

Society and the Concept of Truth in the Selected Plays of Oscar Wilde: Postmodern Aesthetics

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Abstract

Oscar Wilde's Society Plays originated at the end of the nineteenth century, revealing the whimsical, unsettled and often contradictory nature of the fin de siècle Victorian society. Yet, apart from their entertaining purpose, Wilde's Society Plays offer a profound commentary on the complexities of life and human nature reaching beyond the dualistic notions of good and evil. While this aspect of Wilde's plays used to be disregarded, with the main focus usually placed on witticism and epigrammatic nature of his works, it is, in fact, the transformative and multidimensional nature of one's personal truth that is emphasized in such plays as *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). These two works offer an engaging case study of Wilde's almost postmodern notion of the aesthetics of art as well. In both plays, the concepts of truth, identity, naming and one's place in society are presented as transformative experiences enabled through language. Consequently, in *A Woman of No Importance*, characters such as Hester Worsley or Mrs Arbuthnot cannot be easily defined as black or white figures, while their relationships with society reach beyond the dualistic moral framework, defying traditional expectations of Victorian audience. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Gwendolen's and Cecily's seemingly absurd desire to marry a fictitious man called Ernest transforms into a liberating notion of selfhood and separation from limiting social expectations. Moreover, it allows the male characters in the play – Algernon and Jack – to revisit and gain new identities, thus showing that the transformative power of language lies in its aesthetic and artistic potential celebrated by Wilde. Characters in both analyzed plays – especially women – act as mirrors reflecting and responding to social expectations at large, while each character's truth is molded by their perspectives and individual appeal to language. Thus, *A Woman of No Importance* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* reach beyond a mere witticism and play on words, touching upon fundamental notions of truth and one's linguistic power to create an identity enabling personal freedom and separateness – the very notions inherent in Wilde's postmodern aesthetics of art and language.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, postmodern aesthetics, Society Plays, *A Woman of No Importance*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the notion of truth, Victorian society, women, the concept of art

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Introduction

Oscar Wilde's Society Plays originated at the end of the nineteenth century, revealing the whimsical, unsettled and often contradictory nature of the fin de siècle Victorian society. The humorous aspect of Wilde's comedies remains intertwined with a serious, sobering message. Yet, as pointed out by Joseph Bristow, "it took a remarkably long time before teachers were willing to approach Wilde's writing with some measure of seriousness" partly, among other reasons, due to their judgmental focus on his private life instead of his intellectual and professional career.¹ It should be highlighted that, as noted by Brown, for Wilde "the experience of art [was] the only viable means in the contemporary world of countering the commercial spirit, or of arriving at that crucial understanding of the past and present that is essential to a safe future."² Hence, the preoccupation with language aesthetics as inherent in the experience of art was a matter of utmost importance to him, even though often perceived as and reduced to a role of mere witticism. A similar observation comes from Michael Y. Bennett, as he wonders: "while wit occupies the pages and stages of a Wilde comedy of manners, can one even really call his comedies *comedies*?."³ He also adheres to Peter Raby's statement that "[t]he juxtaposition of the comic and serious is one of Wilde's most successful dramatic techniques."⁴

This juxtaposition transforms Oscar Wilde's satirical plays into self-reflective, thoughtful and universally timely commentaries on human nature, social conventions, life and its purpose. As Melissa Knox highlights, there is "the serious, philosophical wisdom of Wilde in the midst of comedies that have been taken as light or as lacking emotional and intellectual depth," further asserting after Powell that Wilde's plays are characterized by "an undercurrent of seriousness which was mostly absent among other farces of the day."⁵ Thus, Wilde's Society Plays reach beyond a conventional debate concerning society and manners, engaging in a wittily presented yet, in truth, profound contemplation of the intricacies of life. If I were to encapsulate the idea inherent in Wilde's Society Plays in the words of one of his literary characters, I would resort to Lord Illingworth's remark that "the world has always laughed at its own tragedies, that being the only way in which it has been able to bear them. And that, consequently, whatever the world has treated seriously belongs to the comedy side of things."⁶ Thus, Wilde's "comedies" transcend socio-cultural landscape, underscoring dramatic nature of life.

As already mentioned, Wilde's Society Plays offer an exaggerated yet accurate mimicry of the actual world. Knox states after Raby that "Wilde's characters, like Ibsen's, are isolated and often stuck in lives that do not appeal to them, while real life seems to go on elsewhere."⁷ Moreover, in this satirized world, the female characters located between

¹ Joseph Bristow (ed.), *Wilde's Writing: Contextual Conditions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p.4.

² Julia P. Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), p. 51.

³ Michael Y. Bennett (ed.), *Oscar Wilde's Society Plays* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 2.

⁴ Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 2.

⁵ Melissa Knox, *Oscar Wilde in the 1990s: The Critic as Creator* (Columbia: Camden House, 2001), p. 46.

⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Anne Varty (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2002), p. 399.

⁷ Knox, *Oscar Wilde in the 1990s*, p. 50.

domestic and public spheres remain almost self-aware of their own limiting theatricality. “What is that dreadful girl talking about?,” asks Mrs Allonby referring to Hester Worsley in *A Woman of No Importance*, to which Lady Stutfield replies “She is painfully natural, is she not?,”⁸ as if being natural was, in fact, abnormal in the world built upon sophisticated yet often meaningless social acts. Hence, Wilde’s plays position his characters, especially women, between “being” and “acting”, just as the actual world places them between the irreconcilable demands of private and public domains. “The real problem of the play is the tension between the individual and society, between public and private life, between established social norms and their deliberate violation,” Norbert Kohl posits, further arguing that

[t]he direct result of the conflict is the continual efforts of the characters to redefine their identity within the framework of their need for personal expression and the parts they play in society. The rigorous codes and conventions, and the pressure to conform, produce in some characters illusory expectations by which they then judge others, but they also produce outsiders who will use any means – including immorality – to integrate themselves into society, because otherwise they will be socially left out in the cold.⁹

In this sense, the recurring themes of Wilde’s “comedies” remain universal in the twenty-first century world as well.

The Woman of No Importance: Negotiating One’s Place and Truth

While dialogues are perceived as the most powerful components of a play, Wilde’s characters are caught in a paradox of being both constructed and alienated by their own words. In *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), the characters communicate in a heavily epigrammatic manner reliant on repartees and witticism. In effect, they appear to act their roles rather than engage in a spontaneous, natural exchange. There is a touch of intellectual refinement in such reenactment of the self, as Taylor observes, “[e]pigrams are a knowledge game ... In Wilde’s time, this game was a common and popular one, attested to by collections of famous writers’ bon mots, printed in handy pocket editions: a literary tradition copied from eighteenth-century wits.”¹⁰ In this sense, Wilde’s characters are not merely artificial – as it is claimed by some critics – but, in fact, their behaviours reflect the actual socio-cultural trends popularized in the author’s time. As Taylor further posits, “Wilde’s characters speak in epigram, but their identities are also epigrammatic. Wilde does not tell stories about their unmasking, but about their negotiations for a personal space in the already mapped out space of character and personality.”¹¹

Such endeavours of the characters to negotiate and gain their personal space is strongly emphasized in *A Woman of No Importance*. “This play, like the other comedies,

⁸ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 397.

⁹ Nicholas Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*, trans. David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 206-207.

¹⁰ Marvin J. Taylor, *Reading Wilde: Querying Spaces* (New York: New York University, 1995), p. 11.

¹¹ Taylor, *Reading Wilde*, p. 18.

reflects (in the name of Lady Hunstanton) the part of England where Wilde wrote the first draft, in this instance Norfolk,” states Peter Raby, “The play was written for Beerbohm Tree, for whom Wilde conceived the role of Lord Illingworth, and produced by him, ‘with interference’ from the author, at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket on 19 April 1893.”¹² The aforementioned epigrammatic nature of dialogues in *A Woman of No Importance* places the characters on a metaphorical stage on which they appear as self-aware actors. While characters in theatrical plays are often allowed to experience human-like moments of confusion, or even moments of speechlessness, Wilde’s characters in *A Woman of No Importance* are usually quick-witted and always ready with intellectual or amusing answers. Paradoxically, the more they partake in social activities, the more alienated they become in the world in which acts of speech separate instead of producing mutual understanding.

There are two exceptions from this rule: the eponymous *Woman of No Importance* – Mrs Arbuthnot and Hester Worsley, an American visitor presented through the prism of her Puritan values. Both of these female characters refuse to ‘act their roles’ and, instead, openly express their actual innermost thoughts. Thus, they become ‘the other,’ as they cannot find a defining place in a performative upper-class structure.

Importantly, there is an intertextual parallel between the character of Hester Worsley – the young outspoken Puritan – and Hester Prynne – the protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*. In Hawthorne’s novel, Hester Prynne is condemned by the Puritan society for bearing a child outside of marriage. As a punishment, she is made to wear a scarlet letter ‘A’ standing for adultery. In Wilde’s play, Hester Worsley strongly advocates Puritan values while upholding that women who sinned should be punished. Yet, similarly to Hester Prynne, she also eventually becomes a social outsider because of her honesty and outspokenness. Even though they represent divergent beliefs (Hester Prynne engages in a love affair, while Hester Worsley is an ardent critic of ‘immorality’), they both possess a strong sense of personal integrity, and they both represent American women at large. What is more, they provide an antithesis to the collective character of morally corrupt society consisting of those who try to fit into its framework while playing their assigned social roles.

The initial difference of values between both female protagonists sharing the same name and a similar fate becomes evident in Hester Worsley’s speech:

Let all women who have sinned be punished ... If a man and a woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love or loathe each other then ... Set a mark, if you wish, on each, but don’t punish the one and let the other go free.¹³

Apparently, Hester Worsley believes that women who broke the rules of conventional social conduct should be awaiting punishment. At the same time, while referencing the *Scarlet Letter* (a “mark”), she argues that punishment should not be the fate of a woman alone, but that it should also involve a man. Hester Worsley’s beliefs are partially contested as soon as she becomes well-acquainted with Mrs Arbuthnot’s story who, as it turns out, bore a child outside of marriage – thus resembling Hester Prynne. Yet, even though partially contested in the play, Miss Worsley’s Puritan values are not criticized – on the contrary, they are presented

¹² Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 91.

¹³ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 388.

as refreshing when confronted with the feeble morality of English upper classes. It is rather, as Christopher Nassaar puts it, that “[i]n his major works, Wilde strove to show *the complexity of truth*” [emphasis added] instead of ‘black or white’ answers.¹⁴ The “complexity of truth” in Wilde’s Society Plays might be regarded as a multidimensionality of the concept of truth, with multidimensionality resulting from varying perspectives and situations faced by the characters in the play. In effect, the concept of truth becomes reflective of individual viewpoints and experiences.

It is precisely the multidimensionality of truth that eventually allows Hester Worsley to re-examine her belief that “all women who have sinned should be punished.”¹⁵ The audience gains a glimpse into Mrs Arbuthnot’s past, including the revelation that she is the mother of a child born out of wedlock to whom she dedicated her entire life, thus becoming a social outcast. The child appears in the play as a young adult, Gerald Arbuthnot, who succeeds in securing a position as Lord Illingworth’s secretary. A moral twist comes with a disclosure that George Illingworth is Gerald’s father, and that he is the man responsible for Mrs Arbuthnot’s suffering. His suggestive surname (‘Illingworth’ – with ‘illing’ indicting the act of mistreating others) – speaks volumes about his character. Throughout the play, Lord Illingworth’s speech is mainly presented in the form of epigrammatic statements of intellectually-stimulating yet morally-dubious nature, with one telling observation that “[l]ife’s aim, if it has one, is simply to be always looking for temptations.”¹⁶ Speaking in epigrams and, thus, assuming a performative role, highlights the character’s affiliation with the theatrical world of English upper classes.

After becoming a victim of Lord Illingworth’s dishonourable behaviour and being confronted with Rachel Arbuthnot’s story, Hester re-examines her Puritan beliefs, finally stating: “I was wrong. God’s law is only Love.”¹⁷ Eventually, Hester and Gerald profess love for each other, while Gerald cuts ties with Lord Illingworth, planning to start a new life with his beloved and his mother. “There are other countries than England... Oh! other countries over sea, better, wiser, and less unjust lands. The world is very wide and very big,” Hester argues, indicating that morally corrupt societies are powerful only within their own circles.¹⁸

Yet, the plot of the play is decidedly more complex than the outline presented above. As already indicated, Oscar Wilde’s Society Plays are remarkably modern. Contrary to the Victorian expectations of a clear-cut approach to morality, the message of *A Woman of No Importance* is not black and white but, instead, filled with numerous complexities regarding the notion of truth. Rachel Arbuthnot cannot be defined either as a saint or a sinner – neither is she a traditional ‘angel in the house,’ nor is she a fallen woman. In fact, she represents womanhood at large, portraying the tragic fate of women who pay the price for following their heart. In this sense, *The Woman of No Importance* can be regarded as a profound tragedy of a woman faced with double-standards, rejection and judgment. Rachel Arbuthnot

¹⁴ Christopher Naassar, ‘Hidden Meanings and the Failure of Art: Wilde’s *A Woman of No Importance*’, *Études Anglaises*, vol. 68, no. 1 (2015), pp. 32-39.

¹⁵ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 388.

¹⁶ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 401.

¹⁷ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 413.

¹⁸ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 412.

epitomizes every woman on whom the framework of moral ambiguity and supposed propriety has been imposed. At the same time, because of her ‘otherness,’ Rachel is the one who can openly reject the world which previously excluded her, and there is a sense of freedom and rebellion in this act of separation. Similarly, because of her status as an outsider, Hester Worsley is given some leeway in the play to loudly express her genuine views – precisely because she does not belong to the world which she is visiting.

At the same time, Rachel Arbuthnot might also be perceived in a light much different from a martyred mother. Even though presented on the surface as a suffering single mother and a pure and defenseless female figure, she appears to be an exceptionally powerful and self-assured character at the same time. As noted by Cristina Aransáez:

[t]he indirect presentation of Mrs. Arbuthnot as a good woman who remains separated from social life and is whole devoted to charity activities may lead one initially to conclude that in the treatment of this character Wilde contradicted the subversive ideas about the characterization of the fallen woman ... Yet as soon as Mrs. Arbuthnot tells her son how she feels about the kind of situation in which she saw herself after her fall, the audience is surprised to discover that she has been not enduring it with the quiet resignation and deep humility which were typical of her predecessors ... [S]he refuses the idea of repenting for her past fault. In contrast to stereotypical unmarried mothers, who expressed abashment about their moral lapse, Mrs. Arbuthnot contends that she is proud of it because her son Gerald was its result.¹⁹

Depending on one’s perception of this character, Mrs. Arbuthnot appears to be a pure and helpless figure who was wronged and removed to the margin of society or, on the contrary, presents herself as a strong woman who recognizes her worth, transforming her supposed ‘fall’ into the experience of conscious and independent motherhood. Once again, in Wilde’s *Society Plays*, truth becomes a multidimensional concept closely connected with experiences and feelings of particular characters. In other words, as Kohl puts it, truth is transformed “into an autonomous entity bound only to the subjective self and its feelings.”²⁰

The Postmodern Aesthetics of Truth

In the light of the above-presented arguments, Oscar Wilde’s *A Woman of No Importance* is not a simplistic, melodramatic play, but a complex work commenting upon the inexplicability of life and dwelling upon tragedies and victories of a woman’s life while resorting to the mask of irony and laughter. Paradoxically, it is Lord Illingworth who perfectly encapsulates the notion of these tragedies in one of the epigrams: “[t]he history of women is the history of the worst form of tyranny the world has ever known. The tyranny of the weak over the strong. It is the only tyranny that lasts.”²¹ While performing his role of a knowledgeable dandy who wears a comfortable social mask, Lord Illingworth ironically reveals one of the truths. “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the

¹⁹ Cristina P. Aransáez, *The Importance of Being a Reader: A Revision of Oscar Wilde’s Works* (Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2015), pp. 316-317.

²⁰ Kohl, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 85.

²¹ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 398.

truth,” observes Oscar Wilde in his *Intentions*.²² This assertion aptly explains the circumstances in which Lord Illingworth makes his observation: in Wilde’s play, truth is a concept hidden behind a performance. “Postmodernism, it may be argued, truly *is* the apotheosis of a ‘truth of masks’”, notices Middeke, further pointing out that :

Postmodern thought has also argued in favour of a departure from coherence; it has claimed that all knowledge of the ‘other’ is necessarily characterized by difference and affected by perspective ... Postmodernism has envisaged the breakdown of binary oppositions.²³

Oscar Wilde’s Society Plays appear to be exceedingly postmodern in the light of Middeke’s observations: they operate within the realm of varied perspectives where dualities do not apply and the category of truth is not monochromatic. Even a universal tragedy of womanhood, as depicted in *A Woman of No Importance*, contains more than one layer of interpretation: as already indicated, on the one hand, Rachel Arbuthnot is a tragic character who selflessly dedicates her life to her son while, on the other hand, she remains constrained by the past and, thus, restricts Gerald from following his career as Lord Illingworth’s secretary. As a result, the ultimate truth – if one can call it as such – appears to be multilayered, simultaneously presenting Rachel as a sacrificial figure and even a potentially selfish mother. The depth of Oscar Wilde’s universal, proto-modern portrayal of womanhood lies in its ontological perspectivism; “Gerald cannot separate his future from my past,” indicates Mrs Arbuthnot in her dispute with Lord Illingworth, while the audience sympathizes both with Gerald – because of his fate, and with his mother – because of her past.²⁴

Christopher Naassar believes that “Mrs Arbuthnot’s hatred of Lord Illingworth is really a generalized hatred of a dominant male – she avoids men altogether and loves only the submissive Gerald.”²⁵ He also notes that Rachel Arbuthnot can be not only likened to, but also contrasted with Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne:

She fights to keep her illegitimate child Gerald just like Hester fought to keep Pearl, arguing like Hester that God gave the child to her. The big difference is that Mrs Arbuthnot, unlike Hester Prynne, never achieves penitence. Quite the contrary, she says to Gerald: “How could I repent of my sin when you, my love, were its fruit. Even now that you are bitter to me I cannot repent. I do not. You are more to me than innocence.” Indeed, is it Hester Worsley, paradoxically, who repents in Wilde’s play, rejecting her earlier Puritanism and embracing Mrs. Arbuthnot as her spiritual mother.²⁶

²² Oscar Wilde, *Intentions* (London: Heinemann and Balestier, 1891), p. 150.

²³ Martin Middeke, ‘Oscar, the Proto-Postmodern? Peter Ackroyd’s *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*’, in *The Importance of Reinventing Oscar Versions of Wilde during the Last 100 Years*, eds Uwe Böker, Richard Corballis, and Julie A. Hibbard (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), p. 207.

²⁴ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 394.

²⁵ Naassar, ‘Hidden Meanings and the Failure of Art’, pp. 32-39.

²⁶ Naassar, ‘Hidden Meanings and the Failure of Art’, pp. 32-39.

Because of its codependency, Naassar posits, the mother-son relationship in *A Woman of No Importance* is “heavily Freudian” and “shows remarkable insight into human nature.”²⁷ Furthermore, Mrs Arbuthnot’s past invites questions which are postmodern in nature and explore a multidimensional understanding of the notions of sin, victimization and control – questions which result in no definite answers apart from pointing towards irresolvable complexities of a woman’s life. In the end of the play, Lord Illingworth himself is reduced to “the man of no importance,”²⁸ what further reveals Mrs Arbuthnot’s ambiguous position of both defeat and power. Naassar goes as far as to say that Lord Illingworth’s final separation from Gerald is characteristic even of revenge.²⁹ However, looked at from another perspective, it can be argued that Lord Illingworth’s punishment is actually a realization of Hester Worsley’s Puritan doctrine according to which punishment is a concept shared by both involved parties.

Wilde’s postmodern aesthetics of truth are further explored in the dialogues between other female characters in the play: while talking about Mrs Arbuthnot, Lady Hunstanton notes that she “doesn’t know anything about the wicked society in which we all live. She won’t go into it. She is far too good.”³⁰ In fact, looked at in traditional terms, Mrs Arbuthnot is well-acquainted with sin, but one might pose a question whether she can be perceived as a definitional ‘fallen woman’ or a ‘sinner’, what further proves that the notions of truth and reality, or even fallenness and sin are multidimensional and too complex to be defined by means of a single perspective or an ultimate judgment, as Wilde’s work clearly postulates.

Moreover, Mrs Arbuthnot’s model of motherhood is called into question when one realizes that, on the one hand, she is deeply protective of Gerald but, on the other hand, she might be selfishly depriving him of agency connected with his future. Behrendt argues in a similar vein, stating that:

Wilde leaves his audience pondering the realities of Mrs. Arbuthnot’s so-called “triumph” as a smothering, humorless mother who has kept her son cloistered in the intellectually stagnant air of the country so that, as a young man, he has no real prospects ... Her vision of motherhood is called into question through an allusion to King Solomon when she selfishly tells her son to his face that she would rather see him “dead” than under the influence of his father.³¹

Other women figures presented in the play act as flat characters epitomizing merely singular perspectives, mainly reflecting the superficial nature of society. Apart from the most impartial and non-judgmental figure – Lady Hunstanton, minor women characters embody predominant vices found in the upper-class society. In this sense, these are the characters with a highlighted ‘thematic’ component, meaning that they can be “taken as representative figure[s], as standing

²⁷ Naassar, ‘Hidden Meanings and the Failure of Art’, pp. 32-39.

²⁸ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 419.

²⁹ Naassar, ‘Hidden Meanings and the Failure of Art’, pp. 32-39.

³⁰ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 408.

³¹ Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), pp. 154-155.

for a class.”³² For instance, Lady Caroline Pontefract is portrayed as a strong, opinionated aristocratic woman exercising a strict control over her submissive husband; Mrs Allonby is eagerly seeking flirtatious gratification outside of her marriage, while Lady Stutfield is a simple-minded, insipid character with few opinions of her own. As previously mentioned, their performative qualities are highlighted through the epigrammatic manner of speaking, thus revealing their artificiality or, how Phelan terms it, their “synthetic” component³³, what situates Wilde’s Society Plays in a strictly artistic realm anticipating postmodern aesthetics. As Kohl observes, Wilde’s design lies in “separat[ing] art from nature and life”³⁴. Middeke argues in a similar vein, noting that “parodic imitation in Wilde becomes a matter of self-conscious art which, in Höfele’s words, hopes ‘to re-authenticate itself by reflecting its very inauthenticity.’”³⁵ Such perception of art as a concept validating itself through its performative existence seems to be futuristically postmodern in nature.

The majority of female characters in *A Woman of No Importance* enacts their roles in an apparently theatrical, self-aware manner reflecting the confining nature of the aristocratic world of the nineteenth-century England. Yet, the modern audience will be able to decode in this enactment universal expectations towards women at large and unwritten, universal laws by which society abides: as it seems, the only way to be admitted into society is to uncritically embrace it – the concept Wilde challenges in *A Woman of No Importance*.

The Importance of Being Earnest: Asserting One’s Identity

The Importance of Being Earnest, A Trivial Comedy for Serious People was first performed in 1895 at the St. James’s Theatre in London. As Bennett points out, “the subtitle of the play ... begs for *serious* attention,”³⁶ emphasizing that “‘Earnest’ and its homophone, ‘Ernest’ might be crucial to the understanding of the play.”³⁷ In contrast to *A Woman of No Importance*, the plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest* primarily revolves around flat, epigrammatic female characters – Cecily Cardew and Gwendolen Fairfax – whose desire is to marry a man named Ernest. As noted by Taylor, “because Wilde is an epigrammatic writer,” *The Importance of Being Earnest* would be the play “which illustrates his complete theatrical mastery, the play that allows for the largest re-mapping of theatrical territory.”³⁸ It is also yet another of Wilde’s plays with the word “importance” in the title – this time pointing towards the significance of “earnestness” – thus, seriousness and sincerity. As noted by Bennett:

[t]he genius of Wilde’s Society Plays, especially the quintessential *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is that Wilde is able to seamlessly marry *satire* and *family drama*, and

³² James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 3.

³³ Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots*, p. 3.

³⁴ Kohl, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 85.

³⁵ Middeke, ‘Oscar, the Proto-Postmodern?’, p. 208.

³⁶ Bennett, *Oscar Wilde’s Society Plays*, p. 2.

³⁷ Bennett, *Oscar Wilde’s Society Plays*, p. 1.

³⁸ Taylor, *Reading Wilde*, pp. 15-16.

thus they can be read as double commentary on the outside world *and* a fictional world.³⁹

The manner in which the female characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are portrayed is, indeed, an apt commentary on the outside world and, once again, on the ways in which society influences one's choices, especially those related to gender roles. In the fictional realm of the play, both Gwendolen and Cecily dream about marrying Ernest – the man who is an idea rather than an actual person – hence symbolizing a desire shared by both women. As the play progresses, John Worthing proposes to Gwendolen under an assumed name of Ernest, while she states:

We live, as I hope you know, Mr Worthing, in an age of ideals ... and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, Gwendolen's cousin, Algernon, proposes to John Worthing's ward, Cecily, who shares a similar wish:

You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Ernest ... There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest.⁴¹

At first glance, the confessions of both characters appear to be absurd and amusing yet, on a deeper level, they are closely related to the notion of family dynamics. Bennett asserts that Gwendolen's desire to marry a man called Ernest results from the fact that she "wants someone earnest – with serious intent and conviction – who is the opposite of her submissive father."⁴² For Gwendolen, he posits, the greatest tragedy would be to become like her mother, Lady Bracknell who, initially depicted by John Worthing as a "a monster, without being a myth,"⁴³ turns out to be excessively unfeminine, domineering and calculating. Hence, the idea of Ernest symbolizes a formation of Gwendolen's new identity, and stands for a separation from her mother.

Even though Gwendolen is a relatively flat, epigrammatic character, she possesses deep self-awareness which allows her to thoroughly analyze the relationship with her mother. On the one hand, she seems to be an ideal Victorian woman who perfectly fits into the framework of expectations of the era while, on the other hand, she is excessively talkative, direct and sometimes bold. These are the characteristics which have the potential of transforming her into the future Lady Bracknell. Hence, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Gwendolen hopes to preserve her feminine side through the symbolic idea of Ernest, while the mother figure acts as an antithesis of a desirable future "self." Bennett observes that

³⁹ Bennett, *Oscar Wilde's Society Plays*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 497.

⁴¹ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 516.

⁴² Bennett, *Oscar Wilde's Society Plays*, p. 6.

⁴³ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 501.

Gwendolen's father "is so dominated by Lady Bracknell that he is figuratively nowhere to be seen."⁴⁴ In fact, Gwendolen's wish it to perform her role in a traditional relationship, while simultaneously being perceived as an assertive woman and a valued life partner. Thus, she strives to find a balance potentially reflected in the name 'Ernest,' for it is her ideal partner's 'earnestness' that she desires.

John Worthing's young ward – Cecily – also hopes to form a relationship with someone "earnest." Her dream is reflected on the pages of a diary in which she narrates her love story with Ernest – her guardian's supposed brother. Cecily is especially interested in forming relationship with Ernest on learning about his alleged wickedness. When she encounters Algernon who acts as Ernest, she addresses him in a childlike manner: "I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy."⁴⁵ Carefully protected from the outside world, Cecily longs for a thrill of a more adventurous and independent life. Thus, a supposedly defiant Ernest epitomizes her rebellion and desire to assert herself as an individual. A similar observation stems from Bennett's analysis:

Cecily is still largely a child and has been treated like a child by Jack her whole life. When Cecily is treated like a child, she has a couple different desires for a future spouse: (1) to find someone who will continue to treat her like a child, and/or (2) to find someone who will treat her like an adult and listen to her. In fact, someone who is earnest can easily fill both of those roles. But who, specifically, is Cecily's Ernest? Her Ernest is reckless and gets into all sorts of scrapes – exactly the opposite of her guardian.⁴⁶

While, on the one hand, Bennett observes that Cecily wants to be treated by her future partner like a child, he also states that, on the other hand, she hopes to be regarded as an adult. Hence, she needs a protective, parental figure, but also a partner who would not resemble her guardian – what might also imply the desire to construct her own separate identity. Paradoxically, in this she can be likened to Gwendolen who also would like to play the role of a subordinate wife, while being treated as an assertive partner as well. As already emphasized, even though both Cecily and Gwendolen appear to be flat characters who remain unchanged throughout the play, their simultaneously push the plot forward with their 'earnest' desire. In other words, as Knox states, "[t]he modest maidens of Victorian farce are replaced by the aggressive, assertive Gwendolen and Cecily."⁴⁷

Even though Jack and Algernon do not read into the meaning of the name 'Ernest' in the same way as Gwendolen and Cecily do, the quest for this name eventually proves to be equally important for them. Their hope to be christened anew as 'Ernest' results from the need to fulfill Gwendolen's and Cecily's expectations towards them or, in other words, to reinvent themselves in order to fit into the desired notion of masculinity. Thus, for Jack and Algernon, the act of changing their names symbolizes a transformation of their identity and the

⁴⁴ Bennett, *Oscar Wilde's Society Plays*, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 508.

⁴⁶ Bennett, *Oscar Wilde's Society Plays*, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Knox, *Oscar Wilde in the 1990s*, p. 46.

adaptability of this concept. Once again, Gwendolen and Cecily possess a tremendous influence on Jack's and Algernon's actions: while symbolically creating the figure of Ernest, Gwendolen and Cecily strive to free themselves from social expectations of a traditional married life and yet, they place Jack and Algernon within the framework of such expectations. According to Balkin, *The Importance of Being Ernest* "renders personality material and corporeal in performance, since, when realistic settings and props parodically verify the fictional Ernest's identity, he becomes a character construct shared by multiple actors."⁴⁸ Thus, the construct through which the characters hope to realize their individual desires, the notion of truth becomes multidimensional once again, as each character perceives Ernest in a slightly different, yet equally important way.

For Jack, specifically, adopting a new name would mean gaining a fully-fledged social identity which he is missing as an orphan. Answering Lady Brackell's impertinent inquiry regarding his family heritage, John Worthing (Jack) states sincerely:

The late Mr Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort ... I was in a hand-bag – a somewhat large, black leather hand-bag, with handles to it – an ordinary hand-bag in fact.⁴⁹

Oscar Wilde skillfully reinvents the popular literary theme of an orphan or what Brown calls "the national myth of the century: the story of a person who was orphaned and who therefore is unsure of his name and identity, who eventually learns his true parentage and name and who can therefore have a new beginning, as in a baptism, and marry."⁵⁰ As she emphasizes, contrary to the traditional realization of the theme, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* "everything, the past above all, can be repaired."⁵¹ That further highlights the importance of naming in Wilde's play and a self-fulfilling nature of language endowed with the characters' intentions:

[a] character who never existed [Ernest] is brought back to life *when someone claims his name* [emphasis added]; characters come up with pasts for one another by pointing to a diary, register, and handbag. But all of this is understood by an audience whose response takes the form of rational amusement, not simply over the supposed ubiquitousness of language, but over the characters' earnest relation to it ... For although each character is an assemblage of words, each possesses an *intention*: the intention to marry.⁵²

Filling words with intentions transforms the characters' world and their identities, ultimately leading them towards the ultimate goal of marriage. When equipped with wholehearted desires, the name 'Ernest' is at the centre of the characters' process of 'becoming.' For John

⁴⁸ Sarah Balkin, *Spectral Characters: Genre and Materiality on the Modern Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), p. 24.

⁴⁹ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 500.

⁵⁰ Julia Prewitt Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), p. 88.

⁵¹ Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism*, p. 88.

⁵² Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism*, p. 89.

Worthing, it is the aforementioned act of reinvention from an orphan into a fully-fledged member of society that offers him personal redemption and happiness in the ruthless world of the upper classes. Hence, as shown in the play, the act of becoming is deeply rooted in one's relationship to language. What follows, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde skillfully marries the concepts of origins, belonging, status and becoming – for the characters are capable of reinventing themselves without reliance on parentage or rank. In this light, life becomes a proto-modern, artistic process of reinvention and revival purely through the intentionality of language.

To be found in a hand-bag means no marital or social prospects even for such a noble character as John Worthing. Even though John boasts a significant income of “seven and eight thousand a year” and possesses “a country house with some land,”⁵³ it is only his parentage that matters to Lady Bracknell. As Bennett puts it:

Jack is not necessarily looking for a title because of its prestige, and he appears to have more money than most titled families, but as an orphan (or so he assumes), he is without family. And here, by marrying Gwendolyn, he – psychologically and metaphorically – is wedded into a long-present and tangibly known family tree.⁵⁴

Ernest is not only the name which John Worthing hopes to legally adopt for the sake of his future with Gwendolen, but also it is the name of his invented, imaginary brother. Serena S. Witzke highlights the duality of John Worthing's identity, stating that he invented his unruly bother Ernest so that he could escape the duties of a virtuous life of Cecily's guardian. Thus, not only does the name Ernest epitomize the ideal future within a legally-sanctioned family structure, but also, paradoxically, it signifies the concept of freedom and escape from constraining obligations. As Witzke notes, John Worthing is “forced to create himself.”⁵⁵

Algernon follows the pattern of creating and reinventing himself while adopting the fictional identity of John Worthing's nonexistent brother. Becoming Ernest offers him the freedom to act as an independent agent, no longer constrained by the confining expectations of his aristocratic family. Paradoxically, while John “uses” Ernest to become a fully-fledged individual approved by the upper classes (represented by Gwendolen's domineering mother, Lady Bracknell), Algernon resorts to his false identity in order to obtain the freedom of self-expression. Affected by an overpowering presence of his aunt, Lady Bracknell, Algernon initially claims that “marriage silences men,” Bennett notes:

Algy's strong aversion to marriage is his aversion to losing himself, to losing his ability to converse in a manner that defines him. But Algy ultimately realizes, once he realizes *who* Cecily's Ernest is, that he desires marriage in order to (1) free himself from the constraint of Lady Bracknell and her uptight social circles and (2) be

⁵³ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 499.

⁵⁴ Bennett, *Oscar Wilde's Society Plays*, p. 7-8.

⁵⁵ Serena S. Witzke, “‘I knew I had a brother!’” Fraternity and Identity in Plautus' *Menaechmi* and Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity*, eds Kathleen Riley, Alastair J. L. Blanshard, and Iarla Manny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 328.

Cecily's Ernest, the very dreamed-up person that Algernon himself always wanted to be.⁵⁶

Thus, while Cecily's desire to marry Ernest leaves Algernon with no choice but to reinvent himself within the framework of her expectations, it also liberates him from other, more overwhelming social constraints. What follows, Algernon eventually discovers in Ernest his dream identity. In this light, the name Ernest signifies for him both freedom and belonging. Importantly, as noted by John Sloan, Ernest predominantly implies liberation from the nineteenth-century social convention, further indicating Wilde's perception of art and language as linked to subversion and rebellion:

In the 1830s, when the word 'earnest' began to be used approvingly to denote Victorian devotion to moral and civic duty, the name Ernest became fashionable. To Wilde's audience, both his title [*The Importance of Being Earnest*] and his subtitle [*A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*] were recognized as ironically subversive of traditional Victorian attitudes.⁵⁷

Gwendolen and Cecily's major role in the play lies in inventing Ernest and projecting him as if he was an authentic figure. Interestingly enough, while Ernest is an invention, one might assume that he cannot be authentic – and yet, he represents a genuine character epitomizing actual happiness and liberated individuality. Ernest's fluid identity replicates the notion of postmodern art which confirms its authenticity through its paradoxically inauthentic, artificial nature.

Conclusion

As Brown emphasizes, "[i]n *A Woman of No Importance*, which concerns itself with the unmasking of stereotypes, the 'reality' beneath them is exposed. But in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the surface of language is presented to us as the only reality and the play *appears* to be celebrating the self-sufficiency of language itself."⁵⁸ This brings the reader closer to Wilde's proto-modern concept of art unmasking society and undoing its fabricated, theatrical layers while, at the same time, building the characters' reality by means of language. After all, as observed by Brown, "[t]he power of art to transform and to spiritualize us ... is contingent on art's initial separation from our customary being."⁵⁹

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the idea encapsulated in the name 'Ernest' – the fluidity of one's identity inherent in language – attests to the concept of Wilde's proto-modern aesthetics of art. Just as Gwendolen's and Cecily's Ernest, art is a projection and a construct validating its authenticity through its artificiality. Even though art is inauthentic, it is not fake – in the same way as the inauthentic Ernest also proves to be genuine. In the play, acting as Ernest or projecting him as an ideal partner allows one to experience personal freedom. Putting on the mask of Ernest allows an individual to act freely and genuinely, while not

⁵⁶ Bennett, *Oscar Wilde's Society Plays*, p. 8.

⁵⁷ John Sloan, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 117.

⁵⁸ Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism*, p. 88.

⁵⁹ Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism*, p. 52.

being confined to restrictive social norms.

Just as art, the concepts of identity and naming are transformative. In Wilde's selected Society Plays, the concept of truth remains multidimensional as well. As Brown aptly puts it, *A Woman of No Importance* particularly concentrates on the relations between characters, ethics, and fate which are "all but nullified"⁶⁰ while going beyond the nineteenth-century dualistic moral framework and, thus, leaving the reader with dilemmas mirroring the actual intricacies of life rather than offering an explicit moral lesson. Consequently, individuals such as Hester Worsley or Mrs Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance* cannot be easily defined as black or white figures, while their relationships with society are complex as well. Even though Mrs Arbuthnot is a victim of the patriarchal world, she is also presented as a powerful female figure, what further highlights the multifaceted notion of womanhood in Wilde's plays. Whereas in *The Importance of Being Earnest* Gwendolen and Cecily are seemingly angelic and withdrawn from men's life, it is precisely them who structure the foundations of Jack's and Algernon's world. Eventually, their seemingly absurd desire transforms into a liberating notion of selfhood and separation from limiting social expectations. Overall, women in Wilde's Society Plays act as mirrors reflecting and responding to social expectations at large.

In the plays discussed in this article Wilde throws light on the complexities of individual lives while not being judgmental, for there is no place for ultimate moral judgment in the realm of multilayered truth and perspectivism – the realm closely mirroring experiences of readers' actual life. In this sense, the portrait of an individual and, especially, of a woman arising from Wilde's plays is relatable also in the modern day. Wilde's literary woman is a universal figure who, regardless of the passing time and changing epochs, remains suspended between her desire to be a free agent and the inevitability of adapting to social conventions in ways that would allow her to preserve at least a part of her integrity and personal separateness. It is a woman who might be hastily judged and criticized, but whose complexities, difficult choices and tragic fate remain hidden from the public eye. Thus, it is a woman with whom the reader can empathize, and whose struggles remain relatable in the present-day world. On the whole, as Başak Çün upholds, in his plays:

Oscar Wilde deconstructs the socially defined gender roles by violating themes such as marriage, seduction, innocence, love, or living as an old maid ... Although they initially seem to recognize the social norms, neither the young nor the elder characters respect and follow the gender norms properly; hence, they spoil the fixed assumptions on their gendered identities ... Each and every relationship is concluded with the idea that couples, either deliberately or not, fail to meet the demands of society with respect to the conduct of proper gender behaviors. Wilde undermines the meanings of "relationship" and "coupling", wiping away the concept of "good" and "bad" women and men.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism*, p. 86.

⁶¹ Başak Çün, *Subversion of Victorian Gender Roles in Oscar Wilde's Selected Plays* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2024), p. 163.

This claim further strengthens my argument that Wilde's preoccupation with the post-modern aesthetics of truth goes beyond the dualistic framework of black and white characters and morally good or evil choices. What follows, rather than merely adhering to their entertaining purpose, Wilde's plays remain to be serious and timely commentaries on profoundly complex and enigmatic human nature.