# The Victorian lower man: The Aristotelian concept of flaw in Oscar Wilde's comedy of manners

## O homem inferior da época vitoriana: o conceito aristotélico da falha moral nas comédias de costumes de Oscar Wilde

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***Resumo***

*Mesmo focada na tragédia, a Poética de Aristóteles apresenta uma idéia fundamental na definição da comédia – o conceito do homem inferior, cujas falhas morais e falta de virtude proporcionam à audiência momentos cômicos. A comédia de costumes, fortemente calcada nesta premissa, é marcada pela utilização de tipos, os quais representam tais falhas e imoralidades. Grande representante da literatura vitoriana, Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) critica a sociedade de seu tempo através do uso de tipos em suas peças. O presente artigo busca observar como esta idéia é posta em prática em duas comédias de costumes de Wilde, quais sejam, A Importância de Ser Fiel e Um Marido Ideal. Tal observação ocorrerá através da análise de trechos dos referidos trabalhos a fim de corroborar a teoria aristotélica no que tange à criação de momentos cômicos, uso dos tipos e crítica social.*

**Palavras-chave:** homem inferior, comédia de costumes, tipos, literatura vitoriana, Oscar Wilde.

***Abstract***

*In spite of being focused on the tragedy, Aristotle's Poetics brings a fundamental idea in the definition of comedy – the concept of the lower man, whose moral flaws and lack of virtue provide the audience with comic moments. The comedy of manners, strongly based on that premise, is marked by the use of types, which represent such flaws and immorality. A representative of Victorian literature, Oscar Wilde (1854 – 1900) criticizes the society of his time through the use of types in his plays. The present article aims at observing how this idea is put into practice in two comedies of manners by Wilde, namely, The Importance of Being Earnest and An Ideal Husband. Such observation will take place through the analysis of excerpts of the referred works to corroborate the Aristotelian theory regarding the creation of comic moments, the use of types and social criticism.*

**Key words:** lower man, comedy of manners, types, Victorian literature, Oscar Wilde.

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## SPECTACLE AND COMIC TURNS: WILDE'S (NOT SO) SUBTLE CRITICISM

Oscar Wilde, like many other authors, tried many genres. But the main difference between the Irish writer and other writers who engaged in such enterprise is that Wilde succeeded in all of them. In his extensive collection of works one finds poetry (an example is *The Ballad of the Reading Gaol*, written during his period of imprisonment), short stories made for children (tributes he paid to his sons Cyril and Vyvyan as they were born in 1885 and 1886, respectively), a novel (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), that along with *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and *Dracula* (1897) probably best represents the symptomatic Victorian struggle between good and evil), and finally, drama.

Wilde's work (his plays, in special) is known for his unparalleled talent in the games with words and a refined sense of humour, enhanced with dandified statements and flamboyant comical characters. Moreover, there is a great deal of clever criticism behind what is apparently an innocent number of silly comedies. Wilde seemed so subtle and harmless that not even Bernard Shaw (1856 – 1950), a contemporary with Wilde and one of the crudest critics of British literature, was able to understand how effective Wilde's subliminal message was. When Anthony Burgess compares both playwrights in his *English Literature*, he says: "George Bernard Shaw (...) stated that this was the way the new drama should go – it should not be afraid to shock, it should concentrate on ideas, it should rely on its own inner life rather than on external 'accidents' like spectacle and comic turns." (p.199)

In spite of the ideological differences between Wilde and Shaw, both have their relevance not only for their undisputed talent, but also because of the very point about which they seemed to disagree: social criticism. If on the one hand Shaw used his genius to create masterpieces full of mauling such as *Pygmalion* (1916) and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1894), Wilde provided us with four comedies: *Lady Windermere's Fan* (February 1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (April 1893), *An Ideal Husband* (January 1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (February 1895). More than the same author, these plays share another hallmark: social values and patterns from Victorian times are put on the table, unveiling in an apparently naïve way "skeletons in everybody's closets" (there is a reason for the word *everybody* to be here, for no one was spared the criticism).

A brief analysis of Wilde's works – such as the one that has been presented in this article – reveals that his work blatantly mirrors the society in which he was inserted. For example, the above mentioned plays are not considered comedies of manners by chance – on the contrary, this fact illustrates the idea that Victorian writers were tremendously influenced by social patterns, behavioral frames and desperate attempts of kepping up appearances. The next sections deal with Victorian times and the arising of the comedies of manners, highlighting the intertwining of these two topics.

## VICTORIA: A QUEEN TO REMEMBER

Victoria's rule is important for many reasons: because hers was the longest reign so far in the history of Britain (1837 – 1901); because she managed to strengthen the Monarchy when the press and even the people started questioning its validity and relevance; because then Britain experienced one of its most successful periods; and also because she is considered until now one of the dearest and most important monarchs ever among the British.

More than being a Queen, Victoria brought her subjects closer to her and her family, giving people the chance of knowing more about the Royal affairs. Her importance can be perceived due to her setting of a pattern in the family life as a whole. She married a German Prince, Albert of Saxe-Coburg, and had nine children. These facts helped her build an immaculate reputation of a perfect mother, wife and ruler at the same time – therefore, she was

admired by both men (who obviously respected her as the Queen but also knew that her example could be really effective in terms of controlling things in their own households) and women, because Victoria showed them that it was possible for a woman to run their domestic and family affairs and still have time for external activities, such as religion and, in Victoria's case, her political duties.

Since Elizabeth I (Queen of England between 1558 and 1603), most subjects had pictures of their Monarchs on the walls of their houses. Regarding Victoria, most paintings depicted scenes in the Royal household that resembled daily scenes of a middle class family. Despite all the luxury that could be seen, the Queen was always portrayed with a sweet smile on her face, and in situations of subjection and respect towards Prince Albert.

After the Prince's death in 1861, Queen Victoria went through very tough times. She refused to be seen in public for a long time, and she also lost her interest for her people's concerns, neglecting her duties. That was when the press and the public in general started questioning how worth Monarchy was.

She then realized that she needed to be more present and active, so she decided it was time for a crucial move. In a certain way, she did the same thing that Oscar Wilde did later, which was (and still is) an effective method: give the public (especially the middle class) what the public wants. She published her memories in a book called *Our Life in the Highlands*, narrating her daily life with the Royal family and their servants. It was a huge success, especially among the middle class, who for the first time had the opportunity of being closer to Royal affairs.

Victoria is an emblematic figure in the history of Britain. Hers was a crucial period in the development of the country and in its consolidation as one of the most powerful nations of the world. Oscar Wilde was Victoria's contemporary both in life and in death – he died in 1900 and she died in 1901. As Regenia Gagnier says in her article *Wilde and the Victorians*, "Dating him in such a way evokes the modernity of the Victorian age, with its values of progress, technology global markets and individualism." (p.18)

## THE THIRD "M" AND THE COMEDY OF MANNERS

Throughout times, Drama has been considered profane and immoral, with some episodes, such as the period preceding the Restoration, in which theaters were shut down in order to prevent the masses from being "contaminated" with nasty contents. Ironically, the beginnings of English Drama took place in a very religious context. Re-enactments of the Passion of Christ, Christmas pageants and other religious momentswere the first known occurences of events that actually resemble theatrical performances in Britain. As Burgess (1974) points out:

> As early as the ninth century, we find genuinely dramatic dialogue inserted into the Mass for Easter Sunday. (...) this Ressurection [of Christ] is made actual and immediate through a dialogue between the Angels at Christ's tomb and the three Maries who have come to look at His body (p.51)

After some time these performances started taking place outside the Church, and they became what is called *Miracle plays* – in other words, plays based on passages from the Bible, mainly from the New Testament. But the Miracle play is only one among three categories in which Drama can be divided in medieval Britain.

The second one is closely related to the Miracle plays, for it also deals with religion, but does not involve the Bible. Instead, plays were created grounded on events that supposedly happened to "holy" people who were later canonized – basically, the adaptation of a saint's biography, which received the name of *Mystery plays*.

And the last of the three "M"s is the one that directly led to the creation of the comedy of manners. These are the *Morality plays*, whose main function was to show that punishments await those who deviate from a straight social way. Obviously, the idea of moralizing the audience through theater is not a British prerogative from medieval times, because since the Greeks theater has had an educational feature – which partly explains the presence of Aristotle as a theoretical

support in this article. This "education" was connected with what one was (or not) supposed to do, and the eventual punishments in case of deviation or sin. And here the lesson is the same as in Greek tragedy: Oedipus, for example, killed his father, had sexual intercourse with his mother and tried to escape his *moira*, his fate. Therefore, he is punished with lunacy and the curse of the gods. Adapting the situation to medieval (and strongly religious) Britain, if one steals a neighbor's chicken, one is condemned to public humiliation and is certain to go to hell after one's death.

Morality plays have in *Everyman* its most representative example. It is an allegory (a typical feature of Morality tradition) printed in the beginning of the sixteenth century, and its characters are, among others, Beauty, Strenght, Discretion, Knowledge and Good-Deeds – and also Everyman, that is a clear reference to mankind. In its path, Everyman "learns that the pleasures, friends and faculties of this world avail a man nothing when death comes" (BURGESS, p.58)

But between the allegorical lessons of Morality plays and Wilde's theater there are almost four hundred years and a major difference: the lessons in Morality plays, though taught through images and metaphors, were objective and effective on a short-term basis, whereas Wilde focused more on simply showing what people used to do and how morally decadent they were underneath their gilded cover of appearances.

The plays that form the main corpus of this article were published between 1892 and 1895, and their main common features are: the analysis and criticism of British society at the end of the nineteenth century, the existence of secrets that lead to the misunderstandings that create comicity in the plays, and the happy ending.

## LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN

Mrs. Erlynne is a woman who abandoned her child and went away. Now she is back, and Margaret, her child, has become a beautiful woman and is married to Lord Arthur Windermere. He gives Mrs. Erlynne money and tries to improve her image within London society, for she is seen as "a woman with a past" (about which no one knew anything). The first misunderstanding takes place when Margaret finds out by chance that her husband is giving money to Mrs. Erlynne. Due to the woman's fame, Margaret thinks that she is Arthur's mistress. She becomes even more suspicious when he forces her to invite Mrs. Erlynne to a party at their house.

She goes to the party, and talks to all the men in the room – which only serves to reinforce the other women's jealousy and evil comments. She takes Arthur's arm and walks with him to the terrace, making Lady Windermere really angry. When she decides to leave her husband, her mother goes after her and stops her from deceiving Arthur and saves her from a probable public humiliation by saying that she took Margaret's fan, that was found at Lord Darlington's, by mistake. Both women become friends, even though the truth is never revealed, and the ending is a happy one.

Misunderstandings are, as in the other plays, a fundamental part of the action. The sequence of events is all based on wrong information or lack of information. Another feature that is recurrent in Wilde's plays is his incomparable witticism, and the pertinent, sometimes even biting comments.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan* he focuses most of his criticism on social behavior and marriage. Several witty remarks can be found about many aspects of our life: for instance, Lord Darlington passes a clever remark about how people can be categorized. He says: "It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious. I take the side of the charming, and you, Lady Windermere, can't help belonging to them." (p.9). He places not only himself in the best category, but also Lady Windermere, with whom he is secretly in love. Lord Darlington is also the persona through which Wilde delivers one of his most famous sentences: "I can resist everything except temptation." (p.10)

The Duchess of Berwick, one of Lady Windermere's old friends, makes an interesting statement about Mrs. Erlynne, even though she does not know her: "Many a woman has a past, but I am told that she has at least a dozen, and

that they all fit" (p.12). Besides the comments about Mrs. Erlynne, the play also provides us with many lines about women in general, showing very clearly certain ideas and preconceptions about them, especially those of the middle and upper classes. The Duchess also says "Crying is the refuge of plain women, but the ruin of pretty ones" (p.15), almost as a warning to Lady Windermere not to spoil her make-up; through the lips of Lady Plymdale, Wilde makes a rough statement on male adultery, a common feature in marriages until now: "I assure you, women of that kind [mistresses] are most useful. They form the basis of other people's marriages" (p.29). Cecil Graham, in Act III, comments the difference between wicked and good women: "Oh! Wicked women bother one. Good women bore one. That is the only difference between them" (p.45).

Inversely, a line about male behavior can also be found in Mrs. Erlynne's conversation with Lady Windermere: "They [men] outrage every law in the world, and are afraid of the world's tongue" (p.39). And, according to Cecil Graham, "women like to find men irretrievably bad, and leave them quite unnatractively good" (p.47).

Another device used by Wilde are the lines in which the characters reproach themselves in matters such as gossip – "CECIL GRAHAM: My own business always bores me to death. I prefer other people's" (p.44); "CECIL GRAHAM: ...Gossip is charming! History is merely gossip. But scandal is gossip made tedious by morality" (p.46) and shallowness – "MRS ERLYNNE: ... a heart doesn't suit me, Windermere. Somehow it doesn't go with modern dress. It makes one look old. And it spoils one's career at critical moments" (p.58).

Repetition was also used by Wilde to create jokes in his plays. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lady Agatha always responds in the same way to all that is asked of her, and her interaction with the Duchess is effectively amusing:

> HOPPER: Awfully sorry, Duchess. We went out for a moment and then got chattering together.
> DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Ah, about dear Australia, I suppose?
> HOPPER: Yes!
> DUCHESS: Agatha, darling!
> LADY AGATHA: Yes, mamma!
> DUCHESS [aside]: Did Mr. Hopper definitely –
> LADY AGATHA: Yes, mamma!
> DUCHESS: And what answer did you give him, dear child?
> LADY AGATHA: Yes, mamma!
> DUCHESS [affectionately]: My dear one! You always say the right thing. Mr. Hopper! Agatha has told me everything. How cleverly you both kept your secret.
> HOPPER: You don't mind my taking Agatha off to Australia, then, Duchess?
> DUCHESS [indignantly]: To Australia? Oh, don't mention that dreadful vulgar place.
> HOPPER: But she said she'd go with me.
> DUCHESS[severely]: Did you say that, Agatha?
> LADY AGATHA: Yes, mamma!
> DUCHESS: Agatha, you say the most silly things possible. (p.32)

## A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE

The second of Wilde's comedies of manners is very interesting because his critical eye looked into a different issue: whereas women are the main focus of the witty lines of the three other plays, *A Woman of No Importance* provides us with many ironic passages on male nature. After reading the title, one may think at first that Wilde chose a female character to be "the one with a past", as Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, or Mrs. Cheveley in *An Ideal Husband*.

Lord Illingworth abandoned poor Mrs. Arbuthnot when she was pregnant with his son Gerald. They meet twenty years after that, and, without knowing that he is his son, Lord Illingworth offers Gerald a job. The truth is revealed, and Wilde manages to make Mrs. Arbuthnot get her revenge: her son proposes to an honest young lady, Hester, and Lord Illingworth is completely humiliated when he asks Mrs. Arbuthnot to marry him, and she declines. One of the most interesting points of such humiliation is that the first act ends when Lord Illingworth finds a letter wrriten by Mrs. Arbuthnot. He recognizes her handwriting, and

refers to her as being "A woman of no importance" (p.121). And the last act ends when Gerald finds his father's glove, and asks whose glove was that, to what his mother answers: "No one in particular. A man of no importance" (p.173).

Men are also the topic of several other lines in the play, especially in the conversations among the female characters. Mrs. Allonby, for instance, begins act II by describing married men: "Ah, all I have noticed is that they are horribly tedious when they are good husbands, and abominably conceited when they are not" (p.123). Mrs. Allonby also comments about her ex-husband: "... Nothing is aggravating as calmness. There is something positively brutal about the good temper of most modern men. I wonder we women stand it as well as we do" (p.124).

Men also talked about themselves, and it is fundamental to point out here that, in each quotation, it is possible to perceive how the British society of that time was portrayed, and subtly criticized by Wilde. For example, one of the main features of that society was their enormous self-confidence, which can immediately lead to a concern with appearance, turning into shallowness. Therefore, Lord Illingworth's opinion on a necktie is not to be disconsidered: "People nowadays are so absolutely superficial that they don't understand the philosophy of the superficial. (...) you should learn how to tie your tie better. (...) The essential thing for a necktie is style. A well-tied necktie is the first serious step in life" (p.143/144). The previous quotation is a fine example of how two topics – the male gender and society – can be perfectly mixed.

Oscar Wilde's criticism does not regard only British society; it also refers to other countries' cultures and usages. In *A Woman of No Importance*, such country is the United States. Hester is American, and the old British Ladies Hunstanton, Caroline and Stutfield, together with Mrs. Allonby and Lord Illingworth, seem to be covered by an impenetrable layer of futility.

> MRS. ALLONBY: They say, Lady Hunstanton, that when good Americans die they go to Paris.
> LADY HUSNTANTON: Indeed? And when bad Americans die, where do they go?
> LORD ILLINGWORTH: Oh, they go to America. (p.112)

And once more, Wilde mixed two different kinds of social relations and criticized the British. On pages 128 and 129, Lady Hunstanton (obviously representing the higher classes of her society) shows how the British feel about the social scheme in the USA and how it works in Britain:

> LH: I hear you have such pleasant society in America. Quite like our own in places, my son wrote to me.
> HESTER: There are cliques in America as elsewhere, Lady Hunstanton. But true American society consists simply of all the good women and good men we have in our country.
> LH: What a sensible system, and I dare say quite pleasant too. I am afraid in England we have too many artificial social barriers. We don't see as much as we should of the middle and lower classes.
> HESTER: In America we have no lower classes.
> LH: Really? What a very strange arrangement.

The tone of the conversation proves that Lady Hunstanton is aware of the differences, and even calls the American system "pleasant". She recognizes the social barriers but, like the rest of English higher classes, she is not willing to break them.

Like Wilde's other plays, *A Woman of No Importance* discusses marriage and relationships between the sexes by pointing out the differences between men and women. For example, Mrs. Allonby does not agree with Lady Stutfield when she says that the world was made for men, because, according to Mrs. Allonby, "...There are far more things forbidden to us than forbidden to them" (p.109).

She also disagrees with Lord Illingworth in a conversation about romance. He claimed that "Women have become too brilliant. Nothing spoils a romance so much as a sense of humour in the woman" (p.117). Mrs. Allonby, on the contrary, says that "... the want of it [sense of humour] in the man" (p.117) is what ruins a relationship. And just to help us build an opinion about Mrs. Allonby's deep knowledge on men's nature, she says to Lady Stutfield: "Men always want to be a woman's first love. That is their clumsy vanity. We women have a more subtle instinct about things. What we like is to be a man's last romance" (p.125).

The misunderstanding present in the

play is the fact that Gerald does not know why his mother insists that he should not go away and work with Lord Illingworth. However, the construction of the atmosphere and the way facts are put to the reader/viewer tend to lead us to think of the situation as being more dramatic than comic. Mrs. Arbuthnot is a serious character within the comedy, and her lines are not funny but full of anger and sorrow instead.

The repetition of certain lines is a common feature in Wilde's plays, and very effective in causing laugh. In *A Woman of No Importance*, Lady Hunstanton, an old lady who seems to be becoming senile, keeps forgetting facts. Her more frequent line is "I forget which". It would not be so funny if her doubts were not so absurd:

> LADY HUNSTANTON: ... Lord Illingworth may marry any day. I was in hopes he would have married Lady Kelso. But I believe he said her family was too large. Or was it her feet? I forget which. (p.108)

> LADY HUNSTANTON: ... Lady Belton eloped with Lord Fethersdale. I remember the occurence perfectly. Poor Lord Belton died three days afterwards of joy, or gout. I forget which. (p.109)

> LADY HUNSTANTON: Ah, that is in the family, dear, that is in the family. And there was also, I remember, a clergyman who wanted to be a lunatic, or a lunatic who wanted to be a clergyman, I forget which... (p.133)

> LADY HUNSTANTON: No, dear, he [Lord Illingworth's brother] was killed in the hunting field. Or was it fishing? Caroline? I forget. (p.133)

## AN IDEAL HUSBAND

1895 was an important year in Oscar Wilde's career, because two of his most famous plays were being staged. *An Ideal Husband* opened in January, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* opened one month later.

The former play tells the story of Robert Chiltern, a Member of Parliament who hides a secret about his past: he profited from important information he had obtained from a person who trusted him and formed his fortune and political career based on that. Laura Cheveley knows Robert's secret and blackmails him, trying to force him to support the construction of an international canal in England, a project in which she had invested a lot of money. She threatens to tell everything to his wife Gertrude and to the press.

Lord Goring, a friend of the family, interferes and tries to help Robert. He recognizes a bracelet he had given to his cousin, and that Mrs. Cheveley had stolen from her. In the end Lord Goring manages to silence Mrs. Cheveley, who goes away without revealing the secret, Gertrude and Robert live happily ever after, his career remains untouched, and Goring marries Mabel Chiltern, Robert's niece.

Wilde deals with politics in *An Ideal Husband*. An important link between the play and actual politics is the fact that when the play was published, the Panama Canal was being constructed (it opened in 1914). Sir Robert criticizes the idea of a canal in the play, which could be seen as criticism or a reference to all the real problems that took place during the construction of the Panama Canal.

As in all of Wilde's comedies, the upper classes are not spared. The first scene of the play is a dialogue between Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon, reinforcing the idea the upper classes had about the middle classes:

> MRS MARCHMONT: I come here to be educated.
> LADY BASILDON: Ah! I hate being educated!
> MRS MARCHMONT: So do I. It puts one almost on a level with the commercial classes, doesn't it? (p.179)

Their conversation continues and Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont emphasize the shallowness of certain women in British society; they also talk about adultery, as if it was normal, common practice with the upper class:

> LADY BASILDON: ... The man who took me in to dinner talked to me about his wife the whole time.
> MRS MARCHMONT: How very trivial of him!
> LB: Terribly trivial! What did your man talk about?

MM: About myself.
LB: And were you interested?
MM: Not in the smallest degree.
LB: What martyrs we are, dear Margaret!
MM: And how well it becomes us, Olivia! (p.179/180)

Remarks about marriage are unavoidable. Lady Markby (*genially*, according to Wilde's stage directions) says that "... nowadays people marry as often as they can, don't they? It is most fashionable." (p.182). And the idea of "having a past", that was used in *Lady Windermere's Fan* through Mrs. Erlynne, is repeated in *An Ideal Husband* with two characters – Robert Chiltern and Laura Cheveley. He has a dark side to his public life, and when Mrs. Cheveley threatens to denounce him Lord Goring finds out she had stolen a jewel, which serves as a reason for her not to accuse Chiltern. Thus, it is those two characters with compromising pasts and their involvement in blackmailing that lead to the misunderstandings in this play.

The first misinterpretation of facts comes when Mrs. Cheveley talks to Sir Robert. Gertrude, his wife, knows Mrs. Cheveley and is not fond of her.

LADY CHILTERN: We were at school together, Mrs. Cheveley.
MRS CHEVELEY [superciliously]: Indeed? I have forgotten all about my
schooldays. I have the vague impression that they were detestable.
LADY CHILTERN [coldly]: I am not surprised! (p.182)

After that, Robert refuses to tell Gertrude about his conversation with Laura Cheveley; otherwise he would have to reveal his worst secret. Since he does not say anything, Gertrude becomes suspicious, and thinks that she cannot trust her husband anymore. She writes a note to Lord Goring saying "'I want you, I trust you, I am coming to you' " (p.252). When Gertrude is expected at Lord Goring's house, the butler is given instructions to "show this lady into the drawing-room when she arrives" (p.237). However, Mrs. Cheveley is the lady who shows up, so she is taken into the drawing room. She finds Gertrude's note and believes that it is a love note instead of a note asking for a friend's help.

*An Ideal Husband* is not Wilde's funniest play, but it certainly is the one with more misunderstandings and with a more coherent interconnection between them.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

Jack Worthing is a man who lives in the country and has invented an alter ego – a sick brother named Ernest – that serves as an excuse for him to spend the weekends in London and to deceive his ward Cecily and the governess, Miss Prism. His friend Algernon Moncrieff and Algernon's cousin Gwendolen Fairfax know Jack as Ernest, and she falls in love with him because of his name ("... my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest (...) The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you" – p.306).

Jack hides from his London acquaintances that he has a ward – an eighteen-year-old girl named Cecily Cardew. Algernon finds it out and goes to Jack's countryside house and introduces himself as Ernest, Jack's brother. Cecily falls in love with Algernon for the same reason as Gwendolen fell for Jack: the name Ernest ("You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Ernest (...) I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest" – p.331/332).

There is a happy ending for all characters: both couples end up together, Jack's governess Miss Prism and Rev. Chasuble also form a couple, Jack and Algernon turn out to be brothers and, miraculously, Jack finds out that his Christian name is actually Ernest.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde focused his criticism mainly on marriage and all the aspects related to it. For instance, Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen's mother, is a very interesting character. She and her friend the Duchess of Bolton keep a list of eligible men in order to prevent their daughters from marrying

the wrong man, namely, one without money or fashionable properties. She asks several questions to Jack, analyzing his life, his family and his estate.

Oscar Wilde demonstrates all his wit through Algernon, the stereotypical bachelor, providing us with funny observations about marriage. In Act I, his butler states that the quality of the wine in the houses of married men is inferior, to which Algernon responds: "Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?" (p.295). Still in Act I, Algernon says: "... There is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. (...) If I ever get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact" (p.297). And finally, one of the funniest passages in the play is a conversation between Jack and Algernon about marriage and how having a Bunbury (an excuse to be absent) is important:

> ALGERNON: Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.
> JACK: That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury.
> ALGERNON: Then your wife will. You don't seem to realize, that in married life three is company and two is none. (p.302)

The sequence of that dialogue leads to recurring aspect of the play: the criticism to a foreign country (see the section about *A Woman of No Importance* – p.24/25). For three times, different characters subtly criticize French culture. However, in a play by Oscar Wilde, all statements should be taken into consideration very carefully. This is proven by the first occurence, where Wilde in reality "criticizes criticism". Algernon's final remark, repeated below, refers to betrayal in marriage.

> ALGERNON: Then your wife will. You don't seem to realize, that in married life three is company and two is none.
> JACK [sententiously]: That, my dear young friend, is the theory that the corrupt French Drama has been propounding for the last fifty years.
> ALGERNON: Yes; and that the happy English home has proved in half the time. (p.302)

A few pages ahead, Lady Bracknell excludes French songs from the music programme of her party because "people always seem to think that they are improper, and either look shocked, which is vulgar, or laugh, which is worse." (p.305). And again, during her "interview" with Jack, when she learns that, as a baby, he was found in a bag in a train station, she says: "To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution." (p.311)

The best example of Wilde's talent in playing with words is, besides the title, a line by Miss Prism, who is madly in love with Rev. Chausble, who apparently does not want to be involved with any woman. She takes the word *misanthrope* and, based on it, creates a word of her own: "You are too much alone, dear Dr. Chasuble. You should get married. A misanthrope I can understand – a *womanthrope*, never!" (p.322)

As in the other plays, we can perceive the use of repetition or simultaneity of lines. Whereas Lady Agatha constantly repeats "Yes, mamma!" in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Phipps always answers "Yes, sir" to Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* and Lady Hunstanton is always in doubt between two options, saying "I forget which", in *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde did something slightly different. There is a scene with both Jack and Algernon being caught in their lies by Gwendolen and Cecily, but instead of having one character repeat the same sentence many times, the author introduces one line that is repeated by two characters at the same time. And again, he manages to create a funny situation. After the two men give their explanations, the girls answer:

> GWENDOLEN and CECILY [speaking together]: Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!
> JACK and ALGERNON [speaking together]: Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon. (p.345)

## THE ARISTOTELIAN CONCEPT OF FLAW

Oscar Wilde's comedies of manners have all the charateristics of the genre: irony, witticism – still unparalleled in Wilde's case – and smart puns involving language. The most suitable example is the title of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, playing with the words *Ernest* and *earnest* (and giving a lot of work to our translators, who have not decided whether *earnest* in Portuguese should become Franco, Prudente, Fiel, or even Ernesto). But the characters are also an important part of the comedies of manners – it is through their actions that all the misunderstanding and fun take place

What kind of characters should any comedy have in order to be effectively funny and amusing? The answer can be found in one of the most remarkable scholars of all time: Aristotle. In one of the most significant critical works of Ancient Times, the *Poetics*, Aristotle makes the first attempt to distinguish between literary genres in history. Most of the *Poetics* is dedicated to tragedy and epic poetry – legend says that he also wrote a volume about comedy, but that has never been found. The answer to the question that opens this paragraph can be found in the very beginning of chapter V of the *Poetics*:

> Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type, – not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain. (p.9)

Even though Aristotle does not use the word, he is saying that comedy has characters with some kind of flaw, otherwise they would not be "of a lower type". And he adds that such flaws do not necessarily make the characters bad, or villains. He uses the words *defect* and *ugliness* to characterize this important aspect of comedy characters.

In Oscar Wilde's plays the main characters also have their flaws, but those are mainly moral or social. There would be no play if Jack, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, were not a liar; all the fun and amusing situations would not exist. The same happens with Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*: she is 'a woman with a past', as the Duchess of Berwick would say, but she loves her daughter and helps her, despite all the problems between them. In other words, Mrs. Erlynne is the perfect combination between flaw and goodness, just like Robert Chiltern and Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband*. Chiltern has a secret to hide in order to keep his public life intact (flaw), but he proves to be a good-natured character. Lord Goring tries to pose as a rebel, or a "bad boy", but he is a character that fascinates the reader/viewer, and he is definitely not a villain. Lord Goring sums up that idea in a conversation he has with Robert Chiltern: "But everyone has some weak point. There is some flaw in each one of us" (p.213). And since Lord Goring is a character by Wilde, there would be no better remark to follow this sentence than this: "My father tells me that even I have faults. Perhaps I have. I don't know" (p.213).

## FINAL REMARKS

Wilde's work remains so popular and so current due to the universality of its characters, not only in terms of time, but also regarding space. That means that the types in his plays depicted members of Victorian England, but they also served to depict other societies in other times – our society in our time, for example. After having read one of Oscar Wilde's comedies, when one thinks about any character it seems impossible to avoid the thought: "I have already met someone like this". And by causing that, the Irish playwright's talent and wit are proven again.

Laughing at the types found in these plays equals laughing at our own mistakes and worse features, and that is a moment to remember Aristotle's concept of the lower man: after all, we are not epic heroes, flawless and morally immaculate. If sometimes we might feel guilty about doing somebody wrong or wishing somebody bad, Oscar Wilde's work is available and eternal, showing that this is the way

mankind is, and the possibility of laughing at ourselves Wilde provides us with is a remarkable reminder of our condition: humans, simply.

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