

# Trivialization and Exquisite Sensationalism: *The Importance of Being Earnest*

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**Abstract:** It is commonly recognized that Oscar Wilde's main contribution to the late-Victorian drama is his dramatic dialogue. The present paper attempts to explore the linguistic features of Wilde's social comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which is summed up here as trivialization and exquisite sensationalism. It shows that Wilde's special skill of trivialization was in fact formed in his journalistic career during the 1880s under the influence of "New Journalism". "Trivialization" helped Wilde to come close to the theatrical audience in a most comprehensible way. Besides, Wilde was also innovative in using a sort of refined and elegant linguistic articulation. His dramatic dialogue possessed a special exquisiteness which enabled him to get rid of the vulgarity of the journalistic trivialization and to create a dramatic discourse of his own. I use the term "exquisite sensationalism" to reveal this feature in contrast to the "vulgar sensationalism" of the late-Victorian journalism and to show that in the theatre Wilde's linguistic paradox was geared towards the most indulgent and sophisticated end. Contextually speaking, the spectacular theatre's commitment to fashion and respectability provided a historical occasion for Wilde to exhibit his exquisiteness. The perfect combination of triviality and exquisiteness in his epigrammatic dialogues not only produced great sensations on stage but also met the need of social elevation of the theatre of the time.

**Keywords:** Wilde, Trivialization, Exquisite Sensationalism, Theatre Publicity

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## 1. Introduction

The present paper presents a discussion of Oscar Wilde's most well-known play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Among the four plays Wilde wrote, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Earnest* has received the most critical attention. The play was recognized by the contemporary critics as the one displaying "Wilde's dialogue, wit, and theatrical construction at their brilliant best" [1]. Scholars of later generations also take it as Wilde's best comedy. They have analyzed the play from various perspectives. Drawing on the theories of psychoanalysis, Christopher Craft analyzes the primary "trope of displacement" in Wilde's invention of "Bunbury" in the play [2]. Besides, Lourdes Bernardes Goncalves, by adopting Bakhtin's concept "heteroglossy," points out that Wilde is very skillful in "causing a break in the normal expectation" [3]. Some other critics address the ideological scope of the text and attempt to reveal the serious, or to say, the subversive forces concealed in

the obvious flippant dialogues. For instance, Jeremy Lalonde presents a detailed discussion about the character Lady Bracknell in the play and contends that she "manifests a preoccupation with social class and an awareness that middle-class subjects can enter into the aristocratic order if they are able to cultivate the right image" [4]. And Alexandra Poulain argues for the emancipatory power of writing in the play as a way of producing reality rather than "documenting reality" [5]. In another recent study, Dahna Lewinsohn-Zamir argues that, with a juxtaposition of two meanings between "being earnest" and "earnest", *Earnest* "helps to illustrate an important legal debate" [6]. However, few critics take notice of the connection between this play created at the summit of Wilde's dramatic career and his long years of journalistic experience during the 1880s. Anya Clayworth has published a new anthology of Oscar Wilde's journalistic essays — *Selected Journalism*. In the introduction to this anthology, Clayworth briefly mentions the impact of Wilde's working experience for newspapers on his writing of society comedies. She holds that those social comedies contain ideas first

rehearsed by Wilde in his journalistic articles [7]. Another study concerning the subject is John Stokes's "Wilde's World: Oscar Wilde and Theatrical Journalism in the 1880s". In this article, Stokes argues that Wilde had his professional theatrical taste molded in the 1880s along with his reviewing practices in *The Dramatic Review* and his acquaintances with the most prominent theatrical figures during this period promised his success in the early 1890s [8]. Stokes's critique is valuable in the sense that it reveals how significant professional theatrical knowledge was to a playwright in the late Victorian period. Following Clayworth's example, the present paper attempts first to put Wilde within a wide journalistic context to trace the formation of his dramatic skill "trivialization" and then to explore Wilde's "exquisite sensationalism" with textual evidence and an analysis of the public function of the Victorian theatre. It shows that Wilde's unique dramatic style was the result of a compromise between Wilde's aesthetic ideal and transformation of the theatre from a popular amusing place to a place of fashion and respectability.

## 2. Juxtaposition of Triviality and Absurdity

In Wilde's time, the dramatic texts were usually subject to the theatre managers' revision. This behavior was further confirmed by a regrettable fact that most plays of the time have passed into oblivion. For lack of adequate copyright protection of the dramatic property, most dramatists of the time would not publish their plays. Although the American Copyright Bill in 1891 solved this problem, the new act did not prevent managers from performing published plays without fair payment to the playwrights. In the light of this historical context, Oscar Wilde was really unique and fortunate as a late-Victorian dramatist: all his finished plays have been published, either during his lifetime or after his death. Besides, Wilde achieved his dramatic, or more precisely, theatrical success with nothing other than his dramatic dialogue — he may be the only dramatist of his time that could use language alone to conquer the whole theatrical world. Within only three years (1892-1895) Wilde rose into prominence on the London stage with four plays, among which his last finished play *Earnest* was usually taken as the best one for its aphoristic wit. *Earnest* was put on stage on 14 February 1895, the Saint Valentine's Day of that year. Before the play opened, in an interview that published in the *St. James's Gazette*, 18 January 1895, Wilde described the newest play with his usual brilliancy: "It is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy, and it has its philosophy.... That we should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality" [9]. At the time when Wilde gave this pronouncement, he had already acquired a position in the West End theatre of London. The successes of the previous three social comedies seemed to indicate that the playwright had the privilege of summing up his dramatic achievements with an explicit theoretical

presentation. Therefore, although Wilde did not openly express his "philosophy of trivialization" until *Earnest*, "trivialization," as an effective way of dramatic writing, had already existed in his other comedies. In this aspect, Elisha Cohn is insightful in saying that Wilde's plays "seem to echo each other's structure and content" [10]. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, while depicting his first dramatic dandy Lord Darlington, Wilde claims through the mouth of Lady Windermere: "Lord Darlington is trivial" [11]. Following this statement, Wilde presents a dialogue around the topic of "being trivial" among three characters of the play:

LADY WINDERMERE: Why do you TALK so trivially about life, then?

LORD DARLINGTON: Because I think that life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: What does he mean? Do, as a concession to my poor wits, Lord Darlington, just explain to me what you really mean.

LORD DALINGTON: I think I had better not, Duchess. Nowadays to be intelligible is to be found out. [11]

Feeling confused about her own judgment of Lord Darlington, Lady Windermere immediately asks the person himself. Lord Darlington's flippant answer sounds more ambiguous; the paradoxical juxtaposition of "serious" and "trivial" certainly goes beyond the comprehension of the orthodox mind, represented in the play by Duchess of Berwick. She cannot help but implore Lord Darlington for a clear explanation. No definite answer comes from the dandy. Lord Darlington craftily evades the question and cuts the discussion off with a refusal, leaving no place for further inquiry. As the dialogue shows, the discussion around "being trivial" contains no definite meaningful content, but as the conversation goes on, it does produce a comic effect in the lexical level and arouses great curiosity among the audience. Through clever inversions, Wilde creates a "new sensation" which possesses a sort of laughter-provoking quality. In her book *Shopping with Freud*, Rachel Bowlby compares Wilde's aphorism to a cigarette: "like the cigarette, it operates by means of an apparent *non sequitur*: pleasure entails *non-satisfaction*" [12]. It is worth noting that cigarette appears repeatedly in Wilde's work. This most common and trivial thing in late Victorians' life, as Bowlby notices, "none the less occupies a prominent and honorable position in the work of [this] avowed critic of vulgarity" [12]. A logic of trivialization thus underlines Wilde's employment of cigarette, which induces us to see not only Wilde's awareness in "selling" himself, but also his unique presentation of personal style in paradoxes. In *Earnest*, Wilde produces a similar effect with his epigrammatic dialogues. More than dealing with the trivial writing itself, he develops "the trivial" into a perfect expression of stylization. The play unfolds its main plot around the fictional "trivial" name "Earnest." "Earnest" is originally a name the young dandy Jack Worthing coins for himself to escape the duty of a guardian in the countryside and to pursue pleasure in the city. During his sojourn in London, Jack falls in love with the young lady Gwendolen Fairfax. Gwendolen merrily accepts his proposal for engagement. To Jack's great surprise, the girl

hopes to marry a man bearing the name "Earnest." She tells her lover that the moment her cousin Algernon Moncrieff first mentions that he has a friend called Earnest, she knows that she is destined to love him. For Gwendolen, the name "Earnest" itself symbolizes the perfect love she desires. When Jack Worthing suggests that Jack is also a charming name, Gwendolen retorts:

I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain. Besides, Jack is a notorious domesticity for John! And I pity any woman who is married to a man called John. She would have a very tedious life with him. She would probably never be allowed to know the entrancing pleasure of a single moment's solitude. The only really safe name is Ernest. [11]

No other woman in the English drama would adopt the same "trivial" attitude as Wilde's Gwendolen in finding "an ideal husband". She cares nothing about the man himself, his family background, his social status, and even his personal attractiveness. In an age when a woman's traditional marital role was fiercely challenged and the image of "new woman" was seriously discussed, Gwendolen uttered a rather different voice. In her humorous accusation of the name "Jack," Gwendolen has completely lapsed into her own reverie. In a delightful mood, she describes to Jack how the domestic life of a wife is disturbed by a vulgar husband named "John." She tries to convince her lover that the two names "Earnest" and "Jack" themselves represent an essential difference. One is "a divine name," for it "has a music of its own" and produces "vibrations," while the other does not "thrill" and "produces absolutely no vibrations" [11]. Gwendolen's eloquent presentation seems to indicate that the girl is only sensitive to an abstract formal beauty and marriage is nothing but a matter of style.

Wilde once spoke of the content of *Earnest* as: "The first act is ingenious, the second beautiful, the third abominably clever!" [13] Imposing an economy of few words, Wilde burst with pride without any concealment. As seen from his statement, the play was not simply an exhibition of his unique personal style, but also, as the hero in his fairy tale "The Nightingale and The Rose" has expressed, was a work of "all style without any sincerity" [11]. After watching the performance of *Earnest*, William Archer, one of the most influential dramatic critics of the time, expressed his puzzlement:

What can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle, whether of art or morals, creates its own canons and conventions, and is nothing but an absolutely willful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality?... [I]t imitates nothing, represents nothing, means nothing, is nothing, except a sort of *rondo capriccio*, in which the artist's fingers run with crisp irresponsibility up and down the key board of life. [14]

The emptiness, the absurdity, and the irresponsibility of the play made a knowledgeable critic feel somewhat difficult to comment on it from any dramatic point of view. Archer's comment represented most of the views of Wilde's contemporaries. J. T. Grein, the avant-garde manager of the Independent Theatre in the 1890s, noticed that *Earnest*

"escaped most of the critics, and certainly the majority of the public" [14]. Some other contemporary critics ascribed their trouble in understanding the play to its absurdity as a sheer exhibition of personal stylization. They held that in building up a comic form of his own, Wilde sacrificed anything that was related to drama. The *Pall Mall Gazette* criticized that Wilde's plays "were full of bright moments, but devoid of consideration as drama" and the *New York Times* contended that Wilde was "hampered by his utter lack of sincerity and his inability to master the technical side of playwriting" [15]. By contrast, Sir. Max Beerbohm made the most penetrating and incisive judgment. He argued that Wilde's aphorisms were "unrelated to action or character" but they were "so good in themselves as to have the quality of dramatic surprise" [15]. Beerbohm's comment alerts us to the verbal peculiarity of *Earnest* — the witty epigrams that Wilde used to cause dramatic sensations are, in effect, nondramatic in themselves.

Wilde himself once claimed that he wrote out *Earnest* within three weeks [16]. Wilde might not be exaggerating, for during the time when he had just finished the first draft of *Earnest*, he was at same time composing three other plays: a new play of modern life for Alexander, a play "with no real serious interest" with American producer Albert Palmer and a "modern school for Scandal" style of play [17]. Wilde's growing confidence in dramatic production could be proved by this tight schedule. In *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, Guy and Small convincingly prove that Wilde's high output in this period was closely connected with his constant lack of money [18]. Besides, it is also worth noting that the easiness and efficiency embodied in conceiving four plays at one time showed a distinct contrast with his repeated failure in dramatic writing in the early 1880s. His two early experimental plays *Vera; or, The Nihilists* (1881) and *The Duchess of Padua* (1883) contained serious themes and were written in the poetic form. Neither of them received favorable criticisms or became a success on stage. Wilde himself also felt very uncertain about his plays at that time. In 1880 Wilde wrote to the Lord Chamberlain E. F. S. Pigott to recommend his first play *Vera; or, The Nihilists*. In the letter, Wilde wrote: "I send you a copy of my first play.... Its literary merit is very slight, but in an acting age perhaps the best test of a good play is that it should not read well" [19]. For lack of confidence in his dramatic skills, Wilde was asking for the professional examiner's advice. As the letter hinted, Wilde himself seemed unsatisfied with his first play, though he expressed it in an ironic tone as if he was sacrificing purposely something literary to suit the unrefined tastes of the theatre. The fact was, Wilde found it challenging to create a play having real theatrical effects, as he confessed in the same letter: "I know only too well how difficult it is to write a really fine drama" [19].

In the social comedies of the 1890s, we see a completely different Wilde. No matter in theme or content, these social comedies have little connection with his early dramatic attempts. As I have mentioned, during the long period between 1883 and 1891, Wilde did not engage himself in dramatic writing. This made his first success of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in 1892 look sudden and abrupt. One

cannot help but wonder what on earth enables Wilde to bring about such a leap in the process of dramatic creation. In his article “Wilde’s World: Oscar Wilde and Theatrical Journalism in the 1880s,” John Stokes argues that Wilde’s reviewing experience for the *Dramatic Review* from February 1885 to May 1886 provided an opportunity to understand the up-to-date trend in the theatre and got him well-prepared for a full entry into the profession [8]. In fact, besides reviewing plays for *The Dramatic Review*, most of time during the 1880s, Wilde contributed to many other periodicals. In other words, as a full-time journalist and editor, Wilde directly experienced the changes that happened to the journalism of the period.

In the decade of the 1880s, the popular press in London was going through a transforming process of “trivialization,” in the phrasing of Jean K. Chalaby. With this term, Chalaby refers to the general trend that in “the *Star*, the *Evening News*, the *Sun*, the *Morning Advertiser*, and the *Daily Mirror*, politics was extremely rare, and leaders were routinely devoted to the most trivial topics” [20]. Alfred Harmsworth (later Lord Northcliffe), editor of several famous newspapers of the time, advocated that his newspaper should “touch life at as many points as possible” [20]. These popular newspapers, termed by Matthew Arnold as “new journalism,” really had a far-reaching impact on Wilde. The articles Wilde wrote during this period were explicitly light in tone, diverse in content, and vivacious in theme. As Anya Clayworth notices, when describing American girls in his essay “The American Invasion,” Wilde ironically argues that the “wonderful charm” of American girls lies in the fact “they never talk serious, except to their dressmaker, and never think seriously, except about amusements” [7]. In another essay on “The American Man,” Wilde continues arguing that the American invasion to the British life “has been purely female in character” [9]. In the essay, Wilde further presents a similar trivial aspect of American life: “They know men much better than they know books, and life interests them more than literature. They have no time to study anything but the stock markets, no leisure to read anything but newspapers” [7]. In this sense, Clayworth concludes: “Treating the ‘trivial things of life very seriously’ is a feature of Wilde’s approach to his journalism from as early as 1885” [7].

It is noteworthy that through these writing experiences, Wilde not only learned to pick up trivial topics for “serious” consideration but also waved “the trivial” into his unique verbal skills. Wilde began to realize that to get his ideas through the hurried eyes of the people reading a newspaper, he needed to cultivate a skill quite trivial and quite distinct, for only in this way could he strike the readers right between the eyes. This way of presentation rehearsed by Wilde in his journalistic essays was later applied to the construction of dramatic dialogues and to a certain extent led up to his theatrical achievements in the social comedies, especially *Earnest*. In *Earnest*, Wilde struck the audience with juxtaposition of triviality and absurdity. Jack Worthing took the cigarette case as the most important possession he had in the world. He said to Algernon Moncriff, another young dandy in the play: “Do you mean to say you have had my

cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward” [11]. While knowing that his cigarette case was left in Algernon’s smoking-room the last time he dined there, Jack emotionally explained to Algernon the “huge” effort he had made to find the cigarette case. Later in the play, in order to get his cigarette case back, Jack revealed to Algernon the ultimate secret of his life — his double personality as being “Earnest” in town and “Jack” in the country. Like Jack, who took smoking cigarettes as his highest pleasure, Algernon talked about eating all the time. He announced that only eating enabled him to overcome the difficulty in life, as he said: “When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Indeed, when I am in really great trouble, as any one who knows me intimately will tell you, I refuse everything except food and drink” [11]. By juxtaposing eating — the “trivial” daily behavior with the great trouble in life — the “serious” aspect, Wilde reverted the orthodox attitude of late Victorians and founded his play upon a sheer absurdity whose ridiculousness produced a tremendous comic effect.

Indeed, in *Earnest*, all the characters showed a lively interest in food and talked about food. For example, the food “cucumber sandwich” frequently appeared in their conversation:

ALGERNON. And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell? [11]

JACK. Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea? [11]

ALGERNON. Oh! There is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven — [Jack puts out his hand to take a sandwich. Algernon at once interferes.] Please don’t touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. [11]

LADY BRACKNELL. I’m sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but 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. And now I’ll have a cup of tea, and one of those nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me.

ALGERNON. [Picking up empty plate in horror.] Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially.

LANE. [Gravely.] There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went down twice.

ALGERNON. No cucumbers!

LANE. No, sir. Not even for ready money.

ALGERNON. I am greatly distressed, Aunt Augusta, about there being no cucumbers, not even for ready money. [11]

As if out of a spontaneous and irrational need, the characters in *Earnest* unanimously express their unreserved admiration for cucumber sandwiches. The discussion of serious topics, such as love, marriage, divorce and death, is often accompanied by a hungry stomach. In these conversations, the cucumber sandwich does not simply serve

as an ornament to the main plot; rather, it occupies a central position and sometimes even directs the whole dialogue towards a devoted discussion. By moving between these serious topics and a nonsensical appetite for food, their dialogues produce an instantly amusing effect for their obvious absurdity. Wilde himself was quite confident about such an arrangement, as he wrote to Charles Spurner Mason: “I am in a very much worse state for money than I told you. But I am just finishing a new play which, as it is quite nonsensical and has no serious interest, will I hope bring me in a lot of red gold” [19]. The letter made it evident that the writing of *Earnest* sprang from an urgent need for money, and the adoption of trivialization would, as Wilde predicted, helped the play achieve success in the theatre bringing him “a lot of red gold.”

Wilde’s explanation in the letter also disclosed another dimension of trivialization. It indicated that although trivialization was a skill Wilde acquired through journalistic writing, it did, in effect, satisfy the taste of the theatrical audience. In other words, trivialization was not just a method Wilde arbitrarily transported from journalism; it had its acclaimed position in the theatrical world. As we all know, the nineteenth century was an age of mass theatre-going; people of all classes came to the theatre for entertainment. Among them, middle-class people constituted the greatest part of the West End theatres in the late-Victorian London. In a study on the components of the theatre audience of the nineteenth century, Nieuwe Gracht redefines the feature of this middle-class audience and challenges the long-established view of taking the history as a story of “paradise lost and regained”. In Gracht’s view, the real history should be “paradise lost nor regained” [21]. That is to say, the theatre audience during the nineteenth century did not change much. On the whole, the audience was trade-based, wealthy, well educated, but not so elite culturally [21].

Gracht’s new demarcation of the theatre audience is very close to Matthew Arnold’s designation of “Philistines.” In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold contended: “[T]he term Philistine conveys a sense which makes it more peculiarly appropriate to our middle class.... who prefer to them that sort of machinery of business, chapels, tea meetings.... worldly splendor, security, power and pleasure” [22]. For these people, serious discussions about literature and art certainly went beyond their comprehension. They were, like common newspaper readers, amused by those lighter talks and sensational stories. Some critics notice that in Oscar Wilde’s social comedies of the early 1890s, daily topics usurped the place of art and literature [17]. Guy and Small have further explored the cultural context of eating the cucumber sandwiches in *Earnest*. They point out that in the late decades of the nineteenth century, cucumbers “were becoming increasingly prized by the middle classes” because at that time all cucumbers were homegrown, often “at considerable expense and with considerable difficulty in heated greenhouses”. As a result, most middle-class people could only buy “inferior specimens”... and the “best cucumbers” could only to “be grown professionally or ‘in the garden of the

wealthy” [18]. This background knowledge explains why in the play Algernon orders cucumber sandwiches for his aunt Lady Bracknell, and his servant Lane cannot buy cucumbers in the market even with “ready money”. Modern readers may find it difficult to sense the comic effect in Wilde’s repeated mention of cucumber sandwich, but this plot was bound to intrigue an intelligible laugh among the contemporary audience. By discussing this particular food of the 1890s, Wilde successfully inserted his comedy into the conventional sense-making system of his time. Seen from this perspective, it is no wonder that when *Earnest* succeeded Henry James’s *Guy Domville* and made a great hit at the St. James’s theatre, James enviously called Wilde “the triumphant Oscar” [23] and ascribed his own failure to the vulgarity of the theatre-going public. James wrote: “the vast English Philistine mob — the regular ‘theatrical public’ of London, which, of all the vulgar publics London contains, is the most brutishly and densely vulgar” [23]. James’s contention was reasonable to a certain extent, but he failed to realize that besides catering for the vulgar audience in its trivial manner, *Earnest* possessed another distinct attribute that contributed more to Wilde’s success in the theatre of his time — the special “exquisite sensationalism”.

### 3. Exquisite Sensationalism

In the previous part, we have discussed the influence of contemporary journalism on Wilde’s writing of *Earnest*. It is worth noting that Wilde’s insistence upon being “trivial” in his social comedies also contained something very different from the “vulgar sensationalism” of contemporary popular press [24]. Actually, Wilde never ceased his attack on the vulgarity of the contemporary journalism. Although Wilde’s comedies derived from the plays of other dramatists of his time, through them Wilde was indeed on the way of building up his own unique dramatic style. In *Earnest*, Wilde finally arrived at the peak of dramatic stylization. Every character speaks in the same manner as the author himself, as the contemporary critic J. T. Grein says: “Oscar Wilde made every personage he depicted talk as he himself was wont to talk” [15]. In the play, all the characters show a strong desire for exhibition of their own wits and are very skillful in using paradoxes. As regard to this point, Wilde has his own explanation. While recalling in jail his past glory in the West End theatre of London, Wilde wrote in *De Profundis*: “I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet” [25]. Wilde was not exaggerating. In his stylization of dramatic dialogues, Wilde had created a language as delicate as a lyric, as beautiful as a sonnet.

Contemporary critics repeatedly expressed the idea that in *Earnest*, Wilde “invent [ed] a new type of play, and that type [was] the only quite original thing he contributed to the English stage” [15]. They held that Wilde’s dramatic skill “preserve [d] a unity of feeling and of tone that se [t] it upon a higher level” [15]. In what follows, I attempt to use the phrase “exquisite sensationalism” (in contrast to the “vulgar

sensationalism” of the late-Victorian journalism) to describe Wilde’s special contribution to the dramatic language.

As shown in the previous part, many contemporary critics complained about Wilde’s non-dramatization in creating his personal style in *Earnest*. However, there also existed a few different voices, among which William Archer conveyed a valuable opinion about Wilde’s unique way of dramatization: “‘farce’ is too gross and commonplace a word to apply to such an iridescent filament of fantasy.... Mr. Wilde’s humor transmutes them into something new and individual” [14]. Archer’s comment revealed an essential dimension of *Earnest* seldom touched by other critics. The play is a personal expression of Wilde’s stylistic beauty. In the play, Wilde gives his aphorism a new vitality through the exhibition of a sort of subtle elegance. Whatever he touches, Wilde transforms it into something graceful and dainty.

Throughout *Earnest* the characters sit around and talk paradoxes in a room “luxuriously and artistically furnished” [11]. The setting represents the typical interior design of the social celebrities of the time. The play starts with Algernon Moncrieff’s narcissistic statement that the way he plays the piano is very — different from others for its stylistic gracefulness. He says: “I don’t play accurately — any one can play accurately — but I play with wonderful expression” [11]. Algernon also blames Jack Worthing, the young man bearing the fictitious name “Earnest”, for the way Jack flirts with his cousin Gwendolen Fairfax is “perfectly disgraceful” [11]. Gwendolen feels herself “destined to love” a man named “Earnest” just because this “divine” name “produces vibrations” [11]. Cecily, another young lady in the play, gets herself engaged imaginatively with Algernon even without his presence. The reason for this immediate engagement is that she admires his “wonderfully good taste” [11].

These characters not only express their ideas in a typical Wildean way: witty, humorous and ridiculous, but also view their life as a complete exhibition of refined taste and elegant appearance, as Cecily professes to her governess: “Ah! Believe me, dear Miss Prism, it is only the superficial qualities that last” [11]. They keep ridiculing the Victorian orthodox notions about love and marriage, but they are quite skillful in not sliding into a radical condemnation of these values. Instead, they choose to express their “radical” ideas in a charming, stylistic way. Upon this point, Archibald Henderson commented: “[T]he astounding thing is, that in his sincere effort to amuse the public, he best succeeded with that public by holding it up to scorn and ridicule with the lightest satire” [15]. J. T. Grein also expressed the same opinion: “*The Importance of Being Earnest* ranks high, not only on account of its gaiety... but because it satirizes vividly, pointedly yet not unkindly, the mannerisms and foibles of a society which is constantly before the public eye” [14]. As these contemporary criticisms showed, Wilde played with his epigrams and frequently touched upon the edge of the conventions, but he had no interest in offending the sensibility of his audience. Benjamin F. Fisher recently points out, in *Earnest*, emotional violence seems all ready to erupt, but it never does [26]. Anyway, what Wilde values most is the instant theatrical

effect his extremely stylistic dialogues produce on stage.

Wilde once wrote to George Alexander, one of the most successful theatre managers of the 1890s, about *Earnest*: “The real charm of the play, if it is to have charm, must be in the dialogue. The plot is slight, but, I think, adequate” [19]. As the letter showed, Wilde was well aware that his dramatic talent was best reflected in dialogue. It is noteworthy that before he re-entered the theatre, Wilde had rehearsed the form of dialogue very successfully in his critical essays. In both *The Decay of Lying* and *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde impressed the reader with a highly stylistic linguistic presentation. Meanwhile, in *The Decay of Lying*, Wilde already hinted at a determination to innovate the dramatic language. He explicitly denounced the vulgarity of the contemporary melodrama, saying: “The characters in these plays talk on the stage exactly as they would talk off it; they have neither aspirations nor aspirates; they are taken directly from life and reproduce its vulgarity down to the smallest detail” [11]. Critics usually take Wilde’s comment as evidence of Wilde’s opposition to realism or naturalism in the late-Victorian theatre. As it shows, in his vowing against the vulgarity of the theatrical realism, Wilde specially opposes a realistic depiction of dramatic characters. In contrast to this “monstrous worship of facts” [11], Wilde advocates an artistic presentation of dramatic personae. In *Earnest* he creates an artificial world where all the characters are exquisitely urban and sophisticated. The most typical example is the young lady Gwendolen Fairfax.

While analyzing the subject of trivialization, I have presented Gwendolen’s extremely stylistic attitude towards love and marriage. Another point concerning her stylization is that she expresses those fugitive and intangible ideas so effortlessly. Compared with other characters, Gwendolen possesses a heightened self-awareness of complexity. In other words, a sense of superior intellect is embodied in her spontaneous speech. No one else in the play is able to surpass her in wit. The following dialogue presents a sharp contrast between the urban sophisticated lady Gwendolen and the country girl Cecily. As we shall see, in her dispute with Cecily, Gwendolen is completely domineering:

GWENDOLEN. Do you allude to me, Miss Cardew, as an entanglement? You are presumptuous. On an occasion of this kind it becomes more than a moral duty to speak one’s mind. It becomes a pleasure.

CECILY. Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into an engagement? How dare you? This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.

GWENDOLEN. [Satirically.] I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different. [11]

The dialogue above occurs in Act Two when Gwendolen visits Jack Worthing’s house in the country. After knowing that the man she loves was once an orphan left in the cloak-room at Victoria Station by his careless governess and then adopted by a country gentleman, Gwendolen is burned with curiosity. She says to Jack Worthing: “The story of your romantic origin... has naturally 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" [11]. As an aristocratic lady growing up in the city, Gwendolen ironically expresses that she does by instinct appreciate anything simple or rural. As she proclaims on another occasion: "Personally I cannot understand how anybody manages to exist in the country, if anybody who is anybody does. The country always bores me to death" [11]. Therefore, a visit to the country seems to be an adventurous expedition. In Jack Worthing's house, Gwendolen sees for the first time Worthing's ward Cecily, who, like Gwendolen herself, desires to marry a man named "Earnest." Cecily has just engaged herself to her "Earnest" — Algernon in reality. The two girls do not know that they are actually engaged to different Earnests. The dispute above is thus originated from this misunderstanding. It is not difficult to detect that Cecily is no match of Gwendolen in the verbal rivalry. Her expression that "When I see a spade I call it a spade" sounds rather plain and obvious in comparison with Gwendolen's witty retort: "I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade." Of Course, Cecily in Wilde's depiction is not a completely innocent country girl. She is fascinated by urbanity and is actually in the process of learning urban ways of life. Gwendolen's statement — "It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different" — makes it clear that the sophisticated city life is certainly beyond the comprehension of the simple country girl.

In the character Gwendolen Wilde thus presents an exquisite taste based upon urbanity. Like Wilde himself, Gwendolen takes style as the supreme principle of life, as she claims: "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing" [11]. As a result of her superficial attitude, Gwendolen symbolizes, in her special way, the urban artificiality. Her dry remarks and unfeeling announcements on the "serious" topics of love, marriage and family show that she is very aware of the culture where she is "critically aware of the culture in which she participates" [27].

#### 4. Oscar Wilde and Theatre Publicity

Seen from the special attention paid by Wilde to the depiction of a cast of characters for their stylistic triviality and exquisiteness, *Earnest* was designed specifically for a group of people in society. To further explain this point, the following part first offers a detailed discussion on the transformation of the late-Victorian theatre from a place of extreme vulgarity to a public institution for the exhibition of respectability and elegance. Then, it attempts to show that the unique exquisiteness in Wilde's dramatic presentation was in response to the enthusiastic pursuit of social elevation among the theatrical profession in the early 1890s. In Wilde times the theatre was not simply an entertaining place, it established itself as a public medium through which a conspicuous exhibition became possible for the privileged audience, and people of lower status informed themselves of the latest fashion. Wilde was well aware of the new public function of the stage; the success of his social comedies proved to be the

result of his collaboration with the theatre manager.

In the 1890s, the late-Victorian theatre's pursuit of social elevation reached a new peak. The two theatres — the Haymarket Theatre and the St. James's Theatre, where Wilde's social comedies were performed, became the most fashionable places of London. Both theatres were specially designed to attract social celebrities. They were small-sized, and decorated elegantly, just like drawing-rooms. In *St. James's: Theatre of Distinction*, Macqueen-Pope describes the St. James's Theatre, where Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *Earnest* (1895) were first produced, in the following words:

In truth, the St. James's became an aristocrat among theatres, and reflected in its heyday — the late Victorian and Edwardian epoch — all that was best in the life of this country. Elegant and rich people filled its stalls, its dress circle and its two boxes. People of substance but less social standing booked for the upper circle, and the rest of the playgoers made for the pit and the gallery. They queued, and in those days the theatre was the only thing for which one did queue. [28]

As Macqueen-Pope shows, in the two theatres assembled the most fashionable people of London. Besides, in the St. James' Theatre, the audience was differentiated into different groups according to social prominence. In *The Last Actor-Managers*, Hesketh Pearson makes the point rather clear: "[T]he St. James's Theatre was the most fashionable playhouse in London. The most expensive seats were occupied by Society with a capital 'S,' the less expensive ones by those who longed to see what Society looked like" [29]. In such an environment, to watch a play was just like attending a public ceremony. The celebrities dressed themselves up in their finest clothes to exhibit their social superiority and the rest part of the theatregoers came to see how their fashionable members behaved.

It was within such a theatrical fashion that in 1890 shortly after he went into management of the St. James's Theatre, George Alexander decided to invite Oscar Wilde to write a play for his theatre. In a letter to Clement Scott, the dramatic critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, Alexander confessed that the initial reason for commissioning a play from Wilde was to use Wilde's name to "bring to the St. James's the smart society circles in which Wilde himself had already moved" [18]. At that time, Wilde had already become a well-known public aesthete. His witty talks and graceful manner in conversation made him a favorable guest among the celebrities in London. In *My Diaries: Being a Personal Narrative of Events, 1888-1914*, the poet Wilfrid Blunt recalled the situation: "The fine society of London and especially the 'Souls' ran after him because they knew he could always amuse them, and the pretty women all allowed him great familiarities" [30]. Alexander paid Wilde £50 in advance for writing a social comedy, and after over one year's preparation, on 20 February 1892 *Lady Windermere's Fan* opened at the St. James's Theatre. The great success of the play helped the young manager acquire his prominent position among the theatres of the 1890s, and Wilde also made a brilliant start as a playwright. At the conclusion of the performance, Wilde made a

self-congratulatory speech to the audience by saying: “I congratulate you on the great success of your performance, which persuades me that you think almost as highly of the play as I do myself” [31].

However, the humorous arrogance showed in the speech could not hide the fact that in his negotiation with the theatre manager, Wilde, like other late-Victorian playwrights, did not gain the upper hand. While preparing the script of *Lady Windermere's Fan* for stage rehearsals, Wilde was persuaded by Alexander to make significant alterations to the play. Each time it was Wilde who gave way. One alteration was concerning the plot of Mrs. Erlynne being Lady Windermere's mother. Wilde desired to keep it a secret that Mrs. Erlynne was Lady Windermere's mother until the last act. Alexander insisted on disclosing the secret to the audience in the second act. Wilde wrote to Alexander:

With regard to your other suggestion about the disclosure of the secret of the play in the second act, had I intended to let out the secret, which is the element of suspense and curiosity, a quality so essentially dramatic, I would have written the play on entirely different lines.... Also it would destroy the dramatic wonder excited by the incident.... If they knew Mrs. Erlynne was the mother, there would be no surprise in her sacrifice.... Also it would destroy the last act: and the chief merit of my last act is to me the fact.... that it is the sudden explanation of what the audience desires to know, followed immediately by the revelation of a character as yet untouched by literature. [19]

As the letter shows, Wilde expects that the performance of *Lady Windermere's Fan* will bring about sensational surprises. He is anxious to create a new type of dramatic character with Mrs. Erlynne and to produce dramatic wonders with suspense in the plot. However, the performance of a play in the late Victorian time is never a matter that can be settled down by the playwright alone. There is no exception for Oscar Wilde. George Alexander did not agree with him upon the ending of the second act. In Alexander's opinion, to keep the audience unaware of the real identity of Mrs. Erlynne until the last act produced a sudden twist of the plot which would be fatal to the whole performance. Unlike Wilde who was trying to make great dramatic sensations, Alexander preferred a gradual advance of interest on the side of the audience. He would not allow a dandy to challenge the audience's intelligence with an unnatural twist of the plot. As a manager who was extremely careful about the “elegant” image of theatre, Alexander catered more for the dramatic taste of those fashionable people. For him, elegance in acting and staging was not a matter of personal preference, but a crucial element to the respectable image of the theatre.

Oscar Wilde was well aware of the new respectable image of the theatre as a public institution and the manager's strenuous effort in maintaining this image, which explained why Wilde originally thought that a farce like *Earnest* was improper for George Alexander and his fashionable theatre. In the early summer of 1894 when Wilde was conceiving of writing this farcical comedy, it seemed to him that Charles Wyndham or Charles Hawtrey rather than Alexander was

more suitable for the piece. In his October letter to George Alexander, Wilde told Alexander: “Of course, the play is not suitable to you at all: you are a romantic actor: the people it wants are actors like Wyndham and Hawtrey. Also, I would be sorry if you altered the definite artistic line of progress you have always followed at the St. James's” [19]. Thinking of *Earnest* as simply a farce, Wilde said plainly that the play was unsuitable for Alexander, a “romantic actor” in his compliment. In another letter written a few days earlier, Wilde assumed that Alexander might think the play “too farcical in incident” for a theatre like his and as regards the American rights, Wilde suggested:

[W]hen you go to the states, it won't be to produce a farcical comedy. You will go as a romantic actor of modern and costume pieces. My play, though the dialogue is sheer comedy, and the best I have ever written, is of course in idea farcical: it could not be made part of a repertoire of serious or classical pieces, except for fun... [19]

As the letter suggests, Wilde was very careful not to offend Alexander with the farce. At the same time he also did very well in impressing the theatre manager by stating that the dramatic dialogues in *Earnest* were the best he had ever written. Wilde's attitude was really ambiguous in the letter, yet when hearing that the St. James's Theatre was suffering a bad reception with Henry James's play *Guy Domville*, Wilde immediately asked the actor-manager Charles Wyndham to transfer *Earnest* to Alexander. In his letter to Henry Arthur Jones, Wyndham thus recalled: “*Guy Domville* failed so utterly and Alexander was in a ‘hole’. Oscar Wilde came to me and asked whether I would let Alexander have *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which would benefit Alexander and also enable Wilde to realize earlier than when he could with me” [19]. As Wyndham hinted in the letter, during that period, Wilde was in urgent need of money, and it seemed that because of the catastrophic debut of *Guy Domville*, Alexander would soon get his play performed. Things went as Wilde expected. Alexander immediately accepted the play and put it into rehearsal.

In the course of rehearsals, Alexander made many alterations to *Earnest*. Among his adjustments to the text, the most radical alteration was to reduce the play from four to three acts. Wilde was obviously annoyed by Alexander's constant revisions. He said to Alexander: “Do you realize, Aleck, what you are asking me to sacrifice?... but I assure you on my honor that it must have taken me fully five minutes to write it!” [1]. In a casual and frivolous manner, Wilde expressed his discontent with Alexander's alteration, but the first night of *Earnest* turned out to be a brilliant success. The success of *Earnest* proved to be the result of the collaboration of Oscar Wilde and theatre manager George Alexander. Wilde's dramatic dialogue suited well with the taste of the theatre public for its special exquisiteness, and George Alexander, as an able man of the theatrical business, knew quite well how to use Wilde's public fame to attract those celebrities to his theatre and to put Wilde's play on stage in a most fashionable and effective way.



## 5. Conclusion

This paper, by analyzing *The Importance of Being Earnest*, has shown that Wilde's dramatic writing was in close relation to the two central media in the late-Victorian public sphere — the press and the theatre. His skill of trivialization was formed under the influence of "New Journalism" and the special "exquisite sensationalism" embodied in his depiction of dramatic characters corresponded to the late-Victorian theatre's commitment to fashion and respectability. As Sean O'Toole stresses, Wilde succeeded in confronting the Victorian conservatism by use of epigrammatic speech and counterbalancing it with a dandified public character [32]. By means of this publicity, Wilde's social comedies acquired a distinct public dimension that explains why, apart from public life, Wilde could write nothing dramatic at all. One day during his exile, while having lunch with Vincent O'Sullivan and other people, Wilde admitted that he was going through a crisis. Some friends of his family suggested that he should find a mountain village to write plays. This was "a most stupid suggestion," as O'Sullivan distinctly felt, "... How could he find that in a mountain village? It would have continued the penal cell" [33]. For Wilde, nothing but a life full of public self-exhibitions could help him recover from the past sufferings. As one was unable to exist without air, Wilde could not live without the applauding audience.

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