

**Ambivalent Acclaim:
Examining the Critical Reception of Oscar
Wilde's Society Comedies**

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A Thesis presented to
the Department of British and American Studies
at the University of Oslo
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Cand. Philol. degree
Autumn Term 2005

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Preface

In writing this thesis I find myself privileged to have so many people to thank. First of all I am indebted to my advisor, Tore Rem for sending me to countless sources which have shaped this thesis tremendously, as well as giving me a good deal of helpful advice and encouragement.

It has also been my good fortune to have friends like Susan Senstad Schwartz and Tone Holt Nielsen who were enormously helpful in reading and enthusiastically responding to my text.

I am also very grateful for the invaluable help I've gotten from my writing assistant, Christina Sørensen, whose attention to details, patience and clarity, has seen this manuscript through countless rewrites.

And then thanks to my parents for their support and encouragement and to my son Benji who kept me sane by distracting me from my work with his lively sense of humour. Last of all thanks to Peter who believed in me when I doubted, patiently listening again and again to yet another Oscar Wilde anecdote, and who has brought my life colour and a little bit of magic through his art.

Introduction

The truth is rarely pure and never simple¹ (Oscar Wilde)

Few writers have captured the imagination of their own time, spawning so much criticism, gossip and mythologizing, as Oscar Wilde did. Wilde's late Victorian era was a time of lively debate on art, gender and sexuality. It was also a time of dramatic social changes, with the discussion created to a large degree by the emerging sciences of psychology, sociology and sexology, just as literature and drama were being shaped by trends in literary and dramatic criticism. Simultaneously, Wilde's era was also a time that witnessed a reactionary backlash against changes such as aestheticism in art, feminism, and after Wilde's trial, homosexuality.

Wilde's role in this intellectual, artistic scene is profoundly interesting; perhaps no other writer of the period quite captured the diversity, ambiguities and deep-seated ambivalence as acutely as Wilde did. His writings span from poetry, journalism on a vast array of topics, essays collected in *Intentions*, the historical dramas of *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua*, society comedies and all the way to the confessional poetry of *De Profundis*. Wilde's works, more than those of any other writer, have come to represent *fin de siècle* England. In addition to this, Wilde himself came to represent the *fin de siècle* individual, both to the public in his lifetime and to modern readers, a veritable icon of dandyism, subversiveness, homosexuality and individualism,

¹ Wilde, Oscar, *The Importance of Being Earnest in Lady Windermere's Fan, Salome, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband, The Importance of Being Earnest*, ed. Raby, Peter (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995), Act I, line 209.

This thesis focuses firstly on Wilde's society comedies in their historical context in order to clarify the question of how Wilde was influenced by the melodramatic theatre that had long been dominant in England. Secondly, it will also examine the discussion of theatre reform and realism that was the most credible, respected dramatic form during Wilde's years as a playwright in 1893-95.

The critic Kerry Powell takes up the question of influence in his 1990 monograph, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, tracing the various Victorian sources from which Wilde clearly draws upon in constructing his society comedies.² Powell's work is invaluable as it resurrects many plays which were never published, but only exist in a single copy in the archives from the Lord Chamberlain's Office. Powell demonstrates that Wilde borrows plots, characters and stage devices from his contemporaries to such an extent that it is understandable that critics accused him of plagiarism. He also explores the influence of Ibsen in Wilde's works especially *An Ideal Husband*. Yet Powell pays little attention to the stylistic aspects of the plays arguing that Wilde is not so innovative and consequently his sources tend to overwhelm the plays.

In contrast, other modern critics such as Katherine Worth, have de-emphasised Wilde's role as a Victorian playwright, instead emphasising his role as literary innovator, a precursor of modernism.³ Other critics again, most notably Christopher Craft in 'Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*', have focused on his textual borrowing from other sources as a sign of intertextuality, a conscious systematic weaving together of different sources that bring with them previous references

² Powell, Kerry, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990).

³ Worth, Katharine, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd. 1987).

of meaning.⁴ The new composition has a richness, a multiplicity of meaning and tone that provide interesting juxtapositions, that in turn transform a series of multi-layered references into a composite whole.

Wilde is undeniably full of intertextualities and, in fact, Ian Small and Josephine Guy go so far as to argue, in *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late 1800s*, that had Wilde not existed, post-modern critics would have invented him.⁵ But whereas Wilde's contemporaries often viewed his incorporations as plagiarism, post-modern critics view Wilde's borrowings as evidence of his genius. However, Wilde was not doing this in an intellectual climate that promoted or condoned borrowing. On the contrary, the intellectual climate of the late Victorian Era was one that highly prized originality.

In this thesis, I will attempt to place Wilde's society comedies historically. For although it is provocative to depict Wilde as a modernist conscious of his role as social critic and self-conscious icon, who cynically manipulated his audience by flattering them with a glamorous view of themselves, a view popularised by the critic Regina Gagnier in her *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*; there is evidence, however, that Wilde was a typical Victorian who struggled with the philosophies of aestheticism and romanticism that lingered on in literature, and also the influence of realism, as well as his own anxiety about social change.⁶

⁴ Craft, Christopher, 'Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*', *Representations*, 31 (1990).

⁵ Guy, Josephine M. and Small, Ian, *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004).

⁶ Gagnier, Regina, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1986)

In the first part of the first chapter, I will attempt to depict the traditions in English Drama of the 1800s, drawing upon the writings of a number of different theatre historians, to highlight the influence of melodrama, spectacle and realism. The history of melodrama and spectacle is not simply a question of the natural evolution of two separate genres, for both are somewhat artificial forms whose developments were curiously intertwined with that of theatre censorship in England. Censorship dominated the English Theatre to such a degree that it played a significant role in shaping the nature of the theatre itself, as well as the sensibilities of the public, and to some extent their notion of national identity.

In the second part of chapter one, I will address the influence of both realism in general and Ibsen in particular in the 1880s and 1890s, and how these influences shaped the English theatre by stimulating discussion amongst theatre critics and playwrights alike. Behind the desire and potential for change, the threat of censorship loomed constant, affecting the theatre in two distinct ways. Firstly, it was affected by providing a concrete legal constraint that encouraged writers to write in a manner that did not threaten conventional social mores. Secondly, because censorship restraints had been in effect for so long that for many theatre critics, it had the effect of causing playwrights and theatre managers to believe in the principle of censorship, and in fact argue for the upholding of censorship. This chapter will also utilize the many insights in Peter Brooks's, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, to examine melodramatic conventions theoretically, as well as the psychological impact that the genre holds.⁷

⁷ Brooks, Peter, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1976).

In chapters two and three, I will initially examine the contemporary criticism of Wilde's society comedies and the trends in theatre criticism that shaped this criticism. Secondly, these chapters will explore Wilde's stylistic use of different dramatic devices such as the use of minor characters to create a subversive subtext within the apparently conventional morality of the plays as a whole.

I will be examining the critical reception of Wilde by contemporaries, especially that of William Archer, Clement Scott, A. B. Walkley and George Bernard Shaw, drawing upon a number of texts from theatrical history to place these critical writings in their historical context. In a textual analysis I will be focusing on Wilde's use of the dramatic device of the confessional scene as a central point in all his society plays. I will argue that this is, in fact, the pivotal source of irony in these plays. In doing so, these chapters will draw heavily upon *The Will to Knowledge: A History of Sexuality, Volume I* in which Michel Foucault studies the way traditions of confession serve as a means of mapping power relations both related to sexuality and to society in general.⁸

Arguing that a subversive subtext exists in Wilde's society comedies was a common theme in studies of Wilde in the 1990s and has been done very convincingly in Sos Eltis's *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*, which contends that Wilde was clearly an anarchist, socialist and a feminist or Craft's deconstruction of a homoerotic subtext in *Earnest*.⁹ In contrast to Eltis's assessment of Wilde, I am sceptical to give any such labels to Wilde because these labels are inherently so laden with a specific ideology and if there was one thing that Wilde was consistent

⁸ Foucault, Michel, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality* (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 1978), I.

⁹ Eltis, Sos, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996).

about it was that of switching masks and poses to avoid being labelled. For as readily as one finds a Wildean quote that would suggest a specific meaning, another contrary one that implies the opposite is sure to arise.

I will not attempt to do a deconstruction of these plays as Craft does but I intend to briefly address his study in the conclusion of chapter 3. Generally, I will argue that, while Wilde's society comedies borrow from a melodramatic tradition, they are at the same time part of the theatrical experimentation in psychological realism. Theatre reform did not result in sudden changes, but a gradual change as a number of playwrights, including Wilde himself as well as his contemporaries, Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero, became more and more daring, challenging the Censor and society as a whole.

Furthermore, I will argue that studying the critical reception of Wilde's society comedies does facilitate understanding the divergence of contemporary and modern views of Wilde's dramatic works, for while his contemporaries did not always perceive him to be a part of this movement in dramatic reform, modern critics typically see Wilde's society comedies as an important precursor to modernist literature.

Chapter 1: The Victorian Theatre – A Source of Inspiration and Influence

When I see a monstrous tulip with **four** petals in someone else's garden, I am impelled to grow a monstrous tulip with **five** wonderful petals, but that is no reason why someone should grow a tulip with only **three** petals.¹ (*Oscar Wilde*)

The question of influence is one that often arises in studying Wilde's society comedies, since contemporary critics frequently accused him of being influenced by the melodramatic theatre of England and France, an insinuation that Wilde had vehemently denied, saying 'My works are dominated by myself' and that no other dramatist had influenced him even 'in the smallest degree'.² On the other hand, though, Wilde occasionally defended these dramatic traditions, arguing that they deserved a bit more respect than they were given.³

Traditionally attitudes regarding the notion of influence have changed greatly since the Renaissance. As Harold Bloom relates in *The Anxiety of Influence*, Ben Jonson, as many of his Renaissance contemporaries, viewed art as hard work and imitation as a normal and healthy part of inspired writing. Jonson also felt that influence was a filial relationship of homage that the author made to his precursors. This view allowed authors to openly acknowledge the literary tradition that they had emerged from and the debt of inspiration that they owed to it. That perception however, changed dramatically with the

¹ Wilde in Ellmann, Richard, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin Books 1987), p. 320.

² Wilde, Oscar, *St. James's Gazette*, 18 Jan 1895, in Bird, Alan, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, (London: Vision Press Ltd. 1977), p. 104.

³ Tydeman, William, ed., *Comedies, Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband, The Importance of Being Earnest, a Casebook* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd. 1982), p. 37.

post-Enlightenment focus on Genius and the Sublime. Thus authors could no longer acknowledge a literary kinship, but were obliged to aspire to originality as if it were a divinely inspired act. Art was no longer hard work; it was a product of an individual's creative genius.⁴ Because authors were pressed to divorce themselves from literary tradition, by the late Victorian Era, Bloom relates that influence had become a source of anxiety. Influence was no longer intimately connected with inspiration, but instead it was viewed negatively, as sign of artistic immaturity and lack of originality.⁵ Wilde was acutely aware of this attitude and tried to cover the traces of influence in his works, but his dramatic debts were plentiful and glaringly visible to his contemporaries.

In contrast to this attitude, modern critics, influenced by the concept of intertextuality, instead see influence as a source of richness that imbues the text with a multiplicity of meanings. But post-modern readings of Wilde can quickly become a means of selectively focusing on certain aspects of a text's historicity in order to further certain political interpretations of Wilde's texts. In such a process these critics, paradoxically, de-historicise Wilde by de-emphasizing his role as a Victorian playwright. Instead the focus is shifted to Wilde's role as a feminist writer and a precursor of modernism as Katherine Worth argues in her monograph on Oscar Wilde. Critics such as Christopher Craft have deconstructed Wilde's text, arguing that Wilde's works are a construction of his homosexuality in the text of *Earnest in Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in The Importance of Being Earnest* (1994).

⁴ Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press 1973), pp. 26-8.

⁵ *Ibid.* 26-8.

These interpretations often present many valuable perspectives, but by de-emphasizing the historical context of Wilde's society comedies and their contemporary reception, the plays then risk being analyzed exclusively from a modern perspective. The Wilde scholars Ian Small and Josephine Guy, in their *Oscar Wilde Revalued: An Essay on New Materials & Methods of Research*, point out that very little study of Wilde has been done that takes into consideration the theatre history of the Victorian period.⁶

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu also cautions against a lack of awareness of a text's historical background in *In Other Words: Essays Toward a Reflexive Sociology*. Bourdieu argues that a critic risks seeing literature as a representation of reality, unless they are clear about observing the text as an object and not a means of finding 'an intellectual solution to intellectual problems'.⁷ Interpretations that promote specific political readings of Wilde's texts can at times verge upon mythologizing. And in doing so, modern readings of Wilde's texts often reveal a post-modern desire to see a certainty and lack of ambivalence as the Marxist literary critic Regina Gagnier does in *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*. Such readings tend to strip Wilde's texts of the dramatic tension appearing in textual ambiguities that reveal a deep-seated ambivalence about the social order of his time. Thus it is important to clarify Wilde's relationship to melodramatic traditions, the experimental theatre of realism and the discussion of theatre reform in order to better understand the historical context of Wilde's society comedies.

⁶ Guy and Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, pp. 155-179.

⁷ Bourdieu, Pierre, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1990) pp. 98-100.

But a discussion of influence can be difficult for modern readers to follow, as an intimate knowledge of the dramatic traditions of the Victorian Era is not typically included in general studies of Victorian literature or Wilde's works. In *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, the critic Kerry Powell addresses this lack of knowledge by tracing the influences of different plots and plot conventions in Wilde's society comedies to specific plays from the melodramatic theatre of the period and is an invaluable source.

Melodrama has with time come to be viewed as a pejorative description of a dramatic expression that is characterized by exaggerated emotion, little characterization or psychological development, and that relies heavily on action and special effects. These negative associations have made it difficult to imagine the genuine enthusiasm and excitement that were once associated with the melodramatic theatre.⁸ But melodrama was the most popular dramatic form throughout the Victorian era, and was by no means a thing of the past in the 1890s when Wilde's society comedies were written and performed. Thus, a basic familiarity with and understanding of the melodramatic form is necessary in order to examine the contemporary criticisms of Wilde's society comedies and to better understand the role melodrama played in the theatre landscape of the 1890s.

This chapter, then, is an overview of the melodramatic theatre, because a familiarization with Victorian dramatic traditions throughout the era enables Wilde's works to be clearly seen in their transitory role from Victorianism to Modernism. A familiarity with the melodramatic theatre is of course difficult, because the melodramatic theatre no longer exists today and, as Michael Booth says in *English Melodrama*,

⁸ Booth, Michael, *English Melodrama*, (London: Jenkins 1965), p. 13.

‘Nothing is harder to bring to life for a modern reader than the theatre of the past...[especially when] the kind of theatre under discussion is now extinct’.⁹

I. The Age of Melodrama

The history of the Victorian drama from the 1830s to the 1890s is for the most part only represented in theatre histories and is not part of the literary canon of the period, one that primarily focuses on prose and poetry. Therefore, it might seem surprising that the English Theatre of the Victorian era was vibrantly alive and well, a fact that was witnessed by the sheer volume of plays written and the frequency with which patrons attended, two or three times a week being fairly common. In this sense, the theatre was an important source of social intercourse and entertainment.

In the 1700s and 1800s, the theatre had been a relatively exclusive meeting place, a sort of social club catering to the aristocracy and some of the wealthier middle-class. But this changed as London became increasingly urbanized and the demand for mass entertainment increased so that by the turn of the 18th-century, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, like many other theatres had undergone a series of reconstructions, expanding the seating capacity from around 600 to 800 to a staggering 3,600 and 3,000 respectively.¹⁰ The theatre was no longer the source of entertainment and reflection for a few as the working class could afford the cheaper seats of the gallery and the middle class began to frequent the theatre especially by the 1860s.

⁹ Booth, *English Melodrama*, p. 13.

¹⁰ Brown, John Russell, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre* (New York: Oxford University Press 1995), pp. 206, 267.

It is therefore not surprising that dramatic works were censored by a series of censorship laws. The censorship laws required that plays needed to be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain's office in order to be performed on the stage. Dramatic censorship in England started in the sixteenth century as a means of policing a large urban population that was living below or near the poverty level; since in a city with a large population of unemployed individuals, the potential for instigating political unrest with the performance of plays of a political nature, was significant. Censoring the theatre did not guarantee political stability, but it did significantly hinder the dissemination of propaganda to illiterate crowds of urban poor.¹¹

However, censoring of plays was rare and many potentially subversive plays were performed, such as Shakespeare's *Richard II* or Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, both depicting the deposing of monarchs.¹² Censorship also was not aimed at regulating standards of morality, since stage violence and sexual innuendo were common staples of Renaissance Theatre. The Restoration Theatre continued developing this tradition and was known for its relatively explicit scenes of sexual pursuit and ravishment. And offstage, the theatre milieu was more than ever the focal point of a busy trade in prostitution.¹³ During the 1700s, various religious groups brought the public's attention to the theatre as a source of immoral influence and consequently De Jongh relates, that the theatre was, 'viewed by half the population throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as [being] at best frivolous and at worst subversive.'¹⁴ Despite the controversy, no reform

¹¹ De Jongh, Nicholas, *Politics, Prudery and Perversion: The Censoring of the English Stage 1901-1968* (London: Methuen 2001), p. 18.

¹² Ibid. 18-23.

¹³ Brown, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre*, pp. 207-8.

¹⁴ De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversion*, pp. 18-23.

came about from a perceived need for moral censorship. Instead, an increased censorship of the stage, in the form of The Stage Licensing Act of 1737, came as a response to some political satires by Henry Fielding, who accused the Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, of political corruption.

The Stage Licensing Act of 1737, then, provided for a stricter censorship of plays. According to the act, only two theatres within the City of Westminster were allowed to stage legitimate dramatic performances. These two patent theatres were Drury Land and Covent Garden. The Lord Chamberlain was given unlimited power of censorship over these two theatres. Other theatres were allowed to produce drama that included some text plus a number of songs.¹⁵ By the late 1790s, the burletta, a genre which was loosely defined as a burlesque of opera, had developed through the influence of French boulevard theatre into the dramatic genre known as melodrama.

Melodrama was enormously popular, dominating the stages of the patent and the non-patent theatres alike. Typically, melodrama is characterized by idealized, sentimental depictions of individuals who encounter dramatic trials and tribulations, but always end justly. It is an oversimplified, surreal world that is clear and predictable but lacks psychological depth.¹⁶

Despite, or because of, its apparent simplicity, melodrama has a universal appeal. In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks examines the genre, tracing its beginnings from the influence of Humanism and Romanticism and the resulting secularization and de-sacralization of society that occurred at the end of the 18th century:

¹⁵ De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversion*, p. 24.

¹⁶ Booth, *English Melodrama*, p. 14.

The origins of melodrama can be accurately located within the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath. This is the epistemological moment which it illustrates and to which it contributes: the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch).¹⁷

According to Brooks, melodrama attempts to rediscover the sacred in everyday life, through the actions of seemingly ordinary individuals. In this respect, melodrama explores a notion of democratic morality. In melodrama, an individual's choices and actions become important with the heightened drama of hyperbole that emphasizes the importance of the individual and the individual's choices. The Romantic era's focus on individualism is then explored in the characters of the hero, the heroine and the villain. The conflict-ridden relationship between these characters reflects melodrama's Manichean vision of the world as divided into the dichotomous realms of good and evil in constant struggle. As Brooks notes, melodrama,

Comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern.¹⁸

The hero and the heroine become symbolic of the individual's responsibility for making moral choices, and these choices therefore signify a purging of evil from their symbolic world. These actions are idealized representations of ordinary individuals' struggles against inherent evil in order to achieve wholeness, a sense of unity with God or goodness, and by repeatedly watching this ideology being enacted on stage, the concepts

¹⁷ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, pp. 14-5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 15.

of hero and heroine become coded in the popular consciousness as that of idealized individuals, to be identified with as ideals on which to model one's life.

Melodrama revolves around Christian notions of morality and it is this aspect that definitively separates the Victorian Drama from Restoration Drama that had little plot and elaborate intrigues and witty verbal repartee instead of moralising. In this sense, the impact of the French Revolution in England was moderated by Evangelicalism. Its influence lent a moral imperative that imbued the public with an expectation that morality was a pivotal point for every aspect of society. As the early Victorian theatre critic Charles Lamb relates, the turn of the century was characterised by a lack of the sacred in social institutions such as marriage or family ties. Instead society was governed by communal ties, and bonds that forged political and economic alliances to a greater degree than in the Victorian era. Eighteenth-century England had a different sense of morality and decorum than the Victorian era and consequently Victorians tended to view Restoration comedy as immoral and distasteful.¹⁹

Thus in contrast to Restoration comedy, melodramatic plots were predictable, simplistic, moral tales that primarily revolved around the villain's pursuit and assault of the heroine. The hero, the heroine's romantic interest, heroically saved the heroine, and the villain, true to theatrical justice, dies in the end. The element of humour in melodramas is often not emphasized, yet it was an essential part of a play's construction, especially in the role of the comic man, the hero's companion, who provided comic subplots and a comic relief from the hyperbolic excesses of the main plot. Slapstick physical humour was typical in melodrama, rather than the verbal witticisms of

¹⁹ Lamb, Charles, 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century', *The London Magazine*, April 1822 in Rowell, George, *Victorian Dramatic Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd. 1971) pp. 256-8.

Restoration comedy. Characterization in melodrama was minimal, and as a result plays were typically plot-driven, enlivened by an overwhelming amount of action. Melodramatic plays became an assembly-line affair with a typical stock company performing around 50 different plays a year. New manuscripts were quickly penned, scantily rehearsed and then performed, with short runs of a few days or a week.

Melodramas were popular fare throughout the 1800s, and in order to keep up with the demand for new plays, melodramatic playwrights were initially little more than hack writers. This is especially true of the resident dramatists who wrote for the minor theatres. The wages of resident dramatists were abysmally low, with anything from 3£ a week to 30 shillings not being uncommon. Others were paid per play and were consequently forced to write at a frantic pace in order to make a living. These dramatists typically wrote hundreds of plays with only slight variations in plot, translated and adapted dramas from the French, novels or newspaper accounts of domestic violence.²⁰

Early melodramas were little more than dramatizations of the gothic novel, gloomy tales of terror, filled with macabre violence, plenty of assaults, attempted rapes, murders and supernatural happenings such as ghosts appearing to reveal secrets and avenge the murdered.²¹ But the Gothic melodrama gradually waned in popularity as other themes closer to contemporary events became popular. These themes allowed for a greater depth of characterization and a deeper exploration of the individual's relationships with the world around them such as the feelings of patriotism and nationalism created by the Napoleonic Wars resulted in the development of the genre of nautical and military melodramas. These melodramas re-enacted major battles both at sea and on land

²⁰ Booth, *English Melodrama*, p. 48.

²¹ *Ibid.* 69.

complete with hundreds of extras outfitted with costumes and weaponry, horses, stage fires and explosions and were enormously popular as audiences were eager to see realistic depictions of military battles punctuated by daring heroic deeds, grandiose speeches and a romantic subplot.²²

Domestic melodramas were a variation of the gothic drama that depicted more ordinary everyday settings of country and urban life. They reflected and stimulated the growing English preoccupation with the notion of home and hearth as the focal point of the patriarchal family by providing highly sentimental renderings that idealized rural family life.²³ The serenity of this pastoral life was usually interrupted by a villain pursuing the heroine, a beautiful peasant girl. A typical heroine spent half the play running through deserted woods and dramatic landscapes, a child in her arms and her hair and clothes dishevelled. The heroine's only recourse was escape or suicide, preferably throwing herself from a cliff to escape the villain's clutches.²⁴

These plays were generally written for a working-class audience and consequently reflected a high degree of class-consciousness. Virtue was connected to hard manual labour and a degree of poverty, while the wealthy were idle, perverse and without scruples.²⁵ Therefore villains were usually portrayed as corrupt nobility or wealthy landowners, trying to assault the virtuous peasant heroine who was always saved from dishonour by a simple, but strong and handsome peasant or woodsman.

Domestic dramas came to encapsulate a variety of themes, some reflecting socio-political problems of the times. Many plays were simply dramatizations of murder and

²² Booth, *English Melodrama*, p. 100.

²³ *Ibid.* 121.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 62.

theft cases that were popularized in the newspaper such as *Sweeney Todd* (1847) a popular dramatization of an early 18th-century mass murderer.²⁶ Another popularly dramatized theme could be seen in factory plays, dramas that focused on the difficult working conditions and poor pay that were part of a factory worker's daily life. To some extent these plays provided a cathartic effect for a frustrated working populace that had no political recourse for their problems. But some of the plays were also laden with a potential for inciting riots and the organizing of labour unions.²⁷ Considering the fact that most of the audience were working-class individuals, these plays were considered particularly dangerous.

Thus these plays, which ran during the 1830's and 1840's contributed to legislation aimed at tightening the legal loopholes of the previous censorship act, bringing about the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843. This act addressed the loopholes of the previous Censorship Acts in placing all theatres, including those outside Westminster, under the jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain. Accordingly, all theatres needed to be licensed, and the plays they performed approved of, before performance. The Lord Chamberlain was allowed to censor and thereby prevent production of plays 'whenever he [the Lord Chamberlain] shall be of the opinion that it is for the Preservation of good Manners, Decorum or of the Public Peace'.²⁸

The act was aimed at curbing the possibility of using the theatre in the dissemination of political propaganda. It was strictly interpreted, and as a result the Censor often intervened, censoring plays that were perceived as promoting 'a whole list

²⁶ Booth, *English Melodrama*, p. 139.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 137.

²⁸ De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversion*, p. 25.

of prohibited areas[...] the Irish problem, the Reform Bill, “Chartism and the Royal Family””.²⁹

Despite the Censor’s apparent efforts to bring morality to the stage, the middle-class did not regularly attend theatre performances until the 1860s. The theatre’s reputation for vice and immorality lingered, and the theatre itself was not necessarily a respectable place.³⁰ The theatre’s chaos lent itself to disreputable behaviour, especially towards women, as they were ‘exposed to much that is unpleasant unless they are actually hemmed in by their male friends’.³¹ This was especially so as theatre auditoriums were typically dark, dimly lit and chaotic. For despite that the early Victorian Theatre was attended by parts of the middle class and the aristocracy; it was dominated by the working-class. The vast majority of these working-class people were semi-literate and, not surprisingly, they were fond of plays with little literary value that were bursting with action and had no long soliloquies.

The introduction of gaslight to the stage and auditorium of theatres brought a respectability and order to the dark chaos of theatre audiences. Improving lighting also encouraged more realism in acting and scenic sets, while spotlights heightened the element of surprise and mystery, allowing the villain to appear more suddenly and seem more sinister and mysterious than before. The illumination of spotlights was contrasted by the use of coloured limelight that created beautiful sunrises, sunsets or iridescent sparkles that imbued scenes with a rich air of romanticism.³² In the rosy limelight, the

²⁹ Stephens, J. R., *The Censorship of English Drama 1824-1901* (1980), in *Politics, Prudery and Perversion* (see De Jongh, above) p. 26.

³⁰ Jenkins, Anthony, *The Making of Victorian Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991), pp. 1-28.

³¹ Pearce, Charles, *Madam Vestris and her Times* (New York: 1969) p.103 in *The Making of Victorian Drama* (see Jenkins, above) p. 19.

³² Brown, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre*, pp. 302-3.

heroine's beauty appeared sublime and serene in a manner that was not possible under the glaring gaslights, or the flickering light of candles that were trimmed by stage hands several times during the course of a play, an intrusion that was obviously very distracting.

The 1850s also saw a rise in the popularity of sensation drama, a blending of melodrama and spectacle that relied heavily on historically authentic costuming, extravagant sets and special effects such as explosions, fires and elaborate trap doors for their popularity. Sensation drama became popular because the larger theatres had such bad acoustics that it was difficult to hear an actor's voice throughout the whole theatre.³³ This problem is comically illustrated by Max Beerbohm's description of how an actor's line of 'I want to help you' was heard as 'Want – pew' in the pit at the Garrick Theatre. Beerbohm also describes that from the pit it was impossible to see any facial expression from most of the actors, except from one actor who probably was judged to be violently over-acting by patrons sitting in the stalls.³⁴

Thus, sensation drama was created in order to compensate for the loss of the spoken word, while the spectacle and the melodrama focused on dazzling audiences with their sumptuous costumes and lively plots. The Shakespearean productions of the era are a typical example of sensation drama that were especially popular amongst working-class crowds. However, spectacle productions of Shakespeare did not necessarily provide a literary experience, since much of the text was omitted, leaving only the action, romance, violence and supernatural ghost scenes. These plays were produced with an attention to details such as elaborate costuming, richly painted sets and hundreds of extras, with an authenticity that was inspired by the new science of archaeology. Archaeology and stage

³³ Booth, *English Melodrama*, p. 52.

³⁴ Beerbohm, Max, 'In the Pit', *The Saturday Review*, 12 May 1906, in Rowell, George, *Victorian Dramatic Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd 1971), pp. 198-202.

realism was a topic that Wilde addressed in his essay *The Truth of Masks* which was later published in the essay collection *Intentions* (1891).

Sensation drama was also used to depict melodramatic stories in an array of colonial settings such as Africa, India and the Far East. This dramatic genre was a parallel to the late Victorian masculine adventure fiction of Kipling, Stevenson and Haggard. Sensation drama drew heavily upon sensational and innovative special-effects such as trap doors installed into walls of the sets and the stage floor, as well as stage fires and explosions that had developed during the course of the century. One of the most striking examples of sensation drama, *The White Heather* (1879), even featured an underwater struggle between the hero and the villain in diving suits.³⁵ But these technical innovations were cumbersome, requiring lengthy curtain pauses for extensive set changes which typically ran from 30 minutes to an hour, and resulted in plays lasting up to five hours. In addition, the shifting of scenery and the movement of hundreds of extras were so noisy that it was often impossible to hear an actor speak.³⁶

The Queen's patronage of the theatre was instrumental in giving English drama a new dignity and respectability. From the late 1820s when she was still a princess, Queen Victoria was fascinated by the theatre and came to be acquainted with many actors and actresses through their royal performances at Windsor.³⁷ The acting profession had now changed and popular actors typically led more moral lives than their predecessors in the previous century, who were often known for their loose morals and drunkenness. The Queen was known for her love of opera, but she also had a special fondness for melodrama's spectacular action and vividly emotional scenes. Her tastes were eclectic,

³⁵ Booth, *English Melodrama*, pp. 172-7.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 171-3.

³⁷ Jenkins, *The Making of Victorian Drama*, pp. 4-7.

including Bulwer's *Richelieu*, circus-like performances of *St. George and the Dragon* (1883) at Astley's, pantomimes with live lions, Shakespearian productions and gothic thrillers like *The Vampire*. While the Queen's patronage of the theatre contributed to bringing an air of propriety and dignity to the theatre, her patronage diminished with the years, especially after Prince Albert's death in 1861 when she largely retired from the public's view. However, The Prince of Wales carried on this tradition of theatre patronage, and he was an even more avid theatre-goer than the Queen, frequenting society comedies, burlesques, melodramas and spectacles. And although he preferred society comedies, he was also fond of popular melodramas known for their innovative special effects. His presence popularized theatre-going, bringing prestige and glamour to opening nights at Irving's Lyceum and Tree's Her Majesty's.³⁸

Theatre remodelling in the 1850s and 1860s including the introduction of electric lights, carpeting and upholstery also brought about a significant change in clientele. As the Queen's patronage suggested, the theatre was no longer a questionable place populated for the most part by working-class individuals, but a respectable and indeed a very fashionable place for middle-class and upper-middle-class individuals to be and to be seen.³⁹ This is aptly illustrated by Henry James's description of the audience of the English theatre in 1877 as genteel, fashionable and respectable, 'It is well dressed, tranquil, motionless; it suggests domestic virtue and comfortable homes.'⁴⁰

Many of the new theatres of the mid-Victorian Era were much smaller than the earlier theatres, providing a more intimate atmosphere and making more naturalistic

³⁸ Jenkins, *The Making of Victorian Drama*, pp. 8-12.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 16-7.

⁴⁰ James, Henry, 'The London Theatres in 1877', *The Galaxy*, May 1877 in Rowell, George, *Victorian Dramatic Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd. 1971), p. 193.

acting possible. Furthermore, the theatre was also changed by the fact that middle-class audiences were typically well-read and expected more from the theatre than the limited plots and unliterary texts that traditional melodrama had offered.⁴¹ They preferred domestic dramas that focused on home and domesticity. These themes of home and domesticity reflected a popular Victorian idealisation of home as a refuge and a source of moral renewal from the *heartless*, alienating, immoral influence of the work place.⁴² Work was seen as a necessary evil that ‘crippled his [man’s] moral sense and distorted his human relationships’.⁴³ The notion of the home as refuge drew upon the sentimental idealisation of the middle-class patriarchal family where the father was the provider, working out of the house; while the mother was the nurturer, the angel mother, a source of altruism and moral purity.

These traditional gender roles originated in part in the early Methodist community, who believed that the family should be modelled on the holy family and that the home should uphold Christian purity and morality. As John Tosh notes in *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle Class Home in Victorian England*, ‘men had a calling to good in the world, but the moral contamination which tainted most forms of work made it essential for them to exploit the spiritual resources of the home’.⁴⁴ Although such beliefs had emerged from the Evangelical movement, they were widely accepted in secular circles by the mid-1800s. These gender roles provided a moral certainty, a

⁴¹ Barrett, Daniel, ‘Play Publication, Readers, and the ‘Decline’ of the Victorian Drama’, *Book History*, II (1999), p. 182.

⁴² Tosh, John, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 1999), pp. 30-3.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 33.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 38.

stabilizing effect against the dissolution of community and traditional social values that came with the modernization and secularization of English culture.⁴⁵

Domestic dramas initially had a higher degree of realism and characterization than previous melodramatic genres as seen in the plays of Tom Robertson. Robertson's plays were fairly realistic sentimental domestic melodrama with romance, some light comedy and a sense of class consciousness. For example in Robertson's early play *Ours* (1866) the Crimean War is a backdrop for a sentimental romance laden with humorous slapstick routines. Here the woman's gender roles reflect the popular mid-Victorian idealized conception of women as a supportive, girlishly cheerful angel mother, and domesticity was depicted as a comforting refuge from the alienation of war and poverty.⁴⁶

The plays of W.S. Gilbert from the mid-1860s to the 1890s, satirised this idealized image of domesticity with farcical burlesques of patriotism, romance, gender roles and domestic life. Gilbert's plays range from semi-realistic renderings of everyday life to fairytales, many of which were written in collaboration with the lyricist Arthur Sullivan. Gilbert's plays offered a reprieve from sentimental melodrama and provided some mild social criticism by ridiculing middle-class values such as honesty, honour and duty. In Gilbert's plays, humour achieved a degree of sophistication. The physical gags and antics of earlier melodrama are largely gone, and instead humour arises from witty, humorous misunderstandings.⁴⁷ Gilbert is perhaps best known to Wilde's scholars for his play *Patience*, which depicts Bunthorne, the fleshly poet, a dandy figure much like Wilde himself.

⁴⁵ Tosh, *A Man's Place*, pp. 29-34.

⁴⁶ Jenkins, *The Making of Victorian Drama*, pp. 73-84.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 107-130.

By the 1870s, the English theatre was still dominated by melodrama and sensation drama. Plays were written only to be performed and were not meant to be read. This was a distinct contrast to the late eighteenth century when plays were popular reading material in the circulating libraries, second only to the novel.⁴⁸ But due to the rise of the novel and the low literary quality of melodramatic plays, dramatic texts were rarely read as texts, nor were they available in anything but acting editions, which were cheap copies written for acting companies and made confusing reading for a general audience not acquainted with stage directions. Many playwrights also avoided printing their plays for fear of piracy, because there was no international copyright law and unlicensed productions were common. Gilbert was one playwright who decided to risk piracy and print a number of his plays in the collection *Original Plays* of 1876. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Gilbert's blank verse plays were literary and made for amusing reading for the general reading public and critics alike.⁴⁹

Plays in themselves were not the focal point of the audience's interest, but were seen as a vehicle for certain performers' talents. As a result, theatre criticism of the greater part of the Victorian Era tended to focus on the actors' performances, the attendance of notable celebrities, and to some extent the play's special effects.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Kenny, Shirley Strum, 'Theatre, Related Arts, and the Profit Motive; An Overview', in Kenny, Shirley Strum, ed., *British Theatre and the Other Arts 1660-1880*, pp.32-3 (London: Associated University Presses 1984), in Barrett, *Book History*, pp. 175.

⁴⁹ Barrett, *Book History*, pp. 178-80.

⁵⁰ Rowell, George, *Victorian Dramatic Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd. 1971), p. xiii.

II. Theatre Reform and the Development of Theatre Criticism

In the 1880s, the theatre critic William Archer broke with the tradition of performance-centred theatre criticism, redefining the role of theatre criticism by focusing on the literariness of the play's text. As a young critic, Archer had travelled extensively, viewing plays in Copenhagen, Hamburg, Christiania, Berlin, Dresden, Vienna and Paris. He was also well acquainted with the plays of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen and would become Ibsen's main translator in England. Archer drew upon these experiences to envision an English theatre that produced works of intellectual and stylistic quality by native playwrights.⁵¹ He felt that theatre critics should educate the public 'in the course of time he [the critic] may even create in the minds of his readers a certain habitual attitude towards the stage, on which the future of the English drama may in no small measure depend'.⁵²

The time was ripe for change and Archer was quickly joined by a number of other influential voices who were also interested in improving the literary quality of the English theatre. Among these was the author Henry James, who echoed Archer's criticism of the English stage, declaring that the theatre was dead. James drew a comparison to the French theatre, 'the theatre plays in Paris a larger part in people's lives than it does anywhere else is by this time a fact too well established to need especial comment.'⁵³ 'The English stage has probably never been so bad as it is at present and at

⁵¹ Postlewait, Thomas, *Prophet of the New Drama: William Archer and the Ibsen Campaign* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press 1986), pp. 25-34.

⁵² Archer, William, 'The Ethics of Theatrical Criticism', in *About the Theatre*, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1886) pp. 175-6.

⁵³ James, Henry, 'The Scenic Art', 1949 in Stokes, John, *Resistible Theatres: Enterprise and Experiment in the Late Nineteenth Century* (U.S.A: Elek Books Ltd. 1972), p. 44.

the same time there probably has never been so much care about it', he added.⁵⁴ James's comments were written shortly after the Comédie Française had visited London in 1879, a tour that was well received by society and intellectuals alike. This company's performance of a classical repertory of Racine, Molière and Corneille gave Londoners a glimpse of a more challenging, intellectual drama than the lighter fare of melodrama and historical spectacle to which they were accustomed.

Then in 1889 André Antoine's Théâtre Libre, an experimental repertory company specializing in naturalist productions of Zola, Tolstoy and Ibsen, toured London, causing a stir that was more provocative than that of the Comédie Française. The Théâtre Libre's naturalist plays, like naturalist literature were concerned with art as a means of examining society and its problems. Their stark depiction of the lives of ordinary working-class and poor people were unsettling to an audience who were used to a steady fare of melodrama and romantic history.

These foreign influences contributed to a discussion of English drama in the intellectual milieu of the 1880s that was chronicled in a number of different theatre journals of the period. Matthew Arnold, the popular cultural critic, was pivotal in popularizing this discussion in the press, in reviews addressing the middle class's growing interest in the theatre.

Like Archer, Arnold was critical of the English theatre. In his article entitled 'The French Play in London', Arnold also argued for a more serious treatment of the theatre.⁵⁵ He felt that the present system of popular private theatres only provided the public with

⁵⁴ James, Henry, 'The London Theatres in 1877', *The Galaxy*, May 1877 in Rowell, *Victorian Dramatic Criticism*, p 193.

⁵⁵ Arnold, Matthew, 'The French Play in London', *The Nineteenth Century*, August 1879pp.242-3, in Stokes, John, *Resistible Theatres: Enterprise and Experiment in the Late Nineteenth Century* (U.S.A: Elek Books Ltd. 1972), pp. 4-5

entertainment and was not addressing issues of social concern. As Arnold saw it, the theatre had the capacity to fill the moral vacuum left by the Church of England's decreasing influence in society by addressing issues of social consequence rather than the formulaic melodramatic plays that presented life as simplistic and devoid of difficult ethical questions. He felt that the playwright and the theatre should ideally play both the roles of social critic and moral guide.

As mentioned, William Archer also played a significant role in the theatre reform debate as a translator and promoter of Ibsen. In an article from 1885, he emphasized the need for an ethical drama in England, a drama that would be 'an efficient factor in the spiritual life of the nation'.⁵⁶ Archer, however, did recognize that an open discussion of ethics and morality was not a simple matter in late Victorian England.

Much of Archer's writings on Ibsen focused on how the Norwegian playwright addressed liberal issues such as the restrictive gender roles that women were given, lack of openness on sexual disease and corruption in public figures. Archer felt that Ibsen approached these ideas realistically, yet with a degree of optimistic idealism that gave hope that meaningful social changes were indeed possible. This mixture of realism and idealism were what Archer hoped English playwrights would emulate. Archer felt that by writing plays that depicted moral and ethical dilemmas tinged with a hopeful optimism regarding social changes, the literary quality of the English theatre would improve as well as providing social criticism as Arnold suggested. The introduction of Archer's translations of Ibsen's plays did play a significant role in revitalizing a discussion of ethics, morality, and of a censorship which Archer felt it necessary to abolish in order to

⁵⁶ Archer, William, *Dramatic Review*, 4 April 1885, pp272-3, in Stokes, John, *Resistible Theatres: Enterprise and Experiment in the Late Nineteenth Century* (U.S.A: Elek Books Ltd. 1972), p.8.

enable playwrights to write socially realistic plays. Ibsen was especially significant in shaping the English public's expectations of drama, for although his plays had limited runs, they were translated into English by William Archer and published in cheap editions which were widely read throughout the late 1880s and early 1890s.⁵⁷

But opposition to Ibsen's dramatic works was widespread. His most significant opponent was perhaps the influential conservative critic, Clement Scott, who saw himself as representing the opinions of the general public. In a review for the *Daily Telegraph*, Scott described Ibsen's *Ghosts* as an obscene play. It was 'an open drain; of a loathsome sore unbandaged; of a dirty act done publicly'.⁵⁸ Scott was enraged by the precedent set by *Ghosts* and thus his review was written in inflammatory language that was aimed at influencing the Censor to take action and prosecute the management of the Independent Theatre.

In addition to William Archer, Ibsen also had some other significant supporters, such as the theatre critic and playwright George Bernard Shaw, who was inspired by Ibsen's daring realism and his questioning of morality. In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Shaw interprets Ibsen's plays as a socialist critique of middle-class moral hypocrisy in a manner that de-emphasized the poetic qualities and the psychological ambivalence of the Norwegian playwright's works.⁵⁹

As a playwright, Shaw was to aspire to an even stronger social criticism than Ibsen in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, which was written in 1894, after *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance* but denied a license by the Lord Chamberlain's

⁵⁷ Rem, Tore, 'Ibsen as Book: Another British Ibsen', *Proceedings: IXth International Ibsen Conference*, eds. Bjørby, Pål and Aarseth, Asbjørn (Bergen: Alvheim & Eide 2001), p. 419.

⁵⁸ Scott, Clement, *Daily Telegraph*, 14 March 1891, reprinted in Egan, Michael, *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1972) pp. 190-3.

⁵⁹ Egan, Michael, *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1972), pp. 21-22.

office until 1925. Oscar Wilde had read Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* and corresponded with Shaw, praising Shaw's public criticism of 'the ridiculous institution' of stage censorship. Wilde wrote that the book 'is such a delight to me that I constantly take it up, and always find it stimulating and refreshing'.⁶⁰ At this time, Wilde also wrote to Archer regarding the censorship issue. Archer had protested the banning of Wilde's *Salome*, which was to be performed by Sarah Bernhardt in June of 1892.⁶¹ Archer referred to it as 'a serious work of art, accepted, studied and rehearsed by the greatest actress of our time'. Regarding *Salome*'s censorship, Archer went so far as to say that:

We require it [*Salome*] to aid in the emancipation of art from the stupid meddling of irresponsible officialism. As soon as the English drama attains to anything like intellectual virility, the days of the censorship will be numbered.⁶²

As a journalist, Wilde wrote theatre reviews and general criticism of trends in the theatre. Of the two essays that are anthologized, the first, *The Truth of Masks* (1885), is an essay on realism and the use of costuming as metaphor in Shakespearian plays. In contrast, the second essay, *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891), addresses the theatre, censorship and the public's role in censoring drama in a manner that anticipates Wilde's career as playwright, and is an important contribution to the discourse around renewal and censorship in the theatre.

In this essay Wilde is highly critical of England's native drama. He comments that 'no country produces such badly written fiction, such tedious, common work in the

⁶⁰ Hart-Davies, Rupert, ed., *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: Hart-Davies 1962), p. 332.

⁶¹ Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, p. 34.

⁶² Hart-Davies, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 317.

novel-form, [or] such silly, vulgar plays as in England'.⁶³ He blames the English public for their inherent dislike of novelty and fear of social change. Wilde also obliquely criticises society's role in the issue of censorship. He points out how journalism has taken on a self-imposed regulatory role, in deciding what sort of art is healthy and desirable. And he also claims that the public has become corrupted by censorship's

Authority to understand or appreciate Individualism. In a word, it comes from the monstrous and ignorant thing that is called Public Opinion, which bad and well-meaning as it is when it tries to control action, is infamous and of evil meaning when it tries to control Thought or Art.⁶⁴

Or in other words, Wilde claims that journalism's concern for appeasing the public played an important part in the censoring of drama in England. He connects the tyranny of public opinion to the democratization of society and society's consequent democratization of art. Wilde also compares the English tradition of censorship to France, where they censored journalism and left the artist with 'almost perfect freedom'.⁶⁵ Wilde does not explicitly refer to the Lord Chamberlain and the laws governing censorship, but he implies that the public's opinion as expressed by the media played a tremendously significant role, setting the standard for the Lord Chamberlain's interpretation of what was defined as 'the Preservation of good Manners, Decorum or of the Public Peace'.⁶⁶

Wilde's essay is also significant in that in the midst of a discussion on censorship, he repeatedly focuses on art for art's sake, not for the sake of free speech or realism. For Wilde, the central issue here is individualism or the individual's artistic evolution.

⁶³ Wilde, Oscar, *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Ellmann, Richard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982), p. 271.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 271.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 277.

⁶⁶ Stephens, *The Censorship of English Drama*, p. 25.

On a practical level, censorship was challenged in 1886 by the Shelley Society's performance of *The Cenci*. The performance of *The Cenci* challenged the Censor's ban by performing for a closed audience of the society's members. This was an event of legal significance, for this performance launched the first indirect challenge to the Censor.⁶⁷ *The Cenci* publicised the issue of censorship, forcing it to become a publicly debated issue after 40 years of passive acceptance. The Censor allowed *The Cenci* to be performed because it was shown to a closed audience of society members and the law only provided for the censoring of public performances.⁶⁸

Experimental theatres also played an important role in exploring the limits of censorship. J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre provided a forum for the production of experimental literary plays that the Censor had banned or was likely to ban. In 1891, the theatre opened with a performance of Ibsen's *Ghosts* which was denied a license by the Lord Chamberlain's office. George Bernard Shaw also had his first staging of his controversial *Widowers' Houses* (1892) at Grein's Independent Theatre. Yet, despite its reputation for liberalness, Grein refused Shaw to perform his later plays, *The Philanderer* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Grein had found these plays to be too radical and had refused to stage them.

However, these theatrical experiments constituted only a small percentage of theatrical performances. Yet despite that such performances were rare, they gave impetus to the discussion of censorship and realism in the media, creating a gradual shift towards more realistic plays that challenged the Censor. The playwrights Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero were examples of this transition. Both started writing conventional

⁶⁷ De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversion*, p. 56.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 38.

domestic melodramas, only to have their plays increasingly reflect a higher degree of social realism and changing social mores, especially regarding women. Jones had begun his career with melodramatic comedies. Jones's comedies were comedies that attempted to be problem plays, that is, plays that addressed social problems. In the early 1880's at the beginning of Jones's career, his plays, such as the highly popular temperance melodrama, *The Silver King* (1882), were considered progressive in contrast to the plays that had been shown before them, since they were more naturalistic than earlier melodramas. Yet Jones's most progressive plays in the 1890s, *The Dancing Girl* (1891) and *The Case of Rebellious Susan* (1894), addressed social changes regarding women only to encourage women to conform to traditionally proscribed gender roles.⁶⁹

Similarly, Arthur Wing Pinero's career began as conventionally as Jones's with sentimental society dramas like *Sweet Lavender* (1888), one of the most popular plays of the 1880s, or the farces *Dandy Dick* (1887) and *The Cabinet Minister* (1890). With time, Pinero began cautiously to explore the genre of problem plays, focusing for the most part on women's issues inspired by reforms in education and laws governing divorce and women's ownership of property which were frequently discussed in the media in the late 1880s and early 1890s with both scepticism and enthusiasm.⁷⁰

Pinero's women were not submissive and passive. They were allowed to explore different aspects of femaleness. This depiction of female characters added an element of realism that gave psychological depth, but often bordered on hysteria. For example in plays like *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893) and *The Benefit of the Doubt* (1895), Pinero draws sympathetic portraits of respectively a woman with a past and a married

⁶⁹ Jenkins, *The Making of Victorian Drama*, pp. 134, 195.

⁷⁰ Ledger, Sally and Luckhurst, Roger, *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History c.1880-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), pp. 75-94.

woman who is suspected of having an affair, and in doing so he questions the double standard regarding women's sexuality. Both plays end tragically, but in the early 1890s it in itself was highly controversial that Pinero created a sympathetic portrait of these women.

In spite of these progressive developments, melodrama remained popular and playwriting remained relatively conservative.⁷¹ Questioning of tradition in general was limited in Victorian England until the late 1870s, a fact which Josephine Guy in *The British Avant-Garde* traces to the French Revolution and the writings of historians and sociologists. Guy relates that while liberal French historians established a tradition for a discourse of rupture and revolt against historical orthodoxies, English historians took the opposite perspective by viewing history as continuous and progressive.⁷² Furthermore, Guy points out that the science of sociology developed out of the aftermath of the French Revolution, a time when intellectuals were concerned with social change and the reconstruction of society.

This, however, was not the case in Britain until the 1870s. Before the 1870s, British sociologists assumed that society was basically sound, only needing small adjustment measures such as prison reform, public health and the regulation of sexuality.⁷³ They did not encourage analytic theorising and saw the French interest in analysing social changes as inherently subversive. Consequently British sociologists

⁷¹ Postlewait, *Profit of the New Drama*, p. 39.

⁷² Guy, Josephine M., *The British Avant-Garde: The Theory and Politics of Tradition* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1991), pp. 53-5.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 58-60.

perpetuated conservative orthodox views on history and tradition, worrying that these theories denied individual moral responsibility.⁷⁴

Traditional themes of morality in melodramatic plays primarily focused around sexuality, and were so cemented into the popular consciousness that it was difficult to enter into a discussion of ethics, or a questioning of the logic and basis of morality. Of course, as Wilde had pointed out in his essay, censorship played a large role in defining morality itself, and which topics were respectable to discuss on the stage. Furthermore, the existence of censorship in itself did much to influence the way playwrights wrote, by encouraging them to deal with taboo themes conventionally, or avoid them altogether.

Wilde's society comedies then, were written for a theatre in transition, a theatre of censorship and popular melodrama struggling to renew itself. Like the problem plays of Jones and Pinero, Wilde's plays are domestic dramas that grapple with social problems. And similar to Jones and Pinero, Wilde does borrow heavily from melodramatic tradition in the form of general plot construction, stock characters and plot devices. Yet, Wilde's plays do not just bring up problematic social topics. Like Ibsen's plays, Wilde's plays subvert the conventional morality of the time, presenting options that are very individualistic. His writings also capture more of the ambivalence of the late Victorian Era than his English contemporaries. Curiously, Wilde's society comedies had no problems with the Censor, nor did his contemporary critics seem to view them as social criticism. Through close readings of these critical texts and analysis of confessional scenes from Wilde's plays, chapters two and three will explore some aspects of why contemporary critics did not perceive Wilde's society comedies as political or controversial.

⁷⁴ Guy, *The British Avant-Garde*, pp. 67-68

Chapter 2: Plagiarism and Success

As for 'success' on the stage, the public is a monster of strange appetites: It swallows, so it seems to me, honeycake and hellebore, with avidity: but there are many publics – and the artist belongs to none of them: If he is admired it is, a little, by chance.¹ (Oscar Wilde)

Wilde's relationship to his critics was complex, for, unlike other debuting playwrights, he was already known as a public figure long before the premiere of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in February of 1892. From 1881-1891, Wilde entered the public's consciousness as a prolific author who wrote in a number of different genres. His poetic, dramatic, prose and critical works before 1891 include *Poems*, a New York Production of the dramas *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua* and the prose works of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*, *A House of Pomegranates*, as well as the essay collection *Intentions*.

The media's reception of Wilde's works was influenced by Wilde's role as a promoter of aestheticism through a series of lectures that he presented both in England and in the United States. Wilde's lectures on Chinese porcelain, Dadas, lilies and sunflowers comprised an easily accessible symbology for a movement that was otherwise somewhat obscure for the general public. However, an important aspect of Wilde's public status was as a comic figure, especially in the pages of *Punch* where, as early as 1881, he was maliciously satirized as Jellaby Postlethwaite.² And Gilbert's play *Patience* did much to popularise the satirization of aesthetic dandy figures. Wilde apparently interpreted the

¹ Wilde, Oscar, in Ellmann, Richard, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin Books 1987), p. 321.

² Nelson, Walter W., *Oscar Wilde from Ravenna to Salomé: A Survey of Contemporary English Criticism* (Dublin: Dublin University Press 1987), pp. 9-11.

play as a good-natured spoof and willingly accepted the offer of lecturing on aestheticism in the US in connection with it. Wilde was quoted as saying that:

Patience, by the way, has done our cause no harm. Ridicule may be a serious weapon, but there should be that in a true poet or a genuine cause which is indestructible; and there is indestructibility in our case. Oh, no: people understand that *Patience* is merely a burlesque. I enjoyed it very much. The music is delightful, and that is certainly on our side, even if the words are not.³

The publicity from the American tour alone established Wilde in the popular consciousness as the central spokesperson of aestheticism, despite the fact that Wilde was not one of the early promoters of French Aestheticism in England, as Whistler and Morris were. This publicity coupled with the fact that Wilde did little to correct this misrepresentation, made a bitter and vocal antagonistic critic of Wilde's friend Whistler, who thereafter did much to brand the popular image of Wilde as a plagiarist.

The critical reception of Wilde's poetry and prose works was modest but primarily favourable, with the exception of *Dorian Gray*, which received for the most part hostile reviews and sparked a debate about morality in the media. Even *Intentions* had not succeeded in giving Wilde credibility as a serious critic, since reviewers were either amused and puzzled or simply annoyed by his cynicism and insincerity. Wilde's early dramas had very short runs in New York and were regarded as artistic failures. Consequently, by 1891, Wilde's status as a promising literary newcomer had faded, while his notoriety as a decadent and public buffoon had grown. Wilde was typically viewed as a clever but unoriginal, prolific writer who freely plagiarised. If anything, Wilde's

³ Nelson, *Oscar Wilde From Ravenna to Salomé*, p. 7.

previous status as a writer and public figure made critics sceptical, while it probably piqued public curiosity regarding his promise as a playwright.

I. *Lady Windermere's Fan*

At the time of the production of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, theatre criticism was primarily concerned with questions of influence, realism and sincerity. The play is about a fallen woman who deserts her husband and child but later returns to meet her daughter after many years of absence. It delighted audiences with its sparkling, witty epigrammatic dialogue that adorned a plot piquant enough to capture their imagination, but was tame enough not to provoke the Censor. The bulk of criticism of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, however, focuses on Wilde's plagiarism, or borrowing, of plot and conventional stock characters from English and French melodramatic plays. As William Archer noted in his book *The Old Drama and the New*, 'It was held to be the first qualification of a critic to know so much of the French drama as to be able to detect the unacknowledged borrowings of the British author'.⁴ Thus, the bulk of dramatic criticism from the 1880s, focused on searching for traces of French or English sources that were heavily plundered, adapted or transformed into new plays.

A.B. Walkley, an influential critic for the *Speaker*, *Star* and *The Times*, was the critic who wrote the most consistently favourable critiques of Wilde's dramas. In his critique of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Walkley compares the use of plot and stock characters with French melodrama. He observes that while Wilde's plot obviously draws upon melodramatic traditions, there was also a tradition for borrowing and reworking

⁴ Archer, William, *The Old Drama and the New: An Essay in Re-Valuation* (London: Heinemann Ltd. 1923), p. 32.

elements of plots. Walkley's critique is far from negative, finding Wilde's use of language to be so amusing that he is willing to forgive *Lady Windermere's Fan* for its structural flaws.⁵

Other critics, such as the author of the Unsigned Review in *Westminster Review*, June 1893, perceived the influence of French melodrama, hailing Wilde as 'an English Sardou', a title which was generally seen as pejorative amongst English critics.⁶ Here the critic does acknowledge that many English critics were very negative to French melodrama, preferring:

The more vigorous, the more direct, the more sincere methods of the Ibsen type of playwright [...] to the indirect, we would almost say insidious craftsmanship of Sardou.⁷

As a result, many critics found Wilde's lack of sincerity disturbing and disorienting.

In contrast to such reviews, Archer's reflected his agenda of reforming the theatre and were primarily concerned with aspects of psychological veracity in characterisation and realism in language. The performances of Ibsen's plays had greatly contributed to shaping Archer's expectations and he in turn influenced many other critics of his day. For, by 1891, Ibsen's plays *A Doll's House* (1889), *Rosmersholm*, *Ghosts*, *Hedda Gabler* and *The Lady from the Sea* had been performed in London and were still fresh in the critics' minds.

Archer's review of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, focused consequently on what he referred to as 'psychological inconsistencies' in the characters of Lady Windermere, Lord

⁵ Walkley, A.B., *Playhouse Impressions*, 1892, in Beckson, Karl, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1970), p. 114.

⁶ Anon., Unsigned Review, *Westminster Review*, June 1893, cxxxix, in Beckson, Karl, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1970), p. 160.

⁷ Ibid.

Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne. Archer points out how the early characterization of Lady Windermere is not fully developed and thus her actions of considering leaving her husband and her child are not believable. Despite his reservations about these details, Archer is generally positive about the play, especially Wilde's use of language.

In contrast to these primarily positive reviews is the virulently negative review written by Clement Scott, a highly influential critic who wrote for the *Daily Telegraph*, at the time Britain's leading newspaper, the *Illustrated London News*, and editing the trade journal *Theatre* during the 1880s. Scott represented an older, more conservative generation of theatre critics than Archer and Walkley, following the theatrical reforms and progress of Robertson, Gilbert and Irving's Lyceum. Since Scott considered Irving's Lyceum productions as a standard of quality theatre, he opposed Archer's enthusiastic support of realism and was provoked by Ibsen, which he found vulgar.

Scott found *Lady Windermere's Fan* highly provoking for a number of reasons. Firstly, he was enraged by the audience's failure to express moral outrage at Lady Windermere's and Mrs. Erlynne's behaviour. Secondly, he found the 'smart speech' of characters such as the Duchess of Berwick and Lady Plymdale cynical and as such highly inappropriate. Last of all, Scott found Wilde's curtain speech, during which Wilde smoked, even more insouciant and rude than the epigrammatic dialogues of the play, and consequently he devoted a large part of his review to berating Wilde for it.

Scott's reaction illustrates the backlash of the older generation of theatre critics who sought beauty and sentimentality and disliked realism and cynicism. The English theatre was accustomed to drawing room comedies, while the French melodramatic theatre was used to the drawing room tragedies of Scribe and Sardou. However, both of

these French playwrights wrote about controversial themes like mistresses and vagrant mothers, but these themes were dealt with in a traditional manner that conformed to traditional gender roles, despite that French dramatists did not have a Censor to appease. In England, critics such as Scott found social conflict in classical plays such as *Oedipus* or Shakespeare's tragedies acceptable, but depicting social conflict in modern middle-class life was considered shockingly indecorous and inappropriate. Consequently Scott viewed the English theatre as morally and artistically superior to the French theatre.

Yet of all the contemporary critics of Wilde's era, only Scott comes close to recognizing that the cynicism of *Lady Windermere's Fan* could have a 'deeper significance'.⁸ Scott claims that Wilde's attempt at social reform is outrageous and must be an ironic demonstration of how far one can venture in a breach of good manners and decorum.

Amongst the numerous other critics of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, were many who agreed with Scott in his dislike of Wilde's witticisms. Elsewhere critics were annoyed by the fact that Wilde draws heavily from both English and French melodrama. As Kerry Powell points out in *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, by 1892, there had been numerous plays that dealt with the theme of the vagrant mother and the orphaned daughter. Powell retraces the influence of many different plays such as the popular *East Lynne* (1891), and Sardou's *Odette*, which was performed in London in 1882 and 1894. In fact, these themes had occurred so often that the character of the vagrant mother in particular had become a stock character.⁹ In these melodramatic plays, stage devices such as letters of farewell, fans, gloves, screens and miniatures of a long dead mother abound.

⁸ Scott, Clement, *Illustrated London News*, 27 February 1892, c in Beckson, Karl, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1970), p124-5.

⁹ Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, pp. 16-9.

However, the errant mother's only conceivable future is dismal, usually involving her dying by illness or suicide. Likewise, the daughter usually follows in her mother's footsteps, abandoning her family and dying by the end of the play.¹⁰

In this sense, *Lady Windermere's Fan* could also conceivably be seen as a sequel to *A Doll's House*; for, in the years following the 1889 performance of the play, there was much speculation about whether Nora would return and, if so, to what sort of family situation. In fact, the discussion was so heated that it generated a number of sequels where authors tried their hands at finishing Nora's story. The novelist Walter Besant's work was amongst the most colourful of the negative sequels to Ibsen's play. In Besant's story, Nora, a novelist of ill-repute, returns home to find Helmer a drunk and their children delinquents. In *Nora's Return: A Sequel to The Doll's House by Henry Ibsen*, a more positive version, Nora returns to nurse a sickly Helmer who realizes his error and repents so that the two are reunited.¹¹

In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde depicts a dandified vagrant mother who does not return to reunite with her daughter but instead returns to blackmail her son-in-law. She discovers, though, that she has some heart left, but that it is more convenient to leave without revealing her identity. At first glance, it is questionable which of the two females, Lady Windermere or Mrs. Erlynne, is really the main character. The play's focus is divided between the two, but the character of Mrs. Erlynne is arguably the more compelling. Wilde had thus drawn upon the late Victorian anxiety that Ibsen explores in *A Doll's House*, the belief that the offspring who are abandoned by their mothers will inevitably be morally corrupt from the lack of a good female role model. Accordingly,

¹⁰ Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, p. 17.

¹¹ Egan, Michael, *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.1972), pp. 7-9.

Lady Windermere's character conjures up a number of questions based on melodramatic expectations. Will Lady Windermere be morally corrupt because her mother abandoned her? Will Lady Windermere leave her husband? And will Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne die in the end?

Ironically, contemporary critics did not seem to notice that, while Wilde borrowed from melodramatic traditions, he adapted them in such a manner that the morality of melodramatic traditions was brought into question. Contemporary critics of Wilde almost entirely ignored these subversive aspects of the society comedies. But in Wilde, comedy is serious, for society is not just the domestic or the trivial world of the feminine, with the masculine world consisting of business and politics. Society is the moral framework upon which the masculine world of business and politics is stretched and mounted. Society sets the standards and defines the limits of action. Wilde's plays are unusual because they show the network of traditional attitudes behind a society in transition. Though Wilde is not unambiguously a feminist writer, he shows what influence women did have even without the vote, since due to the rigid formality of the drawing room, it was the hostess' role to decide who was allowed entrance to society, who was to meet, what conversations would be given the opportunity to occur, and who was allowed to participate in them. The reversal of characters' fortunes in the conclusions of Wilde's plays occur not because of bald idealistic actions as melodramatic convention would dictate, but rather because of the characters' choice of practical solutions.

Wilde, like the feminists of his day, was concerned with the changing gender roles of women and men alike. But Wilde's writings are not as clearly pro-feminist as one might assume, for Wilde expresses an ambivalence to change, an anxiety that was

common amongst men in the late Victorian era. As Elaine Showalter writes in *Sexual Anarchy*, the era saw an identity crisis for both genders and sexual anxiety in general was common among avant-garde male writers.¹² From the 1880s, many men were increasingly marked by a fear that economically liberated women had a castrating effect on men. Some felt threatened by the New Woman's ability to work and provide for herself. But apart from feeling threatened by women entering a work place already beset with unemployment, many men felt these women to be alienating, foreign creatures who fed men's anxieties about their masculinity and sexual identity.

Initially, these anxieties were engendered in part by theories of degeneration. The notion of degeneration was a construct that countered the optimistic Victorian belief in progress. It grew as a reaction to Darwin's evolutionary theories, which affirmed the optimistic belief that economic and technical progress would also result in social progress and stability. Degeneration stemmed from a concern that a counter-evolutionary, degenerate downward trend in evolution would occur. Degeneration theory arose in the late 1850s and became a pivotal idea in Victorian culture expressing the anxiety that the British Empire had experienced its zenith and had only to wait for its inevitable fall, much like the fall of the Roman Empire before it. This popular anxiety was fuelled by the economic recession in the 1880s and more factual observations of a growing population of poorly-nourished, sickly urban poor.

In this sense, degenerate individuals were seen to pose a very real threat to notions of English national identity and to the survival of English culture. The undeserving poor and criminals were perceived as degenerate because they contributed to general economic

¹² Showalter, Elaine, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture and the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago Press 2001), pp. 8-11.

instability, and sexually liberated women and gay men were viewed as degenerates because they revolted against their proscribed reproductive roles, refusing to provide England with healthy labourers and soldiers to serve their country.¹³

In addition, men had also been given reason to examine and define their sexuality according to the new science of sexology which sought to categorize individuals by their sexual experiences and desires.¹⁴ Categories such as homosexuality arose, classifying men's masculine behaviour, character traits and interests. This scientific classifying of men's masculinity caused much uncertainty, complicating the process of an individual's sexual identification.

However, in the early 1890s, sexual identities were not yet clearly defined in the popular consciousness. Wilde explores these identity crises in his plays with a subtlety and ambiguity that is rarely seen in other playwrights of the period. Thus, Wilde's audience did not seem to react to his depiction of effeminate, dandified men, many of whom express both heterosexual and homosexual interests. Nor did this potential multiplicity of sexual interests trouble Wilde's contemporary critics. But after Wilde's trial, the sexual categories of hetero- and homosexual became so firmly established that when Wilde's society comedies were revived in 1904 and 1912, stage managers felt a need to direct actors to use more masculine body language when depicting Wilde's dandies.¹⁵

In general Wilde's contemporaries failed to see that his dramatic writings were intended as social criticism, despite Wilde already having addressed some issues of social

¹³ Ledger and Luckhurst, *The Fin de Siecle*, pp. xiii-xxii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Kaplan, Joel, 'Wilde on the Stage' in Raby, Peter, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002), p. 257.

criticism and journalism in his essay collection, *Intentions*. In *Intentions*, Wilde sketched out an aestheticism that was derived from French Aestheticism, where style was both a means and an end for artistic creation. Wilde's aestheticism was more than 'a religion of beauty', for, despite stylistic similarities, it affirmed more of a positivist view of life than Baudelaire's embracing of death and decay. Wilde also played with French Aestheticism's focus on art for art's sake, coining the notion that life resembled art, an inversion of the realist precept that art should resemble life. Thus Wilde used these essays to deliberately promote himself as an aesthete and a social critic.

Of course, the difficulty with Wilde's writings is that aestheticism and social criticism eventually collide, for while they often have mutual interests, the two have their own respective political agendas. Wilde's aesthetic belief that life should resemble art is visionary and poetic - it refuses to make any compromises to ethics and morality. Wilde's aestheticism does not suggest a specific new social order as many feminists and socialists of his period suggested. It is a call for an artistic social anarchy, a plea for individualism, social tolerance and the overthrow of literary censorship.

The themes of *art for art's sake* and individuality are central in Wilde's society comedies. Nonetheless, contemporary critics of Wilde's society comedies failed to view them as social criticism or to recognize that Wilde's plays were intentionally constructed with equal attention to a stylistic structure of witticisms reminiscent of a comedy of manners, and furthermore that this example of *art for art's sake* was an intentional stylistic heightening of the social criticism in the plays.

When asked whether his plays were realistic, Wilde replied ‘realism is only a background; it cannot form an artistic motive for a play that is to be a work of art’.¹⁶ Wilde intended his society comedies to be an exercise in style, a pastiche of different genres, a style which clearly made him a precursor of modernist writings. His contemporary critics were so focused on the then current trend of realism as popularised by Ibsen that they did not perceive Wilde’s use of epigrammatic dialogue as original, but saw it rather as a sign of laziness. They thought that Oscar was simply being an idle conversationalist when he should have been constructing realistic dialogue. Powell disagrees with this assessment and offers some convincing evidence that Wilde was genuinely influenced by Ibsen especially in *An Ideal Husband* that resembles Ibsen’s *Pillars of Society*, which was performed in London in 1893.¹⁷

Archer’s reviews in particular reflect the assumption that Wilde was attempting to write realistic plays like those of Ibsen, Jones or Pinero. Archer is preoccupied with realistic characterization and grows increasingly annoyed with Wilde’s epigrammatic dialogues, which he finds more distracting with every play. Other critics also assumed that realism was the only way to present a problem play and were otherwise befuddled by Wilde’s mixture of sentimental melodrama and witty Comedy of Manners. And rightly so, for the two genres are normally diametrically opposed; melodramas were constructed around a clear moral vision of society while the Comedy of Manners was constructed around conflicts that arise from violating social conventions. Consequently, it did not seem to occur to critics that Wilde was deliberately trying to merge two different styles of writing, for, despite the frequent usage of epigrammatic witticisms, Wilde’s society

¹⁶ Tydeman, *Comedies*, p. 41.

¹⁷ Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, pp. 74-88.

comedies break with the genre of Comedy of Manners. Wilde's society comedies are problem plays that confront traditional morality, hypocrisy, and question traditional gender roles.¹⁸

Modern critics have often speculated that in drawing upon melodramatic traditions, the most popular genre of the time, Oscar Wilde was consciously aiming at reaching the largest possible audience. Melodramatic plays, as noted in chapter 1, were enormously popular, entertainingly dogmatic plays that reinforced traditional gender roles. Wilde arguably did imitate melodrama so that he could carefully invert genre conventions by playing upon the audience's expectations. It was a manoeuvre that allowed him to appeal to large audiences while deftly criticising the societal order of his time. But Wilde's plays are not merely conscious subversion. They are able to contain the tension of moral polarities of good and bad, making room for ambiguity, ambivalence and paradox to a greater degree than other English playwrights of his time.

The plot of *Lady Windermere's Fan* is constructed around a secret – the parentage of Lady Windermere. The secret is revealed to the audience in Act II, but it remains a secret to Lady Windermere throughout. Wilde has the opportunity of letting Mrs. Erlynne divulge her secret in the beginning of Act III where she is alone with Lady Windermere. And it is here that the language is at its most melodramatic, as if Wilde were deliberately building up the audiences' expectations for a denouement where the mother figure reveals her identity, as happened in the earlier melodramas of vagrant mothers.

As noted in the society comedies, Wilde utilizes epigrammatic dialogue as he does in his essays, inverting truisms in a manner that is amusing and thought provoking. Critics dismissed Wilde's style as simply the product of a highly individualized ego.

¹⁸ Abrams, M. H., *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Harcourt Brace College, 1999), p. 39.

There is indeed truth to this assertion, as Wilde's epigrammatic writing does resemble his conversation, by all accounts of his contemporaries.

The epigrammatic dialogue in the society comedies, however, serves several different purposes. Firstly, the dialogues are deliberately used to create repetition that provides a light, quick tempo, a sharp contrast to the slower pace of the expository melodramatic scenes. For example, Act II begins with Wilde introducing a number of characters. Introducing so many characters in one scene could be tedious and dull yet just when the expository dialogue starts to slow down, the dialogue is enlivened by interspersing it with witticisms. So instead of presenting a problematic situation or a question for the audience to consider, the dialogue skirts the boundary of decorum with a bluntness that is both witty and shocking:

LADY PLYMDALE (to Mr. Dumby) What an absolute brute you are! I never can believe a word you say! Why did you tell me you didn't know her? What do you mean by calling on her three times running? You are not going to go to lunch there; of course you understand that?¹⁹

Then a few lines later, when Lady Plymdale discovers who Mrs. Erlynne is, she comments that 'I really must have a good stare at her'.²⁰ And she adds that Dumby should take her husband with him to visit Mrs. Erlynne as her husband:

LADY PLYMDALE He has become a perfect nuisance. Now, this woman is just the

¹⁹ Wilde, Oscar, *Lady Windermere's Fan* in *Lady Windermere's Fan, Salome, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband, The Importance of Being Earnest*, ed. Raby, Peter (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995), Act II, lines 221-5.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Act II, lines 232.

thing for him. He'll dance attendance upon her as long as she lets him, and won't bother me. I assure you, women of that kind are most useful. They form the basis of other people's marriages.²¹

Allusions to infidelity and dysfunctional marriages, both taboo themes, provide a background which sets the norm for a society that hypocritically ostracizes fallen women. This scene's dialogue also works on a subconscious level, the epigrams as a whole constituting an alternative logic that is internalised whether the audience is aware of it or not. Wilde uses minor characters to create a framing device that illustrates and exaggerates the social context in which Mrs. Erlynne's secret occurs. Here, Wilde's dialogue adds a complexity that suggests a break with melodramatic plot conventions.

Elsewhere, in Act II, where Mrs. Erlynne is introduced at Lady Windermere's party, Mrs. Erlynne comments to Lord Windermere:

MRS. ERLYNNE You must pay me a good deal of attention this evening. I'm afraid of the women. You must introduce me to some of them. The men I can always manage.²²

Mrs. Erlynne conforms to the traditional role of the cynical adventuress, but she also brings a psychological depth to this character, seen in her nervousness and vulnerability. In the beginning of Act III, the dialogue between Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne is true to melodramatic tradition when she expresses a note of regret in her passionate admonitions for Lady Windermere to return to her husband:

MRS. ERLYNNE Go back, Lady Windermere, to the husband who loves you,

²¹ Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Act II, lines 240-5.

²² *Ibid.* Act II, lines 152-6.

whom you love. You have a child, Lady Windermere. Go back to that child who even now, in pain or in joy, may be calling to you. God gave you that child. He will require from you that you make his life fine, that you watch over him. What answer will you make to God if his life is ruined through you? Back to your house, Lady Windermere – your husband loves you!²³

This is the scene that critics disliked most because of its highly charged emotional nature, abruptly followed by the cynicism of the men and their club talk. For example, the dialogue between Dumby and Cecil Graham provides the most dramatic contrast to the melodramatic scene with Mrs. Erlynne and Lady Windermere that precedes it:

CECIL GRAHAM That is a great error. Experience is a question of instinct about life. I have got it, Tuppy hasn't. Experience is the name Tuppy gives to his mistakes. That is all.

DUMBY Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes.

CECIL GRAHAM One shouldn't commit any.²⁴

The difference in tone between these two scenes serves to accentuate an equally sharp contrast between a cynical society and the vulnerability of the individuals in it. It was undoubtedly an unpleasant contrast but that was precisely the point.

However, *Lady Windermere's Fan* is not a traditional rendering of the vagrant mother/orphan daughter story, nor is it a moral tale about Lady Windermere's psychological development, passing from innocence to maturity. Instead *Lady Windermere's Fan* is a story about how little people change, and about the hypocrisy of audiences who can view this and find it agreeable and not objectionable. This is striking for, by the end of the play, Lady Windermere still has retained her initial idealism, despite her suspicions being neither confirmed nor dispelled. As far as Lady Windermere

²³ Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Act III, lines 155-62.

²⁴ *Ibid.* Act III, lines 359-63.

knows, Mrs. Erlynne is a dubious, black-mailing adventuress who most likely is having an affair with her husband.

Archer's review commented at length upon Lady Windermere's character. He assumed that Wilde had simply not consistently developed her character. Of all the contemporary critics, only Archer felt that Wilde had simply neglected to develop a psyche gradually changing its mind about moral idealism. Wilde's lack of foreshadowing, however, was intentional. He specifically has Lady Windermere say that she lacks courage for confrontations and is afraid of being herself.²⁵ Lady Windermere does not have the courage of individualism and because of this she displays only situational morality. That is, she strongly believes in certain moral issues when it is personally advantageous for her to do so, and when it is not, she is willing to forget her suspicions about Mrs. Erlynne. The play's situational morality is doubly ironic, since Wilde speculates that his audience would be so busily wrapped up in their conflicting melodramatic expectations and love of happy endings, that they would fail to see that Lady Windermere did not undergo any psychological character development and that this lack of development was ultimately problematic.

But the most subversive of all rhetorical techniques in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, is Wilde's rendering of the confessional scenes. The discourse of truth has long appeared on the stage in the form of the confessional scene. A central aspect of the melodramatic theatre, it provided the basis for the search for truth, innocence and purity. In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks identifies scenes that reveal truth in a search for innocence, as being at the core of melodrama.

²⁵ Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Act II, lines 297-311.

In confessional scenes, the language is at its most exaggerated and emotional in an effort to depict the extreme contrasts between guilt and innocence, and to clearly demonstrate the existence of virtue. Brooks labels these scenes as ‘the melodramatic moment of astonishment, a moment of ethical evidence and recognition’.²⁶ Recognition is important because these scenes provide an opportunity to express admiration for and pay homage to innocence and purity of intention. The conclusions of melodramatic plays, accordingly, revolve around a recognition and rewarding of virtue and are characterized by an ecstatic moment of euphoria similar to the experience of a religious union with God.

In *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault asserts that gender relationships in the Victorian Era were power relations that were negotiated by traditional gender roles centering around rules and taboos which prohibited and regulated sexual interaction. Foucault traces this to the 18th century’s discovery of population management as a means of attaining and maintaining a large population and its labour capacity. Sexuality was no longer a private, individual matter, but a resource to be managed for the greater good of society. As Foucault notes, the 18th century was:

The first time that a society had affirmed, in a constant way that its future and its fortune were tied not only to the number and the uprightness of its citizens, to their marriage rules and family organisation, but to the manner in which each individual made use of his sex.²⁷

The attainment of power thus spawned a public discourse that sought to regulate the individual’s sexuality, harnessing it for the productive act of procreation through

²⁶ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, pp. 25-6.

²⁷ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, p. 26.

social taboos and increasing moral recrimination.²⁸ This attitude continued into the Victorian era and was publicly and explicitly expressed by countless individuals such as the Reverend W. Arthur, who commented in a newspaper that, ‘in all countries the purity of the family must be the surest strength of a nation’.²⁹

The Evangelical Movement’s focus on individual conscience and chastity outside the ties of marriage were an additional means of social regulation of sexuality. But regulation of sexual matters was not entirely in the hands of the church. Sexuality was regulated by civil law, which even sought to control the sexual relations of married couples by forbidding the dissemination of information about birth control. Similarly, scientific clinical examination sought to regulate sexuality by stigmatising certain sexual behaviours and desires. Regulation of sexuality in the Victorian Era, as Foucault notes, did not result in increased sexual repression, but rather in a heightened awareness of sexuality that was more frequently observed, analysed and discussed.³⁰

Theatre censorship, primarily a means of regulating and limiting the representation of sexuality in drama, resulted in a discourse of its own. For although theatre censorship had originally begun as a means of vouchsafing political stability, by the late Victorian era, stage censorship was primarily used to maintain traditional gender roles, especially those regarding women’s sexuality. In society, women’s free sexual expression was punished by social ostracism and through strict divorce laws; but the Censor allowed audiences to indulge in the vicarious pleasure of watching women on the

²⁸ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, p. 26.

²⁹ Arthur, Reverend W., ‘The Political Value of Social Purity’, *The Sentinel*, September 1885, p.480, in Weeks, Jeffrey, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books 1977), p.18.

³⁰ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, p. 35.

stage cross the boundaries of accepted morality provided that these women invariably met with tragic ends.

Confession is seen by Foucault as a central aspect of the discourse of sexuality. He traces the discussion of sexuality back to the codification of the Catholic sacrament of penance, the ritual for extracting truth. Protestantism changed confession from a ritual rite of the church into an individual act that was even more secretive, an act that expressed an internalised restraint. Since then, confession has played a central role in manifestations of religious and civil power forming a discourse of truth. As a discourse of truth, the confession expresses a personal examination of conscience, a transcendental act of seeking union with God and the achievement of a harmonious relationship with society. Social customs and traditional attitudes regarding sex provide an invisible constraint, an obligation to conceal, keeping sexual acts private until they are revealed in the act of confession.³¹

Foucault describes confession as:

A ritual of discourse [...] that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile.³²

Thus the process of confession purges and purifies the confessee, while the confessor has the authority to interpret the confessee's discourse, to sit in judgment of it and prescribe acts of penance that will grant absolution, and that will restore the individual to the social order. The restraining power of the tradition of the confessional act pervades our

³¹ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, pp. 59-62.

³² *Ibid.* pp. 61-2.

consciousness and our lives. And, whether we are being observed or not, our consciousness takes note and records our transgressions. Therefore, the inevitability of the impending act of confession constrains all individuals, preventing them from forgetting. The confessional scene then plays a central role in melodrama as a means of purification and redemption, because it simultaneously provides the audience with the vicarious pleasure of discovering truths and the moral satisfaction of judging the transgressor.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the audience spends three acts waiting for the confessional scene which melodramatic tradition required. Indeed, there are a number of points where Mrs. Erlynne's secret could have been revealed to Lady Windermere. The most natural of these occasions is when Mrs. Erlynne finds Lady Windermere in Lord Darlington's chambers in the beginning of Act III. Here, Lady Windermere openly accuses Mrs. Erlynne of being her husband's mistress. Mrs. Erlynne denies this, insisting that she is telling the truth. But it is only a partial admission of the truth, which fails to satisfy Lady Windermere or the audience's expectations. Lady Windermere does not change her opinion of Mrs. Erlynne. Yet Wilde has her appear to be moved by Mrs. Erlynne's sentimental speech about motherhood and duty. This sentimental speech touches her and rather than be a heartless Nora, Lady Windermere resolves to return home.

It is conceivable that in this confrontation between the two women Mrs. Erlynne would reveal her real relations to both Lady and Lord Windermere. This possible confession hangs in the air, lending an additional dramatic intensity to the scene. And rightly so, for revealing Mrs. Erlynne's secret would take away Lady Windermere's

justification for leaving, because her mother's relationship to her husband would be cleared from doubt. But in revealing herself, Mrs. Erlynne would have to acknowledge that she was blackmailing Lord Windermere, and because of this, the scene would not set the stage for a sentimental reunion of mother and daughter.

But Wilde does not let Mrs. Erlynne reveal her secret at this point. Instead, he keeps the audience waiting for the confessional scene all through Acts 3 and 4, and this expectation constitutes much of the dramatic intensity of these last two acts, as throughout the dialogue between the Windermers and Mrs. Erlynne in Act IV, the audience is left wondering if it ever will be given its confessional scene. Then finally, at the end of Act IV, another natural occasion for a confessional scene arises in the farewell scene. But here, Mrs. Erlynne is undecided as to whether or not she should divulge her identity.³³

Such a confession would allow Mrs. Erlynne, the confessee, simultaneously to clear her conscience as well as to explain and justify her past deeds. Her confession would be witnessed by a number of confessors. Lady Windermere and Lord Windermere would be her most immediate confessors, judging her and deciding her penance. However, the audience, as additional witnesses, would also function as confessors, vicariously judging her and deciding her penance. But Wilde's vagrant mother, Mrs. Erlynne breaks with tradition when she understands that her daughter wants to keep her idealistic illusions of a mother and life in general:

LADY WINDERMERE We all have ideals in life. At least we all should have. Mine is my mother.

³³ Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Act IV, lines 302-21

Mrs. Erlynne tries to persuade her daughter that truth is preferable to lies by countering that:

MRS. ERLYNNE Ideals are dangerous things. Realities are better. They wound, but they're better.

To which Lady Windermere stubbornly replies:

LADY WINDERMERE If I lost my ideals, I should lose everything.³⁴

Mrs. Erlynne here decides not to reveal her identity as Lady Windermere's mother. Her confession scene is aborted and with it her chances of a traditional reconciliation and absolution. With this traditional ending subverted, Wilde imposes a different morality upon the ending, obliging the audience to follow Lady Windermere's assessment of Mrs. Erlynne as 'a very good woman', a sentiment that is very odd because she does not know, nor does she wish to know, the truth of Mrs. Erlynne's involvement with her husband. In short, from Lady Windermere's point of view, Mrs. Erlynne is upgraded from an immoral fallen woman simply because she helped Lady Windermere when she was almost exposed for her contemplated infidelity. In addition to this, from the audience's point of view, there is never an explanation given that morally justifies why all the male characters have called upon Mrs. Erlynne privately.

³⁴ Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Act IV, lines 306-11.

II. *A Woman of No Importance*

In contrast to the criticism of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the critical reception of *A Woman of No Importance* focused on Wilde's use of epigrammatic dialogue instead of Wilde's plagiarism of melodramatic sources. In this sense, the criticism of *A Woman of No Importance* illustrates an important development in dramatic criticism, where critics increasingly struggled with aspects of style and psychological realism. At the same time, the criticism of *A Woman of No Importance* also illustrates how contemporary criticism was inadequate to the task, being unable to satisfactorily analyse Wilde's stylistic innovations and subtle subversions of traditional gender roles.

A. B. Walkley's criticism best illustrates this shift in focus. Walkley gave the play a mixed review. He commented that Wilde's plots were not original, but brilliantly written 'in point of intellect'.³⁵ But then Walkley also argued that Wilde's epigrams are so easily constructed that 'No doubt, if you would expend as much patience and trouble over this phrase-making process, this game of *bouts-rimés*, as Mr. Wilde, you might have said these things'.³⁶ Furthermore, he expressed a feeling of boredom with Wilde's epigrams, saying that 'after half a dozen or so, anyone can see through the trick; and when they cease to surprise, they cease to amuse'.³⁷ Yet, in spite of this Walkley granted that, 'hang it all, one can't help feeling that there is more in the fellow than in all the other beggars put together'.³⁸

³⁵ Walkley, A. B., *Speaker*, April 29, 1893, vii, pp.484-5 in Beckson, Karl, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1970), pp. 150-2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Walkley was apparently so bored by these epigrams that he, as many other critics reviewing *A Woman of No Importance*, was unwilling to analyse them and unable to see any social commentary in the play. His candidness does, however, reflect the difficulty that critics had when dealing with Wilde's plays.

William Archer's review of *A Woman of No Importance* also reflected a distinct ambivalence towards Wilde's play. On the one hand, Archer praised Wilde, bestowing on him the great compliment, 'Mr. Oscar Wilde's dramatic work [...] must be taken on the very highest plane of modern English drama, and furthermore that it stands alone on that plane'.³⁹ Yet, on the other hand, Archer is careful to express that he is no great fan of Wilde's use of epigrammatic language. He saw Wilde's epigrams, 'pretty soap bubbles', as the play's main defect. And like Walkley, he added that, 'it becomes fatiguing, in the long run to have the whole air a-shimmer, as it were, with iridescent films'.⁴⁰ Archer saw these epigrams or 'soap bubbles' as cynical posturing and as lacking substance. Archer, however, did perceive *A Woman of No Importance* as an important play in what he believed to be the natural evolution of drama towards realism.

In *The Old Drama and the New*, written in 1923, Archer summed up his reflections on the English theatre, writing at length about his views on the evolution of English drama and his dislike of Restoration Comedy. These views explain Archer's distaste for Wilde's 'soap bubbles' more fully. Archer felt that '[English] drama had sunk very low in the eighteenth century, and had almost ceased to exist in the nineteenth'.⁴¹ He objected specifically to how Restoration Comedy's criticism of society was based upon

³⁹ Archer, William, *World*, 1893 in Beckson, Karl, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1970), p. 144.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Archer, *The Old Drama and the New*, p. v.

moral generalisations which Victorian audiences considered distasteful and immoral. But what Archer most disliked was that Restoration Comedy did not aim at realistic psychological development in its characterizations nor naturalness in its language, but was instead artificial and stilted.⁴² Thus Archer felt that witticisms were, ‘a disease which fastened upon English comedy’.⁴³

It is not surprising that Archer disliked Restoration Comedy, seeing it as the apex of artificiality, and given that he preferred Ibsen’s realistic rendering of ordinary life. In contrast to Ibsen, Wilde’s witticisms must have seemed little but artificial. Archer did approve of *A Woman of No Importance* despite Wilde’s use of language, however, he criticised the lapse into overwrought melodrama in Act III where Wilde has Mrs. Arbuthnot cry out ‘Stop, Gerald, stop! He is your father!’⁴⁴ Despite this melodramatic scene, Archer viewed the play very favourably due to the scene between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Arbuthnot, which he sees as being the high point of the play. Archer characterized this realistic scene as ‘the most virile and intelligent [...] piece of English dramatic writing of our day. It is the work of a man who knows life, and knows how to transfer it to the stage’.⁴⁵ But due to the play’s unevenness in tone and its epigrammatic dialogue, Archer does check his initial praise by noting that:

I am far from exulting either *Lady Windermere’s Fan* or *A Woman of No Importance* to the rank of a masterpiece; [but] [...] it behoves us to remember and to avow that we are dealing with works of an altogether

⁴² Archer, *The Old Drama and the New*, p 227.

⁴³ Ibid. p 180.

⁴⁴ Wilde, Oscar, *A Woman of No Importance* in *Lady Windermere’s Fan, Salome, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband, The Importance of Being Earnest*, ed. Raby, Peter (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995), Act III, line 490.

⁴⁵ Archer, *World*, 1893, pp. 144-5.

higher order than others which we may very likely have praised with much less reserve.⁴⁶

With this comment, Archer acknowledges that for a dramatic critic there could be no absolutes, but that one had to take into consideration that the English theatre was in the midst of a transition from melodrama to realistic problem plays.

As for the conservative critic, Clement Scott, he was silent. If he was present on the opening night of *A Woman of No Importance*, he chose to ignore the play and not honour it even with a negative review. Wilde was probably disappointed on this account, as it would seem that his curtain speech was an attempt to appease Scott's vehement criticism of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Wilde responded curiously to the many calls of 'Author' by standing up and announcing in all seriousness, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, I regret to inform you that Mr. Wilde is not in the house'.⁴⁷

Powell lists a number of plays about fallen women and their offspring, such as Jones's *The Dancing Girl*. Jones's play was about a fallen woman and a wicked aristocrat and was played at the Haymarket only two years before *A Woman of No Importance*. And with Beerbohm Tree and Julia Nielsen playing the wicked aristocrat and ingénue, roles that they were both to repeat in *A Woman of No Importance*, Wilde's audience was certainly reminded of its precursor. But then, as Powell points out, there were countless other plays that dwelt on fallen women and their offspring. Amongst the most popular plays of the 1880s was Pinero's *Sweet Lavender*, a story of how an adulterous mother is reconciled with and then marries her seducer.

⁴⁶ Archer, *World*, 1893, pp. 144-5.

⁴⁷ Bird, Alan, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde* (London: Vision Press Ltd. 1977), p. 116.

Wilde's play about a fallen woman, however, has some significant differences from its predecessors. The most obvious difference is that Mrs. Arbuthnot neither dies tragically in the end, nor repents her loss of innocence. In accordance with melodramatic convention, Wilde has Mrs. Arbuthnot confess her past misdeeds to her son. Yet this confessional scene is anything but conventional. Indeed it is the point in the play where Wilde breaks most clearly with melodramatic convention.

Mrs. Arbuthnot tells Gerald a story about an unfortunate young girl, without owning it as her own. In this narrative she emphasizes the girl's innocent lack of knowledge of the world, placing all the blame on Lord Illingworth who 'knew everything [about life]'.⁴⁸ Mrs. Arbuthnot does not relate this story in search of absolution. She is not the confessee seeking forgiveness and penance. Mrs Arbuthnot does not say that the girl fell in love with him, but rather that 'he made this girl love him. He made her love him so much that she left her father's house with him one morning'.⁴⁹

While this narrative is being related, Gerald is instructed to sit close to his mother, just as he used to do when he was a little boy. And the stage directions add the cloyingly sinister detail that 'she runs her fingers through his hair, and strokes his hands', which gives a decidedly Oedipal note to the scene.⁵⁰ Yet despite her efforts at slanting her narrative (see footnotes 48 and 49), one is left wondering how a girl's innocence of 'the world' could remain intact after weeks and months? In all likelihood, her family would have tried to intervene the day after her disappearance. Then we are told that 'she trusted

⁴⁸ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, Act III, line 441.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Act III, lines 442-4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Act III, lines 437-8.

him all the while', and only left him after the child was born.⁵¹ She melodramatically adds that his refusing to marry her ruined her life and her soul and 'all that was sweet and good and pure in her ruined also.'⁵² She notes that she is not in search of forgiveness, nor is she intent on doing penance, but rather she implies that she has already been given the penance of suffering.

In a traditional melodramatic confession scene, Gerald would function as the witness to his mother's confession and would assume the role of confessor, the one who judges the sinner and proscribes penance and grants absolution. But Wilde was careful not to let that tradition prevail in *A Woman of No Importance*. Here his fallen woman, Mrs. Arbuthnot, masterfully constructs her quasi-confession as a plea for sympathy and a condemnation of her seducer. No guilty sinner is absolved and purified in *A Woman of No Importance*. The balance of power is not transferred from the one confessing to her confessor, and the play ends with the woman having used her confession to tighten her stranglehold of control over her son, since throughout the play Mrs. Arbuthnot views Gerald as a possession, a pawn to own and control. As she says to Lord Illingworth in Act II, 'you have no right to claim him [Gerald] or the smallest part of him. The boy is entirely mine, and shall remain mine'.⁵³

Wilde referred to the play as a woman's play but that is not to say that it gives a flattering depiction of women.⁵⁴ *A Woman of No Importance* is a play about the sinister side of women who seek to seduce and emasculate men. The Victorian cult of the home pervades the opening scene, but in Wilde's play home is not a refuge and place of moral

⁵¹ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, Act III, line 448.

⁵² Ibid. Act III, lines 453-4.

⁵³ Ibid. Act II, line 542.

⁵⁴ Tydeman, *Comedies*, p. 13.

renewal. In *A Woman of No Importance*, home represents a secluded domestic realm that is so feminised that men are stifled and emasculated in it. The women in the play are not feminists arguing for equal rights. They are simply interested in dominating and controlling men.

The first act of *A Woman of No Importance* functions as a framing device for the rest of the play. Here, themes of women's purity and passion versus men's decadence and worldliness are juxtaposed within a domestic setting which is anything but a refuge. The speeches of Lady Stutfield and Mrs. Allonby foreshadow the theme of lack of purity in women, which is contrasted to the popular male conception of women as pure and moral beings, as voiced by Mr. Kelvil.

Men's freedom is constantly being questioned and encroached upon, as in the way Sir John is packed away in mufflers and galoshes. They are ever observed and seemingly kept on a short leash by their women, as if they were small children or lapdogs. And even the character of Mrs. Allonby is more than that of a flirtatious cynic. True, her dialogue with Lord Illingworth at the end of Act I foreshadows the themes of a wicked man's fascination with innocence and his desire to corrupt it.

But her dialogue also signals that women aren't always such easy prey. Lord Illingworth comments that 'I don't think there is a woman in the world who would not be a little flattered if one made love to her'.⁵⁵ Mrs. Allonby disagrees and suggests that if Lord Illingworth were to kiss Hester, that she would 'either marry you or strike you across the face with her glove'.⁵⁶ Wilde shapes the dialogue, causing it to resemble that of a duel with both partners taking terms thrusting and parrying. It is Mrs. Allonby who is

⁵⁵ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, Act I, lines 453-454

⁵⁶ Act I, lines 463-4.

the aggressor, always twisting her repartee into a thrust or a taunt. For example, just when Lord Illingworth is inclined to lapse into self-satisfied epigrams, she prods him with a taunt:

MRS. ALLONBY Lord Illingworth, there is one thing I shall always like you for.
 LORD ILLINGWORTH Only one thing? And I have so many bad qualities.
 MRS. ALLONBY Ah, don't be too conceited about them. You may lose them as you grow old.
 LORD ILLINGWORTH I never intend to grow old. The soul is born old but grows young. That is the comedy of life.
 MRS. ALLONBY And the body is born young and grows old. That is life's tragedy.
 LORD ILLINGWORTH It's comedy also, sometimes. But what is the mysterious reason why you will always like me?
 MRS. ALLONBY It is that you have never made love to me.
 LORD ILLINGWORTH I have never done anything else.
 MRS. ALLONBY Really? I have not noticed it.
 LORD ILLINGWORTH How fortunate! It might have been a tragedy for both of us.
 MRS. ALLONBY We should each have survived.
 LORD ILLINGWORTH One can survive everything nowadays except death, and live down everything except a good reputation.
 MRS. ALLONBY Have you tried a good reputation?
 LORD ILLINGWORTH It is one of the many annoyances to which I have never been subjected.
 MRS. ALLONBY It may come.⁵⁷

Mrs. Allonby thus taunts Lord Illingworth that he might end up with the worst possible fate for a dandy – that of getting a good reputation. And when he enquires as to why she threatens him with this, she replies as a spider meticulously preparing her prey that 'I will tell you when you have kissed the Puritan'.⁵⁸ Wilde then ends the scene with more language reminiscent of duelling. Mrs. Allonby is seen as a skilful fencer taunting her prey into the challenge of kissing Hester, the Puritan. It is a challenge which he believes he can master, but which proves to be his downfall. Mrs. Allonby, as the other

⁵⁷ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, Act I, lines 480-503.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Act I, line 505.

women in the play, is interested in having men fail because, 'women adore failures. They lean on us'.⁵⁹

Even Gerald is alternately seduced and emasculated by both his mother and Hester. This occurs first with his mother in the confessional scene as we have just seen. His love interest, Hester is also not as pure or ingenuous as she would seem at first glance. Her innocence is tainted. For, while her acceptance of Mrs. Arbuthnot's lack of innocence might seem like an admirable Christian gesture, one is left wondering as to whether her opinion indeed would have mellowed had she not been in love with Gerald. And indeed her new morality does not seem to fit the character of a girl who was hysterical about being kissed in the prior scene. The intensity of Hester's outburst makes it difficult to believe that this girl, who just a few lines before severely commented that 'a woman who has sinned should be punished', could so quickly change her mind.⁶⁰ Nor does it seem likely that such a judgmental young lady would generously choose Mrs. Arbuthnot for an adopted mother. Lastly, the generosity of Hester is also questionable. The virtuous appearance of her willingness to marry a penniless Gerald is marred by the fact that money is clearly a means by which Hester can control him. After all, Hester has indicated that she does not want Gerald to work and be corrupted by the world.

Lord Illingworth may play the traditional role of villain, but he is the only one throughout the play who seems to see the sinister side of the female characters. For example, Act II's dialogue between Mrs. Arbuthnot and Lord Illingworth is an unconventional confessional scene where both divulge key aspects of their history together. This dialogue reveals a different version of the story of Mrs. Arbuthnot as a

⁵⁹ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, Act I, line 472.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Act III, line 330.

traditional female victim who was seduced but showed an unusual amount of independence by refusing an income and mysteriously disappearing with the child.

In Act III, Lord Illingworth tells Gerald that society is a necessary bore ruled by women.⁶¹ He also adds that the ‘history of women is the history of the worst form of tyranny the world has ever known. The tyranny of the weak over the strong. It is the only tyranny that lasts’.⁶² Then in Act II he points out the pragmatic view that Gerald’s future should be more important than his mother’s past, and that she is sentimentally selfish, because denying him occupational advancement guarantees that he will never be anything but a lowly clerk and a doting son. He says that Gerald is discontented with being an ‘underpaid clerk in a small provincial bank in a third-rate English town’.⁶³ And this belief is indeed later confirmed by Gerald himself. But Mrs. Arbuthnot thinks Lord Illingworth’s masculine world is so vile that she would rather hold Gerald back, keeping him at her side, than let his father help him.

The final scene of Act IV, where Lord Illingworth is dismissed as father and potential husband, occurs in the feminised domestic refuge of Mrs. Arbuthnot’s house. This ‘happy English home’, is a room characterized by old-fashioned décor. The owner of this room is, then, by implication characterized as a respectable guardian of traditional domesticity, a curious notion for an unrepenting fallen woman. But in their familiarity with the melodramatic tradition of treating fallen women, the audience knows that this situation is redeemable – they can marry! Wilde, of course, plays on this expectation by having George propose just such a happy reunion.

⁶¹ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, Act III, lines 76-81.

⁶² *Ibid.* Act III, lines 94-6.

⁶³ *Ibid.* Act II, lines 590-1.

His mother, however, likes her independence and despises Lord Illingworth. Similarly Hester, the Puritan, finds the thought of having her defiler as her legal father-in-law so distasteful, that she talks Gerald out of this conventional solution. Instead, the play ends with the caddish Lord Illingworth dismissed by a slap in the face with his glove, later a Freudian symbol of the female. In this gesture Wilde combines the traditional feminine protest of slapping sexually aggressive men with the masculine tradition of provoking an antagonist to a duel over a matter of honour. With this unusual mix of genders and traditionally coded behaviour, this gesture becomes highly eroticised, an act of female sexual aggression leaving the man humiliated and symbolically castrated.

Lord Illingworth then removes himself from the scene to leave Gerald to an unenviable fate, where his mother and his fiancée have decided his future between them. He is to put all dreams of a career aside and go forth into a future coloured by the sentimental wishes of the two women who would control him. Gerald is by this point thoroughly domesticated, symbolically castrated by a lack of choices in work, and thus unable to interact in a masculine world.

Walkley claimed that this play failed to take up any serious themes, yet, he re-envisioned Wilde's ending. Walkley suggested that a more satisfying ending would be one which allowed Gerald to have the dignity of an occupation. Indeed altering the ending so that Gerald can escape the refuge of domesticity would be a more traditional conclusion, one which men would find far more palatable.

Apart from objecting to a few melodramatic scenes, Archer's criticism focused on the character of Mrs. Arbuthnot. He found her to be psychologically inconsistent, especially in the end of Act III. Here, he drew attention to the contrast between Mrs.

Arbuthnot's rebellious confession and her cowed body language as they are described in the stage directions. However, it is arguable that Mrs. Arbuthnot's character is a plausible one and that Wilde simply captured the psychological tension that many women felt when flaunting convention.

Mrs. Arbuthnot is a woman struggling to be consistent in her defiance of convention. She is an individual, for she dares to keep the child and, consequently, she must live a limited life though she finds this terribly irritating. She has a limited but independent life which includes her son and doing some charity work through the church. But her melodramatic ranting reveals a woman who is tremendously bitter at the social limitations of her life.

A few days after seeing *A Woman of No Importance*, Archer attended the opening night of Pinero's play *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*. This problem play was characterized by an Ibsen-like realism that inflamed Archer and all London with its dramatic depiction of a fallen woman. Pinero's play is an unrelentingly serious, profoundly tragic play about a fallen woman whose past comes back to haunt her. It caused Archer to partially retract his recent praise of Wilde and favour Pinero as the English Ibsen, the foremost playwright of the English stage.

Pinero does render the play's fallen woman, Paula Tanqueray, realistically and sympathetically, but in the end, true to melodramatic convention, he kills his heroine. One is left wondering, then, just how Archer could evaluate Pinero's play to be more socially progressive than Wilde's? Part of the answer to this question may lie in Pinero's realistic style. Unlike Wilde, Pinero's drama is by no means a comedy, nor does it contain any comic dialogue.

The characterization of Pinero's characters is plausible and thoroughly developed, yet highly conventional. The extent of the conventionality of the characters is displayed most clearly in the play's central confessional scene where Ellean reveals to Paula her suspicions about Paula's past. Here, the dialogue develops slowly with no unsuspected secrets being divulged nor any surprising perspectives on these secrets. But the dramatic tension gradually heightens until it climaxes with Paula's melodramatic denial, 'It's a lie! It's a lie!' This is accompanied by Paula's melodramatic gesture of forcing Ellean down upon her knees.⁶⁴ Curiously, though, critics did not dwell upon the melodramatic aspects of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*.

In Archer's review of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, which he describes as 'modern and masterly', he clarifies his tastes in drama by saying that he was not completely against comedy and melodrama 'so long as there are brains in it [...] [that he had not] outgrown my taste for lollipops, if only they were delicately flavoured'. But clearly Archer prefers serious, realistic plays like *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, saying that 'the limitations of Mrs. Tanqueray are really the limitations of the dramatic form'. And nowhere does he make reference to the influence of melodrama in the play or the melodramatic nature of certain scenes such as the confessional scene.⁶⁵ Years later, in *The Old Drama and the New*, Archer was still championing Pinero as the unparalleled playwright of the 1890s, who transformed the late Victorian stage from melodrama to a drama of psychological depth and realism.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Pinero, Arthur Wing, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986), p. 127.

⁶⁵ Archer, William, 'The Second Mrs. Tanqueray', *The World*, 31 May 1893 in Rowell, *Victorian Dramatic Criticism*, p. 232.

⁶⁶ Archer, *The Old Drama and the New*, p. 312.

Generally, Archer's reviews of Jones and Pinero express an appreciation of their plays. Although neither dared to go as far as Ibsen, Archer viewed their mild radicalism as noteworthy. It was an important step in the right direction that was significant enough to warrant some praise. In a review of Pinero's *The Benefit of the Doubt*, Archer attacks the Idealists or Ibsenites, praising Pinero's efforts:

It has always seemed to me to show the densest in gratitude that they should have nothing but sneers and disparagement for the man [Pinero] who was gallantly fighting their own battles, though perhaps with other weapons than theirs.⁶⁷

Archer's comment reminds modern readers that Jones's and Pinero's plays were seen as problem plays and not speculative opportunism.⁶⁸ Pinero especially exemplifies an eroding of the static conception of morality, in that the topic of women and marital problems can begin to be broached. Yet he is unable to conceive of a radically new perception of women, and ultimately embraced traditional views of morality. Like the heroines of melodrama, Pinero's women sacrifice and suffer, but unlike melodrama, they are allowed to struggle with their repressed feelings.

Still it is difficult to understand why Wilde's critics viewed him less favourably than Jones and Pinero. Chapter 3 will address this question, showing that the critical reception of Wilde's works was not a simple preference for realism but instead was the result of the critics' inability to understand Wilde's stylistic innovations and their irritation over his growing popularity and notoriety.

⁶⁷ Archer, William, *The World*, 23 October 1895, in Stokes, John, *Resistible Theatres: Enterprise and Experiment in the Late Nineteenth Century* (U.S.A: Elek Books Ltd. 1972), p. 24.

⁶⁸ Stokes, John, *Resistible Theatres: Enterprise and Experiment in the Late Nineteenth Century* (U.S.A: Elek Books Ltd. 1972), pp. 20-1.

Chapter 3: Fame and Notoriety

As for modern journalism, it is not my business to judge it. It justifies its own existence by the great Darwinian principle of the survival of the vulgarest.¹ (Oscar Wilde)

By 1895, Wilde's reputation as a successful playwright was solidly established. His unique style coupled with the antics of his flamboyant personality as witnessed in newspaper interviews, and the gossip that circulated throughout various circles in London, had firmly set him in the public eye, making him the most talked about literary figure in England even before his trial in April of 1895. He had become a popular icon.²

To a certain degree Wilde's status as a popular icon was intentionally created by himself, playing upon the media's desire for sensational stories and sensational characters. As the critic Regina Gagnier, in *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* notes:

The late-Victorian dandy in Wilde's works and in his practice is the human equivalent of aestheticism in art; he is the man removed from life, a living protest against vulgarity and means-end living.³

Wilde was a consummate dandy in the tradition of Beau Brummel, an early nineteenth-century public figure who protested against the vulgarity of society in his extravagant dress and mannerisms and was imitated by French decadents such as Baudelaire. Yet unlike Brummel, Wilde's dandyism was aimed at entertaining not just the upper class but the middle class as well. Wilde sought beauty with an exhibitionist

¹ Wilde in Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 349.

² Beckson, Karl, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1970), p. 16.

³ Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace*, p. 7.

playfulness similar to early French decadents such as Gérard de Nerval, who was known to walk his pet lobster in the Palais Royal.⁴ Wilde's dandyism was not just a cynically calculated aestheticism that was aimed merely at commercial exploitation. Wilde intuitively understood that his dandyism appealed to the public because even though the middle class were not idle like the aristocracy, they too were often bored.

So Wilde's velvet breeches of his American tour, much like his elegant buttonholes, were calculated to captivate and entertain his public while they also shocked them. Wilde clearly understood that in the late Victorian era, dandies were valued for their entertainment value.

By the opening of his first play, Wilde's talent for self-promotion was so pronounced that even Walkley found himself commenting upon it in his critique of *Lady Windermere's Fan*:

Here is a gentleman who devotes brilliant talents, a splendid audacity, an agreeable charlatanry and a hundred-Barnum-power of advertisement, to making a change in old customs and preventing life from being monotonous. He does this in innumerable ways – by his writings, his talk, his person, his clothes, and everything that is his. He has aimed at doing it in his play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and has been, to my mind, entirely successful.⁵

But in spite of Wilde's talent for self-advertisement, he was unable to control the public's response, and invariably he also found himself the object of ridicule.

⁴ Sturgis, Matthew, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of The Eighteen Nineties* (London: Macmillan 1995), p. 14.

⁵ Walkley, A. B., *Speaker*, 12 January 1895, iv, in Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, p. 119.

I. Parodies

The reception of Wilde's later society comedies was certainly influenced by a number of different parodies both of his early society comedies and his personal life in general. In 1892, the farce *The Poet and the Puppets*, was performed only a few months after the opening of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. The play was a malicious parody of *Lady Windermere's Fan* and a satire on Wilde himself, full of references to Wilde's lectures, writings and his influence in London as a philosopher and artist.⁶ The theatre milieu in London was, however, a relatively small world and Wilde caught wind of the parody before its opening performance. As a result, he had the play brought before Edward F. S. Pigott, the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, which resulted in the censoring of Wilde's name from the play's text.⁷

Less than a year after the opening of *A Woman of No Importance*, another farce, *The Charlatan*, was performed. *The Charlatan* was a loose parody of *A Woman of No Importance*, and with Beerbohm Tree in a role similar to that of Lord Illingworth, audiences certainly associated the two plays, although Wilde was not specifically mentioned in the play or in the play's reviews. But these farces were not as damaging as the satirical anonymous novel, *The Green Carnation*, published in September of 1894. The title is a reference to the green carnations worn by Wilde and a number of his homosexual friends at the opening of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. The work featured Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas thinly disguised as Esmé Amaranth and Lord Reggie and revealed a good deal of intimate details about their relationship, and a lot of general gossip about different members of the aesthetic movement such as Aubrey Beardsley,

⁶ Nelson, *Oscar Wilde from Ravenna to Salomé*, pp. 12-4.

⁷ Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, p. 35.

Max Beerbohm, Walter Pater, Whistler and John Gray, a poet rumored to be Wilde's lover and who supposedly was the inspiration for the character of Dorian Gray.⁸ The book is a clever pastiche of Wilde's writings and a parody of his distinctive conversational style.

The presumed author, Robert Hichens, a novelist, homosexual and one time disciple of Wilde, apparently collected quotations and anecdotes for his parody in Egypt where he had met Douglas in December of 1893 after Douglas had briefly broken with Wilde⁹. Wilde and Douglas were initially amused by the book, but Wilde's sentiments shifted when the rumour circulated that Wilde himself had written it. This rumour then became so widespread that Wilde felt a need to refute it publicly, by writing a letter to the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* on October 1st. The negative publicity of the book was significant. As Ellmann notes, 'the book made its small but noticeable contribution to the growing disfavour Wilde was encountering'.¹⁰ Thus, the fame and notoriety that these parodies generated, certainly lingered in the popular consciousness, and contributed to critics' growing ambivalence toward and annoyance with Wilde's works.

II. An Ideal Husband

The play *An Ideal Husband* focuses on Sir Robert Chiltern's past ill-gotten gain that comes back to haunt him in the figure of a black-mailing adventuress, Mrs. Cheverley. Mrs. Cheverly tries to manipulate Lord Chiltern, now Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, into publicly supporting the building of an Argentinian canal, a fraudulent scheme that would not benefit the public but a handful of investors, including herself.

⁸ Nelson, *Oscar Wilde from Ravenna to Salomé*, pp. 14-15.

⁹ Ellman, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 392.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Unwilling to have his disreputable past revealed, Lord Chiltern agrees to present a false report in parliament, an act that will tarnish his present impeccably good reputation as a public servant. Not understanding the background for his decision, his wife is distraught. Her ideal husband will cease to be perfect and she doubts that she can love such a man.

William Archer's review of *An Ideal Husband* was primarily negative, for, although he refers to the play as 'a very able and entertaining piece of work, charmingly written' Archer says that he has no strong feelings about the play's morality, and then proceeds to criticize just that aspect of the play.¹¹ Apparently, the thing that Archer likes best about the play is that there are few epigrams. For Archer allows that:

Every writer of any individuality has, so to speak, his trademark; but there are times when the output of Mr. Wilde's epigram-factory threatens to become all trademark and no substance.¹²

Two days after Archer's review, George Bernard Shaw wrote a review that reads like a rebuttal of Archer's, criticizing Wilde's style:

Mr. Oscar Wilde's new play at the Haymarket is a dangerous subject, because he has the property of making his critics dull. They laugh angrily at his epigrams, like a child who is coaxed into being amused in the very act of setting up a yell of rage and agony. They protest that the trick is obvious, and that such epigrams can be turned out by the score by anyone light-minded enough to condescend to such frivolity. As far as I can ascertain, I am the only person in London who cannot sit down and write an Oscar Wilde play at will. The fact that his plays, though apparently lucrative, remain unique under these circumstances, says much for the self-denial of our scribes.¹³

¹¹ Archer, William, 'An Ideal Husband', *Pall Mall Budget*, 10 January 1895, in Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, p. 173.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Shaw, George Bernard, *The Saturday Review*, 12 January 1895 in Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 176-8.

Here Shaw satirises the common conception that Wilde's epigrams are so easily composed. Of course if they were so easy to write the theatre would be flooded with Wildean plays as they were so profitable. Shaw also hints that critics are very frustrated by Wilde's use of epigrams. They find them humorous but are annoyed that they do so. On the other hand, Shaw does not seem to take Wilde very seriously and depicts him as:

An arch-artist [who] is so colossally lazy that he trifles even with the work by which an artist escapes work. He distills very quintessence, and gets as product plays which are so unapproachably playful that they are the delight of every playgoer with twopenn'orth of brains.¹⁴

Thus Shaw's review underscores the broad appeal of Wilde's humour, but he also implies that many critics' dislike of Wilde's play was due to their preference for realism and traditional moral values:

The English critic, always protesting that the drama should not be didactic, and yet always complaining if the dramatist does not find sermons in stones and good in everything.¹⁵

Shaw sees the play as cheap entertainment, having no thesis and he objects to the melodramatic stage devices that abound at the end of the play. Clement Scott, on the other hand, gave a mildly sympathetic review. He comments upon the melodramatic influences at length, but concludes that, 'A play is never less interesting to the ordinary

¹⁴ Shaw, George Bernard, *The Saturday Review*, 12 January 1895, pp. 176-178.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

playgoer because something in it has been done before'.¹⁶ Most interesting here is Scott's description of the public's fascination with Wilde's epigrammatic dialogue by relating that, 'Oscar Wilde is the fashion. His catch and whimsicality of dialogue tickle the public. Just now the whole of society is engaged in inventing Oscar Wildeisms'.¹⁷ This comment is an especially revealing indication of the degree to which Wilde had pervaded the popular consciousness, emerging as a significant iconic figure.

Scott's and Walkley's references to Oscarisms suggest that the public was so fascinated with Wilde's style that his audience attended his plays for the Oscarisms which Wilde so liberally distributed throughout his plays, rather than for the plots. In fact, Wilde's persona loomed so large on the public horizon that he was perceived as a meta-character in his last two plays. As a meta-character, Wilde's persona melds with the dandy characters, functioning as a mouthpiece for Wilde's wit and philosophy. *An Ideal Husband* has less epigrammatic dialogue than his previous plays, but it abounds with dandy figures such as Goring, Mrs. Cheveley, Lady Basildon, Mrs. Marchmont, Mable, and, at times, Lord Chiltern himself. All of these characters display different aspects of Wilde's dandyism, and despite that dandy figures do appear in plays by Jones and Pinero, no other playwright could conceivably populate a play with such a density of dandy figures as Wilde does.

While the critics noticed Wilde's use of epigrammatic dialogue as a distinctive trademark none of them were willing to allow that this was a stylistically innovative use of language. Archer, of course, was primarily concerned with the play's realism and character development. Walkley too in his review of *An Ideal Husband* claims that the

¹⁶ Scott, Clement, *Illustrated London News*, 12 January 1895, cvi, in Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, p. 178

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

characters lack realistic psychological development. He starts by criticising the play since it will not aid in the evolution of the English theatre. Then he comments on Wilde's relationship to his audience and how Wilde flatters his public, since his characters are not realistic:

The truth is, he is far from being a realist; actual people neither talk nor behave like his stage-personages. [...] Wilde flatters the public, presents it with a false picture of life which it likes to fancy true, thinks its thoughts, conforms to its ideals, talks – yes, talks its talk. [...] The public talks commonplaces, and so does Mr. Wilde. It is true that his are inverted commonplaces; but the difference is immaterial, for not the nature, only the position, of a thing is altered by its being turned upside-down, these inverted commonplaces are Mr. Wilde's distinctive mark.¹⁸

In this excerpt, Walkley points out the vicarious narcissism of Wilde's plays, flattering the public with an idealized version of how upper-class society liked to view itself in a manner that predates Gagnier's thesis in *Idylls of the Marketplace*. While this image of Wilde flattering an upper-class audience while his simultaneously satires them has much truth to it, it is not true that Wilde's audience was solely composed of upper-class and noble patrons. As Shaw relates, Wilde's images of the glitteringly extravagant society life, 'are enormously attracted to social outsiders (say ninety-nine hundredths of us).'¹⁹ Shaw's comment reminds us that a large segment of Wilde's audience was not aristocratic but was indeed fascinated by them. Wilde, however, instinctively understood that working-class and middle-class patrons went to his plays to savour the ambience, as if the elegance and wit would rub off on them, magically transforming them by inspiring them to suave Oscarisms of their own. But, like Scott, Walkley too is annoyed by the

¹⁸ Walkley, *Speaker*, 12 January 1895, pp. 179

¹⁹ Shaw, George Bernard, *The Saturday Review*, 12 January 1895, pp. 176-178.

trend of Oscarisms and hopes that the London public will soon grow tired of them. He feels that ‘the best that can be said for *An Ideal Husband* is that in it the output of them [Oscarisms] is considerably diminished’.²⁰

Furthermore Walkley also objects to the use of the bracelet as a melodramatic stage device. But his strongest objection is to Wilde’s unfavourable depiction of politicians, which he refers to as ‘stark, staring nonsense. Mr. Wilde might as well, while he is about it, introduce a duel between two members of the Cabinet, or send the leader of the Opposition into the street to erect barricades.’²¹

As Powell relates, plays dealing with ideal husbands were popular in the late 1880s and early 1890s, as the debate about the moral double standard waged in the press, pamphlets and popular literature of the period. Feminist writers such as Sarah Grant, in the novel *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), suggested that pure women shouldn’t marry impure men or that, alternately, women should simply indulge in being equally impure.²² Other radical feminist writers such as Mona Caird felt that marriage was obsolete and that couples should use a so-called ‘free contract’ that could be easily dissolved²³. Many male writers also took up these options, such as Thomas Hardy’s sympathetic *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, or George Gissing’s unsympathetic *The Odd Women* which further stigmatized women who made unorthodox choices.

Male playwrights were for the most part unsympathetic to New Women, and when they were sympathetic they usually offered the same old solutions. In *The Case of the Rebellious Susan* (1894), Jones’s female protagonist is tempted to revenge herself

²⁰ Walkley, *Speaker*, 12 January 1895, pp. 179.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, pp. 89-91.

²³ *Ibid.* 90-2.

upon her wayward husband by finding a lover and yet Jones ultimately has her deciding to go back to her husband. Likewise Pinero's *Lady Bountiful* (1891) has the heroine demand that her fiancé reform into an ideal husband before she condescends to marry him. Other popular playwrights, such as Sydney Grundy, captured the popular consciousness by making fun of unconventional women in the play *The New Woman* (1894).²⁴

Many plays about ideal husbands found the husband active in politics, especially as an MP in Parliament.²⁵ In the first of these, Robertson's *The House or the Home* (1859), the husband neglects his wife for work, only later to be reformed into an attentive ideal husband. Pinero's *The Cabinet Minister* (1890), has an MP involved in a scandal which causes him to retire and accept Chiltern's Hundreds, a common expression that signified resigning from Parliament with a pension.²⁶

A year later Pinero also wrote *The Times* (1891) which dealt with a corrupt MP who is also reformed during the course of the play.²⁷ Then in 1895 the anonymous play *The MP's Wife* depicts yet another MP who pays little attention to his wife until she is involved in a murder scandal. The play ends with both repenting and reforming. And in reactionary farces such as *Husband and Wife* (1891), feminized men that helped with women's household chores are ridiculed. But these are only a few examples, for in addition to these plays, Powell notes that at the time when *An Ideal Husband* opened, at least five other ideal husband plays were also being performed.

²⁴ Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, pp. 89-93.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 98.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 98-101.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 100-103.

While these plays have a conventionally idealistic view of honesty and hypocrisy in politics they reflect a public interest in social reform regarding dishonest politicians. It is tempting to dismiss them because of their conventionality, yet social changes occur gradually as progressive ideas filter throughout society. Foucault describes social change in society's traditional norms, revolutionary change or revolutions themselves, as occurring due to the resistance to power, a multiple resistance with multiple points of pressure. This resistance activates 'groups or individuals in a definite way, inflaming [...] certain moments in life, [and] certain types of behaviour'. This resistance in turn produces 'cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves.'²⁸

In the 1890s there occurred a backlash against feminism and the New Woman in journalism and literature that was a reaction to the discourse of sexuality made more explicit through the emerging discourses of psychology and sexology. The discourse of sexuality addressed and analysed sexual anxieties, concretising them into a vividly real presence. Often these discourses had the effect of reinforcing the status quo by influencing individuals to resist change and cling to the safety of traditional gender roles.

In a similar manner, *An Ideal Husband* like *A Woman of No Importance*, has a distinctly anti-feminist subtext in depicting an unflattering image of the New Woman, and by encouraging women to abandon their own ideas and ideals and blindly support their husbands just as Gertrude Chiltern does in the end of the play. On another level, though, portraying female characters who diverge from the one-dimensional characters of melodrama, served to conceptualize these images in the popular consciousness. But, since

²⁸ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, p. 96.

Wilde's depiction of moral ambiguities are not resolved and are only contained within the work, they are an impetus to social change whether they were intended to be so or not.

Interestingly none of Wilde's critics noticed that more than any other Wildean play, *An Ideal Husband* is a play satirising power relations and the lack of social change in society. In *An Ideal Husband* Wilde monitors and maintains the discourse of power through a complex rendering of power-relations; that of power within couples, between political rivals (Mrs. Cheveley and Lord Chiltern) and power in relation to popular opinion and the fragility of power inherent in democratic systems. Lord Chiltern is a man of great power and wealth. His power can be used for the public good or for private gain. But as Foucault states in *The History of Sexuality*:

Power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations.²⁹

Power then, is present in all relations: economic, political and sexual. Thus laws and traditions also stem from the populous and popular opinion, and consequently, despite the fact that Chiltern wields immense power as a cabinet minister, he has a precarious hold upon his power. He retains his power at the mercy of public opinion and the press, which, as Mrs. Cheveley pointedly reminds him:

Think of their loathsome joy, of the delight they would have in dragging you down, of the mud and mire they would plunge you in.

²⁹ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, p. 94.

think of the hypocrite with his greasy smile penning his leading article.³⁰

As prophetic as Mrs. Cheveley's description of the journalists' enthusiasm for scandal proved to be for Wilde himself, Chiltern's career and his good reputation would inevitably crumble under the outcry of public opinion. Power is to be defined early in the play by Mrs Cheveley as a 'noble career [...] a clever game [...] [and] a great nuisance.'

31

But Chiltern is not the paragon of integrity that society perceives him to be. He objects to Mrs. Cheveley's proposal of financial reward in return for supporting the canal scheme, until he hears that she has evidence of his past misdeeds. Then his answer is quite different. 'I will give you any sum of money you want.'³² Walkley and Archer were both provoked by Chiltern's response in this scene. Walkley objects that this is an unrealistic portrayal of a politician (see footnote 21), while Archer is disgusted by Wilde choosing a dishonest politician who has not changed to be the play's hero.³³ The central confessional scene in *An Ideal Husband* where Lord Chiltern confesses his past to Lord Goring, reveals that Chiltern's publicly held noble sentiments and good deeds are simply a veneer. In his confession, Chiltern describes a Faustian seduction wherein he was seduced by the Baron's beautiful possessions and his philosophy of life, that 'luxury was nothing but a background, a painted scene in a play, and that power, power over other men, power over the world, was the one thing worth having.'³⁴

³⁰ Wilde, Oscar, *An Ideal Husband in Lady Windermere's Fan, Salome, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband, The Importance of Being Earnest*, ed. Raby, Peter (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995), Act I, lines 575-7.

³¹ Ibid. Act I, lines 183-5.

³² Ibid. Act I, lines 583-4.

³³ Archer, 'An Ideal Husband', *Pall Mall Budget*, 10 January 1895, p. 174.

³⁴ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act II, lines 113-5.

Goring is shocked by Chiltern's Machiavellian pragmatism. But Chiltern counters Goring's objection with the observation that Goring is scrupulously moral only because he has never done anything of consequence. With this justification, Chiltern, the confessee, turns the tables, usurping his confessor's power. Goring then, is appalled that he sold himself for money but Chiltern counters, 'I did not sell myself for money. I bought success at a great price.'³⁵ Chiltern counters Goring's moralizing comment that the Baron's philosophy is shallow, for he still feels that the Baron's advice was astute.

One by one, Chiltern whittles away at all the common place platitudes that Goring voices: selling himself, weakness, being worth more, until Goring is left sympathizing with him. At this point Goring is committed to helping Chiltern oppose Mrs. Cheveley's blackmailing scheme, persuaded that what he initially objected to was not important. Their tête-à-tête ends with Chiltern using language usually reserved for heroines in melodrama. 'Oh! I live on hopes now. I clutch at every chance. I feel like a man on a ship that is sinking. The water is round my feet, and the very air is bitter with storm. Hush! I hear my wife's voice.'³⁶ For Chiltern has no regrets and is still a devotee of the Baron's philosophy. It is clear that Chiltern was never seeking absolution, just a chance to satisfy his conscience by explaining and justifying himself to a friend who is obliged by loyalty to sympathise and help him out.

The focal point of *An Ideal Husband* lies in the power relations between Lady and Lord Chilton. Wilde foreshadows the discussions of idealized marital relations in the dialogue between the minor characters Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon early in the play. The pair wittily presents the unsentimental view that an ideal husband is someone

³⁵ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act II, lines 85-6.

³⁶ Ibid. Act II, lines 285-8.

who gives them great freedom, is not boring and expects little of them. This sentiment is contrasted by Mabel, who is single and says that she wants a husband who will always, 'be thinking of me'.³⁷ Curiously Wilde portrays Mabel as having the 'modern' notion that she will catch a suitable husband by giving him much freedom and expecting little for herself. Mabel says that the 'undeserving [are] the only people I am interested in.'³⁸ And no sooner does she state this, than Goring enters as if on cue.

Lady Chiltern, on the other hand, is a woman who wants to believe that her husband is perfect and has never done a morally reprehensible act. It is an image that she so desperately would believe rather than know the truth. When she is alone with her husband and it would be natural to let his character indulge in a confessional scene to seek absolution and support from his wife, but Lady Chiltern rigidly moralizes. Then, as if she does not believe in his innocence, she exclaims 'tell me it is not [true].'³⁹ Such a plea, of course, makes a confession difficult, and consequently Chiltern, as his wife requests, denies that there is anything to hide.

When Mrs. Cheveley does reveal Chiltern's secret, again Lady Chiltern persists in asking him to lie to her. Finally Chiltern does own up to his misdeeds but similar to his confessional scene with Goring, Chiltern does not ask for absolution, nor is he sorry. Instead he emotionally complains about how women expect too much of men by idolizing them. His tirade has all the characteristics of a melodramatic speech by a wronged heroine, the plea for sympathy, the moral outrage, the sentimentality and even a dramatic exit. Critics were quick to object to the melodramatic scene in *A Woman of No Importance* with Mrs. Arbuthnot protesting, 'Stop, Gerald, stop! He is your own

³⁷ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act II, line 495.

³⁸ Ibid. Act II, line 529.

³⁹ Ibid. Act I, line 790.

father!’⁴⁰ Yet none of the critics objected to any of Chiltern’s melodramatic outbursts. In fact, Shaw comments that in objecting to ‘the mechanical idealism of his stupidly good wife’, Wilde strikes a ‘modern note’.⁴¹ But Shaw does not seem to object to the scene. Nor did any of the contemporary critics react to Gertrude’s begging her husband to lie to her.

Similar to Lady Windermere before her, Lady Chiltern is arguably the worst hypocrite in the play because, for all her talk about ideals and high moral principles, Lady Chiltern has an even more desperate need to maintain the façade of perfection than to hear the truth. This is most clearly depicted in Lady Chiltern’s reconciliatory speech at the end of the play one which rings false to modern readers. Perhaps Lady Chiltern could change her mind except for another reason, that Goring does cite, that Chiltern would become so embittered by renouncing a brilliant career opportunity for a quiet domestic life in the country, that it would eventually poison his love for his wife. She would have gained the moral highroad only to find it lonely. And then there is her ambition for her husband.

As we see in the beginning of the play, Lady Chilton stands apart from her guests, receiving them at the top of a grand staircase. Wilde places her here quite literally above her guests at a party where everything glitters with opulence and exclusivity. Throughout the play we are shown Lady Chiltern’s interest in her husband’s political affairs, whether it is in influencing his political visions with agendas of her own or in her concern for his impeccable reputation. It is unlikely that Lady Chiltern would give up these roles as she defines herself through them. She has loved being part of his public life, the social role

⁴⁰ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act III, line 490

⁴¹ Shaw, George Bernard, *The Saturday Review*, 12 January 1895, pp. 176-178.

she plays, and the status it confers. In addition, Lady Chiltern has also had an active political life with the Women's Liberal Association and if Lord Chiltern were to retire to a quiet country life, it would be awkward for her to continue her political involvement. It is not only Lord Chiltern who would lose a lot by retiring, his wife also has much to lose.

The romance between Goring and Mabel Chiltern also strikes a discordant note. It is presented as a match based on love, yet this is difficult to believe. Instead it would seem more plausible that marrying Mabel is Goring's social alibi to please his father, for despite his calm collectedness in other scenes, Goring regresses into playing the sulky son when his father visits him and encourages him to marry. We are given little reason to believe that he is motivated by anything but a superficial affection for Mabel, because throughout the play she is flirting with him and he returns her flirtations with playful banter, but fails to turn up for the one appointment they do have – a ride in the park.

As for Mabel, modern readers would do well to pay attention to the clues Wilde drops. Mabel is a single woman whose duty it is to get married. Then the scene with Lady Chiltern, Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheverley reminds us that to be married was not enough, one must marry someone of the same social standing in order to not create a society scandal. Mabel has received a number of proposals but they are from a man who is decidedly not on the same social standing as she is. Nor does the fact that he has prospects tempt her. She says that she wants a husband who will only think of her, yet Goring has given her no reason to believe that he will be an attentive husband. Their marriage is likely to be little more than a façade, a tableaux where she stands on her head, just as the one we hear her tell Lady Markby about.

But Wilde unravels all these convoluted power relations with the sentimental platitude that Wilde has Goring utter in Act two, that, ‘it is love, and not German philosophy, that is the true explanation of this world.’⁴² And so the couples pair off for a happy ending that Wilde knew only too well that his audience expected. And the play ends on a morally ambiguous note with the realisation that when imperfect people with a degree of moral conscience leave politics, the political arena is left to even more unscrupulous individuals.

III. *The Importance of Being Earnest*

By the opening of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde was loved and hated by a public that was overwhelmingly fascinated with him as a writer and public figure. His fiction, especially *Dorian Gray*, had created an aura of decadence about him, while his society plays were a tremendous financial and popular success. Wilde’s popularity seemed only to grow, despite the lukewarm theatre reviews of *An Ideal Husband* and the various parodies of his works. His personal lifestyle, on the other hand, attracted a great deal of attention, with his flamboyant use of money and the scandalous rumours that were circulating regarding his preference for young men. While critics never referred to these things explicitly, they were certainly aware of them and they seemed to be a phantom presence in their reviews of *Earnest* for despite that they found *Earnest* amusing and observed it to be universally popular with the audience, critics felt a duty to counteract the fad of Oscarisms by pointing out how superficial the play was.

The first of *Earnest*’s reviews listed in Beckson is by a minor critic called Hamilton Fyfe, who stated that:

⁴² Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act II, lines 396-397

By a single stroke [Oscar Wilde] put his enemies under his feet [...] Their name is legion, but the most inveterate of them may be defied to go to St. James's Theatre and keep a straight face through the performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* [...] Since *Charley's Aunt* was first brought from the provinces to London I have not heard such unrestrained, incessant laughter from all parts of the theatre, and those laughed the longest whose approved mission it is to read Oscar long lectures in the press on his dramatic and ethical shortcomings⁴³

Fyfe admits that he too, enjoyed the play, but thought it insignificant and 'devoid of purpose as a paper balloon'.⁴⁴ It would seem that Fyfe is irritated by the audience's 'unrestrained, incessant laughter', and his own enjoyment of the play. Thus he sees the need to emphasize the play's superficiality.

And the critics whose 'mission it [was] to read Oscar long lectures in the press' did reply.⁴⁵ In contrast to most modern critics, Wilde's contemporaries echoed Fyfe's sentiments that it was annoying to observe the audience's whole-hearted enjoyment of *Earnest*, which they found so objectionable. Archer, too, admits that the play is very funny but that it is 'good to see' but not 'good to write about'.⁴⁶ He notes that:

It is delightful to see, it sends wave after wave of laughter curling and foaming round the theatre; but as a text for criticism it is barren and delusive [...] it is intangible, it eludes your grasp. What can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle, whether of art or morals [...] and is nothing but an absolutely wilful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality.⁴⁷

⁴³ Fyfe, Hamilton, New York Times, 17 February 1895, in Beckson, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 188.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Archer, William, *The World*, 20 February 1895, pp56-60, in Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 189-90.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Like Fyfe, Archer agrees that although the play is funny, it has no substance, no theme worth commenting upon. Shaw also finds himself laughing at the play, but he is not amused since:

I go to the theatre to be moved to laughter, not to be tickled or bustled into it; and that is why though I laugh as much as anybody at a farcical comedy, I am out of spirits before the end of the second act, and out of temper before the end of the third, my miserable mechanical laughter intensifying the symptoms at every outburst.⁴⁸

In these comments, Shaw expressed that he was particularly disconcerted by the seductiveness of Wilde's witticisms. He felt that he was being manipulated by Wilde's dialogue. The lines come so fast in *Earnest* that without a play text in front of him it was probably questionable as to whether he, as well as the rest of the audience, were catching all the jokes, and to admit that they possibly were not, was simply too embarrassing.

Shaw admittedly was not fond of farce, but he objects more than anything to the fact that he is unable to see that the play addresses any problems of social or political significance. A.B. Walkley also claims that the play lacks seriousness and is 'sheer nonsense' yet he adds 'better nonsense, I think, our stage has not seen'.⁴⁹ Walkley, however, makes an interesting analysis of the nature of humour in *Earnest*, noting that:

Laughter is the simultaneous recognition of the absurd and the natural in the thing laughed at. Every mental process ultimately consists in the classification in known categories of things yet unknown. When the thing is not placed in any known category [...] [it] is incomprehensible. When

⁴⁸ Shaw, Geroge Bernard, *The Saturday Review*, 16 March 1895, in Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 41-4.

⁴⁹ Walkley, A.B., *Speaker*, 23 February, 1895, iv, in Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 196-98.

the thing is to be placed in two mutually exclusive categories, it shocks out thought [...] that is the absurd.⁵⁰

Modern theorists of humour would concur with Walkley's assessment that comparing contrasting realities is what makes humour funny. But they also add that by presenting unexpected versions of reality, humour often jars cultural norms and values so much that they constitute an assault on traditional orthodoxies, and the more closely humour broaches taboo-laden themes, the more daring and the more exciting the joke.⁵¹

Similarly, modern critics often point out that Wilde's use of humour in his Society Comedies focused on dismantling social norms by ridiculing traditional authority figures such as Lady Berwick, Dr. Daubeny, Lord Caversham, Cannon Chausible and Lady Bracknell. As uncontroversial as that seems today, Wilde's contemporaries failed to see that this was the case, especially in *Earnest*.

An anonymous critic describes the opening night of *Earnest* in a manner that vividly captures the overwhelming extent of the play's popularity, something which no doubt irritated critics who were already feeling sceptical and manipulated. The critic relates that:

Each successive scene elicited roars and hoots of approval, and the audience grew absolutely impatient to hear each succeeding witticism or impertinence the author had in store. Mr. Wilde has the power to make even his *fadeurs* [pointless jokes] diverting. There is not a line without a laugh, and joke, epigram and parody jostle each other unendingly [...] [as] one of the characters say, 'it is much better and rarer to talk nonsense than to listen to it.'⁵²

⁵⁰ Walkley, *Speaker*, 23 February, 1895.

⁵¹ Macionis, John J., *Society: The Basics*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall 1996), pp. 97-9.

⁵² Anon., *The Times*, 15 February 1895, in Tydeman, *Comedies*, p.62

This anonymous critic then went on to express his puzzlement with Wilde's style when used in writing a farce:

The Importance of Being Earnest is somewhat more extravagant than the other pieces which have so far proceeded from his pen. A strange effect is thereby produced. It may only be the result of custom, but Mr. Oscar Wilde's peculiar view of epigram does not accord too well with flippant action. Its proper setting is amongst serious people, in the drawing room after dinner, or so at least we have been thought to think. In a farce it gives one the sensation of drinking wine out of the wrong sort of glass; it conveys to the palate a new sensation which in the end, however, is discovered to be not unpleasing. The public took very kindly last night to this further instalment of Mr. Oscar Wilde's humour.⁵³

The anonymous critic concludes his review with the comment that 'whether in farce or drama, plot continues to be Mr. Oscar Wilde's most vulnerable point.'⁵⁴ Powell would tend to agree with this comment, since he concludes that Wilde's society comedies borrow so much from other plays that they are overwhelmed by them. As he relates late Victorian farce was littered with orphans seeking parents, mistaken identities, adult christenings and plot devices such as lost umbrellas and handbags. One of these farces, *The Foundling* (1894), was similar to *Earnest* in plot and text. *The Foundling* has lovers whose engagement is complicated by misunderstandings, mistaken identities, the likelihood of an adult christening and a domineering aunt much like Lady Bracknell.⁵⁵ Powell observes numerous textual similarities which demonstrate the likelihood that Wilde was familiar with the play and used it as a point of inspiration. However these borrowings are so close that they look suspiciously like plagiarism.⁵⁶

⁵³ Anon., *The Times*, 15 February 1895 in Tydeman, *Comedies*, p. 62.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, pp. 108-11.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 112.

But cries of ‘plagiarism’ ring even more clearly when Powell divulges that even the social excuse of having an imaginary sick friend called Bunbury, was borrowed from *Godpapa* (1891), another farce which also featured an equally imaginary brother named Earnest.⁵⁷ And even having a character dressed in mourning for an imaginary funeral was a plot twist that Wilde owed to Gilbert’s *Engaged* (1877).⁵⁸ Despite these numerous ‘borrowings’, Wilde’s critics curiously chose not to dwell upon his unoriginal borrowings in their criticism of *Earnest*.

Yet Powell argues that Wilde’s treatment of these plot complications in *Earnest* is quite original. For in the original farces, while characters may joke about doing ridiculous things, they rarely enact them. For example in *Earnest*, Cecily insists that her fiancé must be called Earnest and that she cannot be in love with anybody who is not called Earnest. Furthermore Cecily also goes against genre conventions when her engagement is forbidden by petulantly insisting that ‘I hate waiting even five minutes for anybody [...] it always makes me rather cross’.⁵⁹ But the unexpected reversals in *Earnest* were never really explored and most critics left the play overwhelmed with the feeling that the play was simply witty, superficial farce.

In *Earnest*, social power structures are inverted at every turn, such as the ‘happy English home’ no longer being earnestly based on love but on infidelity. *Earnest* is a satirical rehashing of *An Ideal Husband*’s subversive courtship themes: cynical comments on the lack of freedom in marriage and ideal marital expectations are lampooned and the confessional scenes ridicule notions of intimacy and secrecy. However, there is ultimately a great difference between how the two versions of the play, the three-act one

⁵⁷ Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, p. 128.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 110.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 120.

that was performed in 1895 at the St. James's, and the original four-act version, develop these themes.

Stylistically the three-act version is more of a pure farce than the four-act version. The three-act version was the product of much re-writing by both Wilde and Alexander, who had conceived of it primarily as a farce, where the scenes are more highly exaggerated and ridiculous, a fact that is accentuated by the tempo of the action. For example, in the three-act version, the initial courtship of Cecily by Algy is much more spontaneous, with Algy proposing to Cecily in the second scene that they are together. In the four-act version, Wilde inserts two more scenes in which Cecily is present for the whole Grisby scene where she plays a significant role by nonchalantly offering to pay Earnest's exorbitant bill of £ 762 14s. 2d.

The Grisby scene of the four-act version adds a different dimension by allowing Algy to observe Cecily's generosity and the ease with which she dispenses it, an ease that would imply that this amount is merely a small trifle to her. This version also depicts Cecily as a woman who not only can entertain herself and make due with very little attention from him but also someone who spoils herself with presents of beautiful jewellery. In short, Cecily is a woman of resources.

In the four-act version the proposal depicts Algy as a more expressive suitor, for here he addresses Cecily by saying:

I have not merely been your abject slave and servant, but, soaring on the pinions of a possibly monstrous ambition, I have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Wilde, Oscar, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems & Essays* (London: Harper Perennial 1989), p. 358.

In the three-act version, Algy's address to Cecily is a bit shorter and not so intense. Generally, the three-act version's romance between Cecily and Algy occurs at such a tempo that it is almost surreal. This impression is further accentuated by the fact that this version gives no reason why Algy should suddenly change his opinion on marriage from an essentially negative point of view to something desirable. Thus this version's romance is only plausible if one characterises Cecily as a predatory New Woman.

But the audience at the St. James's was not to see the Grisby scene, since just like Algy, Wilde was pressed for money and got Charles Wyndham, who apparently had no objections to the original version, to agree to transfer the performance of the play from the Criterion to Alexander's theatre, where it could be performed months before it was originally scheduled.⁶¹

Edit as he might, though, Alexander could not lessen all the subversive aspects of *Earnest*. What still remains are a number of confessional scenes that served to parody the dramatic convention of confession and absolution. The play begins with Mr. Earnest Worthing unrepentantly confessing that he is not who he seems to be. Of course, Algy, his confessor accepts this confession by outdoing him with a confession of his own – that he has an imaginary invalid friend named Bunbury who provides a reason to be excused from undesirable social duties like dinners with tedious relatives.

When Algy's curiosity leads him to Hertfordshire, Wilde confronts him with a female counterpart who is even more imaginative than him, for Cecily takes a courting scene and turns it into a fake confessional scene with a confession that is a complete fabulation. Her confession is that she has for quite some time had an imaginary

⁶¹ Guy and Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, pp. 129-30.

relationship and correspondence with Algy, and that she is already engaged to him. Thus her confession is not expressing a wish for forgiveness, instead it is an inversion that turns the table on Algy her confessor, leaving him to guiltily wonder how he could have neglected her for so long. And due to the lack of character development in the three-act version, the audience is not given a chance or a legitimate reason to believe that the couple's affection runs any deeper than to a trivial desire for entertainment.

Then when the men are finally obliged to confess that neither of them really is called Earnest, and that they both have been misleading their beloved ones with promises of being Earnest, Wilde takes his new dramatic convention of the inverted confessional scene and switches it back to a conventional one. The audience's expectations are inverted once again as they are presented with two guilty men who remorsefully eat muffins as a sign of their repentance.

But then we are reminded there are after all principles at stake here, and so the men's absolution lies in earnestly promising to be christened, a satirical act of shocking self-sacrifice.⁶² Such a succession of satiric confessions is no doubt funny, but they are so ridiculous and there are so many of them, that it is understandable that the critics found themselves reeling in annoyance at the thought of recounting them.

The truth of the matter is that critics rarely wrote about farce. The plots were so convoluted and trivial that it was seen as a waste of time to try to find a thematic thread that would lend the play enough substance to be taken seriously.⁶³ But Wilde was a respected, enormously popular playwright, and therefore it was necessary to review a farce by Wilde. And even critics such as Archer, Walkley and Shaw, who were usually

⁶² Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act III, line 53-62.

⁶³ Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the theatre of the 1890s*, pp. 121-2.

fairly positive about Wilde's plays, chafed. This puzzlement over Wilde's farcical style in *Earnest* is also seen in an anonymous critic's comments in *The Times*:

The Importance of Being Earnest is somewhat more extravagant than the other pieces which have so far proceeded from his pen. A strange effect is thereby produced. It may only be the result of custom, but Mr. Oscar Wilde's peculiar view of epigram does not accord too well with flippant action. Its proper setting is amongst serious people, in the drawing room after dinner, or so at least we have been thought to think. In a farce it gives one the sensation of drinking wine out of the wrong sort of glass; it conveys to the palate a new sensation which in the end, however, is discovered to be not unpleasing.⁶⁴

Another anonymous critic speculates that Wilde's success was due to 'Mr. Wilde's excellent memory' plagiaristic borrowings from numerous farces.⁶⁵ The critic notes that with 'the public taste for Oscarisms', Wilde has simply capitalized on this trend by 'the experiment of dressing up an old-fashioned screaming farce in the very latest and smartest and verbal fashion'. He postulates that these Oscarisms could be produced automatically by a machine whereby 'we might put our pennies in the slot, press a button, and draw out 'Wilde' paradoxes on tape by the yard'. The critic suspects that the play's popularity is partially due to 'The Importance of Being – Oscar'.⁶⁶

It would seem that critics were reacting to Wilde's popularity and his Oscarisms, since without a doubt, Wilde's stature as a popular icon had grown so prevalent that in churning out Oscarisms he was creating symbols that permeated the popular consciousness. For despite Wilde's Oscarisms being entertaining and Wilde's interviews making good newspaper copy, he was not a safe formable subject. An example of this is

⁶⁴ Anon., *The Times*, 15 February 1895

⁶⁵ Anon., *Truth*, 1895 in Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, p. 191.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Wilde's comment when asked about whether *Earnest* would be a success, Wilde replied, 'My dear fellow, you have got it wrong. The play is a success. The only question is whether the first night's audience will be one.'⁶⁷ This cynical inversion of Wilde's, usually makes post-modern readers smirk with glee, but it certainly irritated his contemporaries.

An account of Wilde's relationship with his contemporary critics is only complete by examining Wilde's attitude toward journalists and journalism. Before his debut with the society comedies, Wilde had written about journalism and the media in several of his essays in *Intentions*. These essays demonstrate that Wilde anticipated much of the criticism that he later received as a playwright including an expectation that his unique writing style would not be recognised by his contemporaries as a serious literary endeavour. They are also a reminder that before Wilde had embarked upon his career as a playwright, he worked as a journalist and was therefore well acquainted with journalism's social and literary criticism.

In the essay *The Artist as Critic*, Wilde discusses the foibles of criticism, the critics' love of realism versus individual style, and their catering to undiscerning readers' tastes and this group's traditional morality. Wilde points out that journalism's obsession with facts gives critics a disproportionate appreciation of realism in art:

Facts are not merely finding a footing-place in history, but they are usurping the domain of Fancy, and have invaded the kingdom of Romance. Their chilling touch is over everything. They are vulgarizing mankind. The crude commercialism of America, its materializing spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to that country having adopted for the national hero a man, who

⁶⁷ Wilde, Oscar in Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 164.

according to his own confession was incapable of telling a lie, and it is not too much to say that the story of George Washington and the cherry tree has done more harm, and in a shorter space of time, than any other moral tale in the whole of literature.⁶⁸

Wilde objects that the modern obsession with facts has resulted in a lack of appreciation of imagination. This quotation is, of course, doubly ironic because the George Washington story that Wilde relates here is utter fabrication. Elsewhere Wilde comments upon the popularity of realism and the subjectivity of truth:

Art, breaking from the prison-house of realism, will run to greet him, and will kiss his [the liar] false, beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style.⁶⁹

Wilde explains his contemporaries' paradoxical love of realism in modern works and their romanticism towards older literature as a de-emphasizing of the poet and the poet's individual creation in the late Victorian era. He felt that critics tended to idealize the past, forgetting that it also had its mundane aspects:

We are sometimes apt to think that the voices that sounded at the dawn of poetry were simpler, fresher, and more natural than ours, and that the world which the early poets looked at, and through which they walked, had a kind of poetical quality of its own, and almost without changing could pass into song.⁷⁰

Idealizing the past, allowed critics to compare contemporary art with realistic journalism. The result, according to Wilde, is a celebration of the ordinary and mundane aspects of life and a loss of the mysterious, mystical aspects. The Marxist cultural critic

⁶⁸ Wilde, *The Artist as Critic*, p. 304.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 305.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 355.

Walter Benjamin would seem to agree with Wilde's assessment, for in his article *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he speaks at length of art losing its aura and uniqueness. Benjamin connects a work of art's aura with its original role as a part of ritual religious rites. In an age of secularized communal life and mass-produced art forms like literature and theatre, art loses its connection with the sacred and, in doing so, loses much of its aura. However, some of art's aura remains and the more secularized the society, the greater the desire the masses have to attain a closeness to art. This closeness is a symbolic fetishism whereby owning, seeing and identifying with a work of art conveys a degree of exclusivity, status and power.⁷¹

Wilde also perceives an unacknowledged continuity in popular conceptions of art, by addressing the issues of art criticism and plagiarism in ancient Greece in the essay *The Critic as Artist*. Here, he points out that accusations of plagiarism are nothing new:

The accusations of plagiarism were endless, and such accusations proceed either from the thin colourless lips of impotence, or from the grotesque mouths of those who, possessing nothing of their own, fancy that they can gain a reputation for wealth by crying out that they have been robbed.⁷²

Yet in writing this Wilde is not merely responding to a hypothetical situation, he is alluding to the bitter criticism he had already received from Whistler. Whistler claimed that Wilde was simply profiting by popularizing a conception of art that he had gained from conversations with Whistler. But while there was doubtless a good deal of truth to this accusation, Whistler himself had borrowed his aestheticism from the French

⁷¹ Benjamin, Walter, 'The Work of Art in Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. Richter, David H. (Boston: St. Martin's Press 1989), pp. 574-5.

⁷² Wilde, *The Artist as Critic*, p. 354.

decadents. Furthermore, Wilde's renderings of this philosophy were far more poetic and memorable than Whistler's.

Later in the essay, Wilde objects to how journalists cater to popular tastes and morals, arguing that this aspect of journalism contributes little to society in general:

It is chiefly, I regret to say through journalism that such people find expression. I regret it because there is much to be said in favor of modern journalism. By giving us the opinions of the uneducated, it keeps us in touch with the ignorance of community. By carefully chronicling the current events of contemporary life, it shows us of what very little importance such events really are.⁷³

This passage illustrates Wilde's defence of the individual artist's creativity and their right to comment on society even when these expressions are at variance with popular tastes and morals. He argues that good art has a unity of style only possible through the unified vision of a highly individual personality.⁷⁴ This argument of Wilde's refers to the media's criticism of Browning and Rossetti, whose works were labelled 'obscure literature'. Josephine Guy discusses this in *The British Avant-Garde: The Theory and Politics of Tradition* where she describes how these authors were marginalized because the mass audience of readers found their poetry inaccessible and difficult. Thus many critics in the mid-Victorian years felt that good poetry was characterized by its clarity and accessibility to the general reading public.⁷⁵

This disapproval of Browning's style illustrated how the literary critics' standards of assessment were unable to address writing that was stylistically innovative, just as theatre critics were inclined to disapprove of drama that was not realistic. Swinbourne,

⁷³ Wilde, *The Artist as Critic*, p. 393.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 388.

⁷⁵ Guy, *The British Avant-Garde*, pp. 81-8.

however, fought against the standard, defending Browning by arguing that accessibility to the 'ready reader' was not necessary for good poetry.⁷⁶ Walter Pater also entered this discussion of 'obscure literature' in defending the poet Rossetti, another writer whose writing was characterized by stylistic innovation. This literary debate ensued throughout the 1880s with charges of obscurity being aimed at aesthetic writers, who were often so heavily criticised that some critics maintained that they were all form and no substance.⁷⁷ Other critics opposed aesthetic literary works because they objected to the focus on individualized expression and subjectivity, instead of the popular view that culture played as a civilizing and educating role for the general public.⁷⁸

Publicly Wilde affected a pose of nonchalance regarding the critics in contrast to his essays, such as in an interview in response to a suggestion of whether theatre critics could be bought, he was quoted as saying, 'judging from their appearance, most of them cannot be at all expensive'.⁷⁹ Comments like this one display an elusive playfulness and arrogance that doubtlessly annoyed contemporary critics, convincing them that as Archer was to later express after Wilde's trial, that Wilde had never seriously applied himself as a playwright.⁸⁰ Others like Clement Scott, revelled in Wilde's public disgrace, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, 'Open the windows! Let in the fresh air.'⁸¹

Scott's comment demonstrates how after Wilde's trial, the gay subtext which Craft deconstructs in *Alias Bunbury* had become glaringly conspicuous. Of course it had

⁷⁶ Guy, *The British Avant-Garde*, p. 83.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 81-8.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 91-2.

⁷⁹ Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 104.

⁸⁰ Archer, William, 1 May 1895 in Archer, Charles, William Archer: Life, Work and Friendship (New Haven: 1931) reprint. in Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, p. 201.

⁸¹ Scott in Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 450.

been there before, yet, critics had chosen to ignore it until the flood of negative popular opinion necessitated cancelling the performances of *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* because suddenly these plays were seen as decadent.

In conclusion, then, because neither the discourse in literary nor dramatic criticism took the stylistic experimentation of aesthetic writings seriously it is not surprising that the original genius of Wilde's plays did not receive the acclaim they deserved within his lifetime. The critics of the revivals of the early 1900s, especially Max Beerbohm seemed to have enough perspective to appreciate Wilde's witty style for its witty inverted truisms and elegance that generations of audiences and readers have found captivatingly funny.

But, knowledge always alters an insight, empowers an opinion and shapes an analysis, and the facts of Wilde's private life were to make an indelible mark on criticism. Thus this positive reception was quickly overshadowed by Holbrook Jackson's more popular view that primarily saw Wilde's work through the prismatic influence of his notoriety.⁸² It was a view that was to typify most criticism of Wilde until the mid-1970s. Since then critics have seen an insightful prescience, a knowingness in Wilde's plays that is distinctly modern and indeed this side of Wilde does exist.

However, from Wilde's essays emerges a version of Wilde that has the wit and cleverness of a modern poseur and a serious, earnest side as well, for Wilde was committed to creating a thing of beauty in his poetry, prose and dramatic works, and he was highly engaged by the discourse of literary and dramatic criticism of the period. The essays express an image of Wilde that is tinged by Romanticism and Victorianism, since

⁸² Jackson, Holbrook, *The Eighteenth Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Grant Richards 1913)

in the midst of his witticisms, Wilde does write seriously of such typically Victorian notions as sincerity, devotion and beauty:

A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal. The true critic will, indeed, always be sincere in his devotion to the principle of beauty, but he will seek for beauty in every age and in each school, and will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought or stereotyped mode of looking at things. He will realise himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view.⁸³

This pose of seriousness is one that is not usually associated with Wilde and it is often forgotten or simply disregarded as we modern critics are seduced by the witty, jaded familiarity of his cynical comments regarding the media, theatre critics and public opinion. Yet it is important that in the midst of our post-modern cynicism that we as modern critics remember and appreciate the profound complexity of a writer who is able both to glimpse the light of the future and to capture the dark ambivalence of his age. For in writing earnestly of sincerity, devotion and beauty, Wilde is clearly a Victorian at heart. He is a Victorian with a distinctly post-modern inclination, but a Victorian nonetheless.

⁸³ Wilde in Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 393.

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