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## **Liberating the Sexed Body: Oscar Wilde Erodes Victorian Conventions as a New World Is Created in the Importance of Being Earnest**

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LIBERATING THE SEXED BODY: OSCAR WILDE ERODES VICTORIAN  
CONVENTIONS AS A NEW WORLD IS CREATED IN *THE IMPORTANCE OF*  
*BEING EARNEST*

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Bachelor of Arts in English

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May, 2007

submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

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## DEDICATION

To my loving mother Anita and grandmother Celestine Peoples. Love is more than just a word it is an action. Thank you for loving me unconditionally.

LIBERATING THE SEXED BODY: OSCAR WILDE ERODES VICTORIAN  
CONVENTIONS AS A NEW WORLD IS CREATED IN *THE IMPORTANCE OF*

*BEING EARNEST*

AMBER M. WULU

**ABSTRACT**

This essay examines the way in which Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* challenges Victorian conventionalist definition of sexuality in terms of gender. Wilde leads the charge against the structure of the heterosexual matrix by examining the extent to which gender regulates a person's identity, perception and future. It is imperative to apply alternate analysis on gay/queer theory to Wilde's work to show how the artist was one of the first to introduce audiences to the notion that gender is in actuality a construct. Several aspects of Wilde's literary career are ignored and critics do not recognize nor understand that the artist's works are the culmination of him addressing the crisis involving the conflict between gender and sexuality. Concepts that once explicitly defined male and female gender roles can no longer distinctly separate both binaries.

Wilde contends that gender is a performance of socially inscribed ideas of male and female behaviors and actions however, these distinct citations can and will overlap. What is important to note is that Wilde understands and illustrates that when overlapping occurs, opportunities for variance allows those that feel limited by the matrix the chance to define an identity outside of categorization. Wilde defiantly questions the adherence to strict gender roles using parody to explore serious subject matter. As a revolutionary, the artist extends his defiance further by doing what no other artist of the time does and that

is to align the new woman and the dandy making both allies of the same cause. Wilde predicts that women would aid in the disintegration of restrictive regulations.

By using the emerging strength, power, and influence of the new woman Wilde reveals the importance of allowing men and women equal opportunities within both the public and private spheres of life. Once the heterosexual matrix is disrupted and exposed for the system of control for which it stands individuality is attainable. This thesis demonstrates that even though it appears as if everyone participates as active players in upholding contradictory constructs of the matrix not everyone willingly participates and follows along according to the rules.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Many scholars of Oscar Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, read it as a study on how the author derides the late Victorian conventions that strictly regulated and defined social identities, which were based upon gender. By giving audiences a farcical interpretation of life, Wilde explored the very nature of identity that defined both the public and private spheres of life. However, many biographers and Wilde scholars neglect to see the importance of the time Wilde spent as the editor of a failing magazine, "Lady's World," viewing this time as unimportant to the artist's career development. However, having died at the age of thirty-five the few years spent as editor are a very significant aspect of the artist's career. Even though his life was considerably brief, Wilde cleared the way for new discourses and eventually for gay/queer idealists but ideologies that explain Wilde's works do not give the female characters of the play credit for their roles in helping to contradict social conventions. Therefore, it is imperative to apply alternate theories to the study of Wilde's text to comprehend the movement of women entering the public sphere as 'New Women' a term that redefined what a woman should be during this era (Green 26). Through the characterization of Lady Bracknell, a 'New Woman' of her time, Wilde introduces individualism as a catalyst that makes way

for avant-garde views on sexuality, liberates the marginalized, and inverts Victorian social constructs in order to create a new world for the characters of the play.

Devoted to the advocacy of women, the concept of feminism has often correlated to what a woman should be in contrast to characteristics possessed by a man; things women typically have been told not to exemplify or avoid. Accordingly, gender is an expression of the sexed body. However Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* would disagree. *Butler* proposes that the differences between men and women are culturally imposed and that gender is not a natural expression of sex (41). The theorist contends that gender is a series of socially governed performatives or citations that are continuously repeated actions that form a stable gender identity. Wilde goes on to define citations as accidentals, areas “where we differ from each other... in dress, manner, tone of voice, religious opinions, personal appearance, tricks of habit and the like” (*Decay of Lying* 5). These accidentals can be subtle or obvious, blatant or muddled but they are all forms of coercion used to uphold the gender constructs of the heterosexual matrix instead of areas of difference. What would appear to be natural behavior is in actuality only that which has been constructed, approved and sanctioned by the matrix. What appears to be natural is then found to be true and reliable.

### 1.1. THE POWER OF PERFORMATIVES

Through the repetition of performatives the conventions that comprise the heterosexual matrix appear as necessary and natural mechanisms that help to shape what a person will become. The problem that arises is that at the center of the matrix lies heterosexuality, the origin and the cause for citations (*Undoing Gender* 10). In this way, social conventions and ideologies that denounce anything as taboo or ‘other’ are

recognizable and upheld. Power also lies in the ability to govern performatives and determine what actions and citations are appropriate for both genders. Through movements, gestures, speech, and social interactions, accidentals shape identity from the signs and conventions that surround the individual; these citations later come to be perceived by the individual as reality (12). The extent to which this reality exists will only stretch as far and last as long as the individual participating in the heterosexual matrix remains an active participant. Butler argues that reality, under these types of restraints, is in actuality a construction created to govern the social world.

The citations of a gender are thought to be inherent, an extension of sexed bodies, as if they were a series of traits ingrained genetically at conception. Butler argues that gender performatives are influential and powerful social rituals that are hard to resist. These performed citations become the conventions that govern behavior and coerce subjects to fall neatly into one of two categories (45). Gender, while living within the structured framework of the heterosexual matrix, is founded upon repeated citations that one must constantly perform in order for society to identify one as either male or female. The constant performance required by gender indicates that the definition of sex coerces a person and eliminates any possibility of variance from set performatives if a person wants to fit in socially. According to Butler, citations are performed and can be parodied creating difference. Therefore, variance does occur and differences are a result of the intervals of time it takes to reiterate the numerous conventions that underlie performatives. Performatives that keep the heterosexual matrix running. The era in which Wilde lived was a revolutionary time when the restructuring of cultural norms had to make way for new ideas and definitions of sexuality. To eliminate the hierarchical

binary, one must showcase instances where men and women's matrix-assigned attributes oscillate and repeat differently than normally prescribed.

In his play Wilde has cleverly disguised traditional Victorian constructs and created a new world for the characters of his play. Lady Bracknell appears to represent a traditional "affectionate mother" who is determined to marry her daughter off to a respectable family (Importance 12). Traditionally, critics have written the character of Lady Bracknell off as a symbol of Victorian social constructs; however, by applying new theories on gender and gay/queer theory to her character the true importance of her position in the play can be understood. In Act I there seems to be nothing affectionate about her as she asserts herself aggressively while interrogating Jack with the traditional questions a father would typically ask of a man pursuing the hand of his daughter. Interestingly, what Wilde has done here is purposely invert the gender roles of Lord and Lady Bracknell. Lord Bracknell, a character that does not appear on stage, is only mentioned in passing by his wife and daughter, and does not get the opportunity to speak for himself throughout the entire play. When Lady Bracknell learns that Algernon may not be attending dinner Lady Bracknell forces her husband to "dine upstairs" something "fortunately he is accustomed to" while guests are being entertained in his home (9). When discussing her husband Lady Bracknell is undaunted by his absence and refers to him as "poor," having "ailments" and several "health" problems. In her view "health is the primary duty of life" and she does not "approve of the modern sympathy with invalids" (9). Lady Bracknell has established that her husband is unable to perform the necessary citations that the heterosexual matrix has established as male ascribed citations; therefore, she has taken on the dominant role in the public sphere in place of her "poor" husband.

Even his daughter Gwendolen attests that her father is “entirely unknown” and does not venture out in the public and this “is quite as it should be” because in opinion the private sphere is “the proper sphere for the man” (34). Here the passive role that is traditionally ascribed to women has been applied to the characterization of Lord Bracknell while Lady Bracknell, on the other hand, exudes the confidence, intelligence and practical thinking typically assigned to males.

While gaining a better perspective of a potential suitor for her daughter in her questioning of Jack, Lady Bracknell ironically mocks education stating, “fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square” (13). It is important to note that before making this claim Lady Bracknell asks Jack, “what do you know” (13)? When Jack declares he knows nothing she is pleased to hear his answer because to know something would mean Jack associates himself with those that are “radically unsound,” and those that use education to promote difference by “tampering” with what is “natural” (13). She ironically “do[es] not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance” as “modern education” does (13). The tone that is set by these lines is contradictory but alludes to the notion that anyone who is “radically unsound” and found to be tampering with the rules of engagement within society are then marginalized. The heterosexual matrix and the conventions that it promotes were widely thought to be natural. Made natural because people ignorantly continue to reiterate performatives without questioning them. Here ignorance is made the tradition while education is made the radical interloper. Lady Bracknell’s statement exposes the tradition that members of the aristocracy openly align themselves with ignorance in order to

remain a part of the heterosexual matrix rather than be thought of as intellectual radicals.

## 1.2. INVERTING THE HETEROSEXUAL MATRIX

While getting to know Jack, Lady Bracknell a protective and determined mother, questions Jack's lack of heredity. The fact that Jack's heritage is linked to a train station appears to be a direct dig at Victorian titles and peerage, which during the 1880s had expanded to allow for "new money" and more diverse social backgrounds to be a part of the aristocracy suddenly not everyone is born into the peerage (Sloan 43). Wilde exposes the "fragility of traditional claims of heredity and privilege" because Jack, at this stage in the play, appears to represent the peerage when there is no proof of his connections at all (44). Lady Bracknell "advise[s] him "to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex" that would be a viable representative and link to the aristocracy (Importance 14). Lady Bracknell makes this task seem very simplistic as if a solution can quickly be achieved. Keeping in mind that Jack's lack of heritage occurred during a time when "the traffic in titles and the power of money over patronage suggested the threat of scandal and corruption in the public life" allowed for buying one's way into the aristocracy (Sloan 44). It can be argued that Wilde establishes heredity and education as catalysts that will inevitably expose the heterosexual matrix for what it is: a system of control. Wilde has inverted gender roles in order to illustrate the hypocrisy of society, while making audiences aware that the world can continue on successfully while women take on male dominated roles in the public sphere.

In times when women are striving to obtain equality between the sexes, they had to look for alternate venues of expression to reject the strict regulations of patriarchal

authority in order to be heard. By embracing, rather than rejecting the patriarchal society, women can work within the system to have an identity—one that does not restrict them from the public sphere of life. This is demonstrated in the character of Lady Bracknell's daughter Gwendolen. Unconventionally Gwendolen represents a domineering young woman who controls and guides the conversations she has with her suitor Jack. In terms of Jack's proposal when he hastily tells Gwendolen "we must get married at once [and that] there is no time to be lost" she chastises him for his ill timed and spontaneous command and demands that he try proposing to her again (Importance 11). In this scene Gwendolen voices her opinion clearly and does not entertain what audiences would have viewed as Jack commanding her to do his bidding by agreeing to his sporadic marriage proposal. What is important to note is that, as a 'New Woman' Gwendolen does not accept Jack's first attempt at a proposal because she is in control of the scene. In control of not simply the conversation but also Jack's actions, she goes on to say, "I adore you. But you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on" (11). In this scene she acts as if she has not heard a word Jack has spoken. She tells Jack what to do and how she would like it done. She has manipulated Jack into proposing to her again but this time in the manner in which she chooses. She even goes so far as to offer her brother Algernon's behavior with woman around town up as an example for how Jack should have proposed. Ironically by telling him what she finds acceptable when Jack sets out to propose for the second time he goes so far as to ask for Gwendolen's permission beforehand so that he will get it right. "Well... may I propose to you now," he asks (11). Afterwards, Gwendolen chastises Jack because he does not propose as well as her brother; however, she does eventually accept

his offer.

What is even more unconventional about this scene is that before Jack has had the opportunity to re-propose she expresses that she would accept his proposal; “I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly before-hand that I am fully determined to accept you” (11). As an inversion of tradition Wilde has allowed a young woman to accept a marriage proposal when her family traditionally would have made this type of decision for her.

The situation placed before the audience is not trivial in any sense of the word.

Traditionally a man would make arrangements beforehand with the family of the young woman he was seriously interested in marrying. He would not have, without the permission of the family, asked for Gwendolen’s hand in marriage without consulting her parents. Gwendolen has undermined her parents along with tradition even after Lady Bracknell reminds her daughter that only herself or her “father [would] inform [her] of [whether she] were engaged or not” (12). But true to being a ‘New Woman’ she stands in contempt blowing kisses and looks longingly back at Jack (an added display of defiance) even after her mother has told her to leave the room (12). It can be argued that Wilde’s acknowledgment and use of the ‘New Woman’ in his literature is proof that he wrote for those who were considered marginalized; those who did not have a voice. Gwendolen is given a voice and she uses it. The ‘New Woman’ became an integral figure in Wilde’s career as a theorist, writer, poet, philanthropist and critic who set out to quantify the reasons why the heterosexual matrix controlled life and find ways to undermine that control



## CHAPTER II

### *LADY'S WORLD AND THE PROGRESSIVE NEW WOMAN*

In order to better comprehend the avant-garde views broached by Wilde, it is important to note Wilde's career previous to the inception of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. During this period, Wilde began working for Cassell & Company--on a magazine titled, *Lady's World* (Ellman 56). Wilde, a prominent aesthete, was known for his extravagance, spending outside of his means, and desire to be "if not famous" then a figure remembered notoriously (Berggren 10). He took the job because he was desperate to provide for himself and the family he was lawfully obligated to support. Under the strain of maintaining a fashionable reputation, Wilde took on the position as editor for a failing woman's magazine. Catharine Ksinan, a Wilde scholar, argues in "Wilde as Editor of Woman's World: Fighting a Dull Slumber in Stale Certitude" that other critics' inability to mention or pay appropriate attention to this portion of Wilde's career is an affront to the artist (408). It can be argued that he was an artist who challenged society by intentionally introducing avant-garde ideas for women. Before his editorship Wilde solicited female journalists and writers from across the country as well as from America, inviting them to offer their work to the magazine. For example in a letter to Julia Ward Howe, an American woman Wilde believed to have helped facilitate the advancements of

women's intellectual lives overseas, he wrote:

I have been asked to become the literary adviser to one of the monthly magazines, and am anxious to make it the recognized organ through which women of culture and position will express their views, and to which they will contribute. There is at present no such magazine in England, though America can boast of many (Hart-Davis 198-199).

Wilde believed the advancements in intellectual life that were taking place in places like Massachusetts "would interest English women immensely. [And] the position taken up by the women of America in the matter of equality, of education, of social morals, of culture, of religion, and of politics [would be] suggestive and valuable" subject matter women should read (199). What is important here is that while on a year long tour of America in 1882 Wilde witnessed and recognized American women advancing in so many different aspects of life, voicing their opinions on so many things, that he wanted these same advancements for English women. He would later go on to compliment Howe stating it would be an honor if a cultured woman of such high influence as herself would become a contributor to the magazine.

As a businessman, Wilde was very mindful of potential readers of the magazine and he expresses his desire to improve upon the publication in a letter to Thomas Wemyss Reid the general manager of Cassell's publishing company, he felt that, "the Lady's World should be made the recognized organ for the expression of women's opinions on all subjects of literature, art, and modern life" (195). He wanted the magazine to honor "the history and culture of women: a publication that would embrace writing about art, literature, and style, but would be popular with a wide readership" (Green 6) Understanding the relevance of his editorship and working in the mass media is a prelude to understanding not only "Wilde's preoccupation with women's issues" but also the

artist's philosophy, style and desire to expose Victorian hypocrisy and change the Victorian perception of sexuality (Ksinan 409).

By taking the job as editor, Wilde set out in various ways to transform the declining magazine. Once called *The Lady's World*, he termed it *Woman's World* instead. According to Ksinan, Wilde's competitors wrote to govern the lives and sexuality of women by offering the virtues of a specific lifestyle saturated with a perpetuated happiness, attainable if one adhered to the publication's guidelines. Wilde, on the other hand, wanted to display "cultural progress" (Ksinan 411). The reconstruction of the publication entailed steering the topics and issues discussed towards a new readership to broaden the magazines audience to include scholarly women. Wilde believes that "artists have sex but art has none" (Clayworth 87). As the magazine stood, Wilde, along with several of his contributors, believed it to be a vulgar and trivial production about gossip and the asinine individuals who were under the impression that women were not important contributors to society, but rather silly, feeble-minded readers never to be spoken of or thought of seriously (Ksinan 410). Renovation of the magazine included changing the name so as to remove all vulgarity that might hinder the success of the new publication. The word 'lady,' in Wilde's view, was tainted, and the distinction between the terms 'lady' and 'woman' became more pronounced in the late 1880s with the rise of the so-called 'New Woman'. It can be argued that Wilde used the shift in the public's interest in women's issues as a political vehicle to introduce more avant-guard lifestyles.

## 2.1. LADIES TAINTED

Many contributors were hesitant to align themselves with Wilde's new endeavor

as the title stood, Lady Verney, a patron of Wilde felt, “I have not the courage to contribute to a magazine with such a title” (Clayworth 88). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women were thought to need guidance in the ways of proper etiquette. Lady-like behavior was demonstrated in women’s magazines, and novels were sanitized, teaching women how to socialize in a passive existence of subverted inferiority, acting as respectable ladies devoid of interests and expression of talent (Ksinan 412). As an editor, Wilde believed that, “the place of women in society and the future of further education of women” were the new topics of interest and he aimed to avoid dated subject matter pertaining to the household and fashion (Clayworth 86). Wilde argues that the magazine as it stood was “too feminine and not sufficiently womanly” and should instead, “deal not merely with what women wear, but with what they think and what they feel” (87). By substituting the word ‘woman’ for ‘lady,’ Wilde places himself in the forefront of a challenge to Victorian psyches by calling into question the categorization of gender, to embrace a new ideal of womanhood, and ultimately, sexuality (Ksinan 413). Changing the title of the magazine from lady’s to woman's dramatically changed the reception of the magazine.

Wilde's work as the editor of a lady's magazine can be viewed as progressive in that while keeping in line with traditional themes and topics Wilde decided to introduce new themes to his readers. Magazines of that time were made into commodities and popular themes circulated rules that women were to engage in in order to be considered supremely domestic (Clayworth 88). In these magazines the market dictated what a woman bought, wore, and especially told her how to think and feel about all of the things around her. If a woman followed specific guild lines and instructions that were laid out in

the pages of magazines like *The Christian Ladies Magazine* or *Ladies Papers* then she would fall in line with tradition and her life would in essence be perfect. But, as Wilde knew, this is not true because the ideal image of a woman was very contradictory. Wilde felt that these type of themes were unnecessary and were used as a means to control women.

What Wilde did in order to be progressive was to use and manipulate the rules and subject matter typically utilized by the market to draw his reader's in. He then masked the more serious subject matter he wanted to expose his readers to so that he could "put [his] view on art" into the discussion on women's issues (Hart-Davis 236). Retrogressive themes were in a sense used to his advantage. Wilde recognized that all the themes essentially lead to the same thing: female domesticity and women staying out of the public sphere. So while other magazines wrote about what one had to do, what one had to think and buy, Wilde set out to change the structure of magazine topics entirely and he started by changing the format of his magazine. He lengthened it from 36 pages to 48, he made sure that women wrote the majority of the articles, not necessarily well known women but he used more obscure female artists who he thought were up and coming (202). He also selected the articles by hand so that they concentrated on the work women were doing in the public sphere. By doing this the subject matter was made for higher educated women and broached topics like what women's' political stances were. He also described the possibility of new professions for women like in teaching, nursing and medicine. He also included articles on different historical societies and women's roles in those societies so as to expose Victorian women to other cultures (199). The content and what *Women's World* had to offer women was revolutionary and that is why

he chose the job as editor; to attach his name to a movement where change was occurring and women were making a difference in the world.

## 2.2. AT THE FOREFRONT ON WOMEN'S ISSUES

To ignore Wilde's editorship of *Women's World* is an affront to the artist's meticulous analysis of every article that was presented for publication, his attention to detail and triumphant promotion from reviewer of periodicals to editor in chief. Charlotte Carmichael Stopes was an accomplished activist for women's rights and author of several books and also a contributor to other prominent periodicals of that time. As the magazine stood Wilde selected artists and subject matter that strove to liberate women from things like clothing citation that required them to wear constricting garments, corsets, that restricted women's breathing ultimately causing severe health problems (Green 2: 5). As a woman who had received a considerably high level of education, even an activist as accomplished as Stopes was rejected by Wilde several times before he finally consented to publishing her work because she wrote lengthy articles that would not have necessarily increased the magazines readership. In response to the incessant letters Stopes had relayed in regards to being made a contributor to the magazine Wilde wrote:

Dear Madam, I am thinking of taking up the subject of rational dress, upon which I observe you read a paper at the meeting of the British Association. I should be glad to know if you could see your way to write a bright, piquant article on the question (Ellman 137).

It is clear that Wilde took his position as editor very seriously because even a famous activist like Stopes had a difficult time getting published in the magazine that sought to "bridge the conventional barrier between femininity and rational discourse" (Green 2: 6). Wilde was an advocate of dress reform and understood the problem women were facing in terms of having to wear uncomfortable cloths that threatened their health. He chose to

enter the discussion and broach the topic of rational dress in his own magazine so as to argue for finding more rational forms of attire so that women were not restricted, caused unnecessary discomfort and left concerned about their well being. Once Stopes was able to get her submissions down to more condensed lengths Wilde allowed her articles into the magazine.

A broad range of literary, social, autobiographical and historical influences shaped Wilde's literary relationship and his professional work. Stephanie Green's article, "Oscar Wilde's the Woman's World," explores Wilde's public and private spheres of life in relation to his editorial post at a magazine, which was a forum for debate about women's issues. In November 1887 Wilde wrote a series of reviews that were published in *Women's World* in reference to the growth and achievements he had observed in Britain's literary communities women were beginning to speak more openly in the public sphere:

It is, however, not merely in fiction and in poetry that the women of this century are making their mark. Their appearance amongst the prominent speakers at the Church Congress, some weeks ago, was in itself a very remarkable proof of the growing influence of women's opinions on all matters connected with the elevation of our national life, and the amelioration of our social conditions. (Other Notes 4)

Wilde illustrates that women's roles and traditional expectations begin to mirror the duties and demands that are traditionally expected of men. He wanted people to take notice and acknowledge such an important shift in women's roles. This is very important to what Wilde had set out to achieve because as the whole of society came to the realization what he already knew, that women had the capabilities to actively participate in mainstream discussions, they would be more accepting of women being more active in the public sphere. It can be argued that the marginalized were making strides and were

beginning to have a voice. The occasions may have been small but they were noticeable.

### 2.3. WOMEN CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIETAL SUCCESS

Not only was it happening in Britain, Wilde was “struck” by what he had seen in America and he went on to enlighten the British public about how female Americans in the North were already at the forefront living their lives as ‘New Women’ that were expanding their roles in the public sphere (4). In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” Wilde went on to write about what he had observed in American culture and he attributed the rapid societal success of American society to the nation allowing women the opportunity to contribute intellectually to the public sphere (13). In his opinion the “influence” women had on life was apparent:

The fact that remarkable intellectual progress of that country is very largely due to the efforts of American women, who edit many of the most powerful magazines and newspapers, take part in the discussion of every question of public interest and exercise an important influence upon the growth and tendencies of literature and art (Other Notes 4).

Wilde’s experience while lecturing across North America opened his eyes. American women stood as a testament to other nations because America was a society that had successfully allowed women the opportunity to begin being intellectual contributors to society. Wilde expressed his support and assured his readers that “in the twentieth century the whole culture of his country would be in petticoats. [And] by that time... the dress of the two sexes will be assimilated, as similarity of costume always follows similarity of pursuits” (4). Reflected in the above quote, before many others Wilde was a head of his time he understood that gender roles could be inverted and through this inversion a new world could be created. Female Americans were thriving due to women’s contributions to the public sphere; so British women could possibly follow on



in the same vain by extended their contributions further then just literature (Hart-Davis 199). The above passages are examples of Wilde's viewpoint specifically on the artifice of femininity, drawing historical examples of successful women to promote the idea of the 'New Woman.'

As Wilde continued to solicit writing contributions from all over Britain as well as northern America he wanted to expose Britain to other cultures that had successfully allowed marginalized individuals the chance to participate in the public sphere. Wilde wrote to expand the attitude the British populace had towards a marginalized group of people. He wanted them to know what women were capable of and in doing so he gathered articles from women who were interested in things pertaining to the public sphere, social issues and equality of the sexes. Articles on fashion were utilized to draw and maintain readership, but acted as a mask for the real issues discussed and debated in the print of every article (Green 108). In this way, Wilde was a great influence on introducing the 'New Woman' who presented a threat to patriarchal society, not only in the magazine, but also in his texts: neither could be ignored (107). As a way to broaden his mission to be a renowned critic, Wilde wrote reviews that were of special interest to women. One review Wilde wrote, on Miss E.R. Chapman's collection of poems entitled, *The New Purgatory and Other Poem*, was published in the periodical, *Pall Mall Gazette* a publication that had both male and female readers. Wilde applauded her and championed the progress women had made believing that women poets of his time had reached very high literary positions,

It used to be said that women were too poetical by nature to make great poets, too receptive to be really creative... but we must not judge woman's poetic power by her achievements in days when education was denied to her, for where there is no faculty of expression no art is possible (Ksinan 423).

Here the artist ultimately combined the social and political emancipation of women with proposals for a society free of conformity, seeking to eliminate preconceived notions about sexuality. He used not only popular, radical writers to draw his audiences into understanding the plight of women he also used more obscure artists like Chapman to showcase the advancements a marginalized group of individuals were making (423). At the forefront of revolutionary topics on women, education and sexuality, Wilde established himself as a pioneer and to begin his quest, he enlisted the support of women who were ready for change. It is unfortunate that Wilde's own personal contributions to the magazine decreased because he unsuccessfully tried to live up to the pressures of a tight publishing schedule and having to come into the office regularly. These, of course, were writing perimeters Wilde was not use to. With the support of Arthur fish, Wilde's editorial assistant, it can be argued that what Wilde set out to accomplish was a much more difficult task then he realized. But he did continue trying. Poor sales did cause Wilde to eventual loss interest and leave the magazine behind.

The shifting separation between the public and private spheres of life results from the ambivalent differentiation historically refined and defined by those in authority. Women's voices in the public sphere have been stifled due to that which has come to define them: their sexuality, physical appearance, and ability. These attributes have served to limit women's experience (as compared to that of men) in the pubic sphere (Sontag 56). It is as if the differences that are found in women that label her a woman make the concept of women being marginalized right when in actuality she is just different then a man. This dichotomy has formed a structured hierarchy of the sexes because a woman's sexuality has been linked with her gender. It can be argued that this

has left her marginalized and silenced; any concerns or demands that she may express are overlooked and considered less important due to her gender. But just as Wilde argues earlier in the text, issues that concern women should also be issues that concern men. Not only was women's health at risk so was her stance and position in life. In a response to the issue facing women regarding the possible discovery of more rational dress in

*Women's World* Wilde wrote:

What women's dress will be in the future it is difficult to say. The writer of the Daily News article is of the opinion that skirts will always be worn as distinctive of the sex, and it is obvious that men's dress, in its present condition, is not by any means an example of a perfectly rational costume. It is more than probable, however, that the dress of the twentieth century will emphasize distinctions of occupation, not distinctions of sex. (Other Notes 4)

Wilde accurately predicted that eventually women's experiences would not be hindered especially not by their clothing. It is inappropriate as well as impractical for women to wear skirts while performing any sort of physical labor. Wilde was in a position as editor of the magazine to help invent and suggest a more suitable costume for women to wear that did not involve risking their health. What is important here is that by inventing new attire and finding more rational dress this would shorten the gap between the life experiences of men and women in terms of what women could do in the public sphere. Thereby, causing a reciprocal link between the roles assigned to men and women in the public and private spheres of life. Wilde writes that even women's occupations were restricted due to the garments they had to wear so as to be considered fashionable in society's view. In terms of the 'New Woman' the construct of gender was threatening women in more ways than imagined. Wilde illustrates in the above passage that this would one day change because contrary to popular belief, opposition should not lie between a women's sexuality and her gender. Wilde was aware of this possible

convergence, this possible overlapping of the spheres definition of women and men's roles in relation to their sexuality. The effects of categorizing men into a single precise category and women into another is not plausible because similar characteristics were beginning to be recognized by the populace as being a part of each groups gender.

In the text Undoing Gender, Judith Butler examines gender identities and how sex has been made understandable through the reinforcement of the heterosexual matrix's manipulation and control of mass media along with social and political institutions.

Under the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm for every person gender categories have been assigned; however, like Wilde, Butler argues against a unified identity that is based on sexuality. In Butler's view gender and sexuality are separate categories and the system of the heterosexual matrix has been reliant upon male and female attributes lying in direct opposition to one another. When attributes or rather citations that do not match the assigned binary begin to be displayed in a person, for instance when a man acts effeminate gender, identities overlap which lead to conflict between the binaries.

Anything different causes conflict and Butler relates this to having a person's life "constituted [for them] by a social world [that] I never chose" (Undoing Gender 2). The importance of this passage is that people have been entered into a social world they have no control of nor realized they had been forced into. Wilde, like many of his contemporaries, displayed homosexual traits even had male lovers while living in accordance with how a heterosexual male is presumed to traditionally live his lifestyle. However, when the sexual activities of Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas were no longer acts that remained behind closed doors the public brought legislation against Wilde making him an example to others that gay sex is a punishable criminal offense.

Unfortunately, Wilde's severe deconstruction of his gender role and duty was taken too far by his acts not being kept in the dark. What is important here and what can be argued is that by separating gender from sexuality a person's personal desires and beliefs would become apparent allowing that person to be, in turn, an individual instead of a societal conformist. Wilde's writing style was a reflection of his personal experiences, both in life and in how society reacted to his representations of life on stage. What happened to Wilde's life is an example of how a person who lives ahead of his time is persecuted for their natural desires when they go against the norms of their time.

Homosexuality has been forbidden because heterosexuality is made uniform through its reliance on heterosexual gender performatives. Homosexuality represented a possible avenue where the heterosexual matrix's standard of sexuality could change. It can be argued that that is the exact reason why homosexuality is forbidden and condemned so vehemently. As Butler states "heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, and the authentic, the norm that determines the real implies that being a homosexual is always a kind of miming, a vain effort to participate in the plenitude of naturalized heterosexuality, which will always fail" (43). What Butler is saying is that it is futile to try and go against the heterosexual matrix because you will fail. But why is this failure so certain? Using Wilde as an example, could it be said that the reason why Wilde was destroyed after he so blatantly defied the heterosexual matrix because he was on the verge of exposing many other artist who also participated in gay sex; those who were also defying their gender role but did not want to be exposed. Wilde sought to separate the tradition of gender from what he believed to be a person's own natural desires while simultaneously separating gender from sexual desire. It is obvious that the

heterosexual matrix will continue moving forward if the necessary citations and performatives are adhered to according to exactly how they have been established. But it is also equally obvious that if you challenge those traditions you will achieve individuality and change what is considered to be the norm.

### CHAPTER III

#### REAL LIFE SETS THE STAGE

Unfortunately in the case of Wilde he was ahead of his time and his life was destroyed due to him expressing what he believed to be his natural desires. To his detriment he tried to be an individual during a time when society was not prepared for such an extreme level of gender role defiance. Wilde's display of individualism disrupted the hegemony of the matrix and the consequence of doing so caused those that rely on the heterosexual matrix to destroy his career and life. Wilde's choice to live a life with his male lover after having produced heirs allowed him the chance to take control of the matrix and define his sexuality on his own terms. What is important to note is that ultimately, Wilde was able to know and also express individualism. In terms of expressing individuality Wilde wrote:

Art is this intense form of Individualism that makes the public try to exercise over it an authority that is as immoral as it is ridiculous, and as corrupting as it is contemptible. It is not quite their fault. The public has always, and in every age, been badly brought up (Under Socialism 9).

In this, Wilde addresses the tradition where society controls people's lives. He stresses that art is a form of individualism that society has attempted to control but can no longer. This is important because as the heterosexual matrix's power of control began to wane in areas like art so too will that power wane in life. Wilde argues that, "life imitates art, far

more than art imitates life,” then art stands as a precursor for what is to eventually happen in life; the marginalized will no longer be considered the marginalized (Decay of Lying 8). Through his craft, which is art, Wilde introduces the public to figures like the ‘New Women’ so as to give the public a new perspective of the world that is no longer limited and controlled by the matrix. This quote is important because it can be argued that Wilde wants the world to understand that art allows the public to see the importance of individuality but the reality that arises from individuality does come at a price (Under Socialism 9). A price Wilde himself was not made fully aware of until he was condemned by the world around him after he chose to express his individuality. The act of simulating an acceptable family simply because society tells one to do so shows the imposition that the heterosexual matrix’s norms have had on the lives of people living under its control. As this quote demonstrates, Wilde does not blame the public for being unaware of what has happened to them he blames those who perpetuate the traditions.

Judith Butler in “Performance Acts and Gender Constitutions” states that the actions and behaviors that are performed will come to condition a person, over the course of time, into performing acts that are either male or female. If a person performs actions and behaviors according to traditional standards they are praised and rewarded for upholding traditions according to their assigned gender but if they do not perform as expected then they are subsequently punished (525). It is important to note that a person’s family and home is the place where the heterosexual matrix is supported and conventions are implemented; families invariably, help transform a person’s body into being sexed (526). Butler is arguing that gender is constituted and she believes that if something is constituted then things like gender can be constituted and construed in different ways



(520). For the *Importance of Being Earnest* to be built on such a highly traditional system like the heterosexual matrix means that the standards and morals that are set up by the matrix are very high. High to the point of the matrix expecting members living under the system to behave and act perfectly but Wilde argues that the standards are too high and nearly impossible to maintain in the same manner time and time again.

### 3.1. THE SEXED BODY

The fact that the play is built on such a strict system of order mirrors what Butler argues in that from birth, based on anatomical differences, citations are assigned to a person based on gender. So it is as if before infancy the male sexed body has a distinct set of conventions while the female sexed body has another completely different set of conventions that must be performed. What is ironic and important here is that Butler, like Wilde, contends that all gender is an act; and that by the body being sexed in this manner people are oppressed and individuality is limited if not extinguished. With the play, Wilde stresses that it is possible to go against tradition because nothing about tradition is set in stone since it is a construct and societies traditions contradict themselves constantly. In fact, the qualities and characteristics used to shape the female sexed body were deemed undesirable characteristics for males to exemplify. By being a 'New Woman' living under a structure that has defined the female sexed body as being inferior to the body of males does not mean that a woman is inferior in intellect or physical capabilities. Wilde's version of the matrix in the play is a funny yet generic form of the heterosexual matrix because it shows that not everyone will teach and reinforce male and female citations in the same manner so variance will occur. What he has done with the genre here is take the seriousness out of romantic literature and instead uses

contemporary knowledge to satirically evaluate Victorian conventions in a melodramatic way. Wilde is also showing audiences what a world without set rules and regulations would look like. He is arguing that it is natural to be different and there should be no need for such strict rules and regulations. Male and female citations can be interpreted in different ways because it's pretty difficult to continue passing traditions on without some part of that tradition being lost or changed.

In Wilde's play, his goal is to disrupt gender norms to allow the 'New Women' to enter into the binary similar to what he attempted to do with homosexuality. Both Wilde and Butler theorize that there are no distinct set of conventions that separate a man from a woman because gender is a construct that can be constituted differently. These differences arise over the course of time and the differences that are created may overlap. However the problem that has arisen from making such distinctions between males and females the binaries were placed in hierarchical categories that made male conventions superior to those females had to perform. But if one can parody gender, then one can ultimately denaturalize it.

### 3.2. LIFE IS A DRAG

By applying new theories like the sexed body and the concept of performance acts for example, drag, to Wilde's play, the messages Wilde tried to convey to his audiences are revisited. Just as the play continued to be revived time and time again over a half century after its first production, having a man play the role of lady Bracknell would have been appropriate and would not have detracted from the 'New Women' as would have been the case during Wilde's lifetime. It can be postulated that Wilde would have, more than likely, approved of such a change in the 1970's based on what Lady Bracknell's

character represented; a woman whose gender roles had shifted and reflected gender roles traditionally assigned to a man. When discussing gender performatives, drag performance is an example of how behaviors are learned and characterized by emulation. Performers of drag demonstrate the imitative nature of both male and female gender identities. The gender of the drag performer is made to be subversive, ultimately revealing the constructed nature of the constraining and conditioning definitions of gender. Being earnest, or rather being a drag performer, consists of, by far, more than men portraying a woman; there is no stereotype even in this performative expression of sexuality. The key to this form of artistic expression is that it demonstrates performance that blurs the lines between society's set mode of perception, the artist, and those who grasp the artist's vision. The performance of drag is sometimes staged in a grandiose, over-the-top manner intended to be simultaneously humorous and serious. This is why applying new theories on gender studies is so important to the study of Wilde's works. It is clear that the concepts and ideas he upheld and attempted to convey were well ahead of his time. It can be argued that the expression of drag is a declaration made by the marginalized, those resisting conservative viewpoints and ideologies with the intention of destabilizing the notion of gender identification. The way in which an individual is perceived or rather judged by the people around them is based on how well that person is able to enact their assigned gender role in comparison to everyone else.

The first production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* was performed on Valentine's Day 1895 at St James Theatre in London. On opening day, a woman, a Miss Rose Leclerco, played the role of Lady Bracknell however; it was not until the play was revived in 1975 that William Hutt famously played Lady Bracknell in drag. It is

important to remember that Victorian audiences would have found it normal if they were to have seen a male play the role of Lady Bracknell but Wilde did not chose to have the original production of the play performed in that manner. Considering the fact that many associated the 'New Women's' demeanor and mannerisms in society as being reflective of a man's gender roles Lady Bracknell was played by a woman. It can be argued that this is very important because Wilde wants to illustrate to his audience that a women can exemplify mannerisms and citations typically attributed to males while still being a woman. Ironically Wilde made it to where it was not normal for Lady Bracknell to be played by a man because during Wilde's time if a male had been cast as Lady Bracknell that would have followed suit with the malicious puns and negative depictions journalists wrote in regards to the 'New Woman'. These puns undercut the rising power of the 'New Woman' through caricature so it would not have been in Wilde's best interest nor appropriate for her to be played by a man during the late Victorian era due to the nature of Wilde's audience. Drag performances are theatrical demonstrations that are examples of how gender performatives do not have to be strictly constructed illustrating that neither the male nor the female sexed bodies have to be controlled.

### 3.3. WILDLY AHEAD OF HIS TIME

Wilde illustrates the tension that arises between the dichotomy of sexuality and gender and demonstrates what happens when gender and sexuality are not strictly heterosexually based as the world is traditionally made out to be. Wilde states that, "where we differ from each other is purely in accidentals: in dress, manner, tone of voice, religious opinions, personal appearance, tricks of habit and the like" (Intentions 10). What is important to note is that the very things that Wilde believed allow for and

promote individuality are the very things society aims to control. This is the exact same postulate Butler makes but she makes it almost a full century after Wilde has already come to this realization about society's control of gender. By suppressing a person's natural desires a person's life is limited and they do not get the opportunity to be an individual because that person has had to assimilate to the rules of the matrix as opposed to exploring the world and coming to understand the world through individuality. Wilde furthers this with, "sooner or later one comes to that dreadful universal thing called human nature" (Intentions 10). As illustrated in this passage, Wilde believes that sooner or later a person's natural desires will triumph over tradition and no longer will that person continue actualizing the sexed body as the heterosexual matrix has defined it. The sexed body could be somewhat liberated from the strict parameters of the matrix if a person performs citations according to their own interpretations. This is exactly what male drag performers do; they perform and interpret the female sexed body through their own interpretations of female citations. So it can be argued that men who perform in drag are the liberated few who have chosen not to assimilate to the definitions of how gendered bodies are suppose to perform. According to Wilde, the things that help promote individuality are the things that should be considered normal and should not be used to control a person's actions or behavior. Unlike what society and peoples families have been convincing them of for years laws that limit a persons natural desires and restrict how a person chooses to interpret the world around them hinders the growth of society.

'Earnest' was a connotation of the Victorian era that related to a person's moral integrity. Wilde illustrates that to be earnest does not mean that a person is

straightforward in what they may be doing or saying and ironically earnest is the term most central to the theme of the play. Wilde's play, as well as his life, can be used, as a testament when "earnest" is substituted in place of the word drag. This is because cultural concepts considered once to be self-explanatory and "earnest" in their definition come to have a dual definition or quality to them, which causes them to be second-guessed and contemplated in new ways in the play. In the second act, Gwendolen ironically remarks, "the home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive-" (Importance 34). Her declaration falls in line with the concept that male gender roles are traditionally constituted for the public sphere but when the male sexed body is linked to the private sphere this changes the demeanor of a man causing him to be effeminate. To be considered effeminate while simultaneously having a male sexed body leads to the sharing of male and female traits, which leads to the dual nature of a man's character. No longer is a man to be without emotion because he takes place in private sphere activities. Gwendolen has illustrated that males do not act in the traditional ways in which they are expected once they perform in the private sphere. She has noted that the male character is made earnest by being an active participant of the private sphere in that there lies a dual nature to the traits he exemplifies even though he continued to be ironically, labeled and defined as a man. As opposed to having to suppress natural emotions men are able to express emotions, which lies in direct conflict with the traditional male sexed body.

It is also ironic that, Gwendolen, like her mother, finds it alluring when men are effeminate. Both women equate the private sphere with femininity but neither of the two

women exemplify the traditional characteristics expected of women either, nor are they active participants in the private sphere as society would traditionally require of them. By Gwendolen making such a statement that conflicts with the traditional male sexed body she openly argues against what gender should be assigned to either the private or public spheres. A Victorian audience would have construed this statement made as an earnest statement, but Wilde scholars relate her remark to the performative, and spheres that can be shaped and reshaped according to shifting societal perspectives. Gwendolyn indicates that a shift occurs if men lack the ability to interact with both spheres. There is a duality present in the statement in that Gwendolen believes that men should be resigned to perform in the private sphere, which is parallel to how her father Lord Bracknell spends his days. While she herself is a woman who is an active and very domineering player in the public sphere, a place and position men are traditionally suppose to perform. Through the characterization of Gwendolen it would seem women are equally able to perform gender roles that men are traditionally assigned. The message Wilde was trying to convey is that equality liberates men and women from the constraints of the heterosexual matrix, and traditions are changed thereby allowing people to be individuals instead of conformist.

## CHAPTER IV

### INDIVIDUALISM LIBERATES THE SEXED BODY

Throughout the play Lady Bracknell's character appears to represent the authoritative adult figure in the play. She is supposed to be viewed as a traditional Victorian female but as she addresses other characters she does so with an earnest tone and not all of her commands are reflective of the heterosexual matrix' ideologies. As her character progresses much of what she imposes in speech is ridiculous. Through her self-assuredness she appears to be serious but most of her commentary is self-contradictory, and hypocritical. "But I do not approve mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind" (Importance 46). In this declaration Lady Bracknell contradicts herself as she questions the notion of Algernon marrying Cecily since she does not agree with mercenary marriages when she herself married in that particular fashion. She puts up one of the biggest façades and exposes herself at the very same time. What Lady Bracknell and Wilde have in common is that they both strive to make things seem one way when in actuality they are another: duplicity. Both Lady Bracknell and Wilde are not exactly what they appear. Lady Bracknell is the 'New Woman'. She insists that characters create and "come up with" families and lie about heritage in order to paint a picture that does not exist. To save face and for the sake of his



audiences coincidentally Algernon (Jack) is a member of the aristocracy but when his heritage was in question Lady Bracknell insisted that he simply make it up as if that would have been equally acceptable.

#### 4.1. DUPLICITY: TAKE CONTROL BY WEARING MASKS

The situations that arise as a result of all the duplicity present within the play can be observed through the characters of Algernon and Jack, two men who can escape the world they live in by creating alternate personae. “Bunburying” gave a man a chance to imagine and to be different from the rest of the men around him by escaping tradition. Even though bunburying was found to represent masked homosexual behavior and activities it can be argued that the act of bunburying allowed men the chance to express their individuality and natural desires without parameters. Aside from the sexual nature of bunburying what engaging in bunburying did is similar to what the ‘New Woman’ has done for women. The ‘New Woman’ was identified as an individual, different from the other women around her because she was performing and taking part in life in the manner for which she chose and not based on societies expectations.

Many critics contend that the character of Algernon displays diverging notions of sexuality. He invents the term bunburying in order to escape the mundane and trivial duties that strict societal mandates demanded of him in the first act of the play. Wilde states, “what is interesting about people in good society... is the mask that each one of them wears” (Intentions 10). Through bunburying Wilde illustrates that people in life wear mask. As Algernon explains, it is clear that masks like bunburying are forced upon people so that they can escape their everyday lives. People want to escape society when the pressure of conformity and performance that has been placed upon them has become

too much. What Wilde wants his audience to be aware of is that masks do many things. But it is what lies underneath masks that make everyone different from one another and that is essential. Algernon, like Wilde, defines life on his own terms, first by masking his true desires to adhere to rules of the heterosexual matrix, but only in order to follow his own pursuits (Butler 79). Wilde was restricted from certain exclusive clubs that were popular during his time, as his political stance and his private life made him “other,” yet an ‘other’ who still had a voice in the public sphere (Bergreen 8). Not only did Wilde set out in his writing to expose Victorian conventions as absurd, he also argued for the separation of the concepts of gender from sexuality. It can be argued that this liberation, or freedom of sexuality, would then allow for individuality, while simultaneously abiding by the mandates of the heterosexual matrix.

What lies underneath, as Wilde illustrates through Algernon, is a person’s true nature and desires; the very things the matrix tells people to suppress. It can be argued that Wilde contended that society forced people to wear masks not necessarily to lie but to make everyone look like each other in order to be comfortable and able to identify one another and the things around them. Wilde enjoyed the concept of the mask but did not find it satisfactory when people did not recognize what lies beneath the masks that people wore. In the play Wilde allows his characters to take control and make wearing masks their own. Wilde embraced the mask because he felt he wore his the best. He understood that the beauty of masks is that they can be put on or taken off so for those who were not ready to show their true selves the matrix was in place to shield them from anything that caused discomfort. But on the other hand the duality of a mask also allows a person to be themselves without restraints. This is the same sort of unmasking women wanted to

experience through the movement of the 'New Woman.' The controlling system of hypocrisy and contradictory information could be overridden by exposing what lies underneath the masks everyone wears. The question is then to what extent will the heterosexual matrix go to stop women from actively participating in the public sphere of life.

#### 4.2. NAMES CREATE LABELS

The 'New Woman' knew and accepted "her role as pioneer with a sense of responsibility" (Fernando 20). This support is evident in the character of Lady Bracknell, the 'New Woman.' Through her, Wilde proves the way in which a name forces a label on an individual and places that individual under specific social constructs that will govern the way he or she may dress, speak, and behave. Wilde continued to privilege the male while working within the binary but used the 'New Woman' to show the negative effects on society if those who were marginalized were to be continually oppressed and unable to enter the public sphere (Richardson 29).

Algernon chose to bunbury while Lady Bracknell's façade of mercenary marriage brought her the most power as a pseudo representative of the heterosexual matrix. If the heterosexual matrix were to be manipulated in a manner (as demonstrated by several characters in Wilde's play) that would gradually allow the female perspective into the tradition, it would benefit the new ideologies and philosophies that were being established. It would also allow those who were once marginalized throughout history the opportunity to finally be heard. The 'New Woman' had the ability to destabilize traditions established by the heterosexual matrix which would allow for new expressions of gender to be performed that were not based on sexuality but were instead based on a

person's own personal desires.

Wilde, intent on circulating a new, stylized melodrama and satire while remaining to some degree in the context of late-Victorian themes and styling techniques, pushed boundaries by introducing a new comedic form. This form would seem unsuitable repertoire to the "serious people" who ran the city (Beckson 2: 17). A.B. Walkley, a theater critic for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, saw that the play was the culmination of Wilde's development as a dramatist and remarked that Wilde, "introduces personages ostensibly of to-day, young men 'about town,' 'revolting' daughters, a clergyman... but he does not poke fun at them as types; he induces us to laugh at their conduct for its sheer whimsicality" (Beckson 245). An unsigned review by a drama critic published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* a day after the first staged performance of the play hailed the piece as a triumph (Raby 143-46). As an artist Wilde, "made great play with the boundary between public and private personality," calling both forms to be brought and presented to the world instead of separated and making individuals live double lives (Beckson 2: 38). A play written for serious people about trivial things was in actuality not at all a trivial play on late-Victorian social conventions but rather a play that has dual meanings and complexity.

In order to seek avenues that would allow them an opportunity to be different from those around them Algernon introduced Jack to the concept of bunburying. "Bunburying," a term created by Algernon helped empower men, giving them a chance live out their dreams and natural desires. According to Algernon, "it isn't easy to be anything nowadays. There's such a lot of beastly competition about" (Wilde 2009). A man could live a double life through bunburying. It is important to note that Wilde

exposed his audiences to the term bunburying to show that there could be and were differences among them. Wilde himself bunburied as he was a father to his family in one realm and a lover to his male companion in another. Victorian and modern audiences came to know the importance of the term “bunburying” once Wilde’s lifestyle was publicly knowledge (Gagnier 48). In order to be distinguishable among members of the aristocracy men like Jack create an alter persona for themselves for Jack his alternate personage was named Ernest. The act of bunburying inspired Jack to research ways to change regulated roles; he was one person in the city and another in the country with his ward Cecily. Through bunburying Jack wore different masks and was able to escape. Wilde, like his characters, “wanted greater opportunities ...for freedom of expression and dissent, [and] the right to contest the status quo” (Leitch 896).

#### 4.3. HUMAN NATURE VERSUS TRADITION

To blatantly discuss matters considered perverse would have garnered the playwright unwanted criticism. What Wilde did in *The Importance of Being Earnest* was to take truisms and problems that emerged in society but that had constantly been dismissed or else addressed only in the private sphere and brought them to light. “To wear masks was Wilde’s personal adjustment to modern life” or rather, he wore a mask as others did, in order to allow society to catch-up with those moving towards modernism (Bentley 177). Bentley states that, “Wilde knew his England” but what Bentley misses here is that he also knew human nature (177). He then shows characters grappling directly with issues: the decline of the aristocracy, nineteenth-century morals, marriage, class systems, and criticisms of life. Like the *Importance of Being Earnest* the novel A Portrait of Dorian Gray stands as a precursor and testament to Wilde’s desire to make

audiences question supposed ethical certainties while introducing private topics for public display. It presented readers with scandalous themes that centered on homoeroticism, distorted moral conventions, and many other revolutionary concepts. The novel illustrates the artist's earliest desire to expose his audience to more modern ways of thinking and the concept of leading a double life, as seen in the deterioration of the character, Dorian Gray.

By ending the play in a traditional romantic manner with the couples subsequently preparing to get married it can be argued that Wilde made the ending this way just so that he could appease his audience. Critics like Richard Foster in "Wilde as Parodist" believe that the play ended with the couples getting married because the "wages of sin is matrimony" and that through marriage all the characters are reformed and so their sins can be forgiven (21). In analyzing the play in another manner it can be said that Wilde had learned his lesson from what had happened with previous works he had produced that did not end as cheerfully as the play. In a Portrait of Dorian Gray readers were shocked at the amount of immorality depicted in a novel that was written five years prior to the inception of the play. The novel was not received well and readers even condemned the work. The novel was even later used as evidence to convict and send Wilde to Prison in 1895. It can be argued that if an artist, like Wilde, knew that pushing the boundaries too far would cause people to completely condemn his work then it can be said that as an artist who did not want to completely lose his audience he did not want the ending of the play to vary from traditional expectations with the same magnitude of variance like A Picture of Dorian Gray did. By knowing what to expect you find comfort in knowing what will happen next. For Victorian audiences it is as if everything is in moral order and

has fallen neatly into place. It would have been too much for audiences not to know that the couples were not getting married because this sort of ending is unsettling and would have made them uncomfortable just like A Picture of Dorian Gray made audiences uncomfortable.

In the text's original form, Dorian Gray's unfiltered self-expression required Wilde to alter and revise the text for the Victorian public, eliminating several passages that alluded to homosexuality and homosexual desires. In order to accommodate adverse reviews from editors who believed that the content was too much for innocent readers, the novel was published as an annotated version of the original manuscript. This is evidence that the ending of *The Importance of Being Earnest* could have been dictated by what Wilde knew his audience wanted. Even with a heavy amount of editing this was not enough to stop the novel from being received poorly. The moral of the story was very much in line with Victorian moral constitution in that in order for the main character to cure his soul, he would have to repent for past transgressions, and that repentance would be before his peers. Similar to *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as well as real life, the judgment and sentencing of one's transgressions came from one's peers. Wilde illustrates through both the play and novel that hidden desires imprison a person and lead to unhappiness. Therefore, desire should be a permitted expression in the public sphere because that leads to difference and individuality.

Similar to the male characters in the play, Lady Bracknell is able to possess an identity, through her actions in the play. For instance, she openly ignores conversations that bring up her husband. He obviously was not an important player in what she set out to accomplish, which is ultimately to marry off her daughter. By ignoring the topic of her

husband, she shows that Victorian women were able to have identities without men, being feminine, in a way that demonstrates that gender did not hinder a woman's speech or her ability to interact in the public sphere of society. Lady Bracknell is a 'New Woman' who has a great deal to say regarding matters from which women were normally excluded (Cunningham 2). She makes a business arrangement for her daughter's future in the absence of her husband. She is a 'New Woman,' and it appears that she will teach her daughter to act in the same manner she does. She is both dominant and able to get her point across, making decisions in the public sphere of Victorian society where marriages were arranged by men (Fernando 25).

Similar to her mother Gwendolyn says, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing" (Importance 43). Gwendolyn and Cecily, the young women in the play, demonstrate gender as a construct as they adhere to and defy what commonly constitutes feminine behavior. Cecily, a dreamer and a romantic, embodies a pastoral innocence that is more the standard Victorian woman. She is countered by the big-city style of Gwendolyn, who is of course Lady Bracknell's daughter. Their femininity, like the diaries they keep, can be construed as fictional. As Wilde said, "to be natural is a very difficult pose to keep up," by which Wilde meant maintaining appearances was hard and many times people were not truthful about who they are because they do not want to be condemned by society (Fernando 23)



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In a satirical style, Wilde is offering a solution to the problem society has created by forcing citations upon both the public and private spheres of people's lives. He has called into question society's laws and used his craft as a tool to expose the flaws and constraining nature of the heterosexual matrix. By depicting life as a construct Wilde chose to go up against traditions that have for centuries punish citizens for not performing gender roles according to set standards. Through his art natural desires and ideals are not suppressed they are instead encouraged and even expanded upon. Even though they were not natural allies, Wilde aligns the 'New Women' and the dandy so as to reveal the deficiencies of the heterosexual matrix. By having the two radical groups collaborate, Wilde allows the public to sympathize with the feminist, the bunburyist, and all those who are required to live a double life amid double standards. By contradicting conventional expectations, Wilde illustrates how "absurd [it is] to divide people into good and bad" based on hierarchical biological differences (Sontag 59). To control the public, Victorian high society perpetuated the hierarchical system of the heterosexual matrix, but Wilde set out to abolish double standards, eliminate strict gender roles, and explore natural desires in order to create individual life experiences.

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