

"TREATMENT OF GENDER, SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF OSCAR WILDE'S THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST AND VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MRS DALLOWAY"

Dr. Anshu,

Assistant Prof., Department of English,
D.J.College, Baraut.

Mini Rana,

Research Scholar, Department of English,
D.J.College, Baraut.

1.1 Introduction

Oscar Wilde was a multi-faceted, contradictory, and immensely popular dramatist of his day. Irish nationalist poetess and renowned surgeon Charlotte Wilde had a son, Wilde, in Dublin in 1854. First he attended Dublin's Trinity College and then Oxford's Magdalen College. He had little choice but to leave college and find work in London, where he met Bernard Shaw and William Butler Yeats, two other Irishmen who had already made their homes there. First and foremost, Wilde became known as an advocate for the aesthetic movement whose motto was "art for art's sake." He also became a lecturer and magazine writer. "To disagree with three quarters of all England on all points of view is one of the first elements of sanity" (Norton 1720), he asserted during his 1882 lecture trip to the United States, where he was well-received. He wed in 1884 and became a father to two boys. While his three collections of short stories failed to garner much attention, his essays on literature and society, such as "The Decay of Lying" (1889), "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1890), and "The Critic as Artist" (1890), were highly regarded (1890). In spite of the enormous popularity of his sole book, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), his greatest achievement was as a writer of London-staged social comedies that ran from 1892 to 1895. These plays included *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. But he was convicted of homosexuality and given a two-year prison term with hard labour in 1895, following an affair with Lord Alfred Douglas. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) and *De Profundis* (1905), a prose self-aggrandizement and criticism, were both penned while he was incarcerated.

"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" (Wilde qtd. in Holland 3), Wilde said three days before he died, in response to a question regarding his life. One of the characters in Wilde's most renowned play, *The Importance of Being Earnest—A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* (1895), whose themes revolve around duplicity and the search for truth, is echoed in the last sentence. My argument is that Wilde took advantage of society's hypocrisy by using the dualistic theme—shown in the language and the tactics of lying—and the well-established Late Victorian idea of double identity in this play. Jack and Algy, two main male characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, are able to live parallel lives because to their fabricated identities. The play's language and the characters' usage of two identities both contribute to and show the dualistic concept.

The characters say one thing and mean something another, and they can be more truthful when they are actually lying. There are also a lot of paradoxes, misunderstandings, and lies—the name Ernest is a pun, and the dialogue is full of both true and false statements. What message is conveyed by the theme of dualistic language and twofold identity? So, what's real and what's not? All these paradoxes—why? Why tell a fib? This essay will argue that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a critique of Victorian societal and moral

principles that explores the concept of duality and its relationship to language and deceit. It will also explain how the play depicts a society with contradictory standards of morality. Also, I'll make the case that colonialism could provide some light on the complexities of dualism, two identities, and deceit. Wilde embodied a hated "other" because to his Irish heritage and his secret homosexuality. Wilde was able to gain access to the wealthy though as a result of his studies, study Classics at Oxford. That would make him an outsider, at least part of the time. Wilde emulated Englishness as "a subtle form of insult," according to Peter Raby's "Wilde's comedies of Society" (158). Raby claims that Wilde utilized this stance to portray and expose English society, which still governed a significant section of the world.

In my analysis of the play, I have relied on various secondary sources. One of the most influential of these is Peter Raby's comprehensive "The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde." This resource contains essays such as "Wilde's fiction(s)" by Jerusha McCormack and "Oscar Wilde: the resurgence of lying" by Declan Kiberd, which delves into the Irish question, language, and deceit. "The Origins of The Importance of Being Earnest" and "Wilde's comedies of society" by Peter Raby delve into the back stories of the characters and their names. Subjects such as language, dandies, ethics, and deconstruction have been addressed in the works of Jeremy Lalonde and Geoffrey Stone, respectively, in their analyses of "The Importance of Being Earnest" and its social criticism.

1.2 Characters and Connotations

The play's characters will be discussed in this section. I will start by looking at the possibility that the characters' names provide any insight into who they are and whether they go by any aliases or dual identities. Next, I'll take a look at the dualistic ideas of contrasting and enhancing one another's personalities. Names, and Ernest in particular, are a major plot point in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. According to Griffith in *Writing Essays about Literature*, playwrights frequently employ stock characters and use their names to reflect their attributes in order to keep their characters basic enough for the audience to grasp while the performance is underway (Griffith 93). As a result, one way to learn more about the characters and what they stand for is to look into the meanings of their names. In a piece that is so focused on the theme of identity, the act of naming something adds depth to it. In addition, a large number of the characters are secretive about their pasts or perhaps have two identities.

1.3 Language and Lying

The vocabulary and deceitful tactics employed by the characters in the play illustrate Wilde's dualistic concept of double identity, which he utilized to expose the hypocrisy in society. In this chapter, I will examine how the dualistic theme is portrayed through the language, dialogue, and comical tone, but mostly through the lying, which might be understood as the use of a double identity. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, W. B. Wilde describes Wilde as a "wordsmith" who had a gift for language and a flair for wit and wordplay. H. Auden "the purest example in English literature" of a "verbal opera" (Cave viii). An example of a name with an absurd double meaning is Earnest, which is derived from a pun. "The condition of aristocrats who find themselves depressed by country life" (337) is how Cecily characterizes the agricultural depression, which is another pun. A new verb "bunburying" or the epithet "bunburist" can be formed from the term Bunbury; for example, Algy states, "now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburist I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying" (302).

Algy uses the word figuratively, but Lady Bracknell takes it literally when she hears that the fictional Bunbury has "quite exploded" (Lalonde 672) upon hearing that he has died. When a character begins to use an expression in one way but ends it in another unexpected one—for example, when Algy says: "I have a business appointment that I am anxious... to miss"—for comedic effect, Wilde would often use the rhetorical device of inversions (321).

In the play, however, the religious significance of Jack and Algy's baptisms has been diminished to that of a simple name change. Even though Algy is the one who most openly mocks marriage and family life, everyone aspires to tie the knot: "If I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact" (297). According to Lady Bracknell, who thinks that socialism could be the result of rebelling against family norms, being born or bred in a handbag—handle or no handle—reminds her of one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. You must be aware of the disastrous outcome that resulted from that shift, right the number 311). According to Lady Bracknell, "education produces no effect whatsoever." This is one of her biggest criticisms of the educational system.

In Wilde's universe, duality and opposites coexist to form a full human, and the interplay between truth and deception might give rise to a transcendent truth. When it comes down to it, the language's duplicity is comprised of epigrams and wordplay that have two meanings. The conflicts, which include characters with conflicting interests, and the duplicity itself are further indicators of this. The play is primarily about deceit, which is subtly woven into the plot using clever language and wit. In order to dissect societal topics like gender, religion, education, family, and the judicial system, the contrasting theme of truth-speaking is used to amplify and shed light on the lying. There is a connection between the play's use of double identities and language and the play's central theme of lying, which Wilde seems to imply is both a virtue and a practical instrument for exposing the truth about an oppressive Imperialist society. The linguistic and deceitful wit of Wilde's play can be better understood if we adopt a colonial stance and consider the comedic rhetoric as a product of Wilde's colonial position and the practice of speaking twice.

In this essay, I have examined how *The Importance of Being Earnest* explores a dualistic subject that is well-established in Late Victorian literature. I began by delving into the names and identities of the characters in "Characters and Connotations," demonstrating how they were forced to adopt multiple personas in order to evade their oppressive society. My next piece, "Language and Lying," explored the ways in which deceit might be expressed through contradictory epigrams and clever wordplay. I went on to show that the dualistic idea is strengthened by the overall structure and doubling of the play. It became quite clear that a few of the characters were living two lives and were being dishonest about it. Using forceful words, they pretended to express truth while actually covering up their lies. Like the characters in the play, the lies and ambiguous language used throughout the play imply that there is a slyness to lying and that there are two sides to every story. On the other hand, I have attempted to deduce whether Wilde may have intended something more serious by utilizing themes of hypocrisy, deceit, and false standards. In my mind, Wilde was an enchanted Irishman who yearned to blend in with the English nobility. Being gay and Irish meant he would never truly be accepted, no matter how brilliant he was. This must have left him with an ambivalent situation.

1.4 VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MRS DALLOWAY

Virginia Woolf's aesthetic theory and understanding of language rely heavily on the metaphor of journey, just as they do with vision. The train ride and the travelling compartment serve as metaphors for both the writer's relationship with her character, which is based on an incomplete understanding of the "truth" about another person, and for a distant and enclosed perception. Because the nomadic writer experiences a reconfiguration of his or her body in respect to geography and time, the topic of form is further elevated to the forefront by the voyage motif. Both "Mr Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1923) and "Street Haunting" (1927), two of Woolf's essays on literary poetics and composition, feature a narrator who is in motion but not yet settled in one spot; they both address the challenge of creating a unified aesthetic order from the subjective, in-process, and sensory-mediated experiences of this nomadic self.

In Woolf's books, travel is linked to concerns of form and the configuration of narrative bodies, time, and place. Also, it's a theme that goes hand in hand with relationality and cultural interaction, which are both politically charged topics. As we saw in the last chapter, the body is central to the relationship dynamic in

Woolf's writings. The self that interacts with different cultures, races, and texts (like a fictional writer encountering a metonymic character), the self that engages in various exchanges as an interlocutor, and the self that is open and vulnerable to influences and pressures because it is willing to shed its "shell-like covering" (Woolf, CE IV 481) and create its own unique identity is dependent on its mobility. Woolf revolves her discussion of the ethics and poetics of representation in novels around the contradictory combination of anonymity and empathy shared with a travelling companion in her essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," which is about the novel as a genre. Using the metaphor of travel, this essay first challenges the myth that writers have a superior relationship to life compared to readers. The railway compartment is a democratizing space meant to bring writers down from their "plinths and pedestals," as the lone flâneuse in "Street Haunting" is. The central idea is that writers are never truly alone.

Unfortunately, Woolf's ghostly street performer finds himself swiftly absorbed into an alternate setting. An stimulation of the creative capacity takes place in the city's material profusion. Immersed in the inter corporeal force of the narrator's encounter with alterity, which serves as both a conduit for the eye's creative abilities and a sort of aesthetic-ethical crucible, the narrator/eye undergoes a metamorphosis from a passive observer to an active artist. Emerging from this transformation, the narrator/eye is able to apply the logic of artistic meaning to impressions: For instance, while standing on the street, one can construct an imaginary house with all its chambers furnished according to one's wishes, complete with a sofa, table, and carpet. Let's take those pearls as an example: we can envision the transformation of life if we wore them.

The relationship between an unrestricted and unstructured travel model - "There were all the places she had not seen; the Indian planes; she felt herself pushing aside the thick leathern curtain of a church in Rome" - and a specific set of beliefs about the "invisible" self, where the subject is seen as free from culturally assigned identities and able to embark on bizarre adventures because no one noticed them. Just like in the essay, the emphasis is on the lines "they could not stop it, she thought exulting" (52-53). The body is profoundly affected by this reimagining of interiority via the lens of a particular form and the reconfiguration of subjectivity in the here and now. The narrator and Mrs. Ramsay in "Street Haunting" partake in a nomadic lifestyle that calls for a shift in conventional wisdom about the body as a socially marked and material object. By embracing mobility, we can rethink the "body" as an expansive and dynamic structure: "Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep," rather than being limited to a single socially understandable physical form that is deemed deserving of the name "body" and thought to be held by a single, supposedly masculine subject of rational consciousness. A privileged way of being, the ability of the subject to "escape" cultural profiling, including the unequal assignment of gender roles, is embodied in Woolf's concept of the mobile-self, which is both geographically and kinetically removed. Just as the concept of travel is not limited to real locations on a map, it can also refer to various kinds of spatial imaginations that do not center on following the lines of a physical blueprint. Both of these Woolf concepts have far-reaching effects on our understanding of the body. As a structure that is both open and porous, the moving body is a detecting body that is shaped by the changes, influences, and violations that hit it. Concurrently, it poses a threat to cultural and disciplinary regimes due to its pervasiveness and the fact that it undermines established notions of self and other, as well as the boundaries between inside and outside.

Both mobility as a means of subjective fluidity, of inhabiting one's own body in various ways, and mobility as a means of inter corporeal exchanges, of experiencing other people's bodies, are in a constant state of dialogue with one another, and they pose dual challenges to the ego's solipsism and stasis. The last stop on Woolf's voyage takes place at a bookstore, where the narrator finds, in books, a bigger reflection of her own city adventures. In order to put one's feelings about mobility into words, the bookstore provides a toolbox full of cultural examples. Although the street haunter finds herself assimilated into the language community and its surroundings through these books, she does not fully identify with the existing body of travel literature. In Woolf's works, especially Mrs. Dalloway, we see an exploration for new words to describe the various ways the body moves before it reaches more culturally sanctioned patterns of movement.

It considers mobility in light of the many power nexuses that surround it, as well as mobility's capacity as both a social activity and a cultural creation constructed through discourse. The concept of mobility is seen as a useful tool for questioning various discursive constructions, even those in which it is involved. This makes it possible to be attuned to the reality that different types of mobilities are shaped by geopolitical, economic, gendered, and historical considerations, and to the fact that hegemonic and exclusivist systems can work together to secure the condition of mobility. Despite popular belief, mobility may not necessarily result in liberating and beneficial outcomes. While Sheller maintains:

Rather than focusing on promoting a mobile subjectivity, the key is to monitor how mobility discourses and practices generate effects of both movement and stagnation. According to Mobility (3), critical mobilities research focuses on the production, practice, and representation of textured rhythms in relation to the gendered, racial, and classed (im) mobilities of specific others, and is equally concerned with friction, turbulence, immobility, dwelling, pauses, and stillness as with speed or flow. The movable body is neither treated uniformly nor in a monolithic fashion by Woolf. Various people in the book embark on a series of journeys across London. Every moving body, whether it's moving freely or being blocked, driven in a straight line or meandering, anchored or floating aimlessly, exposed or hidden, adds its own dynamic to the seemingly static coordinates of physical geography and geometrical space. This dynamic includes a combination of the body's inherent organic spatiality and rhythm with a sociologically acquired repertoire of gender, age, and class conventions.

In a city novel that delves into introspection and uses narrative omniscience to explore subatomic and contrapuntal spaces, Woolf stages an impossible journey back home, using the war's deflations as a lens through which to critique social and institutional machinery. Continuing from Jacob's Room, Mrs. Dalloway's testimony grapples with the process of reduplication and detachment of spatio-temporal experience. This is reminiscent of the sad question asked by Mrs. Flanders at the end of Woolf's last novel: "What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?" Along with Jacob's old shoes, she extended them for him. According to Woolf, Jacob's Room 247. There is a literary effervescence on the topic of the war as "effect" in Woolf's war books, such as Jacob's Room, Mrs. Dalloway, and To the Lighthouse (Levenback, Woolf and the Great War 46).

Lady Bruton's decision to send unemployed youths to Canada seems like a sick example of masculinized imperialist reproduction and racial purification, while William Bradshaw's neurological policing and reform of the "unfit," the ideologically and physically resistant, in order to make "England prosper" (91), are examples of similar demographic manipulations. To put it briefly, the goddesses of Proportion and Conversion have mobilized London by making their "solemn" way through its many crevices. The totalitarian conceptions' ambition to create cultural uniformity and normative behavior has a perilous way of seeping into the everyday and miniature areas of civic life, which contributes to Clarissa Dalloway's perception of the peril of a single day. There is a chance that she may become one of these things due to her role as a combination of "external conformity, ideological affinity and substantive subversion" (Littleton, "Mrs. Dalloway" 38) and her attempts to create a communitarian wholeness through the party.

Conclusion

Thus, the party's physical coordinates are extended to Clarissa's youth and her long-lost garden at Bourton; the party's prospective social space is already occupied by the partial return of her old acquaintance Peter Walsh through reflection. An auditory memory map is formed when Clarissa's body makes physical contact with the Westminster doors' hinges, specifically the "little squeak of hinges" that she used to open the window at Bourton (4). At the same time, the tactile immersion in the crisp London morning redoubles the space of Clarissa's immediate location, merging it with the sensory reproduction of a chilly country morning in a vegetable garden, complete with its own picturesque landscape of rooks fluttering and bucolic smoke wafting off trees, blending with the political hub of the city to which Clarissa now belongs.

For a fleeting moment, the masculine location of political power and monarchical rule—the Acts of Parliament, which Clarissa views as an ominous threat to remove the homeless people sleeping on its steps and control public space—is transformed into a site of sensual organic encounter with the phenomenal realm, the "flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave" (4), made possible by the awakening of this bodily memory of the "air [was] in the early morning" at Bourton. The spatial duplication, depending on the body's peculiar perception of it, persists as Clarissa enters Victoria street. The unexplainable "sense" of unease at Bourton, which accompanied her at her window seat, is re-created on the street as a "specific quietness," "serenity," "inability to put into words" pause, and "suspense" (5). According to what we learn in retrospect, the plot thickens at Bourton because of Clarissa's broken romantic relationships there, which include her troubled heterosexual relationship with Peter, which revolves around the inevitable breakup, and her impossible obsession with Sally Seton, which is grounded in a constant fear of loss and the impending disaster that will inevitably separate them.

In its role as a contemporary embodiment of state power, a symbol that permeates private life, the car uses a language of purposeful opacity to assert itself. This opacity creates a web of finely tuned effects: "it had left a slight ripple which flowed through the glove shops and hat shops and tailors' shops on both sides of Bond Street" (15).

At the level of its atomic basis, seismic pulsations, and vital energies, the motion of the car permeates the civic space. It gives off a "venerable dark breath" and has an effect similar to "shocks in China." After it dies, it causes titillation and bodily permeation, which leads to a regime of physical discipline and uniformity, as seen in the following sentence: "for thirty seconds all heads were inclined in the same way—to the window" (15).

A new form of mobility, one that is generated and transmitted through the collective's physiological and cognitive channels as "rumor," has now replaced the fleeting halt in motion caused by the car.

Once rumour becomes the intangible aide-de-camp of power, it creates a fresh discursive city map, the representation of which in narrative form serves the strategic purpose of showing how the many ideological formations that make up the public sphere are interdependent on one another. What is particularly interesting about this section is the very cartographic scope of its depiction of space, from the narrow, jammed confines of Bond Street to the byways of London where —a general shindyl echoes—strangely across the way in the ears of girls buying white underlinel (15) to the Abbey and its community of worshippers through Regent's Park and out into the uninhabited margins of the city, the primordial forests where the imperialist impetus ratified by and floating upon as an acronym of the nation the vanishing smoke letters —E, G, or L...moving freely as if destined to cross from West to East in a mission of the greatest importance is reproduced in the —adventurous thrush's—hopping boldly, glancing quickly, snatching the snail and tapping him on a stone, once, twice, thrice, an expanse that then serves to underscore the permeation and reach of these typographies and resonances of nationhood, where the —communal spirit and the spatial heterogeneity and spread of London are both —drawn together into one centre (17) in keeping with the motor car's self reflexive logic, redistributed and plotted upon a discursive map of Britishness.

This part develops a view of space as iridescent and prismatic as observed in the disassembling fluidity of the cosmic assemblage, in contrast to Septimus' synthesis of space, his creation of a harmonious space: The clouds seemed like they were gathered for a gods' summit, but there was constant motion among them. The whiteness of the clouds made one imagine chipping away at unyielding rocks with a hatchet. The signs were switched around...At one point, a peak shrank; today, an entire block of pyramidal proportions...entered the middle or gravely guided the parade to a new anchorage. They appeared to be perfectly content at their jobs, yet on the surface, there was nothing more youthful, liberated, or sensitive...It was instantly feasible to alter, depart, and dissolve the solemn assembly; and despite the grim fixity, the collected robustness and rigidity, they brought light to earth and darkness.

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