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Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism

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ABSTRACT

Dandyism is a very important and significant social phenomenon in 19th century Europe. This paper focuses on Oscar Wilde and Wilde's numerous works. Aestheticism was used as a tool by the dandy in his rebellious performances in London, manifesting the contradiction between the spiritual and the material, the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, and art and nature. The social backgrounds and life experiences of Wilde influenced his transformation into dandies during the time of the Victorian period. With his strong sense of fashion and style, and their elegant ironic use of language, the dandies focused on the importance of artificial forms - himself included — in daily life and work. The dandies' concern was pleasure seeking through consuming the visual and actual. To this end Wilde developed unique aesthetic theories regarding evil; he looked for the beautiful in the ugly and repulsive. At the same time, Oscar Wilde criticized the hypocrisy of bourgeois morality and values, showing the genuinely ugly and evil reality beneath bourgeois industrial society, and focusing on revolt and resistance against the bourgeois world. It also considers how dandies' forms of stylistic revolt were influenced by the environments of London. By exploring Wilde's personal and literary styles, we can discover more about the aesthetic preoccupations of him and his dandies. Dandyism was a means of aesthetic revolt in an urban environment.

Keywords: Aestheticism, Dandyism, Oscar Wilde, Revolt.

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1. Introduction

The dandy is generally known as anti-bourgeois intellectual. The dandy, who despised the vulgarity and false morality of the newly emergent bourgeoisie, placed particular importance on nonchalant appearance, refined language, banter and cynicism, which manifested the contradiction between spirit and material, aristocracy and vulgarity, art and nature. Because the dandy regarded himself as artwork, aestheticism is essential to understanding the phenomenon of the dandy. Irrespective of the cultural location of dandyism — and dandyism was as important in London, aestheticism was always central to dandyism. Thus Regenia Gagnier is correct to claim that —the history of dandyism is inseparable from that of aestheticism... (Gagnier, Regenia, 1991: 3). If dandyism can be

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regarded as a performance expressing and combining aristocracy and rebellion, aestheticism is one of its weapons.

To begin, let's take a very quick glance at the history of 19th century aestheticism in Europe. In literature, the aesthetic movement's guiding principal was 'art for art's sake'. This aesthetic doctrine holds that art is an end in itself and does not need to have any moral, religious, political, or educational purpose. Only when art is for art's sake can it be immortal. This idea derives from the 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant's notion that art can only be judged by its own criteria and not by anything external to it — though Kant himself was much more of a moralist than an aesthete. Supporters of this aesthetic perspective maintain that the quality of a work of art cannot be assessed by how well it answers questions of what is good and what is right. Art, from the aesthetic perspective, is primarily about expressing beauty in a highly artistic style.

The dandy is the new aristocrat, though art, rather than inheritance, had become the standard of social evaluation. Richard Pine thinks that the forefather of the dandy is the herald in his *The Dandy and the Herald: Manners, Mind and Morals from Brummell to Durrell*, Certainly, the herald dresses colorfully and his being is bound up with his sense of style, but as Pine rightly says, unlike the herald who serves a definite social role, —[t]he dandy is concerned with style, and for the pure dandy the accomplishment of manners, the aristocracy of taste, results in sublimation. (Pine, Richard., 1988: 41); A dandy's only mission was to be himself, and to develop an extraordinary and elegant self-image. As George Walden explains, —a dandy is most immediately recognizable by the fanatical care he or she takes with their appearance (Walden, George., 2002: 36). The point is also made by Charles Baudelaire who says that —[t]he dandy... stands on an isolated pedestal of self... The dandy has neither obligations nor attachments... no occupation, and no obvious source of support... The dandy's achievement is simply to be himself. (Baudelaire, Charles., 1994: 16) The dandy refused to accept a lifestyle which would conceal his own individuality and personality, the kind of lifestyle, which he believed typified that of the bourgeoisie. Closely connected to one's own elegance was the idea of the self's originality. Dandyism was thus also engaged in a kind of self-worship that demonstrated the aristocratic spirit of the aesthetic and even, paradoxically given the emphasis upon art for art's sake, a kind of moral superiority. As Baudelaire says in *The Painter of the Modern Life*, dandyism is described as —above all, the burning desire to create a personal form of originality, within the external limits of social conventions. It is a kind of cult of the ego which can still survive the pursuit of that form of happiness to be found in others Moreover, the aristocratic dandy did not want to please the masses; he wanted to offend and shock them.

The paper analyzes Oscar Wilde and his dandyism in his theoretical vision. Wilde uses paradoxical language to interpret his dandyism and aestheticism in his works; he reveals the deep cultural meanings of the dandy image, and also the unchangeable historic destiny of the dandy: artists in any city cannot get away from the shadow of formalism after the rise of capitalism. This thesis particularly emphasizes the relationship between morality and evil shown by dandies; it also investigates and interprets dandies' multi-roles in the modern city.

2. Wilde's formalism

The dandy's aestheticism is centered on Formalism, the foundation of dandy performances. Before aestheticism, literati, artists and critics tended to be less concerned with forms of literature than content. However, the dandy's aestheticism departs from this practice and focused upon the outward beauty of things. They are fascinated by appearance and decoration, by the elegance of lifestyle, and dress. In a word, the dandy's aestheticism is about the search for the perfection of appearance. Arthur Ganz notes that:

Above all, the Wildean dandy is the advocate of the supremacy of artistic form. It was his religion, however inadequate as such, to Wilde art meant perfect form. The content, particularly the moral content, of the work was irrelevant; form was everything. The great dandiacal joke which appears over and over again in the play is based on the exalt of the external, or formal, over the internal. The world of dandy is based on the manners not morals. (Arthur, Ganz., 1958: 18)

Wilde was fascinated by the pleasure derived from the contemplation and admiration of his own body and self as well. There are many vivid and colorful dandies. Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* even pay attention to their buttonholes. As the outstanding

dandy at the end of century, Wilde was renowned for his clothing. He always wore bizarre dress, and advocated a revolution in clothing. He wrote about the history of fashion as well as its current developments in newspapers and magazines. He even designed clothing. Regarding the color of clothing, he claimed, —One will be able to discern a man’s views of life by the color he selects. The color of the coat will be symbolic. It will be part of the wonderful symbolism movement in modern art. The imagination will concentrate itself on the waistcoat. Waistcoats will show whether a man can admire poetry or not (Wilde, Oscar., 2002:466)

In general in late Victorian England, individual behavior was guided by rigid conventions, including clothing; flowery and flashy colors were disapproved of, and the wearing of black or grey was universal. Eager to distinguish himself in some way, Wilde delighted in dressing in fine clothing with elaborate adornments and accessories, especially for public occasions. According to his son Vyvyan, he always attracted attention by his flamboyant dress, such as —a velvet coat edged with braid, knee-breeches, black silk stocking, a soft loose silk shirt with a wide turn-down collar and a large flowing green tiell (Holland, Eugene W., 1993:29). Lord Illingworth advises in *A Woman of No Importance*, —Not to be put off with any old-fashioned theories about life... People nowadays are so absolutely superficial that they don’t understand the philosophy of the superficial. ... Sentiment is all very well for the buttonhole, but the essential thing for a necktie is style. A well-tied tie is the first serious step in life (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 444). And as he says: —One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 1114).

Wilde emphasizes the importance of clothes, Barbey also notes the important point that, —Dandyism is social, human and intellectual. It is not a suit of clothes, walking about by itself!..... It is the particular way of wearing these clothes which constitutes Dandyism. One may be a dandy increased clothes... Dandyism is a complete theory of life... it is a way of existing (Barbey d’Aurevilly, Jules., 1897: 17). Dandyism is not about the clothes alone, elegant as they are, but what they mean as an outward sign and as a form of rebellion - they are part of a style and approach to life.

Apart from elegant dress, decorative art also provided Wilde with a novel and a spiritual lifestyle. Wilde began collecting beautiful and exotic antiques during his early years at Trinity College. His room at Oxford was filled with a variety of exquisite items, including celadon vases, Greek statues and rugs, and photographs of favorite paintings, and he included lilies and sunflowers as decorative elements as if they were talismans. By doing so, he constructed in his house an atmosphere that he claimed was essential for cultivating the dandy temperament. His famous aphorism —I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china (Ellmann, Richard., 1988: 45) wittily reveals his pursuit his aesthetics of the self. Wilde’s enthusiasm for decorative art can also be seen in the binding and illustrations of his books. Probably no writer in history demanded such perfection in book binding and illustration nor was so conscious of them. In discussing the relationship between decorative art and aesthetic education, Wilde repeatedly aimed to obtain theoretical support from Plato. However, there are essential differences between the aesthetic concepts of Plato and Wilde: Plato intended to ascend to the idea of beauty and then beyond that to the eternal good through the tangible beautiful form, while Wilde indulged in earthly beauties and their forms. Although most Victorians were very frugal at the time, Wilde was extravagant in his dress and parties. Bell-Villada notes, —whereas Pater hid and labored as an anchorite in the shadows of old Oxford, Wilde would shine and sparkle amid fashionable, worldly London’s smart salon (Bell-Villada, Gene H., c1996:88). Consequently, Wilde became known in London for his unconventional costumes and lifestyle. Even the Prince of Wales asked to meet him, making the famous affirmation, —I do not know Mr. Wilde, and not to know Mr. Wilde is not to be known (Ellmann, Richard., 1988: 129).

During the reign of Victoria, in the United Kingdom, the word morality was frequently discussed. Everything was judged by a moral standard. Morals were used to define social norms. However, if art was judged by this standard too, it loses its independence and power of attraction, going against the principle that all art is freedom. Thus Pater and Ruskin launched the aesthetic movement to defend the independence of arts. Wilde thought that society was the origin and foundation of morals, but the sphere of art and ethics were distinct and separate. He emphasized that morals are used to confine society, and art does not belong to society. This kind of thought goes beyond Victorian traditional morals which are hypocritical, stubborn and full of strict ethical codes.

3. **Morality and evil**

Regarding the relationship between art and morality, Wilde argues that artists are creators of beauty. Their only purpose is to pursue beauty rather than lecture morals. —There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 17). Art is not dependent on morals for existence. It has its own independent life and value. However, we need to be clear that in this sentence, —immoral means amoral, which means that art does not contain morals. So artists can and should express everything, whether vice or virtue. Artists should not have ethical sympathies because —aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 997)

When the press argued that his works are characterized by evil qualities which are anti-moral, in order to defend his own works, Wilde pointed out that the sphere of art and ethics are totally different, and therefore his art should not be judged by a moral standard. Literature creates a sense of beauty that is irrelevant to social morals. If morality fails to ennoble men's hearts but teaches them hypocrisy instead, then they are useful only to hypocritical high society, but of no value to literature. Art should transcend morals — this underpins the dandy's attitude to the relationship between art and morality.

In addition, poetry should be separated from the good, and artists find beauty in evil. Gautier, Pater and Wilde all emphasize the difference between art and morality. In the preface of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Gautier critiques the orthodox literary criticism of the capitalist class that emphasizes art's moral function and hold high classic works; they condemn contemporary works of romanticism which in their eyes have broken traditional social morals. Gautier, however, stresses that art has no relationship with politics and morality. He takes Molière, the master of classics, as an example. Molière, notes Gautier, also ridiculed social morals in his work. Pater also argues that the beauty of art is unique and separated from social reality. Ethical thought is the enemy of art. Wilde's views are more definite. He argues that art does not depend on morals to survive, and further points out that all art is immoral. Moreover, beauty is more supreme than ethics; evil elements can also be in art. Wilde incorporated many images of evil and comparisons to evil in his works. The primary reason that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was slammed so fiercely by reviewers in London upon publication was that, Wilde did not draw a clear distinction between vice and virtue. Wilde said in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, —Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art and —no artist has ethical sympathies, an ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 17) In Wilde's opinion, evil reflects something novel, individual and rebellious to fight against the unchangeable and vulgar mainstream of bourgeoisie.

As the leader of aestheticism, which was the first manifestation of the European mind's rebellion against the morality of the bourgeois age, Wilde preferred moral ambivalence to the certainty of moral conventions. He was fascinated by good and evil; indeed, the structure of his novel is based on the tensions between beauty and ugliness and good and evil, which drive the plotlines of the story. He described the book's hero, Dorian Gray, as follows: —Grace was his, and the white purity of boyhood, and beauty such as old Greek marbles kept for us (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 41) He is so gorgeous that the painter Basil exclaims that he was created to be worshipped. The main point of the novel is not beauty but the hypocrisy and evil behind it. Dorian is faced with two different ways of being, which are represented by Basil and Henry. The former is a symbol of beauty and virtue, while the latter symbolizes evil and vice. Henry says to Dorian with great confidence: —Yes, Dorian, you will always be fond of me. I represent to you all the sins you have never had the courage to commit (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 70). Thus, he ascribes his attraction to evil. Why is the spotless, pure Dorian chasing after evil? Wilde wanted to explore how to find evil within beauty and vice versa. —Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book. There were moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 115). Wilde suggests that the reason that Dorian commits crimes was that he believes that crime was a means of attaining beauty. It seems that the main characters' actions in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflect Wilde's interest in the mutual conversion of beauty and ugliness, good and evil.

According to Wilde, evil may come out of kindness, and good may come out of evil, a kind of rebellion and a subversion of the moral values of bourgeoisie. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Mrs. Erylne is rejected by high society because she elopes with someone when she is young. —You don't know what may be in store for you, unless you leave this house at once. You don't know what it is to fall into the pit, to be despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at — to be an outcast! (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 398) Her crime

lies in the fact she betrays the moral standards of high society, infuriating the noble class, and she achieves infamy. She tries to atone for her crime, but is rejected. Her daughter opposes her — the decent Lady Windermere. It is Mrs. Erlynne, the abandoned woman, who is considered depraved and evil, but who saves the fame and family of Lady Windermere, the so-called decent woman. Finally, unable to establish herself in high society Mrs. Erlynne leaves; this appears glorious but is hypocritical and shameless. Similarly, in *A Woman of No Importance*, Mrs. Arbuthnot is also guilty: when young, she is raped and abandoned by Lord Illingworth. Enduring the discrimination, she undergoes all sorts of hardships and deprivations and raises her son. With her kind nature and pure heart, she resists the shallow, selfish and ignorant high society of the Victorian age. She unyieldingly rejects Illingworth's proposal, refuses hypocrisy and evil, and saves her dignity as a human being. In fact, what is truly evil is the traditional morality of capitalism that leads to misfortune. In *An Ideal Husband*, the boundary between good and evil is further blurred. Sir Robert Chiltern sells the national secret; however, such an ugly act makes him an important politician and a pillar of the state. Through Mrs. Cheveley, Wilde expresses his criticism and disapproval of traditional bourgeois morality: —Remember to what a point your Puritanism in England has brought you. ... Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues — and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins — one after another (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 480). In these works, the severances and cruelty that traditional morality exerts are obviously unreasonable. The writer sympathises with those kind souls who want to atone for their crimes and also expose the irrationality of established morality.

It can be noted that the works of Wilde mainly focus on the reality of the inner world, to reveal the self of humans. It is also the dandy's way to look at the world. In addition to presenting a fuzzy division between vice and virtue, Wilde argued that humans should enjoy their youth, love and beauty, because those things are short and limited; however, he also revealed the wickedness of human nature by describing crime, murder, slander etc. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* again provides a very good example of the relationship between the inner and outer world's, the way in which beauty masks evil. Wilde outlines a very miserable family background for Dorian: his parents' death, his grandfather's murder, and conspiracy, all make Dorian's image seem more vivid and perfect. —Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic, Worlds had to be in travail, that the meanest flower might blow. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 41) When the story comes to the murder, a very horrible picture is presented to readers.

There was a stifled groan, and the horrible sound of someone choking with blood. Three times the outstretched arms shot up convulsively, waving grotesque stiff-fingered hands in the air. And —The thing was still seated in the chair, straining over the table with bowed head, and humped back, and long fantastic arms (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 123).

Moreover, with Dorian's degradation, the picture becomes increasingly hideous:

He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead, or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age. He would place his white hands beside the coarse bloated hands of the picture, and smile. He mocked the misshapen body and the failing limbs (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 103).

Dorian admires and enjoys his evil soul – indeed, the more he indulges in his own beauty, the more interest he takes in his corrupted soul. Dorian's attitude to evil-doing is confusing, and the reason he commits crime is that he firmly believes that is a way to reach and realize beauty. Dorian is a man testing poison by indulging in enjoyment.

The Picture of Dorian Gray demonstrates Wilde's interest in evil. Dorian is always fearful that a portrait of him will reflect his real soul. With fear and thoughts of his sins looming large in his mind, he moves the picture, covered with a piece of amaranth cloth, to a study room and forces himself to forget it. However, Dorian cannot stop himself from appreciating his picture, which depicts his sin and becomes uglier day by day. Wilde attempts to reevaluate evil, setting aside the usual aesthetic experience.

Besides, the pages are loaded with ugly imagery, such as a crude bar, a noisy ballroom, an opium den, and old prostitutes. —Ugliness was the one reality. The coarse brawl, the loathsome den, the crude violence of disordered life, the very vileness of thief and outcast, were more vivid, in their intense

actuality of impression, than all the gracious shapes of Art, the dreamy shadows of Song. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 141) Much of the book exudes a violent atmosphere. Appreciation and emphasis of evil is not an occasional theme but penetrates the whole plot. The following passage typifies the tone of the work: —Filippo, Duke of Milan, who slew his wife, and painted her lips with a scarlet poison that her lover might suck death from the dead thing he fondled... Gian Maria Visconti, who used hounds to chase living men, and whose murdered body was covered with roses by a harlot who had love him. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 114)

To conclude, the dandy's aestheticism was used to explore and describe evil and vices, to find humanity in evil. This undoubtedly shocked and subverted traditional aesthetic standards and the self-righteous morality of bourgeoisie. In *The Artist as Critic*, Wilde emphasizes that literature has an independent life and is able to convey its own information. This view is elaborated in detail in *The Decay of Lying*: —Art never expresses anything but itself. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 924) Wilde believed in art's independent life and self value, asserting that art has no purposes other than itself and is independent. Art is a system in itself and for itself. He does not agree that art is heteronymous, that is, correlated with other things. In his eyes, art is hostile to the age, which contains two connotations: on the one hand, art reflects itself rather than the age; on the other hand, what art shows is quite the opposite of the spirit of the age. Regarding art history, sometimes art has to return to the past, and at other times it has to go ahead before the age.

It is quite normal that works produced in this century can only be appreciated and understood in the next century. Therefore, art is not the production of the times. It does not reflect the age to which it is even hostile sometimes. Since art is irrelevant to the age, it has to get rid of bondage. —Two things that every artist should avoid are modernity of form and modernity of subject-manner. To us, who live in the nineteenth century, any century is a suitable subject for art except our own. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 930)

4. **Wildean paradox**

Paradox is also a very strong tool in his dandy's aesthetic world. Wilde was fully aware of the hypocrisy and selfishness of bourgeois society. His dramas focus on social intercourse, family, love and marriage in British Victorian society, reflecting the hollowness, fraud, hypocrisy and shamelessness of high society and exposing the hypocritical morality of the ruling class. The greatest feature of his work is his use of irony and paradox, derived from Wilde's own marginal role in society. The basis of Wilde's skillful use of paradoxical language can be traced to his Irish identity as well as the Victorian social background. The so-called English upper class of the late 19th century was characterized by hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness, decorating itself with morality and elegance but immoral in mind. On the one hand, behind the dandy mask, he strongly resisted Victorian materialism and middle-class moral values; on the other hand, he depended on the middle and upper classes for his living.

Indeed, the use of paradox is perhaps the most typical characteristic of Wilde's writing. Kohl notes that —their style of epigrammatic compression gives striking form to their ostentatious dismissal of established current views of reality, and by this means they demonstrate their intellectual superiority, conceal their own opinions, and leave themselves sufficient latitude to escape all commitment (Kohl, Norbert., 1989: 228) The dandy in Wilde's work has his unique charm demonstrated in his distinguished conversations: the dandy is adept at combining epigrams with paradoxes. He gives the reader a fresh and new feeling. This new comic form, which emphasizes dramatic language, reflected Wilde's creativity.

Along with using the dandies and ladies of quality as main characters and their lifestyles as integral to his plots, Wilde uses paradoxical language throughout his plays to reveal the true nature of the upper class, those with good behavior. Algernon states, —Lane's view on marriage seems somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 322) Generally speaking, the higher order with its higher education should set a good example for the lower class. However, Algernon suggests that only common people like Lane, less educated but less contaminated by bourgeois hypocrisy, can set a good example for the upper class.

Consider the following dialogue:

Lady Bracknell: I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it, and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 331).

Ignorance which is normally regarded as a sign of inferiority, becomes a delicate exotic fruit in Lady Bracknell's opinion. Ignorance becomes the source of Jack's merit and something upon which Lady Bracknell heaps praise. In contrast, it is implied that modern education in England produces nothing. These paradoxical comments not only reveal the mannered moral principles of the upper class but also criticize the Victorian educational system.

Victorian love and marriage are other targets of excoriation by dandy. The Importance of Being Earnest provides a very good example. On the surface, the upper class has standard moral principles and serious attitudes towards marriage. However, when asked by Algernon why she broke her engagement several times, Cecily states, —It would hardly have been a really serious engagement if it hadn't been broken off at least once (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 348). Lady Bracknell says, —I'm not in favor of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable. The first impression she gives is that her opinion is amusing and absurd, but in fact it reveals something important about the vulnerability of engagement and marriage. The paradox also reveals the true inner world of human beings, who are frequently evil but afraid of this discovery. Lady Bracknell's words indicate that in Victorian society, what matters is not happiness in life but rather decorating oneself perfectly because —we live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 300) Of course, the dandy appreciates beautiful surfaces, but the moral veneer of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy is not beautiful but merely petty.

There is also an interesting dialogue that occurs between Lady Bracknell and Algernon about the widowed Lady Harbury, whose husband recently died:

Lady Bracknell: I'm sorry if we are little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered, she looks quite younger.

Algernon: I hear her hair has turned gold from grief (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 328).

Normally, a husband's death would be a blow, and his wife would be altered because of suffering great pain. But the truth is that Lady Harbury is ready now to go and become a seductress, and enjoy a new life, having been freed by the death of her husband —unconventional changes indeed. Such paradoxes, which appear throughout Wilde's plays, vividly manifest how so-called Victorian social decorum was a mask of conformity. Wilde reveals people's true feelings and motives behind the mask through his dialogues. Moreover, he is not unsympathetic to their true feelings, just to the hypocrisy that prevents these feelings being truly expressed, except perhaps on the stage.

By naming the hero of one of his most well known plays —Earnest, Wilde also criticizes Victorian seriousness, prudery, and hypocrisy. Quite ridiculously, both Gwendolyn and Cecily dream of marrying a man named Earnest. Gwendolyn expresses her affection to Jack by stating, —Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you... in an age of ideals... and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Earnest (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 329). Cecily states, —You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girl's dream of mine to love some-one whose name was Ernest. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 349)

The examples overwhelmed in Wilde's works. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry says, —The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it and —I can sympathize with everything, except suffering. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 371) His four comedies are famous for their paradoxes. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lord Darlington defines the concept of a cynic, —A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 403) and —I can resist everything except temptation. (Ibid) In *A Woman of No Importance*, —The one advantage of playing with fire... is that one never gets even singed. It is the people who don't know how to play with it who get burned up. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 419) and —The only serious form of intellect I know is the British intellect. And on the British intellect the illiterates play the drum. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 423) In *An Ideal Husband*, Mrs. Cheveley says, —... except their husbands. That is the one thing the modern woman never understands. (Wilde, Oscar.,

1949: 501) All of these paradoxes and unmasking are possible because the dandy occupies another social and moral vantage point — one which is able to transcend the moral façade of people with wit and practical wisdom that expresses people's more authentic desires.

Wilde said he had an inborn anti-morality. It was natural that puritan morality was a target. Viscount Goering noted: —And in England a man who can't talk morality twice a week to a large, popular, immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 492) Dandies scorned philistinism and babbitttry, the result of puritanical morality; they kept a high profile and distinguished themselves from the bourgeoisie. Describing the dandies of London, Lord Darling noted: Oh, nowadays 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. Besides, there is this to be said. If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn't. Such is the astounding stupidity of optimism. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 371)

The dandy thus mixed profound thought and a playful attitude towards life with a paradoxical use of language to form a serious cynicism, and with great charm. This can perhaps be summed up as: —We are bogged down in the quagmire while our hearts are even loftier than the sky. (Wilde, Oscar., 1949: 250) The quagmire was the culture of mediocrity and hypocrisy of the time, as well as the sensual pleasure indulged in; the lofty hearts represent the exalted philosophy of life, the attempt to combine aestheticism and hedonism — a utopian ideal doomed to failure. However, even in failure, this rebellious spirit was immortalized in drama. The dandy cared only about form, appearance, happiness, and satisfaction. Beneath the surface ridicule and rage, there was a hidden and serious black humor. Through subversive wit, they demonstrated a profound anti-conventional nature. Their performance was totally incompatible with the morality of the British bourgeoisie.

According to George Woodcock, —Wilde knew how to handle conversation as a great musician knows how to handle an instrument.... His conversation reflects the merits of his thought and work — his quick intellectual penetration, his breadth of learning and rapidity of intuitive insight, his love of phrases and verbal embroidery, his delight at shocking in and out of season by epigram and exaggeration. And, behind all this, Wilde, as he talked, revealed continually that duality which exists in all his actions and thought, and which is expressed at its extreme in his favorite conversational device, the paradox. (Woodcock, George., 1949) Norbert Kohl argues, —it is neither characterization nor plot construction that endows Wildean comedy with the unique flavor, which is derived above all from the language and dialogue. This is what distinguishes Wilde from all other dramatists, and it constitutes the originality of his contribution to the history of English comedy. (Kohl, Norbert., 1989: 227) It can be drawn that Wilde's literary success does not lie in his plots but rather his paradoxical and witty language, and the use of satire and black humor. His writing skills are also his dandy way to express revolt and shock, the reversal of language and emotional expressions challenge selfish moral values related to marriage, love and life. His dramas are based on the contradiction between morality and evil. It is through the contrast between truth and falsehood, good and evil, and beauty and ugliness, that he criticizes social morality and liberates humanity from conscience, thus revealing the virtue of human nature. As a result, truth, good and beauty are no longer bound and distorted by social morality, while falsehood, evil and ugliness are highly valued and constitutes elements of beauty.

Wilde, a homosexual, tweaks the establishment's nose, turns the heterosexual world upside down with a vengeance; once upside down, the lofty lord is no higher than the common clerk. He proclaims himself Lord of Language. He stumbles and learns the truth of his own words that the truth is never simple and certainly not pure. For Belford, as an immature artist Wilde imitated other poets; as a mature artist he stole ideas and spun them into his own tales. When he has a body of work, he stole from himself. Plagiarism was another form of lying, another form of narcissism: he loved his words too much not to toss them into essays, novels and plays, diluting the power of his epigrams and producing an oeuvre of echoes (Belford, Barbara., 1997: 338). Wilde himself explains, to the world I seem, by intention on my part, a dilettante and dandy merely.... It is not wise to show one's heart to the world — and as seriousness of manner is the disguise of the fool, folly in its exquisite modes of triviality and indifference and lack of care is the robe of the wise man. In so vulgar an age as this we all need masks. (Wilde, Oscar., 1962: 353) Reviewing these paradoxes and the epigrams in his works, we can conclude that Wilde's paradoxes reveal a contradictory relationship with conventional opinion, in that what was deemed truth was truly false and shallow, while the truth was repressed but is released. Wilde desired to distinguish

himself from all that was ordinary, including language, behavior, and lifestyle, with the dandy mask. As a dandy, Wilde attaches great importance to beauty, as well as to morality and evil which are frequently discussed in his works. Morality is a social need of humanity and evil reveals the true face of human beings; humanity belongs to the realm or precondition of beauty and beauty can produce evil too.

While wit and paradox are used by the dandy to expose bourgeois hypocrisy, there is also a darker side of morbidity, melancholy, excess, the use of opiates, and excessive-drinking; however, what society brands as evil are what the dandy often embraces as a source of transcendence. In a world of such hypocrisy and demonic means are part of the pathway of transcendence, and rebellion. With his wisdom, he ponders the evil ignored by ordinary people, and through art he helps the reader to see beauty in evil and perceive the eternal sadness in beauty.

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