
Algernon's Comic Aspect as Illustrated in "The Importance of Being Earnest"

Algernon is a comic to a contemporary audience because of his dandyism, his enjoyment of self-gratification, his inverted morals and his double life. Wilde presents Algernon as a dandy figure who is more concerned with style over substance; indeed, Algernon's nature can be seen through Algernon's house, which is described in the opening stage directions as an extravagant setting that was 'luxuriously and artistically furnished'. Algernon also displays lack of concern for formality and accuracy reflected from how he responded to Lane's polite criticism on Algernon's piano playing ability. Algernon claimed to that sentiment was his forte, and that he 'keeps science for Life', showing his artistic flair and nonchalance as well as his belief that expression and sentiment are much more important things. Algernon's unduly concern with being stylish and fashionable could also be seen through his concern towards specific requirements of clothing for his fake identity, Bunbury, in Act 1, where he asks Lane to put up his dress clothes, smoking jacket and Bunbury suits. Algernon's dandyism can also be seen in how he places particular importance to trivial things such as his leisurely hobby of drinking champagne and eating in Act 1. This can be shown through how he eats cucumber sandwiches before Lady Bracknell's arrival yet decides to eat again after she leaves. Algernon is hence recognisable to the Victorian era audience due to his wealth and his idea of having 'art for art's sake', a slogan associated with the Aesthetic movement, which is against Victorian moralism, making him a good stock character to mock since he was superficial and shallow.

Moreover, Algernon is presented as a figure who enjoys indulgence and self-gratification. In Act 1, Algernon's desires for food can be seen. Jack comments on Algernon as 'eating as usual' and Algernon replies saying that it is 'customary in good society to have a slight refreshment at 5 o'clock'. When Jack reached out for some cucumber sandwiches, Algernon stops him and eats them while claiming that they are for his Aunt Augusta. When all of the sandwiches have been consumed, Algernon tells his aunt that the shop had sold out of cucumbers. After she leaves, Algernon decides to go out for dinner. This shows how food is a symbol of self-gratification in the play, the idea that food is to be eaten for style also shows how Algernon has to satisfy his desire for doing something that is quintessentially English. The food he has is also called 'reckless extravagance' according to Jack. Algernon is recognisable to Victorian audience since food was seen as a sign of class and wealth yet it is comical to due to how it is satirical and against Victorian ideals of virtue and modesty.

Algernon is also portrayed as a character with inverted morals and ideas about marriage. According to him, it is romantic to be in love but 'there is nothing romantic about definite

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proposal' and that when the 'excitement is all over', 'the very essence of romance is uncertainty'. Algernon trivialises marriage while Victorians usually view marriage very seriously, reflecting an inversion of Victorian ideals in the play. He also promotes the idea of affairs and infidelity by saying 'Three is company and two is none.' suggesting that ideas of loyalty and honor are insignificant. His cynicism towards love and marriage is reflected through his Bachelor lifestyle and the champagne reference in Act 1, that 'in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand. He also mentions 'divorce courts' and that he view relations as 'simply a tedious pack of people'. Algernon's character is comic because serious things are trivialised and trivial things are made very serious and important to him. Therefore, Victorians may laugh at it but the play is highly sarcastic, satirical and essentially pokes fun at Victorian ideals and moral.

In a historical context, Algernon is recognisable to the Victorian audience as a dandy figure. A dandy figure is a young man that is very concerned about his clothes and appearance and is often in the position of the upper class man. When Wilde wrote the play it was at the time of the aesthetic movement, Wilde portrayed the idea of 'art for art's sake' through Algernon. Algernon's apartment is described in the opening scene as 'luxuriously and artistically furnished', which suggests wealth and superficiality, also how an extravagance life Algernon, and the Victorian upper class is living. This also presages how Wilde will use this play to satire the unrealistic values and morals that the upper class hold. Wilde was strongly influenced by the aesthetes at the time and how Algernon asserts 'anyone can play [piano] accurately but I play with wonderful expression...sentiment is my forte' complements this idea. Algernon's use of nouns "expression" and "sentiment" shows Algernon's belief of art is more important as an extension of artistic styles than an accurate portrayal of reality. The "afternoon tea" arranged by Lane symbolises leisure and the idleness of the upper classes and also emphasises that Algernon clearly values style over substance. He recognizes no duty other than living a beautiful life create comedy and also mock the Victorian views on trivial matter such as appearances, this is perfect to be portrayed by a character that is dandified.

Secondly, Algernon is also recognisable to the Victorian audience as a figure of self-gratification. Algernon is in the upper classes, which the audience at the time will be very relatable. He is wealthy and he spends his time and money on trivial things such as appearance and style, which seems very important to him. In the opening scene, Algernon asked Lane whether he had prepared "the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell" then finish it before Lady Bracknell came. This portrays his self-gratification and also the fact that he is greedy. Using "cucumber sandwiches" portray bathos as this seems like it is the height of Algernon's life – which is likely to be the life of the upper classes at the time, idle and leisure. Algernon "takes two" sandwiches in the opening scene right after Lane "hands [Algernon] them on a salver" also shows his self-gratification, this seems to suggest he did not ask Lane to make them because of Lady Bracknell, he seems to have it done for himself. Later in Act One

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where Algernon “[picks] up empty plate in horror” and shouted: “Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially” seems to go against the Victorian ideals of virtue and modesty; dramatic irony is also used here, as the audience knows that he has finished them all. The “cucumber sandwiches” are also a symbol of food and it suggests euphuism on sex and lust. Food and gluttony suggest and substitute for other appetites and indulgences. Wilde uses Algernon and the symbolism to satire these values that are over-exaggerated and adverse.

Thirdly, Wilde also uses Algernon to portray the inversion Victorian ideals on Marriage and Victorian morals in general. Algernon commented on marriage that it is “very romantic to be in love but there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal.” He is suggesting that only the chase and the flirting is interesting and romantic about a relationship, once people settle down for marriage, it is not about love anymore. At the time, the Victorians view marriage very seriously, however, Wilde is using Algernon to create comedy and to trivialise and satire the Victorian attitude towards marriage. This is very relevant to Wilde’s life as Wilde had extramarital affairs and he is commenting on the values and purpose of marriage – he seems to suggest that it was appropriate behaviour by having extramarital affairs. Algernon inverses the phrase “two is a company, three is crowd” into “three is company and two is none”, this promotes the idea of infidelity as it is a hidden convention to have extramarital affairs at the time, this contrasts to the idea that Victorians are conservative and are strict to their morals. Another example of inversion in the play is when Lady Bracknell usurps the role of the father in interviewing Jack, since typically this was a father’s task. The inversions in the play are used by Wilde to create comedy as serious things are trivialised and trivial things were made serious, this is also complemented in the beginning of the play: “A trivial comedy for serious people” – this seems to act like a disclaimer and is a complete contrast to what is going on in the play.

Algernon is described as portraying a feminine trait; this suggests Wilde’s own sexuality and the double life that both Algernon and Wilde were leading. Wilde was a homosexual and was imprisoned in 1895. Before then, he was having extramarital affairs with Lord Alfred Douglas and a few other men while he was married. His wife was pregnant with their second children when he had these affairs. Through *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde is portraying the two different characters and lives that he was living through Algernon and Jack. Both Algernon and ‘Ernest’ live a double life: Algernon has an imaginary friend named Mr Bunbury and ‘Ernest’ has an imaginary brother named Jack. As defined by Algernon, Bunburying is the practice of creating an elaborate deception that allows one to misbehave while seeming to uphold the very highest standards of duty and responsibility. This is especially reflected in how Algernon and ‘Ernest’ is escaping their social and moral obligations in using the identity of Mr Bunbury and Jack, however these identities allow them to appear far more responsible than they actually are. Using the word ‘Bunbury’ and regularly using it in the form of noun, verb, and adjective displays Algernon as a foolish and an unintelligent upper class man – this is slightly

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ironic since upper class should be more educated and therefore more intelligent. An inversion of expectations creates comedy and is shown in the relationship between Algernon and Lane, this is especially evident when Algernon does not appear to be excessively annoyed at Lane drinking the champagne: "Why...the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information." And Lane does not seem to be ashamed and the audience can interpret Lane's experience of wine by him describing the wine is "to the superior quality".

Where ideas and authorship are concerned, Algernon is a proponent of aestheticism and a stand-in for Wilde himself. Algernon has no moral convictions at all, recognizing no duty other than the responsibility to live beautifully. He is recognized as a dandy figure, self-gratification, has an inversion of Victorian ideals and morals of marriage, and has a double life. As he is in the upper class, he would have been very relatable to the contemporary audience and therefore is comic as he is used by Wilde to satire the morals and values of the Victorian society.

Ultimately, Algernon is comic to a contemporary audience because of his double life. Algernon created a fake identity just like Jack, who is called Bunbury. Algernon uses Bunbury as an excuse to escape from his duties and obligations, for example, dining with Lady Bracknell, by claiming that Bunbury is ill and that he has to go see him at the countryside. He also has a set of clothes specially prepared for his impersonation. Algernon's double life is used to assist him in shirking from his responsibilities and is a direct contrast to Victorian ideals of how people should behave. People back in the day were to be dutiful and honest, while as Algernon used Bunbury to be irresponsible and deceitful. The stark contrast between Algernon and people of the Victorian era makes Algernon a comical character due to his inverted values.

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