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Polarities in the Works of Oscar Wilde

Protiklady v díle Oscara Wildea

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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V Praze dne 25.6.2013 PetraBurianová

Permission

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used to study purposes.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introducing the Argument

Oscar Wilde has fascinated many, including himself. In *De Profundis*, he reflects: "I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. […] Few men hold such a position in their own lifetime, and have it so acknowledged."[1] This was, at least partially, true, but it is also true that these words were written in a prison cell, a world completely different from the one he was writing about. There were two Oscars – one, a celebrity enjoying widespread fame, which was probably however not quite as grand as he had imagined; the other a prisoner, a celebrity still, but for different reasons. Or were they different? Was it not obvious from the beginning? To some, it was; but not for his effeminate behaviour as we might think today, but for certain passages in his writing. What we do always find in his work – and within his person as well, are the polarities, which first seem to be incompatible, but then in accordance with Hegelian dialectic, merge and form something new. Wilde did study Hegel,[2] but he was not the only influence. The Victorian era, which was no less prudent than the preceding or the following one, was only trying to seem as such, and therefore many people were forced to lead a sort of double-life. Especially, of course, non-heterosexuals, and Wilde was one of them. Also, in the sphere of literature, the gothic genre was flourishing, with the Penny Dreadfuls which fed on characters like Jack the Ripper or "Spring-heeled Jack"; or more sophisticated pieces like Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* or Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. These texts were obsessed with double identities, the possibility of two contradictory persons living within one. The aphorisms with which Wilde filled his plays, essays and fiction do often claim the exact opposites to commonly accepted truths; but only

[1] *De Profundis*, 1071.
[2] Allison Pease, "Aestheticism and Aesthetic Theory", Frederick S. Roden, ed., *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 96.

seemingly, because somehow the conclusion they reach is often very close to the original truth. Similarly, the male characters of his plays seem subversive and immoral, but this is only because of their bold statements and opinions on society, culture and life. Judging by their actions however, they are in fact quite conservative and hardly ever do anything immoral. Wilde as a moralist and conservative – this seems hardly a characteristic that defines him, but he certainly was not the complete opposite. The truth is somewhere in between, for to be able to break conservative values one cannot do without them, and in order to give immoral statements one must know what is moral. Wilde was right when he said that he "stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of [his] age",[3] but it was only this precise age for which he could have stood in symbolic relations. He was deeply a part of his environment, not an outcast, as he is sometimes presented.

Wilde was a perfect individualist who lived his life as a work of art – as he had set his mind to do; and yet at times it seems that he may only have been a mere puppet, and that it was the great Victorian public which in fact was pulling his strings. In order to be noticed and, subsequently, to become famous he was forced to adapt and to break the conventions at the same time. These two opposing forces materialised themselves in Wilde's writing.

1.2. Aims and Structure

This thesis will be divided into three chapters, the first dealing with the socio-cultural background of Wilde's life and work, the second chapter offering a deeper insight into his private life and its consequences – his imprisonment. The third chapter will be focused on his literary and philosophical influences. For reference I will use *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2007. I will

[3] "De Profundis" 1071.

choose the specific texts by their relevance to the topic, i.e. when dealing with his trials, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was often brought up by the prosecution,[4] when talking about the reactions of his contemporary audience it will be the plays I will mostly discuss. In this thesis, I will deal with Wilde's prose, namely *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* and his fairy-tale collection; drama – I chose his most successful plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*; and in terms of his essays *The Decay of Lying*, *Critic As Artist*, *The Truth of Masks*; and the letter-essay *De Profundis*. The main focus of each chapter will be the polarities so strongly present in his life and work. Rather than trying to discover something "new", which, as Merlin Holland points out is not very likely nowadays,[5] I will explore the up-to-date scholarship and choose from it what is relevant to my thesis. Since Wilde's person is so interconnected with his works, it is impossible to separate them. My aim is to discover what stands behind these polarities in Wilde's life and work, to what extent he was controlled by his environment, and whether he was largely a "product" of his era.

[4] Joseph Bristow, "Biographies: Oscar Wilde - the man, the life, the legend", Frederick S. Roden, ed., *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 22.
[5] Merlin Holland, "Biography and the art of lying," Peter Raby, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 10.

Chapter 2: Life and Work of Oscar Wilde in Context

2.1. Wildean Studies

Much scholarship has been dedicated to Oscar Wilde. Shortly after his death, four biographies were written, by Arthur Ransome, Richard Harris, Robert Harborough Sherard, and Lord Alfred Douglas. The latter three are necessarily biased, because Harris and Sherard were Wilde's friends and admirers and Lord Douglas his lover and enemy. Harris' biography is more accurate than Sherard's and even more so than Douglas', but it is far from faultless, as Holland points out.[6] Even though Douglas later stated that *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, an angry response to Wilde's accusations towards Douglas in *De Profundis*, and a work which uses such arguments as "Wilde had terrible teeth"[7] "was written for him by T. W. H. Crosland,[8] it nevertheless proves that Wilde evoked strong emotions even after his death. Up until this point in time, he has never been fully forgotten, but the attitudes of the academic world towards him as a writer have gone through changes. Since Wilde was active in so many fields, the criticism concerning his life and work has been fairly rich: he has been dealt with within the context of the Victorian era, LGBT criticism, drama, prose and poetry, art criticism, journalism, national literature and postcolonial studies. The restrictions about talking openly about homosexuality made it equally impossible to talk openly about Wilde. His personal letters were only published in 1962.[9] Robert Sherard, who published three of Wilde's biographies tried to "explain Wilde's homosexual behaviour as a form of epilepsy or madness brought on by excessive indulgence in food and drink, and seems incapable of accepting that Wilde was

[6] Holland 8.
[7] Alfred Douglas, *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, digitalised at Internet Archive, 18 Apr 2013 http://archive.org/stream/oscarwildemyself00dougrich/oscarwildemyself00dougrich_djvu.txt.
[8] Holland 8.
[9] Holland 5.

perfectly well aware of what he was doing".[10] The problem of course was that even if his critics did sympathise with Wilde and accepted his sexuality, they could not say so openly, lest they should be branded as being so themselves. Until the 1970s he "was seldom featured prominently on the curriculum",[11] according to Joseph Bristow, and it was his person, rather than his art what made his name well-known. His plays have been staged without interruption,[12] but he only gained greater respect as a writer in the 1980s and 1990s, especially after Richard Ellmann's famous biography published in 1987.[13]

112 years after his death, Wilde has become more of a myth than a person. Not the in the sense that he is less real, but the popular notion of him nowadays is as a figure composed of just characteristics, such as "witty", "homosexual", "subversive", and neither the man, nor his works are this simplistic. The inevitable problem with Wildean criticism is the fact that his life and work can be analysed from so many angles that those who focus on one aspect tend to make it more important than the others. Thus, we get books focused solely on Wilde's homosexuality, on his aestheticism or on his Irishness, which necessarily tend to push the other aspects of him into the background. There have been various interpretations of his works, based on the forte of their author. Declan Kiberd, for example, sees *The Importance of Being Earnest* as expressing the relationship between England and Ireland,[14] while Reginia Gagnier sees it as a criticism of its own audience.[15] Neil Sammells in his *Wilde Style: The* Plays *and Prose of Oscar Wilde* sees Wilde mainly as rebel against

[10] Holland 7.
[11] Bristow 9.
[12] Bristow 7.
[13] Bristow 7.
[14] Jarlath Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde: Catholicism, Folklore and Ireland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 10.
[15] Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Widle and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986) 111.

a number of conventions of his time, as opposed to one dominant stereotype.[16] He also ventures to compare Wilde to the filmmaker Quentin Tarantino, which seems an appropriate comparison, although Tarantino is commonly mentioned in relation to another Irish playwright, Martin McDonagh. Many critics have refused to accept that Wilde intended his stories as fairy-tales for children; Jarlath Killeen in his study of Wilde's fairy-tales juxtaposes Rodney Shewan's statement that all of Wilde's remarks, with one exception, show that the tales are not meant for children; but that "one exception" is an actual letter in which Wilde explicitly states that they are "really meant for children".[17] Killeen then quotes Shewan who says that "Wilde's characteristic morals are anti-morals" and who cannot accept that a collection of stories with such nihilist tendencies could be intended for children.[18] Wilde himself was said to possess some child-like qualities,[19] and he knew that children were intelligent enough to grasp his meaning, as well as able to deal with the darker side of life. It is also possible, however, that Wilde's childishness was simply a projection of one of the prejudices against the Irish: according to Anthony S. Wohl, the Irish were seen as "light-hearted and imaginative, highly emotional, playful, passionate and sentimental", just like children.[20]

Jarlath Killeen points out that Wilde's Irish heritage was considerably neglected in Wilde criticism till the 1990s, and that it was only given as background information having no influence over his writing.[21] Among the first who claimed that Wilde did indeed continue in the nationalist tradition of his parents was Declan

[16] Valerie A. Murrenus, "Wilde Style: The Plays and Prose of Oscar Wilde by Neil Sammells (review)", *Project Muse*. 24 Jun 2013 http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nhr/summary/v005/5.1murrenus.html.

[17] Jarlath Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007) 9-10.
[18] Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* 10.
[19] Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* 10.
[20] Anthony S. Wohl, "Racism and Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England," *The Victorian Web*, 20 May 2013 http://www.victorianweb.org/history/race/Racism.html.
[21] Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde* 9.

Kiberd in his section on Wilde in the *Field Day Anthology* (1991), followed by Davis Coakley's biography *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* and *Wilde the Irishman* by Owen Dudley Edwards.[22] Killeen summarizes Richard Pine's argument concerning Wilde's Irish identity: "To Pine, Wilde's Protestant Irishness marginalised him in both nineteenth-century Ireland and England, and this marginalisation attracted him to other forms of minority culture, including the homosexual subculture of Victorian London".[23] To say that Wilde was gay because he was an Irishman living in England sounds a little bit too far-fetched; he does of course not mean to suggest that this was the only factor influencing him, but he does imply with this that Wilde's homosexuality was a deliberate decision. It is, therefore, important to take all of these facets of Wilde into account; there cannot be one true theory.

2.2. The Victorians

Wilde could have existed only within his era. His art was a reaction to his environment. He could not stay neutral, but that is not to say he despised the whole Victorian society as he is often represented to have done. He satirised certain attitudes and values, and he could not agree with most of the then popular views; but he was also aware of the fact that he needed the Victorian audience, who wanted to be shocked and entertained by his witticisms and scandals. Of course it was easy to provoke the stuffy Victorians; nowadays, to be able to obtain such effect he would have to become an eccentric rock-star, an idea which was adopted by the creators of the film *Velvet Goldmine*;[24] and even that persona has become common in the twenty-first century western world. As Gagnier illustrates: "The Victorians agonised

[22] Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde*, 10-11.
[23] Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde* 11.
[24] *Velvet Goldmine*, Dir. Todd Haynes. Miramax, 1998. Film.

over values - family values, British values, value as a use or exchange […]."[25] They believed in patriarchy and their right to rule the world. Necessarily, opposition to these values started to emerge. Issues of gender and sexuality were discussed, The "New Women" rebelled against their given status in the patriarchal society, British colonies demanded independence, and the dandy, which was by no means a new "invention", did not exactly rebel, but expressed his disagreement with the state of affairs with his artificial manners. Wilde was connected to all three movements. He edited the magazine *The Woman's World*, and in his works he treated women and men equally, and often the female characters outwit the males; he came from Ireland, from a family of Irish Protestant nationalists, and even though his homeland is not often mentioned in his works, he was a supporter of Irish independence; and he was well-known as a dandy, which was mostly for show.

It is important to know that Wilde was not against the Victorian society model per se; that is he did not suggest substituting it with a completely different one. Rather, he disliked several of its traits and satirised these in his plays, for example the obsession with health[26] in *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

> LADY BRACKNELL: Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it is high time that Mr Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a

[25] Regenia Gagnier, "Wilde and the Victorians," Peter Raby, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. (Cabridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 18.

[26] "Total health or wholeness--mens sana in corpore sano--was a dominant concept for the Victorians, as important in shaping thought about human growth and conduct as nature was to the Romantics." Laurelyn Douglas, "Victorian Attitudes toward Health", *The Victorian Web*, 20 May 2013 http://www.victorianweb.org/science/health/health11.html.

> thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life.[27]

However, he was also very much part of that society. Similar to the popular view of Oscar Wilde, the popular view of the Victorian era is necessarily monolithic, as popular views are. They are, of course, based on truth, but truth which is most fitting to the contemporary. In a time when we pride ourselves on having freedom of speech, sex and religion, respectively, it is easy to point to the Victorians and juxtapose their rigid, prudish views with ours. Melissa S. Van Vuuren observes: "The Victorian age was not sacred or *secular*, but both sacred and *secular*. Likewise, it was not agricultural or industrial, but both at once. The two extremes coexist along with various viewpoints in between. These tensions are apparent not only through historiography but also through literary history, for literature tells the story history cannot."[28]

One of the oppositions against the Victorian values and mostly against its dull and uniform dress-code was dandyism. Dandyism is a movement of oppositions. It "struggles constantly with the problem of how originality can be replicated to create a whole movement",[29] which is of course impossible since originality can exist as a single specimen only. Balzac in his *Traité de la vie élégante*, a dandyist manifesto, claims on the one hand that one must be born elegant and on the other that we can learn how to be elegant; [30] which is similar to the discrepancy in Victorian society between the idea of being born a gentleman and becoming one by the virtue of ones

[27] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 674.
[28] Melissa S. Van Vuuren, *Literary Research and the Victorian and Edwardian Ages, 1830-1910: stragegies and sources* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2011) accessed via *Google Books* 10 May 2013
[29] Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siécle* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998) 14. Via *Google Books* 14 May 2013
[30] Garelick 15.

gentlemanly qualities.[31] Rhonda K. Garelick comments that "such contradictions, as we have seen, lie at the heart of dandyism […]".[32] She also speaks about "the classic dandyist confusion of reality and literature"[33] illustrating it by an example of a fictitious interview with a real, historical person - Beau Burmmell in Balzac's *Traité* and the blending of the "biographical self with the literary or fictionally constructed hero" of the camp style, which crystallised out of dandyism at the end of the nineteenth century, and which was certainly embodied by Wilde. He was, however, not camp because he was gay - as this association is often made nowadays, it was a part of his overall performance as an Aesthete. Also effeminacy, as a part of camp behaviour was not connected with homosexuality in the 19th century; according to Andrew Crowther, it was seen as "a way of attracting women" .[34] Susan Sontag in her famous essay "Notes on 'Camp" defines Camp in the degree or artificiality and stylization: "All Camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice. Nothing in nature can be campy […]".[35] This is in accordance with Wilde's essay "The Decay of Lying". The camp way of dressing was again not associated with homosexuality; on the contrary, as Andrew Crowther notes:

> "In *Patience*, Bunthorne's behaviour is motivated by a desire for female admiration. He is surrounded by and followed by women — when he is not, he is miserable. The "manly" Dragoons go round in bulk, awkward and out of place when talking to the women, much more relaxed when amongst their fellows. The only way they can attract their women back is by wearing long-

[31] David Cody, "The Gentleman", *The Victorian Web*, 20 May 2013 http://www.victorianweb.org/history/gentleman.html.
[32] Garelick 15.
[33] Garelick 16.
[34] Andrew Crowther, "Bunthorne and Oscar Wilde" *The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive, 6 May 2013* http://diamond.boisestate.edu/gas/patience/wilde/wilde.html.
[35] Susan Sontag, "Notes on "Camp," 17 May 2013 http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/sontag-notesoncamp-1964.html.

> hair wigs and velvet suits, and standing in "effete" attitudes. All this is directly in accord with the way "effeminate" behaviour was seen at that time — as a way of attracting women."[36]

Victorian men had to be masculine which was demonstrated by the way they dressed, in which there could be no trace of femininity.[37] In opposition to this, it is Wilde's women that are often stronger and more masculine, than his men.

Dandyism goes hand in hand with Aestheticism, which Allison Pease defines as:

> […] a continuation of, and in part a rejection of, eighteenth-century aesthetics. As an extension of aesthetics in the tradition of Shaftesbury and Kant, Aestheticism continued, and even foregrounded, the claim of art's autonomy, its value apart from morality, utility, and pleasure. As a departure from aesthetics in the tradition of Shaftesbury and Kant, Aestheticism lost faith in the possibility of a rational public sphere and shifted importance away from a subjectively universal response toward a private response that could not be universally communicated.[38]

Wilde was accepted as the leading figure of the Aesthetic movement in England, even though he was mainly following the doctrines of others, as will be later clarified. According to Peter Ackroyd, the English have always steered towards the empirical, the practical philosophy.[39] He quotes Marx and Engels who distinguished between "French 'philosophical system' and "English 'registration of fact'. Aestheticism is therefore a very un-English movement in its impracticality and abstractedness. The movement went against the Philistines of the time, as Matthew

[36] Crowther.
[37] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Random House, 1995) 40.
[38] Allison Pease, "Aestheticism and Aesthetic Theory," Frederick S. Roden, ed., *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 97-98.
[39] Peter Ackroyd, *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: Doubleday, 2003) 398.

Arnold called them,[40] and together with Dandyism and the Decadent movement it preached artificiality over reality. Already the classicists wanted to correct nature, to imitate it as it should be - *la belle nature*.[41] This continues with Whistler[42] and subsequently Wilde, who does not, however, quite aim to imitate nature, but rather believes that nature should imitate him. He claims that nature very rarely can reach the beauty of a work of art and that most of it is much duller. He is, of course, right, for nature does not work by aesthetic rules. Not every day do we get vivid sunsets, and the water in our rivers is far from being crystal clear. Although we can see it after we have been *inspired* by a work of art, which is explained in his essay *The Decay of Lying*, where Wilde proposes that people were not able to perceive London fogs before Turner had painted them. In *The Critic as Artist*, Gilbert echoes Plato's ideas in which those who perceive a work of art become possessed by a "divine madness" ,[43] and it is this madness which allows us to see art in everyday occurrences.

In revealing the fact that most of the traditional Victorian values stood on nonsensical premises, he inverted them, and, in that, he agreed with Nietzsche and is often compared with him. They also shared the same radical perspectivism that there is not one truth, but a multitude of truths which depend on each individual's perspective.[44] This again corresponds to Wilde's views as stated in *The Decay of Lying*.

When Wilde was accused of "gross indecency", and even before that, when people started to suspect his homosexuality, the trigger then, was not his appearance

[40] Martin Procházka, *Literary Theory: An Historical Introduction* (Prague: Karolinum, 2008) 55.
[41] Procházka 39.
[42] Aatos Ojala, *Aestheticism and Oscar Wilde: Part 1, 'Life and Lettters'* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran Kirjapainon Oy, 1954).112.
[43] Wilde, "The Critic as Artist", 1005.
[44] Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 147-148.

and behaviour, but the "immorality" the contemporary critics found in his works. He was an easy suspect, because he proclaimed the decadent motto that art was above morality, he spent a lot of time in Paris under the corrupting influence of the French decadents, as it was seen in England and as we shall explain in more detail later. The fact that his heroes mostly "did nothing" enraged certain classes, as Gagnier notes,[45] and it also did not help him that he was seen in presence of younger boys and undergraduates.[46] The fact that Wilde was a public figure made his trials famous, and it necessarily changed the public view on homosexuality:

> "The extraordinary public and historical interest in Wilde's 1895 trials for acts of gross indecency connects Wilde himself to this emerging understanding of an identity-based *homosexual* status. This new understanding of sexual orientation as a status dubbed same-sex sexuality *homosexuality* and viewed it as a disease or pathological condition, in contrast to the earlier understanding of same-sex sexuality as sinful conduct.[47]

By reducing homosexuality to a disease of the mind it left the homosexuals of the time defenceless, because they could not post their own defence. Christopher Nassaar builds his argument that Wilde's best work dates from 1886 on the widely disputed fact that Wilde had his first homosexual experience in that year.[48] We simply cannot know when this happened; there are no diary entries or witnesses, only a multitude of false letters, as Merlin Holland points out.[49] What is more, his first homosexual experience may not have had any impact on his life or work whatsoever, since even

[45] Gagnier 65.
[46] Harris.
[47] Martha M. Ertman, "Oscar Wilde: Paradoxical Poster Child for Both Identity and Post-Identity," Blackwell Publishing, *The Modern Law Review*, year 2000, Issue 1, volume: 25. 155. accessed via *Libgen* 12 Apr 2013 http://libgen.org/scimag/?s=Oscar+Wilde.
[48] Christopher S. Nassaar, *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974) "Preface," XIII.
[49] Holland 14-15.

if we did have a precise date, we would not know whether Wilde "definitely regarded homosexual contact as evil and now [after 1886] wrote in full awareness of a demonic impulse within himself".[50] Furthermore, a letter from 18th February 1989 contradicts this statement:

> "It is very unfair of people being horrid to me about Bosie and Naples. A patriot put in prison for loving his country loves his country, and a poet in prison for loving boys loves boys. To have altered my life would have been to have admitted that Uranian love is ignoble. I hold it to be noble - more noble than other forms."[51]

The Victorian era witnessed the biggest technological and scientific advances, and especially with the emergence of the theory of evolution, it made many people reconsider and re-evaluate their lives and their religion. *In De Profundis*, Wilde stresses the brain as being the primary organ from which everything originates. Imagination is no longer something unattainable, it is born within us: "We know now that we do not see with the eyes or hear with the ears. They are really channels for the transmission, adequate or inadequate of sense impressions."[52] The scientific world favours accuracy and realism, which Wilde despised. It being that he was a romantic, Wilde loved to observe the natural world – not the actual outside world like Wordsworth, but nature depicted in art. This polarity between science and art is present in Wilde's writing:

> As soon as she had gone, Lady Windermere turned to the picture gallery, where a celebrated political economist was

[50] Nassaar "Preface," XIII.
[51] Oscar Wilde, Letter to Robbie Ross, 18 February 1898, Hôtel de Nice, Rue des Beaux-Arts, Paris. *Oscar Wilde*, "Letters" 26 Apr 2013 http://www.mr-oscar-wilde.de/.
[52] Wilde, "De Profundis" 1087.

> solemnly explaining the scientific theory of music to an indignant virtuoso from Hungary, and began to talk to the Duchess of Paisley.[53]

The Hungarian virtuoso did not need to be told how his music works. He has apparently managed without scientific theories until now and succeeded purely based on his art, which comes from within him; we assume him to be successful given that we are told that Lady Windermere's reception was full of people of distinction. This clash between art and science, as well as religion and science, was typical for the Victorian era. It was the century of Darwin's theory of evolution, which completely changed people's perspective on life. Jarlath Killeen illustrates the situation thus:

> If [Darwin's theory] was true, then the soul was an unproven hypothesis. […] If a person has no soul, then a philosophy based on materialism was inescapable. Without a soul, humans are just collections of atoms and molecules which must obey the natural laws of material objects. […] The implications of Darwin's evolutionary theory not only complemented the realist focus on social and natural causes for human behaviour, but also complemented the realist novel's marginalisation of the supernatural.[54]

The gothic novel which had an influence on Wilde, stems, just as the realist novel, from scientific progress. It was possible that everything could be explained scientifically, and so the men of science were only eager to do so, even if it was clearly nonsensical or easily inferred by common sense. This was still valid in 1934 when G. B. Shaw ridiculed this premise that everything has to be proven by

[53] Wilde, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* 157.
[54] Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde* 81.

experiment and otherwise is only a theory in his *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God,* in which a simple African girl outwitted a scientist.

"Was there no escape possible? Were we no better than chessmen, moved by an unseen power, vessels the potter fashions at his fancy, for honour or for shame?"[55] Here Lord Arthur spells out the fears of the naturalists that our fate is inevitable and it is not within our powers to alter it. It is also the fear of the unconscious, the dread that people could be reduced to a set of impulses, and could therefore not influence their behaviour, because their reactions were stemming from the subconscious. When he learns the terrible truth from the chiromantist, he sets himself to do precisely that – alter his fate even if it involved getting rid of the architect of it. It is obvious from various hints that Mr. Podgers is a charlatan. The fact that he would reveal Lord Arthur's fate for money, that he "has no club", and that the tactics he uses show him to be less than a gentleman, and Lord Savile must know it. Yet he decides to believe him, because the man's reaction upon seeing his hand earlier made him afraid "for the first time in his life".[56] He never questions his fate, and decides to commit the murder he is supposed to do in the future as soon as possible, so that he can be rid of his "duty" and marry his fiancée. After he has been reasoning as such, we read: "He had the rarest of all things, common sense."[57] This is, of course, an irony, because nothing can be further from common sense than the decision he made. That is because it is entirely based on flawed reasoning – the belief in the unquestionable truthfulness of a completely unreliable person. However, had we somehow established that Mr. Podgers was not an impostor, but could genuinely predict what was going to happen, Lord Arthur's cold reasoning – which is another paradox since his coldness originates from his fondness for his fiancée – would be perfectly

[55] Wilde, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* 163.
[56] Wilde, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* 161.
[57] Wilde, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*, 167.

reasonable given his options. The chiromantist is only wearing a mask – his profession was not his vocation, he only uses it as a means of getting into society. His death is insignificant and meaningless to everyone except the protagonist, and if we, as readers, feel anything when Lord Arthur pushes him into the river, it is triumph rather than pity. As we shall see in the third chapter, this hypocrisy so typical for an era which demanded values people were unable to adhere to concerned Wilde greatly, for he had to hide or alter certain facts in the face of the Victorian public: not only his sexual orientation, but also his origins.

2.3: Ireland

Ireland was under British rule till 1922 when the Irish Free State was formed, and even then its freedoms were limited. Many Irish authors before and after Wilde concerned themselves with Irish politics, including those who expatriated to England, like Swift. Except for the Northern part of the island, Ireland has always been Catholic, and the tension between the Catholics and the Protestants resulted in what was called "The Troubles" in the 20th century.[58] Victorian society was slowly gravitating towards polygenism[59] and after Darwin has published his *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, it was believed that certain races were more evolved than others.[60] The Irish were caricatured as having ape-like features, because it was believed they were lower on the scale of evolution, which was the impact of Darwin's theory of evolution and the pseudo-science of phrenology. "Irish "emotion" was contrasted, unfavorably, with English "reason", Irish "femininity" with English "masculine" virtues, Irish "poetic" attributes with English "pragmatism". These were

[58] "Britain's Forgotten Colony?" January 19, 2010, *New Histories* 8 Apr 2013 http://newhistories.group.shef.ac.uk/wordpress/wordpress/?p=256.
[59] Anthony S. Wohl, "Race in Victorian Thought and Science," *The Victorian Web* 20 May 2013 http://www.victorianweb.org/science/sci2.html.
[60] Anthony S. Wohl, "Victorian Racism," *The Victorian Web* 20 May 2013http://www.victorianweb.org/history/race/rc5.html.

all arguments which conveniently supported British rule in Ireland."[61] Declan Kiberd talks about these stereotypes in Victorian Britain: "Thus, if John Bull was industrious and reliable, Paddy was held to be indolent and contrary; if the former was mature and rational, the latter must be unstable and emotional; if the English were adult and manly, the Irish must be childish and feminine."[62] Although Protestant, both Wilde's parents were in favour of Ireland's separation from England and especially his mother was a prominent nationalist.[63] Wilde later supported the leader of the Home Rule Movement, Charles Stewart Parnell[64] who by a twist of fate ended up similarly to Wilde when he suffered a public humiliation and died not long after that.[65] Seamus Deane in an interview links Wilde's trials, Parnell's adultery and Roger Casement's sexuality.[66] Wilde's parents were both public figures, and, like Wilde, of a disputable character. They were by no means universally liked, in the case of Sir William Wilde it was rather the opposite: he was a notorious ladies' man, and there even was a libel brought against him by a young acquaintance of the family.[67] However, he was also a great admirer of Irish folklore and would take his son on some of his expeditions collecting the local stories. Because both his parents were therefore so keen on Irish cultural and political independence, Wilde was exposed to the leading Irish intelligentsia of the time since early childhood.[68] Wilde was aware of his Irish heritage, he once mentioned with some pride to Arthur Ransome that he was descended of Irish kings, and upon his release from prison took on the name of

[61] Wohl, "Racism and Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England".
[62] Kiberd, 30.
[63] Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde 4-8.*
[64] Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde 9.*
[65]Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "Charles Stewart Parnell" in *Multitext Project in Irish History*, University College Cork, Ireland 10 Apr 2013 http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/Charles_Stewart_Parnell.
[66] An Interview with Seamus Deane: University College, Dublin, June 1993, Dympna Callaghan and Seamus Deane, *Social Text* 38 (Spring, 1994): 39-50, Published by: Duke University Press 3 Apr 2013 http://www.jstor.org/stable/466503.
[67] Ransome.

[68] Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde 9.*

Sebastian Melmoth,[69] acknowledging his famous Irish ancestor, the writer Charles Maturin, author of *Melmoth the Wanderer*.[70] However, he was by no means as ardent a nationalist as his parents were, and the pride of his heritage mixed with his desire to be seen as an Oxford-educated member of the English upper-class. Being of an old Irish Protestant descent, the members of Wilde's family were, as Declan Kiberd describes:

> forever English in Ireland, forever Irish in England, and nobody could be more aware than they that there are two sides to every story. In Ireland it was not so much a case of the official versus the unofficial as of the unofficial versus the unofficial*er*. No wonder that Oscar Wilde could assert that a truth in art is that whose opposite may also be true, for he grew up in a country where things both could and could not be so.[71]

Wilde, therefore, was surrounded by opposing tendencies and it was impossible for him to be passive. The Victorian era had strictly delineated places for everyone, including the disruptive elements. Wilde chose both sides, and this is reflected in his works – his characters are bored hedonist aristocrats who do not support the society in any way, and make the story progress with their ornamental talks; and yet these characters do not try to free themselves from their given roles, indeed they are happy where they are. Dorian Gray is the immoral hero, and therefore must spread immorality; and yet he is the one who is punished in the end.

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[69] Karl Beckson and Bobby Fong, "Wilde as Poet", Peter Raby, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 62.

[70] Patrick R. O'Malley, "Religion," Frederick S. Roden, ed., *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 168.

[71] Declan Kiberd, "Oscar Wilde: The Resurgence of Lying",Peter Raby, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 279.

Chapter 3: Private vs. Public Oscar

3.1. The Golden Bird

It is remarkable how artificial Wilde was. In the best sense of the word, he did make his life a piece of art. David Jago rightly points out that Wilde's life sounded more like fiction - a work of art, if you like - than reality.[72] It is quite a memorable life and its events can be retold as an engaging story with a tragic ending. Many have noticed that Wilde had something of a prophet within him, as if he knew all the way what life had in store for him. But he did not. He simply directed his life along the script he had prepared for himself. He did not escape his trials when he could, because he knew that the completion of this life-art needed a tragic ending. In *De Profundis*, he explicitly says so: "I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does.[…] But to have continued the same life would have been wrong, because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on."[73] He has become the golden bird Yeats longs to become in his "Sailing to Byzantium",[74] and he adds, matter-of-factly: "of course all this is foreshadowed and prefigured in my books".[75] His life had a plot he himself had invented. He was not the only director, however. Early in his career, when he embarked on a lecturing tour to the United States, he had been sent by somebody else; it was not on his own account. The tour was mainly to propagate aestheticism so the American audiences would be able to understand Gilbert and Sullivan's famous opera *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride*.[76] The primary aim then, was commercial. It was not Wilde's inner calling to propagate his beliefs, but it was an opportunity and he took it.

[72]David Jago, "School and Theater: Polarities of Homosexual Writing in England," *College English, The Homosexual Imagination*, 36.3 (Nov., 1974):360-368 30 Apr 2013 http://www.jstor.org/stable/374855.
[73] Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1080.
[74] W. B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," English Poetry 1579-1947, (Prague: Václav Tomsa, 1947).
[75] Wilde, "De Profundis", 1080.
[76] Crowther.

Wilde's name was closely connected with commercialism and advertisement, which was in opposition to his socialistic strain, but he did not seem to mind it much. His primary aim was to become "the famous aesthete who "stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of [his] age". In the US in the 1880s one could find a shop selling sweets, which confidently claimed: "To be truly esthetic buy your ice cream and confections at J. N. Piercy's, 115 Court St., Binghamton, N. Y." with a picture of Wilde next to it.[77] So Wilde went to advertise aestheticism, of which he yet had no complete theory of his own – rather, it was a mix of Ruskin's and Morris' ideas,[78] and then came back moderately famous. Due to his being labelled as "the famous aesthete" he was often depersonalised by the society – either perceived as a "decoration", for it was fashionable to have him at one of one's dinners; or as an advertisement for dandyism, and later as a subversive character; a sodomite. The clichéd phrase "you either love him or hate him" fits perfectly to Wilde, for these were indeed the reactions to his person, and often even these two mixed – as Frank Harris observes, many, including himself admired Wilde, and yet were at the same time repulsed by his appearance.[79]

There are several ways to learn about the private life of Oscar Wilde. Biographies – there are the biased ones written by his contemporaries Frank Harris and Lord Alfred Douglas, by Robert Sherard or Arthur Ransome. Then there is the praised, but flawed, as Wilde scholarship has proven,[80] tome by Richard Ellmann, and others like Neil McKenna's *Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* focused on Wilde's sexual life. Another option we have is to read Wilde's letters, or shorter pieces of text about Wilde

[77] Michèle Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 2.
[78] Ojala 76-83.
[79] Harris, Frank. *Oscar Wilde, His Life and Confessions*, digitalised at *The Project Gutenberg*, 13. Apr 2013 http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16894/16894-h/16894-h.htm.
[80] "Revaluing and Re-evaluating Richard Ellmann's Oscar Wilde," *Oscholars*, 7 May 2013 http://www.oscholars.com/TO/Specials/Ellmann/Ellmann.htm#CN.

published by his contemporaries, and it is from these that we can make an outward portrait of Wilde, and get a feeling of what he was - or pretended to be - as a person. The least reliable source is Wilde himself, for most of what he publicly said about himself was part of his pose. What would seem the most honest would be *De Profundis*, not only because of the environment in which it was written, but also because at that period Wilde did not strive – nor could he really – to impress the public, and also due to the fact that this letter was probably not intended to be published.

Why should we even be interested in Wilde's private life? Is it of any relevance to his writing? I believe it is, for there is a remarkable parallel between his life and his work. This interconnectedness is discussed in all the chapters of this thesis, because it is relevant to all three themes. Wilde's life is well documented since he was a public figure, a celebrity. He continuously appeared in the satirical *Punch* magazine, which was the dream of everyone who wished to be talked about, and even often misunderstood, as Wilde evidently desired.[81] It features many caricatures of Wilde as a dandy, mocking his ornate language[82] or his aestheticism.[83] Harris describes how "soon after Oscar left Oxford *Punch* began to caricature him and ridicule the cult of what it christened "The Too Utterly Utter." Nine Englishmen out of ten took delight in the savage contempt poured upon what was known euphemistically as "the æsthetic craze" by the pet organ of the English middle

[81] In the "Critic as Artist", Gilbert says "(…)I live in terror of not being misunderstood." Many have adopted it as Wilde's own statement, but it cannot be proved whether he himself agreed with it since it is pronounced by one of the characters in a dialogue concerning two opposing views. Wilde, "The Critic as Artist" 971.
[82] "Punch Galleries", *Punch*. 22 May 2013 http://punch.photoshelter.com/image/I00007XyRMBueh5o.
[83]"Authors, Books and Literature Cartoons", *Punch*. 22 May 2013 http://punch.photoshelter.com/gallery-image/Authors-Books-and-Literature-Cartoons/G0000T.M.T3mivKw/I0000epimWfnb9ME

class."[84] We will never know the truth about his life, of course, but there are several myths which have already been deconstructed. Even as late as 1987, Richard Ellmann, a renowned scholar, published a photo of Wilde evidently cross-dressing as Salomé, and he also insisted upon syphilis as the cause of Wilde's death. The photo has been proven to be that of a Hungarian opera-singer, Alice Guszalewicz;[85] and the cause of his death was "meningoencephalitis secondary to chronic right middle-ear disease".[86] It is nevertheless clear, that both of these myths are closely connected to his homosexuality.

3.2. Masks

Alfred Douglas said Wilde has always yearned to be a part of the aristocracy. Many believed he was immoral, subversive, living only for pleasure. Then we read his fairy-tales such as *The Young King* or *The Happy Prince* and realise that these are in a striking opposition to what was said about Wilde as a person. It is, of course, possible that he would write these stories without believing the morals within them; and they certainly do contain a moral as does *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his "most-poisonous" novel. Most of the reviews of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were unfavourable, and yet many critics could not help but praise Wilde's style, despite the immorality they saw in the book. Thus we get reviews where the critic is evidently torn between two opposing feelings, as the one in *The Times* attributed to Arthur Symons: "In that horrible book all the imagination, the power, the ingenuity of short stories, are perverted to deplorable uses."[87] Both *The House of*

[84] Harris.
[85] Holland 12.
[86] Ashley H. Robins and Sean L. Sellars, "Oscar Wilde's terminal illness: reappraisal after a century," *Department of Medical History, The Lancet*, Vol 356, 25 Nov 2000. 7 May 2013 http://www.oscholars.com/TO/Appendix/Library/ashley.pdf.
[87] Mason, *Wilde; Art and Morality*, pp. 200-201, quoted in Gagnier, *The Idylls of the Marketplace* 62.

Pomegranates and *Dorian Gray* were published in the same year, 1891.[88] He may have said that there is "no such thing as moral or immoral book", but we should ascribe this to his posing as a "Professor of Aesthetics" rather than to his actual beliefs. Because no matter how much immorality can be found in his work, it is usually the powers of good which win at the end. The wicked Dorian Gray is killed by the good left in him. There is the theme of repentance throughout his fairy tales. Why did the Star-Child have to die? We must understand that his death is not a punishment for the character, but for his subjects. He had suffered so much that he had to die; but he died happy being a beloved king of his kingdom and having achieved all he had set himself to achieve. That was his reward.

Jarlath Killeen points out that many Wilde critics did not take the fairy tales into account, because they simply did not know how to deal with them; compared to his other writings, and *Dorian Gray* especially, they seemed unusually conservative and non-subversive.[89] And yet the differences are not so great; on the contrary, when we take a deeper look, they are in fact very similar. Gagnier compares the extremely favourable reviews of *The House of Pomegranates* and the opposing views on *Dorian Gray*, as well as the works themselves, and says that both works deal with the same issues and cover similar themes; but in *Dorian* "these are dictated as elements of aristocratic and artistic or bohemian life."[90] There are parallels with *Dorian Gray* in the fairy-tales which either run along the same lines – The Star-Child is enamoured of his own beauty like Dorian, and is likewise punished for it; or they have a different ending – the vain king of *The Young King* who loves his precious stones and robes gives it up in the end in turn for God's glory.[91] The Little Prince

[88] Killeen, *The Fairy-Tales of Oscar Wilde* 2.
[89] Killeen, *The Fairy-Tales of Oscar Wilde* 2.
[90] Gagnier, *The Idylls of the Marketplace* 65.
[91] Gagnier, *The Idylls of the Marketplace* 65.

lived for pleasure and the wage for that was the knowledge of misery. Unlike Wilde, The Little Prince did not know about the existence of misery; when he was alive, the harsh reality was behind a wall. Wilde had consciously built this wall around himself after he had set himself to be surrounded only by things beautiful, but he also knew that one day he would have to look at the other side. These two sides are not artificiality and reality or art and life; rather, there are two sides to each of these. Art and life are intermingled and as one closes his eyes to an ugly picture, so does he to poverty. In *De Profundis*, Wilde claims that he confined himself

> so exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sunlit side of the garden, and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom. […] But to have continued the same life would have been wrong, because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on. The other half of the garden had its secrets for me also.[92]

He had to go to prison in order to experience misery. He said that society sent him to prison, but it was rather the case that he sent himself there. He needed a dramatic turn in his life; not necessarily two years in prison for reasons dictated by society; but perhaps there was no other way. He could have escaped to France when he had the chance,[93] but he did not do so. Not because he believed he was guilty, but because he felt he needed to experience "the other side of the garden". Was it worth it? From *De Profundis*, we get the impression that it was; but it is not a very persuasive one and the cost was too great: the loss of his family, bitter disappointment in his lover and damage to his physical and psychic health took their toll on him.

[92] Wilde, "De Profundis" 1080.
[93] Harris

3.3. The Private Li(f)e

As a boy, Wilde attended Portora Royal School in Enniskillen in today's Northern Ireland, which was then referred to as the "Eton of Ireland".[94] After that he studied classics at Trinity College, Dublin, and later he left Ireland to continue his study of the classics at Magdalen College, Oxford.[95] Portora was an exclusively male institution when Wilde attended, and so of course was Oxford - there were a small number of women from 1879, but they were not granted the full membership in the university until as late as 1920.[96] David Jago maintains that there were two homosexual traditions at the turn of the century, one the "public school" one based on extensive reading of the classics, and thus absorbing the Greek ideal of love, which held an important place on the schools' curricula. The other one was "Wildean" tradition which was theatrical and exhibitionist.[97] These two, however, were not exclusive, as Jago claims, because Wilde attended exclusively boys schools, as did E. M . Forster, whom he proposes as a representative of the first tradition, and was also greatly influenced by the classics. Moreover, Wilde was an exhibitionist, but he was not exhibiting his homosexuality, as we have already said. When asked about his life at Portora and the possible connection with his sexual orientation, Wilde answered he had been too young to be preoccupied with romantic or sexual matters; however, he did recall an episode with a younger student who was clearly in love with him. Once again, the conditions were perfect for him to emerge as he did.

Wilde mastered rhetoric, for not only did he study classics at Portora and later at Oxford, but he was also a great public speaker, and was in fact more famous for his

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[94] "History," *Portora Royal School*, 13 April http://www.portoraroyal.co.uk/History_of_School.aspx.
[95] Philip Smith, "Philosophical Approaches to Interpretation of Oscar Wilde", Frederick S.Roden, ed., *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 144.
[96] Judy Batson, "Preface," *Her Oxford* (Vanderbilt University Press: Nashville, 2008) Accessed via Google Books 22 Apr 2013
[97] David Jago, "School and Theater: Polarities of Homosexual Writing in England," College English, The Homosexual Imagination, 36.3 (Nov., 1974):360-368 30 Apr 2013 http://www.jstor.org/stable/374855.

conversation than his writing. He was consciously improving and learned from one of the best speakers of his age, painter and author James McNeill Whistler.[98] Wilde's well-known remark in response to hearing a particularly good witticism, "I wish I had said that", which even made its way into popular culture,[99] and Whistler's answer "You will, Oscar, you will"[100] became reality not much later when Wilde outwitted his master. Often in his writings he used the juxtaposition of certain elements, a rhetorical device known and widely used since Antiquity. In "Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green", we read about Thomas Griffiths Wainwright, who was an artist, a dandy and a murderer, and who is, in the beginning of the essay listed alongside Rubens, Goethe and Milton. A little later, however, we find that: " […] it may be partly admitted that, if we set aside his achievements in the sphere of poison, what he has actually left to us hardly justified his reputation."[101] The fact that his murders are seen as a skill to be compared to that of his art would be outrageous had it not all been an irony. Gagnier compares this essay to Swift's *A Modest Proposal* and sees it as a criticism of *l'art pour l'art*.[102] Indeed, these two are similar in tone – where Swift boldly and logically proposes to feed on Irish children, so does Wilde seemingly distance himself from the moral side of the story, and evaluates Wainewright in the spirit of a true decadent. This was one of Wilde's faces – he even acknowledged that if the public should compare him to one of his characters, they would chose Dorian Gray,[103] to whom morality is unimportant and who lives for the moment and experience. He was fully aware of this mask, for he himself created it, and it was not his true self; only an exaggeration of one of his inclinations. Thanks to

[98] Ojala 66.
[99] See "The Oscar Wilde Sketch" by the comedy troupe Monty Python. http://pianosa.com/pic/sketches/oscarwil.htm
[100] Harris.
[101] Wilde, "Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green 949.
[102] Gagnier, *The Idylls of the Marketplace* 39.
[103] Wilde, Letters, p. 352; quoted in Gaginer, 98.

the irony used in the essay, the "Pen, Pencil and Poison" has two sides to it, and two different readings, one for the intelligent, and another for the less educated.

There is an English tradition which starts with Duns Scotus, which continued with Francis Bacon and was still adhered to by George Orwell, and that is the use of simple, straightforward language without unnecessary ornamentation, preferably of Anglo-Saxon origin, and Wilde goes directly against this tradition. This results partially from Wilde's use of the ornamental style of language of the dandies, so much satirised in *Punch*, and partially because he was not English; he was always attracted to the romantic idea of the Celt and the Irish mysticism and folklore.

Wilde was primarily a talker. Indeed the only point on which everyone seems to agree is that Wilde was a brilliant conversationalist, if not the best on the British Isles. Ojala gives a list of praises of his skill[104] and Harris documented many of his witticisms. His talks were frequently amusing for both the upper and lower classes alike; for Wilde was not saving his talent for the important people of the day only – with a note of disgust Harris mentions Wilde amusing two cockney boys, educating them on the topic of Olympic games and specifically focusing on the nakedness of the contestants.[105] Wilde himself acknowledges that he was far better at writing dialogues than action:[106] "Action in a play is my great trouble – I'm quite miserable until I have got my characters all sitting down in a room to talk." And the success of his plays owes much to his conversational skills. This skill could only make him famous because the time was ripe for it. Both the aristocracy and the nouveau-riche loved to organise dinners and invite the most prominent personages of the time. Wilde got many invitations to these until the cards stopped coming as he was

[104] Ojala 64.
[105] Harris.
[106] Wilde, "Oscar Wilde's Letters" in *The Soil* 1. 4 (Apr., 1917):157-160 15 Apr 2013 http://www.jstor.org/stable/20542320.

becoming more and more scandalous and it was no longer fashionable to have him around, for just like a work of art, he went out of fashion.

His talks are the origin of his famous paradoxes, and he had a chance to master these on many occasions. Wilde loved attention and with seemingly outrageous statements, he was guaranteed it. Gagnier talks about *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "when they invert a Victorian platitude for their own ends, they not only state the opposite of what the audience expects but they include by inference the opposite of their own inversion."[107] Kiberd agrees, and points out the inversions on a different level, especially on that of gender roles: "whatever seems like an opposite in the play materialises as a double".[108] These doubles and split-personas occur very frequently in Wilde's writing. As if the person was not able to contain his or her too diverse inclinations, he or she splits into two - but even though these contradictory qualities need more space they do not exist as two separate characters, because they always come together in the end. This however, differs from the Hegelian dialectic which influenced Wilde greatly, in that the two opposing sides do not become something more, something new; they perish. The Fisherman in *The Fisherman and his Soul* dies after the reunion with his soul, because that is the price he had to pay, like the Star-Child who dies soon after he decided to repent and to lead a better life. Dorian Gray meets the same fate in becoming one with his portrait. When Wainewright's "other-self" was revealed, he paid for it by being sent to a colony.[109] Jack from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, on the other hand, kills his other half by telling his fiancé about it, and is saved.

[107] Gagnier, *The Idylls of the Marketplace* 113.
[108] Kiberd 39.
[109] V. W. Hodgman, 'Wainewright, Thomas Griffiths (1794–1847)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 17 May 2013 http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wainewright-thomas-griffiths-2762/text3919.

Even though Wilde was clearly distinct from the typical representative of the Victorian era, he had to conform in order to survive. His private and public life had to split where his sexuality was concerned by getting married and not being open about his homosexuality – which was, of course, impossible. He had to wear a mask of a happy, heterosexual father of a family. Wilde wore several of these masks, together they made the public persona. He pretended to be the immoral hedonist, and yet in his writing we can see that he was the opposite. People would never be interested in him if he were not controversial, for that was exactly his audience longed for. The whole Victorian society presented themselves as righteous, pious, with a strong sense of morality, when in fact it was all hypocrisy. Wilde then exposed them in his plays and stories: "[…] on the staircase stood several Royal Academicians, disguised as artists, and it was said that at one time the supper-room was absolutely crammed with geniuses."[110] This sequence from *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* where Lady Windermere says that all her pianists look like poets and all her poets look like pianists as well as her general disappointment with the fact that people do not look their part is in accordance with the passage about the Royal Academicians disguised as artists, and indeed the theme of the essay "The Truth of Masks" and Wilde's life in general. We all wear disguises and no one is what one seems to be. The reason for this is the desire to be part of the society, which is paradoxically highly artificial in itself. We find this theme of hypocrisy in most of Wilde's plays.

The paradox of the happy ending of *Lady Windermere's Fan* is that it stands upon lies. Lord Windermere can only continue to worship his wife, because he believes in her virtue, and she in turn does not become more corrupt, because she

[110] Wilde, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* 157.

knows nothing of her mother's past, as Christopher Nassaar points out.[111] There is a parallel between this and Wilde's homosexuality. He could have lied – as had often done with ease – and secure a happy-ending for himself. But, as we have already said, he had chosen to give a tragic turn to his life, and so he let the public condemn him without protest, as Christ did. It is quite touching when, in *De Profundis*, he talks about repentance:

> "Christ, had he been asked, would have said – I feel quite certain about it – that the moment the prodigal son fell on his knees and wept, he made his having wasted his substance with harlots, his swine-herding and hungering for the husks they ate, beautiful and holy moments of his life. It is difficult for most people to grasp the idea. I dare say one has to go to prison to understand it. If so, it may be worthwhile going to prison."[112]

But Wilde was no martyr. For what would it be that he would repent? Only a few pages preceding this passage, he states he does not regret living for pleasure, and repentance, he says, is a way of altering one's past. Wilde admired Christ as a man, took him out of the context of his religion and saw him mainly as a source of artistic imagination. When he is talking about Jesus as well as the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, he highlights in them the compassion with the rich rather than with the poor and the fact that "prosperity seems to him as tragic a thing as suffering".[113] He wrote a review of the translation of Chuang Tzu's works in February 1890, and returned to the theme when in prison.

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[111] Nassaar 77-79.
[112] Wilde, *De Profundis* 1091.
[113] Oscar Wilde, *A Critic in Pall Mall: Being Extracts from Reviews and Miscellanies* (Methuen: London, 1919) 179. 13 Apr 2013 Internet Archive, http://archive.org/details/criticinpallmall00wilduoft 18 May 2013.).

Wilde's attitude towards religion was problematic. He was familiar with religious texts and treated them with respect for their artistic qualities. His mother decided to have him christened for the second time as a Catholic - an incident which various critics saw re-enacted in *The Importance of Being Earnest* in a scene where both Jack and Algernon ask to be christened. He did not practice any religion, although after his release from prison, he travelled Europe and received Pope's blessing "at least seven times" and finally converted to Catholicism on his death-bed.[114] Frank Harris relates Wilde's view on religion: "Oscar used often to say that the chief pleasure he had in visiting Rome was to find the Greek gods and the heroes and heroines of Greek story throned in the Vatican. He preferred Niobe to the Mater Dolorosa and Helen to both; the worship of sorrow must give place, he declared, to the worship of the beautiful."[115] Wilde's parents both came from old Protestant families,[116] but Wilde was always closer to Catholicism.

To be able to live and gain fame in Victorian society Wilde had to create a public persona and, as such, he had to advertise himself. Certain aspects of him had to be intensified – his utter belief in aesthetics as a mode of life and its superiority over morality; and others supressed, hidden even – mainly his sexual orientation; as we have already stated, his camp behaviour did not reveal anything of his sexuality, rather it was understood as an aspect of his aestheticism. He also did not wish to be perceived as an Irishman in the contemporary, degrading sense of the word. He did not conceal his Irish ancestry and praised the Celtic spirit in Yeats' poetry. His interest in folklore is visible in his review of Yeats' collection of Irish folk tales; Wilde does not disrupt the style of the stories in which Yeats talks about the fairy

[114] Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde*, 16.
[115] Harris.
[116] Patrick R. O'Malley, "Religion," Frederick S. Roden, ed., *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 168.

creatures as if they were real: "A Dullahan is the most terrible thing in the world. In 1807 two of the sentries stationed outside St. James's Park saw one climbing the railings, and died of fright. Mr. Yeats suggests that they are possibly "descended from that Irish giant who swam across the Channel with his head in his teeth."[117] This mingling between reality and fiction in his description of the collection, the fact that he talks about the fairy creatures as if they were real, even offering Yeats' "erudite" opinion does not only attribute more importance to the tales but also makes the reader feel closer to the world of Irish folk-tales. This can only be achieved by the author himself having the same inclinations. Wilde must have been familiar with Irish folk-tales since his father collected the Irish folklore. There is a parallel between the *Tír na nÓg* and *Dorian Gray*.

Wilde's parents were both nationalists who "seemed to have stepped out of a bad stage-Irish melodrama"[118] And, even though Wilde was a separatist, he did not integrate Ireland much into his writing. Wilde in London was certainly the opposite of the stereotyped Irishman. Declan Kiberd, quoting Yeats says he was "more English than the English themselves".[119] Contrary to this, in Douglas' biography of Wilde, we read that "he was plagued with the Irishman's propensity to muddle his "shalls" and "wills".[120] Even if this was not a truthful account, the fact that Douglas used part of Wilde's Irish identity as a means of degrading him shows that the attitude towards the Irish did not change even in the beginning of the twentieth century. Interestingly enough, Wilde did not like using his full name when he lived in Ireland: Frank Harris quotes Sir Edward Sullivan: ""It was some little time before he left Portora that the boys got to know of his full name, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie

[117] Oscar Wilde, *A Critic in Pall Mall: Being Extracts from Reviews and Miscellanies* 155.
[118] Kiberd 33.
[119] Kiberd 36.
[120] Douglas.

Wills Wilde. Just at the close of his school career he won the 'Carpenter' Greek Testament Prize,—and on presentation day was called up to the dais by Dr. Steele, by all his names—much to Oscar's annoyance; for a great deal of schoolboy chaff followed."[121] When he came to Oxford, he started signing himself with his full name, "filling two lines of the roll-book with the indisputable proof of his Irish identity".[122] He once proudly declared to Frank Harris that he was a descendant of Irish kings, the O´Flaherties, but when Harris could not help but laugh at the idea of "the greatest of the O'Flaherties, with bushy head and dirty rags, warming enormous hairy legs before a smoking peat-fire",[123] Wilde joined him shortly. It was not easy to be both Irish and English at once, for Wilde did not seem to be sure which one to choose. At one point he praises Yeats for his Celticism, but also for his "romantic temper" influenced by Keats.[124] As usual, he solved the problem with adding yet another layer to his public persona: "His solution was more complex and daring: to become a very Irish kind of English man, just as in Ireland his had been a rather English kind of Irish family.[125]

[121] Harris.
[122] Kiberd 36.
[123] Harris.
[124] Oscar Wilde, *A critic in Pall Mall: being extracts from reviews and miscellanies 158.*
[125] Kiberd 37.

Chapter 4: Influences

4.1. Eminent Victorians

Wilde was a plagiarist. He acknowledged it himself, and he stole not only from others, but from his own works, too. During his trials he cited from memory passages from *Dorian Gray*,[126] as well as some of his essays. Thanks to his impressive memory it was easy for him to only reach and choose the most appropriate from his wide repertoire of phrases. All four famous Victorian authors – Matthew Arnold, William Morris, John Ruskin and Walter Pater had their share in influencing Wilde and shaping his aesthetics. Ruskin and Pater are an obvious choice since both of them were teaching at Oxford when Wilde studied there.[127] Due to their opposing thoughts, the school itself was divided into "two camps", siding either with the more conservative Ruskin, who believed in the social function of art, or Pater, who came later and proclaimed "living for the experience". This however, was the height of his philosophy to which he had always aspired, but till he found the exact words for it and published it under *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* he was tolerated by the Oxford authorities. After the publication of this study, which, according to his own words influenced Wilde so much, he was said to have brought the university into disrepute.[128] Ruskin and Morris were the first to form Wilde's thought, but he later abandoned their doctrines – mainly the belief in art as a tool for social reform, and he became attracted by Pater and the *l'art pour l'art* movement. In his early lectures, Wilde was able to agree with Ruskin that "nothing can be a work of art which is not useful"[129] only to claim a little later that "all art is quite useless",[130] in

[126] Francesca Coppa, "Performance Theory and Performativity," Frederick S. Roden, ed., *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 84.
[127] Ojala 44.
[128] Kate Hext, The "Illusive, Inscrutable, Mistakable" Walter Pater: an Introduction, *The Victorian Web*, 15 May 2013 http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/pater/bio.html.
[129] Ojala 81.

the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Like Whitman, whom he admired,[131] Wilde did not mind contradicting himself. He says in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray:* "to reveal art and to conceal the artist is art's aim."[132] Upon asking however, he projects himself on all the three main characters: "Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry is what the world thinks of me: Dorian what I would like to be - in other ages, perhaps."[133]

In his letter in defence of *Dorian Gray*, Wilde aims to explain his work, and to show the critic "what it really is about".[134] Yet one of Wilde's credos was that the critic's share on creating a work of art was as big as that of the author. By trying to explain the work in his terms he usurps the right to criticise and to make one's own impression. No doubt he believed in his own philosophy, but sometimes he made changes in order to achieve certain goals, as he mentions in the essay *The Truth of Masks*:

> Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.[135]

Five years after he left Oxford, Wilde embarked on a lecturing tour in America, where he was preaching the necessity of beauty in everyday life, a doctrine based on

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[130] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Preface
[131] Gagnier, The Idylls of the Marketplace 158.
[132] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Preface
[133] Wilde, Letters, p. 352; quoted in Gaginer, 98
[134] Oscar Wilde, *Art and Morality, A Defence of "The Picture of Dorian Gray,"* ed. Stuart Mason, 2 May 2013 http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33689/33689-h/33689-h.htm#FNanchor_12_12.
[135] Wilde, "The Truth of Masks" 1037.

John Ruskin's "practical aestheticism".[136] Wilde agreed with Morris, who in turn was influenced by Ruskin even before Wilde, that art could be used as a tool for social change,[137] and this later became one of the seeds of his quarrel with another of his mentors, J. M. Whistler. Ojala explains just how much indebted to Morris and Ruskin Wilde was during the early stages of his writing. He could not, however, agree with Morris' strong views against commercialism;[138] his lecturing tour was, after all, the result of propagation of an opera with the aim of gaining money – as said in the previous chapter. The aforementioned James McNeill Whistler had an immense influence over Wilde. When Wilde met him in London, he initially looked up to him, praising his works and his witty commentaries. The quarrel between the two started when Whistler in his famous "10 o'clock Lecture" accused his former disciple of plagiarism of his ideas, and Wilde answered him in the press, which resulted in "sharp witty exchanges"[139] between Wilde and Whistler. They disagreed on the role of art as a social tool, at that time Whistler was proclaiming *l'art pour l'art*, whereas Wilde's ideas were closer to that of Arnold and Morris. These opposing influences – Arnold and Morris on one side, Whistler and Pater on the other, moulded Wilde's aesthetics.

4.2. The Three Nations

Wilde's life was divided between three countries: Ireland, where he was born, England where he spent most of his life, and France, where he died. His childhood, the interest in folklore and his occasional bursts of nationalism were owing to

[136] Ojala, 74-75
[137] Ojala, 77
[138] Ojala, 79
[139] John Sloan, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 16,17. Via Google Books, 23 May 2013 http://books.google.cz/books?id=L6rKsbWYUeIC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

Ireland, England was his stage, his characters and his audience, and France was a hiding place full of "corrupt" people so unlike the English. The oral culture of Ireland, the stories collected by his father inspired Wilde to write his fairy-tales. His plots, however, were original and they influenced many future Irish stories, like Patrick Pearse's "Íosagán", and had an impact on some of the rebels by its characters' "Christ-like combination of goodness and social rebellion".[140] Irish Catholicism, the mixing of the pagan with the religious always attracted Wilde, and it is clearly present in the *The Fisherman and His Soul.* The strict, unforgiving priest miraculously changes at the end of the story, and not only does he acknowledge the existence of "the wild things", but he also blesses them. It must be noted however, that the change of mind happened after he had smelled the wild flowers, and that perhaps he was not acting upon his own account, but was simply under the influence of drugs. It only depends whether we interpret it in the sense that the flowers "opened his eyes" or, on the contrary, blinded his mind.

I have mentioned the English influence of Pater, Ruskin, Arnold and Morris in the previous sub-chapter, but it was also the English upper-class lifestyle which had an impact on Wilde, and which he quickly adopted. He had to become a member of the upper class, or at least to mingle with them in order to know them perfectly and to subsequently ridicule them in his social comedies. Wilde certainly enjoyed being the centre of attention, and he loved to eat the choicest food and to read and admire expensive editions of his favourite books.[141] He possessed many faults of those who he criticised, but unlike them, he was aware of it.

[140] Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, (United Kingdom: Granta Books, 2000) 326. via *Google Books* 14 Apr 2013 http://books.google.cz/books?id=gsF-n0QxDzoC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false.
[141] Harris.

When Wilde had enough of the English, he left for a place which has always been considered a polar opposite of England,[142] its neighbour across the sea, France. France at the fin de siècle was the home of the French symbolist poets and decadents. Even though many have interpreted the "Conclusion" of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* as a call for an absolute submission to the senses and living for the experience, Pater was not so radical and did not go as far as the French writers and artists of the time, in their hedonistic way of life.[143] Not only did the French symbolism influence those who in turn influenced Wilde – but Wilde himself was captivated by the French. He spent a significant part of his life in France[144] and befriended many of the Parisian bohemia. He was inspired by the poets Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine, Théophile Gautier, and the novelists Joris-Karl Huysmans and Gustav Flaubert. The "yellow book", which has such a corruptive influence over Dorian is generally considered to be Huysman's notorious novel *Á Rebours*.[145] The French Decadent movement certainly influenced Wilde, but he was more of an Aesthete than a Decadent himself; both movements stress the importance of artificiality over reality and art over morality, but the Aesthete is more of an observer, whereas the Decadent "wages a guerilla war against the dominant culture"[146] Yet again, Wilde was somewhere in between, but too often he only pointed out the problems the without trying to do anything about it. The French influence was considerable and he enriched his theory with opinions of his French contemporaries. This gave another weapon to his opponents: the French were seen as corrupt, as this scene from *The Importance of Being Earnest* illustrates:

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[142] Ackroyd 400.
[143] Rachel Teukolsky, "Walter Pater's Renaissance (1873) and the British Aesthetic Movement," *Branch*, 25 May 2013 http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=rachel-teukolsky-walter-paters-renaissance-1873-and-the-british-aesthetic-movement.
[144] Harris.
[145] Gagnier, *The Idylls of the Marketplace*, 65.
[146] Philip K. Cohen, "How the Decadents differ from the Aesthetes and the Aesthetic Movement," The Victorian Web, 5 May 2013 http://www.victorianweb.org/decadence/cohen.html.

> JACK: No. He seems to have expressed a desire to be buried in Paris.
>
> CHASUBLE: In Paris! (*Shakes his head.*) I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at the last (…)[147]

And in other instance Jack mentions "the corrupt French Drama".[148] Fancy dresses were one thing, but to import French decadence into England was a different matter altogether. Of course, Wilde was not the first to bring this part of French culture over the channel – there had already been a number of people following this trend in the kingdom, including Pater, and it was all part of the opposition to the traditional Victorian values.

4.3. Hegel

Aestheticism was not the only philosophy that influenced Wilde, was also drawn to the Hegelian system of dialectics. He mentions it explicitly in *The Truth of Masks*:

> "A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism and through it, that we can realise Hegel's system of contraries."[149]

The work of art can only have meaning when it is made by an artist and contradicted by an art-critic. In *The Critic as Artist* we read: "Yes, Ernest: the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not *doing* but *being*, and not *being* merely, but b*ecoming* - that is what the critical spirit can give us."[150] According to Hegel, whatever we claim as truth is only part of a whole, since there exists another part, which contradicts the first truth, precisely because this truth can have "meaning only in contrast to its

[147] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* 689.
[148] Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest 673.
[149] The Truth of Masks, 1037.
[150] The Critic as Artist, 998.

negation". Together they create a whole. Yet this whole is again only a part of another, bigger whole being formed by the two oppositions again:

> "[…] The absolute is not only subject-object identity but the identity of subject-object identity and subject-object non-identity. Only if subject-object identity exists within the subject-object dualism of our experience is it possible to explain the necessary conditions of empirical knowledge."[151]

The split personalities of Wilde's writing, and indeed Wilde's own person, are in accordance with this theory of oppositions.

[151] Frederick C. Beiser, ed. *The Cambridge Compainon to Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 15.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Much has been written about Wilde, his works analysed several times over. I, therefore, did not focus as much on close reading but rather I decided to look at his works in accordance with the expressive theories, putting an emphasis on the author. However, despite that being the main approach, I did also consider the context, which I believe had an immense influence on the author and subsequently on the work itself, as well as, taken from the other side, the view of these works in the eyes of a reader and a critic.

Wilde's writing is full of paradoxes, inversions and oppositions and these are mostly the result of his surroundings – with his artistic qualities he could excel in any era, but the themes he had chosen could only emerge from such a time when science was becoming the new god, the empire was crumbling, gender roles and sexuality were questioned, and new movements in the sphere of life and art appeared. While others pretended to be great moralists and sinned in private – the number of prostitutes in London in the nineteenth century[152] said a lot about Victorian gentlemen, Wilde did the opposite. He let the public to label him and his writing immoral, overlooking the fact that his works do indeed have a moral, and to point out the truly poisonous characters – the reading public itself.

[152] Jane Rogers, "How widespread were concerns about prostitution?" The Victorian Web, 12 May 2013 http://www.victorianweb.org/victorian/authors/dickens/rogers/3.html

Abstract

Reading through the works of Oscar Wilde, one soon notices the many instances of polarity: the recurring themes of the body versus soul, good versus evil, city versus nature, artificial versus natural and many more. It is to be found in his plays as well as in his prose and fairy-tales. Yet these polarities do not necessarily have to oppose each other: the Wildean dialectic allows contraries to coexist, and thus we have the Star-Child who, through repentance, turns from evil to good; however this turn of character does not ensure a happy-ending, and makes us question whether "good really is good". A great number of Wilde's characters either live a double-life, have two distinct sides to their personality, or even several personalities, and in the case of Dorian Gray the split is literal. What led the author to constantly toy with this motif is a question worth examining. In Wilde's case, the artist's life cannot be entirely separated from his works since so much of what he was and what formed him is reflected in the texts he wrote. His statement that "what people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities" (Ransome, 162) shows that for Wilde, truth was not the opposite of "lie", but there may have been several different versions of truth. His aesthetic views, his sexual orientation, the dandyism and the whole Victorian society and philosophy of the time have their share on the final product – in the form of prose, poetry or drama. Oscar Wilde loved to shock society, but he was also very much part of it. His excesses could only be visible when contrasted to the Victorian values – in our century, he would shock no one. The primary aim of this thesis is to provide an analysis of a cross section of Wilde's works with focus on the topic of polarities. The thesis will be divided into three major parts, first introducing the context, the second part will focus on the polarities between Wilde's private and public life, and in the third part I will examine the literary and philosophical influences.

Keywords

Oscar Wilde, Irish Literature, Polarity, Victorian Era, Dialectic, Drama, Fairy-tales, Essay, 19th Century, fin-de-siècle, homosexuality

Anotace

Při čtení děl Oscara Wildea všímavému čtenáři neunikne, jak často autor využívá protikladů: tělo a duše, dobro a zlo, město a příroda, nebo přirozenost a umělost, jsou častými tématy jeho her, povídek i pohádek. Tyto protiklady se však nemusí nutně navzájem vylučovat – ve Wildeovské dialektice může koexistovat i to, co se zdá být v rozporu. Hvězdné dítě nedojde šťastného konce, přestože se za své skutky kálo a postupně se z něj stal dobrý člověk, a to nás nutí k přemýšlení, jestli dobro skutečně je „dobré“. Wildeovy postavy často žijí dvojím životem nebo mají rozdvojenou osobnost, tak jako v případě Doriana Graye, kde je tato rozdvojenost doslovná. Najít odpověď na otázku proč si autor tak často pohrával s tímto motivem je jedním z cílů této práce. Bylo by spíše na škodu snažit se oddělit autorův život a jeho dílo, protože to, čím byl a co utvářelo jeho osobnost, se silně odráží v jeho textech. Když prohlásil, že „čemu lidé říkají neupřímnost je jednoduše způsob jak znásobit naše osobnosti,“ (Ransome, 162) myslel tím, že opakem pravdy nemusí být jednoznačně lež, ale že pravda se různí podle toho, jak na ni nazíráme. Nemalý podíl na tom, co Oscar Wilde napsal; ať už ve formě prózy, poezie nebo dramatu, měly vlivy, které ho obklopovaly – esteticismus, dandismus, homosexualita a vůbec celá viktoriánská společnost a soudobá filosofie. Hlavním cílem této práce je analýza děl Oscara Wildea se zaměřením na protiklady. Práce bude rozdělena do tří částí, počínaje uvedením do problematiky a zasazením do kontextu, další část se bude věnovat protikladům z Wildeova osobního života a v poslední kapitole se zaměřím na literární a filosofické vlivy, které na autora působily.

Klíčová slova

Oscar Wilde, irská literatura, protiklady, viktoriánské období, dialektika, drama, pohádky, esej, devatenácté století, fin-de-siècle, homosexualita

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