

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*
Class 2

10-minute writing assignment: who is the hero/ine of this play, and why?

- * Last time, we talked about Wilde's life and about deceit as a dominant metaphor of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
- * Deceitfulness in this play has no greater or lesser moral value than truthfulness, and that the opposition between these two is characteristic of all the oppositions between various things in this play - oppositions which instead of clarifying the distance between things, actually serve to bring them closer together.
- * Today we will talk about how Wilde accomplishes this neat trick.

1. THE SPECIAL QUALITY OF THE WOMEN'S DECEITS:

- a. **The women, who seem so truthful and so conscious of lying, are the ones indirectly responsible for the mixup and the resolution** which the brothers' lies anticipate with eerie accuracy. Miss Prism leaves the baby in the train station, but the impending marriages bring the secret out into the open.
- b. **They are formal fictionalizers, as the male characters are informal fictionalizers;** when they make up lies about their lives, they tend to write them down (Cecily and Miss P) or transform themselves into living artworks (Gwendolen: "I always look smart.") Cecily rejects scholarship: "Horrid political economy! Horrid geography! Horrid, horrid German!" and spends all her time writing in her diary.
 - i. Lady Bracknell makes up the rules of the game; thus she is the controlling fictionalizer of them all. Every event that happens is an opportunity to apply these arbitrary rules she uses to give order to the universe:

To be born, or at any rate, bred in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seem to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to?

p. 1677
 - ii. Cecily and Miss Prism are both novelists/memoirists, though the publication of both of their projects is in some doubt.
- c. **Miss Prism's three-decker novel is responsible for the babies being switched;** she was so preoccupied with her work that she lost track of which satchel held the baby - which "creation" was more important.

The manuscript has been "lost or abandoned" in the same way that Jack/Ernest was "lost or abandoned"; perhaps now it too will be found and given its proper identity?

This somehow equates creation with procreation - that babies and manuscripts are the same thing - indistinguishable - and that women who are creative are a little dangerous, but still very compelling and exciting.

2. DECEITFULNESS AND ART

- a. **Sometimes when we talk about a person who's a good deceiver, we call them by admiring terms - they are "artful" or "slick" or good at "sleight of hand."** There's a very short distance between deceptions that are funny and lively and good, and those that are insidious and destructive. There are many rituals we think of as innocuous even though they are deceptive: Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, magicians. We only become disgusted with deceivers when they deceive us against our will or about something serious.
- b. Otherwise - as Wilde's play points out - we love fooling and watching other people getting fooled. We participate actively in watching people be gulled.
- c. **Wilde keeps our skepticism at bay in this play by letting us in on the secrets.** Even though there's no list of dramatis personae at the beginning of the play, we quickly figure out who Bunbury is; like Algernon copying Ernest's country address, we listen in on all the confidential conversations, even when important people like Lady Bracknell **are removed from the room.**
- d. **He also keeps our attention by making the contrast between truth and fiction look absurd - disproportional in various ways.** We feel unentitled to "take the play seriously" for fear of seeming silly, disproportional, comic.
- e. **Artful lying promises the prospect of emotional disengagement - it is artistic, daring, and slick.** We cringe when Jack/Ernest offers Lady Bracknell the black bag as evidence of his genealogy; she tells him that the object itself, the bad, with or without handles, immaterial of line, is not the point of the situation. She wants a story that will confirm to her that Jack/Ernest is suitable for marrying her daughter.

3. **HOW DOES WILDE EQUATE DECEITFULNESS WITH ART?**

- a. **By focusing on marriage - an innocuous and universal situation in which people are extraordinarily sincere:** marriage proposals - and yet which have a reputation for being very insincere rituals (as with Algernon, who wants to marry Cecily at least partly for her money).
 - i. Marriage is the most ritualistic - and thus the most potentially absurd - of human social activities.
- b. **Individual words and phrases have several meanings: the title at first glance seems to affirm "the importance of being earnest,"** but in fact makes no such positive or negative judgment; it simply purports to evaluate whether earnestness is important or not. We fall into the trap.
- c. **Inverts our expectations of social norms:**

A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.

Depends for its humor on our expecting "simple" and "unspoiled" to go with "country"; this is reinforced by the fact that the working out of the play goes on at the country estate, where lots of elaborate deceptions have been happening.

d. **Exposes our social euphemisms by literalizing them:**

Jack: I have lost both my parents.

Lady Bracknell: Both? To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both smacks of carelessness.

Depends for its humor on our social contract to agree to call death "loss"; playing on the more literal meanings of the word at the expense of the euphemistic meaning.

e. **Reveals the artificiality of social constructions by exaggerating them:**

Lady Bracknell: I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over.

Depends on inverting the order of nature: children produce parents? The artificiality of Lady Bracknell's insistence on parenthood lies in the equation of good parent/good child; Wilde is showing us that when you turn the relationship around, it doesn't work. It's just an empty credentialing, labeling system that bears only an arbitrary relationship to reality and the quality of a person. The metaphor of "the season" and "of either sex" just reinforces this. These words hark back to biological propagation, as though Jack were a stag producing his stud papers for Lady Bracknell's approval - it shows that the "refinements" of "high society," which thinks itself so above physical things, is really barbaric.

ANALYSIS OF SCENE

[Act 2: the war between Gwendolen and Cecily.]

4. OPPOSITES AND CONTRADICTIONS

- a. The situation is far more barbaric and territorial under the surface than it seems; the occasional indications of hostility, which appear only in veiled ways, delight us because we can't tell when all hell will break loose, so we are living on the edge.
- b. **Territorial ritual disguised as mere politeness:** the ritual of tea is one of the hostess (territorially) offering hospitality to guests; the rule is that the guest may have anything and everything she wants, but that the hostess is entitled to serve out the food, showing her control over the situation, acting as provider.
- c. **Serving unwanted food:** C does everything G asks her not to do, giving her cake when she has asked for bread and dumping several lumps of sugar in her tea when she has asked for none. Like an act of poisoning to give someone the opposite of what they ask for, since they are about to put the food inside their bodies, an intensely personal act.
- d. **Making fun of G's high-society pretensions:** by serving G "sugar that is not fashionable any more" and a very large slice of the cake "that is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays" C asserts her control over the situation, and implicitly over the "ernest" to which both feel they are entitled. The dialogue that follows this is like that between two knights who are about to fight each other to the mortal end:

G: You have filled my tea with lumps of sugar, and though I asked most distinctly for

bread and butter, you have given me cake. I am known for the gentleness of my disposition, and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I want you, Miss Cardew, you may go too far.

C: To save my poor, innocent, trusting boy from the machinations of any other girl there are no lengths to which I would not go.

G: From the moment I saw you, I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matter. My first impressions of people are invariably right.

- e. **Irony of G's pretensions to omniscience: both women are deceitful and in love with deceivers.** Besides, G has just changed her mind; on p. 1693 she insists, "I like you already more than I can say; my first impressions of people are never wrong."

5. WHAT IS THE POINT OF THIS PLAY? WHO IS ITS HERO?

- a. **My vote goes to Algernon, because he is most fully able to enjoy his deceptions.** While Jack eventually comes clean, Algernon has shown great imagination.
- b. **"Bunbury" began the whole debacle; he used Bunbury to mollify Jack/Ernest's** bad feelings about having made up the "bad city brother."
- c. **Though by the end of the play Algernon claims he has killed off his "brother" "Bunbury," Bunbury has taken a central place in everyone's consciousness.**

In Act III, Jack is feeling terrible about having lied to some many people. But Algernon is enjoying himself.

J: This ghastly state of things is what you call Bunburying, I suppose?

A: Yes, and a perfectly wonderful Bunbury it is. The most wonderful Bunbury I have ever had in my life.

J: Well, you've no right whatsoever to Bunbury here.

A: That is absurd. One has a right to Bunbury anywhere one chooses. Every serious Bunbury knows that.

- d. **"Bunburying" for Algernon has become a substantive noun as well as a proper name, and a verb as well; it is a way of life.** One feels convinced that Algernon will continue the Bunbury dynasty if only for the sheer joy of deceiving others.
- e. **Algernon also gets to marry Cecily, who is clearly the winner of the battle with Gwendolen and a very promising faker indeed.** She also has \$30,000 pounds, just as Millamant did.
- f. **Algernon simply gets the most and best of the food.** His dominant gesture is his ability to consume - and then lie about having consumed - all the wonderful delicate English tea treats: cucumber sandwiches, crumpets, muffins, everything in sight. This is a metaphor for his ability to ingest and overcome - to swallow - everything that comes his way, something the more moral Jack/Ernest is unable to do.

