

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.