

Culture and Entertainment in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

the corrupt French drama

To the rigidly moral English the French seemed too edgy, too open to sexual exploration and to advertising their exploits; their very theater seemed infused with lascivious doings and passion. English theater of the time was largely conventional and tended to be governed by the strict Victorian virtues; there was to be no vulgarity onstage, no indecent exploration. Wilde felt favorably toward France and often spoke longingly of Paris; in fact, after his release from prison, he spent much of his remaining time in France, and died in Paris in 1900. Wilde originally wrote his play, *Salomé*, in French, and it was first produced in Paris.

“That, my dear friend, is the theory that the corrupt French drama has been propounding for the last fifty years.” (Jack, 10)

dreadful popular air

Likely referring to a tune from a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta; the pair had spoofed Wilde and the aesthetic movement in 1881 with *Patience: or, Bunthorne’s Bride*. In *Patience*, a character posing as an aesthete muses that in order to appear as such, “You must lie upon the daisies and discourse in novel phrases of your complicated state of mind, / The meaning doesn’t matter if it’s only idle chatter of a transcendental kind.” Combining the ready wit of librettist W.S. Gilbert with the pleasantly intricate music of Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900), the works of Gilbert and Sullivan were enormously popular with the English public.

“They whistle some dreadful popular air from a British opera.” (stage directions, 66)

German scepticism

Likely referring loosely to the thinking of such philosophers as the German Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), himself most often associated with Nihilism and known for the phrase “God is dead.” In general, skepticism (which extends well beyond Nietzsche and Germany) refers to an inability to know or to judge, indicating doubt even of the most firmly established facts. It could also be a sweeping generalization of the German national temperament rather than a reference to any specific school of thought. However, it is interesting that Gwendolen mentions this, as most ladies were not expected to have any notion of philosophy (though this notion was shifting with the approach of the 20th century); this, combined with Lady Bracknell’s reference to the University Extension

Scheme, may indicate that Gwendolen is more thoroughly informed than many young women of her class.

“This is not the moment for German scepticism.” (Gwendolen, 67)

monthly magazines

With the advent of prodigious advances in technology and a widespread Victorian thirst for information (if not knowledge), such magazines as *London Society* and *Strand Magazine* rose to great popularity. These publications provided anything from articles to illustrations to poems, short stories, and serialized novels. They might cater to different audiences (to young women, to the middle class, to the elite), many focused on printing fiction, and some managed to cull reader bases ranging cross-country, helping to unite the thought and desires of men and women throughout England. Fashions of the day often radiated outward from London in this manner, allowing those who lived in the country or distant towns to aspire to and imitate high society’s fashions (though the fickle fashions may well have shifted by the time the news reached the distant counties).

“The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits, I am told...” (Gwendolen, 14)

Morning Post

A London newspaper that ran upper-class marriage announcements. Such papers helped to keep members of society informed of current happenings and also gave those of the middle and lower class a glimpse into their glittering lives. These accounts of society could be spread out of the city, infusing the rest of the country with the fashions established in London. As such Gwendolen’s announcement in the *Morning Post* would have been more widespread, more widely read and remarked, and more fashionable than Cecily’s in a county newspaper. This concern with seeing the announcement in the paper shows another sign that marriages (mercenary or otherwise) were enacted with society always in mind.

“The announcement will appear in the ‘Morning Post’ on Saturday at the latest.” (Gwendolen, 55)

three-volume novels

Also called three-decker novel, these were (surprise, surprise) published in three parts and became the plague of 19th Century British literature. Their predominance can largely be credited to Charles Edward Mudie, who was also responsible for their middle class

appeal. The three-volume novel's creation could seem less an art than a business, not so much concerned with style or substance as with churning out enough splattered words and sentiments (all along an appropriately moral line) to fill three volumes. Indeed, to meet length requirements, authors learned to pad their stories, creating the wandering, sprawling quality found in much Victorian literature. When the three-volume novel began to fizzle out after 1894, there was much rejoicing. See also Wilde in *The Critic as Artist*: "Anybody can write a three-volume novel. It merely requires a complete ignorance about both life and literature." Note, too, that Wilde himself tended to be meticulous about publications, particularly of poetry, preferring aesthetically pleasing—hence, more costly—productions; he likely would have therefore been all the more opposed to the production-driven copies of three-volume novels.

"I believe that Memory is responsible for all the three-volume novels that Mudie sends us." (Cecily, 30)

"Glossary." *Digital Dramaturgy*. Centerstage.org. Updated October 4, 2009. Web. 12.29.2011.