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**ABSTRACT OF THE PH D THESIS**

**Oscar Wilde’s Characters – between Polyphony and  
Voices of the Same Conscience**

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In an era based almost entirely on reviving Narcissus's and Dionysos's myths, on living life at its peak, on cultivating aesthetics and on promoting the visual illusion, on the freedom of mentalities, one may feel that this would have been the ideal age in which a writer like Oscar Wilde would have felt comfortably, undisturbed by an appaled public opinion. Though, it was proven that along time writers who were exiled, who lived in unworthy conditions, who were tormented by disease or deprived of freedom, succeeded in creating masterpieces, in analyzing the human mind and in revealing unbelievable subtleties. Realizing a study of Oscar Wilde's characters proves the degree of universality and of validity of his characters.

The general aims of the research are realizing an exhibition of characters, starting from Oscar Wilde's texts and demonstrating the hypothesis according to which these characters of an amazing diversity are actually the narrator's and even the author's echoes. Even though the rules of the theory of literature make a clear distinction between the empirical writer and the narrator as the reflexive source who generates fiction, in the case of Oscar Wilde this kind of difference is extremely feeble and most of the time it does not exist as the author himself believes that his life style is the equivalent of aesthetics in its artistic endeavours. This research seeks to surprise characters in the very moment of their fictional creation, until the moment they appear alive in the Victorian world, when they start to move and impose themselves as self being organisms.

Thus, a specific aim of the thesis is to illustrate the permanent shift between fiction and reality and the conflicts between the imposed reason and the vitality of the hedonistic life. Oscar Wilde is the master puppeteer who grants his own freedom to make his characters love, take revenge, make peace with themselves, forgive, tolerate, rebel, interpret on the theatre's or on the world's stage. And still, the Irish writer is everything he endows his paper objects with, just like Gepetto, becoming a mixture of feelings and of characters, wearing infinite masks.

Wilde's case is an exceptional one and this is why in order to fully grasp the meaning of his literary texts it is necessary to initiate research from his life towards his pieces of writing. The text can be perceived as a manifestation which sketches the artist's portrait and not as his final clear cut projection. Wilde's fundamental poetic creation is his life, while his texts are branches of his way of thinking and of his paradigm.

This investigation is based on the hypothesis according to which the characters' gallery created by Wilde evolves in two directions: the one of distinct unities, but polyphonic at the

same time, which complete each other and the one of the voices of the narrator's conscience. All these "paper organisms" find a common point and make up for an amazing symphony, an embrace of the senses which are in perfect harmony.

Regarding the investigation method, I considered necessary an analysis of concepts such as *art*, *antimimesis* and *life*, according to Wilde's view upon them, as it stands out the type of critical approach he practiced in independent essayistic works such as *The Decay of Lying Pen, Pencil and Poison*, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, *The Critic as Artist*, *The Truth of Masks*, in the preface of his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in the letter addressed to Bosie Douglas entitled *De Profundis*, in stories and in parts of his plays. Also, I will use the classification of characters according to types and exponential characters of the society along history, all together with comparison and description. Through these techniques I intent to discover the most subtle details which refer to the characters' psychology besides the appearances, even of those which had not been identified or studied until the present moment by scholars. The comparative analysis proves efficient when I illustrate the paradox which governs Wilde's literary works: a certain type of artificial construction based on veridicity and life, on an explosion of feelings. Moreover, the critical description of the Victorian society, shows an organism whose functions intermingle in order to obtain technological, economic and cultural evolution, at an ideal level prescribed by uniformization, but on the other hand, it indicated the fact that even a society of rigid mentality, can hide a diversity of individuals, of manifestations and of philosophy, which at a certain point can burst violently.

Nevertheless, I intent to use the psychoanalytical approach on Wilde's characters in order to suggest that, in fact, each and every character, no matter how distinct he or she may be, is a piece of the narrator's mirror. The majority of these puppets will lead a constant struggle between *id* and *superego*, between uncontrolled passion and ruled imposed by family, education, religion, politics and other institutions. The writer himself states openly in a letter that many of his characters are facets of his personality according to context, to circumstances and to the state of mind<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde *apud* Jerusha McCormack, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. 112.

After collecting the data necessary for a classification of characters and of an analysis starting from the source texts, I will interpret them in a critical manner and I will realize a poetics of the character as it stands out from Oscar Wilde's plays and novel. After observing the text and after consulting the bibliography connected to the topic of discussion, I will draw the conclusions, the results of the research and the shortcomings or the limits I encountered on the way (for example, due to his controversial existence, Wilde's biographies include false facts, aspects taken from earlier biographies without having the information thoroughly checked or they are written in the style of tabloids out of publicity reasons).

For this doctoral thesis I used intensively research methods such as: literary hermeneutics, the hermeneutics of myths and symbols, the comparison and the description. I also used the method of the qualitative analysis of speech on several levels (semantic, imagistic, at the level of ideas) which serve the demonstration, having as a source text the novel entitled *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Because literature is subjective through its fictional character and is subject to multiple interpretations and contradictory meanings, one can insist on the matter of imposing a prevalent sense or a close one to the narrator's intention.

“The insight into the operations of discourse links the latter to issues of power and hegemony (the imposition of a single dominant meaning), [...]. Indeed, discourse is viewed as functioning as a site of struggle over meaning, with particular instances of discursive use seeking temporality to fix something in a specific way (Phillips and Jørgensen 2002:29)”<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, I will try to identify an interpretation which matches the language used and the empirical writer's life, which in this specific case, has a great relevance, because Wilde himself states in the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that life should be an artwork.

Writing a Ph D thesis by researching the wildian characters in a psychoanalytical context is compulsory as at the present moment there is no detailed approach of the mentioned phenomenon at least in the Romanian cultural space. Most research works which dealt with Oscar Wilde's literary works focused on the way his plays were received and perceived in Romania, a series of translations, the concept of iconography in the novel, the analysis of the dramatic discourse and the forms of plagiarism or imitation of writers such as William

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<sup>2</sup> Gabriele Griffin (editor), *Research methods for English Studies*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2005, p.101.

Shakespeare, F. M. Dostoievski, Robert Louis Stevenson found in his texts. Therefore, the present research work completes the field influenced by the Irish writer. Even though the psychoanalytical approach already has a tradition in the literary critical perspectives, applying such a vision on Wilde's characters is an innovative one which enlarges the research regarding the aesthetic poetics.

In the present thesis I have tried to analyze the aesthetic poetics belonging to Oscar Wilde and of the characters who stood out in the narrative patterns. I considered necessary the type of research centered on the character because there is a lack in this sense in the Romanian literary space. Wilde is one of the literary personalities of great importance who imposed himself in the XIXth century and his contribution at shaping modernism is undoubtful. Leader of opinion, of fashion taste and of aristocratic life-style, the dandy stays even nowadays the playwright, the stage director attentive at details and the dreamy novelist.

In the first chapter, I discussed about the evolution of the character concept along time and about different models of character. In addition, I wrote about Wilde's characters' exhibition underlining the way in which they come to life, about the balance between realism-artificiality and about the road they take from paper characters to people belonging to the realistic sphere.

The third chapter insists on the analysis of the narrative voices which are the equivalent of the empirical writer's conscience, after I have mentioned the main definitions and theoretical perspectives of the human identity in general. I used the psychoanalytic approach in literature using and applying a series of the basic concepts found in Sigmund Freud's studies such as *id*, *ego* and *superego*, the Oedipus' complex, day dreaming, the levels of the dream, hypnosis, *heimlich* (strangeness) etc. The sum of Wilde's life experiences influenced, after undergoing a thorough research of the texts, the choice of the topics developed and sending personal messages through the characters. I succeeded in demonstrating that the educational background, the atmosphere in the middle of the family and the social stage influenced the writer's personality, aspect which is visible in the construction of the characters, in their qualities and shortcomings and in the main characters' action. Wilde's personality was a challenging one as he confronted with the experience of prison, of disease, of lack of money and in the last part of his life he had to deal with the hatred of those he had cared for.

In the fourth chapter I made a radiography of the Victorian society, I underlined the fact that it created an environment proper for technological development and for cultural and artistic flourishing. Besides the rigour and the contrasts which dominated the epoch, literature managed to split from the limits of the mentality and to be free. In order to understand the social circumstances I used an anthropological and psychoanalytical investigation. I had in mind the psychology of the crowds and the way in which Wilde managed to face a cruel, artificial society, with a conventional mentality and with similar personalities, formed according to educational standards. All the wildian characters are part of easily recognisable societies and in each of them are to be found rebelling characters who want to change an established order, to illuminate and to lighted the tensed atmosphere. In this chapter, I managed more than creating a global social picture and that is proving that social groups are an organism by themselves, with their own pulsations able to suffocate any original or brilliant manifestation.

The fifth chapter considers the magical touch met in Wilde's literary works and the gothic features in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In order to give examples of gothic elements I presented a brief history of the gothic phenomenon having as a starting point the architecture. In the plays and in the novel can be traced esoteric symbols and finding, selecting, observing and explaining them leads to a complete professional reading which eases grasping the narrator's message.

In the last chapter I focused on the elements of scenery and atmosphere, two fundamental coordinates, especially in plays. The way in which the Victorian writer succeeds in combining them illustrates proficiency and mathematical ability. The manner in which the furniture and accessories are set on stage proves a well-developed aesthetic sense, but also a way of thinking bent towards symmetry and geometry. The atmosphere is in harmony with the scenery and they both intensify the reader's and the audience's feelings because they have a visual impact which is extremely important. The scenery and the atmosphere mix, mingle and leave the sensation that every object is set exactly where it should be. Moreover, I tackled the problem of time in the Wilde's prose after I have discussed about the most popular theories regarding time. I have shown that at the level of the text, time gets consistency due to characters and that it can be a time of creation, a suspended moment., musical time and individual time with the three branches of past, present and future.

After leading the research, I succeeded in fulfilling the stated aims at the thesis's beginning. I proved that the theory according to which the narrator is totally different from the empirical writer is debatable, especially in the case of writers for whom art is a genuine way of living. I applied means, techniques and concepts specific to psychoanalysis in analyzing characters starting from key events or turning points in the writer's life. The results prove that characters are ramifications of the writer's voice and despite their uniqueness they make a real symphony with polyphonic effects. Each character helps at recreating the writer's image in its complexity, but the advantage of their understanding contributes at analyzing the depths of the wildian mind and spirit. Also, I have established that after confronting the writer's texts and biographies that the double characterized him, but out of the desire to protect himself and his family, and later out of need of entertainment and challenge, the *alter-ego* began to be a part of his psychological and soul structure.

Using masks represents the main psychological process of the artist's mind protecting. Trying to hide, to find a different form of good and truth shows the degree of relativity of the two philosophical concepts. The only concept which is permanent and maintains its validity is the universal beauty. The beauty in art fades away in comparison with the beauty of the art of living. The aesthetic aspect becomes the only chance of the writer and of the narrator to be saved, to find salvation and to explain the slides from normality preached by the society.

Another specific aim which I proved was demonstrating the phenomenon of leaning from fiction to reality. In the plays, the playwright's indications are precise, so it is easy to identify the place and the time of the action. In tragedies, the artist revives riots, biblical scenes and myths which only accept the historical realism combined with pure fantasy. Wilde coins the concept of *anti-mimesis* according to which art imitates life and life is the highest form of art. Speaking about a concept belonging to Aristotle by changing its meaning proves knowledge of the classical philosophy and making a step forward the modernity which is necessary for human evolution.

The whole novelistic discourse is structured on the difference between reason, clear thinking and the passion of hedonistic experiences. Wilde has ever been the master of words which he handles through aphorisms, sparkling and witty speech. The same rhetorical talent was borrowed to his characters who became vehicles of aphorisms which remained popular until

nowadays. After analysing the dialogues from several literary scenes I noticed that even the writer borrows the nickname of Prince Paradox to characters such as Mrs. Cheveley, Mrs. Erlynne, lord Goring, lord Henry, Prince Paul, lady Bracknell, Algernon etc. All the mentioned characters, with no exception, share the same linguistic gift, a brilliant mind of a person oriented towards aim no matter the means. It seems that along with the masks and disguise, language is another efficient method of protection, but offensive at the same time.

The weapon that metaphorically was used against the immobilized, rigid and almost eerie society is irony. Wilde's comedies hide tragedies, bad luck and a degrading state of the docile community focused on absurd rules even at the time of the dawn of modernity. Irony and sarcasm are the best ways to denounce the Victorian gloomy atmosphere, which is inclined towards overproduction and standardization. By cultivating a hedonistic lifestyle, by bringing to the forefront the pulsation of life, Wilde states that the world's humanity should not be forgotten or suppressed by technological progress, social laws or constitutions. He claims that being a sinful person according to the world and religious' percepts is an inner part of any healthy man who doesn't deny his inner passions and desires. Oscar Wilde, the individual and the writer, was always caught between social rigors and repressed desires. Daring to be nonconformist in an order dictated society, cost him dearly both in real life and on the literary scene, drawing enemies.

On Wilde's Victorian stage, women with following attributes: dominating, wise, spiritual, with a sense of humor, logical and intelligent judgments forceful interfere. Throughout the thesis, we debated a theory as challenging as it is successful, namely that women with masculine behaviors are seeking a declaration of emancipation and freedom. Although women had a peripheral status in the society of the nineteenth century, Wilde gives them centrality which was occupied by men up to that point. The imposing character of female voices does not seem probable; however, the narrator can be suspected of practicing disguise, ritual gesture that the writer himself is suspected would have practiced disguising into his character – Salomé. Writer's gesture scandalized the public opinion, while female characters with typical male personalities stir laughter and admiration because they have something peculiar to stand out and succeed in getting the public's attention. Here's another argument that supports the protectiveness of psychic

and orientation as essential features of fiction. What is vehemently blamed, even violently rejected in real life, is subject only to critique and review in literature.

Another success of this research consists in evaluating the symbolic potential in Wilde's work. After intensive reading of bibliographic resources, we don't find anywhere in his works references to the occult elements. Nevertheless, we argued that some Gothic elements are hidden in the deep structure of the reception. Esoteric symbolism in the text led to the idea that the entire novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is an allegorical novel that refers to his journey of discovery and practice of rituals and alchemical mysteries. The transformation procedure, apparently impossible, according to the laws of the visible world, is more than a set of rules known only by the elected ones.

At Wilde, alchemical metamorphosis aims material, but not metals, only the human body, the Divinity's perfect creation. The writer assumes the role of Demiurge and his pride originating in trying refining the Divinity's creation. The end of the novel is just reconfirming the biblical scenes of angel's decline characterized by beauty and special attributes that dared to want defiance of good and supreme beauty - the essence of the essence.

We have also applied psychoanalytical approach to understanding the dynamics and the evolution of the characters, apparently paradoxical or strange phenomena. Each character follows its own story and each plot is generated by psychological conflicts. Wilde's protagonists are like Nicholas Brown's "sick animals", because they suffer and manifest typical symptoms of minor mental disorders disagreements but important in their becoming. The characters carry their spiritual deformations, often unconscious until their deformations consume their energy and elation. The psychoanalytic perspective has proved successful in analyzing the corpus of texts under consideration as in fictional space we feel the writer's anguish and disease. Considered by some critics exceeded, psychoanalysis further demonstrates its validity. The majority of literary works can be interpreted in psychoanalytic key, while the feminist, archetypal, structuralism, biography or semiotic approaches have limitations and impose restrictions in vision and guide it on a well-defined problem.

Finally we have elucidated a significant part of the meanings and connotations of time in Wilde's work. Inside theaters, time keeps its classic function according to which action must take place within twenty-four hours. However, in some plays such as *Vera; or The Nihilists* or *The*

*Importance of Being Earnest*, action takes place in a longer period of time, since the narrative scheme is more complex. Tragedy involves initial strategy and intrigue, while the trick involves stirring general confusion by misleading names, unknown origins, hidden feelings etc.

On the other hand, inside the novel, optic radically changes in terms of temporal coordinates. Along with the pact, the linear flow of time stops and becomes circular or rather a vacuum. Strangely, Dorian's time doesn't coincide with time of those around him who are under the influence of living the moments on edge. The protagonist stops time due to his narcissism burst from grief and sorrow. Because of the absence of parents, Dorian sets himself a new family: painter Basil and Lord Henry. Basil, because of his profession, is endowed with patience, with aesthetic sense, with intuition and creativity, like a mother, while Lord Henry has a status in society, is persuasive, has common sense and authority, being thus the ideal paternal substitute. Time in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the time of creation, a parallel time of logos and becoming.

We also studied the Christian principles found in Wilde's stories. *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* promotes a significant number of Christian motifs such as love, kindness, humility, faith etc. The stories prove an invaluable source of wisdom, Christian moral, philosophy blended with aestheticism.

Therefore I managed to reach the goals: we conducted a detailed study dedicated to the creator's personality, wishing to revitalize the human sensitivity to beauty, without seeking every time certain utility or purpose. Oscar Wilde was a member of the next generation of French symbolist poets and painters, a lover of beauty. The Irish writer managed to overcome the traumas and dramas of family through creation and literature, but the last "shot" he received came from the society which condemned him for daring to live freely and without bias such as the ancients did. Wilde is one of the few writers who have been adulated during his lifetime both in his country and in the United States, France, Italy etc. The writer was fully aware of his own value; his famous reply when he had to declare goods to customs in New York is an important proof: "I have nothing to declare but my own genius".