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American Literature 5

6 March 2009

Socialism as a Pro-Irish Symbol in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

"There is no discordant note of seriousness. It is of nonsense," A. B. Walkley wrote of one of the greatest comedies in the English language (196). Despite its apparent dearth of "seriousness," *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde contains deep, radical meaning on many topics, including socialism. Arguably more surprising than a critic calling the masterpiece, "nonsense," (He continued by saying, "Better nonsense, I think, our stage has not seen," to be fair.) is that Wilde, a self-professed socialist who wrote *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, incorporated the ideology into his opus for reasons more important to him than advancing that cause. Though Wilde supported this economic system employing liberal government control to support equality between the classes (Brians), he had no personal stake in it as he grew up on the "most fashionable side" of Merrion Square in Dublin, Ireland (Coakley 34). Although he was born wealthy, he was also born in Ireland at a time when the English not only controlled Ireland but thought of the Irish in the same way that English aristocrats thought of the working class—as inferiors that they ruled (Killeen 133). Thus, he found the cause of Irish nationalism important not only ideologically but personally. Wilde had several reasons for his zealous support of Ireland's liberty other than his heritage. His mother, "an ardent Irish patriot" (Holland 8), wrote critical pieces targeting the English government because of England's harsh, forcible rule (Killeen 135), so Wilde experienced extreme pro-Irish viewpoints from a young age. Additionally, he frequently criticized the English for misinterpreting him (Coakley 184). Finally, on a personal level, the English censored his plays on several occasions (Coakley 183).

Thus, England provoked his disdain in several manners. Though at first there seems to be no relationship between these two themes, save that Oscar Wilde supported both, the endeavor for Irish freedom mirrored the socialist struggle of the working class to try to obtain independence from and equality to the nobles. Both involved an oppressed group attempting to free itself from the unfair reign of a powerful group who at the time resided above them socially and economically. Wilde noticed this parallel and exploited it to advance both causes at once in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde mocks the English upper class by demonstrating their hypocritical attempts to appear to live up to Victorian ideals when, in reality, they violated them frequently and egregiously. The play features two main heroes, foils for each other; Algernon, who resides in London, often sojourns in the country under the pretense of visiting his friend Bunbury when he wishes to avoid engagements, and his friend Jack, a country-dweller, claims to visit his brother Ernest in London to escape his need to "adopt a high moral tone on all subjects" (6). These lies eventually raise many issues for the two "Bunburyists"—those who visit fabricated friends (named after the man that Algernon "visits")—including temporarily ending both of their engagements. These lies and the many other instances of a lack of respect for Victorian morals—values such as earnestness, propriety, and respect for others—criticize the aristocratic characters of the play and thus the aristocracy altogether, leading to themes supporting socialist ideals of equality between the classes. Socialism, though something that Wilde supported, further acted to represent a cause with which Wilde related personally—Irish nationalism. Although Oscar Wilde was born into the upper class and spent considerable time in London, he shows his Irish nationalism and his disdain for the English in *The Importance of Being Earnest* through socialist-seeming satirization of the English upper class; he reveals the theme primarily by exploiting the fact that the relationship between the English elite and the

plebeians parallels that between the English as a whole and the Irish.

Wilde presents a blatant socialist message, but this apparent socialist theme means little on its own, as Wilde's beliefs did not perfectly fit into socialism. Instead of functioning solely as a theme on its own, it also exposes a deep metaphor in the work. Killeen argues that Wilde did not solely claim socialism because he believed in its basic principles; instead, he proposes, Wilde utilized the socialism for other purposes. Killeen suggests that in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Wilde mentioned popular socialist philosophers more as "name-dropping", as a way to augment the essay's popularity (110). Wilde believed in the main tenets of socialism, but his beliefs far transcended conventional socialism of the time (Hitchens 88). Instead of merely lobbying for socialism because he believed in it, Killeen asserts that Wilde employed his socialism as a tool, in this case for marketing. Wilde somewhat believed in socialism, but he really supported an even more extreme ideology—anarchism. Wilde directly stated this in an interview when he stated, "I am rather more than a Socialist … I am something of an Anarchist" (qtd. in Killeen 109). In the context of Wilde's anarchism, the criticism of the rich in the play gains new meaning. The fact that Wilde harshly criticizes the aristocratic characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* represents a criticism of English government and English society itself. By exposing the superficiality of their honor and honesty, Wilde undermines their Victorian values, portraying the apparent morality as a thin, ornate facade attempting to cover deep-rooted, hideous decay of the society. Hitchens states that Wilde, "taught us to ask, of their majesties, whether they deserve us, or our continued amiable subservience" (90), but Wilde surpasses that query here. In this play, his socialist themes ask whether the entire upper class deserves the submission of the working class laborers who toil much harder than the nobles only to see most of the riches they produces diverted back to the nobles for which they work. This persuades the audience not only to question the government but to question the entire

socioeconomic system. This subversive act of simultaneously questioning the economic system and the government supports the socialist theme and leads the audience to the theme that the socialist theme represents, the belief that England is oppressing Ireland in the same manner that the upper class is oppressing the lower class.

Throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde mocks the English upper class, creating ostensible socialist themes. One particular instance of this ridicule occurs early in the drama when Algernon states, "if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility" (2). Algernon reprobates the "lower orders," but, "it is in fact the upper class that ends up as the target of the critique, and not the lower class" (Tamminen-Kivistö 90). Despite the fact that high society in this time period places considerable emphasis on propriety (Holland 5), Algernon feels that the oppressed, struggling lower class should set the example for the aristocracy that generally prides itself on respectability. This ironic statement shows Wilde's belief in the superiority of the working class, as even his upper-class characters believe that they should look up to the "lower orders" as an example. It also demonstrates the upper class's hypocrisy; the aristocrats claimed to stress morality, yet in reality they completely lacked it, as demonstrated by Algernon's and Jack's need to Bunbury and suspend the propriety in their lives. Algernon's ridiculous disgust with the lower class conversely leads the audience to feel comparable abhorrence for the upper class of which he is a member, demonstrating the hypocrisy and deception of the English upper class. By revealing these faults, Wilde supports the socialist belief that the working class should possess fair power and the wealth that it produces through strenuous toil. Sarah Wallace concurs, stating that by harshly criticizing the values of the nobles, "Wilde's play unmasks middle-class morality." In so doing, he establishes that the lower class is not veritably less moral than the upper class. This creates the socialist theme supporting more

liberty for the lower class, which represents his support for Ireland's freedom from England's ascendancy.

This ridicule equally attacks characters from the town and from the country—despite the dichotomy between the two domains—demonstrating that Wilde is mocking the English upper class as a whole, rather than just dwellers of one realm. Every major character in the play possesses a foil from the other world. These sets of counterparts—Algernon and Jack, Cecily and Gwendolen, and Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism—mirror each other so well that one can easily forget who hails from which land. Algernon and Jack both Bunbury (6) and each bickers profusely with the other (2-8). They Bunbury so that they can shirk their responsibilities and engagements, representing the class as a whole shirking its responsibilities to support the destitute and the menial laborers necessary for their prosperity. As well as signifying the upper class exploiting the workers, it also symbolizes England failing to fulfill its obligation to fairly govern Ireland, since England rules it for its own profit, comparable to the pleasure that Algernon and Jack hedonistically seek through Bunburying, than for the welfare of the Irish people. Bunburying also serves as another example of deception, as each of the heroes invents a person to visit as a pretense for the Bunburying. The fact that both partake in this action shows the balance between the Londoners and the country-dwellers in the play.

Wilde further creates equality between Londoners and country folk by having those from both London and the country say lines that mock the rich. In one such instance, Algernon, who hails from the city, states, “It is awfully hard work doing nothing” (17). In a time when the poor toiled in factories all day, Algernon finds it hard work to deprive himself of the luxuries—theatres, clubs, and other forms of leisure—to which he has become accustomed. Jack, Algernon’s country-dwelling foil, equally strongly shows a major flaw with the upper class, the lack of honesty and true propriety when he declares, “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?" (54). This statement directly opposes what one would generally expect to hear, as he states his deep contrition for the horrible offense of telling the truth, when most, including those of Victorian England, theoretically, value honesty as a virtue rather than a crime. This line uses hyperbole to emphasize how dishonest the aristocrats were by suggesting that one might apologize for straying from the norm and living a life free from lies. Tamminen-Kivistö agrees: "[T]he idea that it is painful for Jack to tell the truth ... reveals Oscar Wilde's view that it is stereotypical behaviour of the upper class people to be deceitful" (48). This attack upon the nobles' honor further conveys Wilde's censure of the upper class by reinforcing the idea of their immorality. The criticism continues when Gwendolen, who contrarily to Jack resides in London, responds to Jack's request, "I can. For I feel that you are sure to change" (54). This reinforces the idea that the status quo in noble society is deceit; Gwendolen does not even consider the possibility that Jack might continue his honesty. Since characters from both the country and the city proclaim these scathing lines, the play satirizes the upper class as a whole. By exposing that the aristocrats possess at least as many faults as those of the working class, these lines imply that England should implement socialism, which would place those from the lower class at equal status with these ignoble nobles.

Wilde further emphasizes this balance by occasionally giving foils the exact same line. For example, when Gwendolen and Cecily determine that some deception has occurred, Gwendolen first asks Jack, "A moment! May I ask if you are engaged to be married to this young lady?", to which he responds, "To dear little Cecily! Of course not! What could have put such an idea into your pretty little head?" (38). Almost immediately thereafter, Cecily, Gwendolen's foil, asks Algernon, Jack's foil, "A moment, Ernest! May I ask you—are you engaged to be married to this young lady?", to which he eventually replies, "Of course not! What could have put such an

idea into your pretty little head?" (39). Each woman responds to her fiance's answer by stating, "Thank you. You may," and then allowing him to kiss her (39). The fact that these two exchanges occur almost identically further shows the balance between those of the country and those of the city, giving the impression that they are so similar that one could substitute one for his or her counterpart without ill effects. This shows that Wilde must be insulting the similarity between them—the fact that they are wealthy and English—because they are treated too similarly for him to be praising one and insulting the other. The fact that characters from both the city and the country say lines with scathing implications about the upper class shows that Wilde directs the satire at the the upper class as a whole, rather than just those who live in the city or in the country, creating an apparent socialist theme by criticizing the rich.

In one brief exchange between Lady Bracknell and Jack, Wilde expands the socialist messages, insults England, and alludes to the issue of Ireland. While determining if Jack may marry Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell professes, "The whole theory of education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square" (13). For one, this passage disparages English society by pointing out the failure of its education system. Furthermore, it continues the ridicule of the upper echelon by implying that the aristocrats prefer that the schools not to teach effectively so that the working class continues to suffer without opportunity to alter their situation. As Lalonde phrases it, "educational institutions serve the interests of the ruling class" (670); therefore, the English schools fail to educate their pupils because the "ruling class" gains from maintaining the educational disparity. Wilde continues this conversation with more lines relating to the pro-Irish theme of the play; a short time later, Lady Bracknell asks, "What are your politics?" Jack responds, "I am a Liberal Unionist" (13). Despite the term "liberal," Liberal Unionists "are

essentially conservative" (Lalonde 670), leading Lady Bracknell to respond approvingly: "Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us" (13). Though Liberal Unionism caused no stir to the characters as Lady Bracknell approved of his conventional views, the does bear great significance, for the Liberal Unionism, "recalls thee matter of Irish Home Rule" (Lalonde 670). This term refers to a bill, which failed to pass in large part due to Liberal Unionists, that would have granted Ireland sovereignty (Lalonde 670). Lady Bracknell, the paradigm of an upper-class English woman caring solely about society and propriety, "dines with," and thus associates with, Liberal Unionists. Since the entire play serves to mock the society that Lady Bracknell represents, th connection of Lady Bracknell to the legislators who prevented Ireland from attaining autonomy transfers all of the socialist-themed criticism of the upper class to England as a whole. By associating Lady Bracknell with both England's upper class and the English rulers who denied Ireland sovereignty, Wilde demonstrates the parallel between the wealthy preventing the commoners from usurping them, such as through inadequate education, and England rejecting Irish Home Rule to prevent Ireland from gaining power.

Another instance of criticism of Lady Bracknell transferring to critique of England's reign over Ireland occurs when she insults Jack for his orphanhood, declaring, "To lose one parent … may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness" (14). This shows the complete callousness of the aristocrats towards those with poor fortune, reflecting their apathy to those who lack economic fortune. By making the instance of insensitivity so extreme, Wilde bolsters the apparent socialist themes, intensifying the satire of the English upper class. Furthermore, since Lady Bracknell, "the paragon of propriety," (Stoller 89) who epitomizes English society, utters this line, her heartless disregard for the suffering of those less blessed than herself reflects onto the entirety of English society because Victorian England stressed propriety, making her the paragon of society itself. This indifference to suffering relates directly to the issue

of English rule of Ireland because the sentiment in Bracknell's line bears similarities to England's actions during the Great Potato Famine, which occurred just a few years before Wilde's birth. During that period of crop failure, the English allowed 1 million Irish to starve to death while still forcing Ireland to export food (Killeen 134). Lady Bracknell's coldness towards Jack's orphanhood emulates England's apathy to the plight of the Irish during the famine. By portraying Lady Bracknell as a woman devoid of morality and sympathy, Wilde harshly criticizes not just the upper class, but England as a whole as well. In so doing, he suggests that England ruthlessly and wrongfully rules Ireland. As these quotes show, Lady Bracknell plays an integral role in the transfer of the socialist theme to the message of Irish nationalism. The criticism of the aristocrats could symbolically disparage all of England without her because the upper class possesses the power in England, but Lady Bracknell takes that connection from abstract to concrete. Her emphasis on respectability even when the other characters experience major lapses and her wealth make her the symbol of Victorian society. Thus, when Wilde connects her with the relationship between England and Ireland, as in these previous passages, that association shifts all of the disparagement of the upper class that riddles the play onto the English government for its treatment of Ireland. Lady Bracknell bridges the criticism from the upper class to the English government and demonstrates the analogy between the two by embodying the upper class and affiliating with Irish persecution indirectly.

Though Wilde supports socialism as well, he primarily utilizes the socialist-seeming theme in *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a metaphor for the theme of Irish nationalism. Mocking the upper class effectively supported his socialist theme, but it also served as a stepping stone for his Irish nationalism theme. The parallel between England's despotism toward Ireland and the aristocrats' oppression of the working class allowed socialism to easily support and represent Irish nationalism. Lady Bracknell enhanced the connection by exemplifying high

society and relating to English persecution of Ireland in two circuitous manners. This theme has more value to Wilde because he was born rich but Irish. Morally, he opposes both England's subjugation of Ireland and the subjugation of the working class by the prosperous, but he only stands to gain from Irish nationalism. In fact, as a fairly affluent figure, he probably would personally suffer from a transition to socialism and the subsequent redistribution of wealth. Though socialism and mocking the upper class of England are not Wilde's primary intention, they act as an extremely effective vehicle for conveying that theme because of the strong parallel. The socialist themes play a pivotal role in the play; though most at the time opposed socialism, simply supporting it would not lead to massive censorship and criminal proceedings. On the other hand, satirizing the English government and suggesting in a more straightforward manner that it does not deserve some of the sovereignty that it possesses would likely cause the government to censor the work and possibly hang him for treason. By concealing this surreptitious theme within another theme, Wilde managed to have his subversive play performed in London, the capital of the government that it harshly criticized. Had the play more directly expressed this theme, the effectiveness would have decreased due to the controversial and seditious nature of the message that Ireland should have autonomy.

This clandestine message demonstrates that an audience must remain wary of interpreting any aspect of a literary work totally literally without considering the possibility of deeper meaning. Wilde showed that even other themes can aptly conceal a theme. Readers must take special care when the writer worked during a time of censorship, but they must always use that diligence because censorship always exists. Even in America today, where technically one may state any opinion, that is not the case. The government may not repress a subversive or unpopular opinion like some others do, but the public still can. If a writer today were to desire to express her support for an opinion with which the vast majority disagrees, perhaps wanting pedophilia

legalized, she would need to use methods like this to protect her career and reputation while still imbuing her work with the theme. Making a controversial theme more discrete also improves the reader's reception of the message. A reader with a strong stance against the author's thesis would often reject the proposal without granting it a fair chance if the writer were to present the message in a straightforward manner. However, if a story requires cogitation for the reader to determine the true theme, the author could dupe an ardently opposed audience into hearing her arguments because the readers would not know the theme until after reading the work and thus hearing the author's rationale. Since there will always be some highly-scorned opinions that the public or those in power find detestable, authors will find ingenious manners such as this one to cloak yet express their unpopular beliefs, and readers must stay aware of this so that they do not pass over these themes.

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