The Importance of Being Earnest  LITERARY ELEMENTS WORKSHEET

Wilde’s Wordplay

Wit is a quality of speech or writing that combines verbal cleverness with keen perception. There are many different terms used to describe this type of language or wordplay. In this play, Wilde uses the following types to create humor:

- **Puns** are words that play on meanings.
- **Epigrams** are short, witty statements that are empty of meaning.
- **Aphorisms**, on the other hand, are brief, cleverly worded statements that make wise observations about life.

Look at the following quotations from the play. Identify the type of wordplay, and then explain the humor in each witticism.

1. The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility! **Type of wordplay:**
   - What is humorous?

2. Jack. It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn’t a dentist. It produces a false impression. **Type of wordplay:**
   - What is humorous?
   - Algernon. Well, that is exactly what dentists always do.

3. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I’ll certainly try to forget the fact. **Type of wordplay:**
   - What is humorous?

FOLLOW-UP: Look back through the play for your favorite pun, epigram, and aphorism. Write them below.

**Pun:** ....................................................................................................................................................
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**Epigram:** ........................................................................................................................................
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**Aphorism:** ..........................................................................................................................................
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