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Gender issues, sexuality and Aestheticism with Oscar Wilde

Miruna IACOB[1]

The present paper attempts to highlight Oscar Wilde's important contribution to the Aesthetic movement through a series of commitments regarding the contextualization and dissemination of the author's wit. Gender and sexuality will be discussed within a modern approach of Oscar Wilde's reception in Europe and in the United States, pursuing a deconstructive paradigm. Monocular perspectives and analyses of a certain cultural identity in a single spatial and temporal perimeter are replaced with the systematic defragmentation of the social and historical levels, thus highlighting the importance of variability and relativity in examining literary phenomena.

Key-words: *sexuality, gender binary system, aestheticism, effeminacy, deconstruction*

1. Preliminary considerations

In today's context of globalisation, one of the key-aspects of progress is related to the constant endeavour of redefining concepts. Modern visions and critical thinking allow socially-marked notions regarding an individual's identity to be analysed in a multitude of discourses. Sexuality and gender have acquired more substance ever since they started to be viewed as conceptual systems displayed under various forms of expression and influences. Emerging in the '90s, among medicalised discourses and legal measures meant to regulate normal sexual behaviour, queer theory builds upon the investigation of sexual identity under the form of a socially designed structure of the individual. The interest area of 'mismatches' will be applied to Oscar Wilde's persona by exploring the cultural, historical and social backgrounds of his time, as well as his reception in Europe and in the United States. The Aesthetic movement which disseminated its ideology in numerous fields of the 19th century, from literature to music, has also witnessed adjacent acts such as effeminacy in male figures, misleading emotional behaviour, lust for ostentatious fashion extravaganza, which have been known to foment further inquiry on what was considered sexually unacceptable.

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, mirunaiacob10@gmail.com

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2. Oscar Wilde and Aestheticism

It seems that all the critical studies that deal with explaining and contextualizing Wilde's works have made a rule out of a systematic approach concerning the social and literary perimeters within which a work of art develops. Since later on the paper will reveal that context is a key-word for understanding Wilde's sexuality and his role in the aesthetic culture, it seems adequate to point out some of the features of the movement which assumes Oscar Wilde as its exponent.

Le fin de siècle draws our attention to a turning point marked by the confluence of divergent opinions concerning the idea of sexuality and the distinct features of the two sexes. On this background − which somehow seems to anticipate women emancipation and empowerment−, we find two movements which are usually associated with Oscar Wilde, namely Decadence and Aestheticism, both of them lacking moral concerns in creating and interpreting art by seeking the bizarre, the spectacular, the necessary innovation meant to reorganize boundaries between what was perceived as conceivable or unconceivable.

According to any dictionary, the Aesthetic movement is a tendency in art which pleads for Beauty of the form, instead of promoting other values. The absolute autonomy of the aesthetic value comes as a result of a decreasing importance given to social and political aspects in literature and any other arts. This tendency develops in the 19th and the 20th century, even reaching to our contemporaries. It is worth noticing that the Aesthetic movement marked a large number of fields not only literature, but also music, painting and decorative arts.

The Decadent movement seems to cast off the traditional vision which pleads for the superiority of nature upon art, from an aesthetic standpoint. Decadence reverses this relation by emphasizing the beauty of the artificial, as Charles Baudelaire would put it in his essay *In praise of Cosmetics* (1863), and the supremacy of art in relation to all that is natural and generally accepted, including the demystification of some immovable standards regarding sexuality.

According to *Dicționarul de termeni literari* (*Dictionary of Literary Terms* 1976, 158), the beginnings of Aestheticism are related to the Pre-Raphaelite movement which appeared in England around 1849. This movement wanted to come back to the work of Raphael, or to a type of art that imitates nature. Among the predecessors of Aestheticism there are John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelly. The promoter of the movement is considered to be the poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rosetti. In Great Britain, the main exponents of aestheticism are Oscar Wilde and Algernon Charles Swinburne, both influenced by the Symbolist doctrine. The British decadents were mostly influenced by Walter Pater and his essays in which he stated that life should only feature intensity and beauty. The plea for the acknowledgement of the inherent value of art gave birth to the famous slogan 'Art for Art's Sake'. This bohemian phrase which dominated the beginning of the 19th century meant to

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suggest a split between beauty and any other social, moral or didactic value. This conception is completely opposed to John Ruskin's who thought that art was not neutral as far as morality was concerned. The survival of the slogan was due to its circulation in France. Théophile Gautier termed the 'L'art pour l'art' phrase as part of a theology of art in dismissing social interference. It is important to notice that the exponents of aestheticism were not just a band pursuing the same goal; they were a heterogeneous group of artists whose efforts shaped the culture of the day.

3. Paris and Aestheticism

Every great movement was always supported by its exponents. Irrespective of the value of their contributions, the readers have always been equally interested in an author's work and life. There is much to be discusses about Oscar Wilde's reception in Europe and in the United States, but if we truly want to understand the complexity of the author's mind and personality we need to examine his strong relation with the city that represents the essence of art and culture: Paris.

To our century, Wilde's reception seems outstandingly modern. First of all, Oscar Wilde was famous even before the people managed to read his books, so what are the specific elements that nurtured his fame within the French perimeter? His biography indicates that throughout his life, his numerous contacts with different artists from various fields have contributed to the delineation of Oscar Wilde's persona and artistry. As a result, in the late 19th century he became the French press' favourite character. Second of all, the French perspective on Wilde's personality as the archetype of English aestheticism stems from his published works and from his portrait made by the media. The situation was more complex since the existential dimension of aestheticism encouraged a certain interest in an author's life and work which was reinforced by the fact that Wilde, as a person, was famous in France before the translation of any of his works in French. In this case, the persona precedes the work of art. Under these conditions, the social reception of Oscar Wilde influenced his literary reception which enabled his readers to think of him as an artist of life. Stefano Maria Evangelista states that not only did the French appreciate Wilde before the English did, but it took the French reception to enlighten them (Evangelista 2010, 3). Wilde's own Francophilia and his knowledge of French literature are well known, as are the specific French influences on his own work. The reciprocal influence of Wilde on French culture has also been explored in various studies, notably in Jacques de Langlade's *Oscar Wilde: Ecrivain français (Oscar Wilde: French writer)* whose title implies that Wilde can be considered a French writer rather than an Irish or English one. However, the affinities between Wilde's Aestheticism and the artistic currents of Symbolism and Decadence point to a shared conception of art which transcends the national and simultaneously privileged French culture.

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The reception of Wilde in France is partly due to the personal contacts he made during his various visits there, initially in 1883, and afterwards between 1891 and 1893. He met various personalities ranging from Sarah Bernhardt, Claude Debussy, Edgar Degas, André Gide, Edmond de Goncourt, Victor Hugo, Joris-Karl Huysmans, to Stéphane Mallarmé, Camille Pissarro, Marcel Proust, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Paul Verlaine, Emile Zola and many others.

The year 1891 proved to be a good year for an Oscar Wilde with a good reputation and an aesthetic vision which was well-received by the French audience. Although his actual works were still relatively unknown there and no further translations had appeared, the vast amount of literary contacts which Wilde made testifies to a crucial change in his social and literary position. In 1891, Wilde attended for the first time to Mallarme's famous soireé (Hibbitt 2010, 68) which was known for its literary discussions. The following day, Wilde showed gratitude for Mallarme's hospitality by complementing his translation of Poe's *The Raven* (Hibbitt, 2010, 69). Wilde's admiration towards the French writer's works is obvious in the preface of his book, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which proves that Mallarmé had a strong influence on Wilde. In the same year, he meets a young generation of writers and translators for his works and shortly his reputation breaks the boundaries of the literary space.

4. Aesthetic Marketing. Sex and gender issues.

In the beginning of her study, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture*, Michelle Mendelessohn draws attention to an interesting aspect which concerns the dissemination of the aesthetic doctrine by means of marketing techniques. In 1882, in New York, the definition of aestheticism was comprised in an advertisement which featured Oscar Wilde and a slogan which said that in order to be truly aesthetic one must buy ice cream and confections at J. N. Percy's (Mendelssohn 2007, 1). The presence of Oscar Wilde in the image did not only suggest that you have to be Oscar Wilde to be aesthetic, but also that Aestheticism comes with velvet knee breeches and a predilection for lilies and sunflowers (Mendelssohn 2007, 1-2). Later on, this small pedantry gave birth to some amusing caricatures, such as De Maurier's, who satirized a rumour that aesthetes lived on lilies.

A very close connection exists between aestheticism and the concept of 'dandy'. The confluence of these two terms gives birth to an artistic human product, self-sufficient by its sophisticated, refined and graceful nature. Although most of Wilde's characters are dandies, the author himself is formally part of the same category of the effeminate dandy, at least through his interest in fashion. It is the very ambiguous and free nature of the dandy which enables us to outline multiple perspectives on sexuality. My argument would be that apparently Americans did not jump to conclusions in order to force a connection between effeminacy and same

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sex preferences. At best, they saw a social status indicator of wealth in this effeminate, almost emotional, mannerism. Moreover, in the book, *Between Men*, Sedweck writes about social class categories in relation to homosexual behaviour, and the first targeted group was that of the aristocrats, followed by middle class people (Sedweck 1985, 172).

What is interesting is that the advertisement seems rather inadequate as the late nineteenth-century Binghamton was known for its industrialized decor which had nothing to do with Wilde's world as we now think of it. Wilde proved to be a wise choice of image and an excellent marketing strategy as it was a reflection of the enormous interest in the aesthetic values which had taken over the entire territory of the United States. Despite the fact that the Americans were familiar with the aesthetic paradigm before Wilde's lecture-tour in 1882 in the Unites States and Canada, the author became an important character that embodied all the characteristics of the aesthetic culture. This was not the only image that was used for marketing purposes implying the selling of particular articles ranging from corsets and lingerie to sewing machines and stoves. Although Wilde never personally endorsed these products, the cards insidiously implied that he was "part of this commercial enterprise and that consumerism was an integral part of being 'truly aesthetic' " (Mendelssohn 2007, 3). This version of Aestheticism is difficult to square with the accustomed view which places English aesthetes within a cultural elite. Thus, we have two different cultures with two different points of view on the same matter, but these artists were not invested in Aestheticism despite their divergent views but because of them, which is to say that Aestheticism's strength resides in its elegant flexibility, in its ability to harmoniously carry oppositions without demanding reconciliation, since after all, Aestheticism was a continuous argument about art and culture.

Sex and gender are two notions which deserve specific attention, especially in the conservative order existing in Wilde's times, when the firmest social entity was represented by the family. Throughout time, both notions have been understood as signs of social status and biological indicators of two different categories marked by distinct features. The dispute on the account of inequality between these socially-determined distinct features have given birth to theories such as feminism or queer theory, that examine the two terms under the idea of a social construct which dictates what is feminine and masculine within a society. Therefore, gender and sexuality do not function as a "given", but as a result of historical and social contextualization combined with our own 'gender binary' perspectives stemming from personal knowledge and progress (Foucault 1978, 105). In every research field, evolution has questioned any generally accepted association in order to emphasize relativity and the possibility of multiple perspectives.

The purpose of deconstruction is that of testing flexibility, inverting and re-evaluating the firm relation between language and reality, by outlining the unfaithful nature of this mirror by thorough investigation of the terms which underlie literary

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and social theories, without completely dismissing the opposing pairs. Without deconstruction, a wide range of alternative interpretations would not have been possible, especially when the aim is to weaken the supremacy of the dominant term. However, the essence of sexuality will never be fully disclosed. The fact that Oscar Wilde revealed rotten aspects of an old fashioned ideology which eventually turned against him, is a feature which legitimates today the necessity of deconstruction.

Sexuality and gender, as well as the social representation of the individuals from this point of view were based on a series of opposite pairs which organize existence in a simplistic way. According to Terry, a well-known hypothesis was that there were two distinct sexes with biologically determined functions such as procreation and sacrifice and that one of them was superior (Terry 1999, 33). Homosexuality, in relation to heterosexuality, is no longer viewed from the dead angle of abnormality, but from the perspective of a non-normative status which does not follow traditional rules. Deconstruction dismisses these traditional premises and considers them inadequate if they are taken separately from one another. On the contrary, if at some level, there is antithesis between two terms; their values are interchangeable in a thorough analysis.

Perhaps the most resonant critical response to a normative ideology of sexuality was the queer theory, in the '90s. With great echo in sociology, this theory covers peculiar, deviant and unnatural choices, gender preferences, within a historical and theoretical background, using poststructuralist and deconstructive decoding methods. Thus, there is an undeniable link between gender and sexuality, in that we can say that sexuality appears to be a subcategory which derives from aspects related to gender.

Although Wilde was married, one of the labels he received was that of a homosexual. Homosexual identity could be modelled by homosexual behaviour dating back since Ancient Greek, where people had no problem in displaying emotional attraction towards the same sex. There are two premises which precede this aspect. On the one hand, we have the reader's expectation for the literary work to confirm the author's sexual orientation, which is not necessarily a reasonable approach. For instance, in *The Importance of Being Ernest*, there is considerable doubt whether the two male characters are in fact avatars of homosexuality. However, the fact that at some extent they would be interested in homosexual relations, although in the play they both display interest in the opposite sex, is equally true. Although this thorough research of sexual orientation in the author's works might be considered ridiculous, what interest me is the variability, the relativity of this concept and the freedom of interpreting it without including it into a single category.

Throughout time, sexuality and gender issues became a world-wide concern and a variety of fields dealt with the homosexual phenomenon by engaging measures related to this notion in various discourses (Terry 1990, 40). On the one hand, we have legal measures taken in the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment against

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homosexual acts in order to prevent the spreading of a so-called degenerate behaviour (Foldy 1997, 87). On the other hand, we have a medical discourse based on psychological endeavour to seek the specificity of homosexuality and to explain life objectively. It also featured a modern approach on homosexuality regarded as a medical status you are born with, thus socially and legally unpunishable. A religious discourse viewed homosexuality as a sin which interfered with normal standards and which needed to be confessed and vocalized so that the representatives of the Church maintain control over the population. (Wilchins 2004, 50)

Starting with 1892, Wilde's celebrity decreased on the cause of his sexual orientation, which made him unwanted among his acquaintances. The years 1856 and 1896 are the years of maturity, but also the years of decline. His trials and sentence to prison coincided with the publication of the first French translation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the first performance of *Salomé* in Paris, in February 1896. Despite the fact that Wilde spent most of the time between 1897 and 1900 in France, he gradually disappeared from the front-page news section. Several former acquaintances shunned him because of his reputation, although Andre Gide and Henry Davray continued to see him. Wilde's death, in 1900, as opposed to his trials, was unworthy of a few more columns inches. However, some of his close friends wrote front-page obituaries in magazines such as: Le Journal, La Revue blanche, La Plume, reaffirming the value of Wilde's work while condemning his treatment. However, the posthumous reception by Gide, Cocteau, Proust, and later on by Camus and Sartre, proved that the artist and writer would not be forgotten.

5. Conclusions

The paper aimed at depicting a concise radiography of the literary, social and historical perimeters which revolve around Oscar Wilde's persona. The main focus is laid on some of the features of the Aesthetic movement, but also on the presence of the author in this context and the way in which the aesthetic doctrine made its way throughout Europe and the United States.

Biographical aspects represent important points in establishing a connection between the literary route itself and the reception of Wilde's works. In outlining a few of the defining traits of Wilde's public image, the main interest is centred on gender issues and the manner in which sexuality and its variations are perceived within two different periods of time and movements. Throughout time, the concept of 'homosexuality' underwent a series of cultural experiences which attempted to refine its social particularities and to multiply perspectives within the heterosexual–homosexual continuum. Finally, yet importantly, some of the chapters outline the relationship between sex and gender and the way in which sexual identity can be a socially-determined status.

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