2.2.4 (a) Analysing Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* by levels/stages

Language—Text

This is part of a printed play-script and is set out accordingly: speakers’ names are stacked in capitals down the left-hand margin; instructions to actors and stage directions are italicised in brackets; speeches are indented. It is on the basis of such textual cues – supported by costume, set and lighting – that the actors and director would turn this script into a particular stage performance (with movement, gestures, sights, sounds) for a particular kind of theatre and audience. Play-scripts are like this: they are texts that openly invite filling with a kind of context. Far more than a free-standing poem or piece of prose, they are a kind of ‘text-in-search-of-a-context’, ‘scripts-to-play-around-with’. Nowadays one is as likely to think film or tv or radio as stage. Perhaps the first thing to do with a play script, then, is to read it out loud, preferably with more than one person: try it out with tongues and ears. It can also, of course, be read silently to oneself and ‘performed’ in the head. Even so, as a written *script*, there is still a lot that can be said about the language of the text, the words on the page.

This is the kind of dialogue and situation that is called interview and, more pointedly, interrogation: Jack is being ‘grilled’ by Lady Bracknell. The one-sidedness of the exchange is clear from the fact that Lady Bracknell asks the questions and makes notes and judgments; Jack replies and tries to be obliging. The overall tone is formal and polite: full titles of address, ‘Mr Worthing’ and ‘Lady Bracknell’, are employed throughout, so the proprieties of gender and rank are strictly maintained by both speakers. Though Jack’s speech is noticeably more conversational in places (‘Well, yes, I must admit, I smoke’) as well as more hesitant (hence the ellipsis ‘I was, well . . . I was found’). At the same time, for all Jack’s evident desire to satisfy Lady Bracknell’s demands, there is clearly a power-struggle or at least clash of life-styles and personalities going on. Lady Bracknell, sets herself up in authority as interviewer and invites Jack to sit down (‘You can take a seat, Mr Worthing’); but he declines and opts not to (‘Thank you, Lady Bracknell, I prefer standing’). On the surface this is ‘polite’ on both their parts; but, in reading or performance, it can be interpreted in
various ways: as an attempt at control and/or kindness on Lady Bracknell’s part and a
display of resistance and/or embarrassment on Jack’s. The ambiguity is crucial.
Similarly, later, Lady Bracknell’s one-word interjections – ‘Found!’, ‘A handbag?’ –
can be understood or delivered as rudely imperious, genuinely bemused, or both.
Correspondingly, Jack’s responses can seem defensive, evasive or naïve in their
excessive length and apparently extraneous detail: ‘The late Mr Thomas Cardew, an
old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition . . . a first-class ticket for
Worthing . . . Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort’. These are all
details that Lady Bracknell throws back at him in her follow-up question (‘Where did
this charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this seaside resort find
you?’). Indeed, she flatly discounts some of the extra information – ‘Yes. The
Brighton Line’ – that he offers by way of explanation and/or excuse: ‘The line is
immaterial’, insists Lady Bracknell. This is a clear instance of the kind of infringing
(or ‘flouting’) of the principles of conversation that discourse analysts would describe
as ‘irrelevant’ on Jack’s Part and ‘impolite’ on Lady Bracknell’s. It is also a classic
instance of the kind of highly contrived and deeply humorous misunderstanding that
characterises conversations and situations played out dramatically on stage. The
whole scene (like the play) is designed to entertain as well as provoke. It is a literary
and in every sense ‘playful’ take on tricky, amusing and potentially revealing
situation.

**Literature—Genre**

This is, then, a playfully ironic version of an interview-as-interrogation; it is
characterised by exaggeration, surprise and witty inversion of expectation. It does not
just present a real-life conversation, it re-presents and artfully displays a conversation
in order to amuse and stimulate an audience. In short it is the kind of literature we call
drama – a play. But it is important to grasp that the ‘literary’, ‘playful’ quality of the
text is not just a matter of a few clever turns of phrase. It is a matter of structure as
well as style. There is the extended pun on ‘duties’, for example: ‘duties expected of
one during one’s lifetime’ (meaning ‘responsibilities’) and ‘duties extracted from one
after one’s death’ (meaning ‘death duties’, ‘taxes’) – framed in similar ways yet
braced between life and death. Such rhetorical poise is maintained in the alliterative
balance of ‘land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure’, and neatly summarised by a wittily antithetical paradox: ‘It gives one position and prevents one from keeping it up’. (Wilde is renowned for his witty epigrams and in some ways his drama is a vehicle for them.) There is also a sustained delight in playing round with the word ‘lost’. When Jack says ‘I have lost both my parents’, he invokes the euphemistic sense of ‘loss’ associated with death. But Lady Bracknell retorts with the emphasis on ‘both’ and over-rides with a literal sense of ‘losing something’ which implies Jack’s personal responsibility (‘Both? . . . That seems like carelessness.’). This literal sense is then picked up and inverted by Jack as he broaches the fact that he was found in a misplaced handbag: ‘I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer to the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me.’ There is even a subtle play on the word ‘ordinary’: over the course of just three uses and a couple of exchanges it moves from referring literally to the ‘ordinary handbag’ in which Jack was found to the ‘ordinary decencies of family life’ which Lady Bracknell claims to have been symbolically overturned by that event.

Such playfulness with language and ideas therefore extends across speeches and between characters. It emerges from the drama of the situation and expresses character-in-action, people doing as well as saying. Thus we see that Lady Bracknell is ultra-organised, with pencil and notebook in hand from the start: she duly goes through a suite of set questions evidently put to every suitor for her daughter’s hand. This is a list that Jack is not on, and much of the humour of the interrogation is generated by the tension between Lady Bracknell’s insistent yet unexpected line of questioning and Jack’s plucky yet finally ineffectual attempts to come up to the mark. The dramatic shape of the encounter builds steadily towards a climax. Jack manages to meet most of the initial and more or less bizarre requirements: he smokes and therefore has an ‘occupation’ that renders him not completely idle; he knows nothing, is untouched by education and is therefore naturally ignorant; his income is substantial and sound, ‘in investments, chiefly’; and his politics are suitably vague and ultimately conservative (‘I am a Liberal Unionist’ . . . ‘Oh, they count as Tories’). All his answers are greeted with an approving comment from Lady Bracknell (‘I am glad/pleased to hear it’, ‘That is satisfactory’) and duly ticked off; the income in particular is noted down: ‘(Makes a note in her book.’). So all is apparently going well for Jack’s prospects.
But then it all goes wrong. Jack finally falls down on the matter of his birth and parentage: he was found in a handbag at Victoria Station. This is the dramatic downturn (‘catastrophe’) to which the exchange has so steadily built: the final reversal that negates all the accumulated positives. The climax itself is carefully orchestrated, with Lady Bracknell’s single-phrase interjections (‘Found!’ ‘A handbag?’ ‘The cloakroom at Victoria Station?’) prompting ever-more embarrassed, obliging and over-detailed responses from Jack: ‘—a somewhat large, black leather handbag, with handles on it—’. Till at last he offers the seemingly utterly irrelevant information already mentioned (‘Yes. The Brighton line’). This occasions Lady Bracknell’s final, full-scale rant, beginning ‘The line is immaterial . . .’, which somehow manages to identify the fact of Jack being ‘born, or at any rate, bred, in a handbag’ with an assault on civilised values as Lady Bracknell understands them (‘a contempt for the ordinary decency of family life’) and, for good measure, recalls ‘the worst excesses of the French Revolution’. She concludes by hinting darkly at the kinds of ‘social indiscretion’ associated with the areas round railway stations. The result is as disastrous as it is ludicrous: Jack’s marriage prospects have been dashed and, if delivered with due timing and panache, the audience is left in a paroxysm of laughter. (In terms of plot, this is the major complication of the play, and all this apparently extraneous information turns out to be essential in tracing Jack’s parentage – thereby opening up the way to marriage and a happy ending.)

In that the immediate effect is laughter and the ultimate ending happy, the overall genre is obviously comedy. But in so far as this is a scene (and a play) that sports with the superficial observance of social proprieties, we may extend that category and call it a comedy of social manners and, in that the play involves love and ends in multiple marriages, a romantic comedy too. (The play is in fact subtitled ‘A Trivial Comedy for Serious People’.) Further, because the butt is maintenance of the conservative political establishment and the bottom line is money, the text has a real critical and political edge. It is satiric, not just ironic – and has targets specific to its own time as well as being translatable into those of others. This brings us to the play’s relations to its social and historical contexts, then and now.

**Culture—Context**
The kinds of social group represented may be conveniently categorised in terms of oppositions and tensions: between women and men, older and younger generations, established aristocracy and the rising middle class, land and money. Both the latter express the difference between ‘country and city’, and that is borne out in the play as a whole, which is set in a city-centre flat (here in Act 1) and a country manor house (in Acts 2 and 3). In fact, much of the historical force as well as dramatic effect of the present scene depends upon the open confrontation – and covert negotiation – of precisely such oppositions. *Lady Bracknell*, by name and by nature, represents an older generation of titled and landed aristocracy conscious of ‘duties’ (social obligations and inheritance tax); *Mr Worthing* (Jack) represents a younger, untitled generation whose money is ‘In investments, chiefly’. Yet Lady Bracknell clearly has an eye to the money. ‘That is satisfactory’, she says, carefully registering Jack’s ‘seven or eight thousand a year’ in her notebook this was a huge sum at a time when a skilled factory worker might have a weekly wage of less than ten shillings – £50 a year. The only obstacle to the marriage, evidently, is Jack’s obscure parentage and ridiculously lowly birth (‘born or, at any rate bred, in a handbag’). Lady Bracknell insists, with characteristically lofty understatement, ‘this could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognized position in good society’. Such a portentously delivered opinion, then as now, leaves open the question of precisely what is meant by a ‘good society’. It also begs the question of ‘regarded’, ‘assured’ and ‘recognized’ by whom.

A theatre audience in London’s West End at the end of the nineteenth century (the play was first performed in 1895) and a contemporary reader, audience or viewer in the early part of the twenty-first century (you today, for example) will obviously have had – and have – different views and values. But it is part of the delight, as well as the difficulty, of studying literary texts that they speak to us both across history and from within their own time. The fascinating thing is that getting to know that history ‘from the inside’ (‘there and then’) also helps us to see and say our own ‘from the outside’ (‘here and now’). Some essential facts are always welcome. But to be really useful these need to be contexts cued by the text: the words on the page are our surest sign-posts to relevant knowledge in the worlds beyond. That is what distinguishes literary history in particular from history in general. With this in mind – text in hand – the following passages (here highlighted in italics) obviously cry out for some contextual and historical information.
Contextual information into critical insight  The sections that follow pick up the notes appended to the Wilde text above and turn them into critical commentary. This kind of transformation is an important part of a process of turning information into insight. It demonstrates the dynamic relation between Taking and making notes (1.2.3)

* ‘The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound.’ In the mouth of Lady Bracknell, this voices an upper-class anxiety about the broadly progressive, proto-democratic education movements of the late 19th century. The 1870 Education Act set out to make elementary schooling available for everyone up to age twelve and was premised on the need for a literate workforce and informed population; ‘We must educate our masters’, as J. S. Mill famously put it (On Liberty, 1869). Workers’ education associations were springing up with the emerging Trades Union and Labour movements; even among the ruling classes, there was an greater emphasis on professional expertise, business acumen and public service. All of these developments are lumped together as ‘modern education’ and airily dismissed as ‘radically unsound’ by Lady Bracknell. The same broad-brush approach is used to stigmatise expressions of popular dissent: ‘acts of violence in Grosvenor Square’ is a reference to actual (not hypothetical) protests there over the past hundred and more years. Then as now this was an affluent area characterised by embassies and international offices. The fact is that all these movements and events were indeed perceived as ‘a serious danger to the upper classes’. Lady Bracknell is therefore an ironic mouthpiece for wishful thinking and wilful ignorance on a national scale: ‘Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever.’

* Lady Bracknell serves a similarly double-edged function, pointing up when seeking to play down, when extravagantly decrying ‘the worst excesses of the French Revolution’, adding darkly ‘And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to?’. Evidently she is referring to the ‘the Terror’ in which aristocrats were beheaded and their lands confiscated by the French first Republic (this was the populist and still current vision of revolutionary anarchy given most memorable
expression by the conservative political writer Edmund Burke). Equally evidently, what Lady Bracknell does not intend is a reference to the revolutionary communes set up in Paris and elsewhere throughout Western Europe in the late 1840s, especially the ‘1848 Revolutions’ (exactly between the 1790s and 1890s). These were also what ‘that . . . movement led to’. They were the kinds of organisation partly envisaged by Thomas Paine, who had a hand in the drafting of the American and French constitutions and was the revolutionary counter-poise to Burke in early nineteenth-century political debate. What’s more, the ‘1848 Revolutions’ were the especial focus of Karl Marx in the later nineteenth century, and followed on naturally, and urgently, from his earlier studies of the English (17th-century) and French (18th-century) Revolutions. We know that Wilde was well acquainted with all these writings and debates. In fact, in the person of Lady Bracknell, he is dramatically, and with heavy irony, giving voice to the kinds of socialist and artistic critique of contemporary society expressly developed in his political and polemical essays ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’ and ‘The Critic as Artist’ (1891). By grasping these passages in context, we can see that Wilde’s wit was of a decidedly democratic, if highly idiosyncratic, persuasion. In his own inimitable way he was as ‘revolutionary’ in his politics as his art.

* ‘Between seven and eight thousand a year’ . . . ‘In land, or in investments?’

As already indicated, this exchange confirms (i) Jack has a very substantial income indeed (over 100 times that of a skilled male factory worker); (ii) this is generated by business investments rather than tied up in land (though it turns out he has ‘a country house with some land . . . about fifteen hundred acres, I believe’ too). To pick up an unanswered question about his benefactor, Jack at least is to be identified more with ‘what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce’ rather than having risen ‘from the ranks of the aristocracy’. In short, he is more a representative of the ‘new’ than the ‘old’ money. And Lady Bracknell, who represents the latter, judges this ‘satisfactory’. Historically speaking, the upper classes may have their landed titles but have always needed middle-class money to keep them going.

* ‘I am a Liberal Unionist’ . . . ‘Oh, they count as Tories.’ Here contemporary party politics – then and now – require some unpacking and re-sorting. ‘Liberal Unionist’ was the name for a section of the Liberal party that broadly favoured the
continuing ‘union’ of the United Kingdom, including Ireland. They ‘count as Tories’ because this was also the position of the old Tory (i.e. Conservative) party. To Lady Bracknell, the difference is slight, a mere matter of social etiquette and precedence: whether they are invited ‘to dine with us’ or simply ‘come in the evening’. To Jack, it is also apparently a matter of indifference or sheer convenience: he initially responded by saying ‘I really have none [politics]’. In short, the party-political centre of gravity of the exchange is compliantly (for Jack) or complacently (for Lady Bracknell) that of the conservative establishment – in modern terms ‘right-wing’. This has peculiar and unforeseen resonance at the present time of writing (May 2010): there has just been a UK government coalition of Liberals and Tories and this too is arguably well to the right. It should be straightaway added, however, that the late nineteenth-century Liberal party was later partly displaced by the Labour party (then without a seat in Parliament) and that the old Tory party was more tied up with landed interests than the present, which is dominated by business, finance and professionals. Then again, the importance of this difference is implied in the distinction between ‘land’ and ‘investments’ already writ large in Wilde. Either way – or perhaps both ways – such connections and distinctions, continuities and discontinuities, are the very stuff of historically informed reading. Insofar as they prompt us to refocus the political issues of the past in terms of those of the present – and vice versa – they tend to be termed ‘Historicist’ (‘New’ or otherwise; see section 2.6).

* ‘a cloakroom at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion – has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now – ’ This is at once the most oblique and potentially significant of the text’s references in context. It too serves both to conceal and, on further investigation, reveal an issue at the vexed and complex heart of Wilde’s writing. Here in the play what it directly refers to is the location of the handbag in which Jack was found: ‘the cloakroom at Victoria Station’ – ‘The Brighton Line’, Jack adds, apparently gratuitously. Outside the play, in the clandestine twilight world that Wilde moved as a homosexual – an aspect of his life that was an open secret amongst friends and acquaintance – train stations (then as now) were one of the regular and recognised places to pick up partners, male or female, for casual sex, paid or otherwise. They are still the favoured haunts for prostitutes, rent-boys and one-off encounters, hetero- and homo-sexual. This fact has an acute relevance and particular poignancy where Wilde and The Importance of
Being Earnest are concerned. Wilde was prosecuted and imprisoned for homosexual acts and ‘gross indecency’ in 1895. One of the things he was smeared with was picking up young men from around railway stations. The play was running at the time and immediately removed from the stage. This was the beginning of the end for Wilde as an applauded artist, provocative social commentator and flamboyant celebrity in his own lifetime. He died in ignominy and relative poverty in Paris just five years later, in 1900. Yet two them, The Importance of Being Earnest and The Ideal Husband, were printed and quickly sold out in 1899, and it was just two years before the present play was revived in London’s West End and it an for 11 months netting well over £20,000.

It was then a further seventy years before there began his systematic reappraisal and revaluation as an iconic ‘gay’ and ‘queer’ writer. The critical focus in this play thereafter tends to shift from the overtly heterosexual, socially acceptable relationships that lead to marriage (of Jack and Gwendolen and of another couple, Algernon and Cecily) to the same-sex, but here non-sexual, relationships of the men and of the women (Jack and Algernon, and Gwendolen and Cecily) who already were or become close friends. In any event, with benefit of hindsight, the immediate inference is inescapable: when Wilde had Lady Bracknell say ‘a cloakroom at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion – has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now’ he either meant more than he seemed to be saying, or turned out to have said more than he meant. Either way, grasping this text in context, proves the importance of an approach that ceaselessly seeks to reinterpret as well as revalue the acts of writing as well as the reading – all the while attending closely to the persistent continuities and occasional discontinuities at various moments of production and reproduction, performance and reception.

The same applies to all the names in this passage and in the play at large. On closer inspection and further reflection, their significance turns out to be at once blatantly obvious and teasingly obscure. ‘Lady Bracknell’, along with her close confederate ‘the Duchess of Bolton’ are named after, respectively, a small town in the rural South of England and a big town in the industrial North. Neither were actual titles of aristocratic seats. ‘Jack’, meanwhile – which collocates most readily with ‘man Jack’, ‘Jack of all trades’, and ‘Jack and Jill’ – is the emphatically heterosexual name for a character whose real name turns out to be ‘Earnest’. Not only is this required by the plot (Gwendolen says she can only marry a man called ‘Earnest’ as
that is how Jack represents himself to her at the beginning) as enshrined in the play’s title. ‘Earnest’ was also a common code-word in the gay slang Wilde’s day for a fellow homosexual male. ‘The Importance of Being Earnest’ (which is also the last line of the play) turns out to be at once much greater and far different from what one might initially expect. Interpretations of the play may therefore vary widely – one might even say ‘Wildely’!