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Introduction

Oscar Wilde: 125 Years On

When Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) arrived at the Albemarle Club in London on 28 February 1895, the porter handed him a calling card left by John Sholto Douglas (1844–1900), the Marquess of Queensberry, bearing the now-infamous inscription: "To Oscar Wilde posing somdomite [sic]". Queensberry had written this note in furious protest against Wilde's relationship with his son, Alfred "Bosie" Douglas (1870–1945), a connection increasingly exposed to public scrutiny in a society where sexual relations between men were not only stigmatised but also objectively criminalised. Wilde promptly sued Queensberry for libel, pressing him to face trial at the Old Bailey, but this decision soon proved rash: what began as Wilde's attempt to defend his reputation ultimately initiated a chain of legal confrontations that culminated, on 25 May 1895, in his conviction for "gross indecency" and his sentence of two years' imprisonment with hard labour.

Wilde's incarceration, most notably at Reading Gaol, was marked by acute emotional and physical suffering: there, he learnt of his mother's death and of his wife's departure to the continent with their children and finally saw his health gradually deteriorate into the frailty that would characterise the final years of his life. Upon his release on 19 May 1897, Wilde left England at once, travelling through Italy and France before settling at the Hôtel d'Alsace in Paris, then a modest building on the city's northern side. In the last years of his life, he renewed contact with some of his closest friends, among them Bosie and Robert Ross (1869–1918), but he would soon die afterwards in his hotel bedroom, on 30 November 1900, most likely of meningoencephalitis, an inflammation probably connected to the hardships of his time in prison.

Between the early 1880s and the mid-1890s, Wilde produced a body of work that defined his public persona as both an artist and intellectual and which fuelled his rapid ascent to a new celebrity status—from his lecture tours in North America in 1882 to the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1890 and 1891. These writings were by no means universally

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admired—Dorian Gray, in particular, elicited notoriously virulent criticism—, but the scandal of these trials finally transformed Wilde into one of the most contested figures of the fin-de-siècle. Time, however, has decisively altered Wilde's standing as a cultural icon: his works now occupy a central place not only in Irish and British literary traditions, but also in broader discussions on artistic defiance and subversive identity in literary traditions worldwide.

The breadth of topics explored in "Oscar Wilde: 125 Years On" pays testament to this pervasiveness of Wilde's literary legacy—thematically, temporally, and geographically.

Emese Melkó's "In the Heart of the Wildean Pomegranate: Beauty, Passion and Faith in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales" recognises how Wilde reinterprets the pomegranate—a fruit rooted in both classical and biblical traditions—as a motif that simultaneously evokes sensuality and spirituality. Her argument is that Wilde explores this image far more deliberately than it is normally assumed, reshaping it as an allegory that intertwines the eroticism of art with the passion of Christ. Bárbara Jarén, in "Oscar Wilde Beyond the Page and Stage: Objects, Craft and the Performance of Identity", reconsiders Wilde's society comedies through the lens of material culture and theatrical craftsmanship, emphasising his continuing relevance to stagecraft today. Wilde's pioneering deployment of props, costumes, and stage conventions, often unsettling to the conventional expectations of 19th century drama, in fact anticipates modern and postmodern theories of agency and performativity.

Eszter György's "Like a Live thing: Uncanny Interart in Oscar 'The Harlot's House'" interrogates Wilde's boundary-defying talent for bending established and contemporary artistic theories and conventions in pursuit of his often subversive oeuvre. This study shows how Wilde, in this strikingly decadent poem, draws on avant-garde European literary innovations while anticipating Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) concept of the uncanny (unheimliche) by more than three decades. Ray O'Neill, in his "Wilde Psychoanalysis: Oscar and Sigmund Architects of Modern Homosexualities", builds on a similar perspective by considering the still controversial relationship between Wilde's understanding of sexuality—including his own—and the multiplying discourses of sexology and sexual identity in the late 19th century. Clearly, this is a moment in European history marked by intense polemics surrounding both the notion and the concept of homosexuality, a concern that also recurs in the theories of figures such as Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), Max Nordau (1849–1923), and Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902), researchers whose work would prove highly influential on psychological theories developed in the century to come.

Ioana Constandache's "The Dorian Gray Effect: Legacy, Scandal, and the Cult of the Aesthetic" looks again at Wilde's only novel and reconsiders the ways in which he served as a kind of nexus through which the theories, philosophies, movements, and fads of the period passed and were refracted by his own character and his own ideological and aesthetic positions. This essay reiterates how Wilde's personality and his bold intentions with this narrative—notably permeated by erotic overtones—continue to captivate scholars, readers, critics, and the wider public nearly 150 years after its first publication. Ana Carolina Vilalta Caetano, in "The Christ as Man: The Secular Jesus of Oscar Wilde's De Profundis and Richard Bruce Nugent's 'Tree with Kerioth-Fruit'", identifies fascinating parallels between Wilde's exceptional prison letter and Nugent's innovative retelling of the gospel. The censorious atmosphere of Victorian London, within which Wilde achieved his greatest successes, appears to share little with the cultural, social, and artistic explosion that ripped through the New York neighbourhood of Harlem in the early part of the twentieth century and sparked the Harlem Renaissance; yet Caetano recognises that a clear line of succession can be traced from Wilde's themes and preoccupations—particularly those related to sexuality and spirituality—to those of Nugent, a writer, illustrator, and popular bohemian who would later become a central figure in this movement.

Elena Canido Muiño, in "What Art Is to Us: Exploring the Uses and Meanings of Ekphrasis in The Picture of Dorian Gray", examines a range of fascinating themes and techniques that Wilde develops and deploys in the construction of this controversial novel. Muiño traces the history of ekphrasis back to its origins in the ancient world—a tradition with which Wilde was deeply familiar—and shows how he reworks it to striking effect in his narrative: while other writers of his period employed this technique with notable success, he went further by rendering protagonist and portrait interchangeable, thereby allowing the boundaries between art and life—and between art and death—to become more fluid and fecund to creation. Maureen DeLeo, in "'He is a perfect horror!': "Freakish" Bodies and Behaviours in Oscar Wilde and Twentieth Century Literature", finally draws attention to the importance of the physical body for Wilde in a period when freak shows and sideshow exhibitions exploited fascination with disability and corporeal difference. DeLeo links Wilde's work to that of Pádraic Ó Conaire, Patrick Pearse, and Flannery O'Connor, writers who similarly sought to trouble or challenge the privileged position ordinarily accorded to the supposed normality or naturalness of the "whole" body.

Fábio Waki, in "An Unpublished Letter by Oscar Wilde Found in Brazil", narrates how he recognised the significance of a letter from Wilde to leading women's suffrage campaigner Dame Millicent Fawcett (1847–1929), held in the archives of Biblioteca Nacional in Rio de Janeiro. Waki explains how this previously unpublished letter provides key evidence of Wilde's support for leading Victorian campaigners for equality, particularly in his role as editor of The Woman's World. Crucially, he also outlines the active role played by Brazilian writers and collectors in introducing Wilde's literature into Brazilian culture, over which it has had formidable impact since the late 19th century.

Given the prevalence of the politics of identity in contemporary cultural debate, it is significant that one of the major arguments in Oscar Wilde Studies over the last three decades has been about the apparent divergence between "Wilde the Irishman" and "Wilde the Cosmopolitan"; however, there is no need to choose between these versions of Wilde, or even to treat them as if they are necessarily in zero sum tension with each other.

For example, the image of a young Oscar Wilde discoursing on Irish mythology to a gathering of Irish and British intellectuals at the Howth Carn in County Dublin in 1878 at the very start of his public career may seem very pertinent to establishing Wilde as a national figure. Yet this image can be paired with the similarly resonant glimpse of Wilde in an American bar in Paris in 1900, at the very end of his life, deep in conversation about contemporary art and culture with, and at times holding court over, a dozen or so Latin American expatriates—including the literary critic Enrique Gómez Carrillo (Guatemala), the poets Guillermo Valencia (Colombia), Rubén Darío (Nicaragua), and the writer Manuel Díaz Rodríguez (Venezuela).[1]

Perhaps, as he conversed with his Latin American friends and acquaintances, Wilde may have remembered his inclusion of musical instruments from South America in Dorian Gray's extraordinary collection of objects and artifacts in Chapter XI of the novel. The narrator explains that Dorian "collected together from all parts of the world the strangest instruments that could be found", including "earthen jars of the Peruvians" and "flutes of human bones such as Alfonso de Ovalle heard in Chile and the sonorous green jaspers that are found near Cuzco", "the long clarin of the Mexicans", and "the harsh ture of the Amazon tribes".[2] Including these objects may signal Wilde's interest in, as well as his knowledge and appreciation of, global culture. Dorian's collection mania, however, is probably best seen as a toxic example of what is sometimes called "cultural appropriation": he shows no interest in being changed or transformed by his encounter with materials from radically different cultures

to his own, preferring instead simply to possess them and then to hide them away as part of his insatiable appetite for things.

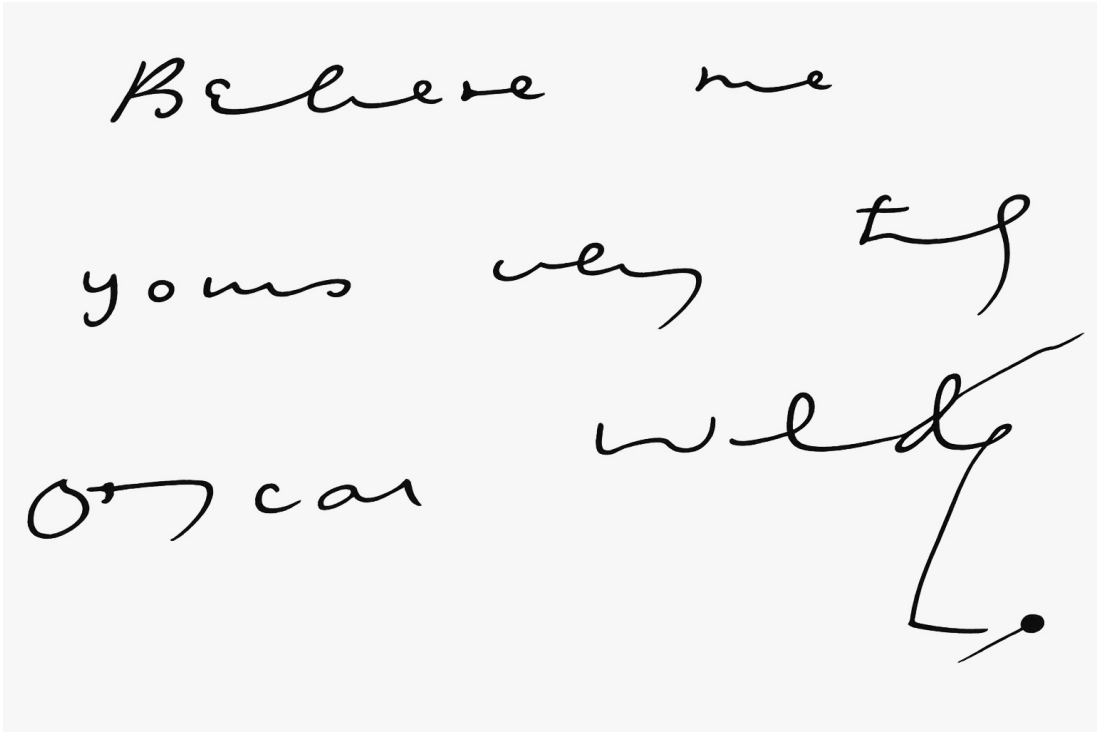
Scholars, therefore, need to be more sensitive to Wilde as a "multiform creature", equally at home in Irish culture and in a range of global cultures, and avoid drawing fast distinctions between these two expressions of a complicated and creative individual. The essays gathered in this special issue take full heed of the plurality of Wilde's identity and the multiplicity of his interests, situating him in both entirely familiar and completely new contexts.

Fábio Waki, Eleanor Fitzsimons, and Jarlath Killeen

Notes

[1] For a brief discussion of this event, see Ana Rodríguez Navas and Nathalie Bouzaglo, 'Oscar Wilde's Forgotten Legacy in Latin America', Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies, 28: 3 (2019), 321. See also Roy Rosenstein, 'Re(dis)covering Oscar Wilde for Latin America', Rediscovering Oscar Wilde, ed. George Sandulescu (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1994), 348–61.

[2] Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 114.



Articles

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In the Heart of the Wildean Pomegranate: Beauty, Passion and Faith in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales

No coração da romã de Wilde: Beleza, paixão e fé nos contos de fadas de Oscar Wilde

Emese Melkó

Abstract: *Oscar Wilde's fiction is known for its use of richly imaginative worlds, where vividly descriptive imagery and ornate language embody the spirit of aestheticism. Within this highly decorated aesthetic framework, the allegorical layers of meaning – art, passion, and Christianity – emerge through recurring symbolic elements that lead the reader towards deeper moral and philosophical dimensions of the narratives. Among these elements, the pomegranate motif stands out as a particularly unique and unifying image which, despite its classical, biblical, and aesthetic connotations, has received surprisingly little critical attention. This paper examines how the pomegranate's multilayered associations – e.g. sensuality, suffering, separation, or salvation – illuminate the central concepts across Oscar Wilde's "The Nightingale and the Rose," "The Happy Prince" in his first collection,* The Happy Prince and Other Tales *(1888), as well as "The Fisherman and His Soul" in his second volume,* A House of Pomegranates *(1891). By tracing the development of the pomegranate motif throughout each narrative, I intend to uncover the 'core' of Wilde's stories, demonstrating how the allegorical layers of beauty, love, and faith manifest and unfold from one to the other, transforming the passion of art into the Passion of Christ.*

Keywords: *Oscar Wilde;* Happy Prince and Other Stories*; Victorian literature; Aestheticism; Allegory; Pomegranate.*

Resumo*: A ficção de Oscar Wilde é conhecida pelo uso de mundos ricamente imaginativos, onde imagens vividamente descritivas e*

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linguagem ornamentada incorporam o espírito do esteticismo. Dentro dessa estrutura estética altamente decorada, as camadas alegóricas de significado — arte, paixão e cristianismo — emergem através de elementos simbólicos recorrentes que conduzem o leitor a dimensões morais e filosóficas mais profundas das narrativas. Entre esses elementos, o motivo da romã destaca-se como uma imagem particularmente única e unificadora que, apesar de suas conotações clássicas, bíblicas e estéticas, recebeu surpreendentemente pouca atenção da crítica. Este artigo examina como as associações multifacetadas da romã — por exemplo, sensualidade, sofrimento, separação ou salvação — iluminam os conceitos centrais em "O Rouxinol e a Rosa", de Oscar Wilde, "O Príncipe Feliz", na sua primeira coleção, O Príncipe Feliz e Outros Contos *(1888), bem como "O Pescador e a Sua Alma", no seu segundo volume,* Uma Casa de Romãs *(1891). Ao traçar o desenvolvimento do motivo da romã ao longo de cada narrativa, pretendo revelar o «núcleo» das histórias de Wilde, demonstrando como as camadas alegóricas de beleza, amor e fé se manifestam e se desenrolam de uma para a outra, transformando a paixão pela arte na Paixão de Cristo.*

Palavras-chave: *Oscar Wilde,* O Príncipe Feliz e Outros Contos; *Literatura Vitoriana; Esteticismo; Alegoria; Romã*

"Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope."
(Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

Aestheticism and Fairy Tales

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854–1900), an Irish-born, decadent, "extreme aesthete" (Ellmann 143), was an outstanding novelist, essayist, dramatist, and a poet in the Late Victorian Period. His works reflect his genius and wit with their sophisticated and ornate language that was unmistakably Wilde's trademark. One of the most famed and best known pieces of his is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) that even he himself defined as "an essay on decorative art" (Frankel 24), but was labelled by the contemporary British press as a "'vulgar,' 'unclean,'

'poisonous,' 'discreditable,' and 'a sham'" novel since it concerned latent homoerotic desires and "gross indecency" (Frankel 4–8). Still, it is considered as an integral part of the Aesthetic Movement flourishing at the end of the nineteenth century, in the 'decadent *fin de siècle*' era.

Art and literature were seen as a medium for defining and monitoring ethical rules and roles, where the representation of 'rewards' for performing noble deeds, and 'punishment' for any immoral act against strict ethical codes, was at the very centre of the exemplary demonstration of proper and virtuous behaviour (Pantić 406–407). Aesthetes, on the other hand, considered art and morality to be distinct, asserting that any artistic creation should remain devoid of didactics as its sole aim is the mere production and appreciation of beauty, as it should be made for nothing but to evoke pleasure in its audience. Thus, those who preferred the traditional Victorian norms saw the last decade as a degeneration – which is, associated with Aestheticism. The era was pervaded by a sense of disillusionment (with the Victorian materialistic and realistic mindset) of decadent artists, who, as a consequence, introduced new approaches (e.g. to literature, visual arts or interior design) and touched on topics such as perversion, sensuality, hedonism, or morbid lusts, placing a quite excessive focus on style and appearance (Boyiopoulos et. al. 1).

The *l'art pour l'art* (or "art for art's sake") movement of French origin was introduced to England by Walter Pater, who had paved the way for the notion with his notorious book, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). It is regarded as "the manifesto of Aestheticism" and the "golden book" of Oscar Wilde (Ellmann 93). According to Pater, art is a subjective concept and, *ipso facto*, cannot be defined; its value lies in the individual (sensory) experience. He proposes that it should be the critic's responsibility to formulate their own perceptions with the aim of making sense of a piece of art. In his "Conclusion," Pater encourages the reader to entirely submit oneself to as many sensations as possible, to 'feast the eyes' on the beauty and pleasure of an artistic creation. "The love of art for its own sake" brings "the highest quality to [one's] moments," satisfying the desire for beauty, therefore the sole success of our lives is to maintain this ecstasy, "to burn always with this gemlike flame" (Pater 197–99). Still, Aestheticism was most propagated by Wilde, who in his "Preface" to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*[1] summed up the purpose of art, best described in his renowned quote: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all" (3–4). He was explicitly radical in his claims about art's amorality, being beyond the boundaries of morality and immorality.

These views even feature in Wilde's other literary works, such as in his fairy tales. His two collections, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). A *fairy tale* is traditionally a literary form, and colloquially refers to a "widespread form of fiction for children" including classics, like *The Arabian Nights*, Perrault's *Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (1697), Andersen's *Fairy Tales* (1835), or *Winnie the Pooh* (1926) by A. A. Milne (Cuddon et al. 120) or *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children's and Household's Tales*). In written form, a fairy tale is usually a prose narrative about a hero's or a heroine's fortunate or unfortunate (magical) adventure, experience of supernatural events, enchantments etc., culminating in a "happily ever after" while it can often be an "interpretation of human nature and psychology" (Cuddon et al. 266). On the other hand, in his study, Jack Zipes argues that although "the literary fairy tale for children developed as a constitutive conservative element of the civilizing process;" there were always "dissenters" who have challenged its norms by parodying the genre or reshaping its themes; Zipes mentions Oscar Wilde as an example who introduced progressive ideas into his tales (304-314).

Allegory and *Mise en Abyme*

In this paper, I argue that in Wilde's tales, the allegorical layers of the narrative – namely art, passion, and Christianity – form a nested structure, with each tale, and even the allegorical layers unfolding within each other, meanwhile all embraced by a larger aesthetic framework, that is, they are to be read and approached from a distinctly artistic perspective. According to J.A. Cuddon, in an allegory, a story or image operates on several layers of meaning, with "one or more secondary meanings of varying degrees of complexity," while also being closely related to parables and fables – therefore, it likewise can be regarded as an "extended metaphor," which is often employed for moral, satirical, and educational reasons (21). In his fairy tales, Oscar Wilde repeatedly applies this literary device, and even the names of his characters frequently allude to the central topic of a certain tale.[2] The common names of his protagonists, such as Happy Prince, or Selfish Giant imply particular characteristics (happiness, selfishness), yet as the stories progress, it becomes obvious that they are all meant for deceiving the reader for ironic purposes.

At the same time, these tales are also approachable from another, novel perspective, namely *how* the allegorical layers of meaning are placed since they are, indeed, masterfully intertwined by Wilde. The artistic technique of *mise en abyme*[3] offers a way to visualise this

idea. As explained by Gregory Minissale, *mise en abyme* refers to "the process of representation within representation" and the involvement in "the art experience" (qtd. in Tsang 103). Furthermore, regarding Jacob Emery's study, the *mise en abyme*, or "text-within-the-text," is thought to have hermeneutic value due to how it can reveal, or more accurately, depict "the framing text" (314).Therefore, in the forthcoming paragraphs, I intend to investigate and illustrate the aforementioned layers in the analysis of the tales titled "The Nightingale and The Rose," The Happy Prince" and "The Fisherman and His Soul".

The Wildean Pomegranate

Oscar Wilde loved breaking conventions nearly as much as he adored art, which extended to his unique approach to Christianity, where he famously called Christ "the supreme Individualist" (1999, 73). As John Allen Quintus argues, Wilde "sought to appreciate aesthetic and psychological possibilities inherent in each [Christianity and Christ] rather than espouse religious principles or theological lessons" (515). Furthermore, Quintus observes that Wilde not only considered Christ as a "realised man" who rebelled against the social norms and "became what he wanted to become," but also identified him as the "precursor" of Romanticism in the field of art and "the supreme artificer" in history (515).

Wilde really saw Christ as an artist whose life embodied beauty and sacrifice, infusing spirituality with creative expressions. Consequently, he regarded these phenomena as "capable of transforming human beings into sentient people" who exhibit both compassion and autonomy, making them "conscious of art and culture and aware of the importance of their souls" (515–16). Wilde's works emphasise these aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities, placing at the heart of a Christ-like life (alongside love and forgiveness), a journey to self-development, self-reliance, and self-expression.

This idea highlights that living such a lifestyle means embracing creative self-manifestation, since the world is full of opportunities for fulfilment where one must remain "entirely and absolutely himself" (Wilde 1999, 69). Thus, my analysis of the allegorical layers of meaning begins with "The Nightingale and The Rose" tale which most beautifully portrays the bird's sacrifice for love and art, where her devotion transforms into a living passion, culminating in the creation of a marvellous work of art. The Nightingale – seeking to help the Student find a red rose so that he may ask his beloved to dance at the ball – must press her breast against the Rose-Tree's thorn

and sing all night, letting it pierce her heart so that her life-blood should colour the rose red. She willingly makes this lethal sacrifice, declaring that "Death is a great price to pay for a red rose" but "Love is better than Life" (*HP* 14).

As the Moon rises, the Nightingale presses her breast against the Rose-Tree and sings all night long with the thorn going deeper inside her chest to fulfil her mission. The tale contains quite explicit descriptions of a sexual intercourse, including the suggestion of orgasm, unfolding under the three songs of the Nightingale. The first song she sings is about "the birth of love of a boy and a girl," resulting in the "pale rose" to grow on the "topmost spray" of the Tree (*HP* 16) – a fairly straightforward depiction of a pre-ejaculatory stage of male arousal. Then, as her song about "the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid" (*HP* 16) intensifies and the rose deepens in colour: the characters are getting closer to their metaphorical orgasmic stage. When the Rose-tree's thorn pierces through the Nightingale's heart – implying the reach of the sexual climax –, for she sings about the everlasting, "divine love" (Willoughby 27) "of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb" (*HP* 16).

As the rose acquires its final colour, the Nightingale simultaneously begins to lose consciousness, bringing the tale to its symbolic climax – the last stage of orgasm. The rose on the Tree responds to the Nightingale's "voice," trembling "all over with ecstasy" (*HP* 16), but as a result, the Nightingale dies.[4] In this context, her death can be taken allegorically, evoking the French concept of *la petite mort* (the little death), which is defined as "the sensation of orgasm as likened to death" (Wingrove 228). This "momentary unconsciousness" also reflects Sigmund Freud's distinction between our two drives; life instinct (*Eros*) and death instinct (*Thanatos*), both of which play a role in the sexual act as well, being united and perfected at its climax (Antal 69) – which is passionately portrayed in Wilde's story.

The Nightingale's last breath sends her angelic song soaring, and her divine artwork is finally finished, yet the creation of this splendid red rose ultimately falls short of the Student's purpose. The Professor's daughter refuses the flower, stating that it does not match her dress and that she has already accepted the invitation of the Chamberlain's nephew, who offered her real jewels. Being so outraged, the Student throws the rose into the street, where a cart tramples it, destroying the hitherto outstanding flower; the Nightingale's gorgeous work of art. He then affirms that Love is foolish and "not half as useful as Logic" (*HP* 17), contradicting the Nightingale's earlier view of Love's importance. This ending echoes the aesthetic credo that no artwork should serve any purpose other than existing for its own sake (other than giving pleasure to its beholder).

For the Student, the rose is merely a tool to win the girl of his dream, rather than something to be admired for its beauty. The rose ultimately had to perish, for otherwise it would have been tainted by the unworthiness of the two human characters, who fail to appreciate either art or true love.

In the tale, the pomegranate motif shows its significance since it symbolises richness and wealth (Pendlebury 128). Yet Wilde places Love above all the luxuries, claiming that it "is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the marketplace" (*HP* 11). This should be viewed within the aesthetic framing: love opens the opportunity to create the most exquisite work of art. In "The Nightingale and The Rose," the splendid rose symbolises the Nightingale's masterpiece that born from the fusion of her three songs, while also representing her artistic sacrifice. She literally pours her whole heart into its creation, embedding her three songs within each other – and within her heart.

The Nightingale's death not only symbolises her passion for art but also evokes the imagery of Christ's Passion, aligning the bird's suffering and self-sacrifice with the broader context of the kind of redeemer. Guy Willoughby argues that this tale functions as "an allegory for the all-consuming love and commitment required of Christ's most notable imitator, the artist" (27). Willoughby suggests that the "thorn-crown" of the Nightingale's suffering blossoms into the red rose – the "venerable symbol of love, beauty, and perfection" – that becomes the artwork in which the creator's own martyrdom is embodied (27). Moreover, as Jarlath Killeen claims, there is another parallel between the Nightingale's death and the Crucifixion of Christ, since both gave their lives and shed their blood for humanity, "for a beautiful idea the world was clearly not ready for" (46).

"The Happy Prince" tale delves even further into the themes of sacrifice and compassion, using the pomegranate motif as a representation of purified and beautified celestial ascension. It is Wilde's earliest fairy tale (1885) and the eponymous story of his initial collection, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), which has been "a perennial favourite of children," and is still celebrated in the 21st century (Wood 157). The narrative opens with the embellished description of the Happy Prince, who is "gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold," for his eyes he has "two bright sapphires," and "a large red ruby" glows "on his sword-hilt" (*HP* 1) – a striking example of Wilde's use of ornate and richly decorative language that also sets the aesthetic frame of his allegorical narratives. The Prince's beauty and happiness are very much adored (like an idol) and envied by the citizens who wish to have a life like the one he lived. Yet the statue-Prince is quite unhappy, as he has been set up so high he can clearly see

"all the ugliness and all the misery" of his city, and though his heart "is made of lead" yet he "cannot chose but weep" (*HP* 3). This image recalls Christ, who beholds both the sinfulness of humanity and its sufferings (e.g. poverty, hunger, grief, pain, and death). In the Gospels there are three notable moments when Jesus weeps, each revealing his humanity and compassion for affliction, much like the Prince: (1) at the tomb of Lazarus, where – though he knows he will raise him from the dead – he shares in the grief of those who mourn (John 11:35); (2) as he approaches Jerusalem, foreseeing its destruction despite the peace and salvation he offers (Luke 19:41–44); and (3) in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he prays in anguish before the crucifixion, showing his human fear and agony (Hebrews 5:7).

Out of compassion and generosity, the Happy Prince, with the help of his loyal Swallow, gives away his splendour piece by piece. While he sacrifices his *outward* beauty and sight to bring joy to the suffering, both the Prince and the Swallow discover their *inner* beauty and undergo a process of spiritual beautification as the Swallow even notes feeling warmth after performing a good deed. The 'transformed' Prince – blind and pale from sacrifice – parallels Jesus carrying the cross, both bearing humanity's miseries and guilt upon themselves. Although the Happy Prince emerges as a Christ-like figure, the Swallow, his devoted helper, mirrors John, Christ's "beloved disciple" (John 13:23; 19:26), who remained faithful even at the foot of his cross – another parallel portrayed in the tale. The Swallow first settles at the Prince's feet, where their friendship begins, and finally dies there after a farewell kiss, marking the end of their earthly bond. The feet thus serve as both the burdened beginning and the salvific ending, recalling the symbolic role of Christ's feet in adoration (Matthew 28:9, when the women worshiped Him after the Resurrection), suffering (Psalm 22:16; Luke 24:39–40, pierced during the crucifixion), forgiveness (Luke 7:37–50, the story of the sinful woman), purification (John 13:4–15, the Last Supper), and redemption – key themes throughout the story as well. Additionally, the Swallow can also function as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, bringing gifts, love, joy, consolation, peace and guidance to those in need, while also representing loyalty, self-sacrifice, service, and spiritual transition.

After the bird's death, the leaden heart of the Prince breaks with sorrow. With these sacrifices their mission is finally completed; as Christ said: "*Tetelestai!*" (John 19:30).[5] Both the Swallow and the Happy Prince eventually manage to beautify their souls and undergo an aestheticised spiritual improvement, which transform their selfishness into selflessness (as in "The Selfish Giant"). Initially, they only pursue their own interest: the Swallow abandons his

friends for love, and the formerly-human-Prince sought various pleasures for himself. Then, they start to follow a (Wildean) Christ-life which ultimately results in their entry to God's "garden of Paradise" (*HP* 10), and Wilde's Eden of Art.

The pomegranate motif also appears in the narrative in the description of the young playwright student, with his lips being as "red as a pomegranate" (*HP* 6). In this sense, it symbolises beauty, decadence, sin, death, and even resurrection (Pendlebury 128): while Wilde presents the blossoming, fresh, young boy – with a "brown and crisp" hair and "large and dreamy eyes" (*HP* 6) – he also reveals his excessive admiration of (young) male beauty. The most explicit reference to homosexual love is the depiction of the kiss on the lips between the two main male characters. In his study, John-Charles Duffy sets the "devoted friendship" model of male love from Plato's *Symposium* as an example, which concerns the great affection between two men (330). Plato makes a distinction between *Uranian* (heavenly) and *Dionian* (earthly) forms of love, placing male-male attachment in the former and heterosexual love in the latter. Duffy also supports this ideal of devotion with a biblical parallel that: "[g]reater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13) – indicating that a "devoted friendship" is "superior to heterosexual love" (330). Thus, since both the Swallow and the Happy Prince die but eventually unite in Heaven, their powerful celestial friendship belongs to *Uranian* love (Duffy 330). Wilde portrays this type of affection as an allegorical expression of the most genuine form of love: it is ultimately purified, elevated, and perfected within a heavenly or spiritual setting. Thus, based on this, the tale's allegorical layers of meaning are mirrored *mise en abyme*: the figure of the Happy Prince as being an admired artistic creation (first layer); the self-sacrificing devotion both of the Swallow and the Prince, which serves as an emblem of human passion and affection for genuine love (second layer); and the ultimate ascension of both characters to God, which depicts the narrative from the perspective of Christian salvation and forgiveness (third layer) – all placed within an aestheticised framework.

Finally, my examination concludes with "The Fisherman and His Soul," the darkest and the most complex of Wilde's fairy tales that explores the motifs of art, Passion, (homo) sexuality, pleasure seeking, redemption, and spiritual transformation, imbued with aestheticised biblical symbolism *mise en abyme*. Here, Wilde depicts a troubled relationship between the human body and soul, focusing on the corrupting potential of bodily and hedonistic lusts. This tension emerges in the young Fisherman's affection for the little Mermaid, whom

he pulls out of the sea. The man demands she sings for him every time he summons her. Mesmerised by her angelic voice, the Fisherman falls in love with her and proposes marriage. The Mermaid's singing offers aesthetic pleasures for the Fisherman, whose fascination and love for her song could be read as a figurative attraction to beauty and art, rather than (or alongside) literal romantic desire. A similarly powerful artistic manifestation occurs in Wilde's "The Nightingale and The Rose," where the Nightingale's enchanting song culminates in her ultimate sacrifice for the sake of Love. This action also mirrors the Fisherman's passion (for art), though – unlike the Nightingale's – his actions are not motivated by selflessness, yet he still sacrifices his life (and soul).

Still, the situation is far more complicated: the Fisherman has a soul, while the Mermaid, like all Sea-folks, does not – so she cannot love him unless he renounces it. The Fisherman seeks the Priest's help to get rid of his soul, calling it a useless part of him since it cannot be seen or touched. The Priest chides him, claiming that the soul is "the noblest part of man" and "more precious than" anything else, a divine present that must be preserved (*HP* 94). Yet the Fisherman, bewitched by the desired Mermaid, declares he would even surrender Heaven itself for her love. For the Priest, however, such passion is "vile," and the soul-less Sea-folks are merely "pagan things" whose temptations must be resisted. Being rejected, the Fisherman attempts to sell his soul at the market, but the merchants find it worthless, valuing only his body (*HP* 96). In this scene, Wilde dramatises the conflicts between earthly pleasures and divine values, emphasising the struggle between vain human wishes and attaining salvation in the afterlife, thereby highlighting the moral and spiritual cost of the Fisherman's desires. He would sacrifice eternal life for love, or to put it even more bluntly, he would sell his soul to the devil.[6] He turns to the young Witch, who eventually agrees on the condition that the "pretty boy" dances with her on top of the mountain at the full moon. In this framing, dancing represents another form of artistic expression that emphasises physical desires besides transcendental meanings (like singing – cf. the Mermaid's or the Nightingale's songs). Both the Mermaid and the Witch are depicted as artist-like characters, but while the Mermaid's singing has a spiritual significance, the Witch's dance appeals more to the Fisherman's physical and sensual drives and needs.

The dancing-ritual – with strong sexual connotations, such as the illustration of horse riding, jumping, the Witch's hot breath, the intensity of the dance etc. – soon takes a darker turn when "some evil thing" starts to watch them from the shadows. Duffy interprets the Satanic figure as a typical Victorian dandy: "a man dressed in a suit of black velvet, cut in the

Spanish fashion" (343). When the woman asks the boy to worship "Him" (Wilde's symbolic 'god of aestheticism [and homosexuality]'), the Fisherman instinctively makes the sign of the Cross and utters the forbidden "holy name," causing the demonic figures to flee. Before the Witch escapes, she reveals the secret of the soul-removal method: the Fisherman must cut away his shadow with a knife of green viper's skin and turn his back to the moon, for the body's shadow is the body of the soul.

Once separated, the Fisherman's Soul – capitalised from that moment onward (from "soul" to "the Soul") and becomes independent from its former owner – asks for the man's heart so it may remain untainted by the world's cruelty. Yet the Fisherman refuses, as his heart already belongs to his beloved Mermaid. The rejected Soul promises to return to the shore every year and call out the Fisherman's name to see if he has changed his mind about reuniting, and to tell him his travels. These decadent adventures dramatise moral and spiritual decline, for without a good/beautiful heart the Soul cannot live an ethically appropriate, Christ-like life, which is another manifestation of *mise en abyme*. He becomes capable of wickedness and descends into sin – such acts that the Fisherman, whose heart remains full of Love, could never commit. Each place the Soul visits evoke not only the seven deadly sins – pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, sloth – but also idolatry, malice, murder, stealing, all portrayed through the seduction of beauty, joy and abundance (the aesthetic framing).

One example is the "Mirror of Wisdom," which the Soul can only approach by passing through three chambers, the first two of which contain idols. While seeking "god," he instead discovers a mirror, "set on an altar of stone," that reflects "all the things that are in heaven and on earth" promising omniscience and priestly worship to its beholder (*HP* 109). The "Mirror of Wisdom," functioning as a false idol, allegorically represents beauty, selfishness and the temptation to elevate oneself to a "god"-like status: where the Soul can pass through the allegorical chambers (layers) of art, passion, and corrupted spirituality *mise en abyme*. The Soul attempts to seduce the Fisherman away from his lover with such fascinations, but in vain: selfless-love still triumphs over self-love. Having no heart with which to love, the Soul cannot understand such intimacy; he only speaks the language of physical pleasures possessed during his journey; rooted in hedonism.

On the other hand, Duffy notes that the Mermaid's lack of legs also implies the absence of female genitalia (in human terms), which makes her unable to satisfy the Fisherman's needs – metaphorically referred to as *dancing* (333). Therefore, yielding to temptation, he follows

his Soul, only to be led into acts of cruelty, such as striking a child and slaying a merchant. Significantly, these demonic deeds are accompanied by recurring pomegranate images ("Street of Pomegranates," "garden of pomegranates"), which here symbolise sin, death, homosexuality, and sensual pleasure (Pendlebury 134). For instance, the "Street of Pomegranates" evokes a brothel-like setting, where the eunuchs are quite suspiciously portrayed as homosexuals, e.g. "one of them drew aside the captain of the guard, and in a low voice whispered to him. The other kept munching scented pastilles, which he took with an affected gesture out of an oval box of lilac enamel" (*HP* 113). In the pomegranate garden, the climax of their fall into sin is the murder of a merchant who provided them with accommodation.

Surrendering to the allure of dance and the sensual attraction symbolised by the pomegranate, the Fisherman finally allows his corrupt Soul to return to his body. Yet this permissive behaviour conceals a subconscious betrayal: by accepting his Soul, the Fisherman excludes the Mermaid from his earthly life. Only through her death does he recognise the selfishness of his desires, and realise that "Love is better than wisdom, and more precious than riches, and fairer than the feet of the daughters of men" (*HP* 125) Here, it is worth noting that another interconnection can be observed with "The Nightingale and The Rose". The Nightingale's last song before her death about "the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb" (*HP* 16) is perfectly illustrated in the Fisherman's story with the lover's purification and ascension. The Fisherman even echoes the Nightingale's love philosophy: Love is better than life and wisdom. Upon this revelation, his heart becomes so entirely filled with love that it breaks – much like the broken leaden heart of the Happy Prince, or the Nightingale's heart pierced by the Rose-Tree's to fulfil her mission – allowing the Soul to reunite with him once more, not through life, but through death. This breaking of the heart recalls the piercing of Christ's side upon the cross (John 19:34), where love is likewise revealed through suffering and death, mirroring *mise en abyme* the sacrificial pattern within Wilde's tale.

Although the Fisherman and the Mermaid lie dead in each other's arms, the Priest orders them to be buried in an unmarked grave in the corner of the "Field of the Fuller," as they are considered cursed. The field itself carries biblical connotations: fullers (washermen) 'full' (thicken) or clean (whiten) clothes (Isaiah 7:3; 36:2; 2 Kings 18:17) which can allegorically represent a gradual spiritual purification. The Fisherman (with his sinner soul) and the Mermaid (without a soul) go through a period of Purgatory, where they advance through

layered states of cleansing before ascending to Heaven. Allegorically, this also mirrors *mise en abyme*, where one layer (the artistic: soul-beautifying process) opens into another (moral and Christian: redemption from sins) – art into passion, Passion into Christianity. Three years later, the Priest discovers the altar adorned with sweet-scented "white flowers," which troubles his senses and makes him talking not of the "wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love." These flowers are "from the corners of the Fuller's Field," from the lover's tomb, signifying their purified spirits and divine reconciliation, representing that those who were once forsaken can ultimately find themselves in God's embrace.

Conclusion

Throughout his stories, Oscar Wilde guides the audience towards the innermost secret of his pomegranate motif, which is none other than the beauty of the core, the greatness of the soul by being magnanimous. The fruit of *passion/Passion* is what this pomegranate symbolises; it holds all the great pleasures and pains, the elevated feelings of delight and burning passions.

Wilde in "De Profundis" (1905) quotes Christ who calls the soul "God's Kingdom" and compares it "to a pearl" or a "tiny seed" (cf. pomegranate seeds) that he can find in everyone. For Wilde, the soul is the "treasury-house" of the body, containing "infinitely precious things" (1999, 255), yet we can recognise our own only when we shed "all alien passions, [...] and all external possession" (1999, 73). Still, such self-recognition is possible for those who can possess a beautiful heart – the very core of the human body, and the quintessential source of our capacity to live and love.

With the use of allegories, Wilde emphasises the most prominent theme one should focus on: the transformation of human love into the passion of art and the Passion of Christ. In both "The Nightingale and The Rose" and "The Fisherman and His Soul" the word *Love* is capitalised and places the whole focus of the narratives on the subject. At the same time, in all these three tales, the broken heart functions both literally and symbolically within Wilde's broader artistic frame. In the first tale analysed, "The Nightingale and the Rose," the Nightingale's heart is pierced by the thorn, using her life-blood as the very substance as the paint that begins colouring the rose, while the bird's angelic voice serves as an allegorical paintbrush, a medium that helps finishing the marvellous masterpiece, the magnificent red rose. This artistic layer connects to the next tale, "The Happy Prince," where the Prince's leaden heart eventually cracks as he witnesses his beloved friend's death: a moment of passion

that completes the tale's movement from aesthetic beauty to self-sacrificial love and redemption – the aforementioned concept of the transformation of the passion of art to the Passion of Christ. And last, but not least, in "The Fisherman and His Soul," the Fisherman's divided heart after his separation from his lover and from his soul, ultimately finds purification, and then enters God's eternal Paradise of Love.

During his imprisonment in Reading Gaol, Wilde continued to affirm this connection between art, passion and spiritual transformation. As the following stanza from "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898) makes clear, he regarded the broken heart as the very condition through which divine grace may enter:

> Ah, happy they whose hearts can break
> And peace of pardon win!
> How else may man make straight his plan
> And cleanse his soul from Sin?
> How else but through a broken heart
> May Lord Christ enter in? (1999, 137)

In his critical essay, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891) Wilde elaborates on Christ's message, and how to interpret it: "'Know Thyself' was written over the portal of the antique world. Over the portal of the new world, 'Be thyself' shall be written. And the message of Christ was simply 'Be thyself.' That is the secret of Christ" (1999, 255), and, by extension, this is also the very secret that lies at the heart of the Wildean Pomegranate.

Notes

1 In later textual references see as "Preface."
2 Allegory is also indicated by common names written in capitalised letters.
3 *Mise en abyme* literally means "placed in the abyss" in French.
4 The connection between the Nightingale and the Rose-tree contradicts the narrative's initial portrayal of heterosexual relationship. The Nightingale is gendered as female ("she/her"), while the Rose-tree is ungendered ("it") and their symbolic "sex act" is a "non-reproductive" penetration as they also belong to different species, moreover it is even unproductive since in the end no one values the rose (Duffy 334).
5 Tetelestai or τετέλεσται in Greek means "it is finished" or "paid in full", referring to the completion of redemption, the victory over sin and death (Manning 2022).
6 For John-Charles Duffy, the Priest's rhetoric shows likeness to "anti-homosexual religious rhetoric," where the Priest's actions function as a reference to the Victorian mainstream who also excluded homosexuality from blessedness – regarding them as "unnatural" creatures (just like the Sea-folks) (342).

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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

Bárbara Zubieta Jarén

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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"Like a live thing": Uncanny interart in Oscar Wilde's 'The Harlot's House' (1885)

"Como uma coisa viva": Interartes inquietantes em 'The Harlot's House' (1885) de Oscar Wilde

Eszter György

Abstract: *This paper aims to study Oscar Wilde's 'The Harlot's House' (1885) from an intermedial perspective to decipher its psychological complexity. As the very epitome of Wildean decadent intermedial poetics, the poem deserves special attention. 'The Harlot's House' exemplifies the boundary-crossing ways Wilde draws on pre-existing and contemporary artistic conventions and theories to channel his often-subversive views on various aspects of contemporary cosmopolitanism, such as nocturnal vagabondage, urban prostitution and metropolitan alienation. I discuss the ways the poem deploys metamusic (Wolf 723), dance, theatricality and pre-cinematic strategies to convey its psychosexual complexity, capturing the uncanny phantasmagoria of urban modernity. Furthermore, studying the chronotopos of the night in the poem will help me establish a link between Ernst Jentsch's 1906 notion of intellectual uncertainty (Jentsch 224) accompanying the poem's intermedial thematization of the marionette and Sigmund Freud's 1919 concept of the uncanny (Freud 84). 'The Harlot's House', via its uncanniness, shows how the text's intermedial poetics allow for an "uncertain" reading of Wilde's poem in which the poetic voice becomes unstable and multivalent.*

Keywords*: Oscar Wilde; Poetry; Intermediality; Marionette; Uncanny .*

Resumo: *Este artigo tem como objetivo estudar The Harlot's House (1885) de Oscar Wilde sob uma perspectiva intermidiática a fim de decifrar*

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sua complexidade psicológica. Como epítome da poética intermidiática decadente de Wilde, o poema merece atenção especial. The Harlot's House exemplifica as formas transfronteiriças pelas quais Wilde mobiliza convenções e teorias artísticas pré-existentes e contemporâneas para expressar suas visões frequentemente subversivas sobre vários aspectos do cosmopolitismo finissecular, como o vagabundear noturno, a prostituição urbana e a alienação metropolitana. Discuto as maneiras pelas quais o poema emprega metamúsica (Wolf 723), dança, teatralidade e estratégias pré-cinemáticas para transmitir sua complexidade psicossexual, capturando a fantasmagoria inquietante da modernidade urbana. Além disso, o estudo do cronotopo da noite no poema ajudará a estabelecer um vínculo entre a noção de incerteza intelectual de Ernst Jentsch (1906) (Jentsch 224), que acompanha a tematização intermidiática da marionete no poema, e o conceito de o inquietante (unheimliche) de Sigmund Freud (1919) (Freud 84). The Harlot's House, por meio de seu caráter inquietante, mostra como a poética intermidiática do texto possibilita uma leitura "incerta" do poema de Wilde, na qual a voz poética se torna instável e multivalente.

Palavras-chave: *Oscar Wilde; Poesia; Intermidialidade; Marionete; Inquietante.*

Introduction

"Life cheats us with shadows, like a puppet-master. We ask it for pleasure. It gives it to us, with bitterness and disappointment in its train" Wilde writes in 'The Critic as Artist' (*Complete Works* Vol IV, 167). Accordingly, I aim to study Oscar Wilde's 'The Harlot's House' to elucidate the ways the corporeal self-expression of the puppet renders the disquieting familiarity of modernity. I aim to highlight how Wilde combines the most corporeal and the most abstract forms of art; that is, the materiality of dance and literature in 'The Harlot's House'. Furthermore, I shall argue that 'The Harlot's House' is a multimedial poem, since it exemplifies the ways Wilde draws on pre-existing and contemporary artistic conventions and theories to channel his often-subversive views on various aspects of contemporary cosmopolitanism, such as nocturnal vagabondage, urban prostitution and metropolitan alienation. Studying the *chronotopos* of the night in the poem will help me establish a link between Ernst Jentsch's notion of intellectual

uncertainty (Jentsch 224) accompanying the intermedial thematization of the marionette in the poem and Freud's 1919 concept of the uncanny.

Recent scholarship has revealed the poem's rich intertextuality. Pascal Aquien has pointed out the significance of Théophile Gautier's '*Bûchers et Tombeaux*' ('Tombs and Funeral Pyres', 1852) and Charles Baudelaire's '*Danse Macabre*' (1857) as primary French sources of inspiration (160). According to Kostas Boyiopoulos, the poem reproduces the "morbid persiflage" of '*Mademoiselle Squelette*' (1883) by decadent poet Maurice Rollinat (Boyiopoulos 1095). Jamil Mustafa has explored various literary sources "haunting 'The Harlot's House'" (60), including transatlantic intertexts, such as Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death' (1842). However, the wealth of the poem's intermedial allusiveness and its relationship with the poem's "uncanniness" remain relatively underestimated.

According to Édouard Roditi, "the perfection of this poem is marred" by the extensive but vague use of dance imagery (29). Conversely, I shall suggest that the interart relations between poetry, music, dance, theatre and even pre-cinematic strategies are part of the poem's prosodic virtuosity and make the poem unique within Wildean aesthetics. In fact, the above art forms fruitfully cooperate in creating a unique artistic event, enabling the reader to perceive the poem as a profound and "holistic mental experience" (Grishakova 20). The poem elicits a heteromedial illusion in the recipient's mind. It is the poem's heteromedial dimension that accounts for the media combination it displays.

Given Wilde's attested familiarity with Heinrich von Kleist's seminal 1810 essay 'On the Marionette Theatre' (Girdwood 84), I analyse the poem as a literary interface between bodily performance and poetry. Within the shifting *fin-de-siècle* landscape of dramaturgic practices, Wilde's unique incorporation of the puppet-theatre into his poem not only signposts a pre-cinematic era, but it also fosters contemporary reception of 'The Harlot's House' in visual art, as epitomized by Althea Gyles's iconic 1904 illustrations which exemplify media transformation. When studied in conjunction with Gyles's illustrations, the structure of the poem and its intermedial transposition usher the reader into the shocking, uncanny experience of metropolitan alienation.

Death in the birth of 'The Harlot's House'

'The Harlot's House' was first published in *The Dramatic Review* in April 1885, and belongs to Wilde's later poetic impressions; a less prolific but all the more accomplished decadent phase of his poetic production (Gardner 5). "The Oscar of the first period is dead", Wilde said reputedly when, returning from America, he decided to conquer the French capital city in a quest for international fame (Frankel 88). He threw himself into the social, intellectual and homosexual circles of *fin-de-siècle* Paris. "Paris was a city of sex and sin" (Sturgis 282), where Wilde could openly live his homosexual life, since the *Code Napoléon* legalized sex between men, largely due to the influence of second consul and arch chancellor Jean-Jacques-Régis de Cambacérès (Sibalis 80). "While in London one hides everything, in Paris one reveals everything [...]; the lowest dive interests me as much as the most elegant café," Wilde remarked (qtd. in McKenna 223).

'The Harlot's House' was written after Wilde's Paris honeymoon with Constance Lloyd, when Wilde was entering literary salons of the most elite circles on the *fin-de-siècle* cultural scene of the French capital. During his honeymoon, Wilde was frequenting brothels in company of Robert Sherard. They visited "the show-places of the Paris Inferno- Père Lunette's and Château Rouge, -which everybody who wishes to know the depths of darkness which exist in the City of Light goes to see (McKenna 75). In the "Salle des Morts", "Oscar was horror-struck" (McKenna 76). This was the favourite place of those who were "seeking unhealthy emotions" (Sherard *Unhappy Friendship* 96), and Wilde is thought to have been inspired by this spectacle as in 'The Harlot's House'.

> Stretched out in every posture of pain and discomfort [...], all in filthy and malodorous rags, the sleepers of the Room of the Dead, with their white faces, immobile and sightless, showed indeed like corpses (Sherard *Unhappy Friendship* 96-97).

According to Nicholas Frankel, it was Marie Aguétant, a well-known Parisian *demimondaine* later to be murdered, who might have inspired 'The Harlot's House'. Wilde picked her up at the Eden Palace and eventually "succumbed to her allurements" (Sherard *Real Oscar Wilde* 155). Sherard's anecdote reveals further details regarding Wilde's equivocal attitude towards the affair with Aguétant and the danger lurking behind carnal desires: "I left him talking to her, [...], but the next day when I called on him at the Hôtel Voltaire, the first

thing he said to me was: 'Robert, what animals we are'" (Sherard *Real Oscar Wilde* 155). Adopting a different approach, critic Florina Tufescu sees the principal biographical sources of the poem in the tragic death of Wilde's half-sisters Mary and Emily Wilde whose crinoline dress caught fire while they were waltzing past the fireplace at Drummaconor House (55). Despite various biographical approaches to the poem's actual genesis, there is one important motif in common in all the above presumptions, that is, the theme of death at the very heart of 'The Harlot's House'. The representation of the death dance and Wilde's preoccupation with morbidity and depravity indeed contextualise the poem within the framework of decadence.

According to Jerome Buckley, 'The Harlot's House' is Wilde's best decadent poem (26). The poem's decadent traits include its "ravishment to the point of [...] horror" (Hanson in *Oscar Wilde in Context* 154) and its singularly arcane, recondite vocabulary. Wilde's occult predilection for the grotesquely *Poesque* arabesques also features the effusively bizarre cacozelia of 'The Sphinx' (1894). The lexical field of dance recurs, in a dreadful *promenade*, along with the *Doppelgänger* theme, in the obsessively circular hallucinatory climax of Wilde's literary swan-song, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). The extravagance of the tropes used and the morbidity of the overall themes exposed in 'The Harlot's House' are crucial decadent characteristics. The poem is about metropolitan alienation, depicting a phantasmatic vision of the nocturnal city. Loitering down the moonlit street, the speaker and his companion suddenly catch the false tune of the *"Treues Liebes Herz"* ("Faithful Dear Heart"), most probably a deliberate misattribution to Johann Strauss. Tempted and seduced by the uncanny shadow play across the blind, the speaker's unnamed companion eventually enters the "house of Lust" (line 30), leaving him alone, speechless in the night street.

'The Harlot's House' is not merely a metropolitan poem; it is also a cosmopolitan one. The focalizer and his companion may be loitering down the Haussmannian *grands boulevards* of *fin-de-siècle* Paris. They might as well be passing by a brothel while roaming in the labyrinth of a nineteenth-century London underworld. Neither spatial *deixis* nor geographical indications are specified. The poem merely sketches the nightmarish spatial binaries between inside and outside, the temporal dialectic between night and day and the crucial thematic oppositions between life and death. Nevertheless, the poem's cosmopolitan dimension is undoubtable, given its intermedial references to the Viennese waltz, the Spanish saraband, the Italian *quadriglia*, the impenetrable mystery of a gas-lit Victorian London, and through its uniquely Frenchified lexis, the contemporary French capital. Therefore, the poem's carefully concealed

cosmopolitan indicators anchor it within the vague, endless complexity of the labyrinthine metropolis. "Whether the cosmopolis makes the deracinated cosmopolite, or the cosmopolite makes the dislocated cosmopolis is a question to which more than one answer may emerge" (Rose 15). The setting is a nocturnal urban milieu where the objects of the rootless *flâneur*'s scrutiny are very often marginalized elements of contemporary society, including the denizens of the East End London and the figure of the urban prostitute. As Buckley posits, "the vignette of the prostitute anticipates a shift from a bright Aesthetic art for art's sake to the darker shadows of Decadence" (26). The representation of urban prostitution also gained significance in an earlier poem titled '*Impression du Matin*' (1881) where the figure of the urban sex-worker is aestheticized through the evocation of her "lips of flame and heart of stone" (line 16) by means of a metonymical shift of self-conscious aesthetic representation (Gyorgy 98). 'The Harlot's House' also evokes the theme of prostitution, offering a much more sombre and more dynamic, kinaesthetic engagement with the experience of estrangement in that context. As Megan Girdwood observes, "Wilde suggests parallels between the harlot's sexual currency and the dance of the puppet, with its automatic gestures and responses" (85). The question arises as to how to establish a link between the poem's dramatic verbal performance and its psychological dimension. The key lies in the interart relations between the poem and the performing arts, which enable Wilde to make the reader perceive the apparitional uncanny as a sense of alienation so characteristic of nocturnal vagabondage within the modern metropolis.

The uncanny poetics of uncertainty

The privileged position of the speaker (and his companion) in contemplating the horrid scene from outside places them in an incognito state. Casting a voyeuristic glimpse across the blind, the lyrical "I" is a *flâneur* looking at a dramatic spectacle. Masking reality with shadows, blurring the boundaries between sleeping and wakefulness, and exploiting the affordances of various media, Wilde conjures up the artifice of the uncanny. The uncanny, as I will show, takes various forms in the poem: repetition compulsion, our relationship with the realm of the dead, the *Doppelgänger* (recurrent in Wildean writing), the mechanics of death-driven sexuality as an allegory of contemporary urban (queer) prostitution and the unreliability of the speaker endow the composition with an extreme psychosexual complexity.

The uncanny is often thought to elude any kind of cognitive mastery. Mark Windsor defines it as an emotional state of "object-directed anxiety" (55), and this will gain particular

significance in my reading of 'The Harlot's House'. The uncanny, according to Freud's seminal 1919 essay, is an extraordinarily strong sensation of fear and even helplessness triggered by the recurrence of something familiar that has been repressed and thus alienated from the self for a long time. In other words, the uncanny arises from the return of the repressed, that is, phenomena associated with childhood beliefs or primitive stages of human development (Freud 94). There is a significant factor that Ernst Jentsch, whom Freud himself would cite in his essay, emphasizes: the significance of leaving the reader in intellectual uncertainty about whether they are confronted with living, flesh-and-blood human beings or mere automata.

> In storytelling, one of the most reliable artistic devices for producing uncanny effects easily is to leave the reader in uncertainty as to whether he has a human person or rather an automaton before him in the case of a particular character. This is done in such a way that the uncertainty does not appear directly at the focal point of his attention, so that he is not given the occasion to investigate and clarify the matter straight away; for the particular emotional effect [...] would hereby be quickly dissipated (Jentsch 224).

As Jentsch further argues, "intellectual certainty provides psychical shelter in the struggle for existence" (227). In 'The Harlot's House', neither the focalizer nor the reader gets a firm grasp of the scene unfolding behind the blind-obscured window. Through the use of expressions suggesting Jentschian intellectual vacillation as a key element in evoking the literary artifice of the uncanny, Wilde's poem showcases the spectral:

> Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed
> A phantom lover to her breast,
> Sometimes they seemed to try to sing.
>
> Sometimes a horrible Marionette
> Came out, and smoked its cigarette
> Upon the steps like a live thing (lines 19-24)

The unsettling hesitancy behind the threefold anaphoric repetition of the adverb of frequency "sometimes", the bizarre accumulation of verbs and infinitives as in "seemed to try to sing" (line 21), the eerie, oxymoronic conceit "like a live thing" (line 24) and the use of the strangely impersonal possessive adjective "its" (line 23) draw the reader immediately into the thrilling

realm of spectrality. Although the reification and desexualized depiction of the prostitute may suggest a misogynistic undercurrent, I argue that the speaker, and, by extension, Wilde, paradoxically adopts in this poem a traditional Victorian male bourgeois viewpoint precisely with the aim of undermining it. Through the mechanistic representation of the lifeless puppet devoid of gender, Wilde repudiates the dehumanizing aspects of life in the modern city. The language of progress is thus used to denigrate the paradoxically destructive forces behind metropolitan existence.

The figure of the lifeless automaton in 'The Harlot's House' is crucial to deciphering the relationship between the enactment of dance and the disquieting effects created by the moonlit, nocturnal metropolis. Freud studied 'The Sandman' by E. T. A. Hoffmann as the literary epitome of the uncanny. In the short story, the beautiful doll Olympia is an "unhomely" character. As Lucia Ruprecht observes,

> the super-human or non-human perfection of statuary and automata is also uncannily close to the 'perfect' regime of a haunted psyche that is pathologically obsessed with compulsive re-enactments of a traumatic scene. Or to use Freud's terms [...], man turned into automaton falls prey to the destructive forces of the death drive (Ruprecht 13).

In Hoffmann, uncanny forces interfere with love at several points of the narrative, as a result of which Nathanael takes his own life, due to the uncertainty of existence (Svenaeus 242). In 'The Harlot's House', we have a loiterer, who, despite her partner's warning, chooses to take the path of an irreversible transition from love to lust, from life to death. The poem's uncanny aspects arise from the focalizer's encounter with the dead in the unsettling milieu of the nocturnal metropolis.

Elisabeth Bronfen points out that Freud does not explain the primordial significance of the night setting in the experience of what he calls the uncanny (52). In fact, in his etymological approach to the uncanny, Freud does make quick mention of the motif of the night, when citing the Latin expression *"intempesta nocte"* ("in the dismal night hours" (Freud 85)). He also makes reference to silence, solitude and darkness as factors that often contribute to an uncanny effect by eliciting repressed infantile complexes. The poem's nocturnal setting is fundamental, since it allows for a permissive space where repressed impulses may resurface again and again. 'The Harlot's House' is the nightmarish equivalent of the nocturnal paradise evoked in 'The Garden of Eros' (1881). 'The Garden of Eros' can be read as a clandestine sexual encounter

within the nocturnal *locus amoenus* of a paradisiacal setting. In a state of reverie and Greek love, floating on the Freudian boundaries between sleeping and wakefulness, the narrator sets out in a quest for "the hidden secret of eternal bliss" (line 22).

> The hidden secret of eternal bliss
> Known to the Grecian here a man might find,
> Ah! you and I may find it now if Love and Sleep be kind ('The G a r d e n of Eros', lines 22-24).

While that early poem depicts night as an idyllic setting to ignite homosexual desire, night-time in 'The Harlot's House' evokes the uncanny and, as Mustafa observes, queer projections of "uncanny sexualities" (65). It is precisely the *chronotopos* of the night (as a double of the day) that links the *flâneur*'s nocturnal perambulations with the poem's intermediality, since it is usually at night that brothels are frequented, illicit, leisurely, sexualized dances are being practiced, and, the night is a setting for the shadow theatre.

It is crucial to note that practically all media imbricating the poem can be associated with the temporal framework of the night. Dance and theatre both procure nocturnal pleasures for the Victorian cosmopolite. The poem's "moonlit street" (line 2) is significant, since it foreshadows the visual register of *Salomé* (1893) with its repeated insinuations to lunar influence on dance (Girdwood 85) and various aspects of the eponymous character's voracious sexuality. Due to the poem's nocturnal setting and its self-reflexive metapoetical engagement with its own intermediality, the composition signposts a pre-cinematic era. Apart from the explicit intermedial thematization of music, the multimedial integration of dance and the uncanny shadow theatre, the poem dynamically introduces the reader to a cinematic experience through the overt mention of the "blind" (line 9) as a direct reference to contemporary pre-cinematic technologies, such as the early projecting Praxinoscope, ancestor of movie films (Mustafa 74).

The tradition of the shadow play or "*les ombres chinoises*" is introduced into the poem in the form of a spectral *mise-en-abyme*. The shadow play was popularized on the cultural stage of *fin-de-siècle* France at the bohemian cabaret *Le Chat Noir*. Henri Rivière played an important role in the renaissance of this genre which dates back to the 7th-century Chinese Tang dynasty. Embedding the shadow play into the poem presupposes a poetic framing technique. In this respect, the very last stanza of the poem echoes the introductory stanza

with its evocation of the street. Zoom-in and zoom-out effects are in operation in the opening and closing stanzas, respectively. A dynamic close-up of uncanny images constitutes the rest of the poem. The final image of dawn's "silver-sandalled feet" (line 35) poetically echoes the thumping, synecdochal evocation of the "tread of dancing feet" (line 1) in the opening stanza. The final stanza also decelerates the rhythm of the poem, the whirl of uncanny images coming to a standstill as foreshadowed by the penultimate stanza ("the shadows ceased to wheel and whirl", line 33).

Gestures, as non-verbal modes of communication, are of utmost importance when studying performance (Bruhn and Schirrmacher 203) in shadow puppetry, where the marionette is pulled by the strings that the puppeteer holds. Imitating this pattern, the "horrible Marionette[s]" (line 22) and "clockwork puppet[s]" (line 19) of the poem are lacking human agency. Nevertheless, they apparently resemble human figures to such an extent that the speaker-focalizer and the reader are equally confused about the true identity of the dancers, which results in a lack of orientation; another key to the uncanny from a Jentschian perspective.

Uncanny intermediality: metamusic, marionette and motion

The poem's dramatic corporeal performance is inherently intermedial and closely related to its implicit and explicit musicality. Due to the poem's peculiar soundscape, an unsettling atmosphere of pervasive unease can be felt right from the outset. The powerful sonic and semantic valence of Wildean lexis is evident in stanza 1: "the tread of dancing feet" (line 1), "the din and fray" (line 4) and "the loud musicians" (line 5) all introduced by the definite article already create a strange note of discord and disturbing cacophony, foregrounding the poem's clockwork mechanism and inescapably aggressive dynamics. The decadent soundscape (Martino 103) and the powerful AAB-CCB rhyme scheme as in "feet"-"street"-"house" and "fray"-"play"-"Strauss", along with the rhythmic intensity of the German language in the overt intermedial thematization of music ("the *Treues Liebes Herz* of Strauss", line 6) introduce a foreign artistic idiom and contribute to the violence of the scene. Therefore, the explicit intermedial reference to the "Faithful Dear Heart" most probably misattributed to Johann Strauss (Raby 65) sets the key note and determines the rhythm of the poem. Nevertheless, misattributing the putative waltz to Strauss might not be involuntary.

I suggest that the intermedial reference to Strauss and "*his*" "Faithful Dear Heart" is intentional and subversive on Wilde's part. The self-consciously false reproduction of Strauss's music is a result of "self-reflexive irony" (Wolf 723), which could be referred to as "metamusic" (Wolf 723) in poetry. Although there is an effort to mimic the triple meter of the waltz rhythm (Smulders 296) in the form of intermedial imitation, the poem is far from an idealized depiction of an elegant Viennese ballroom, which is not haphazard. The voluntary incorporation of a non-existent piece of music contributes to the air of uncertainty left behind, questioning the truthfulness of the events, and, by extension, the very *raison d'être* and existential purpose of the scene. Musicality is also reinforced by the wealth of alliterations and the acoustic dimension of verbal signifiers, as exemplified by these "excessively sibilant lines" (Thomas 487), mimicking the grotesque and serpent-like, at times monstrous, gestures:

> Slim silhouetted skeletons
> Went sidling through the slow quadrille (lines 14-15)

As Kostas Boyiopoulos stresses, the "hyperbolic rhetoric of grotesquery, heightened by the alternation of phrases or words of Frenchified and Greek suffixes (-esques, -ette, -tons) with monosyllabic words ... induces a sense of luridness, tension and unease" (1109). The poem's musical aspects through the use of the Spanish sestet (originally a fourteenth-century Galician-Portuguese stanzaic form) evoke "the rotating or turning pattern of the dance" (Smulders 296) and enable Wilde to gradually choreograph the uncanny by deviating from the initial reading pact between speaker and reader.

The poetic license between speaker and reader is first established in the poem in sketching the physical reality of the urban setting. It is a privilege of the poet, and by extension, the speaker to guide the reader through peculiar emotional states and trigger specific affects. While the speaker's directive influence initially focuses our thoughts on the realistic setting, the uncanny makes sudden irruption into the intimacy of the scene. The poet deceives us into thinking that he is giving us the sober truth, and "he can keep us in the dark for a long time about the precise nature of the conditions he has selected for the world he writes about" (Freud 98). This "uncanny realism" (Windsor 61) exacerbates the focalizer's sense of unease, and, by extension, the reader's experience of unhomeliness. It is in stanza 3 that our perception of reality suddenly tilts and we are introduced into the realm of spectrality:

Like strange mechanical grotesques,
Making fantastic arabesques,
The shadows raced across the blind.

We watched the ghostly dancers spin,
To sound of horn and violin,
Like black leaves wheeling in the wind (lines 7-12)

As the poem's narrative proceeds, its uncanny aspects culminate in the representation of the *danse macabre*. 'The Harlot's House' showcases a horrid, nightmarish pageantry of a ritualistic, carnivalesque procession of the dead. When studying the poem's intense relationship with motion and the power of its kinaesthetic values, one may observe that dance is enacted in the poem through the use of the expression "dancing feet" (line 1) which may also refer to the iambic feet of the poem in prosodic terms. It is interesting to note that practically all the dances mentioned in the poem were considered scandalous in their time. Most importantly, the "stately saraband" (line 17, from the Spanish term *"zarabanda"*) was banned by Philip II in 1583 for its "indecent and repulsive" physical frankness (Clarke 95), loose and ugly motions and its exciting unhealthy emotions. As Pedro Mariana stresses, "amongst other inventions there has appeared during late years a dance and song so lascivious in its words, so ugly in its movements, that it is enough to inflame even very modest people" (qtd. in Horst 45-46). The saraband would later form a grave and solemn part of baroque suites. Its original ¾ beat is not only intermedially thematized but also intermedially imitated in the poem. As for the quadrille, it was originally a square dance performed typically by four couples and containing five figures; and derives from the Italian word "*quadriglia*". It is noteworthy for its rectangular, square-like, mechanistic movements which feature the motion of the "slim-silhouetted skeletons" (line 14) in the poem. However, at the very heart of the poem's kinaesthetic dynamics is the figure of the dancing marionette, which foregrounds the intermediality of performance.

The shifting *fin-de-siècle* landscape of dramaturgic theories exercised a decisive impact on Wilde's choreographic imagination. As Girdwood notes, "fin-de-siècle dancers and theatre practitioners found new possibilities in moving machines" (90). Challenging the anti-gravitational dynamics and principles of graceful elevation characterising the classical ballet tradition, turn-of-century changes in dance techniques reflect mechanical orientation of movements and expression instead of emotion in performance, and more broadly, "theatrical

impersonality" (Girdwood 89). The most accomplished embodiment of novel tendencies in choreography is the figure of the marionette overtly mentioned in 'The Harlot's House'.

Wilde's conception of the marionette derives from his attested engagement with Heinrich von Kleist's essay 'On the Marionette Theatre' (Girdwood 85). Kleist's essay offers a theoretical framework of modernist responses to dance. Wilde reflects on the proto-modernist potentialities of the puppet at various points in his writings and correspondence, which points at his engagement with Kleist's theory. In Wilde's contention, puppets are ideal actors, since:

> There are many advantages in puppets. They never argue. They have no crude views about art [...] They recognise the presiding intellect of the dramatist, and have never been known to ask for their parts to be written up. They are admirably docile, and have no personalities at all (*Complete Letters* 519).

In his enigmatic essay, Kleist conceptualizes "the dancing marionette as the embodiment of grace" (Girdwood 85). The essay appeared as a short story exploiting the dialogue form in the *Berlin Evening Paper* (Vittori 217). Kleist theorizes the paradox of the puppet, since he argues that "pure 'grace' and freedom of movement are only possible for a form which either has 'no consciousness at all – or has infinite consciousness – that is, in the mechanical puppet or in the god'" (Kleist 5).

Kleist's redefining bodily grace and Wilde's understanding of Victorian puppetry play an important role in our notion of the relationship between intermediality and the uncanny in 'The Harlot's House'. Belgian dramatist Maurice Maeterlinck's conception of the static theatre populated by puppets is crucial to Wilde's understanding of the relationship between acting and free will (Girdwood 92). The providential forces behind Maeterlinck's symbolist puppet-theatre anticipate the strings holding the marionette in 'The Harlot's House'. Wilde also alludes to the graceful verisimilitude of the puppet theatre in 'The Birthday of the Infanta' originally published in 1889:

> some Italian puppets appeared in the semi-classical tragedy of Sophonisba on the stage of a small theatre that had been built up for the purpose. They acted so well, and their gestures were so extremely natural, that at the close of the play the eyes of the Infanta were quite dim with tears (*Complete Fairy Tales* 106)

Due to the uncanny presence of the moving marionette dancing on the edge between life and death, the poem not only conveys a crisis of autonomy, but also a crisis of identity in the modern metropolis. Therefore, the poem's verbal dance reflects modern anxieties about death, the uncanny and sexuality. From an intermedial perspective, the marionette's body becomes a technical medium of display. The marionette, like a machine, but unlike a Foucauldian docile body, fears "no subjugation to superimposed psychological control" (Vittori 225), and therefore becomes an ideal model for dancers. Wilde's "horrible Marionette" (line 22) along with his "strange mechanical grotesques" (line 7), "wire-pulled automatons" (line 12) and "clock-work puppet[s]" (line 19) all illustrate how he brings together the representation of the beautiful and the ugly in the form of grotesque. As Kostas Boyiopoulos suggests, "the speaker parades a string of synonyms that reduce sexuality to a deathlike repetitive movement, purposely redundant, tautological and superfluous, suggestive of tedious puppet-like routines" (1115).

The marionette's *fall from grace*

The everyday routines of the prostitute are part of the mundane mechanisms of the machine age. The marionette's mechanistic modes of movement dramatize a series of shocking repetitive encounters with the modern. The first-person *flâneur-voyeur* no longer aestheticizes the objects of his contemplation as he would do in Wilde's earlier aesthetic poetry. Through the evocation of the puppet, the speaker voices a more sombre, more critical, symbolo-decadent response to modernity with all its corollaries, such as contemporary sex work. Wilde clearly perceives the downsides of modern industrialized society. Although the marionette is a figure of idealized grace and perfection *par excellence*, there is a price to pay for automatized flawlessness: people in the industrialized nocturnal metropolis are part of a machinery, whereby they lose their human capacity for feeling to such an extent that they become lifeless puppets devoid of human agency. The speaker, and through his angle of vision, the reader's sudden recognition of the non-human in themselves again produces an uncanny effect.

In Wilde's enigmatic poem, it is precisely the uncanny resemblance between marionette and prostitute that destabilizes our sense of reality and disrupts the epistemic coherence of the scene. Taking Windsor's definition again, the affective state of the uncanny stems from an "object-directed anxiety" (55) projected onto the unsettling figure of the puppet-marionette-

automaton. The speaker's infernal descent into the "uncanny valley" (Mori 98) is a result of the existential threat posed by a psychic dilemma about the figure of the marionette-prostitute dancing on the verge of life. The very figure of the marionette eludes any kind of epistemological grasp and threatens the conventional boundaries between appearances and reality, sleeping and wakefulness, reason and madness, life and death.

The first-person speaker initially refers to the cadaverous "ghostly dancers" (line 10), then, he himself is equally seduced and drawn into the bizarre spectacle. He tries to hold back his lover, warning her of an imminent tragedy, making use of double epanalepsis:

> Then turning to my love I said,
> 'The dead are dancing with the dead,
> The dust is whirling with the dust' (lines 25-27)

The Wildean predilection for the use of the powerful alliteration in the alveolar plosive sound [d] as in "the dead are dancing with the dead" (line 26) contributes to the violent grotesquery of the *danse macabre*. The late-medieval allegory of the death dance as a reenactment of the universal and inevitable nature of death is powerfully dramatized in this "Baudelairean hell or artificial paradise" (Buckley 26). Repetition compulsion within the epanalepses in the above-quoted lines suggests an otherwise indescribable vicious circle. Although the text is teeming with phrases evoking vicious circularity ("spin", line 10; "wheeling", line 12; "whirling", line 27; "wheel and whirl", line 33), there is a point of no return in stanza 10.

> But she, she heard the violin,
> And left my side, and entered in;
> Love passed into the house of Lust (lines 28-30)

Despite the circular patterns of dance, the poem follows the irrevocable trajectory of a deadly spiral that seduces, catches, engulfs and eventually destroys the speaker's lover. The marionette does not stand for perfection or idealized grace any more. Instead, it literally and metaphorically signifies the beloved's *fall from grace* and eventual destruction. This effect is reinforced by the poem's crescendo rhythm up until the climactic stanza 10. The speaker's insistence on the personal pronoun "she" through repetition reinforces the imminent tragedy lurking behind the beloved person's act.

As Jamil Mustafa has shown, the fact that the speaker and his companion stop beneath a brothel, along with the etymology of the term "harlot" (originally referring to "a male vagabond", OED Online; Mustafa 67), raise the question of the companion's gender. The homoerotic subtext suggests the projection of the speaker's "own sexual morbidity and terror" (Mustafa 63).

This approach is in accordance with Bobby Fong's reading of the poem. Fong argues that it is the poetic persona himself who projects his desires onto his lover, and it is he who intends to enter the house of Lust in reality (200). This projection is a psychic defence mechanism arising from the conflict between repressing and embracing queer desire.. The poetic persona projects his double, or rather his true self, onto the blind. The theme of the double (*Der Doppelgänger*) and the speaker's projective queer identification with the shadows which "raced across the blind" (line 9) are again part of the poem's uncanniness.

It is noteworthy that the truncated final "feet" of the poem result in a catalectic depiction of the approaching dawn, which approximates the poem to an *aubade*.

> And down the long and silent street,
> The dawn with silver-sandalled feet,
> Crept like a frightened girl (lines 34-36)

The explicit feminization of daybreak is not so much an idealized Homeric allusion as a trope for the perplexing insignia of imminent separation. The poem's subjectivity, prevalent in terms of focalization and evidenced by the initial intimacy of the first-person plural ("*we*"), is dramatically perturbed by the eventual use of the first-person singular ("Then turning to my love *I* said [...]", line 25, emphasis mine). The repetitive insistence on the personal pronoun "she" (line 28) forebodes the lovers' separation. Although the reference to Provençal courtly love poetry is undoubtable, in Wilde the alarmingly decadent shift is much more dramatic. The simile evoking dawn as a "frightened girl" (line 36) marks an irreversible transition from innocence to experience, love to lust, life to death.

Wilde-Gyles iconotexts and the uncanny phantasmagoria of urban modernity

The irreversible transition to *danse macabre* and the sexualized manner of its performance are most powerfully present in the illustrations of the poem by Irish artist and occultist

Althea Gyles (1867-1949). Her illustrations (Figures 1-5. reproduced by courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library UCLA) are prominent examples of transformative intertextuality, or the process whereby a poem is intermedially transposed into a piece of visual artwork. Embracing the poem's spectral imagery, Gyles captures the poem's metamedial aspects and psychological dimension. The spectral projections in Gyles's illustrations and the interplay between text and image reflect modern anxieties about mechanical and automated forms of human behaviour (Girdwood 96). The poem's dreadful, carnivalesque procession of the dead and the abandon (and abandonment) in Gyles's Bacchanalian illustrations form an iconotextual unity. Gyles employs a self-referential framing technique as part of the *mise-en-scène*. The illustrations are embedded in the framework of a proscenium arch; that of the cityscape as depicted in the poem beginning at night and enigmatically ending with the personified figure of dawn. Gyles genuinely captures the modern phantasmagoria of the city, that is, "the transformation of the urban world into a visual and spatial spectacle inhabited also by the shadowy hauntings of the fleeting and insubstantial" (Collins and Jervis 1).

In Figure 3, the diabolic figure of the violinist holding the fiddle-bow resembles the devil with horns, whose temptation is irresistible for the lover. The appearance of the satyr-like violinist witnesses Wilde's Dionysian cosmopolitanism which nurtures the creative dialogue between antiquity and modernity. Gyles clearly gives a nuanced representation of that dialectic in her illustrations. The fiddle-bow is also a phallic symbol, forming part of the eroticisation of the text. Figure 4 renders the poem's high degree of pictorial saturation in a close-up of uncanny scenes. The illustration depicts the highly eroticized body of the lover in monochromatic hues, like that of a chiaroscuro *tableau vivant*. The transition from life to death occurs in the most violent depiction of the uncanny in Figure 5, where "dead are dancing with the dead" (line 26). The "strange mechanical grotesques" (line 7) are moving with clock-work precision, as if they were automata. Figures 4 and 5, eventually zooming out again, depict the final scene, where the speechless poetic persona, half-involved in the pictorial framework, is abandoned by his lover: "Love passed into the house of Lust" (line 30). The horrid tentacles attached to the dead body of the beloved are those of a monster; their entanglement and the veil-like net the woman's feet are trapped in are the allegory of life in a modern, dehumanizing world.

Figure 1: "We caught the tread of dancing feet" (illustration by Althea Gyles, 1904)

Figure 2: "The shadows raced across the blind" (illustration by Althea Gyles,1904)

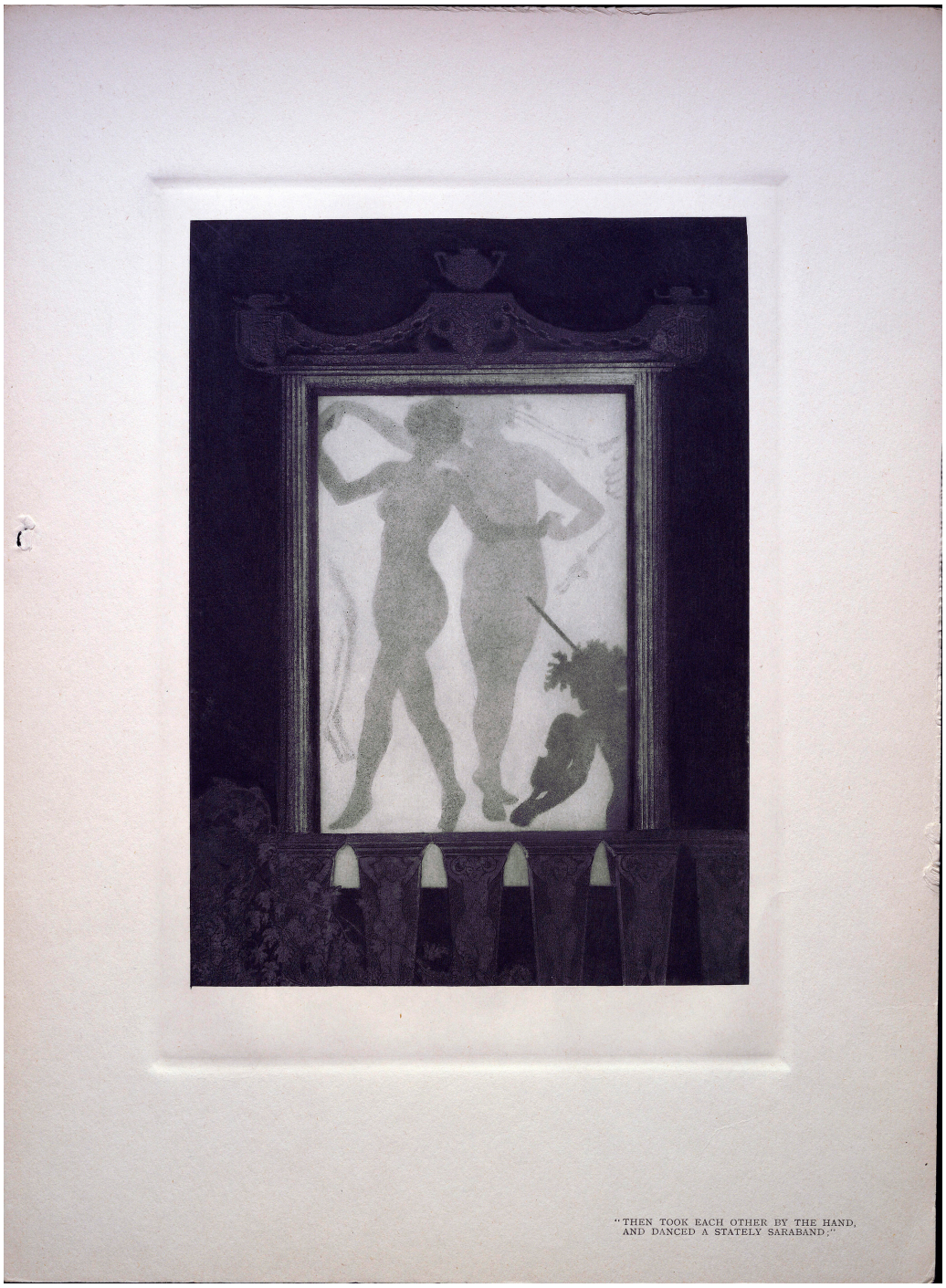

Figure 3: "Then took each other by the hand" (illustration by Althea Gyles, 1904)

Figure 4: "Sometimes a horrible Marionette came out" (illustration by Althea Gyles,1904)

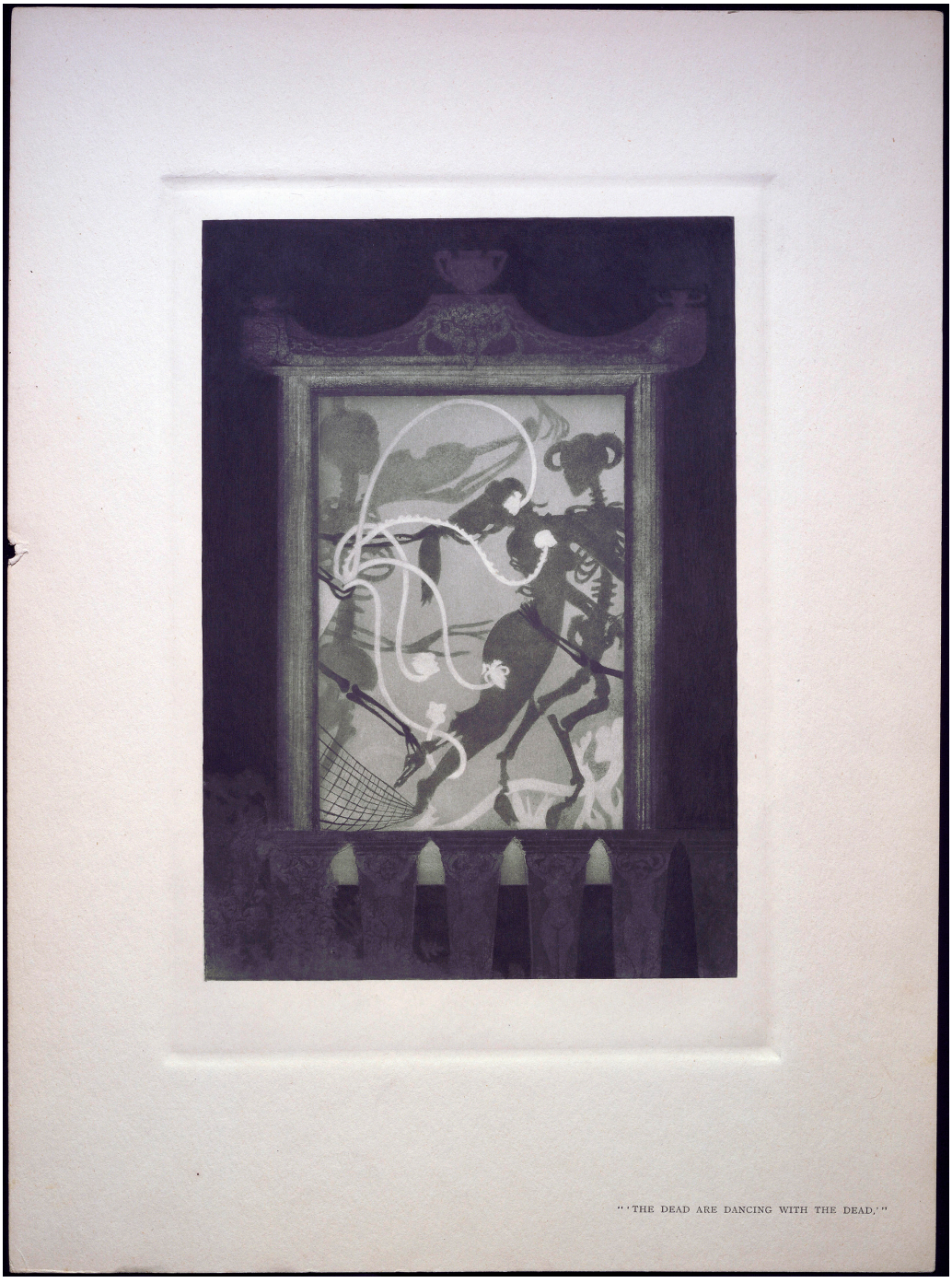

Figure 5: "The dead are dancing with the dead" (illustration by Althea Gyles, 1904)

Conclusion

'The Harlot's House' is a powerful depiction of seduction, cosmopolitanism and urban alienation. Presenting the dancing marionette as its leitmotif, the poem destabilizes conventional boundaries between life and death. With the affectation of its lexis and the artificial representation of the marionette's *danse macabre*, the poem evokes animistic human beliefs in the midst of a Western "civilized" world. The poem addresses, through its intermediality, the universal human fear of death, from the ritualistic practices of the medieval *danse macabre* to modern anxieties about its inevitability. The Wildean preoccupations with the dichotomies of appearances and reality, surface and symbol, life and death reach their utmost fulfilment in the poem's profound engagement with various other media to summon the uncanny.

As I have argued, 'The Harlot's House' is, beyond its French sources of inspiration and transatlantic intertextual references, an intermedial poem with a wealth of intra- and extracompositional interart features. The oft-neglected poem is a cornerstone within the Wilde-canon, marking a dramatic transition from Aestheticism to Decadence in Wildean poetry, and more broadly, Victorian poetry. As I have argued, the poem's intermedial dimension and self-reflexive metapoetics allow for channelling the uncanny in a nocturnal cosmopolitan setting. It is the spatiotemporal reference to the night-time metropolis that links the poem's rich intermediality to the uncanny. Wilde intuitively pioneers the phenomenon of the uncanny in poetry through the evocation of intellectual uncertainty, repetition compulsion, the *Doppelgänger*, queer projections and our encounter with the dead. With the quasi-cinematographic motion of its cadaverous apparitions and the thrill they produce, the poem depicts sombre shadows, hits low notes of cacophony and evokes a crisis of identity. Marking "the advent of poetic decadence in England" (Bristow in *Oscar Wilde in Context* 83), 'The Harlot's House' is the very epitome of Wilde's subversive, border-crossing intermedial poetics. Through its transgressive aesthetics, the poem not only showcases the intermedial, but also transcends the boundaries of poetry into the spheres of psychoanalytic theory.

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Wilde Psychoanalysis: Oscar and Sigmund Architects of Modern Homosexualities

Psicanálises selvagens: Oscar Wilde e Sigmund Freud arquitetos das homossexualidades modernas

Ray O'Neill

Abstract: *Freud and Wilde, born nineteen months apart, each probed the sexual conventions of nineteenth-century Europe. One was a revolutionary thinker whose theories helped define modern psychology; the other, an Irish man of letters imprisoned for "gross indecency." Through their wit, provocations, and often-fraught treatments of queer desire, both shaped emerging discourses on sexuality that challenged prevailing norms. Their work contributed to new constructions and understandings of homosexual identity, even as their positions on same-sex desire were sometimes paradoxical. Both endured personal or professional consequences for their non-heterosexual expressions or associations, tensions that continue to shape their cultural resonance. This paper examines parallels between Wilde and Freud two men who never met, but whose approaches to homosexuality continue to meet in explicitly and subtly influenced modern ideas of queer identity.*

Keywords: *Homosexuality; Narcissism; Psychoanalysis; Gay Identity; Cultural Legacies.*

Resumo: *Sigmund Freud e Oscar Wilde, nascidos com uma diferença de dezenove meses, sondaram cada um à sua maneira as convenções sexuais da Europa do século XIX. Um foi um pensador revolucionário cujas teorias ajudaram a definir a psicologia moderna; o outro, um escritor irlandês encarcerado por "indecência". Por meio de seu humor, provocações e tratamentos com frequência tensos do desejo queer, ambos moldaram discursos emergentes sobre sexualidade que desafiavam as*

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normas vigentes. Seus trabalhos contribuíram para novas construções e compreensões da identidade homossexual, ainda que suas posições sobre o desejo entre pessoas do mesmo sexo fossem por vezes paradoxais. Ambos enfrentaram consequências pessoais ou profissionais por suas expressões ou associações não heterossexuais — tensões que continuam a moldar sua ressonância cultural. Este artigo examina os paralelos entre Wilde e Freud, dois homens que nunca se encontraram, mas cujas abordagens à homossexualidade continuam a convergir — de maneira explícita e sutil — nas ideias modernas sobre identidade queer.

Palavras-chave: *Homossexualidade; Narcisismo; Psicanálise; Identidade gay; Legados culturais.*

Wilde, Celebrity, and the Making of the Figure of 'Wilde'

The public construction of Oscar Wilde as a 'homosexual' figure intersects strikingly with emerging psychoanalytic frameworks of inversion, hermaphroditism and 'male' hegemony. At over 1.9 m tall with a former boxer's build, Wilde was no 'shrinking violet'. Before his mid-1890s trials, his celebrity and aestheticism were perceived as threatening, not for implying homosexuality, but for a feared seductive heterosexuality. Reviewing *Poems*, Higginson worried that Wilde's effete style appealed to "women of high position," intruding into "ladies' boudoirs [to] write prurient poems which their hostesses must discreetly ignore" (Edsall, 82). In this 'pre-trials moment', Wilde's effeminacy suggested a subversive, seductive masculinity, not yet coded as homosexual.

A century later, however, a misattributed photograph was circulated as Wilde dressed as the biblical seductress Salomé. Ellman's biography (429) included it as such, and *Le Monde* republished it in 1987. Over time it became 'evidence' of Wilde's transvestism. Yet research by his grandson Merlin Holland and Horst Schröder identified the figure as Alice Guszalewicz, a Hungarian soprano photographed in 1906. Holland insisted:

> Whatever anyone has said about Oscar and his naughtiness, he wasn't the sort of person who would dress in women's clothes and have himself photographed.

Despite such proof, Penguin, the publisher of Ellmann's biography, has continued to include the misattributed image. The persistence reflects a broader discourse: that "homosexuals" are self-evidently effeminate, narcissistic, "un-men," a stereotype reinforced by psychoanalysis and wider culture.

"An Unspeakable of The Oscar Wilde Sort"

By the twentieth century, Wilde's trials made him the most visible, and notorious, homosexual in Europe. Before 1895, 'homosexual' was a technical category unfamiliar to the public. After the trials, even those who did not know precisely what it meant, knew Wilde was one. His naming, shaming, and imprisonment rendered homosexuality socially legible, though unspeakable. In *Maurice* (1914), Forster's protagonist can only identify himself as "an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort" (139). Wilde himself grasped the stigma of his name. Writing to publisher Smithers in January 1898, just as *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* went to press, he admitted:

> As regards America, I think it better now to publish there without my name, I see it is my name that terrifies ... the withdrawal of my name is essential in America as elsewhere. (Wilde, 2000: 1011)

His name indeed terrified. In the U.S., 'Oscar' ranked 29th among boys' names in the 1880s, falling to 57th by the 1900s, then disappeared until its revival after 1969. In the UK, it dropped out of the top 200 after 1900, only resurging around the centenary of Wilde's death, climbing to 7th by 2013 and is currently 10th. His trials had rendered Oscar and Wilde synonymous with perversion, immorality, homosexuality.

Twentieth-century cultural references cemented this association. A memoir described flamboyant men in evening dress as "perhaps like a couple of Oscar Wildes" (Sinfield, 135). Style alone could signal the allusion: "his neat moustache and admirable waistcoat suggested the sort of dandyism that despises women" (134). By the 1920s, Sinfield argues, the "homosexual Wildean stereotype was settled for two generations" (135). "'Oscar' became a word that could be used as an accusation of homosexuality but also a way for gay people to talk of themselves." (Eribon, 145)

Sexological discourse reinforced this visibility. Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* (1927) acknowledged that Wilde's trials made homosexuality conspicuous:

> The celebrity of Oscar Wilde and the universal publicity given to the facts of the case may have brought conviction of their perversion to many inverts ... paradoxical though it may seem, imparting greater courage to others. (996)

Magnus Hirschfeld similarly observed that long after the trials, 'to Oscar' became slang for anal sex, and effeminate men were teased as 'an Oscar' (1914, 58). Wilde's name thus became both stigma and identity for self and othering understandings of homosexuality.

The Paradoxical Productivity of Censorship

From the start, reporting was shaped by a "deafening silence." On March 3rd 1895, *Reynold's Newspaper* reported Queensbury's arrest for libel but omitted the charge, referring only to "words unfit for publication" (Goodman, 34). The *Star* called it a "very grave and serious allegation" (43), while *The Evening News* described a "horrid nocturne of terrible suggestions" (71). The refusal to state facts generated curiosity, rumour, and discourse.

When Wilde was arrested following Queensbury's acquittal, coverage continued by innuendo. *The Daily Telegraph* reported only that Wilde faced "a charge of a very grave character", whilst denouncing his "inflated egotism" and "diseased vanity" (75). *The Star* referred to "the startling episode of yesterday, the moment involved as more important than any that had proceeded it." (78) *The Illustrated Police News* called it "the most gruesome tragedy of the nineteenth century" (78) Papers debated whether "absolute reticence or modified publicity" better served morality, often choosing oblique horror: "More than that, mercifully, we need not at present say" (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 79)

For some, the solution was erasure. *The Echo* urged: "The best thing for everybody now is to forget Oscar Wilde, let him go into silence, and be heard of no more" (79). Authorities even delayed his arrest to allow possible flight to France. Yet Wilde did not flee. The trials had to happen, and in happening, they made homosexuality public, spoken, visible. explosion.

Oscar Wilde Posing 'Somdomite'

This infamous calling card left by the Marquess of Queensbury, accusing Wilde of being a

"posing somdomite", set in motion the trials that destroyed him and generated a new cultural discourse around 'homosexuality'. Significantly, Wilde is accused not of being a sodomite, but of posing as one. Wilde's outrage was immediate. He wrote to his former lover and loyal friend, Robbie Ross:

> Bosie's father has left a card at my club with hideous words on it. I don't see anything now but a criminal prosecution. (McKenna, 2004, 454)

Something in this "hideous" word repelled Wilde. The insult marked a rupture between how Wilde understood himself as a man who loved men and how the courts, media, and Queensbury apprehended him, a sodomite. Against all advice, Wilde launched a libel prosecution, a decision urged on by Bosie and his family, but also by Wilde's own fury.

Queensbury was unrelenting. He passed the evidence collected for the libel trial directly to the Public Prosecutor, with a cover letter also sent to the press:

> In order that there may be no miscarriage of justice, I think it is my duty at once to send you a copy of all our witnesses' statements, together with a copy of the shorthand notes of the trial. (Cohen, 174-5)

In circulating this evidence, Queensbury sought to force Wilde's separation from Bosie and to leave England, rather than risk another trial which might expose his son.

> If the country allows you to leave, all the better for the country; but, if you take my son with you, I will follow you wherever you go and shoot you. (Hyde, 222)

The Legal Landscape and The Importance of Being 'Earnest'

Queensbury's threats around a "miscarriage of justice" resonated with earlier same-sex scandals. In 1889, the Cleveland Street Scandal exposed a London male brothel allegedly patronised by aristocrats, including Lord Somerset, equerry to the Prince of Wales. The government was accused of a cover-up after both Somerset and the brothel keeper fled abroad.

An earlier case, the 1871 trial of Frederick Park and Ernest Boulton, better known in their cross-dressed personae, Fanny and Stella, had both entertained and scandalised the public. Arrested in women's clothing, while attending the theatre, they were charged with "conspiring and inciting persons to commit an unnatural offence" (Mc Kenna, 2013, 237)

alongside Ernest's lover, former MP Lord Arthur Clinton, who subsequently committed suicide. Their acquittal, after the prosecution failed to prove sodomy, left a cultural legacy linking effeminacy, cross-dressing, and homosexuality with scandal, upper-class hypocrisies, and criminal suspicion.

Just as Wilde's Trials were to define homosexuality for over a century, so Fanny and Stella (Frederick and Ernest), held same-sex visibility and discourse within its cultural moment, one in which anal sex, effeminacy, and cross-dressing were presumed. By the 1890s, 'Ernest' had become a coded byword (as 'Oscar' later would) evoking Uranian (Earn-ian!!) subcultures. In the play Earnest is both an ambiguous adjective and a valued identity. Critics dispute whether Wilde deliberately encoded *The Importance of Being Earnest* with homosexual references, arguing Carson, Queensbury's barrister, would have pounced had such codes been obvious. But such objections assume heterosexual omniscience, denying the possibility of queer delimited resistant language. Wilde's choice of a fashionable address in Piccadilly for Algernon and Ernest's circumspect London ventures, E.4, The Albany, was telling in being the home of George Ives, homosexual rights activist and founder of the secret Order of Chaeronaea. Such allusions encode Wilde within hidden networks of like-desiring men.

Whether or not Wilde intentionally encoded his texts, they came to be read as homosexual once Wilde himself was named as such, or rather, imprisoned into that identity through prosecution, detention and exposure reconfigured as effeminate, narcissistic, homosexual. Wilde's trials mobilised multiple layers of prevailing homosexual discourse: the corruption of youth, effeminacy, narcissism, prostitution, and sodomy. Importantly, Wilde was not tried alone, but alongside Alfred Taylor, a man portrayed as an "obvious" effeminate type, to reinforce unmanliness as a key marker of same-sex desire.

The prosecution highlighted a familiar set of 'homosexual' associations and signifiers:

- Anal sex: "the disgusting filth in which they found the bedclothes on more than one occasion" (Holland, 277).
- Paedophilia/Corruption of Youth: "None of them his equal in years; and ... a curious similarity in the ages of each and every one of them" (274).
- Prostitution: "Had you any particular business with Taylor?" (159).
- Effeminacy and cross-dressing: "Did his rooms strike you as peculiar? ... elaborate furniture ... luxurious ... highly perfumed? ... Did you know whether Mr. Taylor

> had a lady's costume there? Did you ever see him with a lady's fancy dress?" (154–8).

For Wilde, it was not enough to convict him of "gross indecency." He had to be discursively reconstructed as narcissistic, effeminate, corrupt, embodying all the traits late-Victorian culture would come to define as the essence of the 'homosexual' and that primed the stage for Freud's entry onto the sexology theatre.

'Gross Indecency' and the Criminalisation of Desire

Wilde's trial placed, not only him, but same-sex desire itself in the dock, just as scientific discourses were beginning to categorise it. 1885's Labouchère Amendment, under which Wilde was prosecuted, expanded the offence of sodomy into the vague category of "gross indecency." The law never defined the term, reflecting Victorian reluctance to name "immoral" acts and, as Foucault observed, a shift in which "the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage ... a type of life ... consubstantial with him." (43).

The wording of the Act made almost any intimacy between men, kissing, embracing, or simply showing affection, legally punishable:

> Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures, the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted thereof, shall be liable at the discretion of the Court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour. (Moran, 206)

Thus, not only sexual acts but desire itself was criminalised. In Wilde's case, what condemned him was less evidence of sexual behaviour than the "indecency" of his books, persona, and relationships across class/age boundaries. His refusal to conform to Victorian ideals of masculinity marked him as 'unmanly' and therefore suspect.

Unlike sodomy, which carried life imprisonment (and until 1861, the death penalty), prosecutions for "gross indecency" were easier precisely because of its vagueness. When does indecency stop being merely indecent and become gross indecency? . The 1870s trials of Fanny and Stella had already shown how gender nonconformity could be treated as evidence of criminality, but unable to convict under the ultimate gender challenging act of sodomy. By

Wilde's time posing as a gender-challenging 'somdomite' was not only socially threatening, but now a crime.

The amendment itself emerged from moral panic. In July 1885, W.T. Stead's *Pall Mall Gazette* exposé on child prostitution provoked outrage that secured passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill. Sir Howard Vincent, Director of Criminal Investigations at Scotland Yard, had called homosexual acts a modern "scourge" (Kaplan, 173). Stead had written to Labouchère about male prostitution and at the last minute, Labouchère inserted his amendment criminalising male desire more broadly, passed after only four minutes of debate. This same Labouchère's *Truth* magazine had called for greater investigation into the Cleveland Street scandal. Wilde, sentenced under this law, later wrote to Ives in March 1898:

> Yes, I have no doubt we shall win, but the road is long and red with monstrous martyrdoms. ... Nothing but the repeal of the Criminal Law Amendment Act would do any good. That is the essential. It is not so much public opinion as public officials that need educating. (2000, 1044)

"Uranian Love I Hold to Be Noble, More Noble Than Other Forms"

The naming of same-sex desire has always reflected temporal, geographic, and political distinctions. In late-nineteenth-century Germany, such men were described as Urnings or Uranians. Engels, responding to Marx's transmission of Ulrichs' work called the Urnings "extremely unnatural revelations" (Kennedy, 29). Karl Ulrichs' Uranian lexicon framed like-kind desire within a 'spiritualised' Platonic discourse, distinguishing love as physical gratification (common/Dionian) from love as moral development (heavenly/Uranian). By rooting Uranian love in Platonic philosophy, Ulrichs conferred upon it a respectable, civilised lineage.

In England, like-kind loving writers and Oxbridge-educated classicists such as Pater, and later Wilde, adopted the Uranian identity, emphasising ideals of higher love. Wilde's trial speech on "the Love that Dares Not Speak Its Name" reflects this Platonic idealism, framing spiritual affection as morally noble: "a great affection ... as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect" (Ellmann, 463).

Connections between Ulrichs' lexicon and the English Uranians functioned less as

direct borrowing than as a bridge for like-minded men across borders (Kaylor, xiii). Edward Carpenter framed Uranian love as genuine affection between men, independent of sexual acts:

> I use the word Uranians to indicate simply those whose lives and activities are inspired by a genuine friendship or love for their own sex, without venturing to specify their individual and particular habits or relations towards those whom they love (891).

In 1898, after his imprisonment, Wilde wrote to Robbie Ross:

> To have altered my life would have been to have admitted that Uranian love is ignoble. I hold it to be noble, more noble than other forms (2000, 1019).

In 1896, Raffalovich published *Uranisme et Unisexualité* in France, including a chapter on Wilde.

Despite these self-identifications, By the early 20th century, however, the term 'homosexual' dominated, framing non-heterosexuality as unnatural, abnormal, and effeminate. Freud reinforced this label, linking it to narcissism, effeminacy, and degeneracy. Wilde's trials and death as a 'homosexual' unfolded alongside the rise of psychoanalysis, positioning him as both cautionary figure and cultural touchstone.

Narcissism, Wilde's Legacy and Ascriptions to Homosexual Identity

"To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance" (Wilde, 1894a: 19382). By the *fin de siècle*, Wilde became entwined with the emerging psychoanalytic and homosexological discourses linking narcissism with femininity, masturbation, and homo-sameness, framing him as the archetypal "narcissistic homosexual", effeminate, vain, and degenerate. Rank bestows on Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the most overt and frequent invocation of literary Narcissism, quoting Halward's description of Dorian as a Narcissus "He has leaned over the still pool of some Greek woodland, and seen in the water's silent silver the wonder of his own beauty." (Wilde, 2012: 66) In many ways, it is through Rank's combining of the different discourses of Narcissism, the literary, the sexual, the pathological and the anthropological, all culminating in *Dorian Gray* and best exemplified through Wilde that something Wildean begins to inform and be informed by Narcissism. For both narcissism and Wilde himself, what was once noble and aesthetic, was recast as pathological.

Historically, Narcissus symbolised abstinence, beauty, and philosophical self-reflection. Platonic philosophy celebrated him as morally and sensibly attuned (Wieseler, 1856), a legacy echoed in Coelho's celebrated *The Alchemist*, which cites Wilde's Narcissus poem 'The Disciple' (1893) as a prologue. From Ovid through Renaissance and Romantic poetry, Narcissus embodied aestheticism and the search for the mirrored other half, with noble historical figures and literary characters such as Narcissus Marsh, archbishop of Dublin, founder of Ireland's first public library, and at least four Christian saints, bearing this name honourably. In Hesse's Narcissus and Goldmund, Narcissus embodies the composed Apollonian monk against the artistic adventurous Dionysian, Goldmund.

By the 1890s, sexology and psychoanalysis reframed Narcissus as a cautionary emblem of pathological self-love now aligned with homosexuality. Ellis (1898) described extreme auto-eroticism as a rare "Narcissus-like tendency," while Näcke (1899) coined 'Narzissmus'. Sadger was pivotal in introducing the hypothesis into psychoanalytic discourse in 1908, that an early identification with the mother shapes the child's narcissistic future and, in turn, creates the conditions for homosexual fantasies that inform a narcissistic object choice. "a prolonged remaining at the transitory stage of narcissism definitely predisposes one to homosexuality" (1974, 13), and associating it with maternal dominance, paternal weakness, vanity, and mirror fascination (1921, 1974). A committed advocate of degeneracy theory, and lifelong bachelor, Sadger believed homosexuality could be 'cured' through psychoanalysis (1920b), though he himself refused to undertake treatment. Freud initially praised this introduction of narcissism as "new and valuable" (Nunberg & Federn, 312), and shaped by Sadger and Rank, developed it into a central psychoanalytic concept in the wake of Wilde's downfall.

Rank (1911) expanded on the idea, describing narcissism as both a "pathological condition" and a normal developmental stage, linking it to masturbation, and self-admiration. Freud's 1910 analyses of Leonardo da Vinci and Schreber further cemented the link between narcissism, homosexuality, and artistic creation, arguing that auto-erotic instincts may initially focus on the self before reaching to an external love object. This Freudian feminisation of narcissism both produced and reflected its association with homosexuality.

Literature reinforced these associations. Rank's 1914 study of the "double" concluded that poets are inherently Narcissus-like, with Wilde's Dorian Gray exemplifying the convergence of literary, sexual, and pathological discourses.

> Along with fear and hate of the double, the narcissistic infatuation in one's own image and self is most strongly marked in Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray. (Rank, 1911)

Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) further linked aestheticism to moral and biological decline, with a chapter dedicated to Wilde, implicitly associating his art with same-sex desire.

The 1890s marked the final epoch of the classical Narcissus myth within aestheticism, evident in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/91), André Gide's *Traite du Narcisse* (1891), and Wilde's own, "To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance" (1894b). Across these fin de siècle scientific, literary, and cultural frameworks, the Narcissus myth shifts from noble ascetic to aesthete to emblem of perversion, mirroring Wilde's trajectory, and the pathologisation of homosexual identity.

The Trials and the New 'Homosexual' Identity

Before his trials, Wilde's dandified figures, Lord Wotton and Dorian Gray, were read as men of leisure, heterosexual cads perhaps, but firmly within masculine boundaries. After 1895, these traits were retrospectively re-coded as signs of effeminacy, narcissism, and homosexuality. Rank's later reading of *Dorian Gray* as the quintessential text of literary narcissism gained authority only because the trials had publicly reframed Wilde and his characters.

The prosecution explicitly treated Wilde's writings, especially *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as incriminating evidence. Basil Hallward's devotion to Dorian, presented in the novel as a chaste, 'Uranian' ideal, was recast in court as proof of "perversion and sodomy." The trials thus made same-sex desire publicly visible, but more crucially, they forged it into a coherent identity. Effeminacy, narcissism, aesthetic decadence, and desire coalesced into the figure of the 'homosexual', no longer merely a legal category of prohibited acts, but a recognisable social and psychological type.

The Wilder European Front

Wilde's trial reverberated across Europe. Years later, his son Vyvyan recalled:

> my main recollection is of my mother, in tears, poring over masses of press cuttings, mostly from Continental newspapers. ... I could not help seeing

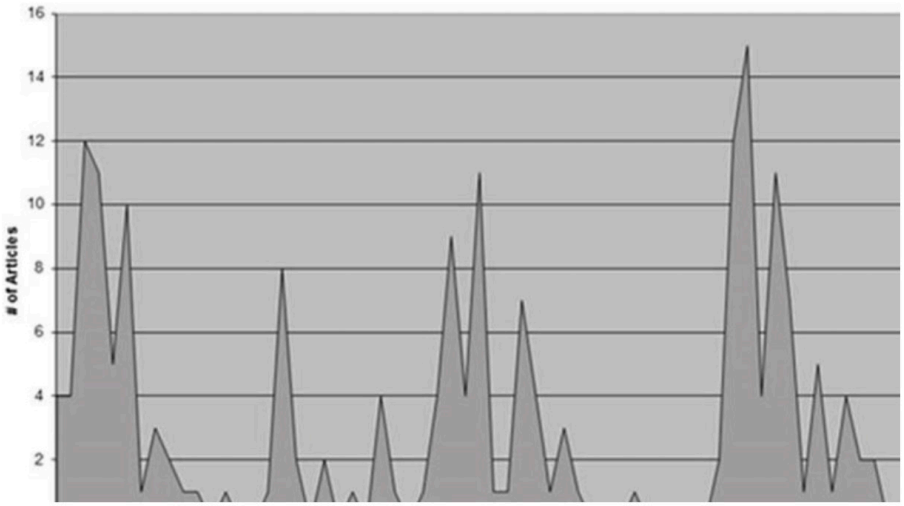
> the name OSCAR WILDE in large headlines. (Holland, 1999: 61).

Cohen describes the trials as "splashed across the front pages of most newspapers throughout Europe" (129).

Ivory's study of German press reporting highlights how Wilde's scandal intersected with the emerging discourses of sexology and psychoanalysis, shaping debates on the 'homosexual' and fuelling early homosexual rights movements. Her research shows that the Vienna-based *Neue Freie Presse*, a paper Freud both read daily and to which he contributed (Solms, 397), was the first German-language newspaper to announce the forthcoming libel trial on March 10th, 1895 as "Prozeß Queensberry" (Ivory, 223).

German newspapers, while often euphemistic, nonetheless named Wilde's alleged offences more directly than the British press. Describing Wilde's acts as relations with other men, they explicitly cited 1871's Paragraph 175 of the German penal code, whose possible repeal was then being debated. One report invoked Westphal's sexological terminology, noting that Carson "suchte aus Wilde's Schriften dessen kontrasexuelle Eigenschaften zu beweisen" (sought to prove from Wilde's writings his 'contrary-sexual' characteristics) (Ivory, 227).

The German press, reflecting contemporary sexological discourses, framed Wilde less as a criminal than as a pathological case, deploying medicalised language such as "krankhafte Belastung" (pathological encumbrance) (230), contrasting with the British moralising rhetoric of vice and perversion. Similar trends appeared in French reporting. As Erber observes, the *Echo de Paris* explained Wilde's case through "the two dominant explanations of sexual orientation



current in French sexology" (1996, 571), while another French journal published an interview with Max Nordau, who claimed that his *Degeneration* had foretold Wilde's downfall (569). In Ivory's analysis, most German-language reports on Wilde's trials (see graph above) cluster around the first proceedings. While coverage peaks immediately after the first and second trials, and again at the opening and conclusion of the third (with May 23rd marking the highest number of reports at fifteen), Ivory argues that, with a few exceptions, reporting on the latter trials was largely telegraphic, as articles tended to relay only the essential facts, such as the verdict, with little or no commentary. For the German press and readership, the spectacle of Wilde's court appearances mattered less than the discursive weight of what he was accused of. Once Wilde's alleged offences were named and debated, the subsequent trials and punishments seemed comparatively incidental. As Ivory puts it, "Wilde's real fall happens in April rather than May in Germany" (231).

Equally significant is the German press's distinctive emphasis on the severity of Wilde's punishment rather than his guilt. Nearly all the major newspapers carried strikingly similar accounts of Wilde's conditions in Pentonville Prison, detailing the privations of "hard labour," and many expressed outright censure of his treatment in early June 1895. The Viennese magazine *Die Zeit*, another of Freud's regular reading sources, went further still: Handl openly criticised Wilde's punishment, framing it as evidence of Britain's excessive bourgeois conservatism in matters of art.

> Too naive to appreciate Wilde's work, they have poured on him all their hatred and fear of 'decadent' artistic movements and thus made him a scapegoat for the ills of their own society. The whole scandal and the sentence and punishment that followed was simply, for Handl, 'very English'. (232)

Such coverage not only distinguished German reporting from its British counterpart but also helped situate Wilde's downfall within the emerging medico-legal and psychoanalytic discourses of sexuality. In a cultural moment when sexologists and analysts like Freud were beginning to name and categorise the 'homosexual' these reports provided material and momentum for theorising same-sex desire within frameworks of pathology, punishment, and identity.

Uncanny Influences: Freud and Wilde

Freud's psychoanalytic concepts of narcissism and the 'double,' while seemingly abstract, found their most vivid and tragic cultural expression in the public figure of Oscar Wilde, whose trials and downfall provided the tangible 'data' for the pathologisation of homosexuality.

Freud's 1919 *The Uncanny* drew on Rank's concept of the "double," tracing its origins to primary narcissism. The double, he argued, springs from "unbounded self-love" as an "assurance of immortality," yet ultimately becomes a "harbinger of death" (235). Wilde's life offers a haunting embodiment of this paradox: his dandyism and aestheticism, manifestations of unbounded self-love, promised a kind of immortality through art and persona—but these same traits precipitated his downfall, turning the assurance of eternal life into an inexorable harbinger of death. In Wilde, narcissism and tragedy intertwine so fully that the theory of the double seems almost written for him, a mirror reflecting the fatal consequences of desire, beauty, and self-fashioning.

Freud and Wilde, born just nineteen months apart, embodied a shared cultural moment between Victorian morality and emerging modern sexualities. Both recognised, in different registers, the importance of being earnest. Wilde provocatively reworked the ancient dictum "Know thyself" into a modern exhortation "Be thyself" (1891b, 18953), shifting emphasis from self-awareness to self-actualisation. Wilde himself says in *De Profundis* (1905) "Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation." Freud, for his part, remarked that "Being entirely honest with oneself is a good exercise" (Masson, 272). Both saw self-realisation as inseparable from suffering, tragedy, and pleasure. Wilde declared at his trial that "the realisation of one's self is the primal aim of life; to realise one's self through pleasure is finer than to realise one's self through pain" (Holland, 75).

Both men grappled with illusion and deception. Freud noted, "Illusions commend themselves to us because they save us pain and allow us to enjoy pleasure instead" (1914, 280). Wilde declared, "Illusion is the first of all pleasures," and lying was "the very basis of civilised society" (1891c: 16850). "The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple" (1895: 4604). Each was fascinated by the slipperiness of truth and the cultural work of deception.

The two men clearly shared ideas, if not philosophies. Both were masters of language, the importance of names. Freud edited Rank's 1914 essay *The Double*, with its Wildean resonances of narcissism, yet referred to Wilde only twice in his collected works, the second

time, fittingly, in *The Uncanny*. Was this a form of self-preservation for Freud's new science, to avoid association with a criminalised figure? Or might it have been an intellectual rejection of Wilde's 'aesthetic' approach to selfhood in favour of a 'scientific' one?

Freud was, however, a keen lover of literature and theatre. He "waxed ecstatically" about Sarah Bernhardt, "After the first words uttered in an intimate, endearing voice, I felt I had known her all my life." (1960, 180), a celebrity crush he shared with Wilde; and maintained a lifelong correspondence with writers such as Schnitzler. Wilde's works were immensely popular in Vienna: from 1900-1910, *An Ideal Husband* was the most frequently staged English play there, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* the most produced English drama overall. Between 1907–1910, Viennese theatres were running *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *Salome*, *A Florentine Tragedy*, and two adaptations of *Dorian Gray*. In 1907 the critic Lothar observed, "Nowadays, Oscar Wilde has become a theatrical trump card in Vienna" (Mayer, 208). Bernard Shaw echoed this in 1905, writing in *Neue Freie Presse*:

> Vienna will more easily get used to the style of Oscar Wilde, for Wilde embodied the artistic culture of the 18th century. Seeing that Vienna, apart from Paris, is the most regressive city in Europe it ought to appreciate Oscar Wilde far more greatly than he will ever be appreciated anywhere in Germany or England. (203)

Tellingly, neither Freud nor Sadger, renowned for their psychoanalytic 'pathographies' of homosexuality, ever addressed Wilde. Even in 1910, when his plays dominated Vienna and society marked the tenth anniversary of his death, Freud turned to Da Vinci and Sadger to von Kleist, leaving Wilde conspicuously absent. What in Wilde's reflection eluded Freud's pen?

But in 1910 Freud also published *Über 'Wilde' Psychoanalyse*, not an analysis of Wilde, but a polemic against unanalysed doctors who, in his view, applied psychoanalytic ideas too crudely. Here Freud explored masturbation and the "rejection of sexuality, or a repression which is over-severe" (223). Could Freud have been unconsciously alluding to the unanalysed Sadger, whose orthodox and often obsessive pathographies linked narcissism ineluctably to homosexuality? (Padovan, 2017) Freud's growing frustration at this juncture with the refusing psychoanalytic self-process Sadger is well-documented; calling him a "congenital fanatic of orthodoxy" (quoted in Rose, 71) and he wrote to Jung in 1910 of the "interminable flow of Sadger's rubbish" (McGuire, 283) and "insufferable" prose (291).

The title *'Wilde' Psychoanalyse* is revealing as language within psychoanalysis always is. In German, 'wilde' carries connotations of "uncontrolled" or "unrestrained," for which ausgelassen or entfesselt might be more precise. Yet wilde also evokes "brutal," "unlawful," and "illicit", associations impossible to separate from Wilde, the criminalised homosexual writer spectrally haunting Freud's Vienna, the cultural "trump card". Whether consciously or not, Freud's word choice hints at a Wildean subtext. At a moment when Sadger's zeal threatened to rigidify psychoanalysis, Freud may have been signalling not only his disdain for "wild" psychoanalysis but also the spectral presence of Wilde himself: an author whose name had become shorthand for both homosexual scandal and dazzling cultural achievement. May this have reflected Freud's unconscious struggle with the cultural figure of Wilde, who embodied both enviable 'dazzling cultural achievement' but also an abject 'sexual scandal', a duality that might threaten to contaminate the scientific rigor Freud sought for establishing psychoanalysis.

The Freudian Homosexual and Wilde's Shadow in Psychoanalysis

Ulrichs' Uranian taxonomy was largely ignored, not only because he was deemed 'homosexual' and thus unqualified, but also because his framework prioritised love over pathology partly. Krafft-Ebing acknowledged Ulrichs' work as foundational yet dismissed its taxonomy, favouring a medically oriented, illness-based framework:

> Other terms were developed ... but it was homosexuality which was adopted as the medical term primarily because of the influence and prominence of Krafft-Ebing (Bullough, 27).

By his death, *Psychopathia Sexualis*—already in twelve editions—had become "the world's most informative volume on the subject of sexual deviation" (35) and "a ground-breaking examination of sexual aberrations" (41).

Through this work, Krafft-Ebing established heterosexuality as the normative standard in binary opposition to non-procreative homosexuality, deemed deviant and morally "monstrous." In his final decade at the University of Vienna, holding what was considered "the most important professorship of psychiatry in the world", he mentored Freud, profoundly shaping psychoanalytic constructions of sexuality and cultural discourses around like-kind desire. As Freud recalled,

> I am finishing *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in the explanation of sexual inversion, I go as far as the literature permits (Krafft-Ebing and predecessors) (Masson, 464).

Alfred Douglas (Bosie) in the Noel Pemberton-Billing libel trial testified that before Wilde wrote *Salome* in 1890, he had been reading Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*. (Bristow, 195) Wilde may well have been thinking of Krafft-Ebing, or indeed Freud, when, after his imprisonment, he bemoaned the fact that "I am a pathological problem in the eyes of German scientists and even in their works I am tabulated" (2000, 1006).

Wilde's naming of "the love that dares not speak its name," draws on Ulrichs and Krafft-Ebing, becomes a conduit for sexological discourses. From prison, Wilde's 1896 petition to the Home Secretary cited Lombroso and Nordau, invoking the language of "sexual madness", "pathological science", "erotomania", and "sensual monomanias," framing his predicament as "diseases to be cured by a physician, rather than crimes to be punished by a judge" (2000, 656). The notoriety of Wilde's trials and downfall provided German sexologists with a paradigmatic "decadent narcissist," grounding the term homosexual as a descriptor for like-kind desire within the afore-mentioned "Oscar-Wilde type," as homosexuality moves into broader public consciousness.

The naming of same-sex desire did not occur in isolation but emerged through the intersecting fin de siècle discourses of psychoanalysis, sexology, and law. Figures like Krafft-Ebing, Sadger, and Freud drew on and reinforced the cultural impact of Wilde's trials, which offered a visible case through which theories of effeminacy, narcissism, and degeneracy could be shown. This convergence produced E.M. Forster's 'Oscar-Wilde sort,' making homosexuality legible as both a social and scientific category, while exposing previously hidden subversive Uranian and homoerotic subcultures to public contempt.

Freud and Krafft-Ebing

Freud's *Three Essays* introduces several key discursive developments in the construction of the homosexual. He briefly uses the term 'invert' to distinguish it from 'perversion', while defining both within a new classification: sexual "aberration." Freud intriguingly acknowledges inversion as "found among persons who otherwise show no marked deviation from the

normal, who on the contrary are distinguished by especially high intellectual development and ethical culture" (139). Yet, tied to science's visual demands to 'see' evidence, he notes "amphigenously inverted (psychosexually hermaphroditic)" individuals (136), bodies not fully male in appearance. Freud engages discursive practices aligning physical hermaphroditism with inversion, referencing Ulrichs as "a spokesman of the male inverts (theory of) 'a feminine brain in a masculine body'" while debating the "regular concurrence of inversion with the psychic and somatic signs of hermaphroditism" (7).

Seeking to move beyond this confusion, Freud still recognises its contingency within scientific discourse: "I was already familiar with the idea of bisexuality used to explain inversion. You will certainly find it in *Psychopathia Sexualis* by Krafft-Ebing" (Masson, 467). For psychology, he observes, the contrast between the sexes increasingly fades into one between activity and passivity, "in which we far too readily identify activity with maleness and passivity with femaleness" (1920, 105–6).

Norton's *Mother Clap's Molly House: Gay Subculture in England, 1700–1830* reinforces this historical perspective, arguing that "gay men did not think of themselves as women trapped in men's bodies until the sexologists began popularising this theory" (1992: 104). In *Teleny* (1895), a gay pornographic novel attributed to Wilde, we see literary expression of this alignment when one protagonist laments, "Why was not one of us born a woman?" (171–2), while another remarks during sex, "I seemed to be a man in front, a woman behind, for the pleasure I felt either way" (118). Same-sex desire thus remained discursively aligned with 'being a woman', and despite Freud's best intentions, with 'passivity'. This alignment persists in culturally in questions like 'Who's the man and who's the woman?' within male same-sex encounters.

This emerging psychoanalytic framework around inversion and hermaphroditism intersected through Wilde's trials and imprisonment, with the public construction of him as 'homosexual'. Wilde embodied traits Freud and other sexologists codified within same-sex desire: effeminacy, aestheticism, and narcissism. As Freud formalised inversion, Wilde's life retrospectively became a template: the aestheticised, effeminate, same-sex desiring male, once celebrated in Uranian discourse, was now mapped onto frameworks of pathology and deviance.

Wilde functions as both exemplar and cautionary figure. His Uranian-inflected defence of "the love that dares not speak its name" aligns with Ulrichs' and Carpenter's frameworks of

spiritually elevated male love. Yet under legal and public scrutiny, these traits were reinterpreted through emerging sexology. Desire, effeminacy, passivity, and narcissism, already theorised in Freudian discourse, found a tangible referent in Wilde, whose celebrity and trials provided the cultural "data" through which these constructions could be articulated.

By tracing Wilde's public persona and literary works alongside Freud's psychoanalytic explorations, we see how both shaped, and were shaped by, emerging discourses on homosexuality. Wilde's artistry and scandal vividly illustrated traits psychoanalysis would pathologise, while Freud codified ideas about desire, identity, and the body. Together, their legacies illuminate the social, cultural, and scientific construction of queer identity, offering enduring insights into sexuality, selfhood, and cultural perception.

Postscript: Or Words From Beyond

Wilde died in 1900 so never commented on the Freudian revolution, or did he? In 1924 the Irish psychic Hester Travers-Smith published *Oscar Wilde from Purgatory*, a record of her sittings with Wilde's spirit. Alongside very Wildean remarks - "Being dead is the most boring experience in life. That is, if one excepts being married or dining with a schoolmaster." (7); "Yes, I have seen my mother. She has not really improved in the process of dying" (9), the Wilde 'spirit' interestingly comments on Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*:

> Dreams dwell far from the world, and in your gross age they live on those who know that life is faded and without form, unless the dream comes which creates for us the veritable image of beauty as she is. We, who have passed beyond your ken, we only know what these men (Freud and Jung) guess at. (33)

And with this last comment on Freud, Wilde from purgatory ceased to speak. Perhaps, in true Freudian tradition, the medium said "Let's leave it there for this week"; or perhaps in true Wildean fashion, he neglected to pay his bill.

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The Dorian Gray Effect: Legacy, Scandal, and the Cult of the Aesthetic

O Efeito Dorian Gray: Legado, escândalo e o culto da estética

Ioana Constandache

Abstract: *This research proposes a systematic and comprehensive investigation of Oscar Wilde's work focusing on* The Picture of Dorian Gray *(1890), widely regarded as the centrepiece of his aesthetic and philosophical discourse. The study begins by contextualizing the author's biography and education, emphasizing the decisive influence of Greco-Roman classicism and the reverberations of Victorian aestheticism. These cultural landmarks are examined to elucidate how they are intricately integrated into the novel's ideational and narrative structure. A detailed analysis of the paradigmatic oppositions Wilde mobilizes–idealism and materialism, spirit and body, truth and appearance–is offered to highlight the dialectical relationship between art and existence, a recurring theme throughout his oeuvre. The analytical approach also considers Wilde's biographical condition, particularly his inner and social exile, reflected in the moral and aesthetic tensions experienced by the protagonist within the context of a declining Victorian society. It aims to decode the novel's symbolic and aesthetic dimensions while situating it within the broader discourse of Wilde's contemporary aesthetic and ethical debates, exploring his ambivalence toward both traditional and modern values. This approach contributes to a nuanced and in-depth interpretation of Wilde's work, revealing the stratifications of his artistic discourse and the associated identity issues, in alignment with modern critical perspectives.*

Keywords*: Oscar Wilde;* The Picture of Dorian Gray*; Aestheticism; Classicism; Decadence; Individualism.*

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Resumo: *Esta pesquisa propõe uma investigação sistemática e abrangente da obra de Oscar Wilde, com foco em* O Retrato de Dorian Gray *(1890), amplamente considerado a peça central de seu discurso estético e filosófico. O estudo começa contextualizando a biografia e a formação do autor, enfatizando a influência decisiva do classicismo greco-romano e as reverberações do esteticismo vitoriano. Esses marcos culturais são examinados para elucidar como estão intrinsecamente integrados à estrutura ideacional e narrativa do romance. Uma análise detalhada das oposições paradigmáticas que Wilde mobiliza – idealismo e materialismo, espírito e corpo, verdade e aparência – é oferecida para destacar a relação dialética entre arte e existência, um tema recorrente em toda a sua obra. A abordagem analítica também considera a condição biográfica de Wilde, particularmente seu exílio interior e social, refletido nas tensões morais e estéticas vivenciadas pelo protagonista no contexto de uma sociedade vitoriana em declínio. O objetivo é decodificar as dimensões simbólicas e estéticas do romance, situando-o no contexto mais amplo dos debates estéticos e éticos contemporâneos de Wilde, explorando sua ambivalência em relação aos valores tradicionais e modernos. Essa abordagem contribui para uma interpretação matizada e aprofundada da obra de Wilde, revelando as estratificações de seu discurso artístico e as questões de identidade a ele associadas, em consonância com as perspectivas críticas modernas.*

Palavras-chave*: Oscar Wilde;* O Retrato de Dorian Gray*; Esteticismo; Classicismo; Decadência; Individualismo.*

Introduction

Just as Oscar Wilde's biography is marked by contradiction—between genius and scandal, classical refinement and the spectacle of decadence—so too *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a text of duality and subversion. The novel is not only an aesthetic product of the British *fin-de-siècle*, but also a reflection on the relationship between art, morality and identity. It emerges from a cultural moment in which fascination with beauty coexists with anxiety about the seductions of aesthetics.

Just a few decades after his death, Wilde was described by Havelock Ellis as "an exotic product of a commercial age" (97), a paradox between the conventional and the decadent, the classicist scholar and the urban dandy. This observation captures the tension between artistic

imagination and the constraints of a morally utilitarian society. His Oxonian education, shaped by John Ruskin and Walter Pater, profoundly influenced his conception of art and aesthetic freedom. As editor of *The Woman's World*, Wilde "commissioned numerous articles on classicism, aesthetics, and Greco-Roman culture" (Ackroyd 142), transforming the journal into a space for the rehabilitation of ancient ideals within the moralistic framework of Victorian society. Thus, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* must be understood as an artistic transposition of this aesthetic ethos that elevates beauty as the supreme value and art's autonomy its guiding principle.

The novel's first edition, published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* (1890), caused an unprecedented scandal, and the text was subjected to severe censorship: about five hundred words were removed to suit contemporary moral sensibilities. As Nicholas Frankel demonstrates in his *Annotated, Uncensored Edition* (2011), these deletions were primarily directed at the homosexual content and emotional nuances of the relationship between Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray. In the original manuscript, Hallward confesses: "It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man should ever give to a friend [...] I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly". (Qtd. in Frankel 120). This confession was radically censored in the printed edition, transforming a moment of vulnerability and desire into an idealized reflection on platonic beauty. Other passages, such as the narrator's observation that in Hallward's nature there was "something that was purely feminine in its tenderness" (118), were also removed, diminishing the novel's emotional depth. Censorship, in this sense, was an act of symbolic amputation, reflecting Victorian fears of aestheticized desire.

Press reactions were remarkably virulent: *The Scots Observer* condemned the novel as "a tale fit for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys" (21), while the *St. James's Gazette* published a defence of Wilde, arguing for artistic freedom. These responses became aesthetic manifestos, turning aestheticism into an instrument of cultural opposition. In 1891, Wilde published a revised edition, accompanied by his famous preface—written in an unmistakably aphoristic style—which proclaimed the autonomy of art: "All art is quite useless". (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 9). Far from nihilistic, this statement proclaims that art must serve neither morality nor utility, but its own ideal of beauty—an act of intellectual rebellion in a moralistic age.

In a letter to Ralph Payne, Wilde offers a self-reflexive interpretation of the novel: "Basil Hallward is what I think I am; Lord Henry what the world thinks me; Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps". (*Letters* 263). This triad reveals the fragmented identity that structures the novel—between interiority, image, and aspiration. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* thus expresses a yearning to transcend reality through beauty and idealization.

From this point of view, Wilde's disdain for "good people"—figures of moral and intellectual conformism—must be read as a philosophical critique of mediocrity. For Wilde, "good people" lack spontaneity, incapable of free thought or creative sensitivity, a notion echoed in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), whose working title, *A Good Woman*, betrays the author's irony toward moral conventions. There, "goodness" is a fragile social construct, a pretext for exclusion, and virtue becomes a form of hypocrisy. (*Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde 47). Moral irony becomes Wilde's aesthetic strategy, undermining conventional value systems.

In *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891), Wilde formulates his aesthetic philosophy: "Nothing should be able to rob a man at all. What a man really has is what is in him. What is outside of him should be a matter of no importance". (17). For him, interiority becomes the source of freedom, and artistic creation its expression. He also adds that "The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful" (30), establishing a fundamental dichotomy between social utilitarianism and aesthetic individuality. This contrast supports the entire ideological edifice of Wilde's aestheticism and grounds the reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a manifesto of aesthetic freedom against moral uniformity.

The novel thus becomes an exploration of art and ethics, and of identity's fragility under social pressure. It proposes a dual inquiry: that of the artist confronted with the public and that of art confronted with its own meaning. This study seeks to delve deeper into these tensions, examining how *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflects the conflict between aestheticism and morality, classical scholarship and decadent modernity, creative individualism and the collective pressures of the Victorian era. In this sense, the novel is not merely a text of decadence, but a dialectical synthesis of the classical Apollonian and the Dionysian of late modernity, erudition and scandal, beauty and damnation—an expression of aesthetic freedom in its purest form.

Oscar Wilde and the Art of Becoming

Oscar Wilde, born in Dublin on 16 October 1854 into a family driven by cultural ambition, began his life under the sign of Libra—an astrological symbol that metaphorically prefigures his lifelong oscillation between form and impulse, aesthetic order and existential chaos. Beyond this zodiacal coincidence, such "oscillation" becomes an ontological principle in the structure of his personality. His biography, read retrospectively, confirms—almost with prophetic logic—this inner dynamic between stability and crisis, self-affirmation and dissolution. As Richard Ellmann notes, "Wilde emerges as one of the most remarkable and controversial figures in the history of English literature—or even world literature—having pursued a career that can be described, without exaggeration, as 'kaleidoscopic and at the same time catastrophic'." (5). Ellmann's remark offers a key to understanding Wilde: he simultaneously embodies the paradigmatic figure of the *fin de siècle* aesthete and the artist who becomes, unintentionally, his own experiment.

In his academic youth, Wilde formulated a self-reflexive vision of his public destiny—an early awareness of the performativity of his identity. His declaration, "Somehow or other I'll be famous, and if not famous, I'll be notorious" (Qtd. in Mendelssohn 24), was, as contemporaries recall, addressed to his friend William Ward. Here, the Wildean concept of becoming through spectacle is crystallized: fame is secondary to the act of turning oneself into a public work. This self-declaration is performative, a conscious act of self-institution through which Wilde becomes, above all, an aesthete of the self.

The well-known episode of his 1882 arrival in America—when he allegedly told the customs officers, "Nothing [...] but my genius"—must be treated with greater historical and critical precision. Although this formulation has become emblematic of the mythology surrounding his personality, it is not attested in contemporary sources. The line, first appearing in *The Oscar Wilde Calendar* (1910), edited by Stuart Mason, is likely apocryphal. Yet this very biographical ambiguity has symbolic value. Rather than dismissing it, we can read the story as a collective projection of the Wildean spirit—a fabrication that expresses the essence of his reputation: that of an artist perceived by Mason as endowed with "a provocative, ostentatious genius incompatible with the institutional normativity of the age". (17). Even if the episode is not factual, it remains revealing in what it suggests about how Wilde was imagined and mythologized.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Wilde was no longer merely an aesthete or dandy, but had become a cultural symptom of late modernity. His transformation into a *cause célèbre* revealed how Victorian society, seemingly morally solid, exorcised its anxieties by demonising the exceptional. His figure, once admired in literary salons and the refined circles of the aristocracy, was recorded by the press and public opinion as that of a poseur, a "dangerous" artist defined by his refusal of conformity. Here it is necessary to mention the Souls group, that London intellectual-aristocratic elite who, although fascinated by Wilde's spirit and humour, never truly integrated him. His relationship with the Souls perfectly illustrates what Ari Adut has called "the conspiracy of tolerance" (228): ironic acceptance coupled with latent rejection. The Souls invited him, cultivated him, and accepted his dedications in *The House of Pomegranates*, but abandoned him as soon as his eccentricity became undesirable. This exclusion was inseparable from his status as an Irish outsider in imperial England—a status Wilde later weaponised, citing the rejection of *Salomé* as proof of systemic marginality, turning exclusion itself into symbolic capital.

This ambivalence—being simultaneously celebrated and condemned—defines the paradoxical reception of Wilde's aestheticism. For the Victorian aristocracy, aestheticism was a "religion of beauty" without a moral or social utility, which made it both fascinating and threatening. Tolerance toward Wilde was purely rhetorical, a double morality that allowed society to condemn Wilde publicly while consuming him privately.

Before this paradoxical consecration, however, Wilde had followed an intellectually rigorous path. After graduating from Portora Royal School—a respectable, albeit provincial institution—and then at Trinity College, Dublin, he distinguished himself in ancient Greek language and literature. The Berkeley Gold Medal, established to encourage Bachelor of Arts students in the study of Greek, marks an early recognition of his commitment to Hellenic culture. His formative relationship with John Pentland Mahaffy—tutor, mentor, friend and later collaborator on *Social Life in Greece* (1874)—was crucial. Mahaffy, a scholar balancing sage-life wisdom with academic professionalism, inspired Wilde, who "wanted, perhaps, to be a professional academic as well as a sage". (Ross 141). This double tension—between academicism and wisdom, rigour and hedonism—would mark the entire Wildean aesthetic.

Wilde later described Mahaffy as "my first and best teacher and the scholar who showed me how to love Greek things" (Qtd. in Sanders 201)—a phrase loaded with semantic ambiguity, since the term "Greek" could, in the Victorian cultural code, serve as a euphemism

for homosexuality, adding symbolic and affective depth to their bond. Their journey to Greece was not merely a study trip, but a spiritual initiation—a Grand Tour transformed into an exercise in aesthetic self-discovery. For Wilde, Greece represented an "ideal homeland" of the spirit, the place where form and idea, beauty and truth, meet in Platonic harmony. Through Mahaffy, Wilde developed not only his taste for philosophical argumentation, but also his sensitivity to what Plato called *to kalon*[1]—the pure, non-functional beauty that generates an ontological tension between self and world—an idea central to his mature aesthetics, in which art transfigures life rather than imitating it.

At Oxford, Wilde entered an environment where the classical culture was not merely an object of scholarly study, but a genuine way of being—a living cultural paradigm, an ethos of intellectual spirit and beauty. The intellectual atmosphere was animated by figures such as Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol College, erudite theologian, and canonical translator of the Platonic works. Jowett's authority was both revered and ironized, as revealed by the well-known epigram:

> Here come I, my name is Jowett.
> All there is to know I know it.
> I am Master of this College
> What I don't know is not knowledge! (Qtd. in Almond 33)

Although humorous, this versification suggests the seriousness of the academic environment in which Wilde was formed—an intellectual space where authority and the discipline of knowledge were almost sacred. In the same context, Henry Liddell, dean of Christ Church and co-author of the famous *Greek-English Lexicon*, upheld a high standard of philological excellence. Access to the seventh edition of the Liddell-Scott lexicon was, at the time, equivalent to entering a community of initiates for whom Greek was not merely a research tool, but an elitist cultural code—a language of spirit and refinement.

The intersection of philological erudition and literary imagination—reflected in the relationship between Henry Liddell and Lewis Carroll—shows that Wilde was formed in a space where the aesthetic and the intellectual coexisted organically. Oxford thus became for him an ideal *topos*, a "Greece of the spirit", where the values of Antiquity were revived in modern forms without losing their aspiration to the aesthetic absolute. This period not only consolidated his intellectual formation, but also provided the symbolic infrastructure for his later project: constructing his life as a work of art grounded in classical culture, aesthetic rhetoric, and social defiance.

This disciplined erudition was what Wilde had long sought since entering Magdalen College—an institution rooted in intellectual tradition, where the aspiration to the classical ideal was intertwined with the freedom of aesthetic speculation. In *De Profundis*, in a grave and confessional tone, Wilde identifies two defining moments in his life: his father's decision to send him to Oxford and his later imprisonment. As Richard Ellmann points out, this contains "a dose of poetic license" (188), since Wilde himself who, following an examination in his third year at Trinity College, Dublin, obtained a demyship at Oxford—an act of personal merit rather than paternal directive. Symbolically, however, the reference to Oxford becomes in his text a sign of spiritual initiation—an entry into a higher order of thought and culture. Oxford offered him a space dedicated to intellectual debate and cultural refinement, where the Greek symposium—from *συμπόσιον* to *ἀγάπη*—served as the ontological framework for articulating a Platonic erotic-aesthetic philosophy. The second moment, that of deprivation, marks a collapse into an order of suffering: an institutionalized regime of moral and social exclusion. Thus emerge two antithetical hypostases: on one hand, the life of intellectual dialogue, where *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* shaped his understanding of beauty as a principle of knowledge; on the other, the dungeon—a descent into Dante's chaos, where reading the *Inferno* in the original becomes a meditation on his own moral exile.

The tragic lesson of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta—"Nessun maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice / nella miseria"[2] (Alighieri 121–23)—acquires, for Wilde, a profound existential resonance, echoing a personal past transfigured by trauma. In this experience of suffering, he reinterprets John Milton's adage from *Paradise Lost*: "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n". (254–55). Originally grounded in Puritan moralism, the statement gains in Wilde a new poetic-philosophical dimension, affirming the autonomy of consciousness and the duality of perception—a tension he internalizes both as aesthetic reflection and inner freedom amid suffering.

Wilde's academic notes from his Oxonian period (1874–1878), published only recently, reveals a young scholar who rejected superficiality. These notebooks are not collections of disparate fragments—as the "magpie" metaphor might suggest—but systematic, rigorously thematized records adapted to the exigencies of academic competitions. As Richard Ellmann observes, "Wilde used this and other notebooks not as a 'magpie' picking up and keeping stray bits, but to record substantive content focused on the Chancellor's English Essay Prize topic".

(32). This confirms his seriousness as a thinker already concerned with the intersections of rhetoric, morality, and aesthetics.

His readings ranged widely—from Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Plutarch—to Baudelaire, Swinburne, Pater, Ruskin, Hegel, Renan, T. H. Huxley, Spencer or Mommsen. He also mastered biblical and Shakespearean texts and showed an early capacity to anticipate his own literary concerns. His studies in *Literae Humaniores*, focused on classical culture, provided a framework comparable to the theology (*Res Divinae*)[3] that his mentor, Jowett, had pursued. Although Wilde did not seek an ecclesiastical career, his intellectual ambition approached that of contemporary theologians, aiming at a moral-aesthetic understanding of existence.

A graduate of *The Greats*, shaped by a literary and nationalist upbringing—his mother being a figure of the Irish Cultural Renaissance—and influenced by Oxford Hegelians, Wilde entered authoritatively into debates on Hellenistic philosophy, Egyptian art, Romantic idealism and the tension between eternity and corporeality. These threads later resurfaced in his creative work—his prose, drama and, most notably *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where classical erudition becomes an authentic aesthetic of ethics.

Wilde's personal onomastics reflect notable cultural and genealogical density. The name "Oscar" was linked, in family tradition, both to Oscar, son of the legendary Ossian in Celtic mythology, and—according to an apocryphal tale—to King Oskar I of Sweden. Recent biographies, however, refute this direct association, showing that his father, Sir William Wilde, did indeed receive the Order of the Polar Star from King Charles XV in 1862, but that the tale of a "royal" baptism appears to be "a sentimental invention of his mother, Lady Wilde". (Sherard 62). The name "Fingal", Ossian's father, symbolized the liberator of Ireland under the poetic name Éirinn (anglicized *Erin*), while "O'Flahertie" evoked an old Galway clan renowned for strength and fighting spirit.

Wilde came under the direct influence of John Ruskin—promoter of Pre-Raphaelitism and fervent defender of the Italian Renaissance—and Walter Pater, theorist of aestheticism. Under their tutelage, Wilde reinterpreted the tradition of the Italian Grand Tour, making formative journeys to Turin, Milan, Genoa, Florence, Padua, Venice and Ravenna. These experiences enabled him to develop a synthesis between archaic Greek culture and the aesthetic ideals of classical Rome, articulating a vision in which beauty becomes an end in itself. Rejecting industrialism and mass production, he advocated authenticity, uniqueness

and an aesthetic untainted by utilitarianism. His words—"It is better to be beautiful than to be good. But it is better to be good than to be ugly" (*The Soul of Man* 61)—represent not merely a refined paradox, but a reflection on the duality between appearance and ethics. Over time, Wilde emerged as a cultural arbiter within the Victorian aesthetic movement.

Oscar Wilde further shaped his public identity after his Parisian experience in spring 1883, a period characterized by intellectual sociability in cafés and salons, and by his "active integration into the cultural and social networks of the age". (Ackroyd 7). His earlier promise—not to remain an obscure academic, but to become a major artistic creator, whether poet, playwright or narrator—reveals both vocational clarity and an aspiration to a quasi-mythical stature, symbolically expressed as being 'in the lap of the gods". (7). His continued concern with academia and class is evident in his confession: "I often think with some regret of my Oxford days and wish I had not left Parnassus for Piccadilly". (Qtd. in Frankel 45). This reflection reveals not only nostalgia for his university days, but also an awareness of the social and material compromises inherent in London public life. His involvement in the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies—attending its inaugural meeting at the Freemason's Tavern on 16 June 1879—and his application to translate Greek for George MacMillan (after traveling in Greece with him), attest to sustained academic commitment and his ambition to build a solid intellectual career. Later, after the birth of his first son and amid financial difficulties, Wilde applied, unsuccessfully, for the post of inspector of schools—formerly held by Matthew Arnold—supported by recommendations such as Mahaffy's. These aspects reveal the intersection of intellectual affirmation, material security, and the evolving artistic identity that defined Wilde's early career.

Wilde's 1884 marriage to Constance Lloyd, situated in "a respectable but not necessarily extremely wealthy social environment," as Ashley Robins points out (144), acquires a special symbolic dimension when we analyse the way he describes his future wife in a letter addressed to the actress Lillie Langtry, to whom he confessed with aesthetic sincerity:

> I am going to be married to a beautiful young girl called Constance Lloyd, a grave, slight, violet-eyed little Artemis, with great coils of heavy brown hair which make her flower-like head droop like a flower, and wonderful ivory hands which draw music from the piano so sweet that the birds stop singing to listen to her". (Wilde, *Letters* 228)

This idealization, addressed to a worldly figure he admired, reveals the tension between the public image of the marriage and Wilde's privately shifting identity. At the same time, the influence of Robert Ross—whose "confident and discreet" homosexual profile left "a lasting mark on his self-perception and creative trajectory" (146)—offered Wilde an existential and creative counterpoint. Ross's admiration and discreet support for homosexual relationships opened a conceptual space in which "Greek love" became both lived experience and aesthetic resource, making sexual experimentation, as Robins observes, "an integral element of the process of self-knowledge and creative development". (146-147).

London's cultural milieu also defined Wilde's position within theatrical circles, where figures such as Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt played central roles. Wilde met them around 1879, and his flamboyant gesture toward Bernhardt in Folkestone—throwing a bouquet of lilacs at her feet—exemplifies the theatrical manner in which "Wilde constructed and performed social relations". (Sherard 33). This admiration for Bernhardt "influenced the very way in which Wilde shaped his own public persona", as Sherard notes (34), partly modelled on the French artist. Connections with figures such as James Abbott McNeill Whistler further reinforced his image as a "self-proclaimed Professor of Aesthetics". (Ackroyd 9). His public image became a performance of elegance and sartorial eccentricity, from *pêcheur*[4] trousers and silk stockings in varying colours to the conspicuous flower in his buttonhole.[5]

Peter Ackroyd's "imaginary testament" attributed to Wilde (7) highlights the contradictory complexity of his personality through a subjective narrative perspective: "magician and prophet", "beggar and saint", an individual whose "wonders the world scorned to flatter ...". (7). This paradoxical image, in which Wilde was sometimes perceived as a "prehistoric animal" or a "stray dog", reflects both his social stigmatization and resilience, salvation being achieved through the "persuasive power of literature". (7). Wilde was deeply aware of his dual role: Solomon and Job, capable of great pleasures and profound suffering. The sense of belonging to a tradition marked by suffering and exile, filtered "through Irish legends and reflection on social marginalization" (Frankel 52) constitutes the core of his identity. This awareness manifests itself in his navigation between "the decadent luxury of London's Strand and the periods of financial and social hardship in Paris, where he lived under the pseudonym Sebastian Melmoth" (53)—an allusion to Saint Sebastian and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*. This final mask symbolizes a 'universe of masks", where

intelligence shielded itself through eccentricity and frivolity, as a defensive strategy against the consequences of excessive sincerity.

Regarding sexual orientation, Ashley Robins dismisses the idea that Ross "originally seduced" Wilde at the age of thirty-two, calling it "highly improbable". (144). Wilde was likely already aware of his homosexuality, perhaps through "frustrating and even repulsive experiences in married life" (146), making him receptive to intimacy with Ross. Although younger, Ross may have introduced "new and more ambitious forms of homosexual expression" (146–147), further integrating sexual exploration into Wilde's personal and artistic evolution.

Wildean Dualities and the Fall of the Ideal

A careful reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* shows that the narrative functions primarily on a literal and conceptual level: it examines not the moral corruptibility of the individual, but the corruptibility of art and its relationship to human perception and reality. Rather than simply depicting a character's moral decline, the novel reflects on the status of art, its power to transcend life's ephemerality, and the intersections of aesthetics with ethics, psychology, and social perception. The novel's conceptual structure rests on oppositions—idealism versus materialism, altruism versus egoism, mind versus brain, soul versus body, perfection versus degradation, beauty versus ugliness. Within this dialectical system, the motto "Truth in art is the unity of a thing with itself" (*The Picture* 97)—derived from Wilde's aesthetic philosophy—becomes the focal point of a contemplative, speculative and reflexive process resonating with the Greek notion of θεωρία, understood not simply as a "philosophical vision", but as an act of elevated perception—an intellectual contemplation presupposing a higher level of artistic discernment and receptivity. In this paradigm, art aligned with popular taste is linked to mediocrity, superficiality and an inability to transcend the banal. As Wilde states, "All art is at once surface and symbol./ Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril./ Those who read the symbol do so at their peril". (67). This duality of art—as surface and symbol—underscores the tension between appearance and essence, phenomenon and concept, immediate beauty and hidden meaning.

The novel has generated a remarkable diversity of critical interpretations. Ari Adut first perceives it as "an attack on late Victorian hypocrisy" (350), stressing its social and moral critiques embedded in the characters' dialogues and decisions. He also sees it as "the story of the domination of an older man by a handsome young man" (237), emphasizing the

psychological, seductive, and erotic dimensions of the relationships between the characters, especially between Dorian Gray and Lord Henry Wotton. A third interpretation views the work as "a sophisticated reinterpretation of Goethe's *Faust*, in which Wilde's protagonist becomes the prototype of the man dominated by Saint Bernard's *curiositas*, after having sold his soul to Lord Henry Wotton's Mephistopheles" (355), underlining the universal theme of the pact with evil, the desire for absolute knowledge, and the allure of transgression. In this light, the narrative can be perceived as a "story about the pact with the devil" (Woodcock 283), resuming the fundamental tension between art and life—a tension Wilde repeatedly explores in his essays, where aesthetics becomes both a mode of living and an existential danger.

Dorian Gray is portrayed as a hyper-self-conscious artist whose pathological projections—onto others and onto his own portrait—catalyze his moral and aesthetic decline. His encounter with Basil Hallward, who sees in him a new creative force—"I see things differently, I think of them differently. I can now recreate life in a way that was hidden from me before" (Wilde, *The Picture* 7)—initiates a tragedy that is at once aesthetic, moral and psychological. Yet the potential of this "ideal thing" is lost through Dorian's moral weakness, his fixation on ephemeral beauty and his failure to integrate emotional responsibility into artistic creation. Hallward becomes an ambivalent figure, a corrupted angel of benevolence whose subtle influence contributes to Dorian's moral degradation, a dynamic reflected in the protagonist's relationship with Sibyl Vane, the fragile actress whose beauty reiterates Wilde's own mechanisms of idealizing the women in his life. Wilde's perception of Constance Lloyd—described to his friend Thomas Waldo Story as "quite young, very grave, and mystical, with wonderful eyes, and dark brown coils of hair" (Wilde, *The Letters* 87), alongside the confession "We are of course desperately in love" (89)—is transfigured into the novel's configuration of femininity as an aesthetic object vulnerable to destruction. This parallel intensifies when the description of Constance reappears in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through Sibyl—"quite young, very grave, and mystical" with "wonderful eyes, and dark brown coils of hair [...]" (Wilde, *The Picture* 19)—serving as a self-referential sign of Wilde's tendency to aestheticize intimate reality into fiction. As a symbol of fleeting beauty and irretrievable innocence, Sibyl Vane embodies the artist's desires, fears, and conflicts, representing an aesthetic ideal so delicate that its corruption becomes the inevitable prelude to catastrophe.

Dorian's personal drama extends into his relationships, and the degradation of the portrait—reflecting his moral decay—becomes a metaphor for the dissolution of integrity,

vanity and morbid curiosity. Awareness of the consequences of one's own sins, superficiality and hypocrisy culminates in the murder of Basil Hallward. This act serves as a prelude to a paradoxical liberation that tragically culminates in Dorian's death, while emphasizing the tension between the desire to immortalize beauty and the inevitability of biological and moral decay. At this culminating moment, the roles of model and portrait reverse, revealing the illusory fragility of youth. The portrait regains its crystalline beauty, while Dorian becomes "an ugly old man" (Wilde*, The Picture* 209), reminding the reader that only art preserves youth intact, while life merely imitates the irreversible passage of time—fragile and imperfect. Andrew Sanders, one of the most authoritative scholars of Victorian literature, interprets *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as "a tragedy of sorts with the subtext of a morality play; its self destructive, darkly sinning central character is at once a desperate suicide and a martyr". (464). This highlights the novel's dual nature, oscillating between personal tragedy and moral discourse, articulated on multiple interpretative levels. Dorian is both the author of his destruction and the victim of fate, and this ambivalence gives the text its dramatic tension, reflecting both the fragility of the human condition and the pull of contradictory aesthetic and moral impulses. The obsessive fear of aging and the wish to manipulate time justify George Woodcock's description of "a neo-alchemical dream of the magic preservation of youth". (22). Lord Henry's warning—"Time is jealous of [him] and wars against [his] lilies and [his] roses" (Wilde, *The Picture* 103)—underscores the inexorability of time and the imperative of youthful experience: "There is nothing better or more beautiful in this world, there is nothing else but youth". (204). This fixation on ephemerality and the artificial preservation of beauty becomes the novel's central axis, offering both "an explanation of Dorian's ambivalence and a philosophical explanation of the impossibility of reconciling aesthetic desires with the biological and moral realities of human existence". (Sanders 464).

In Wilde's work, the figure of the double or *doppelgänger* symbolizes self-fragmentation and inner division, illustrating both otherness and the tension between morality and immorality, ideal and reality. This doubling triggers identity crises and existential anxiety, reflecting Wilde's fascination with magical rituals and occult practices—not as superstitions, but as ways to test personal limits and feel the weight of destiny. His biography reveals a particular sensitivity to such metaphysical tendencies, manifested in ritualistic prohibitions: "To drive in a cab with a white horse, and at dinner he would object if there were mauve flowers on the

table". (Woodcock 38–39). This blend of aesthetic fastidiousness and obsessive concern with premonitory signs reveals how Wilde lived the aesthetic and metaphysical simultaneously.

After his imprisonment, Wilde's discourse shifts toward reflections on failure and inevitable decadence, illustrated through historical figures like Napoleon, Tiberius, and Christ, invoked "with a mixture of pathos, irony, and a bitter awareness of the paradox of greatness and decline". (Ellmann 502–508). This marks a deepened concern with the fragility of the modern subject, caught between decadent aesthetics and social pressure. Aesthetic ideals become seductive yet illusory and sinful, and daily experience appears "even more treacherous" by contrast, as Wilde emphasizes in *De Profundis.* (1905, 72).

This complex aesthetic perception reaches exceptional refinement in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where Walter Pater's influence—especially regarding Roman decadence and Greek pleasure—shapes the meditation on luxury, ephemerality, and effervescent beauty. Basil Hallward's studio is described with synesthetic precision that engages all the senses: "the rich odour of roses", "the heavy scent of the lilac" and "the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn" (Wilde 18–19), creating a space where beauty becomes simultaneously contemplative object and symbol of human frailty. The shadows of birds cast on silk curtains evoke a "momentary Japanesse effect" (18), capturing the paradox of stasis and movement. Lord Henry Wotton, positioned marginally in this scene, acts as both spectator and implicit critic, embodying the corrosive influence of decadent aestheticism—echoing Henry James's remark that "The artist's studio is a natural setting for the critic". (Qtd. in Mendelssohn 91). This interplay of space, aroma, movement, and character positioning heightens the tension between real and imaginary, ideal and vulgar, contemplation and moral criticism. The dialogue between Basil and Lord Henry reveals, on one hand, the aspiration toward a classical aesthetic ideal, reimagined through New Hellenism, and, on the other, a critique of society expressed through a "madness" that fractures the harmony between ideal and reality, generating "a realism that is vulgar and an idealism that is void". (Wilde, *The Picture* 105). Basil—whose name derives from the Greek βασιλεύς, symbolizing the authentic artist—embodies the artist "who upholds the absolute aesthetic ideals promoted by Wilde: New Hellenism, New Individualism and Art for Art's Sake". (Chislett 357). In contrast, Lord Henry represents the decadent, cynical force that undermines this ideal and shapes Dorian's destiny. The text explicitly states: "The lad was to the painter who had fashioned the wonderful portrait. He would seek to dominate him ... He would make that wonderful spirit his own. There was something fascinating in this

son of Love and Death" (Wilde 236–37), highlighting how Dorian becomes absorbed into the gray anonymity of decadence. His identity dissolves into an amorphous entity devoid of individuality—revealing the corrosive impact of Henry's influence and the vulnerability of the aesthetic self.

The novel's finale underscores the irreversibility of decline and the moral and physical degradation that accompany the loss of identity:

> When they entered they found, hanging upon the wall, a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognised who it was. (336)

Colin Cavendish-Jones notes that this "morbid anonymity" becomes identifiable only through the rings, which, like the portrait, function as "immortal artefacts", evoking the paradox *Ars longa, vita brevis*.[6] (255). This final scene not only concludes the narrative tragically, but also offers a synthesis of the modern subject—victim of decadent aestheticism and of a reality that replaces the ideal with the vulgar—underscoring the tension between beauty, ephemerality and morality. Wilde thus reflects on the human condition: the struggle between the desire for aesthetic immortality and the inevitability of decay, sensory exaltation and ethical fragility.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, Oscar Wilde's intellectual and literary profile—as well as his canonical work *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—embodies the fundamental tension between radical aestheticism and the moral constraints of the late Victorian era, between the desire for absolute beauty and the awareness of moral decline. This dialectic reflects the dissonance between his classical training at Trinity College and Oxford—under the guidance of John Pentland Mahaffy, who instilled in him a love of the Greek spirit—and the restrictive values of the society that Wilde "seduces and ironizes at the same time". (Robins 112). His aesthetics, grounded in the Greek ideal of *theōría*— contemplation and self-definition—thus function as a form of inner resistance and ethical individualism. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, often superficially read as

a plea for hedonism, is in fact a subtle theoretical construction in which art and ethics are inseparable. As Wilde asserts in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, "Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known" (35): art becomes ontological self-affirmation against conformity. The portrait of Dorian operates as an ontological device—"a mirror of the split between appearance and essence, aesthetic permanence and corporeal ephemerality". (Frankel 214).

Thus, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* must be understood as an act of intellectual defiance—a meditation on aesthetic freedom and the price of individualism within a morally prescriptive society. Wilde, trained in classicism yet living in an age of decadence and hypocrisy, turns the novel into a space of controlled transgression, where each aphorism becomes an act of selection and subversion, confirming Harold Bloom's claim: "At the bottom and in essence, Wilde is a master in the art of selection". (69). The present study highlights this dialectic—between aestheticism and morality, individualism and conformism, classical culture and modern decadence—to demonstrate that Wildean aesthetics is not mere stylistic play, but a critical reflection on the relationship between art and existence. In view of the censorship of the *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* version and subsequent revisions analyzed by Nicholas Frankel (198–200), it becomes clear that Wilde does not endorse moralizing art, but one that, through ambiguity and transgression, exposes Victorian duplicity. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ultimately transcends fiction: it is an encrypted self-portrait, a meditation on the violence of social repression, and proof that, beyond scandal and exile, art preserves its autonomy, dignity, and lasting significance.

Notes

1 *To kalon* is a key concept in Platonic philosophy, designating ideal, pure, and eternal beauty. In the Symposium, Plato describes the absolute form of beauty: "He will see the beauty now, not in the likeness of a face or of hands or of anything else that belongs to the body ... but the beauty itself, absolute, pure, unmixed ... but the divine beauty itself, in its one form". (Symposium, 211d–212a, trans. Nehamas and Woodruff).

2 "There is no greater sorrow than to recall in misery the time when we were happy".

3 *Res Divinae* is a Latin phrase denoting the study of theology, especially in the academic context of Oxford. In contrast to Literae Humaniores, which includes the study of classical languages, philosophy, and ancient history, Res Divinae refers to the theological discipline–the study of religious doctrines, the Bible, and patristic writings–and was frequently pursued by those preparing for ordination in the Church of England.

[4] Pêcheur trousers were loose, short or rolled-up trousers associated with the late 19th-century bohemian style, often worn by eccentric artists or intellectuals, suggesting a mixture of rustic ease and affected style.

[5] The buttonhole flower, especially the green carnation, was a discreet symbol of homosexual identity in the decadent circles of Victorian London, popularized by Oscar Wilde and his circle. This type of clothing symbolism functioned as a code of recognition in a repressive social context.

[6] "Art is long, life is short".

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The Christ as Man: The Secular Jesus of Oscar Wilde's De Profundis *and Richard Bruce Nugent's "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit"*

O Cristo como Homem: O Jesus secular de De Profundis*, de Oscar Wilde, e "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit", de Richard Bruce Nugent*

Ana Carolina Vilalta Caetano

Abstract: *This article aims at comparatively analyzing Oscar Wilde's epistle De Profundis and Richard Bruce Nugent's short story "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit", exposing the way in which Wilde's aesthetic philosophy and humanized version of Christ echo in the work of the Harlemite. Through a brief contextualization of the aestheticist and the decadent movements, the analysis introduces the prevailing theme of religion, elucidating the different modes of representation within Catholicism and Protestantism. Wilde's depiction of Jesus is examined with both faiths in mind, as well as his interest in Hellenism. His Christ is a poet, an artist creating Himself and reshaping humanity with the power of his imagination. Additionally, by grounding Jesus' miracles in reality and negating Catholic transubstantiation, Wilde is able to further secularize him. Nugent's fictionalized depiction of Jesus is highly indebted to Wilde, who is cited and referenced in his oeuvre. In the short story, Christ is a poet, telling the story of his own myth and commissioning the apostles. His most devout follower is Judas, who aids in the narrativization of their lives by accepting the role of the betrayer. Thus, De Profundis and "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit" are analyzed as decadent texts that represent the Lord as a man and artist.*

Keywords: *Religion; Harlem Renaissance; Decadence; Homoeroticism; Aestheticism.*

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Resumo: *Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar comparativamente a carta De Profundis, de Oscar Wilde, e o conto "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit", de Richard Bruce Nugent, expondo a maneira como a filosofia estética de Wilde e sua versão humanizada de Cristo ecoam na obra do harlemita. Por meio de uma breve contextualização dos movimentos esteticista e decadente, a análise introduz a recorrente temática religiosa, e elucida os diferentes modos de representação dentro do catolicismo e do protestantismo. A maneira como Wilde retrata Jesus é examinada tendo em mente ambas as crenças, assim como seu interesse pelo helenismo. O Cristo wildeano é um poeta, um artista que cria a si mesmo e recria a humanidade com o poder de sua imaginação. Ao pautar os milagres de Jesus na realidade e negar a transubstanciação católica, Wilde consegue secularizá-lo de modo mais incisivo. A representação ficcional de Jesus por Nugent deve muito a Wilde, que é citado e referenciado em sua obra. No conto, Cristo é um poeta, contando a história de seu próprio mito e nomeando os apóstolos. Seu seguidor mais devoto é Judas, que auxilia na narrativização de suas vidas ao aceitar o papel de traidor. Assim, De Profundis e "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit" são analisados como textos decadentes que representam o Cristo como homem e artista.*

Palavras-Chaves: *Religião; Renascimento do Harlem; Decadência; Homoerotismo; Esteticismo.*

Oscar Wilde was interested in antithesis: satirizing it, turning it into a plot device, and using it as a starting point for critique. It is no surprise, then, that, throughout the end of the nineteenth century, his art engaged with two contrarian — and complementary — movements, aestheticism and decadence. If the aesthetes aimed "to be counter-cultural, to oppose the imperative to belong to what is mainstream and established" (Evangelista 49) through the assertion that art did not need to be bound by morals and didacticism, the decadents sought to pervert what was established and embrace what was considered immoral. In turn, Harlem Renaissance author Richard Bruce Nugent was interested in Wilde. In *Infants of the Spring* (1932), a *roman à clef* written by fellow Harlemite Wallace Thurman during the height of the New Negro movement, a fictionalized version of Nugent unabashedly tells his friends, "I think that Oscar Wilde is the greatest man that ever lived" (13). Throughout his life, Nugent would cite Wilde in short-stories and borrow his philosophy of aesthetics for his fiction. In view of this dialogic relationship, the following article aims at analyzing how Wilde's decadent perspective on Christianity, more importantly on the figure of Jesus Christ, present in the

epistle *De Profundis* (1909) finds its way into Nugent's homoerotic biblical tale, "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit".

The Christ as Artist

De Profundis, Wilde's solemn letter to former lover Lord Alfred Douglas, was written during his incarceration in Reading Gaol, between January and March 1897. In the epistle, he recounts pivotal events of his life, such as his years reading classics at Oxford, his mother's passing and his tumultuous relationship with Douglas. The introspective and philosophical tone turns the author into a penitent seeking absolution, as he wrestles with feelings of guilt and shame. The letter is primarily concerned with a "fresh mode of self-realization" (52), a topic intricately connected to the themes of forgiveness, acceptance and honesty. According to Buckler, "the creative imagination upon which his salvation depended could not, he knew, exist and have a constructive result unless he accepted and felt genuine sympathy for himself, his world, and his correspondent as in themselves they actually were" (96). In 1905, after almost a decade since its conception, the edited and abridged manuscript was published by Robert Ross, Wilde's closest friend and literary executor, and titled *De Profundis*.

At Reading Gaol, the author had been deprived of "the oral culture he thrived in and on. In prison, speech itself was punished, and Wilde was found to be in frequent violation of such rules, and was punished accordingly", the constant abuse leaving him dependent on the printed word — more specifically, on the King James Bible, the only book available to him for some time (Killeen 165). His newfound proximity to Protestant theological texts is echoed in *De Profundis*' aesthetic outlook, as "facing up to Reality rather than Romance is the dominating tone of the prison letter, including the depiction of Jesus" (165). Buckler emphasizes that "his betrayal of the imagination and thus of his most gifted and authentic — his Apollonian-self — is also the issue on which the protagonist stands unequivocally self-indicted. On a question so central to his identity only he can assume blame" (101). It is possible, then, to argue that the Wilde represented in the epistle is at a crossroads, divided between the realist text he so harshly criticized throughout his life and the artificial prose that he perfected but ultimately disgraced him.

While aestheticism was shaped by Hellenism and its systematization within the Oxford *Literae Humaniores* course, decadence was largely shaped by Christianity — its dichotomies,

and its lavish art. The depiction of sinful behavior depended on the existence of a fixed moral code, and the decadent writers found in Catholicism's articulation of sin, forgiveness and punishment the ideal framework for their characters' actions. In *Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism*, Martin Lockerd contends that,

> The term "Catholicism" itself contains multitudes. If we define it in relation to discourse, it embraces not only all discursive acts associated with the institutional Church (the seven sacraments, the liturgy, the various prayers and feast days) but also, to a lesser extent, the cultural products of Catholics (Dante's *Commedia*, Guido Reni's *Saint Sebastian*, Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*). In its most expansive sense, then, decadent Catholicism delineates an imaginative space in which the discursive acts of decadence and Catholicism engage, interact, overlap, or simply breathe the same air... Whatever the particulars, this imaginative space is invariably concerned with sin as a real transgression of a divine order. (14)

In Ellis Hanson's seminal book *Decadence and Catholicism*, Wilde's relationship with Christian dogma is analyzed through its representation in his works. Hanson remarks that his early poems showed his allegiance both to Ancient Greece and the Vatican (230), and it is known that Wilde seriously considered converting to Catholicism while at Oxford in 1875, his sophomore year reading Classics (235). To Hanson, the Catholic Church provided Wilde "with an ideal stage. For his dandyism and his aestheticism, there was beautiful ritual and passionate faith. For his taste for scandal, there was a discourse of sin. And for his aesthetic and sexual martyrdom, there was the language of penitence and hagiography" (231). His attraction to Christianity and the Bible was also discursive, "as the most beautiful lie ever told" and as a text similar to an improbable literary theory in its dependence on faith and skilled deceit to convince the skeptics of its truthfulness (234).

Christ is repeatedly mentioned in *De Profundis*. He is categorized as a poet, and his life is declared an idyll. Wilde claims that "it is the imaginative quality of Christ's own nature that makes him this palpitating centre of romance. The strange figures of poetic drama and ballad are made by the imagination of others, but out of his own imagination entirely did Jesus of Nazareth create himself" (69). Christ, the artist, creates himself, his ultimate work of art. In an effort of approximation, Christ also becomes an aesthete, a devotee to beauty, having "the power of not merely saying beautiful things himself, but of making other people say beautiful things to him" (71). Wilde's ideas in *De Profundis* are syncretic. He Hellenizes Christian rituals, such as the Mass,

arguing that it is in the communal answers to the priest that one finds the "survival of the Greek chorus, lost elsewhere to art" (65). His Christ is always figured next to Greek references — from Plato and Sophocles to Thebes and Pelops. *De Profundis* marks Wilde's maturity and his coming into his own version of Catholic faith, but his interest in the subject was perceptible even in earlier works. *Salomé* (1891) is his most memorable religious retelling, but "Wilde also planned to write a play entitled 'Ahab and Isabel', as well as another work that he called the 'Epic of the Cross'" (Hanson 236).

More than a testament to artificiality and a framework for sin, however, decadent Catholicism represents an union between the carnal and the spiritual. According to Lockerd,

> As a religion founded on the literal incarnation of God, the most radical example of spiritual and physical unity in any major religion, Catholicism is actually suited to, if not always vocally in favor of, the poetic-mystic conflation of spiritual and sexual desires. Such theological suitability for the artistic expression of decadent sexuality suggests the extent to which the fin-de-siècle aesthetic can subvert stereotypes of Catholicism as a religion especially opposed to the body in general and to sexuality in particular. (17)

In Catholic iconography, sadomasochistic yearning and devotion are, at times, linked to holiness. Depictions of the suffering and ecstasy of the saints usually combine erotic desire and rapture — Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Sebastian being the most notorious examples, their bodies repeatedly penetrated by arrows, a phallic symbol. Thus, Catholicism offers the language and the aesthetics for the articulation of deviant desires. Lockerd posits that even the celibacy of monasteries and convents became a Decadent obsession, as the seclusion of these spaces facilitated same-sex sexual entanglements (18). Additionally, by utilizing religious imagery to place the expression of sexuality in a scale of morality and remove it from the realm of cultural normativity, the artists of the movement could approach the topic from an even playing field in which homoeroticism and candid heterossexuality were *both* sinful.

Protestantism, on the other hand, offers Wilde the tools to completely humanize — and, to a certain extent, to secularize — Christ. According to Jarlath Killeen, "he grounds his picture of Jesus in theological naturalism, dismissing the issue of miracles magisterially: there are no genuine miracles, no violations of the laws of nature" (165). In *De Profundis*, the author tells his correspondent that he sees

> no difficulty at all in believing that such was the charm of his personality that his mere presence could bring peace to souls in anguish, and that those who touched his garments or his hands forgot their pain; or that as he passed by on the highway of life people who had seen nothing of life's mystery, saw it clearly, and others who had been deaf to every voice but that of pleasure heard for the first time the voice of love and found it as 'musical as Apollo's lute'; or that evil passions fled at his approach, and men whose dull unimaginative lives had been but a mode of death rose as it were from the grave when he called them; or that when he taught on the hillside the multitude forgot their hunger and thirst and the cares of this world, and that to his friends who listened to him as he sat at meat the coarse food seemed delicate, and the water had the taste of good wine, and the whole house became full of the odour and sweetness of nard. (65)

Because Wilde reads the Gospels as literary texts imbued with artistic vision, he is able "to explain the literal through the metaphorical" (Killeen 166). Therefore, it is Christ's personality that brings peace to the sickly, and his mere presence that causes those in agony to forget their pain. In terms of the miracles, the water was not turned into wine, but simply had the taste of it. Further analysis of Wilde's interpretation reveals it to implicitly negate Catholic transubstantiation, as to him the substance itself is never transformed, only the impression of it — the very opposite of the notion of transubstantiation.

To Killeen, the paradoxical nature of the Wildean style manifests itself in the combination of the aforementioned Catholic motifs and the Protestant depiction of Christ. In *De Profundis*,

> Wilde, deprived of the imaginative instruments through which he had constructed his life of the spirit, does allow his visionary imagination to falter and be brought down to earth in the form of the secular Jesus. Yet, he never manages to make this transition fully, and the work is saturated with suggestions of an alternative means of interpretation. Wilde's putative title transforms it into an always already Catholic document, a papal encyclical. (172)

Similarly, when analyzing the complex relationship between Harlem Renaissance artists and religious dogma, Pinkerton argues that "not that many of the writers, artists and architects of the movement were themselves actively Christian; few of them were. But most of them wrestled, nonetheless, with the Christian faith in various ways, often arrogating its abiding

aesthetic and emotional power into their works" (82). This convergence of Catholicism and Protestantism, of organized religion and secularization, of sacred and profane, and of aestheticism and decadence finds its way to Richard Bruce Nugent's *oeuvre* mostly through Wildean texts. *Salomé*, for instance, is referenced numerous times and quoted in his short-story "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (1926), later inspiring two series of drawings, *Salome Dancing* (1925-1930) and *Salome* (1930). In "Slender Length of Beauty" (1920-1930), he rewrites the play as a problematic of doubles and reimagines the princess herself, "the interpolated material" purposefully reinforcing "the Decadent preoccupation with vivid color in Wilde's play" (Mahoney 168). Mahoney describes *Salomé* as crucial and central to "Nugent's later modes of theorizing kinship" and in developing the themes that would permeate his work (165, 168).

Other references to Wilde are scattered throughout his texts — "The Critic as Artist" (1891) appears directly quoted in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade", Wilde himself is mentioned in Nugent's posthumous novel *Gentleman Jigger* (1928-1933; 2008), and in "Pope Pius the Only" (1937) the ironic dandy narrating the story is likely called Algernon in allusion to *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). This makes Wilde a foundational part of Nugent scholarship. He was "a bohemian and decadent aesthete in the tradition of Wilde" (Glick 417), followed Wilde in combining "art and the leisure class, in opposition to middle-class, philistine, masculine practicality" (Schwarz 138), and aspired to "excessive notoriety à la Wilde" (Thurman 31). To Wirth, late executor of Nugent's estate and responsible for the publication of most of his work in the collection *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* (2002), "Nugent began squarely in what might be characterized as the tradition of perfumed decadence" and Wilde's influence is "clear" (41). It is undeniable, then, that Nugent was incredibly well-versed in and inspired by Wildean text, and it makes sense that when creating his fictionalized version of Christ he would turn to *De Profundis*.

The Christ as Man

In 1925, when nineteen-year-old aspiring author Richard Bruce Nugent arrived in Harlem, he encountered a cultural movement of unprecedented proportions. Because of the waves of migration of the southern black population following the end of World War I and thanks to the "astute, economic aggressiveness of black businessmen that had snatched Harlem's newly developed real estate from white middle-class hands", the neighborhood became "the biggest and most elegant

black community in the Western world" (Huggins 14). It was also in 1925 that *The New Negro*, curated and edited by philosopher Alain Locke, was published, documenting the emergence of the 'New Negro' — a direct product of American urbanization and the popularization of Pan-Africanism. According to Locke, what would characterize this new historical moment would be the agency of the African-American to define himself before society, as "so far as he is culturally articulate, we shall let the negro speak for himself" (Locke, 1997, xxv). Nugent was part of the anthology, and, in the following years, his work continued to appear in notable publications. By 1926, he had joined a team of influential young black artists to create *Fire!!*, a modernist literary magazine that opposed the political and aesthetic ideals of the previous generation of Harlemites, namely W.E.B. Dubois and Locke. Nugent had no interest in the good morals and values of the Harlem Renaissance intelligentsia, as he wanted to experiment with art and life. It is important to note, however, that his "brand of aestheticism is often conspicuously racialised and depoliticised at once" (Pinkerton 95), meaning that characters of color permeate his writings, but that raciality is rarely explored at length.

"Tree with Kerioth-Fruit" is part of an unpublished collection now known as *Bible Stories*, and one of five narratives believed to have been written between the late 1920s and early 1930s (Wirth 45). The four surviving[1] stories of Nugent's biblical collection adhere to a loose chronological order and feature some recurring characters. "Beyond Where the Star Stood Still" recounts the journey of the Magi, following Caspar, the king of Ethiopia, Melchior, the Shah of Persia, and Balthasar, the king of Sheba, as they venture out into the desert towards Bethlehem to visit the infant Jesus. Once they reach Herod's palace, Carus, the Tetrarch's prepubescent male lover, leaves his royal position to accompany them after becoming infatuated with Caspar. "The Now Discordant Song of Bells" is narrated from Carus' perspective. Due to the arrival of the Magi and to the force of his blossoming love for Caspar, he exchanges his hedonistic lifestyle for the tenets of Christianity. Back in Ethiopia, years after the birth of the Messiah, Carus realizes that Caspar will only ever see him as a brother, and leaves for Cyrene to tutor one of Caspar's cousins, Simon. "Slender Length of Beauty" recounts the night of Herod's banquet and John the Baptist's death, reimagining Wilde's French play *Salomé*, as previously stated. "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit" portrays Jesus' commissioning of the Twelve Apostles, the Last Supper, the crucifixion and Judas Iscariot's suicide.

"Beyond Where the Star Stood Still", "The Now Discordant Song of Bells" and "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit" are thematically interconnected. The three stories explore the friction

between the love for a perfect God and the love for a flawed person, as well as the inherent tragedy of unrequited feelings. Nugent's retellings of the Gospels question the limits of faith and the meaning of devotion, the ethos of his narratives evident in Carus' insistence that "Love is God" (Nugent 127, 130). In "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit", Judas betrays Jesus because he knows that the other apostles will not, and that the Messiah will be accused of charlatanism if his prophecy proves untrue (145). To protect the legacy of the preachings of Jesus, Judas goes to Pontius Pilate. His last words, as he hangs himself from an olive tree, are "I did but love thee" (146). The idea of sacrificing oneself for love is also present in "The Now Discordant Song of Bells", when Carus unwillingly leaves Ethiopia in order to please Caspar, who wishes him to be his cousin's teacher.

However, more than thematically centralizing sacrifice, "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit" exposes the power of the word and, in Wildean fashion, secularizes Jesus Christ. The narrative begins with John discussing the beauty of a stranger with Simon. Mockingly, they agree that prophets and poets are the same, and Simon speculates that John's interest in the stranger is due to homoerotic attraction. He denies it, claiming to have never indulged in "the Greek refinement", and reiterates his interest in the stranger's words, as "he speaks a poet's tongue" (139). In Nugent's tale, Andrew — known in the Gospels as the first apostle — is never properly introduced, and, instead, the reader is invited to witness John's conversion, the episode that starts the fictionalized commissioning. Days later, John tells Simon the stranger is named Jesus.

In *De Profundis*, Wilde argues that "Christ's place indeed is with the poets. His whole conception of Humanity sprang right out of the imagination and can only be realised by it" (63). In "Tree with Kerioth Fruit", Jesus is represented as "a man inspired — a poet, mad with weighty declamations, who was preparing for martyrdom with majestic gestures. For his power had grown, and his divine madness had inspired the six who loved him and had gained him even more adherents" (142). It is Jesus' ability to create a new conception of humanity and community through imagination that unifies the apostles. Thus, their belief is in the words of the prophet-poet, their faith is in a story.

Judas of Kerioth is the last apostle commissioned, and he becomes the closest to Christ because of his profound understanding of the story being told.

> Judas had heard of the miracles of Jesus, listened to his word repeated, apprehended the beginning of this fantasy, and realized its possible end

> — Judas was a student and knew how a landslide could grow from the journey of one polished pebble. And Judas knew the laws of Moses and the prophecies and the people's need for impetus to keep alive the religion of their fathers... But Judas also knew that poets die giving birth to beauty... (143)

This profound understanding of the function of the word in crafting a reality is the foundation for their love. Jesus sees Judas as his twin, "so alike in thought and desire were they. And in appearance also, for the exact curve of Jesus's eyebrow shaded with deeper brown the darker eyes of Judas, so like Jesus's amber ones" (143). In this context, their twinhood is associated not with the familial bond, but with the concept of complementary halves that also appears in "Slender Length of Beauty". The recurring motif of their undeniable similarity hints at Aristophanes' theory of love in Plato's *Symposium*, which posits that love is a quest to be reunited with one's lost half, as people were divided into two bodies as a punishment from the gods.

> ... Judas was Jesus sculptured on a larger scale and painted more sensuous and passionate. And always Judas stood by Jesus as though to protect him. And was jealous of the affection bestowed on John. For John was the beloved whom Jesus loved as a mother loves her first-born child. But Judas, Jesus knew. ... Through Judas, Jesus could understand the forces he had loosed and, with prophetic poet's eyes, saw also his own end. He read in each happening the event ahead — the event which love blurred for Judas. ...Judas made true Jesus's every saying through understanding. As a parent reads a child's first speech. As a believer explains a prophet. As a man explains a poet. It was a duty of love. (143)

The language emphasizes the complex homoerotic nature of their relationship, characterized simultaneously by jealousy and preternatural comprehension. Moreover, although they are separate, discontinuous beings, there is a peculiar sense of unification. In many ways, Judas and Jesus are narrated as doubles, as if they are the same person divided.

The presence of doubles in literary texts was popularized during the Romantic movement, after the coinage of the term *doppelgänger* by the novelist Jean-Paul Richter in 1796. From the German, it literally translates to "walking companion" or "double walker", but Richter defines it as "those who see themselves" (Bravo 343). Thus, the double is a problematic of identity and vision, and its materialisation is commonly symbolic of imminent death, literal

or metaphorical. The acceptance of the double marks growth, change, and an embrace of the many sides of human subjectivity, but its rejection is usually fatal.

> When the feeling of a genuine otherness, a Romantic vision of the self, finally emerged, it was influenced by political and historical factors (notably the French Revolution) and by idealistic philosophy (Fichte, Über den Bergriffder Wissenschaftslehre, 1794). In a period of political turmoil when established hierarchies were under attack and the authority of the State and the Church were being questioned, the problems of personal identity became of crucial importance, and, against this background, philosophical idealism acted as a metaphysical prop for the theory of the double self. (355)

Doubles can take many forms. In Paul Coates' *The Double and the Other*, he argues that "in love, the other is one's double" (1), a notion that can be easily applied to Judas and Jesus' relationship in Nugent's story. Their understanding makes it possible for Judas to explain the poem-prophecies, and, consequently, to realize them. It is Judas' interpretation — or impression — of the story of Jesus that creates his divinity. To his followers, Christ says "I am the son of God", but to his beloved he confesses that he is the "son of man" (144).

Within the narrative, the proof of Jesus' humanity is also offered through a refutation of miracles. Echoing Wilde's words, Nugent writes that "his quiet tongue could pierce the coma of death inspired by weariness and pain — soothe the invalid and smooth away the fears until the will to live was resurrected. All this Jesus could do with a look, a sound and a caress, so ineluctable was his will and so inspired his being and speech" (144). Here, the events seen as literal are actually metaphors. Just as in *De Profundis*, it is Christ's presence and poetic tongue that heal those in need, his words that resurrect. There is no transubstantiation or feats that defy the possible, his divinity is one of realism. Pinkerton emphasizes that Protestantism was the most practiced strain of Christianity during the Harlem Renaissance (84, 85) and that what led Nugent to biblical subjects were his "decadent sensibilities", further linking him to Wilde (91).

In "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit", Jesus goes mad with his own notion of divinity. By the end of the short story, he problematizes the intrinsic relation between the word and faith, embodying the paradox of religion. He says to Judas,

> "... Knowledge is greater than belief."
> "But thou thyself preachest different, Jesus. Thou sayest, 'Believe and thou shalt dwell in the house of the Lord forever.' "
> And Jesus asked: "Is that not one way of saying that belief leads to knowledge?" He quoted: "Believe and thou shalt know heaven," and after a pause continued, "For as I have said, Judas: I am no more a child, and now I know. I only speak so others may learn to know. First they must believe."
> And Judas lay awake and wept. For he knew. (Nugent 145)

The passage elucidates the supposed irreconcilability of knowledge and belief, since once one knows, there is no need for belief. However, Jesus offers an alternative outlook, positing, instead, that because one believes, one knows. This is how his disciples would be able to "dwell in the house of the Lord forever": their belief in his word would make concrete the metaphysical, his words are not necessarily teachings but inspire knowledge and imagination — that, in its essence, is faith. Similarly, in *De Profundis*, Wilde concludes that "indeed, that is the charm about Christ, when all is said: he is just like a work of art. He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought into his presence one becomes something." (74).

As previously stated, Judas' understanding of Jesus is a fundamental constitutive element of his faith. He knows the story being told and, once Christ announces that one of the apostles will betray him, accepts the role he will have to forcibly play. When, in a moment of clarity, Jesus realizes the price his lover has to pay for the concretization of his preachings, he weeps, as "*he* had betrayed *Judas*" too by breaking his heart (145).

After the crucifixion, grieving, Judas climbs the mountain to the crosses during a storm, and whispers to his beloved, "Thou knowest, Jesus, that had I saved thy life, thou wouldst be even more dead. Even as now in death thou livest to torment me" (146) — these two sentences revealing the sacrifice made in order to preserve Jesus' poems and his reputation as the Messiah. Judas hangs himself from an olive tree, saying "with the poet's tongue he finally had been given: 'I did but love thee'" (146). In the Gospels, Jesus is raised from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion, marking his consolidation as the Lord. The bodily resurrection of Christ is one of the foundational mysteries of Christian faith, and marks the beginning of the Great Commission — the diffusion of the Gospels by the remaining apostles. By having Judas speak "with the poet's tongue", Nugent allows him to finish the narrative Jesus had begun. Judas' actions and choice of words conclude the process of mythmaking and turn Jesus

into a martyr who died for humanity's sins. Judas, who knows and accepts the story, effectively creates Jesus the Lord through his love.

Circling back to Pinkerton's assertion that Nugent's brand of aestheticism was not politicized, it is important to note that, in "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit", even if Jesus and Judas' skin color is never described, there is a parallel to be drawn between Judas' hanging, Jesus' crucifixion and lynching, — especially when taking into consideration that they are doubles that die similarly. The motif was common among Harlemites, and writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude Mckay and Countee Cullen often employed religious imagery and the death of Christ to criticize racial violence. For example, in Hughes' acclaimed poem "Christ in Alabama", which mimics a litany, "Christ is a nigger/Beaten and black" who perishes "on the cross of the South". Only in his aforementioned short story "Pope Pius the Only", published by the literary magazine *Challenge* in 1937, does Nugent explicitly utilize the motif with clear political intent.

The influence of Wilde's *De Profundis* on Nugent's version of Christ is undeniable. By transforming Jesus into a poet, refuting the miracles and centralizing the power of the word in the construction of mythologized narratives, Nugent borrows the Wildean religious philosophy and expands it. He shows Jesus, the artist, creating Himself, his most perfect work of art, and the sacrifices necessary to the desired conclusion. Judas' homoerotic relationship with Jesus, based on their profound understanding of each other as doubles, and his acceptance of the role of the betrayer are fundamental in proving that this Christ is, indeed, the son of man.

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Notes

1 Steve Pinkerton asserts the existence of a fifth story part of the collection, titled "Tunic with a Thousand Pleats" (94-95). The manuscript is available exclusively at the Yale Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The other four stories were published by Thomas Wirth in the book *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance.*

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"What Art is to Us": Exploring Uses and Meanings of Ekphrasis in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray

"O que a arte é para nós": Explorando os usos e sentidos da écfrase em The Picture of Dorian Gray *de Oscar Wilde*

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Abstract: *This paper analyses the uses and meanings of ekphrasis in Oscar Wilde's* The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a novel which transcends the limits of literature by intertwining with other arts, painting in particular. Being Wilde's only novel, it reflects on the role of art in society by combining elements of the Gothic genre and the Aestheticism movement, of which Wilde was a strong proponent. Through its protagonist, the story also delves into themes of morality and the hypocrisy of the Victorian era —by doing so, Wilde critiques the superficiality of social behaviour. Therefore, this paper examines the paradoxical relationship between art and reality, highlighting the complex interplay between ethics and aesthetics and the links between the artist, the subject, and the resulting painting as described in the novel, through ekphrasis. Ultimately, this paper discusses the intertwining of art, life, and death that constitute the thematic core of Wilde's work of fiction.*

Keywords: *Oscar Wilde;* The Picture of Dorian Gray*; Ekphrasis; Aestheticism; Gothic Genre.*

Resumo: *Este artigo analisa os usos e significados da écfrase em* The Picture of Dorian Gray *(1891) de Oscar Wilde, um romance que transcende os limites da literatura ao se entrelaçar com outras artes, especialmente a pintura. Sendo o único romance de Wilde, ele reflete sobre o papel da arte na sociedade ao combinar elementos do gênero gótico e do movimento esteticista, do qual Wilde foi um grande defensor. Por meio de seu protagonista, a narrativa também explora temas de moralidade e a hipocrisia da era vitoriana — e, ao fazê-lo, Wilde critica a superficialidade do comportamento social. Este artigo, assim, examina a relação paradoxal entre arte e realidade, destacando a complexa interação entre ética e*

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estética, bem como os vínculos entre o artista, o modelo e a pintura resultante tal como descrita no romance, por meio da écfrase. Em última instância, este estudo discute o entrelaçamento entre arte, vida e morte que constitui o núcleo temático da obra de ficção de Wilde.

Palavras-chave: *Oscar Wilde;* The Picture of Dorian Gray*; Écfrase; Esteticismo; Gótico.*

In the graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, just like in its film adaptation, Alan Moore affirms that, "Artists use lies to tell the truth. Yes, I created a lie. But because you believed it, you found something true about yourself" (01:23:17). This statement appears in a scene where the main character, V, who hides his face and real identity under a mask, is explaining his motives and the nature of his art and actions, including creating his "lie" of a character. However, the quote itself explores the idea that art is a form of deception that can reveal deeper truths about the human condition. In this regard, there is something extremely comforting in knowing that truth can still be extracted from art, even if it does not specifically relate to oneself, nor even to the artist. In fact, one of the most instinctive, intuitive experiences of our lives is the act of responding to that artwork; whether it is a simple thought, or a profound reaction to something we had not seen before, we are compelled to feel —even if all we feel is the need to stop, or to look away. Since all art relates to all things, it is difficult to isolate oneself from a piece of art because the very act of expression and comprehension is a reaction to it, a fusion between two minds: that of the reader and the writer, or the performer and their audience, for that matter. But how does this all relate to ekphrasis? What even is "ekphrasis"? The point of departure in my theoretical approach is James Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis as "*the verbal representation of a visual representation*," a definition "simple in form but complex in its implications" (299). He notes, however, that "ekphrasis differs from both iconicity and pictorialism because it explicitly represents representation itself. What ekphrasis represents in words, therefore, must itself be *representational*" (1). In that way, literature practices ekphrasis when it wakens and involves the reader's visual imagination through the written words on the page.

This paper will analyse the use and meanings of ekphrasis in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a novel which transcends the limits of literature by intertwining with other arts, painting in particular, in ekphrasis. Being Wilde's only novel, it reflects on the role of art

in society by combining elements of the Gothic genre and the Aestheticism movement, of which Wilde was a strong proponent. Moreover, through its protagonist, the story also delves into themes of morality and the hypocrisy of the Victorian era —and, by doing so, Wilde critiques the obsession with beauty and the superficiality of social behaviour. Therefore, this paper examines the paradoxical relationship between art and reality, highlighting the complex interplay between ethics and aesthetics and the links between the artist, the subject, and the resulting painting that is described verbally in the novel, through ekphrasis. Ultimately, this paper discusses the intertwining of art, life, and death that constitute the thematic core of Wilde's work of fiction.

Ekphrasis in Victorian Literature

Ekphrasis (also spelled "ecphrasis") is a direct transcription from the Greek *ek*, "out of," and *phrasis*, "speech" or "expression." The Greek origin of the word *ekphrasis* literally means "to describe exhaustively," referring to its original meaning in ancient Greek philosophy, when philosophers such as Plato and Socrates used the term "ekphrasis" for the practice of describing or representing anything from the real world in a work of art. Moreover, Horace famously declared in *Ars Poetica* (18BCE), his treatise on poetry, *"Ut pictura poesis"* or "As is painting so is poetry," and in doing so, he provocatively and deliberately aligned the visual and verbal as sister arts (Brink). Like many other ideas in Greek philosophy, Horace's view on both arts was rediscovered by the later writers of the European Renaissance, and the term came to represent a more specific idea: the tendency for writers to describe a work of art such as a painting, a melody or a sculpture at length, in a literary passage.

In the nineteenth century, under the influence of figures like Charles Darwin, the visual arts were integral to Victorian literature through illustrations which worked alongside text to shape narrative, character, and theme. Notable uses include the detailed descriptions by critics like John Ruskin and the integration of art and aesthetics into novels by writers like Charles Dickens, Vernon Lee, George Eliot, and Charlotte Brontë. Likewise, ekphrasis placed visuality at a central and productive position in poetry, with prominent poets like Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Gerard Manley Hopkins producing ekphrastic poems —the vast majority of which concern real, not imaginary, works of art. Ekphrasis would in fact unite poets' and authors' understandings of both subject and object, internal and external realities, in articulating literary realism and allowing for critical

commentary of social issues like those surrounding identity and gender, how they were constructed and represented visually, and how those same representations were interpreted under Victorian's underlying preoccupation with values of order, purity, and unity.[1] For example, a writer would use in their work an ekphrastic description of a female portrait to challenge conventional images of women, or to expose societal ideals about gender roles and the way they were visually codified. As a result, the visual arts in Victorian texts are represented and perceived both as objects and consciousness, capable of revealing as much about the viewer as it does about the object being viewed.[2]

Such kind of ekphrasis is found in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a novel about aesthetes and decadent artists in Victorian times. Unlike the traditional use of ekphrasis, Wilde tends to leap past the surface of the portrait and ponder the hidden depths of the painting's subjects to imply that there is something wrong or dangerous about them. As a result, the complex and paradoxical relationships between art, life, and death constitute the thematic centre of the story, in which the portrait, as a piece of visual art, is presented in a verbal or ekphrastic form. The following sections position the subsequent analysis by framing the central question: how and why is the portrait in *Dorian Gray* represented verbally, with words, and what is their significance? Throughout, we will also explore the relation of observer and the painting as observed subject and discuss its function and importance in Wilde's novel.

Ekphrasis in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Although *The Picture of Dorian Gray* retains elements of the Romanticism, it is an example of late-Victorian Gothic fiction. It first appeared as a serial in the July 1890 edition of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* before being adapted into a novel and published one year later. Thus, it originated at the end of the nineteenth century, a time when the Victorian way of thinking and living was overcome by different artists who were trying to distance themselves from the superfluous reality and the earnestness of the era. Their response was to break taboos and refuse conventional concepts of morality and identity. It was, in fact, the height of decadence and hedonism, and the start of the Aestheticist movement; a movement that had its roots in Romanticism but which, at the same time, signed a turn: "The aesthete must feel the sensations but also live them in his life" (Landlow). Consequently, the supporters of Aestheticism postulated the separation of art and society, since art was expected to be free of

moral purposes. Moreover, in Victorian times, aesthetic authors defended a conception of art's value as irrelevant to its uselessness. Oscar Wilde was a prominent figure in the Aestheticism movement, and thus, aesthetics and the purpose of art are topics that feature predominantly within the storyline of *Dorian Gray*.

The idea that art has no purpose is indeed summarised throughout the novel by aphorisms like "all art is quite useless" and "beauty is the wonder of wonders." Wilde explains that art should be enjoyed purely for its beauty rather than for any underlying moral message — that is, *"l'art pour l'art"* or "art for art's sake." Besides, beauty is not tied to a specific definition, it is as free as the art and the artist. Whereas we live in a time when beauty is rarely defended as a value, both ideas would be central to the Aestheticism movement, where the focus lies on art's beauty only, no matter the form it takes. For those in the aesthetic movement, therefore, outcomes are not where the value of art lies: its value is self-sustaining and inherent in its very existence. The title of Wilde's novel already hints at the importance of art from the perspective of a visual representation and how the portrait is supposed to be beautiful just for the sake of its visual qualities. In the preface, Wilde also states that "[i]t is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." Therefore, if any meaning is found in art at all, it is brought by the audience rather than the artist or the work itself. However, Wilde goes beyond this philosophy to assert that the human being is not only a spectator but art as well, claiming that "one should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art." This message is echoed in Dorian's story too, where Wilde delves into the idea of humans as art.

The protagonist of the novel is introduced to the reader as the new muse for a portrait by artist Basil Hallward. We soon find out that Dorian Gray is a handsome, narcissistic young man who wishes to stay forever young —his portrait would age for him instead. Both vanity and aesthetics are indeed two themes that run throughout the whole novel. As the story develops, we see that Dorian remains ever youthful, no matter how cruel his behaviour. This way, the novel deals with the shadows between appearance and reality, the portrait symbolising the surface people present to society in contrast with their hidden vices and desires. This notion certainly troubled many in Victorian society: what if those morally upstanding and respectable when judged by their external appearances and daily activities, like politicians, teachers, clergymen and so on, were nothing but monsters behind closed curtains? This anxiety fuelled a public fascination with the dark side of society, which was frequently explored in literature and journalism, often contrasting the seemingly perfect public life with a hidden, scandalous private reality. As a literary phenomenon,

the Gothic genre of the late nineteenth century served as a subversive supernatural force as much as a mechanism for this kind of social critique. Set in late-Victorian London, a city often depicted in Gothic literature as a corrupted labyrinth of crime, poverty, and moral compromise —more notably in works by Charles Dickens and in the duality of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), for example— Wilde's novel was a rebellion against the hypocrisy and prudishness of the British society of that time. In fact, *Dorian Gray* ranks alongside *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) as a representation of how Gothic literature explored the darkest recesses of society and the often-disturbing private endeavours of otherwise respectful and admired public faces. These literary pictures provide access to the social and artistic commentaries of Victorian times. For instance, it was widely believed that sinful and shameful acts left a "visible record" upon the faces of those guilty of such activities.[3] Similarly, it is in *Dorian Gray* that Wilde warns that ugly meanings are, indeed, reflections of ugly people, with Dorian remaining youthful while his portrait —an oil painting locked in the attic like a guilty secret— gradually decays. This duality of the portrait and Dorian is used as a narrative link throughout the story.

Thus, the story revolves around the title subject: Dorian Gray's portrait. The portrait is central to the storyline, the point where literature and art truly meet. If Dorian is a disturbing example of the split between the wholesome public persona and the furtive private life that we mentioned before, his change in character throughout the novel is visually depicted through the portrait: he preserves his youth but watches his soul age in this self-portrait, which eventually becomes a mirror to his soul that reflects his moral degradation as a result of his vices through an explicit, aesthetic deterioration. That way, the portrait achieves the effects that Dorian's real physical form cannot, which adds yet another layer of complexity to the novel: a soul is portrayed as a painting, which is in turn being described to the reader. Meanwhile, the reader can further infer the extraordinary beauty of the portrait from others' exaltations of it —such as Basil's and Lord Henry's, who, obsessed with an "ideal male beauty," are simply captivated by it— because ekphrasis allows for a more detailed description of a work from others' reactions to it. Under Wilde's view, a solid object like a painting can and does indeed show us in simplified terms the true state of the protagonist's moral consciousness. In this regard, Heffernan asserts that "ekphrasis animates the fixed figures of graphic art, turning the picture of a single moment into a narrative of successive actions ... and thus makes explicit the story that graphic art tells only by implication" (301).

Paradoxically, although in the preface Wilde cites the uselessness of art, the story raises serious moral questions about the relationship of the aesthetic movement to hedonism, and the capacity of aestheticism without ethics to corrupt a person. Similarly, although the novel represents art as independent of morality, it centres a portrait which depicts the corrupted soul and immoral choices of its owner. Already in the first chapter, the reader receives the first glimpse of the portrait together with a taste of Dorian's narcissism: "In the centre of the room, clamped to an upright easel, stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary beauty" (Wilde 1). As the story unfolds, we read more descriptions of the painting and try to conjure an image in our imagination of what it truly looks like. While at first the painting is described as Basil Hallward's "best work" (Wilde 65), by chapter fourteen, after becoming increasingly worse each time Dorian sees it, the portrait is described as just a "hideous face on the canvas grinning at him" (Wilde 154). This way, instead of simply describing the internalization of sin, Wilde creates through ekphrasis a visual representation of its effects on the human soul: the portrait exemplifies that beauty and evil simply cannot coexist. To achieve this, Wilde does a wonderful job of personifying the portrait through vivid imagery. Those descriptions are moments of ekphrasis because they allow the reader to visualise the portrait through the author's illustrative words.

Wilde included this aspect for another specific reason: as aforementioned, he was a strong proponent of the Aesthetic movement of his time, which rejected the Victorian notion that art is supposed to have a moral purpose or meaning given by the artist and should be enjoyed purely for its beauty instead, seeking to free art from any other responsibility. The portrait is, thus, a useful device in subtly displaying the hidden themes of Wilde's narrative, as it becomes a broader allegorical commentary on Victorian society's wish to moralise art. In this regard, Krieger describes, if not defines, ekphrasis as an "attempt not only to portray visual representations but to create verbal 'pictures' whose complexity resists their being translated into visual form" (xiv). That is, ekphrasis does more than just describe an image; it uses words to create a powerful new verbal "picture" that has its own, unique complexity. Essentially, the verbal description is so rich it can communicate things the original visual art cannot. According to this perspective, through ekphrasis, literature can communicate profound concepts that are beyond simple visual representation, especially certain complex ideas or emotions. In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde expresses this point not through a real, physical magic portrait, but with the magic of language. As he remarks in the preface: "Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art" (Wilde 48). This disparity between linguistic and plastic art is central to Wilde's commentary on the role of art and its capability of challenging

already set norms and beliefs.

Interestingly, the way Wilde introduces his ideas in the novel effectively attracts the reader to agree with him by putting forward a discussion of how different forms of artistic expression impress upon those who experience them. Likewise, by drawing on the late nineteenth century literary traditions of his contemporaries, he reflexively situates the function of ekphrasis within Gothic fiction, a genre in which haunted portraits typically play a sinister role while also provide the opportunity to delve into the intersecting realms of word painting and image perception. In that way, Wilde's mysterious, almost mystical, description of the painting, what it looks like, and how it has supernatural powers to preserve human youth, becomes a clear example of ekphrasis in Gothic literature:

> This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body so it would reveal to him his own soul ... he would keep the glamour of his boyhood. Not one blossom of his loveliness would ever fade. Not one pulse of his life would ever weaken. (Wilde 136)

Furthermore, in Gothic literature —not only in works like the above-mentioned *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* but also in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait" (1842) and Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), particularly— portraits are a supernatural motif for the ego, usually mirroring the destructive nature of obsession, revealing a sinister truth and symbolising the way that humans and society refuse to change.[4] In *Dorian Gray*, as we progress through the protagonist's life, the portrait is modified until neither he nor the reader can even recognise it, each ekphrasis keeping pace with his soul's corruption. Dorian's first discovery of "a touch of cruelty in the mouth" (Wilde 90) comes, indeed, at a vital moment of recognition that leads to a change of attitude and direction. The shift in his personality is exemplified by his reaction to the portrait: he incessantly questions its function and asks,

> But the picture? What was he to say of that? It held the secret of his life and told his story. It had taught him to love his own beauty. Would it teach him to loathe his own soul? ... The picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience. (Wilde 91)

As mentioned before, the oil painting at his prime and subsequent aesthetic deterioration is a repeated notional ekphrasis which highlights Dorian's sinful experiences and makes his decline explicit for the reader to easily identify. In this sense, the whole novel could just be

considered ekphrasis, as it is devoted to the disfigurement of the self-portrait.

Furthermore, ekphrasis can exist in a fictitious character by description of another fictitious character. In *Dorian Gray*, we see this other type of ekphrasis, for instance, in the description of Dorian's lover, Sybil Vane. In Wilde's writing, Sybil —who commits suicide when she comes to believe that Dorian no longer loves her— is compared to the tragic heroines of Shakespeare's plays:

> Sybil Vane represented to you all the heroines of romance, that she was Desdemona one night, and Ophelia the other; that if she died as Juliet, she came to life as Imogen ... The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died ... Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Brabantio died. But don't waste your tears over Sybil Vane. She was less real than they are. (Wilde 132)

In the seventh chapter, the cruelty with which Dorian rejects Sibyl is a big step towards his moral degradation, because it marks the rejection of the compensatory nature of his hedonism and a deeper shift in his inner self. It is also at that point of the novel that the first change in the portrait appears, until it slowly becomes an actual mirror of Dorian's soul, with each sin displayed as a disfigurement of his form or through a sign of aging. From then on, the portrait serves as a reminder to Dorian of the effect that each act has upon his soul, and ekphrasis is thus projected into a pivotal role for the succeeding narrative. Surprisingly, after discovering that the portrait would be the "visible emblem of conscience" (Wilde 91), he frantically writes Sibyl a passionate letter. For this reason, Terence Dawson claims that:

> Dorian is not a realist: he lives entirely in a world of his own make-believe. He shows no respect for the objective 'reality' of others. He is excited not so much by the physical sensation that a person or an external object arouses in him, as by the intuition of a quality inhabiting it. (185)

As the portrait reveals Dorian's increasing loss of contact with reality and respect for others, it is described as "merely an illusion wrought on the troubled senses," and he tries to convince himself that the portrait "had not changed. It was folly to think so" (Wilde 91). In fact, it appears ugly to no-one but Dorian because only Dorian sees it —like his own soul. On the other hand, the painting appears beautiful to characters like Lord Henry and the painter Basil Hallward because that is all they wish to see: the beauty of their muse and idol, Dorian Gray.

Siméus argues that Lord Henry's description of the painting helps in adding detail to his fascination with Dorian, whom he sees as "this young Adonis [who] looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leafs" (Wilde 3). For Dorian, however, the painting is a manifestation of Basil's worship and a reflection of how he is perceived and regarded by others; curiously, though, Basil refuses to exhibit the painting: "The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul" (Wilde 8). From this, we can get the idea that the painting, like all art, is supposed to be created out of an ego-relative perspective, and it is, thus, a metaphor for the artist's ego too. In fact, Dorian himself represents in a way what Oscar Wilde "would like to be —in other ages, perhaps" (352): beautiful, youthful, and free from societal constraints, living a life of pleasure and art; a combination of a socially-admired artist and a man who leads a double, sinful life in private —at least according to Victorian society.

Following the idea that, "[it] is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" (Wilde 48), while Dorian Gray is reflected in the portrait, those he interacts with find themselves in him, as the portrait and Dorian seem to swap places, with Dorian becoming a surface that others cannot find meaning in and the portrait becoming pure meaning. In other words, they see what they do not like in themselves after interacting with him, to the point of losing their innocence, reputation, and even their lives because of their association with him, all while he remains unchanged outwardly.[5] Thus, Dorian Gray is not merely an audience member but also art itself, and the portrait symbolises the ultimate absorption of the world into aesthetic representation. As we continue reading, however, we find out that Basil and Lord Henry's intense fascination with Dorian's portrait is shallow, until it becomes clear that they have no genuine interest in him as a human being, similar to how the aesthetes only care about the beauty aspect of art. Interestingly, in chapter nineteenth, Lord Henry makes a parallel between aesthetes and "criminal" citizens when he observes that: "Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders. I don't blame them in the smallest degree. I should fancy that crime is to them what art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations" —in fact, the term "aestheticism," derived from Greek, exactly means "perceiving through senses."

On the other side, Yacobi asserts that "the change of pictorial models attends and reflects the hero's moment of discovery (anagnorisis), which in turn channels the subsequent flow of the plot" (640). In this case, Dorian exemplifies the constraints of a hedonistic viewpoint that overlooks moral responsibilities toward others, with the portrait reflecting his hypocrisy. As

seen in the paragraph below, by chapter seven, ekphrasis stands out as a crucial role for the narrative of the novel:

> [I]n the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of a hypocrite. The thing was still loathsome –more loathsome, if possible, than before– and the scarlet dew that spotted the hand seemed brighter, and more like blood newly spilt. [...] Through vanity he had spared her. In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness. For curiosity's sake he had tried the denial of self. He recognised that now. (Wilde 221-2)

Through this description, the reader gets the idea that Dorian has been poisoned by his depravity, so much that he even blames the portrait for his crimes, describing it as "the living death of his own soul that troubled him. ... It was the portrait that had done everything" (Wilde 221). Since he wants his sins to completely disappear as if they never happened, McGinn notes that what Dorian eventually decides is upon the idea that "it is better to destroy the last evidence of his sin —the painting of his soul— than to face up to his own depravity. [But] the depravity he seeks to destroy is, in essence, himself; therefore, by killing it, he kills himself" (83). Consequently, the novel serves as a complex and powerful moral allegory for corruption, with Wilde revealing through the story of narcissist Dorian Gray that vanity, arrogance, and a lack of compassion may make for an indulgent life without regrets at first, but it ultimately leads to a "suicide" of the self. On a thematic level, the novel suggests that a hedonistic lifestyle like that adopted by Dorian can be extremely seductive and liberating, yet, as Wilde admitted years later in his letters to the press defending the novel, if there was a moral to the story was that: "All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment in the end" (Ragland-Sullivan 115).

From the ongoing discussion, it can be also concluded that the message Wilde wanted to convey in his novel was that art and the artist remain, for good or ill, two sides of the same coin. The interpretation of Dorian's death scene further illustrates the boundaries of aestheticism combined with vice: Wilde writes that Dorian "seized the thing and stabbed the picture with it" (223), implying that Dorian really stabbed himself because he embodies both the portrait and the *objet d'art* ("object of art") at the same time. Nonetheless, when becoming a piece of art himself, Dorian Gray violates the aesthetic principle of "art for art's sake." As a result, Dorian's painting is not (im)moral until he makes it (im)moral. Therefore, from an analytical perspective, the novel reinforces the idea that "[If] the painted work of art

ceases to be only a beautiful object, a catastrophic state of chaos is created. [...] [A]rt should be beautiful, nothing else" (McGinn 74). However, Wilde asserts in the preface that "[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all." Hence, an artist must have the sole objective to create without having to worry about how it is going to be perceived, for the true beauty of art is, precisely, that is open to interpretations, especially when considering textual-visual engagement and the possibilities of ekphrasis.

Conclusions

This paper has traced the threads of the symbols of Oscar Wilde's aesthetic formation, of the art-life relationship in Aestheticism, to approach what we might come to call the "wildean ekphrasis." The outcome is that, through ekphrasis, Wilde was able to capture and transcend the dual essence of art in his work, especially in *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* a fantastic example of where art and literature cross paths. Furthermore, it was with the ekphrastic, literary portrait of Dorian Gray that Wilde refuted his own reiteration of the aesthetic notion that "All art is quite useless," describing art as functional for both the artist and the audience. In fact, to say that art is "useless" is not to say that it is "valueless," but that its value as a work of art is not associated with its utility. This idea relates to one of the earliest recorded explanations of ekphrasis found in Plato's *Republic*, where the philosopher concludes his discussion on art in Book X with the question: "Which is the art of painting designed to be: an imitation of things as they are, or as they appear? Of appearance or of reality?" (303). Perhaps Plato's truth-seeking question is not to be answered but to be pondered upon, as we immerse ourselves in arts and, between text and image, in ekphrasis. From the discussion above, what becomes clear is that literature, and art in general, does reflect life in its complexity, simplicity, and contradiction, and it has indeed utility as the only medium through which the infinite, the immortal, and the impossible may be expressed, even to this day. In that sense, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a work of art itself in which almost every sentence forms an epigram worth quoting, as this paper has just shown.

Notes

[1] The so-called "Victorian respectability" was an ideology centred on moral, religious and social conformity, dictating codes of behaviour, appearance and etiquette that were essential for social status and reputation in nineteenth-century Britain. It was a complex and often hypocritical system that

emphasised a proper family life, with men as providers and women as "angels in the house," and was defined by public displays of wealth and adherence to strict social and gender roles. See, for example, Christine Hall's "The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology," in *Gender and history in Western Europe*, 1998; Vanessa Dickerson, *Keeping the Victorian House: A Collection of Essays*, 1995; Boris Ford, *The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain*, 1992; and Clarissa Campbell Orr, *Women in the Victorian Art World*, 1995.

[2] For further reading and definition of formal elements, foundational book-length studies of ekphrasis include Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1984); W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1986); Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992); Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994); John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995); Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination* (California: U of California P, 1995); Murray Roston, *Victorian Contexts: Literature and the Visual Arts* (New York: NYU Press, 1996). and most recently, Brian Glaver, *The Wallflower Avante-garde: Modernism, Sexuality, and Queer Ekphrasis* (New York: Oxford UP, 2016).

[3] This is a concept related to the popularity of physiognomy and moral phrenology, which evolved from the work of Franz Joseph Gall and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim and became a fixture in Victorian culture, arts and medicine.

[4] See, for example, A.S. Byatt's *Portraits in Fiction,* 2002; Joanna Woodall's *Portraiture: Facing the Subject,* 1997; or Linda Dryden's *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles,* 2003.

[5] For example, Dorian's devotion to Lord Henry's hedonism and the yellow book precipitate the latter's downfall, while Basil's idolatry of Dorian is, ironically, what leads to his murder.

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"He is a perfect horror!": "Freakish" Bodies and Behaviours in Oscar Wilde and Twentieth-Century Literature

"Ele é um perfeito horror!": Corpos e comportamentos freak em Oscar Wilde e na literatura do século 20

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Abstract: *Oscar Wilde has had a pervasive influence on Irish writers and writers abroad. His influence stems from the self-styled myth of his persona and the memory of his life after his death in November 1900. His fiction and drama have cemented his literary longevity, with film adaptations of his works and continued stagings of his plays. Writers of fiction in particular have directly or indirectly been influenced by the long shadow cast by Wilde. The following article examines the influence of the physical and behavioural 'other' in Wilde's short fiction on the works of Patrick Pearse (1879-1916), Pádraic Ó Conaire (1882-1928), and Flannery O'Connor (1925-1963). For these authors, including Wilde, individuals who are perceived to be 'freaks' or 'freakish' are essential for their unique ability to reflect or to reveal truths, particularly those which are uncomfortable about those who ostracise and other them.*

Keywords: *Oscar Wilde; Twentieth-century Literature; Disability Studies.*

Resumo: *Oscar Wilde exerceu ampla influência tanto sobre escritores irlandeses quanto sobre autores de outros países. Essa influência deriva do mito autoconstruído de sua persona e da memória de sua vida após sua morte, em novembro de 1900. Sua ficção e seu drama consolidaram sua longevidade literária, com adaptações cinematográficas de suas obras e contínuas*

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montagens de suas peças. Escritores de ficção, em particular, foram direta ou indiretamente influenciados pela longa sombra projetada por Wilde. Este artigo examina a influência do "outro" físico e comportamental na ficção breve de Wilde sobre as obras de Patrick Pearse (1879–1916), Pádraic Ó Conaire (1882–1928) e Flannery O'Connor (1925–1963). Para esses autores — incluindo Wilde — indivíduos percebidos como freaks ou freakish são essenciais por sua capacidade singular de refletir ou revelar verdades, especialmente aquelas desconfortáveis, sobre aqueles que os ostracizam e os transformam em "outros".

Palavras-chave: *Oscar Wilde; Literatura do século 20; Estudos da deficiência.*

Dan Goodley writes that '[d]isability has the potential to disrupt how we typically understand the world' by 'challenging ideas and ideals that we take for granted' (Goodley 3). Disability appears in Oscar Wilde's writing, most notably in his short fiction. Characters who are deemed to be 'freaks' or 'freakish' by other characters because of a physical disability or behavioural patterns that disturb and disrupt the world around them in order to reveal uncomfortable truths about that world. The ways in which Wilde positions these characters in his fiction is mirrored in works by other Irish writers, such as Pádraic Ó Conaire (1882-1928) and Patrick Pearse (1879-1916) and the Irish-American writer, Flannery O'Connor (1925-1963). Although these three writers are not in direct reference to Wilde, they each partake in conversations of social estrangement in their respective cultural contexts. Pearse and Ó Conaire both experienced a form of social estrangement that can be equated to disablement in an Irish cultural context. Pearse was considered socially awkward by his peers, and he grappled with his English background, while Ó Conaire struggled to find his place socially in Ireland, and, like Wilde, left Ireland for England. O'Connor was also othered as a Catholic in the Deep South, a culturally and religiously Protestant area of America. These three writers can be found in conversation with Wilde, who uses the body as a site of revelation and of truths revealed through uncomfortable conduits echoes itself in Gothic works Irish and American Gothic traditions.

To define disability is a complex task as the term and its connotations have changed throughout different periods in time in response to various factors, including those which are

socially and politically motivated. In the Victorian era, the normal and abnormal human body was a social and literary fascination. Julia Miele Rodas asserts that 'the presence of disability in Victorian fiction indicates more than a mere reflection of actual disabled persons in the culture. It points also to an underlying anxiety and ambivalence regarding this presence, a grappling with identity, a desire to experiment with places and roles' (Rodas 372). Wilde's body of work constantly experiments with different identities, particularly those which have been othered, and their roles in their respective spaces. The body and physical appearance are othered, for example, in Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), in which Dorian has been othered by Basil Hallward for what he (and others) sees as extreme physical beauty. Wilde, however, also looks toward what is perceived as ugly and freakish, and it is through this body that truths are revealed.

There are three main models of disability: medical, social, and cultural. The social model '[presents] a social and political problem that turns an impairment into an oppression either by erecting barriers or by refusing to create barrier-free environments' (Davis 33).[1] The medical model focuses on an individual's physical disability, and it 'treats disability as a disease in need of a cure' (Davis 49). The third model, cultural disability, demonstrates the ways disability is understood and responded to by a given culture (McRuer 53). These models can be applied to Irish and Southern American cultural contexts. While the medical model is not necessarily tied to the authors mentioned earlier apart from Flannery O'Connor, the social and cultural models are certainly applicable to all of them.

While Wilde identified culturally as Irish, he left Ireland to settle in England, and it was here that he cemented his literary reputation. Following the trials and his release from prison, Wilde was socially othered and forced into exile under a pseudonym. The writers that this article examines were similarly othered in these models. Pearse, for example, was self-conscious of his English heritage, and he strove to great lengths to be considered culturally Irish by those around him. His literary works are largely written in Irish, and he heavily involved himself in the cultural nationalist movement. Pearse's conscious decision to write in Irish was partly informed by a desire to not be seen culturally as Irish. Ó Conaire, like Wilde, left Ireland for England, though he eventually returned after being socially othered for being Irish in London, which is an experience he expresses in *Deoraíocht* (Exile) (1910). As stated earlier, the medical model would apply to Flannery O'Connor, who suffered from the side effects of lupus. Socially and culturally, however, her short fiction partakes in the same conversation as

Wilde, Pearse, and Ó Conaire. O'Connor was born and raised as Catholic in Georgia, a state that is socially and culturally deeply attached to Protestantism.

The social understanding of the 'normal' and 'abnormal' human body was taking shape during the nineteenth century, the effects of which carried into the twentieth century. Lennard J. Davis states that the 'necessity for the average citizen in social thought was paralleled by the need for the average citizen in ideology' (Davis 93). As result of this societal need to categorise and define normal/abnormal, there was a focus on 'the production on the ideological level aimed at the creation of average... nonheroic, middle-class, "real" citizens. In this sense, real means average' (Davis 93). At the start of the nineteenth century, statistics were being sought to reinforce what and *who* was to be considered normal or standard (Davis 105). The human body functioned then (as it still does) as a social signifier. One's outward appearance can suggest certain lifestyle choices or medical histories stemming from those choices, in addition to conditions with which that body was born. Historically, medical conditions originating from disease or birth sometimes would force people to seek employment in freak shows. Freak shows highlighted and demonstrated in real time the body that was deemed to be strange, unusual, and, above all, abnormal. The body that went against what was understood to be the social norm or the average was something to be seen as less than human. Wilde's engagement with the othered, 'freakish' body is a crucial exposition of that which is perceived as 'normal'.

Wilde's short fiction often highlights that which is seen to be strange and unusual. His short story, 'The Birthday of the Infanta', was published in *A House of Pomegranates* in 1891 and it is especially notable for its centring of what perceived as freakish.[2] Its protagonist is a dwarf hired for the purpose of entertaining the Infanta on her twelfth birthday. He is seen by her and the other children as the highlight of the day's entertainment, delighting them by 'waddling on his crooked legs and wagging his huge misshapen head from side to side' (Wilde 192). The narrator mentions that the Spanish Court has 'a cultivated passion for the horrible' (Wilde 192) implying that the day's starring entertainment is part of what is, for the court, essentially a collection of curiosities – people who they have othered as entertainment objects and amusements solely for their perceived strangeness. Justin T. Jones notes that the language of this story pays significant attention to aesthetic, which thus makes the introduction of the Dwarf into this space a sharp contrast (Jones 889). The Dwarf's 'presence ultimately provides the greatest danger to the aesthetic stability of the Infanta's palace of art' (Jones 899). Although the Court collects him for the purpose of using his physicality as a means of entertaining the

party, the danger he presents is the revelation of an uncomfortable truth: the Infanta, although a child, is not as innocent as she appears. It also reveals another uncomfortable truth about the Court itself: the individuals therein are willing to *collect* individuals they see as freakish. The act of collecting people who are othered for their appearance, as is the case with the Dwarf, provides a disturbing revelation about those who fall under the definition of 'normal' or 'standard'. The Dwarf, then, offers an exposition of this truth through what is objectified and, as Goodley states, 'fetishised' by the norm (Goodley 4).

When the Dwarf loses his way in the palace, he stumbles across a room full of mirrors. This moment is a rupture not only for the story itself, but for him as well. It is here that he realises at last that the children were not as innocent in their enjoyment as he believed; he sees that they were laughing *at* him because of his appearance. For the first time, the Dwarf sees that he

> [is] misshapen and hunchbacked, foul to look at and grotesque. He himself was the monster, and it was at him that all the children had been laughing, and the little Princess who he had thought loved him—she too had been merely mocking at his ugliness, and making merry over his twisted limbs For the first time he has seen himself and he comes to the horrible realisation as to why he was brought to the palace (Wilde 201).

The Dwarf not only comes to the realisation that he was being mocked for his physicality, but that the children, especially the Infanta, were not as they seemed. For the first time, he sees that they were not as innocent, and thus not as beautiful, as he believed. Wilde exposes the potential for beauty to be false and cruel, and that it may instead be true ugliness. Beauty, then, is something that can be weaponised and used to target those who are, in the case of the Dwarf, socially disabled. Although the Infanta is seen by the Dwarf as beautiful because of her physical appearance and her behaviour, he comes to realise that her beauty is purely superficial. Her behaviour and treatment of him exposes the ugliness of her character, ugliness that is brought into his consciousness as result of his own body. He sees that the children mock him because he is understood to be outside of what is deemed 'normal'. This mockery comes from the unlikely source of a child, the image of which is most closely and traditionally held to be innocent and pure. The Infanta is, if anything, a source of great cruelty. She demonstrates her cruelty most strongly when she is told the Dwarf will never dance again: she 'frowned, and her

dainty rose-leaf lips curled in pretty disdain' (Wilde 202). Her disapproval, rather than any sympathy, is what shines through in this moment.

Realisations stemming from the physicality of the othered body appear in Pádraic Ó Conaire's novel *Deoraíocht*. Like the Dwarf, the protagonist, Micil O'Maolain, is othered because of his perceived freakishness. After a road accident in London, his leg is amputated, and he is unable to find any work to support himself. He returns to his native Ireland, where he joins a circus as part of its freak show. As stated earlier, employment in a freak show was often the only economic option available to disabled persons. Micil is frustrated by the effects his amputation has on the course of his life, and he intentionally alters his physical appearance to appear more freakish. He grows out his hair so that is 'falling down around my shoulders' and 'it hides my face when I shake myself. But my face is so well painted that I am not permitted to hide it (Ó Conaire 37).[3] David Connor 'highlights "animality theories" that historically viewed Black and disabled people as less than human: the freak shows of the 19th Century that displayed non-European and impaired exhibits as 'exotic' and 'repulsive' attractions' (Goodley 104). Micil embodies the wild man performer, an individual who blurred the lines between human and animal, that was fixture in 19th and 20th century freak shows. If freak show owners 'could not afford to import troupes of exotic foreigners', they would specifically seek out 'working-class Irishmen' to perform as wild men (Durbach 147). The novel is set shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, and freak shows 'were a major site of employment for disabled people before 1930' (Garland-Thomson 131). Micil is now out of place in his own country as people he once knew see him only as a freak show attraction because of his disabled body and socially estranged status as a wild man. He performs to the expectations that he knows that the audience has of him, but in doing so he reveals an uncomfortable truth about his situation. He must not only perform in this way, but that he must adhere and cater to this expectation that has been placed upon him because of his missing limbs and his outward appearance. The audience pays to gawk at what they see as a freak, someone who is so unlike themselves as to appear completely abnormal and thus, to them, entirely exotic.

Micil resents himself for the choices (or lack thereof) that have been given to him following the accident. Rather than a literal mirror that prompts propulsion into self-realisation, Micil's audience reflects back at him who he has become through accident and self-creation. The audience, like the Infanta and her guests, delight in the body they see as freakish, because, for them, he is merely an entertainment object. At the same time, Micil's audience expresses horror at his appearance and behaviour because he embodies the abnormal. He is particularly struck by his

would-be lover's reaction to seeing him in the cage. As he looks around at the audience's reactions, Micil becomes outraged, saying, 'Anger took hold of me. Madness and rage and hatred took hold of me' (Ó Conaire 46).[4] Micil hates that he has become the abnormal and freakish other. Crucially, Micil also consciously others himself. Unlike the Dwarf in Wilde's story, he is conscious of his body. He is aware that, because of his disability, he cannot secure steady employment outside of what he sees as his only real option: being a performer. He uses his body in a deliberate way to serve as entertainment.

This same self-awareness and the objectification of one's body for entertainment is seen in the Southern American writer Flannery O'Connor's short story, 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost' (1955). O'Connor's story revolves around a trio of young girls, two of whom attend a freak show. The two fourteen-year-olds, Susan and Joanne, attend a Catholic convent school and they have been advised, to their great amusement, by Sister Perpetua to tell boys that their bodies are temples of the Holy Ghost (O'Connor, 'Temple' 238). Their developing bodies are important religiously, socially, and morally, something which is highlighted by the instruction to not only view but to tell would-be admirers that their bodies are sacred sites. They jokingly refer to themselves as 'Temple One' and 'Temple Two', and dress themselves in a way that suggests they are older than their ages, taking delight in wearing high heels, red skirts, and lipstick. They alter the appearance of their bodies in a way that pleases them and rejects the notion of it being a sacred space, at least from a more conservatively Catholic perspective. They know that they will likely attract the attention of boys dressing like this, and so they will be given the opportunity to play out what they feel is the punchline to what has become a joke by saying, 'Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!' (O'Connor, 'Temple' 238). They do not take their own bodies seriously, nor do they demonstrate the maturity to understand that there is a reason(s) to safeguard their bodies.

Susan and Joanne have an encounter at the freak show that they are too young and inexperienced to understand. In a tent they see a hermaphrodite, whose body is on display for two separated audiences made up of men and women. James W. Horton argues that the hermaphrodite 'symbolizes and unifies in his/her person virtually all the major characters and the kinds of subject/object relationships they experience. In so doing, the hermaphrodite implies that everyone is a temple of the Holy Ghost, like him/herself' (Horton 36). This unification of duality in a singular host space, the 'freakish' body, forces the revelation that the girl undergoes when she later dreams of the hermaphrodite, whose image is only relayed to her

by Susan and Joanne. Although the hermaphrodite's presence in the freak show is, like Micil, for entertainment, a truth is revealed in that presence. Susan and Joanne repeat to the girl that the hermaphrodite says, 'God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain't disputing His way. I'm showing you because I got to make the best of it' (O'Connor, 'Temple' 245). The hermaphrodite, unlike the Dwarf, is able to accept how their appearance affects their treatment socially. This matter-of-fact manner pushes back onto the audience an uncomfortable truth. While they have paid, like Micil's audience, to gawk and stare and potentially mock, the othered individual embraces their otherness. Unlike Micil, who expresses anxiety at having become the physical other, the hermaphrodite fully accepts that this is the body they have. They also remind the audience that this body, while it does not fall under the norm, is still a possibility that can be encountered outside of a freak show.

The direct confrontation that the girls experience is comparable to the Dwarf seeing himself in the mirrors. While the Dwarf cannot accept his body, the hermaphrodite has accepted their body as well as the social disablement that results from having this body. Like Wilde, O'Connor works with duality to reveal a truth about someone or something. In Wilde's story, the Dwarf's reflection prompts the realisation that the Infanta is not as innocent and beautiful as he believed, while the child's self-realisation stems not from a physical reflection of the othered body, but from a description of an othered body. The hermaphrodite is, unlike the Dwarf, able to take some control of the audience. Before showing their genitalia, they threaten the audience with the reminder that they could be '[stricken] the same way' if they do not behave appropriately (O'Connor, 'Temple' 245). The girl imagines the hermaphrodite in the role of a preacher, a figure of religious authority with social power and influence, and she combines what they said prior to lifting up their dress with what her cousins said about the body being a temple of the Holy Ghost. She thinks of the hermaphrodite saying, 'If any anybody desecrates the temple of God, God will bring him to ruin and if you laugh, He may strike you thisaway. A temple of God is a holy thing' (O'Connor, 'Temple' 246). During Mass at the convent school, she merges the hermaphrodite's body with the consecrated Host, and she thinks that the monstrance that contains it is like 'the tent at the fair that had the freak in it' (O'Connor, 'Temple' 248). The body, for the girl, has become othered because it is something that she cannot comprehend or begin to properly visualise. Her best attempt

at trying to understand what her cousins have seen is by likening it with a familiar image of Christ's body as the transubstantiated Host.

The physically disabled body is treated poorly to reveal uncomfortable truths in O'Connor's story, 'Good Country People' (1955). Joy, who legally changes her name to Hulga to reflect her feelings toward herself and her body following a childhood hunting accident, sees herself as superior to those around her because of her education. When a young man purporting to be a travelling Bible salesman calls on them at their farm, Hulga views him as someone who she can toy with and teach a lesson. Manley Pointer continually returns to her false leg, telling her that he thinks she is 'brave' (O'Connor, 'GCP' 283). Hulga has no reaction to what can be read as condescending or patronising, but she does panic when Manley Pointer removes her leg and abandons her, helpless, in a barn. Pointer has by now revealed that his intentions were not innocent, and that he only pursued her out of morbid curiosity. He has done this before with disabled persons, usually collecting trophies of his triumph over them, such as a glass eye from another woman (O'Connor, 'GCP' 291). He also takes Hulga's glasses, without which she cannot see clearly, as a trophy. Without her means of having clear vision and mobility, Hulga is left crying out for someone to come help her because she is unable to leave the barn.

The place here is important. Both Manley and Hulga have attempted to dehumanise the other, but it is Hulga who is ultimately left the victim. She is left behind in a barn, a place associated with domesticated livestock, which in turn suggests Manley sees her as an animal. Her amputated leg and the prosthetic that she wears are what draws him to her, and her leg is ultimately what leads to her dehumanising treatment. O'Connor herself expressed that this particular episode reveals an uncomfortable truth to the reader. She wrote that when Manley takes Hulga's prosthetic, 'the reader realizes that he has taken away part of the girl's personality and has revealed her deeper affliction to her for the first time' (Westling 511). The removal of her leg and Manley's dehumanisation force Hulga to realise what O'Connor felt was an ugly truth about her. Hulga, who feels she is superior to those who are in her day-to-day life, seizes the chance to exercise what she considers intellectual and philosophical superiority over Manley. His taking her leg forces her to realise that, in this barn, she is not who she thought. Hulga realises that she is everything she despises in other people.

Goodley argues that 'people with impairments are ignored, pitied, patronised, objectified, hated, mocked and fetishised' (Goodley 4). Like the Infanta, Manley Pointer

objectifies and fetishises the body that he perceives as freakish. Hulga is a *thing* rather than a person as he reduces her existence – and her body – to her false leg. In turn, his treatment reveals uncomfortable truths about both Hulga and him. Not only is his language patronising toward her, but his actions are as well. After she removes her leg at his behest, he asks her to 'show me how to take it off and on' (O'Connor, 'GPC' 289). She complies, and he then does it himself, saying 'with a delighted child's face', 'See!... Now I can do it myself' (O'Connor, 'GPC' 289). Things take a darker turn when he sets her leg out of her reach, and he ignores her demand to put it on again. It at this point that Hulga undergoes a similar self-realisation as the Dwarf. Manley dismisses her obvious concern, saying, 'Leave it off for a while. You got me instead' (O'Connor, 'GPC' 289). The physical removal of her leg from her body and it being placed out of reach forces Hulga to realise and acknowledge that '[w]ithout the leg she felt entirely dependent on him' (O'Connor, 'GPC' 289). The disabled body reveals that Manley, like the Infanta, is not who he appears. He is more sinister than meets the eye, as is the Infanta. They are both seemingly unlikely sources of cruelty – one presents himself as an unassuming Bible salesman, and the other is a child – and they each take a twisted pleasure in their objectification and mockery of the disabled body. Both the Infanta and Manley Pointer think very little (if anything at all) of what they have inflicted upon the Dwarf and Hulga, and they both leave them behind.

A more literally objectified body is described in Patrick Pearse's short story, 'Bairbre' (Barbara) (1907). The story opens with a description of what appears to be a disabled woman named Bairbre, only for the narrator to reveal that Barbara is not a woman, but a little girl's doll. She appears to have both physical and mental disabilities. Her social life is extremely limited, presumably because of her disabilities, and 'she didn't ever speak with anybody, but with [Brídín] only' (Pearse 21).[5] The description of her body immediately others her: she is 'blind, 'bald', and '[i]t's not well she could walk, for she was one-legged, and that one leg itself broken' (Pearse 21).[6] Bairbre, like Hulga, is visually impaired and she is missing a leg, and, like Hulga, she appears at least partially dependent on someone else. In a twist, however, Bairbre is revealed by the narrator not to be a woman, but a little girl's doll. Bairbre thus is revealed to be an object rather than a living being. Although Bairbre is perceived as ugly and unusual, Brídín adores her and treats her as though she were her child. This changes, however, when Brídín receives a new, conventionally beautiful doll with blonde hair, white teeth 'like pearls', and a rosy complexion (Pearse 29).[7] This is in stark contrast

to Bairbre, who is bald, missing an eye and a leg, and who can only speak with the help of Brídín's imagination. Bairbre is cast aside in favour of Niamh, the new doll, until Brídín's life is threatened. After her mother saves her from catching herself on fire, Brídín realises that her mother was alerted to the danger by Bairbre, who threw herself off a dress onto the floor, the sound of which caught her mother's attention.

Bairbre's visual and physical impairments are further highlighted by her being a toy. She is largely reliant on Brídín, who provides her with speech and movement. Brídín removes these from Bairbre once Niamh enters the scene, which leaves Bairbre, like Hulga, helpless. Similar to how Wilde positions the Dwarf in 'The Birthday of the Infanta', for Pearse, the disabled body that is seen as ugly and freakish reveals an uncomfortable truth. Brídín views herself as Bairbre's mother, something which makes her abandonment of Bairbre even more jarring. Bairbre's bodily self-sacrifice also reveals that there can be ugliness in that which is seen as beautiful, as is the case with the Infanta. Niamh does not take any action to save Brídín, and it is because of this inaction that Brídín is finally able to see the truth behind Niamh's beauty. Brídín realises that physical beauty is not the only attribute worth having. Niamh, then, demonstrates no empathy or any kind of emotional response to the life and death situation Brídín finds herself in. The Infanta has a similar lack of emotional response to the Dwarf's death, and at one point she even laughs at the idea of him being unable to dance (Wilde 202). The objectified body reveals, in the case of these two children, emotional immaturity. The Infanta, however, unlike Brídín, demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of what she sees before her. This is not dissimilar to the three girls in 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost' who cannot fully comprehend what it is they have seen or heard about.

Perhaps, however, of all of Pearse's ill-treated characters, one of the most striking and enigmatic is the Deargadaol, or the Black Chafer. In 'An Deargadaol' (The Black Chafer) (1916), the titular woman is banished from her community by the local priest for an unspecified transgression she is said to have committed. She is entirely devoid of any physical description, and her age is not provided. Her true name also is omitted by the narrator. She is othered by her secular and religious communities because 'she is a cursed woman' (Pearse 58).[8] The only indication as to the severity of her alleged actions is in her title, which is an allusion to 'one of the three most cursed beasts in the world' (Pearse 57).[9] She is socially othered as she is forced to live in isolation in the mountains where she has no interaction with the people in the village. Her physical removal from the community and her peculiar behaviour in requesting that the narrator's young daughter visit

her in compensation for saving her from drowning, only serves to enhance the strangeness that is attached to her character.

The climax of Pearse's story comes when the Deargadaol is found 'cold dead' in her bed (Pearse 60).[10] Following this, the narrator explains that '[t]here wasn't any luck on me or on my household from that day out' (Pearse 60).[11] His wife dies in childbirth and his livestock all perish from disease. Without any means of income, he is forced to wander Connemara, sharing his experience with the Deargadaol presumably for charity. His tragic encounter with this ostracised woman reveals an uncomfortable truth about her situation. No one can say exactly what her alleged sin was, and her identity is long forgotten. The community's treatment of her, and their lack of compassion and care for her, reveals that, at their core, they themselves are not who they purport to be. It seems, then, that, for Pearse, the community that ill-treats the individual who commits a serious transgression against that individual and themselves.

Wilde, Ó Conaire, Pearse, and O'Connor all experienced social othering as a result of their bodies and behaviours. All three writers had lived experiences of social and physical disablement. Wilde, particularly during his 1882 American lecture tour, leaned heavily into the public's image of an aesthete. His wardrobe and long hair reflected this image, and he consciously made a spectacle of himself. Following his release from prison, Wilde was forced into exile on the Continent, never to return to England. This was a form of social disablement. With the stigmata of the nature of the trials and his sentence, Wilde could not return to the life he had prior to his sentencing. He was marked as an other, albeit one that was socially considered dangerous because of its blatant rejection of societal norms. Wilde, as a result of his trials and imprisonment, became socially impaired according to the social model of disability. The only way for him to rejoin society was abroad, under an assumed name, and to maintain a low profile.

Ó Conaire left Galway for London, where he felt that he did not truly belong, a sensation that is a form of social disablement not unlike what Micil experiences while he resides in London. Later in life Ó Conaire became an alcoholic as an adult and shortly before he died in Dublin he reported feeling intense stomach pains. Like Micil, he appears to have been unable to truly attach himself to a single place. He left his partner and their children behind in London. Although during his time in London Ó Conaire worked in an office, Irish emigrants often took manual labour jobs. They, as Angela Bourke states, 'did the heaviest and most dangerous work in building England's canals and railways, and **…** many were crippled in accidents' (Bourke 65). Following such accidents, many, like Micil, would have had their employment prospects severely limited.

Particularly toward the end of his life, Pearse insisted on being photographed in profile because of a lazy eye, a condition he had from childhood. This made him self-conscious to the point where he avoided being photographed facing the camera directly. Pearse's behaviour was noted by his contemporaries as unusual, with one of his former pupils describing his unusual and distinctive communication style with Willie, Pearse's younger brother, as 'weird in the extreme' (Dudley Edwards 124). The brothers would talk to one another, sometimes in public spaces, in a manner akin to baby-talk. Pearse was thought of as being strange during life for his behaviour and, sometimes, for the fervour with which he devoted himself to the cultural and militant nationalist movements.

O'Connor was othered by both her body and her faith. As a Catholic in the Deep South, an area of America that remains predominantly Protestant, she was marked as unusual. In 1950 she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, but a year later she was re-diagnosed as having lupus (Profitt 76). O'Connor became reliant on crutches to help her move around her farm in rural Georgia. The disease, which caused her father's death, ultimately led to her passing in 1963.

The body perceived as freakish reveals truths that are often uncomfortable and, at times, are difficult to comprehend. Wilde, who is inextricably linked with various instances of being othered, positions the Dwarf as a conduit of truth. Upon seeing the Dwarf, the Cactus exclaims, 'He is a perfect horror!' (Wilde 193). The Dwarf functions as a conduit for the uncomfortable truth that he is not the true horror. Near the end of the story, Wilde constructs a telling sentence that reveals this truth: 'The Infanta! It was a monster, the most grotesque monster he had ever beheld' (Wilde 200). The Infanta, the cruel child who mocks the Dwarf, is the story's true monster. Through him Wilde reveals that beauty and innocence can not only be misleading, but these things can also be abnormally cruel. Wilde's use of the perceived abnormal to expose the true freakishness of the normal echoes itself into twentieth century literature. The figure of the freak is an essential exposer of uncomfortable truths. A subconscious Wildean tradition of physical and social estrangement echoes throughout Irish cultural heritage and in O'Connor's religious heritage of the Deep South.

Notes

[1] Davis clarifies this point saying that he is not referring to literal or physical barriers, but metaphorical ones.

[2] 'The Birthday of the Infanta' was first published in Paris Illustré under a different title in 1889.

[3] 'ag tuitim anuas ar mo ghuailnibh', 'An ghruaig úd i n-aimhréid 'n-a slámmannaibh móra ionnus go bhfoluigheann sí m' éadan nuair a bhainim crathadh asam féin. Acht tá m' éadan chomh breágh daithte sin is nach bhfuil cead agam a fholughadh' (Ó Conaire 34).

[4] 'Ghabh fearg mé. Ghabh cutach buile agus fuath mé' (Ó Conaire 43).

[5] 'nár labhair sí le haon duine riamh ach le Brídín amháin' (Pearse 68). In Joseph Campbell's English translation of the story, Brídín is rendered as 'Brideen'.

[6] 'caoch', 'plaitín', '[n]í go maith a bhí in ann siúl, area bhí sí ar leathchois agus bhí an leathchos sin féin briste' (Pearse 68).

[7] 'le péarlaí' (Pearse 76).

[8] 'gur bhean mhallaithe í' (Pearse 102). The title is translated in English as 'The Black Chafer', though it is sometimes rendered as 'An Dearg-Daol' or 'The Dearg Daol'.

[9] 'na trí feithidí is mallaithe ar an domhan' (Pearse 100).

[10] 'fuar marbh' (Pearse 104).

[11] 'Ní raibh aon rath ormsa ná ar mo chomhluadar ón lá sin amach' (Pearse 104).

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ABEI Journal – The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies, v. 27, n. 2, 2025, pp. 171-183.

An Unpublished Letter by Oscar Wilde Found in Brazil

Uma Carta Inédita de Oscar Wilde Encontrada no Brasil

Fábio Waki

Abstract: *When Oscar Wilde accepted Wemyss Reid's offer to serve as editor-in-chief of The Woman's World in 1887, one of his first initiatives was to write a series of letters to eminent women of the period inviting them to contribute essays reflecting on modern society. Among the women he approached was Dame Millicent Fawcett, a prominent advocate for women's rights who would later become one of the most influential figures in the British suffrage movement. During a recent visit to the Biblioteca Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, I was able to confirm in its Manuscripts Section the existence of an unpublished letter that Wilde wrote to Dame Fawcett as part of this project. This article, originally published in The Wildean 67 (2025), examines the form and content of this message and provides a brief perspective on Dame Fawcett's activities in the social and cultural landscapes of late nineteenth-century Britain.*

Keywords: *Oscar Wilde; Millicent Fawcett; The Woman's World; Biblioteca Nacional; Manuscripts.*

Resumo: *Quando Oscar Wilde aceitou a proposta de Wemyss Reid para assumir o cargo de editor-chefe da The Woman's World em 1887, uma de suas primeiras iniciativas foi escrever uma série de cartas a mulheres eminentes da época convidando-as a contribuir com ensaios que refletissem sobre a sociedade moderna. Entre as mulheres com as quais ele entrou em contato estava Dame Millicent Fawcett, uma destacada defensora dos direitos das mulheres que mais tarde viria a se tornar uma das figuras mais influentes do movimento sufragista britânico. Em uma visita recente à Biblioteca Nacional no Rio de Janeiro, pude confirmar na Seção de Manuscritos a existência de uma*

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carta inédita que Wilde escreveu a Dame Fawcett como parte desse projeto. Este artigo, originalmente publicado na The Wildean 67 (2025), examina a forma e o conteúdo dessa correspondência e oferece uma breve perspectiva sobre as atividades de Dame Fawcett no cenário social e cultural da Grã-Bretanha do final do século XIX.

Palavras-chave: *Oscar Wilde; Millicent Fawcett; The Woman's World; Biblioteca Nacional; Manuscritos.*

The XIX Symposium of Irish Studies in South America, organised by the Brazilian Association of Irish Studies, took place at the University of São Paulo from 14 to 16 October 2024. During this event, Peter O'Neill, an independent researcher, informed me of the existence of a letter by Oscar Wilde to Dame Millicent Fawcett (1847–1929) currently held at the Biblioteca Nacional in Rio de Janeiro.[1] Mr O'Neill said it came to light in March 2023 in the context of the exhibition *Irish in Brazil/Irlandeses no Brasil*, of which he was the intellectual author and a co-curator, on display at the library from 16 March to 16 June 2023. The goal of the exhibition, organised by the Consulate General of Ireland in São Paulo with support of the Biblioteca Nacional, was to showcase material from the library's collection about the physical and intellectual presence of the Irish in Brazil since 1578, the year Thomas Field (1549–1625), an Irish priest and explorer, first set foot on its shores. Upon examining Wilde's letter at the Biblioteca Nacional, I realised it was likely an unpublished piece by the writer, a suspicion I soon confirmed by comparing it with his other letters and manuscripts. For this confirmation, I specifically relied on the letters compiled in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (2000), edited by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, as well as on the manuscripts held at the British Library in London, the Morgan Library in New York, the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, and the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library in Los Angeles.

Description and Transcription

Oscar Wilde's letter housed today at the Biblioteca Nacional in Rio de Janeiro is a four-page paper manuscript, undated, 7in × 8.85in (18cm × 22.5cm), written in black calligraphic handwriting, no images or marginalia by the author, circular stamps and minor pencil marginalia by the library. Wilde's address, 16 Tite Street – Chelsea S.W., is printed in a black letterhead at the top of the first page, while his signature can be clearly read at the bottom of

the last one. The letter bears no date, but it was probably written between May and July 1887 (see below).

This letter is included in an Autograph Album (BNMS Reg. 50/1274) purchased by Luiz Leopoldo Brício de Abreu (1903–70) from a man named Carlos Ribeiro in Brazil on 15 September 1950 for Cr$ 30,000. Brício de Abreu, one of the most influential men of letters in mid-twentieth century Rio de Janeiro, was notable for his role as chief editor of *Dom Casmurro* (1937–44), a literary magazine that, despite its left-wing leanings, remained one of the most significant cultural publications during the Estado Novo (1937–46). The name Carlos Ribeiro, exceedingly common in Brazil, probably refers to the original owner of Livraria São José, a bookshop in Rio de Janeiro celebrated as the oldest in the city and as home to one of the largest rare books collections in Latin America until its closure in 2021 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. There is no known provenance for the letter before it came into the possession of Carlos Ribeiro.

16. TITE STREET.
CHELSEA. S.W.

Dear Mrs Fawcett.

Allow me to thank you for your kind promise to write. Any subject you choose is sure to be interesting.

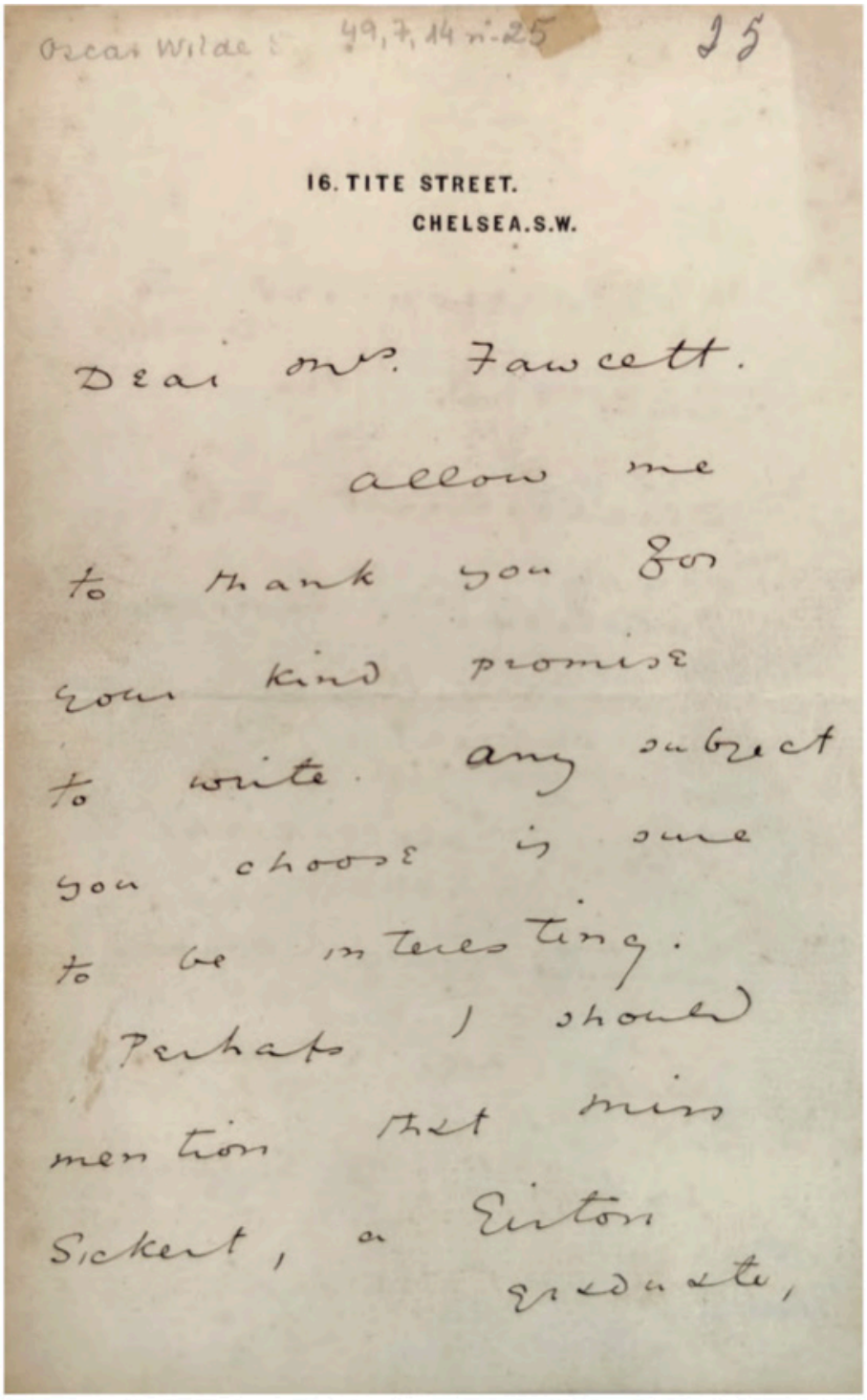
Perhaps I should mention that Miss Sickert, a Girton graduate, has promised to write on the Development of Political Economy, a subject on which she gives lectures in connection with the University Extension Scheme.

I would esteem it a great favour, and so would Messrs Cassell & Co. the proprietors of the magazine, if you would favour us from time to time with any suggestions that may occur to you — or send me the names of any ladies whose work could be of value, or who would wish to have an interview with literature. The magazine will always be open to any of your friends or protégés, and I am anxious to get some young writers, especially any who have received a University Education —

Believe me

yours very truly

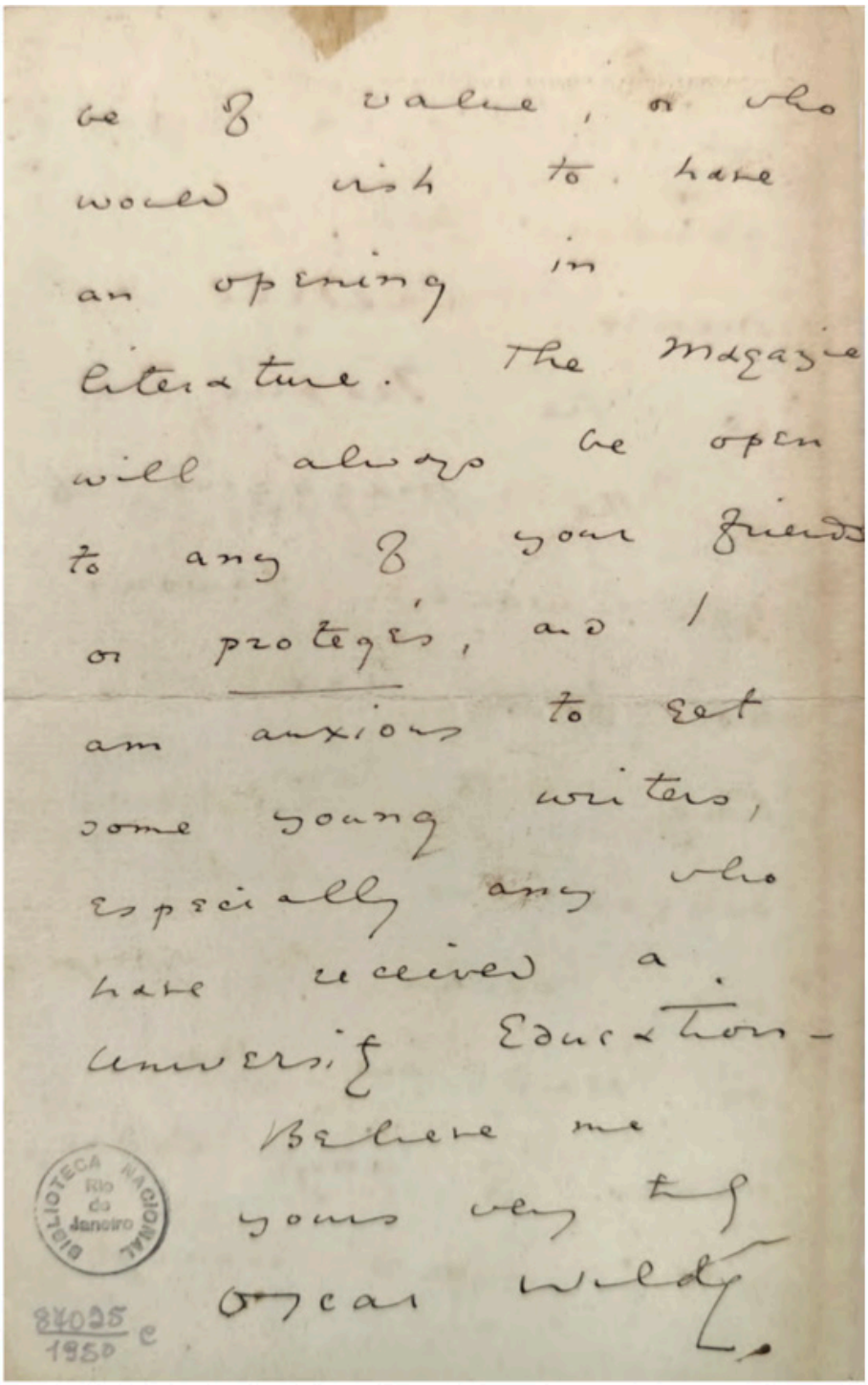
Oscar Wilde


Oscar Wilde 49,7,14 n.25 25

16. TITE STREET.
CHELSEA.S.W.

Dear Mrs. Fawcett.

allow me
to thank you for
your kind promise
to write. any subject
you choose is sure
to be interesting.
Perhaps I should
mention that Miss
Sickert, a Slade
graduate,



be of value, or who would wish to have an opening in literature. The Magazine will always be open to any of your friends or proteges, and I am anxious to get some young writers, especially any who have received a University Education.

Believe me
Yours very truly
Oscar Wilde

Context

When Oscar Wilde took on the role of editor of *The Lady's World* in 1887, one of his first changes was to rename it *The Woman's World*. While the original title suggested a magazine tailored for elite women, with content centred around fashion and household management, the new one indicated it would now be targeted at a broader female readership, encompassing topics such as society, politics, ethics, education, work, and art. This transformation of the periodical from what Cassell & Co. originally planned as a "new high-class magazine for ladies" into what Wilde conceived as a new "organ of women of intellect, culture, and position" (Holland and Hart-Davis 297) was also evident in the modifications made to its front cover. While the original layout featured an idealised woman admiring herself in a hand-held mirror, a book only casually placed in her other hand, the new one would now headline a list of contributors, showcasing within a frame of siren-caryatids the women who had authored articles for that edition. Wilde's project, therefore, was to redesign both the form and content of the magazine to explicitly connect the authors' names to their perspectives on issues that resonated with the interests of an increasingly complex class of women in fin-de-siècle reality. This approach was truly bold for its time. Not only did it acknowledge women as competent individuals capable of sharing their own experiences of and opinions about modern society, but it also recognised the ever-growing stratification of this society in ways that could no longer be understood solely from the perspective of its higher echelons.

Eleanor Fitzsimons writes about Wilde's conception of the magazine:

> Under Wilde's editorship, *The Woman's World* featured regular columns and commissioned articles, almost all of them written by identifiable rather than anonymous women. [...] Authors were identified by their forename and surname at the bottom of each article, with no mention of title or marital status, following the convention used by professional writers, who were generally men. This put women writers on a level with their male counterparts, allowing them a status not often extended to them. (Fitzsimons 11-12)

Wilde outlines this plan in his first response to Thomas Wemyss Reid (1842–1905), general manager of Cassell & Co. who in April 1887 had formally invited him to take on the post of editor of the magazine. He first writes about his conception of the publication as a whole:

> It seems to me that at present it is too feminine, and not sufficiently womanly. No one appreciates more fully than I do the value and importance of Dress, in its relation to good taste and good health: I have treated the subject on which I have constantly lectured on before Institutes and Societies of various kinds, but it seems to me that the field of the modernities, the field of mere millinery and trimmings, is to some extent already occupied by such papers as the Queen and the Lady's Pictorial, and that we should take a wider range, as well as a high standpoint, and deal not merely with what women wear, but with what they think, and what they feel. The Lady's World should be made the recognised organ for the expression of women's opinions on all subjects of literature, art, and modern life, and yet it should be a magazine that men could read with pleasure, and consider it a privilege to contribute to. (Holland and Hart-Davis 297)

He then explains his ideas on how to reconstruct it:

> We should get if possible the Princess Louise and the Princess Christian to contribute to it: an article from the latter on needlework for instance in connection with the Art School of which she is President would be very interesting. Carmen Sylva and Madame Adam should be got to write: Mrs Julia Ward Howe of Boston should be invited to contribute, as well as some of the other cultured women of America, while our list should include such women as Lady Archibald Campbell, a charming writer, Lady Ardilaun, who might give us some of her Irish experiences, Mrs Jeune, Miss Harrison, Miss Mary Robinson, Miss Olive Schreiner, the author of South African Farm; Lady Greville, whose life of Montrose is a very clever monograph, Miss Dorothy Tennant, Lady Verney, Lady Dilke, Lady Dufferin, Lady Constance Howard, Matthew Arnold's daughter, Lady Brassey, Lady Beatrice, Lady Rosebery, Lady Dorothy Nevill, who could write on the Walpoles, Mrs Singleton (Violet Fane), Lady Diana Huddleston, Lady Catherine Gaskell, Lady Paget, Miss Rosa Mulholland, Hon Emily Lawless, Lady Harberton, Mrs Charles McLaren, Lady Pollock, Mrs Fawcett, Miss Pater (sister of the author of Marius) and others too numerous to name in a letter. (Holland and Hart-Davis 297)

Wilde agreed terms with Cassell & Co. in May 1887, and Reid wanted to start paying him from 1st June, ready for the appearance of the first issue edited by him in November. However, Wilde asked that his pay be backdated to 1st May as he was already doing a great deal of work for the magazine (Holland and Hart-Davis 299), much of which involved writing letters to the

women he had mentioned in his proposal and others, asking them to contribute articles. In his letter to Fawcett, Wilde mentions that he has already invited Helena Sickert to contribute an article, and Holland and Hart-Davis propose a date for this letter of 27 May 1887. (Holland and Hart-Davis 301n. The letter is dated, but not in Wilde's hand.) He also wrote to Eleanor Sidgwick (1845–1913), campaigner for women's suffrage and higher education who would later serve as principal of Newnham College at the University of Cambridge (1892–1910):

> [July 1887?]
> 16 Tite Street
>
> Dear Mrs Sidgwick, I am very anxious to have your assistance in a scheme I am engaged in. I have been asked by Messrs Cassell to edit one of their monthly magazines and am anxious to make it the recognised organ through which women of culture and position will express their views. Mrs Fawcett, Miss Thackeray, Lady Dorothy Nevill, Lady Wentworth, Miss Orme, Mrs Francis Jeune, Lady Archibald Campbell and others have promised to write, and I hope you will allow me to add your name to the list of contributors, and, when you have leisure, write an article on any modern subject, or indeed on any subject you select. (Holland and Hart-Davis 307)

As Wilde tells Sidgwick that Mrs Fawcett has already agreed to write for The Woman's World, his letter to Fawcett must have been written after 27 May (the date of the letter to Helena Sickert proposed by Holland and Hart-Davis) and before July 1887, the proposed date for the letter to Sidgwick.[2] Furthermore, the letter to Fawcett is clearly a response to one he has already received from her agreeing to his proposal, so there were at least two other letters before this of which the location is unknown.

Dame Millicent Garrett Fawcett

Dame Millicent Garrett Fawcett was an English feminist, activist and writer, who became particularly known in Victorian society for her leading role in the women's suffrage movement. She began her activism in 1868, with the London Suffrage Committee, and delivered her first public speech in 1869, at a women's suffrage meeting in this city. In 1870, her connection to Oscar Wilde became evident through her association with Sir William Wilde (1815–76) and

Lady Jane Wilde (1821–96) during a suffrage meeting in Dublin after which she spoke at the Wildes' house on Merrion Square in Dublin. She later maintained her relationship with Lady Wilde in London, where they attended further gatherings focused on women's suffrage and political participation.[3] In 1888, the year in which her article appeared in *The Woman's World*, Millicent Fawcett and Constance Wilde were both on the Committee of Women 'formed in connection with the international Peace and Arbitration Society'.[4] This close association and shared interests probably influenced her decision to accept Wilde's invitation to contribute an article to the magazine.

Fawcett led the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies from 1897 to 1919, frequently suggesting nonviolent initiatives for legislative reforms to secure women's voting rights. Her arguments often challenged tired contrary claims such as that women's physical differences made them unfit for political participation. She refuted these claims by dismissing the idea that physical combat should be a prerequisite for political involvement, emphasising, instead, the complementary roles of men and women in society and their shared responsibility for the nation's welfare. Her reasoning was that women's perspectives and contributions were essential for balanced and effective governance precisely because they so often contrasted with those of their male counterparts.

Fawcett also championed the political involvement of women through organisations such as the Primrose League and Women's Liberal Associations, emphasising their growing power to influence political discourse and election outcomes. Interestingly, she noted that, although political corruption was typically driven by men, women were often compelled to shoulder the financial burdens that resulted from it, all while being denied the very voting rights these men enjoyed.

Fawcett's advocacy for women's suffrage extended to global issues, tackling oppressive practices in places like British-controlled India, where women were often called upon to challenge injustices such as child marriage. This perspective reflected her conviction in the universal applicability of women's rights and the moral responsibility of English women to influence reforms in foreign communities.

Also an advocate for equal rights in education, Fawcett co-founded Newnham College at the University of Cambridge in 1871, furthering higher education opportunities for a growing class of women in the country. In his letter, Wilde seems especially interested

in her work on women's education as a topic for the magazine, but her contribution would eventually focus on her broader interest in women's political rights.

Fawcett's article 'Women's Suffrage', which appeared in the November 1888 edition of *The Woman's World*, was a lightly edited transcript of a paper Fawcett had delivered at a meeting of the Cambridge Women's Suffrage Association at the Guildhall on Wednesday 16 February 1887.[5] It offered a strong critique of the exclusion of women from political enfranchisement, framing it as both an 'absurdity' and an 'anomaly'. She argues that, while men of all capabilities, including uneducated men, are normally granted the right to vote, women, regardless of their intelligence, responsibility, contribution, or education, are denied this basic right, even when they actively contribute to society. She ultimately advocates for incremental reforms of truly realistic nature, such as the Women's Suffrage Bill, which sought to enfranchise female householders.

A distinctive aspect of her perspectives on the advancement of women's rights, as evident in this essay, is in fact their pragmatism. Her ideas ultimately gravitate around the idea that granting women the right to vote is less about fairness and more about challenging laws unjust to women. While fairness may be a moral premise too abstract to yield tangible results, challenging unjust laws inevitably leads to the reorganisation of society into a more beneficial and productive collective structure.

Fawcett was throughout her life a tireless advocate for equality, education, and justice, especially as a pathway to a more effective enfranchisement of women as integral members of society. Her efforts culminated in significant recognitions, including her appointment as Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire (GBE) in 1925 and her memorial in Westminster Abbey. In 2018, she became the first woman honoured with a statue in Parliament Square, a testament to her enduring legacy in the fight for women's rights.

Conclusion

Oscar Wilde's letter to Dame Millicent Fawcett, recently found in Brício de Abreu's manuscript collection at the Biblioteca Nacional in Brazil, confirms Wilde's relationships with important figures in Victorian society, sheds new light on his work as a magazine editor, reaffirms his commitment to women's interests, and hints at the possible existence of yet other letters that could further help reconstruct the mosaic of his life. This manuscript, however, is not the first one to come to light in connection with Brazilian sources.

In 2008, Lúcia Moreira Salles (†2009), widow of businessman Walther Moreira Salles (1912–2001), gifted a collection of Wilde's letters and manuscripts to the Morgan Library & Museum in New York. This volume includes messages Wilde exchanged with Alfred Douglas (1870–1945) as well early versions of several of his shorter prose works. Despite its remarkable content, however, few Brazilian scholars seem to be aware of its provenance and existence.

It is widely recognised in Brazilian literary studies today that Wilde deeply influenced writers such as João do Rio (1881–1921) and Mário de Andrade (1893–1945)[6], both of whom drew inspiration from his works and used them as a creative resource to reaffirm their homosexuality within Brazilian society. Still, this letter in Rio de Janeiro and his manuscripts in New York indicate that the role played by Brazilian collectors in bringing his literature into Brazilian culture remains an unexplored subject. His letter has been housed at the Biblioteca Nacional for more than seventy years but has only recently been recognised as a subject of scholarly interest. Similarly, his manuscripts have been housed at the Morgan Library for nearly two decades, yet only a handful of Wildean scholars, even in Brazil, are currently aware of their preservation.

Tracing the exact origins of Wilde's writings is not always possible, but their eventual acquisition by figures such as Brício de Abreu and Moreira Salles highlights his lasting impact as an artist with cultural circles reaching as far afield as Latin America. This article therefore seeks to bring to light the discovery of Wilde's letter in Brazil while emphasising how this finding also exposes the need for further investigation into the influence of his literature and its enduring presence in cultures beyond his own.

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Notes

1. Wilde's manuscript can be found online on Biblioteca Nacional's portal: https://objdigital.bn.br/objdigital2/acervo_digital/div_manuscritos/mss87025/mss87025.pdf
2. Like the letter to Helena Sickert, the letter to Eleanor Sidgwick is dated but in another hand. Helena Sickert would write 'The Evolution of Economics: Competition – Combination – Cooperation' which appeared in the February 1889 issue of *The Woman's World*. No article by Eleanor Sidgwick appeared.
3. In 1880 they were on the platform for a meeting on female enfranchisement at the St James's Hall, Piccadilly (Morning post, 7 May 1880, 2); in 1883 they attended a meeting in the Prince's Hall, Piccadilly on the relative freedoms of women in the USA and Britain (Morning post, 26 June 1883, 3).
4. *Echo*, 20 February 1888, 1.
5. Fawcett in Fitzsimons, 75–9. It was also reproduced in full on page six of the *Cambridge Independent Press* on 12 February 1887, with the heading 'Mrs Henry Fawcett on women's Suffrage. Meeting at Cambridge'. Her speech, one of several delivered in support of the movement by members of the university and others, was applauded frequently throughout.
6. See Braga-Pinto and Vergara.

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Reviews

OHLMEYER, Jane. ***Fazendo Império: Irlanda, imperialismo e o início da era moderna/ Making Empire: Ireland, Imperialism and the Early Modern World.*** Organização: Laura Izarra. Tradução: L. C. Fonseca; M. Bolfarine; D. M. Sales; A. Clarindo; G. Marchese; L. Cardeal; F. M. F. Araujo; E. G. Borges; V. A. C. Pacheco; S. Candian; M. C. Mendes; S. B. Jorge. São Paulo: Editora Unifesp, 2025. 360 p. ISBN 978-65-5632-201-8.

Fazendo Império: Irlanda, imperialismo e o início da era moderna, publicada originalmente em inglês no ano de 2023, pela Oxford University Press, é obra da historiadora Jane Ohlmeyer, professora do Trinity College Dublin. Nascida na Zâmbia, nos limites do antigo império britânico, e criada em Belfast durante os "Conflitos" na Irlanda do Norte, Ohlmeyer reuniu neste livro as reflexões apresentadas em suas renomadas *Ford Lectures*, proferidas pela Universidade de Oxford em 2021. A autora examina a Irlanda não como periferia, mas como elemento constitutivo do "Primeiro Império Inglês" (c. 1550–c. 1770), ressaltando que se tratava de um império essencialmente inglês, e não britânico. Como observa Ken MacMillan (apud Ohlmeyer), tratava-se de um império "baseado em princípios ideológicos", organizado como um "sistema amplamente consistente (embora, em regra, considerado não invasivo) de governança imperial" (p. xvii). Era, além disso, um império global orientado para a exploração econômica.

A versão em português brasileiro, organizada pela Professora Doutora Laura P.Z. de Izarra, da Universidade de São Paulo, é fruto de um trabalho de tradução coletiva orquestrado pela tradutora, e também Professora da Universidade de São Paulo, Doutora Luciana Carvalho Fonseca.

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O título original, *Making Empire*, vai além de um simples recurso de impacto: trata-se de uma alusão à peça *Making History* (*Fazendo História*), escrita em 1988 pelo dramaturgo norte-irlandês Brian Friel, no auge dos conflitos sectários. A peça, encenada pela companhia de teatro *Field Day*, da Irlanda do Norte, questiona narrativas essencialistas e o próprio estatuto da "verdade histórica". Em diálogo célebre, o personagem histórico, Hugh O'Neill, Conde de Tyrone, que ficou famoso por seu papel central na resistência contra a expansão do domínio inglês sobre a Irlanda, especialmente durante a chamada Guerra dos Nove Anos (1594–1603), afirma a seu confidente, Peter Lombard, Arcebispo de Armagh: "*Não acredito que um período da história – um espaço de tempo, em que minha vida, sua vida – contenha em si uma única interpretação 'verdadeira', à espera de ser descoberta. Mas acredito que ele possa abrigar múltiplas narrativas possíveis, e que essas narrativas são moldadas pelas necessidades, demandas e expectativas de diferentes pessoas e épocas."* (Friel, 1988, p. 15-16, tradução nossa).

Inspirada nesse espírito crítico, Ohlmeyer parte da premissa de que "os impérios moldaram a história do mundo nos últimos dois milênios por meio de estruturas políticas, práticas e culturas que operaram" (2024, p. xvii). Examina, assim, o império "em formação" (*in the making*), tratando a Irlanda não como periferia, mas como parte constitutiva desse processo durante o início da modernidade.

A obra é apresentada por meio do capítulo introdutório, "Fazendo Tradução", no qual os tradutores esclarecem alguns dos desafios encontrados durante o processo tradutório. Um deles é o termo *plantation*, "interpretado e/ou traduzido de acordo com o contexto, seja como 'plantação' de pessoas, ou colonos, ou como um sistema de dominação colonial a partir do confisco de extensas porções de terras" (p. xii). Outro exemplo é o termo *big house*, mantido em inglês em toda a obra para evitar sua associação equivocada ao conceito de casa-grande da história brasileira. No Brasil, a casa-grande era a morada do senhor de engenho e uma metáfora para a elite exploradora, marcando a linha racial estruturada pela escravização. Já no contexto irlandês, *big house* refere-se a edificações não apenas grandes, mas também luxuosas e, em certa medida fortificadas, situadas em áreas rurais. Pertenciam a proprietários de terra anglo-irlandeses – grupo social, político e cultural formado, em grande parte, pelos descendentes de colonizadores ingleses estabelecidos na Irlanda, especialmente durante as *plantations* – e cujas propriedades foram constituídas a partir do século XVI.

Fazendo Império busca responder a perguntas seminais: Como o império inglês operou na Irlanda nesse período? Como esse processo se transformou ao longo do tempo? O que significou para os irlandeses terem acesso a outros impérios europeus?

Para tanto, a autora organiza sua análise em uma "Introdução", em que demonstra que o império não é uma memória distante na Irlanda, e seis capítulos (1. Fazendo História, 2. Anglicização, 3. Assimilação, 4. Agentes do Império, 5. Laboratório, 6. Impérios na Irlanda). *Fazendo Império* é estruturada em quatro eixos: integração, agentes, laboratório colonial e impacto cotidiano. O primeiro explora a integração da Irlanda no sistema imperial inglês, fornecendo território e mão de obra para sua expansão; o segundo trata do papel dos irlandeses como agentes do império; o terceiro da Irlanda como "laboratório" para empreitada colonial inglesa; e o quarto, do impacto do império no cotidiano dos irlandeses na era moderna. Desse modo, a autora examina identidades a partir de configurações territoriais, linguísticas e religiosas, das alianças de classe, bem como das conexões estabelecidas entre diferentes impérios e os legados do imperialismo. Assim, apresenta ao público de língua portuguesa acesso a um estudo inovador e fundamental para compreender o império como processo e seu papel na conformação da modernidade. Destaca-se como a autora traz para a discussão os Depoimentos de 1641, testemunhos legais nos quais homens e mulheres protestantes, oriundos de diferentes classes sociais, relataram suas experiências após a eclosão da rebelião dos irlandeses católicos em outubro de 1641.[1]

Questões de identidade e terminologia permeiam toda a obra: o que significavam conceitos como *"irlandesidade"* e *"inglesidade"*? Como religião e língua influenciaram essas noções? Se, e de que forma, tais significados se transformaram ao longo do tempo?

Embora centrado na Irlanda, o estudo também evidencia conexões transimperiais, ou seja, como a ilha se relacionava com outras potências coloniais da época. Ademais, a obra nos faz refletir sobre a própria condição do passado colonial do Brasil em relação a Portugal e as suas consequências.

A tradução de *Making Empire* para o português, agora publicada como *Fazendo Império: Irlanda, imperialismo e o início da era moderna*, representa uma conquista significativa para pesquisadores e leitores interessados em compreender a lógica das políticas imperiais e seus legados.

Mariana Bolfarine

Notas

1 Documentos disponíveis por meio e um projeto de digitalização coordenado pela professora Jane Ohlmeyer no Trinity College Dublin: http://tcd.ie/history/research/1641.php

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CARR, Marina. *Bodas de sangre: en una adaptación de Marina Carr*. Translation and introduction by Melania Terrazas Gallego and Salma Errami Fennane. Logroño: Universidad de La Rioja, Servicio de Publicaciones, 2025, pp. 134. ISBN 978-84-126376-4-9 (rústica); 978-84-126376-5-6 (epub).

Published in 2025 by the University of La Rioja, *Bodas de sangre: en una adaptación de Marina Carr* is a version of Federico García Lorca's tragedy translated into Spanish by Melania Terrazas Gallego, Senior Lecturer in English Studies at the University of La Rioja and Head of the Centre of Irish Studies Banna/Bond (EFACIS), and Salma Errami Fennane, a PhD candidate in English Philology at the University of La Rioja, where she holds an FPI/CAR predoctoral fellowship and a teaching replacement position. Aimed at translating Marina Carr's *Blood Wedding* (2019), this work results from a project made possible through the grant *Intersecciones post-humanas en las literaturas irlandesa y gallega* PID2022-136251NB-I00, funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by *FEDER Una manera de hacer Europa*.

This brand new translation fosters a remarkable cultural return, encapsulating a round trip: an early twentieth-century Spanish tragedy revisited by a 21st-century Irish playwright, and then reintroduced to the drama's original geography. In choosing to translate Carr's Hiberno-English version into a pseudo-dialectal Spanish (Carr, 2025: 32), Gallego and Fennane genuinely engage in what translation theorist André Lefevere (1992 *apud* Carr, 2025: 21) describes as a process of "rewriting" regarding drama translation. The Professors' rewriting of Carr's rewriting is thus one that negotiates fidelity to the Irish playwright's dramaturgical and translation solutions while reopening Lorca's tragedy to new meanings within the target audience's expectations in its place of origin.

As Gallego and Fennane mention in their introduction to the book (Carr, 2025: 22), in *English retranslations of Federico García Lorca's Bodas de Sangre: metaphor, symbol and culture*,

Chun Zhang states that *Bodas de Sangre* (1933) is "the most retranslated and widely recognized theatre piece of Lorca in the English-speaking world," and the dissertation covers 18 retranslations from the USA and the UK (Zhang, 2022: III). While the first—and infamously unsuccesssful—English translation by José Weissberger dates back to 1935 (Zhang, 2022: 12), Marina Carr's *Blood Wedding* is the last to have been published, in 2019—an interim of over 80 years that hints to this drama's long-standing cachet. Still, more specifically, Carr's version subscribes to a national bloodline of Irish retranslations of Lorca's *Bodas de Sangre*, alongside the adaptation work of Dermot Healy—staged in 1989 but published for the first time as part of the collection *Dermot Healy: The Collected Plays* in 2016—, and the rewriting by Brendan Kennelly (1996), which underscores its cross-cultural relevance in Ireland.

Rich intertextuality, formal experimentalism, and bold confrontation of patriarchalism contribute to Carr's critical acclaim and institutional recognition. Evolved across different creative periods her work has culminated in recent mythic rewritings whereby rekindling tales of human fragility and oppression through innovative dramatic forms the Irish playwright responds to contemporary shifts on ideological and sociopolitical landscapes. In fact, since her 1989 debut, Carr's work has been praised for reshaping the theatrical paradigm of womanhood representation, by engaging in matters of human nature, social exclusion, and patriarchal norms. This is precisely where *Blood Wedding* fits within her *oeuvre*; Carr's version is simultaneously a reverential and bold rewriting of Lorca's *Bodas de Sangre*, which blends the Spanish playwright's representation of a markedly sexist rural community with her characteristic psychological depth and feminist swings.

Between late 20th century and early 21st century Carr has emerged as a nationally renowned and internationally recognised female voice in contemporary Irish theatre. Her plays draw on a myriad of influences from Irish literary tradition and Greek tragedy to canonical names, such as Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, and Tolstoi. It also displays a notable linguistic experimentation grounded in the lexical and phonetic particularities of Midlands Hiberno-English. These stakes are dutifully safeguarded by Gallego and Fennane's translation endeavour by choosing to honour Carr's distinctive voice, while fortifying a cultural bridge and laying the foundations for a convergent theatrical space; a place of encounter in between Spanish Andalusia and the Irish Midlands where Federico García Lorca meets Marina Carr.

Bodas de Sangre is the cornerstone of Lorca's *Rural Trilogy*—which also includes *Yerma* and *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*—, devising a portrait of an oppressive rural society, ruled by honour,

strict gender politics, class and ethnic exclusion, and violence against the backdrop of unresolved feuds between families. The dramatic action revolves around "the preparation, celebration, and destruction of a wedding" (Zhang, 2022: 8), and at its centre stands a love triangle: La Novia (The Bride), El Novio (The Bridegroom), and Leonardo, the bride's former lover. In his interweaved combination of poetic verse and prose, Lorca employs elements and procedures gathered both from classical tragedy and from the Spanish Golden Age, or *Siglo de Oro*, permeating the play with symbolic, mythic, and ritualistic connotations, as well as a sense of the inexorability of fate (Carr, 2025: 12).

Besides the mythological characters, the Moon (*La Luna*) and Death (*La Muerte*), Leonardo is in fact the only character who is fully individualised, while the remaining ones are named by their functions within this rigid 1930s Spanish order (Lorca, 1971): *La Madre*, *La Novia*, *La Suegra*, *La Mujer de Leonardo*, *La Criada*, *La Vecina*, *Muchachas*, *El Novio*, *El Padre de la Novia*, *Los Leñadores*, *Mozos*. Accordingly, in her version Carr maintains Lorca's naming system, still restricting individuality to Leonardo, a character whose misogynistic inclinations are enhanced in Carr's rendering, reaffirming the persistence of structural gender inequalities from a contemporary stance. Carr's version unfolds then as an adaptation of Lorca's legacy, sustaining the key character dynamics but significantly reducing the amount of characters; for instance, with the amalgamation of the functions of Death (*La Muerte*) in the performance of the Weaver (*Tejedora*). Mostly similar to Lorca's list, in Gallego and Fennane's translation, characters are listed in alphabetical order (Carr, 2025: 57): *Criada*, *Hijo/Novio*, *Leñador 1*, *Leñador 2*, *Madre*, *Mujer de Leonardo*, *Novia*, *Padre*, *Vecina/Tejedora*.

In the process of rewriting, Carr distinctly recolours the symbolic fabric of *Bodas de Sangre* with her contemporary Irish and feminist sensibility, opening this story of elopement to new meanings and audiences. Refracted from Lorca's context of production to Carr's, themes such as Catholicism, political struggle, female repression, and the weight of patriarchal tradition embody robust tokens of cross-cultural parallel between Ireland and Spain (Carr, 2025: 16). Indeed, Carr's adaptation cannot be detached from its geographical, historical, and sociocultural backdrop in Ireland: a society shaped by civil war, Catholic influence, and by a restrictive set of legislation over women's rights—from constitutional religious inclination, to the prohibition of divorce and the relegation of women to the domestic sphere (Carr, 2025: 13).

The shared ground allows Marina Carr to retain the essential framework of Lorca's drama, but it ultimately provides an opportunity for her to infuse it with habitual rural Irish

peculiarities, as well as her particular contemporary challenging standpoint. As a work embedded in its production context, the publication of *Blood Wedding* in 2019 closely coincides with the repealing of the Irish Constitution's Eighth Amendment after a referendum in 2018—a true landmark on the timeline of the country's evolving gender politics into more liberal stances, which revoked the grant to the unborn of a right to life equal to that of the mother (Carr, 2025: 13).

In contrast with Lorca's solemn tone, Carr's strategic use of irony and humour enables another level of critical exposition of the contradictions and absurdities within traditional gender ideologies. On the one hand, under a pungent tone, the Irish playwright intensifies motifs of internalised gender, class, and race prejudice in the speech of the old woman who reproduces the very norms that oppress them all: the Mother (*Madre*). On the other hand, she foregrounds generational friction, adding more psychological layers to the young character who pushes back against the inherited imposed norms; a woman who embodies a double burden and is torn between social obligation and personal desire; the one whose defiant calls lead to the deadly outcome of the play: the Bride (*Novia*).

The Bride belongs to the tarnished bloodline of *La Manchita*, her mother, a woman defamed for her sexual autonomy who is driven to suicide; she provides a genealogical source of rebellion (Carr, 2025: 17). The young woman's demeanor is thus portrayed as a mirror to heroic passion, inner conflict, and inescapability from a tragic ending; she is a woman who claims her sexuality without shame, rejects the constraints of respectability, and refuses to sacrifice herself for her lover. At last, her death culminates in a moment of liberation rather than punishment, cleverly steering away from Lorca's version, where the Mother withholds from the Bride any possibility of release from the confinement of female existence in such a society that strictly prioritises family, honour, and estate.

Thus, for cultural, theatrical, and also scholarly reasons, Gallego and Fennane argue that the Spanish translation of Marina Carr's *Blood Wedding* is a necessary project which corroborates to the circulation of this canonical play. It seems true that both Lorca's original idea and Carr's adaptation effectively welcome broad readership and rewritings, and the choice for a pseudo-dialectal translation allows Spanish-speaking audiences access to a craft invested in intercultural nuance from contemporary, feminist, foreign and regional standpoints that combines symbolisms from Lorca and Carr. By performing the role of cultural mediators (Carr, 2025: 38), the Spanish translators have employed lexical and phonetic filters to properly convey and reinforce the dialogic significance of this revitalisation, not only when it ratifies Lorca's chassis, but also where it

underscores the changes that have shaped the world over the past century, contributing to the ongoing life of *Bodas de Sangre* and restoring the focus to a Spanish context where it can renew reflections and debates.

Emblematically, Gallego and Fennane employed three main strategies (Perteghella, 2002 *apud* CARR, 2025: 32-3). Firstly, the use of a non-standard register with features from different varieties of Spanish, preserving orality and cultural references of the text with phonetic, morphological, and prosodic features that mimics everyday speech. Secondly, the standardization with dialectal nuances. And lastly, regarding the balance between fidelity to meaning and literal translation from English, they sought to prioritise poetic structure, rhythm, and imagery when possible. The linguistic modifications proposed by the translators enriches the text's performative texture, encouraging a fluid delivery on stage and strengthening the audience's identification with the cultural framework. Through these choices the translation of Carr's *Blood Wedding* forges a mindful interplay between the two playwrights, furthering poetic force, emotional intensity, and symbolic hybridity.

Priscila Borges Rodrigues

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