

# The Reign of the Signifiers :

## Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*

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*The Importance of Being Earnest* is embellished with the absurdity: fictional characters are invented and killed conveniently; two women fall in love with an Earnest only by hearing the name; a baby is misplaced in a hand-bag; fiction turns out to be real. In this respect, the drama is a "fantasy" (Cohen 223) or "Utopia" (Worth 153), in which even the death and the revival are treated nonchalantly. Yet this indicates not only "the unnaturalism" (Gagnier 111) of the drama; in the light of the linguistic construction, this denotes that the signifieds of the words are being nullified and the importance is attached to the signifiers: the plays of the arbitrariness of the sign are performed in the text. This is the problem Archer faced when he attempted to criticise the drama: "[*The Importance of Being Earnest*] imitates nothing, represents nothing, means nothing, is nothing" (190). Of course, he might state this somewhat figuratively, yet this observation suggests a certain potential of the text: the signifiers are separated from their naturally connected signifieds almost everywhere in the text, which leads to the impossibility of making sense of it, making it complicated networks of signification.

It is not rare now to discern the postmodernist elements in Wilde and his work,<sup>(1)</sup> and one of them is obvious in his way of use of language. In addition, as Freedman argues, his usage not only anticipates the contemporary linguistic theory but "underline[s] simultaneously the two understandings of language that divide contemporary critics: the vision of language as an arbitrary system and that which sees it as a social artifact" (6). A passage Freedman cites as one of the typical instances is from *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

CECILY

Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into an engagement?

You are presumptuous. How dare you? This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.

GWENDOLEN (*Satirically*)

I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different. (act 2; 70)<sup>(2)</sup>

It is clear that Gwendolen wittily transforms Cecily's metaphor into the meaning of the thing itself, the literal meaning, whereby the referentiality of language becomes unstable. This manipulation of the signified derived from the same signifier foregrounds the two important aspects of the nature of language I have cited from Freedman. He continued to say:

Whenever you turn, Wilde is suggesting, you see the artificiality and the sociality of language. You see language both as an autonomous system and as a socially established one; this complicated vision calls into question both a naive reliance on the plain meaning of words and an equally unquestioning reliance on a social position that enables you to use them any way you like.

(7)

Especially, the former point is ubiquitous in the text. I will examine such dialogues in detail later, but I emphasises here again that the speech act to point out the possibility of the difference of signifieds conceived by each character, whether it is deliberately made or not, shows off the instability of the seemingly natural connection between the signifiers and the signifieds. In this paper I will analyse how this kind of element is constructed and foregrounded, whereby the linguistic instability of signification is produced, retaining the openness of the text.

The specificity of the linguistic system of the dandy is not limited to the conventional views such as "paradox" or "inversion"; it is embedded with the nullification of the meaning to the extent that the dialogues seem to be absurd and (literally) nonsense. The characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* take over from the dandy in the preceding dramas such a linguistic system, the system where the signifiers reign over the signifieds; besides, contrasted to the remoteness of that system from the main plots in them, in the last drama the narrative concerning Ernest/Bunbury

itself is constructed on the focus of the signifiers.

Then I will see how Ernest is represented in the text. First of all, there is Jack's own explanation: "When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. . . . in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes" (act 1; 14). As this explanation shows, he is leading a double life, Jack in the country while Ernest in the town of which even Algernon knows nothing at first. Considering the utterances by Cecily and Prism, he seems to "adopt a very high moral tone." On the other hand, as a double, Ernest holds the nature contrasted to earnest Jack: he is castigated, say, as incurring "shameful debts" and "leading his life of pleasure" (act 2; 51). Yet these remarks are based on the fictional Ernest Jack has invented, and there is no substance. When Ernests appear with a certain substance as Jack as an Ernest and Algernon as another, the representations of Ernests take on some different aspects: the former is the earnest Ernest who proposes seriously to Gwendolen and is upset by her fetishism of the name, that is, the one who seems to be far from the wicked hedonist; the latter, though he may not be so serious as Jack, is also the one who proposes to Cecily and is equally perplexed by her fetishism of the name. Therefore, when the two women quarrel over their engagement to Ernest, Gwendolen says that he has "a strong upright nature" and is "the very soul of truth and honour" (act 2; 68) while Cecily in the same way calls him as "my poor, innocent, trusting boy" (act 2; 73). As to Ernest disguised by Jack, the fictional Ernest seems to disappear by the representations of Jack/Ernest himself. At any rate, Ernest, whether he is embodied or not, is that which is produced and reproduced by the main characters, the one who exists only as a fiction processed through each character's imagination. As Gillespie says:

[T]he referentiality . . . does not impose a form of closure upon our interpretations of the Ernests that we encounter. In fact, from the start of Wilde's drama, each of the Ernests brought into existence by the diverse imaginations of Jack, Algy, Cecily, and Gwendolen clearly lacks the substance to enforce his dominance as a definitive concept. (104)

The unfixedness of the referentiality of the signifier, Ernest, is foregrounded by the scene where Gwendolen and Cecily construct each narrative only by that signifier.

Gwendolen says: "The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you" (act 1; 23); and Cecily settles the engagement: "after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old tree here. The next day I bought this little ring in your name, and this is the little bangle with the true lovers' knot I promised you always to wear" (act 2; 62-63). It is certain that falling in love only by hearing a name is, as Powell observes, "an absurd parody which turned Victorian reticence inside-out" (132). Yet important here is the process that a signifier which has no substance nor referent is arbitrarily modified and interpreted as having a certain referent and signified. Cecily even writes his love letters for him. That Ernest is a signifier is foregrounded by two women's writing the events with each Ernest, the writing as the inscription of the signs. I have said that a signifier is made having "a certain referent and signified," but more exactly, this means that it is rendered having any referent and any signified. I call this kind of signifier "an empty signifier" to indicate that which floats independently of its referent and its signified, a phrase which is used by Craft when he detects the homosexual connotation in the signifier, Bunbury.<sup>(3)</sup> Ernest as an empty signifier thus can hold any referent and any signified: it is a signifier which flaunts the arbitrary nature of the sign.

Then I will examine another important issue in the text: Bunburyism. Algernon calls Jack a Bunburyist by his inventing an Ernest. Algernon explains his case:

#### ALGERNON

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. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's to-night, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week. (act 1; 15)

According to this explanation, Bunburyism is to invent a fictional character to make an excuse to avoid some nuisances. Yet to dine at Willis's Algernon illustrates as an Bunburyism, which was a fashionable restaurant in King Street if one takes it as historically existed one, has association with the town and is contrary to his own explanation. In the case of Jack, his Bunburyism contains within it the binary opposition between the country and the town, and succeeds by applying the signifiers, Jack/Ernest, to his own state, though, I have to add immediately, the change is limited

almost only to the name and does not extend to the nature. In this respect, Algernon's Bunburyism does not seem to involve the inevitable change of the name as Bunbury, as he Bunburys as Ernest in the text, so Bunbury exists only for the excuse. Yet the signifier of the act, to Bunbury, as Ernest, is represented as completely indeterminate in the text. What exactly does Algernon do as he Bunburys? Only two instances can be seen: to dine with Jack and to propose Cecily. The former cannot be conceived as a salient act different from what Algernon is supposed to do, and the latter, either, does not evoke the act of, say, a hedonist usually associated with the double life. This problem is attributed to the fact that the hedonistic nature is easily found in Algernon's act such as the fetishism of food. The implication of the double life is usually provoked by the difference of each character's nature, yet in the case of Algernon's alleged double life, the difference seems none: his Bunburyism presupposed from him as Algernon does not indicate more hedonistic nature in the text nor his uprightness as Jack as Jack is referred to. In the case of Jack, either, as I have said in passing, his Bunburyism does not reveal much difference between Jack and Ernest despite the change of his name, in that he does not seem deviate even in the town. Here to Bunbury becomes, as the signifier, Ernest, an indeterminate signifier, an empty signifier. To Bunbury or Bunburyism shows off its implied difference through the narrative of the double life, whereas that very difference is vanished. Differentiation is one of the processes of signification, yet Bunburyism in the text leads to indeterminacy through the duplicity that signifier holds. Bunburyism thus becomes a signifier to be connected with any act, any signified.

As I have argued so far, the narrative that demonstrates as an empty signifier both Ernest and his and Algernon's acts called Bunburyism makes clear the wandering nature of the signifiers in the text. This is clearly the case of the narrative of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and it is embedded with the conversations to foreground such a linguistic construction, too. I have already cited as an instance the conversation between Gwendolen and Cecily. Then before seeing the consequence of the signifier, Ernest that Bunburys, I analyse such signifiers' reigning conversations by almost all characters.

It is not surprising to discern the focus on the signifiers in the conversations between Jack and Algernon. To cite just a single instance, as to "little Cecily" (act 1; 11) Jack can arbitrarily change the meaning of "little" which seems to denote more or less the figurative aspect to the literal one concerned with her height. Yet the linguistic

construction of this sort is not limited to these flippant characters; the somewhat serious characters, Prism and Chasuble, too, focus their attention on the signifiers. When the death of Ernest is informed, for instance, Prism exclaims: "What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it" (act 2; 51); and Chasuble 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" (act 2; 52). In these passages is seen the nullification of the signifieds. Especially Prism's utterance is functioning, as McCormack argues, as the Irish Bull:

The Irish Bull sounds like paradox, but is, in fact, its empty mime. It keeps the form of logic, while outraging reason and bringing it to a violent halt. . . . the Irish Bull is a verbal bombshell, exposing the arbitrary nature of the speech-act itself. (88)

Whether it is attributed to "the colonist's revenge on the imperial father-tongue" (88) or not, one can easily witness in Prism's utterance the disclosure of the arbitrariness of the sign. Chasuble's statement also exposes the instability of the relation between the signifier and the signified by showing that a sermon, a signifier as a whole, can be taken up at any occasion by carrying with it any signified. The acceptance of the revival of Ernest, too, denotes such an attitude towards the signifiers, for this indicates the nullification of the signified of "death."

I also have to consult Bracknell briefly, for the unjustly limited view to treat her as an embodiment of Victorian thought is frequently presented. Certainly she seems a monster, seeing the marriage in terms of the commercial exchange. Yet, as Köhl says, "she combines Victorian conventions with aesthetic attitude" (265), and she is, as Gillespie says, even a dandy (128) in that she has an ability to stretch the conventional thought. She has no doubt an authority but it derives not from, as it were, Victorianism but mainly from her own belief. As such, when she is much authoritative, it seems that her words can change the material world surrounding them:

LADY BRACKNELL  
What number in Belgrave Square?  
JACK  
149.

LADY BRACKNELL

The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However that could easily be altered.

JACK

Do you mean the fashion, or the side?

LADY BRACKNELL (*Sternly*)

Both, if necessary, I presume. (act 1; 29)

Once she accepts the signified "149" evokes, she attempts to transform it leaving the signifier unchanged. One can easily see the sovereign of the signifier in this instance. She need not pay attention to the signified, for the signified can be transformed without dealing with the signifier.

As is often argued, as Bracknell at the head, women are stronger in the drama so that Gwendolen and Cecily, for instance, take the initiative in the proposal scene. Yet it needs caution to conclude, as Eltis does from the feminist viewpoint, that "[m]ale domination is mocked" (189), for, as Powell suggests, such was "the cliché in Victorian farce" (132) and Wilde's feminist view is questioned by some critics.<sup>(4)</sup> However, it becomes noteworthy to see this element in the light of the signifier and the signified concerning sex and gender. Calling the four main characters "the Androgyne of Manners," Paglia says that "male and female . . . are equal and interchangeable" (93). Here I take up the female characters alone. In the scene as to the christening, Gwendolen clearly states her sex through the physical aspect: "How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes! Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men are infinitely beyond us"; and Cecily says the same kind of things mentioning men's "physical courage" (act 3; 85). These utterances and the narrative itself which heads for the marriage point out the difference between men and women based on their anatomical sexes. Yet as I have said, two women subvert the gender roles or codes socially attached to them. Although the notion that there is an agency or sexual identity in the usually accepted sense which precedes gender identity must be questioned,<sup>(5)</sup> in the text they are depicted as clearly separable as the one stable and the other unstable concerning each signified. If one follows such a representation, it is appropriate to say that the disjunction between the social codes and the object, the referent, the body which firmly holds the signified as woman denotes the instability of the connection between the signifier and the signified: women are treated as sexualised

women, a signifier persistently fixed to its signified to the extent that the signifier seems the signified itself, whereas another signifier usually coupled with that signifier floats independently. In the light of the linguistic construction (which, of course, at another level I extend to that including gender in that it is constructed through language), the disruption of this kind clearly designates the language as a culturally established one. Gender can be performed regardless of the signifieds.

In this way, the conversations and the actions by the main characters surrounding the narrative as to Ernest/Bunbury foreground the instability of signification. Then I will return to the narrative and examine the consequence of the problematical signifier, Ernest that Bunburys.

Once Jack and Algernon are found out, they are forsaken by the women. Yet Algernon is forgiven by means of the excuse which has, according to Cecily, "the wonderful beauty" (act 3; 83) and Jack is forgiven saying almost no explanation which for Gwendolen has "the stamp of truth"(act 3; 84), both of the cases indicating again the domination of the signifiers over the signifieds. The remaining obstacle is Bracknell's affirmation and the key to resolve this is the identification of Jack. Prism's hand-hag is presented as a vehicle to reveal it. The scene in which Prism ascertains if it is her lost hand-bag is represented somewhat laughably.

JACK

The happiness of more than one life depends on your answer.

MISS PRISM (*Calmly*)

It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days. Here is the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an accident that occurred at Leamington. And here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had had them placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years. (act 3; 100-101)

Prism who forgets the baby she misplaced in the bag and alone indulges in reminiscence, markedly contrasted with Jack who awaits the important information, as Kohl suggests, "trivialises a serious situation" (266). At the same time the situation

that the material signs such as injury, stain, and initials evoke the meanings for her and are not easily directed to the meaning Jack eagerly requires discloses again the instability of signification. Moreover, by showing the difference of the meanings processed in each character's context, this scene reveals that the meaning is inevitably context-bound and equally that every sign makes any context (in this sense, it is always performative). As Derrida argues:

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of this opposition), as a small or large unity, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring. (320)

The scene denotes that the signifiers and the signifieds function through not only the system of the difference but of the contexts. It foregrounds one of the essential systems of signification.

By Prism's proof, Jack obtains his identification as the son of Moncrieff and Algernon's elder brother, and by the Army Lists his name turns out to be Ernest. Here the signifier, Ernest, gets its referent, Jack, yet it also acquires another referent, his father. Then the signified of Ernest becomes again problematical. In the case of one Ernest, the father, though, according to Bracknell, he was "essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life" (act 3; 103), is in essence an absent character, the consequence of which the signified of Ernest remains indeterminate; the other Ernest is, if it is the same as Jack, the one who Bunburys and is in deed an empty signifier itself, the one who is open to the possibility of any act and any nature. The tag emphasises this point: "I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest" (act 3; 105). The pan itself discloses the instability of the meaning at least at the phonetic level, and, above all, this pan makes equal the importance of the name and earnestness. Then Ernest as an empty signifier seems to be fixed at last to the signified, "earnest". Yet, Bunburyist is far from earnest in the usual sense. The signifier, Ernest, gets its referent at least on the surface, though is double. However, one established signified of "earnest" is displaced and made unstable by the pan and the signifier keeps floating as that which can absorb within it

its quite opposite meaning. In fact, by the gesture of imposing the closure upon the relation between the signifier and the signified, the pan leads Ernest to more abysmal indeterminacy.

The drama ends with three couples anticipating the marriage. Yet, though they eagerly head for this ending, there is something grotesque especially as to the two younger couples, for, as Craft observes as one of its reasons, "the sovereignty of the signifier over its signified" (129) exists, whereby persists the indeterminacy of the signifiers, Ernest/Bunbury. Moreover, if one dare to close the signifier, Ernest, he is indeed the signifier that is naturally E(a)rnest when it is not E(a)rnest.

The Army Lists which prove Jack's identification foreground the fact that the name, Ernest, is a signifier. As I have already said, two women's fetishism of the name and the inscription of it in their diaries have much the same effect. Moreover, the fictionality of the text as a whole directs our attention to the fact that it is constructed by the material signs. First of all, Ernest and Bunbury is fundamentally the fictional characters and the text represents the world where even death does not exist. Fictionality makes us more conscious of its linguistic construction and therefore materiality in a usual sense. Evolving itself around Ernest's "Being," the text at the same time denotes that it is the question of the "Being" of signs. Focusing on the linguistic element from the various viewpoints, the text foregrounds the instability of the connection between the signifiers and the signifieds. The narrative is of the empty signifiers so that it is open to the diverse readings. Therefore today, for instance, queer criticism highly focuses its attention on this text<sup>(6)</sup> and Kiberd sees "the Anglo-Irish relations" (17) in Bunbury.

It is appropriate in a sense that, as Nassaar puts it, the drama is full of "wit for wit's sake" (138), for the signifieds are nullified there. Yet to treat this text as nothing but the farcical nonsense points out the general attitude towards nonsense or pun such as in the text. As Culler argues:

[I]n which [the pan] an "accidental" or external relationship between signifiers is treated as a conceptual relationship, identifying "history" as "his history" or connecting meaning (*sens*) and absence (*sans*). We treat the pun as a joke, lest signifiers infect thought. (91-92)

In this sense, *The Importance of Being Earnest* challenges the logocentrism, "the orientation of philosophy toward an order of meaning . . . conceived as existing in itself, as foundation" (Culler 92). As to the problem of gender, too, the text discloses it as cultural effect, though it is limited in that the narrative as a whole is based on the bi-sexedness. At any rate, the signifiers reign over the signifieds in the text. The affinity with the absurd dramas has been pointed out. To cite Freedman's words again, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the text which clearly reveals the absurdity of "a naive reliance on the plain meaning of words."

### Notes

- (1) See, for instance, Eagleton.
- (2) The text I use is: Russell Jackson, ed., *The Importance of Being Earnest* (London: A & C Black Limited, 1988). All passages cited are from this edition. Stage directions are described in italics.
- (3) Craft, 120. Strictly speaking, "an empty signifier" is tautologic, for the signifiers are in principle empty, but I use this phrase to make a point clearer.
- (4) Even in the days of an editor of *Woman's World*, Wilde's feminism is put into question. See Brake and Ledger.
- (5) As Butler argues: "It would be wrong to think that the discussion of 'identity' ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that 'person' only becomes intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (16); and "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25).
- (6) Queer criticism such as Craft's is questioned even by anti-homophobic researchers. See both Bristow and Sinfield as warning against the views which do not take into account the historicity of homosexual concepts. Yet, the dogmatically homophobic view such as Jackson's should also be dispelled, for the narrative with the empty signifiers has potential for the diverse readings. That is why, as O'Connor guesses, Ernest has possibility as "?gay" (33) though this question mark is inevitable, and this is one of the starting points of my argument: why can Ernest who Bunburys be guessed as gay?

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