ART, CRITICISM, AND THE SELF: AT PLAY IN THE WORKS OF OSCAR WILDE

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the works of Oscar Wilde as they articulate and model an aesthetic of play. I show that Wilde distinguishes between true and false forms—or what I call models and anti-models—of play in a number of areas: art, criticism, and society, language, thought, and culture, self and other.

My introduction establishes a context for the cultural value of play in the nineteenth century. I survey the ideas of Friedrich Schiller, who treats play in the aesthetic realm; Matthew Arnold, who discusses Criticism as a free play of the mind; Herbert Spencer, who explores play in the context of evolution; and Johan Huizinga, who analyses play in its social context. In my three chapters on Wilde’s critical essays, I draw upon their ideas to describe Wilde’s philosophy of play and examine how the form of Wilde’s critical essays illuminates his aesthetic. My first chapter explores models and anti-models of play in Art, as they are described by Vivian in “The Decay of Lying.” By exploring the role of “lying” in its aesthetic rather ethical context, Vivian demonstrates the value of the play-spirit for the development of culture. My second chapter discusses models and anti-models of play in Criticism as they are described by Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist.” By refashioning the traditions of nineteenth-century criticism, Gilbert presents his own model of criticism as an aesthetic activity and demonstrates the role of the play-spirit in the development of the individual and the race. My third chapter relates models and anti-models of play in art, criticism, and social life to the modes of self-realization described by Wilde in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.” I take up Wilde’s well-known paradox, that Socialism is a means of realizing Individualism, by showing
how Wilde plays with these terms in an aesthetic rather than a political context. In the remaining chapters I read Wilde’s fictional and dramatic texts in light of his aesthetics and treat the characters as models and anti-models of the play-spirit. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, I take the measure of play, not morality, as a guide for interpretation. In this reading Lord Henry Wotton is the novel’s critic as artist, while Dorian Gray, with his literal-mindedness, his imitative instinct, and his ruthless narcissism, fails to achieve the aesthetic disinterestedness that characterizes true play. My sixth chapter traces themes related to play—game, ceremony, and performance—in Wilde’s Society Comedies to demonstrate how these plays both reflect and critique the spectacle of Society and the conventions of nineteenth-century melodrama. My thesis concludes with The Importance of Being Earnest as it presents a culmination of Wilde’s play-spirit and his playful linguistic strategies. I show how both the form and content of Earnest model the paradoxical ideal of play itself—that through play we may realize the experience of being at one with ourselves and on good terms with the world.
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**Introduction**

*In a certain sense Mr. Wilde is to me our only thorough playwright. He plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre.* (Bernard Shaw *The Saturday Review*, 12 January 1895)

**OSCAR IN THE BOX/ THE MARQUESS IN THE DOCK/ Most Serious Charges Formulated Against Mr. Wilde/ Oscar answers them by an absolute denial—He turns extemporaneous epigrams, and exchanges views of métaphysics, ethics and art with Mr. Carson, Q.C. who opposes the play of Oscarisms with direct suggestions of immorality.* (Headline in *The Morning Leader*, 4 April 1895)

*To the public he seemed to be playing with paradoxes, yet the way in which Wilde stood the platitudes of his time on their heads was more than clever entertainment.* (Stanley Weintraub 1968, ix)

Whether they are commenting on the spectacle of insincerity in Wilde’s plays, his own conversational brilliance, or the disarming triviality of his critical writings, many critics sooner or later call upon the word “play” to characterize the form, content and spirit of Wilde’s discourse.¹ Because critics have responded with both fury and fascination to Wilde’s play, and apply the term in a variety of contexts, it is worth asking what does play really mean? The question seems timely in light of recent scholarship which portrays Wilde as seriously engaged in a persistent critique of Victorian society. To answer this question I turn back to Wilde’s texts themselves, to the persiflage and paradox, the aphorisms and epigrams. The ludic nature of Wilde’s texts, I want to suggest, serves to model the ideal of play, an ideal which lies at the heart of his critical
and fictional works. As models of play, Wilde's texts can help us understand the nature of play and the value of play for the development of the individual and of culture.

Victorian society, Wilde argues, is characterized by a deadly earnestness, which he associates with a narrowed and limited insight, a Philistine concern for conventional morality and utilitarian outcomes. His view was corroborated by Samuel Butler who associated earnestness with cant and hypocrisy in *The Way of All Flesh* (begun in 1873 and published posthumously in 1903). The opposing nature of earnestness and play also invokes the tendencies of Hebraism and Hellenism which Matthew Arnold described in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), and in Wilde's most explicit reference to play, in "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert refers to Arnold's ideal of criticism when he observes that "anything approaching to the free play of the mind is practically unknown amongst us" (1057). He counters the virtue of Arnold's "sweet reasonableness" and Darwin's "serene philosophic temper" to the fanatic, whose "worst vice is his sincerity" (1057). But Gilbert, like Arnold, does not simply discuss play; he demonstrates it. By expressing himself in the form of outrageous aphorisms and provoking paradoxes, Gilbert's subversion of the traditional values associated with the terms of play and earnestness have a striking rhetorical effect: it shifts the reader's attention from the subject of the expression to the mode of expression itself. In his critical writings, Wilde does not argue rationally or earnestly for the virtues he sees in play. Rather he exhibits these virtues-- a certain open-mindedness, a willingness to entertain contradictory and paradoxical ideas, and an ability to treat commonplace notions and materials in novel ways, in the playfulness of his prose.²
Play is itself paradoxical and not always easy to recognize. When trying to determine what is, and is not, play, we discover that play is not easily reduced to a special kind of activity with characteristics that distinguish it from other activities. Gilbert’s reference to the free play of the mind suggests that play is an activity which takes the form of contemplation, but he attempts to distinguish this form of play from practical, everyday notions of action as a mode of production, by suggesting that contemplation is a form of “doing nothing.” Play is played for its own sake and not for some material gain. Skipping with a skipping rope certainly ranks as play but not when the World Heavyweight Champion does it before an audience for pay, even if he loves doing nothing better than skipping. The distinction is further obscured because people often find play in what others consider work. We assume they derive pleasure from the activity because they choose to do it. One cannot be forced to play, but not all activities which we do voluntarily are play (Millar 21). We might then try to recognize play by the mood of the person rather than what he or she is doing. When we are “earnest” we are certainly not playing, but the significance of play cannot be fully defined or exhausted by calling it “not-earnest” or “not-serious” (Huizinga 45). The critic for the Athenaeum (1891) did not necessarily have play as an ideal in mind when he wrote:

Some of the conversation in [Wilde’s] novel is very smart, and while reading it one has the pleasant feeling, not often to be enjoyed in the company of modern novelists, of being entertained by a person of decided ability. . . . So much may be said for The Picture of Dorian Gray, but no more, except, perhaps that the author does not appear to be in earnest. For the rest the novel is unmanly, sickening,
Here we should note that Wilde’s use of the term “serious” is inconsistent. I will reserve “serious” for the positive sense of “thoughtful” and “important” and the term “earnest” to refer to the pejorative sense, identified above as a narrow-minded, Philistine concern for practical outcomes and conventional sense of moral duty. Although seriousness is often presented as a conceptual opposite of play, play can very well include seriousness. As anyone watching a child build a house of cards knows, the associated ideas of “zeal”, “exertion”, “painingstaking” are all qualities which may be found in play. Algernon, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, claims he is a most serious Bunburyst, which is certainly a form of play, but finds it “awfully hard work” doing nothing.

Nevertheless a certain element of freedom and choice, a lack of constraint from conventional ways of handling objects, materials, and ideas is inherent in Wilde’s concept of play. Susanna Millar in *The Psychology of Play* (1968) suggests that “perhaps play is best used as an adverb; not as a name of a class or activities, nor as distinguished by the accompanying mood, but to describe how and under what conditions an action is performed” (21). Millar’s suggestion seems appropriate for looking at play in Wilde’s writings for it points to the notion of style, the possibility of treating any object or idea as a source of play. Using Wilde’s texts as our model, we can see that for Wilde the condition required for genuine play is a certain frame of mind, an attitude or spirit which is open to the possibilities of play and able to respond to them. G.K. Chesterton notes the connection in this way: “Style (as Wilde might have said) is only another name for spirit” (“Oscar Wilde” 251).
Wilde distinguishes between true play and false play. He conceives of true play as an activity performed for its own sake, which may take various forms, such as art, conversation, and thought, and which is experienced when the player approaches the activity in a spirit of disinterestedness, which Wilde associates with the aesthetic temperament (characterized by Kant and Friedrich Schiller) and the critical spirit (described by Arnold). Genuine play is characterized by spontaneity, joy, harmony, and freedom. False play occurs when the player is forced to play, is motivated to play by predetermined or ulterior benefits, or when the purpose of play is to dominate another person, in the sense of satisfying one’s own goals at another person’s expense. For Wilde, play is fundamentally social. The ideal player is not the Byronic hero—the isolated, brooding figure who alienates himself from society—but the Dandy, for whom society itself is a playground and life, including social life, is a work of Art. As a stage direction in An Ideal Husband suggests, to be genuinely playful one must be “on perfectly good terms with the world” (488).

Wilde’s critical essays, The Picture of Dorian Gray, the Society Comedies, and The Importance of Being Earnest, all articulate and dramatize both models and anti-models, i.e. true and false forms, of play. When the activities of play in Art, Criticism, and Society become subordinated to Utilitarian ideals, instrumental purposes, and the demands of public opinion, they afford no evidence of any freedom of the play-spirit. They become anti-models of play. Anti-models, Wilde shows, are a spurious version of play; they retain the form but not the essence or spirit of genuine play. Anti-models of play, Wilde shows, arrest the development of oneself and the race. The predominance of
anti-models and the loss of the genuine play-spirit, Vivian shows in "The Decay of Lying," is the "true decadence" from which the nineteenth century suffered (978). True models of play “make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change” (CA 1058). True models of play create new and beautiful forms of expression through which people may realize their full potential. In play, we experience our faculties as free, spontaneous, and independent of compulsion or external demands. Play, Wilde shows, is the most meaningful of people’s activities and is the central element of culture.

In his Commonplace Notebook, Wilde describes progress as “the instinct for self-preservation in humanity, the desire to affirm one’s own essence,” and “the desire for higher freedom” (Smith and Helfand 110). When Wilde’s works are approached in the context of play, we can see that both the form and content are concerned with how to preserve or create a “space” for oneself amidst a society that values conformity and obligation to others over the development of Individualism. Wilde follows Schiller in showing that aesthetic play most fully provides this experience of a free space in which a person can actualize his or her own potential. Conversely, he shows that to demote the values of imaginative play, whether in art, criticism, or social life, has grave consequences. Individually, our sense of being and potential for self-development is impoverished; collectively we become a degraded race. Insofar then, as my approach to Wilde’s works highlights an aesthetic of play, it is also about a range of related issues: art, criticism and society, language, thought and culture, self and other. And it should be
noted that despite Wilde’s conventional reliance on the masculine pronoun, the premise of his Individualism is that it is a latent potential in every person.

A “serious” study of Wilde’s concept of play would entail a survey of certain theories of play in the nineteenth century and Johan Huizinga’s seminal account of play, *Homo Ludens*. The following discussion does not set out to be an exhaustive account of play theory. Instead, I have chosen four cultural critics who each explores play from a different angle: Friedrich Schiller treats play in the aesthetic realm; Matthew Arnold discusses the free play of the mind as a form of Criticism; Herbert Spencer explores play in the context of evolution; and Johan Huizinga analyses play in its social context. Writing in 1938, Huizinga, it may be argued, offers his pronouncements too late to be of use to a study of Wilde, but Huizinga’s treatment of play as a cultural phenomenon combined with his historical approach can help us see how far Victorian culture bears the character of play.

My goal is not to establish direct lines of influence on Wilde, but rather to outline a significant continuum of speculation on the cultural value of play. Many ideas that these writers express will come into play, as one might say, throughout my discussion of Wilde. Here, my survey is quite selective: I focus only on those aspects of their thought which serve to highlight the difference between models and anti-models of play in Art, Criticism, and Society.
Friedrich Schiller: The Play of the Aesthetic

Schiller’s famous aphorism, “man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays” (107) sets the precedent for many discussions of play in the nineteenth century. The distinctive feature of Schiller’s treatise, On the Aesthetic Education of Man (1795), is his claim that the capacity for aesthetic play is central to the development of a fully realized humanity. Play, Schiller believes, liberates people in the fullest sense of the word. In play people are free to express, shape, and create of their own accord; they realize the potential to exercise any or all of their faculties without exclusion (153).

The basis of Schiller’s treatise is that people’s psyches have become fragmented; this fragmentation takes the general form of a separation and opposition of two mental powers or “drives”—the sense-drive (stofftrieb) and the form-drive (formtrieb), which reflects a separation of sense and reason and the physical and the moral capacities. Each of these drives exerts a constraint upon the psyche; when one drive dominates, it is experienced as a form of compulsion. Only when both drives act in concert, in complete harmony with one another, do they begin to truly “play” and awaken the third drive—the play-drive (spieltrieb). An example of the difference between compulsion (false play) and true play is offered in Letter 14:

When we embrace with passion someone who deserves our contempt, we are painfully aware of the compulsion of nature. When we feel hostile towards another who compels our esteem, we are painfully aware of the compulsion of reason. But once he has at the same time engaged our affection and won our
esteem, then both the compulsion of feeling and the compulsion of reason disappear and we begin to love him, i.e., we begin to play with both our affection and our esteem. (97)

Schiller’s distinction between false and true play was inspired by Kant’s distinction between practical and aesthetic contexts. In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant argues that in situations requiring action and practical choice, our approach is governed by “interest,” whether the interest springs from natural inclination or what the claims of morality require. Kant argues that this precludes a “free judgment” of the objects concerned. However, aesthetic pleasure is a “free delight” since “no interest, whether of sense or reason, extorts approval” (49). Intrinsic to Schiller’s idea of play is the contemplative attitude described by Kant, a distancing of the mind from compulsion and practical preoccupation, endowing play with a capacity to release our various powers which are normally constricted to utilitarian and practical aims.

How do we cultivate this play drive? Schiller’s answer is through an aesthetic education. The aesthetic, Schiller argues, most closely models the ideal of play. Schiller links the play-drive explicitly with artistic expression and the appreciation of beauty when he writes: “With beauty man shall only play, and it is with beauty only that he shall play” (107). Schiller analyses Art as a model of play in which form and content unite, but what I wish to focus on here is not the properties of Art itself, but the experience of the aesthetic. Schiller draws upon Kant’s articulation of Beauty as a certain kind of pleasure; its essence is disinterestedness. In contemplation of the beautiful, Schiller argues, the psyche is freed from the constraints of the other two drives:
Beauty produces no particular result whatsoever, neither for the understanding nor for the will. It accomplishes no particular purpose, neither intellectual nor moral; it discovers no individual truth, helps us perform no individual duty and is, in short, as unfitted to provide a firm basis for character as to enlighten understanding. (147)

Only the aesthetic mode of perception makes people whole, because both their natures must be in harmony if they are to achieve wholeness (215). Schiller argues that people whose play-drive is awakened by art will naturally seek to have their play-drive awakened by other objects. In this way, the appreciation of beauty gives people a social character (215). Genuine play, according to Schiller, promotes harmony within the individual and society, for to aesthetic spectators, the world presents itself, not as something to be used and exploited for their personal ends, which is a form of false play, but as something to be appreciated and enjoyed in its own right, as a continual stimulus to the free play of the mind, and to the powers of aesthetic perception and imagination, which are the common property of all people. In the Aesthetic State, Schiller believes people will confront others only as objects of free play (215). Schiller’s aesthetic is notably paradoxical, for his aesthetic education does ultimately imply a beneficent, and, we might say, practical outcome for society, but an “interest” in such outcomes cannot be a motive for genuine play. The play-spirit, Schiller argues, is cultivated only when we forgo our instrumental attitude towards the world.

According to Schiller, the play-spirit has been corrupted by Utilitarian ideals. Play implies a frame of mind and a mode of being which contrasts with the proprietary
and competitive attitudes which characterize false play. Schiller blamed the specialization of intellectual disciplines for channeling and thus restricting the development of people's faculties. "The various faculties" he wrote, "appear as separate in practice as they are distinguished by the psychologist in theory, and we see not merely individuals, but whole classes of men, developing but one part of their potentialities, while of the rest, as in stunted growths, only vestigial traces remain" (33). Schiller does not deny the advances in society that had ensued from specialization, but he contends, "however much the world as a whole may benefit through this fragmentary specialization of human powers" it must be wrong "if the cultivation of individual powers involves the sacrifice of wholeness" (43). Modern governments, he argued, themselves divided and bureaucratic, reinforced this trend by treating the individual as a tool valued according to his or her usefulness in fulfilling their aims: "When the community makes his office the measure of the man; when in one of its citizens it prizes nothing but memory, in another a mere tabularizing intelligence, in a third only mechanical skill. . . can we wonder that the remaining aptitudes of the psyche are neglected in order to give undivided attention to the one which will bring honour and profit?" (35-37). Schiller suggests that in order to overcome the utilitarian aims and the limited expression of people's faculties which false models of play have incurred, true models of play are needed: "It must be open to us to restore by means of a higher Art the totality of our nature which the arts themselves have destroyed" (43). The "arts themselves" which Schiller refers to here are the arts of specialization and are thus anti-models of play. The "higher Arts" are what I call models of play.
In their introduction to Schiller's *Letters*, Wilkinson and Willoughby observe, “it has been rare for anyone to point as firmly as did Oscar Wilde in the direction of one of Schiller's major achievements” (clxv). In his speech delivered in New York entitled, “The English Renaissance of Art,” (1882), Wilde points to Schiller’s major achievement in Art as the adjustment of “the balance between form and feeling” (126). Although many parallels exist between Schiller's views of art and the views expressed by such writers as Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Pater, Wilkinson and Willoughby argue that Schiller was widely misinterpreted and largely unacknowledged; thus it is difficult to trace the extent of Schiller’s influence on English writers. Schiller’s thought was handed on to the English public primarily through Thomas Carlyle’s essays, his review of the *Letters* in *Fraser's Magazine*, and his *Life of Schiller* (1825). Carlyle’s appraisal was favourable, but there were significant omissions and false emphases, which, according to Wilkinson and Willoughby, played no small part in delaying appreciation of Schiller’s theories in English speaking countries (ci). In particular, despite Schiller’s careful qualifications, Carlyle translated Schiller’s *spieltrieb* by referring to it as the “sport-impulse” (*Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 127).

Another obstacle to the appreciation of Schiller’s play theory is the term “aesthetic” (Wilkinson clviii). In the same lecture, Wilde told his New York audience that for “nine-tenths of the British public” the word simply meant “the French for affectation or the German for a dado” (119). This version had been popularized in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Patience* (1881), in which it was made synonymous with “idle chatter of a transcendental kind,” and in George Du Maurier’s caricatures of the aesthete
Jelly Postlethwaite in *Punch* magazine. It is important to distinguish between Aestheticism as a popular movement, an obsession with dress and decoration, and the “aesthetic” as a philosophic concept. Wilde’s critical writings retain the fullness of meaning which Schiller accorded to the aesthetic: of the work of Art as a whole in which the play-drive realizes itself; and of the temperament which strives to see all objects under their condition of Beauty. Nevertheless, the idea that Art might offer us something quite distinct from utilitarian satisfactions or from the fulfillment of moral demands lies behind some of Wilde’s most perplexing paradoxes. For Wilde, as for Schiller and for Kant, beauty takes on a meaning quite distinct from any notion of the “good.” Wilde equates “good” with a concern for middle class respectability. When Art is created with this goal in mind, it becomes an anti-model of play. The distinction lies behind Gilbert’s claim that all art is “immoral” (CA 1039).

**Matthew Arnold: Criticism at Play**

In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Arnold expresses an ideal of culture that bears a marked resemblance to Schiller’s play-drive. For Arnold, Culture is not just something we can acquire or possess; it is not simply a repository of collective critical insights that can be adopted by individuals, but, like Schiller’s play-drive, is an active force in its own right, striving to be realized. As Collini observes, one indication of this is the frequency with which Arnold uses the word with an active verb (85). In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold writes: culture *endeavours* to see and learn, and to *make* what it sees and learn prevail. More significantly, culture *conceives* of perfection as a “harmonious expansion
of all the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature, and is not consistent with the over-development of any one power at the expense of the rest” (33). The English, Arnold argued, could not achieve the perfection of culture so long as they emphasized one side of their nature at the expense of the other, so long as thought was stifled by practical considerations and served ulterior interests.

Like Schiller, Arnold saw people as divided against themselves and the social order. Famous for his felicitous terms, Arnold identified “Hebraism” and “Hellenism” as the two great traditions of thought and feeling that had influenced the Western world, but which are also two tendencies constantly struggling for dominance within each individual. Like Wilde, Arnold is not always consistent in his use of terms but the major points are clear. “The governing idea of Hellenism is spontaneity of consciousness; that of Hebraism, strictness of conscience” (88, italics in original). Hebraism implies an idea of duty, of moral rules, of the subjugation of the self; its chief concern is to act rightly; the emphasis here is on acting or “doing.” Hellenism, by contrast, concerns itself more with knowledge and beauty, with the play of ideas and the charm of form; the emphasis is on being and becoming. Hebraism attacks wrongdoing, moral laxness, and weakness of will; Hellenism attacks ignorance, ugliness, and rigidity of mind. In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold’s characterizations of Hellenism are far more enthusiastic and favourable than those of Hebraism. This is, in part, because Hellenism is what is lacking in his audience. But ultimately, Arnold asserts, society needs a balance between these two forces. Since both are essential for the full development of the human spirit, the two
must achieve a genuine harmony. Arnold's ideal is one of unity and wholeness rather than a selective, one-sided play of energy. In his view,

The bent of Hellenism is to follow, with flexible activity, the whole play of the universal order, to be apprehensive of missing any part of it, of sacrificing one part to another, to slip away from resting in this or that intimation of it, however capital. An unclouded clearness of mind, an unimpeded play of thought, is what this bent drives at. (88)

Arnold's attempts to cultivate a free play of the mind on all things, leads us not into the territory of Art, but of Criticism. At the heart of Arnold's essay is the desire to cultivate in his audience a frame of mind which is both critical and receptive, able to recognize and appreciate a new idea or form. Criticism implies a mode of thought needed to "create a current of true and fresh ideas" (142) which will serve the cause of perfection and which Arnold found missing in Victorian life. Arnold emphasized "being" over "doing": he was not so much concerned with specific policies and doctrines as with the attitudes they expressed: "What the English public cannot understand is that a man is a just and fruitful object of contemplation much more by virtue of what spirit he is of than by virtue of what system of doctrine he elaborates" (Letters 1: 208).

For Arnold, Criticism is a form of play and he makes a distinction between true and false forms of Criticism. "Real Criticism," he argues, is essentially the exercise of curiosity, the "disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects for its own sake" (Selected Prose 141). Criticism "obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and
everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever” (141). When criticism subserves ulterior demands, when it conforms to some moral, religious or political purpose, it becomes “false to its own nature” (Selected Prose 142). The key distinction between true and false forms of criticism, says Arnold, is “disinterestedness.” Arnold’s explanation of disinterestedness has come under much misunderstanding, perhaps because of its aesthetic flavour. True criticism is characterized by the same free play of the faculties that is experienced in contemplating objects of Beauty:

And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called the “practical view of things,” by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, which perhaps ought often to be attached to them, which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism really has nothing to do with. (142)

Those “ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas” that he is urging criticism to keep aloof from were precisely the kinds of habits, the false forms of play, which in his view narrowed and stultified the intellectual life of Victorian England. In Culture and Anarchy, Arnold argues that a crucial misunderstanding occurs “when we criticise by the help of culture some imperfect doing or other, to have in our eye some well-known rival plan of doing, which we want to serve and recommend” (6). When the aim is to “give the
victory to some rival fetish” one “play[s] false to that culture which it is our very purpose
to recommend” (8).

Arnold suggests that for the development of culture, genuine, playful criticism
must prevail. In this way (as in others) he sets the stage for Wilde’s critical dialogues.
Wilde shows that criticism can and must be playful, but he adds a dialectical twist; by
providing models of perfection for people to follow, play can be a form of criticism.
Among the artists, Wilde shows, it is the critical faculty that invents new forms. Like
Arnold, Wilde conceives of criticism as a mode of thought, which he calls the critical
spirit, but Wilde goes further than Arnold in focusing on the creative function of the
critical spirit and treating criticism itself as a form of art that models play. By
emphasizing the imaginative and subjective nature of criticism, Wilde shows that when
the critical spirit operates in the aesthetic realm it yields the fullest expression, and thus
highest realization of people’s faculties. Criticism, he shows, is even more creative than
art. Wilde also goes further than Arnold in divorcing criticism from practical concerns.
Having learned the best that is known and thought in the world, the goal of the critic,
Wilde argues, is not to create but to contemplate. The critic who contemplates, and does
nothing, becomes a model of play.

Herbert Spencer: The Evolution of Play

Wilde’s critical writings employ many metaphors and arguments drawn from
evolutionary theory. What I wish to focus on here is the evolutionary twist that Spencer
gives to the argument that play, rather than practical action, is a sign of an advanced civilization.

As a play theorist Spencer is best known for his “Surplus Energy Theory.” His theory has generally been reduced to the idea that people play because they have an excess of energy. If people expend all their energy in trying to secure the needs for survival they will not play. But to limit our understanding of Spencer’s view of play to this “surplus energy theory” which emphasizes compulsion, an imitative instinct and a competitive nature is to neglect the aesthetic nature of play.

In his introduction to a section entitled “Aesthetic Sentiments” in *Principles of Psychology* (1872), Spencer claims: “Many years ago I met with a quotation from a German author to the effect that the aesthetic sentiments originate from the play-impulse. I do not remember the name of the author; and if any reasons were given for the statement or any inference drawn from it, I cannot recall them. But the statement itself has remained with me, as being one which if not literally true, is yet the adumbration of a truth” (693). It is generally accepted that this German author was Friedrich Schiller and in his discussion of the aesthetic sentiments Spencer shows that play and art are the same activity because “neither subserves, in any direct way, the processes conducive to life” and neither refers to “ulterior benefits--the proximate ends are their only ends” (694).

Because they are not directly related to the struggle for survival, all forms of play are “superfluous activities,” but Spencer distinguishes between lower (false) forms of play and higher (true) forms of play. False play is primitive; it is motivated by compulsion and the desire to achieve domination. In this type of play the player
instinctively imitates the competitive actions normally required for the struggle for survival. For example:

The sports of boys, chasing one another, wrestling, making prisoners, obviously gratify in a partial way the predatory instincts. . . . For no matter what the game, the satisfaction is in achieving victory—in getting the better of an antagonist. This love of conquest, so dominant in all creatures because it is the correlative of success in the struggle for existence, gets gratification from a victory at chess in the absence of ruder victories. Nay, we may even see that playful conversation is characterized by the same element. . . . Through a wit-combat there runs the effort to obtain mental supremacy. (534)

Such superfluous activity transcends into higher or genuine forms of play only when there is a “manifest union of feeling with action” (630), only when there is a connection between the desire for pleasure and the activity. For Spencer, genuine play is a conscious, pleasurable experience, directed by the sole desire for pleasure. According to Spencer, pleasure, or what he calls “aesthetic feelings” linger in consciousness and are dwelt upon for their own sake, “their nature being such that their continuous presence in consciousness is agreeable” (535).

Using play as an example, Spencer shows that the capacity for aesthetic pleasure, like other mental capacities, evolves from the simple to the complex. At the risk of oversimplifying Spencer’s taxonomy, we can note that the lower forms of pleasure are derived from an external or material stimulus. Higher forms of pleasure are found in the creation of works of art because the stimulus for creation is remote from simple
sensation. The highest form of pleasure, Spencer argues, does not require activity at all, but is experienced in contemplation. In other words the highest form of pleasure, or aesthetic feeling, is experienced in the free play of the mind. Aesthetic feelings arising from contemplation are “especially gratuitous,” says Spencer, for “neither a beneficial end, nor an act conducive to that end, nor a sentiment prompting such acts, forms an element in the aesthetic feeling” (627). Spencer argues that although these aesthetic sentiments are secondary, or less essential for survival, their appearance is the mark of progress for they appear only in civilized life: “so long as there exists a strong craving arising from bodily wants and unsatisfied lower instincts, consciousness is not allowed to dwell on those states that accompany the actions of higher faculties: the cravings continually exclude them” (647).

Spencer’s theory arrives at the same destination as Schiller’s Aesthetic State when he claims that as civilization progresses, (i.e. becomes less competitive and less concerned with practical needs for survival) the aesthetic sentiments take on a social character. As the capacity for pleasure evolves, Spencer argues, it will extend itself to other “higher” mental faculties such as sympathy and altruistic sentiments: “When, however, a long discipline of social life, decreasingly predatory and increasingly peaceful, has allowed the sympathies and resulting altruistic sentiments to develop, these, too, begin to demand spheres of superfluous activity” (649). In other words, as their capacity for play evolves, people become better adapted to their social state.

As his theory of the Aesthetic Sentiments illustrates, Spencer believed the mind comprised a variety of faculties that are the product of the interaction of many
generations of individuals with their environment, both natural and social. Spencer argued that individual consciousness cannot be simply explained by the experiences of the individual; certain ideas transcend the experience of the individual and yet are derived through heredity from the experience of the species. That Wilde was influenced by Spencer’s theory of the development of the mind and consciousness is evident from his Oxford Notebooks that contain many references to Herbert Spencer. In one entry he describes Spencer and Kant as the philosophers who “carry on the line of dialectic” by “returning innate ideas to the mind” (120). And during Wilde’s visit to Amherst, Nova Scotia in 1882, a reporter from the Morning Herald recorded that Wilde spoke “of sociology, [and] of Herbert Spencer, whom he had read and admired greatly. He found nothing in [Spencer’s] work or in any other work on evolution which differed from Plato and Aristotle” (Mikhail 107). These suggestive pairings of science and aesthetics lie behind the many metaphors of evolution by which Wilde makes a connection between self-development and the development of the race. Spencer’s theory of racially acquired characteristics, Gilbert argues in “The Critic as Artist,” provides an evolutionary basis for the importance of “doing nothing.” Similarly, in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” Wilde eschews concern for practical action arguing that evolution “is the law of life” (1101), and moves towards Individualism. In both “The Critic as Artist” and “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” Wilde draws upon Spencer’s theories to show that play, with its art and artifice, is, paradoxically, an authentic human stance.
Johan Huizinga: Society at Play

Written in 1938, Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* remains a seminal account of the relation of play to culture. The fundamental thesis of Huizinga’s study is that “culture arises in the form of play” (46) and “in the absence of the play-spirit civilisation is impossible” (101). In focusing on the relation of play to culture, Huizinga examines play in its concrete and social manifestations.

Huizinga describes play as a “well-defined quality of action which is different from ordinary life” (4). It is a stepping out of “real” life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own. He identifies a number of elements which characterize this special quality of play. Play he notes, “is free, is in fact freedom” (8). It is a voluntary activity: “Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it” (7). Like Schiller, Arnold, and Spencer, Huizinga describes play as disinterested; “it stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites”; it “interpolates itself as a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there” (9).

Another characteristic is play’s secludedness, its limitedness: “it is ‘played out’ within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning” (9). Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is “over,” although once played, it can assume a fixed form as a cultural phenomenon and can be repeated at any time. Play’s limitation as to space suggests the notion of a “playground.” Any material or conceptual “space” can be transformed into a playground; for Wilde, the stage and the dinner table especially. As Huizinga notes, “The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the
screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (10).

All social forms of play, Huizinga suggests, fall into two categories: a contest for something, or a representation of something such as a performance or exhibition. But even where such forms are identified, the qualities of play may be absent. How completely an activity embodies and embraces the essential qualities and characteristics of the "play-spirit," determines the difference between true play and false play.

Genuine play is marked by the spirit of "playing together." Playing together has an "antithetical character" but this does not necessarily mean "contending" or "agonistic" (47). Only false play is characterized by a desire for power or a will to dominate (50). Play is characterized by tension and uncertainty; there is always the question "will it come off?" But when the passion to win obliterates the levity proper to genuine play, the play-spirit is lost (47). Similarly, there is "something at stake" in play but this "something" is not the material result of play, "not the mere fact that the ball is in the hole, but the ideal fact that the game is a success or has been successfully concluded" (49). In other words, genuine play is played for its own sake. Cheating as a means of winning a game robs the action of its play-character because the essence of play is that the rules be kept, that it be fair play (52). Finally, play tends to promote the formation of social groupings or "clubs," but when these groups become characterized by sectarianism, intolerance or suspicion, they lose their play-spirit; their sense of humour, decency and
fair play (205). True play is characterized by a spirit that strives for honour, dignity, superiority, and beauty (75).

When Huizinga turns his eye towards forms of play in the nineteenth century, he finds them lacking a genuine spirit of play. Huizinga observes, as did Arnold, that the nineteenth century seems to leave little room for play:

[Even] the great currents of its thought, however looked at, were all inimical to the play-factor in social life. Neither liberalism nor socialism offered it any nourishment. Experimental and analytical science, philosophy, reformism, Church and State, economics were all pursued in deadly earnest in the 19th century. Even art and letters... seemed to give up their age-old association with play as something not quite respectable. Realism, Naturalism, Impressionism and the rest of that dull catalogue of literary and pictorial coteries were all emptier of the play-spirit than any of the earlier styles had ever been... Never had an age taken itself with more portentous seriousness. Culture ceased to be “played”. Outward forms were no longer intended to give the appearance, the fiction, if you like, of a higher, ideal mode of life. (192)

Huizinga’s observations on Victorian society can help us understand why Wilde rejects the spirit of earnestness which characterized his society and his attempts, in his critical writings, to integrate the concept of play into that of culture. Huizinga’s analysis of social forms of play also provides a framework for treating themes of play in Wilde’s fictional texts. In particular, the characters in the Society Comedies and The Importance
of Being Earnest can be seen to engage in both contests and performance games which take the form of models and anti-models of play.

Oscar Wilde At Play

A stage direction in An Ideal Husband describes Lord Goring as “the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought.” This study presents Wilde as such a philosopher—of play, showing that play is inseparable from Wilde’s notions of progress and what it means to realize the perfection of one’s personality. Only by developing the play-spirit Wilde shows in “The Critic as Artist”, can we realize “the life that has for its aim not doing but being, and not being merely, but becoming” (1041 italics in original). Of course Wilde’s works themselves are testimony to a playful element in Victorian culture. His was also the age of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll for example. What distinguishes Wilde’s contribution to our understanding of play is the performative nature of his texts. In each chapter I treat Wilde’s texts as a model of the play-spirit and establish the ludic nature of these texts as a strategic response to the dull earnestness of his age.

Taking the form of a conversation so stylized as to become a work of art, “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist” model the creative, dynamic, interactive and innovative element of play. The characters show that when we approach life with a genuine spirit of play, the activities of Art, Criticism, and Social Life can be a source of pleasure and possibility.9
In “The Decay of Lying” Vivian’s plan to revive the importance of “lying” stems from the loss of the play-spirit in matters of truth and taste. Vivian observes that in matters of Art, Victorians have forsaken imagination for fact, and a love of beauty for utilitarian concerns. My first chapter discusses the principles of Vivian’s “new aesthetics” in terms of models and anti-models of play in Art. The first principle of Vivian’s “new aesthetics” is that “Art never expresses anything but herself” (987). For Art to be a genuine model of play, the artist must be free to create an object of beauty independent of concerns for practical outcomes, or factual representation. Vivian’s second principle, that “all bad art” comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals” (991), defines Victorian “realism” as an anti-model of play which is dominated by an “imitative instinct”; it takes its fundamental reference from outside itself and is in turn evaluated according to some sphere other than the play sphere of art itself. Having established Art as a completely separate and independent sphere, Vivian proceeds, paradoxically, to show the interplay of life and art with his third principle, “Life imitates Art.” In doing so, he affirms Huizinga’s thesis that culture develops in and as play.

My second chapter explores models and anti-models of play in criticism. In “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde carries Vivian’s aesthetics into the sphere of criticism. Gilbert does not call criticism a “lie,” but he does question our assumptions about the nature of its truths and its fidelity to representing the work of art it criticizes. Gilbert presents his own model of criticism as a subjective, imaginative and aesthetic activity. The true critic, he shows, stands in the same relation to art as the artist does to his or her materials.
When criticism is characterized by a genuine play spirit, it takes pleasure in the “free play of the mind” for its own sake; it develops along its own lines and according to its own logic and presents itself in many forms. In this way, the object of the critic, which Gilbert describes in his famous revision of Arnold’s dictum, is to “is to see the object as in itself it really is not.”

This chapter also explores the critic’s “influence” on culture. When Gilbert claims it is criticism that “makes culture possible” he affirms by anticipation Huizinga’s thesis that in the “absence of the play-spirit civilization is impossible” (101). Drawing upon theories of evolution and the principle of Heredity, Gilbert shows that the development of the race depends on the development of the individual. Gilbert believes the imagination and the critical spirit are innate in the individual and are the result of the accumulated experience of the race, which is inherited by each new generation. By developing the critical spirit, Gilbert argues, “we shall be able to realise, not merely our own lives, but the collective life of the race” (1040).

Gilbert’s emphasis on the interplay of self and other suggests that true criticism takes the form of a conversation. Both “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist” take the form of artful dialogues and in these two chapters I examine how the form of the essays illuminates Wilde’s aesthetic.

Although many critics see “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” as a bland, disjointed essay, my third chapter shows how Wilde retains the playful exhibitionism of the critical dialogues. By playing with the language of politics, philanthropy, capitalism, and art criticism, Wilde undermines their practical aims and ulterior motives, showing
that each, by emphasizing what people have rather than what they are, is a form of false
play and each leads to incomplete, repressed and false modes of self-realization. Wilde
develops Schiller’s theory that to genuinely play a person must be “at one” with him or
herself, and only in play can people realize a full and authentic expression of themselves.
The well known paradox of this essay is that Wilde advocates Socialism as a means of
realizing Individualism. But more than that, I argue, Wilde shows that if Socialism is to
become truly “humanized,” by which he means “hellenised” in Arnold’s sense, then
Socialism itself must take an aesthetic form.

Chapters five and six look at *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Wilde’s Society
Comedies respectively. In these chapters I treat the characters as models and anti-models
of play. The cast of characters, I argue, presents only two models of genuine play: Lord
Henry Wotton in *The Picture Dorian Gray*, and Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband*.

“The good we get from art is not what we learn from it; it is what we become
through it,” Wilde wrote in his *Commonplace Notebook* (Smith and Helfand 51). *The
Picture of Dorian Gray* dramatizes Wilde’s aesthetic of the self and other. In Wilde’s
view, play is a manifestation of the plasticity of one’s personality, of the self’s capacity to
create itself. The cornerstone of Wilde’s aesthetic is that the development of new modes
of expression enables us to have new feelings, more powerful, more refined, and more
self-aware. In being able to express ourselves we transform ourselves. Dorian’s
murderous pursuits and his own self-destruction can be read as a failure to develop an
aesthetic contemplative stance, in other words, the aristocratic pose of Lord Henry, which
is essential for creative and authentic self-expression. One manifestation of his
impoverished play-spirit is the literal-mindedness with which he puts into practice all of Lord Henry’s aphorisms. Similarly, Dorian approaches his portrait in an imitative rather than a critical spirit. As a result his self-development takes on a form of ruthless narcissism in which he tries to play out his desire for complete mastery of self-expression in sphere of action. This is a false form of play, unlike the play of Lord Henry, who talks throughout the novel but never does anything.

With its plot of fatal attraction, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* bears some resemblance to Wilde’s intensely poetic and symbolist drama, *Salomé*. The highly charged eroticism of the play creates what San Juan has accurately characterized as a “universal atmosphere of gratuitousness” (126). It seems tempting to characterize Salomé, with her sterile beauty and her detached manner as a model of play, but genuine play is entirely missing from the drama. Because the characters in *Salomé* are mainly of negative interest to a discussion of play as I conceive of the term, I have excluded it from my study.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian observes that “the canons of good society are, or should be, the same as the canons of art. Form is absolutely essential to it. It should have the dignity of a ceremony, as well as its unreality” (112). One might say that Wilde’s Society Comedies dramatize such an aesthetic of society, but ultimately the curtain of each play closes on a society which is revealed to be an anti-model of play. The ceremonies of society and the games the characters play manifest the form but not the essence of true play. On the surface, Wilde’s comedies present a spectacle of play. The stages are dominated by stylistic excess, exaggeration, and artificiality. The society has
all the characteristics of a play sphere; it is seemingly set apart from practical, dull concerns of “ordinary” life, and, as in a ceremony, the characters’ behaviour and manners are guided by rule and convention. Through their highly stylized conversation, the characters seem all talk and no action. But much of the comedy of the characters derives from their static nature; they are locked in a pose without the attending spirit of playfulness. In this chapter I argue that despite appearances to the contrary, each character, with the exception of Lord Goring, engages in some form of false play. Their fear of public consequences, their concern to always appear in a moral light, and for some characters, the desire for material gain and dominance over others, lends an earnestness to their games which contrasts with the playful form of the dramas themselves.

Critics have noted that in the Society Comedies Wilde’s dandies all find themselves in danger of losing their position as dandies through their involvement in the plot’s action. Lord Darlington exceeds the boundary of propriety when he professes his love to a married woman; Lord Illingworth’s gentlemanly status is undone when it is revealed that he has fathered an illegitimate child; and although I will suggest that An Ideal Husband can be staged so that Lord Goring maintains his dandified pose right to the end, many critics and productions of this play portray him as lapsing into a moral and conventionally sexist position. Ian Gregor, who writes with real insight into Wilde’s playfulness, suggests that it is with The Importance of Being Earnest that Wilde finally creates a world in which the dandy is master because it is a world of the dandy’s own making (512).
Chapter six presents *The Importance of Being Earnest* as the culmination (and final expression) of Wilde’s play-spirit. In this chapter I look at the way in which Wilde creates a play-sphere completely removed from “real” life, and how his ludic strategies model a means of creating a space in which one can feel free and be on good terms with oneself and with others.

In his critical essays, his novel, and his comedies, Wilde, as Shaw notes, “plays with everything.” “Such a feat scandalizes the Englishman,” says Shaw, “who can no more play with wit and philosophy than he can with a football or a cricket bat. He works at both, and has the consolation, if he cannot make people laugh, of being the best cricketer and footballer in the world” (*The Saturday Review*, 12 January 1895). Clearly, Wilde’s claims about the centrality of play and the modes of irony in which he models an aristocratic pose, were designed to provoke the philistine who equated progress with industrialism and materialism. And today, despite the contemporary vogue for Wilde, his emphasis on aesthetic contemplation can still seem unorthodox (perhaps even unmanly) when popular notions of play are characterized by slogans such as “play hard” and “no fear” which connote an extremely direct and physical experience, and when “the arts” are called upon to be held accountable to the public purse. By emphasizing Wilde’s playful aesthetic, my approach runs somewhat “against the grain” of contemporary literary critics who insist that art cannot be divorced from its social context and that its value depends on what it contributes to the good of society. In “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert claims that the real artist moves “from form to thought” (1052). I approach the formal elements and word-play of Wilde’s texts in the same way. I focus on the works themselves—before the notoriety of the trials—as they take up questions of aesthetics and self-realization. I am
not trying to impose a rigid template on Wilde’s work, but to highlight a cluster of
essential characteristics and values which give shape to a diverse selection of his work.

As an object of critical practice Wilde is being treated very “seriously” and recent
critical studies have contributed greatly to our understanding of the man, his works, and
his culture. Because Wilde and his ideas themselves defy easy categorization, studies of
his work have in turn provoked reflection on our own categories for interpreting and
making sense of ourselves and our history. Collectively, critical studies give us a picture
of the many roles Wilde played and the poses he assumed. But taken individually,
specialism is sometimes achieved at the cost of spirit. As John Wilson Foster observes:
“it is possible to revise our perception of Wilde by demoting the Victorian aesthete in him
and promoting the anti-English, wittily subversive feminist and anti-colonialist in him”
(340). But such revisions, he warns, can threaten to backfire, and Foster’s own account
“reveals Wilde as a lifelong champion of that individualism that rejects the primacy of
causes such as nationalism, Irish or otherwise” (340). Similarly, while studies of Wilde
have been central for constructing and studying the discourse on gay male sexuality, (and
such studies, as Laurence Danson suggests, have the advantage of making Wilde seem
historically more consequential) we risk reducing the significance of Wilde’s aestheticism
if we limit it to a mask for his homosexuality. Perhaps more importantly, we risk losing a
sense of Wilde’s true subversiveness in relation to his time and our own, as Gary
Schmidgall (1994) does when he speculates that if Wilde were alive today, he would live
in San Francisco as a book commentator, be staunchly PC (politically correct), deplore
the vulgarity of celebrities and the lack of commitment to curing Aids. And just as Wilde
recycled his epigrams, Schmidgall assures us, he would surely recycle his garbage (379-90). This is a portrait of Wilde as neither critic nor artist. Just as his aphorisms are today taken out of context and used to promote investment services and other products ("nothing succeeds like excess"), when missing the context of his aestheticism, the truths of Wilde’s works can be degraded into facts.

Nevertheless, there are some critics who have explored Wilde’s works in the context of play. In The Wreath of Wild Olive (1997), Mihai Spariosu devotes his final chapter to establishing a context for play in nineteenth century criticism but he limits his discussion of Wilde to “The Critic as Artist” and “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.” His main emphasis, however, is with the nature of play itself as a mode of “liminality” which offers an alternative to Western models of power. In Cosmopolitan Criticism (1996), Julia Prewitt Brown entitles her introductory chapter “Wilde’s Play Drive,” but after noting in one sentence that Wilde, like Schiller, understood relations between life and art in terms of play, she drops play as a concept in favour of “cosmopolitanism” and focuses her comparisons on Wilde and Walter Benjamin. In Frank McGuinness’ essay, provocatively entitled “The Spirit of Play in De Profundis,” he provides an alternative reading of Wilde’s prison letter by showing it is not the “act of a penitent at prayer. It is the act of a penitent as performer” (141). It is a play designed to elicit the response of a single audience member, Lord Alfred Douglas. But the dominant tone is one of grief, and the anxiety McGuinness notes in the letter surrounding Wilde’s sense that he is no longer an artist, points to my reason for leaving it out of my study and concluding with The Importance of Being Earnest. De Profundis is written by a man who is no longer on
good terms with the world. His capacity to adopt Lord Goring’s pose, to “stand in immediate relations to life,” to make it and so “master” it, had been played out to its end.

In “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert claims that he lives in “terror of not being misunderstood” (1016). And stage directions in *An Ideal Husband* inform the audience that Lord Goring “is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage” (488). Inevitably, any attempt to explicate Wilde’s work becomes an exercise in contradiction and inconsistency. The nature of the thesis is itself contradictory; for while I emphasize the “artefactual” features of Wilde’s criticism, I do mine the contents of the essays, the ideas expressed within, to establish a pattern of ideas in his work. While my thesis is, in part, an attempt to unify Wilde’s diverse literary achievement and suggest a coherent aesthetic, my goal is not to resolve the contradictions or explain away the paradoxes. Rather, I hope to retain the playful spirit that seeks to muse over, refine and clarify.
"The Decay of Lying": A Model of Art as Play

He may be lying in every word, but he is sincere in his style.

(G.K. Chesterton, “Oscar Wilde”)

... but the style too, which is that of the doctor rather than the explorer, is a style which I have long since learnt to abandon.

(Matthew Arnold, “On the Modern Element in Literature”)

In a letter written shortly after the publication of the “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde commented: “It is meant to bewilder the masses by its fantastic form; au fond it is of course serious” (Letters 236). While the bewildering effect of Vivian’s propositions is exemplified by the virtue he attaches to “lying” and the vulgarity he attaches to “truth” in a factual sense, the contents of the essay can be easily summarized. Simply stated, Vivian shows that lying, as an expression of the imagination, a faculty distinct from intellect and sense, is one expression of the play-spirit and achieves its highest form in Art. Art, Vivian demonstrates, belongs in the play-sphere and should not be judged by standards other than its own. The true artist, who creates works of beauty in the spirit of play—with imaginative freedom, spontaneity, and disinterestedness—provides models of perfection, which life, with its imitative instinct, tries to follow. Vivian rejects the premise that Art holds up the mirror to nature and to life. When the aim of art is to achieve an accurate representation of common, everyday reality, or to achieve practical ends, it leaves the
play-sphere. It becomes imitative rather than creative; the result is "vulgar, common, and uninteresting" (979). In the absence of the play-spirit, Vivian warns, "Art will become sterile, and beauty will pass from the land" (973). In a series of smartly phrased aphorisms, Vivian offers the principles of his "new aesthetics" for our contemplation: "Art never expresses anything but itself"; "All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals"; "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life"; while the final revelation is that "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" (991-992).

Nevertheless, there is a danger in over-emphasizing the paraphraseable contents of Wilde's essay. As R. J. Green suggests, "The Decay of Lying" "communicates as much by its style as by its content, as much by the poetry of its antitheses and paradoxes as by the prose of its arguments" (400). True, Vivian's ideas on the autonomy of art had already been explored by Kant and Schiller, and his theories draw upon the disdain for life and nature of writers from Gautier to Mallarmé, the disdain for common morality of Poe and Baudelaire, and the disdain for content of Verlaine and Whistler (Ellmann 284-5). But to dismiss Vivian as an unoriginal critic is to miss the significance of play itself. The value of the essay's stylized dialogue for our understanding of play is its modeling of how play occurs and the forms in which the play-spirit is expressed.

A reading of "The Decay of Lying" in light of the theories of play articulated by Schiller, Arnold, Spencer, and Huizinga, and an appreciation of "The Decay of Lying" itself as a model of play, can in turn illuminate Wilde's particular view of art. Through his own playful style of discourse, Vivian presents a view of art as a concrete expression
of the play-spirit, an idea which he shows has never been fully explored. When we emphasize the creative, imaginative nature of lying, we can see that Vivian does not limit his use of the term to refer to what is not fact, nor does he downplay the significance of Art because it is “not real.” To limit “lying” to the conceptual opposite of truth and to demand that Art be an accurate reflection of common experience is the result of our own reluctance to play with ideas-- a reluctance to venture willingly into the unknown, to entertain contradictory notions, and to contemplate ideas in new and novel ways. Vivian argues that only when art models play, only when it is characterized by spontaneity, disinterestedness, and an imaginative handling of everyday ideas, does art maintain a central role in the development of the individual and of culture.

Yeats was one of the first to hear “The Decay of Lying” when he was invited to Wilde’s for Christmas dinner in 1888. On that night, Yeats was amazed by Wilde’s “perfect sentences” which allegorized the victory of the imagination over all impeding circumstance and he would later follow Wilde in using the dialogue form (Ellmann 283). Here, the difference between Vivian’s essay, and the dialogue as a whole, must be marked. For behind the polished and excessively stylized dialogue, we discern the play-spirit in the bravura of the characters’ wit and the unexpected turns in the conversation. As a result of the interruptions, asides, and ironic commentary, Vivian’s original essay is transformed into a dazzling performance of the kind described by Huizinga, a “stepping out of common reality into a higher order” (Huizinga 13, italics in original). Cyril, in stepping through the terrace windows, leaves the world of nature and joins this higher order. He gives himself up to Vivian’s play of ideas and shows a willingness to accept
Vivian’s unique understanding of the terms presented for discussion, even if only temporarily. When Vivian asks if he has proved his theory that Life imitates Art to Cyril’s satisfaction, Cyril shows that he takes pleasure in the play of ideas for its own sake when he replies, “you have proved it to my dissatisfaction, which is better” (987). Behind his comment lies the suggestion that Vivian has not at all succeeded in proving his point along rational or scientific grounds, but this is even better, for it allows Cyril to be charmed by the sheer brilliance of the demonstration. For Cyril, who “wins” is secondary to the fact that the “game” has been successfully played out. Cyril shares with Vivian the victory of a new mode of thought and takes pleasure in moving beyond his initial point of view and contemplating a novel idea. Cyril proves to be a model interlocutor; he lays down the challenges, provoking Vivian’s playful embellishments. Their discussion proceeds in a play-like contest. As it happens, Vivian and Cyril are the names of Wilde’s two sons, adding to the sense that this contest is motivated by youthful curiosity and “whim” (971).

In this play-sphere of their own making, Vivian is “prepared to prove anything” (986). His increasingly excessive claims are marked by his extravagant disregard for the principles of reasoning and a love of his own voice. His ideas are presented and accepted without any background reasoning, and evidence, when it is offered, is outrageously fictionalized. The movement of the argument is not logical and progressive, but “in ever wider and more ambitious imaginative flights” (Connelly 97). As a conversationalist, Vivian gets carried away by his desire, not to convince, but to charm. He takes pleasure in the sound of his utterances for their own sake, repeating an aphorism merely “to have
the pleasure of quoting myself” (991). The points raised for discussion are rarely sustained; rather, ideas are appreciated and contemplated like works of Art; each “creates an incomparable and unique effect, and, having done so, passes on to other things” (DL 986). The dialogue is brought to an end not when a logical conclusion is reached, but when Vivian feels they “have talked long enough” (992). This is a fundamental feature of play; it “interpolates itself as a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there,” and as such, play “presents itself as an intermezzo, an interlude in our daily lives” (Huizinga 9, italics in original).

As the characters exhibit the will to play, testing ideas and taking pleasure in the possibilities that arise, the fundamental attitudes of play emerge: the play-spirit is characterized by a certain spontaneity and a willingness to explore the unknown, to break free from stereotyped and habitual modes of thought, and to push ideas beyond the limits of everyday reason and logic. And yet, paradoxically, the characters are venturing into well-traveled territory--Victorian art criticism. The playfulness emerges in the essay’s style--the art of imaginatively handling “stock notions and habits,” the spirit of selection and exaggeration by which Vivian trifes with accepted conventions and creates, what Arnold calls for, a current of fresh and true ideas (Culture and Anarchy 5).

Lying with Style

Within their highly stylized conversation, the characters venture to offer their own remarks on the importance of style in Art. Style, Vivian suggests, is achieved through a
marriage of contraries: the freedom of the play-spirit expressed within the limitations of form with each medium having its own restrictions. As Kant suggests, “in art is a limitation, without which the spirit, which must be free in art and which alone inspires the work, would have no body and would evaporate altogether; e.g. in poetry there must be an accuracy and wealth of language, and also prosody and measure” (Modern Criticism 10). Huizinga makes an explicit connection between style and play when he asks: “in the very idea of style in art, is there not a tacit admission of a certain play-element? Is not the birth of a style itself a playing of the mind in its search for new forms?” (186). In other words, in Art, the artist’s play-spirit is expressed, and thus realized, in style. Vivian, quoting Goethe, observes, “It is in working within limits that the master reveals himself, and the limitation, the very condition of any art is style” (979).

At the heart of Vivian’s emphasis on style is the notion that art, when it models play, is not “ordinary” or “real” life. It is rather a stepping out of common reality into a higher order with a disposition all of its own: “Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment” (978 my italics). In the free and creative treatment of his or her materials, the artist can give form to ideas with a completeness not known in real life. In this sense, says Vivian, “Art is really a form of exaggeration; and selection, which is the very spirit of art, is nothing more than an intensified mode of over-emphasis” (978). The imaginative transformation of its materials, “the perfection of its form” (978), produces the “heightened reality” of art. For example, “Holbein’s drawings
of the men and women of his time,” says Vivian, “impress us with a sense of their absolute reality. But this is simply because Holbein compelled life to accept his conditions, to restrain itself within his limitations, to reproduce his type and to appear as he wished it to appear. It is style that makes us believe in a thing--nothing but style” (989).

As a form of play, art lies outside of, and is thus freed from, the bounds of everyday reason and logic. The imagination creates in a sphere of its own where, as Huizinga describes it, “things have a very different physiognomy from the ones they wear in ‘ordinary life’ and are bound to ties other than those of logic and causality” (119). For the artist, who is freed from the limitations of logical co-ordination and arrangement, and from the constraints of facts and accuracy, practically everything is possible. Schiller comments on this imaginative freedom in art, where:

with unrestricted freedom [the artist] is able, can he but imagine them together, actually to join together things which nature put asunder; and, conversely, to separate, can he but abstract them in his mind, things which nature has joined together. Nothing need here be sacred to him except his own law, if he but observes the demarcation separating his territory from the actual existence of things, that is to say from the realm of nature. (197)

Vivian tries to capture this playful spirit in his own poetic elaboration on the potency of Art: “She has flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses. She makes and unmakes many worlds, and can draw the moon from heaven with a scarlet thread. Hers are ‘the forms more real than living man,’ and hers the great archetypes of
which things that have no existence are but unfinished copies. Nature has, in her eyes, no laws, no uniformity” (982).

When Cyril remarks of the passage, “I like that, I can see it” (982), he reveals that our “belief” in art, in turn, also lies in the play-sphere. As spectators, when we approach art in the spirit of play, we are freed from conventional understanding; in the sphere of play we are free to believe anything. This is not to say that in play we lose consciousness of “ordinary reality.” Play is not the same as deception or delusion. What art represents is not so much a sham-reality “as a realisation in appearance: ‘imagination’ in the original sense of the word” (Huizinga 14). Just as Vivian takes pleasure in the mere sound of his words, the artist and the spectator of art take delight in the appearance of things, which Schiller calls semblance (schein). Like Vivian, Schiller suggests that art is a veil not a mirror. True semblance, says Schiller, pleases through its sheer appearance, divested of all practical, scientific, and moral connections, and the desire to possess and control the object. Semblance, he says; “we love just because it is semblance, and not because we take it to be something better. Only the first is play, whereas the latter is mere deception” (103). Kant makes a similar distinction when he observes that art “plays with illusion, which it produces at pleasure, but without deceiving by it; for it declares its exercise to be mere play. . .which however can be purposively used by the understanding” (17). As a model of play, art, in turn, stimulates the freedom of the play-spirit in its spectators. According to Schiller, since aesthetic semblance has no utility, the mind, when contemplating semblance, is liberated from practical considerations; it moves out of the everyday world and into the world of play. Kant identifies the qualities of the play-spirit
when he observes that Art "expands the mind by setting the imagination at liberty. . . It strengthens the mind by making it feel its faculty--free, spontaneous, and independent of natural determination" (17).

Without the intervention of a beautiful style, Vivian claims, art leaves the play-sphere and appeals to "reality" for its effect. When art tries to achieve practical aims, and when its treatment of subject matter is guided by what is "real," it affords no evidence of the freedom of the spirit; it leaves the sphere of beauty and becomes an anti-model of play. Vivian's description of beauty is similar to that of Schiller's and Kant's: "The only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art" (976). Vivian's aesthetics rejects and rewrites a long tradition of criticism which treats art as a form of mimesis. Anti-models of play in art, says Vivian, are characterized by an imitative spirit; both form and subject matter are drawn directly from life; the artist strives to copy life rather than create it. This surrender of imaginative form and ideal treatment, says Vivian, creates a "false ideal" for art (972), for the object of art "is not simple truth but complex beauty" (978). The result, says Vivian, is that "we have mistaken the common livery of the age for the vesture of the Muses, and spend our days in the sordid streets and hideous suburbs of our vile cities when we should be out on the hillside with Apollo" (977). Vivian dismisses all such anti-models of play as non-art. According to Vivian, in Art, models of play are characterized by Orientalism; anti-models by realism. "The whole history of [the] Arts in Europe," he
proclaims, "is the record of the struggle between Orientalism, with its frank rejection of imitation, its love of artistic convention, its dislike of the actual representation of any object in Nature, and our own imitative spirit" which produces work that is "vulgar, common and uninteresting" (979). "As a method," Vivian observes, "realism is an absolute failure" (979) and "springs from an entire ignorance of psychology. Man can believe the impossible, but man can never believe the improbable" (990).

Vivian is exploring a number of ideas already formulated by Wilde in his lecture, "The English Renaissance of Art" (1882), in which he proclaimed: "the recognition of a separate sphere for the artist, a consciousness of the absolute difference between the world of art and the world of real fact, between classic grace and absolute reality, forms not merely the essential element of any aesthetic charm but is the characteristic of all great imaginative work and of all great eras of artistic creation" (128). The straightforward nature of Wilde's earlier pronouncements strikes a remarkable contrast to the disarming witticisms of "The Decay of Lying." Whereas Wilde the lecturer established the separate spheres of art and reality, Vivian the conversationalist plays with these terms until the two become indistinguishable: "modern portraits by English painters" are so like the people they represent "that a hundred years from now no one will believe in them" (989); "The only real people are the people who never existed" (975); in modern English melodrama, the characters "talk on stage exactly as they would talk off it; they have neither aspirations nor aspirates; . . .They do not succeed in producing even that impression of reality at which they aim, and which is their only reason for existing" (979).
By striving for modernity of form and subject matter, these writers rob art of its "illusion," which means literally "in-play" (Huizinga 11). Vivian suggests that by "trying to arouse our sympathy for the victims of the poor-law administration," and by "raging and roaring" like "a common pamphleteer" (977), these writers transgress the limits of the play-sphere and produce anti-models of play. Schiller expresses the point more strongly by claiming that such writers transgress their rights as a poet by trying to bring about some determinate existence by means of their art, and they surrender their rights as a poet by allowing experience to encroach upon the territory of the ideal, and restricting the possible to the conditions of the actual (197). “It is exactly because Hecuba is nothing to us,” Vivian claims, “that her sorrows are such an admirable motive for a tragedy” (977). Vivian’s idea of literature is clearly based on the characteristics of play: “In literature,” he says, “we require distinction,” (it is set apart from real life) “charm,” (it provides pleasure and delight) “beauty,” (the pleasure lies outside of practical or moral concerns) and “imaginative power,” (art adorns life and amplifies it) (974).

In “The English Renaissance,” Wilde observed, “there is indeed a poetical attitude to be adopted towards all things, but all things are not fit subjects for poetry” (129). His comment perhaps lies behind Vivian’s critique of the roman psychologique. Taken from real life, the characters in these novels are simply uninteresting, and are thus unsuitable subjects for art:

In point of fact what is interesting about people in good society... is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask. It is a humiliating confession, but we are all of us made out of the same stuff. In
Falstaff there is something of Hamlet, in Hamlet there is not a little of Falstaff. The fat knight has his moods of melancholy, and the young prince his moments of coarse humour. Where we differ from each other is purely in accidentals: in dress, manner, tone of voice, religious opinions, personal appearance, tricks of habits and the like. The more one analyses people, the more all reasons for analysis disappear. Sooner or later one comes to that dreadful universal thing called human nature. (975)

In his book *Oscar Wilde*, Peter Raby suggests that at this point, Vivian appears, by his insistence on the idea of the mask, to be arguing himself into a dismissal of individuality (43), but this misses the idea of the mask as an expression of style. Vivian suggests that when we play with the accidentals of life, with surface qualities and artifice, we rise above the instinctive and imitative impulses of human nature, and above such purposes as are dictated by necessity. The mask is a type of aesthetic play in which we create purposes of our own, and give form to our ideas, no matter how trivial. According to Schiller, when we adorn ourselves in and for itself alone, it is a sign of our development, of our progress towards the Aesthetic State, since it shows evidence of the freedom of the play-spirit, of disinterested and undirected pleasure” (211). As an expression of our play-spirit, the masks that we wear are original, authentic, and, as Vivian would have it, interesting; the mask is an expression of life under the conditions of art. Huizinga observes that the “differentness” of play is most vividly expressed in the mask. Here the “extra-ordinary” nature of play reaches its perfection. The “masked individual ‘plays’ another part, another being. He is another being” (13 italics in original). The
distinction lies behind Vivian's paradox that "Truth" "is entirely and absolutely a matter of style" (981) and Wilde's essay "The Truth of Masks."

The Truths of Fiction

For Vivian, art is not simply a medium for expression, it has a life of its own; it is completely "other" than life and nature. "After all, what is a fine lie?" Vivian asks, and then he answers: "Simply that which is its own evidence" (971). As Declan Kiberd describes it, "a fiction, colourfully told, acquires an autonomy and vitality of its own so compelling that only a pedant would want to check the story against the facts. A really good tale . . . possesses an inner emotional logic which permits the facts to be forgotten" ("The Resurgence of Lying" 279). To illustrate his point that life imitates art, Vivian tells the story of his friend Mr. Hyde who finds himself accidentally enacting, in real life, a scene from R.L. Stevenson's novel. He tells how Mr. Hyde is forced to take refuge in a surgery to escape an angry mob. Vivian's conclusion to the story is: "As he passed out, the name on the brass door-plate of the surgery caught his eye. It was 'Jekyll.' At least it should have been" (984). The story, Vivian, admits, may be a lie, but this need not affect its truth.

Truth in art, Vivian points out, is not simply the transmission of facts; it is not a message decorated, disguised and presented to the audience; Style is not a mere dressing up of reality, and so to appeal from Art to Life is always a mistake. Vivian castigates the most popular and successful novelists of his time for their literal-mindedness and their lack of style: R.L. Stevenson robs a story of its reality "by trying to make it too true";
Rider Haggard grounds his fiction in the real, in a kind of “cowardly corroboration”; “Mr. Henry James writes fiction as if it were a painful duty”; Mr. Marion Crawford “has fallen into the bad habit of uttering moral platitudes... At times he is almost edifying”; “As for the great and daily increasing school of novelists for whom the sun always rises in the East-End, the only thing that can be said about them is that they find life crude and leave it raw” (973-974). It is only style, Vivian insists, which makes us believe in a thing and he continues to overturn assumptions that art reflects the real world by suggesting that beautiful things, indeed beautiful people, are solely the product of the artist’s invention. They do not exist in real life. “I know that you are fond of Japanese things,” he says to Cyril. “Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? If you do, you have never understood Japanese art at all. The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists”; they are “simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art” (988). Japanese art, Vivian claims, tells us nothing about the people of Japan: “The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of the English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them” (988). Vivian becomes carried away by the impression he is creating, articulating his ideas as he explores them, and becoming absorbed by the sound more than the sense of his utterance. The playfulness of his discourse culminates in a gallant show of hyperbole which creates a pleasing sense of finality to his claims: “And so, if you wish to see a Japanese effect you will not act like a tourist and go to Tokio,” for the “whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people” (988).
What delights Vivian and Cyril is not the accuracy of Vivian’s idea but his imaginative treatment of it. As spectators, we deny the play-spirit when we go to art with the expectation of gaining some type of factual knowledge, or of judging the work according to some standard of accuracy: “Art finds her own perfection within and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror” (982). With a great show of bravado, Vivian goads the critics who quote “that hackneyed passage [of Shakespeare’s] forgetting that this unfortunate aphorism about Art holding the mirror up to Nature, is deliberately said by Hamlet in order to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters” (981). Vivian defends his spirit of selection for it is “merely a dramatic utterance, and no more represents Shakespeare’s real views upon art than the speeches of Iago represent his real views upon morals” (981-982). Dramatic utterances, poetic constructions and artistic standpoints, whether in art or in criticism do not require the literal belief of the artist. In Wilde’s famous conclusion to his treatise on archaeology and costume in Shakespeare’s theatre entitled “The Truth of Masks,” he exposes the fictional nature of its truths when he comments, “Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything” (1078).10

The worship of facts, so deadly to the play-spirit in Art, has its counterpart in “the return to Life and Nature.” Nature does not inspire a sense of beauty, or an aesthetic temperament in her viewers. When we compare Nature to the formal perfection of Art, says Vivian, we see “Nature’s lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary
monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition” (970). If we “regard Nature as the
collection of phenomena external to man, people only discover in her what they bring to
her. She has no suggestions of her own” (977). The worship of Nature can mislead even
the greatest poet: Wordsworth “found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there.
He went moralising about the district, but his good work was produced when he returned
not to Nature but to Poetry” (978). And “if we take Nature to mean natural simple
instinct as opposed to self-conscious culture,” says Vivian, “the work produced under this
influence is always old-fashioned, antiquated, and out of date” (977). By imitating nature
artists surrender the play-spirit, namely their spirit of selection and exaggeration, and
their imaginative and ideal handling of subject matter. Art created in the spirit of play is
an expression of our quest for freedom, beauty, and Individualism. Nature, on the other
hand, “has good intentions,” but “she cannot carry them out” (970). More provocatively,
Vivian asserts, “Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity,
is entirely the result of indoor life” (970).

The play-spirit is essential for the development of culture precisely because “Life
imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (992). Vivian’s famous paradox is based on
a conception of who we are: “scientifically speaking, the basis of life--the energy of life,
as Aristotle would call it--is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always
presenting various forms through which the expression can be obtained” (985). Art,
Vivian shows, is the principal medium that allows us to discover ourselves and express
ourselves anew; through art we realize our possibilities. The artist who lies, who creates
unrealistic, impractical, and untruthful forms of art, provides new ideals for life, which
life with her imitative instinct tries to copy. Without the play-spirit to create fresh and beautiful forms in art, our desire for expression would remain inarticulate, and personal experience would become a "vicious and limited circle" (985)."

Having demonstrated that Art creates its own reality, Vivian accepts the task of showing that Nature, no less than Life, imitates Art. By appealing to the free play of our imagination, Art, Vivian shows, makes us more aware of the world around us, more sensitive to beauty, more curious about life and its meaning: "Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and only then, does it come into existence" (986). Vivian is describing a paradox articulated by Kant: "Nature is beautiful because it looks like art, and art can only be called beautiful if we are conscious of it as art while yet it looks like Nature" (Modern Criticism 12). It is the artist who shows us the mysterious loveliness of Nature’s effects, and in this way Nature becomes the artist’s creation. As Huizinga describes it, Art makes "an image of something different, something more beautiful, or more sublime . . . than what actually is" (14, italics in original).

Vivian credits the artist with such imaginative vision: "No great artist ever sees things as they really are" (988), but not without deriding the public, who "never sees anything" (989). Vivian’s proposition that Nature follows the landscape painter is punctuated by the failure of the public and the "philistine" to appreciate art, and to pursue their lives, in the spirit of play. The animating spirit of play is its quest for new forms; the genuine play-spirit is characterized by change and spontaneity: “Art creates an
incomparable and unique effect, and, having done so, passes on to other things” (986).

But once expressed, a play-form can become fixed and grow stale by the public’s demand for predictability and conformity: “Those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets,” Vivian observes, “did not exist until Art had invented them,” but “now they are carried to excess” (986). The public cling to their faith in realism of art and are incapable of appreciating anything new. Such fogs, Vivian observes “become the mere mannerism of a clique and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis. Where the cultured catch an effect, the uncultured catch cold” (986).

The double structure of “The Decay of Lying”—the enveloping dialogue, and the extracts from Vivian’s essay which it contains—provides interludes for Vivian’s observations on the loss of the play-spirit in society as a whole. “Facts,” says Vivian, are not only “usurping the domain of Fancy. . . . they are vulgarising mankind” (980). Provoked by Cyril’s initial limited understanding of lying as the conceptual opposite to truth, Vivian flouts the institutions which strive to verify evidence and which seek the comfort of corroboration. Politics, law, and journalism once conducted themselves in the spirit of play, but have lately “fallen into disrepute”: politicians “never rise beyond the level of misrepresentation, and actually condescend to prove, to discuss, to argue” (971); the “feigned ardours and unreal rhetoric” of the Bar are “delightful” but “they are briefed by the prosaic, and are not ashamed to appeal to precedent” (971); “Newspapers, even, have degenerated. They may now be absolutely relied upon. . . . It is always the unreadable that occurs” (971).
Without the background reasoning behind them or an exposition of the aesthetic nature of lying, Vivian’s comments seem frivolous, but they set the context for his more general thesis, that the loss of play-spirit creates an atmosphere of earnestness and dullness utterly fatal to pleasure in social life and the development of culture. Vivian’s ability to prove his ideas to Cyril’s “dissatisfaction,” which is “even better,” reminds us how easily the forms of social intercourse, the modes of discourse, and even the sources of pleasure, can harden into convention, can forfeit their life and movement and freedom of spirit, and become submerged under a rank layer of ideas. Without fresh, new, beautiful lies, even a sunset can become no more than “a second rate Turner, a Turner of a bad period, with all the painter’s worst faults exaggerated and over-emphasised” (987). And the worship of facts can make a whole nation dull:

The crude commercialism of America, its materialising spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man who, according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie, and it is not too much to say that the story of George Washington and the cherry-tree has done more harm, and in shorter space of time, than any other moral tale in the whole of literature. (980)

The “cultured and fascinating liar,” whose aim is “to charm, to delight, to give pleasure,” is not only “the true founder of social intercourse,” but, anticipating Huizinga, Vivian claims he is “the very basis of civilised society” (981).
In *After Babel* (1975), George Steiner develops this connection between lying and the development of culture. Steiner, like Vivian, suggests that lies are not necessarily the opposite of fact. "Falsity," he says, is not a "mere miscorrespondence of fact. It is itself an active, creative agent" (214). Our capacity for "untruth," says Steiner, our capacity to "unsay the world, to image and speak it otherwise" (218), amounts to our escape from time. To forsake our creation of a "counter-world" says Steiner, "we would turn forever on the treadmill of the present" (218). Steiner makes the suggestion that life imitates art by describing our capacity to lie as a "grammar of futurity" in which fictions take on the power to construct nature and reality and ensure the development of the species: "there could be no personal, no social history as we know them, without the ever renewed springs of life in future-tense propositions. These constitute what Ibsen called the life-lie, the complex dynamism of projection, of will, of consoling illusion, on which our psychic and, conceivably, our biological perpetuation hinge" (159).

Although *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen's play in which he coins the phrase "life-lie," also dramatizes the lie as a potentially neurotic inability to bear reality at all (Durbach 328), Steiner, like Vivian, suggests that the noble form of lying found in art, is not a simple form of escapism. Paradoxically, our refusal to accept the world as it is, and, the capacity of the artist to not "see things as they really are" (988) are a means of being on good terms with the world; a means of experiencing and shaping one's life as a mode of art, with all its creative possibilities. In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde will develop this notion of being and becoming. In "The Decay of Lying" the emphasis is more aesthetic than existential. Vivian's point is that we need lies in order to live beautifully. "We try to
improve the conditions of the race by means of good air, free sunlight, wholesome water, and hideous bare buildings for the better housing of the lower orders. But these things produce health, they do not produce beauty. For this, Art is required, and the true disciples of the great artist are not his studio-imitators, but those who become like his works of art” (983). Vivian’s concern is to restore art to its status of play, to restore art’s creative capacity for lying, and thus free it from the vicious cycle of imitation. When the play-spirit in Art is lost, Vivian warns, “Art will become sterile and beauty will pass from the land” (973).

In “The English Renaissance of Art” Wilde predicted that “in nations, as in individuals, if the passion for creation be not accompanied by the critical, the aesthetic faculty also, it will be sure to waste its strength aimlessly, failing perhaps in the artistic spirit of choice, in the mistaking of feeling for form, or in the following of false ideals” (142). Vivian’s tribute to Arnold is somewhat more playfully conceived:

Many a young man starts in life with a natural gift for exaggeration which, if nurtured in congenial and sympathetic surroundings, or by the imitation of the best models, might grow into something really great and wonderful. But, as a rule, he comes to nothing. He either falls into careless habits of accuracy... or takes to frequenting the society of the aged and the well-informed. (973)

By rejecting stock notions of life and art, and by creating a current of fresh ideas and beautiful forms for life to follow, lying, Vivian suggests, is a form of criticism.

Although Wilde would eschew any practical aim for “The Decay of Lying,” we can discern his intentions, the name, of course, that he gave to his collection of essays: to
improve the conditions of the race by means of good air, free sunlight, wholesome water, and hideous bare buildings for the better housing of the lower orders. But these things produce health, they do not produce beauty. For this, Art is required, and the true disciples of the great artist are not his studio-imitators, but those who become like his works of art” (983). Vivian’s concern is to restore art to its status of play, to restore art’s creative capacity for lying, and thus free it from the vicious cycle of imitation. When the play-spirit in Art is lost, Vivian warns, “Art will become sterile and beauty will pass from the land” (973).

In “The English Renaissance of Art” Wilde predicted that “in nations, as in individuals, if the passion for creation be not accompanied by the critical, the aesthetic faculty also, it will be sure to waste its strength aimlessly, failing perhaps in the artistic spirit of choice, in the mistaking of feeling for form, or in the following of false ideals” (142). Vivian’s tribute to Arnold is somewhat more playfully conceived:

Many a young man starts in life with a natural gift for exaggeration which, if nurtured in congenial and sympathetic surroundings, or by the imitation of the best models, might grow into something really great and wonderful. But, as a rule, he comes to nothing. He either falls into careless habits of accuracy... or takes to frequenting the society of the aged and the well-informed. (973)

By rejecting stock notions of life and art, and by creating a current of fresh ideas and beautiful forms for life to follow, lying, Vivian suggests, is a form of criticism.

Although Wilde would eschew any practical aim for “The Decay of Lying,” we can discern his intentions, the name, of course, that he gave to his collection of essays: to
present a model of criticism which manifests the spirit of play, which generates pleasure as well as thought. Here, a paradox of play emerges which can perhaps best be seen in “The Decay of Lying” itself: the spontaneity of the characters’ conversation, their spirit of disinterestedness, and their willingness to let the conversation go where it will, are the fundamental features of their play-spirit; but these must be held in tension with the finished product. Although Vivian claims to be like Emerson, writing “whim” above his library, the finished dialogue is not the result of mere impulse, but is the result of a conscious and controlled effort to achieve an aesthetic effect as evidenced by Vivian’s rebuke to Cyril not to interrupt in the middle of a sentence. Behind the polished finesse of the characters’ conversation, we can detect Wilde carefully cultivating this impression of spontaneity. But what looks like a contradiction is really an expression of the play-spirit. “The Decay of Lying” has both style and aesthetic form; this makes it a model of art as play.
“The Critic as Artist”: A Model of Criticism as Play

In acknowledging play you acknowledge mind, for whatever else play is, it is not matter. (Huizinga 3)

Rewriting Matthew Arnold

In his review of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published six months after *Intentions* had appeared, Pater spoke of the conversational character of much of Wilde’s writing and praised his mastery of the dialogue which is “really alive” and through which “he carries on, more perhaps than any other writer, the brilliant critical work of Matthew Arnold” (“A Novel by Mr. Oscar Wilde,” *Bookman*, Nov 1891, 59-60; reprinted in Beckson, 83-6). And in a short digression on male prose writers in a review of “English Poetesses” (1888), Wilde himself suggests his admiration for Arnold’s critical works:

“We have a few, a very few, masters, such as they are. We have Carlyle, who should not be imitated; and Mr. Pater, who, through the subtle perfection of his form, is inimitable absolutely; and Mr. Froude, who is useful; and Matthew Arnold, who is a model” (Ellmann, *The Artist as Critic* 106). “The Critic as Artist” shares with Arnold’s criticism a devotion to the free play of the mind on all subjects. But the hallmark of the essay remains the famous reversal of Arnold’s injunction that the aim of the critic “is to see the object as in itself it really is.” Ernest formulates the aphoristic twist, “the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not” (1030), to describe Gilbert’s effort to counter the accepted model--for Gilbert an anti-model--of criticism as detached,
neutral, unbiased and objective, with his own model of criticism as a subjective, imaginative, and aesthetic activity.

Wilde first played with Arnold’s critical premises in a discussion, not of criticism, but of aesthetics. In a lecture delivered to Art students of the Royal Academy in 1883, Wilde promised to discuss the artist’s relation to his or her surroundings. He instructs his audience:

With the facts of the object [the artist] has nothing to do, but with its appearance only, and appearance is a matter of light and shade, of masses, of position, and of value. Appearance is, in fact a matter of effect merely, and it is with the effects of nature that you have to deal, not with the real condition of the object. What you, as painters, have to paint is not things as they are but things as they seem to be, not things as they are but things as they are not. (Essays and Lectures 209)

In this portion of his lecture, Wilde is expressing an idea of art as a model of play which Vivian elaborates upon in “The Decay of Lying” and which leads him to conclude “no great artist ever sees things as they really are” (988). According to Vivian, the true artist, much like Arnold’s critic, gives form to ideas independently of practical, utilitarian concerns, or didactic commentary. But Vivian’s artist differs from Arnold’s critic because the ideal, imaginative, and creative handling of the artists’ materials enables artists to realize their play-spirit and in doing so, provide models of perfection for life to follow. In “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” Arnold also distinguishes between the critic and the artist based on the artist’s exercise of a creative faculty whose development constitutes an individual’s perfection. Responding to accusations that he
placed too high a value on criticism, Arnold holds “it is undeniable that the exercise of a
creative power; that a free creative activity, is the highest function of man; it is proved to
be so by man’s finding in it his true happiness” (Selected Prose 133). Arnold, like
Vivian, acknowledged the social forces which conspire to constrain genuine, creative
expression and believed that the function of criticism is to create an intellectual
atmosphere and generate ideas which will provide the materials for the artist’s creation,
and, in Arnold’s case, for intelligent political discourse. Arnold’s emphasis on “seeing
the object as it really is” attempts to create a space for criticism free from pedantry and
eccentricity, and separate from religious, political or moral concerns. His maxim points
to the flexible, calm, contemplative attitude which the critic should adopt towards things
in general; in this way the critic can experience “a joyful sense of creative activity”
(Selected Prose 157, my italics). But he insisted “still, in full measure, the sense of
creative activity belongs only to genuine creation” (Selected Prose 157). In his much
quoted conclusion Arnold suggests that only in the “true life of literature lies the
promised land toward which criticism can only beckon. The promised land it will not be
ours to enter, and we shall die in the wilderness” (Selected Prose 157). Arnold’s
conclusion leaves the critic out in the wilderness, and, it seems, exiled from a world of
free, gratuitous and creative play,

It seems entirely consistent then, that Wilde takes Arnold’s premise out of its
critical context, and, through his creative reversal of Arnold’s definition of criticism,
places it in the sphere of aesthetics. The move appears to heighten the difference between
aesthetics and criticism so when the phrase, “to see the object as in itself it really is not,”
surfaces in "The Critic as Artist," there is a sense that Wilde simply delighted in the sound of his paradox and employed it, as was his habit, in whatever context was convenient, if also unorthodox. Such contradictions and inconsistencies, Wilde often reminds us, are simply a means of being true to oneself because profound truths are themselves paradoxical. Walter Ong puts forward this argument in terms which nicely suggest Wilde’s distinction between fact and truth: “generally speaking, in matters of deep philosophical or cultural import, the more totally explicit a principle or conclusion is--that is, the more its total meaning is a matter of purely conscious apprehension without proportionate unconscious implications--the more likely it is to be trivial” (Contest 31). For Gilbert, the value of art is that it most fully provides the experience of this kind of truth, truth that is independent of fact, verification and practical usefulness. “Truth,” says Wilde, in “The Truth of Masks,” “is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure” (1071). Interestingly, Einstein himself is said to have remarked on the limitations of a purely objective notion of truth, which results in a “description without meaning--as if you described a Beethoven symphony as a variation of wave pressure” (Nyberg 32). When Gilbert states that the critic “loves truth for its own sake, and loves it not the less because [he] knows it to be unattainable” (1057), he affirms Ong’s sense that profound truths “are invariably aphoristic or gnomic, and paradoxical. They are both clear and mysterious, and dialectically structured” (Contest 31). Any statement can always mean more than it says and we can always imagine more than we can know. 14 This is implied in Wilde’s conclusion to “The Truth of Masks” when he claims “in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true” (1078).
Gilbert's statement also points to the way in which truth is the object of our imagination, and like the imagination, it has no fixed limits. In our search for truth, what we should strive for is not simply greater explicitness, but a richness of understanding. And it is precisely because such truths cannot be explicitly taught, that Gilbert relies on playful rhetorical strategies to express himself. The contradictions and paradoxes contained in his aphorisms and epigrams require some ingenuity on the audience's part for understanding. The premise of Gilbert's critical spirit is that our full capacity for Thought involves the exercise of both the imaginative and intellectual faculties.

In "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert first argues that Art is the product of both faculties because "the antithesis between them is entirely arbitrary. Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all worthy of the name" (1020). More importantly, by employing the paradox, "to see the object as in itself it really is not," in both the sphere of art and criticism, Gilbert is able to argue that the critic stands in the same relation to art as the artist does to his materials. The relation is one of play. In Gilbert's aesthetic criticism the critical spirit meets with the creative; Arnold's disinterested curiosity is joined to the primacy of the imagination, to yield the highest, fullest, and freest expression of individual potential. In the aesthetic realm, Gilbert shows, the most subjective criticism becomes the most objective, and so the most true. Thus, in "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert does not so much stand Arnold on his head, as many critics have described it; rather, he points to the interplay of the two faculties, the critical and the creative, the intellectual and the imaginative, and in doing so, that is, by aestheticizing
Arnold’s critical premises, Gilbert is able to model, more fully than did Arnold, criticism as play.

Of course Arnold is not the only source of allusion in the essay; Arnold’s objective criticism is yoked to the “impressive” criticism of Pater’s essay “Leonardo Da Vinci”; Plato’s “passion for wisdom” and Aristotle’s “passion for knowledge” (1039) are shared by Browning and Meredith; the calm, contemplative ideal of “the almond-eyed sage of the Yellow River, Chuang Tsu” (1044) is also realized by Darwin and Renan. This “dazzle of quotation and allusion,” as Lawrence Danson notes, “amounts to more than saturation name-dropping”, it becomes the material for Gilbert’s play (129). In “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert acts as a *bricoleur*; selecting, gathering and juxtaposing the “contradictory ideas among the Victorians, removing them from their context in order to generate certain philosophical possibilities or hypotheses” (Prewitt Brown 36). Freed from its original context, the tradition of criticism becomes for Gilbert the material for a new creation, provoking Ernest to observe: “Gilbert, you treat the world as if it were a crystal ball. You hold it in your hand, and reverse it to please a wilful fancy. You do nothing but re-write history” (1023). For critics who have tried to measure the levels of agreement and disagreement between Arnold’s criticism and “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert’s playful rhetorical strategies have led to opposing conclusions. For example, William E. Buckler (1989) highlights Gilbert’s indebtedness, arguing “except for the disproportionately celebrated reversal of one of Arnold’s basic critical precepts, all the major thrusts of ‘The Critic as Artist’ are profoundly indebted to Arnold” (284). Rodney Shewan (1977), on the other hand, describes how “Arnold’s critical premises issue
piecemeal from Wilde's *discipulus*, who is ominously called Ernest and seldom contrives to make a valid point. Ernest's errors, or Arnold's ideas, thus become the target for Gilbert" (99), and the impetus for Gilbert's reformulation. And Julia Prewitt Brown (1997) tries (much like Wilde) to have it both ways: "The thinker with whom Wilde is most at odds and perhaps most deeply allied is Matthew Arnold" (47). In attempting to judge the extent to which Arnold's ideas influence Gilbert's criticism, we might take our cue from Gilbert himself when he observes: "I am but too conscious of the fact that we are born in an age when only the dull are treated seriously and I live in fear of not being misunderstood" (1015). The sentiment is loaded with irony, suggesting on one hand the fear that his ideas will be assimilated and imitated by an unthinking and uncritical public, and on the other hand, pointing to a central thesis of the essay, that the true critic will treat the objects or ideas being examined as the starting point for a new creation. In other words, Gilbert encourages his listeners not to accept his ideas as they are, but to play with the possibilities of his ideas as they are not. Gilbert does not simply argue for interpretative play in criticism, he also models for us this play-spirit—a disinterested curiosity, a willingness to entertain paradoxical notions, and an ability to treat commonplace notions in novel ways— and demonstrates for us his theory that thought develops in and as play. His relationship to the tradition of criticism he inherits can be best understood in these terms.
Criticism and Conversation

The characters, the setting, and the form of the dialogue combine to create an atmosphere of play. As Laurel Brake notes, "the dialogue form offers an alternative metaphor for the site of criticism: Wilde displaces Arnold’s pulpit and Pater’s academy with the Aesthetic drawing-room, and the setting of the public occasion and audience favoured by Arnold and Pater’s contemporary work with the private" (45). The private nature of the dialogue enhances its play-like qualities in a number of ways. Since it is in the free play of conversation that we develop our capacity for thought, conversation should not be constrained by any form of external authority or practical concern. Removed from the constraints of a public discourse, Gilbert is free to contemplate and converse at his leisure, showing us that thought can be a source of pleasure, like eating ortolans and drinking Chambertin. By taking a critical discussion out of the institution and lecture hall and moving into the studio, library, and dining room, the more private settings of Wilde’s essays lend a sense of aristocratic seclusion, a sense of separateness from everyday concerns, to the play-sphere. But it is also private in the sense of being of the individual. If the conversation seems one-sided in “The Critic as Artist” it may be because we are watching a private performance; Gilbert’s criticism privileges the imaginative activity of a single mind.

When the scene opens Gilbert is playing the piano; he resists the urge to talk, pleading with Ernest “let me play to you some mad scarlet thing by Dvorák” (1015). Gilbert attempts to extricate himself from the purposes of “learned conversation” because it is not beautiful: it will jar with his aesthetic surroundings, and so he claims, “You will
not ask me to give you a survey of Greek art-criticism from Plato to Plotinus. The night is too lovely for that, and the moon, if she heard us, would put more ashes on her face than are already there” (1017). Gilbert prefers the otherworldliness of the aesthetic; he longs to heed the call of the moon: “Let us go out into the night . . . who knows but we may meet Prince Florizel of Bohemia, and hear the fair Cuban tell us she is not what she seems?” (1016). But he remains to talk, and the artfulness of his conversation transforms the library into a world set apart from common, everyday concerns and in which its own rules obtain. The conversation develops freely along its own lines, according to its own logic, independent of concerns for evidence, morality or utility. Within this play-sphere of his own creation, Gilbert treats the whole world as a spectacle for contemplation. Ernest attests to the seductive and aesthetic nature of their conversation when he pleads with Gilbert, “talk to me till the white-horned day comes into the room. There is something in your voice that is wonderful” (1011). Their conversation becomes an aesthetic experience of the type described by Schiller in which “the most frivolous theme [is] so treated that it leaves us ready to proceed directly from it to some matter of utmost import; the most serious material [is] so treated that we remain capable of exchanging it forthwith for the lightest play” (157). There is an easy, spontaneous exchange of the serious and the trivial in a conversation which touches on everything but concentrates on nothing:

Gilbert: But I see it is time for supper. After we have discussed some Chambertin and a few ortolans, we will pass on to the question of the critic considered in the light of the interpreter.
Ernest: Ah! you admit, then, that the critic may occasionally be allowed to see the object as in itself it really is.

Gilbert: I am not quite sure. Perhaps I may admit it after supper. There is a subtle influence in supper. (1057)

Trying to guess just how earnestly we are to take Gilbert’s redemption of criticism provides for much of the intellectual pleasure of reading the essay. Gilbert, as Buckler correctly reminds us, should be treated as an imaginary character in a drama, with his own temperament, tastes, and talents, for whom a spirited, informed discussion on a subject requiring the subtlest kinds of discrimination is one of the most civilized and civilizing of human activities, and for whom conversation is the art in which he satisfies a will to play he cannot express in other, everyday forms of life (279). The essay, as Shewan argues, certainly is polemical, but polemics, Huizinga reminds us, are never divorced from agonistics (156). The dialogue proceeds in the spirit and mood of performance rather than measured debate. As Gilbert tries to appease his “wilful fancy,” he manifests the glorious exhibitionism and agonistic aspiration of the ancient sophist who, as Theaetetus admits in the Sophist, belongs to the sort of people “who give themselves up to play” (Huizinga 149).

The persiflage and paradox with which we meet Gilbert’s sense of truth draws our attention to the form of his ideas; their expression constitutes an epideixis, an exhibition designed to demonstrate his virtuosity rather than sustain a logical progression of ideas or present a systematic philosophy. Ernest rightly observes, “there is something in what you say but there is not everything in what you say” (1013). As a response to Gilbert’s
pennant for aphorism, it is an important observation. Aphorisms are a form of art which depend on a perfection of phrasing. They are self-conscious creations and bear the stamp and style of the mind who created them. And aphorisms are independent; their characteristic is that they can stand by themselves. They contain their own meaning. As a mode of art, aphorisms are also a mode of thought and convey a kind of truth. Their contradictory and paradoxical nature is designed to provoke further speculation rather than prescribe solutions. As John Groos describes the aphorism, "it is a kind of retort aimed at an orthodox viewpoint or a shallower morality. They tease and prod the lazy assumptions lodged in the reader's mind. They warn us how insidiously our vices can pass themselves off as virtues; they harp shamelessly on the imperfections and contradictions which we would rather ignore" (viii). They suggest that in trying to comprehend profound truths, we need to entertain connections between seemingly incompatible ideas and cultivate a disinterested curiosity.

In its digressive, rather than progressive, unfolding of ideas, the essay itself models the critical spirit. Gilbert comments on the dialogue as a mode of expression:

dialogue, certainly, that wonderful literary form... can never lose for the thinker its attraction as a mode of expression. By its means he can both reveal and conceal himself, and give form to every fancy, and reality to every mood. By its means he can exhibit the object from each point of view, and show it to us in the round, as a sculptor shows us things, gaining in this manner all the richness and reality of effect that comes from those side issues that are suddenly suggested by the central idea in its progress and really illumine the idea more completely, or
from those felicitous after-thoughts that give a fuller completeness to the central scheme, and yet convey something of the delicate charm of chance.

Ernest: By its means, too, he can invent an imaginary antagonist and convert him when he chooses by some absurdly sophistical argument. (1046).

Ernest’s interjection points to the artifice, to the fiction of the dialogue, contributing to our sense that despite the ostensible spontaneity of thought, the final essay is a carefully staged performance. As Edward Watson suggests in “Wilde’s Iconoclastic Classicism,” in “The Critic as Artist” the dialogue form is “used as a creative medium more so than an instructional one: the eiron is no longer seen as an opponent per se, but as representing the other half of consciousness when the matter of Truth remained a slippery, shadowy thing” (226). The numerous digressions and the many voices flowing through the text also lend a musical quality to the essay’s development. As Jonathan Wisenthal notes, in Wilde’s critical dialogues the “ostensible subject is more like a musical theme than the centre of a sustained argument or exposition” (214). This musical quality not only contributes to the pleasing form of the essay, it also helps to illumine the way we apprehend truths. Ong captures the dialogic and dialectical nature of truth when he observes that “truth is symphonic”; a symphony “involves many instruments or voices struggling against or with one another--in a contest, ‘against’ and ‘with’ come to the same thing (Contest 33)”. And Gilbert suggests that “to arrive at what one really believes, one must speak through lips different than one’s own. To know the truth one must imagine myriads of falsehoods” (1047).
This interplay between self and other suggests that true criticism takes the form of a conversation. At the heart of Gilbert's preference for dialogue is the belief that we can develop and refine our thoughts when we are willing to entertain others and articulate and test our beliefs and practices in their light. We achieve an understanding in which our own initial position is modified and clarified in connection with others and thereby enriched. Conversation also becomes a mode of self-development. Gilbert argues that through the growth of the critical spirit we both attain a stronger sense of Individualism and become "Cosmopolitan." Criticism will make us cosmopolitan because the views and experiences of other people, times and places become a part of our own understanding and a means of rising above "race prejudices" (CA 1057). And so the critic does not simply reject history, he recreates it: "the one duty we owe to history" says Gilbert, "is to re-write it" (1023).

Of course, conversation can also entail nonconformity, for in rejecting or disobeying we affirm our own perspective in a new way—again, more differentiated, more aware of itself and its differences from others. It is in this way, Wilde suggests in his "Commonplace Book," that thought progresses: "the normal condition of progress in thought is this: first a narrow definiteness, an uncompromising dogmatism then the antagonism and criticism to which this gives rise[,] lastly the intellectual synthesis and union" (74). Wilde attributes this definition of progress to Hegel, and Wilde's own vision is dialectical, but what we aspire towards is not a final resolution, but a greater capacity for understanding and imagination. Gilbert's belief that the critical spirit can give us "the life that has for its aim not being merely, but becoming" (1041), his
insistence that true criticism "recognise[s] no position as final" (1057), and his
description of the dialogue form itself, suggest that criticism develops not through flat-out
contradiction of what is, or through the head-on collision of ideas, but through moments
of imaginative re-visioning.

In *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*, Michael Patrick Gillespie describes
how Wilde's "paradoxical gestures delineate an aesthetic that celebrates the impulse to
integrate, amalgamate, and conjoin rather than separate, dissipate, or disperse" (37). In
particular, the consequence of Gilbert's line of reasoning, that the critic stands in the
same relation to art as the artist does to life, is that he rejects the stereotypical view that
constructs an antagonistic relationship between the two. Instead, as Gillespie argues, "he
outlines a co-operative venture based upon complementary creative gestures, with
aesthetic pleasure growing out of the conjunction of active imaginations" (44). But
Gillespie himself creates too strong an antithesis between the impulse to conjoin and
integrate, and the impulse to differentiate; he confuses *agonism* with antagonism. The
sheer number of voices behind the many allusions in "The Critic as Artist" and the
dialogic nature of the discussion suggests that Wilde is more interested in the play of
conversation for its own sake, than in achieving a synthesis of ideas. The point is worth
noting because often critics who fail to see the extent to which Gilbert's irony is held in
tension with his ideal vision portray the dialogue form only as a means of debunking
currently held conventions. One result of this is the tendency to pair each character with
a mouthpiece--Gilbert: Wilde / Ernest: Arnold--and position them as adversaries. Gilbert,
we might note, appropriates, contradicts, quotes and deliberately misreads Arnold's
criticism all at once. If we exaggerate the adversarial nature of the two characters we begin to place too much emphasis on the validity and consistency of ideas at the expense of the characters themselves, the performing personae who model for us the critical and creative movement of thought. Despite the many allusions throughout the essay which create a sense of polyphony, there remains a sense that this is a one sided conversation, a carefully orchestrated performance in which Ernest plays the part of accompaniment. If we recall that Ernest, as he tries to summarize and make sense of Gilbert's theory, gets some of the best lines, and if we look forward to *The Importance of Being Earnest*, we might see that Ernest is not so ominously named after all. Ernest models the receptive and responsive attitude that characterizes the critical-spirit. Having been told "the world is made by the singer for the dreamer" he willingly entertains Gilbert's vision: "while you talk it seems to me to be so" (1025). But Ernest's important role is also his more obvious one; by entertaining Gilbert's ideas and thinking through their implications he allows thought to move forward. Without some level of acceptance and reflection of ideas by an audience, a philosophical discussion cannot proceed.

A second result of confusing *agonism* with antagonism is the tendency to focus too narrowly on the role of negation as a critical strategy. There is a basis for this in the text. "The Critic as Artist" demonstrates the essentially polemical function of criticism in the intellectual sphere; its controversies and disputations take the form of opposition to custom, habit, and stasis. Gilbert himself claims that "the artistic critic, like the mystic, is an antinomian always. To be good, according to the vulgar standard of goodness, is obviously quite easy. It merely requires a certain amount of sordid terror, a certain lack
of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle class respectability” (1058). Gilbert’s real point is that the artistic critic has developed his or her Individualism, a notion Wilde will take up in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.” Like the person who lacks the imagination not to be “good,” the person who uncritically says “no” to everything embodies an unthinking, cynical skepticism which is at odds with Gilbert’s association of intellectual development with youthful play, imagination and curiosity. Like Parmenides who notes: “Youth loves to dispute, age to be honoured” (Huizinga 150), Gilbert’s tone is suggestive when he warns Ernest: “I am afraid that you have been listening to the conversation of some one older than yourself. This is always a dangerous thing to do, and if you allow it to degenerate into a habit you will find it absolutely fatal to any intellectual development” (1015). In this way, Gilbert’s playful revision of Ernest’s propositions serves not only to please his wilful fancy, but also the method of the essay as a whole—the need for Gilbert to be presented with one view in order to be stirred to articulate his own more complex sense of the truth, and, hence “The True Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” Wilde’s title for the 1890 version of the essay (my italics).16

Criticisms at the Present Time

The loss of the play-spirit in the sphere of thought forms the basis of Gilbert’s social criticism. Running throughout the dialogue is a criticism and analysis of Philistine culture. Far from realising “the best that has been said and thought,” the “English public always feels perfectly at its ease when a mediocrity is talking to it” (1009), and “forgives...
everything except genius” (1009). Like Arnold, Gilbert contends that a genuine, playful critical spirit, a spirit which values the gratuitous, the non-utilitarian, and the creative, is missing in Victorian life. The true critical spirit is characterized by a “calm disinterestedness,” a “serene philosophic temper which loves truth for its own sake” (1057). But instead, “The English mind is always in a rage. The intellect of the race is wasted in the sordid and stupid quarrels of second-rate politicians or third-rate theologians” (1057), the very opposite of playful dialogue. Huizinga remarks on a similar distinction: “to be a sound culture-creating force [the] play-element must be pure. . . It must not be false seeming, a masking of political purposes behind the illusion of genuine play-forms. True play knows no propaganda; its aim is in itself, and its familiar spirit is happy inspiration” (211).

Criticism in the nineteenth century, Gilbert suggests, is dominated by anti-models of criticism which have stultified the intellectual life of the age. Anti-models of criticism are practical: “There is no country in the world so much in need of unpractical people as this country of ours. With us Thought is degraded by its constant association with practice” (1042). Anti-models foster narrow-mindedness: “Each of the professions means a prejudice. . . We live in the age of the overworked, and the under-educated; the age in which people are so industrious that they become absolutely stupid” (1042). Anti-models are valued for their utility, but “the sure way of knowing nothing about life is to try to make oneself useful” (1042). Finally, anti-models place too high a value on facts: “We, in our educational system, have burdened the memory with a load of unconnected facts, and laboriously striven to impart our laboriously-acquired knowledge. We teach people how
to remember, we never teach them how to grow” (1055). England, “the home of lost ideas,” “has done one thing; it has invented and established Public Opinion, which is an attempt to organise the ignorance of the community, and to elevate it to the dignity of physical force” (1056). Given the current climate, Gilbert asks: “Who that moves in the stress and turmoil of actual existence, noisy politician, or brawling social reformer, or poor narrow-minded priest blinded by the sufferings of that unimportant section of the community among whom he has cast his lot, can seriously claim to be able to form a disinterested intellectual judgment about any one thing?” (1042). His disparagement of the Philistine temperament culminates in his observation that “anything approaching to the free play of the mind is practically unknown amongst us” (1057).

Gilbert places these forces which conspire to restrict the free play of ideas in the context of evolution: “Considered as an instrument of thought, the English mind is coarse and undeveloped. The only thing that can purify it is the growth of the critical instinct” (1056). “It is Criticism, as Arnold points out, that creates the intellectual atmosphere of the age. It is Criticism, as I hope to point out myself some day, that makes the mind a fine instrument” (1055). Gilbert follows Herbert Spencer in his belief that evolutionary progress is away from homogeneity towards heterogeneity, towards greater freedom, complexity and differentiation. According to Spencer, the homogeneous is, under the forces of the external environment, relatively unstable; rather the higher level of evolution the greater is the emphasis placed on individuality. In Spencer’s theory, living things (including the organism, mind, and consciousness) differentiate; they attain their uniqueness through continuous interchanges with their surrounding or external
environments which present exigencies, and thus stimulate adaptation. Spencer's theory joins the tendency towards differentiation to the tendency toward integration, the coalescence of differentiated elements to complete his concept of progress as moving toward harmony and unity found within variety and difference. Gilbert adapts the theory of evolution to support his claim that developing the critical-spirit is the means and measure of progress: "It is Criticism, that makes us cosmopolitan" (1056), and will "annihilate race-prejudices, by insisting on the unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms" (1057). Spencer's theory allows for regressive as well as progressive adaptations; success or failure depends on the mix and power of "inner" (responsive) and "outer" (stimulative) forces. Victorian culture, Gilbert asserts, is in a state of regression. Gilbert uses Spencer's theory to suggest that the modern development of mind has met with an increasingly complex social organism dominated by an unthinking impulse toward stasis, or homogeneity (Smith and Helfand 68). Social institutions, Gilbert argues, promote stupidity in the name of security and stability: "Society which is the beginning and basis of morals, exists simply for the concentration of human energy" (1039). Modern society, Gilbert claims, opposes the development of the mind, for "the security of society lies in custom and unconscious instinct, and the basis of the stability of society, as a healthy organism, is the complete absence of intelligence amongst its members" (1044). In such a climate, all "thought, is, in its essence, dangerous" (1044); and contemplation becomes "the gravest sin of which any citizen can be guilty" (1039).

Progress, then, in Gilbert's terms, depends on developing the critical spirit, a conclusion he demonstrates with an analogy from Darwin: "Aesthetics, in fact, are to
Ethics in the sphere of conscious civilisation, what, in the sphere of the external world, sexual is to natural selection. Ethics, like natural selection, make life possible.

Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change" (1058). The analogy draws upon the same distinction between nature and culture expressed in “The Decay of Lying” in which Vivian argues “nature has good intentions,” but “she cannot carry them out” (96). When Darwin, in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), observes that sexual selection operates “through the exertion of choice, the influence of love and jealousy and the appreciation of the beautiful” (918), we can see the affinity between Darwinian sexual selection and the Wildean critical spirit. But Gilbert’s reference to Darwin is more suggestive than at first it may appear. Like Spencer, Darwin believed that people’s higher faculties and intellectual powers such as abstraction and self-consciousness depend on the continued exercise of other mental faculties (912). Interestingly, he grounds moral development in people’s ability to reflect and contemplate, and in doing so connects moral development to the exercise of the imagination and the intellect. “The moral faculties are generally and justly esteemed as of higher value than the intellectual powers” (913), but we need to bear in mind, says Darwin, that “the activity of the mind in vividly recalling past impressions,” which is a faculty of the imagination, is a “fundamental basis of conscience” (913). This, he states, affords an argument for educating and stimulating in all possible ways the intellectual faculties of every human being (913). Ultimately, Darwin is suggesting that culture progresses through the free play of the imagination and the intellect. These faculties, it
will be Gilbert’s task to show, are most freely exercised in aesthetic criticism whose essence is the recollection and contemplation of vivid impressions.

**Art and the Critical Spirit**

Part One of the dialogue begins with a discussion of the critic’s relationship to art. Ernest’s understanding of criticism derives from the anti-models he has been exposed to and which seem to function only as a hindrance to individual efforts at genuine play. Ernest’s belief that the imagination “spreads, or should spread a solitude around it, and works best in silence and in isolation” (1011) has been influenced by the anti-models of criticism which Arnold disparaged: “By the Ilyssus, says Arnold somewhere, there was no Higginbotham. By the Ilyssus, my dear Gilbert, there were no silly art congresses bringing provincialism to the provinces and teaching the mediocrity how to mouth. By the Ilyssus there were no tedious magazines about art, in which the industrious prattle of what they do not understand” (1015). The “industrial prattle” of these art congresses and magazines is the opposite, or “anti-type” of true dialogue which characterizes genuine criticism. Ernest reveals his understanding of art as a form of play, arguing “the artist [should] be left alone, to create a new world if he wishes it, or, if not, to shadow forth the world which we already know, and of which, I fancy, we would each one of us be wearied if Art, with her fine spirit of choice and delicate instinct of selection, did not, as it were, purify it for us, and give to it a momentary perfection” (1011). Ernest captures the ideal and imaginative qualities of art which set play apart from the “real” world of everyday concerns, but he fails to perceive the voluntary, “self-conscious” nature of play,
believing that great artists in history worked “unconsciously” of critical achievement, and thus were “wiser than they knew,” creating great works which were the result of the “imagination of the races” (1020). Gilbert’s first task is to redress Ernest’s notion that artistic creation is completely distinct from the critical faculty. Art created in the spirit of play transcends impulse and unconscious instinct. It is a “self-conscious and deliberate” activity and therefore employs the critical-spirit: “No great poet sings because he must sing”; a poet “sings because he chooses to sing” (1020). Even the primitive, collective poems with no known authorship received their “beautiful form” and “style” through the choice, selection, spirit, and talent of one individual which is “really the creative faculty in one of its most characteristic moods” (1020). In art, “it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms” (1021). Gilbert playfully misreads Arnold to corroborate his point: “Arnold’s definition of literature as a criticism of life was not very felicitous in form, but it showed how keenly he recognised the importance of the critical element in all creative work” (1020).

Ernest readily concedes that where art models play it expresses the critical spirit, but then the critical spirit, he concludes, in being fully realized in art, must exhaust itself in art, for if the function of Literature is to create “a new world that will be more marvellous, more enduring, and more true than the world which common eyes look upon, and through which common natures seek to realise their perfection,” surely “it will be a thing so complete and perfect that there will be nothing left for the critic to do” (1026). Ernest persists in his understanding of criticism as an activity dependent on the work of art and which takes the form of analysis and interpretation, a type of “imitation” of
another's creation. Gilbert's response is to show that "the critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought" (1027). For the critic, as for the artist, the relation is one of play.

It is the nature of the play-spirit to try and realize itself and in this the critic has advantage over the artist; he can "find his motives anywhere. Treatment is the test" (1027). Criticism, Gilbert argues, is itself an art, and to one so creative as the critic, subject matter is of no importance. Aesthetic criticism, Gilbert argues, is created independently of the art work's subject matter and the intention of the artist. And so "who cares whether Mr. Ruskin's views of Turner are sound or not"? (1028). The work of art is simply "the starting point for a new creation" (1029), and like the artist, the critic "works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful" (1027). The materials of the aesthetic critic, Gilbert argues, come not from the "expressive" nature of art but from its "impressive" nature. Gilbert describes the effect of Pater's essay on the Mona Lisa to underpin his argument that criticism is a type of imaginative play that is, "in its essence, purely subjective":

Who, again, cares whether Mr. Pater has put into the portrait of Mona Lisa something that Leonardo never dreamed of? The painter may have been merely the slave of an archaic smile, as some have fancied, but whenever I pass into the cool galleries of the Palace of the Louvre, and stand before that strange figure "set in its marble chair in that cirque of fantastic rocks, as in some faint light under sea," I murmur to myself, "She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like
the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave..."

And so the picture becomes more wonderful to us than it really is, and reveals to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing, and the music of the mystical prose is as sweet in our ears as was that flute-player's music that lent to the lips of La Gioconda those subtle and poisonous curves. (1028-29)

The critic as artist transforms each art into literature, which Gilbert reminds us is the highest art, and thus a beautiful form to be valued for its own sake.

As Gilbert emphasizes and perhaps exaggerates the creative independence of criticism, he concludes that the critic operates in a higher sphere of play than the artist because the critic is even further removed from the limitations of ordinary life, and from all the potential constraints which Vivian sought to free art from in "The Decay of Lying." The highest criticism "has the least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing, and, as the Greeks would put it, in itself, and to itself, an end. Certainly, it is never trammelled by any shackles of verisimilitude. No ignoble considerations of probability, that cowardly concession to the tedious repetitions of domestic or public life, affect it ever" (1027). The critic's raw materials, being art, have already been "purified" by the imagination and are thus already models of play. As a "creation within creation" (1027), criticism is so subjective, it becomes a record of one's soul: "One may appeal from fiction unto fact, but from the soul there is no appeal" (1027).

Gilbert argues that it is the special nature of Beauty in art that makes the critic creator in turn--it is "the beholder who lends to the beautiful its myriad meanings"
and encourages multiple, subjective interpretations—"The one characteristic of a beautiful form is that one can put into it whatever one wishes, and see in it whatever one chooses to see" (1030). His theory that Beauty "makes all interpretations true, and no interpretation final" (1031), in other words that Beauty allows for the freest range of play for the critical spirit, is explained through a number of paradoxical formulations: "Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing" (1030); and "It is through its very incompleteness that Art becomes complete in beauty" (1031). Beautiful art maintains a delicate equipoise between the Real and the Ideal; if either gains dominance the beauty is lost. A "too definite presentation of the Real" would be "mere imitation"; a "too definite realisation of the Ideal" would be too "purely intellectual" (1031). Gilbert is describing the effects of the aesthetic in terms very close to Schiller’s conception of the play-drive. Schiller argues that only the “aesthetic qualities of phenomena,” or beauty, in its widest sense of the term, appeal to the play-drive (101); in other words, “With beauty man shall only play, and it is with beauty only that he shall play” (107). Gilbert remarks on a similar effect of Art: when Art “becomes complete in beauty,”

[it] addresses itself not to the faculty of recognition nor to the faculty of reason, but to the aesthetic sense alone, which while accepting both reason and
recognition as stages of apprehension, subordinates them both to a pure synthetic impression of the work of art as a whole, and, taking whatever alien emotional elements the work may possess, uses their very complexity as a means by which a richer unity may be added to the ultimate impression itself. (1031)
This has some repercussions for Art because the critic will favour works which stimulate his or her aesthetic faculty, what Gilbert calls our “beauty-sense”, and will reject art which is “too intelligible” such as paintings that deal with scenes out of literature or history. For the critic, “the one thing not worth looking at is the obvious” (1031). This is also the reason why music is the perfect type of art: it is suggestive of reverie and mood but “it can never reveal its ultimate secret” (1031).

**Criticism and the Self**

Gilbert’s theory of interpretation also has implications for the critic who must intensify his personality in order to understand the personality and the works of the artist. Once again, we see that the critic stands in the same relation to art as the artist does to life: “Just as art springs from personality, so it is only to personality that it can be revealed, and from the meeting of the two comes right interpretive criticism” (1034). All art, says Gilbert, springs from personality, an idea elaborated upon in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” when the narrator claims “all Art [is] to a certain degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realise one’s own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life” (W.H. 115). In this way, all art is subjective; “For out of ourselves we can never pass, nor can there be in creation what in the creator was not” (CA 1045). When art models play, the subject of a work of art does not simply correspond to an external object; instead, “the very landscape that Corot looked at was, as he said himself, but a mood of his own mind” (1045). Characters in drama and fiction are born of the artist’s own desire for form in life: “those great figures
of Greek or English Drama... are, in their ultimate analysis, simply the poets themselves, not as they thought they were, but as they thought they were not; and by such thinking came in a strange manner, though but for a moment, really so to be" (1045). For Gilbert, artistic creation is one with self-realisation. By expressing themselves in an ideal and imaginative form, on a plane free from the limitations of life, artists, for a moment, realise the perfection of their personality. And so "the difference between objective and subjective work is one of external form merely" (1045). And just as criticism is a higher form of play than art because it is further removed from the limitations of reality, so too is the objective form the most free, and thus the most subjective, in matter: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth" (1045). Shakespeare's plays, Gilbert, argues, "reveal him to us absolutely, and show us his true nature and temperament far more completely than do those strange and exquisite sonnets, even, in which he bares to crystal eyes the secret closest to his heart" (1045.) When Gilbert argues that in criticism, personality becomes the medium of revelation, he suggests that, like works of art, each mode of criticism is a type of performance and the critic, is, in a sense, one who "acts out" or exhibits the material before him in a new form which is both a critical and a creative element: "when Rubenstein plays to us the Sonata Appassionata of Beethoven he gives us not merely Beethoven, but also himself, and so gives us Beethoven absolutely--Beethoven reinterpreted through a rich artistic nature, and made vivid and wonderful to us by a new and intense experience" (1034).

Gilbert’s approach is clearly phenomenological. He suggests that we cannot directly experience the aesthetic; rather criticism is a form of personal reflection and so
the critic's personality is essential for making meaning and interpreting experiences of the aesthetic. When Ernest observes "the critic, then, considered as the interpreter, will give no less than he receives, and lend as much as he borrows" (1034), he acknowledges that to approach art in the true spirit of play, is to enter into a sort of dialogue or conversation with art. We enter into a conversation with art and are changed by it; if we are not, we have not approached art with the openness, flexibility, and curiosity which characterizes the play-spirit. Anyone unchanged has not had the willingness to explore and be responsive to new truths. The essence of play is uncertainty. "It is no doubt true," says the narrator of "Mr. W.H.,” that “to be filled with an absorbing passion is to surrender the security of one’s lower life, and yet in such surrender there may be gain" (1177). This may be what Wilde means when he quotes Goethe, “only have the courage . . . to give yourselves up to your impressions, allow yourselves to be delighted, moved, elevated, nay instructed, inspired for something great” (“English Renaissance” 148). Only have the courage, Wilde suggests, to give yourself up to play.

Gilbert’s exaltation of subjective criticism and the importance he places on developing the critical spirit stems from his fascination with the soul and the means of realising its secrets. He believes the highest criticism is “the only civilised form of autobiography, as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one’s life," and “with the spiritual and imaginative passions of the mind” (1027). When criticism is truly subjective, the critic is no longer an interpreter of another person’s work; he is an interpreter of himself. The idea is dramatized in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” When the
narrator uncovers the secret of Shakespeare's sonnets, he uncovers the story of his "soul's romance":

Art, even the art of fullest scope and widest vision, can never really show us the external world. All that it shows us is our own soul, the one world of which we have any real cognizance. And the soul itself, the soul of each one of us, is to each one of us a mystery. It hides in the dark and broods, and consciousness cannot tell us of its workings. Consciousness, indeed, is quite inadequate to explain the contents of the personality. It is Art and Art only, that reveals us to ourselves. (1194)

Gilbert describes aesthetic criticism as a process of self-discovery and disclosure: aletheia--an uncovering of what was previously masked or hidden, and anamnesis--the truth of discovering something new and the truth of recognition. He cites Aristotle as a model critic who recognised "the health of a function resides in energy. To have a capacity for passion and not to realise it, is to make oneself incomplete and limited" (1018). Art awakens our soul to new emotions, experiences and passions. The experience of the aesthetic enriches our experience of ourselves and allows us to see and understand in ways we might not otherwise be able to do:

After playing Chopin, I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed, and mourning over tragedies that were not my own. Music always seems to me to produce that effect. It creates for one a past of which one has been ignorant, and fills one with a sense of sorrows that have been hidden from one's tears. I can fancy a man who had led a perfectly commonplace life, hearing by
chance some curious piece of music, and suddenly discovering that his soul,
without his being conscious of it, had passed through terrible experiences, and
known fearful joys, or wild romantic loves, or great renunciations. (1011)

Through art we realize the fullness and completeness of our being by experiencing the
lives of others: “To realise the nineteenth century, one must realise every century that has
preceded it and that has contributed to its making. To know anything about oneself one
must know all about others. There must be no mood with which one cannot sympathise,
no dead mode of life that one cannot make alive” (1041). The subjective nature of
Gilbert’s criticism suggests that, in a very real sense, genuine criticism is “lived.” Art, as
the narrator discovers in “Mr. W.H.,” can take the place of personal experience, and after
working out the drama of Shakespeare’s Sonnets, he will say, “Yes: I had lived it all”
(1194). He is able to live these experiences because the soul, like “the philosopher of the
Ideal City,” is “the spectator of all time and of all existence” (1195). Bringing the soul
into consciousness lies at the heart of Gilbert’s notion of culture. Gilbert believes the
individual’s soul represents a collective inheritance; it carries within it the narrative of
the race which potentially can be realized, and passed on through heredity. By developing
the critical spirit, Gilbert suggests, “we shall be able to realise, not merely our own lives,
but the collective life of the race, and so to make ourselves absolutely modern” (1040). It
is the collective soul that enables us to “escape” ourselves as we commonly experience
ourselves and “realise the experiences of those who are greater than we are” (1041). We
can do this because the imagination, Gilbert believes, is also “the result of heredity. It is
simply concentrated race-experience” (1041). In subjective, aesthetic criticism, Gilbert
suggests, we experience the Other, not literally, but through leaps of imagination: it is the imagination that “enables us to live these countless lives” (1041).

Gilbert sees in the scientific principle of Heredity the possibility of progress or decline (Smith and Helfand 67), because the soul can be either enriched or impoverished by each individual’s experiences: “by revealing to us the absolute mechanism of all action, and so freeing us from the self-imposed and trammelling burden of moral responsibility, the scientific principle of Heredity has become, as it were, the warrant for the contemplative life. It has shown us that we are never less free than when we try to act” (1040). For Gilbert, “action” is a form of “non-play”; it operates in the practical sphere and seeks to sustain the status quo: it “is a blind thing dependent on external influences, and moved by an impulse of whose nature it is unconscious... Its basis is the lack of imagination” (1023). The man of action, Gilbert claims, remains unconscious of his soul and of culture: “When a man acts, he is a puppet. When he describes he is a poet” (1024).

The Importance of Doing Nothing

The highest criticism is “played-out” not on the plane of action, nor even in creation, but in the life of the mind. The critical spirit, Gilbert argues, is most free in the sphere of thought (1044), and so “the mission of the aesthetic movement is to lure people to contemplate, not lead them to create” (1050). Contemplation allows for the free play of the mind because it is invisible: it is outside the sphere of action and thus outside of all power structures and forces of conformity. By living a life devoted to contemplation the
critic realizes the perfection of his own personality. More importantly, Gilbert shows, in contemplation the critic in turn increases the experience of the race. In contemplation, particularly the contemplation of art, we acquire, through imagination, the experience and wisdom of the Other. In the process we transform our soul and carry on the "dialogue" of the race. And so, from the theory of acquired characteristics, Gilbert derives the "importance of doing nothing." The critic who does nothing becomes a model of play: "he will represent the flawless type. In him the culture of the century will see itself realised" (1053).

Realising our capacity for thought is an essential element of criticism because "it is to soul that art speaks," but "the soul may be made the prisoner of the mind as well as of the body" (1047). That the critical-spirit and the play-spirit are one, is borne out by Gilbert's rejection of Ernest's proposal that the critic must be fair, rational, and sincere. The critic, Gilbert argues, can never be fair, or impartial in matters of Art. One cannot stand outside of play and experience it at the same time: "We must surrender ourselves absolutely to the work in question... if we wish to gain its secret. For the time, we must think of nothing else" (1047). The critic is never rational because art embodies a separate sphere, beyond the demands of accuracy, fact, and representation, and appeals to the aesthetic sense rather than reason: "There is nothing sane about the worship of beauty"; only those who do worship it, and transcend the limits of reason can become "pure visionaries" (1048). Finally, because the true critic tries to realize himself in many forms, he is never sincere; he rejects any "settled customs of thought, or stereotyped modes of
looking at things. . .What people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities” (1048).

Gilbert rejects the idea of interpretation which treats Art as a “riddling Sphinx” (1033). Art does not contain its meaning in the way that a shoe-box contains shoes. Interpretation is a kind of conversation. In a sense, the spectator enters into a dialogue with art: “the truths of art cannot be taught: they are revealed only, revealed to natures which have made themselves receptive to all beautiful impressions by the study and worship of all beautiful things. Cultivating an aesthetic temperament then, a temperament “exquisitely susceptible to beauty, and the various impressions that beauty gives us,” becomes a primary requisite for the critic (1049). Gilbert believes that each person possesses a “beauty-sense” and that self-culture comes about by cultivating this faculty for appreciating beauty; in other words, the means of self-culture is through an aesthetic education. The aim of Gilbert’s aesthetic education is to create “not merely the critical temperament, but also the aesthetic instinct, that unerring instinct that reveals to one all things under their conditions of beauty” (1052). This aim has its basis in Hellenic culture and is suggestive of the link in Greek betweenpadia—play, andpaideia—education, or culture. For the Greeks, the treasures of one’s mind were the fruit of one’s leisure. Education was neither necessary nor useful; rather it implied the freedom to pursue noble occupations, not for the sake of a future good, but for their own sakes (Huiizinga 161).

Gilbert’s point is that the person who cultivates this instinct for beauty will not onlylearn what is wonderful and noble but willbecome what is wonderful and noble. He
quotes Plato to illustrate the process whereby “the beauty of material things” may prepare our souls for “the reception of beauty that is spiritual”: “he who has received this true culture of the inner man will with clear and certain vision perceive the omissions and faults in art or nature, and with a taste that cannot err, while he praises, and finds his pleasure in what is good, and receives it into his soul, and so becomes good and noble, he will rightly blame and hate the bad, now in the days of his youth, even before he is able to know the reason why” (1049). The passage is clearly suggestive of Arnold’s Hellenic ideal, described in Culture and Anarchy, of making culture “prevail” and his notion of perfection which unites “beauty and intelligence,” “sweetness and light” (37). Again, Gilbert describes progress as moving from instinct to self-consciousness. As the individual learns to look at all objects under their condition of beauty, he or she will seek to apply the standards of art and the experience of the aesthetic to life as well. These standards, Gilbert suggests, are best modeled by the Decorative Arts, the arts that appeal to us through Form:

Mere colour, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form, can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways. The harmony that resides in the delicate proportions of lines and masses becomes mirrored in the mind. The repetitions and patterns give us rest. The marvels of design stir the imagination. In the mere loveliness of the materials employed there are latent elements of culture. (1051)

Contemplating works of Beauty, gives us the experience of harmony and proportion, of life expressed under the aspect of Form, and so creates in the soul the ideal which is the impetus for improvement (Smith and Helfand 67). The aesthetic becomes an ideal for
individual and social life: “To discern the beauty of a thing,” Gilbert says, “is the highest point at which we can arrive” (1058). This idea was also expressed by Schiller and forms the basis of his aesthetic State: “Beauty alone,” Schiller demonstrates, can confer upon the individual “a social character” (215). In the final letter of “On the Aesthetic Education of Man,” Schiller suggests that whereas government and the idea of moral duties achieve their ends through force and by imposing limits and curbing desires, “in those circles where conduct is governed by beauty, in the aesthetic State, none may appear to the other except as form, or confront him except as an object of free play. To bestow freedom by means of freedom is the fundamental law of this kingdom” (215). And while this ideal State exists in every “finely attuned soul,” as a realized fact it is found only in the chosen few “where conduct is governed, not by some soulless imitation of the manners and morals of others, but by the aesthetic nature we have made our own” (219). Gilbert’s conclusion is expressed in more provocative terms: “even a colour-sense, is more important in the development of an individual, than a sense of right and wrong” (1058), but his point is based on a similar belief, that “Aesthetics belongs to a more spiritual sphere than ethics” (1058).

The Virtues of the Critical Spirit

To understand this incentive to perfection, we might look at how Gilbert’s aesthetic education suggests an idea of virtue which goes beyond the sphere of ethics and returns to the word’s original association with Individualism. The idea of virtue, as the word for it in the Germanic languages shows, is still, in its current connotation,
inextricably bound up with the *idiosyncrasy* of a thing. The Greek sense of the word also carries this sense, “to be the true and genuine thing in one’s kind” (Huizinga 63). Early in the discussion, Gilbert rejects the conventional idea of virtue as a specifically moral quality which prescribes right and wrong actions. Such virtues take the form of self-denial and do not enhance self-development. Nature, he notes, cares little for virtues: “Who knows what the virtues are? Not you. Not I. Not any one” (1024). There are as many pairs of virtues and vices, as there are pairs of passions. Gilbert’s point is that the means of realising one’s virtue is through Individualism and can be expressed in many forms. Gilbert appears to be following Aristotle in viewing virtue not as natural and instinctive, but as a disposition or state of being consciously cultivated and from which virtuous action arises. True virtue, Aristotle suggests, really exists only when it has become instinct, when it produces actions with the same ease as an innate disposition. In a similar vein, Gilbert argues that, even “the mere existence of conscience. . . is a sign of imperfect development. It must be merged in instinct before we become fine” (1024).

For Gilbert, becoming fine, is becoming an Individual. Like Schiller, he envisions an aesthetic State in which “sin is impossible, not because [people] make the renunciations of the ascetic, but because they can do everything they wish without hurt to the soul, and can wish for nothing that can do the soul harm” (1058).

Gilbert’s final paradox, “Aesthetics are higher than Ethics” (1058), brings together Schiller’s idea that beauty promotes peaceful, social life with Spencer’s theory of progress towards Individualism. Gilbert’s final vision of an aesthetic culture is necessarily ethical, but it precludes the dominance of a single ethic or ideology, a position
which is reflected in his rhetorical strategy of juxtaposing different, and seemingly contradictory points of views. Gilbert points to the paradox of his vision of progress: “It is only because Humanity never knows where it is going that it manages to get there” (1023). This is also the paradox of play; for while we achieve self-knowledge in play, we cannot go explicitly looking for it. We cannot say, “today I will look at this painting in the hopes of achieving self-knowledge.” Not only will we preclude such knowledge, we will fail to achieve genuine play because our goal immediately becomes practical: “The sure way of knowing nothing about life is to try and make oneself useful” (1042). True Criticism is not directed towards a fixed or predetermined object, but towards Utopia, itself a playful concept meaning, literally, no place: “England will never be civilised until she has added Utopia to her dominions. . . What we want are unpractical people who see beyond the moment, and think beyond the day” (1043). We must pursue our unknown future, Gilbert suggests, in the spirit of play. In his Oxford Notebooks Wilde suggests how seeing beyond the moment means breaking free from primarily inductive modes of thinking. In a section on "the use of the poetic faculty in science," Wilde writes:

Rem[ember] how the early Greeks had mystic anticipations of nearly all great modern scientific truths: the problem really is what place has imagination and the emotions in science: and primarily rem[ember] that man must use all his faculties in the search for truth: in this age we are so inductive that our facts are outstripping our knowledge--there is so much observation, experiment, analysis--so few wide conceptions: we want more ideas and less facts: the magnificent generalizations of Newton and Harvey [could] never have completed [sic] in this
Here again we see the function of contemplation, which affords, in Schiller’s term, "absolute vision."

In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” Wilde claims: “A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias” (1089). Wilde is suggesting that it is the essence of our humanity to see “the object as it is not,” to see in the existent, “a constant margin of incompleteness, or arrested potentiality which challenges fulfillment” (Steiner 217). In After Babel, Steiner observes that “language is the main instrument of man’s refusal to accept the world as it is” (218). Language, he notes, posits “otherness,” and “that power, as Oscar Wilde was one of the few to recognize, is inherent in every act of form, in art, in music, in the contrarieties which our body sets against gravity and repose” (222). Gilbert’s views on the Greeks’ criticism of language are worth noting at this point. In what appears to be a digression, Gilbert suggests that to understand the Greek’s criticism of language we need to “return to the voice” (1017). Recognizing the power of language to evoke the Other, to “most fully mirror man in all his infinite variety” (1016), the Greeks treated all language from a purely aesthetic standpoint. Words became pure materials for play, an ideal which “we with our accentual system of reasonable or emotional emphasis can barely attain” (1016). Gilbert’s desire to return to the voice is, in many ways, a desire to return to oral culture. An oral culture, Ong
observes, does not put its knowledge into musical and metrical relations: it thinks its thoughts in musical and metrical relations (Orality 123). In oral cultures, to use Gilbert's expression, language is "the parent of thought" (1023). Later in the essay, Gilbert elaborates on this importance of form: "the true artist moves not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion. He does not first conceive an idea, and then say to himself, 'I will put my idea into a complex metre of fourteen lines,' but realising the beauty of the sonnet-scheme, he conceives certain modes of music and methods of rhyme, and the mere form suggests what is to fill and make it intellectually and emotionally complete" (1052). And it is precisely because oral cultures deal with what is already known, that it fosters agonistic performance, in other words, virtuosity. According to Ong, in oral cultures, "what the narrator says is unimportant in the sense that others can say it. The way the narrator says it is what matters. An oral culture is performance minded" (Orality 124). Gilbert points to the same distinction between content and form when he claims if an artist "had something to say, he would probably say it, and the result would be tedious. It is just because he [has] no new messages that he can do beautiful work" (1052).

Gilbert notes the loss of the critical spirit in language since the introduction of printing. "Writing," he concludes, "has done much harm to writers" (1017). Writing fixes language and determines meaning in a way which memorization and verbal repetition never did. The result is that men have become "the slaves of words" (1023). Words have become fixed into conceptual opposites; our attachment to these words, our expectations of meaning, prevent an aesthetic understanding. Gilbert's technique, of course, is to play
with these opposites. With binary oppositions such as lying/truth, insincerity/sincerity, and artifice/authenticity, Gilbert frees the initial term from its conventional meaning and shows it to be of a higher order than the second term. But Gilbert’s strategy is not merely to reverse the values which would leave the original opposition intact; rather, in removing the word form its original context he frees up a space for the creation of a new definition, one forged from connections between contradictory and opposing ideas.

Gilbert reminds us of the potency of language to mediate between the binary opposites that structure our lives and give it its underlying dialectical form: the past and the future, the subjective and the objective, the self and the race. This is because words are both spiritual and material: “Words have not merely music as sweet as that of viol and lute, colour as rich and vivid as any that makes lovely for us the canvas of the Venetian or the Spaniard, and plastic form no less sure and certain than that which reveals itself in marble or in bronze, but thought and passion and spirituality are theirs also, are theirs, indeed alone” (1019). As the most comprehensive medium of art, language has the power to actualize, to energize into consciousness all modes of possible experience. And so Gilbert cautions Ernest: “you must not be frightened of words... What people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities” (1048).

We owe to the Greeks, contends Gilbert, the development of the two highest arts: “Life and Literature, life and the perfect expression of life” (1016). Gilbert’s observation that we cannot experience Life as Art “in an age so marred by false ideals as our own” sets the stage for his increasingly excessive claims for the critic, as he moves from the function of criticism in Art to its function in culture. Just as Gilbert’s notion of the
aesthetic refers both to the work of art and to the realization of people's aesthetic potential, his notion of criticism refers both to the critical work itself, and to an activity of the mind which has as its aim the perfection of the individual. The critical spirit points to the imperishable need of individuals to live in beauty, and there is no satisfying this, Gilbert insists, except in play. In other words, the critical spirit is a disposition to actualization; it is separate from intentions, a distinction which Aristotle points to in his Nicomachean Ethics, when he argues that intentions are invisible, and if the material conditions for actualization are absent, virtue no longer has any meaning. Material conditions can enhance or impinge upon the development of one's play-spirit. With this in mind, we turn to "The Soul of Man Under Socialism."
The Self at Play in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”

*I think I am rather more than a Socialist. I am something of an Anarchist, I believe, but, of course, the dynamite policy is very absurd indeed.* (1894 Interview, qtd in Ellmann, op cit. 273)

Although Wilde rejected acts of terrorism, he was in sympathy with the reforming spirit of such aristocratic revolutionaries as Prince Peter Kropotkin whom he met and described in “De Profundis” as “a man with the soul of that beautiful white Christ that seems coming out of Russia” (934). But Wilde did not admire Kropotkin for his humanitarian efforts; in his view Kropotkin lead a “perfect life” because he lived “solely for self-realisation” (934). Kropotkin was a model personality and testimony to the belief Wilde expresses in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” that “behind the barricade there may be much that is noble and heroic” (1094). Wilde’s social criticism, including his signing of Shaw’s petition to release the Haymarket anarchists (1886) and his letters to the *Daily Chronicle* protesting the treatment of children in prisons (1897), reflects his compassion for the under-privileged and for the condemned, but more importantly, Wilde wanted to eliminate poverty, and the conditions which produce poverty, on the grounds that it is unaesthetic. In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” Wilde looks around at his society and finds himself surrounded by “hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation” (1079). As Christopher Hitchens rightly observes, Wilde appeals to paradox rather than sentimentalism by arguing that we should want the abolition of such conditions for our own sakes (Hitchens 89). Wilde argues that while “all Humanity gains a partial realisation” from the “men of culture,” by whom he means poets, philosophers,
and men of science, the men who embody the free play of the critical spirit; from the collective force of the poor, Humanity realizes nothing but material gains. “Amongst the poor,” Wilde observes, “there is no grace of manner, or charm of speech, or civilisation or culture, or refinement in pleasures, or joy in life” (SM 1080). Amongst the poor, Wilde suggests, there is no play. “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” is perhaps Wilde’s most explicit testimony to Huizinga’s thesis that “civilization is rooted in noble play and that, if it is to unfold in full dignity and style, it cannot afford to neglect the play-element” (210).

As in Wilde’s critical essays, at the heart of “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” lies his belief that Thought and Art are central to the development of a full and meaningful life, and that the freedom experienced in play is the condition necessary for the development of original thought and creativity. In a review of a book edited by Edward Carpenter entitled *Chants of Labour: A Song-Book of the People* (1889) Wilde describes how Socialism will promote the conditions in which art will flourish:

> Mr. Stopford Brooke said some time ago that Socialism and the socialistic spirit would give our poets nobler and loftier themes for song, would widen their sympathies and enlarge the horizon of their vision and would touch, with fire and fervour of a new faith, lips that had else been silent, hearts that but for this fresh gospel had been cold. What Art gains from contemporary events is always a fascinating problem and a problem that is not easy to solve. It is, however, certain that Socialism stands well equipped. . . . Socialism is not going to allow herself to be trammelled by any hard and fast creed or to be stereotyped into an iron
formula. She welcomes many and multiform natures. She rejects none and has room for all. She has the attraction of a wonderful personality. . . . And all of this is well. For, to make men Socialists is nothing, but to make Socialism human is a great thing. (Weintraub, Literary Criticism 107-108)

The qualities of this "wonderful personality" are those of the critical spirit described by Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist" and Arnold in Culture and Anarchy. More importantly, Wilde suggests that for Socialism to become more human, for it to be realized in personal and individual ways, it must become more aesthetic.

Much scholarship on "The Soul of Man" attempts to place the essay in the context of Victorian political debates (e.g. Thomas 83-95 and Murray 195-207). By focusing on "The Soul of Man" as a political tract many critics miss the ludic nature of the text and see the essay as an anomaly in Wilde’s oeuvre. Rodney Shewan, for example, argues it is "the least satisfying of his mature pieces due to its occasional character. It breaks Wilde’s rule in having been written more because other people are what they are than because the artist is what he is" (105). But "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" is perhaps not as "occasional" as Shewan suggests. Wilde continues the method of "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist" by undermining conventional binary structures, mediating oppositions and modelling for his readers a playful stance towards the language and ideas which dominated contemporary political debates. Two other texts, which deal with revolutionary actions and the oppositions which structure people's understanding of the events, are important for emphasizing this context for "The Soul of Man." The first text is Wilde’s first play, Vera, or The Nihilist (1880), which shows his
early attempt to hold up the extreme rhetoric of the Russian revolutionaries to the ideal of Individualism. The second text, "The Nihilisms and Socialisms of the World" (1890) by the Reverend John Page Hopps, captures the need for the critical spirit to temper people's understanding of, and reactions to, revolutionary movements and nicely introduces the playful temperament which unites *Vera*, Wilde's critical essays, and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism."

**Vera, or the Individualist**

The question Wilde raises in the review quoted above about what Art gains from contemporary events is one he had experience with. In 1880, after graduating from Oxford, Wilde turned to contemporary events, the attempted assassinations on the Czar Alexander II, for the basis of his first play, *Vera: or The Nihilist*. (The play was undeniably a failure, closing after one week of performances in New York in August 1883.) In a letter to Marie Prescott, who agreed to play Vera in the New York production, Wilde's alliterative word-play adds to his explanation that *Vera* "is a play not of politics but of passion. It deals with no theories of government, but with men and women simply; and modern Nihilistic Russia, with all the terror of its tyranny and the marvel of its martyrdoms, is merely the fiery and fervent background in front of which the persons of my dream live and love" (*Letters* 149). In Frances Miriam Reed's edition of the play (1989), she traces some of the changes Wilde made to the script which reflect his developing focus on the individual rather than the nihilists as a group. Wilde changed the title from the plural--*Vera; or, The Nihilists*-- to the singular--*Vera; or, The Nihilist*
and thereby placed more emphasis on the play's heroine. Wilde also wrote a new opening prologue. Acting on suggestions from Marie Prescott, he introduced a child into the action, thus allowing Vera the opportunity to be charming and playful and immediately appealing. The function of the revised opening act is to prepare the audience for the noble and passionate woman who will emerge during the course of the play, and it serves as a contrast to her acts as a terrorist made necessary by her life under a despotic regime.

By associating the Nihilist's passion for liberty with the pursuit of Individualism, Wilde suggests they become a motif for Art. In an interview with The World, in New York, just before the opening of the play, Wilde explains:

Heretofore the passion portrayed in drama has been altogether personal, like the love of a man for a woman, or a woman for a man. I have tried to show the passion for liberty. For this purpose I have chosen the most extreme expression of liberty, the Nihilism of Russia, which is akin to the old anarchism of France. All art takes an aristocratic view of life, for civilisation belongs to the higher classes. I want to show how far the aspirations of an uncultivated people can be made a subject for art. (Worth 29)

But the play contains a critique of this "extreme expression" as well. When Vera joins the Nihilists in order to avenge the imprisonment of her brother who was an active member of the Nihilist movement, she must swear an oath: "To strangle whatever nature is inside me; neither to love nor to be loved; neither to pity nor to be pitied; neither to marry nor to be given in marriage, till the end is come" (524). Without admitting it to herself, and in
violation of her oath, Vera falls in love with the mysterious Alexis, a member of the Nihilists, but who in truth is the young Czarevitch who wants liberty for the Russian people and who hates the cruel regime of the Czar, his father. After his father is assassinated by the Nihilists, Alexis is crowned Czar and plans for a republican Russia. But the Nihilists, convinced that all royalty are evil, conspire to kill Alexis also. Lots are drawn and Vera is charged with the deed of murdering Alexis and then throwing the bloody dagger from the balcony as proof the new Czar has been murdered. In the final act, Vera acknowledges her love for Alexis; she stabs herself and flings the dagger off the balcony. Her action allows her to avert the likelihood of a tyranny run by extremists and allows her both to preserve her unfulfilled love and her vow to suppress all feeling. It seems a supreme act of Individualism and a means of rising above the conflict, but the conflict is resolved through self-sacrifice and so her Individualism is only imperfectly realized.

Through numerous Biblical allusions and a Biblical prose style in the play, Wilde identifies the Nihilist cause with Christ. He takes this language from the Nihilists themselves who believed that Christ was the greatest revolutionary of all. In “The Soul of Man” Wilde describes the context which makes sacrifice necessary: “It was necessary that pain should be put forward as mode of self-realisation. Even now, in some places in the world, the message of Christ is necessary. No one who lived in Modern Russia could possibly realise his perfection except by pain... A Nihilist who rejects all authority because he knows authority to be evil, and welcomes all pain, because through that he realises his personality, is a real Christian. To him the Christian ideal is a true thing”
But Christ, Wilde observes in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” “did not revolt against authority” (SM 1103). “Christ made no attempt to restructure society, and consequently the Individualism that he preached to man could be realised only through pain or in solitude” (SM 1102). Simply put, “Pain is not the ultimate mode of perfection” (SM 1103). True Individualism is Individualism “expressing itself through joy” (SM 1103). Although the Nihilists were trying to free themselves from a despotic regime, the strictness of their own code is a mirror image of the Czar’s tyranny and maintains the conditions in which Vera can realize her ideal only through pain and self-sacrifice.

Katharine Worth suggests that in Wilde’s view, the real interest of the play is in its demonstration that the prevailing conflict between love and liberty cannot be resolved in the all-or-nothing terms that the Nihilists are prone to use (30). Significantly, the voice of this critique comes from Prince Paul, a prototype for Wilde’s later dandies. Under the Czar’s regime, Prince Paul was assured of his aristocratic position. The aristocrat is a privileged “player” in society; he or she lives in a free and unconstrained space, removed from the worries and practical concerns that constrain the middle classes. As Yeats observes in his essay “Poetry and Tradition,” “Aristocracies have made beautiful manners, because their place in the world puts them above fear of life” (251). What is striking is the way in which Prince Paul shares with the Nihilists a desire to eliminate horrible living conditions, but his attitude towards “the people” is expressed with an aristocratic disdain that is couched in aesthetic terms: “The people and their rights bore me. I am sick of both. In these modern days to be vulgar, illiterate, common and vicious, seems to give a man a marvellous infinity of rights that his honest fathers never dreamed
of. Believe me, Prince, in any good democracy, every man should be an aristocrat” (665). He is convinced that if the young Czarevitch were to live with the people for a fortnight, “their bad dinners would soon cure him of his democracy” (670). Prince Paul’s argument with democracy is that the people inevitably develop bad taste. Having been banished by Alexis when he becomes Czar, Prince Paul promptly switches his allegiance to the Nihilists, and although one might expect that his desire to join the Nihilists will mark a reversal in his aristocratic prejudices, nothing of the kind occurs:

Vera: The tiger cannot change its nature, nor the snake lose its venom; but are you turned a lover of the people?

Prince Paul: Mon Dieu, non, Mademoiselle! I would much sooner talk scandal in a drawing-room than treason in a cellar. Besides, I hate the common mob, who smell of garlic, smoke bad tobacco, get up early, and dine off one dish. (674)

Prince Paul’s decision to join the Nihilists for the shared purpose of revenge against the Czar takes the form of play—he is simply colluding with the winning side—but the true spirit of play is missing from his actions. He reveals that the Nihilists’ all-or-nothing terms simply mask a form of coercion; participation is required by force rather than by free will or for pleasure. When faced with the choice of his own death or the Nihilist’s oath, he coolly indicates “I would sooner annihilate than be annihilated” (674). When another member expresses surprise at Prince Paul’s presence among the Nihilists, he replies: “As I cannot be Prime Minister, I must be a Nihilist. There is no alternative” (676). His participation is an anti-model of play because genuine play cannot exist where there are no real alternatives. Genuine play is a free activity and an uncertain activity
(Huizinga 47). It implies constant and unpredictable definitions of the situation. The latitude of the player, the margin accorded to his action is essential to play and partly explains the pleasure that it excites. A sense that the outcome is inescapable is incompatible with the nature of play.

Reactions to Vera were also structured along dichotomous terms. The assassination of Alexander II by the Nihilists had cost them all public sympathy. The reviewer for the New York Times (21 August 1883) is clearly influenced by his outrage for the Nihilists' actions:

The Nihilist, as we know him to-day, is an enemy of social order. He is not willing to accept progress reasonably . . . We are unable to feel pity for the men who threw dynamite under the carriage of the Czar Alexander. These men had their grievances, but their methods are distinctly the methods of ruffian and murderer . . . They themselves are merciless despots . . . A dramatist, in consequence, who puts a gang of Nihilists upon the stage on the ground that they are interesting characters of the time and that their convictions make them dramatic, does so at his own peril. (Reed xxx)

The reviewer situates his argument within an oversimplified and extreme dichotomy of anarchy versus order and friend versus foe. By ignoring the ideal behind the Nihilists' aims he makes the contradictory assertion that to be a Nihilist is to be a Despot. Similarly, the reviewer for The New York Herald reveals how conventional oppositions (of a very different sort) structure his expectations and hinder his appreciation of a unique expression of Individualism: "There is but one woman in the entire cast, and
contemporaneous human interest demands two at least—a blonde and a brunette” (Reed xxxiii). The reviews replicate the all-or-nothing terms critiqued in the play and demonstrate that such terms do not permit an aesthetically disinterested response. The absolute nature of such oppositions becomes a form of authority that restricts the free play of the mind and deflects our attention away from the possibilities of other alternatives. Wilde might very well agree with the New York Times critic that the playwright and his art are in “peril” because a mode of thought which conforms to fixed oppositions is antithetical to the play-spirit.

The Critical Spirit of Revolution

In Homo Ludens Huizinga describes how contemporary politics have lost their connection to the true playful element of agonism and have become based on the “friend-foe principle” (209). The “friend-foe” principle creates a situation in which “any ‘other’ group is always either your friend or your enemy” (209). This theory, he suggests, refuses “to regard the enemy even as a rival or adversary. He is merely in your way and is thus to be made away with” (209). This is a form of false play, says Huizinga, and refuses to recognize a higher goal. It leads to the pursuit of mere self-gratification at the expense of any other, and here Huizinga means the pursuit of material interests and petty concerns. Civilisation, Huizinga contends, “is supposed to have carried us beyond this stage” and “only by transcending that pitiable friend-foe relationship will mankind enter into the dignity of man’s estate” (209). What Huizinga calls the dignity of man’s estate is suggestive of what Wilde, in “The Soul of Man,” calls Individualism. Like Wilde,
Huizinga suggests that for the full development of Individualism, not only do external political structures need to change, but people need to develop a more flexible and responsive mode of understanding, one that can see beyond reductionist categories of thought.

In “The Nihilisms and Socialisms of the World” (1890), the Reverend John Page Hopps also advocates a temperament that can see beyond the “friend-foe” principle and beyond immediate outcomes of specific actions. Hopps’ article, which was published shortly before “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” has gone unnoticed by Wilde scholars, but it is of special relevance to my reading of Wilde’s essay, not simply because it deals with the subject of Nihilism and Socialism, but because of its linguistic reflexiveness. Hopps shifts the reader’s attention away from the Nihilists’ actions and foregrounds the binary structures that we use to make sense of the world around us. In doing so, he turns this mode of thought itself into an object of inquiry and contemplation.

Like Wilde, who disdains distinctions upheld by labels when he cites “Socialism, Communism, or what ever one chooses to call it” (SM 1080), Hopps introduces his subject as the “Nihilisms and Socialisms of the world” and includes “the Communisms, Chartisms, and Fenianisms of the world; for, in reality, their cause, their temper, their aspirations, and their aims are the same; and the key to one is the key to all” (271). Referring to the “weird and terrible-looking thing” that is Nihilism, Hopps points to the temper of the times which is locked into a rhetoric of fixed oppositions and mutually exclusive categories when he asks: “Is it the demon it often seems to be, or is it some angel in disguise, or some angel in process of development? How many are, even now,
prepared to ask that question, or to consider it, with even the thinnest veneer of
patience?" (271) Most people have responded to these "sinister and dangerous subjects"
by either ignoring them, running away in indignation or disgust; or they simply "hit, kick,
stifle, [and] smother" (272). But the time has come, says Hopps, for a "fearless and
unconventional" approach (271). He suggests that it is much more difficult to talk about a
thing than to do it when he notes the time has come to "converse" with these ideas, to
"consider" them; for "perchance the ugly thing we took for a demon may be an angel in
disguise" (272). What is needed to deal with these "sinister and dangerous subjects"
(271) is a serene philosophic temper rather than the quick outbursts of emotional
reactions: "The only other way of dealing with these sinister signs of the times is
Hamlet's way: 'Thou comest in such questionable shape, that I will speak with thee.'
That is what I propose" (272).

Conversing with these ideas will help people to understand two things. The first is
that the revolutionary movements are the product of "right aims under wrong conditions";
they are "ugly mainly because they have to confront and grapple with ugly things" (272),
in this case, a tyrannical government which "reduced the masses to such poverty and
misery, that they are not even free to act for their common interests" (273). Secondly, a
disinterested contemplative attitude is needed to see beyond specific actions to detect the
spirit which unites them--their love of Liberty-- and to seek out the "soul of good" in
"these things that seem evil" (278). Hopps pays an explicit tribute to Wilde's "real
insight," his ability to find connections with people's ideas which are far removed from
his own, by quoting from Wilde's poems:20
I love them not, whose hands profane

Plant the red flag upon the piled-up street

For no right cause: beneath whose ignorant reign

Arts, culture, reverence, honour, all things fade,

Save treason and the dagger and her trade,

And murder, with his silent, bloody feet.

......And yet, and yet

These Christs upon the barricades--

God knows, I am with them, in some things.

Hopps rejects arguments that instrumental forms of reasoning and relations based on competition can't be changed and that it is "natural" that "the weakest should go to the wall" (282). He argues "if it is natural for one man to fail, or to sink in the swirl of the stream, it is equally natural for another man, or for ten, or a hundred, or a thousand men to befriend him. No, it is not Nature that is to blame. It is 'Man's inhumanity to man/Makes countless thousands mourn'" (282). What are unnatural and arbitrary are the political and social arrangements which value conformity more than creativity and aggression more than co-operation. In other words, contemporary politics and social institutions create a mentality informed by false play. They promote "friend-foe" relations in which we treat others as instruments to our own ends, or as Hopps describes it, in which "we play each for his own hand" (279). But the ideal, Hopps insists, is not that. Such play is false play because it functions as a cover for ulterior motives, a desire for power or a will to dominate. Even in contest, says Huizinga, true play is characterized by
"playing together." Civilisation demands "fair play" which is "nothing less than good faith expressed in play terms" (Huizinga 211). Nor are we so locked into instrumental forms of development that we can't change. As Wilde insists in "The Soul of Man," it is "exactly the existing conditions that one objects to; and any scheme that could accept these conditions is wrong and foolish. The conditions will be done away with, and human nature will change" (1101). Wilde describes how we need to see beyond what has already been charted and labelled: "a map of the world that does include Utopia is not worth glancing at . . . Progress is the realisation of Utopias" (1089). Hopps also repudiates the limited practical aims of those who ask "what is the use of pursuing the impossible, however beautiful it may be? " (281). He maintains his belief in the value of the imagination:

I believe in looking at bright things--at pictures of places I may never hope to see--at grand mountains I may never hope to climb--or even at what poets only see in dreams. I do not mind men calling these ideals "visionary," for the history of the world is the history of the realisation of derided dreams. "He that hath a dream, let him tell a dream," cried the old Hebrew prophet; for the dreamers have been the creators, the hearteners, the leaders, and the saviours of the world. (282)

Hopps' conclusion calls for greater and freer expressions of Individualism in thought and in art. Like Wilde, he sees that the development of Individualism is vitally connected to the development of civilisation. By undermining the extreme rhetoric which had so far characterized responses to the Nihilists, he attempts to weaken its authority over thought
and imagination and open a space in which other possibilities can be perceived and articulated.

Art and Authority

In "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" play characterizes both the form and content of the thesis which is expressed in a paradox: "Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism" (1080). And play lies at the structural and thematic centre of the essay. As Isobel Murray notes in her article "Oscar Wilde and Individualism" (1991), there is a tri-partite structure to the essay: the first part forecasts the happy future of man when all the effects of authority are removed; the second part deals with the absurdity of authority being exercised over art and artists and argues that true artists are models of the play-spirit; the third part begins when past, present and future are weighed: "But the past is of no importance. The present is of no importance. It is with the future that we have to deal. For the past is what man should not have been. The present is what man ought not to be. The future is what artists are" (SM 1100). At this crucial point in the essay, Murray notes, its logic is underlined: artists are of central importance because they anticipate the true Individualism of man (202). And just as Individualism is central to the development of civilisation, art as a model of play is central to the development of Individualism: "Art is the most intense mood of Individualism that the world has known. I am inclined to say that it is the only real mode of Individualism that the world has known" (1090). Because Art has such a vital
connection to the development of culture, Wilde is not being merely flippant when he describes the public’s attempts to exercise authority over art as “barbarous.”

As in his critical essays, Wilde’s most playful criticisms are directed towards public opinion, journalists, and the critical idioms they apply to matters of art. Wilde plays with their discourse on art in order to underscore precisely that it is an anti-model of play. The origin and the meaning behind the public’s misuse of words, says Wilde, is simple. “It comes from the inability of a community corrupted by authority to understand or appreciate Individualism (SM 1094). Wilde recognizes what Bakhtin describes in The Dialogic Imagination, that “all words have the ‘taste’ of a profession. . . Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions” (293). But Wilde holds this notion of language as a social artefact in tension with a recognition of its materiality. Words are also objects for play. Wilde submits the public’s terms to a more flexible and responsive order. He holds them up to the standard of Individualism, and in doing so he appropriates their words for his own intentions.

Wilde shows that in matters of art, the public’s critical spirit has been bludgeoned by the limited vocabulary they have at their disposal. Their favourite words to apply to a work of art are “unhealthy,” “immoral,” and “unintelligible” and point to the way their understanding is structured by and contained within a system of binary opposites. Just as Hopps, in the article discussed above, describes the public as reacting to dangerous ideas by hitting, smothering, and stifling, Wilde describes how the public, when confronted with a “fresh mode of beauty” get “so angry and bewildered that they always use two
stupid expressions—one is that the work is grossly unintelligible; the other, that work is grossly immoral" (SM 1092). Their judgements take the form of a rhetorical violence; they fling these terms, says Wilde, as an “ordinary mob will use ready-made paving-stones” (1092). He playfully proceeds to “correct” the public’s meaning: “What they mean by these words seems to me to be this. When they say a work is grossly unintelligible, they mean the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is new; when they describe a work as grossly immoral, they mean that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is true. The former expression has reference to style; the latter to subject-matter” (1092). Another favourite word the public use is “morbid”:

> It is a ridiculous word to apply to a work of art. For what is morbidity but a mood of emotion or a mode of thought that one cannot express? The public are all morbid, because the public can never find expression for anything. The artist is never morbid. He expresses everything. He stands outside his subject, and through its medium produces incomparable and artistic effects. (SM 1093)

Wilde does not simply reverse the order of the judgment by calling the public morbid. To do so would leave the original authority of the term and its context in place. In Wilde’s context, which values Individualism, morbidity is testimony to the play-spirit, to the potential range of articulation and expression in art and to the dialogic imagination.

Morbid, Wilde shows, is an absurd term to apply to an artist. It suggests a “monologic” relationship between the artist and his subject matter: “To call an artist morbid because he deals with morbidity as his subject-matter is as silly as if one called Shakespeare mad because he wrote King Lear” (1093). Wilde likens the formidable force of the public’s
judgments to “diplomas of immorality” which “take the place of what in France is the formal recognition of an Academy of Letters and fortunately make the establishment of such an institution quite unnecessary in England” (SM 1092). But the moral basis of their standards proves to be inadequate to their object and becomes the subject of Wilde’s parody: “That they should have called Wordsworth an immoral poet, was only to be expected. Wordsworth was a poet. But that they should have called Charles Kingsley an immoral novelist is extraordinary. Kingsley’s prose was not of a very fine quality” (SM 1092).

Wilde seems to anticipate Nietzsche’s distrust of binary oppositions. In The Will to Power, Nietzsche attacked people’s generation of oppositions in their thinking and language, asserting that people see phenomena in terms of oppositions that they invent and then “falsely” transfer to things, assuming the oppositions are a product of the phenomena rather than their thinking. According to Nietzsche language is the source of oppositions; whereas reality has only continual and infinite gradations of difference. So language falsifies the world to us and our task is to untangle the inadequate terms in which we represent the world, from the world itself. What is notable about Wilde’s technique is that he does not simply reject binary structures in themselves. Rather he rewrites them to suit his aesthetic values, as he does, for example, in the preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray: “There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.” By exposing the inadequacies of the conventional and moral dichotomies which are applied to art, Wilde makes explicit the limited and even destructive associations they set up. In “The Soul of Man” he suggests
that if certain oppositions have come to seem fixed and absolute, it is because they have been exaggerated by an authority which prevents us from seeing the possibility of other alternatives or combinations.

Authoritative discourse, as Bakhtin argues, “demands unconditional allegiance. Therefore authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it” (Dialogic Imagination 343). Wilde observes: “The one thing that the public dislike is novelty” (SM 1091). In this they are served by the canon. They uphold the canon as a repertoire of models to which art and artists must conform. Wilde mocks a consumerist culture which robs texts of their critical nature when he notes, “They swallow their classics whole, and never taste them” (SM 1091). This acceptance of the classics “does a great deal of harm. The uncritical admiration of the Bible and Shakespeare in England is an instance of what I mean” (SM 1092). In his choice of examples Wilde notes the compelling similarity between the discourses of the literary and the sacred canon. He promptly dismisses the Bible, claiming “considerations of ecclesiastical authority enter into the matter” (SM 1092), but elsewhere he expresses his reverence for this sacred text, although for unusual reasons. When told of a brother poet who had gone mad as a result of reading the Bible, Wilde replied: “When I think of all the harm that book has done I despair of ever writing anything to equal it” (Mikhail 25). The satire moves in two directions. It undermines the authority of the bible by presenting it as a piece of literature, while at the same time pointing up the hilarity of an author, whose relationship to language is permeated with play, aspiring to attain such an absolute
and "maddening" authority. "In the case of Shakespeare," Wilde notes, "it is quite obvious that the public really see neither the beauties nor the defects of his plays" (SM 1092). Their uncritical comprehension dissolves their judgments into irrelevance: "If they saw the beauties, they would not object to the development of the drama; and if they saw the defects, they would not object to the development of the drama either. The fact is, the public makes use of the classics of a country as a means of checking the progress of Art. They degrade the classics into authorities" (SM 1092).

Wilde's reference to classics shows his understanding that "canonical works are precisely those located at the intersection of popular and elite or professional preferences" (Nemoianu 241). For example Shakespeare is canonical in a way that Mallarmé is not. Poets, for whom the relation to language is perhaps the most playful, have an advantage in this situation. Excluded from the canon, they find themselves outside of authority's domain, and in a free "liminal" space in which genuine play is possible. As Wilde observes: "in England, the arts which have escaped best are the arts in which the public take no interest. . . . We have been able to have fine poetry in England because the public do not read it, and consequently do not influence it. The public like to insult poets because they are individual, but once they have insulted them, they leave them alone" (1091). On the whole, says Wilde, "the artist gains something by being attacked. His individuality is intensified" (SM 1093).

Wilde highlights the self-destructive nature of the "friend-foe" relationship between art and the public when he claims that the spectator who seeks to exercise authority over the artwork "becomes the avowed enemy of Art, and of himself" (SM.
1097). He becomes his own enemy because in trying to assert his authority over art, he prevents a genuine inter-play between art and the self. Wilde returns to the argument expressed in "The Critic as Artist," that through Art we can realise our perfection (CA 1038). The public is capable of developing "taste and temperament" says Wilde; they have the capacity to become "more civilised" (SM 1096). But for this they need to develop an aesthetic and critical spirit which Wilde describes here as the "temperament of receptivity": "The work of art is to dominate the spectator: the spectator is not to dominate the work of art. The spectator is to be receptive. He is to be the violin on which the master is to play" (SM 1096).

Wilde parodies the public's attempt to resist their aesthetic education by depicting the development of the decorative arts as a battle in which the public's effort to preserve the ugliness of their homes collides with the insistent efforts of craftsmen to surround them in beauty. The "revolution" was won, says Wilde, because the craftsmen "simply starved the public out" (SM 1098). Ugly things are no longer made and "however they may object to it, people must nowadays have something charming in their surroundings" (SM 1098). It is precisely by repudiating the public's standards and the categories of their judgments that the artist expresses his or her Individualism. And for this reason, Wilde acknowledges, the public is afraid of artists: "Art is Individualism and Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine" (1091).
Wilde's wordplay challenges the categories we use to think about art and artists. True art is a model of play which creates its own order, and so it is "ridiculous" and "immoral" to ask it to conform to normative ideological categories. The public's ideas on Art are drawn from "what Art has been, whereas the new work of art is beautiful by being what Art has never been; and to measure it by the standard of the past is to measure it by a standard on the rejection of which its real perfection depends" (SM 1097). The same is true about life: "For the past is what man should not have been. The present is what man ought not to be. The future is what artists are" (SM 1100). A delicate balance is being expressed here between the idea of repudiation and the idea of becoming. The balance is also apparent in Wilde's notion of identity. "I am not English; I'm Irish—which is quite another thing," Wilde stated in 1894 in an interview with the Pall Mall Gazette. The salient point to be made about this comment, suggests Jonathan Freedman, is not only that Wilde saw himself in terms of a nation that didn't then exist, but also that he defined himself as "another thing" without specifying further what that might be (Critical Essays 4). Freedman's interest here is in Wilde's sense of national identity, but Wilde's Individualism in general is based on this special sense of being "other." We miss the full play of these aphorisms if we fail to see how the binary is disrupted in order that a new ideal can be expressed. We also miss out on the full play of the personality if we have a sense that identity is defined only negatively, that it is experienced simply in opposition to something else. The self is not simply "not the other"; it is "quite another thing." For Wilde the secret of the self is housed in the soul and "the soul itself, the soul of each one of us, is to each one of us a mystery. . . . Consciousness, indeed, is quite inadequate to explain the contents of the personality. It is Art, and Art only, that reveals us to
ourselves" ("Mr. W.H." 1194). In Wilde's critical essays he argues that language and art are not only mediums for expression, they also have a life of their own. Art can create a space in which we experience an extension and enlargement of our experience and so to confine our experience of art within a fixed binary structure is to restrict and suppress the play of one's soul. The point is expressed by Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist" when he claims that "it is to the soul that Art speaks, and the soul may be made the prisoner of the mind as well as of the body" (1047).

Paradox and Personality

In "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" Wilde reveals another dichotomy which has imprisoned the free play of the soul. This is the dichotomy of negative freedom and positive freedom. In its place Wilde introduces a third type of freedom which is Individualism. Wilde's Individualism is based on the belief expressed by Schiller that people are only fully, truly, and freely themselves when they play (Aesthetic Education 107) and he follows Schiller in taking freedom out of its political context and placing it in the realm of the aesthetic.

Negative and positive freedom have been given modern canonical definitions by Isaiah Berlin (1969). Negative freedom refers to the area within which a person can act unobstructed by others. It suggests that a person is free to the extent that he or she is not deliberately interfered with or coerced by other people. According to Berlin, people who uphold negative freedom recognize that there must be a certain minimum area of personal freedom. They recognize that without adequate conditions for the use of freedom,
freedom is meaningless: "to offer political rights or safeguards against intervention by the state, to men who are half-naked, illiterate, underfed, and diseased is to mock their condition" (Berlin 124). Wilde begins "The Soul of Man" with a negative conception of freedom when claims "Socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon almost everybody" (1079). Socialism "will ensure the material well-being of each member of the community" (1080) by eliminating poverty and the vulgar living conditions which poverty breeds.

Negative freedom is restricted to the field of action rather than one's mode of being. It does not point to a higher ideal, or a concept of one's "best self." In *Culture and Anarchy* Arnold criticized this aspect of the public's understanding of freedom: "Freedom... was one of those things which we thus worshipped in itself, without enough regarding the ends for which freedom is to be desired." (50). The British Constitution is praised as a "system of checks--a system which stops and paralyses any power in interfering with the free action of individuals" (*Culture and Anarchy* 50). The public's idea of freedom, Arnold argues, is founded on the "exaggerated notion" of the "right blessedness of the mere doing as one likes, of the affirming oneself, and oneself just as it is" (*Culture and Anarchy* 64). Its emphasis is on "machinery"--the mundane and petty interests of practical life--and wastes time on removing prohibitions to marrying one's deceased wife's sister (*Culture and Anarchy* 120). What is needed, according to Arnold, is an idea of "the State-- the nation, in its collective and corporate character, entrusted
with stringent powers for the general advantage, and controlling individual wills in the name of an interest wider than that of individuals” (*Culture and Anarchy* 50).

Arnold’s idea of the State as embodying the authority of our “best self” is an example of positive freedom. Positive freedom, according to Berlin, is concerned with the source of control over one’s life. It asks the question “Who is to say what I am, and what I am not, to be or do?” (Berlin 130). The traditional criticism of positive freedom is that it can lead to despotism and/or a situation in which a person internalizes a form of authority and may “feel himself” (falsely) to be free. Wilde addresses this when he claims:

> It is clear, then, that no Authoritarian Socialism will do. For while under the present system a very large number of people can lead lives of a certain amount of freedom and expression and happiness, under an industrial-barracks system, or a system of economic tyranny, nobody would be able to have any such freedom at all. It is to be regretted that a portion of our community should be practically in slavery, but to propose to solve the problem by enslaving the entire community is childish. (SM 1082)

In “The Soul of Man” Wilde follows Arnold in identifying freedom with the individual’s power to live according to the best in himself or herself, but he rejects Arnold’s idea of establishing a common set of values in the form of the State. In Wilde’s view each person must be his or her own source of authority: “It does not matter what [a person] is, as long as he realises the perfection of the soul that is within him” (SM 1087).
Wilde’s Socialism is clearly anarchist; it draws upon both negative and positive definitions of freedom, but it also calls for something more: “For the full development of Life to its highest mode of perfection, something more is needed. What is needed is Individualism” (SM 1080). More specifically, Wilde says Individualism “converts the abolition of legal restraint into a form of freedom that will help the full development of the personality” (SM 1086). Wilde ties freedom to self-realisation—the free play of one’s self and the discovery of one’s soul. Charles Taylor’s re-definition of positive freedom can help us understand this aspect of Wilde’s thought. In “What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty” (1979), Taylor argues that one is free only to the extent that one has effectively determined oneself and the shape of one’s life. His concept of freedom is “an exercise-concept” (177). Freedom is not simply the opportunity to do something; rather “freedom is a capacity that we have to realise” (my italics 178). The point that Taylor makes--a point similar to what Arnold and Wilde express--is that “being free can’t just be a question of doing what you want in the unproblematic sense. It must also be that what you want doesn’t run against the grain of your basic purposes, or your self-realisation” (“Negative Liberty” 180).

In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” Wilde’s criticism of private property is characterized by his concern for genuine self-realization. With satirical precision he exposes the “self”-defeating nature of private property. He appears to be on the side of “The Liberty and Property Defence League” when he acknowledges that under Capitalism “a great many people are enabled to develop a certain very limited amount of
Individualism” (SM 1080). But in keeping with the general method of the essay, Wilde soon deflates expectation and exposes the inadequacy of the idea:

... in fact, property is really a nuisance. Some years ago people went about the country saying that property has duties. They said it so often and so tediously that, at last, the Church has begun to say it. One hears it now from every pulpit. It is perfectly true. Property not merely has duties, but has so many duties that its possession to any large extent is a bore. It involves endless claims upon one, endless attention to business, endless bother. If property had simply pleasures, we could stand it; but its duties make it unbearable. In the interest of the rich we must get rid of it. (SM 1081)

Private property presents an obstacle not only to those who are deprived of it, but also to those who are in its possession. It has led Individualism astray: “It has made gain, not growth, its aim” (SM 1083). It undermines self-reliance because even an “enormously wealthy merchant may be--often is--at every moment of his life at the mercy of things that are not under his control” (SM 1084). Private property is not simply a sign of one’s social identity; it has effaced the self altogether: “so completely has man’s personality been absorbed by his possessions that the English law has always treated offences against a man’s property with far more severity than offences against his person” (SM 1083). And so it is with “misdirected intentions” that people use “private property to alleviate the horrible evils that result from the institution of private property” (SM 1080). This, says Wilde, is both “immoral and unfair” (SM 1080) for the means contradict the ends. “Charity creates a multitude of sins” (SM 1079). In turn, the “virtues of the poor are much to be regretted” for they (unconsciously) collude with this false individualism: “As
for the virtuous poor, one can pity them, of course, but one cannot possibly admire them.

They have made private terms with the enemy, and sold their birthright for very bad
pottage" (SM 1081). By “confusing a man with what he possesses,” Wilde argues that
“private property has crushed true Individualism, and set up an Individualism which is
false” (SM 1083).

Taylor argues that genuine self-realization must involve self-consciousness in the
sense of “self-awareness, self-understanding, moral discrimination and self-control”;
otherwise exercising our capacity for freedom would not amount to freedom in the sense
of self-direction. When these conditions are not being realized, it can lead to a false play
of the self, in the sense of self-deception or false-consciousness. We can’t say someone is
free, on a self-realization view, “if he is totally unrealised, if for instance he is totally
unaware of his potential, if fulfilling it has never even arisen as a question for him, or if
he is paralysed by the fear of breaking with some norm which he has internalized but
which does not authentically reflect him” (“Negative Liberty” 177). Taylor describes
these conditions as “inner obstacles” to freedom. Wilde also identifies the dispiriting
effect of inner obstacles to Individualism: “Misery and poverty are so absolutely
degrading, and exercise such a paralysing effect over the nature of men, that no class is
ever really conscious of its own suffering. They have to be told of it by other people, and
they often entirely disbelieve them” (SM 1082). On these grounds he justifies the role of
agitators for without them, in “our incomplete state, there would be no advance towards
civilisation” (SM 1082). Wilde was keenly aware of how effectively an internalized mode
of government operates. He claims people benefit from authority that is “violently,
grossly, and cruelly used”, for it brings out “the spirit of revolt and Individualism that is to kill it” (1087). Under visible and violent forms of authority people become aware of their oppression, but when authority colludes with kindness, and is accompanied by prizes and rewards, it bludgeons self-consciousness and kills the critical spirit by bribing people to conform:

People, in that case, are less conscious of the horrible pressure that is being put on them, and so go through their lives in a sort of coarse comfort, like petted animals, without ever realising that they are probably thinking other people’s thoughts, living by other people’s standards, wearing practically what one may call other people’s second-hand clothes, and never being themselves for a moment. (1087)

The personalities expressed under these conditions are at best anti-models. Authority makes identity a normalizing and static concept, a set of forms that constrain the individual. Under these conditions, Wilde suggests, a personality can distinguish itself only by breaking free from the bonds of authority, or, as in the case of artists, by substituting his or her own genius for those bonds. “He who would be free,” Wilde insists, “must not conform” (SM 1087).

The perfect personality, Wilde suggests, is a model of play; its expression is analogous to a work of art. The true personality will not admit any laws but its own laws; nor any authority but its own authority (SM 1085). Just an artist takes no notice of the public’s standards, for to do so he would have to “repress his individualism, forget his culture, annihilate his style, and surrender everything that is valuable in him” (SM 1091), the true personality is expressed without reference to external standards. The “personality
is a very mysterious thing. A man cannot always be estimated by what he does. He may
keep the law, and be worthless. He may break the law, and yet be fine. . . . He might
commit a sin against society, and yet realise through that sin his true perfection” (SM
1086). Moral standards are inadequate for judging the personality, because, like the
critical aesthetic temperament, the personality springs from the play-spirit and seeks
expression in many forms: “in one divine moment, and by selecting its own mode of
expression, a personality might make itself perfect” (SM 1086). Wilde’s notion that each
one of us has our own mode of perfection and our own way of being human entails that
each of us has to discover what it is to be ourselves: “It is within you and not outside of
you, that you will find what you really are, and what you want” (SM 1086). As one
plays out one’s personality, the spirit of choice and selection can take a paradoxical turn
as it does in the opening of “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” The narrator describes
Chatterton’s forgeries as “the result of an artistic desire for perfect representation”
(“W.H.” 1150). Because “all Art [is] to a certain degree a mode of acting, an attempt to
realise one’s own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling
accidents and limitations of real life, to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an
ethical with an aesthetical problem” (“W.H.” 1150). Expressing one’s personality means
being true to oneself, but in the sense of authenticity rather than sincerity. A mask is
authentic in the sense that we become, temporarily, what we play at being. Self-
discovery, Wilde suggests, is a form of poiésis: “It is a question whether we have ever
seen the full expression of the personality, except on the imaginative plane of art. In
action we never have” (SM 1084).
Wilde’s point is that Individualism should not be restricted to artists alone. “Under new conditions Individualism will be far freer, far finer, and far more intensified than it is now. I am not talking of the great imaginatively realised Individualism of such poets as I have mentioned, [Byron, Shelley, Browning, Victor Hugo, Baudelaire] but of the great actual Individualism latent and potential in mankind generally” (SM 1083). It is to be regretted that “society should be constructed on such a basis that man has been forced into a groove in which he cannot freely develop what is wonderful, and fascinating, and delightful in him—in which, in fact, he misses the true pleasure and joy of living” (SM 1083). Contemporary society is structured on the basis of authority and wherever there is someone who exercises authority, there is someone who resists authority (SM 1084). Within this struggle, Wilde observes, “most personalities have been obliged to be rebels” (SM 1084). While the rebel is a sign of “a healthy protest,” it is only an “incomplete personality” that such people realize. “The note of the perfect personality is not rebellion, but peace” (SM 1084).

Wilde insists that the State must give up all forms of government and modes of authority. Authority exaggerates one of the most troubling current dichotomies: that between the individual and society. Wilde sees in evolution a dual tendency--towards greater individuality which results in an increase of the intensity of life and an increase in happiness for individuals--and towards a greater development of social life. We need to have a more flexible and responsive understanding towards others if we are to appreciate this aspect of Individualism. Individualism, says Wilde, will be “unselfish and unaffected,” but under the “tyranny of authority” these words have been used to “express
the obverse of their right signification” (SM 1101). Wilde shows how our capacity to appreciate Individualism is constrained by the dichotomies we establish:

A man is called affected, nowadays, if he dresses as he likes to dress. But in doing that he is acting in a perfectly natural manner. Affectation, in such matters, consists in dressing according to the views of one’s neighbours. . . Or a man is called selfish if he lives in the manner that seems to him most suitable for the full realisation of his own personality; if in fact, the primary aim of his life is self-development. But this is the way in which every one should live. . . Selfishness is asking others to live as one wishes to live. And unselfishness is letting other people’s lives alone, not interfering with them. (1101)

Individualism, which recognizes infinite variety of type, characterizes how people should live together because it fosters the growth of sympathy and joy. When people realize Individualism, “the sympathy of man will be large, healthy and spontaneous. Man will have joy in the contemplation of the joyous life of others” (SM 1102). With irony Wilde points out that it requires “that nature of a true Individualist to sympathise with a friend’s success” (1102).

Wilde shows us that the aesthetic and playful impulse of the personality is, paradoxically, perfectly natural: When people’s lives are characterized by the freedom of play, their personalities “will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows. . . it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is” (SM 1084). Wilde’s vision suggests an idea of harmony (sympathy) between freedom and nature, self and society, and, as in Schiller’s vision, a spontaneous alignment of desire and reason. When
the spirit of Individualism is given full play, rather than a spirit informed by authority, no one will have the desire to interfere with anyone else. People will not be egotistic, they will not make claims upon others simply because it “will not give [them] pleasure” (SM 1101). Individualism, in completing human life will bring wholeness to each person and unity to society and so it will realize all other recognizably moral goals. Social life will then become a source of pleasure and possibility.

Wilde’s vision of anarchy is not opposed to order; rather it creates a new order, a playful, flexible, responsive order. Nor will Individualism lead to atomism. Individualism makes freedom meaningful by putting it in the context of self-realisation. The freedom experienced in play is significant because we are purposive beings. Wilde concludes “The Soul of Man” with the claim that “what Man has sought for is . . . simply Life. Man has sought to live intensely, fully, perfectly. When he can do so without exercising restraint on others, or suffering it ever, and his activities are all pleasurable to him, he will be saner, healthier, more civilised, more himself” (SM 1103).

We turn now to The Picture of Dorian Gray; to the salons of high society and the illicit dens of the underground where, as one might put it, paradox meets perversity in the pursuit of the perfect personality.
The Interplay of Self and Other in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

*One’s real life is so often the life that one does not lead.* (Oscar Wilde 1882, qtd in Beckson 1996)

In response to reviewers’ claims that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was immoral and designed to have an unhealthy influence on its readers, Wilde published a series of twenty-four epigrams to serve as a preface. Patrice Harmon, in her study of the language in *Dorian Gray*, observes that as readers make their way through the epigrams, “the balance and repetition we hear in them so strongly create a sense of enclosure (of the kind found in poetry) that the impulse to reach beyond the preface in order to apply its precepts to the Victorian art world . . . is countered” (147). In other words, the form of the preface serves to emphasize how art is a model of play. It lacks practical consequences because it encapsulates itself; it is characterized by some sort of spatial or temporal boundary that marks it off as a free or neutral space, and a space defined by its own logic and value system. The boundaries of play, says Nancy Morrow, in her study of “dreadful games” in nineteenth-century fiction, ensure the integrity not only of the “middle-ground” of play, but of the realm of actual experience, which remains separated from the realm of play but always surrounding it (15). Anyone who willingly steps into a play-sphere and who wishes to play genuinely, submits him- or herself to the logic of that play. At the same time, the player who steps outside these boundaries leaves behind the neutral realm of play and must acknowledge the consequences of his or her actions. When Dorian
accuses Lord Henry of “poisoning” him by a book, Lord Henry explains that Dorian has mistaken the boundary of art and the limit of its sphere of influence. In Lord Henry’s terms, art is a model of play and “has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile” (163).

The correspondence between the style and substance of the preface and Lord Henry’s conversation is unmistakable. Hannon suggests that “if the preface is ‘authorized’ by Wilde as some sort of key to reading the novel, it would appear to be so not by virtue of any ideal interpretations of the epigrams, but rather as a hint that Lord Henry’s critical voice--his style and method--should be attended to” (148). My reading of the novel develops Hannon’s insight and argues that Lord Henry is a model of the play-spirit in the novel. This reading counters the views of critics who suggest that Dorian is the victim of Lord Henry’s evil influence. I take the measure of play, not morality, as a guide for interpretation.

The very situation which required Wilde to write a preface in order to counter mis-readings of the novel, suggests that the boundaries of play are not always clearly framed or fully acknowledged. Morrow cites performance, social relationships, and conversation as forms of play that have virtually unrecognizable boundaries when compared to the chalked or painted lines of more formal games (16). When the boundaries of play are difficult to detect, a type of false play may result if a person brings his or her real life concerns into the play-sphere. Similarly, the boundaries or “rules” of play may be breached, and become things to be mastered and manipulated as a way to achieve one’s own goals by exploiting others. In The Picture of Dorian Gray we see that
as play mediates between imagination and actuality, it also mediates between desire and satisfaction. And just as the boundaries of play can elude the players, so too can the stance of play become difficult and precarious to maintain; it can easily slide into a form of domination and submission which lacks the true spirit of play. The novel shows us what Wilde has argued in his critical writings: in genuine play we may realize ourselves; in false play we may become fixed, inauthentic and narcissistic.

The Aesthetics of Influence

All influence is immoral from a scientific point of view, says Lord Henry, who then proceeds to enjoy his influence over Dorian. It is immoral because “to influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes the echo of someone else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. The aim of life is self-development. To realise one’s nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for” (29). Jonathan Freedman suggests that in this novel influence “designates that activity by which the individual subject is configured by the discursive efforts of others” (Professions of Taste 44). But as Lord Henry—the novel’s “lord of language”—reveals, we are not completely dominated by discursive constructions. In the free space of play such influences can lose their force of determinism. Influence may be immoral from a scientific point of view, but from an aesthetic point of view, influence, in the form of art, language, or even personality, can be the starting point for a new creation.
“Really to play, a man must play like a child” says Huizinga (199). Dorian’s influence over Basil springs from the younger man’s childishness—the qualities of spontaneity and carelessness associated with his lack of self-consciousness—combined with his physical beauty. Basil points to the mediating power of Dorian’s personality to unite what has historically been separated: “unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. The harmony of soul and body—how much that is! We in our madness have separated the two, and have invented a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void” (24). And he describes the aesthetic nature of Dorian’s influence: “his personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style. I see things differently, I think of things differently. I can now recreate life in a way that was hidden from me before” (24). Early in the novel Basil insists “Dorian Gray is to me simply a motive in art. . . . That is all” (24). His sense of having mastered, in art, the figure he feels has mastered him is belied by another form of influence that will echo throughout the novel: “As long as I live, the personality of Dorian Gray will dominate me” (25). He confesses his insane jealousy of Dorian, his desire to possess him all to himself, and his mad idolatry (93). Dorian’s influence becomes a form of domination associated with a loss of the self and which lies behind Basil’s fear that he has put too much of himself into the portrait. Like a work of art, Dorian’s personality has enabled Basil to discover and create an ideal. But Basil’s gain is accompanied by the same sense of loss described by Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist”: “The true tragedy that dogs the steps of most artists is that they realise their ideal too absolutely. For, when the ideal is realised, it is robbed of its wonder and its mystery” (CA 1031). And indeed the painting
depletes, rather than completes his self. When he and Dorian stopped being friends, the
"soul" went out of his art; he ceased to be a great artist, says Lord Henry, and his work
suffered from "good intentions" (161).

The precise nature of Lord Henry's influence over Dorian is more complex. As
the novel's critic as artist, Lord Henry sees Dorian's personality as a work of art and
which is simply the starting point for a new creation. He is enthralled by Dorian's
receptivity:

Talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every
touch and thrill of the bow. . . there was something terribly enthralling in the
exercise of influence. No other activity was like it. To project one's soul into
some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment; to hear one's own
intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music of passion and
youth; to convey one's temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid
or a strange perfume; there was a real joy in that. (41)

Lord Henry is describing the experience of the artist who shapes a medium to express
and realize his own intentions. It is a type of domination but a creative one; for in order
to achieve such expression the artist must interiorize the instrument, make the instrument
a second nature, a part of himself or herself (Ong, Orality 83). Lord Henry expresses a
similar sentiment: "Yes; he would try to be to Dorian Gray what, without knowing it, the
lad was to the painter who had fashioned the wonderful portrait. He would seek to
dominate him--had already, indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit
his own" (41).
Lord Henry justifies his influence in the context of the critic as artist who, according to Gilbert, will not desire to influence the individual so much as “the age, which he will seek to wake into consciousness, and to make responsive, creating in it new desires and appetites, and lending it his larger vision and his nobler moods” (CA 1053). Just as Dorian suggests a new motif in art to Basil, he suggests to Lord Henry a new harmonizing mode of consciousness: “I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream—I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediaevalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal—to something finer, richer, than the Hellenic ideal, it may be” (29 my italics). Lord Henry’s monologue sounds the same note as the conclusion to “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” in which Wilde claims, “the new Individualism is the new Hellenism” (1104).

Lord Henry’s formula for a new “Hellenism” promptly elides into a new form of “Hedonism” for which Dorian is to become a “visible symbol.” The connection between Dorian’s personality and his physical beauty suggests that the body is also a medium for self-realization, that our feelings and our senses are also a mode of understanding. In Wilde’s view, we come to know the soul in a sensual form, and “it is not merely in art that the body is the soul” (CA 1052). As in a work of art, Dorian’s beauty, says Lord Henry, is a form of “Genius” (31) and can become a powerfully engaging medium for knowledge of all kinds. Lord Henry suggests that Dorian’s physical beauty can body forth a new mode of consciousness; one that unites body and soul, one that realizes the soul in sensual form and by spiritualizing the senses becomes “fine.” He plays with this
idea in aphorism: “Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul” (31).

There is a certain “otherworldliness” surrounding Dorian’s youth and beauty which Lord Henry associates with the possibilities of play. Dorian hasn’t yet incorporated a sense of the limitations on one’s subjectivity imposed by the Other: “all the candour of youth was there, as well as youth’s passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world” (27). The delight Lord Henry anticipates in watching Dorian realize his own nature is tied to his sense that Dorian is the product of his artistry: “To a certain extent the lad was his own creation. He had made him premature. That was something. . . . The pulse and passion of youth were in him, but he was becoming self-conscious” (56). The novel is the story of this emerging self-consciousness—an awareness of the powers that construct Dorian’s subjectivity, and an awareness of the power of his own influence. If Dorian embodies this will to play, why does his pursuit take on such a murderous course and entail his own self-destruction?

The Influence of Sibyl Vane

A turning point in Dorian’s self-development is his love affair with, and subsequent rejection of Sibyl Vane. As Lord Henry listens to Dorian’s rapture over Sibyl he thinks to himself how Dorian’s “nature had developed like a flower, had born blossoms of scarlet flame. Out of its secret hiding-place had crept his Soul, and Desire had come to meet it on the way” (54). What reveals Dorian’s soul and arouses his desire is art in the form of Sibyl Vane. “She is everything to me in life,” claims Dorian. “Night
after night I go to see her play” (51). And later he repeats, “every night of my life I go to see her act” (53). Dorian acknowledges he is not interested in her history; he is not really interested in Sibyl as an individual. The source of her allure is that she is Imogen one night and Juliet another, but she is “never” Sibyl Vane (53). On stage, Sibyl embodies the promise that one’s self is mercurial; not easily fixed or knowable. Dorian is enthralled by the range of experiences that one can realize through her art: “When I think of the wonderful soul that is hidden away in that little ivory body, I am filled with awe” says Dorian (53). “I have seen her in every age and in every costume. Ordinary women never appeal to one’s imagination. They are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. One knows their minds as easily as one knows their bonnets. One can always find them. There is no mystery in any of them” (51). Her death is precipitated when, like the Lady of Shalott, she abandons her art for reality and performance for sincerity. With her cry of, “I have grown sick of shadows” (75), she professes her love in bourgeois and sentimental clichés. On stage she is a work of art. She has perfection of form; she is mysterious and original. Offstage, as Dorian notes, she is “a third rate actress with a pretty face” (75).

Of course, Dorian’s rejection of Sibyl on aesthetic grounds would meet entirely with Lord Henry’s approval, but Dorian’s reaction is fuelled by more than having had to watch “bad art” (73). For by identifying Dorian only as “Prince Charming,” Sibyl had carried the illusion of the stage into real life, inviting Dorian to participate in this play-world and to realize its freedoms and pleasures. By revealing the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which she and Dorian had encapsulated themselves and played out their
love, she becomes what Huizinga calls a “spoil-sport.” The spoil-sport is not the same as
the false-player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face
of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. It is curious, notes Huizinga, “how much more
lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport
shatters the play-world itself; and robs play of its illusion, which means, literally “in
play” (Huizinga 1). When Sibyl breaks the spell of the play, she also robs Dorian of the
experience of play, the experience of freedom, creation, and mastery.

For Dorian, it is a decisive and divisive moment in which he experiences play and
reality as incommensurable. When he later discovers the changes in the portrait, he
mistakenly believes that its magic will erase the boundaries of play, giving him the
freedom to satisfy all of his desires: “eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and
secret, wild joys and wilder sins—he was to have all these things” (88). In transgressing
the boundaries of play, his will to play becomes a formidable anti-model. He dons an all-
pervasive personality which claims exorbitant rights with respect to a reality with which
it is of necessity incompatible.

The False Play of Conscience

Many critics, and indeed Dorian himself, see in the portrait an emblem of his
conscience. As such the portrait becomes an image of the way in which authority is
transmitted and internalized; it functions as a form of domination and control. In this way
Wilde appears to explain Dorian’s murder of Basil and his final urge to destroy the
painting as a result of his fear of exposure. But as Basil makes clear, Dorian’s actions, the
evil nature of his influence over others, is already public knowledge. The picture is not needed to disclose Dorian's character. In fact, seeing in the portrait only an image of conscience as a form of internalized authority is one of Dorian's mistakes. When Dorian discovers the first traces of cruelty in the portrait after the death of Sibyl Vane, he determines to make the painting "a visible emblem of conscience" (79). Motivated by his feelings of shame over his treatment of Sibyl Vane he turns the portrait into a disciplinarian. He vows, "the portrait Basil Hallward had painted of him would be a guide to him through life, would be to him what holiness is to some, and conscience to others, and the fear of God to us all" (81). Soon he realizes the miracle of the portrait: "the portrait was to bear the burden of his shame" (88). Without shame, Dorian feels "safe" from the consequences of his actions. But in trying to realize himself on the plane of action, Dorian never achieves true Individualism. Instead he defines himself negatively and imperfectly. This isn't simply because crime is an imperfect mode of self-realization which "must take cognisance of other people and interfere with them" (SM 1090). For in the value system enclosed within the novel, of which Lord Henry is our touchstone, even murder can be aesthetic if committed in the proper, playful spirit. And one can imagine Lord Henry's approval of Wilde's statement in "Pen, Pencil and Poison," that the "fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose" (1007). But after the Sibyl Vane episode, one cannot imagine Dorian establishing the aesthetic detachment needed to justify a murder with the response: "Yes; it was a dreadful thing to do, but she had very thick ankles" ("Pen, Pencil and Poison" 1007). In keeping conscience as his source of authority, Dorian remains morally conventional. He realizes only the freedom of the outlaw.
Dorian's freedom depends on keeping his "secret" safe. Early in the novel Basil describes the playfulness of secrets in a manner which anticipates the antics in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "I have grown to love secrecy. It seems to be the one thing that can make modern life mysterious or marvellous to us. The commonest thing is delightful if only one hides it. When I leave town now I never tell my people where I am going. If I did, I would lose all my pleasure" (20). In Basil's case, the pleasure generated from keeping secrets is that the secrets themselves are his own fabrication, a means of playing at life. But Dorian's double life and his fear of exposure preclude any imaginative transformation of society's norms and his secret "self" becomes inscribed with external authority. He asserts his personality by acting with increasing aggression and even violence towards those who threaten his sense of security and freedom, and ultimately against himself. Dorian believes himself to have been freed from authority, but at the moment he sees himself in Basil's portrait, he is dominated by another form of power. The self which Dorian strives to realize is itself constructed from images: Basil's painting, Lord Henry's monologue, the poisonous book. The novel is not simply about the role of prohibition and the accompanying fear of exposure in the desire for self-expression, but it is also about how the self creates itself.

Lord Henry, it might be argued, exerts his influence over Dorian too prematurely. Self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one, says Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist." Significantly, Dorian lacks the critical spirit, which is a form of the play spirit, needed to authentically realize himself. Dorian's impoverished play-spirit has its source in his childhood. As a young child Dorian was exiled to the attic which served as his "play-
room” (98). His grandfather had the room specially built for Dorian whom “he had always hated and desired to keep at a distance” (98). To be forced to play is false to the very notion of play: the qualities of play such as spontaneity, joy, freedom, relaxation, and the uniting of feeling and thought that gives play its sense of harmony and makes actions genuinely playful. The attic, where Dorian later hides the painting, becomes a symbol of how his play-spirit has been corrupted. The room brings back memories of his “lonely childhood” (99) and becomes a place of isolation in which he is cut off from the society of others. The effect is to falsely separate play from all other aspects of life, to divorce play from its communal functions, and to separate Dorian’s self-consciousness—his awareness of his own powers of influence—from the true spirit of play. The attic is similar to Miss Havisham’s bridal chamber in *Great Expectations*. “I am tired,” says Miss Havisham to Pip: “I want diversion, and I have done with men and women. Play” (Dickens 88). Although Pip had anticipated playing at Miss Havisham’s and he is sincere in his desire to please her, he is faced with an insurmountable contradiction between the activity demanded of him and the attitude of consciousness which makes such activity genuinely playful. Pip feels too conscious of himself amidst his strange surroundings and has a sense that he would be “unequal to the performance.” Players are absorbed into the special logic of play only when they respond to their own desires. Pip cannot oblige Miss Havisham’s request because he is struck with a feeling of its inauthenticity. For play to be authentic it must unfold from the self.

Without the critical spirit Dorian is subject to *logos*, unable to create himself through *poiésis*. Lord Henry’s seductive, musical monologue, as Freedman has
suggested, has an absolute effect on Dorian. It discursively constructs Dorian’s
subjectivity which Dorian is never able to transcend: “Words! Mere words! How terrible
they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet
what subtle magic there was in them! They seemed able to give a plastic form to formless
things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as those of viol or lute. Mere words!
Was there anything so real as words?” (30).

As Dorian sits for Basil and becomes entranced by Lord Henry’s monologue, he
becomes “dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. Yet
they seemed to him to have come really from himself” (29). This new sense of
consciousness is registered visually and Basil notices “that a look had come into the lad’s
face that he had never seen before” (29). The novel dramatizes the danger which Charles
Taylor describes: authentic self-expression is threatened not only by external invasion but
“it can fail through a mis-shaping which is ultimately of external origin, but may become
anchored in the self” (Taylor, Hegel 24). Wilde’s critical essays argue the need to define
ourselves independently of the processes which urge conformity, but the crucial notion is
not one of simple opposition but of originality. To realize oneself is not to realize an idea
or a plan fixed externally or independently of oneself. When self-realization is not of
one’s own making, it is false; it distorts the self. When Dorian sees the portrait he fails to
realize the painting is a culmination of images of an ideal unity created and presented by
Basil and Lord Henry. Dorian “mis-recognizes” the painting as a mirror image of
himself. His desire to become the painting is itself a form of imitation, originating not
spontaneously from his own self, but in imitation of the desires of Basil and Lord Henry.
As Morrow suggests, how individuals identify and articulate their own desires very often determines how they will play them out (11). The subject of such an inauthentic desire may become involved in a mode of false play, or a “dreadful game” because he or she can never become the imitated other. As a result, play arising from inauthentic desire can never lead to harmony. The rivalry that erupts between the subject of the desire and the imitated other often leads instead to irreconcilable conflict and even violence (Morrow 11). Dorian’s “revelation” of his beauty does not fill him with the promise of becoming; on the contrary his sense of self is accompanied by a feeling of alienation and loss: “The life that was to make his soul would mar his body. He would become dreadful, hideous, and uncouth” (34). Dorian’s fatal prayer, to sell his soul for the permanent beauty reflected in the portrait, sets in motion the false play of his desire which entails his self-destruction. The cost of his “dreadful game” is captured in Lord Henry’s Biblical question near the end of the novel: “what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose. . . his own soul?” (161)

Dorian’s Self Narrative

One cannot resist noting that Dorian’s fatal prayer is an example of life desiring to imitate art. Dorian’s tragedy is that he chooses an imperfect medium in which to realize his soul. In a passage which could have been written about Keat’s poem, “Ode to a Grecian Urn,” Gilbert suggests that “those who live in marble or on painted panel, know of life but a single exquisite instant, eternal indeed in its beauty, but limited to one note of passion or one mood of calm” (CA 1025). “The statue is concentrated to one moment of
perfection. The image stained upon the canvas possesses no spiritual element of growth and change. If they know nothing of death, it is because they know little of life, *for the secrets of life and death belong to those, and those only, whom the sequence of time affects*, and who possess not merely the present but the future, and can rise and fall from a past of glory or shame. Movement, that problem of the visible arts, can be truly realised in Literature alone. It is Literature that shows us the body in its swiftness and the soul in its unrest" (CA 1026, my italics). Wilde's emphasis on becoming, on the development of the soul through the transmission of acquired characteristics, suggests an understanding of life as narrative, as unfolding in story. For this reason, Gilbert claims, "the one duty we owe to history is to re-write it" (CA 1023). Dorian's self-development is arrested narcissistically at the moment his wish is granted. The portrait embodies the promise that he can transcend the ravages of time and realize a personality that will endure with the permanence of art. His quest for self-expression becomes fixated on his body. It takes the form of consumption rather than criticism; a form that exhausts, rather than authors the self. He tries to maintain a unified sense of self through forgetfulness. His object in life is to exist in a pure state of the present; to create dream-worlds of forgetfulness becomes his life's aim. After the death of Sibyl Vane, Lord Henry suggests that Dorian approach the situation with an aesthetic disinterestedness. Through language he recreates the situation and gives it dramatic form and beauty, in a sense, a new reality. Dorian mistakes Lord Henry's words to mean literally that if no one talks about Sibyl's death, it is of not consequence. After he murders Basil he feels "the secret is not to realise the situation" (123).
For Dorian, narrative is a type of memory. It is this aspect of his self that the portrait reveals—the story of his life. In trying to transcend the narrative form of his life, Dorian finds he is unable to author his self. His personality becomes a burden as the real limits of his freedom become apparent. As he is hunted by Sibyl Vane’s brother, time and space seem to collapse in on him. “Memory, like a horrible malady, was eating his soul away... He wanted to be where no man would know who he was. He wanted to escape from himself” (143)—that is, the self that he had become.

The novel closes on the note of loss with which it began. Dorian sees in Hetty Merton the same ideal that Basil once saw in him. Hetty signals a return to unity, to innocence; she is “flower-like... She knew nothing, but she had everything that he had lost” (164). When Dorian tells Lord Henry how he had spared her, Lord Henry reveals the flaw in his logic, pointing out that all Dorian had succeeded in doing was to make her aware of what she cannot have. Like Dorian, her life will be marred by a sense of loss and discontent. Dorian is disillusioned for he felt he had learned a lesson. He decides he wants a “new life,” but as the aged and decrepit picture reveals, he has already become something. In short, he has a history. Dorian’s stabbing of the portrait is a final, vain attempt to transcend the narrative form of life: “It would kill the past and when that was dead he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and, without its hideous warnings he would be at peace” (167). When Dorian destroys the picture, which embodies the story of his life, the narrative which constitutes the novel comes to a close. At his death, Dorian’s appearance is so completely changed that “it was not until they had examined his rings that they recognised who it was” (167). Ironically, all that remains of
Dorian is a social sign of his identity. But the rings do not provide a complete picture of Dorian's self. The reader of the novel is left with the sense that they do not reveal the whole story.

Early in the novel, Dorian tries to envision a world without differentiation:

"without thought or conscious desire, might not things external to ourselves vibrate in unison with our moods and passions, atom calling to atom in secret love or affinity?" (88). This is a world in which the boundary between subject and object, self and other is erased. But this desire to unite with the world threatens the very existence of the self. Language, the novel suggests, enables a reflective, contemplative stance towards things. It establishes the "distance," or "space" needed to create and distinguish ourselves. And as we achieve our identity through language so do we establish values by being brought into conversation with others. Just as a language only exists and is maintained within a language community, one is a self only among other selves. And so when Dorian tests the possibility of expressing his crimes, Lord Henry articulates the framework in which expression can take place, telling Dorian "murder is always a mistake. One should never do anything that one cannot talk about after dinner" (160). Lord Henry's sentiment bears resemblance to Charles Taylor's idea that selves exist only within a "web of interlocution." That is, "I am a self in relation to the conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition" (Taylor, Sources of the Self 36). This is a fitting description of Lord Henry and the novel which is itself, highly conversational.
The Play of Lord Henry Wotton

Language is the noblest instrument we have, either for the revealing or the concealing of thought; talk itself is a sort of spiritualised action; and conversation in one of the loveliest arts. (Oscar Wilde, “Should Geniuses Meet?” in CSR May 4 1887, qtd in Beckson 1996, 99)

The speech community is the play-sphere in which Lord Henry performs. In his view, conversation is the consummate art to which all others arts are to be subordinated. It is the art which makes social life a pleasure and upon entering a room he assesses the occupants’ willingness and ability to play. At his aunt’s he notes with displeasure a gentleman who had fallen into “bad habits of silence” and a woman who was “conversing in that intensely earnest manner which is the one unpardonable error . . . that all really good people fall into” (42). The trouble with modern women, he observes, is that they are more concerned with their looks than with their conversation, unlike their grandmothers, “who painted in order to try and talk brilliantly. Rouge and esprit used to go together” (49). Lord Henry’s conversation has all the qualities of play suggested by Huizinga. It is marked by mirth and grace; it is spontaneous, enchanting, and captivating; it creates a temporary world dedicated to the performance of an act apart; and while in progress all is movement, change, alternation, succession, and association:

He played with the idea, and grew wilful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox. The praise of folly, as he went on, soared into a philosophy, and
Philosophy herself became young, and catching the mad music of Pleasure, wearing, one might fancy, her wine-stained robe and wreath of ivory, danced like a Bacchante over hills of life, and mocked the slow Silenus for being sober. Facts fled before her like frightened forest things...It was an extraordinary improvisation... He charmed his listeners out of themselves, and they followed his pipe laughing. (45)

The performance ends when “At last, liveried in the costume of the age, Reality entered the room in the shape of a servant to tell the Duchess that her carriage was waiting” (45).

Through epigram and aphorism Lord Henry marks the boundary of his play. When asked if he really meant all that he said, his response cuts short any influence his ideas may carry over into real life: “I quite forget what I said... Was it all very bad?” (46). Basil captures the insincere essence of Lord Henry’s conversation when he claims, “I don’t agree with a single word that you have said, and, what is more, Harry, I feel sure you don’t either” (23). And Lord Henry happily disowns himself of a phrase and allows others to serve them in return. When he tells one dinner companion that all Europe says, “Tartuffe has emigrated to England and opened a shop,” the Duchess asks, “Is that yours Harry?” To which Lord Henry responds, “I give it to you” (148). He is aware that without the play-spirit language can become a determining force which constrains one’s identity, and so he refuses to accept the name “Prince Paradox,” arguing “from a label there is no escape” (147). Like Lord Goring in An Ideal Husband, Lord Henry is on excellent terms with the world precisely because his play-spirit enables him to feel free of its constraints.
In looking for evidence of Lord Henry's immoral character, critics have suggested his insincerity comes at a cost, for example his failed marriage and his inability at the end of the novel to perceive Dorian's true nature. But of Lord Henry's emotional and moral life, readers really know nothing. Lord Henry's character is entirely constituted by his conversation—his pose cannot be detached from his prose. Even Basil acknowledges that all one knows for sure about Lord Henry, is how he talks. "I hate the way you talk about your married life, Harry... I believe that you are really a very good husband, but that you are thoroughly ashamed of your own virtues. You are an extraordinary fellow. You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing" (20). As a conversation artist, Lord Henry is indifferent to his subject matter; divorce is as suitable a motive for conversation as marriage. "Treatment is the test," as Gilbert proclaims in "The Critic as Artist" (1027). And like Gilbert, Lord Henry considers aesthetics to be higher than ethics. To commit murder, as Dorian does, is wrong only because one cannot talk about it in pleasant society. The only immoral things in life are those that restrict the free play of conversation.

Keeping Lord Henry's conversation in play requires an audience willing and able to participate. In the following dialogue we see the effects of Lord Henry's talk on his listeners. Significantly, the subject of conversation is how to reclaim one's youth, the same subject that had earlier "seduced" Dorian.

"Ah! Lord Henry, I wish you would tell me how to become young again."

He thought for a moment. "Can you remember any great error that you committed in your early days, Duchess?" he asked, looking at her across the
“A great many, I fear,” she cried.

“Then commit them over again,” he said, gravely. “To get back one’s youth, one has merely to repeat one’s follies.”

“A delightful theory!” she exclaimed. “I must put it into practice.”

“A dangerous theory!” came from Sir Thomas’s tight lips. (44)

Although Sir Thomas mistakes the extent to which the Duchess is simply playing along, he is right on one account; it is the threat of putting Lord Henry’s conversation into action that makes it dangerous.

Only Dorian fails to mark Lord Henry’s conversation as “merely” play. This becomes apparent if we contrast Dorian’s response to Lord Henry: “if you say so it must be true” (67), with Ernest’s response to Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist”: “while you talk it seems to be so.” Dorian lacks the sense of irony needed to create his own pose. He constantly turns to Lord Henry as the source of his self-expression. His imitative, rather than critical spirit, is shown in the extent to which he utters quotations as his own sentiments. Even when he rejects Lord Henry’s influence at the end of the novel, he does so by adopting Basil Hallward’s moral tone. The counterpart to this is that he acts on everything Lord Henry says. “I don’t think I am likely to marry,” he tells Lord Henry. “I am much too in love. That is one of your aphorisms. I am putting it into practice, as I do everything you say” (48).

If we are left in any doubt as to the insincerity of Lord Henry’s intentions, these are cleared when, in the penultimate chapter, he tells Dorian how he would plan to
become young again: “I wish you would tell me your secret. To get back my youth I would do anything in the world, except take exercise, get up early, or be respectable” (162). There is no Faustian bargain here for Lord Henry never does anything except talk. And for this reason he is a source of fascination to those around him—he flouts convention, challenges accepted ideas and puts a philosophy into play, which being considered novel, is at once delightful and dangerous. As a form of play, his conversation enables his listeners to experience the pleasure of thinking dangerously without the fear of living consequences. He is welcome everywhere and his conversations are inevitably followed by an invitation to visit at a later date and carry on with his talk.

Lord Henry models a means of relating with society that reflects both an aesthetic distance, or detachment, and a pleasing proximity, or coexistence, with it. Play, he shows us, is not a means of escaping life, it is a manner of living life. Like the carnival described by Bakhtin, true play is a form of transgression which does not replace or destroy existing modes of social life, but creates a fresher, richer situation. It enhances the context in which it occurs.

Certainly Lord Henry does not model the perfect personality he envisions for Dorian, but he is an adept social player. A key difference between Dorian and Lord Henry is their attitude towards the “rules of play” or games in social life. Dorian experiences the rules as rigid and exclusive allowing for only total adherence or secret violation. Lord Henry, on the other hand, acknowledges the arbitrary nature of the rules and with his spirit of playful dissent, succeeds at mastering the “rules” of society; indeed it is the rules and conventions that give his play its distinctive quality. The games of
society, as they are played out and performed in Wilde's Society Comedies is the subject of the next chapter.
Orchestrating Morality: Wilde’s Society Comedies

*London became their playground.* (Katharine Mansfield 1924)

The Theatre of the Dandy

The following excerpt from Terry Eagleton’s play *St. Oscar* (1989) nicely portrays Wilde’s relationship with the ceremonious, upper-class members of London Society:

Wilde: Of course I want to be accepted. You cannot bite the hand that doesn’t feed you.

Richard Wallace: You don’t fool anybody Oscar. Your accent’s too polished for a start. You should slur a bit more. You’re much too perfect to be the real thing.

Wilde: Oh, that’s just to rub their noses in it: to show them I can handle their preposterous conventions better than they can. That’s what infuriates them so much; they can’t tell whether it’s praise or parody. I subvert their forms by obeying them so faithfully. (25)

The excerpt also describes Wilde as a playwright and his relationship with the conventions and upper-class audiences of nineteenth-century drama. As a playwright, Wilde assumed the pose of the dandy. He adopts an aristocratic position in the treatment of his subject matter, and flouts convention as he imitates, exalts, and parodies the
manners of the upper class through stylistic excess, exaggeration, and artificiality. But the reference to “obeying” Society’s forms in the excerpt is also telling. Wilde’s play-spirit is evident in his Society Comedies in the way he unsettles traditional moral categories and disrupts the audience’s expectations, but in these plays the constraints of the traditional forms of melodrama and the well-made play are still evident. The Comedies themselves are not yet completely realized models of play; not until *The Importance of Being Earnest*, does Wilde free himself from convention and create a play after his own fashion. Similarly, in the Society Comedies, Wilde plays with and “subverts” Society’s forms in order to show up the false nature of their play, while *The Importance of Being Earnest* moves in the opposite direction: characters, themes, and conventions, which one might expect to take the form of anti-models, are surprisingly and paradoxically playful.

Of all Wilde’s stage characters in the Society Comedies, Lord Goring, in *An Ideal Husband*, most fully models the dandy’s play-spirit. The stage directions inform us that “he plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world” (488). “He stands in immediate relations to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it. He is the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought” (522). Lord Goring’s pose is one of aristocratic ease and mastery as he supplants the authority of the many with the authority of one. Since he defines himself in his own terms, he enjoys the sense of his superiority and self-sufficiency. “Fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear.” “Just as vulgarity is simply the conduct of other people.” “And falsehoods the truths of other people.” “The only possible society is oneself,” he
concludes, and “to love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance” (522). As a visible emblem of aesthetic disinterestedness and contemplative detachment, Lord Goring appears to confront a paradox of self-fashioning, for in London Society what one says, what one wears, what one does, where one goes and with whom one is seen, define one’s status. His control over the impression he creates of himself is susceptible to external and contingent forces and the very materials available for creating an impression are contingent upon convention. As Wilde wrote in an 1891 letter to the *Daily Telegraph,* Victorian sobriety had turned the well-made tie and carefully thought out buttonhole into the last strands of masculine self-fashioning (Kaplan and Stowell 12). But in matters of art and criticism, “treatment is the test,” says Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist” (1027). And Lord Goring confronts this obstacle to self-expression by taking seriously the appearance of his buttonhole and not finding it trivial enough. “For the future,” he requests, “a more trivial buttonhole, Phipps, on Thursday evenings” (523). One can detect a similar attitude in Wilde’s Society Comedies where he deploys convention only to show it is inadequate for genuine, creative self-expression. He incorporates the tactics and set patterns of the popularized “well-made” plays which were noted for their ingenious plot constructions, but he infuses these conventions with a new and personal style. This is an important distinction for Wilde, one he outlines in his review of *Twelfth Night* (1886): “While one should always study the method of a great artist, one should never imitate his manner. The manner of an artist is essentially individual” (Weintraub 131). Through his playful handling of convention, Wilde asserts the aristocratic role of the artist when he says of his comedies: “I have given [the public] what they like, so that they may learn to appreciate what I like to give them” (Powell 58).
In social terms dandyism often realized itself as a means of upward mobility (Freedman *Professions*, 50). The dandy "assumes the role of superiority" and "thrown back on his own wit, his own taste, his own discernment, the Dandy/aesthete outdoes the aristocrat at his own game, and in so doing, changes its rules" (Freedman *Professions* 50). Entrance into the circles of English Society is a game of impressions. For a dandy without birth or wealth, what matters is the appearance of superiority, in other words, that the dandy can handle Society’s conventions better than they can. George Alexander’s hope that Wilde’s dandyism also would realize itself as a means of social mobility was one factor in his decision to stage *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. Alexander bought the play in 1890 while arranging his lease for the St. James’ Theatre. He confessed in a private note to critic Clement Scott that the piece was intended to "draw a class of people to the St. James with whom I am not at present in touch" (Kaplan and Stowell 13).²⁵ And it did, by presenting to an aristocratic elite a spectacle of its own superiority. In *Theatre and Fashion* (1994), Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell demonstrate that just as the dandy’s exaggerated imitation and excessive artifice embodies a critique of those very conventions he masters, the "glass of fashion" that Wilde created on stage "was more than a device for stroking the sensibilities of Alexander’s public" (13). In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the "precise codes of dress and manners through which privilege was asserted and power flowed [were] anchored in stage worlds that queried the very values they enacted" (Kaplan and Stowell 13). And in *Idylls of the Marketplace* (1986), Regenia Gagnier analyses the class of Wilde’s audiences and how he manipulated them by "supply[ing] the one fetish for the audience that would distract it long enough to allow his criticisms: an overvalued and exceedingly powerful image of itself" (109). One primary
distinction between Wilde's Society Comedies and the traditional well-made play is the underlying critical attitude towards relations between the individual and society. At times it is a subtle critique; nevertheless it helped Wilde to change the roles and the rules of nineteenth-century melodrama.

Of course, the dandies in Wilde's comedies are not in need of social mobility and they are already aristocrats. But the game of impressions is still being carried on as it becomes difficult for the audience to neatly place the characters into fixed moral categories. As with many of Shaw's characters, Wilde's dandies are attractive, intriguing and pleasing to listen to, but they are on the wrong side of a society which publicly upholds an inflexible sense of right and wrong and prefers productivity over charm. The dandy, as Sima Godfrey describes him (or her), "consciously defies and eludes the convenient labels of definition that modern society uses systematically to categorize its members into objects and functional roles" (24). In An Ideal Husband, Mabel Chiltern is the character who expresses an appreciation of the dandy's unique qualities. When asked if Lord Goring is one of the "beautiful idiots" or "brilliant lunatics" who seem to comprise London Society, Mabel puts him into a "class quite by himself"; he is "developing quite beautifully," but into what she cannot say (484). And when Lord Caversham accuses his son of leading an "idle life," Mabel contradicts the basis of the stereotype and corrects his false impression: "How can you say such a thing? Why, he rides in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of the season. You don't call that leading an idle life, do you?" (483). Indeed, "It's awfully hard work doing
nothing,” Algernon tells us in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (37). Lord Goring also feels compelled to qualify ready-made categories. When Mrs. Marchmont reports to him that Mrs. Cheveley has said “London Society is entirely made up of dowdies and dandies,” Lord Goring tells her that Mrs. Cheveley is in principle “quite right.” “The men are all dowdies and the women are all dandies.” At this point, Mrs. Marchmont is not sure whether she should agree, and after a pause exclaims, “do you really think that is what Mrs. Cheveley meant?” (491). Like Mrs. Marchmont, critics who sought to identify Wilde’s characters by their conventional roles and to gauge the moral system of the plays, found their expectations constantly undermined. In his article, “Dandies and Dowdies: Oscar Wilde’s Refashioning of Society Comedy” (1994), Joseph Bristow describes how the dandyism of Wilde’s theatre is “part and parcel of his wholesale critique of a culture that foolishly wants its meanings and its morals clearly laid out” (56). When an alderman named Routledge praised Wilde for calling a spade a spade and for lashing vice in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Wilde disavowed both intentions. “I have never called a spade a spade,” he said, “the man who did so should be condemned to use one” (Ellmann 347).

Gagnier, Kaplan and Stowell, and Bristow describe how Wilde’s Society Comedies both mirror and critique the spectacle of Society. In this chapter I want to extend their analyses by picking up on the themes, motifs, and structures of dandyism—specifically the notions of ceremony, game, and performance. Each of these is a form of play, but, characteristically, in Wilde’s comedies they show up as their opposite: ceremonies ensure conformity, games maintain the structure but not the essence of play, and performance is no longer a means of self-fashioning, but describes how an individual
conveys the appearance of bourgeois morality for an audience that allows almost no variation on the social roles that one may play. Wilde’s representation of society through modes of stylistic excess, exaggeration, and artificiality extends his critique of the play-spirit in the nineteenth-century. While the sets are dazzling and populated with brilliant speakers, the rules, conventions, and etiquette to which characters must adhere create an atmosphere that is an anti-model of play, punctuated by Wilde’s “insincere” characters such as Mrs. Erlynne, Lord Illingworth, and Lord Goring, whose conformity to the social code is revealed as insincere because they know it is only a code. A brief look at how ceremony, game, and performance function generally in Wilde’s plays is followed by a discussion *Lady Windermere’s Fan, A Woman of No Importance, and An Ideal Husband.*

**Ceremony**

Wilde’s comedies present social life as an elaborate ceremony, with all that word’s emphasis on display and spectacle. In relation to the rules, conventions or etiquette of any ceremony, Wilde’s characters can appear virtuous, villainous or absolutely ridiculous. In *A Woman of No Importance*, when the women are enjoying a brief respite from the company of men, the dandy Mrs. Allonby is asked by Lady Stutfield to describe the "Ideal Man . . . in his relation to us" (443). Mrs. Allonby’s response outlines an elaborate ceremony governing relations, conversation, and the creation of correct impressions for private and public occasions. It is an exacting code of conduct which concludes:
He should persistently compromise us in public, and treat us with absolute respect when we are alone. And yet he should be always ready to have a perfectly terrible scene, whenever we want one, and to become miserable, absolutely miserable, at a moment's notice, and to overwhelm us with just reproaches in less than twenty minutes, and to be positively violent at the end of half an hour, and to leave us for ever at a quarter to eight, when we have to go and dress for dinner. And when, after that, one has seen him for really the last time, and he has refused to take back the little things he has given one, and promised never to communicate with one again, or to write one any foolish letters, he should be perfectly broken-hearted, and telegraph to one all day long, and send one little notes every half-hour by a private hansom, and dine quite alone at the club, so that everyone should know how unhappy he was. And after a whole dreadful week, during which one has gone about everywhere with one's husband, just to show how absolutely lonely one was, he may be given a third last parting, in the evening, and then, if his conduct has been quite irreproachable, and one has behaved really badly to him, he should be allowed to admit that he has been entirely in the wrong, and when he has admitted that, it becomes a woman's duty to forgive, and one can do it all over again from the beginning, with variations. (447)

If the ideal man should approach this meticulous ritual in the proper spirit his reward will be "infinite expectation."

Ceremonies are the rules for the setting of a game, for constituting participants as players in that game, (the ideal man is not one's husband) and for placing and timing it in
relation with other places and time (Freadman 46). For example, in tennis there are the preparations, the choice of partners, occasion, and venue. There is the warm-up, the toss, and, at the end, the declaration of a winner and closing down rituals—showers, presentations, perhaps a drink at the bar. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* marriage games are prepared for with the coming of the season: “a woman who doesn’t part with a daughter every season,” says the Duchess, “has no real affection” (393). The occasion proves to be Lady Windermere’s “small and early,” and the venue is just slightly beyond the bounds of propriety—the terrace—where the play’s other “financial” transactions also take place. Having accomplished her daughter’s engagement to Mr. Hopper, (“love at the end of the season, which is so much more satisfactory”) the Duchess prepares for a swift closing down ritual: “You’ll come to lunch, of course, James. At half-past one, instead of two. The Duke will wish to say a few words to you, I’m sure” (406).

To participate in ceremonials is to know when and where it is appropriate to do and say certain things, and to know that to do and say them at inappropriate places and times is to run the risk of exclusion. In *A Woman of No Importance*, the American puritan, Hester, is also looking for a husband but she is not fully accustomed to the manners of the ceremonial visit to an English country house. Lady Caroline observes that Lady Hunstanton is "sometimes a little lax about the people she asks down here," and "Mrs. Allonby is hardly a very suitable person" (431-432). But no sooner does Hester articulate her agreement: "I dislike her more than I can say" (432), a bold statement which in itself exceeds propriety, than Lady Caroline reverses her judgment: "I am not sure, Miss Worsley, that foreigners like yourself should cultivate likes or dislikes about the
people they are invited to meet. Mrs. Allonby is well born" (432). Her retort is meant to remind Hester of her place as an outsider who must carefully observe and conform to the rules of ceremony (even as they are in a state of flux) if she wishes to remain a participant. Lady Caroline follows this up with a more explicit, if also a more absurd, explanation of the formalities: "It is not customary in England, Miss Worsley, for a young lady to speak with such enthusiasm of any person of the opposite sex. English women conceal their feelings till after they are married. They show them then (432).

Games

Robert Chiltern: A political life is a noble career!
Mrs. Cheveley: Sometimes. And sometimes it is a clever game. (487)

Motifs of game-playing recur throughout the plays, most explicitly in An Ideal Husband. In this play we see that games of politics and ambition can wear two faces. A game can be a structure in which an individual's virtuosity is made manifest through the limitations of the game, or it can foster the kind of self-interest that devalues and distorts human relationships (Morrow 41). In An Ideal Husband, Mrs. Cheveley's games are an anti-model of play and entail the exploitation of others. Her games are dreadful, to use Nancy Morrow's distinction, because they retain the structure but not the essence of play. Mrs. Cheveley denies that her attempt to blackmail Sir Robert is "infamous," telling him, "This is the game of life as we all have to play it, Sir Robert. Sooner or later" (495). She suggests that a game is a metaphor for social life, but her statement carries a sense of coercion and compulsion which is antithetical to the spontaneity and freedom which
characterize genuine play. Wilde’s comedies suggest that the game is an incomplete
metaphor for play in social life. A game suggests that once you have learnt the rules--
implicit and explicit, the playing of a correct game follows automatically, like the output
from a simple algorithmic programme in a computer (Freadman 46). It suggests that all
that matters is whether what one is doing counts as the playing of that game. Applied to
society, it suggests that pleasure in social life is simply the output of a set of rules, an
assumption Lady Windermere makes when she assumes that if we had “hard and fast
rules, we should find life much more simple” (388). If we take Lord Goring as our model
of play in social life, then we see that play implies more flexibility, creativity, and self-
fashioning than the metaphor of a game suggests. We need to adjust the metaphor to
accommodate the idea that rules of social life are rules for play. Playing at social life
entails not only knowing the rules of any one game, but also knowing how much play the
rules allow. Of crucial importance is the attitude or spirit of the players. For the dandy,
the rules of society can increase one’s capacity for pleasure, which, in part, may explain
why so many of Wilde’s dandies are women; they are subjected to more limitations, and
thus more pleasures, than men. The dandy shares the attitude of the critic as artist, who,
Gilbert tells us, “can find his motives everywhere” (CA 1027), and in the dandy this
attitude is joined to mode of playful dissent in which every limitation appears as a
temptation. When Lady Stutfield in A Woman of No Importance claims: "Ah! the world
was made for men and not for women," Mrs. Allonby corrects her: "Oh, don't say that
Lady Stutfield. We have a much better time than they have. There are far more things
forbidden to us than are forbidden to them" (434).
Performance

Wilde's claim that "The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks" ("The Truth of Masks" 1078), establishes a connection between performance and self-realization. His theory of masks stands apart from conventional treatments of the theme in Victorian drama in which moral justice—both dramatic and social—demands that all maskers (whose masks had allowed them to evade moral censure) be finally revealed (Jackson and Small "A Writerly Life," 4). Such a denouement contrived to restore the social norm by making the private domain answerable to public scrutiny and to the public good. "Invariably," notes Ian Small, "in Society Drama the resolution of the play broadly endorsed the moral expectations of the audience, with the consequence that the theatre became one of the ways in which London Society represented to itself the 'naturalness' of its moral code" (Two Society Comedies, xix). In his influential 1950s study, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, the American sociologist Erving Goffman analysed how "the very obligation and profitability of appearing always in a steady moral light . . . forces one to be the sort of person who is practised in the ways of the stage" (251). Or, to use a different imagery, a heightened emphasis on ceremony corresponds with a heightened sense of performance:

In their capacities as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they are being judged. Because these standards are so numerous and so pervasive, the individuals who are performers dwell more than we might think in a moral world. But, qua performers, individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of
realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing
impression that these standards are being realized. (251)

This is an apt description of Wilde’s comedies which break with convention by
performing for their audiences the “pose” of the audiences’ own moral code. In *A
Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth expresses his confidence that, despite her
bourgeois emotional outburst, Hester will keep his kiss a secret along with Mrs.
Arbuthnot’s past: “She couldn’t tell the story without explaining that she objected to
being kissed, could she? And all the women would think her a fool and the men think her
a bore” (478). His assurance parodies the expectation that private morality is
subordinated to the public ceremonial. Hester’s Puritanism, he is convinced, is simply a
performance, and her sense of propriety is highly occasional. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*,
immorality arrives dressed for the occasion when Mrs. Erlynne, the “bad” woman, enacts
a grand stage entrance into the most exclusive sphere of “good” Society once she is
cloaked in the latest fashions. In *An Ideal Husband*, Lord Goring advises Sir Robert to
avoid a confession if he wants to stay in public life by warning him that he would “never
be able to talk morality again. And in England a man who can’t talk morality twice a
week to a large, popular, immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician” (507). In
highlighting the artifice of their value system Wilde also critiques the audience’s value of
sincerity and their expectation that an individual who signifies he or she has certain social
characteristics ought in fact to be what he or she seems.
In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, more than the other comedies, Wilde reveals his acute sensitivity to the way in which "ceremonials frame a time and space, setting it apart from others, and marking its specificity" (Freadman 60). Peter Raby describes for us how Wilde "maps out the restricted geography of English upper-middle class society: Grosvenor Square, Curzon Street, the Park, and, beyond this little parish of St. James's, the rose gardens of country houses like Selby" (*Cambridge Companion* 145). The names of the characters, Raby notes, correspond to the English landscape: Windermere, Darlington, Berwick. And those erring husbands who transgress the bounds of propriety can be sent off the playing field to the spas of Homburg or Aix. The Duchess of Berwick suggests that this is a ritual of repentance: "These wicked women get our husbands away from us, but they always come back, slightly damaged, of course" (392). If a more permanent exile is required, the capitals such as Vienna or Rome can be reached in the luxury of a club car.

Even in more private places and during private exchanges the roles of participants and the kind of behaviour that is appropriate to them are set by the place and occasion. During rehearsal Wilde learned that Alexander planned to use the Act One setting–originally specified as Lord Windermere's library–for Act Four, which Wilde had intended to be Lady Windermere's boudoir, an arrangement which would have shifted the context from male to female territory. Wilde wrote to Alexander: "If through pressure of time, or for reasons of economy, you are unable to give the play its full scenic mounting, the scene that has to be repeated should be the second, not the first. Lady Windermere
may be in her drawing-room in the fourth act. She should not be in her husband's library" 
(More Letters 109-112). They reached a compromise; the morning-room could accommodate both Lady Windermere's area, the props--the table with the bowl of roses, the fan, and site of afternoon tea--and Lord Windermere's area with his bureau, books, papers, and the locked bank-book. Wilde wanted Mrs. Erlynne to have a central position in the last act, and he is acutely aware of how the effects of her movements are conditioned by her role and her place. He writes: "Windermere, being in his own house, can pace up and down--does, in fact, do so; Mrs. Erlynne, of course, cannot do anything of the kind. She rises from the sofa, as marked in the play, and sits down, but with the possibility of Lady Windermere entering at any moment, for her to walk about, or cross, or the like, would be melodramatic, but not dramatic or artistic" (More Letters 109-112).

In this same scene Lord Windermere finds himself being reprimanded for having insulted his guest: "My dear Windermere, manners before morals" (423). It is a reminder that in London Society, the private is always subordinated to the public.

Imagery of space and place links the various strands of class and sexual politics. The first act invites us into the morning room at Carlton House Terrace. The butler enters and asks what appears to be an absurd question, "Is your ladyship at home?", but one the audience would recognize as the first stage of a visiting ceremony. The disparity between speech and appearance marks the transformation of the private sphere into the public. The morning room comes to represent a confined subset of society in which the rules of respectability are clearly defined. Lady Windermere is revealed as the epitome of such respectability which she refuses to compromise, as seen in her apparent refusal to
perceive the sub-text behind Lord Darlington's conversation. For his part, Lord Darlington’s conversation is couched in the use of the conditional tense. *If* he had known it was her birthday, he says, he *would* have covered the whole street with flowers, a declaration meant to undermine the value of the roses given to her by her husband. Similarly, he presents her with a hypothetical situation of a husband who has committed some transgression. Although he scorns the values of the society to which he belongs, he knows that if he wishes to maintain his privileged status he dare not violate its public code of morality and must suppress his desire for a married woman. Nor is it his place, as a man, to inform her of her husband’s indiscretion. The Duchess of Berwick will rise to that occasion quite satisfactorily.

The exclusiveness of the society represented in Lady Windermere’s morning room is emphasized with the Duchess of Berwick’s arrival. Lady Windermere is identified as the arbiter of who is to be admitted into society and who is to be excluded. The Duchess affirms that Lady Windermere’s house is "select" and Lady Windermere asserts the strict moral code which determines eligibility: "I will have no one in my house about whom there is any scandal" (14). But she is confronted with the limitations of her control over respectability when she is told of her husband’s scandalous involvement with Mrs. Erlynne. When Lord Windermere demands that she invite Mrs. Erlynne to her ball, the confrontation ends with a marked distinction between their private and public lives. Lady Windermere declares: “From this moment my life is separate from yours.” But the real threat lies in what follows: “If you wish to avoid a public scandal, write at once to this woman, and tell her that I forbid her to come here!” (397). Mrs.
Erlynne, who is inadmissible to the society ruled by the women, has been plotting her moves in the sphere beyond Lady Windermere’s morning room—in the men’s sphere—the sphere of commerce, clubs, and scandal. Significantly, upon gaining entrance to the ball she claims, "I am afraid of the women. You [Lord Windermere] must introduce me to some of them. The men I can always manage" (401). Clearly, she is embarking on a new game. But the very fact that she has gained entrance to the house makes her instantly acceptable and in a complete reversal of her initial judgment, the Duchess of Berwick remarks to Lady Windermere, “Of course, she must be all right if you invite her (405).

The ball is a spectacle of insincerity in Wilde’s sense of artifice, and it reveals the audience’s insincerity in the more traditional, moral sense of the term as throughout this scene, Wilde plays on the audience’s love of both scandal and fashion. They must wait anxiously as Parker articulates the name of each of the guests. Wilde knows that the audience, like Lady Plymdale, is anxious to "have a good stare" (403) at this notoriously immoral woman. Mrs. Erlynne enters the ball "very beautifully dressed and very dignified" (401). She may have some moral faults but in terms of fashion she is flawless. As Mrs. Erlynne parades her good looks, the other women plot how to use them to their own advantage. “Women of that kind are most useful,” confesses Lady Plymdale. “They form the basis of other people’s marriages” (403). The fashion designers of London Society also stood to capitalize on her appearance as Kaplan and Stowell have argued in Theatre and Fashion. Wilde knew the women on stage often set the fashion trends for the audiences. He appears to be undermining the ease with which the women in the
audience arrive at their judgement of Mrs. Erlynne by having them desire to emulate the appearance of a character whose morality is questionable.\textsuperscript{27}

Mediating between Lady Windermere's sphere of class respectability and the sphere of scandal is the terrace where games of marriage, adultery, and commerce are combined and played out. Agatha is engaged to the Australian Mr. Hopper whose income is the defining trait allowing him admittance to Society, Darlington abandons his position as dandy and distant admirer by suggesting that Lady Windermere run away with him, and Mrs. Erlynne bribes Lord Windermere for a dowry. When Lady Windermere writes her farewell letter to her husband she claims "It is he who has broken the bond of marriage--not I. I only break its bondage" (408). But in running away she does not free herself, nor does she achieve a genuine sense of Individualism. Instead she simply abandons her social position, opens herself up to scandal, and places herself entirely at the mercy of another man. Her dependence and vulnerability is immediately established in Act Three as she waits anxiously for Darlington's return.

Mrs. Erlynne's "moral" act of saving her daughter avoids the revelation of a blood tie which was conventional in nineteenth-century melodrama. Instead Mrs. Erlynne convinces Lady Windermere to go home; she is out of place and would not know how to play the role such a scandalous position would entail. "You have neither the wit nor the courage. You couldn't stand dishonour. No! Go back Lady Windermere!" (413). But before these women have a chance to return to their positions in society, the men come back from the club and the women are forced to hide. That both women are now in a potentially scandalous position emphasizes the men's hypocrisy and prejudices about
‘good’ and ‘bad’ women. Wilde uses costuming and stage positions here to reinforce the notion of a double standard. In centre stage are gathered the men. Their solidarity is expressed in the solid mass of black and white tail-coats and stiff shirts. At stage right, standing alone, is the object of their judgment, Mrs. Erlynne. The splendour of her evening gown that ensured that she was on the same playing field as the women at the ball, suddenly seems flimsy and fragile compared to the men's solid mass. The women's precarious position is emphasized as they listen to, but remain on the outside of, an all-male chorus of which they, as women, are the subject. Mrs. Erlynne, especially, is the object of their jokes and gossip.

The tension of the scene mounts when Cecil Graham discovers Lady Windermere’s fan and her presence threatens to be revealed. The danger is defused when a poised and controlled Mrs. Erlynne makes a stylish entrance to retrieve what she treats as a trivial object: “I am afraid I took your wife’s fan in mistake for my own, when I was leaving your house tonight. I am so sorry” (419). Her performance is her sacrificial act. Her private motives for saving her daughter are kept secret, and publicly her appearance in Lord Darlington’s rooms is disgraceful. When she emerges from behind the curtain she once again adopts the role of an adventuress and abandons the social status she had gained.

In the moral system of the play, what matters is the appearance of virtue and Mrs. Erlynne has learned that one is what one wears. Her discovery that she has a “heart” threatens to undermine the impression of herself she has so carefully fabricated. “I have no ambition to play the part of a mother,” she tells Lord Windermere, “somehow it
doesn't go with modern dress" (425). Goffman suggests that to play a "role" is to enact
the rights and duties attached to a given status (16). But motherhood, Mrs. Erlynne
suggests, entails many duties but few rights. "I suppose, Windermere, you would like me
to retire into a convent or become a hospital nurse, or something of that kind, as people
do in silly modern novels. That is stupid of you, Arthur; in real life we don't do such
things" (425). This is a meta-dramatic commentary addressing the rigid typing of
characters on the Victorian stage which allowed for few variations on the set patterns
(Cave 224). She points to the way in which the conventions of melodrama had prescribed
and limited the roles a woman could play in art and in life. In this case, art had been
lacking the critical spirit. By "refashioning" the history of her role as a "woman with a
past," Wilde insists Mrs. Erlynne is a "figure previously untouched by literature" (Letters
309). She shows that there are other possibilities; although for her what matters only is
that they are fashionable: "And besides, if a woman really repents, she has to go to a bad
dressmaker, otherwise no one believes in her. And nothing in the world would induce me
to that" (425).

In rejecting her role as a repentant, Mrs. Erlynne also rewrites the play's ending.
The final scene of such plays is conventionally a scene of revelation and resolution. In
Lady Windermere's Fan the closing references to a "clever" and a "good woman" are
ironic since no one character's assessment of Mrs. Erlynne is more informed or less
arbitrary than the others'. There is no real agreement as to who really is the good woman;
rather what emerges is an unspoken consensus for each character to withhold information
or knowledge for the sake of maintaining the impressions they have fabricated of
themselves. The characters are like Maggie Verver in Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* who knows that maintaining the fiction of appearances offers each person more possibilities than the traditional melodramatic confrontatation. Wilde questions the value of sincerity by suggesting that maintaining desirable fictions seems to be one of the implicit "rules" that guides members of society in their relations with each other and which keeps their ceremonies in play. Lord Augustus' marriage to Mrs. Erlynne is case in point. Lord Augustus seems comical in his eagerness to have everything "explained" to him and his blind acceptance of whatever unlikely stories Mrs. Erlynne tells him. Although some critics see her marriage to Lord Augustus as a dubious reward for her quitting the game of London Society, it is a promising match. Lord Augustus also understands the performative nature of self, telling Lord Windermere "none of us men do look what we really are. Demmed good thing, too" (399). Certainly, Lord Augustus is concerned with his social position, and in a dilemma to be reworked in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, he finds Mrs. Erlynne's lack of relations to be a "demmed nuisance" requiring him to find a way to create for her an appearance of respectability. And in contrast to the cold-hearted enjoyment the other men take in speculating about Mrs. Erlynne's history, Lord Augustus treats her past as a source of pleasure: "I prefer women with a past. They're so demmed amusing to talk to" (415).

Wilde's amusing characters are another means by which he undermines an easy moral response to his comedies. In his review of a very different type of play, Shelley's *The Cenci*, Wilde suggests that "it is by conflict between our artistic sympathies and our moral judgment that the greatest dramatic effects are produced" (Weintraub 81). His
statement is also of relevance to his comedies. With their wit, charm, and good looks, Wilde’s “bad” characters have an aesthetic appeal. The adventuress, the ambitieux, and the villain are, for the most part, physically and linguistically the most attractive characters on the stage and their flair for flouting convention is a type of critical-spirit. To be good is so easy, Gilbert argues in “The Critic as Artist.” “It merely requires a certain amount of sordid terror, a certain lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle class-respectability. Aesthetics are higher than ethics” (1058). Wilde elaborated the point in a letter to the St. Jame’s Gazette (27 June 1890) regarding The Picture of Dorian Gray. Art, he writes, “deals with the exception and the individual. Good people, belonging as they do to the normal, and so, commonplace, type, are artistically uninteresting. Bad people are, from the point of view of art, fascinating studies. They represent colour, variety and strangeness. Good people exasperate one’s reason; bad people stir one’s imagination” (Weintraub 235). When Mrs. Erlynne leaves the stage for her self-imposed exile in Europe, and the Windermere retreat to Selby where the roses are simply “white and red,” we are left with a fairly bleak (and unplayful) picture of London society, whose philistine codes will not accommodate the “colour, variety and strangeness,” which Mrs. Erlynne represents. 

A Woman of No Importance

Gagnier describes how the audience of A Woman of No Importance “was caught between its required sympathy for a moral heroine and its own delight in a ‘villain’ with a
charming, if amoral wit” (122). Lord Illingworth is a consummate dandy, able to diffuse moral objections to his behaviour through a witty refashioning of the terms:

Lady Stutfield: The world says that Lord Illingworth is very, very wicked.

Lord Illingworth: But what world says that, Lady Stutfield? It must be the next world. This world and I are on excellent terms. [*Sits down beside Mrs. Allonby*]

Lady Stutfield: Everyone I know says you are very, very wicked.

Lord Illingworth: It is perfectly monstrous that way people go about, nowadays, saying things behind one’s back that are absolutely and entirely true.

(435-36)

Lord Illingworth is evenly matched by the play’s female dandy, Mrs. Allonby. Their exchange in the garden, a scene which anticipates the garden scenes in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, heightens the sexual tension between them:

Lord Illingworth: Yes, let us stay here. The Book of Life beings with a man and a woman in a garden.

Mrs. Allonby: It ends with Revelations.

Lord Illingworth: You fence divinely. But the button has come off your foil.

Mrs. Allonby: I still have the mask.

Lord Illingworth: It makes your eyes lovelier. (443)

Mrs. Allonby articulates her philosophy of play: “the one advantage of playing with fire . . . is that one never even gets singed. It is the people who don’t know how to play with it who get burned up” (434). But in the stagnant atmosphere and sneering
company of Hunstanton Chase, her statement takes on a cynical subtext: one must either play the game or be played upon. Mrs. Allonby’s and Lord Illingworth’s games become anti-models of play as they take on a predatory and exploitative nature. Lord Illingworth, we are told by Lord Kevil, regards women simply as a “toy.” And in the final scene Lord Illingworth himself refers to Mrs. Arbuthnot as a “beautiful plaything.” Mrs. Allonby also finds her amusement at the expense of others and sets in motion the challenge to Hester’s virtue:

Mrs. Allonby: Then it is lucky you are not going to kiss her!

Lord Illingworth: Is that a challenge?

Mrs. Allonby: It is an arrow shot in the air. (442)

When it is discovered that Gerald is Lord Illingworth’s son, the ritual of unmasking turns into a contest between mother and father for their son’s affection, which sets in place another type of challenge ending when Mrs. Arbuthnot strikes Lord Illingworth with his own glove. In “Wilde’s Comedies of Society,” Peter Raby describes how the conclusion parodies the ceremonial challenge between two men:

The blow has been postponed form the end of Act III when Mrs. Arbuthnot halts Gerald with the notoriously melodramatic “Stop, Gerald, stop! He is your own father!” Coming from a woman, and unsignalled, hers is a far more telling action; it is the traditional insult of one man to another, an invitation to a challenge, but here wholly unanswerable: a spontaneous subversion of a male code which is absurdly theatrical. (152)
According to Gagnier, it was in the “moral triumph” of Hester, Mrs. Arbuthnot, and her son Gerald at the play’s conclusion that Wilde “caught” the audience in a false position. Although reviews and audiences alike, applauded Mrs. Arbuthnot’s triumph, praising her “pathos”, “dignity,” and “moral fortitude,” they were drawn to the sparkling cynicism and “mature” common sense of the “villain,” the blasé roué Illingworth (Gagnier 123). Gagnier draws attention to a parody of the play in Punch which divided the play between the latitude of the villain with his “saucy epigrams” and the platitude of the heroine with her “moral sentiments to suit the bourgeois palate” (123). This double structure can help us see how the contest is played out at another level as a clash of two worlds, the one maintaining traditional moral values, the other leisurely and ceremoniously overlooking its hypocrisy and sexual double standards. Mrs. Arbuthnot is joined in her values by the Puritan Hester, the American who castigates her hosts for their useless, idle lives spent in abusive conversation, and who claims “I couldn’t believe that any women could really hold such views of life as I have heard to-night from some your [Lady Hunstanton’s] guests” (448). The women’s conversation may be somewhat scandalous, but for themselves, and presumably for the audience, it is also highly entertaining. Hester, one might note, is a little too much like Sibyl Vane in The Picture of Dorian Gray after Sibyl rejects art for life. The women find Hester’s speech tiresome and Lord Illingworth judges her emotional outburst upon being kissed as a poor performance (Dorian calls Sibyl “bad art”), and one which goes against her other role, that of a nouveau riche looking for a husband. To Lord Illingworth’s surprise, Hester turns out to be the “fin-de-siecle” person responsible for his defeat. Lord Illingworth’s defeat seems to stand for the defeat of age, of aristocracy and all that is suggested by the
manicured lawns and terraces of Hunstanton Chase. Although Hester will return to America and Lord Illingworth will retain his position, the play closes with a sense that the ceremonies which govern Hunstanton Chase are on the decline.

Kaplan and Stowell suggest that *A Woman of No Importance* was the play in which Wilde was least willing to accommodate his critics and that “Wilde perversely but characteristically cranked up both his melodramatic and epigrammatic machinery” (21). They might have added that he cranks up his criticisms of Society, for in the contest between melodrama and epigram, between bland Puritanism and hypocritical ceremoniousness, neither side appears to accommodate a genuine spirit of play. Caught between the latitude and the platitude is Gerald. Gerald is the play’s emblem of future possibilities. He has youth and “youth is the Lord of Life” (459), Lord Illingworth tells him, a sentiment echoed in Wilde’s critical essays. He is discontented which is “the first step in the progress of a man or a nation” (456), says Lord Illingworth, repeating an idea at the crux of “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.” And he has an ambition to re-fashion himself in the future promised to him by Lord Illingworth: “A man who can dominate a London dinner-table can dominate the world. The future belongs to the dandy. It is the exquisites who are going to rule” (459). But when his parentage is exposed, Gerald’s curiosity, ambition, and spirit are crushed: “I don’t want to see the world: I’ve seen enough of it” (471), he tells Mrs. Allonby who then describes the true sense of loss: “I hope you don’t think you have exhausted life, Mr. Arbuthnot. When a man says that one knows that life has exhausted him” (459). Having never developed a play-spirit of his own, Gerald is easily subdued—“I don’t want to leave my mother”—and sent off to
America. His departure leaves us to wonder, if the future of Hunstanton Chase does not belong to the dandy, if the exquisites are not going to rule, who will? The play-spirit of the future is left in doubt.

An Ideal Husband

In *An Ideal Husband*, Lord Goring dismisses the suggestion that Sir Robert should publicly expose the scandal from which he achieved political success:

If you did make a clean breast of the whole affair, you would never be able to talk morality again. And in England a man who can’t talk morality twice a week to a large, popular, immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician. There would be nothing left for him as a profession except Botany or the Church. A confession would be of no use. It would ruin you. (507)

It is precisely this gap between private and social values that enables Mrs. Cheveley to blackmail Sir Robert, for she recognizes that in politics an insincere performance of morality has become the rule. And the rules which make a ceremony reliable and controllable are the same rules that can be manipulated. She points this out to Sir Robert with a discomforting directness:

Remember to what a point your Puritanism in England has brought you. In old days nobody pretended to be a bit better than his neighbours. In fact, to be a bit better than one’s neighbour was considered excessively vulgar and middle-class. Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a
paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues--and what is result? You all go over like ninepins--one after the other. (495)

Maintaining a convincing appearance of morality is crucial for Sir Robert precisely because his position depends on a public that values sincerity and insists that a person be what he or she seems, in other words that they have earned a right to play a certain role.

Sir Robert’s weakness is that he had come to believe that the impression he has been staging is a reality. When Mrs. Cheveley approaches him with the Argentine scheme and calls it a “brilliant, daring speculation,” he rejects it: “Believe me, Mrs. Cheveley, it is a swindle. Let us call things by their proper names. It makes matters simpler” (493). Her revelation that she is in possession of his letter which advises Baron Arnheim to buy Suez Canal shares results in his instinctive attempt to creatively redefine the situation by calling the affair “a speculation.” In doing so he reveals the hypocrisy of his all-or-nothing morality and the rigid standards of morality to which he subjects others. In the public’s eye a creative violation of the rules is the same as simply violating the rules. Mrs. Cheveley responds: “It is a swindle, Sir Robert. Let us call things by their proper names. It makes everything simpler” (495). Simpler means a limited set of options of which Mrs. Cheveley is now in control: “The big battalions are on my side. You have a splendid position, but it is your splendid position that makes you so vulnerable. You can’t defend it! And I am in attack” (496). When she says “I intend to play quite fairly with you. One should always play fairly. . . when one has the winning cards” (496), a note of false play is struck, for true play has an element of uncertainty.

When the outcome of a game is determined, the playing of the game ceases. What Mrs.
Cheveley means by fair play, is that she is offering him a deal that will be to her advantage and will allow him to keep up his performance and his public position.

What to call things raises the issue of how to interpret Sir Robert's actions. Sir Robert embodies a form of Individualism which Shaw recognized in his review of the play. Shaw welcomed what he called "the modern note" in "Sir Robert Chiltern's assertion of individuality and courage of his wrongdoings as against the mechanical idealism of his stupidly good wife, and in his bitter criticism of a love that is only the reward of merit" (Saturday Review, 12 January 1895). Lord Goring interprets his action as a sign of weakness but Sir Robert explains the attraction of the risk in which he stood to lose much more than he could gain: "I tell you there are terrible temptations that it requires strength, strength and courage to yield to. To stake all one's life on a single moment, to risk everything on one throw, whether the stake be power or pleasure, I care not--there is no weakness in that. There is a horrible, a terrible courage. I had that courage" (506). Pure avarice, as Huizinga notes, "neither trades or plays; it does not gamble. To dare, to take risks, to bear uncertainty, to endure--these are the essence of the play-spirit" (51).

Lady Chiltern also presents an obstacle to her husband's position. She represents a high moral tone, but as Shaw's review suggests, this comes at the expense of romance, spontaneity and imagination. The only future role she can conceive for her husband is that of the fallen woman's: repentance and retirement from Society.

The play's resolution combines all three motifs of ceremony, game-playing and performance. Lord Goring orchestrates this ending. Like an expert stage manager, he
puts the characters in their place and creates the final impression without involving himself directly in the action. His position has proved troubling for many critics. Kerry Powell, for example, in *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, considers it a weakness that Lord Goring appears to abandon his dandyism and adopt a moral stance. But the dandy’s values do survive. Lord Goring knows that Mrs. Cheveley’s games are motivated by her desire for revenge against Lady Chiltern, who “always got the good conduct prize” in school (486). More explicitly, Mrs. Cheveley says, “I only war against one woman, against Gertrude Chiltern” (534). In demanding that her husband retire, Lady Chiltern, Lord Goring argues, is simply “playing Mrs. Cheveley’s cards” (547). His “speech” on a woman’s love and a man’s ambition can be read as the dandy’s insight into how to play the game. Like Mrs. Erlynne, in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Lord Goring knows the role that Lady Chiltern has been set up to play. He simply shows Lady Chiltern how to play her own cards, which he does by refashioning her role as a wife, a role she then successfully performs.

The speech can certainly sound inconsistent with Lord Goring’s stance as a dandy, but there is no indication that it is meant to be a sincere representation of his views. Critics have pointed to the stage directions which indicate Lord Goring “pulling himself together for a great effort, and showing the philosopher that underlies the dandy” (548). But the effort, I suggest, is meant to be put into the “performance” and the philosophy should be delivered in the same disinterested spirit with which Gilbert articulates his theories of criticism in “The Critic as Artist.” In the context of Wilde’s works, the philosopher is not necessarily (in fact he should not be) a moralist. The
sincerity of the philosophy espoused here by Lord Goring is undercut by the earlier stage
directions which reveal him to be “the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of
thought” (522). This suggests that his wisdom, like his fashion, is fabricated (or “pulled
together”) in response to a particular situation and for the purpose of achieving a desired
effect. It seems more fitting, I think, for Lord Goring to deliver his speech in such a way
as to emphasize its artifice and to play up the irony of saying, for example, that a man’s
life is more valuable because of its “larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions” (548,
my italics). The word ‘ambition’ demands an echo of irony, when throughout the play
‘ambition’ has been the keyword connected to the corrupt, unscrupulous, false forms of
play carried out by Mrs. Cheveley and Sir Robert. Nor does it matter whether the speech
represents Lady Chiltern’s true feelings; indeed, her parrot-like repetition of it to her
husband suggests that it does not. What matters is the effect of the performance and that
the audience, in this case her husband, is persuaded. His exclamations of “Gertrude!
Gertrude!” show us he is convinced, if somewhat melodramatically. What seems
remarkable is that Lord Goring has scripted a role for Lady Chiltern that allows her to
remain, in appearance, “as perfect as all that” (503) and which publicly keeps in play her
husband’s “ideal” qualities. Lord Goring creates a role which appeals to Lady Chiltern on
her level, not his own. What soon becomes apparent, is that after her own performance
Lady Chiltern becomes adept at acting and not just reacting. Her willingness to fabricate
impressions in the future and to re-write the past is determined when she signs Sir
Robert’s name (“the ten commandments in every stroke”) on the letter meant for Lord
Goring. As in the ending to Lady Windermere’s Fan, the ending here depends on
maintaining a fiction, and this one allows for Sir Robert’s possibilities, and, significantly,
also Lady Chiltern’s as she can continue to wear her fashionable bonnets to the women’s league.

Again, the effect of the closing is doubled. In responding to the immediate local situation, Lord Goring is also responding to the exigencies of the larger ceremonial frame which requires a conventional ending to a play of the well-made variety. For the latter, he performs Wilde’s role of orchestrating an ending that will be held up for public scrutiny and judgment. It is a concession to convention but with a twist, for in creating a happy ending, he simultaneously exposes the fiction it is based on. With the implication that Sir Robert will one day be Prime Minister, the play demonstrates how some form of delusion is desirable, and perhaps necessary, to fend off disorder and maintain domestic and social stability. In so far as Victorian theatre represented to its audiences the naturalness of its own moral code, Lord Goring represents its artifice, showing once again that the dandy can handle their conventions better than they can.

In his review of *An Ideal Husband*, Shaw expressed his appreciation of this quality in Wilde’s drama: “to the Irishman . . . there is nothing in the world quite so exquisitely comic as the Englishman’s seriousness. It becomes tragic, perhaps, when the Englishman acts on it; but that occurs too seldom to be taken into account, a fact which intensifies the humour of the situation, the total result being the Englishman utterly unconscious of his real self, Mr. Wilde keenly observant of it and playing on the self-unconsciousness with irresistible humour, and finally, of course, the Englishman annoyed with himself for being amused at his own expense” (*Saturday Review* January 12, 1895). As Shaw’s review suggests, in Wilde’s comedies he returns the audience’s gaze, and, as
in a work of aesthetic criticism, his intention is to make them "conscious of the point at which [they] have arrived" (CA 1055). Stanley Weintraub suggests that "comedy appealed to Wilde because it is the self-conscious side of theatre" (xxxiii), a notion Wilde supports in his own reviews where he claims "an audience looks at a tragedian but a comedian looks at his audience" (Weintraub 125). Wilde's technique is to mirror society but with a difference, a difference which is meant to open the play of possibilities by unsettling the fixed nature of the audience's moral categories. As with the wicked women and the wandering husbands described by the Duchess of Berwick, Wilde's comedies take his audience away and return them "slightly damaged, of course."

In attributing the sins of Dorian Gray to the story's author, critics in the nineteenth century missed the performative nature of the novel. In the Society Comedies Wilde found a medium in which he could more carefully control the impression. In a paradoxical reversal of performer and audience, Wilde revealed himself to be the master of the performance when he addressed the audience of Lady Windermere's Fan: "Ladies and gentlemen: I have enjoyed this evening immensely. The actors have given us a charming rendering of a delightful play, and your appreciation has been most intelligent. I congratulate you on the great success of your performance, which persuades me that you think almost as highly of the play as I do myself" (Ellmann 346, italics in original). Wilde's curtain speech is testimony to Shaw's observation that the theatre is Wilde's true playground, in which he "plays with everything," and the audience's appreciation is a measure of their own play-spirit.
Conclusion: Play and The Importance of Being

The Importance of Being Earnest stands as Wilde’s most completely realized model of play, and his last.30 With An Ideal Husband and The Importance of Being Earnest running concurrently in 1895, Wilde appeared to be enjoying the public’s admiration and applause, until the two trials and his subsequent imprisonment made it clear the playwright was no longer on good terms with society. The Importance of Being Earnest is Wilde’s most original and completely realized play, precisely because it does not pretend to offer itself as anything else. Ian Gregor, who writes about the notion of play and The Importance of Being Earnest, observes that Earnest offers “itself as something irrevocably other than life” (520 italics in original). My approach to Earnest is through the aestheticism expressed in Wilde’s critical essays. In this context, The Importance of Being Earnest is a culmination of Wilde’s play-spirit and a dramatic realization of the principle of Vivian’s aesthetic, that “Art never expresses anything but itself” (DL 987).

Wilde described both A Woman of No Importance and An Ideal Husband as a “new and original play of modern life” (Raby 1995, 95), which indicates that he was taking on the role of the “Critic as Dramatist” and using modern life as the material for a new creation. Critics have noted how in these plays and in Lady Windermere’s Fan, a contrast emerges between the aesthetic embodiment of style and Society’s practical and moral concerns. While the dandies in these plays articulate a new ideal and a new mode of expression, it is never fully realized. In Lady Windermere’s Fan, Lord Darlington is
virtually expelled from the play after expressing his love for a married woman, and in *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth's status as a dandy gives way to that of a villain. In *An Ideal Husband*, the dandy's values do survive, but they never transcend the moralistic backdrop of the Chilterns' idealizing. Significantly, Lord Goring is at his best when conversing with his butler Phipps, who is described as "a mask with a manner." As Lord Goring wanders through the Chilterns' house and exclaims, "I can't find any one in this house to talk to" (537), one suspects that he hasn't yet found the right play.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as Gregor suggests, the dandy succeeds in mastering the world because he exists in a world of fellow dandies, and so it is a world of the dandies' own making (512). Like Phipps, the perfect butler in *An Ideal Husband*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* represents the "dominance of form." Algernon provides us with one of many cues that the "truth" of this world is not found in its imitation of reality but in its imaginative cohesiveness, style, and aristocratic sensibility, divorced from any practical concerns. The play is like Algernon's latest witticism; it is not merely clever; it is "perfectly phrased! and quite as true as any observation in civilised should be" (34). As in "The Critic as Artist," the dialogue of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is intended to create an aesthetic experience of the type described by Schiller in which "the most frivolous theme [is] treated so that it leaves us ready to proceed from it to some matter of utmost import; the most serious material [is] so treated that we remain capable of exchanging it forthwith for the lightest play" (157). Schiller's theory of aesthetic play turns up in Wilde's description of the philosophy of *Earnest*, where it is expressed in similar, if more paradoxical, terms: "we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously,
and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality” (More Letters 196). In The Importance of Being Earnest, themes that are conventionally considered to be serious or trivial are themselves subjected to Wilde’s mocking detachment and his playful dissent. By providing The Importance of Being Earnest with the subtitle, “A Trivial Comedy for Serious People,” Wilde sets the stage for the multiple layers of inversions and substitutions which place aesthetics over ethics, profiles over principles, form over content, and playfulness over earnestness. Within the play itself, Gwendolyn articulates its philosophy: “in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing” (83).

The characters seem to live in an encapsulated play-sphere which is enhanced by the symmetry of the play’s structure and the rhythmic qualities of speech as every utterance seems meant for an audience. In his Reader’s Companion to The Importance of Being Earnest (1995), Peter Raby emphasizes the play-spirit in Earnest when he claims that the hallmark of the play is its freedom from the context of contemporary concerns (10). Wilde himself refers to the play as “exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy,” in an interview with Black and White (16 February 1895). William Archer comments on the play’s aspiration towards music—considered to be the highest form of art—when he observes that Pater “might have found an example in The Importance of Being Earnest, which imitates nothing, represents nothing, means nothing, is nothing, except a sort of rondo capriccioso, in which the artist’s fingers run with crisp irresponsibility up and down the keyboard of life” (World, 20 February 1895). And A.B. Walkley’s comments point to the notion of play as the ability to treat commonplace ideas in novel ways, when
he describes *Earnest* as having "something like real life in detail, yet, in sum, absolutely unlike it; the familiar materials of life shaken up, as it were, and rearranged in a strange, unreal pattern" (*Spectator*, 23 February 1895). The merit of the play, Walkley suggests in the same review, is that "the laughter it excites is absolutely free from bitter afterthought."32

The encapsulated and nonsensical play-sphere of *Earnest* has invited comparison with *Alice in Wonderland*. Camille Paglia (1991) claims the atmosphere created in Cecily’s and Gwendolyn’s tea ceremony-- "the greatest of Wildean episodes"-- was created first by Lewis Carroll: “in Carroll, manners and social laws are disconnected from humane or ‘civilizing’ values. They have mathematical beauty but no moral meaning: they are absurd. But this absurdity is predicated not on some democratic notion of their relativism, but on their arbitrary, divine incomprehensibility” (105). Dennis Spininger (1976) also notes the connection between *Earnest* and *Alice in Wonderland*, but does so to illustrate a different reading. Spininger places *Earnest* firmly in the context of the Theatre of the Absurd. He detects a dominant note of futility and "tragic nothingness" lying behind the surface polish of *Earnest* and criticizes Wilde for refusing to reconcile the opposites he juxtaposes, or to justify them on anything other than aesthetic grounds. He quotes Martin Esslin in his discussion of the play’s absurd atmosphere:

> finding sense in nonsense through absurd logic, Wilde brings the Cheshire Cat into the drawing room, where it fades in the same way it did before Alice’s astounded eyes, leaving its glittering smile to the last, and then: nothing. Like most nonsense literature it achieves its ‘liberating effect by expanding the limits
of sense and opening up vistas of freedom from logic and cramping convention.

Also like most nonsense literature it tends to leave us stranded in that new expanse without a map. (58)

But Wilde has, in a sense, already offered his readers a map in “The Critic as Artist” and “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.” “It is because Humanity has never known where it was going that it has been able to find its way,” Gilbert tells us (CA 1023). And “a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which humanity is always landing” (SM 1089). The paradox, of course, is that Utopia literally means “no-place”; it exists first as an act of imagination before it can be realized as true. To reach Utopia, one must see beyond what is present and what is actual. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, more than any of his other plays, demonstrates Wilde’s technique of breaking up existing categories and rewriting conventional roles in order to free up a space for a new ideal and a new mode of expression, without predetermining or delimiting what they should be. The “Wildean moment,” as Declan Kiberd argues, “is that at which all polar oppositions are transcended” (16). *The Importance of Being Earnest* constructs such a utopian space, and it is in this space that the freedom and power of self-creation is modeled. In this sense *The Importance of Being Earnest* dramatizes Wilde’s ideal of Individualism. Indeed, all characters in *Earnest*, as we shall see in a moment, to some degree model a self-creating force.

At the heart of the play lie the many puns playing upon and critiquing Victorian notions of earnestness. Such a critique had already begun in Samuel Butler’s *The Way of
All Flesh. (Butler began writing the novel 1873 but it was not published until 1903.) The main character of the novel, aptly named Ernest, is portrayed as the victim of coercive parents, a useless education, and his own blind fanatical evangelism. Only when he rejects these “moral influences” and conceives his duty as seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, does he take his first step towards authentic self-realization. He eventually discovers what, according to Lord Henry in The Picture of Dorian Gray, most people have forgotten, that “the highest duty of all duties [is] the duty that one owes to one’s self” (29). And in “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young,” Wilde clarifies what that duty is in terms which nicely prepare us for the characters’ attitudes in Earnest: “The first duty is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has yet discovered” (1205).

Wilde had also already begun to play with the notions of earnestness and sincerity in A Woman of No Importance. Mrs. Allonby reveals she was “horribly deceived” in her husband Ernest (445), because after he proclaimed to her that he had never loved any one else before in his life, she found out that what he had said “was perfectly true” (446). And “that sort of thing,” says Lady Allonby, by which she means sincerity, “makes a man so absolutely uninteresting” (446).

In its conventional associations with Victorian propriety, the name Ernest initially seems fitting for a young, sensible girl like Gwendolyn, and a young, innocent girl like Cecily, to want to marry. Ernest is “the only really safe name” according to Gwendolyn (204), and for Cecily the name “inspires absolute confidence” (64). But when both girls claim to pity any woman not married to a man named Ernest, we begin to observe the
name's power to suggest something far more sensuous and daring. For Gwendolyn, the name “has a music of its own. It produces vibrations” (24). For Cecily, the announcement of Ernest’s arrival fills her with anticipation of meeting someone “wicked” (45). When Algernon, who is pretending to be Ernest, requests that Cecily not think of him as wicked, we find Mrs. Allonby’s disparagement of her husband’s sincerity doubly transformed through Cecily’s response: “If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy” (46). In this play, to be earnest is always to be “quite another thing” than one conventionally expects.

In the Society Comedies, Wilde highlighted the surface nature of Society’s ceremonies by pointing up the discrepancy between what characters say and what they do. An example approaching the absurdity of Earnest can be found in Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon who attend the Chilterns’ party in An Ideal Husband. Having confessed to one another that they are “positively dying for supper” (492), and having privately chastised the men for their poor form in not proffering an invitation to supper, they then unexpectedly subordinate their appetite to appearance.

Vicomte de Nanjac: May I have the honour of taking you down to supper,

    Countess?

Lady Basildon (coldly): I never take supper, thank you, Vicomte. (The Vicomte

    is about to retire. Lady Basildon, seeing this, rises at once and takes his

    arm.) But I will come down with you with pleasure. . . .
Mr. Montford: Like some supper, Mrs. Marchmont?

Mrs. Marchmont (languidly): Thank you, Mr. Montford, I never touch supper.

(Rises hastily and takes his arm.) But I will sit beside you, and watch you.

Mr. Montford: I don’t know that I like being watched when I am eating!

Mrs. Marchmont: Then I will watch someone else.

Mr. Montford: I don’t know that I should like that either.

Mrs. Marchmont (severely): Pray, Mr. Montford, do not make these painful scenes of jealousy in public! (492)

The empty formalities and empty stomachs of the dowagers, combined with Mrs. Marchmont’s fabrication of Montford’s jealous scenes, prepare us for the ceremonies of form in *Earnest*, which not only control polite behaviour, but prove to be “stronger than emotion, gender, and physical appearance” (Paglia 95).

The motifs of ceremony, game, and performance found in Wilde’s Society plays reappear in *Earnest*, but here the formalities of social life adhere to a logic explainable only in terms of the play itself. Manners and customs take on a life of their own and follow their own laws. A baptism ceremony is raised to the height of “self-sacrifice” (85), which requires “physical courage of which we women know absolutely nothing” (85) says Cecily, and is treated on the same level as preparing afternoon tea. A game of Bunburying precipitates further games of masking and unmasking until the poses seem to have detached themselves from the personalities, leading Jack to request of Lady Bracknell: “I hate to seem inquisitive but would you kindly inform me of who I am?” (101). Contest emerges in a battle of the sexes fought with cake and teaspoons and is
resolved by the eating of muffins which "looks like repentance" (82). The subordination
of personal legitimacy to social legitimacy reaches new heights when Lady Bracknell
reprimands Jack for being an orphan: "To lose one parent may be regarded as a
misfortune--to lose both seems like carelessness" (30). As Jack embarks on his search for
his origins, we see that manners "make" a person in more ways than one.

In *Earnest*, even the most private ceremony must meet the demands of form.
When Jack tries to cut short his proposal to Gwendolyn by protesting, "you know what I
have got to say to you," Gwendolyn replies, "Yes, but you don't say it" (25). She then
adds to the sense that his proposal is a public performance: "I hope you will always look
at me just like that, especially when there are other people present" (25). Algernon
confronts similar formal demands from Cecily, who wishes to record his proposal in her
diary which is meant for publication. With only five minutes until "the dog-cart arrives,”
and to overcome his nervous cough which Cecily doesn’t know how to spell, Algernon
declares his love by "speaking very rapidly." The apparent spontaneity of his emotional
declaration is absurdly undercut when Cecily stops to ponder the appropriateness of his
word choice. "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?" (61).

Jack’s proposal to Gwendolyn does find an audience with the arrival of Lady
Bracknell who intrudes upon the proceedings and begins to display her fondness for
imperatives: "Mr. Worthing! Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture." Significantly,
she adds to her sense of the scene’s appearance: "It is most indecorous" (25). Like the
Duchess of Berwick, who orchestrates her daughter’s proposal as a pleasing way to end
the season (and secure a fortune), Lady Bracknell appropriates control of the engagement’s formalities from Gwendolyn: “Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to someone, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact” (26). Having excluded Gwendolyn from the affair, she looks to Jack for the answers which “a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke? . . . I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind” (27). And then having dispensed with such serious matters, she proceeds to the trivial matter of his parents.

Lady Bracknell is one of Wilde’s most ingenious creations and exemplifies how in *Earnest*, Wilde refashions the anti-models of play from his comedies by endowing them with a certain play-spirit. Everything is doubled in this play, and Lady Bracknell, in her role of both model and anti-model of play, is no exception. Lady Bracknell is no mere conventional blocking agent to the young people’s marriage. While she appears to be the representative of Victorian social order, values, and conservative forces, she functions not by enforcing society’s moral code, but by enforcing its forms. She is a master player in this theatre of social life and ceremony. Like Lord Goring, she knows that “fashion is what one wears oneself.” Having created for herself complete authority over matters of form, she has the power to bend the world to her will. Upon learning that Jack lives on the less respectable side of Belgrave Square she expresses her capacity to easily alter the fashion, the side, or “both, if necessary, I presume” (29). After listening to a litany of complaints against Algernon’s behaviour, (he drank an entire pint bottle of Perrier-Jouet, Brut, ‘89 and devoured all the muffins) she upholds her role as Society’s
gatekeeper: "Mr. Worthing, after careful consideration I have decided entirely to overlook my nephew’s conduct to you" (93). Lady Bracknell is responding to Jack’s refusal to allow Algernon to become engaged to his niece. But by this point Lady Bracknell has heard of Cecily’s wealth. Her power to include and exclude others from Society is as formidable as it is egotistically exercised.

As Raby suggests, Lady Bracknell embodies a culmination of the Duchess of Berwick’s ruthlessness and Lady Hunstanton’s fractured logic and these characteristics come together to create an original character with a unique style of speech (65). The full register of both her authority and unpredictability, as Raby describes, are best revealed in her famous handbag passage. Her refusal to express the slightest touch of sympathy at Jack’s revelation that he is an orphan sets the frame for her convoluted response: “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. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to” (31-32). The strength of her final judgment contrasts with the diversions needed to get there. Similarly, her advice to Jack presents an absolute command rendered absurd by the conditions placed on it: “I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, 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” (32). Her amazing concession, “of either sex,” and her suggestion that Jack try to conduct the affair in concert with the season conveys the full range of her artifice,
absurdity, and strange logic. And yet it is fitting that out of this conflation of seriousness
and triviality, the plot is set in motion for Jack to embark on his quest for self-discovery.

As Wilde submits the stock characters, the “serious” plot devices, and the
melodramatic spirit of his earlier comedies to the playful devices of Earnest, one could
say that Wilde the self-plagiarist becomes Wilde the self-parodist. Perhaps nowhere is
this more evident than in the creation of Miss Prism. Miss Prism appears to be a model
of respectability who strictly adheres to her role as an educator and governess. Her
response to the death of Jack’s brother Ernest conveys a firm (if untimely) moral tone:
“What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it” (51). When she reminds us of the
dictates of Divine justice, (“as a man sows, so shall he reap”) and its poetic equivalent,
(“the good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means.”) we hear in
the background the absolute categories which informed the perspectives of Lady
Windermere, Gerald Arbuthnot, and Lady Chiltern. However in Earnest, Wilde trivializes
the serious theme of having to rethink one’s judgments and to learn to be more
compassionate. The force of Miss Prism’s judgment is absurdly juxtaposed with the
occasion, for it is directed at the brother for having been carried off by “a severe chill.”
Its severity provokes pleas for charity from Canon Chasuble who confesses to a weakness
of his own: “Charity, dear Miss Prism, charity! None of us are perfect. I myself am
peculiarly susceptible to draughts” (52). (His comment is one example of many, in which
moral character is expressed ironically in terms of health.) Miss Prism’s unwavering
sense of moral stability alludes to and mocks the climactic moment when a character
reverses his or her moral judgments found in Wilde’s earlier plays, especially Lady
Windermere's Fan. She tells Cecily, "I am not in favour of this modern mania for turning bad people into good people at a moment's notice" (42).

Just as she embodies the high-minded moralism of Lady Windermere and Lady Chiltern, she also embodies their opposites. The "recognition" scene between Miss Prism and Jack serves as the locus for Wilde's play on the stock characters of the "woman with a past," the seduced victim, and the illegitimate child. When Jack tries to embrace Miss Prism, thinking she is his mother, the situation is undoubtedly farcical. Miss Prism recoils from Jack's embrace, explaining that she is unmarried, to which Jack responds:

"Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered. Cannot repentance wipe out an act folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you" (101).

Language, more than coincidence and circumstance, creates the full effect here. Jack's response is very different in tone from Lord Darlington's line in Lady Windermere's Fan, "I think life too complex a thing to be settled by these hard and fast rules," or even Mrs. Erlynne's observation on the role of "repentance" in melodrama: "In real life we don't do such things." The rhetorical context of Jack's response is much richer: he begins with a mock understatement, and moves on through biblical reference to the clichés of romantic melodrama, and finally to the critique of the double-standard found in such early 1890s plays such as The Second Mrs. Tanqueray and Wilde's own Society Comedies. As the levels of irony increase, the effect, as Gregor suggests, is to create a sense of complete moral disengagement on behalf of the audience (519). Similarly, our reaction to what Miss Prism has done by leaving a three volume novel in the bassinette and a baby in the
handbag, is eclipsed by what she says when she is asked to inspect Jack’s handbag to see if it is hers. Given that the “happiness of more than one person depends on [her] answer,” Miss Prism is eccentrically self-centred and unresponsive to the situation:

> It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days. Here is the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an incident that occurred at Leamington. And here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten in an extravagant mood I had had them placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years. (100-101)

The disconnection between situation and response creates an insincerity which is enhanced because of Miss Prism’s total lack of awareness of the effect she is creating, and which erases any pretence of a moral theme in the play.

> With her fond remembrance of “younger and happier days,” Miss Prism lets slip a more wilful, hedonistic side at odds with her mask of propriety. She reveals a playful capacity for making fictions come true. Following up on Cecily’s lie, she tells Canon Chasuble, “I think, dear Doctor, I will have a stroll with you. I find I have a headache after all, and a walk might do it good” (44). She is well suited to Chasuble, whose speech also registers a sexual vitality at odds with his profession. His tendency to express himself in metaphors, “were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism’s pupil, I would hang upon her lips” (44), indicates his own capacity for word-play. His preference for style
over sincerity is revealed in the pride he takes in the form (rather than the content) of his sermon for all occasions.

In *Earnest* the "lower" orders also enjoy the privileged stance of the aristocrat. In the opening scene, which invokes the music and dialogue of "The Critic as Artist," Lane proves to have a better wit and sense of urbanity than his master. Both Lane and Merriman reveal a propensity to view the world as a spectacle for contemplation. They observe the proceedings with complete disinterestedness and help to orchestrate matters with perfect aplomb. When Lady Bracknell is expected to tea, the cucumber sandwiches become a matter of grave importance as they take on the gesture of a synecdochic concern that Algernon feels for making the correct impression upon his Aunt. When he picks up the plate in "horror" and finds it empty, (for he ate them all) he quickly improvises: "Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them especially" (19). Lane proves to be a consummate liar: "There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went down twice," and he generously adds to the impression of Algernon's responsibility. There were no cucumbers, he says, "not even for ready money" (19). Merriman plays more of an obedient role than Lane, quietly following contradictory orders and observing with complete disinterestedness the chaotic comings and goings at the Manor House. His only initiative is to interrupt the characters' embrace in Act III with a cough before announcing the arrival of Lady Bracknell, thus revealing his acute awareness of how the appearance of such a spectacle would be received.
Throughout the play, the moral dimension is raised only to be dispelled. Algernon deflects morality on to his servant: “Lané’s views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don’t set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility” (6). His observation is promptly interjected by Jack’s announcement that it is “pleasure, pleasure!” which brings him to town. “What else should bring one anywhere” (7). Jack justifies pleasure as a matter of health: “When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It’s one’s duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes” (14).

What is striking here is not simply that pleasure is a primary motive, but that the characters have the power to alter or create themselves and their situations after their own fashion. Like Lord Henry Wotton in The Picture of Dorian Gray, the characters seem entirely constituted by language and so have the ability to create themselves at will. W. H. Auden described the play “as the only pure verbal opera in English,” but more tellingly he described it as a “verbal universe in which characters are determined by the kinds of things they say” (136). And Gregor notes that they “shape their lives with the same complete confidence as they shape their phrases” (516). They revel in the power of words; through language they create imaginative fictions of themselves (and others) and then make those fictions true. Early in the first act we find Jack playing the part of Ernest
and coming up to town to woo Gwendolyn, and late in this act we see Algernon playing
the part of Ernest and going down to the country to woo Cecily. Eventually their fiction
takes on a life of its own when it becomes the starting point for Cecily’s and
Gwendolyn’s ideal to marry a man, or at least to marry the name of Ernest.

Both Gwendolyn and Cecily record and extend their linguistic romances in their
diaries which take the form of novels. Cecily’s diary is “simply a very young girl’s
record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication”
(61). Gwendolyn never travels without hers: “one should always have something
sensational to read on the train” (70). The girls are like Dorian Gray standing before his
portrait, except that this time the image reflected is their own creation and there is no
element of conscience. Their play-spirit is directed towards themselves; it is their own
lives that they treat in novel ways. One can imagine Cecily and Gwendolyn turning to
their diaries in the same spirit as Vivian in “The Decay of Lying,” that is, in order to have
the pleasure of quoting themselves.

In Cecily and Gwendolyn are combined the spontaneity of romance and of artful
calculation. Their wilful individuality, which leads to the battle of the teaspoons, becomes
its opposite when they agree upon the next move of the game. For having found
themselves both to have been deceived, they team up on the same side against the men,
and chant in unison, “your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier” (85). Acting
as opposing forces one minute, and “sisters” the next, Gwendolyn and Cecily are striking
eamples of how the characters constantly shift positions in relation to each other and
prove to be adaptable to any occasion. By joining their capacity to entertain contradiction
to a habitual spontaneity, they maintain control of a game whose rules are constantly changing. Much of the play’s hilarity is created as the characters’ attempts to master their own ceremonies and will their own fictions into reality, collide, as much as they collude with the others’. Each exchange in this play generates a new context and new rules, but the characters’ will to play and their adeptness at refashioning themselves ensure they are never caught in a game which is not of their own making.

Except, perhaps, for Jack. Despite the chaotic nature of the games and the play’s multiple layers of irony, Earnest, as Russell Jackson observes, embodies a “classic” discovery and reversal as we follow the hero’s quest and his achievement of dignity and self-awareness (1983, 76). We might think of Algernon as an incarnation of Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist,” but Jack is not the same Ernest who says “while you talk it seems to me to be so” (CA 1025). Jack is indignant at Algernon’s manner of talking:

Jack: Oh that’s nonsense, Algy. You never talk anything but nonsense.

Algernon: Nobody ever does. (40)

Similarly, Jack is infuriated by Algernon’s repose in moments of crisis:

Jack: How can you sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble, I can’t make out. You seem to me to be perfectly heartless.

Algernon: Well, I can’t eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them. (79)
Algernon models a preference for persiflage and paradox, and is endowed with his aunt’s self-sufficient logic. He is a paragon of disinterestedness. Jack, however, lacks Algernon’s aristocratic ease and urbanity. His attempt to maintain control of his moral pose and of the consequences of his double-life is utterly mocked in the funeral scene. Wilde’s *coup de théâtre* was in having Jack appear in the garden at Manor House in full mourning attire, a formality improper to the occasion as his fictional brother Ernest had arrived just half an hour ago and is sitting in the dining room. This time it is Cecily, rather than Lady Bracknell, who presents the news that undoes his plans. Clearly Jack is not as masterful as the others in generating his own plots and willing the desired fiction of himself into being.

Jack’s authority is also undermined as he tries to set boundaries to the various forms of play and refuses to allow his “territory” to be transformed into a play-sphere. But because play is more of an attitude than a physical location, Algernon has the truly appropriate response in the following exchange:

Jack: This ghastly state of things is what you call Bunburying I suppose?

Algernon: Yes, and a perfectly wonderful Bunbury it is. The most wonderful Bunbury I have ever had in my life.

Jack: Well, you’ve no right whatsoever to Bunbury here.

Algernon: That is absurd. One has a right to Bunbury anywhere one chooses.

Every serious Bunburyist knows that.

Jack: Serious Bunburyist. Good heavens!

Algernon: Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any
amusements in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth you are serious about I haven’t got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely trivial nature.

(77)

As Jack and Algernon both compete to become Ernest, Algernon’s comment that “it isn’t easy to be anything nowadays. There’s such a lot of beastly competition about” (17), takes on a double meaning. In the end, Algernon does not succeed in becoming Ernest, (which some critics see as a flaw in the play’ symmetry) but this is of little consequence, because he has never been “earnest” to begin with.

The ending of the play, like Wilde’s notion of truth, is symphonic, and suggests that to know the truth, one must be able to imagine a myriad of falsehoods. Gwendolyn’s line is telling here. Having discovered that “all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth” (104), Jack asks Gwendolyn if she can forgive him. Their nuptials are ensured when she says, “I can. For I feel that you are sure to change” (104). In embracing such change, Gwendolyn reveals her own play-spirit. The final pun, “I’ve now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest,” brings about the denouement of Jack’s quest for identity, at the same time as he realizes the value of an ironic and playful attitude towards himself and society. To arrogate to oneself an aristocratic position in the treatment of one’s subject matter, even when the subject is oneself, is a matter of developing a contemplative spirit. Jack’s final realization is that if “being” is treated as if it were playful rather than earnest, our spirit and our experience of ourselves will feel free.
All lines in *The Importance of Being Earnest*— including the Brighton line— run in many directions, and all have their terminus in play. When Jack’s lineage is revealed, and his origins become one with his terminus, we feel the force of Lady Bracknell’s prediction that “the line is immaterial.” Indeed, Jack’s final “line” of self-discovery resonates with the philosophy of play, for Ernest will not be earnest now that he really is. The line also runs in the opposite direction: as the terminus of the play becomes one with its origin, the play is enclosed as a separate sphere and brought to completion. And so Jack comes into the full realization of the vital importance of being, at the moment when the “play” has also been fully realized. In this sense, both the form and content of *The Importance of Being Earnest* dramatize Wilde’s interest in the aesthetic as a means of preserving or creating a “space” for oneself in a society that promotes self-sacrifice. Ultimately, we are left with the paradox of Wilde’s aestheticism, a notion of art for art’s sake which is placed in the service of a more completely realized humanity. With its final promise of harmonious relationships and its expression of self-realization, we are left with the same paradox at the end of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. This paradox is part of the paradoxical ideal of play itself—that through play we may realize the experience of being at one with ourselves and on good terms with the world.
Notes

1 Further examples illustrate the various contexts in which critics discuss Wilde’s play:

“[In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde] eschews any move toward closure by
supplanting one-dimensional reading with meta-criticism: a consideration of the structure
of the novel conjoined to a playful indulgence of the impulses of the reader” (Gillespie
1992, 12); “Wilde cannot resist the romantic appeal of the ‘great game’ and those who
play it” (Ian Small and Russell Jackson 1983, xxxi); “disengaged from their playfulness
of tone, [the statements in ‘The Decay of Lying’] represent critical positions which in this
century have been widely adopted by many critics of repute” (Hilda Schiff 1965, 84).

2 In *Professions of Taste*, Jonathan Freedman argues that this is the defining quality of
British aestheticism: “the desire to embrace contradictions, indeed the desire to seek
them out the better to play with the possibilities they afford” (6).

3 Nancy Morrow’s study, *Dreadful Games*, is based on the same distinction.

Interestingly, she sees these anti-models of play as the dominant image of literature in the
“Age of Realism”. In “The Decay of Lying,” Vivian chooses examples of Victorian
Realism in Art as anti-models of play, which he condemns for their subject matter, their
lack of style, and the practical motives of the authors.

4 For a comprehensive history of aesthetics, see Gilbert and Kuhn (1954).
Like many others of his period (and like many other writers about play) Schiller looked back nostalgically to the era of Classical Greece when the sense and the intellect were not yet provoked into “hostile partition” and mutual antagonism (Aesthetic Education 31).

Schiller also identified two conflicting tendencies: alongside the “savage,” in whom “feeling predominates over principle,” Schiller set the “barbarian,” in whom “principle destroys feeling” (Aesthetic Letters 21).

In The Principles of Psychology, Spencer reveals his belief that the mind evolved and progressed through stages from the simple to the complex. Sensation is the simplest form of mental activity, (is dependent upon an initiating experience). The most complex form of mental activity is abstract thought, which is independent of any initiating experience or sensation. This independence from sensation is a measure of intellectual progress or mental evolution (517).

“Freedom,” says Huizinga, “must be understood here in the wider sense that leaves untouched the philosophical problem of determinism” (7). He notes the objection that animals and children must play because their instinct drives them to it. But he argues the term “instinct” introduces an unknown quantity and to presuppose the utility of play from the start is to be guilty of a petitio principii (8). Here Huizinga appears to be making a similar distinction as Spencer between primary and higher forms of play. “Children and animals play,” says Huizinga, “because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom” (8 italics in original).

Although his reference to the term “work” seems misguided, Walter Isle puts the point succinctly: “Play is the experimenting, putting things together in new ways in the hope
the new invention will work. But even more it is pushing this relative impulse further into excess and anarchy in the hope that the outrageous will not only surprise but reveal something new” (qtd in Motte 16).

10 This attitude is repeated by Stephen Dedalus in the “Scylla and Carybdis” episode in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. After elaborating a theory of autobiographical aesthetics about Shakespeare, Stephen is asked if he believes his own theory. He simply replies: “no”. This is followed by a suggestion that Stephen put his theory into a dialogue “like the Platonic dialogues Wilde wrote” (175). Joyce also makes use of Wilde’s reference to genius as a cracked looking-glass when Stephen describes the cracked looking-glass of a servant as a symbol of Irish art.

11 The power of the lie to shape one’s life is also dramatized by J. M. Synge in *The Playboy of the Western World*. In this play Christy Mahon transforms himself from a nervous fugitive to a ballad hero by creating an imaginative fiction of himself and then making that fiction his reality by becoming the hero of his own stories. See Kiberd’s “Oscar Wilde: the resurgence of lying.”

12 In “Brian Friel and the Irish Art of Lying,” F.C. McGrath places Friel’s works in the context of a history of Irish liars such as Wilde, Yeats, Synge and Joyce. He also provides an analysis of Steiner’s influence on Friel’s play, *Translations*.


14 I take this latter notion from David Nyberg’s *The Varnished Truth* (1993). Nyberg describes truth as being subjective, representing “something that we feel ought to be
certain in a life that is uncertain. It is our species’ absurdly exciting predicament to have the capacity for imagining more than we can know,” and “we can always imagine knowing more than we actually can know” (30, italics in original).

15 Ong also suggests “the ultimate paradigm or model for dialectical relationships is not a flat contradiction of formal logic but something from the personal, human life-world, conversation itself, dialogue in which one interlocutor needs qualification form the other interlocutor’s statement in order to move toward a fuller truth” (Contest 32).

16 According to Stefan Collini, this dialectical method is Arnold’s method as well and helps explain the tone of his criticism.

17 In ”The English Renaissance,” Wilde suggests: " Art is what makes the life of each citizen a sacrament and not a speculation, art is what makes the life of the whole race immortal." The word "sacrament" also suggests that the experience of art enhances mind and spirit, and the cumulative effects are passed on to subsequent generations.

18 In ”The Function of Criticism,” Arnold observes how the language of criticism has become restricted: “It is noticeable that the word curiosity, which in other languages is used in a good sense, to mean, as a high and fine quality of man’s nature, just this disinterested love of the free play of the mind on all subjects--for its own sake,--it is noticeable, I say, that this word has in our language no sense of the kind, no sense but a rather bad and disparaging one. But criticism, real criticism, is essentially the exercise of this very quality.”

19 John Page Hopps (1834-1911) was first a Baptist and then a Unitarian minister. He was also a religious author and editor. Hopps invited Wilde to address a meeting in
support of the principles of Funeral and Mourning Reform. Wilde wrote to Hopps on
January 14, 1885, saying he was too ill to attend (Letters 168). His letters contain his
suggestions and at the meeting this letter was read aloud by Hopps. Rupert Hart-Davis’
collection of Wilde’s letters contains no further correspondence between Wilde and
Hopps but in a letter postmarked March 7, 1898, Wilde asked Leonard Smithers to send
Hopps a copy of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol."

In fact Hopps combines sections of two separate poems: “Libertatis Sacra Fames” and
“Sonnet to Liberty.”

Wilde refers to himself as a “lord of language” in De Profundis. The phrase is from
Tennyson’s poem, “On Virgil.”

The stage directions which describe Phipps in An Ideal Husband could also describe
Lord Henry: “He is a mask with a manner. Of his intellectual or emotional life, history
knows nothing. He represents the dominance of form” (522).

This is the paradox Wilde confronted in his playwriting. See Ian Small’s and Russell
Jackson’s article, “Oscar Wilde: A Writerly Life,” in Modern Drama (1994) for parallels
between Wilde’s revisions and his practice of self-fashioning.

Wilde felt he needed to turn to another language and context to write Salomé, a play he
claimed “expressed everything.”

And despite his insouciance, Wilde’s letters reveal that he very much needed the money
which would attend his success.

Her success is evident in the way the men violate the protocol of introductions, giving
her the opportunity she needs to work her charms upon the women.
See Kaplan's and Stowell's book *Theatre and Fashion* for an account of the semiotics of dress in Wilde's plays.

It is interesting to note that it was Lady Wilde who had to point out to Wilde the dullness of his original title for *Lady Windermere's Fan*, which was *A Good Woman*.

In *Revising Wilde* (1996), Sos Eltis argues that this stage direction was added only to the final draft of the play when Wilde was preparing it for publication in 1898.

All references to *The Importance of Being Earnest* are from the New Mermaid edition edited by Russell Jackson, London: Ernest Benn Limited 1980.

Because it more fully dramatizes the dandy's philosophy, this scene was substituted for the opening scene of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in Errol Durbach's 1995 production at the Frederic Wood Theatre in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Shaw, however, disagreed. In the *Saturday Review* (23 February 1894) he described his laughter during the play as "mechanical." Later, in a letter printed in Frank Harris' biography of Wilde (1916), Shaw described the play as "heartless."
Works Cited


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