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Oscar Wilde Beyond the Page and Stage: Objects, Craft and the Performance of Identity

Oscar Wilde além das páginas e do palco: Objetos, técnica e a performance da identidade

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Abstract: *Oscar Wilde's society comedies are reconsidered through the lens of material culture and theatrical craftsmanship. By treating Wilde not simply as a dramatist but as an artisan who fashioned identities through objects, I argue that props, costumes, and stage conventions in* Lady Windermere's Fan *(1892),* An Ideal Husband *(1895), and* The Importance of Being Earnest *(1895) function as agents of subversion rather than decorative accessories. Far from being ornamental, objects in Wilde's theatre become central to the destabilization of gender, morality, and social truth. Wilde's contemporaries often failed to recognize the radical implications of this dramaturgy, dismissing his epigrams and props as trivial. Yet these very devices anticipate modern theories of performativity and the agency of things.*

Keywords*: Oscar Wilde; Material Culture; Artisanal Dramaturgy; Performativity, Identity; Theatricality.*

Resumo*: As comédias de sociedade de Oscar Wilde são reconsideradas à luz da cultura material e da artesania teatral. Ao tratar Wilde não apenas como dramaturgo, mas como um artesão que forjou identidades por meio de objetos, argumento que adereços, figurinos e convenções cênicas em* Lady Windermere's Fan, An Ideal Husband *e* The Importance of

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Being Earnest *funcionam como agentes de subversão e não como meros acessórios decorativos. Longe de serem ornamentais, os objetos no teatro de Wilde tornam-se centrais para a desestabilização de gênero, moralidade e verdade social. Seus contemporâneos frequentemente não reconheceram as implicações radicais dessa dramaturgia, descartando seus epigramas e adereços como triviais. No entanto, esses mesmos recursos antecipam teorias modernas de performatividade e da agência das coisas.*

Palavras-chave: *Oscar Wilde; Cultura Material; Dramaturgia Artesanal; Performatividade; Identidade; Teatralidade.*

Introduction

To commemorate Oscar Wilde one hundred and twenty-five years after his death is to return to a figure who defies boundaries. Yet what sustains his importance today is not only the drama of his life but the enduring impact of his art. To revisit Wilde in 2025 is to confront an author whose works speak not simply to Irish or British literature but to the very conditions of performance, identity, and artistic creation.

In this article, I propose to read Wilde as an artisan, a craftsman of masks and illusions who used objects—both textual and theatrical—as his raw materials. This artisan identity situates him in conversation not only with dramatists like Ibsen and Shaw but also with figures across the arts: Whistler's orchestrated arrangements, Beardsley's decadent illustrations, and Morris's anti-industrial ideals all illuminate Wilde's own paradoxical embrace of artifice. Placing Wilde alongside these contemporaries clarifies that his project was never confined to the theatre but belonged to a broader aesthetic culture negotiating the value of craft, ornament, and surface.

This perspective brings into focus a dimension of Wilde's art that was not always visible to his contemporaries, but which becomes clear when we examine his comedies of society alongside his critical writings. Wilde's essays, from *The Truth of Masks* (1891) to *The Critic as Artist* (1891), insist upon the primacy of artifice over realism, of illusion over representation. For Wilde, the true artist is not a mirror of life but a shaper of conditions under which beauty may emerge. His plays embody this aesthetic by granting agency to objects: handbags, brooches, letters, flowers, and costumes are not inert props but catalysts of action, engines of irony, and bearers of identity. They do more than decorate the stage: they precipitate misunderstandings, expose pretenses, and

propel characters toward revelations they would otherwise resist. By letting objects shape action so decisively, Wilde not only satirizes a culture obsessed with surfaces but also suggests that identity itself is a performance assembled from things _beautiful, fragile, and always at risk of slipping out of one's hands.

This argument builds on two claims. First, Wilde's comedies must be understood not only as drawing-room entertainments but as laboratories of aesthetic subversion, where the conventional categories of gender, morality, and respectability are destabilized through material means. Second, Wilde's dramaturgy of objects situates him in dialogue with broader cultural and intellectual traditions, from the influence of French melodrama and Ibsenite realism to the critical responses of contemporaries like Bernard Shaw and critics such as William Archer. To foreground objects in Wilde is therefore to situate him beyond national or literary categories, as a figure whose artistry resonates with interdisciplinary debates across performance, aesthetics, and cultural studies.

The analysis will specially focus on the major society comedies: *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). These works mark Wilde's ascent as a dramatist and crystallize his technique of using objects to construct and deconstruct identity. While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890:1891) had already demonstrated his fascination with the power of material things to mediate subjectivity, the stage offered Wilde a unique workshop in which objects could perform in real time before an audience. The handbag in *Earnest,* the serpent brooch in *An Ideal Husband* (1895), the green carnation in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) _all of these are more than accessories. They are artifacts through which Wilde reimagined the relationship between art and life. They are the material engines through which Wilde reimagined the relationship between art and life, exposing the artificiality of the social self while demonstrating how identities are assembled from costumes, gestures, and things.

The critical reception of these comedies further illuminates Wilde's innovation. For some contemporaries, such as Shaw, Wilde's theatre was witty but superficial, "extremely funny" yet ultimately "heartless",[1] and wrote of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) in the *Saturday Review* "[i]t amused me, of course; but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses me, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening". However, critic William Archer praised it by stating that "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" (Beckson,

144). Such responses reveal the degree to which Wilde unsettled conventional expectations of drama. Far from imitating life, his theatre insisted that life itself was a performance, mediated by costume, gesture, and object. Modern critics, from Lawrence Danson to Alan Sinfield, have recognized this, situating Wilde within debates on gender, identity, and theatricality. By revisiting Wilde's comedies through the lens of material culture, we may see how his artistry anticipated contemporary understandings of performativity and object agency, positioning him as a forerunner of modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. Meanwhile, critics of the "Consumerist Wilde" have long emphasized the primacy of the object and material culture in his work. As Paul L. Fortunato argues in *Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde* (2007), Wilde operates within the mass-cultural economy of the 1890s and, consequently, his plays deploy surface, fashion and objects as part of a consumer aesthetic that anticipates modernist concerns with image, commodity and spectacle. In a similar vein, Pierpaolo Martino's *Consumerism, Celebrity Culture and the Aesthetic Impure in Oscar Wilde* (2015) reads Wilde's theatre as rooted in, and reflective of, consumer-culture mechanisms, where objects, fashion and performance collapse the boundary between art and commodification.

To mark Wilde's anniversary, then, is not only to honor his legacy as a writer but to acknowledge his role as a craftsman of identity, whose plays continue to transcend the limits of literature and speak to interdisciplinary fields. In the following pages, I will examine how Wilde's society comedies deploy objects as active participants in the construction of character and the destabilization of social norms, and how this dramaturgy situates Wilde within a transcultural aesthetic that reaches far beyond the Victorian stage.

Wilde as Artisan of Objects and Masks

When *Lady Windermere's Fan* premiered in 1892, Wilde did more than secure a theatrical triumph: he seemed to have explored a dramaturgy in which objects, rather than mere props, became agents of identity. Unlike the historical *Duchess of Padua*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* was set in late-Victorian London, its familiar *milieu* allowing Wilde to invest everyday objects—fans, flowers, cigars, interiors—with irony and subversive resonance. Wilde, who claimed that "the true dramatist shows us life under the conditions of art, not art in the form of life," wrote a play where the stage was alive with things that rivaled characters in dramatic weight.[2]

The most provocative of these objects never appeared in the script. Wilde instructed male audience members at the premiere to wear green carnations, echoing the dandy Cecil Graham's costume. This theatrical flourish turned the house into a mirror for the stage, destabilizing the boundary between audience and performance. Some interpreted the carnation as a queer emblem,[3] others as a jest;[4] its power lay precisely in producing suspicion without resolution

Critics were divided. *The Athenaeum* condemned Wilde's iconoclasm, while Peter Raby has argued that his success lay in tailoring satire for St. James's Theatre patrons—the very social elite mirrored on stage.[5] By implicating spectators in this interplay of appearances, Wilde made viewing itself part of the drama.

The play also relies on archetypes—the dandy and the "woman with a past"—whose identities are inseparable from costumes. Lawrence Danson observes that Mrs. Erlynne's past is written into her style; she is said to have "a dozen pasts, and that they all fit."[6] Wilde subverts convention by granting his fallen woman vitality and mobility, while the dandy is defined by leisure accessories—cigars, flowers, clothing—that elevate style over substance.

At the center is the titular fan, more than an ornament: it functions as a generative object akin to a Whistler canvas, where the arrangement, rhythm, and visual composition carry as much weight as any narrative subject. The fan mediates suspicion and reconciliation, enacting Wilde's belief in the doubleness of truth and appearance. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), objects are never neutral but perform alongside characters, linking theatrical surface to Victorian debates over morality and display. Wilde's dramaturgy thus anticipates later modernist interest in the performativity of things. The fan orchestrates action and attention,[7] mediating suspicion, secrecy, and eventual reconciliation. For example, its misplacement or movement onstage triggers misunderstandings and exposes hidden motives, Lady Windermere's moral anxieties, Lord Windermere's duplicity, and Mrs. Erlynne's protective manipulation are all catalyzed through its presence. In this way, Wilde enacts his belief in the doubleness of truth and appearance: the fan both conceals and reveals, simultaneously aesthetic and functional. More broadly, objects in *Lady Windermere's Fan* are never neutral; they perform alongside characters, signaling social status, moral tension, and personal identity. By granting objects this agency, Wilde links theatrical surface to Victorian debates over morality, display, and the meaning of artifice. His dramaturgy anticipates modernist preoccupations with the performativity of things, suggesting that objects themselves can shape narrative, character, and ethical perception onstage.

If *Lady Windermere's Fan* revealed Wilde's fascination with props, *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) expanded it into a meditation on gender and social hypocrisy. Though less celebrated than *Earnest* or *An Ideal Husband* (1895), this play illuminates Wilde's evolution. Joseph Bristow argues that it dramatizes how signs of virtue and purity deceive as easily as they reveal.[8] Hester, the American Puritan, articulates morality with certainty, yet her rigidity falters when faced with Mrs. Arbuthnot, whose scandalous past unmasks double standards that vilify women while excusing men. Objects—letters, tokens—become instruments of moral negotiation rather than static evidence.

Lord Illingworth, the play's dandy, performs his philosophy through clothes that function as ideological statements.[9] Wilde politicizes costume, demonstrating that accessories can destabilize moral hierarchies. He replaces psychological depth with a theatre of masks, a "workshop of artifice" (Weiss, 2019) where truth and falsehood coexist. His waistcoats, cravats, and rings are not merely decorative; they signal wit, status, and moral ambiguity, announcing both charm and danger to those around him. For instance, when he enters a room dressed with impeccable elegance, he immediately commands attention and authority, shaping others' perceptions before he speaks. Wilde politicizes costume in this way, showing that accessories can destabilize moral hierarchies: the right combination of hat, glove, or cane can confer influence, obscure culpability, or manipulate desire. Psychological depth is often displaced by this theatre of masks in which truth and falsehood coexist. Illingworth's sartorial choices exemplify this dynamic: his outward polish conceals morally suspect intentions, yet simultaneously invites admiration and complicity, demonstrating how Wilde stages identity as a performance mediated through objects.

This play also highlights Wilde's cosmopolitanism. Hester embodies New England morality, creating a cultural dialogue between American Puritanism and British decadence, filtered through Wilde's Irish perspective, which brings wit, irony, and a skeptical, observant stance to the confrontation of moral codes and social performance. Wilde's stage thus becomes a transnational space where objects mediate both personal and cultural identity. The title's irony is clear: the woman deemed insignificant becomes the drama's moral center, her authority emerging through the very artifacts of her shame.

With *An Ideal Husband* (1895), Wilde perfected his dramaturgy of objects, transforming them into agents of action. At the heart of the play lies a letter exposing political corruption, not as mere plot device but as a shifting artifact: incriminating or redeeming depending on its possessor. This mobility exemplifies Wilde's "artisan aesthetics," in which the dramatist refashions

objects until they shape narrative themselves. In Latour's terms, the letter becomes an "actant," influencing networks of power.[10]

The serpent-shaped brooch offers an even more explicit illustration. Initially proof of Mrs. Cheveley's scheming, it is refashioned by Lord Goring into a bracelet, reversing its meaning. Bristow describes this as *the usurpation of tragedy by comedy*;[11] yet it is also an emblem of Wilde's craftsmanship. By literally reshaping an object on stage, he exposes morality as performance, reputations as malleable as jewelry.

Wilde's dramaturgy draws from melodrama, with its revelatory tokens, and *Ibsenite* realism, where letters often portend tragedy. But Wilde departs from both traditions: catastrophe dissolves into irony, revealing a philosophy of theatrical play rather than moral severity. His comedies unsettle moral categories instead of securing them, anticipating post-realist drama's fascination with surfaces.

Contemporary critics often misread this innovation. William Archer praised *An Ideal Husband*'s polish but lamented its "absence of serious drama,"[12] while Shaw saw in Wilde's originality something "no one else could possibly do."[13] Their ambivalence reflects Wilde's challenge to Victorian expectations of depth and realism; his comedies are carefully engineered mechanisms, not psychological studies and, in this case, Shaw's formulation is ambivalent because, although it acknowledges Wilde's distinctive imaginative power, it simultaneously positions that distinctiveness as a deviation from the normative criteria by which Victorian drama was judged.

By centering dramatic tension on brooches and letters, Wilde transforms the stage into a space of interpretation. Viewers, like characters, are drawn into acts of recognition and misrecognition, making theatre an active negotiation of meaning. Butler's later insights into gender performativity resonate here: identity is constituted through repeated, socially legible acts rather than through an essential inner truth. In *An Ideal Husband,* Sir Robert's honour and Mrs. Cheveley's deceit are not disclosed through psychological introspection but are performed through the circulation and manipulation of material things which are enacted through circulating objects, not psychological revelation.[14] Wilde's stage is an artisan's workshop where material things expose the performative nature of identity.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Wilde radicalizes his dramaturgy. Beneath its sparkling dialogue lies an intricate machinery of props. The opening scene hinges on Algernon's cigarette case, which triggers Jack's unmasking; psychological clues are absent—truth is revealed through misplaced property. Bill Brown's concept of the "thing", (an object that asserts its presence

and reconfigures relations), aptly describes this device:[15]

> We begin confronting the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (Brown 2001:4)

Thus, even Algernon's cucumber sandwiches operate as social signifiers, mocking class ritual and propriety. Wilde invests *trivial* objects with cultural weight. Their exaggerated importance within the scene, (treated as if they carried moral and social consequence), anticipates Barthes's view that everyday commodities acquire a 'mythic' significance, naturalizing the values of the culture that invests them with meaning. The sandwiches become mythic not in themselves, but in how the characters' elaborate etiquette turns a trivial item into a marker of social order.[16]

The handbag, however, epitomizes Wilde's comic subversion and is the true emblem of Wilde's 'myth-making'. As an object that anchors Jack's origin story, it functions as a mock -epic relic whose accidental misplacement determines identity, lineage, and desire. Wilde reduces the solemnity of recognition scenes to absurdity, allowing a misplaced accessory to serve as both a literal container and a symbolic cradle—an origin-thing whose narrative power exceeds its material triviality. In doing so, he exposes how Victorian narratives of birth and legitimacy rely on fetishized objects that only appear stable.

Earnest also invites queer readings. Algernon's "Bunburying" allegorizes secretive queer existence, while the green carnation—by then associated with Wilde's circle—coded aestheticism as resistance. Alan Sinfield has shown how Wilde transformed effeminacy and theatricality into acts of cultural defiance.[17]

From a modern[18] perspective, *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be seen as anticipating certain features of absurdist theatre: much like Beckett's boots or Ionesco's chairs, Wilde's seemingly trivial props, (the handbag, cucumber sandwiches, letters), acquire a disproportionate narrative and symbolic weight, transforming ordinary objects into arbiters of identity, social order, and plot. In doing so, Wilde foregrounds the contingency and performativity of meaning itself, anticipating the later modernist and absurdist fascination with the disjunction between human expectation and the world's indifference. What contemporary critics dismissed as frivolity,

then, can be understood as a pioneering aesthetic strategy, one in which the comic manipulation of objects constitutes a deliberate, highly engineered exploration of the instability of social and textual significance.

The Importance of Being Critically Wilde

The reception of Wilde's comedies offers a fascinating case study in cultural misrecognition. Contemporary critics, as we have anticipated in the previous section, armed with the expectations of realism and morality, repeatedly misread Wilde's dramaturgy of objects as superficiality. William Archer, who had championed Ibsen's moral seriousness, wrote that Wilde's comedies failed to qualify as "drama". When reviewing *Lady Windermere's Fan*, he acknowledged Wilde's brilliance of dialogue but missed the absence of serious character development.[19]

They found the object-driven restructuring of dramatic seriousness that Wilde was proposing unsettling. As we have seen, among the critics, it is worth to focus on George Bernard Shaw, who admired Wilde's invention but complained that *The Importance of Being Earnest* lacked "heart." However, Shaw's complaint reveals the gulf between Wilde and his contemporaries: what Shaw saw as deficiency was Wilde's very project. Wilde sought to strip theatre of its moralizing weight and reveal artifice as its essence.

A. B. Walkley, writing in *The Speaker*, noted the ingenuity of Wilde's machinery but faulted it for being repetitive[20] and dismissed it as *clever mechanism without substance*. Such responses, again, reveal their resistance to Wilde's repudiation of psychological realism; for him, theatrical truth inhered not in interior depth but in the play of surfaces and artifice. Eventually, Wilde's reliance on repetition and mechanism—what modern theory would call performativity—was dismissed as frivolity.

This critical incomprehension testifies to Wilde's originality. His contemporaries could only measure him against the standards of realism and morality, failing to perceive that Wilde was offering an alternative dramaturgy, one in which props and epigrams displaced psychology and where identity emerged from surface rather than depth.

Later critics have recovered this radicality in ways that illuminate the mechanisms I have emphasized. Lawrence Danson's *Wilde's Intentions* (1997) (re)situated the comedies as deliberate critiques of Victorian seriousness, insisting that Wilde's "triviality" reflects a coherent philosophical approach to theatrical form—an approach that privileges wit,

surface patterning, and the orchestration of social signs.[21] Regenia Gagnier, in *Idylls of the Marketplace* (1986), further contextualized this strategy within the material and commercial culture of late Victorian society, showing that Wilde's manipulation of objects—letters, handbags, sandwiches—mirrors the commodification and performativity of social identity, which highlighted Wilde's engagement with consumer culture, arguing that his manipulation of objects displayed the commodification of identity in late Victorian society.[22] For Gagnier, these items are not mere props but markers of a culture in which value, status, and personal significance are mediated through material exchange and display, and Wilde's theatrical manipulation of such objects mirrors this social dynamic: by allowing trivial items to determine plot outcomes and signal character, he foregrounds the performativity inherent in everyday social interactions. In other words, the plays stage a miniature marketplace in which objects circulate as signs of power, propriety, and desire, rendering visible the transactional and socially coded nature of identity itself. Engaging with Gagnier in this way illuminates how Wilde's comic surface, (what some contemporaries dismissed as frivolity) serves a deliberate, critical function, interrogating both the material culture of his moment and the social codes embedded within it. Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century* (1994) complements these insights by tracing how Wilde's artifice, effeminacy, and meticulous staging function as strategies of cultural resistance, demonstrating that surface ornamentation and object-driven plot are themselves deeply political. Taken together, these studies reinforce my argument that Wilde's comedies are not mere entertainment: they are structured experiments in the semiotics of objects, the performativity of identity, and the theatrical exploration of social meaning, also central to the emergence of queer modernity, showing how effeminacy and artifice became sites of both stigma and resistance.[23] To cut a long story short, these studies transformed Wilde from a witty entertainer into a theorist of culture.

Even more striking is Wilde's resonance with later theoretical frameworks. Judith Butler's notion of performativity (*Gender Trouble*, 1990) illuminates Wilde's refusal of fixed essence: Jack's identity in *Earnest* depends on a handbag, just as Butler argues that *gender is constituted through repeated socially intelligible acts*.[24] Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (*Reassembling the Social*, 2005) similarly emphasizes the agency of objects, showing how letters, brooches, and fans participate actively in networks of narrative and social meaning. However, while these frameworks help illuminate aspects of Wilde's dramaturgy, they are not fully analogous: Wilde's manipulation of props operates within a satirical, theatrical context and aims to generate comic

effect, whereas Butler and Latour construct philosophical and sociological theories with broader normative or explanatory ambitions. Nevertheless, reading Wilde through these lenses highlights his anticipation of concerns central to modern theory, (performativity, relationality, and the semiotic weight of material objects) positioning him as an unacknowledged precursor whose comedic experimentation prefigures later intellectual developments.

By tracing this reception history, we see how Wilde's comedies transcend their moment. Misread as frivolous in 1895, they now appear as radical experiments in dramaturgy. Their objects anticipate material culture studies; their trivialities resonate with postmodern theory; their secrecy and parody inspire queer performance. Wilde's plays thus not only belong to Irish studies but also enrich interdisciplinary debates in aesthetics, philosophy, and cultural theory.

By privileging the mechanics of language and objects over psychological realism, Wilde was not failing to produce serious drama; he was producing a new kind of drama altogether, one that insisted on artifice as the truth of identity. This misrecognition is revealing. It underscores the cultural distance between Wilde and his contemporaries, many of whom clung to realism or morality as the guarantors of theatrical legitimacy. Wilde's innovation lay precisely in undermining these guarantees. As he himself declared in *The Decay of Lying* (1891), *life imitates art far more than art imitates life*. His comedies demonstrated this by staging identity as a matter of style, repetition, and performance.

The twentieth-century (and twenty-first) revaluation of Wilde has confirmed the brilliance of his artisan approach. He was never bound by the British or Irish stage; his influence radiates across European modernism, American cultural theory, and global queer studies. Reading Wilde today is to witness how his art transcends national and disciplinary boundaries. Even the seemingly trivial—his handbag, his carnation—becomes charged with meaning, simultaneously aesthetic and social, revealing how the smallest object can govern identity, plot, and cultural critique.

To mark the 125th anniversary of Wilde's death, then, is not only to celebrate a national writer or a master of comedy. It is to recognize him as an artisan of identity whose craft operates across cultures and disciplines. Wilde's plays remind us that objects are never neutral, that identities are never stable, and that the theatre is not a mirror of life but a workshop of artifice.

These critical interventions reveal what Wilde's contemporaries could not see: that his comedies were laboratories of aesthetic, cultural, and even political subversion; and we can now see its radical power.

Wilde, the Artisan Against the Machine

The accusation most frequently leveled against Wilde's comedies by his contemporaries was that they were "mechanical." Archer and Shaw alike complained of ingenious contrivance, "machinery" of wit, and dialogue that worked like a clockwork toy rather than a serious drama. But this supposed defect becomes, in retrospect, the very key to Wilde's artistic originality—and to his continued relevance in our own moment.

To call Wilde "mechanical" was to mistake his artistry for lifelessness. In truth, Wilde's theatre embodies the figure of the artisan, not the automaton. His plays do not replicate existing conventions; they refashion them. A handbag in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, or a brooch in *An Ideal Husband*, functions not as a predictable device but as a crafted object whose meaning shifts depending on timing, irony, and context. Like the artisan who carves wood differently each time, Wilde manipulates stage objects in ways that resist standardization. No algorithm could anticipate the absurdity of Jack's entire identity resting on a forgotten handbag. The laugh it provokes depends on the tension between the triviality of the object and the weight of the social categories it dismantles, as we have been anticipating.

In this sense Wilde's dramaturgy aligns with the ethos of the late-Victorian Arts and Crafts movement,[25] which also championed the artisan against industrial uniformity and sought to restore dignity to labor through the revival of handcrafted goods. William Morris and John Ruskin decried the machine's capacity to erase individuality, and critiqued mechanized production celebrating the creative agency of the hand, and emphasizing objects that preserved individuality and meaning. Wilde's critique of mass production resonates here and with the broader Arts and Crafts movement. As Faulkner argues, Wilde's engagement with Morris *extended beyond admiration to active incorporation, attending lectures and internalizing the decorative-arts sensibility*, while Ruskin's critique of industrial standardization informs Wilde's ironic treatment of social roles and conventions (Faulkner, 2002: 25).

For Wilde, craftsmanship was not merely a means of producing aesthetically pleasing objects but a vital vehicle for self-expression and the preservation of individuality, elevating the artisan to the status of artist, because to do so, it is mandatory to have the craftsman's involvement, as Wilde sees it: "[a]ll art must begin with the handicraftsman, and you must reinstate him into his rightful position." [26]

In this context, Wilde's objects function as artisan-crafted vessels of identity, resisting the flattening, homogenizing forces of social expectation and mechanized uniformity. He

argued that the artist and the artisan must be one and the same, creating work that resists the soulless effects of mechanization: "[l]abour which is always honourable [must be made] noble also" (Wilde, *The English Renaissance of Art*, 1882). In articulating this principle, Wilde challenges the supposed opposition between 'utility' and 'beauty', insisting that true production aligns usefulness with aesthetic integrity:

> People often talk as if there was an opposition between what is beautiful and what is useful. There is no opposition to beauty except ugliness: all things are either beautiful or ugly, and utility will be always on the side of the beautiful thing. (Ibid.)

Wilde, though more ironic than didactic, is performing here a defense of the crafted over the manufactured and translated this principle into the theatre: his props—handbags, letters, brooches are carefully crafted instruments through which identity is enacted, maintained, and revealed. Just as handcrafted goods preserve the individuality and agency of the maker against the flattening effects of the machine, Wilde's props, epigrams, and theatrical artifices preserve and perform the identities of his characters.

In *The Decay of Lying* (1891), he goes a step further and, provocatively, declares that "life imitates art far more than art imitates life," (Wilde, 1891: 15) inverting the naturalist ideal of faithful reproduction. For Wilde, art is not mechanical imitation of life but the artisan's shaping of forms through exaggeration, parody, and mask. By rejecting realism, he positioned himself against the prevailing theatrical "machines" of his day: the moral seriousness of Ibsen, the didactic mechanics of Shaw, the sentimental melodramas that filled the Victorian stage.

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, Wilde's artisan identity offers more than a historical curiosity. It speaks directly to the anxiety of artistic production in the age of automation. Walter Benjamin warned in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), that mechanical technologies erode the *aura* of the artwork, by which he meant the singular presence, unrepeatability, and historically embedded *here and now* of the work of art. *Aura*, in Benjamin's sense, is not a mystical property but the unique effect produced by an object's material specificity and the conditions of its appearance. Seen from this perspective, Wilde's use of objects already anticipates this concern decades earlier, as he had already imagined art as dependent on that *aura*—not in terms of originality of subject, but in the originality of craft. The *aura*[27] of Wilde's handbag or cucumber sandwiches posses *aura* not because they are valuable in themselves,

but because their meaning emerges from a singular theatrical moment shaped by Wilde's precise craftsmanship; the prop acquires a unique presence through timing, rhythm, and context, as it lies, precisely, in their singular theatrical deployment, impossible to reproduce mechanically. If reproduced mechanically or delivered without Wilde's shaping or outside his dramaturgical design, the same object would lose the distinctive charge it carries on the Wildean stage. The same line, delivered in the wrong rhythm, without Wilde's artisan shaping, would fall flat.

In this way Wilde provides a model for preserving the artist's status against the machine. Art, for him, was always a matter of construction, of artisan labor applied to surfaces. Far from being threatened by artifice, Wilde elevated artifice to the level of truth. That elevation itself is what secures art against automation: machines can mimic form, but they cannot craft irony; they can generate phrases, but they cannot stage the excess of wit within a cultural context that makes it sting. The artisan identity lies in that surplus—the gap between repetition and invention—that no algorithm can close.

Moreover, Wilde anticipates a problem that plagues us still: the question of authenticity. Nowadays, we are in a time and in a culture where machines generate images, texts, even performances, and so the authenticity of art risks being redefined. In my view, in Wilde's own period, too, as there were strong cultural investments in values associated with realist fiction, high moral expectations and class respectability. Yet Wilde, as we have been arguing, had already begun to question such assumptions. For him, the "authentic" self was always a mask, and the "authentic" play was an act of conscious artifice and, as Wilde himself puts it: "(...) the objective form is the most subjective in matter. Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth" (*The Critic as Artist,* 1891: 34). Authenticity, therefore, is not a matter of inner purity or unmediated essence but of craft: the singular manipulation of signs, props, and performances. By emphasizing the mask as the medium of truth, Wilde inverted the Victorian valorization of inner essence, insisting that authenticity resides not beneath artifice but within the craft of its presentation. He exposed the performativity underlying what his contemporaries considered authentic expression, showing that social roles, conversational manners, and even emotional display were artfully constructed rather than spontaneously 'true'. For Wilde, depth and sincerity were not inherently virtuous; rather, the artistry with which a self is performed, _ through language, gesture, and props_, determines its resonance and effect. Wilde's handbag is not "authentic" in itself because of its material origin; it becomes authentic as an act

of dramaturgical crafting, deployed in a way that no repetition or mechanical reproduction could fully replicate.

This notion of *authenticity-through-craft* allows us to reposition Wilde as a thinker of relevance to ongoing questions about the status of art and originality in any era, including our own. While it may be overstated to claim that we are in a definitive 'crisis of authenticity', contemporary culture increasingly confronts reproducibility through digital media, algorithmic content, and mass production, raising questions similar to those Wilde already explored in his time. Just as Wilde challenged Victorian assumptions that truth resides beneath social masks or in inward essence, he reminds us that what preserves the artist is not originality of substance but originality of form. The artist is not the one who invents *ex nihilo*, but the artisan who fashions the familiar into the strange, the trivial into the profound. Wilde's laughter _epigrammatic, excessive, crafted with a silversmith's precision_ demonstrates the irreplaceable value of that artisanal labor, whether in Victorian theatre or in any context in which the reproducible threatens to flatten experience.

What critics once dismissed as mechanical "machinery" may thus be Wilde's most enduring gift: an artisanal dramaturgy that resists the machine by embracing artifice as truth. His comedies suggest that to defend art in the age of automation, we must reclaim the artisan identity, but not as nostalgic handcraft, but as a mode of creation that thrives on irony, wit, and irreducible singularity. Wilde, more than any of his contemporaries, understood that art survives not by fleeing artifice but by perfecting it.

Conclusion

To mark the 125th anniversary of Oscar Wilde's death is to confront a writer who continues to resist boundaries. Wilde was an Irishman writing for the London stage, a cosmopolitan immersed in French culture, a critic of Victorian seriousness, and a precursor of modern theories of performance and materiality. His comedies, far from being mere entertainments, constitute a sustained meditation on the power of artifice.

By reading Wilde as an artisan, we can see how his comedies are built from deliberately trivial objects: cigarette cases, cucumber sandwiches, fans, brooches, carnations, and handbags. Their very triviality is what makes them potent _ they are small, everyday items elevated into engines of plot, identity, and meaning. These props do not simply decorate the stage; they destabilize assumptions about gender, morality, identity, and social hierarchy. In Wilde's

hands, the theatre becomes a workshop where the artful manipulation of the most mundane objects exposes truths about human behavior, performance, and social convention, redefining theatre by stripping it of psychological depth and moral instruction, and by insisting that surface, style, and repetition were not distractions but the essence of art.

To celebrate Wilde today is therefore to acknowledge him as an artisan whose craft reshaped theatre and culture. His comedies remind us that identity is performative, that objects act, and that artifice is the deepest form of truth. In this Wilde stands alongside visual artists like Whistler and Beardsley, aesthetic philosophers like Pater and Morris, and later theorists from Benjamin to Butler who likewise wrestled with the power of surfaces, repetitions, and things. His art thus transcends not only Irish and British literature but also the limits of literature itself, marking Wilde as a thinker whose influence radiates across theatre, philosophy, design, and cultural theory.

In confronting the mechanization of culture (whether in the mass production of goods, the standardization of social roles, or the reproducibility of artistic forms), Wilde emerges as a prescient thinker of craft, individuality, and performative identity. His comedies demonstrate that the "machine" cannot replicate the singular artistry of the stage: the timing of a line, the precise deployment of a prop, the epigrammatic turn of wit, all require a human hand and an imaginative mind. Trivial objects such as a handbag, a cucumber sandwich, a brooch, become carriers of social, moral, and aesthetic significance precisely because they are handled with deliberation, embedded in context, and crafted with intentionality. By resisting the flattening effects of mechanization, Wilde shows that art, identity, and meaning are the products of craft, unique, singular, and fundamentally human. In an age increasingly dominated by reproducibility and automation, Wilde's theatre reminds us that what endures, _the aura, the wit, the artistry_ is precisely what cannot be mechanized.

In trivial handbags and cucumber sandwiches, Wilde reveals the contingency of all that society holds sacred. With laughter, he dismantles seriousness; with surface, he reveals depth. That is Wilde's enduring gift: to craft art that remains, in all its wit and complexity, radically alive.

Notes

[1] Bernard Shaw wrote, "[Wilde] was disgusted with me because I, who had praised his first plays handsomely, had turned traitor over *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Clever as it was, it was his first really heartless play." This text can be found as an appendix titled *Memories of Oscar Wilde* by George Bernard Shaw in *Oscar Wilde, His Life and Confessions* (1916), Oscar Wilde's biography by Frank Harris.

[2] Gagnier, Regenia. *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (New York: Garland, 1986), 163.

[3] Hichens, Robert. *The Green Carnation*, London 1894; Dominic Janes, Oscar Wilde Prefigured: Queer Fashioning and British Caricature, Chicago, 2016, pp. 202-205.

[4] Anon., The Man about Town, in: Country Gentleman (5 March 1892), p. 334. 41

[5] *The Athenaeum*, 27 February 1892; Peter Raby, *Wilde's Comedies of Society* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 145.

[6] Danson, Lawrence. *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in His Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 28.

[7] Krishna, Ishita. *Changing the subject: encountering objects and objectness in modernist plays, 1890s–1950s*. Diss. University of York, 2024.

[8] Bristow, Joseph. *Dowdies and Dandies: Oscar Wilde's Refashioning of Society Comedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 59.

[9] Ibid., 60

[10] Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 63.

[11] Bristow, Joseph. *Dowdies and Dandies*, 65.

[12] Archer, William. Review of *An Ideal Husband*, *Pall Mall Budget* (10 Feb. 1895), in Karl Beckson, ed., *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970), 173.

[13] Shaw, George Bernard. "An Ideal Husband," *The Saturday Review* (1895), in *Our Theatres in the Nineties*, vol. II (London: Constable, 1932), 41–44.

[14] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 33.

[15] According to Brown, objects are entities whose purpose, placement, and function are already legible to their users. *Things*, by contrast, emerge when these entities interrupt that legibility, when they malfunction, resist use, exceed their assigned social meanings, or confront us in ways that unsettle our habitual understanding. Bill Brown's notion of "thingness" clarifies the mechanics at work: when objects malfunction, mislead, or exceed their ordinary social role, they disrupt received systems of meaning, exposing identity itself as contingent and performative. Integrating these perspectives, Wilde's comedies emerge as carefully engineered studies in the semiotics of objects, where narrative causality, social critique, and the play of identity are enacted materially and theatrically rather than psychologically. Brown, Bill, "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001): 1-22.

[16] Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957).

[17] Sinfield, Alan. *The Wilde Century* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 3–22.

[18] Even though Wilde's comic treatment of trivial objects and props predates (high) modernism, his investment in the disproportionate narrative force of these trivial objects anticipates the modernist interest in material details found later in other writers such as Marcel Proust and James Joyce. Whereas Proust's madeleine or Joyce's talismanic everyday objects open onto interior temporality and consciousness, Wilde's cucumber sandwiches and, more pointedly, the handbag expose the social and semiotic mechanisms through which identity is constructed. Read through Barthes or, more rigorously, through Bill Brown's 'thing theory,' Wilde's objects reveal how the slightest material fragment can destabilize the systems of value and meaning that Victorian culture sought to naturalize, anticipating the modernist fascination with the epistemological and symbolic charge of trivial objects, though he employs this dynamic for comedic and satirical ends rather than for the exploration of consciousness.

In addition, when it comes to the theatre, the absurdist playwriters such as Beckett or Ionesco are the ones to be considered, as it is explained here.

[19] Archer, William. Review of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *World* (21 Feb. 1892), in Karl Beckson, ed., *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970), 139–41.

[20] Walkley, A. B. "The Importance of Being Earnest," *The Speaker* (16 Feb. 1895), in Beckson, *Critical Heritage*, 182–84.

[21] Danson, Lawrence. *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in His Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 47–65.

[22] Gagnier, Regenia. *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (New York: Garland, 1986), 157–68.

[23] Sinfield, Alan. *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 3–22.

[24] This analogy works **metaphorically**: the handbag *performs* Jack's identity in the play, akin to how repeated acts produce gender in Butler. However, Wilde's intention and context are theatrical, humorous, and socially satirical; Butler's is theoretical, aimed at normative critique.

[25] As Peter Faulkner stated in his *William Morris and Oscar Wilde*: "By 1882 Wilde was already well enough known to be included in Waiter Hamilton's pioneering book The Aesthetic Movement in Enlgland, alongside Ruskin, Rossetti and Morris. In the same year Wilde visited the United States and Canada, giving flamboyant lectures on 'The English Renaissance of Art', 'The Decorative Arts' and 'The House Beautiful', which he repeated in Britain in 1883. Faulkner, Peter. *William Morris and Oscar Wilde*. JWMS 14.4 (Summer 2002): 25-40: 26.

[26] Wilde, Oscar, Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, (London: Collins, 2003), p. 913

[27] We can say the handbag possesses Benjaminian *aura* because, within the performance, it acquires a unique presence that cannot be detached from the specific theatrical situation Wilde creates. Benjamin defines aura as the *"unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be,"* (Benjamin, 1968: 222:3) meaning that an object attains aura when it becomes singular, embedded in a particular time, place, and set of relations that cannot be perfectly replicated. On the Wildean stage, the handbag is not a generic accessory but the decisive hinge of Jack's identity, timed to a precise rhythm of revelation and absurdity. Its meaning depends on the unique constellation of Wilde's language, the audience's anticipation, the actor's delivery, and the exact moment of disclosure. This situational singularity is what grants the prop *aura*: remove it from Wilde's dramaturgical arrangement, and it becomes merely a handbag. Returned to the performance, it becomes something irreducible.

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