

## **THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN OSCAR WILDE'S IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST AND MOLIÈRE'S TARTUFFE.**

In Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the question of each gender's role in society often centers on power. In the Victorian world men had greater influence than women. Men made the decisions for their families, while women worked around the house. Wilde raises interesting questions about gender roles in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, by putting women (like Lady Bracknell) in positions of power and by showing that men can be irresponsible and bad at decision-making. The traditional view of gender relations in the Victorian era was that men were active, manly, assertive and economically independent whilst women were assumed to be passive, pliant and dependent. I believe that Oscar Wilde does challenge these traditional roles deliberately to make humor out of these characteristics and to make fun of the conventional roles of society. The two main male characters, Jack and Algernon, cannot really be regarded as masculine, or at any rate both of them do not fit the criteria for what characteristics a stereotypical Victorian man would be they are both what people at that time would call 'dandy's'.

Algernon and Jack's ungentlemanly behavior and trivial pursuits can be seen as comic and deliberate in making men seem less powerful and serious. Algernon is also a little too concerned with clothing to come across as masculine. This can be seen when he criticizes Jack by saying that he had 'never known anyone to put so much effort into dressing and to produce so little effect'. Algernon also says in Act two when talking to Cecily that he wouldn't trust Jack to buy his outfits as he has "no taste in neckties". Algernon is dandy, making him unmasculine and a bit of a joke in the eyes of the Victorian audience. A time in the play when we see women as having more power than men is in the character Lady Bracknell, she is strong and blunt even coming across as a bit intimidating we get the feel that even Algernon is afraid of her as he would rather make up a fake man than tell her that "he cannot have the pleasure of dining" with her.

Another strong female character we see is Gwendolyn. She is feminine in some aspects like how she wanted the proper engagement (she makes Jack propose formally), but at the same time she can be seen as more masculine than Jack especially because she is quite assertive. Gwendolen is also breaking stereotypes as when her mother tells her to wait in the carriage but she defies her, where as most girls at this time would not even dare to disobey their mothers. A good example of Gwendolen being assertive is when Jack is made to propose to her properly. Even though Gwendolen knows exactly what he is going to ask her and she even tells him that she is going to accept him before he proposes, Gwendolyn insists on a proper proposal, which is absurd. She is clearly going to be more and more like her mother as she matures we see Algernon mention this when he says that a girl's worst flaw is that "they will end up just like their mothers".

Her mother, Lady Bracknell, is probably the most masculine character in the play. She is very pompous and the most assertive of all the characters. She has the power to stop Jack from marrying Gwendolen and has the ability to boss the male characters of the play around. Lady Bracknell's masculinity is funny because it is almost absurd. She is seen as lacking some more feminine characteristics like sympathy for example she has no sympathy for Bunbury who she claims "should just make up his mind whether he is going to live or die". She gives Jack no condolences when he says that he had "lost" both his parents, instead she says that he was careless, and when he explains that he was found she appears to be outraged and shocked giving us the impression that she has control over the situation.

Lady Bracknell has the upper hand over all the main characters in the play. After the examination of the female characters it can be concluded that the female characters are not really typical Victorian women than are Algernon and Jack typical Victorian men. Oscar Wilde has created characters that challenge the Victorian views of gender relations and this is what causes the play to be so funny. The characters are not what you would expect and can be seen as over exaggerated stereotypes of gender roles at the time.

Sexuality plays a great role in this play as Jack goes to London on pleasure trips to see Gwendolen with pretence of going to see a fictitious wicked younger brother. Though as Algernon calls him Bunburyists, Jack insists that he is not a Bunburyist and that if Gwendolen accepts him, he is going to kill his fictitious brother Ernest. Algernon also pretends to have a

friend Bunbury he pretends to go and see anytime he wants to go on a pleasure trip and he is not even ready to stop the act. When Gwendolen asks Algernon to turn his back as she has something to tell Mr. Worthing, Algernon listened carefully and writes down the address Jack gives to Gwendolen on his shirt-cuff and tells Jack he is going to see Bunbury while he was actually going to see Cecily and make love advances to her.

In the play when, when Jack timidly declares his love for Gwendolen, he finds out that she too is very much in love with him as she says "Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you". This is because her ideal has always been to love someone of the name Ernest as there is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. Also when Algernon asks Cecily to marry him, "of course" comes the reply. She says that they have been engaged for the last three months and the engagement was settled on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February and she shows him the "dear old tree" under which she accepted him. She fell in love with the Ernest as her uncle Jack was always talking about the wicked brother "Ernest". She even writes letter three times a week, she writes all his letters for him.

The last but not the least is in the discussion between Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism. When Cecily says Miss Prism has a headache and a short stroll with Dr. Chasuble would do her much good, Miss Prism objects to it and says she didn't say she has headache. Dr Chasuble hopes that Cecily has not been inattentive to her studies, she admits that she has, and the Rector observes that this is strange, for were he fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, he would hand upon her lips. As Miss Prism glares, Dr Chasuble, realizing that his words have a double meaning, becomes very embarrassed and adds immediately that he spoke metaphorically and that his metaphor was drawn from bees.

In Moliere's Tartuffe Orgon presents the Victorian world men who had greater influence than the women. When Orgon returns from the country, we find that he's become obsessed with Tartuffe; he would rather hear about him than about his sick wife. He controls his family and don't allow any of them to contribute in any decision he makes. Mariane's maid Dorine doesn't present the Victorian women as she is not respectful and submissive when she comes in and asks Orgon if Mariane is really going to marry Tartuffe. When her boss confirms this, she makes fun of him, calling the idea ridiculous. Dorine proceeds to annoy Orgon, preventing him from talking further

with Mariane. Dorine tells Mariane that she acts weak in front of her father and she has to stop. She instructs Mariane to stall the wedding to Tartuffe and tells Valère to spread word of Orgon's foolishness around town. She arranges for a meeting between Tartuffe and Elmire, Orgon's wife. Damis insists on watching, and spies on the conversation while hiding in a closet. During the meeting, Tartuffe makes a rather awkward attempt to seduce Elmire. When he fails, Elmire strikes a deal with him. If he refuses to marry Mariane, she says, she won't tell Orgon about what just happened. While Tartuffe seems fine with this, Damis does not. He leaps from the closet and confronts Tartuffe. Because of the power Orgon has over the family, when Damis tells Orgon what happened, Orgon doesn't believe him. As a result, Orgon disinherits Damis and gives Tartuffe the rights to his whole estate.

Elmire is also masculine character in the play. She takes matters into her own hands, and promises to *show* Orgon the truth about Tartuffe. She makes him hide under a table and tells Dorine to call in Tartuffe. When Tartuffe arrives, she does her best to "seduce" him. He is skeptical of the whole situation, given the quick about-face, and demands that she give him some concrete sign of her affection. Elmire becomes increasingly antsy, and eventually asks Tartuffe to step outside the room and look to make sure her husband Orgon isn't around. When he does, Orgon pops out from under the table, enraged.

In Moliere's Tartuffe, there are roles of sexuality in the play. Orgon's family sees Tartuffe is a hypocritical, self-righteous con artist. he pretends to be holy while he is not. During a meeting of Tartuffe Elmire, he makes a rather awkward attempt to seduce Elmire. When he fails, Elmire strikes a deal with him. If he refuses to marry Mariane, she says, she won't tell Orgon about what just happened and Tarffue was ok with it. On the second occasion, Elmire makes Orgon to hide under a table and tells Dorine to call in Tartuffe. When Tartuffe arrives, she does her best to "seduce" him. He is skeptical of the whole situation, given the quick about-face, and demands that she give him some concrete sign of her affection. When Orgon confronts Tartuffe, Tartuffe reminds him that he has the rights to Orgon's property and promises to get his revenge.