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Slaves and masters of words: conformism of the sexual martyr

Burak Irmak

*Istanbul Aydın University, Besyol, Istanbul, Turkey*

**Abstract**

Oscar Wilde was an author who resisted the social norms of his time. We can see several instances when he showed resistance, but when we read his works, we can still see the sense of duty that overwhelmed Victorian life. So it is crucial to examine what he did in his works while he became a kind of sexual martyr in his own life. Language is a social device which is used to think and express ourselves. The way in which Oscar Wilde presents his thoughts is interesting since he presents a dilemma. His work, *The Crime of Lord Arthur Savile* which I am going to examine in my paper, is about a man who tries to murder people in the name of a gendered duty and who gets away with it. With both direct and indirect use of words, Wilde creates a world of morality and duty like a conformist. Direct speech versus action way of language use shows us the direct relation between language, power and knowledge. While the power which holds the language in its hands gives the orders, everyday Victorian man abides by it with his/her actions.

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**1. Introduction**

The topics of gender and sexuality have been debated heavily in Oscar Wilde's work since the day they were written. There were a lot of different and interesting ideas on the issue. Especially, after the theory that is called "Queer", a lot of new articles have been written. His works became important again. The question of "why" is very important here.

After such an era as "Victorian", people have started to realize how repressed they were sexually. In the 20th century, they have started to change their perspective over their own sexuality. Women who were not allowed to talk or even think about sex made the revolution. People rose up against the old order of Victorian Age. Today we can see various and sometimes very harsh criticism over this era. Foucault wrote a whole book called "The History of Sexuality" giving his examples mostly from Victorian Period.

With ACT-UP and Queer Nation, a new era was born in the beginning of 1990's that we can call Era of the New Genders. In this era, we are trying to understand the milestones of the change in the perspectives. Therefore, it is very natural to look at the master of the paradox, Oscar Wilde. He was the wild one in his era. A sodomite father, a Uranist husband a pervert celebrity, a shocking writer and a son. When he did something, he was talked a lot. A lot of people knew him as a writer even when he did not have any literary works. When he was in Algiers where Oscar Wilde "means to demoralize" with Andre Gide, Wilde took Gide to a café where they met with young people with one of whom Andre Gide fell in love with. Wilde realized that he had liberated Gide from his sexual constraints and laughed with "triumph rather than pleasure" (Dollimore, 1998, p. 6). He was a famous and outgoing person who was loved by

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +0090-537-207-73-93  
E-mail address: [burakirmak@beykoz.edu.tr](mailto:burakirmak@beykoz.edu.tr)

the people of high society in England. He was invited to all high-class social events in England. He actually had a lot of followers and fans. In his biography of Oscar Wilde, Robert Sherard (1970) says

A great French actress once said to me, speaking of him, “What attracted to me to Oscar Wilde was that he showed me from the very first that his many kindnesses were not rendered to me for the sake of establishing a claim on my favor, as is the case with nearly every man who comes near us. I found a comrade in him, not a suitor, and a deep and real friendship was possible. It is rarely so between a woman and a man” (p. 13).

He was not afraid to share his thoughts in the society but, he was doing in a way that nobody would see him a person who is corrupted and should not be talked to. His brilliant speeches attracted many people and made him a celebrity but, he was put into prison because of his perverted relationships, but even then he was not feeling guilty according to his famous lover Bosie. What he did was revolutionary and shocking for the high society of his day. From taking boys with green carnations to the theatre on the premiere of his play- which was sign of Uranism or in today’s words Homosexuality at the time, to smoking in front of the audience. He became a kind of martyr for Uranist thought when he was sentenced and became more popular after his death in 1900.

Academics examined his works after his death with various views. As I said before, in the 1990’s it took a different shape. In the 1990’s, after the movement of “Queer Nation” whose motto was “We are here. We are queer. Get used to it!” social discourse has widely changed (“Queernationny” 2014). However, most academics shaped their ideas on Queer Theory from its view about sexuality in general and sexuality of his characters which seem irritating to me because, as a gay writer, he was assumed to write mostly about homosexual characters which may not be the case although it was the mainstream research topic on his works. They did not work on the Heterosexual Matrix of Victorian Society and its effects on his works or performativity and how much the characters in his works were forced into that order or how Wilde’s reaction was to the non-conformist genders in his own characters if there existed any. Therefore, it would be nice to add some fresh ideas on those. To do this, we need to dig deep to find the subtle discourse in his books.

Being a celebrity brings some responsibilities. In his life, he challenged the social norms of gender and sex. That may be the most important reason of his popularity among women. In Victorian Society, there are not many reasons for a man to talk to a woman. Especially, on a social occasion, a man talking to a woman did not mean much except for flirting. However, Wilde actually talked to those women around him and valued their ideas and we are talking about a society that made up hysteria which is a female disease of which the main reason is thinking. I just mentioned Wilde’s responsibilities as a celebrity. Since he was popular, he had to conform gender norms when he actually wanted to resist them. Intellectually, he was against almost all the forms of normative genders. It was like a two-faced medallion. On the one side, a society in which he had to protect his reputation. On the other hand, his philosophy of human nature and gender lied in front of him. It was a big dilemma. We can see it in his books brilliantly. His dilemma made his books full of symbolic meanings on sexuality. His works show us that he wants to live his life without being bound to what the society offers. He is in a prison of society and chains of norms. His brain is chained and his intellect is like a rope in his hands. The key to escape is on the wall hanging. He wants to catch it with his rope but, when he almost reaches it, the rope falls down and he tries it continuously throughout his life time. Then, he actually finds himself in prison for trying to reach to that key and freedom stays on that wall for another century while a lot of people make that rope longer. Victorian norms win the battle but not the war. In his battle, Oscar Wilde can’t win. Of course, it is about the society he lives in.

In *the History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault explains how gender is perceived in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: “A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents’ bedroom” (p 3). It means that every other form of sexuality was illegitimate. For illegitimate sexualities, Victorian Society created punishments and ways of othering people with different sexualities. Again Foucault (1978) says:

The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance: the prostitute, the client, and the pimp, together with the psychiatrist and his hysteric-those ‘Other Victorians’, as Steven Marcus would say- seem to have surreptitiously transferred the pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted (P 4).

Along with Foucault’s ideas of 19<sup>th</sup> Century society, there were other ways of punishing those who went out of the normative sexuality. The Act of Amendment, for instance, punished a person who committed the act was kept in penal servitude for life and for any term not less than 10 years. Oscar Wilde (1997) who suffered from The Act of Amendment writes: “I must say to myself that I ruined myself” (p 1071)... With that expression it is clear that he felt guilty for his sexual experiences. In addition he states that: “I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in

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