering that the play is a comedy, it was quite revealing to study the elements that gave origin to a comic effect, for it lays within the comic the vital power of Wilde’s work: his satire. With this work the Irish author establishes a new artistic language, where it becomes “more than a moral duty to speak one's mind. It becomes a pleasure.” (46). Indeed for the followers of the Decadent movement morality was absolutely banned from art, which, in their view, should only be concerned with aesthetic pleasure. The concepts regarding art that I was able to point in

the discourse of the play are in great consonance with Wilde's personal manifestations on the subject. This comedy is thus one more register of Wilde's provoking ideas on art.

From the previous comparisons we could draw a general outline of Wildean aestheticism, which is foreshadowing of modern artistic tendencies. Art is not regarded as a useful instrument to recreate nature and attempting to reveal the truth of life through moralistic and sentimentalist manifestations. Modern art must allow the sensuous fruition of beauty. The Decadent movement brought the general loss of reference of modern age to art, which should no longer serve governmental interests, nor any religion nor anything that was not pleasurable and individual. I believe Wilde could easily be identified with the following lines by one of his characters:

JACK. Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all

his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me? (67)

Thus, the ultimate certainty about literature is reaffirmed: fiction contains truth after all, and it is in this truth, as well as in the pleasure derived from it, that lays "the vital Importance of Being Earnest" (67)

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