

Mr. Hopper's Australia and Miss Worsley's America:  
Representations of the New World in Oscar Wilde's  
*Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and  
*A Woman of No Importance* (1893)

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Introduction

It was in 1842 when the iconic Victorian writer Charles Dickens set off to North America<sup>1</sup>. Although he was enthusiastically welcomed, however, *American Notes* (1842) records his disappointment with the country and his novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842–1844) openly reflects his displeasure in its middle chapters. While America is depicted negatively in his fiction, another significant country from outside Europe is occasionally featured, and that is Australia, which developed into something more over the years from its origins in “Botany Bay – that distant goal founded when the American colonists perversely refused to accept good British convicts”<sup>2</sup> (Lansbury, “Terra Australis Dickensia” 12).

To begin with, “The Convict’s Return” in *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1836–1837) pictures Australia as merely a place of exile and misery; the cruel schoolmaster Mr. Squeers of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1837) is arrested and transported there. Then, *Sidney’s Australian Hand-Book* (1848), to which Dickens showed great respect, changed his image of Australia (Lansbury, “Terra Australis Dickensia” 12–13). Consequently, in *David Copperfield* (1849), Little Em’ly and Mr. Micawber sail off to Australia to pursue a better life and a new start; symbolically, an Australian convict Abel Magwitch’s wealth turns out to be what nurtured Pip into an English gentleman in *Great Expectations* (1860–1861). Eventually, Dickens himself sent his sons Alfred and Edward to Australia in the 1860s to get settled there.

Around forty years later appears a contrasting literary figure who was also a renowned icon of his time: Oscar Wilde. On the whole, in the Victorian period, it can be said that the English-speaking Others in the “New World”<sup>3</sup>, or the White colonies, were mostly represented by America<sup>4</sup> and Australia, rather than

loyalist Canada or New Zealand which were settled later in the 1840s and 1850s land rush<sup>5</sup>. And while Wilde's representation of Australia in his works remains marginal, his image of America is presented with more depth. It seems that his 1882 tour to North America was the ground of inspiration; he was invited to give lectures on British arts and he was also welcomed fervently<sup>6</sup>. Wilde summarized his thoughts in "Impressions of America" (1882) and other essays in which he responded to the country with humour and irony, mixing admiration and skepticism that rather contrasts with the mainly negative attitude shown by Dickens. On the other hand, although he was not completely indifferent to Australia, his tendency was to treat it as a regional joke.

This paper examines the representations of Australia and America in Oscar Wilde's comedy of society, through analysis of an Australian character Mr. Hopper in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and an American character Miss Worsley in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), as well as the reactions of the English characters towards them, simultaneously paying some attention to the stagecraft of the plays. Significantly, they are both outsiders from the New World, who are going to marry English characters (Agatha Berwick and Gerald Arbuthnot respectively), and simultaneously intrude upon and destabilize the domestic upper-class society of the Old World, Britain. The Australian and the American are characterized as sources of conflict and comedy. Due to their different values, they become in turn the representation of New World Others, able to structurally critique the stubbornness, hypocrisy and xenophobia of the British. However, despite their shared attributes such as youth, freedom and wealth, when comparing Wilde's representation of Australia to that of America, it can be noticed that the latter functions as a stronger advocate of criticism on Britain; Miss Worsley is much more developed as a character in the play than Mr. Hopper. It can be argued that Wilde's inclination to depict America and the American character in depth is owing to his actual experience there; on the other hand, there is no record of Wilde traveling to Australia in his lifetime. Considering his extended tours of the United States, it is perhaps not striking that he writes about it intensively; what is perhaps more surprising is the structural prominence of Australia, given that a number of the jokes are rather easy and disparaging. As for America, many of the ambivalent and ironical opinions given in his essay on the country underscore the lines by Miss Worsley's in *A Woman of No Importance*. It can be claimed, then, Wilde projected himself onto the

female American character and voiced his own views on Victorian society while leaving some uncertainties towards America too. These reflect his own elusive status as an outsider from Ireland<sup>7</sup> who could not be fully absorbed into British society; the fact that Ireland is rather a contrasting nation with America and Australia when speaking of its economic climate at the time and the length of national history could account for his sense of partial sympathy towards the two ex-British countries.

### Mr. Hopper's Australia in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892)

To summarize the history of portrayal of Australia in the Victorian period, it was initially used as “dumping grounds for British convicts” to begin with, which was “a national disgrace” (Brantlinger 18); however, “with the transportation of convicts drawing to an end, the Australian colonies were growing prosperous and offering hope and opportunity to free settlers” (Brantlinger 20) – the convicts had a good chance of emerging as landowners themselves. Drawing from the afore mentioned Sidney's handbook in the late 1840s, according to Coral Lansbury's *Arcady in Australia* (1970), there evolved three typical images of Australia in Victorian literature: firstly, the outback; secondly, place of happiness for new settlers; and thirdly, romantic convicts (Lansbury, *Arcady in Australia* 74–75). In addition, there was a difference in treatment between “well-bred heroes” who returned to English society and working-class or flawed characters who were destined to remain in Australia (Bolton 174).

However, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in reality, after the great rise in population because of the Gold Rushes in the 1850s, subsequent urbanization and rapid growth of major cities such as Melbourne and Sydney (where Mr. Hopper comes from) were prevalent.<sup>8</sup> “The 1880s was a decade of high immigration and high capital imports. Aggregate economic growth was sustained until 1890 or so” (Jackson 13) and “[b]y the standards of the old world, Australians were well fed, well clothed and well housed and, once these basic needs had been met, most people had something left for indulgences of one kind or another. Australian cities were spacious, healthy and free of large areas of extreme poverty. Material living standards were undoubtedly significantly higher than in Britain or Europe” (Jackson 22). Consequently, the image of economic development and opportunity embodied in Mr. Hopper can be considered plausible in the

early 1890s. On the other hand, Ireland was experiencing a totally opposite phenomenon. Its initial population in the 1840s was 6.5 million, and a decade later it plummeted to 5 million after the potato famine, continuing on to the gradual population decline into the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup>.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the Australian Mr. Hopper is initially introduced by the lines by Duchess of Berwick, which mark the Victorian views on Australia, the absurdity of English manners and their self-importance measured against the New World Otherness: “And by the way, [...] he’s [Mr. Hopper’s] that rich young Australian people are taking such notice of just at present. His father made a great fortune by selling some kind of food in circular tins – most palatable, I believe – I fancy it is the thing the servants always refuse to eat. But the son is quite interesting” (Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan* 15-16). “The story of the 19<sup>th</sup> century preserving technology is mainly about how the use of sugar in bottling came to be superseded by canning, and the use of salt in dry-salting, brining and pickling came to be superseded also by canning” (Hunter 139). The emergence of this technology meant Australia and New Zealand could become major international food exporters (Weaver 4), another source of great wealth – again, this marks another contrast; whereas Australia thrived in food business, Ireland had experienced a serious famine. So, it is the Duchess’s intention to marry her daughter Agatha to Mr. Hopper for his wealth, but her lines suggest her contempt for the New Money, making an ironical comment on the taste of the canned food. Meanwhile, she evaluates the son Mr. Hopper very highly and thus justifies the match between him and her own daughter, rather than being honest about the attraction of economic affluence. There is a hint of jealousy towards the New Money, and she is trying to maintain her own pride as a member of traditional English nobility.

The Duchess of Berwick, in accordance with typical Victorian sensitivity to issues of courtship, never reveals her scheme of match-making Agatha and Mr. Hopper to other people, but she cleverly advises her daughter to make the right move; this confirms Samuel Beeton’s satirical attribution of “the manipulative courtship behavior to the mothers of the debutantes” (Phegley 40) in his magazine article<sup>10</sup>. “Mr. Hopper is very late, too. You have kept those five dances for him, Agatha? [...] I’m so glad Lady Windermere has revived cards. – They’re a mother’s only safeguard. [...] The last two dances you might pass on the terrace with Mr. Hopper” (Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan* 21) The fact

that she advises them to go to the terrace is suggestive; this in Victorian times was the conventional site of relative privacy in which romance was allowed to take place<sup>11</sup>. Her control over the cards and specific instructions to her daughter to keep the dances for him show the mother's determination, while Agatha is depicted as a mainly silent and obedient daughter who hardly has any lines throughout the whole play; the contrast in the attitudes of the keen mother and that of the passive daughter is crucial to the stage comedy, and this convention is subverted in the scenes between Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) as well.

The Duchess of Berwick displays the Victorian stereotypes of Australia; but she may not have been alone in harbouring them in the heart, as Wilde was not slow to point out.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Dear Mr. Hopper, how nice of you to come so early. We all know how you are run after in London. [...] We wish there were more like you. It would make life so much easier. Do you know, Mr. Hopper, dear Agatha and I are so much interested in Australia. It must be so pretty with all the dear little kangaroos flying about. Agatha has found it on the map. What a curious shape it is! Just like a large packing case. However, it is a very young country, isn't it? (Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan* 22)

Obviously, her knowledge on Australia is superficial – merely the image of “dear little kangaroos”, the “curious shape” of the continent, and youth attributed to the country (with some resonance of the older country looking down on it) – and her flattering “dear Agatha and I are so much interested in Australia” is shallow, only interested in an economic alliance. However, her opinions are not quite so ridiculous in a Victorian context; for the British people at the time, Australia was a faraway place in the Southern hemisphere that they would hardly have any chance to visit, possibly with “a large packing case” if they ever have any opportunity. According to G. C. Bolden, for Victorian Britons, the topsy-turvy land Australia where exiled criminals were reborn to become well-established settlers offered many other paradoxes such as black swans and platypus, and “above all, over and over again, the kangaroos” (Bolton 173). Likewise, Mr. Hopper's name itself may be owing to the hopping animal and its paradox, and “[u]nfortunately for the stay-at-home English the kangaroo remained

automatically comic” (Bolton 173), which may explain his role as a flat character. Although whether Wilde had known the origin of the name “kangaroo” or not, the response of an aborigine when asked what kind of animal it was – it means “I don’t understand what you are saying” – the animal’s appearance in the speeches works well to signify one’s ignorance towards Australia.

However, the Duchess’s amiable attitude changes dramatically later when Agatha and Mr. Hopper decide to get married, and then to emigrate to Australia. There is an immediate transformation of what she had praised earlier into a blatant insult.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: [...] Mr. Hopper, I am very, very angry with you. You have taken Agatha out on the terrace, and she is so delicate.

HOPPER: Awfully sorry, Duchess. We went out for a moment and then got chatting together.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Ah, about dear Australia, I suppose?

HOPPER: Yes! ... You don’t mind my taking Agatha off to Australia, then, Duchess?

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: To Australia? Oh, don’t mention that dreadful vulgar place. [...] Agatha, you say the most silly things possible. I think on the whole that Grosvenor Square would be a more healthy place to reside in. There are lots of vulgar people live in Grosvenor Square, but at any rate there are no horrid kangaroos crawling about. But we’ll talk about that tomorrow. James, you can take Agatha down. You’ll come to lunch, of course, James. At half-past one, instead of two. The Duke will wish to say a few words to you, I am sure. (Wilde, *Lady Windermere’s Fan* 30)

Concealing the fact that it was originally her plan to make Agatha lead Mr. Hopper onto the terrace, the Duchess deliberately acts indignant. Then, having heard that Agatha might be emigrating with Mr. Hopper, the “dear Australia” suddenly transforms into “that dreadful vulgar place”, and “dear little kangaroos” become “horrid kangaroos crawling about”. “James” is the Duchess’s husband here, and it is her idea to consult him about the way the marriage has taken an unexpected turn. For the Duchess of Berwick, Australia is a land of dreams as long as it stays faraway from herself and her daughter. She is only interested in the wealth that Australian business can offer them, but wishes to have nothing

to do with actual involvement with such an unknown environment – and such mentality of the Duchess is made fun of in this scene.

In fact, a similar type of xenophobia towards Australia reappears in another play by Wilde as well, namely *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

CECILY: I don't think you will require neckties. Uncle Jack is sending you to Australia.

ALGERNON: Australia! I'd sooner die.

CECILY: Well, he said at dinner on Wednesday night, that you would have to choose between this world, the next world, and Australia.

ALGERNON: Oh, well! The accounts I have received of Australia and the next world, are not particularly encouraging. This world is good enough for me, cousin Cecily. (Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* 275–276)

Here, Algernon echoes the reactions by the Duchess of Berwick. Wilde is well known for recycling his materials, and it seems that the same applies to his Australia jokes. Richard Ellmann observes that “Wilde made Australia rather than Scotland the butt of his regional jokes” (Ellmann 207), and Ian Fletcher interprets that Wilde “spared Scotland” (Fletcher 338). Fletcher notes that “this change of venue to the destination of so many Irish immigrants and the site of ‘new world’ nation — building is surely odd for a ‘Celtic’ republican” (Fletcher 388); however, one may look at it the other way round — those who are being made fun of are rather the simple-minded English characters (the Duchess of Berwick and especially the idle Algernon in the latter play) more than Australia.

### Miss Worsley's America in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893)

On the other hand, Wilde gives a much greater effort to portraying America and the American woman. The images of America in British literature were indeed diverse. Brook Miller lists them “as a ‘daughter’ or ‘cousin’ of Britain; as a ‘tabula rasa’; [...] as a beacon in the pursuit of liberty; as a crucial trading partner; as an imperial threat, partner, and competitor; as a mutual member of the Anglo-Saxon race; [...] as a source and embodiment of ‘modernities’ both cultural and economic; as a vacation spot; as a worshipper of British culture; as a critic of British culture; and as the site of a virtual infinity of personal relations for British

citizens, the overwhelming majority of which remain lost to us [the British]" (Miller 2).

Wilde's representation of America does come under such categories to some extent and shares some attributes with that of Australia; however, it can be argued that it is his actual experience in America which inspired him to elaborate in depth. His essays leave some evidence that matches the lines in *A Woman of No Importance* and many of his commentaries on America remain consistent in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), which will be referred to below.

One obvious question would be whether or not Wilde is operating within the transatlantic theme established by Henry James or not. Though their relationship was rather complex<sup>12</sup>, they were definitely aware of each other. James's early works often depicted the clash between Europe and America in a form of romantic relationship between a man and a woman. He contrasted the sophisticated but at times depraved Europe and the simple but virtuous America in *The American* (1877), and with *Daisy Miller* (1878) James became the creator of a wild and free American girl. In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) too, he again pictures an American girl, an admirer of freedom and liberty confronted by a choice of European suitors. James's novels did present the contrast between America and Europe: innocence and maturity, new actions and traditional manners, honesty and hypocrisy, to name a few aspects. However what is characteristic about Wilde is how he handles it with theatrical humour (mostly mocking the British), with an especial emphasis on the new money.

The opening lines of the play already witness the miscommunication between America and Britain, which seems entirely comical but simultaneously marks their different attitudes.

LADY CAROLINE: I believe this is the first English country house you have stayed at, Miss Worsley? [...] You have no country houses, I am told, in America?

HESTER: We have not many.

LADY CAROLINE: Have you any country? What we should call country?

HESTER [Smiling]: We have the largest country in the world, Lady Caroline. They used to tell us at school that some of our states are as big as France and England put together. (Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* 99)

The joke here is that Lady Caroline is asking Miss Worsley about the countryside but Miss Worsley interprets the word “country” to refer to the whole country, or the nation state. In this scene, the English lady is proud of the country house as a symbol of Englishness and tradition. Her lines “You have no country houses, I am told, in America?” and “Have you any country? What we *should* call country?” (Italics mine) hint at America’s lack of tradition and culture. On the other hand, the American woman is pleased to advertise the great size of America with a smile (as specifically suggested in the stage direction), implying that such old-fashioned customs are not what the New World cares about.

The difference between American and English values becomes more evident in further scenes, and in this one, it is about courtship.

HESTER: Mr. Arbuthnot has a beautiful nature! He is so simple, so sincere. He has one of the most beautiful natures I have ever come across. It is a privilege to meet him.

LADY CAROLINE: It is not customary in England, Miss Worsley, for a young lady to speak with such enthusiasm of any person of the opposite sex. English women conceal their feelings till after they are married. They show them then.

HESTER: Do you, in England, allow no friendship to exist between a young man and a young girl?

LADY CAROLINE: We think it very inadvisable. (Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* 100)

While Miss Worsley displays her affection towards Mr. Arbuthnot clearly, Lady Caroline advises her not to be blatant about it. Lady Caroline’s attitude alludes to that of the Duchess of Berwick in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, in which she acts indifferent on the surface but keenly connives a way for Agatha to capture Mr. Hopper. Both Lady Caroline and the Duchess of Berwick exemplify the paradoxical manners of English courtship which are in contrast with the honest ways of Americans.

While Mr. Hopper’s family built their fortune with tinned food, Miss Hester Worsley’s parentage remains vague in *A Woman of No Importance* other than some speculation on “American dry goods”, another unsavoury but expensive preserved food consumed in the outback which at least had guaranteed protein

content. Both the Australian and the American represent New Money from the English point of view, and the English upper-class quickly gossips about her behind her back in the following excerpt. This reflects Lord Henry's comment in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "American girls are as clever at concealing their parents, as English women are at concealing their past" (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 36), which can even hint at the secret of Mrs. Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance*.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: American women are wonderfully clever in concealing their parents.

LADY HUNSTANTON: My dear Lord Illingworth, what do you mean? Miss Worsley, Caroline, is an orphan. Her father was a very wealthy millionaire or philanthropist, or both, I believe, who entertained my son quite hospitably, when he visited Boston. I don't know how he made his money, originally.

KELVIL: I fancy in American dry goods.

LADY HUNSTANTON: What are American dry goods?

LORD ILLINGWORTH: American novels. (Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* 104)

As a matter of fact, this "dry goods" discourse appears several times in Wilde's writings. The first is in "Impressions of America", where he remarks that he has little knowledge of America despite his tours, and he presents as one example: "I cannot compute the value of its dry goods" (Wilde, "Impressions of America" 21). Another is in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where Lord Henry Wotton is pretty much the original Lord Illingworth; their personalities are similar and they even make the identical joke. When Lord Wotton and his company discuss a woman called Mrs. Vandeleur, the following conversation takes place. In the world of Wilde, American dry goods are the source of family mystery with dubious values and somewhat looked down upon and mocked at.

"I am told, on excellent authority, that her father keeps an American dry-goods store," said Sir Thomas Burdon, looking supercilious.[...]

"Dry-goods! What are American dry-goods?" asked the duchess, raising her large hands in wonder and accentuating the verb.

“American novels,” answered Lord Henry, helping himself to some quail. (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 39)

A similar exchange continues in *A Woman of No Importance*, and this time it is about fashion in America. The flow of the dialogue is pretty much the same as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, though of course it has been adapted effectively into the play with lines more rhythmical and sharp.

“I must confess that most of them [Americans] are extremely pretty. And they dress well, too. They get all their dresses in Paris. I wish I could afford to do the same.”

“They say that when good Americans die they go to Paris,” chuckled Sir Thomas, who had a large wardrobe of Humour’s cast-off clothes.

“Really! And where do bad Americans go to when they die?” inquired the duchess.

“They go to America,” murmured Lord Henry. (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 40)

LADY HUNSTANTON: [...] All Americans do dress well. They get their clothes in Paris.

MRS ALLONBY: They say, Lady Hunstanton, that when good Americans die they go to Paris.

LADY HUNSTANTON: Indeed? And when bad Americans die, where do they go to?

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Oh, they go to America. (Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* 104)

In fact, Wilde himself was an editor of a woman’s fashion magazine, *Woman’s World*<sup>13</sup>. In “Impressions of America”, Wilde confesses that “[t]he first thing that struck me on landing in America was that if the Americans are not the most well-dressed people in the world, they are the most comfortably dressed” (Wilde, “Impressions of America” 21). Although the renowned fashionista from Britain does not directly criticize American fashion nor praise the French in contrast, this is a rather ironic way of suggesting American insensitivity towards dress. At the same time, in the play and the novel, the two Lords belittle America as a hell

on earth.

KELVIL: I am afraid you don't appreciate America, Lord Illingworth. It is a very remarkable country, especially considering its youth.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: The youth of America is their oldest tradition. It has been going on now for three hundred years. To hear them talk one would imagine they were in their first childhood. As far as civilisation goes they are in their second. (Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* 104)

The above mentioned "youth" of the New World reminds us of the Duchess of Berwick's initial comment on Australia: "it is a very young country, isn't it?" (Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan* 22) Although they all seem to be giving a compliment, what they have in common is that they are not looking at Australia nor America as Britain's equals. And such youngness could be tied with immaturity, with a more negative nuance, just as Lord Illingworth does.

The age of the countries is more or less connected to the youth of the characters, both in the cases of Mr. Hopper and Miss Worsley, which makes them candidates for international marriage between the New World and the Old World. Whereas Mr. Hopper in *Lady Windermere's Fan* makes a match with Agnes Berwick, Miss Worsley becomes a possible bride in *A Woman of No Importance*; thus symbolically they represent the union of the two worlds and their shared values in a new generation. But, in reality too, in the late Victorian period, it was quite common for British nobility with traditional titles to marry a member of a family from the New World with so-called New Money.<sup>14</sup> In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry comments "It is rather fashionable to marry Americans just now, Uncle George" (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 36).

Particularly, American women were the most popular; Miller claims that grace, brightness and adaptability were often considered to be their charms (Miller 176). However, "American women in the British marriage market were viewed [...] as either a particularly vitalizing or a destructive force" (Miller 176), and Miss Worsley definitely embodies this. The English characters in Wilde's works are rather annoyed about this phenomenon, and it is a likely reflection of their pride and jealousy. Lady Caroline comments "These American girls carry off all the good matches. Why can't they stay in their own country? They are always telling us it is the Paradise of women", and Lord Illingworth cynically

answers, “It is, Lady Caroline. That is why, like Eve, they are so extremely anxious to get out of it” (Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* 104). The same exchange occurs in Wilde’s novel and essay<sup>15</sup> as well: “‘Why can’t these American women stay in their own country? They are always telling us that it is the paradise for women.’ ‘It is. That is the reason why, like Eve, they are so excessively anxious to get out of it,’ said Lord Henry” (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 36): “[T]hough he may be rough in manner, and deficient in the picturesque insincerity of romance, yet he is invariably kind and thoughtful, and has succeeded in making his own country the Paradise of Women. This, however, is perhaps the reason why, like Eve, the women are always so anxious to get out of it” (Wilde, “The American Man” 74). In all cases, American women are associated with Eve from the Garden of Eden, which pictures America as a young land of innocence and its women as Eves; more a case of the fortunate fall, with Eden being sadly boring, and Eve having the robust independence to depart to explore the world.

Oscar Wilde himself praises American women highly while he does not seem to be attracted to American men in general: “American youths are pale and precocious, or sallow and supercilious, but American girls are pretty and charming little oases of pretty unreasonableness in a vast desert of practical common-sense.” (Wilde, “Impressions of America” 34–35): “the women are most charming when they are away from their own country, the men most charming when they are at home” (“The American Man” 71). In his another essay in 1887<sup>16</sup>, Wilde describes American women marrying into Britain and concludes thus: “there are few more important, and none more delightful, than the American Invasion” (“American Invasion” 69).

Another unmissable factor concerning Miss Worsley is her Puritan identity; she even shares the same name as the heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hester.

MRS ALLONBY: I can’t stand the American young lady.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Why?

MRS ALLONBY: She told me yesterday, and in quite a loud voice too, that she was only eighteen. It was most annoying. [...] She is a Puritan besides—

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Ah, that is inexcusable. I don’t mind plain

women being Puritans. It is the only excuse they have for being plain. But she is decidedly pretty. I admire her immensely. (Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* 110)

While Mrs. Allonby's point on Miss Worsley again makes a parallel with the image of her country America – being young, loud and irritating – the significant fact that she is a puritan actually alludes to the growing feminism of social purity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century including Britain. Wilde's attitude is underlined in his essay too, though in a wayward expression: "It is in the colonies, and not in the mother country, that the old life of the country really exists. If one wants to realise what English Puritanism is not at its worst (when it is very bad), but at its best, and then it is not very good – I do not think one can find much of it in England, but much can be found about Boston and Massachusetts. We have got rid of it. America still preserves it, to be, I hope, a short-lived curiosity" (Wilde, "Impressions of America" 28). However, it is known that earlier drafts of *A Woman of No Importance* included much stronger attacks on Hester's puritanism which were deleted upon publication (Powell 138). Powell argues that "[i]n essence Wilde is formulating a new ratio between, on the one hand, the Puritan morality of many Victorian feminists and, on the other hand, his tendency to the amoral aestheticism embodied in Lord Illingworth" (Powell 137). Thus, Wilde has not imposed a fixed judgement upon the American outsider; she has her flaws and his attitude towards her is ambivalent though mainly positive, as he was towards America itself.

Finally, one of the strongest opinions that Miss Worsley maintains in the play is about social class in England. She sharply critiques its unfairness and praises America for its equality, claiming that "true American society consists simply of all the good women and good men we have in our country" (Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* 119), which seems "very strange" (Lady Hunstanton) and "dreadful" (Mrs. Allonby) from the English point of view.

HESTER: In America we have no lower classes [...] We are trying to build up life, Lady Hunstanton, on a better, truer, purer basis than life rests on here. This sounds strange to you all, no doubt. How could it sound other than strange? You rich people in England, you don't know how you are living. How could you know? You shut out from your society the gentle

and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure. [...] Oh, your English society seems to me shallow, selfish, foolish. It has blinded its eyes, and stopped its ears. It lies like a leper in purple. It sits like a dead thing smeared with gold. It is all wrong, all wrong. (Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* 119)

This monologue is one of the longest set-piece speeches for a single character in this play, making it memorable for the audience who feels as if it is being directed to them, with Miss Worsley's repeated uses of second-person "you", as well as to the other characters on stage. Moreover, from a meta-theatrical viewpoint, the theatre auditorium becomes an extension of the drawing-room in the box proscenium, similarly stratified and oppressive. The great energy in her voice pronounces sympathy to the English poor and criticizes the upper-class contempt, which supports Miller's argument on America being "a land of personal freedom and individualism, of boundless economic opportunity and broad social equality. On the other hand America has been perceived as having a self-confidence bordering on arrogance" (Miller 9). Wilde certainly does acknowledge the liberty of America and turns against the destitution in England – "In going to America one learns that poverty is not a necessary accompaniment to civilisation" (Wilde, "Impressions of America" 36). Such awareness of poverty issues are seen in Wilde's "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891)<sup>17</sup> and even shared in his mother Lady Jane Wilde's influential poem "The Famine Year" (1847), and these consciousness would have been rooted in the Irish experience of being exploited by British landowners and the devastating famine.

He also mentions political equality in America: "Every man when he gets to the age of twenty-one is allowed a vote, and thereby immediately acquires his political education. The Americans are the best politically educated people in the world. It is well worth one's while to go to a country which can teach us the beauty of the word FREEDOM and the value of the thing LIBERTY." (Wilde, "Impressions of America" 36). However, he had also made a careful qualification, "I fear I cannot picture America as altogether an Elysium — perhaps, from the ordinary standpoint I know but little about the country" (Wilde, "Impressions of America" 21). Wilde claims himself to be ignorant, nonetheless there is a tone of skepticism beneath. Miss Worley's lines are high and lofty, but their naivety cannot be denied. The United States Constitution did claim that "all men are created equal" – it didn't include women, Native Americans or

slaves<sup>18</sup> though; Wilde too articulates that “[e]very *man* when *he* gets to the age of twenty-one is allowed a vote” (Italics mine) in the sentence quoted above, and Miss Worsley is not seeing that. The representation of America here is merely an ideal that is too complimentary; however, Wilde’s emphasis may have been more on criticism against England and America serves as a convenient counterpart.

## Conclusion

As discussed above, both the Australian Mr. Hopper in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and the American Miss Worsley in *A Woman of No Importance* are key factors of conflict and comedy in English upper-class society, which highlights the different values and psychological distance between the Old World and the New World. Thus, such destabilising forces of Others, in turn, emphasize the pride and prejudice of the English Self. However, despite some shared characteristics such as youth, freedom and wealth, when comparing Oscar Wilde’s representation of Australia (Mr. Hopper) to that of America (Miss Worsley), although the relatively minor appearance of the former is still structurally significant, it is evident that the latter is stronger in terms of the level of social criticism on Britain, or rather England as Wilde specifies in his works. Many of the arguments made by Miss Worsley are in close fit with Wilde’s own views recorded in essays written after his actual visit to the country. *Lady Windermere’s Fan* could be read as Wilde’s displaced autobiography, and the fact that he deployed a female American character to voice his opinions on Britain or England may have been a reflection of his own complex and elusive identity as an Irish Other. However, there are a few points of ambivalence observed through the voice of Lord Illingworth that overlaps with his own perspective, which may hint at his skepticism towards America and Australia, countries which are rather opposite in terms of economic opulence, youth and bright imagery when compared to his own country Ireland. But in the end, while Mr. Hopper and Agatha’s marriage suggest the option of emigration out of England, Miss Worsley and Gerald’s romance implies the possible integration of her New World values into the Old World society in the future, and that may be what Wilde himself could have wished at the turn of the century.

## Notes

1 On their 1842 trip, Dickens and his wife visited the United States and Canada, including places such as New York City, Washington D.C., St. Louis, Niagara Falls, Toronto and Montreal, and others. See Jerome Meckier's "Dickens Discovers America, Dickens Discovers Dickens: The First Visit Reconsidered" (1984) and David Parker's "Dickens and America: The Unflattering Glass" (1986).

2 In the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the American colonies were happy to accept convict labourers, as represented in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722).

3 It must be emphasized that the term "New World", which originally derives from Amerigo Vespucci's pamphlet *Mundus Novus* (1503), in this paper is used in a broader sense ("A continent or country discovered or colonized at a comparatively late period" by Oxford English Dictionary), rather than simply referring to the American continents. For further discussion, see John C. Weaver's *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650-1900* (2014).

4 In this paper, the term "America" and "American" implies the republican United States and its people, victorious over Britain in the War of Independence, rather than Canada and Mexico.

5 Though smaller than other New World regions, New Zealand was depicted by some eminent writers such as Samuel Butler, whose *Erewhon* (1872) was partly based on his own experience as a sheep-farmer. There is also his more conventional travelogue, *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement* (1863).

6 In the United States and Canada, Oscar Wilde visited places such as New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, the Great Lakes, California, Niagara Falls, Cincinnati, and so on; see *Oscar Wilde* by Richard Ellmann, and *Oscar Wilde in America: the Interviews* edited by Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst.

7 His parents were upper-class Anglo-Irish intellectuals and he himself was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and Magdalen College in Oxford.

8 Robert Jackson states that "[in 1901] Sydney and Melbourne, with just under half a million people each, were large cities by any standard of the time." (Jackson 97); see *Australian Economic Development in the Nineteenth Century* (1977) for statistics.

9 Data given at Irish Central Statistics Office's "Population of Ireland 1841-2011.", archived online.

10 "The Manoeuvring Mamma's Matrimonial Monitor, and Belgravian Belle's Bridal Beacon, Containing Twelve Hints for Bewitching Bachelors into Benedicts" (1861) by Samuel Beeton, published in *The Queen*.

11 Gardens too functioned as such romantic settings, as in Tennyson's lyric "Come into the Garden, Maud" (1857), in which the narrator calls out and waits for his beloved.

12 The James-Wilde relationship has been a controversial issue for decades. To

explore the misconceptions and richness of their association, refer to the introduction of *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* (2014): “They were not friends but certainly more than acquaintances; they were not enemies but definitely rivals. They were neither collaborators nor colleagues, yet they conspired (separately) to alter both British and American literary and artistic culture. They borrowed each others’ tropes and themes. And they were as fascinated with each other as they were disdainful of each other. There is no single label that encompasses a relationship so rich” (Mendelssohn 12).

13 *Woman’s World* was published from 1886 to 1890, and Oscar Wilde was the editor between 1887 and 1889. See Clayworth: “The Woman’s World: Oscar Wilde as Editor”.

14 See Edith Wharton’s novel *The Buccaneers* (1938), in which five American girls seek husbands in Britain. Or the BBC Drama series *Downton Abbey* (2010–2015), in which the main characters Robert and Cora are typical examples of such a marriage.

15 “The American Man” (1887) was published in the *Court and Society Review*, 13<sup>th</sup> April 1887. See Anya Clayworth’s *Oscar Wilde: Selected Journalism* (2004) for the text.

16 “The American Invasion” was initially published anonymously in the *Court and Society Review*, March 23, 1887. See Anya Clayworth’s *Oscar Wilde: Selected Journalism* for the text.

17 In the essay, Wilde claims that “the proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible” (Wilde, “Soul of Man” 2), which is echoed in Hester Worsley’s monologue.

18 The Emancipation Act was enacted in 1863, but in reality issues concerning former slaves were not solved; they continued to suffer from poverty and discrimination.

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