

The Closet Conservative: Oscar Wilde's Inadvertent Adherence to Traditional Gender Roles

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Victorian England teetered on the brink of revolutionary political, literary and social change, particularly in the prescription of gender roles and "The Woman Question."

Conservative views on gender roles in this era prescribed that a woman exude virtue, maintain the household, care for children, act as a servant to her husband and most importantly serve as a "moral guardian of society" (Yildirim 46).¹ As described in Aşkın Haluk Yıldırım's "The Woman Question and the Victorian Literature on Gender," challenges to this traditional view arose because, "despite all its seemingly irreversible codes of conduct and deeply rooted traditions, Victorian society was under the strong influence of the age of reform and progress" in the realms of science, economics, and gender politics (47). Women's demands for rights during this period disrupted the centuries-old social hierarchy, leaving women's new role in society undetermined.

In the midst of this social disorder and redefinition, Oscar Wilde, an Irish writer out of England, seemed to rise to the call for women's rights and a deconstructed gender binary. Owing to this, and to the inclusion of non-traditional female characters in his work, Wilde has long been championed as a proto-feminist. Recently, however, scholars have started to debate the extent of the proto-feminist quality of Wilde's work. One such researcher, Michèle Mendelssohn, challenges the long-standing notion that Wilde actively worked to erode sex-based binaries and gender roles². In her article "Notes on Oscar Wilde's Transatlantic Gender Politics" she urges a "nuanced reassessment of Wildean gender politics," uncovering in her research "fundamental questions about how a transgressive politics sits alongside traditionalism" (155). She further notes that her work aligns well with other academics such as "Elaine Showalter, Laurel Brake, Margaret Stetz and Sally Ledger, whose research on the period has revealed [Wilde's] conservative gender bias operating even amid the period's progressive circles" (157). While superficially Wilde may appear to advocate for women and, as a dandy, a deconstructor of gender binaries, evidence grows against this progressive ideal as scholars increasingly uncover his underlying conservatism.

In scenes revealing male and female interrelational dynamics in certain works, Wilde lets slip conservative ideology in his adherence to traditional gender binaries within the confines of the heterosexual romantic sphere. Mendelssohn notes Wilde "acted as an advocate of gender binaries in ways that significantly challenge this [feminist] reputation" (155). According to Jarlath Killeen³, feminist scholar Hélène Cixous theorizes that the Male/Female gender binary serves as a basis for all other stereotyped binaries, such as Reason/Emotion, Activity/Passivity, Culture/Nature, etc. (49). Cixous further argues that this scheme proves inherently misogynist, as

¹ Yıldırım, Aşkın Haluk. "The Woman Question and Victorian Literature on Gender." *Ekev Academic Review* 16.52 (2012): 45-54. Web.

² Mendelssohn, Michèle. "Notes on Oscar Wilde's Transatlantic Gender Politics." *Journal of American Studies* 46.1 (2012): 155-169. Web.

³ Killeen, Jarlath. "Oscar Wilde and Feminism: Prolegomena." *The AnaChronisT* 10 (2004): 46-60. Web.

it divides the genders and configures the female terms as negative (Killeen 49). The internalized binary set Wilde most heavily employs relates to Artifice/Reality, which encompasses by extension Deception/Truth and Immorality/Morality. In these works, Wilde explores romantic dynamics under the duress of the genders' diverging preference for elements of deception and artificiality in relationships. Numerous instances of dysfunction in Wildean romances emerge as a result of the man's introduction of artifice into the relationship and the woman's insistence on seeking the truth, thus creating conflict through constructing an Artifice/Reality binary. While Wilde typically validates the feminine inclination for candor and denounces the deception akin to male performance in the romantic sphere, this scheme inherently reinforces the patriarchy and sexism of the Victorian age by the nature of its engendered roles. When a couple's conflict reaches a detente or conclusion, the men tend to regain the position of control in the relationship, serving to simultaneously restore Victorian ideals of male dominance and female adherence to morality. This incidental reinforcement of certain gender binaries between heterosexual romantic partners in specific scenes of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* complicates Wilde's reputation as a proto-feminist.⁴ While the scenes revealing Wilde's conservatism do not *represent* his entire body of largely progressive work, they do demonstrate a recurring thread of almost unconscious conservative ideals.

Within Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the relationship between Dorian and Sibyl constitutes one of Wilde's earliest and most apparent examples of a romance in which the female character causes conflict by seeking a more candorous relationship. A former actress, Sibyl claims that she can never perform again after feeling true love: "I shall never act again. ... You taught me what reality really is. To-night, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played" (Wilde 74-75). That Sibyl favors her new reality with Dorian over the duplicity her profession introduced into her life upholds this passage's conservative Artifice/Reality binary, supported by traditional Victorian views on female morality and marriage.

As an actress, Sibyl works in a traditionally male profession unsuitable to a proper woman in society due to the alleged immorality of the job; actresses "upset the usual distribution of power by gender, vocalizing powerfully and publicly while men sat passively beyond" (Powell 183)⁵. Most Victorians viewed this challenge to the Artifice/Reality and Active/Passive binaries negatively, so much so that society deemed actresses virtually unsuitable for marriage (Powell 189). That falling in love with Dorian makes Sibyl want to quit her masculine and

⁴ Wilde, Oscar. *An Ideal Husband. The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems &*

Essays. Ed. J.B. Foreman. London: Collins, 1966. 482-551. Print.

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⁵ Powell, Kerry. "A Verdict of Death: Oscar Wilde, Actresses and Victorian Women." *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Peter Raby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 181-194. Print.

tainted job reinforces two traditional values in Victorian society: that marriage or romance “saves” women and that, in accordance with their roles as moral guardians, women prefer truth to illusion, upholding the Artifice/Reality binary.

Sibyl’s new-found preference for a veritable life aligns her with the female gender role, but it also creates conflict between the lovers because it directly contrasts Dorian’s masculine inclination towards falsehood. Dorian, upon hearing Sibyl’s ambition to quit acting, denounces his former lover entirely, saying, “you have killed my love. You used to stir my imagination. Now you don’t even stir my curiosity” (75). Dorian’s rejective reaction to Sibyl’s need for a truer reality reveals his yearning for artifice, fulfilling his gender binary in this passage. If Sibyl killed Dorian’s love, it is because artifice is Dorian’s love; Sibyl is merely the tool engaging with Dorian’s unreality.

The conflict between charade and reality proves irreconcilable in Dorian and Sibyl’s case, so their relationship ends when Dorian dismisses Sibyl, and any potential for a resolution and resumption of their romance becomes obsolete when she commits suicide. This final act of suicide shows Sibyl’s feminine inability to re-enter a life of falsehood to escape from the pain of Dorian’s rejection. Wilde’s use of suicide to eliminate Sibyl’s character works in several ways to contribute to the restoration of traditional gender roles in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In the Victorian era, reactions to suicide began to change from religious condemnation to public sympathy, so long as suicide reports incorporated depictions “clearly based on gendered expectations of rational thought” (Miller 197)⁶. In other words, female suicide described in terms of irrationality, enhanced emotional states or mania received higher levels of public sympathy (Miller 197). Similarly, male suicide described in terms of rationality or logical choice based on physical circumstances met with greater public forgiveness (Miller 197). In this way, Wilde’s depiction of Sibyl’s suicide as an emotional response to Dorian’s rejection — an understanding derived from Dorian’s guilt over her death, saying, “I have murdered Sibyl Vane ... murdered her as surely as if I had cut her little throat with a knife” (83) — pardons her self-murder.

Wilde creates a martyr in Sibyl through her death, the tragedy of which provokes readers’ pity and a call for justice. Unlike situations of male suicide, Victorians often viewed female suicides as falling victim to an outside force. Ian Miller, in his study “Representations of Suicide in Urban North-West England c.1870–1910: The Formative Role of Respectability, Class, Gender and Morality,” concludes that “the idea of women as victims being helplessly overpowered by external ‘manias’ confirmed irrationality and definitions of irregular mental states often assumed to be synonymous with being female, effectively freeing the victim of personal responsibility for their actions” (195). In this sense, Victorian readers should view Sibyl’s suicide as distinctly female, supporting her post-performing return to the feminine sphere. Additionally, casting Sibyl as a *victim* of suicide creates the idea that Dorian, who caused her emotional distress, wronged Sibyl in choosing fantasy over veracity. In this, Wilde reinforces the valor of Sibyl’s role as truth seeker and, by default, moral guardian while condemning Dorian’s shallow desire for illusion. Though at certain points in the novel Wilde seemingly encourages the audience to identify with Dorian, in this moment Wilde clearly invites criticism

⁶ Miller, Ian. “Representations of Suicide in Urban North-West England c.1870–1910: The Formative Role of Respectability, Class, Gender and Morality.” *Mortality* 15.3 (2010): 191-204. Web.

of Dorian's character, and this, seemingly, invites readers to critique the patriarchal gender binary that underwrites Dorian's treatment of and response to Sibyl.

By having Dorian authoritatively end the romance and then silencing Sibyl with suicide, however, Wilde maintains Dorian's masculine dominant role over his female romantic partners throughout the entirety of the romance narrative. The romance narrative in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* does condemn Dorian's search for fantasy and commends Sibyl's yearning for authenticity by creating in her a wronged martyr figure, yet it also maintains and restores conservative Victorian gender roles. While Sibyl, in this case, becomes a moral guardian by rejecting her deceitful profession in search of genuineness in love, Dorian maintains his dominant role as the authoritarian in the relationship and the protagonist of the novel. Though Wilde appears to invite readers to critique the damaging behaviors associated with male gender performance, he fundamentally reinforces its empowering effect. Wilde creates a helpless and ineffective female character whose will to live depends on the whims of a dynamic male character. Problematically, Wilde re-establishes patriarchal roles within the confines of the romantic, heterosexual relationship by essentially silencing the feminine voice through Sibyl's suicide yet permitting the masculine voice to continue through Dorian's. Specific aspects of male-female interactions in the heterosexual romantic sphere in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, therefore, complicate – though don't entirely discredit – Wilde's reputation as a proto-feminist by conforming to traditional sex-based binaries.

This reinforcement of gender roles through romantic conflict resolution caused by women's desire for truth clashing with men's bias towards artifice does not end with Wilde's novel but continues as an important theme in many of his society plays. Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* stands as the society comedy most revealing of this model. In *An Ideal Husband*, Lady Chiltern represents the puritanical, rigidly moral figure while her husband, Sir Robert, reveals himself to be a corrupt politician who stole his wealth through selling state secrets, a fact he hid from his wife for years. This exaggerated Immoral/Moral binary compliments common traditional Victorian views, especially in terms of ethics and religiosity, as spiritual leaders of the time often concluded that "women had a greater religious instinct than men" (Killeen 54). In this sense, Wilde immediately upholds conservative gender stereotypes within the confines of the romantic sphere by aligning the Chilterns with this engendered binary.

In addition to introducing conservative gender roles in this romantic partnership, Wilde uses this Immoral/Moral binary to create conflict between the couple. In Act One, Mrs. Cheveley, who knows of Sir Robert's treasonous past, attempts to blackmail him into endorsing an Argentine Canal plan that he previously wrote a report condemning (Wilde 498). Alarmed and suspicious at his sudden reversal of positions, Lady Chiltern questions him for the truth, following Wilde's depiction of women as crusaders for honesty. She says, "Robert, is there in your life any secret dishonour or disgrace? Tell me, tell me at once" (501), to which Robert deceitfully replies, "Gertrude, there is nothing in my past life that you might not know" (502). In this conversation, the chasm between both the married characters' diverging preferences for transparency and their straining emotional ties begins to clearly develop, demonstrating the conflict growing between them.

In addition to merely trying to discover her husband's deceit, Lady Chiltern outspokenly preaches morality, enhancing her role as the moral guardian of the married couple. For example, when arguing with her husband she reveals she imposes her own unwavering moral ideals strictly on others, such as when she insists, "Circumstances should never alter principles" (501).

This simple declaration reveals the puritanical inflexibility in Lady Chiltern's beliefs, as she claims that regardless of the situation, one should always act with integrity and adhere to higher standards. Additionally, the rhetorical decision to state this as an axiom rather than a personalized criticism accentuates Lady Chiltern's notion of the universality of her uncompromising beliefs. Such maxims adhere to Victorian societal values of an ideal woman, which Wilde portrays in a positive light within the romantic sphere by juxtaposing Lady Chiltern with her corrupt husband.

In contrast, Wilde denounces the romantic male's desire for a fraudulent life through the guilt Sir Robert suffers in keeping his secret. Wilde best demonstrates Sir Robert's internal turmoils in his search for justification and understanding in a private conversation with Lord Goring. Sir Robert laments, "Is it fair that the folly, the sin of one's youth, if men choose to call it a sin, should wreck a life like mine, should place me in the pillory, should shatter all that I have worked for, all that I have built up?" (504). Wilde uses this musing to clearly demonstrate the weight that lies and immorality has on Sir Robert's conscience, thereby deploring men's inclination for artifice. This quote in itself also shows Sir Robert's attempted subscription to a different construction of righteousness than his wife's; he admits that he committed sinful actions in the past, yet tries to suggest that his current position enables him to have a positive impact, which redeems his prior transgressions. This "ends justify the means" attitude crumbles in light of Sir Robert's thinly disguised plea for his friend's validation, revealing his attempts to delude himself into believing that his historical crimes do not merit his wife's disapproval. Sir Robert's above comment to Lord Goring, therefore, constitutes an attempt at self-delusion to mitigate the guilt Sir Robert feels for committing a crime and then continuing to lie about it to his wife. Wilde uses this tactic to demonstrate not only Sir Robert's historical preference for artifice, but also his continued tendency to use deception. Though, as with Dorian, Wilde seems to invite readers to criticize Sir Robert, Wilde again confirms the legitimacy of gender binaries.

Within Sir Robert's above quotation, Wilde uses a specific phrase that not only stresses an inferior masculine moral system but reaffirms the patriarchal order: "if men choose to call it a sin" (504). This phrase shows Sir Robert's attempts to qualify his actions and simultaneously names his preference for *men* to judge his crimes, as opposed to women or God, as Lady Chiltern would suggest. In this particular qualifier, Wilde implies men have a lesser moral code than women, as men *choose* how to label an act's morality rather than adhering to inflexible laws. The suggestion that the judgement a man passes on another's actions serves as a new standard for morality reinforces the concept of a patriarchal society. To this end, men's ability to create revised moral standards undermines women's supposed claim to this sphere.

Despite Sir Robert's internalized conception of a patriarchally derived view of morality, Wilde threatens the era-approved power dynamics by giving Lady Chiltern moral high ground over Sir Robert's admission of fault, which gives her temporary leverage over her husband. This moderately progressive stance takes a blatantly conservative turn through the scene in which Wilde writes the resolution to the couple's feud. To reinforce the Victorian ideal of an honest, morally unambiguous woman, Wilde resolves the marital conflict by validating Lady Chiltern's desire to know the reality of her situation; the truth of Sir Robert's crime comes out. Despite the fact that Lady Chiltern was right in wanting honesty, she willfully forfeits her power to her husband at the end of the play when she repeats Lord Goring's earlier words, "A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions" (549). Highly

problematic in its unveiled misogyny, this quote reveals Wilde's very traditional resolution in restoring power to the men of the play.

The fact that the couple's problems are resolved by a return to the patriarchal structure that declares women as moral guardians in an inferior feminine sphere and men as superior in a public sphere suggests Wilde's advocacy for traditional gender roles. The restorative comedic ending reveals Wilde's misogynistic prescriptive social corrective: in a marriage, a woman must submit to a man's authority. Particularly, Wilde prescribes strictly abiding by conservative gender roles as they relate to the Immoral/Moral and Artifice/Reality binaries, which challenges notions of his proto-feminist identity because it entirely undermines the periodic progressive leanings earlier in the narrative.

Wilde continues to promote traditional gender roles within the romantic sphere in certain scenes in his most famous play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, through the resolution of a conflict created by male dishonesty and female morality. In this case, the two main male protagonists' great act of artifice stems from their inherently deceitful act of "bunburying," the code word Algernon uses to talk about their secret double identities. As Algernon explains, "You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose" (326). This statement proves very revealing of men's disposition towards fantasy. First, the scheme that the men employ itself contains several aspects of illusion typical of Wildean men. First, the two protagonists tell blatant lies to their friends and relatives in order that they may avoid an uncomfortable truth: that they'd prefer to spend the day away from the company of their loved ones. Further, it suggests the universality of the male desire for illusion because it shows the main protagonist's matter-of-fact reception of the knowledge that they both mislead their family and relatives in an identical way.

This idea of the commonness of male deception increases with the morphological changes "Bunbury" undergoes in the text, such as "Bunburyist" and "Bunburied" (325). The modifications to the proper noun "Bunbury" show the frequency of its use, or as Benjamin Zimmer, Charles E. Carlson, and Jane Solomon explain in their article, "Among the New Words," a word undergoes morphological changes, such as transformation from a noun to a verb, "if it refers to a clearly-defined, frequent action for which there isn't a perfectly adequate pre-existing verb" (468).⁷ By changing "Bunbury" into a verb, therefore, Wilde demonstrates the frequency of the action, which implies by extension the frequency of male deception. This contributes to the stereotypical Artifice/Reality binary, as Jack and Algernon seem to form only part of a culture of men who create second false identities for themselves. More than representing the sheer number of men already "Bunburying," Wilde's use of morphological changes shows that the illusive behavior must actually be on the rise, as such a morphological innovation "catches on when it's contemporaneous with the action's becoming commonplace" (Zimmer, Carlson, and Solomon 468). Wilde, in his use of "Bunburying," not only contributes to pre-existing gender binaries by coding his male characters as creating artificial double lives, but by representing the action as contemporary and commonplace, he actively subverts the

⁷ Zimmer, Benjamin, Jane Solomon, and Charles E. Carson. "Among the New Words." *American Speech* 88.4 (2013): 470-496. Web.

Victorian push towards gender equality by suggesting a legitimized alternative trend regressing towards traditional gender binaries.

On the feminine side of the gender binary, Gwendolen and Cecily likewise uphold traditional gender roles within the romantic sphere, but not without exception. Cecily initially challenges the Artifice/Reality binary by vocalizing her distaste for society's failure to develop the female imagination, saying, "People never think of cultivating a young girl's imagination. It is the great defect of modern education" (Wilde 354). Cecily's advocacy for a young woman's right to artifice disrupts her era-determined gender role because it favors illusion over fact, demonstrating the traits of a Wildean proto-feminist character. Not only does Cecily speak of female imagination, she actively engages in creating an alternate reality for herself, much like the men's "Bunburying." She keeps a fantastical diary in which she has recorded her engagement to Ernest at least three months prior to making his acquaintance. However, Cecily only creates these alternate realities before she enters into a real romantic relationship with Algernon; after that, she shifts from writing her "thoughts and impressions" (357) to recording reality (358). This corrective shift matches Wilde's Artifice/Reality binary within the sphere of romantic relationships because, like Sibyl's abandonment of Artifice upon loving Dorian, Cecily leaves behind her imaginative journaling in favor of logging dictation and fact when engaged to Algernon.

Wilde further deviates from the original proto-feminist, single version of Cecily by having her wilfully admit her delusions to her betrothed. When Algernon proposes Cecily responds, "You silly boy! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for these last three months" (359), indicating the passage in her diary detailing the event. That she matter-of-factly explains this delusional romance to Algernon both shows the extent of her prior boldness in entering the Artifice side of the binary and reduces the deceit involved in the action when compared to the men's "Bunburying." Unlike the male characters, Cecily unpromptedly admits her escapist fantasy, incorporating her romantic partner into her illusion and thus removing secrecy between them. Additionally, Cecily confesses to Algernon that she had never before been actually engaged, despite her journal entries, saying, "Yours is the only real proposal I have ever had in all my life" (358). By revealing this fact to Algernon, Wilde demonstrates Cecily's complete entrance into her traditional role as a truthful woman within her romantic partnership.

Just as Cecily plays with Artifice without opposition before entering into a romantic situation, the two male protagonists likewise continue their "Bunburying" schemes without contention until they bring their artifice into the feminine sphere. As Jack and Algernon's false identities unravel, even the imaginative, fantastical diary-keeper Cecily cannot accept their deceit. She says to Gwendolen, "A gross deception has been practiced on both of us," after which the women agree they've been "wounded" and "wronged" (Wilde 366). With this statement, Wilde further mitigates Cecily's previous foray into the male sphere of Artifice when Cecily abandons her inclination for illusion entirely in favor of the truth surrounding the men's double identity. She no longer wishes to suspend her disbelief and opt for a fantasy life with a man falsely claiming to be Ernest, but rather demands to know his real identity and purpose in the country. This reversion to traditional feminine gender roles completes Wilde's slip into conservative ideals regarding women in heterosexual relationships, compromising his identity as a proto-feminist. By having the women condemn the deception working against them, Wilde creates a conservative, engendered Artifice/Reality binary. This binary once again creates conflict between would-be lovers through opposing masculine and feminine views on artifice.

Additionally, Cecily's use of the passive voice contributes to the Active/Passive binary as well: Jack and Algernon actively deceive Cecily and Gwendolen while the women passively allow it to happen. Wilde's decision to have the women describe each other as "wounded" and "wronged" paints them as victims, aligning the reader with their perspective and, in so doing, Wilde validates their desire for truth.

As moral guardians, the women ask Jack for facts, to which he responds, "it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind" (366). Though perhaps exaggerated for humorous effect, with this telling quote Wilde exposes the full scope of masculine rejection of reality: never before has Jack been inclined to tell the truth. In admitting his tendency to lie, Jack self-subscribes to the Artifice/Reality binary, reinforcing his connection with traditionally masculine gender roles. Additionally, Jack reinforces the concept of the patriarchal social order by claiming that telling the truth, thereby exhibiting female characteristics, *reduces* him. That other characters accept Jack's assertion without protest both reflects the cultural legitimacy of Jack's perspective and supports the patriarchal hierarchy. Wilde therefore assigns a negative connotation to the feminine aspect of the Artifice/Reality, which confirms the idea that women conform the inferior sex. Through Jack's admission, Wilde admits male immorality, yet restores patriarchal social order between romantic partners.

The couples in *The Importance of Being Earnest* resolve their conflicts by uncovering Jack's true identity. Interestingly, Wilde gives the women great preoccupation with discovering the men's Christian names, particularly Jack's, whose origins prove unclear. This obsession with naming makes perfect sense when coupled with Dale Spencer's assertion that "Names ... are essential for the construction of reality for without a name it is difficult to accept the existence of an object, an event, a feeling" (qtd. in Garland⁸ 272). Using this understanding, Gwendolen and Cecily's compulsion to name and discover names shows their female desire for identifying and defining reality, while Jack's lack of a true family name represents his connection to unreality, thus the masculine term. Tony Garland emphasizes this very observation in his article "The Contest of Naming Between Ladies in *The Importance of Being Earnest*," saying, "male characters name themselves to achieve their desires" (272). That Jack names himself and creates false identities, therefore, relates back to the practice of "Bunburying," and suggests that male characters use artifice to attain their chief desire: artifice itself.

The conflict between the feuding lovers resolves only when the characters achieve reality and remove illusion, which proves Wilde's support for female tendencies towards candor. Upon learning her lover's true name, Gwendolen cries, "Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first that you could have no other name!" (383). Wilde shows in this exclamation Gwendolen's pleasure at recognizing and accepting Jack's new reality, reiterating her identification with the female-engendered binary term. Also, the name Ernest plays on the word earnest, which means Gwendolen literally finds happiness only when she falls in love with truth. This implicitly reinforces gender roles by portraying a level of happiness only fulfilled by satisfying one's gender role – in this case Gwendolen acting as moral guardian and falling in love with truth. The

⁸ Garland, Tony. "The Contest of Naming Between Ladies in *The Importance of Being Earnest*." *The Explicator* 70.4 (2012): 272–274. Web.

play's comic ending in romantic pairs shows Wilde's condonation of the female preference for candor.

Wilde re-establishes the hierarchy in the romantic partners' relationships by re-aligning Jack with the male term of the gender binary. Contrasting Jack's earlier statement about being honest, he says, "Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth" (383). Just as he spoke earlier of the degradation associated with male truth telling, Jack again addresses honesty—a feminine characteristic—as "terrible," which simultaneously reveals Jack's preference for male artifice and the superiority of the patriarchal term in engendered binaries associated with the romantic sphere at certain points in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Clearly, in certain scenes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde maintained a certain adherence to conservative, Victorian-prescribed gender roles within the confines of heterosexual romantic partnerships, demonstrated through his use of engendered binaries. While Wilde generally designates the female term of the binary as good (namely morality, reality, truth), he ultimately empowers the patriarchal societal order of the era. This narrow view of society disadvantages men by constructing a gender norm that requires risky and potentially damaging behavior, yet if performed successfully ultimately promises authority and control in romantic heteronormative relationships. Similarly, Wilde's adherence to Victorian ideals on gender limits women within the heteronormative romantic sphere to the figure of the moral authority yet strips them of any power, which makes their authority in this sphere a mere facade. While not overtly—or even intentionally—misogynistic, Oscar Wilde's seemingly internalized ideas of romantically-intertwined masculine and feminine gender roles intrinsic to the plot of select portions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* demonstrates the prevailing and inescapable institutional sexism of the Victorian era, even among the most progressive of its writers.