
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Devices of humor in Oscar Wilde's play "The importance of being Earnest"

Dr. Afaf Yousuf Abdulgadir Alkhidir

Assistant Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Art and Humanities, , lBaha University, AlBaha Province, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Dr. Afaf Yousuf Abdulgadir Alkhidir, **E-mail:** a.yousef@bu.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

This paper explores devices of humor that were used by Oscar Wilde in his popular play "The Importance of being Earnest". Techniques and Styles that had been used by Oscar Wilde in humor based on many literary devices and tools. But Oscar Wilde is basically known of his Epigrams. His witty comments were received by audience as perverses. Humor was used within the course of the incidents to reflect his deep perspective on different issues of society and marriage. While Oscar Wilde was using sarcasm and mockery to explain his attitudes, he was in fact depicting very serious and real viewpoints about life and people. 'The Importance of Being Earnest' is one of the nine plays written by Oscar Wilde. Wilde's witty comments were really gorgeous to the degree that are later widely quoted as fabulous epigrams. Humor was specifically main ingredient in this play. Literary devices were used in this play to mock social rules and deception in love relation. These literary devices include irony, sarcasm, wordplay, and double entendre. This paper provides detailed examples of dialogues on which these techniques were used. It is not easy to Create a novel which is rich in such civilized humor. It is more like a philosophical perception about life coated with epigrams. It is something that make you think much about what life is really about. What should be and what shouldn't be. After all, this stir smiling and laughter as you contemplate life's course. This play is about two guys, Algernon and Jack, who were trying to be engaged to two beautiful girls. Each one of the two girls had dreamt of marrying a man named "Ernest". The playwright used this plot to cast out light on different issues related to society and people. Epigrams and humor were used to explain these strong viewpoints.

KEYWORDS

Epigram, humor, witty comments, literary devices

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1. Introduction

If you are wondering what makes you enjoy a written work, then Humor may jump into your mind among other few perceptions. Stage play, that is designed to be performed in theatre, mostly include hilarious comments which based on irony and mockery to criticize social rules and society. There no doubt that Social rules and people's conduct were in the center of the renowned play 'The Importance of Being Earnest' which was written OscarWilde. And to fair enough, Humor seems to be the main ingredient in this play, not just literary device to break a serious storyline.

Humor of different types is used in plays, movies, advertising for entertainment and communication purposes. Humor is also used to break the tension in storyline. Playwright adds humor in serious plays to make it much more interesting.

While humor is widely considered one of the pillars of amusing play, Oscar Wilde is considered one of the great playwrights who used humor and black comedy in his renowned plays. Oscar Wilde was born on October 16,1854, in Aristocratic Irish family, he wrote nine plays based on his witty comments and black comedy, became later made him famous for his epigrams.

This paper discusses types of humor that were used by Oscar Wilde in his renowned play "The Importance of Being Earnest", which is a play that discusses and investigates real issues related to society through applying comedy and humor. Humours perspective has been used to discuss society matters and cultural beliefs by using irony, sarcasm among many other techniques. Oscar Wilde in this play, reflects interesting viewpoints about marriage, society through mockery and witty comments.

It is a play which is widely described as consisting of epigrams that depicts character viewpoints about romance, marital relations, marriage in Victorian Era. This Drama cast shadow on perspectives that were common in society in that time, while the author was trying to reject many of these ideas through mockery.

The researcher firstly examined the life of Oscar Wilde and the life style that widely affects these perceptions. The effect of his parents on his early childhood. Oscar Wilde talent was obvious in his early school years to the degree of saying trenchant things about others. Then the types of humor are discussed to extract what types were used by Oscar Wilde and what degree they were effective in creating humor. Methodology used in this study is clearly explained. It is a qualitative literature Review that discusses various examples from this play, including quotes taken from all characters of this play. Characters explained Oscar wilde viewpoints about life and relationships in humorous dialogues. Discussion and Results part provides various examples of humours quotes that were expressed in dialogues of this play.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The life of Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was the second son of the marriage between William Robert and Jane Francesca. His love to his parents and particularly his mother reached the degree of veneration. (Sherard, p.6). Oscar Wilde inherited from his mother many of those admirable gifts and graces which so distinguished him amongst his contemporaries as Oscar had astonishing facility for learning languages (Sherard, p.30).

Oscar Wilde in Dublin in 1854. His mother was expecting a girl so she kept treating him like a girl, talked to him as a girl, dressing him as a girl. But his father didn't share his wife's caprice. (Sherard, p.83) Oscar Wilde was taught by his father to admire the beauties of Nature. He wrote much about flowers and birds and the beauties of the land under the moving seasons. Despite he described the country as tedious, he continued to live in cities.

In childhood and early boyhood, Oscar wasn't considered as quick or engaging or handsome as his brother. Both boys had the benefit of best schooling of the time. They were sent to one of four royal schools Ireland (Harris. F , 2001)

Oscar Wilde's manner was very reserved when he was student, and he used to keep aloof from the other boys. "Another characteristic which made for his unpopularity amongst his schoolfellows was the extraordinary gift he had of saying trenchant things about others. He was a very boy at giving nicknames. He was the ironical sponsor to the whole school from the headmaster down to the smallest boy in class (Sherard, p.105).

This explains his witty comment on his play "the Importance of being Earnest" and many other plays. But he also used wits against his contemporaries. He kept making bitter comments against people and society. He remarked against one famous contemporary writer by saying "he has no enemies, but he intensely disliked by his friends. "These remarks are all very clever, but they are not gratifying to the people about whom they were made" (Sherard, p.106).

Oscar wilde's success in plays that he made in 1890s were something new within Victorian comedy. He reinvent theatrical comedy tradition dominated by a combination of farce and french-inspired plays creating more philosophical characters than usual stage types inconsistent with audience expectations. (Klassen,2019).

In early part of January he devoted a fortnight to the writing of a comedy of the farcical order to which he gave the name of "The Importance of Being Earnest": This was produced for the first time on 14th February at the St James's Theatre. The author described this piece himself as a "trivial comedy for serious people". He is also reported to have said of it that "The first act is ingenious, the second beautiful, the third abominably clever". (Sherard,p. 329)

The author of the book The Life of Oscar Wilde described this brilliant as an extravaganza spoken by Oscar through the mouths of a number of men and women. The Times critics said the next day morning after the release of this play "almost every sentence of the dialogue bristles with epigram of the now accepted pattern, the manufacture of this being apparently conducted by its patentee with the same facility as 'The Butterwoman's rank to market'(Sherard, p. 330)

The Athenaeum critic wrote "Yet frivolous, saucy, and impertinent as Mr.Wilde's dialogue is. And uncharacteristic also, since every personage in the drama says the same things, it is, in a way, diverting. The audience laughs consumedly, and the critic, even though he should chafe, which is surely superfluous, laughs also inspire of himself. There is, moreover, a grave serenity of

acquiescence in the most monstrous proposition that is actually and highly humorous." (Sherard, 330). While another writer of 'At the play' of The Theatre considered this trivial comedy as a bid for popularity in the direction of farce. While a critic in Truth confessed that he wish to admit that the play amused me very much.

The public never had a moment's hesitation about the play. Each audience laughed as never has audience laughed before in a theatre where the work of an English writer of comedy has been performed. The play is a clean play, a play of the knock-about farcical order. It was aptly as a fantastic farce. We had here the true Oscar, or rather one the true Oscars, full of rollicking, boyish, extravagant humor, turning to mirth all things. (Sherard, p.331).

As Oscar Wilde was Master of humor as shown above, it is important to cast light on types of humor. These include: Pun, irony, slapstick, incongruity, hyperbole, surprise, sarcasm among many others. Surprise and congruity occur when something unexpected happens. Twist in the storyline gives humorous flavor. Self-deprecating humor happens when the speaker or the character makes fun of himself (Hill & Leacock, p.1).

2.2 Types of Humor

Types of Humor that were defined by scholars include irony, hyperbole (overstatement), pun (wordplay), Satire, parody, euphemism, double entendre.

These types are widely defined in literature studies. This paper will give examples from these types and it was used by Oscar Wilde. This paper avoided to give definitions of these types as this is well-known literature Review. But through examples, these literary devices are obviously explained.

It is important here to explain that the researcher came across another study discussed humor in Oscar Wilde's play 'The Importance of being Earnest'. But the topic was different in basic perspective as it was about translation and the effect of translating this play on humor elements. So study topic here is widely different. Another perspective that this paper is detailed research about the devices of humor in Oscar Wilde's play The Importance of Being Earnest.

3. Methodology

The method that is used in this research is qualitative literature Review which based here on creative writing methods. The researcher here makes literary reworking of elements of humor that were used in the famous play The Importance of Being Earnest. This scholar paper collected examples of humor in this play, while at the same time identifies their humor types, the funny sides, and why humorous. So this insightful study explaining types of humor that were used by Oscar Wilde through his unique techniques.

4. Discussion and Results

Oscar Wilde used many literary devices to create humor in his popular play "The importance of being Earnest". First, Let us start with this example of satire that was expressed by servant Lane. She said "I didn't think it polite to listen". Here she mocked the unacceptable conduct of listening at that time.

While here is obvious wordplay in using the word 'listen' which has more than one meaning, Satire was used here to refer to the idea that servant in Victorian era were not allowed to eavesdropping as unacceptable conduct. Servant Lane used Pun to explain the word listen.

Mockery was used also servant Lane referred to bad Champagne in married couple "Is marriage so demoralising as that? " (Wilde, 3). Here satire was used as humor technique.

Irony was used in humorous way as Algernon mocked both upper class and lower class by saying " really," as he was underestimating "if the lower orders don't set us a good example," he added "what on the earth is the use of them?". (Wilde, 4). Everyone expects that lower classes doesn't set a good example, while upper class is. But Oscar Wilde here refers to the idea that lower classes should be a good example, irony here denied that upper class could be good model.

Irony was used to mock a cliché idea about the truth. Algernon said that "the truth is rarely pure and never simple", this is against expectations, and witty comment by Oscar Wilde. He ironized the idea of considering the truth pure or even simple. The truth may be in Oscar Wilde witty comment complex and unexplainable.

Sarcasm was also used in humorous comparison in many comments of Oscar Wilde, here is an example when Algernon said "the way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful..." But comparison here is the funny side "...It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you" (Wilde, 7)

Sarcasm was also used to reflect humourously the strict rules of Victorian social convention. Algernon described "The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands.." He connects between marriage and scandal by saying in obvious irony "...is perfectly scandalous", (Wilde,7), here is also obvious irony as anyone would think that it is not shameful of wife to flirt with her husband, but Oscar wife see that the number of such women was great to scandalous extent.

Anti-proverb or proverb is another technique to make humor that was used by Oscar Wilde. This technique based on changing standard proverb to words of similar sound to create humorous perception. Here is an example when Oscar modified the proverb "two's company, three's a crowd", to make proverb by saying "three is company and two is none" to refer to his perception that to be married to a man is boring, you need a third person to be added to you and your wife, in order to lead happy life. This technique reflects high sense of humor.

Wordplay was used as double entendre when Algernon described Jack with " the most earnest-looking person" (p.14), here the name Ernest is indirectly referred to, as well as the adjective Earnest, making double entendre technique.

As mentioned above, Oscar Wilde used proverb as humor technique. Algernon said "it is simply washing one's clean linen in public" (Wilde, p.21). Oscar Wilde modified the renowned proverb by changing the phrase 'dirty linen' with 'clean linen' to create humorous perception. He said "to wash your clean linen in public".

In another position, another well-known proverb "two is company, three is a crowd" had been modified. Algernon said "three is company, two is none". Oscar Wilde here refers to the idea that in marriage life, there should be a friend to the couple to make their marital life more interesting and not boring.

Literary devices that was used by Oscar Wilde also included Sarcasm. One example when this was expressed in dialogue between Jack and Gwendolen, Jack said to her that she is quite perfect, Gwendolen said "Oh!, I hope I am not that." Then she added proudly "...It would leave no room for developments.". While this reflected common feeling of conceited young girl, this arrogance reflected humorous side in her character. She added " ... and I intend to develop in many directions.". So here she mocked the idea that she is perfect.

Lady Bracknell expressed her mockery of the idea that death of a woman's husband makes her look older. On the contrary, She believes that death of woman's husband makes her seem younger. Lady Harbury said "I never saw a woman so altered". This brings to mind different perceptions about this change. But she explained this through the idea that this lady later seemed younger "...she looks quite twenty years younger". Sarcasm was used here as Lady Bracknell had humorous perception that one's husband death makes her look younger instead of looking older.

Sarcasm was also used through irony technique when Lady Bracknell mocked the state of ignorance " I do not approve of anything that tempers with natural ignorance". This gave ignorance manifestation of perfection, or in other words, State need not to be altered, so you wonder: why? The get the hilarious answer that it " ...is like delicate exotic fruit;" here it seems as if she refers to weirdness of ignorance condition. Then added in humorous simile "touch it and the bloom is gone." (Wilde, 41). Some critics considered this criticizing modern theory of education, as if one didn't receive a good education, we are not going to have a good outcome. Oscar Wilde here was criticizing education at that time by considering ignorance is a blessing. It is irony whatever was meant.

Another humorous idea was that Oscar Wilde considered relatives hold grievances against other family members. Irony was used to express the perception of taking revenge on one's relatives. Algernon said "I love hearing my relations abused". This is a humorous tend to take revenge on relations. The reason which is given was also funniest "... It is the only thing that makes me put up with them at all." (Wilde, 50) , this is against expectations as most people would believe that they don't like to hear their relations being abused, so this is an obvious situational irony.

Paradox was also used to mock the unclear lineage of Jack. Lady Bracknell said "to lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune;" She expressed her lack of empathy when she said sarcastic words to make fun of Jack story of his parents death "to lose both" by saying "to lose both looks like carelessness" (Wilde, 45).

Irony was also used to mock the idea of respect between old and young people. This statement reflect paradox as as well as criticism of young people demands of better treatment. Gwendolen told Jack that "The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out." (Wilde,58). Oscar Wilde here used paradox and Irony by referring to young as deserving respect and they were gaining suitable respect in the past, and now all this vanished.

Oscar Wilde has his special technique in creating hilarious idea, this could be observed in Cecily words "I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life." Here is obvious irony as secrets should be kept in mind, not in a diary.

Oscar Wilde used paradox also to create humor throughout the story. One example when Cecily said "I don't like novels that end happily." This is really strange! and the excuse was also non-reasonable "...They depress me so much" (Wilde, 71), 'depress' here is the unexpected result of story 'end happily'. While this idea is unexplainable, it is hilarious by a way or another.

Making hilarious comparisons between words of the same suffixes was another technique that was used by Oscar Wilde. Miss Prism compared between misanthrope and womanthrope "A misanthrope I can understand". Despite women are human beings, she added for humor purposes "... - a womanthrope, never!" (Wilde, 83).

In this example, Jack assured that he agreed to be christened with other children. But he admitted in humorous double entendre "It would be childish". (Wilde, 91)

Oscar Wilde, also as mentioned before, has tendency to use proverb through modifying them to poke fun of a social conception. When Chasuble says as he tried to console Jack for the death of his brother, he described this as blessing in disguise as the proverb tells, Miss Prism described this "... a blessing of an extremely obvious kind" (Wilde, 91).

Oscar Wilde also used wordplay and Pun in fascinating style. Here, wordplay and Pun when Jack tells Algernon that he has been called back to town, Algernon rejects the idea by saying he hadn't heard any one called him. Wordplay here was in using double entendre (phone versus recall). Jack says "your duty as a gentleman calls you back" (Wilde, 99).

Oscar Wilde is known by his witty comments during dialogues between his characters. Such comments could be hilarious sometimes. Critics described this as witty, but it still humorous with touch of irony most times. This was obvious when Cecily considered that to depart someone who you knew for a short period of time is something painful. Challenging cliché perception that it is painful to depart those who you have known for long time. This is a witty comment as it really true despite unreasonable and unexplainable "... momentary separation from any one to whom has just been introduced is almost unbearable" (Wilde, 102). This was a fabulous mix of irony, witty, sadness, silliness, emotion, reasoning.

Irony stood as a fabulous tool of humor in Oscar Wilde's tendencies. It put on serious clothes, but in a full suit humor clothes. Cecily considered that serious engagement should be broken off at least once" (Wilde, 110). The normal idea is that serious engagement is something that shouldn't be broken easily, but Oscar Wilde refers humoursly to the idea that engagement relation faces many troubles and strong engagement relation last despise being broken many times. This amazing style of Oscar Wilde is in fact is about reflecting another face of truth, but in a funny way that undermines other perceptions.

As mentioned above, Oscar Wilde used polysemous words to create sense of humor, you would mostly laugh when you hear a polysemous word of two unrelated meanings in a sentence. Here is an example when Cecily referred to Jack and Algernon "They're approaching. That is very forward of them"(Wilde, 148). This could be explained under many meanings like advance, anxious, bold, advanced. Such ambiguity make you laugh, or at least smile as the reader became thoughtful of what Cecily really means.

Wordplay - here in the use of double entendre - is usual technique by Oscar Wilde, he uses multi-meaning word to create a state of humor. Lady Bracknell considered that woman should not tell about her age exactly. She gave humorous explanation "it looks so calculating" (Wilde, 167). Is the intended meaning is cunning or deceiving or something else.

Hyperbole and sarcasm are common techniques in creating humor. In this example, Lady Bracknell mocks the tendency of women not to telling their real age. She said, describing Lady Dumbleton "... she has been thirty-five ever since she arrived at the age of forty", and to add more sarcasm "...which was many years ago now" (Wilde, 168).

These are just examples of the technique that was used by Oscar Wilde to create humor and how he used literary devices to establish his industry of black comedy that mocks society's rules.

5. Conclusion

Oscar Wilde amuses audience with a delicate type of humor that is defined by researchers as black comedy. He used many Literary devices and humor devices to create humor. Oscar Wilde used hyperbole, irony, wordplay, pun, double entendres, polysemous, paradox, sarcasm, to establish his style of comedy as explained from examples that were taken directly from his renowned play "Importance of Being Earnest". Oscar Wilde used witty comments to reflect humorous ideas. This wonderful play showed his witty observations about life and marriage. The great playwright Oscar Wilde didn't tend to physical movements which is called slapstick, to poke fun.

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