

Critical analysis of Epigrams

Epigrams are pithy sayings that compress two antithetical ideas into one polished sentence. The best epigrams contain concise language that presents two antithetical ideas in a mirror-image format. For example, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Cecil Graham exclaims, "whenever people agree with me, I always feel I must be wrong."

Here the antithetical ideas are Cecil's opinions versus what people think of his opinions. Graham is saying that when his ideas meet with universal approval, he, paradoxically, decides to disagree with the majority—and disavow his own idea. Underlying his statement is a satire of the people whose opinions Graham so disrespects that their very agreement with him changes his mind.

Almost every character in Wilde's plays and other works occasionally speak in epigrams. Wilde does not simply throw them in to display his own cleverness, but uses them to convey character and mood, and even to structure the plot itself.

The most simplistic of these is to establish character. The characters who use epigrams the most are Cecil Graham, Dunby, Lord Darlington, and Mrs. Erlynne. These characters are shown to be clever and haughty through their use of epigram.

For example, Lord Darlington and Cecil Graham banter about the contrast between a cynic (one who knows the price of everything but the value of nothing) and the sentimentalist (who sees an absurd value in everything and doesn't know the market price of any single thing). Their definitions are humorous and cynical, establishing them as part of the "smart" or sophisticated set.

Lord Darlington's comment that "so many conceited people go about society pretending to be good, that I think it shows rather a sweet and modest disposition to pretend to be bad" also establishes him as a "smart" character, who finds it entertaining to be "bad." His epigrams led at least one director to fail to see Lord Darlington's sympathetic side.

In the 1893 New York production, Maurice Barrymore cast Lord Darlington as a villain. Wilde objected, saying, "Darlington is not a villain, but a man who really believes that Windermere is treating his wife badly, and wishes to save her." In this case, the character's witticisms caused him to be typecast.

On the other hand, not speaking in epigrams is a marker of sincerity. One clue that Lord Windermere is virtuous is that he *never* speaks paradoxically. His comments are straightforward and genuine.

His counterpart, Lord Darlington, is not always so sincere. Darlington's style changes from being cynical to being sincere—symbolized by going from epigrammatic speech to more prosaic speech.

In the first scene, he appears as a dandy, with his blithe, epigrammatic sayings and suave compliments. Only when he begins to woo Lady Windermere in earnest does he drop the mask of cleverness and speak in a relatively straightforward manner.

However, his move toward sincerity is gradual. In the midway point, he uses the antithetical format, as when he suggests that "between man and woman there is no friendship possible. There is passion, enmity, worship but no friendship."

In this phrase he still maintains the formal distance of the clever dandy wooing with words. When he drops even the antitheses, he is at his most sincere, simply telling Lady Windermere that he loves her. At this moment, the audience's estimation of Lord Darlington increases.