



The Underlying Tension in Oscar Wilde's "The Decay of Lying"

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Submitted: 3. January 2024
Published: 18. March 2024
Volume: 11
Issue: 2
Affiliation: Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain
Languages: English
Keywords: Oscar Wilde, Socratic Dialogue, The Decay of Lying, Drama
Categories: News and Views, Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, Visual Arts, Architecture and Design
DOI: 10.17160/josha.11.2.960

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The Underlying Tension in Oscar Wilde's "The Decay of Lying"

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Abstract

The object of study of this paper is *The Decay of Lying* by Oscar Wilde. In *The Decay of Lying*, Wilde presents the four main theses of his aesthetic philosophy that are the following: *Art never expresses anything but itself, all bad Art comes from returning to Life and Nature and elevating them into ideals, Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life, Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.* (Wilde 1905, 83-85) These are presented in the form of a Socratic Dialogue. Plato creates this form to present transcendent truths. (Puchner 2010, 30-35) According to Quintus, the aesthetic philosophy of Wilde already creates a tension between the content and the form. (Quintus 1980, 559) This gets accentuated when it comes to the Socratic Dialogue. In this paper, I explore the dimensions of this question, if there is tension, and how Wilde plays with it. I conclude that Wilde, using the Socratic Dialogue, transforms and adapts it to his philosophy.



The object of study of this paper is *The Decay of Lying* by Oscar Wilde, published in *The Nineteenth Century* in 1889. The revised version was included in his collection of essays named *Intentions* and was published in 1891. In *The Decay of Lying* Wilde presents the four main theses of his aesthetic philosophy. These four theses are communicated in the form of a Socratic Dialogue. This dialogue follows a long series of literature pieces which used this format to communicate transcendent truths. (Puchner 2010, 30-35) According to Quintus, this is a contradiction to the aesthetic philosophy of Wilde, a thesis I will develop in this essay. (Quintus 1980, 559) Still, Wilde consciously chose this format to express his philosophy. Why did he? How did he solve this tension between form and content? Is it even necessary to solve it? In this essay, I am going to answer these questions. Another important point which I am going to examine is, how the Socratic Dialogue reforms the dramatic genre, what type of drama it is, and how it embraces the dialogue of Wilde. To see how this dialogue is a drama and dramatic performance I am going to examine the trials of Oscar Wilde based on the ideas of Wan (2011) and Puchner (2010).

To achieve the aims listed above, I analyse *The Decay of Lying*, both its content and its form.

A series of secondary literature will be used to reveal the original aim of the form, the evolution of the form of the dialogue itself and the underlying tension between form and message. Lastly, I will study the perception of the form as drama and performance.

The analysis of the dialogue as a Socratic Dialogue will be done through the paper of Martin Puchner, which he developed in *The Drama of Ideas* (2010). Puchner positioned Socratic Dialogue as a form of drama and analysed its basic characteristics. I will study how the work of Oscar Wilde fits the Puchner reading of Socratic Dialogue. Another very important source is Bristow and Mitchell, *The Provenance of Oscar Wilde's "Decay of Lying"* (2017). They did a study about the evolution of manuscripts of *The Decay of Lying*. The evolution of these manuscripts is crucial when it comes to understanding how the form of the Socratic Dialogue developed by Wilde, and how it affected the message. Furthermore, Quintus' *The Moral Implications of Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism* (1980) helped me understand the contradictions between the form in which Oscar Wilde chose to write his aesthetic philosophy and the philosophy itself. Quintus' insights are crucial to understanding the relationship between the form and message and the tension that it produces in



the play. Regarding this point, another important source is Comfort's *The Critic as Artist and Liar: The Abuse of Plato and Aristotle by Oscar Wilde* (2008). She studied how Wilde reuses Plato and Aristoteles, in a way that he modified their messages, to fit them into his philosophy. This naturally affected the use of the Socratic Dialogue and what it represented to Wilde.

In the end, I would like to follow with another point that Puchner makes. (Puchner 2010) He repositioned Socratic Dialogue as a category of drama. This is a revolutionary idea since Socratic Dialogue was in a controversial position regarding its categorization among literature genres through centuries. The main problem is that theatre is one of the main channels of communication when it comes to dramatic pieces. This is the problematic aspect of the Socratic Dialogue. To show how the Socratic Dialogue, and especially this one, can be conceived as a performance I used the writing of: Wan's *A Matter of Style: On Reading the Oscar Wilde Trials as literature* (2011). Wan did a reading of the Trial of Oscar Wilde as if it were a piece of literature and a dramatic performance. This reading helps to see *The Decay of Lying* as a dramatic performance.

First, I present the life of Oscar Wilde, his cultural context, and the artistic styles of his age that influenced his writing.

Oscar Fingal O'Fflahertie Wills (1854- 1900) was born in Ireland. He was the son of an educated family with intellectual air. His mother was a famous poet who published under the name Speranza. He moved in the 1870s to London, but his Irish roots remained a significant part of his identity. Later, he chose the Oscar Wilde name for himself as an important point in his character development. He studied in Dublin and London and ended his formation by becoming a classicist scholar. He was present in many intellectual circles in London. Later, he married Constance Llyod, with whom he had two children, Vivian and Cyril. With his wife, he maintained a good relationship throughout his whole life, even after his trial and sentence. But this marriage was unconventional since Wilde was homosexual. He had several love affairs, from which one of the most important was Lord Alfred Douglas. His love towards him deeply marked his life course. The father of Lord Alfred Douglas, the Marquess of Queensberry charged Wilde, accusing him of a sodomite lifestyle. Wilde led a brilliant defence. He won the first round, but afterwards, he ended up being sentenced to two years of forced work in prison. After his release, due to the hostile environment in England, he fled to France, where he died in 1900. (Beckson 2019) His work deeply influenced English and international poetry, drama, and



philosophy. Some of his major works, which brought long-lasting popularity, were *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), *Salome* (1881), *Intentions* (1881), and *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1882). His view on the perception of art, which is partly the topic of this essay, contributed to the narrative, which even today, shapes the way we talk and perceive art in our lives. Apart from his clear influence on art, he made another important contribution to the artistic world. He attributed it to the creation of the picture of the modern artist. His lifestyle, way of occupying spaces and his relationships, shaped how we think of artists and the life they have. (Hegeduš 1998, 241) As Wilde puts it: *Life itself is an art, and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it.* (Pollard 1905, 8)

In this section I portray the three most important artistic directions which were present in Wilde's cultural context and are relevant for the analysis of the Decay of Lying.

Realism in art is the realistic, accurate and truthful representation of reality. Realist painters position themselves against the over idealised and distorted artistic representation. The aim was to portray the lives and reality of the protagonist of the 19th century, the lower middle class as it was. Through its development it had a connection with several socio-political movements, which raised their voice against the everyday life-conditions of citizens. Another important aim of realist artists was to distance themselves from the imitation of past artistic movements, and they aimed to create something that properly represented their age. This was a clear claim against Romanticism and its aesthetic philosophy. Realistic tendencies have a long trajectory in art history, but they became a clear and conscious artistic narrative in the middle of the 19th century in France. One of its first representatives was Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), but also Honoré Daumier (1808-1879) and Millet (1814- 1875) were influential artists. One of the most important persons in the creation of the narrative of Realism was Émile Zola (1840-1902). Artists in each country adapted the artistic movement to its own cultural milieu and social reality. Wilde, however, was horrified by the realist representation of reality, which for him was a crude and non-imaginative description of life. (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2017)

The other important artistic movement in the 18th-19th century was Romanticism. *Romanticism emphasised the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental.*" (Augustyn 2022) This movement was present in all the artistic



representation forms. It was a child of the historical events of the century. The rise and fall of the Enlightenment, the revolutions and the several human catastrophes in their wake marked the Romantics. Romantic artists turned to imaginary scenarios, where the ego was at the centre of the plot. They admired nature, which was a crucial setting for their art. At the same time, romanticism reflected the social problems and political ideologies, which shook the world. They praised folklore and it had a very nationalistic aspect. (Augustyn 2022) The aspect which is more important from the point of view of this essay is the way romantics treated Nature in art. In this artistic tendency, Nature was the centre of the artistic pieces, they thought of it as a motherly, transcendent element in the world order. For Wilde, Nature is nothing more than a material used by Art, but not by any means the centre of Art.

The last element was the *well-made play*. This genre is relevant since it is one of the shaping elements of the theatrical context of Wilde. His plays and dialogues are received by an audience which is used to watching this type of theatre. The two biggest representatives of well-made play were Victorien Sardou (1831-1908) and Augustin Eugène Scribe (1791-1861). The theatre form created by them became popular very quickly and influenced up until the 20th century. As Wilkie Collins (1824- 1889) noted, the aim of the form of the well-made play was: *Make 'em laugh; make 'em weep; make 'em wait*. (Parrott- Sheffer 2023) The form was a very important part of the play since it largely conditioned how the viewers were emotionally affected. The intensity of emotions produced in this type of play stands far away from the Socratic Dialogue of Wilde, where emotions and rationality are approached in a completely different way. (Parrott-Sheffer 2020)

The Decay of Lying is a Socratic Dialogue between two characters: Vivian and Cyril. The story begins in the library. Vivian is in the room when Cyril goes in and says to him: *Let us go and lie on the grass, and smoke cigarettes, and enjoy Nature*. (Wilde 1905, 33) Vivian refuses to go out and they engage in a conversation, which allows Wilde to elaborate his aesthetic philosophy. This happens in the frame of Vivian reading out his recent article titled: *The Decay of Lying*. They go through various points. The conversation makes the plot dynamic and allows a better explanation of the theory. Cyril must be convinced by Vivian, just like the reader by Oscar Wilde. In the end, the four main theses points are summed up. These are as follows. The first one is that *Art never expresses anything but itself*. (Wilde 1905, 83) By this Wilde means that Art is completely independent of everything. It is only born out of art itself. It has its historical evolution, which does not necessarily have to do anything



with the historical reality, in which it was created. His second point is that *All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature and elevating them into ideals*. (Wilde 1905, 84) Since Art is completely independent and never expresses anything but itself, at the moment that Life and Nature stop being the simple raw material for Art, but its point of admiration, Art gets destroyed. He also confirms that *The only beautiful things are the things that do not concern us*. (Wilde 1905, 48) And Life and Nature concern us too much to become the only and main aim of Art. Because of this, he despises Realism. His third point is that *Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life*. (Wilde 1905, 85) According to Wilde, this can be seen through the strong imitative instinct that we have. He points out how we tend to consciously or unconsciously follow the different patterns which are created by the imagination of the artists. Another important point is how Art provides beautiful forms in which Life can express itself. He also proves how Nature imitates Art. Something exists in the moment, that one discovers the beauty in it. Because of this one can appreciate the parts of Nature which we can see. And we see the things that are shown to us by artists. Lastly, Wilde writes that *Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art*. (Wilde 1905, 85) The expression of pure imagination, detached from every reality and beauty is the most valued thing by Wilde in this essay. He condemns facts and any half-lie which needs to be maintained by truth. Pure imagination, and the ability to tell untrue things, are the purposes of Art. All these theses are revolutionary, taking into account the other popular aesthetic directions and narratives explained above. The radicalness of the philosophy can be perceived by the reaction of Cyril, who utters several times: *My dear fellow!*. (Wilde 1905, 40) Wilde not only elaborates his theory but uses the space to criticise other contemporary artistic directions. He does a harsh critique of Realism, and how it destroys Art. The thesis which was elaborated by Wilde is in complete contradiction with the artistic program of Realism. Later he also comments on Romanticism. He mainly does it through the person of Cyril. At the beginning of the essay, when Cyril proposes to go out into Nature and enjoy it, he is making a proposition in line with the romantic ideal. The glorification of Nature and its conversion into Arts purpose is part of this artistic program. Wilde rejects this point since Nature and Life should never be the aim of Art, only its raw material. He later uses other opportunities to criticise Romanticism. But there are some points in which the Romantic artists and Wilde have the same opinion. He praises Orientalism just as much as the Romantics since it is a tendency which is imaginative and detached from our reality. He also comments on many of the famous writers and artists, like Zola, Balzac, and many others. This way he made a very sensitive criticism of the artistic sphere of his age.



The structure is also very important in the play. It begins in the library, as mentioned above, with Vivian working. The two characters spend the whole interaction in the library, speaking, exchanging arguments, and smoking cigarettes. Both characters have great importance, which will be later analysed from the point of view of a Socratic Dialogue. At this moment, I want only to emphasise that Vivian appears as the beholder of truth, and Cyril is the one who is exposed to it and gets convinced by it at the end of the work. The dialogue is very dynamic since there is disagreement between the two, which gives space to a series of questions, reaffirmations, and exclamations, which shake up the reader from the long arguments of Vivian. At the end of the dialogue, when Cyril already accepted the position of Vivian, they go out, following the proposition of Vivian. *And now let us go out on the terrace, where "droops the milk-white peacock like a ghost," while the evening star " washes the dusk with silver." At twilight, nature becomes a wonderfully suggestive effect, and is not without loveliness, though perhaps its chief use is to illustrate quotations from the poets. Come.* (Wilde 1905, 85) With this sentence, Wilde closes the dialogue. The conversation ends as it began, with a proposition to go outside. But still, after reading the dialogue it feels different. Vivian has twisted the purpose of being outside. While Cyril wants to admire Nature, Vivian wants to go out and use Nature as pure material for Art and poetry. The dialogue is coherent and clear. The victory of Vivian is not only achieved on a literary level but also a structural one. Content and form are in total harmony. The reader feels satisfied by the coherence between what the actors of the scene are speaking and how that speech is guided through the structure of the piece.

This dialogue is a Socratic Dialogue. The Socratic Dialogue was analysed by Michael Puchner (2010) and I base my argument on his work. This form of literature was created by Plato. According to Puchner Plato was a reformist of the theatrical scene of Athens, who raised his voice against established drama types, and wanted to implement the Socratic Dialogue as a new and better form of drama. Later, in theatrical history, as the Aristotelian type of drama categorization got more popular, the Socratic Dialogue, since it does not fit so well with the established picture of drama, has slowly faded as a genre.¹ Puchner by the recategorization of the Socratic Dialogue as drama, gives a completely new format to the drama of ideas. This type of dialogue had several formalities, which all work together, intending to present the truth.

¹ Aristoteles does name Socratic Dialogue as one of the genres of drama, as Puchner (2010) points out, but it became forgotten compared to more popular types of dramatic writing.



One of the most important features of the Socratic dialogue is the characters. These must be contemporary to the writer, to be able to represent the truth of the society that is watching the drama. One of them is the Socratic figure, the beholder of truth, the one that guides the other character and the audience towards a discovery. In this play, Vivian is the Socratic character. He is not only the beholder of the truth, but he also is the personification of the philosophy that he represents. The way Vivian refuses to go outside to enjoy Nature is not only an argument, but he is also embodying his philosophy. The other interlocutor, Cyril, is just as important in the play as the Socratic figure. He is the one who is listening to the arguments and slowly becoming convinced. But he is not only important from the point of view of the philosophical content. He is also a crucial part of the dramatic structure. This character is reminding the audience constantly about the dramatic scenario. His seemingly banal interventions, like *My dear boy!* (Wilde 1905, 58) makes the public realise that they are reading a drama, and that just like Cyril, they are an important receptor. It is like Plato saying to the audience: "Wake up! Think!". Moreover, Cyril is crucial in the play, because he raises those questions that the audience may also want to raise. He also facilitates Vivian to get over the parts which are not that interesting or important. He makes the dialogue dynamic and pushes it forward.

Another important part of the Socratic Dialogue is the action itself. This is the point where it differs from the dramatic forms that we are used to. In the Aristotelian drama, the action is the most crucial point. It has to have the following phases: beginning, reverse, recognition, and conclusion. For Plato since the whole aim of this dramatic form is not the evoking of feelings, but the discovery of the truth, the emphasis was not on the dramatic action, but on the argument. He also did not believe in a linear development of the argument. Truth must come up suddenly, out of nothing, to affect the viewer. The audience must be unprepared, to be able to conceive the message. Vivian reveals crucial points, all over the dialogue without following a clear structure of arguments. Although in the end the four main theses are summed up, they are not new, since they have been randomly coming up since the beginning of the play. The criticism of contemporary artists, banal interactions between the two characters, and the aesthetic philosophy of Vivian are happening all at the same time, in a parallel way, but always reinforcing each other. The reader never knows when suddenly a transcendental phrase is going to come up. Plato and Wilde use dramatic action only to give a theatrical impulse to their dramatic arguments. It is a method, not the aim of the drama.



The other important change is the role of the audience. According to Plato, the audience must be active. It should not be a passive process, where the feelings are evoked in the reader, because of how the writer builds up the actions. It must be a conscious process on their behalf, and the public has to feel the right to intervene and become themselves actors, questioning the Socratic character. At this point, the character of Cyril is really important, since he wakes up the audience constantly. According to Puchner, these literary elements are used for these purposes by Plato: *Undo false certainties; Undo classical dramatic forms, and converting them into something new; Defeating relativism.* (Puchner 2010, 30-35) This means that this is a dramatic form consciously created and used to reveal the truth in forms which are not conventional. And this is an interesting point when it comes to Wilde. He uses a form which was created by Plato with these aims, to present his aesthetic philosophy, which in some sense is contradictory to the purpose of the form. This means that in *The Decay of Lying*, there is a tension between the form and the message.

This tension is very interesting, since the election of the form by Wilde was a conscious, but long process. He writes about the origins of the dialogue: *out of my dinner with Robbie came the first and best of all my dialogues. Idea, title, treatment, mode, everything was struck out at a 3 frank 50 cent table d'hote.* (Bristow, Mitchell 2017, 222) This means that this dialogue was born from the dialogue itself. When it comes to the evolution of the dialogue and its creation process, one can also see how it developed slowly into this format. Bristow and Mitchell (2017) did a study about the development of the different manuscripts of the dialogue, which is important for us. The manuscripts of Wilde, after his trial, got out of his hands and began to be sold and moved around the intellectual sphere. The different manuscripts are as follows. The first one is the Berg manuscript. This is in the property of the New York Public Library and contains several folios, which come from the earliest stages of the composition. The second one is held by the Folger Shakespeare Library, and the other one is at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California. The folios indicate the different stages of the creation of the dialogue. While the Berg folio, which probably is one of the earliest stages compared to the others, indicates a more conventional form written in prose and was titled: *On the Decay of Lying*. Compared to it, the Akron fair copy shows a change, in the form of a dialogue². This change in the format allows Cyril to verbalise the possible objections and counter arguments of the readers. For

² The Akron fair copy are fifty-five continuous folios of *The Decay of Lying*.



example the question of Cyril: *You don't mean to say that you seriously believe that Life imitates Art, that Life in fact is the mirror, and art the reality?*.(Wilde 1905, 62) This phrase is not present in the Berg manuscript, but it is crucial in the dynamic of the end product since it allows Vivian to elaborate one of his most important and shocking theses of all. If we look back at the trajectory of the dialogue, it is really interesting to see how it was born, from a dialogue, then transformed into a more conventional form of communicating philosophical ideas, but eventually driven back to its origins and published as a dialogue. This means that Wilde realised what Plato realised a couple of hundred years before. Dialogues are a great format to communicate philosophical ideas. But he did not do, just any dialogue form. He chose the Socratic Dialogue. A form which is created for the communication of truth. And this conscious choice raises the problem of contradiction between form and content. (Quintus 1980, 559) The aesthetic philosophy of Wilde is that art, the telling of beautiful lies never expresses anything but itself, and it is independent of the historical reality, life, and nature. How can this message be transmitted in an artistic form which is created to tell the truth? Truth is not the aim of art. Facts and discovering something relevant to our life is not beautiful, it is not imaginative, it is not art. But Wilde communicates this through art. Quintus in *The Moral Implications of Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism* (1980) reflects on this problem. *The principle of art for art's sake can never be completely accepted or exercised, for following its logical conclusion the principle would exclude philosophical literature, would necessarily separate art from thought, would aim at sensation alone; and literature, of all the arts, is the least amenable to such a goal. Reflection, inquiry, and analysis attend literature probably more than any other art form and render it, to Guérard, the least likely to be decorative merely, or to create a mood merely.* (Quintus 1980, 559) And this phrase sums up the problem perfectly. How do you communicate that art is for art's sake, through a form which is not part of art? This question becomes especially interesting if we have in mind the purpose of the Socratic Dialogue exposed above.

To understand this contradiction between form and content it is also interesting to see how Wilde handles the philosophy of Plato and Aristoteles. Comfort (2008) did a deep study of this topic. Since Wilde had a formation in Classical Studies, he had a deep knowledge of their philosophy. *The Decay of Lying* itself is full of references to the ideas of these philosophers, like the cave metaphor, the promotion of noble lies, or the perception of beauty. But Wilde modifies their ideas by separating Life and Art. Plato and Aristoteles saw these two spheres of existence tangled one into the



other. Because of this Aristotle and Plato perceived danger in Art, and in the feelings that it can develop in human beings. But for Wilde, Art is something independent from Life. Art is beautiful and immoral, and its consequences do not have the danger that the ancient philosophers were afraid of. Wilde developed this thought in *The Critic as a humanist*. Comfort points out, according to him one artistical product, gives space to the other one through criticism and renewal. (Comfort 2008) Because of this, Wilde has no problem taking ideas or forms and putting them into a new context. This is the history and evolution of Art, that he explains in *The Decay of Lying*. The sequences in Art are independent of Life and have to be handled in that manner. This process in some sense releases the tension between the form and message since Wilde's creating a new artistic product reinterprets the form itself. Following this idea, it does not have to be inherently contradictory to the content. He created a new perception of the form. And with this move, in some sense, he keeps the tradition of the Socratic character alive. According to Puchner, the character is comic and existent because it is detached from reality. (Puchner 2010, 16) This Socratic characteristic makes the play coherent. Wilde himself makes a reference to this in the dialogue:

CYRIL. Writing an article! That is not very consistent after what you have just said.

VIVIAN Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to the bitter end of action, to the reductio ad absurdum of practice. Not I, like Emerson, I write over the door of my library the word "Whim." Besides, my article is really a most salutary and valuable warning. If it is attended to, there may be a new Renaissance of Art. (Wilde 1905, 35)

As we can see Wilde himself releases the tension by giving himself the freedom of not being consistent with the facts which are attached to Life and very far away from the beauty of Art. Barañano Letamendía (1985-6), points out how we also have to keep in mind that Wilde, before anything, was an artist and not a philosopher. So, for Wilde, beauty, what it is, and how it works is far more important than philosophy.

Another different, but just as interesting point of Socratic Dialogues comes from the connection between drama and theatre. One of the ways of communicating a drama is theatrical representation. Since Aristotelian drama is built up based on action, the theatrical representations also have grown with dramatic pieces which had as a central element the dramatic action. Because of this, the representation of the



Socratic Dialogue becomes problematic.³ Since the centre of attention is the arguments, one has to adapt the whole theatrical representation to them, which can be shocking in a conventional theatrical scene. (Puchner 2010, 24) Let's remember the well-made play, and its structure as an example of the theatrical scene of the age of Wilde. The trial of Oscar Wilde interpreted as literature can serve as an example of the dramatic representation of a Socratic Dialogue. This is studied by Wan (2011). The trial of Oscar Wilde was one of the biggest social scandalous events of his time. Wilde being a famous and well-known writer, his case attracted the attention of the public eye. As stated by Richard Ellman, *The only play of Oscar Wilde still running in London was the drama of his life.* (Wan 2011, 711) His trial is really interesting to us because his aesthetic philosophy was an important part of his defence. Edward Carson was in charge of the representation of the Marquess of Queensberry. He used several of Wilde's works just as, *The Priest and the Acolyte*, *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*, and Wilde's letters to win the trial. Since his works were used against him, it was a great opportunity for Wilde to preach his aesthetic philosophy, and at the same time defend himself against the charges. When Carson pointed out the immorality of his works, Wilde had the opportunity to explain how art is immoral, since it is independent from Life. One cannot judge an artistic piece from the point of view of Life, only from the point of view of Art.

C--*Apart from art, Mr. Wilde?*

W--*I cannot answer apart from art.*

C--*Suppose a man who was not an artist had written this letter, would you say it was a proper letter?*

W--*A man who was not. an artist could not have written that letter.*

C--*Why?*

W--*Because nobody but an artist could write it. He certainly could not write the language unless he were a man of letters.* (Wan 2011, 720)

As they tried to show his sodomite tendency, through the plots of his literature, he made a point about how art is not based on facts and truth but beautiful lies and imagination.

In some sense, according to Wang, this was a big opportunity for Wilde. Since the trial was a conversation between Carson and him, it turned into a Socratic Dialogue.

³ Naturally, here we have to take into account the way Platon wanted to change also performance and audience when he created the Socratic Dialogue.



Wilde was the Socratic character, the beholder of truth, while Carson was the second character who was being taught. Winning this case, for Wilde, was in some sense, the victory of his philosophy. He managed to create a dramatic performance about his aesthetic philosophy and at the same time win a case in a bureaucratic and binary system, which is approaching Art from a conventional point of view. This trial could be read as the one and great performance of *The Decay of Lying*.

The Decay of Lying was written by Oscar Wilde to propose his artistic program and his aesthetic philosophy. It has a long transcendence in art history since it marked a tendency and was the ground for many following artistic pieces. Wilde, by using a Socratic Dialogue added a really interesting twist to the piece. The form perfectly accompanies the content, culminating in the message. It pushes the truth, the philosophical aesthetic of Wilde forward. He uses it to his advantage, putting into practice the rules which were laid down by Plato to bring out the truth.⁴ At the same time, he changes the parameters of the form. This comes from the contradiction of the content with the form. (Quintus 1980, 559) Wilde does not care about the truth, the morality, and the reality in his art, but still, he uses a form which is created to bring out the truth. With this, he is directly playing with the rules of the game. And this is somehow perfectly in line with his philosophy. It is the same arrogance and humour that one can sense in his trial. The artist stays apart from the rules created by the doctrinaires, the judicial system and any type of Life. (Wan 2011, 726) The artist can use a form, humorously, while he uses it to his advantage, giving a completely new perspective on it. As I mentioned above, and as it stayed both in *The Critic as an Artis* and in *The Decay of Lying*, old artistic forms have to be used in a new sense, always to find beauty to create a new artistic piece. (Comfort 2008, 66-68) Wilde in a funny way, brings out the new and undiscovered beauty of the Socratic Dialogue, by using it and at the same time proving it wrong. As we can see reading his trials, he manages to create a new, beautiful, entertaining and still revealing dramatic performance, using materials which originally were created to bring truth out of Life. In some sense, the form of the Socratic Dialogue has the same trajectory as the structure of the dialogue itself. The two proposals of going out in Nature, which we can read at the beginning and the end of the play, feel different because after reading Wilde's philosophical propositions they have different aims. Wilde uses the Socratic Dialogue just as he uses Nature. He transforms it from a form which is attached to Life, into a *while the evening star* "

⁴ The idea of how Plato used the Socratic Dialogue was borrowed from Puchner. (Puchner 2010, 30-35)



washes the dusk with silver." (Wilde 1905, 85) We have the same dramatic genre in front of us, but it still feels different, because Wilde has used it to the *telling of beautiful untrue things.* (Wilde 1905, 85)



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