



The Man behind the Mask

**A Study on Oscar Wilde and His Influence on
“New Woman” Ideology**

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For my dad -

Pieter de Haan

- until we meet again.

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Introduction

“To disagree with three fourths of all England on all points of view,” said Oscar Wilde, “is one of the first elements of sanity” (Abrams 1748). Evidently, Wilde was a man well ahead of his time. Born in an era marked by Victorian prudery and a high-pitched, moralistic fervor, Wilde’s views and lifestyle were truly antithetical to those of his contemporaries. Not only in style and charisma, but also in beliefs and sexuality did Wilde both shock and liven up Victorian society. “Wilde,” says Harry Smith, “brought color to the gray of Victorian England, with both his words and his appearance” (“Oscar: Wit’s End” 0:52-0:58).

During his college years at Oxford, Wilde became an ardent follower of the aesthetic movement. He grew notoriously famous for his attempts at living up to his blue china, and also became widely renowned for his eloquence of dress and speech. However, even though Wilde’s famous epigrams and aphorisms are ubiquitously present in his plays, his life was ultimately his apotheosis, said Wilde, and not his plays. “I put all my genius into my life,” he said. “I put only my talent into my works” (“Oscar Wilde Quotes”). Although Wilde’s life appears to have been one of luxury and success, it is ultimately this very same lifestyle that played an instrumental role in his downfall. During the production of his last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Wilde was accused for “posing as a somdomite” (sic) by his lover’s father, the marquis of Queensberry. In an attempt to salvage his reputation, Wilde sued for libel but it was all to no avail. Wilde lost the cataclysmic case and was thereafter arrested and officially tried for “gross indecency” (Varty xxv). After an imprisonment of two years, a forced separation from his sons and a reputation forever lost, he could do little but resort to an impoverished and anonymous life in France. Wilde eventually died a premature death in Paris as a lonely and forgotten man. With his works auctioned off and his name removed from every play, nothing but a grave remained to remind people of the eccentric

dandy they once knew.

Not until the eighties and nineties, almost a century later, were Wilde's works once again acknowledged for their literary worth (Varty xxvi). Since then, many theories concerning the true meaning of his work have been elaborately researched and discussed. Some say that Wilde was first and foremost an aesthetic dandy, and that his writing should be interpreted along the lines of the "l'art pour l'art" philosophy¹. Others see him more as a misogynist, and still others as a socialist or communist, but not necessarily as a feminist. Some academics argue that his works are void of purpose, since Wilde himself was not overly fond of literature as a mouthpiece for propaganda. "The aim of most of our modern novelists," said Wilde, "seems to be, not to write good novels, but to write novels that will do good" (Ksinan 420). With the exception of but a few critics, however, the full extent of Wilde's connections with feminism and new woman ideology has not always been acknowledged. Sos Eltis and Gail Finney, for example, are perhaps the only critics who have discussed Wilde's underlying feminism at great length. Others, such as George Watt and Margaret Beetham, touch briefly upon Wilde's involvement, but fall short of recognizing his contributions as being similar to, if not greater than, those of Elizabeth Gaskell or Thomas Hardy. When assessing the influence of the Victorian Age on feminism, it is often Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw who are referred to as the true feminists of that era. "The New Woman sprang fully armed from Ibsen's brain," said fellow writer Max Beerbohm ("New Woman"). Wilde, instead, has been honored more for his wit and progressive lifestyle. His homosexuality, in particular, is what is remembered best. Wilde's true merits as a feminist, however, have often been underestimated.

This feminist arena, at the time, was characterized by the "New Woman" movement. In this movement, "Authors (both female and male) were suddenly exploring gender,

¹ art for art's sake

rejecting motherhood, and considering furthering their careers before accepting their domestic callings. The New Woman rebelled against the Victorian model of the woman as a pure, domestic angel” (“Covenant”). The New Woman was ambitious, independent and educated. She demanded her equal share of rights and was a fervent advocate of women’s suffrage. The New Woman, in short, was everything the Victorian woman was not.

Over the course of his short but prolific career as a writer, Wilde exuded an attitude towards women that was decidedly different from his Victorian colleagues. As opposed to depicting society as it should be, Wilde deliberately used comic exaggeration to expose Victorian society for what it really was. Wilde’s contemporaries, however, “wish[ed] to reform the morals, rather than . . . portray the manners of their age” (Ksinan 420). Victorian novels and plays often followed set patterns with a predetermined outcome. Female characters who did not live up to the Victorian principles of virtue were ostracized from society, and death or sickness were sure to follow. Redemption, in particular, was certainly not an option. Wilde, however, dared to be different. Instead of using characters that are angelically good or irreparably evil, Wilde forced his audience to entertain a more nuanced view of the world. Like Josephine Butler, Wilde realized that “while the collective voice was mouthing moral platitudes, its hand was under the supposedly inviolate petticoat” (Watt 7). Not everything, suggests Wilde, was as it seemed.

By portraying Victorian society as it was, rather than as Victorians thought it should be, Wilde reveals an ongoing tradition of hypocrisy towards women. In doing so, he confronts his audience with the prevailing double standards of their society, and leaves them no choice but to come face to face with the truth. However, as Wilde himself wisely remarked, “If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they will kill you” (Moncur). Wilde realized that, in a society which had accustomed itself to blatantly ignoring the truth, the language of humor would be his only safeguard. On numerous

occasions, either Wilde himself or one of his characters asserts that “life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about” (Wilde, *Lady Windermere* 170; Varty xxv). Therefore, even though Wilde’s plays, at first glance, appear to be mere comedies, it is this very element of comedy that serves as a mouthpiece for Wilde’s criticism. “Wilde deploys comedy and the effects of laughter,” says Varty, “to make a subversive critique of the dominant culture and customs of his day” (xxi). Without the element of humor, Wilde’s plays would probably never have made it to the stage.

In light of prevailing criticism concerning the use of an author’s work as a reflection of his own opinions, it is important to point out that Wilde’s feminism can be deduced not only from his writing, but also from his life as a whole. As a son, husband and even as a paid employee, Wilde actively facilitated the birth of the “New Woman”. As newly-appointed editor in chief of the frivolous *Lady’s World* magazine, Wilde immediately changed the magazine’s name to *Woman’s World*. As an editor, Wilde no longer tolerated the magazine’s previously frivolous appeal. Instead,

Wilde intended to use *Woman’s World* to display and disseminate woman’s writing, to exhibit the breadth of their interests, to underwrite their talents as thinkers, artists, scholars. The editorship gave Wilde the opportunity to challenge society with a renovated model of women’s mental life and labors – which society almost unanimously agreed were not serious and peripheral at best. (Ksinan 409)

Moreover, Wilde also invited his mother “Speranza” and his wife Constance to write scholarly articles for the magazine. In his own contributions to the magazine, Wilde repeatedly praises and encourages the female contributors in their intellectual achievements. In his younger years, Wilde was also witness to the many gatherings organized by his highly intellectual and politically-involved mother. Wilde’s avid advocacy of women’s rights is therefore only a natural outcome of his upbringing.

The four comedies to be used in this study are *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. One of the first issues Wilde addresses in his social comedies is the notion of the fallen woman. As Wilde points out throughout his plays, there are always two sides to a story. His reconstructions of the prevailing hypocrisies also demonstrate that a woman is never purely good or evil. Wilde frees the female characters from society's expectations and allows them to determine their own future. Similarly, a woman's maternal duties are discussed at great length as well. Instead of depicting mothers whose sole purpose in life is to bear and rear children, Wilde introduced the radical notion of voluntary motherhood. This form of motherhood gave his female characters the choice as to whether they wanted to be involved in their children's lives. Lastly, Wilde's plays also serve to unveil the double standards prevalent within the Victorian institution of marriage. Wilde, says Varty, "deploys the structure of the well-made play only to defy its conventionally reactionary politics" (Varty xvi).

Chapter 1 – The Rise of the Fallen Woman

“The traditional ‘Fall of Man’ appears to have been transformed, for many Victorians, into the ‘fall of woman’” (Johnson 225). This fall, adds Johnson, “is made more poignant by the madonna-harlot syndrome that conceives of woman as essentially an angelic creature” (225). Woman, it was thought in the Victorian Age, possessed all the fine qualities that could be expected of an angelic creature: she was pure, selfless, humble, and above all, without sin. In the famous words of the nineteenth-century poet Coventry Patmore, woman was meant to be “an angel in the house” (1723). This tendency in thought fitted in comfortably with the general edicts of morality and propriety of the time; an age in which the stringent codes of conduct left little room for one’s sinful nature and its transgressions. Queen Victoria herself encouraged a manner of living in which her subjects “established a set of values which emphasized hard work, thrift, religious observance, family life, an awareness of one’s duty, absolute honesty in public life and extreme respectability in sexual matters” (O’Driscoll 28). It comes as no surprise, however, that these goals were highly ambitious in nature and proved, particularly for men, too high of a challenge to uphold. Prostitution, for example, was rampant at the end of the nineteenth century, as were mistresses and other adulterous relationships. A life of double standards became a necessary form of survival and soon facilitated the development of “sinful” double lives. Men began to lead one life by day and another by night.

For women, however, there existed an entirely different set of standards. Instead of turning a blind eye to their possible faults and shortcomings, as was the case with men, Victorian society still expected women to remain a symbol of all that was pure, just and true. As Lord Darlington says of Lady Windermere in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, “This woman has purity and innocence. She has everything we men have lost” (Wilde 202). In stark contrast to men, women were seen as “custodians of purity, self-sacrifice, submission, and sexlessness” (Eltis 412). They, in short, became emblematic of all that was meant to be good in Victorian society. Naturally, these strenuous expectations exacted an immense pressure on women to act, think and speak accordingly, and to

live up to the expected norm at all times. It pushed Victorian women onto a very shaky pedestal; a pedestal whose foundations were more easily shattered than that they could ever be rebuilt. The result, as Finney points out, was either devaluation or overvaluation (92). Once such a glorified woman was found to be with fault, this pedestal would immediately topple over and leave a fallen woman in its place. From then onwards there would simply be no turning back. In his study of fallen women in Victorian literature, George Watt discovers that “The heroine herself never feels her lot is to be anything but one of misery . . . She accepts that she can never go back . . . the fall, when it comes, will be final” (5).

In each of his social comedies, Wilde deploys this typically Victorian theme of the fallen woman. Each play has a “fallen” character posing as a potential threat to the stability and well-being of the morally upright characters. It does not seem to have been remarked before that each of these characters is listed last or next-to-last in the character lists at the beginning of each of Wilde’s social comedies. Opposite to what one may expect, this placement shows no correlation to the order of appearance; instead, it appears to confirm the identity of the fallen woman of the play. As will become evident, however, Wilde establishes the theme of the fallen woman in a manner entirely different from his Victorian contemporaries.

In *A Woman of No Importance*, Mrs. Arbuthnot, the character whom Wilde’s audiences would have identified as sinful and deviant, passionately defines what it is to be a fallen woman. A fallen woman, she says, “will always suffer. For her there is no joy, no peace, no atonement. She is a woman who drags a chain like a guilty thing. She is a woman who wears a mask, like a thing that is a leper. The fire cannot purify her. The waters cannot quench her anguish. Nothing can heal her! . . . She is lost! She is a lost soul!” (Wilde, *A Woman* 264). A fallen woman was a woman with a past; a woman who had either consciously or unwillingly become involved in what was then considered inappropriate behavior. Regardless of whether she had been the victim or the perpetrator, such a woman became a “persona non grata”² and was typically ostracized from society. As a result, there

2 an unwelcome person

evolved a dichotomy between the two types of women and the worlds they represented: one was to be married and the other was to be used (8). “Keeping the two worlds apart,” says Watt, “was essential for the preservation of the *status quo*. If a woman transgressed this represented a threat to the whole system” (8). By refusing to marry her when Mrs. Arbuthnot became pregnant with his child, Lord Illingworth automatically thrust her into the latter group of women. “I am disgraced,” she tells her son Gerald, “he is not. That is all. It is the usual history of a man and a woman as it usually happens, as it always happens. And the ending is the ordinary ending. The woman suffers. The man goes free” (Wilde, *A Woman* 269).

It is interesting to note, however, that Wilde allows Mrs. Arbuthnot’s case to develop into a matter of voluntary seclusion as opposed to one dictated by society. Lady Hunstanton invites her on numerous occasions but asserts that it is Mrs. Arbuthnot herself who refuses to come into society. Although Mrs. Arbuthnot, “the lady in black velvet”(Wilde 247), the mother of illegitimate son Gerald and former mistress to Lord Illingworth, would typically have been classified by the audience as a fallen woman, it is she who, according to Lady Hunstanton, “doesn’t know anything about the wicked society in which we all live. She won’t go into it. She is far too good. I consider it a great honour her coming to me last night. It gave quite an atmosphere of respectability to the party” (Wilde, *A Woman* 267). It is perhaps Mrs. Arbuthnot’s dress and honorific title, however, that may have led Lady Hunstanton to believe she was inviting a respectable widow, as opposed to a fallen woman. The American Hester Worsley adds to that, telling Mrs. Arbuthnot that “When you came into the room, somehow you brought with you a sense of what is good and pure in life” (260). Wilde appears to be taking sides and is clearly voting in favor of the fallen woman. Instead of adhering to the Victorian literary tradition in which the sinful woman is punished, overthrown or cast out, as can be seen in much of the boulevard drama of the time, he deliberately portrays Mrs. Arbuthnot as a morally upright character. Granted, she too has character traits that are less than admirable, especially when one assesses the detrimental effect her voluntarily prolonged martyrdom has on Gerald’s career. On the whole, however, Wilde depicts Mrs. Arbuthnot with both pleasant

and unpleasant qualities, and virtues and vices like any other Victorian individual. She cannot, suggests Wilde, be simply reduced to a mere fallen woman. Instead, Wilde empowers Mrs. Arbuthnot and gives her rights and a voice where before the fallen woman would have had none. She even manages to outdo Lord Illingworth in their struggle for Gerald's loyalty, thereby revealing Lord Illingworth's true character and transgressions in the process. Victory is ultimately hers when in the final throes of the play, Lord Illingworth and not Mrs. Arbuthnot becomes the person "of no importance" (278).

In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde broadens the spectrum of fallen women by presenting a radically different type, namely the assertive Mrs. Erlynne. As remorseful and aloof as Mrs. Arbuthnot was, so seemingly indifferent to sin is Mrs. Erlynne. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Mrs. Erlynne disrupts the idyllic peace within the Windermere marriage by blackmailing Lord Windermere in her desperate attempt at re-entry into respectable society. "Many a woman has a past," says the Duchess of Berwick about Mrs. Erlynne, "but I am told that she has at least a dozen, and that they all fit" (Wilde, *Lady Windermere* 171). Her limited chances at success are confirmed when Dumby wittily asserts that Mrs. Erlynne has only a past in front of her, instead of a future (200). Mrs. Erlynne is a character intimately acquainted with the perils of being a fallen woman. "You don't know what it is," she warns Lady Windermere, "to fall into the pit, to be despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at – to be an outcast! . . . One pays for one's sin, and then one pays again, and all one's life one pays" (Wilde 197-198). Lady Windermere describes Mrs. Erlynne as "a woman whom it is an infamy to meet, a degradation to know, a vile woman, a woman who comes between husband and wife" (196).

As it turns out, however, it is Lady Windermere and not Mrs. Erlynne who finds herself on the brink of disgrace. Furthermore, it is Mrs. Erlynne, the fallen woman, who unexpectedly takes on a savior role normally reserved for the upright heroine. After she suspects her husband of having an affair with Mrs. Erlynne, Lady Windermere decides to follow up Lord Darlington on his offer and intends to elope with him. Mrs. Erlynne discovers her secret schemings and is quick to intervene,

exclaiming “Does life repeat its tragedies? . . . Oh! You are on the brink of ruin . . . I’m here to save you, if I can” (Wilde, *Lady Windermere* 192, 195, 199). The traditional Victorian roles have now been drastically reversed, giving Mrs. Erlynne a chance to redeem herself by saving her daughter; Lady Windermere is now the potentially sinful woman. “How securely one thinks one lives out of reach of temptation, sin, folly,” says Lady Windermere, “And then suddenly – Oh! Life is terrible. It rules us, we do not rule it” (206). Ironically, both Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne are referred to as good women. Lady Windermere is repeatedly called a “good woman” by both Lord Windermere and Lord Darlington, whereas Mrs. Erlynne receives the compliment from Lady Windermere herself. According to Lady Windermere, however, Mrs. Erlynne’s “goodness” stems from her decision to keep Lady Windermere’s secret, rather than from a virtuous character trait. It is therefore of no small significance that the play’s full title was, in fact, *Lady Windermere’s Fan: A Play About a Good Woman*. This naturally confronted the Victorian audience with a profound realization: either both women are the “Good Woman”, or both are simply equally bad.

In his comedies, it gradually becomes clear that Wilde strongly disagrees with the Victorian perceptions of what determines good and evil. He repeatedly seems to propound the idea that sin is simply a matter of interpretation. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, it is the Wilde-like Lord Darlington who confesses that

Nowadays, so many conceited people go about society pretending to be good that I think it shows rather a sweet and modest disposition to pretend to be bad. Besides, there is this to be said. If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn’t. Such is the astounding stupidity of optimism. (Wilde, *Lady Windermere* 166-7)

Victorian society dictated what and who was good or bad, but “life,” says Lord Darlington, is “too complex a thing to be settled by these hard and fast rules” (168). Lord Darlington sums up Wilde’s opinions perfectly in an earnest conversation with Lady Windermere, a character who in a sense represents the very essence of traditional Victorian society. “I am afraid,” he says, “that good people do a great deal of harm in this world. Certainly the greatest harm they do is that they make badness

of such extraordinary importance. It is absurd to divide people into good and bad” (168). Lady Windermere, however, confidently adheres to these rules and strictly applies them where necessary (169). It is not until she finds herself on the brink of disgrace that she ardently defends the fallen Mrs. Erlynne, realizing “I don’t think now that people can be divided into the good and the bad as though they were two separate races or creations” (207). She continues by pointing out that “What are called good women may have terrible things in them. . . . Bad women, as they are termed, may have in them sorrow, repentance, pity, sacrifice” (207-208). In defense of fallen women, Wilde hereby criticizes the hasty assumptions and short-sighted judgment which caused certain women to fall from society’s good graces in the first place. In the fiery discussion between Lord Windermere and his ‘puritan’ wife about Mrs. Erlynne, Lord Windermere points out that “People may chatter about her [Mrs. Erlynne], do chatter about her, of course, but they don’t know anything definite against her” (176). The highly volatile and superficial nature of Victorian judgment is made even more clear when Mrs. Erlynne asserts that “if a woman really repents, she has to go to a bad dressmaker, otherwise no one believes in her” (212). Instead of succumbing to this spurious expectation, Mrs. Erlynne retorts that, unlike Mrs. Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance*, she would never consider dressing down as a means by which to prove her repentance (212). In this minor but significant detail, Wilde allows Mrs. Erlynne to become a uniquely strong and independent woman, free from society’s claims on both her life and the assumption that appearance must serve as an adequate judge of one’s character. More importantly, instead of living out the rest of her life in a convent or ending up in the graveyard, as was the norm with fallen women in Victorian literature, Wilde has Mrs. Erlynne happily leave England of her own accord. As will be discussed in chapter two, Mrs. Erlynne determines the course of her own destiny, marries the affluent Lord Augustus and is simply relieved to have rid herself of her maternal duties.

At the very heart of the problem are also characters such as the Duchess of Berwick, who gladly partake in gossip and scandal, and as a result, easily oscillate between their views of society’s ‘delinquents’. Mrs. Erlynne, for example, is to the Duchess a “horrid woman . . . quite scandalous . .

. absolutely inadmissible into society” (171). “I don’t know what society is coming to,” she continues. “The most dreadful people seem to go everywhere. They certainly come to my parties” (170). According to the Duchess, however, what defines people like Mrs. Erlynne as being dreadful, is that her nieces, who “never talk scandal” but of course “remark on it to everyone,” confirm that Mrs. Erlynne is frequently seen in Lord Windermere’s company and is therefore said to be a sinful woman (Wilde 172). As soon as Lady Windermere invites Mrs. Erlynne to her house, the Duchess seems to forget all about her former objections to Mrs. Erlynne, since “she must be alright if *you* [Lady Windermere] invite her. A most attractive woman, and has such sensible views on life. . . . Can’t imagine why people speak against her” (Wilde 188). Soon thereafter she conveniently admits that she must have been misled by her “horrid nieces . . . they’re always talking scandal.” Only moments before, however, these nieces were still considered “such nice domestic creatures . . . so good . . . they never talk scandal” (188). Lord Windermere, on the other hand, appeared to be just as much to blame and yet the Duchess fails to mention his transgressions. His gender, it seems, pardoned his affiliations with the scandal. Wilde also playfully jests at the Victorian tendency to denounce anything even remotely connected to sin when, in *A Woman of No Importance*, Mrs. Allonby reports that there is an orchid in the garden as beautiful as the seven deadly sins. To this Lady Hunstanton replies “My dear, I hope there is nothing of the kind. I will certainly speak to the gardener” (Wilde, *A Woman* 229).

As mentioned earlier on, Victorian society allowed for no faults in women but ironically did support an entirely separate code of conduct for men. Throughout his comedies, Wilde consistently hints at this hypocrisy by allowing several of his characters to question the rules for men and women. “Why should there be one law for men, and another for women?” asks Jack in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (415). The puritan-like Hester takes it even further and demands that men and women are either both punished, or both forgiven.

If a man and woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love or loathe each other there. Let them both be branded. Set a mark, if you wish, on each, but don’t

punish the one and let the other go free. Don't have one law for men and another for women.

You are unjust to women in England. (Wilde, *A Woman* 242)

In Wilde's opinion, however, Hester's views on the matter are rather rigid as well. As can be seen in *An Ideal Husband* after Lady Chiltern discovers the nature of her husband's past, Wilde stresses the importance of the ability to forgive as well. One problem, says George Watt, is that the Victorian "male world's 'moral reality' [asserted that] immorality is not in the act but being caught at it" (Watt 2). Men could simply do as they pleased. The conversation at the Windermere home at the beginning of *Lady Windermere's Fan* sums up the profound difference between the treatment of sinful men and sinful women:

LADY WINDERMERE. I will have no one in my house about whom there is any scandal.

LORD DARLINGTON. Oh, don't say that, Lady Windermere. I should never be admitted!

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Oh, men don't matter. With women it is different. We're good.

Some of us are, at least. (170)

It is therefore of no small importance when Mrs. Allonby points out that "The one advantage of playing with fire . . . is that one never gets even singed. It is the people who don't know how to play with it who get burned up" (Wilde, *A Woman* 224-225). Conniving characters such as Mrs. Allonby and Lord Illingworth manage to escape society's censure, whereas the morally upright, such as Mrs. Arbuthnot (*A Woman*), who has little training in the language of deception, are the ones who fall prey to the whimsical but permanent verdicts of Victorian society. The irony of this predicament is made painfully clear when Gerald, in defense of Lord Illingworth's licentious behavior, questions Mrs. Arbuthnot whether it is "fair to go back twenty years in any man's career". Unfortunately, even if Lord Illingworth's past were to be ignored, Mrs. Arbuthnot will never be freed from hers. "Besides," he asks with an added hint of Wildean irony, "what have you or I to do with Lord Illingworth's early life?" (Wilde, *A Woman* 263).

The juxtaposition of society's double standards can also be seen in the manner in which the Duchess of Berwick (*Lady Windermere*) chooses to ostracize Mrs. Erlynne for her behavior but

patronizingly merely scolds her brother, Lord Augustus, for his. Although her brother is infatuated with Mrs. Erlynne, the Duchess only classifies Mrs. Erlynne's actions as reprehensible, and not those of Lord Augustus. Granted, her brother *is* depicted as a "disreputable" character. However, in stark contrast to a sinful woman's transgressions, Lord Augustus's misdemeanor makes him a man of experience instead of a fallen character. "Experience," says Cecil Graham, "is the name Tuppy [Lord Augustus] gives to his mistakes" (Wilde, *Lady Windermere* 203). In defiance of every moral edict of Victorian society, Wilde clearly demonstrates that men like Lord Darlington, Lord Illingworth, Lord Augustus and Jack Worthing, men who were just as culpable, if not more so, as their female counterparts, were treated more as mischievous children who merely required a gentle scolding, rather than men whose transgressions, if treated similarly to those committed by women, should have led to their expulsion from society. Lady Caroline's brother in *A Woman of No Importance* leads a similarly delinquent life. "I regard Henry as infamous, absolutely infamous" she says, "But I am bound to state, as you were remarking, Jane, that he is excellent company, and he has one of the best cooks in London, and after a good dinner one can forgive anybody, even one's own relations" (Wilde 243). Her brother's infamy is apparently readily redeemed by his excellent dinner parties.

Throughout Wilde's comedies, it slowly becomes clear that Wilde propagates a markedly pro-woman agenda. He skillfully depicts the double standards of the Victorian age and successfully confronts his audience with the biting hypocrisy. Wilde further illustrates the highly volatile nature of the Victorian perception of good and evil, and highlights the superficiality of its judgment. Wilde was also one of the progressive authors of his age who, as George Watt aptly phrases it, was able to "expose the sham respectability which personifies the patriarchy, and give [himself] the role of social reformer in the process" (7). Wilde adhered to the traditional, Victorian character roles such as the ostracized fallen woman and the upright protagonist, only to drastically reverse the roles by the end of the play. The fallen woman is redeemed and the morally upright is confronted with his or her own sinful nature. "The only difference between the saint and the sinner," says Lord Illingworth

in a typically Wildean epigram, “is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future” (Wilde *A Woman* 256).

Chapter 2 – The Perils and Pitfalls of Victorian Motherhood

“Since early in the 19th century,” says Lynn Abrams, “domesticity and motherhood were portrayed as sufficient emotional fulfillment for [Victorian] women”. “Many middle-class women,” she adds, “regarded motherhood and domestic life as a ‘sweet vocation’”. Women in the Victorian age were expected to run a respectable household, provide undivided support to their husband and, above all, serve as breeding machines for the nation. A woman’s maternal responsibilities formed an integral part of her identity. “Marriage,” continues Abrams, “signified a woman’s maturity and respectability, but motherhood was confirmation that she had entered the world of womanly virtue and female fulfillment”.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Victorian literature was replete with role models of such domestic virtue. Varying from poems and plays to complete handbooks, Victorian literature always reminded women of their maternal responsibilities. As Sarah Ellis cautioned her fellow females in *The Women of England*, a handbook stipulating her views on ideal womanhood, “You [women] have deep responsibilities; you have urgent claims; a nation’s moral wealth is in your keeping” (Johnson 25). All women, it was thought, shared an inherent desire to enter into the sacred bond of motherhood. If a mother failed to heed her maternal responsibilities, then the consequences as reflected in Victorian literature were rather drastic in nature. The repercussions often involved her living out her life in shame and selfless remorse in a nunnery, or some other altruistic form of penitence (Eltis 5). Women were expected to have an innate desire to bear and rear children, and to think otherwise was simply unheard of.

In Oscar Wilde’s social comedies, however, Wilde appears to refute this general assumption. In a time in which birth control was only just being marginally introduced, Wilde propositions the revolutionary notion of a motherhood that is voluntary. This form of motherhood allowed for a certain measure of leniency where before there had been only a rigid doctrine. Wilde’s female characters openly question the perils and pitfalls of Victorian motherhood, and some even overtly

admit to having had no maternal ambitions to begin with. Their mentality and their audacious behavior therefore stand in stark contrast to that of women in contemporary Victorian literature and theater.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, for instance, Mrs. Erlynne serves as a prime embodiment of such voluntary motherhood. As discussed in the first chapter, Mrs. Erlynne is a “woman with a past”. She does not meet society’s standards in terms of moral conduct and, more importantly, she purposefully neglects her duties as a mother. Her daughter, Lady Windermere, is unaware of the fact that Mrs. Erlynne is her mother, and her husband Lord Windermere has no intention of revealing the scandalous family relations. “I dare not tell her [Lady Windermere] who this woman really is,” says Lord Windermere. “The shame would kill her” (Wilde 178). Having abandoned her husband and child twenty years ago in pursuit of another man, Mrs. Erlynne is, in more ways than one, a clear example of a “fallen woman”. “A mother’s love means devotion, unselfishness, sacrifice,” says Lord Windermere to Mrs. Erlynne. “What could you know of such things?” (213).

From a Victorian perspective, Mrs. Erlynne would not have been allowed to return to respectable society, let alone make profitable demands for herself at the expense of a morally upright man such as Lord Windermere. Such a woman would normally be hounded out of society and shunned for her negligent behavior. Throughout *Lady Windermere's Fan*, however, Wilde sets a tone that is markedly different from the novels and dramas of his time. Instead of allowing Mrs. Erlynne to be completely evicted from society, Wilde entrusts her with an autonomous spirit and allows her to determine her own future. Mrs. Erlynne then says that the English climate doesn’t suit her and that she is leaving for France of her own free will. “My – heart is affected here,” she says, “and that I don’t like” (209). Apparently, Mrs. Erlynne discovered she has maternal feelings towards her daughter after all, and perhaps now fears their potential growth if she were to stay in England any longer.

As Eltis points out, Mrs. Erlynne “scorns repentance, rejects motherhood as demanding too great a sacrifice of self, and yet, in spite of all this, ends the play triumphantly in possession of a

husband” (80). The unmotherly mother takes control of her life and never for a moment shows any signs of suffering or remorse. She manages her own income by means of blackmail, thwarts Lord Windermere’s plans to unveil her identity, arranges a lucrative marriage for herself and leaves England in search of a more liberal climate. No longer a victim, Mrs. Erlynne clearly arranges redemption on her own terms:

I suppose, Windermere, you would like me to retire into a convent, or become a hospital nurse, or something of that kind, as people do in silly modern novels. That is stupid of you Arthur; in real life we don’t do such things – not as long as we have any good looks left, at any rate. No – what consoles one nowadays is not repentance, but pleasure. Repentance is quite out of date. (212)

When faced with the possibility of renewing her ties with her daughter, Mrs. Erlynne makes it perfectly clear that she has no intention of doing so. “Oh, don’t imagine,” she says, “I am going to have a pathetic scene with her, weep on her neck and tell her who I am . . . I have no ambition to play the part of a mother. Only once in my life have I known a mother’s feelings . . . They were terrible – they made me suffer . . . I want to live childless” (212). Wilde even goes so far as to add a touch of humor to this otherwise disturbing situation and has Mrs. Erlynne assert that, since she has never admitted to being older than twenty-nine, she can hardly be expected to pose as a mother (212).

Even when Mrs. Erlynne does act honorably and selflessly by sacrificing her own reputation so that her daughter’s might be saved, an act that may have partially redeemed her as a mother, Mrs. Erlynne solemnly demands that Lady Windermere not “spoil the one good thing I have done in my life by telling it to anyone” (214). In this scene, however, it is ironic that Mrs. Erlynne ultimately appears to be a more suitable mother than Lady Windermere. Mrs. Erlynne wittingly chooses to sacrifice her reputation in order to save her daughter’s honor, and yet Lady Windermere deliberately forsakes her maternal duties as she conspires to elope with Lord Darlington. In this respect, it is also no small coincidence that both women carry the name Margaret. Not only does this reaffirm the

Victorian notion that the sins of the parents must be visited on the children, as discussed by Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance*, but it also implies that the two women are simply not so different after all. Both, suggests Wilde, are equally susceptible to a sinful nature.

Mrs. Erlynne is therefore a character full of Victorian contradictions. She distances herself from her role as a mother, and yet she is rewarded with a promising future instead of a life of penitence in a nunnery. She is spurned by the other female characters but still succeeds in claiming her rightful place in society. Although not in public, she does repeatedly call Lady Windermere her daughter, even though Lord Windermere attempts to overrule those claims with marital claims of his own (210-211). She even acts in ways that are worthy of praise and yet urges her daughter to keep it a secret rather than have society discover her honorable qualities. In a time when maternal duties, innocence, morality and responsibility were highly in fashion for women, Wilde subtly but successfully depicts a Victorian woman that defies all moral codes of conduct, and yet turns out to be a better mother than the supposedly faultless Lady Windermere. As Eltis aptly points out, “Mrs. Erlynne not only refuses to act according to the audience’s expectations, she even mocks those very expectations” (73).

In the same play we meet another mother, namely the Duchess of Berwick. In stark contrast to Mrs. Erlynne, this mother *does* fit the description of Victorian motherhood. Her treatment of her daughter Agatha, however, leads to such absurd situations that Wilde’s biting criticism certainly becomes very hard to ignore. Agatha is sent to and fro in the house on the most amusing assignments. Every time the conversation between the Duchess and Lady Windermere delves more deeply into Lord Windermere’s transgressions, Agatha is sent at random to admire photographs she is supposedly fond of, or watch the sunset to which she is suddenly devoted. The Duchess then postulates that Mr. Hopper’s interest in her daughter is the result of Agatha’s clever talk. The only clever talk Agatha utters, however, is the “yes mammas” she manages to squeeze in between her mother’s incessant flow of words. The Duchess then continues to applaud Agatha for always saying the right thing, and only a moment later, reprimands her for saying “the most silly things possible”

(188). The most silly thing possible, in this case, was presumably Agatha's affirmative answer when asked by Mr. Hopper to join him in Australia. The Duchess had educated Agatha well in the practice of Victorian dependence and ignorance, but as soon as it appears to be to her disadvantage, the Duchess selfishly intervenes and prevents the submissive Agatha from leaving England. The irony of the situation, however, is that the Duchess considers herself a good mother, since "a mother who doesn't part with a daughter every season has no real affection" (173-174). The Duchess as mother, Wilde implies, is not a character to be taken seriously as she oscillates in her views on kangaroos, adoring them at first, but loathing them soon after, when Australia threatens to become Agatha's new home. Throughout the play, the Duchess merely acts in the interest of her own reputation, rather than in Agatha's favor.

In *A Woman of No Importance*, Wilde also takes a subtle but clear stance on the Victorian notion of motherhood. Mrs. Arbuthnot, mother of illegitimate child Gerald, is her own worst judge. Instead of accepting repeated invitations to join the other women in their social gatherings, Mrs. Arbuthnot remains a self-inflicted martyr. The problem, however, is that by heeding the Victorian codes of conduct, Mrs. Arbuthnot is not only severely punishing herself, but more importantly, she is also indirectly punishing her son. By pursuing these Victorian ideals of martyrdom, her own social ambitions (or lack thereof) are in conflict with her son's prospective career. Now no longer the ideal, selfless mother herself, Mrs. Arbuthnot holds onto her self-inflicted Victorian seclusion, but evidently does so at her son's expense. "Child of my shame," she cries out to Gerald, "be still the child of my shame!" (272).

By holding up a mirror to his Victorian audience, Wilde succeeds in challenging the popular tenets of Victorian motherhood. He creates characters who are more rounded than Victorian audiences would give them credit for. An unmotherly mother turns out to be an adventuress with a noble heart. Instead of facing the traditional Victorian consequences of her subversive behavior, Mrs. Erlynne takes matters into her own hands by marrying Lord Augustus and moving abroad. Her daughter Lady Windermere appears to be just as susceptible to sin, and suddenly finds herself on an

all too slippery slope when she too almost leaves child and husband behind in pursuit of a brighter future with Lord Darlington. The Duchess of Berwick and Mrs. Arbuthnot both succumb to the mores of Victorian motherhood, but do so to the detriment of their children. As Eltis says of Wilde's social comedies, he "not only subverted all the conventions governing the behavior of the fallen woman," but more specifically, Wilde precariously "dared to question the sacred status of motherhood as woman's greatest ambition" (73).

Chapter 3 – Marriage and Its Mistresses

“Although men could divorce their wives for adultery,” says M.H. Abrams in a discussion on the role of women in the Victorian Era, “wives could divorce their husbands only if adultery were combined with cruelty, bigamy, incest, or bestiality” (1055). Life was far from easy for married women in the Victorian Age. The patriarchal society of the time left little room for the needs, ambitions and, most importantly, the rights of women. As several magazines of the time point out, a woman’s duties were grounded entirely in her identity as a wife, mother and mistress (Beetham 27). She had minimal rights concerning her children, her safety or her reputation, and had little or no private property rights until the introduction of much-needed divorce legislation in the 1880s (M.H. Abrams 1055). Although these measures did serve to ameliorate a woman’s circumstances, it did little to improve the institution of marriage itself. A Victorian marital union still often remained one of inequality, hypocrisy and numerous sexual aberrations, and yet at the same time, it exacted unrealistic expectations of virtuous perfection on both partners as well. Since “Victorianism” in general, as Johnson puts it, meant “sexual hypocrisy, repression, denial of natural impulse”, it comes as no surprise that marriage itself was not left unaffected (16).

Victorian marriage, argued Wilde, “was founded on corrupt ethics of ownership, possession and property in which it was impossible for individuals to flourish” (Varty xx). In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, Wilde, in his discussion of a socialistic, communistic utopia, favors an equal distribution of wealth and property. Since Victorian marriage was founded among other things on the possession and transfer of property, “the abolition of private property,” said Wilde, would require that “marriage in its present form must disappear” (“Soul”). Throughout his social comedies, it becomes increasingly clear that Wilde was highly critical of the Victorian institution of marriage. Although he addresses the shortcomings of both husbands and wives, Wilde uses the wives and mothers in particular to undermine the generally accepted mores and manners concerning Victorian marriage. In doing so, Wilde also mocks the naivety with which women were expected to

enter into marriage, and at the same time, boldly ridicules the widely condoned extramarital affairs.

A large dosage of criticism in Wilde's social comedies was directed at the practice of preserving a woman's naivety until marriage. All necessary measures were taken in order to safeguard the inherently innocent nature of women. The natural result was that these Victorian women were kept naive and ignorant concerning matters of sexuality, marriage, prostitution and other such forbidden topics of conversation. They were taught, as Lady Markby points out in *An Ideal Husband*, "not to understand anything . . . I assure you that the amount of things I and my poor dear sister were taught not to understand was quite extraordinary" (320). Women were kept in a state of artificial oblivion so that nothing could tarnish this ideal notion of their womanhood. Not until marriage did women discover the ways of the world. Until then, they were to be taught to worship and be worshiped in return. "And how I worshiped you!" says Lady Chiltern to Sir Robert Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*, after she discovers the intricacies of her husband's fraudulent past. "You were to me something apart from common life, a thing pure, noble, honest, without stain. . . . I made of a man like you my ideal! the ideal of my life!" (325).

As it turns out, Lady Chiltern's love for her husband Robert is based entirely on whether or not he is worthy of her love. Quoting Tennyson's *Guinevere* as she remorsefully realizes her undervaluation of the by then deceased King Arthur, Lady Chiltern asserts that "We needs must love the highest when we see it!" (304). Little does she realize the foreboding implications of this assertion, since it will ultimately lead to a true test of her love for Robert. Lady Chiltern loves "the highest" when she sees it, which directly implies that if someone is not "the highest", then that person is not worthy of her love. Soon thereafter, when she is confronted with her husband's questionable past, Lady Chiltern's initial reaction is to sever all ties with her husband (303). Her ignorance before marriage therefore plays a detrimental role in her relationship with Robert. As Gertrude comes to terms with her husband's past, it is her own past, and not the present, that causes her to cry out to Robert, saying "We women worship when we love; and when we lose our worship, we lose everything. Oh! Don't kill my love for you, don't kill that!" (303). If Lady Chiltern's

ignorance of the world had not been encouraged to such an extent, then her marriage might have altogether avoided such a near fatal blow.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Lady Bracknell also confirms the importance of a woman's naivety before marriage, declaring "I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable" (410). She promotes superficiality of every kind and even encourages Cecily to lie about her age, and to choose a future husband based on looks (410-11). Lady Caroline in *A Woman of No Importance* sums up the spirit of the age nicely when she reprimands Hester Worsley, the American, for her free-spirited praise of Gerald Arbuthnot, saying "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" (222).

Next to his criticism of the role of women before they were married, Wilde also satirizes the institution of Victorian marriage in general. In *An Ideal Husband*, Lord Goring, the archetype of the Victorian dandy, is a close friend of the Chilterns. Like Wilde, Goring functions as both an intricately involved member of Victorian society, and yet also as a detached critic of the very same. Interesting to note is that Wilde added stage directions concerning a description of Goring only after he was released from prison (Varty xx). This description depicts a version of Goring that highly resembled Wilde in both physical features and in dress. One could infer from these later additions that Goring may therefore have been intended as a literary personification of Wilde. In his role as family confidant, Goring is provided with ample opportunities to point out the flaws in Robert and Gertrude's marriage. In doing so, Wilde uses Goring as a vessel by which he could freely voice his criticism on Victorian marriage in general.

A critical view of Victorian marriage as a whole is seen when Goring finds himself in a predicament concerning his affections towards Mabel Chiltern. His meddlesome father, Lord Caversham, insists that Goring has no freedom of choice when it comes to marriage. "That is a matter for me, sir," says Lord Caversham; "there is property at stake. It is not a matter for affection.

Affection comes later on in married life” (333). To this Goring sarcastically replies that yes, “in married life affection comes when people thoroughly dislike each other, father, doesn’t it?” Lord Caversham automatically agrees, only to hurriedly disagree a moment later when he realizes his mistake. He resumes the conversation by claiming that marriage is largely based on common sense, and that this common sense is a privilege of the male sex only (333). The devaluation of marriage is further confirmed when Lady Markby exclaims that “nowadays people marry as often as they can, don’t they? It is most fashionable” (283).

In *A Woman of No Importance*, Wilde’s characters humorously disapprove of long-term marriages and of the negative side-effects of marriage in general. A conversation between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby illustrates the changing views on marriage:

LORD ILLINGWORTH. So much marriage is certainly not becoming. Twenty years of romance makes a woman look like a ruin; but twenty years of marriage make her something like a public building.

Mrs. ALLONBY. Twenty years of romance! Is there such a thing?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Not in our day. Women have become too brilliant. (231)

Mrs. Allonby then satirically describes the ideal man as one who ultimately treats women as dependent, needy and irrational children (239). Even Gerald’s exhortations towards his mother concerning her potential marriage to his father, reflect Wilde’s criticism of marriage and of the role of married women. “The marriage must take place,” commands Gerald; “It is a duty that you owe, not merely to yourself, but to all other women – yes, to all the other women in the world, lest he betray more” (270). As Mrs. Arbuthnot rightly points out, however, she owes nothing to her fellow women, let alone to Lord Illingworth, and instead, proceeds to secure her own future and happiness.

Lastly, Wilde’s plays also bring to light the double standards of Victorian extramarital relationships, both in prostitution and in general affairs with other women. According to prevailing views on marriage, prostitution formed an integral aspect of a marital relationship. As Watt points out, “a large but hidden number of Victorians accepted the presence of a large body of prostitutes,

not as a force against the *status quo* but rather as a supporter of it” (7). Prostitution, in short, was simply tolerated. It was tolerated both as support of the institution of marriage, and as a means by which wives were protected from their husband’s supposedly more excessive sexual impulses. Women were simply not expected to have innate sexual desires. In an age of both heightened domestic prudery and of a booming sex industry, the image of the pure and spotless bride had to be maintained at all costs. “A related attitude to this tacit acceptance of prostitution,” says Watt, “was the ridiculous belief that men had a natural sexual energy which women did not possess. . . . A man could [therefore] vent his sexual passion on someone other than his wife, often managing to keep the purity of his wife intact” (7). An affair with a prostitute, however, was in a wife’s interest as well, since “In absorbing the destructive excess of intemperate and overwhelming male sexuality, . . . the prostitute not only prolonged the marriage relationship, but created conditions as a result which favored the smooth transfer of property through unbroken inheritance and the stable family” (7). Johnson even goes so far as to suggest that women were perhaps better off if they married an indecent man, in the Victorian sense, rather than a decent one. If the husband entertained extramarital relations, says Johnson, he would largely ignore his wife and would thereby relieve her of her Victorian child-bearing obligations (27).

Throughout *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the female characters discuss their husbands’ latest transgressions and offer their expertise on the matter to Lady Windermere, a novice in the art of marital debauchery. “I assure you,” says Lady Plymdale about Mrs. Erlynne, “women of that kind are most useful. They form the basis of other people’s marriages” (186). The rest of the conversation is marked by Victorian society’s underlying expectations of married women. If one’s husband was led astray by an attractive woman or a maid, for example, then it was the wife’s duty to safeguard her interests and make sure he was immediately escorted off to the countryside. “I assure you, my dear,” says the Duchess of Berwick to Lady Windermere, “that on several occasions after I was first married, I had to pretend to be very ill, and was obliged to drink the most unpleasant mineral waters, merely to get Berwick [her husband] out of town. He was so extremely susceptible”

(172). When teaching Gerald about marriage in *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth observes that “the happiness of a married man . . . depends on the people he has not married” (Wilde 254).

Throughout his social comedies, Wilde toys with the Victorian views on marriage. He delves more deeply into its relationships and challenges the generally accepted duties of wives. Wilde mocks the required ignorance of single women and empowers them in their quest to become full-fledged world citizens. Wilde also refutes the expected roles of married women and confronts husbands with their own responsibilities. He even addresses the prevailing views on prostitution as a means by which to confront Victorian society with its hypocrisy. It also remains important to realize that Wilde never portrays his characters as purely good or irreparably evil. Instead, his aim was to address both sides of an issue in order to point out the hypocrisy and double standards prevalent within Victorian society. “London is full of women who trust their husbands,” says Lady Windermere. “One can always recognize them. They look so thoroughly unhappy. I am not going to be one of them” (183).

Conclusion

“From the twentieth-century perspective,” says Watt, “there is a difference, and a distinct one, between a prostitute and a girl who makes one mistake.” “An element of Victorian society,” he continues, “did not allow for such a distinction” (2). Wilde, like a few other writers of his time, questioned the stringent moral codes that seemed to dictate Victorian society. He did not believe in the black or white classification of women that was taking place, and yet at the same time, he was not one who favored the preaching of morals through literature. Wilde’s aim was to depict a slightly exaggerated version of society as it was, with all its forms of hypocrisy, double standards and repression of women.

As is commonly known, Wilde himself led a rather double life as well, so it was never his intention to preach morality. Instead, Wilde was probably one of those individuals who, like Mrs. Allonby in *A Woman of No Importance*, thought he knew how to play with fire without getting his hands burned (224-225). He believed that “there was no one fall, no single disgrace, no automatic placing in categories of purity or prostitution” (Watt 7). Ironically, in the end, even Wilde could not escape society’s judgment; he, too, had his “fingers burned”.

It has become clear, therefore, that Wilde’s social comedies do serve a higher, pro-woman agenda. Although his plays address prevailing hypocrisies in more areas of society than only that of the New Woman, it suffices for now to have demonstrated that Wilde’s comedies have played a vital role in the development and support of New Woman ideology. “Wilde’s renegade, rebellious and daring women,” says Ksinan, “dismantle Victorian female stereotypes; they are anticipations of the New Woman ideal” (424). Although often mistaken for a misogynist and overshadowed by more outspoken feminist writers such as Ibsen and Shaw, Oscar Wilde himself was immensely proactive in the movement for women’s rights and was quite progressive in his literary support of the New Woman.

In his social comedies, Wilde addressed several themes concerning the abysmal position of

women in Victorian society. Firstly, he confronted his audience with the double standards concerning “fallen women”. Wilde highlighted the hypocritical role of men in the matter, and also pointed out the detrimental effects of Mrs. Arbuthnot’s self-inflicted martyrdom. Furthermore, Wilde largely undermined the Victorian expectations of women as mothers, and points out that the “fallen” Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* is perhaps an even better mother than the morally-upright Lady Windermere. Wilde also criticized the double standards in marriage and demonstrated that many idyllic marriages were built on status and reputation, rather than unconditional affection.

A related topic suitable for further research is the phenomenon of the domestic martyr. Dr. Daubeny’s wife in *A Woman of No Importance*, for example, is praised for her excellence as a woman and as a wife, and yet with each passing description, it appears as if there is nothing left of her but a rapidly deteriorated, childlike version. Mrs. Arbuthnot, on the other hand, practices a voluntary martyrdom and thereby heeds society’s expectations of her as a fallen woman. What is interesting to note, however, is that Mrs. Arbuthnot describes herself in rather lofty, Biblical terms. “Gerald, when you were naked,” she says, “I clothed you, when you were hungry I gave you food” (271). It would be interesting, therefore, to discover the true implications of their respective identities as martyr, and to determine whether they, too, served a higher feminist agenda.

As has become evident, Wilde’s anomalous writing style clearly paved the way in voicing his pro-woman agenda. Humor ultimately became his successful mode of communication. It was perhaps this very same humor that has caused academics over time to underestimate his role as a feminist writer. Although these plays were intended as comedies, it is important to realize that Wilde “treat[ed] serious things with sincere and studied triviality” (Varty xxv). These plays, therefore, as humorous and witty as they may be, must be taken seriously in their role as catalysts to the rise of feminism. As Oscar Wilde said, “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth” (Finney 65).

Appendix

Dramatis Personae

Lady Windermere's Fan:

Lord Windermere
Lord Darlington
Lord Augustus Lorton
Mr. Dumby
Mr. Cecil Graham
Mr. Hopper
Parker, *butler*
Lady Windermere
The Duchess of Berwick
Lady Agatha Carlisle
Lady Plymdale
Lady Stutfield
Lady Jedburgh
Mrs. Cowper-Cowper
Mrs. Erlynne
Rosalie, *maid*

A Woman of No Importance:

Lord Illingworth
Sir John Pontefract
Lord Alfred Rufford
Mr. Kelvil MP
The Venerable Archdeacon Daubeny DD
Gerald Arbuthnot
Farquhar, *butler*
Francis, *footman*
Lady Hunstanton
Lady Caroline Pontefract
Lady Stutfield
Mrs. Allonby
Miss Hester Worsley
Alice, *maid*

Mrs. Arbuthnot

An Ideal Husband:

The Earl of Caversham KG
Viscount Goring, *his son*
Sir Robert Chiltern Bart, *Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs*
Vicomte de Nanjac, *attaché at the French embassy in London*
Mr. Montford
Mason, *butler to Sir Robert Chiltern*
Phipps, *Lord Goring's servant*
James, *footman*
Harold, *footman*
Lady Chiltern
Lady Markby
The Countess of Basildon
Mrs. Marchmont
Miss Mabel Chiltern, *Sir Robert Chiltern's Sister*
Mrs. Cheveley

The Importance of Being Earnest:

John Worthing JP
Algernon Moncrieff
Reverend Canon Chasuble DD
Merriman, *butler*
Lane, *manservant*
Lady Bracknell
The Honourable Gwendolyn Fairfax
Cecily Cardew
Miss Prism, *governess*

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