Dandy Indeed: Vandalizing Victorian Morality with the Works of Oscar Wilde

Throughout the legendary mocker’s revered bibliography, Oscar Wilde’s assault on Victorian society is rendered predominantly through the lens of a figure exalting surface, not sentiment. This radiant *pose* amongst the wintry elite perpetuates an effective surveillance of Victorian society’s moral pretense with an exclusive allure. In Wilde’s world, this fashioned figure cascading down the surface of the Victorian stratosphere delivers a vital consciousness its own fashioned existence, exposing the moral cloak of Victorian society as a costume itself. Through this shrewd indictment of moral artifice, the dandy disembarks.

In Wilde’s lauded canon of Victorian vandalism, the dandy’s contempt for Victorian sentimentalism personifies immunity to the innocence of *love* and *morals*, postural constructs embodied by the society he inhabits. This disposition epitomizes a connective tissue between audience and performance based on the implication that the audience will exalt the dandy’s satirically invulnerable palette – thus deeming elite
society accessible to the masses through a shared condemnation of its ignorance. This assessment is animated through an analysis of two of Wilde’s most revered works for the stage: *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

*Lady Windermere’s Fan* is strategically punctuated by the appearance of Cecil Graham, the loquacious nephew of one Lady Jedburgh, a prominent installation in London society. Cecil’s derision of high society attracts the audience with the prospect of a shared elitism -- one defined by his scorn and sanctioned by their participation. When the Aristotelian model of tragedy is juxtaposed onto this text, it minimizes the distance between Wilde’s satire and the observing masses through a shared access to knowledge, as defined by its contrast to what Cecil deems ignorant. Within this construct, Wilde orchestrates the grand feat of fusing audience and satirist in a collective critique condemning the hypocrisy of the Victorian era.

The subversively arresting suggestion that morality can (and perhaps should) be desecrated is galvanized by Cecil’s suggestion that it is something that he would never practice. The satire of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* is thus navigated by this gorgeously amoral “man of experience,” possessing a rare “instinct about life” (83). Our ambassador consistently stabs at the mere mention of morality, indicting the moral life with a series of knowledgeable incisions. Cecil valiantly articulates this disposition in Act III, proclaiming to a society of Lords, “A man who moralizes is usually a hypocrite, and a woman who moralizes in invariably plain” (81). Throughout *Lady Windermere’s Fan* Cecil never moralizes, and those figures that do become the pathetic victims of his elevated wit.
In Acts II and III, the spectator secures elevation over the same privileged society through a constant defeat of society’s ignorance with an enlightened knowledge ostensibly shared with Cecil. The proposed ignorance of Cecil’s peers is perpetually blitzed by his sardonically knowledgeable (in the Aristotelian sense) asides and the spectator’s certification of them. This knowledge stands in diametric contrast to that of the sentimentalist Lords, the victims of the play’s satirical critique. Figures espousing value are shattered by Cecil’s homicidal coding of the sentimentalist as, “the man who sees absurd value in everything and doesn’t know the market price of a single thing” (83). Audience and ambassador (Cecil) can thus collectively marvel at what they know – and what the subjects of their shared contempt do not.

The invitation to join Cecil in a zone of moral neutrality also immunizes the spectator from his attacks -- if the proposal is accepted. If the spectator adopts morality as a sartorial device, their experience is consequently protected from Cecil’s knowing criticism. As the legendarily ornate loafer suggests to both Lord Darlington and the observing masses, “My dear fellow, what on earth should we men do going about with purity and innocence? A carefully thought-out buttonhole is more effective” (82). Therein, the spectator’s designation of Victorian sentimentalism as grossly inadequate tailoring results in protection from a poorly attired moral existence.

The principled existence of the Victorian age darts further out of fashion through Cecil’s conclusive appraisal of values as relics of his father’s era, equating morals with age -- placing the ethical life in a rather obsolescent sphere. In Act II Cecil boldly attests, “My father would talk morality after dinner. I told him he was old enough to know better. But my experience is that as soon as people are old enough to know better, they know
nothing at all” (59). Throughout *Lady Windermere’s Fan* the spectator’s alliance with Cecil Graham yields a collectively sanctimonious satire, enriching the spectator with an enormous sense of well being – one entrenched in the shared experience of knowing better.

Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* strikes a pose illustrating the emerging *utility* of postural morality within the affected code of Victorian society. The construction of dual identities by Algernon and Jack accordant to their sphere of inhabitation (city or country) personifies the dandy’s necessary immunity to morality – and their reliance on it to capably tilt Victorian Society toward their favor. The piece also asserts that individual success may be maximized by the adoption of *morality* as a textural device in the art of postural deception. This code is arrested in Algernon’s execution of “Bunburyism,” defined as the propensity of the individual to lead a deceptive dual life – allowing the dandy to perform *morally* or *immorally* in order to maximize their own pleasure in a relevant context.

The subjection of morality as a sartorial tool is most stridently exemplified in Jack’s construction of “Ernest,” an additional identity serving a deliciously double purpose. Jack constructs the illness stricken “Ernest” to perpetuate Victorian morality to his ward by caring for the health of a false person, his ostensible moral tutelage galvanized by a compassion for the sick. However, the *sickly* Ernest (no pun intended) also provides an agency of deceptive escape from the moral country to the immorality of the vulgar city. Jack suggests:

> 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 to one’s health or 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 Alban, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. (285)

Thus, the development of an additional identity illustrates Jack’s dependence on an outward observance of morality (in order to “guard” effectively) to engage in the immoral wickedness of urban dandyism.

When Jack ultimately decides to abandon this inherent immorality in favor of exposing his lack of “Ernest” – ness, he is a man without a language, an amorphous figure without skeletal assistance. Jack suggests, “Gwendolyn – Cecily – it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind” (325). Further, upon hearing the revelation that his true name is in fact Ernest, Jack again notes the significance of deceit in the posture of the dandy, suggesting, “it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that he has been speaking nothing but the truth” (343).

In order to effectively note the significance of an immoral posture in elite society, it is necessary to exhibit the tendency of the privileged to celebrate wickedness, which *The Importance of Being Earnest* suggests in high-fi resolution. This assessment is summoned in young Cecily’s suggestion that elite society is dependent upon the transgressor of morality as a rather grand topic amongst the upper classes. Cecily suggests to Algernon, “Well, ever since dear Uncle Jack first confessed to us that he had
a younger brother who was very wicked and bad, you of course have formed the chief topic of conversation between myself and Miss Prism. And of course a man who is talked about is always very attractive” (315). In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the dandy continues to thrive as the topic of conversation, his deception occupying and ultimately replacing Victorian virtue with sartorial flare.

In both *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* the replacement of ethics with elegance echoes boldly, signaling the aptitude of the audience to supersede the “moral” existence through a consciousness of its inherent absurdity. Throughout the Wildean canon, the Victorian world of these texts is ultimately a self-perpetuating bazaar of moral masquerade, punctuated only by the critique of the individual who arrives in costume. The dandy’s stratification of artifice over earnestness introduces an ultimate insider – one who escorts the audience with a satirical mirror, unlocking the absurdities of Victorian society’s moral pageantry with its own reflection. Accordingly, in the context of this masquerade of sentimental morality, the dandy who dresses for the ball is also the most capable of *undressing* it.
Works Cited:

