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From Masks to Masterpieces

Oscar Wilde's Self-Revelation in his Works

B.A.Essay

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Abstract

This thesis features a detailed analysis of the characters in some of the works of Oscar Wilde. Wilde was an extraordinary writer whose career and life went through numerous different stages. He is considered the most iconic writers of the 19th century and his wisdom and legacy still remains to this day. This thesis explores and reflects upon the meaning of Wilde's work and the possibility that Wilde used his characters as a way to deal with his inner struggle and if he was in fact portraying himself in his work. The answer to these questions is yet to be found but clear themes in his work only add to that speculation. His plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and the novel *A Picture of Dorian Gray* are used to demonstrate the recurrent themes. The themes are the submissive character, deception, self-portrait and dual personalities in the characters. The obedient character is an interesting theme with Wilde portraying the women characters as dominant while the male characters tend to be submissive. The self-portrait theme provides a perspective into the self-portrait and if Wilde portrayed himself in the characters. The deception theme touches on the deception portrayed by Wilde's characters as well as the deception found in his own life. Finally, the duality theme refers to the dual characters portrayed in Wilde's work and the importance of the mask. Many characters in his work have the need to conceal their true self as may have been true for Wilde himself. The notion of the themes is intertwined with the person Oscar Wilde and perhaps there is a connection between his characters and himself.

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Introduction

Oscar Wilde is a well-known Irish author and a poet who has received deserved attention for his work and made his mark in the 19th century literary and drama field. He was born in Dublin in 1854, a disappointment to his mother who had been expecting and praying for a girl. His childhood was anything but ordinary. For instance, his mother dressed him in girl's clothing as a young boy. That fact is certainly interesting in light of his sexual desires later in life (V Holland 10). As society of his time proposed, he married a woman. Her name was Constance Lloyd and they were married in 1884. They had two sons, Cyril, born in 1885 and Vyvyan born in 1886 ("A Woman"). Later in his life Wilde started a relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas and had accusations brought against him for being a homosexual. He was eventually sentenced to two years in prison.

The work of Oscar Wilde is fascinating in many ways. His plays and novels offer a somewhat new perspective on marriage, sexual desires and conventional gender roles of his time. For a long time the work of Wilde remained in the shadow and what was written about him had more to do with the person Oscar Wilde than the author Oscar Wilde. As time has passed the focus has fortunately shifted to the brilliant work he left behind. The first books published after his death were more or less about his life and fate and it was not until after 1950 where a serious literary criticism of his work emerged (Raby xxviii-xxix). Wilde, being an extraordinary writer, influenced many other writers of his time and long after his death.

That being said, it is quite obvious that the character of Wilde is inseparable from the analysis of his work, and the question of whether Wilde uses his work as an escape from reality is an intriguing one. It is also interesting to analyze the characters in Wilde's works and to explore the possibility that any of them can be seen as an alter ego of Wilde himself. These questions and issues are the main focus of this thesis.

This analysis of Wilde's major work reveals four main themes that can be found in one or more of his works. The first theme centers the notion of "the submissive characters". Characters from the plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *A Woman Of No Importance* (1893) are analyzed in order to shed some light of any underlying submissiveness in the characters. The second theme is the dual character that can be found in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)

and in the plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*. Furthermore, the second theme centers on the notion on whether Wilde's tendency to create dual characters may represent Wilde's own desire for a dual character in his real life. The third theme follows the deception that occurs in many of Wilde's works. Characters from the plays *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *An Ideal Husband* and *A Woman of No Importance* will be used as examples for this theme. The fourth and final theme follows the self-portrait and the hypothesis that Wilde is portraying himself in his works. The characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *A Woman of No Importance* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* are used in an effort to show Wilde's own portrait reflected in his characters.

Before starting the analysis of these themes it is important to take a closer look at the life of Oscar Wilde and the events that shaped his life and made him the writer he was. As mentioned previously his own character is intertwined with the analysis of the work and an insight into his life may be vital to the understanding of his work.

1. The life and legacy of Oscar Wilde

A few days before the death of Oscar Wilde he was asked about his life and he replied: “Some said my life was a lie but I always knew it to be the truth; for like the truth it was rarely pure and never simple” (M Holland 3). These words are a good indicator to the complicated life Oscar Wilde had to endure. He is often regarded as one of the most remarkable literary figures in the history of English literature. Without a doubt he was an extremely talented and well-known poet in the 19th century. His career went through many different phases, “from ridicule to adulation, from adulation to fame, from triumphant fame to contempt, disgrace, and disdain, eventually to return, to honour and triumph” as described by Vyvyan Holland (5).

Wilde was born Oscar O’Flahertie Fingal Wills Wilde (“A Woman”). His mother had been expecting a girl so when she gave birth to a boy it was a little disappointing and for the first years of Wilde’s life his mother dressed him in girl’s clothing (V Holland 10). At the age of ten he, along with his brother, was sent to Portora Royal School but he did not like the stay there due to lack of common interest with other boys and not long after that he won a scholarship to Trinity College where he studied for the next three years (V Holland 14-15). He then received a scholarship to study at Magdalen College, Oxford. While studying there Wilde became involved and was fascinated by the aesthetic theories of Walter Pater and John Ruskin, his professors at Oxford (“A Woman”). During those times, the Victorian gentleman’s clothes were most likely either black or grey but Wilde attracted attention by his unconventional style and old fashioned clothing (“A Woman”). His literary talent had a very slow development and by the time he was thirty years old he had only written one book: a book of collected poems that was published in 1881 (V Holland 31). He went on lecture tours in America and other places that were an enormous success and helped establish his name. After about 69 lectures he returned to England. Wilde certainly enjoyed his life and had an expensive lifestyle. In the fall of 1883 he got engaged to Miss Constance Mary Lloyd who was so wealthy that Wilde was able to do whatever he pleased without money being an issue (“A Woman”). However, Wilde was unsure how to develop his career. After the birth of his two sons, Wilde started seeking a more steady income and became the editor of a magazine which he renamed *The Woman’s World* but only stayed there for two years. Wilde, having only written one volume of poems, wrote

short stories for children in 1888 followed by fairy stories for adults in 1891 (“A Woman”). Following these publications *The Picture of Dorian Grey* was published in 1891 but received bad criticism amongst the public (V Holland 69-70). Over the next five years Wilde continued to build his literary and drama career by the writing of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* in 1892, *A Woman of no Importance* in 1893, *An Ideal Husband* in 1895 and finally *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1895. The last two plays mentioned were both an enormous success. Wilde finally had his well-deserved success in the literary and drama field. Wilde seems to have been witty in his real life as well as in his writing as he demonstrated by his response to the customs official who asked if he had anything to declare in the United States in 1882. His response was simply: “Only my genius” (Ousby 1019).

Even though Oscar Wilde was married to a woman, he was in fact a homosexual and started a relationship with a man named Alfred Douglas. However, due to the society of his time, homosexuality was not considered acceptable and Wilde had to face the harsh reality of having to keep his feelings to himself. Douglas’s father, the Marquis of Queensberry disapproved of their relationship and tried ending it. Wilde decided to file a lawsuit against Queensberry accusing him of libel, lost that case and was faced with a counter-suit from Queensberry who accused Wilde of “gross indecency” (“A Woman”). The foundation of this case against Wilde was his letters to Douglas, his published work, like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and young men that were willing to testify in favor of Queensberry (“A Woman”). When the judge was announcing his sentence he said:

“It is no use for me to address you. People who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame, and one cannot hope to produce any effect upon them. It is the worst case I have ever tried..... That you, Wilde, have been the centre of a circle of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind among young men it is impossible to doubt.

“I shall under such circumstances be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows. In my judgment it is totally inadequate for such a case as this.

“The sentence of the court is that each of you be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for two years.” (Harris 317-18)

Through his conviction and imprisonment Wilde had to endure hardship, humiliation and cruelty. For example, when he was brought to prison, he was forced to stand on the station platform in front of people passing, so the people could see his humiliation and those who were present spat on him (Wilson 65-6). In the prison he was allowed books and writing tools and there he wrote *De Profundis* in which he tried to defend his lifestyle

("A Woman"). After returning from prison his literary career was over because of this difficult time in his life and he no longer had any contact with his sons. He moved to France and never returned back to England. He died on November 30th 1900 two years after his wife Constance and only a day after he had been accepted into the Roman Catholic Church (V Holland 131).

Oscar Wilde remains one of the world's most talented writers and an extraordinary figure who continues to have an influence in today's literary field, even more than 100 years after his death. His influence on other writers is well known; one example is from an Icelandic author and playwright, Guðmundur Kamban. In his study on Kamban's works, Sveinn Einarsson describes Wilde's influence on Kamban in the play *Marmari*, which he wrote in 1918. There he emphasizes how Kamban applies the sharp criticism on society, just like Wilde, and also challenges double morality (Einarsson 427). Additionally, one of the main leaders of the Dada movement, Hugo Ball and his Danish friend Emmy Hennings started a theatrical group in Zurich in 1916, sixteen years after Wilde's death. They cited Oscar Wilde among their influences in their work: Oscar Wilde was the main influence in their production (Wilson 143). Furthermore, one can see Wilde's legacy and the effect his life and philosophy had on other people's behavior and especially people who were fascinated by his aesthetic views. One of them, the journalist Curt Siegfried, took Wilde's Dorian Gray as a model for his own life (Wilson 188).

Oscar Wilde did indeed have a remarkable life as a successful and brilliant author. Wilde's sexuality remained hidden for a long time and his inner struggle with that may indeed have impacted him as a writer. Whether his status as a writer in literary history is greater because of his own personal life remains unclear but his private person has undoubtedly affected his literary legacy through his work. While considering Wilde's personal life in regards to his sexuality the notion of submissiveness surfaces

and whether Wilde was a bit submissive in his own life, in regards to society's rules and approval.

2. Submissive male characters

In light of the above statements about Wilde's personal struggles it is interesting to note that in his works, characters can be found that are submissive and easily manipulated. The indication is that some of the male characters he created seem to be undermined by women and tend to show submissive behavior. An example of this tendency can be found in Wilde's work, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *An Ideal Husband* and *A Woman of No Importance*. Wilde portrays the male characters as if they are obedient towards the women and many of their conversations revolve around gaining acceptance and approval. Wilde's portrayal and demonstration of these male characters is a very interesting subject to observe. Perhaps traces of his own personality can be found in these characters.

Submissive male characters are easily found in the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The play revolves around two men, Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing. Both of them have feelings towards female characters in the play. These women are named Cecily and Gwendolen. Algernon and Jack try everything they can in order to persuade them into marriage. To make the storyline more interesting and complicated Wilde connects the characters. Algernon is Gwendolen's cousin and Cecily is the granddaughter of the man who adopted and raised Jack. Algernon pursues Cecily while Jack is in love with Gwendolen. Algernon and Jack are not represented as what would be considered as ideal men, instead they are portrayed as the opposite and almost to the verge of making them seem to be disparaged. They are both handsome young men, polite and very enthusiastic about the women they love but very submissive and dependent on other people's views and approval. The play demonstrates these views in many different dialogues and scenarios. For example the scene when Lady Bracknell is discussing where Jack comes from and he tells her that he was found in a handbag at Victoria Station in London when he was an infant. In this scenario Jack is presented as lower class and someone that is or should be beneath Lady Bracknell, at least in her opinion (*Being Earnest* 425). The submissive part of Jack's character becomes very clear because he longs for the approval of Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen. As previously stated, Algernon and Jack both represent men and fiancés that are quite submissive. When it comes to proposing to their women, everything depends upon the approval of whoever is their guardian. Everyone in the upper society was subject to

such an approval but these characters do not have the courage to rise above it. In Algernon's case it is eventually Jack who has the final say, because according to the will of Cecily's grandfather he is the guardian of Cecily (*Being Earnest* 418). In Jack's case it is Lady Bracknell who has the final say because she is Gwendolen's mother. The final scenes of the play demonstrate very clearly how submissive and manipulated these two men are. It is quite obvious who is in charge and it certainly looks like Wilde is making the male characters obedient towards the women. They are always waiting for someone else's permission, instead of taking charge of their own affairs. Another example from the play in the case of Jack is demonstrated in a conversation between Lady Bracknell and Jack.

JACK. But, my dear Lady Bracknell, the matter is entirely in your own hands. The moment you consent to my marriage with Gwendolen, I will most gladly allow your nephew to form an alliance with my ward.

LADY BRA. [*Rising and drawing herself up.*] You must be quite aware that what you propose is out of the question.

JACK. Then a passionate celibacy is all that any of us can look forward to.
(*Being Earnest. Act 3. 453*).

In the case of Algernon, the same characteristics are present. He is extremely unassertive and only wants Cecily's love in return. After Cecily's acceptance of Algernon's proposal there is only the approval from her guardian that they need. Instead of taking the matters that regard their future into his own hands, Algernon waits patiently after the approval from Lady Bracknell. Both of the characters' dialogues with Lady Bracknell and the other women are fascinating. For example, the way Jack talks to Lady Bracknell, he is so willing to obey her and receive her acceptance that he gives her the right to decide on whether or not he should marry Gwendolen. Instead of being firm on his desire to marry Gwendolen, with or without Lady Bracknell's permission, he is afraid of standing up to her, is submissive and lets her be in charge. Both of the situations with Jack and Algernon are relatively the same, both are eager to get married to the woman they love and both are waiting for the necessary approval.

Similar submissiveness is also present in the play *An Ideal Husband* which was produced in 1895. The play was a tremendous success and apparently it showed a new side to Wilde and that he was adopting the best method in writing plays (V Holland 95). This play takes place over the course of twenty-four hours and revolves around four main characters. The two main male characters are presented as quite submissive but yet very polite gentlemen. An example of the politeness is shown very early on in the play when Sir Robert Chiltern picks up the fan that Mrs. Cheveley drops, saying "Allow me" (*Ideal Husband* 358). As with some other characters created by Wilde the men in *An Ideal Husband* seem to let the women be in charge. Early on in the play Lady Basildon says that men are grossly material (*Ideal Husband* 362). It is interesting that Wilde would represent male characters in such a way. Sir Robert Chiltern is a person who everyone thinks of as the "ideal husband". He is a politician who has a very scandalous secret that he hopes never will reach the surface. However, Mrs. Cheveley is already in possession of a letter that will destroy Sir Robert Chiltern because it reveals the real reason for his wealth (*Ideal Husband* 364). Mrs. Cheveley is manipulating him, and demands that she will sell him the letter back but in return he should show his public support of an Argentine scheme.

MRS. CHEV. [*Detains him by touching his arm with her fan, and keeping it there while she is talking.*] I realise that I am talking to a man who laid the foundation of his fortune by selling to a Stock Exchange speculator a Cabinet secret.

SIR ROBERT. [*Biting his lip.*] What do you mean?

MRS. CHEV. [*Rising and facing him.*] I mean that I know the real origin of your wealth and your career, and I have got your letter, too.

SIR ROBERT. What letter?

MRS. CHEV. [*Contemptuously.*] The letter you wrote to Baron Arnheim, when you were Lord Radley's secretary, telling the Baron to buy Suez Canal shares—a letter written three days before the Government announced its own purchase.

SIR ROBERT. [*Hoarsely.*] It is not true.

MRS. CHEV. You thought that letter had been destroyed. How foolish of you! It is in my possession.

SIR ROBERT. The affair to which you allude was no more than a speculation. The House of Commons had not yet passed the bill; it might have been rejected.

MRS. CHEV. It was a swindle, Sir Robert. Let us call things by their proper names. It makes everything simpler. And now I am going to sell you that letter, and the price I ask for it is your public support of the Argentine scheme. You made your own fortune out of one canal. You must help me and my friends to make our fortunes out of another! (*Ideal Husband*. Act 1. 364).

In this scene, Wilde does not portray the male character as a strong male figure, but instead as a submissive character who is being manipulated by the woman. The woman has the upper hand and her intention is to blackmail him. After Lady Chiltern has found out about this horrible scheme that Mrs. Cheveley is working on she demands that her husband writes a letter to Mrs. Cheveley to tell her that he declines to participate in this plot of hers (*Ideal Husband* 370). Lady Chiltern is very firm with her husband who argues that it is too late for him to contact Mrs. Cheveley.

LADY CHI. That makes no matter. She must know at once that she has been mistaken in you—and that you are not a man to do anything base or underhand or dishonourable. Write her, Robert. Write that you decline to support this scheme of hers, as you hold it to be a dishonest scheme. Yes—write the word dishonest. She knows what that word means. [*Sir Robert Chiltern sits down and writes a letter. His wife takes it up and reads it.*] Yes; that will do. [*Rings bell.*] And now the envelope. [*He writes the envelope slowly. Enter Mason.*] Have this letter sent at once to Claridge's Hotel. There is no answer. [*Exit Mason. Lady Chiltern kneels down beside her husband and puts her arms round him.*] Robert, love gives one a sort of instinct to things. I feel to-night that I have saved you from something that might have been a danger to you, from something that might have made men honour you less than they do. I don't think you realize sufficiently, Robert, that you have brought into the political life of our time a nobler atmosphere, a finer attitude towards life, a

freer air of purer aims and higher ideals—I know it, and for that I love you, Robert.

SIR ROBERT. Oh, love me always, Gertrude, love me always!

(*Ideal Husband*. Act 1. 370-71).

In this scene Lady Chiltern is completely putting words into Sir Robert's mouth and telling him what to say. He has absolutely no say in the matter and just does what he is told. He has no courage to tell her the truth about his bad position. There is nothing else that he can contribute to this letter because according to his wife, it includes everything that is important for Mrs. Cheveley to read. However, he does seem thankful to his wife. That scene certainly shows a submissive side to the "ideal" husband.

Another submissive character in the work of Wilde is Sir John Pontefract from the play *A Woman of No Importance*. The representation of male characters in this work of Wilde is not altogether of the submissive kind, but this particular character would certainly fall under this criteria. *A Woman of No Importance* was produced on April 19th 1893 in London (V Holland 87). Just like *An Ideal Husband* the events of this play take place in less than 24 hours. Sir John Pontefract is married to Lady Caroline and the two of them have a very interesting relationship, where he allows his wife to control most aspects of their marriage. He is the ideal submissive character because he does exactly what his wife tells him to do and has no initiative on his own. This can clearly be shown in the following scene that occurs between Sir John Pontefract and Lady Caroline, after she has engaged in a conversation with Hester.

HES. [*Smiling.*] We have the largest country in the world, Lady Caroline. They used to tell us at school that some of our states are as big as France and England put together.

LADY CAR. Ah! you must find it very draughty, I should fancy. [*To Sir John.*] John, you should have your muffler. What is the use of my always knitting mufflers for you if you won't wear them?

SIR JOHN. I am quite warm, I assure you.

LADY CAR. I think not, John. Well, you couldn't come to a more charming place than this, Miss Worsley, though the house is excessively damp, quite

unpardonably damp, and dear Lady Hunstanton is sometimes a little lax about the people she asks down here. [*To Sir John.*] Jane mixes too much. Lord Illingworth, of course, is a man of high distinction. It is a privilege to meet him. And that member of Parliament, Mr. Kettle---

SIR JOHN. Kelvil, my love, Kelvil. (*A Woman. Act 1. 308-9*)

Also, when the two are getting ready for the park Lady Caroline tells her husband that he must put certain shoes on.

LADY CAR. John, the grass is too damp for you. You had better go and put on your overshoes at once.

SIR JOHN. I am quite comfortable, Caroline, I assure you.

LADY CAR. You must allow me to be the best judge of that, John. Pray, do as I tell you.

[*Sir John gets up and goes off.*] (*A Woman. Act 1. 311*)

This dialogue clearly shows the woman's domination in their marriage and that Sir John Pontefract is a very submissive character and obeys his wife. This dominated relationship between them can also be seen in the following passage.

LADY CAR. John, have you got your overshoes on?

SIR JOHN. Yes, my love.

LADY CAR. I think you had better come over here, John. It is more sheltered.

SIR JOHN. I am quite comfortable, Caroline.

LADY CAR. I think not, John. You had better sit beside me.

[*Sir John rises and goes across.*] (*A Woman. Act 1. 311-12*)

The only time that Sir John Pontefract speaks he is either correcting his wife when she repeatedly says Mr. Kettle instead of Kelvil (*A Woman 309; 312*) or following orders from his wife. Later in the play Wilde shows the character trying to escape his wife's dominance by seeking out other women's company so his wife is constantly searching for him from one room to another (*A Woman 335-36*).

While the submissive theme is undoubtedly something that could shed light onto Wilde's own life the duality of characters is even more telling as it is thought to mean either a hidden face or even a corrupt personality.

3. Dual characters and the mask

As submissive characters are present in Wilde's work the notion of the duality is also evident and with that comes the reflection about the mask that is easy to hide behind. A dual character is a two-sided person who can seem to represent two different personalities and desires. It can mean to have a double character or a double nature of some sort ("Dual"). In some cases, perhaps the notion of duality represents further desires of change or fresh perspectives. In the works of Wilde the notion of a dual character is often evident, for example in *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. What makes Wilde an interesting writer is the mystery behind his work. Perhaps Wilde was trying to say that he was in fact a dual character himself. He was a married man with two sons and a supposedly content married life. Then on the other hand he was in a relationship with a man. With that being said, perhaps he was using these characters as a way to come across what he was really feeling. Still, these kinds of ideas are only up for speculation and never possible to generalize. The dual characters of Algernon Moncrieff, Jack Ernest, Sir Robert Chiltern and Mrs. Cheveley possibly represent the actual dual character of Wilde himself.

In the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* both of the two main characters are presented as dual characters. When the storyline starts evolving it becomes evident that Jack goes by the name of Jack in the country but when he is in London he goes by the name of Ernest (*Being Earnest* 418). Jack has made up a story that he has a brother named Ernest. His made-up-story about his brother Ernest who lives in town has certainly given him the freedom to skip town easily in order to attend to his brother's needs. Jack invents another person so he has an excuse to disappear whenever he wants to or be in two different places at the same time. In fact he gets himself in trouble because the woman he wants to marry, Gwendolen, is fonder of the name Ernest than of the person himself. The following takes place when Gwendolen expresses her love for Jack.

JACK. You really love me, Gwendolen?

GWEN. Passionately!

JACK. Darling! You don't know how happy you've made me.

GWEN. My own Ernest!

JACK. But you don't really mean to say that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Ernest?

GWEN. But your name is Ernest.

JACK. Yes, I know it is. But supposing it was something else? Do you mean to say you couldn't love me then?

GWEN. [*Glibly.*] Ah! that is clearly a metaphysical speculation, and like most metaphysical speculations has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life, as we know them. (*Being Earnest*. Act 1. 422)

Jack has a dilemma with his dual character because Gwendolen is fonder of the idea of being married to someone whose name is Ernest than actually getting married to him.

Just like his friend Jack, Algernon Moncrieff invents another person to escape something or to give him more space. Perhaps he is fed up with the environment around him and he uses this Bunbury person to escape his reality. For example, when Algernon is meeting Jack for dinner he says he is meeting Bunbury (*Being Earnest* 419). When Jack has gone to Miss Prism's house to stay with Gwendolen he announces that his dear brother Ernest passed away the evening before and that he has received a telegram to that effect (*Being Earnest* 434). Little does he know that Algernon is planning to win Cecily over by pretending to be Jack's well-known brother Ernest. He knows exactly where they are staying because he was listening when Lady Bracknell was questioning Jack about his origins and his home (*Being Earnest* 425-28). That scene, where Algernon shows up as Ernest, presents an awkward circumstance because Jack has lied about his brother's passing and Algernon's arrival ruins that for him. Both of these characters, Jack and Algernon, represent a dual character; they invent other personas so that they can hide behind them. They both seek to disappear whenever they please and therefore have invented this mask of themselves, the mask that contains the dual personality. This creation of characters is very intriguing.

Dual characters, in the sense that they have something to hide, either from their past or as part of their own characters have the tendency to hide it behind a mask. Wilde may have come up with the best description of this inclination: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth" (*Nothing* 16). In the play *An Ideal Husband* there are many instances of a dual

character. For example, Lady Chiltern is angry with her husband for hiding the secret about his wealth from her all of these years and for not being honest with her.

LADY CHI. Don't come near me. Don't touch me. I feel as if you had soiled me for ever. Oh! what a mask you have been wearing all these years. A horrible painted mask! You sold yourself for money. Oh! a common thief were better! You put yourself up to sale to the highest bidder! You were bought in the market. You lied to the whole world. And yet you will not lie to me (*Ideal Husband*. Act 2. 387).

Sir Robert Chiltern never told his wife the foundation of his wealth, but now the mask that he is wearing that hides his betrayal is fallen and his hidden secret is exposed. Another character from *An Ideal Husband*, Mrs. Cheveley, is also interesting in this context. When introduced in the play she is described as very graceful, good looking and well dressed (*Ideal Husband* 355). She keeps her good looks and demeanor all the time until Lord Goring exposes her as a thief because she stole a bracelet. He threatens to call the police so she will be prosecuted. He knew that she had stolen this particular bracelet because he had given it to another woman. He confronts her and the following dialogue takes place.

MRS. CHEV. When did you see it last?

LORD GOR. [*Calmly.*] Oh, ten years ago, on Lady Berkshire, from whom you stole it.

MRS. CHEV. [*Starting.*] What do you mean?

LORD GOR. I mean that you stole that ornament from my cousin, Mary Berkshire, to whom I gave it when she was married. Suspicion fell on a wretched servant, who was sent away in disgrace. I recognized it last night. I determined to say nothing about it till I had found the thief. I have found the thief now, and I have heard her own confession.

MRS. CHEV. [*Tossing her head.*] It is not true.

LORD GOR. You know it is true. Why, thief is written across your face at this moment.

MRS. CHEV. I will deny the whole affair from beginning to end. I will say that I have never seen this wretched thing, that it was never in my possession. [*Mrs. Cheveley tries to get the bracelet off her arm, but fails. Lord Goring looks on amused. Her thin fingers tear at the jewel to no purpose. A curse breaks from her.*]

LORD GOR. The drawback of stealing a thing, Mrs. Cheveley, is that one never knows how wonderful the thing that one steals is. You can't get that bracelet off, unless you know where the spring is. And I see you don't know where the spring is. It is rather difficult to find.

MRS. CHEV. You brute! You coward! [*She tries again to unclasp the bracelet, but fails.*] (*Ideal Husband*. Act 3. 400).

Wilde's description about the character of Mrs. Cheveley shows the means of the mask. Mrs. Cheveley has in a way been wearing a mask. She was beautiful and attractive but all of a sudden when she is busted for stealing, the mask disappears and she becomes horrible to look at. Lord Goring corners her and calls her out on stealing the bracelet and then she totally loses control because the mask that contains her dual personality falls off. She eventually regains herself but she has met in Lord Goring a person who is her match when it comes to trickery. This description of Mrs. Cheveley is interesting in light of the deception theme because perhaps Wilde was showing how easy it was to hide behind something and not show one's real face which is exactly the way he had to live most of his life.

Another interesting dual character is Dorian Gray from the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The duality of Dorian Gray becomes very clear when Wilde describes the dark side of him, his reckless behavior and cruelty, which usually is not apparent to those around him who only see the charming and beautiful side of him. For example, his behavior towards Sybil Vane is harsh, when she disappoints him in the theatre because of her bad performance. When he visits her backstage he brutally criticizes her. In a desperate response she explains herself by telling him that her love for him is so overwhelming that she can no longer perform as an actress but he quite coldly abandons her (*Dorian* 158-59).

This presence of duality in Wilde's work is intriguing and certainly leaves many questions yet unanswered. As we move from the dual characters and the mask the next apparent theme in Wilde's works is the one of deception, which is interesting in light of Wilde's circumstances in life.

3. Deception

As with the dual characters and the use of the mask the notion of deception is a common theme in Wilde's work. Either it is a character that is manipulating others or is being manipulated. This continuous theme throughout most of his works draws an interesting question: whether Wilde himself thought that his own life was nothing but a deception. As stated before he certainly lived a dual life and maybe regarded himself as a dual personality; possibly he considered that writing about deception in his characters would make it easier for him to cope with his own deception.

The deception is obvious in the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* as the two main male characters fall under the deception theme. As previously stated, Jack and Algernon both create other characters or personalities as a way to make their life more interesting and to have more opportunities than in their regular life, and by doing so deceive the people around them. For them, this deception is normal and they allow themselves to deceive others in an effort to live this double life they so badly seek. Both of them are willing to deceive the women they love, telling them wrong names and wrongful facts about themselves. However, as the play evolves and it is time for Ernest to give his consent that Algernon and Cecily will marry he changes roles. Suddenly, he wants to inform Lady Bracknell just how deceitful Algernon really is, overlooking the fact that he is the same.

JACK. I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Lady Bracknell, but this engagement is quite out of the question. I am Miss Cardew's guardian, and she cannot marry without my consent until she comes of age. That consent I absolutely decline to give.

LADY BRA. Upon what grounds, may I ask? Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?

JACK. It pains me very much to have to speak frankly to you, Lady Bracknell, about your nephew, but the fact is that I do not approve at all of his moral character. I suspect him of being untruthful. [*Algernon and Cecily look at him in indignant amazement.*]

LADY BRA. Untruthful! My nephew Algernon? Impossible! He is an Oxonian.

JACK. I fear there can be no possible doubt about the matter. This afternoon, during my temporary absence in London on an important question of romance, he obtained admission to my house by means of the false pretense of being my brother. Under an assumed name he drank, I've just been informed by my butler, an entire pint bottle of my Perrier-Jouet, Brut, '89; a wine I was specially reserving for myself. Continuing his disgraceful deception, he succeeded in the course of the afternoon in alienating the affections of my only ward. He subsequently stayed to tea, and devoured every single muffin. And what makes his conduct all the more heartless is, that he was perfectly well aware from the first that I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don't intend to have a brother, not even of any kind. I distinctly told him so myself yesterday afternoon. (*Being Earnest*. Act 3. 452).

Furthermore, in the play *A Woman of No Importance* the character of Mrs. Arbuthnot uses deception in regards to telling her son, Gerald, about the real identity of his father. Having raised her son on her own she informed him that his father was deceased (*A Woman* 332). As the storyline continues the real truth is exposed and it comes to light that Gerald's father is in fact Lord Illingworth. The deception of Mrs. Arbuthnot is revealed and she is faced with the decision of allowing her son to work for his father. Lord Illingworth had offered Gerald a job, without knowing he was his son. A conversation between Mrs. Arbuthnot with her son is also interesting in this context because she is talking about herself and confessing that she is a woman who wears a mask (*A Woman* 341). She tells Gerald the story when she met Lord Illingworth. Perhaps she was in a way wearing this mask to cover up her secret that involved the identity of her former lover and the father of her son.

Just like in the plays *A Woman of No Importance* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* the character of Sir Robert Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband* has his own share of deception and faces manipulation. When Sir Robert was a young man he met Baron Arnheim and he became fascinated by his company. Baron became very close to him and asked Robert to provide him with information he had because of his job in the

Cabinet. That information, which was a Cabinet secret paper, became very valuable to Baron Arnheim and he promised that instead of that information he would make Robert a rich man. Mr. Arnheim was in the position of manipulating Robert. Mrs. Cheveley was later in the same position as Robert because Baron Arnheim became a very close friend to her and helped her acquire wealth. Through their relationship she got her hands on that valuable letter that could expose Robert Chiltern. Consequently, Robert Chiltern is a victim of blackmail because of this valuable letter Mrs. Cheveley has in her possession. The speculation about Baron Arnheim's manipulating manner draws close attention to another person, who is Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. One can find resemblance in the way Lord Henry manipulates Dorian Gray. Both of those characters, Baron Arnheim and Lord Henry, seem to be slightly corrupt and have this deceitful manner when they are imposing their will on other people.

The deception theme is fairly important in Wilde's life and may provide a vital understanding of what kind of struggles Wilde was facing in his personal life. In this discussion, a quote from Wilde himself is intriguing: "When one is in love, one always begins by deceiving one's self, and one always ends by deceiving others. That is what the world calls a romance" (*Dorian* 137). As with deception the next recurrent theme that is ongoing in Wilde's work is the notion of the self-portrait and if Wilde is possibly portraying his inner personality in his work.

4. Self-portrait

As with the previous themes, the question of whether Wilde had a tendency to hide behind his masterpieces still surfaces with the theme of the self-portrait. This recurrent theme certainly opens up a possibility of general wondering of whether some characters can be seen as an alter ego of Wilde himself. Despite the fact that in his later years it was common knowledge that Wilde was a homosexual, he could never fully live his life the way he wanted to due to the society that he lived in.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* there are traces of Wilde's own personality and desires that are represented in the male characters. Still, it is never possible to generalize in that regard, but it is easy to speculate. Perhaps, Wilde says it best in a letter to Ralph Payne discussing the novel and that certainly helps this generalization: "I am so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine: it contains much of me in it. 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* 352). *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was brutally criticized when it was published in 1890. The reason for this harsh criticism was that it was said to have exposed the hypocrisy of Victorian Englishmen and that Wilde had not used an acceptable pattern and therefore the book was considered incomprehensible (V Holland 70). Wilde had to defend his book to the press and to the public and did so very thoroughly in letters that were printed in *St James's Gazette* (V Holland 70). There are three main male characters in this novel. The first one, Basil Hallward, is a painter who paints a portrait of the young and beautiful Dorian Gray. There are many statements regarding the beauty of Dorian Gray that may be considered as Wilde's homosexuality becoming clearer but of course that is only up for speculation. For example, the way Basil describes Dorian the first time he sees him, stating, "In the centre of the room, clamped to an upright easel, stood the full length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty..." (*Dorian* 105). It has been mentioned above that Wilde said he wanted to be Dorian Gray in another life. The similarities of Dorian and Wilde are profound and present in the story are many examples that support that hypothesis. Dorian meets Lord Henry when he is modeling for Basil's painting. After their discussion where Lord Henry tries to influence him by giving him advice about his life, sinning and the beauty that could go away, Dorian's views on life have completely changed (*Dorian* 115-18). When Dorian finally sees the

finished painting he becomes aware of his beauty for the first time (*Dorian* 120). However, after witnessing and feeling the overflow of emotions because of his beauty Dorian starts wishing that he could change roles with the painting, meaning that he could always remain young.

“How sad it is!” murmured Dorian Gray, with his eyes still fixed upon his own portrait. “How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!” (*Dorian* 120)

Furthermore Dorian also states that Lord Henry is quite correct and that when one loses one’s good looks, whatever they may be, one loses everything (*Dorian* 121). It seems that after Dorian’s conversation with Lord Henry, he starts being scared that his physical appearance is not forever.

“I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me. Why should it keep what I must lose? Every moment that passes takes something from me, and gives something to it. Oh, if it were only the other way! If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now! Why did you paint it? It will mock me some day – mock me horribly!” (*Dorian* 121)

But then life goes on and when all the evil he has been doing starts to haunt him, he is afraid that he will be burdened by his past. He is afraid that other people will get to know his secret, the picture that discloses his corrupted soul. The only way out is to destroy the picture and he uses a knife to do so. The following passage explains this thoroughly: “It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free. It would kill his monstrous soul-life, and without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace. He

seized the thing, and stabbed the picture with it. There was a cry heard, and a crash” (*Dorian* 243).

With that being said, the idea that Dorian is the self-portrait of Wilde is not too surreal. Without stating a fact, there is a possibility that this is exactly what Oscar Wilde yearned for in his life, to be able to always stay young and graceful and that is why he stated that the character of Dorian Gray was someone he wanted to be in another life.

Oscar Wilde wrote the play *A Woman of No Importance* in 1892 while staying with Lord Alfred Douglas in a rented farmhouse (Raby xv). The name of one of the female characters resembles the location where it was written, Lady Hunstanton. In the first production of *A Woman of No Importance* a man named Herbert Beerbohm Tree played the role of Lord Illingworth. According to Wilde the character of Lord Illingworth was unlike any other that had been seen before. He told Tree the following: ”He is a figure of art. Indeed, if you can bear the truth, he is MYSELF” (Raby xv). He didn’t want the actor to make the character look too theatrical stating that “every day Herbert becomes *de plus en plus oscarisé*. It is a wonderful case of nature imitating art” (Raby xv-xvi). In this statement Wilde is clearly saying that Lord Illingworth is a reflection of himself. With that in mind, the connection between Lord Illingworth and Gerald is interesting. In light of Wilde saying that Lord Illingworth is himself perhaps the character of Gerald is meant to represent Lord Alfred Douglas. The sudden thrill of Lord Illingworth to offer Gerald a job and help him succeed is perhaps Wilde’s way of exemplifying his own relationship with Alfred Douglas. The fact that Wilde and Douglas were together when the play was written only actuates the idea that Wilde was portraying himself in these characters.

Conclusion

The character of Oscar Wilde is inseparable from the analysis of his work. The question of whether Wilde uses his work as an escape from his personal struggle is an intriguing one. Examples demonstrated in this thesis add to the speculation that the characters Wilde created may be seen as an alter ego of Wilde himself. Oscar Wilde made a name for himself and he continues to be one of the most brilliant writers of the 19th century. Viewing his work and the ravishing legacy he left behind, it is quite obvious that his work really does speak for itself, in the sense of good literature. To the day when this essay was written his proverbs and quotations are still used: some of them have even become well-known phrases. People use them without knowing where that wisdom originates, and that is a true legacy for someone like Oscar Wilde. The questions and philosophies regarding his work will always be just a speculation but the overrunning themes that are present in his works can certainly be connected to his own life in the examples that have been shown in this thesis. There is a chance Wilde used his work to bring across his own feelings, desires, and ways of looking at life and inner struggle. With that being said, one can wonder if the title of the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* was Wilde's reminder to be honest to himself and show his real character in life. In that respect the last quote of the play is significant and an appropriate ending: "On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Ernest" (*Being Earnest* 457).

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