

การตีความนัยสำคัญของ “ฉากหน้า” และความ “ลุ่มลึก”
ในบทละครของ ออสการ์ ไวลด์ ที่ประพันธ์ขึ้นในช่วงทศวรรษที่ 1890
The Significance of ‘Surfaces’ and ‘Depths’
in Oscar Wilde’s Plays of the 1890^s

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บทคัดย่อ

บทละครของออสการ์ ไวลด์ นักประพันธ์เชื้อสายไอริช เป็นที่รู้จักอย่างกว้างขวางสำหรับผู้ศึกษางานวรรณกรรมอังกฤษจากทั้งการสัมผัสชิ้นงานเขียนโดยตรงและผ่านผลงานดัดแปลงเป็นภาพยนตร์และละครเวที บทความวิชาการชิ้นนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาบทละครของออสการ์ ไวลด์ 3 เรื่อง ได้แก่ Lady Windermere's Fan, An Ideal Husband และ The Importance of Being Earnest ซึ่งเป็นผลงานที่ประพันธ์ขึ้นในช่วงทศวรรษที่ 1890 โดยผ่านการอ่านเชิงวิเคราะห์ ตีความผ่านตัวอักษรและนัยยะแฝง โดยศึกษาถึงความสัมพันธ์ของ “ฉากหน้า” และความ “ลุ่มลึก” ในบริบทของความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างมนุษย์ในสังคม อย่างไรก็ตาม งานศึกษาชิ้นนี้ได้มีวัตถุประสงค์ในการนำบริบททางสังคมสมัยใดสมัยหนึ่งมาตีความ หากแต่เป็นการนำเสนอแง่มุมความซับซ้อนที่เกิดขึ้นในความสัมพันธ์ของมนุษย์ที่สามารถสะท้อนผ่านงานวรรณกรรม

คำสำคัญ : ออสการ์ ไวลด์, บทละคร, ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างมนุษย์, ความจริง, อุดมคติ, การปิดบังซ่อนเร้น

Abstract

Oscar Wilde's plays have been well-known for students of English literature for quite a long time through the reading of original texts and experiencing their visual adaptations. The study is an examination of Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, all written during 1890s. The method adapted to analyse the plays is close-reading, focusing on both the contents and the implications – thus uncovering the significance of 'surfaces' and 'depths' of the (con)text which is critically challenged by the author. The study is not, however, an attempt to specifically define the social situation in the late nineteenth century England. On the contrary, it presents the ways in which human relationship could conceal and yet expose vital complexity and frivolity; these ways include the depiction of social concealment, the ridicule of the ideal, and the question against wealth.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, plays, human relationship, reality, ideal, concealment

Introduction

‘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’

Three days before his death, Oscar Wilde gave this description about his life in London. (Holland, 1997, p. 3) Taking into account such paradoxical explanation of Wilde’s life, literary critics may have been led to study his works in relations with his biography, especially his sexuality. In one way, most of his works could be explored in the light of social criticism, especially when, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, ‘anxieties concerning the collapse of culture, the weakening of national might, the possibly fatal decay – physical, moral, spiritual, creative – of the Anglo-Saxon “race” as a whole’ (Arata, 1996, p.1) were present. However, as Wilde’s plays have ever since been adapted into cinematic and theatrical production around the world, it can be believed that there exist some universal understanding of the significance and implications which are accessible through common sense and through time. This assumption leads to the search for such common grounds in Wilde’s plays, which, in fact, produces various aspects and layers of literary analysis.

Considering Wilde’s dialogue assigned for Lady Bracknell’s speech in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, ‘We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces’,

(Wilde, Act III, Line 164-165, p. 299) one might assume that there exist complicated differences between the ‘surface’ and the ‘depth’. If things exist on the surfaces, they could be sensed simply by a mere glance, while those lie or are hidden beneath may or may not be as they appear. Applying such views of life in a reading of Wilde’s plays, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, one may find that the plays, reflecting and criticizing the Victorian fin-de-siècle society, explore the significance of ‘surfaces’ and ‘depths’ in relation with social criticism through three different means; the plays depict the society of concealment, ridicule the ideal-based relationship, and challenge and question the importance of wealth.

i) Depiction of society of concealment

With regards to social criticism, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* present the society in which the luxury of manners exists amidst the tea parties and dance balls; however, people involved in such society are prone to have hidden secrets. In other words, some are not what

they seem to be; their true selves are concealed, while others are willing to be convinced by what they appear.

Lady Windermere's Fan illustrates the double-layered concealment: Mrs Erlynne's determined decision to conceal her motherhood and the truth about Lady Windermere's misdeed, and the latter's concealment of her mistake from her own husband. In the play, Mrs Erlynne, a woman dandy, is condemned as a 'bad' woman from her behavior in the past. However, the play explores the real self of this woman dandy, one who is usually portrayed as not desiring to conform to society and indulging in individualism, by allowing her to demonstrate her motherly sacrifice. At the cost of her own reputation, Mrs Erlynne prevents her daughter, Lady Windermere, who does not acknowledge their relationship even until the play's end, from making the same mistake she did – eloping with another man while misunderstanding the husband. This leads to another significant concealment in the

play; unless Lady Windermere conceals her intended elopement, she would be detested by Lord Windermere in the same way she used to view Mrs Erlynne. Paradoxically, the concealment reveals the true 'self' of the condemned figure; Mrs Erlynne's motherly virtues are demonstrated through Lady Windermere's concealing the truth from her husband at the cost of the elder's social reputation. In fact, the couple's happiness is secured by Mrs Erlynne's sacrifice which only she herself and Lady Windermere know and must conceal from the world. One may argue about her concealment of the relationship to Lady Windermere which may be acceptable now that the latter is considerably obliged to her. In response, Ian Gregor (1982, p. 115) observes that Mrs Erlynne's decision is not either of artifice or ethics; as a dandy, she would rather create false image of herself and, like an artist, turn life into a work of art. Therefore the choice she makes for her 'self' does not signify her virtues:

MRS ERLYNNE [...] I have no ambition to play the part of a mother. Only once in my life have I known a mother's feelings. That was last night. They were terrible – they made me suffer – they made me suffer too much. For twenty years, as you say, I have lived childless – I want to live childless still. [...]

(Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Act VI, Line 231-235, p. 54)

Although she chooses to detach herself from familial relationship, her understanding of the situation and her sacrifice render her a sensible figure and equips her with motherly virtues. When considering Mrs Erlynne's concerns about and her sacrifice for Lady Windermere, one can no longer claim that she is heartless; yet, as an individualist, her chosen mode of life and familial responsibilities would not get along. However, just as soon as one could sense her masked feelings, one would again be moved to perceive the effect of the concealment of all the truth. Lord Windermere, the one person who first seems open-minded to Mrs Erlynne, becomes like others in the society who judges only by what his eyes could see when he mistakes her for having an affair with Lord Darlington and condemns her, 'I should feel it was not true. A mother's love means devotion, unselfishness, sacrifice. What could you know of such things?' (Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Act VI, Line 280-282, p. 55). The speech given to Lord Windermere creates an irony when, in fact, such strong words could be used against his own wife, whose real 'self' must now

be concealed from him.

Inasmuch as one experiences the surface of self-concealment and the depth of actual virtue in domestic affairs from the first play, Wilde's another play, *An Ideal Husband*, moves to explore the depth of 'self' also in political arena. Sir Robert Chiltern, a seemingly respectable virtuous political figure, bears the burden of his past: his corruption that would secure wealth for himself and his family. Best concealed from this secret, Lady Chiltern believes her husband to be a man who would not 'do anything base or underhand or dishonourable' (Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act I, Line 847-848, p. 188). Ironically, the saying is given to her when it is already known that her husband is not such a gentleman. Like Mrs Erlynne, but in a reversing way, Sir Robert possesses a concealed self; the former a gentle heart beneath her flippancy, the latter a corrupted self behind the respectable appearance. However, Sir Robert should not be regarded as a total hypocrite; he justifies himself to Lord Goring, with understandable causes, of being lured by Baron Arnheim towards corruption:

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN (rising) [...] Wealth has given me enormous power. It gave me at the very outset of my life freedom, and freedom is everything. You have never been poor, and never known what ambition is. You cannot understand what a wonderful chance the Baron gave me. [...]

(Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act II, Line 119-123, p. 193)

Understanding Sir Robert in the light of Wilde's dandical philosophy of absolute freedom and 'the substitution of aesthetic values for moral values' (Ganz, 1982, p. 131), he is much like Mrs Erlynne in valuing life's freedom as the highest goal, for which, as he is led to believe, corruption could pave way. In fact, Sir Robert's 'self' requires forgiveness from his wife in the same way Mrs Erlynne receives alleviated attitudes from her daughter. However, his wife's understanding and forgiveness are induced by Lord Goring, a gentleman possessing self-reversing characteristics. On the surfaces, he is a man with exquisite self-presentation who loves 'talking about nothing' (Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act I, Line 293, p. 173) and whose seriousness is not expected. On the contrary, despite his frivolous disposition, Lord Goring possesses realistic understanding of human nature and society. Saying to Lady Chiltern about her husband's past misdeed that 'in every nature there are elements of weakness, or worse than weakness' (Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act II, Line 379-380, p. 199) and 'life cannot be understood without much charity, cannot be lived without much charity. It is love [...] that is the true explanation of this world', (Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act II, Line 395-397, p. 200) emphasizes his understanding of man's possible mistakes and practical modes of life. This will locate Lord Goring as a guide

and philosopher, in spite of his flippancy on the surface. (Gregor, 1982, p. 117) In fact, the dandy figures in these two plays, Mrs Erlynne and Lord Goring, help resolve the story into a happy ending: the survival of marriage and profession, respectively.

In addition to the contrast between the 'self' on the surfaces and that in the depths, the society of concealment is elaborated into the concept of double-life in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Both heroes, Jack and Algernon, live double-life, creating their double-self in order to conceal their dissipation or avoid unpleasant circumstances; taking the first glance at the surface of the play, one could sense that neither of them is what they appear. Besides the fact that they are not Ernest - the person they convince others to believe them to be, the complexity of the 'surfaces' and the 'depths' of social concealment is heightened by the characters' paradoxical personalities related to their expresses and hidden concerns. Richard Foster (1982, p. 165) argues that the figures of Jack and Algernon are not as flamboyant as they attempt to present themselves; Algernon is subtly found out about his double-life by Cecily in their first meeting and Jack could not help worrying and perspiring throughout the play. In spite of their trivial conversation in which they treat serious matters so frivolously, it might not be hard to find that their concerns – class,

money, and marriage – are truly serious. Both Jack and Algernon have worries and acknowledge of what they should or should not do in accordance with social standards and these are what encourage them to create their double. Norbert Kohl (1989, pp. 269-270) explains that their double-life, or Bunburying, is a means of escaping from social hypocrisy which, masked under Victorian earnestness and moral standards, allows individuals to fulfill their needs without violating the codes it imposes. Kohl elaborates this by using Jack's identity; as a guardian of a young girl, Jack needs to acquire high moral tones which would not satisfy his human needs or anyone else's in a position like his. Thus, paradoxically, the society that requires from him responsibility and morality induces him to create his 'other' self in order to escape from social conventions.

ii) **Ridicule of the ideal**

Taking into account the definition of 'ideal' from the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a person or thing regarded as realizing the highest conception, a perfect example or representative' and 'that which exists only as a mental conception especially an idealized one; an imaginary, usually idealized, thing', it appears unreasonable for the society to hold on, in many aspects of life, to something which does not really exist. In the plays, Wilde ridicules the

society's ideal surfaces by overturning and contrasting them with the reality, emphasizing the non-existence of such ideal. Nonetheless, in case of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in which Wilde uses quite a more comical tone of the ridicule, the play is not directly a presentation of reversing reality, but this will be discussed later in detail.

As for *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the ridicule of the ideal is double-layered; the most obvious one is Lady Windermere's attitudes, the other the interpretation of Lord Windermere's. To begin with Lady Windermere, concealed from the truth about their relationship, she holds on to the idealized image of her mother who she does not acknowledge it is Mrs Erlynne, whose past Lady Windermere detests so much that she almost cannot bear her presence in the house. Wilde ridicules Lady Windermere's strong attachment to ideal-ity by making her say: 'We all have ideals in life. At least we should have. Mine is my mother' and 'If I lost my ideals, I should lose everything' (Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Act IV, Line 306-307, p. 55) This leads to Mrs Erlynne's realizing that her daughter's understanding is too narrow to cope with reality and deciding to conceal the truth so that the latter could 'retain her false ideal as the basis of her faith'. (Eltis, 1996, p. 83) The ridicule is further explained as Eltis suggests that in fact both Lord and

Lady Windermere are 'isolated in their idealism and virtue amidst a gallery of cynics and pragmatists'. (1996, p. 56) This implies that Lord Windermere would condemn and detest his wife in the same way he does Mrs Erlynne when he misunderstands that the latter is having an affair with Lord Darlington with whom his wife almost elopes, had not she been prevented by Mrs Erlynne herself. This is why the concealment of the truth is necessary. On the other hand, Lady Windermere's idealistic virtues, still trusted by her husband through the play's end, are reduced to less than Mrs Erlynne's since the former then is no longer the 'real' idealistic wife who has never sinned but must 'appear' so to her husband so that their marriage can survive. The kind of ridicule not only points out that the ideal does not exist but also reveals the society's faith in the superficiality, its being unable or unwilling to cope with reality, and its clinging to hypocrisy – the reliance on the ideal.

Considering the matter of ideal with its definition as given above in *An Ideal Husband*, the title is a ridicule in itself; there is no such husband. Yet, as the play's concern is more public than the first one's; the political ideal is ridiculed while at the same time the domestic ideal challenged. Sir Robert Chiltern, idealized by his wife as a straightforward husband as well as a

totally honest political figure, is actually a man who has corrupted and concealed the truth from her. In fact, when Lady Chiltern claims that she knows him better anyone else does and believes him to be the purest politician of her knowledge, it is such an ironic situation since, all this time, Sir Robert's past misdeed is exposed to some characters, and more importantly to the public which in this case is the audience or the reader. Despite the irony, one may not help sympathize with Lady Chiltern, for her statement reflects her immature mind which would not be able to accept the reverse of the ideal. In other words, the idealistic characteristics of the husband that Lady Chiltern expects can be achieved only when he is a 'true' idealistic politician. However, Wilde still carries his ridicule of the ideal into the more public sphere; Wilde makes Lord Caversham read *The Times's* article about Sir Robert which praises him as an unblemished political figure and superior than other foreign politicians in morality, as if this is to satirize English society's acceptance of hidden hypocrisy. (Eltis, 1996, p. 148) A close look at this play demonstrates that the means of ridicule runs in parallel with that in *Lady Windermere's Fan*; the ideal does not exist, and there are always those who prefer to cling to the ideal on the surface which equals to hypocrisy.

When Gwendolen in *The Importance of Being Earnest* says 'We live, as

I hope you know, Mr Worthing, in an age of ideals' (Act I, Line 378-379, p. 262) the concept of ideal is certainly to be discussed, but one should note that the play is created with quite a different technique and style when compared with the two discussed above. The characters in the play do not use the make-believe dialogue, yet they and the audience need to take it seriously. In other words, the play treats trivial matters so seriously that it becomes absurd, while serious ones with triviality. Therefore, the play is not a straightforward attack of society's ideal, but it requires more consideration and interpretation within its sheer laughing tone on the surfaces. To clarify, Wilde obviously mocks the ideal by giving his characters seriousness in trivial subjects, for example, the ideal of the name Earnest; both Gwendolen and Cecily echo each other's idealistic views of the name, regardless of the self of the particular person in saying 'and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence' (Act I, Line 378-379, p. 262). The matter is comically mocked by that fact that, at the stage, neither Jack nor Algernon, proposing to the two girls, is Ernest/ earnest. While the ideal of earnestness is challenged, one may argue that at least at the play's end, Jack becomes really earnest when he coincidentally discovers that his name is

Ernest. However, Eltis (1996, p. 194) justifies that the world in the play is that of absurdity where things are easily adaptable, 'a utopia where all attempts to assert authority are doomed to failure'. Thus, the sudden and coincidental fulfilled realization of the self becomes possible as the credibility and seriousness are waved aside.

In addition to the ridicule of the ideal of name, Wilde also mocks that of romantic relationship, quite in the reversing way he does with the seriousness taken for the matter of the name Ernest. Treating the relationship which is supposed to be something important in a very trivial manner as if to unwind the romanticized concept of love, Gwendolen and Cecily recount on their diary so as to find out who is proposed before the other. At the same time, as Foster (1982, p. 161) argues, the myth of love at first sight (for Cecily) is parodied as the recorded matters in her relationship with Algernon are mostly simulated by her imaginary ideals. Thus, in quite a different tone, Wilde's ridicule in this play is not as direct as in the first two, yet it seems sharper and more satirical.

iii) Challenge and question the importance of wealth

Reading the three plays, only few could fail to observe that the matter of wealth and money is significantly mentioned, especially when the characters are

dealing with their career and marriage – in other words, with both professional and personal affairs. The significance of the surfaces and the depths is explored in this arena as wealth is put into question alongside with morality and decision about life.

To begin with professional sphere, in *An Ideal Husband*, the surface of politi-

cal career is threatened by the hidden corruptive means of gaining wealth. The audience know that Sir Robert has corrupted in order to establish himself, but, as Wilde places this figure as ‘the sinner who must be pardoned’, (Ganz, 1982, p. 128) he deserves at least some degrees of sympathy and understanding, especially when he justifies that:

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN Every man of ambition has to fight his century with its own weapons. What this century worships is wealth. The god of this century is wealth. To succeed one must have wealth. At all cost one must have wealth.

(Act II, Line 66-69, p. 191)

The repetition of ‘wealth’ emphasizes the morbid society where ‘at all cost’ wealth must prevail. Moreover, while Sir Robert claims that wealth would give him absolute freedom, he becomes paradoxically self-imprisoned by having to hide his secret corruption and almost becomes enslaved of blackmail. However, as the audience

may sympathize with this character, moral standards are considerably challenged as one may question to what extent the society can accept hypocrisy in the depth. Moreover, while Lord Goring is trying to persuade Lady Chiltern to forgive her husband by saying;

LORD GORING [...] I think that in practical life there is something about success, actual success, that is a little unscrupulous, something about ambition that is unscrupulous always. Once a man has set his heart and soul on getting to a certain point, if he has to climb the crag, he climbs the crag [...],

(Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act II, Line 366-370, p. 199)

he, as an educated and high-ranked gentleman, demonstrates his acceptance of wealth gained through such corruption. Eltis (1996, p. 135) furthers the point of such acceptability of corruption by explaining that, as Wilde allows Sir Robert to resume and advance his career as a pure unblemished figure despite his being exposed of the past corruption, Wilde achieves to portray the scene of British politics in which people compromise their morality and are willing to accept such hypocrisy; neither contemporary reviewer nor audience expressed fury or disbelief towards the happy conclusion which allows the immorality to pass on almost unnoticed. Moreover, to view the society as a battlefield as Sir Robert argues for himself, Sir Robert may not totally triumphs since his means is exposed, though he eventually survives.

As well as in professional sphere, the importance of wealth is used to explore the surfaces and the depths in domestic arena. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, marriage is treated as a mercenary deal valued by money and property. Duchess of Berwick, after having just condemned all men as monsters, ironically compliments Mr Hopper, the man with whom she wants to her daughter to be married, saying, 'he's that rich young Australian people are taking notice of just at present', (Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Act I, Line 341-341,

p. 16) and comments to the young man himself, 'we know your value, Mr Hopper. We wish there were more like you. It would make life so much easier' (Act II, Line 34-35, p. 22). Measuring the value of man with richness may create the society in which individuals' morality and feelings are often neglected. What the mother sees as profitable in a man to whom her daughter will be married is the wealth, not morality or personal regards to the daughter. A similar means of measuring is present with Lady Bracknell, a representative of Victorian parent, as she echoes the Duchess's consideration regarding her young relatives' marriage. In the interview with Jack, who proposes to her daughter, Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell inquires after his social position, income, and property, in the same way that she becomes much more interested in Cecily, a young lady whom her nephew, Algernon, just proposes, when she knows that the latter possesses a large sum of fortune. These qualities of worshipping social rank, title, and prestige make Lady Bracknell 'the classic figure of social snobbery and narrow-mindedness'. (Kohl, 1989, p. 264) It might, in addition, be suggested that, in such society as of Lady Bracknell, human emotions, the essence that may be hidden underneath the personalities on the surfaces, are reduced to be less important than wealth. When one observes the nineteenth-century social situation, one might see this

claim reflected through matrimonial decision. As the Victorian conventions allowed parents or guardians to make decision about their children's partner in marriage, they often found themselves base their decision on the wooer's financial situation. (Kohl, 1989, p. 265) The emphasis on wealth as presented in these two plays, in fact, reinforces the society's reliance on the surfaces of life; wealth is what can be judged from appearances, while the depths, where virtues or vices may contrast to the outer qualities, are neglected.

Conclusion

Within the light of social criticism, Wilde's three plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* explore the significance of the surfaces and the depths of late-Victorian society. Throughout the plays' stories, the depiction of self and social concealment, the surprise overturn of the ideal, and the questions about the importance of wealth all contribute to the exposition of the depths of social values. However, this study only focuses on the layers of implication interpreted through the plays' dialogue. One can as well expand his or her emphasis to cover the way and the reasons for which Wilde has chosen to relate such subtle social criticism through comedies, which, in fact, suggests the layered means of communication –

making his audience laugh at their own flaws and follies while realizing the plays' connotative attack. As this study has proved to some extent, it is not to be understood that the surfaces are always covered with virtuous images while in the depths always lie hidden vices; yet, the plays demonstrate that the world is such a multi-layered society in which sometimes things are not what they appear. Rather, echoing Wilde's statement at the beginning, life, as well as other things in this world, is rarely pure and simple.

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