# Quintessential Wilde

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# Quintessential Wilde:

## *His Worldly Place, His Penetrating Philosophy and His Influential Aestheticism*

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Quintessential Wilde: His Worldly Place, His Penetrating Philosophy and His Influential Aestheticism

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For Hillel,
Suzie & Elie,
Jonathan & Tamar,
Yaakov & Ayelet,
Emuna Bella
Shira & Ike,
Aharon Yisrael
Devora, Dov, Sam and Ella,
who continue to study, learn and inspire.

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# PREFACE

The majority of the papers included in *Quintessential Wilde*: *His Worldly Place, His Penetrating Philosophy and His Influential Aestheticism* were presented at the Northeast Modern Language Association's [NeMLA's] 2014 Convention to commemorate the 160th anniversary of Oscar Wilde's birth. The "Oscar Wilde" sessions I organized and chaired were presented in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Because of the international interest and the wide diversity related to Oscar Wilde, a monograph of critical analysis is essential in order to more completely understand Wilde's philosophy, his aesthetics and his influence in a multiplicity of genres into the twenty-first century. *Quintessential Wilde*: *His Worldly Place, His Penetrating Philosophy and His Influential Aestheticism* has a broad spectrum of subjects including: his travels, his sexuality, his musical influence, his children's literature, his jail writings, his individualism, his masks, his homosexuality, his influence on others, and his morality.

Part I, "His Worldly Place," begins with Linda Archer's study, "Oscar Wilde and the Passion of the Absurd" in Chapter One which initiates the discussion of Wilde's satiric absurdities in his plays and even throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which Archer asserts are part of what make Wilde's work such an enduring reflection of the late Victorian era. She further argues that through his use of the absurd in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* in particular, much of which Archer claims is recycled in *Dorian Gray*, Wilde successfully skewers Victorian mores and paints an accurate picture for the modern reader of the way Wilde and his fellow decadents saw the last death throes of Victoria's reign. Archer further illustrates that Wilde is not relying on satire alone to get his point across regarding the stuffiness of Victorian society. Archer indicates that Wilde actually has a type of passion interwoven into the threads of sarcasm, pointing out the absurdity of Victorian society's rejection of passion and sexuality. Without Wilde's work, the modern view of the Victorian era would be vastly different, but that is not the only reason Wilde's work has endured. Archer examines *Earnest*, *Lady Windermere* and *Dorian Gray* in the light of this "passion of the absurd" and how the very structure of Wilde's writing has made it endure and will make it endure well into the future.

In Chapter Two, Oliver Buckton's "Oscar Wilde's London: Sexuality and Aesthetics in the *Fin de Siècle* Metropolis" argues that Wilde's legacy is significantly linked to the modern history of Britain's capital city, especially the transformation of the metropolitan scene in the late nineteenth century, and the rise of consumer culture in the *fin-de-siècle.* Buckton asserts that Wilde's writing combines excitement and enthusiasm for the burgeoning city with deep misgivings about the anonymity and commercialization of everyday life that was a growing feature of London's spectacular growth. In particular, Buckton explores the ways in which London is represented as a space of sexual adventure and individual freedom yet simultaneously—and paradoxically—a corrupt center of exploitation and degradation. Wilde's presence continues to be strongly felt in London today including the practice of "Bunburying"—very much an urban pleasure in *The Importance of Being Earnest*—and the narrator's anxious commentary on urban decay in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Buckton also contrasts the lyrical portraits of sexual abandonment and loss in Wilde's poetry. Wilde's 1881 poem "Impression du Matin" ends with the description of a London prostitute, "one pale woman all alone. . . With lips of flame and heart of stone." Yet it is in his 1891 novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that Wilde probes most deeply into the late-Victorian anxieties over what he terms "the sordid shame of the great city." Drawing on critical sources such as Judith Walkowitz's *City of Dreadful Night* and Matt Cook's *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914*, Buckton examines the ambivalent depictions of London as actual location and as metaphor for pleasure, loss of innocence, and artistic freedom.

In Chapter Three, Dejan Kuzmanovic's "Self-Fashioning and Anti-Normative Personhood: Wilde's Anniversary Gift to Twenty-First-Century Queers" argues that in spite of continuing scholarly interest in Oscar Wilde and his acknowledged impact on contemporary queer cultures, there has been little sustained effort to articulate the vision of queer personhood which emerges from his aesthetic and ethical philosophy. Kuzmanovic asserts that Wilde's theorizing of the relationship between self-identification and social engagement—particularly in his essays and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—can assist in the ongoing discussions about "queer" lives (those lived outside of normative gender and sexual identities) and in overcoming a key impasse between two competing strands of current queer thought: one emphasizing similarities between queer minorities and the heterosexual mainstream and the other insisting on the queer potential for questioning and transforming the norms, institutions and values of that mainstream. Kuzmanovic presents Wilde's argument that anti-normative individuals—the artist, the critic, the

dandy and, by implication, any "queer" person—can effectively transform his social reality precisely through a deliberate, self-conscious crafting of his personal identity. Kuzmanovic asserts that such self-fashioning exposes personal identity as perpetually (re)produced rather than innate and stable, and it reveals that this instability enables self-aware agency with potentially transformative social impact. In several ways Wilde's "queer" figures confound normative expectations. They develop intimate relationships based on affinities that are simultaneously erotic, aesthetic and political. Their guiding affect is the joy derived from their emotional and ethical unpredictability rather than the anxiety caused by the social pressures of normalization exercised upon them. Their ethics promotes highly idiosyncratic moral actions masquerading as a flaunting of solipsistic irresponsibility. Kuzmanovic argues that individuals and groups intent upon questioning and undermining normative gender and sexual identities have still much to learn from Wilde's work.

In Chapter Four, Annette M. Magid's "Oscar Wilde's Worldliness: Lecturing in America" analyzes the impact of Oscar Wilde, who originally was sent to America to serve as a living "poster" to promote Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride*, a highly successful production in London's Savoy Theatre. There was concern that American audiences also might not understand the British humor in *Patience* and Wilde's lecture tour titled "The Principles of Aestheticism" was designed to help introduce people in the United States to issues of aesthetics so they would attend the forthcoming theater performances. It should be noted that the operetta *Patience* was a satire focusing on aesthetic choices, lampooning a Wilde-like, flower-loving poet. Since Wilde's life was an ongoing performance starring himself, he was a perfect choice for the production's promotion. Magid asserts that his American lecture tour as the self-proclaimed "Professor [or Apostle] of Aesthetics" went beyond his role as theatrical poster-boy. Wilde's lectures exhibited his disdain for conventional morality and his relentless pursuit of celebrity which introduced him to the Gilded-Age Americans as well as rural audiences. Magid illustrates that through his lectures on art and beauty, Wilde demonstrates his ability to draw crowds, tantalize audiences and accumulate revenue which played into the consumerist/capitalist economics of the United States. Magid states that not only was Wilde a wonderful wit, perfect with his quick repartees and excellent with comedic timing, he was also a great speaker with a melodious voice. Wilde was knowledgeable about nearly every topic. His remarkable memory, inherited, no doubt, from his father Sir William, enabled him to speak cleverly about whatever topic arose, at times borrowing witticisms from

others. He readily offered his opinion about whatever popped into his fertile mind and what he didn't know, he made up with such eloquence that even the cleverest listener thought Wilde was incorporating precise facts into his lectures. Magid illustrates that the secondary result of Wilde's tour to a multiplicity of cities and towns across America was his influence of aesthetic theories on many members of the female audience. Even though some men viewed Oscar as peculiar and effeminate, women appreciated his desire to make their dull lives beautiful. Oscar lectured on House Beautiful as well as aesthetic theory which some American women embraced as refreshing. Magid asserts that Wilde's American lectures of 1883 professing his aesthetic theories had profound and enduring repercussions on American audiences.

Part II, "His Penetrating Philosophy," begins with Chapter Five, an analysis of Wilde's children's stories in Sema Ege's "Wilde's Stories: Lyrical and Universal Epitome of Adult Indifference to Children's Suffering." Ege argues that Oscar Wilde's, the great aesthete's, highly artistic stories like "The Happy Prince" or "The Stolen Child", often regarded as children's tales, can on one level be read as great social reform texts/treatises that must have contributed to the efforts made on both sides of the Atlantic for the improvement of children's conditions which eventually (by 1918) culminated in issues concerning child education and labor become law in all forty-eight states in the USA. Wilde's lyrical description of the silenced children whose plight is displayed within the scope of a few pages is drawn with such sensitivity, with such warmth of heart that they entail a profound depth. It is this depth that immediately leads to countless other associations. Wilde's just one word or sentence, or one character like the Selfish Giant or the town mayor, reminds the reader of all kinds of injustice done to children by all institutions (including parents/families). Ege asserts that Wilde's descriptions of children or of those who harm them are so delicate and yet so well thought that they even compel the reader to weigh and consider, for instance, fathers using their children as a part of their own experiments as in Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter"; being abused at schools in London as had happened to the son of Goldsmith's Vicar (*The Vicar of Wakefield*); or the danger of being manipulated by the vain ambitions of people who believe their upper ranks bestow on them the right to do so, as is manifest in Emma's treatment of Harriet (Jane Austen's *Emma*). Ege argues that focusing on Wilde's display of society's treatment of children in his short stories is meant to pave the way to a utopian blissful existence for children where the one prime maxim should be how wonderful is the power of love. Ege asserts that Wilde, as far as children's issues were concerned, as

in all other matters, was not a man of his times but a Universalist and that this highly criticized nineteenth-century Aesthete will continue to be a pathfinder for future Man.

In Chapter Six, "Celebrity, (Auto)biography and Failure in Wilde's *De Profundis*", Pierpaolo Martino asserts that today Oscar Wilde can be considered the most iconic of the English writers. Martino argues that the secret of Wilde's contemporary success is given by the artist's capacity of translating his life into a form of writing and his writing into a vital gesture in which resonates a complex critique of late nineteenth century English society and through which we can also interpret and criticize our own time. In his own age, the Anglo-Irish writer became at once director and actor of himself in the most important of his plays, namely *Oscar Wilde*. In between the last two centuries, Wilde's self-conscious construction of his identity, along with his performance of a complex, ironic masculinity, have become sources of inspiration for such playwrights as Terry Eagleton, Tom Stoppard and David Hare, who have literally translated seminal *acts* of Wilde's life into successful dramatic works. Hare's *The Judas Kiss* (1998) describes two pivotal moments of the path which—in the last act of his life—led Wilde to destruction; namely, the day Wilde decides to stay in London and face imprisonment, and the night, after his release two years later, when (in Naples) Lord Alfred Douglas betrays him. Martino asserts that the two acts of Hare's play—in which the author quotes from Wilde's letters and from *De Profundis*—stage two moments, two aspects of Wilde's experience, which in different ways investigate the consequences of taking an uncompromisingly moral position in a world largely informed by prejudice and conformity.

"The Postmodern Masks of Oscar Wilde," Chapter Seven, by Heather Marcovitch, explores both Wilde's biography and his persona, which are the basis for several postmodern plays and films interrogating the biographical subject. David Hare's *The Judas Kiss* (1997) and Moises Kaufman's *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1998) attempt to deconstruct the cultural expectations informing the narrative of Wilde's trials and sentencing. Hare, for instance, reverses the narrative emphasis by placing the trials in the background and, instead, dramatizing the usually offstage conversations. Kaufman foregrounds the textuality of the trials and dramatizes criticism alongside the unfolding of events. Marcovitch argues that both of these plays problematize the biographical character of Wilde by either displacing or critiquing the received definition of Wilde as a gay martyr. While Wilde's biography grounds the above two dramas, Todd Haynes, in his 1998 film *Velvet Goldmine*, further reifies

Wilde's character as a cultural sign that influenced the early years of the gay liberation movement and its musical contemporary, the crypto-queer, androgynous glam rock. In this movie about the mutability of identity and its connection to art and to performance, Wilde's iconicity and his biography frame the narrative of the film. Marcovitch asserts that though none of these dramatizations makes any disingenuous claims to biographical truth, they all contribute to the reframing of Wilde's cultural signification in the late twentieth century as a performative text. These works complicate the dominant narrative of Wilde as the martyred homosexual man by foregrounding Wilde as artist and as a postmodern subject; moreover, they also challenge the received hermeneutics of the trials as a watershed event in Wilde's biography. Marcovitch examines the postmodern textual iterations of Wilde in these three biodramas and examines the late-twentieth-century reframing of Wilde as an artist, historical figure and cultural icon.

In "Reclaiming the Fisherman: Soul Searching and the Subversive in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales," Chapter Eight, Ariana Mashilker notes a parallelism with Giordano Bruno in Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland.* Kiberd writes, "The truth, in life as well as art, was that whose opposite could also be true: Every great power evolved its own opposite in order to achieve itself . . . but from such opposition might spring reunion." If this holds true for Wilde and for Joyce, as seems to be hauntingly the case, the intersection might be found in what Jarlath Killeen calls "Wilde's most obscure fairy tale" in *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, that is "The Fisherman and His Soul," and an examination of Joyce's multifaceted treatment of the Harpy/Siren/Ker/Mermaid figure throughout *Ulysses*. Mashilker asserts that when held against his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde's fairy tale, "The Fisherman and His Soul," could arguably stand as the more subversive of the two works. In Wilde's manipulation of archetypes in "The Fisherman and His Soul" one finds the precursor to Joyce's parallel exploration in *Ulysses*: under the guise of a love story, each attempts a reconciled construction of *self*—the artist and the Irishman—a need only heightened by voluntary exile from their native soil.

Part III, "His Influential Aestheticism," begins with Chapter Nine, "Two Mysterious Portraits: Gogol and Wilde on Art and Artists," by Anastasia Pease. Pease asserts that in the essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism" Oscar Wilde writes that whereas writing fights against time (because to be appreciated, it requires time), sculpture and painting do not face the same challenge. Nevertheless, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* revolves around a pictorial work of art that actually does change

through time. The central image of Wilde's novel—a living work of art linked to a human spirit—is similar to one of Nikolai Gogol's stories, called "The Mysterious Portrait". In Gogol, too, the artist's inspiration and skill create a portrait that is haunted. The artist's life is linked to the painting, as are the lives of everyone who subsequently owns the portrait. At the center of the story is a promising young artist who is finally driven mad by the work of art. Through a close textual analysis, Pease explores the ways Gogol's and Wilde's stories reflect on the power of art, the role of artists, the relationship between art and money, as well as the mysteries of talent and inspiration.

In Chapter Ten, Frederick David King's "Oscar Wilde, 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' and British Aestheticism's Revisionist History of Same-Sex Desire" focuses on "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." and revisionist history in late-Victorian sexual discourses. King taught a course in 2013 where he looked at late-Victorian literature and the competing discourses of medicine (i.e. sexology), the law (i.e. sodomy), and Aestheticism/ Decadence (i.e. Eros/Hellenism where same-sex desire is caught up in ideas of beauty and sensation). King developed an idea of reading W. H. as revisionist history as a way to combat and challenge legal condemnation as criminals and medical diagnosis as "abnormal perverts" to paraphrase Krafft-Ebing. W. H. offers an alternative by inventing a history of same-sex desire through literature making love between men something beautiful and hopeful instead of something sinful or diseased. At the same time, the story also places same-sex desire into a larger discourse of beauty and literary history, troubling the idea of truth and ideas of fiction that Wilde explores in his essay "The Decay of Lying." King focuses on something related to Donald E. Hall's 2006 book *Reading Sexualities* and David Halperin's *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*. There is also recent work on Wilde, Aestheticism and Ancient Greece by Stephano Evangelista and others that informs the essay. King posits the social and cultural history as also really fascinating.

Linda Gordon in Chapter Eleven focuses on "Oscar Wilde Stands Uneasy: Individual and Aestheticism". Gordon's paper examines the aestheticism of Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the context of radical changes in nineteenth-century visual art and utopian thought. Wilde develops his disruptive, disintegrating aesthetics in his theoretical works and expands them in his novel. In Wilde's own words, his aesthetic "individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force". In a pictorial-literary structure that anticipates Paul Cézanne's aesthetic of surface and Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic, Wilde's ideas and voices come into productive conflict with other ideas and voices. Gordon asserts that

Wilde brings the authoritative into question in his aesthetic individualism. In his novel, Wilde reveals how the aesthetic tradition has become torn between the desire to stress individualities and the drive toward aestheticizing "wholeness", a harmony of parts. For Wilde, as for Bakhtin's twentieth-century investigations of the novel as a dialogic genre, the novel is a dynamic form that embraces traditional contraries, explores the potential of their conflict, and projects a critical, utopian scheme, as H.G. Wells would say, "for bettering the interplay of individualities". These tensions motivate the novel's dark plot. Gordon explores the disruptive relation between individual and aestheticism in the aesthetic individualism of *Dorian Gray*.

In Chapter Twelve, "Breathing New Life into Legends: Oscar Wilde and the Doctrines of the Aesthetic Movement," Moira Di Mauro-Jackson explores "The Secrets of Immortality: Oscar Wilde and Literature." She explores current media to exemplify Wilde's world renown. Merely examining common Facebook pages depicts Wilde's present-day popularity; the Oscar Wilde Facebook page indicates 1,001,830 "likes" and 36,018 people talking about Wilde, continuing a celebration of a skill that 160 years after his birth, Di Mauro-Jackson argues, surpasses his ability as an essayist, dramatist, story teller, editor, orator and novelist. Di Mauro-Jackson offers a comprehensive vision of Wilde as a profound believer in the power of art to change society and of words to hold a mirror up to society which permeate his immortality. Wilde's appeal to his traditional reading public may well have failed in *Dorian Gray*, if they had realized how devastating the mirror Wilde was holding up to them was—as he showed them a creature, a blank slate, completely created by the worst among them, embodying the worst of their potential. It is possible, in this reading, to see Dorian's death less as martyrdom than as an act of atonement for sins. In similar terms, Wilde's own identity as Christ-martyr in his trial has the two sides of this figure in it, as well. Di Mauro-Jackson claims that Wilde is the martyr of an unfeeling social order (be that martyrdom caused by ethnicity, sexual proclivity or Decadent hubris and immorality). *De Profundis* may also be read as an individual coming out of the night of the soul, out of his Gethsemane, and finding the courage to say more directly what he has said only more obliquely to that point. Di Mauro-Jackson asserts that Wilde today is a perfect fit for so many contemporary causes: a witty, sought-after author who helps—and continues to—portray "the [human] body in its swiftness and the soul in its unrest" through his own works.

The focus of this study is to continue the enduring quest to read and understand a man who in his time was not fully appreciated for his wit and

genius, but through the years and into the twenty-first century continues to prove that Oscar Wilde's worldly place, penetrating philosophy and influential aestheticism are indeed quintessential.

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# PART I

# HIS WORLDLY PLACE

My experiences with the press in the West have been very pleasant, and I have met gentlemen whose intelligent conversation I have enjoyed. They have talked with me of art and literature, and understand the subjects. Such persons I like to meet.

—Oscar Wilde, "Speranza's Gifted Son,"
*St. Louis Globe-Democrat,* February 26, 1882.

# CHAPTER ONE

# OSCAR WILDE AND THE PASSION OF THE ABSURD

LINDA ARCHER

In celebrating the 160th anniversary of Oscar Wilde's birth, the question of why his works have endured so long crops up, particularly considering that to some they appear to be mere baubles in the literary canon. This question becomes even more of an issue when one considers that in the last years of Wilde's life, after the trial and subsequent scandal, no one even dared mention Wilde or his work. The answer, however, is simple. Wilde's satiric absurdities in his plays and even throughout much of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are part of what makes Wilde's work such an enduring reflection of the late Victorian era. Through his use of the absurd in *The Importance of Being Earnest, Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*, some of which is recycled in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde successfully skewers Victorian mores and paints an accurate picture for the modern reader of the way Wilde and his fellow decadents saw the last, long-awaited death throes of Victoria's reign. The modern reader can relate to the weariness of much of society with the rigid strictures of the sixty-year reign of the queen.

This is not to say that Wilde is relying on satire alone to get across his point regarding the stuffiness of Victorian society. He actually has a type of passion interwoven into the threads of sarcasm, pointing out the absurdity of Victorian society's rejection of passion and sexuality. Margaret Kennedy writes that "Art teaches people how to live; it is the way out of despair, towards a better life. Wilde may not be so direct, but this connection between art and social reform (an argument for criticism's utility) is embedded in his work."[1] Without Wilde's work, the modern view of the Victorian era would be vastly different, but that is not the only

[1] Kennedy 2013, 102.

reason Wilde's work has endured. In examining Wilde's "passion of the absurd," the qualities of his writing which touch the audience will highlight their strengths.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, one of the strengths is something that appears in most of Wilde's work—reflections of Wilde himself in at least one character. In *Earnest*, the most obvious reflective character is Algernon Moncrieff. Algernon is also the character most critical of the strictures of Victorian society. His very character in its lightness is the antithesis of the somber Victorian model. Nearly every word he speaks is an indictment, even stating "I don't care two pence for social possibilities." Lady Bracknell, representing that very society, replies, "Never speak disrespectfully of society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that."[2]

This is not to say that the character of Algernon is the only one to reflect the absurd, however. The entire design of the play itself is absurd. Gwendolen and Cecily's passion for the name of Ernest itself is absurd, and it is meant to be. All of the characters are superficial, with only Algernon careening into reality enough to be mocking the fabric of Victorian society. Karl Beckson takes this further, saying:

> *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a play of multiple masks, employs the word *absurd* some eight times in its comic depiction of a bewildering world of seemingly irrational and incomprehensible impulses on the part of the two young female characters, who wish only to fall in love with someone named "Ernest"—the "only really safe name," says one; a name that "seems to inspire absolute confidence," says the other.[3]

Despite her position as a stalwart supporter of the Victorian status quo, Lady Bracknell does have some of the best lines in the realm of the absurd. In referencing the widowed Lady Harbury, she states "I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger", following up with "she seems to me to be living entirely for pleasure," as though pleasure was a thing actively to be avoided.[4] Of course Algernon gets the follow-up line, "I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief," which is repeated in Chapter XV of the 1891 version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This is social critique reflective of a truism for the Victorian era, that most women were indeed better off without the husbands they acquired through their arranged marriages. Going several steps further,

[2] Wilde 2012, 1771.
[3] Beckson 2003, 4.
[4] Wilde 2012, 1740.

Virginia Morris suggests that the main reason women tended to poison their husbands was that it was the only more or less socially acceptable way of getting rid of them.

Lady Bracknell is symbolic of the way these marriages come to be arranged when she responds to Gwendolen's announcement that she is engaged to Jack by informing her that she is definitely *not* engaged, and when she is, she will be informed of it by either Lady Bracknell or Lord Bracknell, "should his health permit."[5] Gwendolen's marriage is, like most marriages for young Victorian women, to be arranged along the lines of society's rules, meaning along monetary and bloodline considerations.

Even the love between Jack and Gwendolen and Algernon and Cicely is absurd. Cicely has made a complete fantasy out of her love affair with the mysterious "Uncle Ernest" to the point of breaking off the engagement in her diary before renewing it several days later, and this was prior to her ever actually meeting him. Gwendolen has done something along the same lines, falling in love with Jack because of his name, and before he even proposes and warning him "I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you."[6] Wilde assuredly did not intend his audience to take such declarations seriously; they are lampoons of the absurdity of solemn Victorian wedding vows.

Along with the absurd in Wilde's lampooning of Victorian social mores, causing Wilde's work to endure, performances of his plays keep them in the public eye. Several film versions have been made of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, with the character of Lady Bracknell being the plum role. From Dame Edith Evans to Dame Wendy Hiller to Dame Judi Dench in the most recent version, Lady Bracknell's character is portrayed as formidable, a battleship of a woman. One problem with the film versions, however, is that despite the fact that they use Wilde's language, the viewer often sees more of the director's interpretation than of Wilde's satire. This is the case with the 2002 Dench version. Extraneous material and errors (Lady Bracknell as a former dance hall girl; Algernon as Jack/Ernest's elder brother rather than his younger one, as the play's text clearly states) detract greatly from the subtlety of Wilde's social satire. The text by itself is quite sufficient to make Wilde's point; there is no reason to drag in twenty-first-century subtexts.

Conversely, the 1952 version of *Earnest* remains faithful to Wilde's intentions regarding the play as entertainment and social satire. Dame Edith Evans exhibits the proper degree of social outrage when she bellows

[5] Wilde 2012, 1743.
[6] Wilde 2012, 1742.

"A handbag?" This is not the whispered line from the more recent version. This is Lady Bracknell as moral Victorian matron deeply appalled by the thought of her daughter marrying into "a railway station." It simply was not done, which highlights the absurdity of societal rules. There are no extraneous scenes here, such as Algernon arriving in the country by balloon, nor is there a suggestion, however slight, that Lady Bracknell had ever, even in a dream, been a dance hall girl.

The portrayals of Jack by Sir Michael Redgrave and Colin Firth are similar, as are those of Michael Denison and Rupert Everett. In fact, for a time Everett seemed to be making a career of acting Wilde, considering his role of Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* in 1999. For the female roles, Reese Witherspoon is too old to be Cecily, whereas Dorothy Tutin is not, or at least she does not appear to be. Tutin also handles the satirical duel with Gwendolen much better. Her initial verbal interplay with Algernon reflects much more in the way of the absurdity of a girl engaged to marry a man she has just met, the engagement having happened months previously.

Algernon also exemplifies a split with typical Victorian society in his total disregard for the rules and regulations involving social hierarchies. To an average Victorian, breaking down the barriers between classes would be absurd, but Baselga encapsulates this, referring to Algernon's opening scene with Lane, with:

> First, one of the most important rules of Victorian England regarding social stratification is implicitly broken, because neither the master nor the servant respect[s] the established verticality. On the other hand, Lane has been caught sponging on his master's cellar, which he admits shamelessly, almost proudly; on the other, Algernon's reaction could not be more indulgent, taking it as the normal thing to do. Secondly, a highly sacred institution of Victorian England is lampooned here: Marriage, which is said to be demoralizing and implicitly dull and the antithesis of enjoyment.[7]

This attitude is repeated in *An Ideal Husband* in Lord Goring's speeches to his father on the subject of marriage.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* actually splits the Wilde reflection among the three main characters: Basil Hallward is the artistic Wilde, creating beauty on canvas as Wilde does with words; Lord Henry is a more sinister version of Algernon Moncrieff, even repeating some of Algernon's lines from *Earnest*; and Dorian Gray begins as the innocent Wilde then moves on to be Wilde's satire of the Victorian ideas of good and evil, that

[7] Baselga 1994, 19.

someone who is beautiful is necessarily good, while evil is written on the individual's face.

Passion and absurdity run throughout the novel in each of the characters and his actions. Basil Hallward's passion for Dorian is unrequited, yet pure. It is the artist's passion for beauty, and as Hallward says, "As long as I live, the personality of Dorian Gray will dominate me."[8] The painting and Dorian himself continue to haunt Hallward right up until his murder at the hand of Dorian. Despite Wilde's assertion that "All art is quite useless," it is necessary to remember that at the beginning of the preface he says that "The artist is the creator of beautiful things."[9] Passionate absurdity thus does not apply to Basil Hallward. As an artist, he is to be lauded, not mocked.

Lord Henry Wotton, on the other hand, uses satire and wit to critique the failings of Victorian society that the majority see as virtues. One of the first things Lord Henry says upon meeting Dorian repeats exactly one of Wilde's most quoted lines:

> The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.[10]

The very fabric of Victorian society was interwoven with ideals of self-denial and restraint, which Wilde shows in most of his work as being hypocritical, both in theory and reality. Lord Henry as a more sinister version of Algernon Moncrieff becomes truly evident in Chapter XV of the 1891 version of the novel when he says, of Madame de Ferrol, "Her capacity for family affection is extraordinary. When her third husband died, her hair turned quite gold from grief," parroting Algernon's description of Lady Harbury.[11]

Despite the saturnine qualities of Lord Henry, Wilde does give him some scruples. While Lord Henry sees the hidden passions, gives in to them, and finds society absurd, he does draw the line somewhere. Even he cannot stomach Dorian's behavior and has been estranged from him for many years at the time of Dorian's death. Absurdity gives way in Wilde's writings when it encounters negative passion, i.e., Dorian's ruthlessness. In *Earnest* the situation never arises because there is no negative passion. Even Lady Bracknell cannot be taken seriously as a threat to the lovers.

[8] Wilde 2007, 195.
[9] Wilde 2007, 3.
[10] Wilde 2007, 199.
[11] Wilde 2007, 148.

However, Dorian becomes an increasingly menacing and frightening figure, and in the end the satiric powers of the absurd cannot overthrow him. It is his own inward-turning passion that leads him to stab the portrait, killing him in the process.

The popular imagination of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was saturated with blood and violence. One can find a variety of sensational murder cases of the period, including the Roadhouse murder of 1860 (an important source for Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*) and the Jack the Ripper murders of 1888. This was the era of Dr. Crippen, hanged in 1910 for the murder of his wife, and of George Joseph Smith and the famous "brides in the bath" case. It was in this period that there occurred, in the phrase of Judith Flanders, "the invention of murder."[12] That is, it was the period when the British in particular became fascinated with the gory details of sensational murder cases. Wilde, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was doing no more than tapping in to popular taste. Yet at the same time, he was satirizing British bloodthirstiness and using it to show the essential hypocrisy of British high society.

The passions in Dorian are over the top. He does things simply because he can and get away with it because the Victorian values are so shallow, which is satiric fodder for Wilde. The absurd is played up here because while it is clear that something is off with Dorian, because his looks reflect innocence, no one knows what exactly is off. The first view of the possibility of Dorian's passion appears when he is speaking of the painting and says, "Appreciate it? I am in love with it, Basil. It is part of myself, I feel that."[13] This line sets up the notion that Dorian does exhibit passion, but his true passion is only for himself. Even his so-called great love for Sibyl Vane is not truly love. Dorian only loves her when she is not herself, when she is the characters she portrays. His love for her is based upon how her art reflects back to himself for appreciating it. Wilde makes it clear that while everyone for a time loves Dorian, he loves no one. In fact, his decision to devote himself to pleasure and passion is a distinct choice, and one which goes totally against the Victorian norms.

> He felt that the time had really come for making his choice. Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided that for him,—youth, life, and his own curiosity about life. Eternal infinite passions, pleasures, subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins,—he was to have all these things.[14]

[12] Flanders 2014.
[13] Wilde 2007, 206.
[14] Wilde 2007, 243.

Dorian's statement underlines what will be his total abnegation of responsibility for his actions throughout the novel. He himself is not at fault for his admittedly reprehensible actions; it is Fate's fault. Wilde designs Dorian's attitude to be patently absurd, yet it is so typically Victorian. The difference in Wilde's handling of Victorian hypocrisy, thus stabbing at it, is that Dorian Gray has an accurate mirror: the portrait.

Even in his fascination with the changes in the portrait as his passions become darker and darker, Dorian is driven to sink lower into the depths of what would be considered evil even by the standards of a society much less repressive than the Victorians. The Victorian need to keep all of this hidden, though, leads Dorian to murder Basil Hallward simply for wanting to see the portrait. In moving away from the passionate absurd with Dorian Gray, Wilde has stripped away the masks of the darker aspects of Victorian society. In the character of Dorian throughout the novel, until the very end, Wilde illustrates the Victorian denial of responsibility for the darker actions which occurred—child labor, prostitution, poverty, even the murders which were becoming more common, culminating with Jack the Ripper. The majority of Victorian society was bewildered by this, but Dorian Gray, in the end, is not. As he stabs at the picture, he is literally and figuratively killing himself.

The 1945 film version of *Dorian Gray*, with its black and white *film noir* quality, emphasizes these darks and lights within Dorian's character. As the film goes on, the light quality becomes darker, with more shadows to be seen throughout. The absurdity of situations is highlighted through extremely melodramatic music right up until the end, then shifts to the lighting. When Dorian stabs the picture and the camera pans up to the painting, it is brightly lit to show not the horror of the twisted face in the previous scene but Dorian as the young man he had once been. Like the current version of *Earnest*, however, the director couldn't leave Wilde's vision well enough alone and has to add in a romantic interest for Dorian in the form of Basil Hallward's niece Gladys, played as an adult by Donna Reed. As usual, this character is completely unnecessary and almost destroys Wilde's satire and his twisted humor.

*Lady Windermere's Fan* is where the twist comes in regarding the inclusion of characters reflective of Wilde. There actually are none in this play, but there is absurdity galore, both regarding passions and manners. In fact, "Wilde's first two plays are about fallen women in an attempt to invalidate that category. . . ."[15] Lady Windermere herself is absurd in holding herself up as a sparkling example of a lady in Victorian society.

[15] Kennedy 2013, 105.

Her foil in many cases is Lord Darlington, who is another of Wilde's characters to voice the absurd. One of his earliest comments to Lady Windermere is "If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn't."[16] The traditional Victorians took goodness very seriously indeed, but if someone of Society appeared to be bad, it actually took a major scandal for Society to believe it. This is the same problem Wilde deals with regarding Dorian Gray. Lord Darlington even continues the idea by saying that "It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious. I take the side of the charming. . . ."[17]

Lady Windermere actually fits into neither camp. She is the Victorian prude, convinced of her own virtue and rectitude, which in her mind makes it impossible for her to associate with Mrs. Erlynne in any way although her statement to Lord Windermere that "I am told there is hardly a husband in London who does not waste his time over *some* shameful passion"[18] seems to acknowledge the tendency toward passion in the males of the time if not the females. This is ironic, in that Kerry Powell writes that in the early manuscripts, "Lady Windermere is a cynical hypocrite, and the mission of the play is to expose the sensual and self-indulgent nature that her devotion to 'purity' conceals."[19] Wilde obviously turns this around by the final version. In fact, Lady Plymdale, referring to Lady Windermere, says that "It takes a thoroughly good woman to do a thoroughly stupid thing," which Wilde follows up with Cecil Graham saying that "They [women] always want one to be good. And if we are good, when they meet us, they don't love us at all. They like to find us irretrievably bad, and to leave us quite unattractively good."[20]

This focus on goodness and purity in Lady Windermere's character is, in Wilde's view, completely absurd in its total disregard for passion. It makes one wonder (from a modern perspective) how the Windermeres ever managed to reproduce; but from a Victorian perspective this was normal. Lady Windermere's antipathy in this play is focused on Mrs. Erlynne and Lord Windermere's attempts to get his wife to recognize her and welcome her into society.

Lady Windermere's confusion at her husband's efforts regarding Mrs. Erlynne stem from her exceedingly narrow views of propriety regarding who should or should not be allowed into Society. She takes the "proper"

[16] Wilde 1917, 11.
[17] Wilde 1917, 15.
[18] Wilde 1917, 38.
[19] Powell 2009, 43.
[20] Wilde 1917, 103.

Victorian view that once Society has exiled someone, that exile should remain permanent. "Mrs. Erlynne [. . .] is a cosmopolitan woman—a traveler, in some respects out of necessity. She is in a social exile, but she gets by because she is modern, independent and intelligent. Wilde illustrates that society does not really care about Mrs. Erlynne's sin but affects revulsion for her behavior."[21] This idea of society's revulsion is anathema to Wilde, and although he toned down his sarcasm regarding Lady Windermere in revisions (possibly as a sop to Lillie Langtry), as Powell says, "revisions . . . do not alter the fact that *Lady Windermere's Fan* is framed as an assault upon the gender ideology of late-Victorian feminism and the social purity movement."[22]

The audience (and Lord Windermere) know that Mrs. Erlynne is Lady Windermere's mother, thus making Lady Windermere the product of a broken home, a major taboo at the time. In fact, in consideration of Victorian society's views of morality, the very fact that Lady Windermere's mother left her father for another man would have branded Lady Windermere as being exactly like her mother. "The apple does not fall far from the tree." This can also be seen as another of Wilde's indictments of arranged marriages. Can they possibly be happy under those circumstances? "Passion will out." Mrs. Erlynne, however, proves to be of a much higher character than her daughter, and Wilde injects even more irony in the fact that never throughout the play does Lady Windermere ever realize that Mrs. Erlynne is her mother. Mrs. Erlynne first appears in the 1891 version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, described as "a pushing nobody, with a delightful lisp, and Venetian red hair," which is a close description of Lillie Langtry.[23] Given Lady Windermere's snubbing of her, one wonders why she would risk her own recovered reputation to save that of her daughter. That is precisely the point, though. Kennedy states that she

> intervenes to prevent her [Lady Windermere] from making a ruinous mistake, one that her own experience allows her to know the outcome of. Mrs. Erlynne has managed to salvage her life, but doubts her daughter's ability to do so.[24]

Despite such a short acquaintance, Wilde has written the character of Mrs. Erlynne as being extremely perceptive in the ways of society's hypocrisy,

[21] Kennedy 2013, 105.
[22] Powell 2009, 58.
[23] Wilde 2007, 146.
[24] Kennedy 2013, 106.