

# Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish

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## 1. Towards an Assessment of Wilde's Irish Background

I want to get to the point when I shall be able to say quite simply, and without affectation, that the two great turning-points of my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison.<sup>1</sup>

Wilde's father not only sent his son to an English University but to another country, a country which traditionally treated Wilde's home country, Ireland, as the furthest province or nearest colony of the English Empire. Politically Ireland always constituted a security risk to England. Culturally Ireland was traditionally regarded as a "savage" and "barbaric" island which never could be quite acculturated by the English, an imperialist view which can be traced back to such prominent English classics as Sir Francis Bacon and Edmund Spenser.<sup>2</sup> Religiously Ireland was regarded as an "anti-Christian" popish outpost of Roman Catholicism. Economically Ireland was a highly impoverished agrarian country. A couple of years before Wilde matriculated in Oxford, Benjamin Disraeli characterized the nature of Anglo-Irish relations in the following way:

That dense population in extreme distress inhabits an island where there is an Established Church which is not their Church, and a territorial aristocracy the richest of whom live in distant capitals. Thus, you have a starving population, an absentee aristocracy, and an alien church.[...] *That is the Irish question.*<sup>3</sup>

Viewing Wilde's "emigration" to England in this context, the usage of the dramatic term "turning-point" becomes more understandable. For this term not only refers to the academic opportunities Oxford offered Wilde for his career as a lecturer and writer. What Wilde at the same time implies is that his career as a successful writer was closely linked to his career as an eccentric member of English society. Needless to emphasise that it was extremely difficult for a true-born Irishman to change sides, that is, to reverse the role of being a member of a culturally and socially discriminated nation of "underdogs" to the role of an adopted member of a society which partly defined itself through its alleged cultural superiority over Wilde's native country. Wilde not only succeeded in adopting the mannerisms, civilisation, culture, and speech of the English but even surpassed these standards, so that he is today generally known as an "English" writer and as one of the most prominent representatives of the "nineties"<sup>4</sup> in Victorian literature. It is worth noting, however, and this brings us to the second "turning-point" of Wilde's life, that his membership in English society was only an episode, though a very long episode and a very successful one to which he

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<sup>1</sup>Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis, Works* (London & Glasgow: Collins, 1948) 860.

<sup>2</sup>Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, 1596.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted from: Robert Rhodes James, *The British Revolution: British Politics 1880-1939* (London: Methuen, 1978) 40.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Manfred Pfister & Bernd Schulte-Middelich, *Die 'Nineties': Das englische Fin de siècle zwischen Dekadenz und Sozialkritik* (München: Francke, 1983).

owes his fame. Nevertheless, all this ended when he was expelled from English society as a result of his being convicted for his homosexual liaisons. Let us bear in mind that his rise and fall as a writer coincides with his rise and fall as a member of the English society. And we have to take into account that he died without a clear-cut ethnic identity in Paris just as he was born and brought up as a “Non-Englishman” in Ireland. Wilde’s relationship with England could be described as a tragic liaison from which both sides benefited (and from which the other side still benefits today) which – to quote Lord Henry – began “by deceiving oneself and ended by deceiving others”<sup>5</sup> and consequently ended with a scandal.

Why then is Wilde’s work and membership in English society, which was provisional and revocable from the start, so closely interrelated? Viewing the first stage of this Anglo-Irish liaison, Wilde’s days in Oxford, this University not only provided him with an academic “Access Card” to enter English society, the “Club of England,” but also brought him together with such outstanding scholars as Ruskin and Pater who acquainted him with concepts such as Aestheticism, “New Hellenism” and the “English Renaissance.” These concepts, and even more so the “Conclusions”<sup>6</sup> his academic mentors derived from it, offered him both an academic and social frame of reference for his writings as well as for his future career as a Dandy, Aesthete, and *enfant terrible* of English society. Furthermore, England provided him with the opportunities of the metropolitan urbanity of a highly industrialised and prospering country, a political and economic world power which could afford the complete idleness of a comparatively large section of its population. It was only within the social context of the upper-class, detached from the necessity to be professionally or commercially involved in the production sphere, where Wilde could “choose the sphere of activity that [was] really congenial to [him].”<sup>7</sup> This sphere of activity could be described – in Wilde’s words – as developing one’s “grace of manner, or charm of speech, or civilisation or culture, or refinement in pleasure, or joy of life.”<sup>8</sup> Such external signs of metropolitan civility promised the realisation of more fundamental values which Wilde envisaged for his “Utopian map”<sup>9</sup> of his own life and the life of mankind:

The aim of life is self-development. To realise one’s nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for.[...] 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

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<sup>5</sup>Lord Henry in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Works, op. cit.*, 52.

<sup>6</sup>See the “Conclusions” of Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873), a book which Wilde devoured many times. As regards Pater’s influence on Wilde, cf. Robert Morris Seiler, ed., *Walter Pater: A Life Remembered* (Calgary: Calgary UP, 1987) 55-57.

<sup>7</sup>Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, *Works, op. cit.*, 1019.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 1028.

would forget the maladies of medievalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal.<sup>10</sup>

According to Wilde this Utopia must be based upon man's liberation from the imperatives of physical and economic self-preservation which degrades life to a mere struggle for survival. Such Utopian ideals were partly realised in the case of the English upper-classes which could avail themselves of enormous financial resources to attain these aesthetic, social, and intellectual ideals without being in any way implicated in the production sphere. This explains Wilde's affinity to the higher strata of English society and is one of the reasons why all his prose and drama work is set in this sphere of society. Likewise, England offered Wilde a metropolitan centre, London, where all the relevant social and cultural forces of his age were concentrated. It met Wilde's notion of urbanity which he equated with art and artificiality, Bohemian life-style, civility, apart from being an arena for enacting his dramatic works and the drama of his life. In addition to that, English society served Wilde as an ideal sounding-board for his provocative life-style and art. Its rigid behavioural codes and world view constituted the very material for his witty inversions of ossified common places, the disrupting of established views, and the reversing of reified ideologies:

I love London Society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what Society should be!<sup>11</sup>

English society was not only the object of Wilde's art but at the same time its audience which gratified Wilde's provocations both financially and through responding to him in such a way that he was bound to gain a reputation. Wilde was perfectly aware that not being talked about by Society is much worse than being talked about.

Needless to say that the logic and strategy of Wilde's art could not have succeeded in Ireland which, unlike England, was predominantly a rural country. It was inhabited by a peasant society and governed by an impoverished landowning-class or an absentee aristocracy which resided in England. It was a peripheral country void of the material and social basis as well as of the urbanity Wilde needed for the realisation of his art and life. On the other hand one could argue that his career would have pursued different avenues without his Irish background.

Even a most cursory look at Wilde's biography suggests that his Irish background is of an oblique importance. Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on 16 October 1854 in 21 Westland Row, Dublin, Ireland.<sup>12</sup> The names Oscar and Fingal come from Irish legend, O'Flahertie, a cryptic name which even Wilde himself occasionally misspelt, refers to the pre-Norman kings of West Connacht. One should not underestimate the significance of the Irishness of these names for they were carefully chosen by his mother who had gained quite a reputation as an author of

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<sup>10</sup>Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Works, op. cit.*, 29.

<sup>11</sup>Wilde, quoted from: Leslie Frewin, *The Importance of Being Oscar* (London: W.H. Allen, 1987) 139.

<sup>12</sup>The biographical data of the subsequent paragraphs are taken from Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1988).

inflammatory nationalist poetry which she published under the name of Speranza. In one of her articles published in the *Nation*, a nationalist magazine edited by Gavan Duffy, she announced that “the long pending war with England has actually commenced.”<sup>13</sup> According to Richard Ellmann, the most important of Wilde’s biographers, we can assume that “Lady Wilde communicated to her son both her nationalism and her determination to embody it in verse.”<sup>14</sup>

Wilde’s Irish background, however, is more intricate than the above presented biographical material may suggest. He was born into a family which not only maintained nationalist views but at the same time belonged to the Protestant and Anglicized upper-class of Irish society, a political, social, and economic elite, the descendants of **Protestant Ascendancy**, that is, the successors of English-born settlers who colonised Ireland during the 17th century and governed it ever since. This Protestant elite originally regarded itself as the sole upholder of English interests and civility. It is in this light that we have to regard the wealth and success of Wilde’s family which had close links to the Irish and English establishment. In 1864 Oscar’s father, William Wilde, a famous physician, even received a knighthood, and his family wholeheartedly rejoiced over his decoration. So Wilde’s ethnic socialisation was ambivalent from the start, his upbringing Anglo-Irish in the true sense of the word. He was subject to two opposing forces, each pulling upon different directions: On the one hand, his mother’s nationalism, on the other hand, an affinity to the “social possibilities” of England which he soon learned to identify with wealth, promotion, and success. The latter force both explains his drift to England and his swift assimilation in Oxford. The Irish facet of his upbringing might partly explain why this adjustment was never quite completed.

When Wilde matriculated in Oxford, Magdalen College, in 1874 he was described by other undergraduate students as “naive, embarrassed,” with a “convulsive laugh, a lisp and an Irish accent.”<sup>15</sup> Within a year Wilde not only adjusted to the rules of the Oxford decorum, but even went “beyond rather than behind the English.” His Irish accent completely disappeared: “My Irish accent was one of the many things I forgot in Oxford.”<sup>16</sup> He adopted an intonation which was not only English, or rather Oxonian, but set new standards which made him the Lord of the English language. This linguistic assimilation coincided with concomitant political and cultural adjustments. In one of his early poems, “Ave Imperatrix,” he explicitly relates himself to England, English history and English values:

Where are the brave, the strong, the fleet?  
Where is our English chivalry?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>Wilde, *Works, op. cit.*, 696.

Nearly ten years later, when Wilde undertook his grand lecturing tour through America (to declare his genius rather than English goods), he presented himself, and was perceived by the Americans, as an English intellectual who preached the aestheticism of the “English Renaissance.” He was criticised for this accordingly by members of the Irish community in New York. The *Irish Nation* expressed its disappointment in the Anglicised self-esteem of Speranza’s son with a poem:

Speranza’s son / Oscar Wilde Lecture on what He / Calls the English Renaissance / The Utterness of Aestheticism  
/ Phrasing about Beauty while a / Hideous Tyranny Overshadows / His native country / Talent sadly misapplied.<sup>18</sup>

The poem not only hints at the fame of his mother whose nationalist poetry was known even in America but also at Wilde’s estrangement from his ethnic background. However, Wilde did not fail to respond to such claims by pragmatically relating his aestheticism to his Irish background. On one occasion of his tour he stated:

Rhyme, the basis of modern poetry, is entirely of Irish invention. But with the coming of the English, art in Ireland came to an end, and it has had no existence for over seven hundred years. I am glad it has not, for art could not live and flourish under a tyrant.<sup>19</sup>

The ambiguity of Wilde’s rediscovered nationalism, however, becomes apparent if we take a view at the following statement he uttered on another occasion: “Of course, I couldn’t talk democratic principles to my friend the Prince of Wales.”<sup>20</sup> Here, again, we can detect Wilde’s affinity to boastfully alluding to his social connections and success, which he identified with England in general, with the English upper-classes in particular, at the expense of the Irish nationalism he claimed.

The Irish factor in Wilde’s life is not easy to handle. It is, to apply a quote from *The Importance of Being Earnest* to the question of Wilde’s nationality, “rarely pure and never simple. [Wilde’s] life would [have been] very tedious if it were either, and [his] literature a complete impossibility.”<sup>21</sup> Though born and brought up in Ireland, Wilde was far from being a nationalist. Nor is Ireland or the Irish question in any way thematised in his literary work. Instead of that, England and English society are the recurring targets in his work. Yet the thematisation, mockery and challenging of English society both required familiarity and distance, attachment and detachment, domesticity as well as foreignness, in short: the very ambivalence which characterises Wilde’s Anglo-Irish background. It required more than mere foreign otherness but a type of foreignness which was linked to England in a symbiotic way, culturally, socially and politically. Wilde cheerfully described this symbiosis, despite of its asymmetric and tragic nature, in the following way: “Teach the English

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<sup>18</sup>Quoted from R. Ellmann, *op. cit.*, 185-86.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>*The Importance of Being Earnest, Works, op. cit.*, 325-26.

how to talk and the Irish how to listen; then society will be quite civilised.”<sup>22</sup>

Wilde led many double lives. During his childhood he was frequently treated by his mother as a daughter, was dressed accordingly, which acquainted him with the enacting of completely opposed roles at a very early stage. Likewise, as a young infant, he was secretly baptised by a Catholic priest without being officially registered as a Catholic, and continued his life, for the time being, as a Protestant. In later years “Wilde saw his life divide more emphatically between a clandestine, illegal aspect, and an overt, declarable side,”<sup>23</sup> leading the double life of a married husband on the one hand, the life of a homosexual adventurer on the other. I would argue that Wilde’s Irish background ought to be surveyed as one plane of this multifarious doubleness which dominated his art and life: Wilde as a boy and as a girl, as a Protestant and as a Catholic, as a married man and as a homosexual, and, last but not least, Wilde as an Irishman and as an Englishman. He drew upon these national roles whenever it suited him: In Oxford he acted and posed as an Englishman, on his tour through the United States he complemented his preaching of the “English Renaissance” by the sudden re-discovery, the Renaissance, of his Irish background. When the performance of *Salomé* was prevented by an English court he drew upon a third nationality:

If the Censor refuses *Salome* [sic], I shall leave England to settle in France where I shall take out letters of naturalization. I will not consent to call myself a citizen of a country that shows such narrowness in artistic judgement. I am not English. I am Irish which is quite another thing.<sup>24</sup>

The fact that Wilde considered France rather than Ireland for emigration suggests that he dealt with the question of nationality very pragmatically. Although emphasizing his Irish nationality, he chose France as a place of refuge, probably because its capital could offer him a metropolitan ambient similar to London. It ought to be remarked in passing, however, that he eventually refrained from emigrating to France in view of the military service which was then attached to the rights or duties of French citizenship.

Attempting to arrive at a preliminary conclusion regarding the importance of Wilde’s Irish background, it could be maintained that it is not so much the Irishness of his upbringing which shaped his art and life, but rather the ambivalence, ambiguity and doubleness of his Anglo-Irish family background, which initiated many other, possibly more crucial, ambiguities in his life. Wilde was not chosen by a nationality. He rather chose his nationalities, in the same way as he embraced other roles in his life without surrendering them to

any formal acceptance of creed or system, or of mistaking, for a house in which to live, an inn that is but suitable for the sojourn of a night, or a few hours of a night [...].<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Quoted from L. Frewin, *op. cit.*, 25.

<sup>23</sup>R. Ellmann, *op. cit.*, 368.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>25</sup>*The Picture of Dorian Gray, Works, op. cit.*, 106.

## 2. *The Importance of Being Earnest*: Towards a brief Assessment of Wilde's last Play against his Irish Background

The importance of being Irish in Wilde's life resembles in many ways the gist of his most famous and accomplished play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Both the title and the plot of this comedy are centred upon a play with names: Christian names, names of fashionable streets, names of non-existing friends. Nationalities and names have one thing in common. They often establish and reify powerful stereotypes and clichés, arresting man in a prison house of prejudice, bias and discrimination. If one brings the power of names and nationalities to its negative apogee, they can easily turn into social and political segregations or destructive nationalisms, an ideology which Orwell characterised as the "habit of assuming that human beings can be classified like insects and that whole blocks of millions or tens of millions of people can be confidently labelled 'good' or 'bad'."<sup>26</sup>

One promising way out of the discriminating power of nationalisms is to choose nationalities playfully and cheerfully rather than to fall victims to them. Wilde dealt with his Irish background in this way. The same applies to the male protagonists, Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. They are both in love with two "sweet, simple, innocent, [...] brilliant, clever"<sup>27</sup> girls, Gwendolen and Cecily, who are in love with the Christian name Ernest rather than with Algernon and Jack (both as names and as persons). According to Cecily "there is very little music in the name of Jack, if any at all, indeed."

It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations.... I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain. [...] The only really safe name is Ernest.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, their Christian names are "an insuperable barrier"<sup>29</sup> in their wooing, just as national identities can be insuperable barriers in the true sense of the word. Consequently, Jack and Algernon assume the name Ernest, initially by pretence, and then, when this lie is disclosed, they endeavour to be christened under this name. Needless to say that the comic potential of the play is partly grounded in the mistaken identities which arise from this game with names. There is, however, a more fundamental comic rhythm underlying the play. The gleeful lying and playing around with names not only overcomes "insuperable barriers" but proves to be an anticipated truth. In the end it turns out that Jack's name is really Ernest. In the last scene of *The Importance*, Jack, who has been lying throughout the play, not only assuming false names but inventing a fictitious brother, has to admit

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<sup>26</sup> George Orwell, "Notes on Nationalism," in: *The Decline of the English Murder and other Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1965) 155.

<sup>27</sup>*The Importance of Being Earnest, Works, op. cit.*, 356.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 359.

that “all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth.”<sup>30</sup> The lies employed by the protagonists to master “insuperable barriers” prove to be meaningful fictions in a social world (with clear-cut references to the real-existing Victorian world) which Wilde portrayed as absurd and meaningless.

It should be noted that there are not only comic and cathartic but also epistemological dimensions attached to the theme of meaningful fictions in *The Importance*. “The Truth,” says Algernon, “is rarely pure and never simple.”<sup>31</sup> Honest people often speak nothing but the truth, and these truths may well turn out to be false. In Wilde’s comedy the protagonists do nothing but lying, and these lies assert themselves as anticipated truths. The playing with the name Ernest is more rewarding than the “importance of being earnest”. Ethically one might adhere to the fallacy of our every-day concept of truth. Epistemologically, however, Wilde’s pragmatic concept of truth is much superior. It should be remarked that there are interesting analogies between Wilde’s comedy and developments in the philosophy of science at the end of the 19th century which propagated the deliberate and pragmatic usage of fictions to arrive at meaningful scientific findings.<sup>32</sup> Wilde, however, was not concerned with such scientific questions. He rather wants to make us “feel that confident fantasies justify themselves, that a bold imagination is more useful than plodding attention to apparent facts.”<sup>33</sup> For Wilde, lying is “an art, a science, and a social pleasure,”<sup>34</sup> a statement which hints to the fact that this is not only a theme in Wilde’s fiction but part of the overall emancipatory program underlying his work: The overcoming of closed ideological systems, of ossified creeds and reified truths, of public opinion, and, last but not least, of external labels such as names and nationalities by a playful structuring and re-structuring of reality.

Another feature of *The Importance*, which can both be related to the above discussed theme of lying and to the many ambiguities of Wilde’s life (including the ambivalence of his Irishness), is the theme of leading a double life, the shaping of fictitious identities and the enacting of different roles. Algernon invents an invalid friend, Bunbury, in order to escape from the social pressures of his relatives, just as Jack devises a wicked brother (who is said to reside in London) in order to avoid the social confinements of his rural family ambience. They both attempt to appear respectable in their immediate social sphere and pretend to be wicked when they operate under assumed identities. “I hope,” says Cecily to Algernon, “you have not been leading a double life, pretending

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<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Hans Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* (Berlin: Verlag von Reuther & Reichard, 1911); William James, *Essays in Pragmatism*, ed. Alburey Castell (New York: Hafner, 1948; repr. 1974); John Dewey, *The Logic of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1938). A similar discussion of the epistemological potentials of *The Importance* can be found in Franz Zaic’s essay “Oscar Wilde: *The Importance of Being Earnest*,” in: Horst Oppel, ed., *Das moderne Englische Drama* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1963) 49-52.

<sup>33</sup>David Parker, “Oscar Wilde’s Great Farce,” in: William Tydeman, ed. *Wilde: Comedies: A Casebook* (London: MacMillan, 1982) 175.

<sup>34</sup>*The Decay of Lying, Works, op. cit.*, 911.

to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.”<sup>35</sup>

The splitting up of personal identity into an ensemble of different roles coincides with the re-arranging of the socially ascribed functions and values of these roles. At the end of the first scene (Act I) Algernon complains that the lower orders fail to set the upper-classes a good example. In doing so, he assigns the lower orders the “moral responsibility” of his own class. In the second act the object of charity is reversed and applied to the upper classes when Chasuble speaks of the “Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders.”<sup>36</sup> Even the function and “roles” of the metaphysical order of Christianity are reversed when Algernon cynically states that “Divorces are made in Heaven.”<sup>37</sup> We could go on and on. The most essential re-definition of roles, however, applies to the enacting of male-female relationships. In *The Importance* the female protagonists dominate over their male counterparts. Within the fictitious world of diary-writing they design their engagements and marriages (and the marriages of their future husbands) to put them into practice whenever the opportunity arises. Cecily and Gwendolen are plot-makers in the true sense of the word. They devise fictitious episodes, love-plots, engagements, and these fictions, like the lies of their male counterparts, turn out to be anticipated truths. They deal with love in a playful fashion as if it were all a game. And they define the rules of this game. In *The Importance* Wilde brings Lord Darlington’s statement in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* that marriage is a game, a game that in this early play still has melodramatic overtones, to its positive apogee. The protagonists in *The Importance* are “game people,”<sup>38</sup> just as the figures in Pinter’s and Albee’s plays, however much more joyfully and successfully than the characters in the 20th century theatre of the absurd.

The playing with a myriad of roles and identities is not only a central theme in *The Importance* but a recurrent theme in Wilde’s other works, especially in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Similar variations on the theme of double-life can be observed in Victorian literature in general. These thematic correspondences in late 19th century literature indicate that the pressures of Victorian society were not only perceived by Wilde alone. But in Wilde’s case the shaping of new identities is not only a defensive or singular response to particular demands of Victorian society but the very condition of his personality: “an egoist without and ego.”<sup>39</sup> His most prominent double life, the life of a husband and of a homosexual, is only the best known (not necessarily the most important one) facet of a multifarious personality which “is rarely pure and never simple.”

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<sup>35</sup>*The Importance, Works, op. cit.*, 341.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Eric Berne, *Games People Play* (New York: Grove Press, 1964).

<sup>39</sup>Jerusha McCormack, “Masks without Faces: The Personalities of Oscar Wilde,” *English Literature in Transition* 22 (1979): 253-269; 268.

### 3. Concluding Remarks: Wilde's Mother and "Mother Ireland"

We have argued that the ambiguity of Wilde's Irishness can be regarded both as a manifestation of his multi-facetedness and as one of the sources which conspired to Wilde's affinity to enacting contradictory roles, assumed identities, and nationalities. In a similar way Terry Eagleton, who for some time flirted "with the idea of a long critical essay" on Wilde and then chose to dramatize the drama of Oscar's life in a play, presents us with a portrayal of *Saint Oscar* which also stresses the ambivalence of his Anglo-Irish background as a determining force of his multifarious personality.<sup>40</sup> Eagleton's sensitiveness for the ethnic dimensions of Wilde's life was partly prompted by his own quest "to make sense of [his] ambiguous, contradictory identity, as one of Irish working-class provenance now teaching at the very belly of the beast at Oxford."<sup>41</sup> In Eagleton's play Wilde is portrayed as a sexual as well as "racial hybrid,"<sup>42</sup> fragmented by the contradictory claims of antithetical national and familial force fields: Ireland versus England, Dublin versus Oxford, Republicanism versus Aestheticism, Irish peasantry versus fashionable literary salons in Dublin, Merrion Square versus Kinsale, in short, Protestant establishmentarianism versus Catholic nationalism; furthermore, the voice of "Mother Ireland" versus the calls of Wilde's mother, Lady Wilde. Eagleton causally relates the biographical genesis of Wilde's ethnical fragmentation to his immediate familial environment rather than to the overall existence of national dichotomies which merely constitute a set (or a setting) for Lady Wilde's own ambiguities delegated to her son. Lady Wilde is presented as a character who on the one hand is engaged in Irish Republicanism and, on the other hand, complains about the tenants' rents being paid late; a figure who is said to have lectured Irish histrionics upon her son while having encouraged him to lose his Irish accent; who prompted him to live up to the decorum of the English upper-classes, celebrating his academic and social success at Oxford, and, at the same time, calling him back to take part in the Celtic Revival. Eagleton's play insinuates that Wilde's life is not so much drawn apart by the crushed reverberations of "Mother Ireland's" voice drifting to the shores of his adopted country, England, but by the ambivalent calls of his real mother. The drama of Wilde's life is thus portrayed to be initiated by a family drama, "das Drama des begabten Kindes,"<sup>43</sup> which falls victim to the *idées fixes* of a moody mother, rather than by a national drama:

WILDE: I learned all my drama from you, mother. You passed on your illusions to me; it's just that we put them at different uses. You're playing an Irishwoman, I am playing an Englishman; what's the difference?<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Terry Eagleton, *Saint Oscar*, (Derry: Field Day, 1989) viii.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>43</sup>Alice Miller, *Das Drama des begabten Kindes* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979).

<sup>44</sup>T. Eagleton, *op. cit.*, 15.