

摘要

作为一名戏剧家、评论家和美学家，王尔德对英国社会及英国文学都有着不可忽视的影响。他死后 100 多年来，人们对他的评论从未停止过。一类评论注重王尔德的个人生活和人格以及使他早陨的同性恋纠纷、诉讼、审判等；另一类评论注重文本分析，聚焦于王尔德作品形式上的创新。

王尔德作品的集大成者还是他的戏剧。他的戏剧尤其是他的喜剧，不仅有很高的文学价值，而且久演不衰。以前的戏剧评论大都集中在文本分析上，阐述王尔德戏剧的语言特点、结构创新以及在戏剧史上的地位，但王尔德的唯美主义思想在喜剧中的体现常常被忽略。

事实上，王尔德的喜剧与他本人的唯美主义思想密不可分。本文通过对当时维多利亚时代的背景分析，以及王尔德美学思想的阐述，挖掘王尔德喜剧中的浪荡子形象和纨绔主义的核心准则。王尔德通过形形色色的浪荡子形象，无情批判维多利亚时期资产阶级虚伪的道德观，同时，宣扬了他的唯美主义思想。本文也将重新定义王尔德的纨绔主义，其核心准则即以唯美主义的价值观代替维多利亚道德观。

本文的引言部分介绍了王尔德的一生，概括了历来的文学评论，提出了本文的主要目标，即分析王尔德喜剧中的浪荡子形象及纨绔主义，寻找王尔德纨绔主义的核心准则。

第一章介绍了王尔德之前历史上的浪荡子及纨绔主义，通过对英国摄政时期和法国巴黎公社时期浪荡子的分析，总结出历史上的浪荡子都出现在社会动荡不安的时期，而且总是具有反叛特征。这对理解王尔德的纨绔主义非常重要，因为王尔德的笔下浪荡子继承了他之前浪荡子的特征。

第二章分析介绍了王尔德所处的时代——维多利亚时代的时代背景。工业革命的兴起和达尔文《物种起源》的出版强烈动摇了维多利亚时代的价值观，宗教观和道德观，产生了世纪末的悲哀。在这种时代背景下，文人们不得不寻求解决社会矛盾的办法。这时唯美主义运动登上了历史舞台。作为唯美主义的先锋，王尔德表达了他“为艺术而艺术”的思想。形式至上，艺术不模仿自然而是自然模仿艺术，艺术无功利都是王尔德所宣扬的。唯美主义思想是王尔德笔下浪荡子的指导思想。至此，王尔德笔下的浪荡子们有了存在的充分条件。

第三章侧重文本分析，介绍了王尔德喜剧中的浪荡子，分析了王尔德的纨绔主义。通过五个部分，阐述了王尔德纨绔主义的继承性和独立性：形式主义、享乐主义、虚无主义，以及浪荡子语言中的反讽和悖论。这些方面都表现出纨绔主义的反叛性和美学诉求。

结论部分总结了前文，同时也指出王尔德浪荡子与纨绔主义的缺陷。王尔德是个非常矛

盾的人，他在批判社会的同时也希望被社会接受。然而浪荡子与纨绔主义只有在作品中才能实现其目标——用以唯美主义的价值观代替维多利亚道德观，在现实生活中是不可能改变社会现状也不会为社会所接受。这也可能是王尔德最后必然被社会所弃之原因。

关键词：浪荡子、纨绔主义、唯美主义、维多利亚道德观

ABSTRACT

As a playwright, a critic, an aesthete, Oscar Wilde has great impact on English literature and British society. In the past one hundred years, much research work has been done on him. Some scholars have focused on his personal life and personality and others have turned to Wilde's literary texts, concentrating on the artistic form of his works.

His plays, especially his social comedies, which are still being acted today, have a high literary value. Most of the previous criticism has focused on the language, the structure, and the historic position of Wilde's comedies, and has more or less ignored that his comedies embody his aesthetic ideas.

In fact, Wilde's aesthetics is closely connected with his comedies. This thesis tries to unify Wilde's aestheticism and his comedies through a dynamic point of view. With the introduction of Victorian social background, and the elaboration of Wilde's aestheticism, the thesis tries to dig out the underlying meanings of the dandy image and dandyism in Wilde's comedies. The essence of Wildean dandyism is to substitute the Victorian moral value with aesthetic values. Through a lot of dandies under his pen, Wilde, on the one hand, has challenged the hypocritical Victorian moral value, and on the other hand, has advocated his aestheticism.

The first chapter gives an introduction of the development of dandyism before Oscar Wilde, and concludes that dandyism appeared at the time of social instability and transition, and dandies always bore the characteristics of offensive, which cannot be separated from the social background. This conclusion is very crucial because Wildean dandyism inherited the characteristic of the previous dandyism.

In Chapter Two, the social background of Wilde's age is introduced. With the Industrial Revolution and the progress of the society, Victorian morality was at stake. The change in society was parallel to the drastic changes in literature. The rise of Aestheticism in literature disintegrated the standard Victorian morals of the middle-class. Wilde was a leading figure in this movement. In the later part of this chapter, Wilde's aestheticism—the aesthetic rules for Wildean dandyism, are elaborated upon. Actually, the very essence of Wildean dandyism comes out, that is,

to substitute aesthetic values for moral values.

Chapter Three expounds Wildean dandies and dandyism. All the supporting examples are extracted from Wilde's social comedies. This chapter illustrates Wildean dandyism from five aspects: Formalism, Dandyism of senses, Narcissism, Nihilism and Wildean language. These five aspects reveal Wildean dandyism's rebellious and aesthetic characteristics.

In the conclusion, the thesis argues Wilde was very paradoxical. When he criticized the society he also wanted to be accepted by the society. Dandies and dandyism could only achieve their target-- substituting the Victorian moral value with aesthetic values in the literary works. In real life, they couldn't change the social system and could hardly be accepted by the society.

Key Words: Dandy, Dandyism, Aestheticism, Victorian Morality

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Introduction

Although he died more than one hundred years ago, Oscar Wilde's impact on English literature and British society has never diminished. He is not one of those writers who as the centuries change lose their relevance. His works for the theatre are still frequently acted today; his radical position as a critic has been re-evaluated; he has been identified as a key figure within gay criticism; his position as an Irish writer gives him status in the context of postcolonial criticism; his trial of being a homosexual gives him a special contemporary relevance since the marriage of homosexuals has been legitimized in Great Britain. In defiance of what might seem critical overkill, Wilde, both as writer and individual, remains as elusive as ever.

Wilde was born on October 16, 1854 in Dublin. His mother Lady Jane Francesca Wilde was a poet and journalist. His father Sir William Wilde was an Irish antiquarian, gifted writer, and specialist in diseases of the eye and ear. Wilde studied at Portora Royal School (1864-71), Trinity College, Dublin (1871-74) and Magdalen College, Oxford (1874-78). In 1878 Wilde received his B.A. and in the same year he moved to London. His lifestyle and humorous wit soon made him the spokesman for Aestheticism, the late 19th century movement in England that advocated art for art's sake. He worked as art reviewer (1881), lectured in the United States and Canada (1882), and lived in Paris (1883). Between the years 1883 and 1884 he lectured in Britain. From the mid-1880s he was a regular contributor for *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Dramatic View*. In 1884 Wilde married Constance Lloyd, and to support his family Wilde edited in 1887-89 *Woman's World*. In 1888 he published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, fairy-stories written for his two sons. Wilde's marriage ended in 1893. He had met a few years earlier Lord Alfred Douglas, an athlete and a poet, who became both the love of the author's life and his downfall. Wilde made his reputation in the theatre world between the years 1892 and 1895 with a series of highly popular plays. *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) dealt with a blackmailing divorcee driven to self-sacrifice by maternal love. In *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) an illegitimate son is torn between his father and mother. *An Ideal Husband* (1895) dealt with blackmail, political corruption and public and private honor. *The Importance of Being*

Earnest (1895) was about two fashionable young gentlemen and their eventually successful courtship. Before his theatrical success Wilde produced several essays. His two major literary-theoretical works were the dialogues "The Decay of Lying" (1889) and "The Critic as Artist" (1890). Although Wilde was married and was the father of two children, Wilde's personal life was open to rumors. His years of triumph ended dramatically, when his intimate association with Alfred Douglas led to his trial on charges of homosexuality (then illegal in Britain). He was sentenced to two years hard labor for the crime of sodomy. Wilde was first in Wandsworth prison, London, and then in Reading Gaol. During this period he wrote *De Profundis* (1895), a dramatic monologue and autobiography, which was addressed to Alfred Douglas. After his release in 1897, Wilde in Berneval, near Dieppe, wrote "The Ballad of Reading Gaol", revealing his concern for inhumane prison conditions. Wilde died of cerebral meningitis on November 30, 1900, penniless, in a cheap Paris hotel at the age of 46.

Wilde's life was short; however, his writings have covered different genres. Few writers have succeeded in so many genres: The novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, stories such as "The Happy Prince" and "The Selfish Giant", the high farce of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the scenario of Strauss's *Salome*, the tragic *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, are only a few examples.

In the past one hundred years, much research work has been done on him. According to the critical works and essays, Western research work on Wilde mainly experiences three stages chronologically. The first stage, before 1960, focuses on his personal life and personality. The information is best demonstrated in his biographies, such as the biographies written by Hesketh Pearson and Frank Harris. At the second stage stretching from 1960s to 1980s, the readership, influenced by New Criticism, turns to Wilde's literary texts, concentrating on the artistic form of his works. Richard Ellmann is no doubt one of the best that are devoted to working on Wilde during this stage. He publishes many valuable works passing on to those who are interested in Wilde, for example, *The Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (1969), and *Oscar Wilde* (1988). Besides, *Oscar Wilde: the Works of a Conformist Rebel* (1989) by Norbert Kohl is an exemplary text study about Wilde. After 1980s, there appears a tendency of

cultural studies in Wilde. The scholars “review Wilde and his Aestheticism in specific social and historical environment” (Zhang Jieming, 2004). This critical pattern is different from the traditional ones that in sociology emphasize social determinism, but makes more effort to explore “the imperceptible influences exercised by social consciousness and sub-consciousness.” (Zhang Jieming, 2004). It means that the cultural studies lay great emphasis on the close relationship between art and the society. It holds that even Wilde’s “pure beauty” cannot be separated from daily life; in effect, his pursuit of beauty and art is attributed to some social and economic factors, for instance, the industrial mode of production, market economy, and commodity culture. Thereupon, many critical works spring up, among which *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism and Commodity Culture* published in 1990 by Jonathan Freedman is a good example. Moreover, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (2001) by Peter Raby collects critical essays on both text studies and cultural studies of different scholars that are beneficial and inspiring to later researchers.

In China, Wilde studies began in 1909 when Zhou Zouren introduced his fairy tale *The Happy Prince*. From 1909 to 1930s Chinese scholars did more translation work than research. Besides Zhou Zuoren, Chen Duxiu, Yu Dafu and other scholars of Chinese cultural circles translated Wilde’s works of different types. In addition, some scholars, like Liang Shiqiu, Zhang Wentian, drawing on the introduction to Wilde’s life and his works, wrote some commentary essays on his theories and works. The most prosperous phase is from 1980s till now. Various versions of Wilde’s works have been published in this phase; and in 2000 *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (translation) was published, signifying Chinese completion in translating Wilde’s works. Meanwhile, many devoted researchers in this phase, including Zhou Xiaoyi, Zhang Jieming, Ge Guilu, and so on, pay more attention to the meaning in depth of Wilde’s works. They examine his writing background, compare his aesthetic points of view with Chinese ones, or discuss the writing characteristics in his works. On the whole, Chinese researchers have achieved a lot in Wilde studies from his ideological tendency to his artistic features. In his two books, *Beyond Aestheticism: Oscar Wilde*

and Consumer Society (1996) and *Aestheticism and Consumer Culture* (2002), Zhou Xiaoyi systematically probes into the relationship between Wilde and the consumer society as well as consumer culture. These two books are great contributions to the Chinese studies on Wilde.

Taking a panoramic view of Oscar Wilde, we can sense the rebellious dandiacal characteristics prevailed both in his works and in his life, which should be given utmost priority. First, Wilde himself is a dandy. His behavior and his words exclaim that he is a dandy. Second, Wilde creates dandies in his works, especially in his comedies. Why has Wilde created so many dandies in his works? What do they speak? How do they behave? Why do they speak and behave like that? This thesis tries to give an elaboration on Wilde's dandyism. A detailed text analysis of his comedies will be done in order to better understand Wildean dandyism. The task of the thesis is to dig out the essence of Wildean dandyism. All the supporting examples in this paper will be extracted from his four social comedies, that is, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). For the purpose of having a thorough understanding of the essence of the dandies and dandyism, this paper elaborates upon Wildean dandyism in three chapters.

The first chapter gives an introduction of the development of dandyism before Oscar Wilde, and concludes that dandyism appeared at the time of social instability and transition, and dandies always bore the characteristics of offensive, which cannot be separated from the social background. This conclusion is very crucial because Wildean dandyism inherited the characteristic of the previous dandyism.

In Chapter Two the social background of Wilde's age is introduced. With the Industrial Revolution and the progress of the society, Victorian morality was at stake. The change in society paralleled to the drastic changes in literature. The rise of Aestheticism in literature disintegrated the standard Victorian morals of the middle-class. Wilde was a leading figure in this movement. In the later part of this chapter, Wilde's aestheticism—the aesthetic rule for Wildean dandyism, is elaborated upon. Actually, the very essence of Wildean dandyism comes out, that is, to substitute

aesthetic values for moral values. The behavior and the words of the dandies under Wilde's pen actually reflect this essence.

Chapter Three expounds Wildean dandies and dandyism in his comedies. This chapter illustrates Wildean dandyism from five aspects: Formalism, Dandyism of senses, Narcissism, Nihilism and Wildean language. These five aspects reveal Wildean dandyism's rebellious and aesthetic characteristics.

Chapter 1 Dandies and Dandyism Before Oscar Wilde

The dandy is an alien figure for most people; therefore, a misread one. The most natural association with the dandy is the pleasure-oriented playboy in most Chinese readers' minds, due to the similar Chinese versions or the boulevardier in French version. They tend to take for granted that dandies indulge themselves in delicacies, alcohol, gamble, sex, and adventures. To most people, dandyism refers to dandies' deliberation to wear finery beyond the reach of other men. However, in fact, dandyism is a social phenomenon, which bore a rebellious characteristic throughout its history. Before we deal with Wilde's dandyism, let's look into the development of dandyism in Europe.

1.1 Dandy in Regency Period

In English, dandyism comes from "dandy" which appeared in the late 18th century. According to Moers Ellen, in the American Independence War, a song popular among English soldiers probably has the direct connection with the origin of dandyism:

Yankee Doodle came to town
Riding on a pony,
Stuck a feather in his hat
And called it Macaroni.

(Ellen, 1960:11)

Doodle is American slang, which means the people who do nothing serious. Doodle and dandy has the similar pronunciation and spelling. Their meanings are also related to the other word in the song "Macaroni", Macaroni comes from the Italian word *maccarone*, whose meaning is "Italian pasta". In this song, it surely means the fashionable man, playboy. Later in 1764, a club in London whose main purpose was to introduce the fashionable and elegant way of life from south Europe to England was founded. Most of its members had visited Italy. Its name was "macaroni club". This club became an important cradleland of dandyism.

The earliest dandies appeared in the refined elite's clubs located in St. James

Street and King Street during the Regency Period (1810-1820), London. By then, George Brumell was the unquestionable essence. This student in Oxford had the unparalleled talent and the connoisseurship in man's manners and dress, which was lacking for common middle-class men, For the reason that the Prince Regent was a fervent adorer and imitator of Brumell, a social mode was brought to London, which would be criticized later – the dandified style. Soon, Brumell fell into disfavor and his place was taken by Count D'orsay, a man with woman's face and soft disposition. Bearing the aristocratic trait, both Brumell and D'orsay were annoyed by the newly rising bourgeoisie's vulgar appearance and hypocritical morality. Therefore, both of them spent much time and paid much attention to their appearances in order to make themselves into work of art. The reason for them to do so was to offend people rather than to please people. For these delicate gentlemen, the puritan ethics, such as hardworking, thrift, simple and plain living, order, and devoutness could only foster vulgar and dull upstarts instead of an elegant soul. They deliberately put on a pose of that is indifferent, arrogant, slothful, elegant, sartorially fastidious, and conversationally felicitous – a metaphysical war against middle classes' vulgarity. Thus, dress and witty remarks became the rebellious symbols against the unimaginative bourgeoisie.

It is at this point that the two opposite social forces, the aristocracy and the proletarian, met and fought against the newly settled bourgeoisie. In this sense, Brumell and D'orsay can be called the spiritual ally of the textile workers who destroyed spinning machines in Manchester and Nottingham (Another famous dandy, Byron, made a speech in the House of Lords, defending these workers for the action in February, 1812). When the workers in Manchester destroyed spinning machines, they were taking the machine as antagonistic force, which showed their lack of class ideology and a kind of dread towards modern industrial civilization. Dandies who took middle classes' vulgarity as their enemy, showed the same lack of class ideology. Both the machine-destroyers in Manchester and dandies in London only manifested a vague anti-bourgeoisie sentiment. While Brumell and D'orsay materialized this sentiment in the form of their dress, at the end of the Regency Period, other dandies

put this sentiment into literature and deepened it (Most dandies had very good education for the reason of their aristocratic family background.) Without exception, dandies' creations at the time were novels; even the prospective successful politician Benjamin Disraeli began his dandy life by writing several unsuccessful novels.

The reaction of the bourgeoisie towards aristocratic dandy's disdain can be divided into two stages.

In the first stage, the bourgeoisie accepted the dandies' disdain and tried to imitate their way of living. Facing the long developed and perfect noble culture of aristocracy, the bourgeoisie bore a cultural inferiority complex. Dandies' life opened a new scene to the over-inflexible capitalist class. The hedonic artistic life was delicate, exquisite, tender, and elegant. The later nobilization of the capitalist class was to a certain extent an approval of the value of this life style. Ascetic ethics only fitted in straitened circumstances, because it contributed to the development of production and prosperity of economy. Once this goal was fulfilled, hedonic ethics took the place of ascetic one. It was at this time that the proletariat saw a parting ally and realized it was a reactionary enemy.

The second stage was the outbreak of discontent. On the one hand, the bourgeoisie were adorers and imitators of Brummell or D'orsay; on the other hand, the different class origin and family background aroused the sense of self-esteem of their bourgeoisie identity. When the Prince Regent died in 1830, the feeling of discontent was made known to the public. The first thing they wanted to do was to proclaim dandy's immorality. However, they disappointedly discovered that the well-educated dandies had occupied the literary field. Seeing this, they had to hire some men of letters to advocate their views and vilify dandies. This tradition lasted to the Victorian age in which Wilde lived.

1.2 Dandyism in France

After the Regency Period, the center of dandy's circles moved from London to Paris with Baudelaire being the nuclear person. The French is a nation full of revolutionary passion. This passion definitely contains a sensitive sense of history,

which in turn encourages the passion. As an artist, Baudelaire was a dandy to the bone. His most celebrated works, the extraordinary cycle of poems *Les Fleurs Du Mal* rang a sound of dramatic vibration. Thus he was skillful at bringing dramatic effect into actual life, which was embodied especially in his clothing. With the increasing tension between the rebellious dandy and the bourgeoisie, Baudelaire gave up Brummell and D'orsay's elegant costume and noble manners as means of showing their sense of superiority, but adopted bizarre clothes and dissipated conduct instead, to resist materialism and show individual's independence. Resistance, especially the resistance of artists, became the theme of Paris dandies. Baudelaire used his black dress to oppose to "commonplace" and "authority", which can be considered as the theoretical source of modern artists' favor towards fantastic clothing.

When the revolution of the Paris Commune broke out in 1871, the dandies as artists acted actively in the struggle. In the streets and alleys hailing of storms of shots and shells, Baudelaire was seen brandishing a rifle behind street barricades. It was in the revolution that Baudelaire fully realized the meaning of Dandy. Karl Marx attributed the failure of Paris Commune to the immaturity of revolutionary conditions and theories. But the Paris Commune was already the last socialist movement that began to move eastwards, leaving the developed capitalist countries, which were considered as the most qualified revolution basis by Marx, and reaching the final success in "the weakest link in the imperialist chain" according to Lenin's deduction. Both London and Paris were no longer the paradise or refuge of dandies.

From the development of dandyism, we can discover two factors are of most importance to dandyism. One is social instability and transition, or, in Thomas Smith's words, societal "structural decrystallization". (Smith, 1974: 726) (e.g., the English Regency period with Brummell; and the Paris Commune with Baudelaire.) The second factor is the characteristics of the offensive -- challenging the existing social rules and values. (eg. Brummell and D'orsay were against bourgeoisie's vulgar appearance and hypocritical morality; and Baudelaire opposed to "commonplace" and "authority") In "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863) Baudelaire writes,

"Dandyism appears especially in those periods of transition...In the confusion of

such times, a certain number of men, disenchanted and leisured “outsiders,” but all of them richly endowed with native energy, may conceive the idea of establishing a new kind of aristocracy... Dandyism is the last new kind of flicker if heroism in decadent ages... Dandyism is a setting sun; like the declining star, it is magnificent, without heat and full of melancholy.”

(Calloway, 1997: 34)

The dandy, as an “outsider,” “celebrity,” or “cultural entrepreneur”(Smith, 1974: 739), uses dandyism as a form of social currency to purchase “social difference” – that is, admittance to Society at the level of sociopolitical power to which he aspires. Karl Beckson writes, “For the industrious, pious middle class that increasingly valued social equality, the pose of dandyism was potently offensive, for it implied elitest superiority, calculated irresponsibility, and cultivated langor...” (Beckson, 1970:35)

Wilde has inherited all the above ideas. His dandies, like Baudelaire’s and Barbey’s, are aristocrats, who use their wit to shock and startle the gross philistines. Above all they are individualists who demand absolute freedom. The Wildean dandy, however, much as he inherits from the tradition, is not simply a composite of English and French models. Wilde takes the figure of the dandy because it embodies a lot what he wishes to express, but he adds to it some new elements we recognize as particularly Wildean.

Before we deal with Wildean dandyism, let’s look into the social background and aesthetic movement of Wilde’s age, because they are two essential factors of Wildean dandyism.

Chapter 2 The Social Background and Aesthetic Movement of Wilde's Age

2.1 Social Background

2.1.1 Moral Anxiety at Fin-de-Siecle

Covering Queen Victoria's sixty-three-years reign, the term "Victorian age" is a general one, and it comprises three distinct eras: early Victorian period from about 1830 to 1850, mid-Victorian 1850 to 1875, and late Victorian from 1875 to 1900 (Williams, 1958: 34). The late Victorian era is the one that is most representative of the characteristics and attitudes of Victorian society.

The word "Victorian" carries rich associations, among which is the notion of Victorian virtues. The Queen, who had an unflinching sense of duty and a total respect for moral proprieties, set a standard of solid virtues that appealed especially to the middle class. Victorian's Prime Minister Disraeli once said, "If ever I want to know what the middle classes are thinking, I always ask her Majesty's opinion." (Blamires, 1963:10) Sobriety and respectability characterized much of her early reign, superficially at least. However, the changing phases in the history of Victorian morality should be recognized.

. With the Industrial Revolution and the progress of the society, the Queen was loosening her grip over her people's moral senses and there emerged the uncertainty of religion and morality. At the end of the century, the moral looseness, the dissipations and the debaucheries were rampant in the middle-class; the coarseness and grossness of aristocratic manners and conduct had been notorious. Even Edward, the Prince of Wales, had recourse to a life of pleasure and dissipation. This period was characterized by feelings of languor and ennui, an awareness of aimlessness in life and a search for new sensations combined with disgust for moral and religious limitations.

The change in society paralleled to the drastic changes in literature. One cannot look into the later Victorian literature without sensing the inner unease and dissatisfactions. Aestheticism and symbolism developed themselves under these conditions, often with a decadent flavor. The rise of Aestheticism in literary circle in Great Britain disintegrated the standard Victorian morals of the middle-class. Literary

decadence manifested itself in an extreme aestheticism which despised nature, worshipped the artificial and preferred beauty to the conventional morals.

The enthusiasm for moral purpose in literature was replaced by aesthetic tendency to seek beauty for its own sake at the fin-de-siecle. Oscar Wilde played an indispensable role in such a change, and he was the main figure in the “Naughty Nineties”, with his *Decay of Lying*, which asserted that “Art is our spirited protest, our attempt to teach Nature her proper place”. (Wilde, 1994:124)

“The Nineties began in 1889 and ended in 1895,” Richard Ellmann, the famous biographer of Oscar Wilde, has noted, writing of the space between Wilde’s triumph and his trial, “At least the Wildean Nineties did so, and without Wilde the decade would never have found its character” (Bradbury, 2004: 49-50). The conventionally minded middle-class was mocked by Oscar Wilde’s flamboyance, paradoxes and perversion. Wilde fulfilled the needs of the avant-garde of artists and intellectuals to break free from Victorian conventions and realized their demands to be free from the tradition of Victorian fiction—pedantic, realistic and popular.

2.2 Aestheticism

2.2.1 Rise of Aestheticism

In 1832, the French writer Theophile Gautier popularized the doctrine ‘l’art pour l’art’(‘art for art’s sake’), and it was taken up in mid-19th –century France by the Symbolist poets like Charles Baudelaire. Though he had died as early as 1867, Baudelaire was destined to remain a key figure for the 1890s, revered by the aesthetes for his pose of morbid sensitivity, and the decadents for his opium-inspired explorations of strange and exquisite sensations. His extraordinary book of poems, as mentioned in the previous chapter, —*Les Fleurs du Mal* of 1857 exerted a powerful influence, both thematically and stylistically, over the men of the nineties who responded to his uncompromising search for beauty.

Aestheticism flourished in the English Aesthetic Movement of the late 19th century, when the leading figures were D.G.Rossetti (1828-1882), the head of Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the critic poet and playwright, A.C.Swinburne

(1837-1909), whose poetry and painting inspired the aesthetes, interpreted his artistic aim as the pursuit of beauty, which is divorced from social meaning. In Rossetti's poetry the Victorian bias in favor of objectivity was reversed, and the romantic mode of introspection and confession resumed.

The first Englishman who wrote about the theory of aestheticism was Walter Pater, the most important critical writer of the late Victorian period, whose most important works were *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and *Appreciations* (1889). Pater was the exponent of a *carpe diem* philosophy suited to an age when the old certainties were crumbling. His aesthetic philosophy resulted in the apotheosis of beauty as the supreme experience of life, and of art as the superior reality, atoning for the deficiencies of nature and totally unlike any other kind of human activity.

The chief representative of the movement in England was Oscar Wilde. As Pater's disciple, Wilde believed that the only reality worth seeking was not material goods but an intangible – the individual human experience. "Life," said Wilde in *A Woman of No Importance*, "is a *mauvais quart d'heure* made up of exquisite moments." (Wilde, 1988: 324)

In term of art, the doctrine of aestheticism holds that art is an end in itself and does not need to have any moral, religious, political, or educational purpose. Only when art is for art's sake, can it be immortal. This idea is developed from the 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant's view that art can only be judged by its own criteria and not by anything external to it. The aesthetes interpret their artistic aim as the desire and pursuit of beauty, divorced from social meaning, the poetic wisdom and passion, and the love of art for art's sake.

2.2.2 Wilde's Aesthetics

What is Aestheticism? According to Zhu Guangqian, famous Chinese scholar of aesthetics, aesthetics is the study of beauty and its basic question is the relation between form and content, ration and sense (Zhu Guangqian, 2003: 641). Since its beginning, aesthetics has been stressing beauty and its role in literary practice. Oscar

Wilde's aesthetics and his view on beauty had been expressed profoundly in his critical essays and lectures. We can summarize them as follows:

To begin with, he thinks that art should alienate from life, the life of Babbitt and hypocrite. To fight with such life, he espouses the "beauty" of art, which in his eyes is universally dominant. The beauty of art, together with its value, should by no means take the cue from life and nature, for art transcends them so far. All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature and elevating them into ideals. Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art's rough material, but before they are of real service to art they must be translated into artistic conventions. The moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything. "As a method Realism is a complete failure, and the two things that every artist should avoid are modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter. To us, who live in the nineteenth century, any century is suitable for art except our own. The only beautiful things are the things that do not concern us." (Wilde, 1994: 285)

Secondly, art is properly the aim of itself. Wilde's belief in the independence and self-value of art is built as follows, "The artist is the creator of beautiful things.... There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written, that is all."(Wilde, 1994: 103) Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely on its own lines. Hence he indulges himself in the pursuit of the beauty of form, alleging that only style can make art immortal.

Last but not least, art foreruns life. His third doctrine is that life imitates Art far more than Arts imitates Life. "This results not merely from Life's imitative instinct, but from the fact that the self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression, and that Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realize that energy." (Wilde, 1994: 290) It is under the pens of writers that men see the beauty of fog in London. As a result he proposes to make life artful, but not the contrary.

When the central governing standards of Victorian society were challenged by the first economic crisis and social reformers like the Fabians, the avant-garde of artist and intellectuals like Wilde were forced to realize the bankruptcy of the old values.

Wilde was confronted with all kinds of existential questions without having the answers which had before been provided by sound values. To him, orthodoxy and the “natural” laws of society, which most Victorians took for granted, were outdated. Since the materialist values of the middle-class could not satisfy him, he had to create his own values and identity. Wildean dandies meet the need. They are witty and cynical and are born to protest against the vulgarity of Victorian middle-class values. Every Wildean dandy stands against the background of a vulgar and Philistine “mundane world”, and is determined to turn his back on utilitarianism and commercialism which are thought to invade his “art world”. It is because they are so aware of the moral anxiety in the society that these witty and cynical dandies choose to resort to aestheticism, because art is immortal and amoral, which can alienate from life, the life of Babbitt and hypocrite.

If aestheticism movement broke out to rebel against the Victorian moral standard, dandies were the best spokesmen for the aestheticism, because, through their words and behavior, they challenged the existing moral standard and advocated aestheticism. Just as discussed in the previous chapter, dandyism appeared at the time of social instability and transition, now it was the time for Wildean dandies to stand on the historic stage. In the next chapter, Wildean dandies and dandyism in his four comedies will be explored.

Chapter 3 Wildean Dandyism in His Social Comedies

Up to now a clear picture of historical dandyism has been described, and besides, the reason why Wilde invented dandies in his work is also clarified – because only dandies can best illustrate his aesthetic point of view and at the same time challenge the Victorian morality. In this chapter Wildean dandyism in Wilde's works will be explored. Before dealing with the dandyism, it's necessary to expound the dandies in Wilde's four comedies.

3.1 Dandies Under Wilde's Pen

Lady Windermere's Fan

Wilde's first comedy concerns Lady Windermere, who learns from a gossiping Duchess that her husband Lord Windermere has been visiting and giving large sums of money to a Mrs. Erlynne, a charming woman with a past. She confronts her husband, who alone knows that Mrs. Erlynne is the disgraced mother of Lady Windermere, with the evidence of his bankbook, but he denies any involvement. When he asks his wife to help Mrs. Erlynne reenter society, she coldly refuses and threatens to strike Mrs. Erlynne across the face with the fan she has just that day received from him as a birthday gift. In spite of her threat, he invites Mrs. Erlynne to the party. When the elegant Mrs. Erlynne arrives, Lady Windermere drops her fan and bows coldly. Later, when she overhears Mrs. Erlynne tell her husband that she will expect a two-thousand-pound settlement, she writes a note to her husband telling of her intention to run away with Lord Darlington, a notorious dandy. Mrs. Erlynne intercepts the note and later, in Lord Darlington's rooms, attempts to persuade the skeptical Lady Windermere not to ruin her life. When the men arrive, Mrs. Erlynne hides Lady Windermere behind a curtain and leaves the room. When Lord Windermere angrily demands that Darlington explain the presence of his wife's fan, Mrs. Erlynne enters and explains that she mistook the fan for her own. The next day Lord Windermere tells his wife that she will never be troubled by Mrs. Erlynne again, but Lady Windermere replies that she no longer thinks of her as a bad woman and that women ought not to be divided into the good and the bad. Mrs. Erlynne enters to

return the fan and announce that she is soon to be married and will be living on the Continent.

Lord Darlington is the first dandy to appear in Wilde's comedy and his character is shaped appropriately. He is an aristocrat whose natural superiority of intellect and wit is used to shock the Philistines around him. He is an absolute individualist who revels in exquisite sensations. His code of life is based upon the substitution of aesthetic values for moral ones. Like most Wildean dandies, one of Lord Darlington's functions is to shock or bewilder the Philistines. But Lord Darlington's role as a dandy seems to diminish after the first act. He becomes little more than one side of a conventional love triangle and his dandiacal qualities correspondingly diminish. His insouciant wit cannot survive the deep commitments of passionate love, and he is eventually given such lines as "She is a good woman. She is the only good woman I have ever met in my life." Cecil Graham, who assumes the dandiacal role in the third act, replies to this sentiment as any good dandy should: "Well, you are a lucky fellow! Why, I have met hundreds of good women. I never seem to meet any but good women. The world is perfectly packed with good women. To know them is a middle-class education" (Wilde, 1988: 417.)

On occasion Mrs. Erlynne functions in the dandiacal role and gets the witty lines. When Lord Windermere recoils with horror at Mrs. Erlynne's lack of repentance, Mrs. Erlynne replies:

"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--not as long as we have any good looks left, at any rate. No--what consoles one nowadays is not repentance, but pleasure. Repentance is quite out of date. 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 do that."

(Wilde, 1988:425)

A little earlier she tells Lord Windermere that she intends to leave England because "London is too full of fogs and--and serious people." A few lines later, when

Lord Windermere reproaches her for intruding in his home after being discovered in Darlington's apartments, she replies "My dear Windermere, manners before morals!"(Wilde, 1988: 422-423.)

In this comedy, Lady Windermere is the main character whose ideas and behaviors strictly obey the Victorian morality. She represents the Philistine world which Wilde criticizes. Lord Darlington and Mrs. Erlynne are dandies who are the spokesmen of Wilde. Through their witty remarks, Wilde has advocated his aesthetic values.

A Woman of No Importance

The basic conflict of Wilde's second comedy is found between Lord Illingworth, a charming aristocrat of wicked reputation, and Mrs. Arbuthnot, a woman who early in her life had trusted a man and been disgraced, for possession of their illegitimate son, Gerald Arbuthnot. Because only Mrs. Arbuthnot knows the secret of his birth, she cannot explain to her son why she objects to his taking a position as secretary to Lord Illingworth, who has deeply influenced Gerald with his dandiacal life and ideals. Eventually Lord Illingworth reveals his true nature by insulting Hester Worsley, a rich and rather puritanical American girl who is in love with Gerald and believes that all men and women who sin should be banished from the society of good people. Gerald vows to kill Lord Illingworth; and, consequently, his mother is forced to reveal that Lord Illingworth is his father. Gerald takes the conventional Philistine attitude and insists that Lord Illingworth marry his mother. Mrs. Arbuthnot insists that this would be an even greater disgrace. When Hester supports her, Gerald is finally convinced of the rightness of his mother's position. Lord Illingworth, who had contemptuously referred to Mrs. Arbuthnot earlier as "a woman of no importance," is dismissed in similar terms at the close of the drama.

In this play, Lord Illingworth is Wilde's chief spokesman. He epitomizes the elegant and artificial world to which Gerald Arbuthnot aspires. Surrounding him is the dominant dandiacal society in which Lady Caroline, Lady Hustanton, Lady Stutfield and especially Lady Allonby represents the insiders of the societal norm. The conflict

between the opposing dandiacal and Philistine points of view enables Wilde not only to exercise his wit but also to illuminate his ideas. For example, the witty conversation between Lord Illingworth and Gerald at the opening of the third act is clearly derived from the conversation between Lord Henry Wotton and Dorian in the second chapter of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Just as Lord Henry attempts to seduce the innocent Dorian to a New Hedonism, Lord Illingworth attempts to convert Gerald to modern dandyism:

LORD ILLINGWORTH: I suppose your mother is very religious, and that sort of thing.

GERALD: Oh, yes, she's always going to church.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Ah! She is not modern, and to be modern is the only thing worth being nowadays. You want to be modern, don't you, Gerald? You want to know life as it really is. Not to be put off with any old-fashioned theories about life. Well, what you have to do at present is simply to fit yourself for the best society. 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.

(Wilde 1988: 459)

In this play, Wilde creates a dandiacal society to stand against the Philistine world. Dandies not only startle the people from the Philistine world, but also spare no pains to convert their attitude and morality.

An Ideal Husband

Wilde's third comedy, *An Ideal Husband*, presents in Lady Chiltern another Puritan who cannot forgive anyone who has ever done a wicked or shameful deed. Her husband Robert, whom she idealizes, has long ago made his fortune by dishonorably selling a government secret. Mrs. Cheveley, a dishonest former school acquaintance of Lady Chiltern, attempts to blackmail Sir Robert into supporting a fraudulent Argentine canal project. Sir Robert is certain he will lose his wife if his

secret is revealed, but Lord Goring, the Wildean dandy, encourages him to fight Mrs. Cheveley. When Lady Chiltern learns of her husband's past, she castigates him and rejects his pleas for forgiveness. Later, Lord Goring receives a seemingly compromising letter from Lady Chiltern. By confronting Mrs. Cheveley with a diamond brooch she had stolen, Lord Goring obtains the damaging letter Sir Robert had written long ago that revealed his guilt, but Mrs. Cheveley obtains Lady Chiltern's letter and declares her intention to send it to Sir Robert that night. The next day Sir Robert officially denounces the fraudulent canal scheme and is reunited with his wife. The letter Mrs. Cheveley had sent had been an affectionate and forgiving one that had been intended for him all along. Lord Goring wins the lovely Mabel Chiltern while Lady Chiltern discovers that "Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing."

In *An Ideal Husband*, Lord Goring represents a significant development in Wilde's treatment of the dandy. In the previous two comedies, dandies always appear as a villain, for Wilde dare not advocate his dandyism too directly. In order to comfort the nerve of middle-class, the dandiacal world seems to be a world of villain. However, Lord Goring loses the usual role of as a villain.

The Importance of Being Earnest

The plot centers upon Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing. Jack wants to marry Gwendolen Fairfax but Algernon refuses to give his permission to marry his cousin until Jack clears up the question of Cecily. Jack pretends ignorance; but, when Algernon reads the inscription "From little Cecily with her fondest love to Uncle Jack" on a cigarette case that Jack has misplaced, Jack confesses that old Mr. Cardew, who adopted him when he was a boy, had made him guardian of his granddaughter Miss Cecily Cardew. Jack admits that he has always pretended to have a wicked younger brother named Ernest. Thus, he has always been known as Uncle Jack to Cecily rather than Ernest, his real name. Algernon has in similar fashion invented an imaginary sick friend named Bunbury who provides him with an excuse to go out into the country whenever he chooses. Later, when Jack confesses his love for Gwendolen,

she tells him that she can never love anyone whose name is not Earnest. However, Lady Bracknell refuses to recognize the engagement when Jack reveals that he was found in a handbag in Victoria Station.

When Algernon, masquerading later as Jack's brother Earnest, meets Cecily, she tells him that she can never love anyone named Algernon. Both men make arrangements with a Dr. Chausuble to have their names changed. When Cecily and Gwendolen finally meet, they discover the double deception and decide that neither of them is engaged to anyone. Both girls, however, decide to forgive Jack and Algernon when they learn of their proposed christenings. When Dr. Chausuble mentions the name of Cecily's tutor, Miss Prism, Lady Bracknell starts and insists that she be sent for. Miss Prism, who years before was a nurse in the family, appears and quails when Lady Bracknell demands "Where is that baby?" Prism explains that she left the baby in the perambulator with the manuscript of a novel she had written. She confesses that in a moment of abstraction she had deposited the manuscript in the bassinet and the baby in a large handbag. When Jack, who has been listening intently, asks her where she deposited the handbag, she replies that she left it in the cloakroom of Victoria Station. Jack rushes out in great excitement and returns clutching a handbag which Miss Prism identifies as hers. When Jack embraces her and calls her mother, she recoils in indignation. Lady Bracknell explains that Jack is the son of her sister Mrs. Moncrieff and, consequently, Algernon's elder brother. Jack then discovers that his real name is Earnest. Gwendolen is delighted. Miss Prism and Dr. Chausuble embrace, Algernon and Cecily embrace, and Jack and Gwendolen embrace, all exclaiming "At last!" When Lady Bracknell accuses him of displaying signs of triviality, Jack replies, "On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest."

The Importance of Being Earnest contains characters--male and female alike--who all speak like dandies, concerned with the dominance of form, so that philistine and puritan are always subjected to satire and aesthetic judgment. Indeed, as Joseph Wood Krutch has stated, Wilde has "created a mythological realm of perfect dandyism." For Wilde--in life as in art--and for other great dandies before him,

dandyism was the last heroic gesture against the increasingly vulgar world of the late nineteenth century; the dandy's superiority and individualism were his only codes of manners and morality.

Unlike certain characters in Wilde's preceding comedies, those in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are in no need of forgiveness for a sinful secret (not even Miss Prism, who had misplaced Jack when he was a baby), for in the dandiacal world, bourgeois morality does not exist, only the code of the dandy. As Gwendolen says, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing." Gwendolen's wish to marry a man named "Ernest" reveals her dandiacal concern with form and an unconcern with Jack's character. Cecily, who is Gwendolen's double, is delighted when Algernon appears as the wicked Ernest, for she is concerned with the beauty of the name, not with the philistine horror of wickedness. When Algernon protests that he is not really wicked, she responds: '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.'

3.2 Wildean Dandyism

In the next part, Wildean dandyism will be explored in five aspects: Formalism, Dandyism of senses, Narcissism, Nihilism and Wildean language.

3.2.1 Formalism

As mentioned before, Wilde's aestheticism searches for depth in the very midst of appearance. Arthur Ganz sees a concern for form as the essential quality in dandy. "Above all, the Wildean dandy is the advocate of the supremacy of artistic form. It was his religion, however inadequate as such, to Wilde art meant perfect form. The content, particularly the moral content, of the work was irrelevant; form was everything. The great dandiacal joke which appears over and over again in the play is based on the exalt of the external, or formal, over the international. The world of dandy is based on the manners not morals."(Ganz 1958:1429) Correspondent with this

rule, Wilde invented a group of dandies in his social comedies, all of whom dressed to look decorative-- the prime motive of the dandies. Wilde said that an artist "gains his inspiration from form, and from form purely," (Wilde, 1994: 201) and so does the dandy. Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* pay much attention to their buttonholes, which means they care a lot about their appearance:

LORD DARLINGTON: This woman has purity and innocence. She has everything we men have lost.

Mr. CECIL GRAM: My dear fellow, what on earth should we men do going about with purity and innocence? A carefully thought-out buttonhole is much more effective. (Wilde, 1994: 285)

LORD GORING: Got my second buttonhole for me, Phipps? ... (looking at himself in the glass.) Don't you think I quite like this buttonhole, Phipps. Makes me look a little too old. Makes me almost in the prime of life, eh, Phipps?

LORD GORING: I am not quite sure, for the future a more trivial buttonhole, Phipps, on Thursday evenings.

(Wilde, 1994: 402)

In two of Wilde's comedies, "buttonhole" appears, which means Wilde pays much attention to appearance. Form is before moral.

Mable Chiltern says Lord Goring "changes his clothes at least five times a day" (Wilde, 1994: 3676), it could be seen that Wildean dandies take great pains with appearance.

It is one of the fundamental traits of Wildean aestheticism that it searches for depth not in the hidden world of essence, but in the very midst of appearances, that is, form. Wilde's condemnation of shallowness as the "supreme vice" in *De Profundis* (1897) is not merely a grief-stricken reaction to the prison experience, but a continuation of insight expressed in works. In his famous "*Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*" (1894), Wilde had already written with contempt that "only the shallow know themselves", a dictum that could have been pronounced in *The*

Picture of Dorian Gray (1890) by the dandiacal Lord Henry, since according to him “it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearance.” In general, Wilde derides the shallowness and superficiality of those who pretend to have an immediate apprehension of the hidden nature of themselves or of things. “From a Wildean perspective, the Delphic “Know thyself!” usually interpreted as commanding Socratic introspection, denotes an absence of self-critical reflection, since the passion in the heart of man will never become transparent to the distance eye of rationality”(Bauer, 2007) Thus, according to Wilde’s aestheticism, style, not sincerity was the vital thing in matters of great importance.

Like the dandies under his pen, Wilde himself paid much attention to formalism. When Wilde was thirteen at Portora Royal School, a letter to his mother revealed his tastes in clothing were a dandy’s:

September 1868

Portora School

...The flannel shirts you sent in the hamper are both Willie’s, mine are one quite scarlet and the other lilac but it is too hot to wear them yet....

(Hart-Davis, 1962: 20)

Wilde continued at Trinity the elaborate style of dressing in which he had invented at Portora. He came into his friend’s rooms one day wearing an outlandish pair of trousers. When his friend started to tease him about them, Wilde begged him solemnly not to make them an object of jest. He was planning a trip to Umbria, he explained: “These are my Trasimeno trousers, and I mean to wear them there.” In 1878, Wilde moved to London with a degree from Oxford and a burning desire to achieve success. In late Victorian England, men were bound by the growth of rigid conventions stipulating the “correct” dress for each and every occasion. One thing to impress on the young man in society is to let the dress be as neat and tasty as consistent with his means. Men’s clothes became sober in colour; the darkish blues, light fawns and plaids for trousers of the 1850s and early 1860s faded by the 1870s into a general range of grey and black. (Richard 1990:12) The society did not like loud and flashy colours. It was left to lively members of the working and lower-middle classes or the nouveau riche to indulge in a flashy tie or figured waistcoat.

In spending money, the society did not approve of extravagance. People were expected to practice a proper economy. Getting money, and saving it “for a rainy day” is a sign of God’s grace. So generally speaking, men’s formal daytime dress at that time simply included a single-breasted lounging jacket known as the Albert, trousers at equal length at knee and ankle, short ankle-length boots and a low top hat. (Richard 1990:13) But Wilde had been taught by his mother to view life as a performance, he made a spectacle of everything in London, his wardrobe was designed not by tailors, but by theatre costumers who Wilde felt would more easily understand the dramatic effect he was trying to achieve. His standard costume included a velvet coat edged with braid, knee breeches, black silk stockings, a soft loose shirt with wide low turned-down collar, and a large flowing pale green tie. He topped the costume off with sunflowers and lilies in his buttonhole, a garish touch which became almost a signature for Wilde. (Bartlett 1988: 65) Obviously, this is strongly contradictory to standard social dress. Within two years, he had made quite a name for himself. Wilde took public laugh for nothing, he once said: “One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.”(Wilde 1994: 65)

Kohl points out reasonably: “Dandies are distinguished externally by their exquisite sense of dress and manners, and psychologically by their blasé detachment from and aesthetic opposition to bourgeois utilitarianism.” (Kohl 1989: 215) It is true that Wilde, like Byron, Brummel and Benjamin Disraeli, has seized the attention of Victorian society with his eccentric clothes and brilliant conversation. But for the true dandy, clothes are incidental while attitude is purposive. The following section will expound Wildean dandyism from other perspectives.

3.2.2 Dandyism of Senses

Dandyism of Senses was put forward by Stephen Calloway, “That quality we might define as a Dandyism of the Senses – a self-consciously precious and highly fastidious discrimination brought to bear on both art and life. The dandy-aesthetes of the *fin-de-siecle* period above all honed their senses and cultivated the rarest of sensibilities; they made the perfection of the pose of exquisiteness their greatest aim

and they directed all their languid energies towards nurturing a cult of aesthetic response that begin beyond ordinary notions of taste, that lies beyond mere consideration of fashion, and operates quite outside the dictates of all conventional canons of morality” (Calloway 1997: 34)

As mentioned in the second chapter, one of Walter Pater’s works was very crucial to the aestheticism movement, that is, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). In the “Conclusion” to the first edition, Pater proposed that young men should, in the search for aesthetic experience and in pursuit of the all important heightened sensibility, “burn always with a hard, gem-like flame”. He exhorted them to seek primarily for sensation and “great passions” in both art and life, and to “get as many pulsations as possible into the given time”. (Pater 1873: 39) Strongly influenced by Walter Pater, Wildean dandyism put much emphasis on senses.

From my point of view, Dandyism of senses to some extent means Epicureanism. This term has two distinct, though cognate, meanings. In its popular sense, the word stands for a refined and calculating selfishness, seeking not power or fame, but the pleasures of senses, and those in company rather than solitude. In a narrow sense, Epicureanism signifies a philosophical system, which includes theory of conduct, of nature, of mind (Briggs, 1987:89). This system takes its name from Epicurus, a Greek, who, in 307 B.C., founded a school at Athens. The school’s watchword is “Pleasure”, which is originally opposite to the watchword “duty” of another contemporary school, the Stoic School. Wildean dandies’ Epicureanism is mainly expressed in four aspects:

1. They seek sheer pleasure and depreciate the puritan ethics of Victorian times.

By the 1890s there was a widespread hedonistic reaction against the strict ethical code of Victorianism in England. According to one contemporary, “A new spirit of pleasure is abroad amongst us.” (Arnstein, 1988: 187) Writers like Oscar Wilde professed pride in the supposed decadence of this fin-de-siecle decade. His dandies are all pleasure-seekers and leaders of London’s fashionable high society, a world old Victorians neither approved nor understood. It meant horse racing, golf,

tennis, and polo by day and restaurants and theatres by night. Such habits required leisure time and an income sufficient to live without working. So it is naturally that they strongly denounce puritan work ethic, the central ethic in Victorian times.

Willean dandies believe life represented beauty and pleasured in a thousand variations; Puritan work ethic, on the other hand rests on a fixed and immovable conception of life; it is based on the Calvinistic idea that life is a curse, imposed upon man by the wrath of God. In order to redeem himself man must do constant penance and work hard. Man must always give his best service honestly and strive to be perfect in every good work. The puritans believed that honest toil, if persevered with, led to mundane and spiritual rewards. Whatever its correlation with material wealth, hard work is undoubtedly seen as virtuous – the greatest tribute paid to the deceased seems to be “worked hard all his/her life” (Fletcher, 1979: 147). To protest against the somewhat pathological work ethic, Willean dandies label pleasure to be the highest good. In the first act of *An Ideal Husband*, when people are talking about Lording Goring, the typical dandy, they say the following:

MABLE: (Coming up to Lord Caversham.) Why do you call Lord Goring good-for-nothing?

LORD CAVERSHAM: Because he leads such an idle life.

MABLE: 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 didn't all that leading an idle life, do you? (Wilde, 1994: 367)

This way of life is completely against the Victorian. However, according to the dandiacal value, it is justifiable.

LORD CAVERSHAM: You seem to me to be living entirely for pleasure.

LORD GORING: What else is there to live for, father? Nothing ages like happiness. (Wilde, 1994:373)

And it is an urbane Utopia we see at the start of the first act in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street are "luxuriously and artistically furnished" (Wilde, 1994: 429), music is heard from the off-stage piano as Algernon saves his science for life and relies on sentiment in his piano playing. With the entrance of Jack, the "Pleasure" motif rings out loud and clear. When Algernon asks Jack what brings him to the town, Jack answers: "Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? ..." (Wilde, 1994: 430)

As we can see from the above dialogues, philosophy is viewed by Wildean dandies as the art of making life happy, as for the purpose of life, according to Epicurus, is personal pleasure of course. By pleasure, they mean not that state of well-being and perfection, but the pleasure itself. Moreover, this pleasure is sensuous, for it is such only as is attainable in this life. This pleasure is the immediate purpose of every action. It is a state, equably diffused, the absence of pain and anxiety. It is Wildean dandies' firm belief that wise man will accordingly desire not the longest life, but the most pleasurable.

2. Wildean dandies oppose Victorian sentimentality and philanthropy. They think people should avoid indulging in pain, ignore and forget pain, and seek pleasure as quickly as possible.

The fashion for sentimental novels started in the mid-eighteenth century. Throughout the 19th century, sentimentalism presented a new view of human nature which prized feeling over thinking, passion over reason, and personal instinct of "pity, tenderness, and benevolence" over social duties (Hamilton, 1882: 24). Sentimentalist moral philosophy became the proper subject of the arts in the 19th century and idea of art moved to a Romantic emphasis upon sentiment, philanthropy, sympathy, and sincerity. To a certain extent, Victorian sentimentality is one of the elements that lead to the rise of philanthropy course in mid-Victorian times. By giving to the poor through organized charity the rich hoped that beggars would not come knocking on their front doors or approach them in the streets. Thus philanthropy course, a peculiar phenomenon in Victorian England began. It started by "district visiting", and then

developed into many charity organizations.

Wildean dandies, however, are determined to avoid all sentimentality, all turgid common sense. They laugh at the hypocrisy of the high-tone philanthropy. What attracts them, what they insist on cultivating in themselves, is a new form of beauty characterized by the strange, the bizarre, the abnormal. They believe "If there were less sympathy in the world, there would be less trouble in the world" (Wilde, 1994: 24)

Their main beliefs in this aspect include:

I) A blessed and indestructible being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble to any other being; so he is free from sympathy, worry, anger and partiality, for all such things imply weakness.

Wildean dandies are content with philosophic contemplation. Generally, they are afraid of the power that an individual – any individual – is potentially capable of exercising over them. Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* expresses his thoughts: "I always pass on good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never of any use to oneself." (Wilde, 1994: 381) They do not involve themselves in the worries of their friends, for worry signals suffering, and Wildean dandies will do everything possible to avoid suffering. They block off any realization that might pain them. They are afraid to lead a sentimental life. Their wit is just one of their defenses. It is a way of evading the obligation to respond to the demands and individuality of another person.

Therefore, to a certain degree, Wildean dandies are ascetics. Totally devoted to the construction of themselves through style, they must never allow emotion, spontaneous or natural and hence vulgar behavior. They tread a narrow path in search of the sublime. They seek to create themselves through poise which includes a strict control of ecstasy and deep feeling.

(II) Death is nothing to them; for that which has been dissolved into its elements experiences no sensations, and that which has no sensation is nothing to them.

Wildean dandies believe that people should habituate himself to think that death is nothing; for all good and evil is in feeling; now death is the privation of feeling. Hence, the right knowledge that death is nothing to them makes them enjoy what

there is in this life.

(III) The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When such pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together.

In *A Woman of No Importance*, as Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby prepare to leave for the simple pleasure of tea in the yellow drawing-room, Lord Illingworth glimpses the handwriting on the letter left by Lady Hunstanton and is at once back in the past, recognizing the hand of a woman he used to know years ago, he pushed the memory away with the dismissive “Oh! No one. No one in particular. A woman of no importance.” (Wilde, 1994: 330) Obviously, Lord Illingworth is interrupted by painful memory but the stirring in him do not upset the elegant pleasure of his hedonistic life for long. He forgets it at once, and behaves as normal:

MR. KELVIL: You cannot deny that the House of Commons has always shown great sympathy with the sufferings of the poor.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: That is its special vice. That is the special vice of the age. One should sympathize with the joy, the beauty, the color of life. The less said about life's sores the better, Mr. Kelvil. (Wilde, 1994: 325)

To Wildean dandies, current pleasure is of utmost importance. Nothing can prevent them from gaining pleasure. Even they have sinned according to Victorian morality, they would not stop experiencing pleasure.

3. Wildean dandies believe people should escape from religion, family and duty, three main corner-stones of Victorian society.

The threefold application of the Puritanism in Victorian England includes: first, our position in the church; second, marriage and the family; and third, our position in the world. This constitutes the three main corners of Victorian society (namely religion, family and duty), but Wildean dandies seems disagree with these three corners.

A principal root of Victorian religion was the evangelical religious revival, which started in the early 19th century and continued unabated until the middle decade of the 19th century. (Marshall, 1973:189) For evangelical believers, the Bible from the first page to the last is the word of God, heaven and hell were as certain as the sun in the sky and the Last Judgement was as real as a businessman's weekly balance sheet. Evangelicalism provides code of ethics for Victorians and it imposed on society, even on classes which were indifferent to its religious basis. Philanthropy is a factor that can prove the hypocrisy of Victorian religious code. As we know, late Victorian age was an age of considerable material prosperity in which wealth was spreading among an increasingly large section of the population, but the solid puritan virtues of diligence and thrift restrained the ostentation and worship of wealth. The upper and middle class, in the attempt to "behave the best", preached humanitarianism and social welfare, this is mostly expressed in the eagerness of Victorian puritans to embrace philanthropic causes. In fact, philanthropy, to a large extent, is an acceptable pastime for wealthy ladies. By giving to the poor through organized charity the rich hoped that they could achieve moral height and beggars would not come knocking on their front doors or approach them in the streets. Wildean dandyism denounces the national enthusiasm on philanthropic course in *An Ideal Husband* when Mrs. Cheveley says to Sir Robert Chiltern: "... And philanthropy seems to me to have become simply refuge of people who wish to annoy their fellow-creatures..." (Wilde 1994:371) For Wilde, this progress made in the refinement of morals seems to be merely a product of Victorian religious hypocrisy. It is his belief that the philanthropic course has refined away people's simplicity and Victorians have become artificial, hypocritical, and on the whole worse than they were half a century ago.

In Victorian society the family was a most important social unit. In late Victorian times, English society had undergone a moral revolution, at least as far as its upper and middle ranks were concerned. England had been presented with a new pattern of family life in which home life was expected to be happy, with faithful husbands, dutiful wives and obedient children. Music, reading, sketching and embroidery were recognized as healthy hobbies. Country walks and study of botany

were encouraged. In any event, the praise of domestic life came to be sung more loudly than ever before in British history. The special praise of the home, "Home, Sweet Home" was a continuing theme of the period. "Late Victorian Englanders became the first generation that ever asked their children to worship the hearth without altar." (Briggs, 1987: 157) Wilde, however, despises the monotony and dullness of family life. Wildean dandies express clear nonchalance to family life in his works. In *A Woman of No Importance*, when talking about Lord Illingworth, Mr. Kelvil says: "Lord Illingworth is, of course, a very brilliant man, but he seems to me to be lacking in that fine faith in the nobility and purity of life which is so important in this country...He gives me the impression of a man who does not appreciate the beauty of our English home-life. I would say that he was tainted with foreign ideas on the subject." (Wilde, 1994:327) Lord Illingworth's lack in fine faith is very reflection of Wilde's skepticism in family life.

Wildean dandies also believe people should escape from duty. In *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth says: "Oh, duty is what one expects from others, it is not what one does one's-self."(Wilde, 1994: 342) This theory totally destroys virtue, and eliminates the idea and sentiment expressed by the words "ought", "should", "duty", "right", and "wrong".

4. Wildean dandies do not approve of taking things seriously and protest against puritan dogmatism strongly.

Puritanism celebrated its reign of terror in England during the 18th century and 19th centuries, destroying and crushing every manifestation of art. The word puritan dogmatism has often been used when a rigid moralism, the condemnation of innocent pleasure, or religious narrowness is stigmatized as puritanical. It was the spirit of puritan dogmatism which robbed Shelley of his children, because he would not bow to the dicta of religion. It was the same narrow spirit which alienated Byron from his native land, because that great genius rebelled against it. It even demanded another toll – the life of Oscar Wilde. In Wilde's opinion, puritan dogmatism's main vice lies on puritans' sense of seriousness.

To Wildean dandies, there is never such a thing as seriousness or absolute dogma, but only agreements made in mutual dealings among men. These agreements are against the inflictions sufferings. They despise dogmatism, laugh at the seriousness, the monotony and the dullness of dogmatism. They believe: "Seriousness is the only refuge of the shallow." (Wilde, 1994: 43) In Act One of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lord Darlington disapproves Lady Windermere:

LADY WINDERMERE: Why do you talk so trivially about life, then?

LORD DARLINGTON: Because I think that life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it. (Wilde, 1994: 261)

As Wilde put it in an interview given before the first production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the philosophy of his piece is that "we should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality." (Beckson, 1970: 154)

3.2.3 Narcissism

"When Narcissus died, the flowers of the field were desolate and asked the river for some drops of water to weep for him. 'Oh!' answered the river, 'of all my drops of water were tears, I should not have enough to weep for Narcissus myself. I love him.' 'Oh!' replied the flowers of the field. 'How could you not have loved Narcissus? He was so beautiful.' 'Was he beautiful?' said the river. 'And who should know better than you? Each day, leaning over your bank, he beheld his beauty in your waters.' 'If I loved him,' replied the river, 'it was because, when he leaned over my waters, I saw the reflection of my waters in his eye'." (Ellmann, 1987: 356)

Wildean dandies often rely on the pleasure derived from contemplation or admiration of their own bodies or selves, they believe a dandy must aspire to be perpetually sublime; "he must live and sleep in front of a mirror" (Zhou, 1996: 45). This is typical of narcissism. In Wilde's works, Wildean dandies' narcissism mainly includes two kinds of behaviors, namely, "genius" concept and "flawless" concept.

In his times and society, Wilde was an outsider, the very gifts he used to charm the class made him an object of suspicion: as Irishman, aesthete, homosexual, and above all, perhaps, as wit and artist, he was alien among ordinary people. No doubt the sense of his own separateness, as well as his strong social compassion, is reflected in Wildean dandies' part played by outcasts and outsiders in his drama. There is a richly varied repertoire of "outcast" parts, from the "wicked" Lord Illingworth to "good-for-nothing" Lord Goring and the "foundling" Jack Worthing. Wilde seemed to have a peculiar think they are geniuses and look down upon the society around them. Lord Goring says: "Other people are quite dreadful. The only possible society is oneself ... to love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance, Phipps." (Wilde, 1994: 402); Mr. Cecil Graham remarks: "whenever people agree with me, I always feel I must be wrong." (Wilde, 1994: 285); Algernon declares: "If I am occasionally a little over-dressed, I make up for it by being always immensely over-educated." (Wilde, 1994: 452); Even Wilde himself exclaims: "I have nothing to declare except my genius." (Beckson, 1970: 67) Maybe the following words will best exemplify Wildean dandies' "genius" concept:

"I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age... The gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring; I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art: I altered the minds of men and the color of things: there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder... I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction: I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram." (Wilde, 1994: 545)

Wilde intended his dandies to be different from the bankers, notaries, and money makers that surround them; he intended them to be "characters by their own" (Harris, 1916: 253). To achieve this effect, the most convenient way is to declare their genius in a fake-modest society. Wildean dandies take distinction for their very principle; accentuate difference in a society that is moving toward uniformisation. They are conscious and elaborate rejections of bourgeois life. Their genius makes them self-made aristocrats, if only aristocrats of style.

Wildean dandies either believe the flawlessness of their own or reject to be faced with their flaws. They emphasize that people should avoid being faced with their own flaws so as to achieve lifelong romance for themselves. Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* is a flawless dandy:

MABLE CHILTERN: You are always telling me of your bad qualities, Lord Goring.

LORD GORING: I have only told you half of them as yet, Miss Mable.

MABEL CHILTERN: Are the others very bad?

LORD GORING: Quite dreadful! When I think of them at night I go to sleep at once.

(Wilde, 1994: 327)

LORD GORING: ...But everyone has some weak point, there is some flaw in each one of us. (strolls over to the fireplace and looks at himself in the glass.) My father tells me that even I have fault. Perhaps I have. I don't know. (Wilde, 1994: 389)

When Lord Goring “strolls over to the fireplace and looks at himself in the glass”, there is a charming moment of silence. Obviously, he adores his image in the glass. He would like to think this elegant image is flawless. Here, we can see that Wildean dandies’ narcissism is elevated by this charming moment to an extreme point.

Wildean dandies’ narcissism reflects Wilde’s aesthetics. Beauty for Wilde always lies in the perfection of form; the content of work is irrelevant. Wilde said that an artist “gains his inspiration from form, and from form purely” (Tydeman, 1982: 132) and so does the dandy. The dandiical world is the world of pure aestheticism. Actually, Wildean dandies consider themselves to be talented and flawless, because they never think about ethics. For them, Form, is the fundamental thing. As long as their appearances are good, they are perfect.

3.2.4 Nihilism

Victorian times witnessed flourish in business and rapid advance in scientific knowledge. Throughout the whole 19th century, British Empire was on constant expansion. Proud Victorians were confident in their nation. They were optimistic, pro-active, and they believed they were to teach all nations. This positive view of the

future had tremendous implications because it inspired vision. It motivated effort and enterprise. Victorians devoted themselves into the society, and they believed they would win the nation for Christ. (Stokes, 1989:75) These prospects were believed by the Victorians as most certain of fulfillment. They imagined the future would be as bright as the promise of God.

On the contrary, Wildean dandies always assume a blasé demeanor. They express an air of weariness to everything around them and disappointment in all worldly pleasure. They are extremely skeptical and deny all existence. They reject all distinctions in moral or religious value and are ready to repudiate all previous theories of morality or religious belief. This is typical nihilism.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Jack and Algernon bring into the play from time to time a rather modern emphasis on the idea of nihilism, as when they discuss ways they might spend the evening: Algernon suggests theatre, club, and the Empire, Jack responds by saying he “loathing listening”, “hate talking” and “Can’t bear looking at things”. When asked what to do then, he answers with a weary “Nothing.” (Wilde, 1994: 373) Maybe Lord Illingworth’s paradox in *A Woman of No Importance* could best exemplify Wildean dandies’ nihilistic attitude to this world.

Gerald: I suppose society is wonderfully delightful!

Lord Illingworth: To be in it is merely a bore. But to be out of it simply a tragedy.

(Wilde, 1994: 346)

Nihilism actually bears the characteristics of rebellion. Because the current moral values cannot satisfy Wilde, he creates a dandiacal world, however, in reality, this dandiacal world is impossible to exist. Therefore to the government, dandyism meant nihilism.

Through Formalism, Dandyism of senses, Narcissism, Nihilism, Wildean dandyism could be detected. The Wildean dandies challenge the Victorian morality from different aspects, and at the same time, advocate aestheticism. The essence of the Wildean dandy's code is the substitution of aesthetic values for moral values. In addition, the reason why Wildean dandies are unique lies in their witty language,

which is to be discussed in the next section.

3.2.5 Wildean Language

Norbert Kohl, says: “It is neither characterization nor plot construction that endows Wildean comedy with the unique flavor, which is derived above all from the language and dialogue. This is what distinguished Wilde from all other dramatist, and it constitutes the originality of his contribution to the history of English comedy.” (Kohl, 1989: 227) His comment is true. The fame of Wilde’s comedies does not rest on his plots or his characterization, but chiefly on his brilliant and witty language and dialogue, which contain paradoxes, epigrams, satire and humor. Certainly such elements can also be found in the writings of other playwrights, but in my opinion, Wilde’s language has the distinguished feature of its own, and is called by some critics, Wildean language.

Wilde’s dialogue, especially what the dandies say, is impressive, is witty and epigrammatic, but there is never any real communication between two sides. The dialogue is virtual monologue instead, “expressing the narcissism and extreme subjectivism of the dandy,” (Kohl, 1989: 228), showing his feeling of superiority. The dandy’s lack of commitment to anything makes all the dialogues seem irrelevant. Here is an example from Act 3 of *An Ideal Husband* in which Lord Goring has a chat with Phipps his butler.

LORD GORING: Got my second buttonhole for me, Phipps?

PHIPPS: Yes, my lord. (Takes his hat, cane, and cape, and presents new buttonhole on salver.)

LORD GORING: Rather distinguished thing, Phipps. I am the only person of the smallest importance in London at present who wears a buttonhole.

PHIPPS: Yes, my lord, I have observed that.

LORDING GORING: (taking out old buttonhole). You see, Phipps, Fashion is what one wears oneself. What unfashionable is what other people wear.

PHIPPS: Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING: (putting in new buttonhole) And falsehoods the truths of other people.

PHIPPS: Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING: Other people are quite dreadful. The only possible society is oneself.

PHIPPS: Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING: To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance. Phipps.

(Wilde, 1994: 633)

It is obvious that Goring is not conducting conversation with his servant, but is merely using the presence of the latter as a means of making an impact on the audience. An immediate comic effect is produced by the contrast between the mechanical repetition of “Yes, my lord” and varied observation made by Goring. What is basically a monologue is characterized by its sudden changes of direction, as it jumps from the buttonhole at the beginning to self-love at the end. The only continuity is that of association with each observation momentarily appearing to assume some sort of validity. Each statement is a generalization, with the concrete detail (the buttonhole) leading to a succession of abstract epigrams.

The dandy dialogues are not meant to develop or to exchange ideas, but are designed to disguise and to shock. Effect is everything. Since the content is generally irrelevant, what matters is the form in which the statement is designed to meet the demands of the situation. A typical example of the meaninglessness of content as opposed to the efficacy of form is the conversation between Lady Windermere’s guests at her birthday.

DUMBY: Good evening, Lady Stutfield. I suppose this will be the last ball of the season?

LADY STUTRIELD: I suppose so, Mr. Dumby. It’s been a delightful season, hasn’t it?

DUMBY: Quite delightful! Good evening, Duchess, I suppose this will be the last ball of the season?

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: I suppose so, Mr. Dumby. It has been a very dull season, hasn't it?

DUMBY: Quite delightful! Good evening, Duchess, I suppose this will be the last ball of the season?

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: I suppose so, Mr. Dumby. It has been very dull season, hasn't it?

DUMBY: Dreadfully dull! Dreadfully dull!

(Wilde, 1994: 499)

What the audience hear in this episode is the single stereotype question, and the various contradictory answers. There is no social communication here, gaps are maintained so that they themselves become an expression of the lack of communication. "Wilde also uses the mechanical questions and the protean reactions of Dumby as means of criticism, implicitly denouncing the predominance of manners over content, and the sheer hollowness of all these set formulae." (Kohl, 1989: 231)

In the cheerful uncommitted and witty dialogues of Wilde's dandies, paradoxes are perhaps most typical of Wilde's language. "Their style of epigrammatic compression gives striking form to their ostentatious dismissal of established current views of reality, and by this means they demonstrate their intellectual superiority, conceal their own opinions, and leave themselves sufficient latitude to escape all commitment" (Kohl, 1989: 228). For example, in Act 1 of *The Importance of Being Earnest* Lady Bracknell and Algernon are talking about the widowed Lady Harbury, whose husband died fairly recently:

LADY BRACKNELL: I'm sorry if we are little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered, she looks quite younger.

ALGERNON: I hear her hair has turned gold from grief. (Wilde, 1994: 674)

The readers or spectators will not be surprised that Lady Harbury has been altered by her husband's death, but they certainly did not expect to find her become younger and her hair turned "gold from grief". The conversational cliché of the grieving widow, aging quickly with more grey hair than before is shattered by Wilde,

who describes her as a woman “who seems...to be living entirely for pleasure now,” The substitution of “gold” for the expected “grey” is particularly effective, for the unconventional and unnatural change of hair color may also allude to the inheritance which the pleasure-loving widow is now enjoying. Such paradoxes illustrate vividly how social decorum is to be seen merely as a mask of conformity, and they also bring out true motives that hide behind the mask. On another occasion, Lady Bracknell says, “I’m not in favor of long engagements. They give people opportunity of finding out each other’s character before marriage, which I think is never advisable.” (Wilde, 1994: 709) Generally speaking, before marriage, the better one knows about one’s sweetheart’s character, the happier the couple will be in the future. So in this sense, Lady Bracknell’s opinion is amusing and absurd, but in fact it is quite true. The paradox just reveals the inner world of certain people, who have something evil in their heart and are afraid of being found out. To them, fine character does not matter much in marriage; what matters most to them is how they are able to disguise and decorate themselves perfectly, in a word, to make their form dazzling. Through Lady Bracknell, Wilde hints to the audience that hypocrisy has become one of the most important virtues in the polite society.

In general, like Wilde himself, the dandies are not content with the existing environment around them, holding an aversion to the capitalist society and eventually transforming this aversion into activities that are incompatible with the traditional morality. This is called dandyism, a sort of rejection of bourgeoisie life. The creation of dandies and dandyism reveals Wilde’s inner world. His ideology is divergent from the mainstream of society; so the dandies created by Wilde, on the one hand, are “dissatisfied with the so-called social development and the historical progress”; on the other hand, “they focus on themselves, transforming the utopian impulse into the pursuit of personal charm”(Zhou Xiaoyi, 2002: 47).

Conclusion

This thesis has an exploration of Wildean dandies and dandyism.

Dandies and dandyism always appear in those periods of transition (the English Regency period with Brummell, and the Paris Commune with Baudelaire.) Wildean dandyism appeared at Fin-de-Siecle when uncertainty of religion and morality emerged. At that time, Queen Victoria was loosening her grip over her people's moral senses. Literature circles were also experiencing some drastic changes. The enthusiasm for moral purpose in literature was replaced by aesthetic tendency to seek beauty for its own sake.

Dandies and dandyism bear the characteristic of the offensive. Dandies are not satisfied with the existing social rules and values and they challenge the social rules and values. Wildean dandies use their wit to shock and startle the gross philistine and resist against the society.

Wildean dandies and dandyism are closely related to his aesthetics. Wilde thinks that art should alienate from life; and art is the aim of itself; art foreruns life. Wildean dandies speak and behave in accordance with the aesthetes. To some extent, dandies are aesthetes, and dandyism is aestheticism. From its rebellious and aesthetic characteristics, the very essence of Wildean dandyism comes out, that is, to substitute the Victorian moral value with aesthetics value.

Wildean dandyism in Wilde's comedies can be illustrated from five aspects: Formalism, Dandyism of Senses, Narcissism, Nihilism and Wildean language. Formalism means dandies search for depth in the very midst of appearance. Form is the most important thing. For dandies, appearances and clothes are most important and they never pay attention to people's inner heart. Dandyism of Senses is mainly expressed in four aspects: dandies seek sheer pleasure and depreciate puritan work ethic of Victorian times, oppose Victorian sentimentality and philanthropy course, believe people should escape from religion, family and duty, the three main corner-stones of Victorian society; and disapprove of taking things seriously and strongly protest against puritan dogmatism. Every aspect supported by dandies appeals to aestheticism but opposed by Victorians. Narcissism means dandies think

they are perfect and flawless, and Nihilism shows dandies are not confident in their nations. Both ideas have challenged Victorian way of thinking. Wildean dandies use their epigrammatic, paradoxical, witty Wildean language to shock the Victorian society. Wildean language is a unique and effective weapon to resist against Victorian world.

Wilde himself together with the dandies under his pen has developed into the spokesmen of the nineteenth century “Art for Art’s Sake” movement, which defied the contemporary Victorian moral values. However, there is high degree of ambivalence or contradiction in Wilde, which he himself never denied. On the one hand, he was a figurehead of the aesthetic movement in England, waging in his art a fierce protest against the philistinism, materialism and morality of the Victorian middle-class; yet on the other hand, his dandyism made him follow the fashion of his day, showing fetishism for commodities in actual life. He fought against bourgeois vulgarity, but in some way he also confirmed it, for it is the same bourgeois society he needed to earn a living as a writer. Norbert Kohl’s following conclusion gives a good summary about Oscar Wilde:

It is as if Wilde took one step towards reality, but then stopped because he lacked the courage to commit himself. Illusion remains preferable to reality. This extraordinary mixture of Victorian orthodoxy and anti-Victorian provocation, theatrical cliché and verbal originality, is typical of an author who in his writings as in his life remained conformist rebel.

(Kohl, 1989: 254)

Kohl’s conclusion seems somewhat contradictory to what has been previously elaborated upon. It is true that Wilde uses dandies to challenge the Victorian morality and to express his aestheticism. However, it is not that direct. Wilde still wants to be accepted by the society so that he carefully chooses comedy as his chip and creates a non-existing dandiical world to advocate his points of view.

Of course, Wildean dandies and dandyism are successful as a spokesman for

Wilde. Ironically, because of this success, Wilde fell to the ground more quickly. As we know, Wilde was put into prison because he committed sodomy. His homo relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas wouldn't be tolerated by the society at that time. We admit that Wilde's own folly and masochism may have brought him into the prisoner's dock at Old Bailey, but actually he was victimized by the hypocrisy of society that he had ridiculed and exposed by his dandies and dandyism. He became the scapegoat for his society's moral insecurities.

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