Socialism and Gender Relations in Oscar Wilde's the Importance of Being Earnest (1895), and a Comparison with George Bernard Shaw's Mrs Warren's Profession (1893/1902)

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Abstract

This thesis first explores Oscar Wilde's aesthetic and socialist ideas and then examines the ways in which they impact the portrayal of gender relations in his play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). The thesis analyses how Wilde's perception of gender roles assigned to men and women by the Victorian Society affects the characters in the play where men are effeminate and more individual, and women are the ones without individualism. The final chapter brings Wilde's aesthetic socialism into dialogue with George Bernard Shaw's more traditional socialism, in particular with his portrayal of the position of women in late-Victorian capitalism in his play *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1893/1902).

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, *Mrs Warren's Profession*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Socialism, Gender, Aestheticism, Victorian England

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Introduction

Oscar Wilde, being both famous and infamous during his time, is a person whose life was full of contradictions and oppositions. He was an Irishman who moved to London and seemed to become more English than the English themselves, his greatest creation being the image built around the name Oscar Wilde. Wilde was a socialist who focused on art and beauty and advocated against social roles, but also enjoyed high class gatherings and good social position. He was against private property and considered it immoral but at the same time valued expensive things and a luxurious life. Wilde was an aesthete who argued that art and beauty existed for their own sake and held them as the most important aspects of life, but at the same time he wrote plays and essays that criticised the Victorian society of his time and thus conveyed messages through art. Oscar Wilde was also married to a woman and had two children while living the life of a gay man, even being imprisoned for *gross indecency*. Many of the contradictions of Wilde's life were products of how Victorian London society fostered the concept of double lifestyle by permitting men to do almost anything as long as it was done away from the public eye.

This thesis aims to explore how Oscar Wilde's politics and his aesthetic socialism shape the gender relations in his 1896 comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It will do this by first exploring Wilde's life, aesthetic, and social theories and, in particular, his 1891 essay, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. The thesis then analyses how Wilde's conception of socialist individualism shaped the constructions of male and female characters and their interactions in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. This thesis concludes by comparing Wilde's portrayal of gender dynamics in this play and his aesthetic socialism, with George Bernard Shaw's 1895 play Mrs Warren's Profession.

1. The Life of Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was born in 1854 Ireland into a Dublin bourgeois family that held an established position in that society, which provided him a rich background (Ryder 8-9). Wilde's mother Lady Jane Wilde was a feminist, literary hostess and an active Irish nationalist, poet and translator (Diniejko 1). Under the pen name of Speranza, she wrote for, and edited, nationalist journals and organised political campaigns (Kiberd 53 and 61). Wilde's father, Sir William Wilde, who was known as the dirtiest man in Dublin (Kiberd 53), was a famous scholar who wrote in fields of medicine, archaeology and Irish folklore (Diniejko 1). Sir William was an ophthalmic surgeon who established his career in St Mark's Hospital and Dispensary for Diseases for Eye and Ear. He edited medical journals and published his own work in the field of medicine based on his experience traveling through the Mediterranean and Near East (Ryder 8). Oscar Wilde was not the only child in the Wilde family: he had an older brother, Willie, born in 1852, and a sister, Isola, born in 1857, who died at the age of nine from fever (Ryder 8). Sir William died while Wilde was studying at Oxford University and his mother moved to London to stay close to Wilde after he graduated (Kiberd 55). Lady Jane died while Wilde was imprisoned in Reading Gaol for *gross indecency*, so he was not able to visit her during her last days. Despite Wilde leaving Ireland and moving to England, he was proud of his parents and their achievements and acknowledged the rich legacy they left for him (Ryder 7).

Like many characters in his plays, Wilde's life was marked by secrets and masks, which he had put on to keep his position in society. Many of the contradictions of Wilde's life start from the very way he looked: having a tall and, in the eyes of others, ungraceful body, Wilde wore expensive clothes and studied elegance that went far beyond the norms of society of his time (Kiberd 55). While he was against performativity, the society he lived in forced many into

conformity because a good position in society was required if one wanted success. The classic image of Oscar Wilde is that of a long-haired dandy, wearing a suit with a carnation in his buttonhole (Dobson 39). One famous portrayal of Wilde's clothes that express a certain attitude, which has now become known as Wildean stereotype, was made by Napoleon Sarony: "a kind of effete languor, in which Wilde, decked out in capes, velvet waistcoats and silken knee breeches, poses with an expression of exquisite ennui" (Dobson 35). This Wildean image is very much alive today thanks to the many productions of his plays and a number of academic works being written about him (Buckton 120).

One important aspect of Wilde's life was being an Irishman who lived in London. Kiberd has argued that Wilde's double identity led him towards sketching out a Utopia, a no-place, which was neither Ireland nor England. Wilde believed that every Irishmen has an element of English inside of them, but also that every Englishmen has an element of Irishness (Kiberd 59-60, 66, 71). Wilde criticised Victorian Englishmen for attributing to the Irish the emotions they have repressed, in order to maintain their obsession for organising the world into antitheses based on nationality, gender, class and morals (Kiberd 56 and 59). For Wilde, English perception of the Irish, or rather, of the so-called stage Irishman, spoke more about English problems than the Irish themselves. In his writing stage-Ireland becomes stage-England which highlighted the triviality and superficiality of such concepts: "His solution was more complex and daring: to become a very Irish kind of English man, just as in Ireland his had been rather English kind of Irish family" (Kiberd 56-58).

Growing up in Dublin, Wilde witnessed a society that considered words a powerful weapon. It was a colonial society where one had to be careful about what one said, where many things were considered proper when they were not talked about publicly but were condemned when brought to public attention. (McCormack 18). This was known as the conspiracy of silence and it was also

what defined Wilde of Victorian London. While everyone knew about his affairs with men, they were tolerated as long as they were not publicly talked about; as soon as it became public, Wilde was prosecuted by law (McCormack 20-21). Homosexuality was illegal at the time in England and the newspapers in London reported around twenty annual convictions from 1890 to 1895 for sex between men (Cook 151-153 quoted in Cook 55-56). Wilde's involvement with the law and his imprisonment began when the Marquess of Queensberry - the author of Queensberry rules for boxing, whose son, Lord Alfred Douglas, nicknamed Bosie, was in a relationship with Wilde - accused him publicly of being a sodomite, thus breaking the conspiracy of silence (Ellmann 409 quoted in Robson 9). This accusation led Wilde to sue Queensberry for libel - a case that quickly collapsed (McCormack 21). The Central Criminal Court Session Paper declared the hearing itself unfit for publication and Wilde was further prosecuted by the Crown for homosexuality, which was, at the time, referred to as *gross indecency* (Holland 197). The full truth about Wilde's three trials and his imprisonment for *gross indecencies* was discovered later through a letter which he wrote to Bosie, later published as *De Profundis* in 1949 and his collected letters published in 1962 (Holland 199). After the two prosecutions, Wilde was sentenced to two years of hard labour in Reading Gaol (Holland 209).

There were many misconceptions about Wilde's sexuality and imprisonment after his death "Few writers of the past 150 years have had their lives so subjected, posthumously, to gossip, uncorroborated anecdote and even total fabrication as Oscar Wilde" (Holland 197). His homosexuality was ignored for many years, however, since the late 20th century Wilde has gained the reputation of being a gay martyr, though this too is questionable. Wilde did not prosecute Queensberry to fight for the rights of queer people, but instead denied any relations with men, believing that he was fighting for his art, and only later realized that his own freedom was in

question (Holland 197, 207). Despite this, the importance of Wilde's contribution to the fight against discrimination against the queer community is undeniable, and his fate serves as a clear example of the prejudice and intolerance they have had to suffer and are still suffering today.

2. Oscar Wilde as Aesthete and Socialist

2.1. Aestheticism

Oscar Wilde was known for his aestheticism, which can be defined as a: "belief that taste and the pursuit of beauty should be chief principles in not only art, but also life" (Livesey 261). The movement itself originated from the French artist Théophile Gautier and his preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1863), where he promoted the idea of *l'art pour l'art*, better known in English as *art for art's sake*. This differed greatly from other 19th-century principles as it was based on a belief that art should not be valued according to social criteria, but in its own terms:

> In aestheticism the subjective view of beauty becomes the primary means of judging value: when considering whether a poem or a painting is good, aestheticism merely asks if it is beautiful or meaningful as a work of art (Livesey 261-262).

Aestheticism as a movement had several defining characteristics. The word *aesthetic* originated from ancient Greek and became a German neologism in the 1820s and 1830s (Morgan 667). Aestheticism puts beauty as the most important aspect of both art and life, it is contemplative rather than active, it is a self-conscious movement that tends to use characters' gender to express ambiguity and transgress the erotic standards of the time (Hanson 150-151). Aesthetes believed that art should not be used for moral purposes or be educative; instead, its only purpose should be the pursuit of beauty. They believed that art should exist on its own, be free, and that morality ruins it (Quintus 559-561).

In his essay, *The Truth of Masks* (1891) Wilde argues that art has only one aim, and that is its own perfection. In his view, art is something that exists and functions by its own laws. As he makes clear, this influenced his attitude to the theatre, which he views as a place where art and

beauty are realised and shown to the world. For Wilde, theatre should be a place where people who are experts in different areas of dramatic production work together to create beautiful, realistic, and accurate costumes and sets for the plays. When producing a play, one should pay attention to everything, from attire and wigs to the smallest detail on a piece of jewellery. Not only should costumes be representative of the time the play is set in but should also be comfortable and natural for actors playing the characters: "Lord Lytton's proposal that the dresses should merely be beautiful without being accurate is founded on a misapprehension of the nature of costume, and of its value on the stage (Wilde "Truth of Masks" 169). As this shows, Wilde's aestheticism plays a key role in his conception of theatre.

One important characteristic of Wilde's aestheticism is his view on the relationship between art and nature. In his essay *The Decay of Lying: An Observation* (1891) through the dialogue between two characters, Cyril and Vivian, Wilde expresses his ideas about this relationship. For Vivian, art is above nature because nature is modelled on art and not the other way around; or rather, the beauty in nature can be found because of art:

> If we take Nature to mean natural simple instinct as opposed to self-conscious culture, the work produced under this influence is always old-fashioned, antiquated, and out of date. One touch of Nature may make the whole world kin, but two touches of Nature will destroy any work of Art. If, on the other hand, we regard Nature as the collection of phenomena external to man, people only discover in her what they bring to her. She has no suggestions of her own. (Wilde, "Decay" 20).

Furthermore, Vivian holds nature does not help us love art, because it is not nature that produces art, but art that produces nature. Because of this, the more people study art the less they are care

about it, because art cannot be judged and forced into existence, it exists on its own and is, in itself, perfect (Wilde "Decay" 7):

> Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror. She has flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses. (Wilde, "Decay" 28).

Wilde despises everything that came to be through forced social norms and roles and believes in the freedom of people to do what they want and not what they have to. This view of society is closely linked to his understanding of art. In his view, it is impossible to make art beautiful and force it to be something that it is not, because art is beauty itself. Wilde strived to imagine a society where everything would be focused on creating art, a world where people would not be forced to create, but rather want to create which would allow art to exist:

> Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. The third stage is when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness. That is the true decadence, and it is from this that we are now suffering. (Wilde, "Decay" 21).

Crucially, this view of art in society becomes the basis of his socialism, as can be seen in his essay, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891). There, Wilde argues that what ruins art are capitalism and altruism, and his aestheticism is explicitly anti-commerce. He argues that altruism damages poetry and art because people are forced to write for others and not for art itself. Art is ruined when it is dictated by someone, and when it is made for demand it loses its value and purpose:

> whenever a community or a powerful section of community, or a government of any kind, attempts to dictate to the artist what he is to do, Art either entirely vanishes, or becomes

> stereotyped, or degenerates into a low and ignoble form of craft (Wilde "Soul of Man" 289-290).

In Wilde's view, the element that would benefit the most from his vision of socialism is art since people would do things because they want to and not because they are obliged to. Art is beautiful because it shows the artist as they are, away from public interest: "A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want" (Wilde, "Soul of Man" 290). For Wilde this will prevent selfishness and egotism because people will lead a natural life, the way they want to and not the way society wants:

> It will be a marvellous thing – the true personality of man – when we see it. It will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows. It will not be at discord. It will never argue or dispute. It will not prove things. It will know everything. And yet it will not busy itself about knowledge. It will have wisdom. Its value will not be measured by material things. It will have nothing. And yet it will have everything, and whatever one takes from it, it will still have, so rich will it be. It will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they will be different. (Wilde "Soul of Man" 279).

2.2. Socialism

Wilde's early interest in politics can be traced to his play *Vera: or, The Nihilists* (1883), and, later, in his review of *Chants of Labour: A Song Book of People* edited by Edward Carpenter in 1889, Wilde openly declared his anarchist position; however, he never joined any organisation (Diniejko 2). At the time, there were three different socialist organisations in England: the Social Democratic Federation founded in 1881 and led by H.M. Hyndman, the Socialist League founded

in 1885 and led by William Morris, and the Fabian Movement founded in 1884 and led by Sidney and Beatrice Webb and George Bernard Shaw (Guy 243-244).

Undoubtedly, Wilde's most important piece of writing on socialism and his view on society is his 1891 essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*.

Firstly, this essay criticises capitalism and altruism. Wilde argues that trying to solve the world's evils will only contribute to the existence of evil in society:

> The majority of people spoil their lives by an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism […] they very seriously and very sentimentally set themselves to the task of remedying the evils that they see. But their remedies do not cure the disease: they merely prolong it. Indeed, their remedies are part of the disease (Wilde "Soul of Man" 269).

Wilde sees the solution to the problems made by capitalism in his version of socialism. He argues that socialism would relieve people of the need of living for others and this would reconstruct society.

Further, Wilde criticises private property and finds it demoralising saying that it encourages crimes and jealousy in people. Wilde argues that a capitalist society puts property in the first place and man in the second, or rather, sees private property as the most important factor:

> Indeed, so completely has man's personality been absorbed by his possessions that the English law has always treated offences against man's property with far more severity than offences against his person, and property is still the test of complete citizenship (Wilde, "Soul of Man" 277).

Wilde believes that private property should be abolished and become public property:

> converting private property into public wealth, and substituting co-operation for competition, will restore society to its proper condition of a thoroughly healthy organism, and insure the material well-being of each member of the community (Wilde "Soul of Man" 271).

Wilde also sees both the legal authority of the state and the authority of one person over the other as degrading whether it be violent or kind. People who live in places with violent governments need to fight against them, but even worse is the situation in which people live in places with kind governments because they do not even realise their oppression:

> When it is violently, grossly, and cruelly used, it produces a good effect, by creating, or at any rate bringing out, the spirit of revolt and Individualism that is to kill it. When it is used with a certain amount of kindness, and accompanied by prizes and rewards, it is dreadfully demoralising. (Wilde "Soul of Man" 285).

He disagrees with authoritarian socialism and advocates the abolition of any kind of government. Wilde argues that the state should be a voluntary association that organises labour, manufacture and distribution: "Of course, authority and compulsion are out of question. All association must be quite voluntary. It is only in voluntary associations that man is free." (Wilde "Soul of Man" 276).

One of the main concerns Wilde expresses in his essay is the development of individualism in society. Wilde believes that individualism is the ability of a person to be truly themselves without any restrictions, it is the absolute freedom of a person to live and do what they want. Individualism enables people to stay true to themselves and their needs and desires without the pressure of society to conform to any of the norms.

Personality and *individualism* were highly discussed terms in late 19th century England. The term personality spoke to the difference between private and public life and a person's surface and depth. The view of Victorian personality was affected by the new findings in cognitive and physical sciences and the realisation of the idea that someone's personality is dependent on the way other people perceive them (Danson 96, 97 quoted in Balkin 28). On the other hand, Individualism was the name of a short-lived movement in late-19th century England. This was not a formal organisation, but was an idea expressed by individuals who opposed any kind of reform in the society and who had a strong hate for the state (Guy 245). Despite Individualists being directly against socialism, one point of agreement between them and Wilde's vision is their view of state and anarchism: both opposed any kind of formal authority and strived to build a different environment. (Guy 246).

Wilde also argues for the abolition of marriage and other institutions, including capitalism itself which he sees as destructive for individualism. For him, socialism would involve no institutional restraint, but would enable the freedom of love and the freedom of people:

> Man has sought to live intensely, fully, perfectly. When he can do so without exercising restraint on other, or suffering in ever, and his activities are all pleasurable to him, he will be saner, healthier, more civilised, more himself (Wilde "Soul of Man" 316).

3. *The Importance of Being Earnest*

The first performance of Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* was in the St. James Theatre London in 1895. It was a popular success, with people queuing up to see it. At first, the play received positive feedback from the audience and the critics. However, after Wilde's trial for *gross indecency* the play was shut down and prevented from being performed again. Despite this, after Wilde's release from the prison, his reputation as a dramatist and writer returned and a script was published before his death in 1900 (Donohue 307-309).

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Oscar Wilde parodies the Victorian view of individualism and the society's tendency to focus on the trivial while disregarding the important. The characters in the play represent what happens to people in a capitalist world with misplaced values. Despite being silly and light-hearted, *The Importance of Being Earnest* also talks about "shady origins, spirit personalities, oppressive patriarchal powers" (Eagleton 4). The characters can be understood as articulating aspects of Wilde's view of society: even if the characters and events seem absurd and unrealistic, their interactions become an indirect commentary on society. In this work, Wilde shows that identity is a kind of fiction and that a person cannot truly be themselves because even when they think they are, that is just another form of acting (Eagleton 6). Society assigns roles to people that do not align with their true wants and feelings, and so people often created a double, someone who could express their true feelings, while, at the same time, they preserved their role in society by putting on a mask. This lifestyle affected what Wilde deemed the most important – individualism.

These ideas of society and individualism can be seen in *The Importance of Being Earnest* through characters of Jack Ernest Worthing, Algernon Moncrieff, Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen

Fairfax and Cecily Cardew, and in particular through the gender dynamics generated by their interactions.

Firstly, both Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff are characters whose individualism is compromised by societal expectations. They both represent people whose identities are established through the creation of fake identities, by the construction of an imaginary double. Jack Worthing leads a double life, having made up a brother, Ernest, who lives in the city, he uses him as an excuse to leave the country and get to London, where he even assumes the name of Ernest. At the beginning of the play, he is perceived as someone who has no individualism because of that fake identity, which prevents him from being able to live as truly himself. On the other hand, Algernon Moncrieff, at the beginning of the play, builds his individualism through the refusal of social norms and avoidance of social gatherings:

> Despite the fact that communal acceptance is required for a social identity, throughout most of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algy is identified by his individuality. This is demonstrated by his defiance of social norms, including his creation of an imaginary friend contrary to the dictates of society's birth scripts (Scholl, 3).

He sees marriage as something absurd and unnecessary because, in his view, no marriage is honest or based on true love: "The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If I ever get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact." (Wilde "Earnest" 8). Moreover, he finds public displays of affection repulsive: "Indeed, it is not even decent…and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase. The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous." (Wilde, "Earnest" 14).

Algernon is the one who introduces Jack to the term he uses to signify a double life, *bunburying*, named after his imaginary invalid friend Bunbury, who he uses as an excuse to leave

town and get to the country. He even takes the name Ernest, posing as Jack's brother, when introducing himself to Cecily. Both Algernon and Jack take the name Ernest in the play, but the irony of the name itself has a comical effect. While being earnest implies being genuine, it appeals to the most ungenuine people in the play, and for very non-earnest reasons. It is, for instance, the most important factor for Gwendolen and Cecily when it comes to choosing a partner:

> my ideal has always been to love someone of the name 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 (Wilde, "Earnest" 20).

The name as such mocks the Victorian tendency to believe that they are focusing on the important while they are really focusing on the trivial. For Gwendolen and Cecily, it is not important if Algernon and Jack really are earnest, but only that their name is Ernest.

Jack loses his individuality by acquiring the role of a guardian and giving up his double life to marry Gwendolen. From the very beginning, Jack was playing a role imposed by society: to be a good example as Cecily's guardian.

> When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in Albany and gets into the most dreadful scrapes (Wilde, "Earnest" 13).

At the end of the play, both Jack and Algernon discover that their double identities were not a lie, that they really are brothers, and that Jack is named Ernest. Despite this, neither Algernon nor Ernest are individuals. Through the institution of marriage, or rather, engagement, they lose their unique identities and become interchangeable shells. In this light, it can be argued that both

were more individual at the beginning of the play, expressing themselves through *bunburying*, than at the end of the play when they lost their individualism by taking the route towards marrying.

Secondly, both Ernest and Algernon can be seen as characters who are effeminate. Ernest is the character representing the effeminate dandy, one who dislikes the domesticity of the middle-classes and has enough free time for flirting. At the end of the 19th century, leisure and class were related to effeminate ideals, which were often linked with immorality and idleness. Because of this, rich people could either seem useful and good, or display idleness, immorality and effeminacy, which is evident in Ernest (Sinfield 38). By inverting gender norms, Jack, or rather, Ernest, appears to be effeminate, taking on the passive role in the relationship with Gwendolen:

> GWENDOLEN. Yes, Mr. Worthing, what have you got to say to me?
>
> JACK. You know what I have got to say to you.
>
> GWENDOLEN. Yes, but you don't say it.
>
> JACK. Gwendolen, will you marry me? (Goes on his knees)
>
> GWENDOLEN. Of course I will, darling. How long have you been about it! I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.
>
> JACK. My own one, I have never loved any one in the world but you. (Wilde, "Earnest" 22).

With this, the question of the stability of gender identity is posed:

> the dandy is a symptom of instability within Victorian gender norms – in this case, the persistent shadow of a feminizing theatricality that the ideal of the Victorian gentleman had ostensibly cast out (Adams 222).

Algernon is an effeminate person as well. He has to marry into a rich family, which was more expected of women at the time, as the men were the ones who usually had to provide for the family (Lalonde 663). Moreover, Algernon also takes on the passive role in his relationship with Cecily. He takes on a double identity as Jack's imaginary brother Ernest to pursue her, but as Scholl argues "[he] becomes a character who unimaginatively follows the social scripts of birth and death, which effaces the individuality which he had previously established by not following the social scripts" (Scholl, 5). Both Ernest and Algernon are characters who do not fit into the Victorian ideal of what a man should be and how he should act. With this, Wilde is using their gender to point out the absurdity of the roles Victorian society assigned to different genders.

Lady Bracknell represents Victorian society itself, being the person who completely conformed to society's standards and lost all her individualism. With her character, Wilde mocks the Victorian obsession with the trivial and their dismissal of the important; or rather, their tendency to see trivial things as something of great importance. She takes on the role of authority and implements society's rules, which is evident in her question to Ernest (Robson 9). While questioning Ernest after his proposal to Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell gives importance to trivial matter such as his family name, amount of property and money, but neglects the importance of his personality and love for Gwendolen. Additionally, she disregards Cecily as Algernon's fiancée until she discovers her wealth and good family name. Just as Wilde points out in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891), the focus is on having instead of being.

Lady Bracknell is also a character who represents the inverted gender norms by taking on the roles which were, at the time, assigned to husbands. As mentioned above, she is the one who questions Ernest to see if he is fit for Gwendolen, and she searches for suitable wife for Algernon. She takes on an active role in the organisation of social gatherings and sees her husband only as a

number used for organising her place settings (Balking 42), expecting him to be present only when she desires so: "LADY BRACKNELL. *(frowning)* I hope not, Algernon. It would put my table completely out. Your uncle would have to dine upstairs. Fortunately he is accustomed to that." (Wilde, "Earnest" 18). With this, the absurdity and irony of Victorian morals are emphasized. By focusing on the way society perceives someone, individualism is neglected and cannot develop. Lady Bracknell gives great importance to property, money and image and because of that, she has no perception of her true wants and desires, thus not ever being an individual.

Both Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew serve as literary devices that serve to pull men away from individualism and force them into social norms, and thus could be seen as the villains of the story. Through their characters, Wilde criticizes the Victorian obsession with marriage and institutions. Gwendolen is the one for whom Ernest gives up his double life to live an 'honest' life, but, for Wilde, even worse is Cecily for whom Algernon gives up his dislike of marriage and conforms. Moreover, because Algernon is not good enough for marriage as he is, Cecily encourages him to rebuild himself into someone who can fit into society's standards of a good groom:

> ALGERNON. […] This world is good enough for me, cousin Cecily.
>
> CECILY. Yes, but are you good enough for it?
>
> ALGERNON. I'm afraid I'm not that. This is why I want you to reform me. You might make that your mission, if you don't mind cousin Cecily.
>
> CECILY. I'm afraid I've no time this afternoon.
>
> ALGERNON. Well, would you mind my reforming myself this afternoon?
>
> CECILY. It is rather Quixotic of you, But I think you should try. (Wilde, "Earnest" 41).

Additionally, Cecily is the one who openly criticizes the concept of double life which is the only expression of individualism for Ernest and Algernon: “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.” (Wilde, “Earnest” 40). Instead, she emphasizes the importance of marriage and plans it out completely in her diary, even before she met Algernon, whom she knows as Ernest. Like Gwendolen, Cecily has a tendency to focus on the trivial. For example, she argues with Gwendolen over their engagement to Ernest, instead of confronting Ernest who was allegedly engaged to both of them simultaneously: “I feel bound to point out that since Earnest proposed to you he clearly has changed his mind.” (Wilde, “Earnest” 61).

Both Gwendolen and Cecily cannot be individuals because of their relationship with the social institution of marriage. Instead of exploring their wants and desires, both only aim to marry someone named Ernest. They are both presented as smart and knowledgeable characters who study difficult subjects and read heavy literature but have completely neglected their intelligence in their need to fulfil societal expectations.

Further, by inverting Cecily’s and Gwendolen’s gender roles, Wilde emphasizes the absurdity of the Victorian perception of gender and its role in marriage. In Gwendolen’s relationship with Jack, she takes on the dominant role and dictates the flow of their engagement where she requires all the necessary formalities:

> GWENDOLEN. I adore you. But you haven’t proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.
>
> JACK. Well … may I propose to you now?

> GWENDOLEN. I think it would be an admirable opportunity. And to spare you any possible disappointment Mr. Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you. (Wilde, "Earnest" 22).

Similarly, in her relationship with Algernon, Cecily takes on the dominant role and dictates the relationship, sketching it out in her diary:

> CECILY. On the 14th of February last. Worn out by your entire ignorance of my existence, I determined to end the matter one way or the other, and after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old tree here. The next day I bought this little ring in your name, and this is the little bangle with the true lovers' knot I promised you always to wear. (Wilde, "Earnest" 54).

Through Gwendolen and Cecily, Wilde comments on the absurdity of the way women were treated, ironically saying that man's role is being at home: "How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes! Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men are infinitely beyond us" (Wilde, "Earnest" 74). This can also be seen in Gwendolen's commentary about her father who she praises for staying at home and leaving the responsibility of handling social relation to his wife. With this, Wilde shows his dislike for Victorian division between genders (Kiberd 60-61). Through Gwendolen and Cecily, Wilde presents a dandified version of women who break through the pure and innocent ideal set down by the Victorian society, which shatters the image of gender categories which were deemed as important at the time (Sinfield 47-48). When taking into consideration gender, it is, in Wilde's view, just another social construct created by society, that tells people, especially women, what they are expected to do, which was to marry rich and have children. By conforming to these expectations, and not because they are women, Cecily and Gwendolen are the villains in the story.

4. Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw

Despite Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw both being Irish dramatists, writers and socialists who moved from Dublin to London, their view of how society should be built differed greatly. They came from different backgrounds and social positions. While Wilde was from a higher class, belonging to a protestant family with a rich background, Shaw came from a protestant family which was not connected with writing and plays. His mother was a singer who left and moved to London when Shaw was sixteen years old, and he stayed with his father until he left for London at the age of twenty. Contrary to Wilde, Shaw established his name as a dramatist later in his life, producing his first play at the age of thirty-six (Dunkel 256).

Their Anglo-Irish identities and English perceptions of the Irish, in particular the stage Irishman, connects Wilde and Shaw. While Wilde wanted to eradicate the difference between English and Irish (Kiberd 56), Shaw emphasized the performativity of roles assigned to each nation depending on the expectation of the other: "these assigned parts are seen as impositions by the other side rather than opportunities for true self-expression" (Kiberd 76). Both Wilde and Shaw used England as a place where they explored what Irish and English identities might mean and tried to redefine the concepts (Kiberd 75).

Wilde and Shaw were both known as socialists in their time, but their visions of socialism differed greatly. Wilde's socialism was focused on aestheticism, art and beauty. He wanted to construct a society in which people would be completely free to be individuals, which would allow art to be produced. On the other hand, Shaw was a leader and a member of a group known as the Fabian Society, which was founded by Bernard Shaw and Sidney and Beatrice Webb in 1884 (Stigler 469). The main interest of the Fabian Society was the classical theory of the rent of the land, which was based on a belief that in every country there is a set amount of land each person

needs and everything more than that is unnecessary. They believed that the redistribution of land would increase the wealth of the population as a whole (Stigler 471). Contrary to Wilde who opposed any kind of private property, Shaw only emphasized the amount of property that would be necessary for the economy to develop. Further, the Fabians believed in the importance of knowledge and education. Because of that, they placed a lot of emphasis on creating schools and higher education institutions that could provide people with the knowledge they need (McKernan 237). On the other hand, Wilde focused on beauty and promotion of art. He did not give great importance to education, but instead, focused on aestheticism.

Instead of focusing on individualism like Wilde, Shaw stressed collectivism, or rather equality, which he considered most important (McKernan 237). Shaw advocated for social reforms through intellectual battles rather than militant ones, speaking out against the higher, ruling class of England and fighting for the rights of working classes, which were barely surviving at the time: "as a journalist Shaw aligned himself against whatever the middle-class or the aristocracy admired: their selfishness, conventional morality, bad manners, and their substitution of emotion for thinking." (Dunkel 257). Wilde and Shaw's vision of government differed greatly as well. While Wilde believed that any kind of government should be abolished and that their only role should be in commerce, Shaw believed that the government must exist, but should be reformed, even getting a position in a municipal office of the Vestry Committee of Ward Seven of St. Pancras. Shaw used his position as a way of fighting for the equality of people and the rights of women. Even though many of his reforms were unsuccessful, his thinking was revolutionary for that time. (Hill 132, 134).

A further difference between Wilde and Shaw is their view of gender, which can be seen in the plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Mrs Warren's Profession*. While Wilde tried to

show the triviality of gender roles which were assigned to people and wanted to eradicate the division between male and female, Shaw uses gender as a way of showing how discrimination functions and the double standards that were connected to each gender. In *Mrs Warren's Profession* both Vivie and Kitty Warren are presented as strong women, but only by taking on the roles that are usually assigned to men. Vivie Warren is a highly educated person, studying at Cambridge University and being extremely good at maths, she wanted to pursue a career where she would not be dependent on anyone, but would provide for herself, which was not considered acceptable by society. For example, in a conversation between Praed and Vivie, Praed mentioned that her "magnificent achievements at Cambridge [were] a thing unheard of in [his] day (Shaw 27). Her mother, Kitty Warren, on the other hand, built her own career, having started from the very bottom to becoming a leading entrepreneur in the lucrative (for the brothel owners) business of prostitution. She is financially independent and has had the opportunity to build her and her daughter's life as she wanted. Shaw argues that women can be independent and smart, but society is built on patriarchal norms that considers them incompetent and gives all the advantages to men. In his preface to *Mrs Warren's Profession*, Shaw argues that prostitution is not as immoral as poverty, because the way society is built prevents women from rising from poverty into independent lives:

> It is no defence of an immoral life to say that the alternative offered by society collectively to poor women is a miserable life, starved, overworked, fetid, ailing, ugly. Though it is quite natural and RIGHT for Mrs Warren to choose what is, according to her lights, the least immoral alternative, it is none the less infamous of society to offer such alternatives. For the alternatives offered are not morality and immorality, but two sorts of immorality. The man who cannot see that starvation, overwork, dirt, and disease are as anti-social as

> prostitution- that they are the vices and crimes of a nation, not merely its misfortunes – is (to put it as politely as possible) a hopelessly Private Person. (Shaw 16-17).

Another difference between Wilde and Shaw is their view of property. As mentioned above, Wilde was strongly against private property, while Shaw was not completely against it. Instead, he was concerned with how it was distributed. What Shaw criticizes is not how much someone owns, but how this might be acquired through the exploitation of others, which he regarded as immoral. This can be seen in Kitty Warren, whose pursuit of prostitution was not considered immoral by both Shaw and Vivie when it was a means of surviving and providing for herself. However, it was seen as immoral when it became a way of earning money by exploiting others. For example, in the conversation between Vivie and Kitty Warren, it is evident that Vivie approved of her mother's prostitution while it was a necessity but was against it when she found out that Kitty Warren was still part of the prostitution chain for her own financial gain. Kitty Warren was under the impression that her daughter Vivie was indifferent about her prostitution. However, nearing the end of the play, Kitty Warren asks Vivie if she minds her involvement in prostitution. Vivie expresses her disdain by saying that she does mind, but for different reasons:

> MRS WARREN. […] But I thought it was ended: you said you didn't mind.
>
> VIVIE [steadfastly] Excuse me: I do mind.
>
> MRS WARREN. But I explained—
>
> VIVIE. You explained how it came about. You did not tell me that it is still going on [She sits]." (Shaw 97-98).

Further, Kitty Warren and George Crofts are considered immoral, not so much for their involvement with the prostitution chain as such, but because they are taking a percentage of the earnings from the women underneath them doing all the hard work:

> We've got two in Brussels, one in Ostend, one in Vienna, and two in Budapest. Of course there are others besides ourselves in it; but we hold most of the capital; and your mother's indispensable as managing director." (Shaw 77).

Wilde and Shaw both emphasized their dislike of capitalism which they considered something that ruins society and prevents freedom. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde discusses the effect of capitalism on society, but not explicitly. The effect is shown through the relations of characters who need to conform to the roles in society and pursue marriage as appropriate wives and husbands. On the other hand, in *Mrs Warren's Profession*, Shaw explicitly criticizes capitalism, especially its effect on women:

> every man and woman present will know that as long as poverty makes virtue hideous and the spare pocket-money of rich bachelordom makes vice dazzling, their daily hand-in-hand fight against prostitution with prayer and persuasion, shelter and scanty arms will be a losing one (Shaw 1).

For Shaw, *Mrs Warren's Profession* is a play written for women, and he noted that it was their enthusiasm and support which allowed the play to be finally performed (Shaw 15).

A final difference between Wilde and Shaw can be found in their views on aestheticism. While Wilde was considered an aesthete, Shaw saw his work as teaching society a moral lesson. Shaw writes about issues in society in order to help create a world where everyone would be equal. Shaw even pokes fun at aestheticism through the character of Praed in *Mrs Warren's Profession*,

who considered himself an aesthete, and who appalled at Vivie's lack of what he views as the essentially feminine qualities of art and grace:

> "PRAED. You make my blood run cold. Are you to have no romance, no beauty in your life?
>
> VIVIE. I don't care for either, I assure you.
>
> PRAED. You can't mean that.
>
> VIVIE. Oh yes I do. I like working and getting paid for it. When I'm tired of working, I like a comfortable chair, a cigar, a little whisky, and a novel with a good detective story in it.
>
> PRAED [rising in a frenzy of repudiation] I don't believe it. I am an artist; and I can't believe it: I refuse to believe it. It's only that you havn't discovered yet what a wonderful world art can open up to you" (Shaw 29).

Praed is a character who emphasizes the importance of enjoying art and proclaims himself an artist, yet seems to do very little about producing art. He is shocked by Vivie's smoking, drinking and education, arguing that art should be the main goal of every person, and sees no beauty in Vivie's vision of future. While aestheticism was a defining movement for Wilde's work, Shaw did not consider it important. Instead of wanting to rebuilt society for the production of art, Shaw wanted to create a society where the distribution of wealth would be equal.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the ways in which Oscar Wilde's perception of aesthetic, political and gender issues is expressed in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and compare Wilde's beliefs to those of George Bernard Shaw and his play *Mrs Warren's Profession*. Both Wilde and Shaw express their political views and socialist ideas in their plays.

Wilde's play relies on irony and sarcasm to critique the society he lives in and shows what happens in the capitalist world which neglects, in his opinion, two of the most important elements of human life, art and beauty. Through the characters in the play, he shows the inverted reality which emphasizes the absurdity of social norms that are forced upon each gender.

On the other hand, Shaw uses the controversial topic of prostitution to emphasize the ugliness of capitalist society. Shaw argues that lower-class women were forced into prostitution and exploited by rich people who were ready to do anything for money. Through the characters in the play, Shaw portrays the unequal opportunities given to women, and the boundaries they need to cross to survive.

Even though their perception of how society should be built and what is important differs, they both strived to imagine a society in which people would be free of the excessive burdens of capitalism.

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