Abstract

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

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Peer-review under responsibility of Dokuz Eylul University, Faculty of Education.

Keywords: Queer Theory; Oscar Wilde, Gender Resistance

1. Introduction

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

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

With ACT-UP and Queer Nation, a new era was born in the beginning of 1990’s that we can call Era of the New Genders. In this era, we are trying to understand the milestones of the change in the perspectives. Therefore, it is very natural to look at the master of the paradox, Oscar Wilde. He was the wild one in his era. A sodomite father, a Uranist husband a pervert celebrity, a shocking writer and a son. When he did something, he was talked a lot. A lot of people knew him as a writer even when he did not have any literary works. When he was in Algiers where Oscar Wilde “means to demoralize” with Andre Gide, Wilde took Gide to a café where they met with young people with one of whom Andre Gide fell in love with. Wilde realized that he had liberated Gide from his sexual constraints and laughed with “triumph rather than pleasure” (Dollimore, 1998, p. 6). He was a famous and outgoing person who was loved by
the people of high society in England. He was invited to all high-class social events in England. He actually had a lot of followers and fans. In his biography of Oscar Wilde, Robert Sherard (1970) says

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

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

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

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

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

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

Along with Foucault’s ideas of 19th Century society, there were other ways of punishing those who went out of the normative sexuality. The Act of Amendment, for instance, punished a person who committed the act was kept in penal servitude for life and for any term not less than 10 years. Oscar Wilde (1997) who suffered from The Act of Amendment writes: “I must say to myself that I ruined myself” (p 1071). With that expression it is clear that he felt guilty for his sexual experiences. In addition he states that: “I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in
horrible disgrace" (Wilde, 1998, p 1071). His moral dilemma could be seen in his works and this peaked when he was put into the prison.

Language is a social device which is used to think and express ourselves but, it is an interesting device since when we think about who holds the device. Then we begin to think are they really my thoughts or is that what the others want me to think? When we say marriage, do we actually mean what we feel or are we led to think the way we say it. Or when we call someone, excuse my language here, “fag”, is that us talking or our fear from the society. From this point on, we can turn back to Oscar Wilde and his works. The way in which Oscar Wilde presents his thoughts is interesting since he presents a dilemma as I said before. While he counts himself a “Uranist" - defender of sexual freedom, in his literary works, he punishes people who are against the duties that pressure every individual in the society and praises those who complete their gendered duties.

2. Conformism and Crime

That’s why previously, I opened an argument on while we say something, is it always us saying this or the society we live in? His work, *The Crime of Lord Arthur Savile* which I am going to examine in here, is about a man who tries to murder people in the name of a gendered duty and who gets away with it. Lord Arthur Savile is a typical Victorian man. It is the body of the norms of the society. Lord Savile is engaged to get married which is a duty of every respected man in the 19th Century England. The story begins at Lady Windermere’s party and the party shows the stereotypical Victorian women in one room altogether. We clearly see the mentality that created hysteria actually exists in the story from a different man. However, this man actually shows resistance to the norms in his real life. The first stereotype we see is that woman believes in magic and fortunetelling and cannot live without them and see it as a kind of science. On the first page of the story Gladys, an insignificant character of the story says “My chiromantist, Duchess; I can’t live without him at present” (Wilde, 1997, p. 157). Chiromantist is a person who is actually a fortuneteller who reads hands and tells the future and women are really interested in seeing their future and believe in it. However, in spite of his “reason”, Lord Savile believes in it when his hand is also read. With both direct and indirect use of words, Wilde creates a world of morality and duty like a conformist. Wilde does not want his own performative roles which are forced onto him. In the story he writes:

Actors are so fortunate. They can choose whether they will appear in tragedy or in comedy, whether they will suffer or make merry, laugh or shed tears. But in real life it is different. Most men and women are forced to perform parts for which they have no qualifications. Our Gildernsterns play Hamlet for us, and our Hamlets have to jest like Prince Hal. The world is a stage but, the play is badly cast (Wilde, 1997, p 163).

Forced genders and sexualities are the basis of Victorian life. Just to fit in and complete their duties people living in that society are capable of doing anything for that matter. Lord Arthur Savile is not different. After the fortuneteller reads his hand, he is shocked and mortified with the news that he will kill a relative before his marriage. His reason fights with his feelings. In the story after he learns his future, Wilde (1997) writes “His reason revolted against it, and yet he felt that some tragedy was hanging over him, and that he had been suddenly called up to bear an intolerable burden." (p. 163). This burden is the burden of duty added. His duty given by the society to get married is twice as heavy now that he will kill someone. Of course, there is a direct meaning of “burden" in here as well as an indirect one. As a direct word, we see that this “burden” is the feeling of his having to kill someone while indirectly indicates that his duty of getting married is a burden and needs to be completed even if a murder was a part of this duty. Oscar Wilde’s language style for the story is also interesting in his main character does not talk much; he does what he is told by the society. His feelings and thoughts are given indirectly. As Foucalt’s saying (1978) “On the subject of sex, silence became the rule", Lord Savile is also almost always silent even for his duties over sex (p. 1). His silence in the story may be the indicator of Wilde’s view that the society does not care about the individuals. The important thing here is to abide the rules and stay silent. You can talk in your head but, you should not say anything. The main character is terrorized by the idea of the murder. He is really afraid but he does not say it. He only tells these things in his head and we learn his fear from the writer not by him. Because as a man he is not supposed to be afraid of anything, he says nothing. He is the male performativity in flesh with his thoughts and actions and the other characters representing the higher class society give direct speeches and lead the main character into murder with their talk in the name of morality and duty. Women in the story, on the contrary, always talks and their speech is almost always direct. Their characteristics are not significant. They are presented in the story as a whole package of the society. They like the idea of marriage so much that they want to say it out loud very often. We can see the excitement of a woman in the story of Lord Savile’s engagement when she says: “Don’t tell him that he is engaged to one of the most beautiful girls in London, because it appeared in the Morning Post a month ago” (Wilde, 1997, p. 161). She is clearly excited and beauty is important for her since the only fact we know about the person Lord Savile is engaged to is her beauty and that is the only quality that is presented by the society for a woman. Another fact we see about woman and marriage is that they should get married but only once women
with more than one partner in her life is not moral. The story actually begins with a woman’s story on how she got married 3 times and this being a scandal. When it comes to man according to the direct speech of women in the story they should not be “fascinating”. They set standards and norms for Lord Savile. He does not talk but do what he is told to do by the society, or in other words women surrounding him. This direct speech versus action way of language use shows us the direct relation between language, power and knowledge. While the power which holds the language in its hands gives the orders, everyday Victorian man abides by it with his/her actions.

Simone De Beauvoir’s famous saying “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” does not apply here though the saying should have been true for both genders since even though you may have been put in that gender role, he may not be able to hold on there forever because it is not just like you become a man because of the way you raised, but you try to stay that way since you are supposedly born into that role In fact, Lord Savile is tired of his role though he tries to stay in that role (“Beauvoir” 2014). As I quoted before from the story, he thinks that he does not fit in the role properly but, he knows that he has to follow the rules. He can’t just let his performativity go. Because it is not productive, the society doesn’t want him to be himself. People who are not reproductive do not suit in the capitalist British society of the 19th century. However, he also has an original self, we are not able to uncover from the story. Butler (1994) says “gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a ‘one’ who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today” (p. 6).

Lord Savile has to wear the gender that is found suitable for him: a rich noble man who will get married. On his way to fit that role, he has to kill a person. Such a savage act is normal and doable if it is for the society’s norms. At least this is what Lord Savile thinks. He is afraid but, he wants to do it anyway. Unlike the actors on the stage, we hold onto our roles for life. It is rare that an actor makes mistakes about his roles on the stage. Not everyone is an actor. Even if everyone was a great actor, we would not be able to perform our roles perfectly in real life as long as we live. Therefore everybody makes mistakes within their roles. Those failures or those mistakes are the things that are interesting about our gender performativity. Most people still assume that since they are born into the heterosexual matrix of the society, they will be a straight and natural part of it but, you cannot be part of something unnatural and manmade fully. You just act into it and you fail from time to time. We see those failures every single day and those failures make people angry, stressed, fearful, terrorized, aggressive and sad. They even cause wars between the countries just to see who holds the land which is seen as a lady. It is a manly act. Those who fail are all around us and it is us. If we do not realize that all the tags we have on us are just roles and we may fail, we will not live our lives to the fullest. Like a teacher who gets angry and stressed in his/her class, when he is not listened by his students, our main character in the story also gets frustrated when he fails to kill someone. Since we do not do our genders alone people around him also get frustrated. Sibyl, Lord Arthur’s fiancée wants to break off the engagement when Lord Arthur fails to murder someone to get married to her and postpones the wedding. Lord Henry gets so frustrated that in the story Wilde (1997) writes “He had tried to do his duty, but it seemed as if Destiny himself turned traitor” (p. 178).

3. Conclusion

After two failures, he finally manages to kill someone and that someone is no one but the fortuneteller himself. Traditionally, in Wilde’s works as he says “The good ended happily and the bad unhappily.”(Wilde,1997, p. 685). In that sense, Lord Savile ends up happily ever after. He is good because he conforms his roles. He kills a man but, that is not important as long as it is for marriage. In conclusion, a real life resistant Oscar Wilde actually had to become a conformist in his works. He became a symbol of resistance to gender norms. He became a corner stone in the History of Sexuality with the artistic and resistant life he led. However, he had to fail as a gender resistant in his own works.

References


