

DRAMA *Works*

Plays Through Practice

LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN

by

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EXTRACT

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Extract

WORKING THROUGH THE PLAY IN A PRACTICAL WAY

From the beginning the exercises assume a knowledge of the story-line and what happens to the characters. It is important, therefore, that before you start the following work you will have read the play. At the very least, you should have read the plot outline and character sketches that precede this section.

I try never to be dictatorial in the practical work. There is no version that is more right or more wrong than another. What the following work hopes to encourage is the habit of experiment. Too often, when you read a line it is the first meaning that becomes fixed in the mind. Often this could be just the most obvious and other subtler interpretations might add richness to the character.

It is important that you also get in the habit of recording the results of all the work you do. When experimenting with a character this is especially important. At the end you will need to go through all your work on each character once more, checking that your decisions make sense. People can be contradictory in real life, of course, but not to the point of absurdity!

ACT ONE

OPENING - ENTRANCE OF DUCHESS OF BERWICK

The opening stage directions would mean more to Wilde's audience than to us. Carlton House Terrace was a very posh address, favoured by diplomats and statesmen. So a message as to the Windermere's status is immediately given.

A morning-room is a kind of secondary drawing-room, usually catching the morning sun. Wilde indicates the minimum of furniture needed, which allows for seating but also gives plenty of space for movement. There are give-away details, such as Wilde's insistence on a 'blue bowl'. As a leading light of the Aesthetic Movement - a group of people dedicated to beauty and art - details matter. Wilde would have wanted each item of furniture to be pleasing, and the bowl beautiful.

Before beginning work on the text, it is important to plan out the set within which your practical work will take place.

First of all, in groups, map out a setting on a proscenium arch stage [the picture frame stage which is what Wilde would have been using]. Follow his directions, for ease, and because there's no reason not to.

Research on the internet for furniture of the late nineteenth century to see what kind of bureaux [desks], tables and sofas were fashionable. As relative newly-weds, this couple would have bought their furnishings recently and, no doubt, following fashion. Then look to see what kind of fabrics and colours were used. Were walls panelled in wood, or covered in wall-paper? What were favourite wall-paper designs? What fabric might curtains be made of? Would they be in plain colours or patterned?

Art of this period is very helpful. The Victorians painted many pictures of the home which show clearly the kind of interiors and colour schemes favoured. They also show, of course, the colours and styles of costumes. Make sure that you are looking at the period of the 1880s to early 90s [the play was first performed in 1892].

Make a selection from your research and carpet or suggest a large rug for the floor, fabric on the sofa and colour and style of curtains. The wood of the furniture would be highly polished. Lightish wood, or dark? The former suggests youth, a marriage in its

early stages. I think a round table for the one R, on which Lady Windermere is arranging her roses. Note that the fan, the main symbol throughout the play, is also on the table.

You cannot, of course, build a set, but you can indicate where all the furniture is and use this every time you work practically on the play. It is important for planning moves, exits and entrances, and so on. So, with chairs if you have nothing else in your working space, indicate where entrances and exits are, and where all the furnishings are placed. Two chairs together could be the sofa. Chairs also can stand for the tables. Make sure that everyone knows exactly what represents what, and build this 'set' before starting work at the beginning of each lesson.

Parker is the butler. This person is the Head Servant in a Victorian establishment. All the servants answer to him and he, along with his female counterpart, the housekeeper, will run the whole household. The butler's voice will be as upperclass as his master's, perhaps painstakingly even more so since it is probably not natural to him but learned.

His question is careful, delicately and tactfully put. It is clear to a Victorian audience that there may be some problem about the caller. A butler, whose mistress is clearly 'at home' would not check unless there was a problem.

So Lady Windermere's reply is cautious, immediately aware, and her response to the name Lord Darlington tells the audience, and Parker, that there is something about this man [her hesitation] and that she will not be in private with him, since any other callers will be shown up.

The rules about 'calling' are to us extraordinary. They are quite specific. The hours for calling were between 3.0 and 6.0 in the afternoon. New acquaintances would call between 3.0 and 4.0; the more intimate a friend you were, the later you could call - up to 6.0.

The rules of Society in general were very rigid. They would be set and administered by the women. They covered everything from dress to everyday behaviour. To give you an example, dress code for a widow was very specific: black for the first year, a little alleviation allowed for the second, such as white lace at collars and cuffs, grey or mauve dresses for following years. Some people, following Queen Victoria's example after the death of her beloved Prince Albert, retained their black until they died - as she did.

It was women who judged who was respectable and who wasn't. They ruled who would be acceptable in Society, and anyone who was anyone at this time wanted to be invited in. It is important to understand the rigidity of this before embarking on the play.

The brief opening with the butler whets the appetite of the audience. They know something is up between Lady Windermere and Lord Darlington but not what. So there is a lively anticipation of this character's entrance.

Because a modern audience will not have this knowledge of social niceties, see if you can put enough nuances into the opening duologue between mistress of the house and butler for a modern audience to be at the same level of anticipation. Much will be said by the way Parker speaks Lord Darlington's name - with a slight colouring of disapproval or the utmost delicacy, almost tiptoeing around the syllables - and Lady Windermere's hesitation. **Try it out.**

Once Parker has left, Lady Windermere has one line in which to whet our appetite further. **Knowing what you do of the story-line, try this line:**

with decision, a lift of her chin - she will sort him out for once and for all rather uncertainly - she's not quite sure how to cope with him despite wanting to make things clear to him, she is a little attracted to him, and flattered, but is trying hard to suppress all this and do the right thing - so there's a little sparkle of excitement in her demeanour

Which works best and sums up what you think of her at this point?

There are various ways of playing Lady Windermere from the start:

as a very young and inexperienced woman who tries to cover her basic uncertainty with a veneer of received ideas

as someone who has made up her mind about life in general, strongly opinionated

Within these two options, there are a variety of manners in which she can be tackled:

with enthusiasm, a certain fieriness

innocently naive, a certain sweetness and lightness about her which desolemnise the strict opinions she often shows

quietly sincere and thoughtful, a controlled manner

Having read the scene through, experimenting with the above suggestions, which do you think fits best with your idea of her at this point?

How does Lord Darlington enter? He says later in the scene that he is quite miserable. He knows he has done something to upset her. But he is also a practised dandy, used to playing Society's games. Probably he is used to winning round women too. So he could be feeling genuinely a bit unsure about his reception, or he could be confident he can win her round. He could be rather mocking [inwardly] of Lady Windermere's strait-lacedness and be putting on an exaggerated humility. Your opinion will colour the way he comes in.

Even if you decide to play him uncertainly, the offer of his hand to shake is forward. 'A man has no right to take a lady's hand until it is offered' says a book of etiquette of the time. It suggests also that he has crossed the room and come quite close to her straightaway.

Try Lady Windermere's speech as a gentle reproof therefore. Or it could be that she decides to ignore his forward manners, covering it with a show of enthusiasm for the flowers which covers what? Embarrassment - she is flustered by the attraction she feels, or flustered by being courted and admired in such a fashion? Maybe she is quite innocent, disarmed by his open manner and prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt? Discuss and try out the little interchange according to your decisions.

Selby, which is mentioned a few times in the play, is presumably the name of their country estate. A place in the country as well as in the town would be quite usual for people of this class.

Try Lord Darlington's 'They are quite perfect...' speech:

genuinely enthusiastic for the flowers, caught up in enthusiasm for anything she is enthusiastic about - and as an aesthete, the perfection of the flowers would be something which he really admires

using the smelling of them as an excuse to manoeuvre himself close to her - a moment perhaps where their faces nearly touch and she, realising, withdraws

not looking at the flowers at all but meaning her when he talks about perfection - this might occasion a look of reproof from her, and again a move away

Experiment with these options. Carry your decision through into the rest of the speech. Is the admiration of the fan a cover? Genuine - it's a beautiful object of art?

The significance of the fan is quite naturally introduced here and would alert an audience because of the play's title.

Lady Windermere's speeches about the fan and about her birthday appear quite genuinely pleased, even excited as a young girl may be at the thought of her twenty-first birthday party.

What is Lord Darlington doing to prompt Lady Windermere to say 'Do sit down'? Try:

**being too close, crowding her
again trying to take her hand, perhaps to kiss it - he may have made a
move in this direction on 'No? Is it really?'
moving round to the other side of the flowers again, staring at her
and into her face, which she finds embarrassing
playing with the fan, so that she has to snatch it from him and put it
back down on the table**

The last of these would occasion a sharp order from Lady Windermere. Otherwise, she may be breathless, flustered, trying to control him by forcing him to move away to a respectable distance.

Whatever is happening, I am sure that Lord Darlington knows full well what he is doing and the effect he is having. He would show this in the way he sits down - with a flamboyant flourish perhaps and a rather mocking or self-satisfied smile. Lady Windermere's flower-arranging is becoming more and more of a way of hiding herself.

The chair is a little way away. Plan it out on the setting you have made in your studio space. Later in the scene, when Lady Windermere moves to the table by the sofa and tea is brought in, Darlington is invited to bring his chair over.

Do you think that Darlington genuinely doesn't realise how compliments can upset a woman? Or is he trying to show her how pleasant such things are - in other words telling her to lighten up?

Even if you are playing Lady Windermere as very sweet and young, this little scene can work. She can be trying very hard to be grown-up, to be sensible and proper. The effect might be rather endearing, because we have seen the enthusiasm about her present and about the flowers.

Work on how she is when the servants enter - very stiff and long-necked - trying so hard to do the right thing.

It appears that Lady Windermere's objections to compliments is that they are insincere. Do you think this is modest of her - she underestimates her own prettiness? Do you admire her stand-point or do you think she's being a bit too serious under the circumstances? How do you girls in the group feel about being complimented?

Lady Windermere appears to want to reform Lord Darlington. She is annoyed by the man's 'playing the game' pretending to be bad when she thinks he is good. The insincerity of compliments which are not proper to a married woman, and in any case not meant, annoyed her as a symptom of the 'badness of the age' which she professes to despise.

Read through the dialogue, in pairs, from Lady Windermere's 'believe me, you are better than most other men...' to Parker's next entrance. [Page 8-10 Methuen; 15-16 Penguin; 6-end of 7 NHB].

Summarise the main points that each person makes.

Check list below:

LORD DARLINGTON:

He is proud of his 'little vanity' to be bad rather than good.

Badness is not taken seriously by the world.

Good people, who are taken seriously by the world, are terrible bores.

However, he wants Lady Windermere to take him seriously.
He wants to be her friend and be counted on by her should she need a friend.
Though he doesn't comment on the ideal of love, he does say that anything is better than sacrifice for love's sake.

LADY WINDERMERE:

She thinks that Lord Darlington is pretending to be bad and cannot understand why he doesn't want to be taken seriously by the world.

She is willing to be friends with Lord Darlington providing he doesn't compliment her or speak extravagant nonsense to her.

She was brought up to understand the difference between right and wrong.

There is no grey area between these two poles.

She deplores the modern times where people marry for 'speculation', that is for financial reasons. They should marry for love.

Love is tested and purified by sacrifice.

The arguments here are central to the play. Lady Windermere has to bend in her Puritanical views during the course of the action. Her mother, Mrs Erylne, proves that sacrifice is indeed a part of love. Lord Darlington is stung by two good women and ends up losing everything, including his credibility as a leader of the Society wits.

One senses that Lord Darlington is already inhabiting a grey area, where he has not really committed to one side or the other. Though he appears to be 'in charge' in the sense of being sure of himself and the superiority of his views, the seeds are sown here for him to fall by the wayside.

Using the points you have made, improvise the dialogue between these two in your own words. Try it once through for content; make sure you have all the relevant information there. Then refine it, so that you are also giving some idea of the characters involved - your opinion of them.

Lord Darlington can also be played a number of ways. One of three 'wits' in the play, and perhaps the chief of them, he could be played as a 'rake', a roué - cynical in the extreme and after the 'good' Lady Windermere because he doesn't believe in goodness and wants to prove to himself [and perhaps to her] that she is just a woman after all and capable of falling. Her goodness makes her more attractive, a challenge to be conquered. [Think *Dangerous Liaisons*, those who know it.]

Or he could be stuck, bored, tiring of the life of a wit, restless and looking for something else. Perhaps he envies Lord Windermere his wife, realises she is a jewel, and genuinely wants her, if not as a lover, at least as a friend. This is the portrait of a man who is wavering, in that grey area of indecision.

Perhaps he is somewhere in between, just someone who enjoys the game. Intrigued by Lady Windermere, he is trying to test her out. Perhaps he can get her to fall for him, he's not sure, but he'll turn on his famous charm and maybe ...

In summary then:

cold and calculating

a warm man - basically good as Lady Windermere suggests - who has fallen in love

a shallow person, clever enough to enjoy playing with people as well as ideas

Discuss these options and also his age. For instance, if you see him as cold and calculating, I imagine he would be quite a bit older than Lady Windermere. In those days, men were often married to much younger women. Late thirties or early forties was the general time for a man to take a wife and start a family. And custom makes what to our youth would appear 'gross' - a man old enough to be her father, etc. - acceptable, normal.

After your discussion and decisions, revisit your dialogue and see what