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Ciddi Olmanın Önemi'nde Kimliğin Performatif Halleri: Bir Yapısökümcü Okuma

*Identity Performance in The Importance of Being
Earliest: A Subversive Reading*

Özet

Oscar Wilde bilhassa toplumsal komedileriyle ön plana çıkan bir oyun yazarıdır. *Ciddi Olmanın Önemi* adlı oyunu Viktorya çağının sözde değerlerini ve edebiyattaki temsilini alaya alan ve dil ile kimlik kavramlarını tersyüz eden taşlamalı bir güldürüdür. Oyun, dönemin yapmacık ve dayatma ahlak değerlerinden dolayı düşkünlüğüne uğramış yazarın yitirdiği inancını, belirsizlik duygularını ve ikiyüzlülüğe olan tepkisi dile getirmesi bakımından yapısöküme kendini açmaktadır. Bu nedenle de oyun aslında bireylerin sözde görkemli Viktorya çağında yaşadıkları saygın hayatların ve kayıtsız memnuniyetlerinin sert birleştirisidir. Oyun tam da bu amaçla ikili karşıtlıklar arasındaki sınırları muğlaklaştırır ve birlikte uyumsuz görünen zıtlıkları birarada uyum içerisinde kullanır. Wilde'in ortaya çıkardığı şey parody tanımına çok yakındır ve oyun da yazarın dil ile oynaması ve hiciv içeriğiyle parody etkisi yaratır. Bu makale, *Ciddi Olmanın Önemi* adlı oyunu inceleyerek oyunun Viktorya çağı imajını ve edebiyattaki temsilini ne ölçüde yapısöküme uğrattığını ve tersyüz ettiğini irdelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Viktoryyanizm, Anti-Viktoryyanizm, Oscar Wilde, yapısöküm, kimlik politikaları.

Abstract

Oscar Wilde is known for his society comedies. His play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is a farcical play ridiculing the values and representation of the Victorian period and subverting the deployment of language and identity. The play sets a good example for deconstructive analyses because Wilde, disappointed with the pretentious and superimposed moral codes of the century, portrayed his sense of disenchantment, ambiguity, and hypocrisy in his play. Therefore, the play turns out to be a harsh critique of the moral collapse behind the apparently glorious period and decent lives and the (self-)deceptive complacency of individuals. What Wilde creates is quite similar to the definition of burlesque; a burlesque effect thanks to his play with language and his farcical plot. This article intends to find out to what extent his play bears a deconstructivist and subversive approach to the face value and image of the Victorian era.

Keywords: Victorianism, Anti-Victorianism, Oscar Wilde, deconstruction, identity politics

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Introduction

Late-Victorian as he was, Oscar Wilde stood out from the crowd of the era with his revolutionary life and literary style, and thus, he is considered a modern playwright. William Archer, in his review of *A Woman of No Importance*, admires Wilde's work since "it must be taken on the very highest plane of modern English drama [...] In intellectual calibre, artistic competence – and in dramatic instinct – Mr Wilde has no rival among his fellow workers for the stage" (qtd in Varty v). Wilde is especially known for his society comedies. In the nineteenth century, well-made plays were established and three of Wilde's plays comply with the mainstream. Yet the fourth one, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is a farcical play ridiculing the strict morality of the Victorian era and subverting the deployment of language. The play opens itself for deconstructive analyses because Wilde, disillusioned with the pretentious and superimposed moral codes of the century, depicted his sense of disenchantment, ambiguity, and hypocrisy in the play. Thus, the play turns out to be a harsh critique of the moral collapse behind apparently decent lives and the (self-)deceptive attitude of individuals.

Deconstruction dates back to the Structuralist movement, which tried to find out deep structural principles and binary oppositions underlying all texts. However, structuralism was entrapped within the world which Derrida calls 'metaphysics'. Poststructuralist interventions of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan take structuralism a step further and aim at "unravelling the entire project of Western 'bourgeois' humanism", which is also referred as the Enlightenment Project (Selden 1989 6). These pioneers of poststructuralism differ from their antecedents in that they resisted oppression and deception presented in the guise of such privileged terms as "Truth, Hierarchy, Morality, Merit, etc". Derrida, for instance, argues that man always thinks through opposites, but these opposites are also hierarchies privileging one term over its other. He does not attempt or intend to reverse the binaries; he just tries to blur and destroy the boundaries between opposites. Ross C. Murfin asserts that to deconstruct a text is to show that a text can have intertwined opposite discourses, strands of narrative, and threads of meaning (262). Likewise, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* the boundaries between opposite concepts are blurred and apparently incompatible legs are used together in a harmony. This was actually what Wilde explicitly stated in an interview as

his purpose of writing the play: "We should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and all the serious things with sincere and studied triviality" (qtd in Varty xxii). What he asserts is quite similar to the definition of burlesque, and accordingly what he achieves in the play is a burlesque effect thanks to his play with language and his farcical plot. This paper aims to analyse *The Importance of Being Earnest* in order to find out to what extent it bears a deconstructivist and subversive attitude towards accepted Victorian values.

Analysis

The deployment and construction of identity have always been a great concern for deconstructivist criticism. According to deconstruction, "identity is never simply complete or given, but is the product of [...] decisions and assumptions" (Thomson 300). *The Importance of Being Earnest* is tailor-made for deconstructive analysis because it problematises the theme of identity. In the play, two men, Jack and Algernon, create alter egos and utilise them in order to cope with the pressure of Victorian morality. Through his alter ego "Ernest", Jack Worthing flees from the country life, where he is to mind his ward Cecily, into town life. Likewise, Algernon Moncrieff using the same name, Ernest, flies from the town into the country. They both pretend to be visiting some people in need; Jack pretends to be helping his notorious brother and Algernon minding an ill friend – Mr Bunbury. Jack proposes to Gwendolen and Algernon falls in love with Cecily; surprisingly, both women are more than willing to marry a man called 'Ernest' because they believe the name Ernest to be a reliable indicator of an earnest nature. The women are unaware that the signifier 'Ernest' does not refer to any signified like 'earnest.' The play "reminds us that there is really no difference between being earnest and being called Ernest, between being true and simulating truth, at least in a world where people believe that names actually 'mean' something" (Thomson 310).

The wordplay on the homonym pair 'earnest/ Earnest' first appears when Algernon finds Jack's cigarette case with a note inside. He thinks Jack's name is Ernest and when he finds out that it is not, he is disillusioned: "You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest looking person I ever saw in my life"

(Wilde 1632). Although Algernon himself is another 'Bunburyist', he cannot believe having been fooled; he still believes in the metaphysical signifieds. However, in deconstruction a signifier has its meaning only within a particular context. Otherwise, a signifier cannot refer directly to a signified. To illustrate the point, Derrida coins the term *différance*; in spoken language the word cannot be told apart from *différence*. The distinction can only be made in written form (Selden 1988 85). Similarly the words Ernest and earnest are pronounced the same, yet their spellings are different. However, characters in the play fail to distinguish between being earnest and being named Ernest.

Gwendolen is another device used by Wilde to ridicule the signification of 'Ernest'. Actually Gwendolen sometimes shows awareness of the arbitrariness of the relation of a sign to a signified:

JACK. Charming day it has been, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN. Pray don't talk to me about the weather, Mr. Worthing. Whenever people talk to me about the weather, I always feel quite certain that they mean something else. And that makes me so nervous. (Wilde 1636)

She knows that when a person starts talking about the weather, it is just beating about the bush and they are actually trying to get to the main point. This is true because Jack – pretending to be Ernest – is trying to profess his love to her. When he finally manages to do so, Gwendolen talks about the 'age of ideals' she lives in: "My ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you" (Wilde 1636). Oscar Wilde, by using Gwendolen, mocks the false and irrelevant meanings attributed to words. Gwendolen loved Jack before she even met him, just because of his name, Ernest – which was not his at all. She loved him passionately and thinks that his name Ernest has a divine music and vibrations.

Obviously disturbed and worried due to Gwendolen's excessive attraction to his false name, Jack tries to find out what would happen if she learnt his real name:

JACK. I think there are lots of other much nicer names.
I think Jack, for instance, a charming name.

GWENDOLEN. Jack? ... No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed [...] Besides, Jack is a notorious domesticity for John! And I pity any woman who is married to a man called John [...] The only really safe name is Ernest.
(Wilde 1636)

For Gwendolen, each name has a signified and people are automatically attributed characteristics according to their names. She is not aware of her being fooled by Jack and she assumes that the name Ernest proves the reliability of her husband-to-be.

In post-structuralism names are random and they never refer to a fixed signified. Jack Worthing's story of how he got his family name is another subversion of the belief in certain meanings. He explains to Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen's mother, how he was found and adopted: "An old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort" (Wilde 1639). For Lady Bracknell, one's family name and possessions certify their noble background. However, Jack's surname was picked randomly and it does not refer to any specific family. Upon learning the truth about Jack's life, Lady Bracknell strongly advises him "to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over" (Wilde 1639). Using Bracknell, Wilde underlines that names can be bought so long as one is prosperous. In this way, he highlights the hypocrisy in the society and wisely deconstructs the so-called morality of the Victorian age.

Cecily is another literary device Wilde employs to underline the arbitrariness of words and deconstruct the meanings attributed to them. In her article Köseoğlu underlines the significance of women in fiction in terms of "stopping the chaos in society" and claims that "in a male-dominated society, a female's having the ability to establish morality in society and to punish the wicked" is noteworthy (133). In Wilde's

play, similarly, just like Gwendolen, Cecily falls in love with Algernon only because she supposes that his name is Ernest. She tells Algernon how important his name – which is not his—is: “It had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest [...] There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest” (Wilde 1652). Like Gwendolen, she associates trust with the name Ernest and falls into the metaphysical entrapment. Oscar Wilde elaborates the theme of signification with the first dialogue between Cecily and Gwendolen. As soon as they meet, Gwendolen enthusiastically says: “What a very sweet name! Something tells me that we are going to be great friends. I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong” (Wilde 1653). Nevertheless, when she thinks that she and Cecily are engaged to the same person, since both presume that they are engaged to an Ernest, she loses her temper: “From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right” (Wilde 1656). Her latter utterance is in sharp contrast to her former one. By belying her *first* impression, Gwendolen actually questions the validity and reliability of appearances in Victorian life. In fact Oscar Wilde’s aim is

the exposure of the moral bankruptcy of the codes governing society. [He] uses farce to ridicule social etiquette by depicting characters so harnessed by the inflexibility of the social system that their attempts to accommodate their own individuality within it result in deception (Bunburying), self-deception (Cecily and her diary), tyranny (Lady Bracknell’s prohibitions) and aggression (Cecily and Gwendolen at tea) (Varty xxii).

The characters develop various defense mechanisms to be able to survive within the apparently moral and decent members of the society. This is why Jack and Algernon create doubles and get out of their everyday lives. Surprisingly, though, at the end of the play the doubles they created become real; Jack’s Christian name turns out to be ‘Ernest’ indeed and Jack turns out to be Algernon’s lost elder brother.

The fact that apparent deceptions and self-deceptions in the play finally become real means art itself becomes real life. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, life imitates art and the play turns out to be a celebration of the superiority of artifice over real life. Occasionally the play employs self-reflexivity, which is usually attributed to post-modern texts, and subverts realistic narrative by foregrounding its own fictionality. Cecily is the main agent of ridiculing the fictive nature of works of art. She always keeps a diary and writes everything word for word in it. Even when Algernon tries to propose to her, she interrupts him in order to be able to write his words down in her diary: "If you will allow me I will copy your remarks into my diary [Goes over to table and begins writing in diary]" (Wilde 1650). She does not count on her memory to keep records of her life because she believes that memory makes up things which have never happened. She, therefore, takes writing for granted, which is totally a misconception she is not aware of. She attempts to take every single word Algernon utters down and warns him when he coughs:

CECILY. Oh, don't cough Ernest. When one is dictating one should speak fluently and not cough. Besides, I don't know how to spell a cough. [Writes as ALGERNON speaks.]

ALGERNON. [speaking very rapidly] Cecily, ever since I first looked upon your wonderful and incomparable beauty, I have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly.

CECILY. I don't think that you should tell me that you love me wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly. Hopelessly doesn't seem to make much sense, does it? (Wilde 1651)

Cecily illustrates the self-reflexivity in the text with her writing, which is – she says, to be published later. She reveals the writing process of the text and its fictiveness. Moreover, she acts like an editor and changes Algernon's remarks, which subverts the established narrative styles. Traditionally a narrative creates an illusion of reality and a

make-believe world in which the reader inevitably gets involved. Wilde's play, in contrast, shatters this illusion and raises an awareness of the fictitious nature of his play.

Alex Thomson asserts that both writing and reality are iterable. "In its very structure, an 'event' is like a word, or like a text. Events are 'iterable': they can be cited, discussed, and examined in new contexts" (305). Accordingly, in the play Cecily not only discloses the process of writing but also re-writes the history in her diary. Her diary is her phantasy world where she records events which never happened. For instance, she accepts Algernon's proposal immediately on the grounds that they have been engaged for three months. She explains how they got engaged—in her mind: "I accepted you under this dear old tree. The next day I bought this little ring in your name, and this is the little bangle with the true lovers' knot I promised you always to wear" (Wilde 1651). In fact Algernon just meets Cecily and it is love at first sight for him. However, Cecily— from the moment she first heard Algernon's name, which she thinks is Ernest, invented an affair and even bought a ring for herself in Algernon's name. Cecily's invented world is what Baudrillard calls 'hyperreal'; it initially refers to a material reality beyond itself, yet it distorts, disguises, and finally replaces that reality (qtd in Sheehan 30-31). In her hyperreal world, during her imaginary affair with Algernon, Cecily even wrote letters to herself from Algernon:

CECILY. This is the box in which I keep all your dear letters. [Kneels at table, opens box, and produces letters tied up with blue ribbon.]

ALGERNON. My letters! But my own sweet Cecily, I have never written you any letters.

CECILY. You need hardly remind me of that, Ernest. I remember only too well that I was forced to write your letters for you. I always wrote three times a week, and sometimes oftener [...]

The three you wrote me after I had broken off the engagement are so beautiful, and so badly

spelled, that even now I can hardly read them without crying a little.

ALGERNON. But was our engagement ever broken off?

CECILY. Of course it was. On the 22nd of last March.(Wilde 1651-1652)

Her inventing the break-off of her imaginary engagement, writing false letters from a person she has never met, and recording each and every thing in her diary neatly is the parody of realistic writing. What she writes in her diary finally comes true and she gets engaged to Algernon, which shows that—in contrast to the traditional *mimetic* theory of art— life imitates art. By using Cecily, Oscar Wilde also questions and challenges the reliability of texts. Texts, like history, are nothing but fiction. This is why Wilde attacks and ruins the concept of Truth, one of the innumerable centring and organising principles Western thought has produced. Writing is degraded further in the play by Algernon: “More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read” (Wilde 1631). It is a direct attack on the literary canon and the popular works of the period. Cecily takes the debate further by praising the Canon Chasuble: “Dr. Chasuble is a most learned man. He has never written a single book, so you can imagine how much he knows” (Wilde 1652). All these statements are also successive attacks on logocentrism as Wilde shows that not everything written is factual or valuable. Writing does not correspond to ‘presence’ or ‘absence’ of anything. The privileged term ‘writing’, or ‘word’, is deconstructed in this way.

Conclusion

To conclude, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of the earliest examples of modern plays in that it deconstructs not only the reified relation of signifiers to their referents but also the mimetic theory of art, blurring the boundary between art and real life. Wilde also subverts the hypocritical morality of the Victorian society and reveals what lies behind so-called decent lives. An expert who had to lead a double life because of his sexual orientation throughout his life, Wilde wisely mocks and attacks the loopholes in the pretentious Victorian society.

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