

## Abstract

This study examines the deconstructive relationship between three works of Oscar Wilde and the contradictions in late Victorian society. Victorian values such as “earnestness,” “wholeness,” and “beauty” are destabilized by Wilde’s blank-parodic mode of writing.

Oscar Wilde’s relationship with late Victorian society was both alienated and intimate, in part because the late Victorian conformist was a hypocrite: the “pharisaic” Victorian proposed values and modes of behavior to himself and others which he had no hope of actually realizing himself. As an aesthete, Oscar Wilde advocated “art for art’s sake,” but his artist representation of Victorian society challenged the normal codes of the Victorian society, not directly as Shaw did by substituting a counter-code, but by drawing the conventional Victorian values into question.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* will be used to illustrate Wilde’s deconstructive practice, focusing on the Victorian value of earnestness and the separation of the name “Ernest” as signifier from the earnest personality it signifies. *Salome* will be used to show not only how the “wholeness” of a religious hero, Iokanaan (John the Baptist), becomes tainted by desire, but also how his decapitated head, still an object of Salome’s mad desire (as signifier or signified?), draws humanity itself into question. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the wholeness and beauty of Dorian is shown to be fragmented, most profoundly in “Dorian’s” location in both a body and a painting. In all three instances, without directly confronting Victorian norms, Wilde illustrates the tensions and contradictions in the idealism of late Victorian society.