

Aesthetics vs. Ethics in the Plays of Oscar Wilde

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Abstract: *Oscar Wilde is renowned for the sharp wit of his pithy aphorisms, which are evident throughout his writing. In particular, his dramatic oeuvre demonstrates the enduring qualities of his skill as a playwright. However, one of his most enduring legacy comes from one of his critical writings: the effective separation between aesthetics and ethics. In “The Critic as Artist”, one of the essays published in Intentions, in 1891, Wilde draws a distinction between Aesthetics and Ethics, arguing that they belong to different spheres. Wilde’s essay was of seminal importance in altering the way in which works of art were analysed: to this day, morality and utility are no longer considered valid criteria with which to judge the artistic qualities of any creative work. The aim of this article is to discuss Wilde’s plays in the light of his aesthetic criticism, focusing primarily on the separation between aesthetics and ethics, demonstrating that the very aesthetic principles Wilde helped to establish and disseminate are also present in the texts of his plays, since the first tragedy, Vera, or The Nihilists (1882) to his last play, The Importance of Being Earnest (1895).*

Keywords: *Oscar Wilde; Aestheticism; Plays.*

Resumo: *Oscar Wilde é conhecido pela sagacidade de seus aforismos expressivos, evidentes em seus escritos. Em particular, sua obra dramática demonstra as qualidades duradouras de sua habilidade como dramaturgo. No entanto, um dos seus mais duradouros legados vem de sua escrita crítica: a separação entre estética e ética. Em “O crítico como artista”, um dos ensaios publicados em Intenções, em 1891, Wilde faz uma distinção entre estética e ética, argumentando que pertencem a diferentes esferas. O ensaio de Wilde foi de importância seminal para alterar a maneira em que as obras de arte são analisadas: até os dias de hoje, a moralidade e a utilidade não são mais consideradas critérios válidos para o julgamento das qualidades artísticas de qualquer trabalho criativo. O objetivo deste artigo é discutir as peças de Wilde à luz de sua crítica estética, concentrando-se principalmente na separação entre estética e ética, demonstrando que os princípios estéticos que Wilde ajudou a estabelecer e a disseminar também estão presentes em suas peças, desde a sua primeira tragédia Vera, ou Os Nihilistas (1882) até a sua última peça, A Importância de ser prudente (1895).*

Palavras-chave: *Oscar Wilde; Estética; Peças.*

Received: 30/10/2019

Accepted: 03/02/2020

Introduction

Oscar Wilde is renowned for the sharp wit of his pithy aphorisms, which are evident throughout his writing. In particular his dramatic oeuvre demonstrates the enduring qualities of his skill as a playwright and, more than a century after his death, Wilde's plays remain in constant demand on the stages of London's West End and in theatres around the world, captivating audiences just as they did when he was alive. In fact, public appetite for Wilde's masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest* has steadily risen and it has rarely been out of production since its premiere in 1895. The first revival of *The Importance of Being Earnest* was staged in London in January 1902. In the 108 ensuing years, until February 2010, there were a total of 41 new productions of the play (including adaptations and plays inspired by the original), one every 2.6 years. However, from 2000 onwards, the frequency has increased and the play has been revived every year (Harris, 2011, 129-227).

Since the 1970s, academic interest in Wilde's writing has grown exponentially, rescuing him from earlier charges that his work was immoral, shallow and frivolous. This re-evaluation has extended to his critical writings, which were formerly considered to be derivative of Pater's and Ruskin's, Wilde often being referred to as their "disciple" rather than as an exponent of Aestheticism in his own right. Although Wilde was undeniably influenced by Pater, he was very concerned to develop his own aesthetic ideas. He discussed not only questions of beauty in art, artistic self-expression and art criticism, but also philosophical concepts in binary opposition such as "truth versus lie", "universal versus individual" and "aesthetics versus ethics". Published together in *Intentions* in 1891, these essays may be regarded as Wilde's own aesthetic theories.

In "The Critic as Artist", one of the essays published in *Intentions*, Wilde draws a distinction between Aesthetics and Ethics, arguing that they belong to different spheres. Since almost two decades had elapsed between the publication of Pater's book, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, in 1873, and the appearance of his own book on the topic, *Intentions*, in 1891, some critics regarded Wilde as unoriginal. Nonetheless, the mocking irony of the writing was uniquely his own, and, of all his contributions to literature and the arts, Wilde's most enduring legacy is the effective separation between aesthetics and ethics. Wilde's essay was of seminal importance in altering the way in which works of art were analysed: to this day, morality and utility are no longer considered valid criteria with which to judge the artistic qualities of any creative work.

Our aim here is to discuss Wilde's plays in the light of his aesthetic criticism, focusing primarily on the separation between aesthetics and ethics, demonstrating that the very aesthetic principles Wilde helped to establish and disseminate are also present in the texts of his plays, since the first tragedy, *Vera, or The Nihilists* (1882) to his last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Wilde's tragedies were his first experiments in the field of drama, and they are also the first works in which he incorporated the concepts Aestheticism into his plays, but the separation of aesthetics and ethics was to be a salient feature of his tragedies and comedies alike.

The detachment between aesthetics and ethics

The two parts of "The Critic as Artist" were first published in 1890, in the July and September issues of *The Nineteenth Century*, respectively. "The Critic as Artist" is written as a dialogue between two characters, Gilbert and Ernest. Through the former, Wilde argues about

the importance of both the critical faculty and artistic creation, because, for him, the artist must be critical and creative if he wants to produce great works of art. Moreover, Wilde argues that criticism should be as creative as the work produced by the literary writer, because there is no great art without self-consciousness, and Wilde identifies self-consciousness with the critical spirit. The critical work is thus seen as being superior to the work of the artist, in the same way that, for Wilde, criticism unifies all forms of art. Wilde also discusses the separation between art and morals: he claims that aesthetics surpasses ethics, since beauty is superior to everything. Nevertheless, Wilde clarifies that aesthetics, even being considered higher than ethics, does not replace it: each concept belongs to a completely different sphere.

Wilde insists on the split between art and morals, as for him, “[a]ll art is immoral. . . . For emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art, and emotion for the sake of action is the aim of life, and of that practical organisation of life that we call society” (2003, 1136). When Wilde claims that every work of art is immoral, he is also saying that art should not be judged by moral criteria, as art does not adhere to ethical or moral principles, simply because it belongs to a different domain. For Wilde, works of art are supposed to provoke emotions which shall be entirely experienced in order to widen the senses. The purpose of the work of art is not to enhance proper behaviour or any kind of moral conduct, since art belongs to the sphere of aesthetics, whereas life belongs to the sphere of ethics:

Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive. Even a colour-sense is more important, in the development of the individual, than a sense of right and wrong. (2003, 1154)

Wilde goes beyond a simple separation between aesthetics and ethics. For him, aesthetics supplants ethics, since the role attributed to beauty is superior to all.

Even though Wilde associates the two concepts, he subverts the traditional correlation between aesthetics and ethics, since he is no longer saying that art should present morality or didacticism, but beauty instead. Moreover, Wilde places beauty in a superior position in relation to morals. He argues that ethics should not interfere with aesthetics, that is, it should not be a criterion for the critical evaluation of aesthetics; the only possible connection between these two realms, is one which recognises the primacy of aesthetics over ethics.

Wilde’s incorporation of aesthetic theory into dramatic practice

The distinction between aesthetics and ethics mentioned above is present in all Wilde’s plays through the discourse of some of the characters, from the very outset of Wilde’s career as a playwright, when he wrote *Vera, or The Nihilists* to his last play and masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

In *Vera, or The Nihilists*, this distinction is made only once, through Prince Paul’s comment that reveals that he is happy to be regarded as wicked:

PRINCE PAUL. I would sooner lose my best friend than my worst enemy. To have friends, you know, one need only be good-natured; but when a man has no enemy left there must be something mean about him (2003, 698)

Prince Paul is a character who has some dandiacal features. He is ironic, smart and cunning, and his speech is witty. With such traits, his position is analogous to that of the Aesthetic philosopher, and yet he is the play's villain. This coincidence is made possible by Wilde's conviction that aesthetics and ethics are separate spheres: therefore, the Aesthetic philosopher does not necessarily need to be a good character. Nonetheless, even though the division between aesthetics and ethics enables Prince Paul to be immoral, he does not embody aesthetic values related to the main criterion of Wildean Aestheticism, beauty, and, therefore, he cannot be said to be a true dandy.

In Wilde's second tragedy, *The Duchess of Padua* (1891), he enables the distinction between aesthetics and ethics to be recognised when Simone Gesso, the Duke of Padua, states his disdain for ethics and morals, positioning himself against righteous values. Occasionally, his posture corresponds to that of Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist", for he places aesthetics over ethics. This may be seen in the following dialogue, when the Duke is talking to some citizens of Padua, who are praying for the governor's mercy:

DUKE. (*To the Citizens.*)
 Well my good loyal citizens of Padua,
 . . . I promise this—
 FIRST CITIZEN. Marry, he will lighten the taxes!
 SECOND CITIZEN. Or a dole of bread, think you, for each man?
 DUKE. That, on next Sunday, the Lord Cardinal
 Shall, after Holy Mass, preach you a sermon
 Upon the Beauty of Obedience (2003, 622-3)

When the Duke states that the people need to learn the beauty of obedience, rather than having their needs met, he is not being a fair leader, but he is emphasising that good behaviour has its own aesthetic merit. The Duke qualifies manners according to Aesthetic criteria; hence, for him, "Aesthetics are higher than ethics" (2003, 1154).

The distinction between Aesthetics and Ethics also applies in Wilde's third play, *Salomé* (1891), in the characters of Salomé and Jokanaan. Whereas Salomé represents the sphere of aesthetics, mainly due to her search for beauty, Jokanaan represents the sphere of ethics, as his speech is couched in a high moral tone. Since they belong to different realms they can never coexist.

Every time Jokanaan speaks about the Messiah and admonishes Salomé and her family for their sins, he stands up for his religion. However, Salomé does not seem to take his prophecies and sermons seriously, since she is so unsettled by his beauty. Salomé's desire for Jokanaan is repugnant to him, and he continually tries to repel her:

JOKANAAN. Back! Daughter of Babylon! Come not near the chosen of the Lord. . .
 SALOMÉ. Speak again, Jokanaan. Thy voice is wine to me (2003, 589).

Clearly, Salomé is so involved in her feelings that she is completely oblivious to the content of Jokanaan's speech, caring only for the beauty of his voice. Since aesthetics is separate from ethics, the aesthetic motto, "art for art's sake", reinforces the idea that art does not have to serve a specific purpose, neither a moral nor a didactic one. Art stands out purely for its beauty. In *Salomé*, this aspect of Wilde's aesthetic criticism is represented in the plot, since the protagonist's behaviour is amoral and her actions are determined by her perception of

what is beautiful. It is for this reason that Salomé does not care about what Jokanaan prophesies. Instead, she focuses her attention on the beauty of his physical appearance.

Whereas in Wilde's tragedies the difference between Aesthetics and Ethics appears sporadically, it is heightened in the comedies. In Wilde's first comedy, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), there are many examples of the separation of aesthetics and ethics. Every time any character refers to morality as boring, they are equating ethics with a dull attitude towards life. It is worth remembering Wilde's remark in "The Truth of Masks", "in aesthetic criticism, attitude is everything" (2003, 1173). Hence, an aesthetic position requires an interesting attitude, which can also be achieved through immoral behaviour.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lord Darlington is one of the most dissolute characters. He is wicked and immoral, which makes him aesthetically interesting. Nevertheless, he denies being wicked, for being recognised (as depraved) is being found out. He prefers to remain inscrutable, which gives him a post of vantage, for it enables him to keep his true identity to himself.

Another instance of immoral behaviour is described by the Duchess of Berwick at the beginning of the first act, when she pays a visit to Lady Windermere and tells her that Lord Windermere has some kind of obscure relationship with Mrs Erlynne. The Duchess of Berwick refers to Mrs Erlynne's appearance and attitude:

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Oh, on account of that horrid woman. She dresses so well, too, which makes it much worse, sets such a dreadful example (2003, 425-6)

Mrs Erlynne's good taste for clothes and her immoral behaviour are both characteristics that make her even more appealing to the audience. At this point in the play Mrs Erlynne has yet to make her first appearance, so the audience is curious to meet the dandy that other characters talk so much about. Mrs Erlynne's infamy is counterposed to her habit of dressing well; the fact that the Duchess of Berwick states that Mrs Erlynne's appearance sets a dreadful example is revealing, for it implies that people will follow her bad behaviour based only on the fact that she is well-dressed. Aesthetics is thus presented as being higher than ethics, for a woman who has a highly developed aesthetic taste is able to influence the moral behaviour of many people.

When the male characters are together in Lord Darlington's house, in the third act, Cecil Graham, one of the dandies of the play, defines the difference between scandal and gossip, drawing a parallel between aesthetics and ethics:

LORD WINDERMERE. What is the difference between scandal and gossip?

CECIL GRAHAM. Oh! gossip is charming! History is merely gossip. But scandal is gossip made tedious by morality. Now, I never moralise. A man who moralises is usually a hypocrite, and a woman who moralises is invariably plain (2003, 451)

According to Cecil Graham, in order to be beautiful, one does not need to have high ethical principles. Instead, for Cecil Graham, to remain beautiful, a woman must be immoral, since expressing moral judgments makes a woman look serious and, therefore, unattractive. Thus, not only is gossip superior to scandal – whereas aesthetics is higher than ethics –, but, in addition, morality is able to diminish the value of beauty from any subject.

Dumby and Cecil Graham go on to disapprove of the fact that Lord Windermere does not want to play cards with them, and Dumby makes a sarcastic remark about marriage, attributing the fact that Lord Windermere does not want to play cards to the fact that he is a married man and, as such, he is committed to the seriousness necessary to his position: "Good

heavens! How marriage ruins a man! It's as demoralising as cigarettes, and far more expensive" (2003, 451). As Dumby associates Lord Windermere's unwillingness to play cards with a lack of triviality and ability to enjoy leisure activities, he is replacing the ethical code with an aesthetic one, as if having no desire for the life of pleasure were the same as having no principles left. Seriousness, which is associated with morality, leaves no room for pleasure-seeking, which is connected to Wildean aestheticism.

In the same scene, while the men are talking, Lord Darlington asserts that his loved one – Lady Windermere – is the only good woman he has ever met, but Cecil Graham disdains good women:

LORD DARLINGTON. This woman has purity and innocence. She has everything we men have lost.

CECIL GRAHAM. My dear fellow, what on earth should we men do going about with purity and innocence? A carefully thought-out buttonhole is much more effective (2003, 451-2)

Cecil Graham despises the characteristics Lord Darlington values, which are moral virtues which are considered useless, for they cannot embellish someone's appearance. His conclusion draws a parallel with Wilde's argument in "The Critic as Artist" that "Even a colour-sense is more important, in the development of the individual, than a sense of right and wrong" (2003, 1154). Cecil Graham thus serves as a mouthpiece for Wilde's arguments on the distinction between aesthetics and ethics.

Finally, in the last act of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, when Mrs Erlynne appears in the Windermere's house to bid farewell to her daughter, Lord Windermere accuses her of behaving absurdly and treats her as he thinks she deserves to be treated:

LORD WINDERMERE (*coming up to MRS ERLYNNE and speaking in a low voice*). It is monstrous your intruding yourself here after your conduct last night.

MRS ERLYNNE (*with an amused smile*). My dear Windermere, manners before morals! (2003, 457)

Mrs Erlynne's response emphasises her belief that having good manners, in other words, sustaining a pose, is more important than having high ethical principles. Aesthetics is, once more, considered more important than ethics.

The same distinction between Aesthetics and Ethics can be seen in Wilde's fourth play, *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), whenever a character equates morality with dullness. In the first act, Mrs Allonby and Lord Illingworth talk about Miss Hester Worsley and he criticises the fact that the latter is a Puritan. He cannot stand a pretty young girl holding views so different from his own, which reveals the extent of his conceited self-centredness:

MRS ALLONBY. She is a Puritan besides . . .

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Ah, that is inexcusable. I don't mind plain women being Puritans. It is the only excuse they have for being plain. But she is decidedly pretty. I admire her immensely (2003, 475)

In Lord Illingworth's opinion, Miss Hester's ideas are antiquated and inappropriate for an attractive girl, for he associates morality with the lack of beauty. When he declares that he does

not mind plain women being Puritans, he is substituting ethics for aesthetics. In his judgment, a woman should not spoil her beauty with morality, for ethics is exceedingly unbecoming.

Lord Illingworth defends the primacy of aesthetics over ethics throughout the play. In a dialogue with Mrs Allonby, he is thankful for having never been considered a man with a good reputation, as if being regarded as a good person would be a demerit:

LORD ILLINGWORTH. One can survive everything nowadays, except death, and live down anything except a good reputation.

MRS ALLONBY. Have you tried a good reputation?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. It is one of the many annoyances to which I have never been subjected (2003, 477)

A good reputation, in Lord Illingworth's opinion, would require a greater level of strength, for it would damage his aesthetic principles. In his view, an aesthete should not only split aesthetics and ethics, but also present an immoral attitude which would reveal his disregard for morality. However, an immoral attitude is not of itself sufficient to prove one's aesthetic merits. Aestheticism is supposed to be accompanied by immorality, but immorality without any conception of beauty is ineffective.

In Act Three, Lord Illingworth has a conversation with Gerald Arbuthnot "from father to son". He counsels Gerald on how he should behave in society and towards women, outlining the philosopher's view on women and men: "to the philosopher, my dear Gerald, women represent the triumph of matter over mind – just as men represent the triumph of mind over morals" (2003, 494). The triumph of matter over mind may be regarded as the inversion of the common idea that willpower can overcome physical obstacles. Thus, if women represent the triumph of matter over mind, they represent the irrational, that is, all that is inconsistent with reason. His view is that Mrs Arbuthnot's morality is irrational, as it was not overcome by her reason: she was incapable of extricating herself from the set of principles governing Victorian society. Lord Illingworth's affirmation that men represent the triumph of mind over morals may be seen as a reference to the ability of the intellect to overcome principles. Since principles are grounded in tradition, they can be defeated by an exercise of the individual will. The individual mind, the seat of aesthetic perception, is thus seen as being more powerful than the combined power of the moral universe.

In the third act of *A Woman of No Importance*, Lady Hunstanton replies to the acerbic comments of Lord Illingworth by saying that he sounds excessively immoral. Lord Illingworth's riposte is that "All thought is immoral. Its very essence is destruction. If you think of anything, you kill it. Nothing survives being thought of" (2003, 497-8), echoing the words of Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist": "all the arts are immoral, except those baser forms of sensual or didactic art that seek to excite to action of evil or of good. For action of every kind belongs to the sphere of ethics. The aim of art is simply to create a mood" (2003, 1139). Whereas Lord Illingworth talks about thought, Gilbert talks about the arts, but every work of art is initially conceived in the mind. In his comedies, there is thus an evident overlap between the aesthetic ideas voiced by the least moral characters and those that Wilde had previously set out in his aesthetic criticism.

In *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde delineates the separation between aesthetics and ethics through his character descriptions. Although Wilde makes little use of stage directions in most of his plays, *An Ideal Husband* is an exception, for it is the only play in which Wilde gives us long descriptions of each character.

One such stage direction describes Lord Goring and it is possible to notice that, from the outset, he is characterised as a dandy, but he is rather an unconventional one, for he is the first dandiacal character Wilde showed to be good. In fact, in *An Ideal Husband* it seems as if Wilde is reversing the procedure he had followed in his previous plays. In his separation of aesthetics from ethics, Wilde had included immoral/amoral elements in his characters' traits. Those characters who present immoral traits are dandies depicted as villains or at least as antagonists. It seems as if Wilde was concerned to show that villains can have an aesthetic sense, because it has nothing to do with ethics. Nonetheless, in *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde depicts his dandy as a good character, demonstrating a refined aesthetic taste is not necessarily associated with villainy. As aesthetics and ethics exist in separate spheres, good character and good aesthetic taste can coincide since they are not mutually exclusive:

(Enter LORD GORING in evening dress with a buttonhole. He is wearing a silk hat and Inverness cape. White-gloved, he carries a Louis Seize cane. His are all the delicate fopperies of Fashion. One sees that he stands in immediate relation to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it. He is the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought.) (2003, 553)

Lord Goring is presented as the dandy philosopher; his clothes are associated with the superiority of his state of mind, that is, his refined aesthetic sense is also shown through his choice of clothing. However, he is never described as a moralist hypocrite. Wilde had shown in his previous plays that moralism for its own sake tends to lead to hypocrisy. In *An Ideal Husband*, he demonstrates that having a good character does not depend on being a moralist.

When Lord Goring interferes to save both the Chilterns' marriage and Sir Robert Chiltern's political career, he does so because the Chilterns are his friends. He is motivated by love instead of moralism, as it is also clear in his speech to Mrs Cheveley. Through Lord Goring's speech, Wilde seems to be showing us that the values underlying people's actions can be good, but they do not need to be moralistic. Lord Goring does not uphold high moralistic values when he convinces Lady Chiltern to allow Sir Robert Chiltern to continue his political career. Despite knowing that Sir Robert Chiltern had constructed his career and fortune upon a sordid past secret, Lord Goring values Lord Robert's happiness over and above the upright behaviour his wife expects from him. He is thus driven by his love towards his friends and may be regarded as Wilde's first attempt at combining a truthful character with a trivial personality. Because of this unusual arrangement in his characterisation, Lord Goring may be seen as the most unconventional character in Wilde's plays up to this point.

Even though Lord Goring is Wilde's first kind dandy, the wicked ones are nonetheless present in *An Ideal Husband*. The villain, Mrs Cheveley, embraces aesthetics rather than ethics. She is similar to the dandies Wilde had created in his previous plays – cruel, vindictive, immoral, wicked and ironic. One of her comments on how customs and morals have become stricter so that scandals can now destroy a person's career, Mrs Cheveley is not only using this argument to blackmail Sir Robert Chiltern, but she is also pointing out that the Victorian moral code serves to devastate English citizens, who do not always fit the category. The irony is in the way she deplores how this new code of behaviour does not allow scandals to lend charm or interest to the corrupted person.

In fact, Mrs Cheveley's moral code is quite different from that of Victorian society: "Do you know, Gertrude, I don't mind your talking morality a bit. Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike" (2003, 551). When Mrs Cheveley defines morality in terms of fondness, she is implicitly saying that Victorian morality is only useful as a

mechanism for the destruction of one's enemies. She also says that morality, and thus ethics, as well as aesthetics, are merely poses. However, the aesthetic pose is considered by her to be more becoming than the ethical one. She scorns Victorian principles to the point that they become an instrument of revenge in her hands. She expects that Sir Robert Chiltern's career will be destroyed by the strict Victorian moral code if he does not agree to her terms. Her only task would be the disclosure of his past secret, and the system would do the rest.

In fact, Mrs Cheveley's sharp irony is Wilde's means of deploring the hypocrisy of Victorian society. Nonetheless, the most important characteristic of the Wildean dandy is his/her aesthetic discourse, and Mrs Cheveley is depicted as a truly Wildean dandy:

LORD GORING. Pray have a cigarette. Half the pretty women in London smoke cigarettes. Personally I prefer the other half.

MRS CHEVELEY: Thanks. I never smoke. My dressmaker wouldn't like it, and a woman's first duty in life is to her dressmaker, isn't it? What the second duty is, no one has as yet discovered (2003, 563).

When Mrs Cheveley asserts that a woman's first duty in life is to her dressmaker, she is obviously including herself in the category, and telling Lord Goring that being well-dressed and having a carefully thought-out appearance is her primary concern in life. As a dandy, Mrs Cheveley has her own conception of beauty, which is embodied in her appearance. It is worthy of note that Mrs Cheveley's statements about her first and second duty in life are taken from Wilde's Phrases and "Philosophies for the Use of the Young" in the December issue of the student magazine *The Chameleon* in 1894. Indeed, Wilde's first aphorism in the text is that "The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has as yet discovered" (2003, 1244). By reshaping his statement and including it in the discourse of one of his characters, Wilde creates a parallel between his own discourse and that of Mrs Cheveley, clearly revealing that his characters work as mouthpieces for his own thoughts.

Wilde's vigorous defence of the separation between aesthetics and ethics is also present in his last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), which includes several references to immorality and to the superiority of beauty over morals. When Gwendolen asserts, for example, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing" (1994, 55), she is defending the truth of this aesthetic principle. If style, which is related to the unity of art and is also connected with aesthetics, is more important than truth – which belongs to the territory of morality and ethics –, then style surpasses truth and aesthetics surpasses ethics.

The characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* constantly defend immorality, and one instance of this can be seen in the first act, when Algernon presses John for a reasonable explanation involving his cigarette case and the inscription inside it. John produces a satisfactory explanation, but Algernon takes issue with his clichéd adage about the nature of truth:

JACK. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.

ALGERNON The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility! (1994, 12-13)

When Jack affirms that a "high moral tone" does not contribute either to health or happiness, he makes it clear that, for him, an ethical code of behaviour is a boring attitude towards life, which does not correspond to his main objective, for he intends to live a life of

pleasure, based on aesthetic principles. Although he aspires to the life of a dandy, he is ultimately unsuccessful for he does not espouse aesthetic values as wholeheartedly as Algernon does. Nonetheless, he still tries to do so, and when he incorporates the identity of his fake brother Ernest, it is as if he is able to free himself from the dominance of his own ethical principles.

Nonetheless, Algernon is not an immoral character. He is, rather, an amoral one, for his notion of morality does not even exist; he has completely replaced ethics with aesthetics. When Jack tells Algernon that he intends to part with his fake brother Ernest if Gwendolen accepts his proposal, he also advises Algernon to do the same, to which he answers: "You don't seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none" (1994, 14). Algernon inverts the traditional saying that "two is company, three is a crowd", in which the original meaning is that, when two people want to enjoy private time, a third person will be seen as an intrusion. Algernon, however, says that married life is tedious when lived by the couple alone, suggesting that what makes married life amusing is the possibility of having extramarital affairs. Jack disagrees with Algernon, for he thinks that a charming girl like Gwendolen could never make him feel bored enough to look for extramarital amusements. Nonetheless, Algernon defeats Jack's argument by saying that, even if John does not want to have the company of other women, his wife will want to have the company of other men, suggesting that it is impossible for the couple to be amused in each other's company. Algernon sounds sententious and resigned, as if reality was extremely different from what is preached by Victorian principles. Being amoral, Algernon does not base his thoughts and beliefs on ethical principles, but rather on his perception of society. Thus, Algernon, just like Gilbert, in "The Critic as Artist", proposes that morality should not be used as a criterion for judging either art or life.

Conclusion

Wilde attempts to achieve his objective of separating aesthetics and ethics by undermining the moral sense of his audience. He does so by means of two artifices: laughter and empathy. The former is employed in his first and second tragedies, namely *Vera, or The Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua*, in both of which the most immoral and cruel characters are also the funniest. Such is the case of Prince Paul in *Vera, or The Nihilists* and Simone Gesso in *The Duchess of Padua*. The satirical tone with regard to immorality is introduced gradually, since laughter cannot be unrestrained in a tragedy. As a result, laughter is seen as a powerful weapon, since it is through it that the audience is amused by content which, if presented in a serious manner, might be considered absurd.

In the comedies, the relationship between comedy and immorality is more profound, for the overt intention is to provoke laughter, and Wilde's purpose is to entertain the audience. Nevertheless, immoral (or amoral) elements are inserted in such a way that the audience drop their guard and begin to laugh at themselves as they perceive the ridiculousness of their own moral code. This artifice is embodied above all through the figure of the dandy, whose dialogue exploits the boundary between triviality and seriousness. This playfulness camouflages the underlying battle between the moral and the immoral, in which values are inverted through laughter. That is the main reason why the division between aesthetics and ethics escalates from the tragedies to the comedies: the nature of comedy itself allows Wilde to use an amusing tone in his characters' speech.

Wilde's second artifice, that of empathy, induces the audience to see the morally reprehensible characters as being more attractive than those who stand for the values of

rectitude. Those characters with ‘a past’ are presented in such a way that, despite being condemned in the eyes of society, the audience views them with sympathy, as can be seen in the case of Mrs Erlynne in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Mrs Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance*, and even Sir Robert Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*. Wilde draws the distinction between aesthetics and ethics by revealing the fundamental immorality of Victorian pride and self-love and, above all, the hypocrisy underlying the institution of marriage. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the audience sees Lady Windermere passing through a transformation from an intransigent position, in which she sees people as either good or bad, to a more flexible one, when she begins to perceive that Mrs Erlynne is actually a very good woman since she sacrifices her own reputation in order to save that of her daughter. Despite Mrs Erlynne’s past, she is redeemed by the love she has for her daughter. In *A Woman of No Importance*, Mrs Arbuthnot’s morality is undercut by her hatred for Lord Illingworth. She rejects her son’s suggestion that she should get married to Lord Illingworth through the overwhelming force of her pride and self-love. Similarly, in *An Ideal Husband*, Lady Gertrude Chiltern’s strict moral sense is opposed to the love she feels for her husband and she is convinced by Lord Goring to allow her morals to be flexible in order to save her marriage. In her case, however, marriage is more important than morality, and she remains faithful to her vows.

The separation between aesthetics and ethics is present in each of Wilde’s plays, but it gains an increasingly important role as his oeuvre transitions from tragedy to comedy. In *Vera*, or *The Nihilists*, *Salomé* and *The Duchess of Padua*, the opposition between aesthetics and ethics is, as it were, bubbling under the surface, becoming manifest sporadically. However, in the comedies, the dichotomy between aesthetics and ethics may be considered of thematic importance. Wilde signals the increased importance of this concern not only by incorporating quotations from or references to his own aesthetic writings into the dialogue of his characters — especially the dandies —, but also by leading the audience to empathise with the most immoral (or amoral) characters, beguiled by their wit. A defence of the separation between aesthetics and ethics was one of the fundamental tenets of the Aesthetic Movement and, in his plays, Wilde revealed himself not only to be a faithful disciple but also an increasingly ardent and inspirational proponent.

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