

KIK-EN229 Proseminar

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Bachelor's Thesis
Dandyism in Oscar Wilde's Plays
Lady Windermere's Fan
and
The Importance of Being Earnest

Introduction

Oscar Wilde (1854 - 1900) was a renowned man of letters who plied his pen in England during the Victorian era. Born in Ireland, he began studies in Oxford university through academic merit at the age of 20. After graduating, he pressed forward to London in 1881 (Ellman 105). Wilde's scope as a writer was prolific. Numerous studies concerning Wilde's dramas, plays, short stories, criticism, presentations, journalism, and personal life have been produced throughout the academic world. At this moment the worldwide ProQuest-database lists over 1600 academic journal articles, over 900 books, and over 200 dissertations or theses devoted to Oscar Wilde. Precious little, however, has been written about the pose that Wilde created for himself with and the dandy male characters he created (Breward 129).

By bringing about a new B.A. work, I hope to gather and present a collection of more or less forgotten academic works that give voice to a mostly disregarded side of Oscar Wilde. The key to understanding this aspect is, as Stephen Calloway so well states, taking note of Wilde's Dandyism of the Senses, which is "a self-consciously precious and highly fastidious discrimination brought to bear on both art and life" (Calloway 34). In short, Wilde's tastes were extremely specialised. After Wilde's death, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt wrote in his diary: "He was without exception the most brilliant talker I have ever come across, the most ready, the most witty, the most audacious" (Hyde 178). I believe one could substitute any of his dandy characters with an Oscar Wilde without losing the effect of their dialogue and actions. Such are the similarities in temperament and words between the artist and his creations. Wilde believed that an artist's life, i.e., his total life story including art and life outside artistic pieces, forms a whole that is the artist's highest creation.

This B.A. work presents the concept of dandyism, first as a social phenomenon, later as an intellectual one, and finally as an

amalgam of both. I also present a historical person, Beau Brummell, who was hailed during his time, as opposed to the later condemnation of Victorian prudes, for his refined pose and lifestyle. He is relevant for this essay as his life story forms the archetype of the dandy, and Wilde's characters bear similar traits. This is followed by a literature review of works that deal with dandyism in Oscar Wilde's works. Wilde ridiculed and examined the elite circles of his times but, like both dandy characters analysed in this essay, Wilde was not shunned for being too wicked or irritating. He and his wilder men were highly entertaining company and managed to walk the fine line between insult and humour.

Finally, I will apply the concept of dandyism as it pertains to the male characters in Wilde's plays *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and analyse how dandyism affects these characters as well as the plays. I will argue that these men receive similar surface treatment from Wilde in their poses and wit, but their dramatic roles are different. The plays have three years between them, and Wilde's dandy characters are fairly similar. In the plays, their functions are alike and include serious and light sentiments: both act as comics but also as social critics of the people and mores around them. Amid superficial buffoons, Lord Darlington sees through appearances. He ridicules others as well as love but falls prey to it. Algernon Moncrieff carps about the mores of his time, but falls prey to superficiality as he mainly falls in love to looks instead of the persona.

The Beau

To understand the dandies in the two Wilde plays of this essay, it is essential to know what the concept of dandyism has been through history. First and foremost dandyism, as it pertains to dress, is the very renunciation of clothing that aims to stand out. Secondly, as it pertains to social graces and an individual's pose, it embraces intricate refinement and a critical taste. The

two at first seem contradictory but settle themselves as dandy figures have always been whimsical and eccentric. The two also met in one, highly influential historical person whose life must be remembered each time dandyism is discussed. George Bryan "Beau" Brummell's (1778 - 1840) life story during Britain's Regency era had a quintessential effect on the definition of dandyism. The word dandy was in use as a pejorative term for effeminately dressed-up city men before Brummell, so he was mostly called a rake or a *beau* during his time (Moers 11). Born as the son of Lord North's private secretary, who later rose to become High Sheriff of Berkshire, George Brummell began his ascent into the highest social circles from wealthy middle class. His father paid and enabled him to attend Eton in 1790, later on continuing to Oriel College in Oxford, and during these years Brummell already produced an effect on his school chums as an estimably stylish and witty young man (Jesse, 21). What's more, he was introduced to the future king of England, George IV, while in Eton.

Brummell continued to London after dropping out of Oriel, and received a commission in the prince's regiment - the 10th Regiment of Dragoons. After first befriending the prince well and later becoming a captain, despite no battle merits, Brummell finally left the unit as he learned that the troops would be moved to Manchester. His reasoning was that the provincial city was not at all to his tastes: "I really could not go - think, your Royal Highness, Manchester!" (Jesse 34). In 1799 Brummell inherited at least £30,000 from his late father, in today's currency worth some two million pounds (Kelly IX). Buying a home from the very central Mayfair, London, and spending liberally at a host of tailors and artisans, he became known as the most stylish man in the highest social circles of Britain. This was in no small part thanks to his close friendship with the prince who was enchanted by Beau's charisma (Jesse 27). His nickname, Beau, was given during these years for his tall stature and handsome behaviour, though his face was marred by a broken nose.

For at least a decade, Beau Brummell ruled supreme (Laver 14), yet his rake's progress was mostly enabled by the dwindling inheritance, eaten off most by high-stakes gambling and unessential extravagances. Finally Beau thought too highly of his stature, throwing out mean jokes about the prince's paramour and the royal's looks as if to an equal (Jesse 189-190). The prince took offence and Brummell was snubbed for life. While the highest circles closed their doors to him, some choicest friends yet sent out invites. As a final seal, Beau's debtors grew angry. In 1816 Beau fled in the night to Calais – after attending opera, of course (Kelly 332). There he lived alone, impoverished, with the help of gifts from old friends and the pawnshops that took his few valuables. He lost his interest in style, became dirty and slovenly, and hallucinated about his past exploits with the finest coteries of Britain (Kelly 449). Finally, George Bryan "Beau" Brummell died from the repercussions of syphilitic attacks and strokes, in pain and insane, in 1840. The rake progressed no further.

The story of Brummell matters to dandyism and this essay due to his life story and influence, both socially and especially as recorded in print. Virginia Woolf has noted: "Without a single noble, important, or valuable action to [Beau Brummell's] credit, he cuts a figure; he stands for a symbol; his ghost walks among us still" (Woolf 1). This is a keen observation. Brummell had no profession, lands, titles or achievements other than his powers to entertain and make an impression. He worked for no cause but himself, yet still was talked about in the highest circles, he was invited to all the parties that mattered, he was admired, and his critical eye was feared. He was, in Moers's and Brummell's contemporaries' words, at the "top of the male *ton*" (Moers 18).

What's more, Brummell's quick and witty jokes, fine looks, highly individual lifestyle, and legend were preserved in countless

diaries, letters, and later on in books as well (Kelly 9). All this seems to me that he was the first western person to be famous for being famous. Beau serves as the archetype for the concept, and the men who have been titled as latter-day dandies share many of his traits (Moers 17). Oscar Wilde has been hailed as a dandy as well. To understand dandyism, it is well to remember how Beau Brummell lived, and how his legend may have effected the dandy figures in Oscar Wilde's plays. Both Algernon and Darlington are witty, selfish, stylish, part of the finer circles, graceful, and outspoken – but in an endearing fashion that didn't insult. Finally, Brummell was known to entice women and pay visits to society courtesans but he was never married. His dandy pose was mostly solitary and differs from Wilde's characters.

Dandyism

Ellen Moers's *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* is likely the most cited academic study on dandyism. Thus, I feel she should have the first referenced say in listing the characteristics of dandyism. The most defining, most often mentioned dandiacal traits are independence, idleness, and a self-entitled sense of superiority (Moers 13). The first means that a dandy is content to live for himself. If others find his person amusing and also please him, he will not shun fine company – but neither will he beg for acceptance. The second means that a dandy is free. He is free from the chokehold of menial labour or obligations. Many real-life dandies, such as Wilde, Brummell, Count d'Orsay, have been well-off enough to reach this stature, and many dandy characters in plays or stories (Hercule Poirot, Sherlock Holmes, Lord Goring) as well. The third means that the dandy holds himself above the common, above the vulgar, above the unwitting. To this status he has been anointed by no one but himself.

The dandy figure has devoted time and effort to learn the differences between aesthetic nuances, whether they relate to art, tailoring or films, and will not waste words with people who do

not understand his passions. The Beau, for example, collected snuff-boxes. Not because they were essential or particularly useful, though snuff was a great vogue in his time, but because through them he could exercise taste. The style with which he opened a box, raised it, and inhaled snuff was unique to him. The same thinking was exercised in Brummell's home decorations, Sèvres porcelain objects, his accessories, his clothing – they were simply of the best kind, according to the elite's tastes at the time (Gronow 62). During the 1700s, bourgeois men's clothing was richly decorated, ornate, colourful, silken. Brummell favoured plain wool cloths, undecorated and unpatterned, in dark colours. Similar apparel was mostly worn in the countryside for leisure pursuits. Beau's personal style was revolutionary – *rus in urbe*, or country style in the city (Steele 200).

In translated form, Roland Barthes has stated "The dandy in no way sets the upper classes against the lower classes, but rather, exclusively and absolutely, sets the individual against the common herd" (qtd. in Nelson 136). This notion is at the very heart of the Wildean dandies: they are apolitical, of no party or clique. They have relations but cordiality does not spare friends from witty remarks and critique. These dandies are the very solipsism of individualism and against their time's normative, restrictive views. Wilde's grasp of dandyism owes much to Charles Baudelaire's views: both praise artificialities and recognise evil as a natural facet of man. Things were what they looked like. What we today call image was discussed under the term of pose. For Wilde, the pose of the dandy was supreme. His and Baudelaire's greatest difference was the hero figure. For Charles, the critic was all. For Oscar, the artist's life, not works only, was all.

Literature Review

Few academic articles have been devoted to dandyism particularly in Oscar Wilde's plays. This literature review lists the source texts for the purposes of this B.A.

Oscar Wilde, the Dandy-Artist: A Study of Dandyism in the Life and Works of Oscar Wilde, With Particular Attention Given to the Intellectual Bases of Wilde's Dandyism is Alfred L. Recoulley III's Ph.D. from 1969 and my main source. It is an in-depth presentation about dandyism and its influence on Wilde, which first lays its basis by presenting the -ism along with other similar intellectual movements. Recoulley then sheds light on Wilde's family, his time in various schools before Oxford university, early poems, trip to America, the creation of his artistic pose (what we today call image), his encounters with artists in Paris, early works, lecture tour and marriage, his reviews of the works of others. Then we learn about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde's only novel, and its sources as well as critical and audience reactions to it. The fifth chapter presents Wilde's plays and the last one is a conclusion about Wilde's last works and fall from grace. The thesis is nearly 400 pages, much too large to present here in full, but suffice it to say that the whole is written so well that it is the definite piece on the matter. Sadly, it is also a forgotten, uncited academic text as well. Compared to the length of this doctorate, Recoulley writes little about dandyism in Wilde's plays. He does define Darlington's role as the one who sees through appearances, and mentions the artificiality of facades in Algernon and the people around him. Both characters survey their company and, instead of taking note internally, speak out their opinions. My essay hopefully contributes to Wildean scholarship by elaborating on the echo of Recoulley's footsteps. I argue that the function of the dandy character in Oscar Wilde's plays is to play the part of a social critic.

The Life of George Brummell, ESQ., Commonly Called Beau Brummell (1844) by Captain Jesse is the first biographical book on Brummell. It was written by a captain of the British Army who became interested in the legend of his contemporary. Jesse

interviewed countless people who had met or known Brummell, collected anecdotes, read personal letters, and finally travelled to Caen to meet his idol, albeit in Brummell's diminished latter-day state. Many of the book's sources remain anonymous, however, and Jesse writes that this was their wish.

The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm (1960) is the masterpiece of Ellen Moers, an acclaimed study and presentation about dandyism in its social and literary manifestations. She presents a similar background as Recoulley, who quotes her work several times in his own, and first tells about refined men entertaining high circles in London in the late 1700s, how dandyism was taken up by 19th century French writers, and how the phenomenon of dandiacal men dwindled and disappeared. She also presents short biographies of well-known dandies like Brummell, such as Benjamin Disraeli (before his political days), Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Count D'Orsay, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Baudelaire, and Max Beerbohm. Moers's work has often been cited in later dandy studies.

Wilde and the Dandyism of the Senses was written by Stephen Calloway, published in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (1997), and presents Oscar Wilde's early influences. In the first paragraph, Calloway makes an interesting and helpful summary about the mindset of the Aesthetic and Decadent artists of England in the 1880s and '90s. He titles it as "Dandyism of the Senses - a self-consciously precious and highly fastidious discrimination brought to bear on both art and life" (Calloway 1). This appeals to me because I feel it explains much about Wilde's character and works to readers who are unfamiliar with him. In a sense, Wilde was a critic of life and objects - as opposed to the regular sense of the critic as one who discerns works of art only. After this handy revelation, the journal presents people who influenced the young Wilde as he set about to create an artistic persona and pose

for himself. James McNeill Whistler, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, Walter Pater, and many more are cited.

Beau Brummell: The Ultimate Dandy (2005) is Ian Kelly's ultimate beau-ography (if I may) about the man who was legend. Kelly spent several years researching this extremely thorough biography that finally tells the tale of Brummell, who rose from high middle class to become the best man at the Prince of Wales's wedding, the brightest star in England's highest social circles, a man known for being known. Only to lose it all, having to escape debts to France, losing his mind to syphilis (Kelly's unique discovery), and dying as a most pitiable example of the rake's progress.

The plays

The social role of the dandy was the entertainer's. My argument for Wilde's use of these figures in his plays is two-fold. I argue that Wilde chose the pose for these men in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* because of their role as social critics, and because dandiacal men had a reputation as highly entertaining company. Both characters poke holes into the veneer of the other characters by pointing out their superficial, hypocritical, or self-entitled actions. The difference between lord Darlington and Algernon Moncrieff is their self-awareness: the lord is aware of his own fondness of appearances, while Algernon has no clue of his. Dear old Algernon falls in love with looks, Darlington with the person. Oscar Wilde was a popular social lion in Britain's upper circles, which he used as fodder for imagination, and chose to ridicule their foibles, such as superficiality and social facades. Even most of his critical pieces use upper-class surroundings. To do this without losing face or their graces, his critique came in the form of hypocritical upper-class characters and the dandies who see through them. Wilde's attitude to his work is best summed up by his quip: "It is style that makes us believe in a thing — nothing but style" (Moers 300).

In these plays, the stooges are those following the norms of their times by keeping up appearances, while the rebellious dandies rise above such

social games. They may not live happily ever after, as Lord Darlington is left alone, but theirs are not the lives spent worrying over the opinions of others. For examples of social critique, at the very beginning of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Darlington states his view of his people bluntly: "Oh, nowadays so many conceited people go about Society pretending to be good..." (Wilde, act 1, scene 1, p7). The capital Society here refers to the upper-class London circles which leave this lord wanting. Algernon's irreverent attitude is revealed at the beginning of the play: "A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it" (Wilde, act 1, scene 1, p 302). This shows his disregard for the obligations of the Victorian husband as he uses bunburying to escape boring social events, and seek excitement elsewhere. Both are highly vocal in their critique, and somehow escape being cut from their high circles despite this. What they say is outrageous but put in such a witty way that others seem more amused than irritated.

Lady Windermere's Fan

Oscar Wilde's plays are characterised by caustic wit and ridicule of the British upper class, Victorian morals as well as appearances. The plays are comedies of manners in which causing a scene is an anathema. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), Wilde's dandy is Lord Darlington because he best embodies the pose of a dandy as defined in the beginnings of this essay. A darling of the London high circles, Darlington pronounces his independence and aversion to his peers and their moralities by espousing, in his words, wickedness. This appearance, however, is only superficial (Horsum 127) – inside his feelings are pure. He is over 30 and a bachelor, an anomaly by Victorian standards. The Lord's self-assuredness is superior – he has an answer to everything. As Recoulley notes, the lord is "a critic of illusions" (Recoulley 310) because he socialises in circles where public image is everything, a true alternative fact. While others may be aware of the same things as Darlington, his voicing these inner opinions forces others to take a stance as well. Contrary to Algernon,

Darlington is forceful in voicing romantic interest. Lord Darlington is in fact more true to his personal values than Lady Windermere, which we shall later see.

In Lady Windermere's Fan, Lord Darlington's most important role is the social critic. He takes note of artifices and opens them to polite ridicule. A case in point comes when he shares his view of Victorian marriage: "It's a curious thing, about the game of marriage...the wives hold all the honours, and invariably lose the odd trick" [ie. husband] (Wilde, act 1, scene 1, p 11). Then the Duchess of Berwick bemusedly replies "Dear Lord Darlington, how thoroughly depraved you are!" Through social graces, Darlington manages to astound with wicked humour and yet retain an air of cordiality. Life is, after all, a far too important a thing ever to take seriously! The Duchess's reply shows how these witty retorts to everything around him make Darlington a highly entertaining persona. He is a Victorian equivalent of the Middle Age court jester. Despite his pose of self-centred aloofness, the society matters to him: "I won't tell you that the world matters nothing, or the world's voice, or the voice of society. They matter a great deal. They matter far too much" (Wilde, act 2, scene 1, p 30). Like Oscar Wilde, Lord Darlington wants to critique the upper class but remain a member.

Victorian morality espoused self-control and prudery, but none are present in Darlington's behaviour towards Lady Windermere. Instead he is very forward in his words and shows keen interest in her romantic favours. Darlington's world view is summed up in his dialogue: "It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious. I take the side of the charming... I couldn't help it. I can resist everything except temptation" (Wilde, act 1, scene 1, p 9-10). Social graces are most important to this dandy figure in meting out the bores from the lions. Charisma is capital. Later, as he encourages Lady Windermere to leave her unfaithful husband and elope with him: "...

there are moments when one has to choose between living one's own life – fully, entirely, completely – or dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands" (Wilde, act 2, scene 1, p 30). Scenes such as this show that Lord Darlington lives against the morals of his times but does so without losing place. Thus, for Lord Darlington, the pleasures of the senses overcome moral judgements.

As the previous quotations showed, Darlington is self-centred and pleasure-fond – he is not willing to let himself down. While these traits are not linked to my essay thesis, they do reinforce the dandy archetype as defined in relating Beau Brummell's story. Despite all, the Duchess exclaims "What a charming wicked creature! I like him so much." (Wilde, act 1, scene 1, p 12). To understand this testimonial better it is well to note that dukes and duchesses are only below royals in aristocracy. Darlington has friends in very high places, seemingly charmed by his charisma even though he speaks bluntly. After Lady Windermere extols life and exclaims that its purification is sacrifice, Darlington smiles and curtly states that anything is better than being sacrificed (Wilde, act 1, scene 1, p 8). This scene, along with his previous actions, shows that this dandy is looking out for himself. He is yet cynical and selfish. However coldly aloof, finally the darling Lord succumbs to Lady Windermere, a married woman of solid standing, and loses his reserve. His is no longer the dandy's pose but that of a man in love: "My life – my whole life. Take it, and do with it what you will... I love you – love you as I have never loved any living thing. From the moment I met you I loved you, loved you blindly, adoringly, madly! You did not know it then – you know it now!" (Wilde, act 2, scene 1, p 30). After this pouring of emotion, his role changes into a pining courtier.

We learn an important side of Lord Darlington when the plot moves into a critical phase, where a choice must be made between appearances and emotions. Darlington's role as a social critic is solidified by his

willpower to face ridicule among his peers. He is willing to forgo all for love, proposes elopement to Lady Windermere, and demands an answer immediately (Wilde, act 2, scene 1, p 30). After receiving the negative, his passions fade surprisingly fast. In his view, Lady Windermere would rather live in secret shame as the wife of an unfaithful man rather than divorcing for future happiness. All just to retain an edifice for her social circle. She would bow down to morality and peer pressure while he, however wicked by the day's norms, would face it and by opposing live through the shame. After this episode, he affirms his change to his friends: "...if one really loves a woman, all other women in the world become absolutely meaningless to one. Love changes one – I am changed" (Wilde, act 3, scene 1, p 49). In this moment, he has no witty notions to share.

In the end, Darlington is changed through love but does not get the girl. At this point, he likely does not care anymore. The last we see of Lord Darlington in the play, his is an expression of astonishment mingled with anger as Mrs Erlynne saves him and Lady Windermere from a love triangle scandal by claiming the Lady's fan as hers. It feels strange that Wilde is willing to forget Darlington so quickly. He is not mentioned after the fan is recovered, instead the drama focuses on whether Lady Windermere learns the identity of her mother. Evidently the topic of motherly love and sacrifice is more important to Wilde than the aloof figure of the dandy. The Windermeres continue their marriage, but both keep secrets from each other and through them hold an artifice. As Darlington mentioned, he has changed through love and abandoned the dandy's pose. This play differs greatly from *The Importance of Being Earnest* as the dandy of the play is risking a marriage by proposing elopement, while in the latter the dandy character is willing to risk changing his name. During the Victorian era, cheating in marriage was not accepted grounds for divorce, and divorced people were shunned in upper-class circles.

The Importance of Being Earnest

Wilde's dandy character in this play is Algernon Moncrieff, who is very similar to Lord Darlington. Both act as social critics whose jabs are softened enough to avoid blunt blows. Both project the dandy's pose of superiority through force of will, resist social mores of the times, and

both fall in love and lose their composure. Algernon's self-centredness and aloofness have justified an alter (ego) friend in the form of Bunbury, a made-up person who he uses to rid himself of the most boring social duties. For him, a dinner with an aunt is a bore. To avoid such trivial pursuits, he simply states that he must visit his ailing friend, Bunbury, and cannot dine (Wilde, act 1, scene 1, p 304). In a sense, all main characters in this play are childish to an extreme, living in the moment, and are taken to sudden changes of mind. While *Lady Windermere's Fan* has dark themes of unfaithfulness and elopement, *The Importance of Being Earnest* remains light and silly throughout. Regarding *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Wilde's best-known and most popular play, Recouley reminds his reader that Wilde was "as much a part of the society he portrayed as any one of the characters, yet he was above it with his wit" (Recouley 328-329).

Algernon's attitude to his relatives displays his self-centredness, which is characteristic of dandy figures: "Relations are simply a tedious pack of people who haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die" (Wilde, act 1, scene 1, p 312). While this is likely meant as a witty remark, a thoroughly friendly persona would hardly share such an opinion. He goes through plenty of trouble to invent an imaginary friend, all in order to keep up with selfish pastimes and an image of empathy. After his servant, Lane, tells Algernon of his failed marriage, A. languidly states that he's not interested. Algernon's empathy runs as deep as his surface. Further, he is not at all amused by marriage. It destroys the excitement of being in love, and either the man or the woman will keep a Bunbury aside (Wilde, act 1, scene 1, p 301). Algernon is a confirmed cynic in the first act of the play.

The keeping up of appearances and the ways in which language is used are hallmarks of breeding for this dandy character. Thus, Algernon differs greatly from Lord Darlington. While both make fun of the pursuit for trivial things, Algernon is also guilty of this cardinal sin and does not seem to notice it. In his view, Algernon would make love to a woman, if she's pretty, and to someone else entirely if she's not. He is so taken with Cecily's appearances that he takes the liberty of daring to love

her, after some fifteen minutes of acquaintance. Algernon's duties as a gentleman, moreover, have never kept him from his pleasures. Amusement is the salt of his earth. It is these pleasures and having his will be done at all times that further mark Algernon as an incurable dandy figure. With his traits, Algernon is much more superficial than Lord Darlington. He is more anxious as well as shown by his habit of snacking copiously throughout the play, to soothe his nerves, with little regard for the moment.

Both dandies abandon their former selfishness, drop down on their knees, and swear their undying love, though Algernon seems much more superficial in his love than Darlington. After all, he fell in love with the looks of Cecily instead of her persona, humour, or other intangible things. Still, Algernon is even willing to change his image, in the form of his first name, to reach the image that Cecily has come to adore. In the second act, he makes arrangements with Dr. Chasuble for this. Cecily seems to have decided to love the concept of an Ernest man. Both of Wilde's dandy figures are changed for the better through love, though we never learn how long their passions will last. I feel that the concept of love is not ridiculed in Wilde's plays but the ways people show their love. Comparing the two, Darlington is willing to risk all for love – Algernon is willing to risk his first name.

Conclusions

While the former darling never receives the lady of his dreams, the latter Bunburyist does. In both plays, the dandy figures are treated and act similarly, both have the same social function in the unfolding drama. They are social critics, as Wilde was to his contemporaries, they see through artifices and yell, of course most cordially, that the Emperor has no clothes, as Wilde did through his plays. If the upper-class Britain of his time viewed the plays as simple comedies and amusements, Wilde's final joke was on them. Finally, as Lord Darlington, Wilde was also changed by love and he decided to risk his reputation and social appearances by pursuing a man. The Victorian society was disgusted by his choice and ostracised him. Oscar Wilde died in shame, poverty, and loneliness. His life story mirrors the bright ascent and darkling fall of

Beau Brummell. However, these men in his plays could be given the stories that Wilde perhaps would have liked to live through.

Oscar Wilde did define dandyism in his own words. For him, it was "an attempt to assert the absolute modernity of beauty" (Moers 301). As for me, I cannot disagree with the inimitable Alfred Lunsford Recoulley III in his analysis of the *meaning* Wilde was after by creating dandy characters. In his stylish men, Lord Goring, Lord Darlington, Algernon Moncrieff and others, Wilde saw "artistic images of himself living selectively and dandiacally as he would like to live" (Recoulley 332). They are artistic because the figures have been created by an artist, Mr Wilde, for an artistic medium, the Victorian theatre stage, to explore humanity, the topic of most artworks. These images are of himself because their demeanour, cultural backgrounds, and witty jokes are comparable to Wilde's. These figures are living selectively as their membership in Victorian elite allows them great expectations in life. They have had access to education and social circles, their male gender allows freedom to choose how to spend their days. They choose to live dandiacally as the characters meet the definition of a dandy as laid out at the beginning of this essay. Finally, they live as Oscar Wilde would have liked to live: free, financially secure, witty, well-connected, charming, stylish, and always have the perfect retort for life's slings and arrows. While the characters and Wilde got into scrapes, he finally succumbed to his while these perfect specimens remain, by comparison, unmarred.

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