

The Language of Hand Props in the Comedies of Oscar Wilde (I)

Poco Indo

I

In 1892, the British theatre discovered a comic dramatist whose brilliant dialogue, if not anything else, it unanimously acclaimed. Now as we approach the centenary of Oscar Wilde's death in Paris, the contemporary British theatre is enjoying the revival of his comedies,¹ and critics celebrating a century since the peak of his success have devoted themselves to rediscovering what lies 'beneath the surface'.² Those aspects in his works that were otherwise obscured by his wit have been given due attention, his features revalued, his trial reassessed, and his biography revised.³ Unquestionably, such reconsideration has shed a new light on Wilde, and at the same time has provided us with a rich variety of insights into the age to which he owed his popularity and in which he aroused controversy.

The well-argued scholarship of the past decade, however, yields surprisingly little in the way of demonstrating Wilde's use of visual elements. That Wilde was conscious of the visual significance of his stage production is clearly spelt out in his letter to George Alexander dated February 1892.⁴ In this letter written during the rehearsals of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde complains of Alexander's intention to place Lady Windermere in her husband's library in the last act. What Wilde had directed in his book was 'Lady Windermere's boudoir', a set which he considered 'very essential from

a dramatic point of view'. He also comments on the arrangement of the sofa on which Mrs Erlynne is to be seated in the last act—an arrangement that should ensure him his desired effect.

Although Wilde's strategy in utilizing visual elements has not received much comment, the significance of visual elements in his plays has not altogether gone unobserved. For instance, Richard Allen Cave, quoting the stage proxemic and kinesic mentioned in the same letter, points out the power invested in Mrs Erlynne by virtue of these codes.⁵ Katherine Worth, on the other hand, in her examination on the visual effects of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, illustrates the symbolic overtones of stage 'spaces' and of the titular hand property.⁶ These discussions reveal the significance of visual dimension in Wilde's plays, and promise that there are bountiful rewards in store for further discussion.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore a little further into the visual dimension, and to hopefully demonstrate Wilde's dramaturgy that merits attention. Before turning to the discussion, the focus of attention of this paper and the terminology adopted will be explained briefly.

II

Elements appealing to the eyes make just as legitimate a claim to the audience's attention as do those appealing to the ears. Wilde's undoubted skill in manipulating the audience through his witty dialogue, therefore, is constantly complemented by the visual elements of the performance. However, the degree of attention paid to respective elements varies considerably between individual members of the audience, not to mention the interpretations he/she bestows on them. Added to this is the fact that each production will differ from all the other productions, and each performance of

a particular production will vary from each of the other performances to some extent. In order to cope with the elusive nature of the proposed subject and yet to offer a reasonably incisive argument, I have confined myself to the analysis of effects available through Wilde's artistic utilization of hand props, or to put it another way, the language that Wilde required his hand props to speak.

Central to this issue is the fact that hand props must first attract attention before they can make themselves heard. When the audience's perception is free to wander across the perceptual field at will, relishing whatever its eyes and ears meet, it is the responsibility of the dramatist to guide the audience's attention to the proper, or rather the desired element of the spectacle.⁷ We may say with fair certainty that, however small their part may be, actors are promised attention, even if momentary, by their sheer living presence on stage, with kinesic and discourse granted them by the dramatist increasing the degree of attention. While actors in the possession of self-generating power are thus competent to become the focus of attention autonomously, hand props without such power are incompetent in that there is no guarantee of their sheer presence attracting attention without recourse to the actors.⁸ It follows that the language of hand props calls for synchronization with kinesic or discourse before they are allowed to speak, and thus to be heard.

Of particular interest in this paper, therefore, are hand props entailing motivation that invite the audience's attention by mean of kinesic or discourse. The degree of motivation can range from the very explicit to the least explicit. On the one hand, to take a simple example, an actor on stage may be in physical contact with a hand prop, with or without eye catching kinesic, making reference to the object in his/her dialogue. On the other hand, an actor may merely make a silent nod designating an object that is beyond his/her reach. It is important, however, to bear in mind that the degree of motivation is not

necessarily in proportion to that of the attention paid. It must also be borne in mind that since each member of the audience brings to a performance his/her personal factors that condition his/her perception, the perception of the motivation itself is subject to variation.

In addition to hand props, although costumes do not come under the same heading, those that are handled and/or carried are discussed when they prove relevant to the purpose of this paper. Likewise, other props, small items in particular, are discussed when relevant.

With regard to motivation on the discourse level and the kinesic level, the dialogue and the stage directions as are given in the published editions are consulted. However, it must be mentioned that Wilde's stage directions are inconsistent. He provides elaborate descriptions of blocking, the set, and the characters, and even requests small work in some plays while leaving out, in other plays, a large amount of crosses and stage business that arises organically out of the lines of the play. Wilde seemed to have in mind a different audience—namely the readers—for some of the published editions.⁹ Whatever audience he had in mind, it may be said that the stage directions Wilde chose to be printed assumed greater significance for him than those he left out, and that they signify the visual elements he desired to be picked up and taken in. In other words, the performance text he envisaged made significant utilization of his stage directions in the dramatic text.¹⁰ While those on the printed pages are the primary concern here, those left out are also taken into account when relevant.

One final, yet foremost issue must be explained. In order to clarify the argument and at the same time to elucidate Wilde's use of hand props, I have tentatively classified the language they speak into three categories according to the messages they bear: character-directed, stage-directed, and

audience-directed. Hand props that speak character-directed language are those that speak for or about characters. The characters can be either in sight of the audience or not in sight of the audience while they are being spoken for or about. The term 'present character' are used to denote the former and 'absent character' to denote the latter.¹¹ Hand props that speak stage-directed language are those that speak about the stage, such as the environment against which the action unfolds and the atmosphere in which the action takes place. Hand props that speak audience-directed language are those that speak directly to the audience asking for its immediate response.

It is important to note that these categories are not exclusive. They overlap and merge. That is, a certain hand prop may speak more than one language at a time and/or speak a different language at a different time. In addition, each language can be charged with more than one message. It is this synchronization, simultaneity, and multiplicity that lends force to the stage production—some speaking loud and some speaking soft.

In the discussion that follows, hand props as cited in the published editions are discussed in alphabetical order with occasional grouping attempted. As for character-directed language, relevant characters are nominated, and their state—present or absent—is notified in brackets when the discussion does not make it clear. When the same hand prop claims attention after a certain lapse of time, it is discussed separately under the headings of A1–An. As space is limited, the present paper only discusses the language of hand props in *Lady Windermere's Fan*.¹² Cross-references are made when necessary.

III

Bank book:

Two bank books are produced as Lady Windermere breaks into Lord

Windermere's desk in Act I. The set for Act I that Wilde had proposed in his book was Lord Windermere's library, hence the rather inappropriate placing of Lord Windermere's private document in the morning-room.¹³

The first bank book speaks two languages: character-directed and audience-directed. As for Lady Windermere, it is used to expose her susceptibility and to reveal her fickle view of others. As for Lord Windermere (absent), it proves his innocence, though temporary. It also puts the Duchess of Berwick (absent) in line with her nieces who are 'always talking scandal' (II. 335). As to audience-directed language, this first bank book is used to hold its suspense before it belies its expectation: Lady Windermere examines the book '*page by page*'.

The second bank book also speaks two languages: character-directed and audience-directed. As for Lady Windermere, it justifies her doubt. It also projects her jealousy and her prim nature when she '*throws book on floor*', as if it were soiled. The longer it stays there, the longer it speaks. In fact, Wilde does not indicate the precise moment as to when Lord Windermere should pick it up. The stage direction only says 17 lines later, '*Puts book back into desk*,' by which time 7 speech turns have been covered. It also provides evidence of Mrs Erlynne (absent) receiving financial support from Lord Windermere (absent), which in turn reflects, as Sos Eltis explains, 'the links between property and propriety on which their society is based' (91). It is interesting to note that this second bank book affords a close parallel to Lady Windermere's fan in that what was first to signify the husband's love towards his wife later becomes 'soiled', and in that they both embody the secret of the owner. As for the Duchess of Berwick (absent), it puts her back in line with her nieces who 'never talk scandal' (I. 259-60).

As to audience-directed language, the second bank book also creates

continued suspense but in a different manner. The stage direction reads, '*Tries to open it, but fails. Sees paper knife on bureau, and with it cuts cover from book.*' It must be noted that Wilde does not use the same strategy consecutively. Instead of going page by page, Lady Windermere '*begins to start at the first page*' and immediately cries out, 'Mrs Erlynne— £ 600— Mrs Erlynne— £ 700 . . .' (I. 351-52). In addition, the bank book on the floor elevates the tension of the audience lest Lord Windermere should enter the room. (See 'fan A2' and 'paper knife'.)

Bell:

The bell rings three times: twice in Act I to summon Parker, and once in Act IV to summon Rosalie. Since all three actions take place in the morning-room, it is fair to assume that the same bell is used, though Lord Windermere rings '*electric bell*' while Lady Windermere rings '*bell*' and touches '*bell*'. All three bells speak character-directed language.

The first bell announces Lady Windermere's call for Parker and confirms the departure of the Duchess of Berwick (present) and Lady Agatha (present). The second bell announces Lord Windermere's call for Parker. The manner in which the bell is used conveys another message about Lady Windermere and Lord Windermere. While Lady Windermere rings for Parker well after the Duchess of Berwick rises and expresses her wish to leave (13 lines, 4 speech turns later), Lord Windermere rings for Parker even before he sits down to write the card that is to be handed to Parker. The stage direction reads, '*Rings electric bell, sits and writes card.*' A sharp contrast is being made here, reflecting their psychological state. Lady Windermere wishes to hear more about Mrs Erlynne; Lord Windermere wishes to hear no more about Mrs Erlynne. The specification for an electric bell may imply Wilde's

request for a sharp ringing tone in which case Lord Windermere's irritation as well as his resolution should be emphasised.

The third bell announces Lady Windermere's wish to summon Rosalie. However, since the audience has already seen Parker summoned twice by the same bell, Rosalie's entrance should belie its expectation, and hence attract attention. In this sense, the third bell assumes audience-directed language as well. This effect, however, is a by-product. Had Act IV taken place in Lady Windermere's boudoir as Wilde had originally planned, the set would have led the audience to expect a maid, not a butler.

Although not indicated in the text, it seems necessary to have Lady Windermere ring the bell once more at the end of Act I just before she leaves the room. Parker's entrance without being summoned seems rather awkward when there is no guest to be announced and when he is not unaware of the tension between his lord and his lady. In addition, the orders that are given him by Lady Windermere indicate that he is being expected. As the stage direction for his entrance is placed immediately after the stage direction asking Lady Windermere to move right, it is fairly reasonable to suppose that she moves right and rings the bell.

Bouquet:

The bouquet Mrs Erlynne brings with her on her long-awaited entry in Act II speaks two languages: character-directed and audience-directed.¹⁴ It claims Mrs Erlynne's domination of Lord Augustus when he is made to carry the bouquet as she '*goes towards ballroom on Lord Windermere's arm*'. Lord Augustus following her '*holding bouquet*' confirms what the Duchess of Berwick (absent) had said earlier: 'Augustus is completely infatuated about her' (I. 218-19). This stage picture also illustrates what Mrs Erlynne is to say

later: 'There is a great deal of good in Lord Augustus' (II. 415). Here, the bouquet speaks simultaneously about Mrs Erlynne, the dominator, and Lord Augustus, the dominated. As such, when a hand prop embodies the relationship between two characters, it naturally speaks for both parties. Such hand props are all the more important, for they will always speak for or about absent characters. However, it must be mentioned that the consensus between the two parties as to the understanding of their relationship is another matter.

In addition to this message, when Mrs Erlynne makes her first appearance, the bouquet she carries may lead some of those in the audience to associate an evil image with this equivocal guest. As Bram Dijkstra explains, 'The link between woman and the flowers had, under the pervasive influence of Baudelaire, clearly taken on an ominous quality in the minds of fin-de-siècle males.'¹⁵

As to audience-directed language, the bouquet enables the audience to identify Lord Augustus immediately when he enters '*carrying bouquet*' at the end of Act II. (See 'fan A1'.)

Brandy and whisky:

Both brandy and whisky speak two languages: character-directed and audience-directed. As compared to brandy and soda, whisky and soda indicates modernity, for 'the more accepted drinks had been brandy and soda until the mid-1880s' (III. 209n). So brandy and soda is for Lord Augustus, and whisky and soda for Cecil Graham.

As for Lord Augustus, another message about his character is conveyed here. When he goes for the drink out of anger and anguish, the stage direction and the dialogue contradict—a striking device for calling attention. The stage

direction reads, *'Pouring himself out a brandy and soda at table,'* while his dialogue reads, 'Promised Mrs Erlynne never to play or drink again' (III. 288-89). His action invites laughter, but a sympathetic one, for the contradiction highlights why he could not keep the promise.

Also for Cecil Graham, another message may be read here. His drink is offered by Lord Darlington: 'Have something to drink, you fellows. Cecil, you'll have a whisky and soda?' (III. 208-9) Patricia Flanagan Behrendt points out that this dialogue indicates their greater familiarity with one another, for Lord Darlington distinguishes Cecil from the other 'fellows' (142).

These drinks have a message to announce to the audience. They induce its excitement by making Cecil Graham, Lord Darlington, and Lord Augustus come from wherever they are to the table on which the decanters and the glasses are placed. (See 'fan A5'.)

Buttonhole:

Buttonhole speaks audience-directed language. It enables the audience to differentiate, what Katherine Worth aptly calls, 'the tailcoats and stiff shirts' (92). No specific motivation is cited in the text, apart from Cecil Graham's allusion to buttonholes in general (III. 320-21). But the difference in their buttonholes as well as no buttonholes should be marked as early as Act II. The differentiation then should in time serve to identify the characters.¹⁶

Card:

Four cards are cited. The first card is not actually produced on stage; nonetheless, it has an important message to deliver in character-directed language. It is an invitation card sent to Mr Hopper (absent) at the request of the Duchess of Berwick (present). It indicates her desperate effort to marry

off Lady Agatha to Mr Hopper. It also provides an opportunity for the Duchess to introduce Mr Hopper.

A question arises here as to whether Lady Windermere whose invitation has become a criterion for respectability should invite a man to her 'very small, very early, and very select' (I. 161) dance without knowing who he is. On the other hand, it is also difficult to believe that the Duchess should request an invitation card for Mr Hopper without telling her who he is. However, what may seem tactless in the dramatic text can be interpreted otherwise in the performance text. For example, it may be that Lady Windermere wearing an expression of great worries does not even notice that the Duchess is repeating what she had said before. In fact, Wilde's stage directions support such reading. When Lord Darlington takes his leave, Lady Windermere sees him off '*standing up stage*' with him, whereas for the Duchess and Lady Agatha, she stays fixed downstage even when the Duchess bids her goodbye upstage. '*Coming down again*', the Duchess delivers the lines concerning Mr Hopper and goes up again as '*Parker opens C. doors*'. All this while no stage direction is assigned for Lady Windermere.

The second card is an invitation card sent to Mrs Erlynne at her own request. It speaks character-directed language at A1, and character-directed and audience-directed languages at A2.

A1: The card is utilised so as to highlight three characters. It signifies Lady Windermere's adamant refusal to invite Mrs Erlynne, which serves to add on to her image as an unmistakable moralist an image of an unflinching moralist. It must be noted that her concern is more on Mrs Erlynne's coming to her party than on her husband's having a love affair. It also signifies the power Mrs Erlynne has over Lord Windermere, which in turn serves to affirm Mrs Erlynne's wish to re-enter the Society and have 'a happier, a surer life

than she has had' (I. 431).

A2: Lord Windermere' answer, 'Mrs Erlynne has received a card' (II. 94) to Lord Augustus' inquiry, 'Your wife has sent her a card?' (II. 93) gets a laugh, but Lord Augustus' subsequent response, 'Then she's all right' (II. 95) reflects his innocence. The repeated reference to this card serves to keep the expectation of the audience alive. (See 'fan A4'.)

The third card, which is of a different sort, speaks character-directed language. It is a young lady's card on which her dancing partners' names are to be written. The Duchess of Berwick scrutinizes the names and scratches out two saying, 'No nice girls should ever waltz with such particularly younger sons!' (II. 6-8) Thus it is used to demonstrate her materialism. It also represents 'the slightly "old-fashioned" morality of Lady Windermere's house' (II. 4-5n). In addition it helps to push Lady Agatha towards a caricature. She mechanically answers her mother's questions about the dances left without even taking a glance at the card.

The fourth card is Mrs Erlynne's visiting card which speaks character-directed language. Parker brings it on a tray: 'Mrs Erlynne has called to return your ladyship's fan which she took by mistake last night. Mrs Erlynne has written a message on the card' (IV. 90-92). It serves to project Mrs Erlynne as a respectable woman making a call with duly manners. It is important to keep up the good impression she has made on the audience by accommodating herself to moral conventions of a fallen woman. This impression is important, for it is to be balanced against the unconventional pronouncements she makes when she comes on stage. (See 'fan A7'.)

Cards:

The main language of the packet of cards mentioned in Act III is

audience-directed. It lures Cecil Graham from wherever he is to where it is placed (up centre), which excites the audience. (See 'fan A5'.)

Cigar and cigarette:

Cigar and cigarette speak character-directed language. The manner of smoking is an actor's stock-in-trade whereby he/she expresses his/her psychological state. For example, the puffing of a cigar alone can communicate Lord Augustus' anger in Act III. In addition, cigarettes being more expensive and more recent a custom compared to cigars, the smoking of a cigarette projects an image of a man accommodating himself to luxury and modernity. The contrast is clearly illustrated: cigars for Lord Augustus and Lord Windermere, and cigarettes for Cecil Graham and Lord Darlington.¹⁷ (See 'brandy and whisky'.)

Cloak and coat:

The main language of these garments is character-directed. By putting them on, the characters express their intention to leave, and by taking them off, their intention to stay, as do Lady Windermere in Acts II and III, and Lord Windermere in Act III.¹⁸ (See 'first letter A1' and 'fan A5'.) The manner in which the garments are handled elaborates the message, such as a hasty leave and a reluctant stay. They can also be used to register other aspects of the characters. When Lady Windermere '*throws off her cloak and flings it on the sofa*', it demonstrates her temperament as well as her fickle decision to stay. On the other hand, if a character remains covered when the set requires the garment to be taken off, it claims his/her intention not to stay long, as should be the case with Mrs Erlynne in Act III. Lady Windermere's cloak conveys another message about herself when she asks for it before going out on the

terrace where the air is cooler: 'Parker, send my cloak out' (II. 163). Here, it hints at her cowardice as well as her fragility. (See 'fan A4'.) Since it speaks, though softly, about the stage, it assumes a stage-directed language as well.

Lady Windermere's cloak is assigned with a very important message in Act III. This message which is simultaneously stage-directed and audience-directed is crucial to the dramatic situation of this act.¹⁹ It serves to point out to the audience that Lady Windermere's fan is going to be left behind in Lord Darlington's room. If found out, it 'would be construed as evidence of an adulterous relationship' (III. 374n).

When Lady Windermere pleads Mrs Erlynne to take her home, Wilde makes Mrs Erlynne question the whereabouts of her cloak: 'Where is your cloak? (*Getting it from sofa*) Here. Put it on' (III. 179). This otherwise superfluous question draws the attention of the audience to the sofa where the fan is placed. The unnecessary 'from sofa' suggests the importance of guiding the audience's attention to this piece of furniture. This, in fact, is the second notice given to the audience, the first one being when Lady Windermere '*throws off her cloak and flings it on the sofa*'. Without the awareness of the fan being left on the sofa, the audience would not be able to fully relish the excitement aroused while Lady Windermere is hiding behind the curtain. (See 'fan A5'.)

The problem of sight lines is involved here. The stage direction reads, '*A large sofa is in front of the fireplace R. At the back of the stage a curtain is drawn across the window. Doors L. and R. Table R. with writing materials.*' To be more precise, the left door through which Lady Windermere retreats unobserved should be placed upstage close to the curtain, and the right door through which Mrs Erlynne steps forward to enable the retreat should be placed downstage. It follows that the fireplace is at center stage right and the

table at upstage right. Now if the sofa is placed not in parallel with the fireplace but angled, a majority of the audience, including those seated in the end seats of the front row and the box seats near the stage, should have no problem in having visual access to the fan, even if part of it, once they know where to direct their attention.

Fan:

Although only two fans are mentioned in the text, it is reasonable to suppose that the ladies, some if not all, at Lady Windermere's ball should have fans with them.²⁰ The two fans are Lady Windermere's and the Duchess of Berwick's. The latter fan that speaks less will be discussed first.

The Duchess of Berwick's fan speaks two languages: character-directed and stage-directed. As to stage-directed language, it indicates the stuffiness of the ballroom. However, that is not why the Duchess is '*fanning herself*' as she says, 'The air is so pleasant there' (II. 11). As mentioned above, while other ladies are likely to have fans with them, it is only the Duchess that is asked to use it. To put it another way, she is the only one to find the ballroom stuffy. The Duchess uses the stuffiness of the ballroom as an excuse to send Lady Agatha onto the terrace with Mr Hopper where the marriage bargain is more likely to succeed—another indication of her desperate effort.

Lady Windermere's fan speaks all three languages. The titular fan belongs to what Martin Esslin categorizes as 'Framing systems outside the drama proper' (103). Being incorporated in the title, this fan exerts a powerful motivation on the audience to decode its meaning. Besides, it is ostentatious in itself: 'It sported sixteen white ostrich feathers fixed to a handle of yellow tortoiseshell, upon which "Margaret" . . . was traced in diamonds' (Kaplan and Stowell 19).

A1: The fan is placed on a table as the curtain rises. Lord Darlington draws the attention of the audience to this fan soon after he makes his entrance: 'And what a wonderful fan! May I look at it?' (I. 13-14) Then follows the introduction: 'It's got my name on it, and everything. I have only just seen it myself. It's my husband's birthday present to me. . . . I'm coming of age today. . . . That is why I am giving this party tonight' (I. 15-20).²¹ Thus, the fan is introduced as a love token. It embodies the relationship between Lord Windermere (absent) and Lady Windermere. (See 'bouquet'.)

The messages that the fan should bear are given at this early stage and in a compact manner. Then, the fan is allowed to speak no more. After this, the fan is completely ignored for well over 300 lines, during which time many other matters clamour for attention, and the fan may well drift far away from the focus of attention. The silence lends force to the message it bears when it once again becomes the central focus of attention.

A2: Lord Windermere walks nonchalantly into a scene whose tension is elevated by the bank book lying on the floor, and inquires after what he assumes is still the love token: 'Well, dear, has the fan been sent home yet?' (I. 354) His inquiry is immediately nullified as he sees the bank book on the floor. The fan still embodies the relationship between Lord and Lady Windermere, but there is no consensus as to their understanding of the relationship. The fan highlights the chasm between them. Then again, the fan is ignored for over 100 lines.

A3: When the silence is broken, its message is completely altered. What was to celebrate her coming of age is to celebrate her 'good' conduct, what was the token of love becomes the token of her 'hard and fast rules', and what was his birthday present becomes her weapon: 'There is not a *good* woman in London who would not applaud me. We have been too lax. We must make an

example. I propose to begin tonight. (*Picking up fan*) Yes, you gave me this fan today; it was your birthday present. If that woman crosses my threshold, I shall strike her across the face with it' (II. 477-82).²² Thus, the fan is charged with audience-directed message.

A4: Once the silence is broken, its voice is loud. No motivation is necessary to draw the attention of the audience to the fan. The audience is led to believe that Lady Windermere 'who goes in for being so proper' (II. 225) would keep her word. Its expectancy is amplified by the delayed entrance of Mrs Erlynne. However, too long a wait makes the attention flag. Wilde tactfully avoids this to happen by charging the fan with a different message. As if to say that there may be a truce, which in fact is what Lady Windermere wants, she hands the weapon to a third party when Lord Windermere claims to speak to her: 'Will you hold my fan for me, Lord Darlington? Thanks (II. 125). The disappointment lends force to the continued suspense as well as to the unforgiving moralist: 'Lord Darlington, will you give me back my fan, please? Thanks. . . . A useful thing a fan, isn't it?' (II. 136-37)²³ The path is thus well paved for Mrs Erlynne to make her long-awaited entry.

Greater disappointment, however, awaits the audience. Not only could Lady Windermere not dare 'strike her across the face with it', she drops her weapon on the floor. The stage direction reads, 'Lady Windermere *clutches at her fan, and lets it drop on the floor.*'²⁴ Because the expectation to have the 'fascinating puritan' keep her word was great, when her virtuous stand betrays itself, it breeds disappointment in her character. Henceforth the fan becomes the token of lack of courage. This is supported by her own self-judgement whereby she calls herself a coward. Gagnier Reginia reads another message here: 'Dropping her husband's gift augurs the weak Lady Windermere's easy surrender of her husband' (119).

A5: The presence of the fan in Lord Darlington's room bears multiple messages. First, it keeps the attention of the audience on the alert lest it should miss the critical moment. The tension is enhanced by the rhythm of expectation and disappointment created by the crosses, especially those of Cecil Graham's. The stage directions for his crosses before he spots the fan are as follows: '*Goes to table with Lord Darlington*', '*Cecil Graham comes towards him laughing*', '*Cecil Graham goes back to C. table*', '*Rising and going to him*', '*Strolls away*', '*Coming towards him L. C.*', '*Goes up C.*', '*Sitting on the back of the sofa*', '*Moves up to front of fireplace*', '*Standing with his back to the fireplace*'. The tension builds as he goes nearer the fan every time he makes his move. Secondly, it reminds the audience of absent characters—Lady Windermere and Mrs Erlynne—whose presence may drift away as the audience amuses itself with the dandies' witty talk. Thirdly, it gives an ironical touch to what they say about good and bad women. These messages interact and take on other messages.

The disclosure of the fan is also presented with calculated tact. As a matter of fact it is Cecil Graham that spots the fan first. The stage direction reads, '*Sees Lady Windermere's fan on the sofa.*' However, he is not going to let it out so easily. He first pokes fun at Lord Darling, and then invites Lord Augustus to share the fun. It takes the reluctant Lord Augustus 18 lines to join him, by which time 9 speech turns have been covered. Cecil Graham '*points to the fan*' and '*in a low voice*' lets him share the secret. Next, Cecil Graham nominates Lord Windermere who is about to leave. His call, '*Arthur*', should ring sharply in the audience's ears, and his coat should attract its eyes. It takes another 13 speech turns (20 lines) for Lord Windermere who is eager to leave to decide to share the fun. It is all very slow up to this point. Then, the tempo changes. After '*a pause*', Lord Windermere '*seizes the fan*'

and 'Dumby rises'. It only takes 11 speech turns (16 lines), 5 of which are Lord Windermere's, before he '*rushes towards the curtain C.*', during which time he reveals himself to be as unforgiving a moralist as Lady Windermere. The tempo slows down again as Mrs Erlynne steps forward to make herself seem the guilty one. She, unlike Lady Windermere, has kept her word: 'Oh! to save you from the abyss into which you are falling, there is nothing in the world I would not dare, nothing in the world' (III. 83-85). She then quietly '*takes fan from him*', and walks off with what is now the token of courage.

A6: Lady Windermere's inquiry about the fan in Act IV, as was Lord Windermere's inquiry in Act I, highlights the chasm between them. It also reveals her narrow-mindedness and her weakness.

A7: Then the fan makes its grand entry on a tray. Although it speaks very eloquently on its own about the mother sacrificing herself for her daughter, Wilde take pains to confirm its message, and that twice, on the verbal level, once by Parker and again by Mrs Erlynne. Thus, the fan speaks loudly for Mrs Erlynne and serves to create a positive impression of her—positive enough to set her off against the unnecessary censure of the audience. Then silence follows. (See 'fourth card'.)

A8: When the silence is broken, the fan is 'soiled': 'I can't bear the sight of it now. I shall never let my wife use it again. The thing is soiled for me' (IV. 205-7). Mrs Erlynne responds, 'I think I *shall* keep it. It's extremely pretty. (*Takes up fan*) I shall ask Margaret to give it to me' (IV. 208-9). Thus, the fan changes hand. However, it does not rest here. The fan changes hand dramatically at the end of the play and is placed in the hands of Lord Augustus who 'would carry off anything gracefully' (IV. 382). Thus, the most talkative hand prop that did its service to reveal what is 'beneath the surface' of Lady Windermere and Lord Windermere ends with perhaps the only two good ones

in the play. (See 'bouquet' and 'cloak and coat'.)

Hand-mirror:

The hand-mirror speaks character-directed language. Bram Dijkstra explains, 'A woman's glance in the mirror became representative of her perverse unwillingness to recognize that it was her natural, predestined duty to yield her ego to man's will' (135). Thus, when Mrs Erlynne uses this hand prop, it may well bear a symbolic message. The stage direction reads, '*Takes up hand-mirror from table and looks into it*' (IV. 242). It is aptly placed where this stage picture should magnify the image of Mrs Erlynne as 'a character as yet untouched by literature' (*Letters* 309): after her rejection of motherhood, and before her refusal to repent. It is followed by Lord Windermere's line: 'You fill me with horror—with absolute horror' (IV. 244). The hand-mirror, though small, speaks well.

Letter:

Some letters are produced on stage. The first letter is from Lady Windermere to Lord Windermere, but it never reaches its destination. It speaks character-directed language and audience-directed language.

A1: The letter signifies Lady Windermere's weakness. As is clear from her soliloquy in Lord Darlington's room, she is waiting for Lord Windermere to come and fetch her: 'Arthur must have read my letter by this time. If he cared for me, he would have come for me, would have taken me back by force' (III. 4-6). Her hesitation and her weakness are implied in the stage direction for this first letter. It reads, '*Puts on cloak and goes to the door, then turns back. Sits down at table and writes a letter, puts it into an envelope, and leaves it on table.*' In addition, she ensures that Lord Windermere will read

the letter before long by informing Parker about the letter before she leaves: 'Her ladyship told me she had left a letter for his lordship on the table' (II. 456-57).

However, it is very important to note that Wilde deliberately encourages the audience to misinterpret the significance of the letter as well as Lady Windermere's conduct. He makes Lady Windermere declare that she will go to Lord Darlington and then write the letter, which makes it look like a farewell letter. He also makes her speech after writing the letter equivocal. The audience is thus led to believe that after all she had the courage to leave her immoral husband. She restores her former self in the eyes of the audience. As for Mrs Erlynne, the letter serves to reveal her identity.²⁵

A2: As Lady Windermere waits for Lord Windermere in Lord Darlington's room, the misinterpretation is sustained by the use of the pronoun 'he' in her soliloquy. Then with the name of 'Arthur', misinterpretation gives way to disappointment, which lends force to her weakness. The audience is now led to believe Mrs Erlynne's words: 'You haven't got the kind of brains that enables a woman to get back. You have neither the wit nor the courage. You couldn't stand dishonour' (III. 160-63). Instead, all these qualities are attributed to Mrs Erlynne. The misinterpretation of the letter, therefore, speaks for Mrs Erlynne.

Other letters speak for Lord Darlington. In his case, the importance is in the fact that he is writing a letter, not in the letter itself. Soon after his entrance in Act III with the other dandies, Lord Darlington excuses himself saying he has a few letters to write and goes down stage where the writing table is placed, and he stays there for quite a long while. This letter writing spares him from joining the dandies' conversation. Thus, it enables Wilde to get away as much as possible with the awkward combination of a lover and a

dandy.

Paper knife:

Although the paper knife is small in size, its message should not be missed as Lady Windermere cuts open her husband's private bank book in Act I. The language it speaks is character-directed. When Lady Windermere ventures to use this hand prop, the audience is led to question the moral standard of Lady Windermere who has made so many pronouncements about what is right and what is wrong. This is double-checked later with a comment from Lord Windermere: 'Margaret, you have cut open my bank book. You have no right to do such a thing!' (I. 355-56) It also symbolises the exposure of Lord Windermere's (absent) secret. (See 'bank book'.)

Photograph:

Two photographs are produced in Act IV. They speak character-directed language. First Mrs Erlynne asks Lady Windermere for her photograph, and then she asks for one with her and her baby. The photographs are both used to demonstrate the maternal feelings in Mrs Erlynne. This is to be balanced against her rejection of maternal feelings which she announces later. The photographs are also used as an excuse to allow a private conversation between Mrs Erlynne and Lord Windermere.

Photograph album:

The language of photograph album is character-directed. As for the Duchess of Berwick, it is used to express her wish to keep Lady Agatha from hearing adult conversation. She also makes good use of it to advertise her daughter: 'Dear girl! She is so fond of photographs of Switzerland. Such a

pure taste, I think' (I. 211-12). This is another indication of her desperate effort to marry off Lady Agatha. As for Lady Agatha, it serves to make her a well-sheltered daughter and a dutiful daughter. However, if a daughter who can only say 'Yes, mamma' is a 'chatterbox', a daughter 'so fond of photographs' may well flip through the pages and quickly close the album. (See 'first card', 'third card', and 'first fan'.)

Pocket-handkerchief:

The language of Lady Windermere's pocket-handkerchief is character-directed. She wipes her hands in order to serve tea for Lord Darlington in Act I. It goes without saying that it indicates that her hands were wet. More important a message is that she did not wish to use it before. The stage direction makes it clear that she had it with her when Lord Darlington made his greetings: '*Wipes her hands with her pocket-handkerchief, goes to tea-table L., and sits down.*' The excuse she made then was not a simple excuse but one that would allow her to abide by her rigid codes of respectable manners without offending him. (See 'roses'.)

Roses:

A1: The language of roses in Act I is character-directed. It speaks for Lady Windermere and for Lord Darlington. As the curtain rises, she is '*arranging roses in a blue bowl*'. When Lord Darlington and Lady Windermere exchange greetings, Lady Windermere uses the roses as an excuse for not being able to shake hands with him: 'My hands are all wet with these roses' (I. 11). Thus, the roses spare her from accepting the 'undue forwardness on Lord Darlington's part' (I. 10n). Since Act I is geared towards creating an image of Lady Windermere as being an unmistakable moralist representing the

highest standards of life, anything that should obscure this image would destroy the whole design, and that to happen at the very beginning would be lethal. In this sense, the roses are assigned a very important role. They make it possible to present Lord Darlington's undue forwardness from the very outset without inviting unnecessary response from the audience. Lady Windermere keeps on '*arranging flowers*' until there is a good reason to wipe her hands.

A2: The roses are used again to spare her from any conversation that would interfere with her character: 'Don't stir, I am merely going to finish my flowers' (I. 116). (See 'pocket-handkerchief'.)

A3: The roses may take on a symbolic message in Act IV. Towards the very end of the play Lady Windermere motivates the attention of the audience to the roses she was arranging in Act I: 'In the Rose Garden at Selby the roses are white and red' (IV. 400-1). This seemingly insignificant line may hint at the static nature of her perception. As roses are either white or red, so are the people either good or bad. That she still labels people is clearly expressed in the final line: 'Ah, you're marrying a very good woman!' (IV. 420) If the roses she was arranging in Act I is placed somewhere obvious, the fact that her simple moral dichotomy has not changed would be made even clearer.²⁶

Tray and tea things:

The language of tray and tea things in Act I is character-directed at both A1 and A2.

A1: It is only when Parker and footman enter with tray and tea things that Lady Windermere stops arranging the flowers and wipes her hands. They provide her the opportunity to move away from Lord Darlington and change the topic, thus enabling her to keep up the image of 'being proper'.

A2: The tea that the Duchess of Berwick declines offers her the first opportunity to demonstrate her fascinating character.

There is another tray produced on stage, not with tea things but with the titular fan. (See 'fan A7'.)

Notes

- 1 Recent noted revivals include Philip Prowse's production of *A Woman of No Importance* (1991), Peter Hall's production of *An Ideal Husband* (1992) which is, in fact, still running in the West End, and Nicholas Hytner's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1993).
- 2 'All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.' Preface to 'The Picture of Dorian Gray,' *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989) 9.
- 3 Critics such as Katherine Worth and Kerry Powell have initiated a new reading of Wilde's plays.
- 4 *More Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Vanguard, 1985) 109-11. See also the letter addressed to Grace Hawthorne in which Wilde claims that his plays require artistic setting and beautiful dresses, and that it is not worth producing his plays if suitable presentation cannot be afforded. *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962) 134.
- 5 'Power Structuring: The Presentation of Outsider Figures in Wilde's Plays,' *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde*, ed. C. George Sandulescu (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1994) 37-51.
- 6 *Oscar Wilde* (London: Macmillan, 1983) 91-94.
- 7 The responsibility, in fact, lies not only with the dramatist but also with the director, the designer, the actors and all the other members of the production team. In order not to obscure the outline of my argument, I have pointed out only what is immediately relevant to the purpose of this paper.
- 8 It must be mentioned that, although there is no such case with Wilde, hand props may mechanically be granted self-generating power, for example, a flying dagger.
- 9 Russell Jackson, introduction, *An Ideal Husband*, by Oscar Wilde in Ian Small and Russell Jackson ed., *Two Society Comedies* (London: Benn, 1983) 129. See also

Russell Jackson, introduction, *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, by Oscar Wilde (1980; London: A & C Black, 1996) xlii.

- 10 I follow Keir Elam's definition here. The dramatic text is the textual material 'composed for the theatre', and the performance text is 'that produced in the theatre'. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980) 3.
- 11 The terminology has been adopted to avoid unnecessary confusion that may arise by using onstage and offstage.
- 12 All references are to Ian Small ed., *Lady Windermere's Fan* (London: Benn, 1980).
- 13 The morning-room was perhaps a compromise between Alexander's intention to use the same set for Act I and IV, and Wilde's refusal to have it so. See *More Letters of Oscar Wilde* 109-10.
- 14 The stage direction for her entrance in Act II leaves out the bouquet, but that she enters with it is obvious.
- 15 *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988) 233.
- 16 Character-directed language has not been discussed because the text does not specify who wears a buttonhole and who does not, not to mention its description. A photograph of a scene from Act III in Katherine Worth, *Oscar Wilde* (5a) shows three men wearing buttonholes.
- 17 Although the text does not require a cigarette for Lord Darlington, there is no reason to suppose otherwise. In fact, it would be very amusing if Lord Darlington previously seen to smoke a cigarette should be made to smoke a cigar later, which would coincide with his line, 'Love changes one—I am changed' (III. 360-61).
- 18 The text does not give any information about the whereabouts of Lord Windermere's coat, but that he has it with him as he enters Lord Darlington's room is obvious, for the text does indicate where he puts it on. If Lord Windermere is the only one to have his coat with him, it should speak eloquently about his reluctant stay which is announced as he comes in: 'I'm afraid I can't stay long' (III. 197-98).
- 19 The cloak in this case cannot be categorized as exclusively speaking stage-directed language, for the message it conveys is not meant to be shared

with the characters of the fictional world.

- 20 'The stuffiness of ballroom and consequent inconvenience for guests were a topic that exercised many writers of etiquette manuals' (II. 4-5n). In addition, fans were very fashionable in the Victorian period. See Hélène Alexander, *Fans* (Risborough: Shire Publications, 1989) 19-28.
- 21 Although Lady Windermere's reply suggests that Lord Darlington picks the fan up and opens it, there is no suggestion in the lines as to where he puts it down. However, since the fan is introduced as a love token, it should not stay too long in the hands of Lord Darlington who is in love with Lady Windermere and has doubts about Lord Windermere's love.
- 22 In some of the early drafts, Lady Windermere orders Parker to hand her the fan after her announcement to insult Mrs Erlynne (II. 486n). The printed edition, by comparison, lends more power to the fan as a weapon.
- 23 The early drafts have different lines for Lady Windermere. The difference is closely related to the revelation of Mrs Erlynne's identity. The revelation before her entrance and after her entrance makes significant difference to the audience's expectation. The former will yield a negative expectation of not wanting Lady Windermere to keep her word, and the latter a positive one of wanting her to keep it. What Wilde wanted was the latter. See Poco Indo, 'Lady Windermere's Fan: The Revelation of Mrs. Erlynne's Identity,' *Infinity* 20 (1995): 17.
- 24 The entry of Mrs Erlynne underwent heavy revisions but the fact that Lady Windermere drops the fan and that Lord Darlington picks it up for her stays the same.
- 25 See Ian Small, introduction, for early drafts.
- 26 Since Act I and Act IV take place in the same morning-room, the roses should be on stage. However, we do not know whether Wilde intended to have the roses in Lady Windermere's boudoir.

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