Substitution in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

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Résumé : *Quand on parle de la critique littéraire psychanalytique, l'un des premiers aspects à mentionner est qu'elle fait référence à ce type de critique littéraire qui est influencée par la psychanalyse dans la méthode, le concept, la théorie et la forme. La plupart des concepts utilisés dans ce genre de critique - la dynamique de l'identité sexuelle, la définition des sexes, la rivalité fraternelle, la vie et pulsions de mort, le doublement, d'identification, le voyeurisme, la mélancolie, l'inquiétant, même les rêves et les sentiments inconscients - se trouvent dans les travaux de Sigmund Freud, comme le souligne la citation suivante : « l'enquête la plus sondée à la dynamique de la vie psychique, et donc, par extension du possible, des textes ». Les principales théories psychanalytiques (la théorie topographique, la théorie structurale, etc.) peuvent être regroupées dans plusieurs écoles théoriques qui diffèrent les unes des autres dans une certaine mesure, mais qui soulignent toutes l'importance majeure de l'inconscient et la forte influence de ses éléments sur la vie psychique de l'individu. Comme le moins confus des esprits modernes, Freud n'a qu'un seul message, celui d'accepter les contradictions et de construire la psychologie de l'individu sur celles-ci. Il y a quelques vérités dans ces approches, mais pas une seule vérité ; ce sont des aides, mais, en fait, ce n'en est aucune. La succession sans fin de tout autre idée profonde et originale ne nous laisse plus qu'étrangers à nous-mêmes. Nous en savons davantage, mais, dans le même temps, nous avons été faits pour réaliser à quel point nos connaissances sont insuffisantes. La psychanalyse et la littérature peuvent s'enrichir mutuellement par le biais « d'un processus commun d'interprétation » ; la psychanalyse examine les articulations de nos angoisses les plus intimes, traite des relations dans notre intériorité et les décode, de même que les personnalités décodent la littérature et des caractères différents, nous fournissant ainsi un moyen viable d'organiser, d'interpréter et de remodeler notre monde intérieur et extérieur, par l'utilisation des symboles et des histoires. Discuter un texte du point de vue de son dynamisme et des dimensions de ces formes, signifie considérer la forme comme quelque chose plein de vitalité, comme partie du procès de développement, puisque les textes sont actifs par le processus de lecture : elle est similaire à la théorie dynamique freudienne, avec la seule différence que la dernière traite principalement des éléments de la répression, la substitution et la sublimation. Ainsi, notre article abordera-il ces aspects de l'esprit humain dans la comédie sociale Wildean The Importance de Being Earnest, qui est somme toute, « une pièce sur les noms, et un jeu de noms ».*

Mots-clés *: substitution, double, renversement de symboles*

When talking about psychoanalytic literary criticism, one of the first things to mention is that it refers to that certain sort of literary criticism which is influenced by psychoanalysis in method, concept, theory and form. Most concepts used in this type of criticism – the dynamics of sexual identity, gender definition, sibling rivalry, the life and death drives, doubling, identification, voyeurism, melancholy, the uncanny, even the dreams and the unconscious feelings – are to be found in Sigmund Freud's works, as he offers "the most probing inquiry into the dynamics of the psychic life, and hence, by possible extension, of texts" [1], as well as in that of his followers Carl Gustav Jung and Jacques Lacan. Many theoretical points of psychoanalysis may affect one's reading and understanding of literature, and "so may literature have implications for the development of the psychoanalytic theory" [2]; just like the "as-if nature of literature", in the sense that it is, to a certain extent, not real, the psychoanalytic treatment is characterized by an "as-if and not-real and transferential" trait; thus, "literary texts provide a privileged realm of observation, comparatively insulated from outer reality by virtue of their fictive, fantastic, imaginary nature". The figures of the psychoanalytical world and those of the cultural one "remain forever separate yet forever parallel" [3].

The major psychoanalytic theories can be grouped in several theoretical schools which differ one from the other to some extent, but which all stress the major importance of the unconscious and the strong influence of its elements on people's mental lives. As the least confused of modern minds, Freud has no message but to accept contradictions and build the

individual's psychology on them. There are some **truths** in these approaches, but no **truth**; **helps**, but no **help**. The endless succession of any profound and original insights leaves us more than even strangers to ourselves. We know more, but, in the same time, we have been made to realize how insufficient our knowledge is [4].

As a starting point for this "quest" within our complex selves, one of the first theories to be mentioned is the *topographic theory*, in which Freud provides the readers with a configuration of the human mind and its mental processes, dividing the human mind into Conscious, Unconscious and Pre – Conscious. He envisions the mind as being a map, carefully layered, consisting of these three parts; according to his vision, the conscious mind is governed by the *reality principle* and refers to the logical, orderly, rational operations of everyday life, while the unconscious is that part of the mind not affected by reality, but of wishes and desires, being a world of fantasy, where logic and reality are minimum and where urges and fantastical desires are shaped; it is governed by the *pleasure principle* and contains anxiety – producing materials such as sexual impulses or aggressive drives held outside awareness as a form of self – protection. The preconscious part of the mind is largely out of consciousness but can be brought to attention. Because of its nature, the unconscious is thought to play a more important role in the individual's personality than the other two elements of Freud's topographic model [5]. According to the Freudian ideas, the mind is always in conflict with itself and the unconscious always motivates the conscious thinking and behaviour [6]. "Within this model of psychic functioning", any mental or social problems the individual might be facing are "understood to result both from the amount and kind of mental contents residing in the unconscious. The impulses associated with such mental contents continuously attempt to penetrate the successive barriers through the preconscious into conscious awareness. The pressure generated by these intruding impulses gives raise to anxiety and other defensive maneuvers". In order for the individual to treat these problems, the unconscious has to be made conscious, "clearing the path" [7].

In contrast to the *topographic theory*, which describes conflicts between the conscious and the unconscious, the *structural theory* describes conflicts between the ***id***, the ***ego*** and the ***superego***; this last part of the individual's mind has only a small preconscious part – that part people call their "conscience"; it plunges deeply into the unconscious as it is based on "introjections from various developmental levels" [8]. It posits an intrinsic tension in all individuals' lives, between "the wish for gratification of instinctual drives" on the one hand, and the "feelings of unpleasure that such drives often arouse" on the other. "Unpleasure can take the form of a fear of future occurrence, often called anxiety, or a repetition of a previously experience catastrophe, also known as depression" [9]. This essential tension between drives and unpleasures stands as the centerpiece of Freud's conflict theory. These drives have four attributes: a *source*, an *aim*, an *impetus* and an *object*, where the *source* of the drives consists of the sum of the somatic processes which make a demand on the mind, the *aim* is gratification through discharge, the *impetus* is the intensity of the drive, whereas the *object* is the most invariable aspect of them all, in the sense that it can be an inanimate object, another person, or even a part of one's body [10]. This system operates according to the *pleasure principle*, as the individual's foremost goal is to seek satisfaction; simultaneously with the individual's pursuit of happiness is the avoidance of gratification when one's wishes threaten to give rise to anxiety, guilt or even fear of punishment, be it internal or external. Freud called the system as such because it refers literally to structures – the three structures that he thought make up the human psyche: the ***ego***, described as reason and common sense, the ***id*** as the passions and the ***superego*** as conscience [11] or as the sum of all prohibitions of one's parents or culture; although the structures are interdependent, their aims and functions frequently meet and all mental problems are related to conflicts among these: wishes, reality and ideas. In Gerald Schamess' vision, this theory is "a solid, architectural metaphor of the

self, constructed like a building out of three interrelated parts" [12] in which the ***ego*** regulates unconscious wishes that are morally or socially unacceptable. He presents a structural dichotomy between rational ***ego*** and irrational ***id*** and, rooted in these counterparts, he also brings into question the masculine – feminine and rational – irrational dichotomies which seem to govern the individual's personality [13], as well as all the binary concepts which are to be found within the individual and the two types of drives or instincts, constantly clashing [14]. With the development of this theory, Freud began to see anxiety and all the other mental and behavioural problems as potential breakthroughs of the individual's most dangerous impulses. Resistance was now perceived as the ***ego***'s response to the perceived danger of being overwhelmed, perception which led to the exploration and understanding of this perception of danger [15].

Another of Freud's theories is the *economic theory* which states that there are two kinds of processes of excitation or two ways of discharging it, and that there are finite amounts of psychic energy which, if used in one particular place, cannot be available for use in another. He made practical use of this theory when dealing with *narcissism* and *depression*, saying that too much love directed inwards makes the individual incapable of affectively connecting oneself to others. He defines narcissism as "the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way as otherwise the body of a sexual object is treated; that is to say, he experiences sexual pleasure in gazing at, caressing and fondling his body, till complete gratification ensues upon these activities" [16]. The development of the individual is a progress from narcissism to object love and even when object love is deeply rooted, a hint of narcissism still persists. The individual's libido is some kind of reservoir from which feelings must flow towards outside objects and in which they can flow back from those particular external objects [17] but, in the narcissist's case, it withdraws from the outer world and is directed on to the ego. Narcissism can give rise to a primitive or inchoate form of object choice, called *identification*, in which the adult, usually sexually immature, seeks an object conceived of in his own image, and therefore loved as he loves himself [18]. On the other hand, Freud considers the moments when one withdraws the energy from the outside world and invests in the self in cases of illness, sleep or mourning, healthy narcissism [19]. "A person suffering organic pain and discomfort relinquishes his interest in the things of the outside world, in so far as they do not concern suffering. At the same time, he withdraws libidinal interest from his love – subject; as long as he suffers, he ceases to love". In the same manner, the condition of sleep implies a withdrawal of the libido away from external objects and back to one's person, dreaming becoming thus a form of egoism. His advice is that we must begin to love in order not to fall ill and, vice versa, we must fall ill if, as a consequence of our own frustrations, we cannot love [20].

Hartmann distinguishes between "the ego as structure and the self as referent of one's own person", the latter being a subjective, experiencing agent; he also mentions that it is the self as agent that feels disappointed by failures and inferiority, thus experiencing the feeling of depression [21]. As a Freudian concept, depression is "the result of poor resolution of the conflict between primitive urges (id) and internalization or acceptance of social taboos against the expressions of these urges (superego)" [22]. His solution to avoid such potentially damaging conflicts is for the individuals to mask their primitive sexual drives by developing characteristic methods to subdue the intolerable levels of anxiety, methods called *defense mechanisms* [23](refusal to accept external reality as it seems too threatening, reshaping of the external reality so as to fit the individual's needs, retreating into fantasy, where coping with reality is easier, transforming the negative feeling towards others into negative feelings towards self, aggression towards others, and so on and so forth). The major consequence of depression, in any of its forms, is the impoverishment of the ego, meaning the inability of the

depressed person to function, be it on intellectual, social or moral level [24], or as a member of a community.

Freud offers another theory, called the *genetic theory*, which looks into the evolution of the human mind as a "psychic apparatus". Central to this theory is the idea that "the body and the sexual history of the human subject persist in all productions of the conscious mind". For Freud, according to this theory, "the concept of sexuality is not one of mere biology or genital urge, but is rather the complex of bodily and mental desire which manifests itself in earliest infancy as well as in adult life" [25]. From the very first, his theories on infantile sexuality, the specific stages of libidinal development and the etiology of neurosis focused on the genetic causes in the human development. He believed that, when tracing one physical structure back, one could discover the genetic causes of neurotic symptoms. Hence, he considered the physical life as a continuous thread of activity. Furthermore, this genetic viewpoint incorporated two fundamental factors: hereditary disposition and the predisposing influential experiences of early childhood [26]. "We have been able to make our simple genetic formula more complete, without dropping it. Transference neuroses correspond to a conflict between the ego and the id; narcissistic neuroses, to a conflict between the ego and the super ego; and psychoses to one between the ego and the external world" [27].

Dynamic theory is another Freudian concept in which, "instead of investigating the single psychological systems that correspond to simple needs and desires, we are dealing with interrelationships of these systems, with their differentiation and transformations, and with the different kinds of larger wholes built up from them" [28]. These interrelations are very delicate and liable and of outmost importance for understanding the underlying reality of behaviour and all the personality differences. The concepts which are being dealt with in this theory are those of *repression, substitution* and *sublimation*. *Substitution* is also called *symbol formation* and it is considered to be a normal process as it implies a change from active to passive and a reversal of the content. In *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud gives common examples of *substitution*, such as the example of the old maid who keeps a dog or the bachelor who keeps snuff – boxes, both finding substitutes for their needs (the need for a companion in marriage for the first and the need for various conquests for the latter) [29]. The most famous substitution example is that of *Oedipus complex*, in which the paternal metaphor (through the figure of the father) as a symbol of social authority is substituted for the child's love of the mother; through this substitution, the child obtains a place in the social order beyond the family [30]. *Repression* is when "an instinctual impulse meets resistances, the aim of which is to make the impulse inoperative", its essence being the "function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness" [31]. The instinct is altogether suppressed so that no trace of it is to be found and it appears in the guise of a feeling, more often than it should transformed into anxiety. If *repression* is "that intrapsychic process by which the ego carries out the behests of the group, *sublimation* must be its inversion" hence it requires either the individual or the group to equate symbolically one kind of behaviour with another [32]. Both processes are automatic and unconscious so they cannot be forced upon the individual nor can they be directed by conscious effort. In *sublimation*, one form of matter is transformed into another, more valuable and more powerful; private wishes and anti – social instincts are converted into public achievements and social interests. Therefore, the individuals, considered to be the only source of power, must forfeit some of their energy to a certain group's demands and channel their energies into art and literature, into scientific discovery and the pursuit of knowledge, and into the formation of civilization itself [33].

The *adaptive* or *adaptational theory*, called by Freud's followers, "evolutionary", is the last one of Freud's theories; he assumed that certain kinds of links between the experiences of the past and present generations of living organisms must exist in nature, in order to prepare individuals to be capable of executing complex adaptive strategies. These

adaptive strategies can only be possible if there is some way in which the past can be used to evaluate situational or contextual meanings and conditions in the present environment and anticipate the future, to link the experiences throughout the ancestral past, and therefore act in the present [34]. Some of the ego's adaptive efforts could be considered built – in biological functions and so the human action adapts the environment to human functions, and then, the human being adapts to the environment he had helped to create.

The conjunction between literature and psychoanalysis having become highly popular nowadays, there is a renewed interest in literature in various psychoanalytic quarters and an ever – increasing number of interdisciplinary studies on the part of both psychoanalysis and literary theoreticians have shown the richness of the dialogue and its beneficial potential for both fields [35]. Brooks states his concern about "the legitimacy and force that psychoanalysis may claim when imported into the study of literary texts; whatever the promise of their union, "literature and psychoanalysis remain mismatched bedfellows" – or, better said, "playmates", because, just as literature has "an unconscious that psychoanalysis then reveals", it can also serve, in its turn, as "the unconscious of psychoanalysis", "pointing towards the unknown" "due to the ongoing engagement with the uncanny", for literature functions precisely as psychoanalysis' "unthought". Traditional psychoanalytic criticism tends to have three categories, depending on the object of the analysis: the author, the reader or the fictitious characters in the text. Like the author, the fictitious character "has been deconstructed into an effect of textual codes, a kind of thematic mirage" and the psychoanalytic approach of the character's unconscious has begun; some authors have even claimed they could speak to their characters, while the latter took the control of the story, shaping it to an end different from the writer's initial pattern. Moreover, the role of the reader in the creation of textual meaning has, without a doubt, increased, as texts may be addressed to real readers, or to the reader as psychological everyman [36]. Thus, stories come to unfold the reader's personal desires and needs, just as the narrative seems to be the reader's understanding of reality, being more of a negotiation with the problem of temporality and the only way in which man fights his consciousness of existence within the limits of his own mortality. Psychoanalysis and literature can mutually enrich one another through "a shared process of interpretation"; they both consider there are motives and meanings which are disguised by other meanings and which work through other concepts; "they can also undo one another by the overdeterminations accruing within the interpretative detours and indirections that constitute their structural limits" [37]. We may therefore speak about a "convergence of psychoanalysis and literary criticism because we sense that there ought to be a correspondence between literary and psychic dynamics, since we constitute ourselves in part through our fictions within the constraints of a transindividual symbolic order, that of signs, including, pre – eminently, language itself" [38]. Moreover, psychoanalysis examines the articulations of our most private anxieties, deals with the relations in our inner selves and decodes them, just as literature decodes different personalities and characters, providing us with a viable way of organizing, interpreting and reshaping our inner and outer world, through the use of symbols and stories. On the other hand, some literary critics seem to believe that "in inviting, in seducing the psychoanalyst, in tempting him into the quicksand of its rhetoric, literature, in truth, only invites him to subvert himself, only lures psychoanalysis into its necessary self-subversion" [39], as literature provides the writer, the reader, as well as its vivid characters, with a lot more means of creating exceptional effects than there are to be found in real life. Sometimes, literature may be said to represent Life hence Life – poor, probable, uninteresting human Life, tired of repeating itself – comes to imitate Art, to "follow meekly after it and try to reproduce, in its own simple and untutored way, some of the marvels of which Art talks" [40].

Therefore, Freud sets out to look for some common human activity that is "akin to creative writing" and finds it in daydreaming or the creation of fantasies. The fantasy "hovers between three times – the three moments of time which our ideation involves. Mental work is linked to some provoking occasion in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subject's major wishes. From there it harks back to the memory of an earlier experience (usually an infantile one) in which this wish was fulfilled; and it now creates a situation relating to the future which represents a fulfillment of the wish. What it thus creates is a day – dream or phantasy, which carries about it traces of its origin from the occasion which provoked it and from the memory. Thus past, present and future are strung together, as it were, on the thread of the wish that runs through them" [41]. Discussing a text from the dynamic point of view and the dimensions of form, means to consider the form as something that is not inert, but part of a process that unfolds and develops, as texts are activated through the reading process; it is similar to the Freudian dynamic theory, with the sole difference that the latter deals chiefly with elements of repression, substitution and sublimation. Thus, the present paper will continue with approaching these aspects of the human mind within the Wildean social comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "a play about names, and a play on names" [42]. The very title of the play, accompanied by the subtitle *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* speaks for itself, as genuinely *serious* people could not possibly allow themselves be part of *trivial* circumstances. The state of *being* in this play is synonymous to *seeming* and even *becoming* [43], depending on the interpretation the reader likes to give to the word. The play is a continuing effort to elaborate topics already familiar to Wilde's readers in a manner that reflects the needs and features of his age. Thus, it presents a widely creative consciousness, that could not limit itself to a "prescriptive plot and character development" and that could not afford ignoring the social and moral strictures of the age, hence the play's controversial character and ability to move action and dialogue to the limits of implied social boundaries [44]. In Victorian England, *earnestness* was a philosophy whose message consisted in emphasizing the importance of having genuine beliefs about the fundamental questions of life, and putting those beliefs into practice according to one's moral standards or social position, in an awfully sincere and truthful society inspired by a highly praised ideal. As he pushes depiction towards caricature, some of his characters (mainly the male ones) try to fit the image of the paradigm of convention operating strictly according to the ideals of society, whereas one of the female characters (Lady Bracknell) makes no attempt whatsoever to conceal her contempt for the external social restraints or not even to mask her self – centered views upon life in general and society in particular. She is the most perversely *earnest* character of the play, her lines describing someone who is *in earnest* indeed: "*I do not in any way approve of the modern sympathy for invalids. It is morbid.*" or "*Health is the primary duty of life*" (Act 1) [45]; in addition, she praises ignorance, which she considers to be "a delicate exotic fruit", so unappreciated but oh so ever enchanting. The social problems that Wilde's couples face and their willingness to defy conventions and establish new patterns of behaviour make the readers sympathize with their story. However, in as far as the love story within the play is concerned, it violently breaks the Romeo and Juliet pattern, for Wilde's mothers are able "both to maintain and overturn aspects of their traditional roles" as they generally turn out to be "far more daring than their offspring". As a rule, Wildean characters, be they male of female, "remain oblivious to the force of conventional familial motivations" as they all seem to "prefer a materialistic attitude that concedes nothing to either sentimentality or social convention" [46].

Thus, *substitution* in *The Importance of Being Earnest* equals reversal of symbols, personalities and even values, as Wilde creates humour through the interchange of all values and ideas characteristic to his society; Wildean humour is sometimes based on euphemisms, while most of his witty remarks are based on contradictions, on incongruity between morals

and values: "*Few parents nowadays pay any regard to what their children say to them. The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out. Whatever influence I ever had over mamma, I lost at the age of three*" [47] and on the sheer mocking of the sacred institutions and values of that certain community – "*divorces are made in heaven*". The technique is transparent, yet extremely effective, as Wilde substitutes one element in a cliché for its opposite and the cliché becomes something new, surprising and more often than not, certainly funny [48]. Switching things around – good/wicked, marriage/divorce, young/old – the author breaks the mould coining a humour of inversion, which nonetheless helps to depict a most faithful blueprint of Victorian society: "*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*" [49].

As the perfect examples of substitution, one must also mention Algy's Bunburying with all his "Bunbury suits", compulsory when "going Bunburying", even if sometimes he has "no right to Bunbury", as well as Jacks' invention and subsequent suppression of his "scapegrace brother Ernest" [50]; both characters have turned to means of substituting needs and values by using imaginary characters to whom they have attached a different social status and a whole different set of values. Both Algernon and Jack use their fictitious friend or brother to wonder from the city to the country and vice versa; more important still, to run from small responsibilities and chores they are forced to take, due to their social status, while suggesting great seriousness and sense of duty. To many critics, Bunbury is the symbol of embedded sexuality, a ruthless play on the different dimensions of it, including some of its unorthodox ones; "serious Bunburyism releases a polytrophic sexuality so mobile, so evanescent in speed and turn, that it traverses, Ariel – like, a fugitive path through oral, genital, and anal ports until it expends itself in and as the displacements of language. It is Wilde's extraordinary gift to return this vertigo of substitution and repetition to his audience" [51]. His always ill invalid friend Bunbury is the last resort when Algernon likes to embark on sexual escapades: "*Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.*
That's nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly don't want to know Bunbury.
Then your wife will." [52].

On the other hand, *Ernest* is, in fact, a substitute for two types of personality: in the country, he is known as the "wicked cousin Ernest" and the extravagant brother who likes leading a depraved life, while in the city he is a perfect gentleman, perfectly liable to marry a perfectly respectable high society woman. But above all that, Ernest is a state of mind, an ideal of perfection easy to be reached, as long as one's name is Ernest: "*I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest – looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them. "Mr. Ernest Worthing, B.4, The Albany". I'll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if you ever attempt to deny it to me.*" [53]

As a symbol of perfection and of outstanding purity, Ernest is target of all social marriage arrangements: "*For me, you have always had an irresistible fascination. Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you. We live, as I hope you know, in an age of ideals…; and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment that Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.*" On the other hand, the real name that Ernest substitutes "*does not thrill; it produces absolutely no vibrations*" [54]. Any woman whose husband is called any other way but Ernest is pitied and denied any form of entrancing pleasure. To be called Ernest, or to be married to one, is "safe" as it saves one

form being earnest and, in the same time, it guarantees the safety of one's social condition and identity.

What is most ironic in the purest Wildean way is that Jack has been E(a)rnest all the time and that there **is** a "wicked brother" but he is Algernon; it is now that Jack discovers the true meaning of being earnest and the meaning is that, without a proper name, Gwendolen is not going to marry him and, without a proper address and family ties, there is no hope of becoming Lady Bracknell's son – in – law: "*I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over*" [55]. The concept of leading a double life which is so seriously approached in Wilde's other plays, becomes, by the end of this one, just a harmless and amusingly pleasant Bunburying, or, in other words, the scheme of playing dear old Jack in the country and happy – go – lucky Ernest in the town.

The play on names and identities is indeed the most important substitution within *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but it is not the only one. Thus, sins always appear as the characters' hidden thoughts, while playing upon words. Substitutions of this kind are often related to food and sex, for example the two men's fight for muffins in Act 3, where the real competition is for the two women's attention and ultimately hand, or Algy's inordinate and selfish cravings, such as his huge appetite for cucumber sandwiches in Act 1. Likewise, the women's need to keep more public than private diaries and write love declarations and sweet words, exactly as they were addressed to them, and even inventing some of them so that they could be able to read "poetry" any time they want, seems to be similar to their male counterparts' craving for food. By re – reading their diaries and precious love letters, Cecily and Gwendolen substitute their craving for "the sins of the flesh", allowing themselves to feel the erotic shivers of an imaginary sexual intercourse. Cecily keeps a diary with all the love declarations and the feelings these have aroused in her: "*You see, it is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication. When it appears in volume form I hope you will order a copy. But pray, Ernest, don't stop. I delight in taking down from dictation. I have reached 'absolute perfection'. You can go on. I am quite ready for more"*; she has an imaginary fiancé, and exchanges letters with him; she even broke the engagement once. Similar to Cecily, Gwendolen has made her diary compulsory reading, as "*One should always have something sensational to read in the train*" [56].

The Importance of Being Earnest plays upon words and concepts, showing the readers words have indeed the power to change destinies and that the power of suggestion is a very important drive which can make people become whatever they want. Making practical use of substitution, on a wide range of levels (social, moral and external), a world of deeply hidden meanings unfolds, as the reader realizes that nothing is as it appears to be; but everything is as one wishes it to be. The author also plays upon the human mind, the characters' as well as ours, exploring all that it has to give to life, creating and recreating universes, constantly reinventing himself and his characters, by means of our own ways of understanding.

Notes

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