

The Victorian Age (1830 - 1900)

Part - III



Social Aspects

By the end of the 19th century England had grown and a strong national economy and overseas empire had been established. Social conditions improved as the working conditions gradually became more humane for the mass of the population. Education also improved and most people had become literate. There was enough time and money for the population to afford simple pleasures of life. It was literacy that greatly contributed to the development of the mass-circulation newspapers.

Much of the literature of the period reflected the prudish and proper moral standards of the middle classes which persevered. The strict code imposed by the Puritans a hundred and fifty years previously caused the theater to dwindle as well as due to the undemanding taste of the audiences who were satisfied with sentimental romances, melodramatic tragedies and farcical comedies. Without a theatrical tradition productions became artificial. Generally the plays pictured scenes in which virtue was invariably rewarded and vice always punished.

A small literary movement, known as 'The Aesthetics', appeared in the 1880's. The objective of

this group was to bring up fresh ideas. As if to make amends for several decades of artistic monotony the supporters found their motivating factor in these newly presented ideas.

What was left of the aristocracy and the established wealthy industrialists who were doing their best to adopt the way of life and manners of the old aristocracy were the conventional aspects of society which deserved to be satirized. These people made 'Genteelity' persist. They used their wealth to lead an extravagant life. Restaurants and tea-shops became popular, and dining out to exquisite orchestras and eating fancy food substituted the habits of over-eating of the earlier Victorians. The public considered these people prominent, the social columns in newspapers featured their activities. The average working man could never dream of leading a life similar to the life the people of this social class led. For many people, just reading about their activities in the newspapers was a romantic escape. Much the same as contemporary movie stars, singers and athletes who offer the same world of fantasy for many people nowadays.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

An Irish-born novelist, playwright, poet, and critic, Wilde was the chief proponent of the aesthetic movement, based on the principle of art for art's sake. Wilde was born Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, in Dublin. Wilde's first book was *Poems* written in 1881. His first play was *Vera, or the Nihilists* written in 1882 and produced in New York City. Upon returning to England he settled in London and in 1884 married a wealthy Irish woman, with whom he had two sons.

In 1895, at the peak of his career, Wilde became the central figure in one of the most sensational court trials of the century. Wilde, who had been a close friend of the young Lord Alfred Douglas, was convicted of sodomy and was sentenced in 1895 to two years of hard labor in prison, from which he emerged financially bankrupt and spiritually downcast. He spent the rest of his life in Paris, using the pseudonym Sebastian Melmoth.

Wilde wrote a series of plays in the style of the *Comedy of Manners* - popular during the 18th century, before the downfall of the theatre. In other words, the *Comedy of Manners* is a sort of play that makes fun of the artificial conventions, customs and follies of the society and times in which it is written. In his plays Wilde offers a mild satire of the English



Oscar Wilde
Culver Pictures

upper classes who were well contented with their own group. His style is typical of the genre and gains strength from witty dialogues. His characterization and plot seem artificial and incidental; used simply as means for witty speech. The *Comedy of Manners* appeals to the intellect rather than to the heart and as such Wilde considered his own plays "Trivial comedies for thinking people".

Wilde brilliantly expresses his wit in epigrams - short, polished sayings with an unusual twist of meaning. His plays are laced with them and many have become famous even when used out of context; eg.

"I can resist everything except temptation."

"One should never trust a woman who tells her real age. A woman who would tell one that, would tell one everything."

"The old believe everything; the middle-aged suspect everything; the young know everything."

"Fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months."

"Marriage is the one subject on which all women agree and all men disagree."

Oscar Wilde: 'The Importance of Being Earnest'

The setting of the play is the upper class London society. The title itself is a pun of the 'earnestness' of Victorian vanity, hypocrisy and prudery. In the following extract Earnest has proposed marriage to Gwendolen and has to face the subsequent interrogation by her mother, Lady Bracknell.

Gwendolen:	I am engaged to Mr. Worthing, mamma.
Lady Bracknell:	Pardon me, you are not engaged to any one. When you do become engaged to some one, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself . . . And now I have a few questions to put to you, Mr. Worthing. While I am making these inquiries, you; Gwendolen, will wait for me below in the carriage.
Gwendolen (reproachfully):	Mamma!
Lady Bracknell:	In the carriage, Gwendolen! (Gwendolen goes to the door. She and Jack blow kisses to each other behind Lady Bracknell's back. Lady Bracknell looks vaguely about as if she could not understand what the noise was. Finally turns round.) Gwendolen, the carriage!
Gwendolen:	Yes, mamma. (Goes out, looking back at Jack.)
Lady Bracknell (sitting down):	You can take a seat, Mr. Worthing. (Looks in her pocket for note-book and pencil.)
Jack:	Thank you, Lady Bracknell, I prefer standing.
Lady Bracknell (pencil and note-book in hand):	I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?
Jack:	Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.
Lady Bracknell:	I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you?
Jack:	Twenty-nine.
Lady Bracknell:	A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?
Jack (after some hesitation):	I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.
Lady Bracknell:	I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything, that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square ¹ What is your income?
Jack:	Between seven and eight thousand a year.
Lady Bracknell (makes a note in her book):	In land, or in investments?
Jack:	In investments, chiefly.
Lady Bracknell:	That is satisfactory. What between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one's death, land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up. That's all that can be said about land.
Jack:	I have a country house with some land, of course, attached to it, about fifteen hundred acres, I believe; but I don't depend on that for my real income. In fact, as far as I can make out, the poachers are the only people who make anything out of it.
Lady Bracknell:	A country house! How many bedrooms? Well, that point can be cleared up afterwards. You have a town house, I hope? A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.
Jack:	Well, I own a house in Belgrave Square ² , but it is let by the year to Lady Bloxham. Of course, I can get it back whenever I like, at six months' notice.
Lady Bracknell:	Lady Bloxham? I don't know her.
Jack:	Oh, she goes about ³ very little. She is a lady considerably advanced in years.
Lady Bracknell:	Ah, nowadays that is no guarantee of respectability of character. What number in Belgrave Square?
Jack:	149.
Lady Bracknell (shaking her head):	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. What are your politics?

Jack:	Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist.
Lady Bracknell:	Oh, they count as Tories ⁴ . They dine with us. Or come in the evening, at any rate. Now to minor matters. Are your parents living?
Jack:	I have lost both my parents.
Lady Bracknell:	Both? . . . That seems like carelessness. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce ⁵ , or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?
Jack:	I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me . . . I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was . . . well, I was found.
Lady Bracknell:	Found!
Jack:	The late Mr. Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort.
Lady Bracknell:	Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this seaside resort find you?
Jack (gravely):	In a hand-bag.
Lady Bracknell:	A hand-bag?
Jack (very seriously):	Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a hand-bag - a somewhat large, black leather hand-bag, with handles to it - an ordinary hand-bag in fact.
Lady Bracknell:	In what locality did this Mr. James, or Thomas, Cardew come across this ordinary hand-bag?
Jack:	In the cloak-room at Victoria Station. It was given to him in mistake for his own.
Lady Bracknell:	The cloak-room at Victoria Station?
Jack:	Yes. The Brighton line ⁶ .
Lady Bracknell:	The line is immaterial. Mr. Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution ⁷ . And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found, a cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion - has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now - but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognised position in good society.
Jack:	May I ask you then what you would advise me to do? I need hardly say I would do anything in the world to ensure Gwendolen's happiness.
Lady Bracknell:	I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season ⁸ is quite over.
Jack:	Well, I don't see how I could possibly manage to do that. I can produce the hand-bag at any moment. It is in my dressing-room at home. I really think that should satisfy you, Lady Bracknell.
Lady Bracknell:	Me, sir! What has it to do with me? 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, and form an alliance with a parcel. Good-morning, Mr. Worthing! . . . (Lady Bracknell sweeps out in majestic indignation.)

DISCUSSION:

1. How would you describe the character of Lady Bracknell?.
2. What are some of her unintentional ironies?
3. Point out evidence of Lady's Bracknell's snobbish attitudes.
4. Locate an epigram in the selection above.
5. What kind of person is Jack and why?
6. What is the source of the humor in the extract above?
7. How does the extract above reflect the society and times in which it was written?

¹ a wealthy part of London

² a wealthy part of London

³ goes out (archaic)

⁴ conservatives (the party of the rich)

⁵ a reference to the royal color, purple

⁶ the route to Brighton

⁷ The French Revolution in 1789 when most of the aristocracy were executed

⁸ the social season

Did you know that Wilde wore long hair and velvet knee breeches? And that his rooms were filled with various objects of art such as sun-flowers, peacock feathers, and blue china? Wilde claimed to aspire to the perfection of the china. His attitudes and manners were ridiculed by his contemporaries.