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Wit and Value System in the Plays of Oscar Wilde and Tom Stoppard.

A Thesis

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Table of Contents

Page

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Abstract

The objective of this thesis is twofold: First, it seeks to present a detailed survey of one of the significant concepts in drama, i.e. wit, discusses traditional assumptions about it and debates that it is not just a technical device. Instead, the thesis suggests a perspective of wit which relates it to the value system of society. Second, it offers readings of Oscar Wilde and Tom Stoppard's plays in order to grasp the nature of the relationship between wit and value system in their plays respectively.

Chapter One "Introduction" traces the development of the term wit from its etymological origin, its various treatments in the critical writings of famous thinkers throughout different ages, and its social role in light of its relationship with value system. Wit could thus be utilised as a subversive tool or as a tool of consolidating the system of values. Hence, the role of wit surpasses its being an aesthetic device; it could be a tool of changing or stabilising the status quo.

Chapter Two, "The Witty Artist and Value System in Oscar Wilde's Plays", deals with Wilde's use of wit as an aesthetic mask which at once conceals and reveals his severe criticism of Victorian value system. Moreover, this chapter argues that Wilde manages to make a reconciliation between his aesthetic slogan of Art for Art's Sake and his humanist commitment. Limiting the scope of analysis to Wilde's subversive use of wit in three major plays, namely, Lady Windermere's Fan, An Ideal Husband and The Importance of Being Earnest shows how he utilises his wit to expose and attack the contradictions and hypocrisies of Victorian morality.

The premise that Tom Stoppard's witty plays celebrate non-commitment regarding social and political issues is tackled in Chapter Three "Value System in Tom Stoppard's Witty Plays". This chapter reveals how Stoppard's aesthetic and moral vision is affected by logical positivism and Ludwig Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy. The analysis of three plays written by Stoppard, namely, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Travesties and The Real Thing, indicates that he does not believe that art could effect change by means of direct action; instead, his plays represent the theatrical consolidation of absolute values and the rejection of relativism.

The thesis results in some general findings which assert that wit could be used either as a subversive tool which challenges dogmatic systems of values or as a tool of the celebration of the absolute, unchangeable nature of values. Moreover, the study manifests the influence of Wilde's wit on Stoppard's style and aesthetic vision. Finally, it reaches the conclusion that Wilde is more socially committed towards changing the value system of society than Stoppard whose witty plays dramatise his social and political detachment.

Key Words:

1. Wit.
2. Value system.
3. Absolute versus relative values.
4. Art for Art's Sake.
5. Linguistic philosophy.

Preface

This thesis proposes to achieve a dual purpose. First, it seeks to introduce a social perspective which relates wit to value system. Second, it attempts to contribute to the criticism of Oscar Wilde and Tom Stoppard's plays by focusing on the nature of the relationship between wit and value system in their plays.

The thesis consists of three chapters. Chapter One "Introduction" discusses the premise that wit is closely related to the value system of society. So, it moves from a debate on the defects of some of the definitions of wit throughout its historical stages of development to a new perspective which concentrates on its social function. Thus, it could be argued that the role of wit surpasses its being a technical device. It could rather be a tool of either subverting the value system of society or stabilising the status quo.

In order to prove that wit is closely related to value system, some of Wilde and Stoppard's witty plays are analysed in this thesis as practical dramatic manifestations of this social function of wit. Hence, Chapter Two "The Witty Artist and Value System in Oscar Wilde's Plays" examines how Wilde's wit is a mask which enables him to pretend to be socially uncommitted. The scope of this chapter is the analysis of Wilde's use of wit in Lady Windermere's Fan (1892), An Ideal Husband (1895) and The Importance of Being Earnest (1895). The analysis of these plays seeks to prove that Wilde's wit is directed towards the subversion and change of the value system of Victorian England. It also investigates how Wilde reconciles the contradiction between being a champion of Art for Art's Sake and being socially committed by means of adapting this aesthetics to humanism.

The thesis follows a chronological order by moving from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century in order to see whether the

relationship between wit and social commitment towards change advances or regresses from Wilde to Stoppard. So, Chapter Three "Value System in Tom Stoppard's Witty Plays" argues that Stoppard is not committed towards change. His plays, particularly Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (1966), Travesties (1974) and The Real Thing (1982), celebrate the absolutisation of values and their insusceptibility to change. Moreover, the chapter debates that Stoppard's wit propagates the supremacy of art over life. In other words, this study attempts to prove that Stoppard's commitment to art makes him a better proponent of Art for Art's Sake than Wilde himself who is more like a disguised social reformer. In brief, this thesis juxtaposes the relativisation of values in Wilde's witty plays with the absolutisation of values in Stoppard's witty plays.

Finally, the thesis ends with a conclusion which sums up the findings of the study.

Chapter One
Introduction

One of the main objectives of this chapter is the analysis of the concept of wit. The problem of defining wit in literary criticism could be attributed to the traditional authoritative definitions of wit in dictionaries, glossaries and the critical writings of famous men of thought. Such definitions are debated with and juxtaposed in order to realise the pros and cons of these definitions and suggest a social perspective which relates it to the value system of society. The rationale of such argument is that:

> literary wit can be more interesting than readerly habits, prejudices, and methodologies commonly allow, then that recognition in itself would be a move in a right direction. If we also recognize that literary wit can be central to 'serious' dimensions of the text rather than merely decorative and superficial, then literary wit obviously requires better attention than it normally receives. . . . Specially, we must allow the possibility . . . that literary wit is, or can be, an insurrection against conventional and formulaic thinking, that wit can be 'clever' enough to make war on cleverness, funny or shocking enough to overturn ordinary assumptions about humor, laughter, and surprise, intellectually or psychologically anarchic enough to jolt, jam, or shatter whatever we thought were absolutes about the intellect, the self, the deep order or disorder of worlds we think we know – or 'know' that we don't. (Michelson 30)

That is why the following argument discusses traditional assumptions about wit; such assumptions which sometimes restrict its sphere to being a decorative device for amusement and disregard its ability to deal with serious aspects of literary texts. So, this chapter aims at attempting to liberate wit from authoritative assumptions about its role in literary texts. In other words, it investigates how wit could challenge common notions about thematic seriousness, laughter, knowledge, the self and the operations of the human mind.

Definitions of wit provided by most dictionaries, glossaries and encyclopaedias could be seen to offer "antiquated paradigms" (7). Bruce Michelson also points out,

> First, these treatments tend to run circular: a paragraph or two addressing *wit* . . . will commonly refer to a discussion of *humor* somewhere else in the same volume, and the *humor* entry will begin or end with a directive 'See also *wit*'. The bothersome terms thereby negotiated by playing them off against each other. Second, these reference works rarely attempt a distinction between *literary* wit and wit in other cultural contexts, or wit of any other kind. . . . Third, reference works specifically about poetry and poetics have been better at describing the practice of wit than most of the all-genre literary guides. . . . Fourth, in these literary and cultural guides, language applied to *wit* often exudes suspicion and condescension. (6)

Thus, dealing with wit and humour as opposites in most references and lack of distinctions between the use of wit in a play, in a poem, or in the everyday life of the layman are among the basic defects in most of the lexical definitions of wit. Moreover, another major defect is the relegation of wit to an inferior status in discussions of literary discourse in favour of more 'serious' elements. But wit in the modern age requires "fresher paradigms for imagining literary, psychological, intellectual and cultural experience" (7).

An example of treating wit and humour as opposites in glossaries and dictionaries appears in M. H. Abrams' A Glossary of Literary Terms. In that glossary, the difference between wit and humour is seen as follows: wit "is always intended by the speaker to be comic, but many speeches that we find comically humorous are intended by the speakers themselves to be serious" (198). Besides, the difference between wit and humour lies in the idea that "a humorous saying is not cast in the neat, epigrammatic form of a witty saying" (198). Wit is also considered, from this point of view, as an intellectual variety of humour. Humour is "a 'harmless' form of the comic" (198). In contrast, wit is more intentional,

more aggressive, more intolerant and more critical of human values than humour, while the latter "implies a sympathetic recognition of human values and deals with the foibles and incongruities of human nature, good-naturedly exhibited" (Harmon 539). Although this view stresses the critical and social role of wit in its treatment of human values, it does not do justice to the richness and significance of wit in literary discourse.

These traditional dicussions of wit in dictionaries, glossaries and encyclopaedias result in "keeping literary and cultural analysis within established habits and structures" (Michelson 7). Besides these lexical definitions, there are other definitions offered by canonical figures in the history of thought and criticism. The validity of these definitions relies on the famous names who have pronounced them rather than the idea of how far these pronouncements illustrate the vital role of wit in literary texts. The ups and downs in the concept of wit throughout history are juxtaposed in this chapter in order to reach a perspective of wit that suits its pivotal role in literary discourse in the modern age.

As for the etymological origin of wit, Cuddon's Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory points out that the origin of wit is 'witan' which means 'to know' (985). Besides, wit means wisdom and "'the mind' or sometimes one of its specialized functions, such as reasoning or understanding" (Westgate 283). In other words, "Wit is knowledge, and communicates it. The most striking effect of wit, the chief cause of its delightfulness – surprise – is but a drop from the ocean of joyous surprise, whose spring or source is knowledge" (Tuxton, "Wit. II" 415). This implies that, before the changes to which the concept of wit have been subjected throughout the history of literary and cultural thought, wit has been related to the realm of knowledge. In its etymological origin, wit is not merely decorative; instead, wit is wisdom, discernment and judgment.

In contrast with its association with knowledge and wisdom in its etymological origin, wit is discussed as just a decoration of style in classical criticism. “The perfection of style”, Aristotle argues, “is to be clear without being mean” (81). That is why he insists that “It is a great matter to observe propriety” (87) in modes of expression such as metaphor. Such ‘propriety’ is wit. For Aristotle, making good metaphors “implies an eye on resemblances” (87). Seen from this point of view, the witty utterance, in the form of metaphor for instance, should be characterised with both decorum and the ability to observe resemblance and affinity instead of disparity and incongruity.

Among the classical treatments of wit is also Cicero’s discussion of wit in De Oratore. This book explains that “there being two sorts of wit, one running with even flow all through a speech, while the other, though incisive, is intermittent, the ancients called the former ‘irony’ and the latter ‘raillery’” (Cicero 359). In spite of this strict differentiation between the ironic effect of a whole speech and specific jokes, Cicero’s discussion of wit shows the high esteem it holds in his discussion of rhetoric and his obsession with the “great and frequent utility of witticisms in oratory” (367). However, his definition of wit limits its scope to the art of oratory instead of offering a thorough discussion of its importance in the various fields and genres of literature. Another major defect in his use of wit is that he restricts laughter “to that which may be described as unseemly or ugly; for the chief, if not the only, objects of laughter are those sayings which remark upon and point out something unseemly in no unseemly manner” (373). In this case, wit focuses on exciting laughter which highlights inappropriate or repulsive aspects in manners which are actually neither inappropriate nor repulsive.

When we turn to the Elizabethan concept of wit, “we are immediately struck with the breadth and flexibility of the term” (Stein 77). Furthermore, “During the Renaissance period it meant ‘intelligence’ or ‘wisdom’; thus intellectual capacity; even, perhaps, ‘genius’” (Cuddon

975). The high esteem with which wit was regarded as equivalent to wisdom or as an important faculty of the mind during the Renaissance is exemplified in Sir Philip Sidney's book The Defense of Poesy. Sidney states,

> For poesy must not be drawn by the ears, it must be gently led, or rather it must lead; which was partly the cause that made the ancient learned affirm it was a divine gift, and no human skill, since all other knowledges lie ready for any that hath strength of wit, a poet no industry can make if his own genius be not carried into it. (46)

Thus, from Sidney's viewpoint in particular and the Renaissance viewpoint in general, wit is the talent, intelligence and presence of mind which enable the poet to compose poetry. It also signifies the powers of the mind. Besides, for the Elizabethan, "'wit' still meant primarily 'intellect' or 'mental capacity', though it had also such meanings, apparently derivative from the central one, as 'understanding', 'wisdom', even 'power of imagination' or 'invention'" (Ustick and Hudson 107). Moreover, it "means *imagination*, and includes both 'fancy' and 'judgment'" (Stein 78). Elizabethan wit "was a strenuous art, at best requiring a man to be both beholder and partaker – in ways not charted and defined in advance, but requiring individual definition, every time" (91).

In Metaphysical poetry, the term 'wit' implied "such nimbleness of thought and such originality in figures of speech as was found in the Metaphysical poetry of John Donne and others" (Beckson and Ganz 302). According to A. J. Smith, "the distinctive sensibility of the metaphysical poets, the peculiar fusion of thought and feeling in their wit, may have something to do with a particular understanding of the relationship of body and soul" (4). From this perspective,

> As expressed by seventeenth century English poets such as Donne and Herbert, this sensibility yields an intellectual verse that is fully inflected with passion and that is capable

> of apprehending and dramatizing all the dualities of early modern consciousness. (Summers and Pebworth 2)

Metaphysical wit is thus characterised by this mixture of thought and feeling. The wit of Donne's lyrics, for instance, are characterised by "both their sophisticated levity and their dramatic truth, both their epigrammatic neatness and their symbolic import" (Guss 308). For a Metaphysical poet, "wit is the means of discovering, or recovering, the hidden correspondences which link the entire creation in a providential interchange of love" (Smith 5). Therefore, Metaphysical wit, as expressed in metaphysical conceit, is an intellectual and spiritual process which is a vital tool of discovering and recovering the unexpected recognition of correspondence or likeness that joins the whole creation in the interchange of love (5). However, the Metaphysical use of wit confuses it with fancy. This narrows the scope of wit and makes it lack the pivotal element of judgment. In addition, such Metaphysical poets as George Herbert are cautious of excessive use of wit. Wit is described in Herbert's poem "The Church Porch" as "an unruly engine" which is "wildly striking / Sometimes a friend, sometimes the engineer" (Herbert 26). It is as if Herbert warns us of "the intellectual dangers of wit" (Westgate 281).

Besides the Metaphysical point of view, Dryden considers wit as "propriety of thoughts, and ornament of words" ("Preface to Fables, Ancient and Modern" 3). Like Aristotle, Dryden insists on propriety in metaphor and similar witty techniques. Since wit is viewed as propriety or decorum, a witty utterance should conform to accepted norms, tastes and the demands of respectability decreed by the situation or by society at large. This implies that it is a tool of maintaining the norms of decorum, manners and morality, rather than challenging them.

Furthermore, in "Defence of the Epilogue", Dryden's view on wit is highlighted when he states, "it being very certain, that even folly itself, well represented, is wit in a larger signification" (The Critical and Miscellaneous Prose Works of John Dryden 245). For him, folly is an

exaggerated form of wit. However, according to Dryden, literary decorum, or propriety, is wit in its highest form only when the following condition is fulfilled: “sublimest subjects ought to be adorned with the sublimest, and consequently often, with the most figurative expression” (413). Wit, in this case, is thus considered as propriety in literary texts instead of regarding it as wisdom or the intellect as it was held in the Renaissance perspective of the concept. In his poetic works, as in “Absalom and Achitophel”, he writes,

> Great wits are sure to madness near allied
> And thin partitions do their bounds divide. (163-64)

Here, Dryden describes great wits as possessing a mixture of intelligence and madness. Besides, he refers to wit in the second line of his poem “To my Dear Friend Mr. Congreve on his Comedy Call'd the Double Dealer” and laments the fact that “The present age of wit obscures the past” (1). His undertone here is one of sorrow or irony. The contradiction which this seventeenth-century concept of wit implies is that “While the writers of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were convinced that they were living in an age of wit, they seemed far less certain as to what this might mean” (Lund 53). The reason for Dryden’s belief in wit as propriety is political allegiance since “Living in an age when the English nation was at the heart of an expanding Empire, Dryden considered it his duty as a poet to contribute to the improvement of the national language” (Skouen 386-87). This is one of the causes of Dryden’s “emphasis on propriety and aptness” (382). Since wit is the aptness of style, it is a means of refining language, and consequently, consolidating the power of the English Empire. Moreover, since it is social consensus which determines the norms of decency, Dryden’s definition of wit directs its use towards the maintenance of social power and the superiority of society over the individual.

In the seventeenth century, hence, the term wit became equivalent to either “fancy, dexterity of thought and imagination” (Cuddon 985) or propriety, versus genuine judgment and knowledge. During that century,