

The Motif of Inversion in the Importance of Being Earnest

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Abstract: *In the Importance of Being Earnest, Wilde employs a paradoxical pattern that demonstrates the parallel existence of countervailing precepts in the society of his time. The establishment of this recurrent idea of inversion is in evidence in the play at the level of social interaction, common notions of morality and philosophical thoughts. A critical study of the play reveals that Wilde uses this technique of inversion to reject the simplistic Victorian explanation of human nature as being unnatural and suffocating. The play is an interaction of the contradictory aspects. Thus the characters in the play voice noble sentiments representing the strait laced individuals of the time while at the same time they are full of all the cynicism, hypocrisy and colorful natural urges such as, a love of monetary gain, natural sexual urges, gender role reversals; that completely challenge the same rigorous code. He uses the technique of inversion by passing the value system of the age, consisting of all the notions held dear by the Victorians such as family life. Morality, Victorian romanticism and even the Protestant muscularity concept through the sieve of a very cynical and analytical ridicule which leads to the logical redundancy of the code.*

Keywords: *Motif of inversion, Oscar Wilde, Paradoxical patterns, Victorian code of ethics, Opposite practical reality.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the play, Wilde portrays characters that have one foot in the Victorian code while having the other in an exactly opposite practical reality. This schizophrenic conflict is his stage that brings about the inversion into sharp relief. This research paper will explore the play to demonstrate such an inversion of the paradoxical situation.

Wilde proceeds to ridicule the upheld strict beliefs and principles dear to the Victorian age in the following manner. The characters of Jack, Lady and Lord Bracknell and their course of action throughout the play challenge the very fundamental norms of noble birth and Protestant masculinity held dear by the conventional English society. The predominant Anglo Protestant church adapted Darwin's theory of evolution and his concept of survival of the fittest according to its own civilizing zeal. In its application, they stressed the production of a masculine man with a flawless birth, a right social behavior and a muscular appearance to carry on the imperialistic drive in the future generations as well (Killeen 143-45).

2. ANALYSIS

The dubious origin of Jack as a foundling does not make him suffer, from any complex; rather, he proclaims his birth unabashedly "I was well, I was found in a handbag" (I. 244). His name Worthing is not derived from an authentic family source but from the fact that the man who found him "happened to have a first class ticket for Worthing in his pocket" (I. 244). So it becomes clear that Jack Worthing is an outcast when measured by typical standard. Lady Bracknell is somewhat bewildered on hearing it but she is not altogether shocked by Jack's unhesitating reference to his dubious pedigree. She cynically retorts "to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent of either sex, before the season is quite over"(I. 244). In Lady Bracknell's lenient approach towards Jack, Wilde projects his rejection of the excessive importance attached to the purity of birth as was the case in prevalent social set up. The idea "to be born or at any rate bred, in a handbag, whether it had handles or not" (I.244); does not disturb her seriously from a moral point of view. Her concerns about the parentage of Jack exhibit the pretentious attitude of the society to keep up appearances. Lady Bracknell's expression of alarm is more for the fear of the society than to address her own personal

preferences. She is alarmed to some extent but her judgment of Jack is more from the prospect of a rich and well settled son-in-law than from the aspect of his origin.

In the third act of the play, the identity of Jack is revealed as the son of an army general. Lady Bracknell discloses the fact to him in these words: "The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life"(III.288). Judged by the Darwinian principles, Jack must be an embodiment of his father's qualities, but he turns out to be the very opposite. He is not disciplined when observed by military standards and prefers to be engaged more in pleasure seeking activities than doing any serious work. He himself expresses, "Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?"(1.230). In spite of his dubious birth, Jack holds a prominent and respectable position and his activities stand in contrast to the upheld notions of the Victorians. His portrayal in the play suggests that the search of the Victorians for an ideal muscular man through pure birth is a misguided activity.

In the world of the *Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde presents another male, Lord Bracknell, who also serves as a contrast to the much hyped image of the ideal dominating male. His complete absence throughout the play ridicules the hegemonic Victorian code. Gwendolen, his daughter, seems to be familiar with this situation in her household when she says; "Outside the family circle, papa, I am glad to say is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for a man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties; he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not" (II. 266). Her response is quite natural a reaction to the society which is extremely fond of male domination. The domesticated role of Lord Bracknell is utterly unacceptable in the world outside the play whereas Jack being found in a handbag at a railway station terminus is shocking to the moves of the Victorian society. In this respect, Jarlath Killeen aptly remarks, "The play can be read as an attempt by Wilde to privilege the forms of masculinity that were being marginalized by the manly Christianity of the Protestant imperialistic middle classes (144).The presentation of Jack and Lord Bracknell in passive shades rules out the emergence of the much idealized concept of Victorian masculinity.

Since the Victorian society was segregated between a dominant male, inhabiting the confines of a prescribed perimeter and a woman that was bound within a limited and effeminate angel - in - the - house role (Killeen 149). The domineering figure of Lady Bracknell is a reaction to the rigorous enforcement of this dichotomy. She exhibits strong administrative qualities and controls her domestic as well as outside affairs. Throughout the play, her character is a challenge to the strict segregation of gender roles defined by the accepted social norms. In her interview with Jack, she usurps the role of the father and holds an extremely powerful position by being concerned with the way things should be as defined by her. She comments on the side of Belgrave Square where Jack's house is located "The fashionable side. I thought there was something. However that could easily be altered?" (1.243). Jack is a bit confused if Lady Bracknell means that the fashion or the side of the house could be changed to which she replies: "Both, if necessary, I presume" (1.243).She wants all the things to be settled according to her wishes. It is her authoritative nature that demonstrates a reversal of the customary male dominated society.

Her logical reasoning and rational analysis of Jack's personality during his interview with her proves that she can look beneath the surface of things. Jack is pushed into a corner by Lady Bracknell when he answers one of her questions about his general knowledge of worldly affairs to which he replies in a retreating tone "I know nothing, Lady Bracknell" (1.242). She is confident, bold and witty and proves herself to be worthy of the position she enjoys. The social power exercised by the men to oppress and confine the womenfolk inside a prescribed sphere is strongly rejected by Lady Bracknell. She carves out a powerful status for herself in the house by driving Lord Bracknell out of her sphere of serious business. She states that he is sent to bed whenever the dinner table numbers are all out: "Fortunately he is accustomed to that" (1.238).

Through Lady Bracknell's domineering presence in the play, Wilde sidelines the prevalent idea of male supremacy. She manages to solve all the problems herself without any support from the male members of the house. The role of Lady Bracknell as depicted in the play is that of a fairy godmother with a magical wand in her hand. She manages to control and subdue all the male members in her domestic and social circle by the touch of that wand. It can be observed that she holds a moral and social supremacy in the household by withholding information of Gwendolen's flight from her father and insists that men must always be kept in the dark.

Lady Bracknell, poses a threat to the possible match between Jack and Gwendolen by saying; "You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter - a girl brought up with the utmost care - to marry into a cloak room" (1.245). But it is only through her patronage that everything is settled in a desirable way. She controls and administers the state of affairs that are required to settle the match and for this purpose follows her daughter to the country side. She knows exactly how to extract information about her missing daughter from the servant "whose confidence I purchased by means of a small coin" (f.278), No one in the play knows the value of money more than Lady Bracknell who admits the fact boldly in these words: "When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way" (III.281). She is an expert in handling all kind of situations and persons. The temporary threat to the marriage of her daughter with Jack is washed away when she gives the false impression to Lord Bracknell that their daughter "is attending a more than usually lengthy lecture by-university Extension Scheme" (III.278).

In the play, it is observed that Lady Bracknell ridicules the role of the typical husband when she expresses further, "I do not propose to undeceive him. Indeed I have never undeceived him on any question. I would consider it wrong" (III.278). This statement by her negates the contemporary idea of male dominance and the rejection of the notion that in a married life honesty and fidelity are only a woman's moral duty and the husband is supposed to be free of all such rules. Contrary to the strict social set up of Victorian society, Lady Bracknell emerges as a powerful figure who defies and challenges the typical value system as it can be explained in these words: "The likes of Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell wandering the countryside without Lord Bracknell knowing anything about it is precisely what the Low church Evangelicals wished to avoid" (Killeen 147).

The paradoxical figure of lady Bracknell projects Wilde's cynicism against the hypocrisy and affectation of the English society at that time. Her verbal respect to almost all the moral principles held sacred by the Victorians is, in fact, mimicry of the strict code of behaviors championed by them. On one hand she voices these stifling views, while on the other, her mind and her actions work in an entirely opposite way. Through her actions, she targets the society which is full of hypocrisy and adopts a course that demonstrates natural liberation of human instincts. She pays verbal respect to family position and society and tells her nephew Algernon never to speak disrespectfully of society: "Only people who can't get into it do that" (III.281). Instead of speaking against the society, she is given a free hand by Wilde to mould everything according to her own will and whim. The alarm shown by Lady Bracknell at the dubious origin of Jack is sidelined when she adds his name to her list of eligible candidates: "However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires" (1.242). If measured by the strict rules of the age, her priority in this context should have been to investigate the parentage and lineage of Jack at the earliest but the first question that comes out of her mouth is a trivial one. Her question from Jack "Do you smoke?" (1.242); is a clear indication that she is more interested in other things than his family. In her demand from Jack "to produce at least one parent before the time is over" (1.244); though the ultimate in cynicism, yet she cannot rule out the natural desire of a mother to see her daughter well settled in married life. The serious question of Jack's dubious origin is blurred in the light of his income being "between seven and eight thousand a year chiefly in investments" and "a country house with about fifteen hundred acres" (1.243). Lady Bracknell follows Gwendolen to the Manor house not to stop her from the pursuit of a suitable husband in the form of Jack but she stands guard to the material gains as the result of the match and practically facilitates the two couples in finalizing their decision of marriage. In giving her consent for the marriages. Lac> Bracknell's preference of wealth is her natural tendency to material gains as opposed:: the noble Victorians in their requirement of a docile housewife who is unaffected by such considerations.

Wilde's demonstration of the inverse paradox of the Victorian affectation is further highlighted when Lady Bracknell mimics the intolerance of society towards and kind of illness. She shows no sympathy for Mr. Bunbury, an invalid friend of Algernon by saying, "Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life" (1.238). This clear cut statement is a parody of the Victorian obsession with health and it reflects the motto of the prevalent robust Protestantism. But her rejection of this unnatural and false norm can be noticed in her marriage to a man who stays in bed all the time. Illness or bad health is out of one's control and any intolerance towards such a thing exhibits unnatural or artificial behavior on the part of the society. Lady Bracknell's acceptance of her ailing husband is her tolerance of human incapacities which the society tends to ignore.

Lady Bracknell represents the high headedness of the English and she guards the high morals of her society against the supposedly threatening ideas propagated by other nations. When Jack discloses his origin, the lady holds the French Revolution responsible for spreading immoral and irreligious ideas. To her it seems "to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution" (1.244). Her prejudices are clear when she gives reasons for her preference of German songs to the French; "But German sounds a thoroughly respectable language and indeed, I believe it so" (1.239). French culture and ideology, with its revised outlook on the human rights offered a liberal and more satisfying code of life. It essentially posed a threat to the much guarded English morality of that time. This self assumed sense of moral responsibility is rejected by the paradoxical actions of Lady Bracknell. She takes no time to accept the services of a French maid to adapt Cecily's appearance according to the fashions of the time as according to her "A thoroughly experienced French maid produces a really marvelous result in a very brief space of time" (III.280). The services offered by a French expert do not disturb her any more as her high moral tone is compromised by the massive investments owned by Cecily. The future of her nephew, Algernon, is more important to Lady Bracknell than the bad effects of any revolutionary ideals. She does not hesitate to give a clear statement about her material inclinations: "A moment, Mr. Worthing, A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her" (III.280). In the play, Lady Bracknell's paradoxical figure voices all the high morals of the age, while at the same time her tendencies towards the natural urges challenge the very suffocating and rigorous code upheld by the Victorians.

In context of the romantic ideals, the two girls, Gwendolen and Cecily follow a pattern in the play which would be completely unacceptable by the Victorian lords. They take charge of their own romantic lives, while the men stand by watching in a relatively passive role. Contrary to the contemporary suffocating notions, they adopt an informal attitude with regard to gender roles, social norms and romantic views. Instead of being concerned with serious aspects about marriage, their preference of the name Earnest suggests their attachment to romantic ideas and their dissatisfaction with the strict rules attached to marriage and family life. Gwendolen's obsession with the name Earnest can be noticed in her words: "we live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of idealsand my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Earnest" (1.239). their words and actions are an outburst against the unnatural shackles of a society which tends to imprison their human desires. Gwendolen prefers the manners of expression rather than the substance of it when she says, "True, in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing" (III.276). This expression of her thought clearly demonstrates a reaction against the double standards of morality practised by the aristocracy at that time.

The two young girls, Gwendolen and Cecily enjoy a freedom of expression and action which would have been denied to them in the social set up of Wilde's time. They dominate the romantic relationships to, mock the contemporary belief of the male supremacy in love and marriage. Both the girls play the leading role in their own love stories. Gwendolen is self assertive like her mother Lady Bracknell. She is attracted towards Jack for the reasons which run counter to the serious considerations of the Victorian parents. Instead of being discouraged by the repulsive behaviour of her mother towards Jack, She rebels against her openly by telling him, "But although she may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I am marry some one else, and marry often, noting that she can possibly do can alter my eternal devotion to you" (11.248). Gwendolen does not select Jack for his family status or noble parentage as would have been the case with any other girl of her age at the time. The reasons which she relates for her devotion to him are quite opposite or rather shocking to the strict moral beliefs of the Victorian society. As she says to Jack "The story of your romantic origin, as related to me by mamma, with unpleasing comments, has naturally stirred the deeper fibers of my nature" (11.248). In an urge to follow her own romantic associations, she defies the very norms of the family life as well as those of the society. She stands against her mother's will by planning to follow Jack to his country house and to keep in touch with him daily: "It may be necessary to do something desperate. That, of course, will require serious consideration. I will communicate with you daily" (1.248) It is quite clear from her attitude that she would not allow even her near and dear ones to stand in the way of her romantic fulfillment. Gwendolen's decision in favor of Jack negates the earnestness of society to find a flawless male. She shuns down the very idea by preferring Earnest who is a pleasure loving man.

Gwendolen takes charge of her love life and is more active than Jack, It is she who gives courage and

confidence to him against Lady Bracknell's discouraging attitude. She is honest in the expression of her feelings for Jack. When Jack proposes to Gwendolen, the latter gives her acceptance even before he puts it in words: "Mr. Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you (1.240). Through the course of action followed by Gwendolen, Wilde targets the hypocrisy of the society. The strict conventional code of Victorianism is broken through the frank and open expression of feelings by Gwendolen. She is not subdued even by her mother and protests at Lady Bracknell's sudden interruption when Jack is proposing to her "Mamma! I must beg you to retire. This is no place for you. Besides, Mr. Worthing has not quite finished yet" (1.241).

The open and bold acknowledgement of her love for Jack is utterly unacceptable by the older generation. Her dissatisfaction over the inability of the older generation to address the problems of the young can be noticed in these words: "Few parents now days pay any regard to what their children say to them. The old fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out" (1.248). This inversion of the notion is a desperate cry of the youth against the hard and fast rules imposed on them by their elders. They are yoked to the inhuman code of morality of which their reaction is quite normal. Gwendolen inherits nothing from her father. All her self assertiveness comes from Lady Bracknell. Throughout the play, the female characters establish a matriarchal supremacy which runs counter to the predominant masculine society.

The romantic notions of Cecily are much deeper as compared to her simplistic appearance. She lives in the world of her secret diaries where she has created an engagement with Algernon even before she actually sees him, as she says to him, "You silly you! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months" (11.263). And if Algernon (her lover) would not send her love letters, she would write them herself and if no one buys her a ring, she can produce one: "The next day I bought this little ring in your name" (11.263). The romantic imagination weaved by a country girl like Cecily in the play turns the Victorian morals Upside down. Wilde's aim is to highlight the necessity of a balanced system which could consider human nature as malleable and the fulfillment of natural emotions as vital to the psychological and physical health of an individual. In a sense, he tries to create an atmosphere where the expression of human desires is not considered a sin. His characters in the play reject the inhuman and self imposed structures which breed hypocrisy and affectation Richard Ellman in the introductory passage to his book entitled Oscar Wilde, justifies Wilde in this creation of a system in the play which is counter to the strict principles of Victorianism: "Essentially Wilde was conducting, in the most civilized way, an anatomy of his society, and a radical reconsideration of its ethics. He knew all the secrets and could expose all the pretense he was proposing that good and evil are not what they *seem*, that moral tabs cannot cope with the complexity of behaviour" (xii).

The two relatively passive males, Algernon and Jack are full of natural human urges. They find themselves unable to exist in the hypocritical and suffocating environment, so they create a fictional world for the outlet of their human desires. Algernon invents "Bunburyism" (1.234); which comes forth as contrary to the high moral code held dear by the Victorians. Otto Reinert defines the term in these words: "Bunburyism means to invent a fictitious character, who can serve as a pretext for escaping a frustrating social routine, regulated by a repressive convention" (157). Algernon has invented a fictitious invalid friend by the name of Mr. Bunbury who serves as an excuse for him to escape a frustrating social routine: "I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose" (1.235). Algernon's yearning for an aesthetic life amidst strict Victorian correctness is his natural need against a social code that says life must be lived without human instincts. His escape towards Bunburyism serves to get rid of the monotonous routine that deadens the natural urge to enjoy life. In this way he does not accept the hypocritical convention where he is placed next "to Mary Farquhar who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner table" (1.235); and to Algernon this is like "washing one's clean linen in public" (1.236). He would much rather have her flin with him and is alarmed at the growing number of women who have this tendency. Such family dinners are boring to Algernon where there is nothing enjoyable for him. In a social set up where the only thing to peruse in a marriage is to abide by a commitment without the consideration of its true Spirit, then this very concept of matrimony bore? Algernon and he inverts the cliché about marriages being made in Heaven to "Divorces are made in Heaven" (1.231). His reaction to Lane's remark, that first rate champagne is rarely served in married households, is spontaneous, "Is marriage so demoralizing as that?" (1.229). The established hard and fast rules attached to married life pose a threat to Algernon's liberal instincts. He does not

feel normal in a set up where in a marriage "Three is a company and two is none" (1.236). In his inversions of the social philosophies, the stress is on the fact that rules are made for human beings and not vice versa.

Wilde, being fed up of the pretensions of the Victorian society, gives freedom to the characters in the play to listen to their inner voices and act accordingly. Algernon's rejection of the Victorian morality can be seen in his making fun of the moral structuring of the lower strata of society: "Really, if the lower order don't send us a good example, what on earth in the use of them?" (1.230). Thus he damns the Victorian morals by relegating their observance by the lower order. The realm of this code is seen by him as relevant only to the lower strata which of itself exists as a lower caste. He finds the men who do not belong to the lower class as free of such confines. Hence the upper class should not be enslaved by the yoke of the insufferable discipline of this code. He caustically remarks that: "More than half of the modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read" (1.232). This is the damage that society has suffered by limiting the thought process or by imposing a censorship on what to read hence this controlled society is either for dunces or for the lower strata. Similarly his cry that "relatives are a tedious pack of people" is a spontaneous reaction of a person against an artificial society which tends to burden him with unnecessary formalities.

Under a strict moral and religious code where there is hardly any consideration for the release of natural emotions and where the death of a husband turns the time in reversal for the widowed Lady Harbury and instead of turning grey from grief, "her hair has turned quite gold" (1.237); Algernon seems justified to turn away from marriage. He sees nothing wrong in disobeying the hypocritical conventions and seeks the fulfillment of human emotions in Bunburyism without doing any harm to anyone around him. In his invented world, there is no place for the inhuman and unnatural Victorian correctness. The artificial and monotonous code offered to him by the society stands contrary to his malleable nature. It blunts his spirit. Reinert gives an explanation of Algernon's invented world in these words; "Bunburyism marks one of the extreme points in the swing of the pendulum, Victorianism the other" (158).

In the first act of the play, Jack comes to know about the term Bunburyism from Algernon for the first time but it is quite obvious that he is a confirmed Bunburyist even before the concept was known to him. He himself says, "well, my name is Earnest in town and Jack in the country" (1.233). Further, he explains the need to change his identity and it reflects his human tendency towards a relatively liberal aspect. As he says, "And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness" (1.234). Jack is leading his life in two opposite dimensions. On one hand, he has to adopt a serious moral tone for his ward Cecily and consequently his activities in the town are completely hidden from her. She holds an altogether different image of Jack when she says, "Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious!" (II. 250) Miss Prism's view about him is not different from that of Cecily; "Mr. Worthing has many troubles in his life. Idle merriment and triviality would be out of place in his conversation" (II.250). This is an ultimate example of inversion wherein the same person contains two totally opposing personalities, complete with representation of two contrary behaviors. While one is serious, responsible and upholds the Victorian code to its ultimate sanctity; the other is the pretentious; though perfectly natural charlatan who was found in a satchel at the railway station.

In the fulfillment of their human instincts, the characters of Wilde in the play never indulge in moral digression. Jack and Algernon are justified in Bunburying in a society where there is a suppression of natural human feelings. This simple harmless activity on the part of these two males is not misused by them. The play would have been a breath of fresh air for the Victorian audience as they could identify their own long suppressed desires being brought to life on stage. Jack and Algernon are not involved in any illicit relationship. To the audience, they do not appear as repulsive figures, rather the honest and natural acknowledgement of their desires justify their actions. Throughout the play Algernon's insatiable appetite for muffins reflect the unfulfillment of his sexual hunger; but he does not adopt any negative way to satisfy his physical needs.

Jack finds a suitable match in Gwendolen and his commitment to her is genuine as he makes it clear to Algernon, "If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury" (1.238). Although Algernon wants to carry on with his Bunburying in the beginning, yet as the action proceeds, he develops a serious relationship with Cecily and does not need that excuse to visit his invalid friend any more. He says clearly to Lady Bracknell; "Oh, I killed Bunbury this afternoon. I mean poor Bunbury died this afternoon" (III.278).

This practice of Bunburyism is a temporary invention to facilitate their normal human tendencies. In the adoption of a code of behaviour quite contrary to the suffocating structure. Wilde offers a remedy to cure the moral schizophrenia from which the Victorians were suffering.

Wilde's portrayal of Dr. Canon Chasuble in human colours questions the strict doctrine of celibacy retained by the church. Dr. Chasuble shoves aside the excessive concerns of the next world in pursuit of his present human needs when he says, "Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips" (11.252). In Canon, Wilde incorporates human element denied to him by the Protestant lords. His pious exterior cannot hide his true human urges. His argument in favour of celibacy seems weaker in the pretext of his strong natural desires. On one hand Dr. Canon tries to convince Miss Prism about the rules of the church by saying, "The precept as well as the practice of the primitive Church was distinctly against matrimony" (11.255); but all this is a vague attempt on his part in the presence of a more attractive option which he cannot resist. He goes out to have a walk with Miss Prism in the garden; "with pleasure. Miss

Prism, with pleasure; we might go as far as the school and back" (11.252). In the inclination of Dr. Canon towards Miss Prism, Wilde sees no infidelity to his religious duties.

The flexibility of Dr. Canon in terms of his religious duties stands in contrast to the strict adherence of the Victorians to their extreme doctrines. He is ready to re-christen Algernon and Jack thus removing any possible obstruction in their achievement of happiness. "Every thing is quite ready for the christenings" (III.283). Christening or baptism is usually done in childhood but Canon's readiness to perform the ritual for the young men indicates his willingness to accommodate the malleable human behaviour instead of strict religious requirements.

According to the rules of the church, Canon's activities and duties as a clergyman should have been directed only towards the achievement of the spiritual regimen but he defies the inhuman laws imposed on him and yearns to fulfill his needs as a human being.

Most of his time is spent in the company of Miss Prism and therefore in the little time that is left for religious service, he even moulds the sermons thus accommodating his natural urges and says, "My sermon on the meaning of the manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful, or, as in the present case, distressing. I have preached it at harvest celebrations, christening confirmation, on days of humiliation and festal days" (11.257). Thus his natural desires seep out from under the hard layer of celibacy. Beneath the religious garb, Canon is a living being with flesh and blood. This very natural need of human beings is ignored by the society and Wilde makes an effort to show it through a priest who is continuously in conflict with the strict code of celibacy and ultimately the human tendencies in him prevail over the rigorous religious norms. He makes excuses for defying the canonical strictures and thus prefers to spend his time with his beloved. His sexual desires are not directed towards the fertile Cecily or Gwendolen, but to the middle aged Miss Prism, whose abilities with children are already under question by her substitution of Jack for "a manuscript of a three - volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality" (III.285). For Dr. Chasuble, Miss Prism is "the most cultivated of the ladies and the very picture of respectability" (III.284). Her sobriety and decency proves to be an affectation when Lady Bracknell reveals her past in these words "Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?" (III.284). Lady Bracknell then gives details about her past mistake of mishandling the child (Jack) twenty eight years ago. For a woman of her age, it is unusual for Miss Prism to retain a keen sexual imagination. Her indulgence in romance has not subsided even after her blunder of losing the child.

The unfulfilled sexual desire in Dr. Canon makes him wait until the old age to lure a woman who is far from child bearing age. Nothing can stop him from following his instincts. He is inclined towards Miss Prism in spite of her past mistakes and "the stain on the lining" of her handbag caused by "the explosion of a temperance beverage" (III.286). Canon accepts all her shortcomings to be natural human follies and acts in a manner which breaks the standards of Victorian prejudiced judgment. The characters of Wilde, in the play are not segregated into saints or sinners. They are presented as normal beings with human urges and follies. Their behaviour is a complete negation of the contemporary melodrama that propagates hypocrisy.

In conclusion then, the play is an excellent tool that Wilde uses to upend the absurdity of the Victorian notional ideal. He pontificates, through his characters, on the various salients of hypocrisy upheld by the high and mighty of his age. His characters, Jack and Algernon even resort to taking refuge from

this suffocating ideology, in an escapist identity named Bunburyism. He demonstrates the inverse paradox mainly by a supercilious and patronizing commentary by his two main characters, Earnest (Jack) and Algernon that highlight the fatuousness of a pretentious society. Such superficial affectations are hard to maintain, in that they are unrealistic from both the point of human nature and of reality. Hence again and again, whenever this code comes up against the dictates of a malleable human nature or personal interest or for that, matter pecuniary gains, the former loses against the latter.

Through the interstices of the above paradoxical inverse, the redundancy of the Victorian code is exposed in all its hypocritical absurdity. The ultimate blow is even more surprising in that the two protagonists: Earnest and Algernon who are the sounding boards for Wilde's critique of the Victorian sentiments also fall victim to all that they have opposed. Thus Algernon who is the antithesis of a family man and the non-marrying kind ties the knot with his beloved Cecily. The high praise he had dispensed for bachelorhood and for using the fairer sex as an object for non serious flirtation is all abandoned in the end at the altar of marriage. Earnest, on the other hand who represented the base born foundling is found to be of noble birth after all. Lady Bracknell is a composite of her struggle to keep up social appearances on the one hand and an eminently good sense on the other. Though she is critical of social critics as being those that cannot join society, she does not let any altruistic notions stand in the way of her self interest. She is the least of the confused characters as in case of a conflict between the Victorian notions and her good sense, she errs on the side of the latter. She whittles down Victorianism to an object, to be used when and as required and to set aside when inconvenient.

3. CONCLUSION

The present study comes to the inference that Oscar Wilde brings into conflict the high minded but increasingly difficult to maintain beliefs of the Victorian age, with a sense of modern reality. The inverse paradox may be described as the fulcrum around which the two arms of a scissor operate. It holds the two arms of the scissor, one arm being the burden of the insufferable social altruism that collapses upon itself through sheer unsustainable weight. The other arm of the scissor is the emergence of the long suppressed human urges expressing a revolt against enforcement of the rigorous code. The inverse pattern in the play acting as the fulcrum puts these two atavistic forces in harness, thereby ravaging all that the Victorian code stood by.

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